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# Small Losses, Pt. 4

By Juniper, Amanda Kear, Ellen Million, Ron Swartzendruber, Smitty & Jen Bro  
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## 2860.09.18 – Kadanzer Weyr

"Can you do anything for her?" R'mal asked, setting the bowl down on the examination table. Inside, his gold Renata lay curled in a tight ball of misery, padded with one of R'mal's formerly immaculate peach scarves.

"Frankly, there's not a lot of hope," Corsan replied, looking weary. "Ever since the first one died, they've been dropping like... well, like those lazybugs. Sorry, I know that's not exactly the image you wanted," he went on wryly.

R'mal grimaced. Once the lazybugs had finished their mating, they had all died within a day. "You're right, my dear craftmaster, that was not the sort of comparison I was looking for. Is there any hope at all?"

"We've had a few recoveries," Corsan said neutrally, not looking at R'mal as he gently dripped a bit of medicine into Renata's mouth. The little gold firelizard sneezed and shook her head violently, spraying both men with tiny droplets.

"Oh dear," R'mal said. "I suppose I had better change clothes before getting close to Udoth, hadn't I."

Corsan looked up, "Actually, no. We're now sure the sickness doesn't pass to dragons."

"How sure?" R'mal said.

"Well, L'drun's Rhynt certainly didn't get it, and he's been around the Dragon Infirmary for months. If any dragon could catch this, it would be him."

"Ah, yes, I suppose he would make a good test, at that. Not many of that poor group left now, is there?"

"One tragedy at a time, please," Corsan said, mouth twisted. Only four of the dragonets of Nioranth's sickly clutch had survived to their graduation a few sevendays prior, and one of them was bronze Rhynt, who had never grown strong enough to fly. "At least Giselle was happy to have apprentice L'drun back."

R'mal looked down and stroked poor Renata, who raised her head feebly to meet the caress. Her pain made a dull ache in R'mal's own chest as he dabbed at her inflamed eyes and nostrils with a clean corner of the scarf. "Is there any chance of a cure? Or a preventative, to stop others from suffering?"

"Not yet," Corsan said. "We think we've identified the disease, at least, but that hasn't helped us. Oddly enough, it was your wingrider, the Oldtimer, who put us on the right track."

"Which one of my riders?"

"The Oldtimer – ah, right, I meant V'harn. The one who seems like an Oldtimer to *me*. He said that one Turn when he was a child, the wherries at Fort's Feeding Grounds had something like this. That led us to look more closely at the beasthealers' Records for wherries until we found a reference we had missed. But..." Corsan's voice trailed off.

"But?" R'mal prompted.

Corsan sighed. "But the Record in question said there was no known cure. It said any infected beasts should be slaughtered at once to prevent the spread of the disease. That was why V'harn remembered it, you see. They had to kill every wherry in their herd."

R'mal looked down, realizing that his hands had moved protectively over Renata.

Corsan noticed as well. "Don't worry," he said, mouth twisting again. "Even if we could or would do that, it's far too late. The sickness is everywhere now, even the North. All the Weys are reporting it."

There was a wet splurting sound from the bowl, and Renata twitched. R'mal winced at the new smell.

"Well, that scarf needed laundering anyway," Corsan said, deadpan. R'mal looked at him sharply, but the craftmaster only shrugged tiredly. "Sorry, we're all a bit on the ragged edge here. Too many firelizards, too little sleep."

"If you weren't laughing, you'd be crying?" R'mal asked sympathetically. He carefully picked up Renata from the mess she was now lying in, and cleaned her with a handkerchief pulled from his pocket. Seeing the prim, delicate little gold reduced to this indignity made R'mal blink back tears.

"We have to keep from going crazy somehow," Corsan said, picking up the bowl and going to the washbasin in the corner.

"I don't suppose you have a clean cloth?" R'mal asked.

"Sorry," the dragonhealer replied as he dumped the much-soiled scarf into a bag and washed out the bowl. "Moriltan's running double shifts at the laundry and he still can't keep up. At least it won't be much longer now."

"Much longer until--" R'mal broke off when he realized what Corsan meant. He cradled Renata to his chest, sending what comfort he could. She gave a weak little trill, but it only set her to coughing again. All R'mal could do was pull off his scarf and wrap her in it. "How much longer does she have?" he asked at last.

"A day, maybe two."

The thought of Renata suffering for even that long made R'mal's throat tighten again. He looked bleakly at Corsan. "Craftmaster, is there anything you can do to... help her?"

Corsan looked back, clearly understanding his meaning. "You're not the first to ask that. We can, but you'll not like it."

"I don't like the thought of her suffering for two more days. Do it. I trust you have a way that's painless?"

"Not quite painless, but very quick," the dragonhealer replied. "Give her to me and I'll take care of her for you once you leave. Trust me, you won't like to watch this."

"I'm sorry, my dear craftmaster, but I can't simply leave her. I assure you I'm not squeamish."

Corsan seemed about to argue, but then shook his head wearily. "Whatever you say, flightleader. Hand her to me."

R'mal cradled Renata one last time, stroking her eye ridges just the way she liked. She barely raised her head, and gave a tired little cheep as he handed her to Corsan, still wrapped in the scarf. He sent her all the comfort he could muster as Corsan shifted the weak little body in his hands. R'mal suddenly realized what the dragonhealer was about to do, but before he could say anything, Corsan twisted Renata's neck sharply to the side and upward. The faint crunch of her neck breaking seemed to find an echo in R'mal's chest, and he knew she was gone.

"I told you you wouldn't like it," Corsan said. "We've tried other ways, but this is the quickest."

"I... thank you, craftmaster. She didn't have time to feel any pain." R'mal realized Corsan must have a lot of practice at this by now.

"Will you want to leave her with us? We'll be taking another load *between* soon."

"I think that would be best. Leave her wrapped in the scarf, if you could." R'mal reached out to stroke the limp form in Corsan's arms one last time, holding back his sadness as best he could. Renata was done with suffering now. "Thank you, craftmaster. Please pass my thanks on to Master Giselle and the rest of the staff as well. It must be hard on all of you."

Corsan only smiled wanly. "Thank us by not getting any dragons hurt in next couple of 'Falls, eh?"

It took R'mal a moment to realize it was meant as a joke. "If I have anything to say about it, you'll not have a single dragon patient," he replied in the same vein. "Now I'm sure you have many others to see, so I'll not take any more of your time."

Picking up Renata's bowl, he left, blinking back tears.



#### 2860.09.19

"I'm so sorry," Lyra whispered, pulling a cloth over bronze Sedis's still form. She glanced up at T'tin's stricken face. His eyes were locked on the bundle of cloth around his poor firelizard. She quickly looked away again, wincing. The handsome young bronzerider's grief forcibly reminded her of the little ball of misery in the back of her own mind.

"I'd..." T'tin's voice was thick, almost hoarse-sounding. "I'd like some time alone, if you don't mind."

"Of course," Lyra said, her voice soft. She gathered up a couple soiled cloths and wiped away a spot of firelizard vomit she'd missed, and turned to leave. She paused at the door to the private room and looked back. T'tin's broad shoulders were uncharacteristically slumped, and as she watched, they started to shake. She slipped out of the room, leaving behind her the sound of his weeping.

Lyra wiped the moisture away from her own eyes. It shouldn't be like this, she thought; bronzeriders like T'tin were so strong and steadfast. To see him look so vulnerable... It was painful.

She deposited the cloths in a nearly-full laundry bag, reported Sedis's death to Master Corsan, and then (with his permission) practically ran to the makeshift nest where Twink languished.

When she could break away, Lyra tended to Twink herself. His suffering put the wheeling emotions of the patients she was helping in a completely different light. She knew that each firelizard owner had the same bundle of firelizard emotions affecting them, that the firelizard's pain was its person's pain too. Dragonriders insisted that it wasn't as intense as with dragons... but it was still real.

She was almost afraid to see what condition her brown was in. She hadn't been able to check on him since her arrival that morning, when she had tried unsuccessfully to feed him. She had left him sleeping. She had worried about him all through her shift...

Lyra stopped short when she saw him sitting up, preening one of his hind legs. He acknowledged her with a miserable chirp. She approached him slowly, and Twink followed her movements, blinking at her. He chirped again, and he sent her pathetic thoughts full of his suffering. Still, there was something different in his thoughts... something stronger. She had been sure yesterday that he was on his way out. But now, as she leaned over him and scratched his eyeridge just so, his eyes seemed... clear. He nudged her hand, and his eyes, which had been so grey for so long, bore a tinge of red.

"You're... hungry!" Lyra said. In her heart rose the first inklings of hope she'd felt in days.



#### 2860.09.20

Giselle sat at her desk, working on the latest reports, letting the quiet scratch of her quill serve to distract her thoughts away from the tight knot of misery in her mind.

Benn and Lili were both asleep in their box, their small, wheezy snores a constant reminder of what had befallen the Weyr. Of what had befallen the world.

Rubbing tiredly at her eyes, Giselle looked down at her notes. The progression of the disease was known now, the succession of symptoms that would follow on from first diagnosis. Over ninety-five percent of the firelizard population was susceptible, and of those that contracted the disease some eighty to ninety percent were dead within two sevendays of the first symptoms. Most likely transmitted through touch, the illness was relentless and sweeping through tame, feral and wild populations alike, Hold and Hall and Weyr all suffering the same fate, the North barely lagging behind the South.

That there *had* been survivors offered some hope, although even those that appeared to be recovering were still weak and there was no way of telling whether or not their strength would ever fully recover. There could yet be secondary problems – a susceptibility to further infections, reduced stamina, sterility – but those were issues that would need to be addressed as they arose. For now –

Giselle sighed and looked bleakly at the box that held her own pets. For now, they simply had to deal with the sick as best they could and hope that at least those left unaffected would be able to breed a new generation.

She could hear sounds beyond the curtained doorway, the bustle of the Dragon Infirmary quieter now that there were fewer new cases to deal with. Corsan had volunteered

to take the majority of the hands-on firelizard work, reasoning that he was one of those least affected, while Giselle dealt with coordinating effort and collating information. It was a transparent excuse to allow her to spend more time with Benn and Lili and they both knew it, but Giselle had found herself unable to reject the suggestion, professional detachment evaporating in the face of her own pets' illness. There were few on the dragonhealer staff who had never impressed a firelizard, and they had quietly taken on the brunt of the workload, organising things so that the treatment of any dragon injuries was not interrupted or delayed by the needs of their smaller cousins. That no dragon had contracted the illness was a relief, but Giselle couldn't help but feel that the Weyrleadership had lost interest as soon as their immunity had been confirmed. Lybelle's attention appeared to have shifted to the political ramifications of the plague, to more abstract losses and gains than the small lives that still hung in the balance.

But then the Weyrwoman, like Corsan, had never attached a firelizard of her own.

Giselle reached across for the latest casualty report, a daily listing of names and colours and numbers. The ferals were a simple colour count at the bottom of the page – Aretei was rarely seen without a bucket of small corpses these days as she patrolled the Weyr for the dead and dying, beating the tunnelsnakes to their meals. There were no recoveries listed from the feral population – they simply didn't have the resources to cope with the unowned and so Aretei had been euthanising the sick as she found them. The mere thought of it made Giselle shudder, but it was a kinder fate than the scavengers would allow and it allowed her to build a more accurate picture of how the Weyr was affected. It was the work of a moment to snap a neck and –

Giselle felt the lump forming in the back of her throat and swallowed against it angrily, glad that there was nobody there to see her as she covered her face with her hands, fighting against tears. It was stupid – she had spent decades working with injured and dying dragons; had euthanised a senior queen without hesitation, but the thought of doing the same for her own firelizards.... She was tired, she was stressed, she was at the end of her tether, and there was *nothing* that she, for all her training and experience, could do but wait and hope.

She drew in a deep breath, forcing herself to calm, then started as something tugged gently at her sleeve. Lowering her hands, she looked down to see Benn sitting on the desk, gazing up at her as he projected feeble thoughts of hunger.

He was far too thin, his bronze hide patchy and dry... but his eyes were clearer, his colour fractionally better, and if his appetite was returning.... Feeling a sudden, breathless rush of hope, Giselle pulled the box towards her and heard Lili's chirp of protest before she saw her – gold hide no longer so pale, eyes whirling slowly with her indignation at being disturbed.

This time, Giselle let the tears come, laughing as she scooped Benn into her arms. It looked as though she would be one of the lucky ones.

"I am not a begging man," Lord Dracir said, looking bleak. "But I need the help of the Weyr."

"So I understood from your message," R'mal replied, feeling sympathy for the Lord of Kadanzer Hold. "But you did not say what you needed, only that you would like an urgent conference. Weyrwoman Lybelle fights Thread today, so I came in her stead."

Dracir sighed and pushed up his spectacles to rub at his eyes. They looked weary, and had dark circles under them. "I don't need to tell you that times have been hard for my Hold in the last few Turns. The eruption buried too many fertile fields, and the earthquakes make our salt mines hazardous. The two most profitable ones collapsed outright. And of course we lost the revenues from tithe trains passing through our land on the way to the Weyr's old home."

"I am aware of all this," R'mal said gently. Lord Dracir must have been tired indeed, if he was repeating the obvious at such length. Or else he was just trying to work himself up to admit some fresh bad news.

"I suppose you are also aware that several of our mountain roads have been destroyed in earthquakes. Many of my coholders must get their goods out through more hazardous routes that are only open part of the Turn, and during the winter there is no communication with some coholds at all."

"Our sweepriders have seen this in a few holds at least," R'mal agreed. "As always, they are available to help when needed."

"Yes, but the coholders know the Weyr is not to be disturbed except for the most major emergencies. What they really need is a way to stay in touch, to know they are not forgotten during the long winter months, and to know when the trails are open before they set out. When we still had the good roads, morale was not a problem. But I have had more and more requests to move coholders to new land out of the mountains. You must know how desperate these people must be before making such a request. In an attempt to improve morale, I have supplied firelizard eggs to the coholds most affected, so they can send messages to the outside world." He stopped and sighed again.

R'mal began to see where this was going, but waited as Dracir continued.

"I am afraid I made rather too many promises to my people about firelizards helping their feelings of isolation. It certainly was helping for a time, as the firelizards I supplied grew old enough to be dependable messengers. Requests for moves were growing fewer. More goods were getting to market as people were able to know in advance when the trails were clear." He stopped again, for longer this time.

"And now the plague," R'mal said, keeping his voice steady even as he remembered his own gold Renata's recent death. "Has the sickness affected even these isolated coholds?"

"I am afraid that it has. Some have reported sick firelizards. Far too many have simply not been heard from at all."

"How can the Weyr help?" R'mal asked.

"I don't rightly know," Dracir admitted. "But I do not know where else to turn. I know all the Holds are affected,



not just my own. We've all grown to rely on quick communication. The loss of it affects the flow of trade, and the negotiations between Lords, and even the security of caravan trains, but I know of no hold with worse need than my own. With firelizards gone, the Weyr now holds the only means of instantaneous communication on the continent."

"The firelizards are not all gone," R'mal said. "Some at the Weyr have recovered. Wild ones have also been seen again. In time the numbers will be replenished."

"But I do not have time!" Dracir said sharply. "My hold suffers. My people suffer."

R'mal repressed a sigh. The plague was going to affect holders everywhere on Pern, but Kadanzer hold was already demoralized and did not need a further blow. "Lord Dracir, I cannot promise specific help from the Weyr, but your people certainly deserve it and I will argue for it. Perhaps Watchrider S'toris can be authorized to travel to the coholds in question once a month to carry messages?"

Dracir's mouth quirked in a rueful half-smile. "I have already been sending S'toris to some of these cots, without asking the Weyr's permission. There are just too many of them.

"I think you are justified in using S'toris. I know you would not have him spend so much time carrying messages that it would interfere with his other duties." "Unlike certain other Lords," R'mal thought to himself. "But there are so many cots that one dragonrider could not serve all of them, I may have a solution. A temporary one, at least."

"Go on," Dracir said, looking interested.

"One day each month I lend my riders to help in some situation where they could do some good."

"Yes, they have helped several of my minor holds dig out ashfalls, rebuild fallen barns, and so forth. I am grateful. Could you assign them to carry messages for my people? Would that not interfere too much with their other duties?" The hope on Dracir's face was plain to see; even though he was at pains to voice the objection, it was clear to R'mal what he really wanted.

"For one day, I could. And perhaps a day next month as well, if the Weyr has not already taken official action by then."

"Thank you, sir," Dracir said. "I am in your debt."

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### 2860.09.22 – Kadanzer Weyr

N'larion was woken by the sound of claws scabbling on the roof of his weyrcot. It was still dark outside. "Blasted 'snakes!" He groped off the edge of his bed for one of his boots, and hurled it at the ceiling. It made a satisfying thump as it hit, and there was a flurry of scabbling as the interlopers fled across the roof tiles.

His green firelizard, Fern, poked her head out from under the scrap of blanket that he had been using for her bedding since she got sick. It had been easier to scrounge a supply of rags that could be thrown away if she messed them, than it was to annoy the laundry staff by letting Fern sleep on his bed. The little green was past the puking and incontinence stage now, but had taken to hiding for hours at

a time underneath the scrap of red blanket that was her current bedding.

She gave a soft chirp, and N'larion chided himself for waking her. It was just those shaffing tunnelsnakes. Was it just him, or were there more around than usual? They had certainly got remarkably bold: first when the lazybugs thronged the Weyr, and later when the firelizards started dying. Usually if Fern detected a 'snake on the roof she'd be off to harass and chase it. If it was a small one, she might even kill it and bring it back to him to demonstrate her hunting prowess. It seemed now that the tables were turned: tunnelsnakes greedily feasting on the bodies of dead firelizards. It was not a sight for the faint hearted, as attested a few days ago by the shrieks of distressed candidates out hunting for their sick pets and finding more than they bargained for.

Only Aretei the dragonhealer seemed unmoved by it all. She had mentioned to N'larion that the hungry tunnelsnakes made her life easier as she tramped round the Weyr collecting the bodies of dead and dying firelizards. "Every one a 'snake runs off with is one less for me to collect!" had been her acerbic comment.

There was another furtive scabbling sound from the roof. N'larion glared at the ceiling and then buried his head under the blankets, trying to block out the irritating noise. The sooner that Fern recovered, the better!

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### 2860.09.25 - Pottercraft Hall, Thornblaze

"Master Emendin! Master Emendin!"

The Masterpotter was putting on his boots with a view to setting off for breakfast in the Main Hall, when the early morning knocking at his door – all too common of late – began. He recognised the voice of Alerada, the Headwoman of the Potterhall. Emendin exchanged a glance with his wife, Roskelle, and she put down her hairbrush with more force than was probably necessary and swept to the door to their quarters.

"Yes?" Roskelle's voice was harsh with irritation.

Master Emendin himself was feeling his patience strained over this last sevenday. He pulled on his second boot, as Headwoman Alerada's words reached his ears: "Forgive the intrusion at this early hour, Roskelle, but Steward Dolan is here again—"

"And demanding that my husband be roused out of bed to act as message boy!" snapped Roskelle.

"Now, dear, it is not Alerada's fault," said Emendin, as he crossed to the doorway to join the two women. "Although," he admonished with a frown in the Headwoman's direction, "From now on I think we should make it a rule that I will not listen to any of these requests before breakfast!"

Alerada looked apologetic. "Yes, sir. It's just that Steward Dolan can be very insistent."

"Yes, yes. Especially with Lord Kabald on his tail." Emendin sighed. Would be it that *one* of the firelizards that had belonged to Lord Kabald, Lady Audri and Steward Dolan had survived. Or that any of those left alive in the Hold had recovered enough to be used for message delivery.

It was come to a sorry thing when his own bronze Chatter, with all his bad habits and irascible moods, was considered the most reliable message carrier in the vicinity. "Please tell Steward Dolan that he is welcome to *breakfast* in our Hall—" Emendin gave 'breakfast' special emphasis. "—And I will see him after I have eaten my own."

Alerada nodded and made to leave, but Emendin waved a hand at her to halt. He looked at his wife. "I think, Roskelle, that we shall dine in our quarters this morning, because you are feeling poorly. Hmm?"

Roskelle, who looked the positive picture of health, nodded. "Yes, dear. I think I have a touch of fever coming on!"

Headwoman Alerada gave a brief laugh. "I shall arrange for a tray to be sent up immediately." She nodded politely to each of them and hurried off.

Emendin closed the door to their rooms. "I think we'll let the Steward stew for a candlemark or two."

Roskelle frowned at him. "You should send him back to the Hold with his tail between his legs. Or assign Journeyman Terrall and his blue to the Hold for a time."

"Now dear, Journeyman Terrall has better things to do than sit about at Thornblaze Hold. And his blue is not very reliable." Emendin put an arm around her and kissed her lightly on the forehead.

She was not mollified. "You are the Masterpotter -- *you* have better things to do than be at Lord Kabald's beck and call! Let them use the drums or send for a sweeperider!"

It was becoming most vexing. Steward Dolan was here almost every day, requesting messages be sent on behalf of Lord Kabald. Any of the usual Hall business that required a swift message now devolved onto Emendin's firelizard by default, after a couple of messages had gone undelivered by Terrall's less than clever blue. Most of the other pottermasters were restrained in their requests for messages, but it appeared that the mere rarity of message carriers promoted any and all messages to 'urgent' in the eyes of Masters Ficalo and Chazard.

And, of course, Emendin's bronze Chatter could only go to a location where he had been, or find a person that he knew. As soon as the local beasthealer deemed the 'lizard fit enough, Emendin had been to a succession of recent Gathers and minor potterhalls, with the sole intention of reinforcing Chatter's knowledge of the destination and the persons to whom messages should be delivered. That had seemed a prudent idea at the time, but in hindsight may have been a mistake, as a less well-travelled firelizard would be less in demand!

The cause of all this strife raised his head from where he was curled up on the foot of the bed, and gave a querulous cheep. Chatter was still more tan than bronze in colour after his illness. His appetite had gradually increased, but he was not yet as insistent that he be fed *now* as he used to be early in the morning. Chatter's bad habit of chewing at his owner's ear or fingers to demand attention, had returned with a vengeance, however! The little bronze waddled across the bed, hopped onto the bedpost and butted his head at his owner's thigh, then nipped at Emendin's trous.

The potter signed as he rubbed at the little monster's eyeridges. "I think," he said to Roskelle. "That I shall request that our Archivist and one or two journeymen travel

to the Northern Potterhall to look at their records. A report on how the potters in the early Ninth Pass managed their business before everyone became so reliant on these little creatures would be a *very* interesting topic of conversation for the Masters' table of an evening."

Roskelle put her arm round his waist. "And might a copy find its way to Steward Dolan?"

He smiled. "I think it might, at that!"



### 2860.09.26 – Kadanzer Weyr

Andrian drummed his fingers against the rim of his sandtable. The sand bore neat staves, ruled with the five-pronged rake that gave parallel lines, but they remained as bare of notes and lyrics as they had been at the start of the afternoon. Writing new music to help raise morale was high on his priority list at present, but inspiration was sadly lacking. When it came down to it, his own morale could do with a boost.

It was almost inevitable, once R'mal's gold Renata had caught the plague, that his own Tigli would also fall victim to it. He'd been without his small blue friend for four days now. The loss was still raw, and in memory he could still feel the dying firelizard's distress. But right now, he was on edge and unsettled, as if he wanted to be out and doing something, or going somewhere – anywhere – rather than sitting here with no small blue head leaning over the sand to peer at what he was writing. He felt confined, isolated.

It occurred to him that part of his problem was that he hadn't heard from Masterharper Forelen for more than a sevenday. Tigli had been a companion, but he'd also been able to keep Andrian in touch with harpers throughout the continent, and without the possibility of exchanging news with his colleagues, he felt almost blind. He and Forelen maintained their friendship by an almost daily exchange of messages, or had done, but it was far longer than usual since Forelen's bronze or brown had popped out of *between* with the usual message-tube. Andrian smiled for an instant at the memory of giving Forelen the egg that contained bronze Perdo. He hoped that the Masterharper was simply keeping his firelizards close by him to keep them safe, but he feared another explanation, and wondered guiltily if he'd spread the plague to the Harper Hall by sending Tigli there. If only he could find out!

As Weyrharper, he was within his rights to request a dragon to transport him on any urgent craft business, or to carry a message to his superior. For personal messages, though, like everyone else in the Weyr, he was dependent on his own resources. Though R'mal would gladly help, if he and Udoth were free, Andrian didn't like to impose on his weyrmate, whose duties as Weyrsecond and flightleader kept him extremely busy. Besides, he didn't really want to *go* anywhere, just to keep in touch.

Still, living in the Weyr made it fairly easy to trade services or a small fee with a dragonrider for transport or message delivery. That was an option that most people didn't have. Perhaps he should make a bargain with one of the riders to run a certain number of messages for him in return for marks, or... well, harpers didn't make a lot that

could be traded. Nobody had to pay for their basic education, and it was rare for someone to commission a song, or poetry. Instruments, though... Andrian smiled. He enjoyed the woodwork involved in instrument crafting, and a moment's thought suggested just the rider to interest in his wares. Giving up the futile attempt at composition, he went to his shelves to pick out some samples.

By the time the sixth bell sounded, he was concluding an enthusiastic discussion with greenrider N'vai. They'd compared designs, examined the sample, and the young rider had specified the details of his new double pipes, right down to the details of the finish and carving.

"They will be a bit more challenging to play than your old ones," Andrian explained, "but I think you'll find them rewarding." He was looking forward to the work: it had been too long since he'd indulged in this particular pleasure. And he would get some messages delivered to Forelen and some trips over there, when N'vai's Wing duties permitted. It was a good arrangement all round.

"That's a bargain, then," the greenrider concluded. "And much better for letters – I mean, you couldn't use the drums for those." After a momentary hesitation, he frowned. "Even if you had them."

Andrian realised that he was staring. N'vai was one of the riders who had travelled forward in time from the devastated Southern Weyr. "Drums? The Weyr had message drums in your day? We've never had them – not here, nor at the old Weyr. Nobody in the South uses them now."

"Not the Weyr, no, but we could hear the ones at the Hold," N'vai answered. "Lord Toric had them placed all along the coast, I think, but I don't know exactly where. I suppose they got washed away – along with everything else."

"Did he? That's very interesting..." Andrian was thinking rapidly. He'd have to see if A'zelen could give him the details. N'vai was right: sending personal letters by message drum wasn't a practical proposition, even if it were allowed. But what about all the urgent messages that might previously have been sent by firelizard? In the North, drums were used to tell important news: they could call for a healer, or spread warning of a plague. Could they really be of any use over the much larger distances in the South? He wondered if he could even remember the drum code he'd learned as an apprentice.

Feeling woefully ignorant, he realised that N'vai was waiting for him to continue, and smiled. "It sounds as if Southern Weyr still has things to teach Kadanzer!"



**2860.09.27**

"There's another one!" Faryna rushed to the kitchen doorway, beating at the intruding tunnelsnake with her broom. The creature gave an aggressive hiss, but then retreated as the girl gave it a clout. "I hate 'snakes!" Faryna announced vehemently.

Headwoman Raecliffe said that the tunnelsnakes and whitewings had eaten lots and lots of lazybugs and had had lots and lots of babies. And Kedria said that the flitters normally kept the 'snakes and things away, but then the

flitters went and died – and the tunnelsnakes and whitewings and crawlers and things went and ate *them* too, and had even more babies. So now the wretched things were everywhere, and trying all the time to steal food from store rooms and the kitchens. Faryna thought bad words that she wasn't allowed to say out loud every time she saw one scurry across a path or peer down at her from a roof beam.

She was supposed to be helping Kedria with the bread making today. Faryna loved kneading the dough, even if she still had to stand on a stool to be tall enough to do it properly. It was hard work but very satisfying. But 'snakes kept trying to come in the kitchen door and it was too hot today to close it. So instead of helping with the dough, the girl had to grate cheese for the savoury pastries and chase off tunnelsnakes every time she spotted one in the doorway. She glared out the door, daring any hidden 'snakes to come out where she could see them. There was some rustling in the bushes by the bakery pits, and a brief glimpse of beady little eyes staring at her before the creature retreated into the foliage.

"I hate 'snakes!" she muttered again, and stomped back into the kitchens to continue grating the cheese.

She'd chased out three more – or maybe it was the same one three times – when a couple of the boys from the Candidate Barracks turned up in the kitchen doorway. "Resla said to bring you these!" the oldest announced. The boys each held up a half dozen very dead tunnelsnakes of varying sizes – a few were large, but even more were tiny, clearly born recently. Each boy had a catapult tucked into his belt. "And she says we can have the morning to kill as many as the kitchens can handle." The teenagers grinned at the prospect of the sport.

Faryna stared at the tunnelsnake carcasses with a sinking feeling. Tunnelsnake stew... ugh. Tough and stringy and full of hard little bones...

Kedria and Grandma Farny conferred briefly. "Put them over there," said Kedria pointing towards the butcher's block. "And yes, we'll take a couple of dozen more if you can catch them."

The boys assured her that they could, and raced off.

"There's some keep coming into the kitchens!" Faryna yelled after them. "Kill those ones first!" But the boys were out of earshot and pelting away.

"Faryna," said Grandma Farny. "When you're done with the cheese, can you start skinning the 'snakes? And Mirelli, peel some redroots, please. They'll go well with tunnelsnake."

Tunnelsnake stew. Ugh! With redroots! Double ugh! Faryna gave the carcasses a baleful stare. "I really, really HATE 'snakes!"



**2860.09.28**

Lybelle steepled her fingers and looked annoyed. "Is it really that much of a problem?" she asked impatiently.

"Shells, yes," Z'hon returned, just as impatiently. L'ars and M'ler were nodding agreement, and A'nar looked like he would rather be anywhere else.

R'mal toyed with the end of his scarf and nodded slowly. "I thought we had a good solution with Dracir," he said. "One day out of a month wouldn't have been so bad for running extra messages. But the individual holdings seem to have a different idea about what messages can wait until that one day." There were grumbles in response to that.

The monthly meetings with all of the wingleaders and wingseconds stretched long enough without added complications, and the plague devastating the firelizard population had turned up many unexpected wrinkles, all of which, it seemed, needed to be discussed in agonizing detail.

Bad enough that riders had their own firelizards to worry over and mourn as the sickness spread and they dropped off by the dozens, but now, sweepriders were being flagged down for every little reason to carry messages that had previously been trusted to the dragons' smaller cousins.

B'deras put his mug down (clearly unhappy that it didn't contain something stronger) and added, "Even when our sweepriders refuse the message, it's still a stop the rider didn't need to make. Sweeps are taking four times as long as they ought to. We're going to have to start breaking them up among more riders if this continues."

Z'hon scowled. "Some of them are offering good marks for the extra message service, too. Not everyone is turning them down when they should."

Lybelle pursed her lips and frowned. "Are dragons actually showing fatigue over this? Is it starting to interfere with their ability to do their duties?"

There was a moment of quiet at the table while each of them consulted the dragon side of the network.

R'mal asked Udoth, taking a brief moment for his own grief over Renata. The reply from Udoth, and from the other dragons, confirmed that many of them were more tired than usual, though perhaps not dangerously so.

"We can't just stop answering sweep flags, can we?" V'rili asked.

Almost on top of his wingsecond's words, Th'rin said sharply, "Our duty is to fight 'Fall, not run marriage announcements and coordinate trade."

"Can we penalize holds that are putting up flags unnecessarily?" Dunia proposed.

"Who decides when it's unnecessary? Every Lord on the continent thinks their problems are the most important," Z'hon argued.

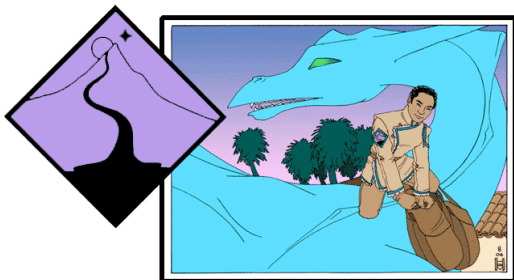
"And it's not going to stop riders from taking good marks where they can get it," A'nar added wryly. "At least, as long as they think they can get away with it."

"Any rider who is tiring their dragon for profit will be grounded," Lybelle said, offering no room for disagreement. "I expect you to keep an eye on your wingmen and see that

it doesn't get to that point."

R'mal nodded with the others.

Lybelle went on, "That should help for now, but we will need a better solution before long." She swept her gaze around the table. "This won't be the only problem we see, either. So many small losses will lead to bigger problems. With so few firelizards, our world will be a different place; just how different, we have only begun to discover."



# Kadanzer Weyr

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