
A Thief Among Us

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"Meiriel... Rilam... Zaras... Lodrun... Lyra... Deza... Kelion... Beltas and Aliana..."

The infirmary was quiet, save for Giselle's quiet words and the simple scratching of chalk that accompanied each spoken name. Bright morning sunlight poured through the windows of the Infirmary and onto the faces of the nine apprentice dragonhealers who stood around the craftmaster's desk in a semi-circle.

"I can't believe our luck!" Lyra whispered excitedly. She couldn't take her eyes off the small pots lined up on the table, let alone, stop thinking about the contents within them. Inside each, tucked under a cushioning bed of sand, lay a small egg. "Is the craftmaster really going to give us each a firelizard egg?" she whispered.

"Master Giselle's probably going to make us crack them open into a basin like kitchen help, then dissect the embryos," Lodrun whispered back, deadpan.

Lyra's eyes went wide. "She wouldn't make us do that, would she?"

Lodrun's amused grin was his only answer.

The apprentices' murmurs ceased when Giselle finally turned to face them. "One of the most important things you will learn about a dragon is the details of its anatomy," she said. The craftmaster stood still as she spoke, her tone as formal as though addressing Lord Holders rather than an anxious ring of apprentices. As always, the craftmaster had a severe, regal presence, one which belied her petite size. "Your knowledge of dragon anatomy is critical to your success as a dragonhealer. A firelizard is a pale substitute for a dragon, but it can give you critical insight -- both in terms of anatomy and physiology, and as a window through which to glimpse a bit of the power of a dragon's bond with his rider. I cannot give you -- nor do I want to give you -- each a dragon of your own. But as my master did for me, I can give each of you a firelizard egg. These firelizard eggs are not gifts. They are tests. What grade you achieve in this segment of your training will depend on the viable hatching of these eggs." Giselle paused for a moment, and turned her sharp stare onto each student in turn as she finished. "And should you Impress a healthy firelizard as a result, all the better. Its training and health will receive further grading marks from me, and from the journeymen above you. It will

be your job to care for the eggs I am about to give you. If you can see these eggs to hatching, you'll have a firelizard -- and a study subject -- of your own. Of course, that means you will need to keep the eggs adequately safe and warm, or they will not hatch. You'll also need to watch them closely. Make sure you find food and have it readily on hand when the eggs hatch - the best way to a firelizard's heart is through its stomach. Are there any questions?"

"Do we have to leave our eggs here, or are we allowed to take them out of the Infirmary?" Aliana asked.

"Tend to your egg however you think is best. For example, if you believe the safest and warmest place for your egg is underneath your pillow at night, then that is your decision. Just remember that your decisions will have consequences. If your egg breaks before hatching, I will not replace it."

"How old are the eggs?" Zaras asked next. "How long until they're estimated to hatch?"

Giselle nodded approval of that question. "Lili laid the clutch last month. They're within a sevenday of hatching now, so they're not as sensitive to temperature as a younger, softer egg would be, but you should still take steps to ensure that they don't become chilled."

Zaras nodded in understanding, and Giselle searched the faces of the other apprentices to see if they had questions, as well. There was only silence. Silence and expectant stares.

"All right, then. Come and claim your egg crocks."



"Oh jays," moaned Morres. "That is so unfair! Your craftmaster gives you firelizard eggs? The best I've ever been handed was a shovel, to use on the dung pile."

Lodrun sat proudly at the candidates' table at lunchtime, showing off his firelizard egg, his crock of sand at his elbow. "Beautiful, isn't it?"

"It is!" breathed Lytora, and she and Jepha hung over the red-haired youth's shoulders for a closer look. "How beautiful!"

"Can I touch it?" Rycas asked hopefully.

"Of course, ladies, of course!" Lodrun said, grinning slyly at the other candidates who sat across from him. Orlen scowled and looked thoroughly disgusted, while Morres, Jevik and Netheril looked on with varying expressions of envy and jealousy.

"It's so big!" Lytora squealed, reaching out to stroke the shell gently with her fingers.

"With all of the bronze mottling in the shell, does that mean it'll hatch bronze?" Jepha asked.

"Looks mostly green to me," Netheril muttered to the other boys.

Lodrun ignored Netheril's sour comment. "It might well hatch bronze or gold. From the size, I wouldn't expect less than a brown."

"How would you know? It's just a firelizard egg," Orlen challenged him.

"Yes – and it's *mine*," Lodrun grinned back. "Like I said earlier, Craftmaster Giselle is giving us these eggs in part to test us in what we know. And I've been an apprentice for seven Turns now, long enough almost to smell my journeyman knots. Firelizard eggs aren't the same as dragon eggs. I really don't know how this egg will hatch – there's no telling, although size is a promising indicator. Dragon eggs are more predictable than firelizard eggs, since a firelizard gold is seldom as uniquely colored as a dragon egg. But even so, considering the size of this egg, I'd wager on a brown or bronze. Or even a gold."

"That would be wonderful if she hatched out a gold, wouldn't it?" said Rycas, all dreamy-eyed as she fondled Lodrun's egg wistfully.

"It sure would," Lodrun agreed. "And I'm sure I'd be able to use some help keeping the hungry lady fed, you know, if it does hatch out gold."

The girls were all quick to volunteer, while Orlen and the other youths looked at one another in narrow-eyed disgust.

Then Beltas arrived, meal tray in one hand, and a clay pot in the other. "Ladies and lordlings, take a look at *this*," he announced, putting down the egg crock proudly. "Have you ever seen such a beautiful firelizard egg?" he asked, brushing aside the egg's cover of sand to expose a blue and brown swirled shell.

"There goes my appetite," Jevik groaned. "This just isn't fair at all!"

"No, it's not," Orlen agreed, with a sudden smug look. He caught his companion's eyes, and made a show of finishing off the last bite on his plate. "I'm going back for seconds," he announced. "Anyone coming with me?"

Netheril and Jevik scrambled to their feet, even though Jevik's plate was still half-full. "Sure thing!" Netheril said, and the three youths headed back toward the Weyrhall's serving line, their heads together the moment they were out of eavesdropping range of the table they had just left.

Morres watched them go with a hint of concern in his eyes – but Lodrun and Beltas were too busy showing off their firelizard eggs to an eager audience to take notice.

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Aliana reached out with anxious hands and ever-so-carefully turned her firelizard egg before carefully nestling sand back over the top of the delicate shell. She was excited about the prospect of having a firelizard of her very own. She could only hope she didn't make a mistake that would end up costing her both her new pet and a passing grade on her assignment.

Something touched her shoulder, and when she turned to look, she found her sister Coralia's bronze firelizard Ashi perched there. She had plied him with enough treats that he now often sought her out when he was hungry or wanted some attention.

"Am I doing this right, Ashi?" she asked the firelizard while scratching under his chin. He chirped and tilted his head in reply. "You know more than I do, I suppose."

"Hey, Aliana, are you going to come along to dinner or not?" Lyra asked, leaning through the doorway in the girl's barracks. "Nori and Villsha and I are all waiting!"

"Hold on. I'm coming!" Aliana hurriedly put the egg crock under her bunk, then turned to Ashi. "Now, make sure nothing happens to it, all right?" The bronze firelizard gave a small chirp. Taking that as an agreement, Aliana ran off after Lyra.

When Aliana returned later that evening, following her shift, she was excited and happy. During dinner, she and the other girls had spent their time coming up with all sorts of names, helping Aliana and Lyra to decide on the best firelizard names for each color and a few extras in case anyone else needed suggestions. Ashi was gone by the time the girls returned to the barracks.

As Aliana bent under her bunk to collect the crock, she found to her dismay the crock had been knocked over. Its contents were spilled all over the place -- except for the egg, which was missing. She fought back her initial feelings of panic while she began to search.

Then it struck her. Ashi had taken it. She had told him to protect it, so he probably had taken it to a safe place until it hatched. That's what she told herself. She had to believe that -- there way no way she was going to fail this project, especially when its reward was so great.

She turned her attentions to finding Ashi, then, in the hopes the new search would prove more fruitful than her last. But while Ashi was easy enough to find, in her sister Coralia's care, Aliana was forced to accept that her firelizard egg was nowhere to be found.

"Zaras! Wake up!" hissed a voice in his ear, while strong hands shook at his arm.

Zaras woke with a moan. He rolled over, automatically catching after his blanket as it threatened to slide off of his bunk. "Go away, I'm having such a nice dream," he muttered at his childhood friend and foster-brother. "And you're not invited."

Lodrun ripped away the blanket. "This is important," he whispered. "My egg is gone."

That woke Zaras up. He sat up and wiped a hand over his eyes. "What?" he said, careful to pitch his voice low, so as not to wake other sleeping candidates in the Barracks around them.

Lodrun's face was pale in the darkness. "My firelizard egg. It's gone." He held up an empty crock to illustrate that.

"How'd you lose it?" Zaras asked, yawning hugely.

"I didn't. It was here on its heating dish on the bedside table when I went to sleep. I turned it before I fell asleep, and just woke up to turn it again--"

Zaras jumped down out of the top bunk, and went immediately to his own egg pot, stashed on a heating dish on

top of the trunk he shared with Lodrun at the end of their bunk-beds. To Zaras's relief, his own egg was still safely in its own crock; he brushed aside sand and found the glossy shell, a pale spot of iridescence in the dark of the barracks. He rotated the egg carefully and covered again with sand again, checked to make sure the heating dish was still evenly warm, then turned to look up at Lodrun, who now stood beside the opened trunk. Lodrun was naked except for a ragged pair of shorts, and held his empty crock against his chest possessively.

"Someone must have taken it," Lodrun said in a fierce undertone, sweeping the nearby bunk beds with a fierce stare. As far as Zaras could tell, they were all full of sleeping candidates, and he didn't see anyone missing. "You know the other candidates are jealous," Lodrun added. "I'll bet one of the boys swiped it, thinking they could cause me to sweat."

"If it's a prank, it sure isn't a funny one," Zaras whispered. "You heard what happened when N'dren stole firelizard eggs from that greenrider, right?"

Lodrun nodded soberly. When Weyrling N'dren had stolen firelizard eggs from a classmate – albeit as a prank, but one that resulted in his Impressing his gold Sarla – Weyrlingmaster D'zan had had the weyrling bronzerider marched out in front of the entire Weyrling Wing and strapped, bare-assed, before everyone. Lodrun and Zaras had still been candidates back at Ista Weyr when that had happened, but even three Turns later, talk of the event still circulated in the candidates' barracks after lights-out. "If another candidate did it, then you know what the Weyrlingmaster'll do."

"If he's feeling gentle, just skin them with his tongue, then ship them back home," Zaras agreed. "We better find your egg, before something happens to it. Or before the Weyrlingmaster learns about any of this."

"The Weyrlingmaster," Lodrun echoed, "or Craftmaster Giselle."

Zaras nodded. "C'mon, we'd better start looking."



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A hand closed around his upper arm, startling Kelion from his studies. He jumped and looked up to see Beltas standing beside his seat at the Infirmary worktable. "Have you seen Orlen?" Beltas demanded.

Kelion arched his eyebrows in interest. "What, in here? I've been on duty the last couple of hours. What'd he do, steal your egg?" he asked with a crooked smile, pointing at the empty pot in Beltas' left hand.

Beltas frowned and nodded. "Someone did, and I'm betting it was Orlen. I'm sure he did it, just to see me fail. He always thinks he's *so* much better than the rest of us, just because *his* father's Lord Holder."

Kelion took a quick glance at the pot that was sitting on the table before him, just to check that his egg was still there. It was. "Not so loud," he said in a whisper. "You'll

attract Aretei's attention, and you don't want her or Craftmaster Giselle to find out that you lost your egg!"

Beltas looked around nervously. "You're right, that's the last thing I need," he muttered.

Kelion shook his head and chuckled a little. It was rare for Beltas to act like a serious apprentice. He was laid-back and comical, constantly playing tricks on other apprentices and other candidates in the barracks. He and Beltas had become good friends when they had both transferred to Kadanzer this last Turn.

"TheCandidate Barracks!" Beltas said suddenly and snapped his fingers, making Kelion jump in surprise. "I bet you he hid them in the barracks! C'mon! I want to have a witness when we find the missing eggs hidden in his trunk!" He grabbed Kelion's arm and pulled him off his stool.

"Let me go," Kelion hissed, grabbing after his own egg pot. "I'm on duty!"

"C'mon, we'll hurry, nobody will notice," Beltas said, dragging the smaller youth toward the Infirmary's side door.

"Beltas! I can't leave! I'm on shift! Wait!" Kelion protested, wishing that, as Beltas's senior in Turns as an apprentice, he would for once get a little bit more respect. "If Journeywoman Aretei catches me away from the Infirmary, I'll be in trouble! And so will you!"

Beltas marched him out of the Infirmary and started across the back courtyard toward the candidate barracks. "Don't worry... once we find the eggs in Orlen's trunk, *he'll* be the one in trouble. Besides, I'm not a candidate. I have no clue what trunk is his. You sleep under the same roof, don't tell me you don't know."

Kelion sighed and looked back towards the Dragon Infirmary, but said nothing else as they slipped into the Candidate Barracks. The bunks were deserted at this hour, as the rest of the Weyr's candidates were either on-duty with their chosen craft or working on their day's chore assignment. Kelion led Beltas to Orlen's and watched as Beltas searched it and the candidate's trunk. Kelion clutched his egg crock to him, hoping that soon they would find the missing egg and that he could hurry back to the Infirmary before he was found away while scheduled on a duty shift. When Beltas's search of Orlen's trunk turned up nothing, they both ducked down and looked under his bunk.

"It could be in any of the empty trunks or bunks in here... or over on the girls' side, even," Kelion said, waving toward the separating wall, "because you know that if a boy was determined, he'd just sneak into the girls' side."

"We don't have time!" Beltas made an exasperated noise, cursing under his breath. "Shaffit! Shaffit! Shaffit!" He gave Orlen's trunk a kick, then grabbed for Kelion's arm again. "C'mon, let's get you back to the Infirmary before the journeyman on duty notices."

They hurried out of the barracks and back across the northern back courtyard. "You still think it's Orlen pulling a trick on you?" Kelion asked in concern.

"What else do you think it could be?" Beltas asked as they reached the Infirmary's side door. He held it open for Kelion to go in first.

"I don't know," Kelion said, starting to get concerned. He looked down at his egg crock again as he slipped through the door. "What if the eggs really *have* been stolen? What if it's not a prank? There's all the rest of the barracks you know, lots of empty bunks, the storage rooms--"

"Shards. I think we have something else to worry about now," Beltas replied in a wincing voice.

Kelion looked up to see Journeywoman Aretei leaning against the work table where Kelion had been sitting, her arms crossed over her chest and a scowl on her face.

"Welcome back, boys," the journeywoman said. "I'm assuming Kelion didn't need his hand held all the way to the necessary and back, so would you two care to explain for me where you've been?"



"I didn't have anything to do with it!" Jevik said, sprawled face-down in the compost he had been shoveling, with one arm twisted tight behind him and Lodrun's knee pressed painfully into the small of his back. "I didn't!"

"You sure about that?" Lodrun asked calmly, applying more pressure. Jevik hissed and squirmed, but was unable to break free of the other youth's grip. "You absolutely sure?"

"Yes!" Jevik said. "Let me go!"

"What about your friends?" Zaras asked, who stood guard nearby, making sure that none of the Feeding Ground's staff came around the swineshed to interrupt the interrogation. "You and Netheril and Lord Purol's bratling – you had your heads together as thick as thieves last night."

"We were talking about doing it, sure," Jevik admitted. "We thought we'd make a big prank out of it, and stash the eggs in the Weyrlingmaster's own desk drawers. But we were going to wait a day or two, until the eggs were closer to hatching and until we knew for sure the Weyrlingmaster and his dragon weren't going to be near his weyrcot."

Lodrun traded a glance with Zaras, then let his grip on the other candidate go. He retreated a step to let Jevik rise, even offering him a friendly hand. Jevik ignored it, and sullenly wiped dirt from his face. "You're not going to tell the Weyrlingmaster on us, are you?"

"Oh no." Lodrun snorted. "No, I'm sure the old brownrider wouldn't be very happy with you, and you didn't actually *do* anything yet, right? Why bother the Weyrlingmaster with this little problem of ours? Because you know what the Weyrlingmaster thinks of thievery. You know how he'd have us all standing at attention while he had the barracks taken apart stick by stick around us, until the stolen eggs have been found."

"What would the Weyrherder think, if he heard of any of this as well? The Weyr ships thieves back to the little holds and caravans they come from, you know," Zaras added.

"Right," Lodrun agreed. "So it's best for us candidates to find the eggs ourselves, without a word slipping edgewise for anyone to here. Besides, Resla might cry. I hate it when

women cry. You'd hate it if you made Resla cry, wouldn't you, Jevik? I know you would."

"You absolutely sure Orlen and Netheril haven't taken a little independent action here?" Zaras demanded, as Jevik nodded sullenly Lodrun's last statement.

"Yeah, I'm sure," Jevik said, as he brushed bits of compost off his tunic-front. "But I'll make sure of it."

"Good. Do that." Lodrun clapped the other candidate's shoulder soundly, hard enough to rock the other youth forward on the balls of his feet. "And let us know by dinner-time, will you? Because the sooner you get your friends off the hook and find those eggs, the less likely it is that the Weyrlingmaster hears of any of this."



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By morning, word quickly spread among the apprentices about the three missing eggs, turning even the fact that Beltas and Kelion had been assigned a month-long tour of punishment duties, with the caveat they be kept separated, into a mere gossip foot-note.

"I swear I put the crock under my bunk before I left for the Weyrhall last night!" Aliana explained to the hushed group of apprentices who had gathered around her. "And when I came back, the crock was still there, but the egg was gone!"

"Did you see any clues that would have given away who stole it?" Beltas asked in an anxious voice.

Aliana shook her head.

"This is serious," Rilam said. "We're going to have to tell Master Giselle that the eggs are missing."

"Not until we've eliminated all other options," Lodrun argued. "Someone must know something. We tell the craftmaster, then she'll go to the Weyrlingmaster, and he'll turn the barracks upside down and inside out. There's got to be a less painful solution here--"

Rilam arched his eyebrow, his tone becoming defensive. "I'm just trying to help you and everyone else whose eggs were stolen. If we tell Giselle, she can get the Weyrwoman or the Weyrlingmaster to help. And if the Weyrlingmaster can get you your eggs back before some thief can Impress them, then so what if the rest of the candidates get a little bent out of shape over an inspection or two? And maybe once the thief knows how much trouble he'll be in for taking the eggs, he'll give them back."

"It's all your fault anyway, Lodrun," Aliana blurted. "If you and Beltas hadn't been parading your egg to everyone, there wouldn't be half as many people jealously drooling over our eggs!"

"Quiet!" Zaras hissed, cutting off any further conversation on who was to blame. Across the room, Giselle had stepped out of her office and shut the door behind her. "And it's not as if you've been shy about letting everyone know you had an egg of your own," Zaras added in a sharp whisper, as Journeywoman Krysia intercepted the craftmaster with a question.

"There are certainly enough jealous people who might be after our eggs," Rilam said. "It doesn't help narrow down the suspects when so many people know we have them. I still think we should tell."

"Or maybe find hiding places for our eggs," Kelion said, "In hopes that the rest of us can keep what we have, if our thief wants a whole fair of their own."

Then Krysia and Giselle had parted ways and the craftmaster was heading toward the anxious knot of apprentices. "Good morning," Giselle called. "We've got some dead ferals to dissect this morning – they're fresh right now, but will get ripe fast, so let's get to work!" the craftmaster ordered crisply. The apprentices traded looks, but no one said anything.



Lyra glanced quickly back over her shoulder one more time to make sure no one had noticed her, and then slipped into Luka's weycot. It was nearly time for dinner, and most people she had seen were headed to Main to a good hot supper. No one had paid any attention to her, she was sure of it. She sped quickly around the room looking for a place to stash the precious crock. Then she spotted it: a shelf that would be warmed by the afternoon sun, with a large glazed jar of sweet oil surrounded by a cluster of potted leafy green plants. Her own egg crock would hardly be noticed and the sunny spot would help keep the sand and the egg beneath it warm until she came to check on it again. Lyra hastily shoved the chalk-smudged crock slightly behind the other jar, and then stood back to admire her own cleverness. "Let's see you steal my bronze now, whoever you are!" she said under her breath. Then, smiling her satisfaction, she hurried back to the Main complex and dinner, certain that no one in their right mind would take something from her older sister's weycot.



Nightsingers were calling as Meiriël cautiously slipped from the Dragon Infirmary, clutching her egg crock to her chest. She froze in the shadows of the building, looking quickly around to make sure no one was watching. Slowly, oh so slowly, she crept away from the protection of the Infirmary wall and bolted swiftly across the open square to her mother Rasha's herb garden.

She was determined that under no circumstances was her own egg going to be stolen like the other three apprentices' eggs had been. And she had a plan to keep whoever was taking them from getting hers. Meiriël had timed things so that she was putting her egg in its hiding place while most everyone was in the Weyrhall eating the evening meal and she herself hidden in the darkness. As long as no idle healer spotted her out of the Infirmary windows, no one would see her.

The girl raced around to the back of the garden, so that the waist-high lavender blooms would provide her with

cover. She assured herself that the garden was deserted and there was no one to observe her. Then she set down her crock and pulled a trowel from her skirt's deep pockets.

Meiriël worked quickly and quietly, digging into the soft, rich dirt. Her long auburn braid fell over her shoulder and she impatiently shoved it back, and when it fell a second time, she swore a soft oath and knotted it into a quick bun at the base of her neck to keep it out of her way. Then, returning to her frantic digging, the girl finished making her hole, digging it just deep enough to put her egg crock inside and leave a couple of inches on top. Carefully, she pushed the loose dirt around the sides of the crock, tamping it down securely. Once that was accomplished, Meiriël scooped up the leftover dirt and spread it around the garden, making sure everything blended in.

Then, creeping quietly, she made her way to where her mother stored her gardening tools and gathered up a small pail. Carefully, she made her way over to the small pile of manure set near the garden and filled the small pail. Returning to where she buried the eggpot, Meiriël dumped the pail over the slight depression in the ground and spread it evenly over the top, trying to make it blend in with the rest of the garden.

Once she was done, she made sure she put everything back where she found it and happily trotted off to wash herself off and get a meal. Her egg was safe; not a single person had seen her leave or spotted her while she buried it. That meant that no one would be able to steal it now!



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When Meiriël dropped by the Infirmary garden the next morning before breakfast for a visit and to check on the safety of her egg, she discovered her mother Rasha kneeling very close to the spot in which Meiriël had buried the eggcrock. The headsecond was busy smoothing over an uneven section of ground which obviously had been dug up, with the scent of shredded lavender still thick in the air. Rasha was quiet as she worked, but it was clear to Meiriël from her mother's expression that Rasha wasn't pleased.

"What's happened?" Meiriël asked.

Rasha set her spade down on the ground and turned at the sound of her daughter's voice. She eyed her daughter coolly for a moment, then offered Meiriël a familiar piece of crockery. The chalk inscription from the side had long since been wiped off, but Meiriël knew her mother had recognized the egg pot.

"Care to explain this?" Rasha asked dryly.

Meiriël looked down at the empty egg pot in her hands, and then looked at her mother again. "My egg!" she asked, her voice pleaded.

"That was buried in my garden, and held nothing but dirt and sand," Rasha replied.

Meiriël moaned, then burst into tears.



"Mine's gone too," Lyra admitted, her face anguished. "I tried hiding it in Luka's weycot, but when I went back this morning to check on it, the crock was right where I had left it, and the egg was gone!"

The ring of faces around the breakfast table was grim. "We have to tell the craftmaster," Rilam said finally.

"We can find the eggs on our own," Beltas countered. "After all, someone knows where they are!"

"There are only so many places you could hide them in the Weyr, right?" Kelion added.

"You're joking, right?" Lyra countered. "I could think of hundreds of places you could start looking, and that's just in Main alone."

Then Deza trailed into the room, the last of the apprentices to show for breakfast. The girl's face was flushed and wet with tears. "Oh no," cried Meiriell. "Not you, too?"

The mute apprentice began to write feverishly on her slate board, pausing only to wipe her eyes and nose. 'Someone tried to steal my egg. Instead, they knocked the pot off the shelf and broke it. Broke the pot. Broke the egg. Sand everywhere. Shell everywhere. Baby firelizard smashed all up, not a chance of saving it.'

Meiriell hugged Deza tightly as the other girl's slate made a silent round of the table. "That's it," Lodrun said quietly. "Rilam's right. This isn't a joke and this isn't funny. Not anymore."



"What do you mean, your eggs have been stolen?" Giselle's cool gaze moved to each apprentice in turn. "And why wasn't I told about this before?" Her less-than-pleased mood elicited a sigh from Lili, who was perched on Giselle's shoulder, but the gesture was hardly noticed.

Giselle wasn't happy with the silence she got for a response. "Those eggs are vital to your getting a good mark on your assignment. I don't understand why this wasn't brought to my attention sooner." She searched the faces of each of the apprentices before her. When there was still no response, she impatiently added, "The punishment for stealing is severe. It doesn't matter if they were taken in an attempt at a prank or not. This is serious business. Whose eggs are missing?"

"Beltas's, Aliana's, Lyra's and Meiriell's and mine," Lodrun answered, breaking the group's silence.

"And Deza's was broken when someone tried to steal it," Zaras added.

Giselle nodded. "And how many of these thefts could have been prevented if you'd told me this was happening right from the start?" There was more than one silent, guilty look in response to the craftmaster's question, and she continued, her tone less than sympathetic. "I'd suggest those of you who still have your eggs keep better guard over them. In the meantime, I'll be speaking to the Weyrwoman

regarding the thefts. She won't take this matter lightly. Hopefully the thief will consider the consequences of his or her actions and will return the eggs. If not, however, don't assume that I'll waive the requirements and give those of you who lost your eggs a passing grade. Part of your assignment, if you recall, was that the eggs be well-taken care of so they hatched." Giselle frowned at the gathered group. "Zaras, Lodrun, Kelion – as my seniormost apprentices, I'm particularly disappointed in the three of you. I expected better. All of you – dismissed."



Rilam returned straight to his bunk in the support staff barracks as fast as his legs could carry him. There probably really was no reason to run, but if someone *did* want to steal his firelizard egg, which he carried clutched to his chest in its crock, then who was to say they wouldn't try to take it by force? The egg thief still hadn't been found, and even though no more eggs had been stolen since Giselle had spoken to Valenne about the thefts, that was no sign that the culprit wouldn't strike again.

His boot caught on a raised cobble and he tripped. He managed to catch his balance before he fell and dropped the egg crock, but the near-accident made him pause to catch his breath. If Rilam wasn't careful, his anxiety was going to be more of a threat than the still-at-large egg thief. The apprentice took a calming breath and forced himself to slow his pace and walked back to his bunk, instead.

The barracks hall was quiet, as most of the hall's residents were pursuing their day's duties. Roo, Rilam's wherry, was standing in his cage, dozing in sunlight that washed through the window near Rilam's bunk. The brightly colored wherry opened an eye to gaze at Rilam when he sat down on his bed. 'It's a good thing Roo's a light sleeper,' Rilam mused. 'If someone does come in here to steal my egg in the middle of the night, Roo's screaming will wake me and everyone else up. And besides, would someone really risk coming into a barracks full of sleeping men just to steal one firelizard egg?'

Rilam carefully placed the crock containing his precious firelizard egg on the small table next to his bunk, then sat and proceeded to pull off his shoes and socks. Roo moved closer to the crock and twisted his head so one golden eye was focused on the container.

"That's a firelizard egg," Rilam said to the wherry. "The two of you are going to have to learn to get along once he hatches. But in the meantime, you're going to let me know if someone tries to take him, all right?"

Rilam stood and peeled off his shirt. He felt sticky with sweat, and figured a quick shower was in order. He tossed his shirt on his bunk and sprinted to the bathhouse, certain that he wouldn't be gone long enough for anyone to even have a chance at stealing his firelizard egg.

He was only gone for a few minutes, but his jaw dropped when he returned to his bunk. While he was out, Roo had climbed out of his cage and onto the table, and had

cracked the top of the egg open with his beak. Even now, as Rilam approached, Roo was happily guzzling down the egg's contents, purring as he did so.

Rilam was beyond words and couldn't find the breath to even summon a reprimand. He sat down hard on his bunk and stared at Roo in disbelief. All chances for a passing grade on this assignment had just gone down a wherry's throat.



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Nioranth had begun to lay her third clutch the day before, and the Dragonhealer periodically left her infirmary to check on the young gold's progress. Seeing Giselle step out of the infirmary, Kelion excused himself to slip off to the Dragonhealer's office, where, on their craftmaster's orders, the apprentices now kept their egg crocks while they worked their daily duty shifts.

"Yeah, yeah, excuses, excuses," Lodrun said to Zaras while they continued to stir the boiling redwort cauldron. Brewing the harsh-smelling antiseptic was necessary but unpleasant work – exactly the kind of task given to apprentices who had earned their craftmaster's disappointment.

Journeyman Kieran looked up from his record keeping as Kelion approached. "Sir, I just want to check on my egg," Kelion said. Kieran nodded and went back to his own work, and Kelion passed him and strode for Giselle's office door.

The door was already open a fraction. Kelion pushed it open, then froze in horror when he saw a golden shape crouched over the top of his egg crock, at the end of the row of egg crocks sitting on top of the craftmaster's desk. The firelizard hissed maliciously at him, his firelizard egg clutched possessively against her belly.

"Hey!" he shouted. "Wait! That's *mine*!"

The little gold – he belatedly recognized the creature as Giselle's own gold, Lili – snarled at him and unfurled her wings. She took off, her grip on the precious egg precarious as she flew laboriously past him, out the door, and down the Infirmary hall toward the open storage room doorway.

"It's Lili!" Kelion hollered, racing after her. "And she's stealing my egg!"

He made it through the door just in time to see Lili disappear behind a stack of linens on one of the room's broad shelves. Kelion grabbed up handfuls of cloth and hauled, spilling an entire stack onto the floor. In the sheltered niche behind the linens, Giselle's gold firelizard had built herself a nest out of shredded bandage rolls and gauze, decorated with bits of shiny bauble and ribbon that the firelizard had stolen from who-knows-whom in the Weyr. Lili was hunched over her nest now, the gleam of eggs visible beneath her as she hissed and exposed her talons in threat.

Footsteps were hammering up the hall behind him. Kelion made a reach for the closest egg, and snatched his

hand back bloody and torn. "She's got our eggs!" he yelled as Journeyman Kieran came racing into the room, with Lodrun at his heels.

Lili hissed a fierce challenge at the new arrivals, her little eyes glowing red. Kieran took in the sight, and turned at once to Lodrun. "Go and fetch the Craftmaster," he said. "Giselle is going to have to be the one to reclaim those eggs from her gold." As Lodrun sprinted off, the journeyman leaned closer for a better look, inviting a taloned swipe from Lili. At the same moment, a stream of green, blue, brown and bronze bodies flooded into the room through the doorway, scattering to find perches in the rafters. The fair of firelizards all began to hum as they took their places expectantly. "You'd better go as well," Kieran said, giving Kelion a grin. "Get a big bowl of scraps from the kitchens, and get the rest of your fellow apprentices, because it looks to me like those eggs are just about to hatch."



Craftmaster Giselle finally managed to coerce her unhappy queen into relinquishing the stolen eggs, leaving Lili to hiss and sulk from the rafters of the central Infirmary room as the apprentices reclaimed their eggs. The apprentices gathered in a circle with their rocking eggs, most of them having taken a handful of meat from a big basin of meat scraps Kieran now held. Only Apprentices Rilam and Deza stood outside of that circle, Rilam having offered to take over Zaras's post at the redwort pot and Deza's egg having already been broken. The firelizard fair had resettled in the rafters overhead, while Giselle's bronze Benn circled down to claim one of the craftmaster's shoulders. The firelizards set up an eager hum, except for Lili, who continued to let out the occasional shrill, piercing complaint.

"I don't think this is my original egg," Aliana protested, eyeing the larger one Lyra had been handed.

"I'd say just count yourself lucky to have gotten an egg back," Kieran said sternly. "If Kelion hadn't found Lili's nest, these would have hatched without you."

"It's beginning to crack!" Lyra squealed, nearly dropping her egg in excitement. "Look! Look!"

"As the firelizard emerges from its shell, offer it meat and thoughts of welcome and friendship," Giselle said, her voice cool and calm. Lyra snatched up a handful of clammy scraps as more of her egg began to crack and crumble. "As the hatchling emerges from its shell, note the eyetooth, located at the end of the snout," Giselle continued. Lyra, however, was clearly oblivious to any details as a little brown crawled its way out of the egg in her palm. There was a welcoming carol from the firelizards overhead, and Lyra eagerly offered the first scrap of meat to the little brown creature that now clung stubbornly to her hand.

"He's eating! He's eating!" she cried happily.

"Keep feeding him," Kieran urged her.

Other eggs were beginning to crack as well. Aliana was next, managing to Impress a little blue firelizard as it clawed its way out of its shell. Kelion and Beltas had chosen eggs,

but in their excitement they had both forgotten to grab meat scraps. Kelion handed his egg to Beltas and bolted for scraps, leaving Beltas with both rocking eggs. "Hey!" Beltas cried, jumping up as Kelion's egg suddenly popped open, spilling out a brown firelizard. The creature clawed for balance, tangling its claws in Beltas's sleeve. Beltas, almost in a panic, looked down at the tiny firelizard, which began to scream for food.

"Give me your egg, you've got mine!" Kelion cried, thrusting a chunk of meat at Beltas and taking Beltas's egg in trade. The hungry firelizard tore ravenously at the food offered him, and Beltas popped another morsel into the creature's mouth to satisfy it.

Nearby, Meiriell clutched her own egg close, cooing wordless welcome as she watched cracks spread out across the egg in her palm. Deza hovered near her foster-sister's shoulder, tears streaming down her face as she watched. Meiriell's egg shuddered and cracked, and a tiny green's head poked out. Meiriell helped the little green firelizard break the shell the rest of the way and hurriedly fed the hungry creature, murmuring promises of love and affection as her foster-sister gazed on.

Zaras's egg was next to break shell. "It's a bronze!" the youth crowed. He offered the little creature its first bite of meat. It swallowed it whole and began to choke violently. Zaras's delight turned to open terror. "Craftmaster!" Journeyman Kieran was closer than Giselle, however. He reached in and took away the little bronze, gently massaging it until the clump of meat was disgorged. The little bronze had itself wrapped around Kieran's wrist by then, though; there was nothing Zaras could do but watch as the journeyman impressed a new friend.

Deza had retreated to have her cry, and was doing so from her seat on a stool at the worktable immediately behind Lodrun, splitting his attention between his hatching egg and the weeping girl. With a groan, he snatched after another handful of meat and went to press his egg into Deza's hands.

"Take it," he told her, when the girl blinked up at him in teary-eyed surprise.

The egg itself wasn't waiting to remain in passive dispute; the hatchling inside began battering against its shell, cracking it violently. A little blue broke free, and Deza clutched the firelizard against her chest, feeding it tenderly.

"You flunk," Zaras muttered in Lodrun's ear. "Why in blazes did you just do that?"

"I can't stand seeing a pretty girl cry," Lodrun answered.

"Piss on that," Zaras snorted. "Had you been wanting to do a really good deed, you could have given your egg to your best friend."

Lodrun grinned and gave Zaras's shoulder a punch. "If you were a little prettier when you cry, I just might have."

Kelion's egg was the last to hatch, exposing a damp little green firelizard in his hands. He fed the creature carefully, intent on not letting her choke, and she twined herself eagerly around the fingers of one hand, eager to eat as much as she could, as fast as he could feed it to her.

The welcoming chorus from the rafters had gone silent. Subdued, Lili swept down to claim Giselle's other shoulder, hiding her golden head in the craftmaster's red hair. Giselle stroked her gold as she watched her gathered apprentices, and for a time, there was a rare smile of satisfaction on her face.



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