
Little Crawly Things

by Amanda Kear

Ninth Pass: 2433.09.02

Printed in FTA #22 (2005)

This story is printed by Kadanzer Weyr (www.kadanzer.org), a fan club approved by Anne McCaffrey in 1995. Kadanzer Weyr is a non-profit group -- all materials pertaining to Ms. McCaffrey's works displayed on this website may only be accessed for personal, non-commercial purposes. Please do not reproduce without permission. All references to worlds and characters based on Anne McCaffrey's fiction are copyright© Anne McCaffrey 1967, 2005, all rights reserved, and used by permission of the author. The Dragonriders of Pern® is registered U.S. Patent and Trademark Office, by Anne McCaffrey, used here with permission. Use or reproduction without a license is strictly prohibited.

There are little THINGS on my eggs. Nioranth's mental voice had a petulant tone.

Hmm? Dunia was studying star charts again, making sure that her calculations were correct for the inevitable trip forward that she would make. Her departure date was not yet fixed, but once Corsan had finally decided whether he was coming with her and little Farnya, Dunia would set a day for taking her leave from the Ninth Pass. Meanwhile, Nioranth was also tying her to this time, as the queen was on the hatching sands. Only a few days beforehand the gold had dropped the clutch from her fourth rising here at Southern. *Little things? What sort of little things?*

Annoying little crawly things. LOTS of annoying little crawly things. I do not like them on my eggs. Rider, I need you here to take away the little crawly things.

I'm coming, oh fussy one. Little crawly things? What in sweet Faranth's name was her gold talking about? If she was fretting about a few flies buzzing about the hatching grounds, Dunia would give her a piece of her mind. The young woman put down the hide she was annotating and stood up, giving her back a good stretch to get the kinks out of it.

Something considerably larger than the average fly droned past her head in a slow, weaving flight. It landed with an audible thump on the record hide she had been studying and began to walk ponderously across it. Dunia stared. It looked rather like a trundlebug of some sort, but was larger and – as she had just witnessed – could fly, if not exactly elegantly. It was about the length of her thumb and twice as thick, with a chestnut brown carapace. Was this one of Nioranth's little crawly things?

She picked up the record hide and shook the creature out the window, just in case it found hides to be edible and tasty. The she quickly slipped on a pair of shoes and headed for Nioranth and her eggs.

There were a few more of the winged trundlebugs ambling about in her path as she made her way onto the sands. They were certainly not very bright – they barely reacted to her almost stepping on them. If she had been a hungry treehopper, then their lives would have been considerably shortened. As if at her thought, a firelizard swooped down and pounced on one of the oblivious

creatures. The little brown happily crunched its way through its buggy snack and set about devouring a second.

There you are! See, there are lots of little crawly things! Nioranth raised her head from where she was vigorously licking one of her eggs. **I lick them off, but they come back. Make them go away!**

Several of her clutch did indeed have bugs sitting on top of them, or slowly climbing up them. There were also a few dozen on the rocky walls of the Hatching Grounds. They seemed to like climbing, as all were ambling ponderously upwards. As she watched, a few more droned over the rocky walls of the Hatching Grounds and descended to the sands. They immediately started to climb up the nearest egg.

What on earth were they? And were they harmful? Dunia didn't want either herself or Nioranth getting bitten or stung. *Nioranth, can you ask Yashelth to tell Genna that there are some kind of big insects at the hatching grounds. I need to know if they sting.*

Yashelth says that they are in her wallow too. She does not like them either.

In Yashelth's wallow? Shards, they must be all over the Weyr! *What does Genna say?*

Yashelth's rider says that they are not harmful, just annoying. She is coming to speak with you.

Well, if they were not harmful... Dunia gingerly plucked a bug off the nearest egg. It just sat in her grip, waving its legs a little. It didn't try to wriggle free, or fly away, or squirt anything noxious at her. Perhaps this was going to be less arduous than she had first thought. She grabbed a second with her other hand and marched to the hatching ground entrance, where she hurled the two bugs away. One buzzed into flight in mid air. The other hit the ground, bounced and was snapped up by a whitewing that darted down from the rocks.

A couple of journeys later, Dunia had come to the conclusion that the bugs were docile enough that she could probably fill a bucket with them, and evict them en masse. As it was, she could carry nine or ten in a fold in her skirts, and shake them all out at once. There were three appreciative whitewings and the brown firelizard waiting outside on each journey. From the racket that a bigger flock of whitewings was kicking up in the trees nearby, the bugs were a welcome snack for predators around the Weyr. Had the swarm been blown in on the wind last night? They certainly didn't look capable of sustained flight over any distance.

As Dunia shook out her skirts a fourth time, Genna's voice reached her, bubbling with laughter. "Oh youngling, you'll never win, doing it that way!" She looked round to see the Weyrwoman with a basket on each arm.

"Nioranth wants them out of the Hatching Grounds, and her wish is my command..."

Genna laughed again. "Well, we'll do our best—" She patted one of the baskets. "But she will just have to get used to them. There are going to be a lot more over the next

sevenday or so.” She eyed Dunia curiously. “You’ve never seen them before?”

“No – should I?”

“That’s odd – we get a swarm emerging every seven turns, regular as greens rising. There are none in your time?”

Dunia shook her head, and reached to take one of Genna’s baskets, using the action to cover her confusion. Her time? Did these wretched bugs live on the plateau in the Tenth Pass too? Maybe Kadanzer had not been at its new site long enough to have the pleasure of seeing a swarm. Or perhaps they had all perished when Southern had? “Maybe someone got fed up of them and found a way to get rid of them?” she suggested.

“I suppose it is possible,” said Genna. “Although I can imagine that the Farmcrafters have more productive things to do with their time. They don’t eat the crops or spread disease, so there are far more deserving bugs to be got rid of. They are, however, an infernal nuisance.” She cocked her head to one side, evidently listening to Yashelth. “I’d better go and recruit some weyrbrats to sweep them out of Yashelth’s wallow. Here, you take both baskets. Fill one and close the lid, then use the other to throw basketloads over the cliff.”

“What do I do with the first basket?” Dunia asked in puzzlement.

“Get someone to bring it to the kitchens.”

“The kitchens?” She blinked in surprise.

“Yes, they are edible. Quite tasty too. Sort of like a nutty flavoured spiderclaw.”

“Ugh!” Dunia looked at a pair of bugs slowly climbing up one of Nioranth’s eggs and wrinkled her nose in distaste. Genna laughed again.

If you and Yashelth’s rider eat them, that will get them off my eggs faster, said Nioranth. Carrying them is not working. And there are some sitting on ME now! The queen shook a forelimb to dislodge a couple of the bugs.

Genna was starting to head back to her weyr. “I’ll send a weyrling or two to help you catch them, if you think Nioranth will let them on the sands. Otherwise, recruit some firelizards. That fair of Vivia’s must be good for something!”

Dunia doubted that Nioranth would want any weyrings near her precious eggs at the moment, bugs or no bugs. “Send someone to carry the baskets to the cliffs,” she said. “I’ll see what she says about firelizards.” Who had firelizards here at Southern? Apart from Vivia and her vast clutch of them, of course? Let’s see... Wingsecond N’larion from L’tan’s wing had a green, the headsecond had that pair of blues... Dunia mentally checked off names.

“What do you call these things?” she called after Genna.

“Lazy bugs!” came back the reply.

Vivia dutifully arrived with her fair of firelizards, bubbling over at the chance to help. N’larion and a small task force of other riders and support staff accompanied her with their own ‘lizards. Nioranth, however, was not happy.

I do not like firelizards near my eggs. Stupid, noisy creatures.

Well, it’s your choice. Crawly things or firelizards.

Dunia was certainly not winning the war to remove the creatures. They seemed to be arriving faster than she could collect a basketful and cart it away. Maybe it was even the same ones flying back again.

The gold made a discontented rumble. She brushed off another of the lazy bugs from an egg with her muzzle and then carefully stood on it. ***They must go away as soon as they have eaten all the bugs.***

Dunia sighed in relief. She trotted to where the firelizard owners waited by the entrance to the hatching bowl. Several of their pets were quite excited, their eyes whirling. “She’s agreed, but wants the ‘lizards gone when they’ve finished them off.”

The broad, burly N’larion raised an eyebrow. “That may work today and tomorrow, goldrider, but after that all the firelizards for miles around will be so stuffed full they won’t be able to fly.” His green Fern gave a subdued chirp and launched herself from his shoulder and soared into the hatching grounds to pounce on a bug. Nioranth lidded her eyes, but otherwise did not react.

She sighed. “It’ll keep her happy for now, at least. I wish I had my blue Balt here. He had an appetite like a dragon’s.”

The other ‘lizards had taken Nioranth’s acceptance of N’larion’s Fern as a signal, and swept into the fray. The sands became a storm of coloured wings as the little creatures darted to and fro, happily snatching up bugs.

“You want a firelizard?” said Vivia brightly. “I could get you an egg next time I hear of a clutch. I’m hoping to impress a gold and a brown sometime, to go with my greens, blues and Twinkle.”

Dunia still couldn’t believe that anyone would name a bronze firelizard Twinkle. She hoped the indignity of it gave the little bronze a hefty appetite for bugs. “No, that’s alright,” she said diplomatically. “I’d more than likely lose it *between* when I go home. Wouldn’t be fair on the poor creature.”

The aforementioned Twinkle was the first back to his owner, his little belly bulging with his insectoid meal. Dunia remembered that she was supposed to be taking a basketful of the creatures back to the kitchens. Well, no matter – from the amount of the pests here, there were bound to be plenty between the hatching grounds and the Weyrhall.

I like these firelizards, said Nioranth. They have eaten all the little crawly things. They may come back if more crawly things arrive. She radiated contentment.



Nioranth's contentment – as brownrider N'larion had predicted – was short-lived. By midmorning the next day, the hatching grounds were again awash with lazy bugs. They were emerging from the ground in profusion all over the Weyr, and the females were climbing up anything that would give them a vantage point. The male bugs, which had slightly paler carapaces and mating spurs on their hind two pairs of limbs – a feature that Corsan lovingly pointed out to her and that Dunia filed away in the category 'too much information' – buzzed around mating with any female that sat still long enough. Given that the creatures aptly lived up to their name of 'lazy bug', this meant that there were little buggy lovers wherever you looked. And little buggy fights where males sought to push each other off whatever vantage point the female had chosen.

Walls were a firm favourite, as were trees, any washing left out to dry, and dragons. Dragons, to little lazy bug minds, were just these marvellous big coloured rocks. Difficult to scale, because of the smooth hide, but well worth the effort. Some of the Weyr's dragons ignored them, some just got up and gave themselves a good shake now and then, and some drove their riders mad trying to get rid of the bugs. Nioranth was definitely in the latter category.

Every predatory creature in and around the Weyr – firelizards, tunnelsnakes, wherries and felines – had gorged themselves insensible in the first three days of the outbreak. Sated firelizards sprawled in the shade. Whitewings with distended bellies laboured to take off. The support staff were muttering darkly about there being a tunnelsnake population explosion to come, as soon as the 'snakes had converted the sudden food bounty into eggs.

The human population of the Weyr was also becoming sated on the lazy bug diet. Dunia finally overcame enough of her revulsion to try some of the fried bugs that were now the staple of every Weyr meal. While she agreed that they were edible, she just couldn't drum up the enthusiasm for them that some of the Southern weyrfolk espoused. Headwoman Ima, Vesoz and Alstan, for example, were like children at the gather sweet stall – they just couldn't get enough of them. Ima was happily packing handfuls of bug meat in salt, to keep for a 'special treat' months from now. Dunia shuddered at the thought.

Once the firelizards were too gorged to even think about catching another bug, keeping Nioranth's eggs free of the pesky critters became well nigh impossible. The queen became very fractious and bug squashing became her obsession. Cleaning squashed bugs and bug ichor coated sand off Nioranth's feet became Dunia's main mission in life. The queen would only let candidates onto the sand to see her eggs if the youngsters in question took a bucketload of bugs away with them.



Dunia woke on day seven of the infestation and groaned at the thought of another day spent wrestling against the rising tides of insects. It was stifling hot in the room,

because the only way to keep the critters out was to close the shutters. The now very familiar drone and thud informed her that another bug had just collided with the exterior of the shutters. She reached mentally for Nioranth, hoping that the queen was still asleep and she would thus be able to get a shower and breakfast (more bugs, no doubt) before her bondmate was imperiously demanding her presence. *Nioranth?*

. ***I am here, rider mine*** The gold seemed distracted, but not irritable or stressed.

She decided to take advantage of this situation before it deteriorated into another bug stomping frenzy. *I will be little while yet. I need to wash and get something to eat.*

Yes, I am hungry too. I may visit the feeding grounds today, was Nioranth's only response.

Relieved, Dunia took her shower, and even managed a leisurely breakfast, although meatrolls featuring chopped bugs would not have been her first choice. She picked her way across insect strewn paths, and arrived at the hatching grounds to find... no eggs!

Nioranth, where are your eggs?

The queen looked up smugly. ***I buried them. The little crawly things cannot sit on them now!***



Five days later the infestation reached its peak, and thereafter dead or dying bugs outnumbered the living ones. Support staff and weyrlings bustled around with buckets and wheelbarrows, collecting bug corpses to dispose of. The middens became a veritable bug graveyard, some were ploughed directly into the fields, and cliffs well away from the bathing beaches became a site for weyrlings having bug throwing competitions.

Seventeen days after the first one had emerged, there were no living lazy bugs in the Weyr. "Thank Faranth that's finally over!" Dunia exclaimed as the last bug corpse was hurled over the cliffs for any wherries not thoroughly sick of the taste of them to scavenge.

"They'll be back again in seven Turns," warned Genna.

"My dear Weyrwoman, I have absolutely *no* intention of being around for the next outbreak, even if I have to time it back to the Eighth Pass to avoid them!"



Kadanzer Weyr
Alternate Tenth Pass Dragonriders of Pern® Fanclub
www.kadanzer.org