
Forward Alone

by Jen Bro

2860.10.14

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2860.10.14

V'tor shrugged against his weariness and leaned against Isalth. He would have stayed up too late the night before he had the late watch... E'darin's offer of a late dragon-poker game had been just too good to pass up. V'tor yawned so deeply that his throat made a little 'gleep' sound.

Nyth says her rider will sneak you some spirits, if you like, Isalth said.

V'tor chuckled. *She's awake this late?* he thought. *Better yet, E'darin is awake? E'darin should know better, anyway. No spirits while I'm on watch.*

Isalth rumbled his equivalent of a shrug.

Their vantage from the crest of the Hatching Ground caldera gave them a great view of the entire Weyr complex. Every once in a while he glimpsed a shadow of motion in the Hatching Ground below as Savukath fussed over her eggs. Ihyanith had insisted that Savukath use the primary Hatching Ground, rather than the auxiliary grounds (her favorite), for her clutch. The young gold showed her displeasure by hovering over her clutch more protectively than usual... and that was saying a lot. Thankfully, the hardening eggs would hatch soon.

With Belior halfway to zenith and Timor following, the first waxing gibbous and the second just past full, the entire Weyr complex was a maze of soft light and shadow. V'tor wished he could appreciate it better.

The Red Star's baleful gleam in the sky reminded him of many a night he'd watched the rogue planet in the Ninth Pass, anticipating a long, Thread-free life after it passed. That dream was gone now, thanks to Dunia. Even a Turn and a half later, bitterness boiled inside him. He tried not to think of the she-wher most days, and instead buried himself in work.

V'tor volunteered for as many nighttime watch-shifts as Wingleader Th'rin allowed, since he still had trouble sleeping. It helped him a little, though it still gave him a lot of time to think of how much he'd lost at Dunia's hands. His home, his family back in the Ninth Pass, and his sister, Bressa, lost *between* on the journey forward. He had E'darin, his boyhood friend, but he still felt as though he had come forward alone, to this Weyr in the same place but so drastically different and full of strangers. The loss ached keenly.

You are sad about things past, Isalth said. You should worry about the itchy patch on my shoulder.

V'tor gave a rueful smile. *You're right, brother mine,* he said. *Doesn't do to get all worked up again about something neither I nor you can change.* He shifted and rubbed the spot Isalth complained of. He still wished Dunia had paid for what she'd done to all of them... but for the life of him, he couldn't think of anything that would have measured up to his own loss.

There was a sudden blast of cold air – from below. A dragon's moan, and the thump of a heavy landing on sand. Under V'tor's hand, Isalth stiffened.

At the same moment, Savukath let out an angry shriek. Other dragons answered her, including Isalth.

"What is it? Isalth!" V'tor straightened.

Savukath orders us to get them out! Isalth said, his eyes angry orange in the night.

"Who?" V'tor demanded, puzzled and angry. He climbed Isalth's shoulder, ignoring his straps. Who would be foolish enough to invade a Hatching Ground, even at night?

Savukath only says they must get out. She does not say who. She demands it!

"Is it a dragon? Who is it?"

Devereth says she cannot move. She is thirsty, she hurts terribly. Savukath orders us to get them out!

The name hit V'tor like a bucket of cold water. "What... did you say?"

Devereth and her rider appeared in the Hatching Grounds. Savukath wants them out NOW. Ihyanith demands to know what is going on. We must go.

Numb, V'tor forgot his standing orders, everything he was trained to do. Devereth, Bressa's green, was *here*. Devereth... *and her rider*. 'It can't be!'

Some part of him realized that Isalth was gliding down already. V'tor hardly noticed. His eyes were fixed on the dark shape that he could see now, a shadow on the sands. He couldn't distinguish a color yet. Isalth touched down on the sands, reluctant to land there with Savukath having a fit. The gold flared her wings out, mantled them over her clutch and roared again. V'tor slid down the blue's shoulder. He landed with a thump on the Sands, and Isalth launched for the crest of the Hatching Grounds as quickly as he could, to get himself away from the angry queen.

Savukath was tensed as if to lunge, but Luka was already there, nightshift-clad, standing with her arms outstretched between her queen and the trespasser. "Quickly!" she yelled. "Get the rider off and out of here! Help is coming, but I can't talk sense into Savukath; it's all I can do to restrain her!" The urgency in her voice, punctuated by Savukath's angry bellows, spurred V'tor into action.

The intruding dragon crouched in the sands, but her head – V'tor still couldn't make out the color in the dark, and only knew from Isalth that she was a green – lolled to one side and she breathed a moan. She was in dire shape. That was all the attention he paid her, though, as he rushed to the dragon's shoulder. The rider slumped in the riding straps – a mangled affair, barely keeping the rider on the dragon's neck. In fact, the dragon appeared to have very little harness at all... but in the moonlight and shadow of the Grounds, he could make out little more.

"Who...?" he breathed, his eyes were fixed on the rider. He reached trembling hands up to release the straps.

Devereth, Isalth supplied again. I summon help.

"The rider...?" V'tor said, but Isalth could tell him no more. He pulled at the straps, trying to figure out in the darkness how they were attached – but somehow they unfastened underneath his fingers, and the rider slid down the dragon's shoulder into his arms. So light... so little there. Was it...?

"Is that...?" said a blessedly familiar voice. "V'tor??"

V'tor cradled her. She was mere skin and bones. "Bressa!"

"V'tor..." she said. "I knew you'd be here." Then she burst into tears and clung to him. "I..." she gasped between sobs, "I'm not... alone!"



2715(?)

Bressa and Devereth came out of a long *between* into night above the place Southern Weyr should be but was not, victim of the tsunami long Turns ago. In this time, the forest had overgrown even the ruins. The destruction was only days past for Bressa, a survivor and refugee, pulled unwittingly into the future by Dunia and gold Nioranth. Above the peninsula the moons hung in their respective orbits, deep crescents.

But something was terribly, terribly wrong.

They are all gone! Devereth's mind was panic-tinged.

The sky around them should be filled with other weary dragons, other refugees from the Ninth Pass... but it was empty.

"No," Bressa whispered, and between her legs she felt the rumble of Devereth's bellow, echoing her despair.

They were alone.



How they managed to land, Bressa couldn't remember. She awoke to daylight and found herself cradled in Devereth's forelimbs. The green snoozed, her thoughts sleepy and silent, and her pain distant.

The cliffs of the old Hatching caldera rose around them. Devereth had landed inside, and then nestled in the sand against one of the walls, where they would be protected from anything that might be prowling the untamed jungle on the empty peninsula. Devereth's riding straps lay in a puddle by her shoulder, though Bressa could not remember removing them.

Bressa scrubbed at her face -- it was sticky and salty, her eyes were heavy, and her head ached. She must have cried a long time.

As the enormity of her situation hit her, she broke down again. How could they *all* be lost? Their faces swam before her mind's eye: Weyrleader J'hanos, Dunia, the young weyrings, steady A'zelen, dear Vesoz... her earnest foster-brother E'darin... her brother V'tor....

Her weeping woke Devereth.

What is wrong, my rider? the green dragon said, ignoring her own discomfort. *What has hurt you?* Her mind-

touch was laced with growing panic and confusion, and she swung her head this way and that, eyes whirling violet with flashes of yellow and white.

Bressa struggled to control herself, for her dragon's sake. She hugged Devereth's neck and forced herself to be calm. Devereth calmed slowly, but her eyes still whirled with anxiety and distress.

I itch very badly and I hurt. Where are the others? Where is the man with the oil?

Bressa just shook her head. Corsan had carried any oil they had *between* with him.

Wooden and numb, she forced herself through the routine that the refugees had followed after previous jumps *between*. Devereth's pained weariness and her own fear clouded her thoughts. She washed Devereth in the same freshwater spring the refugees had used for ten jumps, giving particular care to sores and itchy spots forming in the creases around the green's limbs, and where her riding straps met hide. Bressa found herself some fresh fruit in the deepening jungle and flew Devereth to hunt sparingly.

Several times Devereth remarked that it was not right for them to be alone, that there should be others here. Each time Bressa struggled not to cry again.

In the afternoon Devereth sank into another exhausted sleep, and Bressa sat beside her and tried to keep her fear and despair at bay. Devereth would have no relief from her patched, flaking hide, and her seeping sores would only grow worse and worse. Bressa had her basic healing know-how, but no supplies and no help. She didn't even have any flint to start a fire.

But Devereth needed her. They were both alive. They could still make it. They *had* to make it!

Her mind boggled that her green should have survived instead of her bronze, brown, and blue companions. And the golds; especially gold Nioranth. Part of her dared hope that she -- or they -- had mis-jumped, gone too far or not far enough. But that didn't change anything. She could have overshot by days, weeks, or even years. She had no chance of finding her companions now (if they were out there to find) except one: forward.

She had to go to Dunia's time, alone. Any who survived would be there. 'V'tor *will* be there,' she told herself fiercely, scrubbing tears out of her eyes yet again.

But now Bressa didn't have Dunia, her star charts, or Nioranth to guide her. She was a healer, not a Starcrafter. She wished she had taken better looks at the charts. They had traveled based on the movements of the moons and the Red Star... a thought which brought to mind the Ballad of Lessa's Ride. Lessa had also relied on the waxing and waning of the Red Star for her famous ride forward.

Lessa, Bressa... Bressa managed a chuckle at the similarity. But her own travel was not so urgent for the survival of Pern... only for her own and Devereth's survival.

She did some quick calculations. With eleven jumps so far, they should be somewhere around 2715, leaving six more jumps to go: five of twenty-five years, and one of only nineteen. That was only if they hadn't mis-jumped too far. Devereth was growing weaker by the jump and didn't have a bronze's stamina. They would have to pace themselves if they were going to make it, but they had to go quickly enough to outrun Devereth's worsening condition.

Devereth stirred. *Itch*, the green said, disgruntled. *I itch very badly, and I hurt. I should be oiled now.*

"I know, dearest," Bressa said. She rubbed Devereth's arm with her palm. "I know. I don't have any oil. Wait a bit, and I'll take you down to that spring again. Won't that feel good?"

Yes, but it would feel much better if you oiled me afterward.

Bressa sighed.

She wanted to eat, and Devereth was willing to hunt again and share with her. Bressa tried to make a fire from some wood, but it had rained recently and she could find nothing dry enough. Nor did she have any cord to string a bow, like V'tor had shown her once, to make lighting a fire easier. She finally tossed the sticks aside in frustration. She'd never been very good at lighting fires without flint, anyway. She briefly wished for firestone for Devereth...

You could eat meat the way I eat it, Devereth suggested. Her mindtouch felt at once like an eager, helpful child and an over-patient old auntie trying to explain something simple. *Then you would not need fire.*

"No, dearest," Bressa said. "It might make me sick, and neither of us can afford that."

Bressa felt Devereth puzzle over that. *Meat does not make ME sick,* she said finally.

"No, but you are a dragon. Your stomach is built differently than mine."

Devereth accepted that, but Bressa could tell that her hunger was affecting Devereth and she wished she could do something more about it than eat fruit.



The sky grew dark, and Bressa watched the moons, low on the horizon. She had an unpleasant choice. They could wait a day as the refugees had all along, to allow Devereth more rest, but it would also allow more time for her hide to dry, flake and crack, becoming more of a risk *between*. Or they could go now, and risk growing exhaustion. Neither was a pleasant prospect.

She didn't want to kill them with her impatience, but she hated Devereth's pain.

I am ready. I can go now. Bressa looked up at her dragon. Devereth peered down at her. *The sooner we go, the sooner we find oil. And males. No?*

"Heh," Bressa said. "Your logic is infallible, my dear."

Devereth preened. *I must have males to appreciate my beauty.*

"I appreciate you!"

Of course; you have to because you are my rider. THEY will appreciate me because I am beautiful.

Bressa laughed and shook sand out of Devereth's riding straps. "All right," she said, "but we'll have a longer break before our next jump." She eased the straps over her dragon's shoulders and tore off strips from the hem of her long-ruined Gather dress to pad the sorest spots.

Once a-dragonback, Bressa considered what coordinates she would give Devereth to get them where they needed to be. The cone of the Hatching Grounds, of course, and the moons... and the Red Star, a mere speck in the distance. They had watched it wane and wax and wane again over the

past eleven jumps. This time, it would begin to grow again, but it would still be distant. She could estimate its course, having visualized it over the past jumps. That, combined with a sense of moving *forward*...

It was a sketchy reference at best, not one she trusted. By the time Devereth launched, Bressa was shaking. She hadn't been this nervous since her first *betweening* lessons as a weyrling.

We will make it, Devereth said, her mindvoice encouraging.

Bressa gritted her teeth. "We'll see when we come out of *between*," she said. She passed the coordinates, such as they were, to Devereth. Then they went *between*.



2740(?)

Bressa gasped and almost cried with relief when they appeared out of *between* into another night above the old Hatching Grounds. The jungle was thicker, the stars different, and the Red Star a pale, distant pulse.

They had made it.

The skies around them and the ground below were empty. They hadn't caught up with the others, then. Not that Bressa had thought they would... but part of her had hoped. She patted Devereth's neck, more to comfort herself than anything else.

They landed in the Hatching Grounds again, and she pulled off Devereth's straps. Her dragon sagged to the ground, and Bressa let herself fall asleep next to her life partner, dreaming dreams of her lost companions... Vesoz, E'darin, and especially V'tor.



2790(?)

On their third jump alone Devereth's sores became too much for her harness, and Bressa found herself scouring the beach for a sharp shell or stone she could use to alter the riding straps. She didn't need anything to hold her during a vigorous Threadfall... just enough to hold her to Devereth's back through *between*. She found a likely-looking rock -- obsidian, she thought -- and chipped at it with another stone to get a better cutting edge. Then she attacked the leather straps with vigor, while Devereth slept. The end result wasn't pretty, but when Devereth woke and tried it on, it didn't chafe her sores as badly as the full harness had. Bressa hoped it would hold.

Then she leaned against Devereth's side, and found herself nodding in and out of sleep as well, with restless dreams waking her. Some were dreams of home, her father, and Southern Weyr. Some of her dreams brought her forward to find that her companions had never arrived.

She awoke fully from a dream in which she abandoned her desperate journey forward and found a place for herself in one of the Weyrs of this time. She rubbed her eyes and pondered her aching, empty stomach. The thought of living her life out during a Thread-free Interval had its merits. It

would certainly end her privations and suffering -- and Devereth's.

But she knew what Dunia's thoughts on that would have been. It might be easier to keep a single rider out of the records, but still... word would get out. And Dunia had been plenty insistent... there *were* no time-traveling dragons during the Long Interval.

Besides, her family connections drew her onward. She clung to the hope of seeing V'tor again the way a drowning swimmer would cling to a piece of driftwood.

2840(?)

Only one jump more, Bressa repeated to herself. *Only one...*

A deep crack under Devereth's left wing-shoulder oozed ichor. Another under her right shoulder looked like it might be forming an abscess. Bressa wept at Devereth's pain as she rinsed the wounds in fresh water. She wished she could do more. "Soon, dear heart," she said, when Devereth rumbled her discomfort. "Only one more jump and we'll be among friends." "I hope."

Devereth slept for much of the two days Bressa allowed them. It hurt to fly, so the dragon resisted hunting. Wild wherries were tricky to catch, and she just didn't have the energy. Bressa wept more at Devereth's thin frame and paling hide. Bressa tried her best to catch fish and crawlers, to help her companion, but what little she found was barely a mouthful for herself, much less her dragon. Devereth still showered her with appreciation for her efforts.

When night finally came on the second day, Devereth woke reluctantly.

"But we must, dearest," Bressa coaxed. "Just one jump more and we'll be there. I promise!"

Only one?

"And there will be oil there, and food a-plenty, and there will be blues and browns and bronzes for you to flirt with to your heart's content."

Other dragons, Devereth said with weary interest, a faint shadow of her former enthusiasm.

Bressa nodded, choking back tears. Her own fatigue and hunger were consumed by Devereth's gnawing pain and exhaustion. When Devereth stood Bressa had to brace herself against the pain that flared through their bond. She eased the lone leather strap around Devereth's neck, the last bit of harness, and she climbed up Devereth's arm. She settled herself carefully and held on as tightly as she could. Devereth groaned.

Before giving Devereth the order to launch Bressa formed the coordinates in her mind. They would jump within the Hatching Grounds caldera, and she would picture a dragon and rider at the crest of it. A blue dragon, with a tall, dark-haired rider who shared her high cheekbones and olive complexion. 'V'tor WILL be there,' Bressa thought fiercely, and brushed tears from her face. She didn't want them freezing there *between*.

She gave Devereth the coordinates, and the dragon heaved herself into the air. They went *between*.

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They came out of *between* low above the sands of the Hatching Grounds... and they were not alone.

Devereth landed heavily in the sand at the feet of a nesting queen.

Devereth's forelegs just missed the outside circle of eggs. In the dark the queen's eyes blazed orange. She hissed her indignation and gathered herself to strike. Devereth stumbled backwards several steps before her legs gave out and she lay still. The queen stopped herself mid-launch, but only because a nightshift-clad figure raced out of the darkness and planted herself in front of her. "Savukath, NO!" the woman shouted. The queen backed down, and instead straddled her clutch, mantling her wings over them, and bugled. Elsewhere more dragons echoed the queen's alarm.

Bressa's relief ('We made it!') was tempered by urgency. A nesting queen was a force of nature she didn't care to face. She berated herself for not considering that the Hatching Grounds might be in use when they arrived.

Devereth, we have to get out of here NOW!! she said.

I hurt. Devereth's mindvoice was weak. *I cannot fly anymore. Savukath wants us out. She sees I am not well. She sends for others to come get us out NOW. I tell her I will not hurt her eggs, but she tells me -- She is RUDE!* Devereth lifted her head and eyed the queen warily. She tried to rise -- likely in response to the queen's orders -- but her legs would not hold her up. She sank again to the sand.

"I don't blame her," Bressa muttered. The gold dragon lashed her tail and bellowed again, but did not move to strike. She wondered if she should try to dismount, or if the gold would focus her frustration on a second target. She decided she'd best not find out... the woman (she assumed it was the queen's rider) could hold the queen back now, but Bressa did not want to test the situation. Her legs probably wouldn't hold her up, anyway. Adrenaline seeped away leaving exhaustion in its wake. She slumped forward on Devereth's neck and waited.

I thirst, Devereth said.

"I know," Bressa said.

They didn't wait long.

Wingbeats announced the arrival of another, a dragon that touched down just long enough for his rider to slip down the dragon's shoulder. The rider landed with a thump on the sands, and the dragon took off again. Then someone was there, helping her down, speaking in a familiar voice... and holding her in strong arms.

"Is that...?" She tried to see his face in the shadows. So familiar. "V'tor???"

Then he was squeezing the breath out of her. "Bressa!"

"V'tor..." she said. "I knew you'd be here." Then she burst into tears and clung to him. All the terror and loneliness of her long journey welled out of her. She clung to her brother fiercely. "I..." she gasped between sobs, "I'm not... alone!"

Then she cried herself unconscious.

2860.10.15

"Please tell me I dreamed it," Lybelle said in a terse voice.

Across the desk from her, Dragonhealer Giselle and Weyrhealer Glynda glanced at each other. Lybelle's testiness was understandable, and probably made worse by Ihyanith's own foul mood. Savukath was *still* screaming bloody murder that someone had DARED disturb her clutch, Amisseth had begun clutching in the secondary Hatching Ground this morning, there was wrap-up from an early morning Threadfall... and now this.

"Unfortunately, no," Giselle said. "Or should we say 'fortunately'?"

"She did survive under rather... *impossible* odds," Glynda said with a half-smile.

"Impossible, yes," Lybelle said, "but she still did it. And now she's here. I trust her fellow time-travelers were glad to hear that she made it?"

"Bluerider V'tor has scarcely left her side to use the privy," Glynda said.

"Her brother, I understand?" Lybelle asked, and Glynda nodded. "I also trust that Wingleader Th'rin has given him a leave of his duties in the meantime?" Glynda couldn't answer that, and Lybelle gave a wry smile. "How is she?"

"Well enough, considering the circumstances," Glynda said. "She is a fair bit worse off than the rest of the Southern Weyr contingent was when they arrived, because she had to make half the journey on her own."

"And her dragon?"

"As well as can be expected," Giselle said. "Starvation, dehydration, plus all the attendant skin disorders we saw in the others. A couple of oozing abscesses."

Lybelle winced. "At least she hasn't died on us, and I trust that she won't – we didn't lose any of her compatriots after their arrival and we have a better idea of what to expect from the situation now." She glanced at Giselle, who nodded. "The logistics of removing her from the Hatching Grounds without upsetting Savukath further were daunting enough that I'd hate to have wasted the effort."

"Devereth did manage a buck this morning," Giselle continued. "We had it killed and brought in from the Feeding Grounds."

"How long until she can manage a full feeding?"

"I can't say," Giselle said, waving one hand. "We'll watch her closely and give her several small meals as she can handle them, rather than have her gorge... it might cause too many other problems."

Lybelle nodded, leaning back in her chair. "Bressa will need the same lessons and rehabilitation that the other Ninth Pass riders received," she said. "As soon as she is able, I'll

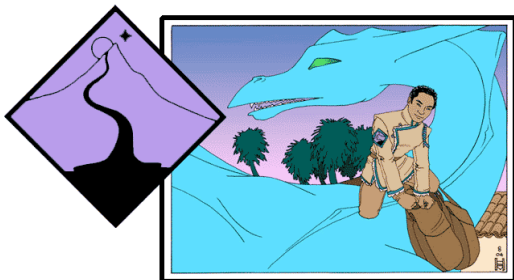
schedule history lessons for her with Weyrharper Andrian. And as soon as Devereth is well-enough recovered, they will start their re-training with D'zan."

"It will be several sevendays, at best," Giselle interjected.

"Of course," Lybelle said. "For now, they are both in your care. At least we should be able to keep the excitement of this arrival reasonably contained and one pair should be easier to rehabilitate than thirty." She frowned. "Still, I think I might just send for Dunia and J'hanos – perhaps they can tell me if we can expect any more little surprises in the coming Turns."

"At least this surprise is a dragon alive, and not a dragon dead," Giselle said.

"Yes," Lybelle said thoughtfully. "A dragon alive is better indeed."



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