
An Unhappy Ending

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Lybelle drummed her fingers on the table and scowled at Zherra's vacant seat. The late-afternoon meeting of Kadanzer's goldriders was about to start, and the blasted girl was late. Again. *Ihyanith, where is Velcroth's rider?*

After a pause, her gold answered, **Velcroth is sleeping.**

That was no surprise. Velcroth was near clutching, and was asleep more often than not these days. 'I suppose Zherra will come in late, then,' she thought. 'Not that that's any different than usual.'

"All right," she said, "let's get started. I expect Zherra will be here shortly." Then she launched into the business of the day. As the meeting progressed and there was still no sign of Zherra, though, the Weyrwoman eyed the empty seat. Over a Turn out of training and the girl was still flighty and sometimes unreliable. Lybelle was going to have to get after her for that... even a very junior goldrider couldn't neglect her duties.

"... And we have yet another bronzerider complaint about being barred from gold flights," Dunia was saying.

Lybelle turned her attention to the Weyrwoman-second. "Really? Who is it this time?"

"D'nin," Dunia said, with a small smile. Lybelle rolled her eyes. "He claims Waheath is complaining at him for not getting to fly some of the golds. He wants us to loosen the restrictions for more-distantly-related bronzes." The Weyrleadership had received variations on these complaints for months, but it wasn't going to change her decision. They had to keep the bloodlines strong, to avoid another plague like the one that took the inbred Benden giants.

Now if only she could get riders with sense enough... She turned her eyes back to Zherra's chair.

"Where is Zherra?" she asked in the lull. "I hadn't heard that she was sick. Have any of you seen her today?" Lybelle had had Ihyanith bespeak all the golds that morning to remind them, so surely the girl had not forgotten.

"I saw her this morning on her way to the showers," Revanne said. "She was humming and seemed to be in a good mood."

"Too good a mood," Cassidoria said. "She's been getting on my nerves. That girl's in love with someone, I'm sure of it."

"But you haven't heard of anything that would have prevented her from coming to this meeting, have you?" Lybelle asked. "Anything about Velcroth?" Zherra's gold was getting very egg-heavy, but there was likely still a seven-day before she clutched. And Ihyanith would have said something.

All the goldriders shook their heads, but Luka shifted in her seat and looked troubled.

"What is it, Luka?" Lybelle asked.

"I just remembered something Savukath said earlier today," Luka said, "and it worries me, now that I'm thinking of it. She was irritated about Velcroth complaining about a holder. Someone Zherra is interested in. I didn't pay any attention to it at the time, because Zherra is always interested in someone or other... but..." She paused, and bit her lower lip in thought.

"But what?" Lybelle said. Her tone was a little more sharp than she had intended.

"Well, now that I remember the wording, it sounds like Savukath thought that Velcroth was saying that Zherra was planning to meet someone. And was trying to hide it." Luka waved her hands. "I could be wrong! Savukath was confused about it, and wasn't relaying it to me very clearly."

Lybelle felt a faint alarm. "Meeting a holder?" She and Dunia shared a glance.

"Who would she possibly be trying to meet?" Dunia asked. "And why would she need to hide--"

"Let's find out, shall we?" Lybelle reached for her queen. *Ihyanith, is Velcroth still sleeping?*

She is.

Wake her. I need to know where her rider is. Now.

There was a pause. **Velcroth says she is away from the Weyr,** the queen said. **She is not happy.**

Away from the Weyr? With Velcroth so close to clutching? *Where is she?*

Another pause.

She says her rider wishes it to be secret. Ihyanith's nonsense tone communicated what the queen thought of that. **But she tells me, because I ask her. She is in the Cibola foothills, at a little cot. She says her rider is... was... mating with a holder. Velcroth is not happy about him.**

"Who?" Lybelle said aloud.

Velcroth does not care to remember the man's name. She says it is someone from Cibola, one of the cross Lord's clutch.

"What!" Lybelle shot to her feet. "Cross Lord" and "Cibola" in the same sentence meant Morgav was involved. Morgav, or his brood, meddling with one of her riders. Worse – with one of her *goldriders*.

Her eyes slowly focused on the room around her. All the other goldriders were watching her warily. "Zherra," she said in a tight tone, "is in more trouble than she can even begin to imagine..."



Rider!

At first, Zherra didn't notice her dragon talking to her. She was laying with Esthevan in the softest bed she'd ever been in ("Down mattress," he'd told her), suffused in the most sublime afterglow. She lay in the crook of Esthevan's arm, smelling his glorious smell and savoring the whole feel of the moment. She sighed.

Rider! Velcroth sounded distressed.

Zherra winced. *What is it?*

Ihyanith's rider asks where you are. There is a meeting. You are not there. Velcroth's mindvoice grew increasingly agitated.

Zherra shot up.

"What is it?" Esthevan asked, his voice taking on an irritated tone.

"I had a meeting! I forgot!" Zherra scrambled out of the bed and rummaged for her underthings. She couldn't remember what had happened to them, except that they'd come off.

Esthevan made a lazy "hmmph" sound as he stretched his arms up and then settled his hands behind his head. "They'll just have to do without you for now," he said.

"No, you don't understand," Zherra said, getting more panicked. But before she could explain that the senior queen could compel Velcroth to tell her everything, Velcroth spoke again, frantic.

Ihyanith's rider is very angry! Ihyanith demands that we return to the Weyr at once!

"Oh no," Zherra said. She felt faint.



Lybelle had Ihyanith ground Velcroth the moment the pair returned to the Weyr. Velcroth was appropriately meek. Zherra, however – despite her shame at being caught – acted defiant, though to Lybelle, it seemed like a front to cover her fear. Lybelle had Dunia escort the young goldrider to her quarters until the Weyrwoman could question her, but Zherra demanded to know why she was to be confined just for missing a meeting.

"She can't possibly think this is about a meeting," L'ars said when he joined Lybelle in her office and received a rundown of events.

"Oh, she's well aware that we know something's up, but she's still trying to hide things," Lybelle replied. "We'll get it out of her."

L'ars sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "Interrogating girls... somehow I never thought I'd signed up for that when I managed to become Weyrleader."

"You won't have to," Lybelle said. "I think I can handle Zherra. But I would appreciate your presence, if only to demonstrate that this is a Weyrleadership issue. We have to get to the bottom of this, if Morgav or any of his offspring are involved."

L'ars nodded grimly.

Together they descended on Zherra's cot in the Queen's Wing. They passed a few people on the way, but most of them seemed to sense their mood and left them alone. When they arrived, they found Dunia on Zherra's front step. She greeted the Weyrleaders solemnly.

"She's still inside?" Lybelle asked. Dunia nodded.

"Where would she go, anyway?" L'ars asked, his tone light but forced.

Lybelle stepped to the door, knocked firmly, and entered before she heard an answer.

Zherra sat on the edge of one of the chairs in her weyrcot's sitting area. Her shoulders were slumped, her eyes red from recent tears ('Of course,' thought Lybelle unsympathetically), and her tunic and skirt looked rumpled.

Her expression looked like a mix of fear and determination. It failed to impress Lybelle.

L'ars took a seat in one of the other chairs, stretching his arms across the back and crossing his legs. Lybelle was glad to have L'ars as back-up; she was too exasperated to be patient, and his relaxed manner could prove useful. Perhaps putting Zherra a little at ease might help open her up more. Lybelle stood in front of the girl and folded her arms.

"So," she said. "You're back."

Zherra sniffed, and squared her jaw.

"Ihyanith tells me that you and Velcroth were in Cibola territory. And that you were *mating* with a holder. Would you care to elaborate on that?"

A touch of color bloomed on Zherra's cheeks, and she met Lybelle's eyes but looked away quickly.

"Who was it?" Lybelle asked.

Zherra blushed even more. "He told me not to tell," she said. Her mouth was set in a pout, and the wretched girl's expression made it clear that she felt she was being picked on unfairly.

"Since *when* does a mere holder tell the rider of a Kadanzer queen what she can and cannot do?" Lybelle leaned down and, with a finger, turned Zherra's face to hers. The girl's bright eyes glared back defiantly.

"Who. Was. It?"

Zherra hesitated, then finally said, "Esthevan."

Lybelle straightened and turned away from the little fool, running through the Cibola succession in her head. "Lord Morgav's second son. Gather organizer. A known womanizer. All of Morgav's children were raised on deceit and subterfuge, Zherra, as you well know."

Zherra shook her head. "Esthevan isn't like that. He loves me. He told me so!"

"He told you? Just as he told you not to tell anyone about your liaisons? Hardly the actions of a man in love. He's manipulating you, Zherra," Lybelle told the younger goldrider. "He probably thinks it will give him some advantage over the Weyr."

Zherra shook her head again, more vigorously. "No, he wouldn't do that to me."

Lybelle snorted. "I'm sorry to spoil your innocence, but no one raised in that Lord's halls ever does anything that is not to his own advantage somehow. And he is more than twice your age. I know that some men fall for girls just barely in their womanhood, but he doesn't seem the type."

Zherra was still shaking her head, and her eyes brimmed with unshed tears. "But..." and her voice broke. "He promised me."

L'ars made a *tsk* sound. Lybelle glanced at him, noting his expression of pity. She turned back to Zherra, tapping her fingers on her arms. "Do you have anything *else* to say for yourself?"

A rustling of fabric drew Lybelle's attention back to L'ars, who sat forward now, resting elbows on knees and clasping his fingers loosely. "Where did you meet him?" the Weyrleader asked.

Zherra swallowed. "A gather a Turn and a half ago... he danced with me. He said I was beautiful and he was in love with me..."

"... And?" L'ars prompted.

Zherra sniffed, and wiped at her eyes. Then she scowled. "What does it matter who I love?"

"Oh, for the -- you're a *goldrider*, Zherra!" Lybelle snapped. "Not some lightwing greenrider free to spread her legs wherever she wishes! You have responsibilities and a political presence in your own right -- you've been *trained* in this. What did you --"

She stopped when a gesture from L'ars caught her attention. At his inquiring look, she nodded curtly, giving him another turn with the girl.

"Zherra, you're a very pretty girl," the Weyrleader said in his charming way. "And you are young. And you have your lovely gold Velcroth. There are a lot of men out there who will try to use all of that to their advantage, and Esthevan is certainly one of them."

Zherra looked stricken. L'ars nodded.

"I can only blame your inexperience for you not realizing what Esthevan was trying to do. It's not your fault."

Lybelle snorted. "I had hoped that I had educated my goldriders well enough to be able to recognize when they were being manipulated."

"But..." Zherra protested, tears glistening on her cheeks. "But he... but I..."

"What, did you think this was true love?" L'ars asked.

Zherra paused. She glanced at Lybelle, then looked back at L'ars. She nodded.

"Your *real* "true love" is Velcroth," he said gently. "*Her* needs must come first. You knew that, of course."

She nodded again, and her face screwed up, threatening more tears.

"Did you think you would be allowed to live in a hold? With Velcroth?"

She shook her head and started to weep.

"Did you think he would come and live with you here?"

Zherra sniffed. "I thought... maybe... he would...?"

"You thought wrong," Lybelle said. "Do you think a man who has had every luxury his entire life is going to live here at the Weyr? Leave behind all his rank and power? For a dragonrider, even if she is a goldrider?"

Zherra cried in earnest now. Outside Velcroth gave meek voice in response to her rider's distress, but Lybelle knew Ihyanith was keeping careful hold on the young gold. The Weyrwoman sighed. "Zherra, what you have done is very serious. Besides getting involved with this Lord Holder's son, you also took Velcroth out of the Weyr -- to Cibola, no less! -- so close to her clutching. Your treatment of her --" Zherra launched into fresh sobs. "-- is unbecoming of a dragonrider. Not to listen to your partner? To ignore her wellbeing?"

"I know this is hard for you," L'ars said, "but we cannot

allow you to see Esthevan again."

Zherra was nearly in hysterics by now, and Velcroth's noises of agitation were increasing. Lybelle rolled her eyes at the girl's dramatics. Zherra was weyrbred; there was no excuse for this kind of behavior. Lybelle waited patiently, until Zherra's sobs dissolved into miserable hiccups.

"We'll let you calm down while we decide what is to be done," Lybelle said. "In the meantime, I will trust you to stay put and stay out of trouble -- and if you attempt to betray that trust, I *will* have Ihyanith reinforce it. You and Velcroth are not to leave the Weyr until after Velcroth's clutch has hatched. Am I clear?"

Zherra managed a nod.

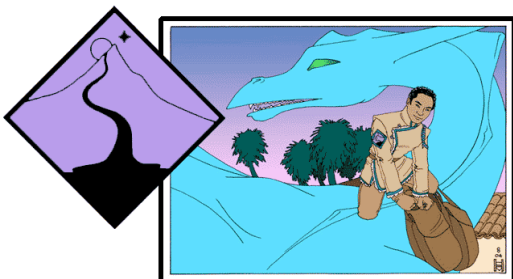
Lybelle exchanged glances with L'ars, then turned. The Weyrleader followed her out of Zherra's cot and closed the door behind them. Behind the closed door, they could hear the whump of Zherra flinging herself on her bed, and the girl began sobbing anew. Lybelle just shook her head.

Outside, egg-heavy Velcroth was curled miserably in her wallow, her eyes whirling in distress. The gold crooned softly as the Weyrleaders passed. Dunia still stood nearby, a discreet distance from the cot. As Lybelle and L'ars approached, she stepped forward. "Well?"

"She's embroiled in some Cibola scheme," Lybelle said.

"Cibola!" Dunia exclaimed.

Lybelle nodded, her lips set in a line. "We have to get to the bottom of this tunnelsnake pit and put a stop to it," she said. "Right now."



Kadanzer Weyr

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