
Raindrops

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The skies opened and the rain came cascading down.

Steady, T'varren told his brown as the deluge broke over them, and Darjenth gave an excited shudder, flicking his wings to send water sheeting off them. *Watch for clumps, not the rain.* The leading edge of 'Fall had almost reached land and momentarily they would be flaming Thread over the Weyr itself.

There is much rain! Darjenth observed. ***Sannath complains. She says flying in much rain is too tiring.***

If we're lucky, it'll drown some Thread for us, T'varren sent to his bondmate. Though until then there would be that tricky period where the Thread was semi-sodden and more difficult to incinerate with the normal amount of flame. The result would be that the Queens' Wing was likely to see a lot of action this 'Fall, as partially charred Thread fell down to their level from where FireFlight flew.

A clump! Malyuth claims it!

T'varren peered through the myriad raindrops that pattered across his flying goggles, as G'lant's green surged past them to sear their ancient enemy. Dragon eyes were much better than human in conditions like this.

Mine! Darjenth banked and belched flame, reducing some strands to harmless char. ***Drannath tells Kathlamith to keep in formation. She gets in his way.***

Neicea's Kathlamith could be a menace at times – too quick to race in before she'd checked what others were doing. T'varren was glad that the green did not fly adjacent to them.

More! Sannath flames it! She misses some!

He felt his brown tense beneath him, and they flickered between to avoid what the green had missed. T'varren could half imagine his rain-soaked leathers freezing solid around him in the chill blackness. Then they burst again into the humid rain over the Weyr. Malyuth was ahead of them, her wings beating a steady rhythm as she rose to meet another tangle.

Sannath complains again about the rain. I tell her she is foolish. Fighting Thread in the rain is much better than sitting on the ground in the rain.

T'varren spared a glance down toward the Weyr that lay far below, where SkyFlight were on deck in case they were needed. *You may be right,* he said.

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S'then was crouched ready to throw the dice, and cursed volubly as the downpour hit his back. Varie gave a startled shriek and B'ranur erupted in laughter. The three of them scrambled to grab flying jackets and helmets and sprint to the shelter of the porch on B'ranur's weycot. Brown Chath, blue Tordith and green Marath watched all this sudden activity with interest, from where they clustered round Tordith's wallow. All three dragons were harnessed up and bore firestone sacks, ready to answer the call if SkyFlight was needed to assist FireFlight in today's 'Fall. As long as they could be airborne in a few minutes, Wingleader M'ler didn't mind that his riders dispersed around SkyMaster's area to chat, gamble and otherwise keep themselves occupied as they waited.

"Told you we should have been watching those clouds," said B'ranur. "It was bound to happen."

"Yeah, but it's too hot to play indoors today," S'then rattled the dice in his palm. "At least there is – was – a bit of a breeze outside." He gazed morosely to where their playing area was being turned into a temporary swamp by the hammering rain. If anything, the humidity had just risen a notch or two, making it hotter still.

Varie eyed the planks that made up the floor of the porch. She prodded at the chink between a pair of them with a booted toe. "I think we'd lose the dice if we threw them here. Shaffit, just when I was winning, too!"

S'then grinned. "I still have two more throws to go. I might beat you yet."

"Wait a minute." B'ranur disappeared into his weycot and emerged with an armful of blanket. He spread it over the porch floor, and the game resumed.

Varie won that one, and the next. S'then bowed out of the third one, leaving B'ranur and Varie to duel it out. Off among the SkyMaster weycots he could see some of the men in today's groundcrew trudging back to shelter. Their flamethrowers wouldn't function very well in this torrential downpour, their range drastically reduced and pilot lights likely to go out. So the crews would have to do a sweep across the Weyr and its environs later, likely with the assistance of many dragon eyes to spot anything amiss. If they were lucky any stray Thread would drown in the rapidly deepening puddles.

He gazed up at the sky, watching as FireFlight did their duty. He could see distant flickers of flame, high above the Weyr, and fancied that he could pick out which gold was which as the Queens' Wing did a pass above them. Sweat ran down into his eyes.

S'then pined for the dry heat of his Igen Weyr youth, or the cool climates of the Old Weyr. The stickiness of the tropics could be wearing at the best of times, even with Turns of acclimatisation. He did sometimes wonder what had possessed the Kadanzer Weyrleadership to move the Weyr to this humid climate.

His eye was drawn to the answer: the volcanic cone that rose from at other side of the Weyr, just visible through the sheets of rain. The cone that hid within it the main Hatching Grounds, where even now one of their queens tended her eggs.



Yes, humidity and tropical rainstorms or not, this was where Kadanzer belonged.



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Dunia retreated from her seat on the edge of the Hatching Ground sands, making a dash for the shelter of the goldrider's cot provided for the resident queenrider. She'd heard someone say that you didn't get any less wet if you walked rather than ran, but whoever came up with that theory had never been out in a tropical downpour, where the first few drops could herald what felt like a whole lake of water arriving a heartbeat or two later.

That lake was now here with a vengeance. A dense curtain of water and the dim light caused by the lowering clouds so reduced the visibility at the bottom of the crater that even the bright gold bulk of her queen was a greyed out shape. Hearing the queen, of course, was not a problem. Nioranth was already grumbling about the downpour that hammered into the hot sands.

I do not like this rain. My eggs do not like this rain.

Your eggs are perfectly safe, silly, Dunia chided her gently. *The awning will keep the rain off them.* It had been built to withstand the almost daily rainstorms that could afflict Kadanzer at certain times of year. This squall was just one of many that it had weathered, and many more that it would survive. Drips and drops might reach the eggs, but they were kept largely dry.

Nioranth rumbled discontentedly, and moved from her basking spot to join her eggs under the canvas awning. She shook herself as she reached the shelter, scattering drops from her gold hide and splattering the clutch of eggs with more water than would likely drip through the canvas in the next hour or two. Dunia refrained from pointing this out.

I do not like this rain, the queen repeated. She tilted her head upwards, although she could not see through the canvas overhead. ***Pelagrath does not like this rain either,*** she said, referring to the watchdragon on the rim of the crater above.

Dunia, safely sheltered from the downpour in the doorway of the cot, cast a sympathetic glance to where the green dragon and her rider stood watch. *That I find entirely understandable. Think yourself lucky that's not you up there!*

I am gold, retorted Nioranth haughtily. ***Golds are not watchdragons.***



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Fashine hunched closer against Pelagrath's neck as the first squall sluiced over them. She felt an irrational urge to shiver, even though she could not feel anything other than stiflingly hot in her flying gear. A glance down from the crater rim – where she and her green stood watch – showed goldrider Dunia hurrying for the shelter of the Hatching Ground cot.

"It's all right for some..." Fashine muttered, though there was no real resentment in the tone. FireFlight fought

Thread. SkyFlight was on deck. So that meant that it was left to WindFlight to provide the watchdragon for the day, and her name had come up on the rota.

Under normal circumstances watchdragon duty could be quite... relaxing wasn't quite the right word. Soothing? Calming? She could sit up here on the crater rim, far away from the cares of the world, and watch the comings and goings of the world at a distance. Pelagrath's long-sighted eyes could inform her of the movements of distant ships or travellers on the road that led to the Weyr. She could just be with her dragon, and forget the cares and worries of the rest of her life.

However, today Thread passed directly over the Weyr. So today Fashine had on her full flying gear, and Pelagrath had chewed firestone. There was only a minuscule chance that a stray piece of Thread would escape FireFlight, reach the Weyr and – Faranth help them – land on the eggs in the Hatching Grounds. But minuscule or not, that chance existed, so she and her green stood ready to deal with it.

Nioranth does not like the rain, said Pelagrath. ***I do not like the rain either. This rain is heavy. How does the rain know how heavy to fall?***

Fashine was rather taken aback by this query, although by now she should be used to her dragon's odd questions about the world. *Um... I don't know. Some types of clouds just have more rain in them, I guess.*

Fortunately Pelagrath seemed content with this answer. Her head now turned to the south, where the Herders' Complex and Weyr Farm lay. ***There are people coming. People and herdbeasts. Why are they travelling when Thread and rain fall from the sky?***

Fashine had no idea. A tithe train arriving *now*? Who could she inform? Lybelle was astride Ihyanith, flying with the Queens' Wing, as were all the other goldriders except Cassidoria and Dunia. Cassidoria was at the dragonhealers, her Amiseth standing ready to hold casualties. Dunia was with Nioranth and the eggs. Well then, it would have to be Dunia.

Tell Nioranth to inform her rider that a tithe train is arriving with herdbeasts.



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Alecto cursed and whistled to the dogs to keep the herdbeasts on the move. He'd been hoping they would be under shelter by the time the storm hit. To be frank, he had hoped they'd be under shelter by the time *Thread* was overhead, and that was far more likely to make him soil his trousers. Mistimed both, and no doubt Lord Elim would hear of it and make his displeasure known. Anything that concerned the Weyr was apt to set Alecto's Lord off these days.

He whistled another command to the dogs as a red bullock took it into his head to reverse course and strike out for the river. The dogs obeyed quick enough, bounding forward to nip at the heels of the stray. It was Rettig and Sandobin he'd had more worry of, the pair as white as sheets at the idea of being out in Thread, and their fear had

communicated itself to the beasts these last few miles, making them skittish and slowing the whole herd down.

They should have stayed at Windward Hold another two days. Stayed safely sheltered from Thread despite the outrageous fees the Windward Holder was charging for fodder for the tithe herd. The man had hinted that he might take one of the bullocks in exchange, and give Alecto a few marks of his own into the bargain. As if the drover could do that! Since setting out from Waterfall Hold he had already lost one beast to predators and another to a leg broken when it stumbled on a steep trail. Neither the Weyr nor his Lord would be pleased with the loss. Claiming that a third had succumbed to one of those calamities would just convince his Lord that he was too careless or too unlucky to trust as lead drover again. Not to mention that Rettig and Sandobin would have to be brought in on the deception.

No, Alecto had pulled his duty and honour about him like a shield and informed the Windward Holder brusquely that his cattle were not for sale and the herd would be leaving at first light. When the man mentioned when Threadfall was due, Alecto had brushed him off, saying that two days was plenty of time to travel the last thirty miles to the Weyr.

Well, he had almost been right. As the tithe road wound its way through the jungle, Alecto had been relieved to see Kadanzer's cone getting closer and closer each time a twist in the tithe road revealed it. But those glimpses had also shown them storm clouds scudding their way – and finally there had been an ominous smudge of not-cloud in the sky, that could be only one thing.

"Steady, lads, steady." Alecto's words were as much for himself as for Sandobin and Rettig. "Stands to reason that the Weyr won't let Thread fall on its own lands, eh?" He had to raise his voice to be heard over the drumming of the rain.

Rettig nodded mutely. Sandobin had stopped and was pointing at the sky. "Look! Dragonfire!"

Looking upwards into the downpour almost felt like drowning. Alecto shielded his eyes from the water running into them. Yes, there were flickers of orange against the dark grey clouds, and tiny shapes that looked at this distance more like firelizards than mighty dragons. "See lads – what did I tell you! We'll be safe as a miner down a mine." He tried to keep the fear and doubt out of his voice.

The trees were thinning out now, as they passed from jungle to the cleared lands around the Weyr proper. "There – see! There's the beast fields of the Weyr right there. Get on yer, get on!" Alecto gave the nearest herdbeast a whack across the rump with his switch, setting it to a lumbering run. The dogs reacted on cue, goading the rest of the herd to increase their speed and follow. "Yah! Yah! Get on yer!"

Sandobin broke into a jog, pointing this time not at the sky, but toward the fields and barns that Alecto knew from previous droves to belong to the Weyrherder. "There's people out. There's people out in Thread!" In the distance a man and boy headed through the rain to one of the barns.

"See?" Alecto kept pace with the others. "Told you the dragonmen wouldn't let Thread fall on their own. Their herders are out just like us, and nothing to worry about but mud and rain."



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"Hurry, Journeyman Trevon, hurry!" Young Ekalt resisted the urge to tug at the beasthealer's sleeve to urge him onwards. The youngest apprentice to the Herders did *not* chivvy journeymen along as if they were feeble old uncles, even if said apprentice was holder-born and scared witless to be outside when dragons fought Thread directly above their heads.

Rain ran down the boy's face and into the collar of his shirt. One of the milkers was calving way before her time, and Weyrherder Marshall had sent him to fetch Beasthealer Trevon to tend her. He'd run all the way, as much through fear of Thread as concern for the beast that bellowed in pain with every contraction. For all his time at the Weyr since the dragonmen had come to collect their family to join his brother Teeyan – now bronzerider T'yan – Ekalt couldn't get rid of the fear of those times when Thread passed directly overhead. The Weyr was full of wooden buildings, not the comforting solid – and Thread-proof – stone of Ekalt's Ierne homeland. The presence of all the dragons was comforting, but Ekalt couldn't help but notice how many of those dragons bore Threadscores. Even dragons got it wrong at times!

"She's in that barn." The boy had already told Trevon this at least three times, but the journeyman just smiled patiently and jogged onwards through the mud and rain. At last they were there, and at least protected from the pouring rain.

Weyrherder Marshall and Journeyman Trevon exchanged a few words and then Trevon went to work, murmuring quiet words to the straining herdbeast as he ran his hands over her body. Ekalt hovered nearby, in case he was needed to fetch and carry. He cast worried looks alternately up at the tiled ceiling of the barn and out the door to where the rain sheeted down.

His attention was drawn back to Marshall and Trevon, the latter shaking his head, after an internal examination of the milkbeast. "I think the calf is dead inside her. It would be too underdeveloped to survive birth, anyway. I need to get it out of her as quickly as possible."

"Will she survive?" asked the Weyrherder. "She's a good milker."

"She's got a good chance," replied Trevon as he rubbed his arm with another rinse of redwort. "Let's get started."

It didn't take long, once Trevon had untangled the calf and umbilical cord within the milker's womb. The tiny calf slid free to land wet and inert on the ground. The afterbirth followed a moment later. The milker nosed at both of them and licked at the calf a couple of times, then lost interest.

Trevon prescribed something to add to her feed for the next seven days, to stop internal bleeding and build up her strength. Ekalt swelled with pride when Master Marshall assigned that task to him. He stroked the milker's nose with propriety. "We'll soon have you well again, we will," he assured her.

Marshall was shaking his head over the dead calf. "Best get to skinning it, I suppose," he said. "At least the tanners will benefit."

Trevon nodded as he washed blood and redwort off his hands. "Nothing quite so soft as the skin of an unborn calf."

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Master Majidi darted a look upwards as the rain drummed on the roof of the tanner's teaching rooms. The three apprentices burst out into a babble of excited chatter. She pitched her voice slightly louder to carry over the noise of rain and youngsters looking for an excuse not to pay attention. "Anyone who has never seen rain before can go outside and examine it at close quarters. Anyone? Hmm, I thought not."

She fixed the restless apprentices with a frown. She couldn't really blame them for being fractious or inattentive, trapped indoors in such heat on a restday, with the knowledge that the Wings fought Thread over the Weyr itself today. But such was a tanner's life – mess, smell and uncomfortable conditions went with the territory. The apprentices should thank Faranth that they weren't flensing hides or stirring tubs of goat and fowl droppings, ready to pour the stinking mess into the soaking pits. After all, the reason they were here at all on a restday was because of that little prank they had pulled on Journeyman Allam. It would take the poor man days to get the smell out of his gather clothes.

"Perhaps if everyone is so fascinated by a little rain, someone could remind us of the various ways of waterproofing leather. Apprentice Jasef?"

The youngster cleared his throat and began to recite from previous lessons. Majidi interrupted now and then to fire a question at one of the others, to make sure that none were nodding off in the heat. The older apprentices like Jasef knew this stuff inside out and backwards by now, but it always helped to keep them on their toes.

After waterproofing, she moved the apprentices on to ways of avoiding mould – the bane of any tanner in tropical climates like this one – giving them pieces of leather and fur in various states of decomposition to hand around. There were horrified giggles from the youngest apprentices as the fur came out in handfuls from the brain-tanned pelt she gave them. It looked like a canine afflicted with mange.

"See," she said. "Brain tanning produces lovely soft furs and beautiful hides, fit for a Lady Holder to wear. But that Lady Holder had better keep them away from damp, or she'll soon look like a holdless bandit." That remark elicited more giggles, this time from all three of them. It seemed her charges were going from sleepy or fractious to silly. Time to get them out of the stifling confines of the teaching rooms.

"Right, class," she said. "Get your coats and come with me – we're off to see Weyrharper Andrian. You should all have a harper's view on the types of hide and gut his craft needs for the manufacture of their instruments."

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At the sudden sound of the downpour, Andrian glanced up from the score he was copying out. The noise of the rain almost drowned out the soft knock on his office door. "Come in," he called.

It was bronzerider R'mal, his weyrmate, who gave him a disapproving look. "This is supposed to be a restday, dear," he pointed out. "And yet here you are, scribbling away."

Andrian sighed and laid down his pen. "I know, I know. But there's Thread right above the Weyr today and it felt somehow... disrespectful... not to do something productive."

It was R'mal's turn to sigh. "Dragonriders feel the same way, my dear." He crossed the room to sit by Andrian, laying his hand over the harper's. "But we mustn't upset our dragons with such thoughts, so we learn to compensate... in other ways." He stretched out his long legs and gazed at his feet. "Like polishing your boots until you could use them as a mirror. Or mending that shirt of your weyrmate's that he's been ignoring for the last month."

"You didn't?" said Andrian, feeling immediately guilty. He'd been meaning to repair that ragged hem for ages.

"I did. And finished that lace I've been neglecting. And tidied the weycot. Twice." R'mal gave Andrian's hand a squeeze. "It's all just displacement activity, dear. Makes you feel useful and distracts you from what's going on up above."

Andrian nodded, somehow consoled by R'mal admitting to the same feelings of uselessness at times like this. He and his weyrmate were so well matched that the delight of it sometimes took him by surprise.

"I was going to suggest a walk," R'mal continued, "But as you see..." He gestured elegantly to where the rain battered at the shutters. "A mad dash to the Main Hall for some klah might be more in order, hmm?"

The harper grimaced guiltily. "Ah, I sort of promised Master Majidi that I'd give a lecture to some of her errant apprentices... Lunch, perhaps?"

"I'll hold you to that, dearest." R'mal leaned over to kiss his weyrmate on the nose.

From outside, cutting through the sound of the rain, came the scream of a dragon in pain. R'mal's hand tightened on Andrian's, threatening to crush it. His eyes took on that unfocussed gaze of communication with Udoth. "The dragonhealers are dealing with it. Nothing we can do to help. Nothing we can do."

The desolation in his voice echoed that in Andrian's heart.

The skies opened and the rain came cascading down.

Cassidoria stared with dismay as sheets of rain descended around the Dragon Infirmary and water began to gush in on flurries of wind, but the dragonhealers seemed

less concerned. Apprentices scurried to roll down the canvas sides of the barn-like infirmary buildings, keeping out the rain. Giselle and the senior dragonhealers barely reacted to the activity, calmly continuing their preparations for the inevitable casualties.

Outside, her Amiseth gazed up at the sky, head tilting to and fro as she watched the battle that progressed above. The queen seemed oblivious to the rain that landed on her gold hide and poured down her flanks in rivulets. She gave her rider a running commentary on events high above them. ***Drannath tells Kathlamith to keep in formation. She gets in his way. Kireth is scored – it is not bad. He fights on. Ithyanith reminds the greens that fighting in the rain will be taxing, and they should not take foolish risks when they tire. Phanth tells Vedith and Kith to close the gap in their formation. They obey.***

From what she could tell, the 'Fall was going well. It always felt strange when 'Fall occurred over the Weyr itself. Defending their own homes felt odd, when so often the Wings were far away, fighting over distant holds.

Amiseth's urgent cry cut into her thoughts. ***Kathlamith and Malyuth collide! Malyuth's wing is hurt! She comes here, she comes here!***

"Casualty coming!" she yelled to the dragonhealers. "Collision. Wing injury."

The words were barely out of her mouth when Malyuth appeared from *between* low to the ground, trying to back-wing to slow her descent, but one wing flailing uselessly, one spar obviously broken. The green crashed rather than landed, shoulder and injured wing hitting the rain-slick cobbles, wrenching a shriek of pain from her throat. The green's rider – G'lant – was scrambling out of his riding straps intent on comforting his bondmate, apparently oblivious to the weaving neck and thrashing talons that clawed at the ground as Malyuth attempted to escape her pain.

Tell her to keep still, Cassidora ordered her queen. The green froze and then lowered her head to the ground with a moan. Rain poured down on her suddenly still body. Several dragonhealers surged forward into the downpour.

Corsan was suddenly at her side. "You said collision. Who else?" His eyes darted to Amiseth, as if expecting her to keen out in mourning.

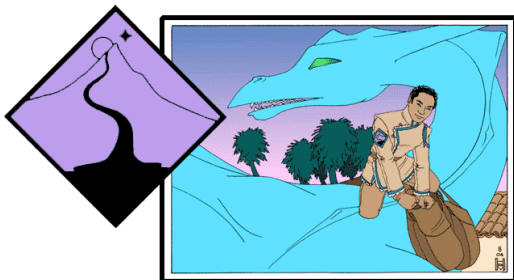
Cassidora passed on the query and then the response. "Kathlamith has broken a talon, and her rider is badly shaken. B'nalsh has ordered them back to the Weyr."

Corsan nodded. "A broken talon we can deal with later." He moved out into the pouring rain to deliver the news to Giselle, who was coaxing Malyuth into extending

her broken wing so that the healers could start to brace and splint the injury.

Cassidora watched the hive of activity, passing on instructions to Amiseth as needed. With her wing numbed and braced, Malyuth was urged to move into the shelter of the dragon infirmary, and settle in one of the wallows there. G'lant hovered anxiously by his bondmate's side all this time.

Amiseth released her hold on the green and activity round the Dragon Infirmary gradually subsided into stillness. The skies were open and the rain came cascading down.



Kadanzer Weyr

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