
Twists in the Path

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In so many ways, it seemed just like the last time. Only now, Revanne was even less certain that she ought to be standing out on the Hatching Ground of Southern Weyr at all.

Even having done it only once before, so much of it seemed familiar: the heat of the Sands tangible in the way it made the air twist and dance invisibly above it, blurring the sight of the broody queen (this time, it was gigantic Irineth presiding) and the stands of spectators farther away; the feel of the bleached-linen Candidate's robe against her skin (she had heard that in the Northern Weyr, in colder climates, they used fine wool instead, and she was glad that here they used locally-favored material, even as she also wondered if they could sweat enough to make the white cloth turn transparent); the strange perspective of standing on the Sands themselves, rather than watching from a distance (here you could really see the beauty of the patterns on the eggs, and even see the striations and hear the little tap-tap-taps of the hatchlings inside).

Therefore, to take her mind off the imminent event, Revanne reviewed for herself the differences.

Before, she had not yet become a journeywoman; still an apprentice, although a favored one, she had yet to leave the Weyr she had come to by right of Search at fifteen. She had yet to go and visit Telgar Smithcrafthall, with its shocking Northern winter and its intimidating weight of centuries, but its friendly and supportive people, including journeywomen and even a few female craftmasters. She hadn't yet joined their ranks, had the red cords pinned to her shoulder, walked to the oval tables.

At eighteen she had been an adult, but was still hovering on the verge of really starting her life.

And then, it had seemed possible that she might Impress - certainly earnest, hopeful M'tan, her Search rider, had thought so. That was before the hatchling queen had walked past her without a second glance. Before M'tan and Nolth died in Threadfall, and that link with her past was gone.

The Mastersmith had agreed to the wishes of Weyrsmith Baldis, and though he'd given her the chance to choose otherwise, Revanne had returned to Southern Weyr, to the work she enjoyed and the people she knew and the climate that, she admitted, suited her. The tail end of winter

near Telgar Hold was bad enough; she could not imagine wintering-over in a Weyr like the High Reaches.

Now, she was a woman, and if she had stayed home in her little cothold - which she had not seen since leaving it that day six Turns ago, to accompany her father to Delta Hold - she would certainly be married, and have toddlers racing around.

As it was, she was better than the other two journeymen at wrangling the apprentices, and the candidates and weyrings who sometimes helped them; and while he didn't say it too often in their hearing, as he was as conscious as anyone of not provoking jealousy, Baldis was given to privately wondering if she might become the Weyrsmith one day. One day far, far in the future, of course, when Baldis himself retired.

M'tan and Nolth were really the reason she was standing here now - honoring their memory, honoring what had brought her to the Weyr in the first place. That and the fact that Irineth had obligingly produced a queen egg with a few months to spare before Revanne would turn twenty-two, and be ineligible to stand ever again.

She squared her shoulders and, at the signal from Weyrleader L'tan, began to lead the line of girls out to encircle the queen egg, set off as it always was to one side of the rest of the clutch. Not quite as many queen-candidates as last time, only fifteen, but that still meant that the odds were decidedly against her. She was older than any of them by at least three Turns, and the youngest of them seemed to her like little more than babies.

The main part of the hatching was already underway. Irineth had laid a fair-sized clutch, as Benden-bred queens tended to. Revanne had seen many, many Hatchings now, and she knew that these dragonets, wobbling and awkward as they stumbled forward to find their bondmates, were not as large as they might be, since enormous Irineth had been flown by H'mar's Moreth, a very fast and wily bronze of full Oldtime extraction. Still, when you were actually standing on the sands and watching the dragonets come your way, they looked plenty large enough.

Queen eggs, though, always waited to hatch, as if the dragonets inside wanted to be sure that everyone's full attention was on them.

Revanne was looking over towards the larger group of boys, and the brown, blue and green hatchlings moving unsteadily towards them, when she heard a gasp from down the row of girls. She turned her attention back as she heard Irineth croon, the sound somehow both urgent and immensely self-satisfied, and she realized that there was ripple of movement from the watching bronzes, avidly awaiting the hatching of a new queen, as well.

As if in response to Irineth's summons, the gold egg twitched and rolled slightly. It settled, then twitched again, and suddenly a quarter of it gave way under a powerful kick. There was a convulsion, as if the hatchling inside had spotted daylight and wanted to put her nose through the hole her hind foot had made, and then the cracks were spreading

and the egg split into three larger pieces and many smaller ones, falling away.

The little gold was half-turned away from the girls, and when Irineth crooned again, her over-sized head turned to look up at the big queen. Seeming to get the correct idea in another moment, her head swayed around drunkenly on her too-thin neck, and she kicked absently with one of her hind feet at a few remaining pieces of clinging shell before getting all her legs under her and beginning to move.

Revanne was at the end of the line of girls, closest to where the boys had been standing, and when the gold dragonet lurched into motion it was more or less in the direction of the middle of the line. Her head was constantly swinging from side to side, as if surveying her options, and while Revanne kept her eyes steadily on the little queen, she was aware of the varying reactions of the other girls. None of them were frightened - none were last-minute Searches and all had been quite thoroughly trained, and Revanne and a few experienced others had made sure to prepare the newest - but several were visibly nervous.

Josina, another veteran of that last hatching, was standing with her hands clasped in front of her, as if she were just about to recite a lesson for the Weyrilingmaster. Amilla, a holdbred girl from some far-away place on Island River, was twisting the hem of her robe between her fingers, putting creases into the linen. Serike, two down in the line from Revanne, was muttering under her breath, not loud enough to hear, but her lips were moving.

It seemed to Revanne that the little gold was taking her time. Certainly compared to Sirith's hatching, this one was a great deal less purposeful in her march along the line of candidates. She was an even paler color than Sirith had been, a pearly, creamy gold that, when clean, would positively gleam.

The dragonet finally stopped in front of Elounda, and the dark-skinned weyrbred girl, the youngest of the candidates, started to kneel, but then with a snort the gold picked herself up and started walking again. Revanne almost felt sorry for poor Elounda, but knew the girl might have many more chances to Impress. Who knew? She might even find a green, as Bressa had at the Hatching three Turns before.

The gold had started at the middle of the line and then turned to her right, and that left at least half the girls at her back and unconsidered. Revanne could see a variety of reactions - dismay, disappointment, confusion. They hadn't seen as many Hatchings as she had, hadn't seen a dragonet exhaust possibilities in one direction only to double back and try again in another. The little queen might still go along to the end of the line, all the way to Revanne, and not find what she was looking for.

The dragonet did not even look up at Yelemei, and she glanced at Caryli, pausing with one forefoot upraised before moving on. Serike merited a longer scrutiny, and the girl fell quiet, her body leaning forward towards the young queen, almost imploring, before slumping in defeat when the dragonet continued. That left only Kirissa, a seaholder's

daughter who Revanne had thought a little too fond of looking down her nose at the rest of them, between her and the gold's scrutiny. 'Oh, please,' she found herself thinking, 'whatever you do, don't pick that rank-happy little wherry...'

The little queen didn't, passing by the flaxen-haired girl and raising her head with a questioning croon. 'And now,' thought Revanne, 'you'll have to turn round do the entire line over again -'

Why should I turn around? You are right here, a puzzled voice told her, and all of a sudden Revanne's legs wouldn't hold her and she sank down onto her knees in the hot sand, and it seemed as if the entire world around her had disappeared except for a whirling pair of opalescent eyes.

You do not want me to go? the same voice asked, anxiously, and Revanne leaned forward, hardly having to do so at all as the dragonet came closer, running her hands along the curve of the pearly-golden neck.

"No, no dearest, no, I don't want you to go," she half-laughed, knowing that she was crying and unable to help herself. "I just wasn't expecting you to want *me* -"

You are my rider, of course I want you, said the little queen, with the firmness of unassailable draconic logic, and Revanne laughed again.

"Of course," she agreed.

And she knew even without words that Orylath was hungry, because suddenly that hunger was her own, and the little gold's name was in her mind before she had even thought to ask for it. Revanne stood up slowly, and Orylath leaned against her and supported her, and she brushed sand from her knees briskly, starting to notice the activity around her again.

Where is the food? the hatchling asked, with a surge of impatience that Revanne also felt, and she felt herself smiling indulgently down at her dragon - *her dragon*, she realized, with a start. Hers.

Unexpected, unplanned-for. Revanne also realized, suddenly, that from here on, her life would be completely different, not at all what she had worked and prepared for. Orylath had suddenly turned all her plans and expectations on their heads.

Then she looked down into those radiant eyes, and the only thing she could think was that yes, this was as it should be. Everything up until now had only been a prelude to this perfect, wonderful, miraculous moment.

"The food is this way, dearest," Revanne said aloud, nudging the gold dragonet with her hip and with her mind. "Come along."



Alstan slowly made his way through the Hatching Feast throng, nodding and smiling and letting himself be caught by one guest after another. The role of the Weyrsinger at such gatherings was to circulate and gauge the mood of the crowd as much as it was to entertain and inform, and today's Hatching, with its queen egg and its politically charged atmosphere, was providing a rich seam of information.

Glancing across the Weyrhall while nodding politely at the latest guest to demand his attention -- a minor Holder whose klah crop was evidently suffering a bad case of rootblight -- the harper could see Kadana holding court in a corner. She was surrounded, as ever, by an eager pack of bronzeriders whose cords told of varying ranks and allegiances, each an increasingly hopeful contender for the Weyrleadership of Barrier Mountain. It had escaped no-one's notice that today had marked Irineth's last Hatching at Southern -- her next clutch would be both conceived and laid in the great caldera that housed the South's newest Weyr, its sire winning more for his rider than mere bragging rights. That the queen had provided her golden own replacement before her departure was seen as a good omen for the future and a fitting farewell to the site that had been her home for more than a decade.

The approach of the Holder's wife and son -- the boy now a bluerider, it seemed -- allowed Alstan to escape hearing more tales of agricultural woe, and he made his way across to the drinks table in search of refreshment. Chaurdia, who had transferred to Southern from Fort just a few months earlier, was already there, and Alstan grinned at her as he took a cup of chilled globefruit juice. "I trust that you're enjoying yourself, Goldrider?"

Southern's new Weyrwoman-second chuckled softly. "It's quite the spectacle, but then queen eggs always bring out the best in a Weyr's hospitality, I find."

"Well, they bring in the greatest number of spectators and we wouldn't want to disappoint the masses!"

"And the masses just keep on growing in the South..." Chaurdia smiled and looked across to where Kadana was earnestly discussing something with D'was of Telgar and An'zer of Benden. "No wonder we need another Weyr to protect them all. Not that I'd want to go to Barrier Mountain myself -- far too cold. Leinath and I have decided that we are definitely warm-weather creatures."

"Yes, I believe young Tesai said much the same of herself. She was wasn't entirely pleased when you agreed to the exchange -- Fort's not as bad as High Reaches, but they still get snow in the winter. Still, I'm sure she'll adapt soon enough." Alstan shook his head. "So strange to think that her Sirith was the last queen we had hatch here at Southern - - I don't know where the time goes..."

"And that from a youngster like you!" the goldrider said with a snort. "You wait until you have my Turns, Weyrsinger, and *then* you can talk about time flying by!"

Alstan took a sip of his juice, his gaze straying across to where a dark-haired young woman, her face uncharacteristically animated, was deep in conversation with Weyrsmith Baldis. "It's going to be strange to think of Revanne as a queenrider," he said. "She's been around for so long as a Smith. Baldis is going to be sorry to lose her."

Chaurdia snorted softly. "The Smithcraft is no place for a woman," she opined.

"I wouldn't let Revanne hear you say that," Alstan told her, smiling into his cup. "Or Baldis for that matter."

"A moot point," the goldrider said, with a graceful sweep of her wine glass. "The girl is a dragonrider now and *that* it all that matters."

"True enough," Alstan murmured as Chaurdia moved off through the crowd, almost immediately being snared by a man whose cords showed him to be from one of the newer, more southerly holdings. Whatever Revanne's achievements in her Craft, they were now secondary to her role as a weyrling and a queenrider... and the harper could just *imagine* how the forthright young woman would react to having to work alongside Vivia on a regular basis. That would be something worth looking out for....

"*Juice*, Alstan? You're letting the side down, you know!"

"I'm trying to decipher the political complexities of the Southern Continent, Ves -- I need a clear head."

"Tut, and after I made sure to get the good stuff out too...." Vesoz paused on his way towards the kitchens and grinned at his friend. "Still, if you won't drink the wine, I'm sure that someone will."

Alstan chuckled. "I don't see you drinking it either, you know."

"Yeah, well, I need a clear head too, alas," Vesoz said, not looking terribly disappointed. "I've got *responsibilities* now, you know!"

"Yes, how is that going?" the harper asked, noting the solidly green cords pinned to the younger man's shoulder. Vesoz had been promoted to headsecond just days before, taking the place of the retiring Henrala, and was still quite intensely pleased with himself. There had been a few raised eyebrows at Headwoman Ima's choice for her new assistant but Alstan hadn't been overly surprised -- for all his occasionally scattered moments and odd sense of humour, Vesoz was a hard worker with a good head for numbers.

"Not too bad." Vesoz ran a hand back through his hair. "It's different, doing things from this end, having to worry about what everybody *else* is doing."

"Makes a change from just worrying about what your brother is doing, hmm?" Alstan inquired innocently.

Vesoz frowned at him. "As if *he's* not giving me enough to worry about as it is! You know that Jal wants to try for Barrier Mountain?"

"I can't say that I'm entirely surprised," Alstan said slowly. "Jhanos is an ambitious man --"

"But *Kadana*?"

"Kadana there or L'tan here...."

"Oh, don't remind me...." Vesoz groaned. "Yashelth finally decides she fancies a change of mate and she picks bloody Aneth. It's all I've heard about for the last two months."

Alstan smiled. "I think that might be overstating the case slightly."

"Not by much." Vesoz shook his head despairingly. "But *Barrier Mountain*? Weyrleaders change but I get the feeling that Kadana will be eternal down in her little patch of Pern. It's bloody cold down there, too. *And* it's landlocked."

"You don't have to go with him if he wins, you know."

Vesoz gave the harper the look that comment deserved. "I suppose I should be grateful he's not over there trying to crawl into Kadana's lap like some of them seem to be doing...." He sighed, then brightened. "Still, if he doesn't win, it means we get to stay here with no Kadana!"

"I'll hope for abject failure then, shall I?" Alstan said with a chuckle. He downed the last of his juice and looked around, spotting the Rubicon Holder speaking with the familiar form of Enril. Southern Hold's harper was looking a little greyer these days, but his mind -- and his tongue -- was still as sharp as ever and Alstan would need to speak to him before the day was done. "Right," he said, putting his cup down on the table. "Duty calls...."

"That it does," Vesoz said, grinning as he glanced at the cords on his shoulder once more. "I'd better get back to the cooks before it all goes to pieces in there!"

The Weyrsinger shook his head in bemusement as Southern Weyr's newest headsecond disappeared into the kitchens -- it looked as though getting a little rank of his own might just do Vesoz the world of good. Then the Paradise River Lord was bearing down on him and Alstan had his own responsibilities to concern himself with for a while.



Genna stood outside the Weyrhall and watched as the last of the Hatching guests departed, carried between on the wings of those pairs assigned to passenger duty. The day had been a long one, but it had also been successful to the Weyrwoman's experienced eye, not least because of the birth of a healthy young queen. There were those in the North who noted that Irineth's departure left Southern without a full-Benden gold, but Genna refused to see that as a problem -- she was content with the bloodlines she had at her disposal and she approved of young Orylath's choice of rider. Revanne was a bright, no-nonsense woman who had already made a place for herself in the Weyr, a levelheaded sort who would help to balance out Vivia and provide a voice of reason when Dunia finally left for her mysterious future.

Thought of Dunia gave Genna pause. Her Weyrwoman-third was showing the curve of her pregnancy now, the growing child merely the latest thing to tie her to Southern for a little longer. There were days when Genna doubted that the younger goldrider ever would leave the Ninth Pass -- she was settled with a family, after all, with a trusted position in the Weyr's leadership. Corsan had made master two Turns before and was helping Renthic to train the next generation of dragonhealers, and their two girls were a firm part of the ever-growing pack of cousins that their father's siblings had provided. With everything so comfortable for her, there seemed little reason why Dunia would want to leave... but leaving was the one thing that she had always been determined to do, right from the moment she had first regained consciousness, so many Turns before.

Genna supposed that she could understand the need to *belong*, but Dunia had now been in the Ninth Pass for far longer than she had been a Tenth Pass rider, and Weyrwoman thought that after so much time she might have as much trouble adapting back to her old home as Corsan would adapting to his new one.

Maybe the following Turn would finally see Nioranth and her rider on their way... but Genna rather suspected that yet another reason to remain might just raise its head before any plan could be put into action.

Footsteps sounded behind her and Genna turned to see her Weyrleader approaching. It was strange to think of anyone other than K'med or T'del in the role, but it had been L'tan's bronze Aneth who had won Yashelth's last flight and pushed the two older men back to being mere wingleaders. L'tan was not, perhaps, the tallest or the most... *imaginative* of men, but he was a solid enough leader and sufficiently square of jaw and broad of shoulder to fulfil most holder expectations of what a Weyrleader should look like. Genna doubted that he would last beyond the next flight but his elevation would at least serve to teach K'med and T'del not to be too complacent about their positions....

"I think that went rather well, don't you, Weyrwoman?" L'tan said, coming to a halt beside her. "A shame to lose Kadana to Barrier Mountain, but Orylath looks to be a fine young thing!"

"I think that poor Baldis is in shock at her choice, but he always knew that Revanne came to us as a candidate and the Smithcraft's loss is the Queens' Wing's gain." Genna smiled. "Revanne will make a good replacement for Kadana."

L'tan nodded. "A fine parting gift to us indeed. And three new bronzes as well!"

"And two more female greenriders." The young, weyrbred Elounda and the older, holder-born Caryli had both been chased down by greens as they turned to leave the sands, Elounda accepting her Kventh joyfully, while Maith had needed to pursue her intended rider almost out of the Grounds before finally Impressing. "There seem to be more and more of those each Turn...."

The Weyrleader shook his head. "No offence to the girls, Weyrwoman, but it's not natural, girls riding fighting dragons. Threadfighting is a dangerous business, best left to the men."

"Well, the dragons seem to think it's nothing remarkable, and I won't argue with their opinion," Genna said, turning to go back into the Weyrhall and the sounds of music still coming from within -- the guests might have left but the weyrfolk still had some celebrating to do. "And it's not as though the Pass will be with us for much longer."

"That's true," L'tan murmured, following his Weyrwoman. "But this Pass won't be the last, no matter what the holders think -- Dunia is living proof of that. We can't allow the traditional ways to be thrown aside!"

"Now you're sounding like old V'harn," Genna said with a smile. "I think that the future will rather take care of itself, no matter what we do, and I for one am rather looking forward to seeing the end of *this* Pass. Dunia can flit away

to the Tenth if she wants, but *I* think that one Pass is *more* than enough for any one lifetime!"

"I suspect that you may be right about that, Weyrwoman," L'tan said with a sigh, but there was a look on his face that made Genna suspect that he wouldn't object to accompanying Dunia and hunting Thread in a new century. Of course, she reminded herself, it wasn't as though bronzes picked their riders for their self-preservation instincts....

"I know I'm right," she said, stepping back into the Hall just as the harpers started on a lively dance tune. "And this lifetime's not yet done, Weyrleader. Let's enjoy it while we can."



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