
Nioranth Flies Again

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This is boring! Nioranth voiced her customary early morning complaint, and folded her wings firmly to her sides. ***I am not a weyrling. Why do I have to do exercises like a weyrling?***

Dunia sighed and shoved a stray lock of hair out of her eyes. Her gold was not at all happy about the wing strengthening exercises that she had to perform for the last month to build up her muscle strength. With each passing day the queen got more and more difficult to persuade that they were necessary. *You know why*, she said irritably, looking up at her queen. *You haven't flown for months. The exercises are to strengthen your wing and make sure it can take the strain. You don't want the bone to snap again, do you?*

Nioranth gave a discontented rumble. Her head snaked back and forth for a moment and then she reluctantly spread her pinions and began the first of the series of flapping exercises that the dragonhealers had set them to do several times a day. The downstrokes got increasingly more vigorous as the gold vented her frustration into the motion. Dust and fragments of grass showered Dunia even at the distance she stood.

“Getting fractious again, is she?”

Corsan's voice behind her distracted Dunia from scowling at her gold, and she turned to give a wry smile to her lover. “When is she not?” she said. “Though I understand her frustration. Being ground bound is getting on my nerves too. Has Master Renthic made his decision about when she—?”

“Today.” Corsan's arms circled her and he gave her a swift kiss on the cheek. “I come as the bearer of glad tidings.”

“Today?” Finally! Dunia knew she was grinning like a fool at the news that her dragon could fly again. *Nioranth, did you hear—?*

I fly! I fly! Nioranth gave a triumphant bugle that startled a flock of wherries from the nearby trees, tensed the muscles in her hindquarters and leapt skywards in a huge leap. The backwash from the first downstroke knocked Dunia back into Corsan.

“Nioranth, no!” Dunia stared, appalled at her gold's precipitous takeoff.

“Er...” said Corsan, tilting his head back to watch the queen as she zigzagged higher into the sky. “I think Renthic wanted to supervise...”

“Aaah! I know, I know!” The young goldrider glared at her dragon, who was now engaged in a series of aerial swoops. *Nioranth! Get back here!*

The queen's feelings of disgruntlement washed over Dunia, as Nioranth's stubborn nature came to the fore again. ***I wish to fly. It has been too long since I flew. You should fly with me.***

Well, I can't very well fly if you are up there and I am down here! Dunia remarked acidly. *Get down here NOW!*

Reluctantly, the gold acquiesced to her rider's will and began her descent. However, her return was slow and spiralling as the queen eked out her spell in the air for as long as possible. She veered from her flight path for one last dramatic swoop over the aerial formation of one of the Weyrling classes, causing a couple of the greens to jink out of her way, then flipped her wings to make a rapid descent to her wallow. Dust and dry grass whirled up again in the backwash of her landing.

Corsan sneezed in the dust, then cocked his head over to one side. “Well, that take off and landing certainly *looked* sound enough. Could you ask Nioranth to—?” He gestured to show that he wished the queen to extend her wing.

At some firm prompting from Dunia, Nioranth spread her scarred wing and lay down in her wallow, angling the wing low enough to let Corsan run expert dragonhealer's fingers over muscle and membrane, feeling for muscle tremors, knots of tension or unusual temperatures. Swirling eyes regarded him as he did so.

We will fly together when he is finished? Nioranth made it more of a statement than a question.

We will fly together when Corsan [U]and[U] Master Renthic have given their approval. Dunia implicitly trusted any diagnosis that Corsan might make, but Master Renthic would likely want to check the health of the queen, and the wait would be good discipline for her stubborn, aggravating, beloved gold.

“Hmm.” Corsan gave a thoughtful nod. “I think—“ He paused and his eyes swivelled to Nioranth's watchful gaze. Dunia hid a smile as she watched him mentally rephrase what he was going to say to take account of how the impatient gold might interpret the words. “I think that Master Renthic will be here any minute to give a final opinion. He can hardly have missed our little display, can he? Perhaps we could sit in the shade until he arrives, eh?”

Dunia linked her arm with his. “Perhaps we could.” Nioranth gave another discontented rumble as the pair of them retreated to the porch of her weyrcot, and fussed about in her wallow, turning round and round before choosing a position to settle in.

Dragonhealer Renthic did indeed arrive shortly afterwards, and tutted and tsked over Nioranth's unscheduled flight for a few minutes before doing his own examination of her wing and comparing muttered notes with Corsan. Finally with a smile and a nod – and well out of

any sweep of Nioranth's wings, Dunia noted – he announced that the queen was fit to fly. “But only for short periods with an hour's rest between them, at least for the first few days. Slowly does it.”

The words were barely out of his mouth when Nioranth was on her feet. *We fly, we fly! Come rider, we fly!* The gold crouched and offered a leg to Dunia to mount.

Dunia rolled her eyes. *Not without your harness, we don't!* She thanked Master Renthic, gave Corsan a brief hug, and trotted into her weycot to fetch Nioranth's mended and oiled riding straps, and her own flying gear. By the time that the goldrider was finally on her dragon's back, Nioranth was dancing about like an overexcited weyrling about to go on her maiden flight.

The gold gave another triumphant bugle and sprang into the air with a neck-wrenching leap. Powerful strokes sent her surging higher and higher, and Dunia began to share her gold's excitement. Oh she had missed this – the wind in her face and the rhythm of strong, confident wingbeats. Leaning into Nioranth's turns and catching the sound and scent of the ground below as the gold caught a thermal. The glorious freedom of flight and of feeling at one with her bondmate.

Nioranth went into a dive and pulled up to skim low over the sea in a glide. The tips of her wings just missed the water's surface as she began to flap again, gaining height to pass over the cliffs of the Whitewing Islands in their not-quite-right Ninth Pass topography. Screaming flocks of whitewings took to the air as the dragon hurtled by. The gold left the islands behind and climbed higher and higher into the cloudless sky.

I fly well, do I not? said Nioranth smugly.

Yes, you fly well, agreed Dunia, revelling in the space and motion.

I fly very well. When I rise only the best bronze will catch me.

The notion of her gold rising jolted Dunia out of her elated mood. Nioranth should have risen about a month ago, but their timing it and her injuries had thrown the gold out of her cycle. There was no telling when she might rise again. Master Renthic had estimated that it would be several months after the queen was in fighting form, so despite her gold's lustful optimism, a mating flight was not likely to occur anytime soon.

However, whenever Nioranth rose, she was likely to clutch and her eggs to be hatched before Dunia's own baby was born. The thought brought the goldrider mixed emotions: happy memories of her own Impression vied with the realisation that Nioranth's offspring would perish in the tsunami a handful of Turns from now. The realisation hit her that the people she had gotten to know, and in some cases come to love, here at Southern would also die.

She had to speak to Corsan, convince him to come to the Tenth Pass with her. Convince him without telling him the whole truth: that the reason was not just “I love you and will miss you” but “I don't want you to die!” Dunia bit her

lip at the deceptions that she was daily forced to commit in the name of causality and the future.

Yes, she would speak to Corsan and they would plan. And then toward the end of next Turn, when her baby had grown old enough to travel *between*, her little family would set off for the Tenth Pass and Kadanzer Weyr.



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On the first day of month Nine, Dunia and Nioranth flew against Thread with the Queen's Wing of Southern Weyr. The experience was exhilarating – as much from the edginess of the slightly different tactics that the Ninth Pass riders used, as from the sheer joy of fulfilling a dragonrider's necessary and vital role in protecting Pern. She and Nioranth had trained with the Southern Queen's Wing for two sevendays, once the queen was well enough to fly. However they had sat out several 'Falls in frustration until the dragonhealers were convinced that the recuperating gold had the stamina to last out a 'Fall. Nioranth was insufferable until the pair were actually pitting their wits against the ancient enemy once more. But within a few short sevendays, the queen had forgotten that she had ever had to sit out a 'Fall or that the patterns they flew were not the ones she had trained to since birth. Dragon memory twisting reality into an ever present Now.

A little over three and a half months later Nioranth rose to mate and was caught by bronze Suloth. Much to the relief of Suloth's rider T'del and to the dismay of goldrider Vivia, who had been pining after the man as if he was her One True Love from a harper ballad since his bronze had caught her Zyath two months previously. Obviously, the dragon of your One True Love would not dare to fly another's queen, so after a day or so of heartbroken angst that made Dunia want to throttle the girl, Vivia apparently forgot that T'del had ever existed.

Aggravating drippy queenriders aside, there were other surprises about gold risings here. Dunia had been intrigued to learn that Southern Weyr golds were still rising twice a Turn so late into the Pass. Those at Kadanzer had not done so since quite early into the Tenth Pass, and Nioranth, being so young, had always been on an annual cycle. She mentioned the discrepancy to Corsan and set off a raft of speculation amongst the dragonhealers as to cause and effect, and – Dunia suspected – a flurry of betting amongst the apprentices as to which pattern Nioranth would continue to follow. Corsan had a theory that it might be to do with the vastness of the Southern Continent and the relative sparsity of the dragon population there. Dunia did not disabuse him of the notion that Southern Weyr-of-the-Future was vastly more populous than the Ninth Pass Weyr, nor mention any of the wrinkles in the history of the Weys – such as the setting up of Barrier Mountain Weyr that was to eventually become Kadanzer, and the terrible demise of that site.

Dunia's and Nioranth's pregnancies carried on apace, with the queen approaching too egg heavy to fly Thread even as it became an equal struggle for her rider. Maneuvering her increasingly rotund body on and off her queen whilst carrying a flamethrower – not to mention having to borrow some outsized flying leathers from one of the recuperating bronzeriders – Dunia could certainly now appreciate why female riders were discouraged from having the large families that holders favoured. As much as she had been exhilarated to join Southern's Queens' Wing, Dunia was now relieved when she and Nioranth were grounded until the production of their respective offspring.

On the eighteenth day of month Two, Nioranth went to the Hatching Grounds and produced a clutch of twenty eggs. As she sat on the edge of the sands and dutifully admired each egg, Dunia ran her hands over her taut belly and fervently hoped that her own birth would be as easy.



Kadanzer Weyr

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