

Ok, I hope this one gets out there. I have no clue what the distribution is going to end up being here, since none of the posts I've put have reached any of the other 'well connected' machines I call, but apparently my posts ARE making it out into net-land somewhere!

Here's my first trial post, and probably out of the stories I've written, the one I spent the most time on. I wrote this one about six or eight years ago, and re-tuned it a little for general distribution. Hope you all like it!

COMPANION

by

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A flash, or was it? He peered hard into the sky, above the distant mountain range. No, it must have been his imagination. He walked on, headed towards that very mountain, where a pass between the mountain would allow him to cross through to the valley on the other side, where he would once again be with his tribe. He marched on, his sword clinking lightly in it's sheath at his side. It would be dark before long, and he could make it to the mountain before then if he pressed on. There he would find shelter, to protect him from the many creatures that plagued these areas at night.

He was a warrior, trained well in the arts of combat, but, so unlike his people, he hunted alone, spending more and more of his days away from the confines of his tribe. He knew their feelings, he sensed their anger at his ways, and he waited for the day that they must surely declare him an outcast, for he never followed the rituals of his people, and oft-times studied things they would deem sacriligious to their gods. The gods seemed to favor him though, for they never failed him when he called upon their vast powers. Indeed, they seemed to approve of his unruly ways.

There! Another flash! This time there was no mistaking it, something was happening over the mountain, or was it beyond? In his own village perhaps? He increased his pace to a mild jog. The mountain was about another hour away if he kept this pace, and he knew better than to tax his strength out here on the open plain. He kept this pace easily, not tiring himself, until he reached the base of the mountains. It was almost full dark now, and he needed to find a place to sleep and be sheltered from the creatures that hunted in the night. There was no sense in pressing onward through the mountain now. It would take another half day's journey to make it through to the other side.

At the entrance to the pass, the mountain rose sharply on both sides, offering no gentle slopes to climb to get off the travelled path and rest for the night. The walls were not so steep as to be unclimbable, but still required a good deal of effort and time.

He climbed the rocky walls with the ease of someone who had done this sort of thing many times, until he was a distance of about fifty feet above the ground. After a few minutes of searching, he found a small dugout that would suit him nicely for the night. The rock face beneath him was not so steep here, but would still be more than enough to prevent any animals from climbing up to attack him, and above him the rock face became much steeper, making it that much more difficult for anything to approach

from above. He had little need to worry about bandits here, this path was used very rarely, and almost exclusively by his own people.

His position offered him a view in the general direction where he thought he had seen the flashes, but no further flashes appeared in the night sky, so he settled down to a cold meal, not wishing to try to light a fire which might attract attention from unwanted visitors. Besides, he thought with mild mirth, it was too far back down to the bottom to look for wood. After eating, he wrapped his supplies and settled in for a few hours sleep, planning to be on the move again well before sunup.

Hardly more than a few minutes had passed before he heard a trickle of rocks skitter down the slope not very far away. He listened for a long time for sounds of motion, but there was only silence.

He pondered the idea of this being an avalanche area, but quickly put that thought out of his mind. A few stray rocks now and then, that's all. But... strange, it almost seemed too quiet. Occasionally he heard a bird whistle far in the distance. No sounds emanated from any point nearby. He remained motionless, listening, straining his eyes to peer through the darkness.

Suddenly, a much larger rush of rocks plummeted down the hillside, directly over the hollow where he lay, causing him to press himself up against the back to stay out of the stream of dirt and rocks that careened on down the mountain right in front of him. When they subsided, he picked up his gear, and secured his sword and equipment to his back, making sure all was well braced against noise. Then, cautiously, he moved out of the hollow and began to climb even higher, slowly, silently, towards the source of this disturbance.

The going was slow, and he climbed for what seemed like hours, until he reached what appeared to be a large outcropping of rock, but as he moved closer, his eyes exposed the huge form of a dragon, lying on the ground. He stopped in his tracks, staring hard at the creature, not daring to move lest it spotted him. His mind whirring with thoughts. He suddenly caught the odor of the dragon, which contrary to his beliefs, was not at all pungent or distasteful. There was another smell mingled with the dragon's though, one he was all too well familiar with, the smell of blood.

He inched closer to the creature, stopping and dropping flat to the ground as it moved in a spasmodic twitch, sending another shower of rocks down the hillside. Well, that explains that! He thought to himself. He moved until he was barely ten feet from the dragon, and he could now see the wounds that scored it's body. Yes, this would explain the flashes he had seen, as he noticed the scorch marks on the dragon's wings. Apparently, this dragon and another had gotten into a disagreement over something, and this one lost.

It became obvious the dragon was unconscious, or it would have noticed his approach long before now. A gentle breeze was blowing his scent straight at the dragon. Stupid, he thought. I should know better. Keeping an eye out for signs of movement, he made his way cautiously up to the dragon and began probing the wounds, gaining confidence as he worked, and he felt sure the dragon had been harmed too severely, and would not live on it's own without attention.

His first impulse was to try to help it, but then common sense began to work it's way into his thoughts. "Leave it alone", he muttered under his breath. "Leave now, and you just might live. This isn't any ordinary woodland creature. Your own tribe would be aghast at the thought of what you're contemplating." And that last thought was enough to ensure his actions. He cared not at all what his tribe thought of what he did.

With his brows drawn down in determination, he began to unpack his things, gathering his medicinal herbs and spell components. He built a fire on a small patch of level

ground, for up here, close to the top, there was some forestation. He settled down to a long night of mixing potions and weaving spells, working himself raw, and harder than he had ever worked before. By morning, he had patched up most of the wounds, and he could do no more without rest. He lay down against the dragon's hide, to rest a short time, for the dragon's hide was warm against the chill of the night.

He awoke later that day, surprized at how long he slept, and angry at himself for doing so. There was much work yet to do, and he must be on his way before the dragon awoke, else he may prove to be the first meal this creature would enjoy!

He spent most of that day finishing the task of binding and cleansing the dragon's wounds, periodically checking the dragon's eyes and breathing rhythm to be sure it was not ready to awaken.

In due course, night approached, and still he didn't leave. Some time ago he felt sure that the dragon's constitution would carry it through from this point, and that he need not stay around any longer. He knew he was taking a great risk staying here. When the creature awoke, it would probably not be strong enough to move much, much less attack and devour him, but it was foolish to take chances. He had done all that was necessary, and yet still he stayed, checking and rechecking the bandages.

Again, he awoke to the sun overhead, further cursing himself out for a fool. He didn't remember at what time he fell asleep, but guessed he had been sleeping for quite a few hours. It was nearly noon. He hadn't realized he had worn himself out so much. Now more than ever it was time to leave. He hastily collected his belongings and put them back in his pack, and was about to go back for one final quick look at the bandages on the dragon, when he noticed the dragon was staring straight at him.

Too shocked to move, he just stood there, staring back into those swirling orbs, rivited by their hypnotic effect. He felt an odd sensation, and realized the dragon was somehow probing his mind. Odd, he thought, he felt no fear of the great beast, and he sensed no malice coming from it either. It didn't take him long to realise the dragon must be feeding this feeling into him.

Suddenly, the dragon's voice entered into his mind. It was a deep, commanding voice, yet it held the qualities of intelligence and thoughtfulness. *Why have you healed me?* asked the voice. It echoed through his mind, much like the sound of talking in a deep cavern. His mind began to reply to the dragon, even though he had made no conscious effort to do so, and he knew he could not restrain his thoughts even if he had wanted to. *It has always been my nature to help the injured creatures I encounter, and when I discovered you wounded here, I could do aught else but to try to heal you, even though I knew that I was risking my life, to save yours.*

The dragon continued to hold his gaze on him, giving off no hint of emotion. He did not know how long the contact lasted, or what thoughts the dragon had taken from his mind, but he was suddenly aware that the dragon was no longer looking at him. He shook his head sharply to clear it. The dragon was staring up into the sky, apparently lost in thought. He knew now, that the dragon would not harm him, so he picked up his gear and fitted it about himself, preparing to leave.

When he was done, he moved in front of the dragon. "I am leaving now, you should heal quickly from this point on, without my aid." He did not know why he bothered to tell this to the dragon, but he felt he could not simply leave without some last word. He stared at the dragon, hoping for a reply, but the dragon continued to look upwards, scanning the horizon and ignoring him. At length, he turned away, and began to move towards the edge and climb back down, when the dragon suddenly turned to look at him.

"Where will you go?" It asked aloud with the same deep voice he heard in his mind, the sudden loudness of the voice startled him, and he turned back towards the dragon, somewhat startled by the question.

"To my village." He replied simply. The dragon looked at him for a moment longer and then turned away once more to scan the horizon. With a shrug, the warrior turned and prepared once more to descend, when again, the dragon spoke.

"Stay." It said, without turning to face him. It was not a command, but a request. He detected a note of longing in the dragon's voice. A longing that told of ages of loneliness. He turned towards the dragon once more, and moved closer.

"Why?" he asked. "I mean, why would you want the company of someone like me?"

The dragon still stared away into the sky. "I have known many things in my life. I have fought many battles, and I have known much pain. I have seen many lands, and crossed many continents", the dragon said, a note of wistfulness in it's voice. A moment of silence passed, and then suddenly, the dragon turned it's head towards him. "But I have never known friendship. You are the first who has ever shown me compassion. The first who has ever given me any aid. I owe you my very life," it said to him. Then, the dragon released a heavy sigh. "I would like to call you friend," it said with what seemed to be great difficulty.

He looked up towards the dragon, barely believing what he had just heard. Dragons were not known for their friendliness! Yet, here he was, standing face-to-face with a dragon. He stood quietly, looking deep into the dragon's eyes, and, sensing a growing bond he felt with this creature, he began to smile. He was sure now, that he would never finish that journey back to his tribe.

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