



A movie poster featuring a muscular man with long dark hair and intricate tattoos on his chest and waist. He is shirtless, wearing a dark jacket over his shoulders, and has his wrists cuffed in front of him. The background shows a fantastical city with towers and a large, winged creature flying in the sky. The title 'A LAMENTATION OF SWIANS' is at the bottom.

GOLDIE  
MCBRIDE

A LAMENTATION  
OF SWIANS

Lamentation of Swans  
*by Goldie McBride*

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## Chapter One

Gwyneth had never seen an elf—no magical beings of any kind. Of course, she'd *heard* of elves, but she'd never expected to actually see one. They rarely left their magical realms to walk among mortals and she'd never been beyond the castle gates in her life, doubted she ever would. A mixture of curiosity and awe filled her as she studied the one currently testing the chains that bound him, momentarily diverting her from the tempestuous emotions roiling inside of her. The long black hair that hung halfway to his waist was as inky as a starless night. She'd caught a flash of bluish highlights when they'd dragged the would-be assassin through the castle gates and across the bailey, like the glint of sunlight on a raven's wing, which proved it to be a profound black and not merely a very dark brown. His skin was golden brown.

She wondered if he was one of those referred to as a dark elf, or if it had nothing to do with coloring at all but rather a dark heart. She shouldn't have been in any doubt, she supposed, since he'd been caught in the very act of committing the most treacherous of deeds, but she was far more filled with awe and admiration than revulsion, and that was *before* she'd seen him.

Now that she'd seen him—well, she could barely catch her breath. She felt dizzy and hot and completely confused. Her heart was palpitating at a frantic pace, her ears ringing. It almost felt like fear, except she knew it wasn't. It felt like—

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*desire*, but she could hardly credit that, could've more easily accepted the fear. Why would she feel want or need for *that*—with him—when she could think of few things she found more disgusting, frightening, and painful?

It confused her, but she was more certain that it wasn't fear that was making her feel so strange. She supposed it was wicked of her that she didn't see his attempt on the king's life as proof of a dark heart, but she didn't. The truth was, she was far from alone in despising the king. There would've been far more folk of the realm who would've considered him a hero if he'd succeeded than a villain and she was one of them.

It was one of the things that had nerved her to approach him, the possibility, however vague, that he was nothing like the men of the castle, nothing like a mortal man, all of whom seemed to be nothing more than slight variations of the king, who was a vile creature as far as she was concerned.

It was almost disappointing to see that, beyond the very distinctive ears, there was not a great deal to set him apart physically from the men she saw every day. He was as near naked as he could possibly be and still retain even a bare modicum of decency. He'd arrived shirtless and barefooted, his breeches shredded until there was almost nothing left to the imagination.

She was a little disturbed that the 'little' that had been left to imagination had made her breathless with conjecture.

She couldn't fathom why.

If there was anything she hated more than men's quick tempers, quicker fists, and nasty habits, it was their 'nasty

sticks'. She would've been a happy woman if she'd thought it possible she would never encounter another.

She couldn't deny that the elf's form was pleasing to her senses, but she wasn't even certain of why she found his form pleasing. He was tall and lean. Maybe it was the fact that he was still muscular for all that when the men she was more familiar with than she'd ever wanted to be were either skinny sticks with virtually no muscle at all, or beefy and hauled around as much fat as muscle?

There was no doubt in her mind that he had plenty of muscle to make him physically powerful, and yet that lean form must also make him swift and nimble.

A wave of nausea abruptly shunted her eager curiosity aside, for almost the moment her imagination supplied her with an image of that handsome face above hers, that pleasing body striving above hers, her mind supplanted them with real memories that were far from pleasant.

Thom had managed to corner her before she could slip out of the great hall only a little earlier when she'd helped to serve the evening meal. She'd become adroit at avoiding the men-at-arms, but she'd been distracted—by *him*. She'd allowed her mind to stray at the most dangerous of times and she'd paid for it in flesh.

She'd been witless enough to struggle on top of the stupidity of allowing herself to get cornered and now it wasn't just her woman's flesh that was battered. She was bruised and battered all over from his roughness. Her face was still throbbing where he'd cuffed her with his fist.

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She could thank her stars he wasn't the brute Bradford was, she supposed. Otherwise he might have killed her instead of merely rattling her brains in her head. Then again, she might've been able to elude Bradford. He wasn't as young as Thom and he was a sight heavier. She'd managed to elude Bradford's clutches the last time he'd tried for her when she'd accidentally planted her foot in the midst of his genitals.

Of course, she'd had to hide for nigh a month to avoid the lesson he'd promised and poor Meg had ended up having to endure instead, but as badly as she'd felt about it she'd never been able to bring herself to simply endure as the others did.

She didn't think she could bear it anymore at all—not another moment, not another day.

She hadn't even had her first menses when the men-at-arms had noticed her budding breasts and commenced to laying in wait for her. The first time had been the absolute worst, but she couldn't say that any time since had been a great deal better beyond not being as painful in her woman's place. For the most part, she managed to avoid capture, but she had her duties. Cook would beat her and chase her from the kitchen if she tried to hide to avoid having to help with serving and every meal since that first time she'd been caught had been a living nightmare.

"Do you have a purpose for skulking there in the shadows? Or have you merely come to gape, mortal?" the elf growled, jerking Gwyneth from her thoughts, startling her so badly that she nearly dropped the peace offerings she'd brought to try to help her bribe the assassin.



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Gwyneth clutched the wine skin and the bundle of cheese and bread a little more tightly, wrestling with the craven urge to run away. As unnerving as the elf was, though, her desperation won out.

"How did you know I was here?" she asked in a low voice.

He turned his head when she spoke and she could see him focus on the wall she stood behind, almost as if he could see the thin crevice she was peering through.

His lips curled. "I could smell you."

The insult jolted through her in a shockwave. Anger slowly flickered to life in the wake of it.

Truthfully, she smelled the stench on herself—not hers, but Thom's. At least, it hadn't been hers before he'd shoved her to the rushes and coupled with her like a dog. She'd been trying to close her mind to it because it reminded her too strongly of what had happened and made her feel sick to her stomach.

It was hard to ignore the fact that he hadn't actually looked toward her until she'd spoken, however.

The anger began to war with the fear and desperation churning inside of her. Beyond the fact that he'd insulted her without provocation, she wondered if it wasn't a strong indication that he was no better than those she'd hoped he would help her escape from. It seemed unavoidable that he was merely angry and lashing out at the nearest object handy as they so often did.

As tempted as she was to simply turn around and leave the way she'd come, though, there was no hope behind her. It remained to be seen if there was hope before her. "I

brought you something to eat," she said finally, swallowing her anger and her fear with an effort.

He was silent for so long she thought he'd decided to ignore her. "You've taken a strange route to bring food."

There was a question in the comment and she realized much, if not all, of his anger had vanished. It had at least diminished and it made hope rise in her that she'd been mistaken.

"They didn't send me to bring it to you," she confessed at length.

She had his full attention and wondered as she stared at his shadowed face if he could pierce the darkness. Surely not? The cell itself was dim, lit only by a meager amount of light from the torch in the sconce on the wall beyond his cell. Where she stood, she could barely see her hand in front of her face. She'd found her way by memory along the passages she'd traversed many times, fearful of taking a candle as much because she thought it might be missed as from the anxiety that the telltale glow might be detected through some crack and give her away. Most of the castle's inhabitants were dead to the world, true, the men-at-arms having drunk themselves to sleep as was their habit and the servants having worked themselves into a stupor, but in Belmor Castle there were always some people stirring.

"I can not reach it from there," he responded finally.

Gwyneth hesitated, but she'd come this far. If her courage failed her now she might never get another opportunity to escape. "You won't ... you won't hurt me if I come near enough to give it to you?"

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She couldn't tell anything about his expression in the shadows, but she could tell he was mulling over her question.

"Who are you?"

Nobody. "A serving maid."

"There would be no benefit in harming you, then, would there?"

Oddly enough, both his tone and the remark reassured her. "Except to vent your ill humor."

She saw a muscle work in his square jaw.

"There is only one I would care to vent my ill humor on and, as he is not around, I believe I can contain it."

"A moment," she responded, moving away from the peep hole through which she'd studied him. Guiding herself with one hand along the wall, she counted her paces until she'd reached the secret door that led into the dungeons. Despite the antiquity of it, the device that worked it had been very cleverly designed. The door swung open soundlessly. After peering around to be sure none of the guards were near enough to spot her, she made her way quickly along the passage until she reached the assassin's door.

Kneeling on the floor, she very carefully tore off a piece of bread about the size of her fist and a chunk of cheese about half again that big. Her heart was thundering in her chest when she pushed her hand through the small slot at the bottom of the door designed for feeding prisoners when the guards felt like it.

"It's not very old at all," she murmured.

"It smells appetizing enough from here," he responded dryly, "but I am chained to the wall. I still can not reach it."

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Gwyneth sat back on her heels in consternation. She hadn't counted on them chaining him—he'd been manacled when they'd brought him in. She'd thought they would only toss him into a cell.

She would have to try to lift the guard's keys, she realized, feeling cold terror wash over her. In the back of her mind, she'd realized that all along, that she would have to open the door to free him and there was no way to do that without the keys. She just hadn't wanted to think too hard about the obstacles that stood between her and her goal.

Moreover, she'd envisioned pleading her case before she set him free. She'd thought she might wring a promise from him while she had something to bargain with. Once she'd freed him, she wouldn't have anything at all.

Retrieving the food she'd offered, she licked her dry lips and took the plunge. "By what name are you known?"

He seemed a little disconcerted by the turn in the conversation, and suspicious.

"Caelin. What is your name, little maid?"

She doubted he had any idea of her size or age, but she appreciated his effort to soften her with words. It was a small thing, true, and no doubt an attempt to deceive, and yet, even though it cost little, kind words were as rare as hen's teeth. "Gwyneth."

He was silent for several moments. She did not know why, but there was something in his silence that disturbed her. It was almost as if the name was familiar to him—no great surprise, she supposed since it was a common enough name,

but still it bothered her, that silence that seemed to indicate that he was thinking. "Only Gwyneth?"

She ignored that. He had to know she was of Belmor. "If I help you escape, will you take me with you?"

Contrary to what she'd more than half expected given the fact that the king had ordered him drawn and quartered at dawn, he greeted her question with a prolonged, thoughtful silence. "I came to kill King Gerald. If you set me free, I am honor bound to try again. I do not think you want to be with me when I do, little maid."

Gwyneth digested that in shocked silence. She thought what shocked her most was his honesty. She'd been prepared for him to lie, to readily agree regardless of what he planned to do. She hadn't been prepared for the possibility that he'd so boldly refuse. She didn't actually understand it if it came to that. He was an elf and she knew, although they weren't immortal, that they lived many times as long as mortals. Mayhap their lives weren't as precious to them? Even if that was true, though, it was completely incomprehensible that he'd risk such a horrible death if he had a chance at freedom.

But then, maybe he thought he could free himself? "Couldn't you ... take me someplace safe and then come back?" she asked plaintively.

"Where in all of the realm of Wynsmere is a safe place?" he growled sardonically. "You are an innocent if you believe there is such a place in these lands since Gerald, 'the impaler' seized the thrown."

His sarcasm was biting, particularly since he had to know she was no innocent. There was no such thing for anyone who

lived in the shadow of Belmor Castle. Truthfully, she couldn't recall a time when she had been. Even as a small child she had seen such things at King Gerald's principle seat, Castle Belmor, that sickened her, gave her horrible nightmares, made her so fearful that many nights she was afraid to close her eyes.

She swallowed with an effort against the knot of fear and frustration that formed a hard, unswallowable knot in her throat. "They will make a place for me on the executioner's platform if I help you to escape and we are caught."

"They are likely to if they catch you down here," he said harshly. "Run back to your corner, little maid, and turn your mind from this business."

Defeat settled on Gwyneth's shoulders. She didn't know why it had even occurred to her to think for a moment that there was any escape for her. She was doomed to live out her days in the shadow of Belmor Castle—however many days that numbered. Death almost seemed preferable—so long as it was a swift one. Few folk had that blessing, though.

The urge to weep washed over her, but she squelched it. Nothing could be more useless. He wasn't likely to unbend, even a little, because she shed tears. It would only get her caught.

For a time she wallowed in the misery of defeat, too caught up in the death of her hopes to turn her mind elsewhere. As the pain eased, though, her mind turned again to the fate that awaited him. She felt bile rise in her throat at the thought.

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She couldn't simply leave, she realized. She couldn't turn her back on him and allow so horrible a fate to overtake him when she might prevent it. Rising decisively after a few moments, Gwyneth set her 'bribery' down and moved quietly to the corner, peering around to see if she could see any sign of the guard who generally patrolled the dungeons. When she saw no sign of him, she tilted her head to listen. Faintly, she could hear a chorus of snores, but it was hard to say if any belonged to the guard or if all belonged to the other wretched souls rotting within the dungeon. She heard nothing that indicated he might be awake, though, and finally gathered the nerve to creep down the passage for a better look.

He was slumped across the rickety table in his little cubby hole, she saw, a mug of overturned ale near his hand, his cheek in the puddle that had formed on the rough top and was dripping through the cracks and onto the stone floor. After studying his face for a long moment, she scanned him for the keys and discovered without much surprise that the ring of keys was hooked to his belt.

Anywhere but that, she thought, feeling her belly cinch a few knots tighter than before. Again, she hesitated, wondering if she'd lost her mind, but the image of the stranger rose in her mind again, the elfin man who called himself Caelin. She couldn't bear the thought of what would happen to him come morning if she did nothing. She didn't know why, but she couldn't.

Dragging in a sustaining breath, she held it, let it pass slowly between her lips as she began to inch closer to the guard. A thick stream of drool dripped from his thick lower lip

to join the puddle of ale on the table. His entire face was slack.

Reaching him, she curled her fingers around the keys to keep them from jingling when she lifted them from the hook on his belt. He uttered a snort as she lifted the ring. She froze for a split second and then completed the action, slipping the top of the ring free from the hook. Before she could release a sigh of relief, he snorted again and lifted his head, staring at her bleary eyed. "Wha's this?" he slurred.

Gwyneth stared at him wide-eyed, praying he'd settle his head and drop back into his drunken stupor, searching her mind frantically for a reason for her presence. She finally managed to force her lips to curl when she saw, contrary to her hopes, that he was scanning her length speculatively. "I brung you a bit o'food an' some wine ta wash it down," she said in a hoarse whisper. "I din like ta wake you, though."

He made a grab for her abruptly. Fortunately, he was too drunk to move with any coordination. He tripped over his boots and sprawled on the floor. Gwyneth uttered a giggle, dancing out of his reach. Intended to sound flirtatious, hysteria threaded the sound instead, but she doubted he had enough wit about him to realize it or care if he did.

"I see in ain't food ye've got on yer mind," she muttered in an attempt to sound seductive. "I'll just git the stuff I left around the corner an' once ye've had a bit of food if yer still interested...."

He almost caught her as she whirled to dash back down the corridor, but although he succeeded in grabbing her foot, his hold wasn't firm enough to trip her up. Racing frantically



back the way she'd come, she dropped to her knees and pitched the ring of keys through the food slot of Caelin's cell. Whether he could reach them or not remained to be seen, but she didn't want the guard grabbing her and discovering she had them and it seemed doubtful, now, that she could elude him long enough to free the elf.

She'd done what she could. It was all that she could do.

A heaviness still settled over her as it flickered through her mind that it might all be for nothing, that he might not be able to reach the keys she'd tossed to him at such risk to herself.

The guard lurched around the corner and grabbed her before she could gather up the wineskin and the cloth wrapped food. Staggering, he pitched them both onto the rough stone floor, landing on top of Gwyneth hard enough to knock the breath from her, stunning her.

"I'll have a piece of you," he growled, "and then mayhap another bit and then I'll think about the wine."

He wreaked of ale, but his breath was worse. By the time Gwyneth had managed to drag air into her bruised chest again, though, she'd had time to realize it would be better all the way around not to fight him. He was still too drunk for his suspicions to have been aroused. If she didn't give him any trouble, mayhap he'd finished quickly and pass out, and she could still escape with her hide intact.

Hiking her skirts, he shoved a hand between her legs, fondled her roughly for a moment and began fumbling to get his nasty stick from his pants. Bile rose in Gwyneth's throat. Between his stench, his foul breath, and the certainty that

she had to endure another poking before she had any chance of escape, it was all Gwyneth could do to hold onto the contents of her stomach.

She felt something about the thickness and length of a finger prodding her and relaxed fractionally when she realized his member wasn't large enough to cause her a great deal of discomfort. The man, himself, was another matter. After stabbing at the tender skin along her cleft ineffectually for several moments while she lifted her hips up and down in an effort to help him ring the right hole, he finally managed to find her opening and plowed inside of her. Her eyes stung, watering at the burning pain. It was always the same, she thought despairingly, although Alyce had assured her she would grow accustomed and that it was far, far better to endure the discomfort of a few moments than to risk whelping the bastard's brat. She wasn't certain she completely agreed, not if it meant there was no pain in the other place, but her fear of childbirth weighed heavily against that, and worse yet was the threat of succeeding in producing offspring in the image of their fathers. She did not know if she could stomach allowing such a babe to suckle her without vomiting.

Snuffling and grunting like a pig as he began pumping into her, he grabbed a handful of breast and squeezed it until Gwyneth had to grind her teeth to keep from crying out. He made several attempts to capture her mouth, but Gwyneth managed to elude that, jerking her head away each time so that, although she felt his slobber smear across first one

cheek and then the other, she didn't have to endure the taste of his putrid mouth on hers.

He'd managed no more than a handful of seconds of humping and grunting when he abruptly jerked, uttered a grunt, and went limp on top of her. Gwyneth struggled to push him off, to catch her breath. Abruptly, he rolled off, sprawling limply on the floor beside her.

"Swine!" Caelin growled furiously, bending over the unconscious guard with his fists balled.

Gwyneth struggled upright, shoving her skirts down. "Is he dead?" she asked shakily when she realized the guard hadn't merely passed out—at least not without help.

Caelin slid a speculative glance at her. "Say the word and he will be," he said grimly.

Feeling her heart leap, her throat grow dry, Gwyneth gaped at him but finally shook her head. "You should go. They'll send someone to spell him in a bit."

He nodded. Kneeling over the man, he relieved the man of his weapons,—a short sword and a dagger—tore a piece of cloth from the guard's shirt, and used it to form a gag. Grasping the man beneath his arms, he dragged him into the cell. Gwyneth heard the clink of the manacles as she finally gathered her wits and looked around for the bread and cheese she'd stolen. The scuffle with the guard had crushed the bread a bit and the cheese, she saw, had been kicked several yards. Scrambling on her hands and knees, she gathered what was left, brushed the dirt and debris from the food, and carefully tied it in the cloth she'd used to carry it.

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Caelin emerged from the cell again just as she finally managed to get to her feet. He locked the cell behind him while she tucked the knotted cloth into the waist of her skirt and slipped the strap on the wine skin over her shoulder to leave her hands free. "I'll show you the passage," she said shakily.

Nodding, he looked around and finally pulled the torch from the sconce on the wall. She stared at it, frowning as she struggled to find the words to reason with him. "There are cracks and peep holes all along the passage. If anyone's about, they're liable to see the light."

He divided a glance between her and the torch and finally returned it to the sconce, following her as she moved to the wall and felt around for the catch that would release the secret door. He caught her arm as they stepped inside and the door closed. "Show me the way to the king's bedchamber."

She shook her head even though she doubted he could see it. "I don't know the way."

He studied her, or perhaps considered whether or not she was lying. "You do."

Resentment swelled inside of her. "I freed you. Let me go. I am going whether you help me or not! I cannot *endure* this place longer!"

"Show me the way first," he growled, fury in his voice and in the tension of his stance.

She tried to pull her arm free. "I risked enough to free you—endured that pig rutting me. Let me go, I say! I am leaving."

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She sensed an internal struggle but finally his grip on her arm eased. "I will take you a short distance from the castle and give you directions to reach the first village beyond here. And then you will tell me the way to his apartments. If I can, I will join you again once I am done here."

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## **Chapter Two**

Reluctance instantly clogged Gwyneth's throat, but she merely nodded.

It wasn't that she cared if the king died. In fact, she thought she would cheer with everyone else. The reluctance was entirely from the dismay she felt that he would get himself killed in the attempt. There was no reasoning with men, though, she knew. Once they'd set their mind to do something they would certainly not listen to a woman—mayhap another man, but not a 'silly female'.

Turning to her right, she placed a hand along the wall. He followed closely, settling one hand near hers on the wall and the other at her waist. She could feel his warmth at her back, could feel his leg brush her skirts from time to time. His hand felt heavy on her waist and it only grew heavier as they progressed, his heat filtering through the threadbare fabric of her skirt and shift and the bustier she wore around her ribs.

She did her best to block her keen awareness of him and focus on keeping her footing as the floor began to be more and more uneven, but she stumbled from time to time. Each time she did, his hand tightened on her waist briefly.

After a time, the wall also grew rougher beneath her hand and she realized they were no longer beneath the castle itself but had reached the caverns that connected to the passage. Almost as if he'd read her mind, he spoke.

"We aren't beneath the castle any longer."

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The timber of his deep voice sent a quiver through her to join the faint shaking she'd become increasingly aware of at her core. "No," she responded, hearing the quaver in her voice.

"You are cold?"

Gwyneth swallowed with an effort. The air was cool and damp and the contrast between that and his warmth, she was sure, contributed to the tremors. But just as surely the chill air didn't account for it entirely. "A little chilled," she said finally. "Stay here a moment. It's safe to light a torch now ... and not at all safe to traverse the caverns without the aid of a light."

He released her almost reluctantly as she pulled away and felt around until she found the flint and torch she kept near the entrance to the cave. The oiled rags wrapped round the top of the torch were damp from the humidity and it took several minutes for a spark to catch. When it did, she tucked the flint into the bundle at her waist and lifted the torch, scanning their surroundings.

"How do you know about the caverns?"

Gwyneth sent him a sharp glance at his tone, wondering at the suspicion that threaded his voice. "I am not sure. I suppose I was shown, but I do not remember."

She felt his assessing gaze on her as she moved toward the passage she knew would lead them into the valley beyond the mountain range where Belmor Castle lay.

"Does the king know of the passages?"

Gwyneth flicked a glance at him over her shoulder. "I do not know."

He tilted his head at her speculatively, but she turned away. "If you thought they did you'd be more anxious."

"How do you know how anxious I am?" she asked tartly.

"You tremble from fear then?"

There was disbelief in his voice. It irritated her because she suspected he had a very good idea that it was him that had her trembling. "Should I not be fearful when it means my life if we are captured together?"

"You should. This is why I think it is strange that you are not."

Gwyneth compressed her lips. "You do not know me, elf. Unless you read minds—and I have never heard it said that elfin folk possessed that ability—do not presume to guess what I feel."

They traveled in silence for a time. "Why did you risk so much to free me?" he asked after a while.

She supposed it was to be expected that he would be curious, and yet she'd hoped he wouldn't ask. "I did not want to watch your execution."

"You need not have."

"Not looking would not have kept it out of my mind," she said in a strained voice.

What did he expect her to say? What was he digging for? Everything she'd said was the truth, even if it wasn't the whole truth. She didn't actually understand her reasoning herself. It wasn't something she could explain.

The decision was more a matter of many things coming to a head at once, she decided, than any one thing, many things that had begun to outweigh her fears.



She wasn't terribly afraid at the moment because she thought they were relatively safe. She was almost positive no one knew about the secret passages or the cavern besides her. She didn't know why she thought that except that she'd never heard anyone mention them and certainly never come upon anyone.

Not that she spent a great deal of time wandering through the secret passages, but she'd taken refuge in them many times in her memory. She'd explored them as a child and since that time until she'd memorized every twist and turn and new every secret door.

She didn't know how she knew about them when it seemed no one else did, but she supposed she'd learned before King Gerald's time. She could remember when he'd taken the castle. She just couldn't remember the old king, or his queen, and certainly no one had dared to speak of them since King Gerald the Impaler had seized the throne, so named because he was so fond of mounting his enemies, which was anyone who displeased him, on pikes along the roads throughout his kingdom.

"If you are laboring under the belief that I am not guilty of the crime of which I was accused, you are wrong."

Gwyneth flicked a glance at him over her shoulder. "If you are laboring under the impression that I would hold that against you, you are wrong."

He pulled her to a stop, forcing her to turn and look at him. "Why would you risk so much for me?"

The barely suppressed violence and suspicion in his tone confused and unnerved her. It was almost as if he sensed a

trap of some sort, suspected her motives, but what could he possibly think she had to gain by releasing him and then leading him to his death? She supposed, after a moment, that it was understandable, given his treatment, that he trusted no one within Belmor and she still didn't understand why it seemed that he felt animosity toward her.

And mayhap she was only imagining it was directed toward her?

Or he was still angry that she'd refused his request?

She allowed her gaze to flicker over his handsome face for a handful of seconds, studying the appealing features she'd only guessed at when she'd watched him from a distance. He stirred her. She didn't know why, but she wouldn't have told him if she had understood herself why she had only to look at him to feel her pulse race and her breath grow short, to feel *want* for him to touch in the all the ways she'd thought she hated when other men touched her.

It defied reason that she had looked at him, a battered prisoner, and felt hope, that she'd felt truly alive for the first time that she could recall.

She looked away when she felt a blush rising to her cheeks. "I do not know," she murmured. "I thought...." She lifted her gaze to meet his again. "I felt hope when I saw you. I have not felt that in a very long time."

He studied her face assessingly and finally lifted his free hand and gently touched her swollen cheek. She winced, more because it brought to her mind how misshapen it was, how ugly, than because she felt any pain. Lifting her own

hand when he allowed his to drop, she covered it self-consciously.

"If ever a man needed killing it is Gerald the Impaler. Show me the way."

She felt her face twist with the anguish that descended upon her. "So that you can throw your life away?"

"If necessary."

"For nothing?"

His expression hardened. "If I slay Gerald, it would not be for nothing."

"You would never get near enough!" she said angrily. "He is surrounded by magic. You could not pierce the spell that protects him. If you could, you would not have been in that cell!"

"I *did* get near enough!" he snarled furiously. "I was within an inch of piercing his black heart! If not for his guard, he would be dead now! It was not his magic that saved him. I was outnumbered. Damn it woman! Someone has to put an end to that monster, whatever the sacrifice! What hope have you felt if you have no confidence that I could end his reign of terror?"

Gwyneth swallowed with an effort. "You could lead...."

"Whom? The dead? Those willing to fight him have lost heart. The monarchy is dead. It died when the true king and the princes and princess vanished from the 'loving care' of their uncle."

"Some say...."

He shook his head angrily, cutting her off. "That is nothing but wishful thinking ... because their corpses have never been

found. In their hearts, everyone knows that the boy king and his siblings were murdered long ago."

"Go then!" Gwyneth said angrily. "You do not need me to show you the way! The passage is behind you. Follow it! It will lead you to his chambers eventually. I do not *know* the way."

Jerking free of his hold, she turned on her heel and stalked away, trying to think what she would do when she left the caverns behind. She knew nothing about the countryside beyond. She'd never dared explore it, fearful every moment that she was gone that it would be noticed and they would begin to search for her, perhaps find the passages themselves.

He caught up to her, grasping her arm and halting her again. "I gave you my word that I would take you a safe distance from the castle," he said tightly.

"You did not give your word, and I would not hold you to it if you had," Gwyneth said angrily. "I am far better off without you! They will search for you. They will not miss one maid."

"This is true," he said, grim amusement threading his voice now, "but that did not seem to weigh with you before when you asked me to help you escape."

She sent him a resentful glance. "I had not thought, then, that you would be more of a liability than a help," she said tartly.

"You are saucy for a lowly maid," he said, speculation mingling with the amusement that still laced his voice. "And oddly well spoken."

The comments unnerved her, chilled her. She wasn't in the habit of unleashing her temper. If she had been she would've been dead long since, or feeble minded from having the 'sauciness' beat out of her. She couldn't fathom why she'd given vent to it with him—except that she was frightened out of her mind and she had convinced herself that he wasn't like the others.

"I beg pardon," she said shakily.

"So I am the only one privileged to feel the sharp edge of your tongue?"

She was overwrought. There was no other explanation for it. She'd allowed emotionalism to cloud her judgment. She was fortunate that he seemed to view it with amusement ... at least at the moment. She was vastly disappointed that he seemed so reluctant to help her when she'd helped him. She was angry that she'd risked so much to set him free only to discover that he was determined to throw his life away needlessly anyway, but neither of those reasons were sound enough to explain her loss of control.

"You need only follow the passage to the stairs and go up them four flights. There are peep holes spaced out along the walls. One will give you a view of the target you seek and there will be a secret panel along the wall in one direction or the other. It is usually in the corner of the room where it is least noticeable. There is a latch on the inside that must be turned. On the other side it requires pressure in the same area to release the latch." She paused. "I pray you find a swift death Caelin—for your sake and mine—and not the death he planned for you, for that would haunt me forever."

Lamentation of Swans  
by Goldie McBride

\* \* \* \*

Her words haunted Caelin as he made his way along the passage. It wasn't fear of death that kept them in his mind, however.

Nothing had transpired as he had expected, planned, anticipated. King Gerald had been waiting for him alright, as Artimus had told him, but not to yield his charge to him as he had been instructed. He had arrived to find himself barred from the castle by the protection spell, had been refused admittance by the guard, and told to go about his business when he had sent word to the king that he had been sent to take the serving girl, Gwyneth, to the Temple of Mannet Rae at Sherbrooke.

He had been forced to retreat a short distance and consider how he was going to fulfill the task he had been given when he'd been presented with what appeared to be an insurmountable obstacle. In truth, he had not planned the attack upon the king so much as he had seized the opportunity. It had certainly occurred to him that it was the surest way to be taken inside—if they did not kill him outright. He had *wanted* to kill the bastard when he had been barred from the castle—actually, he had long thought the world would be a better place without the bastard but until he had had direct dealings with him he had not wanted to do it himself so badly. He would not have gotten the opportunity even to try, however, if the king had not brought a troop from the castle to hunt *him* down and kill him.

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Being hauled to the dungeon in chains had certainly not been something he had anticipated when he had set out. He had known that it would be no easy task to free himself or to search the castle afterward for the girl, but it had seemed the only possibility for success.

And then the girl had simply presented herself to him, had come to the dungeon to free him almost as if she had been sent. He had wondered if she had been. Mayhap Artimus had manipulated her in some way, but he could not see that it was anything that she was aware of—try though he might to detect it.

She was nothing like he had expected her to be, not the creature he had envisioned when the wizard Artimus had sent him forth to find her and fetch her to the temple for the rites. She should have been as foul as the vile creature that had spawned her! She should have been twisted and pitted and belly churningly ugly!

She should not have pleased his eyes! She should not have made his cock stir with desire. Even if she had not been the spawn of that creature, she should not! She was not elfin. He was not certain *what* she was, but more mortal than aught else.

There was an aura of magic about her, faint but unmistakable—a legacy of her sire, no doubt. That was how he had known her, suspected even before she had given him her name. It was not her magic, though. He was almost certain of that, but some enchantment, mayhap, that the wizard had placed upon her.

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A poor one, by the gods, if it had been intended to preserve that part of her that was precious to the wizard! That which he needed to free himself from his prison, for it had not!

Anger churned in his belly again when he thought of that. Despoiled! Before his very eyes, almost within his grasp, and him helpless to prevent it!

All was lost! *Nothing* he could do now would give him the chance to free the soul of his beloved mother from that bastard who held her chained in the between realm! Nothing! Because Gerald the Impaler had not guarded the girl as he had been charged! Gerald had balked him at every turn!

Damn him! Damn him to eternal torment! And her, too, the sniveling, useless lump of mortal flesh, he thought with abrupt viciousness. She was useless! Useless! He could not wrap his mind around it, could not think what to do beyond the driving need for vengeance—upon someone.

He would slit the bastard's throat, pull his black heart from his chest while he lay drowning in his own blood!

He had managed to find the stairway the wench spoke of and ascend no more than two flights, however, when he heard the alarm raised, a clamor within the walls of the castle that could only mean one thing. His escape had been discovered.

He stopped abruptly, listening, at war with the urge to continue and exact his revenge and the certainty that he had lost any chance of catching the bastard unaware and unprotected. Frustration built in him until he wanted to howl his rage. Abruptly his focus shifted to the girl, though.



The useless pawn.

Was she useless? Was there no way he might fool the wizard long enough to draw him forth and, mayhap, slay him? Artimus needed the girl to free him from his prison, but could he use her when she was despoiled, no longer the virgin he had expected?

He didn't know. Black magic was a force he didn't fully understand, but he realized abruptly that he couldn't simply give up. He had to try, somehow, to free his mother from Artimus' clutches.

He had to have the girl even to attempt anything at all, he realized in sudden panic as he listened to the noises escalate on the other side of the wall of the secret passage. They would find her in their search for him, perhaps slay her outright for her treachery. They would have to know that she had been his accomplice—little though he'd needed her damned interference! The little fool!

He *knew* he should have killed the guard! His body would have been evidence enough of the escape, but it was his tongue that was a danger to the girl!

Gods damn it!

He launched himself down the stairs at a dead run and raced down the corridor, unmindful of the noise he made. There was enough clamor beyond the passage to mask it and, in any case, he feared if he didn't make haste he would find his efforts wasted. To his surprise and vast relief, he found her huddled in the caverns. Tears stained her cheeks. It made his belly tighten when he saw them, but he dismissed the

flicker of guilt. He had no doubt that she had shed them for herself.

"We have been discovered," he said grimly. "On your feet! Hurry now, wench, or we will die tonight!"

Gwyneth scrambled to her feet, so relieved to see him alive when she had been certain he had gone to his death that it took her a moment to realize what he had said. "He is dead?"

"Nay," he growled. "I had not even reached the top of the stairs when I heard the alarm go up. The guard was found, no doubt! I should have slit his throat. They will know I had help."

Gwyneth thought for several moments that she would faint with fright or throw up. She fought both urges, whirling to lead him as quickly as she could through the labyrinth of tunnels that honeycombed the mountain. She chose the one that led the furthest from the outer curtain wall in the hope that they could reach it before the searchers had spread that far.

She stopped to catch her breath when they reached the opening. The elf, Caelin, pushed past her. She thought for several fearful moments that he meant to abandon her. Even as she pushed herself away from the wall, however, he returned, snatched the torch from her hand and tossed it the ground, stamping the flames out. "They are not convinced, yet, that we have managed to find our way outside the walls. We do not want to remove that doubt."

He took her hand. "The ground is rocky. Take care where you step."

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Warmth flowed through Gwyneth when she felt his hand close around hers, felt his strength in his firm grip. Nodding, although he hadn't waited for her acknowledgement, she followed him as carefully as she could, afraid that, if she sent rocks tumbling, the sound might carry far enough to give them away. There was enough light outside, though, for her to see better than she had thought she would be able to. Relief warred with uneasiness at that discovery. Was it nearing dawn already? Would the sun lift the darkness she had hoped would cloak them until they were a safe distance from the castle?

Or was in not dawn approaching at all? Was it merely the lessening of the deep gloom of the caverns that made it seem so light?

Surely, that must be it, she decided. She had only waited until the hall had quieted to leave. It could not be much past midnight if it was even that late.

She stumbled several times in spite of her efforts to be as careful as possible. Caelin was far taller than she. His legs covered the rocky slope as if it was broad daylight, free of treacherous rocks, and as level as the floor of the loft where she slept. Beyond that, she was weary. She had been laboring in the kitchens since well before dawn. She hurt all over from the roughness of the guard when he had rutted her and Thom not many hours before that. And she was more frightened than she had ever been in her life. The fear, she thought, was almost more taxing of her strength than any of the rest.

The third time she stumbled, Caelin stopped abruptly and turned his anger upon her. "Is it your intention to give us away?" he demanded in a low growl.

Gwyneth studied him in dismay. "My legs are not as long as yours," she whispered.

He seemed to wrestle with himself, but instead of cuffing her for her impudence on top of her clumsiness, he merely turned away and pulled her to a walk again. He moved slower than he had before. It was almost a reproach in and of itself, an unspoken criticism of her failings, for he moved more slowly than even she needed. She swallowed the bitterness that rose in her throat with an effort.

At least he hadn't beat her.

But then, she reflected, that would not have been accomplished without making a great deal more noise than she had made stumbling over the rock and no doubt she was slowing him down enough as it was. He didn't want to spare the time.

When they finally reached more level ground and she thought it safe to do so, she looked behind them, searching for the castle to see how far they'd come.

Not nearly as far as she'd hoped, she discovered with dismay. She could see the torches moving along the ramparts without difficulty.

Caelin paused and lifted his head, uttering a strangely musical warbling sound. He paused, as if he was listening, and then uttered it again. Gwyneth thought at first that the rhythmic pounding in her ears was nothing more than the sound of her heart, for it took on a more rapid cadence when

she glanced back at the castle again and thought she saw the gate begin to open. She was certain of it when she caught the first glimpse of a torch in the gaping mouth.

A soft whicker snatched her attention away from that distant threat. She whipped her head around fearfully and saw a dark shadow racing toward them across the field. "They are sending out a search party!" she gasped, gripping Caelin's arm a little frantically.

"I know. It was a certainty that they would sooner or later. We are fortunate that it was later ... and that they did not manage to capture Darkness."

Gwyneth swallowed convulsively, but she saw that the frightening shadow was no horrible apparition or even a horseman bearing down upon them. It was merely a black stallion. It began to slow even as she recognized it for what it was but was still racing directly toward them at a frightening speed. It skidded to a halt before Caelin, nodding its head so vigorously that it tossed its mane wildly about its head.

"Good boy!" Caelin murmured, his deep voice a soft croon of affection that sent a flicker of envy and resentment through her. If she had had a mane and tail she might have earned more appreciation for her own efforts, she thought bitterly.

She did not have more than a moment to dwell on it. Caelin turned, caught her about the waist, and tossed her onto the back of the prancing beast. It began to sidle and dance harder almost the instant her tailbone settled painfully against its spine. Gwyneth sucked in a sharp breath as she felt her balance shift, felt herself falling.

She hit the ground hard enough to knock the breath from her lungs, too stunned for many moments to get her bearings or attempt to rise.

Caelin grasped the horse's head, whispering near his ear and the nasty beast settled. Stroking the horse soothingly, he moved around to where she lay. "Did she frighten you, big fellow?" he murmured before he knelt to help her to her feet. "Ignore the stench. She is nothing more than a mortal maid—well, female."

Hurt and anger welled in her breast at that. Even as she gained her feet, however, Caelin grasped her and tossed her onto the hateful beast's back again. "Hold on this time until I mount," he advised her sardonically.

She twisted her hands in the stallion's mane, more than a little tempted to see if she could wrench it out. Caelin caught the mane above her grip and flung himself across the horse's back behind her. Settling one arm around her, he pulled her tightly into the cradle of his thighs and nudged the horse. With no more urging than that, Darkness turned and launched himself into a ground eating lope, racing across the broad, open fields that surrounded the castle.

Gwyneth was glad for the hold, despite the fact that it was becoming increasingly clear that she was not welcome, that Caelin considered her a burden he would be better off without. It seemed unfair that he felt no gratitude at all for the risk she had taken to help him, for the mauling she had endured for his sake, but she had not done it to earn his gratitude, she acknowledged, and it was doubtful he entertained any illusions about her motives. She had helped

him in the hope that he would help her and he could be in no doubt of that when she had tried to barter with him. Mayhap he considered them even, given the circumstances, and felt no reason for any sense of obligation.

She supposed he was right.

It still stung that he took every opportunity to throw it in her face that she was less than appealing by referring to her stench, but she was obliged to admit that he had reason to be offended. She had not smelt half as bad from the sweat of her labors as she did from the maulings she'd endured from Thom and then that disgusting drunkard, Bard. If it was not bad enough to be ground into the filth on the floors by their rutting, neither man had smelled as if they had been near enough to water or soap to wet more than their fingers since spring—at the least. She could hardly bear the stench herself. She would gladly have scrubbed the smell of them from her skin and clothes if there had been any way to do so!

Under the circumstances, she began to feel more shamed than abused, wished that she could put enough distance between them that she need not worry that he could smell her filth. There was not much hope of it with the king's men on their heels, but she had not heard a hue and cry. She held out the hope that they would be combing the hills surrounding the castle for some time before they tumbled to the fact that their quarry was long gone.

She had actually begun to relax somewhat as Darkness ate up the miles with his steady lope when the horse began to slow, began to toss his head and whicker a warning that he had scented danger in the shadows that lay before them.

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*by Goldie McBride*

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### **Chapter Three**

Drake felt a ripple along his skin that took no more than a fraction of a second to identify. Forcing the sudden tension from his shoulders by rolling them ever so slightly, he narrowed his eyes against the smoke that lay in a low cloud in the tavern and slowly searched the throng of humanity in the establishment for the magic user. A wielder, he wondered, in such a place?

Mayhap. It was a popular place, he thought wryly, being the only one of its kind for many miles. Travelers had little choice but to patronize it, regardless of the rough crowd that he could see gathered under its roof. They were easy enough to pick out—the bullies that strutted around like they owned the place, shoving people out of their way, demanding service without regard to anyone else waiting.

He dismissed them. The magic was powerful. No one with that kind of power worried about throwing his weight around to ward off a confrontation. They had nothing to prove. The travelers perched on the edges of their seats while they waited to be served, looking torn between hopefulness that they might actually get a bite to eat before they were forced to leave and the urge to bolt immediately, he also dismissed.

His gaze settled finally on a man in the shadows at the far end of the room. His keen eyes pierced the gloom wreathing the man. He looked to be somewhere between thirty and five and thirty in human years and yet there was as much white in the hair that hung well past his shoulders as there was

black—an odd sort of coloration. It wasn't mixed. It wasn't black hair threaded with white. There were wide shocks of white on either side of the front that framed his face. The back was all black.

He scanned the remainder of the tall figure folded into the booth—long legs stretched out beneath the table, broad shoulders.

Not a wizard, he decided. Not human.

He considered for a moment and finally pushed his way through the throng. They gaped at him as he passed, but they were mere humans. They were no threat and therefore of no interest.

He stood over the table looking down at the stranger, the magic user, and finally settled across from him.

The stranger met his gaze. Something flickered in his eyes, recognition of a fellow magic.

Drake sprawled negligently in the seat he'd appropriated and dragged in a deep breath now that he was close enough to ignore the other scents around them. Surprise flickered through him. He glanced at the odd shaped scar on the man's forehead. "What would a unicorn be doing in a place like this, I wonder?" he murmured in an amused, rumbling voice, although he was far from amused. He was, in fact, deeply suspicious that he knew exactly what the unicorn was doing there. Most of his irritation, however, was due to the fact that he hadn't instantly recognized the man for what he was. Inwardly, he shrugged. It was the hair and the poor lighting that had thrown him. He could see now that the paler hair was not merely white, but rather white gold.

Faine studied the giant of a man across from him. "If you are going to walk about as such a great, hulking brute, you waste your time trying to blend with the humans, dragon. Few of them attain such massive proportions," he said dryly.

Drake stared at him indignantly. Instead of pointing out that it was hard enough to reduce his bulk to such a piddling stature, he took exception to the insult about his appearance. "I am a handsome creature ... which ever form I take," he growled. "You need not take your own lack of confidence out upon me, unicorn. It was a civil question."

Faine rolled his eyes. "I had forgotten how vain you creatures are. I must certainly beg pardon. You are magnificent—I am surprised that bench will hold your magnificence."

Drake narrowed his eyes at him. "You are touchy."

"I am hungry," Faine retorted. "I have traveled far this day and this is the only establishment I have run across in hours that held promise of food." He lifted his voice at that. "Sometime this eve?"

The people around them fell silent for several moments when he bellowed at the maid across the room. She had paused to gape at him. "Yes, sir! Coming up, sir!" she gasped uneasily.

"Bring a plate for my companion while you are about it, wench! And ale!"

Drake lifted his brows at him. "From whence have you traveled?"

Faine studied him for a long moment and finally lifted his tankard, draining it before he set it down.

Drake swallowed with an effort. His throat was dry as dust from his own travels and he had always been fond of ale. It was one of the few things humans did well in his opinion—brew.

"Blackmoor Forest."

Drake looked at the unicorn in surprise, abruptly remembering his suspicions of before. "That is a very long way to travel—like that. Four legs would have brought you faster."

Faine's lips tightened. "My wings brought me faster than that," he said tartly. "You are not the only one with wings."

Drake smiled thinly. "Ah—more and more curious. There are not many of your tribe left. And whence do you travel to that you have decided that two legs will carry you better than wings?"

"If you are curious, spit it out, dragon," Faine said sarcastically.

Drake grinned abruptly, but there was little humor in the smile. "I am called Drake."

"That is a great surprise ... since you *are* a Drake. No imagination, the dragons," he muttered.

Drake glared at him. "You are curiously uncivil, unicorn. What is it that you are up to to travel so far, I wonder? And disguised as a human? You are not on tribal business."

"I am here on my own business!" Faine snapped. "My name is Faine, and I did not ask for your company ... Drake."

The barmaid, who'd arrived at their table to hear the last of that speech, sloshed ale on the table in her rush to drop the tankards and the plates of stew. Faine slid an evil look

from the puddle on the table to the woman. She paled noticeably, snatched a dirty rag from the waist of her gown and hurriedly dried the table before dropping two forks upon the surface. "I'll be back with a fresh loaf of bread."

"I am impressed," Drake said coolly. "You have frightened a witless female—mortal."

Faine flushed. Hunching his shoulders, he picked up the fork and began to stab at the food on his plate and push it into his mouth.

"Ah," Drake observed. "I am a touch testy when I am hungry, also." He picked up his tankard and drained it, setting it down before he availed himself of the other fork and focused on emptying his own plate. He'd nearly cleaned it when the maid returned with the promised loaf of bread. "Another tankard of ale for me and my friend and another plate of the stew."

She gaped at him, but merely nodded jerkily.

"There's others here ain't had the first plate yet," a man at the next table over growled.

Drake flicked a hard look at the man, staring at him until the man turned pale and turned away.

Faine snorted. "You are in no great humor yourself."

Drake sighed. "I do not suffer humans gladly. They are a disgusting species."

"Which begs the question of what it is that brings you here among them."

Drake mopped up the plate with the bread and shoved it into his mouth. "I am searching for something."

"Something you lost?"

Drake's expression twisted abruptly. "Aye."

Faine studied him a long moment. "This something is not somehow connected to the wizard Artimus?"

"Aye, very closely connected. Is that what has brought you, then?"

Faine glared at his plate. "Aye."

"He is not taking any chances," Drake murmured. "Or mayhap he thinks to play us against one another?"

Faine considered that thoughtfully. "It is hard to understand the workings of the mind of humans—especially those of his ilk."

"Shall we do battle for the prize, then, unicorn? Or combine our wisdom to battle a common foe?"

Faine studied him. "You do not need my help, dragon. You are as powerful as I am."

"More powerful," Drake corrected him. "As it happens, this ... object that I have lost is far too valuable to me to dismiss the possibility of gaining an ally to strengthen my chances of retrieving it."

"What is it that the bastard holds of yours?"

Drake swallowed with an effort. "My mate's egg—the last of her line since he has slain her. And you? What does he hold over you?"

Faine released an explosive breath and finally flicked a hand through the black hair that lay across his shoulders. "He has placed an enchantment upon me, stolen my ability to change at will. By day, I am myself. By night—this."

Drake looked at him curiously. "I cannot imagine much that is worse than losing one's will, but I am not certain I

completely understand. You had the ability to change before, did you not?"

"And change back at will also," Faine said tightly. "I chose not to. I despise this form. I despise the thing I become when I am in this form—human! I feel ... the things that they do, feel myself changing more and more each day when I am forced to live in this body. I have lost my purity of spirit. I am an outcast of my tribe. I do not know if I can regain what he has taken from me, for I am blacker every day, but I have no choice but to try."

Drake was damned if he could see that Faine had much to complain of, but he supposed it was not that Faine was worried about the impurity of spirit so much as he was worried about the fact that he would have no mate—which he could understand having lost his own. Or mayhap, it was a combination of that and being outcast from his tribe? The unicorns were not solitary creatures as the dragons were, he reminded himself. They were accustomed to living together. Solitude, he supposed, to one such as Faine was a form of torment.

As for the impurity of his spirit—well, he had not balked at wolfing down the stew and unicorns were not meat eaters. Clearly, he was driven or he would not have come so far. He was not certain how much of an asset Faine would be to him when he was wrestling his own demons, but it would be tricky to rescue his mate's egg. It might take finesse and he was not good at that. It was as important to acknowledge one's failings, he thought, as one's strong points.

He nodded. "It will be better for both of us, I believe, if we pit ourselves against Artimus together. He is a strong wizard—an evil bastard—as evil as they come. I have sworn an oath that I will avenge my mate upon him and free her egg to preserve her line. I do not mind hedging my bets. I do not trust that he will willingly fulfill his end of the bargain. We must be prepared for that."

Faine considered it, but not long. As badly as he hated to admit it, he knew Drake was more powerful than he was. It was to his benefit perhaps more than Drake's to join forces with him. "I will not mind either. Shall we go to Belmor Castle then to retrieve the spawn of that creature and take her to him?"

"The sooner the better. I do not want Maud's hatchling in his hands."

Drake was outraged at the coin demanded for such a piddling meal. He was not even full! Sullenly, for he hated parting with his gold, he tossed the coins down upon the table before the thieving wench and stalked out of the tavern. Faine, he discovered, was grinning when he finally recovered enough from his pique to glance at his new companion.

"There is something you find humorous, brother?" Drake growled.

Faine shook his head. "It is not a tale, then, about dragons and their gold," he murmured.

Drake narrowed his eyes at Faine broodingly. "And what tales are these?"

"That you are tightfisted as bedamned."



Drake sucked in a breath of outrage. "That is a *lie*! We are generous creatures! It is only that I have a dislike of being robbed!"

"You ate two meals," Faine reminded him.

"Two? By the gods! It was not even enough at two piddling plates!"

"You are a big fellow."

"I am trim!" Drake growled. He patted his flat belly and struck his fist against his chest. "This is all muscle and you are an insulting twit!"

Faine was amused, but he allowed it to drop and they traveled in silence for several miles. It was Drake who first caught the scent and stopped abruptly. "Magic."

Faine glanced at him sharply and inhaled a deep drag of breath, trying to dismiss the anger that welled in him that his own senses were so dulled by the human form that he had not noticed. He caught the scent, faintly, but it disgusted him that he had not only not captured it first, he still could not entirely identify it.

He was loathe to admit it, however.

"Elfin. He is a long way from his forest. Shall we wait to see what that other scent is that wreathes him? Or show ourselves, do you think?"

"Unless his own senses are too cloyed with the other scent, I think he will guess that we are here," Faine said dryly.

Drake nodded. "I thought as much myself. We should simply proceed then and meet him."

They had not walked much further when Faine's eyes finally picked out the travelers heading in their direction. They

were mounted, but he did not believe that it was the beast that had confused him. The bouncing breasts of the figure on the front easily identified the gender of the forward rider, but he still could not tell whether it was she who was elfin or her companion, much to his disgust.

The horse slowed and finally stopped altogether while still some distance from the two of them.

"Wary," Drake commented in a low growl and then lifted his voice to address them. "What is that you have with you, elf?"

"What business is that of yours, dragon?" the elf asked coolly.

Drake sniffed the air. "A very great deal, my friend. I have traveled a great distance. I do not believe that I will allow you to make off with the prize that I have been seeking."

Caelin cursed under his breath. The king's men behind them and a dragon and a unicorn before him, if he was not mistaken! "The prize is mine!" he growled. "I worked hard for it and I mean to take it with me."

Drake mulled that over. "Artimus has been very busy. Why, I wonder, would he send an elf when he has already sent me?"

"And the unicorn? Did he send him on his errand, as well?"

"Aye," Faine replied.

"One prize for three. There is a dilemma," Caelin said tightly. "I warn you, I will not give it up without a fight. I have a trade in mind that is dear to me."

"We also."

Caelin considered that. He was well aware that he had few options, however. The dragon could fly and would if pushed to it and Darkness could not outrun a dragon. "Shall we parlay, then, and see if we can come to an amiable agreement since it seems that we are traveling in the same direction after all?"

"I could simply take her," Drake growled.

"Dead, she would do you no good," Caelin responded coldly. "I could slit her throat faster than you can transform yourself. Shall we see?"

Drake considered whether he would or not and realized that he could not tell only from speaking to the elf. If the wizard held a hostage dear to him, however, he would have no more to lose by slitting her throat than if she was taken from him. It seemed likely he would do just as he threatened. "Let us sit down and discuss this."

"This is a poor place for it, dragon," Caelin retorted coolly. "King Gerald's men are no great distance behind us."

"The bastard did not turn her over to you?" Drake demanded indignantly. "He was to hold her in safekeeping until the wizard sent for her."

"He seemed loathe to hand her over when I demanded it. I was forced to use guile to enter his keep."

Drake glanced at Faine. "Already the bastard has lied," he growled.

Faine shrugged. "In all likelihood, but not necessarily. No doubt that is why he decided to send the three of us. He suspected that Gerald had betrayed him."

Drake grunted. "Do not forget that you agreed to parlay," he said. "I will scatter the king's men, but I will expect you to

honor your word and meet me at the mountain pass so that we may sit down and see if we can figure this out."

"Agreed," Caelin said readily.

"Follow him, Faine, while I take care of the humans."

Faine sent him an irritated look. "I can not shift," he said pointedly. "I will follow, but I am not likely to keep up in this form."

Drake grunted. "Faine will go with you."

"I have no problem with that," Caelin said grimly. "I gave you my word."

"On the horse."

Caelin stared at him. "He is a unicorn. Why can he not shift? Darkness is laboring already! He has run for miles carrying the two of us!"

"It is a long story," Drake snapped. "Can you take him up? Will you?"

"We will not *make* the pass riding three!" Caelin snapped.

"Fine!" Drake snapped. "I will carry him myself."

He snatched at the tie at his throat angrily, loosening the neck of the shirt and pulling it off. "Carry my clothes, Faine. I do not want to have to buy or steal more and it is too cold to run about in nothing more than human skin!"

"And distressing, no doubt, to the humans," Faine said tartly.

"Are you insulting me again, unicorn?" Drake demanded testily.

Faine chuckled. "I was only thinking that if the man-root you carry in any way matches the size of the rest of you that

that would distress the humans no end—and make the ladies swoon."

Drake grinned abruptly, pleased with that. "It is a fine staff, if I do say so myself."

Dropping to the ground, he pulled his boots off and set them aside, and then shucked his breeches. Faine had actually been jesting. He was a little startled to discover that Drake had not been merely boasting as he seemed inclined to do. "By the gods! You do not have trouble with wind drag?"

Drake chuckled. "It works well enough as a rudder—and quite well as a rutter, if it comes to that, and that is all that matters to me."

Faine gathered Drake's clothing and bundled them. Privately, he had his doubts there were many human females that would not run screaming at the sight of it. He had had a bit of trouble with that himself and he did not have near the breadth or length Drake was swinging. Aye, they were impressed with it, but they were as likely as not to decline taking a ride on it.

Well, he *did* have near that, but still....

The elf, he discovered, still lingered and the female in front of him was staring at Drake open mouthed. It irritated him, despite his earlier thoughts. She looked more unsettled when Drake crouched and transformed himself.

Inwardly, Faine shrugged. He was not inclined to think Drake nearly as handsome a creature as Drake had insisted he was. In point of fact, he suffered a qualm at being so near him in his dragon form. Somehow, it had seemed far more

reasonable to consider joining forces with Drake when they had both been in human form than it did now.

Apparently, the elf felt the same. When Drake shifted, the horse began to dance rather frantically, and the elf allowed him his head when he abruptly bolted.

Drake flexed his wings, stretching to ease his muscles from being cramped so long in the human form. Gathering force into the muscles of his legs, he dipped toward the ground and sprang upward, beating at the still air near the ground to lift himself aloft. It took far more effort than he had anticipated and it annoyed him. For a few moments, anxiety wafted through him that he had not displayed his magnificence to the female, but he dismissed it almost immediately, wondering where the thought had even arisen from.

She was human, he thought with disgust, female or not.

He considered why the thought might have occurred to him as he gained an altitude that allowed him to see for several miles, pinpointing the torches in the distance without any trouble at all once he had risen above the trees.

He could not put it down to missing his mate. He did, but he had needs and he had not thought that punishing himself and suffering more would tarnish her memory in any way. He did not grieve less because he allowed himself a little comfort. He had not forsaken his vow.

It should not have been lust then, though he supposed that might be it. She was pleasing to his eyes—for a human female. He struggled with that thought and realized that it was an attempt to lie to himself. He had a loathing for humans in general, and wizards in particular, but he had

always found human females to his taste. Of course, they were only for fucking, for assuaging his needs, but they were useful for that when the dragon females had no interest in fucking merely for pleasure, or for amusement.

So, mayhap it was lust.

But she was a bad target for it, he reminded himself, in fact not a possibility.

Artimus had been clear on that—he needed a virginal sacrifice and he meant to have *that* virgin.

It seemed a great shame to waste a pretty female like that. There were plenty of ugly ones! Why could he not use an ugly, virginal female? And why must it be his own spawn? Human or not, there was something very wrong with that!

Humans! They were a wasteful lot!

He was in a suitable frame of mind once he'd reached the soldiers, he discovered, to want to create mayhem upon them, although, in a general way, he never killed without cause. There *was* cause, however, he reminded himself. Gerald had sent them to interfere in his quest for revenge and the search for his mate's child!

They noticed him at once, of course. He was far too magnificent to go unnoticed, dark or not, and they began to lob their missiles at him in panic.

Provocation, he thought triumphantly! He whipped around in a tight circle, gritting his teeth as their arrows found marks. Sucking in a deep breath, he ground his back teeth together to ignite the gases and belched a swath of flame at his tormentors. They screamed. They ran, for their horses

had bucked many of them from their saddles and were racing frantically in the other direction.

He climbed until he was well out of range and plucked the painful arrows from his hide, dropping them. For a few moments, he soared on the currents of air at that altitude, gauging the damage and finally decided that he was good for another pass.

He swung around, sucking air into his lungs to force the gases from his glands and then he swooped low as he expelled the fire. Satisfied that they seemed far more interested in retreating to the castle than following—for the moment at least—he flapped his great wings to carry him upward again, circling to watch them on the ground below and make certain they didn't regroup and resume their pursuit.

He brooded over Gerald's treachery as he studied the man children below him. There was no end to the treachery of man, he thought. One could never trust them. They were always plotting something.

Deciding Gerald needed a lesson himself, he allowed his nose to lead him to the castle. He was glad he did. He had not believed the elf was lying but it never hurt to check. Gerald did, indeed have a protection spell over the castle. Now how had he managed that? He had no magic of his own, not according to anything he had heard.

Artimus had to be the source. So, had he woven it to add that protection to the female? And, if so, why was it that he had failed to mention the spell when he had sent them upon



their errand? Who was being duped? What game was Artimus really playing, he wondered?

Setting his questions aside for the moment, he tested the strength of the magic and discovered a weakness. He could break the barrier at the highest points.

Artimus had not counted upon a dragon, he thought with satisfaction. Climbing along the tower until he could see the humans still milling about in the bailey below him, he sucked in a deep breath and spewed fire and death upon Belmor Castle. "Stay out of my way, humans!" he bellowed in his beastly growl. "The female is mine. I will be back if you interfere again!"

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## Chapter Four

Gwyneth was in such a state of shock after the encounter with the strange men near the edge of the forest that her mind was reeling with the questions circling round and round in her head. She had been unnerved when she saw the two men blocking their path, for she had thought, at first, that they must be thieves. She might not have left the castle before, but there were plenty who did and many carrying tales of robbers that waylaid travelers and relieved them of everything they had of value.

She didn't know why, but she hadn't actually believed that the two were anything but men even though Caelin had called them dragon and unicorn. They *looked* like two ordinary men.

Well, she amended, there was nothing ordinary about them—not really. Dragon looked as if he was nigh seven feet tall and about half that across the shoulders. His face had been shadowy, but she had not seen that he had the ugly, distorted features that were common in giant men. Of course, he wasn't actually a giant, just uncommonly tall, but still about the tallest man that she had ever seen. She had *still* perceived him as a man, nothing more than a very large man. She had wondered if, perhaps, he was of the warrior race that lived across the sea, for his hair was very light and she had heard that they were a fair race and uncommonly big.

The man who traveled with him—unicorn—was also very tall, though not nearly as broad shouldered. And he was still a very large man, for all that he seemed small next to dragon,

perhaps a half a head shorter, near six feet in height, and the sort of build that gave the entirely false impression that he was slender only because of his height. His shoulders did not lack much of being as wide as dragon's, though, so he was certainly not thin regardless of that perception. His hair was strange—all dark in the back, with two very wide streaks at the front that were pale enough to appear white, whether they were or not.

The three, Caelin and the strangers, had not seemed friendly, but she had begun to realize fairly quickly that there was some sort of stand-off, that none of the three actually wanted to test themselves against the others. She'd relaxed a little when she sensed that, enough to study the strangers closely, enough to begin to notice that they pleased her senses. She wasn't certain how. She'd barely been aware of it at first, but she had definitely found their appearance to her liking. She didn't think she would've paid so much attention as to notice so many details otherwise.

In any case, it was hard to dismiss that she'd found them attractive when she'd been so focused on studying them that she'd hardly followed the conversation. It had seemed a very cryptic sort of discussion anyway and she thought she would've had trouble following it if she had given it her entire attention.

There was no chance of that once dragon had begun to strip. From the moment he'd removed his shirt and the light from the stars and the sliver of a moon had illuminated his bare torso, she had been completely mesmerized. He was not merely bulky as she had thought. There were large, bulging

muscles along his arms, chest, even his back, that rippled with his movements in a way that made her breathless. Her mind had instantly perceived that as sheer beauty. There was no dismissing or questioning whether she liked what she saw. She'd couldn't take her eyes off of him as he revealed more and more of himself.

His man-root sent her into a flutter that was a mixture of shock, fascination, and uneasiness. He was a very large man. It should not have come as a great surprise that he would have a man-root to match, and yet it did. Somehow, she had thought even while she waited breathlessly to see it, that it would be normal in size, even though the man wasn't.

And then the body that had so fascinated her had simply vanished and in its place was a great golden dragon.

It wasn't until that shock had worn off a little that Gwyneth's mind had begun to pick apart the conversation between the three. She wasn't certain she would've been able to turn any part of her mind to unraveling it except that her thoughts had been led that way when she tried to figure out how Caelin had known that dragon really was a dragon. He had called the other unicorn. She had a hard time accepting that, but he had said the big man was a dragon and he certainly was.

Then she recalled that they had begun to discuss a prize they were all seeking from Belmor Castle—her. They had said her. They had seemed to be talking about *her*.

That made no sense to her at all. Caelin had not taken her! She had freed him and begged him to take her with him and he had been very nasty about it! He had made it very clear

that he didn't actually *want* to take her, regardless of the bargain she'd tried to wrangle from him.

Had she been completely duped, she wondered? Had he used her fear against her, convinced her by his very reluctance—seeming reluctance—to not only free him and show him the way to escape, but to lead him out without presenting him with even a token struggle?

If he had seemed eager, would she have begun to entertain doubts, she wondered? Would it have made her uneasy?

She thought, mayhap, it would have, but was he that clever?

Or had he not wanted to take her because he had not thought she was the one he had come for and then decided that she was? And if that was the case, what had she done to convince him that she was the one he sought?

She could not be the prize they were talking about, she decided. Not that she'd actually believed for a moment that she could be, but she was still confused. If she wasn't the prize, why had they behaved as if she was? What made them believe she was? And how was she to convince them that she wasn't?

Or would it be better if she did not even try? Wouldn't they abandon her if she convinced them? And what had she to worry about if she wasn't? Nothing, she thought. When she was presented to this wizard they had spoken of, Artimus, he would know at once that she was not the one he had sent for and would have no use for her, would he?

Or would that matter to the wizard even if he knew?

Surely it would if he had sent for someone specific.

Caelin paused when they reached the mountain pass, but he made no attempt to dismount. Instead, he walked Darkness slowly, studying the terrain around them as if he was searching for something. Apparently he was, for after a little bit, he guided Darkness from the cart path that they had been following. The horse began to climb. That wasn't especially noticeable just at first, although Gwyneth did notice she had to lean forward further over the horse's neck, but it began to be more and more noticeable as the horse began to struggle with the steep incline, bounding upward so that Gwyneth began to think it would unseat her.

Finally, to her relief, Darkness reached a place where the ground leveled out. Caelin slid off the horse's back. When he removed his support, Gwyneth found herself slipping, as well. She sucked in a sharp breath, trying to catch herself, but she'd passed any point of regaining her balance. She managed, briefly, to get her legs under her as her foot struck the ground, but it was very briefly. Every muscle on her body, it seemed to her, had turned to jelly. The knee of the leg that caught her buckled before she could firmly plant her leg and she sprawled on the rocky ground, scraping her palms and knees.

Caelin flicked a glance at her and focused on grooming his horse. Gathering a handful of grasses, he rubbed the horse down while she grunted and heaved and finally managed to get to her feet and stand up.

She studied her stinging palms and looked around a little hopefully for some sign of water. She didn't see any, but

when Caelin finally finished his task and walked off, the horse followed him obediently, and Gwyneth, limping and trying to ignore her stinging knees and hands, also followed. He led the horse to a pool of water.

Pleasure leapt in her. Gwyneth scrambled around the man and horse and picked her way to the edge of the pool, plunging her hands into the soothing coolness.

"It would not be amiss to bathe while you are at it," Caelin said coolly. "I believe that I will see if I can remove some of the stench of King Gerald's hospitality from myself."

Gwyneth glanced at him. At least he hadn't merely pointed out that *she* stank! She stared at the water a little uneasily, though. It had felt wonderfully cool on her burning hands, but it *was* cool. It was less pleasant to think of submerging herself entirely in the cold water. Beyond that, she was doubtful that simply dipping in it, or even soaking, would do much to remove the filth from her skin and clothing, and what she was to wear afterwards if she washed her clothing? And what good would it do to bathe if she didn't?

On the other hand, she was revolted by the combined smells of Bard and Thom that seemed to cling to her. She wasn't certain any longer if they still did, though, or if she was only imagining it because she had smelled it before.

Caelin gave her a sour look when she didn't immediately begin to strip. Shaking his head, he waded into the pool until he was waist deep and ducked beneath the surface. Gwyneth's heart surged against her chest wall in anxiety when he didn't surface again immediately. Anxious, she watched the ripples moving along the top of the water and

finally relaxed when his head bobbed above the water many yards from where he'd disappeared.

A sound behind her drew her attention. She whirled with a jolt and discovered the sound she had heard was the approach of the dragon. He lit heavily enough she felt the ground vibrate beneath her. Unicorn slid from his back. As soon as he'd landed, dragon shifted and became a man once more.

He strode toward the pool where she sat, but his gaze was on Caelin. "We agreed that you would stop at the pass!" he growled.

"You agreed," Caelin said. "In any case, this is a part of the pass."

"It is not the *beginning* of the pass—which is where I searched for you and where I expected you to be!"

"We had need of water to make camp," Caelin said pointedly.

Drake transferred his attention to the water. "I may as well bathe myself," he said. "The man-children stuck me with their arrows and I am bloodied from battle."

He turned to look at unicorn. "You have my clothes?"

Unicorn approached him and handed him the bundle. Dragon dropped the pile in Gwyneth's lap. "You may as well make yourself useful and wash these, wench—not the boots!"

Gwyneth stared at the bundle and glanced up at Dragon as he strode by her, heading for the pool. Her gaze was caught by the swing of his cock. When he dove into the pool, effectively breaking her focus, she turned away and discovered unicorn was undressing. He dropped his own



clothes in her lap. "There is soap in my pack over there, wench. Mind you rinse them well. The clothes are scratchy and damned uncomfortable if they aren't rinsed properly."

Caelin emerged from the water. "If there is soap, then I have need of it. The man scent isn't something that is easy to rid oneself of." He peeled his wet pants off and dropped them with the rest. "Mind the tears, wench! These barely cover me as it is."

"I worked in the kitchens," Gwyneth said when Caelin had retrieved the soap from unicorn's pack and headed back to the pool. "I'm not a laundress."

He crouched beside her. Despite every effort to ignore his nakedness, Gwyneth found her gaze drawn by the sway of his man-root as he crouched. "You do not strike me as a half-wit. You need only rub the soap into the clothes, scrub them together a bit, and then rinse. It cannot be that difficult."

He straightened, diving into the pool.

It was a lot of laundry to clean before she slept, she thought in dismay, and it was already well into the night—not long before dawn unless she was mistaken. She was weary enough that she felt like crying only to look at the work. Sniffing back the urge, she gathered up the clothes in a bundle and moved to the edge of the pool. The sooner done, she told herself, the sooner she might lie down and rest.

She doubted she would find much rest. She had not brought the makings of a pallet. She hadn't dared.

"You should wash your own while you are about it," Caelin said pointedly when he had finished bathing and brought her

the soap. "It would not hurt to make use of the soap to scrub the scent of that pig off of you either."

Gwyneth stared at him for a moment and finally returned her attention to the laundry. She had enough to do without adding her own, she thought a little resentfully, but she was growing very weary of him harping on the fact that the guard had rutted her.

By the time dragon and unicorn finally got out and trooped past her, she had decided that she could barely tolerate the smell any longer herself. Removing her clothes, she piled them with theirs, waded into the water with the soap and scrubbed herself thoroughly.

Her teeth were chattering long before she'd finished, for the water was as cold as she'd thought it was, but she had the far more pleasant scent of unicorn's soap in her nostrils each time she breathed. It was colder *outside* the pool than in it, she discovered when she tried to stand up. She was going to have to get out and dry off at some point, she thought in dismay, but she was certainly in no rush to face the discomfort and decided to finish the laundry from the pool.

The flicker of firelight caught her eye as she was finishing up and a surge of delight went through her. They'd built a fire! She could stand in front of the fire and dry herself. Slogging from the water when she'd tossed the last piece onto the pile, shivering all over, she'd already hurried toward the fire when it occurred to her that the clothes also needed to be dried and that they weren't likely to dry if left in a mound in the edge of the pool. Her back and shoulders, arms and hands were already burning from wrestling with the

water heavy clothing, but she gathered them up and carried the dripping mass with her.

Seeing that the men had gathered around the fire to warm themselves dry, she glanced around for someplace to spread the clothes and began spreading them over whatever rock or tree limb she could reach until she'd spread everything. Then she rushed, shivering, teeth chattering, to squat in front of the fire, holding her shaking hands toward the flames.

Dragon handed her a piece of her food. *Her* food! She discovered when she glanced around that the men had helped themselves to the bread, cheese, and wine she'd brought. She stared down at the fist sized pieces Dragon had handed to her and then looked at him. "This is my food."

"Yes. You should eat."

Gwyneth bit her lip. "But ... it is mine! I brought it so I would have something to eat on the way to the village."

Dragon shrugged. "Well, you will not be going to the village so you will not need it."

She blinked at him. "Where am I going?"

"We are taking you to the priests of the Temple of Mannet Rae at Sherbrooke."

Gwyneth's belly tightened. "Why there?"

"Artimus said we were to take you there," unicorn supplied, getting to his feet.

She watched him as he moved to his own pack and took a folded blanket from it. He brought it back and handed it to her. Pleasure wafted through her. She smiled at him tentatively as he returned to his place at the fire. "Thank you!"

He nodded. "You are welcome. I thought it might not be as distracting to everyone if you would cover up your woman's place. I don't know about the others, but I find it difficult to follow the conversation with it gaping at me."

"I find it distracting, as well," Dragon agreed. "I enjoy looking at it. There is no doubt about that. It is a very pretty female place, but distracting. Definitely."

Gwyneth felt her jaw slide to half-mast. She glanced down instinctively and saw that he was right. She'd squatted, but she hadn't wanted to sit on the dirt with her bottom bare and she'd only succeeded in framing her sex with her legs. Reddening, she unfolded the blanket and draped it around herself.

"Who is Artimus?"

"Evil bastard!" Dragon growled. "A wizard."

"A very powerful wizard," unicorn agreed.

"And powerfully evil," Caelin growled. "Your father."

Gwyneth blinked at him in shocked disbelief. "My father?"

"So he says, but he is a liar besides being an evil bastard," Dragon growled. "And I cannot fathom why he wants to use his own spawn as sacrifice. It seems to me that he would use someone else's."

Gwyneth felt cold wash over her when she'd only begun to get warm. A strange buzzing began in her ears. "He ... wants to sacrifice me?"

Unicorn nodded. "At the temple. That is why we were sent to collect you and take you there. He is a wielder of black magic and I suppose therein may lie the answer, for it is dark

magic. Evil. No doubt the spell he plans to use you for will be more powerful for the sacrifice of his own daughter."

Gwyneth felt tears of terror well in her eyes. She swallowed convulsively several times. She hadn't expected anything like this. They were so calm about it that she was almost tempted to believe it was some sort of jest, but it occurred to her that there was no reason for them not to be calm about it when it was her *life* that hung in the balance. In truth, she had often heard the men-at-arms discuss such things with a callousness that had made her blood run cold, but she had *a/ways* perceived them as monsters. She had not considered that these men could be the same. "But ... I don't want to die!"

Dragon turned to look at her in surprise and more than a little irritation. "That is absurd! You are mortal! You are bound to die ... sometime."

"Yes, but ... I don't want to die now!" Gwyneth wailed.

"It will be quick and relatively painless, I am certain," unicorn said soothingly. "Most of the time they simply stab the sacrifice in the heart and that cannot take more than a few minutes at the very most."

Gwyneth clutched at her chest, feeling as if her heart would stop beating right that moment. She struggled to catch her breath.

Caelin cleared his throat. "As to that, there may be a problem."

"What sort of problem?" Dragon demanded.

"She is no pure maiden."

"No maiden?" dragon and unicorn demanded almost at the same moment. "She's supposed to be a virgin!"

Caelin shrugged. "She spread her legs for the guard right before my eyes. She is certainly no virgin and, as she did not fight him, nor showed any great surprise, or was even particularly upset afterward, I would have to say she is a very well used piece indeed," he said angrily.

Outrage flickered to life briefly at Caelin's assessment of the situation, but it didn't last. All three of them turned condemning gazes on her. Gwyneth shrank away from the anger she saw in them, but since it occurred to her forcefully that she was of no use to them if she lacked her maidenhead, she wasn't inclined to tell them she still had it. She was, in point of fact, very sorry that she had allowed Alyce to convince her that sodomy was far better if she must endure being rutted since she could at least avoid having her belly filled with unwanted babes. To think that she had endured *that* so many times when she would have been far better off, babes or not, if she had gotten rid of her maidenhead!

"Well! This is a fine mess!" Dragon growled angrily. "Why did you even bring her if she was useless?"

Caelin shrugged. "I didn't know what else to do. He expects us to bring her, by the gods! And to present her before the next full moon. I thought I might think of something!"

Dragon settled to studying her broodingly—they all did. Gwyneth mopped the tears from her face with the blanket and stared at the fire, wondering what they would do with her now that they'd discovered she was not of any use to them.

Lamentation of Swans  
by Goldie McBride

After a few moments, dragon leaned closer to her and dragged in a deep breath. Gwyneth studied him uneasily, wondering if he was considering eating her since she appeared to be useless for anything else. A look of satisfaction flickered across his face and Gwyneth had heart palpitations, wondering if he might be able to smell her maidenhead.

"She is fertile," he said in a rumbling voice.

Caelin and unicorn turned to look at her speculatively.

"That is interesting, Drake," unicorn said dryly, "but I don't see it as being of any benefit to us."

Drake smiled, a toothy smile that made Gwyneth exceedingly uneasy. "Think, Faine! A babe is pure, is it not? Virginal, innocent? If we plant one there, how will Artimus be able to tell whether it is the babe in her womb or her? His magic will detect only the purity."

Faine stared at him for a long moment, glanced at her and then at Caelin. "That is evil and I will have nothing to do with it!" he growled angrily. "I do not know how you could contemplate allowing your own seed to be used as a sacrifice!"

"My seed *is* to be sacrificed!" Drake bellowed angrily. "The evil bastard has my mate's egg! She will die if I cannot free her from him and I am far more interested in saving my mate's progeny than the spawn of this human, by the gods! In any case, we will not know *who* has fertilized her egg if we all fuck her! And it is not as if it will be much more than a seed if she is to be sacrificed at the next full moon! It will be very little different from wasting one's seed."

"It is worth a try," Caelin said thoughtfully if a little doubtfully. "You do not think that they will check her maidenhead when we give her to them?"

"If they do, we are undone!" Faine said grimly.

"I cannot think of anything else to try," Drake growled irritably. "If you do not like the idea, then come up with something else."

Gwyneth watched them uneasily as they pondered it, wondering if it would do the least good to attempt to run.

"No," Caelin said decisively. "I cannot think of anything else. Lie down, wench, and spread your legs."

Gwyneth blinked at him.

"Hold on now!" Faine said.

Gwyneth glanced at him hopefully.

"I don't see why you should have the first turn."

"I captured her," Caelin said pointedly. "I should be first. I *will* be first!"

"Well, I am not going after Drake," Faine said angrily. "Once he has wallowed it out there will be no touching the sides!"

Drake scowled at him in outrage. "She is a female! She is made to stretch, by the gods! It will go back!"

"But when?" Faine snapped. "That is what I am worried about."

Drake caught his cock in his hand and shook it at Faine. "It is not even nearly as big as a babe and she could pass one of those."

"But I haven't," Gwyneth said a little fearfully. "And it causes a great deal of pain when a woman has one!"



"Well, it is not as big!" Drake said.

"But it is still too big," Gwyneth argued, too unnerved by the idea to keep her tongue. "I would far rather not."

Drake studied her sullenly. "This is a magnificent cock!" he growled. "And *I* am a golden dragon! You should be honored that I am willing to share it with you at all!"

"But I'm not! I'd far rather you saved it for someone else!"

"Gods! It is not going to do us any good if he saves it for someone else!" Caelin snapped. "Be reasonable, wench! We must all fuck you so that none of us know who has sired the sacrifice!"

Gwyneth's chin wobbled. "But I don't want it!"

Drake studied her for a long moment. "Please?" he growled.

Gwyneth felt the blood drain from her face, for there was nothing supplicating about the way he'd said it, regardless of *what* he'd said.

"You might as well have saved your breath," Faine said testily, "if you were only going to bellow at her!" He smiled soothingly at Gwyneth. "Caelin and I will go first and then you will be filled with seed and it will be easy enough for him to slip that club of his in. You'll see. You will hardly notice the difference."

She wasn't convinced, but it occurred to her that there was no escape. He was a dragon. He would only transform himself and capture her if she tried to run and then he might be more inclined to eat her.

She wasn't certain that would be worse, but it seemed worse at the moment. Stiff with fear, she settled the blanket

on the ground and lay back, promising herself that if it *did* hurt, she would simply leap up and run and take her chances. She was not completely against their plan. It had occurred to her very quickly that it was a very good way to rid herself of her maidenhead and she thought she might avoid being used as a virgin sacrifice without it, regardless of what they thought to the contrary.

It might not have been quite as bad, Gwyneth reflected later, if she hadn't braced herself for the pain she expected. Unfortunately, she knew from all the talk in the kitchens that the loss of one's maidenhead hurt, and she tensed in anticipation of it the moment Caelin leaned over her and began to probe her. It took all she could do to refrain from lifting her hips as she usually did and trying to convince him to use the other hole, or guide him toward it. As Alyce had pointed out, men really did not care where they shoved their rod so long as they had a hole to push it into and, quite often, they did not seem to know the difference.

Of course, they were usually too drunk to find their cock without both hands, but one would've thought they would notice something was not quite right. *She* certainly felt it.

It began to burn the moment he wedged his cock in her hole in point of fact. She panted for breath. He panted for breath.

"It is bone dry here," he muttered in disgust when he'd drawn away to see what the problem was and pushed his finger inside instead. "Can you not produce a little moisture?"

She looked at him fearfully.

"You will have to spare the time to warm her up a bit," Faine advised him.

Caelin glared at him. "*I* did not need warming up," he said pointedly.

"By the gods! You *have* been with a woman before?"

"I will *not* dignify that with an answer!" Caelin growled. "I have been with many *elfin* women. She is not, and, as Drake said, if *I* am gracious enough to allow her to have it, *she* should have the grace to produce a little moisture!"

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## Chapter Five

Faine and Drake exchanged a look. Irritated, Caelin got up, signaled for them to join him and walked a little distance away after Caelin had ordered Gwyneth not to move from the spot.

"What is the problem?" Drake growled. "I do not believe for a moment that you have no notion of how to warm a woman up! *I* know, and I am a dragon!"

"Well, I'm damned if I know what that has to do with it!" Caelin said testily.

"Dragon women do not *need* to be warmed up because they are ready to mate or they will not let a male near them. She is human, but even I have been with a few. You must cuddle her a little and give her a few kisses and when she relaxes, *then* you can sheathe your sword!"

Caelin glared at him, annoyed that they would question his knowledge and experience of women. Did he look so green behind the ears as to have no knowledge of women?

He had found the entire business repugnant from the very beginning, before he had ever set eyes on the girl. Nothing short of what Artimus had used would have convinced him to have any part of it—but there was the rub. He had no choice except to turn his back on the woman who had given him life, and he could not do that. He had convinced himself that there was enough hate in his heart for her father to carry him through what he had to do, or that, at the very least, he could simply close his mind to her.

He had begun to have problems with that from the moment he had met her, though. It was bad enough that he must be intimate with her to see this through. He thought he could manage that. He had certainly had no trouble feeling desire for her. He knew, though, that he could not afford to behave as a lover—in any way—or he was lost. It was not a battle he could win. "I know that! I do not want to cuddle and kiss her, gods damn it," he growled. "It is bad enough to fuck her when she is to be sacrificed in no time at all. I would rather not think of her as anything else, thank you very much!"

Drake glanced at Faine.

Faine shrugged. "He has a point. It was easy enough to consider what Artimus had in mind when we had no one to think of but ourselves and our problems. She is a pretty little thing. It would not be hard at all to grow fond of her, and then where will we be? Worse off than before!"

Drake glared at Caelin. "I will warm her up. I am a dragon. It will not bother me at all."

"Just do not forget yourself!" Caelin said tightly. "I go first and then Faine and then, if she is to be ruined by you, it will not be of any consequence to our plan."

Gwyneth's eyes nearly bugged from their sockets when Drake stalked toward her and dropped to his knees. He caught her by her ankles when she tried to scramble up and run, tipping her onto her back and falling over before she could sit up again. She tried to swim backwards using her feet and elbows, but he outmaneuvered her. Grasping her arms, he pushed them above her head and manacled them with one

hand. He settled his belly against her pelvis to finish pinning her to the ground.

The fight went out of her abruptly. She stared at him wide-eyed, panting for breath. She swallowed convulsively. "I thought you were going to be last?" she croaked.

Drake frowned as he listened to the wild, frightened tattoo of her heart in her chest. "I am. I am only going to be first to kiss you," he murmured in a rumbling voice. "That is nothing to be frightened of, is it?"

She stared at him warily, but her heart began to slow. He shifted upward a little, supporting the bulk of his weight off of her chest with his arms and lowering his face slowly toward hers to allow her a few moments to accept. She turned her face away when he leaned close enough to brush his lips to hers. Impatience flickered through him, but he ignored her effort to elude him and brushed his lips along her cheek instead, lightly. Beyond being pleasing to his eyes, she had a pleasing scent, he decided, breathing her essence into his lungs, tasting her as he nibbled the smooth skin of her cheek only with his lips. He lingered there, waiting until her curiosity stirred and then he slowly made his way back toward her lips. That time, she turned ever so slightly to meet him.

Triumph wafted through him. He explored her lips with the same leisure that he had her cheek, waiting for them to part on a breath before he slipped his tongue inside. He felt a jolt run through her, felt an echo within his own body and a flash of heat. She was sweet, he thought, savoring the taste of her as much as he enjoyed the soft slick walls of her mouth and the friction of rubbing his tongue along hers.

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Slowly, he felt the tension melt from her, felt the muscles straining against him relax and still he kissed her, enjoying it far too much to stop right away. It occurred to him after a time that there was a good deal more of her to explore.

Deciding he might as well, he took one last savoring sweep of her mouth and pulled away, sucking lightly at the softness of her throat before he moved lower to explore the soft mounds of flesh below that. The tips puckered for his mouth. He plucked at them lightly. The tiny little buds that had never been suckled fascinated him.

She gasped, shuddered, moving restlessly against him. "It feels strange," she whispered.

"Does it, my dove?" he murmured. "How does it feel strange?"

She swallowed audibly. "It makes my belly feel strange."

He smiled against her skin, plucking at the tip and then covering it with his mouth and suckling. "When I do this? Or this?"

"Both."

He moved to the other breast. "Does it feel as strange here?" he murmured.

"I feel very strange all over," she whispered shakily.

He sighed and stared down at her breasts, reluctant to yield his prize now that he'd warmed her. He'd agreed to, he reminded himself. One more taste, he decided, nuzzling his face against her delightfully soft little mounds before he kissed each one lingeringly and finally rolled away.

Discontent filled him immediately when Caelin took his place. Frowning, he got up and moved a short distance to

wait, watching Caelin keenly as he seated the head of his cock in her and began struggling to claim her sheathe.

It disturbed him that it seemed a very tight fit when Caelin's staff was not as big as his and doubts began to niggle at him. She was a little thing, but then they all seemed little to him, and he'd plowed a fair number of them.

Caelin wasn't certain if he was more angry or more randy from watching Drake ready her, but the moment he pressed his flesh only a little inside her, he forgot his pique. She was warm and wet and her depths beckoned—and it was still an uncommonly tight fit, especially for a woman he was certain had vast experience.

Ignoring it, unable to think beyond getting sheathed before he shamed himself and spilled his seed without managing it, he moved in and out of her shallowly until he could feel her moisture coating him, could feel easier movement. Shifting then to give himself a little better leverage, he drove swiftly and ... not so smoothly to the hilt.

He felt the pop of the flesh he'd pierced the moment he tore past it. A jolt went through him. His mind erupted into chaos. Gasping for breath, he levered himself up to stare at her ashen face and he knew, he *knew* he had been duped!

He discovered it didn't matter, not at the moment. Her body was squeezing his so tightly he could barely breathe. He didn't think he could've ignored his instincts to move if his life had depended upon it.

And it was too late to worry about it in any case.



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With a mixture of fiery lust and temper, he withdrew and plunged again, driving into her over and over until he felt his seed erupt from his shaft.

Huffing for breath, he finally levered himself up far enough to stare down at her face accusingly, but it was a wasted effort. She had squeezed her eyes tightly closed.

Pulling out of her, he got to his feet and stalked to the pool to wash himself, his mind in turmoil.

She could not have been a maiden, he told himself! He had *seen* her couple with that bastard with his own eyes!

But his mind was shouting that she had been and he had only to look as his cock to see her virgin's blood.

The minx! The *deceptive* little minx! She was her father's daughter alright, he thought furiously!

Gods! He should have known that she could not be trusted! Outwitted! She had outwitted them all! Deceitful little witch! He had allowed his lust for the wench to cloud his mind and look where that had gotten him!

He was abruptly fiercely glad that he had not taken the time to warm her himself! He had been tempted—too tempted—and he had resented Drake's interference. At least he had spared himself that folly! And he was furious enough with her for her conniving, he thought it would be far easier from here on out to dismiss her from his mind. Plunging into the pool abruptly, he focused on working off his anger, swimming back and forth across the water.

Gwyneth refused to open her eyes until Caelin had left, knowing he must have guessed what she'd done, fearful that acknowledging it would set off his temper. She was relieved

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when he merely stalked away, but she was in far too much pain to truly feel it at the moment.

She opened her eyes when Faine took his place, trying not to wince when she felt him probing her there—where it still burned, felt scoured. He entered her slowly, though, not swiftly as Caelin had and she discovered that much of the pain had eased, that he was right. Caelin had left enough moisture with his seed to make Faine's claiming less hurtful.

She relaxed a little when he began to move in and out of her, knowing that once he did it would not be long before he had pleased himself and then she would only have Drake to worry about.

She felt an odd warmth curl through her when she thought about Drake, when she remembered the way it had felt when he'd kissed her mouth and her breasts. She grew warm as Faine moved within her, began to feel a sort of ache, an almost pleasurable tingle from time to time. It was elusive. She couldn't quite capture it, couldn't quite hold on to it, even though it continued to grow until he finally stopped, shuddered as he emptied his seed into her, and then rolled away.

She felt strangely let down, almost disappointed.

Drake moved to stand over her, looking down at her with an odd expression on his face.

She couldn't help but notice his rod wasn't standing any longer.

He met her gaze and forced a smile to his lips. "Rest. I will be back in a moment."

Stalking down to the pool where Faine and Caelin had gone to bathe, he sat down and glared at the water. "She is torn and bleeding," he said a little sickly. "I think I should wait a bit."

Caelin's face heated. "We agreed that we all would fuck her so that none of us would know who had seeded her," he said tightly, for he had no intention of confessing that he'd been a complete fool and ruined everything for everyone. It was punishment enough that he would have to live with the knowledge!

Drake glared at him. "Well, my member has lost interest!" he snapped, catching the limp thing in one hand and wagging it at him.

"So wake the dragon up!" Faine said testily. "You were ready enough before, by the gods! This was your idea to start with!"

"Yes, but she is torn and bleeding now! She was not then! And I'm not at all certain that I should try. Does she not seem a bit ... more runty than they commonly are?"

"They are all small to you."

"Yes, but small compared to others, not me, gods damn it!"

"You said it would not bother you!" Caelin reminded him.

"That was the kissing and cuddling, and it did not. And it does not bother me still. I am only thinking of our quest. If I ... mortally wound her, we will have nothing!"

"We will have nothing if you do not seed her, gods damn it!" Caelin snapped. "Do you mean to keep your word, or not?"

Drake glared at him. Heaving an explosive breath, he got to his feet and stalked back to the campsite. Gwyneth was still waiting for him and he settled beside her, thinking.

"Is something wrong?" Gwyneth asked uneasily, wondering if Caelin had told him what she'd done.

"My staff had gone down."

Gwyneth stared at him blankly. "Will it not rise again?"

He sent her a brooding look. "It is not always on command, you know!"

Surprise flickered through her. "Oh."

Releasing an irritated breath when it occurred to him that the longer he waited the less the fluids inside her were likely to help him, he settled lower. "I will tease you a bit and see if it awakens," he said decisively. "If it does, then I will also fuck you. If it does not, then clearly the gods disapprove."

As uneasy as Gwyneth was, she couldn't help but feel warmth at the suggestion. She'd liked his kisses. She'd never thought that she would like kisses.

She was pretty certain that she would not have if it came to that, not from any who had tried before. She liked the way Drake's mouth felt upon her flesh, though, liked the way she felt when his mouth covered hers.

"I would like that," she said when he did nothing more than stare at her. "I liked your kisses."

He sent her a look she had difficulty interpreting and then moved closer, nuzzling his face against her neck. She felt her flesh pebble as his heated breath rushed from his lungs, felt herself begin to tingle all over with warmth. When he lifted his head at last and sought her lips, she lifted to meet him

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eagerly. It delighted her that it felt just as pleasurable as it had the first time, perhaps a little more since she wasn't afraid this time, was eager to experience it.

It seemed the longer he kissed her, in fact, the more she wanted it. She began to feel hot, not just warm. By the time he broke from her lips and moved lower, she was beginning to feel a sense of ... need, of want. She knew what she wanted as soon as she felt his mouth pulling at her breast. Her belly clenched and she felt a strange sort of ache, a thirst to be filled.

She was still unnerved by the size of him, still ached from the loss of her maidenhead, but that throbbing had lessened considerably, had begun to be overshadowed by the want to feel him as she'd felt them. She shifted restlessly against him, trying to fight the urge but the ache only grew until she thought she didn't care if it hurt. She just needed it.

"Drake," she whispered a little desperately when he seemed content merely to pluck at her nipples and build the fire higher inside of her. "Please."

He stirred, lifting his head to look at her. He seemed to hesitate. She pulled on him plaintively. "Please?"

He pushed her legs apart and settled between them. "Tell me if I hurt you, little dove," he murmured huskily.

It did hurt, but it felt strangely satisfying, as well. She was gasping for breath by the time he'd pushed deeply inside her—and still filled with want. "It still ... aches," she said plaintively.

A shudder went through him. He withdrew and slowly pushed inside her again. "And now?"

"More."

He moved slowly at first, stirring the heat a little higher each time until she was gasping and pulling at him, lifting to meet him each time. He began to move a little faster. Gwyneth felt a sense of gathering inside of her that grew until it abruptly shattered. Ripples of pleasure flowed through her and then her body would seize, and then erupt with another wave until she was gasping for breath. She felt him stiffen, shudder as she was shuddering and for the first time she understood what it was they found when they joined their body with hers and moved so frantically in and out of her.

A blissful sense of peace descended over her in the aftermath that was almost as wonderful as the pleasure had been. She felt herself drifting, too weary to open her eyes or to struggle to remain awake, and she yielded to it.

\* \* \* \*

Caelin settled beside the fire finally, trying to compose himself for a few hours sleep, but found that he was still too angry to find the peace he needed. It didn't escape him that Gwyneth had had no trouble.

Nor had Drake seemed to have difficulty rutting her, and then dropping to sleep as if he had been knocked unconscious, for all his complaining earlier. It irritated him more that she had curled up next to the great hulking brute as if he was some warm, cuddly thing and not a dragon.

Women! There was no understanding them!

Especially human women!

He managed to doze after a time from sheer determination and woke to find Drake still cuddling the woman, but awake himself as if he had been for some time. His expression was thoughtful.

He sat up and stretched. "Well? Have we done it?"

Drake's expression closed. He shrugged, disentangled himself from the woman and sat up. "I am hungry. I will go hunting."

Caelin frowned, although he was also hungry. "We should break camp and move on. The king is not likely to give up his pawn easily, particularly if he thinks he may have to deal directly with Artimus before much longer. Where is Faine?"

Drake nudged his head in the direction of the pool and stood up. "I will see how effective my attack was last eve while I am hunting." He glanced down at Gwyneth. "It will not hurt to allow her to rest a little."

"It isn't wise to cuddle or coddle the wench. You and I both know that she is as good as dead now."

Drake sent him a cool look. "She will be dead now and not later if we do not coddle her a little, elf! She is not like us. She is not even a man. It would be bad enough if she were just a frail human, but a woman...."

"They are tougher than one would think," Caelin said dryly. "They grow in numbers every day while the numbers of our kind shrink."

Drake shrugged. "My tribe is not threatened. I am only here to protect my mate's line. This is personal for me." He sent Caelin a hard look. "It will gain me nothing to present a

corpse at the temple ... or even a sacrifice nigh dead already."

"I see your point. I will leave that to you. I do not want to begin to think of her as a pet and I do not trust that I would not." He did not think he would have near the trouble with that, now, as he had before she had deceived him, but he had no desire to test his willpower. He got up and headed to the pool when Drake had shifted and flown away. There he found Darkness drinking and eyeing the winged unicorn stallion with a mixture of curiosity and animosity. Caelin checked when he saw the unicorn. The unicorn was a magnificent beast, to borrow from Drake, but Caelin had never seen one that wasn't pure white—few winged, if it came to that. Faine was almost entirely black except for a shock of white gold hair near his face.

His pack was strapped awkwardly to his back, making it clear he'd attached it to himself while he was still in human form. "Drake says we will bide here a while," he advised the unicorn as he moved to the water's edge. "He has gone to hunt and to check on King Gerald's men."

Faine nodded, lifted his head to look around and finally followed Darkness off in search of grasses to fill his own need for food. Caelin watched him curiously for a few moments and finally shrugged inwardly and focused on bathing and drinking. The girl was still asleep when he returned to the campsite. Ignoring her, he checked the clothing and found that his trousers, such as they were, had dried in the few hours since they had stopped. When he'd pulled them on, he



went off to relieve himself and to gather wood, hopeful that Dragon meant to bring back enough food to share.

He was ill prepared for the expedition ... now, he thought in disgust, wondering if he should chance circling back to collect his belongings or simply keep going and appropriate what he needed along the way as he came across it. He wasn't likely to find a bow as fine as his own, or a sword, but then circling back would not gain him those either. No doubt they were tucked safely away in Gerald's armory now, he thought in disgust. The other things, though, they would not come amiss—his bedroll and hunting knife in particular.

Mayhap, he could persuade Faine to give him a ride back to where he'd stashed his travel gear?

What to do with their little sacrifice while he was gone, though? A very little thought produced the conclusion that he would have to wait upon the dragon's return. He didn't think that there was much chance that she would try to flee when she had nowhere to go and, he was fairly certain, no knowledge either of surviving in the wild or the countryside. There was always the slim chance that some predator might happen upon her, though—two legged or four legged. None of them could afford to chance that.

The thoughts brought him full circle to the interlude before dawn, which he had been studiously trying to put from his mind. They were no worse off, he told himself, than they had been before when they believed that she was not pure.

He knew that was not true and it angered him that he was still trying to convince himself that he could blame her for the ruination of his plans when, in truth, he had no one to blame

but himself. He had jumped to a conclusion and it had cost him—dearly—had cost his mother. He had not really believed that he could trust Artimus to uphold his end of the bargain any of the time, but he'd had no choice but to try.

And he had not even given it his best!

He had *wanted* an excuse to fuck her. He had tried everything that he could think of to put that thought from his mind from the time the seed had first sprang forth as he had watched that pig rut her—nay, before that even, when he had first caught her scent. When her voice had come to him out of the darkness and skated along his nerve endings like a caress and drawn his cock to attention.

He did not understand it—at all! It seemed clear that both Drake and Faine, especially Drake, had a taste for human women. *He* did not! He was completely content to take lovers only among his own tribe. He was almost tempted to allow himself to believe that it was that she was exotic to him, but he couldn't quite accept that. He did not mix with humans very often, but he did walk among them often enough that they were no novelty to him. He had had a mild interest in fucking their women from time to time, but he had never had a great deal of difficulty resisting the urge. He had known it for what it was—simply an itch that was in need of scratching—one that could wait until he had returned to his tribe.

He was tempted to blame it on some sort of spell Artimus had woven round her, but the faint tendrils of magic he detected about her were not strong enough to be a calculated lure. In any case, that defied logic. If Artimus' need was for a

virginal sacrifice, it would make far more sense to place a charm about her that would repel the interest of men, not draw them to her—and clearly he had not done that!

He shook the thought as unanswerable and not one he could afford to allow himself to dwell on. He needed to keep her out of his head. He needed to keep his distance as much as possible. She was not for such a one as he to pluck, however much interest he had in doing so. She was destined to die for Artimus' machinations, evidently had been from conception. He could think of no other reason Artimus might have a desire to spawn—unless by doing so he benefited.

Drake was a fool to play with that. It was not his business, of course—unless Drake allowed himself to become sentimental over her to the point of putting his own plans at risk. But he did not believe the old dragon was nearly as cold-blooded as he apparently liked to think of himself. If he was not careful, he would have many things to regret about this business! He would be far better off to focus on his own spawn and allow Artimus to deal with his since there was nothing in this world that either of them could do to stop the bastard!

No, nor the unicorn either. He had not heard Faine's story, but he must have powerful motives to involve himself in anything so vile as the plot that Artimus had hatched in his intentions toward the girl. They were noble, pure hearted creatures by nature and he had seen that Faine was struggling mightily with his nature and his conscience.

Truthfully, he had actually been shocked that Faine had been as eager to mount the wench as he had been. Drake, he

was not surprised about. Dragons were rather selfish and inclined toward self-indulgence anyway, but Faine....

Did that mean that there was some possibility that the girl was a lure after all?

He turned that over a moment and discarded it again. It seemed more likely that Faine had discovered he could not walk among men as a man and remain aloof to their dark urges. In his own way, he was playing with fire just as Drake was—as he was, he thought in disgust.

If he had used more self-control, they would not be in this mess! They would not have to place their hope of success in spawning on the girl! It sickened him to his soul that they had to. It was all very well to say that they would not know which of them had spawned the life that would be sacrificed for the loss of the girl's maidenhead! They would *all* know that there was a chance that it was theirs, and he didn't think that he was going to be able to convince himself that it was theirs and not his!

It made it worse that he meant to use his seed to free his mother's soul if necessary, and he knew that his mother would never condone such a thing, that she would chose to remain imprisoned between worlds for eternity rather than sacrifice the life of her unborn grandchild.

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## **Chapter Six**

There was no part of Gwyneth's body that she could find that did not hurt when she woke. She winced at her first slight movement as she began to surface toward awareness and the pain brought her fully awake with a gasp. It was a struggle to get up. By the time she'd managed to get herself upright, she had discovered places that hurt that she had not known she had.

Pushing her hair out of her face, she looked around the campsite cautiously. She spied Caelin at once, moving toward the coals that were all that remained of the campfire, but she saw no sign of either Faine or Drake. Biting her lip to keep from grunting and groaning, she got to her feet and looked around to get her bearings and then moved stiffly toward the pool, taking the blanket Faine had given her the night before with her.

It wasn't that she thought Caelin might not be able to contain himself if he saw her naked, far from it. She felt more self-conscious, not less, since he had coupled with her and she didn't feel that she could handle any of his snide remarks so early in the day when she felt like weeping just from weariness and discomfort.

Dropping the blanket on a rock beside the pool, she waded out into the water with care until it was lapping at her knees and finally crouched to bathe herself. Her inner thighs, she saw with some alarm and also a hint of justification, were smeared with blood. It was no wonder she hurt, she told

herself. She looked as if she had been battered half to death! The water soothed her throbbing genitals but the moment she touched herself, it complained more loudly. Releasing little grunts of pain, she persevered, using her hands and the water to rub at the stickiness of both blood and their seed until she decided that she was as clean as she could manage without a cloth or soap.

She had no idea what had become of the bar of soap. She hadn't felt up to looking for it, hadn't thought about it until she'd gotten into the water, but she saw no sign of it now and assumed Faine had collected it.

It didn't matter. She wasn't certain she could've endured the sting of the soap when she already hurt.

It buoyed her spirits a little when it dawned on her that she had weathered coupling with all three—even dragon's massive staff—and had lived through it. There had been a good deal of blood. She felt battered enough to think she might be at death's door, but she had not been torn badly enough to bleed to death!

She was certain at least some of it was her maiden's blood, in any case, and she would've bled from the loss of her maidenhead regardless of size of the staff used to puncture it.

The momentary lift in her spirits plummeted again as it dawned on her that she had not really changed anything beyond ridding herself of that bit of skin. If Drake was right and they had managed to fill her belly with their seed and it had taken root as he believed it would—well she was in doubt that their seed had borne fruit—she might be no better off at all.

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She had thought it might, somehow, make a difference. She wasn't so certain anymore and realized that she'd merely jumped at the slim possibility when she knew she had no hope at all otherwise.

Not that she could have stopped them if they were determined!

She was actually surprised, now that she'd gotten over being so terrified at the thought of being impaled on three such ungodly enormous man-roots—especially Drake's when she had been certain she would be unlikely to survive Caelin or Faine. In truth, they had been far more gentle about it than anyone ever had before. It was a rare thing indeed that she survived coupling with a single man and did not have many bruises to show for it beyond the coupling itself.

It occurred to her to wonder why she had *wanted* Drake to do that to her. He'd seemed to have lost interest. Why hadn't she left it at that? Why had she felt compelled to draw his interest and why had she begun to feel that she *needed* him to fill her?

She hadn't expected to feel pleasure. She could've understood it better if she'd ever had reason to believe she might possibly enjoy it, but she hadn't. She'd never even come *close* to enjoying it before. It had *always* been painful and disgusting and that was why she'd done her best to elude the men at the castle.

Maybe it was because she had listened to Alyce and made certain that each time she was caught and found it unavoidable, that they used that hole that had felt so wrong? Maybe, but she had never felt a want to be filled like she had

with Drake and even to a smaller degree with Caelin and Faine. She thought if either of them had kissed her and caressed her as Drake had, she would've wanted them to push their cocks inside of her, too—because she hadn't found it the least bit repulsive when they had once the pain had passed. She had found it ... pleasant.

She dismissed the thoughts with an effort. She was glad that it hadn't been the ordeal she'd feared it would be, that it hadn't left her feeling so disgusted that she could hardly bear her own skin, but she couldn't see that it helped her in any other way. It certainly wouldn't if their seed had taken root in her belly and Drake was right. She would still be facing death and she had only a few weeks before that.

Was there any chance that she might escape them and thereby escape the fate planned for her, she wondered?

But escape to where? Before she had helped Caelin, she might have had the option of staying at the castle and enduring the life she had there. She was afraid, though, that even if it was true that Gerald had been holding her to use her against the wizard Artimus, he would be so furious now that he would have her slain on sight.

She discovered when she finally waded out and picked up the blanket that there were two horses coming toward her, or more specifically the water, to drink.

Not two horses. Darkness and a unicorn—an ebony winged unicorn. Her breath caught her in her throat in wonder as she stared at the unicorn. He was the most beautiful thing that she'd ever seen. While she stood frozen, gaping at him in awe, he walked almost right up to her.



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Like a sleepwalker, she lifted a hand to touch him to assure herself that he was actually real. He shied away from her touch abruptly.

Her heart hammering in her chest, she stared at him in dismay as he moved away. Realization sank into her slowly.

Only a pure maiden might touch one.

And she was so despoiled that she was amazed he had touched her himself, even in man form.

It was Faine, she realized, though she'd been too awed to see him in his natural form to realize it at first. It was hard to grasp, in any case, that this creature was the same—just as it was still hard to grasp that the golden dragon she found so terrifying was the same as the man whose kisses she had welcomed, had enjoyed so thoroughly the night before.

She shouldn't have tried to touch him, tainted as she was, she thought, feeling her throat close and then anger that it was through no fault of her own that she'd been sullied. She had not sought it. She had done her best to preserve her honor, such as it was. It wasn't fair that it could be ripped from her and the shame was still hers!

He was so beautiful that it hurt her to look at him. No wonder he was such a handsome man, she thought, that it made her breathless to look at him—which was why she had not. She hadn't been able to bring herself to more than glance at him.

Not that she had done much more with Drake or Caelin or that it would've done her much good to try to study them when darkness had shrouded them from the moment they had met.

She'd seen Caelin well enough to lust over him, she reminded herself. It was true that it had hurt her to think of what King Gerald had in mind for him. It was true that she couldn't bear the thought of him coming to such a horrible end, and she would've pitied anyone who faced that—*did* pity them—for it wasn't a rare punishment by any means. She had never felt compelled to throw her own life away to try to save anyone before, though.

She still didn't entirely understand what had drawn her to try for his sake, but she supposed it was as she'd thought before—she'd been as seduced by the possibility of escaping herself as she had been by her attraction to him.

Turning away finally, she headed back to the campsite and checked the clothing she'd washed the night before. It was still damp, but she had nothing else to put on and she thought they must leave soon. She felt better in any case once she'd pulled her undress on to cover her nakedness. Caelin had ignored her, whether it was pointed or not, but her nakedness around him made her feel vulnerable.

At least she understood now why he seemed to despise her. It wasn't her imagination. He *did* despise her ... because of her sire. It was unfair to her mind, but life was never fair, and as resentful as it made her, she understood. She thought she might have been inclined to feel the same if she'd been in his position. Artimus had done something terrible to him, just as he had to Drake and Faine. Given what she knew about Drake, she also knew it had to be very terrible even though she had no idea what it was he'd done.

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She couldn't help but admire Drake for his dedication to his mate and his child, regardless of what that dedication meant to her. He must have loved his mate very much, she thought sadly, to feel such a need for revenge that he would allow Artimus to manipulate him. He was too proud to bend to the will of another otherwise, especially a human, she thought.

Very likely, it was the same with the others.

She was doomed by their honor, she thought in sudden fear. She had no hope of fighting them, little hope of escaping them.

She didn't think that she could compose herself to accept the fate it seemed impossible to avoid, though. She didn't have the nobility of spirit. She was weak. She felt more like weeping and begging for her life, as miserable as it was. She thought she would have wept except that it was useless.

Quite often worse than useless, for the men of the castle were inclined to be *more* angered by a wailing woman. She didn't know if they would be that way. She didn't think they would, but it seemed unlikely that it would sway them.

Drake returned before the sun had risen very far from the horizon. Dropping the carcass of a cow near the pool, he shifted and set about cleaning the beast of its entrails. Caelin got up as soon as Drake appeared and joined him.

Gwyneth watched them, feeling her stomach rumble with hunger. The two of them set up a spit made of limbs above the fire Caelin had built, carefully balanced the carcass on it to cook and then returned to the pool to clean up.

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Her head ached, Gwyneth realized as she stared at the cooking meat. She thought it was from emptiness and quite possibly from the little sleep she'd had. She knew she couldn't have slept more than a few hours despite the fact that it had been well past dawn when she'd awakened, for they'd been up most of the night fleeing and coupling. Since there didn't seem to be anything expected of her at the moment, she decided to lie down and rest a bit more.

\* \* \* \*

"I had brought supplies with me for the journey," Caelin said as he and Drake bathed. "As things transpired, I had to abandon them at my encampment, but I think it would be worthwhile to retrieve them if we can spare the time."

Drake nodded, frowning. "They are busy cleaning up and counting the dead this morning, but I am as certain as I can be that they will not linger long over it. There was a sense of great urgency about the place. I think King Gerald is far more rattled about 'misplacing' his pawn than the escape of an assassin."

Caelin frowned at that. "Mayhap it would be better to move on, then."

"The woman needs more than a thin blanket and her rags to keep body and soul together," Drake growled. "It is a long journey for one like her." He lifted his head to study the sun. "Faine will be willing to take you, but you should be quick about it."

"I hadn't intended to linger," Caelin said dryly.

"If you cannot return before dusk, I will have to fetch you both," Drake said. "Faine is bespelled. He has no control of his change. At dusk, he will become a man again and neither of you would fair well from that, I'm thinking."

Startled, Caelin glanced toward the field where Faine was grazing. "In that case, we should go now if he's willing."

"I will guard our prize," Drake said, turning to study her.

Caelin hesitated. "You will be far better off to set your mind on the prize you stand to win from delivering her. She is not a prize, Drake."

Drake smiled thinly. "There are prizes and then are ... benefits. The lovely little hole between her legs is prize enough at the moment."

Caelin felt heat wash through him. He tamped it with an effort. "I thought the objective was merely to sew our seed?"

Drake shrugged. "It may take more dedication than one night of plowing that field."

Caelin had mixed feelings about that. His cock did not, he thought wryly, but he did. "I don't suppose, once the deed is done, that it will matter how many times it is plowed so long as you keep in mind that she is Artimus' prize, not ours," he said grimly.

"You will not avail yourself when she has such a sweet little cunt?" Drake drawled causally. "It's easy enough to close your mind to the rest once your cock is nestled so snugly inside her."

For him—maybe—but Caelin wasn't convinced and he was even less convinced that he could close his mind to the rest. On the other hand, he discovered he was deeply reluctant to

give Drake free reign with her. "My cock has a mind of its own. I suppose I will see whether I rule it or it rules me," he said dryly, rising and striding toward Faine purposefully.

Drake watched him broodingly. He did not particularly care for the notion of sharing his sweet pot with the other two, but he supposed it would not make that much difference. So long as he could dip into the pot whenever he was hungry, that would be enough.

He pulled his attention from Caelin and Faine when the unicorn allowed Caelin to climb onto his back and galloped toward the precipice on the other side of the field to attain the lift he needed to take flight. After studying Gwyneth a little hungrily for some time, he finally decided he should wait a bit. He had hours before the others returned. No doubt she was sore from their play the night before. He could afford to wait a few hours, give her a little time to get over some of the soreness. He would still have plenty of time to play with the pretty little female before the others returned.

He was pleased with the shy admiration he noted in her. It had made him uneasy, at first, when she would not meet his gaze, but when he noticed that a faint blush colored her cheeks when she did look at him and that her gaze often went to his mouth, he decided he was very pleased.

Faine and Caelin were fools to his mind. Certainly, they were not dragons and, mayhap, they knew their own limitations, but for so small a gift as a little gentleness and a few kisses, he thought he had reaped a very generous reward. He had enjoyed it himself besides, and now he had the additional satisfaction of knowing that he had tamed the

little dove. She would be more eager for the pleasure he had shown her before and he would not have to work nearly as hard to summon the heat he wanted!

Mayhap he would not summon it for them again. Why should he, after all? He had only done it the first time because he agreed to wait for them to go first and he had been impatient with the wait.

No doubt it was not even necessary to the plan in any case. They were all magical folk, after all, and he, at least, was magnificent! If their seed had failed to find the mark, he knew *his* had not!

Mayhap they would not even *want* to enjoy what they could while they could, but he saw no reason why he shouldn't. She *was* mortal, after all. If he allowed it to bother him that they would die, he would never have mounted the first and discovered that it was almost as satisfying to ride them as a Gretchen. It was true that he knew the hour and day of her death and even the means, when that was not usually the case, but it meant the same regardless as far as he was concerned. He fucked them and moved on, knowing that the female was not long for the world, that they would pass in what was little more than a blink for him. If he had ever regretted anything at all, it was that it was always difficult to convince the creatures to unlock their legs! With some it was harder than others, but it always required patience, and he did not have a great deal of that!

He rather thought it was damned convenient that he was to be stuck with this one long enough to make thorough use of her. It was more of a waste to coax a female to hand for

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only one spot of pleasure than to coax one that he could expend himself on until he was thoroughly sated before he had to look for another.

He was beginning to think, in point of fact, in terms of finding one to keep for a pet. That would be very convenient! Of course, he would have to put up with the creature all of the time, not just when he wanted to make use of her honey pot, but such was life! For every silver-lining, there was shit on the other side.

\* \* \* \*

Drake ran out of patience for waiting when he saw that the sun had nearly reached the halfway point between its zenith and sunset. He had fed her and watched while she slept. She should be recovered enough.

As he rose to approach her and shake her awake, however, it occurred to him that the hard ground hadn't offered much comfort the night before. It had seemed to him that he had managed to find every tiny, pointy rock anywhere in her vicinity with his knees and elbows. The skin he was wearing, his human skin, simply wasn't nearly as impervious to pain as his true skin.

There was no point in being uncomfortable while he was fucking her, he decided, not when it could not take more than a few moments to look around for a spot that might offer more in the way of comfort. He did not actually have to go far. He found the perfect place at the far end of the pool. A stunted tree grew there that was surprisingly brushy at the top for all that it was not tall at all. It created a nice little



shade beneath that would prevent the human skin, his and hers, from burning in the sun and moss grew over the ground beneath it. He lay down on the ground, testing it, and decided it couldn't hurt to add a little more brush for cushioning. When he'd gathered an armload and piled it beneath the tree, fluffing it, he stood back, admiring his handiwork for a moment and finally returned to the campsite.

Shaking his head when he discovered that she was still sleeping, he shook her awake and caught her hand, pulling her to her feet.

"It is time to go?" she asked a little drunkenly, clearly confused.

For that matter, he discovered she was stumbling a little drunkenly.

He scooped her up into her arms, eager to get on with it. "Yes. It is time."

She looked more confused when he set her on her feet beneath the tree.

"There you go. A nice soft spot to plant your rump, my dove! Remove your clothes and lie down, there's a good girl!"

She blinked at him, looked down at the mound of brush he'd gathered, looked at him again and finally seemed to get the idea. "You want me to remove them—all?" she said a little doubtfully.

"Yes! Yes all of it," he said a little impatiently. "You'll want kisses, yes?"

She blushed, but she untied the corset around her waist and loosened it.

He'd stripped his own clothes off long before she was out of hers. He frowned a little impatiently, but settled on the ground to wait. A happy thought occurred to him as he watched her strip. He could add her clothing to the brush pile and it would shield his knees even better, because he'd discovered the moment he planted his bare ass on it that the brush prickled more than he'd expected.

When he'd spread her clothes, he reached for her and pulled her down on the pallet he'd made. She lay back, staring at him a little uneasily.

"What is it?"

She cleared her throat. "It's ... uh ... I'm a little sore."

"Still?" He was a little suspicious. "Well, spread your legs and let me have a look."

She reddened. It wasn't the faint blush he'd noticed before. Her face turned as red as a ripe fruit, and her neck, and even the tops of her breasts. She parted her knees, however, and he got down to have a look.

He frowned when he'd looked her woman's place over thoroughly, tsking when he recalled humans simply didn't heal as they ought to. "Never mind," he said to himself. "I can fix that."

"You can?" she asked, doubtfully.

Drake flicked a look of surprise at her. "Of course I can! I am a dragon! I can do anything." He thought that over a moment. "Well, most anything."

"How?"

He grinned abruptly, feeling his hunger mount as the thought settled firmly in his mind. "I will smother it with kisses. Nothing is more beneficial than a dragon's kiss."

She still looked doubtful and thoroughly confused, but he decided he thought it was adorable. He was mildly insulted, but, clearly, she had no experience with dragons. There was no sense in being insulted that she was too ignorant to realize how truly magnificent a creature he was.

He settled beside her, examining her body with his gaze, savoring the delight it was to his senses merely to study it. There was no rush, after all. He might as well enjoy it properly. It was a luxury and a sheer delight, he discovered, to enjoy the anticipation for a few moments, to savor. He was so inclined to gobble when he was hungry that he rarely spared the time to relish.

It might merely be his imagination, he decided, but she seemed very cunningly designed. She had the pretty, soft mounds on her chest that fit his mouth and his hands nicely. Her waist was tiny, small enough to give him a very good hand grip, especially since her hips flared beneath.

He liked the thick, golden hair that hung about her shoulders like a cape and the matching fleece at the apex of her thighs. It wasn't as pretty as white gold would've been, but it was still pretty.

He discovered that she was staring at him a little uneasily when he finally turned his attention to her pretty little face to admire her pink, bowed lips and her wide blue eyes.

"You are not uneasy, my pet?"

She swallowed convulsively but shook her head.

He chuckled huskily. "Liar," he murmured, leaning down to kiss her. He could hear her heart fluttering against her chest with nerves, poor little dove, but it wasn't pounding nearly as frantically as it had the first time. Mayhap, he thought wryly, he hadn't completely tamed his little wild bird, but she was coming along nicely.

He settled his mouth firmly on hers and drank of her essence, feeling it flow through him like the most potent ale. By the time he was drunk with it, she'd relaxed against the pallet he'd made for them.

He got so caught up in suckling at her plump little breasts that he almost forgot that he'd intended to heal her little cunt before he shoved his cock into it. Mentally chastising himself for his impatience, he moved between her legs and pushed them wide enough to get his shoulders between them.

He tried, at any rate. Well, he only needed room for his head. He pushed her legs over his shoulders instead and settled to his task. He discovered it was far more interesting than he'd anticipated. The moment he dragged his tongue along her poor, torn little cleft, her taste filled his mouth and sent a rush of hunger through him. "Mmm," he murmured. "I will have a more of this."

She didn't seem terribly keen on allowing him what he wanted. Her legs tightened around his neck the moment he found the plump little bud at the apex of her thighs and began to lick and suck at it. Her hands clamped onto his head, digging into his hair and pulling.

He disentangled her fingers, clamped his hands around her wrists and held them to the ground on either side of her hips,

sucking and licking at her until she was bucking a little frantically against his mouth. Distracted, he lifted his head. She had her head thrown back and was gasping. He listened intently for a moment and decided it was gasps of ecstasy rather than pain or distress and lowered his head again.

She began to utter keener gasps when he decided to run his tongue inside her little hole—just to be sure there was no damage there that require a little essence of dragon to heal it. He discovered then, however, that he liked the taste of her cream and he lapped and sucked at it until he'd gathered all he could reach on his tongue. Momentary thwarted, it dawned on him that his dragon's tongue could reach more of her honey and he focused a moment on shifting that part of himself.

He discovered he was right. His dragon's tongue was just long enough to dip all the way inside and lap up all of her cream.

She was screaming a little hoarsely when he finally decided, with a great deal of disappointment, that he'd gotten it all.

Rising up on his knees, he studied her speculatively, wondering if he could persuade her to make more for him. She was gasping and twitching, however, and it dawned on him that she'd come. That was a novel thing!

Pleased, he settled to study the look on her face and decided, yes, he'd certainly pleased her, and only with his tongue!

He was good. He'd thought he was, but this was proof positive that he was every bit as good as he'd suspected he was!

He smiled at her when she finally managed to open her eyes.

"Did you enjoy that, my dove?"

She swallowed convulsively. "Yes."

Pleased that she'd acknowledged his prowess, he settled close to begin kissing her again. He'd gotten carried away. He'd lapped up all of her honey. She had to make more for him if he was to shove his cock into her. "There, my pretty baby. It is all better now and it will be better still when I have given you my cock, for that is even more magnificent than my tongue."

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## Chapter Seven

Gwyneth struggled, but she couldn't help but chuckle. Drake lifted his head to look at her curiously. She could see the fever in his eyes, though, knew he hadn't found the release he'd given her. She touched his face. "You are amazingly conceited."

He lifted his brows. "I'll concede amazing, but it is not conceit if it is the truth," he said dismissively.

She stroked his hair as he kissed her breasts. "It's conceit even if it is the truth," she murmured. "You don't need to point it out, you know. It's very apparent."

He grunted. "To you, perhaps, my little bird, but not everyone is as clever and quick as you are."

"If they haven't enough wit to see it for themselves, it is a waste of time to point it out, surely?"

"You have a point," he agreed, lifting his head to study her for a long moment. "You aren't trying to distract me, are you, my precious?"

Gwyneth couldn't help but smile. "I'll be quiet."

She studied him as he positioned himself between her legs and guided his man-root to join with her. He *was* amazing, she thought, amazingly beautiful in a purely male sense. Even the harsh plains and angles of his face, although fierce, pleased her femininity.

They were more harsh, now, with his excitement and she felt an echo inside of her even before she felt him stretching her flesh, burrowing inside of her. The expectation of pain

never materialized. She felt the discomforting burn of skin stretched to its very limits by his girth, the strain of her muscles to engulf him, but not true pain and there was an odd sort of pleasure, she discovered, in the joining itself. To feel his flesh embedded within her, cradled at her core, created a warm sense of belonging.

It was false, of course, she told herself as he leaned over her and began to saw slowly back and forth along her channel, stirring heat from the warmth, but it gave her a sense of goodness, of rightness that she'd never felt before. She lifted her arms to him in welcome when he settled lower, stroking his silky skin and the hard muscles that bunched and flexed with his efforts.

He shuddered, gasping harshly at her touch and a sense of pleasure flowed through her to know that the caress of her hands could effect him so powerfully, could make the giant of a man tremble. Such thoughts gave beneath her own delight at his touch. She felt the ache inside of her begin to grow, reached for it now with the knowledge of experience.

He'd spent so long pleasing her he no patience to wait now. Almost at once, he began to pump into her faster. She raced him to the peak, leapt from it when she felt his body gather itself to expel his seed. The hot bath of it on her womb seemed to carry her higher than she'd been before, to keep her flying longer. She cried out at in ecstasy at the force of it, calling his name in praise.

He breathed gustily for several moments after his body had ceased to shudder and finally pitched himself to one side of her. "That was ... quite something," he murmured, surprise



in his voice. "I have not taken the time to savor before. It adds a bit more at the end, I believe. I have not come quite that hard before, which is amazing in itself, for I was entirely certain that I had emptied my seed in you only last eve."

Gwyneth smiled faintly as she rolled toward him and draped herself over his big body. *He* was quite something, she thought, a very odd sort with failings a plenty, and yet he was amazingly gentle for such a giant of a man—for a dragon—and surprisingly sweet.

\* \* \* \*

Caelin's satisfaction in his foray with Faine lasted right up until Faine landed at the campsite and he discovered it empty—actually, until he heard the feminine laugh coming from the pool. Dropping his bundle, he stalked toward the pool to see what the devil was going on and stopped abruptly in his tracks when he saw Drake romping in the water with the wench! Romping!

"By the gods! You are not concerned about an enemy coming upon you!"

The smile on Drake's face faded. He slid a narrow eyed look at Caelin. "I am not, because I would've heard—or smelled—the approach of an enemy."

Caelin's lips tightened. "Faine and I landed right in the middle of the encampment!"

"I know, and from the sound of it, you were successful in retrieving your travel gear."

Balked of getting a rise out of Drake, Caelin slid a look at the girl who was the reason, he knew, that Drake was

behaving like a complete dolt when he was certainly old enough to know better. She'd been facing Drake when he arrived, but she had twisted at the waist to stare at him, affording him an excellent profile of a tear drop shaped breast. He scanned her with his gaze, searching his mind for a justifiable complaint. His cock rose when he had scanned her length to the buttocks peeking just above the surface of the water. There was a mark on her hip that caught his eye, however.

He frowned, studying it, and finally decided to move closer to better examine it.

He was only peripherally aware that her eyes had widened when he started toward her purposefully until she moved around behind Drake. "Here now, girl! Let me have a look at that," he said impatiently.

"A look at what?" Drake growled when he caught her arm and dragged her back, bending to study her buttocks.

"Gods! Have you noticed this, Drake?"

"I have licked every luscious inch of her and noticed all," Drake said calmly.

Caelin threw a glare at him. Catching Gwyneth around the tops of her thighs, he hoisted her buttocks upward, stabbing a finger at the mark. "This! Have you seen this?"

"I see that you are like to drown her if you are going to hold her head down in the water," Drake observed with a growl, studying Gwyneth's efforts to beat the water hard enough to hold her head above it.

"I'm damned if that is not a fleur de lis!"

That caught Drake's attention. He grabbed Gwyneth and lifted her ass high enough to study it himself. "Where?"

"On her hip—just there."

Coughing to expel the water she'd inhaled when Caelin had tipped her head first into the water, Gwyneth struggled to twist around and see what they were talking about. She couldn't, but she remembered someone had noticed a mark on her hip before. "It's a birthmark."

"It does not look like a birthmark to me," Caelin said grimly.

"What does it look like?" she asked.

"Did I not already say that?" he demanded testily. "Stay out of this! What do you think, Drake?"

"I think this is a luscious little bottom," Drake growled. "And you are right. I have not nibbled on this part." He planted his face in the crevice between her cheeks and inhaled deeply.

Gwyneth uttered a squawk and tried to surge upright.

"Can you get your mind off of her cunt for a moment?" Caelin growled. "Do not tell me you have not been plowing her furrows all day, for I shan't believe it."

Drake sent him a resentful look. "Not all day," he growled sullenly.

Caelin shook his head. "Never mind. If you cannot get your mind off your cock...."

Drake set her down. "You should dry off, pet. Your skin is burning."

Gwyneth waded from the water and used her slip to dry off. Drake followed her, popping her soundly on the ass when

she bent over to retrieve her chemise and nearly oversetting her. She rubbed the stinging cheek, sending him a frowning look of question.

He grinned at the flicker of temper, quickly squelched, in her eyes. She had more spirit, he decided than she displayed and the cleverness to hide it. "That is a luscious bottom, precious. I believe when next I tumble you I will begin feasting there."

She sent a glance in the direction Caelin had disappeared, and he frowned. Shrugging, he pulled his clothes on and headed back to the campsite.

Caelin had settled to stir up the fire beneath the cow that had been slowly roasting all day. "There is not much beef left," he commented.

Drake shrugged. "I was hungry. I have been nibbling."

Caelin's lips thinned. "So I heard."

Drake chuckled. "When you reach my age, youngling, you will be wise enough to know that the gods are stingy bastards! It is rare indeed that they drop a gift in one's lap and one should relish them when they come along—regardless of the circumstances. What are you thinking about the mark on the wench's hip?"

Caelin frowned thoughtfully. "Mayhap she is right and it is only a birthmark."

"But you do not think so?"

Caelin wrestled with himself for a moment. "King Gerald slew the royal family."

Drake grunted, sliding a glance toward Gwyneth when she appeared on the trail from the pool. "So they say. Of course,

there are the rumors that some survived. Artimus claims her as his spawn."

"She is deceitful enough to be his spawn," Caelin muttered.

Drake studied him thoughtfully. "How has she deceived you, elf?"

Caelin reddened uncomfortably, but he had no intention of admitting that he had been too blinded by his lust to see what he should have. In any case, she *was* deceitful! "She knew of secret passages within the castle that no one else seemed to know and used them to reach the dungeon where I was held. She outwitted the entire guard save the one stationed directly in the dungeon and she outmaneuvered him," he said tightly. "Almost. He awakened when she snatched his keys to release me."

Drake studied him for a long moment. "And this displeases you? She risked much to free you."

"I did not need her to free me," he growled. "In any case, I have to wonder why."

"What tale did she spin for you?" he asked when Gwyneth, having seen that they were deep in conversation, stopped uncertainly instead of approaching them.

Caelin shrugged. "That she thought I might free her. She asked me to take her with me."

"Mmm," Drake said thoughtfully. "This is a very curious tangle we have here. One would almost suppose that she knew of Artimus' design, and yet she seemed genuinely frightened when we spoke of the ritual."

Caelin mulled that over and finally scrubbed a hand along his neck, massaging it. "It *is* a curious tangle," he agreed. "A series of coincidences, you think?"

"Hmmm. I have always thought coincidence the design of the gods—when they are truly coincidence. The rest of the time they *are* design, someone's."

"The girl has magic," Caelin murmured. "It led me to her—or at least I noticed it the moment she found her way to me. It seems too insignificant to be no threat, and yet...."

"You think it might be? Hers? Or Artimus'?"

"I thought of it, but dismissed it. Now I am not so certain we should dismiss it."

"It?" Drake prompted.

"Suppose she was designed as a lure?"

Drake's brows lifted. He turned his head to study Gwyneth. "She is certainly alluring, and very much to my taste, but I can hardly credit her as a lure. She is a pretty little thing, true, but not beautiful and one would expect a lure to be, wouldn't one? What would be the purpose? And how could he think to preserve her innocence if he designed her as a lure?"

"That is why I dismissed it before," Caelin admitted. "But I lust for her and you lust for her and Faine does. Does that not seem ... unusual?"

Drake grunted. "Unusual ... yes, I suppose, given that we are three very different creatures but, from what you said, it was not that unusual for the men of the castle to rut her. Mayhap she has an entirely natural appeal? I have observed that it is like with some women—human females—just as it is with some human males. There is not always rhyme or reason

to it—nothing discernible. They are not always beautiful, and the beautiful are not always as avidly sought after. Some merely have a very wide appeal to many," he said with a shrug.

"So, you don't think we need be concerned that she is a lure for a trap?"

Drake frowned. "I do not trust Artimus as far as I can spit. I don't think we should dismiss any possibilities. I will turn this in my mind and see if I can think of any possibilities that make sense. Frankly, at this point, it does not.

"I have detected the magic as you did, but it is too weak to concern me. It does not seem to be her magic—which might then explain the allure, but I do not think she is capable of a glamour spell—in fact casting any sort of spell.

"The mark on her hip troubles me. It isn't impossible that she might be the little princess. I think it doubtful, but not beyond the realms of possibility. She has golden hair and the Belmors were known for it. Why would Artimus claim her as his own, though? He could not have thought to gain anything by that. He must know how universally despised he is and that his spawn would be reviled for that reason alone."

"Mayhap he thought it would be an added incentive to protect her for him? To inspire fear of retribution?"

"If he thought that," Drake said dryly, "then he was certainly wrong. It did not prevent the men of the castle from defiling her. There is no innocence in her eyes, poor little morsel. She had suffered much at the hands of her guardian."

"And will suffer more," Caelin said pointedly. "You should guard your heart, dragon. Artimus will have her."

Drake chuckled. "I am a dragon! I have no heart, elf!" Lifting a hand, he summoned Gwyneth. "Sit, child. Are you hungry?"

She blushed, but nodded, and he chuckled again. "Loving vigorously builds the appetite, yes?"

Gwyneth felt her face turn redder, but she smiled at his teasing.

Tearing a piece of meat off of the roasting beef, he waved it around to cool it and finally handed it to her. "What did you see when you and Faine retrieved your gear?"

"Probably much the same as you saw," Caelin said grimly. "Belmor is still as stirred as an anthill, but it seems clear Gerald intends to move a sizeable army. He has men scouring the countryside for horses and supplies."

"So—they will be moving soon," Drake said, lifting his head to study the sky. "It is late to consider moving on today, but we should go at dawn. I believe that I will go up and see what I can see that lies ahead. We need more meat, as well."

He got up decisively, stripped his clothes off and strode across the clearing, shifting almost mid-stride and taking to the air. Gwyneth watched him with a mixture of awe and uneasiness, reflecting that it was still difficult to wrap her mind around the fact that he wasn't truly a man.

Caelin was studying her when she glanced back toward the fire. He got up and moved to the pack on the ground not far from the fire. Untying it, he pulled a sword from the bundle and a sharpening stone. Gwyneth studied the sword. It looked like the sort the common soldiers carried and she wondered if he had collected it from the site where Drake had battled the



soldiers the night before. Since he settled to sharpen it and clean the rust from it, she decided she was right. She didn't think that he would leave any sword that belonged to him in such a disgraceful state.

"What do you know of that odd mark on your hip?" he asked abruptly enough that she jumped.

"Nothing," she responded.

He sent her a look. "You said that it was a birthmark," he reminded her.

"I can't see it myself," she said a little testily. "I'd forgotten it was there, but one of the maids noticed it once. I remember someone remarking on it."

He lifted his brows. "But not who remarked upon it?"

Gwyneth frowned thoughtfully. "One of the maids," she reiterated. "I don't recall who, or even when."

Caelin studied the sword he was working on frowningly. "No one ever spoke of your sire?"

Gwyneth swallowed a little convulsively. "No one ever spoke of either of my parents."

"Not even Gerald?"

Gwyneth gaped at him. "He's the king. I never spoke to him!"

"And you have never heard of the wizard Artimus?"

"I did not say that. I have heard tales of him—very little. People are afraid to speak his name above a whisper, though, and he is not someone they enjoy telling tales of so I have never heard much. I understood that he had been slain."

Caelin grunted. "Some evil never dies."

Gwyneth felt her flesh creep, felt the hairs on the back of her neck prickle. "So he is alive?"

"Nay, not in the sense that you think. He is chained—for now—in the underworld."

"I ... don't understand. How could he be a threat to this world if he is chained there? How could he ... do anything in this world from there?"

"More easily than you think," Caelin said tightly. "He has minions in both worlds—King Gerald for one. There was a time when this realm had a good king."

Gwyneth stared at him breathlessly. "What happened to him?" she asked when he focused on his sword once again instead of continuing.

"Artimus—and Gerald. I don't profess to know the entire tale. Ordinarily, we do not concern ourselves with the bickering of mortals. At a guess, Artimus betrayed King John with the intention of setting Gerald up as a puppet king—he was John's brother, by the bye and Artimus was the royal wizard. Except, Gerald betrayed Artimus. As I said, I don't profess to know the whole of it. King John succeeded in chaining Artimus—that much I *do* know—not how he managed it.

"And, unfortunately, it has not stopped Artimus from his machinations. You and I would not be here otherwise."

"Or Faine or Drake."

He flicked a hard look at her. "Or Faine or Drake," he agreed.

Gwyneth considered what he'd told her. "So you and Faine and Drake are his minions?"

His head jerked upwards. He stared at her with such rage that for several moments she thought that he would slay her. "I am no follower of Artimus," he said finally through gritted teeth. "You may say with truth that I am a slave to his whims, but if you value the life you have left, do not suggest, again, that I willingly do his bidding."

Gwyneth was still too shaken to move when Faine plodded toward her sometime later and stopped beside the fire. As the last rays of the sun dipped below the horizon, he changed from unicorn to man. He studied her for a moment and finally moved to his pack and extracted his clothes and boots, settling across the fire from her when he'd dressed.

"What, I wonder, did you say to the elf to send him off in such a foul temper, little maid?"

Gwyneth swallowed a little convulsively and looked down at her hands. "If I repeat it, you will be enraged with me, too," she mumbled.

"I will strive to contain myself," he said dryly.

She shrugged. "He was telling me that Artimus had minions in both this world and the underworld that did his bidding."

"Ah! And you concluded that that is what we are because he sent us to fetch you to him?" he said bitterly.

"Unfortunately, you are close to right—too close for comfort for either of us—any of us. It is impossible to have dealings with Artimus without becoming tainted by the evil that he exudes. It surrounds him and invades the pores until one feels as if they will choke on it. As it happens, Caelin's intentions were noble—and Drake's—they still are. It is what

they must do to succeed that twists it, that makes evil of good intentions. Artimus is a master at that."

Gwyneth studied him curiously. "But not yours?"

"Nay. I came to save my own soul from his foul clutches, only to realize, now, when it is too late that merely by yielding to the vile creature I became what I wanted to escape."

"I don't understand."

He shook his head, staring at the flames. "I am no longer what was mine by birth—what was once as easy to me as breathing—neither pure nor noble of spirit. I thought that Artimus had offered me a way to redeem myself, but in truth it is only the way to descend to the darkest part of myself. It *is* a part of me. It was always there. I just did not see it." He grimaced. "Mayhap it is truer to say that he made me find myself."

"But ... you're a unicorn."

"And each day I grow blacker. Soon, I will be as black as sin," he said, flicking at the shocks of white hair at his temples.

Gwyneth was still confused, but she saw that he was distressed. "I thought you were a handsome creature, the most beautiful thing that I had ever seen."

He blushed, frowning. "I am black!"

"Caelin's hair is black and he isn't evil."

"It reflects the darkness of my heart!"

"There isn't any darkness in your heart that I can tell."

His lips tightened. "Well, you obviously no nothing of the matter," he said somewhat testily. "I have lust in my heart for you, wench! That is a sign of my loss of nobility!"

Gwyneth blushed. "Do you?" she asked, intrigued.

He stared at her hard for a moment and looked away. "I feel ... all the things that men feel! In the beginning it was only when I was forced by the spell he placed upon me to transform into human. Now, I cannot put those things from my mind even when I assume my true form."

"You feel ignoble because you have bad thoughts?"

"I *am* base because of the thoughts I have!"

"I don't believe that. A person cannot help having bad thoughts from time to time. It is *acting* upon them that makes them bad, not merely thinking about it."

"I *did* act upon it! Even when I had pointed out myself that it was an evil thing that Drake had decided to do, I could not refrain from joining them! And it was not even because I wanted to help them. It was only because I lusted."

Gwyneth thought that over. "Then you were still more noble, because you only acted upon the lust not a willingness to sacrifice an innocent."

"It was a dastardly thing to do for *any* reason!"

"Why? You didn't hurt me. You weren't trying to hurt me. Men do it all the time."

"It does not make it right because they do!"

"It doesn't make it wrong, either—except when they hurt. It's the nature of the beast."

"An ignoble beast, man!" Faine said tightly. "I do not want to model myself after them! That is exactly the problem."

Lamentation of Swans  
*by Goldie McBride*

Gwyneth stared at him for a long moment and finally looked away, allowing the subject to drop. Her heart was drumming with hopefulness, however. Faine, of all of them, felt that what they were doing was unacceptable for any reason. Was it at all possible that he might be persuaded to help her, she wondered? *Could* he help her? Did she have time to try to convince him even if he could?

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## Chapter Eight

Drake returned with a wildly kicking and screaming horse that was very much alive. If Gwyneth hadn't been so horrified, she thought she might have laughed at the expressions on both Faine's and Caelin's faces.

"By the gods, Drake! What the fuck? A horse? You mean to *eat* a horse?" Faine demanded, clearly outraged.

"To ride!" Drake roared in his beast voice. "Take the thing, else he will be off again the moment I let him go!"

Faine and Caelin exchanged a glance but finally surged forward to grasp the trailing reins of the stallion. It took both them, using all of their considerable strength and weight to prevent the beast from bolting the moment Drake released him. He bucked wildly, kicking back at Drake as he struggled upward again. By the time Drake had vanished into the night sky once more, however, they had managed to quiet the animal enough to keep all four feet on the ground.

Caelin slipped closer until he could settle one hand on the horse's face and the other in his mane, speaking to him quietly all the while.

Gwyneth felt so giddy, she couldn't decide whether she most wanted to weep or laugh. She finally decided that she was so frightened and unsettled by the entire episode that it was hysteria, not amusement that made her feel like doing both.

She could scarcely believe Drake capable of capturing and carrying off such a beast! It was clearly a warhorse, and those were bred for their size and strength and ferocity!

She couldn't decide why she was so horrified—not the sake of the horse. Not that she would've wanted it hurt, but it occurred to her fairly quickly that it was Drake's battle with the thing that had so unnerved her.

She'd been near hysterical for fear that *he* would be hurt!  
And that Faine or Caelin might be hurt.

It was absurd, she assured herself—especially her fears for Drake—but there was no denying it. From the moment she'd been drawn to search for him in the sky and seen his struggle to keep his hold on the thing and stay aloft, she'd leapt to her feet, clapping her hands over her mouth to keep from screaming.

When Caelin finally managed to calm the beast, she sank weakly to the ground, covered her face and burst into tears. Someone dropped to the ground beside her a few moments later and patted her on the back a little awkwardly. She wept harder at the offer of comfort.

"The beast is none the worse for his flight," Faine said soothingly. "No doubt it will be a while before he finds his balls again to mount a filly, but he is not hurt."

Gwyneth choked and uttered a slightly hysterical giggle.

He bent low, tilting his head to try to peer at her face. "Is that more tears? Or a laugh?"

Gwyneth mopped her face off with her skirt and finally lifted her head. "Both, I suppose," she responded, sniffing.

"Gods! Your face is a mess! All red and puffy."



Disconcerted, Gwyneth hid her face against her knees.

"You aren't going to start crying again?" he asked uneasily.

"No," she said.

"Good, because it won't stop being red and puffy until you do."

Gwyneth dropped her hands to her lap and stared at the fire. "It looks that bad?"

He caught her chin and tipped her face up for his inspection in spite of her efforts to elude his grasp. He stared at her for a long moment and swallowed a little convulsively. "It is not nearly ugly enough to suit me," he murmured, leaning closer and brushing his lips lightly along hers.

Gwyneth's breath caught in her throat. She stilled, feeling every sense suddenly open and keenly receptive, focused, so that she not only felt the pressure of his lips against hers, she felt the warmth. She felt the faint roughness of his cheek as he rolled it along hers to match lips to lips. She felt the texture of them and the fit against her own mouth. His heated breath stirred the fine down along her upper lip and cheeks, making her face tingle, sending echoes through her that made the flesh of her breasts and her sex contract. It wound its way through her slightly parted lips into her mouth and into her nostrils, giving her just the faintest taste and scent of him, enough to decide she liked both, wanted more.

Her awareness broadened. His nearness and his size gave her a sense of being surrounded and engulfed by him as it measured the breadth of his shoulders, the depth of his chest, the size of his hand. Welcome and anticipation sang through

her veins before she had consciously acknowledged that she liked everything her senses had detected.

She sucked in a shaky breath when he lifted his lips from hers after a moment, opening her eyes slowly to meet his gaze. He released a pent up breath and slipped his hand along her jaw, curling his fingers along the back of her head and drawing her close again. "You are far too much temptation," he murmured raggedly, covering her mouth and kissing her deeply as he dragged her closer, trapped her against him with the hard bands of his arms.

He sank fully into her psyche that time, jolting her senses into a wild scramble to record everything at once and creating chaos. It was no tentative sampling as before, no slow awakening of her senses. His mouth enfolded hers in a blaze of heat. The thrust of his tongue lay conquest to every tender inner surface of her mouth at once. There was ravening hunger in his touch and in his hold on her, a demand for appeasement that her body responded to by yielding at once.

Before she entirely knew what had happened, she felt the ground beneath her and Faine on top of her, felt the pressure of his body digging into hers as he moved against her, the knead of his hand on one breast, at her waist, along her hip as he explored what he could of her through her clothing. Air brushed her legs and then higher as he pushed her skirts upward and for a handful of seconds, she felt a trace of panic as her mind instantly connected with memories far from pleasant.

Even as she felt the hard mass of his erection pressing bruisingly along her thigh, though, he broke the kiss. His

harsh pants for breath pelted her with his scent, dragged her back to the present as he began to suck feverishly at her throat and the side of her neck, brushing his face along hers. Moisture flooded her channel as it worked in a feverish anticipation to match his, aching for his possession. He found her already wet for him and it seemed to rip away the last threads of his control. He began to pump his hips to drive into her the moment he found his way. His harsh grunts of effort sent rippling waves of heat through her, stealing her breath, making her drunk with anticipation.

The stark contrast in the need his feverish efforts aroused in her to what she'd felt in very similar circumstances before wasn't lost on her. It flickered through her mind and left a sense of wonder in its wake and was gone, swallowed by the conflagration that sprang up as she felt her flesh engulf his, felt him claim her channel with agonizing slowness.

He was shaking all over by the time he'd dug into her as far as he could go, seemed too mindless in his quest for several moments even to realize he could go no deeper. For a handful of seconds he continued to strain against the insurmountable obstacle of her womb and then he began to move jerkily, pumping his hips to drag his cock outward along her channel and thrusting in again in frantic haste to reclaim it.

The muscles along her channel contracted, clenching along his length in reaction. She heard him grinding his teeth. A breathless grunt escaped him. "Gods!" he gasped hoarsely. "It feels so good inside of you."

Gwyneth felt her skin pebble all over in reaction, felt her heart slam against her chest wall, felt the throbbing ache at

her core expand and then fragment. She sucked in a sharp breath as waves of bliss began to crash through her. Faine pumped a little frantically, uttered faint choked grunts as own body began to yield up his seed in response, and released a long, ragged sigh of relief when it finally stopped.

"Gods!" he muttered when he'd finally caught his breath, leaning away to search her face worriedly. "Did I hurt you?"

Gwyneth opened her eyes with an effort. "No," she grunted, abruptly aware of the hard, pebble strewn ground beneath her. *He* hadn't hurt her, but the ground she'd been pressed against had left bruises all over her backside.

He scanned her face and finally levered himself off of her, rolling on his hip and then up into a sitting position. He seemed completely focused on adjusting his trousers and shoving his cock into them when Gwyneth pushed herself up onto her elbows a little drunkenly. She glanced at him and then down at her skirts, bunched up around her waist, and finally reached with shaking hands to push them down.

Faine shot to his feet abruptly as she sat up, stalked away from the fire, and disappeared into the darkness. Right up until that moment, Gwyneth had been basking in the residual warmth from their coupling. A chill traced a path over her overheated skin as she stared after him. Despite some uncomfortable similarities, it hadn't felt or made her feel in any way as it had felt when the men of the castle had shoved her down, thrown her skirts up, and plunged their nasty sticks into her—not until that moment.

Shivering, she clasped her arms around herself, too confused even to cry, although she felt her throat close.

\* \* \* \*

They got off to a late start the following morning despite the fact that they'd awakened before the first fingers of dawn were reaching up to chase the darkness. It transpired that Drake had captured a steed for himself for the journey and he and the beast didn't see eye to eye on the subject. It was fortunate Caelin had had the forethought to tether the stallion securely even though he'd successfully calmed the beast. The moment Drake drew close enough for the animal to catch his scent and identify him as the monster that had snatched him into the sky the night before, the stallion virtually foamed at the mouth with rage, rearing up and trying to strike with his hooves, snapping at him with his teeth.

Drake spoke soothingly to him as he'd seen Caelin do with his own horse, but the stallion wasn't having any of it. He continued to buck and rear and lash out threateningly. Drake glared at him and finally grabbed the tether. Giving it a hard yank that jerked the horse toward him, he balled his fist up and slammed it into the horse's head so hard the stallion's knees wobbled and then buckled and the animal keeled over.

Gwyneth, Faine, and Caelin were gaping at him when he turned and stalked back toward the campsite to snatch up the supplies he'd gathered while he was out 'hunting'.

"Is he ... dead?" Gwyneth gasped shakily.

"Nay! He's thinking a bit about crossing me is all," Drake growled.

Caelin and Faine had strode to the downed horse and crouched to examine him. The two exchanged a speaking

glance and straightened as Drake marched back and booted the horse in the ribs. "Get up, you lazy brute!" he growled.

The horse lifted his head a little dazedly and began to struggle to his feet. He had to plant his legs in a wide stance to remain on them once he was up. Drake plunked his bedroll and supplies on the horse's rump, tying them in place.

Caelin grinned reluctantly. "You've a soft touch with animals, dragon."

Drake grunted. "Never had much patience and I'm too old to have any now," he muttered.

"It's not hard to learn the way of the horse whisperer," Caelin said pointedly.

Drake stared at him. "He's a stallion," he said pointedly, flicking a piercing look at Gwyneth. "I'll save the soft touch for the fillies."

Caelin's lips tightened fractionally. He glanced at Gwyneth, as well and then strode to the campsite to retrieve his own supplies, uttering the warbling sound he had before. Darkness raced from the field where he'd been grazing, prancing and dancing for him as if he was delighted to be summoned.

Faine, once more a unicorn, followed the stallion more slowly.

Gwyneth stared at him for a moment and looked away. He hadn't spoken to her after their interlude the night before. In fact, he'd made himself scarce until they'd all bedded down to sleep. The sense of having been rutted had left her after a while as it slowly sank in that he hadn't simply gotten up and walked away, dismissing her like a piece of trash as the men usually did when they were done with her. There'd been more

a sense of him trying to escaped his shame for using her for his lust. That hadn't made her feel a great deal better since it also made her feel ashamed for enjoying it as much as she had, but she didn't think he'd meant it that way.

He was too conflicted to realize how he'd made her feel and, if their coupling was anything to go by, it wasn't just his imagination that he was losing control.

He nudged her with his soft muzzle when Caelin mounted and trotted toward her on Darkness. Startled, she turned to look at him. He studied her for a long moment, and brushed his face along her belly and breasts, barely missing her with his horn.

She stared into his eyes for a long moment as the sense filled her that he was trying to apologize and finally lifted a hand tentatively and stroked his face. He whickered softly, dropped a little awkwardly to his knees and bowed his head.

Charmed, she smiled at him.

He tossed his head.

"She can ride with me," Drake said tightly. "There's plenty of room this beast."

Gwyneth glanced toward Drake when he spoke and then looked at Faine again. She realized when he jerked his head up that he was offering to carry her. She bit her lip. "I'm not very good at staying on," she said.

Caelin uttered a snort of a laugh. "That is an understatement if I have ever heard one!"

Gwyneth slid a resentful glance at him and resolutely approached Faine. Lifting her skirts, she threw one leg across his back and gripped his mane, tightening her hold as he

stood up. It was a near thing, but she managed to stay on his back. She sent Caelin a smirk of triumph. Scowling at her, he nudged Darkness forward.

Drake was glaring at both of them, she discovered. Uttering a huff of irritation, he nudged his own mount into motion. Faine trailed them as they made their way down to the pass.

"It would've been far easier—and faster—if we flew. I suppose that didn't occur to you?"

Drake sent Caelin a narrow eyed look. "*It occurred* to me that I would rather mount this stallion than *be* mounted, thank you very much. In any case, there is no particular rush. We need only reach the temple by the full moon, and I need time to consider what it is that Artimus is up to. It *occurs* to me that he may be reluctant to yield what he has agreed to, that he might decide it will be more useful to his ends to hold it a while longer until he has thought of another task that he needs."

Caelin grunted, flicking a glance over his shoulder at Gwyneth. "It isn't because you want more time to fuck the wench?"

Drake shrugged. "That, too," he said, unruffled, then added pointedly. "You will not gain what it is you seek by rushing the girl there and placing her in the hands of his minions. We must confront Artimus himself and prevent him from claiming her until he has done his part or we will have performed a vile service for the evil bastard and gained nothing in return. I have vowed to do all that I can for my mate. I am prepared to do what I must to save Maud's



daughter. I am not prepared to sacrifice Gwyneth if I cannot succeed in saving Maud's child. In truth, I would far prefer to think of a way to outwit the bastard and give him nothing for the suffering he has caused me. It sickens me to the depths of my soul to consider fighting evil with evil deeds of my own. And beyond that, it is a shameful waste of as fine a piece of woman flesh as I have ever had."

Caelin frowned, conceding Drake had valid points. It had been no part of his plan at any time to simply turn the girl over to the temple priests and trust that they would uphold their promise. The word of such creatures was less than nothing and, like Drake, he meant to see his mother freed, not just for her sake, but to free himself from Artimus' clutches. It had made him sick with rage when Gwyneth had lumped him with Artimus' followers, sicker to know that there was truth in it, however reluctant he was to be used.

He almost pitied Faine, who had not even as much as he and Drake did to try to assuage his conscience, but in truth, there wasn't a hair's worth of difference. It boiled down to sacrificing Gwyneth to save themselves however they looked at it and he was no more comfortable with that than Drake or Faine were.

He almost thought Artimus must be gloating over the turmoil he had to have known it would cause them. Fool that he was, he had thought he could distance himself from her and see her only as an ends to a means. He had thought that he could blind himself to her as a woman because she was human. He thought he had lost that chance when the guard had attacked her—maybe even before that. Surprise didn't

begin to describe how he'd felt when he discovered she had come to try to 'save' him. There had been a sense of triumph and satisfaction that she'd come to him, placed herself right into his hands and spared him the necessity of searching for her—until he had been forced to watch helplessly while she fought a bastard twice her size for yielding to her soft heart. He thought he could have dismissed the risks she'd taken for him, a stranger, if not for that.

He had succeeded grandly in driving her away, in making her leery of him. If he could've succeeded half as well in driving her from his mind, he thought with disgust, he would have been far happier.

Instead, he'd watched Drake gentle her with his practiced touch, had seen her blossom with the kindness he'd been willing to give in return for acceptance. He hadn't really tried to contain his rage, or his outrage. He'd tried to turn it against her, but it was like battling a fire with a blazing torch. *He was burning.*

It chafed him that Drake was right and there was no way to end this thing swiftly, to end the torment. He didn't know anything to do to save himself but to keep trying to build the barrier higher and wider, to build it big enough he couldn't breach it. Because he'd begun to doubt that he could continue to keep his distance if he couldn't force her away with his ill temper and he was afraid if he didn't that he would be lost.

\* \* \* \*

A fear inspired rush of a adrenaline rolled through Gwyneth as she gazed up at the moon. Her skin prickled. It

was hard to accept that she wouldn't live to see the moon wane, that she could count her life in days.

Coldness swept over her as her mind conjured an image of a dark and secretive room, a cold slab beneath her back, a priest standing over her with his knife raised.

She jumped when a hand settled on her arm, throwing a frightened glance at the owner of the hand. Something flickered in Drake's eyes.

"You are too far away, little dove. Come close and I will warm you."

The heat that blazed in his eyes gave the offer an entirely different meaning than the one implied, but she felt an answering warmth, an eagerness not just for his touch for the pleasure he gave her, but for the comfort, the sense of protectiveness. She knew it was just an illusion, but she needed it. He dragged her onto his lap when she'd shifted closer against his side, curling his arms around her and nuzzling his face against the side of her neck.

"I imagine she is well bred by now," Caelin said shortly.

Drake slid one hand down to cup her sex and then her belly. "The egg is shy," he murmured, an edge to his voice despite the teasing way he'd said it, "or clever in eluding us. She is still fertile. The perfume of it makes me drunk with want. I think I will have to work at capturing it much, much harder."

A shiver worked its way through Gwyneth that was almost equal parts the warmth of desire and the cold of dread.

She had thought, hoped, that Drake's talk was just that—talk without substance. It occurred to her forcefully, though, that he was right, at least as far as she knew of such things. She *was* in the fullness of her time.

Was it even possible, though, that such beings could get a child on her?

Again, Drake seemed to believe it, but she had no idea if he had reason to believe it or if it was nothing more than his arrogance, his certainty that there was almost nothing he could not do.

And if he succeeded?

If he was right, then nothing would stop the count down of her days. Truthfully, she didn't believe anything would stop it regardless. She'd hoped when she'd yielded her maidenhead that that would prevent it, and yet here they were, another day closer to the temple and the fate that had been decided for her.

They were going to take her and give her to the priests, regardless of whether the priests decided she was suitable as a sacrifice or not, she realized with a horrible sense of dread. Maybe they would simply kill her for thwarting their plans for her, but either way....

"You are not serious? She is not bred?"

Drake grunted. "In all truth, she is not," he said dryly. "I am entirely willing to undertake the project on my own, however. If I am dedicated, I am certain my seed will overcome resistance and conquer."

Caelin glanced at Faine.

"You are too kind," Faine said tightly. "We agreed, however, that it would be best if none of us knew—for certain. I am willing to honor that agreement."

"Unnecessary," Drake said coolly.

"We insist," Caelin retorted, equally cold.

Drake studied them for a tense moment and finally relaxed. "Very well. It must be done tonight, else we will lose the fragile bud and our seed will fall on fallow ground." He stroked a hand along Gwyneth's arm. "Disrobe for us, sweeting, and lie down on my pallet."

Gwyneth tensed, but she wasn't afraid of them—any of them. It was nerves and anticipation that made her fingers tremble—and a modicum of anxiety about what would happen to her if they were successful."

Caelin swallowed a little convulsively. "I do not see a need in her disrobing. We can simply toss the wench's skirts up and be done with it."

Drake sent him a speculative look and shrugged. "It is for me."

"Then she can disrobe when it is your turn," Caelin said tightly.

"If she stands then, your seed will run out and you will need to fuck her again. She might just as well disrobe now—in fact better, else you will be forced to fuck her all over again."

As reasonable as he'd said it, it flickered through Caelin's mind that there was nothing reasonable about it, but he discovered he couldn't gather his thoughts once the

suggestion had been made. "That is a good point," he said a little hoarsely, watching Gwyneth undress.

"Aye, I thought that you would see it my way," Drake said sardonically.

It wasn't until Gwyneth had undressed and settled on the pallet that it dawned on Caelin that he was still fully clothed. He began to pull at his clothes a little frantically, struggling with the cords that seemed determined to become knots. He'd peeled his britches down before he realized he still had his boots on. Gritting his teeth, he tried hopping on one leg while he removed them and finally gave up and sat down. Rocks instantly bit into his bare ass, but the distraction had no effect on the raging erection. It only served to bring a throbbing to another part of his anatomy.

"Mind you," Drake drawled when Caelin had settled on his knees and pushed Gwyneth's legs apart, "she is more likely to take your seed if you can make her come. Of course, if you cannot, you cannot."

Gwyneth turned to gape at him at the comment. He winked at her, shrugged as if to say he'd done what he could, and then took a seat across the fire from them to watch the proceedings.

Caelin's mouth was so dry when he finally found himself staring down at Gwyneth that he couldn't seem to gather enough spit to swallow. Feeling strangely detached from his surroundings, he leaned over her, planting his palms on either side of her shoulders.

She didn't need to come, he told himself. He only needed to thrust into her until he came and that would be enough. No

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doubt she was already warm and wet, for he could see from her panting breaths and the way her breasts trembled with the force of her heartbeat that she was certainly not unmoved whether she was as ready to explode as he was or not.

It was the discovery when he finally lifted his gaze to her face that she was looking at Drake that riled his temper, that splintered the raging lust into rage and lust. He dropped to his elbows, captured her face and kissed her with the savagery of both, determined to drive Drake from her mind. She stiffened for a moment and then yielded abruptly to his conquest of her mouth, making a sound in her throat that made everything inside of him grow more taut. At the same time, it tamed the rage, leaving only need, desperate need.

He kissed her mouth until he'd begun to think he might black out from the insufficiency of air he could take in. Breaking away, he sucked in a gulp to chase the darkness and dove for her throat and then her breasts.

She tasted like heaven. She felt like the most delicious of sins. He was so intent on filling his senses with her that it took him a few moments to realize that she'd begun to make faint whimpering sounds of distress. He lifted his head and stared at her dazedly, too drunk with the fire inside his belly to think.

"Now, Caelin!" she gasped.

Yes! Now! he thought feverishly, pushing a hand between her legs to stroke her, to search for the sweet honey he needed to push inside of her. His mind went blank for a moment when he pushed a finger inside of her and felt her heat, felt her flesh close around his finger. Shaking, he jerked

his finger from her, grasped his cock, and shoved at her opening frantically, trying to get inside of her before he came. She enveloped him. His skin tightened, rippled as waves of gooseflesh moved over him. Gritting his teeth to focus his mind on something else, anything else, until he'd wedged himself fully inside of her, he found himself huffing so hard for breath that the blackness washed over him again.

He paused when he'd finally conquered her channel, trying to catch his breath, thinking if he only stayed as he was the muscles of her passage that were kneading his flesh would bring him off without any further effort on his part.

*She* needed to come, though.

He'd forgotten why.

Yes! Because she fucking came for Drake and she was going to scream for him, by the gods! Levering himself upward enough to watch her face, he began to thrust into her, fast, then slow, deep then shallow, trying to find a rhythm that would please her.

He was damned if he could tell, gods damn it! She moaned every time, regardless. Fuck it! He couldn't hold on to his seed forever! He felt as if she'd squeezed his balls up into his throat and he was strangling on them.

He settled a little lower and began to search for the rhythm he needed—any rhythm. Gods! He couldn't remember if it had felt this good the first time or not.

Insects were crawling all over him, spreading fire. His brain was on fire. He began to thrust into her feverishly to put out the fire before it consumed him.



She gasped, arched her back, uttered the keening cry he'd been waiting for and the moment she did his seed exploded from him so hard he nearly blacked out. It forced a choked grunt from him and then another as his body continued to convulse, forcing his seed through his cock like acid.

Relief filled him when it finally stopped. A mellow warmth flowed through him and took every ounce of strength with it. He sagged against her, thankful his heart had finally slowed instead of exploding and he could drag in a decent breath of air.

It took sheer determination to push himself up onto his knees. He settled on his heels, staring down at her. Slowly, his gaze traveled her length and settled on her cleft.

He could see his seed dripping from the mouth of her sex. Panting, he glanced around a little dazedly and finally grabbed his tunic, shoving it under her hips.

"You could always stand her on her head," Drake said dryly. "It's certain she wouldn't lose any of your seed that way. She might gargle it, but it could not drip out."

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## Chapter Nine

Caelin felt his face heat with a mixture of discomfort and anger. He discovered when he glanced at Gwyneth, however, that she was struggling to keep from laughing and the humor of the situation struck him. Grinning reluctantly, if somewhat sheepishly, he moved away from her to dress himself.

With a resurgence of his previous pique, he noted Faine, for all his breast beating about the 'wrongness' of it, had no trouble performing his 'duty'. Drake, of course, made no pretense of coupling with her for the sake of the group. He enjoyed her with lusty enthusiasm.

It didn't escape Caelin that she enjoyed him with equal enthusiasm or please him in the least, particularly when he realized Drake had outmaneuvered them all by suggesting she lie down on his pallet. He didn't actually think about until it occurred to him that he wouldn't mind sharing his own with her.

Drake's eyes were gleaming with triumphant amusement when he sent him an accusing look. "She is sleeping now anyway, poor little dove," he murmured.

Caelin frowned, wrestling with the desire to couple with her again and an equal certainty that his desire to do so was evidence enough that he was in deep trouble. "You are certain that it was enough?"

"I believe there is enough seed in her to float her eyeballs," Drake retorted dryly. "If *something* does not take root, then it cannot be done."

"We have made a mess of your pallet. You may take mine, if you like."

Drake's eyes gleamed. "Thank you, youngling, but I believe I will sleep well enough with my little pet curled against me. She is delightfully cuddly even when she is sticky."

Caelin swallowed the angry retort that rose to his tongue. In truth, he knew Drake had done him a favor, regardless of whether he'd meant to or not. It was becoming abundantly clear to him that he could not maintain the distance of strangers that would have given him some comfort. It wasn't that it hadn't bothered him at all to think of sacrificing a stranger to save his mother's soul. It had, and yet the woman who had given him life meant far more to him than any stranger possibly could.

Except Gwyneth was no longer a stranger. She was no faceless, soulless being that meant nothing to him and he could not put her back into the nothing that she had been.

The thought plagued him more each day.

He could not abandon his mother to her suffering. He could not!

And he'd begun to realize that his own life would be a torment to him forever more if he gave Gwyneth over to Artimus.

\* \* \* \*

It was harder work balancing on the back of a horse, Gwyneth reflected, than she would ever have thought. Not that Faine *was* a horse, of course. Unicorns were far more

noble than mere horses, but she thought riding one was much the same for she could not tell a great deal of difference in the ache of her buttocks and legs.

Or her back.

Or her shoulders and arms.

She didn't think she had been as weary after a day of working in the kitchens at the castle as she was from doing nothing more than riding the livelong day, from sunrise until it was nearing sunset.

They had been riding for nigh a week. She would've thought that she would grow accustomed in that length of time, or least begin to grow accustomed. Then again, she thought with a touch of amusement, she supposed it might be because she was not accustomed to being ridden hard every night and then riding hard the next day.

She didn't feel inclined to object, even if she hadn't known that objecting was never a good idea and generally useless besides. They gave her pleasure. She had never known a time in her life when she had felt such pleasure, and it wasn't entirely the coupling. She enjoyed that—far more than she would ever have thought possible, but she also enjoyed cuddling, and she had no lack of partners to cuddle her now.

She'd feared that Drake and Caelin might come to blows over it the first time Caelin had insisted that she share his pallet, but he'd only complained, glared at Caelin, and then shrugged as if it didn't matter at all.

She'd been torn then, more than she would've thought possible when she'd first joined them. It had hurt that Drake didn't seem to care when he'd seemed so affectionate, and

yet she'd desperately wanted to know what it was like to sleep in Caelin's arms.

Heaven! He'd loved her as Drake had, kissed her until she was so dizzy from his kisses it had felt as if the world was spinning, and then he'd coupled with her and afterwards he'd held her in his arms.

She hungered for those moments almost more than the coupling, as much as she enjoyed that. It made her feel loved and protected and that was all that kept her sane when she knew what she must face.

"Why do you not run along to the lake, my precious, and bathe?" Drake suggested, giving Gwyneth a swat on her bottom to send her on her way. "I can see that you are weary. The water will ease your misery from the ride."

She glanced worriedly from him to Caelin and Faine, knowing that they wanted her out of the way to discuss their journey, or perhaps their plans. Finally, she nodded, glancing back a time or two as she headed to the lake Drake had pointed out.

Drake settled on the ground to watch her, propping himself up on one elbow. "Be certain to scrub the smell of horse off, my pet. I mean to smother you with kisses all over tonight and I do not want to be thinking of Faine when I do."

Faine glared at him, but since the sun had yet to set and the change had not come upon him, and unlike Drake, he couldn't talk when he was in his natural form, he could do nothing more.

Caelin was fairly certain that that had prompted Drake to make the comment more than an interest in whether or not

Gwyneth bathed thoroughly, regardless of his intentions. He seemed to take a great deal of delight in baiting Faine when he was in no position to defend himself verbally.

His amusement waned when he saw that Drake was completely focused on watching Gwyneth undress. With the best will in the world, he discovered he couldn't resist following the direction of Drake's gaze and, once he had, he was too focused on watching her himself to turn his mind away.

"You are convinced that that mark on her hip is not the fleur de lis?" he murmured thoughtfully.

"I have begun to think there is a good possibility that it is," Drake drawled.

Caelin sent him a quick look. "Then you think that she is not Artimus' daughter?"

Drake sent him a glance of amusement. "Why would you think that one would preclude the other? He was the royal wizard. It would be child's play to him. It would take nothing more than a glamour to pose as the king and plant his own seed."

Caelin frowned, returning his attention to Gwyneth. "In which case, she would not truly be a princess, even if she was the daughter of the queen."

Drake studied him assessingly. "We have only conjecture and a claim from a vile bastard who is not known for his honor or his integrity. King John may well have sired her. We do not know that he did not. What I do know and should have seen right off is that she is every inch a princess royal. She has her mother's quiet strength. They did not break her,

though it is clear they tried. She has been sorely used, but she needed only a little kindness to blossom. She is a swan among lowly sparrows," Drake murmured meditatively, lifting his head to look up as a lamentation of swans passed overhead. Heading directly toward the lake, the flock settled in the water around her, looking her over curiously but with no indication that they beheld her as anything but one of them.

Surprise flickered through Caelin and the abrupt certainty that her magic was far stronger than it had been before. "I'll be damned."

"It is entirely possible that we all will."

\* \* \* \*

Caelin glanced back to see how much distance was between him and Faine, who was carrying Gwyneth and then nudged Darkness until he'd come alongside Drake. "Any thoughts on how we are going to play this game that Artimus has set us upon?"

"Many. I am still working on the puzzle."

Frustration rose in Caelin, but he tamped it. He could hardly rail at Drake for not producing a solution when he could not himself. "I have heard it said that Artimus was a seer."

"I have heard this also," Drake replied.

"It if is true, then that complicates things even more—especially if he foresaw this day."

Drake frowned. "I have known a few seers in my time. I asked one once upon a time what it was that he saw when he looked into the future."

"And?" Caelin prompted a little impatiently.

"Flickering images of things that might be."

Caelin frowned. "Something like a dream, you think?"

"I had the impression that it was dream-like, but he said that it was more like trying to look across a lake on a foggy day. The mists would part and he would see something and then they would close again and mayhap he would see something else. And then he would study over what he'd seen and he would try to decide what it was and what it meant."

"Mayhap he was not a very good seer," Caelin said dryly.

"It was Merlin."

Caelin sent him a sharp look. There were few who hadn't heard of the great seer, Merlin. "You knew him?" Caelin asked blankly.

Drake chuckled. "I am a dragon, youngling," he said chidingly.

Caelin dismissed the effort to calculate the dragon's age. "And he saw no more than that? Or do you think that he only told you that?"

"I think he spoke the truth. I do not think that he could see better than anyone else. I believe that he devoted more time to looking and I also believe that it was his understanding of human nature that ultimately helped him the most."

"In what way?" Caelin asked curiously.



Drake shrugged. "If there is famine, there is war and so if he saw famine he knew that war would follow because that is the nature of man—the instinct for survival."

"So you don't think that Artimus could have seen enough of this time for it to be a threat to any plans we made?"

"There is always the possibility that he saw enough to be a very dangerous threat."

Caelin shook his head. "It gives me a headache trying to think of a way to outwit him when I know so little and fear that he knows much more. He would have had a reason to send the three of us. I am certain of that—a reason beyond the fear that Gerald would betray him and refuse to give her up."

"He has had many years to plot," Drake agreed.

Caelin's lips tightened. "But to have placed Gwyneth with Gerald, he would've had to have known that it would come to this, that he would be defeated and the only way that he could turn defeat into triumph would be with the girl. I've no notion of her age, but he would have had to have sired her before King John drove him into the underworld and chained him there. That suggests that he knew that he would need her. I cannot believe that he merely sired her and then decided to use her."

"I believe this, also," Drake agreed. "Which certainly suggests that he saw this time."

"But?"

"I do not believe that he saw *us*," Drake said with emphasis.

Caelin frowned. "I do not follow."

"If he saw a glimpse of this time and he saw that a dragon, an elf, and a unicorn would bring the girl to him, it is not likely that he saw who the dragon, elf, and unicorn were."

Caelin considered that carefully. "I do not see how that would make a difference. If he saw three with Gwyneth, then it would have had to have been us, wouldn't it?"

"Mayhap, and mayhap not. There is always freewill. Say that he saw a dragon, an elf, and a unicorn and he knew that they would be there, that they must be in order for the future he saw to transpire. He would assume that the three he chose were destined to be those he saw, but that is not necessarily the case. And, if we are not the three he saw, we have freewill, and thus the future he saw may not come to pass."

"You are saying that we have the possibility of changing what he saw," Caelin said slowly. "So long as we do not simply accept that we cannot change it, but how can we know that every step we take was not predestined and the results will be the same?"

"We cannot know until we try."

"But you mean to try?"

"Of course," Drake said, clearly surprised that he would ask.

Caelin felt as if a weight had fallen from his shoulders.

\* \* \* \*

Drake pulled his stallion to a halt, folded his arms over the pommel, and studied the canyon they were about to enter.

Feeling the hair on the back of his neck prickle, Caelin pulled his own mount to a stop and scanned the walls on

either side. "This is an excellent place for an ambush," he said quietly.

"My thoughts exactly."

Caelin closed his eyes, feeling with his other senses. They prickled just as the hair on the back of his neck had. "They are waiting."

Drake nodded. "Mayhap a quarter of a mile."

Caelin glanced back worriedly at Gwyneth. "How the devil did they get around us?" he muttered.

Drake shrugged. "I chose the most direct route, but we've been in no great hurry. I expected them to attack sooner." He dismounted. Bending, he removed his boots and stuffed them in his saddlebag and then stripped his tunic and breeches off.

Caelin stared at him blankly when he mounted the horse again.

"They do not know you travel with a dragon," Drake said. "Chances are, if they've managed to scout at all, they believe we are two elves and one woman since they know that you are an elf ... and it is doubtful they will have seen Faine in human form. So, we will continue on as if we have no notion what they are about and then, when they attack, we will have the opportunity to trim their numbers."

Caelin frowned. "I like all of that except the part where Gwyneth follows on Faine. I think he should take her up and you and I will do battle and meet him on the other side."

Drake turned to look at Gwyneth speculatively. "She can barely stay astride him now. She will be smashed on the rocks if he takes her up and then is forced to try to avoid their arrows."

"She is liable to catch an arrow if he doesn't!"

"They do not want her dead. They want her back. They will be doing their utmost not to hit her. We will make it easy for them to miss by having her trail us far enough that she is not in the line of fire."

Caelin dismounted decisively. "I will tie her to Faine. If he thinks it necessary to take flight to protect her, he will not have to worry about her falling off."

Drake frowned but nodded. "I think that might be for the best. They will not be surprised to see her bound and will think nothing of it."

Caelin snorted. "I suppose they will think nothing of the fact that you are riding naked either?"

Drake looked irritated. "I do not doubt they will think it strange, but I see no reason to ruin a perfectly good tunic and breeches when I am certain I will need to shift, to say nothing of the boots! They do not give those away, let me tell you! I do not even like to think of the coin I had to lay out to get them!"

"Why did you not simply steal them?" Caelin asked, amused.

Drake glared at him. "Because I am not a thief! In any case, I have not run across anyone with feet as big as mine."

"Couldn't we just ... go around them?" Gwyneth asked unhappily, watching Caelin anxiously as he bound her wrists together around Faine's neck with a strip he'd torn from her chemise.

Caelin checked his knot and patted her cheek. "Nay, wench! They would only circle around in front of us again, or attack from behind. Best to take care of it now."

Gwyneth bit her lip as he returned to Darkness and swung himself astride the great black horse, pulling his short sword.

"Mind you, Faine, keep her well back from the thick of things, but take care they do not cut you off from us."

Faine nodded his head vigorously, nearly wrenching Gwyneth from her perch since she was bound to his neck. She wiggled to distribute her weight more evenly as he trotted after Drake and Caelin. He sent her a reproving look and she reddened. "I slipped."

Shaking his head at her, he returned his attention to the riders in front of them, lifting his own head to scan the sides of the canyon as they rode deeper into it. Gwyneth couldn't decide whether she most wanted to keep a watch for the soldiers, or hide her face against Faine's neck. It was a childish urge, she knew, and pathetically useless as any sort of protection, but the anticipation of terror was making her feel faint and sick. Her heart fluttered so madly that it felt as if it had lost all rhythm. She couldn't seem to get enough air into her lungs and the lack made darkness and dizziness swarm around her.

As tensed as she was for what she *expected* to happen, it almost defied logic that the first bellow of challenge she heard made her hair stand on end and nearly stopped her heart in her chest. She whipped her head wildly around in search of the threat and was almost sorry she had. Soldiers were pouring over the rocks around them in a fleshy wave. Drake

leapt up abruptly, balancing on his feet for a handful of moments on the racing stallion's back and then, almost in the blink of an eye, transformed himself.

His hair vanished. His skin rippled and changed from golden brown to an almost metal-like gold with the texture of reptilian hide. Horny growths sprouted down his spine and along the elongating tail that had sprouted from the end of his spine. Bony wings webbed with a thin, almost transparent skin, sprouted from his shoulder blades. He spread them wide and a great shadow fell over the canyon.

The men in the forefront of those who'd been racing into the canyon on his side, skidded to a halt. The men behind them fell over them. Within moments, there was a struggling mass of bodies as they tried to extricate themselves. Drake sucked in a deep breath and blew out a wall of flame. Screams, smoke, and the awful stench of burning flesh filled the canyon.

Gwyneth wrenched her gaze from the horrible sight and saw that, although Caelin had been fighting a running battle, swinging at the men coming at him and laying them open with his sword, the sheer weight of numbers had finally forced Darkness to a virtual standstill. The horse was lashing out with his forelegs and his hind legs, creating almost as much destruction as Caelin was with his sword. Drake's horse, abandoned as Drake took flight, maddened by the battle around him, was fighting as ferociously as Darkness, stomping soldiers to a bloody mush.

Faine abruptly charged into the fray, skewering one of the soldiers with his horn as he darted toward Caelin's blindside.

He jerked free as the man's body began to fall, but the attempt to guard Caelin's back brought them into the thick of the fight. They found themselves surrounded within moments and Faine twisted, bucked, and rammed the soldiers, trying to create a hole to slip through.

"Take her up, Faine!" Caelin bellowed when he finally managed to find a moment to spare a glance at them. It was enough for him to see that Faine was surrounded and unable to use his wings.

He began slinging his sword faster, using it almost more as a club than a blade as he struggled to beat a path to them. "Drake!" he bellowed abruptly. "*&Agrave; la Reine!* To the queen!"

A huge shadow fell over them abruptly, the near deafening sound of beating wings, a rush of air and dirt. The men surrounding them began to fall or fly away as Drake snatched at them with his claws, plucked them from the ground, and tossed them left and right.

Faine reared abruptly onto his hind legs, punching at the men pulling at him and jerking at Gwyneth in an effort to drag her off his back. She thought her arms would be wrenched from the socket or her hands would separate from her wrists. She screamed as she felt one shoulder give. Faine uttered a cry at almost the same moment. Gwyneth felt the jolt go through him as one of the men drove his sword into Faine's chest, felt the burning prick of the tip of the blade in one thigh as it went through him and into her.

She screamed again, that time in terror that Faine had been mortally wounded, felt the world tilt as he fell over,

carrying her with him and then wrenching and tugging. She began trying to flail her arms at the man who'd cut the bindings on her wrists, but one arm was useless.

"It's me!" Caelin growled, hefting her on to his shoulder and taking off at a run.

Her vision strangely dark and distorted, Gwyneth struggled to lift her head enough to look for Faine and Drake. Drake had lit on the ground near Faine and was systematically punching men and shredding them with his claws.

"Get up, you lazy bastard before they finish you off!" he bellowed, giving Faine a kick. Faine struggled to his feet, bracing his legs wide to stay on them once he'd managed it and looking around dazedly.

Satisfied that he'd put the soldiers on the run, Drake glanced around, studied Faine's wobbly progress for a moment and searched for Caelin and Gwyneth. Seeing that Caelin was struggling to mount Darkness with Gwyneth still slung over one shoulder, and returned his attention to the battleground. Except for a few stragglers who seemed more intent on retreat than fighting and the bodies and charred remains of bodies, he saw they had the canyon to themselves.

He knees wobbled. He locked them with an effort and looked down at himself in confusion, searching for the source of his sudden weakness. Arrows studded his torso and legs, nigh a dozen all told, although he doubted those in his wings had anything to do with the weakness. Grasping the hafts, he plucked the arrows out of his flesh, studied the gashes from swords and looked around for the rest of the party.



Caelin had finally managed to mount Darkness and was rapidly diminishing with distance. Faine, he saw, wasn't faring well at all. He still had his legs under him, but he was staggering.

He looked around for his stallion but a very little thought was enough to convince him that it wouldn't be wise to expend the energy to transform himself and make use of the horse. Dragging in a shaky breath, struggling to ignore the pain from his wounds, he followed Faine, hoping against hope that the screams he remembered were only from fright and Gwyneth had suffered no lasting harm.

He was in no shape to hurry after them to find out. Catching up to Faine, he settled an arm along his back, in part to help guide the unicorn, in part to help keep himself on his feet.

He lifted his head now and then to search the sky and the sides of the canyon, watching for a new threat, worrying that the sun would set before Faine had recovered enough from his wound. The enchantment would make him change whether he was strong enough to manage it or not. He couldn't decide, though, if the darkness that seemed to be descending very rapidly was the sun setting or unconscious.

He shook his head, trying to shake it off.

They hadn't traveled much more than a mile by his reckoning when Faine's legs, shaking with every step, abruptly gave out.

Wavering slightly on his own feet, Drake stared down at him blankly for several moments, blinking the swarm of black insects from his eyes. Heaving a deep breath to collect

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himself, he bent over, hefted Faine to his feet and then lifted him to carry him across his shoulders. For a moment, he wavered, nearly blacking out, but he managed to blink away the impending darkness, find his bearings, and begin the trek to join Gwyneth and Caelin.

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## Chapter Ten

Fear rode Caelin harder than he rode Darkness. Gwyneth had gone perfectly limp, but he couldn't tell if she had only fainted or if she was hurt that badly—mayhap dying. If he'd thought it safe to stop to check her, he would have, but a very little debate over the possibility convinced him getting her a safe distance from attack was imperative. She might die anyway, but he didn't think he could fight off another attack.

He stopped as soon as he'd convinced himself he'd put enough distance between them and King Gerald's men to allow him to check her. Pulling her from his shoulder to his lap, he pressed his fingers to the pulse in her neck. Relieved to feel the steady beat, faint though it was, he looked her over for wounds. Her skirts were bloodied, but he couldn't tell if it was his blood or hers.

"Find us some water, Darkness," he ordered the horse, cradling Gwyneth against his chest. She stirred from time to time, but never quite attained complete consciousness. He thought her faint groans indication enough of some injury, but it wasn't until Darkness finally found his way to a small stream that he dismounted and settled her carefully on the ground to check her.

He found that her left shoulder had been dislocated almost immediately. "This is going to hurt like hell, darling," he said grimly, "but it must be done."

His hope that she might be far enough from consciousness to feel little pain vanished as he caught her arm in a firm grip

and pulled on it until it popped back into join. She sucked in a sharp breath that bordered a scream as he did, and then went limp again. Mopping the sweat from his brow, he moved to her legs and tossed her skirts up. He found the wound immediately. His belly clenched as he studied the blood, but he had no idea if she'd lost too much or not. She was as pale as a ghost, but that could've been from the pain, he told himself.

Tearing a piece from her underskirt, he bathed the wound and studied it. It was more of a puncture than a slice. He thought it had bled well enough to cleanse it of any foreign objects, though—he hoped. It was still bleeding a little, but thankfully not much.

Tearing another strip from her clothes, he bound it snugly, checked to make certain it wasn't tight enough to cut off the circulation and finally straightened her skirts.

He discovered she was looking at him when he glanced at her face. She swallowed a little convulsively, tears filling her eyes.

"Shhh!" he said moving to settle beside her and pulling her carefully into his arms. "It is over. You are alright now, dearling."

She burrowed her face against his chest. "It is not alright! You are hurt. Let me see to your wounds."

"I am not hurt badly. Just be still."

To his relief, she subsided, sniffing back her tears. "You are not just saying that?"

"I will let you kiss them all better when you are better," he said teasingly.

"You were bleeding."

"I am elfin, dearling. It takes a sight more than a few minor cuts to bring elfin folk down."

"But you hurt?"

"Like a son-of-a-bitch," he retorted almost cheerfully, "but you can not take away the hurt. It will stop in a bit."

She pulled away a few minutes later and looked around. "Where are Faine and Drake?"

Caelin glanced worriedly down the trail. "They will be along ... soon now. Wait here while I get my pack and we can make you more comfortable."

She sat up and watched him keenly while he retrieved his bedroll from Darkness. It took an effort to refrain from moving stiffly, but he thought she was distressed enough. He didn't want her bounding up and trying to fuss over him, and he knew she would if she realized how badly he was hurt.

Spreading his bedroll, he helped her onto it and, upon consideration, pulled another strip from her underskirt and bound her left arm to her chest to restrict the movement. "I will have no underskirt left if I am hurt more," she said, a teasing note to her voice.

He managed a faint smile. "Then you should try very hard not to get hurt again."

She met his gaze for a long moment. He looked away first. "Lie still, there's a good girl. I think I will bathe and see how much of this blood is mine and how much belonged to the men I fought."

He felt her gaze on him as he knelt by the stream and washed away the blood. Tearing his tunic into strips, he

bound two of the wounds he found since they were still gaping and still bleeding sluggishly. The others he discovered were neither deep nor in need of anything but cleaning.

He felt a little lightheaded when he stood up, but he managed to make it back to the pallet. "I think I will lie down and rest my eyes a moment," he murmured a little drunkenly. "Wake me if you see any sign of the king's men."

Gwyneth stared down at him in dismay but a very little thought produced the indisputable truth. There *was* nothing she could do for him beyond what he'd already done himself. It brought her a little relief to see that the bleeding seemed to have stopped. The bandages he'd wrapped around himself were stained, but the blood wasn't seeping through. Brushing his hair from his brow, she leaned down and pressed her lips lightly to his forehead.

His lips curled slightly. "That is better. A little lower would be better still."

Gwyneth felt her lips tremble on a smile. "I will do that when you are a little better and can enjoy it more."

He opened his eyes and stared at her with a mixture of surprise and heat but closed them again almost at once. "There is incentive to recover quickly," he muttered.

The urge to smother him in kisses as Drake had so often indulged her swept over her. As he was hardly in a condition to appreciate it and she knew it would only be for herself, she tamped it, instead looking around worriedly for any sign of Drake and Faine.

Her heart contracted painfully in her chest when she finally remembered how she'd come to be wounded. It took an effort

to keep from bursting into tears. She fought them back, reminding herself that Faine was a unicorn—magical. He could not die, she assured herself. It was a grievous wound, and that was why it was taking so long for him to catch up.

Likely Drake, as well, she thought, suddenly feeling more hopeful. Drake had stayed to help him. That was what was keeping them!

The quiet made her uneasy, though. After a bit, she got up and retrieved Caelin's short sword. It was bloody all the way to the pommel, and sticky. She was tempted to plunge it into the water, but she recalled that she'd heard the men-at-arms discussing the proper care of their weapons and cleaning it with water was not acceptable—not for the blade, at any rate. Finding the swatch of cloth Caelin had used to clean her wound, she dampened it in the stream and cleaned the pommel and then wrung the cloth out and picked up sand with it to cleanse the blade.

She was so intent on her task that it was a few moments before her mind interpreted the faint sounds behind her as something other than Darkness or Caelin. She whirled then with a mixture of hope and fear.

Discovering it was Drake and that he was carrying Faine across his shoulders, she shoved to her feet and rushed toward them.

Drake stopped when he saw her. His knees wobbled and then he dropped to his knees and fell forward.

Sucking in a screaming breath, Gwyneth flew across the space that separated her from the two of them, dropping to

examine Faine where he'd rolled to a halt. He was unconscious, she discovered, but breathing.

"He will be fine, my pet," Drake said in his rumbling dragon's voice.

Uttering a sob, Gwyneth scrambled to him, examining him frantically with her gaze and feeling as if the earth had dropped away beneath her. "Drake! Darling! You are so hurt!" Sobbing almost uncontrollably, she struggled to lift his head into her lap and curled her good arm protectively around his head and shoulders. "Tell me what to do! I don't know what to do for you!"

"The salt of your tears is blinding me," he muttered.

Sniffing, Gwyneth uttered a watery chuckle as hopefulness and relief washed through her and brushed at her tears. "Tell me you are alright and I will not weep, dearest."

He released a shuddering breath. "I will be alright, my precious, when I have slept a bit."

She hugged him tightly, stroking his face when he passed out. She could not bring herself to get up. She sat with his head cradled in her lap until she finally realized that darkness was falling. She looked around a little helplessly, then. Caelin was unconscious on his bedroll and a goodly distance from Drake and Faine. There was nothing she could do about that. She couldn't move them.

A little reassured when Drake continued to breathe, however difficult and pained his breaths, she finally settled his head carefully on the hard ground and got up. She was stiff from sitting so long, she discovered. It took an effort to make her way to the stream. She pulled her underskirt off and tore



it into strips. Wetting one, she moved to Faine and studied his wound. It wasn't bleeding anymore, she saw, but he was still unconscious. She squeezed the water into his mouth instead of using it on the wound, feeling a surge of hopefulness when he swallowed.

She leaned down to kiss his face and got up again, returning to the stream for more water. When she'd given Drake water as she had Faine, she moved around him to examine his wounds. Dismay filled her when she saw how butchered he was. All of them were wounded, but Drake had taken far more damaged than all of them put together.

Fear almost froze her. Her tears kept blinding her, but she brushed them away and carefully cleansed all of his wounds. She had no idea how to bind him when he was still in dragon form, though, so she simply focused on pouring water over the wounds that were still bleeding and pressing a cloth to them until, one by one, they closed.

The light was failing rapidly when she finally looked up from her task. She debated whether it was a good idea to light a fire or not, but finally decided she would have to light at least a small one else she'd be too blind to offer them any sort of help.

Getting up, she moved around the area collecting dried sticks until she had a small pile. When she'd arranged them, she searched Caelin's pack for flint to light it and settled on her knees beside the pile. She almost passed out herself when she pulled her arm from the sling Caelin had made for her, but she couldn't light a fire with one hand. It was almost torture, striking the flint to produce the spark she needed.

She thought for a bit that she *would* pass out, but finally she succeeded in lighting it.

Settling back on her heels, she fought a round with the nausea that followed on the heels of the pain. When she'd mastered it, she got up and carried water to the men again. Faine had transformed from unicorn into his man form when she reached him. Naked, he lay shivering on the ground. She searched his pack and unearthed his blanket, spreading it over him and then tucking the edges beneath him the best she could since she couldn't move him. She paused long enough to stroke him soothingly until he'd begun to shiver a little less and then got up wearily to get water for Drake.

The moon rose when she'd settled beside Drake to carefully squeeze water into his mouth. Drawn by the brightness of the light, she lifted her head to stare at it. Her chest tightened when she saw why it was so bright. It was almost three quarters full.

Fear wound its way through her. The thought occurred to her that the men were unconscious and unable to stop her if she fled, but it had no sooner flashed through her mind than it was followed by the realization that they were unconscious and defenseless. She couldn't leave them like that. They'd nearly died today defending her. It didn't matter that they had their reasons for protecting her. It only mattered that they had and that she cared too much about them to leave them when they might need her.

They were magicals, her inner voice reminded her, far more capable of surviving even such terrible wounds than any

mortal. It didn't matter. They needed her now. *That* mattered.

Reluctantly, she dragged her gaze from the clock that was counting her days and focused on Drake. The moment she looked at him, a strange sort of peace settled inside her. She stroked his dragon face lovingly and leaned down to kiss him again before she left to check on Caelin.

\* \* \* \*

Caelin allowed the tension to go out of his muscles when Gwyneth left Drake and moved to the stream again. He knew the moment she lifted her head to stare at the moon what must be going through her mind. He'd expected her to leap to her feet and run.

He didn't know what to think when she didn't. He stared up at the moon, listening to her movements. Why would she stay, he wondered, when she knew what lay ahead of her?

She looked surprised and glad when she knelt beside him a few moments later and discovered he was conscious. A smile curled her lips. "I was worried about you. Feeling better?"

He struggled to sit up, grunting with the effort. She planted a hand on his chest and leaned against him to hold him down and he subsided, staring at her in bemusement. "Just lie still a little longer. I'm not going anywhere."

He studied her face curiously. "How are Faine and Drake?"

The smile disappeared. Worry creased her brows. "I don't know—unconscious. Faine hasn't been conscious since Drake carried him in. I don't know what to think of that. Drake—said

he needed to sleep a bit and he would be alright and then passed out. He's terribly wounded, Caelin."

Caelin's brows creased. "He has not shifted?"

She shook her head.

He nodded and settled back. "He will heal faster."

Gwyneth swallowed a little convulsively, but it calmed her fears considerably to hear that. "He's too weak to shift," she said flatly.

Something flickered in Caelin's eyes. "He knows he'll heal faster in his true form. He is an old dragon, wench. He knows what he's doing."

"I am not old," Drake growled, his voice faint and ragged with pain. "I will have you know that I am in my prime, youngling!"

Sucking in a quick breath of sheer delight, Gwyneth shot to her feet and limped quickly to his side. "You are awake!" she said with pleasure.

"I was not talking in my sleep," he retorted irritably.

Gwyneth knelt beside him and leaned down to rub her face along his rough cheek. "Are you thirsty, old dragon?" she asked teasingly.

His eyes gleamed. "Take care that this weathered old dragon hide doesn't scratch that pretty cheek, wench!"

She kissed his snout. "I will get you a drink of water."

"Food would not be amiss, wench. I am hungry! How is the unicorn?"

"I still live ... more is the pity," he said with a touch of bitterness.

"Do not say such a thing!" Gwyneth said crossly, moving to him and kissing his face. "Thank the gods that you are! That was a terrible wound! I was worried sick about you!"

He swallowed audibly when she leaned away. "I am relieved at least to see that you are alive ... no thanks to my clumsy attempts to protect you!" he added dryly.

"They were not clumsy! We were sorely outnumbered."

"And surrounded!" Caelin put in angrily. "Did it slip your mind that you were to keep the wench out of the thick of it!"

"He saved you from being stabbed in the back!" Gwyneth snapped, whirling on him angrily. "If he had not leapt to your defense, that bastard would have run you through!"

Caelin stared at her—gaped at her actually. Anger and jealousy swiftly overcame his shock at her angry defense of Faine, however. "It was not his *job* to watch my back! He was supposed to be guarding you!"

"You do not need to make him feel worse! It was the right thing to do! We would've been surrounded regardless—were surrounded!"

"You do not know that!"

"I do! They were everywhere. He held back until he saw the soldier coming up behind you and we were already surrounded and he was fighting. They were trying to cut us off and would have if he hadn't leapt to your defense. It was actually better that he did—except that he was wounded—because you were there to help me when he fell."

Caelin stared at her for a long moment, wrestling with her logic, and finally glanced at Drake. He saw amusement in the dragon's eyes but no help. "Then I must thank you, Faine, for

your help," he grumbled, settling back on his bedroll and glaring up at the sky.

"You are welcome," Faine said stiffly. "But you are right. I should have allowed the bastard to run you through and found my way clear of the men so that I could protect Gwyneth. It is not that I did not try, by the gods! I am deeply aware that I failed!"

"Hush!" Gwyneth said chidingly. "I am not hurt ... hardly at all. I was ... so proud of all of you! So amazed! You are a formidable army! I am sure King Gerald will not be in any shape to attack again!"

Caelin felt his face heat. He squirmed uncomfortably, but he couldn't help but be pleased that Gwyneth thought they'd acquitted themselves well. He thought they'd done very well, himself, considering the odds. It was unfortunate that he hadn't *realized* the odds they might have to face. He felt like a complete dolt not to have considered that they might be overrun. Considering the damage Drake had already done to Gerald's men, though, he'd been confident that he would not have mustered so many so quickly.

They had underestimated King Gerald, he thought grimly. There was no getting around the fact that their arrogance had very nearly resulted in disaster.

Gwyneth found the food they'd brought with them and carefully divided it between the four of them. It was very little divided four ways, even though Caelin saw Gwyneth hadn't kept more than a few bites for herself. They would need food, and soon, he thought tiredly, especially Drake and Faine. They were hurt far worse than he was. Deciding it could wait

until he'd rested a few hours more, he closed his eyes and drifted to sleep.

Panic went through him when he woke and saw no sign of Gwyneth. He wasn't particularly pleased when he discovered she'd taken Drake's bedroll and tried to cover him and then curled up next to him. Shaking his head at her feeble attempt to keep the dragon warm when she looked like a child curled up beside the great, hulking brute, he left the camp to search for food.

When he returned near dawn, Drake and Faine were sitting around the campfire. Gwyneth was asleep on the pallet he'd abandoned. He wondered if she'd gotten there on her own or if Drake had moved her.

Drake and Faine examined his offerings with a touch of pique.

"That is the best you could do?" Drake asked. "I could eat that by myself."

"But you won't," Caelin retorted irritably. "You are lucky I managed to snare a few hares. I have no bow for hunting."

"I will change soon," Faine said. "I can find something to fill my belly then."

Drake and Caelin exchanged a speaking look and kept their peace.

Drake broke the silence nigh an hour later. "How is the child?"

Faine leaned over to touch her forehead lightly. "No sign of a fever, I don't think. She seems a little warm, but I am thinking it is the fire."

"Child?" Caelin muttered. "She is all woman."

Drake shrugged. "She could be one hundred and still seem a child to me."

"I thought you were in your prime?"

Drake sent him a look. "I am."

For all the complaints about the hares, it at least didn't take long for them to cook and Caelin handed one to Drake and one to Faine. Despite his earlier protest, Faine took it, as Caelin had suspected he would. It took a great deal of energy to heal wounds and Gwyneth hadn't exaggerated when she'd wept over how grievously both Drake and Faine were wounded.

"She wept for me," Drake said, studying her sleeping face, both surprise and confusion in his voice. He glanced at the others to see if they could challenge his statement. "She had the strangest look upon her face when she looked at me ... and she wept."

"Pity," Caelin said shortly, annoyed with the train of Drake's thoughts, more annoyed because he had seen it himself and it aroused a sense of possessiveness he wasn't particularly happy about.

"It was not pity!" Drake indignantly. He thought it over, and added before Caelin could suggest it, "Nor fear or revulsion either ... and I was in dragon form."

Caelin grunted. "And you are a magnificent dragon," he said dryly.

Drake perked up, sending Caelin a pleased look. "Indeed! Gwyneth says it is immodest to say so, but I have heard it said many times—that I am a magnificent drake. That is the lady dragons, though," he added. "Gwyneth is human. She



would not be able to appreciate how magnificent a dragon I am."

Caelin rolled his eyes. "Can you not come up with another word to brag about yourself? I weary of magnificent."

Drake looked at him indignantly. "There is *not* another word that so perfectly describes me!"

"You love her," Faine said.

Drake turned to look at him. "I have cherished every inch of her," he agreed. "And when I am better, I will do so again."

Faine frowned. "You are in love with her," he said tightly.

Drake gaped at him. "Do not be absurd! I am a dragon! I respected and admired my mate, Maud. I even felt a good deal of affection for her, but we dragons are not subject to such ... *maudlin* sentiments! We are not capable of it!"

Faine heaved a miserable breath. "I am in love with her."

Drake glared at him and then glanced at Caelin. Discovering that Caelin was also glaring at Faine, he returned his attention to Faine. "That is nearly as absurd as saying that *I* am in love with her! You are a unicorn, dunderhead! And unless I am very much mistaken, and I almost never wrong, *she* is the lost princess!"

"I did not *say* that I was worthy of her!" Faine ground out. "I am only saying what I feel in my heart!"

"Since the last time I saw you displaying your affection, it was with your white ass bobbing up and down between her thighs, I am more inclined to call it lust," Caelin said sardonically.

Faine scowled at him and then abruptly clasped his head between his hands as if he would crush his skull. "Do you think I do not know that I have sullied something that should have been as pure as she is? I cannot help it! I have such impure thoughts! Each time I close my eyes, I see her lying naked in the moonlight—think I can almost feel her smooth, white skin. I see her beautiful breasts with their perfect pink buds and I thirst to take them in my mouth. I see her beautiful...."

"Stop it!" Drake growled. "You are making me horny and I am as certain as I can be that I will pass out if my cock gets any harder! I am not recovered yet, gods damn it! Do not be waving what I cannot have under my nose!"

Faine dropped his hands and stared at the fire morosely. "I am justly served for the evil things that I have thought to do."

"Have thought about doing? Or have done?" Drake asked with interest.

Faine stared at him a long moment and finally got up without answering. Undressing, he carefully packed his bundle and strapped it on as he did each dawning. He'd barely done so when the first rays lit the sky and he changed into his true form.

"He enjoys suffering," Caelin said irritably as he watched Faine trot away from them.

Drake frowned. "I had not thought so, but you may be right. If he did not, he would have had better sense than to decide to fall in love with a princess."

Lamentation of Swans  
*by Goldie McBride*

Caelin watched Faine until he'd taken flight, off in search of a field to graze in, no doubt. Stirring the fire with a stick, he studied Gwyneth's sleeping face for a moment. "You are right. That is the height of idiocy."

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## **Chapter Eleven**

It wouldn't have been accurate to say that Gwyneth felt no regrets at all for her decision to stay when she might've had the chance to flee. She realized, though, that it had only felt like a decision she'd made when, in truth, she had no more freewill in choosing her fate than the men had. Artimus had sent the three of them to take her from Belmor Castle to the temple. To do the things he'd already done to insure it, it was clear that he meant for her to be there and if he could reach beyond the underworld then it seemed unlikely that she could outrun him no matter what she did.

It comforted her a little to think that her sacrifice might actually be worth something to someone other than Artimus. She thought she would truly have felt that her life was nothing if it hadn't bought something for the men she'd grown to care about.

At least she had that to cling to—Drake would have his daughter back. Caelin would know that his mother's soul was free and that she could find peace, and poor Faine would see an end to his own torment. Mayhap, he could even return to his tribe and find acceptance.

She discovered that it was comforting, too, that Faine had said that it would be quick and relatively painless. She'd seen many, many horrible, lingering deaths in her time, but very few that were swift and clean. She wasn't ready to face the other world, the spirit world. She wanted ... something of the life she had before she passed, but the truth was that until

she'd followed Caelin off, she had had nothing ahead of her but a life of misery, drudgery, and hardship.

It was ironic that the only true happiness she'd known was with the men who were taking her to her execution, but it was still true. In some ways, she thought it was a fair exchange—a few weeks of happiness after years of misery. Unfortunately, it was the happiness that made it harder to give up her life. She wasn't certain if she could've been any more accepting if she'd been snatched directly from Belmor Castle and transported in the blink of an eye to the temple, but she almost thought she might've been. She'd been desperate enough to beg a stranger to help her, knowing full well that he might've done anything to her once he had her away from the castle.

She did her best to not think of it at all, to simply enjoy life while she could, but of course it shadowed the back of her mind every step of the way and could not be completely banished.

It was nearly mid-day the day after the battle before they left their campsite and moved on. She didn't approve of them moving that soon, but Caelin seemed almost fully recovered and even Drake and Faine were much improved. They moved slowly for all that. Caelin took her up on his horse with him since Faine was still recovering. Drake, despite the odds against it, had managed to find the horse he'd 'broken in'.

They moved down the opposite side of the mountain they'd been climbing and into a wide valley before they stopped near a stream for the night. Drake, despite the fact that he was still weak, left them to go hunting and returned a few hours

later with a large deer and the intelligence that he'd seen no campfires near enough to pose a threat. It seemed King Gerald's men were still in full retreat.

Remembering what she'd seen of the battle, she wasn't surprised. Drake had probably taken out more than half of the men slain that day by himself and both Faine and Caelin had slain at least a dozen men between them and wounded that many more. She had no clear idea of the exact number of men the king kept, but she thought that that battle would have had to have been a severe blow. She was certain he would be forced to give up if only because of the number of men he'd lost.

It transpired that she was wrong. Three days later, they arrived at the Temple of Mannet Rae at Sherbrooke and found the remainder of King Gerald's army camped almost in the shadow of the Temple and waiting for them.

\* \* \* \*

Drake, Caelin, and Faine studied the army spread out over the plain of Sherbrooke in grim faced silence.

"Somehow I do not think they are there to welcome us and escort us inside," Caelin said finally.

Drake grunted an agreement. "Upon reflection, I suppose it might have been better to have rushed to the temple as swiftly as possible and kicked our heels there while we waited."

"Well!" Caelin said. "We tried! I suppose we might as well turn around and leave now."

Gwyneth felt a surge of hopefulness that made her heart run away with her.

Drake slid a glance at him. "And miss our chance to destroy Artimus forever?"

Gwyneth glanced at Drake in breathless surprise, afraid to accept the hope that welled inside of her.

Caelin swiveled around to look at Gwyneth. "I've never much liked the notion of using the wench to get to him."

"We're not likely to get close enough without her," Drake said pointedly. "We need *her* to draw him out."

Caelin looked at him again. "We may all die in the attempt."

Drake nodded, issuing a deep sigh. "We have known since we joined forces that it might come to that. It ... disturbs me far more than it did in the beginning, but nothing else has changed. It must be done. We must rid the world of him once and for all and Gwyneth is the key."

Caelin frowned. "We still don't know *how* she is to be the key."

"And we will not know until the time comes."

Caelin shook his head, but dismissed his qualms about proceeding. "How are we to crack this little nut? You could carry me and Faine could carry Gwyneth, but only if we try before the sun sets. If we wait till dark, when we would have a far better chance of reaching the temple in one piece, Faine will have shifted and then only you can fly."

"That does present a problem, particularly when we can't afford to enter the temple in a weakened state—which we will

be if we are full of holes. I am as certain that I can be that it will take everything *all* of us have to defeat him, together."

"There are archers among them. I don't know that we could reach the temple and get inside without becoming pincushions even with the dark to conceal us, and tonight is the full moon. We would have to reach the temple before the moon rises, not only for the cloak of darkness, but also because they will begin the ritual."

"I think I must fly over and have a better look at the temple before we formulate any plans," Drake said thoughtfully.

"They will see you and they will know we are here."

"They will know we are here because tonight is the night," Drake pointed out.

"True," Caelin countered, "but they might decide to strike instead of waiting for us to come to them if they can figure out where we are."

Drake frowned. "They will have a close idea of our approach," he agreed. "Let us move around the army, then, and see how much we can learn about the temple. We might well find a weak spot in their defenses while we are about it."

Despite every effort to dam the surge of hope that kept building inside of her, Gwyneth found that she couldn't. She might not meet her fate tonight! She might live to see many more days, might have the chance to live a full life, have children....

She might even now be carrying a babe! She hadn't allowed herself to think about that, despite the fact that she'd been well aware that they were trying to insure that she was,



because she hadn't believed that there was any chance at all that she would live to bring it into the world. She'd thought that it would die with her, and she hadn't wanted to think about that.

She couldn't hold those thoughts back once she'd allowed hope to begin to rise inside of her. It thrilled her to think that Drake or Caelin or Faine had fathered her child even more than the thought of having a baby excited her.

For a time those thoughts buoyed her spirits so high that she spared none for what must come before she had any chance of the life she'd begun to envision. As the day wore on, however, weariness finally brought her from her lofty perch to recall the conversation between Caelin and Drake that she'd dismissed.

Neither Drake or Caelin were confident that they could succeed in what they'd set out to do. All the time that she'd been thinking about dying, she realized, they'd been facing the same possibility.

It almost seemed worse when they had so much more to lose, for they were magical, perhaps not entirely immortal, but such long-lived people that death was a virtual stranger to them.

She didn't want to think of death claiming them. She thought she could accept being claimed herself far easier than to imagine living if they didn't. If they died together, she wondered, would they remain together? Or was there one world for the spirits of humans and another place entirely for magical beings?

She shook the thought, unwilling to examine it too closely. They weren't going to die—not today. Somehow, they would triumph. She knew that any single one of them was a formidable foe and that, together, they were as near invincible as it was possible to be. They would find a way and they would destroy Artimus. She knew they would!

The sun had sunk toward the horizon before they had made it even half way around the temple. They stopped again on a rise to study the problem.

"There is a protection spell over the temple," Drake said emphatically.

Caelin nodded. "I have not seen a single soldier within twenty yards of the base of the temple. The question is, what sort of protection spell?"

Drake folded his arms across his chest, studying the temple thoughtfully. "It would not have been designed to keep her out."

"Nay, but it might have been designed to keep *us* out."

"That is what troubles me," Drake admitted. "Even if we reach the temple unscathed, there is still the possibility that we won't be able to get inside."

"Our options for getting to the temple are lessening by the moment," Caelin said pointedly.

Drake shook his head. "I had already dismissed the first option. Trying by daylight is just too risky and too fraught with disaster. I am thinking that the priests will begin to grow anxious as the sun sets. They may be more inclined to open the doors to us all if we wait until the moon is risen. They will want to begin the ceremony when it reaches its zenith."

"Moonrise will leave us more exposed."

"I did not say that we would wait ... only that, if we discover that the spell also shields the temple from us, we can try again when the moon rises. Also, I discovered when I attacked Belmor Castle that the topmost peaks weren't protected at all. Do we assume that it was forgotten? Or that it was left open specifically for me?" He shrugged. "Or Faine."

"I do not think we should assume that Artimus forgot anything. I am not saying it is not possible, but I do not think it likely."

"Still—regardless of the why of it—if the same is true of the temple, we could get inside from the top. It will open for the ritual."

Caelin frowned. "You are saying if we arrive and discover that only Gwyneth can pass through we try the top of the temple?"

"I do not like it."

"I do not like it either, gods damn it! There is too much risk that we would not get in at all!"

"We may not have a choice," Drake said tightly.

Caelin stared at him for a long moment and finally nodded. "I will take the temple apart by hand if I have to!"

"Let us hope we do not have to."

"How are we going to do this? You cannot carry the three of us at once."

Drake shook his head. "I have been thinking and thinking, but I do not believe that I can get high enough to avoid the arrows carrying three. I had the devil of a time with that gods damned horse."

"Two?"

"Most likely."

"But you are not positive?"

"I do not think that I could fly back and forth three times and still avoid detection. We will be lucky if I can manage it twice. I will take you first and then, if the protection spell presents no problem, return for Faine and Gwyneth."

Caelin nodded. "I do not like leaving only Faine to protect her, but it will be far better here than there."

The three of them dismounted and Caelin and Drake worked on devising a sling to support a rider while they waited for the sun to set. Caelin gave Faine his sword before he climbed up on Drake's back, tested the sling they'd devised, and then adjusted the straps beneath his buttocks and around his shoulders.

Gwyneth felt her throat close with terror as Drake flapped his mighty wings and lifted into the air, not just fear of what awaited them, or even the fear that Caelin might fall, but the sheer terror of knowing that, when Drake returned, she would have to climb on his back.

She turned to look at Faine when they'd left. He seemed to realize she needed reassurance. Pulling his boots on, he got up and strode toward her, drawing her tightly into his arms. "It will be alright, sweeting. I swear it!"

Shuddering, Gwyneth tightened her arms around him, comforted more by his warmth and his touch than she was by his words, as certain as she was that he meant it. After a few moments, she drew away from him and moved to the edge of

the rise to see if she could see what was happening in the field below.

The army camped there had built fires before the sun had set and she could see shadowy figures passing back and forth in the firelight. Her heart skipped a beat when she noticed several figures stop abruptly and then a rushing she feared meant that they'd heard, or possibly seen, Drake. She knew it for certain when she suddenly saw flashes of light in the sky—arrows tipped with flames.

"Gods!" Faine exclaimed. "They have spotted him!"

On the way to the temple, Gwyneth wondered? Or on the way back? She had no idea how long it might take Drake to fly such a distance. To ride a horse so far would've taken several hours, but she'd had the sense that Drake hadn't expected it to take that long. Thankfully, they saw the arrows arch in the air and return toward the ground.

The downward trek brought about far more chaos than the discovery, or the suspicion, that Drake was above them. Even from the distance, they could hear shouts and screams as arrows found victims on the ground and see a frantic racing around of the men.

"Fools!" Faine muttered. "They have fired into their own ranks in their zeal to strike Drake!"

"Mayhap they won't be as quick to shoot when he returns," Gwyneth said hopefully.

"I would not count on it," Faine said. "That was not a few random shots fired by overzealous archers. They were ordered to shoot."

Gwyneth didn't suppose it would've changed anything if he'd kept his thoughts to himself, because she saw that he was right only a little later when they again saw a hail of fire tipped arrows. It might have comforted her for a little while to delude herself, however.

She rushed to Drake when he finally alit on the ground near them, searching him for any sign of injuries.

"They missed," Drake said with satisfaction. "Caelin was neither favorably impressed nor particularly happy with my evasive maneuvers, but we came through unscathed. You might want to fashion another sling before the two of you climb up. You may share the one you sit on, but I believe you will each want one around your shoulders."

Gwyneth stared at him with dismay. She hadn't wanted to fly at all! It needed only the suggestion that it was liable to be more frightening even than she'd imagined before to convince her she would prefer to die on the ground. "Couldn't ... you just hold me?" she asked a little weakly.

His dragon chuckle was actually a lot more unnerving than Gwyneth would've thought. He patted her cheek. "No, my pet. You will be far safer on my back. They will be aiming at my chest."

Gwyneth swallowed convulsively, but she didn't point out that arrows in his chest might result in a crash anyway. She was shivering by the time Faine had helped her onto Drake's back and adjusted the slings around her. She managed to close her hands around the straps, however. Her fingers were already beginning to cramp with the desperate grip she had them before Drake became airborne, but she was fairly

certain once he did that nothing short of cutting them off was going to uncurl them.

It didn't help particularly that it was so dark that she couldn't actually see the ground and that Drake's body cut off any view she might have had unless she'd leaned to one side or turned her head and she was too frightened to do the first and too frozen to try the second. The rush of wind through her hair and over her body was just as terrifying, she was sure, as it would've been if she could've seen how high they were. Faine shielded her from some of the wind with his body. She thought if it hadn't been for the comfort of having him behind her and the warmth he shared with her that she might actually have died of fright before she reached the temple.

She was near to weeping with terror when Drake finally settled. Faine had to peel her fingers loose from the straps and she was too stiff to climb down on her own. She sucked in a frightened gasp when Caelin grabbed her and then flung her arms around him frantically when she realized it was him.

Drake shifted into human form. Pulling his clothing from his pack, he dressed quickly and then joined Gwyneth, Caelin, and Faine where they stood on the outer edge of the roof of the temple, staring down at King Gerald's army.

It was clear that the king had figured out that his ploy hadn't worked. The army had turned upon the temple and his men were readying their siege engines to assault the temple itself.

"He must know that it is useless," Drake muttered.

"He is a desperate man. He thinks Artimus is about to be freed upon the world once more and he knows that Artimus knows he betrayed him," Caelin said.

They ducked instinctively as the army began to sling balls of fire at the temple with the catapults, but it was as if an invisible shield surrounded the temple. The fireballs crashed, shattered into flying, flaming pieces and fell away. When the moon rose, men lay dead and dying all around the foot of the temple from the missiles that had been flung at the temple, only to bounce back and kill the men who had sent them forth.

A trumpet sounded as the moon crested the horizon and the men abandoned their siege engines and began to flee to the north behind the king's pennant. King Gerald had been defeated without managing to strike a single blow against Artimus.

It made Gwyneth's blood run cold to realize an army had failed the task they'd taken upon themselves.

"I find it more unnerving that the protection spell did not prevent us from reaching the temple," Caelin muttered. "It almost seems like an invitation ... and an invitation from Artimus is never a good thing."

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## Chapter Twelve

They were met by the priests and a contingent of the temple guards when they reached the temple entrance by climbing down the stair-like stones that formed the outer walls of the temple. The guards instantly brought their pikes level. "Remove your weapons!" the captain of the guards demanded in a voice that brooked no argument.

Their lips set in a grim line, Drake, Caelin, and Faine reached slowly for the knives in their belts, withdrew them and dropped them. Faine, lowered the sword he held in one hand and added it to the small pile.

The captain looked the weapons over and gave them another hard look. Nudging the man beside him, he sent him to collect the short sword and the knives. "Search them."

The guard passed the knives and carefully checked each of the men.

"All of them. Her, too."

Gwyneth stared at the man uneasily as he ran his hands over her and then lifted her skirts to check her legs. A shudder went through her when he slipped his hand to the top of her thighs and checked her cleft. He stepped back after a moment, collected the weapons they'd discarded and joined the other men, taking up his pike.

Two of the priests stepped forward when the guards had finished. Clamping a hand on each of her wrists, they jerked her forward when she didn't immediately step forward on her own.

Behind her, she heard an aborted scuffle as one, or more, of the men surged forward and was blocked by the guards.

"You were to have brought her to temple five days ago!" the head priest said furiously when Gwyneth had been dragged past him. "There is no time for the purification rituals!"

"I was told she was to be here at the full moon," Drake growled.

"Fool!" the head priest bellowed. "Be here! Yes! She was to be here, not to be *brought* here!"

"Well, she is here!" Caelin snapped. "We had a deal with Artimus! He gave his word that he would give us what he'd promised if we had the girl here!"

"You will be fortunate if he does not slay you!" the head priest snarled furiously and then turned to the guards. "Take them to the chamber and hold them there while we prepare the girl!"

It took all Caelin could do to refrain from glancing at Drake uneasily. If the 'preparations' the priest was talking about included checking to see if she was untouched they were all in trouble.

Gwyneth had disappeared by the time the temple guards escorted them inside. Caelin's uneasiness deepened. He didn't like being separated from her even for a little while, but there seemed no hope for it. Trying to comfort himself with the fact that the high priest had ordered them to be escorted to the chamber, he studied the interior of the temple as they were escorted down a wide corridor. His stomach went weightless when he saw they were heading directly toward what looked

to be a pit but, to his relief, he saw as they neared it that stairs led downward in what almost looked like an endless spiral.

He glanced uneasily at Drake as they were prodded to descend, wondering if they'd been double-crossed already. He'd assumed, since the full moon clearly played a large role in the proceedings, that the ritual would be at the top of the temple. Tensing as they descended deeper and deeper until he was certain they were in the bowels of the earth, Caelin braced himself for battle.

They came at last to the bottom of the stairs. He paused, glancing up. A guard poked him painfully between the shoulder blades with his pike to get him going again. Stumbling forward at the push, he caught his balance and passed through the wide double doors in front of him.

The hair on the back of his neck began to prickle even before he'd passed beneath the huge lentil. His body began to tingle with the presence of magic and then to burn as the sensation intensified.

The chamber, he discovered, was surprisingly small, little more than thirty feet square. Torches had been placed at intervals along the walls and, in their flickering light, he saw that benches lined the walls and the temple priests, cloaked in the blood red of the temple, lined the benches. In the center was a single stone slab raised on a dais to about waist height. Coldness swept through him as he spied it. The guards directed them to a spot about half way between the benches and the sacrificial altar.

The priests began to chant almost as soon as they'd stopped. Trying to ignore the sense of stinging insects crawling over his skin that had begun almost as soon as they'd entered the chamber, Caelin studied the room, lifting his head to look upward when saw that the altar itself was glowing.

A channel, he saw, had been cut through the stone that led all the way upward through the temple and opened to the sky. He could see a sliver of the moon above him.

His belly tightened. He glanced uneasily toward Drake and felt a jolt run through him when he saw the priests who'd led Gwyneth away earlier, were dragging her toward the chamber entrance. It was hard to say whether she was struggling against them or if they were on rushing her so that she had to struggle to keep up.

The fear evident in her pale face and taut features lightened fractionally when she caught sight of him and Drake and Faine waiting inside.

The voices of the chanting priests rose as Gwyneth was brought into the chamber.

Gone was the gown that she'd worn when she arrived, Caelin saw. In it's place was a robe that barely covered her nakedness.

Anger flashed through him. He tamped it with an effort, focused on pushing it from his mind. Dark magic, he knew, would use it against him and it was powerful enough in the room already that he felt its burn.

Dragging her to the altar amidst the chants, the priests who'd brought her in lifted her by her wrists and ankles and

placed her on the altar, clamping manacles to each before they released her.

Calm, Caelin told himself. The manacles wouldn't hurt her.

She was shivering from both fear and cold he didn't doubt, but mostly fear.

Peace, he told himself, searching for the magic inside himself and commanding it to come forth, to protect.

The chanting of the priests distracted him. He found his mind divided between his efforts to call his own magic forth and the attempt to decipher the language of the chant and understand it.

They were summoning the black magic of the underworld and the overworld to open the gate between the two. For several moments, that realization shook him. If the gates opened—*when* the gates opened, Artimus would step through.

They had to allow that if they were to have a chance of destroying him, but what if they couldn't? What if they allowed the gates to open and found they weren't strong enough, even with the three of them, to defeat Artimus and close the gates again?

He opened his eyes, abruptly focusing on Gwyneth when he'd been at pains to keep her from his mind, realizing that he had to focus on her to protect her.

*Come to me, keepers of the magic of the light. I command thee! Come forth and protect Gwyneth from the darkness!*

Tuning out the sound of the priests' voices until they became little more than an annoying buzz of sound, he

trained his gaze on Gwyneth's face and continued the chant in his mind.

*Come to me, keepers of the magic of the light. I command thee! Come forth and protect Gwyneth from the darkness!*

The light from above intensified until he knew without looking that the full moon had filled the window above the altar. Behind her, between the altar where she lay and the priests who'd put her there, a faint bluish glow appeared.

The gates were opening!

*I command thee, keepers of the magic of the light! Come forth and protect this innocent from the dwellers of the darkness! Come to me! Give me the power of the light to banish the darkness!*

The blue light grew, intensified, until it was leaping toward the ceiling. Its uncanny glow lit the features of the chanting priests behind it, fell across Gwyneth until she seemed to be consumed by it. Something slithered through the bluish light, something black and vile. A stench invaded the chamber as the gates up, of rotting flesh, of sulfur. As the blue light had before, the slithering snake-like tendrils grew. A face materialized in the murky haze and then a torso and arms. Wavering and indistinct at first, it swiftly attained form.

Caelin knew it was Artimus even though he'd never seen the face before. The apparition rose above Gwyneth, stared down at her for a long moment and then grinned abruptly, staring straight at them. "You brought me the seed. How predictable! How delightful!"

Caelin felt a jolt run through him.

Artimus laughed abruptly. "You thought you would trick me? Me? You didn't wonder *why* I sent the three of you when one would have done? I've no use for her maidenhead! I have a great deal of use for the seed of a dragon, an elf, and a unicorn—three of the most powerful of magics all combined in one body—a royal body."

"Gods!" Faine muttered in horror.

"Focus!" Drake growled.

"Ah!" Artimus chuckled, trailing a finger tipped with a long claw along the center of Gwyneth's body from her throat to her groin. "You thought the three of you were strong enough to defeat me?"

Caelin felt sweat break across his brow with the effort to focus on bringing forth his magic.

Artimus abruptly settled over Gwyneth like a lover, coiling his snake like arms all around her, lifting her away from the stone so that she almost seemed to float.

"Now!" Drake bellowed, abruptly throwing forth the magic he'd summoned in a single, powerful ball of light.

Gritting his teeth, Caelin threw his own at the command, as did Faine. A blinding white light moved in a wave from them, encompassing the entire altar and both Gwyneth and Artimus.

Panic erupted amongst the priests. Crying out, gasping in horror as the light washed through the chamber, some merely threw up their hands to shield themselves from the light, shrinking away from it, but many of them rushed to abandon the temple, slamming into one another in their frantic haste.

Some tripped and fell beneath the panicked wave and were trampled by others.

"Push him away, Gwyneth! Use your magic, girl! Summon it to fight him! Don't let him rip your soul from your body! He wants your body for himself!"

Gwyneth uttered a choked sound as if she was strangling. "Can't!"

"You can! He gave you the power at your birth! Thrust him from you! Call your own powers forth and thrust him away! You can crush him!"

The light wavered. They could see the light emanating from Gwyneth battering against the darkness that was Artimus, but the light was weak and growing steadily weaker. They had chained her to her death, Caelin though in sudden horror. They'd bound him to her with their power and she couldn't break free. He couldn't escape the light without her. He would take her with him! "She can't do it!" Caelin bellowed. "She isn't strong enough yet."

"Children! Protect your mother!" Drake bellowed abruptly.

The words had barely left his mouth when the light emanating from Gwyneth intensified, grew, began to swallow the darkness. Artimus screamed in rage. "The child is mine to command! Mine! She is mine! It is *my* spell that collected the powers of the fathers. For me! Give me your body, you bitch!"

"No!" Gwyneth screamed at him.

Abruptly the tug of war between Gwyneth and Artimus ended. The light exploded in the chamber like a starburst, killing the priests who hadn't had the presence of mind to flee



as soon as they saw that the light was swallowing the darkness.

The torches went out as the light dispersed, leaving them in a profound darkness broken only by the feeble light of the moon as it moved across the window above.

Caelin was too frozen with doubt to move for several moments. When Drake surged forward, however, he moved, rushing to the altar to stare down at Gwyneth.

"She's breathing," Drake said, his voice hoarse.

Caelin glanced at him, swallowing a little sickly. Moving to her wrists as Drake unshackled her ankles, he unlocked them and pulled her hands free of the restraints. She was perfectly limp and he felt cold dread wash through him. Had they placed too much faith in her strength?

\* \* \* \*

The sunlight against her eyelids drew Gwyneth toward consciousness. With awareness her mind instantly leapt to the fear she'd taken with her that she would never see the sun again when she'd felt herself falling into a deep, dark hole. Pleasure flickered through her and she opened her eyes, peering through her lashes at the blue sky above her.

"Good morning, my pet."

Blinking away the dregs of sleep, Gwyneth turned at the sound of his voice, a smile already curling her lips. "Drake," she said, discovering her voice sounded hoarse and her throat felt scoured.

He settled beside her, propping on his arm. "Two days you've slept. We'd begun to fear you would not awaken."

"Two?" No wonder she felt as if she'd dried up! She frowned, trying to think why she might have slept for two days. Dread began to filter through her before the memories surfaced. She moved her hand to her belly, cupping it. "Is the baby alright?"

Drake's face darkened. He looked distinctly uncomfortable. "Babies," he said gently.

Gwyneth stared at him blankly. "Babies?" she echoed.

Drake shrugged. "The only thing more powerful than a dragon, an elf, and a unicorn is all three."

She struggled with that a moment. "You think there's one of each? In here?"

"Will you hit me with something if I say that I *know* there is one each ... in there?"

She thought it over. Slowly a sense of euphoria took hold of her and as it did, she felt a smile curl her lips. "Really?"

Drake cocked his head, studying her a little curiously. "You do not seem upset."

Gwyneth chuckled. "Because I'm not. You're certain they're alright?"

He frowned. "They were strong enough to help you fight Artimus off. I think they're alright."

Gwyneth felt her excitement crash at that. She pushed herself upright and looked around. Discovering that she was lying on a pallet beneath a tree in a wooded area, she frowned. "What happened to Artimus?"

"We defeated him, destroyed him. He opened the gate. We prevented him from returning—or from taking a body that

would allow him to remain here, in the overworld. There was no place for his soul to go and the light destroyed him."

"He's dead?"

"He died long ago—his body. I confess, it threw me that he'd commanded that we bring you. Why, I wondered, would he want a woman's body when, in this world, they have no power at all to speak of? They are the chattel of men.

"Then, when I realized that you were the lost princess, I understood. You are the last of your line, the last of the Belmors. You are the heir to the thrown.

"That was only part of it, of course. The beauty of his plan was that he could become so powerful no one could threaten him, merely by taking your body and holding your soul captive and the souls of our sons—the dragon, the elf, and the unicorn. Then he would have so much power no one could oppose him."

Gwyneth gaped at him. As soon as he'd mentioned the lost princess and began to talk of heirs and rulers, he'd completely lost her. "I'm a serf."

"Nay! You were raised as a serf. You were used as a serf, but you were not born a serf. You were born to rule. If your family had lived, then you would've been wed to the ruler of another realm to bring more power to your family. Artimus saw to it than none of the others lived, however—only you—because he could use you as he couldn't the others."

Dismay filled Gwyneth. She wasn't certain why, but a sense of impending doom began to settle heavily over her that was almost more frightening than when she'd believed that she would die.

She didn't *feel* like a queen! She didn't *want* to be a queen! She just wanted to be a mother.

"What of King Gerald?" she asked abruptly as it occurred to her that the last time she'd seen him he was still very much alive.

Drake's lips curled in distaste. "Your uncle? I suppose we will have to deal with...." He paused, looking uncomfortable. "He will have to be dealt with. He's a threat to the throne. He has fled the realm for now, fearing retribution from Artimus, but it will not be long before he learns that Artimus was destroyed and he will think that he can take back the throne of Wynsmere."

"My uncle?" Gwyneth echoed in dismay, feeling for several moments as if she would throw up. "That terrible man was my uncle?"

Drake looked at her with sympathy. "Your father's brother. Once King John had produced such a strong line of succession, however, he knew that the day would never come when he sat upon the throne—not without treachery, and he was obviously willing to betray his family, his brother. I would like to say that Artimus tricked him in some way, but I do not believe that was the case."

Gwyneth felt like crying. "Was there no one in my family who was not vile? Artimus was bad enough, but at least I did not grow up seeing the terrible things he did. King Gerald...."

"Your mother was a great lady," Drake said gently. "She was known far and wide for her beauty, her generosity, and her kind heart. The little princes—would have been great men

if they had lived, because your father—your true father—King John was the greatest ruler Wynsmere has ever known."

Gwyneth looked at him hopefully. "Then ... Artimus wasn't my father?"

"I do not believe that he was," Drake said after a slight hesitation. "I have seen nothing of him in you."

Gwyneth's brows twitched together. "The magic?"

"I can not say except to say that the magic within you is white magic, not black magic—mayhap from your mother as it grew stronger when you conceived and that is not uncommon among witches. She was not known for it, but that does not rule out the possibility that she was a carrier of magic. Caelin suspected that Artimus had created you as a lure. It's possible that that is where your magic springs from, the seed of magic that he had to use to create the spell."

Gwyneth stared at him unhappily as that sank in. She suddenly didn't care where the magic had come from. She suddenly felt like weeping. Her chest felt as if it was being crushed by sorrow. She wanted to deny it, but it made so much sense that she found she couldn't.

She'd been created as a lure to capture the seed Artimus wanted. It hadn't been *her* they'd been drawn to any of the time. It wasn't *her* they found so irresistible. It had never been her that they'd wanted. It was only the magic that had pulled them to her!

She wanted to throw herself upon Drake's chest and beg him to reassure her, to tell her that he cared for her. She wanted to feel the warmth of his arms and his affection as she had so many times before.

She supposed it was just as well that she heard Faine and Caelin returning. It kept her from playing the fool and shaming herself.

They embarrassed her by kneeling.

"Your highness," Caelin said with cool respect. "Faine and I have taken the liberty of finding suitable clothing for you to wear. The realm is in chaos since Gerald fled. We made it known that the princess had been found."

She glanced at him in dismay that deepened when he mentioned that they'd told everyone that she was the lost princess. "But ... we don't know for sure! I might not be her! What if I am not?"

"The mark on your hip will be your proof, Your Highness. It is true an imposter could tattoo the fleur de lis. Everyone knows that the royal children were marked upon their birth with the royal emblem, but only a handful know the exact size and color and the details within the mark. That was kept secret. I have confidence—we all do—that it will be seen that yours is the mark of the true princess."

She didn't feel like a princess! She didn't *want* to be a princess!

Because she knew if she was that she wouldn't be allowed to marry as she pleased. She wouldn't be allowed to have lovers. She wouldn't be allowed to have *them! Nothing* the world had to offer could compensate her for the loss of them!

But she had lost them already! More accurately, she supposed, she had never had them. "So I am to dress like a princess and go to Belmor and then they will decide if I am

really a princess and if I am, then I will be queen?" she asked numbly.

"We will escort you back to Belmor," Drake said. "We would be honored to have the task of protecting Your Royal Highness."

Gwyneth swallowed a little convulsively. "Until you can give me into someone else's keeping?"

"We will always be honored to be called upon, Your Highness. You need only send for me at any time—or the others," Faine added hastily when Drake and Caelin glared at him.

Gwyneth had stared at him for almost a full minute before it finally pierced the cloud of misery enveloping her that he was different and it took another minute after that to realize *how* he was different. "You aren't a unicorn!" Heat flooded her cheeks. "I mean, its daylight and you're in human form!"

He smiled. "The choice is mine. Destroying Artimus freed me."

Gwyneth glanced at Drake and Caelin, shamed that she'd been so wrapped up in her own misery that she hadn't thought about theirs. "Your daughter? Your mother? They are freed, too?"

"He took his black magic with him," Caelin said solemnly. "Thank you, Your Highness, for thinking of my mother. Her soul is free. We would never have succeeded without your help."

"Maud's daughter," Drake corrected her. "I said that he had taken my mate's egg and held her daughter. I did not say that she was my daughter."

Confusion and embarrassment flickered through Gwyneth. "I didn't really do anything."

Drake smiled a little lopsidedly. "Granted, you had help—the babes lent their strength to protect—but it was you who did the most."

Gwyneth frowned. "You said 'children, protect your mother'. You commanded them. I remember."

"And they responded," he said, smiling, "the command was for you. I knew that you would find the strength you needed to protect your babes."

Warmth filled her at that. Smiling, she placed her hand over the womb where they slept. She was pleased to know that she'd helped them destroy Artimus, helped them to gain their freedom, but she was comforted—nay, proud of herself—to know that she hadn't failed her babes, that she'd found the strength she needed to protect them. "It was love," she murmured.

She saw that they were looking at her strangely when she looked up at them.

"A mother's love is the strongest magic there is," Drake said slowly, his voice sounding strange.

The men exchanged a look. "If you feel up to the journey, Your Highness, we should get going," Caelin said.

Nodding, Gwyneth took the finery they'd brought her and looked it over. "I need to bathe first," she said decisively. "Is there anywhere that I might bathe?"

They looked uncomfortable. "There is a lake," Faine said doubtfully, "but that's hardly a place for a queen."



"Don't be silly! I've bathed in every puddle between Belmor Castle and here ... where ever here is! I'm not queen, yet," Gwyneth said.

Caelin and Faine both looked at Drake uneasily. Drake shrugged. "She is right and very likely she will have to make use of whatever 'puddles' we run across on the way back. We will guard her."

Gwyneth thought that even that much was absurd when she'd had no protection beyond the three of them since she'd left Belmor—and it point of fact, she had never had better protection!

There was something about their discomfort over it that made her heart flutter just a little, as if in warning, except that she certainly didn't feel any sort of threat. It disconcerted her when they'd walked down to the lake and she dropped the robe that she was still wearing from the temple ritual. All three men stared at her as if she'd suddenly conked them on the head with a rock, reddened, and then whipped around to show her their backs!

Hurt instantly poured through her. Anger purged it when it occurred to her that they'd had no trouble at all looking at her before. Pain wafted through her again when she remembered what Drake had told her about their suspicions that she'd been enchanted by Artimus as a lure, but then doubt began to wind it's through it. Artimus no longer held any sway in this world, so she couldn't *still* be a lure. If they still felt something then it must be real!

There was only one way to find out, she decided. "I don't suppose there is any soap?"

All three of them turned to look at her. Their minds seemed to go blank the moment they did.

"What?" Faine asked vaguely.

Struggling to keep from smiling, she looked down at her reflection in the water. More for something to do than because she thought it might stir them, she scooped water in her hands and lifted it to her breasts. Caelin swallowed convulsively. As she watched, his gaze followed the cascade of water. Her own throat went dry. "I was just wondering if there was any soap?"

Drake's face was completely slack, she saw, feeling a tickle of amusement but also a tightening of want low in her belly.

"Soap?" Faine repeated as if he'd never heard the word.

"Do we?" she asked, studying his face, feeling more heat curl in her as she saw the fire in his eyes.

"What?"

"Have soap?"

Faine blinked, slowly. "Soap? Yes! We have soap! I will fetch it!"

She wasn't terribly comfortable in the role of seductress, but it was too important to her not to try simply because she felt awkward. Wading to the edge of the lake, she sat down as if she was merely waiting for Faine to bring the soap, and leaned back, using her arms as a prop. She flipped her feet in the water for a moment and then, just for mischief, spread her legs wide and brought them together again.

Drake swallowed so audibly she could hear the sound.

Lamentation of Swans  
*by Goldie McBride*

Caelin cleared his throat. She saw his hand go to his groin and then he snatched it away again when he realized he'd drawn her gaze by the movement.

They weren't immune to her! They still wanted her!

But did that mean they cared for her as a woman, cared for her as Gwyneth?

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## **Chapter Thirteen**

On some levels, Gwyneth thought she must be insane to dread going back to Belmor Castle more than she'd dreaded being taken to the temple. She didn't suppose she was facing death—unless it was by assassin—but she was miserable and afraid. When they'd taken her, she'd been afraid, but happier than she'd ever been.

It wasn't entirely their fault that she was miserable. The fear—that was anxiety about the unknown and her ability to handle it, or not, but the unhappiness, that was their doing.

They behaved as if she'd suddenly become an entirely different person when she was no different than she'd always been! She almost thought she would've preferred it if they'd ignored her completely. It made her uncomfortable that they were always, now, asking if she was tired, hungry, needed to rest.

It was annoying, too. After the first few days, she was ready to scream at them like a fishwife.

She thought part of it, as embarrassing as it was to admit even to herself, was that she'd grown accustomed to having them as lovers—all of them. It had been hard to get used to coupling with at least one man every night, sometimes two and occasionally three. She'd been so sore and exhausted in the beginning that she was torn between delight to have them and an almost equal desire to whine or cry that she was too tired.

Lamentation of Swans  
by Goldie McBride

Now, none of them would touch her. She'd thought at first that, with the spell Artimus had placed on her broken, that they simply weren't interested any longer, but the more she studied them, the more convinced she was that they were just as miserable about not coupling with her as she was.

How absurd was it that it was alright to treat her like a lusty wench before and now to behave as if she was some ... virgin goddess they didn't dare touch? They *knew* they'd fathered their babes on her!

It angered her that that seemed to unsettle them so much when they had been so determined to put them there to start with!

She decided after a week on the trail that she'd had enough. They'd all gathered around the campfire to eat and they were studiously ignoring her as usual and she was so randy for a bout of coupling that she felt like crying. "I don't want to be the queen!" she said abruptly, getting up and stalking to the stream to bathe.

They followed her. She'd known they would—not that they would do anything! They would only stand around her with their backs to her as if they weren't allowed to *look* when they'd *touched* everything!

"You were born to be queen," Drake said when she'd undressed and flopped in the water sullenly, folding her arms instead of bathing. "I was born a dragon and you were born a queen."

She glared at his back. "It isn't the same thing!"

"Of course it is! It is a birthright—and a responsibility," he added before she could inform him that she didn't want it and

she didn't know why she had to take it, regardless. She might have been born to be a queen, but she'd been a kitchen maid! Her birthright certainly hadn't interfered with her scrubbing floors and pots and peeling roots until it had felt as if her fingers would fall off!

"I don't know how to be a queen," she whined.

"You are as clever as anyone I have ever known. You will learn and you will have advisors to help you make the decisions that you will need to make," Faine offered.

"What sort of advisors?" she asked, feeling a flicker of hopefulness.

"Men of the realm, the lords."

"Will I have a husband?"

None of them spoke for so long that she'd begun to wonder if she was even allowed to marry. "You will be a queen," Drake answered finally. "You may choose a husband, but very likely the lords will make suggestions and you'll be expected to choose from among them—for political purposes. Or, you may choose a consort if one of the lords strikes your fancy or you would prefer not to share the power of the throne. He would not have equal station and therefore wouldn't expect to become king. In fact, he wouldn't be allowed to become king."

Gwyneth mulled that over, but it didn't actually take a great deal of thought. "Would I ask?"

Drake turned to look at her, confusion in his eyes. "Ask what?"

"If I chose a consort, how would I choose? Would I ask?"

Something flickered in his eyes. "Your advisors will explain all these things," he said a little tightly.

Gwyneth's heart was beating so rapidly with anxiety that she felt breathless. It took all she could do to ask the question she wanted answered, but she couldn't allow her fear of rejection to destroy any chance of happiness she might have. "I want the three of you to be my consorts and my advisors."

All three of them whipped around to stare at her as if she'd lost her mind.

"You can't have three!" Caelin said indignantly.

"Why not?"

"Because, gods damn it! It's never been done! I am certain it is against the law, or something like that ... and none of us would be acceptable to any of the lords as consorts!"

"*They* won't be coupling with you!" she retorted angrily.

They gaped at her. Slowly, they began to turn red.

"I think that it's perfectly reasonable to choose the fathers of my babes as my consorts!"

"They will never allow it!"

Gwyneth swallowed against the knot of emotion in her throat. "You did not say whether it was what you wanted or not."

"It does not matter what we want," Drake said gruffly.

"It does to me. I love you. I want you. I need you. I don't know how I could do this without you. My children need their fathers."

When none of them said anything, she looked away. "I suppose my advisors will supply someone to father them,"

she said a little bitterly. "But how are they to learn to be brave and strong, honorable and honest without the men who sired them? What if the man chosen to guide them isn't all of those things? Or even *any* of those things?"

"That is fighting dirty," Drake said gruffly.

There were tears in Gwyneth's eyes when she looked up at him, but she didn't try to hide them. "Do you care nothing for me?"

Drake swallowed convulsively a couple of times. "I am a dragon.... I will love you till the end of my days."

It took a few moments for that to sink in. When it did, Gwyneth bounded up and launched herself at him, clinging to him. "Then stay with me, please? Don't leave me!"

He hugged her tightly. "We will have a fight on our hands, my love."

"If it doesn't please them, then they can find someone else to rule. I am a woman first."

"Then we will see what we see," Drake said, leaning down to kiss her.

When she pulled away, she looked at Caelin and Faine. "You cannot fault me for loving you all. You should not have made me love you if it was not something you could accept."

Caelin seemed to wrestle with himself. "I would far rather have you all to myself, but I do not think I could bring myself to leave if you love me even half as much as I love you."

Gwyneth flew to him and hugged him tightly. "You cannot possibly love me more than I love you!"



Faine looked at her uncomfortably. "I am bound by my heart to you and have been from the start, little princess, but I am certain I am not worthy of you."

"You are not only worthy, dearest, but beloved," Gwyneth said, kissing him as she had the others. "And you are very needed. You will teach my sons humility to balance out the conceit they will learn from Drake."

Drake was looking at her indignantly when she turned to smile at him, but Faine and Caelin had both laughed.

"Now you can all show me how very much love me—because I am desperately horny! And I promised Caelin when he got better that I would smother him with kisses and I have been so looking forward to it!"

Faine was shocked. "Your Highness! It is unseemly! We should have the binding first!"

"Pooh! I am already pregnant! You cannot get me any *more* with child than I am now!"

\* \* \* \*

Drake's words were proven prophetic. Gwyneth discovered she did indeed have a fight on her hands when she informed the hall of lords that she had chosen her consorts and meant to bind herself to them at her coronation. They were outraged and argumentative and she finally sent her consorts-to-be from the chambers when she began to fear that they would wipe out the hall of lords.

"I am the queen, yes?"

"Your majesty...."

"Yes or no?"

"Yes, your majesty ... but it would profit the realm if you were to choose royalty from a house that could be an asset to your realm."

"I will form allies—by my policies—not with my body! *They* fathered my children. I will wed the fathers of my children—and the realm could not be better served than to have a happy queen with three powerful magicals at her side. It is just as important to unite the *people* of the realm."

"That is actually another problem that we need to discuss—you will have three heirs, if what we have been told is true. That is always a very dangerous thing."

"Not with my sons!" Gwyneth said emphatically. "They will rule together—as equals."

"It would be far better, since you are not at all far along, if we brought in a physician to ... uh ... remove the problem before it rises, so to speak."

Gwyneth stared at the man in horror. "Over *your* dead body! If you cannot agree with me and you are all agreed that my decision makes me unfit to rule, I will gladly hand this mess over to you and you may sort it out! I have made *my* decision. I will live in exile before I will give one inch on this. Now, you are welcome to make your decision."

\* \* \* \*

Queen Gwyneth was crowned on the 11th day of May as her father had been crowned before her and pledged her vows to her consorts before a great crowd of curious if not well-wishers. She found when they left the cathedral, however, that there were many well-wishers among them.

Lamentation of Swans  
*by Goldie McBride*

The crowd hailed the new queen with enthusiasm that voiced their hopes that the reign of terror of King Gerald the Impaler had ended and a new era of peace, love, and prosperity would be theirs.

Gwyneth found her own peace and contentment with her consorts and the three beautiful sons they gave her—and the three beautiful daughters they gave her after that.

The End

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Lamentation of Swans  
*by Goldie McBride*

Read an excerpt from Goldie McBride's upcoming medieval romance coming in January of 2010:

Fallen Warrior

By

Goldie McBride

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## Chapter One

There was no reward for virtue in the life fate had handed her, Roslyn reflected bitterly.

Her fellow troubadours had been outraged when they had finally stopped running long enough to discover why they'd been chased from the dubious comfort of Castle Kilbane. The lord of the castle had thought to bestow his favor upon her and she had had the temerity to scorn him? Who did she think she was? A bleedin' lady?

The question of whether or not they would even allow her to remain with the troupe had been up for debate for many miles. It was only Gilly's reminder that she'd landed them the gig in the first place that had finally decided the matter in her favor, but she had been forewarned. If the next lord of the manor decided to favor her, she had best grit her teeth and let him toss her skirts over her head, otherwise she need not think she would be traveling with them anymore.

A ragged shout of excitement went up from her fellow travelers. With an effort, Roslyn lifted her head and peered through the sleet toward the keep they were approaching, resisting the urge to blow on her freezing fingers to warm them lest it remind those around her that she was the reason they were all freezing, weary unto death, and starving.

A dark, hulking shape rose up from the crag overlooking the moor.

It was Montrose, the lair of the dark lord, Roland Montague.

Roslyn shivered, but it was more than the cold seeping through her ragged clothing. The villagers in the little town they had left behind had not merely been bursting with the news that nobles from half the kingdom were gathering at Castle Montrose for a wedding celebration. They had been eager to impart the dark rumors that surrounded the lord himself, Roland Montague, brother of the groom.

Bloodshed had gained him his holdings, but it was said that he had been cursed for the evil he had brought upon the land with his army, his manhood withered in the flower of his youth and that malady had only made him more cruel.

The young bride he had taken shortly after he had become lord had met an untimely and mysterious death.

A wave of nausea rolled over Roslyn with that thought.

She was more than passingly familiar with the ways a cruel man could invent to rid himself of an unwanted bride. She would not have been where she was now except for similar circumstances, and the fact that her own husband had been no great hand at subtlety. Thrice, he'd beaten her nigh to death and three times she had lost the seed he had sown in her, and yet neither the beatings nor the miscarriages had achieved his ends.

She had her kinsman to thank for the poison, for when they had warned him point blank that they would not tolerate the murder of their kinswoman, Rolphe had simply decided that subtlety was needed. He might have succeeded save for the fact that her nurse was well versed in poisons and he had been too impatient to administer the poison slowly, so that she appeared to be sickening.

She had fled then, knowing her life was forfeit if she stayed, fearing it would be forfeit anyway, for she had no notion of how to fend for herself in the world. Fortune had favored her when she had stumbled upon the troupe and they had taken her in, but the fear was never far from her that they would cross paths at some noble's keep.

He might not recognize the girl he had once called his wife, in any event. Nearly eighteen now and no longer in the first blush of youth, she had grown nigh three inches in the two years since she had fled. Between the late spurt of growth and the scarcity of food, she had lost the plumpness that had once been hers and gained the lithe body of the dancer she had become. Her hair, once a pale, faded brown, had been lightened to a bright auburn with the lye she applied to it regularly.

She had had cause to regret that bit of cleverness for it had drawn unwelcome attention more than once, but it was not something that could be easily undone once done. In any case, she wasn't entirely easy in her mind that her disguise was proof against detection as it was should she encounter the man she had lived with for more than two years and it seemed more prudent to err on the side of caution.

The lord of Kilbane had been the first who'd sought her out and tried force when persuasion had failed. Before, she'd managed to evade the amorous attentions of those whose eye she'd caught.

Perhaps, she thought, lifting her head to study the castle looming above them like a great, hulking beast of prey, Lord Roland's infirmity would be enough protection.

Lamentation of Swans  
*by Goldie McBride*

They saw long before they reached it that the main gate had already been locked tight against the approaching night and the party moved off the road and made their way around the castle through the deepening gloom to the postern gate. There they were ordered to wait while the steward was sent for. No one spoke as they huddled together for warmth, too weary with cold and footsore to feel like bolstering their flagging spirits with conversation.

It was full dark and by Roslyn's reckoning, an hour had passed before the steward finally arrived, peering down at them from the wall above. Braun, the leader of their little troupe, stepped forward at once and sketched a courteous bow. "We were told in the village that there is to be a wedding celebration at Montrose Castle and have come to offer our services as entertainment."

The steward took a torch and leaned out, peering down at the huddled group. "How many of you are there and what can you offer?"

"Seven—three are musicians, two dancers, two tumblers and jugglers."

The steward mulled that over for several moments. "No singers?"

"Two of our members can sing."

"How is it that you find yourselves without a patron in the middle of the winter?" the steward asked sharply.

Roslyn shifted uncomfortably.

"Our place was usurped by a troop with a dancing bear," Braun lied promptly.



The steward seemed satisfied with that. After haggling with Braun for some moments over the pay, he gestured that they might enter and everyone surged forward as they heard the groan as the gate began to slowly open. "The castle is full to bursting at the seams now and barely half the guests have arrived," the steward told them as he led them through the nether regions of the castle. "You will be fortune indeed if you can find space on the floor to bed down and do not have to sleep on your feet. You'll have to hurry if you expect to be fed."

Thus adjured, they ignored their half frozen limbs and hurried to keep up as the steward led them at last to the great hall where the diners were finishing their meal. Almost as they entered the great hall, the din of hundreds of voices petered to a halt as someone—Roslyn thought it must be Lord Roland—rose from his seat at the high table and bellowed a command for silence. His first words confirmed it. "After a great deal of consideration, I have come at last to a decision regarding my estate. Unless fortune should chose to smile upon me—which I have grave doubts at this point that it will—upon the first anniversary of the birth of his first son, I will officially appoint my brother, Phillip, as my heir."

Intrigued more by the timber of the voice itself than the announcement, Roslyn tried to peer toward the speaker as they were herded toward the back of the great hall, but many had jumped to their feet at the announcement and she could see little beyond the fact that the man who'd spoken was broad, exceptionally tall and very dark. The man seated beside him was also dark. She assumed it must be the

brother he'd spoken of, but from the glimpse she caught of his face he did not seem particularly pleased by the announcement. She wondered if it was because of the reservations Lord Roland had expressed or if there was some less obvious reason for his displeasure. Whatever the case, his smile was obviously a little forced as he, too, got to his feet. "In that case, I need only wait a matter of eighteen months or so to have my brother's honor bestowed upon me!" he announced, winking at a woman Roslyn assumed must be his blushing bride.

There were a few guffaws of laughter, but the crowd seemed strangely solemn for such an occasion, and their cheers at their lord's announcement halfhearted at best.

It puzzled Roslyn, particularly in light of the rumors surrounding Lord Roland. The only conclusion she could draw from it was that Lord Phillip was even less favored than his brother.

There was no place to sit they discovered with little surprise, even at the lowest tables, but they managed to grab a few scraps from a passing servant and found a place near the back wall to wolf it down. Roslyn glanced longingly toward the enormous hearth on the wall near the high tables, but she knew very well that there was no chance any of them would be allowed near it to warm themselves and the heat from the great, roaring fire did not even begin to penetrate so far back in the hall. The heat from hundreds of bodies made the hall far warmer than it might have been otherwise, however, and between that and the food in her belly Roslyn began to thaw.

The steward had not specified when they might be called upon, but as soon as they'd eaten they began to prepare themselves. The four men in the group formed a semi-circle around Roslyn and Gilly so that they could shimmy into their dance costumes. They'd become adept at pulling the costumes on beneath their clothing since there was rarely any privacy for changing. Roslyn had been horrified both by the costume and the dance when Bruan had first suggested it. Both had originated in the east, which Braun had never visited, but since very few folk had ever done so there was no one to dispute his claims that both the dance and the costumes were completely authentic.

Roslyn entertained a good bit of doubt, but she could not deny that the dance and the costume together were a strong draw—not really surprising since the cloth the costumes were made of was so sheer it was like dancing in veils—which was what Braun called it 'the dance of the veils'—and the dance itself was indecently evocative, which made it all the worse, she supposed, that she had not only mastered it, but so thoroughly enjoyed it that she lost herself in the music and dance once she had begun.

It was just as well, for she wasn't at all certain that she would ever have been able to perform in front of such crowds if she could not escape into herself while she danced.

Of course, she could not flatter herself unduly that she was exceptionally accomplished. Truth to tell, she doubted any of the men ever noticed much beyond the sheer costume itself.

When they'd finished adjusting the costumes, they removed their rough gowns and pulled robes over the

costumes that could be easily discarded once they were called upon to dance.

Roslyn's belly clenched as she saw the steward approaching the high table. She could see little of the men seated there, but there was no doubt in her mind that it was the lord of the castle the steward approached and spoke to. After a moment, the lord signaled dismissal of the troubadour who'd been singing a ballad. Almost in the same moment, a servant pushed his way through the group and informed Braun that they were summoned.

Fastening her veil across the lower half of her face, Roslyn pulled her hood up to cover her bright hair and followed Gilly.

She would almost have preferred to go first than to stand and watch the others perform, waiting her turn and becoming more and more nervous as her own turn approached, but Braun had decreed that the dance of the veils was to be their finale, and Gilly never argued with Braun over such matters, bowing completely to his judgment. Since Gilly was Braun's woman and she held little sway over his decisions, at least in matters regarding their performance, Roslyn had never even considered arguing with him.

In any case, she knew he was right. The crowd was generally so rowdy after the dance that it was next to impossible for the others to perform. Moreover, by waiting for the dancers to perform last, the diners were usually too intoxicated to present a great deal of trouble. Quite often, a good half of the men had already fallen into a drunken stupor before they even began to dance and even those who had not were in no state to act upon any amorous intentions they

might have and it was easy enough for her and Gilly to pull their cloaks on once more and melt away into the crowd.

That was usually the case. Roslyn couldn't help but notice that the men at arms crowded into the great hall seemed predominantly sober for celebrants. She'd noticed a few staggering about, and perhaps a handful lolling at the table, or beneath it, snoring loudly, but most, although not entirely sober, were far more alert than she would've expected.

She exchanged an uneasy glance with Gilly, wondering if she'd noticed. Apparently, she had, for her eyes, usually gleaming with mischief, were dark with anxiety.

It was too late to formulate another plan.

Surreptitiously, Roslyn peered toward the high table. Her heart tripped over itself.

Uneasy about drawing unwanted attention, she'd taken care to stand behind Gilly when they'd made their way to the cleared area below the lord's table, nor had she glanced even once toward the lords seated there, certain it would only make her more uneasy about performing. At almost the same moment that she looked up, however, Lord Roland leaned toward his brother and their gazes seemed to lock across the distance.

A suffocating sense of panic washed over her, for his eyes were so cold and pale a shade of blue, they seemed to stab through her like an ice pick, even across the distance that separated them. With an effort, she quelled the panic, reminding herself that she was covered from head to toe. He could not possibly tell anything at all about her, even if she was right and he was staring at her. He could not have seen

her eyes in the shadows beneath her hooded cloak and could not have intended to make eye contact.

She was still stiff with nerves, however, when Braun signaled that she and Gilly were to take their places to begin the dance. It took an effort to still her quaking heart, to focus upon her performance. Dropping the robe at the edge of the dance floor, she moved into position, her head bowed, her eyes closed while she sought the inner peace she needed. With the first strains of the music, she opened her eyes, focused upon a point between the shoulders of the two men seated at the center of the table and allowed her joy of music and dance to wash over her. The sights and sounds around her faded to insignificance as she dipped and twirled, gyrating her hips to make the tiny metal disks sewn along the waist of her costume tinkle like tiny bells. The brightly colored veils swirled about her, revealing glimpses of heated flesh, then concealing once more.

She was breathless, but exuberant, when the dance ended at last and she and Gilly settled like fallen blossoms on the chill stone floor.

Utter silence followed the last, dying note of Braun's lute and fear tightened inside her belly. Warily, Roslyn lifted her head, rose unsteadily.

She found she could not evade Lord Roland's gaze that time. From the moment she lifted her head, she was caught as surely as if he had manacled the enormous hands fisted atop the table around her. A half dozen painful heartbeats passed. Blinking slowly, as if coming out of a deep sleep, Lord Roland's gaze flickered beyond her. Forcing his lips to curl in

a semblance of a smile, he lifted his hands and began to clap. As if it had needed that to rouse his men from their stupor, the hall erupted then into loud approval.

Roslyn and Gilly exchanged a glance of relief, curtsied deeply, and backed toward the robes they'd discarded.

"Nay! I would have another dance!"

Roslyn froze in her tracks as Lord Phillip spoke, her gaze flickering uneasily to Braun. Braun's smile looked slightly forced, but he bowed.

"Perhaps tomorrow," Lord Roland said, his voice sounding strangely rough. "We will have a full day tomorrow and must rise early." He stood abruptly when he had spoken, ignoring the glare his brother sent him, and strode from the room, pausing only a moment to speak to his steward. The scrape of benches being pushed back instantly flooded the great hall as Lord Roland's men at arms rose from the tables to seek their own pallets.

The troop exchanged nervous glances. "Is this bad, do you think, Braun?" Harry, the youngest of the group, asked uneasily.

Braun shook his head, but before he could voice his opinion, the steward stepped up to them, clamping a hand on Roslyn's arm. "My lord requests a private dance from the woman."

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## **Chapter Two**

Roslyn's eyes widened with alarm, but she knew even as she glanced at Braun that he not only would not object, he would be furious with her if she rejected the request. In any case, it was not a request and they all knew it.

Roslyn's thoughts were chaotic as the steward led her from the great hall and up the winding stairs to the lord's quarters. Foremost in her mind was whether or not she was being taken to Lord Roland, or his brother.

One seemed as possible as the other in that neither seemed at all likely. Lord Phillip's bride had already arrived. He was to take his vows within the se'nnight. He could not, surely, mean to insult his bride by bedding a female, even one as lowly as herself, just before he took his vows?

On the other hand, the tales about Lord Roland had been very specific about his infirmity and the speech he had made as she had entered the great hall certainly seemed to bear up the veracity of those rumors. That being the case, why would he have any interest at all in commanding a private dance?

She did not have as long to scare herself silly as she would have liked. The steward thrust her through a doorway near the head of the stairs, closed it firmly behind her, and departed.

Firelight danced and crept along the stone walls. Near the hearth, Lord Roland was sprawled negligently in a high backed chair, his gaze brooding as he studied her. For many



moments, Roslyn could only stare back at him, her tongue glued to the roof of her mouth.

He seemed far bigger even than she'd thought observing him from a distance, even without the armor he'd worn earlier, for he'd discarded it in the time since he had left the hall and wore no more now than his chausses and a simple tunic that seemed to strain at the seams from the muscles that banded his chest and upper arms. She saw, when she had nerved herself to lift her gaze, that he was not as old as she would have supposed given that he had appointed an heir, could not be much the elder of the two brothers.

His features were boldly male, and surprisingly attractive given the unyielding set of his strong jaw and chin, the harsh angles of his cheeks, his blade of a nose, and the harsh set of his thin lipped mouth.

Surprise flickered through her when she saw his eyes were dark and she wondered, briefly, what had given her the impression that they were so pale until he summoned her with a flick of one index finger. As she moved nearer, she saw that his pupils were dilated—due to the dimness of the room or something else she preferred not to consider—but the thin sliver of iris surrounding the pupil was very pale indeed.

"Take off the robe."

Swallowing with an effort, Roslyn complied, dropping it to the floor at her feet.

"The veil over your face, as well."

Roslyn hesitated for a split second and finally loosened the veil on one side, allowing it to fall. There was no doubt in her mind then that his eyes were dilated with desire, for they

darkened even more as he studied her. She moistened her dry lips with an effort, feeling her belly quiver indescribably as his gaze settled on her mouth. "You wanted me to dance for you?" she asked with an effort.

His gaze flickered down her length and then up again, lingering for several moments on her breasts. A faintly derisive smile quirked one corner of his lips. "Aye," he said finally, his voice rough. "Pleasure me with your dance."

It would have been easier to comply if he had been thoughtful enough to summon Braun, as well, to play while she danced, but she knew why he had not and did not dare suggest it. Bowing her head, she bent to scoop the robe up and tossed it out of her way.

Closing her eyes, she began to hum the tune, allowing the rhythm of the dance to work its way slowly through her stiff, unresponsive muscles. The music began to play inside her head, energy flowing from it into her muscles, and she became lost in the dance as she so often did when she performed.

She was unnerved to discover when she had prostrated herself on the floor with the end of the dance and finally lifted her head that Lord Roland had risen from his chair. His back was to her, his gaze on the flames in the hearth.

She studied him uncertainly for several moments, wondering if she should rise and leave the room quietly or remain as she was. Finally, she stood. He turned at the movement, his face stony and Roslyn felt her pulse leap with anxiety. "I will try again," she said quickly.

His lips tightened. "Enough!" he said harshly.

The harshness of his voice made her heart jerk painfully. For her part, men seemed entirely too ready to express their displeasure with their fists and she didn't harbor any doubts that this one was any different. She took a nervous step back, but held her ground as it occurred to her that she would have Braun to contend with even if she managed to escape Lord Roland unscathed—which seemed debatable since the door was closed, and possibly bolted, as well. "I beg pardon if I have displeased you, my lord."

He lifted a hand and scrubbed it across the dark stubble on his chin. "Nay. You have not displeased me," he said tiredly. "By what name are you known?"

"Rose," Roslyn stammered. It was dangerous, she knew, to use a name so close to her own, but less fraught with disaster, she had decided, than not responding to a name she might have invented. That would certainly have aroused suspicions and she had known that Rolphe was searching for her when she had first fled.

He looked her over and the corners of his mouth curled so faintly she wondered if she had imagined the smile. "Surprisingly appropriate." He turned away, studying the fire. "You may go, Rose," he added.

After a stunned moment of disbelief, she bobbed a quick curtsy and moved hastily toward the door. Remembering her robe as she reached it, she dashed back for the robe, bobbed another curtsy, and threw the robe around her as she headed toward the door again.

A mixture of relief and dread flooded her as she let herself out. Braun was not going to be pleased to see her again this

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eve for, despite the rumors to the contrary, she knew he had expected that she would spend the night with Lord Roland.

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### **Chapter Three**

Roslyn hesitated indecisively once she had reached the corridor. Braun was likely to question her about returning and possibly very unpleasantly. There was some safety in bedding down with her fellow troubadours, however, that she might regret giving up if she decided to sleep elsewhere.

After some consideration, she finally decided that it was doubtful she could avoid Braun's wrath whatever she did and it might be easier to face tonight, while he might be constrained by the others crowded around them. Several men at arms eyed her as she picked her way through the great hall in search of her party, but, to her relief, none accosted her. Braun sat up and glared at her when she crawled between Gilly and Lon. "Ye've not crowned the lord with a fagot like ye did the last one?" he whispered harshly.

"I danced for him. He told me I could go."

Braun eyed her suspiciously. "This is truth?"

"Aye." She considered it a moment. "He asked me to take off the veil. Mayhap what he saw did not appeal to him?"

Braun's look was disbelieving. Finally, he shrugged.

"Mayhap yer too thin fer his liking."

Without quite knowing why it was, Roslyn felt a pang at that comment. She had thought him exceptionally attractive, both very handsome and well built. Given the rumors, she had not expected that he would find her attractive and had wondered why he'd even commanded a private performance. In truth, she was certain she did not want him to, but it was

still disturbing to think he had found her so completely unappealing that he had not even been tempted.

How much faith could she place in the tales she'd heard? She had not believed that they could be completely true, she realized. Some had had the ring of truth—particularly the part about the bloody conquest of the land. She didn't doubt that many had cursed him for it, but she had not actually believed any of the curses had had the power to actually affect him. She was still more inclined to think, if it was true and he had been 'unmanned', then it was due to a war wound, not the curse of some poor serf who had been raped.

But was it true at all? Was he incapable of bedding a woman? Or just disinterested in her in particular?

She fell asleep still pondering it. The scrape of trestle tables as the serfs began setting up to break fast woke her shortly before dawn. It took an effort to drag herself up. Still more than half asleep, she followed Gilly outside to the well to freshen up. The water was icy and effectively brought her fully awake. Shivering with the cold, she dabbed half-heartedly at cleaning and then went with Gilly in search of a place to relieve herself.

The trumpets sounded at the gate as she and Gilly were heading back and they paused to see who the arrivals were. In a few moments, she caught a glimpse of Lord Roland and his brother leading a large party of men. As the keep began filling with men on horses, she and Gilly scampered for the safety of the castle to keep from being run down in the general melee.

Roslyn found once she was inside that her heart was still fluttering uncomfortably fast. Part of it was fear, she knew. Anyone with a whit of sense experienced fear when they found themselves in the path of mounted men at arms. She'd thought, too, although it may have been no more than her imagination, that Lord Roland had looked directly at her and even the thought that she might have attracted his notice unnerved her.

It was not altogether fear, however, and she knew it because it wasn't until she caught sight of Lord Roland that her heart had jerked strangely in her chest, and it wasn't until she'd looked at him that she'd felt a knee weakening rush and a flush of warmth.

Her stomach was so knotted with nerves it was next to impossible to choke down food, but Roslyn struggled to eat as much as she could, knowing that she could not count on another meal. When they'd broken their fast they found space in one of the barns and began rehearsing for the night's entertainment. In honor of the bride, Roslyn and Lon were to sing a love ballad, accompanied by Lon's lute. Braun would sing a war ballad in honor of the groom, who was known to be a fine warrior—not nearly as impressive as his elder brother, Lord Roland, but well respected. Will and Peter practiced a series of tumbling and juggling moves they hoped with thrill and impress the castle folk.

By the time Braun was finally satisfied that everyone had their parts memorized, it was nearing dusk and they were allowed free time until the evening meal. Most of the troupe fled at once into the more hospitable comfort of the castle,

joining the guests and castle folk congregating there to entertain themselves while they waited for food to be served. Roslyn wasn't especially anxious to do so. She had no particular reason to fear that her husband might be one of the guests, but she never liked to take unnecessary chances. After her disappearance, he had put it about that she had died. She didn't think he would be pleased to discover that she was still very much alive.

She wandered through the crowded bailey for a time, halfheartedly watching the performers from some of the other troupes who were working the crowd, searching for a place where she might seek quiet reflection without the danger of being accosted by any of the drunken revelers.

Finally, she mounted the stairs that led up to the battlements. Despite the general air of celebration, there were guards posted along the wall, but a handful only, and she found an overlook at last that was unoccupied. The wind off of the moors snatched her hood from her head the moment she reached the crenulated wall, whipping her bright hair around her like a lash and chilling her to the bone. Gathering the tresses in one hand, she tucked the whipping mass of hair into the back of her cloak and pulled the hood up again, clutching the edges tightly at her throat.

A sense of loneliness filled her as she stared out over the darkening moors and memories of the home where she had grown to adulthood flooded her. She had never thought that she would miss the home of her childhood. At the time that she had left, she had been glad to be leaving.



She could still recall how excited she had been when her father had told her that she was a woman grown and he had arranged a marriage for her. For many weeks she had floated around on a cloud of fantasy and hope, but Rolphe had been a disappointment to her girlish fantasies. Nearly thirty, he had been as hairy as a beast and battle scarred. The choice was not hers, however, and she had soon convinced herself that he was not ill favored, not so very old, after all. Moreover, her father's arrangement meant that she would be a lady of stature. Rolphe's holdings were vast, and he was respected by his peers and his men.

Her father had remarried the year before and his young bride had already produced a male heir for her father. She had allowed herself to be encouraged by thoughts of having babes of her own ... thoughts of being chatelaine of her own castle. She was nigh fourteen winters, only a year younger than her father's new bride and it had chafed her to find her place usurped by her father's wife.

She had been shocked to discover the marriage bed was distasteful to her. Her stepmother had not seemed to find it so, and her father was many years older than her own husband. She had told herself that it was simply something she would grow accustomed to, and hopefully grow to like, but she had not. For the most part, coupling with Rolphe had ceased to be a painful experience, but the acts he had demanded of her had not become any easier to bear. In truth, she had come to dread her marriage bed more and more as time went on.

She was not certain whether her reluctance displeased him and that was what had led him to become more and more ill-tempered with her, or if his ill temper was what had caused her to become more and more reluctant to lie with him. It didn't seem to matter. She could not please him no matter what she did. If she defied him when he was in a temper, he beat her and if she cowered from him, he beat her worse. Even when she had finally found herself with child after nigh a year with him, he had only been temporarily appeased and when he'd lost his temper and beat her so badly she had lost the child he had been furious with her, blamed her for provoking him, blamed her for being so poor a breeder that she could not even carry his son to term.

She had not even fully recovered from that loss when she found herself breeding again, except that she had hardly realized she was pregnant before she miscarried the second. When the third child fared no better, Rolphe had come to realize that he would breed no heirs on her. He'd turned his thoughts then to ridding himself of a useless wife so that he could search for one capable of producing an heir.

She had been hopeful, at first, when her father had finally recognized her plight and seemed inclined to help her, but it had taken no more than a single, tearful, conversation with her father to realize that the power struggle was between her husband and her father. Her life and continued good health was incidental and it would do her no good to flee to her father for help. He would bluster and threaten, and then he would send her back to her husband.

She had almost been tempted to take the poison when her nurse had discovered it, as it had seemed the only way to escape the living hell she had found herself caught up in, but Rolphe had not managed to completely cow her. There still lingered a spark of defiance and she had rebelled against giving him what he wanted—his freedom to marry again.

Alive, she continued to pose a threat to him. So long as any lived who knew her, he could not marry again for fear that she would surface and befoul his plans.

It was revenge of a sort, the only revenge she was allowed, but a dangerous one, for she knew that he would not hesitate to strike her down if he should find her now that she was completely without protection and traveling under an assumed identity.

"It is dangerous to lose yourself so completely in your thoughts that you do not hear the approach of another."

Roslyn jumped and whirled at the sound of the deep voice so close behind her, her heart jerking to a painful halt. The wind plucked her hood from her suddenly nerveless fingers, snatching her hair loose and whipping it around her face. With shaking fingers, she gathered the strands blocking her vision, but relief did not come when she saw the dark visage of Lord Roland. Instead, her stomach tightened and then went weightless, as if she'd just leapt from the castle walls. She bobbed a nervous curtsy. "My apologies, my lord. The wind.... I did not hear you."

He moved to stand beside her, leaning against the battlements as he studied her. "The wind is blustery today, but it was your thoughts that claimed your attention, I'll

wager ... and not terribly pleasant ones, from what I discerned from your expression."

She glanced around self-consciously. "I should not be here."

He caught her arm when she would have brushed past him and hurried away. She glanced down at the large hand clamped around her upper arm and then up at his face. His eyes were narrowed now, but she didn't nurse the hope that it was to shield them from the wind's chill. "You have lost your taste so quickly for the view from the battlements? Strange when I have watched you here for nigh an hour."

Roslyn swallowed with an effort, forced a tremulous smile. It only made her more uneasy to know that he had been watching her so long. "Small wonder I find myself chilled. The sun has set and I must go if I am expected to perform tonight."

She reddened the moment the words were out of her mouth, fearful that he would put a different interpretation on the comment than what she'd intended.

He seemed to. Instead of releasing her, he pulled her closer, until she could feel the heat of his body thawing the chill from her own. His hand, as he lightly brushed it along her cold cheek, felt like a hot coal. "You do not have the look of a serf."

Roslyn blinked, disconcerted by the turn of the conversation and ill prepared for verbal sword play. "I am a free woman," she said before she thought better of it.

His brows rose. "A merchant's daughter, mayhap?"

She hesitated, but it was as good an answer as any. "Aye."

"And yet you had to think it over."

She couldn't contain the blush that rose to her cheeks. "I was only surprised that you guessed it so quickly," she lied.

He let that pass although she could see he did not believe it. "How is it, I wonder, that the daughter of a merchant finds herself traveling with a group of players?"

Roslyn bit her lip, realizing her mistake. She should have simply stuck with the story she'd invented to tell the troupe. "He died ... and my husband, as well, and I was forced to find a means of supporting myself."

His dark brows collided at the bridge of his nose and she had the distinct feeling that he wasn't pleased to hear that she was a widow. His next comment seemed to confirm it. "And so, despite your air of innocence, the fruit has been plucked."

A twinge of resentment surfaced that she had not the protection of her true station to prevent such an impertinent question. "Well plucked," she said tightly. "I was wed for nigh three years."

He seemed less pleased, if possible, with that answer. "That being the case, one wonders why you did not find a less hazardous means of support."

Roslyn could not prevent the distaste that curled her lips, but she felt it would be a mistake to air her true feelings on the matter. "I should have become some wealthy man's layman, you mean? I confess I had no taste for it, for my heart is in the grave."

His face tightened with anger. He loosened his hold on her, flicking a gaze along her length. "It is not your heart that ... men desire."

She had the feeling when he hesitated that he had meant to say something else entirely, but no wish to delve into it. "I should go, my lord, if I am to entertain your guests."

To her relief, he released her. Bobbing a curtsey, she made good her escape, hurrying along the walk and down the stairs. Braun was virtually dancing with anxiety when she reached the great hall where everyone had gathered to sup and finally found her way to her group. "Where have you been?" he snarled.

"Talking with Lord Roland," Roslyn returned tartly.

It took the wind out of his sails. He blinked at her several times, and she could see the cogs turning in his mind. "He must not have been too displeased with you then," he said finally.

He was fishing, but she wasn't about to either correct his misinterpretation or agree with it. Instead, she shrugged, took the bread and cheese Gilly handed her and concentrated on chewing her dry food carefully lest she choke. She saw, when she finally nerved herself to glance toward the high table, that Lord Roland had joined his family. Her food settled in the pit of her stomach like a stone.

Why was he so curious about her, she wondered? And how was it that he seemed to have noticed that she was not low born when no one else had in all the time and all the places she had wandered with the troupe?

She could not help but fear his interest was dangerous to her continued well being. Perhaps he knew Rolphe? Perhaps he had heard something that had led him to believe that Rolphe's wife was not dead as he claimed?

She shook the thoughts off, trying to convince herself that she was frightening herself needlessly. He would have asked her more specific questions, she was almost certain, if he had indeed suspected who she was.

The 'almost' continued to plague her, however, and she was a mass of nerves by the time she was called upon to perform. Almost against her will, she found her gaze straying to the high table as she surreptitiously examined the nobles seated there.

Surprise flickered through her when she actually looked at Lord Phillip's bride for the first time. She looked to be well past her twentieth year and she was quite plain. Perhaps Lord Phillip had chosen her because she was a proven breeder? Or, perhaps, it was her dowry that he had found irresistible? She could not fool herself into believing his attentiveness to his bride stemmed from either respect or affection, for his expression was not at all doting.

Pity welled inside her, but then it occurred to her that it might, perhaps, be unwarranted. She had felt the sting of her father's hand more than once, but he was not at all like Rolphe. Mayhap Lord Phillip was not as ill tempered either and would be kind to his bride?

Or would he?

Lord Roland's bride had died, according to tales the villagers told, under suspicious circumstances. Mayhap,

despite the fact that they seemed far more gentlemanly, the brothers Montague were actually as brutish as Rolphe?

Her gaze flickered to Lord Roland at that thought and she discovered, much to her discomfort, that he was watching her. She looked away at once, but she couldn't help but worry what he might have read of her thoughts in her expression.

It was not her place to judge and certainly not to condemn ... or even to feel pity for someone above her station. Lady Montague did not seem greatly disturbed by her situation. She seemed somewhat nervous, but then any bride had reason to be all things considered. In any event, she was far too old for this to be her first marriage. Most likely she was a young widow and heavily dowried, which should insure her good treatment, whatever Lord Phillip might feel about her.

She felt uncomfortable, however, about the love ballad she was to sing, and glanced at Lon to see what he thought about the matter. He seemed almost to shrug as he began to pick at his lute to test the tune, as if his thoughts had followed a similar path. He looked up at her as he began to sing and, with relief, Roslyn focused on her role.

It was a beautiful song, and pulled at some desperate yearning deep inside of her to find even a taste of what the lovers of the song had felt for one another, for they had loved each other so deeply that when they were torn apart by war they had found that neither could live without the other.

When they had finished their song, there was absolute silence in the hall for the space of several moments. Abruptly, as if embarrassed that they had been moved by anything so sentimental, everyone began to speak and laugh very loudly.



Bowing, Roslyn withdrew with relief to wait until it came her time to dance.

The future Lady Montague excused herself and left with her ladies when the juggling and tumbling began. Roslyn was relieved. She had been too agitated the night before to consider it, wasn't certain if the lady had even been present the night before, but she didn't think that Lord Phillip's bride would have been pleased with the dance she and Gilly were to perform.

Halfway through Will and Peter's performance, someone grasped Roslyn's upper arm. She jumped, glancing up quickly to see who had accosted her. Her heart fluttered uncomfortably when she saw it was Lord Roland's steward.

"Lord Roland has sent me to escort you to his chambers."

Roslyn gaped at him for a moment before she glanced at the high table. Lord Roland still sat where she'd last seen him. She frowned. "After my dance?"

"Now."

"But...."

"Are ye daft?" Braun growled near her ear. "We are here at his lordship's pleasure. Go."

She didn't argue further, but it was with a mixture of feelings that she allowed the steward to lead her from the hall. Embarrassment was a part of it, for she felt the interested gazes of all those they passed, heard the whispers that followed in her wake. She couldn't hear what they were saying, but she didn't need to. They were speculating on Lord Roland's particular interest in her.

Was that it, she wondered suddenly? Had Lord Roland chosen her to try to squelch the hated rumors circulating about him? But why her? And why now?

Or had she placed too much faith in the prattling of low born folk who could know nothing about the life of a member of the aristocracy?

She had been pacing before the hearth for some minutes before the door of Lord Roland's chambers opened. Jerking to a halt, she curtsied low.

"Impatient?"

Roslyn's head jerked up as if she was no more than a puppet and it was he who controlled the strings. There was amusement in his cool eyes and a faint smile upon his hard mouth.

"My lord?"

He stopped when he reached her, pulling the veil from her face. "You were pacing."

She need only say 'yes' and lower her eyes coyly and he would be pleased to think he had been right. She could not bring herself to utter the lie.

"I thought not," he murmured. "What then?"

Roslyn swallowed, rattled that he stood so near her she could feel the heat of his great body, could almost imagine she felt the brush of him against her with each breath. "I was ... to entertain your guests," she managed to say finally.

One black brow rose, the other descended as he studied her coolly. "You are here to do *my* bidding—whatever that should be."

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