
Time to Dance

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2859.12.04

"Well, we actually made it!" K'zuan laughed. "We got through our last 'Fall as a class and didn't even lose anybody!" He skipped for a couple of steps, but then his foot slipped in a muddy patch on the path and he almost fell over.

Ryuri couldn't resist teasing him. "It would be terrible to survive all the way to graduation only to land face-first in a puddle and drown!"

"Speaking of drowning," Rubi said from just ahead, as she looked at the gray sky between the trees overhead.

"Summer's coming again!" laughed Nalsha from beside her. "C'mon, let's run and beat the rain!" She and Rubi took off. Ryuri grinned and chased after them, feeling light on her feet as she passed a few other classmates also heading to the Weyrhall. The skies opened and the rain came crashing down, and soon the whole class was running, getting drenched but laughing anyway, until they all piled through the Weyrhall doors.

"Looks like we're early!" K'zuan called out as he shook the water off his arms. It was actually well after lunch, but as usual when a 'Fall made riders miss a meal, the kitchen staff had saved generous portions for them. Several of the kitchen ladies were in the process of setting food out on the serving table, but other than that the hall was almost empty.

"Good thing Weyrwoman-second Dunia let us go before the ground sweeps were finished," M'ronit said.

"Yep!" M'con added "So we get first crack at the food!"

"Hah!" laughed Jayna. "Don't eat it all, now!"

"Yes, mother," M'con replied sarcastically as he headed over to grab a tray. Others were already in line, and Ryuri finished wringing out her tunic and followed.

"I was hoping for a nice easy 'Fall," T'yan was saying to M'ronit and M'con just ahead of Ryuri. "But then of course it had to blow south onto the Dorado coast."

"Right, usually I like the first hour of that Thread track," M'con agreed. "Flying along all nice and lazy watching the clumps drown in the sea, waving at the occasional seahold... that's my idea of Threadfighting!"

"Well, that is why we are out there watching Thread drown," M'ronit said. "Because every so often it does blow onshore."

"At least the weather was good over Thornblaze!" G'rian put in from behind Ryuri. "And we got a good break over the Great Bay."

"But then those annoying thermals over the Cibola desert," T'yan grumbled. "I don't even know why we bother flying that, nothing there but sand and salt mines." He reached across the table to grab a couple of big meatrolls.

"I don't know why we bother flying Cibola at all!" M'con said, ladling soup into his bowl. Ryuri kept forgetting he was the nephew of Izmir's lord, but hearing him talk that way about Izmir's rival hold reminded her.

"Because we have to!" M'ronit said reprovingly. "Two thirds of that hold is fertile farmland. Let a burrow get started there and do you think Izmir would be safe?"

Ryuri rolled her eyes at their bickering -- that was new for the formerly inseparable pair -- but her mood was too good to let it get to her. "So, here we are!" she said to G'rian and Synde behind her, as the boys ahead left for the table.

"That's right!" Synde said. "Just a couple days of drills, and then we graduate!"

"We did pretty good, I'd say," G'rian said. "Only lost six."

"Too bad for D'relt and K'red," Ryuri grimaced as she reached the table. "They came close, but didn't quite make it."

"At least you're showing some sympathy!" Nalsha piped up. "You were such a wher's ass about M'len, after all."

"Oh, give that a rest, Nalsha!" Rubi said from next to her, rolling her eyes and nudging her friend. "That was months ago."

Ryuri nodded gratefully to Rubi, but didn't say anything. They'd lost Karista, Gwenlynn, M'len, K'red, D'relt, and of course Faydra. Six out of twenty-one was about average; but Ryuri didn't want to think about the other half of that statistic, namely that the same number would probably die in their first Turn as wingriders. All weyrfolk knew the odds from birth. Weyrling training could never quite prepare anyone for the real thing. As her classmates chattered happily, Ryuri was hard-pressed to hide her sinking mood.

The real test was coming.



"So," L'ars said as he sat down next to Lybelle at the head of the council table. "Another new crop. D'zan?"

The Weyrlingmaster said, "It's a fairly solid group, and none are being held back. I have concerns with some of them, but you've all had a chance to see for yourselves over the last couple of months."

"I don't need any in the Queens' Wing," Lybelle put in, "and there are no cross-crafted dragonhealers. The combat Wings can have all fifteen graduates."

"A good group this time," L'ars observed.

Z'hon snorted.

"Do you have something to say?" R'mal asked the shaven-headed wingleader pointedly.

"Just that I want two this time," Z'hon said.

"Well, I'm fine with one, as long as it's a brown," B'deras of SkySoaring said, leaning back nonchalantly. "Any brown will do... well, so long as it's not that thin pale weak one or the ambitious girl."

"Not picky at all, are we," said D'zan gruffly. Beside him, Jallori grinned. The Weyrleader went on, "That only leaves K'zuan--"

"Bh'ruk's brother? No thanks," B'deras said quickly.

"Afraid of the competition?" L'ars put in slyly.

"--and H'jari," D'zan finished. "Unless you've an objection to him as well?"

"Kayanth's rider? I'll take him."

"And once again B'deras manages to snag the first choice," Th'rin said, amused.

"You could have spoken up if you wanted him," B'deras yawned.

"Oh, he wasn't the one I wanted," replied the FireBlaze wingleader. "I want T'yan, because I'm short of bronzes other than J'hanos."

A'nar spoke up quickly. "I should get T'yan. We've only one unranked bronze as well, with an inexperienced rider to boot."

"I would not exactly call G'tin inexperienced," R'mal stated politely.

"The boy is less experienced than J'hanos," growled Z'hon. "And the Oldtimer's bloody great beast counts for two anyway, or at least he thought so when he was still in my Wing."

"There's no doubt J'hanos is more experienced," said Lybelle. She traded glances with L'ars.

The Weyrleader nodded. "StormWind gets T'yan. Th'rin, you get your pick of the browns."

"Fine," Th'rin said levelly. "But I want both Ryuri and K'zuan, then."

"I want Ryuri in StrongWind," Z'hon retorted. "It's where she belongs, anyone can see that."

Jallori raised an eyebrow at D'zan and the Weyrleader's mouth twitched. "Glad I didn't take your bet," he muttered to her under L'ars's next words.

"No, Z'hon, you don't need any more of the larger colors. Any *other* objections?"

B'nalsh of FireStar seemed on the point of speaking, but then shook his head.

"Done, then," Lybelle agreed.

Z'hon was not subdued. "I want Synde and G'rian instead. Synde has already asked to be in StrongWind."

The Weyrleader said, "Both of these two are suited for StrongWind, are they not?" He looked at D'zan and Jallori.

"Well enough," D'zan agreed. Jallori nodded.

L'ars shrugged. "Moving along, then."

M'ler of SkyMaster spoke up. "I would like Jayna. I have need of a mature greenrider."

"Jayna has definitely matured," D'zan said. "She needs seasoning in the air, but she's the steadiest of the greens."

"Looks like I'd best grab while the grabbing is good," B'nalsh said before L'ars could speak. "How about Rubi and Nalsha?"

"I was going to keep those two for myself," L'ars laughed. "How about Nalsha and the pick of the other greens?"

"Fine with me," grinned B'nalsh. "I'll take Ranya instead of Rubi."

"What about you, R'mal?"

"M'ronit and M'con have both requested to be in FlameWind," the blonde flightleader replied.

D'zan broke in, "I've another rider I was hoping to place there instead of M'con."

"That would be Annalora?" R'mal said with a small sigh.

"Yes. She needs a gentle but steady hand, and you had better watch her closely at gathers, as if I had to warn you."

"Very well, I will take her and M'ronit. Where shall we place M'con?"

"I'll take him myself," L'ars said after a moment.

"We need another for StormWind," A'nar said. "Runea."

L'ars frowned. "Which would just leave Br'dyl for SkyTamer. Objections, T'jalden?"

"Fine with me. I'm at full wingstrength."

"We're done, then," L'ars nodded. "Thanks for making this an easy one," he grinned, looking around the wingleaders as they stood.

"Adjourned, then," Lybelle said.



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"So, any bets?" K'zuan said as he sat down next to Ryuri at the class's table. "They won't announce our Wings until dinner's nearly done, so there's still time to lay your marks!"

"M'ronit and I are going to FlameWind," M'con said confidently. "Nobody better bet against that, unless you want to lose, of course."

"What makes you so sure?" T'yan challenged.

"Because I asked!" M'con said. "We both asked, and Wingleader R'mal said he didn't see any reason why not. So we're in for sure! He never lies."

Beside him, M'ronit didn't look so certain.

"Is that really what he said, M'ronit?" Ryuri asked.

"Well--" he started to say.

"What, you think I'm lying or something?" M'con snorted before M'ronit could get more than a word out.

"No, I'm just seeing what he has to say when you aren't speaking for him," Ryuri shot back.

"Right!" Rubi chimed in from Ryuri's other side. "Just because you're sleeping together doesn't mean you get to be nasty to him."

"He's not being nasty," M'ronit said firmly. "I can stand up for myself, you know."

"So did he really promise you a spot?" Nalsha asked. "That's not supposed to happen, right?"

M'con started to say something but this time it was M'ronit who overrode him. "He said what M'con said he said."

"I thought Jallori told us not to bother the wingleaders with requests like that?" H'jari put in, confused. "If I thought it was all right, I would have asked to be in FireStorm."

"She didn't say we couldn't, bonehead," Ryuri grinned at H'jari to show she didn't mean the insult seriously. H'jari had once annoyed her beyond reason, but he was all right now that he wasn't mooning after her like a lovestruck woolie anymore. "She just said that it wasn't likely to do any good. They consider requests, but all sorts of other

stuff can override it, just like with the weyrling cot assignments."

"Oh, go on and lecture us some more," T'yan groaned.

"Well, R'mal said we'd be in his Wing, and he's a Flightleader, so he can get what he wants," M'con insisted. Again, M'ronit didn't look so sure; this wasn't the first time Ryuri thought he might be the smarter one of the pair.

K'zuan ignored M'con and pressed his original question. "C'mon, somebody wants to bet, right?"

"I bet a quartermark Ryuri ends up in StrongWind," Annalora drawled.

"I hope not!" Ryuri said, shuddering. The things she'd heard from M'mon during his first months there were bad enough, but what really scared her was the fact that there clearly were worse things he refused to tell her, his own twin sister, about.

"Hey, they aren't that bad anymore," Synde said. "Sure, they had a bad patch a few months ago, but..."

"But I lost a whole mark betting that L'ars would boot Z'hon out of the wingleadership!" K'zuan grumbled, then grinned, "Not fair of the man to hang on to his position just to spite me, you know."

"Not just you," H'jari said. "I lost money too, betting J'hanos would be the wingleader there by now. Instead he gets sent off to FireBlaze, Z'hon hangs on and brings his people back into line--"

"--and I still don't want to be in StrongWind!" Ryuri said sharply. M'mon's solution to his problems there seemed to have been joining in with the Z'honlings. Since Ryuri couldn't stand that clutch of blowhards, if she landed in that Wing she was probably in for a hard time.

"I think I'll be in FireStorm," Annalora announced.

M'con and Rubi and T'yan all rolled their eyes at their lazy classmate. "I'll lay a half-mark against that!" G'rian said. "It's a wonder you're even graduating, and you think the Weyrleader wants you in his own Wing?"

"If I was the betting type," T'yan said, "I'd bet on you going to FlameWind instead. R'mal takes all the problem cases."

"Hey!" M'con and Annalora said at once.

Before either could go on, M'ronit put in, "That's not always true, you know. That Wing has more good riders than not."

"Hey, quiet down there!" Jayna said from her end of the table. "It's time!"

At the dais table, D'zan rose to his feet.

"Last call for bets!" K'zuan whispered urgently, but nobody took him up on it.

"It's graduation night," D'zan announced in a voice that would have carried across the drill ground, and was enough to quiet the Weyrhall. "This is the twenty-eighth class since the Poisoning, and everyone in it is moving on to the combat Wings. Thanks to brownrider Jallori and the rest of my staff for training these pups right. I could say more, but you've heard it all before. Weyrleader?"

L'ars got up as the Weyrleader resumed his seat. "For FireStorm, greenrider Rubi and bluerider M'con."

Rubi leaped up and actually squealed, but it was drowned out by M'con.

"What!?" M'con's voice made people at nearby tables turn and look. "He promised!"

"No he didn't," M'ronit murmured. "You just heard what you wanted to hear. It'll be all right, though. Go on."

Rubi was already making her way to the FireStorm table, looking like she was walking on air. Nalsha watched her, seeming a little sad. M'con looked rebellious, but started over to his new Wing's table too.

Wingleader M'ler was already on his feet. "For SkyMaster, Jayna. Welcome to our Wing, greenrider."

Jayna's solemn expression bloomed into a smile, and she walked to her new table without looking back.

"Goodbye, mother," K'zuan said in a stage whisper. Nalsha laughed, but smothered it as A'nar got to his feet before Jayna was halfway to her destination.

"StormWind taps Bronzerider T'yan and Greenrider Runea." Both of them got to their feet and went to join their new Wing, also not looking back.

"For FireStar, Nalsha and Ranya," B'nalsh announced, smiling. "Welcome in." The two greenriders hurried over to join him. Ryuri noticed Rubi giving Nalsha a thumbs-up from FireStorm's table; the two friends were in the same flight, at least.

"Brownrider H'jari, come join us in SkySoaring," B'deras drawled. H'jari grinned as he got to his feet, and nodded to his remaining classmates before striding confidently off.

R'mal stood and said, "FlameWind welcomes M'ronit and Annalora." M'ronit looked thoughtful, and Annalora sulky, but neither hesitated. Ryuri looked up and down the nearly empty table; besides her, it was just K'zuan, G'rian, Synde and Br'dyl.

And now came the moment Ryuri had been dreading; Z'hon got to his feet. Ryuri's teeth clenched. She did *not* want to go to StrongWind! Z'hon didn't say anything for a moment, and Ryuri held her breath. Was he looking at her? He was! She wanted to yell to D'zan, even to the Weyrwoman, and ask them to change the assignment. She had to clutch the edge of the seat to keep herself from jumping up and blurting out something that would surely get her in trouble.

"Bluerider G'rian and Greenrider Synde, come join us." Z'hon said. Ryuri's breath went out with a whoosh as the bald wingleader went on. "If you're not up to it, Faranth help you, because I surely will not."

G'rian smiled wryly and nodded to Ryuri. She got her wits back together enough to wish her friend "Good luck!" as he turned to go. Synde was already halfway across the Weyrhall.

Th'rin was already standing. "For FireBlaze, Brownriders K'zuan and Ryuri."

Ryuri felt light-headed, but got to her feet and grinned at K'zuan as they walked together to join their new Wing. Ryuri barely heard Wingleader T'jalden tap Br'dyl for SkyTamer, because she was too busy looking at the people she'd be living with and fighting with from now on. She knew many of them by name and face, of course; from recent weyrling classes she knew athletic, twitchy A'ram; romantic R'ka, son of Dorado's Lord; proud C'jon from the class just before her own; Relki with whom she had once commiserated about failing to Impress for so many Turns; sturdy, confident Calynne; and dreamy, lazy Sasilva. Elounda, one of the weyrling group from the Ninth Pass,

was also a recent graduate; only a month and a half ago, same as C'jon. FireBlaze hadn't lost many weyrlings this Turn, she realized. That was a good sign.

There were more from the Ninth Pass; V'tor, dark and intense, barely glanced at her; the older and more relaxed – and handsome -- R'banon grinned; and of course there was their former Weyrleader J'hanos as well. Others she knew by sight but not to speak to were the veterans Kiah and Z'lar, sour-faced Fera, snooty Lilia, and the identical twins D'nel and H'rek, sitting on either side of D'nel's weyrmate Nokai, a nearly-five-Turn veteran despite being younger than Ryuri herself.

There were many more; nervous Rhyiza, dutiful Yunilyn, and pretty Jassy, who smiled a welcome and motioned Ryuri to an empty spot between herself and young F'gal, who was all but hopping up and down in excitement. K'zuan was already taking a seat between shy Seina and friendly K'san. At the far end of the table were junior wingsecond V'rili, less than a Turn in his knots, and senior wingsecond A'lerin, as a twenty-Turn veteran anything but new. At the other end sat Wingleader Th'rin himself, who had been Weyrleader during the move from Kadanzer Mountain; he nodded a welcome as Ryuri stepped over the bench and sat.

"Hey! Fresh meat!" A'ram said, grinning from across the table.

"Oh, it's you," Ryuri shot back, grinning despite her nervousness. "I didn't recognize you until you opened your big mouth." She and A'ram had often played netball and dashball together in past Turns; his sense of humor had always tended toward sarcastic teasing, though there seemed an edge to it now that Ryuri tried to ignore. She wanted to leave a good first impression with her new wingmates, so she wasn't about to let anyone get a rise out of her.

C'jon, next to A'ram, looked her up and down. "Why couldn't we get one of the pretty ones?"

Ryuri laughed at that. "Yes, because it's so important that the person fighting Thread next to you looks good!"

"Who cares about Thread?" A'ram replied.

"Not me!" C'jon said. "Who did you think we were, StrongWind? There's more to us than drills and fighting, and nice looking wingmates *are* good for the really important stuff."

A'ram gave an exaggerated sigh. "Looks like we lost out this time!"

Ryuri opened her mouth to give them a hot response, but felt a hand on her arm and remembered her resolve not to be baited.

Beside her, Jassy drawled, "This particular nice-looking wingmate thinks you two are full of it." She squeezed Ryuri's arm lightly, and in a voice meant to be overheard, told her "Boys will be boys, right?"

"Yes, don't mind those pups," R'banon said from Jassy's other side. "I understand you're from Fort, originally?"

"I am," Ryuri replied neutrally.

"Well, so am I," the older rider replied. "Just from a lot longer ago," he added, grinning. "Maybe we could compare notes sometime."

Ryuri figured he was implying a little more than that, but he was good-looking and probably quite experienced, so she just grinned and said, "Maybe we could."

"If you're still around," came a growl from beyond R'banon.

Frowning, Ryuri leaned around and saw that it was V'tor. "What's that you said?" she challenged.

"You heard me," V'tor replied. "We haven't lost anyone since T'oma, a few months back. We're about due, and new-bloods like you are on the long side of the odds."

"Look to your own odds!" Ryuri shot back, this time ignoring Jassy's cautioning hand. "Nobody's immune."

"I've survived longer odds than you'll ever see," V'tor said flatly. "And I've seen people die who were worth three of you. So I don't care who you are or what you want; you don't matter until you prove yourself."

"Well, then watch me and see!" Ryuri retorted, meeting his cold stare without a flinch.

"Enough of that down there!" wingsecond V'rili said, voice sharp with command.

Immediately Ryuri sat up straight. "Yes sir!"

C'jon hooted with laughter. "Yes, sir," he mimicked in an exaggeratedly feminine voice, but Calynne elbowed him and he shut up.

"I swear, she thinks we're StrongWind," A'ram sighed, shaking his head.

Jassy gripped Ryuri's arm again. "You two think you're Z'honlings or something," she told the two across the table. "Remember, we don't haze people. And it wasn't so long since you were new yourself, especially you, C'jon."

"I can defend myself, thank you very much!" Ryuri grumbled.

To her surprise, Jassy laughed. "Sure, but you don't have to! You're in FireBlaze now, and we stick up for each other."

"That's right!" young F'gal piped up.

Calynne added, "And if these two keep bothering you, we'll sit on them until they learn better."

"You can sit on me any day, Jassy!" A'ram said with an exaggerated leer.

Jassy rolled her eyes and laughed. "Keep trying, big-mouth. Maybe someday you'll get lucky."

C'jon and F'gal laughed at A'ram, and some more banter swept in from the other side, but Ryuri didn't pay attention to it. Instead she leaned closer to Jassy and asked in a low voice, "So, what can I expect in the next few days? Is there an initiation or something?"

Jassy replied in the same tone, "Well, we don't haze our new-bloods like StrongWind. We won't make you run around naked and painted in weird colors like FireStorm, either. Really there's not much to it. Whenever somebody new comes in we pick somebody experienced to be their, well, big brother or big sister or whatever you want to call it."

"All right, who's mine?" Ryuri asked.

"Me, as it happens," Jassy grinned. "Even though I'm younger than you. It's kind of funny, you're actually older than a bunch of us."

"Comes of getting a late start, I guess," Ryuri said, with a pang of memory from all those Turns of not Impressing.

"Ah, but I bet you wouldn't trade your Ceorth for anything, am I right?"

Ryuri felt herself grinning foolishly, remembering that moment of Impression; Jassy smiled back, obviously remembering her own.

I chose you, Ceorth said drowsily. ***Why does it matter how old you are?***

It doesn't, Ryuri replied. *I'm just glad you did choose me.* To Jassy, she said, "Anything else I need to know?"

"Not much. We drill hard, but aside from that and the usual duties your time is your own. Our next 'Fall is in six days, over Sunstone, Kadanzer and Barrier. You'll get your Wing patch after that; that's about all the initiation we really do. As long as you pull your weight, you'll be fine."

"Hey, people," F'gal said. "The harpers are tuning up. Let's get this table cleared off and moved so we can dance!"

The group dissolved in a bustling rush. Only then did Ryuri remember that she'd left her tray back at their old weyrling table. Most of her classmates had, in fact. Jayna had gone back to pick them up, and she nodded as Ryuri came over to give her a hand.

"I guess that's the last time for us, eh?" Jayna said wistfully. "It's a real shock to go from oldest people in the oldest class to junior-most in a Wing!"

"It is that," Ryuri agreed, piling plates and utensils onto a tray. "Good luck!" She blinked, then added, "Wait a moment, you have 'Fall late tonight, right?"

"The Wing does, but they're letting me sit out until I've had a chance to drill with them first, thank Faranth."

"That's good, I'd hate to have a midnight 'Fall my first time!" said Rubi, coming up to help them carry. "Hey, look at Synde and G'rian!"

Ryuri turned towards StrongWind's table and saw her two classmates almost staggering under the loads of trays and plates and bowls they were carrying. "The hazing starts right away, I guess," she said, seeing most of the pair's new wingmates laughing and taunting them. M'mon was right in the thick of it, she noticed with annoyance.

"WindFlight goes up in three days," Ryuri said absently.

"They'll be the first of us to fly 'Fall, I'd guess," Rubi said as she started back towards the dish drop-off.

Ryuri and Jayna followed, as support staffers came to move the table. Jayna said sympathetically, "No way Z'hon would let them off their first time, huh."

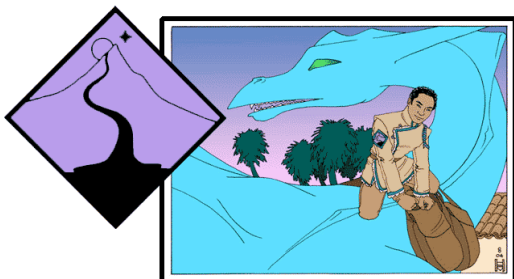
"Not sharding likely!" Ryuri laughed. "I'm just glad I didn't get stuck in that Wing."

As they neared the dish window, they came up to the StrongWind pair. Jayna offered to take some of Synde's load, but the younger girl shook her head. "I've got to carry it all," she said, biting her lip.

"Good luck!" Ryuri said. "Tell me if M'mon is too much of a wher's ass to you, eh?"

"Thanks, but I doubt you can do anything about it. Don't worry about me, I can take it." She set her load down with a sigh of relief, and one of the kitchen staff pulled it over to the other side of the window. She turned and left without saying goodbye. G'rian also hurried back after unloading, but at least he threw Ryuri a smile. When she turned around, Jayna and Rubi were already lost in the crowd.

Ryuri shook her head, wondering how many of her friends would still be alive at the next graduation. Or if *she* would be. Grimacing, she pushed that thought aside. It was time to dance.



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