
Winner Takes All

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The window shutters of Z'hon's weycot were flung wide to catch the evening breeze, and both rooms of the wingleader's cottage were filled with sweating, drinking, and card-holding men, as Z'hon's residence had become the night's lair for disappointed bronzeriders to gather after the day's gold Mating Flight.

"First Fordath catches Nicareth, and now Sh'den gets Savukath," muttered B'raniz into his mug of beer. "The damn golds are going to be choosing browns next."

"Well, gentlemen," T'jalden said, raising his fourth glass in a toast. "This Weyr is going to the boys."

"Nothing wrong with that, if you're one the boys," snorted C'nor. "Guess this means it's my turn next, right? Salute me now, fellows, because if my old classmates G'tin and Sh'den can do it, then it's my turn next! And since Nicareth's next to go up--"

"Close your mouth, pup," Z'hon said. "You're no more going to be our next Weyrleader than your mother's going to stand on the sands for a gold."

"Fordath's success with Nicareth last Turn was just a freak accident," B'raniz agreed.

"Or Valenne really has the hots for pretty boys," S'kash said sourly.

"In which case, you still haven't a hope," Y'heto said, elbowing C'nor in the ribs.

"C'nor doesn't," T'tin grinned, "but I sure do! There's nothing cousin G'tin's got that I haven't got as well. And bigger, too, I might add."

There was laughter from some quarters of the room at that. "Bigger ain't always better," called T'seke from his corner. "It's what you do with it."

"But bigger is better when you know what you're doing," crowed Y'heto. "And if you need lessons, T'tin, I can always grab me a greenrider and give you a show."

The general conversation devolved into catcalls and pointed teasing, until Z'hon rose to his feet to knock the tap open on a fresh cask of ale. "Chasing greenriders is boys' work, so you can all leave chasing the golds to us men," he called out as he refilled his mug.

"I don't recall your Ulaieth having won the day. Or Savukath," T'seke scoffed.

"That's because Savukath's burdened with a rider who doesn't know any better," Z'hon shot back as he settled back

into his favorite chair. "Luka's a girl who is scared of a real men."

"Gotta question any woman who favors cripples and children over real bronzeriders," agreed T'noh sullenly.

"Ain't that the truth?" snorted C'nor. "Luka was always like that as a weyrling, too. Too high and mighty for her own good."

"Girl like that needs a *real* man to show her what she's missing," T'jalden said, with a pull at his glass of beer.

Z'hon chuckled richly at that prospect. "It's never too late to teach a woman that lesson."

"As if you think you're able?" B'raniz scoffed.

"Ready, able, and reporting for duty," Z'hon countered.

B'raniz rolled his eyes. "As if that goldrider would give you a second look. The girl clearly has standards."

"And you think you're more able to thaw Luka's ice?" Z'hon said drolly.

"Having a face and some manners usually make the difference," B'raniz countered.

"A little hair helps, too," T'seke snickered in an aside to Y'heto, who scowled at him in defense of his wingleader Z'hon's gleaming bald head.

"Then I'll call your bluff, and set the terms," Z'hon said, oblivious to T'seke's commentary. "The first man to have that frigid goldrider Luka on her knees and eating out of his hand is the man who wins."

"She to be eating out of our hand?" C'nor sniggered. "And not--"

"Why only Luka?" interrupted T'noh.

"Dunia's weyrbred, so she's already broken to the saddle," said S'kash.

"What about Cassidora, then?" asked Y'heto.

"She's all but weyrmated," T'noh said dismissively. "But there's always Zherra. She's fresh meat."

"Zherra's still a weyrling," T'jalden cautioned. "So's Faydra. But look twice at either of them, and the Weyrlingmaster's will have you by the short hairs."

"Now there's a thought that'll shrivel your sack!" snickered T'jalden.

"Forget the weyrling until after she's graduated. Being a sister to that twitchskirt Bh'ruk, she can't be much of a challenge anyway," S'kash said.

"Agreed! Now put up or shut up, regarding Goldrider Luka," Z'hon announced, grinning at his gathered companions. "Whichever one of us who beds Luka first -- and can produce proof or witnesses to his claim -- then he's the man who wins."

"Wins what?" C'nor demanded.

"Bragging rights!" said Y'heto.

"Respect," T'seke said.

"Even more bragging rights!" T'tin snickered.

"The reputation as the Weyr's highest-flying loverboy!" T'noh grinned.

"I've a keg of bluerider B'nyu's homebrew, and I'll put that up for the winner. And each participant needs to put a skin of wine or ale of their own, at the very least," T'jalden said.

"Done, then!" Z'hon said. "Men, choose your weapons and your strategies, and may the best of us win!"



2858.09.05

Bh'ruk turned up at her elbow as Luka reached the dinner buffet line. "Luka? We've got to talk."

"Can it wait?" Luka asked hopefully. Their morning wing drills had been rigorous – Valenne was still stinging from the death of brownrider Casmir and her dragon in 'Fall two days before, and had been merciless on her riders. Savukath had demanded her regular bath and oiling afterwards, and Luka had missed out on lunch. She felt famished, and the fragrance from the kitchens was mouth-watering. Luka wanted nothing more than to collect dinner and see if she could find Drayvin and the other herders in the crowded Weyrhall to sit with.

Bh'ruk snorted. "I don't know why you always stand in line like some wingrider. Go sit at the goldrider's table and send some candidate for your dinner if you're hungry. If you've got a little rank, why not use it?"

"I like getting my own," Luka countered. "I don't want some girl waiting on me hand and foot like I were the Weyrwoman. What did you need to tell me?"

Bh'ruk glanced around them cautiously, then leaned close to whisper in her ear. "It's a secret. I just heard about it from another bronzerider last night. But --"

"Luka!" Bronzerider T'tin strode up, smiling charmingly, a forelock of ebony hair falling across one eye. "There's a gather at Fort tomorrow -- will you come to it with me?"

"Sorry, Valenne's scheduled wingdrills for the Queens' Wing," Luka said quickly. "Thank you -- but I can't."

"After drills then," T'tin said. "The dancing should be extraordinary, with all of those Fort harpers."

"Back off," Bh'ruk said cheerfully, waving the other bronzerider away. "Wait your turn, poacher."

"As if a quality girl like this would take a randy wher like you seriously?" T'tin laughed, before turning back to Luka. "I'll be looking for you at Fort, and expect you to dance a round with me," he said with a wink. Then he sauntered away, leaving Luka to eye Bh'ruk suspiciously.

"What's going on?" she asked. "He's the third offer I've had to visit the Fort Gather."

Bh'ruk nodded. "All from other bronzeriders, right?" he asked.

"Yes..." Luka frowned, realizing that was true. The line had moved forward without them. Luka stepped aside, out of the dinner line, and pulled Bh'ruk with her. "You were about to warn me about something, weren't you?" she asked suspiciously.

Bh'ruk raked his hand through the strands of brown hair that fell across his forehead, and gave her a sheepish smile. "You didn't hear this from me, I'm just standing here and flirting," he said in an undertone, with more animation than

the words called for. "Because if the Z'honlings learn I tattled on them, I'll be pounded into paste, understand?"

"Bh'ruk, what in the blazes is going on?"

"Wingleader Z'hon and his bachelor herd have a wager going – the basic challenge is to bed you, and provide proof of, or witnesses to, the bedding. Winner takes all."

Luka stared at her friend, aghast. "What?"

"So, will you? Go to the gather with me?" Bh'ruk said loudly, flicking a glance over her shoulder.

"Are you out of your mind?" Luka retorted. "Shaffit, but I--"

"But I asked first!" Bh'ruk said, his voice still uncharacteristically loud.

"Bugger off, pretty boy," boomed a voice from behind Luka's shoulder. She spun to find Wingleader Z'hon standing behind her. "Let a real man show the girl a good time."

Luka looked at the wingleader in disgust. She detested the man, from the soles of his polished boots to the dome of his polished head. She gave him a cold glare, and turned away from him deliberately. "I would love to go with you, Bh'ruk, and Savukath isn't happy about being kept waiting. Shall we go? Now?"

Z'hon was saying something, but Luka wasn't interested in listening. She grabbed Bh'ruk by the sleeve and pulled, and he followed willingly, not looking back at the elder bronzerider as they made good on their escape.

"Why me? What's going on?" Luka demanded as they left the Weyrhall.

"Z'hon and his lot have a friendly little bronzerider wager on," Bh'ruk explained, keeping a nervous eye on the Weyrhall door behind them. He edged them over several steps, so that they were partially hidden behind a flowering fellis tree. "As I just told you – who ever sleeps with you first wins, and they've got to have proof or witnesses to the act."

"You can't be serious – this is a joke, isn't it?"

Bh'ruk rolled his eyes. "You were the one who just complained about being pestered by bronzeriders, weren't you?"

Luka shut her mouth with an effort, knowing she was gaping like a fish. Wagering was nothing new; betting on the outcome of mating flights was a regular hobby for many weyrfolk, and some Wings even considered it a formalized sport. But Savukath wouldn't rise again for another full Turn – and the bronzeriders in question weren't betting on her queen's fickle performance, but Luka's own. "That's just wrong," she muttered angrily.

Bh'ruk snorted. "Yeah, well, you've got my sympathies -- I've had folks wagering on my lovelife before and I can't say that I much liked it. So when a couple of the Z'honlings tried to recruit me, I figured I'd better let you know about it. Don't let any of those bastards sweet-talk you too much." He grinned. "If there's sweet-talking to be done, that should be my job!"

Luka frowned and shot a sullen glance toward the Weyrhall. "If that swollen whersport thinks I'm just going to

stand around and let myself play willing target, he's got another thing coming. I'm a goldrider. That means I don't have to tolerate this!"

"What, the pawing attentions of desperate bronzeboys? I rather thought that was part of the deal with riding a gold...."

"But Savukath just rose! I shouldn't have to worry about this sort of nonsense for an entire Turn in between her risings!"

Bh'ruk sighed. "I don't think Savukath's the one they're chasing."

Luka gave her friend a miserable look. Savukath would welcome the attention, and think it only right and just that she was desired. But Luka wasn't able to verbalize how deeply it frightened her, or even why. It was just *wrong*, and *unwelcome* and bitterly *unfair*.

"Oh, come on," Bh'ruk laughed, giving her shoulders a little shake. "Don't look so glum. It's not like the Red Star is falling on your head. Don't take everything so seriously, Luka! You know, there *is* an easy way to spoil Z'hon's fun. Turn the tables on him. C'mon. You and I could head over to your weycot, and just get it over with..." he said with a wink to show that he wasn't entirely serious.

Luka gave her friend the sour look that proposition deserved. "Thanks for the warning," she said, heading back for the Weyrhall door. "I've got to do something to stop this. Now."

Luka strode straight back to the Queen's Wing table, where Valenne sat with Lybelle and Dunia. All three women snorted in disgust at news of the wager.

"Boys will be boys," Valenne said dryly. "Just ignore them; they'll get bored and lose interest soon enough."

"A girl could almost begin to feel insulted," Dunia snorted. "I'm considered old meat, am I?"

"You and me both," Valenne said.

"The boys must just be scared of me," Lybelle chuckled. Dunia laughed outright. "Good for them. They should be."

"But—" Luka stammered. The other goldriders' lack of concern over the wager rattled her. "But it's *wrong*! You can't just let them continue to do this!"

"Do what?" asked Cassidoria, arriving with her plate and dropping into her usual seat.

"Z'hon and his boys have a wager on, to see which of them can get Luka in bed first," Valenne replied.

"Why Luka?" Cassidoria said, tossing an annoyed glance toward the StrongWind table.

"The rest of us are just too old or daunting, I suppose," Dunia replied airily. "Or maybe you're just taken," she added. "You'd think maybe Z'hon and his friends are afraid of knocking heads with your brownrider D'camron, but aren't so scared of poor Drayvin."

"Who is?" Cassidoria sniffed. "Men don't come much meeker without having green dragons attached."

Dunia laughed, while Luka gave her fellow junior goldriders an offended look. "That's not fair!" she snapped. "And please be serious – this wager business isn't a joke!!"

"Isn't it?" Cassidoria countered. "Sounds like one to me. So what if a bunch of idiots have some stupid wager? It's their time and their marks. You can't stop fools from being fools."

"Dori's right," Valenne agreed. "Luka, get some lunch and don't get so flustered over a bit of nonsense."

"But it's not nonsense!" Luka said in exasperation. "They're serious about it! And they want proof – and witnesses—"

"Grow up," Cassidoria said. "So what if a few bronzeriders are plotting to get into your bed? They won't get there unless you invite them, and we all know there's little chance of that. Sit down, eat your vegetables, and get over yourself, will you?"

"Dori, play nice," Lybelle said dryly.

"We already know that men are all dogs," Cassidoria continued. "And bronzeriders are often the worst. But just because they're playing their little game doesn't mean you have to play along. Just ignore them."

"That's easy for you to say!" Luka snapped. "They're not betting on sneaking between your sheets!"

"You just can't grow up, can you?" Cassidoria retorted. "Someone says the word 'sex' around you and you fall to pieces. Yes, the bronzeboys want to bed you. Get over it already. If you weren't so hung up on it, maybe your gold wouldn't be so inhibited that she's letting her clutch-brothers catch her."

Luka flushed red and sank down onto a chair.

"Cassidoria, what crawled into your pants?" Dunia snapped in her friend's defense. "Have a fight with that wingsecond of yours or something?"

"No, I'd just thought that I'd be able to leave the weyrings behind when I graduated."

"Girls, that'll be enough," Valenne said firmly. "Luka, we all sympathize that some bronzeriders are making you the focus of their bad taste. But guess what? They'll get bored and move on, soon enough. Especially if you just ignore their bad behavior. Cassidoria, a little more compassion from you would be nice, some day."

"Luka, if you don't like it, just set the silly bronzeboys straight," Lybelle told her. "They're doing this to stroke themselves in front of the other bronzeriders, so teach them a lesson. Go after the ringleaders, and puncture their egos. Embarrass Z'hon in front of his herd of sycophants -- do it right and it'll make a lasting impression."

"Right," Dunia agreed cheerfully. "Maybe the rest of the mob will turn on Z'hon, and distract themselves with the merry opportunity to mock him."

"I'd pay to see that," Valenne chuckled.

"They're bronzeriders," Lybelle agreed with a wicked smile. "They can't concentrate on too many things at once!"

That earned a round of laughter from the other women. Luka looked at them in dismay, stricken that none of her fellow goldriders seemed to think her situation important.

"Luka," Valenne said, seeing her junior's sober expression, "just don't worry about it. Z'hon and his friends will be fools, and if you just ignore them, they'll go away."

"What if they won't?" Luka asked in desperation. "Please, this really is important to me—"

"Come on already!" Cassidora cried, rolling her eyes in exasperation. "Why are we still talking about this?"

"Luka," Valenne said, her voice suddenly serious. "Ignore them. They'll tire of their little game and move on to more willing targets. And I don't want you to take this up with the Weyrleader."

"G'tin?" Luka said, horrified. "He'd never think of joining them in this!"

"No, he wouldn't – and he'd make the mistake of taking this nonsense just as seriously as you are, if he learned of it. Poor G'tin hasn't an ounce of good sense in his head when it comes to you, and he won't do himself any good rushing to your rescue. He's got trouble enough getting respect from the other bronzeriders; don't you dare inspire him to trouble on your account. You hear me?" Valenne demanded, her voice and eyes suddenly sharp.

Luka felt herself flush, insulted by the Weyrwoman's suggestion. "I don't want G'tin's help," she snapped, pushing herself to her feet. "And I'm clearly not going to get any from you when I need it!" She whirled away from the goldriders' table, furious and at a loss of where to turn next.

StrongWind's table was half the Weyrhall away, and Z'hon's bald head shone from the middle of that crowd. Luka aimed for that target, letting her fury propel her.

"Wingleader," she snapped as she arrived. "I know about your stupid wager with your friends, and I want you to stop it! Immediately!"

The rowdy chatter around the StrongWind table went silent, and nearly everyone turned to stare. Z'hon kept his seat on the bench, smiling up at Luka with mocking innocence.

"Why goldrider, what ever are you talking about?" he purred.

"You know well enough!" Luka said, aware of the attention focused on their exchange, and knowing her face was going from a rosy flush to crimson embarrassment. "I don't appreciate it, I don't like it, and I don't want it. You're not doing yourself any favors with this. None of you are. Stop it. Immediately!"

Z'hon laughed, and gave her a lazy, arrogant once-over. "Would you all look at the spitfire?" he drawled to his wingmen. "Scratch the little goldrider and me-owrrr!" There was a round of laughter at his words, and Z'hon cocked his head to one side, grinning wickedly. "Poor kitten, you know how cute you are when you puff up and hiss like this. Whatever do you think you'll do about it?"

Luka glared at the man, not having thought that far herself. The wingleader had called her bluff – she could demand compliance, but how could she enforce it? Especially without attracting the Weyrleader's attention to the matter? "I'll ask you. Politely. Just this once, and with respect for your rank as wingleader," she said, as sternly as she could manage. "Please stop this nonsense. Be a gentleman for once, or simply act your age. Put a stop to this silly wager business of your. Please."

"Look, fellows," Z'hon said, with a theatrical wink for his companions. "She's begging me already."

Luka glared at the man in helpless disgust. ***Ulaireth's rider bothers you?*** Savukath said, roused from her post-Fall nap by her rider's swirl of emotions. ***I will order Ulaireth to make his rider stop!***

How? Luka shot back bitterly. *You'll what? Ground him? Clip his wings?*

Make him miserable! Savukath retorted, her thought bright with anticipation. ***I can make him roll in the middens, or crawl to me on his belly, or eat seaweed until he bloats with gas!***

The gold would. With enthusiasm. Ancestors forbid Savukath ever became a senior queen in any Weyr – any chance to dominate other dragons lit her up like a basket full of glows. *Savukath, no! You know you can't, and you know Nicareth would squash you flat if you tried!*

Z'hon had taken Luka's silence for compliance. "You know, there's one way I'd be happy to help you out," he said, with a conspiratorial chuckle. "Let me take you back to my weycot right now, and we'll put this whole wager business to an end. You'll be happy you did."

Luka recoiled from that offer, and there was a crow of laughter from some of Z'hon's wingmen. Luka glared for a moment longer, too angry and rattled for a response, then turned on her heel and strode off, trying to gather what shreds of dignity she had left.

"Ah, don't sulk!" Z'hon called after her, to the laughter of his wingmen. "Girl, you know I'll be gentle!"

Seaweed. Until he bloats, Savukath suggested in malicious good cheer.

It was tempting. No, she countered. It's the rider who needs to suffer, not his poor dumb bronze!

You do not let me have any fun, Savukath complained.

No, nor should I! Luka retorted. That's not the answer!

Then what is? Savukath demanded.

The question fueled Luka out of the Weyrhall doors. *I don't know! But I'll find one. Z'hon is the ringleader of all of this. He's not going to make my life miserable without some payback. I swear it!*



2858.09.06

The Queen's Wing couldn't fly every rider, every 'Fall, and generally only flew half its available riders in each. Tonight's Threadfall saw Luka and Savukath grounded, as WindFlight rose to fly a crossover with Eastern Weyr, and then chase Thread across Rubicon and Cathay toward the mountain barrens. It meant a shorter 'Fall than usual – and meant that Luka had to work fast.

FireFlight was waiting on deck as WindFlight's relief in case of unforeseen emergency; that meant that any of the FireStormers, Luka's first choice for help, were unavailable. Likewise, Bh'ruk and his weyrling class were flying firestone duty. That meant turning to another grounded member of the Queen's Wing.

"I don't think this is such a great idea," Dunia said dubiously, as the two young goldriders crept into WindFlight Complex, their way lit by Belior's glowing face, only a single night's sliver from waxing full. "In fact, as the goldrider in authority of this complex, I should forbid you from doing anything of the sort."

"But it's Z'hon," Luka whispered back urgently. "He deserves this, and far worse!"

"True," Dunia said. "The puffed-up whersport certainly does. Just promise me you won't attach a treehopper to his ass."

It was an awkward joke, seeing how Luka's last attempt at a prank had gone amiss, seven months ago now. A treehopper down the privy had turned into a bite wound gone septic, and Greenrider Kyra had died as a result of gangrene. Luka gave her friend a narrow glance. "Trust me, I certainly considered that. And if I didn't feel so badly for the poor treehopper, I'd do it a heartbeat!"

Dunia laughed as the two slipped through the trees. Tomorrow would be laundry day for all of WindFlight, which meant each cottage sported a laundry bag next to the door or on the porch. In a couple of hours, not long after WindFlight's riders had gotten home and shed their sweat and soot-stained clothes, Moriltan and a few of his laundry staff would pass through the Complex with hand-carts, collecting the laundry bags, which where there then delivered to ox-pulled laundry wagon that waited near WindHall. "Where do you want me to start?" Dunia asked, as they reached the fringes of StrongWind's housing section.

"Pants or paint – what's your preference?" Luka asked, holding up her can of paint in one hand, two paintbrushes in the other.

"I'll get started with the exterior decorating effort," Dunia grinned, reaching for a paintbrush. "Just let me make sure I start with the right weycot! Would so hate to get the wrong one -- ah! There it is!" Dunia grabbed for the pail of paint and scrambled up the steps of Z'hon's weycot.

Luka stuck the other brush into a pocket for the time being, and followed Dunia up the steps. She opened the lid to her glow basket as she stepped into Z'hon's cottage. Then she turned back and grabbed up his laundry bag.

"It's hard to tell, in the dark, how much of his stuff will take a dye," she called back as she swung open Z'hon's wardrobe and began to sort through his clothing. Everything that looked pale enough in the dim light went into the laundry bag. When she had finished with the wardrobe, it was into the drawers of a dresser, where she found what clean underwear the bronzerider had to his name. It went into the bag as well. Finally, she pawed through the collected laundry until she had found a finely embroidered linen tunic. Luka fished a parchment-wrapped bundle out of the belt pouch she wore, carefully knotted the tunic around the bundle without touching the sharply-scented concentrate directly, and shoved the tunic back into the center of the laundry bag.

"Got it all?" Dunia asked, wielding the paint brush with aplomb as Luka dragged the laundry bag back out onto the porch.

"Got it," Luka replied. She grinned at her partner in crime, then skipped down the porch steps and toward the next weycot. "I'll finish this up as soon as possible and be back to help paint! We've only got a few hours before the end of tonight's 'Fall.'"

"Won't be enough time to paint the whole weycot," Dunia replied cheerfully. "But we'll at least get the sides done that everyone will see!"



By dawn, the unsuspecting StrongWind riders were asleep in their beds, Dunia was safely back in her own, and Luka had visited the Weyrhall for a bite of breakfast and bracing cup of klah before finding the workers who were about to drive the loaded laundry-wagon – sporting a bag speckled with pink paint just visible in the pile – and catching a ride with them out to the eastern headland, where the Weyr's laundry operation was centered. There, she presented herself to the headsecond who oversaw the Weyr's laundry operation.

"Goldrider, *you* want to work the day's shift?" Moriltan repeated, eyeing Luka with clear suspicion. He and his three-man crew were already back with their loaded handcarts

"Valenne recommend it," Luka replied, as innocently as she could. "A Weyrwoman should be familiar will all elements of the domestic operation of a Weyr," she says..." The laundry staff were all looking at her dubiously now, and Luka smiled desperately. "And it's been so long since I was a candidate..."

Moriltan's men were dumping their cargo in a heap, while several women began to pick up StrongWind's collection bags and rapidly sort through the contents. "StrongWind's got itself a good bit more laundry than usual," one of the ladies said, as she went through a bulging bag.

Moriltan snorted and made a point of hefting Z'hon's laundry bag off of the wagon first. His assessing look at Luka was knowing. "Goldrider, you're welcome here today only on the clear understanding that my staff and I are not responsible for any unexpected mishaps which may occur."

"Yes sir," Luka agreed with a weak smile.

There were several large cauldrons, into which the contents of the laundry bags went. The staff was careful to keep all a single Wing's laundry together, divided by cauldrons; later, after items had spent the afternoon hanging out to dry, clothing was folded and sorted back into an individual wingrider's laundry bag. The bags were put back onto the wagon and taken back to the Weyrhall, where the riders could collect them at dinner. Individual riders were considered responsible for embroidering their own names into their clothing for identification. Anything that couldn't be identified by the staff was sent back to the Weyr's stores.

Moriltan and his collection staff had been the first to see Luka and Dunia's handiwork of the night before; whispers spread as Luka set to work, helping stir the steaming cauldrons. The staff did a quick sort of each laundry bag, putting aside anything which was leather or wool for specialized care. Everything was dumped into the cauldrons of hot water, largely segregated by Wing. Luka did not fail to notice the show Moriltan made of dumping Z'hon's clothing into one of those cauldrons. She kept an eye on that cauldron, anxious to find an excuse to attend it.

"Not every day we get visited by a goldrider," said Yornala, the glasscrafter's wife. Her plump apple-cheeks were aglow in the rising steam.

"Never's happened," grinned Aenelle, brown eyes laughing. "Not since after I transferred here at least."

"Goldriders might walk through, certainly," said Moriltan, fixing Luka with a knowing smile. "Or rush up asking favors for something they wanted done in a hurry. But work a day with us?"

"Your gold won't let you stay with us long, I'll wager not," Yornala said, with a wink for her companions.

"Of course she won't," Bhazella agreed. Bhazella was a plump and cheerful woman, with her son Bh'ruk's ready smile. "But she'll let you stay long enough, won't she now?"

"I expect so," Luka said, trying not to sound half as anxious as she felt. She was trapped on all sides – clearly Moriltan's staff suspected that she was up to something. And why wouldn't they? Probably the only time the laundry staff had willing visitors was when a weyrbrat was up to no good. Maybe it was just a novelty of seeing one of the Weyr's goldriders being the one who up to no good that allowed them to accept her masquerade? "But the Weyrherder will tell you, I'm good for a day's work. I spend as much time working at the Feeding Grounds as Savukath and my other duties will allow."

"Because you have that quiet young man of yours out there, haven't you?" Yornala said, her tone teasing. "A fine dragonrider like you and a herder without rank knots to his name. It sounds like the makes of a harper ballad to me."

Moriltan had stopped stirring his cauldron and was frowning into the water. "FireStormers were busy last night," Moriltan said then. "Someone up and painted Wingleader Z'hon's weycot a fine shell pink."

There was laughter among the staff, and several ladies sent fresh speculative glances toward Luka. "StrongWind's Wingleader is certainly full of himself," Bhazella commented. "He's certain not to appreciate that much."

"Maybe it'll improve his manners some," Yornala snorted. "The man forgets who keeps him fed and clothed."

Moriltan stirring his cauldron, and lifted out a piece of clothing with a paddle. It dripped a stream of pink water back into the huge, steaming pot. He was scowling as he stared at Luka. She flinched, then forced herself to meet his eyes.

"Looks like something with a fresh dye has run. Everything in this pot is going to be affected," he said evenly.

"Shards no, I sorted—" Anelle began to say. Then she stopped. All of the ladies were looking toward Luka now.

"A shame, that," Luka said. She cleared her voice carefully. "Sir, why don't you allow me to take responsibility for that cauldron? Looks like the damage is already done, right? If anyone complains to the Headwoman--"

"Like all of StrongWind Wing?" Moriltan shot.

Luka shrugged that off. "A shame, isn't it? But nothing's ruined. Just a nice lovely shade of pink. Maybe a change of color will do Z'hon and his riders a bit of good? If anyone complains to Raecliffe, why, you had me underfoot, and I must have not sorted everything out of the bag properly. A shame. Regrettable error. But what are you to do?"

Moriltan snorted and offered Luka his paddle. "Yes, goldrider," he chuckled. "A real shame. Bhazella, please make sure nothing else regrettable happens in my absence, will you? I'm off to the Weyrhall for a chat with the Headwoman and a cup of klah."



Luka worked until Moriltan's staff took their noontime rest break. She followed Bhazella and the others back to the Weyrhall at Main. *Nicareth's rider calls for you*, Savukath said, as Luka followed followed Bhazella and the others on the long stroll back to Main" or something.

Weyrwoman Valenne was sitting at the Queens' Wing table, talking with Headwoman Raecliffe; Lybelle and Cassidoria were there already with their meals, while Dunia was nowhere to be seen. Valenne's expression was amused as the Headwoman strolled away; the senior Weyrwoman spotted Luka's approach and waved her over.

"Get the goldrider a plate of whatever looks good," Valenne ordered a passing candidate, and gestured for Luka to sit. Luka glanced at her fellow goldriders as she sat. Cassidoria continued eating her own meal with cold disinterest, but Lybelle's smile was rich with amusement.

"You certainly work fast when your panties are in a twist," Lybelle commented, arching one slender eyebrow. "The gossips are looking more animated than I've seen them in a while." Luka tried to look innocent and confused by the comment, but she knew the effort failed.

"I just received a couple of interesting reports from the Headwoman," Valenne said pointedly. "Someone was busy last night, while WindFlight was flying 'Fall. And then you show up on a whim to work in the laundry, the same morning that an entire batch of washing gets mistakenly dyed red."

"Not red," Luka shrugged. "Pink."

"Pink." Valenne smirked and tapped the tabletop between them with her fingers. "Why?"

"Well, I used the most crimson dye concentrate I could find in the stores, but I was betting that with that much water, it'd all --"

"Yes," Valenne interrupted impatiently. "Pink. Red. Piss-yellow. I don't care what color you managed to get. I want to know *why*. Wingleader Z'hon's weycot. Most of the StrongWind Wing's laundry. What are you trying to do?"

Luka slid a glance at Lybelle. "I asked Z'hon nicely to stop his stupid wager. He wouldn't. So, like Lybelle said -- puncture the ego. I wanted a nice peach color, like R'mal's favorite scarf, but faded pink will have to do."

Lybelle was smiling into her cup of tea. Valenne shook her head and sighed. "I thought you had learned a lesson with Kyra," the Weyrwoman said.

"I did." Luka chewed her bottom lip for a moment, then shrugged. "Look, no treehoppers were involved. No damage was done. No one was hurt. Nothing was ruined—"

"No. Just pinked," Lybelle chuckled. "How much of their clothing did you get?"

"As much as I could find," Luka admitted. "Doesn't do me any good to dye only half of it. It's not fun if they won't be forced to wear it."

Lybelle laughed outright, but Valenne was still shaking her head. "Luka..." she sighed.

"I made sure the laundry staff knew I was responsible. Well, they knew I was up to something all along, but when Z'hon or the StrongWinders ask questions, all fingers will point directly back to me. There shouldn't be any further trouble -- clearly I'm responsible, not the staff, not FireStorm, not some candidate with a grudge about getting knocked up by an unrepentant wingman. I did it. Me."

"Don't you think StrongWind or Z'hon will retaliate?" Valenne said. "You've lived alongside FireStorm -- you *know* how these things escalate."

"Maybe someone retaliates, but at least I've stood up for myself! And I'm a goldrider. If Z'hon or his wingmen were to try anything with me, then they've picked a fight with *you* as Weyrwoman, because I'm your junior. Z'hon knows marks against him will lead to him losing his Wing. And Savukath would appreciate the diversion if she caught them trying anything, because that would give her the chance to stomp all over some offending rider's dragon. Finally, I *do* live with FireStorm. No wingrider is likely to try anything with me if that means invading FireStorm's turf, right? Certainly Z'hon doesn't want to see his wingmen start up another prank feud; certainly Flightleader R'mal doesn't. And while Z'hon's wingmen might think it would be safer to take it up with me if I'm down at the Feeding Grounds, I know Drayvin and Trevon and the Weyrherder wouldn't stand for it." Luka managed a smile. "Z'hon didn't think I'd do anything about his wager. I think he needs a lesson more than I do."

"She has a point there," Lybelle agreed.

"I'd have any weyrbrat's butt in a sling for this sort of thing," Valenne said, smiling ruefully herself. "But I am inclined to agree with Lybelle. And with you. Luka, you're getting two months of punishment duty with the laundry. If your hands don't turn into prunes by the end of those two months, I'll consider assigning another month or two. And

if you cause any more trouble, I'll make you go over and whitewash Z'hon's cottage back to how it was. I'm sure he and his wingmen would enjoy watching that."

"But -- I don't think Z'hon will keep it pink that long," Luka protested. "He's probably already called for paint and a brush and candidates to do the sweating."

Valenne grinned, and traded a look with Lybelle. "No he won't. On my orders, his cot will stay pink, for as long as you're on punishment duty. I'll talk to Z'hon directly. And if StrongWinders cause any trouble during that time, I'll make them all paint their own weycots pink to look just like their wingleader's."

"Would serve them all right, too," Lybelle said, smiling as she sipped at her tea.

Valenne rose to go. "Luka -- I am serious about this," she said. "Just because it is Z'hon and his bag of crazy whersports involved, I'm going easy on you about this. But you are a junior goldrider of this Weyr, not some weyrbrat. If you need solutions to future problems -- I don't want to see you get so creative about it. Hear me?"

"Yes, ma'am," Luka said.

Valenne stared at her drolly for a moment longer, then shook her head and walked off, apparently heading for WindFlight and words with Z'hon. Luka watched her go, unable to restrain a growing smile.

"Pink," Lybelle snorted, regarding Luka with continued amusement. "I'd have tossed out the dye, and used powered itchweed myself, just sprinkled it in while I was folding."

"Thank you," Luka said. "I'll remember that for next time."



FireStorm had a small beach party that night; Luka stayed for a short time, until the combination of Drayvin's discomfort and the FireStormers' repeated toast to her for providing them with "pinkshirts" to tease because too much. She and Drayvin left the beach hand in hand and strolled up the moonlit path back up the plateau and on toward her weycot. Savukath was already asleep, her lazy dreams an occasional splash of emotion and color in the back of Luka's mind.

"What were they teasing you about?" Drayvin asked as they reached her weycot porch. His normal quiet reserve always became nearly glacial when around the boisterous, rowdy crowd of FireStormers, but Luka knew he tolerated short stints at their parties just to please her.

"Nothing," Luka said as she sat on the top porch step. She amended the comment as Drayvin sat beside her. "Or not much, really. Wingleader Z'hon of StrongWind and some of the other bronzeriders were being rude, and when I asked Z'hon to see that it stopped, he refused. So I just had to quirt him a little, just to get his attention."

The laconic herder sat and frowned into the darkness, his hat in his hands. He toyed with the braided horsehair of his hatband for a time. "Is the bronzerider a problem?" he asked quietly.

Luka sighed happily and leaned against the herder's side. She rested her head against his shoulder, touched and pleased by her beau's question. Shy as he was, he was willing to challenge another man on her behalf, if necessary. "No. Z'hon is nothing," she said. "He's not going to trouble me further."

They sat in silence after that, a comfortable, lazy silence which Luka appreciated. Drayvin rested a hand on her knee – a customary touch, possessive in its weight but undemanding. At length, she felt him shift and prepare to rise; Drayvin had to rise early, along with the rest of the Weyrherder's staff. She rose with him, smiling fondly as she watched him put his dusty drover's hat back on his head.

"Sleep well," he wished her. She hugged herself and watched him stroll away, then turned and went into her weycot when he had disappeared into the night. Luka was exhausted, having only caught snatches of sleep the night before, and looking forward to nothing more than climbing into her bed and sleeping as soundly as Savukath –

She was reaching for the glowbasket near the door when a voice in the same room spoke. "Hello, goldrider."

Startled, Luka knocked the basket off its shelf. Someone sitting in the cot's central room rose, so that the light from Belior's full moon shown off his bald head, his face shadowed. "Z'hon! What are you—" He moved and she recoiled a step, hitting the doorframe with one shoulder. "Get out of my cot!" she snarled.

"What? You have some right against intrusion you don't believe my wingmen and I share?" growled the bronzerider's deep voice. "You are free are invade our homes as you will, and destroy our property—"

"Get out!" Luka demanded, trying to wrestle the pounding of her heart. She edged back into the room, away from the door, correcting her first instinct for retreat. "Out! Now!"

Z'hon advanced on her, his face still shadowed in the dark room. His stride was clipped, the angle of his shoulders menacing. "In time. When I decide it. You have much to answer for, girl."

"Goldrider," she corrected him fiercely, refusing another retreat. "And don't you forget it! Now get *out*."

"Or what? You'll raise the Weyr to your defense? That excuse of a man you sat with outside, maybe? Will he protect you? Or that arrogant boy who we're forced to call Weyrleader, who lusts after you but hasn't the balls to do anything about it." He stopped only a half-step in front of her, hands on his hips and leaning forward to loom over her. "And if I refuse? You will do *what*? Wake your gold and rouse the Weyr? I would enjoy that, seeing how that'll put you right where I want you. In front of my cottage, sweating in the sun, on display before me and my wingman as you put things to right." Z'hon chuckled roughly. "Go ahead. What *will* you do? I'm waiting to see."

Luka took a shaking breath and held her ground. Z'hon's body language was aggressive and promising violence, igniting every nerve in her with a desire for escape. At heart, she *knew* that she was terrified of men.

Z'hon was *trying* to frighten her, and even while she knew it, she could not seem to avoid it. But she held her ground, determined not to be chased out of her own home – and in that moment of decision, discovered something unexpected.

Z'hon stood before her, legs spread, hands on hips, shoulders rolled back, leaning forward as though to bowl her over. Moonlight shone on his profile, and she found herself looking him almost in the glittering eyes. With a start, she realized Z'hon was only a bare few inches taller than her.

Luka straightened self-consciously. "You want something, bronzerider?" she demanded, crossing her arms defensively over her chest. "If so, have your say and get it over with. I had a long night last night, after all, and have better things to do with myself tonight than listen to your blather."

Z'hon bristled visibly. "You went way out of line, girl," he growled. "Your complaint was with me – not my wingmen!"

"Goldrider," Luka drawled back, trying to assume a confidence she didn't feel. She thought of Lybelle's nonsense presence, and lifted her chin to mime Lybelle's "I haven't been a girl for Turns, and you're wearing thin on my patience."

"You do NOT mess with my men!" Z'hon snarled. He stabbed a finger at her, poking her in the chest, just beneath the notch of her throat. Luka swatted his hand away, and he stabbed the finger at her again, hard enough to hurt. "You had no *right* to mess with them, girl, and you'll not do it again!"

"You'll get your hands off of me, and take your sad, naked skull *out* of my home!" Luka hissed. "You have no *right* to wager over me like a filly in a gatherday race! You don't like the consequences, bronzerider? Don't stand there and cry to me about it. If you're not going to treat me with respect, then sure as Thread falls, I'm sure not about to give you any!"

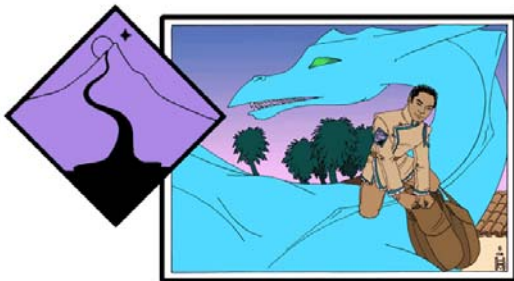
Z'hon stood silent for a moment, then shouldered her aside roughly. "Do it again, girl, and we'll have more than words," he growled as he strode out the door. "As it is, you've made this more than just a game. This is personal now, between you and me. So look forward to Savukath's next rising. Because Ulairith and I will be."

Then Z'hon was gone, and Luka heaved the door shut behind him. She leaned against her, heart slamming against her throat, and listened to his heavy step descend off the porch.

Savukath, blast her, had slept through the entire encounter. Luka closed her eyes and took a deep, shuddering breath, thinking the Riverman himself might come through the window and Savukath, self-absorbed creature, would sleep through the murder that followed. Her back braced against the door, Luka slid down to the floor and hugged her knees to her chest, still trying to calm the hammering of her heart. Fury jostled with the shivery gut-deep fear that still spiked her nerves. 'Rotten bastard!' she thought bitterly. 'Z'hon knew I was scared of him, and he *enjoyed* it!'

“Ignore it,’ the other goldriders said. ‘Don’t get flustered over a bit of nonsense. Show them you ride a gold.’ Luka pressed her face against her hands, trying to control the afterburn of adrenaline that coursed through her still, making her tremble. But she *had* no power, not that she could see. Her power rested on the promise of being respected for her rank, but if Z’hon had no respect for her – and the other bronzeriders as well, who thought her just a prize to be wagered over – then what recourse did she have? She had not the physical strength to *make* them respect her, and contrary to Lybelle’s advice, a domestic prank had not won her battle for her, either. If anything, Z’hon was now more determined to win his wager.

Luka took a deep breath, then pushed herself to her feet. There was a Turn, yet, until Savukath next rose. Time enough to make sure that Z’hon and his bronze wouldn’t come close to winning Savukath. Certainly not if her rider had anything to say about it.



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