
Weyrwoman-Second

(Part One)

by Amanda Kear

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Nioranth back-winged neatly and settled into the Gather Square by the Weyrcrafters' building, by Ihyanith's side. Amisseth followed, landing to their rear. Dunia heaved a sigh of relief and pulled off her flying helmet with one hand – the other still wielding the wand of her flamethrower.

We fought Thread, said Nioranth smugly. *We fought Thread well.*

Indeed we did, dearest. However wearying the actual 'Fall was, it was a blessed relief to be through her re-training and an active part of the Queens' Wing again. Nioranth had been insufferable while they had been restricted to the training exercises that had been necessary for all those from the Ninth Pass. Doubly insufferable, as the queen had been the furthest behind in her re-training, because she had spent their first few sevendays after returning on the Hatching Grounds. Queens, in Nioranth's modest opinion, should not have to train at all. They should tell everyone else what to do!

Two apprentice smiths ran to Nioranth's side. The younger - a boy - looked a bit skittish about approaching this close to so many queens. Dunia smiled at the pair, albeit rather wearily, as she unstrapped her flamethrower and lowered it down to them. "No problems to report," she said. "My compliments to Journeyman Kason."

"Thank you, goldrider." The elder apprentice bobbed a bow, and then the pair headed toward the storage area for the flamethrowers, one bearing the weight of the tanks and the other holding the awkwardly long wand so that it did not catch on the ground or bump into the dragons that towered above them.

Ihyanith's rider wishes to speak with you, Nioranth informed her. *I tell Ihyanith that I need you to bathe me first.*

Dunia looked over to where Lybelle sat astride her egg-heavy gold, suddenly prickling with an irrational fear that the Weyrwoman had found fault with their performance today, and would order them back to training. The 'Fall had gone well – not only she and Nioranth, but the whole Wing had performed efficiently.

Lybelle gave her a nod of acknowledgement and called: "After bathing, then!"

Dunia smiled and gave a thumbs up. No faults in their Threadfighting tactics then.

Ihyanith's hindquarters shifted down into a crouch, and then powerful muscles hurled her aloft. Dunia waited until Ihyanith was clear of the air above the Gather Square and all the smiths in the immediate area were at a safe distance, then she instructed Nioranth to take to the air.

The pair winged their way back to her cot and Nioranth alighted in her wallow. Her great golden head swung round to regard her rider as she dismounted. *Hurry. I wish to bathe with the bronzes!*

Dunia smiled. Yes, things were certainly back to normal now.



Savukath had apparently also demanded a bath after Threadfall was over, even though it had been Luka's turn to spend the 'Fall at the Dragonhealer Infirmary. Dunia smiled and waved at her friend as Nioranth plunged into the water to join the younger queen.

"How did the sweeps go?" Luka called.

"Only three burrows," replied Dunia, wading out after her gold. "But all almost on top of Maori Hold, more's the trouble." She wrinkled her nose in a grimace.

"Oh dear! Did Lord Korys kick up a fuss?"

Dunia shrugged, and started to scrub down Nioranth's neck. "Not really. He was his usual gruff self and grumbled a bit, more for show than anything else. I think he secretly enjoys the excuse of burrows to go a-charging about his Hold on horseback."

Luka laughed, and then was distracted from the conversation as she attempted to get Savukath to extend her wing rather than preening it for the trio of nearby bronzes. Dunia tried not to smile. While Nioranth was no less an outrageous flirt, at least she would shift position on command... or at least on a peremptory swat with the scrubbing brush!

She lost herself in the familiar routine of scrubbing her dragon's hide for a time. The day felt... good. Up at the crack of dawn; a 'Fall with no fatalities or serious injuries; and now a couple of hours at the beach with Luka and members of SkyFlight as the sun climbed towards noon. Only her dealings with Lord Korys and the Maori groundcrews introduced an aura of strangeness to the day.

Since her return from the Ninth Pass, Dunia had spent virtually all her time at the Weyr: first because of Nioranth's clutch on the sands, then in re-training. Talking to holders had seemed... odd. Still, it was something she was going to have to get used to again, Dunia supposed. Though if she were honest with herself she would rather put it off. Staying here at the Weyr, surrounded by friends and family who had thought her dead, made the goldrider feel loved and appreciated, and blunted some of the edge from her sorrow over the rift with Corsan, and her guilt at not having been able to save more of Southern's dragonriders.

Two of those surviving Southern dragonriders who now flew with SkyTamer were wading to shore with their

dragons: blueriders B'kal and O'kimos. The former gave her a stare as the pair passed by. O'kimos blanked her completely, although he did incline his head respectfully to both Savukath and Nioranth. Dunia ducked under Nioranth's neck to scrub the other side, pretending she hadn't noticed the slight.

She scoured Nioranth's hide with unnecessary vigour, causing the queen to turn her head and regard her with whirling eyes. *You are upset, rider.*

No, not really. Dunia sent love and reassurance to her bondmate. *I'm just... remembering things. That's all.* Remembering a time when the Ninth Pass riders didn't hate her or cold-shoulder her. *Nioranth, when you next rise, you must promise not to let Vhauth or young Eryth catch you.* It wouldn't happen for months yet, but at the moment the thought of that particular outcome was unbearable.

What is wrong with Vhauth? Nioranth asked. *He is a very fine bronze. A very fine and LARGE bronze. Savukath and Velcroth agree. Eryth is large too, but he is young. Ihyanith says he is too young to catch a queen, but she agrees he is fun to flirt with. Amisseth likes Vhauth, but says that Ulaireth and Rath are also very fine.*

Argh! Was Nioranth passing her comments on to every queen in the Weyr? *What do Orylath and Yttrith think?* Dunia asked sarcastically.

Orylath is sleepy and does not wish to talk, Nioranth said, taking the question literally. *Yttrith is too young to understand about bronzes properly. Ihyanith also points out that there are many large browns. Mulujath is as big as some bronzes,* the queen mused. *But he will not be able to win a flight because of his wing. And I will only let a bronze catch me!*

Nioranth rambled on in this vein for most of the rest of her bath and oiling. Tedious though having a commentary on every bronze in the Weyr was, it did at least serve to shake Dunia from her momentary upset about the Ninth Pass survivors. They were, after all, a very small fragment of the Weyr's population – as demonstrated by Nioranth's seemingly endless litany of bronze names and how fine she and the other queens deemed each to be.



"Ah, Dunia." Lybelle carefully set down her pen as Dunia knocked and stuck her head round the open door of the Weyrwoman's office. "I gather from our gossiping golds that every single bronze in the Weyr has so many admirable qualities it's a wonder that they can bear their collective egos aloft."

Dunia grimaced. "I think I preferred it when Nioranth was sulking about not being able to fly 'Fall."

A snort from Lybelle. "At least we can hope that all this talk of bronzes is a good omen for Nioranth's future fertility. Her journey put a lot of physical stresses on her – and the dragonhealers can't assure me that there will be no long-term effects. All this Weyr needs is another Nicareth!"

A shiver ran through Dunia at the thought that she might have harmed her beloved gold on the horrendous journey

back to the Tenth Pass. It had been an infection that caused Nicareth's infertility – and Nioranth had had plenty of those! She recalled the oozing cracks in the skin that all the dragons had borne by the time they reached Kadanzer. And Nioranth had been egg-heavy to boot.

"Is that what you wanted to talk to me about?" she asked.

Lybelle shook her head. "No. That's a worry – but one that we'll simply have to wait out. I wanted to talk about you getting out and about more with the Holders. You need to get caught up with current politics."

"I've been—" Dunia began.

"Yes, I know that you've been very dutiful in talking to Weyrharper Andrian, Cassidora and Luka, as well as myself, and trying to catch-up that way. But that's all been a bit... academic... up to now. You need to get some experience in the air, not on the drill grounds, so to speak. The odd chat to a Holder at a Hatching isn't enough." Lybelle's face took on a thoughtful frown. "I knew I could trust you with Lord Korys this morning, but I'm still not sure that you're quite ready to deal with a Morgav or a Heln."

Dunia opened her mouth to speak, but Lybelle held up a hand to forestall any comment by the younger rider. "Yes, yes. I know you're not Valenne, to go flying off the handle in front of a prickly Lord Holder. But if you continue to insist on hiding in the Weyr, there are those Lords who'll take it as a sign of weakness. I need a strong Weyrwoman-Second – and one who is *perceived* to be strong."

A nod. "I understand." She felt a twinge of guilt that she'd been neglecting her duties, mixed in with a reluctance to deal with those who might be hostile. The Ninth Passers were bad enough...

"Good. In which case, you can start by attending tomorrow's Gather at Sunstone Hold."

Dunia blinked in surprise. "Tomorrow...?"

"Yes." Lybelle nodded decisively. "Tomorrow. Their watchriders inform me that Lord Kairo and Lord Lomcoli will be there, and that Lord Dracir is thinking of going."

"So you want me to do a bit of politicking...?"

"Oh, more than that! I want you to *enjoy* yourself." Lybelle adopted a stern expression that reminded Dunia momentarily of her mother. "You're too wrapped up in yourself and Kadanzer at the moment. Get yourself back out there. Mix with riders from other Weyr, dance with crafters... sing bawdy ballads with drunken drudges for all I care."

"Um..." she raised an eyebrow in query. "Bawdy ballads?"

A quirk of a smile from Lybelle. "Perhaps not in front of Lord Janol. But just unlock that defensive door of yours and let the world back in. And, to that end, I'm telling Ihyanith that no Ninth Pass riders or crafters can attend."

"Uh..." Dunia didn't quite know how to respond to that.

"What? You think the whole Weyr doesn't know that you and Corsan walk on eggshells around each other. Or that it will be a warm day *between* before some of the survivors forgive you for their survival." The Weyrwoman

shook her head wearily, but whether at Dunia, Corsan or the others, was unclear.

Dunia glanced down at her feet briefly, and then steeled herself to meet Lybelle's gaze again. "I know," she said softly.

"Well, then – time you started dealing with it," said Lybelle emphatically. "Sunstone Hold tomorrow."

She gave a nod. Perhaps Lybelle was right. Perhaps this was what she needed. A trip with her girls – Murgon was too young to take from his foster mother for such a jaunt – would do her good. "I'll take Corsia and Farnya—"

"No!" Lybelle cut across her casual remark sharply. "If you are fussing over them, you may as well stay home. No Lord Holder will take you seriously if you have children tugging at your skirts. This is about status, Dunia – you won't see Lord and Lady Holders wiping the snot from their own offspring's noses. The Weyr has to meet that image and match it."

Resentment briefly flared in the younger woman, mingled with the lingering sadness that she'd had to give up care of her children. But the feeling was transitory – she may prickle at the unfairness of it now and then, but she couldn't deny the reality of being a goldrider. She had a duty. A duty to Nioranth, to the Weyr... to all the people and territory Kadanzer protected.

She gave a curt nod to Lybelle. "I'll be there – for Kadanzer and for myself." She was Dunia, gold Nioranth's rider. Time to act the part.



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Nioranth emerged from *between* high above the white granite edifice that was Sunstone Hold. *Skith greets us*, said Nioranth, naming Sunstone's current watchdragon. *He tells me which field to land in, and where the best bathing spots along the river are.*

Tell H'sark that I'll exchange a turn on the dance floor for a catch-up on Hold gossip, Dunia said, as Nioranth banked and began her descent. Terianth, Iveth and Quarith had travelled with them, but courteously gave Nioranth the wing-room to be first to spiral down to the pasture that had been designated as a landing site. Dunia's firelizard, Balt, blinked into view above Nioranth's neck and squeaked happily, following her down.

Skith says his rider says he will be delighted, Nioranth replied. Gold Darlath and bronze Rolenth of Eastern Weyr are here. Their riders send greetings.

Dunia could see the gleam of gold amongst the dragons who sprawled indolently on the riverbank. *Return the greeting please, Nioranth, and say I'll see them soon.*

The air at Sunstone Hold was a lot less humid than that of Kadanzer Weyr. It looked to be a pleasantly warm day. The best sort of Gather weather: not too hot for dancing, not too chilled that people would huddle in shelter instead of browsing the traders' stalls. Nioranth back-winged and settled lightly down in a pasture quite some distance from

the main entrance to the Hold. Bronze Terianth made his own landing next to them as Dunia dismounted and removed her flying jacket and helmet. She ran a comb quickly through her hair, as K'yrel dismounted.

Do you want to bathe? she asked her gold. *Will I remove your straps?*

No, said Nioranth. *I shall lie in the sun.*

Dunia patted her bondmate affectionately on the flank and secured her jacket and helmet to the straps. *Well, off with you then.*

Wingsecond K'yrel ducked slightly at the backwash of air from Nioranth and Terianth's take off, and then offered his arm to Dunia. Further down the field Iveth and Quarith were disembarking passengers. Dunia had decided that – if she was going to cultivate the sort of image Lybelle desired her Weyrwoman-Second to have – then to have Nioranth turn up laden like a packbeast was not a good way to start. So, much as she would have liked to transport her brother Petair, or Headsecond Danissa and her foster-daughter Dwayana, today they were relegated to travelling by Tildy's green and R'san's blue.

Dunia took K'yrel's proffered arm with a smile. "Well, Wingsecond, shall we a-gathering go?" she asked cheerily.

K'yrel smiled back. Flightleader R'mal had regretfully declined Dunia's polite enquiry as to whether he wished to be her escort to the Sunstone Harvest Gather. Understandable, given the estrangement between R'mal and his erstwhile family.

"Do you wish to walk? Or shall we avail ourselves of the transport?" K'yrel asked, with a nod toward Sunstone's unique Gather arrangements.

Lord Janol had a dislike – a fear even – of dragons, so it was not surprising that he wished them to land some distance from his Hold. However, he was not so impolitic that he would have important guests trudge across dusty fields in their Gather finest. The allocated landing arrangements were a masterpiece in compromise: a more distant field than another Lord might choose, but with a trio of pony-drawn traps available a short walk away to transport those high ranking guests who did not wish to walk.

As Dunia watched, a fourth pony-trap returned at a brisk trot from the Hold, the driver deftly turning his blinkered pony in a wide circle, so that it got only the merest glimpse of the dragons currently offloading passengers in the landing field. Even so, those must be the most placid runners in the whole hold, to get this close to the likes of Nioranth without more than a nervous snort and ears briefly laid flat as Quarith took off.

"Let's ride," replied Dunia. "We may as well arrive in style."

The trap driver was all gracious smiles and deference, assisting Dunia to mount the vehicle as if she were a frail old auntie, and not someone who had just dismounted from a gold dragon. The piebald pony set off at a brisk trot toward the Hold – no doubt a great deal happier to be moving *away* from a field awash with the scent of dragon. Dunia had never ridden in a trap like this before, and found it a pleasant – if bumpy – ride.

She glanced back to where her relatives and Dwayana and Danissa were sorting out their own transport. "Oh dear! I think Tildy is trying to convince them to race," she said. Her greenrider cousin was gesticulating at the two traps and the Hold.

"Don't worry, goldrider," said their driver, with a grin. "The beasts don't mind a sprint now and then."

Just as well, she mused, as two traps thundered past them a moment later – a whooping Tildy clinging on to the lead one, R'san and Dwayana in the other. Balt leaped into the air and winged after them, chittering excitedly.

"Well, that's Firestorm for you! Though at least some Kadanzer inhabitants will be making a dignified entrance," K'yrel observed with a smile and a gesture back to where Petair and Danissa had opted to walk.

Dunia laughed. She loved her cousin Tildy dearly, but had to agree that she was Firestorm to the core. There were days that Dunia was relieved that it was Luka, not her, who had to deal with their antics on a daily basis. WindFlight was an altogether a more civilised set of wings to live with. Still, Tildy's antics had sparked a deepening enthusiasm for this gather. Lybelle was right – it *had* been too long.

By the time that their transport had drawn to a neat halt near the double stone doors of the hold, Tildy and the others had vanished into the gather throng. This time K'yrel pipped the driver to the post, and leapt lightly off the trap to offer Dunia a hand as assistance to step down. The goldrider nodded thanks to the driver, then linked arms with K'yrel and headed to where Lord Janol and his sister Lady Alayn were greeting arrivals of rank.

"Lord Janol, Lady Alayn – a pleasant gather day to you!" Dunia smiled brightly as she approached the waiting Holders.

"Welcome to Sunstone, queenrider Dunia, Wingsecond K'yrel." Lord Janol smiled courteously back, and flicked a finger at a waiting drudge as a signal to serve the new arrivals cups of mulled wine.

Lord Janol's phobia of dragons, it seemed, did not extend to avoiding knowledge of their riders' names. It was a dullard of a Lord Holder indeed who neglected to keep a working knowledge of the bronzeriders who might someday find themselves the Weyrleader of Kadanzer. Though, Dunia pondered, if that rider ever turned out to be R'mal, then relationships between Sunstone and the Weyr might become... interesting.

That might be a topic to touch on later with Lady Alayn. Perhaps after the wine had been flowing freely... Janol's sister – according to Cassidora and Weyrharper Andrian – had a habit of drinking too much at Gathers, with sometimes scandalous results. Scandalous for a hold, at any rate: Dunia very much doubted that Lady Alayn could give Firestorm a run for their money.

"All is well at the Weyr?" Lady Alayn enquired. She was fiddling with her goblet rather than drinking from it.

K'yrel and Dunia assured her that it was, and asked in turn about the harvest that this gather was celebration of. These social niceties dealt with, the pair of dragonriders moved on toward the Gather Square, leaving Janol and

Alayn to repeat the formula with the next high-ranking arrivals.

"Not bad," said Dunia, sipping at her mulled wine as they walked. Her cook's instinct sifted through the tastes, trying to pinpoint the individual spices in it. "Mmm, I think there is a little ginger in this. Some klah bark too."

"Did you notice that Lady Alayn seemed to be on the redfruit juice rather than the wine?" K'yrel asked.

"I thought she was just being on her best behaviour while her brother was at her side," Dunia said. "Redfruit juice, eh? Well, I suppose sipping cup after cup of this—" she raised the goblet of wine "—While greeting guests would have even Lord Heln declaring that he was everyone's best friend."

K'yrel grinned at the thought of the solemn and reclusive Ierne Islander drunkenly hugging all and sundry. "Maybe we should serve this to the Lords at Hatchings."

Dunia raised her cup in a mock toast. "Maybe we should."



Whether it was the mulled wine or the change of scenery, Dunia found that she was indeed really enjoying the Sunstone Harvest Gather. She and K'yrel strolled the gather stalls, admiring the wide selection of goods from the nearby Tannerhall. The wingsecond spotted an exquisitely tooled pair of boots with a dragon motif, and set about haggling with a journeyman over the price of making a pair for him. Dunia drifted down the stalls as the haggling intensified, admiring strands of ceramic beads that an inventive potter apprentice was doing a brisk trade in. She waved at Headsecond Danissa, who bore an armful of brightly coloured yarns and was now peering at a selection of scarves.

The smell of bubbly pies drew the goldrider to the end of the row of booths. Balt blinked into view just as she was handing over a thirty-second mark for some pies for herself and K'yrel – the firelizard's instinct for a possible meal as unerring as ever. The blue squeaked and settled on the awning of the nearby yarn seller's booth. He made piteous creeling noises and crouched down as small as he could, trying to portray an image of a tiny creature racked by hunger. Dunia stifled a giggle at the sight.

"Does he look to you, Weyrlady? I might have some scraps if he's that hungry," the pieman offered. A grubby drudge child loitering nearby – perhaps a little younger than her daughter, Corsia – looked hopeful at the mention of scraps.

"No, no," said Dunia. "It's all an act. He'll eat until he bursts, and still beg for more."

Balt swooped down to the ground by her feet. Irrepressible scavenger he might be, but he at least had the sense not to try and perch on her shoulder when she was in her gather best. He creeled again at Dunia and patted at her foot with a forepaw. When this brought nothing but a good natured laugh, the blue tried an experimental creel at the pieman and then the drudge child. The latter watched the

firelizard with wide, round eyes and Dunia realised that the girl had possibly never been this close to a firelizard before. She herself was so used to the Weyr being awash with tame and wild ones alike, that she forgot that they were a rarity in other climes.

“On the other hand,” she said conversationally to the pieman. “I’ll get no peace to eat these if he doesn’t get something.”

She scooped one of her recently purchased pies off the pieman’s tray. Then she crouched and held it out to the drudge girl. “Would you like to feed him? You can share this with him.”

Both girl and Balt looked rapturous at the thought. Dunia heard the pieman tsk to himself, but she ignored him and encouraged the girl to break off a small piece of the hot pie and offer it to Balt. The lizard grabbed at the sticky confection, chewing enthusiastically. “Now you take a bite,” she said to the girl.

The child nibbled a tiny piece, obviously afraid to take more than her fair share. She’d finished her tiny mouthful before Balt had done with his, and had another piece waiting for him. Dunia tucked into a pie of her own as she watched. It was, she thought loyally, not as good as her mother’s, but was still a fine sticky treat – and just right for a bright gather day like this.

Balt, as she’d rather expected he would, licked at the third mouthful rather than ate it properly. A typical firelizard’s tolerance for sugar was far lower than your average human’s. She smiled at the girl. “He’s full now. Better eat the rest yourself.”

“Thank you, dragonlady! Thank you!” The girl crammed a huge mouthful of pie into her face, juices running down her chin and over her hands.

“The rest of your pies, goldrider.” The pieman managed to sound disapproving – as if his wares were beyond the ken of mere drudge children.

“Thank you.” Dunia picked up the rest of her purchases and turned to find a very satisfied looking K’yrel at her shoulder. “Deal made?” she asked.

“Shaken on, and I collect the boots in four sevendays.” The Wingsecond glanced at the now very sticky drudge girl, and at Balt fastidiously licking his forepaws clean. “I see you’ve been making new friends,” he said.

“Well, one never knows where the next Lessa will come from,” she replied, more for the pieman’s benefit than K’yrel’s. She handed the bronzerider two pies. “Shall we find some wine to wash those down?”



K’yrel did his duty as her escort by leading her onto the dance floor for one of the first dances of the day. It was a sedate affair which, Dunia thought, was probably appropriate for two people who had just stuffed themselves with bubbly pies! Shards, she hadn’t danced in such a long while. She’d just never seemed to have the time at the two Kadanzer Hatching Feasts since she had returned from the Ninth Pass – mainly from being besieged by visitors who

wanted to talk to the infamous goldrider who had travelled in time. And, to be honest, she hadn’t felt much like dancing after seeing the sickly hatchlings and dead eggs of Nioranth’s clutch.

But licking lips still sticky with sugar and promenading a stately progression around the Gather Square in the sunshine were a marvellous boost to the spirits. Dunia was almost taken aback as she realised how much she was enjoying herself. *You are happy*, put in Nioranth. *That is good. It is good for you to be happy when I am happy.*

Yes, agreed Dunia. *It is good.* She nodded graciously to Lord Janol and Lady Alayn, as the other couple swirled by. Alayn looked to be a much more graceful dancer than her brother.

The Eastern Weyrleaders – Weyrwoman Selina and Weyrleader D’bon – were on the periphery of the dance square, deep in conversation with Mastertanner Flint. When Dwayana appeared and pounced on K’yrel for a dance of her own, Dunia joined the trio.

“Weyrwoman Second Dunia.” D’bon inclined his head graciously at her approach. “Master Flint was just telling us that Eastern is behind Kadanzer in the queue for more wherehide.”

“I’m sure Master Flint was telling you no such thing,” she replied. D’bon was always one to feel hard done by the world – and tithes and supplies were the Weyrwoman’s worry and responsibility, not the Weyrleader’s.

The Master in question treated her to a friendly smile. “Indeed. I was just commenting on the fine quality of leather the eastern breed of looper produces. I have masters back at the Hall drooling over it.”

“Are those wild lopers or domesticated?” asked Dunia. Perhaps she should mention this to the herders or tanners back at Kadanzer – or at least find out if it was something they were already aware of.

“Managed rather than domesticated,” said Selina. Ah yes, Selina was from a herder background originally, Dunia remembered. “Lord Makel of Falling Star Hold has men riding with the herds and guiding their migration paths.”

“Sharding nuisance to keep track of in ‘Fall,’ D’bon remarked.

“But worth it for that leather!” said Master Flint. “Not that I am biased or anything,” he added with another of his habitual smiles. “I’m sure their meat is also excellent and their eggs delicious.”

“And their dung smells sweeter than perfume,” added D’bon.

“Ah,” said Flint, his smile a little more uncertain.

Selima gave her companion a small frown. D’bon took on that slightly unfocused look of a man in communication with his dragon.

Darlath’s rider tells Rolenth’s rider to stop being a wherryhead, Nioranth informed her. *Savukath is here. Eorawth is here. Their riders will meet you by the dance square.*

“Uh... I think I’ll go see if I can rustle up another skin of that red,” D’bon said and departed abruptly.

“So how is Nioranth?” asked Selina.

“Very smug now that she is fighting Thread again,” said Dunia.

Master Flint looked concerned. “Has Nioranth been indisposed?”

“No, no.” Dunia hurried to reassure him. “It was simply that the others from the Ninth Pass had a head start on us in re-training for flying ‘Fall. Because of Nioranth’s clutch on the sands, you see.”

“Re-training?” The Mastertanner looked intrigued. “I’d heard something along those lines, but I must have misinterpreted it. I thought it was for dragons injured on your, ah... your journey.”

It was interesting, Dunia mused, how some people would seize on any opportunity to talk about her time in the Ninth Pass, whilst others would delicately skirt around the topic, as if not wanting to mention a recently deceased relative for fear of causing distress. She wondered if those latter sorts, like Master Flint, were doing it out of the knowledge of all those left behind to perish in the past, or were just uneasy about being in the presence of someone who featured in a Harper ballad. Another thought struck her – Faranth forbid that the harpers here got it into their heads to sing the wretched thing! *Nioranth, please ask Iveth and Quarith to get their riders to pass on a message. Tell Petair to instruct the local harpers that if they play the Ninth Pass ballad I’ll... She tried to think of a suitable threat. I’ll have you sit on their favourite instruments!*

That would be uncomfortable, said the queen. *Why would I do that?* But the message was dutifully passed along, and Dunia turned her attention back to Master Flint’s query, trying to explain the differences in Threadfighting tactics between the Ninth and Tenth Passes. Weyrwoman Selina was an enthusiastic participant in the conversation, and between them Dunia rather thought they had bamboozled Master Flint with rather more information than he had bargained on.



Dunia parted company from Master Flint and Weyrwoman Selina when she spotted H’sark – Sunstone’s Watchrider – limping his way along the edge of the dancing area. She quelled a slight frown as she moved to meet and greet the grey-haired bluerider. H’sark had been retired to watchrider status when his joint disease got too bad to fight Thread any more. Even the brief exposure to the cold of *between* could set off sharp pains in his joints for hours afterwards. The constant flitting in and out of *between* that fighting Thread entailed sent grey-muzzled Skith into fits of agitation over his rider’s pain. The role of watchrider, where he might go sevendays without the need to go *between*, suited H’sark down to the ground. And the bluerider was the steady, sensible sort who could be trusted to live among Holders without chasing their girls – or boys – or letting his dragon feed in the prize bloodstock.

But Dunia didn’t like the look of that limp. “Good morning, bluerider H’sark,” she said with a smile. “Are you well?”

“Goldrider Dunia.” H’sark, proper as always, returned her greeting with a formal salute. “As well as a grey-haired, old uncle like me has a right to be,” he replied in answer to her question. He shook his head as her gaze strayed to his legs. “Don’t worry yourself, goldrider. It just takes a bit longer than it does at Kadanzer for the sun to warm the stiffness out of these old legs in the morning.”

“And doubtless Lord Janol had one too many errands he needed you and Skith to do before the Gather got started?” Dunia ventured.

“Aye, well, maybe that too,” H’sark admitted with a sheepish grin. “But it’s difficult to say no to a Lord Holder on Gather Day. Good relations with the Weyr and all that.”

“Perhaps.” Dunia reached out to Nioranth. *Could you be a dear and ask Skith if his rider is well?* she asked.

Skith says his rider hurts but tells him not to worry about it. Skith worries a little anyway, came the reply.

Hmm. That didn’t sound good. Dunia gestured away from the throng around the dancers. “Shall we find somewhere quiet to sit? In the sun would be nice.”

“You promised me a dance, goldrider,” said H’sark.

“I think we’ll sit the dances out for a time – until Skith thinks those legs of yours are up to it.”

“Ah, blabbed on by my own dragon!” grumbled H’sark, but without any real rancour in the tone.

Dunia smiled. “One of the many benefits of riding a gold.”

H’sark laughed. “Well then, goldrider, with you, Skith and Nioranth wanting it, then I’ll go sit in the sun for a while. Could an old man beg a drink while we talk?”

It was Dunia’s turn to laugh. “He could indeed. Go grab some seats and I’ll find someone who can supply us with wine.”

A short while later the pair of them were seated on a bench in the sun, sipping at a very palatable white. The chatter of other gather-goers around them muted the music of the Hold harpers. Balt blinked into sight and swooped to settle on Dunia’s lap, projecting a jumbled series of images of other firelizards and aerial views of the gather crowds. She scratched his eyeridges absently as she chatted about various Weyr happenings with H’sark.

“So, what should I know about Sunstone’s affairs, then?” she asked the watchrider.

“Lord Janol is more than pleased with the harvest, from the way he’s been chatting in the Main Hall at mealtimes,” said H’sark. “So there should be no skimping on tithes from any of those beholden to him. There’s talk, and as far as I know that’s all it is – talk – that some of Kadanzer Hold’s people are looking to move elsewhere, because of the mess the volcano has made of so much of their lands.”

“Move *here*? Sunstone’s borders are much further from the affected areas than Barrier or Waterfall,” said Dunia. “And Kadanzer Hold has unaffected lands aplenty.” And there most certainly had not been mention of large hordes of people on the move in any of the sweeprider reports for either Kadanzer or Sunstone Holds’ lands.

H’sark shrugged. “Aye, well I said it was just talk. Could just be Sunstoners thinking their Hold is the best and

every holder and holdless will want to head here soon as drop a hat.”

“Lybelle mentioned that Lord Dracir might come here today, but I haven’t seen him,” said Dunia. *Nioranth, could you ask Baseth at Kadanzer Hold if Lord Dracir is here at Sunstone, please?*

A pause and then: *Baseth says that he was to bring him here, but it did not happen. His rider does not think that it will happen today.*

Thank you. Dunia refocused on H’sark. “Apparently Lord Dracir is not coming after all.”

Another shrug from H’sark. “He can’t be worried that Sunstone is stealing all his holders away then.”

“So, anything else got the Hold gossiping?”

“Well, apparently Lord Janol is considering marrying his youngest daughter, Zonna, off to Lomcoli of Rubicon,” H’sark said.

Dunia raised an eyebrow. “You’d think he’d be a bit more circumspect about such plans unless he wants every other Lord to start making competing offers of daughters, grand-daughters, sisters, cousins and the like.”

“Aye, well, if that’s so, he either didn’t bargain on Zonna finding out, or her getting in such a tizzy about it. The girl thinks Lord Lomcoli is something out of a harper’s ballad. She will tell anyone who has a pair of ears about the plan, and how she can’t wait to get a young, handsome husband.” H’sark harrumphed – but whether at the vagaries of youth or the oddity of holders, Dunia couldn’t tell.

“If I was Zonna, I wouldn’t count my bronzes before they’ve hatched,” said the goldrider. A Lord Holder’s marriage plans very rarely took into consideration the wishes of young women.



Luka and Z’haq spotted the pair of them sitting in the sun and stopped by to chat, Luka asking after H’sark’s health. It seemed that Nioranth was not the only gold that Skith was passing his worries to. Dunia made a mental note to ask the Sunstone Hold healer to check up on the old watchrider.

Her half-brother R’san joined them as they chatted, munching on a meat roll. Balt perked up at that and eyed the snack hopefully, greedy little monster that he was. You would think that a quarter of a bubbly pie would be enough food for the day for one small blue firelizard!

Her relationship with bluerider R’san felt odd at times. He was her older brother, but since her time in the past, she had gone from being several Turns younger to a few Turns older than him. They got on well together and their reunion had been a happy one, but that sudden reversal of age difference put a strange dissonance on things at times. The same with Z’haq – he had briefly been her lover back before the accident, but now he seemed so young! As did Luka sometimes.

Dunia smiled to herself. She sounded like a toothless old auntie, when her mind went off on tangents like these. And a Gather Day was no time to dwell on such things! “So,” she said to R’san. “What’s the latest outrageous

Firestorm escapade? Or can’t you say while Fire Complex’s goldrider is within earshot?” She winked at Luka and sat back to listen...



A shadow fell over Dunia as she shooed the ever-hungry Balt away from her wine goblet. A tipsy firelizard she could do without. She looked up. “Would you care to dance, goldrider Dunia?” Lord Kairo of Dorado offered her his arm.

“If Lady Narna doesn’t mind me stealing you away from her,” said Dunia, glancing past several tables to where Kairo’s wife sat fanning herself on the shaded side of the Gather Square. The sun was high in the sky now, and the goldrider and H’sark were both enjoying the heat, but Lady Narna looked rather flushed. Dunia inclined her head towards Narna in enquiry, and the Lady Holder nodded politely in her direction.

“I have already run her ragged,” replied Kairo with a smile.

Dunia deposited Balt onto the bench beside Luka and H’sark, gave a nod of thanks to the latter, then stood and took Lord Kairo’s proffered arm. “Well, don’t exhaust me too much – there’s Thread to fly tomorrow.”

“Most certainly not, goldrider. Especially when my fishermen tell me there’s a risk the wind will blow Thread onto our shores. It is a long ride from my Hold to the shore!” The pair wended their way through the tables and stepped into the throng of dancers just as the harpers struck the first beat of a lively tune. Kairo swung her neatly into the flow of the dance.

Dunia felt herself blush a little at the reference to her encounter with Lord Korys this morning. She laughed. “I see word from Maori spreads fast.”

“Oh, grumbles about the Weyr propagate faster than most.” Kairo dipped his head in what could have been a courteous nod to Lord Lomcoli as they skipped by a table where the Lord of Rubicon sat drinking with Lord Janol’s sister and his youngest daughter, Zonna – she of the proposed marriage plans.

Dunia filed Kairo’s little piece of information away for future reference. Lomcoli was still more boy than man – but more often than not he was an ally of Morgav. And he did not seem to have fully outgrown an adolescent’s ability to bear grudges or to speak before stopping to think. A sidelong glance confirmed some of what H’sark had told her: Zonna was gazing at Lord Lomcoli with an intense mixture of adoration and possessiveness, idly fiddling with a ribbon in her intricately curled hair.

The Lord of Dorado changed the subject: “I overheard the hold harper telling Lord Janol that if a certain ballad was played, then Nioranth would sit on the offending harpers’ favourite instruments,” Lord Kairo remarked with a raised eyebrow.

“Well, she’s a gold,” Dunia countered with a smile as she pirouetted through one of the turns of the dance. “I could hardly say that she was going to flame them.”

“Ah, quite.”

“I hope Lord Janol hadn’t requested the ballad specially,” the goldrider said. She doubted it – Janol’s dislike of dragons more than likely extended to listening to musical accounts of draconic abilities such as being able to travel in time.

“I don’t believe so,” replied Lord Kairo. “I was, of course, looking forward greatly to hearing it myself.” There was a twinkle in his eye as he said this.

“I hear you have many talented harpers at Dorado Hold,” Dunia said, as the flow of the dance brought them into the shaded part of the Gather Square. “I’m sure they could serenade you tonight when you return.”

A short bark of laughter from Lord Kairo drew stares from the dancers nearest to them. “I’m sure they could indeed! Though I’m not sure what my good lady wife would say to me starting another gather when we return from this one.” He steered her deftly to avoid collision with a pair of children whose dancing owed more to energy than it did to any recognisable pattern of steps.

Their chatter continued in this vein until the harpers ended the tune with a flourish. Lord Kairo sketched her a bow in formal end to the dance and the pair left the dance square and joined Lady Narna in the shade, Dunia sending her apologies for abandoning H’sark and the others via Nioranth. Kairo flicked his fingers at a hovering drudge and called for more wine. “I hate them hovering like that,” he said. “I never know whether they are there to fetch and carry, or there to listen in for their superiors.”

Narna tsked. “Now, Kairo, behave. If they weren’t there you’d be grumbling that Lord Janol didn’t know how to look after high-ranking guests.” From the tone of her voice, Dunia guessed that this was a well-worn topic of conversation between the two. “Will Weyrwoman Lybelle be here today?” continued Lady Narna.

Dunia shook her head. “I think not. Ihyanith is egg-heavy – she’ll clutch in a few days time. She’s still nimble enough to fly tomorrow’s ‘Fall, but I think she is fussing about leaving the Weyr for anything other than that.”

“So this sevenday would not be a good time to have a crisis that required the Weyrwoman’s attention, then?” mused Kairo.

Dunia cocked her head to one side in query. “Why? Are you planning on having a crisis, Lord Kairo?”

He smiled. “Now, if it is planned, then it is hardly a crisis! But no – no crisis planned or otherwise is on my horizon. I was just considering that as you are Weyrwoman Second then any current crisis would be yours to deal with, not Weyrwoman Lybelle’s.”

“I’m sure Lybelle wouldn’t view it that way,” said Dunia, “But yes, up to a point it would be mine.” She gave Lord Kairo a hard stare, wondering if his comment was indeed just idle speculation, or a warning that she should be on her toes.

“Now you see – *that’s* why Pern has Lord Holders and not Lady Holders running the show,” said a loud voice just behind her. Dunia turned to see Lord Lomcoli standing there, with an anxious-looking Zonna flicking glances back and forth between him and the table they had been sitting at

earlier, where Lady Alayn was haranguing a drudge. “They’d be off getting broody about babies just when they were needed to cope with a crisis.” Lomcoli snagged an empty chair from an adjacent table and was just about to crash into it when he belatedly remembered Zonna’s presence and offered it to her with a flourish instead. “Worse for you weyrwomen,” he continued, gesturing at Dunia. “Got your dragons getting broody for you.”

“Ah, but even a broody dragon can keep the males in line,” responded Dunia tartly. Lady Narna smothered a laugh behind her fan.

Lomcoli frowned and then barked at a drudge to fetch another chair. A bronze firelizard blinked into view and settled on his shoulder, and he stroked it absently. Balt cheeped at the new arrival quizzically.

“So, Rubicon,” said Kairo, to fill the uncomfortable silence that had descended. “I hear the Seacraft’s grumbling that you have a bandit problem on your eastern flank. How goes that?”

The Lord of Rubicon’s frown deepened into a scowl. “Shaff them all *between!* I’ve weeded out the small fry, but there are some of the buggers going to and from Araby’s lands.”

“They’re crossing the Rubicon?” Dunia asked in surprise, affecting not to notice Lord Lomcoli’s less than lordly language. That was a substantial strait, not some trifling waterway that a bandit could swim a stolen horse across.

“Yes, they are crossing the shaffing Rubicon!” The drudge with the chair chose that moment to arrive and Lomcoli all but snatched it off her, his firelizard frantically flapping to keep its balance on his shoulder. The girl bobbed a curtsy and scuttled back into the safety of the Gather crowds. Lomcoli plonked himself gracelessly into the chair. “Just wait until a sharding tithe train gets affected,” grumbled the young Lord. “Then you dragonriders will sit up and take notice!”

“We can take notice before then, Lord Lomcoli,” said Dunia. Dealing with bandits and sea raiders was Hold business, but perhaps Kadanzer and Eastern’s sweepriders ought to compare notes on any activity they noted over the border of their two territories. “I’ll ask Nioranth…” A moment later a message had been passed from her gold to Ihyanith and Phanth back at the Weyr, as well as Darlath and Rolenth of Eastern, here at the Gather. “It is agreed… Weyrleader L’ars of Kadanzer and Weyrleader D’bon of Eastern will compare sweeprider reports for movements on the Rubicon. And the sweepriders will keep an eye out for anything suspicious. Perhaps if you could brief me on dates and what they should be looking for? Or would you prefer one of our bronzeriders to come to Rubicon on another day?”

Darlath and Rolenth’s riders ask where you are, interrupted Nioranth.

Tell them in the shady side of the dance floor, under a blue awning, said Dunia. She realised that she had missed Lomcoli’s reply as she spoke to her queen. “Forgive me, Lord Lomcoli – I believe D’bon is coming to talk to you now. You were saying?”

Lomcoli blinked at her in surprise. His bronze firelizard dropped to his lap and butted its head against his hand, demanding to have its eyeridges rubbed. "I.. that is..." He visibly gathered his thoughts. "Would the day after tomorrow suit Weyrleader L'ars?"

"If not him, then one of the wingleaders should certainly be able to come," Dunia assured him. "I will send a message to Rubicon via your watchdragon, tomorrow."

Kairo leaned forward to pour all those assembled another goblet of wine. "There is nothing so speedy as a determined dragonrider, eh Lomcoli?" He flashed Dunia an enigmatic look, which she chose to interpret as satisfaction as to the way his conversational gambit had turned out. Kairo had always been an ally of the Weyr. If Kadanzer and Eastern proved useful in ending Lomcoli's bandit problem, then maybe he too would venture further out of Morgav's shadow.



As D'bon and Lomcoli retreated a little ways off to discuss the latter's needs on the raider matter, Dunia exchanged polite inconsequentialities with Zonna, Kairo and Narna. The wine, the harvest, the new tapestry that had just been hung in the Hold's Main Hall.

The harpers finished their current piece with a flourish, and as the clapping from the dancers and audience died away, Lord Janol's voice could be heard raised in anger. Dunia's gaze was drawn to Janol and Alayn, arguing on the fringe of the dancers.

Janol appeared to be having trouble keeping his temper under control. "Alayn, try to behave as your rank befits! You'll never find another husband if you become known as a drunk!"

"Any man who doesn't already know I drink is a fool not worth marrying!" retorted Alayn, and turned abruptly away from her brother with a whirl of her skirts.

"Alayn!" Janol called after her, but Lady Alayn ignored him and bore down like a dragon after Thread on the table where Dunia and the others sat. A few paces away her expression metamorphosed into that of the charming hostess. "Lord Kairo, will you do me the honour of dancing with me? Lady Narna – with your permission."

"Of course, of course." Lady Narna smiled acquiescence.

"Goldrider." Alayn nodded politely to Dunia and took Kairo's arm, but paused before heading for the dancing area. She fixed Lord Lomcoli with an intent stare. "And you, you lout – either dance with my niece or tell her you're not interested. The girl should be able to enjoy the gather!" And with that, Lady Alayn all but dragged a startled Kairo onto the dance floor.

Zonna had gone bright pink. Lomcoli stared after Alayn. "Shaffit, what's got into her?"

"Too much of this excellent white, I should think," remarked Dunia. She had better go easy on the wine herself, if she was flying Threadfall tomorrow. Alayn and Kairo had joined Petair and a dark-skinned woman whom Dunia didn't

recognise for a foursome reel. The Lady of the Hold was certainly being a good advert for having a fun time at a gather. Second husband, eh? Was Lord Janol trying to expand his Hold's influence again? Seemed that way if he was mentioning marriage for both his daughter and sister.

Possible marriages, sea-crossing bandits, looper hides and gossip about tipsy Lady Alayn – Dunia would certainly have a full report to give Lybelle on her return.



It was well past sunset when Dunia and K'yrel finally departed from Sunstone. The trip down to the landing field was another brisk trot in a pony trap – an eerie sensation with the distant glow of dragon eyes in the dark. From the set of the pony's ears, its eyesight was good enough to make out exactly what owned those eyes. In deference to the beast, she stepped nimbly from the cart and, with a call of thanks to the driver, strode to where her gold was backwinging in to land.

It had been, she decided, as she put on her flying jacket and checked Nioranth's straps, a most entertaining day. She was aglow with a buzz of happiness that she hadn't felt for months. Balt swooped and soared around them in the semi-darkness, echoing her emotion. All of it – from bubbly pies to churlish Lord Lomcoli – had been stimulating and a welcome reminder that there was life beyond the Weyr. Lybelle, it seemed, had been right about what she needed.

The brief cold of *between* and she was back in the substantially lighter skies over Kadanzer – the Weyr being an hour behind Sunstone Hold. She sent her thanks for accompanying her to K'yrel via Terianth, and asked Nioranth to head back to her weycot. The queen complied briskly, eager to be rid of her riding straps.

Dunia fell into bed a short while later, not bothering to head over to the Weyrhall for a meal. She'd sampled more than enough during the day to tide her over until breakfast. She fell asleep with head still buzzing with gather gossip and the wine she'd drunk.



The next day's 'Fall was another early one, so Dunia was up and about before first light, grabbing a cup of klah and a meatroll from the Weyrhall. WindFlight was to fly this one, with FireFlight on deck, so riders from both flights were jostling for an early morning breakfast before their own pre-Fall preparations. Dunia tried not to laugh as she saw that R'san and Tildy were both nursing obvious hangovers – they'd doubtless be hoping that Fire did not get called into action! Her own head felt a little muzzy, but nothing a cup or two of klah couldn't cope with.

She was fetching another jug of that klah for the goldrider's table when she overheard bluerider V'harn muttering to himself about "All right for some, swanning off to gathers that the rest of us aren't good enough to go..." And N'laron of the Queens' Wing wore a more than usually grim expression this morning. Dunia winced inwardly, her

mood deflating a little. Lybelle's ban on the Ninth Passers going to Sunstone might have after effects, it seemed.

Revanne, at least, did not seem uncivil this morning – and she was not one to hold back in her opinions. The pair exchanged a few words about the sweepriders' reports on the weather conditions over the Dorado coast, then Dunia excused herself to go and see to Nioranth.

As she arrived back at her weycot, she was surprised to see her daughter Farnya and her foster-mother Kedria waiting on her porch.

"See," she heard Kedria say. "I told you she would have gone for breakfast. Now are you going to stop being a worrywart?"

Dunia smiled at them uncertainly. "A good morning to you, Farnya, Kedria. What can Nioranth and I do for you?"

"I hurt my arm!" Farnya waved one arm at the other, which Dunia could now see in the dim morning light was in a sling. "I hurt my arm and you were away forever and ever yesterday, and Kedria made me go to bed before you got back!"

A sudden pang of guilt and worry struck the goldrider. She darted an anxious look at Kedria. "What happened?" She crouched to give Farnya a hug, careful not to squeeze the sling-bound arm too tightly. "Are you all right?"

"Oh, it's just a sprain," said Kedria. "Though you'd have thought from the tears and tantrums that Thread was eating her alive." Farnya's fostermother ruffled the girl's hair affectionately.

Dunia relaxed a little. Minor. Of course. If the injury had been a serious one, then the healers would have sent word via Nioranth.

"It HURT!" Farnya pulled away from her mother and batted at Kedria's hand irritably. "The steps were wet and I didn't see because I was carrying a big bundle of laundry, and I fell, and it HURT." Lips pouted into a sulky expression. "And you weren't here, and they wouldn't tell you I was hurt!" Her voice rang with childish indignation.

Kedria tsked. "Now, now! You can't expect your mother to come running every time you have a spill or a scrape. She's a goldrider – she has important things to do."

Another twinge of guilt as Dunia reviewed the dancing and drinking and bubbly pies that had formed a great deal of yesterday's activities. The goldrider brushed a stray lock of hair away from Farnya's face. "I'll come see you after 'Fall – how's that?" The girl nodded in sulky acceptance. "What did the healers say about your arm?" she continued.

"I have to keep the bandage on and rest it for a sevenday," the girl replied.

"Which means no chores," added Kedria with a sigh. "You can imagine how that's gone down with the other weyrbrats her age!"

"Well then," Dunia forced a smile. "Every cloud has a silver lining, then, eh Farnya?"

"Suppose," mumbled Farnya. Dunia gave her another careful hug, and then tactfully ushered her and Kedria away, so that she could prepare Nioranth for the upcoming 'Fall.

In truth, the pair could have stayed to watch – and in fact Farnya and Corsia had done just that when they were littler and had lived in her weycot at Southern – but her mood had dipped and she wanted a little time to get back on track before facing Thread. She was now feeling rather guilty for having enjoyed herself so much at Sunstone yesterday... and at the same time feeling irritable at herself for that irrational guilt.

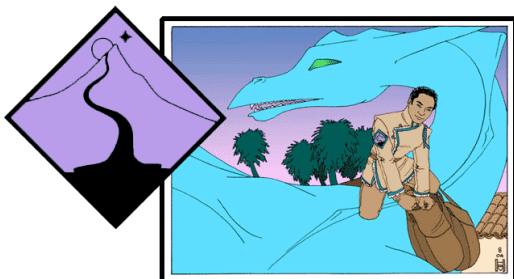
You were happy. Why are you now sad because you were happy? Nioranth demanded as she dipped her head to accept the fighting straps. *That is foolish. I am happy if I remember being happy. My way is better.* The smug self-assurance that accompanied the last statement was enough to knock Dunia out of her introspection.

She rode a gold dragon. And that meant a life of both glorious freedom and tight constraints. The colour of Nioranth's hide as she cracked shell had given Dunia rank and status – but it was up to her to accept the responsibility and use it. She could be a flutterbrain like Vivia of Southern, or let her heart rule her head like Valenne and potentially cause chaos for the Weyr's relations with the Holds, or brood like an angsty teenager every time some personal crisis came up and be of no use to man nor beast.

Or she could be a Weyrwoman Second and act like one.

Dunia fastened the last strap and pulled on her flying helmet. *Yes, dearest gold of mine, you are right. Your way is better.* Would that it be that all life would acquiesce to the demands of a queen!

(To be continued...)



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