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# Worse Things

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2859.05.25

Printed in FTA #24 (2007)

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Asleth bugled frantically. Ryuri looked to her left-- there was nobody on the blue's neck! Then down, to see a falling figure...

*Ceorth! Go!*

*I go!* Obediently the small brown tucked his wings and dove after M'len. Above them, Asleth dove too, shaken out of his panic. Ryuri leaned forward and clung to Ceorth's neck, glad of her goggles in the screaming wind of their dive. *Khuth and Telyeth also dive.* Ceorth said.

*They're too late. And I think we're too late. Remember, stabilize with just your wingtips, like we practiced.* Such maneuvers weren't part of the official drills, of course, but Ryuri and Ceorth had been practicing lots of things that weren't in the official drills.

*I have not forgotten.* Beside them, Asleth spun out of control and had to pull up, bugling in panic. M'len was also spinning, flailing his arms and kicking his legs. "Remember your lessons, you bonehead!" Ryuri muttered through her teeth. "Spread out and fall like a leaf!" No use asking Ceorth to relay that through Asleth; Jallori was surely trying already. Nusrath suddenly appeared below M'len's receding form, but too far to the side. It was almost impossible to make that kind of jump perfectly enough, which was why Ryuri hadn't even tried.

*I cannot go any faster,* Ceorth said matter-of-factly.

*Keep trying!*

*Nusrath tells me to pull up. The drill is not done. He says we could not leave our place in Threadfall, so we should not have left it now.*

*All right, fine. Remember, don't snap your wings out all the way at this speed.* Ryuri couldn't look away from the diminishing figure of M'len, so she closed her eyes, feeling sick. But she couldn't shut off her imagination of M'len's last moments. And beneath it, the memory of even worse things that could happen.

*Yes, I remember.* Ceorth sounded subdued. Carefully he changed his angle of descent until he was shooting along in a horizontal glide. Then he stretched out his neck and, with the other dragons of the class, began to keen.



"Well, I'm glad M'len died," Ryuri said at dinner that night. "He was an ass."

"How can you say that about him?" Nalsha asked

incredulously, not noticing she'd just dropped her breadroll into her stew.

"He's been... well, *\*was\** a real pain lately," Rubi said, "but nobody deserves to die for that. Anyway if you're glad he's dead, why'd you try to save him?"

"What happened, anyway?" Synde asked from further down the table, before Ryuri could answer. "I just saw him falling. And you diving after him. That was really something!"

"Hey, she wasn't the only one to dive," M'con said in an aggrieved tone. "G'rian and I tried too."

"You're lucky you didn't try too hard, or you might have hurt Telyeth's wings trying to pull up," M'ronit said.

Ryuri sighed. "I asked Jallori afterwards. Nobody knows why he fell. Maybe one of his straps got charred somehow, or maybe he just shaffed up when he put them on. But a big clump of rope hit him, and off he went."

"And that was your big chance to show off, huh?" T'yan said sourly.

"I was not trying to show off!" Ryuri flared. "I was trying to save his shaffing life!"

"Jallori and D'zan didn't give you much credit for that, did they," put in Synde.

"And they were right!" T'yan said. "None of you should have left your places. We're going up against real Thread soon, and I don't want you dropping out of formation and leaving me exposed."

Ryuri rolled her eyes. "When we go up against real Thread, the Queens' Wing will be there. They may not catch falling dragons anymore, but a rider would be no problem. Plus I hardly think any of you are going to shaff up your straps after today, eh?"

"So that's all this is to you?" Nalsha pressed. "Just something to teach us stupid holdbreds to mind our lessons?"

"Hey!" Rubi snapped. "Quit throwing that at Ryuri, you know she's not like that anymore."

"Oh, so you're her best friend now? Just because you're her cotmate..."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Rubi snarled back.

"Hey, stow it!" T'yan ordered.

"What's going on with you two these days?" K'zuan asked. "Best friends for a Turn, and all of a sudden clawing at each other like wildcats."

Nalsha blushed, and Rubi looked away.

"Ohhh, I get it!" M'con crowed.

"Get your mind out of the middens," Synde groaned. "You boys always think everything is about sex."

Nalsha had turned to look pleadingly at Rubi, who avoided her friend's eyes and got up from the table without finishing her dinner. Ryuri wasn't sure what their problem was, but figured they would work it out on their own.

"Poor M'len," Jayna said into the uncomfortable pause. "He was so scared of messing up."

"Oh, yes, poor M'len," Synde said sarcastically.

From the other side of Jayna, Br'dyl muttered, "You never said 'poor us' when M'len was trying to tell us what shaffups we were. Honestly, he's worse than Ryuri ever was."

Jayna shook her head slowly. "He was just lashing out because he was afraid. Trust me, I know."

Nalsha asked plaintively, "Can't we talk about something else?" When nobody responded immediately, she went on, "Um, Ryuri, how's your brother doing?"

"He's doing lots of pushups!" K'zuan teased.

"Ugh, StrongWind," Jayna said. "I hope I don't get stuck there when we graduate."

"Hey, they aren't so bad," Synde said. "M'mon's strong, so he's probably having fun, isn't he, Ryuri?"

"He's having his first Threadfall tomorrow," Ryuri said levelly. "Tomorrow night, actually." She thought of her twin fighting Thread in pitch darkness. Of death, and worse things. Old memories tried to surface, and Ryuri realized she'd lost her appetite.



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"--and I don't mind telling you I was scared out of my wits that first time," M'mon said. "We lost two riders before we were even done taking the handoff from Eastern, when that Oldtimer ex-weyrleader shaffed up." He tossed the ball to Ryuri, who was next to the net; she hit it to Synde, who popped it up for M'mon to send it over the net to the other side. G'rian bounced it to Solea, who hit it to Zaras, who sent it back sharply, almost hitting the net. The game went on, too hard and fast for anybody to talk. Ryuri tried not to think about their old friend K'levan, who would undoubtedly be here if he wasn't up fighting Thread with FireStar right now.

When they took a breather, M'mon went on. "Then that second time, we were just on deck but had to take off in a hurry to help SkyFlight when that squall blew up over Rubicon. Otherwise we'd be up there fighting now instead of FireFlight." He paused, and Ryuri could tell he was thinking of K'levan too.

"So what's it really like in StrongWind?" Synde asked.

"I won't lie to you, it's tough."

"It must've been," Ryuri said. "This is the first evening you've spent with us for a while; I was starting to wonder if you'd forgotten about us."

M'mon shrugged. "There's a lot of hazing the first couple sevendays, but I just had my initiation yesterday, so that ought to get better soon."

"So what is this initiation anyway?" Synde asked. "I've heard rumors but nobody ever says anything for sure."

"And I'm not going to, either. You'll just have to join up if you want to find out." M'mon grinned at the younger girl. But then, in a lower voice, he muttered, "There's a lot I can't talk about. Maybe you shouldn't--"

At that moment, draconic keening filled the air. "R'hanon," Ryuri and M'mon said together.

"Were you close to him?" Synde asked M'mon.

"He was my classmate," M'mon shrugged, grimacing. "We weren't what you'd call close, but he was all right. Hey!" he yelled to the other team. "Come on, let's get back

to the game."

The next few exchanges were hot and fast; M'mon was savage, and always-competitive Zaras quickly picked up the mood. Solea struggled gamely to keep up, and even Ryuri and her classmates had to look sharp.

Just as Ryuri dove after a slam from Zaras, the dragons keened again. She managed to get the ball up within range of M'mon, but he was standing stock-still and didn't even see it.

*Zilruth is gone*, Ceorth said.

"K'levan," Ryuri said numbly, still on the ground.

"K'levan?" Solea gasped. "Oh, no!" She rushed around the net and threw her arms around M'mon, who stood with his eyes tightly shut.

Ryuri levered herself to her feet. G'rian was shaking his head slowly, mouth twisted. Synde looked uncertainly between her classmates and M'mon; she hadn't been close friends with K'levan. Even Zaras seemed a little subdued.

After a moment, M'mon gently untangled himself from Solea. "Let's keep playing," he said in a tight voice. "It's what he would have wanted."

"I don't care!" Ryuri burst out, surprising herself. "How can you..." her voice was stopped by a lump in her throat. If not for the storm last time, it would have been M'mon up there tonight.

"K'levan would have wanted it. You know how he loved netball," G'rian agreed. He'd been friends with K'levan for as many Turns as the twins had.

"Shaff this!" Ryuri grated. "I don't want to play some sharding game when my friend is dead!"

Off to the side, Zaras rolled his eyes.

Ryuri rounded on him. "Do you have something to say? You'll always be safe on the ground. Everybody knows you only Stand so you can get sympathy sex when you don't Impress."

Zaras started to respond, but M'mon waved him to silence. "Ryuri, what's wrong with you? Life goes on."

"And I suppose K'levan would say the same thing if that storm hadn't happened? If it was you who got killed up there tonight while he was here?"

"But I didn't get killed!" M'mon said harshly. "Things happen the way they happen, and I'm not going to sit and cry about it! Besides, you know there are worse ways to go."

White rage choked Ryuri. "Shaff you!" she yelled. "I'm not talking to you anymore."

As she turned and ran for the darkness, she thought she heard him call after her, but she refused to listen.



### 2859.06.11

"What's wrong with you lately, Ryuri?" Kyulora said after breakfast a few days later.

"Nothing's wrong, little sister," Ryuri said, forcing a grin.

"Sure there is," Kyulora said, tossing her long blonde braid. "You skipped family breakfast, you snapped at

Mother yesterday, you leave the room whenever M'mon comes in... he really wants to talk to you, by the way."

"Well, I don't want to talk to him!" Ryuri snapped. "I have drills to go to."

"So something *is* wrong."

Instead of answering, Ryuri said "You're about to turn fifteen. Take my word for it, don't stand candidate. Enjoy being a smith. Make journeyman. Stay on the shaffing ground."

Kyulora stared for a moment, then laughed. "Not on your life! I'll be a smith, but only until my dragon finds me. Maybe if there's no dragon for me, then I'll make journeyman, but I've got seven Turns to Stand and I'm using every one of them."

"Someone in this family has to live out the Pass!" Ryuri burst out.

"So I'm supposed to go without a dragon just to make you happy? Forget that! I don't want any of us to die, but somebody has to go up there and fight. If I die, I'll die knowing my life meant something."

"There are worse things than dying!" Ryuri snarled.

Kyulora rolled her eyes. "I give up! I was there that day too, you know. If you haven't gotten over it in ten Turns, that's your problem. Now go do your shaffing drills." She whirled and stalked off, leaving Ryuri staring after her.



As soon as the class came out of *between* Ryuri knew she was going to be in trouble. They had gone from mild breeze and clouds over the Weyr to what looked like a brewing thunderstorm over the Great Bay. Everyone was caught by surprise and had to struggle to stay in formation, all except Jallori, who had surely known exactly what she was leading them into.

*Nusrath's rider says to ready for the rope drill.*

*How is your other stomach?* Ryuri asked automatically.

*Ready to flame! You chose good stone for me.*

High up against the looming cloudbank, Ryuri saw riders dumping their loads of dyed ropevine out into the air. As the formation rose to meet the false Thread, all Ryuri could think was that she didn't want to be here. She tried to goad herself into the exhilaration of combat, yelling and whooping for all she was worth -- if anyone heard her over the wind, let them think she was enjoying herself -- but it did no good. M'mon would be flying Thread again tomorrow.

Ryuri forced her mind back to the here-and-now. They were headed for a storm that made her think of the one M'mon had faced in his second 'Fall. The first of the clumps came into range, and Ceorth flamed it, but had to dodge the char that blew back at his face. Why hadn't Jallori warned them about the weather? Wingleaders always told their riders what to expect, in case they hadn't already heard it from their wingmates or checked for themselves. There came another clump, and Ceorth got it, this time at a better angle so the char missed him. Was she supposed to know the weather over every region of every Hold just on the off-chance that Jallori would order the class up for a surprise

drill like today's?

More clumps came; Ryuri guided Ceorth to the outside and got one of them. Shard the other, she wasn't going after it in weather like this; in a real 'Fall there'd be lower Wings to catch it. Ceorth had to fight the wind to get back into place, just as Ryuri felt like she was fighting the wind of her own feelings to stay focused on the drill. The last thing she wanted was another score mark. At least she didn't have to worry about her classmates anymore; they'd either do their job or they wouldn't, and it wasn't Ryuri's job to watch them. The wind kept rising, and raindrops splattered on Ryuri's goggles; the storm itself would be on them soon.

*Khuth has char in his eye, Ceorth said matter-of-factly. He returns to the Weyr.*

If that was their only injury today, they'd be lucky. Flying in high wind was nothing new, but not with live flame; if they weren't careful, somebody was going to get killed.

Unstoppably, K'levan's face popped into her mind. He'd been friends with Ryuri and M'mon since they were all weyrbrats together, and now he was dead. They'd played netball and holdball and dashball together, swam and joked and played pranks and even made love a few times-- and he'd taken a clump in the face over Ierne Island five days ago. That was not so far away from here, and M'mon would be crossing this way tomorrow as well. He could die, or worse.

A flicker of motion caught her eye, and she started to yell a warning. Too late. Ceorth was looking the wrong way, and the ropevine clump hit his neck with a blow Ryuri could feel through his body.

*No!* Ryuri wailed in her mind.

*There is another clump! I flame!* Ceorth's fighting spirit was undimmed, but Ryuri felt horrible. The shock kept her alert as they flamed more clumps, including another that would have hit Ceorth.

*Nusrath's rider says the drill is over. We return home in formation, on her signal.*

The clumps were still falling, but Ryuri ignored them as she formed the image of the Weyr's tile-patterned roofs in late afternoon. *Jump when she says.*

Black *between* took them, and they came out into air that felt calm, even though the clouds were moving at a steady clip. An afternoon shower, even in the dry season, she thought automatically as the class spiraled in to land. Ceorth wasn't the only dragon showing red dye, at least.

Soon they were in formation. Ryuri expected a dressing-down, but to her surprise Jallori looked sympathetic.

"Consider that a lesson in how fast the weather can change," she said in her usual calm tone. "We meant to give you a high-wind drill, but not that high. The storm came on faster than we thought. We decided to let you have a small taste of it, because that kind of surprise happens to everyone and it's best you learn to face it instead of freezing up with fear."

"Does she mean me?" Ryuri thought as the first drops of rain pattered on her helmet. 'I did *not* freeze!'

*You were afraid,* Ceorth's voice came to her. *But I know*

*you did not mean for me to be hit. We will not be hit next time!*

*We will not,* Ryuri agreed firmly.

Jallori was saying, "The dragonhealers inform me that Khuth's eye will be fine. Now go get cleaned up before dinner. Dismissed!"

The rain began to pour down in earnest as the formation broke up. Ryuri looked at Ceorth's neck; that dye would need to be scrubbed. If it were summer, the rain could be counted on to last long enough to do her job for her, but it wasn't summer. At least winter here didn't mean cold days; just warm instead of hot. Considering she could have missed Impressing Ceorth and gotten stuck in a cold mountain Weyr again, a little rain wasn't so bad.

A little voice in the back of her mind whispered, 'But if you didn't have Ceorth, then you'd be safe.' Angrily, she shook that treacherous thought away.

*You are angry!* Ceorth said.

*It's not a big deal,* Ryuri lied. *Let's go get you cleaned off. This rain won't last long enough to wash you properly.*

*I want to swim!* He said, starting for the weyrling beach.

*Swim a bit, and I'll scrub you when I get there.* She watched fondly as he bounded off. Then she stripped off her goggles and helmet. 'My hair's getting shaggy, time to get it cut soon,' she thought absently as she started after her brown.

Ryuri wasn't the only one who needed to scrub a dragon. Green Nyseth, blue Rahuth, and green Maireth all had gotten hit, and their riders were following them to the beach. Ryuri grimaced at Annalora's and K'red's backs. No surprise that those two had gotten hit, but that just made it all the more embarrassing for her and Rubi.

Nalsha followed a bit behind Rubi, and seemed to be asking to come help her bathe Maireth. Ryuri could not quite make out Rubi's sharp response, but her tone was plain enough. Soon Nalsha jogged back past Ryuri, looking dejected.

By the time Ryuri got down to the beach, Annalora and K'red were finishing up. Rubi sat on the bathing pier, waiting while Maireth wallowed in the waves further out. Ceorth was out there too, and Ryuri walked out onto the pier as the other two weyrlings left with their dragons. The rain had slackened to a drizzle, but the clouds still loomed overhead.

"I thought winter was supposed to be the dry season here," Ryuri grumbled by way of greeting as she sat down next to her cotmate.

"It's been Turns and I'm still getting used to it," Rubi replied. "But I like a bit of rain in the winter. And today it fits my mood."

Ryuri looked more closely at the younger girl. Rubi didn't seem her usual happy self, all right; she sat with her knees drawn up to her chest, staring morosely out to sea. Ryuri supposed she should try to find out what was wrong, but it seemed like too much effort right then.

The silence stretched. "Nasty drill," Ryuri finally said.

"Flying us right into a storm was a dirty trick," Rubi agreed tonelessly.

Ryuri decided she couldn't just let the younger girl wallow. "So..." Ryuri paused, looking out to sea, then went on. "What's going on with you and Nalsha?"

"You really want to know?" Rubi replied morosely.

"Sure, why wouldn't I? You're my friend, and my cotmate too."

"Maybe that's part of the problem."

"What?"

"She wanted to be my cotmate. Well, she wanted to share more than just a cot, if you see what I mean," Rubi laughed bitterly.

"Oh, she wanted to sleep with you?" Ryuri was surprised that a problem that small would sour the normally cheerful Rubi so much.

"Yes she wanted to sleep with me! You weyrbreds are so flip about it. It's not easy for everyone, you know."

"Well, maybe it's not my business, but what's the problem? Just tell her yes or no."

"It's not that easy! How am I supposed to be friends with her anymore if all she ever wanted was... that?"

"You don't know that was all she ever wanted. Weren't you two friends ever since she was Searched? You'd only been here a month yourself, but since you'd been through a Hatching you took her under your wing when she was all scared and shy."

"I remember some of you laughed at me for it, too," Rubi pointed out.

"Yes, and you stood up to us, so we left you alone. Besides, I hadn't learned my lesson about holdbreeds yet."

"If you learned your lesson you wouldn't be laughing at me now!"

"I am not laughing at you! Just go talk to Nalsha. I know it's scary, but--"

"Like you know anything about being scared!" Rubi interrupted bitterly.

"I do so know about being scared!" Ryuri burst out, surprising herself. "Well, I do," she went on softly, remembering that huge red dye stain on Ceorth's neck. And trying not to think about M'mon. And worse things.

"What scares you?" Rubi prompted after a while.

"I'm worried about M'mon," Ryuri admitted.

"But you're not afraid of anything yourself, huh?" Rubi said bitterly.

Ryuri bridled at that, but made herself say it honestly instead of snapping out a retort. "That's not true either. It's, well... I'm not looking forward to fighting Thread. It..." She paused, then went on in a rush. "It scares me spineless. I just want to run away and hide. There, I admitted it." Surprisingly, actually coming out and saying it after so long was a relief.

"What scares you most about it?"

"Well, getting hurt or killed obviously, but I'd have to say getting Ceorth killed would be... that would be the worst thing." She hoped Rubi hadn't heard the catch in her voice.

"Losing a dragon must be pretty awful," Rubi said in a tone that told Ryuri she didn't fully understand. "I can't imagine losing Maireth. That would be... that would be *lonely*."

"Eh, I forgot you didn't grow up here. It's a long sight

worse than just awful and lonely. Let me tell you what happened to my father." The words spilled from Ryuri's mouth; she was horrified, but couldn't make herself stop. "This was when we still lived at Fort, right at the start of the Pass. A lot of good people died learning how to fight Thread. Close to the end of a long 'Fall over Boll my father ziggged when he should have zagged and his Imlath caught a big patch right in the face."

Rubi winced, but the words kept pouring out of Ryuri's mouth. "I'd just started my apprenticeship, and was down in a deep passage when the Weyrminer's firelizard found me with the news. I ran all the way to the Infirmary and found the rest of the family there with Father. Imlath never had a chance. I don't know how he even landed with both eyes gone; maybe the others helped him somehow. But he died half an hour later. I was holding my father's hand when it happened and he..."

Ryuri swallowed. Why was she even telling Rubi this? But the words came out anyway. "The dragons keened, and he just sat there and didn't even scream. He just dropped my hand and sat there, and he wouldn't listen to me, or my mother, or anyone. I don't think he even knew we were there anymore. The only thing that got a response was when the healer showed him the mercy flask. He grabbed it out of her hands and quaffed it down right there in front of us all without so much as a goodbye. I don't think it even occurred to him. There was nothing left of him but a hole, except... his eyes. I'll never forget the look in his eyes. The worst thing about it is that they weren't quite empty. I think there was a little part of him left, enough to know the rest was gone." Ryuri felt the tears on her cheeks and drew a shuddering breath. "I know they aren't always that bad, but... well, sometimes I imagine that happening to me and it makes me want to scream." Finally she fell silent, feeling spent from the flow of confession.

"Oh," was all Rubi said, in a very small voice.

"I was angry at him for a long time, but eventually I realized it wasn't his fault. Loss of a dragon takes some people that way. So I quit being angry, but for a long time I was scared to Impress. Scared to get a dragon and maybe have that happen to me someday." Ryuri admitted. "But I just buried it and pretended everything was fine, you know, nothing ever fazes Ryuri," she went on bitterly.

They both were silent for a long time. Then, strangely, Rubi giggled.

"What?" Ryuri snapped, suddenly angry at her cotmate.

"Oh, I was just thinking, that was the best compliment you've ever given anyone."

Had she lost her mind completely? "What in Faranth's name are you talking about?"

"Right at the start. You said you'd forgotten that I didn't grow up here. I can't believe you said that."

Ryuri opened her mouth for a flippant retort, then closed it. "Am I really still that bad?"

"Well, you are better than you were the first few months. You were a real wher's ass then. But you still don't let anybody forget even for a moment that you're better than we are."

"I don't..." Ryuri started to say, but Rubi actually cut her

off.

"Yes you do. Oh, you don't say it out loud, but we all get the message anyway. We struggling all day, every day, and you just pretty much laugh at everything and breeze through. Only that infuriating butthead T'yan is as good as you are."

Ryuri lay there silently. She really had never thought of it like that. Finally she said, "So it's not enough that I stopped calling everybody holdbreds? They all still think I think I'm better than them?"

"Well, you *do* think that," Rubi said tartly. "Look me in the eye and tell me you don't."

Ryuri frowned and looked at Rubi. "All right, since I'm being honest. Yes, I still think I'm a better rider than most of them. But I know there's more to life than being the best rider. I still have a lot to learn about the other stuff."

"Such as?" Rubi prompted.

"You're pushy tonight. Don't forget, I'm four Turns older than you."

"So? You're my friend, and I'll push you if that what it takes to get you to open up. Honestly, you really are like a boy sometimes."

Ryuri laughed. "All right, all right, I admit it, I'm not so good with feelings. Worrying about stuff gets in the way when I'm flying."

"So quit carrying it around with you! Don't you feel better after you admitted you were scared?"

"I guess, but that doesn't make the fear go away."

"I know. I'm scared too. We just need to find a way to live with it. Just promise you won't let it turn you back into the kind of ass you were last Turn, all right?"

Ryuri laughed. "Or like M'len was. Sure, if I can count on you to call me on it when I slip."

"That's a deal."

"And speaking of calling people on things, I think you should go talk to Nalsha. Even though it's scary."

"But what if she wants to...?"

"Then either say yes or say no, but say you'll still be her friend no matter what. That is what you want, right?"

"Well, yes," Rubi admitted.

"Then go talk to her!" As Rubi left, Ryuri thought, 'Or else someday you may find it's too late.' With that thought, she went to look for her brother.

END



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