

DANMAR

Warrior of Tears



Kay Murky

A Novella from the World of Kitra



DANMAR: Warrior of Tears

By Kay Murky



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Table of Contents

[Acknowledgements](#)

[Glossary](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[More Tales from Kitra](#)

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See <http://www.kaymurky.com> for full list

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This novel is a work of fiction. Names, places and characters are the product of the author's imagination and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or existing fictional characters, is entirely coincidental.

Glossary

For maps, character list, background and an Onlash/English word list:

<http://www.kaymurky.com>

Chapter One

Marteen swore, and ducked back into the crevice he was hiding in. Just his damned bad luck, as always.

Fifteen years ago he had hoped to one day become a great healer, and one of The Wise Ones. To be the one who would lead his people to throw off the yoke of the Empire. Never had his dreams had anything to do with being stuck on a rocky hill, on a different continent, on loan to another country and surrounded by Imperial and Essian soldiers whom he was supposed to command.

The hills they had picked to set up the ambush for the enemy was all rock, with only small clumps of the dry bushes and grass that seemed to be the only local plant growth. At least the crevices they were hiding in provided some shelter from the merciless sun, but nothing could dispel the discomfort of the oppressive heat and humidity. Wriggling his shoulders under the shiny metal armour plates only caused chafing, and brought no release. Irritably, he swatted at the cloud of ever present insects humming around him.

A rustle next to him announced a new arrival in his crevice. “Another two marks until sunset, I would guess.” The junior Adept sank to the ground in a pool of red cloth, wiping the perspiration off his face with his sleeve. Marteen realised that he had at least one thing to be thankful for; the summer uniform of the Imperial soldiers might have the awkward shiny shoulder armour and breast plates, but the shirts and trousers were made from lightweight brown cloth. The poor mage was boiling inside layered robes of thick red wool.

“At least it will be a bit cooler then.” Maarteen looked at the other man, judging him to be about the same age as himself, and half grinned as he passed the waterskin over. “So, Lord Vinterlan. What sins have you committed, to have been sent along on this awful mission?”

The mage stiffened as he studied the Imperial Captain with narrowed eyes. After a moment his face slowly relaxed into an answering grin, which turned into a rueful half laugh, half sigh. “I asked too many questions, Captain Marteen, and I unfortunately voiced my disagreement with the Senior Imperial Adept.”

“Ah.” Marteen almost felt pity for the man. Almost, but not quite. As far as mages went, Vinterlan was not a bad sort. “Then we’re in the same boat. That grey dragon they captured, for example. I understand why they wanted to do it, but did they have to damage the poor beast like that? She felt...”

He managed to shut himself up just in time. No matter how good a sort Vinterlan was, he was still an Adept, and

Marteen had not struggled for nothing over the last fourteen years to keep his gift hidden. He had no idea how much of the mage or healing gift he actually had, but he had seen what had happened to those from his country who had shown that ability. They had either been brainwashed into the Imperial Mage School, or driven to suicide. If he had slipped up now and mentioned that he had, however briefly, made contact with the dragon's mind...

Fortunately the mage had not noticed that slip, too busy swatting at the insects swarming around him, attracted by the smell of his sweat.

“There I have to agree with you; unnecessary cruelty. But everything Rikkelan does, even if not outright cruel, has that underlying vindictiveness. I also managed to put my foot into it by questioning that action.” Vinterlan passed the waterskin back to Marteen and they lapsed into silence, each to his own thoughts.

Dragons. Now that was something he had not thought ever to see. The Wise Ones from his own country had spoken about the dragons of the North, calling them Keepers of Wisdom. The Imperial schools taught that they were a myth, whereas the Imperial Army taught it's officers that the dragons were vicious tools of the Onlashian military; mindless beasts controlled by magic for only one purpose; warfare. Something the general population of Empire need not know of.

Marteen had always doubted anything the Empire tried to teach him. He had learned by rote and spouted whatever was necessary when called upon, but he questioned everything, if not

out loud, at least in his mind. The couple of brief contacts he had had with the poor captured dragon's mind had been enough to tell him that his doubts were well founded.

Next to him the mage suddenly started chuckling. "I suppose there's no harm in telling you this. You've seen us communicating with the mirrors?"

Marteen nodded, and the mage carried on with a grin on his bony face. "Well. One of my friends gave me an update last night. A couple of nights ago, the night after we left ... chaos broke out in the base camp. Someone killed a few mages... the most unpleasant and inept of our lot. Not only that, but whoever it was also managed to burn down four of the main storage tents. While they were trying to put out the fires, a storm cloud broke right over them. It did drown the fires, but also gave cover for whoever retrieved that dragon."

"Sh... It was rescued?" Marteen felt a flutter of relief in his chest. He had felt so guilty about that beast, even though he knew he was not able to do anything about or for it.

"Apparently, or it healed and rescued itself, including totally dismembering those set to guard it. That's why Lord Rikkelan's in such a foul mood, and taking over control of the army. He's the type that would want revenge."

Still grinning, the mage rested his head against the rock and closed his eyes. "Just thought you'd find it interesting."

It was interesting indeed. Someone had outwitted the Senior Imperial Adept. Marteen would have liked to shake that individual's hand. Eventually he drifted off into a half doze, the buzzing song of the insects lulling him to sleep.

* * * * *

Daninackin stretched his pale yellow wings wide, then furled them again over his back as he settled down. Around him in the small valley the rest of the attack forces drawn from the Allied armies sat waiting for full dark. Just one line of hills lay between them and their targets. Soon the enemy would find itself trapped in its own snare.

Dani did not like the idea. Subterfuge within subterfuge. Like his name, he liked to have things open, above board. Clear vision. What a name to saddle a dragon with. He huffed a soft sigh and turned his head at the sound of someone approaching.

{: You're troubled, old friend. :} The Commander of the Fehrkarkon, as the un-partnered humans and dragons of The Onla were known, spoke directly into Dani's mind. The big brown dragon landed in front of Dani, sat back on his haunches and lifted his left arm to present the spread claw. Dani copied the movement, touching Karragh's extended talon tips with his own, careful so as not to injure his own or his friend's sensitive 'fingers' with the sharp talons. As he did so, he studied their bracelets. The copper bracelets were a sign of honour and bravery. They had won theirs ten years ago in this same area when their team had extracted the imprisoned human warriors of the Allied armies from behind the enemy lines.

Dani's wide bracelets had three lines of inlaid lacquer twisted around them; thin purple and green veins to show his status as journeyman level mage and healer, and the slightly thicker red swirl of the junior officer. Karragh's had one thin

line, a green one. The other two lines of red and purple were thick swirls of colour: commanding officer and master mage.

Regret flowed through Dani, and he stopped just short of feeling envious of his friend. It was his own fault though. He could have moved on when Karragh had done it. Instead he had doggedly kept on where he was, hoping with each passing year that one of the new recruits would be a suitable fehrar; a partner for him. Or maybe even a halshin... a partner to bond with. There too, Karragh had been wiser than him.

Dani dropped his claw and lowered himself to the ground first, waiting for Karragh to follow suit before he replied to his friend's statement. *{: Just wondering about time flying past. I have just decided that this is the year I give up waiting and go for further training. And that reminds me. Baratorn on your bonding. :}*

Dani's conscience gave a sharp twist as he uttered the congratulation. Was he really happy for his friend? *{: The warrior is a good match for you. It's just going to take a bit of time to get used to thinking of you as part of a team. What are you going to call yourselves? Kargesh, or Raghkar? Rock of Gold sounds a bit better than Stone Rock, I must say. If it was me, I would go with the first choice. :}* He did not try to hide the humour in his voice as he teased his friend.

Karragh hissed softly and pulled his head back in surprise. *{: How did you know? :}*

Dani lifted his upper lip in the dragons' version of a smile. *{: Obvious to someone who knows you as well as I do, old friend. The two of you had been looking at each other the way two*

youngsters do when they can't decide whether to pounce on that tail or not. And now you both look like a pair does after a successful and satisfying tail-chase. I'm not dull, Kar! :}

The big brown dragon huffed, looked away and pulled his neck down between his shoulders in a sign of draconic embarrassment. *{: Clear vision indeed. We're trying to keep it quiet until it's been sorted out with the Elders and my partner's people. :}*

{: Well, it's given me hope that maybe I'm not so silly, hoping for a fehrar or halshin. But I'm not going to wait any more. Time to move on. :} Dani looked in the direction of the hills they were supposed to attack in a few hours, and a shiver went down his spine. Impulsively he decided to share his misgivings with the Fehrarkon Commander, aloud this time.

"I'm not happy about tonight. Something's not right." This statement drew the attention of the few other dragons and humans close enough to hear them.

"What do you mean?" Karragh turned his head back and studied Dani with narrowed eyes. "Those with a bit of foresight saw no problems in our plans, and even the Allied commanders could not fault them."

"Not the plans. I went over them several times, and they're all good... brilliant, in fact. Just something... something doesn't feel right to me. I just can't put a talon on it."

"Well, we'll soon know. From the way General Sheldrangur is stretching his neck, they are ready to give the order to go. See you later." Karragh touched his nose quickly to Dani's neck, in the way good friends showed their affection,

before ambling off towards where Oshnacki, the human half of the team of generals known as Shelosh, had now joined his draconic partner.

That left Dani once again to wait. As junior Healer commander he was in charge of triage. His talent for being able to spot the extent of injuries, whether to human or dragon, and make a quick diagnosis as to who could be saved and who was beyond hope, was useful in battle situations. The Healer Command team of Mineltan remained with the bulk of the Allied Armies, leaving it in the capable claws of Dani and field medic teams to sort out the aftermath of this little battle. Their task was to do emergency first aid, then sort and transport the wounded to the healers' tents that had been set up behind the front line.

Hopefully they would get more than just a couple of marks rest before the main battle started the following day. Somehow Dani doubted it. There were only four marks left to midnight, and about seven marks from midnight to sunrise. From his previous experience he knew that if it took them two marks to take those enemy positions, it would take at least six or seven marks to clear out the wounded.

Team Shelosh's mental voice reverberated through the minds of the Onla among the assembled as they counted down for the attack, the two Generals' voices merging into one. *{: Remember; get in place, report, then wait for the order to flame, then back off and only interfere if it seems that the ground crews can't cope. En... si... kat... USH! :}*

* * * * *

Chapter Two

Marteen studied the heavens. The stars were different here in the north, the familiar constellations of the Southern Kitran sky nowhere to be seen. He wondered if he would ever find out if these people also had astrologers, and what their stars told them. Would he even still be alive after tomorrow's battle?

Originally the eight hundred men on the large hill with him were part of a rear ambush on the Allied armies, sent forward by the mad king of the Essians to be in place before either of the main armies met. Then, earlier on in the day, an out of breath messenger had arrived to tell them that their orders had changed. That the Imperial Adept, Lord Rikkelan, had taken over tactical control of the Essian army, and that instead of a rear attack as the enemy forces passed by, it had been decided to meet the enemy in the valley where the ambush had been planned. Instead of attacking the enemy from the rear, they now had to wait until the two opposing forces charged each other, and then attack the enemy from the flanks.

That did make a bit better tactical sense than the ambush had made. But still. What about the dragons? In all the tactical decisions either by the Essian king, or the Imperial Adept, the dragons' presence had been ignored.

As he stood there watching the sky there was a whisper in his mind such as he had not heard since he had tried to contact the grey dragon. The words he could not understand, but the hair

on his neck stood on end. There was something only too familiar about the cadence of the words. He had uttered similar sounding instructions too many times in the last few years.

“Men! Listen up. Have your weapons ready!”

Those closest to Marteen immediately responded, his own men first, the Essians slightly slower. Even in the dark he could feel their disbelieving looks on him, but how could he explain? Once again he scanned the sky, this time noticing the black shadows moving among the stars, straight towards their hill.

Dragons! He knew it. He had known something was wrong from the beginning. His damn bad luck again. Dragons... dragons supposedly breathed fire... they were in the crevices, but so was the sparse plant growth, all dry from the singeing summer heat. A trap indeed. They would be trapped in the fire among those rocks... He did not wait for the beasts to start circling.

“Move out of the crevices, get ready to defend!”

The mage was suddenly next to him, only recognisable in the dark by the swish of his robes. “Captain! What’s going on? Are you going insane?”

“Look up, dammit! Those are dragons up there, and...”

This time the voice in his head was not a whisper, but a loud command. { : *Hockan! Ginuni! En... si... kat... USH! :* }

“GET DOWN!!! Drop where you stand! Cover your heads!” Marteen’s voice, even though he screamed as he had never done before, was barely audible over the roar of the dragons and the yells of their riders as they attacked. He himself

barely had enough time to throw himself down before the sheet of flame started spreading from the top of the hill.

Scarcely had the dragons drawn up again at the bottom of the hill when the shouts, screams and clashing of steel against steel told him that they were not only being attacked from above, but from below as well. “UP! If you can move, get up! Stay away from the flames. Have your weapons ready!”

Marteen lost track of what was happening as the thick smoke billowed out from the crevices. It flushed out the men who had not heard his orders, most of them unarmed. The smoke also started running up any clear channels through the rocks, being pulled up as in a chimney, and soon it was not possible to distinguish friend from foe. By the time the enemy sword bounced off his chest armour and bit into his side, he was so overcome by the smoke that he mercifully blacked out immediately.

Slowly Marteen drifted back to consciousness, even in his semi-aware state once again damning his bad luck.

It had started long before he was born, when the Empire had invaded the small far southern mountain country of Cistorri. Imperial schools had sprung up, taking the place of the traditional teachings of the Elders. In these schools they had been taught that the Empire saved them from hunger, poverty and illiteracy, but they knew better, as The Wise Ones had taught them the truth.

For three hundred years the Wise Ones had been hiding away in the most inhospitable parts of the mountains, only

coming down among the people to teach in secret the true histories, and to find among the youngsters those who were gifted, to take back with them for training. For those three hundred years the true history of his people had survived. A history filled with much wisdom, but few heroes.

Everything had been fine, until the summer after his tenth birthday. Out of the blue he had started to feel any pain another person in his vicinity was feeling. If his little brother fell and scraped his knee, Marteen's knee would burn in sympathy. The worst was when one of the women went into labour... the young Marteen would lie in bed screaming too.

And he started hearing snatches of other people's thoughts. Not much. Just whisperings, but it was scary for a ten year old boy. That's why the following year his mother had taken him to the Wise one, on one of her visits.

Even now, he remembered it well. The Wise One had laid her hands on his head.

"Close your eyes, Marteen."

Obediently he had done so, but nearly opened them again when her voice had spoken directly inside his head. *{: Tell me, Marteen, with your voice, what do you see? :}*

"I see a mountain top, with steep cliffs, and a stone building on top of it. There are three rope ladders hanging down the side of the cliff, and two people climbing up to the building."

She had lifted her hands away and he opened his eyes again to see her smile. "That is good, Marteen. Next year, I'll come for you and I will take you there. For now, I will teach you

how to shield yourself so you don't feel and hear the things you don't want to."

He had been eleven years old then. A scrawny young boy dreaming dreams of being the hero that would free his people from the Platar Empire's yoke. A scrawny boy who learned too fast and too well, and whose thirst for knowledge brought the wrong attention upon him. Before his twelfth birthday, the Imperial Prefect's examiners had visited his little school, and the next thing he knew he was shipped away to the city to attend one of the Imperial schools for gifted children. They had barely allowed him to say goodbye to his parents.

Now, fifteen years later, he could barely remember what his family looked like. In his dreams he often saw their faces, but those dreams faded quickly in the stark reality of day.

He had no say regarding anything in his life. Bloody bad luck.

He became aware of his surroundings, the pain in his side, the smoke in his throat and nostrils. But the moment Marteen started to make sense of what was going on around him, the pain and desperate mental screams of the injured hit his consciousness like a hammer, and he drifted off again into that world of memories and partial consciousness.

* * * * *

Doing triage at night with just the light of two of the four moons and a couple of torches was not easy, even when utilizing that special sight a healer-mage had. Dani carefully but swiftly

studied each of the human bodies as the wounded were brought before him, giving brisk instructions as to emergency treatment before they were transported to the healers tents back in the main camp.

The taking of the enemy positions on the eight hills overlooking the valley where they intended to confront the Essian Army the next morning had not taken long. Less than the two marks he had originally given it. The evacuation of the wounded also did not take long.

Despite the arguments presented by the other Allies, it was not according to The Onla Way to leave an injured man on the battle field, friend or foe. This little battle was over. Once they had overpowered the enemy, those still in decent shape were taken prisoner, but treated well. As for the enemy wounded, they were indiscriminately treated with those of the Allied forces. Once on the mend, it would be decided what to do with them.

Also according to the strictures of The Onla Way was to send such men home, but without their weapons, of course.

Two identical green dragons landed awkwardly with stretchers between their claws, and their riders, also identical, slipped down their sides to help lower the stretchers to the ground. Dani never knew which was which, so he carefully refrained from directly addressing either of the sets of twins.

“How many left up there?”

“Not sure. Would say we’re about half way done. Should be finished about a mark past midnight....” The young human apparently got distracted by his patient and he stopped talking,

but without missing a beat the other twin took up the sentence for him.

“... if we work fast. Then we can get some sleep in. Kirdai said that Mineltan suggested we should check with you when the last are off the hills, and if you’re satisfied, we can be dismissed.”

“Kirdai said...” Dani muttered, as he was already studying the wounded man the twins had put in front of him. “You tell Kirosh I will check with Minelbet and Tanika myself. And this leg may have to be amputated. The bone is crushed too badly to deal with here. Put a note with him that he needs to be transported back to base at Lowrin the moment someone is available to take him.... Next!”

As the wounded were paraded past him, the feeling of something being wrong was still with him. What could it be? They had overpowered the enemy for now. But something was definitely wrong. Beneath his armour plates, his skin was crawling.

* * * * *

Marteen struggled up through the mists to consciousness. Bad luck he might have, but he was no quitter. He had not gotten this far fighting that luck, just to give up on life in a foreign country on a miserable piece of rock. Memories came and went in flashes through his muddled mind.

It had been more than bad luck that had drawn him into the troops that had accompanied Lord Rikkelan, the Imperial

Adept. Once again, his abilities had been noticed by the wrong people. He had picked up Essian and the Ranmorian Trade Language from one of the Essian officers who had been sent to the Empire for further training, and someone had mentioned it to the superior officers. That he was already unpopular with said officers because of his tendency to question orders, had him on the first ship out to the continent of Ranmor.

When would he learn to shut up?

That same bad habit he had of questioning orders he did not agree with had him in conflict with the Adept within a few hours of their meeting. In fact, it had happened as soon as the man had joined them at the border to take over command from the Junior Adept who had travelled with the Imperial soldiers. Marteen had not agreed with the way that they had damaged the captured dragon, and had said so. That had brought him immediately to the attention of Lord Rikkelan. And not in a good way.

What a beautiful creature the grey dragon had been. Even broken, there had been a grace about the beast that he had to admire. The only thing that was not bad luck about this whole situation was that Lord Rikkelan, like most of the Imperial Mages, was head blind. No natural telepathy at all. The mage had to rely on very involved, energy consuming spells to be able to get into anyone's mind.

Marteen had watched the mage crudely break someone's mind, to get the smallest bit of information from the poor victim. That Rikkelan intended to do the same to the captured dragon had incensed Marteen to the point where he was willing to go

against orders. When his protests had fallen on deaf ears, and had earned him a dressing down by his Commander with a threat of demotion from his rank, he had tried to find another way to help the poor beast.

That the beast was intelligent was no surprise. Among his people they had legends of the Wise Winged Ones of the north. That he had been able to contact the mind of the dragon had been a surprise. The poor thing had been gibbering in pain and fear, fighting to keep control of her mind away from the mages. All Marteen could do was to keep telling her not to give up, to keep fighting. He had not done so in words but in emotions, as best as he could. That was until the enemy mages had taken control of their dragon's mind, and shielded the beast.

He had enjoyed watching from the shadows as the Adept had struggled to break through the shield that had protected the dragon. And now the junior Adept had said the dragon had been freed. If he was not semi conscious and half delirious, he would have been rejoicing.

And just there lay his biggest problem. He would probably one day be hanged as a traitor, as his sentiments definitely lay with the enemy here. The Emperor wanted the northern continent, the one the locals called Ranmor. And the empire would treat these people just as it had treated those of Marteen's country. Slavery without shackles, his father had called it.

Slowly he swam to the surface of full consciousness, only to once more be overpowered by the emotional chaos around him. In his weakened state, he did not even realise that the shields that he had maintained so vigilantly over the years had

disintegrated, his energy draining away into the rocky hill. All he knew was that he was drowning... disappearing. Anxiously he clung to semi-consciousness, calling out for help in the mists between this world and the next one.

Someone heard his calls. On a hilltop much further north, the injured grey dragon lifted her head and tried to rise up on her legs, only to be prevented from moving by the splints and bandages keeping her recently repaired flesh and bone in place. She whimpered softly and then bugled, calling her partner.

* * * * *

Chapter Three

Dani had been closer in his estimation of the time the cleanup tasks would take, than he had been with the duration of the skirmish. The stars told him that it was at least three marks past midnight when the last of the stretchers were moved away to be transported to the camp.

“That’s it, Dani.” Karragh spoke up behind him. “We can get at least four or five marks rest now. Only the enemy dead remain on those hills, and that’s not our problem.”

The big brown dragon was speaking aloud for the benefit of the two humans with him. One was the huge man that Karragh had recently partnered with, the other a Valterni commander who had been in charge of the evacuation of the wounded. Dani sat back on his haunches, and stuck one of his talons between his teeth. An irritating habit he had since childhood when he was feeling worried. Chewing talons was something for insecure younglings to do, not a dragon who had thirty three years to his life. But right now he was too tired to care.

“Are you sure? Did they double check?”

“The fires lit up that place so brightly, that it was as if we were working in daylight.” The Valterni commander standing next to the brown dragon sounded as tired as he looked.

Dani turned his head to look at the hill closest to them. Smoke was still drifting into the night sky from the smouldering embers that dotted the hillside. That crawling feeling he had felt

under his amour all night had intensified as time had passed, and it was now more than just an irritation. It was driving him insane. “Something’s not right,” he softly muttered to himself.

At that moment the mental touch of Mineltan, the Onlashian Healer-Commander team, reached him and Karragh simultaneously. *{: Karragh? Dani? We’ve just been contacted by the Healer Adept at Fort Lowrin base camp. He says that Songhmar, the injured grey they pulled from the enemy camp, is being contacted by someone still stuck on one of those hills. She can’t tell them who it is, or where the person is. She’s still half out of it, so she babbles a bit, but she insists that ‘the voice that kept me alive’ is stuck on that hill, and dying. It makes no sense to any one of us, except that maybe one of the mages got left behind. Can you check? :}*

{: All our people, and those of our allies, have been accounted for; dead or alive. :} Karragh sounded as confident as only a dragon who had double checked the figures for himself could sound. *{: None of our mages were even injured. What now remains up there is only from the enemy side, and even then the medics were sure that those remaining are dead. :}*

Dani only half heard what Karragh mind-sent back to his fellow Commanders, as for the first time in years, and the first time ever in a battle situation, he dropped his protective shields completely. Only years of training and a strong will enabled him to ignore the accumulated pain and anguish around him as he stretched a searching tendril of his own consciousness towards that hill that had been bothering him all night.

He knew the moment he made contact. It was as if that tendril was grabbed by another, weak and faltering, but still strong enough for him to connect with the essence of the being lying on that hill, its life energy bleeding away into the soil.

There was only emotion; pain, regret, longing, and the tiniest portion of hope.

With a roar and a jet of flame that surprised even himself, Dani took to the air with a massive stroke of his wings. Deaf to the shouts behind him and the confusion his abrupt departure had caused, the yellow dragon arrowed straight towards that hill that had bothered him so much. He now knew exactly where the man lay dying among the smouldering embers. Behind him Karragh only waited for his partner to settle in the saddle before he took off as well, following.

Near the top of the hill Dani settled down on a rock and looked around him. The smoke was now reduced to thin wisps curling up from smouldering bits of shrub, most of the area covered in trampled ash, blood and corpses. For a moment he doubted himself. How had he been so sure that it was here? There was no movement among the bodies, and he had lost that tenuous link he had so briefly managed to establish. Karragh landing on an adjacent rock stirred up the ash, and Dani sneezed loudly.

Maybe it was just Fate taking a hand, or maybe it was the sound that stirred the man, but for a brief moment Dani felt that mental touch again. It lasted just long enough for him to get a direction bearing. Switching to the sight a healer-mage uses when working with his patients, he saw the faint greenish-blue

glow of a healer's aura underneath a pile of bodies. It was indeed so faint, that if he had not been concentrating on that area in particular, he would have missed it.

With a growl he jumped down off the rock, stalked over and used his hand-claws to drag the corpses off the still living man. He totally disregarded the possibility that without the protection of the usual armoured gauntlets, his sensitive taloned fingers could be injured. All he knew was that he had to get to the man, fast.

The clean up crew must have decided that the man was dead, and had simply piled more bodies on top of him as they were searching for survivors. Karragh's partner slipped off his shoulder, the two joining Dani and within moments the rest of the bodies were removed. Karragh's partner bent over the man and put his fingers to the neck of the battered, soot covered figure. "Yes, he's alive. But just."

Quickly Dani scanned the figure, trying to suppress his emotional response and to act professionally. "A lot of minor stab and cut wounds, but there is a deep stab wound in his left side, and both internal and external bleeding. I can't fix it here. Can either of you do it?"

Both Karragh and the human shook their heads. "When it comes to healing, we're both on journeyman level as well." Karragh sounded concerned, but shook his head. "Maybe we should just give him a quick mercy death."

For the first time in his life Dani growled and bared all his teeth at a friend. "You do, you die."

Surprised, both dragon and human stepped back, the human putting his hands up in the sign of surrender. “Hock! It was just a thought!”

“I’m taking him to Minelbet and Tanika. Tell the others I’m going ahead.” Dani deliberately moved between the two partners and the wounded man, then leaned down and scooped him up in his hand-claws. He pressed the body securely against his chest, holding it much as his mother had held him as a youngling before he could fly, and stretched his wings to take off.

“Torn vishii, Dani!” Karragh shouted after him. Good winds. He was going to need them. Please, Universe, Great Creator, don’t let this human die now. Dani did not know why the life of one enemy soldier was so important to him, but he did not have the time or the emotional energy to ponder the question right then. The little prayer repeated itself over and over in his mind as his wings bore them the few maahla north to where the main body of the Allied army had made camp for the night.

Karragh apparently had sent word ahead of him, with details of the man’s injuries, as the two partners that formed the Healer Command team were waiting for him as he landed, a stretcher ready. Apart from a few strange and worried glances in his direction, nothing was mentioned about the way he was treating this wounded enemy soldier. He was glad nobody asked questions, as he did not have the answers himself.

Even though almost exhausted themselves, both being Master Healer-Mages, Minelbet and Tanika made short work of

stopping the bleeding of the deep stab wound in the man's side. "That's all we can do for now. Anything further will take too much energy, and we have a battle awaiting us in the morning.... Which is only four marks off from now." Tanika wiped a strand of dark brown hair out of her green eyes, and yawned. "We need to take a nap, or else I won't be able to function. And so should you. I need you back here, so I can send the evacuations to you for assessment."

"I'll be fine. I'll just nap here." Dani was not going to leave the man. Someone else might feel the way Karragh had. That it was better to give the enemy soldier a mercy death.

"Nonsense. Go find a comfortable place. I'll just call a couple of the medics to fetch..."

"No."

Minelbet turned her golden gaze on him and he was glad that he no longer had a crush on the big green dragon. Those eyes of hers could melt steel. "Daninackin, what's wrong with you? You did more than your duty by bringing the man here. And even Songhmar back at Fort Lowrin has calmed down now."

"I'm not letting him out of my sight." Dani was slightly embarrassed at the way that came out. More growl than words. What was it with him? He could not answer them.

Both healers studied him for a moment, and then Tanika sighed. "Have it your way. I'll let them come tend to him over there." She pointed to a spot to one side of the healers' tents, slightly out of the way, but still accessible and in line with the path that had been laid out for the wounded to be brought in

during the battle. “Then you can settle down next to him. That should also work as a place for you to do the assessments tomorrow.”

She shook her head as she walked towards the tent to call one of her helpers.

{: I don't know what it is with you males! :} Minelbet's voice echoed softly in his head. *{: If it's not bad enough what Karragh did, you come along doing something even more bizarre. At least he took a hale and hearty Kaadish warrior as a pet. But no, you have to go and find a dying Imperial Captain. Really! As if we don't have enough to stress about! :}*

She flicked her tail at him as she stalked off, leaving Dani gaping after her.

Minelbet must be mistaken. This was nothing like Karragh's situation. He was just concerned for the man. If he saved someone, he wanted to make damn sure that being, whether dragon or human, remained alive. That was all there was to it.

But he could not help hovering protectively when the orderlies came to remove the uniform from the man, wash the soot off him and dress the minor wounds. Still the man did not regain consciousness, though to mage-sight his aura was slowly beginning to gain strength.

The orderlies waited for Dani to settle in the spot Tanika had indicated, then laid several blankets down before wrapping the wounded man in a sheet and laying him on the blankets on Dani's left side. One of them, an Onla fehrarkon human female, winked at Dani and lingered as the other man, a Valterni medic,

walked back into the big tent. As soon as the Valterni was out of earshot, the woman leaned towards Dani and whispered, “I don’t blame you for keeping watch over this one, Petmarpen Daninackin. He’s quite a looker. Once he’s healed, I would not mind getting to know him myself!”

She chuckled as she strolled away, leaving Dani to study the man in the torchlight. He had no idea what humans found attractive in each other, never even having had a temporary partnership. The man was well built, like most professional soldiers were. If he stood up, he would probably be almost, but not quite as tall as the average Onla human male. About the size of an Onla human female. But the Onla humans were exceptionally tall, compared to the other Ranmorians.

In the lamplight the man’s shoulder length hair, and the stubble on his face, shone silver. Although there were several old battle scars among the new ones on his body, there were none on the square face. But still, he could not judge as another human would. What he tried to see in that face now was the reason as to why he was so protective over the man. Why?

With a sigh he dropped one wing to cover the man’s body against the night insects, while tucking his head under his other wing for a few marks’ doze.

As most healers throughout the ages, Dani was able to sleep no matter how much went on around him, until his internal alarm woke him up when he wanted it to. He was wide awake by the time the bulk of the Army quietly marched that last maahla,

around the bend in the valley, and onto what would be the battle field.

By midmorning the stream of casualties was constant, the medic teams plucking them out of the chaos of the battlefield at Mineltan's direction. The medic teams of human and dragon dropped the wounded off in the queue waiting to be checked by Dani, then hopped back over the hill to where the battle was raging. From where the healers' tents were in the Allied camp, the noise could be heard even from that distance.

Someone brought Dani a big jug of water, which he emptied in one gulp. The fehrarkon support staffer was expecting it though, as he had brought along another pail full of drinking water that he refilled the jug with. "For later." He winked as he walked off. Dani lifted his wing slightly and peered at the unconscious man. His breathing was even, he had no fever, and his aura was getting stronger by the moment. But still he did not move.

Then there was no more time for thinking of the man, as the stream of injured starting coming faster, and Dani had to make split second decisions that could cost lives. At some point, just when he thought he was starting to tire, for a moment he felt slightly dizzy. But it was such a brief moment, and afterwards he felt reenergized, and he found himself able to think just that little bit faster.

* * * * *

His awareness of his surroundings returned more slowly this time, without the accompanying dreams and memories haunting him. Instead, it was as if he drifted awake after a long, peaceful sleep. This time he was able to slap up his shields when the pain and emotions of others assaulted his consciousness. For a few moments he just lay there, aware of the heat, the pain in his side, and the various aches and pains in the rest of his body. But he felt clean, and strangely rested. Marteen moved his shoulders slightly, the absence of the chafing shoulder armour finally alerting him to the fact that he was naked, with some kind of thin cloth covering him from the waist down.

Without opening his eyes, his fingers moved to his side where the pain was the worst, only to encounter a thin bandage wrapped around his middle. Slowly he checked himself with his hands, finding a few more bandages on his chest and his arms. From the feel of it, there were a couple around his legs as well. So. Wherever he was, someone had taken care of him. He could not imagine that it was either the Essians, or the Imperial soldiers. That little battle back there had definitely not gone their way.

Then if it was the enemy who had taken him off that hill, why was he being cared for, and not tied up? Not in shackles? What kind of people were these Ranmorian, to treat an enemy like this?

Slowly Marteen opened his eyes, only to quickly close them again. Was he in the next world then? Carefully he opened them again, but he was still surrounded by the intense golden glow that had surprised him the first time. Eventually his eyes

adjusted, and he realised that the glow was caused by the noon sun shining through a thick golden yellow membrane. A membrane attached to bony spars that could only be part of a wing. Moving his head slightly to the right, he could see the side of his shelter. Soft looking yellow skin stretched over what were obviously ribs.

This was no tent he was in. He was actually lying under the shelter of a spread dragon wing!

It took him a while to accept that. Then the exterior noises started making an impression on him. Marteen had been in too many battles not to know the sound of one, even though it was faint. Closer by were voices, speaking in languages he did not know. Every now and then, though, a phrase was spoken in Ranmorian Trade, which he could understand. Through this was the sound of groaning and whimpering usually associated with the wounded.

So he was among the healers of the enemy. But how did he get here? Should he move? What would happen? Curiosity got the better of him and he closed his eyes while he slowly lowered his shield. Just a bit.

Just a bit was enough to disorientate him completely. Unexpectedly he found himself looking out of someone else's eyes. Eyes that were able to zoom in on an injury, see it in minute detail, then switch to healer-mage sight and recognise the immediate requirements of the wounded. Even though he could not understand the words, the thought processes of the mind he found himself in took place partially in words, partially in

emotions, but mostly in images. So Marteen was able to follow a lot of what this being thought.

Quietly he lay, too surprised to move, and watched as the host mind dealt with injury after injury, giving sharp and distinct orders. Those in Trade he understood completely, the others he had a vague idea of what the mind was ordering the people to do.

Some of the wounded were dragons, and his interest became more intense as he shared the view of the alien bone structure and innards through the strange eyes. Complex systems of muscles and membranes, hollow bones and wire-strong sinews. How beautifully, how intricately were these beasts made!

Then suddenly the realisation hit him. He was indeed looking through the eyes of a dragon! It was a dragon who was making these life or death decisions not only about draconic lives, but human lives as well! This was no beast, but a highly intelligent being... a being with knowledge, as well as compassion and empathy for those brought before him. That he was also a gifted mage and healer...

But what Marteen could not fathom, was why he was in the dragon's mind. He opened his own eyes, but shut them quickly again as for that moment he had double vision. One set of eyes seeing the underside of the dragon's wings, the other pair seeing through the dragon's eyes.

Quietly he lay there, thinking hard. Whatever the situation, this was an opportunity to get to know and study his surroundings without him having to move. And to get to know this dragon who had Marteen literally under his wing. What was

he to the dragon? A captive or a patient? Hopefully not a meal... but then, the bandages would not be there, or would they? The being in whose mind he was lurking was definitely cultured and intelligent, but that did not say anything regarding its eating habits.

The legends about the dragons among his people back home in Cistorri seemed to say otherwise. That the Winged Wise Ones came many years ago, and taught the Elders of Cistorri how to use The Sight, and about healing and magic. There was nothing in the legends of any of his ancestors being devoured by these visitors.

As the afternoon wore on the sounds of the battle were no longer audible, and the stream of injured grew. They were now joined by the walking wounded as the warriors and soldiers of the various nations returned, tired but triumphant. The walking wounded apparently saw to themselves or were seen to by their shield mates, as only the very serious cases were brought to the dragon for inspection.

Marteen had decided that the dragon must be male, because there was nothing feminine in the mind. His previous contact with the grey dragon had left him with no doubt as to her femininity, and this mind was a strong contrast to hers.

He was also getting used to the strange double vision and lay with his eyes now open, studying the underside of the yellow wing and the soft skin on his right. He was lying with his feet towards the dragon's head, and what he had previously thought was a pillow, seemed to be the front portion of a blanket covered hind claw. The dragon paused in what he was doing to take a

drink of water from a very large jug that stood next to him, the front hand-claw carefully lifting the earthen ware utensil to his mouth.

Marteen's dry tongue tried to moisten his cracked lips and he realised that he was extremely thirsty, and very hungry indeed.

* * * * *

Chapter Four

The gamble of the Allied General Staff to surprise the enemy's ambush positions, had reduced the morale of the attacking Essians and had paid off. It was partially responsible for their eventual victory. In essence this was supposed to have been a policing action to prevent the Essian Army from crossing the border into Valtern, but with so many variables anything could have gone wrong. This could have turned into a long war, like the previous attempt of the Essians to invade ten years ago. That the Allies had managed to all out defeat the enemy within the space of ten marks was only due to the fact that their opponents had nothing like The Onla, humans and dragons, and the vicious Kaadish warriors on their side. Even the Imperial Mages that they had on loan from the Platar Emperor could not stand against the joint effort of the Onlashian and Koltranian mages.

All that remained now was to clean up the mess.

"Ho! Dani. Are you still coping there?" Dani lifted his head from where he was watching them remove the wounded man he had just diagnosed, and saw Karragh pushing past in the stream of humans coming to and going from the healers' tents.

"Barely." Dani was not going to lie. He was starting to feel his exhaustion. His brown friend might have more reason to look wilted, having just partaken in the ten mark long battle, but... ah well. He was not going to make excuses for himself. He

bared his upper teeth in a grin and tilted his head a bit as he studied the Fehrkarkon Commander. “I see you are in one piece. Next time, I will come with you, and have some fun. I actually missed being in the heat of the battle.”

That was no lie. Dani sighed as he watched Karragh moving through the throngs towards the Command tents. The sounds of the battle had stirred Dani’s warrior spirit, and it was only his dedication to his calling as a healer, and the man lying under his wing, that had prevented him from jumping up and flying over to join in.

A sweat and blood streaked warrior strolled past him, drinking deeply from a waterskin. Dani found his eyes fixed on that and he swallowed convulsively. Why was he suddenly so thirsty? He had drunk the rest of his water only a few moments...

It was only then that he realised that the Imperial Captain hidden under his wing had been awake, and joined with him in mind, for the last few marks. He had been too busy, too involved in what he was doing to notice it. The joining of minds had also been so instinctive, so natural that apart from that momentary dizziness, it had had no effect on him. The yellow haze he had experienced in his sight he had blamed on tiredness, but now he realised that it had been the underside of his own wing that had been overlying his own vision the whole time.

Dani felt like laughing from relief, but managed to keep it to a grin as he turned his head towards the approaching Tanika and Minelbet. The pair looked tired and care worn. Maybe it was a good thing that he was only a petmarpen, a junior commander.

“Barakish, Dani. Eshiket.” Tanika smiled a bit as she greeted and thanked him, though the smile did not reach her eyes. “Good work done so far. I think you can take a half mark break now, because I’m sure you have eyestrain by now.”

“Will do. Eshi.” It was good to be thanked for your work by your superiors, and just good manners to thank them in return for understanding your situation. What was more important now was to do something about the thirst driving him so crazy. “Do you have a waterskin with you?”

“Sure.” Tanika unhooked it from her shoulder, but looked uncertain. “Though I doubt it would do more than wet your tongue. I thought someone would have thought to bring you some!”

“Not me. My patient.”

* * * * *

Occasionally Dani, whose name Marteen had now gathered from the conversations with those bringing the wounded to him, would speak to one of the medics, obviously from a different country than himself, in Trade. So it was with some misgivings that Marteen thought he should try and speak to the dragon, mind to mind and using the words of the Trade language, about his need for water.

As the woman and the green dragon approached, he saw through Dani’s eyes how those around reacted. The fist on the chest was obviously their own people’s way of saluting, but the more familiar hand in the air was used by the Valtern forces. So

she was someone of Rank. Now that he thought of it, the big brown dragon Dani had spoken to earlier had received the same reaction. Did that mean that dragons held rank among these people as well? Strange concept.

When the woman took the waterskin off her shoulder, he tensed. Could it be that the dragon had felt his need?

Suddenly the covering wing lifted, not much, but just enough for the yellow head to peer in underneath. The dragon tilted his head slightly and one large emerald green eye studied him intently, the slitted black pupil slightly expanding. Then the upper lip lifted, showing a row of sharp, vicious looking teeth, including two fangs longer and thicker than his forearms. But the emotion emanating from the draconic mind was of tired humour, not bloodlust.

For the first time Marteen tried to communicate directly to this being whom he had not yet decided was captor or saviour. He thought hard, forming the words clearly in his mind in the Trade language these people used among the different nations. {*: My name is Marteen, you are called Dani. I thirst and hunger. Please. :}*

The dragon Dani huffed softly, his breath like an oven door being opened, the metallic smell tickling Marteen's nostrils and throat, still sensitive from the smoke inhalation of the night before. {*: I hear you, warrior. :}*

Abruptly the yellow head withdrew and Marteen heard the rumbling as the dragon spoke softly to those with him, then the wing lifted a bit more and the head reappeared, this time joined by the tall woman the dragon had been speaking to. She was

dressed in what looked like soft green leather trousers and a green sleeveless jerkin that laced up in the front. Her long dark brown hair was gathered in a single braid that hung down her back, and her features were fine-boned and aristocratic. Above the green eyes lay a metal headband with green, purple, silver and red lacquer inlay and a V point that dipped between her eyebrows towards her nose.

“You Trade speak?” Her voice was soft, but held the tone of someone who was used to being in command.

“Yes.” The word came out in a croak. It was only then that Marteen realised how raw his throat actually was.

“Arms you can move?”

He tried, and as he lifted his right arm she unstopped the waterskin and handed it to him. She had to support his head with one hand and guide the waterskin with the other, as he was too weak to raise himself much. That was strange, as he did not feel that weak. Experience with being wounded before had also taught him not to drink too much, so after a few careful sips and painful swallows, he pushed the skin away.

“Thank you.”

“Welcome you are, Warrior of Tears.” The woman smiled slightly, transforming her face for a moment from austerity to beauty.

Marteen was taken aback by her words. “Why do you call me that?”

She looked surprised. “That not your name is?”

“My name is Marteen.”

“Yes. Mar tan Teen. Warrior of tears that is, in Onlash.” This time the smile turned into a grin. “Well, Mar Teen. Lucky you were. Nearly on hill died. Songhmar you hear, call us for you to look. Daninackin you also hear, you find. Wound deep was. Healed now.” She spoke as she deftly removed the bandage from his side. “Very weak you still will feel. Lot of blood lost. Small cuts and bruises also not healed. No energy for minor wounds to deep heal can waste. Too many wounded. Not enough healers.” Her smile had disappeared. “You understand?”

“Yes.” He did. That some healer mage of at least master level, probably herself, had expended the magical energy needed to deep heal an enemy soldier’s life threatening wound was to him almost incomprehensible. It was something his own people might have done, but not those of the Empire. That with a battle looming then, and now in the aftermath of a battle, there was no energy to spare among the healers to do the same with minor wounds was also totally understandable. Something else she had said caught his attention though.

“Song... the grey dragon? Is she alright?”

“She is healing.” The yellow dragon’s vocal voice was deeper than his mental tone, more of a rumble, and Marteen had to listen closely to hear the individual words, though the dragon’s Trade was better than that of the woman. “It will be a long time before she flies again.”

“Good. I felt bad that I could not help her.” Marteen swallowed, and closed his eyes. Then he opened them again, and frowned. “My men?”

“Only surviving Imperial warrior you are.” The woman’s face and voice was expressionless. “Tunlati warriors sure make all Imperial ones dead are. Think you dead too, they did. Tunlati not Imperial warriors like much.”

Marteen had no answer to that, and closed his eyes again. Most of those men were in similar situations as he himself; forced into the military at a young age, without any choice in the matter, and no way to get out alive. Some of them had even been friends. He felt the tears form behind his eyelids and turned his face towards the dragon’s side, away from the woman who was now checking his minor wounds. He ignored her as she muttered something to the dragon, who just hummed.

When she had finished she gripped his shoulder once, and then withdrew. Her voice was expressionless as she spoke while she straightened up. “Food will send later, when someone makes. Just .. uhhh.. meat and vegetable water?”

“Broth or soup.” The dragon supplied the words she was looking for.

“That, yes.”

Marteen nodded, but did not turn his head. He felt more than saw the dragon dropping the wing over him again.

All those men, dead. For what? A greedy emperor, a vindictive mage, and an insane barbarian king’s follies. What was going to happen to him now? There was no way he could return to the Empire, having lost all his men, and live. He would definitely be executed. As the prisoner of these people, what was his future? Would they be tending his wounds like this, only to execute him later?

Marteen sighed, having forgotten that he had that link with the dragon, and worried about what they were going to do with him. He did not even know if these people kept slaves. Nothing he could do about it, though.

He felt so tired.

{: *Sleep. Rest. Sleep is good. Do not worry.* :} The thought was so faint, just a whisper, that in his tired state he just accepted it as part of his own thought processes.

* * * * *

Dani looked at the two wilting commanders, and forgot his own woes for a moment. “The two of you needs rest too. You’ve been at it for more than a full day with only what, two marks of rest? If you fall over, nobody will benefit from it.”

“Soon.” Minelbet huffed a sigh, her green wings drooping slightly. “But they’ll probably still be bringing wounded from the battle ground until deep into the night. And we only have two marks of sunlight left. So we’d better get moving. Do you need that break, or can you carry on.”

“I’ll carry on.” For a moment Dani wanted to ask them what was going to happen to his Imperial Captain, but then decided against it. It was only too obvious that the joint minds of Mineltan had moved on to their patients, the Imperial warrior no longer a priority. Best to leave it that way. Hopefully they had not mentioned him to anyone. And the only other people who knew the identity of the man rescued off the hill were Karragh and his partner. Had they discussed it with anyone?

All through the evening Dani kept checking on the man, in between scanning the injuries of the soldiers and warriors brought before him. As it grew later, the injured brought in were the worst of the enemy casualties. The Onla treated them exactly as they did those of the Allies, except for the fact that they were kept separately from the others, especially the Tunlati.

Some time around mid-evening the man stirred, and Dani felt him in his mind again, watching. When the tall black haired medic came past, he asked about the broth Tanika had promised. The woman promptly left and returned with it, helping the man to sit up and eat. She left again, but sent one of the Onla male medics back with that strange utensil they used for bed bound humans to relieve themselves in. If Dani did not have a badly butchered Essian lying in front of him, he would have been tempted to sneak a peek. Somehow, in thirteen years as a medic, he had never witnessed it actually being used, and he was very curious as to how it was achieved.

Eventually, a few marks after midnight, Dani could not go on. The stream of bodies had dwindled to a trickle, and he did not even have the energy to mind send to Mineltan a request that he be taken off duty. He had to send a junior warrior to them with the request.

Tanika herself came to see him, barely able to stand up straight herself. She leaned against his shoulder for support and patted him affectionately on the neck, speaking to him more like the old friend she was, than his superior officer. “Eshi, Dani. I did not realise you were still at it. You can go find yourself a quiet spot now. Min and I have also just been relieved. Don’t

report back for duty until midday. And, if nobody else tells you this, let me say it. What you did last night and today was, and is, much appreciated.”

No mention of the man with him. Had she forgotten? Quite possibly. Who else had? Dani murmured suitable responses and watched Tanika walk away from the large healers’ tents to where the smaller ones for the officers’ use had been pitched. Now where had his own group put its camp up? He was definitely NOT going in that direction.

The man, Marteen, was awake again. Three of the four moons were in various positions in the night sky. This provided just enough light so that anyone walking between the tents where there were no torches would not bump into anything. But with the night-sight of a dragon, to Dani it was as clear as daylight.

He furled his left wing, flipping it in place against his side, just holding it slightly higher than normal. Twisting his neck, Dani carefully nudged the man’s thigh with the tip of his nose. {*: Marteen? Can you try to get up? Hold on to my nose and try. We have to move from here. :}*

It took three tries for the man to get to his feet, and he was perspiring heavily. {*I’m sorry, friend. I cannot walk. :}*

{*: Just stand still. :}*

Now that the man was standing, it was easy for Dani to grab the waterskin and hook it around one of his teeth. Marteen had managed to wrap the piece of sheeting they had covered him with around his waist, covering his private parts, so all Dani had to do was to pick up the blankets. With them in his hand-claws, he hesitated for a moment, then brought his head down and tilted

it so that one of his eyes was directly in front of Marteen's face. *{: I'm not going to hurt you. But we need to move from here. I don't want to leave you near any Tunlati warriors, just in case one of them finds out who you are. I'm going to wrap the blankets around you, then pick you up. Just stay calm, and if possible, relax. :}*

A few moments later Dani gathered the man to his chest with his claws. He stretched his wings once to make sure that they had not cramped up from sitting still for so long, then with a big jump and one strong downbeat, lifted himself over the healers tents and up the side of one of the hills. Earlier in the day he had noticed the small clump of trees just above where the rest of the Onla were camped, and well within the guard perimeter. It only took him about six wing beats to get there. The landing was a bit wobbly and he had to keep his wings spread for balance. As he slowly relaxed his hold, Marteen crumpled down. Although he sat flat on the ground, he did manage to prop himself with up his arms.

{: That was... interesting. :} The man's sunburned face seemed pale in the moonlight, his grey eyes large in the hollow sockets. *{: Good thing you didn't warn me what you intended to do. I might have offered to walk. :}*

Dani flipped his wings against his back and tilted his head. *{: Is that a weak attempt at humour? :}*

{: Very weak, I know. So am I. :} The man sighed. *{: What now? :}*

{: Now we get some rest. Don't lie down yet. :}

Dani found a level spot just within the cover of the small trees, which were more like large bushes of the local woody variety, and with his hind legs and foot-claws scraped clear a small area. Marteen managed to walk the few steps, hanging onto Dani's wing, but at last they were both comfortable.

Exhaustion overtook the man quickly and he drifted off into a deep sleep. But tired as he was, Dani could not sleep. Eventually, he came up with a plan of action, and only then did he close his eyes and lower his head, instantly falling into that dreamless state that only the very tired can achieve.

* * * * *

Chapter Five

The combination of the heat and the sunlight alone had not been enough to wake Marteen, but when a deep rumbling vibrated right through him he started to surface. For long moments he simply lay there, trying to orientate himself. Where was he?

Not that he was uncomfortable, though his bruised and battered body still complained against the slightest movement. In fact, he was loath to move at all. Slowly, as the last remnants of sleepiness left his mind, he remembered what had happened and opened his eyes. The sun was high already and he judged it to be just after midmorning. From where he lay he had a good view of the huge Allied camp spread throughout the valley. In the distance large smoke columns were rising, and despite the heat he shivered.

Bodies were being burned out there.

Throughout most of the Platar Empire, by law, the dead were buried within two days. But he had heard, and occasionally seen among some of the back country Essians, that the people of Ranmor cremated their dead. Memory told him that he had heard tales that before the Empire invaded his own country it had been the practice to cremate as well.

The principle of cremation did not bother him. What did was that he had a good idea of the number of bodies going into

those funeral fires. Bodies of men he had known, spoken to, joked with, disciplined, shared food with...

Marteen sighed, and his teeth rattled as another loud rumble vibrated through his body. He finally realised what had woken him, and the unexpectedness of it had him chuckling softly.

He was lying tucked with his back against Dani's stomach, with the dragon partially curled around him.

And the yellow dragon was snoring.

Just his bad luck. From the frying pan into the fire. Not only had he managed to get all his men killed, but he had been rescued, and now apparently kidnapped, by a snoring dragon.

For a long time Marteen just lay there, trying to figure out what his next move should be. Should he try to escape? He did not think he had the strength to walk more than a few paces. As it was, the only food he had had in two days had been the bit of broth the night before, and he was feeling rather hungry. He had the waterskin, but that was practically empty already.

And if he did manage to escape, where would he go?

Having lost not only the skirmish on that hill, but all his men, made it impossible for him to go back to the Imperial forces stationed in Essa. If Lord Rikkelan survived, he would joyously make an example of Marteen, showing other Imperial officers what happened to those who were unsuccessful. If he was lucky, he would be executed swiftly. But if his normal luck prevailed, he would be looking forward to excruciating torture, and then death. Not a sane option, either of them.

He could try and make for the coast, get himself hired on a merchant ship and try to work his way south, eventually getting back home. But he had not been home in what, thirteen years? Not since that time they had taken him to go to school in the city. They kept on promising that next year he would be able to visit his family, but next year never came.

And if he made it home, what would the situation be there? Would The Wise Ones hiding in the mountains still be willing to take him in, tainted as he was by his service to the Empire? It might be his only hope of survival, though.

Or should he just lie here, and wait to see what fate had in store for him.

He was so deep in thought that he had not noticed that the snoring had stopped.

“Or you can trust me.”

The dragon’s voice and words were so unexpected, Marteen nearly hurt his neck as he jerked his head around to try and see the face of the dragon. All that was visible from where he lay was the side of the huge yellow head and one emerald eye, still only half open.

“Trust you to do what?”

“To make sure that you remain alive for now. As for the rest, shall we just see what happens? From your thoughts right now, I gather that you are not particularly anxious to return to the Empire, and getting to your own country might not be possible, right?”

Marteen sighed. “Right.” At the same time, his stomach rumbled.

“You need food, and I need to get to work.” The dragon stood up and stretched himself like a cat, spreading his wings wide.

When Dani moved, Marteen had instinctively rolled out of the way, and he now watched the dragon with appreciation. Under the supple yellow skin well defined muscles flexed, and the wing membranes reflected the sunlight in sparkling points. Whereas the skin of the belly, over the ribs and the chest was soft and smooth, that of the neck, back, tail, and limbs was covered with what looked like yellow armour plating. Still close enough, Marteen sat up and stretched out his hand, gingerly touching one of the armour plates on the leg closest to him. It felt warm, smooth and rock hard, but the edges were knife sharp.

Dani folded his wings and moved a few paces back before he turned towards Marteen and struck a pose; neck arched, balancing on the knuckles of one claw hand and extending the other with the talons spread, as if reaching for something.

“A magnificent beast am I. Look at me and adore me.”

Marteen had pulled his hand back sharply when the dragon had moved, and now looked up at the head that towered above him. The green eyes sparkled with humour and the upper lip had pulled up and away from the teeth, almost as if the dragon was smiling.

“Well, of course I am smiling!” Dani relaxed his pose and dropped his nose until it was only an arm span above Marteen’s head. “All us dragons are horribly vain, but I’m not THAT vain. I was just reacting to the expression on your face. Now if you want to see a truly magnificent beast, you have to see our clan

Elder, Danaarvish. He is almost twice my size and solid silver. Or even...” He hesitated and lifted his head to look out over the camp. “Look there, by the green healer’s tents, to the right. See that black monster just landing. That’s Kirosh. He is fourteen years younger than me, and already much bigger. Only black dragon with us right now. They’re rather rare. The young terror is already even bigger than Karragh.”

“Karragh?” Marteen looked, and where earlier he had mostly noticed the people and the smoke, he now saw the dragons that were quietly moving around in the background, or landing at the edges of the camp before they walked deeper into it. The black dragon was apparently still transporting wounded, as two bandaged humans were being lowered from his back.

“Yes. Look there, on the opposite side of the camp. See that clump of big tents? Some have the royal standards flying above them. That’s the General staff. Now look to the left. That golden brown hill there, that’s my friend Karragh. He’s our Fehrarkon Commander. That is what dragons like me, who have no partners, are called. Partner-less – Fehrarkon.”

Dani huffed softly. “But that’s not important now. We need to get you into better shelter, and then I have to go.”

If, before now, someone had told Marteen that a dragon could fashion a shelter from a few bushes and a blanket with his claws, he would have laughed. But he was not laughing once he lay under that shelter, with his back propped against a blanket covered rock, watching the dragon make the short flight to the healers’ tents.

What had he known about dragons before he met this one? What he had heard as a child, was that they were legendary beings who imparted wisdom to the Wise Ones. What he had been told at school was that they were fictitious, which obviously was not true. And then there was what he had been taught at the Military Academy. That they were mindless beasts bred for warfare. Obviously also not true.

So he knew nothing about dragons, except that they apparently had Gifts of magic and healing. He had witnessed that the night before, seeing through Dani's eyes and lurking in the dragon's mind. The magic the dragon had used were simple things such as creating a mage light to study a wound more closely or to clear away blood from a wound so that he could see it better. But it had nevertheless been magic.

That Dani was also highly intelligent was obvious.

As he watched, the yellow dragon landed quite close to the black one and bent his head to apparently talk to one of the humans nearby. Then he moved in amongst the healers' tents and disappeared from sight.

For what could have been another time mark, Marteen sat there with his back propped against a blanket covered rock, under the shade of the bushes and the blanket. He fortunately still had a bit of water left, but his hunger was becoming overpowering. All he had to keep him busy was watching the activities in the camp below, and wrestling with his thoughts.

Marteen had not seen anyone leave the camp and had not heard anything, but as time passed he got that prickling sensation one gets when someone is watching you. Slowly he turned his

head. About five paces away, among the bushes, a tall man stood watching him.

As most of the men down in the camp, this one was dressed only in trousers and boots. The clothing was of black leather, and the black hair was pulled away from the face into a long braid that hung down the man's back. He carried a canvas wrapped bundle in his arms, a waterskin over his shoulder, and a bedroll bound with a leather strap was hooked over one wrist.

Now that Marteen had noticed him, he stepped forward, dropped the bedroll and bundle next to Marteen, and sat down on his haunches.

"Greetings." The voice was deep, cultured, and his Platirri only slightly accented. The man was obviously Onlashian, as none of the other races had either their height, except the occasional Kaadish man, their pale skin or their fine bone structure.

"Greetings." Marteen answered carefully, not knowing whether to hold his hand out in the Plattiri way, or not. "I had not expected someone to be able to speak the language of the Empire, here."

"I seldom get an opportunity to try it out." Was that a ghost of a smile on the still face? The man seemed around his own age, roughly in the mid twenties, but had obviously seen more than just this battle. A vicious looking scar, long healed, ran from his left temple over his cheek to the corner of his mouth. However it did not detract from the young man's aristocratic look.

“I have brought you a bedroll, some clothing and food.” The long fingers deftly untied the bundle and passed over a smaller bundle wrapped in what turned out to be a clean square of white linen. “There’s travel bread, cheese, and some fruit. You will have to wait for warm food until you get to Lowrin, as I agree with Daninackin that you should rather avoid the Tunlati, for now.”

The man looked up briefly, then down again at what he was doing, and Marteen caught only a brief glimpse of the intense blue eyes. It took all his will power not to start eating immediately.

Once opened, the bundle revealed trousers, boots, a belt and a linen shirt; all in a very nondescript brown. That was good. He did not want to draw attention to himself. Marteen waited for the man to say more, but he stood up and only said, “Eat.”, before he busied himself replacing the blanket Dani had used for the shelter with the canvas the clothing had been wrapped in.

Silently Marteen ate, while watching the man’s graceful movements as he worked. Above the black eyebrows rested a circlet similar to the one that the Healer Commander was wearing. Except that it only had three thin lines of lacquer on it, blue, red and silver. It did have the pointed V resting between his eyebrows, though. Now that he thought about it, almost all of the Onlashians he had seen through Dani’s eyes the day before had been wearing those circlets, but most of the others had all been just plain circlets, with one or two that had the V pointing upwards.

That was something he should ask Dani about. If he remembered.

The man finished and looked down at Marteen in silence for a moment as he ate, which caused Marteen to nearly choke from discomfort. As if realising this, the man looked away, then sat down on a nearby rock, studying the camp. Only once Marteen had finished eating, and washed the food down with some water, did the man finally speak again.

“You are not from Platar. You also do not look like most of the other citizens of the Empire.”

“No.” Marteen pondered for a moment whether to tell this man the truth, or not. Then decided he had no reason to try and hide anymore. In his current circumstances, truth was the only possible way to stay alive. “Although technically we are part of the Empire, my country has only been ruled by them for the last three hundred years. We are considered backward by them, but occasionally they come and take the brightest of the children...”

Concisely he told the story of how he had been removed from his parents’ care as a child.

“... they promised me that I would be trained as a healer. Then instead, when I graduated from their schools, they came and took the top ten students of the year, and transported us to the Military Academy in Latziria, the Emperor’s capital. We were ‘drafted’ into the army. It is a forced service, from which the only way to escape is either to die, be executed, or reach retirement age of seventy.”

There was silence, and Marteen, who had been looking at his hands as he spoke, looked up to find the strange blue eyes staring intently at him.

“And you managed to hide your gifts all this time.” The voice was soft, and it was a statement, not a question. “It must be hard for a born healer to kill.”

“Kill or be killed. As long as your shields hold, you survive.”

For a few more moments the man looked at him, then nodded, and stood up.

“I will leave you now. Dani should be back just after sunset. Tomorrow he is going to be assigned to return to Lowrin with some of the patients. He will take you with him and take you to the head of his clan, who is also there. Aghtiro Hammar will be expecting you, because we will tell him about you. Be honest with the Aghtiro and everything will work out well.”

There was a slight hesitation, then the man looked down at him again. “Marteen? Don’t be afraid to look into Dani’s eyes. You will not regret it if you do.”

Marteen still wanted to ask what the man meant by that, and what the word ‘Aghtiro’ meant, but as quietly as he had arrived, the man walked a few paces away, then just disappeared.

Later in the afternoon Marteen thought he saw the man walking from the healers’ tents to those of the officers, but he was not sure. There could be many Onlashians dressed in black, and they all had dark hair, worn it in those ridiculously long braids.

With his stomach full, it was easy to drift into a light sleep again.

* * * * *

Chapter Six

Dani had sunk himself into his work, although he had been aware of when the man had spoken to Marteen, lurking in the man's mind as Marteen had done with him the day before. But Dani had not expected them to use the language of the Empire though, and he wondered what had been said.

He had to wait for his shift to finish before he could go past Kirosh, where he was stretched out with his team mates next to a small cooking fire.

"Barakish." Dani greeted the whole team, who responded, before continuing with whatever they were doing.

{: Kirosh? Did you manage to do as I requested? :}

The black dragon turned his head towards Dani and lifted his upper lip. *{: That, and more. A report went to Aghtiro Hammar this afternoon, about your 'pet'. He will arrange that the mage Elder there will be present when you take the human to him. And he is already making arrangements to have you transferred back to Marzanhammas tomorrow afternoon. :}*

Dani had not expected that. He had just thought to offer the human refuge with his Cavern. *{: Why? :}*

Kirosh puffed softly. *{: My halshin thinks you should look the human in the eye. He suggests it would be a good bonding. He read the man's thoughts, and his heart, and as you said... the Warrior of Tears is a good man. :}*

Bonding... for a moment Dani did not know how to respond. He had to admit that he had secretly thought that he should offer the man fehrarhalsh - partnership. He had not even considered trying to bond with him. A bonding was not something one could force. It either happened, or it did not. For some it took years, for others, like Karragh, it seemed predestined. And rarely someone like Kirosh came along, who had been bonded from birth.

Why had he not thought of trying to bond with the man?

Dani sighed. He knew why. He was scared that it would not work.

{: You should, you know. My partner thinks it's predestined, like Karragh and his partner, and usually I am the one with premonitions, not he. So when my halshin says he has a premonition, I usually listen. :}

Dani looked at the younger dragon in disbelief. But Kirosh was not to be silenced. *{: And the other thing, Dani old boy, is that if you do manage to bond with him, nobody can say anything about him being with us. :}*

Half a mark later Dani, instead of flying, walked slowly through the camp to where he had left the man. He needed time to think. What if he tried to bond with Marteen and it did not work? What if he asked the man and he refused? The other option would be to just attempt it, without telling the man what was involved. But even just the idea of that went totally against the grain of Dani's personality.

Marteen was awake and waiting for him, sitting on a rock next to the shelter instead of lying down underneath it.

“You’re tired.” The concern in the man’s voice was obvious, and it made hope flare up in Dani’s breast.

“I am.” He sank down next to the little shelter that Kirosh’s partner had extended, and rested his head on the blanket which was spread out on the ground. How was he going to approach this?

The man grunted as he got up and carefully moved back to the shelter, equally carefully lowering himself again to sit on the blanket next to Dani’s head. Dani did not move, just followed Marteen’s movement with the eye closest to the man. Then Dani huffed a sigh and closed his eyes.

The touch was tentative, as if the man was scared as to what his reaction would be, but the hand rested warmly behind his ear. “I wish I had the energy to pass on to you, to help.” The tone of the voice was wistful.

“Thank you. The thought alone is appreciated.” Dani felt the gentle questing mind touch, and was tempted to lower his shields. But he could not do it yet.

* * * * *

Marteen wondered why the yellow dragon was suddenly shielding so tightly against his contact. Had he, inadvertently, said or done something to upset Dani? He withdrew his hand and let it lie in his lap, staring out at the camp fires.

“Are you in trouble for rescuing me?” He had to know.

“No.”

“Could you be?”

“No, not for rescuing you from the hill, but maybe for abducting you afterwards.”

There was a slight tone of humour in the tired voice. Abducting him. Marteen had not considered it an abduction, but he supposed it could be looked at that way.

“Why did you?”

There was a long silence and Marteen wondered if the dragon was asleep, or just ignoring the question. It was apparently the latter, as the next time Dani spoke, it was with a question of his own.

“The man that brought you the clothing and food today. What did he say to you?”

Briefly Marteen outlined the entire meeting, including what he had told the man about his past. Again there was a long silence, then Dani sighed, lifted his head and pulled himself up a bit, drawing his legs and elbows beneath him.

“Marteen...” The dragon hesitated, looked at him, then looked away again. “What do you know about dragon partnerships.”

“Nothing, really. Before this I did not even know that there was such a thing. We were taught at the Academy that all dragons were animals.”

Dani sighed again, a big huff. “I will have to explain to you then, very briefly. Dragons are not only intelligent, but we also have careers, hopes, dreams, anything else our fellow Onla, the humans, have. We only differ biologically. About half of the dragons of Onlashia are partnered with humans. Such a partnership can be for convenience, to perform a specific task, or

to get ahead in one's career. But other partnerships are more lasting. We call those partnerships bonds. There are three different kinds of bonds. The friendship bond, which is when a pair, human and dragon, work together for a long period and become so used to each other, that they formalise that bond. Then there is the life bond. That is an instinctive bonding that goes deeper than just friendship. It is a sharing of minds – a sharing of thoughts and emotions that cannot be broken by either partner. It is for life. Then there is the last one. A soulbond. Those are rare. The two partners are born already bonded.”

Marteen waited for Dani to carry on, but the dragon fell silent again.

“And do you have a partner?”

“No. I am fehrarkon. Unpartnered. But I do not need to remain so.”

“Oh.” Marteen did not know what to say. It was as if the dragon expected something from him, but what? “Why are you telling me this?”

Again there was an uncomfortable silence before Dani spoke again. “Because... tomorrow we will go to Lowrin. I have asked for our Aghtiro, the head of my Cavern... what others call clan, to consider giving you refuge. Now if you go with me, and apply for it, you will find he is a kind man. But it will cause problems. He will have to go before the Elders and Military Leaders of our country to petition for it. He will have to make a pretty good case as to why he wants to take an enemy soldier into his Cavern.”

“Oh.” Marteen felt flabbergasted. He had had no idea that the dragon had been trying to save his skin to that extent. Why? “Why? Why would you do that much for me?”

In the dark the dragon swung his head towards the man, and pinned him with an intense, glowing green gaze. “If I knew, I would have told you. I think...”

Marteen could not look away from that gaze, staring at the dragon’s eyes as if hypnotized. What had the man said earlier in the day, before he had left?

“Daidokt!” The word that slipped over the dragon’s tongue was obviously an expletive. Dani blinked and turned his head away again, leaving Marteen feeling slightly disorientated.

“What is my alternative?” It was hard to think clearly.

“There is that which I have mentioned. There is also the option of me helping you to get beyond the guards, to the closest village on the Essian side, and you can try to make your way home.”

“No.” Marteen hesitated, then sighed. “Yes, I wish with all my heart I could go to the true home of my childhood, but it’s not possible. I would not make it alive. Not even if I had no injuries, and was as strong as a horse. Cistorri is landlocked. The only way in or out is through the lands of the Empire.”

“You could try to make your way into Valtern, and find work there, but if someone recognises you for an Imperial soldier, you would be caught as a spy.”

“And your people would not assume I am one?”

In the moonlight the teeth glinted as the dragon pulled his lip up in a smile. “You have already been tested. You were not even aware of it.”

“How?”

“The young man who visited you today. I will not tell you how. Later, if you are still with me, you will find out for yourself. If not, then it is better you do not know.”

For a long time silence hung between them, as both studied the camp below, each busy with his own thoughts. Marteen’s thoughts tended to go in a circle, bringing him right back to where he was.

“And those are my choices.” He made it a statement, not a question.

“There is one more option, and another, which is only a remote possibility.”

“What are they?”

“That you go into a willing, formal fehrarhalsh partnership with me. An agreement for the two of us to work together, for a fixed period of time. That would mean that you will have to be accepted in the Onlashian military. It would take some intense negotiation from my Aghtiro’s side, but if you agree to be interrogated, and then to swear an oath of fealty to the Onla, it could be done.”

“And the possibility?”

Dani took his time before he replied, and his voice sounded uncertain for the first time since Marteen had become aware of his presence. “If we life bonded, which is something

that may, or may not work, you automatically become part of The Onla, no matter what your origin or history.”

It was Marteen’s turn to be silent for a while. Eventually he had to ask, “This life bond. What does it entail?” He had visions of the blood bond ceremonies some of the barbarians from the far South practiced. But these dragons, and their people, were no barbarians.

“If we attempt to bond, and it succeeds, then we will be able share our thoughts and emotions at will; there will be a permanent link between us, for the rest of our lives. You will be able to see through my eyes, and I through yours, and we will hear what the other hears. But if I get killed, you will most likely die as well, and also the other way round. Our lives will be linked until the day we die.”

That brought up another question. “Just how long does a dragon normally live?”

Dani snorted. “Very long. Our kron, what you would call king, and his partner are now almost three hundred years old.”

“But my people only live at most to ninety or hundred, occasionally a tiny bit longer. Will that mean that if we do manage to bond, you will die young, when I die as an old man?”

“No.” Dani swung his head around again, pinning Marteen with that same hypnotic gaze. “It will mean that you will grow old slower, and if not killed in war or by disease, will grow old with me. Does that make the bonding more tempting? That you might have an extended life?”

“No.” Marteen shuddered. “I don’t know if I want to live that long. If one can be assured of having good health, and

happiness, then it would be wonderful, but nobody can predict that. What if your life is one of misery and strife? What if after a few years, we start irritating each other? We know nothing really of each other.”

“That is true.” {*: And a good answer. :}*

For the first time that evening Dani dropped the shields that had prevented them from communicating mind to mind. {*: There is another thing. You should not have been able to see through my eyes, right from the start. That is why Kirosh’s partner thinks that we would bond easily. He thinks we are already partially there. :}*

“He told me not to be afraid of looking into your eyes. What did he mean?” For some reason, Marteen felt uncomfortable with the mind to mind communication. As if he was committing himself to something he was not sure of.

“He probably meant you should not fear bonding. I suppose he is a good one to comment on something like that.” Dani had not turned his gaze away this time, and that glowing green gaze was becoming more and more difficult to avoid.

“Why?”

“Because he had no choice in the matter. He has been bonded with Kirosh since before they were born... and no, I have no idea what that feels like, or entails. The soul bonded don’t discuss it.” How did Dani know that was going to be his next question? Oh.

{*: Yes. Your shields are down as well, and your thoughts are jumping out at me. :}*

What could he lose? What could he gain? Already it was difficult to think of going on without the dragon as companion. Slowly Marteen lifted his eyes, met the dragon's hypnotic gaze and thought, *{: Well, what do we do now? Is there a ritual or some... :}*

Marteen forgot what he wanted to say as he was drawn into those eyes, deeper and deeper. Flashes of his own memories competed with those of the dragon, totally alien concepts and experiences. The feeling of wind slipping over extended wings, and the experience of diving through the waves of the sea between the islands. Looking down as he flew, the Onlashian islands shimmering below in the sapphire sea like so many emeralds scattered by an indiscriminate hand.

The one emotion that grabbed his heart and twisted it was the security of belonging, of knowing no matter where you are, or where you go, you are part of the Cavern. That sure knowledge that no matter what happened to you, the Cavern would move heaven and earth to find you again. No wonder they had gone after the grey dragon. She belonged to a Cavern too.

At first Marteen retained enough self awareness to know which were his own thoughts, and which were Kirosh's thoughts or memories. But eventually he lost himself completely in the bond, and his eyes slowly closed.

The sun's first rays on his face woke Marteen, and he stretched luxuriously, only to stop when he found himself pinned down by a tree stump.

Not a tree stump, but a thick dragon arm that had him clutched against Dani's chest as the dragon slept. Very much like a child would hold onto a soft toy. Uncertain whether to wake the dragon, or try to extract himself, Marteen took stock of his surroundings. Everything seemed to be brighter, more colourful. The dull brown tents of the camp glittered with dew, reflecting golden sparks of sunlight. The sky was a fresh, bright blue, and he seemed to have finally regained his sense of smell... intensely.

He needed a bath!

{: *Indeed you do, Tshoulan, you stink!* :} Marteen was suddenly released, and he rolled out of the way as the dragon stretched.

Tshoulan. The meaning of the word was there, in his mind. My life. He was bonded for life, to a dragon.

Something else was different. More than just his sight, his smell, and yes, his hearing. The sounds of the camp below were much louder than they had been the day before.

Tentatively he sat up, stretched again, and came to his feet. Where he had been barely able to take a few paces away from the little shelter the previous day, to relieve himself, he now felt strong, and strangely energised. He brought his hands up to his face, to look at them and had to promptly sit down on a rock as his legs nearly gave away in surprise.

Whereas the previous day, the back of his hands and forearms had been covered with the slowly healing cuts, slices and bruises of the battle, the skin was now smooth, only scars

remaining. Slowly he checked his other wounds. Even the deep one in his side was no more than a white scar.

A yellow nose appeared in his line of vision and he lifted a hand to touch it, feeling the smooth skin, and the life beneath it, with his fingertips.

{: Are you done admiring yourself? :}

{: It's a miracle! :}

{: No, no miracle. In the bonding process, my healing energy mixed with yours, amplifying it, and your body was able to heal itself like it would have done if you had been trained how to do it. :}

Marteen leaned forward and pressed his face against Dani's cheek.

"It seems as if I am getting all of the benefits from this arrangement, and you none."

Dani puffed a chuckle and his hot breath stirred Marteen's hair, flowing warmly over his back. "Uhm. I think I might have forgotten to mention a few things last night; such as a seasons worth of partnership training, where you are taught exactly how to take care of my needs. Also the fact that from now on, where I go, you go. And by the way, now that you are healed, there is a spot between my shoulders, under the armour, that itches horribly."

Marteen was still laughing as he gingerly crawled up Dani's neck towards that spot.

Just his luck.

Bonded, for life... with an itchy dragon.

DANMAR: Warrior of Tears

Kay Murky



More Tales From Kitra
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KIRDAI: Spark & Dagger
An epic adventure from Kitra

For an introverted scholar like Dai, there could be only thing worse than having a rare soul-bond with an equally rare black dragon. That would be to find yourself playing a part in an ancient prophesy that speaks of adventure and great deeds. When he discovers this bond, he will find that there is no difference between the two situations at all.

Growing up in the background at Amery castle, and known as 'The Bastard' or 'The Ghost of Amery', Dai has no memory of the time before his arrival ten years ago in the company of a dying man - a man they say was his father. But in his dreams his father wears another face - not the one of the man in the portrait hanging in the Great Hall. Dai wants to know what he is, but how can he if he does not even know who he is? All he knows is that he is not the grandson of the Duke of Amery - no matter what anyone else believes. Then there are the nightmares that haunt him, and the niggling feeling that there is more missing in his life than just his memory.

As happened ten years before, the nations of The Alliance have to mobilise against the threat of an Essian

invasion. Travelling as the Duke's secretary cum personal guard, Dai's life in the shadows seems at an end. He finds himself privy to War Council meetings, and makes friends with princes and mages... and one young journeywoman mage in particular. Events keep pushing him to the foreground, putting him in situations that challenge his intelligence and his reserve.

Black Kirosh knows who he is, but until his missing soul bonded partner is found, he will not be able to find out what he is. Is he a warrior, a mage, a healer, a scholar, or perhaps all of the above? Prankster Kirosh is not satisfied with waiting for Destiny and Fate to bring his partner back. The extroverted young dragon manages to win himself a place in the elite Reconnaissance and Rescue wing of the Onlashian military, and a promise from his Commander to help him in his search for his missing soul partner.

-----oOo-----