
Exaggeration

by Ron Swartzendruber

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For a wonder, it wasn't raining. The freshly bathed dragonets of Weyrling Class 28 sported in the warm surf below the cliffs that loomed over the bathing pier, or lazed on the beach a little further off. Some of their riders gathered tiredly on the pier, while their more energetic classmates swam with their dragonets in the gentle waves between the pier and the breakwater further offshore.

"It's nice so have some sun for a change!" Ryuri exclaimed, floating upright in the water while hanging on to the shore side of the pier. She was far enough out along its length that she could barely touch bottom, and every swell lifted her off her feet.

"I thought it was supposed to be summer!" Rubi said. "Where'd all the rain come from, this month?"

"It *is* summer. This is the tropics, remember? Soon it'll be raining all day, every day," put in K'zuan, seated on the ocean side of the pier with T'yan. He dangled his feet in the water, watching the swimmers. "I don't know where they get the energy, I'm tired!"

"You should know better than to stay up late the night before an early morning drill," T'yan said.

"I was too excited to sleep! I didn't exactly see you all relaxed and calm either. I don't know why Weyrlingsecond Jallori scheduled our first night-flying drill before dawn instead of late evening. What did she expect?"

Fifteen-Turn-old Rubi swam up as he was talking. She clung to the pier across from Ryuri and said, "That wasn't so bad. What got me was that we went right on into morning drills with only an hour for breakfast, and then that stupid extra exercise drill right after lunch!"

"At least we have the rest of the afternoon off," K'zuan replied reasonably. "That doesn't happen every day."

Ryuri was only half-listening as she lifted her feet and let her head loll back, the gentle waves ruffling her hair. She wasn't really interested in what her classmates had to say; she got along with them well enough these days, but felt no great need to be friends. Besides, there were more interesting things to occupy her attention, most important of which was Ceorth. As he dozed on the sand, feeling the warm sun on his back, part of Ryuri's mind felt his drowsy, gliding dreams.

Another part of her mind relived the morning's drill. Ever since the day when she took her first faltering glide on

Ceorth's back, flying always gave her a rush. She wished they were done with the short practice flights and strengthening exercises; more than once she had thought about trying to sneak off on a restday and take longer flights, but she knew all a muscle strain at this stage would ground them for far longer than she could bear. Did this floating in the water feel the way gliding did for Ceorth?

T'yan interrupted her reverie. "She shouldn't do that," he grumbled to no one in particular.

Ryuri looked up, but had to turn around towards the beach to follow T'yan's gaze. Their classmate Annalora slowly walked up out of the surf, naked as a hatchling wherry. That in itself wasn't so remarkable; by now even the holdbreds swam naked, though most ran shamefacedly for their clothes as soon as they got out. What was remarkable about Annalora was her curvaceous figure and her utter lack of shame. As she stood there making a production of wringing out her hair and brushing water from her flawless skin, M'con gave a low whistle from the water nearby.

"It's indecent," T'yan went on, though his eyes stayed locked on their classmate's lithe body until she sat down in the hollow of her green Nyseth's neck. "Doesn't she know the effect she has on us?"

"She knows exactly the effect she has," Ryuri chuckled. "Relax, boys... we'll get the Lecture soon, and then you can quench those urges instead of complaining about them."

"I just wish us weyrbreds didn't have to follow that stupid six-month celibacy rule," said G'rian loudly as he walked towards them, having heard the conversation from the end of the pier. Jayna walked with him; the older girl had developed quite a crush on her dark-skinned classmate, who had stood for Hatchings almost as long as Ryuri herself had. Ryuri kept having to remind herself that Jayna really was older than G'rian and Ryuri herself; with her diffident shyness, she seemed so much younger than her Turns, though she still had more maturity than most of the younger riders.

"It wouldn't be fair if you could sleep with people but we had to wait!" Rubi protested, her broad face furrowing into a frown.

"But it's supposed to be just so we don't get stressed and scare the dragons, right?" retorted G'rian. "It's more of a stress for us to go without than for you to wait a while longer. You're all used to not getting any." Beside him Jayna blushed, but she didn't say anything.

"True enough," said Ryuri, "But we're all supposed to be classmates together, right? Having different rules wouldn't exactly help that."

"Just because you ride brown like Weyrlingsecond Jallori doesn't make you a weyrlingsecond yourself!" M'con giped.

Ryuri outwardly ignored him, but his words stung. She *did* want to be a wingsecond someday, though she didn't want to admit it openly. "There *are* exceptions to the rules, you know," Ryuri said in a knowing tone. That ought to distract them.

"Like my brother," muttered K'zuan.

"Bh'ruk?" M'con said unbelievably, now clinging to the pier near Ryuri. "I thought he must've been put in that cot over by the weyrlingassistants so they could keep an eye on him for his six months!"

"That's what they wanted you to think. I don't know how he did it, but he cut a deal with D'zan..."

"With D'zan?" several classmates exclaimed incredulously.

"I ought to know," said Ryuri, stretching languidly at the thought of a few certain memorable nights.

"No, you didn't!" squeaked Jayna, aghast.

"Did you really?" Rubi said.

"Sure, before I Impressed. One time Bh'ruk and I walked right past D'zan, L'ward, B'baer, and K'bort on the way to Bh'ruk's cot, and he just grinned and waved at them."

"And they let him?" Jayna gaped.

"Oh, D'zan looked like he was about to bite his own teeth off, but he didn't say anything," Ryuri grinned. "The other three actually joked with us about it."

"Good thing Faydra isn't hearing this," G'rian muttered. Ryuri agreed inwardly; the rebellious goldrider was off shoveling manure for her latest punishment duty, but talk of anyone successfully thumbing their nose at the Weyrlingstaff would probably have had her all a-quiver inside, and plotting to duplicate the feat.

"That brother of mine," K'zuan groaned, bringing Ryuri back to more pleasant thoughts. "I don't know how he does what he does, but he sure does it."

"Oh, does he ever!" agreed Ryuri with a throaty laugh.

"So..." Rubi asked tentatively, "What is this 'lecture' you talk about, anyway?"

By then more classmates had drifted in to join the conversation. "Yes," Nalsha said. "Whenever anybody mentions it, they get this tone of voice like it's some big scary secret."

A mischievous idea occurred to Ryuri. "So you really want to know about *The Lecture*?" she said, exaggerating the words ridiculously.

"Yes, I want to know," Jayna put in, and D'relt, Ranya, and K'red chimed in with agreement.

"Well," Ryuri said, kicking up and leaning onto the edge of the pier, still in the water from the waist down. "Gather around and I'll tell you." She shot a wink to K'zuan and G'rian, though the latter just rolled his eyes and left as the holdbreds clustered tighter together. Jayna looked from G'rian to Ryuri, but curiosity apparently won out because she stayed to listen. K'zuan stayed, too; Ryuri knew he'd play along. A fleeting thought warned her that she should be trying to get closer to her classmates instead of playing jokes at their expense, but she ignored it and it went away as she began her tale.

"I heard all the details from my brother M'mon. His class got the Lecture a bit before we Impressed. It's not really all that big a secret to us weyrbreds, but we aren't supposed to tell anybody else. So you all have to promise not to tattle on me for talking, all right?"

"All right." "Sure." "I promise," various voices chimed in with agreement, and the group -- about a third of the class, now -- leaned in closer. Even T'yan looked interested. Luckily for her there wasn't anybody who'd know the real story and spoil the joke.

"So anyway, it's mostly about sex," she started off bluntly. "About what happens when your dragon rises to mate, and what you have to do before then to get ready for it."

"Get ready for it?" Jayna asked doubtfully.

"Yes. If you go virgin to your first mating flight, it's bad."

"Somebody even died from it a few Turns ago," added K'zuan, recognizing his cue. "Panicked and sent her green *between*, and had to be given the mercy flask. The green took T'bias's brown with her, and he died too."

The group hushed at the thought, and Ryuri spoke briskly into the silence. "So since then, they're extra careful about it. If you don't take care for it yourself, they stand over you and make you." That last part was not true, of course, but Ryuri was enjoying stringing them along. They'd hear the real lecture soon enough, after all.

"So you *have* to sleep with somebody?" Ranya said in a faint voice.

"That's right," K'zuan replied.

"That doesn't sound so bad," Rubi said. "I'm kind of wishing I hadn't missed my chance before Impressing, anyway." Nalsha nodded in agreement, smiling at Rubi.

"Well, maybe not for you girls."

"I've already... well, I'm not a virgin anymore," said K'red awkwardly. He sounded so proud of himself; Ryuri was almost sad to burst his bubble. Oh well, the rest of their reactions would be funny.

"Yes, but there's virgin, and then there's virgin," Ryuri said mysteriously.

"You mean, like boys sleeping with boys?" M'con said, the curiosity on his face plain to see.

"Eeeeeewww!" Ranya burst out, then blushed as everybody looked at her.

"Exactly like boys sleeping with boys, as it happens." Ryuri said briskly. "There are enough male greenriders out there, that anyone with a male dragon is going to fly one of their greens sometime. Even if it isn't your first mating flight, you can't risk going virgin to it."

"Can't risk panicking and sending your dragon *between*, after all," said K'zuan. He couldn't keep the mischievous tone out of his voice, but it looked like none of the others picked up on it.

"And you mean not virgin that way," T'yan said flatly. M'con, K'red, Br'dyl, and D'relt all looked everywhere but at each other.

"That's right," Ryuri said, grinning at their holdbred discomfiture, unable to resist adding to it. "Just remember this bit of advice: spit isn't a good lubricant." She laughed out loud at their gaping confusion. "Never mind, you'll figure it out one way or the other... as long as you don't wait so long the weyrlingseconds have to show you!"

"I don't believe you!" T'yan blustered. "They'll never make me do any of that... filth!" He gave Ryuri a glare that might've dropped a watchtower in its tracks, then stomped off down the pier before she could say anything. He was probably smart enough to figure out that there was no such rule, or else to ask someone and find out. But Ryuri would bet marks that some of the others believed every word of it.

"What about, you know, girls?" Nalsha asked tentatively.

"Oh, that's not such a big deal," Ryuri said dismissively. "There's few enough of us brown and bluerider women, you'll probably never wake up next to one of us. Never hurts to get practice, though." She cocked an eyebrow at her listeners, seeing that Ranya had gone white, while Nalsha blushed pink, and Rubi looked like she'd be blushing too if her skin weren't dark enough to hide it. A lot of the boys were blushing too-- Ryuri had never figured out why the idea of two women together got men so hot under the trousers. "Don't be asking me for lessons, though," she added wryly. Some of the girls *were* sort of cute, but she preferred men.

Nobody else seemed to be able to find their voices, so Ryuri finished. "Just don't let the Weyrlingmaster catch you getting too frisky before the Lecture," she warned jokingly, "Or you might find yourself missing the parts of your anatomy you'll want to use after it!"

With that, she dropped back down into the water and stroked away to go join Ceorth in his dreams of flying.



That night, though, Ryuri could not sleep. She wished she hadn't brought up the subject of sex so openly, because she couldn't get it out of her mind now. She'd never been crazy for it like some of her friends, but almost six months without it had her feeling as hot and muggy as the tropical night air. She wondered if this was how men felt all the time-- it would go a long way to explaining some of the stupid things they did.

Right now Ryuri herself felt like doing something stupid. Sure, she could take care of things on her own, but after her great show of superiority, she hardly wanted her classmates catching her at it right there in the barracks. And if she was going to take the huge risk of sneaking out anyway, she wanted more than that. Sneaking out had never seemed worth the risk before, but she told herself that since so few people actually did it, she might have a chance of getting away with it. Everyone else was asleep; she looked twice at Faydra, but the goldrider was out cold, probably exhausted from the afternoon's punishment duty. That was a relief; if Faydra saw anybody trying anything as outrageous as sneaking out, there was no telling what she would do; invite herself along, sneak out separately, have Yttrith wake the weyrlingstaff, or more likely something else, more devious than Ryuri could imagine. That is, if she hadn't managed to sneak out already a time or two; Ryuri wouldn't have put that past her.

But it looked like luck was with Ryuri, and she really could do it without anyone knowing; even the weyrlingstaff and their dragons would be asleep this time of night. Well, probably.

'If I get away with it, *one* other person will know', she thought wryly. She really shouldn't risk it, though. She should stay here and grit her teeth. Besides, the weyrlingstaff were probably extra watchful whenever a class was this close to the Lecture; there were only a few days left, after all. Of course, they might not hold the Lecture right at the start of the training period next sevenday, so it might well be longer. She groaned to herself at the thought.

Ceorth twitched and whuffled in his wallow next to her bunk. He was almost too big to fit, and he was the smallest of the browns in the class. She propped herself up on one elbow and gazed down fondly at him. She still had not grown tired of just looking at him, and supposed she never would. Maybe he would even distract her long enough for her tiredness to overcome her horniness so she could sleep.

As she watched, she caught an echo of his dreams. Wind in his wings as he looped and dove, other dragons all around him... all of a sudden it reminded Ryuri too much of a mating flight. At his age, it was probably just innocent play, unless maybe Ryuri's own needs were leaking into his mind.

That settled it. That stupid rule was to protect the dragons, and Ceorth was obviously worse off with her in this state than he'd be if she went and got some relief. Yes, that was it. She pulled her shorts on under her thin nightshirt and climbed out through one of the open windows rather than risking the creak of the door.

The night air was even muggier outside, redolent with tropical scents, and clouds hid the moons and stars. It had rained earlier in the evening, but was only dripping now. Barefoot, she crept past the lecture hall and into the trees just south of the weyrlingstaff cots. They were probably all asleep; the dragons she could see certainly looked like it. Eagerness battling caution, she made her way past several cots to the door of Bh'ruk's, hoping he would not mind being woken. As she reached for the latch, though, muffled noises from inside told her that her friend was already awake -- and already had company.

Ryuri felt her mouth twist, but didn't let her disappointment hold her there where she might be caught. Bh'ruk might have some special deal with the weyrlingmaster, but Ryuri herself certainly did not.

After escaping the weyrling complex, she pondered who to try next. Automatically she checked on Ceorth and found him still fast asleep. She really should go back and get some sleep herself or she'd regret it the next day, but she still felt far too wound up to sleep. Maybe Lodrun would be willing to help her out?

She kept away from the glow-lit paths as she walked around the edge of Main past the Dragon Infirmary. When she came in sight of the candidate barracks door, she realized what she should have known all along; there was no way she could sneak in there without someone seeing and

telling. Maybe he'd come out looking for company of his own? If she waited... but no. She didn't dare hide in these trees, since the Weyrwoman's weyr was right on the other side of them; Valenne had been snappish lately, and the last thing Ryuri wanted was to startle Nicareth and wake her rider.

As quietly as she could, she went around the back of the Weyrhall. Maybe some of her friends in the support staff barracks were up and about? But no, everything was quiet there too.

She was desperate enough to consider heading into one of the Flight complexes, but sanity reasserted itself after only a moment. There was no way she could keep an adventure a secret there, and she'd jump right into Nicareth's jaws before facing the Weyrlingmaster if he caught her with a rider.

She worked her way back up to the weyring complex, trying to decide whether to wake G'rian via Ceorth and Khuth. None of the others in the class were worth considering, either too annoying or too young or both. G'rian would be willing, she was sure, and would keep the secret rather than land himself in just as much trouble and Ryuri. What she didn't know was whether G'rian could sneak out without waking anyone else, or if they could find a place far enough away from anyone. G'rian had many talents, but keeping his voice down was not among them.

Ryuri decided to try Bh'ruk again before risking G'rian. As she crept through the trees south of the weyring complex hall, she heard hushed whispers ahead and froze. Was someone lying in wait to catch her? No, she recognized them now; Rubi and Nalsha. Whatever they were up to, maybe it would distract her from her other need.

Treading as carefully as she could, Ryuri crept up behind them as they looked towards the weyringstaff cots. Nalsha turned her head to whisper something into her friend's ear, but stifled a shriek when she saw Ryuri behind them.

"So, what are you two doing sneaking out?" Ryuri asked.

"And if we asked you the same question? You're not our Weyrlingsecond," Rubi replied boldly, her dark skin all but hiding her in the dim light.

"I could say I was out looking for you, trying to keep you out of trouble."

"But we only left when I woke up and saw your bunk empty," Rubi replied.

"Shh!" Nalsha hissed. "Look, he's moving!"

Ryuri squatted down to see what her classmates were talking about. There was a figure in the shadow of the stores building... she couldn't make out who it was at first, but then she saw it was M'con. He wasn't moving, though, but staring towards Bh'ruk's cot. Ryuri followed his gaze and saw who the girls were looking at; a slight figure crouched down against the wall, too deep in the shadow for face or even gender to be seen.

"Aww, he sat down again," Nalsha said.

"Who is it?" Ryuri whispered. Five weyrings sneaking out in one night was unheard of, and a disaster waiting to happen, but she couldn't help being amused all the same.

"D'relt." Rubi answered softly. "We sneaked out after you did and spotted M'con following somebody. We saw it was D'relt when he passed the trail to Main and walked too close to a glowbasket."

Ryuri chuckled, wondering what Bh'ruk would say when he heard about it in the morning. That is, if he wasn't already looking out his window silently, laughing himself silly. Up ahead, D'relt stood up again and made as if to peer into that window, but suddenly ducked as though he'd heard a noise.

That brought Ryuri back to reality. Because her little story this afternoon had brought all this on, it was up to her to fix it or Jallori would peg her as the ringleader of this night's adventures. "All right, this little lineup is funny, but we've got to get everybody out of here. If any of us makes a mistake, we *all* get caught."

"Not if we sneak out of here before they know we're here," Rubi retorted, just a bit too loudly. It was either that or Nalsha's silencing hiss that alerted M'con, who looked back in their direction. Ryuri froze, knowing movement would give them away; so did Rubi, apparently, but Nalsha apparently didn't have as much experience sneaking around. She dropped to the ground in a whoosh of breath; Rubi groaned as M'con started towards them.

"So, more people sneaking out," M'con grumbled.

"You grumpy at getting caught?" Rubi muttered back. M'con didn't reply; he was busy helping the embarrassed Nalsha back up. Ryuri grinned in the dark; for the last month or so, M'con's attraction to the petite girl had been obvious to everyone except Nalsha herself. Ryuri wondered again if M'con just wanted Nalsha because she was the only girl in the class shorter than he was, but put the idle speculation out of her head as she motioned everybody to retreat.

The whole group backed off into the clump of trees by the complex hall, far enough away not to be seen or heard even if one of the weyringstaff woke up. "We need to get D'relt out of there," Ryuri said firmly. "If he gets caught, Jallori will ask around until she knows who all else sneaked out. Even if all your dragons sleep through this, how much do you want to bet some of our classmates don't?"

"Then why bother about D'relt if we're going to get caught anyway?" Rubi asked.

"Because if we all get out of here fast and quiet enough, Jallori won't have any reason to ask anybody about sneaking out," M'con answered before Ryuri could. Muttering, he went on, "I wish we could leave him to get in trouble, if he's going to sneak off to that bastard instead of--" he bit off whatever else he was going to say.

"Right," Ryuri added, not bothering to wonder what M'con was talking about. "Rubi, you want to sneak up there and get D'relt for us?"

Nalsha protested, "Why does *she* have to? Ryuri's the one who started it!"

"Because I have the darkest skin," Rubi answered. "With five of us out here, we don't have much time, and it has to be whoever has the best chance of getting away if we wake anybody up."

"Why are you defending Ryuri? She doesn't care about us!" Nalsha went on.

"Hey!" Ryuri said, then went on more quietly, "I promised not to be such an ass to everybody, and I meant it!"

"Then why'd you scare everybody so bad this afternoon?"

Ryuri opened her mouth, then shut it again. Nalsha had a point.

"You know she's been helping me study, Nalsha," Rubi said more calmly. "She's not exactly a friend but she's better than she was."

M'con had held his tongue, looking back and forth between Nalsha and the weycrofts where D'relt hid, but now he spoke up. "Come on, Nalsha, let's head back to the Barracks."

Nalsha looked like she wanted to argue some more, but Rubi spoke first. "Ryuri, I'll go get D'relt, but only if I can call in that big favor you owe me, right now."

"What do you need?" Ryuri asked cautiously.

"Last time we sneaked out at night I was risking my butt trying to keep yours out of trouble, so this time it's your turn." Rubi's teeth looked bright white as she grinned. "You have to stay out here, and if anybody wakes up, you have to make noise and get them to chase you instead of me."

"I... all right, I'll do it." M'con and Nalsha turned to go, and Ryuri couldn't resist teasing them. "Hey, no stopping for funny business on the way back!" The two of them crept off without answering, and Ryuri silently wished M'con luck, even as she doubted he'd get any tonight with Nalsha so worried about Rubi.

"Before I go, I need to ask you something," Rubi said. "You were whershitting us all this morning, right? About the weyrlingstaff forcing the boys to sleep together and all?"

"Mostly," Ryuri admitted. "The part about not being a virgin at your first flight is true enough, but you don't have to lose your virginity every way."

Rubi smothered a giggle. "Don't worry, I won't tell. It'll be too funny watching the boys look sideways at each other!"

"Good," Ryuri felt herself grinning. "And I won't tell

on you for sneaking out if you don't tell on me."

"Done," Rubi said. "You wouldn't make such a bad friend after all. Now I have a silly greenrider to go rescue." Before Ryuri could think of a reply, Rubi was off through the trees and gone.

'Friend?' Ryuri thought. Well, for a holdbred, Rubi wasn't bad, even as young as she was. 'Maybe something good will come from my exaggeration after all,' Ryuri thought to herself, and settled in to wait.



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