
Elevation

by Smitty

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Golden wings caught the sunlight, flashing a shining lure to the males who followed, hungry, yearning, straining to last the course. The weakest were falling behind now, some admitting their defeat and turning away to start on the long, slow flight home while others struggled on in vain hope of making the catch. Ahead of them, unheeding and uncaring of their rivals' exhaustion, the pack leaders raced in their frantic pursuit, each instinctively convinced of his eventual victory. The challenge was a harsh one, but the prize... the prize was worth every sacrifice.

Six remained, then five, then four, the savage pace stripping the strength from bronze wings. The survivors grew ever more aware of one another as their numbers reduced, each fiercely determined to deny his rivals and claim the queen's favour for himself. One, huge and brightly touched by the sun, sought to repeat his success of months before; two others -- older, battle-scarred beasts with a golden wealth of triumph behind them -- sought to deny him that goal, mutual enmity suppressed in the need to oust this upstart and return to the natural way of things. Jostling for position, they fought to deny their competitor wingspace, attempting to foul his air without denying themselves in the process.

So intent were they on the perceived threat of one thief that they quite failed to account for the position of another. Dark wings carved the air, carrying their owner wide of the others' conflict, a sweeping arc that caught the attention of none but their golden prize --

Who matched this new suitor's trajectory with her own, intrigued. By the time her three former mates realised that the threat lay outside of their battle, it was already too late.



2440.03.02

"Weyrleader!"

It was amazing just how *good* that one word could sound when uttered in the correct context. Nodding politely to the coholder couple -- now the proud parent's of Southern Weyr's newest bronzerider -- he'd been speaking with, J'hanos turned to greet the founder of the young Waterfall Hold with a broad smile. "Holder Leremas, I'm so

pleased to see that you could make it. Did Waterfall have any young men on the sands today?"

"No, no, none today, but a Hatching is always a fine event." The stocky holder beamed jovially at the bronzerider. "Too often these are the only times we get to meet our neighbours!"

"Yes, the South does rather conspire to keep people apart through distance," J'hanos returned. "I'm sure that time will change that, however -- the holdings are expanding with each Turn. Lord Toric is doing a fine job in seeing the land settled."

"That he is," Leremas agreed. "I wanted to congratulate you on your elevation, Weyrleader. It seems that the Weyr has a new man at the helm each time I come here...."

"The last Turn has been a time of flux in the Leadership, it's true," J'hanos allowed, "but rest assured that Vhauth and I have every intention of changing that. It was a good flight and the catch one that we have every intention of repeating the next time Yashelth rises."

"Did I hear my name mentioned?" Genna walked up to rest a hand on her Weyrleader's arm. "So good to see you again, Holder Leremas. I trust that Waterfall prospers?"

"It does, my Lady, it does." Leremas's smile took on a touch of pride as he said, "We've added five new coholds along the Yellowfern River in the last Turn alone... as I'm sure you know, what with your sweepriders and all." His gaze drifted to something beyond the Weyrwoman's shoulder and he abruptly nodded to them both. "If you would excuse me, I need to speak to my Lord...."

Genna watched him go. "Another one curious to see who our new Weyrleader is?" she asked, archly. "I swear that this is the best turn-out we've had for a Hatching since Orylath broke shell."

"It does them no harm to know who is charged with their safety," J'hanos told her. "Besides, now that Barrier Mountain has split the territory, I think they're all keen to see which of them are still looking to Southern."

The Weyrwoman chuckled. "You may want to rephrase that in Toric's hearing," she said. "I don't think he's comfortable with losing our sweeprider cover down at that end of the continent. It's not as though we ever reported to him what his holders were up to, but the sense of isolation isn't helping his mood, from what Alstan has been saying."

"Enril's been talking, has he?"

"Enril is a harper -- talking is what they're best at. Toric would never have asked for Enril if he couldn't be somewhat circumspect, but you know how it goes when you get two harpers together!"

"Just so long as Alstan isn't spilling all of our secrets...." J'hanos smiled and sipped at his wine. Yashelth had risen just three days before and the betting had apparently been fierce on whether L'tan would retain the Weyr or K'med or T'del would return Southern to its usual routine. Vhauth's success had evidently upset more than just the disappointed contenders, but J'hanos found it hard to pity those fools who would place their marks on something as uncertain as a mating flight. He had coveted the Weyrleadership since his

Search, half a lifetime ago, although he had only started to pursue it seriously since becoming a Wingleader, unwilling to take on the role without the experience to do it justice. History, he knew, was rarely kind to those who went charging into anything unprepared... if history even remembered them at all.

Genna looked around at the crowd mingling and enjoying the feast. "So, how are you enjoying the day?" she asked her Weyrleader. "You certainly seem more comfortable on this sort of stage than L'tan did."

J'hanos snorted softly. "I was *raised* on this sort of stage," he reminded her. "L'tan was a coholder before he came to the Weyr; he'd have been a fieldhand if not for Aneth. I was trained as a potential Lord."

"As if we could ever forget," Genna said, smiling into her wine. "You're playing this to the hilt, aren't you?"

"One should always give the people what they expect," J'hanos told her, casting his own gaze across the crowd. Oh yes, he was enjoying the day all right, enjoying the chance to finally taste the social reality of the rank he had desired for so *very* long. The Hatching of Nioranth's latest clutch provided the perfect opportunity for him to make his debut on the political stage of the South and he was *not* about to let it go to waste. "And one should always strive to make a good impression with those whose opinions may matter."

"Toric?"

"Toric may Hold a sizeable portion of the planet but his own Holding is primarily a port and the main point of contact with the North." J'hanos's smile was more than a little self-satisfied as he added, "And given all of *that*, he should certainly be trying to make a good impression on one of the Tillek Blood, don't you think?"

Genna laughed. "And here I thought I'd heard *everything* that a bronzerider's ego could come up with! It seems that I was wrong."

J'hanos shrugged. "It's true enough. And we may as well try to use whatever advantage we can to ensure that the tithes keep coming after the Pass."

"You really think that you'll last that long, Weyrleader?"

"Vhauth and I certainly intend to try..."

The goldrider rolled her eyes. "Let's just see what Yashelth has to say about that, shall we?"

J'hanos chuckled softly. "Of course, Weyrwoman." And then they were being accosted by Torald, Toric's Heir, and it was time to return to the roles of rank for a while longer.



J'hanos made his way to the edge of the Hatching Grounds, gazing out across the moonlit expanse of sand as, behind him, the faint sound of music competed with the soft murmur of the sea. The older weyrings had already cleared away the broken shells left by the emerging hatchlings and the eroded old caldera that housed Southern's Grounds seemed strangely peaceful after the excitement of earlier in

the day. Zyath would lay her clutch before the end of the month but until then the sands would stand empty.

The bronzerider stepped out onto the Grounds, feeling the heated sand shift slightly beneath his expensively booted feet. He had been seventeen when he had first walked out to face the eggs, young and brash and impossibly arrogant, not expecting for a moment the humiliation of being passed over by the hatchling dragons. Four times he had stood in all, four times in six months, but all the frustration of failure had faded to nothing in the moment that he'd met Vhauth's eyes and heard the whispered name in his mind....

Some things were undeniably worth the wait.

Looking around at the shadowed rock walls rising to either side of him, J'hanos recalled each of those Hatchings, recalled the sound of the crowds and the humming of the dragons and the sense of every eye being on him. He had always *known* that he would Impress bronze, had, no doubt, been quite insufferable in his certainty that he would be a bronzerider and that he would be a Weyrleader.

J'hanos smiled into the darkness and thought that maybe it was time to find himself some new ambitions....

He was still wallowing in the memory of Impression when a soft sound from the spectator stands caught his attention. Frowning and not a little self-conscious at having been observed when he'd thought himself alone, he started towards the staggered rows of benches. "Who's there?"

A quiet mewling was his answer, building up within moments to the full-lunged wail of a human infant, quickly hushed. Striding across, he saw a figure seated at the edge of the sands, curled protectively around a bundle in its arms. With Vhauth asleep, it took the bronzerider a few moments to recognise the figure as Dunia.

"Goldrider?" he asked. "I thought that you were in the Weyrhall."

"Murgon was getting restless and needed feeding," came the reply, and there was a roughness to Dunia's voice that made J'hanos suspect that the child had not been the only one crying. He decided not to comment on it -- Dunia was barely a sevenday past her son's birth and the hormones of new mothers could lead to some quite startling mood swings in his experience. "I came out here to get some peace."

If that was a hint, the Weyrleader chose to ignore it, settling himself beside the goldrider instead. "Me too," he said. "Things are winding down at the Feast now and I thought I'd see if the sands had been properly cleared."

"Not just surveying your domain, then?"

J'hanos chuckled. "Am I that predictable? I was just thinking about Impressing Vhauth on these sands," he told her. "Won't be long now until he has another clutch of his own here, and this time by the Senior. Hopefully it will be the first of many that he sires on Yashelth...."

There was a small sound, almost of distress, from beside him, and the Weyrleader couldn't tell if it had issued from Dunia or her child. "I wish you well with that," the goldrider said after a few moments. "Vhauth is a strong sire

-- he's always done well by Nioranth on those times he's flown her."

"He has," J'hanos affirmed with a pleased smile. "I should probably thank Nioranth and yourself for breaking him in -- she was the first queen he caught, after all... and waking up with you has always been a far more pleasant experience than waking up with Vivia..."

Dunia laughed quietly. "I'm glad to hear it."

"He's not yet managed to sire a queen, but that's just a matter of time, I'm sure," J'hanos went on. "He's sired enough bronzes to make sure that his contribution to the future is secure, at least --"

The woman beside him drew in a shaky breath and J'hanos turned to really look at her in concern. "Dunia? Are you all right?"

"I'm fine, I'm fine," she said, trembling as she held back tears. "It's just --"

"The baby?" the bronzerider asked sympathetically. "Enasha was the same with Jeshan for a while, but it passed." He turned his gaze back to the sands. "Dragons have it so much easier."

"So Corsan says," Dunia replied, the ghost of a smile in her tone. "They have it easier in so many, many ways..."

J'hanos nodded, his thoughts already straying to Yashelth's clutch and to the rising that would come after it, when he would need to prove that Vhauth was not just a single-flight fancy. It would be a challenge... but it was one that he was confident Vhauth was equal to. Not that the bronze was thinking quite that far ahead yet, not while he was still basking in the warm glow of his victory. "Yes, life would be so much easier if we didn't need to plan ahead for things," he mused, then glanced at the goldrider. "Of course, I guess that you already know much of what's important!"

Dunia didn't look at him. "I don't know nearly as much as people think I do," she said quietly.

"Are you still thinking of going back to your Tenth Pass?" She nodded silently. "Well, you're not going to be going this Turn, what with the babe there, so I hope that you can wait until young Orylath is rising." J'hanos looked out over the sands thoughtfully. "We don't want to be left queen-light, even with only a decade left to the Pass."

There was a silence from the goldrider that stretched on and on until he turned to look at her with a frown. "Dunia?"

"I have to -- Murgon needs changing." She stood abruptly, clutching her child to her. "I'm sorry, Weyrleader."

J'hanos watched her hurry away, grateful that *he* didn't need to worry about maternal hormones, and turned his mind back to the sands and the eggs that Yashelth would lay there from this flight and the next and the next.... The Pass would end but the Weyr would carry on, the eroded bowl of Southern's Hatching Grounds cradling one clutch after another, on and on into a future that Dunia knew but that he could only imagine....

The Weyrleader smiled in the moonlight. He might never know the future, but the least he could do was make sure that it knew his name. Pushing himself to his feet, he started back towards the Weyrhall and a future of his own.



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