
Weyrleaders' Conclave

by Amanda Kear

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Life settled into a comfortable routine. At times Dunia could almost forget that she had not been at Southern Weyr all her life. At times she could forget the people of Kadanzer, or the destruction that awaited those who lived here.

She and Nioranth fought Thread, rose in mating flights and clutched big strong eggs, performed their duties as weyrwoman-fourth efficiently and well. Teshea was glad to have her here as a buffer between herself and the maddeningly bubbly Vivia. Her relationship with Corsan was comfortable and loving, and little Farny was bright as a button. And with only one Lord Holder to deal with – irascible as he was – the political life of the Weyr was oh so much less complicated.

Dunia would be content to stay here forever, if it were possible. Stay here and never have to brave the terrors of a series of jumps *between* times. Stay here and never have to wake up in panic from yet another nightmare that she had started the journey and mis-jumped again...

But history kept rearing its ugly head and reminding her that she was an interloper in this time. Throughout 2434 there had been meetings about the construction of a new Weyr for the southern continent. Now the Barrier Mountain Weyr site had been chosen, and the first surveys prior to the excavation of weyrs and lower caverns had begun. She had visited the site with Genna and the other Southern goldriders, and it was an eerie feeling, to see the volcano without any sign of human habitation marking its caldera.

Junior goldriders who wished to be considered for the post of Barrier Mountain's first Weyrwoman had been asked to put their names forward. Weyrleaders and Weyrwomen were compiling reports for each other on the suitability of any applicants from their own Weyrs, and had whittled the list down to eight aspirants. Vivia was one of the disappointed rejects, although both Teshea and Kadana of Southern Weyr were being considered. The southern continent may be thankfully absent of fairs of bickering Lord Holders, but its gathers were now marked by a considerable degree of politicking between gold and bronze riders, as all the potential weyrwomen of Barrier Mountain sought to descend on Southern Hold's lands as often as possible 'to get to know the territory and people'.

From her vantage point of the other end of history, Dunia could watch with detachment as the goldriders manoeuvred for position and tried to gain influence amongst the various Weyrleaders who would make the final choice. Their strategies were complicated, of course, by the fact that – barring accidents – the Weyrwomen would retain their position, but the Weyrleaders might be replaced at the next mating flight. Some of the goldriders therefore concentrated more of their efforts on impressing the Weyrwomen, whilst others spread their nets wider and hoped that 'their' Weyrleader was still in place when the day came.

The bronzeriders too, were maneuvering. Once the Weyrwoman had been chosen, it would be an open flight to decide the Weyrleader. Ambitious bronzeriders from all over both continents were trying to become memorable to all the weyrwoman-applicants, not knowing as yet who to throw all their efforts into sweet talking. Their antics sometimes reduced Dunia to inappropriate fits of giggles.

2436 dawned and within a few days Dunia realised that she was pregnant again. She must have caught at Nioranth's final mating flight of 2435 or shortly afterwards. The horror of the tsunami was still turns away, and Corsan was convinced that this too must be his child, so she took the decision to keep it. After all, what difference was another turn or two going to matter?

She was happy here. She would stay a little while longer.



2436.08.03, Fort Weyr

Nioranth landed delicately on the Weyrwoman's ledge at Fort Weyr beside Kadana's Irineth and Dunia thanked her for her consideration. The rest of the Southern Weyr contingent had landed in the bowl and would make their way up the stairs, but in Dunia's advanced state of pregnancy, she would rather do without tackling such a climb unless she absolutely had to. When she had been carrying little Farny, things had been relatively easy. However, after a hopeful start of minimal morning sickness, *this* baby was proving to be more of a burden. Add to that an energetic mating flight only a sevenday past, and Dunia's body was feeling rather abused at the moment. Steep stairs were not on her agenda for this meeting!

For a moment Dunia sat on Nioranth's back, watching Kadana dismount from Irineth. *That* one wasn't pregnant, so had no excuse for landing on the ledge, apart from a pressing need to throw herself into the pre-meeting fray as soon as possible. Oh, but she was *so* determined to wheedle, cajole and politic her way into the Weyrwoman'ship of the as-yet-unfinished Barrier Mountain Weyr. Dunia's dislike of the woman warred with the knowledge that she *would* succeed in her goal and Barrier Mountain would prosper. Strangling Kadana might be tempting, but was unfortunately not possible if Kadanzer's history was to follow its predestined path.

Dunia sat a moment more, then doggedly threw herself into the graceless struggle that her eight month pregnancy made of getting on and off her dragon. The gold assisted as best she could, hunkering down and angling her forelimb to make the descent less of an effort in mountaineering.

Thank Faranth they decided to have the Conclave now, and not in a few more sevendays!

The dragons from Telgar are here. Nioranth glanced up at the shapes that had blinked into the air far above them. ***Tofath's rider asks what is the delay? He wishes me to move so that he and Orguth may land here.*** Irineth was already in the air again, soaring down toward the Fort Weyr lake.

She gave an irritated grunt. Telgar's Weyrleader was too impatient by far. *Tell Tofath's rider that when HE is eight months pregnant HE may criticise my speed in dismounting, and not before.* Dunia slid gently down the last few feet to the solid rock of the ledge.

Tofath's rider says that no-one has ever managed to get him pregnant, but you are welcome to try. Nioranth transmitted this deadpan, giving Dunia no clue as to whether she understood the comment.

She gave another irritable grunt and patted Nioranth's leg before walking away to give the queen wingroom to take off. My, but was she cranky today. Anyone would think that Nioranth was near to rising, instead of a sevenday past that particular event. Better get a lid on her mood and try to be as pleasant as possible. After all, she had to pretend that she didn't already know the result of today's meeting to decide who would be Weyrwoman of the new Weyr when it finally opened.

Just like she had to pretend that she didn't know it would be that squeaky-voiced, self-satisfied wherry of a Benden bronzerider An'zer, who would win the first mating flight and become Barrier Mountain's first Weyrleader. Gah – he and Kadana deserved each other, they really did!

That selfsame Kadana was just ahead of her in the tunnel that led to Margatta and Luduth's weyr and Fort's council room. Her plump figure was gesticulating wildly as she described something to two of Fort Weyr's junior queenriders, obviously there to greet the various gold and bronzeriders as they arrived. One of them – Lysette, also in the running for the Barrier Mountain post – spotted Dunia's slow approach and curtly excused herself from Kadana. She trotted along to the pregnant woman and offered an arm. "Back trouble?" she queried, with a sympathetic smile.

"And then some," said Dunia. She felt like an old auntie leaning on the other woman's arm, but accepted the help with a smile. At least Lysette had some degree of courteous sympathy, unlike Kadana. "I think this one must be at least triplets, from the way I'm growing."

Lysette's smile broadened. "Ah, I was convinced I was going to lay a gold egg, the way my first one felt. Dragons have it easy."

"Don't they just!"

Ahead of them, Kadana had stopped haranguing the other Fort goldrider and was just disappearing from view

into the council room. Behind, Dunia could hear the voices of G'lish and Ildina, Telgar's Weyrleaders. A glance back showed them and Telgar's brownrider Weyrsecond striding up the tunnel. She patted Lysette on the arm. "I'm fine from here. You'd better go and do the meet and greet, or Ildina will be complaining about being ignored in favour of a mere Weyrwoman-fourth."

The council room was crowded, this being the one last chance for the competing queenriders to impress the collected Weyrleaders and Weyrwomen before they met in Conclave. And more than a few wingleaders appeared to have the need to put their oar in, too. The place was a throng of bronzeriders and goldriders, more than a few decked out in their gather best. Kadana had – as expected – homed in on the Benden Weyrleaders like a firelizard to free food. Benden had a young goldrider, Tahaele, who was in the running, but they also favoured Kadana and that full-blood Benden monster that she rode.

Fort's Weyrwoman-third, Chaurdia, was sitting at the table talking to Weyrleader Ch'hem of Eastern and his Weyrsecond, D'nolt, but rose from her seat and beckoned Dunia over. "Sit down, child. Would you like wine? We have Tillek white or a Benden red."

"Ah, there goes Fort again," said Ch'hem with a grin. "Making us Southern Continent visitors feel inadequate by offering her seat before we've even noticed the lady is there." He offered his own chair with a flourish. "I believe the cushion on this one is far superior to that one."

"And nicely warmed by his large backside, no doubt," said Chaurdia tartly. Ch'hem was her cousin or half-brother – Dunia couldn't remember which – and the pair had dedicated as much time to bickering as to politics in every meeting that Dunia had attended concerning the Barrier Mountain leadership.

"Thank you," she said to the pair of them. She settled herself gratefully into Ch'hem's chair, glad to take the weight off her feet, and smiled at Chaurdia. "Tillek white would be lovely, thank you." There, that ought to keep both of them happy.

"So, any thoughts on who the conclave will choose?" D'nolt asked in too innocent a tone, as Chaurdia went to fetch the wine.

Dunia let out a long-suffering sigh. Being regarded as some sort of oracle was very wearing. She fixed the Weyrsecond with a stern gaze. "If I knew – and I am *not* saying that I do – then I would not be telling every bronzerider who asked. You are, I think, the twelfth to date who has enquired."

Ch'hem snorted. D'nolt tried to look the picture of wounded innocence. "But Dunia," he said, "Think how much time we could save here. No long, tedious meeting to wait out while our esteemed Weyrleaders debate the issue. Go straight to the heart of the matter."

"Go straight to lay down a bet, more like," retorted Dunia. She softened her expression to smile thanks at Chaurdia as she returned with a generous cup of white.

Ch'hem burst out laughing, attracting stares from several of those nearby. He wagged a finger at his Weyrsecond. "Ah, she hardly knows you and she has the cut of your cloth already, D'nolt!"

D'nolt looked unrepentant, but decided to beat a retreat as the Telgar delegation and the rest of Southern's attendees entered the council room, making the place suddenly even more crowded. G'lish of Telgar buttonholed the Fort Weyrleader, to loudly demand when the meeting proper would start and then to grumble at N'ton's reply that the Istans were not yet here. As people pressed forward to exchange greetings and get themselves wine, a blue firelizard rose from where it had been perched on the central table and zipped about the room, causing annoyed glares. Abruptly it gave an alarmed squeak and vanished *between*.

"Heh! Someone's queen told the little pest what for, no doubt. I told Eralille not to bring it, but does she listen?" T'div of Igen slid neatly into the chair that D'nolt had vacated. "Eastern. Goldriders." The dark-skinned young man nodded his greeting to them all. "So, how is Southern looking after those dragons of ours? Your dragonhealers still working their miracles?"

Dunia paused a second to recall what the last dragonhealer report had said on the matter of Igen riders in the recuperation Wing. "Atinonth will fly again, although she will not be fighting Thread for another month or two yet. Swanth will be fully fit at about the same time. Eultho has more scar tissue than membrane on his left wing, but Master Renthic believes he will regain full mobility in time. Isilth... it is really too early to tell."

T'div winced at that last comment, but nodded in understanding. "Well, please pass on my thanks to Master Renthic and his fellows." He turned his attention to the Fort goldrider. "So Chaurdia, how do you fancy your chances against our Eralille, then?"

"Well, I'm betting that it was one of the Benden queens who just squashed her flutter, so I'm thinking their support for her may be lacking..."

The others bantered this way for a time and then excused themselves to talk to others. Dunia sat and sipped her wine and let people circulate around her. There were eight candidates for the Weyrwoman's position at Barrier Mountain. Teshea and Kadana from Southern, Lysette and Chaurdia from Fort, the diminutive Zemuna from High Reaches, young Tahaelle from Benden, Eralille from Igen, and Lisammi from Ista. None of the goldriders from Telgar and Eastern had put themselves forward for the job, so the support of their Weyrleaders was being heavily courted by several of the candidates. Certainly if Kadana could bear to tear herself away from the Benden Weyrleader for a moment – and from the scowl on the Benden Weyrwoman's face she might find her departure assisted with the toe of a boot – then she would likely pounce on G'lish of Telgar and bend his ear about her worthiness. Teshea had impressed at High Reaches, so there was speculation that if their Zemuna did not receive favour, they would throw their backing behind Teshea as their second choice.

The Ista Weyrleaders are here, Nioranth informed her, just as she was thinking of getting up to see if there was any redfruit juice to drink. The healers and Corsan would disapprove mightily if she drank wine all day.

A general stir about the chamber showed that the rest of the gathering were also aware of the Istans arrival. "About time[,] too," grumbled G'lish.

"Yes," muttered Dunia to herself. "Anyone would think that they'd been fighting Thread only seven hours ago, or something." The logistics of finding a day when none of the Weyrs were fighting 'Fall and everyone was sufficiently rested had proved tricky. The first date that had been picked had gone by the wayside when Yashelth chose to rise a couple of sevendays earlier than Genna was expecting her to. Not to mention the fact that she was caught by Suloth rather than Lorth, so T'del had once more replaced K'med as Southern's Weyrleader.

"Now, Dunia – behave." As if summoned by her thought, K'med appeared at her elbow, a cup of juice in his hand. He squatted down beside her chair and offered the cup to her.

"Ah, just what I wanted!" She smiled and took the juice. "I swear sometimes, K'med, that you can Hear All Goldriders."

"Fortunately not, given the present company," he replied.

K'med was now acting as T'del's Weyrsecond – a position that the pair took turns at as and when Yashelth picked one of their bronzes over the other. It was an arrangement that both men seemed happy with. "So are you annoyed or relieved that the ones who were so anxious to speak to you a few sevendays ago are now chasing T'del instead?" she asked.

He looked aggrieved. "That doesn't bother me so much as all the wretched note-taking I did these past months. I have enough hides to cover a dragon, all with my scribbles on the good and bad points of all the goldriders who wanted to be considered. T'del has barely glanced at them. Says he can keep it all in his head and doesn't need 'em. Ah, here's Ista." K'med straightened up as G'dened, Cosira and Lisammi entered the chamber. He glanced at Dunia. "They'll be starting the meeting shortly, or G'lish will drive everyone to distraction. Do you want to get a head start on the stairs, or call for Nioranth to ferry you to the Weyrhall?"

"I'll walk, thanks. Down is easier than up, although an arm to lean on would be appreciated." Dunia stood up and took the bronzerider's arm, her other hand still clutching the cup of juice. They made their way slowly through the throng of people, pausing to greet the Istans, and then headed for the stairs that led from the landing ledge down towards the bowl.



Although the steep walls of Fort Weyr kept much of the summer sunshine from penetrating the bowl, there was currently a bright patch of sunlight warming the area outside

the entrance to the Lower Caverns. The support staff had brought out chairs and benches from the Main Hall and Dunia and K'med had just got themselves settled there with a group of Fort wingriders, when the rest of the junior goldriders, Weyrseconds and other bronzeriders began to drift out of Luduth's weyr and down the stairs.

"Looks like it's started, then," remarked K'med. "I'm going to snag a couple of meatrolls from the hearth before the hordes get here. Do you want something?"

"Yes, that would be nice," Dunia said absently. Her baby had decided to kick, and she wondered if gold dragons ever felt any movement from their offspring before they encased their eggs in shells and laid them. She must ask Nioranth when she was near to clutching.

The atmosphere was different now, the hopeful goldriders no longer able to influence the Weyrleaders' decisions. Dunia and K'med amused themselves observing which were practically gnawing their fingernails to the quick over the wait, and which were using the delay as a chance to relax and socialize. Kadana was very much in the former group, whilst Teshea favoured the latter. Vivia annoyed the pair of them by flitting to and fro between them, speculating excitedly about who might be chosen.

The sun had very nearly moved round enough to put their chosen seats in shadow when there was a sudden hush. Dunia looked round to see the assembled Weyrleaders descending from the council chamber. Dragons sunning themselves on various ledges and heights around the Weyr roused in sudden interest. Riders began to drift out of the Lower Caverns.

K'med gave an amused snort. "I think N'ton intended to make the announcement in the Main Hall. Looks like he's going to get ambushed before he gets there."

N'ton strode into the midst of the assembled throng, and held up his hand for silence. Dunia stood up and tried to feign the interested excitement that the rest of the crowd radiated. Ah well, at least her pregnancy would be an ideal excuse to leave the celebrations early. She suspected that Kadana's jubilation would not be a pretty sight.

N'ton's voice rang out clearly in the sudden stillness of the bowl. "It is the decision of the assembled Weyrleaders that the senior Weyrwoman of Barrier Mountain Weyr shall be – Teshea, gold Elnath's rider of Southern Weyr!"

Teshea? Dunia almost fell rather than sat back down into her chair as the crowd cheered the news. She could feel the blood drain from her face and her breath become short and panicky. It couldn't be Teshea – it just couldn't be! It had to be Kadana! Kadana and An'zer – Kadanzer Weyr.

Oh shards, what had she done? She must have changed something! Something she had said, or done had influenced one of the Weyrleaders or maybe affected Kadana or Teshea themselves.

Teshea was Weyrwoman – history was all wrong.

"Dunia, are you all right?" K'med had noticed her distress. His face was full of sudden concern. "What's the matter?"

"I – I—" She floundered, not knowing what to do, and grasping for the comforting presence of Nioranth. *You've chosen the wrong person!* she wanted to shout. *It has to be Kadana!* But if she told them, would that change other things? Would that mess up time even more? How could she know what would change things and what wouldn't until *after* she had done them?

"Is it the baby?" K'med, bless him, had jumped to the wrong conclusion. Dunia grasped at the lifeline it offered.

She nodded and wrapped her arms protectively around her belly. "Yes. Contraction – it just took me by surprise. I'm sure it's nothing."

"Nothing, my arse. You're white as a sheet, girl." K'med scowled at her in a fatherly way and barked at one of the nearby Fort riders who was also looking at her in concern: "Brownrider, get your dragon to tell your healers that our goldrider here needs to see them right away."

Dunia sat quiet and let them fuss over her, let them escort her to the Fort Weyr's healers and told them that she had just experienced an unexpected contraction. Another lie, to add to the many that she had already told. The lies that hadn't worked, if Teshea was now to be Weyrwoman of Barrier Mountain. She let the healers examine her and advise that she stay the night here at Fort before going back *between* to Southern. She agreed that she should let her own healers check on her every day for the next few sevendays. She heartily acquiesced to the suggestion that she rest and not join in the celebration that was now going on.

And then she lay in a strange bed in a strange weyr and wondered what distorted version of history she and Nioranth would find when they traveled forward to the future.



Kadanzer Weyr

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