

The Bonds Forged in War

Commissioned by Hurricandrake

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The mission plan was straightforward: begin the invasion through an all-out beach offence to claim the shore of Eres. Eres would then serve as a staging area and a foothold to claim the rest of the state of Iuslune.

Or at least it was straightforward in theory. In practice though, the situation got sticky. Perhaps the invasion was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Or perhaps the Dralic army was already stationed by the beach by the time their stealth ships got there. Or perhaps there were spies amongst their ranks, revealing their strategies to the enemy long before the mission even began.

Whatever the reason, the only thing that mattered was that the mission was a failure. At that time, Storm was seated in the holding bay of the ship among rows of other troops.

"We will be disembarking within the next fifteen mikes," his sergeant was announcing, "Whole lot, do an equipment check."

Everyone began checking their utility vests. Frag grenades. Loaded magazines. Rifle parts.

As the blue dragon checked his side pouch, a loud explosion came from the front of the ship. Before he could react, a second explosion beneath them ripped a huge hole in the steel hull, emptying the sea into the holding bay.

The entire bay descended into chaos as the draconic troops turned to their equally-confused commanders.

"Open the bay doors!" one of them was shouting.

Soldiers at the sides were scrambling to inflate the life rafts that hung on the walls of the holding bay, racing against the rising waters of the ship.

Storm tried to keep his cool.

Panicking wouldn't solve anything.

But the worried looks of everyone around him was contagious.

Suddenly, one more explosion ripped the side of the ship open and water gushed around them. The waves washed over him, knocking him off his feet and depriving him of air. He was floating in the body of water, barely making it the shouts of panic above him.

Air.

He needed air.

He swam in the direction of the flicking lights that should've been the ceiling. Then a much-needed breath of air. Around him, soldiers were struggling to stay afloat. Some of them had managed to get the life raft floating and were trying to push it through the half-submerged bay doors.

Another wave pulled him under. Then there was something. Maybe it was a heavy object that came loose from the impact. Maybe it was a floating piece of hull debris. Or maybe it was the kicking legs of his flailing comrades. Whatever it was, the last thing Storm remembered was that this "something" hit him on the side of the head, knocking him out.

Storm woke up to the sensation of scummy water washing against his back. As he got up, he found himself resting against a tangle of roots. All around him were mangrove trees, tangling their gnarled branches with their neighbouring shrubs. Their branches blotted out the sun, casting a dull green all around the blue dragon. The open sea could still be seen some distance away, bright and cheery.

Storm stumbled to his feet, his uniform dripping with the algae-filled seawater as he tried to stand in the shallow, muddy waters. Thankfully, his rifle was still with him. He placed his finger around the trigger guard with his right hand and tightly gripped the handguard with the left.

He tried to spread his wings to dry them but a sharp pain made him fall over in pain. He turned over to peer at his wing; one of them was bent in an odd angle at the forearm and the sharp edge of the broken bone was poking through his leathery skin.

A fracture.

He needed help. He held his gun close to him as he splashed his way through the water. His heart was beating faster and faster as he hurried for the open sea.

The light blue of the sea and sky greeted him but it wasn't enough to put the dragon at ease. His eyes scanned the vast expanse of the empty ocean and shore.

No fighting.

No ship.

No soldiers.

"No..." Storm gasped. His knees grew weak and he collapsed into the mud. He was well and truly alone.

Fear.

No, it wasn't quite fear that held him in place for ages. It was more like the feeling of raw shock hitting him like a wall to the face that paralyzed him. He was trapped in enemy territory with no means of escape. No ship. No flight. Questions flooded his mind one after the other, each of them piling up over each other without answer or resolution.

How far was he from the landing point? Could he make it back there?

And even if he did, was the mission a success? Would he find his comrades welcoming him with open arms?

Or would he face only loss and defeat? Were there any survivors? Would they all, like him, be stranded?

And would they risk another squad for a rescue mission?

Only when the sun threatened to set and engulf him in the darkness did he get up and look around him. The sea still showed no sign of rescue and the swamp behind him only seemed even more ominous in the dark.

He had to find shelter.

The next morning found the blue dragon trekking inland through the marshes. His broken wing was clumsily splinted with branches and vines, a process that had caused him much pain the previous night. He had no clue which direction the ocean currents had carried him from so there wasn't any way he could trace his way back to the battlefield. All he could do was to keep exploring until he found something.

His utility pouch had two days of rations but Storm was going to make it last. If he conserved his energy, he could probably limit himself to two or even one meal a day. Storm shuddered at the thought; the last time he had to do that was during their jungle survival training; six days in the jungle with two days of rations. By the third day of skimping on rations and foraging for food, his hunger had reduced him to a feeble mess.

He was not looking forward to that again.

Still, it wasn't like he had a choice. If the worst was to be expected, he would be trapped here for an indefinite amount of time until help came.

Suddenly, a familiar deep grey colour came into view among the trees.

"Huh?"

It was the hull of their stealth ships. Or at least a part of it. The chunk of the hull was at least twice Storm's height, half-submerged in the muddy waters. The metal edges of it were twisted and warped as if it had been heated and stretched before it was torn off the rest of the ship.

Hidden among the low shrubs at the base of the hull was a deep purple colour. As Storm slowly approached it, he could make out a female Dralic, glaring suspiciously at him. Her form was almost shark-like except for her draconic horns and muzzle. Storm returned the glare, after all, they came from the two opposing sides of the war they were fighting.

However, the Dralic's tail and legs were trapped underneath the hull, keeping her pinned on the ground. Before Storm could react, she whipped out her rifle and fired a shot towards him.

He was halfway into a crouch as the bullet missed and sailed above his head. From behind him, a piercing shriek assaulted his ears and he turned around.

A giant green snake right behind him was recoiling in pain. Storm stumbled backwards and fell bum-first into the mud. The slimy serpent had been so silent, he had failed to notice it as it slithered up behind him. The Dralic fired a few more shots, striking it between the eyes.

Its cries of pain subsided as its writhing came to a slow stop. Storm stared at its lifeless body for a few moments, making sure it was well and truly dead before he turned to the Dralic.

"T-thanks," he managed between his heavy pants.

"Thank me by getting me out of this thing," she responded without hesitation.

Storm looked her up and down as if assessing her threat to him.

"Are you going to help me out? Or are you going to stand there and wait for another swamp snake to get us both?" she snapped at him.

"Give me the gun first," he replied.

"If I wanted to shoot you, I'd have done it already," came the curt reply.

A moment of silence hung between them.

"Fine," Storm grunted as he went over to the hull and stood beside the Dralic. Squatting down, he dug in the mud until he found the base of the hull and pushed his fingers beneath it. With a huge heave, he strained as he tried to lift the hull up.

The metal refused to budge. The dragon tried again, this time putting his back into it. The metal shifted in the mud, rising by just a few centimetres.

"Just...a bit more..." the Dralic gasped, one hand forward as if to drag herself forward and another hand under the edge of the metal that was keeping her pinned, straining to pull herself free.

Storm closed his eyes and focused his entire being into lifting up the metal. He could feel the entire hunk of metal shifting in the unstable ground. His fingers felt like it was on fire from the weight of the metal.

"I...I can't hold on for much longer!" Storm gasped in agony.

"It's almost up. Don't drop the damn thing on me!" she snapped back.

Almost...

There was the sound of splashing in the muddy waters as the Dralic pried herself free. Storm let go, dropping the hull back into the mud with a loud splash before collapsing onto the ground himself. The both of them spent the next few minutes panting in relief.

As their strength came back to them, so did their sense of caution.

"So why are you here?" Storm glared at the Dralic.

"I should be asking you the same thing," she scoffed back, "Seeing that you're currently in our territory."

"I asked first," came the retort.

There was a moment of hesitation before she finally replied, "There were incoming enemy ships. No doubt to invade our land. We were dispatched to...deal with the threat."

Storm's eyes widened at the realization. "And you fired missiles at us?" he asked scathingly.

"No," she raised an eyebrow at his response, "We're the naval team, hiding beneath the waves while you have eyes only in the sky. We planted piercing bombs on all the ships, each one strong enough to tear through thick steel." A satisfied grin started to form at the sides of her mouth as she turned wistfully to the side, "And we detonated them togeth-

"You could've killed us!" Storm interrupted angrily.

"Oh?" she turned back to look at him, "So you were on one of those ships? Lucky you. After the ships were blown apart, my squad would've been swarming the ships like piranhas drawn to flesh, ready to give each survivor a deep stab to the heart." Her smug grin only served to infuriate Storm even more. There was a flash of blue as the dragon pounced on the Dralic.

"Tell me why I shouldn't kill you right here and now," he snarled.

The Dralic threw Storm off her with a swift kick of her feet before pouncing on the dragon, pinning him down.

"Because I haven't," she whispered her thinly-veiled threat into his ear.

Storm glared nervously at her as he tried to slow his rapid breathing. Confident that the dragon wouldn't attack, the Dralic got to her feet.

"Anyway," she continued as if nothing had happened, "We both need to travel through the swamp to get out of here. And with creatures like that," she nodded towards the carcass of the giant snake, "I don't think either of us would want to be alone."

Storm looked at the large snake with a sense of morbid awe. Venom was dripping from its fangs, colouring the swampy water purple as they mixed. That thing could've killed him before he even knew what was happening.

"Well? Is that a yes or a no?" the Dralic seemed impatient.

"Alright," Storm grunted, "But once we get out, we're enemies again."

"Fine by me," the Dralic turned around and headed deeper into the swamp, "Follow me."

"Wait!" Storm chased after her, "I haven't got your name yet."

The Dralic turned around to face him. "Nalani," she said curtly.

"Storm," the dragon replied but the Dralic had already turned and trudged ahead.

Shrugging to himself, Storm followed her through the marshy waters.

The night found the two of them climbing up separate trees to rest. Storm settled for the lower branches of a particularly tall mangrove tree and Nalani perched herself in another tree a few metres lower. The Dralic had earlier suggested that they took to the trees to rest for the night; after all, she knew of the dangers lurking within the vast and extensive swamp: crocodilian monsters hiding in the mud, strangling vines equipped with poison-tipped spines, and many other unknown threats that could turn their peaceful rest into a nasty surprise in a matter of seconds.

Taking the rope from his utility pouch, he looped it around the trunk of the tree and secured it around his waist to prevent himself from falling off the branch while sleeping. Once he was confident he was safely secured, Storm dug through his pack of rations. The two days' worth of rations amounted to six dark green foil vacuum packs: four of which contained meals of compacted rice, noodles, or stew; and two of which contained sweetened mixtures that passed off for dessert. There were also loose packets of biscuits, fruit bars, and powdered tea, the last of which he was accustomed to swallowing dry rather than actually making any form of beverages with.

He'd have to save the ration packs for when he really needed them. For now, though, he would content himself with a pack of biscuits to last him through the night. Stowing the other packs away in his vest, he gingerly tore the plastic off the pack and nibbled on a corner of a brown biscuit. Its dry, powdery texture spread over his tongue as he slowly chewed on it. Opening his bottle, he took a sip to wash down the bland mush in his mouth.

As he ate, he peeked at Nalani with a watchful eye. Every now and then, he'd catch her looking back at him. He didn't trust her and he could tell that neither did she. All it took was for her to creep up on him while he was sound asleep and he'd be another casualty in the war. Perhaps he should watch her all night to make sure she didn't try anything funny.

Before he knew it, the pack of biscuits was gone, leaving him somewhat satisfied but still a little hungry. But that would have to do; he had no idea how long he would be here. He folded up the plastic wrapper and tucked it into a corner of his utility pouch.

The cool breeze of the night danced around the leaves of Storm's tree, wafting in the earthy scents of the swamp vegetation. The refreshing air seemed to cast a sleepy spell over him. The hours of trekking combined with the humid heat of the day had taken its toll on him, making the prospect of sleeping seemed all the more desirable.

Perhaps if he closed his eyes for just a bit and opened them again. If he could keep it up every few minutes, he'd be able to see if the Dralic was up to something.

He closed his eyes.

A deep breath...

He opened them again. Nalani was still leaning against the trunk of her tree, posed as if she were deep in thought.

Again, he closed his eyes.

He savoured the quiet darkness around him. He could feel his tense muscles relax with each breath he took. Maybe just a bit more...

And he opened his eyes. Nalani hasn't moved from her position. He was going to be fine.

He closed his eyes. His fatigue seemed to flood the air around him, calling out for the sweet comfort of sleep.

But he shouldn't be falling asleep. He needed to keep watch.

But just a bit more wouldn't hurt.

And before he knew it, Storm was fast asleep.

Storm jerked awake. The sun to his left was shining in his eyes.

Shit. He had slept through the whole night.

But he was alive.

He looked at Nalani's tree to find the Dralic still leaning against her tree's trunk on her perch, fast asleep. Apparently she, too, was tired out from the entire day's worth of navigating the harsh landscape.

A sudden thought flashed through his mind: *he could take aim and kill her right there and then.*

Save himself the stress of wondering when she was going to turn on him.

His right hand reached for the rifle and his left dug into his vest pouch for the loaded magazine.

Then he paused.

He could kill her now. But then again, she could've done the same to him while he was sleeping. Storm snorted and took his arm off the rifle grip.

He would wait and see.

They were headed north in the direction of the nearest civilization with Nalani leading the way. The both of them were silent as they continued their tedious trek through the swamp. Despite it being morning, the sun's scorching rays had started to bake the swamp around them, making it both hot and humid.

An incessant fly was buzzing around Storm's head and he swatted at it agitatedly. He furrowed his brows, trying to distract himself from the discomfort he was feeling.

"So," he started, "How did you end up being a soldier for the war?"

Nalani, having gotten used to listening to the sound of chirps of birds and crickets in the marshes, seemed taken aback by the sudden question. She paused for a second before deciding that the question was harmless before answering.

"Your kind attacked us first," she responded scathingly making Storm flinch, "I am only defending the country that is mine."

A part of Storm wanted to protest to her accusations but this was neither the time nor place for that. Silence hung between them before Storm spoke up again, "But surely you didn't have to join the war? I mean, there must've been other people who were willing to fight too?"

"It's not about reaching some quota," Nalani snapped back, "If every additional weapon on the battlefield increases our chances of winning the war, then it's only right that everyone joins in the fight. This is our rightful nation, handed down from generation to generation for centuries. This is a matter of pride."

Nalani huffed as she ended her tirade but Storm could sense that she had more to say. Sure enough, after a few seconds of silence, she started again but with a lower voice this time, "When we win this war, I will bring glory to my village as an honorary warrior. My mother is back at home, waiting for me to make her proud. Disappointing them is not an option."

The Dralic huffed again, this time done with all she had to say. "We will rest here," she pointed to a tangled growth of trees that formed a shady dome. They crouched and settled beneath the twisted branches and leaves, thankful for the shelter from the sweltering sun.

Storm's hunger was coming back, hitting him with full force. He instinctively reached for his pack of rations and took out a meal pack. "Rice with salted chicken and peanuts" read the label. He could eat half a pack, then save the rest for dinner. Carefully starting at a notch at the side of the foiled pack, he tore a straight line through the top of the pack.

Inside the pack were rice, bits of minced meat, and peanut chunks; all stirred together into a uniformly even mix. The mixture had been vacuumed-sealed within the foil, compacting it into a lumpy cake-like form that took the shape of the rectangular pack. Storm squeezed out a bit of the mushy blob and bit into it, savouring the salty flavour in his mouth. Food, even in this form, was tasty when you're hungry.

He looked up and saw the Dralic watching him. She caught him looking at her and she hastily turned away. A part of him wanted to share his food with her but another part of him knew that it was in his own best interests to save his rations. After all, they were his.

But his conscience pestered him. The next bite out of his rice tasted almost bland in his mouth. There was a moment of hesitation before he reached into his vest, pulled out another ration pack, and tossed it to Nalani.

She saw the foil pack land on the tree roots next to her and she looked at Storm suspiciously.

"What are you getting at?" she asked, "What do you want from me?"

"You looked hungry," Storm shrugged, "Just take it. No strings attached."

The Dralic watched him carefully for a few moments but her hunger soon got the better of her. She reached out to pick up the ration pack, tore it open, and began eating its contents.

"So, about me," Storm continued as if she had asked him the question he asked her earlier, "I enlisted as a soldier long before the war started. I guess that at that time, I was looking to be stronger. Physically. And perhaps as a person, too."

He gazed wistfully at the shafts of sunlight that broke through the dense canopy above them. "I wasn't that close to my family," he continued, "But at least now I can be doing something for them."

Nalani nodded in response, listening as she swallowed another bite. "Family," she spoke, "The things you do for family."

Storm's gaze wandered to the ground. "Maybe," he shrugged, "Yeah."

The both of them continued the rest of the meal in silence. Before they knew it, they had finished the last of the rations, squeezing every last bit of food out of the foil pack.

So much for saving half for later.

Five days. Five days since the dragon had experienced a proper meal or a good night's rest. A small stream caught Storm's eye as they continued the trek.

"Stop, Nalani, give me a second," he opened his empty canteen bottle and stooped down to fill it up.

"Wait!" the Dralic slapped the canteen out of his hand, "Don't just drink from the streams here."

"Then what do I use for water?"

"Just tap a- wait. Have you been drinking from the ground?" she glared at the dragon.

"N-no, I've just been rationing my water," Storm replied nervously.

"Good. Most of the water here is contaminated," she huffed, "Follow me, I'll get you your water."

She grabbed the tomahawk that was hanging from her utility belt and gave it a swing, feeling its sturdy weight in her hand. After that, she continued forward, tapping the hammer end of the axe against each tree. Storm picked up his canteen and shook the dirt and water off it and followed.

Nalani suddenly stopped at one of the trees, tapping it again to listen for its sound. Satisfied, she hacked at the tree with her tomahawk. After she reached a certain depth, water began to

drip out from the tree's xylem tubes and down its bark. She wedged a branch into the slanted gap, allowing water to trickle down in a steady stream.

"Here, fill your bottle," she nodded. Storm complied. "Arothia trees filter out the swamp water from time to time," Nalani continued, "It's drinkable."

"You know a lot of things," Storm nodded gratefully.

"You need to know a lot of things if you want to survive."

"You don't have to share it with me, you know," Nalani shrugged, trying to appear nonchalant about the last fruit bar that Storm had saved.

The both of them had found some refuge from the scorching sun under the shade of a huge mangrove tree, seating themselves on its huge buttress roots.

"I know," the dragon admitted, "But I want to anyway." He tore open the plastic wrap and broke the bar in half, giving the bigger piece to the Dralic.

"Give me the smaller piece," she insisted.

"No," Storm refused, "Take it or leave it."

Nalani rolled her eyes. "Fine," she took the chunk of fruit bar and took a bite from it, "Thanks."

"No problem," Storm replied, "Guess we'll have to make this last."

"We are going to forage for food," Nalani said firmly, "Berries, leaves, tubers. We're going to be fine."

The dragon heaved a sigh of relief. He didn't know his way around the swamp, much less know about what vegetation here is edible. At least with Nalani here, he could perhaps learn how.

Storm woke up in the middle of the night to Nalani nudging him awake. They were taking refuge in the hollow core of a large, fallen tree. Part of its bark had rotted away, leaving a large half-circle of shelter that spanned both their arms' lengths.

"What's it?" he asked groggily.

"Aren't you cold?" the Dralic asked, seated beside him.

As if to answer her question, the wind blew through the hollow log, sending chills up Storm's spine.

"Yeah," he admitted.

Silence hung in the air.

"D-do you want to hug?" Storm stuttered, "For warmth, I mean."

Nalani hesitated. "No, it's fine," she replied, getting up to shift back to her corner.

Storm reached out and grabbed her hand before she could leave. "Are you sure?" he asked again.

"It's okay. We're...this is not right. We shouldn't be..." she stammered.

"We might be on different sides of the war but tonight, we're not enemies," Storm reasoned, "We're two people trying to survive. Together. Come and join me." He pulled her towards him.

"Thanks...thanks," the Dralic repeated as she tried to hide a slight blush that had made its way to her cheeks.

She gingerly shifted and lowered herself beside the dragon and the both of them cuddled, holding their bodies close. They shifted until their arms and torsos were comfortably resting against each other. Storm could feel her heart beating against his: strong and steady.

"It's warm here," Nalani whispered.

"Yeah," Storm nodded.

"It feels good."

"Shh," Nalani said as she dived behind a short shrub, pulling Storm along with her. The muddy ground had given way to moss-covered dirt as they made their way further inland, caking the dragon's boots with more mud as he crouched unsteadily behind the Dralic. He was feeling a bit weak: they had been living off swamp vegetation since their rations ran out two days ago.

He peeked over her shoulder to see what she was looking at: a large buffalo-like creature grazing in the middle of a pond filled with tall grass and algae. It was easily twice as tall as Storm, towering over the aquatic plants around it.

"It's a Bovius," she explained, "Peaceful if you don't stray too close, but vicious if attacked. You see those sharp horns and tusks? It uses those to gore their victims. Tear them to shreds."

"We can just circle around it," Storm shrugged, "No big deal."

"That's not the point. You see it as a threat now but in a few minutes time you'll be seeing it as food."

The prospect of eating something filling suddenly piqued the dragon's interest. "So what's the plan?" he asked.

"You approach it from the front and surprise it," she pointed out a thick bush that was close to the edge of the pond, "I'll flank it. Its hide is pretty thick so our bullets won't do much to it. The only way to kill it is to wound it at its weak spot: its belly. If you attract its attention, it rears up on its hind feet to attack. If the timing is right I can go under it and stab it there. One shot is all I need so all you have to do is distract it."

She took out a medium-lengthed dagger from its sheath in preparation for the battle ahead. "Go," she instructed.

Storm circled the pond, moving from cover to cover behind the trees until he was facing the Bovius' head. Its twisted horns and long tusks gleamed in the sunlight, sharp, pointed, and ready to impale its next victim.

The dragon shuddered. The creature hasn't noticed him yet though, so he waited until it lowered its head to graze before making a quick sprint for the bush that Nalani had pointed out earlier. Only ten steps stood between him and the beast, and now that he was up close, it seemed bigger than ever.

Storm nervously looked towards Nalani's hiding position for the signal and she returned his look with a thumbs up. The dragon gulped. Here goes nothing.

He changed out the empty magazine in his rifle, replacing it with a loaded one before cocking it. With his weapon ready, he rose out of the bushes and fired a few shots at the Bovius. The bullets ricocheted off the thick skin of its forehead, leaving only a shallow dent on its softer epidermis.

The beast looked up in response, coming face to face with the dragon before letting out an eerie guttural growl.

"Fuck."

Storm stumbled backwards, almost tripping over the vines on the ground. He fired a few shots at the beast as he retreated. The Bovius was preparing to attack. It swung its body from side to side, splashing the pond water around it.

Its movements, however, was enough to make strong waves that threw Nalani off her balance. She wasn't prepared as the beast reared up on its hind legs and stomped on the ground. It gave off a loud roar before charging at the dragon.

She quickly recovered and turned to the dragon. "Run!" she shouted. Storm didn't need to be told twice. He swiftly got to his feet and ran around the pond with the beast hot on his heels. No matter how hard he ran, the Bovius was gaining on him. Its head was lowered, aiming its horns at him.

Help!

There was the sound of a gunshot as Nalani shot the beast at the side of its head. It snarled, ignoring the fleeing dragon and turning to face the Dralic. She fired a few more shots, aiming for its eyes but narrowly missing.

Storm grunted, trying to catch his breath as he got up. His hunger was taking its toll on him, both physically and mentally. He looked and saw the beast advancing on Nalani.

"Storm! Mind lending a hand?" she shouted.

The dragon raised his rifle and fired at the Bovius, trying to turn its attention to him again. The beast ignored his shots as it continued stomping towards the Dralic. Nalani back away from the beast but an underwater root caught her ankle, making her trip and fall into the pond.

"Shit," Storm swore, blindly dashing towards where Nalani was.

The beast got on its hind legs, ready to stomp again.

Another missed opportunity to kill the beast.

Or was it?

Frantically opening his utility pouch, Storm took out his frag grenade and pulled out the pin. The beast had just landed in the pond, splashing waves everywhere as it opened its mouth to roar.

It was a crazy plan but he was willing to risk it.

Storm ran between the beast and Nalani, throwing the fragmentation into the Bovius' mouth as it closed. He instinctively turned around and threw himself over Nalani, pushing the both of them underwater. He spread his wings like a shield and he could feel a painful snap as his fractured wing broke free of the splint. Then there was a barrage of metal fragments against his back.

Then nothing.

Storm came to on the banks of the pond with Nalani frantically shaking him awake.

"Thank goodness," she sighed as she let go. "I...I was so worried," she admitted.

"I'm fine, I think," the dragon got up to a sitting position, coughing up some of the dirty water that had gone down the wrong way. He tried to assess the damage as he examined his body. His wings and back were covered with cuts from where the metal fragments of the grenade sliced his skin, some of them embedding themselves within his flesh. The bone in his half-mended wing was broken again, another thing he had to fix.

Half of the pond was already stained red with the Bovius' blood. Its corpse, or what was left of it was lying in the scummy water. Half its head was blown open, leaving a trail of brain bits seeping into the pond.

"We did it," Storm muttered, somewhat in disbelief.

"Yeah, we did," Nalani grinned.

"Should we...cut up its meat?" the dragon asked.

"Later. But first, we need to get you fixed up."

The evening found them around sitting beside each other in front of a bonfire. They had found a small recess under a dirt overhang and had set up camp there. Storm's cuts and fractures were properly dressed with vines and leaves. A crushed Paricius plant acted as a healing paste for his wounds.

Chunks of steak were seated on stone slabs around the fire, slowly cooking from the heat. The two soldiers had already had their fill of meat and were feeling a little sleepy. The rest of the meat they would pack for the journey ahead.

They both let out contented sighs as they enjoyed the warmth of the fire. Their fingers were intertwined in each other's and one of Storm's arms was behind Nalani. This had been the best break they've had since they started on this journey about nine days ago. But they were almost out of the proverbial woods: according to Nalani, they should see civilization by tomorrow.

He was staring at the flames as they slowly licked at the logs, slowly but surely consuming them and leaving ashes behind.

"What are you thinking of?" Nalani interrupted his reverie.

"Hmm?" he turned from the bonfire to look at the Dralic, "Oh, I was thinking of home."

"What about home?" Nalani asked.

"The first day I was stranded here, I thought I'd never see home again," Storm admitted, "I wanted to give up just there and then. In my mind, I couldn't see any way that I could make it out alive. I was only trying to survive because the thought of death was scary."

"But you have family," Nalani reasoned, huddling closer to the dragon, "That is something you can live for."

"To be honest, I'm not that close to my family. When I hatched, I was the runt of the litter; I wasn't supposed to live to see my first hatchday. Well, I survived, but I was still weak. Unlike my other siblings, I couldn't fight, I couldn't hunt. I was basically useless. A burden."

"My entire life, I've been trying to make up for that. If there was a way I could ease my burden on my family, I'd do it. Any small chore or errand I could do, I'd do. It got to the point where my brothers and sisters would push me around. I'd be at their beck and call. It felt unfair, but then again, I was the burden. I was the loser."

"I joined the army when the opportunity arose. It felt like the only way I could make up for my uselessness. My way to contribute. Then the war started and now I'm here, stranded in the middle of enemy territory with no escape. Even after everything I've tried, I'm just as worthless as when I started. I felt like I should've just died when I was born instead of being a thorn in everyone's side. Maybe ending up on this island to die is a fitting punishment for me."

"But after I met you and we got a plan, I got back that sense of hope. It started with a small glow, then it grew into a flame, and now it's a huge fire. I...I feel like I can make it out of this," Storm admitted, slightly blushing as he did so, "What are you going to do when you get home?"

"I...I'm not sure," Nalani shrugged.

"Go and see your mother," Storm suggested, "She must miss you a lot."

"Yeah...well, no," she corrected herself.

"What do you mean?"

"I don't think she misses me."

"Why not?" Storm turned to the Dralic, "You're fighting a war. Any mother would be worried sick."

Nalani didn't return his gaze. "I don't think she ever loved me," she admitted.

Silence hung between them until she spoke up again, "My bastard dad left us when I was a young girl and my mother had to raise me alone. She was a warrior at that time but she had to give that up to find work that could support both of us. Guess glory and honour doesn't put food on the table."

She chuckled to herself. "Since then," she continued, "She would leave the house to go work before I even woke up, and she'd come back past my bedtime. It was only on the weekends that we could really spend time together."

Her eyes fell to the ground as she lowered her voice, "One time, I was feeling really lonely so I stayed up for her. When she came back and found me awake, she scolded me for that. Said I should've been sleeping instead."

"Maybe it was because she was tired from having to support the both of us, but she never did pay much attention to me. It was always work, work, work. I don't think she ever really loved me."

"And maybe I understand that. She was our village's best fighter, that was her career. Her life, even. And if her husband didn't leave her, maybe she'd still be fighting. Or if she didn't have to support me, she'd still be able to chase her own dreams."

"I decided I was going to make something out of my life. I told myself I'd be a fighter, just like my mother. I'd be the best in the village, or even luslune. So I started training. I trained by myself at first but as I got better, my mother's old teacher decided to take me in."

"Then my mother fell ill. Too weak to walk, too weak to even get out of bed. I had to train in the day and do odd jobs in the night. Just enough to get by. Until one day I beat the fighting champion in my village: I had become the best, just like my mum used to be."

"I was kneeling beside her bed when I told her that I had made it. That I was now the best. And you know what she did?" Nalani choked as if the words were hard for her to say.

"S-she turned away from me. She'd rather face the wall than look at me."

Storm pulled her closer to him, giving her a warm squeeze. The dragon could feel her teardrops wet his scales she leaned in. The both of them sat in silence, watching the dying flames of the bonfire.

"I'm going to be the best soldier in this war," she muttered, half to Storm, half to herself, "And if I can't, at least I'll die trying."

The last embers of the bonfire glowed in the dark, illuminating the silhouettes of Storm and Nalani sleeping in each other's arms. Storm's utility vest was opened and draped over their bodies as a makeshift blanket, keeping them warm in the cold of the night. Their embrace was firm and snug as if they were holding on to each other, refusing to let go.

If it were up to them, they would stop time there and then; wrapped in each other's arms, their warm breaths filling the space between them, gently sinking into the comfort of their physical union.

The vines and trees of the swamp gradually thinned out as they travelled the next day. Before they knew it, they were standing among the last of the trees, scattered haphazardly about the vast desert-like terrain before them. Beyond the expanse of yellow-orange sand, they could just about make out the outline of a village.

"We're here," Nalani heaved a sigh of relief, wiping beads of sweat from her brow, "It's about a two-hour journey back to civilization."

"Can you make it there yourself?" Storm asked.

"Yeah, of course," Nalani snorted, "It's an easy- wait. What are you talking about?"

"I think this is the point we have to say our farewells," the dragon said softly but firmly.

"B-but why?" the Dralic gave him a confused look.

"I can't come with you. I'm your enemy. One step into your city and they'll send me to prison before you can even blink."

"I'll vouch for you!" Nalani suggested, "I can say you're on our side and-"

"And be caught fraternizing with the enemy? Nalani, you'll be sent to prison with me."

"Then we can run away. We don't have to go back," the Dralic pleaded, grasping his arm with both her hands.

"You have your mother-"

"I was thinking about it last night," she interrupted, "I'm starting to understand why my father left my mother. She was caught up with her own ambitions with being the best warrior that she neglected him. Neglected me. When my father left her, she took care of me as her way of

redemption. And when I started learning how to fight, my mother started to see herself in me. The more I got better, the more she pushed me away.

"But I understand now. I need to let go. Let go of trying to achieve more. To slow down and appreciate what I've got." Her eyes locked with Storm's. "When you were injured yesterday. While fighting the beast. I...I was so worried. I realized didn't want to lose you. And now that I got you here, I don't want to give you up."

"Please," Storm pleaded, "You have to go back. Your mother needs you. And you have your future ahead of you. Don't give that up for me."

"Don't think with your head!" Nalani retorted in frustration and exasperation, "Think with your heart! What does your heart say?"

"My heart wants to run away with you-"

"Then come with me!" Nalani tugged on his arm, "Stop doing things for my good. Stop doing things for other people's good. When was the last time you did something for yourself? You need to fight. Fight for what you want. Fight for what you love." The Dralic was almost close to tears. "Come," she gasped, "Come with me. We can run away. We can go somewhere where nobody knows us. We can spend the rest of our lives together. Do it. Do it for you. Do it for me."

Storm held Nalani by the side of her shoulders, squeezing her firmly. "I'm doing this. I know what I have to do to make it work for the both of us. I'm doing this for you. And I'm doing this for me."

"But-"

"Do you trust me?"

Silence hung between them as Nalani struggled to answer, not wanting to admit it.

"Do you trust me?" Storm asked again.

With tears in her eyes, Nalani nodded reluctantly.

"Okay, good," Storm gave her a peck on her cheek, "I'll be going now but I want you to go back to your people. You got that?"

Nalani nodded again. Storm turned to leave but the Dralic pulled him back, holding him tightly in her embrace. The dragon returned the hug and the both of them stood there for a long while.

"Thank you," Nalani whispered, "For our time together."

"And to you," Storm replied, "I'll treasure it always."

They let go and stepped back, looking at each other with a longing that they both know they couldn't satisfy. Not here, not now.

"Now, go," Storm nodded.

With slow and reluctant movements, Nalani turned and made for the village. Every few steps, she'd turn back to see the dragon still standing there, watching her as she trekked the last leg of their journey, this time alone.

Before long, the dragon was barely a speck in the horizon. She stopped looking back, holding her rifle close to her as she picked up the pace and hurried ahead.

Nalani walked around the house wistfully. The war had ended five years ago with a signed treaty between both nations. When she returned, she took a break from fighting to care for her mother until she passed on three years later. After that, she left her village and moved to the suburban areas of Crevia. Once there, she gave up her fighting career, trading it in for one in singing and playing the bow harp.

Life had moved on and so had she. Still, on quiet afternoons such as this, her mind would wander. She made her way to the mantelpiece over the fireplace where her war memorabilia sat on a lacy mantle scarf. As she stroked their cold metal surfaces, her fingers stirred the thin layer of dust that had settled over them.

Her eyes fell upon the military dog tags in the middle of the mantelpiece, engraved with Storm's name and blood type. As her fingers brushed against it, memories and their sensations came flooding back to her.

The feel of the sand beneath her boots as she finished the last part of the journey alone.

The burning heat of the desert air against her face.

The stinging sensation of tears in her eyes.

She let go and stepped back, letting her mind wander again.

Did Storm make it out alive?

And if he did, where was he now?

Was he missing her too, the way she was missing him now?

Wherever he was, she hoped he was happy.

Nalani sat on her plush couch, slowly drifting off to the sound of birds chirping outside. The chimes of the doorbell broke her out of her trance. Mildly annoyed, she got out of the seat and made for the door. She looked through the peephole and saw a familiar blue dragon.

She took a few steps back. Her breath was quickening.

Just like in her dreams. She'd see him. They'd close in for the embrace. And then she'd wake up.

Her heart was beating loudly in her chest. In her ears.

Was she dreaming?

But dream or not, she knew what she wanted. She ran up to the door and unlocked it, throwing it open.

Sure enough, the blue dragon was still there, dressed in a coat and a fedora.

He wasn't fading away. She wasn't waking up from a dream.

"I'm here to fight for what I love," Storm grinned, tipping his hat.

Nalani flung herself into his arms.

~ End ~