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# Slayer

D.L. SNOW

*Marriage? No, thanks. She'd rather kiss a dragon.*

*An Enchanted Story*

All Prince Cahill needs to assume the throne is one simple thing: a wife. Except every virgin princess in the kingdom has turned up deflowered before the deal can be sealed. The very next maiden to cross this threshold, he vows, will be his bride.

When she appears—injured, half-frozen and reeking of dragon dung—he holds to his promise and puts her to the final test to prove her worthiness. A test that involves a mattress and a pea.

Breanna couldn't be less interested in marriage, especially to a cocksure royal like Cahill. Since losing her family to a dragon horde, she has become the continent's finest slayer—a job she doesn't plan on giving up until the last dragon's blood drips from her sword.

Yet her sleepless nights are plagued with visions of Cahill doing wicked things to her untutored body. And when she fights at his side to repel a dragon attack, her visions become delicious reality.

But Queen Eleanor, whose reign is about to end, has no intention of giving up her power. Not to Prince Cahill, and certainly not to some young upstart...

Warning: This book contains corruption, seduction, conspiracy and magically-induced erotic dreams. And that's just the first chapter.

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# Slayer

*D.L. Snow*

# Dedication

To all the strong women in my life (you know who you are) who battle dragons of all shapes and sizes on a daily basis. You are an inspiration to me.

# Chapter One

Captain Peacock strode across the great hall, the heels of his Hessian boots echoing sharply against the polished marble. Queen Eleanor glanced up from the scroll open upon her knees and frowned at the expression on the captain's face. The serpent that coiled in the pit of her stomach lifted its head in preparation to strike. "Tell me," she demanded before he'd completed his bow. "Where are they? What are they doing?"

"Riding. Then a picnic to follow down by the lake."

"A picnic." Bitterness crept up her throat and twisted her lips into a snarl. "How romantic." The idea of this latest young upstart, this Princess Abelinda, taking her place was unfathomable. But her stepson Cahill seemed smitten.

Peacock's nod was curt, his back straight as he cocked his head to await instructions. She tapped the quill she held against her pursed lips, and then, suddenly aware of the tickle of the feather on her face, she stroked her lips with more purpose. With narrowed eyes she inspected the captain before her. Yes, he was about the right height and build—tall and powerful. It was no surprise the man had become captain of the guard at such a young age. His dark hair was thick and in need of a barber, but wavy and comely. His brows were heavy, his nose slightly off-kilter and his jaw firm. In his eyes was a glint that told the queen this man both knew his place yet held ambitions beyond the realm of his birthright.

"Remove your coat," Eleanor ordered.

"Excuse me?"

"Your coat. Remove it." She waved the feather in his general direction. "Your jerkin and shirt too, if you please."

The man hesitated for only a fraction of a second before complying. The queen stood and regally stepped down from her dais toward her bare-chested subordinate to inspect the hardened planes of his physique. She ran her hands along the muscles of his back and sides, circling him, trailing her fingers around and up through the silky curls on his belly and chest, then over his powerful shoulders. "Now," she whispered, "your breeches."

"My queen?"

Eleanor tugged on the draw that held his breeches in place. "Off. I need to see what I'm working with here." Beneath her feathery touch, the man held himself completely in check. That point pleased her. Immensely. Yes, he would do.

The sun glinted off the pond like polished diamonds, and Prince Cahill reclined upon the blanket feeling an utter sense of contentment. The cold duck, fresh butter rolls and wine filled his stomach and lulled him into nearly forgetting that he'd rather be out hunting the dragon that plagued the kingdom than courting princesses. But a prince had certain obligations, and this particular princess was not exactly a hardship to be around. With hands tucked behind his head, he watched through half-lowered lids as Princess Abelinda weaved a crown out of daisies.

"What do you think?" she asked in that high musical lilt of hers as she placed the crown upon her thick dark hair, adjusting it so that it sat at a jaunty angle upon her head.

"Beautiful," he breathed and he meant it. The white of the flowers contrasted with her dark wavy hair and complemented the creamy hue of her skin. Yes, the prince nodded to himself; that was an apt comparison. And like some cat, one of the great mountain cats no doubt, Cahill longed to lap at that creamy shoulder of hers and taste the rich milk in the valley between her ample breasts, where her bodice hung low over her bosom. The longing was both exciting and torturous.

Slowly, the prince rolled over and contented himself with simply reaching for one of her dainty hands. There would be time for enjoying the princess's more illicit delights once they were married. With a gentleness that in no way betrayed the impatient straining at the front of his breeches, Cahill lifted Abelinda's fingers to his lips, inhaling the sweet scent of honeysuckle that clung to her like the ivy itself clung to the walls of the castle.

Roses blossomed in the fullness of her cheeks, and her dark eyes sparkled. "Oh, Cahill! Have you ever been so happy?"

With her hand still pressed to his lips, Cahill kissed her once more then pressed her hand against his cheek, closing his eyes and imagining what that small hand might feel like were he to slip it down to cup the ridge between his legs. He smiled. Tomorrow. They would marry tomorrow, and by tomorrow night, he would know.

"Your Highness?"

Cahill opened his eyes and squinted up into the shadow of the man who stood above him. With reluctance, he dropped Abelinda's hand and pushed himself to his feet. It took more than a little effort to keep from groaning at the sudden uncomfortable pressure at the front of his snug breeches.

"I'm sorry to disturb Your Highness."

Once standing, Cahill recognized the captain of the guard, a man not much older than himself. "What is it, Peacock?"

"The queen wishes you to take tea with her this afternoon." The man glanced down at Abelinda, still seated on the picnic blanket beneath the overhanging branches of the massive willow tree. "That is, if the princess will excuse you."

"But of course," Abelinda cooed. "I don't think I could eat again for a week."

"You could do worse," the queen commented once tea was poured and Cahill's mouth was full of persimmon cake.

He loathed the cake, but it was his stepmother's favorite and their meetings always went more amiably when he managed to swallow at least one morsel. "She's lovely and you know it," Cahill responded once the dry cake passed well enough down his esophagus.

"Yes, of her beauty there is no question. Her parentage is another matter."

Cahill swallowed a mouthful of tea to clear any stray crumbs. "What are you talking about?"

"I knew her father very well."

By the inflection in Eleanor's voice, Cahill was left with little doubt as to just how well she knew the King of Enravia.

"I always wondered how one as fair as King Henri could sire such a dark-haired daughter."

Setting his cup down with care, Cahill replied. "My father was equally fair, and I am equally dark."

"Yes, but that is from your mother's side. I see your father in the breadth of your shoulders and the length of your nose. With you there is no doubt."

Cahill shrugged. "It makes no difference. I'm marrying Abelinda tomorrow."

"Oh, but my dear son, it makes a great deal of difference. Think of the scandal should the lovely Abelinda be proven to be a bastard." She shook her head gravely, "Forced to divorce, any children of the union disowned." After a thoughtful sip of tea, the queen sighed and continued. "I know you too well, my son. These things are law, and if they should occur, your gentle nature would not withstand them."

Cahill doubted her belief in his gentle nature. But there was truth in his stepmother's words. The law decreed that he must marry a princess—one of pure blood. "Well," he said, "there is no way of knowing. Her mother is dead and gone. There is no proof either way."

"Except for the test."

"What test?"

The queen pulled a scroll from her sleeve and carelessly tossed it onto the table between them. "Oh, here, my dear, have another slice of cake." Ignoring the scroll, she passed him the plate of sweets.

With a grim smile, Cahill slid a slice onto his empty plate. Somehow, impossibly, the cake was drier than usual. Then he reached for the scroll and pulled it taut against his knees to read.



“It’s a very old test,” the queen eventually continued while he read, “but trustworthy, nonetheless. For it is well known that a true and pure princess has the most delicate of skin.”

Cahill nodded. Although he had managed to refrain from exploring too much of Abelinda’s creamy skin—only one more day until he would enjoy those delights!—he had seen enough to attest that she was indeed a delicacy.

The queen continued to speak while Cahill perused the ancient scroll. “It’s simple, really. And though it has not been practiced for a few generations, the test is irrefutably accurate.” After an audible sigh, she said, “More’s the pity it’s been in disuse for so long.”

“The Enchanted Pea Test,” Cahill read.

“Exactly.” The queen motioned to a small silver plate upon which sat a gold gilt box. The queen flicked the catch with her fingernail and opened the lid, revealing a hardened pea that glowed with an ethereal luminescence. “We place the pea beneath her mattress tonight. If the pea disturbs her sleep, as it would disturb any true princess—”

“When,” Cahill interrupted.

Eleanor smiled. “Yes. *When* it disturbs her rest, it will prove, beyond a doubt, that she is of pure blood and body and you may marry your princess.”

“With your blessing?”

“Of course.”

Cahill considered the evidence in the scroll. He’d heard of the test, though his understanding was that it was a test of virginity, not purity of blood. Either way, it didn’t matter. If there was one thing he was certain of, it was Abelinda’s virtue. Setting the scroll aside, Cahill stood and brushed the crumbs from his lap. “I have no doubt Abelinda will pass this test. She will feel the pea, and I will marry her.” He nodded once in the general direction of his stepmother and strode purposefully across the room to the door.

“Oh, I have no doubt she will *feel* the pea,” Eleanor called. “None at all.”

## Chapter Two

Princess Abelinda awoke suddenly. The merry crackling of the fire had all but sputtered out, leaving the tapestry-covered walls shifting with vague shadows from the few remaining coals. She pulled the feathered quilt up around her chin and turned over, preparing herself to go back to sleep. But the princess was unable to get comfortable. Tomorrow was her wedding day. Perhaps the thrill of her pending nuptials was keeping her awake. Was there any man more gallant than Prince Cahill? Any more handsome? Abelinda doubted it and considered herself to be among the luckiest women in the realm.

She closed her eyes and pictured Cahill as he appeared to her this afternoon: the smoldering look in his eyes that left her skin tingling as if he'd crushed her lips in an ardent kiss rather than simply brushing his mouth against her knuckles. Her response to his touch was uncharted territory and left Abelinda gasping and giddy. Why, with but a glance her nipples hardened urgently against her bodice. A simple caress on the inside of her wrist resulted in a strange quivering and throbbing between her legs.

Without thinking, the princess rubbed her knees together, recreating the tingling sensation she felt whenever Cahill was near. Her hand fluttered down to her belly and then lower, inquisitive and yet uncertain as to its purpose, following some instinctual path to unknown pleasure. Rolling onto her back, Abelinda eased her legs apart and gave herself up to her hand's strange will as it hovered a hair's width above the sheer cotton of her chemise. Even before touching herself she was aware of the moist heat that seeped out through the small unexplored opening that led to the internal blaze of her body. With a sigh, she pressed her slim fingers down into the heat and gasped. Her thumb prodded an unusual nubbin, like the pearl button on the overlap of her kid gloves, and Abelinda was certain it had never been there before.

Suddenly the quilt was much too heavy and her skin much too warm. She kicked her legs free of the cover and yanked up on her nightdress. Furiously her fingers explored as gasps and panting moans slipped past her lips. Barely did her brain have time to register the propriety of her actions as, for the first time in her young life, Abelinda was driven by a pure and physical need that she could never have guessed at. With dainty fingers, she fondled the moisture at the juncture of her legs, not fully comprehending what exactly it was that she needed but knowing, without a doubt, that there was a need and it ran strong and deep.

"Perhaps I can be of some assistance," a deep voice rumbled from the foot of the bed.

Abelinda sprang into a sitting position, fear and dissatisfaction vying for control of her emotions.

"Be not alarmed, Princess, for it is only me."

"Cahill?"

He did not respond, but Abelinda recognized him in the near darkness. His midnight hair, his enormous size. With measured steps, he rounded the bed until he stood in the shadow by her side. Starting with her ankles, his large hands grazed the length of her bared legs.

Her breath caught in her throat as she whispered, "Cahill, we aren't yet married."

His touch told her that it didn't matter. Up those hands swept, knowing, understanding what was to be done. Where her own hands had moved with ignorance, Cahill's moved with a certainty that hinted at pleasures beyond her wildest imaginings. With none of the gentleness from earlier in the day, he grasped the diaphanous material that clung to her heated skin and rent it easily from her body.

"Oh, my!"

His hands found her breasts, and he cursed softly under his breath, using unfamiliar words to tell her what he wanted to do to her. The profanity would have shocked Abelinda earlier, but now only served to increase the unspeakable tension that grew inside her. She squeezed her eyes shut once Cahill's lips descended on her nipple. He pinched her other nipple, hard, and Abelinda shuddered in pleasure, barely registering that Cahill's hands suddenly seemed more calloused than they'd felt earlier in the day.

"Yes," she moaned as she writhed beneath his skillful touch. His hands were everywhere, her hair, her face, her breasts, her thighs. He grasped her hand and held it against her naked heat, grinding her fingers into her slick moisture. Then he did the most bizarre thing. He wrenched her hand away and, one by one, sucked greedily on each of her slim fingers.

"Oh!"

While he licked the very last drop of juice from her fingertips, he cupped her with his other hand and rubbed her hard until her body arched like a bow pulled taut. Whipping her head from side to side, Abelinda knew she needed something. Something wonderful and terrible. Something only Cahill could give.

Finally Cahill climbed on top of her, his weight pressing her firmly into the mattress. But it was a weight Abelinda was glad to bear. Driven by instinct, she wiggled her legs out from beneath him and spread herself, wrapping her legs around his, the heat of her center searching desperately for satisfaction.

"Not yet, my love." His voice sounded strained. In fact, he sounded nothing like the man she knew. But then, she didn't recognize her own voice, her own groans of pleasure.

He grasped both sides of her face and kissed her. Finally. His lips so full, so large, bruised hers to the point of pain, but it was a welcome pain. She opened her mouth for his tongue and drank from him as if she was dying of thirst and he was a bottomless well. Suddenly his hand was in her hair and he yanked her head back. "Who are you?" he asked, his voice raw from panting.

"Abelinda. Your wife-to-be."

"I would never have guessed."

How a man could be both so rough and so gentle was a mystery. His tongue circled her mouth and her ear. He tasted her neck and collarbone. His hands returned to her breasts and kneaded them, plumping them up for him to suckle. To Abelinda's surprise, Cahill moved lower still. His tongue trailed down the valley between her breasts to the indent of her bellybutton. But his downward journey did not end there and, though she had no idea where he was heading, her body seemed to guess as her hips strained unconsciously toward his questing mouth.

Cahill immediately latched on to that newest, tiniest appendage between her legs, and the shock of pleasure had Abelinda bucking as she cried out for mercy. "Please," she moaned. "Oh, please!" But the man who held her hips as his mouth devoured her was too strong and too intent on his task to listen to her cries.

She reveled in the pressure of his fingertips as he clutched her dimpled thighs and delighted in the way his whiskered jaw scratched against the sensitive flesh of her inner leg. But most of all, Abelinda's body writhed with the mind-boggling pleasure of Cahill's tongue as he flicked and fondled that naughty nubbin until tears streamed down Abelinda's face. And then, oh then, he plunged two fingers into her heated core just as he bit that strange part of her.

Abelinda screamed.

Liquid fire shot through her body, constricting every muscle into a spasm of delight. Cahill kissed her soundly between her legs and then, with one deft movement, lifted himself so he was propped above her, his knees pushing hard against hers, his hips grinding down, urging something large and full of life toward the new opening he had created.

"Tell me, Princess," Cahill murmured with a hoarse voice, "is this what you want?"

Abelinda did not have to consider her answer. Though she had yet to touch the object of his manhood—that monstrous beast over which maiden friends giggled and guessed at, that had always elicited horrible images in Abelinda's mind—she now had no qualms about the thing. She knew exactly where she wanted such a shocking entity and exactly how hard she wanted Cahill to use it.

"Oh yes, my love, yes, yes, yes, yes!" she cried. And then in the vocabulary she'd just learned from Cahill himself, Abelinda begged, "Fuck me, my prince, fuck me!"

With one sure thrust, he impaled her and Abelinda was sure she had died and gone to heaven.

It was late. That was a good sign. It was normal for the well-rested to rise early and for those with interrupted sleep to rise late. With no more than niggling doubt, Cahill filled his plate from the sideboard and sat at the long table in the breakfast room. Pork, eggs, bread and gravy. It smelled wonderful, but Cahill found his appetite wanting. When the door creaked on its hinges, Cahill's head shot up, his heart pounding erratically against his ribs.

“Good morning, my son.”

Forcing his lips into a smile, Cahill replied, “Good morning, Stepmother.”

There was barely time for the queen to seat herself before a footman informed them that the princess would be joining them shortly.

Cahill swallowed and pushed his plate away. He felt like a man about to be sentenced—acquitted or the gallows, which was it to be? Acquitted, of course. He was certain of the outcome. Almost entirely certain.

Finally the double doors swung open and Abelinda swept into the room. Her scent was stronger than ever, honeysuckle covered in dew and warmed by the morning sun, and the aroma reached across the room to tickle his nose. His heart soared at the sight of her. Her flushed cheeks, her sparkling eyes; her look of utter and complete...satiation. She glanced coyly at Cahill, watching him beneath her lashes as she moved across the room.

“Ah, my dear,” the queen intoned. “You are looking lovelier than ever this morning. May I inquire how you slept?”

Abelinda pressed her lips together in a sweet yet somehow sensuous smile. How it was possible for her lips to be even fuller and rosier than before, Cahill had no idea. Beneath the volume of her skirts, her rounded rump swayed back and forth as she moved in a way that begged Cahill to watch. He licked his lips in glorious anticipation of Abelinda’s answer, of their forthcoming betrothal and more specifically of the time he would spend with her in their wedding bed.

Abelinda paused after piling enough food on her plate to feed an army. “Oh, Your Majesty,” Abelinda gushed as she carried her plate to the table. Once seated on the edge of her chair, she turned to Cahill, her face alit with the most beatific smile. “I don’t think I’ve ever slept so well in my life.”

Breanna knew that smell. It wasn’t just the sulfurous odor of rotten eggs that gave it away. It was the undigested fats turned rancid in the sun mixed with decay and filth.

Dragon shit.

Stinking horseflies hovered above the puddle of refuse, the only insect brave enough, or stupid enough, to attempt to survive the sulfuric fumes. Brea approached the offensive pile and swirled the tip of her broadsword through the debris, looking for evidence of the dragon’s crime. Two dented helmets and a half-digested lower limb with boot still intact was all the evidence Brea needed.

She scanned the horizon, noting other buzzing piles of dung, but none so recent as this. Clearly the lair was nearby. She whistled once high and then low, a signal to her horse to stay put. Dragons had extremely keen senses of smell, and horseflesh was a favorite dish. She refused to lose another horse to a foul fire-breather.

Then, with a sigh of resignation, Brea sucked in a gulp of air and held it while she jumped into the dragon sludge with both feet. Quickly, before she had to take another breath, she scooped the still-warm waste into her hands and spread it over her leggings and tunic. With a shiver of disgust, she leapt out of the puddle and gasped for breath, gagging as she knew she would. She was covered in it, so there was no way of escaping the stench. But Brea knew from vast experience that the only way to successfully hunt a dragon was to smell like one. And this dragon was going down.

As quietly as her muck-sucking boots would allow, Brea crept up and over a hillock, only to find herself perched on the edge of a sheer chalk cliff. On the stony beach below sat a medium-sized, scaly, winged reptile. The creature was tossing stones down its gullet, which was a common enough occurrence. The beasts were indiscriminate in their diet, and the stones aided in digestion. With the dragon distracted by its task, it was the perfect time to attack. Brea reached behind her, pulled an arrow from her quiver and nocked it. With a deep breath, she drew back on the string to the anchor point on her cheek. She didn't really need to aim. This arrow was not meant to kill, for dragons had only one weakness and were nearly impossible to kill with an arrow. No, this arrow was meant as a distraction.

She released the arrow and then dropped her bow, cupping her hands around her mouth to imitate the call of the trumpeter swan, another preferred snack of the vile reptile. Strips of cotton unfurled from the arrow and, though the fluttering missile looked nothing like a swan to her, it would appear swanlike to the pea-brained monster below. The enormous head of the beast lifted to the sound of her call. Then the dragon stretched out its wings and bounded in that awkward way it had when preparing for flight. Brea bounced on the balls of her feet, a loop of rope between her teeth, her hands twitching by her side, waiting for the perfect moment. Finally, the massive wings inexplicably lifted the beast into the air, bringing it, for only a split second, within jumping distance.

Brea sprang. She clung to the beast's neck, pulling herself up so that she could grasp the curved horn between its ears. She looped the rope around the horn and then wrapped it three times around her left hand. With her right hand, she unsheathed the sword she wore across her back. There was no time for mistakes. The dragon tossed its head to and fro in an effort to dislodge her, but Brea hung on, though for a moment she was sure all was lost. Brea swore she was airborne, her head in the clouds, her limbs flailing for some kind of purchase, but then she realized the dragon had simply flown straight up and then turned its nose straight down into a dive, giving her the illusion of weightlessness.

Once gravity kicked in, Brea raised her right hand, aiming the tip of her sword at the center of the reptile's eye. Squeezing the neck of the beast with her thighs, she let go of the rope so she could use both hands to drive the sword into the eye of the dragon—into the heart of its pea-sized brain.

With one final squawk, the dragon shuddered beneath her, but like all of the beasts she'd killed before, its wings spread wide in death, allowing the incapacitated body to glide gently to the ground where it then crumpled to a heap as Brea leapt nimbly to the beach. The still-warm body twitched and quivered,

stinking worse than ever. With the edge of her sword, Brea was quick to dislodge a scale from the dragon's flank before the carcass spontaneously combusted. She would notch the haft of her sword later, once she was clean and enjoying a hot meal and a mug of ale at the nearest inn.

Unfortunately, Brea would not get her wish. For no sooner had she slipped the pearly scale into the sleeve of her tunic than a burst of fire shot down from the cliff above. A squawk, louder than anything she'd ever heard before, rumbled along the cliff, dislodging boulders and debris onto the beach below.

Slowly, Brea turned to face her new adversary. She had to look up, way up. The beast was so enormous it blocked the sun. Brea's mouth dropped open. "Shit on a stick," she cursed, her hand automatically reaching for her broadsword. Above her soared the mother of all dragons. The biggest fucking beast she'd ever seen. And by the flames spewing from her nostrils, this mother was royally pissed off.

## Chapter Three

Eleven. Eleven princesses had come and gone. Eleven princesses had failed the test. Cahill was at his wit's end. Of course he wasn't sad to see every one of them go. There were few he felt any real attachment for. But Zaina was one of them. Zaina, who was older than her predecessors; she had an air of maturity the others lacked, yet retained an element of innocence he'd found endearing. He'd been sure Zaina would pass the test.

But he was wrong. Again.

Not only did she fail, but he had been completely deceived by her wiles. When he informed her they could not marry, the woman screamed and cursed worse than the fishmonger. She spat in his face and clawed at his cheeks until Captain Peacock was forced to drag her from the room.

From the highest room in the keep, Cahill watched as the carriage transporting Zaina back home bumped across the drawbridge. When he closed his eyes, he could still hear the woman screaming out his name. Cursing him. Was it his fault? Was he to blame, as Zaina had accused? Or was it something else?

"It's not your fault, my son." The queen had silently entered the tower room behind him.

Cahill turned and scrutinized the woman he'd never felt comfortable calling Mother. "Isn't it curious that none of the princesses have passed the test? I've run the gamut on princesses, from A to Z. There are none left to choose from. How can every one of them be imposters?"

She sighed heavily. "It's a mystery. A tragedy. Things were so much simpler in my day."

"Were they?"

Cahill turned to the sound of footsteps outside the door. Peacock, the captain of the guard, stood at attention just beyond the doorframe. Eleanor didn't go anywhere without the man these days. In fact, rarely did she consult Cahill anymore. It was always Peacock. Cahill needed to focus on acquiring a wife, she'd explained. But now, as he studied the queen more closely, he wasn't so sure.

"Cahill?" Eleanor asked cocking her head to the side. "Is everything all right?"

"Oh yes, Stepmother, everything is perfect. Things are turning out just the way you want, aren't they?"

"Whatever can you mean, my son?"

Cahill took a step closer, his face burning with suspicion. "You. You've sabotaged every one of them, haven't you?"



The queen's smooth features did not waver in the least at his accusation. "Me?" Eleanor raised a hand to her breast. "You accuse me of some form of ill? Such an insult!"

"An insult?" Cahill scoffed. "Not likely. Would Your Majesty care to explain how eleven out of eleven princesses can all manage to fail the test?"

"It's simple really," Eleanor said as she adjusted the crown of polished gold on her head. "These modern women have no care for virtue or chastity. And is it any wonder? Considering their parents?" She made a tsking sound and shook her head. "No, it is a corrupt world we live in. It's such a pity there is no one good enough for you. But, you know the law."

"Perhaps it is time that the law was changed."

"That's just it," the queen said as she rubbed her large sapphire ring with her thumb. "This is one of those sticky situations. Only a king has the power to change the law that governs your marriage. But you will not become king until you marry—and you must marry according to the law if you want to become king. You see?" She implored him with a sickening air of innocence. "This is why the test is so—"

Eleanor didn't get a chance to finish as Cahill roughly grabbed her and shook her. The queen had the decency to look shocked and perhaps a bit fearful for a split second, but then her gaze flicked over Cahill's shoulder and her smile told him Peacock had entered the room and was now standing only a few steps away. Cahill released her and through clenched teeth said, "I don't know what you've done or how you've done it, but I do know this: the next princess to walk through the doors to this castle will become my wife." Cahill smiled and added, "And once she is queen, I will send you back to Dunvegan, that scorched and barren kingdom from which you came."

Pushing past his stepmother and the captain of the guard, Cahill moved with haste down the stairs of the tower, cringing at the sound of Eleanor's laughter as it followed him, echoing off the stone all the way down.

Eleanor rolled over onto her stomach, the damp covers tangling between her legs. "Rub my shoulders, will you?"

Peacock complied. As always. The man had turned into her greatest asset and ally. Not half bad beneath the covers either. She'd always enjoyed the attentions of powerful men. Though Peacock didn't have the rank she had grown accustomed to, his was a physical power, and it was intoxicating in its own way. More and more she found herself ordering him to her bedchamber at all hours of the day. Though she still preferred his company at night. And tonight, with the rain pounding the stone walls, and the wind whistling through the halls, she enjoyed Peacock's massive warmth more than ever.

She stretched languidly beneath his large and calloused hands, feeling almost as if she could purr in contentment. She'd won. There was not one princess left on the continent. She had dispatched all eligible

prospects, and now there was no hope of Cahill ever becoming king. She would reign until the day she died. And she would keep Peacock by her side. At least until she no longer had any use for him.

“Ah, lower. Yes, that’s it.” She smiled into the goose pillow. There was a moment there, this afternoon, when she’d almost felt sorry for Cahill. But it didn’t last long.

She shifted beneath Peacock’s hands. “No, not there, lower.”

“How’s this?”

Lifting her head from the pillow, she turned to look at him. “Lower,” she commanded with a twist of her lips.

His eyes widened, “But we just—”

“Are you arguing?”

Without another word, he shook his head. A brief smile pulled across his face before his hands moved lower to caress her backside. Eleanor flopped back down, spread-eagle, anxiously anticipating Peacock’s lips and adept tongue. After the night he’d spent with the lusty Zaina, the man was exhausted, no doubt. He may not even manage an erection. But that didn’t matter. All he had to do was please her. She was his queen, and though she enjoyed his company, it was important that he knew his place, important that she remind him of his position, and that she remind him often.

“Ah!” she gasped as he hoisted her hips up and back, roughly pressing his thumb against her clit before his tongue invaded her. “Now you have the spot.” She clamped down on the pillow with her teeth, not allowing herself to groan, not wanting Peacock to know just how much she enjoyed his ministrations.

Eleanor first became aware of the absence of Peacock’s mouth when a cool breeze fell across her heated body. Finally the insistent banging on the chamber door registered.

“Hellfire and damnation,” she snarled. “Go find out what that noise is all about.”

But Peacock was already throwing his shirt over his head and bending over to pull on his breeches. Eleanor leaned farther back to get a view of his muscular backside before he covered himself up completely.

“Don’t trouble yourself, my queen. I’ll take care of it.”

Eleanor nodded and pulled the cover up over her now-chilled flesh. “Oh, and Captain,” she called as he unbarred the door. “Once you’ve finished with the matter, I’d like you to come back and finish what you started up here.”

Cold. Like the large floating masses of blue ice in Northern Belgravia, Brea was colder than she’d ever been before. She hugged the shaggy neck of the horse beneath her, but even Elrond was cold. His gait had slowed hours ago as they traveled countless miles in the torrential downpour. At least the cold served to dull the pain and slow her heart rate so that the gash on her thigh oozed thickly rather than spurting blood

like a fountain. The tourniquet helped, but now her leg was numb, and she vaguely wondered if she'd ever have use of it again.

The hollow thud of hooves against wood barely registered in her muddled brain. A voice demanding, "Who goes there?" did not rouse her. The screech of a rusted bolt as it slid within its wet casing and the squealing hinges of the massive door could not make her lift her head.

"What's that stench?"

"Dragon."

"It's a slayer."

"Injured, by the looks of things."

"What should be done, Cap'n?"

Someone grasped her hair and pulled her head back. "You," a loud voice boomed. "What do you call yourself?"

When she did not answer, the man raised his other hand and slapped her soundly across the cheek. Brea shook her head, startled into awareness. "What?" She reached automatically for her sword, but her scabbard was empty. She had been disarmed without her knowing it. She found enough energy to scowl down into the face of the large man who still had his fist caught in her hair.

"Your name, slayer. What is your name?"

"Brea," she spat. "Princess Breanna of Morainia."

"He's a she?"

"A princess?"

"Not likely!"

The last thing Brea saw was the huge man's face. He squinted up at her through the rain, and Brea was startled by the way his pupils glinted like the polished tips of a matching set of daggers. Then the world turned in upon itself, and Brea's eyes rolled up into her skull. Her frozen body grew limp, and she slid off her horse into the open arms of the stunned captain.

"Impossible!"

Cahill could hear the queen's cries from down the hall. He'd heard the news himself, the moment he'd been roused, as his valet was bursting with information about the late-night visitor.

"Morainia was decimated years ago. There were no survivors. She's nothing but an imposter!" came his stepmother's irate voice.

Cahill grinned and then wiped the smile from his face before pounding on the door to the queen's chambers. When the door finally opened, the queen stood before him with a grim look upon her flushed face, and Cahill struggled to keep a victorious smile from his lips.

It was quite possible his struggle was unsuccessful.

“Cahill.” She scowled. “I imagine you’ve heard we have an unexpected guest. I suggest we go and greet this new arrival immediately.”

“I couldn’t agree more, Stepmother.”

Cahill followed the queen down the hallway, surprised when she turned into the western wing. It was the oldest part of the castle, run down and never used for quartering guests. Until now. A guard standing outside a closed door was the only indication that any of these rooms were inhabited. But, as Cahill drew nearer, a rotten odor hung heavy in the damp air. It was a stench he was well familiar with.

“Och!” The queen held her nose. “What is that?”

“Dragon,” Cahill informed her.

She turned to a member of her ladies-in-waiting and ordered the lass to do something about the reek. “I will not abide such putridity in my castle.”

Cahill cast an examining glance at his stepmother. Her castle, was it? Well, he would see about that. Without further ado, he pushed open the door to the chamber, only to be struck in the face with an even more concentrated aroma of dragon. By the door lay a pile of rags that must have once served as the occupant’s clothes. Another guard sat in a chair by the hearth, a greenish tinge to his pallor, his weapon lying carelessly on the floor by his feet.

“You, man,” Cahill called, “whose sword is that?”

The man scrambled to his feet and executed a wobbly bow. “Why, Your Highness,” the man stammered. “The broadsword belongs to him, er...that...I mean...her.” He pointed to the lump thrashing beneath the bedclothes.

Cahill stooped to retrieve the sword, turning it this way and that in the dim light. He tested its heft by swinging it in an arc. It reminded him greatly of the first sword his father gave him when he was only a lad. He sheathed the weapon and propped it against the wall, then turned with interest to the enigma still abed. “A female slayer,” he muttered to himself. “Extraordinary.”

His stepmother stood beside the bedstead, gingerly prodding the covered lump with a closed fist while she held a sleeve up to her face. “You there,” she demanded in a muffled voice that sounded less than regal. “Wake up and explain yourself.”

A low moan was the lump’s only reply.

Cahill strode across the room to the other side of the bed and drew back the quilts. He was surprised by the slight size of the occupant. He was more surprised by the flushed skin, the fever-matted hair and the perceivable heat the slender body emitted. Then the sour, metallic scent of blood caught his attention, and he yanked the covers all the way down. Crimson stained the bedclothes and the rough shift worn by the girl.

“Guard,” Cahill called. “Call the surgeon. Our guest is injured.”

The surgeon confirmed that the injury was the result of an entanglement with a dragon. The claws of the beast seeped venom that charred flesh like acid. For Cahill's benefit, the surgeon pointed out the mottled flesh high on the girl's thigh. The queen noticeably wavered at this sight before her ladies hurried her out the door. But Cahill observed the wound with a detached interest. It must have been incredibly painful. How long had the woman ridden before finding herself at the door to the castle?

Whether she was a princess or not, the female was most certainly a slayer, and her unusual choice of occupation automatically qualified her for a higher degree of regard than what she'd so far been afforded. Once the surgeon attended to her wound, Cahill ordered the slayer moved to the guest quarters in the east wing.

For a fortnight, the woman fought fevers and sweats caused by the ugly wound on her thigh. During that time, Cahill prayed for her recovery, for though he had no special regard for her as a woman, her situation intrigued him. In addition, he was determined to take on a wife. Cahill had long understood that affection rarely played a role in a royal union, and this mysterious woman could be his final chance to step into his birthright and take his rightful position as king.

"So," the queen said during one of their rare meals taken together, "you're intent on marrying that..." She waved her hand around in disgust, "...that thing."

"Her name is Breanna."

"So she says."

"She is a princess."

"We'll see about that."

"You will not sabotage this."

The queen had no opportunity to reply as at that precise moment a footman burst into the room, trembling with excitement. "Your Highnesses, the...er...guest. He...she is awake."

Cahill stood from the table, but the queen was quicker. She strode so rapidly after the footman, Cahill almost had to jog to catch up. With her back straight, her head held high, her long nose pointed in a downward direction, the queen pushed through into Breanna's chamber clearly prepared for battle. But the queen could only stop and stare, as Cahill was certain she was as shocked by what she found in the chamber as he was.

A person of slight stature sat up in bed, greedily devouring a goose leg. This person's hair was tangled and matted and stuck up at strange angles. The nightdress sat askew across her slim frame, revealing a very bare shoulder and more—though the individual seemed not to care in the least about the indiscretion. All angles and sinew, this individual was supposed to be female, but Cahill saw nothing in the least bit

feminine about her. Except for, perhaps, her eyes. Large and grey, they were framed by long lashes and still glowed from what was likely residual fever.

“Merciful Joseph, this is good,” the girl said with her mouth full and a large hunk of meat hanging on the wrong side of her lips. She swiped her face with the back of her hand and then wiped the grease unceremoniously down the front of her nightshirt. After tossing the gnawed drumstick back onto the platter across her knees, she grabbed a flagon of ale and downed it in one go. Once finished, she let out the most reprehensible belch and followed that with another backhand across her mouth.

Normally, the queen would have been visibly shaken by such a display, but instead she turned to Cahill with an arched brow and a look of unrepressed glee on her face. He knew exactly what she was thinking, and suddenly Cahill felt quite ill. A smelly, unkempt, belching, dragon-slaying wife? Was he out of his mind?

“My dear,” Eleanor began, her voice sweeter than honey. “I can’t tell you how pleased we are to see you feeling so much better. I hope that we are not disturbing you?”

The girl shrugged and picked up the bone to give its marrow another good suck. Cahill could only stare—like watching an execution, the sight was horrible but, inexplicably, difficult to turn away from.

“May I introduce my son Prince Cahill.” Eleanor waved him forward, and Cahill did his best imitation of a bow. “And I am Eleanor, Queen of Lorentia.”

The girl flicked her gaze briefly over Cahill, bared her teeth in what might have been a smile, then looked away just as quickly. “I am pleased to make your acquaintance.” The sound of her cultured speech was in complete contrast to her appearance, and Cahill could not reconcile the two. “I am Breanna, Princess of Morainia. But, please, call me Brea.”

“Morainia?” Eleanor stepped closer. “That’s strange. I understood that the entire royal family was wiped out with their land and their subjects during the hordes of ’73. ‘Burned to a crisp’ were the reports we received. The dragons left nothing, no castle, no villages, no forests, no farmland. Just pools of sulfur and charred ruins.”

The girl stopped eating and pushed the tray away, staring at Eleanor with an empty-eyed gaze. “You’re right,” she said quietly. “There is nothing left.” She blinked those large grey eyes and then shrugged and absently picked up a meat pie. “Except for me.”

“You? You are the sole survivor? How is that possible?”

The girl took an enormous bite of the pie and, while her mouth was still full, said, “I wasn’t there when the dragons attacked.” After another couple of bites, she set the pie down. “Here,” she said as she twisted a ring from her thumb and tossed it toward the queen. “If you don’t believe me.”

With a swift grab, Cahill snatched the gravy-smeared missile out of the air before it struck his stepmother in the eye. It was a signet ring with the royal crest of the Morai family. He passed the ring to Eleanor who held it with disgust between the tip of her thumb and index finger. She studied it briefly then

set it on the table by the bed. “This proves nothing. If you are heir to Morainia, where have you been these last five years and why does no one know you are alive?”

“Heir to Morainia?” The girl’s laugh sounded scornful. “Heir to *nothing* is what you mean.” She rolled her shoulders then raised her hands above her head and arched her back in a very feline-like stretch. The movement suddenly made her appear much more female as Cahill couldn’t help but notice the gentle swells tipped with tiny budding nipples pressing against her nightshirt as she stretched.

“Stepmother, I think it’s rather obvious where Princess Breanna has been for the last five years.” Cahill answered for her. He pointed to the sheathed sword that now hung from a hook on the wall. “She’s spent that time hunting the bloody beasts that murdered her family.”

## Chapter Four

Breanna breathed a huge sigh of relief once her hosts left the chamber. The queen sucked the energy right out of the room with her cynicism and calculated conversation. But that didn't bother her nearly as much as the prince. He'd watched her with something quite different but even more disturbing. She'd seen that look before. He was assessing her, measuring her, as if she were a piece of property or a beast of burden he meant to buy. It was the very same look every suitor who had ever passed through the gates of her father's house had used to appraise her and her sisters.

Well, she would have none of it. She had no desire to ever belong to anyone. Never had, never would. Fleeing her arranged betrothal five years ago had saved her life. If that wasn't a sign Brea should never marry, she didn't know what was. Now that her fever had broken, it was time to move on before the young prince became any more proprietary.

"Hello?" she called as she eased her legs out of bed.

Two young maids bustled into the room looking nervous and shaking with what could only be described as fear.

"Don't worry," Brea growled, "I don't bite..." She gnashed her teeth, "...very hard."

The taller girl jumped behind the other, using the plumper girl's body as a shield. Brea laughed. "Blessed gods in heaven! Relax, would you? I'm only teasing."

The girls looked from one to the other, and the squat girl in front curtsied in apology, fear or both.

"Where are my clothes?" Brea asked.

"Oh!" The girl swung to look at her friend. "We, er...burned them."

"You burned my clothes!" The girls jumped, and Brea almost laughed until she thought of the scale she'd tucked into her tunic. She didn't collect them only as trophies, but as a source of income. Royal families paid bags of gold for dragon scales. Had it been burned too, or had she lost it during her fight with the mother of all dragons? Brea couldn't remember. "So now what am I supposed to wear?"

The taller girl stepped out from behind her friend and, as if she didn't want to turn her back on Brea, sided-stepped to a wardrobe on the adjacent wall. She pulled out some garment that seemed to be constructed of silk and satin, lace and crinolines—enough material to form a small mountain.

"Oh no." Brea shook her head. "I'm not wearing that."



The girls looked between one another again with that wide-eyed fearful look, and Brea rolled her eyes. Bother. She'd endured worse than wearing a dress. Although by the look of this monstrosity, Brea would rather endure a pile of dragon shit than have to wear anything so frivolous.

She sighed. But, until she found something more appropriate, she'd just have to make do. "Would it be too much trouble to ask for a tub and hot water? I'd do anything to scrub this dragon stink out of my hair."

The girls both sprinted for the door in order to do her bidding, and probably to get out of her sight, and smell. Once they were gone, Brea pushed herself out of bed and tested her leg. The pain nearly dropped her to the ground. She pulled up the edge of the nightdress to look at the wound. It was still red and hot to touch, but looked better than she'd imagined. The surgeon had done a fine job of pulling the flaps of skin together and using horsefly maggots to eat away the rotten flesh. She'd have a fine scar when all was said and done, a scar to be proud of.

A flurry of soldiers approached Breanna as she limped awkwardly across the forecourt, her weight leaning heavily upon a crutch. She turned away as they passed, but thankfully none of the men seemed to notice her or how ridiculous she looked. Brea had forgotten just how silly and impractical gowns were. Squeezing in here, pushing up there, with far too much material around the legs and barely enough around her torso. For not the first time, Brea wished she'd learned to sew. But her father had indulged her and allowed her to learn the art of swordsmanship and archery instead, probably because Brea was the closest thing to a son he and her mother were able to produce. Suddenly Brea stopped as she turned into the covered walkway leading to the stables. She leaned against the arcade wall, certain that it was the insistent throbbing in her thigh that had abruptly brought moisture to her eyes.

But Brea had no time to contemplate the tear that meandered down her cheek. The firm sound of boot against stone and a masculine stride brought her back to herself. Pushing away from the wall, Brea tried to continue on through the covered walkway, but her limbs decided against cooperation.

"Excuse me, Miss. Are you in need of assistance?"

"No, I'm fine." But her involuntary groan contradicted her words.

"Here, let me." He grabbed her elbow.

"I said I'm fine!" She pulled her arm away with force and made the mistake of glaring up into the man's face. *Dragon's breath and brimstone! Cahill!*

He reached out as if to finger a curl from her freshly laundered hair. Then he gasped and took two steps back, with dark eyes gone wide in incredulity. "Breanna?" he whispered. He looked her up and down, then swept his gaze over her once more, this time more leisurely. "Unbelievable."

Brea rolled her eyes and sighed with exasperation. The maids had spent two hours on her, insisting on unsnarling every tangle in her hair and pinning it up in a silly feminine style. Her scalp still throbbed from it. “Stop looking at me in that stupid manner.”

Apparently he didn’t hear her. So she stared back and scrutinized him—his size, the breadth of his shoulders, his inherent strength. Though it appalled her to do it, to ask for help, Brea considered her options. The quicker she got to the stable, the quicker she could leave. With reluctance, she held out her elbow. “Now that you’re here, you might as well make yourself useful. Help me walk.”

He shook himself out of whatever trance had stilled him and said, “But of course.” Then he took her elbow in his right hand and wrapped his left arm about her waist. “Lean into me.”

Brea blew air out through her lips because there was no way she was going to allow his large body to come any closer to hers. But after only the first few steps, she found she couldn’t help herself. If it weren’t for Cahill’s arms—his strong arms—she would not be standing. Brea shook her head. Thank the heavens she’d soon be gone and never see him again.

“Where are we going?” Cahill asked.

“To the stable.”

“Why?”

“I’m leaving.”

Cahill stopped, forcing Brea to stop mid-step. Causing her to fall against his chest. “You’re not leaving.”

“But I am.”

“You’re not well enough.”

“I’m fine.”

“Really?” Cahill said with that insufferable degree of cockiness that males his size too often exhibited. He let go of her and stepped around to face her. “Then go.”

But Brea’s wounded leg gave out and she crumpled to the ground. With what seemed too little effort, Cahill stooped down and lifted her into his arms.

“Put me down, you swine!”

“Stop squirming,” he said, turning back in the direction of the castle and walking briskly as if she weighed nothing at all.

“I said put me down,” Brea said through clenched teeth, pulling her dagger out of her bodice and shoving the tip under Cahill’s chin.

Cahill stopped walking, but did not put her down. “What are you going to do? Slit my throat and then crawl away? Your neck is much too lovely for the hangman’s noose. It would be such a waste.”

Brea dug the tip of her dagger into the soft flesh beneath his jaw, drawing blood.

“Ouch.”

"I don't play games, Prince. Now, put me down."

Reluctantly, he lowered her back to her feet, but did not let her go. "You are not a prisoner here, you know."

"Then help me to the stable."

"Where will you go?"

"I can take care of—" Brea was about to say myself, but the truth was, now that her belongings had been burned, the dragon scale along with everything else, she had nothing. The only things of value she had were her horse, her sword and her family ring, and Brea was not prepared to part with any of those three things yet.

"Princess, you are my guest. I beseech you to stay at least until you are well enough to walk on your own."

Brea squinted up into Cahill's face, considering his words. "And that's all? I'm simply a *guest*?" she asked.

"What do you mean?"

"You don't have any...designs on me?"

First Cahill's eyes widened and then they narrowed before Brea noticed a distinctive twitching at the corners of his mouth. "What in Cragmar's name makes you think I have designs on you?"

"It doesn't take a great sage to see what's going on here. You're young and attractive yet still single. You have a stepmother who appears to be spawned by dragons, and I'm guessing you need a wife to take over because you've been watching me like a hawk."

Cahill studied her for what seemed an eternity. Then a broad smile flashed across his face, and he burst out laughing. He laughed so hard, tears streamed down his cheeks. He let go of her only for a second to wipe the moisture from his eyes. But without his support, her knees buckled, and she cursed a blue streak under her breath as she stumbled forward.

"Fine language for a princess," Cahill said with mirth as he caught her before she fell.

The blush in her cheeks came as a complete surprise, annoying her to no end.

"Now that we have everything out in the open, will you stay?"

Brea studied him hard for a moment, but then dropped her gaze when she felt her cheeks grow even warmer.

"I won't make any untoward advances."

"Do you promise?"

He put his hand on his heart and swore, "I promise I will not attempt to seduce you...unless you ask."

She gave him a shove and said, "That's about as likely as a talking pig." Then she put her weight on her crutch and willed herself to move without his help. She made it a few steps before he took her elbow again and steered her toward the castle.

“A talking pig, eh?” he said conversationally. “I seem to recall someone calling me a *swine* earlier. Does that count?”

Brea bit the inside of her cheek. There was no way she would let him catch her smiling.

Cahill deposited Breanna in her chambers with the promise he’d send up the court tailor immediately so that she might have some clothing fashioned more to her liking. He still reeled from her transformation. If it wasn’t for those luminous grey eyes, he would never have recognized her. Never! Although he should have identified her right away once he noticed the baldric. There was only one lady of his acquaintance who wore a shoulder belt to hold a blade across her back. He’d missed it because he hadn’t been looking at her back. He’d been eyeing her slim waist, her long neck and the enticing dip of her bodice. Even her scent had caught him unaware—sunshine and pine. She smelled like a mountain meadow.

Contrary to what she might think, her reluctance only increased his interest. There was no doubt about it, Breanna of Morainia was a rare woman, and the challenge of wooing her and bringing her to her knees excited Cahill in a way that even the most beautiful princesses were unable to.

As Cahill turned down the hall to the queen’s receiving room, his thoughts of the delights of Breanna’s person were quickly forgotten. A number of the queen’s guards milled about in the hallway outside the double doors to the chamber. At the sight of him, they drew to attention and parted, bowing as he passed. Cahill threw open the doors and strode across the room to where the queen conferred with Captain Peacock and four other officers of the guard.

“What is it, Stepmother? What is afoot?”

But it was Peacock who replied, “A horde is forming and has attacked along the border of Arcana and Baldane on Lorentia’s western border.”

“When did this happen? Why was I not informed?”

“We’ve only just learned of the attack ourselves, Your Highness. Lieutenant Rodham just arrived from the western border.”

Cahill nodded to the lieutenant, a man he’d met only twice before, and then drew near, peering down at the map unfurled across the large wooden desk. “How many?”

“Reports confirmed three fiends. Unconfirmed tell of four.”

“Not so many, then.”

“No,” Lieutenant Rodham agreed. “But they’ve managed to decimate two villages and evade the slayers.”

“What is your opinion on containment?” Cahill asked Rodham.

“Arcana and Baldane have always been allies. They should be able to manage this between them—”

“But it wouldn’t hurt to fortify our western border,” Cahill finished for the man.

“Exactly.”

“Will fifty men do the trick?”

The lieutenant nodded, and Cahill motioned to Peacock. “Amass fifty of our best soldiers and ride out immediately.”

“Yes, Your Highness,” Peacock said with a pointed glance at the queen.

“Peacock need not go. He’s better off staying here, guarding the castle.”

“A horde is forming, Stepmother. The dragons haven’t horded since ’73, and we all know what resulted from Morainia’s miscalculation of that threat.”

“It is for the best, my queen,” Peacock assured her to the murmured acknowledgements of the other soldiers.

The queen smiled stiffly. She was outnumbered and she knew it. Why she insisted Peacock remained behind, Cahill could well guess. It likely had something to do with the fact that she watched him as if he were a fatted lamb and she a malnourished she-wolf. Whatever her relationship was with the man did not bother him; it was her lack of judgment in matters of the kingdom that reminded Cahill of his rightful position as king.

The thought of his kingship prompted Cahill to think of Breanna. He lingered until the plans had been finalized and the soldiers filed out of the room. Then he turned to the queen. “The princess Breanna will be our guest for another month at least.”

The queen wrinkled her nose at the mention of the princess’s name. “I see.”

“Do you still require proof of her purity?”

“Of course. Why should she be the exception?”

“Why indeed,” Cahill agreed as he turned to leave, although he was certain that if Brea was anything, it was an exception.

Brea closed her eyes, but sleep eluded her. The throbbing in her thigh had dulled to a constant ache and made it difficult to get comfortable. After rolling onto her back, she carefully stretched her legs. She needed exercise. That must be the reason she felt so restless. Her body was rebelling from all this damnable bed rest, making her squirm as if she had bedbugs beneath her skin. She scratched, but the scratching did nothing to ease the strange sensation that continued to spread from low in her abdomen up through her body and along her limbs. The sensation wasn’t exactly itchy, it was...tingly.

As she attempted to will herself to sleep, her hands lay restlessly on her stomach, unconsciously rubbing her abdomen and the dint between her breasts. Without knowing why, Brea spread her hands up and over the mounds of her breasts, and then circled her nipples with her thumbs. She gasped. Her nipples stood hard and erect, like they did when she was cold, but Brea wasn’t cold right now. She was hot. Stifling

hot. She kicked at the bedding with her good leg to let some cool air beneath, then sighed as the air rushed across her skin like a cool caress.

Cahill's caress.

She closed her eyes and imagined the air was his hands hovering just above her heated flesh. She turned her head to the side and moaned as her right hand slipped down her stomach to her hip and then to the top of her injured thigh. While her left hand kneaded her breast, her right delicately traced the healing skin, tracing the scar she would have. Suddenly her hand slid between her legs, urging her thighs apart so that she could caress the softer, unblemished flesh of her inner thigh. Brea fondled the terrain of her body as if it was someone else's—unfamiliar, unexplored. She wound her fingers through the damp curls that hid her sex, marveling at her body's sensitivity. She ran a fingertip along the length of her opening, nearly bucking off the bed when she skimmed her tender clit. At least she thought that's what the engorged flesh was called.

"Let me get some spit on me clit, eh?" she'd overheard the serving wench say when Brea had happened upon the copulation in the back of a tavern. The coarse image of the two commoners rutting in that dark, filthy room normally would have had Brea cringing in revulsion. But at this moment, while her hands stroked her restless body, Brea pictured this scene much differently. Suddenly *she* was the serving wench and her partner's slouching form straightened into a tall physique with fine, broad shoulders. The greasy tangled strands of hair became thick and black, and his bowed legs grew taut with muscles. He reached for her, and she willingly moved into his arms, pulling her bodice low, baring her nipples for his hands and lips.

Brea slid her hand from her breast up her neck to her mouth, rubbing her lips with the pad of her thumb. In her mind's eye, it was the man touching her lips, first with his thumb, then with his lips and his tongue. His kiss melted her, and she sighed into his mouth, pressing her body closer to his, opening her mouth and her legs in an invitation to plunder her.

He deftly pulled her skirts up, revealing her bared bottom. "There is one advantage to gowns," he whispered before he reached beneath her skirts to fondle her. "Easy access."

"Oh, Cahill," she moaned, arching into him.

*Cahill?*

Brea blinked.

The room was cool and dark. The bed too soft beneath her. She sat up and scrubbed a hand up and down her face, causing her lips to tingle under her touch as if Cahill were still—

"Cahill? Ugh!" she muttered. "What is wrong with me?" She shook herself like a horse shakes its withers to flick away flies. Then she lay back down and tried to sleep, but images of Cahill—his head bent above hers, his broad chest supporting her as she walked, a definite bulge behind the cover of his breeches nudging her hip—plagued her. She pulled her hair, trying to yank the images from her mind, but they

wouldn't stop. The harder she tried, the faster the visions came—Cahill's naked body glistening from a dip in a shaded pool, Cahill lying gloriously nude on a mossy bank beside her, stroking her side and hip, urging her to part her legs for him. Cahill whispering sweet words of seduction in her ear, nipping at her lobe and running his tongue the length of her jaw to her lips until he penetrated her mouth like a dagger just as she begged him to penetrate her...

"Stop it!" Brea cried, her hands on either side of her head, her eyes shut tight. "Stop it!"

But it was useless. The harder she tried to think of something else, anything besides Cahill—slaying dragons, for example—the more Cahill assaulted her thoughts. Finally Brea sat up and shoved all the bedding onto the floor. She pushed herself off the bed and tumbled, exhausted, into the pile of bedding below. Eventually, she fell asleep.

## Chapter Five

The next morning, Cahill followed his stepmother into the breakfast room only to find Breanna already there, though once again he almost didn't recognize her, dressed as she was this morning in snug-fitting leggings and an oversized tunic belted at her slim waist with a wide leather sash. He paused at the doors to stare at her figure. If he thought she'd been attractive in a gown, she was doubly so in her new, unorthodox attire. The leggings hugged her long, muscular legs, leaving very little to the imagination. The sash emphasized her slim waist and, even though the tunic hung loose, the swell of her bosom was exposed through the loose lacing at the neck.

But when Breanna looked up at his entrance, her face appeared altered. Dark shadows rimmed her glassy eyes and, instead of a smile, she greeted him with a deep scowl.

"How did you sleep, my dear?" the queen asked in a falsely congenial voice.

"Horribly," was Breanna's curt reply. "I think you've got a bedbug infestation." As if to prove her assertion, she scratched a band of skin beneath her collarbone. Then, before either of them could inquire further, Breanna motioned to a footman who promptly came to her aid and assisted her out of her chair and toward the door. As she moved passed him, she cast one more withering look in Cahill's direction.

Despite the look—she was probably still put out by their conversation yesterday—Cahill grinned and exhaled in satisfaction. "She passed." He turned to his stepmother. "She is a princess. There is no denying it now."

But Eleanor's features displayed none of the dismay he'd anticipated. From the wide sleeve of her gown she withdrew the now-familiar ancient scroll and tossed it onto the table before him. "Not so hasty, my son. The test is incomplete."

"What are you talking about?" He unrolled the scroll and skimmed over it, mumbling as he read. "Yes, yes, a true princess will be unable to sleep...plagued by visions and discomfort." Cahill looked up. "What? What is incomplete?"

Eleanor pointed at the scroll. "You must read to the very last."

Cahill looked down. Sure enough, on the very bottom of the scroll, in very small print, was a passage he hadn't read before. "It's so small, I can hardly make it out." Cahill squinted. Holding the scroll very close he read silently. Then burst out, "Twenty feather mattresses! Is this some kind of a joke?"

Eleanor raised her hands in false earnestness. "It's no joke, my son. The only way to be absolutely certain this...slayer is who she claims to be, is if she can feel the pea beneath twenty mattresses."



“Why didn’t this come up before?” Cahill demanded.

“Because all of those other women were harlots. They didn’t even make it past the first stage of the test.” The queen smiled and this time her expression appeared genuine. “Patience, my son. If she is true, she will pass the test. But you must have patience.”

More than two weeks passed and Cahill watched as Brea endured restless night after restless night. Every morning it was the same, no matter how early he rose, she’d already be up and she would leave the room before Cahill could even enter, scowling and hissing at him like he was a demon sent from hell. As time passed, he could see the worry etched across his stepmother’s brows. Yet Cahill didn’t feel much better himself, for with every mattress added to her ever-growing bed, Breanna’s body also grew stronger. It wouldn’t be long before she left, and chances were she would leave not only before the test was complete, but before he could convince her to become his wife.

He did his best to appease her, though from a distance, as she spoke not more than a couple of words to him at a time. He let her have free rein in the castle, he had a bow constructed specifically for her so that she might practice archery, and he promised to have the nicks in her sword repaired and its edge sharpened. Though the last task he put off, sensing she would abandon him the moment her weapon was ready.

It was after the nineteenth night that Cahill followed Brea to the archery field and watched from the cover of the gardener’s shed as she practiced. He was taking no chances that she might try to leave without saying a word. He watched her walk back and forth across the field, her limp less pronounced. Though she still required her crutch for walking long distances, she seemed able to stand on her injured leg with the steadiness essential for the sport. And based on her skill during the session, Cahill would never have guessed she was injured.

She might not have the power in her arms to let arrows fly great distances, but he’d never seen her equal in accuracy. The court archer was obviously accustomed to her by now, as he coached her and corrected her even though her aim was nearly always true. In fact, the only time it wasn’t was when Cahill stepped out from behind the stone cottage and drew near. Brea did not turn, but he saw how her body stiffened at his approach. The arrow she let go wobbled awkwardly through the air and then fell dully a good ten paces to the left of the target.

“What was that?” the archer demanded, whipping a young willow branch across Brea’s knuckles.

Cahill grinned. He well remembered the archer’s lessons and the swollen knuckles that resulted from his instruction.

“Oh! Your Highness. I didn’t see you there.” The archer bowed low as Cahill came to stand by Brea’s side. “Have you come to practice?”

“Yes. Bring me my bow.” He smiled down at Brea’s snarl.

"I'm done," she said and handed her bow and quiver to the archer.

"But m'lady! You've only just started."

"Let the lady leave," Cahill instructed. "I wouldn't want to embarrass her."

Brea paused. "Embarrass me?"

"Yes." He looked down into her upturned face. "I had hoped to engage in a little bit of fun. A contest, perhaps, with small wagers. But I see that I make you nervous." He smiled and winked.

Her upper lip curled, showing her small white teeth, but she did not leave. The archer returned momentarily, and Cahill took his bow, a longer, much more powerful bow than the one Brea used, and nocked his first arrow. He let fly and the arrow hit the target only a pinky width off center.

"What kind of wager were you thinking of?" Brea asked in a restrained voice.

"A bag of silver." He let his second arrow fly. This time it was wide of the bulls-eye in the other direction.

"You know I don't have any silver to wager with."

"You have a horse," Cahill lowered his bow and turned to her. "You have your family ring."

"Neither of which I care to gamble."

"Of course," Cahill said absently as he nodded to the archer to move the target back ten paces. Then he shot another arrow. This time it was just a tad low. "You can't afford to lose. I understand."

He felt her stare. Out the corner of his eye, he could just make out her face, her narrowed eyes, her lips pressed together in a hard line. It took Cahill a great amount of control to keep from laughing.

"Two bags of silver for my horse. Ten arrows at one hundred paces."

Cahill's lips twitched. So, she wasn't new to the art of wagering. It came as no surprise. "Two bags of silver for that decrepit animal? I hardly think he's worth that. He's so old he should be let out to pasture, or better yet, made into a hearty stew."

"Two bags," she growled. "What's wrong, Prince? Are you afraid you'll lose? To a girl?"

He had to admit, she was good. She even understood the importance of competitive banter. He allowed the smile that had been playing at the corner of his mouth to cross his face. "Perhaps I am, Princess." Then he bowed gallantly and said, "Ladies first."

The archer paced the distance and set the target. Each of them drew ten arrows for their quivers, inspecting each for flaws. Once both were satisfied, Brea limped up, took a deep breath and drew.

"I understand you didn't sleep very well again last night," the prince said quietly just as she loosed her arrow. "I'm sorry to hear it."

Brea cursed as her arrow wobbled and struck the ground at the base of the target.

"Nice try," Cahill said, stepping up and rapidly firing, as if drawing a bowstring and aiming required very little effort. His arrow struck true. Ten points for him.

For the next eight arrows, Cahill kept quiet, giving Brea an opportunity to catch up. He even used the arrow that she'd secretly sabotaged by pulling on a corner of the fletching when his back was turned. But when each of them were down to their last shot, he wandered directly behind Brea and whistled as she pulled her arrow from her quiver, inspecting it once more before nocking it. She would need a perfect bulls-eye to beat him.

"I don't know why more ladies don't dress in fitted trousers," Cahill said. By the set of her shoulders, she was doing her very best to ignore him as she raised the bow to her face and pulled. "The view is spectacular from back here. You, my princess, have a deliciously firm rump."

The arrow flew straight up, and Cahill pulled the princess back beneath the eaves of the shed for cover.

"Why you!" She pounded on his chest, taking her anger out with her small fists. Cahill had to admit, for one so slight, she packed quite a punch. "You distracted me! You cheated!"

"I cheated? That's rich coming from you. Interfering with my arrows behind my back! Not very ladylike."

"If you knew I'd done it, why did you use that arrow?"

Cahill grasped her flailing fists and pulled her close. "Because I knew I would win regardless."

Brea's expression turned volatile. She yanked her hand from his and slapped him soundly across the cheek.

His cheek stung from the impact, but did not succeed in wiping the grin from Cahill's face. "I guess a kiss to the winner is too much to ask."

She slapped him again. "You promised. You promised you would not make...you said you wouldn't...make advances."

With a hand on the wall on either side of Brea's body, Cahill leaned down into her. For the first time since he'd known her, she looked afraid. "That was not a seduction, Princess," Cahill whispered as he stared deeply into her troubled eyes. "That was gamesmanship. If you would but allow me, I could show you the difference." He blew gently into her ear, for which he was rewarded with a third and final slap.

Cahill stepped back and bowed. But before he left, he grabbed Brea's right hand and pressed a kiss to her reddened palm. "What do you think?" he asked as he moved away before she could slap him again. "I'm thinking horse stew for dinner tonight."

Turning, Cahill sauntered away, fully aware of the wretched state he'd left her in. He may not be any closer to wooing her, but at least he had relieved her of her horse. The woman wouldn't be leaving any time soon.

Brea struggled to regain her breath. She was so angry her lungs refused to draw air. It was crazy. So she'd lost a simple wager. So she'd lost said wager to her arch nemesis. It wasn't the end of the world. It wasn't like coming home to find your family and home utterly obliterated. Yet, for some reason, she felt nearly as angry now as she did that day.

It was this place. It was driving her insane. She couldn't sleep, she couldn't eat. There was no escape. And, everywhere she went, there was Cahill. Smiling at her. Pretending interest in her. Looking dashing. His body beckoning hers until it took every ounce of self-control to leave the room before she flung herself into his arms, wrestled him to the ground and tore his breeches open with her teeth.

Pressing her palms hard against her temples, Brea moaned in frustration. With the loss of her horse, she truly had no escape. She'd been in financial straits before, but she'd always had her health to count on and her ability to hunt. Though she was more mobile than when she'd first arrived, Brea had no delusions about her ability as a slayer. Based on this current loss to Cahill, Brea even doubted her ability to defend herself.

Misery settled over her shoulders like a cloak, and Brea absently twisted the ring on her finger as she considered her options. As far as she could tell, she had two. She could stay and continue to be tormented by visions of Cahill in various stages of undress, ideas of matrimony and carnal pleasures luring her in, attempting to convince her of the myth of happiness in marriage. Or she could sell the only thing that remained of her family, buy a horse and ride far, far away from Cahill and all the unworthy temptations he represented.

She removed the ring and studied it before making up her mind. She pressed her lips to the insignia and then slipped the ring back on her finger.

Her decision was made.

There was nothing more valuable to Breanna than her freedom.

She was not a prisoner, Brea reminded herself. There was no reason to creep. But she couldn't help it. For some reason she knew that Cahill would stop her if he had any idea what she was up to. And Brea was certain that if he restrained her with those big, strong hands of his, his face hovering only inches away, she would do something heinous, like drag his face down to her and kiss him. Then all would be lost.

So she crept along the dark halls of the castle, making sure no one saw or heard her leave.

Once outside she kept to the shadows, holding her cloak and hood fast against her face. As luck would have it, a regiment of about a dozen soldiers rode through the gates into the fortification, giving Brea the perfect opportunity to slip outside without drawing any attention to herself.

Once across the drawbridge, Brea felt her shoulders relax. She was free. Her progress was slow and she would probably have to sleep in a ditch or a field for the next few nights, but Brea didn't mind. For the

first time in over a month, Brea felt as if she could breathe. She had a bag of provisions she'd squirreled away and some other supplies, a flint and an extra cloak, nothing of any value or that anyone would miss. Eventually she would come to a village far enough away from the castle where she could safely sell her ring and buy a new horse and anything else she might need.

Brea supposed she could have taken some silver or gold from the castle. Why, she probably should have taken Elrond, her horse. But the only thing Brea had left was her pride and her honor, and theft, even theft of her rightful property, was beneath her.

As the moon rose, traffic along the road thinned to naught. It was late. The only people out at this time were idiots and highwaymen. Brea was neither. She yawned as she tried to gauge how far she'd come, but there was no hint of the castle behind her in the dark. She wandered to the side of the road, looking for a safe spot to spend the night. A small stand of trees caught her attention. They provided the perfect cover from the road, and the fallen leaves could be gathered up to make a warm nest.

Lying down in her bed of leaves, Brea curled up, gripping her dagger in her left hand and her sword in her right. Within moments she was asleep, sleeping more soundly than she had in weeks.

The approaching thunder of hoof beats awoke Brea early the next morning. As quietly as she could, she crawled from her nest to the edge of the woods and peered between the spiky leaves of a holly bush to watch the procession approach from down the road. There must have been a hundred horses at least. And by the looks of things, the soldiers were prepared for battle.

As the company drew nearer, Brea could just begin to make out the faces of the riders. Her breath lodged in her throat when she realized she recognized the face of the man at the head of the contingent. There was no mistaking his shock of black curls, his regal face, his powerful breadth and the flag under which he rode.

Cahill!

Brea had to cover her mouth to keep from uttering his name aloud. What was he doing? Where was he going? With wide eyes she watched him pass, feeling a strange sense of concern over the notion of him leading his troops to war. But her concern did not bring her to her feet. She stayed crouched behind the bushes, the pain in her leg all but forgotten.

However, some commotion in the ranks just behind Cahill brought the procession to a halt. Brea held her breath as only a few leaves separated her from the fidgeting flanks of the horses a few feet away.

"What is it?" Cahill demanded in that deep baritone of his.

"Sorry, Your Highness. It's this horse."

Brea ducked her head to see what was going on. A soldier two rows behind Cahill was pulling up hard on his reins trying to get his prancing mount under control. But the horse was not cooperating. It kept tossing its head, rolling its eyes and sidestepping around the other horses.

Brea covered her mouth again.

Elrond!

Her former steed whinnied and danced until he'd maneuvered himself to the edge of the company, sniffing the branches of the bush only inches from her face.

"Shoo," Brea whispered. "Go on boy, shoo."

But it was too late. The guard must have heard her. "There's someone here."

"Could be bandits."

Before Brea had time to run, ten hulking soldiers surrounded her with swords drawn. Her capture was swift, and Brea knew better than to struggle. The King's Guard did not have much tolerance for highwaymen and often meted out immediate justice whether warranted or not.

With her arms restrained behind her, she was at the mercy of Elrond's wet nose and more than one snicker from the company of soldiers.

"It's a woman!"

"What should we do with her?"

"I've got a few ideas," one man called. "If you boys don't know what to do, I suppose I could let you watch—teach you a thing or two." The company roared with laughter and sneers.

"Enough!" There was no mistaking the prince's voice. He rode closer, but Brea didn't look up. "Princess Breanna. As always, it's a pleasure to see you." At the mention of her name, the rough hands released her. Brea stumbled forward and finally lifted her head to regard the prince. There was no mistaking the raw, calculating glint in his eyes. It troubled her greatly and sent an immediate flush to her cheeks and to other parts of her anatomy farther south.

Cahill leaned down and instructed her to grasp his hand. With one deft pull, he hoisted her up and onto his horse. Her backside nestled much too snugly against his parted legs for Brea's comfort. He secured her to him with both arms and then kicked his horse forward. "Move out!" he called as he cantered up to resume his place at the head of the procession.

"What do you think you're doing?" she asked, her heart battering the inside of her ribcage.

"I'm taking you to battle."

"Why?"

"I don't trust you to wait for my return."

She struggled to free herself, but Cahill held her easily in place. "You said I wasn't a prisoner," she complained.

"I lied."

## Chapter Six

For most of the ride, Brea held herself completely still. She managed to ignore the warmth of Cahill's broad chest, the weight of his arms around hers and the pressure of his thighs on her backside by focusing on the pain in her leg. This was the first time she'd been on a horse since she'd been injured and, after nearly a full day's ride, the pain was becoming unbearable. She needed a distraction.

"Tell me," Brea began, but her voice cracked from a day of disuse. She cleared her throat and started again. "Tell me, who do you go to war with?"

"Dragons."

Brea's ears perked up. "Dragons? What? More than one?"

"Yes. A horde has formed and entered Lorentia from the southwest."

"A horde," Brea muttered. "How many?"

"A dozen at least."

An icy chill ran down Brea's spine. The last horde had decimated her kingdom. There'd been nothing like it since. "I'll help," she whispered. Cahill didn't answer. Perhaps he didn't hear her. She half turned to him and said in a louder voice, "I'll help. I'll help slay the beasts."

The rumble started low in Cahill's chest, but soon spread up and out his throat in a loud roar of laughter.

"What's so funny?"

It took a moment or two for Cahill to get his mirth under control. Finally he said, "I know you're a slayer, Brea. But this is a horde. I've amassed an army. Your services will not be necessary."

Brea heard his words, but she also heard the subtext in what he said. She was a woman, a weak, insignificant woman. Her help was laughable.

She flipped her leg over the neck of the horse and spun to face him. His look of shock lasted all of three seconds. Then he smiled. "Did you know you're beautiful when you're angry?"

Before she could slap him, he dodged out of the way. He grabbed her wrist with his left hand and said, "As much as I like it a little rough, Princess, I've had enough of your abuse for one day."

She scowled and pulled her wrist free of his clutch. "Just so you know, I'm the best slayer on the continent."

Cahill raised a single brow. "The best slayer? Really. Says who?"

"Me."

Cahill smiled. It was the kind of smile an adult bestowed on a small child who'd said something amusing.

"Tell me, Prince. What is the name of your champion?"

"Pritchard." Cahill indicated the man who rode to his right. Pritchard was as big as a house. His arms were the size of tree trunks. He could probably circle her neck with one hand and easily squeeze the life out of her. His face was large and broad, his brows heavy, his nose thick like a summer squash. "He's a brute," Brea said. "How many dragons has he killed?"

"Seventeen."

"Seventeen," Brea nodded, her gaze still on the giant of a man. "That is impressive." Then she turned her attention back to Cahill. "So, what about you, Prince. How many dragons do you have under your belt?"

He grinned. "Not so many." Then he leaned closer and whispered, "Only eight."

Brea was impressed, though she wasn't about to say so. Members of royal families, though trained in combat, rarely put themselves in danger. Eight dragons was a respectable number of kills. Particularly for a prince.

"Aren't you going to ask me?" she asked innocently.

Cahill's smile was patronizing. "Of course. How many dragons, Brea? No. Let me guess. Three?" He chuckled.

Without thinking, Brea reached for her sword, but her scabbard was empty. "Where's my sword?"

"Ah, it's been put away for safekeeping." Cahill eased his grip on her to unbuckle his saddlebag. He pulled the small sword out of the bag, but before passing it to Brea, added, "I trust you won't try to impale me with it."

"Only if I'm provoked."

His lips twitched at her comment. "Was I right? Is it three?"

"You're close," Brea said as seriously as she could. Then she ran her thumb up and down the rough notches in the handle and passed the blade back to Cahill haft first. "Count the notches."

He accepted the blade and started to count. Brea watched with amusement as his brows slowly drew closer and closer together across his forehead. Finally he looked up at her, his expression one of incredulity. "Impossible."

Brea shrugged.

"There is no way you've slain twenty-two dragons."

"Actually," Brea said with a finger tapping her lips in thought, "it's twenty-three. I didn't get a chance to notch the last one before I was attacked." Brea put her hand out for her sword, and Cahill returned it to her without a word. She slid it into the scabbard strapped to her back and then flipped her good leg back over the horse's neck so that she was once again facing forward.



Cahill remained silent for the remainder of the ride. Even his grip on her loosened to the point that Brea could have slipped between his grasp and slid off the horse. But she wasn't about to do that. There was no reason to escape now. She was a dragon slayer and there was a horde of the nasty beasts that required her attention. She was so intent on the pending battle, imagining her blade penetrating a host of yellow eyeballs, that nothing could distract her, not her throbbing thigh, not Cahill's warm body. Well, almost nothing. Brea was still aware of Cahill's breadth, but his strength no longer troubled her as much as it had. In fact, Brea felt so comfortable, so certain of herself, that she forgot everything and nestled her head against Cahill's shoulder and promptly fell into a deep sleep.

When Brea awoke, it was to that unnerving, panicky feeling of having no idea where she was. The steady gait of the horse no longer moved beneath her. In fact, she was not sitting, she was lying down, on a pile of furs no less. Brea sat up, automatically reaching for her dagger. But of course it was gone.

"Ah, you're awake. Just in time for the evening meal."

Brea spun around at Cahill's voice and found him watching her from a stool beside a table. On the table lay maps and beside that dishes that still steamed with the aroma of meat and turnips.

Gingerly, Brea pushed herself up and approached.

"Don't worry," Cahill assured her, "I've already tasted everything. Nothing's been poisoned."

Brea rolled her eyes. She reached across the table for a roll and split it open with her fingers. Then she dipped the roll in the steaming stew and ate. It was delicious.

"Please sit." Cahill motioned to a stool across from him.

Brea sat and ate, not knowing when she'd enjoyed a meal more. Fresh air always did that to her appetite. "Where are we?" she asked through a mouthful of food.

"The royal lodgings," Cahill said. "I know it's not much, but it's better than where the troops are quartered and certainly more preferable than a ditch."

"I prefer the ditch," Brea muttered as she reached for a flagon of ale. Then she cleared her throat and said, "You know what I mean. Where are we? How far are we from the horde?"

"We're camped outside of Lumbreck, a half-day's journey from the border, where the dragons attacked two days ago."

"Have you received any news from your scouts?"

"No. But I expect to hear something any minute."

Brea nodded and Cahill turned back to the maps spread out upon the other half of the table. Brea helped herself to another serving of stew, this time eating more slowly and enjoying the flavors. After a few minutes, Cahill's valet bowed through the door and removed the empty dishes.

Brea had to admit that there was something nice about going to battle as royalty. Hot food, warm bedding, servants. “Well,” Brea said as she pushed herself to her feet. “Thank you for the meal. I’ll be on my way.”

“Where do you think you’re going?” Cahill asked, looking up from the maps.

“To my tent.”

“*This* is your tent.”

“Oh. But where are you staying?”

“Here.”

With her hands on her hips, Brea shook her head. “I can’t stay here with you.”

“There are few options.”

“Few options means there are more than one. I want to hear the alternative to staying alone in a tent with you.”

Cahill sighed. “Your only other option is to camp amongst the soldiers where you will be unprotected and likely molested.”

“I think I’ll take my chances with the soldiers,” Brea said as she turned to go.

With a loud smack, Cahill pounded the table, “Dammit, woman, what is wrong with you? What do you take me for? An ogre? *I* will not molest you. *I* will not take advantage of you. You have my word.”

“Your word,” Brea spat. “What is that worth?”

Cahill stood so suddenly he knocked his stool flying. He stalked Brea like a mountain lion advancing on a young fawn. “My word is everything,” he seethed. “I am an honorable man, Brea, and I do not take kindly to such insults on my character.” He did not stop his approach until he towered over her, making Brea feel both small and insignificant. Then Cahill took a deep breath and a reluctant step back. His smile did not reach his eyes. “This tent is big enough for the both of us. I will not compromise you.”

“Do you promise?”

“I promise.” He paused and his smile grew. “I will not seduce you, Brea...unless of course you want me to.”

“See!” Brea pointed at him. “That! What you did just there. Those innuendos. That’s seduction! You’ve proven over and over again that you can’t be trusted.”

In one step, Cahill stood chest-to-chin with Brea. He wrapped a hand around her waist and pulled her against him. In a low voice, he whispered in her ear, “Truly, Princess, you need a lesson in seduction. I am only engaging in courtly banter.” He traced her jaw with the tip of his finger. “The fact that my banter bothers you tells me that you take my innuendos seriously.” He cocked his head to the side, “Tell me, Brea, who is it that you don’t trust? Is it me...or is it you?”

Before Brea could answer, the door to the tent swung open and the valet stepped through. “The scouts have arrived, Your Highness, and the officers are gathering to hear the news.”

Cahill released Brea and turned back to the table to gather the maps. “Please make yourself comfortable, Princess.” Then he pushed the flap at the door and ducked out.

Brea watched him go, her heart pounding, her pulse racing. She couldn’t stop thinking about Cahill’s question. Who was it that she didn’t trust? Was it him or was it her?

“I’m coming too,” Brea insisted.

“Stop it, Brea, and I mean it. You sound like a petulant child.” Brea stamped her foot, and Cahill turned to her with a single brow raised as if to say, “You see?” But what he said instead made Brea even angrier. “If you want to be of use, help me with my armor.”

Picking up the nearest weighty object, a clay jug, Brea flung it at Cahill’s head. He ducked just in time, and the urn thudded heavily to the ground. “Men!” Brea fumed and then pushed her way out of the tent. The morning sun had yet to burn the moisture from the ground and pockets of mist clung to low-lying depressions, giving the perfect cover for hunting dragons. If the hunters knew what they were doing, that was.

The telltale sounds of battle preparation met Brea’s ears as she wandered through the camp. Steel against steel, steel against stone, as last minute sharpening of weapons took place—probably more out of nerves than necessity—steel against leather as swords were sheathed and unsheathed. Conversation was at a minimum, none of the raucous laughter of the night before, and even the horses shifted peculiarly as they sensed the tension in the camp. A familiar whinny brought Brea up short.

“Elrond!” she said with a smile as she patted the horse’s nose. “You’re a good boy, aren’t you?” The horse nuzzled her hair and whickered softly.

“Was this your horse, Highness?”

Brea turned and recognized the rider from the day before. “Yes. What’s your name, soldier?”

“Bailey.”

With a nod, Brea said, “Listen, Bailey. There’s something you should know about Elrond. When you’re hunting dragons he’s trained to—”

“Begging your pardon, Your Highness,” Bailey interrupted. He ignored any further instruction from her as he stepped into the stirrup and mounted the horse. Before he rode away he said, “A token, Princess?”

“How about some spit in the eye?” Brea mumbled beneath her breath. Then she forced a smile and pointed at her unconventional attire and said, “I have nothing to give but words of encouragement. Fight well, Bailey.”

He touched a hand to his sword and then turned Elrond and kicked him into a trot to catch up with the forming ranks.

“Idiot,” Brea muttered as she watched Bailey join ranks. Then she started to follow the company on foot as they moved slowly down into an open field. “You’re all a bunch of overblown, armor-clad, sword-wielding idiots!” The battle drums sounded and banners waved in the morning breeze and Brea grumbled under her breath. Who did they think they were going to battle with? A neighboring kingdom? This was not the way to fight dragons. All that noise, all those horses? It would only serve to attract dragons and incite them into a feeding frenzy.

A lone tree stood atop a knoll overlooking the field and soldiers below. It would be the perfect place to watch the massacre and, though climbing sent sparks of pain down her leg, Brea didn’t pay much attention. Once securely seated in an upper branch, Brea waited, as did the soldiers. The sun rose and burned off the morning dew. It was going to be a hot day. Excellent weather for dragons—the beasts preferred to attack in the heat. The sunshine was dreadful for soldiers who were already sweating in heavy armor and would be looking directly into the sun, battling dragons from above.

From the south, a strange black vee darkened the horizon. Brea watched with horrified fascination as the dragons drew near. She’d never seen anything like it. A horde of dragons, flying in formation. Even from this distance, their angry squawks filled the air, their stench burned her nostrils. Within too short a time, the dragons were upon them, circling the field and the soldiers below. The futility of the company’s arrows brought a lump to Brea’s throat. She shut her eyes when she heard the first burst of flames and the screams of agony from the men and horses.

A sob tore through her chest, and Brea pressed her hands to her ears. Behind her closed lids she did not see a company of soldiers—she saw a crumbling castle, she watched as her three younger sisters and her four older ones ran for cover, but there was no cover to be had. Her mother fleeing with the new babe cradled in her arms, blackened with one breath of a damnable beast, the baby charred into a lump of coal in her mother’s singed arms. Her father, sword in hand, doing all he could to save his family. It wasn’t enough. Not nearly.

With tears streaming down her face, Brea swung down from the branch and jumped the remaining three feet to the ground. She didn’t even notice the searing pain in her leg as she ran, hobbling, back to camp. It was one thing to fight dragons. It was quite another to watch. Brea would be a spectator no longer.

The rest of the day was spent in preparation. She sharpened her sword herself, gathered arrows and fitted them with strips of cloth. She scoped out the surrounding landscape, devising battle plans in her mind, all the while trying, without success, to ignore the sounds of anguish from the battlefield. Her only consolation was that if there were still men to feel pain, there were still men who were fighting.

Brea stopped and lifted her face to the sky, sending a silent prayer that one of those men still fighting would be Cahill.

It was the silence that alerted Brea to the end of the battle and had her scrambling out of the tent. With a hand to her forehead, she searched the sky, but only benign clouds floated overhead. The dragons were

gone. Limping as quickly as she could, she hurried toward the field, but the soldiers were already returning. What was left of them. Comrades leaned upon comrades. Others had bodies lying limp in front of saddles. Beyond the sad procession Brea could make out wisps of smoke where piles of the dead smoldered on the field.

In her panic to spot the prince, Brea nearly missed him. The plumage atop his helmet was singed beyond recognition; he dragged his feet like the two horses he led, one of which was piled high with injured men.

“Cahill!” Brea shouted and rushed to him.

Cahill barely acknowledged her. He handed her the reins to one of the horses and instructed her to take the wounded to the surgeon’s tent. It took her a moment to realize the horse carrying the burden was Elrond. He hung his head next to hers as if in apology and Brea patted him and whispered soothing words into his tired ears.

When she returned to the tent, she found Cahill sitting on the stool, staring blank-eyed into space. She didn’t think he noticed her until he said, “You can have your horse back.”

Brea sucked in a breath. “Bailey?”

Cahill turned his empty eyes on her. “He’s alive. But he refuses to ride a horse that’s afraid of dragons.” Cahill studied her, and Brea watched as all the emotions of the day flitted across his face. Suddenly he was on his feet. “What kind of dragon slayer has a horse that is afraid of dragons? Tell me that?”

But Cahill wasn’t the only one with battle scars. Brea had watched and listened all day and her own emotions ran raw. “Afraid of dragons! You idiot!” She stormed up to Cahill and gave him a good hard shove. “Elrond is not afraid, he’s *trained* to stay back unless I call him. What kind of fool takes horses into battle with dragons? Do you know nothing about the beasts?”

Brea found herself in a staring match with Cahill. Sparks of anger, hatred and humiliation flew between them. It was Cahill who blinked first. “If you know so much about dragons, why don’t you enlighten me?” His voice shook with barely concealed rage.

Brea turned away from the intensity of his gaze. Her breath came hard and fast as she tried to decide where to begin. “First of all, dragons have very small brains. They’re governed by their instincts, which are essentially food and destruction.” She paced the room, stopping every few moments to glare at the prince. “How many horses did you lose?”

“About fifty.”

“And how many men?”

Cahill was slow to reply. “Not quite so many, but close.”

“Tell me, did the dragons eat the horses or the men?”

Brea watched as Cahill considered her question. Then his eyes widened as realization struck. "They ate a few men, but...mostly horses."

"And, how many dragons did you slay?"

Quietly, Cahill said, "One."

Brea clenched her fists and groaned. "One? One!" She shook her head and cursed as she paced some more. "I'm not a mathematician, Your Highness, but I think the odds are heavily in the dragons' favor."

"Do you think I don't know that?" Cahill shouted. "Do you think I don't know that I led my men into a slaughter?" He stormed up to Brea and grabbed the front of her tunic to pull her face closer to his. "I watched them die, Brea. I was there." Brea had seen Cahill upset. She'd seen him angry. Brea had never seen Cahill like this before. He looked like he wanted to tear out her throat with his teeth and, in his current state, Brea had no doubt he was completely capable of such a feat. In fact, Brea was pretty sure that was exactly what the prince intended to do as he twisted the knot of her hair in his fist, yanked her head back and exposed her throat. But instead of her throat he devoured her mouth, in a terrible, frantic, crushing kiss.

To her surprise, Brea kissed him back. She met his ferocity with a fierceness of her own. When he plunged his tongue into her mouth, she sucked on him, nipped him and then sucked some more. It was she, not Cahill, who pulled and tugged at Cahill's clothing, trying unsuccessfully to rip the chainmail from his chest, needing to touch him, to hold him and feel his skin next to hers. Having no luck with his chest, Brea instinctively moved lower, finding the knot at his waist and frenetically working it with one hand.

At first when Cahill covered her hand with his, Brea thought it was to help her undo the tie. But then he held her hand still against the conspicuous ridge beneath his trousers, not allowing her to move. He tore his lips away from hers, panting heavily as he rested his chin atop her head. "I'm sorry," he murmured, his voice heavy with torment as he pulled away. "I gave you my word. I'm sorry, Brea."

Brea licked her swollen lips and gulped air in order to get her own breathing under control. "It's not your fault," she said in a breathy voice. "It's the battle. I've seen it before, how battle makes men..." Brea didn't finish. She stepped forward to lay her hand on Cahill's arm, but the prince backed away.

"Don't come too close, Princess. I'm not sure I have myself completely under control."

Stopped in her tracks, Brea wondered if she should admit to him that she didn't want him under control. That after all her protests, the very thing she wanted at this time was to give in to Cahill's angry passion. To soothe him with her body, to ease the guilt she recognized in him because she'd lived with it herself for five years.

But Cahill would never forgive himself for using her, whether she allowed him to or not. Brea was beginning to suspect he was a better man than she'd ever imagined. So Brea turned and sat on a stool, using the table between them as a shield. "Let me distract you, then," she said. "Let me tell you the secret to killing dragons."

## Chapter Seven

Before the break of dawn, Cahill gathered his officers for a debriefing and to plan their new strategy of attack. Cahill had stayed up with Brea and gone over the maps, the princess pointing out ideal spots to ambush the beasts. But Cahill was no more than a few sentences into his explanation of the new form of attack when Pritchard stood.

“Your Highness,” Pritchard interrupted with his booming baritone voice. “With all due respect, this manner of attack you propose will prove futile.”

“Futile?” Cahill challenged. “Yesterday was futile. Today we try something different.”

Pritchard pointed to the markings on the map. “You’ve got the men all separated. They’ll make easy pickings for dragons.” Pritchard turned to look at each of the officers, asking for support. By the number of nods, he had it. “We all know the best way to down a dragon is with numbers. Ten men take out their wings. Five to chop the beast’s head off once it’s on the ground.” He waved at the map with contempt. “Two men here, three men there?” He shook his head. “We’ll be annihilated.”

The murmurs of agreement set Cahill’s teeth on edge. “I am your prince,” Cahill asserted. “I have—”

“And I,” Pritchard interrupted using his size to his advantage, “am your champion and an expert in slaying dragons.” Pritchard turned to the men who all nodded at him with a clear look of relief in their eyes. “Now,” Pritchard said, “here’s what we’re going to do.”

Cahill looked away. Pritchard was right. He had authority because Cahill was only a prince. If Cahill were king, things would be much different.

Frustrated and angry, Cahill returned to the tent to don his armor, only to find Brea gone. He couldn’t really blame her for leaving and he held little hope that she would return. Thus it was with a heavy heart that Cahill rode out with the troops. He glanced up at the cloudy sky. At least the day was cooler. The beasts would be sluggish without the sun to warm their cold blood. But they were still outnumbered. Horribly outnumbered. Cahill took one last look back, hoping to catch sight of Brea, but there was no sign of her, and Cahill tried not to think about the fact that he never had a chance to say goodbye.

Perhaps it was the weather, perhaps it was the hardened determination in the soldiers that made the battle more successful that day. Their casualties were still too high for Cahill’s liking, but much less significant than the day before. In addition, they’d managed to kill two dragons. This was due, in part, to the fact that fewer dragons had flown out to meet them that day. That knowledge did not necessarily bode

well with Cahill. If the other dragons were not engaging in battle, where were they? How much destruction had they wrought?

To his great surprise and pleasure, Brea was inside the tent when Cahill returned, shoveling food into her mouth like she hadn't eaten in a week. The sight brought a faint smile to his face, and then Cahill frowned. "Ewph! It even smells like dragon in here."

"Oh!" Brea turned and waved from her place at the table. "Sorry," she said after swallowing a huge mouthful. "That's probably me." She sniffed at her clothes. "Dragon is so hard to get out of wool." From the sleeve of her tunic she withdrew three glimmering scales and tossed them onto the table.

Cahill dropped his sword and gingerly nudged the scales apart. Dragon scales were as individual as the beasts themselves. It was not hard to tell these scales came from three separate dragons—one ruby red, the other opalesque and the third glittered like a sapphire. As Cahill well knew, the window for dislodging a scale from a dragon was small indeed; for dragon scales only loosened in death and must be pulled before the monster burst into flames. Cahill looked at Brea with a new and sudden respect. She'd told him she was the best slayer, but he'd never fully believed her. Until now.

He collapsed onto the stool beside her. "Three?" Cahill said with false nonchalance. "Only three?" He chuckled, "Princess, you're slipping."

Brea smiled in pleasure and then pointed at her injured leg propped on some cushions under the table. "I know. I'm not quite up to standard. But if you could spare someone, I could use some help tomorrow."

"I know just the man."

Cahill hung from the tree, like Brea had taught him, trying to regulate his breathing, but finding it difficult with a glob of dragon shit sliding down his left cheek. This was soon forgotten, however, when the thundering hooves of an approaching horse alerted him to action. It was Brea riding Elrond hard, heading straight for him with a fire-breather right on her tail.

*"Attack from above," Brea had said. "Dragons never look up."*

Brea flew by, then Cahill let go of the branch, landing squarely straddling the beast's neck. With one swift movement, he pulled his sword, lifted it high and drove it to the hilt through the black slit in the dragon's yellow eye.

*"Think of it as a bulls-eye," Brea had instructed.*

Sure enough, death came instantly. The dragon's wings stretched taut in its final convulsion and the stinking body glided gently to the ground where Cahill was able to easily slide off. He jogged to join Brea and Elrond a safe distance away before the body went up in flames. "I can't believe it!" he crowed. "It's so easy."

Brea narrowed her eyes and scoffed, "Easy?"



"I mean efficient," Cahill said and grinned. "There's no hacking at a writhing neck covered in almost impenetrable scales. No fire, no mess." He raised his hand to Brea to pull her down from the horse and she accepted the help without hesitation. "We make quite a team."

She nodded, but her face was turned to the surrounding countryside where only blackened patches on the ground indicated the number of dragons that died that day. "That's it," Brea sighed. "We did it. We killed them all."

In a voice filled with wonder and dread, Cahill said, "Maybe not all. What the hell is that?"

Brea followed his outstretched arm and finger and then muttered, "Fuck a duck."

Cahill swung his head to look at her in surprise, then turned his attention back to the monster that glided overhead.

"That, my prince, is the beast that gave me this." Cahill glanced back at Brea and to where she was pointing down at her leggings which were stained where her old wound had reopened and oozed blood.

"You fought that thing?" he said with admiration.

Brea nodded grimly. "As you can see, it won."

Slowly Cahill shook his head back and forth. "You're still here," he said. "I call that a draw."

The enormous dragon circled high overhead, squawking shrilly so that both Cahill and Brea had to cover their ears. Then it swooped, flying low over the land, its head swaying back and forth as if looking for something, or someone. Finally the dragon rose and flew off, out of sight.

"We'll save that one for another day," Cahill said as he reached for her hand and squeezed it.

Brea settled back against the copper tub, her knees drawn to her chest, reveling in the soothing warmth of the water. She'd washed first in a nearby stream, but only lye soap would get the dragon smell out of her hair. As for her clothes, the cook had confiscated them in order to boil them in vinegar in hopes of removing the stink. After another dunk of her head beneath the water, Brea rose, dripping, and used a blanket to dry herself. Cahill had given her one of his spare shirts to wear and Brea laughed at herself as she cinched the garment around her waist with a strip of leather. It was long enough to be a dress. Not a proper dress, but a nightdress at least, and that's all she needed it for. Her clothes would be dry enough by morning when the company rode out.

Peeking out through the tent flap, Brea called to Cahill's valet to remove the washtub and bring in some food. She tucked a fur around her shoulders for decency's sake, then Brea sat at the table and waited for the food and Cahill to arrive. He came in moments later, smelling clean and masculine. Brea kept her lashes lowered as a sudden shyness descended over her.

They ate in relative silence, making mundane remarks about the flavor of this dish and that. Finally Cahill cleared his throat and said, "I cannot go on like this. I must make my intentions known."

Slowly Brea looked up from her food. The firelight flickered in Cahill's dark eyes, making him appear more sinister than regal.

"Breanna, I beg you. No, I beseech you to consent to be my wife."

Though Brea knew it was coming, had known his intentions all along, her answer became lodged in her throat. She licked her suddenly dry lips and said, "I'm sorry, Cahill. I can't."

He didn't move for a long time. Finally he spoke. "Why?"

All her old resentments, her old prejudices about marriage reared their ugly heads in her mind. "I know how these things work. The minute I marry you, I belong to you. I give up everything."

"What do you give up?" Cahill argued. "Marry me and you gain a title and a kingdom."

"Both of which I already have," Brea countered.

"Bah!" Cahill fumed. "You have nothing."

"Nothing?" Brea rose in anger. "I have everything I need, Prince." She limped purposefully around to the other side of the table, using the fact that he was still seated to her advantage. "I don't need your land, I don't need your title." With each item she listed, she poked him in the shoulder. "I don't need a stinking husband to make demands of me once he thinks he owns me."

"What do you mean, make demands?"

"Don't pretend you don't know what I'm talking about. I'm not one of your sheltered young princesses who has no idea of the filthy rutting tendencies of men. I know what goes on behind closed doors."

Cahill's expression changed. First understanding, then shock, and then anger. "You're not a virgin," he said in a low voice. "Someone abused you."

Brea laughed. "No, I'm a virgin." She pulled her dagger out from her leather belt and twisted it between her hands. "I wouldn't let a stinking, breeding male near enough to abuse me."

Cahill frowned. "Then what do you know of things that take place 'behind closed doors'?"

"You may find this shocking, Your Highness, but commoners rut regardless of whether doors are open or closed. In fact doors have very little to do with it. Stables, tavern floors, up against walls." Brea shivered with revulsion. "Beastly copulations. No thank you."

"Ah," Cahill said. "A tavern education." He stood, and Brea found herself no longer at an advantage. "I'm afraid, Princess, your education may be lacking. What you have witnessed is only a very limited version of the act in question."

"I'd wager I know more than enough."

"A wager." The prince smiled as he lifted her chin with his thumb, forcing her to look at him. "Now that's a wager I'd be willing to take."

Brea scowled, but Cahill tightened his grip on her chin, holding her in place. "What if I was to convince you otherwise, Princess? What if I was to prove there was more to this carnal act than you are

aware and what if I was to wager that by the end of it, you will be begging me to take you to our marriage bed?"

Still holding her dagger, Brea pressed the tip into the juncture of his rib cage. With satisfaction she watched his eyes widen at the sharp pain of it. "I will make no such wager."

Cahill released her face and stepped back, out of the reach of her dagger's lethal point. "Because you know you'll lose."

"Ha!"

"Remind me, Brea, who was tugging at the draw to my breeches the other day. I might be mistaken, but I'm almost certain it was you."

"You swine!"

"Yes. A talking swine, at that. Come on, Brea. Stop fighting it." His hand moved so swiftly she wasn't able to get away in time. He grasped her wrist and squeezed until she dropped the dagger. Then he pulled Brea to the bed of furs and pushed her down. "Tell me you don't want me."

"I don't want you," she snapped. And she didn't. Not logically. But apparently her hands did because they wound around Cahill's neck and pulled him down onto the furs beside her.

## Chapter Eight

Cahill kissed Brea using every ounce of control he could muster. His tongue flicked gently over hers, his lips moved with a forced laziness that was nearly killing him. But she'd encouraged him, if somewhat unwittingly, and he didn't want to scare her off. He paused from his kiss to regard her beneath heavy lids. There was no mistaking the raw desire in her grey eyes, no mistaking the attraction she felt as her body shuddered beneath his hands. "Tell me to stop, Brea. Tell me now," he urged. "Or I won't be able to."

Brea's lips parted as if she was about to say it, about to tell him to stop. But she didn't. Instead she licked her lips as her breath caught in her throat.

"Merciful gods in heaven." Cahill groaned as he leaned down into her and kissed her with more restraint than he thought he could bear. He had to have her. He had to hear her moan. It was absolutely essential that he bring this combative woman to her knees. Because she already had him on his knees.

Cahill was certain he had died and gone to heaven when, in a breathy voice, Brea moaned, "Please, Cahill. Please don't stop."

As if stopping was even a possibility.

He groaned as he pulled her close and nuzzled the side of her neck. "I have never met a woman like you," he whispered into her hair as he deftly untied the sash at her waist. He slid it out from beneath her and then tugged at her shirt until he had it pulled up and over her head. She laid there beneath him, her grey eyes wide with longing and wonder. He kissed her lips and then paused a moment to take in her glorious body.

She was so much slimmer than other women he'd seen. Her flesh was not rounded with dimpled plumpness, but firm with planes that came from hard work and muscle. Her breasts, though small, were full and ripe, tipped with tiny rosebud nipples that cried out for his kisses. "Yes," he sighed as he gave in to those pretty demands. He kissed her breast then flicked her nipple with his tongue, well aware of how his kisses were affecting Brea's breathing. "I've never desired a woman as I desire you." With reverence, he ran his hands gently down the length of her torso. "So strong," he whispered as he leaned down to kiss her shoulder. "So beautiful." He cupped her breast and shifted his body so that he could have better access to her other nipple, for he desperately needed to taste her again, to suck and lick and devour her deliciousness.

Brea sighed and held his head to her chest. His tongue danced across her hardened bud before he sucked her into his mouth again. But his right hand continued downward to her thighs, and Cahill kissed

the valley between her breasts before he raised his head so he could watch his hand trace the vicious scar on her leg. “So brave.”

“Cahill?”

“Yes, my love?” So enthralled was he by his exploration of her extraordinary physique, he did not hear the quavering in her voice.

“Cahill, I can’t do this.”

How he wanted to ignore her. His hand was even then easing her legs apart. Stopping now was tantamount to the worst torture he could imagine. But he stopped nonetheless. He closed his eyes and let out a long, shaky breath.

“Why are you stopping?” Brea asked with a voice quavering even more than his.

“You asked me to. It’s hard, Brea, to—”

“No,” she said as she shook her head from side to side., She grabbed his hand and slid it back into place between her legs. It was then he noticed that her little bottom rocked back and forth, grinding into the furs beneath her. “What I mean is, I can’t do it. I can’t just *lie* here, like those other women. The ones in the taverns.” She bit her lip and wiggled some more. “I’m going crazy. I need to *do* something.”

It took a moment for Cahill to understand what Brea was talking about. Then he smiled, and his hand happily went back to work between her legs. “You don’t have to just lie there, my love.”

Her brows furrowed as her breath came faster. “Then tell me what to do.”

“Why don’t you start by undressing me?”

A smile of delight lit up her face as she flew to her knees. Cahill wondered if she even realized the manner in which she pressed her heels into that tender part of her rump as she rocked back and forth and side to side. But then he totally forgot that line of thinking as her hands tore at his shirt. Literally tore it. She used her teeth to assist in the shredding of his clothes, and Cahill didn’t think he’d ever been more aroused.

However, once the remains of his shirt slid from his chest, Brea’s inquisitive hands would have brought him to his knees were he not already there. “You’re so hard,” she said as her palms spanned his chest. Then she leaned down and kissed him, mimicking his movements, her tongue flicking here and there, just as his had. Cahill clutched her head to his chest and groaned, gritting his teeth, afraid he would spill his seed upon the furs instead of depositing his essence inside Brea’s glorious body.

“If you think that’s hard, woman, you should reach lower.”

She was already one step ahead of him. Her fingers fumbled at the tie, and Cahill roughly moved her hands away to take care of it himself. He stood in order to remove his breeches and boots and chuckled low in his throat at the wide-eyed look Brea had on her face as she stared at his erection.

If she licked her lips one more time, Cahill would not be able to control himself. Thank the heavens she didn’t. Instead she whispered, “Cahill, has anyone ever told you it resembles a decapitated dragon?”

Cahill laughed. "No! And I'm not sure that's a compliment."

"May I?" She reached tentatively toward him, and Cahill nodded, his jaw clenched as he held his breath. Her trembling fingers stroked the length of him, circling and cupping until Cahill was quite certain he was going to die or burst or both.

He grabbed her hand and wrenched it from his throbbing cock. "My turn." Gently he pushed Brea onto her back and then, gripping an ankle in each hand, pulled her legs apart, bending them gently at the knees. "If you need to do something, Princess, you may touch yourself, or run your hands through my hair." He kissed the inside of her knee. "Groaning is good. Screaming my name, even better."

He gently ran his hands up her thighs and parted her silky curls with his thumbs. Brea let go a string of curses, using words even Cahill was unfamiliar with. "That works," he muttered as he kissed higher, one leg and then the next, gently pressing kisses here and there, but all the while holding her writhing legs firmly apart.

"What are you...oh!" Brea cried as he blew cool air onto her moist opening.

He touched her clit, and she bucked beneath his hands. "Oh, Princess," he groaned. Then he lowered himself so that he could suck her salty juice down his throat. He nipped at her clit and stroked her with his tongue as Brea ground her pelvis into his face. But her hands were in his hair tugging him away. He lifted his head and smiled at the wild look in her eyes.

"Cahill!" she panted. "You can't do that. You have to stop."

"Why? Don't you like it?" He ducked down for another kiss, and Brea cried out, though her hands tightened in his hair.

"That can't be...proper."

He plunged his tongue inside of her. In and out, in and out while her hips rocked back and forth. "Proper, Princess?" Cahill asked as he lifted his head for just a moment, "There is nothing proper about the things I want to do to you."

"...oh!"

Finally, Cahill rose from his place between her legs and crawled up to meet her. Her hair lay disheveled about her face. Her eyes luminous with need. Her lips parted and swollen. She was the most beautiful creature he'd ever seen. He lowered his face to kiss her, and at first she kept her mouth closed, but his tongue was too insistent and once she opened her mouth, she went wild, sucking her scent from his lips and tongue. With a groan, Cahill pulled away. Stroking her face, he whispered, "You know, my dear. Some women enjoy returning the favor."

"You mean...?"

Cahill nodded, then closed his eyes and grunted softly as images of Brea taking him into her mouth nearly set him off. She reached down between his legs, and Cahill rolled swiftly away.

"May I try it?" she asked, her voice husky with desire.

"Next time, my love," Cahill said as he rolled back on top of her, grasping her naughty hands and holding them above her head. "I will not be able to control myself now if you do."

"Oh!" she said as for the first time he nudged his cock between her legs. It was Cahill's intent to go slow, to ease his throbbing cock into her tight opening. But he did not anticipate Brea wrapping her strong legs around his waist. Nor could he have predicted the force with which she both ground her pelvis against him and pulled hard against his buttocks. With a curse he wouldn't have dreamt of uttering with any other female, Cahill thrust.

The thin wall of her virtue didn't stand a chance, and Cahill was unable to slow once he'd forced himself inside. Even if he could have slowed, Brea wouldn't have let him. For the first time ever, Cahill found he could completely be himself with a woman. He could drive himself into her without fear of breaking her. He could say the indecent thoughts that popped into his head, he could grunt and groan with the ecstasy of joining his body so violently with a mate who matched him thrust for thrust, curse for curse, moan for moan.

At last, when Brea screamed his name and Cahill was certain her fingers were permanently embedded into his butt cheeks, Cahill let go. The pleasure of spilling himself inside of her was unmatched, and his entire body quaked with a strange pleasure that bordered on pain.

Collapsing on top of her, he rolled both of their bodies so that they lay on their sides facing each other. In the circle of his arms, Brea's whole body trembled.

"You're cold," he said.

"No."

"I've hurt you."

"Oh, no."

"What is it?"

"I had no idea. Cahill, I had no idea."

"Oh." He held her tight and pulled a fur up over their entwined nakedness. Cahill never wanted to undo himself from this extraordinary woman.

"I think I want to do it again."

Laughing quietly at her comment, Cahill caressed the side of her damp cheek. "We will, my love. Once we are married."

Brea went still in his arms. Then, much to his consternation, she pushed herself away. "I won't marry you, Cahill."

"But we must. Now more than ever."

"Why?"

"Because I've taken your virginity!"

"You didn't take it, Cahill, I gave it to you."

“But, Brea, please.” He reached for her, but she moved out of his embrace. She shook her head and got shakily to her feet, a blanket of fur clutched to her bosom. “Don’t you understand?” she asked with a sob in her voice. “The only thing I have left is my freedom. I can’t give it up. Please don’t ask me to.”



## Chapter Nine

“So the troops return victorious,” the queen said, sounding anything but pleased with the matter. She turned to Peacock. “It seems my stepson has accomplished what you could not.” She clucked her tongue against her teeth. “A shame he couldn’t have been killed in battle. Such an honorable way to die.”

“The woman Breanna rides with the party.”

Eleanor leaned closer to the window of the keep, her eyes narrowed as they watched the procession below. “Is that so?”

“I’m told an attachment has developed.” There was a clear tone of revulsion in Peacock’s voice.

“Och!” she fumed. “Why couldn’t she have just gone back to the rock she crawled out from under?” Eleanor felt Peacock fidget by her side as the troops returned home to flags, fanfare and tears for the fallen. She turned to look up at him. This was the twentieth night. She had only one chance left. “I shall require your services once more, I’m afraid.”

Peacock did not meet her eyes. He stared stonily at the troops below. Then, in a very low voice, he whispered, “No.”

“No?” The queen turned to study him through narrowed eyes. “Did you just say no?”

Finally he dropped his gaze from the window and the intensity behind his black eyes nearly knocked Eleanor over. “That’s right, my queen,” Peacock snarled. “I said no.”

“How dare—” But Eleanor had no time to finish. Peacock grabbed her arm, holding her wrist so tight she felt the bones pop beneath his hand.

“There is only one thing you can promise that will entice me to perform this wretched act with that dragon slaying he-she.”

With a squeak of pain as Peacock tightened his grip on her, Eleanor asked, “What is that?”

“Marry me so that I may rule by your side.”

Eleanor tried to wriggle her wrist free, but Peacock refused to release her. “I’m sorry, Captain,” Eleanor said, her voice strained. “You know the law. I must marry royalty.”

“That law applies only to men, and you know it.”

Eleanor gasped. “How do you know that?”

“I’ve read the scrolls myself.”

“You read?”

He nodded.

“How very studious of you.”

Peacock ignored her jibe and pulled her close so that she had to crane her neck to look up at him when he spoke. “What’s it going to be, Your Highness? Take your chances on that dragon-slaying princess having pure blood, or accept me by your side as your equal?”

## Chapter Ten

Brea climbed the ridiculous ladder that was now required for her to reach the top of her bed. Twenty feather mattresses. She counted them as she climbed. “*Nothing but the best for our guest,*” the queen had assured her. Not likely! But Brea had promised Cahill she would spend one more night. Promised him she’d think over his proposal and give him her final answer in the morning.

She could have ridden out. She had the seven bags of gold in payment for the slaughter of the dragons. Seven bags of gold would last her a long time. A lifetime, if she was careful. There was no reason for her to stay in the castle one more night. Except that she couldn’t leave. The thought of never seeing Cahill again sent a chill through her bones and pierced her heart. The idea of leaving, of returning to a life of solitude, hunting dragons—alone, staying in flea-ridden beds—never knowing the comfort of a warm body by her side, her only companion her horse. The thought of returning to the life she’d lead for the last five years no longer held the same appeal.

She was a fool.

Cahill wanted her. He loved her. He’d told her so, over and over and over again.

And she wanted Cahill.

Suddenly Brea sat up in bed because she could no longer remember her reasons for refusing him. For the first time, everything became clear. She loved him. She loved Cahill! She wouldn’t give anything up by marrying him. She would gain a lover, a companion and a friend. With Cahill by her side, Brea could start living life all over again.

Now that she’d had her revelation, it took great restraint not to run out the door, down the hall, find Cahill’s chamber and throw herself in his arms. But it was late, and she was suddenly exhausted, from the travel, from the battle, from everything. Though she loved him with all her heart and could hardly wait to tell the whole world, a part of her also wanted to hold on to the knowledge for just this night. To keep this one last thing to herself; at least until morning. Then, when the sun rose, she would go to his chamber, accept his proposal and make love to him, trying out that thing he said some women liked to do.

It was only moments later, as Brea imagined just how that act might be performed, that she fell into an exhausted, dreamless slumber. Sometime in the middle of the night, however, Brea was roused by something hard poking her in the back. “Errrghh,” she mumbled and rolled over. But the poking didn’t stop.

“Princess,” a voice slurred in her ear, “wake up.”

Brea rolled toward the voice and smacked into a warm and fully naked male body. Her eyelids flew open, though it made no difference. The room was completely dark. "Cahill?" she whispered.

"Ummph," came his reply along with the sour stench of Brandy wine on his breath.

"Och, Cahill, you're drunk." She gave him a nudge with her elbow.

"Drunk on love," he slurred as he reached for her in the dark. His clumsy hands fumbled sloppily with the bedclothes and her nightdress.

Brea slapped his hands away. "Cahill, enough! Go back to bed. We'll talk in the morning."

"I'm already in bed. The only bed I want to be in," he murmured as he grappled her breasts, squeezing too hard, hurting her.

"I said stop!" Brea brought her knee up. She didn't intend to have her knee land where it did, but she also didn't try to avoid that sensitive area between his legs.

Cahill groaned and curled around his injury.

"Serves you right," Brea muttered as she kicked at his back with her feet. "Now go back to your own bed!"

The growl started as a low rumble from beside her and then grew. "She-devil!" Cahill spat as he turned and threw himself on top of her. "You'll pay for that." His slobbering mouth fell upon hers, forcing her lips apart, driving his tongue down her throat. Brea tried to kick free, but his weight bore her into the suffocating mounds of mattresses beneath her.

Everything was all wrong. Cahill's kisses, his body, his anger, his voice. This was not the Cahill she loved. This was not a man she wanted to marry. This was her nightmare version of marriage come true.

"You like it rough, Princess?" he slobbered in her ear.

"Yeah," Brea sobbed. "I like it rough." Then she slipped her hand beneath the pillow and withdrew her dagger, slashing blindly in front of her.

"My hand!" he cried. "Why, you bloody bitch."

But Brea didn't give him another chance to attack. With both legs she kicked him from her bed. Cahill tumbled back, his body thudding dully against the wooden floor, twenty mattresses beneath her. "And don't even think about coming back or I will kill you."

She heard him rise slowly to his feet. He fumbled blindly in the dark, finally found the door and slammed it shut behind him.

Brea dropped the dagger, covered her face and wept.

At the break of dawn, Brea dressed, her traveling cloak around her shoulders, her purse of gold hidden beneath her tunic, her heart empty and desolate. She felt as if her soul had died and left her body drained and numb. With slow steps she descended the stairs to the foyer where the queen waited with the captain of

the guard by her side, probably having been alerted to her departure by the footman she'd asked to ready her mount.

As Brea approached, the queen stepped into her path and said, "My dear, I'm so sorry to see you l—"

"Get out of my way." Caring nothing for the queen's gasp of surprise, Brea pushed roughly past her. She had her sights set on the door. She had to get out. Now.

Just as she felt the doors swing out beneath her hands, she heard the unmistakable sound of rapid footfalls down stairs. Her empty heart dropped into her stomach, and suddenly all of the emotions that eluded her returned with a vengeance.

"Brea! Wait!"

Brea ran. She ran for the stables where Elrond stood, saddled and waiting. With a hop she was on his back and riding hard across the courtyard.

"Stop!"

Brea kicked Elrond into a gallop, only to have to pull up on the reins as she came upon a closed drawbridge. "Open the bridge!" she shouted to the keeper.

To her relief, the bridge started to move under the loud clanking of chains against cogs.

"Stop! Stop that bridge!" Cahill ordered as he sprinted toward her only a few hundred paces behind.

With a thunderous squeal, the drawbridge ceased its movement. Brea cursed and then spun Elrond around to face her once-again nemesis. "What do you want?" she scowled.

Now that it was obvious she could not leave, Cahill slowed his stride. He put his hands up in supplication. "Please, Brea. Wait. There's something I need to say."

"You said everything you needed to last night."

"What?" He paused and then continued. "I just wanted to tell you that I don't want to marry you."

"You don't..." Brea didn't think her heart could break into any more pieces. But it could and it did. "You're no better than any of them, do you know that? You're a stinking, filthy, rutting pig." Brea sat straight and tall in her saddle. She looked down her nose at the man who stood beneath her. The man she'd thought she loved. The man who'd hurt her worse than even the dragon who'd scarred her. With a flare of her nostrils, she sucked all the moisture from her mouth and spat on the ground by the side of his boot. She turned back toward the bridge and said, "Tell the keeper to lower the bridge."

She didn't hear him give the command—perhaps it was as simple as a flick of his wrist—but the bridge roared to life and Brea closed her eyes to wait as tears gathered behind her lids. But all she could see was Cahill. His expression, pale and crushed. His hands held out to her, pleading with her; open, strong, those hands had given her such pleasure.

Frowning, Brea realized there was something wrong with the picture in her mind. What was it? Suddenly she spun her horse around, finding Cahill standing in the very same position she'd left him, as if she'd turned him to stone. "Show me your hands."

“What?”

She rode up to his side, leaned over Elrond’s back and grabbed his arm. She flipped his right hand over. Nothing. Not a scratch. “Show me your left.” Cahill gave her his hand. She inspected it. Again, nothing. Brea nearly fell off her horse. She shut her eyes and drew a deep breath. It wasn’t him last night. It wasn’t him!

Cahill snatched his hands from hers and drew his sword. His movement was so sudden Brea was left with her mouth open in shock and confusion. But Cahill wasn’t looking at her. He was looking at something over her head. Suddenly a great shadow passed between the ground and the sun, and Cahill cried, “Breanna, watch out!”

All Brea had time for was a quick glance up, into the fiendish yellow eyes of her true nemesis, the enormous mother of all dragons. “Spawn of the damned,” she cursed. She reached for her sword just as the beast swooped and grabbed the back of her cloak in its reeking muzzle.

“No!” Cahill cried.

With a swing of her arm, Brea embedded her sword in the side of the monster’s neck. It pitched its head in an attempt to toss Brea to her death. But she held onto her sword with all her might, her legs kicking instinctively to find purchase. The dragon dived and weaved, but Brea held on. Heading directly for the castle, the enormous beast flew straight at a wall, trying to wipe Brea off on the stone façade. Instead, she simply used the stone as leverage for her flailing feet and pulled herself up to straddle the neck of the fiend.

However, this dragon was so large, she could scarcely sit astride its breadth, and Brea was afraid if she pulled her sword loose she would lose her hold and fall to her death. Suddenly the dragon swooped again and flew only a horse-height above the ground. Brea considered jumping off, but she knew her chances of getting in position to kill the beast again were slim to none. It was only when she looked up and realized that the dragon was flying straight for the yawning opening of the gates of the castle walls that Brea realized what the brute intended to do. Knock her off on the lintel stones as it flew through the opening to freedom.

“Fires of hell!” Brea muttered. With only seconds to act, she knew what she had to do. Somehow she had to flip her body so that she clung beneath the beast, not on top of it.

Just as she was about to pull her leg over the dragon’s neck, Brea felt a vibration along the length beneath her. She looked up and there sat Cahill, looping a length of rope around the dragon’s curved horn and pulling himself into position. He drew his sword, lifted it and plunged. The dragon squawked, but something was wrong. It wobbled and shuddered, but the dragon did not die.

“Cahill! Grab my hand!” Brea shouted. He reached back for her, and their hands locked just as the monster pitched awkwardly to the left. If it wasn’t for Cahill’s grasp, Brea would have fallen. But his grip was firm and Brea knew, without a doubt, he would not let go. Cahill pulled her up the dragon’s neck while

she tugged on her embedded sword. With a wet, sucking sound, her sword came free, and Brea found herself wrapped protectively by Cahill's right arm.

"Now," she shouted as she raised her sword. "Let me go."

"No. Give me your sword."

"Cahill! I can do it!" It was only a split second, but it seemed like an eternity as she watched Cahill at war with himself, wanting to save her yet trusting Brea to save herself. Brea needed only to narrow her eyes at Cahill for him to loosen his grip. Once free, Brea lunged forward, raised her sword above her head and plunged it straight into the eye of the dragon. With a final shudder, the creature expelled its last burst of fire and dropped like a stone to the ground.

Without a second to spare, Brea jumped and rolled to safety amidst the sound of confusion, terror and horrible cries of pain. "Cahill?" she cried as she leapt to her feet, certain the screams were his. "Cahill!"

Cahill appeared from the other side of the downed beast, his clothes torn, his face streaked with dirt and dragon blood. "Here, Brea. I'm here."

Brea sprinted to his side and threw herself into his arms. He hugged her tight then drew her back from the dragon's carcass. "Oh no! Look!"

There, sticking out from beneath the gigantic body of the dragon was the bottom of a gown and a pair of fine satin slippers that kicked once, then twice before falling limp. The queen was dead.

"Help!"

Hand in hand, Brea and Cahill rushed toward the cries of distress only to find Peacock, the captain of the guard, also trapped beneath the beast. His legs were surely crushed, but he still lived. He held his hands out to Cahill and Brea, asking to be pulled free. Cahill reached for him, but Brea stopped him.

"No," she said. "Leave him." For across the palm of the captain's hand stretched a nasty gash. A dagger wound. Made by the dagger at Brea's waist. She pulled Cahill back to safety just as the dragon combusted, flames shooting high into the air, singeing the tips of Brea's hair. Peacock's screams died out almost before they began.

Cahill held her in his arms and kissed her face and hair in relief. "I don't care about my title, Brea. All I care about is you."

"I know."

"We don't have to marry, not if you don't want. But I do need you, Brea. I need you to stay with me."

All Brea could do was shake her head. "No," she said. "No, if I stay we do this right."

"What are you saying, Princess?"

"I want to marry you, Cahill. I want to belong to you and I want you to belong to me."

Cahill studied her for a moment, then he lifted her off her feet and twirled her in the air as he hooted with joy.

Grinning and giggling like she hadn't done in years, Brea added, "I think you'd better call the clergyman immediately. There's something I really want to try."

The most glorious smile spread across Cahill's face as he hugged her so hard she could barely breathe. He kissed her head, her nose, her cheek and finally her mouth. "I have a feeling that the two of us are going to live happily ever after."

"Cahill," Brea chided as her hands slipped down his back to his splendidly firm backside. "You know I don't believe in fairytales."

"No?" He planted a deliciously wet kiss on her lips. "That's funny, because you're living one."



## About the Author

DL spent her youth living by trial and error. From touring with an international performing group, backpacking through northern Africa to living bohemian style in Berlin, she pursued adventure and passion from one place to the next, never really knowing where she'd end up. It wasn't until she met the love of her life, the son of a Nakoda chief, and started a family, that DL found her true calling—writing. Now, she writes about passion and adventure, and she is happy to say she still never knows where her characters are going to end up. To learn more about D.L. Snow, please visit [www.dlsnow.ca](http://www.dlsnow.ca).

*One act of kindness cements a destiny she couldn't fathom.*

## Wolf

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### *An Enchanted Story*

As a child, the Lost Woods were Hannah's passion. A place where she dreamed of mysterious creatures, including one she saved—a man who magically changed into a wolf. Now, twelve years later, the woods are her refuge from a horde of marauders who killed her mother.

This time, it is the wolf who saves her. And he is no dream.

Stephan can't help but remember the time Hannah encouraged him to free his injured leg and continue the soul journey required of his kind. The child unwittingly bound herself to him, and now the woman tempts him like no other. Yet if she learns his secret, her fragile trust could be broken for all time.

Hannah doesn't see how she can possibly fit into Stephan's world—especially when their overwhelming passion reveals the one reason she should not trust him. Stephan has fought more than his share of battles, but the one for Hannah's heart is the one that could break his own...

*Warning: Kickass, shape-shifting alphas will leave you breathlessly begging for Lost Woods. Be careful...they may know what you think!*

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Wolf:*

Stephan.

My pulse quickened and I fiddled with the hem of my borrowed dress. I gawked at his powerful body as he greeted Nalla. His eyes danced with adoration when around her, and I wished I could see the same glimmer in his eyes when he thought of me.

The same type of clinging leather pants molded against his powerful thighs. Muscle rippled across his stomach, partially visible through the open wood-colored vest. His chest was unmarred by hair. My fingers longed to trace the contours of his smooth skin.

Heat spread through me to center at my nether regions. I squeezed my thighs together and looked down because I was afraid my cheeks were stained with shame. My attraction to him had grown, and my body refused to behave.

His long legs brought him to me faster than I was prepared for. I stood, my legs wobbling as my breathing accelerated. His hands grasped my arms, steadying me with a strength that made me shiver. Not even the mightiest of my village's fighters were so honed and muscular. I'd seen enough of his people to know none of the men in his pride were like the men I was accustomed to.

"Thanks."

Thanks. Not only was it a naïve and foolish thing to say, but it came out with a meekness that made my mind scream at my blathering tongue. I'd thought of clever retorts and envisioned conversations with him about many things for the past few nights. I'd even fantasized about him.

And all I had to say when he stood before me was "thanks". A flicker of darkness appeared and disappeared in his golden eyes.

Nalla shuffled a chair. The dragging sound across the bare floor of the eating area pulled me from my lustful thoughts. I focused my attention to where his fingers touched my skin. Tingles danced there and spread through me like molten fire. Heat rushed to my core. My pussy moistened. My nipples hardened.

I fought the urge to tug on my dress or look down to see if it was apparent. I refused to sever my contact with him.

"She's been asking about you." Nalla's voice quashed the connection I'd felt. I stepped back enough to allow my heartbeat to slow, but his assessing gaze remained on me, and I was lost in the tumbling waves of desire his presence had incited.

"Really?" His voice, filled with curiosity, made me smile. "I've been catching up on pride issues. Some of it is quite tedious. I'm sure your company would have broken up the monotony."

"She has a restless spirit, much like you." Nalla chuckled. "Were she one of us, she'd be prowling in animal form."

Stephan grinned. I couldn't understand their amusement, but I knew she had no ill regard for me. She sat at the table and regarded us.

"Is her leg healing well?" he asked.

I hadn't realized how injured my leg was until Nalla had begun treating it. "Those poultices of hers don't burn anymore. Surely that's a good sign."

Nalla laughed. The rich tones of her wise voice soothed me. I hadn't realized I missed my gran until that moment. They were too alike for me not to be drawn to her.

"She's been asking about your talisman and wanted to walk the village. Perhaps you can appease her."

"Sure." His voice was low. "I'll gladly tell her why she has our talisman and what it represents."

"Your father wouldn't approve."

"Then it's a good thing I stopped heeding his advice long ago. If anyone has need of me, send Fallon for me."

Fallon. "He's your brother, right?"

"I see you've been learning of my family. I trust Nalla's delighted in telling you many stories of my foolish youth."

I wished that was the case. The woman had offered nothing.

"I will, now that I see you approve."

Stephan chuckled and touched my arm. The contact made my skin tingle. "Let us go before she starts now."

His arm rested on my back just above my waist. Cool air whipped through my hair when we exited the home I'd been locked away in. Unable to contain my glee, I paused and took a deep breath.

"I should've come sooner, but Nalla kept telling me you needed to heal."

"She's very protective."

"It's in her blood. Women in my clan have been healers for many generations." His hand fell away from me when we began to walk through his village.

Everyone halted their activities as we passed. I found their scrutiny disconcerting. The first few moved to their knees as if about to undertake a chore I didn't understand. All the homes we passed resembled one another. Most displayed a talisman on the entry.

I tried to study them without being obvious, but decided it best not to when Stephan drew me closer to him.

"Your people don't like me."

"They're unaccustomed to strangers. There's a difference." The sincerity calmed my nervousness even though I doubted it was the truth for everyone.

"I've heard some of them yelling at Nalla." I winced when his jaw twitched. "She tries to hide it, but I hear them. They want me gone."

"She should have told me this. I would've dealt with their meddling myself."

I shook my head. "They have a right to be upset. I'm doing nothing to earn my keep and am not of your pride."

We continued our path toward the woods and my pulse quickened when I realized he didn't intend to remain within the village. A few awkward smiles greeted me once we neared a group of homes with the same talisman that I wore around my neck.

"This is your family's area?"

He nodded. "On my father's side."

"Why isn't Nalla here? She displays this talisman, yet is on the other side of the village."

"She's on my mother's side, but may display whichever talisman she feels within her soul since she's a healer. She's chosen this one since it's stronger than her other option."

"Do all your kind get that option?"

"Only the healers or those within the royal line." His hand returned to my back and drew me toward him until my thigh brushed his as we walked. "You gather information well." My mind swelled with his admiration.

He paused and turned me to face him. His attention moved to the village, now a good distance from our secluded cove. I was fascinated by the large tree misshapen by time. Its trunk was hollowed near the base. A small sitting stool rested within the area.

“This is my retreat.”

“It’s beautiful.”

His fingers grazed my cheek. My heart flailed in my chest. He’d brought me here—trusted me with his private spot. Could he be feeling the heat between us as I did? My breathing became ragged. My nipples ached with a hardness my naïve mind couldn’t deny. My entire body yearned for Stephan.

“You have no idea what hunger you incite in me, Hannah.” His breath fell against my forehead as he drew me forward until my hips collided with his groin. “Your thoughts drive me mad with the need to possess you.”

I stumbled on his statement, but any attempt to understand it vanished when his hand wrapped in my hair and he drew me to his lips. I closed my eyes. Unable to breathe, I prayed my pounding pulse wouldn’t explode with the turbulent flames of anticipation burning me.

His lips caressed mine and his tongue tasted my mouth, tracing the contours before foraying to my tongue. I swallowed his groan, thinking it more of a growl. My arms wrapped around him.

The kiss was unexpected and unlike any of the wayward advances village men had made—not that many had tried. I followed his lead and clung to him, my body burning with a need I didn’t understand or know how to sate. All I knew was Stephan would absolve me from my raging desires.

His kiss grew more demanding, more consuming. I relished his body crushed against mine. Heat spread through my legs as he lifted my dress. I moaned when he guided me toward the tree until my back was pressed against it. His hand ran up my thigh while his mouth claimed mine.

His other hand rubbed an aching nipple through my dress. I longed to strip and feel his fingers on me there. A growl echoed around us and mingled with my gasp as his fingers found my pussy.

Hot lips moved to my ear. The huskiness of his voice rumbled through me. “You’re so wet for me, Hannah.”

*The darkness in his soul could claim her love...or her life...*

## **Savage Kingdom**

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Freygard, a world where women rule and men are slaves, would seem to be a female Nirvana. Not for the warrior Nerya. So far her required visits to the coupling chambers have been awkward and embarrassing. Until Jaden. Despite his chains, the defiant slave's expert pleasuring satisfies her body—and sparks a determination to defend him from her cruel queen.

Jaden couldn't be in a worse position. Nerya has not only claimed his prized white stallion, she's somehow managed to abscond with his ability to resist her sexual appeal. His escape attempt is disastrous, until Nerya intervenes with an unheard-of deal. In exchange for guiding her to an unmapped kingdom to find the sister she never knew she had, she will free both him and his men.

On the journey, Nerya's determined to resist her powerful attraction to Jaden melts away in the heat of his desire. Leaving her wondering just who is in control—and what it is about him that bothers her. When they are forced to face a soul-stealing mage, his secret is revealed.

He is warrior of the feared Dai'Shi-en, legendary for the dark magic that fuels their violence...and their lust.

*Warning: Contains hot, sweaty warrior sex, sex in chains and sex in a tent.*

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Savage Kingdom:*

She'd made a mistake sitting so close to him because, moving more swiftly than she could ever have expected, Jaden grabbed her and pulled her toward him. Keeping her imprisoned in his strong arms, he took possession of her lips, kissing her with unrestrained passion, thrusting his tongue into her mouth. She should fight him, try to get away, yet she couldn't find the strength. Her body responded to his sensual demands, and her tongue darted between his lips, eager to explore the hot, moist interior of his mouth. Raw unrestrained lust flooded through her as the kiss deepened and continued until she was boneless and trembling with desire.

As Jaden let go of her, Nerya shakily straightened. She rubbed a hand against her face, but that wouldn't wipe away the blush that tainted her cheeks. How could she have allowed herself to get so carried away with lust for a mere man? She was a warrior. She must act like one. Yet still part of her longed for him to touch her again. "How dare you! I could have you whipped for such disrespectful behavior."

"You stare at me with disdain and call me slave. Yet I have only to touch you and you melt in my arms."

"You deceive yourself."

"Your attraction for me terrifies you, doesn't it?"

“The women of Freygard do not feel desire for slaves.”

“Don’t try to deny it. Your expression tells me all I want to know.” He continued to stare at her with eyes so black she could lose her soul in them. “Leave now, then. Find some other man to couple with, if all you want is fertile seed.”

What sort of warrior would she be if she fled from this challenge? Nerya couldn’t tear her gaze from the face of this demon who tempted her to deny all she’d been taught. She’d bedded a number of women, but she’d never experienced the pleasure she’d felt when she’d coupled with Jaden. Deep down she had to admit she was desperate to experience that exquisite pleasure again. Her entire body ached with desire for him.

“Men are put on this earth to serve women, and if I order it, you will serve me right now.”

“Yes. I’ll serve you.” He slid his long legs off the bed, and Nerya sprang to her feet, the stool clattering to the floor as she took a step back, out of his reach. “But not in the way your queen demands it. Unchain me and let me show you what true pleasure can be.” As she stepped back another pace, he added, “You’ve no need to fear me. I won’t harm you.”

“I don’t fear you. I’m a warrior. I fear nothing.”

“Except your own desire.” His voice was lower pitched now and caressingly smooth. “I’ll not harm you or even attempt to escape.”

“This is insane.”

“Sex wouldn’t be quite such a humiliating experience if I was unfettered,” he replied, his arm muscles flexing as he pulled against his chains. “Surely you don’t keep all the slaves who serve in these chambers chained?”

“Of course we don’t.”

“Perhaps I should feel honored, then, that you all fear me so much. You’re curious about me and my mission, are you not? If you release me, I’ll tell you all you wish to know.”

“*All* I wish to know?”

“Everything, Nerya. In fact, there are things you should know that may well eventually concern the fate of your land as well as mine.”

Was he telling the truth? Did he have such information? It might be wise to take advantage of this situation and learn all she could. Even if she released him from his chains, there was no way he could escape. He had no weapon, and she was perfectly capable of defending herself if the need arose.

“If you are lying to me...”

“I’m not lying.” He put his hand to his heart. “I swear on my honor as a nobleman that I’m not.”

Nerya walked to the table, flipped open the small wooden box and removed the key to his manacles. Not at all certain why she was acting so rashly, she returned to Jaden and slid the cylindrical iron key into

the lock. With a quick twist, the locking pin released and the heavy manacle fell open. Jaden gave a sigh of relief, flexing his arm while she opened the other manacle.

Jaden sprang from the bed and grabbed her, reacting far too swiftly for her to even attempt to resist him as he pulled her back against his muscular chest. Yet she was certain he'd no intention of harming her as one of his hands reached for her breasts, while the other slid across her stomach. He eased her closer. Her bottom pressed against his groin, and the rigid line of his cock dug seductively into her buttocks.

"Relax," he whispered in a low, hypnotic voice as his warm breath brushed her earlobe. "I'm not going to hurt you. I just want to give you pleasure."

He kissed her neck, then tipped her forward a little so he could unfasten the back laces of her gown. Pulling them apart, he eased the neck open wider and slid the garment from her shoulders and down her arms. The silky fabric crumpled around her waist, and Nerya shivered as one of his large hands clasped her left breast. He kneaded the firm mound until she gave a soft, pleading moan. Then his fingers brushed against her nipples. Arching her back, she ground her buttocks against his cock as Jaden rolled the tiny teats between fingers and thumbs, pulling on them until they stiffened and elongated into hard cones.

"Jaden." She gasped as he twisted her around and eased the white silk from her hips. The dress slithered downwards, landing in a crumpled pool at her feet.

He towered over her, and she was faced with a broad, muscular chest still hidden beneath the linen tunic. She lifted her hands, caressed his dusky skin and threaded her fingers through his black, silky locks. Jaden's mouth covered hers, and he kissed her long and deeply, sensually exploring her mouth with his tongue. Her fingers reached for the ties that held his tunic together at the shoulders. She wanted him naked—she needed to feel his warm flesh pressed close to hers. Nerya's fingers, normally so agile, fumbled with the knots. Her insides twisted with desire and her limbs felt weak, while his kiss made her breathless with lust.

"Let me." He pulled at the ties, ripping them away. The tunic fell to the floor. Jaden kicked it aside, scooped her into his arms and carried her to the bed.

Before Nerya knew what was happening, she lay on the mattress and Jaden crouched astride her legs. As he leaned over her, the ends of his hair brushed erotically against the skin of her stomach, and she shivered with pleasure. He caressed the firm curves of her breasts, then kissed the soft flesh. Taking one aching nipple between his lips, he sucked on it until a starburst of pleasurable sensations surged through her body, flooding her veins with desire. Pulling the nipple deeper into his mouth, Jaden grazed it with his teeth as one of his large hands slid down over her midriff. His sword-roughened fingers explored her body, his hand molding itself to the swell of her hips, moving seductively over the flat plain of her stomach.

Trembling, she lay there, too weak to do anything as he splayed his fingers over her lower belly then threaded them through the springy curls covering her pubis. Her heart leapt as his hand crept between her thighs. Never had she dreamed she could feel need like this.



Nerya shuddered as his long fingers eased their way between her sex lips, sliding deeper into the soft folds. They moved with tantalizing slowness along the narrow pink valley until they reached her clitoris. At once the pleasure grew and expanded, unfurling like the petals of an early blossoming rose. Nerya gave a keening gasp as he circled the sensitive spot, rubbing it with his fingertips. Moaning with bliss, she allowed her thighs to roll fully open as he slipped his fingers inside her. Moisture flowed, making his movements more fluid as he began to thrust into her with a seductive rhythm, while the pad of his thumb teased her pleasure nub. This was like no sexual encounter she'd experienced in the past. Nerya closed her eyes and gave herself up to the erotic delight.

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