
Idle Fancies

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"So, I finally get the opportunity to meet the goldrider who has caused such a stir."

Dunia turned around amid the hubbub of the Hatching feast, and saw a richly dressed, middle-aged holder. He was short and stocky, with greying brown hair and beard, and a slightly oily smile. It was the Southern Hold steward; what was his name? "Ah, Steward Cynestan, thank you for coming to the feast," she said diplomatically.

"Oh, my pleasure, I assure you." His light-colored eyes twinkled with what might have been either mischief, or amused malice.

"And how fares the hold?" She hoped to get this conversation over quickly; Genna had warned her about the steward. The Weyrwoman had remarked with a wry smile that given a choice of being trapped talking to Lord Toric, or to Cynestan, she would unhesitatingly choose the former; Cynestan, she said, always made her feel as if she need to wash herself afterwards. He was an opportunist, but he was also shrewd, and very smart.

"Quite well, quite well, thank you for asking," the older man smiled. "I'm assured the Weyr fares well too. What of the Weyr you come from? Which one did you say it was, again?"

"I didn't."

"Yes, I noticed that. No one will say from where you come. Perhaps you're another Lessa, come to take our dragonriders away to the future?" He laughed dryly.

"Hardly that," she responded, managing an answering laugh she hoped sounded natural despite the sudden dryness in her mouth.

"Oh, of course not. Those at Landing assure us that Thread will not return after this Pass, so why would there be any need for another Lessa?" His tone seemed light, but his eyes locked on to hers.

'He knows,' she thought suddenly. She didn't know why she was suddenly so sure, only that she was. "Exactly," she agreed aloud. "But, if you'll excuse me, I really must--"

"Oh, indulge me another moment, if you would. Humor an old man."

Well, Genna had told her to be tactful and not offend him. "You hardly strike me as old, Steward Cynestan." It was the truth; she doubted he was older than fifty. Privately

she was relieved that there was only one Hold and its people for her to worry about, rather than seventeen.

His smile widened. "You flatter me, goldrider," he replied, with a little bow.

She was about to respond when a young man approached with a glass of wine. He was stamped from the same mold as Cynestan; probably a son.

"Ah, thank you, Morestan," Cynestan said as he took the glass. He glanced over at her, assuring himself that she was supplied with a goblet as well, before dismissing the youth with a tilt of his head. "Now be off with you; the goldrider and I are talking." The young man bowed and left.

"Now as I was saying," he turned back to Dunia before she could beat a retreat. "Humor an old man's idle fancy for a moment."

"I thought idle fancies were a folly of the young?" she responded, hoping that might distract him.

"Perhaps I'm simply young at heart," he returned, with an insincere smile. "Indulge me, if you will. Let us say you come from the future, since I am assured that it is quite impossible to jump from the past -- accidentally, that is."

"I don't--"

He cut her off. "I would assume Southern Hold continues to prosper?"

She wanted to say, "No, you old fool, it is totally destroyed and you probably die with it," but she managed to hold her tongue.

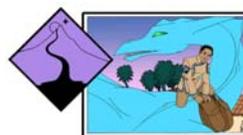
Cynestan looked at her sharply. "Or not?"

"I hardly think I would tell you even if I knew," Dunia managed. "I suppose there would be many Holds in the future competing with one another -- but I wouldn't know."

"Yes, I suppose even that fishing camp over in Cibola will be a Hold someday, and those new settlements beyond Landing."

Dunia tried to keep her expression calm, even bored-looking. "This is quite a fancy you have. We both might speculate for hours, but..." She shrugged, to show that she thought that would yield nothing useful. "Now if you would excuse me, Steward, I have a newborn I must attend to."

She walked away as fast as dignity would allow, even as Cynestan tried to speak further. He started after her, but was accosted by a man with Fishercraft captain's knots, and she soon lost him in the crowd. She found herself quite without appetite, and left the Weyrhall in search of Corsan and comfort.



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