
Flight Lessons

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Cybris began strapping her flight harness on Sujath's chest, checking each stitch as she went. She had oiled it the night before, and the dark leather looked rich and fine against Sujath's dark green skin. Though the green dragon wasn't opposed to a good roll in the mud, she had—thankfully—kept herself clean after the scrub-down Cybris had given her yesterday. She glowed with health. Her muscles, which were substantial for a dragon her age and size, rippled with her slightest movement.

Cybris' arms protested as she tightened the harness snugly. The aches in her muscles never seemed to fade these days, especially with the added exercise required from the punishment duties she always seemed to have. Last night it had been scrubbing floors while Sujath slept soundly in her wallow. Remembering being singled out because of Sujath's behavior made Cybris tighten the last strap with a bit more force than she'd intended. Sujath's head swung around to nudge her gently in the back.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Did that hurt?" Cybris murmured, pulling her dragon's head to her and scratching her eye-ridge.

No, Sujath answered, looking distracted. **But you are upset again.**

Cybris forced a smile and shook her head. "I'm fine. Is anything pinching you? I still have time to adjust it before Sahara makes us start."

It is perfect. You have never hurt me, Sujath said, gently pulling her head out of Cybris' arms and looking around at her classmates, who were also scurrying to harness their dragons. The green was unusually quiet, watching everyone go about their business with hooded orange eyes.

Cybris had no doubt that Sujath was really wide awake and alert, even if she wasn't shifting impatiently, like some of her siblings were. She felt a surge of pride for her dragon, who was as quick to learn as she was quick to anger. Now, with the anticipation of their first flight together filling them both, Sujath was looking forward—calm in the waiting as long as she wasn't being left behind. Cybris knew that the moment the drill started, Sujath's intense desire to be in the

air would peak and Cybris would be in for a fight to keep her steady and on the ground. But Cybris thrust that persistent thought away from her. Not today. Today she wouldn't have to hear the Weyrlingsecond telling her it was *her* job to control Sujath, because Sujath would be perfect. Cybris knew her dragon had that in her—the perfect drill, the perfect flight, and the raw *talent* that could put them both at the top of their class. She thought that Weyrlingsecond Sahara saw that talent in them too, and comforted herself sometimes by telling herself that that's why she was so hard on the pair.

The constant upward battle to get Sujath to behave in the drills wasn't something Cybris could blame her for. She sympathized with her dragon's intense desire to press beyond the boundaries set for them. Hadn't she spent two Turns of her life working herself into the ground for a family that needed her, only to have it amount to nothing? She had hoped it would be different at the Weyr. Even with the strict disciplinary nature of Thread-fighting, the way holders talked about the Weyr had made it sound like a place for individuals to shine. But in essence it was the same—or at least it was now while she was a weyrling. She leaned against Sujath's shoulder and inhaled her spicy scent.

She had to be calm and collected, because today she would fly with Sujath for the first time.

"Hey Cybris," Sapherlin said, sliding past Sujath and her own green Lorsenth to speak to her friend. "It's finally here, isn't it?" She was working her hair into a braid that would lie flat under her helmet, her dragon already harnessed and conversing with bronze Ohith over her shoulder.

"Yes, and I can't believe it. Took long enough."

"And Sujath looks so calm too," Sapherlin said in genuine surprise, "you must not have the nervous stomach I'm getting, Cybris."

"Oh, I'm nervous, and excited, and impatient. I don't think Sujath can even *feel* nervous though, which I suppose is lucky."

"Senrhaeth is the same," Cassia said, who was standing nearby and buttoning up her flight jacket. "He doesn't understand the need for all this fuss—says it's what dragons are meant to do—fly with their riders."

"Very true," said Sapherlin, "I know the Impression makes the rider, but now it feels like we are really dragonriders!"

"Soon, at least," agreed Cybris, finding it impossible to keep from grinning around at her friends. "I can't wait until we start doing rope drills and Sujath can really flaunt her moves."

"Don't look too far ahead yet," Sapherlin said, "because

we still have to practice going *between*, and there's learning about mating flights to look forward to. I doubt those lessons are going to be as exciting."

"I know!" Cassia teased. "Imagine what Sujath will be like when it comes time to rise."

Cybris groaned. "Let's deal with that when it comes and not a moment sooner."

"Well, we all know what Lorsenth is going to be like, don't we?" said Cassia, making Sapherlin blush. "I mean, she's going to be quite big for a green, isn't she?" Both Cassia and Cybris laughed aloud—they often teased Sapherlin about her dragon's particular fondness of her bronze brothers.

"At least you won't look like a giant riding a pony," Cybris said. "My legs are going to hang down a little. Can't complain, though; at least she's big enough not to be held back."

"Why would you worry about that? She's big enough and strong enough now, and she's only going to get bigger," Sapherlin said. "I've seen her antics in the air—she's so athletic. I seriously doubt she will have problems."

Cybris was comforted, but still could not voice her real concerns. Would Weyrlingsecond Shahara reprimand them today for Sujath's behavior? Would she be in middens duty this time tomorrow? Sujath was being good now, but the time would come during the drill when the fractious green would test Cybris. She always tested. And they hadn't been allowed to exercise beforehand today because Shahara was concerned that Sujath would be over-stressed. Cybris could see why she was concerned, but Sujath couldn't have been in better health. As Cybris rested her face against her dragon's chest she drew strength from her dragon's steady heartbeats.

Today she would fly with Sujath.



(The day before...)

The meeting of the weyrlingstaff had yet to be called to order when Shahara walked in. The aroma of freshly-brewed klah – probably Resla's, from the delicious smell of it – drew her to the klah pot at a table in the corner. She poured herself a cup and brought it with her to the table. Jallori was filling the rest of the weyrlingstaff in on her current crop of weyrlings. B'baer and L'ward nodded at Shahara as she took the seat between them, but Jallori continued her story.

"...And they had their first bellyache two nights ago," she was saying. "T'rened let Hesraeth eat too much, and as expected, he woke the rest of them in the middle of the night with his bellyaching. Thought he was going to die."

"They ALL think they're going to die," K'bort said.

"I'm surprised it took this long," Shahara said. "Usually they have their first bellyache in the first couple sevendays after they clutch."

Jallori nodded. "Well, we gave him the usual treatment," she said, with an expressive wave. The rest of the weyrlingstaff chuckled wickedly. The 'usual treatment' involved a fast-acting laxative, and generally guaranteed that the whole weyrling class would remember never to let their dragons overeat.

"And what about Amiseth's notorious clutch?" L'ward asked.

"They're sure big enough, aren't they?" Ambri chuckled.

"Not that much bigger," K'bort said. "They're only a quarter Benden, after all."

"So, Shahara," L'ward said, "how are they progressing?"

"They're coming along," Shahara said, then took a long sip of klah. "You know how it goes. There's the same cluster of greenrider flirts and blueriders eager to prove they're just as good as the bronzes. S'var's shyest of the bunch, but Duhonth's forcing him to open up. D'rian, one of the Benden candidates, is a complete ass to his classmates but he works hard and is one of my best students. On the other end there's K'syr, who's a lazy bastard who'll do whatever he can to get out of work. Luckily his dragon is eager to prove himself against the other bronzes, and drags K'syr along with him."

"Speaking of bronzes," B'baer chuckled. "There's enough bronze hot air in that clutch to fill a tall ship's sails."

At the far end of the table, bronzerider G'nan gave a sour grunt. Ambri nudged him with her elbow. "Don't take it personally," she said cheerfully. "So, are your bronzeriders giving you any trouble yet?"

"Oh, they're all bronze, through and through," Shahara said. "Arohath is delighted to have them all to herself for now."

"Now there's a queen, make no mistake," B'baer said. "Glad I'm not working with *her*."

"Dwayana is a good match for her," Shahara responded. Arohath was more than headstrong, when it came to it, but Dwayana came from powerful stock, and was every ounce a queenrider. 'Nothing like Ytrith's rider, Faydra,' Shahara thought. Shahara suppressed a shudder and tried not to look towards Jallori, who'd had the challenge of working with the ill-fated pair. "They'll be a formidable team when they're both grown."

“Indeed,” T’rynne nodded in agreement, his brown hair swishing against his forehead.

“I’ve got a repressed holder girl pushing her boundaries again,” she added.

“Which one?” Ambri asked.

“Cybris.”

“Cybris?” Resla said. “But she’s always so hardworking and polite.”

“She is on the outside,” Shahara said, “but watch her long enough in class, and you can see the signs. Remember how Sujath swiped at Ateith when they were just out of the shell? She’s a real handful. Downright mean to some of her classmates, especially the bronze ones. In drills, she doesn’t disobey—directly. But she pushes every limit she can think of. Trouble is—I think Cybris eggs her on. Whatever she may tell me, it’s clear she secretly pushes Sujath to lash out. She may not even realize she’s doing it, but it’s happening.”

“You get some like that, every so often,” L’ward said, then leaned back and drained his klah.

“When they were mere sevendays old I caught them sneaking out early,” Shahara said. “Cybris told me the exercise helped Sujath focus. I couldn’t risk her doing it without supervision and overstraining her dragon, so I put a stop to it. Had her try it under my supervision during the weyrings’ free time, after training. It seems to help a bit, but if I’m not absolutely specific with instructions in drills, or any other time, she pushes her limits.”

“No way you can keep that up,” B’baer said. “She’s got to learn to behave on her own...”

“Implied orders, not just spoken orders,” Ambri added, and heads nodded around the table.

“Exactly,” Shahara said. “I’m constantly calling them to order, to keep them in line. They’ll get someone killed some day if it continues, make no mistake. Otherwise, they’re very hard-working. I’ve seen some great problem-solving skills, even leadership potential. They’ll make great wingriders someday, *if* they can harness their abilities. Cybris needs to learn to control Sujath, but as long as she secretly wants Sujath to rebel, nothing’s going to change.”

As she was saying this, D’zan entered the room.

“Talking about Sujath, eh?” he said.

“Yep,” B’baer said, raising his klah mug like a glass of wine, as if toasting D’zan’s arrival. “She’s a right sorry bitch. Must be one in every clutch.”

“Be nice,” Ambri chided. B’baer just smiled back at her.

“I feel like I’ve tried everything,” Shahara said. “Punishment duty has little effect: only makes them more resentful, all the more eager to lash out the next time.” Then she paused. She had scheduled the class’s first mounted flight tomorrow, and a thought occurred to her. It just might work. “I’ll hold them back,” she said aloud.

“What?” D’zan said after a short pause. “Isn’t that a bit drastic, holding them back a class?”

“No, no...” Shahara waved her hands. “I mean I’ll keep her on the ground while the rest of the class has their first mounted flight.”

The table was quiet for a moment. “Wouldn’t that just antagonize her more?” K’bort asked.

“She has to learn to control her dragon,” Shahara replied. “Making Sujath sit and watch the rest may be a good exercise for her. If she succeeds in keeping Sujath on the ground, maybe then I’ll let her have her turn.”

“Are you sure?” D’zan asked.

Shahara folded her arms. “My dear Weyrilingmaster,” she said, “I have been teaching weyrings for decades longer than you’ve been with the Weyriling Wing. I think I know my methods.” Then she smiled.

D’zan gave a grudging grunt and a half-smile. “Maybe you’re right,” he said.

Shahara took another sip of her cooling klah as D’zan called the meeting to order. She knew she was a good teacher; she had Turns of experience. If anyone could get something through to a recalcitrant weyring, she would. Cybris and Sujath’s quiet rebellion was not a failure. Not yet, anyway. And she’d do anything she could to prevent it becoming one.



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“Cybris,” Shahara called, “step forward.” Cybris felt a rush of adrenaline. She was going to be the first to fly? They had all lined up and passed harness inspection; everyone was poised in anticipation and excitement. Already, as she stepped forward with Sujath, Cybris was calculating how this would affect Sujath’s behavior—it would make the beginning of the drill easier, but Cybris suspected her dragon would quickly grow bored after their first flight. But Shahara was speaking again and Cybris re-focused her attention.

“Cybris and Sujath, you will stand to one side for the duration of this drill.” There was a collective intake of breath from her classmates behind her. Cybris was sure she had

misheard. Her ears were ringing. “You will not be flying today.” Shahara’s voice was raised so that the other weyrings could hear her, but her eyes remained fixed on Cybris. “You need to learn to control Sujath.”

“M-ma’am,” Cybris gasped out. She felt dizzy and ashamed. And she had thought they were doing better in the drills!

“You need to figure out what you want, Cybris, and not promote Sujath’s behavior,” Shahara said, in a less carrying voice. “If you want to survive as a wingrider, this is something you *will* do. Now stand aside. If you succeed in managing Sujath’s behavior I will let you fly during tomorrow’s drill, but only then.”

Cybris couldn’t even muster a ‘yes ma’am’ but she stepped aside as ordered, her eyes downcast. She dug her fingernails into Sujath’s shoulder when her dragon hesitated and the green complied with nothing more than an angry flick of her tail.

I do not understand! Layketh orders me to step aside and watch!

That’s what we are going to do, Sujath! We will jump through their hoops. We will show them!

Yes, we will show them! Sujath said. The heat of the green’s temper rose like a firestorm, and in horror Cybris tried to snap down on it with her mental control. But Sujath was now a coil of anger and resentment and pent-up energy ready to explode. Her wings mantled, her muscles bunched, her eyes whirled orange and she slashed at the ground with her foreclaws. Cybris’ own vision clouded momentarily as Sujath’s emotion swept over her. Sujath wanted to *fly*—the sky belonged to *her*—her and Cybris.

With Sujath’s recognition of her rider, Cybris’ own awareness came crashing back. *No!* she mentally screamed at her dragon, her own anger and frustration burning every other thought out of her mind. *Stay on the ground, Sujath.* Sujath flattened herself to the dirt. The green dragon, her eyes whirling, writhed in anger as she watched the first of their classmates step forward to take their first flight. She was fighting Cybris’ control and Cybris was straining against her with all the strength she had. But Sujath was winning. Her dragon wanted to fly with her more than Cybris wanted to stay on the ground.

And then realization hit Cybris—Shahara had hinted that she was *encouraging* Sujath. Was she telling Sujath one thing and feeling another? But how could Sujath feel her emotions when she herself wasn’t entirely aware of them? Cybris pushed that thought away; right now she had to deal with the problem at hand or be grounded for life. Still wrestling for control, Cybris fought to subdue Sujath and neutralize her own feelings simultaneously. The green hissed and snapped at the air in defiance. The other weyrings, waiting their turn, kept giving the pair nervous, sidelong

glances.

Stop fighting me, Sujath! You know you are going to lose. I am stronger, Cybris said, gritting her teeth. Sujath’s wordless answer was full of anger towards Layketh and Shahara. As though an echo of her dragon’s feelings, her own resentment bubbled up, but this time she recognized it for what it was. ‘Stop it yourself, Cybris,’ she snapped at herself. *And we are strongest as a team, Sujath. This is a test. I’m not angry at the Weyringsecond. She is doing this because she wants us to be the very best we can be.* As she said it, Cybris recognized the truth in it herself, and her own anger subsided. Of *course* that’s what Shahara was doing—she was singling them out because they singled themselves out by being who they were. Her love for Sujath, even in the state she was in now, overwhelmed the negative feeling she had and Cybris suddenly found control within her ability.

Sujath’s thrashings subsided and she lowered her head to Cybris’ proffered hand. She grumbled unhappily and her eyes were still a heavy orange, but they were whirling slowly now. Cybris was exhausted. She felt as though she had been running forever at the height of a Kadanzer summer, but they hadn’t moved since Shahara had sent them to the side. Several dragonpairs had already made their first flights, but Cybris was only vaguely aware of the happy faces of her friends.

She had always been calm and collected. But it had been on the surface. She had never let her fellow holders’ resentment of her family get to her. She hadn’t let her *mother’s* complete emotional absence after her father’s death get to her. She hadn’t even allowed herself to feel the grief of her brother’s death—never been *allowed* to. There had been pieces to be picked up, and Cybris had taken the responsibility onto her own shoulders. And put on a face. It wasn’t the work she resented. It was the fact that she always had to be the strong one. ‘But I was the strong one, of *course* it was my duty!’ Cybris thought reflexively. Her emotional control had been a tool at the Seahold that she still believed kept her family together and strong. That was true, but it didn’t change the circumstances at all. Perhaps that’s why the Search had been a blessing to her. Even though she loved her family and Dog Creek Seahold, she wanted a higher duty—something other than the everyday tasks of caring for a family that seemed to make everyone else happy. ‘And I was so sure I was happy. I must have been happy’, Cybris thought, feeling confused as well as exhausted.

Again, there was the idea of duty. It had been her duty to look after her family and she had risen and met the challenge. Being a dragonrider was another kind of duty. Perhaps a duty even more stringent than that of taking care of her broken family—in this case, if she messed up people would *die*. But if she succeeded she could also save the lives and livelihoods of countless others. Shahara was right of course, there was too much at stake to allow her and Sujath to get out of hand. They might kill themselves, but odds were that they would bring other innocent people down with

them.

I will bite them! Sujath spat, thankfully only voicing her anger to Cybris, ***they fly and I do not. I should be flying—I am quicker and braver than any of them.***

It doesn't matter, Sujath. We have a duty, and our duty is to sit right here and not fly.

I do not understand, came Sujath's response, her flight muscles twitching with bottled energy.

I love you Sujath—and stop being so impatient. As if one day could really hold us back! Cybris said, without bitter resentment, but with the firm knowledge that she was right—and that Shahara probably knew that as well.

That is true, Sujath allowed, gazing off into the sea at which her classmates were launching themselves with whoops of delight.

'I am still the strong one in this sense—Sujath is too flighty, too high-energy, too easily angered, to be the leader in this partnership. Which is why I have to make this work', Cybris thought. She also remembered what her friend, bluerider V'dalin, had said, that Sujath had chosen her because she had the abilities to control Sujath. She felt Sujath's muscles bunch to launch herself again, this time in pursuit of her favorite brother Duhonth.

Sujath, no, Cybris said firmly, without explanation. This was going to take more work than just realizing she had been encouraging her dragon to misbehave.

Cybris doubted this issue of control would have ever come up if Sujath had been a passive dragon. She hadn't realized it before, but Sujath always did what she wanted and not necessarily what she asked. When she got afraid or angry enough to actually be *wanting* the required behavior in Sujath, that's when she started to behave, if grudgingly.

And Sujath couldn't be fooled by the face that Cybris put on. That was the problem. However much she buried her feelings, her resentment and grief could be picked up by Sujath. She had known that there were other feelings inside of her that she never let out, but after two Turns of controlling herself she had become less aware of them. That had to change, and soon, because even if she was out of touch with her emotions, Sujath clearly wasn't. Cybris sighed and laid her cheek against Sujath's warm neck. 'What's wrong with me?' she thought, 'why am I fighting this? Sujath already knows me better than I know myself.' The details didn't matter to Sujath—just the emotions behind them. The grief, for instance, that lingered in the background of all Cybris' fond childhood memories, was probably felt by Sujath too.

My brother, Sujath. I had a brother.

I have brothers too, Sujath said, ***they are slow and***

stupid.

Yes, but Timas died. Him and my father got lost in a bad storm and they both died.

You are sad, Sujath said. ***I want you to be happy. It is better that way.***

I miss him. He was my best friend. He always looked after me—we were a team!

We are a 'team' too. You are my rider.

Cybris gazed up at her dragon, feeling the connection between them. She had never understood the connection between herself and her brother—had never tried. They had just been able to understand each other intimately. Why did she keep trying to analyze what she felt with Sujath?

Cybris sighed and hugged Sujath's head to her chest. It was an awkward gesture, not least because Sujath had gotten too big for Cybris to hold any part of her comfortably. But Sujath waited a moment before she squirmed out of her grasp.

I want to fly with you, Sujath said, and Cybris felt the frustration building inside her again.

I want to fly with you, to, Cybris said. *But today we stay on the ground.* Sujath didn't argue, verbally or emotionally, with her rider's calm acknowledgement.

Cybris understood at last. What would come, would come—and they had to meet it together or not at all. Cybris couldn't think of anything she would rather do with her life.



Shahara sighed. It was late and she was tired, but it was the kind of fatigue that came with a day well spent, and she felt content in the solitude of her cot.

From outside came the sounds of Layketh putting her wallow to rights and getting comfortable before she slept. Shahara only had a few tasks more to take care of before she would let herself relax. She still had to take down her notes and observations on the day's drills, for one. She pulled the glow basket closer to her and considered how each of her weyrings had preformed during their first flights.

'They did very well,' Shahara thought. It was a good group, full of dynamic personalities and natural ability. And difficulties, of course. Sapherlin and green Lorsenth had been a little over-exuberant. S'var had clearly been nervous, but Duhonth, as usual, had buoyed him up with his playful nature. Bronze Yengarth and T'syr had had a perfect flight and hadn't pushed the boundaries of their task at all. Yes, it was all very satisfying. Even her particular worry, greenrider Cybris, had succeeded in keeping Sujath on the ground and

under control throughout the whole exercise. There had been moments when Shahara had thought she would fail; Layketh had informed her regularly of Sujath's wrathful state of mind. But Shahara had been right.

She hoped that the fractious pair had learned something that would stick with them. Cybris, at least, seemed to have come to some kind of understanding, because at one point during the drill Sujath had calmed a degree and the dragonpair had remained quiet and tractable through the rest. Time would tell. There was no doubt that it had been a difficult punishment, and Shahara suspected Cybris's resentment would not disappear overnight.

Sujath's rider is here, Layketh said, her mindvoice tired and disinterested.

It was as though thinking about Cybris had called her up. Shahara gave an exasperated huff. Usually weyrlings went to Resla or their friends if they needed consolation, though sometimes they would go to one of the weyrlingstaff. There were many reasons why a weyrling would seek her out, but after such a significant punishment, very few of them had anything to say that she wanted to hear. Some would cry, looking for absolution or a lesser punishment. Or they would beg—Shahara hated that. Usually this meant another dousing of the painful truth. And it also meant having an open door, at *any* time.

Shahara crossed the room to her door, opened it, and peered out. Cybris hesitated just outside the circle of light given off by the glowbasket in the cot. She was still dressed in her flight leathers, though she had removed her jacket and helmet.

"Weyrlingsecond?" The girl's voice was soft; her eyes looked red in the half-light. Shahara suspected she had been crying. "I was wondering if I could have a word with you?"

The girl's tone made it clear that she half expected to be sent away, but Shahara sighed and relented against her will. "If it is a brief word. Come on in and have a seat."

Cybris did as she was told and seated herself stiffly on the edge of Shahara's single chair, while Shahara collected up her notes from the day. "Well, what have you come to say?" Shahara asked.

"It's just—you seem to think that I've been encouraging Sujath."

Shahara merely nodded and waited for the girl to speak again.

"You're right. But it was a mistake—I didn't mean to," Cybris said. "I'm not trying to make excuses. I just wanted you to know that I think I figured it out."

Shahara suppressed a smile. Just as she thought, the girl had a good head on her shoulders. But that couldn't be all she had come here to say. "You've come to tell me this so that you will be sure to fly tomorrow?"

Cybris shook her head. "I know that's up to you. I don't

think anything I have to say will be important."

"Do you understand what *is* important, greenrider?" Shahara asked.

The pause was a significant one, but when Cybris did speak her voice was steady, "What's important is that I do my duty, not just to the Weyr and my classmates but to us—I mean, Sujath and I. I'm not being a leader, and that is what she needs most of all."

The weyrlingassistant considered her student and nodded in agreement. "Some dragons lead their riders," she said, thinking of K'syr and his bronze Bremnoth, "and other dragons need *strong* leaders to fulfill their potential."

Cybris looked up into Shahara's face for the first time. Shahara sensed that Cybris was wondering if she was capable of the kind of leadership Sujath needed. "Someone once told me," Cybris said, "that Sujath picked me because I was the one on the Sands most suited to control her."

"It isn't always clear why a hatchling chooses a certain rider. It could be that she saw something like that in you." Shahara was wary of encouraging her student's arrogance, but Cybris seemed to accept the answer for what it was.

"But I'm never going to wake up and find that I have a sweet and gentle dragon, am I?" Cybris asked. "She is going to keep fighting me. I'm going to keep getting punishment duty."

Shahara regarded the girl curiously. "She will probably always be touchy, yes. Perhaps less so as she matures. But whether or not you will keep getting punished is up to you."

Cybris nodded. "I understand," she said, "and I'm glad that she will stay the way she is—challenging and talented—even if I change and get stronger. I like her the way she is."

There was a definite terseness to Cybris' words now, and a kind of personal defiance in her eyes that Shahara couldn't miss. 'Like dragon, like rider', Shahara thought, finding it difficult to keep from smiling. "I wouldn't expect any less, greenrider."

