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Dragon Slayer

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Book Blurb

A Dragon's Curse

Griall must find the woman who can release him from his curse before he becomes a Death Beast like his father. Even if the man inside him craves the Dragon Slayer's touch, he knows she must destroy the beast who shares his skin before it's too late.

A Slayer's Pride

Xara cannot escape the lie upon which her life is built. A Slayer who has never fought a dragon, she'll never feel strong enough to be the one Griall seeks. Surely, a Slayer wouldn't allow herself to love a beast! Xara must find a Slayer's power to kill this dragon before his curse destroys them both.

Chapter One

"You were a fool to make that bargain."

The ale flowed thick and bitter over Grial's tongue. "'Tis done."

Across the round table, with armguards over his massive biceps, Andar tipped back his mug, tilting the dragon's head etched deep into the wooden stein. Its empty snake eyes took Grial back to that reptile face, pale wrinkled skin under the white tangle of hair. He had another moon cycle until the Wizard's tourney.

"Your part in this is simple."

Andar's dark solemn eyes met his. "Destiny is *never* simple."

Grial drank deeply before glancing about the tavern known as Dragon's Mug, where the dirt packed floor was freshly swept and the small fire pit spat out flames and grease smoke. The slab of meat above it hadn't been charred enough – the beast inside him ached to roast it to perfection.

The dragon in him grew stronger every day. As he'd done for the past winter, Grial fought it back, wondering if his father did the same, and his father before that. The Clan of the Black Dragon, fierce warriors foolish enough to have bargained with the Fanged Wizard . . . paying for doing so for centuries with their souls.

Once more, Andar lifted his mug, his wrists and forearms wrapped in thick leather – tough enough to withstand a blow yet supple enough to allow one's wrist to merge with steel. His weathered face was solemn, his dark eyes tired yet intense. Even inside the tavern, he sat with his back to the wall, watching for any foe that may have escaped his Druid senses.

In that regard, at least, being born with a mix of dragon and human blood had been a blessing. Grial didn't need armor when his scales could withstand a sword's cold kiss.

Beyond the fire pit, the barman made his way around the tables, slopping strong smelling ale into uplifted cups. Fortune had smiled on the Dragon's Mug. The barman may have had three fingers on his hand and a limp that caused the ale to splatter, but

with the tourney near, many a warrior stopped here to rest by on their journey to the Blackrock Mountain.

"You'll know if she's the one." Grialldipped his head. Only a Dragon Slayer could set him free. With Druid magic, Andar may have found her in this tavern.

"I'll tell you what I can." His friend set down his mug and challenged Grialld with a moment's silence. Even a Druid—one who could see destiny—would not affirm a fate until a person lived it. "There was no reason for the Fanged Wizard to agree."

Grialld forced away the small tendrils of guilt gathering in his throat. "A Dragon Slayer could keep him fed for centuries. And I am still strong enough to resist the Wizard's magic." The beast inside him shuddered. "I went to see him, in his keep."

The Druid's dark eyes widened. "You hadn't told me this."

It wasn't the beast that shuddered this time, remembering the press of darkness on his mind. "I allowed him to feed on me in exchange for six moon cycles to find this Slayer." Grialld didn't know how long he would be able to hold back the beast inside him. For now, while he could still control the dragon, the Fanged One couldn't use magic to devour his soul. As the dragon got stronger, the Wizard would be able to use the blood of Grialld's ancestors to tap into the darkness of the beast and enslave him, as he had enslaved his father. To feed on his soul while turning him into a weapon of rage and destruction.

"You are prepared to die if the Dragon Slayer defeats you?"

"Yes."

"Then you damn her as well."

The dragon stirred, heating the fire in his veins. "She will be strong enough to fight against his magic." Again, he forced the beast in him to quiet. "If the Wizard lacks my strength, he won't be able to control her. He'll need her blood, willingly given, to links his will to hers." Same as when Grialld's forefather had given his blood in exchange for riches, damning his offspring.

Again, Andar's calm eyes met his. "Your father threw himself into the cliffs."

"Call me a coward then." He told himself he chose to die a warrior's death, but in truth he didn't know if he was strong enough to take his own life as his father had done.

The Druid offered him a tired smile. "Even if this woman is the Dragon Slayer – "

"You want to know about the Dragon Slayer?" The limping barman spilled more ale in their mugs.

Andar nodded his thanks. "You know of whom we speak?"

"That I do, bless my mother's grave." His voice was that of a born tale teller. "The Dragon Slayer is none other but my sister. Saved me from the Green Beast when I was but a lad." He wiggled his misshapen hand as if to prove his words. "You will not find a braver, stronger warrior. Why just two moons ago – "

Griall couldn't tell what made his senses prickle, making the beast inside him stir. It was as if somebody's gaze caressed his skin.

He caught sight of her out of the corner of his eye. The flash of hair that escaped her hood burned brighter than the fire. Just as he turned to look at her, the woman tucked the tousled strands back into the coarse wool of her hood. And with a daring tilt of her chin, she met his gaze, her eyes the color of emeralds, rare and bright and pure.

The barman's voice faded to an annoying buzz.

She stood tall, taller than most females, dressed simply, with no frills, more like a man than a young woman. Breeches gartered over shapely calves, a long tunic slit on the side to allow freedom of movement. No jeweled girdle to draw attention to her waist, yet somehow, Griall could see his hands encircling it. Long sleeves fell loosely from her elbows and probably hid weapons, just as her cape hid the twin swords behind her back. Above each shapely shoulder, he saw the simple, leather-bound hilts.

The barman hadn't stopped speaking, telling his tale in a singsong voice. Griall watched those jewel-colored eyes narrow in anger as she accepted a mug from an older woman and allowed herself to be loosely embraced. Tense, nervous. For a swift moment, Griall hoped it was because of him, because she felt the same tensions that hardened every muscle in his body, the same promise he wouldn't allow himself to keep.

A sudden crackle of the fire had her hands jerking up toward her swords. Then, as if realizing she was watched, the woman lowered those amazing eyes to sit down by the fire and take a long and hearty drink.

The barman's voice broke through his thoughts, something about thirty men and greedy monsters. Grial lifted his hand, palm up, to stem the flow of words.

"Andar?"

"I cannot tell for certain." The Druid lifted a dark eyebrow, challenging him to say otherwise. "But our friend here —" He nodded at the barman. "Is too adventurous for his words."

"Why . . . Why you are —" With indignation on his face, the barman slapped down the ale he carried. "You accuse me of lies, inside my tavern? My sister will not stand for it."

Slowly, his expression somewhat lighter now, Andar lifted the mug to his mouth and sipped long and slow. "I'm tasting water in your ale. And 'tis a coward of some breed who'll hide behind a female."

At that, the one of jeweled eyes turned toward them sharply and set down her mug. Her motion fluid, she came to her feet, graceful and lethal.

Whatever feelings her body stirred inside the beast, Grial ignored.

Again, her gaze brushed over him, so potent he could swear she touched him. Time froze for a short moment; his breath spiked. And as if she felt the same, she held his gaze a moment longer before turning away to climb up a set of narrow stairs at the back of the tavern. And though Grial knew she was aware of him watching, she didn't turn around once.

"She lives here? Your sister?"

"I will not honor you with answers." A red mask of indignation covered the barman's face. It didn't hide his disapproving frown as he followed Grial's gaze.

"You've worn out your welcome here."

With a last swallow Grial stood, giving the beast a small satisfaction when the barman stepped back a few strides with apprehension.

"You're right, my friend." He looked at Andar, hoped the Druid would keep the man busy a while longer. "The ale is tasting thin."

* * * * *

The mead left a bitter aftertaste in Xara's mouth.

Again, her brother spun stories of her travels, each time with graver danger followed by stunning victory. Lies, all of them, for which Xara should have been grateful. Serrain found the people willing to give her coin for protection, to guard their goods or daughters from outlaws and other beasts.

His lies bought her the respect she'd always yearned for. No longer was she looked upon with pity, an orphan cursed by fate. Respect replaced their disdain. And yet, as Xara walked into her room above the tavern, the churning in her belly turned the mead to ash.

She'd forced herself to train, to learn, to become what her brother had called her long ago. The Dragon Slayer. Each journey presented danger, and each new task yielded more risk – and therefore more coin. And every time she tried to tell Serrain her fears, he sadly looked upon his missing fingers and limped away, a broken and sad man. And Xara would accept all he would ask of her.

Today, he lusted after coin from the two wealthy strangers. She hadn't liked the way they looked at her, with long measuring glances, the likes of which she should have grown accustomed to. She'd proven herself every time, a woman warrior, able to battle any man or beast, although the beasts she'd faced were wolves and bears.

The stranger who had taken an interest in the Dragon's Mug's ale appeared huge inside the armor he hadn't taken off, as if he had expected someone to attack him. The other, with those solemn silver eyes, looked through her as if he could see into her soul. She knew him, somehow, though she'd never seen the likes of him before. Handsome – brutally so, with a strong square jaw and slashing cheekbones. His silver gaze was like a touch, a subtle brush of skin, a warning and a promise. It gave her a familiar feeling in

her belly, a churning she recognized as fear, the same churning she had felt inside the Green Dragon's cave.

The sun nearly having set, Xara lit her oil lamp to chase away the shadows gathering over her drawings and her books. Her collection of knowledge quenched her thirst for technique and strategy and facts that kept her safe and let her earn the gold she gave to Serrain and the Green Dragon.

She and Serrain were both young, and books had been a rare indulgence. From them, she'd learned how to bargain while fear chilled her blood, while Serrain had lain unconscious, bleeding amidst the bones and rusting weapons.

Her brother hadn't known she'd bargained for his life, and after she'd dragged him outside, into the sunshine, he had never asked what happened. But since then, he had called her Dragon Slayer.

The hard knock on the door had Xara reaching for a dagger. "Come."

A squeak of hinges and the stranger with the hot silver eyes crowded her room, his height so great he had to slouch so as not to touch the ceiling. If she were to fight this man, his reach would give him an advantage.

He appeared whipcord lean and able to move fast. She didn't like the stillness in his eyes and forced herself to tear her gaze away, to study his face instead . . . the square jaw, the full, sensual lips that should have looked out of place but didn't.

"You're called the Dragon Slayer."

"That I am." She forced her voice to remain even.

He smelled good – skin, leather and man. No armor, unless he'd hidden it under his dark cloak. The cape covered his hair, but she could see a long, black loose strand curving over his cheek.

Simple, unadorned clothes, no lace, no ribbon. His linen undertunic gleamed white against the bronze skin beneath. A single sword. No gold, no jewels, and yet he carried himself as a man used to great wealth.

She forced herself to calm, to not allow this stranger to affect her. And still she tightened her grip on her dagger.

"I mean no harm to you."

"Is that so?" Xara smiled, more of a show of teeth.

The room, already small, seemed much too intimate, too warm with him inside it.

"You are too beautiful to shoulder what they call you."

She frowned, the hilt of her blade cold against her hand. "You've had too much of Serrain's ale."

"I wonder" He let the sentence hang for a short moment. "I wonder how much coin buys your services."

Soft words, as was the insult in them. Designed, no doubt, to provoke. "Serrain is whom you seek."

"I seek the one called Dragon Slayer." The stillness in him turned into a blur as he moved closer to lift up her sleeve. With palms both warm and gentle, he exposed the birthmark on her upper arm.

"Remove your hands." Her pulse throbbed in her ears, her belly growing hot.

"Your mark isn't complete." Something she couldn't comprehend moved in his eyes.

"Remove your hands!" With clenched teeth Xara lifted the dagger, would have slashed him if he hadn't moved aside, shifting to miss her blade, those silver eyes intent and hot on hers.

"Your mark isn't complete, but you are the true Dragon Slayer." His voice went soft with purpose.

Weary, Xara held the dagger low against her side, the sharp edge facing him.

"I've been searching for you."

"As have many others."

"Perhaps." He offered her a dark and somber smile. "The birthmark on your skin would be the reason why."

The birthmark . . . the reason she'd been abandoned, alone and cold and hungry, on Serrain's mother's doorstep. Cursed, they had said. Cursed with an ancient mark.

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"Your business isn't with me."

"It is." He watched her with those silver eyes, as if analyzing her every reaction. Strategy, she told herself, and forced her body to keep to still.

"If the swords at your back aren't decoration, I wish to know the extent of your skill."

Others had asked for demonstrations. "I have no wish to fight you."

"Fifty pieces of gold." He said it causally, a man used to wealth.

Serrain would be rubbing his hands together by now. "You wish for protection?" An insult, soft, just like the one he'd delivered moments ago.

Chuckling, he sidestepped it. "I wish to see you wield a sword."

Perhaps his goal was simpler than she'd thought. Perhaps he wanted to match his skills against hers then boast of his encounter with the Dragon Slayer. She imagined him bragging to his comrade regarding his prowess as they shared a cup of ale. She'd seen those such as him, their weapons designed to carry jewels, rather than forged for blood.

She took a moment to study him, remembering the strategy and skills her books had taught her. He'd proven he was fast. His height would gift him with a better reach, but also leave him more exposed upon extension.

Her debt to the Green Dragon was coming due, and Serrain's tales hadn't garnered her as much as they used to.

"There is a clearing by Bear Rock, where Shanna River bends toward the south." She raised her chin and held out her hand, the one free of the dagger. "Payment is tendered regardless of the outcome."

"Agreed." Smoothly, he took a silken pouch from inside his tunic. Without counting the gold, he gently placed the bag into her hand, clasped hard, warm fingers over it.

A long, sizzling moment passed while he kept his hand on hers. Xara refused to snatch her palm away. Instead, she forced herself to watch his eyes, willing some sort of

fear into them. But instead of fear, something exotic looked back at her. Exotic, sad and beautiful.

He didn't release her hand as he walked toward the door, forcing her to follow.

"You'll come alone."

"Of course." He smiled again as he retreated into the hall, a slow, strange smile that had her belly churning. "I wouldn't want any interruptions."

Chapter Two

Darius would have screamed, except his weakened lungs produced no sound.

He woke with sweat rolling over his old skin, his feeble body twitching, too weak to kick away the heavy fur smothering him. He used magic instead, although he should have hoarded it until the tourney, when his strength and youth would be restored.

Countless candles lit the chamber, and still he used magic for more light. The heavy scarlet brocades trimmed with gold hung off his bed, the shadows on them looking like clawed fingers. The dream replayed in his mind.

It can't be. After five centuries of sacrifice, surely the dark magic he served wouldn't fail him.

He willed his staff to lift up from the floor, using the most sacred tool of magic as a cane to get his body out of the furs that trapped him.

In the trembling candlelight, Darius wasted more magic opening his books, then pouring cool water into a silver bowl. He scowled at his reflection on the shimmering surface.

The Fanged Wizard, the peasants called him, due to his eyeteeth which remained long and white and strong while all his other teeth fell out every time he aged.

All of them would grow back once he devoured a dragon's soul. He'd get his strength back, and his vigor.

Dragon Slayer

For now, Darius willed the disturbing visions into the silver bowl as the nightmare voices echoed in his ears. *All hail the Dragon Slayer.*

Impossible. No Dragon Slayer had ever been strong enough to challenge his dark magic. And yet the dream showed him a woman with hair of fire who stole his youth, while his dragon bled at her feet.

Impossible, he told himself again, and willed a satin cloth to mop his brow.

He had no choice but to accept Grial's bargain. In his weakened state, he had attempted to link his will to the son of his last dragon, only to be violently pushed back. The conflict between human and dragon nature hadn't yet weakened Grial's soul, yet Darius, rapidly aging, couldn't afford to wait.

When the dragon offered his soul's strength in return for a six moon cycle respite, Darius gladly took that bargain. He knew a time would come when the beast's darkness would prevail, making Grial ripe for centuries old magic.

Already, Darius had a link to him. Although he could not yet control Grial's will, he could sense his whereabouts. This quest to find the Dragon Slayer had been a ploy designed to win the Wizard's favor. Darius had no doubt, the dragon wouldn't succeed.

More than ten winters had passed since he last fed off a dragon's power, when Grial's father somehow broke his hold and threw himself into the cliffs at Buried Hills. Since then, he had been forced to feed on human warriors who barely sustained him. Who couldn't give him what he needed most.

Like an old fool, he longed for Lila, with her soft lips and waterfall of silky golden hair. His chambermaid dressed him and bathed him, and though she feared him, she never saw him as a man, powerful, strong, able to make her scream with terrifying pleasure.

And like an old fool, Darius wanted her awed by his power — over dragons and men alike. The night the dragon came to him to strike his bargain, Darius stole some of his strength. But even then, he still didn't have enough magic to harden his body to take sweet, succulent Lila.

She would have come to him, willingly, meekly, if he so desired. But she'd have pity in her eyes. Darius wanted her to fight, to scream, to beat against the double edges of pain mixed with terror. He wanted to take her as a man, magic be damned.

Now, in the chill of the dying day, he was left with a feeble body and crumbling magic in his hands. If the red haired woman was the Dragon Slayer . . . He thought about the strength and power she carried, the power that would feed him for a century.

She will kill you.

Those silent words chilling his blood, Darius concentrated on the silver bowl, focusing past his wrinkled pale image. The water moved in languid circles, soothing him with its rhythm. Although his magic couldn't track a person whose name he didn't know, he still had enough soldiers to find and kill her.

Gripping his staff in old gnarled fingers, Darius used magic to call Lila, hoping her sweet song would lull him back to sleep. When finally the dragon's strength would fill his body, he'd find another use for that soft mouth, would force her to curse him while she begged for more.

* * * * *

The promise of a storm hung heavy in the air, the chill scraping at Grial's bare arms. On nights like this, the fire in him pushed back the cold. He reveled in the coming storm, the beast inside him roaring with the excitement in the air.

Bear Rock loomed dark against black skies; no moon shimmered upon Shanna's waters. But he didn't need light to see the Dragon Slayer walking toward him.

Same understated clothes, complete with armor now, leather and metal guards over her arms and shoulders, more on her back and chest and feet.

"You don't need armor."

Her gasp was a small dark satisfaction. She hadn't seen him, hadn't noticed him looking at that soft and inviting mouth.

A hiss of metal against leather – she gracefully unsheathed her swords. "I disagree." She firmed her lips, lifted her chin slightly. Grial imagined she would not allow him the small pleasure of surprising her again. "On your ready."

He smiled at that. "Now."

She leapt, and the man in him admired the elegance and lethal beauty of her body. The beast in him heated the fire in his veins, wanted to rage, to fight, to take. To feast on her, to taste that soft and supple skin, to feel her move against him, over him, beneath him.

He fought those thoughts as he moved back, avoiding her twin swords rather than risk matching his strength against hers.

Not yet, by Fanged One's breath.

Insult laced her subtle silver laugh. "Your sword. You did remember it?"

"Of course." He circled her, wondering how much her senses compensated for the darkness, testing her with a silent move to get behind her back.

She turned toward him; again their eyes locked, held. And with a swift short breath, Grial gripped his blade and lunged.

Her twin swords crossed to cradle his. Time slowed, as did his breathing. In the dark night, he could see her eyes, the mystery of emeralds edged with hot silver. Her mouth firmed, her chest rose and fell under the armor. The beast inside him wanted to taste the skin above her pulse.

A slash of lightning broke the spell.

A hiss of metal, a bright spark as she moved back, twisted her swords in an attempt to knock his blade away. He turned with her, and narrowly avoided a small leather-bound fist aimed for his skull. With his free hand he grabbed her forearm, using the dragon's strength to spin her until she stumbled against him, her body strong and slim and warm.

The beast growled low in satisfaction. Grial ignored it.

"You are strong, Dragon Slayer."

She didn't move to get away.

"There's much I can teach you – if you come with me."

Her breaths were short and shallow, as if she too felt the heat pumping between their bodies.

"Come with you where?" Her breathless voice curled over him like a silken, invisible touch.

While he fought for control, she gained her breath and footing, spun away to face him once again, her blades held low, one to defend, the other ready to engage him.

The first drops of rain fell, sharp and cold over his face.

"What's your name, Dragon Slayer?"

Those jewel-colored eyes wouldn't meet his now, as if she were ashamed by what he'd called her. "Xara."

"Xara." He liked how her name tasted when he said it, a rough caress over his tongue. The rain fell harder, the drops sparkling on her lips, steaming before they touched the fire of her hair. "Xara," he said again, because he liked it. "There is a dragon you must slay."

She lurched back as if he spoke of something foul.

He could not see her arms under the guards, but the mark on her flesh had been one of a coiled dragon. The lack of wings meant she hadn't recognized her power, but Grial felt the magic when he touched the mark – a warmth that had nothing to do with the satin smoothness of her skin, or the fire under it.

"You've seen enough." The rain splattered against her hair, dulling its color, taming the strands that had escaped her braid. Stubborn uplifted chin, her weapons still in front of her. Beautifully lethal.

"Your skills are a good blend of strategy and courage." Why did he sense fear from her now, when only moments ago she'd shown a touch of recklessness? "There's only so much the books can teach you. I can complete what's left."

"Forgive me if I doubt you". The rain slid off her face like tears.

He waited a long moment. The Slayer didn't move.

"There is a dragon you must slay," Grial said again, and frowned as she shook her head.

Those soft lips trembled, parted. She looked up at the sky, gulped in a breath of air and then choked on it. "Something's burning."

The beast in him gloried in the smell of fire as Xara sheathed her swords and ran toward the village where the sky glowed red.

* * * * *

The stench of smoke clung to her skin. She breathed it, tasting its acrid fury on her tongue as she ran through the grass and mud and rain.

"Serrain!" She was already hoarse from screaming out his name, from breathing smoke and ash and fire. Raindrops stung hot and vicious at her cheeks. "Serrain!"

People already gathered, watching as people do, none of them risking their lives to see if her brother was trapped in the tavern, a cripple, burning while they stood in the safety of the rain.

Intense heat hit her like a slap. She breathed, short shallow breaths, and crouched as she went inside, keeping her body low while she squinted through the flames and smoke. She still had time; the rain had been a blessing. She simply had to breathe . . . concentrate, be strong. She had to get Serrain out of the fire.

She screamed his name again while the fire laughed with gleeful sparks, her leather armor burning her skin as heat and ash consumed her. "Serrain!"

A shadow moved; she lunged toward it and gripped his misshapen hand in hers. Just like in the dragon's cave, he clung to her, weakened and scared while she fought to get him out. Strength was her only asset, strength and the fear churning in her blood. She dragged him behind her, coughing wildly, squinting against the smoke.

Somebody grabbed her arms, somebody with inhuman strength, pushing her forward, lifting her. She lost her grip on her brother, struggled weakly, couldn't see through tears and smoke.

"Serrain!" Her breath broke on a cough that raked her insides.

"I have him!"

She knew the stranger's voice even if she couldn't make out his features. He wrapped something around her, something that kept her skin from burning, and dragged both Serrain and her outside to safety. Air blasted her face, full of soot and smoke and ash, but tasting crisp as snow. She took a deep breath, filled her lungs, while raindrops soothed her face with cool, cool water.

Beside her, her savior bled from the curved scars etched into his arms.

Xara didn't have the strength to ask him questions. "Thank you." Her throat felt seared every time she breathed.

He knelt beside her, his light eyes intense, his ink black hair wet and hanging in sheets down his broad back. "Are you hurt?"

She shook her head. "Serrain?"

A cough drew her attention. She turned to see her brother laying on the ground, a barmaid holding a tankard to his lips, his terror evident in his weak and trembling body. Behind him, the rain beat down on the flames, a timeless battle of raw elements.

"Serrain." Trembling, Xara knelt beside him. "Brother. Are you hurt?"

He answered with a noisy gulp.

"What happened here?"

He stared at the flames, his face dirty and scared, the same as it had been in the Green Dragon's cave.

"Brother — "

"They wanted you." He croaked the words in a harsh whisper. "The one called Dragon Slayer." A fit of coughs raked his slight body. He took another thirsty gulp from the tankard. "I told them that I handle your affairs." He lifted a trembling hand, the one that was misshapen. Pointed his fingers at the flames. "This is because of you."

The acrid taste inside her throat couldn't compete with the dread filling her soul.

"Who did this?" She fought to firm her voice.

He didn't answer, just stared at the flames, blood and soot streaking down his face.

"Who did this?"

"Does it matter?" He finally turned wild, accusing eyes to her. "You promised to protect me, always." He took another drink while her throat felt scraped with rocks.

"Again, you are too late." He lifted his misshapen hand and laughed, bitter and ugly.

"After this, no one will give you gold for your protection. I'll have no coin to rebuild."

"She saved your life," the stranger growled beside her.

Pain tearing her chest, Xara lifted a hand and shook her head at the man who saved both their lives.

The rain poured harder now, battling the fire down to the earth, sending white smoke into the sky.

"The Dragon Slayer," Serrain whispered, his voice mocking and raw. "'You're no one. No one!'" His choking, mocking laughter grated in her ears. "You're nothing but a curse."

He struggled to get up, and Xara reached out to help him.

He pushed away her hand. "You're cursed—just like they said. And this is my reward for taking you in." He let loose another wild laugh as he turned past her to stare at the charred body of a woman laying a few steps away. With cold stabbing her heart, Xara recognized his wife.

"Verika is dead—the best cook in the realm. What will I serve the travelers? Have you no coin to offer me then, nothing to help me?" Again he struggled to get up. "But I forget. You spend your coin on books and scrolls and foolishness." His lips twisted into an ugly scowl. "They fueled the fire, helped the tavern burn."

She sagged against the blow of words, refused to cry as raindrops bathed her face, while the smoke and soot masked the damp bitter taste inside her mouth. With numb fingers she dug into her tunic, gripped at the pouch of gold. Silent, she handed it to the one she had called brother then watched him spill the coins out into his healthy palm. His lips moved as he counted.

The man who saved them both stood silently beside her, his arms bare, the skin bleeding over the curving scars.

"What is your name, stranger?" She kept her voice soft, praying she wouldn't cry.

"Griall."

"Griall." She watched Serrain stumble away, supported by the same barmaid who'd given him water. In the light of the dying flames, his body was a silhouette as he knelt on the ground beside his wife. Verika. The best cook in the realm.

"You said there is a dragon that needs slaying." Her throat felt raw — determination, dread and ash mixed with great sorrow.

"Yes." He offered no words of pity.

Xara straightened and took one last look at the smoking tavern that had been her home. The flames were mostly gone, with it her books, her life, the lies she lived with.

She turned back to the stranger who had saved her. "If you still wish it, I will go with you to slay him."

Chapter Three

She'd been silent for five days, a ghost who fought and walked beside him. She spoke of nothing, not of her brother nor her curse. She ate without hesitation, never commenting on taste or scent or spice. Only when they trained did she show any spirit. Then, her eyes held a semblance of the same fire he'd seen in her when they'd sparred, as if the pain of used up muscles dulled the ache in her heart.

Each morning, in a clearing in the woods, she matched her swords and skills against his. And even then the fire in her eyes didn't burn as brightly, and her technique was slower than before, as if the words of that bastard who had called himself her brother weighed on her more than the thick armor she wore.

At least the beast inside him remained quiet, the strange craving for her dulled by the emptiness in her eyes. The previous night, the moon turned a new face. He had less than a month to teach her the full meaning of a Dragon Slayer's power.

"You can't rely on strength." At least not yet; not until she felt the full extent of her abilities. "You must be fast." He whirled, scraped at her arm guard with his sword. "You must be cunning. Merciless."

She moved around him, kept him within her sight, light on her feet if not in demeanor. No answers, no replies to insults or demands. She fought in eerie silence.

His sword felt hot against his hand as she stumbled back. He waited for her to regain her balance. "Again."

She dipped into a stance, her twin swords low and crossed in front of her, the clothes he bought her soft and supple, not hampering her movements. The fire of her neatly braided hair remained dull, like her eyes.

He leapt, missed an edged blade by a hair width, kicked at her sword, dragged her closer to him. "You only need one sword."

He thought he saw a spark, heard her breathe deeply. She didn't struggle, yet Grial felt her body tense.

"Let go."

He kept his hand on her, ignoring the supple strength under smooth skin wrapped in soft leather.

"You don't need armor."

Two more strikes. Neatly she sidestepped to plunge forward with her blades. He sliced at the arm closest to him, used his control and speed to rip the leather guard without spilling blood.

Her eyes flared, just for an instant.

"You only need one sword," he said once more.

She took a breath, her chest rising under her armor. "I use two swords."

"They make you slow." He nudged at the ruined leather lying in the dirt, and had less than a moment to evade a blade, direct this time, with heat behind it.

Perhaps he'd found the key.

Another lunge, again she caught his sword between her blades. This time he twisted, angled his hands to force the edge to turn down to the ground. With a long hissing stroke, Grial brought his sword up and sliced the armor off her other hand.

"Bastard." She ground out, and he thought he heard a laugh before she lunged at him with swift and sure strikes, her swords singing.

"You only need one sword."

"I enjoy having two." Her voice stayed low, a mocking growl now.

Hearing it, the beast inside him woke, tasted the air. Grew hungry.

"Two swords divide your focus." Again he circled, managing to break her balance, cutting the leather binds that held the guards over her chest and back. And when she whirled around to face him, in a swift motion Grial sliced off the leather thong binding her hair.

This time he was certain he heard a laugh.

His answering grin faded as those emerald eyes locked with his, her hair falling over her face like a fiery halo. His muscles clenched while the beast inside him shuddered.

He wasn't sure which of the beings in him spoke. "Fight, Dragon Slayer."

She nodded, showed her teeth, crossed the twin blades over her body. Once more, she had his sword cradled between hers. The tiny pulse beating inside the fragile hollow of her throat captured his attention. He wondered what it would taste like beneath his lips.

She surprised him by kicking high, a crashing force that would have snapped his neck if he hadn't brought his arm up. His sword flew into the air. She smiled, standing over him with twin swords pointed at his throat.

Desire pooled in his belly, raw and hot and dark. He had no right to want her, no right to think of her as anything but his own weapon, forged to free him.

The beast growled, softly, as if marking her as mate. Again, Grial forced his body to ignore it.

"Don't underestimate your enemy." Slowly, he pushed himself down onto his knees, then used his legs as a dragon's tail, whipped her feet from under her. He caught her before she tumbled to the ground. At such close range, her swords were useless; she'd have to use her wits and strength.

Intent to train was long forgotten as they rolled, as Xara fought to free her arms, refusing to drop her swords, her body strong and supple against him. His pulse roared in his head; he was surprised the beast didn't douse her with fire. Her lips were soft and lush and close to his, and when she pressed him down into the grass, her woman's flesh bumped hard against his own arousal.

The jewel-colored eyes flared bright, her mouth parted, pink and moist and delicate. He could lean forward, just a bit, just for a small, soft taste.

The beast growled in approval. Again, Grial fought it back, battling the urge to plunder. Instead he remained still, her swords on each side of his head, her wrists gripped in his hands, pulsing and warm.

Her hair curtained her face as she got up then pierced him with a wild green stare.

"Again," she growled, and as he lunged to get his blade, she spun with him, tilted her swords and cut into his skin.

He caught a whiff of his own blood, metallic, bitter, red, welling up on his skin like fire. The beast howled, the sound of rage and lust. And when she leapt again, fearless and beautiful, the beast inside him threw her hard onto the damp ground.

Silence nearly crushed him.

She didn't move, not for a breathless second while his insides turned to ice. Dread burned as he leapt toward her, filled with terror and loathing and regret, but then she reared up, her arms scratched and bleeding, her breathing quick and rough.

"I'm sorry." The words meant nothing, yet they were the only ones he had. He saw his father now, rage mixed with pain, madness laced with regret.

She shook her head, the spark in her eyes cold and dark. "Again." She crossed her blades, wincing just a bit.

"You've had enough." She was in pain; he didn't need to smell her blood to know she'd spilled it. He didn't know the way to offer comfort, didn't have the words to take his actions back. He didn't know how to control this greed, this need for her.

"Again!" She bared her teeth, stepped forward.

"You are in pain." And shame rolled through him, shame and a dark self-loathing. He'll hurt her more, Grial told himself, and fought against the stab of guilt. She'd face worse scars than he could ever give.

For now at least, he could allow her to recover. With that in mind he sheathed his sword into the scabbard on his back, watching her as she did the same.

"You don't believe you are the Dragon Slayer." He headed back to Red Woods Inn, knowing she followed him, hearing her swift intake of breath when he let out those words.

"I don't." Short silence. "I lack the Slayer's strength."

"And yet you came with me."

A shrug. A small attempt at nonchalance. "I want to learn what you can teach me."

He swallowed back the images of the carnal things he could teach her. Instead, Grial focused on the wound on his arm, feeling it closing, as his skin always had whenever scales pierced it from the inside, out.

"You've faced a dragon." Perhaps she had no strength, but Grial knew this part at least was true. The name given to her was not carried in vein.

"You've heard Serrain's stories."

"Yes or no?"

The emerald fire in her eyes flared up again. "Yes. I have faced a dragon."

"And you lived."

She simply shrugged in answer. And since it was too late to ask Andar about the dragon mark over her arm, Grial let it be.

* * * * *

Dragon Slayer

The moon, a fat, bright disk, lit her way.

Outside the village gates, her body aching, her bones nearly weeping from exhaustion, Xara knelt once again to see if the leaves growing at her feet were those called Eagle's Foot. She'd read that rubbing the fleshy leaves against one's skin could soothe away the pain of aching muscles, while the scent of them could bring serenity to a disjointed mind.

Her breaths puffed cold and white in the sharp air, each bruise a groan, each scrape a wince of pain. The leaves she found felt smooth, where as Eagle's Foot was coarse, its scent distinct and acrid.

Through all the training she had forced upon herself, she'd never encountered any so grueling, or any that made her feel this . . . alive. The difference lay in having someone's sword meet hers, with enough strength to push back against her. And in sparring with someone who could fight better than her, push her to her limits. Hurt her when she couldn't hurt herself.

Serrain had said she was nothing. With a small, bitter laugh, Xara watched the fog of her exhale evaporate into the thin pale moonlight. The man she had called brother had been right. Finally a truth after the wealth of lies.

She had faced Eldan, the Green Dragon. She had saved Serrain's life. But there had been no skill, no sword, no victory. She simply offered gold, and struck a bargain. A coward's way of avoiding an honorable fight.

She had a chance now, Xara thought, ignoring pain while she knelt again, testing the leaves growing in the cold fall air. Perhaps she'd never be a full-blooded Dragon Slayer, but she could train to make the lie a truth.

She had no strength to boast of, nor enough skill to match against a dragon. But she could learn enough to face herself. To face a dragon without fear, without the churning in her belly, without the need to hide.

Whatever his reasons, Grial believed in her enough to train her. She would take everything and hope it was sufficient.

She thought again about his weight on her, his sex pressing against her, swollen and heavy. She knew arousal, had studied it inside her books, had even practiced it with a young man who braved to love the Dragon Slayer.

Those were the words he'd used telling the tale – and though there had been bravery, she didn't remember love. A flash of pain, followed by pressure. All of it over before Xara could feel the fire, the "little death" the romance poets praised inside their books.

With Grial, in the forest, she had felt alive, as if her very skin awakened, eager for his touch.

Perhaps she shouldn't have thought of it just now, not with pain curling in her muscles, her body begging her to rest. And yet, she couldn't push away the memory of his heat, his hard large body under her, those silver eyes darkening when her hair caressed his face.

"What do you know of medicines?"

His voice didn't startle her. Instead, its low and soothing timbre made her blood run deep and slow and hot.

She didn't want to look at him, not with the moon etching his features with its silver light. Both beautiful and masculine. His eyes were on her lips, a subtle soft caress. She felt her mouth tingle.

"I've read about herbs in books." Under his gaze, she knelt again, felt the telltale prickle of the fleshy leaf she'd been looking for. The scent of it flooded her nostrils.

"Having the books and having knowledge aren't the same."

"Perhaps." She didn't want to argue, didn't want spoil the crisp silence with more words. Instead, she shoved a handful of Eagle's Foot into the laced up slit of her chemise and pressed it against her shoulder. The bitter smell held a slight hint of sweetness. The fleshy leaves burned at her skin.

"You should have told me you were hurt."

She wouldn't reveal weakness. "I'm not." Her body tingled now in a thousand places, the ache of used up muscles mixing with something deeper, more intense.

"I see it in your eyes."

She would have shrugged if she'd had the strength.

"You should be resting."

"I couldn't sleep."

Xara didn't hear him move closer, yet she could feel his heat ripple over her skin like a soft caress. His hands moved gently on her wrists. Those silver eyes met hers, as if asking for her permission.

She nodded, couldn't pull her gaze away. Slowly, his mouth firm, Grial slid his palms under the linen of her sleeves. Hard, callused fingers moved hot and firm over her skin. His eyes gleamed softly in the moonlight.

He pressed his palm on top of her hand on her shoulder to fuse more heat over the pain. "Let me."

He spoke so softly she had to strain to hear him. Watching the shadows kiss the harsh planes of his face, she removed her hand and stood still before him. He pressed the leaves into her shoulder, his palm sending healing heat into the ache, into the skin that yearned for his as moments became breaths.

His fingers brushed the soft swells of her breasts, and Stars above help her, Xara wanted his hands there. Time became liquid, soft. She heard her own heartbeat, slow and deep, while his heat pulsed stronger.

Like her, he remained silent, watching her with those glowing eyes, exotic, dangerous.

"'Tis my fault you're hurt." His words were gruff and clipped.

"It's nothing." It was everything. The warmth spreading through her made her shiver. "The pain makes me feel alive." She took the chance, took a tiny step closer, willed him to put his other arm around her. "*You* make me feel alive."

Somewhere an owl hooted at the sky.

"You know not what you're saying."

"Perhaps not." She smiled and lifted her mouth toward his. Waited.

He brushed his palms over her arms, gripped both her wrists. "You don't want this."

"I do."

He shook his head and groaned, regret and need in that soft disappearing sound.

Then he leaned closer, smelling of male and wood and leather, holding still before brushing her lips with his. Her wrists still trapped, Xara leaned toward him, letting her eyes drift closed as her mouth touched his.

Soft. Firm. His kiss was restrained passion, as if whatever fought in him, Grial locked away. She wanted the greed she had felt earlier today, the need to fight blooming into the need for skin, for raw and naked passion. She fought his grip now, wanted to press herself against his chest, wanted his strong arms to crush her to him.

His mouth went hot on hers, demanding now instead of soothing, greedy instead of gentle, a blind passion's dance. Then nothing as he tore away from her.

Taking a breath, she forced herself to open her eyes.

His face bled, dark scales covering his skin, his body turning massive, black and shiny, that of a monster, of a beast. Of a Dragon.

Xara would have screamed, except she had no air. The Dragon looked at her with Grial's eyes, its body lit up by the cruel moonlight, its scales shiny and sharp, its tail sinuously curling in the dry cold grass.

It brought its face close to her, its hot breath washing over her skin. "Is this what you want?"

She screamed now, reaching for her swords, gripping them with trembling fingers. The moon reflected on the crossed, shaking blades.

Grial's silver eyes were sad while the Dragon laughed at her. "You aren't ready yet."

It moved away, and she felt the cold air stirring. Shaking, a sword gripped in each hand, Xara looked up to see massive dark wings carry the dragon to the sky, those silver eyes still sad, still glowing. She watched while it flew away, a scar across the moon, a childhood nightmare.

When she could move enough to jerk her gaze away, she sheathed her swords, and found a dark liquid staining the linen of her sleeves.

Blood.

* * * * *

His staff dropped to the floor, the clang so loud it startled those who served him. He didn't have the strength to nod to them, just willed Lila to reach out and grasp the jewel-encrusted shaft. She held it flat in both her hands, palms up, those pretty fingers curling around it as she handed it back to him with a slight bow and smile.

A few more days and he would have the strength to take her to his bed, to sample all the subtle joys and screams of womanhood. He'd find another use for that soft mouth than helping him sleep with her song.

His plate was gold, his knife was silver. The mead was from the best farmlands in the realm, his falcon tender and well spiced. And yet, after the sudden vision, the things Darius enjoyed were meaningless.

Around him, his hall grew silent. Women moved with a frightened look in their eyes, men with their empty gazes looked dispassionately at him. Waiting for orders.

The Fanged Wizard had none to give.

He took their youth, but their strength didn't last. Only the one carrying the fire of dragon's blood could sustain him for the dark power he was meant to wield. Fate and magic had intertwined the day he met Liam of the clan of the Black Dragons, a fool who bargained with his soul for riches almost five centuries ago.

Once Darius regained his strength, Lila would look at him with fear instead of pity. Her song would become hoarse by morning; but he wouldn't need her voice to sleep after another sort of sport.

Looking at her, her fresh young cheeks, her ample bosom, he remembered a time, not too long ago, when he'd reached for her, only to have her recoil with a look of

horror on her face when his twisted fingers came a breath away from touching her young flesh.

The vision from the other night shook him once again—a woman with flame colored hair, bleeding away the one who held his strength.

"Arik." He longed for days when the boom of his voice shook the rafters. Now, it wheezed out thin and pale.

"My Lord." His man came forward to kneel with a flourish at his feet. When Darius took his soul, he'd been a man ripened with age and war and courage, a warrior who'd seen his share of blood.

The strength Darius took from him had lasted five winters. But before the moon turned again, the old warrior's body would become blood colored ash.

"What of your scouts?" With weakened fingers, he gripped his staff, would have dropped it again if it weren't for magic. He couldn't waste it, not now, not with the threat of the red haired woman from his visions. And yet he couldn't bear to show weakness with Lila watching him.

"They found one foolish enough to call his sister Dragon Slayer." With empty eyes, Arik met his gaze, the scar over his cheek pale against dark weathered skin.

"You've found his sister. Killed her." Darius didn't phrase it as a question.

His tone held no remorse. "My man set fire to his tavern."

Strength born of fear flowed into the Wizard's veins. "He did not see her body?"

"He saw the barman grieve over a woman's corpse."

A dog, that's all Arik was meant to be, a foolish loyal dog, unable to understand, to grasp what destiny could bring them if he failed.

Darius forced his blood to calm. "Come here."

His man came closer. Darius smelled the porridge on his breath, and longed for a time when he would once again enjoy it. "You've been a loyal servant." He used magic to lift up his staff and angle it. Its power ripped Arik to shreds in silence, denying Darius the screams of agony that usually sang with other favored punishments. Instead, red ash floated serenely in the air, snowflakes after a storm of blood.

Dragon Slayer

His Lila gifted him with a bright open-mouthed smile while that ample bosom heaved with horror mixed with lust. Darius thought of the day when he would give her a true knowledge of his power but then the vision slammed into him again.

Countless voices chanted, "Dragon Slayer." A woman with fire in her hair lifted twin swords into the sun. His dragon, his salvation, lay lifeless at her feet. And when Darius cried out in despair, the dragon's eyes opened to look at him. *Xara*, he heard, a growl mixed with a curse. *Xara. The Dragon Slayer.*

He sagged against the vision, would have used magic if Lila hadn't held him up. He loathed her youth, her strength, that supple skin, the pity in her eyes for the old feeble man who couldn't lift a finger. Who couldn't sleep without her voice.

Soon. The Fanged One gave her a slight smile, watching as she cringed, her gaze locked on his mouth. If he did not need to conserve his magic, he would have used it tonight, used his staff on her since his body was useless. The thought of her, screaming with dark horror, warmed the chill icing his veins.

"Karl." His voice had weakened more; again his crutch of magic helped him.

"My Lord." The soldier with a metal helm rose up to bow.

"Find her. The woman. *Xara*." Her name hurt the Fanged One's throat. "She travels on the road to Blackrock Mountain."

"Yes, My Lord." No hesitation, no questions. Disregarding his meal, Karl bowed again. He and Lila exchanged a brief smile before Karl took his leave.

The Fanged One noted the exchange, but had no energy for jealousy. He needed the dragon, a powerful strong soul to bring him back to life. Then Lila would know to whom her smiles belonged.

Chapter Four

Waves crashed below his wings, violent and angry, while the winds howled at his feet. Having stirred up the air and water, Grial watched them raging against the

cliffs of Buried Hills. Destruction. Mindless hate. He would become the same if Xara couldn't stop him.

He stood in the beast's form on the sharpest cliff, his wings heavy across his back, his throat burning. Each time the beast stirred, Grial grew weaker fighting the dark urges of his mixed blood. Soon, Darius, The Fanged One, would overtake him, controlling his soul while feeding off it. He'd lose control over the fire coursing through the beast's veins. He'd become a raging Dragon, destroying everything he loved. Just as his father had.

As the sea boiled, Grial thought about spending his life here. If he were a full-blooded dragon, he'd be immune to spells, immune to love. He'd be alone, the sea his only company, serene and powerful, great calm combined with the most violent of storms. Just like the one he trained to kill him.

He had no business touching her, wanting her as a man could want a woman. He was to train her for the kill, to end this thing inside him before the Fanged One took hold of his soul and strength and blood.

Above the angry sea, Grial lifted his paws, enormous, covered with fine black scales, the strong nails thick and dark as tree branches. Thick leather wings lay heavy at his back. He felt the power in them, the will to rage, destroy. He'd seen the devastation caused by a similar set of wings, had heard the cries of children whose weak wooden huts were torn apart by the winds and burned with dragon's breath. The Fanged One had been displeased with their tithe. And his father's Dragon made them pay for the Wizard's displeasure.

As the winds howled, Grial remembered the dull shock of seeing the father he'd thought dead for a decade spreading destruction amidst the cries of the villagers. He'd known he had the blood of dragons in his veins. He'd known that someday, he would be able to take the form of one, to fly, to breathe out fire. But until that night, he hadn't known what fate befell his father. What fate would befall him.

A seasoned warrior of seventeen winters, he'd lifted up his sword against the monster his father had become.

Dragon Slayer

Remembering the grief, the shock, he roared a curse, letting out a burst of flame into the sea, an arc of fire that lit up the night.

His father had done the same, blowing fire at his feet, telling him to back down. With rage burning in his throat, his sword trembling in his hands, Grial did not. The silver eyes he faced were mirrors of his. Even as the dragon spat more fire, his father begged Grial to end the torture. To let him finally rest.

Grial hadn't been able to pierce the dragon's hide. And after roaring out another burst of fire, his father flung himself into the cliffs.

After a decade of having his soul devoured by evil, Goar the Black Dragon had enough courage to fight against destroying what he loved. Grial, his son, did not possess a heart so strong.

He shouldn't have revealed himself to Xara so quickly. He should have given her time to grieve, to balance thought and action. The need in her emerald eyes had the beast growling with passion and he had lost control of it, couldn't stop the scales cutting through his skin.

She shouldn't have wanted his hands defiling her softness. Perhaps for this, he let the dragon be, allowed his other shape to greet her, finally. He'd wanted to see the terror in her eyes, needed to see her hate, her fear. Even now, a part of him screamed to go back, to finish what Xara sweetly offered. No thought to honor. Just raw need.

Growling a curse, Grial sent another arc of fire through the sky. Somewhere below these hills, his father's bones were battered by the sea.

Chapter Five

The sun set, taking with it the pitiful pale light that never cured the dampness of the woods. Winter was almost here, Xara thought, and huddled deeper in her cloak while the breeze playfully chilled her.

Had it been less than a day's cycle since she tore her gaze away from the dark streak over the moon? She'd watched the dragon fly, leaving its blood upon her clothes.

Griall's blood. She could still feel Griall's eyes watching her, filled with mad desperation and raw with need.

With a small laugh she shook her head and told herself she was being fanciful. With chilly fingers, Xara rubbed two branches in her hands, trying to start a small spark of fire. She wouldn't think of him, not now, not while her emotions hadn't been calmed by time and distance. If she did think of him, it was only to remind herself of how foolish she'd been when she'd trusted a stranger with beautiful, merciless eyes.

Perhaps she wasn't the true Dragon Slayer, but she would survive. She'd gathered roots and berries to quell her hunger. Her horse – the horse Griall had given her – nibbled at the grass and looked content.

Xara rubbed the sticks and for the first time felt free. No obligations, no more duties. No one to tell her what to do, no one to manipulate her. Perhaps she would stop paying Eldan the Dragon every moon cycle. Her brother had never known about it – and if he had, he'd probably demand the coin for himself.

Thinking about Serrain was useless. Pushing away the dull ache in her heart, she tossed the sticks aside and simply huddled in her cloak as shivers raked her body. And when she thought of Griall's warm touch again, Xara forced the memory from her mind.

He'd laughed at her after he kissed her and then turned into a beast.

He didn't harm you. And with her gaping at him, frozen in shock, not even reaching for her blades, he'd had ample opportunity.

As the night spread its wings around her, Xara wondered again why he had played this game. If his intent had been to kill her, he could have done so easily enough. Once more, the image of his eyes flashed through her mind – eyes filled with need, grief, desire and pain.

And heat. As if fire warmed his blood.

Shivering, she took up the sticks again, rubbing them with trembling fingers.

“Allow me.”

Before she had the time to think, to gasp, to turn, fire's flower bloomed, bathing her in light.

"You're brave to have come after me." She hoped her voice didn't betray the tremble in her body.

"You aren't reaching for your blades."

She couldn't tell if it was man or beast behind her, yet she refused to turn. Something cool shivered down her back. Anticipation, nerves. A dose of fear. "Would you prefer I did?"

"Yes." His low, raspy voice washed over her.

"Well then." She rose swiftly, her cloak unfurling with a snap designed to blind him. Her blades sang in the night.

"No need to fight me as a man." She gave him what she hoped was a leering smile, while her heartbeat thundered in her head. Bloodlust roared in her ears, strength born of fear coursing through her veins. She could take him, right now, this instant. She would not be afraid. "Go ahead," she taunted, moving a small step closer, turning the blades so the light danced on the edges. "Show me your teeth." She bared her own.

He tilted his head but didn't move a muscle. The red light from the flames caressed his features, the raw-edged beauty that could turn into a beast.

"Give me the dragon," Xara snarled and damning strategy and skill, she leapt.

Her blade pierced his skin; she wondered if she pierced the scales beneath. Her blood churned, rage laced with betrayal. She pushed him back, nearly ran her sword into his chest, used her elbow to crack his chin and send him sprawling.

Strength flowed through her and made her loose her breath.

He didn't get up. In the light of the fire, he laid motionless, just a man, beautiful and bleeding, his silver eyes intense.

She gasped for air, aimed both swords at his throat. Waited for him to end this game and change into the Beast. Fight until death.

He laid still, as if waiting for her to kill him.

"Change, Dragon." She would have screamed the words, except her raw throat barely allowed a whisper. "Show me your true form."

"You see it." Soft and calm words, yet underlined with darkness.

"No." Teeth clenched, she took that final step, allowed her sword to touch his throat, added a hint of pressure. She froze at the faint mark of blood.

If she had strength, she'd finish him, carry her name with truth. Somehow, she had the sense he would allow it.

"Why?"

"It claws at me," he answered simply. "You need not fear it while I'm alive."

"You are a dragon."

"Yes."

"You lied to me." And that, perhaps, was what hurt the most.

"Yes." He didn't make a move to rise.

She took a small step back, confusion clouding her mind, shivers raking her body.

"You are a Dragon Slayer." His silver eyes were intense on hers. "There is a dragon you must slay."

The swords were heavy in her hands, the leather bound hilts so cold they burned her. She stepped back again, shaking her head at him. He couldn't mean himself; this had to be another game. Just like before, when he had kissed her.

"Moments ago you were prepared to kill me. Nothing has changed since then."

Again she shook her head, couldn't comprehend the icy feeling that seized her.

"You said I shouldn't fear it."

His eyes flared hot as if he lost control for a short moment. "While I live."

"I never slew a dragon." The words flew out before she could stop them, a slip of the tongue that may have changed her life.

He remained silent. Would he kill her now that he knew the full strength of her lie?

"The mark upon your skin says otherwise." He leapt to his feet.

"You heard Serrain. It's nothing but a curse." She shouldn't have told him the truth, and yet relief soothed the ice shards in her belly. At least she didn't have to lie, to either one of them.

His face was harsh and beautiful "You know nothing of curses."

"And you do."

He laughed now, short and bitter, pushed up his sleeve to show the bleeding marks carved on his arms. The scales, she realized. The scales made his skin bleed.

"My clan is cursed by our mixed blood." In the light of the fire, his skin was a dull bronze under the scars. "The man inside me fights the dragon. As I grow weaker, Darius the Fanged will take my soul, my strength. My will. The only way to break his spell is death."

She fought to find her voice. "I will not be the one to slay you."

"Liar." In a swift move he was beside her, his hands, callused and warm, gripping her wrists, sliding under wool to find her skin, to touch the cursed mark of the coiled dragon.

She couldn't breathe with his hands on her, couldn't think with him this close. A dragon. An enemy. Her body did not care.

"Don't touch me."

He gave her a mocking, lethal smile. "What will you do to make me stop?"

She plowed her fist into his face, heard the crack of bone. Watched as that sensual mouth bled, those light eyes narrowed. Surely he'd shift into the dragon now. His scales, his teeth would cool the lust inside her belly.

She willed him to turn into the beast. Lifted a fist again. Froze mid-swing when he pulled her toward him, tumbling them both onto the grass. She rolled on top of him, struggling to push his arms over his head. The fire in her belly flared as she cradled him between her thighs, the heat of his arousal hot and urgent against her.

She arched toward him, as forbidden pleasure coiled. While her head screamed stop, arousal bloomed inside her as she struggled, pushing herself into him, wanting more, needing more contact.

Her hands were now above her head, his heat fueling the tension gripping every muscle. Watching her eyes, Grial took his weight off her, eased to the side, claimed both her wrists in one large fist while she struggled to breathe, to calm, to think.

Slowly, his free hand traveled up, those clever fingers brushing over her lips, tracing a dark path over her neck.

She should have stopped him. She did not.

Slow, as if allowing her time to push at him, Grial slid a fingertip between her breasts, over her belly. The heat of him burned through her clothes, the need inside her tense and hot and spinning. His gaze locked with hers, Grial cupped her breast.

Her nipple pebbled under his hand. Her breath lodged in her throat.

"Look at me."

She only shook her head.

"Xara."

She jerked open her eyes to find him a breath from her mouth, his jaw clenched, his lips firm. Slowly, sensually, he slid his palm down, over her quivering belly to find her woman's flesh and press against her, his touch searing her skin through layers of clothing.

She didn't understand, didn't think with gasps raking her body. He wouldn't let her look away as he ground his palm against her aching heat, coiling her arousal tighter. When her climax speared her, Grial held her close while she shuddered in his arms.

Silence stretched as her heartbeat slowed. In a few moments she would move away, grab both her blades, and tell herself she was a fool for letting her guard down with a dragon. For now, she simply basked in all that warmth and strength.

His lips briefly caressed her hair before Grial shifted away and the chill quickly claimed his place beside her. Xara watched the flames dance while she lay motionless, not sure what she should say or do. And when he dropped a cloak around her, she damned her pride and brought it close so that his scent could soothe her. "What about —?"

"Don't speak of it. His voice was harsh yet low, the flames gold on his skin. "This changes nothing."

* * * * *

He couldn't taste her — couldn't take that risk. And yet he would have given everything to sample the pleasure of her mouth, the sweet dark secrets of her sex.

Her eyes had glowed emerald green while she gasped in pleasure. In all his life, he'd never seen such an erotic sight. Even now, his arms bled as the beast matched wills against him, urging him to take her, take his pleasure, have her writhing in his arms, screaming for more.

Nothing had changed, he told himself again, as she laid on the ground, sweetly spent, his cloak like a caress around her. He'd given her pleasure, taking nothing in return. She still had to fulfill her destiny and slay the beast.

His horse's soft snort had him tensing.

"We're not alone."

She jerked up, looking up at him, her soft mouth an odd contrast with hard eyes.

"I don't hear anything."

Silent, he held her blades out to her, noted how she was careful not to touch him. He wanted her shunning his touch, Grial told himself, and pushed away the need to grasp her hands.

"We need to go." He didn't like this silence, didn't trust the false calm of an approaching storm.

Reins in his fist, Grial grabbed her hand just as a fierce glow split the night — torches, hundreds of them, surrounding them, moving closer.

Frightened, his horse reared up and sacrificed its life for theirs. Two arrows pierced its heart.

The night breathed fire as they ran; the smell of flames foul and bright as they sought refuge in the shadows. A whistle, sharp and sure. Grial leapt to cover her,

grunted as pain pierced his back, where his heart would be if scales didn't stop the flying steel.

"Are you hurt?"

He wouldn't let her turn, just pushed her to keep running. "Go!" He kept his body at her back, protecting her so arrows wouldn't find her. Although both blades were in her hands, he wouldn't let her fight, wouldn't allow her to turn back and face them.

"Unleash the dragon!"

Pain burned him, his scales bled. And yet he couldn't shift. As the torches moved closer, GrialI smelled them and pleaded with his beast to fly them out to safety. The dragon wouldn't spread its wings.

He saw the soldiers now, fire reflecting in their armor, the Fanged One's snake coiled on their chests. Darius's soldiers with their empty eyes and weathered souls.

"I'll fight them!" A crazy scream, a fearful challenge.

"Too many!"

Arrows flew, some finding home inside his flesh, making his dragon roar. And still it wouldn't push through his bleeding skin to snap out its wings.

He caught a movement to his side, pushed Xara away with enough strength to make her stumble just before an arrow narrowly missed her arm. Another arrow sawed through his skin and into scales.

He wouldn't let her die like this. He would not allow the Wizard to burn out her light before she found it. Rage built inside him as he turned and gripped his sword.

"GrialI!"

He heard her stumble back. Without a choice he let the fire roar, bursting a flaming arc for a dividing line. The soldiers halted, their mouths slack, without surprise or fear.

"Go!" GrialI gripped her hand, pulling her toward Shanna's calm waters, praying they were near the bridge as icy shards of pain pierced his body.

Dragon Slayer

Time stretched before they saw the bridge arching over the river. And when they crossed, Grial pushed past the fear of being the same monster as his father was. Taking a breath, he set the bridge on fire, knowing she'd never see him as a man again.

Across the water, he saw the torches moving. Without souls, without fear, the soldiers risked their lives to walk through flames.

Her swords gripped in both hands, Xara stared back in the direction from which they'd come.

"Who are they?"

"The Fanged Wizard's slaves."

* * * * *

Grial didn't know how long they ran. The moon lit up their path, the solemn trunks of trees providing them dark cover. He couldn't hear soldiers, couldn't smell the torches, and yet he wouldn't stop until he found the one place they would be safe.

He gripped her small hot hand in his.

"We can rest here?" Low hoarse voice, as if she had been screaming.

"Are you hurt?"

"No."

He'd expected the response, just as he'd expected the heat with which she said it and the fire in her eyes when she spared him a look.

"My friend, Andar, left a circle of stones somewhere here. It'll keep us safe." He forced his thoughts away from the soft skin against his. Instead he focused on his bleeding back, the pain of it, a dull and throbbing aching blessing. As long as he could focus on his injury, he wouldn't think of tasting her.

The one time he'd needed the beast inside him, the dragon wouldn't emerge. He still breathed fire, still had the scales under his skin—the only reason he survived the arrows. And yet he hadn't been able to take dragon form.

"You're bleeding."

Griall shrugged. "'Tis not the first time."

Her palm inside his was a wanton pleasure, an innocent touch teasing him with its subtle caress. He couldn't smell her skin, and yet the soft dew on her neck drove him insane.

To his relief, he saw the circle of stones, stark white against the dark, damp ground. As they approached, Griall felt that first push of magic before the Druid powers let them into their protective enclave. No one but Andar would find them here.

Inside the circle, he breathed out a flame to touch the pile of logs Andar had left. The light dancing over her skin gifted her with an ethereal glowing beauty.

Griall clenched his fists and urged his blood to calm.

"You didn't turn into a dragon." There was no fear in her eyes.

"I . . . I did not." He could take this one chance to lay with her, without the fear of the beast hurting her. Just once, he could lose himself inside her, forget about honor, duty, her destiny or his.

Instead he gritted his teeth and told himself he wouldn't touch her. "The Fanged One wants you dead."

She shook her head. "I'm no one." She took a long, drawn out breath, as if she was preparing herself for what was to come next. "I never slew a dragon."

She'd said that once before. Griall had no doubt she believed it. "You bear the Dragon Slayer's mark." Again he lifted up her sleeve, hating the sight of her fine skin bruised and marred by scratches.

"The Fanged Wizard wants you because of me." Regret turned his blood to ice. Never had he considered what Darius would do to her once she slew the dragon. Surely, the Wizard's power would be weakened enough for her to fight whatever magic he would throw at her. And yet . . .

She stepped toward him. "The heat you make. It's wondrous."

He gripped her hands before she slid them up his neck. "Did you not hear me? 'Tis my fault you are hunted."

"I care not." She gave a small shrug as her gaze met his, dark emeralds edged with desire.

"You don't want me."

"We're alive, Grial. Make me feel alive."

Her lips were soft, seductive, sinful. He should have moved away, and yet he couldn't stop kissing her, couldn't force himself to tear away from the dark wonders of her mouth. Just one more kiss, just one more taste, her lips, her cheeks, that fascinating hollow in her neck.

He had to step away, to force himself to think. Her taste was sweeter than the finest mead, dark, delicate, teasing his senses.

He had to stop this, Grial told himself, as he unbound her hair, threading his fingers through the fiery silk. *End it*, a voice whispered in his head as they both sunk onto their knees and she tilted her neck, offering the fragile column of her throat for him to feast on.

End it. The words echoed in his mind, while the beast inside him shuddered with dark pleasure.

Gentle, so gentle. His hands were soft as water while he touched her, as if she was the most precious of porcelains. The fire in her throbbed with a liquid heat, and yet she couldn't force Grial to hurry, hypnotized by glowing silver eyes.

A dragon's eyes. And Xara didn't care.

With trembling fingers she untied her cloak, fighting with the laces of her tunic. She would have torn them if he hadn't grasped her hands.

"Let me," he murmured against her lips and lowered her onto the thick wool of his cloak.

She arched up to meet his lips, reveling in the taste of him—rich, exotic, masculine. More heat coursed through her veins, desire's arrow pulsing between her thighs. She tried to catch his palm, to show him where to touch her. Instead, he pulled

open her laces and shoved both tunic and chemise over her head. Bared her skin to the night.

She shivered yet she wasn't cold. Grial didn't touch her, simply devoured her with his gaze, as if committing every curve to memory. Locking her gaze with his, she brought his palm to her neck and felt the raw need in him.

"Touch me."

Slowly, he lowered his head to meet her lips once more, to trail a shivering path down her neck, pausing to do wicked, delicious things behind her ear. She couldn't control the shivers spiraling out from her core as his lips traveled lower, subtly grazing over her collarbone before kissing a sensitive pebbling nipple.

She jerked at the gentle touch as the sensations spiraled. A soft lick of his tongue, a taste and a caress that made her crave another. His lips paid homage to her other breast, lifting it up toward his mouth, loving the aching tip with sensuous licks and delicious kisses.

His palms moved in a rough caress over her belly, finding her heated core as he continued the onslaught of pleasure. She shuddered again then clamped her thighs around his hand as his fingers brushed a hidden place that sent small sparks of fire through her.

"Look at me." His breath washed over her bared skin. "I want to see your eyes."

She fought to keep her lids open while he touched her, slowly, intimately, his fingers teasing her, giving her just enough to make her crave more.

"Stop." She needed him inside her. Would die without him.

"You don't want this?" His voice held an edge, raw and pleading.

"Inside me," she whispered, and clenched against the emptiness between her thighs. "Inside me. Now."

He shook his head. "You don't know what you're asking."

She couldn't breathe from the twin-edged sensation, pleasure and pain trembling with need.

"I need you."

"I can give you what you need." He leaned in once again, his breath raging against her.

"No!" She nearly wept, fought for each breath. "Inside me. Or none at all."

He gasped for air as if he couldn't get enough, his hands sliding away from her to fist at his sides. "You don't know – "

"Yes I do."

"I'm a dragon."

"Yes." Nearly whimpering with need, Xara firmed her lips, lifted her chin. If he didn't fill her she would die, she would burn in the fire. So she reached out for her blade, lifted it high above her naked body, saw the light glitter on its edge. "If you don't do this now, I will slay you."

His eyes narrowed to slits and still he didn't move while that silver gaze caressed her.

"Remove your clothing, Dragon."

"Or?"

Despite the pain of need, she smiled. "Or I will cut them from you."

His gaze was raw and dark as he stripped off his tunic, and then kicked aside his britches and his boots, revealing himself to her. Gold skin was poured over hardened muscles, scars and black marks from scales enhancing his dark beauty. His arousal jutted toward her, strong and thick.

"Inside me." She stood up on her knees and let the sword drop to the ground. Reached both her hands toward him. A breathless moment later he stepped into her arms and Xara lost herself inside his embrace, the need, the craving so intense she bit his skin above the circling scars.

His strong hands lifted her above him; she spread her thighs, opening herself, readying herself for him. Their gazes locked as Grial sheathed himself inside her.

Dark pleasure speared her, enflaming the sparks on her skin into a raging fire. She threaded her fingers through his hair, buried her face between his neck and shoulder as his hands closed on her hips and showed her how to move.

Pleasure and need, desire, lust and passion. She moved her body over his, brought them both pleasure, watched as her dragon fought for breath.

His arms crushed her against him as she trembled, as the bright need inside her peaked. She shattered into tiny pulsing pieces just as he pressed his lips into her neck to shudder and to groan his own release.

Chapter Six

"You found her."

"Yes, My Lord." Karl rose, his hands and face scarred with fresh burns.

"You've killed her."

Same dispassionate face. "No, My Lord. The dragon allowed her to escape."

Darius didn't feel fury anymore, wouldn't allow himself to do so. Emotion cost too much, and the Fanged Wizard had to protect what power had been left to him.

A few more days and he would have a well of power. For now he had to be content with what he had.

"The Dragon." He said lovingly, caressing each syllable with his tongue. His future and his strength were in those words.

"Yes, My Lord."

He didn't waste magic on his pride and gripped his staff when Lila brought it moments later. For now he'd let her serve him by doing the things he no longer had strength to do. She would serve him in other ways once his youth would be restored again.

"The dragon should have been disabled." He'd gathered all the magic he could spare to keep the dragon from transforming, allowing Grial to retain only enough so that the soldiers wouldn't injure him.

"His fire cleared their path. Our arrows —"

Dragon Slayer

"You shot at him?" Fury stirred. The Wizard worked hard to defuse it. Emotions were a waste of strength, an indulgence he could ill afford. Beside him, Lila looked at Karl, her dark eyes open wide.

"Yes, My Lord."

"Then you must thank the Fates he retained enough of the dragon's strength to avoid injury. Had you harmed him" Darius couldn't bear to finish the thought.

As if to calm him, Lila brought him warmed mead; he let her hold the chalice to his lips while he drank and willed his fury to dissipate. When she wiped at his drooling chin with a pitying smile, Darius longed to crush her throat with magic.

In time, he told himself and instead used his power to connect to all the magic wielders he could reach, those far and near Blackrock Mountain. Anyone who would kill the woman known as Dragon Slayer would find the Fanged One in their debt.

* * * * *

The morning light painted the ground with blood red tones. Standing with his face to the sun, Grial breathed in the autumn air while Xara slept, still wrapped tight in his cloak, beautifully naked under it.

"Your blood is in my circle." Outside the edge of stones, Andar slid off his horse.

"Then we are even now."

The Druid didn't smile. "As I see." A slap on the horse's flank sent the animal searching for grass to nibble on. "Would you like me to heal it?"

"I would be in your debt."

The circle shimmered when Andar stepped over the stones and motioned for Grial to turn.

"Your wounds burn with poison." No emotion in the Druid's voice, just a cool, dispassionate tone. Andar no longer wasted himself on emotions.

Griall's mind eased as his friend murmured something low and soothing while running something cool over his back. He hadn't noticed he still bled, hadn't focused on anything but Xara's touch.

The blood brought back the thoughts he didn't want to face.

"How will she kill you at the tourney if she feels for you?"

"Say nothing." Griall risked a look at Xara, was relieved to find her still asleep.

"What happened between us" Griall struggled to explain it, but couldn't begin to understand the mix of emotions in his gut. "I should have never allowed it."

"Never is never long enough." Andar pressed something into his back.

Griall gritted his teeth as pain hissed then retreated.

"A Dragon in love with a Slayer." Behind him, his friend snorted. "There's a tale."

"Darius hunts her."

"Yes." The poultice was removed, the cool ache with it. "I felt his magic press at me." A pause. "He knows her face, Griall. He wants her dead, and you beside him."

"He is afraid of her, of what she could be." Grimacing, Griall turned. "I do not have the strength my father found when he faced me." Again his father flashed into his mind, as he begged Griall to plunge his sword into his neck before finally throwing himself at the cliffs. "With her, I'll die a warrior."

With flat dark eyes, the Druid met his gaze. "You'll die a coward. Afraid to face yourself and your own strength."

Again, Griall risked a glance at Xara. The steady rise and fall of her chest had fresh guilt grabbing at his heart. "She needs more rest."

Andar tilted his head in silent agreement.

They walked in silence through the trees, the morning light soft on their faces.

"I didn't intend for this."

"Perhaps you didn't." Andar studied the forest with black eyes. "You still have time to end this."

"Not now, not when he wants her dead."

Dragon Slayer

A small laugh. "Only because his spies and scrying bowls have shown him your feelings for her. If you decide she isn't the one, he'll do the same."

"The mark —"

"You said yourself it wasn't complete."

Griall mulled over those words as they walked toward the stream. "I should have asked for you to kill me."

A sad smile. "Even if I could stomach death, my blade wouldn't pierce your hide."

Chapter Seven

She still smelled Griall on her skin.

Unable to move, Xara couldn't stop the tears from escaping. Griall had nearly died protecting her. He bled from wounds filled with poison while she seduced him, with no regard for what he pain he surely felt.

She hadn't noticed the savage marks over his back.

The Fanged Wizard had heard of her lies and sent his people to destroy her — and Griall bled for his belief in what she couldn't be.

Finally, she forced herself to rise. Dressed, with her blades sheathed at her back, Xara pushed out of the circle, feeling Andar's magic press against her skin, as if attempting to detain her.

The Druid's grey horse nibbled on dying grass a few short steps away.

She would no longer live a life of lies. If Griall was determined to find someone to kill him, Xara refused to be the one for the task.

The mark on her must indeed be a curse, she thought while she ran her palm over the horse's flank, soothing it with soft words and a treat of fruit. Everyone she had ever loved had died or turned against her. A curse, Serrain had said. And he was right.

There was a simple way to end this. She'd find Eldan the Dragon and she would face him as a Dragon Slayer should. She would prove to Griall and the Fanged Wizard

that she was no one, no one but a curse, an orphaned girl who let her pride and ego get the best of her.

She swung onto the horse, calming it with soothing words while it whinnied. And as it ran into the morning breeze, she brushed the tears out of her eyes and for the first time felt the lies lifted.

* * * * *

Guilt was a hard companion. As Shanna's waters bubbled with heat around his body, Grial wondered if Xara would enjoy it. He pictured her hair slick with water, wet ropes of fire hanging down to her back.

Xara would become a warrior, be revered by the realm. Respected, feared. Loved.

Once she killed the Fanged One's the dragon, she would know the full extent of her strength. Darius wouldn't have any power over her. Without a dragon, the Wizard would grow weaker, his human souls unable to sustain him.

She simply had to realize she was the one. She'd learn to believe in fate, in destiny. She'd learn to tap into the strength he could already feel, the strength coiling just under the surface of her skin, ready to burst forth. Once she defeated him, the name she carried would become the truth.

They would train more. He wouldn't touch her, wouldn't risk losing himself in her again. Now that she knew his other form, he'd train her to fight a real dragon. Because regardless of the respite he was given, Grial was certain his beast would be back.

His thoughts heavy, he made his way back to the circle to find Andar solemnly looking at the dying fire. His horse was gone and Xara with it.

The Druid watched him with dark, calm eyes. "She must not have needed more rest."

Dragon Slayer

Griall couldn't see any signs of struggle; no soldiers had taken her against her will. She had gone willingly. Or worse, she simply ran to get away.

His blood boiled hot as the beast clawed out, his black scales dull in the pale morning light.

Andar didn't move, his hand remaining by his sword but never reaching for it. "If she is smart, she'll know you'd fly over the open roads."

"She's smart." The dragon's tongue felt thick and foreign, the words it spat out strange and low. "She'll keep to the forests." Turning his neck, he felt the weight of wings pull at the newly healed skin under the scales. "Help me find her."

"I won't." Calmly, the Druid crossed his arms over his chest. "Will you burn me for it?"

"Perhaps I should."

"You could just end this. Let her live her life."

The ground was damp still; he could fly low over the woods and try to find the horse's trail. Guilt slithered on his back and was ignored in favor of determination.

His wings unfurled painfully above his back, just as they had the first time he'd shifted. "At least wish me good hunting."

"I wish you would not eat my horse."

Chapter Eight

She stayed off the main roads, to keep away from Griall and the Fanged One's soldiers. Foolish perhaps to have run off, and yet it was the only path Xara could think of. She'd prove she was a liar, and Griall would find somebody else to spill his blood. A true Slayer of Dragons who wouldn't feel a tug inside her heart looking at him.

Every step took her closer to the dragon that had sealed her fate. She knew these woods, had run wild here when she was innocent and didn't know passion or real loss. It had been here that she challenged Serrain to a fight, taunting him that he was just a coward, destined for nothing more than serving ale. It was because of her Serrain ran

off to prove his bravery, to seek the cave rumored to be the dwelling of a dragon. He'd disappeared for days and Xara searched for him and prayed he'd be spared.

The autumn air chilled her skin yet still Xara could smell the summer grass and hear the moths play in the branches. She'd called out her brother's name, both frightened and determined to save him. She'd found a torn cuff of his tunic and by some magic followed him into the Death Beast's home.

Now, she approached that same dragon's lair. When Andar's horse refused to step closer to the cave, Xara thought back to that dark bottomless chasm, when holding the torch in her shaking hand had made the fire tremble.

She'd faced a dragon then, and lived, had made her fortune on it. Now, as she let the horse go, she wondered if it would have been better if Eldan had simply killed her.

Lighting a torch inside the mouth of the cave, she lifted it high to look around. This time the fire didn't tremble in her hand, but fear once again churned in her belly.

Her life had started here after all. Perhaps it would end here.

The cave still smelled like death, a stale mixture of rotting flesh and burning metal. Scarred walls, as if they had been scraped with weapons and terrified screams.

Forcing her breaths to even, Xara walked into the dark, letting it close around her, press its weight at her skin while the air thickened. The steady light bounced off the swords and skulls scattered at her feet. A more fanciful woman would have thought she could hear them screaming.

Pieces of gold lay on the ground, coins of foreign lands glittering coolly in the torch's light. She knelt to touch them, wondering briefly what warriors came here to give their lives for bloodless metal. Shrugging, she nudged a coin with her boot, and then stepped over it.

"You aren't interested in treasure?" The Dragon's voice oozed with the shadows, slithering along the dark walls of his cave. She couldn't see him and yet she felt his gaze on her.

Green eyes, Xara remembered. With the long slashing pupils of a snake.

"Eldan." She called out his name and heard it disappear in the darkness.

Dragon Slayer

"The little Dragon Slayer."

The smell of burnt skin told her he was close.

"You tend to leave your offerings in the forest. Or have you bought a spell to give you courage to find me again?"

She forced herself to swallow. "I need to speak with you."

"Is that so?" His head emerged from the dense darkness, teeth longer than her fingers, snake eyes flat and amused. The green of his scales had faded since their last encounter, as if something leached the life out of him. "Speak, little Dragon Slayer. Before your scent gets too distracting and I must get a taste of it."

Fear churned faster in her belly, making it difficult for her to breathe. Xara refused to let him see it. "Your sense of smell burned out long ago. I've come to talk about a new arrangement."

"Our last arrangement has been profitable."

She wouldn't look at his mouth, those yellow teeth. Instead, she forced herself to look at those flat eyes.

"Our arrangement has come to its end."

"And you have come here freely?" More of his body crawled out of the darkness, his belly hanging low, covered with pale green scales.

"Peace, Dragon." She had no fear, Xara realized. The churning still bothered her belly, but she was not afraid. Instead, whatever burned inside her gave her strength. As if fear itself was helping her. "You may be interested in what I have to offer."

She didn't jump when his breath ruffled her hair, didn't jerk even as her pulse beat at her throat. The smell of sulfur burned her eyes.

"Then speak, Slayer." That last word was mocking, said in a slow malicious drawl. "Before your blood gets cold."

Xara ignored the shudders raking through her. "You'll end your exile and prove that the Dragon Slayer is nothing but a lie." She paused while he snorted. "You'll fly over Blackrock Mountain—the day the moon returns with a new face. You're fond of

gold, and I've upheld my word for nearly ten years. I will honor the same amount if you agree to this, and you will have a tale to last for centuries."

She heard a soft and gleeful chuckle. "You Humans are so petty. I gave you fortune and respect, and now you ask me to destroy it." He laughed outright; she saw the white folds of his belly wiggle in the torchlight. His claws were folded neatly over it.

"If I say no, what will you do?" he asked in a, silky hissing voice. "Will you unleash those toys that you call weapons? Threaten my life with magic?" He laughed again. "But I forgot . . . you aren't a Dragon Slayer. You'll scream—just as your brother did—and beg me to spare you. "

"In fact—" He flung out a wing. "Let's hear how you beg."

Her throat closed, her muscles clenched, her blood began to boil. She had to force out the words. "I have no wish to fight you, Dragon."

"Perhaps not." Another laugh and his wing nearly knocked her off her feet. "But The Fanged Wizard wants you dead, and to my fortune, you've come here." Another swipe of claws ripped at the skin above her cursed mark.

"I will enjoy the gold his gratitude will bring me. And as you've said, I'll have an interesting tale."

His claws narrowly missed her neck. She threw the torch at him, shuddered as he snapped it into pieces, licking at the fire. Forcing her pulse to slow, Xara rolled away, gritting her teeth against the sting of pain below her shoulder.

She had to run, to move. He would need only a few moments to see clearly in the dark, to know exactly where she hid. She wouldn't die like this, quivering like the last coward, fearing this thing she was said to have killed.

"Hiding?" There was hunger in his voice, dark lust for death. "Wedging your tiny body into a crevice in a rock?" His voice was close, amused and sweetly frightening. "Imagine how I'll tell the tale of you cowering before me in darkness."

The churning in her belly wouldn't stop. She breathed, as soft as she could force herself. He didn't see her yet, but that didn't account for his hearing.

Wincing against the tug of pain, she tossed Grial's gold into his face, heard the coins bounce, imagined Eldan extending a giant claw to catch them as they fell.

A breath, a leap and Xara gripped her blades, sliced at the heavy wrinkles of his gut, was knocked aside while the air screamed around her. She could barely hear over the pounding of her heart, couldn't see in the darkness. Pain roared inside her and still she gripped her swords, ready to meet death like a warrior.

A growl, a cough, another growl, low, menacing, familiar to her. She felt blood dripping through her palms as she crawled forward, hoping to see, to hear, to understand what happened in the sudden silence.

Then she was lifted, carried out into the cool air, the wind slapping her cheeks, the woods falling below her. And when she twisted to look up, she saw giant teeth and silver eyes.

Grial held her in his claws, his grip steady and strong around her waist. Her hair had escaped her braid once more, and flew behind her, bright red against shiny black scales.

Relief flowed through her like warm wine. A gulp of air filled her with crisp exhilaration. The chill should have roughened her skin, and yet she reveled in the cool fresh air.

No words for now — she didn't need them. Instead, with her swords still gripped in her hands she spread her arms as wide as she could get them, as if she flew herself, as if those leather wings were hers to command.

And when the dragon swooped down to the sea below the cliffs, Xara's only regret was that the flight couldn't last longer.

Chapter Nine

He was afraid he'd drop her into the sea, or worse, smash her into the rocks of Buried Hills. With fear in his gut, he forced himself to slowly drift onto the cliffs, with

gentle movements let her down. She stumbled with her swords still in her hands, her tunic torn and bloody.

The beast's breath raging in him, Grial flew deeper into his own cave. He needed to let the anger pass before she saw him. He'd barely allowed Eldan to live, had been terrified at the thought of that old dragon touching her. He thanked whatever fates had helped him track the horse in time just as Xara – bleeding, defiant – stood to plunge her blades into the belly of the beast, unaware Eldan had already coiled to crush her.

Foolish and brave. A true blooded Dragon Slayer.

His scales pressed through his skin when he heard her footsteps.

"You shouldn't have come after me."

He had expected anger, fear, maybe both. Instead her voice was soft, those jewel-toned eyes tired. Naked, for his dragon form always tore through his clothes, he turned to see her in the darkness and fought to calm his pulse.

"You were foolish to face him."

A soft and somber laugh. "I was."

He would have loved to have tasted the scent of her exhilaration while they flew. In the hot darkness of his cave, Grial could see her face, still rosy from the wind, her hair like flames behind her.

"All this to prove yourself?" The beast snarled once again. And again, Grial fought against it. "Risk your life for pride? For ego?"

"Pride." The word was small and bitter. "It had nothing to do with pride."

He didn't have the strength to back away when she walked toward him.

"My lie caused you to bleed. I couldn't stand it." With a strength that surprised him, Xara gripped his hand. "For once, I saw inside myself." Her eyes glowed now, green light so deep he could've drowned in it. "I went there to destroy the lie, so you would know I'm not the one you seek. I know the truth now."

She bled from the deep gash above the dragon mark over her arm. Grial shook his head at her foolhardiness. "He would've killed you."

She lifted her non-injured shoulder. "He did not."

Dragon Slayer

He couldn't allow himself to touch her. "The Fanged Wizard will try to kill you."

"He can try."

Something hot swelled inside his chest, both his and the dragon's that lived inside him.

"I will go with you to the Fanged One's tourney." A solemn voice, a challenge. "I will help you fight the hold the Fanged One has on you." That emerald gaze searched his. "And if you cannot beat it" A short pause. "I'll set you free."

He'd wanted her to understand, needed to hear those words. Couldn't stand them now that she had spoken.

"You can't." He wondered how she stood his teeth, his scales, the monster he became. "You won't be strong enough." He would be damned if he'd allow Darius to touch her with his dirty magic.

Her gaze pierced his skin. "I am the Dragon Slayer."

Soft and slow words, as if she said them for the first time, as if she finally believed them. If he brought her to Blackrock Mountain, he would be forced to fight her; the Wizard would command him to destroy. He knew now how his father felt, the madness and the grief, why he had begged to die. He'd flown into the cliffs to keep himself from killing the only thing he still loved.

"You are nothing." He had to force himself to speak the words. "You have no strength in you. I was misled."

A sharp hiss of an inhale. "I don't believe you."

He turned to walk away, wouldn't face her for fear she would sense his lie. "Believe what you wish. You aren't the one."

Her blades sang from behind him. He should've let her kill him, allowed her end his torment, let him find peace. Except the Fanged One would hunt her until time's end, armed with the proof that she was the Dragon Slayer.

Her only safety was to never know herself.

Schooling his features, Grial turned, offering her a frown. The hurt glow of those jewel eyes, that stubborn chin, the tiny shudder of her body were nearly his undoing.

"Fight, Dragon." Soft and deadly words.

He didn't have the strength to let out a mocking laugh while the beast howled with pain inside his head. Fisting his hands against his sides, he turned his back to her to walk deeper into of the cave, fighting the urge to glance back at her.

"You will not walk away from me!" Filled with hurt anger, her tone nearly drove him to turn around.

"You have no strength to harm me." He hoped those words would pierce through the last of her resolve, because he couldn't find the strength to mock her.

Her blade whistled in silence, catching an odd ray of light that danced into the cave. He watched as it descended in a perfect arc and neatly sliced his arm, through skin and through the black scales of the beast.

No other creature than a Dragon Slayer could pierce a dragon's hide.

Blood welled, his beast roared with it. Grial fought to hold it in himself, to keep it from unleashing, to keep the feelings deep instead of swirling up.

"You need to leave," he ground out through clenched teeth, fighting the beast, the blood, himself, fighting for breath, for reason.

Her eyes were bright as Xara stood to block his path. "I'm not afraid of you."

"You should be."

"Show me." The challenge, the soft slap of it had him snarling in hunger. "Show me to be afraid of you."

The beast broke his control.

She wasn't afraid when Grial lifted her off her feet, shaking her before holding her against him, taking her lips with a low growl. His hands moved quick and rough over her skin, not gentle like before, but as if driven by raw hunger. Hunger that overwhelmed her, thrilled her to the point where she simply closed her eyes and let him feed.

His lips drugged her, tracing nibbling biting kisses on her skin, over her cheeks, her mouth, lingering over the arched column of her neck. Through the wild beat of her pulse, she heard Grial make low noises in his throat while he devoured her.

With a swift jerk he ripped the laces of her clothes, and then lifted both tunic and chemise over her head, feasting on bared flesh, murmuring something incoherent.

She didn't need words. With fumbling hands she reached for him, reveling in the male skin she found. Pressing her palms against the muscles of his chest, she felt the shuddering rhythm of his heart.

His arm bled where she cut him; that silver gaze glowed in the darkness. Keeping her eyes on his, Xara sank to her knees in front of him and softly brushed her lips over the wound. Lower, over his belly. When he sucked in his breath she kissed him lower still then slid her lip over the molten heat of his arousal.

With a rough motion, Grial jerked her to her feet to carry her deeper into the cave, where all was dark, where she could only feel his touch, his lips, his passion.

The roaring in her ears was her pulse; under her palms she felt his heartbeat thunder. In the dark, he laid her on soft and thick wool that smelled like him. And when he turned her on her belly and gathered her hair off her neck, she stilled.

Defenseless. She couldn't do anything, but take whatever he would give her. The thought stroked at the fire in her veins. She fisted the wool in her hands, struggling to rear up only to feel his hand pressing down at her back, both firm and gentle.

"You're afraid now," Grial whispered in her ear, his warm breath sending shivers through her skin, the need inside her burning unfulfilled.

"I'm not afraid." She was already aching for him. "I need to touch you."

"Soon."

His lips traveled along her spine, sending more shivers dancing through her. Hot open-mouthed kisses, quick stinging grazes of his teeth over the sensitive skin of her buttocks. *Defenseless*, she thought once again and shivered more.

His palms caressed the backs of her thighs and Xara shifted to allow his fingers better access to her heated flesh. He brushed against her slick wet heat, teasing her with

a short flick of pleasure before returning to her buttocks, cupping them in his palms. Again, she felt his lips low on her spine, this time traveling up, each kiss placed higher, each nibble tightening the pressure in her until she was sure she'd burst.

A graze of teeth between her shoulder blades had her rearing up onto her elbows, freeing her breasts for his touch. Sliding his palms under her shoulders, Grial cupped her breasts and coiled her pleasure tighter.

"I need to touch you." She reared up again, trying to grasp his neck as he caressed her nipples. And when she felt him move between her thighs she held her breath until he sank inside her with a long hard stroke, covering her body with his weight, his heat, his heartbeat.

Pleasure exploded, need and lust coiled together, pulsing in her blood. They moved as one, his gasps her own, his heartbeat pulsing in her. Deliriously, furiously fast, as if he couldn't get enough, as if she wouldn't be complete without him inside her.

His hands caressed her, rough, tender and hot, drawing out the fire, the pleasure boiling inside her. His body slammed hard into hers as a white searing light exploded in her eyes, consuming her until that last final moment when they both froze in a breathless flight that hurled them both into oblivion.

* * * * *

Grial didn't know how long he slept, how long he held her. He woke with Xara's taste over his lips, the beast lazily sated. For once, the thing inside him was quiet in his mind.

This wasn't Eldan's cave with skulls and bones and weapons. And yet aside from the human joy he found in flowing water and the comforts he had brought here over the years, he was still nothing but a monster. A Death Beast, like his father before him.

What he had done only prolonged the inevitable. Regardless of his feelings for Xara, he had to set her free so he could keep her safe.

In the warm darkness, Grial savored the feel of her against him, that satin skin, so soft yet far from fragile. He knew the instance she woke up and smiled at him.

The beast inside him bled.

He should've scared her earlier, bathed her in fire, made her hate him so she could live her life. But she smiled at him, soft and sleepy, and he could take with him this memory to give him the strength to die.

"You need to go." He ached to smooth a lock of hair off her forehead but couldn't permit himself to touch her one last time.

"You've said that once before." She sat up and with a soft sensual sound his cloak slid off her body. She probably didn't realize he could see in the dark, otherwise she would have snatched the wool to pull over her breasts. Shameless, Grial devoured her with his eyes, while forcing his body to stay still.

"The only way you will be safe is if you aren't with me."

"You didn't fly me out of Eldan's cave to let me go."

He braced himself to hurt her. "I couldn't let him kill you prior to the tournament. And when I saw your lack of strength, I didn't want your blood upon my hands."

He saw the words slice through her. "You aren't the one that I've been searching for." The mark on her left shoulder, the coiled dragon was complete. Eldan had finished it, searing her fate in pain and blood. And though she had the strength to pierce a dragon's hide, Grial would risk everything rather than let her know more heartache.

He wouldn't let the Wizard touch her.

"The mark." She scrambled to stand.

He followed her, as she groped for his cloak, hiding her body from him the same way he hid his soul.

"This mark", she said again, the dark wool swallowing the light of her. "It all meant nothing."

"Yes." For once, the beast didn't move, didn't try to sear through his skin. As if they both were in agreement. "You aren't the one I need." The final blow. "You trained well, you are a fierce warrior. If you want gold for the time spent — "

"Drown it at sea." A raw and vicious whisper.

Her lips trembled then firmed, as if she forced a mask onto her face. And yet the pain that burned his chest was nothing compared to the thought of the Fanged Wizard hunting her to devour her bright magic.

She backed away and stumbled. When he reached out to steady her, she slapped his hand away.

"Don't." Her voice was firm, her chin didn't tremble. "I'll need light to get out."

Silent, he breathed out fire toward the torches he had planted in the cave. The trembling light danced over water pooling deeper in the shadows, the furs and clothes he'd brought here after that first time the dragon took him over and he found himself naked and alone.

He felt the same naked loneliness as Xara knelt for her clothes, pressing them to her chest as if they were a shield. In silence, swallowed by his cloak, she walked toward the mouth of the cave.

"I'll take you to the ground."

She speared him with a look over her shoulder, a gaze of grief, of pain, of cold defeat. "I do not need your help."

He waited while she made her way out of the cave, fought beast and man to remain still instead of giving in to the urge to fly her safely outside.

Frozen, he listened for her steps while she climbed down, strong and graceful. Gone.

The beast couldn't wait much longer. His teeth unclenched, his fists drew blood. Inside the Buried Hills, the Dragon's roar shuddered over the silent cliffs.

Chapter Ten

Dragon Slayer

Xara didn't know how long she walked, dazed, broken, numb. She had believed; that was the worst of it. She'd faced a dragon and was spared from fighting it, and yet she still believed she was the one. Grial had saved her from doing something foolish – and still she'd craved a fight.

She felt for him, a dragon. Perhaps that was a sign she'd never be what she professed – surely a Dragon Slayer wouldn't love the enemy. Surely a Dragon Slayer wouldn't allow herself to be seduced, touched by those hands, that mouth. Pleasured until she had been blind from it.

She hadn't formed the words but inside, she had known them. She loved a dragon.

As dry fall leaves danced in the moonless sky, Xara bitterly laughed and huddled in her cloak. No point in starting a fire. She didn't think she could be warm again.

A rustle in the grass didn't have her leaping to her feet. She sat where she was and watched the leaves whirl to the ground.

Footsteps behind her back didn't have her reaching for her blades. Instead, she simply looked over her shoulder at the silhouette of an armored man.

"You have no business with me." The words were heavy in her mouth. She hadn't spoken since she had left the cave.

"I have business with the Dragon Slayer."

His voice sounded familiar. Andar the Druid.

She nodded to him and turned back to her leaves. "I'm no dragon slayer." Perhaps she should've bought ink to write it on her face.

"Grial told you this?"

Her throat closed for a moment. He sent her from him, pushed her away. Furious, Xara blinked the tears back. "I lack the strength he needs."

"I see." A cryptic silence.

"What do you see, Druid?"

"A woman in love with a dragon." There was no mocking laughter in his voice. He sat beside her; a quick flick of his fingers had a small fire bursting over the whirling

leaves. He smiled slightly at her raised brow. "Your dragon isn't the only one to command fire."

She shrugged and moodily stared at the flames, her knees drawn up, her arms wrapped over them. The fire did nothing to warm what was inside her skin.

"Do you believe in fate?" The words spilled out before she could stop them.

The Druid used a branch to stir the flames. "I have been taught we make our own fate." He laughed lightly. "And then fate shakes her fist and has her way with us."

"That means nothing."

"Perhaps." He handed her a strip of dark dried meat. "You may be fated to become a Dragon Slayer. Or you may not."

"I know my fate."

"Do you." It wasn't stated as a question, and yet she thought about it as such.

"Griall told me I don't have the strength. I'm not the Dragon Slayer."

Thoughtful, Andar bit into the dried meat then chased it with something from the waterskin he carried. "If I say you are of my blood, a Druid, will you put out this fire with a spell?"

She shook her head, frowning at him. "I'm not a Druid."

"You are certain of this?"

"Yes." She stared at the meat at her hand and wondered when she had last eaten.

"You know you're not a Druid. You feel it in your bones. You do not need for me to tell you otherwise."

Slowly, she nodded, while the flames danced along his weathered face. There was no laughter on it, no amusement. Perhaps a faint mark of regret.

"You shouldn't accept what others tell you," he continued, and didn't meet her gaze. "Listen to what's inside you to decide."

Inside her she had fear. "Before, Griall told me I was one. Should I believe that?"

Andar simply shrugged. "Believe what you need to believe."

She really was tired. "Damn you, you speak in riddles."

"That I do." He took another long pull from the waterskin. "And you will damn yourself when you find that you could have saved him."

Her blood — warmed slightly by the fire — ran cold again.

"Explain."

"In two days time, Grial will present himself to the Fanged Wizard as was their bargain. It's not something he can run from, because now, he is weak enough for the Fanged One to link their wills." The words were said as if it had already happened. "His soul will be devoured, slowly. He will become a shell, a body without thought ready to do the Wizard's bidding. He'll be the Wizard's weapon. And his slave."

Her breath quickened. "He didn't tell me this."

"I'm telling you this now."

"You want me to fight him? Kill him before the Wizard's spell takes hold?" She stood now, fists clenched as unwanted tears blurred the fire. "Even if I could, even if I had strength for it, I wouldn't bring him harm."

"Then you doom him yourself."

"You are his friend." She paced while the fire danced brighter. "Why not attempt to break the spell?"

"I've already tried. It's bound by blood. Only blood will destroy it."

Grial's blood. "But killing him . . ."

"You'll set him free."

Before she could say anything, Andar lifted his hand.

"Challenge him." His voice was deeper now, as if the magic of the Druids took him over. "Face him — and test the bounds of the dark magic enslaving him. Offer yourself, without fear."

The churning in her belly quickened once again, blood humming in her veins. "And if I cannot break the spell?"

The fire died down again. "If you don't break the spell, he'll spend his life having his soul devoured, a slave of the Fanged Wizard. If you kill him, the Wizard will attempt to drain your strength, bind you to him the same way he has bound Grial."

There was no pity in those dark and ageless eyes. "You'll need a Slayer's strength regardless of the outcome."

Chapter Eleven

The beast ruled him, the scales piercing his skin without effort. The Wizard commanded him to shed his human form and he'd walked as a dragon for two days, his weight heavy and his chest dull with pain.

He felt as if had an open, oozing wound on his neck, as the Fanged One started to feed off him. The old man's eyes had glittered with dark excitement when Grial knelt in front of him and accepted his fate.

"What of your Dragon Slayer?" The Wizard's voice had been merely a whisper, a force of air and words through deformed lips. Beside him, a young woman stared at him with a look of terror on her face.

Grial faced those snake-like eyes and lied while he was able. "There is no one to best me."

Even if Darius hadn't believed him, he had no strength to argue otherwise. For now Xara was safe. After the tournament, before the new moon would ascend the sky, Grial would throw himself into the jagged cliffs at Buried Hills. He knew now how to find the same strength as his father had.

Now, with the sun high in the gleeful sky, he sat beside the throne of the Fanged Wizard, with a heavy gold chain around his neck. In the grass field below, banners flapped with the wind, and men fought for the privilege to become one of the Fanged One's elite warriors.

Fools, all of them. They would become the Fanged One's slaves.

He would fight one of them, Grial imagined. There was always one to lift his sword and challenge the Wizard's dragon to be called Dragon Slayer. But that person wouldn't be Xara, and the thought brought peace to what still remained human inside the dragon's shell.

Dragon Slayer

The field was empty of trees and other things a man would try to hide in. At a safe distance, he heard people's voices, sensed their fear of the Wizard's new pet.

"Black Dragon!" A voice carried across the field, strong and full, making his heart beat loud even as his blood froze. "Will you accept my challenge?"

Fear gripped him with icy claws. Xara stood tall across the tourney field, flanked by an armored warrior carrying a simple banner of white silk. The hilts of her twin swords gleamed in the midday sun.

He had no choice but to laugh, loudly, mocking. With a small movement of his lips, fire bloomed into an arc sweeping over her banner.

His blood shivered when Darius pulled his feeble body upright, lifting a shaking, pointing finger. "She is the one," he wheezed, and Grial felt a mouth sucking at a wound on his neck, drawing more power from him. "Kill her."

The man inside him silently begged Xara to run while the dragon spat more fire, watching as she leapt through it, her hair bright, her skin fragile and red.

What was inside him fought for control against a Wizard's magic.

"Only a coward burns from afar," she yelled, and crossed her swords in front of her. The sun gleamed bright along their edges. "Are you afraid to face me, Dragon?"

"She's the one." The Wizard's voice, strong now, boomed over him. The staff he clutched in those gnarled fingers pointed toward him and blasted him with the Fanged One's will. "Kill her. Now." The words echoed into his skull, fired his blood with something foul and evil. The man inside him fought it, screaming, while the dragon raged.

"She must fight others first," he said with a thickening tongue, while Darius's snakelike eyes burned into him.

"Kill her before she destroys you."

He fought the roaring dragon with each breath, each scale of his huge body. The Wizard's voice burst through his veins, loud, demanding, thirsty for blood. *Kill her.* A song that slithered through his mind.

"You do not own me yet."

The staff jumped and those pale, pale eyes locked onto his. The man inside him burned while the will for Xara's death grew stronger.

Something drained him, something he couldn't fight. "Destroy her," the Fanged Wizard murmured, his hair darker now, his posture stronger. Those long, lethally pointed fingers didn't look as old. "Kill her and I will let you drink her soul."

The churning in her belly wasn't fear. An ache perhaps, pain at seeing Grialld chained to the old Wizard's throne, chained like a giant dog, his proud head low, his eyes a dull and dirty silver.

If she failed, she would die. If she failed, she would condemn him to a century of this existence.

She didn't flinch when the Fanged Wizard stood; even at this distance she could sense those pale eyes probing her. And when the foulness of him touched her from a distance, the churning in her stomach reared up and beat him back.

She couldn't tell how much of Grialld had been left when the black dragon spat out more fire. If she succeeded, his death would mean freedom. She would give it to him while she wept.

The Wizard leaned heavily on his cane, his long dark robe flapping in the wind, his shock of black hair long over his shoulders. That snakelike face watched her with hungry madness in its eyes.

"Death to the Dragon Slayer," he hissed and as the staff in his hand burst with dark flames, Grialld unfurled his massive leather wings.

She felt no fear. She wouldn't let him see her pain. Instead, she waited with her swords and coolly smiled at the beast she fell in love with.

He landed close to her, so large she had to step back to see him, his body heat already racking her with warmth. And in a move that sent her pulse thudding into her throat, he put his great head at her feet, under the crisscrossed blades.

"I can't control it," he ground out, his voice thick and full of pain. "Finish it." A short pause. "Please."

She couldn't move, couldn't see for the tears that threatened.

"Fight it," she whispered.

"Can't." Black smoke poured from his large nostrils, more gathered from a source she didn't see. "Another moment and . . . I'd rather die." More smoke. "End this."

She stumbled back.

"End this." Fire poured from his mouth, burning her feet, stinging her eyes. "End it before I do."

"Then do it!" Shrouded in smoke, she shoved her swords into their scabbards. "Do it if you can find the strength! Do it." Her throat already hoarse from screaming, Xara lunged toward him to slide her palm on the black leather of his nose. The eyes that stared back at her were already red with madness.

"You damn us both." His voice grew distant.

Her tears choked her, made her weak. Somewhere above, the screaming Wizard probed her with magic that an unknown power in her pushed against.

Griall's body jerked, his large wings shaking as he fought himself. His gaze pleading with her, he dug his claws into the ground. "Do it before I kill you. Please."

She had no choice. At least she could end it all quickly. Spare him more pain. Her blades gripped firmly in her hands, Xara lifted them high. And screaming at the darkened heavens she plunged her blades into his neck.

The scales gave way under her weapons; she heard his roar of pain as magic boiled bright, enveloping her swords, devouring her. She didn't understand the churning in her blood, just felt it growing, larger, faster, until it burst out with a loud scream of light, through her body, through her swords, scorching the air.

The high-pitched scream sounded far away. She squinted through the smoke, nearly screamed herself when she saw blood staining her fingers. Atop the hill, the Fanged One's throne was stained with blood and magic. His bones spilled white and ancient on the gold cushioned seat.

In the harsh smoke, the dragon didn't move. In the deafening silence, Xara knelt beside him, unable to control the sobs that raked her heart.

The crowd moved closer. She heard their mumbles, a low rhythmic chant. "All Hail the Dragon Slayer."

The words meant nothing to her.

She didn't try to hide the tears while her hands burned with Grial's blood.

"Get up. Get up damn you!" She felt the faint warmth of his body and poured out the words she should have said before. "I love you." A hoarse whisper, lost in the fading heat.

The crowd moved closer; she heard the hiss of swords drawn up.

"Burn the Dragon!" The chant grew louder, a wave of sound crashing over her.

Fisting her hands around her swords, Xara forced herself to stand in front of him, a Slayer defending a dying Dragon.

He rose to his full height, the scales of his head shining, his blood still dripping to the grass. His shadow fell across her swords.

"All hail the Dragon Slayer!" He boomed the words in that low growling voice and bowed his head toward her. And in the roar that followed, Grial unfurled his wings.

Once more, dark smoke surrounded them, no doubt a gift from Andar.

"How can you love a dragon?"

Xara breathed out in relief as her pulse pounded. "I have no choice." She had no fear, no pride.

He nodded, shrunk as his scales retreated through his skin, until he stood before her, naked and bleeding in the blackened air. Defenseless, but for the strange light in his eyes.

"I love you, Dragon Slayer."

Swords still in hand, she flung her arms around him, kissing him as something warm and liquid squeezed her heart. "You have no clothes."

With gentle fingers, Grial wiped the tears on her cheeks. "A noble reason to shift back and fly away with you." Smiling, he rested his brow on hers. "Perhaps we'll start a tale of a brave Slayer kidnapped by a Dragon for her love."

Dragon Slayer

Her heart beat wildly as his warmth shivered on her skin. "Perhaps then we can tell a tale of a humbled Dragon, tamed by a Dragon Slayer's love."