

Healer leaned against a tree, gasping. It didn't seem to do much good—the air was full of smoke, and it was hard to catch her breath. All the same, she couldn't run any longer without taking a break. She'd been running for what felt like hours already.

A horrible shrieking filled the sky. Healer cringed as she looked above her, but she couldn't see past the canopy of leaves and smoke. She still knew without seeing that a dragon had made that noise.

That was part of why she was running toward the Dragon's Keep. She had been on her way from the Academy anyway to train the new recruits, but when she'd heard that horrible screaming...

It was a dragon; she knew that. But it seemed... *feral*. Dragons weren't feral, not any more. The majority of them were governed by the dragon kings, who worked with the dragon lords to keep the peace between the humans and magical beasts. Sure, some dragons wandered off on their own in wild bands, but none of them ever sounded like *this*.

Healer clasped her hands over her ears as the dragons continued to screech. *What is going on?* she wondered.

Trees erupted into flame only a few yards to her right, startling Healer into running again. She'd be safe at the Dragon's Keep. And if she wasn't, then maybe she could at least help some people along the way.

Healer wasn't sure how long she ran, but the adrenaline coursing through her body kept her going. The crackles of flame surrounding her certainly encouraged her progress, as well.

She only slowed down when she overheard shouting and clashing metal ahead of her. She stopped, trying desperately to catch her breath, and put her back against a tall oak tree. Slowly, carefully, she peered around the tree to see the confrontation taking place ahead of her.

A tall, blond man—a dragon warrior, if his leather clothes were any indication—was attacking a dark-haired man in long red robes: a dragon lord. The dragon lord's robes were cut in a few places, and Healer's Body Magic could sense the wounds in his legs and arms. Her magic could also detect a waning magical shield protecting the front of the dragon warrior.

The fight seemed to be slowing down. The dragon lord had backed away, his sword pointed slightly toward the ground. The warrior did not advance, but watched the lord warily.

"We've been friends all these years, Curtis." Healer recognized the dragon lord's voice, but she couldn't quite place it. "You didn't have to choose them."

"You turned against us!" the dragon warrior—Curtis, the lord had said—shouted. "You defied the Council's orders! You've slaughtered them! How could you?"

The pair circled each other, their gazes never wavering from their opponent. The dragon lord laughed.

"How could you *not*? They were all fools. Think about how we can improve Shethara with the dragons under our control."

Healer's breath caught as the dragon lord's face became visible. She knew him. She'd taught him just a few years ago at the Academy, and she'd feared him even then.

Kenric.

But wherever Kenric went, there was always...

"You call destroying the Dragon's Keep an improvement?" Healer watched in dismay as the warrior's shield flickered.

"I do," Kenric said. "Please. Let me just explain. Old friend."

Curtis hesitated. Healer assessed his magic; he was exhausted. She could practically hear what he was thinking: if they talked, he could rest, and regain some of his strength.

The dragon warrior slowly lowered his sword.

And then Healer saw the dragon lord's Sampar. Paratheon crept behind Curtis, unnoticed. Kenric grinned.

Healer opened her mouth to warn the dragon warrior at the same time that the dragon opened its jaws and blasted Curtis with radiation.

Curtis screamed and collapsed, writhing in pain. Healer took a step forward, ready to rush in and help—but she would be no match against Kenric. She hadn't been when they were both at the Academy, and she certainly wouldn't be now. Choking back her fear, she stepped behind the tree again.

"Why?" the dragon warrior managed to choke.

Kenric walked over to his dragon and smiled down at the dragon warrior.

"Power."

Healer shrank against the sturdy oak tree as Kenric swung up onto his Sampar.

"You were never a match for me, Curtis," the dragon lord said. "You never should have been foolish enough to try to stand in my way."

Curtis lifted a hand, but it was no use. Paratheon took off, Kenric astride him. Healer watched the pair disappear, and then lowered her gaze back to the fallen dragon warrior.

He was barely breathing.

Healer ran to him and knelt quickly at his side. His skin was veined with the radiation poisoning, his breathing was shallow, and his eyelids fluttered as he struggled to remain conscious.

"Get... out of... here," he muttered to Healer as she put her hands on his chest. "It's... too late. Run."

"It's not too late, dragon warrior," Healer said calmly. She felt the warmth of her Body Magic run down her arms and out through her fingers, into Curtis's body. His back arched as the magic hit him, but Healer's hands remained steady on his chest as she healed him.

Several minutes passed, and Healer was sweating by the time she was done, but she felt the last of the radiation leave the dragon warrior's body. She heaved a breath and sat back, looking around the small clearing as she focused on breathing deeply.

"Thank you," Curtis whispered. "Who are you?"

"My name is Healer."

Curtis chuckled. "That's fitting."

"It is," Healer said calmly.

They sat in silence for a moment, listening to the far-off screeching of feral dragons.

"He's killed them all," Curtis whispered, shocked, as he sat up. "The dragon lords are dead."

Healer tensed, but forced herself to keep breathing. "Then we'll have to convince one of the dragon kings to select another. Together, they'll figure out whatever's happened."

Curtis hung his head. "There are no dragon kings, Healer."

Healer frowned. "That's impossible."

"The dragon kings are dead," Curtis said. "The lords have all been slaughtered. There's no one left."

"Won't another king rise?"

Curtis shook his head slowly. "No. Kenric's controlling them all with his Spirit Magic. He's the king now."

Healer gasped. "But... but if that's true, what do we do?"

Curtis reached across the grass and grabbed his sword. He stood up and extended his other hand to Healer. She took it, and was surprised to find a bright determination in the young dragon warrior's eyes.

"We fight, Healer," he said. "We bring him down."

"Can you do that?" Healer asked.

Curtis gave a grim smile. "Long live the king."