
A Gather At Southern Hold

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Wingsecond N'larion folded his arms and gazed sternly at the assembled wingriders of L'tan's Wing. "Right you lot, listen up. Southern Hold has the gather flag flying today—" He stopped to scowl at the ragged cheers a few of the riders raised. "Wingleader L'tan has generously given permission for you reprobates to attend the gather, but you'll do it under *my* rules."

No-one *quite* groaned aloud, but the brownrider could see a few grimaces among the younger riders. The old hands were too disciplined to react, and had in addition heard variants on this lecture many times in the past. "Firstly, tomorrow's sweepriders *will* be back by midnight and *will* be sober and fit for duty by dawn." His eyes flickered over each of those riders in turn. "Pace yourselves if you don't think a night's sleep will do the job."

"Yes, sir," said Br'chon and A'ranis, the riders due to carry out tomorrow's sweeps.

The stocky wingsecond nodded in acknowledgement. "Second, I know Southern Hold is within spitting distance, but that's no excuse for irresponsible stunts on the way back, *especially* after you've had a skinful. If you fly back you *will* use riding straps! Otherwise, use your legs and walk. If any of you useless louts fall off your dragon when drunk, then you'd better make damn sure you snap your neck on impact. The alternative when I catch up with you will not be pretty! Understand?"

"Yes, sir!" The chorused reply was crisp and clear.

He directed a glare at the audience until he was certain that they were sure the threat was not in jest. "Next, this is the first gather Southern Hold has held since our Teshea was named as future Weyrwoman of Barrier Mountain. Expect this gather to boast more bronzeriders than you can shake a stick at."

This time he shared the grimace that more than a few riders made. "Yes, yes, I know – it should be one of *our* bronzes that wins that flight. But, until one of you bronzeboys proves it—" His gaze swept over the bronzeriders in L'tan's wing. "—then Teshea will be the centre of attention. Now, Weyrwoman Teshea is not some

little slip of a holder girl, or they wouldn't have given her the job. She and Elnath are quite capable of telling unwanted bronzeriders to shaff themselves *between*, so I don't want to see any of you raising a ruckus on her behalf."

Again the assembled wingriders chorused their assent.

"Teshea does not need our protection." N'larion's normally harsh expression softened into a half smile. "Young M'ceb, however – that's another matter entirely..."

There were appreciative whoops and catcalls at this, and the bronzerider in question flushed. He was Vivia's latest infatuation, and spent a considerable portion of his time trying to dodge the goldrider's attention – not an easy task when the woman had an entire fair of firelizards on the look out for her chosen paramour.

"And, finally, in case any of you have forgotten – we have a gold egg on the sands." N'larion paused to let the group settle down and pay attention to his words again. "If your dragon senses anyone with goldrider potential, then inform Weyrwoman Genna or the Weyrlingmaster immediately. And I *do* mean goldrider potential, bluerider W'tal – this is not an excuse to entice pretty holder girls into your sleeping furs."

The bluerider in question received a few half friendly shoves and ribald comments from those nearby. When the clutch that produced Vivia's gold Zyath had been laid, W'tal had come back from a whole string of gathers with a succession of good looking girls that his dragon had allegedly 'Searched'. No one had ever let him forget it.

"Right, dismissed." He felt a touch of pride as he watched them disperse towards their weycots. They were a sound lot, L'tan's Wing were.



"Yes, I'm sure I'm up to it," said Dunia in reply to Corsan's third query on whether she felt well enough to attend the Southern Hold gather. "I need cheering up, all our goldriders should really put in an appearance, and Headwoman Ima has agreed to take Farnya for the afternoon to give your sister a break, so I don't need to baby-sit. I don't intend to stay more than a few hours. Corsia will be screaming for a feed by then, anyway."

Her second daughter had been born a little over a month ago, and it had been a hard birth that had left her exhausted for more than a seven-day. Corsia was a very big baby, and from what Dunia could tell from the way she yelled since then, most of that size must be sheer lung power. Nioranth had begun to complain about how loudly and how often the child cried.

Since Teshea had been named as Barrier Mountain's Weyrwoman-to-be, Dunia had oscillated between anxious and depressed. Those around her put down her moods to problems in the later stages of her pregnancy and to post-natal depression, but the truth of the matter was that her stable world had just tilted on its axis and Dunia was floundering in the knowledge that there was nothing she could *do* to rectify the situation. Pernese history would just

have to sort itself out somehow... or alter to a new road that she was as blind to as the rest of the Ninth Pass inhabitants were.

A gather was just what she needed – something to affirm that life went on, even if it was not taking the path that Dunia's history had intended it to. She wanted to show off baby Corsia to the visiting goldriders, dance with her weyrmate, and generally forget that Kadana, not Teshea, had been destined to be Weyrwoman of Barrier Mountain.



“Thank you.” Dunia took her fretting baby from greenrider Arrezia who had been tending the child whilst she and Corsan did a few turns round the dance square. Kadana and bronzerider An'zer of Benden followed them off the dance floor.

“No problem,” said Arrezia with a smile. Dunia still had trouble adjusting to how few female greenriders there were in the Ninth Pass. Not surprising, she supposed, given that most Weys – Southern included – only allowed girls on the sands when there was a gold egg present. She had kept quiet on that difference between this time and her own.

Corsan flopped down into a chair. “I don't know about you, love, but I'm exhausted. I'm sure the harpers weren't supposed to play that tune that fast.”

Arrezia and Dunia laughed. Kadana managed a smile, but her attention was really on the Hold drudges. She called for another skin of wine to be brought to the table.

“Does this mean that I won't be able to tempt you onto the dance floor myself?” asked Arrezia.

Corsan gave an exaggerated show of hauling himself wearily to his feet. “Well... such shining talents as myself usually only perform for goldriders and Lady Holders, but I shall endeavour to find some last scraps of energy to try, greenrider.”

Dunia freed a hand from where she was cradling Corsia, and swatted Corsan on the arm. “Shining talent, indeed! You have my permission to kick him in the shins, Arrezia, if he stands on your feet.”

Arrezia laughed and grabbed Corsan's hand, pulling him out onto the square to join the couples already energetically swirling through the harpers' latest choice. An'zer, Dunia had noted, had frowned slightly at Corsan's comment about goldriders. He was obviously one of those annoying sorts who believed that queenriders belonged with bronzeriders.

An'zer had Benden bronzerider written all over him. He had the good looks, athletic body and square jaw that came straight out of a harper's ballad. He was apparently a skilled wingsecond, and tapped to become a wingleader any time soon. Unfortunately, as soon as he opened his mouth, Dunia had trouble taking him seriously, as bronzerider An'zer had possibly the most annoying, whiny, squeaky voice she had ever heard.

He was using that whiny, squeaky voice now to ask Kadana how Genna was faring, now that one of her

goldriders spent most of her time embroiled in the construction and planning for Barrier Mountain. In her reply Kadana didn't quite manage to hide her jealousy at Teshea's luck.

Corsia was wriggling in Dunia's grasp. The infant looked up at her mother, snuffled a couple of times and then let out an experimental wail. Dunia rocked her daughter, but the crying did not abate. “Hungry are we?” she said. “Kadana, could you pass me my shawl?”

“I don't know why you don't foster them out properly, instead of this half and half affair you use,” remarked Kadana as she handed over the garment from where it was draped over the back of the chair Arrezia had vacated.

Dunia bristled defensively. She knew her not-quite-fostering arrangements with Corsan's sister Ceresa were unusual, with Dunia nursing her own children and only handing them over to their foster mother when they were weaned, but Kadana could just keep her opinion to herself! “That would hardly be fair, now, would it?” she said tartly. “Foster the children out to some other woman and then snatch them away from her when I return to the— to my home Weyr.” In her annoyance she had almost blurted out ‘the Tenth Pass’ at a gather filled with holders. Her origin was common knowledge at the Weyr, but it had not been made public at the Hold, and the weyrfolk had been told to keep the matter quiet. Shards, but did Kadana know how to make her seethe!

She draped the shawl over herself and Corsia, before unfastening her blouse. Holderfolk could sometimes be a bit twitchy about seeing a woman feeding her baby in public. The child grizzled a bit more and then took the nipple. She looked up and decided to change the subject to something more neutral than her children or Barrier Mountain Weyr.

“I see M'ceb has foolishly let Vivia snare him again,” she observed. The young bronzerider was twirling Vivia round the dancefloor, the sunlight sparkling off some bit of jewellery the young woman had pinned to her dress. “I don't recognise that brooch – I hope the poor boy has not been foolish enough to give her jewellery. She'll take it as a sign that he's The One.”

“What's wrong with – M'ceb, was it? – giving Vivia jewellery?” asked An'zer in puzzlement.

“Oh, you mean you haven't heard?” said Kadana, in genuine astonishment. She looked across at Dunia, and mutual dislike or no, the pair of them grinned at each other and then gleefully launched into a description of Vivia's lovelorn antics every time a bronze caught her Zyath.

“Her one true love?” said An'zer.

Dunia and Kadana nodded. Dunia elaborated. “Oh yes. She's desperately clingy from the moment Zyath rises until right about the time her eggs hatch. Then she goes all gooey over the hatchlings for a while. If you value your sanity, don't ever let your Certh catch her Zyath.”

“Unless you are looking for a One True Love yourself, of course,” said Kadana, and giggled in a slightly tipsy way at the thought.

The music came to a climax and the dancers separated, pausing to clap as the harpers bowed and left the dais. Corsan and greenrider Arrezia returned to the table, Vivia and M'ceb trailing along behind them. M'ceb had a slightly hunted look. Two of Vivia's ever present firelizards descended to perch on her shoulders, but she chased them off, complaining that their claws were snagging her dress.

"Well, I am *definitely* sitting the next few sets out," said Corsan. He pulled out a chair for Arrezia with a flourish. "This young lady could dance the legs off a dragon."

Out of the corner of her eye, Dunia could see Teshea and one of the Telgar bronzeriders leave the dance floor. She said something to the man and he gave a brief bow and departed, leaving her in the company of some of the riders from L'tan's wing.

An'zer suddenly sat up straighter, also having noticed. "Please, queenrider Vivia, have my seat," he squeaked, standing and mimicking Corsan's gesture. His eyes, however, were still fixed on where Teshea stood. "I must go and see if I can find some more Benden red – this skin is all but done." The bronzerider began to saunter away, in an apparently casual manner that just happened to take him towards Teshea.

Kadana gave a discontented huff. "Well, that's the last we'll see of *him* for an hour."

The others followed her gaze. "Poor Teshea," said Vivia. "Having all those men chase after her like that when she doesn't want it. What must it be like?"

M'ceb – who had his nose buried in a cup of wine – choked noisily at this last remark. Corsan and Arrezia pounded him heavily on the back until he stopped spluttering. Dunia decided to distract Vivia as she started fussing at the poor lad.

"That's a lovely brooch, Vivia. Did you buy it at the gather?" Indeed, now that she could see it up close, it was a magnificent piece of work. The design was a gold firelizard, wrought in gemstones and gold. The firelizard grasped its own tail in its mouth to complete the circle of the brooch. The gems glittered and flashed in the sunshine. Not a gather stall piece that – it looked to be a special commission from the Smithcraft's jewellers.

"No," replied the younger woman. She fingered the brooch lovingly. "It was a gift from my father. He knows how much I love firelizards and said that a goldrider should have jewelry to match her station." She seemed blithely unaware that the remark could be considered insulting in the present company.

High-ranking Holder or not, Vivia's father either had too many marks on his hands or a propensity to spoil his daughters. Or, Dunia thought cynically to herself, perhaps he had a son who had just had a betrothal gift returned to him. Though given the firelizard theme and Vivia's propensity for collecting eggs, perhaps that was being ungenerous to the man. "It's beautiful," she said diplomatically. She, Kadana and Arrezia admired the piece for a few more moments, while Vivia chatted away about what sort of stones the brooch displayed.

When Dunia looked up, M'ceb was nowhere in sight. Vivia gave a squeak of disappointment. Corsan feigned ignorance of where the bronzerider had gone, but Dunia noticed that the knot of L'tan's Wing riders around Teshea had also departed. A rescue had evidently been effected.

She smiled at Corsan. "So, are you too exhausted from dancing to escort me and our darling daughter back to the Weyr?"

"If I say yes, will that great queen of yours offer us a lift?"

"No, she's asleep snuggled up to Aneth." Nioranth was quite taken with L'tan's bronze since he had flown her in her last rising.

"Ah, well if she's snuggling... can't interrupt something important like that, can we? Walking it is, then." Corsan nuzzled at her hair. "Would there, perhaps, be some snuggling on offer for me after I've performed this arduous task?"

Dunia rested her cheek against his. "There will definitely be a *lot* of snuggling if you change Corsia and put her to bed..."



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