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# Against the Inevitable

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J'hanos woke cold, grumbling to himself as he opened his eyes to a darkness still unfamiliar even after almost a sevenday. *Are you sure it's morning?* he sent plaintively to Vhauth.

***I can see the sky, came the reply. It is light but the rock hides the sun. I do not like this place. I wish to see the sun rise.***

*I'd settle for some warmth. Has nobody told this place that it's meant to be midsummer?* the bronzerider asked rhetorically. He sighed and ran his hands across his stubbled face, wiping the sleep from his eyes. *Is there any sign of--*

***Not yet.*** Vhauth's mind was alert, his senses focused -- evidently the bronze had been awake for some time. ***I watch. I will know when she is ready.***

*Good.* Barrier Mountain Weyr had been officially opened just five days earlier, the empty caldera filling with dragons as Kadana and Irineth welcomed their Wings... and the bronzeriders who would vie to become their Weyrleader. The new Weyrwoman had thrown a feast of insane extravagance for such a young Weyr, greeting each of the senior pairs of Pern with practiced words and a too-pleased smile as they introduced their hopeful suitors and their transferring fighters. Vhauth was one of three bronzes to have come from Southern, all of them previous mates of Irineth's, but Kadana had treated them with the same overly-polite interest as she had the others. Not that any of the bronzeriders were truly strangers, of course -- the majority had been sniffing around Kadana, and around Teshea before her, for Turns.

J'hanos had forced himself to smile through the pleasantries, all the while mourning the lost Teshea, whose level-headed practicality would have made the whole business so much more bearable -- Kadana enjoyed playing the part of Weyrwoman far too much. A part of him still wondered just what he was doing there, so far from the sands and warm seas of Southern, courting the favour of a woman he could barely stand... but the desire to make his mark on history, to claim a new Weyr for himself, was too much to be rejected out of hand. J'hanos was no dragon to be tied to the here and now -- Vhauth might only see a queen nearing her heat but his rider saw a shining place in

the South's young history, an opportunity to be remembered in the centuries to come.

Idly, he wondered if Dunia knew what the outcome of this flight would be, then discarded the idea. The goldrider had proved remarkably adept at keeping her secrets over the Turns -- no doubt this would be no easier a tale to extract from her.

Rolling onto his side, the bronzerider fumbled for a glowbasket and looked around at the raw rock of the cavern around him, the only obvious signs of human influence being the bunk and the small press pushed up against the far wall. It was all a far cry from the airy weycots of Southern, currently basking in the tropical humidity that invariably followed Turn's End, and even from the ancient rocky fortresses the bronzerider had known at Tillek and Crom, where the weight of ages had smoothed the stone into safe familiarity. This place was *new*, the Turns of work that had already gone into making it habitable barely visible to those more used to older, tamer environs. It was exciting and disturbing at the same time, but the thought of making it his....

J'hanos snorted softly. As if any bronzerider could truly claim Barrier Mountain as his own when there was Kadana to contend with.

The weyr that J'hanos had been assigned had access to its own bathing room, a rank-bought luxury that few here would enjoy. The bronzerider, used to the shared facilities at Southern, thought it somewhat extravagant... if not entirely unwelcome. He washed, shaved and dressed quickly, pulling on a knitted tunic that he usually reserved for warmth in Threadfall but which seemed entirely suited to the mild summer of the deep south, then headed out to join Vhauth on the ledge overlooking the Bowl.

***There are no trees,*** Vhauth grumbled. ***I like trees. I like my wallow. I like the beaches where I can scour my hide on the sands.***

J'hanos patted the bronze shoulder sympathetically as he gazed across the windswept caldera with its central lake and brightly quartz-flecked walls. "I know, I miss the sea," he said aloud. "But we could be Weyrleaders before long...."

***I could catch Yashelth for you,*** Vhauth offered hopefully. ***I have outflown Aneth before.***

*Not for Yashelth,* his rider returned, a little sourly. It had been a surprise when neither Suloth nor Lorth had won Southern's Senior, but J'hanos had been less than pleased to discover that L'tan was his new Weyrleader. *I still can't believe we're taking orders from that square-jawed imbecile.*

Vhauth rumbled. ***I can catch her.***

*I know you can.* J'hanos sent back. *But let's just concentrate on Irineth for now, shall we?*

He made his way down to the Lower Caverns by way of the stairs the had been laboriously cut through the rock at the back of the weyr, moving through the glow-lit passages that seemed to riddle Barrier Mountain like shipworm tunnels. It had taken him some time to work out the way that the corridors connected, tracing his steps back and forth until he had the way memorised -- he had no desire to

humiliate himself by getting lost in the bowels of the Weyr while so many rivals watched for weakness. His weyr was only on the second level, thankfully, and not far from the great cavern of the Weyrhall, and he heard the bustle and smelt the warm scent of fresh bread and klah long before he reached his goal. The caverns staff were a mixed group from across Pern, some transferred with the dragonriders who now formed Barrier Mountain's young Wings, others who had been there Turns already, having been part of the construction crew. Vara, the Headwoman, was a no-nonsense woman in her late forties who had come from Telgar some five Turns earlier, and she seemed to be doing well in organising her disparate group of helpers. There were already rumours flying that Vara and Kadana were not enamoured of one another, however, something that none of the hopeful bronzeriders found terribly encouraging.

J'hanos was settling down with his breakfast when a familiar form dropped onto the bench beside him. "Decided to get out of bed did we? Some of us have been up for hours, you know."

The bronzerider snorted into his klah. "Good morning to you too, Ves."

Vesoz reached across to snag one of the warm pastries from his brother's plate. "Any word from Vhauth regarding, you know...." He nodded to where Kadana sat in solitary splendour on the Weyrleaders' dais, her dark, curly hair tied back with golden ribbons that matched her voluminous gown. "Irineth's due any day now -- she can't put it off much longer."

"Nothing yet," the bronzerider said, his tone edged with his frustration. Laughter drew his attention and he looked across the hall to where three bronzeriders -- T'sel and N'merl of Fort and D'was of Telgar -- were openly eyeing the Weyrwoman. "The sooner we get this farce over with the better, though."

"Too true," Vesoz agreed glumly. "The sooner we get back to Southern, the happier I'll be."

J'hanos gave his brother a measuring look. "Thank you for your vote of confidence," he said acidly.

"What?" Vesoz blinked at him, then realised what he had said. "Oh, I mean, no offence to you and Vhauth intended, but I'm going to go *insane* if I have to stay here much longer. I'm out of the habit of living in a cave and I've hardly seen Ennie since I got here -- she's even less keen on this place than I am."

J'hanos sipped at his klah. "You don't have to stay."

"You know the rules -- I go where you go, and who'd keep an eye on you if I went and left you on your own here?" Vesoz asked, flashing the bronzerider a humourless smile. "Besides, Vara is desperate for all the Headseconds she can round up, even me."

"Nice to hear that you're in demand, at least," J'hanos said distractedly, his eyes narrowing as he watched two more of his rivals enter the hall. "Too many bronzeriders around here...."

"Barrier Mountain certainly seems to have twice as many wingleaders in residence than any other Weyr on

Pern," Vesoz noted, "although I doubt that many will stay past the flight. How long is it until you're meant to be flying 'Fall at Southern?'"

"Three days," J'hanos answered automatically, his mind briefly flicking back to his Wing. A'zelen and Sh'dan were keeping him informed of goings-on back at Southern and, in truth, he did occasionally catch himself wishing that he were back at the coastal Weyr, with its warmth and its foliage and with the soft sound and scent of the sea underlying everything. Pride, however, insisted that he try for Barrier Mountain despite his reservations and Vhauth's complaints. "Assuming that Irineth rises before then, of course."

Vesoz nodded, then looked up with a frown. "Oh, and here comes his Lordship...."

J'hanos set his jaw and watched with silent contempt as An'zer of Benden strode into the Weyrhall, the handsome harper-song image of a bronzerider with his sun-touched brown hair and blue eyes. An'zer's Certh was the largest of the contenders by some considerable margin, a fact that was not lost on either An'zer or the other bronzeriders at the Weyr, and the man had a distinct attitude of entitlement towards Barrier Mountain that was utterly infuriating to everyone but, it seemed, Kadana. As J'hanos watched, the Benden wingleader strode up to the dais, bowing to the Weyrwoman and offering some no doubt ingratiating greeting that made the goldrider laugh. "I see she's forgetting the way Pretty Boy there used to hang around Teshea at every Hatching and Gather she attended," he muttered.

"Oh, she's probably just laughing at his voice," Vesoz said, before dropping into a passable imitation of An'zer's never-quite-broken nasal whine. "Weyrwoman, you shine with the radiance of the sun but your Weyr is a barely-carved excuse for a latrine pit...." He chuckled and shook his head, pushing himself to his feet. "Have fun waiting for things to happen, Jal -- I have work to be getting on with."

"Now there are words I never thought I'd hear," J'hanos murmured as Vesoz walked away. "You might just be starting to grow up at last." Turning his attention back to An'zer, now making his way across to the serving tables, J'hanos frowned, feeling his frustrations growing again. An'zer seemed to think that he had already won the flight and Kadana didn't appear inclined to disabuse him of that concept. Hardly surprising, of course, given that the goldrider's political inclinations had always been tied to her dragon's bloodline, but that very assumption of victory might just be the spur that one of the others needed to cause an upset. And looking around the Weyrhall, where every bronzerider seemed to be glaring daggers at the oblivious An'zer, that might not be entirely outside of the realms of possibility....

Shaking his head in disgust at his rivals, J'hanos raised his klah mug again, his thoughts turning angry, turning predatory, turning --

***Come! It is time! I must have blood!***

Vhauth's summons cut through his rider's deliberations like a well-honed scythe, the dragon's earlier protests

washing away on a sudden tide of furious lust. J'hanos dropped his cup, leaving it to spill its contents across the polished wood of the table as he sprang to his feet and looked towards Kadana, who smiled broadly, her expression supremely pleased, and started for the cavern's entrance. The bronzeriders formed up around her, providing a loose escort as she strode proudly towards the weyr where Irineth still slept, as yet unaware of the great males who launched themselves from around the shadowed Bowl, bugling their challenges as they descended on the feeding pens to wreak havoc on the terrified beasts within. Vhauth was one of the first to blood, J'hanos noted with feral pride, snatching a bawling herdbeast from beneath the claws of a red-eyed Certh.

With luck that would not be all he stole from the Benden bronze this day.

J'hanos could taste the blood, could feel the aching anticipation in phantom wings as Kadana and her suitors reached the steps that led to the Weyrwoman's weyr and paused, waiting, waiting....

Irineth woke with an angry scream, throwing herself from her ledge and making for the penned animals just across the Bowl's width with a speed and an agility that no beast of her size should be able to command. Kadana stood straight, her gaze locked on her queen as the dragon scattered wherries and bronzes alike in her fevered need. If Irineth protested the need to take only blood, her rider showed no sign, simply swaying slightly as the great gold buried her teeth in the throat of a struggling loper and drained it in three greedy draughts before launching for another. J'hanos watched the queen blood with eager fascination, his perceptions split between his human body and the dark bronze form who crouched, worshipful and *hungry* before Irineth's glory, ready -- oh *so* ready -- to chase and to catch and to twine and to claim and to --

The golden dragon threw aside her fourth kill, roaring her challenge to the heavens. J'hanos closed his eyes as the bellow rang and echoed from the Bowl walls, feeling the sound in his bones, in the taut membranes of his wings as a voice that was/was not his own answered her call. Muscles bunched, uncoiled, and in the next moment the glowing gold was racing for height and J'hanos surrendered himself to his dragon's fierce passions, his mind merging with Vhauth's as the bronze threw himself skywards.

They would show An'zer the folly of presumption.



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It was late the next day when Weyrleader An'zer called J'hanos into his office. The Southern bronzerider climbed the stairs to the Senior weyrs with a heavy tread, resenting this summons and wanting to just be *away* from this too-cold, too-new place with its smugly superior leaders. If that mating flight had only worked out a little differently....

But that, J'hanos acknowledged bitterly, had never been going to happen. The flight had been long and grueling, Irineth fully testing her mates' commitment high above the snow-capped mountains of the Western Barrier Range. Vhauth had fought to remain in the race until the end, but at the last there had been no question as to which of the exhausted bronzes the gold chose, Irineth dropping down to entwine Certh herself, as if he were the only male in contention. J'hanos had woken in the bed of a young, blonde kitchen girl with no recollection of how he had gotten there and feeling nothing but a desperate need to return to the place he belonged.

Vhauth's exhaustion had scuppered any plans for an early escape, however. The big bronze had finally returned from the flight to collapse bonelessly on the roughly carved dragon couch of his assigned weyr, falling instantly into a sleep that had lasted until mid-afternoon the next day. Vesoz -- whom J'hanos had found waiting with his bags already packed and ready to go -- had been just as frustrated as his brother, but there had been little that they could do but wait and hope for escape before the new Weyrleaders realised that they were still there.

It had been a forlorn hope, of course. Headwoman Vara had recruited Vesoz to help with the breakfast shift again and so the bronzerider had been present when Kadana and An'zer had made their appearance, hopelessly overdressed for the time of day. The goldrider had no doubt spent the night explaining exactly how much power her consort didn't have, J'hanos thought sourly, only half-listening as the pair swept up to the dais to make their announcements to the Weyr and boast of how large their barely-conceived clutch of inbred hatchlings promised to be. Barrier Mountain's presence promised to take some of the burden of Threadfall from the Southern Wings, which could only be for the good given the way the holders were expanding across the continent with each passing Turn, but, listening to the pair addressing their domain, J'hanos thought that he might almost prefer the Thread.

Then, just when he thought that he might finally be able to withdraw from the Weyr to lick his wounds in peace, Vhauth had passed on An'zer's summons. And so J'hanos found himself swallowing his pride to knock at the door of the new Weyrleader's office, trying not to think of how *he* ought to be the one waiting on the other side of the door.

"Come in, J'hanos!" An'zer was standing behind his desk as the other bronzerider entered, pinning a Threadfall chart to the board that hung there. Other charts were arranged neatly along a shelf, ribbon markers hanging from the end of each scroll to show the 'Fall pattern it represented. "I'm glad to see that you're still here."

"Weyrleader?" J'hanos covered his contempt with a veneer of political politeness, the training of his holder past coming to the fore. A part of him grudgingly acknowledged that the man did at least seem to be preparing himself to lead his Wings and not just to be Kadana's pet -- be expected perhaps, given that An'zer *had* been a wingleader -- but that

didn't mean that he had to think that the Benden rider deserved the job. "You wanted to see me?"

"Yes -- a lot of the others seem to have disappeared back to their home Weys. Poor losers if you ask me." An'zer finished with the chart and settled into the ornate chair behind the desk, indicating with one hand that J'hanos should take the somewhat less impressive seat opposite. "It's good to see that there are some who show more interest in Barrier Mountain than just the Leadership."

J'hanos managed not to laugh. "There were none here who were less than Wingsecond," he said. "They have other responsibilities now that Kadana has dispensed with their services."

"Kadana only commands the Queens' Wing in 'Fall," An'zer said, "and now that Irineth has risen, Zemuna and Lisammi and their queens will be transferring in imminently. There's more than one gold in need of a mate here... and more than one Wing in need of a leader."

"I already lead a Wing," J'hanos pointed out, suddenly curious as to where this conversation was going.

"A Southern Weyr Wing," An'zer pressed, leaning forward to meet the other bronzerider's gaze. "Southern has good men aplenty. I'm offering you a chance to help establish Barrier Mountain's fighting Wings, her fighting style, to bring your expertise to a new Weyr, to make your mark on the future of the South! You already know the territories, which most of the other riders here don't. Bring in your own people if you wish, but consider this offer. You won't hear a better one at Southern."

J'hanos looked at An'zer thoughtfully. The offer was a generous one, as well the Weyrleader knew, and in other circumstances he might have been tempted to consider it... but not today, not here. "Weyrleader, I'm honoured --"

"Good!" An'zer beamed at him. "I'll have the transfer papers drawn up immediately."

"-- but I'm afraid that I must refuse your offer."

The almost comical way that An'zer's face fell made J'hanos's extended stay at Barrier Mountain almost seem worth it. "You're refusing me?" he said in disbelief, his already squeaky voice creeping a little higher. "Why?"

'Because I hate the weather,' J'hanos thought to himself, 'I hate the location, I hate bloody Kadana lording it over everyone, and I *really* hate smug bastards who count flights as won before the queen has even risen.' He kept those opinions to himself, however, as he offered the Weyrleader an apologetic smile and said, "I belong at Southern."

"Nonsense," An'zer shot back. "A man of your breeding, of your ambition --"

"Wingleader here, or wingleader there." J'hanos shrugged, careful not to show how much he was enjoying the other man's discomfiture. "I have no great desire to transfer and now that Yashelth's favour has wandered from her usual mates...."

"You fancy yourself as a Weyrleader?"

"I wouldn't be here if I didn't."

An'zer's gaze was assessing. "Well then, Wingleader," he said coolly, "I believe I will see you for handover in two days." He waved a hand at the chart behind him, representing a 'Fall that passed across the settlements to the north of Drake's Lake -- a 'Fall that was now split between the territories of Southern and Barrier Mountain. "I wish you well in your ambitions -- who knows, perhaps the day will come when we meet as equals once more."

J'hanos didn't respond to that last barb, instead smiling pleasantly and extending his hand as he stood. "Let us hope that that day comes soon, Weyrleader," he said. "Clear skies, An'zer. I hope that you and your Weyr will prosper."

"And the same to you, Wingleader." An'zer clasped J'hanos's arm firmly, then released him and turned back to his charts. "I believe you know the way out."

J'hanos nodded and turned and didn't start laughing until he was back in the Weyr Bowl, his mood perversely lifted by An'zer's irritation. Vhauth touched his mind sleepily, curious as to what his rider found amusing. *A little revenge for yesterday*, J'hanos told his dragon. *Wake yourself up -- we're going back to the trees and the seas and the sand.*

***We return to Southern?*** Vhauth asked eagerly.

*That we do, just as soon as I can find Ves.* J'hanos let his smile grow a little wider as he made for the closest entrance to the Lower Caverns, remembering once more the startled look on An'zer's face as he had refused the Weyrleader's attempt to poach him from Southern. Frankly, there were worse people to deal with than L'tan, and it wouldn't be long until Yashelth rose, and when she did....

When she did, J'hanos decided, he and Vhauth would be ready. Barrier Mountain would just have to manage without them.



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