
Rite of Passage

by Meliss Taday & Whitney Ware; with apologies to Gaelic Storm for the song lyrics

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L'ars looked up from Threadfall chart on his desk at his wingseconds. "...and then there's the matter of the upcoming graduation. Have you had a chance to take a look at any of the weyrings? I'd like your feedback on which of them FireStorm might tap."

"More graduates?" B'tai groaned. "Shaffit, you do realize that we haven't even initiated the last lot?"

"The ones who survived, you mean," K'danag added dryly. "The last graduates were so raw, it wasn't worth the effort to initiate them."

L'ars regarded his two wingseconds with amusement. "As Wingleader, you know that I don't know anything about any initiations... but I had missed those knocks on my door. Now that we've doors and roofs over our heads again, brownriders, I will observe that you've been lax in your duties."

B'tai and K'danag looked at one another. "Time to rectify that," B'tai said, while K'danag smiled a slow, narrow smile of agreement.

"After 'Fall tonight?" K'danag asked.

"I've got the firewater. Do you still have the paint?"

"Enough for three," K'danag replied.

L'ars chuckled. "If it's a good, easy 'Fall like we hope it'll be, then officially, I have no idea what either of you are talking about."



The afternoon's Fall had swept in from the sea, skipping over the tip of the Cibolan peninsula before ranging on over the western stretches of Izmir. It had been fairly easy work, what with more than half of the Fall coming down over open ocean.

It was becoming a tradition for the riders of FireStorm Wing to always meet on the western stretch of beach closest to Fire Complex to bathe their dragons after Threadfall. N'dren trod water, grateful for the help of his green Sarla and gold Flicker in scrubbing the reek of firestone from Jeth's bronze hide. Many of his wingmates had already finished bathing their dragons and were gathered on the shore to relax. The sun was setting, and the FireStorm riders

were building their traditional after-Fall bonfire on the beach.

Zenith invites me to swim with her, Jeth said, anxious himself for the scrubbing session to be over. *Hurry!*

"Chaya and the rest have a whole lot less dragon to scrub than I do," N'dren grumbled good-naturedly. He swiped his scrubbing rag over the tip of Jeth's tail. "Done, done, done. Go swim and rinse. Dinner's waiting for me on the shore."

Dinner would be waiting, or so N'dren hoped fervently as he swam for the beach. FireStorm wingriders traded favor-points with the kitchen staff to ensure that baskets of food and drink would be delivered; in return, as 'Fog and 'Fall allowed, FireStorm riders were always available for errands when Headcook Farny called.

Both of his firelizards winged after Jeth instead of following the young rider to shore. N'dren climbed out of the surf and caught up the towel he had left waiting with his clothes. He towed off quickly and yanked up on his shorts, his stomach growling at the promise of dinner.

The rest of FireStorm Wing was crowded together in a knot near the bonfire. 'Dinner basket must have just arrived,' N'dren thought as he approached. "Hungry boy coming through!" he cried, diving for that crowd.

"Make way, make way," grinned bluerider H'keo, slapping N'dren on the shoulder as N'dren squirmed past. Other bodies shifted, clearing his way, and N'dren slipped through the crowd into the center with remarkable ease.

Too easily, his nerves registered — the wingriders of FireStorm were not known for hesitation or shyness, or for failing to meet a push with a shove. Then he blinked, seeing who else stood in the center of that ring. His wingmates Chaya and Y'su. Fellow Flitterbrats both of them, and fellow graduates of his weyring class.

"Got 'em!" called greenrider Jeri.

"Fresh blood, front and center," A'rori crowed. "Fresh blood, come and get it!"

"Fresh blood!" echoed Bria, Tadiara, and Salynia. Within moments, the rest of the Wing had joined in the chant.

Y'su drew close to Chaya, his expression frightened. "Think we can run for it?" Chaya shook her head. N'dren felt a moment's dismay as well — before he remembered.

Weyrbrat that he was, he *remembered* FireStorm Wing's initiations. Indeed, parts of the ritual had become events eagerly awaited by a full audience of weyrbrats and weyrings. But since he and his classmates hadn't been put through an initiation since their rush-graduation, he had concluded that the ritual had somehow died with the Old Weyr itself.

Wingsecond B'tai stepped forward, out of the ring of chanting dragonriders. He raised one hand, and the others fell into a smug, grinning silence.

"We've waited to see if you'd survive, since many of your classmates didn't," B'tai said, with a cat's smile on his handsome face. "Front and center, Fresh Blood. We've yet to see if you're ready to become one of *us*."

"We've flown with FireStorm for six months," Chaya said indignantly. "Of course we're part of the Wing!"

"Not yet, you're not," B'tai responded. "Not until *we* decide you are. We've watched, and we've waited, to see if you three are worthy of our Wing. The time has now come for you to prove your worth to us – one way or another. Do you have what it takes to be a true FireStormer? Or do we pack up your things and dump you on FireStar's doorstep come morning?"

"Drink!" sang out M'scel, tossing a wineskin to B'tai. The rest of the gathered caught up the word and began to chant "Drink! Drink! Drink!" while B'tai held up the wineskin, displaying its swollen weight. Then with a flourish, he uncapped it, and shot a stream of ruby liquid into his mouth.

"Mother's milk," he said, smacking his lips appreciatively. "Drink up." The brownrider handed the skin to N'dren first. "And don't make us force you to do so."

N'dren took the wineskin gingerly. He eyed B'tai, thought about faking a long swallow, and decided against it. The wingsecond and the rest of the crowd were watching him too closely for him to fake it, and he didn't doubt that they'd hold him down and force him as the brownrider had promised. N'dren drank.

He was expecting wine. Instead, he found the blistering taste of firewater. It burned its way down his throat, sweet and searing. N'dren wiped his mouth and handed the skin to Chaya, who was watching him anxiously. He managed a tight smile for her.

"Drink! Drink! Drink!" the chant continued.

Chaya took a swallow and coughed. Y'su was next – he took a mouthful and almost spat it out. T'raff and R'san had him by the shoulders in a moment, steadying him.

"You drank that like some holdergirl," B'tai snorted. "All three of you drink like prissy SkyMaster riders. Time to learn to drink like a FireStormer!" He moved to take the wineskin away from Y'su. The young brownrider clutched the wineskin against his chest, then quickly took a second drink. There was a cheer from the crowd, and Y'su chugged down several long swallows of the firewater before making a show of wiping his lips and passing the wineskin back to N'dren. The wingriders cheered and clapped for Y'su, while N'dren smirked and, despite knowing his head was going to regret it tomorrow, moved to match Y'su's performance.

The wineskin made more passes; by the time it was back in N'dren's hand the sixth time, the world had become rosy and carefree. Jandae was at his back, steadying his shoulders. N'dren leaned back into her cushiony support, closed his eyes, tilted his head and raised the wineskin for another drink. When the expected stream of firewater didn't arrive, he opened his eyes and struggled to focus on the wineskin in his hands. He could see his hands, posed above his head. But there was no wineskin.

Laughter coursed around him. N'dren grinned in good humor and turned to find B'tai holding the wineskin. The wingsecond took a quick drink of firewater, then tossed the wineskin on to Perianne, who was closest to him. "Pass on

the joy juice," B'tai said, which met a cheer of approval from the FireStorm riders.



"FireStorm initiation!" called Bherruk, leaning into the boys' side of the candidate barracks with a grin plastered across his face.

"Oh yeah!" cried Caradrin, rolling off his bunk and scrambling for the barracks door, while behind him, other weyrbrats dropped what they had been doing and scurried to follow.

"What's going on?" asked Ankasen, a recent Search from Barrier Hold.

"FireStorm Wing initiation for new riders," replied Maximon, in a disapproving tone of voice. He was one of the few weyrbred youths not to join the flood. "I'd have thought mature riders would have outgrown such behavior."

Caradrin snagged Ankasen's sleeve as he raced past. "They might, but thank the Ancestors FireStorm hasn't!" he said with a knowing wink, pulling Ankasen with him out the door.



Y'su had managed to remove all of his clothing except for his underwear, which was now providing him with an unexpected challenge. Chaya stood with her hands crossed over her bare breasts, shivering despite the humid tropical heat. N'dren swayed on his feet and tried to take stock of the situation. The wineskin was empty. His clothing was gone. And a bucket of impossibly blue paint had arrived.

"Harper blue," he observed. "Not my best color."

Y'su hiccupped. "Nor mine," he slurred with a foolish grin.

Z'haq and R'san were passing around paintbrushes, and Bria had turned up with a smaller jar of what proved to be crimson red. Tadieria, Auriala, and Salynia all set to work painting N'dren, while other wingmates concentrated on Chaya and Y'su. "Hey!" Y'su squealed. "That tickles!"

It *did* tickle. N'dren bit his lip to keep from laughing at the sensation. The paint felt cool and slick, bringing surprising relief to the wine-fever heat of his skin. Then he began to bite a little harder when the paintbrushes began to stir another kind of heat, further down his anatomy.

"What is in that?" asked Chaya with some concern, as B'nyu, M'scel and Jandae painted her in streaks of blue and crimson. "Some paints are poisonous—"

"Don't you fret," Jandae purred. "A little blue won't kill you."

"Need more of that over here," Auriala called, waving for more harper blue. "Got something a little extra here to cover."

"Hey!" N'dren protested, throwing aside embarrassment with drunken glee. "Send the whole bucket, she'll need it if she keeps at what she's been doing!"

M'scel and Bria led the cheers at that. N'dren grinned at Chaya and Y'su; they were both rapidly disappearing under a layer of paint. Chaya's painters had simply layered on the color, although Jeri was now adding a more decorative touch to the effort, by painting yellow blossoms over Chaya's small breasts. Y'su's painters had painted him entirely red, while Z'haq and Rhiada were splotching blue wildcat-like rosettes across his flanks and shoulders; R'san caught that idea and was embellishing with thick whisker-stripes across Y'su's face and a big dap of blue across his nose. N'dren didn't have to look down at himself to feel the stripes Auriala, Taderia and Salynia were applying. He simply grinned like a fool and tried not to be too distracted by the unexpectedly sensuous sensation of those brushes against his naked skin.

"Hey!" he yelped as the brushes went somewhere unexpected. "Not blue on those, please!"

"You're right," Taderia giggled. "Rhiada, pass me some of that yellow, will you?"

"The Weyr will be flashed as it's never been flashed before," Salynia laughed.

There was a spate of laughter at that. Then B'tai began to pass through, collecting buckets and brushes.

"They're done," he announced. "Time for the next step."

Wingriders grinned and stepped back to study their handiwork with appreciation. Wingsecond K'danag stepped forward, trying not to smile too broadly.

"New blood, fall in!" he barked, in his wingsecond crisp-voice. N'dren found himself swaying on his feet, but staggered into line with his two classmates.

Y'su reached out a steadying hand to help his friend and giggled. "I'm kinda glad they haven't forgotten all about this," he whispered into N'dren's ear.

K'danag circled them, his face composed into a sober, sharp-eyed expression, for all the world as if he were speaking to disobedient wingmen rather than three naked, paint-dripping drunkards. "Flying with FireStorm requires three things. You've got to prove to all of us now that you've got what FireStorm is made of. So fall in now and follow me – at pace, without faltering, and without question. Do you understand me, bloods?"

"Yes, sir," N'dren, Chaya and Y'su all managed to reply, in staggered unison.

"Then forward march. Hop to it! Dog trot, and follow me."

K'danag began to jog. Y'su and Chaya followed him at once. N'dren staggered a bit in finding his footing in the sand, and struggled after them. He didn't have to ask where they were headed or what would come next.

After all... he had been a weyrbrat once. He remembered this part, very, very keenly...



Candidates and older weyrbrats had claimed their points of vantage along the winding path through the FireFlight

Complex; blankets, chair and hammocks had sprouted like mushrooms, and someone had nicked a skin of cooking wine from the kitchens, and it was being passed from hand to hand. "Here they come!" shouted Ryuri, to ragged cheers from up and down the curving line.

Bherruk and Caradrin added their voices to that cheer as Wingsecond K'danag came jogging into view. Ankasen simply stood and stared, shocked dumb by the sight of the three painted figures who came stumbling along behind him.

"They're naked!" he exclaimed.

"Give the holderboy a drink," laughed Bherruk, tossing the skin of cooking wine at Ankasen.

The wineskin hit the dirt; Ankasen was too busy staring at Chaya's bobbing breasts to notice anything else. Wingsecond K'danag led his painted trio up the path and through the ranks of cheering weyrbrats. Ankasen and the rest turned as they past. A crowd of FireStormers came along merrily behind their initiates, and Bherruk and the other weyrbrats felling in after that cheerful crowd.

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"Just watch," Bherruk teased Ankasen, as the tanner apprentice pulled the new candidate along by the sleeve. "It gets even better!"



Wingsecond K'danag marched them right through the Complex, so that N'dren half-feared they might be made parade to the Weyrhall and back. They passed the empty Firehall, where the wingleaders had their offices, and then N'dren realized K'danag's destination.

Savukath lay drowsing in her wallow, her polished hide reflecting the sun's brilliance. She opened one eye to watch their approach, then raised her head with a curious snort. With her eyes swirling in growing emerald of curiosity, the young queen swayed her neck to follow their course around her wallow and up the porch steps to the door of Luka's weycot. "At attention!" the wingsecond barked at his three initiates, while he rapped hard on the goldrider's door.

N'dren tried to stand up straight, but somewhere half way through the FireStorm section of the Complex the absurdity of the moment had collared him, and he had been giggling uncontrollably since. Beside him, Chaya staggered, and bounced off his shoulder as she steadied herself.

K'danag knocked again. There was a noisy shuffle of feet behind them, below the porch, as a crowd of FireStormers arrived in a boisterous good humor.

"Oh no! Someone must have warned the goldrider we were coming!" called Karlina. "I bet she ran and hid!"

"No, there she is!" yelled M'scel, pointing toward the southwest. N'dren turned, as did the others, to see Luka,

some distance away through the trees, coming their way with a work basket balanced on one hip. Probably more of her plantings, N'dren figured – the goldrider seemed to have a passion for building trellises and planting flowers around the complex's privies.

Luka was walking fast, clearly alerted by Savukath to the visitors at her door. "Wingsecond?" she called, spotting B'tai among the crowd. "What is—"

Then Luka stopped shortly, her expression falling with shock. She blinked, closed her open mouth, and blinked again. "Ah..." she said, taking a hesitant step backward. "Bronzerider N'dren? If you'd not mind... you're dripping."

N'dren looked down, and saw that yes, indeed, he was dripping, little spots of blue onto the woven grass mat Luka had outside her weycot door. "Scuse," he said, shuffling aside. "Sorry about that."

"Goldrider Luka, if you'll serve as our first witness," said K'danag, his crisp voice sounding for all of the world as if the matter were of far more importance than three young wingmates being paraded about in nothing more than paint. "Flying with FireStorm requires three things. A sense of rhythm – for even the worst of 'Falls will have a pattern; a sense of timing – for if you don't know where you are, you're a danger to those flying around you. And above else -- a sense of humor, because if you take life too seriously, life will leave you behind. We present to you three new bloods who want to consider themselves part of FireStorm Wing. Bloods – prove yourselves."

An expectant silence fell, and N'dren felt Y'su and Chaya's confusion over what was expected of them next, almost as keenly as he could smell the alcohol in their shared exhalations. N'dren grinned, feeling vastly pleased about things. The paint was still wet and cool against his skin (although he suspected parts might begin to itch as it dried), the afternoon was beautiful, and best of all, he and his two closest friends were the center of attention from an avid crowd. He beamed, gave his waiting audience a theatrical wink, and then began to sing, letting the notes sort themselves as they would.

Lemme tell you a little story about a man named Tanner Yarr;

He was a hard drinking son of a raider, always at the bar...

Beer from the keg or brandywine from the shelf,

He could open his throttle and throw back a bottle as quick as the Harper himself... Tanner Yarr!"

There was a hoot of laughter from the crowd, and then hands began to clap along. N'dren elbowed Y'su sharply to get the brownrider to join in. It was a familiar song, one of the FireStorm Wing's favorite drinking songs. Y'su took up a harmony in his rich, lilting tenor, while Chaya chimed in a moment later, off-key but her voice finding the measure sure enough.

*Word got around that Tanner Yarr was no pretender,
From Izmir to here they'd lock up the beer when the tanner
went on a bender
Down at Safe Mooring, the Rising Sun, or at the Hog
If he was drinking at seven, by ten to eleven
well all the booze would be gone!
Tanner Yarr!*

N'dren lifted his arms and spun, beginning to dance a jig as he and his two friends continued to sing.

*Even if you saw it yourself, you wouldn't believe it,
And I wouldn't trust a person like me, if I were you
I wasn't there, I swear I have an alibi
I heard it from a man who knows a fella who says it's true!*

Then Y'su was dancing as well, hooking a elbow through N'dren's, and the gathered wingriders were howling in laughter as they spun into a reel, dragging Chaya into the dance with them.

*It was late in the morning on a cold rainy night,
That tanner rolled into the Wherry's End, looking to get
tight
He had his marks in his pocket, he had whiskey in his
eye,
Yarr said: Get up off your asses and set up the glasses,
I'm drinking this place dry!*

*Now all the serious boozers, they were soon broken
hearted
When the tanner finished off six and he was only getting
started
Guzzling down the pints, knockin' em back like candy,
He was lookin' alright to be drinkin' all night, then Jora
brought out the brandy!
Tanner Yarr!*

*Even if you saw it yourself, you wouldn't believe it,
And I wouldn't trust a person like me, if I were you
I wasn't there, I swear I have an alibi
I heard it from a man who knows a fella who says it's true!*

*Tanner drank the whole damn bottle, had another pint
or two,
When it made no impression, he started his session with
B'nyu's strongest homebrew
He was waiting for a pint when his face turned green
Jaysus, the tanner fell down after only fifteen!
You could have heard a pin drop, then the crowd let out
a roar
It took five barmaids to lift Tanner off the floor!
The healer looked him over and said 'I ain't never seen
it worst –
but it's not what you're thinkin',
it wasn't the drinkin'
why this man died of thirst!*

*Even if you saw it yourself, you wouldn't believe it,
And I wouldn't trust a person like me, if I were you
I wasn't there, I swear I have an alibi
I heard it from a man who knows a fella who says it's true!*

There was a roar of approval as the song came to its finish, and the applause for the irregular performance earned a querulous rumble of complaint from Savukath. "They can sing! They can dance!" shouted out Jandae in approval.

"They can hold their beer!" Z'haq added.

"And they aren't bad on the eyes, either!" laughed Aurala.

"I think we'll keep them!" agreed Bria.

"Not yet we don't. We have three more witnesses yet," Wingsecond K'danag said, gesturing for the three drunk wingriders to stumble their way off of Luka's porch. "There's three Wingleaders yet to see."

"And if you all can make it that far," laughed Jeri, "then the *real* party can begin!"

That earned another roar of approval; the crowd parted to make way for K'danag and the three initiates as they jogged back up the path, heading now for Wingleader Th'rin's cottage. N'dren knew, now, how this would go. FireBlaze's Wingleader would be visited, and then B'nalsh, before they finished up at L'ars's door. And then it would be back down to the beach, where there would be wine, and beer, and music and dancing and singing...

A party would be waiting, N'dren knew. There would always be that, when FireStorm's wishes for an evening were involved. And the wingsecond's threats aside, N'dren knew for sure now that he and his best friends were always going to be welcome. The trio could collapse and fail now, but their gameness to present a smile and a wink in the face of humiliation had truly earned them their place in FireStorm Wing.



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