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HEART OF A WARRIOR

LOVE'S IMMORTAL PANTHEON VOL. 3

Heart of A Warrior

By

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Dedicated to all those who must face challenges in their lives.

A warrior survives doing what he can to heal the heart, body or mind. When all say to give up, *Hope* whispers, "Don't. Try again."

Chapter One

"I call to you to do battle by my uncle's side... Aid him in his conquest. Let your blade be as his should be.... His heart as your heart."

The young man's plea for his uncle did not go unheard. Scáthach appeared in the hospital room seconds after she heard the prayer. She was curious to know why she'd been summoned here to this realm. Smells of disinfectant, sweat and death wafted through the open door of the hospital room. Monitor beeps, the rolling of food carts and the light murmur of the hospital staff touched her ears, but no threat seemed eminent. She had donned her warrior garb of tightly fitted clothing with her sword and axe strapped to her side. Her long dark bangs were pulled back from her face and braided to stay out of her eyes. Being battle ready, had kept her alive, but no foe awaited her here in the beige-walled room meant for the ill or the dying.

It had been some time since she had been in this world with its computers and high tech machinery. She much preferred the centuries before there were gadgets to help mankind to work less. The luxuries made them weak and soft around the middle. A real man should be fit with muscled arms to enable him to wield a sword ... or to hold a woman in his embrace in the art of making love, whichever seemed fitting at the time. She shook her head in dismay of what mankind had given up for his comforts. "Humans," she muttered under her breath. "Thank the gods, I am no longer one of them." The Tuatha de Dannan had touched her, making her the Warrior Goddess.

She trained men worthy of her guidance on the magical Isle of Mist, which others called the Isle of Skye. Her duties also were to guide the souls slain in battle on their Death Journey to Tir Nan Og, the land of eternal youth and beauty.

The young boy, who had summoned her, lounged next to the hospital bed in slumber. His cheeks were still round and childish with freckles that bridged his nose, giving his age to be no more than ten and two. His sandy blond hair hung in waves over his left eye. He was long and lanky, showing signs he would one day be a tall man. He clutched a book tightly to his chest and she could make out the title: Celtic Gods and Goddess. A smile curved her lips. The boy was also smart. He had sent for her, a warrior who had taught the greatest heroes of all time how to fight. He prayed for his uncle in hopes she would guide him. She frowned at the strange request. This was not a battlefield.

She glanced at the bed where a man lay still as death, presumably the uncle in question. Tubes and wires were attached to his body while a monitor beeped in time with his heartbeat. Dark auburn hair with strands of mahogany and russet covered his head like a thick mane. The gods would approve of his strong chiseled chin with hair stubble roughing the edges. His cheekbones were broad and his eyes slanted catlike with thick lashes that were gold near the lids and deep auburn as they curved out to lay featherlike on his cheeks. His features betrayed his Celtic heritage.

She pulled back the covers and took her fill of what lay beneath. Broad muscular chest, flat stomach and long thick thighs flattered him. This was not a man who sat behind a desk, flipping switches to do his work. He appeared to be

strong and yet... She took hold of his hand to read his palm and see what his future held. Indeed the man was at war. A battle wreaked havoc inside of him, trying to take over and bring him to his knees. Death was near and it wouldn't be long before his fight would be over and yet the man hadn't given up.

She glanced at the sleeping child again. He wanted his uncle to live and feared he couldn't fight this alone. She was an expert in the art of war and never shied away from a challenge. She returned her gaze to the bedside, running a hand down the man's arm. A war was a war no matter where the battle was held. Be it on the fields of heather with an army or an illness attacking the body. Both held an enemy that needed to be defeated.

She'd see if this man was worthy to have her as a teacher. If so, she would give him the tools to battle this, making him a warrior. She lifted his arm and read the nametag attached to his wrist. "Trey Brennan." Her gaze shifted to his face. His eyes had fluttered open at the sound of her voice. The catlike eyes were an amber color, warm and intelligent. "Are you a fighter?" she asked.

He appeared confused by her question, his eyebrows drawing together, giving him a fierce look, a warrior's glare.

"Are you a fighter?" she repeated the question.

His brows smoothed and his gaze gave her an appreciative once over. "You're beautiful. Are you an angel?"

She had been called many things. Angel was not one of them. "No. I want your word that you'll fight to live. I will not waste my time on someone who will surrender at the first sight of a battle."

He glanced at his nephew still asleep in the chair. "I don't want to die."

"Then you must listen to me."

He nodded his head. "I will do anything. I'm all Joey has. His parents died five years ago. If I'm gone he'll have no one to care for him."

Joey was the boy's name. Trey had raised him then. Good, she thought. He will work hard, knowing he must survive for his nephew. All warriors had to have a purpose or else the fight wouldn't matter. Win or die would not make a difference. In this case, survival had to be something he wanted, something he would strive to have. She gave him a curt nod. "Then I accept you for my student."

His lips curved at the corners.

Nice full lips meant for kissing, she thought.

"This is a nice dream." His voice was a deep masculine baritone. "I always had a thing for beautiful raven-haired women."

She leaned close so she could whisper in his ear. "Work hard and you may win me as well. Aye?"

"I'd like that." He closed his eyes again, falling back to sleep.

Chapter Two

Trey awoke with a start, inhaling as he did so as if he couldn't catch his breath. Wide eyed he glanced around his make shift room—a tent of some sort with only furs to cover what he supposed was his bed. Clothing lay neatly beside him along with furred boots. A long sword etched with Celtic symbols rested on top of the garments, gleaming silver in the light that shone through the opening in the tent. “What is going on?” His thoughts were a jumbled mess as he sorted through where he was and why. He'd been ill—cancer. The big “C” word sent tremors down his spine. Leukemia to be exact and the bone marrow transplant hadn't worked. His body was rejecting the treatment. So why wasn't he in the hospital? “Don't be stupid, Brennan. This is a dream.” His brow creased and his frown deepened as he wondered why the dream seemed so real. “The meds must be strong if I can bring on this delusion with such vivid detail.”

No, this was something entirely different. The inkling in the back of his mind told him this wasn't a dream. His eyes widened then. “I've died and this is... what exactly? Was this Heaven? Or perhaps this was one of the levels of Hell.

He threw back the furs that covered him intent on finding out what was going on, but halted when he realized he was bare as the day he'd been born. Not that he was opposed to sleeping in the nude, but when he didn't know how he came to be without his clothes that was a whole different story. Apprehension knotted in his stomach. Then he chuckled over the obscurity of the situation. “You're probably dead, man. Why would you need clothes?” As he said the words his gaze landed on the garments beside his makeshift bed.

At the same moment the flap opened.

“Shit.” He hastily covered his lower extremity with his hands for what good it did when he was standing there in all his natural glory. If he was dead, how come he still had emotions like being embarrassed over being found with his pants down, so to speak? To make matters worse, the visitor was a knock-you-off-your-feet gorgeous woman. She was tall, standing only a few inches shorter than his height of six-foot four. Her hair was long almost black, but the light shining through the opening of the tent danced off the strands, highlighting her tresses with beams of cinnamon, russet, and red amber. She was clad in a tight fitting garment of leather and fur that accentuated every curve. Silver bands adorned her arms with Celtic carvings etched into the metal. Her firm thighs were bare and went on forever. Fur boots covered her feet to mid calf. “Warrior,” he whispered wondering why that word of all words came to mind. Not exactly a word used for an endearment and yet the woman's lips twitched at the corners and her pale blue eyes twinkled in merriment as if he paid her a compliment.

His body reacted like a man fully alive and well and he knew his fair skin turned a nice shade of pink. Her gaze flickered down to his groin and he backed up a step. What was he doing? Surely this was only a dream, some fantasy he had locked away in his pea brain to only resurface now moments before he died. That was it. This was like a last request before death took him. If that was so, then why did he have reservations?

“If you're ready, we'll begin.” Her voice was a slow burr like a melodious vibration.

“Ready?” Oh his body parts—one in particular was ready, but he had a hunch she was speaking of something entirely different.

Again, those lush full lips of hers twitched but this time a smile appeared, revealing straight white teeth. “I’ll allow you to dress then meet me outside. You don’t have much time to prepare.”

He drew his brows together in a frown. “Prepare for what?”

“To meet and destroy the enemy of course.” She didn’t wait for him to question her further, but whirled around and left the tent expecting him to do as he had been told.

Enemy? Fight? “What the hell?” He glanced around him. Maybe he had hit it on the nail. Maybe this was hell and he would be tortured by having a beautiful woman within his grasp but unable to have her, but have to wage war on some unknown enemy for further punishment. He may have never been a saint, but he hadn’t lived a wicked life. He worked hard, paid his taxes and cared for his nephew as if he were his own son. Why was he being punished? There was only one way to find out and she was waiting for him outside the tent. He was no coward and would meet whatever challenge awaited him.

He grabbed the clothes.

Chapter Three

Scáthach was glad Trey had made the transition to the Isle of Skye without any ill effects. He was indeed a strong man, standing taller than she stood. The russet strands of his hair glimmered in the sun, but once it set, the mahogany would take over, making his hair a darker shade of auburn. His body was as impressive as his face. Long and lean with hard muscled thighs. His broad shoulders and wide chest proved he could wield a sword or hold a woman close, whichever was deemed appropriate. Away from his world his true soul shone through. He radiated strength, determination and heat. She hadn't missed how his body reacted to her and truth be known, she wasn't immune to his charms either. She had not seen such beauty since she trained Cú Chulainn, the most powerful warrior Ireland had ever seen. He mastered the arts of underwater fighting and other combat moves that few ever accomplished. With her invention, the Gáe Bolg, Cú Chulainn had won many battles.

She turned as the flap swung open and Trey emerged from its depth, wearing the garments of a born warrior. A smile of pure feminine pleasure teased her lips as her gaze took him in once more. Oh yes, he was Cú Chulainn and more. The gods had surely designed Trey Brennan for battle, but they had also created him for female pleasure as well.

"Welcome, Trey Brennan to Dú Scáith."

His mouth dropped open, slacked in disbelief before he recovered. "The Castle of Shadows? Like in the legendary Scáthach's castle, the Isle of Mist?" He chuckled nervously.

"I am impressed. You know your Celtic history."

"You mean legends," he insisted.

She shrugged not seeing the difference.

He glanced around him and she gave him his leisure, letting him become accustomed to his new world. She was proud of her fortress and what she had accomplished over the centuries. The grounds were equipped with all that was needed to fine-tune a warrior's gifts. Her home stood on the most northerly island in the Inner Hebrides of what modern people now called Scotland. The island's peninsulas spread out from the mountainous center of Cuillin Hills. Her castle was strong and impenetrable while it stood shrouded in the magical mist of invisibility. Only those who were skilled and brave enough to penetrate the many defenses of her fortress were allowed access. However, she was a goddess and granted entrance to a soul who showed promise of being a fully formed warrior.

"Tell me I'm dreaming." Trey's Adam's apple bobbed up and down.

"Why would I be so inclined to tell you this?"

"Because if I'm not dreaming, I must be dead and I cannot die. Do you hear me? I won't die."

"Oh aye, I hear you well enough Trey Brennan. Let me assure you that you are neither dreaming nor dead."

He took a deep breath but still didn't relax with her news. Odd, she'd thought her words would put him at ease.

“If I’m not dead and not dreaming, what is this? Why am I here?”

She thought she had explained this to him already, but she could be a patient teacher if the mood suited her. “You must defeat your enemy and become the victor before it is too late. If you will let me, I will teach you the fine arts of combat and prepare you for the battle.”

He shook his head. “What battle? I don’t understand. I was in the hospital—my death bed if you must know and now... He spread his arms wide. “Now I’m trapped in a dream world from an old Irish legend.”

Sometimes humans were so narrowed minded. “Well, that is irrelevant. There is more than just your world. There are many realms of existence. Train well and all will make sense once more to you.”

He blinked in disbelief, his lids sliding over the amber colored eyes with a slow and deliberate closing and opening again.

Her shoulders lifted and lowered in a shrug. “What do you have to lose? Defeat the enemy here and you will find what you seek in your world.”

Chapter Four

Trey was at a loss for words. Battle? Train? Defeat the enemy? He didn't understand why his mind trapped him in this realm of unconsciousness. Why couldn't he be surrounded by beautiful women who wanted to pleasure him in the last moments he had on earth?

His gaze slid over the goddess, Scáthach with a body that screamed warrior with her firm taunt arms and thighs. Her height may intimidate some men, but he was tall and liked the idea that she would fit to him perfectly. He had a hunch the woman had passion aplenty, but she made it perfectly clear that she wanted to train him in the art of warfare—not make love to him. She took his breath away with a mere glance and his lower extremity wanted her in the worse way. Didn't it figure? He lay on his deathbed but his body still craved the feel of a woman beneath him. He supposed it was true. Men did have two brains and his lower one ached something horrible and the cure stood right in front of him in the form of a goddess.

Scáthach arched one perfectly formed eyebrow, giving him the distinct feeling she read his mind.

"Well?" she asked, her lips threatening to smile.

For a moment he didn't know what she asked. Then it dawned on him. She wanted to train him for battle and wanted his permission to proceed. What the hell? Why not? She didn't look inclined to give into his more basic physical need. Perhaps a good workout would take his mind off what he couldn't have. "Fine. I'll train."

She nodded her approval, giving him the feeling he had passed some kind of test.

He followed her out to the battlefield where other young men of various ages practiced their moves, some with a sword others with battleaxes. His fingers caressed the cool metal at his side. He once held a sword when he had attended a Scottish Festival with his nephew, but he had never wielded one in a battle—pretend or real. His thoughts wavered to Joey, wondering how he was doing. Was he all right? Was someone looking after him? He hoped he was keeping up with his school work and—

"He will be fine." Scáthach spoke, breaking through his thoughts.

"What?"

"Your nephew is strong. You've done well by him. No matter what happens, he will be all right."

For some reason her words soothed him and he believed her.

"We'll start with something simple like hand to hand combat first."

"Okay. Who will I fight?"

Her rich chuckle had him lifting a brow. "You'll fight me of course."

"I couldn't. I might hurt you."

"Really?" Her voice held a note of doubt.

He rolled his eyes. She may be in shape, but he wasn't a pushover. Besides, he was taught never to hit a woman. "Truly, I don't want..."

Before he could finish his sentence, Scáthach had swept her leg in back of his knees, sending him sprawling to the ground in an embarrassed heap. He looked

up, shading his eyes to see her standing there with her hands on her hips and grinning down at him.

"As you were saying," she said haughtily and sauntered away.

He leapt to his feet. So this was how she wanted to play. A smile slid into place. He could play rough when need be.

He went after her, intent of bringing her down and holding her there until she realized he was the stronger of the two.

She slammed her fist into his sternum with a series of powerful blows before sending a kick to the groin and a whack across his back that sent him to his knees. "What the hell," he wheezed.

She knelt down beside him. "Are you going to stop fooling around now?"

Fooling around? Was the woman mad? With a swift move he took her down hard, using his full weight to hold her, but damn if the woman didn't have moves he had never seen in his life. Before he knew it, he was the one on his back with her straddling him. He would have liked the position if she hadn't insisted in beating him to a pulp. Her fist slammed into his nose, sending a fine spray of crimson blood in the air.

"I think you broke my nose," he wailed.

"Oh aye. I did." She jumped off him and bounced on the balls of her feet. "Come on. Stand and greet me like a man."

He was seeing stars and she waved to him, enticing him to come after her.

"Now stop playing around and give me your best shot, Trey. Or don't you have it in you?"

Fine, he hadn't started this fight, but he was damn well going to finish it. He jumped to his feet, wiping away the blood from his nose with the back of his hand. He went after her.

He fought or rather he defended her blows and finally got in a few of his own. He was one bloody and bruised up mess by the time she was through with him. She still looked like a goddess with her dark silky hair shining bright in the sun's rays. Her blue eyes assessed him with a wicked gleam.

He lay sprawled on the ground for the hundredth time, trying to catch his breath. She stood over him, offering her hand to help him up. "Truce," she said. "You've had enough for one day."

"Geeze, thanks." He took hold of her hand and came to his feet. Funny how he ached everywhere imaginable and yet he'd never felt more alive. It was as if he had somehow made it through a trial of some sort and had come out the victor.

"Aye, you did well," she said, again with that mind reading ability of hers.

He gave her a half-cocked smile, mostly because his lip was swollen. "You beat the crap out of me and you're telling me I did well."

"Aye. You did well. You lived and will have another day to fight. There is no dishonor in that. Now come with me. There is a spring that will heal your wounds and I'll rub a herb ointment on your body to sooth the tension in your muscles."

"Now that sounds like something I'll enjoy."

The gleam in her pale blue eyes raked over him. "You were good on the field. You have the heart of a warrior. I wonder how you are when it comes to bed play."

Did she just ask him how he was in bed?

"No answer?" She stepped closer, running her hand leisurely up his arm, using only her fingertips.

"I...that is...I have had no complaints," he sputtered and cursed under his breath for his lack of finesse.

A low chuckle reached his red-tipped ears. "We shall see, won't we?" Then she turned on her heels expecting him to follow.

Of course he did. How could he not?

He thought he would be led back to the tent but his quarters were within the castle of Dú Scáith, a fine stone structure with all the comforts of home. Fragrant rushes covered the wood floor of his room. The sconces were lit and a warm roaring fire glowed red and orange within the fireplace, adding more light. He smiled when he caught sight of the large spacious bed that stood near the hearth with furs spread across it for added warmth. This may be a dream of some sort, but Dú Scáith was in the heart of Scotland or Alba as it once was called and the nights could be quite chilly.

Draped in a towel that one of the servants had left for him, he followed the steps down to the lower level of the castle where a hot spring waited for him. Scáthach told him the waters would sooth his aching muscles and heal his wounds. He hoped she was right. His muscles felt stretched to the limit and pain throbbed in places he didn't know could ache with such a burning intensity. Even his hair hurt, if that was possible. Probably from the few times Scáthach had managed to drag his sorry ass back into the fight. He had never met anyone who was that determined to make him throw a punch. "*You have the heart of a warrior*", she told him. Somehow that image fell short when he tried to imagine himself wielding a sword. He was a professor at a community college and the only physical strain his muscles endured was a trip to the gym four times a week. This was all before he became ill three months ago. Only yesterday, lifting his head off the pillow had proved to be a challenge. However, in this realm his destiny had shifted. He wasn't lying in a hospital bed. He was being trained for warfare by a goddess. "Just go with the flow, Brennan and see where it leads you," he mumbled under his breath.

The room below the castle was actually a cave. Rock forms of different sizes surrounded the spring and steps were carved out of the stones to give easier access into the pool. He left the towel on one of the rocks and slid beneath the froth that churned on the water's surface. Warmth immediately seeped into his pores like tiny massaging fingertips, working to smooth the kinks out of his tired muscles. The rhythmic rise and fall of the water churning and rippling around him lulled him until he felt his eyelids closing. He jerked awake, knowing he couldn't fall asleep while he lounged in a pool, unless he fancied a death by drowning.

He waded toward the steps intent on retrieving his towel and heading back to his quarters, but his gaze locked onto a vision walking toward him, a sacred beauty draped in a transparent garment. "Scáthach." His voice came out in breathless wonderment. He wanted to cross the chasm that separated them and take her into his arms, feel the softness of her flesh as his hands caressed her. Damn, he would sell his soul for just one kiss.

The seductive smile she threw at him made his body heat to a boiling point and he feared he'd melt into the bubbling froth of the spring.

"Were you expecting someone else, Trey Brennan?"

He loved the way his name rolled off her tongue as if she were a siren calling him home. "No. I didn't think you'd..." He cleared his throat. To hell with what he thought. She was here and it looked like she planned on joining him. If she did, it would be at her own risk. She may be the master on the field, but this was his battleground and his skills of seduction would make her surrender to his will. He would win her over until a throbbing desire rolled into one slow roll of want.

She seemed to sense what he wanted and let the thin garment that covered her slide off her shoulders and pool at her feet. She sure had a body that pushed all his buttons. Her hair cascaded over one shoulder in riotous waves of black silk. She was a warrior firm and strong but also feminine with luscious curves beckoning him to touch. "You're heart-stopping gorgeous," he told her in all honesty.

Her long legged gait was a pleasure to watch as she sauntered over to the pool. Her skin was smooth as silk and for a second he questioned his ability to seduce her. She was doing a mighty fine job of seducing him, but heck that was easy. All she had to do was show up.

She entered the water and glided toward him. Her hands caressed his chest with purpose. "Your heart is beating strong for one that has stopped."

"It's only an expression. You're so beautiful." He took her in his arms, feeling every curve against his body. God in heaven, he wanted her. She leaned close as if to kiss him, but her tongue stroked his lips with a soft sensual lick. If there had been any doubt of his need to take her, there was no uncertainty now. His hands plunged into her hair, pulling her head closer and with one smooth move covered her mouth with his own. Her lips demanded long slow kisses that would cloud the mind and he ravished with pleasure. His tongue boldly swept in and took more, kissing her over and over again like there was no tomorrow.

Energy flowed between them and every cell in his body erupted with the need to be inside of her. She must have sensed his need or maybe it mirrored her own. She wrapped her legs around his waist, giving him access to what his body craved. His hand stroked her back, finding the deep curve that gave rise to her firm bottom. Tilting her hips, his swollen and rigid flesh filled her completely. Her gasp slid along his senses, making his body ache with need for release, but not yet. Aware of the strength and warmth of her flesh, he wanted to savor the embrace. Gripping a fist full of her hair, he slanted his mouth over hers with a hungry kiss. She opened her mouth eagerly, welcoming the feel of his tongue stroking hers. A low growl of approval vibrated from her as she gave in to the pleasure he offered. He hadn't moved inside her, but already her hot tunnel clutched and gripped him, threatening to make him lose his control.

Her mouth tore away from his with breathless abandonment and light smoldered in the liquid blue of her eyes. "Now, my warrior."

There was no mistaking her meaning. His hands held her hips as their bodies moved in time with the hypnotic sound of the water lapping against the rocks. She clung to him desperately and his eyes closed relishing the way her flesh felt warm and soft against him. His heart thudded erratically against his chest,

wanting more of her. He sunk into her body over and over again until the heady rush of pleasure ignited as she spiraled up and over, taking him with her.

His mouth found hers again and his fingers slid into her hair, bringing her closer as he plundered her lips with a kiss that was sure to reach her soul.

His eyes opened and he looked at her with a satisfied smile. "You are a goddess."

Her mouth pressed against the pulse in his neck. "Aye, I know." Her seductive voice caressed him.

He could feel himself hardening inside of her again.

She pulled away to look at him in surprise. "My you're a generous lover."

His shoulders lifted in a shrug. "It might be selfishness on my part. It's been a long time."

Her gaze met his with a mischievous gleam. "You were strong and determined on the field today, my warrior." Her hand slid down his back, bringing every nerve ending to life. "As a reward, I'm honor bound to serve you this night."

God, if he had died, then this was indeed heaven.

Chapter Five

Centuries had come and gone with her never finding a worthy partner. Trey Brennan had proved a surprise. She gave herself freely and he in turn had been a generous lover, catering to her needs with pleasure. She was a goddess and men worshiped her for many reasons, but Trey had treated her as a woman.

He slept soundly now, his breath slow and even as it should be in slumber. His body needed rest and time to rejuvenate. The hot spring's magical properties had healed and mended his body in this realm, erasing the effects of the rigorous training he had endured yesterday. His skin was smooth and unblemished and when he awakened his muscles would feel worked but not worn.

Lying on her back, her gaze turned toward the window where she could see the silvery light as it broke through the thick cover of darkness. The new day dawned and her warrior would have to battle once more.

"You're awake." His deep voice was rough from sleep.

She turned toward him with a smile touching her lips. His hair was in disarray, standing on end with strands falling over his brow. Exquisite perfection with just a touch of wildness is how she liked her men and Trey Brennan was all that and more. "Aye. You have a long day ahead of you. Today you must learn the art of wielding a sword and ..." she trailed off, wondering if she should teach him what she had taught Cú Chulainn. He seemed worthy or was her mind clouded by their love play? Trey may be a man, but he loved like a god, using her body for his pleasure as well as giving it and she had been the one to tire first, not him.

He moved to his side, sitting up and resting his head on the palm of his hand. His gaze held hers. "I must be honest. I have never used a weapon of any kind."

She lifted his free arm, gliding her hand down the length of it, from shoulder to wrist, caressing the taunt muscles. "Your limbs were made to hold a sword. As we speak, one is already being fashioned for you. You will need to master the use of the weapon for the final battle."

He pulled his hand away. "You keep mentioning this final battle. No matter what you think, I'm not a warrior. I'm just a man."

It amazed her how Trey had impacted her resolve to save him. She wasn't just doing this for the little boy who had prayed for her help. She was doing this for her, too. Trey's smile, his gentle touch and aye, his fierce fighting instincts had seeped into her heart, making her more than determined to see he won the fight.

"Aye, you are a man, but you must become the warrior to win. It's the only way you'll survive."

Confusion darkened the color of his expression and he sat up in bed, leaning against the back frame.

"What's wrong?"

"For a moment I forgot that this was only a dream. You talk about me becoming a warrior and fighting a battle, but in reality I'm dying, aren't I?" His amber eyes sought hers for the truth. "The fight you speak of is the fight for my life. Isn't that right?"

She wouldn't lie to him, but it didn't make it easier to tell him the truth with the ache that settled behind her heart. He would survive or he would not. She

screamed silently at the injustice of it all. Trey had a good soul, a man who would make a difference in the world and there was a little boy who still needed him. Death could not have him. She pierced her lips together, forging a plan in her mind. She would do it. She would teach him how to use the deadly barbed spear she had given to Cú Chulainn. Trey would not dishonor the weapon and would use it well. "Your nephew prayed to me," she told him.

"Joey? He prayed to you?" Bewilderment clouded his features and she could see the wheels working as he tried to wrap some sense around what she told him.

She nodded. "The boy loves you and feared you had given up."

He closed his eyes with a sigh. "I heard the doctors talking. They said there wasn't any more they could do for me."

Words could cut like a knife as easily as a sword could cut through flesh. The doctors had given up on him. No wonder he had considered welcoming death. She sat up, too and reached for his hand, surprised at how tiny her own hand felt in his. "You can fight this. You can win." She spoke with determination, trying to evoke hope in him.

He shook his head, his eyes looking achingly vulnerable.

"Listen to me," she demanded and he met her gaze. "You can win. I am Scáthach, the Warrior Goddess and I do not train men without worth."

Chapter Six

She didn't train men without worth. Her clear melodic voice demanded him to hear her words and obey them. The thing was: He didn't know if any of this was real. Scáthach insisted there were many realms of existence and the Isle of the Mist was one such place. He'd love to believe her, but there could be another explanation. One, he wasn't particularly fond of. Maybe his fever-racked brain had retreated to a safe part in his subconscious and planned on waiting it out in this fantasy of *warrior meets goddess*. This couldn't last forever though. His body would finally give up. He never thought of himself as having such a vivid imagination, but who knew what kinds of drugs were being pumped through his veins. This could be a side effect.

Some side effect, too. Taking a trip to the magical Dú Scáith of Alba and making love to a demanding goddess who insisted he had the heart of a warrior—yep, it was one hell of a fantasy.

He pinched the bridge of his nose in frustration then stopped. "What the hell?" His nose was broken yesterday and hurt like the devil. He gingerly felt his nose, expecting to feel pain but there was none. "The spring." She told him the waters would heal him. He hadn't thought literally. He lifted his shirt and stared at his torso, feeling his ribs where a nasty blue and purple bruise had been, but only smooth unmarred skin met his eyes. He hadn't noticed last night, but then again he had been preoccupied. He pierced his lips together. "Of course you're healed, dimwit. This is a dream." He said the words, but he didn't believe them. Somehow this was all too real. "I will have to fight for my life." The realization of what was happening finally dawned on him. A quick assessment of what he would fight told him he might not come out the victor.

He took a deep breath against the panic that threatened to take over. "Do you want to live, Brennan?" he asked himself. The answer was simple. "Yes. Hope was in his reach and he'd be damned if he didn't take it."

He grabbed his sword and went out to find Scáthach.

She stood waiting for him in the courtyard dressed to kill figuratively and literally. Her long legs slightly apart and her hands were on her hips. She lifted her chin and gave him a blue-eyed stare of approval. Then she leaned down and picked up a weapon. It appeared to be a long barbed spear. One direct hit with a weapon like that would prove deadly. "This is my creation, the Gáe Bulg," she told him with pride.

He knew his Irish legends. Scáthach had only taught Cú Chulainn the technique of using the spear and he had defeated Ferdiad in a final battle with it. Some believed the Gáe Bulg was made from the bone of a sea monster. Seeing the weapon for himself, he could well believe it had been. The barbs, ivory in color were long and jagged, a weapon that would tear its way into the flesh, slicing muscle and severing arteries on its way. His gaze sought hers. "Why are you showing me this?"

"Why you ask?" She shook her head with a smile. "I plan on teaching you its secret, Trey Brennan."

She didn't just hand over the infamous weapon. He would first have to prove he could handle it properly without spearing himself by accident. She was

ruthless in her teaching, taking him down again and again, but he would force himself to his feet each and every time.

Today, they worked with rods, four feet in length. He was trying to deflect the blows but she was too quick. His forearms would be black and blue by the time they were ready to call it a day.

"You aren't trying," she accused. "Concentrate."

"I am concentrating." His response was curt and delivered with a bitter tone of resentment.

She shook her head and came at him as a stalker goes after its prey.

"This is bullshit!" he screamed at her, frustrated that he couldn't defeat her.

"Stop thinking of me as a woman, Trey. You must believe I am the enemy. I will destroy you. Do you hear me? I want your head on a stake, your entrails pulled from your gut and your heart bleeding in my hands. See the enemy's vile face, not mine standing before you. Take the bastard down."

His eyes narrowed with determination and this time he was ready. The rods slammed into each other with a whacking noise that vibrated throughout his entire body. He turned the battle around. He was no longer the prey but the one stalking, giving her what she'd been giving him all day long. Pounding away, making her retreat. Damn, it felt good. He brought the rod down and up, relieving her of her weapon. He pointed the rod at her throat. If it had been a real sword and this a genuine fight, she would have been dead.

Her eyes widened in surprise. Then she smiled. "Well done, warrior."

He lowered the rod and relaxed his stance. "Why is it that I'm out of breath and you haven't even broken a sweat?"

"I'm a goddess," she said with indignation.

He chuckled and gave her an elaborate bow. "So you are."

She joined him in laughter, but then fell serious again. "I will show you how to use the Gáe Bulg. You will do me proud, Trey Brennan."

Her gaze held him in high esteem and he said a silent prayer that he would not disappoint her.

Chapter Seven

Brutal practice, long soothing baths in the spring and making love to a goddess every night—a man could get used to this. However, all good things must come to an end.

“It’s time,” Scáthach announced as she gazed out the window. The thin wrap draped around her fell low on her back, exposing the vibrant tattoo she bore of the mythical creature the phoenix. The wings spread across her shoulder blades in shades of orange, red and yellow, the tail feathering down her back and disappearing below the garment. The legend of the mythical creature mesmerized him. From the phoenix’s own ashes, it rises from the flames to live again.

After they made love last night, Scáthach rested on her stomach, giving him full view of her backside. His fingers caressed the lines of the design with reverence. She told him his destiny paralleled the mythical bird’s fate. She bore the symbol in hopes of healing him. *You will rise out of the flames and live again, too.* Her words still echoed in his mind with renewed hope.

“How do you know it’s time?” His curiosity won out. Was it in the clouds billowing across the blue of the sky? Had a bird whispered the news to her?

She turned her gaze to him. “The wind has changed directions.”

Aah of course. He hadn’t thought of that one. “Come back to bed.” He lifted the covers in invitation. He didn’t want to fight. He’d much rather make love to her, kissing her where he knew she liked.

She smiled almost sadly. “No. Our time has come to an end. You will have to make your stand today.

He gave her a brief smile with a shrug of his shoulders. “A man has to try doesn’t he?”

“Oh aye. I would be disappointed if you didn’t.”

The smell of heather and the sea air hit his nostrils as he strolled to meet his destiny. The mist that usually shrouded the island stood back, low to the ground and circling them as if it were making room for the battle. The sun had risen high in the sky, but the clouds had thickened, threatening rain and the wind whipped around him like a tease of what the storm would entail.

On the crest above them, the enemy stood dressed in black, large and threatening as a storm preparing to let loose.

Sweat poured down Trey’s back and he felt the blood drain from his face. This was it, the final battle that would determine if he lived or died. There was one good thing about all this. It would be over. No more struggling to draw in each breath. No more worrying about Joey and his welfare. The fight would finally come to an end.

Scáthach strode over to him with her hair tied back away from her face, giving her features a-don’t-mess-with-me-look. She stood tall and regal like the goddess that she was. She was so beautiful it took his breath away. “Are you ready?” she asked.

He supposed he was as ready as he would ever be. “Yes.”

She gave him a curt nod. "You will win this."

He was glad someone thought he could. He glanced at the foreboding figure on the hill; waiting to cut his head off by the way he gripped his broad sword with glee. He gulped back the fear that threatened to break loose and pulled back his shoulders, standing tall. Then he went out to meet the enemy, his weapon in his hand.

As he drew closer, he saw the enemy wore a tattoo on his scalp in place of hair. If he remembered his Celtic symbols, the twin spirals at the crown signified something similar to the yin and yang in the Chinese culture. At the base there was the awen aka, the three rays representing the light seen at the point of death. The right ray would symbolize the masculine and the left the feminine. The central was the mediator, the balance—again the ying and yang. There always had to be balance—good and evil as well as life and death. If he survived this battle, he'd live and if he lost—death. Was the enemy the disease that threatened to take over his body? A part of him believed it to be true.

Standing in front of the enemy now, the hideous face spread into a wide smile as if reading his mind. Darkened stubs of what were once teeth filled the foul mouth. His garments were dark and fur laden as seemed to be the trend in this world. One scar was evident down the length of his face, starting at his eye and ending at the point of his chin. His eyes were dark, an endless pool of inky blackness.

Trey touched the hilt of his sword and felt comfort in having the cold steel at his side.

The enemy took his stance with his sword held out in front of him and the point aimed at Trey's eyes.

Trey responded in kind. He gripped the sword with one hand above the cross like T of the sword and with his other hand he gripped near the pommel so to be able to grasp the blade if he needed to defend himself from heavy blows. He lifted the sword high, with the point aimed at the enemy's eyes. Fair was fair, if the enemy planned on impaling his brain, he had no problem returning the favor.

They circled one another, their gaze locked on the other's moves. Trey knew he had to find a weakness to win. He would then call upon the Gáe Bulg, the barbed spear and drive it into the enemy's heart.

Trey couldn't stand the suspense. He made the first move, going for the enemy's left leg right above the knee, swinging the sword around and down with the intent of immobilizing him. The enemy side stepped to the right, blocking the blow with his sword. His guttural chuckle of amusement rang through the air as he took his sword and swung it clockwise, making a cut on Trey's leg right above the knee before he had a chance to side step. The slice stung like the devil but it wasn't a deep enough cut to cause any permanent damage.

They backed off and circled again. Sweat glistened on Trey's brow and he felt the droplets trickle down his face. "Focus, Brennan," he coaxed under his breath. He could ill afford making another rash mistake if he wanted to succeed in taking the bastard down.

"I thought you'd be a challenge," the enemy said, his voice gravelly and deep but spoken with a precise manner of politeness, which seemed a contradiction to the severity of their swordplay.

Trey didn't acknowledge his comment but attacked again, swinging the sword toward the enemy's head, passing to his left and around as he did so. The cold steel sliced through the air, but before making contact, the enemy sensed his move and side stepped to the right, making a sloping parry by angling his sword across and downwards protecting his head. The enemy swung his sword to the left, forcing Trey to bring his blade up to defend the blow.

Trey backed up. He lowered the sword, saving his energy while he waited for the enemy to make his move. His breath was labored and his leg hurt, throbbing in time with the beat of his heart.

"You will not survive," the enemy predicted. "You should bow down now and let me end your misery. I shall make it fast. One slice to the neck." He slid his forefinger across his neck in imitation of his intent.

"Never." Screw waiting for the enemy to make a move. At this rate he would talk him to death. Trey lifted his sword and went after him with a vengeance, but the enemy blocked him at every turn as if he mirrored his moves. Metal against metal sparked like lightning as the swords connected. Trey began to weaken. The enemy's blows vibrated down his arm until he thought he'd lose the sword all together. The weapon felt like lead in his hands and his limbs moved as if trudging through mud.

The evil smile seemed frozen on the enemy's face. "You are no threat to me, Trey Brennan. You cannot win this fight. Give up."

"No." Trey had lowered his sword and barely missed being sliced in two as the blade whipped across his stomach, leaving a nice thin cut like a brand. It was only a flesh wound, but deep enough to remind him of his mortality. Clutching his side he wavered on his feet before tumbling to the ground. He wiped the sweat away from his eyes and tried to rise, but his feet wouldn't obey.

"It's over." The enemy raised his sword.

Trey managed to get to his knees. He wouldn't die lying down. He'd meet death on his feet. His vision caught a movement behind the enemy and fear gripped him. "Scáthach, no!" he shouted his warning as the enemy whirled around to fight her, already sensing her presence.

"You will not take my warrior." Her voice commanded with authority, fully expecting the enemy to comply.

"Your warrior," he mocked. "He is not yours. You cannot keep him like a pet, Scáthach." He swung his sword, but Scáthach parried with ease.

Trey looked down at his feet where the Gáe Bulg appeared the moment Scáthach did, but this wasn't the way it was suppose to be. Scáthach wasn't supposed to put herself in danger. This was his fight.

The enemy swung his sword up and around, hooking Scáthach's sword and flinging it from her grip. He had to move or the enemy would kill her.

As the enemy raised his sword to take his beloved Scáthach's head, he also raised the Gáe Bulg, bringing it down and using it like a javelin, spearing the enemy just below the ribs before shoving it deeper with an upward thrust. The enemy bellowed as the barbs opened inside of him, cutting away and severing as it forged its way into his heart. The dark eyes of his enemy focused on him with hatred before glazing over. Death took him before he hit the ground.

Scáthach looked up at Trey, her blue eyes sparkling with approval. "You did it. You defeated the enemy."

Trey offered his hand to her. "You were not supposed to be in the midst of the fight. You could have been killed."

"Are you reprimanding me, warrior?"

It seemed wrong to reprimand a goddess, but damn it any way. "Yes." He pulled her to him and crushed his mouth to hers, kissing her like there was no tomorrow.

She reluctantly pulled away, her hand on his chest.

"No." He tried to pull her to him once more, but she was persistent.

"You will have to go now."

"Go? Why? I won. Shouldn't I be able to claim the fair maiden?" His voice teased, but he was serious. He wouldn't give her up so easily.

Her lips curved. "Oh, aye my warrior. If it is your wish, you have the right to claim the fair maiden." She touched the spiral Celtic symbol on her silver bands that she wore on her arms. He remembered now what the symbols represented: Links to other worlds. She was sending him home.

"Scáthach don't." He closed his eyes to block out the pain. He felt like every molecule in his body was splitting apart. Did he escape death only to succumb to this?

"Don't fight it." Scáthach's voice drifted toward him a second before all went black.

Chapter Eight

Every bone in his body ached as if someone had beaten him to a bloody pulp and left him for dead. Sleep seemed the best course of escape, but he forced himself to open his eyes. Deep brown eyes stared at him unblinkingly. "Joey?"

"Uncle Trey, you're awake. The doctors said you'd be waking up soon, but they didn't always think you would. They thought you were a goner a few days ago."

Leave it to his nephew to say it like it was. "I fought." His voice sounded rough from lack of use.

"Scáthach did it," Joey said in breathless wonder. "I saw the prayer in the book you gave me about Celtic Gods and Goddess." He ran over to the chair and brought back the book to show him. "Your doctor told me your body was in a battle, fighting to make you well."

A nurse walked in with a cart to monitor his vitals. "Oh, you're awake. Good."

"Scáthach," Trey mumbled, remembering the dream. It was a dream, wasn't it? He frowned. She'd made him a warrior and he had fought. "I feel like shit. Did I win the fight or not?" he asked the nurse.

She chuckled. "You won. Dr. Laine said the tests came back and everything looked great. You're going to be fine. You should be going home by the end of the week."

"Uncle Trey, did she make you a warrior?" Joey asked.

"I ..." he didn't know what to say. He remembered the training and Scáthach, the beautiful goddess who had helped him.

"If anyone qualifies as being a warrior, your uncle does," the nurse told Joey. "He's a real miracle and you don't get to see that every day."

Later on, Joey had gone home with his friend, Christopher. His parents were good enough to let Joey stay with them while he was in the hospital. Thank goodness for nice people. Trey slept, only waking when a nurse would come in to check his vitals. He would then drift off to sleep with ease once more.

In the morning he felt well enough to join some of the other long-termed patients in the lounge. The room had tables, and a flat screen television set on caption so as not to disturb those who wished to play cards or just talk.

Jenna, his nurse for the day wheeled him down the hall toward the lounge, chatting all the way. "There's a patient here who came out of coma after being in one for six months. Just like that." She snapped her fingers. "The weird thing is when she woke up, she asked for you. What are the odds that you two would know each other?"

Trey turned to look at her. "This woman knows me?"

"Yes, I thought you would like to talk to her since you two must obviously be friends. Here she is."

"Who did you say she was?" Before Jenna could answer she had wheeled him around to face the woman who had awakened with his name on her lips. His breath caught in his throat. "Scáthach?"

"My warrior."

They spoke at the same time and laughed.

"I'll let you two catch up," the nurse said and left them.

He stared at her. He couldn't help it. The light from the window beamed down on her raven strands of hair, making them shimmer with cinnamon, russet, and red amber. His gaze took in her beautiful face with those kissable lips. "It is you."

Her brows puckered. "You called me Scáthach. My name is Skye. Do we know each other?"

Now it was his turn to be confused. "I thought you knew me. The nurse said..."

Her face turned a nice shade of pink. "I dreamt of you." She cleared her throat. "You were a warrior and ..."

"And you were Scáthach."

Her blush deepened. "It wasn't a dream, was it? You were there. We fought with swords and we made ..." Her eyes widened as she remembered other things they had done.

He didn't pretend to understand what this all meant. Maybe in another realm she was a goddess and he was her warrior. Together, they had conquered the enemy, making them well and whole again. However, they were in this world and goddess and warriors of legends weren't real. Or were they? It was all in the eye of the beholder, he supposed.

"Let's start over. Let me introduce myself. I'm Trey Brennan." He held out his hand.

"I'm Skye Alba." Her hand slipped into his, warm and soft. Her blue-eyed gaze met his causing anticipation to thicken the air. He knew with certainty they had all the promises of tomorrow within their grasp.

About the Author:

Karen Michelle Nutt lives in California with her husband, three fascinating children, two dogs, named Jack and Shakespeare, and three cats that have everyone well trained.

Her book *Lost in the Mist of Time* was nominated by New Books Review for 2006, Spotlight Best Fantasy Book of the Year Award. The Object of Romance Anthology feature's her novella, "Mr. O'Grady's Magic Box." It was nominated for P & E's Top Ten Reader's Award and A Twist of Fate finalized for the P.E.A.R.L Awards for Best Time Travel.

In her spare time, she reviews books for PNR-Paranormal Romance Reviews. An avid reader of history, romance, and the paranormal, she tends to combine the three in her writings. She enjoys travel, old movies, books, and the chance to weave a tale.

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