
Shell Games

by Smitty

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"Hey, Alstan! You want a firelizard?"

Alstan paused in his tidying, putting down the pile of chalk-scrawled slates from that morning's writing lesson before turning to face this new visitor to his classroom. "Ves, what are you talking about?"

"Firelizards. Do you want one?" Vesoz all but bounced across the room, dropping into a chair at one of the student desks and beaming at the journeyman harper. "I need to find a good home for an egg."

"Ennie's finally clutched somewhere sensible?" Alstan eyed the little green sitting on the younger man's shoulder with open disbelief. "That would be a first...."

"Ennie?" Vesoz laughed and reached up to stroke his pet, who trilled happily at the touch. "No, no, nothing that unlikely. No, rumour has it that Vivia has acquired a couple more eggs."

Alstan groaned. "Vivia is getting *more* firelizards?" The young goldrider's ever-expanding fair was something of a minor legend at the Weyr, invariably spoken of in the horrified tones usually reserved for such tales as the infamous exploding latrine at West. "How many does she have now anyway? Ten? Eleven? And," he added suspiciously, "what does this have to do with whether or not I want an egg?"

"Look on it as a service to the Weyr," Vesoz said cheerfully. "At least you'd bother to train --"

"You're going to *steal* an egg from Vivia?"

"Well, not so much *steal* as *exchange*...."

"You're going to steal an egg from Vivia and give it to *me*?"

"Sure!" Vesoz grinned brightly. "It'll be worth it, I promise."

"Because I'll have a little flying stomach to contend with?"

"No, because Vivia *won't*! Well, all right," Vesoz allowed, "she will, but only one rather than two, which has got to be a step in the right direction, wouldn't you say?"

Alstan smothered his sigh and started to clean off the slates with a wipe cloth. "Ves, isn't it a little *early* for you to have been drinking? And anyway, why just take the one? If this is meant to be a 'service to the Weyr', wouldn't it be more of a 'service' to take both?"

"No, because it'll be *funnier* this way." The young support staffer leaned forward, his elbows on the desk in front of him as he looked up at the harper. "Trust me."

"Trust *you*?" Alstan snorted as he laid a slate to one side and picked up another. "Sorry, Ves, you'll need to find someone else -- Enril would throw three kinds of fit if I turned up with a hatchling."

"Enril would be too busy laughing his arse off to even notice you having a pet."

"Oh, no," the harper corrected him. "You *know* what Enril thinks about firelizards...."

"I know what he thinks about Vivia too."

"I'd be surprised if the entire bloody continent doesn't know what Enril thinks about Vivia," Alstan muttered. "Anyway, you're assuming that I actually *want* a firelizard."

"Don't you?"

"Not really."

Vesoz's smile widened a notch. "No? That's not what you told Renea after she got that little bronze of hers last month...."

Alstan threw his friend a long-suffering look. "Yes, is there *anything* that goes on in this Weyr that you don't know about?"

"You're the harper, you tell me." Vesoz blinked up at him innocently. "Come on, this'll be fun!"

"Fun? And you don't think that Vivia will find it a little suspicious if I just *happen* to turn up with a firelizard hatchling at the same time she does?"

Vesoz *looked* at him. "This is Vivia we're talking about, remember? She hasn't got the brains to be suspicious."

Alstan sighed. "You have a point."

"Good! Now, I need to borrow some ink...."



2436.06.12

"Laundry call!" Vesoz called unnecessarily as he approached the weycot door, carrying one of the baskets used for bedding changes. He had loitered in the shade of an overgrown puzzleleaf grove until Vivia had taken Zyath to feed -- with luck he would be in and out before she returned and there would be no indication of his presence other than the sudden appearance of clean sheets. Ennie fluttered overhead, chittering to herself as she settled on the eaves of the tiled roof and peered down at her owner, her small thoughts curious. Vesoz grinned up at her and sent a brief mental command to *stay* as he pushed the door open with his hip and slipped inside.

Headsecond Jarana had been rather startled -- and not a little suspicious -- when he had volunteered to take the goldrider cots for his laundry shift. Most of the laundry collection involved removing the soiled linen and leaving fresh for the riders to arrange for themselves, but goldriders and Wingleaders had their beds made for them and the task was not generally a favoured one. He had managed to

convince her that it was his forfeit for losing a drunken bet and she had sent him off with firm words regarding young men and their inability to moderate their behaviour. Now, with Genna and Teshea's beds stripped clean and made afresh, it was time to see to Vivia's. And to carry out a little mission of his own besides....

Vivia's fixation with firelizards was reflected in the décor of her weycrot, with numerous pictures and models of the creatures fashioned from all manner of things -- bone, wood, glass, clay, even a polished jade carving that hung above the overstuffed couch. A few of the pieces had clearly been repaired, and one of or two looked a little chewed, the damage no doubt inflicted by the very firelizards the ornaments were meant to represent. A painting of a gold -- firelizard or dragon, it was hard to tell which -- hung against one wall of the weycrot and beneath it a table held an ornate pottery bowl with brightly painted firelizards cavorting around the outside and down the sturdy legs that supported it above a short, lit candle.

Vesoz smiled wickedly as he saw the bowl, setting his basket on the floor as he moved across to look at it. Lifting the artistically perforated lid, he found himself looking at two small, softly marbled eggs that lay half-buried in candle-warmed sand. He chuckled at the sight. "Got you...."

Moving quickly, he returned to the laundry basket, slipping one tanned hand beneath the top layers of fabric to withdraw a small earthenware pot of his own. This one was not so warm as Vivia's egg dish, but then its inhabitant was not so fussy about temperature. Making his way back to the firelizard eggs, Vesoz pushed them to one side then tipped the sand in his pot into the warming dish, stirring it around to cover any colour differences and to warm through so that he could carry his spoils away without worrying about the egg cooling off too quickly. Settling his new, ink-mottled addition to Vivia's little family safely apart from the original shells, he replaced the cover and set off to complete the chore he was nominally there to do.

A short time later, having somehow managed to work around the stunning *pinkness* of Vivia's sleeping chamber without making himself blind, Vesoz stuffed the old bedding back into his basket and returned to the warming dish to finish his work. He hummed cheerfully to himself as he scooped out the excess sand, dropping it quickly into his pot and then selecting the egg that most closely resembled his new addition to follow it. He was just rearranging the eggs that he was leaving for Vivia, smoothing out the sand and checking on the positioning, when a loud cheep sounded from outside and a flash of *curiosity-warning-greeting* pushed its way into his mind.

Vesoz swore and snatched for the lid of the warming dish, almost dropping it in his haste to cover his handiwork. He had barely managed to get it back in place before a bronze firelizard popped into the air in front of him, chittering angrily. Vesoz jerked back instinctively, then snatched for his egg pot as a high female voice cried, "*Twinkle!* That isn't very nice!"

"Oh, er, hello, goldrider," Vesoz started, plastering a hopefully friendly smile across his face and ignoring the little bronze that flapped suspiciously around his head as he concealed the pot behind his back. "I, er, was just doing the laundry run and saw your egg dish! I was just admiring it when you came in. Don't think I've ever seen one that looks *quite* like that before."

"Oh, I know! Isn't it *pretty?*" Vivia beamed at him and skipped across the room, followed by a fluttering trail of blue and green forms. "I found it at a gather last Turn and it's just *perfect* for eggs!" She flipped a lock of her red hair back behind one ear and giggled. "I can't get my girls to clutch in it but if I get a gold, I'm just *certain* that she'll love it! Her own pretty little hatching grounds...."

"That's nice," Vesoz said, edging away from the table as Twinkle settled on the back of an elaborately carved chair and glared balefully at him. "I've, er, changed all your bedding, so everything's fresh, but I really should be getting across to do Dunia's --"

"Oh!" Vivia's gaze suddenly snapped away from the gaudy warming dish and she fixed Vesoz with a look that was almost predatory. "You're Wingsecond J'hanos's brother, aren't you?"

Vesoz froze and blinked at her, startled by this abrupt change of subject. "Um, yes...."

The goldrider beamed at him. "Oh, how is he? Zyath is very taken with his Vhauth, you know -- I really don't know how he's never managed to catch her, such a fine, big bronze.... And it was so sad when J'hanos's weymate died, but that was, what? Three, four Turns ago now? Do you think he'll take another weymate? He must be awfully lonely! So, so sad...."

It was a hiss from Twinkle that finally snapped Vesoz out of the horrified trance that Vivia's twittering monologue was starting to put him into. She actually thought that Jal might be interested in her? Worse, she thought that *he* might be a way to get to the bronzerider? Shards, and he'd thought *Enasha* a bad match! At least he was aware of just what his brother thought of the young goldrider, although he rather doubted that Vivia would want to hear it.

Tightening his grip on the egg pot behind his back, Vesoz started to edge towards the linen basket once more. "Yes, it has been a while since *Enasha* died," he said conversationally, wishing that she'd look away from him, if only for a moment, "but Jal's not wanting for female company -- you know how it goes. And D'ralt makes sure that he stays busy. And I'm sure that Vhauth is just as taken with your Zyath, but I'm not the one to be asking about that." Finally reaching the basket, he glanced around the room and latched onto the first thing that looked halfway suitable as a diversion. "Nice piece of jade you've got there."

"Jade? Oh! Yes!" Vivia beamed and turned towards the carving of a firelizard clutching a fish that hung above her couch. "It *is* pretty, isn't it?"

"It certainly is," Vesoz agreed, using her moment of distraction to slip his egg pot into the laundry basket, hiding

it safely beneath the crumpled sheets. Twinkle hissed again and fanned his bronze wings in agitation. "But I really do need to get these away to the laundry and see to Dunia's sleeping arrangements."

Vivia giggled at his phrasing. "I don't think Corsan would like that!"

Vesoz shook his head, scooped up his basket, and escaped as quickly as he could, Twinkle's irate chittering following him out. He smiled wickedly to himself as he left -- given how fond Vivia was of that nasty little bronze tunnelsnake, she ought to just *love* the new addition he'd just made to her fair....



2436.06.21

Alstan was practicing a new tune of Enril's, trying to work the chords into muscle memory before the evening's performance in the Weyrhall, when an olive green form suddenly materialised before him and, after circling the room twice, landed in the middle of his desk, scattering papers and scrolls in all directions.

"Ennie!" Groaning, the harper set his gitar aside and went to repair the damage that the firelizard had wreaked. "And to think I let your owner talk me into getting a little flying menace of my own," he said to the green. "What does Ves want anyway?"

To his surprise, however, Ennie wasn't carrying a note from her owner. Alstan had barely recognised that when, to his even greater surprise, he realised that she was humming. He stared at the green for a few moments, then turned towards the small, sand-filled pot that was warming in a shaft of sunlight on the table. "What, *now*?"

The firelizard cocked her small head at him, then flitted across to sit by the pot, sniffing at it curiously. Alstan followed her, resting a careful hand against the sun-touched earthenware and feeling it shift urgently beneath his touch. He laughed, slightly nervously, and pulled back, wondering just what he was supposed to feed the thing....

"Not too late, am I?" Vesoz clattered through the door, grinning from ear to ear and waving a small dish of something. "I brought you some fish scraps!"

"Heh, nice to see that one of us is being organised," Alstan said weakly, turning his attention back to the now visibly twitching pot. "So, does this mean that Vivia...?"

"Is cooing over her eggs right now? Oh yes." Vesoz dropped into a chair and pushed his fishy offerings across the table to Alstan, batting Ennie's nose away from the tempting morsels with his other hand. "She'll be sitting there all ready to welcome the latest noisy little additions to her family...."

"But only one of the eggs is ready to hatch?" Alstan ventured.

Vesoz grinned. "You'd think so, but the funny thing about that particular species is that once they get past a certain stage, they'll just hatch out a little early if the nest material gets too disturbed --"

Two blues and another green appeared at the window, humming happily along with Ennie. A moment later, a bronze appeared, settling onto the table and eyeing both the pot and Vesoz with curious blue-green eyes. Alstan looked at the gathering fair, recognising Fedrek's Tali and J'hanos's Lan amongst them, and took a deep breath. "Right, so what do I do?"

"Get the egg out of the pot for a start," Vesoz suggested.

"Yes, I suppose that would help, wouldn't it?" The harper lifted the lid gingerly and carefully tipped the jerking shell out onto the table. It was a mid-sized egg, delicately shaded with deepening patterns of blue, but there was nothing delicate in the way it twitched and spun on the polished surface beneath it as its impatient occupant fought their way out. "What colour do you think --"

As if in answer, the shell fractured and a small brown leg kicked itself free, swiftly followed by a thrashing tail. Alstan reached to catch the egg before it disappeared over the edge of the table, his hands closing around it a bare instant before the hatchling finally fought free of his confinement and gave voice to a surprisingly loud wail. "All right, I've got him!"

Vesoz grinned. "That plate of fish guts is there for a reason, you know," he said, his eyes on the little brown. "Start feeding him before he decides he'd rather be with Vivia!"

The harper fumbled for the dish, snatching up something soft and slippery and gingerly offering it to the hatchling, who pounced on it with a greedy squeal. He ignored Vesoz's laughter when the brown nipped at his string-callused fingers, demanding more food with tiny teeth... and with a sudden wash of alien emotion, a small, pulsing litany of *need-hunger-love* that made Alstan gasp. "Oh...."

"Feels weird, doesn't it?" Vesoz said, and the harper looked up to see his friend pulling Ennie back from the fish scraps again. "Jal says it's nothing like what you get with a dragon -- that's meant to be just... *more*. But we'll never know what that's like and this...." He smiled fondly at his little green. "It's enough. I was twelve when I got Ennie and I can remember thinking that the world just couldn't get any better than that."

Alstan grinned and continued feeding the ravenous scrap of life that sat in his palm, amazed that so small a creature could eat so much. Outside, dragons were starting to sound off about something, but the harper ignored them, too caught up in the strange connection that now tied the little brown to him to pay them any heed. The hatchling was just beginning to slow his feeding when the bronze on the table gave a chirrup of greeting and the door swung open to admit a puzzled-looking J'hanos.

"I don't know what's going on out there," the bronzerider started, "but there's *quite* the commotion going on around Vivia's weyr. Zyath is upset because her rider won't stop screaming about firelizards clutching tunnelsnakes and Vhauth can't work out what she's --"

J'hanos stopped, his gaze hardening as it flicked between the two men and the tiny brown, who promptly burped and curled up to sleep in Alstan's hand. "Ves?"

"Yes, Jal?"

"Would I regret it if I asked if this has anything to do with you?"

"Possibly."

The bronzerider closed his eyes and groaned. "I don't want to know, do I?"

"Probably not," Alstan admitted, gently stroking the hatchling dozing in his hand. "I've been trying to avoid the details myself."

Vesoz turned innocent brown eyes to his brother. "I've just been sitting here helping Alstan -- as I'm sure you already know through Lan here, given that you managed to find me." The bronze firelizard cheeped at mention of his name and launched himself from the table to settle on J'hanos's shoulder. "Anyway," Vesoz continued cheerfully, "I'm sure all the entertaining bits will be doing the rounds by dinner."

"Suitably embellished, no doubt," J'hanos muttered.

"Hey, that's half the fun of gossip! Trying to work out which bits are true and which bits are just wishful thinking!"

"Yes, there are days when I wonder why I didn't just leave you in Tillek, really there are."

Alstan chuckled and left the brothers to it. Moving the sleepy brown to the crook of his arm, he smiled and murmured, "You would have been wasted on Vivia. Now I just need to work out what I'm going to tell Enril..."



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