
Rising Stakes

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"Is it just me or are the bronzeriders being even more than usually annoying this morning," remarked Corsan as he sat down beside Dunia at the table in the Weyrhall. He had heaped a tray high with bread and cold meats for their breakfast.

The young goldrider looked up from where she was doing her usual early morning juggling act of nursing baby Farnya and sipping at her much needed first cup of klah. She glanced across to where T'del, K'lenyr and Y'kinal were openly watching her as they ate their own breakfasts. D'ralt and his recently-promoted wingsecond, J'hanos, were at least trying to be more subtle, but she was still aware of their interest.

"You'd think they'd never seen a woman feed a baby before," continued Corsan irritably. "Or seen breasts. Not that yours aren't worth staring at, of course. But can't you get that queen of yours to tell them to shove *between* and stop spoiling my breakfast?"

"Unfortunately, oh weyrmate of mine, it is 'that queen' of mine who is the problem." Dunia tilted her head to one side to regard her lover with a wistful expression. "The bronzeriders are sniffing around because Nioranth will rise any time now."

The dragonhealer paused in the motion of piling slices of cold wherry onto a piece of bread. "Today?"

"Most likely. She is still sound asleep, which is often a sign at this hour. But if not today, then certainly tomorrow." Dunia reached to take the bread from him and bit off a mouthful, trying not to scatter crumbs on Farnya.

He gave a crooked half smile and looked away. "Half-Turn cycle, then," he said in a non-committal tone, referring to the frequency of Nioranth's risings.

"Don't you go all holder husband on me now," said Dunia around a mouthful of bread and wherry. Corsan was weyrbred and familiar with the ways of dragons, so he knew the facts of life where mating flights were concerned. He wouldn't let himself get wound up in a fit of aggressive jealousy, and blame her or sulk as she had witnessed some holdbred weyrmates do. But he would *care*. And she loved him for it.

"I don't mind her rising, love. She has to. It's just that bronzeriders get so irritatingly smug about it all. Can't you

have a word with Nioranth and ask her to get caught by a nice quiet blue?"

Dunia gave a snort of laughter at the thought of Nioranth mating with a blue. It was a good job that the queen was asleep and not privy to the conversation -- she would huff with righteous indignation for a sevenday at the mere suggestion that a blue was worthy of her.

"Still, half-Turn cycle, eh? Looks like Nioranth has settled into the rhythm of our Ninth Pass queens. That's quite a shift from what you've described as her usual schedule. There'll be a few marks passing hands amongst the dragonhealers over that."

"Hmm." Dunia adjusted Farnya's position as the baby started to fuss, and then picked up her bread again. "So are you a winner or a loser?"

"Oh, a winner." Corsan looked at her and the usual sparkle was back in his eyes. "I bet that she would shift to a twice a Turn cycle, so if she did then I was up on the marks... and if she didn't, I had you all to myself for a few months longer. See -- a winner, no matter what happened."

This time the choke of laughter *did* scatter crumbs all over Farnya.

They were leaving the Weyrhall when Nioranth awoke, the queen a sudden, ravenous presence in Dunia's mind. The young woman stopped in mid-stride with a gasp, and then gathered her wits about her as she felt her gold launch herself into the air and speed towards the feeding grounds, scattering the bronzes already gathered there as she swooped in low.

"It's now!" she cried, feeling the familiar dissonance as reality diverged into *Dunia-standing-here* and *Dunia-and-Nioranth*. Dunia-standing-here quickly thrust little Farnya into Corsan's waiting arms, whilst her mind shrieked with bloodlust as Dunia-and-Nioranth bore down on a hapless runner.

Blood! Just the blood, so that you can fly high and long! Dunia-and-Nioranth battled wills for a moment, and then hot, delicious blood was pouring down her throat.

Dunia-standing-here was dimly aware of Corsan saying something, but the words flowed away on the taste of blood in her mouth. She began to walk towards the flight cots, bronzeriders converging on her from the periphery of her human vision. On the grounds, Dunia-and-Nioranth felled another runner, and without delay fastened her jaws around its neck, tearing into the soft throat.

The screaming hunger in her belly resolved abruptly into a burning need of another kind and Dunia-and-Nioranth sprang into the sky, bugling a savage challenge to any who dared to try and catch her.



Broad wings churned the air, a myriad shades of bronze flashing in the morning sunlight as Southern's males pursued their golden prize, crimson eyes locked on Nioranth's fleeing form. Time became an irrelevance, a minor consideration to be forgotten until the pace grew punishing and the body's

strength faltered and failed, sending the unworthy into a slow spiral out of the pack and onto the long, slow journey home.

At the end, only four remained, four out of the more than two dozen that had started the flight. Exhausted and aching and oh, so *very* close to their goal, to the gleaming gold who now turned to consider them, banking above just beyond their reach and urging them to greater effort by the mere fact of her presence. So beautiful, so perfectly fertile, so --

Nioranth bugled a taunting challenge and folded her wings, diving down through the scattered remnants of her suitor pack towards the forest canopy so far below. The bronzes screamed their answer, snapping their exhausted pinions to their bodies as they dropped in the final pursuit. The first to draw close reached for the queen with unsheathed talons... only to overshoot as she twisted and snapped her wings wide again, carolling her cleverness as she caught the winds once more --

And a dark body collided with her own, tangling and twining and stilling her struggles in a carnal embrace that was more than echoed in a wooden cot at Southern Weyr.



Corsan was at West, finishing up a reconstruction on the wing of an Igen blue, when dragons sounded off around him and the throat-scored bronze that Renthic had been tending raised his head and gave a low moan. The journeyman paused in his stitching, knowing what had just happened... and then went back to work, refusing to let himself speculate on which of the bronzes had made the catch.

"You all right?" Tolomas asked as Corsan finally hopped down from the work table he'd been standing on to reach his patient.

"Why wouldn't I be?" Corsan asked his fellow journeyman. "I'm a big boy now -- I know what a mating flight is."

"The downside of catching yourself a goldrider?" Tolomas asked, quirking a smile as he helped to fold the table for storage. "Having to stand back while someone *else* gets to catch her...."

"Very funny." Corsan poked his tongue out at the other dragonhealer. "All these Turns, I never really appreciated what mother went through every time father's green Wezath rose...."

Tolomas chuckled. "You know who won?"

"Wezath?"

"Nioranth!"

"Nope."

"You want to?"

Corsan hesitated. "Much as I would love to say no and just ignore the whole sorry business, I suppose I should know if I have a rival for my beloved's affections." He sighed. "Spit it out."

Tolomas grinned. "Vhauth."

"Really?" Corsan frowned. "Huh. About time, I suppose -- he's been getting closer in this past Turn and at least he's not one of the complete inbreds."

"Depends on whether you're talking about dragon or rider," Tolomas offered cheerfully. "Those Lords do tend to stick to their own, I've heard...."

"And if the result is brats that look like *that*, who can blame them?" Corsan snorted. "I just hope Dunia's head doesn't get turned by J'hanos and his pretty cheekbones. I told her she should get Nioranth to settle down with a nice quiet blue, but would she listen?"

Tolomas laughed. "I can just imagine what Genna would have to say about *that*."

"I'd be more interested in what the bronzeriders would have to say...."

"Heh, well, at least J'hanos is pretty solidly weyrmated, so I doubt you'll have much of a problem there." Tolomas finished heaving the folded table up against the wall of West's main Infirmary and looked across to where Chervas, with young Ukalen in tow, was talking to a bandaged greenrider. "Looks like the reinforcements are here," he told Corsan. "You might as well get off to the Weyrhall, get some food down you before your goldrider reappears; I'll finish up here. Who knows, if you're really lucky, you might get to laugh at a few of the disappointed bronzeriders...."

There were precious few bronzeriders in evidence when Corsan reached Main and the Weyrhall there, the flight losers evidently all off recovering from their defeat in their own ways. Trying not to think about that too hard, the dragonhealer collected a plate of curried fliptails and flatbread and headed across to the long dining tables in the hope of a quiet lunch.

Halfway there, however, he noticed one of the kitchen girls sitting alone at the end of one of the benches, both hands wrapped around a klah mug. For a moment, Corsan couldn't *quite* place her, although he felt that he ought to --

Oh, of course....

Setting his tray down opposite her, Corsan waited for her to look up before speaking. "Enasha, right? I'm --"

"Journeyman Corsan." Enasha's smile didn't quite reach her green eyes. "I know."

"That's me." Corsan smiled crookedly at her and shovelled in a mouthful of food. "I guess we're in the same boat, thanks to Nioranth and Vhauth. So, are congratulations in order for, you know, your weyrmate's dragon catching my weyrmate's dragon? I'm sure there must be some sort of proper etiquette for this sort of thing, but they just don't seem to have classes for inter-weyrmating relations." He popped another fliptail into his mouth. "Maybe we should suggest that to the Weyrwoman...."

"No congratulations necessary," Enasha said flatly, looking into her mug.

Corsan paused. "Are you all right? Have you eaten?"

"No." Enasha sighed, and looked up to meet his eyes. "Doubt I could keep it down anyway, between my boy," she patted the subtly pregnant curve of her stomach, "and his

father." She bit at her lip, then suddenly said, "I don't know how you can just sit there and eat when your weyrmate is, *is with someone else!*"

"Er..." Corsan blinked at her. "I'm hungry?" Realising that that was likely not a useful answer, he added, "Dunia's a goldrider -- flights rather go with the territory and I don't think I'm going to get to be a bronzerider any time soon."

Enasha hunched her shoulders, as though cold. "I don't know how you can be so calm," she murmured.

"I survived it last time," Corsan shrugged. "And it's not as though your J'hanos has never won a flight before."

"Never a *gold's* flight." Enasha's knuckles were white against her mug. "Never a gold's."

"Golds, greens, all just variations on a theme," Corsan said lightly, feeling more than a little concerned by Enasha's reaction. Poor girl was likely holdbred -- there were some who never quite managed to adapt to the realities of Weyr life. "That's the thing with these riders -- they get to be all Noble In The Face Of Danger where Thread is concerned, but as soon as their dragons get frisky, they just get swept along with them, like it or not. But there are some things that the dragons *don't* get to decide, no matter what Vivia thinks. It was *Dunia* who chose *me*, just like J'hanos chose you."

"I know," Enasha said simply. "That doesn't make this any easier, though."

Corsan reached across to pat her hand. "A flight's a flight," he told her. "They happen, but they don't mean anything if the riders don't want them to. J'hanos will be back with you before you know it."

Enasha looked down at his hand and pulled her mug towards her, away from his sympathetic touch. "He'd better be," she said, moving one arm to cover her belly. "Shells, but he'd better be."



J'hanos woke to find himself pressed against a warm body too softly curved to be a greenrider, his nostrils filled with the musky scent of a woman not Enasha. He smiled against his partner's shoulder, savouring his victory for a few moments as he recalled the glory of the catch, so much more satisfying, so much more *real* than with the greens that were Vhauth's more usual mates. This had been long, exhausting, requiring a stamina of thought as much as of body, nature demanding that only the very *best* sired the next generation....

They had waited *far* too long for this.

Reaching for Vhauth, he found the bronze submerged in exhausted sleep, the rippling surface of his mind textured with a brightly burnished sense of pride and triumph. J'hanos sighed contentedly as he recalled what it had been to be fully submerged in that shimmering consciousness, fused at root and core, feeling each subtle shift of air beneath his seeking wings, feeling the heated solidity of Nioranth's body locked against him, even as her rider's heated softness opened beneath --

Dunia shifted against him, yawning and stretching as she roused herself from satiated sleep. J'hanos shook himself free of his flight-dreams and rolled away from her reluctantly, recognising that his moment of victory was past. "Good evening, goldrider."

"Evening already?" Dunia rubbed at her eyes and pushed herself up on the bed, blinking at him.

"Sun was past zenith by the end, so I would imagine so," J'hanos said with a satisfied smile. "It was a long flight."

Dunia chuckled softly. "Is length all that you bronzeriders ever worry about?"

"We have to amuse ourselves somehow." He stretched, working the kinks from his spine, aware of the goldrider's eyes on him. "Hopefully the clutch will reflect Nioranth and Vhauth's efforts."

"This is your first time winning a gold flight, isn't it?"

"Yes," J'hanos replied, bristling slightly and then clamping down on that reaction -- he had *won* this flight, he and Vhauth were finally out of the bachelor herd of bronzes and making their contribution to the Weyr's future. His smile returned, touched now with something like embarrassment. "My first time with a female rider too. It's... different."

Dunia looked at him oddly. "Oh... of course," she said, belatedly pulling a sheet up to cover herself.

J'hanos snorted softly at her movement. "I'm not going to try for second helpings, if that's what you're thinking," he said archly. "You're not the only one with a weyrmate here. Flights don't count, but afterwards? I suspect that might."

The goldrider nodded, visibly relaxing a little. "Yes, and as understanding as Corsan may be --"

"You don't want to betray his trust any more than I do Enasha's." J'hanos rolled onto his stomach, hiding his traitorous body's nascent opinion on the matter. "Still, I think that Vhauth might not object to a repeat performance the next time Nioranth rises...."

Dunia glanced at him sharply, then laughed. "Don't go counting your eggs just yet, bronzerider."

J'hanos smiled wickedly at her, but his thoughts returned to his weyrmate and the child she carried, a pregnancy every bit as precious to him as Nioranth's. "I wouldn't dream of it, my lady. I wouldn't dream of it."



Dunia let the shower wash suds off her back as she scrubbed more soapsand into her hair. The mating flight had been a pleasant experience and Corsan was weyrbred, but she didn't want to return to her weyrmate smelling of sex and another man. She wondered how J'hanos's own weyrmate would react to the flight -- from what little Dunia knew of the woman, Enasha wasn't exactly enamoured of goldriders at the best of times. For all his obvious dedication to the relationship, J'hanos might find his life becoming complicated for the next few months.

And his was not the only life that might develop unexpected complications because of Nioranth's rising. Dunia counted out months in her head as she rinsed off her hair. Nioranth's eggs from this clutch would hatch about a month before little Farny was old enough to travel *between*. That gave her a very small window of opportunity to get back to the Tenth Pass before Nioranth rose again, now that the gold appeared to have switched to the half-Turn cycle of the Ninth Pass queens.

The goldrider had calculated that it would take her sixteen jumps to get all the way back to Kadanzer, and she would want to rest for at least a day between each of them. After all, an accurate jump *between* of twenty-five Turns required a crystal clear and rested mind. She wanted absolutely *no* chance of another mis-jump like the one that had brought her here.

Dunia wrung the bulk of the water from her long hair with her hands and stepped from the shower to grab a towel to finish the task. So then, a minimum of fifteen days to travel through time, and possibly more than that if the pair of them started to feel stressed or ill with the constant timing. Nioranth would also need to be fed and oiled along the way, which may cause further delays. They might get lucky with the hunting, or they might have to expend time locating a wild herd to prey upon. They couldn't risk going anywhere near human habitation, or they would end up being written up in some record somewhere and mess up history. No records had survived the doomed Southern Weyr, so she was safe enough here.

Say twenty or twenty five days travel, to be on the safe side, then. That was her problem. Farny would be old enough to go *between* late in month 11 to the middle of month 12. Dunia was not about to risk her child by choosing the earlier date, so month 12 it was. But on her new cycle, Nioranth was likely to rise again late in that month or very early the next. She couldn't risk the queen rising while they were in transit -- Farny knew what sort of disaster that could result in. Nioranth might call bronzes to her from across the planet... or jump to some unsuspecting Weyr in search of them... or vanish *between* in frustration at the lack of mates.... None were scenarios that Dunia wished to contemplate.

Either they had to complete their journey before Nioranth rose again -- or she had to put it off until afterwards. What then? Travel while the queen was pregnant? She could certainly arrive back at Kadanzer with plenty of time to spare before the eggs would need to be laid. However, would timing it affect the clutch in any way?

Dunia wracked her brains trying to remember if the records had said anything about such problems when the Oldtimers came forward with Lessa. Surely some of their queens had been carrying eggs at the time? She must ask Corsan -- and *there* was another relationship that she would need to consider in all of this -- it was the sort of obscure dragonhealer trivia that he would delight in ferreting out.

The alternative was to wait here until Nioranth had laid and hatched her eggs. Dunia felt a twinge of guilt at that -- it would be another clutch of weyrings who would grow up only to potentially perish in the disaster of 2440. Southern Weyr's only survivors had been riders who had been away from the Weyr at the time.

Besides, waiting for Nioranth's children to hatch would delay her return another few months. And for all that there were Turns to go before the tsunami became a threat, with every day here Dunia felt herself more and more drawn into life at Southern. The people here had gone from being strangers to being family, to being every bit as real to her as those she knew in Kadanzer's distant future.

She worried that if she left it too long, she might not want to leave at all.



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