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# Small Losses, Pt. 3

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## 2860.09.14 – Dorado Hold

“I really do appreciate this, Narna,” Dalpha was saying as he finished writing out the note that her brown firelizard was shortly to be dispatched to deliver.

The Lady of Dorado smiled, and stroked Sandy's folded wings as they waited for the steward to finish. “And I keep telling you, Dalpha, it's no trouble at all.”

Her husband's brother grimaced, blowing on the ink to dry it before he rolled the bit of hide for the message-tube. “I never realized before how much I'd come to take Dart for granted as a messenger. Or how often I sent him out in a sevenday.”

Narna hummed sympathetically. “How is Dart feeling? Any better?”

Dalpha shook his head. “No change. He won't move from the top of the wardrobe, and that makes changing out the cloths I've got him lying on a challenge, I can tell you.”

“Oh, dear.” Narna could imagine. Several of the Hold's sick firelizards had advanced to such a stage that they were an absolute mess at both ends, to the consternation of their owners and of the cleaning staff. “I wish the Weyr's dragonhealers had had something useful to tell Kairo when he was there for the Hatching.”

“So do I,” Dalpha agreed grimly. The worst part was not knowing what could be done for the tiny creatures. Nothing their human companions tried seemed to help.

It also wasn't as comforting as it should be that a few of the firelizards, like her own brown Sandy, had not sickened at all, or only very little and had then gotten better. Sandy was now much in demand from her husband and his steward, and was being sent on errands everywhere. The little brown had never been so wholly the center of attention, and he thrived on it. It didn't bear thinking about, what it would be like if they hadn't even one to send for messages.

Of course, Narna realized, they weren't completely cut off. They still had their watchrider, and G'ral had been a huge help to Kairo these past few sevendays – to the point where Kairo wondered in private if the man might be in trouble with the Weyr if it knew how often the Lord was taking advantage of that resource. But what else could he do? As time went on, and the firelizards weren't getting any better – in fact, more and more of them were falling ill – all the minor Holds and the coholders were in a state of near-panic. They needed their Lord's reassurance, and all their Lord had, besides his own sick green, was his wife's healthy brown, and a blue watchdragon.

What was worse, Sandy could only be sent to places that Narna could visualize for him – and while she could do Dorado's minor Holds, and many of the other Lords' Holds across Kadanzer, and the Weyr, not even all of those were as clear in her mind as they should be. She simply couldn't claim to know all of Dorado's coholds well enough, something she had never even thought about before, and now felt ashamed that it was true. She was terribly afraid that Kairo or Dalpha would ask her one day to send the brown somewhere that she didn't remember well enough, and didn't visualize clearly enough, and that he would be lost *between*. Wasn't that what they always said was such a danger for dragonriders? Poor visualization?

“Here you are, it's ready,” Dalpha told her, holding out the capped message-tube. Narna drew herself back from her woolgathering and took it, and Sandy sat up straight, knowing what was coming. She clipped the little tube to the wherhide collar around his neck.

“Do you want this to go to Caley himself?” she asked.

“Yes. You know him best, isn't that right?” the steward asked. She nodded. “Then that's the safest thing. Lord Caley will understand.”

Of course he would. Caley did not have a firelizard of his own, and had always relied on his half-brother Lyraan's for such errands.

Narna was about to pick Sandy up off her lap, in order to start the routine of reinforcement she always went through when giving him important instructions, when there was a commotion out in the corridor, the sound of shouting and running feet.

“My lord! My lord Kairo!”

Looking at each other with alarm, Dalpha and Narna both rose, leaving the steward's office and emerging into the multi-storey open central stairwell of the main Hold. Dalpha leaned over the balustrade and looked down. “What is it, man?” he called out, irritably.

Narna looked over just in time to see a young guardsman taking the stairs two and three at a time on his way up towards them. “Steward Dalpha! Do you know where my lord Kairo is?”

“He's with Harper Bedlow,” said the steward. “Now calm down, before you burst something. What's all this running about and shouting?” Dalpha's voice was measured and calming, but it had a core of steel in it that reminded you that he might have made as good a Lord as his brother, had things worked out differently.

The guardsman's eyes went from the steward, to Narna, and rested for a moment on the brown firelizard perched on her arm. The youngster gulped for air after his mad dash, and straightened up to give his report. “I'm sorry, sir. It's just – it's Captain Gerrig. His firelizard's died.”

Dalpha cursed, and Narna said, “Oh, no!”, and brown Sandy rattled his wings, picking up on his human's distress. Gerrig had a brown, Ranger, who had been with the Guard captain for as long as Narna could remember, and Ranger had been one of the first in the Hold to become sick, not long after –

Narna gasped. “Kairo!”

Dalpha was already ordering the young guardsman to go find Healer Radys instead, promising to find Lord Kairo and bring him himself. Then he turned, and saw Narna's stricken

look. "Poor old Gerrig," he said, shaking his head. "Ranger was as old as the hills, though, and –"

"So is Sage!" Narna blurted out. "And she was sick before any of the others were! I know she was!"

"Come on," said the steward, and he led the way towards Bedlow's office with grim purpose.

Halfway there, though, they met the journeyman harper and his Lord rushing in the other direction; they'd heard the shouts and come to investigate themselves. "What's wrong?" Kairo demanded, the moment he saw their faces.

"We've just been told that Gerrig's Ranger has died," his brother told him. Kairo came to a sudden halt, as if he'd been slapped. Bedlow groaned in sympathy.

"When?" the Lord barked.

Dalphi shook his head. "I don't know. I sent the guardsman to fetch Radys – no, I don't know if Gerrig is unwell or not, but it must be a shock for him. I said I would come to get you."

Narna moved forward, and laid a hand on her husband's arm. "Kairo! What about Sage? I know that she and Ranger became sick around the same time..."

Kairo shook his head sharply, as if clearing it, and looked down at her. His eyes were slow to focus. "I – I don't know. You know that I cannot find her –"

Narna knew that he hadn't tried – not because he didn't care about the little green, but because this was her habit, known over long Turns. When she neared clutching time, she habitually went into hiding until after the clutch was presumably hatched and abandoned. Narna knew that Kairo had been trying desperately to reassure himself that all must be well with her, that if she were truly ill then she would have come to him seeking attention. But he'd also shown the strain of the echoes of frightened misery that he received from her – and still she'd remained hidden.

"Sandy can find her," Narna declared, with more confidence than she felt. Firelizards could be very tricky to find, if they didn't want to be found. But few firelizards would know Sage better than Sandy, who had flown her many times in the past, and slept curled with her near their bed many times more.

Her husband nodded decisively. "Try it. The feelings I've had from her lately have been faint – I'd hoped that meant she was getting better, but..."

Narna held her brown up to eye-level, stroking his neck. "Sandy, I want you to find Sage for me. She's hidden herself somewhere, and we need to find her."

He chirped, and then took off, winking *between* within a few wingbeats.

Kairo looked at his brother. "Dalphi, go see to Gerrig. Tell him I'll be there directly, but I have to know –"

The steward nodded, and slapped the older man on the arm. "He'll understand."

The brown firelizard returned moments later, eyes whirling with a distressed violet tinge, and he creeled as he circled their heads. "What is he saying?" Kairo demanded.

"Very little that makes sense." Narna gave up on coaxing him down to her hand. "Just that it's dark and close, and Sage is so weak that she didn't even snap at him. Oh, Kairo –"

His hand on her shoulder steadied both her and him. "Can he show us where?"

Soon she and Kairo and Bedlow were hurrying after the firelizard, who echoed their sense of urgency with impatient scolding when they were too slow and had to go the long way around when he could fly directly. They scarcely even noticed the light drizzle outside as they made their way between the buildings of the Hold, attracting the attention of everyone they passed. Kitchen drudges and stablehands stopped their work to stare.

Sandy led them through the maze of outbuildings, far past the busy stables and the henhouses, all the way out to the milking barn on the edge of the pastures that stretched out to either side of the Hold. Narna wasn't sure that she had ever even come into this barn in all her time at Dorado. The interior was quiet at this time of day, with the herd out in the pasture. She had to pause inside the doorway to allow her eyes to adjust to the dim light, but Kairo didn't stop, following the brown across the barn and to a ladder that led to an upper loft.

"Kairo! At least take a glowbasket!" she called, but he didn't appear to hear her, climbing the ladder into the dark.

"I'll take it to him," said Bedlow, snatching one that was hanging on a hook by the barn door.

Narna could hear Sandy flapping and crying in a back corner of the loft above. "Is she there? Can you see her?" she asked, wondering what had possessed the little green to choose this place of all places to hide herself and her clutch. Was it even warm enough for a clutch to hatch here? And what about tunnelsnakes?

"We've found her!" Bedlow called. Narna bit her lip, uneasy at Kairo's silence.

Soon they appeared at the top of the ladder again. Her husband was carrying something large – she realized it was a milking pail. "There now, careful, my lord," came the harper's deeply resonant voice. "Let me go down first."

Bedlow made it down quickly, handing off the glowbasket to Narna and then turning to hold the ladder steady as Kairo descended, awkwardly one-handed with the pail in the other. Sandy circled him, creeling steadily until even Narna could not stand it any more. She summoned him to her with a sharp word, and he landed on her shoulder. She hushed him, praising him for helping them find Sage so quickly, and felt him trembling where he leaned into her neck.

"Kairo --?" she said tentatively, moving closer with the glows. Her husband reached the bottom of the ladder and turned, finally revealing what he held in his arms.

It was a broken milk-pail – that must have been why it was up in the loft, discarded – that the little green must have found and thought would make a safe and secure nest for her clutch. It was half-filled with hay and bits of cloth and other things, and the smell of it was awful, sour and acrid. It made Narna realize how clean firelizards normally kept themselves, and how they almost always messed elsewhere, for she had never smelled a firelizard that stank as badly as this.

Still without speaking, Kairo set the pail on the ground, then reached in and scooped out the green firelizard within, bits of clinging hay and all. Without regard for the stink or the mess, he cradled her against his chest, soiling the cloth of his tunic. Narna moved closer to him, and could hear him

murmuring apologies to the little green – who, in the glowlight, Narna thought looked rather too grey.

“Kairo?” she repeated, wanting to touch him but hesitating.

“Oh, Narna, look at her,” Kairo said sadly. He stroked Sage’s neck, but she didn’t respond at all. “I should never have let it go this far. I should have tracked her down sooner than this...”

Narna did put her hand on his arm, then, stroking it soothingly. There was a tremor in her husband’s voice, and his eyes filled and glistened, and she was very glad that the barn was empty. Dorado’s Lord prided himself on his self-control, he would never have wanted to be seen like this, not over a firelizard. She exchanged a meaningful look with Bedlow, and he nodded solemnly. She had no doubts about the harper’s loyalty to Kairo, at least; he would not hold such a display against him.

“There’s nothing more you could have done, dearest,” Narna told him, knowing them for empty words of little comfort.

“I could have kept her close, and made her comfortable,” he said, softly. “I could have tried.”

“Then let us take her back to the Hold, and do that now,” she suggested, equally softly. And with pressure from her on one side, and from Bedlow on the other, they got Dorado’s Lord moving again towards the barn’s door.

They drew even more stares on the slow return trip back up to the Hold – something Narna would have avoided, if she could. It wouldn’t do the Hold’s morale any good to see the state their Lord was in, or to see how deathly ill the firelizards could become without even Lord Kairo able to do anything about it, not even to save his own. It made Narna feel guilty for Sandy’s healthy presence spiralling in the air above them.

They had made it inside, and halfway up the stairs to the upper floor where the Lord’s apartments were. There came a sound behind them; Narna turned her head to see Dalpha coming in – and then above her Kairo gave a strangled cry and collapsed against the stair’s rail. Bedlow shouted in alarm, moving in quickly to brace the Lord against falling, while Narna put her arm around her much-taller husband’s waist, to try to do the same. They were able to ease him down to sit on the stairs, his back against the wall, as Dalpha rushed towards them and entirely too many people appeared above and below.

“Kairo? Kairo, look at me!” Narna shook her husband’s shoulder, frightened by the glassy look in his eyes and the grey pallor underneath his brown complexion. He also wasn’t breathing. She shook him harder. “Kairo!”

“Where’s Radys?” Bedlow asked as Dalpha arrived.

“Still down in the stables with Gerrig, sear it,” the steward reported.

Kairo let out the breath he’d been holding, then, in a shuddering heave. Relieved as she was at that, Narna was afraid that the next moment he would be sobbing openly on the stairs, and she shot a look of desperate appeal at Dalpha. He nodded, his expression grim.

“All right, then, brother. Up you go.” Nearly as tall as Kairo, Dalpha had no trouble hooking his arm under the older man’s and heaving upward. “Let’s get you into your bedroom.”

Narna turned to see that Behalla, the watchrider’s wife and one of the Headwoman’s ‘seconds, had emerged from the kitchens and was scolding the other drudges back to their work. “Behalla!” she called, catching the woman’s attention. “Send a boy running down to the stables to fetch Healer Radys!” She received a nod in return.

Then Narna followed the trio of men up the stairs and to the Lord’s apartment, keeping firm control over her bearing and expression, knowing how vital it was to present a calm front for the rest of the Hold’s observation. It was bad enough that they had witnessed their Lord’s collapse, and rumor would be flying around the Hold immediately, joining with whatever rumors had started with the Guard captain’s ‘lizard’s death.

Narna had never tried to imagine before what it would be like to lose her firelizard. She was more grateful than ever that Sandy, at least, had failed to sicken like the rest. But many others in the Hold did not have that luxury, and what she had just seen frightened her. Kairo’s and Gerrig’s ‘lizards had been some of the first to sicken, and now both were dead within a short time of each other. That did not bode well for the rest of the Hold.

Worse, what did it bode for her husband? The loss of a firelizard was surely nowhere near as horrible as the loss of a dragon, Narna told herself. But it had stripped her husband of his customary self-control, and that was bad enough, whatever else it had done to him, and to Gerrig before him. Neither man was in bad health, but she had seen other men, men with weak hearts, look as Kairo just had, just before they died. She needed the healer’s reassurance, and she needed it quickly.

And she needed Kairo recovered and himself again, as soon as he was able. For if even a fraction of the firelizards who were ill died as these two had, then the Hold might well be thrown into a panic, unless their Lord kept them in hand.



### *Same Day – Kadanzer Weyr*

*The small one is ill*, Miseth reported to T'tin early in the morning.

*Sedis, ill?* T'tin said. Sedis had been dripping from the nose, sneezing, and pawing at his eyes... and T'tin had been watching for signs of it affecting Miseth, just as the dragonhealers had recommended. That Miseth should comment about it, though... normally the big bronze scarcely noticed his small cousin.

*His meal came back up on my hide. It was those bugs. And some fish. I need a bath.*

T'tin groaned. 'Just what I need,' he thought, 'and we have to fly Thread this afternoon...' Then he tried to stem a sudden pang of alarm. Sedis had been eating those lazybugs like crazy, just like all the other firelizards in the Weyr... but he'd heard rumors. T'tin *hoped* the firelizard just had indigestion, and not something worse...

Now that he was paying attention, though, T'tin became aware in his mind of the subdued ball of misery that was Sedis – a stark contrast to the 'lizard's normal, loud and intrusive sendings. T'tin was so used to blocking it out that

he hadn't even noticed the change. He rolled out of bed. By the time he was lacing his boots, Miseth spoke again.

*Now it is coming out his other end.*

"What!"

*I really need a bath. And he is very ill. He is moaning.*

*Goodness...*

Bootlaces abandoned, T'tin hurried to Miseth's side. Sedis was draped across Miseth's shoulder like a scarf, his hide standing out in gray pallor against Miseth's healthy bronze. In shock, T'tin stared at the dribbling mess Sedis had made on his dragon's shoulder. He shook out of it, though, when Sedis's body was wracked with a horrifying cough. He ran to his storage and grabbed a towel, then ran to his dragon's side and wrapped his poor firelizard up, then sprinted to the Dragon Infirmary, trying to ease his dismay. Master Giselle would surely know what to do.



Giselle eyed Benn, and Benn eyed her back with feeble ire from the top of the bookcase. Gold Lili, curled at the bronze's side, was even more miserable, her eyes dull and second-lidded as she broadcast her displeasure at the world. Neither firelizard stirred as a lazybug dropped from an overhead beam and began to crawl placidly across a pile of reports.

"Serves you right for eating yourselves stupid," Giselle told them sharply as she flicked the lazybug from her desk. Benn muttered unhappily and turned his back on her and the offending crawler. The lazybug righted itself after hitting the wall and proceeded to climb again.

Giselle watched it, then swore softly under her breath. For the moment, at least, over-eating seemed to be all that was affecting her own two; carefully as she was now watching them for signs of the illness, it hadn't shown up yet. That gave her little comfort, though. From the many other cases she and the other dragonhealers had seen in the last seven days, the onset of the disease was swift and sudden, even if it probably incubated in the victims' bodies for some time before that. It was possible, she admitted, that the firelizards were contagious in that state, spreading the illness while they could still move about, only to worsen later. Only that would explain the rapid and thorough spread of this plague. And it did not help that here at the Weyr, the universal firelizard over-indulgence in the lazybug explosion made it harder to spot the onset of the disease's symptoms.

Even for the less serious problem of over-eating, it was one thing to treat the firelizards being brought into the Dragon Infirmary, but quite another to feel the effects of their misery through the bond of impression. Lili and Benn were suffering and there was little that she could do about it beyond offering the same symptomatic palliatives as they gave to everyone else.

It would have been a relief if they could still have blamed the other illness on the lazybugs. But the fact that every other creature in the Weyr, from whitewings down to treehoppers, were feasting in them with no ill effect gave credence to Corsan's claim that they were innocent of everything beyond being pathetically easy to catch. That

fact, and the greater one that had been realised at the last Hatching – that firelizards across both continents were falling ill with the same set of symptoms, even those that had never encountered a lazybug in their lives.

Giselle pinched at the bridge of her nose and went back to reviewing the day's reports. There had been a steady stream of worried owners in through the course of the day, each cradling a grey-tinged firelizard. 'Indigestion' was still scrawled as the diagnosis for some of the cases... but 'mild fever' had overtaken it in frequency, as had 'irritated mucous membranes', 'sore eyes', 'cough', 'vomiting' and 'nasal discharge'.

The list of symptoms grew longer with each passing day, as did the number of concerned owners. Giselle didn't appreciate the drain on the finite resources of the Dragon Infirmary... but she also couldn't deny the concerns and fears of those who brought their pets to her, not when her own worries for Benn and Lili were a tight knot in her gut.

Not for the first time in the past seven days, she questioned the wisdom of having given firelizards to her apprentices.

The din of the Infirmary through the curtain separating her office from the main area sounded more like post-Fall triage than a quiet evening ought to. Giselle glanced up as the curtain was pulled aside and Aretei put her head into the office. "Giselle?"

Giselle gestured the journeywoman in. "What is it now?"

Aretei was holding an off-color bronze firelizard in her hands, and Giselle recognized the creature at once by the awkward angle of one wing. "Is that Resla's Hope?" She pushed aside the reports to clear a space on her desk and Aretei carefully set him down. Always a patient subject, Hope rolled onto his side, but didn't put his head up for scratches as he usually did, letting it fall wearily to the table instead. Benn made a weak noise of disgust, but it was a feeble version of his usual jealousy when Giselle treated another firelizard.

"This one definitely isn't indigestion," Aretei told her. "Stomach upset, tremors, cough, irritated eyes, nasal discharge..." She lifted the little bronze's head gently and rotated it to show Giselle. There was clear snot oozing from the creature's nostrils, and while Giselle observed it curiously, Hope gave an unhappy, phlegmy cough. "Resla tells me that her gold started to show the same symptoms this afternoon."

"Bring the headsecond in," Giselle said. She carefully manipulated Hope's limbs, watching for tenderness or stiffness, then gently prodded the apparently empty stomach. Hope moaned, chewing at the air in protest, then vomited a milky foam that looked to be free of any lazybug shells.

Footsteps beyond the curtain heralded Resla's approach and Giselle looked up from the stricken bronze as she entered. "Has he been eating the lazybugs?"

Resla had Varla on her hip - the child was quiet and big-eyed, but clearly upset, clinging hard to her mother's tunic. "Some," the headsecond said evenly. "Not as many as Sunrise does - he plays with them more than eating them. He's been sick since yesterday, but I didn't think it was more than just an upset stomach until he and Sunrise started coughing."

Giselle frowned. "You didn't bring the gold in?"

"She's got eggs," Resla reminded her. "And Sunrise isn't sick enough that she wants to leave them for any length of time."

The curtain door was thrown open, Corsan striding in without asking entrance. He was carrying a tray of the kind used for sorting and sterilising medical tools, only now there was a pale green firelizard curled loosely on the ceramic glaze. He pushed an already unstable pile of reports aside one-handed, sending several falling to the rug, and placed the tray on the desk. "We have a problem."

"We have any number of problems!" Giselle snapped, her angry gaze flicking between her fellow master and the stricken green. The firelizard was almost grey, her limbs loosely arranged before her as she trembled on the tray. Her eyes were fully lidded, her skin and wing membranes patchy and dry except for where she was leaking bodily fluids from every apparent orifice. As the dragonhealer watched, she opened her mouth as if to cough... and then convulsed once and went utterly limp, her final breath bubbling through congested nostrils as it left her body.

A woman's cry of horrified denial sounded from somewhere beyond the curtain, and Resla went pale and clutched at Varla hard enough that the little girl began to cry. On the bookcase, Benn and Lili both tilted their heads up and keened shrilly while Hope gave a weak, wet attempt at the same, an eerie, dim echo of the sound that deafened the Infirmary when a dragon died.

"That was the first – she won't be the last." Corsan rested his hands on the edge of Giselle's overcrowded desk and met her eyes. "As I said: we have a problem. This isn't just making them sick – it's killing them."

Pushing aside the sick, instinctive worry that it could be Benn or Lili next, Giselle nodded. "It would appear that we do. Call everybody in – journeymen *and* apprentices. We need to work out how we're going to handle this."



**2860.09.15**

Lyra chewed on the end of her stylus between jotting down notes on the most recent patient, bluerider J'loo's green Coby.

"Labored breathing, diarrhoea, vomiting, nasal discharge," Craftmaster Corsan listed the symptoms as he examined his patient, lifting each of her small limbs gently. "And yes, it looks like we have paresis here." The firelizard, her deep green hide faded to a sorry grey, fluttered her wings and pawed feebly at the air with one foreclaw – she seemed unable to move otherwise. As the dragonhealer drew back, she shivered oddly, the tremor wracking her entire body for long seconds. "And seizure," Master Corsan said, and Lyra carefully added it to her list.

J'loo swallowed hard and wrung his hands as he watched the dragonhealers work – the normally light-hearted prankster was beside himself with distress. As Coby's seizure ebbed, Master Corsan gave the bluerider a reassuring smile, then turned to Lyra and drew the apprentice a little to one side. "Right, Lyra, I need you to take J'loo here to one of the private rooms, but before you go, make sure both you

and he rinse your arms up to your elbows – anything that might have touched a sick firelizard – in redwort. And send someone to find him a change of clothing – his are covered in 'lizard crap and we don't need this disease spread any wider than it is. Not to mention, this Infirmary smells bad enough already...."

Lyra nodded through the instructions, feeling her heart sink a little: the private rooms were reserved for those whose firelizards were thought to be closest to death. The meeting of the previous day had scared her badly – the plight of the firelizards had seemed almost funny when they had thought them to be simply greedy, but to see them all so sick and weak and to know that there was *nothing* that even the Weyr's dragonhealers could do to cure them...

She also wondered at Master Corsan's instructions about making sure both she and the rider washed carefully and changed their clothing. The one bright spot in all this misery so far was the conviction of the senior dragonhealers that the firelizards' disease wasn't being caught by the dragons. Then she realized that if the precautions weren't for the dragons, maybe it was an attempt to keep the sickness from spreading to any firelizards who hadn't caught it yet – like her own brown Twink, she realized with a sinking heart.

"Are you all right, Lyra?"

She blinked, feeling the dampness of unshed tears against her lashes. She nodded quickly to Master Corsan. "Yes, sir."

"Good girl." He patted her shoulder. "Now, go see to your patient."

"Yes, sir," Lyra said, getting a firm grip on her composure as she stepped back towards J'loo. "Come with me, please, bluerider."

J'loo followed her, holding his little green close to his chest. "She's never been sick before," he said shakily. "She's in so much pain. My poor Coby... Is she going to die?"

Lyra didn't know what to say. Her only thoughts were of her own brown Twink, who had started coughing and pawing at his eyes that very morning.



"So, we have deaths." Lybelle steepled her long fingers and leaned back in her chair. "How many?"

"Six at the Weyr so far," Giselle reported tiredly, sitting on the edge of the brightly coloured couch in the Weyrwoman's office. She felt exhausted, worn down, her thoughts constantly straying to Lili and Benn, now ensconced in a sorry heap of gold and bronze in a box on her desk, having finally given up their claim on the bookcase in preference to a nest closer to their human. She had seen so much pain and suffering befall the dragons of this Weyr, had seen so many riders suffer alongside their beasts while she worked, that it felt strange to finally taste their anguish.... "Six so far, but there will be more. Has there been any word from the holds?"

"I've been collating reports from the sweeps and the watchriders," Lybelle told her. "This disease has spread across the entire continent within the past few sevendays, and there have been firelizard deaths in Riverdance, Maori and Dorado. Lord Kairo's own green was one of the first to

succumb at Dorado, although Lady Narna's brown is by all accounts the very picture of health."

Giselle nodded. "That agrees with what we've been seeing here – the majority are falling ill but there are a handful that appear to be only mildly affected at most." She tapped her fingers against her untouched mug of klah. "I still have hope that there will be some that recover their health, but if they do it probably won't be because of our efforts."

"There is still no cure?"

"We can provide temporary relief from certain of the symptoms," Giselle said, setting her mug down. "But a cure? No, and not for want of trying. Our current thinking is that the disease will run its course through the population, leaving any survivors immune to its effect."

"And the dragons?" Lybelle gaze was keen as she watched Giselle's face. "None of the watchdragons have reported illness and the watchwhers at the holds and in the Minecraft appear completely unaffected. Firelizards are keeling over left and right, but from all that I've heard from outside of the Weyr, *only* firelizards."

"At this stage, Weyrwoman, we believe the dragons are incapable of catching the disease," Giselle told her, glad to be able to pass on some good news at least. "There have been no reported symptoms – not in the Wings, in the watchdragons, in the weyrlings, the hatchlings, nor the injured in the Infirmary. Any exposure would have started at the same time as for the firelizards and, frankly, if there was any chance of cross-infection then we would already know. L'drun's bronze Rhyth has a fragile constitution at the best of times and, given the respiratory symptoms associated with this disease –"

"– he would have been the first to fall ill." Lybelle finished for her, nodding thoughtfully. "Well, at least that's one worry that we don't need to concern ourselves with. I'll assume that even if infection were a possibility, then quarantine would already be too late?"

"For the Weyrs and the major holds and halls? Yes, any exposure has already happened. We've also had reports from the North that the disease was carried there and is spreading. Some of the cotholds *might* yet be unaffected, but for some of the more remote sites, firelizards are the only form of communication they have." The dragonhealer shook her head sadly. "Given how long it has been, though, I would think that we have already reached saturation, in terms of spread through the population. And then..."

"Then?" Lybelle prompted as the other woman hesitated.

"We're confident that dragons cannot contract this disease," Giselle repeated carefully. "But they are closely related to the firelizards and there is a possibility that they

may act as asymptomatic carriers."

"So they can't catch it but they might spread it?"

"Essentially, yes."

Lybelle looked at her a moment, then shook her head. "I'd ask that you not repeat that possibility elsewhere. We're in a Pass. We *can't* stop dragons from going to Holds, infective or not. We need to be able to liaise with the groundcrews. As tragic as this situation is, we cannot quarantine the Weyr for the sake of a few firelizards, especially not with the communications reduced to...." She trailed off, frowning thoughtfully, then shook her head again. "We can't quarantine the Weyr. Which leaves us with the question of what we *can* do."

"At this stage, Weyrwoman?" Giselle sighed, thinking of Lili and Benn once more. "We wait. We just wait for the disease to burn itself out. That's all we can do."



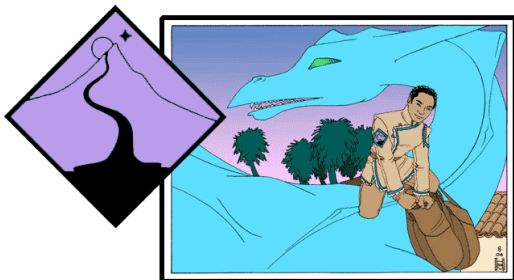
Catching movement from the corner of his eye as he checked on the progress of a wing-scored blue, Corsan turned to see Giselle wearily making her way through the Infirmary. Waving to Aretei to let her know that he was taking a break, Corsan followed the other master through the curtain, leaning on the doorframe as she settled herself at her desk. "How did the meeting with Lybelle go? Do we have a timeline yet?"

"Nothing reported until a couple of sevendays ago, and then there's a tidal wave of – I'm sorry." Giselle winced and ran a hand down across her face. "And then it's everywhere and spreading like wildfire and nobody seems able to do anything about it." She looked down at the wooden box that had taken up residence on the edge of her desk. The position of the box meant that Corsan couldn't see inside, but he had a pretty good idea of what Giselle was seeing from the smell alone. "Dragons and watchwhers are unaffected, but the firelizards...."

"I know." Corsan said sympathetically. "So, we carry on as we have been? Treat the symptoms as they arise, try to make them as comfortable as we can for as long as we can and hope that we don't have a bad 'Fall?"

"Yes," Giselle said simply, reaching into the box and receiving a quiet, phlegmy trill in response. "And we should be prepared to...." She took a deep breath, closing her eyes. "And we should be prepared to put the worst of them out of their misery if there's nothing more that we can do."

*To be continued...*



# Kadanzner Weyr

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