
Awake, Again

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2860.10.15

Printed in FTA #26 (2009)

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Bressa gasped awake and stared at her surroundings, bewildered. Instead of sky, she saw a bare ceiling. Light filtered through linen screens instead of the open air. She grasped at the sides of what could only be a cot. Wonder of wonders, an actual cot.

Her eyes began to water and her throat tighten. 'A dream,' she thought. 'I'll wake any moment now.' She lay back on the cot, closed her eyes, and took one deep breath, then another. Then she opened her eyes again.

The dream was still there.

Instinctively she felt for Devereth. Her green's mind was muffled in slumber, and lacked the background of pain that had dominated even her sleep over the past nights.

Bressa felt... numb. Her life for seven days had been fear and hunger and exhaustion. She was hungry now, but it was not the urgent, desperate hunger of starvation. She seemed to have a recent memory of broth and bread – Sweet Faranth, bread! In flashes, she remembered a final jump... landing in sand... the throaty bellow of an angry queen... falling from Devereth's back into the arms of...

"V'tor!" Bressa gasped aloud.

"I'm here!" she heard, and suddenly he was there, kneeling by her bedside, holding her hands. The surge of panic she felt faded, but she still felt that she was about to cry.

V'tor seemed to sense it, and wrapped his arms around her shoulders – awkwardly, since she still lay in the bed. "I'm glad you're awake!" He sat up again. "I'll let the healers know --" He started to rise, but Bressa grabbed at his hand.

"No, don't go!" she said. She was desperate not to be alone.

"Bressa?" A young voice, not one she recognized. Bressa peered in the direction of the voice, in time to see a young, blonde girl dressed in a brown frock, with a simple rank knot on her shoulder, round the corner of the screen. The girl smiled at the two of them kindly.

"Bluerider," she said, with a nod to V'tor. Then she turned to Bressa and bobbed her head. "I'm Nori. I was told that you could have some food when you woke... bread and soup would be best. Can I get you some?" Bressa's stomach chose that moment to gurgle loudly. V'tor laughed, and Nori smiled, a touch of color brightening her face. "I'll take that as a yes," she said. "Be back soon!" Then she disappeared again behind the screen.

V'tor turned back to Bressa. Her relief at his company brought her old humor back. V'tor had been by her side throughout the whole agonizing trek guiding Devereth from

the Hatching Grounds to the Dragon Infirmary in the middle of the night, but they had not had time to talk. "So," she said, "how have you been?"

V'tor's face twisted in a funny way and he slugged her shoulder – but with no force behind it. "I spent a Turn and a half thinking you were *dead*, and that's all you have to say for yourself?" He finally smiled. "I can't tell you how good it is to see you alive."

She sighed. "I can't tell you how glad I am to *be* alive. For a while there, I didn't think I would be for very much longer." She gave a shuddering sigh. Then she told V'tor about finding herself alone, and how she and Devereth had managed those last jumps forward by themselves.

During the course of her story, a soft rap on the privacy screen's frame announced Nori's return. She set a tray on a low table beside Bressa's cot, and she and V'tor helped Bressa to sit up (Bressa still couldn't believe how exhausted she was, and how weak she felt). Bressa felt brief surprise at the soft, clean shift she was wearing – then she remembered a tub of hot water and someone handing her a change of clothes. She wondered with some detachment what had happened to the ruined dress she had worn on her journey forward.

Once Bressa was sitting up and eating, Nori said, "The other healers will want to see you now that you're awake."

Bressa glanced at Nori's knots, and the girl smiled. "I'm an apprentice healer," she said.

"You?" Bressa couldn't contain her surprise.

V'tor laughed at Nori's uncertain look. "Our father would *never* have taken a female apprentice," he explained to Nori. Reilen had been the Weyrhealer at Southern, and he was *very* traditional, even in those enlightened times. To Bressa, V'tor said, "Just wait until you meet Glynda. Girls apprentice all the time here at the Weyr, though it's not too common elsewhere." His eyes twinkled.

Nori smiled and nodded. "And am I ever glad to be at the Weyr! Being an apprentice here is a far cry from being a drudge at Cibola. Oh, Journeyman Amano said he would be by soon to check you. He'll determine whether or not you're fit for more visitors. And you've got a lot of 'em waiting to see you."

Bressa was filled with both relief and anxiety. She would have company all day, if she were fit enough. She hoped they would deem her fit.

Nori continued, "Master Corsan will be by soon, too, to fill you in on how Devereth is doing."

"Master Corsan!" She glanced at V'tor, who nodded and smiled. Bressa felt tears pricking her eyes. It was all real.

Nori smiled in sympathy. "I bet you all will have a lot of catching up to do."

Bressa used the last chunk of soft bread to sop up the last of her broth. She chewed thoughtfully, then paused.

"How many..." Bressa started, then swallowed her mouthful. "How many made it forward?" She hadn't thought to ask last night; she was just so relieved to *be* there, and that -- hope beyond hope -- V'tor was alive.

"Twenty-six dragons," V'tor said. "Thirty-seven people."

The number struck Bressa. They had lost more after she had mis-jumped. So many lost. "What about E'darin?" Their

foster brother rode a green, too; more vulnerable than the larger colors.

V'tor smiled. "He made it. He had some responsibilities this morning, or he would have been here too. Told me to tell you how glad he is you're here."

Bressa exhaled in relief, then paused. "And Vesoz?"

V'tor's smile broadened, and he nodded. "He's here too, and sends his regards. He should be by to visit later."

Bressa smiled too, but felt a pang. Her relationship with Vesoz was purely casual, and both of them had known it would last as long as their combined interest... but she had only been away for him for a handful of sevendays, whereas he had thought her lost for a Turn and a half. He had surely moved on already. She wondered how long it would take for her to move on, too.

"Ah, she's awake!"

Bressa looked up to see first the head and then the rest of a stocky, dark-complexioned man appear from around the linen screen. Nori turned and then stood to greet the newcomer, who smiled cheerfully at them all.

"Journeyman Amano," Nori said. "Bressa just finished eating."

"Perfect," he said, and pulled Nori's chair close to Bressa's cotside. V'tor stepped around the screen to allow some privacy. "I trust you got plenty of rest last night?"

Amano proceeded to question and examine her, and Bressa bore it with good patience -- made easier by Amano's good humor and excellent bedside manner. He was just the type of healer her father would have liked on his staff, she thought with a pang of fresh grief.

"I'm sure you have lost a lot of weight," Amano said, "considering how little you had to eat on your journey, and knowing the condition of our other Ninth Pass refugees when *they* arrived." Behind the screen, V'tor snorted. Amano glanced that direction with a smile, and continued, "Frankly, I feared you would be far more emaciated, considering you spent so much of the journey alone. We'll get you fattened up again in no time. Eat when you're hungry -- and you can have whatever you want, now, since your stomach seems to have borne what you've given it so far.

"You've also suffered from exhaustion, so get as much rest as you can for a few days. But otherwise, you're hale as a young mare, despite your solitary journey. So we'll leave you to the care of the dragonhealers. Send me a message through them if you have any trouble. When you feel up to it, someone can arrange a tour of the Weyr. Your brother, I'm sure, would be glad to do the honors."

"Of course," V'tor said, entering again, and Bressa managed a smile.

Another face appeared from around the screen, and this time it was one she recognized.

"Corsan!" Bressa swung her feet down from the cot and stood -- and paused to shake off the sudden light-headedness. The dragonhealer came forward and pulled her into a hug.

"It's good to see you, too," he said, pulling back with a smile. "Now sit down before you fall down!"

"I'll let you talk to the dragonhealer about your dragon," Amano said. "If you need anything, let the dragonhealing staff know." Then he left, and Nori followed, giving her a cheerful smile and a wave.

When they were gone, Bressa found it harder to hold back the tears, but she managed a smile. "Corsan, it's so good to see another familiar face."

"I could say the same thing." He sighed. "After so long... your arrival has been a bit of a shock for all of us."

Bressa's smile faltered, and she glanced at V'tor.

"A good shock!" Corsan said, giving her shoulders a reassuring squeeze. "We're all so happy you're here, that you're alive. You're probably going to be overrun with visitors."

"I sure hope so," she replied softly. "After being alone so long..."

"I know," Corsan said. "Believe me, I *know*." He let his hands drop. "You look well, Bressa. It's amazing what a square meal and exposure to soapsand can do..."

"I feel pretty good," she replied, and sat down again. "After a night of sleep and a good meal... but Devereth...?"

"The lovely Devereth is in the best of hands," Corsan assured her. "She fared far worse than you did, as you already know, but her abscesses have been drained and cleaned and she's showing good progress. She'll have to stay here in the Dragon Infirmary while the last of the infection is drawn out and after that she'll need to rest and gradually build up her strength. It'll be a while before she's fit to fly in the fighting Wings, but the others all recovered from their journey forward and I don't see why she won't. If she was strong enough to make it here, I don't see a few abscesses keeping her down for long!"

"Can I see her?" Bressa asked.

Corsan smiled. "Of course -- she's just on the other side of that screen. Don't stand up too quickly, though--"

That was in response to Bressa's sudden movement to rise. This time Bressa was ready, and she steadied herself even before V'tor made it to her side. Then, holding her brother's arm, she gingerly stepped her way around the linen screen separating her cot from the wallow her lifemate rested in. There was Devereth's large, dark-green bulk, curled in slumber.

The dragon had been well cared-for during Bressa's sleep. Near her head was a large barrel filled with water. Her hide had a faint sheen of fresh oil, Bressa saw with gratitude. It didn't hide the deeper cracks that had formed over their journey, but it made her look so much healthier.

"I helped oil her," V'tor said with a smile. Bressa squeezed his arm in thanks.

"She ate a young herdbeast this morning," Corsan said from beside her. "It was killed and brought from the Feeding Grounds -- she wasn't really up to tackling anything too lively." He walked around Devereth to crouch by her head. "She'll be hungry again when she wakes -- we didn't want to overfeed her and risk making her sick, so she'll be on small but regular meals for a while. Active hunting is out until she's fully mobile again."

"I hate to be such a bother to everyone," Bressa said with some chagrin.

"Oh, you're no trouble at all -- you should have seen it here when we arrived with a full Wing of casualties!" Corsan smiled and shook his head. "Devereth here is reaping the benefits of that experience -- we know what we're doing now, the best ways to treat her. We'll get her healthy again, don't you worry."

Bressa eyed the two visible bandages – one under the shoulder of Devereth's right wing arm, and the other on her chest, inside her right forearm. She was sure there were more.

"We're changing the poultices twice daily," Corsan was saying. "The wounds will have to remain open to fully drain the infection, but they'll heal from the inside out. It will take three or four sevendays for the abscesses to close completely, and then she'll need to work on rebuilding muscle tone and keeping the scarring supple."

Bressa nodded, but she wasn't really listening. Something else was on her mind, now that she knew Devereth was out of danger.

"Corsan," she said, before he could start again. "What about me?"

"What?" he said, sounding puzzled.

"What do I do while Devereth recovers? I ride a fighting dragon. I'm not good for much else." V'tor's hand tightened around her shoulder – sympathy, she thought, though she couldn't see his face.

"Ah." Corsan smiled. "Don't worry – you'll be kept busy. You've got a lot of catching up to do: four centuries of history to be digested, and more besides! Once you're up and about, you'll have lessons with Weyrharper Andrian – I know, I kept calling him Weyrsinger but that's one of the changes you'll need to get used to – to learn Kadanzer's history."

Bressa blinked. "Kadanzer?" V'tor laughed at her tone.

"Afraid so," Corsan said. "This isn't Southern Weyr, you see – it's Barrier Mountain. Only Kadana and An'zer renamed it after themselves in the Interval, and then the mountain blew up so they all moved here and..." He eyed her stunned expression. "I know. There's a lot, and it's rather overwhelming to take it in all at once."

"It seems so," she said in a dry tone.

"Anyway, once Devereth's well enough to start reconditioning, you'll have training sessions with the Weyrwingmaster on Tenth Pass fighting techniques and *betweening* coordinates--" Corsan stopped when a taller, middle-aged woman with her hair pinned back in a bun rounded the corner. "Ah, Headwoman Raecliffe!"

"Master Corsan," the woman said cordially. Then she turned. "Bluerider V'tor, I presume? And you must be Bressa. I'm the Headwoman. I'm here to see that you get some proper clothing – besides that shift." Bressa then noticed that the Headwoman wore a long measuring cord, with colored beads tied at regular intervals for markers, slung around her neck. "If you want to come inside, I'll get some measurements." She glanced towards Corsan, who nodded.

"I'll be back later to check on Devereth," he said, and

with a parting wave, he left her in Raecliffe's hands.

The Headwoman gestured towards the private cot area, and V'tor supported her back around the linen curtain. Raecliffe then proceeded with great efficiency to take measurements of every part of her. Bressa thought it peculiar that the Headwoman never looked her in the eyes and scarcely looked at her face, but she bore the measuring process in good humor (she could ask V'tor about it when they were alone again) and she answered Raecliffe's questions about her clothing and color preferences.

"You'll probably want to stay with Devereth in the Infirmary for now," Raecliffe said, when she was done. She coiled the beaded cord and slung it around her neck again. "But I've instructions to set up a weyrcot for you in the Queens' Wing complex. You'll be assigned there at first, while Devereth is still recuperating and retraining her flight muscles."

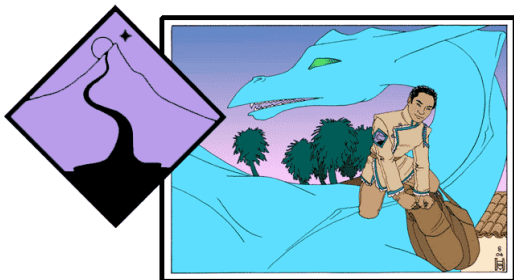
Bressa nodded, not sure what response was required.

"If you like, you can come pick out some furniture from the Weyr stores; we can get it set up nicely for you whenever you're ready."

Bressa swallowed. "To be honest, this whole thing is very overwhelming."

Raecliffe nodded and smiled. "I'll give you however long you need. Until later!" Then the Headwoman left her with her brother.

Bressa slowly sat on her cot. She swallowed hard, willing the tears not to come. She felt lost in this new world, with its new faces, and centuries of new history to learn. V'tor sat beside her and put an arm around her shoulders. She leaned into him. He was a comforting presence in the face of her disorientation. She needed him to anchor her through this storm, and she was glad -- *so* glad -- he had made it forward alive.



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