
Head in the Clouds

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The cloud looked like a sleeping dragon as Ceorth climbed towards it. After they swung around the cottony mass, Ryuri glanced back and saw that it looked completely different from the other side. Funny how clouds could do that, she mused, looking forward again as they flew between more puffs of white. Funny all the things you didn't notice from the ground, that riders somehow forgot to put into their stories.

Then again, Ryuri didn't think she could ever describe flying to someone who hadn't done it, not in a way that would really mean anything. The rush of wind past the helmet... the clean, crisp taste of the air... the feel of Ceorth's warm and muscular neck between her thighs... no, there were no words for any of it, not really.

Ceorth looped easily around and between the fluffy clouds. These were cumulus, she thought, rolling the odd word on her tongue. The Ancients sure had come up with a lot of weird words for clouds. Cumulus, the puffy white masses like the ones was looking at now. Stratus, the long marching ranks. Cirrus, the sparse wisps that soared higher than any dragon could fly. Nimbus, the solid gray mass that meant rain. All of these, and their combinations and variations, poured through her mind, each one with the memorized images from lessons now supplemented by memories of actual cloud formations she'd seen in wingdrills or these solo flights she'd begun taking as soon as she could.

Ceorth's mindvoice broke through his rider's reverie.

We are high enough now, rider. I want to try it again.

All right, just head back that way as we go, I don't like the look of that cloud bank up ahead.

I will do that. We go now! With no further warning, Ceorth rolled forward, stroked his wings once, then tucked them for the dive. The air screamed past Ryuri's helmet and whipped away her exultant yell before it reached her ears. The green jungle blur grew noticeably closer, though still comfortably far below. Ryuri bent far forward as Ceorth rocked from side to side. He stabilized himself with tiny adjustments, keeping his wings tucked -- he'd learned the hard way not to try maneuvering with any more than a wingtip at this speed, though the mistake had taught him a lot about how to recover from a surprise barrel roll.

Now! Ceorth's warning barely gave Ryuri time to clutch her flying straps. The horizon turned over, and again and

again and again; Ryuri's exultant whoop was as one with Ceorth's wordless swell of joy.

With a bruising jerk Ceorth leveled out and spent the rest of his speed in a steep, steady-winged climb. Ryuri's vision started to grey out, and she clung to Ceorth's neck, gasping and laughing, until her hammering heart could force the blood back into her head again.

Four rolls that time! Ryuri laughed, thumping Ceorth's neck excitedly.

We climbed well without having to struggle, Ceorth replied. ***That was a good angle.***

Want to try for five rolls?

I want to dodge clouds now.

Ryuri let him have his way; it was his reward for obeying so well during drills. He finally was doing that now without Ryuri having to control him every moment, for which she was relieved. Her early laxness had not caused any permanent problems for her brown. Not every fault from early in training had been corrected, though; some of her classmates still resented her. She didn't want to think about that right now, though, not on a restday with the whole sky around them.

Ceorth had found a thicker patch of clouds, now, and flew through them back and fourth as fast as he could, dodging through the narrow and ever-changing gaps as though the wispy grey edges were really silver Thread that would burn him if he touched it. The wind had begun to pick up, Ryuri noticed, teasing more of those wisps from the edges of the formerly rounded and pillowy cumulus. The sun was still bright overhead; though there was a solid gray bank of cumulonimbus off to the west, the air didn't smell like rain yet. She would just need to keep an eye on it, was all. They should not stay up too much longer, anyway; Ceorth was far from full-grown yet, and Weyrlingsecond Jallori would put a hard stop to their restday solo flights if they ever made Ceorth noticeably tired at drills the next day.

Thinking of drills reminded her that their first jumps *between* were coming up soon. They'd already been doing visualization exercises for the last couple of sevendays; the next few would have them practicing jumps with coordinates from Nusrath and Yoseth, and generating their own for the older dragons and their riders to review, and finally their first true solo jumps. Ryuri never liked admitting to fear, but this was different; if a weyrling didn't fear their first jump at least a little, they obviously didn't have half the sense of a wherry.

Even though her body was with Ceorth, her thoughts refused to submerge in action as they normally did so easily. Her mind drifted to questions that probably gnawed at every one of her classmates. How many will we lose? And who?

Truth to tell, Ryuri wouldn't cry all that hard if certain of them vanished *between*; but she was surprised to realize she would miss a lot of them. She was starting to get along better with many of them, though some of the boys still had not forgiven her for scaring them with the thought of being forced to sleep together, especially bronzerider T'yan, who nursed grudges the way most boys nursed crushes.

Holdbreds were so weird about sex, she hadn't been able to resist tweaking them that time before the Lecture. Automatically she leaned as Ceorth banked sharply, but her chain of thought would not be stopped, wish it away though she might.

There might not be anything to do about T'yan, but she really should try to get along better with the others. She wasn't sure how to do that, but she knew it was her responsibility after how dismissive she'd been about the holdbreds early on. At least she'd made a start with Rubi, which was lucky since that was who she'd ended up sharing a cot with.

A rumble of thunder snapped Ryuri out of her woolgathering. The clouds had thickened around them, and a vast anvil-shaped cumulonimbus mass loomed to the west. *We should get back*, she told Ceorth.

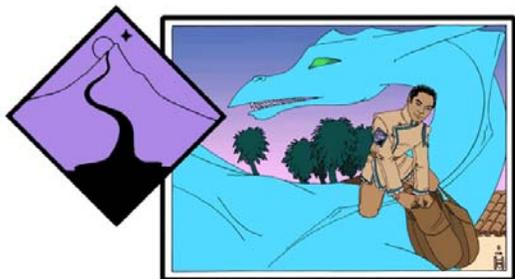
The winds here are fun! he said by way of reply, still dodging through the narrowing gaps between cloud patches.

But getting caught in a thunderstorm wouldn't be so fun! As if to punctuate her warning, thunder cracked again, closer this time.

You are right, Ceorth agreed suddenly. ***The air feels prickly. I will fly fast.*** He turned and made for the clearer air to the east, in the direction of the Weyr. Thunder crashed again, and this time she saw a flash reflected off the clouds up ahead.

Ryuri's worries went away in a familiar surge of adrenaline. Ceorth winged his way ahead of the storm, and Ryuri bent low over his neck, thrilling at the power of his muscles beneath her. She laughed despite the danger, finally feeling alive again. Rain began to spatter them, and she urged Ceorth to greater speed.

Jallori would shard her up one side and down the other for letting herself get caught in the storm, but right now Ryuri didn't care. She felt her heart lift and her worries fall away. Ryuri meant to enjoy every moment, because she knew that sooner or later she was going to have to land.



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