
Searching Higher

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“There is a bluerider here for you, Cybris!” The young woman said, looking both frightened and excited.

Cybris felt her heart drop into her stomach and she swallowed hard. The fishing net Cybris had been bundling up hung forgotten in her hands. She had suspected as much when she had seen the blue dragon circling and finally dropping to land in Dog Creek's small gather square—known this day was rapidly approaching since she had accepted the Search.

“He's here to pick up some chickens Maedi promised him too, so you have time to say goodbye if you need to.” The holder woman laid a hand on Cybris' shoulder sympathetically, as though she thought Cybris would never be seen again.

“That's all right. I've said my goodbyes to my family already. Best not keep a dragonrider waiting!” She flashed the woman a smile and, rediscovering the net in her hands, finished bundling it and wrapping it in canvas for safekeeping.

Cybris was determined. She was not going to let her anxiety or fear show. She had had two turns before this to practice burying her unwanted feelings and perfecting the art of fitting in without sacrificing her own happiness. Too much. ‘That's going to come in handy now, more than ever’, Cybris thought as she hurried away from the docks, reassuring her fellow workers that she was fine and didn't need assistance.

She felt a twinge of hesitance wash over her as she hurried past the familiar buildings, knowing that it might well be a long time before she set foot on the Seahold's ground again. Just as she left her cot, all her worldly belongings now carried in a neat bundle in her arms, her sister Zei appeared looking hot and bothered. She had clearly been in the garden working while Cybris was down dockside repairing nets. Her hair, which was fairer than Cybris' and with more wave to it, was bound back in a tight knot to keep it out of her eyes while she worked.

“There you are!” Zei said tartly, “I knew you were going to try and sneak off.”

“Zei,” Cybris said as she shifted her belongings and embraced her younger sister, “I already said goodbye. Nobody knew when the dragonrider was going to show up.”

Zei grimaced in answer and pushed a swatch of loose hair out of her face with dirty hands. “Why don't you just say ‘it's easier this way’ and forget the excuses. Just suffer through one more goodbye, okay?”

Cybris grinned. Zei reminded her so much of their deceased brother Timas—she was temperamental and spoke her mind far more than was proper for a young woman. Cybris had often thought, in the time between accepting the Search and now, that Zei should have been the one called to Stand. “I suppose I can suffer through one more goodbye,” Cybris allowed, and hugged her sister to her tightly again. “Take care of mother, Samanta and the baby, little sister. I'll keep in touch.” Cybris didn't know how she was going to ‘keep in touch’—but she imagined that people at the Weyr could help her write a letter or something similar.

“And I expect you to come visit, you know, when you have a dragon all your own.” Zei said.

‘If’, Cybris thought, ‘not when?’ But she nodded, forcing herself to smile. “I will. Love you, Zei. Now get back to work!”

Zei laughed, shrugged Cybris off and slipped away towards the gardens again, lifting her hand and mouthing ‘goodbye’ as she went.

Cybris returned Zei's wave, but as her sister disappeared the feeling in her gut became even heavier. It would have been easier if Cybris had been allowed to slip away without final partings. As it was she was glad only Zei—who lived so much in the moment with little worry for the future—had met her before she left. She hurried on to Dog Creek's modest gather square where the bluerider awaited. If she was lucky, she would be up and away before she had time to regret her decision.



“This little man,” V'dalin said, examining the young rooster hanging in his sister-in-law's arms, “is quite the fierce-looking thing, isn't he?”

Maedi nodded, “He is certainly a fighter—see the feathers missing here?” she flipped the bird upside down to show a patch of pinfeathers growing from a spot on the rooster's chest. “Took on a canine, and won.” The woman smiled, as proud of her poultry as a mother would be of a talented child. He certainly understood the fixation, and was more than happy to find a kindred spirit in Maedi.

Why do you like her so much? V'dalin's blue Benturinth said, sounding grumpy. ***She didn't even greet me.***

She's nervous about you, big lump—you know how holders are.

Maedi was watching V'dalin curiously—was she able to recognize that he was speaking to his dragon?

“Impressive.” V'dalin answered her, admiring the rooster's bold coloring and sleek, healthy feathers.

“I certainly think so. Of course our poultry may not be as big and fancy as the beasthold's, but this breed does very well near the ocean. They are hardy. I'd hate to see this rooster end up in the cookery pot, but we have quite enough in the way of breeding cocks here.”

“And mine keep disappearing. So I appreciate you offering these few to me.” V'dalin confessed. “And now, quite seriously, what do I owe you?”

“Oh, consider it part of a friendly tithe—though our Harper asked if I could pass these along.” She drew out a

bundle of papers, likely letters, to hand to V'dalin. "And do visit again sometime, when Dalt isn't out at sea."

V'dalin nodded in agreement; it would be good to see his elder brother again. He picked up two of the cages and moved to secure them to Benturinth's side, who had been sunning himself while he spoke to Maedi.

The one we are here for is coming, Benturinth said, bored. V'dalin turned to see a young woman hurrying forward, her skirts hitched up and carrying a small bundle of belongings in her free hand. Maedi spotted her too and waved her over.

The two women stood in sharp contrast to each other. Where V'dalin's sister-in-law, Maedi, was curvy and short, the new Kadanzer candidate was lean and tall—though not nearly as tall as V'dalin himself. He appraised her straight dark hair, worn down her back in a braid. Her large hazel eyes and wide — if nervous — smile were pretty. Always curious to see how holders reacted around Benturinth, he was pleased to see no hesitation or uneasiness in her face or posture as she approached. Maedi, as kind and mothering as she was, treated Benturinth as though he were an imposing horse. The girl's reaction was a welcome sign—especially since he was going to take her to Kadanzer today so that she would eventually stand on the hatching sands.

"Cybris!" Maedi called out cheerfully as the young woman met them, "This is V'dalin. Dalt's little brother." She gave him a critical sideways glance, reminding V'dalin of his fostermother's critical gaze. "Well, not *that* little!"

"And this," V'dalin said, at Benturinth's annoyed wuffle behind them, "Is Benturinth." He whacked his dragon's shoulder to rouse him and keep him from being rude.

"Nice to meet you both." Cybris said, smiling at the blue dragon. The fingers that were not wrapped around the bundle of her belongings twitched, as though she wanted to reach out and touch Benturinth but thought better of it.

V'dalin tied the last of the small chicken cages firmly to Benturinth's side, while he stood with one wing half-raised.

"Well, you best get going." Maedi said, and V'dalin bent in two to hug her.

"Thank Dalt for me, and let your Harper know that I will deliver the papers the moment I get back. I'll visit again soon, Faranth willing!"

Maedi nodded curtly and embraced Cybris as well, before gathering up her own skirts and hurrying away from the bluff with a wave of parting that they both returned.

Can we go now? Benturinth said, The wind is uncomfortable and I want a bath.

"You know," V'dalin said, smiling at Cybris, "Ben likes to have his eye ridges scratched right here."

Cybris, correctly interpreting the invitation, moved forward and reached out to scratch Benturinth's resignedly offered head. The young woman's face glowed with pleasure as Benturinth pushed himself into her hand, a rumble of satisfaction rising from his throat.

"He is very beautiful." Cybris said.

"He thinks so too." V'dalin laughed, and then asked, "Have you ever ridden a-dragon-back before?"

"No."

V'dalin was surprised to hear the frankness in Cybris' voice—no fear, or even a nervous treble. She looked excited

but she remained composed, as though waiting for him to make the first move.

'I've been at the Weyr too long,' V'dalin thought, 'I've forgotten what it is to be a holder, never taking for granted the ground they walk on.'

Why should she be nervous? Benturinth interjected, I am strong and a good flyer. She is right not to be nervous.

V'dalin couldn't help but chuckle out loud at his dragon's easy logic, and in answer to Cybris' curious look he said, "Benturinth is complaining that the wind on this bluff is too cold." He rubbed the blue's nose ridge fondly, "He really can be a big baby sometimes, this one."

"I wouldn't mind giving him what he wanted," Cybris said, a wry smile twisting her mouth, "especially seeing how big he is."

V'dalin returned her grin, "Wait and see if you get your own before you say that. Besides, he's not particularly large compared to a bronze." He passed her an older flight jacket he had stowed on Benturinth's harness. "Here," he said, "it's a short flight once we go *between*, but there is no need for you to be chilled before you get to the Weyr."

Cybris quickly donned the jacket—rolling up its sleeves so that they could accommodate her smaller frame—and laced it up tightly.

Meanwhile V'dalin secured Cybris' small bundle of belongings the back of the harness, to Benturinth's annoyance. The chickens, though they were packed into small cages with only small cracks for air, still bounced around and cackled, sending down dust into the air.

Don't worry, you only have to play pack-runner for a short spell, V'dalin reassured his dragon.

I don't understand why you want more feathered-things. They wake me up.

I like them. You know that! Benturinth grumbled in ascent and offered a forelimb to his rider, encouraging him to mount and be on his way. V'dalin rolled his eyes and bounded astride his dragon, strapping himself in securely before offering a hand to Cybris.

When she took it, he noted how strong her long fingers felt, even though his glove. It was clear that she was used to working—something that would certainly help her transition into Weyr life. Whether or not the other aspects of the Weyr life would bother her, he couldn't tell. She was impossible to read. He showed her how to sit and helped strap her in. The skirts she was wearing were awkward and bunched up on the saddle, but she did not comment about them. Would anything faze her? She had said that she had never been astride a dragon before, so this, at least was something new.

Ready to see what this one is made of, Old Boy? V'dalin asked, slapping the blue's neck.

I will go fast. Benturinth said, his voice full of humor. With no more warning than that, he unfurled his wings with a snap and launched himself into the air.



The first few moments of flight took Cybris' breath away. Benturinth's sudden spring thrust her backwards so that the straps securing her to the saddle tightened painfully against her. She forgot her need to appear strong and

independent and grabbed the bluerider around the waist tightly with a gasp of surprise. ‘He did that on purpose’, she thought angrily. Was this how it was going to be at the Weyr? Was this how all dragonriders were—rude and unpredictable? ‘Then again’, she thought, ‘to him I’m probably a stuck up prude!’

She chided herself—of course it wasn’t going to be anything like floating along in the water. Benturinth surged upwards, struggling to gain height in the dead air just above the hold. The power between each of his wing strokes thrust Cybris back into the saddle and Cybris mimicked V’dalin and leaned forward into the blue’s wing strokes. She felt hair escaping from her braid and lashing against her face and understood at once the close-cropped hair the woman Searchrider had sported. The chickens, being confined to such small cages, could not actually open their wings to make a fuss—but they were making quite a bit of noise just the same.

Then, as Benturinth flew over the cliffs above the harbor, he found a thermal and the updraft thrust them up into the sky even though the blue dragon had stopped flapping. Cybris stomach sank, but more from the rapid height gain than nerves now. She loosened her grip on the bluerider’s waist just enough to look past her billowing skirts and down on Dog Creek Seahold. She was awed by the sight—she recognized the cluster of buildings, the gather square and, of course, the docks and the ships harbored there. Yet, everything was so small. She thought she saw the little people coming up from the docks waving, and lifted her hand to wave back briefly before grabbing V’dalin around the waist again. She found herself grinning despite herself—this was amazing!

Benturinth soared in a tight circle over the Seahold and bugled loudly. The sound sent a chill of delight down Cybris’ spine. Any fear of flight that she still had left her and she felt the unusual urge to whoop along with the blue dragon.

“We are going to go jump *between* now.” V’dalin yelled over the wind. “Just hold on to me and you will be fine.”

“I’m ready.” Cybris shouted, grateful for the warning this time. Just as she tightened her hold on his stomach, they went *between*.

The first thing Cybris thought was that she was drowning. The black void of *between* was exactly how she imagined it might be—except instead of feeling the crushing weight of the water, it was cold emptiness that was filling the space around her. She couldn’t feel V’dalin’s large form in front of her, or Benturinth’s solid back beneath. She tried to wave a hand into the emptiness and still felt nothing. It was terrifying and she forced herself not to try and breathe in the emptiness. ‘But in a way it is also peaceful’, Cybris thought. She remembered the old sailors talking about drowning, and how people would relax and stop fighting it in the end. They said that it could be as peaceful as going to sleep. *Between* wasn’t quite like that, but Cybris was comforted by the idea, as morbid as it was. She had little time to be frightened anyway, because within moments they burst out into the sunlight again, and Cybris, squinting her eyes in the light, took in deep breaths of the warm air.

“Are you all right?” V’dalin called over the wind.

“Yes!” Cybris answered, wondering if he could feel her heart pounding through his jacket. She was not sure she was fine at all—she had known dragons could go *between*, but hadn’t given it much thought beyond that. Dragonriders did this all the time? They drowned a little every day? Something akin to panic swept through her, even though the actual time she had spent *between* had been short. She thought that it might have been less overwhelming if she *hadn’t* been given the warning that it was coming. It was not *between* that scared her; it was the unknown life that stretched before her. She closed her eyes and took deep breaths, all the while smelling the leather of V’dalin’s jacket and the unusual spicy smell of Benturinth. Those two things, along with the rush of air over her face as the blue dragon soared over the Weyr, were so profoundly physical that focusing on them calmed her. She had dealt with far worse things before. When she opened her eyes again she was able to swallow her fear and she looked down to the sweep of land below her.

It was Kadanzer all right—the multitudes of dragons of every color sunning themselves here and there were proof enough of that. She saw the cluster of buildings that must be the main Weyr, and the pale wisps of smoke rising into the afternoon. Excitement and nervous energy rushed through her. She could see little cots spread out over the peninsula, with dragons of every color sunning themselves next to them. The sunlight glinted of arrangements of colored tiles on the roofs of the larger buildings, making Cybris lean forward with curiosity, wondering what those were for. Looking the other direction she saw neat fields and orchards, and near them a large area that was clearly a field for beasts. The ocean was familiar to her, even though the coastline was not. Could she come to think of this place as home?

Below them, sunning dragons bugled a welcome as Benturinth dipped lower to come in for a landing. Cybris found with surprise that she was dreading the moment the blue dragon touched the ground, expecting it to be rough like his take-off. As he swooped down, Cybris braced for the landing, but at the last moment, Benturinth back-winged and his feet touched the ground gently. As Benturinth folded his wings he swung his head around and nosed one of the cages strapped to his sides. Quite a few feathers drifted down from the cracks in the cage and the occupant chattered angrily and pecked at Benturinth’s nose. The dragon hastily withdrew his head, looking dignified.

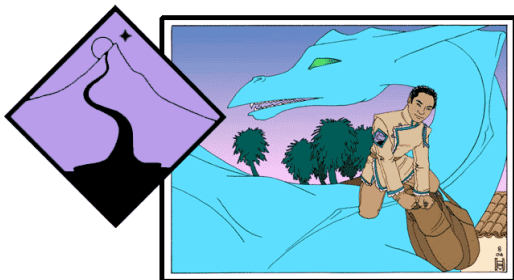
“Aw, shard it.” V’dalin grumbled, undoing the straps holding him in place and hopping down before Cybris had any time to register that they were on the ground. “You made all my chickens bald, Benturinth.”

“I imagine that will make them easier to eat.” Cybris said, fumbling with the straps that still held her in place. Her hands were shaking. She couldn’t seem to get control of the nervousness racing through her veins and she hated the feeling. Of course, this dragon man would laugh...

And he was laughing—but at what she had said, not her shaking. When she looked at him, V’dalin’s smile was genuine and kind. He undid her straps and he helped her down of Benturinth as though she weighed nothing. The hard ground underneath Cybris feet swelled underneath her like the beginning of a great wave, and she found herself

leaning on Benturinth to steady herself. To her surprise the blue stood stock still, his eyes whirling blue-green, until the ground started acting solid again. She glanced up; concerned that V'dalin wouldn't appreciate her touching his dragon without permission. The dragonrider was watching her, but his expression was contemplative rather than annoyed.

“Welcome to Kadanzer Weyr, Candidate.”



Kadanzer Weyr

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