
Broken Lines

by Smitty

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"Two sevendays and she'll be good as new," Aretei said, smoothing numbweed across the scored flank of a dark young green. "It's not deep but you'll need to make sure it's kept clean and that she doesn't over-exert herself until the new hide has had a chance to grow in. Understand?"

"Yes, Journeywoman." Halrae's face was a picture of relief in the glowlight and she scratched her dragon's proffered nose lovingly. "We caught an updraft just off Ieme Tip, had a clump come apart as we got to it. We skipped back as soon as it touched her, but –"

"Save it for your report to your wingleader." The dragonhealer stepped back from green Uayth's injury, wiping her hands on the cloth she carried in the side pocket of her long leather apron. "For now, get her back to her wallow and bedded down – someone will check on her tomorrow."

Turning away from the green, Aretei looked around the glowlit square between the dragon and human Infirmary. WindFlight was flying 'Fall, following the Leading Edge across the Dorado Coast track that would be easier if it were not at night. Much of the 'Fall was spent over water, but the winds across the coastal areas could catch the unwary and punish them in an instant as clumps suddenly changed direction or came apart before them. So far, with the 'Fall mostly done, there had been nothing worse than minor scores, stray fragments reminding dragon and rider alike that there was no such thing as an easy 'Fall.

"Three wingtips, a clipped tail, and a scored backside." Kieran yawned. "If it's going to be like this all night, half of us may as well go to bed."

Giselle turned a level and disapproving stare on her journeyman, while Corsan shook his head and chuckled softly. "Not so loud, Kieran – the Thread will hear you...."

"Doesn't it always?" muttered Rilam.

Aretei looked up into the clear night sky, at the stars twinkling as innocent and Thread-free as she remembered from her childhood in Igen. There was a breeze coming in off the sea, however, a tang of salt in the air, and the rustling of the leaves provided a soft background that carried no memories of the dry desert Weyr of her youth, a quiet reminder of just how close to once-forbidden greenery she now lived. The 'Fall had been free of serious casualties so far, but that was no guarantee – fortunes could turn on an instant, the winds turning cruel on a whim, a simple mistake turning to savage tragedy. Aretei remembered a night not unlike this, remembered the devastation that another dragon's flame had inflicted on D'vin, a dragonhealer himself, and his brown Ignacith. Another 'easy' night had

seen a bronze dead and a queen thrown four centuries into the past –

She glanced towards Corsan as he bounced on his toes and said something that made young Bastian laugh. Sometimes, of course, things still managed to turn out for the best....

"They must be getting close to shore again," Rilam said, searching the skies. "Could be looking at updrafts over the Cibola coastline."

"Velcroth says that they're still over water." Zherra stepped closer to Giselle, a frown marring her pretty features. Her gold was a sevenday from dropping her maiden clutch, aiding the Weyr's dragonhealers because she was simply too egg-heavy to fly the 'Fall. Aretei found the girl frustratingly inconstant – insecure in one moment and bossy in the next, whatever might serve to draw the most attention to herself – but trusted that she would settle in time, if only to prove her queen's choice. "She says that Udoth can see land but he says the winds are good so far."

"Let's see what the Thread has to say about that, shall we?" Corsan turned back towards the tables that held the pails of redwort and numbweed, running his hands back through his short, unruly red hair. "It's always the bad ones you remember," he said conversationally. "If this is all we get for tonight, we'll have forgotten all about it by morning. Well, except for whoever is meant to be checking on our silly little scores from earlier, hopefully, because we *did* say that we'd send someone over and nobody likes to think they're unmemorable. Not to a healer, anyway...."

Kieran laughed and half-turned towards the Southern-trained master... and then gold Velcroth, who had been half-doing at the side of the Dragon Infirmary, reared up with a fierce bugle, her orange gaze fixed a half-length over the cobbles. Two heartbeats later, a pale blue dragon burst into the air and immediately crashed to the ground, thrashing and flapping in silent agony, his throat a bloodied mess of Threadscore. A wing swept hard past Aretei as she tried to get closer to the stricken blue, the outer wingfinger leaving scraps of hide and dark smears of ichor across stone. "Zherra! Hold him!"

The young goldrider closed her eyes and a moment later the injured dragon stilled beneath Velcroth's command. On the blue's shoulder, his rider seemed intent on making up for his dragon's lack of voice, shrieking for help at the top of his lungs. The man seemed to be sagging in his seat, no doubt carrying injuries of his own, but Aretei ignored him, leaving him to the healers and trusting that anyone capable of producing that much noise was not in imminent danger of death.

She reached the blue in the same moment as Giselle and Corsan, boots almost slipping in the ichor that was pooling too rapidly beneath the blue's neck. The dragon hadn't made a sound since his appearance but now she could hear a rough rattling deep within his chest, the sound wet and utterly wrong. "Bastian!" Giselle snapped over her shoulder. "Bring glows!"

"Oh, this one is going to be fun," Corsan murmured as he crouched to examine where the ichor was flowing from, nodding quick thanks to the apprentice who set two glowbaskets on the ground and scurried back out of the way.

"Scoring to the throat; mostly superficial but he's had at least one strand bite deep enough to do real damage...."

Giselle leaned against the blue neck, her hands examining the edges of the wound as Aretei held a glowbasket close for her. Green bubbles coated her fingers, emerging from the depths of the injury in pulsing streams. "He's bleeding out and fast."

"Bleeding *in* as well, if that rattling's anything to go by," Aretei added, glancing towards the blue's head and noting the open mouth, the bloody froth around his flaring nostrils. She was peripherally aware of others cutting the moaning rider free of his straps, pulling him away from his dragon and towards the Infirmary, where he wouldn't be able to see whatever followed. "Tracheal lacerations – he's bleeding into the windpipe."

"He's drowning." Giselle set her jaw. "The score has opened wounds on the trachea and one of the main blood vessels; he's inhaling blood in every breath, then pushing air out through the ichor, causing the froth. The flow is too great, the surrounding trauma too involved – there's nothing we can do but ease his passing."

Corsan threw the other master a sharp look. "Sorry, but I'm going to have to beg to differ on that one. Kieran," he called over his shoulder, "bring me the chamberwood pipe we use to decant the redwort barrels; Zaras, Rilam, I need buckets of fresh redwort and numbweed here *now*, along with all the sterile wipes you can lay your hands on! Go!"

"What are you doing?" Giselle caught at Corsan's shoulder as the others darted off for the requested supplies. "This dragon is in agony. There's nothing –"

"We'd better get working fast, then."

"When we can't even see what we're trying to treat?"

"I've done this before," Corsan told her quickly, his gaze flicking across the ugly scores. "Not in over four centuries, granted, but look on this as a chance to see a bit of old Southern brilliance in action."

Giselle hesitated, clearly torn between professional curiosity and the desire to end the blue's suffering as quickly and cleanly as possible. "You can save him?"

"Watch and learn." Corsan grinned at her, then plunged his hands into the bucket of redwort as Rilam set it down, recoating his fingers and arms before reaching into the blue's bloody wound up past his elbow. The dragon twitched, but the flow of ichor abruptly lessened. "All right," he said, frowning, "I've located the damaged vessel – it's holed but not severed; he wouldn't have made it back here if it was. Bleed is venous rather than arterial, so the pressure is lower. Aretei, I'm going to need you to take over from me here in a moment...."

Aretei nodded and coated her hands and arms with the oily red liquid, making sure to work it under her nails. The pooling ichor was still warm as she knelt at Corsan's side and slid her arm in alongside his, feeling ravaged flesh part around her fingers. It took a few moments to locate her target in the slick heat, but then her hand was wrapped around the broad vein, the blue's lifeblood pulsing hot against her palm. "I've got it," she said quietly, shifting her position as Corsan pulled back. "What now?"

"Now – do we have those wipes? Ah, good girl, Lyra – *now* it gets *interesting*." He took the chamberwood tube from Zaras, peering through its drilled centre a moment

before nodding to himself. "I'm guessing this is one of the techniques lost with the tsunami, so watch closely, boys and girls...." Corsan dropped one end on the tube into the redwort bucket, dunking it quickly up and down a few times before pulling it out and rotating it quickly between his palms. Fat red spatters flew off in all directions, sending the younger apprentices scuttling back with squeals of protest. "There. Now, what we need to do here is to stop the flow of ichor into the lungs without suffocating him entirely. Aretei here is containing the worst of the bleed from the vein, but it's too major a vessel to clamp and we can't stitch it while she's holding it. The tracheal injury isn't being flooded right now, but it is still open to the lesser bleeds within the main body of the wound."

Giselle was watching as Corsan spoke, frowning as she coated the external scores with numbweed, taking care not to get any onto Aretei's skin. "The first step would seem to be to clean the wound cavity and close the tracheal tear."

"Right. *But*," Corsan waggled the tube at his fellow master before handing it back to Zaras, "there's not enough room in there to work without causing more trauma, not with Aretei here holding his circulatory system together anyway. So, to buy ourselves a bit of time, we need to divert the airway."

Aretei realised his intent in the moment before he knelt beside her and reached back into the wound, his hand sliding past her own as he sought the ridged tissue of the blue's windpipe. "We have to stop meeting like this," Corsan muttered, his attention fully on his careful fumbblings. He paused, frowned, then reached for a small cutting blade. "Need to enlarge the opening just a little...."

Giselle opened her mouth as if to protest, then shook her head and stepped back, her gaze quickly scanning the skies. No further casualties had followed the blue into the Weyr and hopefully none would – Aretei could just imagine what would happen if Velcroth released her hold on the injured beast. She held perfectly still as Corsan worked within the blue's throat, trusting him not to nick either the damaged vein or her hand. Long moments passed, then he grunted and pulled one hand free. "Zaras?"

The young journeyman passed him the chamberwood and Corsan pushed it into the wound, redworted end first. Aretei felt it scrape against her wrist, felt an instant of resistance... then something gave and the blue shuddered hard, the rattling sounds in his chest growing momentarily louder. A fetid mist of fine green droplets gusted from the end of the tube with a noise like a poorly-made bassflute and Corsan rocked back on his heels. "There. The airway is diverted – he can breathe freely for now, though we can't leave him like that too long. Right now we need to get in with the wipes, clear away as much of the froth and mess from the greater wound as we can, put in some numbweed and get that vein stitched before Aretei here loses all feeling in her fingers."

"I'll admit to a touch of cramp," Aretei told him, resisting the urge to flex her stiff digits. The chamberwood echoed with the hollow sound of the blue's rough breath, vibrating against her forearm as Corsan instructed Lyra to hold it steady. "Do we know who he is?" she asked the gathered spectators. "It would be nice to have a name here...."

"Alyteth," Zherra said quietly, her green eyes wide. "A'kasen Impressed from the clutch before me. They fly with StrongWind."

"They're not going to be flying with anyone for a while," Giselle said, moving closer to examine the tube now protruding from the wound as Corsan and Zaras set about cleaning the scores as best they could. "We need some sterile spreaders here," she called over her shoulder, not turning to see who had scurried off to fetch the equipment. To Corsan she said, "I'll take the blood vessel – I have the smallest hands and the neatest stitch."

"Fastest too – it's yours," he told her, glancing up at Velcroth as the queen rumbled, then bugled shortly as a brown burst into the air overhead and circled down to land at the other side of the square. "Ah, shells.... Zherra?"

"J'son's Rohoth," the young goldrider said quickly, never taking her eyes from the blue as Kieran went to the brown's aid. "Another wingtip – he won't need Velcroth's help."

"Good." Giselle gave her hands a fresh coat of redwort and selected a needle from her kit, threading it with nimble fingers. "Extent of damage?"

"Tear is the width of my palm," Aretei reported promptly as Rilam slid the wound spreaders into position and opened up the scores as best he could without causing further damage. "Vessel walls still feel strong – shouldn't disintegrate with the stitches although I'd recommend varying the suture style over different runs."

Giselle nodded, kneeling beside her journeywoman. "I'll be putting in a basic holding stitch first," she said, pitching her voice to carry to those gathered around the blue, "to contain the worst of the bleed and give me time to work. With that in place, I'll then go back over the length of the tear with finer sutures, to ensure that the stitches don't give way when he moves." She nodded again, a quick, decisive movement, and Aretei released her grip on the vein, rocking back as her arm slid free of the injury and Giselle moved in, her stern features a mask of concentration as she worked. "Now, can anyone tell me which suture styles will work best in this scenario, given the nature of the damage and its position in the body?"

Flexing her stiff, bloody fingers, the journeywoman eased herself away from Giselle and her audience, the hollow throb of the blue's respiration loud in her ears. Alyteth was going to carry the scars of this for the rest of his life, but at least it looked as though he might *have* a life. There were hours of work ahead of the dragonhealers yet – the tracheal damage would need to be addressed once the vein had been repaired, and then they would need to work outwards with ever greater amounts of numbweed and redwort and catgut to close the more basic scoring but, infection and shock and all the other more usual threats allowing, he should *live*... and maybe even live to fight Thread again.

Wiping her ichor-coated hand on her apron cloth, Aretei flexed her fingers once more, checked her suture kit, and waited to be called back into the fray.



Sunlight was filtering through the treeline as Giselle made her way back to the Dragon Infirmary from its human

counterpart, the long night finally over. There had been no serious injuries other than Alyteth's, nothing more than wingtips and fragment burns, but the blue had kept everyone busy, his misfortune turning into a valuable training exercise.

Valuable training for her as well as for the apprentices, as it turned out. She wasn't used to that.

Alyteth's wallow within the Dragon Infirmary had been screened off, affording the blue a measure of privacy that he was in no state to appreciate given his state of unconsciousness, exhaustion and blood loss and the command of a queen carrying him down beyond the pain. It had taken the combined efforts of Tallah's Solanth and L'rino's Branth half-supporting and half-carrying him to get the blue off the bloodied cobbles, the transfer made under the strict guidance of Ihyanith, the elder queen having taken over from Velcroth after the Fall's end. His recovery would not be swift and there might well be complications yet, but for now he was comfortable and there was little more that the dragonhealers could do but wait to see how his condition progressed.

Stepping past the screen to check on the blue, Giselle wasn't entirely surprised to find someone already there. "So what did the healers have to say?" Corsan asked, his voice rough with fatigue. "Tell me his rider is going to survive, please – I'd hate for all that to have been for nothing...."

"A'kasen will live," Giselle replied quietly, gazing at the mass of neat stitchwork that held Alyteth's throat together. The blue's colour was better than it had been, but the scarring would be extensive and he would likely be mute for the rest of his life following the damage to his airway. "According to Peregan, it seems that he was running out of firestone and decided to fully empty his sack before going to restock. Alyteth banked suddenly to avoid a clump while his rider was still bending to find the last pieces in the open bag. A'kasen took a faceful of rock and a concussion, and his dragon lost concentration for a moment as a result. Somehow they managed to retain enough wit to return to the Weyr even with their injuries."

"Lucky," Corsan said with a yawn.

"Extremely." Giselle ran her hands down over her face. "I was ready to euthanise."

"Just as well I was here, then." Corsan took a step forward, crouching to examine the sutures in the ravaged hide. "I'm sorry – there's still so much that...." He shook his head. "It's hard for me to know what was lost until I see it in action. Or not in action, as the case may be."

"Even after a Turn?"

"Even after a Turn." He snorted softly. "I should start writing this stuff down."

"Yes, you should. The Craft lost so much with Southern, so much knowledge." Giselle frowned, thinking back over the events of the evening, the things that she had learned. "I trained at Ista, but even there...."

"Ista doesn't have the space – Southern did." Corsan smiled sadly, turning back towards her. "And you trained in an Interval. We were in a Pass, with so very many *more* opportunities for sudden and messy disaster. The whole world came to us – anything more than basic stitching they just dropped into our laps... provided the injured could still get into the air and assuming they didn't just jump to us in

the first place, of course; a lot of riders seemed to know our coordinates better than they did their home Weyr." He closed his eyes. "All the specialists and the expertise and the equipment in one place and warm weather besides. Then it turned out that the only problem was that all the specialists and the expertise –"

"– were in one place." Giselle finished for him. It made her stomach clench to think of it – the very heart of the craft she had dedicated her life to, the greatest gathering of dragonhealer knowledge in Pernese history wiped out in a moment.... "Ista would be glad to have you. Master Karestin –"

"Has already asked. Every time I've seen him, in fact, and I don't doubt that we'll be seeing him again before the night– day is out." Corsan snorted and smothered a yawn. "But, Southern or Kadanzer, *this* is my home. I was born at Ista but this is where my memories are, what's left of my family. Ista took what remained of us before, I've seen the records – still can't believe that Ukalen ended up the Craftmaster, I remember him when he was Bastian's age – but all the masters, the older journeymen...."

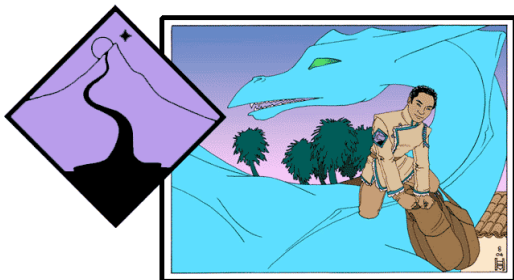
Giselle nodded slowly. "You're all that's left. That 'old Southern brilliance' exists nowhere outside of your mind." She looked at the sleeping blue, aware that he would be dead by her hand but for Corsan's intervention. "The craft *needs* you."

"It'll just have to need me here, then." He patted a blue neckridge, careful to avoid the numbweed that had been slathered across Alyteth's patchwork hide. "We need to work out what's been lost and what I just haven't seen through simple lack of opportunity, make sure the right things get written up. Just not right now." Another smothered yawn. "Right now we both need to get some sleep – I think the excitement's over for the night."

"The *night* is over for the night." Giselle reminded him, feeling her own fatigue threaten to overwhelm her. She could hear movement beyond the screens, Dawn organising the Infirmary's morning rounds, and knew that it was time to let others worry about Alyteth's care. Later, she would check on the blue's progress, see to the reports of the night's activities, look into stocking a selection of smoothed and hollowed tubes of varying width in case of future need. A waxy coating at the penetrative end should prevent any possibility of splinters infecting the wound....

The yawn caught her by surprise. Corsan chuckled. "See, time for bed." He patted her shoulder. "I'll see you later. Goodnight, Giselle."

"Goodnight." She watched him leave, then cast one last look at the injured blue. "Lucky, indeed," she murmured, then set off towards her quarters and the bed that waited there.



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