
Small Losses, Pt. 1

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2860.08.18 – Whitesands Seahold, Dorado

Whitesands Seahold enjoyed one of the finest situations that Lord Kairo had ever seen -- dramatically sheltered by steep jungle-clad hills, turquoise waters crashing against black rocks at the mouth of the river estuary, the sun gleaming off the beaches to either side that gave the Hold its name. The main Hold itself sat halfway up the hill's slope, affording a sweeping view of the harbor and beaches below, and out to sea to the north and west. The holders had properly and painstakingly cleared the slopes around and above of the tenacious tropical greenery, and kept it clear, no light task in this climate. Far above, on the cleared point of the ridge, Dorado Hold's blue watchdragon sat with wings half-spread in the sun.

Yes, Kairo reflected, a beautiful hold to live in. It was a pity that its present Seaholder was proving to be such a disagreeable man.

Kairo mourned for a moment the old Seaholder, Haneer, who himself had not been the easiest man to get along with, but at least he had been unfailingly honest and reliable in his duty to his people and his Lord. Haneer's ship had been lost in an autumn storm, and to compound the tragedy, his presumptive heir had been lost with him. That had surprised Dorado's Lord -- he'd thought the old seaman would have known better than to have both of them on the same ship. Haneer had married his daughters to other seamen, but those who were not already heirs of other seaholds were not, unfortunately, suitable to become the Seaholder of Whitesands. Kairo had been forced to look at the other leading shipmasters of the Hold to find one to elevate in rank.

Surdan had won that honor. While he had not been a popular choice, exactly, he had seemed to have the spine for it, and not to want it *too* badly -- always a recommendation in Kairo's reckoning. He had sent his brother and Steward, Dalpha, to live at the Seahold for two sevendays, and his grudging recommendation of Surdan had been the result.

Dalpha had also warned him not to expect the new Seaholder to be personable. It was a warning well-taken, now that he was here and could judge for himself. Surdan's wife seemed to be doing much better as the hold's new Lady than her husband was as its Seaholder, at least so far as the warmth of the other ladies of the seahold indicated. Surdan glowered at everyone, including his Lord and his entourage, and he had no social graces to speak of. Well, Kairo thought philosophically, he did not need the Seaholder of

Whitesands to be loved. He only needed the man to manage the hold well, and to be fair and honest about it.

Kairo stood on the wide balcony that ran the length of the Hold's upper storey, resting his hands on the balustrade. The hold itself was still chilled and in shadow from the hill behind it, as dawn barely colored the clouds far out over the sea to the west.

"It's flaming early for you to be rising," grunted a deep voice behind him.

Kairo turned his head only a little, acknowledging the approach of the short, stocky figure of his captain of the Guard. Gerrig was bearing a mug of klah in either hand; he set one down on the wide balustrade next to Kairo's hand. Gerrig was older than his Lord, and Kairo could not remember a time when the other man had not been a Doradan guardsman. They had risen in rank together, and Gerrig knew his Lord's habits as well as anyone.

"Sage was restless," Kairo replied, sipping the hot klah in a distracted way. The green firelizard's antics had wakened him and her mood had not let him fall back asleep, until he had finally given up and risen to see the dawn. Now his eyes went back to studying the way the advancing dawn lightened the sky and revealed the details of the harbor below. Ships that had been dark shapes sprinkled with glowbasket lights in the rigging were now coming alive with men on their decks, the colorful pennants of Rivermouth and Haven Beach and even Delta Seahold visible flying from their tallest masts.

"So was Ranger," Gerrig said, referring to his own brown. Not that the captain had not always been an earlier riser than his Lord, and unfailingly alert to Kairo's movements when they were travelling. "I told him to bloody well go out and find a wild fair to play with, if he was -- oh, shellshards!" the older man groaned theatrically. "That little winged ingrate -- she's rising, isn't she?"

Kairo quirked a smile over his shoulder, and took a longer sip of klah. "Her timing, as usual, is impeccable." The entire reason that Dorado's Lord was there at Whitesands was to invest shipmaster Surdan as the new Seaholder, and today was the day of the ceremony.

The Guard captain huffed air through his moustache with irritation. "Well, could be worse, I suppose. She'll be well and truly caught by the time you're expected for breakfast." And that would be informal, and light, with the ceremonial investiture scheduled for midday, and a feast to follow. "Has she blooded yet?"

"Not yet." Kairo's eyes were unfocused as he stared out over the seahold's vista. Flashes of color along the beaches at the surf-line showed where both the seahold's firelizards and the wild ones went about their morning's hunting. Whitesands enjoyed a reputation for having wild nesting sites along its coast. "She's fishing now -- it will be soon, I can tell you that."

"I'll bet you anything that Ranger will be off after her," said Gerrig, with a snort. "And here I thought he'd found himself a wild one to chase."

"He'll find the competition stiffer than usual, this time." Over the Turns, the Guard captain's brown had flown his Lord's green many times, since they knew each other well, and more often than not, when she rose, there were few

others around to participate. This flight would be a different story.

Gerrig pursed his lips, then laughed, and drained off the rest of his klah in one long draught. "What a way to start the morning, eh?"

"Could be worse," Kairo repeated. Though, it could be better, too -- he could be home, with his own lady wife waiting for him in bed. But, he'd had Sage for many Turns now, and this was hardly a new or unexpected experience. She had risen in more awkward circumstances before.

"I'll leave you to it, then!" said the captain, punching his Lord lightly on the arm. "Don't forget about breakfast, eh?" he called over his shoulder, as he walked away.

"Hardly," Kairo murmured, sipping at his klah again, barely tasting it.

In his mind's eye he saw the images of light on the water and glittering scales, and felt his blood begin to surge with anticipation.



2860.08.28 – Maori Hold

Blue Vhiath emerged from *between* into the bright, chill air over Maori Hold, bellowing his greeting to the watchdragon. Sunlight glittered off a thin but even coating of snow, gone already from the roadways around the Hold but still laying over the fields and on the roofs of buildings. The glare made it difficult to see, and Lord Kairo squinted, shading his eyes with one hand although it didn't really help.

Within the folds of his cloak, his green firelizard Sage stirred, but did not emerge -- unlike Harper Bedlow's younger green, Tani, who launched herself with a trill from the journeyman's shoulder and went arrowing off to find the local fairs. Kairo frowned, and pulled back the cloak for a look at the firelizard. Sage blinked watery eyes at him, and licked the end of her muzzle, but showed no desire to move from her warm cocoon.

Mentally, he shrugged. This wasn't the first time the little green had been sick in her long life. He was beginning to regret bringing her along, though he'd hoped that the gather atmosphere would perk her up. Now he wondered if he was going to wind up burdened with her wanting to be cradled in a pathetic little bundle all through the day. Not that her plight didn't tug at his heart -- but she was hardly an ornament to his appearance, in this state, and it didn't do for a Lord to show *that* much sentimentality over one of the little creatures in public. He should have been firm with her, and insisted she stay sleeping in his apartments, curled up with Narna's brown.

Once they were landed, Bedlow watched with amusement as Kairo coaxed her from the cloak and onto his shoulder, where she crouched as near to his neck as she could manage.

"She didn't look that ill at supper yesterday," the harper observed.

"Nor did she act it," Kairo admitted ruefully. As if on cue, the little green sneezed, and rubbed her nose against her forearm.

"I haven't noticed other firelizards around the Hold seeming to have a cold," said Bedlow, shifting his gitar-case to lie more comfortably across his back. Usually, if one of the Hold's firelizards became sick with this sort of cold virus, it went through the population quickly. "And Tani isn't suffering, luckily."

"No. She must have caught it elsewhere." Kairo cast his mind back over the last seven day or two. "The Smithcrafthall three days ago. Riverdance a day before that. Everywhere crowded with firelizards, even in this season."

"You said she rose at Whitesands, too," the harper recalled.

"Oh, yes. Caught by a wild brown, and spent the day with his fair." Kairo shrugged. "Ah well, no telling. I suppose we can expect it to run through the rest in Dorado. If I'd thought about it, I really would have left her at home."

As it was, he wished that he could leave her tucked into the nest of the cloak in the care of Dorado's watchdragon -- but Vhiath had already taken off again. Perhaps he would ask his host, Lord Korys, to point out a quiet corner in which to settle her.

But, not long after, formal greetings to Lord Korys and his lady-wife Tarina out of the way, Kairo noted that the little green seemed to be perking up considerably. She still sneezed and her nose still ran -- whose didn't, in the chill, damp air? -- but she sat up straighter and spread her wings from time to time. When Kairo came across Rourke of Riverdance at the Vintners' stall, Sage even took off from his shoulder and landed on the peak of the stall's roof to exchange greetings with the other Lord's blue Denzi. Their chattering attracted the attention of a bronze, wearing a collar in the colors of Rubicon. Kairo put them out of his mind as he accepted a mug of mulled wine from Rourke and the two found a place near a roaring brazier to drink and watch the horse-drawn sledge races on the icy course laid out below.

Later still, Kairo was pleased to see that she'd recovered enough to beg some of his meatroll from him. While feeding her tidbits in public was not his habit, generally, he relented in this case and gave her almost half of it.

Sage licked the sausage all over, and nibbled daintily at the end. Her prize soon attracted an interested clutch of onlookers, including a very bold, darkish blue who sneaked in under the green's wing to steal a bite. Sage hissed at him, but perhaps it was a sign of her illness that kept her reaction subdued; she didn't even swipe at him, let alone try to run him off or take the food and retreat, as she normally might have.

"Balt, you greedy gut! Leave that poor green alone -- you're already stuffed!" exclaimed a voice from behind him, and Kairo turned to see Goldrider Dunia striding forward to pluck the blue away. She made the immediate connection between Sage's gold-and-white neck-banding and the man sitting next to her. "Good day to you, Lord Kairo -- that must be... Sage, then."

Dorado's Lord nodded, with a friendly smile. He liked Kadanzer's Weyrwoman-Second, whose time in the Ninth Pass had matured her considerably, but still left her with a twinkle of good humor, sometimes, in her eye. Did the Weyr's leaders work to remember the names of all those firelizards who looked to the Lords and Craftmasters, the way any lord worth his title knew the names of all the

leaders' dragons? Or did the goldrider simply have an unusually good memory for such things?

With Dunia, he thought, he might very well just ask her. She was less intimidating than Weyrwoman Lybelle; easier company, certainly. Not that Kairo did not like the Weyrwoman, too, or at least respect her. But conversation with Lybelle could often feel like a practice duel; you had to pay attention.

"Good gather-day to you, goldrider," he greeted her. "And I doubt that Sage will finish the entire thing. I often think she enjoys the begging more than she does getting what she was begging *for*."

Dunia laughed. "Oh, I know what that's like!" Then she pointed. "And that's the Masterharper's brown, I think. Have you seen him?" She shaded her eyes, scanning the area around the Hold's forecourt.

"Forelen? Earlier, yes." Kairo stood, and dusted off the seat of his thick over-tunic. "And I believe I overheard that Korys is imposing on him to act as a judge in the ice-sculpting – something about relying on that well-known Harper neutrality."

The goldrider grimaced. "Apparently," she said, "the Weyr's position is deemed sufficiently neutral for that as well; Korys asked me the moment I'd landed. That will teach me to beat the Weyrleaders to the festival." She shrugged. "Well, I'll see him there, then. I've a message for him from our Weyrsinger." The archaic term came out automatically; she didn't even seem to notice it.

Smiling down at her, Kairo offered his arm. "I believe the viewing will be starting soon. May I offer my lady goldrider an escort?"

"My lord, I would be honored," she replied. Her answer was formal but underneath it he caught that hint of merry smile that made him like her so much. She put her gloved hand in the crook of his elbow, and they started off down to the shore of the lake together.



2860.08.28

A couple of glasses of Rubicon red were just the tonic T'tin needed after a week of StrongWind drills and Threadfall. The Maori Winterfest itself was welcome refreshment. The sun had set, and he wheeled around the dance floor with a bright-eyed Maori holder girl whose name he couldn't remember -- scarcely sixteen turns, if he was any judge -- who seemed especially eager to keep a bronzerider company. He considered offering to be more than company later... the coquettish way she eyed him during the dance was encouraging. He wouldn't push anything, but willing company was... well, willing company.

T'tin had sent his bronze firelizard Sedis to play with the resident fair -- swelled in numbers by other visiting firelizards -- and bronze Miseth lounged with the other visiting dragons. T'tin sent a wordless query to his dragon, and Miseth responded contentedly; he wouldn't need his rider soon, and his rider could do as he wished. T'tin smiled.

When you are happy, I am happy, the bronze said.

The harpers rounded off the ending chords of the reel and T'tin swung his partner in a last flourish that sent her skirt spinning. She giggled breathlessly and placed a hand on his arm with careless calculation. He met her eyes and gave her a wink. Then he offered her a bow and kissed her hand. "Would you accept my company for the remainder of the--"

Ulaireth reminds us that we must be up at the regular hour for morning drills, Miseth informed him.

T'tin straightened and cursed under his breath. He hoped the bright-eyed lass had not heard. She gave him a puzzled look. He recovered quickly and gave her his most charming smile. "My apologies," he said. "My dragon just relayed a message to me. I fear I must retire early tonight. Would you accompany me on a walk around the grounds before I have to leave? We could find somewhere... quiet."

In answer, she gave a throaty laugh and placed her hand on his proffered arm. As they walked, she leaned her head against his shoulder. He smiled down at her and launched into exaggerated tales of his and Miseth's derring-do in Threadfall. All the while, he kept an eye out for a secluded or sheltered place around Winterfest grounds that might be suitable for... private company.



T'tin gave the nameless holder girl a proper farewell kiss after they left the shadows of the bushes beyond the last of the Winterfest food booths. He had thoroughly enjoyed delighting her to breathlessness, but he felt no desire to continue the relationship. He'd never be able to live with her airy, mindless banter and constant giggling. She gave him several hints that she wouldn't mind being "Searched", but he pretended not to get the hint. (He couldn't pretend Miseth had any Search abilities to speak of...) Still, it was not an evening lost. He'd have something to brag about with his StrongWind wingmates.

She walked away from him, continually looking over her shoulder, waving and blushing and giggling. T'tin waved, but sighed. He should know better... the poor girl was smitten and would never forget him, but he just couldn't be emotionally attached... He thought back to his beloved Amilianna, three turns dead now. He wondered briefly what she would have thought of his womanizing.

Suddenly melancholy, he walked to the field that served as a take-off and landing spot for the dragons, and summoned Miseth and Sedis. Miseth came promptly, but T'tin was harnessed and ready to launch before Sedis arrived and wrapped his tail around T'tin's neck.

"Where have you been, pesky thing?" T'tin asked, irritated. Sedis gave him a self-satisfied chirp and sent him images of sunning, flying and eating with a myriad of other firelizards of all colors. T'tin rolled his eyes at him but smiled, and gave Miseth the order to launch.



2860.09.01 – Kadanzer Weyr

Dunia cut a couple of slices of cheese and helped herself to some bread and fruit from what was on offer for lunch.

Her blue firelizard, Balt, swooped after her as she headed for the table where the goldriders usually sat. "How's Savukath?" she asked Luka, as she sat down. "I saw that she was starting to look egg-heavy."

Luka laughed. "Oh, yes – and everyone had better admire her their every waking moment, or she'll grumble my ear off about it."

As Luka recounted Savukath's latest complaint, Dunia heard an odd, but strangely familiar drone in the background. Suddenly something small struck her head and bounced onto the table in front of her. She looked down, annoyed, and expecting to see a bread pellet or something similar thrown by some weyring with more bravado than sense.

A fat, brown crawler lay on its back, waving legs in the air as it attempted to right itself.

"Oh no," said Dunia, as she recognised the lazybug for what it was. "Not them. Not again!"



Blue Balt sprawled on the table next to his human, a studied picture of indolence. He had to be clever-sneaky-Balt. His human was eating, and would scold if he tried to take a share. His human came here to the Food Place several times a day and collected food from the huge piles of it that other humans left behind. Eating from those big piles was Very Bad. None of the firelizards got away with doing that, not even the golds. Eating from his human's little pile was only Bad, however. Balt was prepared to be Bad if the end result was food in his mouth.

He half lidded his eyes, watching a piece of cheese that was near the edge of his human's plate. Things that fell off the plate were fine to eat. Maybe if he shoved his wing against the plate, the food would fall...? And then he could eat it without being Bad.

He was about to enact this cunning tactic when a wash of surprise and irritation washed over him from his human. Balt sat up with an aggrieved squeak. How had she known?

But his human was not looking at him, and did not start a scold. On the far side of the plate was a crawler. A fat, juicy crawler! His human didn't like eating crawlers – but Balt did. He trotted round the plate and pounced on the tasty titbit. It crunched nicely and tasted much better than cheese.

Some humans shrieking at another table startled him, and Balt tensed ready to leap into the air and go *between* from Here-Danger to There-Safe. Two humans were battling at another crawler at it flew around them. Balt cocked his head. He could hear the humans' danger-anxiety-distress noises, but other humans were making happy-safe-fun noises. There was no danger here for a small blue firelizard.

A flash of green and bronze and the buzzing crawler was snatched out of the air. The green who grabbed it then fled from the Food Place with her prize clutched in her talons, the bronze in pursuit. Balt settled down to finish crunching his own crawler. He sidled closer to the cheese again, but his human picked the piece up and bit it in two! He watched as she fiddled with the remaining half, while talking animatedly to the other humans at the table. His human was still irritable, but Balt couldn't identify the

cause. Maybe Big-Gold-Bossy was upsetting her. Balt often wanted to scold Big-Gold-Bossy, but didn't dare. She might eat him.

Another blue blinked into the air above the table where Balt sat – this one looked to the human that his own human sat next to. The newcomer broadcast excited images of *crawlers-crawlers-crawlers* and *food-lots-good*.

Food-lots-where? Balt asked.

Crawlers-ground-air came the reply and images of several nearby locations. Balt launched himself into the air and went to see for himself.

He blinked out of *between* above the Herb Garden, and scanned the ground carefully for cats before alighting. With a squeak of delight he spotted several of the crawlers slowly climbing the stem of one of the plants. Balt grabbed the nearest and crunched into it contentedly. Better still, the rest of the crawlers didn't fly away. He pulled them off the stem one at a time.

He was making short work of his fifth – spitting out the legs because he was starting to feel full – when the other blue reappeared, with a brown and two greens. Between them the Herb Garden was soon denuded of crawlers. Balt shrieked indignantly as the brown grabbed the last remaining lazybug. The brown hissed through a mouthful of crawler, eyes whirling and broadcasting *Brown-dominant-mine-mine-mine!*

Cowed, Balt nipped swiftly *between* to emerge amongst the trees nearby. He flipped his wings irritably and perched on a branch. A glance down showed him several more of the strange and tasty new crawlers emerging from the soil by the tree's roots. He dropped from his perch onto the nearest one, pulled its legs off and began to chew.

Three crawlers later, Balt was full to bursting. He lay contentedly at the base of the tree, his belly distended by the amount he had eaten. He barely twitched when one of the surviving crawlers climbed over his outstretched tail. *Happy-full-good* he sent to any and all firelizards nearby.

Food-good-lots! and *Happy-full-good* came from all around. Balt summoned the energy to go back to a sunny spot on the top of his human's cave-of-wood, and settled down for a long pleasant snooze.



Resla was greeted at the kitchen door with a shriek and scattered laughter. Hope rotated on Resla's shoulder to get a better view of the action.

Kendi shot her a harried look and bustled past her out into the crowded main hall carrying a heaped tray of rolls to replenish the buffet tables. Clearly she had no time for frightened candidates, and Resla didn't have to search hard for the reason behind Brayanta's vocal outburst. A lazybug had fallen off the wall and tumbled into the pot the girl was breaking eggs into.

"I'm not picking that out!" she wailed, and her fellow candidates snickered, but no one stepped up to save her. "I'm not," Brayanta protested. "I won't do it." She looked close to tears, and with her sleeves rolled neatly up past her elbows and her hair pinned carefully into a bun, dress covered with the largest apron the kitchen had to offer, Resla guessed that she wasn't particularly comfortable even with

the casual, functional messiness of the kitchen. She was holding her egg shells at arm's length, fingers all spread apart from each other, and she was eyeing the floor and the wall with horror.

"I'll get it," the headsecond offered kindly, and the candidates who hadn't noticed her entrance immediately busied themselves with the tasks they'd been assigned and stopped giggling at Brayanta's discomfort.

Resla reached into the pot and plucked the struggling crawler out of the egg goo. Brayanta looked no less horrified, and seemed not the least comforted by Hope's comical interest in the bug, or in his careful acceptance of it when Resla offered it to him as food. The headsecond stepped on another of the bugs, crawling close to Brayanta's foot, and tried to draw the girl's attention back to the eggs.

"You're getting close for that batch," she said encouragingly. "Must be nearly two hundred eggs in there!"

Brayanta gave a distressed little sob. "I've lost count," she wailed. "I'll have to do it again!"

Trying to forestall true tears, Resla tried to encourage, "You'll remember if you think about it calmly for a moment."

"One hundred and seventy eight," Parvinia offered cheerfully from where she was chopping potatoes. "She was counting out loud." Beyond her, Faylinda elbowed the other girl; Resla wasn't sure of her intent with the gesture, but smiled at both of them.

Still nearly hysterical, Brayanta sniffed and broke another egg into the pot. "I didn't think that being Searched would be like this," she complained. "Doing drudge-work and living in piles of bugs."

Resla laughed lightly. "Believe me when I say, this isn't normal!"

Far from it; the outbreak of lazybugs was nearing ludicrous levels, and Brayanta wasn't the first candidate to have trouble with it. Even grown riders were cursing the big, clumsy flying crawlers that had staked a claim on the Weyr and were doing their best to overrun it. The things were everywhere, climbing and mating and doing awkward acrobatics when the wind was too stiff. They couldn't be kept out of cots or storage, and though they seemed to do no particular damage to any stores, they crunched disgustingly underfoot and were ugly, squat bugs with no particularly redeeming features. It was a daily task to sweep them down off of her office walls and out of the door, and keep them from crawling over anything in their path, even sleeping Varla.

Hope and Sunrise quite enjoyed them - Sunrise ate them until her belly bulged (and made no appreciable dent in their population), and Hope like liked to mount valiant campaigns across her office floor to catch them all before

they crawled too high on the walls to reach or Resla swept them out.

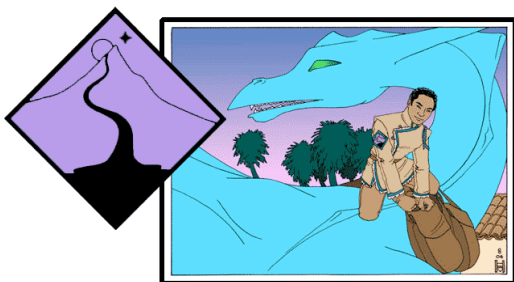
The headsecond gave Brayanta a gentle squeeze on the shoulder. "This only happens once every seven Turns," she said encouragingly. "It won't last much longer, Dunia says, and then you'll be back to just the drudge-work."

Brayanta muttered unappreciatively and went back to breaking eggs, carefully counting as she went. Resla took a quick look over the other candidates to see that they were doing their jobs, and returned to the main hall for her own lunch. Hope decided that the bug he'd been treasuring in his mouth was not as tasty as the smells in the hall and dropped it. It was everything Resla could do not to give her own girlish shriek as the bug - dead now, but still distastefully buglike - fell into the collar of her shirt and she had to fish it out. It was tacky with egg goo.

As she left, there was another shriek from further down the large kitchen. Resla decided to ignore that one and braved Kendi's look of ire as the cook returned to the kitchen with a stack of empty platters.

It was going to be a long seven-day.

To be continued...



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