
Pages from a Life

by Amanda Kear

2860.10.24

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2860.10.24... the present

Dunia was woken in the dead of the night by Nioranth's urgent call. **Rider! My eggs are coming! I need you!**

She fumbled for the glowbasket, muttering deprecations against gold dragons who insisted on clutching in pitch blackness. *You know where the Hatching Grounds are*, she ventured. *I'm sure you could make your way there on your own...* It wasn't as if the main Hatching Ground was far from their weycot. Dunia could walk there in a few minutes.

No! I need you NOW!

Yes, yes, alright – I'm coming. Dunia soothed her petulant queen as she pulled on some clothes. She felt achy and had a touch of a sore throat, as if a cold was coming on. Shaffit, it looked like she was coming down with whatever it was that had had Zherra sniffing and sneezing through the last goldrider meeting. Yawning mightily, she gathered up the glowbasket and some harness that was in need of repair. At least she could get on with something useful whilst Nioranth went through the long, drawn out process of laying.

Outside, the gold was shuffling from foot to foot impatiently, her huge eyes an eerie glow in the darkness. Timor was a slim crescent in the sky, and Belior was in dark phase so offered no light at all. The night was filled with the soft sounds of chirping crawlers. Taking care in the dark, Dunia mounted bareback – no need for straps on the short hop to the Hatching Grounds. Nioranth's egg-heavy body did an ungainly take off and gained height in a lumbering fashion, then flapped somewhat gracelessly toward their destination. The watchdragon perched on the rim of the main Hatching Ground was visible as a pair of eyes that turned in their direction.

Malyuth sends greetings, Nioranth said. **I tell her that I will lay many eggs and they will be very beautiful.** She back-winged and descended onto the warm sands, giving a rumble of contentment as her hind feet touched down.

Dunia opened the glowbasket and dismounted, sliding down Nioranth's carefully angled forelimb. *Thank you*, she sent, stifling another yawn. Now that Nioranth was no longer broadcasting a sense of urgency, the goldrider could feel sleep pulling at her again. She picked her way across the sands by glowlight, giving a half wave in the direction of G'lant and Malyuth perched far above. Ah well, if she

dozed off perhaps the greenrider and his dragon would fill in as appreciative audience for the soon-to-arrive eggs.

Her queen was pushing the sand about with her muzzle, transmitting a sense of well-being and random comments about how right and proper the temperature and the texture was. Dunia refrained from pointing out that it was exactly the same sand that she'd laid innumerable previous clutches on. She sat down at the edge of the grounds, opening a couple of the glowbaskets that marked the rim of the sands, and adding their light to the one she had brought with her. The trio of glowbaskets cast just enough light to enable her to see Nioranth turning round and round on the spot, trying to decide the perfect place to lay her first egg.

Ten minutes later, when Dunia's head had begun to droop, a wave of smug contentment and an audible rumble from Nioranth brought her back to wakefulness. The shape of a single large egg now sat on the sands, being licked by its mother. The Candidates would label that one a 'bronze' egg, for sure. **Look at my egg! Is it not beautiful?**

It was very beautiful indeed, Dunia agreed. Very beautiful. Her eyelids fluttered and slowly closed...



2849.08.15

Karlina gave another loud snore.

She's still asleep! The ten-Turn-old Dunia conveyed this information to her co-conspirators by pantomime and gestures. She, her brother Browan and friend Sethia tiptoed into the storage cavern. Dunia tried not to look the others in the eye, just in case she succumbed to the giggles and gave the game away. One hand was thrust into her pocket, where the scissors she'd filched from Weyrtanner Lepik rested.

Her cousin Karlina was slumped over a table, her head resting on her arms. The glorious auburn tresses that the older girl was so proud of were drawn up into a ponytail, to keep them out of the way while she did her chores. Scraps of paper, a pot of glue and jar after jar of redfruit jam occupied the rest of the table, where Karlina was supposed to be occupied in the task of writing out labels for the results of a marathon jam-making session in the kitchens.

But yesterday there had been a hatching feast for one of gold Eliath's clutches, and Karlina – because she was a mere three Turns older than Dunia – had been permitted to stay up far longer than the trio now sneaking up on her. She had endlessly boasted about it while they did the shared chore of sweeping out the Weyrhall after breakfast. How *this* rider had danced with her and *that* rider had complimented her hair, and *that* rider had told her she was goldrider material for sure...

Of course, the downside of all this revelry into the early hours of the morning was that Karlina was now – mid afternoon – slumped fast asleep over her work-table in a quiet storage cavern. Sethia had found her that way when she and the others were playing guards-and-raiders in the nearby corridors. A plan had hatched in Dunia's mind.

Karlina gave a snorting sort of snore and mumbled something. The trio froze. But the older girl just stirred slightly and then the rhythm of her breathing settled back again. Dunia edged forward stealthily and pulled the scissors from her pocket. Sethia nodded encouragingly.

Carefully... ever so carefully... the girl reached out and gently lifted Karlina's ponytail clear of her neck. Then slowly, slowly, slowly – as slowly as the time she'd sneaked into Weyrwoman Charayn's quarters when gold Eliath was asleep – she moved her other arm to position the scissors.

Snip!

Razor sharp scissors, designed to cut through wherhide, sliced neatly through Karlina's hair. Browan gasped in admiration and horror. Sethia gave a stifled giggle. Karlina's eyes blinked open. "Huh? What--?" The girl sat up too suddenly and a jam jar was knocked off the table to shatter on the stone floor.

The trio fled, Dunia still with the scissors in one hand and the hank of hair in the other. She threw the latter aside as she exited the storage cavern, the sounds of Karlina's horror and outrage echoing behind her.



2860.10.24... the present

"Hmm...?" Dunia was mentally prodded awake by her gold. A second egg rested on the sands beside the first.

I have two eggs now, said Nioranth happily. *This one is beautiful too.*

Yes, it was a very nice egg, Dunia agreed. Definitely worth admiring. And worth licking of course... she fought back fatigue as her queen went through her usual ritual of pushing the new egg this way and that, and slobbering all over it.



2849.11.20

"Dunia, you really do give the word 'weyrbrat' a bad name!" Her mother, Farny, shook her head in exasperation. "Sneaking into the goldriders' quarters, hiding all of Karlina's underwear, putting salt in the sweetener bowl on the klah hearth... And now putting molasses in Karlina's clothes press! What were you thinking?"

The eleven-Turn-old Dunia pouted. Karlina was bossy and boastful and thought she was so grown up now that she was growing tits. And she was unbearable about how she was standing Candidate and going to become a goldrider one day. "She pulled the arms off my favourite doll!" she said indignantly.

"Yes -- *after* you cut off her hair," Farny reminded her.

The girl looked at the floor sulkily.

"You obviously don't have enough to occupy your time," her mother said. "I think that from now on you'll help me in the kitchens all day. That way at least I can keep an eye on you."

She looked up. Helping in the kitchens? Was that supposed to be a punishment? She *liked* helping in the kitchens.

Her mother fixed her with a stern glare. "*After* you do two sevendays in the laundry, of course, starting with washing all of Karlina's clothes."

Dunia groaned.



2860.10.24... the present

This time when she awoke there were four eggs just visible in the dim light cast by the glows. Oh dear, had she missed the obligatory admiration of one of them?

Malyuth and her rider admire my eggs, said Nioranth in a slightly sulky tone.

Dunia hurried to reassure her dragon that she too admired them. Did Nioranth have a favourite one, she ventured, trying to suppress another yawn, and wishing that she'd thought to bring something to soothe her sore throat. Questions of that nature were usually enough to prod the queen out of a sulk.

Sure enough, the queen's irritation turned to puzzlement. *They are all my favourite*, she replied. *They are all perfect and beautiful, so they are all my favourite. Another egg comes soon. It will be my favourite too.*

Dunia nodded off again to Nioranth's assurances that all the eggs she laid would be her favourite. How could it be any other way? She wondered muzzily if that would remain the case if one of them were a gold?



2850.09.12

Dunia was finished with her regular afternoon chore of taking the tuber peelings to the middens. She placed the empty bowl with the pile of other crockery waiting to be washed and then had a scout round the kitchen cavern, to see if her mother might have time to spare. But the kitchens were already bustling with the start of preparations for the evening meal, and Farny was deep in conversation with Headcook Olversan. Dunia hung around, hoping to catch her mother's eye before someone spotted her and asked why she wasn't making herself useful.

Lower caverns workers Kerra and Farah pushed past her, each bearing a huge wooden bowl brimming with mushrooms. They plonked their burdens down onto a table. "Olversan!" called Kerra. "Is this enough, or should we go back for more?" The headcook glanced over, bellowed his approval and asked Farah to fetch more sweetener from the storage caverns, and for Dunia to start chopping the mushrooms. The girl sighed and got on with the task. She'd been hoping to cajole her mother into letting her help with baking the dessert today.

She sliced quickly and efficiently. The mushrooms were not a kind she was familiar with. Dunia was usually

ambivalent about mushrooms. But these ones looked so juicy and succulent. She considered popping one into her mouth, right now, while no-one was looking. Furtive fingers reached out and drew one up toward her mouth...

A sharp slap across the knuckles ended that plan. "Ow!" the girl cried.

Farah wagged an admonishing finger in her face. "They're not ready for eating yet. And not for thieving fingers. Worse than tunnelsnakes sometimes, you young ones. I'll finish that chopping. Here, take this sweetener to Olversan." She thrust a canister into Dunia's arms. "Be off with you!"

Why was the normally shy Farah in such an ill mood today? She almost looked as if she was about to cry as she started to chop the mushrooms. Still no matter, the sweetener provided a perfect excuse to ask to help with dessert. And her mother always let her sample it as they were going along – even if the result meant that the girl was too stuffed with sugary titbits to eat a proper meal later on. Dunia threw Farah a cheeky smile and hurried off across the kitchens.



2860.10.24... the present

Dunia awoke with a gasp, the remnants of a dream fading from her thoughts. She stirred uneasily. Nioranth was squatting on the sands, and rose to reveal a fifth, newly laid egg. Dunia shook off the memory of the dream and praised her queen.

Malyuth also likes my new egg, came the smug comment. Yes, replied Dunia sleepily, she was sure Malyuth did. She wondered if the green really thought so or was just being polite or dutiful? She'd never really considered the topic before. Nioranth had always been completely disinterested in the other queens' clutches, but that might be a natural impulse to avoid triggering the instincts of a protective mother. Perhaps she could ask G'lant after the clutching was over.

She got up and walked around the edge of the sands for a while, to stretch the stiffness from her legs and try to force herself into more wakefulness. Her head still felt muzzy, her joints ached and her nose was blocked. She was definitely coming down with Zherra's cold.

It was no use. All the walking was doing was making her feel slightly nauseous. Even if it wasn't Zherra's cold, she was definitely sickening for something. Maybe another doze would do her good. Her Ladyship would just have to sulk!



2854.02.17

A firelizard popped into the kitchen cavern. Then another and another. Dunia looked up in surprise from where she was kneading the dough. Farny and the Headwoman would not be pleased – having animals in the

kitchens was unhygienic, not to mention what food they might steal. It was only when the fourth one blinked in from *between* that she registered the fact that they were humming...

"Dunia! Dunia! Your egg!" Her mother was gesturing frantically at the little pot that sat on the warming plate of the smallest stove. The pot that contained her firelizard egg! The little vessel was rocking from side to side.

The girl fair flew across the kitchens, her hands still messy with flour and dough. The other kitchen workers drew closer, craning their necks for a good view, but trying not to crowd her. "Food! I'll need—"

The want was anticipated, her mother shoving a chopping board covered in fish scraps into her arms. Dunia held it with one arm, while she carefully tipped out the contents of the pot onto the warming plate with the other. Sand and an already cracked egg tumbled out. A small blue snout was poking out.

She tried to think welcoming thoughts, but her mind was full of panic that she might do something wrong. At least on the sands the dragonet did the hard work of choosing you... Brownrider S'toris had also been awarded an egg from the clutch they had discovered together – was his egg also hatching this very instant?

Gingerly she scooped up the egg one handed, just in time for it to shatter and a tiny, wet, blue hatchling to lie sprawled in her palm. Horrendous hunger pangs assailed her. "Here – eat!" She plonked her hand with the hatchling onto the chopping board she cradled with the other arm. It gave a shriek of glee and dived head first into the pile of fish heads.



2860.10.24... the present

This time Nioranth's mental prodding was more forceful. *Wake up rider! I have many more eggs!* Many, in this case, being three. *Do you not like my eggs?* the gold asked plaintively.

Yes, she reassured the queen, she liked the eggs very much. She just wasn't feeling very well right now. A glance upwards to what few stars could be seen in the circle of sky above the Hatching Ground told the goldrider that she had been asleep about an hour.

Nioranth stood protectively over her clutch, for once not licking any of them. Her eyes were light spots in the darkness. *These are Udoth's eggs too?* she asked.

Dunia agreed that they were Udoth's eggs too. The queen no longer had any memory of the flight when R'mal's Udoth had sired them, but she often retained a vague attachment to her 'mate' for a few sevendays afterwards. Usually it vanished when another queen rose, and Dunia was surprised that this one had survived past Velcroth's rising of a sevenday or so ago. She was also surprised that Nioranth referred to the eggs as 'Udoth's'. In the vast majority of her clutches, Nioranth's eggs were very determinedly identified as *MINE!* and woe betide any sire who laid claim to them.

Is Udoth awake? Dunia asked suspiciously.

Yes, Udoth is awake. I tell him of my eggs. He is pleased.

Ah, that was it then. Nioranth wanted more appreciative admirers. Nothing to worry about, then. Udoth and Nioranth could chat away and keep the gold occupied for a while. Dunia squirmed into a more comfortable position and settled back into another doze.



2854.05.10

This would be her tenth time on the sands. It had been a Turn since her cousin Karlina had impressed her green, and standing for clutches was not nearly so much fun as it had been before that. Especially as there was a gold on the sands again. Watching the frustration on Karlina's face as she'd failed to impress gold Evath and then failed again with gold Virankath had been endlessly entertaining. Almost as much fun as seeing the expressions and hearing the cries of joy from the successful Candidates. The one thing about being a Candidate yourself was that you got a first class view of everything!

Her cousin Karlina was smirking at her from the stands, doubtless hoping to see her fail again and then brag about her own Impression. Still she couldn't begrudge Karlina her green. In Dunia's view the older girl – young woman now – had actually become a smidgen less irksome since she'd bonded with green Sirath. Possibly because their paths no longer overlapped so much and there was less to engender rivalry. Karlina was destined to be a wingrider, and could be annoyingly smug about it at times. Dunia, however, had other goals now. She was still standing for hatchings more from habit than ambition. She had firmly set her mind to becoming Headwoman one day. She was thus absorbing everything possible about the running of the Weyr's support staff, and found that a lot of the organisation and logistics appealed to her. A smooth running kitchen and laundry made everyone happy!

She smiled broadly as a couple of her classmates Impressed. Alayaya and Shaelyn both walked from the sands with a green. A third green looked Dunia over, and she couldn't help but feel the wash of disappointment as the little creature tottered on to joyfully greet Jesika.

No, forget dragonets – think Headwoman. Maybe she should stop standing for clutches? She would get a lot more useful experience helping in the kitchens on a Hatching Day. Organising the Feast on the short notice from humming to the final shell cracking was a logistical challenge. More so if there was a Lord or two in the audience. Quality, not just quantity, that's what was needed there.

The commotion from the crowd drew her back to the present. The gold egg had hatched at last! Dunia had a brief hope as the new queen tottered along the line of Candidates towards her, then quashed it. No, don't be silly. Headsecond, then Headwoman – that's the path for you.

Then a set of whirling eyes gazed deeply into her own. *I am yours. You are mine. I am Nioranth. I am very hungry.*

Her plans, it seemed, had just been changed...



2860.10.24... the present

“Goldrider Dunia?”

A hand gently shook her shoulder. Dunia blinked in confusion and looked up at Flightleader R'mal. What was R'mal doing in her cot? And why was there sand in her bed?

“Goldrider, are you all right?” There was concern in R'mal's voice. “I wouldn't have woken you, but you looked most uncomfortable in that position and your queen is insisting that you look at her eggs. Insisting most forcefully, in fact,” he added with a touch of chagrin.

Of course – she was in the Hatching Grounds and Nioranth was laying. Dunia sat up, her head feeling like it was stuffed with cotton wool. It was still dark. “R'mal, what are you doing here?” She hadn't expected any visitors until the sun had risen.

The bronzerider sat down beside her. “Udoth woke me,” he waved a hand upwards and Dunia saw that there were now two dragons silhouetted against the stars. “Nioranth was most insistent that we come to see her eggs.”

“Oh, R'mal I am *so* sorry!” Argh, she was going to throttle that gold of hers. “I just haven't been able to stay awake. I think I'm coming down with a cold or something.”

“Don't worry, my dear. Glad to be of service.” He patted her reassuringly on the shoulder. “Andrian has gone to the night hearth to see what might be available. I'm sure he'll be along with something soon.”

“Oh no, she's got the Weyrharper up too?” Andrian doubtless woke when his weyrmate got out of bed in the middle of the night. She wasn't going to throttle her gold, she was going to trade her in for a... for a... for a watchwher!

“It's quite all right,” R'mal said. “That's what makes life in a Weyr interesting, hmm?”

Dunia commented that far too many interesting things had happened in her life. What she wanted for a while was boredom and banality. R'mal laughed and offered her his arm to walk onto the sands and inspect the latest egg. There were now eleven in the clutch.

“My dear, you do feel a little feverish,” said R'mal with concern at the touch of her hand on his arm. “Shall I ask Andrian to fetch the healers when he arrives?”

“No, no, that's not necessary,” she said. “I'm sure I can sleep this off. If only Her Ladyship over there will let me.”

R'mal frowned, not looking entirely convinced by this argument. “Why don't you go and lie down in the goldrider's cot then,” he suggested. “Much more comfortable than sitting on the ground. Andrian or I can wake you if Nioranth needs you.”

“Thank you,” said Dunia. A real bed might make another doze more refreshing. “But be warned – it’ll be ‘when’ not ‘if’ she wants me!”



2854.09.25

Are you ready? Nioranth asked. *The bronzes look at me! I wish to fly NOW.*

Yes, I’m ready, Dunia replied from her perch on the gold’s neck. She felt like she’d been ready for this from the moment the gold cracked shell – to fly with her dragon. *Go, go!*

Without further ado the gold gave a massive downstroke of her wings and leaped into the air. They flapped up, up, up. Somehow it felt further and faster and simply more intense because she was sitting on the back of her own dragon, and not merely a passenger on another’s.

You do not need another dragon! said Nioranth imperiously. *You have me. We shall fly together and fight Thread together. You are my rider.* The young queen executed the turn that they had been instructed to make by Weyrlingsecond Kase and flew steadily towards the next landmark on their prescribed route. Dunia revelled in the rush of air past her face and the rhythm of Nioranth’s wings. Yes, *this* was where she belonged!



2860.10.24... *the present*

Dunia gradually became aware that two people were calling her name. One was Nioranth, the other... she rolled onto her back and looked up in confusion at Journeyman Peregana. “Oh,” she mumbled. “Is someone ill?”

Yes, Udoth’s rider says that YOU are ill. The healer will make you better and then you will come to see my eggs. They are very fine eggs. This last pronouncement came out rather plaintively.

Peregana had been saying something too, but Dunia had missed it due to Nioranth’s speech. “Sorry,” she said. “Missed that. Nioranth.” She sat up in the bed, feeling uncomfortably hot and achy – and also still as if she could to sleep for a month.

“Flightleader R’mal thought that a visit from a healer couldn’t go amiss,” Peregana said. “Especially where the health of one of our goldriders is concerned.” He bent slightly to feel the temperature of her forehead, and frowned.

“I told him it was just a cold coming on,” said Dunia. “Zherra’s had it—“

“And Zherra is abed with it too,” Peregana informed her. “You are running quite the fever there. Now hold still a moment...” The healer deftly felt around her throat and behind her ears, making thoughtful ‘hmmm’ noises as he did so. He asked her to move so that he could listen to her lungs. Eventually he examination was complete.

“Verdict?” asked Dunia. She tried and failed to suppress another yawn.

“The same as young Zherra – a feverish cold. I’ll give you something that should take the worst of the aches away and reduce the fever. Aside from that, drink lots of water and no going *between* for a couple of days.”

“I don’t think that’s likely to happen,” she replied, waving a hand beyond the shutters of the cot, to where Nioranth and her clutch resided. Eggs and a broody queen were going to be the extent of her horizons for a while.

“And sleep,” added Peregana. “The best remedy is plenty of sleep.”



2855.07.12

It was a mixture of terror and pride. This was what she had drilled and rehearsed for. This was what a dragonrider was destined for.

Threadfall!

Not just flying the ‘Fall to re-supply firestone – but to actually fight Thread. The weyrlings of Dunia’s class were flying the trailing edge of the ‘Fall for the first time, and she had joined the Queens’ Wing to fly where a gold was destined to fly. She held the wand of her flamethrower proudly as Nioranth flew in formation with the other golds. For the first time she was truly glad of all those tedious exercises that Weyrlingsecond Kase had made her do to strengthen the muscles in her arms. She had to be able to control the wand and hold it steady for long periods during the ‘Fall. What use was a queenrider who seared her own dragon because she couldn’t hold up her weapon?

There is Thread. Virankath claims it. Her rider flames it! Nioranth’s enthusiasm and excitement even outstripped her own.

Renorath’s rider flames! She misses some. Mine! That Thread is mine! The gold surged forwards to meet what tumbled down from Renorath’s level. Dunia depressed the trigger on her flamethrower and the ancient enemy was charred to ash. Hot particles swirled briefly around her before the wash from Nioranth’s wings swept them away.

Dunia’s shout of triumph mingled with Nioranth’s exultant bugle.



2856.04.15

Nioranth had finally been persuaded that she was overdue for a good oiling. Since her maiden mating flight three days ago the gold wanted to do little other than curl up in her new wallow next to L’rian’s bronze Goryneth, who had won the flight. Mere trivialities such as the fact that more than half of the new Weyr was a construction site, or that Thread had fallen yesterday and the day before had done

little to alter the gold's opinion. She wanted her wallow and she wanted her mate to share it with her.

A fine layer of sawdust settling on her gold skin had finally settled the matter. Sawdust drifted over from where the woodsmiths laboured, clay dust from the potters. When Dunia remarked that Nioranth looked more like a brown and white herdbeast than a dragon, that was enough for the gold to demand the bath and oiling that she had been postponing for days.

Now Dunia was on the beach with her gold, happily rubbing in oil into her gleaming hide. The rhythm and familiar routine made this new Weyr seem a less alien place. Nioranth gave happy rumbles, enjoying the attention and the sunshine.

Abruptly the gold stood up, sending Dunia tumbling to the sand. ***Nanyth is gone! Hunith is gone! Corath is gone! The mountain flames them! Sarath is gone! Imicith is gone! Bevorith is gone!*** The litany of names seemed unending, as one by one the dragons raised their heads to keen and keen and keen...

Dunia threw back her head and howled with them.



2860.10.24... the present

Dunia rolled over, half awake. Dim light came in through the windows of the unfamiliar cot. ***I have nineteen eggs now,*** Nioranth informed her smugly. ***Everyone admires my eggs.***

Tha's nice, mumbled Dunia, sliding back into sleep. Her last thought was to wonder who exactly 'everyone' was?



2859.02.11

It went on and on. The blackness so intense that her eyes imagined dancing patterns of light to fill it. The cold so bone biting deep that she felt the blood must surely thicken to ice in her veins.

We are lost! We are lost! Oh Nioranth, what have I done?

We are not lost, the golden queen insisted. ***We are going to where you wanted. I can feel that place. We will be there soon.***

Soon? Dunia let hope push back the despair and panic at the relentless lack of sensation that was *between*. *Soon*. She started to count silently, internally, to keep track of time in this timeless non-place. To grasp at the hope that Nioranth was right and they were not merely adrift in the darkness. That soon – in seconds or in minutes – they would erupt into the air above Kadanzer and feel the warmth of the tropical day around them.

But the numbers went on and on – just as the void went on and on – until she could no longer keep them straight in

her head, tens and hundreds jumbling together so she could no longer tell if she had counted to a mere eighty or a lengthy eight hundred.

Lost, lost, lost! Dunia cried.

Soon, soon, soon! Nioranth sent back – the one stable and fixed point in an infinity of nothingness.



2432.03.21 – the Ninth Pass

If Master Reilen said "Push!" one more time, Dunia was going to throttle him with his own rank cords. "I AM pushing!" she snarled, some other choice words cut off as another contraction gripped her. She reached for her gold's comforting presence, drawing on Nioranth's stubborn resilience as support. The queen's mind was full of confusion and concern at her pain.

"This is all your fault!" Dunia shouted at Corsan. Why had she ever thought sex was a good idea? It just led to all this agony. "Never forgive you..." she panted. "Never. All your fault..."

That man is hurting you? Nioranth's anxiety and bemusement was in her mind. ***Your egg is hurting you?***

No, Corsan is not hurting me! she tried not to snap at her bondmate, but she was filled with the need to shout at someone and make this all be over. "And it's not an egg, it's a BABY!"

From the look on the healer and Corsan's faces, she'd said that last bit out loud. She glared at her weyrmate as he tried desperately to keep a straight face. "Don't you dare laugh! I swear if you laugh we'll never have sex again!"

Corsan made a strangled noise, looking as if he was choking.

"You're laughing... you're... ah... ah... AAAAH!" Dunia yelled and pushed in rhythm with the contractions.

"That's it, that's it! Push!" cried Master Reilen. "Almost there... yes!"

A sudden sensation of relief, of pain dropping several notches in intensity, and Master Reilen was scooping up a red squirming bundle and thrusting it into her arms. "It's a girl. Goldrider Dunia, you have a daughter!"



2860.09.16

Balt had been a tight knot of misery and pain in her mind for days now. Then abruptly he was gone. Dunia gasped at the simultaneous feelings of grief and relief. It was over. It was finally over. She hadn't been brave enough to ask for the dragonhealers to end his suffering, always grasping at the hope that he would recover. Now tears leaked from her eyes at the mingled emotions of guilt, heartache and respite from her own torment.

Nioranth pushed into her mind. ***I am here. The little greedy one is gone, but I am here.*** Dunia clutched at that solid, stable anchor to her world. Her queen's love and

confidence and ego washed over her. *I am here*, repeated Nioranth imperiously. *You do not need a firelizard. You have ME!*



2860.10.24... the present

Dunia's nostrils twitched at the faint smell of fish soup, and the fragments of dream that had been in her head faded... She opened her eyes to the sight of her eldest daughter, Farnya, very carefully putting down a tray which bore a soup bowl, a jug and a hearty mound of fresh fruit.

"Good morning... is it morning? How long have I slept?" Her head still felt stuffed with cotton wool, and she was conscious of a full bladder and a raging thirst.

Farnya grinned. "Morning has long gone, Mama! You slept and slept and slept. All the dragons are saying that Nioranth is most put out. Bronzerider R'mal said that she wanted the whole Weyr to come and watch her laying, but Ihyanith told her to stop being foolish and that there was Thread to fly. So one of the Weyrling classes is here instead. We brought them breakfast, and now they're having a late lunch."

"Oh dear." Dunia reached out mentally to her queen, and found a large Nioranth-shaped sulk.

I like my eggs. I like my eggs very much. Layketh and her rider like my eggs, and Shoalanth and her rider like my eggs, and Mivuhoth and his rider like my eggs, and Radanth and his rider likes my eggs... The litany of names went on and on.

I like your eggs too! Dunia said.

I have many eggs. You have not seen most of my many eggs. How can you like them if you have not seen them! Nioranth was indignant.

How many? Dunia ventured. She pushed back the coverings and got out of bed, still feeling stiff and sore.

I have twenty-four eggs. They are very beautiful.

I'll be there any moment now... Dunia made a very necessary trip to the necessary, then gulped down several mouthfuls of fruit juice straight from the jug. Farnya helped her to gather her clothes and make herself halfway presentable to be seen in public.

Many sets of eyes – human and dragon – turned toward her as she stepped outside the goldrider's cot. Weyrlingsecond Shahara and her class were ranged about the first few rows of the stands, supping at bowls of soup or munching at pieces of fruit. She and Shahara exchanged polite nods. Layketh, the young dragons of the class –

including a very penitent -looking gold Arohath, Dunia noted – the current watchrider and a couple of other adult dragons were perched high on the walls of the Hatching Grounds. It looked like some sort of bizarre rehearsal for a hatching.

See, said Nioranth. *Many other people like my eggs, even if you do not!* She snaked her head back and forth over the clutch in a mixture of protectiveness and pride.

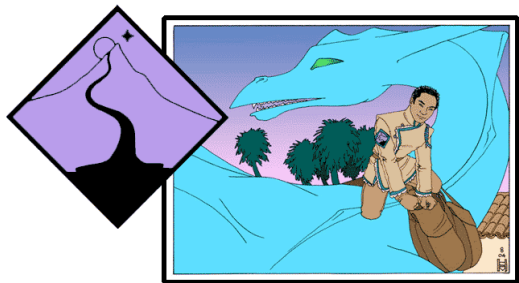
Dunia left Farnya on the edge of the sands and gradually picked her way across to her queen, lavishing attention and praise on each egg that she passed on the way. *What nice creamy swirls there is on this one... and isn't this one lovely and large... and this one is such a nice colour...*

Nioranth moved her huge head down to Dunia's level. *You like my eggs?* she said hopefully. *You will stay with me and my eggs? You will not sleep all the time?*

The goldrider hugged her queen's muzzle and reassured her that yes, she liked all her eggs VERY MUCH, and no, she was not going to sleep all the time.

The queen rumbled to herself, not quite mollified. *Do you like this egg?* She pulled from Dunia's embrace to nudge a small egg with brown and cream splotches. *And this one? Onto the next. And this one?*

Yes, I like that one... And that one too... And of course I like that one... There were times when Dunia was very, very pleased that dragons had short memories!



Kadanzer Weyr

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