

To Challenge a Dragon

Shelly Laurenston

Book One of the Dragon Kin Series

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Dear Reader,

Here we are again. September, summer is coming to an end and the early morning dew coats the grass and with it comes a fresh smell that brings forth beginnings of early fall.

We have a varied selection of books for you to enjoy this month, so sit back and check out the sneak peak.

From Our *Isis Reprints* come **Dream Angel** and **Dream Dancer** from Denise Dietz. Both are set against an exotic backdrop of a 19th Century Circus. Then there's Australian author Anna Jacobs writing as Sophie Jaye, **Marrying a Stranger**. A delightful story about a marriage of convenience.

From Cathy McDavid **Real Men Sell Bras** for *C'est La Vie!* A quirky contemporary.

From *Amethyst Inferno* this month we bring you three sizzling hot tales. These stories are sure to increase the heat. Lynn Warren brings us **Eternal Flame** a wickedly devilish Vampire that will have your pulses racing and the first in a Trilogy about The Blackthorn Triplets.

Stolen Courage comes to us from Rae Monet. This story will have you running through a gamut of emotions. It's highly sensual, deeply emotional with a fine dose of suspense. Just to keep you on the edge of your seat. From Shelly Laurenston comes a fantasy tale **To Challenge A Dragon** a spunky heroine and a sexy shapeshifting dragon will keep you delightfully entertained.

This month for *Amethyst Flashburn* we have **Trail Boss** by Julia Templeton. A smoldering hot contemporary set on a dude ranch. This one is for all you Cowboy lovers.

Finally, *Amethyst Flame* Kally Jo Surbeck a medieval fantasy, **Sudden Fall**. A princess has to find her soul-mate or her kingdom will be lost. This is the first of two books in the Yadderwal Balance series.

And don't forget, *Operation: Pleiades* **The Curse of the Midnight Star** continue this month.

Well, we have something to suit everyone's tastes. I hope you enjoy September's releases and come for more.

Gail Northman

Editor: Triskelion Publishing

Dedication:

To Cypress B. and Terri O. The first fans of Fearghus the Destroyer and his kin. As they

both know, there is nothing like having the loyalty of dragons.

Chapter One

He'd heard the sounds of battle for quite sometime. But, as always, he ignored it. The wars of men meant nothing to him. Never had. But those same sounds right outside his den? Well, that did stir him to move.

His tail unwound from around his body and he slowly moved to the entrance of his home. He didn't know what to expect and not sure he even cared, but things were pretty boring right now and this just might prove interesting. Or, at the very least, dinner.

The blade entered Annwyl's side, ripping through armor and flesh and tearing through organs. Blood flowed and she knew she was dying. The soldier smiled at her cry of pain, which only brought out the tell-tale rage Annwyl had become famous for.

She raised her blade and, with a cry of pure blood-curdling fury, swung it. The steel sang through the air as it swiped through the man, separating his head from his neck. His blood slashed across her face and arm. The other soldiers stopped. They had handily disposed of her small band of warriors without much trouble once they had them backed into this desolate glen. But she never allowed them an easy path to the killing blow. Until now.

Her life's blood drained from her body and she knew her time grew short. Her vision hazy, she felt weaker and lighter. She struggled to breathe. But she'd fight as long as she had breath in her body. Annwyl raised her sword, clasping the handle in both bloody hands and waited for the next attack.

One of the men stepped forward. She could tell by the look on his face that he wanted to be the one to take her head. Present it to her brother so that he could keep it as a trophy and warning to others who would dare question his reign.

She watched him move with assured slowness. Clearly, he also knew she was dying. Knew she couldn't fight much longer.

Her legs shook as her strength fled, and her body ached to lie down for just a few minutes and sleep. Just a little nap...

Annwyl's eyes snapped open and she realized the soldier was that much closer. She swung her sword and he easily parried the blow. He smiled and Annwyl would give her soul for just one last surge of strength to wipe that smug smile off his face.

The soldier looked back at his comrades, making sure they were all watching before he killed her. But he left himself open. And one thing her father always taught her...never let an obvious opportunity pass by. She ran him through with her blade, slamming the steel into his stomach as his head snapped back around to look at her in horror. For good measure, she twisted her sword in his gut, watching in satisfaction as he opened his mouth to scream but left the world with nothing more than a whimper.

She yanked her blade out of him and he dropped to the ground. She knew that would be her last kill, but she would still die with her blade raised. She turned to the remaining men but they, to her surprise, no longer found her of any interest. They looked past her. In to the cave she now stood in front of.

Annwyl tried to figure out what new trick this could be but she never took her fading eyes off the men in front of her. Even as the ground shook under her. Even as they backed away from her in obvious horror. Even as the enormous shadow fell across her body, completely blocking out the sun.

It wasn't until the men screamed and began to run that she glanced up to see black scales hovering just above her. When the scales moved, a large breath inhaled into even larger lungs, she finally looked back at the fleeing soldiers.

The stream of fire flew across the glen, destroying trees, flowers and, eventually, men. Using her sword now to prop herself up, she watched as the enemy soldiers were engulfed in flame, their bodies writhing as they desperately fought to put out the fires that covered their bodies.

A small sense of satisfaction rippled through her, even with the knowledge that she would be next. As the screams died away, Annwyl again looked up to find the dragon now looking down at her. He watched her with obvious curiosity and made no move to blast her into oblivion. At least not yet.

"I'd fear you, Lord Dragon," she got out as the little strength left fled her body and she dropped to one knee, her hand still holding her blood-covered sword. "If I weren't already dying." She gave a bitter half-smile. "Sorry to deny you that tasty morsel." She coughed and blood flowed onto her chin and down her burnished steel armor.

Annwyl's body dropped to the ground. And, soon after, she felt herself moving. She didn't know whether her soul passed over to the land of her ancestors or into the mouth of a beast, but either way she was done with this life.

Chapter Two

Annwyl heard moaning. Incessant, loud moaning. It took her several long moments to realize that she was the one making the annoying sound.

She forced her eyes open and struggled to focus. She knew that she laid in a proper bed, her naked body covered with animal furs. She could hear the crackle of a pit fire nearby and feel its warmth. Other than that, she had no idea where she was or how she got here. Last thing she remembered... she died. But there was a little too much pain for her to be dead.

Her eyes focused and she realized she was in a room. A room with stone walls. She blinked again and attempted to still the rising panic. These were no mere stone walls. But cave walls.

"By the gods," she whispered as she reached out and touched her hand to the cold grey stone.

"Good. You're awake."

Annwyl gulped and prayed the gods were just playing a cruel joke on her. She raised herself on her elbows when that deep, dark voice spoke again, "Careful. You don't want to tear open those stitches."

With utter and almost heart-stopping dread, Annwyl looked over her shoulder and then couldn't turn away. There he was. An enormous black dragon, his wings pressed tight against his body. The light emanating from the pit fire causing his shiny black scales to glisten. His huge horned head rested in the center of one of his claws. He looked so casual. If she didn't know better, she'd swear he smirked at her, his black eyes searing her from across the gulf between them. A magnificent creature. But a creature nonetheless. A monster.

"Dragons can speak, then?" *Brilliant, Annwyl.* But she really didn't know what else to say.

"Aye." Scales brushed against stone and she bit the inside of her mouth to stop herself from cringing. "My name is Fearghus."

Annwyl frowned. "Fearghus?" She thought for a moment. Then dread settled over her bones, dragging her down to the pits of despair. "Fearghus... the Destroyer?"

"That's what they call me."

"But you haven't been seen in years. I thought you were a myth." Right now, she silently prayed he was a myth.

"Do I look like a myth?"

Annwyl stared at the enormous beast, marveling at the length and breadth of him. Black scales covered the entire length of his body, two black horns atop his mighty head. And a mane of silky black hair swept across his forehead, down his back, nearly touching the dirt floor. She cleared her throat. "No. You look real enough to my eyes."

"Good."

"I've heard stories about you. You smote whole villages."

"On occasion."

She turned away from that steady gaze as she wondered how the gods could be so cruel. Instead of letting her die in battle as a true warrior, they instead let her end up as dinner for a beast.

"And you are Annwyl of Garbhán Isle. Annwyl of the Dark Plains. And, last I heard, Annwyl the Bloody." Annwyl did cringe at that. She hated that particular title. "You take the heads of men and bathe in their blood."

"I do not!" She looked back at the dragon. "You take a man's head there's blood. Spurting blood. But I do not bathe in anything but water."

"If you say so."

His calmness made her feel overly defensive. "And I'm not just taking men's heads. Only the enemies of Dark Plains. My brother's men."

“Ah, yes. Lorcan. The Butcher of Garbhán Isle. Seems to me if you just took *his* head your war would be over.”

Annwyl gritted her teeth. And it wasn't from the pain of her wound. “Do you think that I've not thought of that? Do you think that if I could get close enough to the little toe-rag that I would not kill him if I had the chance?” The dragon didn't answer and her rage snapped right into place.

“Well... *do you?*”

The dragon blinked at her sudden outburst. “Do you always get this angry at the mention of your brother?”

“*No!*” She barked. Then, “*Yes!*” Annwyl sighed. “Sometimes.” The dragon chuckled and she fought the urge to start screaming. And to keep screaming. His laughter wasn't an unpleasant sound, but chatting up a dragon... well, perhaps she *was* finally going mad.

The dragon slowly moved from behind her and brought more of his enormous body into the room. He settled to her right, but she could only see half of him without turning her head. The rest remained outside the alcove. She wondered what he looked like in his entirety.

“Why, exactly am I not...”

“Dead?”

She nodded.

“You would be, if I hadn't found you.”

“And why did you save me?”

“I don't know. You... fascinate me.”

Annwyl frowned. “What?” Compared to a dragon, she was nothing. Just human.

“Your bravery. It fascinates me. When you saw me you didn't try to run like those men. You stood your ground.”

“I was already dying, what was the point?”

“It doesn't matter. The dragon-fear affects young and old. The dying and the strong. You should have run for your life or dropped to your knees begging for mercy.”

“I drop to my knees for no man,” she snapped before thinking. He laughed outright. A low, pleasant sound. Like his speaking voice. Shame it belonged to a monster.

“I'll keep that in mind.” He chuckled as he carefully turned his big body, his head coming frighteningly close to her, and walked out of the chamber. She watched as his tail swung into the room, its sharp end grazing against the stone walls. She tried not to panic when she realized that his tail alone stretched the length of the tallest man in her troops. “I will send someone to help you up and get you fed.”

“A man?”

“What?” The dragon slammed his large head into the ceiling.

Annwyl lowered herself back on the bed. That had just been a dream. “Nothing. I’m tired.”

“Then you best get some sleep.”

“Wait!” He stopped and looked over his shoulder at her. Annwyl took in a deep breath. “Thank you. For saving me.”

“You’re welcome, beautiful one.” He started walking again. “But don’t get too comfortable,” he casually tossed over his shoulder. “Who knows what I’ll make you do to repay me my kindness.”

Annwyl leaned back against the soft bed and felt a shudder run through her. She just wished she could say that she shuddered from fear or at the very least revulsion. What truly worried her was that it felt like neither.

Fearghus rubbed the fresh bump on his head. He’d heard about Annwyl the Bloody’s rage, but he had no idea how overwhelming it could be. Her angry bellow damn near as powerful as a dragon’s roar.

No wonder she hadn’t defeated her brother yet. He terrified her. He could tell from her overzealous rage at the mere mention of the man.

If she faced Lorcan now, even if her body completely healed, he doubted she would defeat him. Either her anger or her fear would get the best of her.

And for some inexplicable reason that thought worried the hell out of him. When did he start caring about humans? Unlike some of his kin, he didn’t hate humans. Yet he didn’t live among them either. So his original plans for the human girl were to simply heal her wounds then dump her near a human village. He didn’t like complications. He didn’t like anyone around him. He liked peace. He liked quiet. And not much else. But the mere thought of just leaving her somewhere sickened him.

He could already tell this was going to get complicated. And he hated complicated.

“Good. You’re awake.” Annwyl looked up into the face of a woman. A witch, based on the precise, but brutal scar that marred one side of her face. All witches were marked in such a manner on order of her brother. The face behind the scar looked as if it might have been beautiful once. “You must have fallen asleep after he left.” She pulled the fur covering off Annwyl’s body. “Let’s get you up.”

Annwyl slowly swung her legs off the bed and, using one arm, pushed herself up.

“Careful now. Don’t want to open up that wound again.”

Annwyl nodded as she sat quietly, waiting for the nausea that suddenly descended upon her to pass.

“You’re very lucky, you know.”

“Am I?”

“Most other dragons would have made you a meal. Not a guest.”

Annwyl nodded slowly, "I know." Annwyl looked at the witch again. "I have seen you before."

"Aye. I help at the village when I can."

"The healer. I remember now. I had no idea you befriended the dragons."

"They have my loyalty."

Annwyl looked at the woman's scars. Not surprising that she risked life among the dragons rather than of men. "Did my brother do that to you?"

"He ordered it. He is not a friend to the Sisterhood." The woman wrapped a robe around Annwyl's bare shoulders.

Her brother hated all witches. Mostly because they were women. And he absolutely hated all women. "He's always been afraid of that which he does not understand."

"Does that include you?"

Annwyl laughed as she slowly pushed herself off the bed. The laugh sounded bitter even to her own ears. "My brother understands me all too well. That's why both of us have struggled to take any ground."

"I see you did not escape his punishment." The witch motioned to the wounds on the young woman's back. The raised flesh healed but still an angry red.

"That's not from him." Annwyl pulled the robe tight around her body. Velvet and lush, she loved the softness of it against her battle-hardened skin. She wondered what rich baron the dragon took this from as he tore his caravan apart and ate the occupants.

The woman put her arm around Annwyl's waist and helped her to a table laid out with food and wine. "Your name is... Morfyd. Yes?" Annwyl lowered herself into a sturdy chair.

"Yes."

"Did you help heal me as well?"

"Yes."

"Well, thank you for your help, Morfyd. It is greatly appreciated."

"I did it because the dragon asked. But betray him, lady..."

"Don't threaten me." Annwyl easily cut in without even looking up from the food before her. "I really hate that. And you need not remind me of my blood debt to the dragon." Annwyl sipped wine from a silver chalice and stared at the woman. "I owe him my life. I'll never betray him. And don't call me 'lady.' Annwyl will do."

Carefully placing the chalice on the wood table, she found Morfyd staring at her. "Something wrong?"

"No. I'm just very curious about you."

"Well," Annwyl grinned, "I've been told that I'm fascinating."

Morfyd pulled out the only other chair and sat across from Annwyl. "I have heard much about

your brother. It amazes me you still live.”

Annwyl began to eat the hearty stew, desperately trying not to think too hard about what kind of meat it contained. “It amazes me as well. Daily.”

“But you saved many people. Released many from his dungeons.”

Annwyl shrugged silently as she wondered whether that was gristle she currently chewed on.

“No one else would challenge him. No man would step forward to face him,” Morfyd pushed.

“Well, he’s my brother. He used to set fire to my hair and throw knives at my head. Facing him in combat was inevitable.”

“But you lived under his roof until two years ago. We’ve all heard the stories about life on Garbhán Isle.”

“My brother had other concerns after my father died. He wanted to make sure everyone feared him. He didn’t have time to worry about his bastard sister.”

“Why didn’t he marry you off? He could have forged an alliance with one of the bigger kingdoms.”

Annwyl briefly thought of Lord Hamish of Madron Province and how close she came to being his bride. The thought chilled her.

“He tried. But the nobles just kept changing their minds.”

“And did you help them with that?”

She held up her thumb and forefinger, a little bit apart. “Just a little.”

For the first time, Morfyd smiled and Annwyl found herself warming up to the witch a bit.

Annwyl pushed her nearly empty bowl away from her and drank more of the wine. It shocked her how well she ate. Shocked her that she still breathed.

“Make sure you finish off the wine. I have added herbs that will heal you and stave off infection.”

Annwyl stared warily into her wine chalice. “What kind of herbs?”

Morfyd shrugged as she stood, picking up Annwyl’s empty bowl. “Lots of different ones. It’s my own potion. It works quite well. It can also heal rashes and gout. And prevent a woman from becoming with child. But I guess that doesn’t matter to you.”

Annwyl glanced up from her wine. “Why do you say that?”

“Because you’re a virgin.”

Annwyl froze. That couldn’t be just an assumption. She’d lived with a male army for well over two years; everyone assumed she lost her virginity ages ago.

“How did you...know that?”

“He told me.”

Annwyl knew the witch meant the dragon, and that’s when the fury built up in her chest. A fury

that she never could control. “*Dragon!*” She bellowed his name so loudly, Morfyd stumbled back away from her.

The ground shook as the dragon returned to her. “What? What is it?”

Annwyl forced herself to her feet, her hand against her recent wound. “How did you know? And tell me true.”

“Know what?” He looked at Morfyd who shrugged and quickly left. Almost ran.

“That I was a virgin. No one knows that. How did you?” She had no idea how long her deep sleep held her. Unable to protect herself. Unable to stop someone from...she shook her head. She couldn’t bear to even think it.

“This is why you *demand* my presence? Because I know your deep dark secret?”

“Not that you know. But *how* you know.”

He lowered his head until they were eye to eye. But Annwyl, too angry for logic, did not flinch or back away. Considering his head was the length of her body and she towered over most men, she probably should have. Instead she let her anger wash over her. Just as she always had. “Well? *Answer me!*”

His black eyes narrowed at her angry shout, and his nostrils flared. “I can smell it on you.”

Annwyl reared back from the dragon, “What?”

“I can smell it on you. That no man has been with you. That your maidenhead is still in tact. That you, beautiful one, are a virgin.”

Annwyl looked at the dragon in horror, her voice no more than a whisper. “Really? You can smell that on me?”

“No,” he responded flatly. “But you are quite chatty in your sleep.”

She rolled her eyes, “You tricky...” Her anger fled as quickly as it came. She leaned against the table, her strength waning.

“So, did you think I somehow took advantage of you while you slept?”

“Well...” Annwyl flinched as one talon tapped impatiently on the stone floor awaiting her answer. “The thought had crossed my mind.” She lowered herself into one of the other chairs surrounding the table. Too weak to stand any longer. “I’m sorry. I know only what I learned from my brother... and he would have checked.”

The great beast sighed. “I have heard tales of your brother. You do realize that he should have been killed at birth?”

Annwyl smiled, “If only.” She looked across the cave floor to the bed. It looked so far away and her body was still so weak.

“Here.” He lowered his claw and opened it. Black talons as long as her leg glistened at Annwyl.

“You must be mad.”

“How did you think you got in here?”

“Yes, but...” There she went again. Treating him as an animal when, in the little time she’d known him, he’d treated her with more respect than any man she’d met at her brother’s castle.

She pushed herself up and took the two steps to his outstretched claw. With force of will she didn’t know she possessed she stepped onto it, pushing out the vision she had of him shoving her into his mouth like a piece of steak. He lifted her up, gently moving his forearm until reaching the bed. He carefully lowered her onto the fur coverings.

“Now, let’s try not to have any more fits of anger until you get more of your strength back.”

Annwyl laughed. “As you wish.”

She sat down on the bed, her long legs hanging over the side. She watched his body leave the cavern. His long tail following behind. But Annwyl wondered if it had a will of its own as it whipped out and wrapped itself around her leg. For a brief moment she worried it might drag her across the room. But instead it caressed her leg, the ebony scales rubbing against her calf. Then it released her and disappeared with the dragon that wielded it.

Long after he’d gone and she slid herself back under the fur covers, Annwyl still felt where he’d touched her leg. And she wondered what insanity began to take over her normally sensible mind.

Lorcan of Garbhán Isle stared out over his battlements, watching the two suns lower in the west, and wondered how his sister kept slipping from his grasp.

No matter what he did or what he tried, she just wouldn’t die. And the longer she lived, the more men she killed. His men. His troops. The number of headless bodies with her name carved on their chest rivaled even his own. Of course, his took 31 years to achieve. She’d accumulated hers in little over two.

He wished now he’d killed her when he had the chance. She was ten, he just fourteen. She had just arrived, sleeping soundly in her new bed. He held the pillow in his hands. He knew he could smother her, and no one would ever know. But she woke up, looked at him, and flew into a blinding rage. Which he returned. His father found the two of them rolling around on the floor trying to choke each other. The man had not been pleased and he made them pay for waking him out of a sound sleep.

Lorcan winced, remembering the brutality of the beating they both received. What gave him small satisfaction was that he’d expected the beating. His bastard sister apparently lived a simple life in her poor village and received little or no discipline. Her reaction to her punishment... well, truly reward enough for him.

He didn’t know one could hate someone as much as he hated this girl. But she continued to make a fool of him. There were several surrounding kingdoms that gave her campaign gold and troops in

the hopes that she would do what they could not. Kill him. Take his throne.

He'd see her head on a spike outside his castle walls first. And he now had the perfect ally to assist him.

He never much liked witches. Didn't like the idea of such weak beings as females having that kind of power that they probably could not control. But he tolerated sorcerers well enough. And Hefaidd-Hen was just what he needed. Pay him well and Hefaidd-Hen would hand you the world. He'd proven himself over and over the few months they'd been allies. Although he still hadn't captured his sister.

Lorcan heard the soldier pinned to the floor beneath his boot moan. With a sneer, he pushed his foot down harder on his neck. The worthless little bastard had failed him. He'd come back without the bitch.

He glanced over his shoulder at his lieutenants. They watched him, trying their best to hide their fear. But he could smell it. He looked back at the lowering suns. "I want my sister." He growled the words low. "*I want my sister!*" He slammed his foot down, snapping the man's neck and crushing his jaw. "*Now get out of my sight!*"

He heard them run from the room.

They better run.

He would have his sister. He would see the bitch dead if he had to destroy half the world to get to her.

"Well, I see now why the women in the village avoid her. She's crazy."

Fearghus the Destroyer settled his enormous bulk near his lair's underground lake. "She's not crazy, little sister. She's angry."

Morfyd settled against a rock opposite her brother, wrapping her cloak tightly around her body. Her human form constantly cold, constantly shivering. And yet, she lived freely among the humans. They all believed her to be human. Merely a powerful witch and healer. Even as Annwyl's brother ordered her face sliced open during the early days of his reign, she stayed human. Fearghus could just never understand why.

But for the first time, Fearghus needed to call on his sister as a human. His power could only keep Annwyl alive for a short time. Morfyd and her ancient dragon Magicks actually healed the girl by mending her damaged organs. And as a human female, she could comfortably tend to the girl's needs.

Morfyd nodded, "From what I've heard she has much to be angry about. It's a well-known fact that her father was a tyrant and her brother hated her from the day she appeared."

"Do you know why?" Fearghus found himself becoming obsessively fascinated with the girl.

"I know they don't have the same mother. Annwyl's mother never married her father. You

know how important that is to these humans. And Lorcan never let her forget that she was a bastard. A *poor* bastard, no less, from some little village east of Kerezik.”

“Can she be trusted?”

Morfyd shrugged. “Her men are loyal to her. And as much as the village women avoid her they do respect her. They trust their men’s lives with her. But whether *we* can trust her? That I do not know, brother. She’s still human.”

Fearghus, too, wasn’t sure he could trust Annwyl. Dragons possessed powers that far outweighed most creatures. But these powers, like their ability to use flame or to shift to human, kept them alive. Humans were a treacherous and dangerous lot and made killing one of his kind as some sort of right of passage. No. His brethren relied on secrecy. He couldn’t and wouldn’t betray that to a girl he knew nothing about. Just bringing her to his lair was a dangerous risk he normally would never take. There were very few that knew a dragon lived in Dark Glen. And those who stumbled upon him in the past he quickly silenced. But that hadn’t been an option for Annwyl. She really did fascinate him, just as he said. Her bravery. Her strength. Her beauty. And she was beautiful. Tall. Strong. Brown hair with golden streaks that reached down past the waist of her lean body.

“I’m still impressed she challenged you like that,” his sister continued. “Although it could just be more proof that she’s mad.”

Fearghus heard her, but barely. His mind busy recalling when he first found Annwyl. He shifted to human to easily remove her armor and get at her wound. He remembered how quickly and strongly his human body reacted to the sight of her. Naked, pale, and covered in her own blood, there was something about her that called to him. As he chanted the spell that would keep her alive until Morfyd arrived, she watched him with the darkest green eyes he’d ever seen. Over the subsequent days, while he cared for her, he kept seeing those eyes in his dreams. That long, lean body covered in many battle scars there as well. Without even trying, the girl trapped his attention and he couldn’t stop thinking about her, which was unusual. Quite a few females had graced his life over the more than two hundred years he existed. All of them beautiful and cultured. Some human and some dragon. But none entranced him like this tiny girl. How tall was she anyway? Maybe six feet? He smiled; only his people would call her “tiny.”

A small fireball hit him in the face. He again looked at his sister, smoke still curling out from her human nostrils.

“What, brat?”

“I said she’ll want to return to her men as soon as she can.”

“I know.”

His sister smiled up at him. “And will you be ready for that, idiot?”

“It’s Lord Idiot to you.” Fearghus rested his head on crossed his forearms. “And yes, brat. I

will be.”

No matter how beautiful Annwyl was to him, he wouldn't get involved with some human girl. He would simply let her heal, then send her back to her people. And that would be the end of that.

Chapter Three

Annwyl dreamed again. Ever since that bastard's sword impaled her, the same dream returned to her over and over again. Of a beautiful man with long black hair and dark brown eyes. Tall, powerful, and strong of body. Standing over her, he would wipe her brow and softly whisper that she would live. And once, in her favorite dream, he kissed her. The softest, sweetest kiss she'd ever received.

And every time she woke up and found him not there, the same twinge of regret tightened her chest and made her body ache. The same twinge of longing racked her waking hours.

Long ago Annwyl gave up hope that she'd ever find a man she could love and respect. The warriors at her brother's castle were brutish, rude, and often brainless. By the time she escaped and went on to lead her army, she'd become almost dead inside. Over the two years she led the rebellion a few of her men showed her some interest ...until something made her angry. Then they all seemed to drift away. Unlike the dragon. He didn't shrink from her rage. He appeared to enjoy it. Greatly.

The strange way of man and beast. It never failed to confuse her.

She wondered where she'd created this dream lover from. Had she ever seen the man before? Perhaps in one of the towns or villages that aided her troops? Or perhaps she created him from her own imagination. She knew not. But lately she'd begun to regret having to wake up.

He sat on the edge of the bed and stared at her, as he always did. He stroked her face with his large, strong hand. She sighed contentedly and smiled. He returned it with a smile of his own. Annwyl felt bold in this dream world. Brazen. She reached out a hand and slid it around the back of his neck, drawing him down for a kiss. She liked this dream lover, he didn't resist her. Instead he let her lead him. When their lips met, her whole body responded. Intense heat from his body licked over her flesh. Her nipples tightened and grew hard, begging for the touch of those strong hands of his. Heat and moisture pulsed between her legs. She experienced things she never felt before. And she wanted more.

His tongue licked across her lips and she instinctively opened her mouth to let him in. She moaned as his tongue slid across and around hers, and her body arched as she tried to get closer to him. She wanted her dream lover. In her bed. In her.

But he pulled away from her. She grasped for him... and found herself face down on the floor. Again.

“By all that's...” She pushed herself up as Morfyd hurried to her side.

“By the gods, lass. Are you all right?”

“Yes. Yes.” She took Morfyd's arm and allowed the woman to help her sit back on the bed.

“I’m fine.” She couldn’t keep ending up on the floor. Now it was just getting embarrassing.

“You should leave her there. She looks adorable. Like a puppy.”

Annwyl turned narrowed eyes on her dragon-rescuer as he sat by the entrance to this part of his lair. “Quiet, Dragon,” she warned playfully. She’d become used to the dragon lingering near her. Teasing her. In fact, she found she started to like it. To like him.

Morfyd examined her wound, already less painful than it was the previous day. “Why do I keep finding you on the floor,” Morfyd asked with a slight mixture of annoyance and humor.

“I keep having this dream about a man...” Remembering they were not alone, Annwyl stopped. She cleared her throat. “Uh...it’s nothing though.” Morfyd only glanced at her, then she turned two suddenly angry eyes on the dragon. Annwyl watched as the dragon looked up at the ceiling. Perhaps examining it for cracks.

“So, how long before I can return to my men?”

“Well...” was all Morfyd got out before the dragon cut her off.

“We need to make sure you’re well first. Wouldn’t want you to get caught in a battle still weak.”

Annwyl shrugged. “That’s fine. I just worry about my men. They need to know I’m alive. I don’t want them to...”

“Give up hope,” Morfyd gently asked as she cleaned off the wound and placed another bandage over it.

“Aye. I can’t desert them now.”

“You’re not. And I doubt they will give up hope.” Morfyd straightened up. “But I will see what I can do.”

“Thank you.”

“I’ll bring you some food.” Morfyd left, punching the dragon in his side as she walked past him. Had the witch gone mad? Did she not see his fangs?

“Tell me, Dragon, do you have anything to read?”

“Read?”

“Yes. Does your kind read?”

“Of course we read!”

“Don’t yell.”

The dragon growled at her and she fought her smile.

“Come on then.” He headed off deep into his lair. Annwyl wrapped the fur covering tight around her naked body and followed.

Definitely one of the stupidest things he’d ever done. He really couldn’t believe he was doing it.

He turned a corner and led her to the right. He could have just brought her some books. Dropped them right into her lap. Instead he led her here. He led a human to *his* treasure. *What the hell am I thinking?*

He reached the entrance and stepped in. She stopped dead in her tracks and waited.

Fearghus didn't say anything. He wanted to see her reaction. She didn't speak for several moments. Then, "I'm freezing me tits off. Where are the books?"

Fearghus blinked. " 'I'm freezing me tits off,' " he mimicked back to her.

Annwyl shrugged. "I've been with my troops for over two years now," she muttered as if that explained everything.

Fearghus motioned to a corner of the room. "The books are over there." He watched her clamor over gold, jewels, and the other riches he claimed over many, many years. She reached the books and examined them closely.

"So do you like to read or are you desperately bored?"

"No. I'm not bored at all. I'm actually enjoying myself quite a bit. It's nice and quiet here." She grabbed two books. "And I love to read. To learn. I should have been a scholar."

"Why aren't you?"

She shrugged as she walked back over the riches as if she stepped on old stones. "My father had other plans for me. He thought I'd make a fine noble's bride."

Fearghus couldn't stop the laugh that burst from his snout. Annwyl glared at him. "Well thank you very much!"

"I mean no offense. I just don't see you worrying about the supplies for the kitchens or whether you'll breed a son to carry on the family line."

"Really? And what do you see for me?"

"Exactly what you're doing now. Protecting your people from a tyrant."

She smiled and he felt pride for causing it. She began to head back toward where she slept.

"Wait."

"Yes?"

"Wouldn't you like some clothes?"

"You have clothes?" He motioned to several chests buried in a corner. She handed the two books to him and descended on the wooden boxes. She dug through the clothes quickly. She ignored the beautiful and richly made gowns, tossing them aside like a wench's bar dress. But when she discovered a chest filled with men's clothes, she began to take several articles for herself. Several pairs of breeches, shirts, and leather boots that she held up against her rather sizable feet to make sure they would fit.

Once she had what she needed, she took her new clothes and books, and headed out of the cave.

“Well, come on then,” she barked lightly at him.

And, like some idiot human, he followed her back to her room. Once there she dropped the clothes and books to her bed and the fur covering at her feet.

Fearghus tried his best not to watch her naked body. But he sadly failed the attempt. He couldn't help himself. She was beautiful and strong. A fierce warrior with the scars to show it. He desperately wanted to lick every one of those marks.

She pulled on a pair of breeches that were the right length for her, but a little big. When she turned around, showing her beautiful large breasts, he barely bit back his groan in time. She ripped one of the shirts into long, wide strips, her chest moving seductively in time with her actions. When done, she used the strips to wrap around her breasts, binding them in place. She pulled another plain shirt on over her head, pulled on the boots and stood before the dragon.

“Well? What do you think?”

I think you're the most amazing female I've ever met. And I would like to fuck you all night long. Bend over. “What do I think about what?”

She sighed. “Typical male.”

Annwyl sat on her bed and rubbed her eyes. Her side ached. Her body cold. But she finally had clothes.

“What's wrong?” She looked up long enough to see the dragon settle down in the chamber, watching her. She found him doing that often.

“Just thinking about my men.”

“You are truly worried about them?”

Annwyl nodded. She closed her eyes again and rubbed her palms against them. It helped to relieve the ache that started in her head when she fell to the floor. “They are all good, strong men. But my brother's troops...”

“Outnumber you?”

“Aye. Even with the help from the other kingdoms, my brother still has more troops. More supplies. More everything.” She lowered her hands. “And we have...” She turned her eyes to the dragon and stopped.

Then she smiled.

If Fearghus were human, he would have run from the room simply from the expression on her beautiful face. He knew what she was thinking. So he decided to end this now. “No.”

“I haven’t asked you anything yet.”

“But you’re going to, and the answer is no.”

She released a frustrated little growl. “Why?”

“I don’t involve myself in the petty problems of men.”

“But I’m a woman.” She smiled again, and he would have laughed if he weren’t so annoyed.

“That you are. And the answer is still no.”

She pushed herself off the bed. “We could help each other.”

“Wouldn’t you rather just take all my gold and jewels, kill me in my sleep, and be done with it?”

She dismissed the riches he offered with a wave of her hand. “Gold I have. I need your power, dragon.”

“No.” He watched her walk around the cave floor, impressed with how quickly her body was healing. She already appeared stronger; which only seemed to make her more determined.

What have I gotten myself into ?

“There must be something we can offer you. Something you want or need.”

He sighed dramatically and fell silent for a moment. “Well, I’m always in need of fresh virgin sacrifices.”

She rolled her eyes, “Very funny.”

“Annwyl there is nothing that a human can offer me. I have everything I need. There’s a reason no one has seen me in nearly seventy years.”

She became so agitated he feared she might come out of her skin. “I’m not asking you to give up your life here. Help me defeat, Lorcan, and then it can be like we never met. I’ll leave you to your solace.”

For some reason that was the last thing he ever wanted to hear from her, but he ignored the pang of regret her statement caused.

“I can’t help you defeat your brother. You must do it yourself. And you must do it alone.”

“Why?”

“If you do not kill Lorcan yourself, your reign will always be in question. The other kingdoms will rise up against you and kill you and your precious troops. Is that what you want?”

“Of course not.”

“Then you best take his head yourself.”

Her eyes narrowed as she looked at him. “But you don’t think I can.” She walked toward him. “Do you?”

“No. Not really.”

There went that rage. “*Why not?*”

“Because *you* don’t think you can.”

Her rage came and went so quickly, it was quite the sight to behold. Her whole body seemed to deflate, her hand going to her wounded side. “You’re right. I don’t think I can.” She sat on her bed. “He’s so fast. His skill with a blade... I couldn’t even touch him.”

“You give up too easily. You just need training.”

“From who? I know of no warrior as skilled as my brother.”

“I do.”

Annwyl looked up. “You know someone?”

“Uh...” Things just kept getting more and more complicated. “Yes. I do.”

“Do you trust him?”

Only as much as he trusted himself. “Aye. I do.”

“And he will help me prepare to kill Lorcan?” Fearghus nodded. “Then, perhaps, you could help my army against my brother’s troops?”

“Annwyl...”

She leaned forward, wincing from the pain she caused her side. “Please, Fearghus. I know I already owe you my life. But if there’s anything... It’s just to have the power of a dragon behind us...”

“So I help you defeat your brother,” he cut in churlishly. “And then what are your plans?”

Annwyl frowned. “My plans?”

“Yes. Your plans. You take your brother’s head, your troops are waiting. What is the next thing that you do?”

Annwyl just stared at him. He realized in that instant that the girl had no plans. None. No grand schemes of controlling the world. No plots to destroy any other empires. Not even the plan to have a celebratory dinner.

“Annwyl, you’ll be queen. You’ll have to do something.”

“But I don’t want to be queen.” Her body shook with panic, and he could hear it in her voice.

“You take his head, you’ll have little choice.”

“What the hell am I supposed to do as queen?”

“Well... you could try *ruling*.”

“That sounds awfully complicated.”

“I don’t understand you.”

“What do you mean?”

“You command the largest rebellion known to this land. From what I understand, your troops are blindly loyal to you. And other kingdoms send you reinforcements and gold.”

“Your point?”

“You’re already queen, Annwyl. You just need to take the crown.”

She shook her head, “My father didn’t believe in crowns. There’s a throne, though.”

“Then take your throne. Take it and become queen.”

“I will. If you fight with me, dragon.”

“Will I get any peace if I don’t?”

“Sometimes queens have to do things they’re not always proud of,” she teased. “Including the torturing of handsome dragons, such as yourself. I could have people traipsing in and out of here all the time. *Talkative* people.” She smiled as she spoke—and called him “handsome”—but he wouldn’t put anything past her.

“Then you don’t give me much choice, do you?”

“No. I don’t.”

“Then I will fight with you, Annwyl.”

She grinned, and he felt pride for causing it.

Chapter Four

As the days passed and Annwyl became stronger, she began to venture out into the glen surrounding the dragon’s lair. She’d never felt safer as she did at this very moment. In the middle of a dragon’s territory with only a sword to protect her. And she could never be safer. He allowed her to do what she wished. Go where she wished. Which she did. Although she actively avoided the section where the smell of burned men still lingered.

Annwyl moved slowly among the trees and flowers. All so beautiful and hers to enjoy in solitude. Like everyone else in the surrounding kingdoms she learned to fear Dark Glen. And from the outside, it stood dark and imposing. But once inside, the dense forest created a place of tranquility and quiet. If she’d known as a child that she had nothing to fear, she would have escaped to it long ago.

She rubbed her side. Her wound still a bit tender, but nearly healed. The dragon and witch had done a brilliant job of keeping her alive.

Yet she agonized over the agreement she made with the dragon. Was she that desperate to defeat her brother? That desperate to see her brother’s blood on her sword that she’d risk the life of the dragon who saved her? Clearly the answer was yes.

But she must be mad. She should flee. Back to her men. Back to the safety of her troops and away from the dragon. She should. But she most likely would not. The question she kept asking herself, though, was why. Why wouldn’t she leave this place? Why wouldn’t she leave him?

And why did he himself seem to resist the idea anytime she mentioned leaving?

Annwyl smiled as she thought about how her little space within his lair kept becoming more and more furnished. First only a bed to sleep in and table for her to eat at. After that several stuffed chairs appeared. Then a rug. Then a tapestry. Some beautiful silver candlesticks with sweet-smelling candles.

He wanted to make her feel comfortable. At home. Surprisingly, the beast’s lair felt more like a

home than any place she'd lived in since she were a child and sent to live with her father.

No. She could never repay the dragon for his kindness. As it was, what life she possessed already belonged to him. And yet she felt no fear. She should. He could ask her for anything in order to pay her blood debt to him. No, she felt something all together different than fear. Anticipation.

Annwyl stopped, her silent revelry broken. She'd sensed the battle before she heard the clash of swords and the cries of dying men. She knew she didn't have all her strength back yet, but she had to see. Had to know if her brother's men had infiltrated the dragon's glen. And if they had, she'd kill them all. She wouldn't put the dragon at anymore risk.

She ran quickly and silently, re-assured by the weight of the blade strapped to her back and the dagger sheathed at her hip. She slipped behind a boulder and watched the brutal conflict. Her brother's men. About eight of them. All fighting one man.

The man from her dreams.

Annwyl's chest constricted as gooseflesh broke out over her skin. She watched him with wide eyes. His face was the face she saw in her dreams almost every night while she recovered her strength. That black hair the same hair that she always made sure to dig her hands into. Who the hell was this? Other than remembering him from her dreams, she still didn't recognize him. A stranger. A large, gorgeous stranger that wore the crest of an army not seen for many years on the bright red surcoat worn over his chain mail.

Annwyl shook her head. She refused to believe that her dream had come to life and now brutally fought her brother's men.

And fight he did. He moved fast. Faster than she'd ever seen a man move before. His skills with a blade unparalleled. He dispatched two of the men within seconds and moved onto the remaining six.

But the blade in her back distracted her from the knight. There hadn't been eight men in the dragon's glen... there had been nine.

"Lady Annwyl. When I had the men scout this area, I had no idea we would actually find you."

Annwyl gritted her teeth. She recognized that voice. Desmond L'Udair. One of her brother's many lieutenants and the man that once grabbed her breast during dinner. Of course, only the remaining four fingers on his right hand currently held the blade now digging into her spine.

"Lord L'Udair. I'd really hoped you died." She looked over her shoulder at him. "So, how's the hand?"

Some thought L'Udair handsome. But she only saw the ugly side of him. Like now, when his lips twisted into an angry snarl. He seized her by the hair and snatched her to him so that her back and sword slammed against his chest.

"The question, as always, my sweet, is whether I return you to your brother with or without your

head?" He held the blade of his weapon against her neck. "Or perhaps we should spend a little time together before I return you at all. I still owe you for the loss of my finger."

"Lay with me, L'Udair, and you risk the rest of your...parts." She smiled at him and saw his leer fade.

"What amazes me," said a low voice in front of her, "is that you haven't killed him yet."

Annwyl focused on the mysterious man who had, while L'Udair made his threats, eliminated the rest of the small scouting party.

"Do you really have time for this," he asked.

She raised an eyebrow. "You're right, of course." Annwyl unsheathed the dagger at her side and in one fluid move brought it back over her shoulder, not stopping until it tore through L'Udair's eye. As soon as he began screaming she pulled away from him before he could finish her off with his own sword. She would have taken his head, but he died quickly and she rarely removed the heads of the dead.

Annwyl heard her dream-lover move. She drew the blade strapped to her back, touching the tip against his throat just as he got within arms reach of her. "Hold, Knight." She stared at him, taking a deep breath to still her rapidly beating heart. *By the gods, he's beautiful.* And Annwyl didn't trust him as far as she could throw him. Which wasn't far. He had to be the biggest man she'd ever seen. All of it hard-packed muscle that radiated power and strength.

She tightened her grip on her sword. "I know you."

"And I know you."

Annwyl frowned, "Who are you?"

"Who are *you*?"

Her eyes narrowed. "You kissed me."

"And I believe *you* kissed *me*."

Annwyl's rage grew, her patience for games waning greatly. "Perhaps you failed to realize that I have a blade to your throat, Knight."

"And perhaps you failed to realize..." he knocked her blade away, placing the tip of his own against her throat. "...that I'm not some weak-willed toady who slaves for your brother, Annwyl the Bloody of the Dark Plains."

Annwyl glanced down at the sword and back at the man holding it. "Who the hell are you?"

"The dragon sent me." He lowered his blade. "And he was right. You are too slow. You'll never defeat Lorcan."

Her rage welled up and she slashed at him with her blade. But it wasn't one of her well-trained maneuvers. It fell awkward and messy. He blocked her easily, slamming her to the ground.

Her teeth rattled in her head. Good thing her wound had already healed, otherwise Morfyd

would be sewing it up once again.

The knight stood over her, “You can do better than that, can’t you?” She stared up at him and he smiled. “Or maybe not. Guess we’ll just have to see.”

He wandered off. Annwyl knew he expected her to follow. And, for some unknown reason, she did.

She found him by the stream that ran through the glen. It took all her strength to walk up to him. She really wanted to run back into the dragon’s lair and hide under his massive wings. She wasn’t afraid of this man. It was something else. Something far more dangerous.

As she approached, he turned and smiled. And Annwyl felt her stomach clench. Actually, the clenching might have been a bit lower.

She’d never known a man who made her so...well... nervous. And she’d lived on Garbhán Isle since the age of ten; all she’d ever known were men who made it their business to make women nervous, if not downright terrified.

“Well,” she demanded coldly.

He moved to stand in front of her, his gorgeous smile teasing her. “Desperate are we?”

Annwyl shook her head and stepped away from him. “I thought you said something about training me for battle, knight.” *For the dragon*. She would only do this because the dragon asked her to. And she would damn well make sure he knew it, too.

“Aye, I did, Annwyl the Bloody.”

“Do stop calling me that.”

“You should be proud of that name. From what I understand, you earned it.”

“My brother also called me dung heap. I’m sure he thought I earned that too, but I’d rather no one call me that.”

“Fair enough.”

“And do you have a name?” He opened his mouth to say something but she stopped him. “You know what? I don’t want to know.”

“Really?”

“It will make beating the hell out of you so much easier.”

She wanted to throw him off. Make him uneasy. But his smile beamed like a bright ray of sunlight in the darkened glen. “A challenge. I like that.” He growled the last sentence, and it slithered all the way down to her toes. Part of her wanted to panic over that statement, since it frightened her more than the dragon himself. But she didn’t have time. Not with the blade flashing past her head, forcing her to duck and unsheathe her own sword.

He watched her move. Drank her in. And when she took off her shirt and continued to fight in just leather leggings, boots, and the cloth that bound her breasts down, he had to constantly remind himself of why he now helped her. To train her to be a better fighter. Nothing more or less. It was *not* so he could lick the tender spot between her shoulder and throat.

Annwyl, though, turned out to be a damn good fighter. Strong. Powerful. Highly aggressive. She listened to direction well and picked up combat skills quickly. But her anger definitely remained her main weakness. Anytime he blocked one of her faster blows, anytime he moved too quickly for her to make contact and, especially, anytime he touched her, the girl flew into a rage. An all-consuming rage. And although he knew the soldiers of Lorcan's army would easily fall to her blade, her brother was different. He knew of that man's reputation as a warrior and, as Annwyl now stood, she didn't stand a chance. Her fear of Lorcan would stop her from making the killing blow. Her rage would make her vulnerable. The mere thought of her getting killed sent a cold wave of fear through him.

Yet if he could teach her to control her rage, she could turn it into her greatest ally. Use it to destroy any and all who dare challenge her.

The shifting sun and deepening shadows told him that the hour grew late. The expression on her face told him that exhaustion would claim her soon, although she'd never admit it. At least not to him. But he knew what would push her over the edge. He grabbed her ass.

Annwyl screeched and swung around. He knocked her blade from her hand and threw her on her back.

"How many times, exactly, do I have to tell you that your anger leaves you exposed and open to attack?"

She raised herself on her elbows. "You grabbed me," she accused. "Again!"

He leaned down so that they were nose to nose. "Yes I did. And I enjoyed every second of it."

Her fist flashed out, aiming for his face. But he caught her hand, his fingers brushing across hers. "Of course, if you learned to control your rage I'd never get near you." He brought her fingers to his lips and kissed them gently. "But until that time comes, I guess your ass belongs to me."

She bared her teeth, and he didn't try to hide his smile. How could he when he knew how it irritated her so? "I think we've practiced enough for the day. At least I have. And the dragon now has a scouting party for his dinner. But I'll be back tomorrow. Be ready, Annwyl the Bloody. This won't get any easier."

Fearghus entered what he now considered her chamber, but immediately ducked the book flung at his head. Clearly she'd been waiting for him. And she was not happy.

"*He's the one supposed to be helping me,*" she roared at him.

“Did you just throw a book at me? In my own den?”

“Yes. *And I’d throw it again!*”

Fearghus scratched his head in confusion. He’d never met a human brave enough—or stupid enough, depending on your point of view—to challenge him. “But,” he croaked out, amazed, “I’m a dragon.”

“And I have tits. It means nothing to me!”

“What exactly is wrong with you?”

“That...that...”

“Knight?”

“Bastard!”

“Me or the knight?”

“*Both of you!*”

His anger crawled up his spine and settled itself against the back of his neck. He briefly closed his eyes, taking in a deep soothing breath. She was making him angry, and Fearghus the Destroyer didn’t get angry. “I’ll come back when you’ve calmed down.” He turned to go, but she seized his tail... and pulled.

“Oi! Don’t walk away from me!”

If Annwyl could have punched herself in the face, she would have. Anything had to be better than watching the dragon turn, oh so slowly, to face her. She had clearly angered him. *Really* angered him. And when he just as slowly walked over to her, Annwyl knew that she might finally see her ancestors waiting to welcome her home. But no matter, Annwyl planned to stand her ground. She wasn’t going to let some dangerously grumpy dragon make her cower. Of course, she did let him back her up against the far cave wall. But she had no choice; he just kept coming.

Annwyl thought briefly about panicking, but that seemed about as useful as punching herself in the face. Instead she straightened her shoulders and looked directly into the dragon’s dark eyes.

“You don’t scare me, you know.” Impressive. She almost sounded as if she meant that.

“Really?” His tail appeared and the dangerously sharp point smashing into the cave wall right beside her head. Her body tensed as bits of stone hit the side of her face. He placed the tip of one of his wings on the other side of her, effectively boxing her in. He leaned in close to her, the flaring nostrils of his snout almost touching her face. “I should scare you, beautiful one. I can turn you to ash where you stand.”

The beast had a point, but no use backing down now. “Then do it if you’re going to.”

The dragon’s eyes dragged across the entire length of her body. Then he breathed in deep, his

eyes closed, as if he were sniffing a really good meal... *Well, that's not a soothing thought.*

"No one's ever thrown anything at me," he finally got out as his dark eyes again focused on her.

"Well, you deserved it. You should have warned me about him."

Fearghus took a step back. She realized that she'd held her breath the entire time. She let it out as the beast took another step away from her. She guessed he'd decided not to eat her... today. "Was it really that bad, Annwyl?" His anger seemed to have dissipated. She wondered how he did that. Control his rage. She envied him the skill.

"Yes. It was."

"But did you learn anything?"

Damn dragon with his bloody life lessons. "That's beside the point."

"Annwyl?"

"All right. Maybe a little." He chuckled and Annwyl, without meaning to, smiled in response. "I've always been better than anyone I've ever fought." Not that she had a choice. Her father knew teaching her to fight was the only way she would ever survive her childhood. Her brother had actively tried to kill her on more than one occasion and she had a tendency to say things that caused some men to want to see her dead. She guessed, though, that none of the men—including her father—expected her to be as good or as a brutal a fighter as she turned out to be. "But your knight. He made me feel like I couldn't fight off a ten-year-old boy."

Fearghus sighed. "Give it time. He's...uh...doing what I asked him to." She didn't want to give it time. Or give the knight a chance. She found him... disconcerting. And she didn't like that feeling one bit. And she hated him for making her feel that way. She hated him a lot.

"You sure?"

"Positive." He studied her. "All right?" She shrugged. "Annwyl. Answer me." Gods, he could be commanding. He didn't yell. He didn't have to. And it had nothing to do with the size of him. It sent a delicious little shiver throughout her entire body.

Gods, Annwyl. Get control of yourself!

"Yes. All right." She glared at him, even as her rage slipped away. "But I won't be nice!"

The dragon looked her up and down. "I don't think he'll mind much."

She rolled her eyes. "Probably not." She stepped away from the dragon. "Men are disgusting."

Fearghus couldn't believe how angry she'd made him. He didn't get angry. Annoyed? Definitely. Stern? Absolutely. But to lose his temper? He didn't do that. Ever. Until her. And it didn't help that when she was angry, she gave off that scent... a musk, maybe. Something that called to him. He'd smelled it before when, as the knight, he'd annoyed the hell out of her. He worked hard to ignore

that smell. But this time he leaned in and enjoyed her scent. Let it pulsate through his veins. It gave him all sorts of visions. Things he could do to her. Things she could do to him. It didn't help his resolve.

He watched her walk away. Watched her tight rear move in those leather leggings. He couldn't help himself. He swatted that rear with his tail.

"Oi!" She jumped and turned to glare at the dragon. "What was that for?"

For having the most amazing ass I've ever seen. No. He probably shouldn't say that.

"To remind you that you're in my lair. And don't forget it."

She should have been angry, but she smirked instead. *Interesting.* "I'll bear that in mind."

They stared at each other. And, if Fearghus had been in human form, he would have kissed her and anything else he could think of. But he couldn't do that. He *wouldn't* do that. No involvement with the human. He made the decision. He'd stick to it. No matter how much he wanted to suck on those... *Dammit.* He needed to go before he did something inappropriate. Fun. But inappropriate. "Well, is there anything else?"

"No." *Good.* Fearghus walked to the exit. "But..."

Fearghus cringed and looked back at her. "But?"

"Well, now that..." she cleared her throat. "We have all that resolved, I was hoping we could talk."

"Talk?" That completely distracted him from sucking on anything of hers. "About what?"

"About anything."

If Fearghus had eyebrows he would have raised them. She couldn't get away from the knight, who she believed to be human, fast enough. But she wanted to sit and chat with the dragon who had, just moments before, threatened to burn her to embers. Such an odd girl.

He smoothly turned his big body around and sat back on his hind legs, his head scraping the ceiling. "Well... I guess I can."

"Good." She eagerly jumped up on the table, sitting cross-legged. "Should I start then?"

"Perhaps you better."

"As you wish." She fell silent as she thought, and he stared at her breasts. She'd taken the bindings off and he could see the outline of the perfectly round mounds under the cotton shirt. *Gods, Fearghus! Get control of yourself!*

"I know. How old are you?"

"268."

"Years?"

"Aye."

"So dragons are immortal?"

"No."

“But legends say you are.”

“They’re wrong.” She prompted him to continue. He wasn’t used to talking so much. “The first dragons, the elders, were immortal. But a mated pair asked the gods for the gift of children. The gods agreed, but the price would be that they lose their immortality. Our line is descended from them.”

Annwyl stared at him with her mouth open. “That is the sweetest story I’ve ever heard.”

“It is?” The girl read too many books.

“Yes. It’s romantic. They gave up immortality to be together and start a family.”

Fearghus shrugged. “It’s a tale they tell the hatchlings. I’m almost positive there was more to it than that.”

“Are you always so cynical?”

“Yes.”

“So you’re not immortal, but your kind clearly lives a long time.”

“Yes. About 800 years or so.”

“So, compared to other dragons, you’re kind of a baby?”

Fearghus grunted. “If you feel the need to put it that way.”

“Any siblings?”

“Yes.”

“How many?”

Fearghus sighed and settled down for what would clearly be a long and painful night. He almost missed the days when she lay unconscious and near-death. “Too many. And you?”

With a frown, “Is that meant to be funny?”

Oops. He actually just meant to be polite. Of course, he’d never been very good at polite. “No. Just wondering if there was anyone else besides the demon-spawn you call kin.”

“Sadly no. Or at least none that my father has claimed.” She propped her elbows onto her knees and cupped her chin in the palm of her hands. “Are you close to your family?”

“Just one sister. The others I only see at family times. And that is grudgingly.”

“Dragons have family times? Is that just a simple get together or are virgin sacrifices required?” Fearghus barked out a laugh and the girl smiled, “See? Got you to laugh.”

“That you did.”

Maybe the evening wouldn’t be that painful after all.

Chapter Five

Brastias, general of the Dark Plains rebellion and Annwyl’s second in command, leaned back into the hard wood chair and rubbed his tired eyes. She must be dead. She had to be dead. Annwyl would never disappear this long without word sent. He already sent trackers out to find her, but they came back empty-handed, losing her trail somewhere near Dark Glen, a haunted place most men dare

not enter.

Of course, Annwyl was not most men. She often dared where others fled. She remained the bravest warrior Brastias knew and he'd met many men over the years who he considered brave.

But Annwyl could be foolhardy and her anger... formidable.

And yet every day for two years Brastias thanked the gods for his good fortune. On a whim they had attacked a heavily armed caravan coming from Garbhán Isle. Its cargo had been Annwyl. Dressed in white bridal clothes and chained to the horse she rode, her destiny to be the unwilling bride for some noble in Madron. And based on how heavily armed her procession, dangerously unhappy about it as well. Once the attack began, one of his men released Annwyl and told her to escape. She didn't. Instead she took up a sword and fought. Fought, in fact, like a demon sent from the gods of hate and revenge. Her rage a mighty sight to behold. By the time the girl finished, she stood among the headless remains of those she killed. Her white gown completely covered in blood. On that day the men had given her the name Annwyl the Bloody and, as much as she hated it, the name stuck.

They returned with her to their encampment, but no one knew what to do with her. The women of the camp shunned her. She frightened them and she turned out to be completely useless with anything domestic. But she possessed information on her brother. She knew where to attack and when. She knew his strengths and his weaknesses. And she wanted nothing more than to destroy him. Soon she brought in the financial assistance of other regions. No one wanted Lorcan in power longer than necessary. If his sister could stop him, she would have their loyalty. She protected their borders and the rebellion's troops grew.

Eventually Annwyl took control and Brastias gave it over gratefully. She earned their loyalty and trust and after two years the men would follow her down into the very pits of hell if she asked them.

But, if she were dead... Brastias didn't want to even consider it. They hadn't found her body. Perhaps they could still rescue her.

"General." Brastias' eyes shifted to the front of his tent. Danelin, his next in command stood waiting. "There's a witch here to see you."

Brastias nodded once. She probably wanted to see Annwyl or, if his world contained any luck at all, perhaps she could tell him where to find his missing leader.

A tall woman entered his tent. An astounding beauty, tragically marked as a witch. He truly hoped that a special hell waited for men like Lorcan.

She walked toward him. Almost glided. He knew he'd seen her before. The people considered her a talented witch with healing powers. But he had no time for magic or witches. Even beautiful ones. He

had a rebellion to win.

“Yes, lady?”

“You are General Brastias?”

“Aye.”

The witch glanced at Danelin, refusing to speak in front of him. “Go, Danelin. I will call if you are needed.”

Danelin left, closing the tent flap behind him. The woman stood before him. She didn’t speak. She just stared.

“So, what is it, woman?” She raised one delicate eyebrow and he felt as if she’d dug down into his very soul.

“I have word of Annwyl of the Dark Plains.”

Brastias stood quickly, grasping the woman by the arms; she stood almost as tall as he. “Tell me, witch. Where is she?”

She stared at him. “Remove your hands, or I’ll make sure you don’t have any.” Brastias took a deep breath and released her. “She is safe and alive. But she is healing. She won’t be back for another fortnight.”

Brastias heaved a sigh of overwhelming relief as he sat heavily in his chair. “Thank the gods. I thought we’d lost her.”

“You almost had. But the girl must have the gods smiling down on her.”

“Can I see her?”

The woman watched him carefully. “No. But I will get any messages you may have to her.”

“Give me a few moments, I need to write something.” He grabbed quill and paper and wrote Annwyl a brief-but-to-the-point letter. He folded it, affixed his seal, and handed it to the witch. “Give her this and my love.”

“You are her man then,” she asked cautiously.

Brastias laughed. He did like his head securely attached to his shoulders. Becoming Annwyl’s man risked that.

“Annwyl has no man because there is no man worthy of her. That includes me. So she has become the sister I lost many years ago in Lorcan’s dungeons.”

The woman nodded and walked back to the entrance of Brastias’ tent. She stopped before leaving. “She asks,” the witch spoke softly without turning around, “That you not lose hope.”

“As long as she lives, we won’t.”

Then she was gone. Brastias closed his eyes in relief. Annwyl wasn’t dead. His hope returned.

Morfyd landed softly on the glen grounds. Unlike her brother, she'd learned to move silently as dragon.

Once securely on hard earth, she shook her body, releasing the wetness her wings picked up along the flight. She spoke the ancient words of enchantment that allowed her to shift back to human. Moving swiftly, she picked up the clothes she'd hidden away earlier and garbed herself. Her body shook from the chill and she wanted nothing more than to settle in front of a fire to warm her human form.

She'd taken longer than she originally planned to get back. But if Fearghus needed to involve himself in the Sibling War, she wanted to let the Queen know now. It would be worse for him if she found out after the fact. Of course the Queen didn't seem too interested, but Bercelak was and that could be a problem for them both.

But first she wanted to get the note from the general to Annwyl. She'd learned to like the human girl, with her sudden rages and tendency to end up on the floor. And clearly Annwyl had enthralled her taciturn and cranky older brother.

Fearghus didn't really like anyone. Human or dragon. Among their kind, many considered him rude and inconsiderate. Among humans, they feared the black dragon who smote whole villages. Of course, leave it to humans to exaggerate the truth. He'd only smote one village when their king made killing him into a tournament event.

Morfyd wrapped a cloak around her witch's garb and headed to her brother's den. As always when in human form, she pulled the hood of the cloak over her head to hide her mane of white hair. It was not white from age. Like her mother, she'd been born a white dragon. White dragons were rare and often born with powers far outreaching of other dragons. But she still had a way to go before she could even think to compete against her mother's skill.

She entered her brother's den and moved deep within to reach the girl's chamber. He had practically made that section of the cave into the girl's bedroom.

Very subtle, Fearghus.

As she neared her destination, she heard Annwyl speak and her brother...laugh?

Morfyd stopped. Perhaps she heard wrongly. Perhaps she'd finally gone insane. Morfyd inched closer to the chamber and waited.

"Now, I did try to set him on fire once when I was twelve. But, I assure you, I felt awful about it later."

"And how long did that awful feeling last?"

"Until he set the dogs on me."

She heard her brother chuckle and she started at the sound.

"Can I ask you a favor?"

“Another? What do you want now, woman? My gold? My lair?”

“No. No. No. Nothing like that. And this might sound strange...”

“...as opposed to your horse manure story.”

“*But...*”

“But?”

“Can I touch your horns?”

Morfyd blinked and looked around, half expecting her three other brothers to be standing behind her, proving this was nothing but a joke. Could she have truly heard what she thought she'd just heard?

“I'm sorry. Could you repeat that? Because I think I just got the brain fever.”

She heard the girl give a very unladylike snort. “I've never touched a dragon before. Your horns look so beautiful and I would just like to...”

“All right. Stop. Before you say something that will make both of us uncomfortable.” She heard her brother move his body. Morfyd realized he was lowering himself so that the girl could reach him.

Morfyd couldn't stand not knowing. As silently as she could manage, she peeked around the corner and looked into the girl's chamber. What she saw astounded her, simply because it *was* Fearghus.

The girl stood on tip-toes, Fearghus allowing Annwyl to lean against him as she reached up and ran her strong, battle-scarred hand across his horn, her tanned skin standing out against its shiny blackness. Her other hand moved down his neck and grasped the mane of black hair that flowed across it.

“I didn't know dragons had hair. It's like a horse's mane.”

“It is *not* like a horse's mane,” Fearghus snapped. To Morfyd's surprise, Annwyl didn't scurry across the room to shy away from her brother. Instead, she laughed, leaning closer against his body.

“No need to get testy. I was merely implying that your kind was really meant to be beasts of burden for us humans. Just like horses. And centaurs.”

“Oh, is that all? Well, I apologize, Lady Annwyl. I thought you were saying something insulting.”

Morfyd stepped away from Annwyl's chamber. Her brother making jokes? Well, perhaps the time had come for her to completely lose her mind considering the family she came from. Dragons did do that sort of thing on occasion.

She looked down at the letter she had clutched in her hand. It could wait until tomorrow.

Silently she turned and went to get something soothing to drink. Or, at the very least, some hard ale. She needed something to help her sleep because the last image she witnessed before turning away from the chamber would have her awake and obsessing for hours. The image of Annwyl the Bloody, known terror of the Dark Plains, lovingly running her hand down Fearghus' snout... and Fearghus the

Destroyer letting her.

Fearghus watched Annwyl sleep. They talked long into the night. And she fell asleep lying against his side, a handful of hair wound around her fingers. When she started to slide to the floor, he picked her up, laid her out on the bed, and covered her with one of the furs.

His affection for the human grew steadily by the day. Sometimes by the minute. And it wasn't just her beauty, but her utter lack of fear of everything and anything except her brother. She didn't fear dying. She didn't fear battle. And, most importantly, she didn't fear Fearghus. She touched him. Ran her hands across his scales and through his mane.

But it was when he covered her up with the fur and she sighed his name in her sleep, that he lost his heart.

Chapter Six

Lorcan threw the table across the room, nearly crushing one of his soldiers. He roared in rage. Seven days and they still hadn't found the bitch girl or any of his men.

He grabbed two heavy wood chairs and flung them as well. His guards scattered, running for safety. But there was no safety from his rage. A rage rivaled by only one other.

"Find her! Find the bitch!" Several of his men stared blankly at him. "*Now!*" The men ran.

Lorcan leaned his burning forehead against the cool stone of his castle wall.

"My lord?" Lorcan took a deep, soothing breath and looked at his council. Hefaidh-Hen still remained the only one brave enough to face him during one of his rages. "Perhaps we are avoiding the obvious."

"Which is?" Lorcan slowly turned, his anger under some control.

"Perhaps your sister has fled to Dark Glen."

"My sister is weak and stupid, but she is not insane. No one goes into Dark Glen. Because no one ever comes back out again. She knows that well enough."

Hefaidh-Hen turned disturbingly milky blue eyes to his master, and Lorcan shuddered inward. "She may not have gone there willingly, but it doesn't mean she's not there."

"Then she would already be dead?"

"No. All signs tell me she still lives."

Lorcan snorted. He should have known better than to get his hopes up.

"Then what is your council, wizard?"

Hefaidh-Hen smiled, if you could call it that. "Let me take some of your men and go into Dark Glen myself. I will see if I can find her."

"I can't afford to lose you, Hefaidh-Hen. Even if it means destroying her. I need you during these rebel attacks. Every day more troops arrive to fight with her."

“And while she lives they will continue to arrive.”

“I said no.” Lorcan, his anger spent, sat down heavily in one of the chairs he had not yet thrown. “But send a few of my warriors. Make sure they understand that they go into Dark Glen, or what lies in there will be the least of their worries.”

Hefaidd-Hen bowed low. “As you wish, my Lord.”

Then the wizard took his leave and Lorcan began to breathe again. He thought of his ugly little sister and reveled in the delight he would take in planting her head on a spike outside his castle walls.

“I will have you, bitch.” He growled low, hoping his words would find her wherever she was. He wanted her to know that her time would soon end. He wanted her to know that he would rule the land in his father’s place. He wanted her to know just how much he hated her.

He roared again, his rage returning ten-fold. He roared and roared, until he knew she could hear him wherever she was.

Annwyl sprung naked from the bed. Her sword, which she always kept on the floor within arm’s reach, firmly grasped in her hand. Her brother’s presence surrounded her. She felt him near her. She spun around, expecting to find him standing behind her.

“Are you all right?”

Annwyl barked in surprise at the voice. Without thought, only instinct, she spun around again and threw her sword across the room. The only reason the blade didn’t slam into Morfyd’s forehead was because the witch moved too fast. She dropped to the floor with a hoarse cry.

“By the gods, Morfyd!” Annwyl, now realizing where she was and that she truly was safe, ran to the woman. “Are you hurt?”

The witch grasped the girl’s hand and let Annwyl help her up. “No. No. I’m fine.”

“Morfyd, I’m so sorry.”

“It’s all right.” Morfyd sat down heavily in one of the chairs. “I startled you.”

Annwyl crouched beside Morfyd. She couldn’t bring herself to release the woman’s hand. “I thought he was here,” she whispered.

Morfyd frowned, “Thought who was here?”

“My brother. I felt him here, Morfyd. As surely as you are standing here now.”

“You were just dreaming. He can’t hurt you here. Fearghus would never let him.”

The witch spoke true, of course. She trusted the dragon with her life, more than any of her own troops. Even more than Brastias.

“Thank you for understanding.” Annwyl stood and went back to her bed, wrapping one of the fur covers around her shivering naked body. “And for being able to move so fast. I don’t know what I would have done if I...”

“But you didn’t. So let’s not think of it a moment longer. Here.” Morfyd handed her a parchment. Annwyl saw the seal of Brastias and grinned.

“You saw him, then?”

“Aye. He seemed heartily relieved that you still live.”

Annwyl sat down on her bed. “And my men?”

“They still have hope.”

Annwyl nodded. “Thank you for doing this.”

Morfyd stood up. “Do not speak of it. I will get you something to eat while you read your letter.”

Once the witch left, Annwyl carefully removed the seal and opened the parchment.

Annwyl—

We await your return.

Yours in life, death, and war.

Brastias

Annwyl read the letter again and then held it against her chest. Her army waited. Soon she must return.

Fearghus watched his sister grab several pieces of fruit. Her human body seemed shakier than usual. “Are you all right?”

“That mad bitch threw a blade at my head.”

He studied his sister, “What did you say to her?”

Morfyd swung around to glare at him, fruit flying everywhere. “What did I...why do you... how dare you...” Morfyd stopped and pulled herself together. “I did nothing, brother. She was having a nightmare about Lorcan or something. I happened to walk in at the wrong time.”

“Or something?”

Morfyd shrugged as she knelt down to pick up the scattered pieces of fruit. “He could very well be contacting her through her dreams.”

“I thought you put up protections around the glen?”

“I did,” she snapped. “That doesn’t mean he hasn’t found a wizard to work around them.”

Fearghus walked up to his sister. He towered over her in human form, dressed and ready to start his training with Annwyl. “No one should be able to get past your protections, sister. I don’t care if it’s the Queen herself. I want Annwyl safe. Understand?”

Morfyd’s eyes narrowed as she examined her brother. “Why are you dressed like that?” Her frown deepened, “And for that matter, why are you human?”

Damn . “I need to go into town.”

“Town for what?”

“Supplies. Now get on with the spell-casting. Please.”

He stormed off before she could ask anymore questions that would force him to lie to her more.

Annwyl was falling. Then she was landing. Her back hitting the hard ground, then her head. She laid there. Unable to move. Suddenly his face loomed over her.

“Sorry ‘bout that.”

No he wasn't. He wasn't sorry about anything. She'd gotten in a couple of really good blows and he just retaliated, knocking her right on her backside...hard.

It took her several moments to get her breath back, by then he reached out to help her stand. She slapped his hands away and dragged herself up so that she knelt on the hard ground.

She glared at him.

“What's that look for? It's not my fault you weren't fast enough.”

Annwyl punched him in the face. “Was that fast enough,” she snapped.

Now he glared as he clutched his barely wounded nose.

Annwyl pushed herself to stand up, but the spasm in her neck and shoulder forced her right back down. She moaned in pain and the knight looked at her.

“What is it?”

“Nothing.”

“Liar.” He moved behind her and placed his hands on her shoulders. His touch sent shocks through her body. Annwyl tried to push his hands off, but he ignored her.

“Stop being difficult.”

His strong hands glided across her shoulders and quickly found the spot at the base of her neck where her muscles bunched into tight knots. “Gods, girl. There's a huge knot here.” His thumb pushed into the flesh and Annwyl's body jerked.

“Oi! Painful!”

“Sorry.”

“No you're not.” She stood up while trying to pull away, but he pulled her back.

“Must you be so difficult? If you give me a moment, I can fix this.”

Annwyl gritted her teeth.

The knight chuckled, his hands massaging muscles on her shoulder. Annwyl bit her lip and barely stopped herself from moaning. The man had the most unbelievable hands she ever experienced. She closed her eyes and tried to focus on something—*anything!*—that could distract her from the feeling of him touching her.

The muscles loosened under his big fingers and she found herself relaxing...grudgingly.

“You know, you still don’t know my name.”

“And I still don’t want to know.” When she left the glen with Fearghus she never wanted to see the man again. At least, that’s what she kept telling herself.

“Such a difficult girl.”

“I’m hardly a girl.”

“Oh. Sorry. Do you prefer old maid?”

Annwyl clenched her fingers into tight fists.

“There’s that knot again. It just got worse.” *What a surprise.*

The knight pulled her arm out, massaging it all the way down. He stopped at her tight fist. “Unclench.”

She glared at him but didn’t answer. He slapped the back of her hand. “Ow!”

“I said unclench, woman.”

She opened her hand and he began to gently massage each finger.

“You don’t like me, do you?”

“No. I don’t.”

“Do you like the dragon?”

“Of course, I like the dragon.”

“What do you mean ‘of course’? No one likes dragons.”

“Then why are you here?” He opened his mouth to answer but abruptly stopped. Annwyl nodded knowingly. “I see.”

“You see what?”

“I know what’s going on.”

“You do?”

“You don’t fool me.” She pointed at the crest on his surcoat. “That army hasn’t been seen in over 20 years.”

The knight looked down at his crest as if seeing it for the first time. Annwyl watched as an unruly bit of black hair fell over his eye. She longed to touch that hair. Longed to feel it move across her naked flesh. *I am completely out of control!*

“Really?” He sounded so innocent or at least he tried.

“Yes. Really. Where did you find it anyway? Some castle you robbed? Or the dragon’s den? Knight my ass. You’re a mercenary. A blade for hire. The lowest of the low.”

The knight let out a deep sigh and looked away from her. Ha! She caught him.

He loved the humans’ complete inability to see anything even when it stared them right in their faces. He knew what it was, too. Their logic. How could anything the size of a dragon turn into a

human? Humans understood nothing of ancient Magick and how powerful it could be.

For a moment, he really thought that Annwyl figured it out. Still, he remained grateful she hadn't. He knew he shouldn't lie to her and, in the beginning, he really hadn't planned to. He trusted her now more than he trusted anyone, but her reaction to him as a human male completely confounded him.

She wanted the knight but hated the knight. Cared for the dragon but, not surprisingly, didn't seem to have any other feelings than general friendliness.

Annwyl continued to be the most complex creature he'd ever met. And, when he wasn't staring at her chest or rear, he found her intelligent, delightful, and extremely funny. Just a joy to be around. But only the dragon seemed lucky enough to see that side of her. When he came to her as the knight, he found her surly, foul-tempered, and downright rude. Although he still found her a joy to be around, but probably because he liked how she smelled when she became angry. A musk all her own that forced him to fight his erection every time he caught a whiff of it.

Annwyl, the things I could do to you...

He needed to focus. Right now. Right this second. Or he would end up doing something very stupid.

He cleared his throat and released her arm. "Feel better?"

"Yes."

"And..."

"And what?" He raised an eyebrow and Annwyl scowled. "Thank you."

"Now that wasn't so hard was it?"

She turned away from him and he caught sight of that lovely rear again. He slapped it with the palm of his hand. Annwyl stopped. Gritted her teeth. But did nothing.

He came up behind her. "Good," he whispered in her ear. "You're getting better. You want to beat me to a bloody pulp but you're able to restrain yourself. Nice." He desperately wanted to touch her, but he fought the desire as best he could. He had no idea his human body could be so hard to control.

"Now," he barked gruffly. "Let's start again."

"So." Morfyd placed a bowl of stew in front of Annwyl. "Tell me about your Brastias."

Annwyl frowned. "He's not *my* Brastias. At the moment, he's no woman's Brastias." Annwyl's frown quickly turned to a grin. "Interested?"

"What?" Morfyd started. "No."

"Oh, then you are just being nosy."

"Oh, forget I asked."

Annwyl dug into the hearty stew. After her long day with the knight, her body demanded

sustenance.

“Is it hard to be with all those men? All day? Every day?”

Annwyl drank some of Morfyd’s wine. She knew no threat of infection remained, but the wine still tasted unbelievably delicious.

“Not at all.”

“Really?”

“Absolutely. Just let one of the men touch you inappropriately and you take his arm off right at the shoulder joint. Then, as he’s bleeding to death, you slam his face into a few things, and you’ll find that the other men just leave you alone.” Morfyd stared at Annwyl with wide eyes. “What?”

Morfyd cleared her throat. “Nothing.”

Annwyl could hear Fearghus coming, the cave shaking with each mighty step he took. She didn’t look up from her stew until he entered her chamber. “Lord Dragon.”

“Lady Annwyl.”

“I was wondering when you were going to come and visit me.”

The dragon barely glanced at Morfyd. “Don’t you have somewhere to be, Morfyd?”

“No.”

The dragon bumped her chair with one of his talons. She glared but stood up. “Fine. I’m heading back to the village.”

“Good idea. All those sick humans for you to take care of.”

Morfyd sneered at the dragon while addressing Annwyl. “See you in the morning, Annwyl.”

“Have a good night.”

Annwyl finished off her stew then turned to the dragon, a chalice of wine in her hand.

“So, Lord Dragon, what are your plans for this evening?”

He adjusted his body awkwardly and the end of his deadly tail landed gently in her lap. “Well, I thought we could do that thing again.”

“That thing?” Annwyl desperately fought a smile as she ran her hand across the scaled tip. Its very edge shaped like an arrowhead and just as sharp. She briefly wondered if the dragon ever needed to sharpen it with a stone. “Do you mean talking?”

“Yes. Yes. Whatever it is called.”

“You like talking, don’t you? Just admit it.”

“I like talking to *you*. And that is all I will admit to.”

“Fine. No need to get testy.” His snout moved close as well. Without even thinking about it, she rubbed her hand over it. And the dragon let her. “So tell me more about your family.”

“Don’t you get bored with my family stories?”

“Not at all.” She leaned forward and looked at him, her hand once again resting on the tip of his

tail. "Waiting."

Fearghus sighed. "Well, one time we shaved our baby brother's head."

Annwyl burst out laughing.

Chapter Seven

Annwyl hit the ground. Again. She had to admit it. She grew tired of seeing the world from the flat of her back.

She winced as the pain shocked through her head. The knight had hit her with the back of his hand, the sword he held adding to the power of the move.

"I think you broke my nose."

"Probably." He stood over her, staring into her face. Suddenly she silently cursed herself for removing her shirt while they trained, the rocky dirt digging into her bare back that the bindings did not cover. "No. I just pushed it out of joint a bit."

Annwyl began to stand but he pushed her back down. "Calm yourself." He tossed his blade aside and straddled her hips. She watched him with narrowed eyes as he rested the lower half of his body against hers.

He leaned over and took her nose between both of his big hands. "This may hurt a bit."

He adjusted her nose back into place with a "pop."

"Ow!" She slapped his shoulder.

"Don't be a baby," he admonished with a smile. "So, while I'm down here, any other aches or pains you need me to assist you with?"

Annwyl needed him to get off her because she didn't want him off her. She wanted him to run his hands over her body. She wanted him to kiss her. She wanted this man inside of her. And the thought absolutely terrified her.

"Get off me."

"You know the magic word."

Annwyl rolled her eyes. "Please," she bit out between clenched teeth. The man continued to try what little patience she possessed.

"Now. Now. You can do a little better than that. A little nicer please. Perhaps mean it."

"Oh, come on!"

"Unless..."

"Unless?"

"Unless you don't want me to move." He leaned in closer, "Unless you want me to stay right here."

Bastard, it seemed like he could read her thoughts. Just having him on top of her caused her blood to race. And she had the strangest throbbing sensation between her thighs. Not unpleasant, but

definitely disconcerting.

“Well,” he persisted.

But she couldn't answer him. She couldn't speak. If she did, she truly feared what the hell would come out of her mouth. Instead, she just stared into those dark black eyes of his and wondered if his sweat would taste salty on her tongue.

He allowed more of his weight to rest against her hips, and she bit the inside of her mouth to keep from moaning out loud. “Answer me, Annwyl.”

She swallowed, hard, and forced herself under some kind of control. Dammit, she was a warrior. The leader of one of the toughest rebellions in known history and still she let some knight completely confuse her.

“Get your ass off me... please.”

He stared at her stunned, then threw his head back and laughed. He jumped up, grasping her arm and pulling her up with him. “You never fail to amuse me.”

“I'm glad I can be so entertaining.” She quickly picked up her shirt by the stream and pulled it on over her head. She needed something to hide the hard points of her nipples. The bindings were just not helping with that. “I think my nose has gone through quite enough this day. Besides, it grows late. I must go.”

He took hold of her wrist, “Are you sure?”

“I said so, didn't I?”

“That's not what I asked you.”

“I don't have time for this.” She hated how desperate she sounded at the moment, her entire body responding to his touch. Screaming out for him to explore every bit of her flesh.

“Don't leave.” His voice low. Enticing.

“One of us needs to go.”

He smiled at her, “Why?”

Her eyes traveled the long length of him, taking in the expanse of his wide shoulders, the muscles bulging under his chain mail. “Trust me on this.”

He moved in closer to her. He still held onto her arm, but his fingers began to move along the flesh. Traveling up her arm. Her breasts tightened. Her nipples became painfully hard. Her breath quickened. She wanted this man. Gods, did she want him. More than anything before in her life. And he knew it. She could tell by the way he looked at her. The way he moved into her, his body nearly touching hers.

“You *really* need to go.”

He lowered his head, his eyes on her lips. “Really? Are you sure?”

She watched as his mouth lowered to meet hers.

Clearly he'd lost his mind. And he blamed the girl for it. In the beginning, he had no intention of doing anything more than training. But with those green eyes of hers staring up at him and that body calling out to be taken, really, what was a poor dragon to do?

Kiss her, of course. At least that was the plan as he brought his head down to taste her, but he felt a sharp slap as a hand covered his face.

"Hold it." Annwyl reared back from him as she pushed his face away with her hand.

He pulled back, surprised.

"Exactly what do you think you're doing?" She radiated anger. Although not her usual rage. It seemed something else all together.

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me." She pushed him by his shoulders. "What do you..." Push. "Think you are..." Push. "*Doing?*" Shove.

He felt his back slam into a tree and he gritted his teeth. Was he seriously letting some human push him around his own glen? As he watched her re-adjust the bindings under her shirt to make sure that her breasts didn't slip out, he realized that yes. Yes, he was letting some human push him around. But not just any human. Annwyl.

"I'm not some whore you can just grab and take as you like."

He took a deep breath. "I know."

Annwyl blinked, surprised by his answer. "Um... well... so long as we understand each other."

He smiled. "We do."

"Well... good. Now... go away."

"If that is what you wish."

"Yes. Yes. That is what I wish." She waved a dismissive hand as she stepped away from him.

"Of course, a good-bye kiss would prompt me to leave just a little faster," he called after her.

Annwyl stopped and, until the end of time, he would always swear that he heard her growl.

Why did he insist on torturing her? What did he want? Why wouldn't the man just leave? Annwyl swung around expecting him to be where she left him, against that tree. But he stood right behind her. The man moved faster than lightning. Startled, she stumbled back from him and almost fell, but he caught her around the waist. She felt searing heat on her flesh where he held her and her breath caught in her throat as he leaned in, keeping her bent over his arm.

"Are you all right?" His low voice slid softly across her flesh. Teasing. Making her body ache with need for him.

"I'll be better when you let me go."

“And I’ll be better when you kiss me. Want to make a deal?” She let out another agitated growl and he grinned in response. “I do like that sound.”

“Let me go.”

“Kiss me.”

“How about I just run you through?”

“I believe you need a sword for that task.”

She realized she’d left her sword lying on the ground at her feet. *Stupid, Annwyl, stupid!*

His smile softened as he looked down into her face, “Just kiss me.” It came out more a plea than a demand. And, as much as her rational mind railed against it, she wanted to kiss him.

She brought her head up slightly as he lowered his. They met somewhere in the middle, and when his lips touched hers, a bolt of heat swept through her. Heat and... recognition? Her hands reached up and gripped his shoulders as her mouth opened and his tongue slid in. He swept strong, dry fingers across her bare skin, slipping easily under her bindings to gently graze her breast. Her body jerked in response and Annwyl realized that she hovered moments away from letting this man do anything he wanted to her. *Anything.*

She pushed against his shoulders, while pulling her body out of his arms. She forced herself away and the two stood staring at each other, both gasping for breath. Her nipples painfully hard now as, she guessed, was the erection desperately trying to push its way through the knight’s chain mail leggings.

“Now. As you promised. Go.”

“Are you sure?” He took a step toward her and she jumped back.

“You keep asking me that.” There was that desperation again.

The knight grinned, “I keep hoping you’ll give me a different answer.”

“I won’t. Now go!”

He nodded and took a deep breath, “As I promised.”

He walked off. Once Annwyl knew that he truly was gone, she walked back to the stream and sat in the middle of it, letting the cold water rush past her. After a few minutes, she stuck her head in as well.

Fearghus dived into his lake. Still human but so was the raging erection he had at the moment. The girl insisted on making him insane. Whether she admitted it or not, her body definitely called to him. Loudly. And what, exactly, did he think he was doing? Why the hell did he kiss her? A human, he reminded himself desperately. Just a human. Just a gorgeous, big-breasted human.

He gritted his teeth. He really didn’t know how much more he could stand. But he had to fight it. He had to resist her. Simply for his own state of mind.

When Fearghus pulled himself out of the water he'd returned to his dragon form once more. He shook the wetness from his body and wings and settled down for a few minutes to get control of his impulse. His impulse to go back outside and find Annwyl. To find her and to fuck her.

"Dragon!" Annwyl's voice rang through his lair, causing his whole body to clench.

"Damn." He covered his eyes with his claw. The woman would be the death of him.

"Dragon!"

Annwyl went deeper into the cavern than she ever had before. She couldn't find Morfyd, and she wanted to see Fearghus. Now. "Dragon!"

"Here." She heard his deep, rich voice and followed. She found him stretched out beside an underground lake, his tail swirling through the water. "What's wrong?"

"Your friend needs to go."

"Not again. What did he do now?"

She climbed up onto a boulder and looked the dragon in the eye. "He's very... disconcerting."

"Disconcerting? I didn't know that was a flaw."

"It can be."

"I don't understand why he makes you so nervous and I don't. I can turn you into a fireball."

So can he.

"Well, you're very sweet. And charming."

"They call me Fearghus the Destroyer."

She dismissed that with a wave of her hand, "And they call me Annwyl the Bloody. I'm not impressed."

"You're a very strange girl, Annwyl."

"You get raised by my family and see how you turn out." She clenched her fists in frustration. She'd never been so frustrated before in her life. All over some man.

"I think it would be a mistake to send him away. He's preparing you to fight Lorcan. Eventually you will have to face your brother and kill him." He sounded as if he'd grown weary of reminding her of that fact. But, once again, she blamed the knight. She should tell the dragon to toss a fireball at him.

"I know."

"Unless there is another reason you want me to send him away?"

Annwyl thought carefully on her answer. Tell the dragon that every time she was around the man her body cried out for him? Tell him that every time their swords clashed she became wet with desire? That she continually wondered what he would look like naked and on top of her? Did she admit that to the dragon?

"No." She shook her head, "No other reason." She sighed, "Just..."

“Just what?”

Why can't he be more like you? “Nothing.”

She looked down at the lake, the water a beautiful clear blue with an active spring constantly replenishing it. She motioned to it. “Do you mind?”

“Uh... uh... no.” He adjusted his large body. “Would you like me to leave?”

“Why?” She slid down the boulder and went to the water’s edge. “You’ve seen me naked before.” She dropped her sheathed sword to the ground. “Unless human bodies repulse you?”

“What? No! Just do whatever you must.”

She shrugged, quickly undressed, and dived into the water.

He understood now. The gods were testing him. Clearly that must be the only reason this woman now floated naked and face up in his lake, completely oblivious to his presence. The gods had a cruel sense of humor.

“Dragon?” He realized she’d been speaking to him for quite awhile. But he just couldn’t stop staring at her breasts. They were amazing.

“What?”

“I said, ‘How do you know him?’ ”

He tore his eyes away from her chest, “Who?”

She frowned. “Am I annoying you, Lord Dragon?”

Annoying wasn’t the word he’d use. “No. Why?”

With a shrug, “Just wondering. You seem a little tense.”

You have no idea...

She caught the end of his tail with both hands. Her fingers were long and strong, and he could easily imagine those hands stroking him to climax.

No. I shouldn't have gone down that road.

“The tip of your tail is sharp as a blade and the entire length of it muscle. Do you ever use it as a weapon?”

He cleared his throat. Anything to distract himself from her magical hands. “I have.”

“Fascinating.”

It really didn’t help that she insisted on touching him all the time. He never had a human come near him, much less constantly explore almost every inch of him. He grunted. She *was* trying to kill him.

Why the hell had he involved himself in the Sibling War anyway? He should have just kept sleeping.

“What is it exactly that bothers you about him?”

“Everything.” She glanced down at the water. “How deep is this?”

“I can get my entire body into it. And ‘everything’ seems like a lot.”

“He’s smug.” She gripped his tail between both her arms and held on tight. “Lift me.”

“Are you insane? And *I* am smug.”

“Yes. But he’s irritatingly smug.” She still clung to his tail. “Please.” She begged with a smile.

With a dramatic sigh, Fearghus lifted his tail, the girl going with it. She squealed and laughed, warming his heart.

“Now what,” he asked her as she hung there, frighteningly far up from the lake.

“Now? I let go.” And she did. He watched her crash back into the water, disappearing into the dark blue recesses of the lake. But, within a few seconds, she fought her way back to the surface.

“That,” her wet face flush with excitement, “was bloody brilliant!”

Fearghus lowered his head so that they met eye to eye. “Have you always been so... different?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. Probably.” She kissed him sweetly on the snout and swam away.

His claw touched the spot where she’d kissed him. She had such soft lips. He growled low as he watched her naked body swim across the lake and wondered what it would feel like to bury himself inside her, to feel her climax, to feel her soft mouth on his...

“Sorry, Fearghus, am I interrupting anything?”

He gritted his teeth at the sound of his sister’s voice and wondered how long she’d been standing there. Knowing his sister, he bet it was quite awhile.

Fearghus slammed his tail down and she jumped out of the way just in time. “No,” he innocently replied. “You’re not interrupting anything.”

His sister glared at him and he feared she might shift right then just so she could make sure her blast held enough strength to knock him across the cave floor. He knew he heard “bastard” muttered under her breath.

“I have to go back to the village for a few hours. But tell Annwyl there’s food for her.” She turned to walk back the way she came.

“As you wish.” He lazily swished his tail and heard her curse as he swiped her feet, causing her to trip and stumble out of the cavern. “Sorry,” he called after her.

“Was that Morfyd?”

He found Annwyl stepping out of the water. Her brown hair reached down to her knees, covering her long, strong body and, thankfully, those breasts.

“There’s food.”

“Good. I’m starving.” She reached down and grabbed her clothes and sword.

“Annwyl…”

“I know. I know. He serves a purpose and I should just give him a chance. Right?”

“Actually I was going to say you should put your clothes on, there’s a chill in here.”

“Oh.”

“But you should also give him a chance.”

She squinted up at him. “Fine, dragon.” She grinned. “Anything for you.”

And Fearghus’ heart missed several beats before it began moving again.

“But he best not piss me off again.”

Fearghus cringed. He could practically guarantee he couldn’t stop himself from doing that.

Chapter Eight

“Here.”

Annwyl found the knight holding a sword out to her. “What’s wrong with my blade?”

“Nothing. I want you to start using both.”

Annwyl took the sword from his hand. It bore beautiful workmanship. A noble’s blade. A little heavy for her, but a weight she would be able to get used to. And she bet it could cut through anything. She wondered where he got it from. What noble died at his hand? She shrugged. She never liked nobles much, so she really didn’t care.

“How does it feel?”

“Good.”

“Want some time to get used to it?”

She didn’t answer. Instead she swung at his head with her new blade. He ducked and she blocked his retaliatory blow with her other sword. He smiled at her sudden attack and she felt pride. It took much to impress this man.

As the morning progressed into afternoon, the contact of their blades and the grunts of exertion the only sound in the glen.

Morfyd pulled away from the flames and growled. No matter how hard she tried, she just couldn’t see Lorcan. She couldn’t see into his world. She recently heard that he had joined forces with a powerful wizard whose name no one ever seemed to remember.

Powerful indeed. There were very few humans who could block her. She’d have to warn Fearghus. Let him know that the girl may have more to worry about than that demon brother of hers.

Fearghus. What exactly was going on with him and that girl? Morfyd wasn’t blind. She watched him watch her. Clearly he’d become enamored of the female. But she sensed something else going on. As Annwyl became stronger, Morfyd began to spend most of her time in the local village. A

recent bout of fever required her skills. But she sensed that neither Annwyl nor Fearghus spent their days in the lair. And if they weren't in the lair, where the hell were they?

Morfyd knew that her curiosity would soon get the better of her. But something was going on, and she planned to find out exactly what.

Annwyl watched the shadows move through the glen. She knew the hour grew late. And her body tensed in anticipation. She saw it now as a kind of a ritual. They would meet and train for hours. Break to eat in silence. Train for several more hours. And at the end of it, something would happen. Something that usually caused increased wetness between her thighs.

Their blades clashed one more time.

"Hold," he barked. She smiled. The stronger she grew, the more she seemed to be wearing him out. She had no doubt he could continue for a few more hours, but she liked that her skills had improved since they'd first started.

He sheathed his sword and turned from her. She crouched down and picked up her shirt, pulling the soft, plain cotton material over her head. She sheathed both her weapons and looked up to find boots standing in front of her. She fought to control her breathing as she slowly looked up at him.

He stared down at her, his face inscrutable and half covered by his black hair. He almost looked angry at her, his silence driving her to distraction. "Is there a problem," she snapped.

A low growl erupted from the back of his throat as he reached down and took hold of her shirt, pulling her to her feet. Then his mouth latched onto hers. Annwyl didn't fight him. She had no desire to. Instead she wrapped one arm around his neck, the other around his waist. He had her by the nape of her neck, his other hand slipping under her shirt. His rough fingers moved across the sweat-covered flesh of her back while his mouth claimed hers in a kiss that was so desperate, so passionate, that she thought for sure he would take her right at that moment.

Instead, he let her go as abruptly as he'd grabbed her. And she couldn't stop the whimper that escaped her throat when he broke off contact. He stared at her for a moment longer, then he stormed off. Just like that. Leaving nothing but the dull ache between her legs to keep her company.

Morfyd placed food in front of Annwyl and watched the girl ignore it. In fact, she hadn't spoken since her return. Morfyd glanced over the girl's body. She wore only her bindings and leggings, and for the first time Morfyd noticed the bruises, bloody nicks, and deep cuts that covered Annwyl's body.

"Annwyl." The girl's green eyes flickered toward Morfyd. "Where did those bruises come from?"

"My training." She made the statement as if Morfyd were supposed to know what the hell she

spoke of.

“Your training?”

“Aye. With the knight.”

Morfyd’s eyes narrowed, “What knight?”

“The one who was here when I was healing. The dragon’s friend.”

Morfyd couldn’t hide her surprise as she took a sudden step back. Her brother with a knight friend? Not in this lifetime. Or any lifetime for that matter. And suddenly his recent desire to traipse into the village as human made sense.

“Ah, yes. His *knight* friend. And he’s done this to you?”

“You could say that.”

Morfyd nodded. She needed to find out what was going on. Now. The curiosity was killing her!

“Is the dragon here?” Annwyl asked hopefully.

“As a matter of fact, no. He’s not.” The girl went back to staring at the wall. “Eat, Annwyl. I need you to keep your strength up. Understand?”

The girl nodded but made no move to eat and continued to stare at her fascinating wall.

He looped around the glen, moving past a large boulder, heading for the back way into his den. He’d gone into town, running all the way, to order a few things and hopefully work the girl out of his system. It didn’t work. If he stumbled across her now, he’d have a hard time not to taking her up against a tree. So, again, it looked as if his cold lake would be his only respite.

But as he came around the boulder he stopped. Morfyd stood waiting for him. Her eyes narrowed in anger, her arms crossed in front of her chest, one foot tapping sharply against the grass.

She glared at her brother for several moments. “I’m telling,” she barked. Then she was off.

“Morfyd!” He charged after her, snatching her around the waist before she could get away from him. She slapped at his hands. But when that didn’t work she slammed her elbow into his face. He released her and she spun around to face him.

The two siblings stared at each other. “Keep your mouth shut, sister.”

Morfyd hissed just before she latched onto a handful of Fearghus’ hair and pulled.

“You little...” He winced in pain and wrapped his arm under his sister’s leg, tossing her on her back. She didn’t let her grip on his hair go though, and instead reached up and punched him in the head. “Ow!” He slapped her hands away. Could this be more ridiculous? They were dragons. The mightiest killers in the known world. What the hell were they doing?

“Hold it! Just hold it!”

Morfyd stopped. “How could you lie to her like that?”

“I’m not lying.”

“Did you go up to her and say ‘It’s me. Fearghus.’ ”

“Well, not exactly...”

“Liar!” She dragged herself off the ground by using her brother’s hair to pull herself to her feet.

“Stop yelling!”

She finally released her hold on Fearghus’ hair. “What are you up to brother?”

“Getting her ready.”

She raised an eyebrow. “For what exactly?”

Dirty little... “That’s not what I meant. Soon she will face her brother, and I’m making sure she’s ready to do that. I won’t watch her die.”

“That’s admirable, brother. But I still don’t know why you haven’t told her the truth. Told her who you are.”

“Our power to shift is one of our most sacred secrets. Do you think I’m going to reveal it to some little girl?” He motioned to his sister’s scarred face, “You even kept our secret while they cut your face.” For a moment, even Fearghus believed that excuse. Morfyd however...

“Ha! That’s a weak excuse, brother. If they’d known what I was they would have killed me or at least tried to. And I’d rather not be like old Terlack with only one wing. And I’m sure she wouldn’t harm a hair on that big, thick head of yours. So why don’t you just admit the truth?”

“And what truth is that?”

“That you’re afraid. Afraid that once she knows who and what you are that you don’t stand a chance with her.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’ve seen how you look at her, brother. I’m not blind.”

“No, but you are insane. I have no interest in some human girl.” If he wasn’t careful, his lies would choke him. He wanted that girl more than life itself. He’d tried to walk away earlier, but he couldn’t. He just had to taste her again. And it took all his strength to stop himself from going further. From ripping off her clothes and burying himself inside of her until morning.

“You’re afraid that if she finds out her knight is really you... really a dragon, she won’t give you another look.” His sister stood in front of him now. Her blue eyes boring into his head. “You desire her, brother. And you don’t want anything to jeopardize that.”

Fearghus looked down at his sister. “Are you done?”

“Aye.”

“Then hear me well, sister. I don’t have to explain myself to you.” He leaned into her. “You just keep your mouth shut. I’ll tell her when I’m ready.”

“Fine. But you best hope it’s not too late, brother.” She punched him in the chest—hard—and

walked away from him.

Fearghus sighed, he had too many damn females in his life.

Annwyl just started eating when Morfyd stormed back in. She stopped and looked at the witch. Watched her pace in front of her. "Is everything all right, Morfyd?"

Morfyd looked at her and Annwyl put her spoonful of food down. Based on the expression Morfyd wore on that scarred face of hers, Annwyl wanted to make sure she could sprint to the door if necessary.

"What's going on with you and that knight?"

"What? Uh... nothing?"

Morfyd pulled a chair over, sat in it, and stared at Annwyl.

She'd always heard it was a bad idea to lie to a witch. "Well, he's kissed me a few times."

"And?"

"And nothing."

"Nothing else has happened between the two of you?"

"No."

"But you want more, don't you?"

Annwyl's face get hot. A blast of the dragon's flame couldn't make it any hotter than it was at this very moment. "I... uh..."

"Annwyl."

"Yes. All right. I do want more."

"So why has nothing more happened?"

Annwyl shrugged.

"Are you afraid? I know he'd be your first."

"No. I'm not afraid."

"Is it because you might become with child? Because as long as you keep drinking the wine..."

"No. No. That's not it." Morfyd waited for her to continue, but she didn't think she could speak the full truth. Not out loud. "You'll never understand."

"Annwyl, I'm a witch. I understand much more than you could ever conceive. Just tell me before you shred my nerves."

Annwyl looked into those clear blue eyes as she found herself wringing her hands. "I..." she swallowed, "I feel guilty."

Morfyd tilted her head. Her brows pulled together in confusion. "Feel guilty about what?"

Annwyl closed her eyes and rushed forward before she lost all nerve, "I can't help but feel I'm betraying the dragon."

Silence followed her admission. She slowly opened her eyes to find Morfyd still staring at her. But her expression of anger and confusion were gone. Instead, she smiled. A smile of such kindness that Annwyl felt her heart warm for the scarred witch.

“I want you to do me a favor, Annwyl.”

“Anything.” And she meant it.

“If you want the knight, take him.”

Annwyl blinked. That wasn't the response she'd expected. *Ever.* “What?”

“I'm sorry. Was I not clear? I said if you want him. Take him.”

“But...”

“Do not worry about the dragon. Just promise me. If this is what you want, you'll take him.”

She reached out her hand and ran it along Annwyl's cheek. “Trust me, my friend.”

Annwyl watched Morfyd leave. Her confusion continued to grow by the day. The minute. The second.

She pushed her chair away from the table, slowly standing on wobbly legs. She needed to see the dragon. The one calming thing in her life. He was what he was and she loved him for that.

Fearghus, his head resting in the palm of his claw, sighed. Again.

“How many times must we do this?”

“Until I get it right.”

“Aren't you tired? You had your training today, didn't you?”

“Yes. But all we do is sword train. This hones my reflexes. Now do it again.”

Fearghus again sighed and swung his tail. Then he swung it back. He heard her squeal but unlike before he didn't hear her lovely bottom hit the ground. “Annwyl?” He turned around but she'd disappeared. His confusion lasted only a moment. He felt the weight on his tail. Slowly, doing his best not to laugh, he brought his tail around. The tip of it caught under her shirt and there she hung. “Are we done now?”

Her face took on a charming beet red color. “Yes. We're done now.”

“You sure? I mean, we can keep going if you like.”

She growled at him, “Enjoying this, are you dragon?”

“As a matter of fact, yes I am.”

“Down.” He carefully lowered her to the ground and watched her struggle to get untangled from his tail. She finally had to yank off her shirt and Fearghus took in a shaky breath. She wore no bindings.

She really needed to stop getting naked around him.

“I should be faster than that.”

“Annwyl, you’re tired. You had a long day. As did I.”

Annwyl raised an eyebrow as she pulled the shirt back on. “And what did you do all day?”

“Many things. Dragons are very busy higher beings.”

Annwyl smirked at him, her arms crossing in front of her voluptuous chest. “Higher beings, eh? It must be nice.”

“You need not feel jealous. You are much better than most humans.”

Annwyl laughed outright. And Fearghus realized how much he loved to see her smile. “Why thank you, Oh mighty dragon.” She curtsied low.

“Now. Now, Annwyl. No need to curtsy. A simple nod of your head and absolute worship will be more than enough.”

Annwyl liked Fearghus more and more every day. At some point she began to think of him as *her* dragon. As if the great beast belonged to her and her alone. Ridiculous, of course. The dragon belonged to no one, but she found the feeling comforting.

She laughed now when she thought of how afraid she had been of him. Afraid of him and all his kind. That feeling seemed like ages ago. Now she found herself almost dreading the day that she would have to leave. She and the dragon never spoke of it. They spoke of everything except her leaving.

And Annwyl did love talking to her dragon. She loved to hear the history of his kind. The stories of his family. She loved to hear him. Just the deep, rumbling sound of his dragon voice calmed her. Eased the rage that always pulsated just beneath the surface.

“Absolute worship? That’s a very tall order.”

“You are a very tall girl.”

Annwyl chuckled as she knelt before the dragon and held her hand out to him.

“I thought you kneeled before no man.”

“You are a dragon. And don’t get your hopes up. I just want to see your talon.”

“I’m under such scrutiny.” He grumbled in annoyance, but laid one of his talons into her palm just the same. Coal black and smooth, its tip sharp and quite deadly. She closed her hand over it, marveling at the fact that her long fingers could barely reach around.

“What’s it like?”

“What? Being a dragon?”

“No.” She smiled as she released the talon, “Flying?”

He laughed, “Fine.”

“Fine? Just fine? That’s the best you can do?”

“Well, I’ve been flying most of my life so it’s not as interesting to me as it seems to be to you.”

“You take your gifts for granted, dragon.”

“As do you.”

“And what gifts do I have exactly? The ability to have my own brother trying to kill me?”

“The ability to inspire hardened warriors to follow you into battle. I know few who have such a gift as that.”

Annwyl shrugged. “They were desperate. No one else knows much about my brother.”

“If they were desperate, they would have sent you back to him with a ribbon around your head.”

Annwyl smiled at the dragon. He possessed the uncanny ability to make her feel as if she could challenge the entire world and win. And after a long day of being thrown on her back and told that her rage would only get her killed, it was nice to come back to the lair and have the dragon make her feel like she was worth something.

She sat down on his front claw, leaning back against his forearm. She let out a deep, contented breath and felt her sore body begin to relax. She put her hands behind her head and looked off into the dark cavern, amazed at the size of the dragon’s home.

With mild sarcasm, “Comfortable?”

She wiggled her rear against his scales. “Yes. As a matter of fact, I’m quite comfortable thank you.” She let his chuckle wash over her and her body relaxed even more.

“Annwyl?”

“Aye?”

“Did you get those marks on your back from your brother?”

Annwyl didn’t even have to look to know which marks he spoke of. There were scars from battle all over her body. But the ones her dragon spoke of were brutal whip marks that covered her back. Those scars belonged to her more years than she could remember.

“No.” Annwyl cleared her throat, and she admitted something to the dragon that she never admitted to anyone ever before. “I got these from my father.” She still hated the man. Even being dead for so many years she still hated him. She lowered her arms and laid her hands in her lap. “My brother has the same marks. One of the few things we have in common.”

Annwyl didn’t even realize at first that she clasped her hands together. Claspings them so tightly that the knuckles had gone white. Then the dragon placed two of his talons against them, and she realized that only her father ever caused her to feel this way. She closed her eyes and willed herself not to cry. She’d shed enough tears over that bastard. She would shed no more.

She opened her eyes when the dragon stretched himself out and crossed his forearms over each other. He adjusted her so that she rested in the crook of his forearm, his claws ensconcing her safely. He lowered his head until it rested over her outstretched legs. She stared at him for several long moments. His eyes closed, he didn’t make any further moves. She realized he wanted her to feel safe. And she did. He was giving her his strength, his power, his protection. She didn’t fear the razor-sharp

talons that laid so close to her body or the mighty head with all its dangerous fangs. She didn't fear Fearghus the Destroyer at all. She marveled at the feeling. The feeling of being safe. It seemed strange to feel neither fear nor rage. As new a feeling to her as her desires for the knight. And, she had to admit, she liked both. That two different beings could introduce her to such opposite emotions shocked her to her very core. No matter what happened, both beings would forever share a place in her heart.

Annwyl reached out her hand and brushed her fingertips lightly over the scales on his snout. She let her hand rest there as she closed her eyes and leaned back.

She had no idea how long they stayed like that, but when she finally couldn't stifle a yawn any longer, Fearghus spoke up. "You'd best get to bed, Lady Annwyl."

"Aye." Annwyl pulled her legs out from under the dragon and stood up, shaking off the pins and needles that ran through them. "That demon-knight you've trapped me with is quite the task master." His head still remained close, so she bent down and kissed the dragon on his black snout. "Good night, Lord Dragon. And thank you."

"For what?"

She smiled. "For nothing at all. Which is exactly what I needed."

Annwyl walked past him to get back to her chamber. As she left she couldn't help but slide her hand across his leathery wings and the scales of his body.

Fearghus closed his eyes as her hand swept across his body. Something she did almost every night now before going to bed. Although he didn't expect her to kiss him. It took all his strength to not shift right then and there. To kiss her back as he wanted to. To do what he could to take away her pain over a cruel father and a sadistic brother.

His sister was right, of course. *Unforgivable brat*. He did long for the girl. Longed to make her his own. But the reason she felt so comfortable with him was because he was not a man. From men she'd only known pain and abuse. Yet a dragon protected her. Cared for her. Saved her life.

He thought of her touching his human flesh the way she touched his scales. Running her hands along his body, the skin sensitive to the touch because of the shifting.

His entire body shuddered at the thought, and he headed toward his lake. The water, cold and bracing, was just what he needed right now.

Hefaidh-Hen glared at the flames and wondered what the hell was going on. He'd never really focused much energy on seeing into Dark Glen before. He never cared. But his instincts, which were never wrong, told him that he could find the girl there. And he needed to find the girl.

Not for Lorcan. He could care less whether the fool ever got his precious revenge. It seemed

that the girl had more reason to want her brother dead. But Hefaidd-Hen needed the girl for other reasons. He had to stop the rebellion and she was the key.

For he had plans. Important plans that he needed Lorcan for. The girl, however, would never be stupid enough to trust him. He could never have made her an ally. But Lorcan, so lost in his rage, didn't even realize that someone like Hefaidd-Hen would never waste his time on such petty battles. Unless he wanted something in return.

So he needed the girl out of the way. Every day she pulled more and more loyalty from the other kingdoms to her side. What had started out as a poor and rather ineffectual rebellion had become something much more deadly and decisive in the girl's capable hands.

Lorcan insisted that he wanted her alive, so that he could have the pleasure of taking her head. And Hefaidd-Hen would do what he could to keep the fool happy. At least for the time being. But if the girl had to die first, she had to die.

Hefaidd-Hen looked back into the flames and frowned. He still couldn't see anything. What could possibly be strong enough to block him? It must be powerful Magick, because there were few who could match him.

Whoever or whatever protected the little whelp needed to die as well.

All these little distractions took away from his plans. And soon his patience would run out. Especially with Lorcan. He didn't realize that someone could be so dislikable. But the man was. Never happy. Never satisfied. Any failure met with brutal and uncontrollable rage.

Hefaidd-Hen wondered how long before he lost his patience with the puny man. He had a feeling he'd know soon enough.

Chapter Nine

"If you want him, take him." It sounded more like an order than anything else. And Annwyl felt compelled to obey. She smiled at her own centaur shit. She wanted the man. Nothing the witch could say would ever change that.

Annwyl reached the stream where she and the knight always met to practice. She stopped short, taking in those broad shoulders and back that tapered into the narrow waist. He crouched by the stream, his body taut and ready under his chain mail. Even before he turned around she knew he was beautiful.

He glanced over his shoulder, sensing her presence. "Well, hello, pretty lady." He pushed thick golden blond hair out of his eyes and leered at her. Openly. Didn't even try to hide his lust.

"Who the hell are you?" Considering almost all feared Dark Glen there seemed to be many visitors here of late, her included.

"Gwenvael is my name. And you are?"

"Your worst enemy, unless you tell me your business here, knight."

She glanced down at his surcoat and noticed that it bore the same color and crest as the one worn by her knight. Another mercenary it seemed.

Gwenvael stood up to his full height and Annwyl tightened her grip on her sword, ready to unsheathe it if need be. He was enormous. And she had no doubt that her knight and this man were brothers.

“I’m here to see the dragon.”

Her eyes narrowed, “Why?”

“My, we are protective.”

“Yes. *We* are. Now answer my question.”

“I have a message for him. From family.”

“Really? Well, give it to me. I’ll make sure he gets it.” She held out her hand.

The knight smiled. “Actually, the message is in my head, sweet one.” He took her hand, and brought it up to his lips. Annwyl watched as he kissed the tips gently, all the while staring into her eyes. She let him finish, then pinched his nose between her thumb and forefinger. She twisted until she got a cry of pain from him.

“Don’t touch. I don’t like to be touched.”

“I see that.”

“Say you’re sorry or I’ll take it off.”

“Sorry. Sorry!”

She released him. He rubbed his nose and pouted. She couldn’t help but smile. So very cute. And so very charming. Of course she still wouldn’t trust him with her dead horse.

His sister was up to something. He could tell. He’d known her for over 200 years and she’d been annoying him senseless that entire time. But she would tell him nothing now. She was still too angry at discovering his double life.

But she would never be as angry with him as he was with himself. Yesterday had been the final straw. He had no intention of touching Annwyl, much less kissing her. He, in fact, had started to walk away. But, once again, he couldn’t help himself. And when she kissed him back...

But today would be different. Today he would get control of this human body of his. Today he would not touch her. He wouldn’t even look at her. Today he would face the fact that she was human and he a dragon.

Fearghus sighed. When had everything become so difficult? *When you just had to rescue her, you idiot.* He now realized he should have never gone out to help. He should have let the humans fight their war as they’d been doing for centuries. As soon as he became involved, everything became difficult. Complicated. Now he had his sister and some human girl living with him. Who else exactly

would appear to drive him insane?

He realized too late that he should never have entertained that thought as he came upon them. They sat by the stream. His unmistakable charm oozing from every pore while she laughed loudly at whatever he'd just said. She almost looked as if she were flirting.

Brutal jealousy came up and choked him. He would throttle the little bastard. Send him back to their mother without the rest of his tail.

He walked out of the trees and Gwenvael looked at him. "Oh. Greetings, big brother."

He gritted his teeth. Had the little bastard told her anything? Gwenvael, unlike the rest of their kin, did not believe in discretion. It didn't take long to realize that if one asked Gwenvael a direct question about dragons or anything for that matter, he would give a direct answer.

"I'm here to see the dragon." He winked at Fearghus. And Fearghus barely contained the near overwhelming desire to take the boy's head completely off his shoulders and kick it right out of his glen.

"Is that a fact," he spit out between clenched teeth.

"Oh, yes. Important family business has sent me this way."

"Well, why don't you find Morfyd? I'm sure she's in the cave. She can help you."

"Really? Do you think so?" Gwenvael's glee almost caused the little bastard to froth at the mouth. He had Fearghus right where he wanted him and they both knew it.

"I'm sure of it."

"Well, then. I guess I better go find this elusive Morfyd." Gwenvael's grin practically blinded him. But when the bastard caught Annwyl's hand in his, and kissed it, Fearghus realized that he would definitely have to kill the little toe-rag.

"I thought we discussed this, knight," she chastised with a smile.

"We did. But I just couldn't help myself, lady."

Gwenvael stood up and walked toward Fearghus. "I'll see you soon, brother."

The two brothers stared at each other until Gwenvael disappeared out of sight.

Fearghus turned back to find Annwyl standing, brushing dirt off her backside. "You never mentioned a brother before. You two look very much alike."

"What were you doing with him?"

She looked up startled and caught on to his implications almost immediately. "Anything I like."

He snarled. She snarled back. He moved on her, his hands slipping under her arms, lifting her off the ground and pushing her back against a tree. He could smell the lingering scent of his brother surrounding her and he wanted that smell gone. If she smelled of a male, it would be of him and no other.

"You need to stay away from him."

"Don't try and tell me what to do. I answer to no man."

He lifted her up higher so that they were eye to eye. “You’ll do as I say.”

The look on her face. The smell of desire battering his senses. The fullness of her lips. None of that moved him. It was what she said next that did the most damage.

“Make me.”

This couldn’t have been what Morfyd meant. She must have meant something else. Something less... dangerous. Or, at the very least, less stupid.

But Annwyl challenged him. Not with a sword or a mace. Those she could handle. She challenged *him*. Had she lost her mind? Had she finally become as mad as her brother?

She stared into those beautiful dark eyes, one of them almost blocked by the hair that continually fell across it, and realized that for once she might be in over her head. Her feet weren’t even on solid ground. He lifted her as if she weighed no more than a babe. And, even worse, she *still* didn’t know the man’s name.

By the gods, woman. What have you done?

But she wouldn’t back down now. She had her pride to think about. At least that’s what she kept telling herself.

He leaned in close to her. His mouth brushing against her cheek. His hot breath tickling the inside of her ear.

“A challenge? Woman, are you trying to kill me?”

Annwyl frowned in confusion. What was he talking about? “Do you speak of the dragon? He would not harm you.”

He ran his tongue along her jaw. “You think you control the dragon, do you?”

Annwyl had to force herself to focus. His tongue against her skin made her crave more. More of his touch. More of him. “He’s not mine to control.” Annwyl bit back a moan. He pinned her against the tree. His body, hard and tight against hers, the only thing holding her up.

“Then what makes you think...” He kissed her collarbone. “You can stop him...” He kissed her neck. “From harming me?” He nipped her earlobe.

“A creature he may be, knight, but an honorable one. I’d trust my life with him before any human.”

His hands stopped moving. His body became still. His lips rested gently against her ear. Had she insulted him? She didn’t want him to stop, but she would never beg him either. So she waited.

“You care for a dragon?”

“I care for this dragon, knight. He is my friend.”

“And I?”

“You? I have no idea. But I wouldn’t exactly call us friends.”

He released her, letting her drop to the ground like a sack of potatoes. “Then why are you here with me now, Annwyl?”

“I didn’t say I didn’t want you. I just said I wasn’t sure if I care for you.”

He stepped back and stared at her long and hard. “Honest girl,” he finally managed.

“My family can be called a lot of things, lord knight, but liars aren’t one of them.”

“Fair enough.”

Annwyl fought to understand the confusing man. She sensed he wanted something from her, but she had no idea what. And her frustration was too great to try and figure it out. With an aggravated sigh, she pushed past him.

“We’re not done.”

She stopped in mid-stride, annoyed by his tone. Annoyed by him. “We’re not?” She faced him, arms crossed in front of her chest

“No. I’m still waiting.” He walked toward her, and she felt like a hunted doe in the woods.

“Waiting? For what?”

“For your promise to me.” He stepped in front of her and what little light the two suns poured into the dragon’s heavily wooded glen the man’s huge body completely blocked out. She now stood completely in shadow.

“Promise?”

“Your promise to stay away from Gwenvael.”

Now she really was annoyed. She could care less about Gwenvael. A mischievous little troublemaker that one. But she also understood how brothers could make each other insane. “I do not intend to make such a promise.” She could see his jaw tighten and she had the sudden desire to be wicked. *Very* wicked. “Truth be told, I just can’t stop thinking about the man. Tell me.” She cocked her head to the side as she looked up at the knight’s dark handsome face. “Does he already have a woman?”

“You test me, wench.”

“And you push me. I strongly suggest you not.”

“Or you’ll what?”

She gave him the same smile that she gave an enemy soldier in battle. She didn’t practice it, but she knew it when she gave it. Men blanched at this expression. Most ran. All died. Her knight didn’t even flinch.

“Or I’ll make your brother a very happy man. He seems more than willing.”

With a feral growl, he grabbed her arms and pinned them behind her back. He pulled her close and she felt the intense heat from his body. The anger. And the lust. “You play where you should not, Lady Annwyl.”

She could have backed off. She probably should have. But Annwyl had always been reckless. Foolish. And this man... this man brought out something base and primal in her. Something that she couldn't control.

"Only one man ruled me. Now his bones lay rotting in the ground. And since his death I answer to no man. And especially not to you."

The knight gave a painful groan, just before his lips slammed against hers. And for Annwyl there would be no going back.

Fearghus wanted to be stronger than this. He wanted to hand her sword to her and begin their daily training session. Instead he ripped her swords from her back and threw them across the glen floor.

Annwyl the Bloody was more dangerous than anyone realized. She took no prisoners whether in love or war. Her response to his kiss as desperate and demanding as he felt. But he had to remind himself that she was still a virgin. As much as he wanted to find a boulder and bend her over it, he couldn't. He didn't want her first experience to be a painful memory that made her wince.

He fought for control, pulled away from her, leaving her gasping, and annoyed.

"Take your clothes off," he ordered as he stepped away from her. She frowned in confusion. "I'll rip them off your back if I do it myself. Take them off."

Annwyl stared at him, her entire body tense. For a moment, he thought she might have changed her mind. Her eyes flickered to the path that led back to the cave. But then she pulled the shirt over her head. Followed by the bindings. She slid the breeches off past her hips and long legs, dropping them in a puddle at her feet. She kicked them as well as her boots aside. She stood before him completely naked. He studied every inch of her. Every scar. Every freckle. She was so beautiful. And his.

"You stare, knight."

"Yes. I do. You're beautiful."

Suddenly she appeared awkward and shy. Her eyes shifted to the ground and it seemed as if she might bolt.

"Has no one told you that before?"

"They have. Usually when they wanted something from my brother or myself. They've never meant it."

And suddenly he saw the woman behind the warrior. A woman who grew up among evil men but still somehow managed to keep her soul. A woman who fought for the freedom of people she didn't know and who risked her life everyday to defend them against her own kin. A woman who easily called a dragon her friend. And whether she knew it or not she belonged to him. His woman. His warrior. His life. He'd do anything to protect her. Anything to keep her.

He reached out and pushed her long hair off her shoulder. Gently he ran his finger down her chest, across her breast, circling the nipple. He watched it harden at his touch. Watched her breath come hard and fast. She smelled of desire and the forest. And soon she would smell of him.

His arm slipped around her waist and he roughly pulled her flat against his body. His mouth captured hers as his hands trailed down her back and bottom. Her strong hands gripped fistfuls of his hair. Her tongue tasted his.

He moved away from her long enough to snatch off his own clothes and weapons, then he had her in his arms again. Fearghus nipped the soft flesh at her neck and heard her give a growl. The sound played across his every nerve, testing the very control of his human body. He lowered her to the soft grass of the glen, settling down beside her.

Annwyl loved the feel of his body. His hips fit snugly against hers. His hands were rough and large, capable of holding her sizable breasts. His skin hard and smooth. Her fingers reveled in flowing across his body, through his long thick hair.

As he slowly trailed his tongue down her chest, she feared she might come out of her skin. But his hands held on to her, grounding her, as they trailed down her back until they cupped her rear. His tongue slid between her thighs, causing her back to arch. But when his teeth rasped over her clit a feral moan tore from her throat.

Annwyl always believed herself beyond this. That desire would never trap her like the few women she'd known over the years. But now she realized that her body had become a treacherous thing. In battle it responded to her every command. Did things she never believed that it could. Had strength she never knew it possessed.

But now her body completely ignored her. It responded to something else all together. And until it got what it needed, it would no longer respond to anything she thought or rationalized. It would only respond to her desires. To her needs. And at the moment, that meant her body would only respond to him.

He loved the taste of her. The scent of her. Everything about her brought him to life. Making him more human than he'd ever been before. She panted, her body tight and coiled, afraid of this new feeling. This new sensation that she'd never had. But when she tightened her hand in his hair, winding the strands around her fingers, he realized how much he needed her. How much he would risk just so that he could have this time with her.

He swirled his tongue slowly around her clit as he slipped a finger inside of her. Her whole body jerked, and he smiled as he licked her over and over while slowly fucking her with his hand. She moaned aloud and he wondered how much more of this he could stand before he could be inside of her. But her

body jerked again and the muscles of her sex tightened around his finger. She gasped loudly and gripped his hair tighter as she came, her juices sliding down her thighs.

He licked her clean as the spasms passed and moved slowly up her body, kissing and licking every scar as he went.

His lips reached her mouth and he groaned in surprise to find out how hungry she was for him. Fearghus hadn't satiated her as much as he made her want more. Her passion increased his.

He settled his hips between her thighs, his erection pushing against her. She panted in his ear, her body shifting beneath his, preparing herself for his shaft, her legs opening wider. Fearghus kissed her along her neck, moving up to her earlobe. He licked the sensitive bit of flesh, and then bit down on it.

She gave out a sharp cry of surprise and that's when he slammed home, breeching her maidenhead, and filling her completely, his cock buried deep inside her.

She wrapped her arms around him and Fearghus waited until she became used to the size of him, until she became comfortable having him inside her. In moments, she began to kiss his neck and along his jaw. He kissed her again. And while he slowly explored her mouth, he began to thrust into her. He enjoyed the feel of her, the way her body moved beneath his. He didn't want to do anything to hurt her, so he took his time, keeping his own pleasure at bay until she could have hers.

Then he heard her mutter something against his throat. "What," he asked softly, and he started at her answer.

"Harder."

She couldn't believe she said the word once, much less twice. But she had always been a woman who knew what she wanted. And she needed him to move inside of her harder. She appreciated the time he took, the gentleness of it all, but she was over the hardest part. He breeched her maidenhead in expert fashion and now she wanted to move past that.

He paused, "Did you just say 'harder?'"

"Yes." She cringed. "Guess that was rude." An accusation flung at her more than once.

He licked the hollow of her neck, "Not at all."

He slammed into her and Annwyl felt every nerve in her body come alive. He pulled out and slammed into her again. She closed her eyes and let the pleasure wash over her.

As he moved inside of her, she ran her hands down his back. When heat spread from her loins and up her spine, she dug her nails into his back as her whole body began to tighten and she lost her breath. When the first spasm tore through her, her nails ripped across his flesh and she screamed out, her body arching against his.

He slammed into her again, his whole body shaking as he released inside of her.

Annwyl leaned her forehead against his neck. She closed her eyes and listened to his breathing.

His heart beat against her chest as his warm body held her close. Before she knew it, Annwyl was asleep.

He could feel Annwyl's even breathing against his hot flesh as she fell asleep against him. He smiled as he relaxed them both against the grass. He smoothed her long hair away from her face and stared down at her. No frowns. No worries. It looked as if she were having a dreamless sleep.

He cradled her in his arms and kissed her sweat-covered forehead. He closed his eyes. When they awoke he'd tell her the truth. All of it.

Whether his mad little warlord wanted to hear it or not.

Chapter Ten

Annwyl awoke to find that the shadows had deepened and herself naked in the knight's arms. She turned her head, and their eyes locked. He watched her silently. And she guessed he had been for quite awhile.

He started to speak and Annwyl stopped him. "Don't." She pulled away from him, picked up her clothes, and walked off. "See you tomorrow."

See you tomorrow? Fearghus sat up and watched her walk off. She didn't even look back at him as she walked and put her clothes on at the same time. She barely acknowledged his existence. She wouldn't even let him speak.

Fearghus clenched his fists, his rage swarming around him. He needed to hurt something. To destroy something.

Fearghus' eyes narrowed. *Gwenvael*.

He stood up with a growl. He needed to find his brother. He needed to kick the shit out of something and Gwenvael would do quite nicely.

Gwenvael sat in one of the chairs in Annwyl's room, his feet up on the table. He'd done his task. He'd given Morfyd the message. And she would make sure that Fearghus got it. Now he could play. And he'd bet all his gold that Annwyl could be quite the entertainment. Sweet. Innocent. And his brother was crazy about her.

He didn't blame him. She was a beautiful girl. Tall. Scarred. A little mean. And he always liked that in a female. He just loved it when they were mean. But that wasn't what really interested him. It was the fact that "Don't bother me" Fearghus had finally fallen. And fallen hard by the looks of it. He thought his brother would rip his guts out when he saw him talking to Annwyl.

Absolutely nothing made his day more fun than when he could drive Fearghus insane. He may be first-born, but Gwenvael always felt his particular birthright was to torture his siblings. And Fearghus had always been his greatest challenge, therefore his favorite. Mainly because he was the quintessential dragon. He never moved faster than he had to. He never got upset or seriously angry. He never worried. And he never seemed to care about anything except his privacy and his quiet.

Then the human came along. When he heard that Fearghus rescued a human, Gwenvael had been shocked. When he found out it had been Annwyl the Bloody, notorious sister of The Butcher of Garbhán Isle, he became intrigued. And now that he'd seen his brother desperate with lust...well, things just became much more interesting.

Besides, he thought with a growl, *I still owe him for my tail.*

He heard her coming a league away. The woman stomped like an elephant.

Annwyl stormed into the chamber and stopped as soon as she saw him.

"I was wondering where you'd gone."

"What do you want, Gwenvael?" She wasn't in the same mood she had been a few hours before. He fought back the smile. He could smell his brother all over her. It seemed that Fearghus finally stopped being a prat.

"I just stopped by to see you. Is there anything wrong with that?"

She sighed, heavily, and stomped across the room. She stopped in front of a large wood chest. "Where did this come from?" At his shrug, she smiled. "Fearghus." She said it so softly, he almost didn't hear her. Annwyl knelt down and opened it. There were clothes inside, but she ignored them for the dagger that lay on top.

He wondered what dead nobleman's hand his brother pried that little item from. Gwenvael watched her examine the blade and became bored. Time now to have a little fun.

"So, where's my brother?"

"I have no idea." She tested the weight of the blade.

"I hope you're not... well, getting any feelings for him. That would be a mistake."

"Really? And why is that?" She gripped the handle of the dagger with one hand, while checking the sharpness of its blade with the other.

"I just don't think he could appreciate a woman like you."

"And you?"

Gwenvael gave that smile that had gotten him more pleasure than he cared to admit. "I am not my brother, lady."

That's when she moved.

She was up and across the room, snatching him out of his chair in mere seconds. Annwyl slammed him face down on the table, her knee against his back to hold him in place. The point of her

blade burrowed into the skin of his neck. As human that blade could easily kill him.

She leaned in and spoke quietly, "I don't know what's going on between you and your brother. And I don't want to know. But I'll not be the bone between you two dogs. So take yourself from my sight. I am in no mood."

With that she lifted him off the table and shoved him from the chamber.

The crazed bitch had more strength than he realized as she sent him tumbling from her presence. He fell and slid across the cave floor, coming to an abrupt stop when a large boot slammed into his head.

He looked up and braved a smile, "Oh. Hello, brother."

With a growl Fearghus lifted him off the ground by the back of his neck.

Morfyd reached down and pulled an Aouregan root. The materials she collected were for a spell that might help her destroy the protective barriers surrounding Lorcan. But she found the yelling just too distracting. And when her baby brother literally flew over her head and landed in a heap not a quarter league from her, she decided it was time to say something.

"Fearghus!" She stepped in front of her advancing brother and put her hand on his chest. "Leave him alone."

"Just let me kill him. Please."

Morfyd bit the inside of her cheek to stop herself from laughing. After all these years her brothers still couldn't get along.

"No. She'll never forgive you if you kill him. She still resents you for his tail." To this day she remembered her three other brothers playing catch with the tip of Gwenvael's tail and her mother raging like never before. It was funny then and it was still funny now.

"I hate him, Morfyd. I hate him."

"I know." She patted her brother's shoulder. "But he is all our burden to bear. Our pain."

"You know what?" Gwenvael jumped up, his rage pouring off him in waves. "You're all bastards. And I hope the lot of your rot in hell."

"You just stay away from her, you little toe-rag!"

"What's wrong, big brother? Can't handle your woman?"

Morfyd dodged just in time to avoid the fireball Fearghus let loose. But it hit Gwenvael full in the chest, sending him flying back into the trees.

"Keep him out of my sight, sister."

"Fearghus..."

"No!"

She'd never seen her brother so angry. And she had the distinct feeling it had very little to do

with Gwenvael's presence—for once.

“Wait.” She caught up to Fearghus and grasped his arm. “Gwenvael brought a message.”

Fearghus stopped walking. “From who?”

She smirked. “Who do you think? And he's not happy. He doesn't want us involved in this Sibling War.”

Fearghus looked at his sister. “And this means what to me?”

She sighed. “We can't just ignore him.”

“I can and I will. You do whatever it is you need to do, sister.”

He snatched his arm away and walked back into his cave. She wouldn't bother going after him. There would be no point. She knew as soon as she got the message from Gwenvael that this would only set Fearghus' resolve. He never liked anyone telling him what to do... anyone.

She heard Gwenvael moaning and headed toward the sound. Then Morfyd stopped. She sniffed the air and looked around her. She felt a presence. Something deadly and evil.

She had to move quickly. She began a chant in her ancient tongue, and soon flames covered her body. Flames that didn't burn. She wrote sigils in the air and, with a roar that shook the glen, she sent the flames off.

Once the flames disappeared from her sight, she again headed off toward Gwenvael. She would tend her little brother's wounds and hope that Fearghus didn't merely open them up again tomorrow.

Hefaidh-Hen flew back out of his chair and across the room, slamming into the far wall. He collapsed to the floor and stayed there. His head feeling as if it might split open, his body racked with lightning strikes of pain. He should be dead. And, if he were any other wizard, he would be.

Two of his three acolytes were immediately by his side. “Master?” He slapped their hands away and continued to sit on the floor. He gasped for air, stunned.

So, it had been Morfyd. The Dragon-Witch. That explained so much.

He smiled, even through the pain, and watched as his apprentices fearfully backed away from him.

Fearghus shifted back to dragon before returning to his lake. He was glad he had, too, because Annwyl waited for him. She sat on one of the large boulders that, because of its height, would bring them eye to eye. Her wet hair told him she'd bathed. Probably trying to wash him off, attempting to remove his scent from her body. That tore his heart more than he could admit.

But when she saw him and smiled, he became completely confused. It was the warmest smile he'd ever seen and she seemed completely relieved by his presence.

As long as he existed, he would never understand the girl.

“Fearghus. I wondered where you’d gotten to.”

“Is everything all right?”

She sighed. “I guess.”

The woman was killing him. Slowly. Bit by bit.

He settled down next to her and she immediately grasped a handful of his hair. “All right, Annwyl. What is it?”

“The knight.”

Fearghus tensed. “Yes?”

“I lost my virginity to him today.”

Fearghus’ head snapped around so fast that he dragged the girl off the rock, her hand still gripping his hair. “Oi!”

“Oh. Sorry.” He never expected her to tell him. Never expected her to tell anyone. The way she walked away a mere hour before led him to believe she’d go to the grave with that secret. “Are you all right?”

“My butt hurts.”

“*What?*”

“From dragging on the rock. And do get your mind out of the gutter, dragon.”

Fearghus chuckled at that. “Sorry.”

She lowered herself to the ground but still had a firm grip on his hair. She leaned into him and Fearghus couldn’t believe how warm her body felt against his.

“What do I need to do to mount you?”

“*What?*”

“For battle! Honestly, Fearghus.”

“Oh. That. Just catch hold of my hair and climb.”

“Won’t that hurt you?”

“No.”

She seized two handfuls of his hair and pulled herself up until she placed herself on his back. She sat low on his shoulders, her legs straddling him at his neck.

“No saddle?”

“I’m not a horse.”

“No need to get testy. Just asking.”

She squeezed her thighs tight around his neck and he wondered how much more the gods would make him endure before he lost all reason.

“Did he... hurt you?” Fearghus had to know. Had to know what she was feeling, thinking. And she wouldn’t tell the knight. So maybe she would tell the dragon.

“No.”

“I can’t help you if you don’t talk to me, Annwyl.” Yes. He would go to hell and this girl would be the one to send him there. A special hell for evil dragons that lied to beautiful women.

She gave a great sigh as she combed her strong fingers through his mane. He fought the desire to purr like a cat. “I don’t know what I want.”

“Do you want him?”

“Oh, yes. I want him. I *really* want him. But...”

“But...?”

Annwyl could easily spend the rest of her life right here. Right on top of this enormous beast. Her legs straddling his neck. Her hands buried in his mane of black hair. She wondered what it would be like to ride with him into battle. To feel his strong body soar through the deep blue skies of Dark Plains.

But would she be happy? Could she give up her life as a leader and a woman to spend the remainder of her days in this cave with this dragon? Her dragon?

The knight had opened a new door for her. She never trusted anyone enough to let them get that close to her. He hadn’t made love to her, as she’d heard the kitchen maids call it. What they had was much more primal. Much deeper.

Could she give that up to stay with her dragon and be no more than a friend? That’s all the dragon could really offer her and there would be no guarantee he wanted to give her even that much.

And although the knight gave her insurmountable pleasure, it was the dragon that she wanted to talk to when she awoke in the knight’s arms.

Perhaps her father had been right. Maybe she did go out of her way to make things difficult.

“Annwyl?”

She realized that the dragon waited for her answer, but she really had none to give.

Annwyl stood on the dragon’s back and stretched. “I don’t want to talk about this anymore.”

“Then what do you want to talk about?”

Annwyl, on a whim, did a handstand.

“What are you doing back there?”

“Nothing to worry yourself about, dragon.” She balanced her body and proceeded to move across the dragon’s back, inch by inch using only her hands. “Tell me more about your family.”

Fearghus stretched out and Annwyl let out a squeal of surprise as she lost her balance and landed heavily against his back. Ignoring her, the dragon rested his enormous head on his arms. “I cut the tip of

my brother's tail off once."

Annwyl sat up with a laugh and wondered what the hell she was going to do.

Chapter Eleven

Hysterical laughter. Why did he keep hearing hysterical laughter? Fearghus opened one eye to stare at his two siblings. They were practically falling over each other they were laughing so hard. They woke him up from a sound sleep for this?

"What?" His current mood wouldn't allow for this. And definitely wouldn't allow for *him*.

Gwenvael choked out an answer. "She braided your hair, brother."

"Like a horse's mane," his sister added.

He growled and watched Gwenvael snatch their sister out of the way before the stream of white flame hit them both.

Of course, that didn't stop the laughter.

"If that's how you feel, you should tell him." Morfyd tossed two apples to Annwyl. "But you can't hide in here all day."

"I know." Annwyl looked at her friend. "I'm just not sure what I should say."

"Whatever feels right."

Annwyl nodded and left the chamber. She passed Gwenvael as she walked out of the dragon's lair. "How's your neck, Gwenvael?"

He glared but said nothing. Although she noticed he moved as far away from her as possible.

She bit back a smile and headed out in search of her knight.

She was so confused. And she wasn't used to that feeling. She made life and death decisions every day. Even before she took over the rebellion, she risked her life and her brother's wrath to help innocent people trapped in the Garbhán Isle dungeons. But her feelings over two males were making her completely useless.

But she would talk to the knight. Tell him how she felt. And most likely end it. Her heart didn't belong to him, even if her treacherous body did.

She found him crouching by the stream, much as Gwenvael had done the day before. Unlike Gwenvael, however, the sight of his body sent a thrill through her that knocked the air from her lungs.

She forced herself to walk up to him. To face the man and tell him exactly what she thought. She knew he sensed her presence, his whole body tensed at her approach. Waiting. Waiting for her. She stood behind him for several long moments. Neither speaking. Annwyl crouched low, her body close to his.

Before she realized what she was doing, she slipped her arm around his shoulders and kissed the side of his thick neck. His whole body suddenly loosened up at her touch and he turned his head to look

at her. He gave her the perfect opportunity to say something. To tell him the truth. But she couldn't stop staring at his full lips or wondering what it would be like to have him inside her again.

She kissed him and his moaning growl set her body on fire. Wanting someone was one thing. Knowing they wanted you just as much was something else entirely.

Tomorrow, she thought as he ripped the shirt from her back. *I'll tell him everything tomorrow.*

Tomorrow. I'll tell her everything tomorrow. Only a twinge of guilt needled his heart as Annwyl eagerly pulled his chain-mail shirt over his head. Morfyd convinced him that morning that he should finally tell Annwyl the truth. Tell her that her dragon and her knight were one.

He promised himself he'd do it, too. He could feel her standing behind him and he had his speech all prepared. Then suddenly her arms were around him and her lips were on his neck. With those simple gestures all logic disappeared and all he could think about was burying his head between her thighs.

It seemed like they were both naked in a matter of seconds. Fearghus licked his way down her body, loving the feel of her hands on his skin, and in his hair. He settled between her thighs, her legs on his shoulders, and ran his tongue between the lips of her sex. He marveled at how wet she already was, how clearly she wanted him. He dipped his tongue inside of her and her body arched off the ground. She tasted so good, felt so good. He realized, as he slowly dragged his tongue across her clit, that she was everything he wanted and more.

He couldn't give her up. He wouldn't let her go. There had to be some way to keep her. To prove to her that they were meant for each other. And he would risk absolutely everything to make that happen.

Lorcan stared at his advisor. "I'm sorry. Could you repeat that?"

Hefaidd-Hen spoke with his usual measured slowness. "Your sister is being protected by a dragon, milord. Perhaps two. The vision was not clear."

"I don't understand. How is she *protected* by dragons? People like her are *eaten* by dragons. *I'm confused!*" He bellowed.

"I can't explain the relationship, Lord Lorcan. I can only tell you my vision."

Lorcan rubbed his head. "Am I asking too much to want the little bitch dead? *Am I?*" It seemed Hefaidd-Hen learned long ago not to answer certain questions. "All I want is for her to suffer a painful, horrifying death. And for her head to be on a spike in front of my castle. That's all I want."

"We can still achieve that."

“Go up against a dragon...or two? I think not, Hefaidd-Hen. I’d rather my last memory not be of flames.”

“Trust me, lord. I can find a way to get your sister and all that you desire.”

“How?”

“By doing what I do best.”

Lorcan looked at his advisor, a brutal chill running down his spine. Those cold blue eyes stared back, telling him nothing about the man behind them. But Hefaidd-Hen had proven himself time and time again in the past. As much as his very presence disturbed Lorcan, he could not deny that the man was a powerful ally.

“You have three days. After that Hefaidd-Hen, I start to get angry.”

“I understand.” Hefaidd-Hen gave Lorcan the oddest smile before he bowed low and quietly left.

Morfyd needed to go to the village. A woman in her care would give birth in the next few days and all the signs told her it would not be an easy delivery. She already warned Fearghus she might be gone off and on for a bit, but Annwyl’s body healed well. She no longer needed Morfyd’s care.

As she walked out of the cave she passed Annwyl walking in. The girl had her swords in one hand. The other hand held her ripped shirt and bindings over her ample breasts. Her brows angled down into a dark frown and she wouldn’t even look at Morfyd as she passed.

“How did that talk go then?” Morfyd called over her shoulder.

“Shut. Up.”

Morfyd laughed as she advanced into the glen toward the clearing where she could take off. She rounded a corner and came upon her brother, his chainmail shirt and sword in his big hand, heading toward the hidden entrance of his cave. She watched him as he passed and she noticed the long scratches across his back.

“How did that talk go then?” Morfyd called over her shoulder.

“Shut. Up.”

Morfyd shook her head. If love always made you this pathetic, she wanted nothing to do with it.

Brastias tugged the hood of his cloak over his face. Again he wondered how much longer they had before Lorcan made his move. He could feel it. Feel it coming. Even before his spies told him to start getting his men ready, he knew that something had changed. Lorcan’s troops were readying for battle at Garbhán Isle. And he sensed that a strike would be coming from Lorcan himself, but he wasn’t sure when or how.

He wished he could see Annwyl. Discuss it with her. She knew her brother better than anyone

else. She'd know exactly how and when Lorcan's forces would strike. Instead, all he could do now was wait for more information to come their way and hope they'd have time to react.

The door to the busy pub smashed open and again he turned to see who entered. Already he'd lost three hours waiting. Waiting to see her.

Danelin brought him over another ale and sat across from him. "How much longer?"

"Until she gets here."

Brastias didn't mean to be so abrupt but he didn't like being out in the open anymore than Danelin. He'd rather be back at the camp, safe, with a lot of troops surrounding him. But he had to know how Annwyl fared. It had been days since the witch called Morfyd came to see him that first and only time. He hoped she would bring more messages from Annwyl. But she never returned. So, when he heard that she was in the village visiting one of the women about to have a baby, he decided to go to her himself. He heard that she always stopped at the pub for food or drink later in the evenings. So he waited and worried. Not about her or even about Annwyl. But about the rebellion.

He could tell the rebellion would soon come to an end. Tension grew daily. Many of the local villages emptied out. All except this one. Many of the rebellion's families lived here. Their wives and children. He debated whether to give the order to move them all into the Citadel of Ó Donnchadha where they would hopefully be safest. He knew the women would never willingly leave their mates.

As he wondered about the logic of this move, he saw her. How could he miss her? She stood taller than Annwyl and almost the same height as him. A grey cloak covered her witch's robes. She found a table in the back and ordered food. After the bar wench left, Brastias walked over to her table.

"Remember me?"

Glittering blue eyes turned to look at him. Her eyes were almond shaped, almost like a cats. "How could I forget? You're so compelling."

Brastias smiled as he sat down opposite her. "How is she doing?"

"Better. Stronger every day."

"How much longer before she returns to us?"

The witch blinked, "Not sure really."

"What do you mean you're not sure?"

"What exactly do you think I mean?"

The witch's vagueness caused the hairs on his neck to rise. He didn't like this one bit. "Is she safe?"

The witch hissed at the insult. "Of course she is. Safer than if she were with you."

Brastias glared at the witch. "Really? And how is that possible when you are here and she is wherever you left her? Alone."

Perhaps it was the look in the witch's blue eyes or the way she didn't answer him, but it suddenly

became clear. “She’s not alone, is she?” When the witch didn’t answer, he grabbed her hand. She snatched it away as if he were on fire.

She stood up quickly. “Be well assured that she is safe. And soon she will return to you. You’ll be able to find me at the village from time to time should you need to get an *actual* message to her.” She tossed a few copper coins on the table and stormed out.

“What the hell happened?”

Brastias looked up at Danelin. He shook his head. “I don’t know. But something’s going on.”

Danelin sat down as the barmaid left the witch’s food on the table and scooped up the coins she left. “What?”

“I don’t think the witch is taking care of her. It’s somebody else.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you think she’s safe?”

Brastias thought about it a minute, listened to his gut. “Yes. I think she is.”

Danelin seemed surprised by that. “Then why do you have that look on your face?”

“Did you see the way she ran out of here? Like I had the plague or something.”

“Who? The witch?”

“Aye.”

“And this bothers you because...”

“Well... it’s rude.”

“Uh huh.”

Brastias growled at his second in command, “Shut up.”

Fearghus turned the page of his book with one of his talons. He never bothered to read the story about his grandfather, Ailean, before. But Ailean spent most of his life as human. And lately, Fearghus began to wonder what that was like.

Completely engrossed in the chapter about Ailean and three bar wenches, he didn’t know Annwyl sat down beside him until she pushed herself up against his side, near his wing. She brought wine, cheese, bread, and a book. She didn’t say a word, just began reading and occasionally drinking or eating.

Fearghus watched her. “What are you doing?”

“What does it look like?”

“No talking tonight?”

She smiled softly, “No. Not tonight.”

“Good.”

Tonight he didn't want to talk. He just wanted to read his book and enjoy Annwyl being beside him.

He didn't know when he fell in love with her. It might have been when he first saw her outside his cave, fighting for her life. Or when she yanked his tail. Or possibly when she swam naked in his lake. In the end it didn't matter. It didn't matter when he fell in love with her. All he knew was that he loved her now. And would love her until his ancestors called him home.

He thought of the too-short lifespan of the humans. Or, at least of his Annwyl. Even if she survived the Sibling War she still wouldn't survive as long as Fearghus. The thought of living without her cut him like a lance through his heart. A very selfish part of him wished he could walk away from her. Leave her to live her human life with some human male. But when he looked at her, he realized that wasn't possible. She dipped her forefinger in the chalice of wine, leaned her head back, and let the wine drip into her open mouth. He shook his head at the woman's overt silliness. Still, he couldn't help but think about that mouth of hers exploring his entire body. That finger running over his shaft and wiping the fluid off its head.

Annwyl put her finger in her mouth and sucked it clean. Without meaning to, he gave a little moan and she turned to look at him. Oblivious, she winked at him and went back to her book.

There was one thing he could do, but it risked too much and could lose him everything. He shook his head. No. The Queen would be his last resort. She was *always* his last resort.

The air shifted in front of her as the blade slashed by her throat. With a laugh, she danced back several steps and brandished her two swords. He attacked and she blocked the move, while she swung out her leg aiming for his groin. He stopped her, catching hold of her ankle, then flipping her up and over. She landed face down, but forced her body up and moving before he could get his hands on her.

Annwyl really did have herself to blame for this. Throwing out "If you can take me, you can have me" before their swords clashed was, in retrospect, probably a bad idea. She really should stop challenging the man but she had to admit that she did enjoy a good fight.

Her father always accused her of making everything difficult. Perhaps he was right. If she wanted the knight, she could have easily taken him. From the time she walked up to him that morning, he had been more than ready. She knew it and he never said a word to her. But she realized now that she liked the challenge. She liked making him work for it. And work he did.

He knocked one of her swords out of her hand, so she backhanded him, causing the big ox to stagger away from her. She tried to charge past him, but he reached out that long arm and grabbed her. She struggled to get away from him, but his iron-like grip held fast. He pulled her struggling body into his chest with one arm. With the other he twisted her wrist until she dropped her sword.

"Seems, my Lady, that I've got you."

“Bastard!”

“Now I guess I can have you.”

“Let me go!”

“You made a bargain, my Lady.”

Annwyl growled in frustration, loving the feel of his arm around her, his hard body pushing into her back.

He forced her up against a tree, her back still to him. He leaned in close and whispered in her ear, “I’d hate to think the future ruler of Dark Plain would not keep her promises.”

Then he ripped her leggings off.

Hours he spent creating the spell that would drag Annwyl from her protective cocoon with the dragons right to *his* lair. Days he spent gathering all the necessary ingredients. He even had to sacrifice one of his favorite acolytes who, tragically for him, was a virgin.

But the virgin blood opened the doorway between space and time. And that’s when he saw her. Stark naked and astride some male. She rode him like he were a favored stallion, her hips grinding against the man’s body. Hefaidh-Hen’s view took in her back and he could see her muscles flexing as she came closer and closer to release. He could see the sheen of sweat on her tanned skin, the sweat-drenched hair draping across her rippling muscles. He could hear her moans and cries of pleasure. Hefaidh-Hen’s fingers neared her, about to touch her flesh. She was nearly his. But Lorcan burst in. Stormed in, actually. Pushing about his acolytes, demanding Hefaidh-Hen’s immediate response to his presence.

With his concentration broken, the doorway slammed shut and the girl slipped his grasp. He roared in anger.

And Hefaidh-Hen turned all his fury toward the Butcher of Garbhán Isle.

Fearghus snatched Annwyl’s naked, sweaty body protectively to him and sat up.

“Wait. Don’t stop.” He’d never gotten the stubborn, demanding, insatiable wench that close to begging before, but he had to ignore her. Something wasn’t right.

The energy surrounded him. A presence. Not quite human. He looked around him and sniffed the air.

“What? What is it?” She reached for her sword, but he stopped her.

They were alone in his glen again. But a dark sense of foreboding invaded his very soul at that moment. Things were about to change. Forever.

He looked at Annwyl. She stared at him, a small smile on her lips. “Everything all right, knight?”

He didn’t answer her. Instead he kissed her collarbone and stretched back out, his hard,

demanding cock still inside her. “Finish what you started, woman.”

Her smile grew wide, “My pleasure, knight.”

Lorcan slowly opened his eyes. The brutal pain in his head making him wish for death. Just the dim light from a close-by pit fire caused a moan to escape. He couldn't remember what happened. Not clearly. But he knew from the sound of loud breathing in the room that something was terribly, terribly wrong.

“Ah, my Lord. I am so glad to see that you are finally coming around.” The voice sounded familiar, but he couldn't quite place it. He tried to push himself up with his arms, but something powerful and large slapped flat across his back, forcing him back to the ground.

“No. No. Stay down. I want you to rest before you try getting up.” The voice sighed heavily. “I am so sorry, my Lord, that it was necessary to be so harsh with you. But I think that it is time we made some things clear, mhmm?”

Lorcan didn't try to rise again. Whatever pushed him down still rested against his back, holding him in place. But he slowly swiveled his head around to see what spoke to him.

On sight of it he immediately tried to pull away, but it wouldn't let him go. “Now. Now. There is no reason to fear me. I am your ally. Just like I have always been.” Lorcan retched and his dinner from several hours ago burst across the floor.

“Well, that is lovely. You humans. So quick to panic. It amazes me that any of you still live.”

Lorcan closed his eyes tight and refused to look at it anymore. He couldn't. Not if he hoped to keep his sanity.

“This can be a very profitable relationship for us both, Lorcan. As long as you understand that *you* belong to *me*. Body. Soul. And what little bit there is of a mind. I will give you your sister, but, in return, you will give me what I want as well. As long as you agree to that, you will live a very long time. But if you do not...” It pushed against his back and he knew that at any moment his ribs would break. But it stopped itself before going that far. “Do you understand, Lorcan?”

For the first time since his father died, Lorcan shook in fear. “Yes. Yes. I understand.” Tears slid down his face and he realized that he hadn't done that either since the death of his father.

“Good. Good. I do like when things are clear and concise. It's just in my nature.” It patted his back almost lovingly. “We have so many plans to make. There will be much bloodshed soon. But you just rest now, my pet. You will have your sister soon enough.”

Lorcan cried silently and prayed for oblivion.

Annwyl stared up at the cave ceiling, her hands behind her head. The dragon's even breathing causing his scales to move gently beneath her. He'd let her climb up his back and lie there. He didn't

complain and she let herself enjoy the moment. His mane of hair spread across his scales and felt silky next to her bare skin. She wore nothing but her recently mended leather leggings and her bindings. She'd spent another day entangled with her knight. They had barely trained in days. Instead choosing to rut around the glen like two dogs in heat. But she just couldn't help herself. The man did things to her body; made her feel things; took her to heights that she never thought possible. And every evening, as the shadows darkened, she'd leave him and return to her dragon. Shame she couldn't live her life in this manner for the next thousand years or so.

"How was your training today?" His low voice rumbled through his body, vibrating against her flesh.

"Fine," she lied. She hadn't touched a sword—at least one made of metal—in two days.

"Good."

"Dragon?"

"Yes?"

"Have you ever had a woman?"

"What?"

"I mean a female. Mate. Whatever your kind calls them?"

"Oh." His body moved a little beneath her. "No, I've had no mate. Why?"

"Just wondering."

"What is it, Annwyl? What's bothering you?"

Nothing now. In fact, she felt relieved.

"Annwyl?"

She turned over, her head resting on her arms. "I'm fine, Dragon. Just curious." She closed her eyes. She never felt so safe before in her life. So at peace. She realized now that there was no man alive who could ever make her feel this way.

She smiled. *Only I would fall in love with a dragon.*

Fearghus loved the feel of her body against his. Loved the fact that she felt safe enough with him to fall asleep while stretched out across his back. He didn't realize how much that feeling would mean to him. How much this girl would mean to him.

He never realized that his feelings for Annwyl could get any stronger than they already were, but he was wrong. They were stronger and becoming stronger every day.

By day he laid with her as human and every night she found him by the lake and they talked for hours. She still confused him, but he wouldn't give up their time together for all the gold in the world.

But he still feared the day he would have to tell her the truth. Tell her that he'd been lying to her. Would she hate him? Would she ever forgive him? He didn't know. And he didn't want to think about

it too much. Because his gut would twist up and a sudden sense of panic would set in. He thought only humans could experience panic. It annoyed him to discover he was wrong about that, too.

No, he thought as Annwyl tightened her grip in his mane of hair and sighed softly in her sleep, *I'll not give her up without a fight. Never.*

Chapter Twelve

It had been a hard birth, but both baby and mother survived. Besides, Morfyd needed to get away. Give her brother and his human some time alone. Of course, Gwenvael refused to leave until he got an answer from Fearghus, but she was able to bribe him to stay out of the lovers' way. She would have thought that her baby brother would be too embarrassed to take money from his sister. She quickly discovered how wrong she was on that point.

Dark Glen lay only a few leagues away, but she wasn't ready to go back yet. She never knew where or when she might stumble across Fearghus and Annwyl going "at it" as Gwenvael so eloquently put it. The late hour and a brief check around, assured herself that she was alone.

Morfyd quickly stripped off her robes and dived naked into the lake. She enjoyed the rush of cold water over her human form. She didn't know why but her kind did love water. She'd envied Fearghus a bit when he found his lair. A cave with its own fresh-water lake. Now that was heaven.

"She couldn't have gotten far. Go that way. I'll check the lake." Morfyd froze. She heard male voices and knew that they were looking for her. She swam to the edge of the lake and had just pulled herself out when a man stumbled from the bushes. She stood tall, ready to burn him to embers when he straightened up, turning to face her.

"Brastias?"

"Morfyd. Good. We were..." Brastias stopped. Apparently he just realized she was naked and he became transfixed. She waited, but he kept staring. His light eyes seemingly unable to look away. With a growling groan, "Damn, woman."

"Brastias?" She snapped her fingers. "Brastias!"

"Uh..." He yanked himself out of his trance and turned away from her. "Sorry. Sorry. I just didn't... I... uh..."

Morfyd grabbed her robes from off the ground. "What is it? What do you want?"

"I need you to get word to... um... um...uh..."

"Annwyl?"

"Yes, that's it."

Morfyd wanted to laugh but her sudden awareness of her own naked body trapped the sound in her throat. She pulled on her clothes. "You can..." she cleared her throat, "turn around now."

Brastias looked over his shoulder at her. "I'm very sorry. I heard you'd just left the village. I didn't know you'd be here...uh...bathing."

Morfyd pushed her wet hair off her face. “No bother. Really. We’ll just never speak of it again. *Ever*. Now you said you had a message for Annwyl.”

“Yes.” He slowly turned his body to face her. “We’ve received word that Lorcan will be attacking this village in three days time. We’re going to move the women and children to the Citadel of Ó Donnchadha. We think they’ll be safe there...I never knew your hair was white.”

Morfyd’s head snapped up, her eyes locking with Brastias’.

“Uh... I mean.” He continued in a rush, “We believe Lorcan will be attacking himself. I haven’t seen him in battle for quite some time, but I know Annwyl’s been waiting for this chance. I need you to let her know.”

“I will.”

“No matter what, we will fight to protect this village, so if she’s not ready...”

“She’s ready.”

“Tell her we’ll carry on until we hear from her.”

Morfyd nodded, “I’ll let her know.”

“Thank you.” Brastias stared at her for a moment longer than quickly turned away, slamming into Danelin who had just emerged from the trees. He spun Danelin around and, before the man could say a word, pushed him back into the trees and away from the lake.

Morfyd covered her face with her hands. “Just bloody wonderful.”

Fearghus walked past his treasure room toward his lake. He stopped, taking several steps back. Gwenvael sat on his pile of riches like he owned it.

“What are you doing?”

“Waiting for you. You’ve been avoiding me.”

“As if you are worth avoiding.”

“Well, it was either sit here or go sit on Annwyl. But she’d hurt me. Of course, I’m not sure I’d mind.”

Still drenched in sweat from his last encounter with Annwyl, he could still smell her all over his body; still taste her on his lips. So, he wasn’t about to let his idiot brother upset him. “What do you want?”

“I’m waiting for you to give me a message to take back.”

“There is no message. It’s none of their business.”

“Do you really think it’s that easy? Do you really think you don’t have to live by the same laws the rest of us do?”

Fearghus snorted, “What laws do you live by, little brother?”

Gwenvael grinned, “The ones that keep me alive and healthy.”

“Go back to them. Tell them anything you want. But when Annwyl leaves to fight her brother, I will be by her side.”

Gwenvael sighed. “She could never love you, brother. She’s human. I’d hate to see you give up your family for a girl that as soon as she finds out the truth, will run fast and far from you.”

Fearghus gritted his teeth and tamped down his desire to blast Gwenvael where he sat. He didn’t dare go near him. He might shift and rip the little bastard’s guts out. “Get from my sight, boy. Before I send your head back to them as a gift.” Fearghus headed toward his lake.

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you.” Gwenvael yelled after him.

Annwyl leaned her forehead against the dragon’s snout. “You’ve been very quiet this evening. What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

She knew he was lying. He’d barely spoken two words in the past hour. “Did I do something?”

“No. Of course not. It’s just family problems. Nothing to concern yourself with.”

“That message Gwenvael brought with him. They don’t want you involved with my war, do they?”

The dragon sighed, heavily. “What they want doesn’t concern me.”

“I won’t come between you and your kin. You saved my life, you owe me nothing more.”

He pulled his majestic head away from her. “This isn’t about owing you anything, Annwyl. I fight by your side because that is what I choose to do.”

He moved away from her. Restless, he didn’t stand still for long this night. She also sensed his anxiety and annoyance. And she knew that somehow she stood at the heart of it, but she didn’t know what she’d done. Unless, of course... “Is this about the knight?”

The dragon stopped moving, but he didn’t turn to face her. “If I asked you to stop seeing him, would you?”

Annwyl closed her eyes. Finally, the question she dreaded since this all began. But she only had one answer for the dragon. Only one answer that would not be a lie.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because you asked me to. And I am loyal to you and you alone. I’ll always be loyal to you, Fearghus.”

“Because I saved your life?”

“No. I owe you my life for that. If you hit me with a ball of flame I wouldn’t try and stop you. My life is yours to take. But my loyalty is not. That has to be earned. And you have.”

“How?”

“You’ve made me feel safe. When no other has.”

Annwyl drifted slowly to him. Once in front of him, she rested her hand on his snout. He closed his eyes at her touch. “For that you’ll always have my loyalty.”

She walked around the dragon and wrapped her arms as far around his neck as she could. She hugged him and, as always, he let her. “Good night, my friend.”

“Good night, Annwyl.”

She headed back to her chamber, but couldn’t help but slide her hand across his leathery wings and the scales of his body. Just like she did every night.

Fearghus didn’t watch her leave, as he often did. His emotions a jumble in his head. The man that he played by day railed against the fact that she could so easily give him up. The dragon agonized in confusion because she was willing to give up for him something that she clearly desired. But not once had she mentioned love. Only loyalty. Of course, he had not mentioned love either.

The little human managed to completely confound him and he wasn’t sure he would ever be able to forgive her for it.

She watched the soldiers quietly flow into the glen. She could smell their fear. They didn’t want to be in Dark Glen, no sane person would. So their other option must have been much worse. And once she recognized their armor, she realized it was. They were Lorcan’s men. He sent them to her brother’s glen. Sent them to find Annwyl.

She let them get farther in, away from any troops that might be waiting in safety outside the glen. She waited and she watched. When the time was right, she moved behind them, clearing her throat. The men stopped. At first, they wouldn’t turn around. Afraid of what they might find. But she waited, knowing their human curiosity would get the best of them. It did. When she saw their eyes, Morfyd let go a stream of fire that scorched them to cinders before they could scream.

Gwenvael appeared beside her, his golden scales glinting brightly in the moonlight. He sniffed the air and looked at the still-smoldering remains of the soldiers.

He smiled at his sister. “Dinner.”

It had gone on for days. The two of them constantly “at it.” Like two mating beasts. Gwenvael shook his head in disgust. He understood lust. Actually, he appreciated lust greatly. But love? A strictly human emotion. And although he enjoyed gallivanting around town as human, he had no intention of making a muddle of his life as they all seemed to.

Of course, he would have never thought Fearghus the Destroyer would either. If there was one

thing he could always count on from his large, less-than-social brother it was his seemingly innate ability to feel nothing for anyone. So, to now watch him moon over some slip of a girl made Gwenvael question all his beliefs.

His head snapped up and he studied at the sky. For a moment he thought he'd heard the flap of large leather wings. But as he searched the sky he saw nothing. He dismissed it and went in search of his sister. The soldiers from the previous night were not sitting well in his stomach and he needed one of her soothing concoctions.

She always did have a tendency to overcook their food.

Annwyl followed the sounds of retching. She found Morfyd by the stream. Her arms around Gwenvael's shoulders as he vomited into the water.

"He all right?"

Morfyd shrugged. "He ate too much. But he'll be fine. And I have a message for you from..." she cleared her throat, "... Brastias."

Annwyl frowned. Did Morfyd just blush? "What message?"

"Your brother plans to attack the Citadel of Ó Donnchadha in three days time. Maybe less. I tried to tell you last night but you were sound asleep."

Annwyl shrugged. "All right. Thank you." She'd already planned to return to her troops in the next day or two.

"Is that all your brother warrants? A shrug and a thank you?"

"As a matter of fact, yes." Annwyl snapped, unable to help herself. "I have other things on my mind besides him. Oh..." she waved her hand. "I'll come back later." Annwyl made to go, but Morfyd stopped her.

"Wait. Annwyl. What is it?"

"I can't go on like this."

Morfyd dropped Gwenvael, his head slamming into the stream. Annwyl grinned as Gwenvael cursed the woman.

Morfyd moved over to Annwyl and looked at her. "You can't go on like what?"

"My days with the knight. My nights with the dragon. It's becoming impossible."

"Annwyl, talk to him."

"I tried that. I can't think when I'm around him. He does this thing with his tongue..."

"Annwyl! I mean the dragon. Talk to the dragon."

"I tried last night, but... I think he grows tired of me. And what if he laughs?"

"He hasn't. And he won't." Morfyd smiled. "Trust me."

"But..."

“No. I don’t want to hear it. Just tell the big bastard how you feel. How you feel about *him*. He needs to hear it. And you need to say it.”

“But the knight...”

“Don’t worry about him. Talk to the dragon. The knight can wait.”

Annwyl took a deep breath. She had to do something. Soon she would face her brother and most likely death. She didn’t want to go to her grave knowing that her weakness held her back from the one thing that truly mattered to her.

She nodded and headed back to the cave. Back to her dragon.

Fearghus followed the sound of retching. He found his brother doubled-over and Morfyd patting him on the back.

“What’s wrong with him?”

“He ate too many soldiers last night.”

“Soldiers? Here?”

Morfyd nodded. “Lorcan’s men. Don’t worry. I took care of them.”

“But this means they know Annwyl is here.”

Morfyd shook her head as she rubbed Gwenvael’s sweaty brow. “Not necessarily. It looked more like they were just checking the area. You know, a scouting party.” Morfyd looked up at her brother and frowned. “Why are you here?”

“What do you mean why am I here?”

“I just sent Annwyl to find you. She wants to talk to you.”

“Talk to me?” He pointed to himself. “Or to me?” He pointed toward his cave.

Morfyd laughed and seemed about to answer when she stopped and stared off behind him.

Fearghus turned around. “What are *you* doing here?”

Briec, next in line behind Fearghus, leaned against a tree and watched his siblings quietly. Naked, fresh from shifting, his long silver mane of hair stretched down his back and fell across his face and shoulder.

“When there was no answer from you or Morfyd and baby brother didn’t return...”

Fearghus shook his head, “Not this again.” He didn’t want to hear it. He wanted to find Annwyl. Hear what she had to say. And no matter what she said, he would tell her the truth. Tell her everything. He just couldn’t go on like this anymore.

“I told you not to ignore him.” Morfyd chastised as she helped a very green Gwenvael to his feet.

“Go back to the old bastard and tell him to stay out of my life.”

Briec shook his head. “I can’t.”

Fearghus frowned. "What do you mean you can't?"

"I mean I can't... because he's already here. He awaits you in your den."

Before Fearghus could react, Morfyd's hand suddenly gripped his arm, nearly tearing the skin off. "Gods, Fearghus. Annwyl."

"Dragon!" Annwyl called out before she even entered his part of the lair. "Dragon! Are you here?"

She marched into the dragon's main chamber, the words she needed to tell him on her lips. "Fearghus, I..." She stopped.

Although the dragon she now saw before her bore the same size and color as Fearghus, this one's black mane had silver and white hair streaked through it, and his scales were not as bright. Clearly an older dragon.

And he definitely wasn't Fearghus.

She stopped and stared at him. The old dragon looked at her.

"You."

The look of welcome that she always saw in Fearghus' eyes did not spark in this dragon's. And she knew in that split second that he wanted her dead.

She burst into a run, the dragon's flames just missing her. The dragon took in another deep breath so Annwyl dived behind a large boulder. Flames erupted all around her as she crouched down low. The flames went around the boulder but its heat scared her beyond anything she'd known. He could kill her with one blast. She ignored the panic that began to rise and unsheathed her sword.

After several moments, the flames stopped and she could hear the dragon stomping toward the boulder. She held her breath and waited. He stopped and she glanced over just as his snout came around the boulder, latching on to her scent.

She waited until the beast's head was close enough then she slashed him across the snout. Dragon blood spurted across her arm and the dragon roared in pain and anger as she sprinted out, heading away from the beast. He charged after her. Annwyl knew that in order to survive she needed to let her instincts take over. She weaved between other boulders, using the beast's size and weight against him. When he stopped to strike her with flame, she would again hide behind a boulder or a stone wall. But she couldn't keep it up much longer. She needed to kill the dragon before it killed her. She stayed behind a boulder longer than normal and this time, just as she somehow knew he would, the dragon came from overhead.

As his head silently lowered to get close to her she jumped up on the boulder and onto the beast's snout. Startled, he gave her the time she needed to run up and over his head, down his neck, across his back, until she reached his tail. She knew he could use it as a weapon, so she moved quickly.

She held the tip down with her foot and slammed her sword between it and where the scales were at their smallest and weakest. Where Fearghus once cut his brother's tail off.

She impaled the tail, burying the blade into the ground. The roar he sent out shook the cave and Annwyl knew she only had seconds before he got himself loose. So she unsheathed her second sword and ran under the dragon.

She could only pray that a dragon's weakness was the same as a human's. The groin. She laid flat on her back and using her legs slid completely under him. She had to move quickly. Once he realized that she was there, all he had to do was lay down.

As she hoped, the hard scales that covered the rest of his body did not cover his groin. His shaft protectively tucked up inside the flesh, thankfully out of sight and away from her face. She'd already seen more of this dragon than she'd ever wanted to. She raised her sword and dug it into the beast's fleshy underbelly, readying herself to push the blade through. She hoped the move would allow her time to get out of the cave and out of the glen if she had to.

"Annwyl! No!"

Annwyl froze. Blood began to seep where the tip of her blade rested, but she pushed no further. The dragon above her stopped breathing. He couldn't sit now. True, he'd crush her, but he'd impale himself in the process.

"Annwyl, love. Give me your hand."

Annwyl glanced over and saw the shiny black talons of her dragon. Breathing hard, a war raged in her soul between the warrior ready to strike the killing blow and Annwyl the woman who knew this dragon was Fearghus' father.

"Fearghus?"

"Annwyl. Trust me."

Annwyl looked back at the bleeding beast above her. If the old dragon killed her now, she knew as sure as she knew her own name that Fearghus would kill him. The old beast wouldn't risk that. She decided to trust the one being she'd trusted all along.

She grabbed onto his talon and allowed him to snatch her out from under the great dragon. He pushed her back into Morfyd and Gwenvael and turned to face his father, protecting them all with his own body.

Chapter Thirteen

Never before had anyone gotten so close to killing Bercelak. And if he hadn't stopped her, Annwyl would have killed him. She found the one weak spot on a dragon. The one place with no protective scales.

When the four of them charged in, Annwyl had just slid her long body under the dragon's. Fearghus called her name but the blood lust had her, and she couldn't hear him. So he shifted, his voice

shifting with him, almost bringing the walls down with his call to her.

Part of him didn't want to stop her, he was so angry at his father. But he knew that if Annwyl killed him, there would be no going back for the Queen. She would move heaven and earth to destroy Annwyl and he would do the same to protect her. But at the sound of his voice, she stopped. Cold. He wasn't sure he had that kind of self-control. But, as always, Annwyl continued to amaze him.

"You son of a bitch!" Fearghus' rage shook the walls of his lair, and he itched to beat the old bastard to death.

His father had his claw over his slashed snout while desperately trying to get his tail released from the blade that held it. "Did you see what that mad bitch did to me?"

"I should have let her kill you."

"I gave you strict orders..."

"I don't answer to you! Get out. *Now!*"

"What is your attachment to this human?" His father's shrewd eyes stared closely at his son, his nostrils twitched. "I smell her all over you."

"I said go!"

His father looked around him to see Annwyl. "What did he tell you, little human, to get you to spread your legs?"

Fearghus released a fireball that sent his father flying across the cave, part of his tail torn off where the blade impaled it.

"Fearghus, no!" Morfyd shouted behind him. But he only glanced at his sister. His anger had a stranglehold on him now. Too blind with rage to acknowledge anything. Until he heard Annwyl.

"Fearghus?" She didn't shout. She didn't scream. She said it so quietly that the rest of his family probably never heard her. But he did.

Annwyl sheathed her sword and listened to the fight between father and son. It almost reminded her of Lorcan and their father, but she doubted the fight would end with Fearghus crying and cowering in a corner.

The old dragon's cold eyes turned to her. She pulled away from Morfyd, ready to face the old bastard when something caught her eye. The bright red of a tunic. Shredded and sitting at the entrance to the chamber. She walked over to it as the family squabble continued. She crouched down beside the garment and also found chainmail leggings, chainmail shirt, and leather boots. All shredded and ripped apart. For a moment she worried that maybe her knight had become food for the old dragon, but she could find no blood and the garments seemed split apart.

She looked up at Fearghus who had just blasted his father across the room. What did the old bastard say to her? *What did he tell you, little human, to get you to spread your legs?* At that

moment, Morfyd called out to Fearghus and in anger the dragon's head snapped around to briefly look at her. The action caused his mane to flip to the opposite side and an unruly bit of black hair fell over his eye. Annwyl stared. How had she never noticed it before? That black hair that she loved so much on both her knight and her dragon. The hair she insisted on running her hands through when she talked with her dragon or gripping in passion when she rode her knight.

“Fearghus?”

He moved to descend on his fallen father, but her voice stopped him. He looked at her. Their eyes locked. And Annwyl felt a wave of cold spike down her spine. Her eyes shifted to Morfyd, but the woman looked away from her. Gwenvael, although still a little green, turned his entire body away. His eyes downcast. Then she realized that there was another. She looked up to find a silver-haired naked man staring at her. He grinned in greeting. Then he winked.

Annwyl stood and walked to Fearghus. She stood in front of him. “Fearghus?”

“I can explain everything...”

“Can you, boy?” Fearghus closed his eyes at the sound of his father's voice. The old dragon had hauled his enormous bulk up and stood behind his son.

Annwyl felt it at that moment. She had kept it at bay so long that she forgot how good it felt to wrap it around herself like a warm cloak in the middle of winter. She unsheathed her sword as her rage spread through her limbs.

Fearghus' eyes snapped open in surprise at the sound. “Annwyl.” She moved around him, her eyes locked with his. He turned his body as she walked. He waited for it. Waited for the blow. And he'd take it too. She was sure of that.

“Are you going to let some human do this to you, Fearghus?” His father barked in disgust. Annwyl now stood between the two dragons. Her eyes still locked with Fearghus', her blade pointing tip-down, the handle gripped by both her hands. She held the weapon so tightly that her tan knuckles now white with the effort.

“You lied to me.”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I didn't think you'd understand.”

“Just kill her, Fearghus. Kill her and be done with it,” his father sighed heavily.

“Tell me, Fearghus.” She raised the sword high, her rage singing through her veins. “Do you understand this?”

She spun on her heel away from Fearghus and, using all the rage she contained, slammed the blade into the old dragon's claw between his talons where the scales were at their thinnest, nailing it—and him—to the hard ground.

The dragon's head fell back and the roar he let out most likely rang out hundreds of leagues away.

Annwyl turned to her lover. "Burn in hell, Fearghus."

She walked away, leaving the dragons to tend their wounded father.

Chapter Fourteen

His siblings stood there silent, stunned by their father's scream of pain. But Fearghus watched Annwyl. He watched her walk toward the exit. Watched her notice Briec staring at her. She stopped and stared back at his silver-haired brother. When he smiled at her, she backhanded him across the head, knocking the dragon's human form into Gwenvael.

He glanced at his younger brother. "Go with her."

"*Have you lost your mind?*" Gwenvael demanded as he helped Briec to his feet. "She's insane! I'm not going anywhere!"

Fearghus growled low, making sure his fangs showed. Gwenvael winced back and grudgingly followed.

"Keep her safe," he called after his brother. He looked at Morfyd who finally snapped out of her surprise and now tended their father.

"How bad is it?"

Morfyd looked at her brother with wide eyes. "She went straight through to the cave floor. I think it's stone." She didn't bother hiding the awe in her voice.

"No. There's some dirt there."

"Well, it's going to have to be pried out. It's imbedded."

He sneered at his father, "He'll live. I'm going after her."

"What?" His sister stood up in front of her brother. "Fearghus, don't. She's angry. *Very* angry. She impaled your father... twice. Give her some time to calm down."

"I lied to her, Morfyd. She has every right to be angry. Besides, it wasn't me she hurt."

"No. You're not going anywhere until you help me with him." She went back to Berceklak. "I can't do this alone."

Fearghus shook his head. His sister didn't need his help. But she wanted to give Annwyl at least a few minutes to calm her rage. Perhaps not a bad idea, when he thought about it a moment.

He watched his father struggling to pull his claw from the cave floor, but he couldn't do it without tearing open the wound. The bastard was effectively stuck until he and Morfyd helped him. Fearghus smiled a little at his father's suffering and the female that caused it.

I do love that woman.

"Stay away from me, Gwenvael."

“I don’t want to be here, but my brother gave me no choice.” Gwenvael struggled to keep up with her. His stomach still threatened to remove the rest of the soldiers he’d eaten the previous night and she had very long legs. She didn’t run but rather stalked. And he knew if he got too close he could end up like Brieac. Or worse...like his father.

He finally understood what his brother saw in this woman. Dragon females were dangerous, but very calculating. And sometimes very cold. For them it was all about the politics. Not for Annwyl, though. She cared nothing for politics. She ran on instinct and emotion. Her instincts kept her alive. Her emotions made her a lethal weapon. How could Fearghus not fall in love with her? If Gwenvael thought about it himself, he might have to admit he’d fallen a little in love with her himself.

It didn’t take long for her to reach the edge of Fearghus’ glen. He followed her out but found himself slamming into the back of her. He thought once she hit open ground she’d run for it, back to her troops. But when he looked up he saw what stopped her.

Two battalions of soldiers waited for her. They wore Lorcan’s colors and they clearly had every intention of taking her back alive for their leader to have his revenge. At least 10 men had nets to snag the female.

“I have no weapons,” she muttered under her breath as she took a step back toward Gwenvael.

“Yes you do.” He tossed his sword to her. Annwyl stared at the weapon. And Gwenvael quickly realized that the girl had lived in safety with Fearghus too long. Well, no matter. He knew exactly how to get Annwyl the Bloody back. “And don’t forget, Annwyl. My brother lied to you. Made a fool of you. And he’s probably having a good laugh with the old dragon as we speak. Now,” he shoved her toward several advancing men, “go get ‘em.” He watched as the girl gave a bellow of rage and took off the head of the first man who came near her. Then she turned and swiped off another. Gwenvael shivered. Her name fit her well.

Gwenvael saw soldiers moving toward him. He shifted, forcing the girl to dash off to the side to avoid the crush of his dragon body.

“Dragon!” He expected them to run. They always ran before. But these troops didn’t.

And he suddenly realized that Annwyl hadn’t been the only one expected. So had a dragon.

Annwyl slammed her blade into another soldier’s belly and sliced him open. She snatched the man’s sword from the sheath at his side, ignoring the bowels that fell to the ground in front of her, and turned to face the next attacker. They wanted to get her in those nets, but she knew what that meant. Going back to her brother and any tortures he had planned for her. The thought chilled her to the bone and spurred her speed and malice.

She began first by hacking off arms. Any arms holding nets. She realized quickly how her training with Fearghus benefited her as she lobbed off another arm and removed the man’s head. She

moved faster now. Her attacks more pointed, more deadly. For a moment she forgot how angry she was with him. But then she remembered, and practically cut a man in two with her rage.

She heard Gwenvael's roar of anger and turned to find that a separate group of men were trying to take the dragon down. They had ropes wrapped around his neck and at least thirty men were trying to pull the beast to the ground. He blasted a few with a breath of fire, but she recalled that in his human form Gwenvael had been quite ill. She now realized that same illness affected the dragon as well. A few more moments, he would be down and the soldiers would take him.

She ran toward him, taking another soldier's head as she passed by. She slid to a stop under the dragon's neck and slashed at the ropes holding him, slicing as many as she could into two. Gwenvael pulled up as some of the pressure lessened, dragging the men holding the last few intact ropes with him. As they came close, Annwyl gutted several of them, and took a few heads.

"Fire!"

Annwyl crossed her blades in front of her as archers released a volley of arrows. But they never reached her, as white flame destroyed them in mid-flight. A silver dragon appeared over the battle, his flame taking out almost an entire battalion. A white dragon swooped down and snapped up a carriage of soldiers, tossing them like toys. Then Annwyl saw him.

He landed beside his golden brother, blasting the last of the men still holding ropes.

"Take her!" He barked at the now-free Gwenvael.

"What about you?"

"We're fine. Take her!"

Another group of men charged Annwyl. She readied her blades but suddenly found herself gripped firmly about the waist and airborne. She watched the land recede from her sight.

"You bastard! Let me down!"

"Not on your life, beauty." The golden claw gripped her tighter. "You get hurt, he'll kill me. Now quiet. I'm trying not to vomit."

Fearghus watched Bric and Morfyd unleash lines of flame, destroying anything in their wake. A small group of men, about twenty, ran toward him, their blades drawn. In disgust, Fearghus spit out a fireball and watched with little satisfaction as the men writhed and screamed.

He saw another group trying to escape. "Bric! Kill them! Leave none alive!"

Bric followed and Fearghus walked out among the remains, stepping on any men he thought still lived. Morfyd landed in front of him.

He nodded toward the empty spot where Gwenvael first stood and the ropes that lay there. "Seems I was expected as well."

His sister nodded. "Seems so."

Fearghus growled, "I am not happy, sister."

"I can tell."

"And you still have no idea who's helping Lorcan?"

"It's Hefaidd-Hen." Fearghus watched as a wounded Bercelak landed gingerly in front of him, making sure not to further damage his wounded claw.

"Hefaidd-Hen? *The* Hefaidd-Hen?"

"Well, that's just bloody wonderful," Morfyd spat out as Bric continued to fly overhead blasting flames.

"And when were you planning to tell us?"

"Never. The girl shouldn't have even been here. And you shouldn't have been helping her."

"Why would Hefaidd-Hen help Lorcan?" Morfyd cut in before Fearghus could go for their father's throat.

"How should I know? And why should I care? These are human concerns, not ours."

"You should care because Hefaidd-Hen's a dragon," Morfyd snapped angrily.

"If he gets Lorcan's loyalty, then he gets his troops, which no doubt would triple once he's secured the loyalty of the other regions."

"And once he gets his troops, he moves on the Queen." Morfyd summed up quickly.

Fearghus saw his father suddenly realize the implication to them all of Hefaidd-Hen's involvement.

"He wouldn't dare." If there was one thing Fearghus had always been sure of it was his father's feelings for the Queen. He had no doubt this little revelation would change everything.

"That dragon craves power more than anything," he reminded Bercelak. "And all he's ever wanted was the Queen's throne."

"There's much power in her blood," Morfyd added. "If he takes it..."

"That won't happen."

"Then you best hope Annwyl defeats Lorcan, father. If she doesn't, however, then we'd best prepare for war. Because no dragon will be safe."

Fearghus watched Bercelak struggle with all this. The old dragon hated being wrong. Especially when his own children pointed it out to him. But Bercelak knew, in his heart, how right they were. And Fearghus knew that he would do what was best for the Queen, like Bercelak always had.

His father's head snapped up. "Bric and I will return to the Queen. And you two make sure the girl wins, I don't care what you have to do."

"If she let's us near her, father," Morfyd bravely chastised. "Her last memory is of you trying to kill her and telling her about Fearghus before he could."

Bric finally landed behind his father. He tossed his silver mane. "She still saved Gwenvael. I

saw her. She's a brave girl... for a human."

"I know that," Fearghus snapped. He looked at his father, "I'm just not sure how I'm going to fix this."

"Well you better find a way, *boy*. Use whatever charm she seems to think you possess. You got her on her back at least once before."

Morfyd slid between Fearghus and their father before he could kill the old bastard. "Fearghus!"

"Just let me kill him. I'm begging you!"

"Father, go!"

The dragon didn't waste time, he took to the skies. Briece nodded at his siblings once and followed.

"Really, Fearghus. You need to stop asking me to let you kill our family."

Fearghus shook his head. "They just keep irritating me."

Morfyd gave a smile he knew would frighten any human, "I know. But that's what most families do. Irritate." She stepped back. "I need to do something, Fearghus. And you need to go to Annwyl."

Fearghus looked down at his large claws and sighed. "She hates me."

"Yes. I believe she does."

"*How is that supportive,*" he bellowed.

"I'm not going to lie to you, brother. But I also know she loves you. She must. She risked her life to save Gwenvael."

"Yes. She did."

"And now she's alone with him." Fearghus looked at his sister. "She's alone with big, golden, charming Gwenvael. And he's probably feeling so indebted to her right now for saving his life."

Fearghus knew what his sister was doing. Knew how she was trying to manipulate him. That didn't change the fact that it worked.

He took to the skies, only briefly wondering what "something" his sister must do at that very moment. But he thought of Gwenvael alone with Annwyl and he forgot all about his sister.

Annwyl's rear hit the ground hard. The shock traveled all the way from her spine to her teeth. But she knew that in the dragon's mind he'd dropped her gently to the ground.

She heard him land behind her and felt human hands grip her under her arms and lift her to her feet. "That wasn't too hard was it?"

"No. Like landing on pillows." She pulled away from him.

"I could have taken you directly to your camp."

"True, but then I'd have a camp full of screaming men wetting themselves over the dragon."

"Oh. Good point."

She didn't know what to do with this Gwenvael. And not just because he was naked and very much like his brother. But because up until now he never stopped flirting with her, although he'd always kept a healthy distance from her and Fearghus. But this Gwenvael seemed almost sweet, the smug bravado gone.

"Well, you can go." She waved him away, hoping he'd leave. She wanted to be alone. She wanted to be angry. *Really* angry.

"Yes. I just wanted to say... well, thank you for saving me."

She had, hadn't she? Why? At the moment, she hated all dragons. Especially large black ones. Must have been instinct. Anything that fought against Lorcan or his men, she needed to protect.

"You're welcome." She realized he was leaning into her. His eyes focused on her mouth, his lips slightly open. She slapped her hand over his face, just as she had his brother. "What are you doing?"

"I was going to give you a kiss..."

"Don't even think about it, Gwenvael. I am in no mood."

The dragon nodded sagely, "You still love him."

"No, Gwenvael. I don't love anything. And I don't think I'll love anything *ever again!*" He stepped back at her sudden spurt of rage. "*Now get out of my sight!*"

She stomped off toward camp, her rage walking beside her like a pet panther.

Chapter Fifteen

Brastias dismissed the other lieutenants. Once alone with Danelin, he asked him the question that had plagued him all day. "Anything more on Lorcan?"

Danelin shook his head, "No. And I'm worried."

Brastias shook his head. "That bastard's going to move soon. I can feel it."

"Have you seen the witch again? Do you know if Annwyl is still returning?" At the mere mention of Morfyd, Brastias felt his whole body tighten. "I don't know," he barked gruffly.

"What if she's still healing? She'll be no use to us if she can't fight."

Brastias walked out of the tent, Danelin beside him. "I want the men prepared and ready. When Lorcan moves, I don't want us surprised. By anything."

"I understand."

The two men stepped aside as a woman pushed past them heading to Annwyl's tent.

Brastias stopped. "Was that...?"

"I... think so."

Brastias and Danelin followed. They found Annwyl just as she threw a chair across the room.

"*Lying, conniving, toe-rag!*"

Danelin gave Brastias a look, turned, and ran.

"Annwyl?"

Angry green eyes locked on to him, and he wished he'd run like Danelin. When he still had the chance. "Brastias. My friend." *Uh-oh, this couldn't be good.* "Do you lie to me?"

"Uh... no."

"See? *That's a lie!*"

"Annwyl, calm down. Tell me what happened."

"Happened? Nothing. Nothing happened. Everything is just fine. Perfect. Better than perfect."

Brastias wanted to pursue this further, and probably take his life in his hands, when he heard the screams of the men from outside the tent.

"Lorcan." He ran out of the tent and slammed into Danelin, who couldn't move. He stood trapped. In fear. Fear of the mammoth black dragon that landed in the middle of their camp.

"By the gods."

The dragon looked around at the surrounding troops, but still hadn't sent anyone to hell.

"*Annwyl!*"

"Oh, gods. It's... talking." Danelin looked like he would piss himself any moment.

But fear for Annwyl kept Brastias moving. He drew his sword, intent on challenging the creature when she stormed out of the tent. He seized her arm in what he thought a powerful grip to stop her, but with her formidable anger she easily pulled away, stomping off to face the dragon.

The men watched as Annwyl the Bloody took a stand against something from their darkest nightmares. Too afraid to fight, but too terrified for their leader to run away.

And then Brastias saw the girl do something that he would never forget.

She kicked the beast. Right in the front forearm.

Brastias and Danelin exchanged glances.

"Well, you always thought she was insane," Brastias offered.

"I didn't think I was right."

"You lying toe-rag!" She yelled up at him.

"Let me explain."

"*Go to hell!*"

"Annwyl."

"*No!*" She headed back to her tent. "Leave me, dragon. I never want to see you, or your family, again. *Ever!*"

Danelin glanced at Brastias, "Family?"

"Don't ask."

The dragon silently watched Annwyl's retreating form. He began chanting and, as flame surrounded him, Brastias wondered if he would die this day. The flames grew, enveloping the beast.

Eventually the flames died away, leaving a very large, very naked man.

With a growl, he followed after Annwyl, disappearing into the tent after her.

“So they can shapeshift then?” Danelin asked quietly.

“Seems so.”

“Should we go after him?”

Brastias looked at Danelin. It took him awhile, but he finally figured out what he just witnessed. A lover’s quarrel. Leave it to Annwyl.

“Uh... I think not. We need to ready the troops. And let’s ready them somewhere away from camp, I think.”

He glanced at the tent, shook his head, and walked off. A quaking Danelin following quietly behind.

“Why won’t you talk to me?”

“You want me to talk? Fine. How’s your father?”

“How do you think he is? You stabbed him in the foot.”

“I would have aimed for his heart, but I wasn’t sure he actually had one. Do any of you have one?”

“Annwyl, I couldn’t tell you the truth.”

“Why?”

“I...uh...” He didn’t know this would be so hard. Was he joking? Of course, he knew it would be this hard!

“Still waiting.” He got the feeling he could claim being one of the few who actually got her this angry. Funny, that didn’t seem like such a good thing to him at the moment.

“I was going to tell you. I swear.”

“Really? You were *going* to tell me?” Her sarcasm thick. Her bitterness filled the tent. He couldn’t blame her. He’d asked for this.

“Yes, Annwyl, I was. Today. My father just beat me to it.”

“And why didn’t you tell me before?”

He moved into the room toward her. She took a step back, drawing her sword. “Everything changed.”

He stood before her now, her blade at his throat. “I couldn’t stop thinking about you, Annwyl. I wanted you, more than anything. And I didn’t know how to tell you the truth without losing you. You trusted the dragon, but you absolutely hated the man. I needed you to accept all of me. Today I thought maybe you could.”

He took a step forward and felt the tip of the blade just pierce his flesh. A trickle of blood eased

down his neck to his chest. Annwyl's breath came out in short gasps as she stared into his eyes. "You could kill me now. Easily. If that's what you want." He moved in a bit more. Any more and the blade would tear through his throat and kill him. "Is that what you want, Annwyl?"

She stared at him for several long moments. "Yes, Fearghus," she growled out. "It is."

Not the answer he hoped for, but he was quickly distracted by the pain in his knee where she kicked him.

He barked in agony as she pushed him out of her way and moved a safe distance from him, against the far tent wall beside her bed. "Luckily for you, I owe you my life. Bastard."

Annwyl knew her rage could snap loose at any moment. She wanted to run the lying bastard through. Wanted him to know the pain she suffered when she realized the truth. Fearghus knew she had little knowledge of dragons except they were something to fear. She had no idea they could turn human. Live as human. And, based on the rutting that went on all over his glen recently, mate as human.

She felt like a fool. A whore and a fool. And she hated him for making her feel that way. So, yes. She did want to see him dead. His blood on her sword. And although he gave her the perfect opportunity, she couldn't bring herself to do it. At the moment, she hated herself for that weakness.

He rubbed his knee and looked at her. "I need you to calm down so we can talk about this."

"I hate you."

He stood to his full height, already recovered from the blow. Clearly he wasn't that easy to kill as human. Any other man would be nursing a shattered knee from that practiced kick.

"Can't you give me a chance?"

"No." He seemed startled by that.

"Can't you even try?"

"No."

"Can you tell me you feel nothing for me?"

"I felt for the dragon who rescued me. Took care of me."

"And the man?"

She shook her head, "I don't know what I felt for him... you... whatever."

For the first time, she was lying. She knew exactly what her feelings for the man were. Lust. Pure, simple, and quite exquisite. But she couldn't tell him that. She could never admit that to him now. Even as she had to cross her arms in front of her chest to hide her hardening nipples or that damn distracting pulse coming from between her thighs. No, she could never admit any of that to him.

But when she glanced up at him, she realized he already knew. Just by the expression on his handsome face.

Fearghus moved to her again so that he stood in front of her. *Brave man*, she thought with

intense bitterness. He looked down at her, then lowered his head until his forehead rested against hers. He didn't try to kiss or grab her. He simply rested against her. And it felt wonderful.

She stood stock still, wondering exactly what he was up to until she heard him whisper, "I'm so sorry, Annwyl. Please. Please forgive me."

No. He wouldn't get out of this with a simple apology. Not in a million years. Even with an apology as sweet and heartfelt as that.

"There is nothing you can ever say or do that will make me forgive you," she whispered back.

He pulled away from her and stared. She wondered what he was thinking, but she wasn't expecting the grin that spread across his face.

"Was that a challenge, Lady Annwyl?"

Her face grew hot as she pushed away from him. "It was most certainly not!" She scrambled away from him, scooting around the table. He stood on the other side, his hands resting against the hard wood.

"It sounded like a challenge."

"It was *not* a challenge, but a statement of fact. I will never forgive you."

"Challenge."

"Stop saying that!" She tried to look away from him, but she kept seeing his gloriously naked body. But when she looked up into his eyes, she kept seeing him. His soul. Staring at her.

She moved around the table again and he slowly followed, every muscle moving, anticipating the chase.

He looked at her and she found herself marveling at how long those black lashes of his were.

"I bet I can *make you* forgive me."

Damn him to hell. She hated him. She hated him with every fiber of her being. But her damn treacherous body responded like never before. She kept forcing herself to move away from him, but it became harder and harder. Especially when all her body wanted to do was climb onto the wood table that separated them and let him climb on to her.

"I'm not going to do this." She cringed. That probably would have sounded a lot more convincing if she weren't panting when she said it.

"Do what?"

"Stop it!"

"Stop what?"

"You know most men try not to get me this angry."

He stopped, his dark eyes burning into her very soul. "I'm not most men. I'm not a man at all."

And that's when Annwyl charged for the tent opening, but he caught hold of her before she could even get within arm's length of it.

He pulled her to him, her back against his chest. He snatched the sword from her hand and tossed it across the tent. He leaned in close to her ear, while the hand on her waist skimmed under her shirt. "Forgive me, Annwyl."

"No."

His free hand pulled her long hair off out of the way. His fingers brushing against the skin of her throat, causing her entire body to shudder. Her damn treacherous body. Then his hot mouth was on her neck, his tongue running along the side. The hand under her shirt went right for her bindings, gliding under them, pushing them out of the way.

It felt like her head and her body were completely separate. Her head kept screaming at her to pull away. Telling her to make him stop. While her body just ignored her head. Instead, her body did things like reach her arms back so that she could dig her fingers into his hair, while also stretching the entire length of her taut so that his fingers against her swollen breasts would feel that much more wonderful. She hated her body. Hated its weakness. Clearly her body only thought about her immediate pleasure and not what this would all mean later. No, only her poor head thought about that.

He gripped her nipples with both of his large hands as he gently bit the flesh at her throat. He let the bite get a little harder, and Annwyl realized with horror that she rewarded his actions with a moan.

"Forgive me, Annwyl," he said again. His voice a dark, husky whisper in her ear.

She knew she should just say it and get it over with. But she wanted him to make her say it, and he had a way to go before that happened.

"Never."

No female had ever made him feel this way. Dragon or human. But Annwyl stood apart from the others. She wasn't dragon. She wasn't human. She was something more. She was his.

He pulled the shirt off her body and tore the bindings from her back. He turned her around, his gaze immediately falling on those breasts that he so loved. He gripped her close as he leaned his head down, sucking a nipple into his mouth.

She moaned and leaned back, both her hands in his hair. He ran his tongue over the already hard nipple again and again, teasing it. Teasing her. Her grip on his hair tightened.

"Say it, Annwyl," he demanded against her hot flesh. "Say you forgive me."

"No."

He slammed her against the wood table and ripped the breeches from her body. She let out a startled, hungry gasp and he leaned into her, running his tongue up her neck until he reached her mouth. He swiped his tongue along her full bottom lip. She leaned up, capturing his mouth in a searing kiss. Her tongue sliding along his teeth, gliding along the inside of his mouth.

He ran his hand down her body and between her legs. Her head fell back as he slipped his finger

inside of her, slowly moving in and out.

“Tell me, woman.”

“Go to hell.”

He jerked back startled. She stared up at him. Her eyes full of lust and challenge.

“Want it that way, do you?”

He pinned her to the table with his body while his eyes wandered around the room. As the leader of the rebellion she received the best of what they could manage. That meant she had an actual bed. Made of a solid wooden frame, it wasn't very large, but long enough to suit her height. It would do quite nicely.

In seconds, he caught sight of what he needed lying on the floor, conveniently beside the bed.

“Come on then.”

He gripped her wrists in one hand, stepped back, and pulled her up.

She watched him with wary eyes as he dragged her to the bed. But when he reached down and snatched up a good length of rope that someone had been practicing knots on, she burst into laughter and began to fight at the same time.

“Not on your life, dragon!”

“You started this.”

“No I did not!”

He leered at her as he held her tight. Ignoring her struggles, he hauled her to the bed and threw her face down on the fur coverings. His knee, well placed, held her down.

“You bastard! Let me go!”

“No.” He mimicked her recent simple delivery as he took her wrists, bound them securely with the rope, and tied the end of the rope to the wooden frame.

“Fearghus, let me go! Now!”

He ignored her, instead crouching by the bed and running his hand along the entire length of her body. She closed her eyes and gave a shuddering moan.

“Tell me what I want to hear, Annwyl. Tell me, and I'll let you go.”

“No!”

In response, he slapped her rear.

Annwyl froze. Her eyes wide in shock. Did he just slap her ass? As if in answer, he slapped the other cheek.

She glared at him, “Have. You. Gone. Mad?”

He smiled at her and she couldn't believe how beautiful he was. “Just forgive me. Unless, of course, you want me to...” He raised his hand above her rear. Annwyl snarled. How could she hate

him and want him at the same time? How could she feel completely betrayed and still be having the time of her life?

Fearghus kissed her, taking her breath away as he smoothed his hand across her rear. He slid two of his fingers inside of her. Already so wet and ready for him, her body offered absolutely no resistance.

He began again to slowly move his fingers in and out of her, making her writhe on the bed. She closed her eyes and moaned. The man must have some kind of spell he used on her. Nothing, absolutely nothing, could feel this good on its own. Her body tightened as heat spread across her groin and up her spine.

Then he stopped.

Annwyl's eyes flew open and she groaned in frustration. "Don't you dare stop!"

He stared at her mouth. "Then say it. Say you forgive me."

She wanted him to finish. Wanted him to bring her the pleasure only he could. But she would never give in that easy. Unable to speak for fear she'd start begging, she shook her head.

He gently pushed her tangle of hair out of her face and stared at her. Her eyes boldly swept across his body, lingering on his erection. He growled in response, standing up. His body towering over her, Fearghus placed his knee on the bed and leaned in, his engorged cock right by her mouth. Without a seconds thought, she pushed her mouth onto it, taking in as much of it as she could until the head tickled the back of her throat. She began to deeply suck his shaft, while her tongue ran along the underside.

His eyes closed and he growled her name.

Clearly her mouth was a gift from the gods. There could be no other explanation for something that felt so wonderful. He let himself get lost there for several minutes, as she sucked and licked him. He pulled away before he came in her mouth, although the little moan of disappointment she gave when he did almost made him reconsider. But he wanted to release while buried deep inside her.

Panting, he stood back and almost came just looking at her. Laid out on the bed, bound at the wrists, her body vibrated with her need for him. He couldn't wait any longer, whether she gave in or not. He had to have her.

He kneeled between her legs, pushing them up and under her so that he had a delicious view of her rear.

He entered her from behind, gritting his teeth as her head dropped forward, and she gave a guttural gasp. He moved in slowly, taking his time, ignoring her pleas and rude demands. He waited until he imbedded his cock deep inside her, then he leaned forward.

"Tell me, Annwyl," he panted desperately in her ear. "Tell me you forgive me."

“No.”

He sank his teeth into the flesh of her back and she bucked under him. He ran his hand down her body until he had his hand at her bottom, then he slapped her rear again.

“*Why do you keep doing that?*”

“Because now it’s just getting fun. Besides, you wench, you’re enjoying it.”

“No, I am not!”

“Liar.” She growled as his hand slapped the firm flesh of her rear. “Now tell me you forgive me.”

She took a moment to get her breath. “Why? Why do you care?”

Fearghus blinked. *By the gods, she doesn’t know.*

He smoothed his hand across her back as he nuzzled the back of her neck. “Because I love you.”

Annwyl’s entire body started at the whispered pronouncement. Her dragon loved her. That’s all she wanted to know. All she ever needed to know.

She tossed her head back and looked at him. Saw the truth in his eyes. “Untie me, Fearghus.” He leaned forward and released her bonds. Once free, she pulled away from him. A moan escaped his lips as he slid out of her. She turned her body so that they faced each other.

Annwyl stared at Fearghus, her hand brushing against his cheek and skimming along his chiseled jaw. Then she growled and punched him in the chest. “You idiot!”

“Ow!”

“Why didn’t you tell me that before? *You’re making me crazy!*” She punched him in the shoulder.

“Stop hitting me!”

She stood up and stormed away from him to the middle of the tent, her arms crossed in front of her chest. “I thought I was finally going insane. Because of you!”

“Are you done?”

Annwyl stopped pacing, slowly turning to face Fearghus. He leaned back against the bed, his long legs on the floor, his long erection at the ready. “Excuse me?”

He smiled as his smoldering gaze swept over her. “I asked if you were done. I mean you can go on all day about how I wronged you, if you like. Or you can come over here and let me make it up to you.”

Annwyl bit the inside of her mouth to stop herself from smiling. *Cheeky bastard.* “I’m very wounded, you know. Devastated. May never recover from this.”

“Come to me, Annwyl.” He held his hand out to her, a beautiful smile spreading across that

gorgeous face. “Bring that pretty ass to me.”

Annwyl rolled her eyes, but went to him nonetheless. She took his offered hand. Fearghus squeezed it as he gently turned her away from him. He grasped her hips and pulled her back to him, lowering her body until his hot shaft slowly entered her from behind. She gasped as he placed her on his erection, taking his time. Moving slow.

Once she fully enveloped him, he slid his hands to her breasts. He gripped the nipples tight between his callused fingers, while he rubbed his forehead against her back and nuzzled her neck. Annwyl groaned and she wondered how she ever thought she could give this up. Give *him* up. She realized she no longer had to worry about it. She had them both. Dragon and knight were one in the same. And he loved her.

He nipped the nape of her neck and gripped her hips. He slowly moved her up and down his shaft. Over and over, until Annwyl felt sure she’d go insane. His tongue glided up and down the back of her neck, his hair cascaded over her shoulders and rubbed against her sensitive breasts.

Annwyl placed her hands over his. She gripped them tight, digging her nails into his flesh. “Gods, Fearghus. You’re driving me mad.”

He chuckled against her neck. “Too slow?” She could only manage to nod. “Then tell me what I want to hear.”

She gasped as his hands tightened on her. She shook her head. She had no idea what he was talking about. “Tell me you forgive me, Annwyl. Forgive me and I’ll fuck you until you scream.”

Hell, she’d forgiven him a hundred times over. At least she had in her head. But to verbalize it, right at this moment, when she couldn’t even see straight. That was the real challenge.

“Uh... yes.”

“Yes what?”

She moaned. She was so close. So close. “Forgive.”

“Forgive what?”

What an utter bastard! “You.”

“Say it Annwyl. Say it, because I can keep this up for hours.”

Hours? She couldn’t handle five more seconds of this, much less hours. She forced herself to concentrate, using the same skills she used in battle.

“I forgive you, Fearghus. I forgive you.”

Suddenly he lifted her off his cock and threw her back on the bed. He pushed her ankles up around her ears, slamming his cock into her. She gripped the headboard with both hands and growled Fearghus’ name. Already so close, it didn’t take much more to push her right over the edge and the growl became a scream as she exploded around him. Wood splintered in her hands, the headboard an unlikely causality to their mating.

His climax followed close behind, a savage groan torn from him as her muscles gripped him, attempting to wring every last drop from his body.

They stayed locked together. Neither moving nor speaking. Eventually he pulled out of her, gently lowering her legs. He stretched out beside her on the bed so that she could nuzzle against him.

Annwyl smiled as he kissed her forehead.

“Now what, Dragon?”

He ran his hand across her cheek. How close he'd come to losing her. The only thing he ever wanted. “I think we have a war to win.”

Annwyl shook her head. “No. I don't... I didn't...”

He kissed her mouth and she stopped babbling. “I know. I want to. Actually, I've been ordered to.” He grinned. “Besides I really want to see you go up against that brother of yours.”

“Are you sure?”

“I'm sure.” He reached down and pulled fur coverings from the floor over their entwined bodies. She settled in close to him, nuzzling his neck as he ran his hands along her back.

He would help her win this war. Not for his father or the Queen. But for her. For his Annwyl. For the love of his life.

Chapter Sixteen

Annwyl's eyes flew open as the hand closed over her mouth. But once she saw Morfyd's blue eyes, she relaxed. Morfyd took several steps back and motioned for Annwyl to follow, then she quietly slipped out of the tent.

Annwyl tried to move out from under the large possessive arm slung over her waist. But it tightened, and Fearghus snuggled into her back. “Where do you think you're going?”

Smiling, she rubbed the hand at her waist. Just his low, rumbling voice gliding across her back had her wet and ready for him. “Can't a girl have some time to herself? I'll be back in a bit.”

His teeth nipped her shoulder. “Better be.”

She tumbled out of bed, grabbed a fur covering, and stepped out of the tent. She walked around the corner and found Morfyd impatiently waiting for her.

“What is it?” She liked Morfyd, but she really wanted to be back in bed, Fearghus' arms wrapped tight around her. His cock inside her, hard and ready.

“I need you to come with me.”

“What? Where?”

“I can't explain now. Here.” She handed Annwyl her clothes. She had no idea when Morfyd took these. Nor could she understand the secrecy.

“Morfyd what is going on?”

“I need you to trust me, but we need to get moving before Fearghus comes looking for you.”

Annwyl put her clothes on while she watched Morfyd. “You too, huh?”

“Me, too, what?”

“You and Fearghus. I never noticed before but you look a bit alike.”

“He’s my brother.”

“Big family.” Annwyl tugged on her boots, pulled her surcoat over her head, and wrapped a leather belt around her waist. Once dressed, she put her hands on her hips and raised an eyebrow.

“What now, lady dragon?”

Morfyd watched Annwyl address her lieutenants. True, she’d seen a side of Annwyl that these men never had. The wounded warrior struggling to live. The woman who loved her brother. And the warrior woman she’d taken as a friend.

But she now saw why these men followed her. Annwyl radiated strength and determination. She was more than the leader of the rebellion. She was the heart of it.

“Move out tonight. We’ve gotten word that when the two suns rise tomorrow, Lorcan will attack the Citadel of Ó Donnchadha. We can’t let him get through, our women and children are there. Kill anyone that wears Lorcan’s colors. No survivors. No prisoners.”

“And you?” Brastias asked.

“I leave with Morfyd. Now. But I’ll be back by morning. Tomorrow I will face my brother.”

“And what of...” The men shifted uncomfortably, unwilling to meet Annwyl’s eyes.

She smirked. “And what of my dragon?” Morfyd blinked in surprise. Annwyl wasn’t even trying to hide her relationship with Fearghus.

Brastias cleared his throat. “Yes, Annwyl. What of your dragon?”

“Let him sleep. When he awakes tell him that I will return by suns up. Not too hard is it?”

“And are we safe around him?”

Annwyl sighed in annoyance at the question, but Morfyd answered for her. “Yes. You are safe around him. But when you tell him about Annwyl, I wouldn’t stand around. I strongly suggest moving away quickly. Very quickly.”

Annwyl and her men stared at Morfyd. She shrugged at Annwyl’s raised eyebrow. “He is my brother. I know him well.”

The men, en masse, stepped away from her. All except Brastias, who stared at her. She realized that they were completely unaware that she, too, was a dragon. “Don’t worry. You’re safe around me as well.” She smiled but only Brastias and Annwyl smiled back.

“All right, then. We’re off.” Annwyl stepped away from the large table strewn with maps that she’d been leaning against. “I’ll see you all at dawn.”

Morfyd walked out of the tent, Annwyl behind her. Brastias' voice stopped them.

"Annwyl." The two females looked at him. He braved another smile at Morfyd before speaking to Annwyl. "Your weapons?"

"No." Morfyd shook her head. "No weapons, Annwyl."

Annwyl looked at Brastias and shrugged. "No weapons."

"Then please be careful."

Annwyl nodded and followed as Morfyd led her away from the camp to the clearing where she'd landed earlier.

The girl stepped back as Morfyd shifted, shaking out her wings and mane of hair. "You ready, Lady Annwyl?"

Annwyl grabbed on to the white mane of hair and expertly hauled herself up onto Morfyd's back. "Aye, Lady Dragon. I'm ready."

"I just don't understand our brother. A human." Briece gave a great sigh, causing Gwenvael to roll his eyes in annoyance.

"You don't know anything, Briece. She's different."

"Don't you really mean crazed, baby brother?"

Gwenvael saw Morfyd's white scales swooping toward them. He stood up. Both he and Briece were already in human form and dressed.

"You're just mad she slapped you around." Gwenvael looked at his brother. "Like a bitch."

Briece stood up. Slightly taller than Gwenvael, but still shorter than Fearghus, he tended to be just as much fun to torture as their older sibling. "I let her hit me."

"You had to. Otherwise she would have killed you where you stood."

Morfyd made one of her soundless landings and patiently waited while Annwyl dismounted. She shifted to human and Annwyl wrapped a fur covering around her shoulders.

He rushed down the stairs to meet them. "Lady Annwyl."

"Gwenvael."

"Feeling better?"

She couldn't hide her smile or the blush to her cheeks. Now he knew what he always suspected—his brother was a brave, brave dragon. "Much, thank you."

"Good."

Briece now stood beside him. His arms crossed in front of his chest. "Lady." He nodded coldly to her and Annwyl glanced between Gwenvael and Morfyd.

"I'm sorry, do I know you?"

Briece blinked in surprise. "I am Briece the Mighty."

Annwyl examined Gwenvael's brother over from head to toe. "Really?" She remarked at last. "Did you give yourself that name?"

Gwenvael and Morfyd choked back a laugh before Morfyd pulled the girl away and up the stairs. "Come, Annwyl. We don't have much time."

Briec sneered after their retreating forms. "I hope the Queen eats her marrow like pudding."

Gwenvael scowled. If those two became enemies, who knew who would come out the winner. They were equally frightening females.

Gwenvael jogged up the stairs, Briec closely behind him. "Just remember, Briec. She almost took down Father. So we best hope they get along."

Annwyl thought they would travel for long distances across land. She guessed wrongly. Morfyd instead, went straight up. Higher and higher until they reached the crest of Devenallt Mountain just above the clouds. It contained the court of the infamous Dragon Queen. Believed to be a myth, she, like Fearghus, turned out to be all too real. And little did Annwyl know a whole community of dragons were always so close. They truly did keep their lives secret from humans. And now, here Annwyl was. A common bastard girl, walking into the majestic halls of the Queen's court.

As she entered the main hall with Morfyd all conversation stopped. The dragons all turned to her. They watched her. Closely. Annwyl felt naked and alone. She wished that Fearghus accompanied her, but she knew he'd never let her come. He wouldn't risk it. He wouldn't risk her. The thought brought a smile to her face and she didn't notice Fearghus' father until she practically climbed on top of the old bastard. Still in dragon form, his claw and tail freshly bandaged. His damaged snout smeared with some kind of ointment, probably to stop the bleeding.

He glared down at her with those cold eyes and Annwyl felt that desire to run again. But she wouldn't give the old bastard the satisfaction.

"How's the claw?" She called up to him. Morfyd gasped and seized her arm, dragging her up another set of steps and into another hall.

"Please try not to get yourself killed, Annwyl. Fearghus would never forgive me."

"I'll keep it in mind." As they entered the next hall, she again halted all dragon conversation. Instead they watched her walk by.

"They all stare."

"Yes. It's been hundreds of years since a human has been here."

"You mean a human who wasn't brought here as a meal?" Morfyd shrugged but would say nothing else.

"I see."

A dragon walked toward Annwyl and Morfyd hissed at him. "Keep back, Kesslene."

“I just wanted to see the pretty thing,” the dragon announced to the room.

“Oi!” Annwyl snapped. The last one who referred to her as a “thing”—Lorcan—she had every intention of killing soon.

Morfyd kept Annwyl moving, although the large dragon kept pace with them. “Don’t be cute, Kesslene. Besides, she’s with Fearghus. And you remember what he did to you the last time you caused his displeasure.” Morfyd went down another flight of stairs and the dragon Kesslene stopped following, but he wasn’t done.

“With Fearghus? Really? Then why has he not ‘Claimed’ her?”

“Claimed me?”

“Worry about that later, Annwyl.” After several minutes, they stopped in front of another set of stairs.

“You dragons really like stairs.”

“Up these stairs and inside. You know what to do.”

Annwyl nodded once, took a deep breath, and walked up the steps and into the Queen’s chamber.

The Great Queen tossed her mane of white hair out of her eyes, and turned the page of the book she read. As she did, the chain linked to the collar around her throat rattled lightly and she smiled. Then a familiar scent hit her nostrils. She sniffed the air.

“Fearghus?” She closed the book in her hand and turned, her chain rattling more. But it wasn’t Fearghus standing in front of her, but a tiny human. *How cute.* Bercelak sent her a little something to munch on.

“And who are you?” She always liked to chat with her meals before disemboweling. You never knew what you might learn.

The human female did not answer. She just stared at her. A typical response when humans saw her. She stood much larger than most dragons.

She snapped two talons together. “Hello?”

It came alive, clearing its throat. “Um... I am Annwyl.”

“Annwyl. Annwyl. I do not know an Annwyl. So, are you my dinner?”

“No.” It took a step back. “No. I’m not dinner. Let’s never say that again. I am Annwyl of the Dark Plains.” The Queen stared at it. “Annwyl of Garbhán Isle?” Still nothing. It sighed. “Annwyl the Bloody.”

“*You* are Annwyl the Bloody?”

It looked slightly defeated, “Yes.”

“You are awfully tiny to be Annwyl the Bloody.”

“I’m taller than most men.”

“That just does not impress me.”

Morfyd should have warned her. She should have let her know that she would be facing a being this large and imposing. How could the dragon before her be anything *but* a queen?

She reminded Annwyl of Morfyd. Her scales a glossy white. Her mane the color of fresh snow. But she stood as tall and wide as Fearghus, if not a little bigger than that.

“Is Fearghus here? I smell him.”

Annwyl now wished she bathed before leaving the campsite, but there hadn’t been time.

“Uh... no, he’s not here.” She cleared her throat. “That’s me... you...uh... smell.”

Intense blue eyes shifted and the Queen leaned in closer as if to get a good look at her.

“You? He’s been with you? A human? Whatever for?”

This was one of those times where Annwyl had a really crude remark at the ready. Something that would include the word “suck.” But she kept her tongue in check. Controlled her impulses. It wasn’t easy.

“He loves me.”

“Does he now?” The Queen sat up and for the first time Annwyl noticed that she wore a collar around her throat with a chain connected to it. The chain led to a stone wall, securely attached to a thick metal circle. She frowned but didn’t have much time to think about it as the Queen moved closer to her.

“Whether he does or doesn’t, concerns me not. Why are *you* here?”

“I must fight Lorcan of Garbhán Isle in a few hours...”

“I do not concern myself with the problems of humans.”

“But my problem isn’t human, lady. It is Hefaidd-Hen.”

“Ah, yes. Bercelak told me of his involvement with your brother.”

“Morfyd said you could give me some kind of protection. He will surely use Hefaidd-Hen against me.”

“Are you afraid you’ll die, human?”

Annwyl shook her head, “No, lady. That has never been my worry. I worry that I will not be able to kill my brother *before* I die. That has always been my greatest fear. I know what he can do. He’ll destroy all that oppose him and Hefaidd-Hen will help him do it. I just need protection from Hefaidd-Hen long enough to kill my brother. After that I don’t care what happens to me.”

“And what of Fearghus?”

“Fearghus said he will fight with me.”

“So you risk his life as well as your own?”

“My life is forfeit, lady. All I care about now is killing my brother. He must die this day so that my people can be free. And I truly believe I’m the only one that can do it. Fearghus can take care of himself.”

“But if you die, what of Fearghus?”

Annwyl shrugged, uncomfortable with these questions. “He will find another, I guess. I don’t know.”

The Queen snorted. “You don’t know dragons at all, do you?”

“I never said I did.”

“And if Fearghus dies, but you live. Then what?”

Annwyl’s face tightened. The thought of something—anything—happening to Fearghus caused her anger to vibrate just below her flesh. Her voice low, her rage barely contained. “You best pray that never happens, Lady. For if he dies and I live, then I will tear this world apart with my rage. And no one will be safe. I promise you that.”

The Queen watched Annwyl for several long moments. “You are an interesting... thing. I think I understand what my son sees in you.”

Annwyl swallowed. “Son?”

“You didn’t know?” Annwyl slowly shook her head. “Yes. I think all my children are quite unimpressed with their rank among dragons.”

“Yes. Apparently they are.”

The Queen smiled at that, and Annwyl had to stop herself from running from the chamber. Her smile revealed a frightening display of what seemed to be hundreds of teeth. Mostly fangs. The dragon moved to the other side of the cave, reaching into a tiny cavern. She dug inside, then came out with a small but shiny object. She walked over to Annwyl and held the item out to her.

Annwyl took it from the Queen’s white claw. She examined it carefully. A necklace. Made of a strong, but extremely thin, silver-colored metal, twisted into an intricate design, the thin lines swirling around and through each other.

“Remove your shirt and put it on. It needs to be right next to the flesh.”

Annwyl followed the Queen’s direction, quickly pulling off her surcoat and shirt, and placing the necklace right at the base of her throat. It lay flat against her collar bone and the top part of her chest, while two thin bits laced around her neck and clasped at the back. She re-dressed quickly, eager to be away as dawn and the fight for her people drew near. She prayed there would be no more questions.

“How does that fit then?”

Annwyl nodded. “Fine. And this will protect me from Hefaidh-Hen?”

“No. That will not help you.” Annwyl sighed in exasperation. Then why waste her time putting on bits of jewelry? But before she could ask the question, the Queen cocked her head to one side.

“That will not help you with Hefaidd-Hen, but this will.”

Annwyl looked up just as the Queen let loose a ball of flame that threw the girl from her chamber.

Morfyd and her three siblings waited outside the Queen’s chamber. Éibhear, the youngest brother, anxiously jumped around them. “When are we going? When? When?”

Briec calmly looked at him, “You ask that question one more time, and we’re going to shave your head... again.”

Éibhear sunk into a moody silence as Morfyd wondered what kept the girl so long. She risked Fearghus’ wrath by bringing Annwyl here and taking her to the Queen. There was every chance that the girl would not survive. But she had to risk it and Annwyl agreed. In her more than two hundred years alive, she never knew a braver human. One willing to face the Queen of Dragons. And Morfyd warned her. Warned her that the Queen had no sympathy for humans. Annwyl laughed. Not dismissively, but after fighting off Bercelak a lack of sympathy just didn’t sound that scary to her. So she walked in alone to face the one being that could protect her or turn her to ash where she stood.

Morfyd still had no idea which the Queen would choose. She gave up long ago trying to guess her moods and whims. All she could hope for now was that her fondness for Fearghus kept the girl alive.

The siblings stopped talking. They all heard it. The unmistakable sound of air sucked into lungs. They all turned to each other, just as a ball of flame flew out of the chamber. It hit the wall and crashed against the floor.

“Oh, gods! Annwyl!” Morfyd and Gwenvael rushed over as Annwyl rolled herself on the floor to put the flame out. But by the time they reached her the flame disappeared.

No. That wasn’t right. It didn’t disappear. It went *in* to her. Her skin soaked up the flame. Annwyl, however, still screamed and rolled around, completely unaware that the fire was gone.

Morfyd caught hold of her. “Annwyl! Annwyl! It’s all right!”

After a few moments, Annwyl stopped. She rolled into a ball and breathed in gulps of air, her entire body shaking. They all waited. Silently. Expecting her to snap out of it. But the Queen’s voice called from inside her chamber. “It’s not over yet, my loves.”

That’s when Annwyl started screaming again. Not in fear and panic. But in pure, unbridled pain. “Get it off me! *Get it off me!*” She ripped off her surcoat and her chain mail shirt and dug at the flesh on her throat and neck. “*Get it off me!*”

Morfyd hit the girl with a spell that knocked her out instantly. Annwyl fell back and Morfyd looked closely at her.

“What are those markings?” Gwenvael asked next to her.

“I don’t know.” Morfyd ran her hand along the flesh and felt something just under the skin. Something imbedded in the girl’s flesh. Something that she knew hadn’t been there a few hours before. Within seconds the markings turned a deep rich brown and Morfyd gasped, “The Chain of Beathag!”

Gwenvael stared in awe. “She gave her *that*?”

Briec snorted in disgust. “The only reason she gave that to this human was because of Fearghus.”

“Well, she never liked you,” Gwenvael muttered.

“Amazing breasts.” Éibhear noted casually.

“Would you control yourself,” Morfyd snapped at her oversized baby brother. She lifted the girl up. “Help me get her clothes back on. We need to get her out of here quickly and don’t let the others see.” The dragon court would find out about the Queen’s gift soon enough.

Her chain mail scorched. Her hair darker, the gold streaks that ran through it brighter. And her skin looked like she’d spent several days under the hot desert suns of Alsandair. But other than that, Annwyl lived.

They dressed her quickly and stood her up; Gwenvael took one arm, Briec the other. Morfyd muttered a counter-spell and Annwyl awoke, still screaming.

“Annwyl!” She’d made sure to put a healing spell on her chest to stop the pain. She grabbed the girl by the face and yelled her name again.

Annwyl finally stopped screaming. She looked around.

“Better?”

Annwyl’s eyes latched on to her, and that infamous rage exploded around her. “*What did that bitch do to me?*”

“I heard that!” The siblings all cringed and began dragging Annwyl down the stairs, ignoring the girl’s angry protests. But when she shuddered and began to shake uncontrollably they stopped.

Morfyd pushed the girl’s hair from her face. “You all right, Annwyl?”

After a few moments, Annwyl nodded. Gods, the girl carried some strength within her. More strength than even some dragons possessed.

“I’ll be fine. Just give me a bit...” Annwyl’s eyes focused on Éibhear. “Your hair is blue.”

“I’m a blue dragon.” He announced with his usual pride. Morfyd rolled her eyes. Éibhear did love his blue hair.

Annwyl glanced at Morfyd. “Another brother?”

Morfyd shrugged as they went up another flight of stairs, meeting Bercelak at the top.

He looked down at Annwyl. “So she survived?”

“Looks that way, father.” Morfyd answered, a little smugly.

Annwyl, still supported by Gwenvael and Briec, raised her head and looked at Bercelak with

narrowed accusing eyes, “Why is the Queen chained inside her chamber?”

Morfyd closed her eyes in utter embarrassment. *For the love of...*

Bercelak’s relationship with their mother never failed to either embarrass or annoy all their children. If she didn’t know for a fact that they loved each other more than anything, she would have divorced herself from the clan long ago out of sheer disgust.

Her father grinned. “Did she complain?” Morfyd and Brieic exchanged mortified glances while Gwenvael and Éibhear bit back their laughter.

Annwyl shook her head. “No.”

“Then what do you care what goes on between me and my mate?”

Annwyl stared thoughtfully at him, then recognition dawned. “Oh, by the gods!”

“Time to go!” Morfyd started moving again, “The suns will rise soon.”

“Yes. All of you must be off.”

Morfyd stopped and looked at her father. “All of us?” She’d already talked her brothers into helping Fearghus, but they were planning to do it without Bercelak’s knowledge. Now it seemed their father finally realized the danger of Lorcan and Hefaidh-Hen winning this battle and perhaps the Sibling War.

“Aye. You can’t let your brother fight alone with some humans. You all must go with him. I will stay here with the Queen.”

“I bet you will,” Annwyl muttered under her breath.

The siblings exchanged glances as Bercelak began pushing them toward the exit. “Go. Now. You haven’t much time.”

“Wait!” Morfyd watched as her younger sister, Keita, in human form ran toward them. She wore a beautiful gown probably given to her by some noble that thought her a sweet maid before he took her to bed and found out otherwise. Well, perhaps a noble, his brother, and his cousin took her to bed. All at the same time. *Slut*. “Sorry I’m late!”

“What are *you* doing here?”

“Daddy asked me to come.” She gave a toss of her long red hair before smiling up at Bercelak who smiled back and patted her shoulder.

“ ‘Daddy asked me to come.’ ” Morfyd mimicked brutally. Her sister sneered at her and she wanted to kick daddy’s little princess in the face, but Annwyl’s voice stopped her.

“Exactly how many are in your family?”

“Too many,” all the siblings answered at once.

Chapter Seventeen

Danelin lived the first nine years of his life in Garbhán Isle’s dungeons. He’d been battling the troops of the Isle since he turned twelve. And learned to fear nothing besides the Siblings’ wrath, which

all men of any intelligence feared.

Until the day the black dragon landed in the middle of their camp. For the first time he learned the meaning of true fear. Seeing the black talons of the beast touch down. Watching the mighty horned head turn slowly as it watched the troops surrounding it. Hearing it roar Annwyl's name. He thought he would never experience fear quite like that again.

He turned out to be very wrong.

Standing across from a dragon that had shapeshifted into a man and explaining to him how his lady love left, but "Don't worry. She'll be back soon enough" introduced him to a whole new world of fear. Especially when the dragon stood naked across from him and Brastias, big arms crossed in front of a big chest, big legs braced firmly apart and, most disturbingly, black smoke curling from his nostrils.

Luckily they had already sent the troops ahead. But the two suns were rising and he needed to get Brastias to the Citadel. Someone needed to lead since they really had no idea when Annwyl would return. Although, he and Brastias had no intention of telling the dragon that. Of course now they realize they should never have told the dragon about Annwyl while his big body blocked the exit. Now he stood between them and the way out of the tent.

And the dragon wasn't moving.

"So you just let her leave?"

Danelin exchanged glances with Brastias.

Brastias raised an eyebrow. "Perhaps you haven't actually *met* Annwyl the Bloody, but you don't let her or not let her go anywhere. You just stay out of her way."

Danelin forced himself not to cower as the dragon growled in displeasure.

He watched the two humans stare at him. Brastias looked annoyed. The boy looked like he might start screaming at any second. He knew he shouldn't take his anger at Annwyl out on these two men, but they were here and she was not.

The last thing he remembered was her slipping that lovely body out of bed with whispered promises to return quickly. He awoke several hours later to the sounds of Annwyl's troops moving out. He also discovered his bed cold and no sign of his woman. A feeling, he found, he did not relish.

By the time he dragged his human body out of bed, most of the troops were gone, leaving Brastias and the boy. He cornered them in one of the supply tents and refused to let them go. Their cavalier attitude of Annwyl's disappearance with his sister did nothing but raise his anger. Where Morfyd may have taken her, he could only guess. But if he guessed right, his sister would pay.

"She's not our responsibility, dragon. Nor is she yours."

He had to admit, Brastias turned out to be a lot braver than he thought. The boy, though, didn't look like he could handle much more. But he wasn't done with them. Soon he would start threatening

body parts but a hand on his bare shoulder stopped him.

“There you all are.” Annwyl smiled. “Everything all right?”

Fearghus scowled. “No. Everything’s not all right. Where the hell have you been?”

“Discuss later. Fight war now.” With a motion of her head, Brastias and the boy quickly left.

“You better not have been terrorizing them.”

“Annwyl.” He caught her arm. “What’s going on?” He looked at her face and wondered what was different. The two suns just began to rise, darkness still filled the tent, so he couldn’t see all that clearly, but he knew something had changed.

“Later. Right now my people need me, Fearghus.” She reached up and kissed him lightly.

“Trust me.”

He brushed his head against her cheek and breathed in her scent. “Try not to get yourself killed, Annwyl.”

She laughed, “Why do all of you keep telling me that?”

He kissed her, long and deep until she pulled away. He enjoyed the fact that it seemed to be a struggle for her.

“We... uh... better go.” She stared at his lips for a moment longer then, with a deep sigh of regret, stepped away from him and through the tent opening.

He followed, but stumbled upon finding his siblings waiting for him. *All* his siblings.

“Took you two long enough.” Briec snapped.

“What exactly were you two doing in there?” Gwenvael smirked.

“Big brother!” Keita spread her wings wide, completely blocking out Morfyd.

Morfyd slammed her claw down, causing the ground to shake. “You do that one more time, Keita, and I’ll start taking pieces of you right here!”

“Let’s go! Let’s go! Let’s go!” Éibhear took off and continued to swoop around the group, “Come on! We’ll miss all the best kills!”

Fearghus glared at Annwyl. She backed away from him with a shrug. “They wanted to help.”

“When we’re done with your brother, woman, we *will* discuss this.”

“Promises. Promises.” Annwyl leered as she quickly strapped her swords to her back, leather gauntlets on her wrists, and tied her hair back with a long leather strap.

Fearghus walked out in to the middle of the campsite and shifted, doing his best to ignore his squabbling kin. He shook out his mane and turned to Annwyl as she secured her swords to her back.

“Lady Annwyl?”

Annwyl finished adjusting her weapons, “Lord Dragon?”

“I think it is time we make you queen.”

Annwyl nodded once...and smiled.

Brastias rolled on his side, avoiding the war hammer aimed at his head. He stood and brought his ax up, splitting the man from groin to neck.

“Behind you!” Brastias didn’t turn but swung his ax back and up. He took off a soldier’s sword arm, then turned to finish the man off. Prying his ax from the man’s corpse, he glanced at Danelin who called the warning.

“Where is she, Brastias?” The warrior yelled over the din of battle.

“She’ll be here.”

“Well, her and those dragons better be here soon.”

“Why?”

Danelin pointed to the sky and Brastias turned to see why the color drained from his lieutenant’s face. It wasn’t just that it was a dragon. Or that Lorcan rode him. But the fact that they were not alone. Eight other dragons flew with them, geared for battle.

Brastias cringed. Things just became more difficult.

As they flew toward battle, Fearghus gave explicit instructions, while Annwyl clung to his back. “Lorcan belongs to Annwyl. Hefaidh-Hen is mine. Kill every one else that wears Lorcan’s colors. Understand?”

“Wait. Is that it? Has our brother no words of wisdom before we go into battle?” Gwenvael demanded with sarcasm.

“As a matter of fact, I do. Don’t get killed.” Morfyd and Keita laughed as they moved out. His three brothers following.

“And Annwyl. Remember what I told you.”

“Protect my right side?”

“No.”

“Feint with my left?”

“No.”

“Nice ass.”

“No!” His growl of annoyance only elicited a sweet chuckle from his woman.

“Watch my rage, heart of my heart?”

“Condescending cow.”

Chapter Eighteen

The ball of flame narrowly missed her and she desperately clung to Fearghus’ neck and hair as he spun and dived down toward the middle of the battle. For several agonizing moments her world turned upside down and she felt certain she would retch at any second, when the dragon thankfully righted

himself. She didn't care what he said, she was getting him a saddle.

As they neared the ground she caught sight of Brastias. "There! Land me there!"

Fearghus dropped lower, plowed through a contingent of horse-mounted soldiers, and slid to a halt in front of a startled Brastias.

Annwyl slipped off the dragon's back. She unsheathed both her swords and turned to her dragon-lover.

The two stared at each other.

"Stay well, Lady Annwyl."

"Stay alive, Lord Dragon."

Fearghus unfurled his mighty wings and lifted off into the air to join the battle already raging with the other dragons and his siblings.

"We're glad you're here." Brastias stood beside her now, covered in blood, the majority of which she doubted belonged to him.

"Sorry I took so long, my friend." She tested the weight of her blades. As always they felt good in her hands. She was ready.

"Where is he, Brastias?"

"Up there." He pointed to a ridge where she could hear the war cries of men. But between her and her brother lay a battery of troops screaming for her blood.

One soldier ran for her, the blood lust having grabbed hold of his mind. She brought her two swords together, stepping aside as the man's head snapped off his body.

Annwyl smiled at Brastias. "Perhaps you should let me take this from here."

She wondered what he saw on her face when she looked at him, because he visibly blanched and backed away from her. "As always, Annwyl. They're all yours."

Annwyl smiled and charged in, killing all that stood in her way and did not wear the colors of her army.

A bolt of lightning hit Fearghus dead in the chest. He flew back with a roar. Leave it to Hefaidh-Hen to find lightning dragons. Purple beasts with awesome powers, but he already tired of the stinging pain their lightning caused. Plus, he knew they were singeing his hair.

He could see Gwenvael coming up behind the dragon. He moved in again to distract him and barely missed the bolt the beast sent out. As the dragon reared back to send out another, Gwenvael wrapped his maw around his neck and held it. Fearghus dived in and slammed his talons into the beast's groin and belly, ripping up. The dragon roared in pain as he lost his bowels over the battlefield. And when they released him he dropped to the ground, taking out some of Lorcan's men in the process.

The two brothers stared at each other. They got along at no other time as when they were in

battle together. And Fearghus finally admitted to himself it brought him joy that his family fought with him this day.

The two brothers separated and Fearghus went over to help Morfyd. But as she dispensed with two dragons, one with flame the other with a spell, he wasn't quite sure why he bothered.

Then he saw Éibhear tumble past him. He caught his brother's arm before he could fall to the ground while he hit the enemy dragon with flame, knocking the beast back.

"Éibhear! Are you all right," he demanded in the ancient language of dragons.

"Aye, brother. That bitch caught me by surprise, is all."

"Well, watch your back, pup. I'll never hear the end of it if anything happens to you. You she likes."

Éibhear took to the air once again, going after the bitch dragon that just tried to kill him.

"Morfyd!" Fearghus flew to his sister. "Hefaidh-Hen. Where is he?"

His sister closed her eyes and tried to reach out with her Magick to find the dragon. Suddenly her eyes snapped open and she looked at her brother.

"What is it?"

"Annwyl."

Annwyl tore through her brother's troops. Most of them she beheaded as was her way. She only wasted time with arms and legs when the head wasn't readily available. And she only took those limbs to slow the enemy down long enough so that she could take the head.

A soldier dived for her. She blocked his blow and brought her other sword down cleaving off half his skull and silencing the man's screams. She turned, just as another soldier hoped to sneak up on her from behind. She gutted him, which she also liked to do. Especially when her blade released the entrails.

She realized with a smile that she truly did earn her name. She really *was* Annwyl the Bloody. And proud of it. But she tired of wasting herself on these men. She wanted her brother. She wanted *his* head. And by the gods, she would have it.

She killed off two more soldiers stupid enough to get in her way, and then charged up the ridge, screaming for Lorcan. As she made it to the top, she slid to a halt in the wet grass. Lorcan waited for her. Waited for her with his dragon.

She glanced behind her and realized that more of his troops blocked her escape.

Annwyl glared at her brother. "Afraid to face me yourself, Lorcan?" He wouldn't even meet her eyes. "Can't you answer me, brother?"

"You can direct your questions to me, Lady Annwyl."

She looked at what could only be Hefaidh-Hen. Unlike Fearghus and his kin, she saw no beauty

in this beast. No sense of grace or elegance. Just a cold-blooded killer. His dragon body appeared almost skeletal. His color a sickening maggot-white. His dragon eyes a pale, watery blue. Just looking at him made her skin crawl.

“Are you ruler of Dark Plains now, Hefaidd-Hen?”

“I am merely council to Lorcan.”

“And what has been your council to my brother?”

“That he should not waste his time killing you. He should leave that to me.”

Annwyl stilled her panic. The Queen supposedly gave her a gift that would help her fight Hefaidd-Hen. She had no idea what her flames would do, but she prayed that the Queen really did help her. She prayed hard. For although she could hear Brastias calling to his men. Hear them battling to get through the line of troops separating her from them. She still knew. She knew, as Hefaidd-Hen reared back to take in a lungful of air, that they would never get to her in time.

She looked at her brother. “No matter what happens, this isn’t over, brother.”

Fearghus flew as fast as he could, Morfyd doing her best to keep up with him, calling his name. He ignored her. Morfyd saw the ambush. An ambush for Annwyl only. As strong as she was now, she would never be able to face Hefaidd-Hen down. Never be able to win against him. He wasn’t just a dragon, but a wizard as well. His flame, like Morfyd’s on occasion, would be rife with Magick.

But as he closed in on the ridge his woman now stood on, he could see he wouldn’t be in time. No matter how fast he flew. No matter what he did. He would lose her.

Brastias couldn’t clear the enemy troops and make it up the ridge before the foul beast sent a blast that completely covered his leader in a white-hot flame. And no ordinary flame, like the one he saw her dragon lover spew. But something different. And seemingly a waste of Magick, considering she was just a girl.

But when the flame and smoke cleared, there she still stood. Her eyes shut tight, her face turned away. Everything as it should be. Even her chain mail and surcoat.

Brastias stopped. That wasn’t possible. There should be nothing of her left. Not even ash.

He saw the dragon rear back in confusion as Annwyl slowly opened her eyes and looked around. She most likely expected to see those of her ancestors welcoming her to the next world. Instead her eyes focused on a startled and a little bit disturbed Brastias.

She grinned and wiggled her eyebrows at him. “She’s bloody mad,” he whispered as she swung around and looked at the dragon.

“Did you miss,” she asked sweetly.

The dragon looked as if he were about to answer, but he never got the chance. Fearghus

swooped down and snatched him up. The beautiful Morfyd right behind him.

Brastias threw himself back into the fray, but not before he heard Annwyl address Lorcan. “I guess it’s just us then. Eh, brother?”

Lorcan smiled. Things just turned in his favor. He knew he couldn’t battle Hefaidd-Hen on his own. He’d killed dragons before. But Hefaidd-Hen wasn’t just a dragon. He was something completely different. Unnatural. Unholy. Evil. But with Hefaidd-Hen off battling his own kind, he could finally do what he’d wanted to do since the day the little bitch became part of his life.

He would kill his only sister.

Lorcan brought his blade up and charged.

Annwyl dodged the blade, slicing her brother’s back as he passed her. But the blade barely touched him. He swung around to face her again.

“You’ve become fast, little sister.” He openly leered. “Did the dragon teach you that just before he pushed you to your knees?”

The siblings shadowed each other. Moving slowly, purposely. Waiting for the other to make the first move.

Annwyl knew exactly what her brother was doing. He was baiting her. And it would have worked...a few weeks ago.

“He taught me many things, brother. Although I think it is you that has become the bitch of a dragon. Did Hefaidd-Hen make you moan as he took you?”

Lorcan began to growl, but quickly it became a full-blown roar. He attacked. A straight thrust to her belly. Annwyl parried with one blade and slashed his mid-section with the other. She danced back away from him.

Her brother looked down at the blood seeping from under his garments. Annwyl knew the damage was slight. But Lorcan’s shock went to the fact that few ever came that close to striking him before. And that’s when she knew she had him.

His rage exploded out, surrounding her. She knew she should be scared. Or angry. She felt neither. His anger calmed her. Soothed her. She knew the control belonged to her, while he drowned in his own rage.

She stayed on the defensive, letting him come to her. He attacked again, this time swinging at her neck. She blocked the blade and slammed her body into him. Lorcan stumbled back. He righted himself quick enough, though, and brutally backhanded Annwyl. Her body flew several feet before landing. Yet her dragon had hit her like that before while training, so she barely felt Lorcan’s fist. She

scrambled to her feet before he ever reached her.

After fighting Fearghus, Lorcan's moves seemed slow and blocky. Not the fluid movements of her dragon. Suddenly she couldn't understand what she so greatly feared all these years. Hell, she faced Bercelak the Great and almost destroyed him. Was her brother really that much of a challenge?

She found herself getting calmer. Seeing his moves long before he ever made them. She could also see his rage burning through his body. He wanted her dead so badly his attacks became sloppier. Soon blood covered him. And none of it belonged to her.

Fearghus took Hefaidd-Hen up toward the suns, his talons digging into the soft white underbelly. He no longer had the protective scales of their breed.

What did this dragon do to himself?

Hefaidd-Hen spat out a spell and an almost unbearable pain racked Fearghus' body. A pain that came from within. Now he saw that the beast gave parts of himself for the Magick that coursed through his veins. The Magick that he now used on him. But Fearghus wouldn't let the bastard go. He'd only go after Annwyl again. He couldn't risk that. So he kept his claws dug deep into Hefaidd-Hen's flesh and held on.

Another wave of pain tore through Fearghus' body. He roared. But his roar could never match Hefaidd-Hen's brutal scream. He opened his eyes to see that Morfyd attached herself to Hefaidd-Hen's back. Her claws dug in deep to the white flesh as she spoke a spell that set the beast on fire. And without scales, he had no protection from the unholy flames Morfyd unleashed.

"Now, Fearghus! Now!"

Fearghus dug his claws deeper into Hefaidd-Hen's lower body and opened him up from bowel to throat.

Hefaidd-Hen screamed. A scream of surprise and utter pain. Fearghus and Morfyd released his body. The unnatural beast plummeted to the ground, vainly attempting to keep his entrails in and put out the fire that covered him. Morfyd spewed another spell at the retreating form and Hefaidd-Hen burst into pieces.

Fearghus glanced at his sister. "That was a bit much, don't you think?"

She gave an innocent shrug, "I like to be certain."

Annwyl saw an opening and took it. She lunged and thrust her blade into his thigh. Lorcan roared in pain and slapped her across the face. His gauntleted hand opening a slash across her cheek. She went down on her belly and he straddled her from behind, his two hands on her throat. His rage had him out of control, but she never thought he'd use his bare hands to kill her. She only had seconds

before she blacked out. She pulled her dagger from her side and slashed backward. Screaming, he stumbled off her.

Jumping up before Lorcan could recover, Annwyl turned and saw her brother's hand over his face, blood pouring from between his fingers. She'd slashed him across his eye. Quickly, not wanting to give him any time to attack again, she moved behind him while he kneeled on the ground, cradling his bleeding eye. Her father always taught her that if one destroys a man's legs, you've destroyed the man. Remembering that, she slashed the tendons on the back of both Lorcan's ankles. She ignored his screaming as it intensified ten-fold. Knowing that he couldn't walk or run, she kicked him in the back, knocking him to the ground.

Annwyl straddled him, just as he'd done to her. Snatching off the strip of leather she used to bind her hair back, she pushed her brother's hands out of her way and wrapped it around his throat. She pulled the ends tight and ignored his flailing arms, keeping the pressure up.

There would be no noble death for him. She would not take his head while he still breathed as she would have any other warrior. He deserved no such courtesy. Instead, she gritted her teeth and kept up the pressure.

Soon his movements slowed and desperate needy sounds came from the back of his throat. She waited until he dropped off unconscious and with one strong pull, she snapped his neck.

She released him and his lifeless body dropped to the ground. She realized that it took less time than she thought it would. The task of actually killing her own brother.

"Annwyl."

Annwyl tore her eyes away from her brother's body and looked up at the looming form of her dragon-lover.

"You need to turn the tide of this battle."

She glanced over the battlefield, and saw that her men and Lorcan's were at a standstill. Both sides fighting equally well. Neither side giving up any ground.

She nodded as she retrieved her sword, "You are right."

Brastias raised his ax to cleave another man in two when he heard her voice. Clear and strong, booming over the battlefield and the land.

"Hear me!"

On her command, they all stopped fighting and focused their attention on her. Even the enemy paused. She stood upon the black dragon's back as if she were born to be there.

"I lead Dark Plains! I lead these troops! And now Garbhán Isle belongs *to me!*" With that final screech, she raised her brother's head high in the air.

Her men screamed her name as Brastias turned to the soldier before him. "Now where were

we?" He asked, just before cleaving the man in two.

Chapter Nineteen

Fearghus sank deep into the metal tub someone placed into Annwyl's tent. He let the hot water wrap around his human body, soaking the aching muscles. He would rather be back at his lake, but this would do for now. Besides, he would be home soon enough.

"Annwyl?" Morfyd entered the tent, but stopped short on sight of her brother. "Oh. You."

"Yes. Me."

"Where's Annwyl?"

"Still celebrating with her men, I presume." He closed his eyes and leaned back against the tub.

"Did the family leave?"

"All except Gwenvael. He's enjoying the camp girls, I think."

"That better be all he's enjoying," Fearghus growled out.

Morfyd chuckled. "He tried, but I hear Annwyl handled it."

"Does he still have his head?"

"For the moment."

"Sister, I need to ask you something."

"Yes?"

"How did Annwyl survive the flames? Hefaidd-Hen's flames?"

"Uh... well, you know... um..."

Fearghus jumped up and out of the tub, grabbing his sister by her arms and snatching her completely into the tent. "*You let Annwyl face her alone, didn't you?*"

"It was a risk she was willing to take!" Morfyd pulled her arms away and pushed her brother.

"But not a risk that *I* was willing to take! Not with her life!" Fearghus pushed her back.

"I feel no guilt for what I did. I had to protect her and the family agreed."

"I didn't agree!"

"We didn't *ask* you!" She punched her brother in the chest.

"But Annwyl belongs to me." He slapped his hand over his sister's face and shoved her.

Morfyd stumbled back and glared at him. "No. She doesn't." Morfyd smirked at him. "You haven't Claimed her." Fearghus winced at that. His sister spoke true. Until he performed the Claiming Ceremony, Annwyl was as unshackled as a virgin. "You haven't marked her as your own. So she belongs to no one. Although the way Gwenvael has been looking at her lately, you never know."

The siblings growled at each other. Then Fearghus pulled his sister into a headlock.

"Ow! Let me go, you crazy bastard!"

He ground his knuckles into the top of her head, "You are the most irritating little..."

"Annwyl, I..." Fearghus looked up as Brastias entered the tent. But he took one look at the

siblings and walked back out.

Fearghus released his sister and shoved her away so that she couldn't get in a good kick.

"If anything had happened to her..."

"But it didn't. And maybe you didn't notice, but it saved her life!"

With that Morfyd straightened up her robes, pushed her white hair out of her face, stuck her tongue out at her brother, and left.

Fearghus growled, smoke curling out from his nostrils. "Brat."

Annwyl headed back to her tent. She'd grown tired of pushing Gwenvael's hand off her thigh every ten seconds. Eventually she just pulled his fingers back until she heard one of them give a satisfying "snap." It angered him to no end, but after the past day he really didn't worry her.

She walked past rows of men feasting and celebrating. Still so much more work to do, but she let the men have their time. They earned it. And they would earn more still. Annwyl knew that she must attack Garbhán Isle and take possession of the castle before she would truly be queen. It galled her that she would have to return to a place she held with such contempt, but the seat of power for Dark Plains *was* Garbhán Isle. She had no choice. And once done there she would then have to defeat any and all that might still hold loyalty to her brother. Yes, she had much work to do. But tonight she would celebrate. Tonight was special.

She slowed down to stop and glance at the front of camp. There it stood. Her brother's head on a spike. She smiled, feeling an overwhelming sense of satisfaction.

"Uh... Annwyl?" She looked around to see Danelin standing before her. "You're scaring the men."

Annwyl looked at her troops. They stopped eating to watch her stare at the remains of her brother. And they did appear a little frightened.

"Sorry." He made to walk past her, but she stopped him. "Nice work today, Danelin."

He smiled proudly, nodded, and moved on.

As she neared her tent, Annwyl realized that no troops guarded it. That could only mean one thing.

As she stepped through the flaps, she saw him lounging decadently in a high-backed chair. A fur spread from the bed wrapped around his long, muscular body. His long black hair, recently washed, partially covering his face and chest. Her breath caught in her throat. She became wet at just the sight of him.

"Lord Dragon."

"Queen Annwyl."

This was the first she'd seen of him once the battle turned. He'd gone off to help his family finish

off the enemy dragons, she to destroy as many of Lorcan's men as they could get their hands on. But war and sex had now become one for her. Probably forever. She blazed through men, knowing that the sooner she completed her task, the quicker she could return to Fearghus.

"A bath awaits you." She glanced over at the huge tub. Since she still had her brother's blood in her hair, a bath might be a good idea.

She moved to the middle of her tent and quickly removed the sheathed swords hanging from her back.

"Slowly."

She looked up at Fearghus. He watched her closely with those beautiful black eyes of his. The walls of her womb clenched and it took all her strength not to launch herself at him. Instead, she slowly removed her surcoat. Pulled off her boots and her chain mail. Unbound her breasts and slipped off the material that covered her sex. When done, she stood there. His eyes roved languidly over her. Taking in not only her body but every wound that she now wore on it after the day's battle.

He motioned to the tub with a flick of his eyes. She slipped into it and shivered.

"Cold?"

"A little."

Throwing off the fur covering, he slowly stood and walked toward her. She studied his body as he came to rest beside the tub. Underneath all those long, hard muscles lay the heart and soul of a dragon. *Her* dragon. She licked her lips, her only thought of sucking his sweet cock once again into her willing mouth.

Fearghus crouched down next to her. He placed his hand in the tub between her thighs. She hoped he would touch her but he didn't. His hand just rested there until she noticed that the water warmed up, nice and hot. This dragon Magick really did have its uses.

"Relax," he coaxed her gently. And she did just that, leaning back into the tub. Letting her head rest on the rim.

Fearghus poured water over her hair and soaped up her scalp. He washed the blood and sweat of the day from her hair and eventually her body.

"Comfortable?"

"Yes."

"Relaxed?"

"Very."

"Good."

Then Annwyl screamed as Fearghus shoved her head under water. He held her down for several long seconds as she fought to get that piece of steel he called an arm off her head. Eventually he

released her and she came coughing and sputtering back to air.

“*What in all that’s holy...*”

He took hold of her shoulders and easily lifted her from the tub. “Listen to me clearly, woman. Never face my family again without me! *Ever!* You are never and I mean *never* to risk your life like that again! Are we clear?”

Annwyl pulled away from him and took several stumbling steps back. “No! We are not clear!” She turned on him. “I did what I had to. And I’d do it again! And I’m not afraid of your family!”

“Annwyl,” he warned through gritted teeth.

“No! I don’t want to hear it!” She fought to get the strands of wet brown hair out of her eyes. “Do you have any idea what I went through today? In just one day I stood in the dragon’s flame...*twice!*”

“But I...”

“*Quiet!*” He stood there, startled into silence. “I also had to face that cold bitch you call a mother! I took my own brother’s head! *And* I was forced to break *your* brother’s hand because he wouldn’t stop touching me!”

Fearghus broke out in a grin and she stopped her tirade. “What?”

“You broke his hand?” He couldn’t help but laugh.

“Well, it was more like a finger. But the way he carried on, you’d think I’d broken his entire arm.”

Fearghus laughed. Hard. And, eventually, Annwyl smiled.

What the hell was he going to do? He loved this woman. Loved everything about her. Wanted her as his mate. But she had a kingdom to run. Allies to forge. Enemies to crush. He already saw the fear in the men’s eyes. They witnessed her “dance” with the dragon’s flame. A dance she survived. And they all knew she took him as her lover. His presence would do nothing but put her safety at risk.

“What are you thinking, Dragon?”

He shook his head and moved to her. “Nothing,” he whispered as he slipped an arm around her waist.

“Still lying, I see.” She pulled away from him.

He sighed. “What, Annwyl?”

“You’re planning to leave, aren’t you?”

How she knew these things, he’d never know. “Look, you have a kingdom to...”

“Horseshit!”

“What?”

“He told me you’d come up with some noble horseshit about me having to defend my kingdom

and no one able to accept the two of us.”

“Gwenvael,” he growled angrily. “Annwyl, it is for your...”

“You have two choices, Dragon.” She cut in smoothly.

He crossed his arms in front of his chest, “Do I?”

“Yes. You do.”

“And they are?”

“Claim me now. Or let me go forever.”

He’d kill his brother for his big mouth.

“You don’t even know what that means.”

“Yes. I do.”

He wanted to Claim her. To make her his own. Yet he planned to wait until she secured her reign. And, if after that, she still wanted him... “No. You don’t.”

“I know I’ll not waste my life waiting for you.” That stung. More than he wanted to admit.

“I’m not asking you to.”

“Really? You’re not?”

“No.”

“So I can take any man right now and you won’t care.”

“If that’s your wish.” He bet a lie that size could kill him.

“Well, any man won’t do,” she mused softly. “But I think Gwenvael is still here.”

She grabbed a fur covering and headed toward the tent flap. Fearghus seized her by her arm and swung her around. “That’s not funny,” he growled.

“Fearghus, just admit it. You’d kill any man or dragon that came near me.”

He wanted to say no. He wanted it to be the truth. But they both knew better.

“I would.”

She leaned into him. Her breasts against his forearm. He closed his eyes as her hand ran down his chest, his hips, finally grasping his shaft in her hand. She ran her fingers over the veins and ridges, her thumb circled the head. “Then Claim me.”

“No.”

She angrily released what had now become a healthy erection. “Why?”

“Because it would be clear to all that you are mine. That your love and loyalty belonged to a dragon.”

“And?”

“Could you at least *act* afraid?”

“The only thing I feared has his head on a spike outside my camp. Now my fear is of living the rest of my life without you.”

Fearghus stared at Annwyl. Just that morning the woman bravely took the Queen's flame. A flame imbued with the most ancient of Magicks. And until her death, Annwyl would always be immune to any dragon's fire. But he knew his mother well enough to know that she didn't make it easy on the girl. Annwyl's back and side completely covered in dark bruises. The old bitch probably knocked her right out of her chamber.

His eyes glanced briefly at the mark clearly defined on her chest; burned into the tan skin just above her breasts. She now wore the Chain of Beathag as well. And would for the rest of her life. It would always be there, just under her skin. One of the most powerful gods-created items a dragon could bestow upon a human. The Chain of Beathag could extend the life of the wearer but only if their heart remained pure and their love true. Their love for the dragon. Otherwise it would be a fiery and painful death that would last days.

He touched the mark and Annwyl winced, her skin still sensitive. Annwyl loved him. She wouldn't have survived if she hadn't.

Yet he couldn't let that change his plan. He wouldn't put Annwyl at risk until she secured her reign. Of course that didn't mean Annwyl would make it easy on him.

"Annwyl..."

"I grow tired of this...and of you." She snatched her arm away from him, taking several long strides to the wood table in the middle of her tent. Already she moved like a queen. The humans would be lucky to have her as their sovereign.

"Claim me now, Dragon." She crossed her arms in front of her chest, the fur barely covering her at all. "Or go. And never come back."

He knew what he should do. He should walk out of her life forever. He should let some nice human boy take her. Some nice human boy he would have to kill for touching the woman he loved.

With a sigh, Fearghus went and stood in front of her. "You are a mad bitch, Annwyl the Bloody."

"What other woman would put up with you, Fearghus the Destroyer?"

Fearghus leaned down and kissed the top of Annwyl's head to prevent himself from laughing. "You are a strange woman, Queen Annwyl." He brushed his cheek against hers.

"So I've been told." His hands slid under the fur covering, gliding along her waist, her back, her rear. He heard her breath catch as she leaned into him. "Don't make me wait, Dragon. Claim me now or let me go forever."

"Are you sure, Annwyl? Once this is done, there will be no going back."

"I've made my decision, Dragon." She let the fur covering drop to the floor. "But make sure it's what *you* want. Do me no favors."

He gripped her around the waist and easily sat Annwyl on the wood table. He kissed her

forehead, then her neck as he grasped both her forearms in his hands. He leaned in and kissed her luscious mouth as his grip on her arms became tighter.

Annwyl stared at Fearghus and wondered what he was doing. He stood quietly, holding onto her forearms as if he were afraid she'd run away. But that wouldn't happen. She wanted this, and him, more than anything. But maybe he decided he just didn't want her. That he'd rather spend his long life with a dragon as a mate.

Gwenvael led her on this course damn him. The drunker the dragon got, the more she realized how much he actually cared for his gruff older brother. Even as he tried to put his hand on her rear. Then Morfyd confirmed it. The two of them planted themselves on either side of her and told her that if she wanted their brother, she'd best get him to Claim her this night. Otherwise he'd leave, thinking he did it for the right reasons.

But maybe they were wrong. Maybe he didn't want her at all. Not for any length of time anyway.

Annwyl winced. His grip on her arms hadn't tightened, but pain still slashed across her flesh. Her fists rested against his chest and she felt his deep, even breathing against her skin as her agony became more intense. The pain reminded her of when she burned her hand over an open flame or got too close to a bubbling pot. It went through her skin right down to the flesh and bone beneath.

She tried to stifle a yelp of pain, but she just couldn't. It hurt that much. She dropped her head against his chest, praying it wouldn't last much longer, a warm jolt passed through her body. Her nipples hardened. Her sex became wet. Her breath came out in short gasps. She moaned as her entire body tightened. Fearghus' erection rose against her in response to her body's call.

Annwyl gasped as another pulse of heat passed through her. Her sex clenched. Her legs weakened. She was coming. She didn't know how or why, but she was coming. And when a third wave of heat flashed through her body, she cried out. She came hard, her teeth biting into the flesh of his chest.

Fearghus kissed her then. His mouth brutally claiming hers; his tongue torturing hers with bold strokes.

The pain in her arms receded and her spasms stopped. Fearghus released her and she glanced down at her forearms, saw burned flesh on both. The lingering after-pain made her wonder if they would ever heal.

"That is so every dragon knows you belong to me." He kissed her again as he laid her back against the table. "And this..." he kissed her breasts, her chest, her stomach. "This is for me." He lowered his head between her legs, his tongue swiping the inside flesh of her thigh. She clenched her teeth as a burning pain spread over the area. He did the same to the other thigh and she gripped the

table, her fingers digging into the wood. He breathed over the two areas and the pain swept through once again. Annwyl bit her lip to stop herself from screaming but a low moan escaped as her body shook. Then his tongue speared through the folds of her sex, replacing the pain with sweet, deep pleasure. Her back arched off the table, but he gripped her legs and held her as his tongue dipped inside and around the swollen, hungry flesh.

She forgot the pain as Fearghus' talented tongue stroked her over and over again, bringing her closer and closer to release. Her hands clenched into fists, her moans filled the tent. Soon she began to shake as her climax ripped through her, a loud cry torn from her heated body.

Fearghus gently gathered her to him, pulling her off the table, and pressing her still shuddering body against his.

Fearghus whispered softly against her ear, "Are you all right?"

Her arms hurt. The insides of her thighs were sore. And burns permanently marred her body. Yes, Annwyl felt just fine.

She wet her lips and took a deep breath. "Is that all, dragon?"

Breathing hard, his cock hot and demanding against her, he growled. "Not even close."

"Good. I was about to feel disappointed."

Fearghus' head brushed against hers as he breathed in deeply. "You always smell so good, Annwyl."

"I do?" At least she hoped she said that. She wasn't quite sure. Fearghus slowly rubbing his head against hers, his long hair sliding across her naked body completely distracted her. An innocent move, it still made her knees weak and her nipples tighten painfully.

"You amaze me, woman."

"Then finish it," she purred as she wrapped her arms around his neck, ignoring the searing pain the move caused her forearms. "And keep me as your own."

Apparently he needed no further prompting. He turned her so that she faced the wood table. He ran his hands down her back. His lips following close behind. Alternately nipping and sucking her skin. He licked any wounds she had, cleaning them with his tongue. She wanted to order him to get on with it, but she knew he would just make her wait longer. So she placed her hands, palms flat, against the wood table and wondered when she'd become such a bitch in heat. She lost all control around her dragon.

Fearghus wondered how long before she started barking orders at him. He grinned against her flesh. Annwyl reigned absolute as the most demanding female he'd ever met. And every day she surprised him. Already she handled the worst part of the Claiming, the Branding not being for the faint of

heart.

Truth be told, he thought as soon as the process began she'd beg him to stop. At the first touch of heat on her arms, she'd panic and run. But he should've known she'd stay. She'd grit her teeth and faced the challenge.

But he never expected her to climax. Her whole body shook with the force of it and she drew blood when she bit into his chest.

The Claiming differed from pairing to pairing—after all these years his parents' notorious Claiming still remained the talk of the court—but he knew what he needed from his Annwyl. And, as always, it would be his pleasure to get it from her.

He pushed her legs apart and deftly entered her from behind. He wasn't sure, but he thought he heard her mutter "About time." Already wet and so tight, he felt like he might come before he even finished the first stroke. No other female ever made him so desperate. So hungry. He let his cock rest inside of her and he waited. And waited. She lasted about ten seconds before she pushed back into him.

He slapped her rear.

"Oi!"

"This is my Claiming, wench. Not yours. Try that again and we stop... for good." He lied, of course. There would be no way he would ever stop taking her. Fucking her any and every way he could. But he loved that growl of annoyance she gave when he taunted her. It made him harder.

For good measure—and really just because he wanted to—he slapped her rear again. She glared at him over her shoulder, but she couldn't hide the rush of moisture or the way her muscles gripped his cock.

She wanted him. Needed him. Which was good. Because this night he would make her his own, so that she'd never forget it.

She knew now that only one male could have ever claimed her. Only one dragon strong enough to make her his and his alone. Any other male she would have left dead on the wedding sheets. But her Fearghus was brave enough to take her. Brave enough to burn his mark into her flesh. And brave enough to slap her ass.

He never tried to tame her. He loved everything about her, including her rage, and he never tried to change it or make it go away. Fearghus embraced it as he embraced all of her.

He was her perfect match and one day they would rule Garbhán Isle together.

Fearghus moved inside her. Slowly. Taking his time. Making her hungry for it. She cursed him but it came out suspiciously like a moan. But by the gods it felt so good. And she couldn't stop herself from moaning. Gasping. Saying his name. Screaming his name.

He brought his long, hard body over hers and kissed her shoulders, back, and neck. His hands slipped under her body and gripped her breasts, squeezing her nipples tight. She leaned her head back and he kissed her.

He stood, lifting her chest off the table with one hand while the other slowly found its way down to her dripping sex. He massaged her there, avoiding her clit. And she thought briefly that she might possibly have to *kill him*.

She needed release. And she needed it now.

She leaned back against him, her arms going back to wrap around his neck as he hungrily nipped her throat. She again ignored the pain in her forearms as his black hair rasped across the wounds. She didn't care. Because at that very moment, even the pain felt good.

"Finish it, Fearghus," she begged desperately. "Now."

"Tell me what I need to hear first, Annwyl. Tell me."

Some how, she knew exactly what he wanted. What he *needed*. And she would not delay in telling him. "I love you, Fearghus. I love you and I'm yours. There will be no other. Ever." As if that had ever been an option.

"And I'm yours, Annwyl. Forever."

"Yes. That's wonderful," she barked dismissively. "Now finish it." He laughed, she assumed at the desperation in her voice. His cock thrust smoothly in and out of her as his fingers gripped her clit and firmly stroked the engorged nub. Her fingers dug into Fearghus' hair, gripping the silky strands as the wave of heat spread across her lower back. She moaned desperately as her body began to shake. Heat tore up her spine and her clit spasmed uncontrollably. The moan became a scream as the climax racked her body. He fucked her through her orgasm, but when her cries settled he allowed himself to come with a roar, his seed exploding into her.

The pair laid against the table, tiny spasms rocking their bodies. Until Annwyl looked back at him.

"Fearghus?" He looked asleep. His eyes closed; his breathing even and deep.

"Aye?" He finally answered without opening his eyes.

"So is that it then?"

He smiled. "Yes, Annwyl. That's it."

She looked across the tent to the tub, then back at him. "That tub certainly is far away."

He opened his eyes and glanced over. "Aye. That it is."

"Think we can make it?"

"Leave it to me, woman." He took a deep breath, wrapped his arm around her waist, and lifted her off the floor. He walked over to the tub, carrying her easily, his cock still buried inside her. With his

free hand, he reached down and dumped the tub over, the used water splashing across the floor.

“Watch. Learned this from Morfyd.”

He spoke an incantation in a language Annwyl never heard before. In moments, the tub filled with steamy water.

“Nice trick.”

“I thought so.” Fearghus stepped into the tub, still tightly holding Annwyl in his arms. He lowered himself into the hot water and relaxed back. “Of course, somewhere I may have just caused a drought.”

“Couldn’t be helped.”

“Selfish bitch.”

He kissed her neck, licked her ear, while his hands roamed slowly over her flesh. His shaft still buried deep inside of her.

“You know, Fearghus, you can let me go now.”

“I know,” he muttered against her neck. But his body seemed to have a plan of its own, as his hands did nothing but excite her, his cock hard again, growing in response to her moans.

Annwyl smiled. This was going to be a long night.

Annwyl forced her eyes open. Based on the shadows crawling across the dirt floor, most of the day had already passed. She probably missed luncheon.

She didn’t reach for Fearghus. There was no point. He was gone. She didn’t know when he left, but as soon as she awoke, she felt his absence.

The dragon took possession of her body all night. A few times she’d wake to find him inside of her, making love to her until she climaxed. One time she thought she dreamed that she’d taken him, only to wake up to find herself straddling his hips and riding his cock until he exploded inside of her. But the last time he came to her she knew something was different. He moved slow and gentle inside her. Taking his time, giving her the sweetest experience she ever had.

And she knew that when dawn came, he’d leave her. Tragically, she’d been right.

Annwyl dragged herself up to a sitting position, the fur cover slipping to her waist. She ached all over. And she did mean *all over*. Wounds from the battle littered her body. And her muscles and skin were sore from Fearghus’ Claiming of her.

Remembering the Claiming, she glanced down at her forearms and froze.

“*Brastias!*”

In a few moments her head battle lord strode into her tent, his eyes averted from her naked breasts that she didn’t bother to cover. “Is Morfyd still here?”

“Aye.”

“Fetch her.”

He didn't ask questions, he just moved. In a few minutes Morfyd came in, she saw the look on Annwyl's face and immediately became concerned. “What's wrong?”

“Your brother's gone.”

Morfyd nodded. “Yes. I saw him this morning.”

“Why?”

“He said you needed to do this on your own. You would be the one ruling these people. It was up to you to earn their loyalty. All he could do was bring their fear.”

Of course, he spoke true. *The bastard.*

Annwyl pointed to the marks on her chest. The pain she endured made her hope it had some useful significance and wasn't just the Queen having a bit of fun. “You never gave me a straight answer about this.”

“That is the Chain of Beathag. It's now a part of you, like your skin. The marks will never go away. And it has extended your life five...maybe six-hundred years. Perhaps a bit more or less than that. Hard to tell, really.”

Annwyl stared at her friend. “Oh.” Well, that might be worth a few minutes of excruciating pain.

She cleared her throat and held out her arms, “And these?”

Morfyd took Annwyl's forearms in her hands and studied them. She smiled, “Fearghus Claimed you last night, I see.” Clearly Morfyd slept somewhere else last night, since anyone within a league of the camp site could hear their exhaustive couplings.

“Yes. Now what are these?”

Morfyd shrugged. “He branded you.”

Annwyl looked again at the wounds. Last night they had just been areas of burned skin. She assumed that once she healed, scarred flesh would remain. But that's not what she saw now. Instead she saw a dragon brand on each of her forearms. The lines were dark, the dragons clearly defined. Easily seen. Each dragon different from the other, both wrapped around her forearms. Otherwise the flesh on her arms remained healthy and clear.

“He *really* branded you,” Morfyd added.

“What does that mean?”

“I've just never seen one so... dark before. Except my mothers. These lines are coal black.”

“He said it would be clear that my love and loyalty was too the dragon. Your brother was not joking.” Annwyl blinked as she remembered all of the Claiming from the previous night. She lifted the fur covering over her legs and sighed. “Oh, honestly!”

Morfyd peeked over the fur covering and snorted out a laugh at the sight of Annwyl's thighs. Dragons, larger than the ones on her forearms, clearly branded on her flesh. "He's more like Bercelak than any of us realized," Morfyd laughed.

"Well, I'll not wear a chain. I'll leave that to the Queen."

Morfyd leaned back, her smile revealing what a beautiful woman she was even with the scar. "If you like I could have some gauntlets made that would hide the ones on your arms. If you are feeling unsafe."

Annwyl shook her head. "No. What are a few more scars, brands, burns? Besides, I'll not hide my loyalty to your brother from any man." She stood and headed toward the tub. "And if one of them dare calls me a dragon's whore, I'll take their head." She stopped and motioned to the tub. "Now, can you do that trick with the water?"

Chapter Twenty

Brastias searched the castle for her. She kept disappearing on them. And once they found one hiding place, she would simply find another.

One year had passed since Annwyl took her brother's head and his place as leader of Garbhán Isle and Dark Plains. For six months she squashed rebellions as quickly as they rose. She also created alliances with other nearby kingdoms that hadn't been in place for almost a century.

But once the battles stopped and Annwyl's kingdom became peaceful, she seemed increasingly unhappy. It didn't take him long to realize that she was a war-time ruler. Her leadership born of blood and struggles for ground. That was all she knew.

But Brastias also knew that if Fearghus had been by her side, she'd be much less restless. Yet the dragon never came for her. And she never returned to Dark Glen to find him.

Morfyd, however, stayed by her side as council. Almost two hundred and fifty years of knowledge trapped inside that beautiful body and she helped Annwyl with the decisions involving peace and politics. Brastias did what he could, but it was Morfyd that kept Annwyl from taking nobles' heads on a whim. An amazing dragon, that one.

He'd just passed an unused bedroom when he heard a sound from the other side of the door. The sound of a turning page.

Brastias walked back and pushed open the heavy oak door. He found her reading by a window, a lone candle the only illumination in the room.

"Annwyl?"

"What now?" Her snappish tone increased as the months passed.

"We need you in the main hall."

"Why?"

"Delegations are here to bring you tributes."

“Again?” She sounded so annoyed he wasn’t about to tell her the truth. “Can’t you do it, Brastias?”

“I do not rule this land.”

“*Fine!*” She threw her book across the room and stormed past him. Once she was too far away to get in a good punch, he sighed quietly in relief and followed her.

He cringed when he saw what she wore. Leather breeches, leather boots, and one of those damned sleeveless chain mail shirts she insisted on wearing. Her branded forearms exposed for all the court to see. He thought about asking her to cover them with gauntlets, but he really liked his throat uncut and he had every intention of keeping it that way.

He thought of the upcoming evening and hoped that Morfyd carefully thought out this plan of hers.

Annwyl stalked into the throne room. Some of the nobles began to bow, but seemed to remember how much Annwyl hated it and they stopped themselves. If she weren’t so annoyed with the whole process, she would laugh. But she *was* annoyed. Very, very annoyed.

Annwyl threw herself into the high-backed stone chair her brother and father once used as a throne. She hated it. And she only used it for occasions like these.

“Lady Annwyl...” Morfyd began, but Annwyl cut her off.

“Can we just get this over with?”

Morfyd nodded, “As you wish.”

Delegations from surrounding kingdoms began to come before her. They offered a tribute to her of precious metals or gems. Or presented something that meant a great deal in their land. But Annwyl also began to notice something else. Every last one of the nobles that came before her brought with them a son. A strong, virile, unmarried male. When the House of Arranz presented three sons, one of them a boy no more than ten and two years of age, she’d had enough.

“Excuse me.” She stood up and walked over to Morfyd. “May I speak with you for a moment?”

She didn’t give the dragon a chance to answer, but grabbed her arm and dragged her out of the throne room and into a servant’s hallway.

“What is this?” Annwyl demanded.

“What do you think? And get off me.”

Annwyl silently reminded herself that Morfyd *was* a dragon. She could decide to shift right now and take the whole castle with her.

“I don’t want this.”

“No one is saying you have to take any of them as a mate. But you should at least look like you’re considering it. If they think one of their sons has a chance at being your consort, we’ve got a little more bargaining power.”

“Bargaining power for what?”

“Grain from Kerezik. Lumber from Madron. The list goes on and on. Do you not listen to our daily meetings about the state of your lands?”

“Of course I don’t. They’re dead boring.”

“Not everything can involve bloodshed, Annwyl.”

“Can’t you come get me when there is bloodshed? Otherwise just leave me alone to read.”

Morfyd took Annwyl by the shoulders and none too gently shoved her back into the throne room.

Grudgingly, Annwyl returned to her throne and let the painful precession continue.

Eventually she stopped looking at any of them. She sat sideways in the big chair, her legs thrown over the arm. She responded to each representative polite enough, but she could no longer hide her annoyance at the entire process.

But when the heir to the House of Madron strutted in with his entourage, she knew she just about hit the end of her tether.

The Madron advisor made the announcement. “Lady Annwyl of Garbhán Isle, the people of Madron bring you their thanks and undying loyalty.”

Annwyl glared at Brastias and Morfyd, huddled together in a corner watching her. They both knew her feelings about Hamish Madron. And how Hamish Madron felt about her.

Hamish stepped forward. “Lady Annwyl. It’s been so long since we’ve seen each other.”

“Lord Hamish.” She gave a wave of her hand and prayed the torture would end soon.

“Perhaps, lady, when you are done here we can dine together and discuss the future of our kingdoms.”

Annwyl smirked at the sudden look of panic on Brastias’ face. She knew what her old friend feared and she delighted in giving him exactly what he expected.

“No.”

A long pause followed as the Madron representatives took in her short, but direct answer.

Hamish pushed. “I’m sorry, lady. Is there something else that keeps your attention this night?”

“No. I just don’t like you.” Brastias rolled his eyes in exasperation. Poor thing, he didn’t realize that the torture had only begun. “You were ready to force me into marrying you. You’re lucky I let you keep your lands and your head.” Hamish glared at her. “Besides, Lord Hamish, any attempt to seduce me to get my crown would only have my dragon hunting you down and killing you. And I’d let him.”

Hamish became very pale and he didn’t bother hiding his disgust. “So the rumors are true then? You have mated with a dragon.”

“Very true. But, of course, if it bothers you, Lord Hamish... please, feel free to come and take my throne from me.”

Rhiannon landed and watched the men run for their lives. She really never tired of that moment. The panic on their tiny little faces. The sounds of their screams as they scurried off. She would have laughed and maybe sampled a few of the delicacies, but she had a purpose.

She needed that little human girl to get off her precious throne and return to her son. Any more time apart and there would be war. Already she regretted her recent insistence Fearghus come to the court. It cost Kisslene his life. It started with a simple, although admittedly crass, remark on Fearghus' choice of mate. It should have led to a challenge between the two. But this time no challenge came. No warning. Fearghus calmly told him to apologize. Kisslene wondered aloud if he too would enjoy bedding the girl. And Fearghus snapped the dragon's neck without a moment's pause. All court activity stopped. True, it wasn't the first time a brutal death happened in her court. Mostly due to Bercelak's rage or parts of Gwenvael being where they should not. But this was the first time that Fearghus caused the problem. And then Fearghus challenged any and all in the hall to take his rightful place among his clan. After seeing his hearty dispense of Kisslene, no dragon stepped forward. Not even his own kin would approach him.

Later, Rhiannon spoke with her children. Asking them about their brother. His siblings expressed worry about their brother's sadness. A word she would never use with Fearghus. He wasn't as exuberant as Éibhear or as lusty as Gwenvael or as cock-sure as Briece. He wasn't even brutish and grumpy like her Bercelak. Instead, he lived quietly and calmly. He only became upset when he couldn't have time to himself. He left the court earlier than any of her others because he couldn't stand the noise or his siblings constantly pestering him. And she let him go with her blessings. She prided herself on understanding all her hatchlings. She understood them better than any of them realized. She knew he needed to be alone. And even when he took the throne as king, he'd be the same way still. Nothing would change that. Or him.

Then the chatty little human girl came along. Because of the girl people now knew dragons could shift into human. Her sweet Éibhear, who she always had such high hopes for, only spoke of mating for life with a human. A human! And her own daughter, heir to her Magick and power, actually *served* the human female at Garbhán Isle.

In the beginning, Rhiannon became convinced that the girl seduced her son—and clearly the rest of her family—with her feminine wiles. At least, that's what she thought before she met her. But she quickly realized the girl had absolutely no feminine wiles to speak of. A hard warrior who risked death so that she could protect all her tiny human kin. Rhiannon even stopped referring to her as “it” the moment she took her flame. She screamed, true, but mostly because the pain was excruciating. But

once the process changed her body, the girl had gone on to take her brother's head, become ruler of all Dark Plains and Garbhán Isle, and still unite with a dragon. *All in the same day.*

That still impressed her. But now she had an unhappy son and she blamed the girl. A year had passed. The female tamped down all forms of insurgence with her tiny but mighty fist and now she needed to return to her mate. He'd Claimed her, she now belonged to him. If the girl changed her mind... well, it would be in her best interest *not* to change her mind.

Rhiannon's offer to Annwyl was simple. "Return to Fearghus now or suffer my wrath."

She stalked through the castle, her children trailing behind her, as Keita desperately tried to cover up her mother's nakedness with a cloak. Her children had arrived a bit earlier and were already dressed. They lived among the humans more than she, and she often forgot how much the human's own bodies caused them such distress. She paused outside the throne room long enough to pull the cloak on, but stopped and halted her children at the sound of Annwyl's voice.

"So the rumors are true then?" A male voice snapped in disgust. "You have mated with a dragon."

"Very true. But, of course, if it bothers you, Lord Hamish... please, feel free to come and take my throne from me."

Rhiannon exchanged glances with her children. Seemed she still might be underestimating the tiny human.

Annwyl swung her legs off the arm of the stone chair and stood to her full height. She looked in the eye of each and every head of the Houses before her. She tired of games and pretending. With all the Houses present, the time now came to make sure everyone understood her reign and her.

"Perhaps this is as good a time as any to clarify the situation for all. That way there are no misunderstandings. Yes. The rumors are true. My mate is Fearghus the Destroyer, the Black Dragon of Dark Plains. He is my mate and my consort. With him I shall rule. I understand if any of you have a problem with this. And please, feel free to try and take my throne from me." She lowered her voice to a whisper, but it razored across the silent hall like a shout. "Please."

She waited. When none stepped forward she turned her back. But the flicker of Danelin's eyes alerted her. They weathered many battles together and sometimes all you had time for was a look or one word. She knew exactly what he needed to tell her and she moved with her usual speed and brutality.

Annwyl pulled the jeweled dagger Fearghus gave her so long ago from her boot and, turning only her upper body, flung it behind her. The blade skewered the throat of a member of the House of Adhamhan who wanted to kill her in the name of his people. A big man in full armor, he wore no helm and Annwyl's blade lodged itself right in his neck. His big body crashed to the floor, causing everyone but Annwyl and her troops to jump.

Annwyl stared at him for a long moment, letting it all settle in for everyone present. Then she looked over the faces of the nobles. “Any one else?” No one moved. “I guess we are all clear now.”

She sat back on the throne, watching as Hamish scurried to the back of the hall. She glanced at Danelin, “Are we done now?”

He leaned in low so that only Annwyl could hear him.

“There were to be three more, but I believe they may have run for their lives.”

“That weighs heavy on my heart, Danelin,” she muttered under her breath.

He raised an eyebrow, “I can see that, Annwyl.” All her original troops from her squire to Brastias still called her by her name only, without the formality of title and she would not have it any other way.

“Annwyl the Bloody!” A voice rang out across the hall, startling Annwyl and Danelin as well as the entire court. “You speak of your mate and yet you are not with him.”

Annwyl’s eyes narrowed as her rage began to flow through her veins like blood. It must have been on her face as well, Danelin stepped back from her. His hand on his sword while Brastias and her troops moved in closer. Whether they were worried *for* her or *about* her she did not know.

She stared at the woman who stood at the large wood doors of the hall. Completely covered in a light blue cloak, she was the tallest female Annwyl had ever come across.

“Not sure what business that is of yours, lady.” Annwyl wondered whether she would kill her slowly or just out right.

The woman came forward, the cloak swirling around her bare feet. “I’ve traveled far to meet with you, Lady Annwyl, but I don’t like to waste my time or bandy words about.”

“And neither do I. So perhaps you should get to your point before I lose my patience.”

Annwyl felt a hand grip her shoulder and looked up to see Morfyd beside her. “Annwyl, I’d like to present Queen Rhiannon of the House of Gwalchmai fab Gwyar.” Annwyl cringed. What an ugly family name. She would hate to be stuck with something like that. “My mother.”

The feeling to bury one’s head in a ditch can be an overwhelming one, but Annwyl fought it just the same. The Queen stood in front of her. As human. She snatched back the hood of her cloak. Snow white hair tumbled down around her shoulders and an expression of intense dissatisfaction rippled across her face. She didn’t even seem to notice the gasp that went up from the court when they saw the mark of her own Claiming, a black dragon brand that went from her jaw down her neck and disappeared under her cloak.

But now Annwyl understood why all Rhiannon’s children were beautiful. As human she was absolutely stunning.

She looked at those who accompanied Rhiannon. A beautiful red-headed female who looked as innocent and sweet as any daddy’s girl. And three males that were clearly brothers. All quite beautiful in

their own way. The one with silver hair looked like he appeared before her under protest. The golden-haired one openly leered at her. And the blue-haired one grinned so happily that she could do nothing but give him a quick smile back.

“My point, *lady*, is that it is time to take your rightful place beside my son.”

Annwyl took a deep, shaky breath. The bitch just ordered her back to Fearghus. *Ordered her.* Her hands clenched into fists as the rage welled up. She could control the emotion now, but that only made it more deadly. Gwenvael must have seen it. He shut his eyes in resignation.

“And perhaps, *lady*, you should mind your own business.” Morfyd’s fingers dug deep into her shoulder as warning. A warning she ignored. “What goes on between Fearghus and myself is our concern. Not yours. And you need to remember that.”

She noticed Rhiannon’s children desperately trying to get her attention while Morfyd came dangerously close to tearing her arm off.

“Perhaps you forget who I am.”

“I forget nothing. And pray tell me, lady, how is your mate’s tail?”

At that point, Morfyd threw up her hands and walked back to Brastias’ side while Rhiannon’s sons cringed and the beautiful red-head dropped her head in her hands.

Rhiannon smiled. A disturbing sight to say the least. Unlike her children, her human teeth still resembled fangs more than anything else. “You know, Lady Annwyl, any woman strong enough to impale a dragon as mighty as Bercelak the Great, should be strong enough to go claim what is hers.”

Interesting turn from the Queen. Annwyl expected her to rip her head off instead. At least she expected her to try. “I appreciate your concern, lady. But I am at a loss as to why your son did not come himself.”

And save me from his damn kin!

“He foolishly fears that he will bring great risk to your safety. I now know there is nothing to fear. You are a deadly adversary. I doubt anyone here would dare your wrath. I know I wouldn’t.”

Annwyl wondered for a moment if Rhiannon spoke these words just for the benefit of the nobles. But she doubted the dragon would be bothered. The female a dangerously honest foe or friend. “But since my son is such a...”

“Prat?” Gwenvael offered.

“Insidious harpy?” Briec countered.

“Concerned mate.” Their mother spat out between gritted teeth as she silenced them both with a glare. “I have a gift for you.”

Annwyl readied herself. The Queen may be honest, but Annwyl still didn’t take anything she said at face value. “Gift” could leave her covered in blood and eyeless. “Really?”

“I offer you my loyalty and the loyalty of all dragons in Dark Plains.”

Annwyl wasn't sure what that should mean to her. “Oh. That's very...um...sweet.”

Morfyd returned to her side and leaned down to whisper loudly in her ear so that all could hear. “In case you didn't know, that means if anyone ever tries to strike out against you or your throne they will bring the entire dragon kingdom of Dark Plains and all our allies down on their heads. It happened once before about 1,000 years ago. When the dragons were done, they'd wiped the land clean.”

A jolt passed through Annwyl's body as some of the humans in the hall began to inch their way toward the exit. And Hamish couldn't run fast enough. She wondered what he originally had planned.

Annwyl looked at Fearghus' mother. “You give this loyalty to me? A human?”

“Yes.”

“Because of Fearghus?”

“No. I give nothing to my children. It all must be earned. And you have earned this. You've done very well. Without us. And without Fearghus.” She gave a bored sigh. “Simply put, you've impressed me, Annwyl the Bloody. And I do not impress easily.”

“I...uh... thank you?” For once Annwyl couldn't think of a thing to say.

Rhiannon waved her hand dismissively. “Yes. Yes.” She turned away. “But my son awaits, perhaps you best get that rump of yours moving.” Rhiannon headed toward the exit. “I must go. Bercelak, too, awaits and he is so impatient.”

“Need to get back to your chain, lady?” Morfyd and Keita coughed in surprise while the brothers simply appeared stunned.

Rhiannon glanced at Annwyl over her shoulder and gave the most sensual smile Annwyl ever witnessed. “Jealous?” Then she was gone.

Gwenvael stepped forward. For the first time Annwyl watched him get angry. “Woman, are you mad?”

“Why does everyone ask me that?”

“Well, you must have impressed her,” Keita added. “I thought for sure she would tear out your throat.” Annwyl remembered those white talons of the Queen quite well. “I kept thinking what are we going to tell Fearghus? Then I thought *who* is going to tell Fearghus? Then I thought we'd make Morfyd do it.”

With a vicious hiss, “Excuse me?”

“Would all of you stop!” Annwyl wiped her hands on her leggings and stared down at her knees. She knew what she had to do. She looked up at the dragons. “I need a ride.”

Gwenvael smiled. Relief seemed to spread through his entire body. He would never admit it but Annwyl knew the dragon cared much for his brother. “Thought you would. I can take you.”

Annwyl raised an eyebrow. “Sure that is wise?”

Gwenvael shrugged, “Good point. Briec will take you.”

“I will not! I’ll not have her smelling like me when she gets back to him. I *like* my tail.”

“I’ll take her!” Éibhear offered happily.

“No!” Both his brothers snapped.

“Honestly. You three are such idiots.” Keita motioned to Annwyl. “Let us go, sister. I will take you. I have some...uh...plans with a few soldiers near the glen.”

Annwyl shook her head as Morfyd snorted in disgust. “Um... all right.” She glanced over her shoulder, “Brastias.”

“Yes, Annwyl?” He stood beside Morfyd trying desperately not to smile, and failing miserably.

“I must take care of something, Brastias. Think you and Morfyd can keep that grain and lumber moving until my return?”

“Of course.” He grinned. “But we’ll let you know immediately if there’s any bloodshed.”

Annwyl looked at him, “And that’s all I’ve ever asked.”

Fearghus stretched out by his lake, his jaw cupped in one claw, the tip of his tail making swirling patterns in the blue water. He sighed. A year since he left her the morning after the final battle with her brother. A year since he held her in his arms. A year since he kissed her. A year since he buried his head between her thighs. A year since she punched him in the face.

He sighed again. He truly did miss her. He didn’t think he could miss anything or anyone that much. He wanted to go to her. Wanted to take his rightful place by her side. But he feared for her safety. And, more importantly, did she even still want him? What if she’d found someone else? Someone human? Someone who wouldn’t cough and accidentally toss a fireball at her in the process?

Did she already forget about him? Did she still love him? And when exactly did he become so insecure?

He sat up. *This is ridiculous.* He would go to Garbhán Isle. He’d retrieve his woman. She belonged to him. He Claimed her and nothing would change that.

Besides, he couldn’t take it anymore. Everything around his lair reminded him of Annwyl. He could almost smell her. Could almost feel her running up his dragon back, climbing atop his head, and bending her body over him so that their eyes could meet.

“Did you miss me?”

“Annwyl?” Fearghus, startled, jerked and Annwyl fell backward, tumbling down his back and tail. She hit the ground with an “oaf!”

He spun around and stared at her. Unwilling to believe she was really in his lair. As she struggled to her feet, he shifted.

“Well that was quite the greeting...oh!”

He grabbed her and dropped both of them to the ground, his arms protecting her head and back. Once he had her on the ground, he kissed her. Her body’s response immediate and as strong as always. Then he pinned her arms over her head, holding her body down with his. “*Where the hell have you been?*”

“Where have *I* been? *Where have you been?*”

“Here! Waiting for you!”

She tried to yank her arms from his grasp, but he held on tight. He would not let her get away now. “You left me, Fearghus. I woke up and you were gone. What was I supposed to think?”

“That I wanted to protect you.”

“Yes. So your sister told me. But why didn’t you tell me?”

“Would you have let me go?”

“Don’t flatter yourself.”

He stared at her...hard. She glared back.

“If that’s how you feel, then why are you here now, Annwyl?”

“Your mother came for me,” she bit out between clenched teeth.

Fearghus stopped. “What?”

“I said that your mother came for me. Told me it was time to take my place beside you.”

His mother ordered Annwyl back to him. That just couldn’t be good. Fearghus was afraid to ask but he had to know. “What did you say to her, Annwyl?”

“I told her to mind her own business.”

“Gods, woman!” Fearghus released her so that he could use his hands to cover his eyes in exasperation as he sat back on his heels. “Are you mad?”

Annwyl pulled herself out from under him. “Why does everyone keep asking me that?”

“What else?” He looked up at her. “What else did you say to her?”

She shrugged. “Let’s see... well, I asked her how Bercelak’s tail was doing?”

Fearghus buried his head in his hands again. “Are you that sure she won’t kill you?”

“Oh, no. Not at all. Figured she’d kill me right on the spot.” She stated it so nonchalantly that he knew she was being completely honest with him.

“And yet you...”

“Don’t like to be ordered around, Fearghus. You should know that.”

“Well, she clearly didn’t kill you. So what did she say?”

Again the shrug. “She gave me the loyalty of all dragons.” Fearghus stared at Annwyl. Not sure he heard her correctly. His mother handed to a human the loyalty of all dragons? Was he on another plain of existence? Had the gods decided to play tricks on his mind? *What in hell...* “Then she said she had to go, and I asked her if she was going back to her chain.”

His mother’s gift completely forgotten, he tried to look stern, but kept laughing instead. “Tell me you’re lying. Please.”

Annwyl grinned at him, “Wish I could. But it just flew out of my mouth.”

Fearghus grinned back. How could he not? He loved the most difficult woman he’d ever met, and he couldn’t imagine his life without her. He eyed her slowly. A bit leaner and a little darker, he guessed from the time she spent in battle and under the two suns. She still had a thin scar across her cheek from her brother’s gauntleted hand. And his brands stood out clear and triumphant on her forearms. Ah, Annwyl. Still beautiful. And still his.

“That’s a very subtle tunic you’re wearing, my love.”

Annwyl glanced down at the sleeveless chainmail shirt she wore. “I had these specially made. I like my arms to be free and comfortable. Easier to take heads.”

Fearghus nodded. “Did you miss me?”

Annwyl leaned back, the palms of her hands lying flat against the cave floor. Her body stretched tight. Taunting him. Tempting him. After all this time he still wanted her so badly he could barely breathe. “Not really.”

He tilted his head to the side, “Tell me you missed me, Annwyl.”

Annwyl’s eyes locked with his own. “No.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Tell me now, woman.”

She stared at his mouth. “Make me.”

“A challenge, *Queen Annwyl*?”

“Not a challenge you’d ever be able to live up to, *Prince Dragon*.”

With a snarl that he knew only Annwyl would find playful, he seized her ankle and snatched her body to him, dragging her across the cave floor.

“Oi!”

He pulled off her weapons, yanked off her chainmail shirt, and dragged her leggings from her body, pausing only briefly to lick the brands on the inside of her thighs.

Annwyl pushed at his chest, “You know, I should really beat the living...” He didn’t let her finish. Instead he pushed her down and stretched himself across her, covering her mouth in a brutal kiss. She shoved at his shoulders while her legs wrapped around his waist. Still his Annwyl, as always fighting to the bitter end while milking him dry. He grabbed her wrists and again pinned her arms above her

head. She growled in response as she sucked his tongue deep into her mouth. He settled between her thighs and buried himself inside of her. Slick and ready, her body shook beneath his with barely contained lust. Her moans and cries desperate against his lips. Her hips arched against him and he thrust hard into her in response.

She'd been gone too long from him. Too many nights spent alone, wondering if she were safe. If she were happy. If she missed him. Too much time apart for both of them, and he would never let it happen again.

So he Claimed her. Again. And he made sure she knew it.

Annwyl wrapped her legs around his waist and wondered how she'd managed so long without having him inside her. Filling her completely, making her think of nothing but him. Want nothing but him. A brutal coupling, but one she understood. He was Claiming her. Again. And she wouldn't have it any other way. She needed it as much as he did. To know that she belonged to him. And that he belonged to her.

She struggled to loose her arms from his steel grip, knowing that he'd never let go. She wanted to touch him. To feel his skin beneath her fingers. But she loved the fight just as much. He'd never give her an inch. Never let her get away with anything. She would always be his challenge and he would always face it with his usual unquenched vigor.

Annwyl strained against him. Each hard thrust bringing her closer to climax. He kissed her face. Her jaw. Her neck. But when his teeth sank into the flesh below her collarbone, she went over the edge. She screamed in release. A war cry. But he continued ahead. Never stopping until, several minutes later, he tore another scream from her. And that time he came with her. His roar almost drowning out hers.

Fearghus released her arms, laying his head against her chest. She managed a tired smile as she wrapped herself around him. "All right. So I missed you a bit," she finally admitted.

He laughed and she closed her eyes, the feeling of that deep voice sliding through her. She was safe. At home.

"No, no, Annwyl. Please stop. You're drowning me with all your emotion." He chuckled as his hands gently caressed her sweat-covered body. "And just so you know. I missed you too."

"Then why did you not come for me?"

Fearghus heard the pain in her voice and he hated himself for causing it. "Because I'm an idiot, Annwyl. That's why."

"So long as we understand each other."

He smiled. "We do."

“Well... good.” He hugged her tight and licked the side of her breast. She gave a soft moan and Fearghus knew that he never wanted to be without that sound ever again.

“And why exactly did your mother come for me, Fearghus?”

“Guess I had her a bit worried.”

“Oh? And how did you do that?”

He shrugged, “Well, you know...”

“You scared the hell out of everyone, didn’t you?”

“Just a bit.”

Annwyl gripped him tighter. “Foolish higher beings.”

He looked into the face of his mate, stared into those beautiful green eyes. “You should be scared. I’m a dragon, Annwyl. A born hunter and killer. The most ancient of destroyers.”

Annwyl burst out laughing. “You are so cute when you try to look scary.” She tweaked his nose with her thumb and forefinger.

“What the hell am I going to do with you, wench?”

She ran her hand along his jaw. “Rule with me, Fearghus.”

“What?”

“Rule with me.”

“You want me to come with you to Garbhán Isle?” And of course he would. He would give up everything to be with her. He had no intention of ever letting her go again. He just wanted to hear her say it.

Annwyl looked off toward the lake. He could see it on her face. She already had a plan; she just needed to figure out how to get him to agree to it. “That’s one option.”

“And another option is...”

“We rule Dark Plains from here.”

“No.”

“Why? It’s perfect.”

“Annwyl, I don’t think the nobles would feel comfortable being here.” And he didn’t want them anywhere near his lair.

But Annwyl sneered in disgust. “I don’t want those people here!” She barked at him, clearly annoyed he’d even suggest it. “With us! And don’t you dare offer!”

“Then what are you saying?”

“Garbhán Isle is not my home, Fearghus. This is. You are.”

He thought of the part of his lair that he made into their home. He equipped it with everything he thought a human might need or want and then added the biggest bookshelf and bed he could find. At the

time he kept wondering why he would even try. He always thought a queen must have her court with her. But then, Annwyl would never be an ordinary queen.

“I’m guessing, woman, that you already have this planned.”

Her eyes sparkled with excitement as she sat up, pulling away from him. “I’ve got it all worked out. The troops can set perimeters outside the glen. That way we’ll be protected. And, of course, I’ll only use my best and closest men. Morfyd and Brastias can take care of the day-to-day issues at Garbhán Isle. It’s all dead boring, anyway. It’s all about lumber and grain and... yuck! I can’t even make myself care.” He shook his head and grinned as she continued, “Your family and the other dragons will feel safer here, if they dare visit. And if there is any strike against our throne, Morfyd will be able to let us know. And now that your mother is on our side we can strike down anyone that gets in our way. Crush them like ants!”

She finished the last part off as if she just told him about a beautiful dress she made or new horses she bought. *Not* that she was, actually, discussing an alliance not seen in Dark Plains for more than a thousand years between men and dragons. An alliance she clearly planned to use.

He stared at her, not sure what he should say.

“Come on, Fearghus. You can’t tell me that’s not bloody brilliant.”

He laughed, “Yes, Annwyl. It’s *bloody* brilliant.” Fearghus leaned in and nuzzled her neck, his fingers brushing her hard nipples

She giggled as she pushed his face away. “That’s not an answer, Dragon!”

“Oh, you actually want an answer. I thought you already had your mind made up.”

She shrugged, a less-than-innocent smile on her lips. “I do. I was just being polite.”

He stared at her, then shook his head. “No.”

“What do you mean no?”

He stretched out next to her. His hands behind his head. “I mean no. I don’t think so.”

Annwyl pushed him, “Why not?”

Now he shrugged. “Just don’t feel like it.”

Annwyl crossed her arms in front of that gorgeous chest he never stopped thinking about, “Really?”

“Annwyl, I’ve been alone for well over hundred years. I’m used to being on my own. I think it will take some... convincing on your part.”

“Convincing?” She raised an eyebrow. “How much convincing?”

“Well, I am a stubborn dragon. Very stubborn. We’re looking at hours, if not days of convincing... or years.” He looked into her green eyes. “Perhaps a lifetime.”

Annwyl stretched out across his chest, her head propped up on one arm. “I guess I best get started then.”

“I guess you better, wench.”

Annwyl kissed him then. And Fearghus never let her go.

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