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# Adding Insult

by Ellen Million

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Sunrise was in a good mood, and Hope was allowed to sit at the edge of the metal pan that had been his sandbox to admire her and her pile of pretty, leathery eggs.

“What a clutch,” V'lar said appreciatively, leaning over the back of the couch to inspect the protected corner where Sunrise was rearranging the eggs in the loose sand. “I'm surprised they all fit in that pan.”

Resla laughed, and joined him in kneeling on the couch to look over it backwards. Sunrise preened happily at the attention, and Hope brought her a lazybug, a slow-crawling, clumsy flying insect that liked to cling to vertical surfaces. She accepted it with arrogant indifference, crunching at the shell, but left half of it uneaten to the side. The weyrbrats had been diligently bringing her treats for the last handful of days, hoping to woo a chance to see the eggs and subtly impress on Resla their desire and deservedness for one of the firelizards when they hatched. She would have to turn the clutch over to the Weyrwoman, once they had hardened sufficiently, but she would receive a few for herself.

“We had a few bad moments while she was laying where I didn't think that they would all fit,” the headsecond chuckled. “I could just imagine all those eggs spilling out down the sides of the pile and rolling underneath the couch!” The heap of eggs was still precarious – a round two dozen eggs in a pyramid loosely chinked with sand.

V'lar tucked a lock of hair behind her ear – it was an easy, familiar gesture that was always still a surprise to Resla. “She's a good mother; she'd know,” the bronzerider said warmly, and Resla suspected he wasn't really directing the statement towards the gold firelizard.

She blushed, and was half-grateful when there was a clatter at the door, and she turned to find a more dignified position and greet Lya, Ekalt and Enya as they spilled in to return Varla. V'lar opened arms wide to toddling Varla, and Ellya's three youngest children scrambled to the couch to peer over the back at Sunrise and her pile of eggs as Resla moved to make room for them. Their happy chatter washed over the headsecond, and she sat behind her desk watching them and wishing she could take V'lar's comment at face value, and not wonder if a 'good mother' was all that she was to him.



2860.09.14

The smell was Resla's first hint that something wasn't right.

It was sour and unpleasant, and after a short search of her office, the headsecond found the source of it behind the couch set sideways across the corner to protect Sunrise's eggs. The little queen looked miserable, crouching over her eggs, and there was an odoriferous heap of bile and lazybug parts next to her pan.

“Serves you right,” Resla said with little pity as she pulled the couch away from the corner so she could clean it up. “If you weren't stuffing yourself silly on those dashed bugs, you wouldn't have indigestion.”

She was unwilling to admit how much she detested the lazybugs. She picked them out of her weyrings' hair, and out of her food, and swept them out of her office. While she didn't like to consider herself squeamish, the sound of them crawling up her walls was beginning to put her off her sleep – and this recent wrinkle to their infestation did nothing to improve their image in her mind.

No sooner had she replaced the couch, than Hope unhappily staggered out of the bedroom where he'd been left sleeping and vomited noisily in the center of the floor.

Varla, as early a riser as Resla was, immediately started toddling towards this messy new entertainment, and Resla swept her up to keep her from playing the vile puddle.

“Faranth!” V'lar stood in the doorway to the bedroom, wearing only britches. “Retching firelizard wasn't the wakeup I was hoping for this morning.”

Resla handed him Varla, who fussed at being kept from the smelly new place to play and took another rag from her shelves to clean up the mess. “I wouldn't have thought you'd hear it in there,” she said apologetically.

V'lar wrinkled his nose at Varla, who giggled. “This wasn't the one I heard,” he told the headsecond. “He left another gift for you on the bedspread. Possibly more vile than this one. I think one of the lazybugs was still alive.”

“Wretched little pain,” Resla told Hope without any real anger; he was miserable enough without a scold to make things worse.

Once she'd cleaned that one up, Sunrise threw up again.

“Do you want me to clean that one up?” V'lar asked, clearly hoping she wouldn't take him up on the offer.

Resla shot him a strained smile. “No, of course not,” she said. “Keep Varla out of the mess for a moment, and we'll go to the Main Hall for some breakfast after I've mopped this up.”

They left Sunrise with her eggs and Hope in his basket looking sick and listless, and Resla couldn't keep the worry from her face.

“They'll be all right,” V'lar said coaxingly. “Just too many lazybugs in too small a belly.”

Resla nodded reluctantly. Yes, plenty of firelizards around the Weyr had suffered the effects of lazybug overeating. But by now, everyone was aware of the illness that was spreading through firelizards, both here at the Weyr, and amongst all the Holds. Reports had come in, even with the sparse attendance at Orylath's recent Hatching. The Ninth Pass refugees, especially Master Corsan, had seen lazybug outbreaks before, and they'd been quick to warn that

this other illness wasn't connected to the firelizards' gluttony. But not all of the Weyr's firelizards seemed to have caught this other illness, that looked like a bad cold. Resla had been hoping, the longer Hope and Sunrise failed to show any symptoms, that her two would be spared.

"If they're still ill by this evening, take Hope to Giselle. She doesn't seem to mind prodding at him."



Resla was badly shaken by her visit to Giselle's office. Hope and Sunrise were far from the only firelizards who seemed to have these symptoms, and an unexpected death of a little green firelizard while Resla watched had been a nasty shock.

She wandered back to the Weyrling Wing automatically, and found herself at D'zan's office door without thinking about it. It was half open, and she knocked on it politely as she walked in.

The Weyrlingmaster scowled at her in greeting. Varla cooed happily at him, but Resla held onto her where she might usually have put her down to play. The child's happy noises turned to protests at being held.

"I just came back from the dragon infirmary," she said faintly, keeping her distance. "Hope and Sunrise are both ill, and Giselle wants me to have no contact with the weyrling dragons."

D'zan put down the paperwork he was reading and was quiet a moment while conferring with Yoseth. "Not just ill from gorging on lazybugs?" he said darkly, rising from his chair. The look he gave her turned grim as he considered the repercussions of that - trust the Weyrlingmaster to think of worst outcomes first. "Time to immediately isolate the younger weyrlings who have sharding flits - I'll have Ellya and L'ward start on moving them out of the barracks into shared cots away from the others. We can't keep the damned things from their owners, and can't keep the weyrlings from their dragons, but maybe we can cut out the risk. Will a redwort bath cut the rate of infection?"

"I don't know," Resla confessed.

The brownrider muttered a curse. "We'll isolate those dragonets away from the others, but it's probably too late to stop any spread at this point," D'zan said dourly. "Shaffing whoreson flitters have always been a pain in my balls."

Resla clutched Hope's empty basket closer to her and Varla pushed and kicked her legs, running through her small vocabulary in an effort to explain her desire for freedom.

The Weyrlingmaster looked at Resla again, and his angry expression softened. "You take Hope and Sunrise to the Infirmary?" he asked.

"I took Hope," Resla told him, shifting Varla to her other hip. "Sunrise wouldn't leave her eggs."

"Giselle and her staff will take good care of him," D'zan said, his attempt at comfort sounding rusty. "Ellya can shoulder her share of this - take the afternoon off if you want. I trust you to protect yourself and yours during this, and limit yourself to contact with weyrlings who don't have firelizards until this is under control. Understand me?"

Resla nodded, and Varla squirmed and cried in her arms to be let down. "I'll stop and let her know," she said

quietly, and she fled the office before he could say more, feeling helpless and scared.



*2860.09.15*

"How can such a small creature expel so much foul matter?" V'lar asked, the first hint of impatience in his voice. He was wearing most of the latest dump - he'd been trying to coax water into Sunrise when she deposited a load, not of vomit this time, but of damp diarrhea, on his pants.

Resla was doing the same with Hope, with greater success, trying to keep her own dinner down over the vile smell that didn't seem to scrub out of her cot any faster than it reappeared. "I think there's one rag left," she told him, exhausted. "I'll have to get more from the stores." It was growing dark; the glowbaskets were still covered in the corners.

"I don't envy anyone having to do laundry this seven-day," V'lar said wryly as he stood to remove the worst of the mess.

Resla was already wearing her share of it - she was fairly sure that one of the spots was going to stain her shirt, and her worn apron had an array of unattractive new colors to it. Weyrlings and candidates had flocked to her with their sick flits once Giselle had started banning them from the dragon infirmary, so not all of it was from her own two, but enough of it was that she was right on the edge of panic. The previous night had been nearly sleepless. It had been almost two days now, that neither of the firelizards had been able to keep down any food, and more worrisome, had been dehydrating from both ends. Both of them were running temperatures, hot and dry to the touch, and both of them had developed seizures and coughs. Sunrise had finally even permitted Resla to lift her off of her eggs, and seemed not to remember them at all in her overall misery.

V'lar stopped at Resla's chair and put the unresisting Sunrise in her lap. The gold shuddered, coughed and swayed in place, crouching down uncomfortably.

Resla was more irritated than appreciative. "I'm busy with Hope right now," she said more crossly than she intended, and reminded herself to be grateful for V'lar's patience.

"You're better at getting them to drink," V'lar reminded her. "You should concentrate on Sunrise."

Resla automatically stroked Hope, not actively wanting to play favorites, but loyally favoring her older and more maligned flit. "Why Sunrise?" she asked sharply. "Is she so superior?"

V'lar was clearly as tired as she was, and said without candor, "Yes." He seemed to realize how badly Resla would take that, and, daubing at his pants, quickly explained, "It's not that Hope's a bad firelizard, and it's not because he can't fly. But this outbreak has been hard on the firelizard population; a strong breeder is more important than Hope, no matter how sweet-tempered he is."

Outrage choked the headsecond. "How can you say that?" she demanded.

"Be reasonable," V'lar said coaxingly. "Those eggs you'll be able to keep from this clutch are going to be worth

a pretty mark with so many firelizards dead. A gold that's willing to clutch in a cot is like a bottomless well in a desert."

Resla could feel rage simmering up in her blood. "That's all that's really important to you, isn't it," she said around tight teeth. "All you really care about is breeders." Before she could stop herself, she added acidly, "That's the only reason you're in this cot at all, isn't it?"

V'lar froze, face all astonishment and disbelief. "You can't think that," he said slowly.

"Why can't I?" Resla demanded, beyond care for her words. "Isn't it true? If it weren't for Varla, would you have spent more than an evening or two with me before traipsing on to a prettier conquest? Aren't you always on me about 'our next child,' and looking crushed when I get my courses?"

Anger was not a common look on V'lar, but Resla had no trouble recognizing it. "You've got a lot of nerve, Resla," he said softly, but sharply. "You've been stringing me along for how long, now, all half-committed and still in love with someone else?"

"In love...?" Sunrise's claws bit into Resla's leg, but the usually vocal gold was silent.

"In love," he repeated firmly. "With the Weyrlingmaster."

"Don't be ridiculous," Resla hissed. "I thought you'd be above gossip..."

"It's not gossip to watch you sprint to his side when you think he might be injured," V'lar said furiously. "It's not gossip seeing firsthand how you look for him first every time you come into the main hall. Gossip isn't even in the picture when I see how you're always trying to make his life easier and better. You have to brew a fresh pot of klah for him, you have to see that his laundry is done just so."

"That's my *job*," Resla protested. Unwanted tears were beginning to sting at her eyes.

"It's not your job to defend him every time his name comes up." V'lar's voice never raised, but it didn't lack impact for its lack of volume. "Shells, you almost broke a man's jaw for speaking ill of *him*. I've never seen you stand up for me that way. You don't even admit we're together, do you, and you act like I'm going to dishonor you if I so much as peck you on the cheek in front of someone."

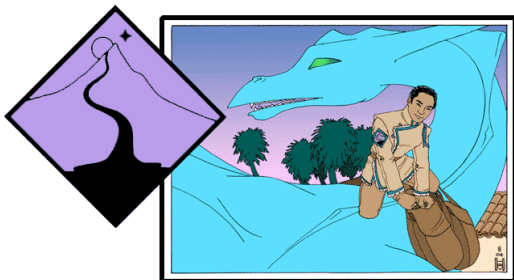
"Ridiculous," Resla repeated weakly, unable to entirely deny it and feeling abandoned by the anger that had already spilled away from her. "Why are you even here if you feel that way?" she rallied.

"You're right," V'lar agreed unexpectedly. "It was ridiculous of me to wait around so long. I have no shaffing idea why I'm here."

He dropped the rag he'd been cleaning his pants with,

and left the office in a few short strides, letting the door swing shut with a bang behind him. There was a rustling rush of wings as Jreth took off from the wallow in front of Resla's cot.

Varla woke, and cried fussily from the bedroom. Resla let her whimper, tears pouring down her own cheeks, in a dark room full of the stench of dying firelizard.



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