



KALLAAYT'S TALE

ROSEMARY LAUREY

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Rosemary Laurey

“I will give what help I can, but...”

Kallaayt gave Arragh a twisted smile. The older dragon always made him feel like a hatchling. “But you think me a foolish and ill-advised dragon.”

Arragh shook his great head. “I think you disregard how shifting saps power and strength, and because of this may put yourself and this human female in danger.”

Dark green eyes flashed with lights of sapphire blue. “You think me young and reckless!”

Arragh stilled Kallaayt’s arm with sheathed claws. A hundred was young in dragon time, and Kallaayt had ever been prone to taking offense. “Not that. I killed two innocent human women before I brought my Myfanwy back to the fire mountain as my mate. Would you carry that on your soul?”

Kallaayt stared in shock for several long seconds. “Not you! You did not kill them. Their own people slaughtered them!”

“And if I had never entered their land, they would still be spinning and weaving by their own firesides.”

“You entered their land to bring back a fertile mate.”

“Yes.” A slow smile curved Arragh’s wide mouth. “I did.” As if on cue, Myfanwy and a group of females appeared from one of the caves in the valley. As they passed beneath the two dragons perched on the crater, the females waved. Kallaayt’s dragon sight caught the smile Myfanwy flashed Arragh’s way before she walked on, her swollen belly ripe with her babe. Arragh followed her with his eyes. “A most worthy mate,” he said as if to himself.

“Gwen is equally worthy.”

A dragon would have to be deaf and senseless to miss the affront in those four words. “You have chosen her. How could any one of us doubt? My question is not her worth, but her acceptance of your nature. Never forget, humans are taught to fear and despise us.”

“Myfanwy does not fear you.”

“Not now, but when she first saw me...”

“She was afraid?”

“Terrified! I smelt her fear from a hundred meters. Her cowardly brothers had lashed her to a tree then fled to save their own worthless hides. She was petrified, but looked me in the eye and her courage was such that she never even flinched. Then, Kallaayt, was when I fell in love.” Arragh smiled. “I wish that same joy to every unmated dragon among us, but never forget humans use tales of ravaging worms to frighten their children. We are the bogeymen of their nightmares. What if your Gwen cannot accept your true nature?”

“Myfanwy did.”

“Yes.” Arragh nodded. “But she knew me as dragon from the first. Gwen believes you human, a wandering trader. She may take fright when you reveal yourself.”

“Not Gwen. She has courage enough to accept and she loves me. Last harvest, she agreed to wait for me.”

Arragh forbore to point out she'd agreed to wait for Kall the trader, not a dreaded worm of destruction. “When will you leave for her?”

“Less than a sennight. Even now, I gather my wares. Marbra and the others have prepared treen to trade. Rarrp has made me fine clay vessels. Even your Myfanwy has turned shell buttons for me to carry. They all wish me success.”

How could they not? The whole mountain was agog with the prospect of the first live birth after five decades. The anticipation of a second fecund female was enough to turn everyone's head—including young Kallaayt's. “I wish you and your chosen well, but ask that you not go alone.”

“You think me incapable?”

Sweet Goddess preserve him from young dragons with tender egos! “Not that at all! Two minds are always better than one. Why not take your brother?”

A snort greeted that suggestion. “Kallauwn? I can find a mate by myself!”

“Bringing Gwen back is but part of your quest. Humans and their towns are changeable and unpredictable. Who knows what may have happened since you were

there? Ask Kallauwn to accompany you as far as Tintawn. He can wait there. If you need him, summon him.”

His words weren't rejected out of hand, but neither did Kallaayt embrace the idea. “Goddess knows what he might do while I'm gone.”

“True, but I doubt it would be as disastrous as you needing him and not having him within hailing.”

“You're convinced I cannot do this alone.”

“No, I am not.” Arragh paused. Had he ever been as touchy as Kallaayt? Most probably back in his new-winged days. “But I have seen the fury mortals can unleash and the cruelty they show to their own. I would not wish that horror on your Gwen.”

Kallaayt shuddered at the thought. “As always, Arragh, you're right. I doubt I'll need his help, but he'll enjoy the jaunt.”

Arragh gave Kallaayt a thump between his wing ridges. “Take him along. Let him learn from you how to find a worthy mortal mate. May the Goddess go with you, and may your Gwen prove as perfect as my Myfanwy.”

Some days later, as Kallaayt sewed hides together for packs, Myfanwy approached him. She hesitated, waiting for him to acknowledge her. He'd mentioned this strange habit to Arragh. “She was taught deference and subservience to males,” he'd replied. Kallaayt had shaken his head at the time, just as he puzzled now. She was a gestating female: a creature of awe and wonder, possessing the power of procreation. Who could ever understand how humans thought? And why should they take it upon themselves to so subvert the natural order of life? In Llanbarra, where Gwen dwelt, and other towns he'd visited in his peddler's guise, females took second place to the males. Were considered weaker and inferior. Incredible! How these humans mangled the Goddess's will!

He sighed inwardly and smiled at the sturdy, pale-skinned woman and her ripe belly. “How may I serve you, most-fecund Myfanwy?”

A hesitant smile curled her lips. "I would speak with you, about your chosen bride." She hesitated a heartbeat or two. "If I do not intrude."

He moved a little to his right to make room for her on the grassy hillock. "How could the female who carries our next born ever intrude?"

She sat down but blushed as he cupped a hand on her rounded belly and felt the thrust of a sturdy foot, or perhaps the punch of a little clenched fist. "You nurture a fine young dragon there, Myfanwy."

"Rarrp says I have two."

Dear Goddess! Was it even possible? "And what do you think?"

"Arragh says she is never wrong in these things, so I expect I will have twins." Myfanwy smiled. "A boy and a girl, she predicts."

Could they ever be so blessed? Male and female offspring together. "The day Arragh brought you to us was glorious indeed."

She smiled—a little wistfully, he noticed. Was she remembering leaving her human home, pursued by brothers and kin and how they attacked her and Arragh with fire?

"Yes," she said, "I will never forget the afternoon he carried me away and brought me here." The broad smile as her eyes gleamed made clear her utter contentment. She rested her strong hands on her swelling belly. "And now you wish to bring your own mate back to Cader Bala?"

"If the Goddess wills, yes."

"It's not the Goddess who has to leave her home and family."

The sharpness in her words more than surprised him. "You are discontented?" Was it possible? She appeared satisfied and fulfilled. She was revered and respected by every dragon in the fire mountain.

Myfanwy shook her head. "I am not foolish, Kallaayt. If I were not here, I would have been killed by my people. Of course I am content." She smoothed both hands over her belly. "Most contented." She smiled, a slow quiet smile this time, as if to herself or perhaps the young ones she carried. "But, if Arragh had asked me if I would leave my home and live with him forever in the fire mountain in the west, I would have fled in

shock. Humans do not know dragons as I do now, and I fear your chosen believes the horrors, not the truth.”

He'd lain awake considering that, after his conversation with Arragh. “What should I do?”

“Does Gwen have any notion you are other than Kall the itinerant trader?”

“No.”

She went silent, biting her lower lip as a little crease appeared between her eyes. “You must tell her.”

He knew that much! But he held back his irritation. He would never snarl at a female, much less a pregnant one. “How?” he asked, hearing his own uncertainty.

“As soon as seems propitious. Has she—” she paused, “—has she accepted your love?”

He hoped. “When we last parted, I asked if she would wait for my return. That's how humans court, is it not?”

“Sometimes, but often a girl's family chooses her mate, and she has little say in the matter.”

Barbaric! How could these humans so stray from their beginnings and the teachings and wisdom the dragons once shared with them? How uncivilized. He kept that opinion to himself.

“Gwen has no family. Only Karil, the innkeeper, an uncle who barely deserves the title. Her father owned the chief inn in Llanbarra. Her mother was an outsider and had no family in the city. They both died in an epidemic two years ago. Her uncle inherited the inn that in any right-ordered town would have been Gwen's.” An injustice that made Kallaayt want to rail at the town rulers who sanctioned such things. “He grudges her shelter. Where she was once a loved daughter, she now toils in the kitchen and sleeps in an attic over the stables.”

Myfanwy seemed unsurprised. “In the human world it usually goes hard with a woman alone.”

He let out a dragon snort to tell her what he thought of that custom. "In direct defiance of the Goddess's will."

"They care little for the Goddess, because she teaches what the men do not care to hear—" Myfanwy paused, "—but in the circumstances, Gwen's unfortunate situation is your advantage. With no family, and in a desperate position, Gwen may well be more ready to go with you than a girl with security and a loving family."

He forbore commenting that Myfanwy's supposedly loving family had offered her as sacrifice to a dragon. "She is courageous and honorable, but to be so alone is a tragedy. When she comes here with me, she will be surrounded by protectors."

"One will content her, I believe."

He smiled as he caught her meaning. "She is so fine, Myfanwy. As worthy as you to bear a dragon."

"Accustom Gwen to your being more than human before you mention her fecundity."

"You believe so? Don't humans put great worth on healthy offspring?"

"Yes," she agreed, "but a woman likes to fancy she's valued for herself not just her possible fertility. And remember marrying a husband chosen by one's parents is a little more expected than flying off to Cader Bala with a dragon."

"I see." He did. Only too well. "You fear she may refuse me."

Myfanwy shrugged. "How she will receive the truth, I cannot tell. But, you must tell her. And soon. If she accepts you, mortals pledge a betrothal with a ring." When he stared at her uncomprehending she went on. "A ring to wear on her finger."

He'd seen such during his forays into Llanbarra. "I will have Granned make one of finest red gold and gems from the mountain heart."

Myfanwy shook her head. "That would get too much attention on the hand of a woman who works in a kitchen. Why not have Granned make a fine band of red gold? Few mortals will see it for what it is, and Gwen will know it's a gift from your heart."

"I will, and I'll remember your advice. I cannot wait to bring Gwen back here."

"And we cannot wait to welcome her."

Ten days later, in mortal form and pulling a laden handcart, Kallaayt left his brother behind him in the abandoned homestead of Tintawn and set off for Llanbarra.

“Summon me when you need me,” Kallauwn said.

“If I need you.” Kallaayt clasped his younger brother to him. “My thanks for your help with the cart and goods. Wait for me here.”

“I will never stir.”

With a neglected farmstead, a profusion of vegetables and chickens and rabbits run wild, Kallauwn had no reason to wander. “Leave some young vegetables for Gwen.”

“She will have the finest.”

By late afternoon, Kallaayt approached the gates of Llanbarra.

Six months ago, the workers were laboring to construct a perimeter fence. Now it was the height of two men and wide gates marked the entry from the road. Presumably at night they were sealed to keep out invaders and undesirables. Kallaayt shook his head. Mortals! Judging by the brawls and disturbances he’d witnessed in the streets, there was more risk of harm from the town citizenry than from the woods, flocks and farmsteads scattered over the fertile plain of Barr.

As he approached the gate, a roughly dressed guard, too young to yet shave, challenged him. “What business do you have in our fair city, peddler?”

“Same business as ever: to sell my wares.” Were they going to refuse him entry?

“Get on with you, Hal!” the second sentry said. “We’re here to stop bandits and thieves, not honest traders!” He nodded at Kallaayt. “This is Kall, the trader from the west.” The sentry gave the lad a not-unkindly nudge. “Stand aside, you, and let him enter, and if you wish to stand in good stead with that Betsy of yours, you’d best visit Kall for one of his trinkets.” He nodded to Kallaayt. “Putting up at the Flowing Flagon, are you?”

“As always. I have some fine leather pouches your wife would welcome, Harrad,” Kallaayt replied, remembering the man’s name.

"I'll bear that in mind," Harrad said. "She was right pleased with the buttons and buckle I bought from you last visit. Is her name day in a week or so. I'll visit you in the trading square tomorrow."

"I will await you," Kallaayt replied. And they both knew he'd hold aside a fine gift or two that he'd otherwise have sold at a good price. He'd made an effort to court the favor of the city guards.

Kallaayt pulled his cart through the wide-arched gate and over the hard cobbles, and immediately encountered a barrier blocking the street.

"Your business?" a ferret-faced man demanded.

"I am Kall, the trader. I come to sell my wares." Sweet Goddess! How many times was he to answer the same question? At this pace it would be night before he reached the inn.

The man consulted a list and then conferred with another guard standing by. "Seems you are well-known. You many pass. After payment of the bishop's levy."

"What levy is this?"

The soldier took a step forward. "By order of the bishop, all traders are tithed. What is the value of your goods?"

"Fifty silver pieces." These mortals strove to put a price on everything.

The tax collector nodded. "Assuming a tendency to undervalue, I assess your levy as six silver pieces." Extortion, but to protest would delay meeting Gwen. "Refusal to pay results in confiscation of goods."

"Why would a trader refuse?" Kallaayt replied as he counted out six silver coins, making sure they saw the remaining two he dropped back in. It never did well to appear impecunious, or too prosperous. His larger purse remained safe under his belt.

They seemed less than pleased as he handed over the coins. A soldier prodded at the packs and boxes but lifted the barrier and let him pass.

"What if a poor tinker or peddler cannot pay on entry?" Kallaayt asked.

The soldier grinned. "We accept payment in goods."

Foolishness all around. How many itinerant traders had his access to gold and silver? News of this would spread, and peddlers would bypass Llanbarra for more hospitable towns.

Kallaayt passed through the narrow streets and looked around. As always, new wooden buildings grew at the pace of apple trees, but the gutters were filled with refuse and slops. He turned into the stable yard of the Flowing Flagon and called for Ben, the head ostler. A rough-headed man appeared. “Ben’s gone to the Spreading Oak,” he told Kallaayt. “I’m running things here now.”

That explained the grass between the paving stones and the sour smell from the stables. If it weren’t for seeing Gwen, Kallaayt would have joined Ben at the smaller inn by the Southgate. “I need space to store my wares.”

The man prodded at the cart and seemed disappointed the straps and locks held. “We can offer that but will cost you.”

“My arrangement with innkeeper Karil is a share of my take.” And a generous portion it was too.

“That’s as may be, but I’m the one as protects your property when you’re away.”

Kallaayt handed over a fistful of copper coins, promising silver in two days. Goods sold or not, he was leaving as soon as Gwen agreed. He checked the locks and straps on his cart, paused by the pump to wash the dust of the road off his face and chest, pulled on a clean shirt and crossed to the kitchen.

The vast heat and smoke-filled room was abuzz with enough activity to approach disorder. But look as Kallaayt might from one end to the other, he saw no sign of Gwen.

“Is you here to eat?” a sweaty-faced lad asked. Kallaayt stared. Gwen would throw up her arms when she saw the state of the lad’s hands and fingernails. “You’d best get to the buttery then.”

Not yet. “I will, lad. But first I’d speak with Gwen.”

The lad’s eyes went wide before a nasty smirk curled his wet mouth. “You would, would you, sir? Then it’s not the Flowing Flagon you need, but the house of Wide Open Legs.”

The insolence of the lad! For a split second, Kallaayt understood why mortals hit each other. How dare he suggest Kallaayt look for her in the most famous of the town brothels? “I think not,” he replied, his voice sounding tight. “Call her, if you will.”

The grin was now downright insolent. Kallaayt took a deep breath. He was dragon, this greasy lad would not anger him, but neither would he insult his chosen. “Boy...”

He was interrupted by a red-faced kitchen maid with smoothed-back dark hair. “Get on with you Mag!” she snarled at the boy. “Wash your hands and get that bowl of punch to the gentlemen in the front parlor, if you don’t want to feel a wooden spoon round your rear!”

The boy scuttled off and the maid looked at Kallaayt. He remembered her from earlier visits.

“Mari,” Kallaayt began, “where’s Gwen? That lout said...” He angled his head in the direction the boy had gone.

“Mag is an ache in the head,” Mari replied. “Look, Kall. Go to the buttery. The new cook hates visitors to his kitchen.” New cook? Was Gwen at last given the dignity she deserved? Was the lad’s spite jealousy at her good fortune? “I’ll bring you stew and ale and tell you all that’s happened since last you were here.” She looked around as if scared she’d be overheard. “Go and take a seat. Best we not talk here. I’ll be there as fast as I can.”

Now would not be fast enough. But Kallaayt caught her anxiety and nodded before stepping out and across the hallway.

The buttery was all but empty. Two men looked up from their seats by the empty fireplace. After the briefest of nods acknowledging Kallaayt’s “good day”, they returned to their beef and ale as he took a seat by the open window and frowned over the lad’s malicious words.

No doubt Gwen had censured him—for his dirty hands, most likely—and he bore a spiteful grudge. But at least Gwen had been raised from her position in the kitchen. What had spurred that generosity in her cold-eyed uncle?

“Here you are!” Mari set a tray down on the table and served a steaming pot of savory stew with a hunk of dark bread and a tankard of ale. She’d remembered his preference for raw fruit and set a basket of polished apples and winter pears on the scrubbed table.

“I thank you.” He handed her a silver coin which she slipped into her pocket with a smile and profuse thanks. “It’s little enough, Mari. Now, tell me where I may find Gwen, and if her uncle will prevent me.”

“He’ll not stop you,” she replied, “but...”

“Where is she?” The beginnings of apprehension stirred his dragon heart.

Mari frowned. “Sir, Gwen made me swear never to tell you, she was so ashamed, but she also told me you’d pledged to her. And I think that gives me leave to break my promise.”

“What did she not want told? Where is she?”

“Mag spoke rightly, sir. She’s in the house of Wide Open Legs.”

A great icy load heaved in Kallaayt’s chest. “How?” It came out as a growl. “How could she sell herself there?” Hurt surged through him. He had vowed to preserve her honor until they were mated under the skies of the great fire mountain and now he was to believe she was selling herself to any man with coin in his purse. “Impossible!”

Worried eyes met his. “It was not her fault, sir. Truly it was not. It was a great injustice, but she had nowhere else to go.”

He knew he should not have waited until spring. “What happened?”

Mari took a deep breath, her dark eyes glistening as she remembered. “Just after you left, as the leaves were turning, her uncle announced he’d handfasted her to Morgan the Miller.”

“She was forced into marriage?”

“No, sir. She refused.”

The Goddess bless his Gwen. He knew she’d stand true. “What happened?”

“It was terrible. Karil Joneth shouted at her, beat her and threatened to turn her out of doors, but she would not consent. It was then she told me she was handfasted to you and would never accept another even if her uncle beat her until she bled.”

His growl came from deep within his heart. He had some debts to settle with the innkeeper. “What then?”

“That was the worst of all. One night, in the month of first frost, Morgan the Miller came to her room.”

Kallaayt's mind burned and froze at the same time. “You know it was him?”

“I was awake, sir, and heard her screams and went running.” Her face set hard. “I saw him clear as I see you. I hit him and jumped on him, thinking two of us might have a chance, but he threw me off, and I hit the wall and went senseless. When I came to, it was to find Gwen sobbing over me. She was bloodied and beaten, and raped.”

Kallaayt was silent now. Human tongue didn't possess the words to express his anger and he could not roar and spurt fire in this tidy paneled room. “And...”

Mari shook her head. “Morgan went to the new bishop and denounced her as unchaste. By then, she knew she was pregnant. She protested her innocence but they dismissed it as the accusations of the guilty. Karil cast her out. She tried to get hired in other inns, even the cookshop by the river, but no one dared hire her after the public shaming. Madame Lou was the only one in town who'd take her in.”

He shuddered. His Gwen, in a brothel! “She works there still?”

“As cook,” Mari replied.

Praise the goddess for small mercies. “I must see her.”

Mari nodded. “Finish your dinner first. But don't tarry too long, evenings are busy in that house.”

He didn't even finish the stew. The new cook lacked Gwen's touch. Or perhaps misery and worry took his appetite away. Kallaayt swigged down the ale, tore off a couple of mouthfuls of bread and set off for Madame Lou's house.

Kallaayt paused at the corner and looked down the unpaved street at the front door. It took every fiber of his dragon control not to storm the wide oak door above the three

yellow stone steps. But if Madame Lou had offered Gwen a refuge from the streets, she deserved Kallaayt's thanks, not his ire.

When trading with the wenches he'd used the narrow side door. Not today. If Gwen cooked, she'd be in the kitchen. He went around to the back. Savory aromas wafting from the half-open door reminded Kallaayt he'd dined sparsely. He paused on the step, listening. Gwen's sweet voice admonished someone to "stir those onions, we want them browned, not blackened".

He peered in. Gwen, her dark hair tied back with a kerchief and her blue eyes intent on her work, was rolling pastry at the table, and a young girl, scarcely more than a child, stirred a large pan on the stove.

As the child turned, Kallaayt glimpsed her cleft mouth. Another outcast. She saw Kallaayt and looked away, but not before saying, "Mistress Gwen, a caller."

He stepped over the threshold as Gwen turned. His mind barely registered her swollen belly, before she screamed, "Kall! No!" And fainted, the rolling pin clattering to the floor.

He swept her up in his arms and turned to the now-crying girl. "Where can I lay her down?"

As Kallaayt strode towards the far door, the child fled, calling for Madame Lou.

Madame Lou responded in seconds, blocking the doorway, hands on her hips. "And who are you? Entering uninvited and attacking my cook."

"Gwen fainted. She needs a bed and..." He looked at the child. "Fetch her some barley water and cool cloths for her face," he said, and turned to Madam Lou. "Where can I take her?"

She led him to a small parlor with an upholstered divan. Kallaayt carried the still-limp Gwen across the carpeted floor and gently set her on the pillows. She was pale, her face much thinner than he remembered, and her belly seemed too heavy for her slender legs. Myfanwy thrived on her gestation, Gwen was weakened.

"Can you not do better for her?" he snapped at Madame Lou. "Toiling in a kitchen in this condition."

Madame Lou stepped up to loom over him. "Gwen's woman enough to decide when to rest and when to work. She was perfectly well until you walked in and scared her half to death. Who are you? Explain yourself before I call the constables!"

"I am Kall, the trader, and Gwen is promised to me."

The woman's face didn't soften one trace. "I remember you now." She frowned. "If Gwen is yours, you did a poor job of protecting her."

"The ones who abused her will suffer."

She raised an eyebrow in disbelief. "Indeed?"

"I swear it, by the Goddess."

That earned him a sharp look. He scarcely noticed. "Kall?" Gwen's faint voice had all his attention. "Why are you here?"

He smiled down at her dark eyes and hair as golden as ripe corn. "Didn't I promise I would return when the oak trees set new leaves? I'm here. To take you home."

Her eyes flashed with panic as her hands covered her belly. "I cannot go with you now, Kall. I am ruined."

"You are not!" His growl echoed in the small room. "You are blameless! Sorely wronged! A victim does not carry guilt for her abusers."

"But, like this?" She looked down in panic at her swelling body and shook her head. "I cannot leave if I would."

"I will not see you stay where you were so misused. We leave at dawn, Gwen."

"Hold here!" Madam Lou prodded Kallaayt on the shoulder. "Noble words and fine-sounding deeds, but who's to say you're honest? You'll not carry her off, in her condition too, to wander the lanes and byways and birth herself under a hedge."

At last, one human cared for his Gwen. No, two. Mari was worried about her. "Gwen will be safe with me. My kin will welcome her as my chosen mate, and we have skilled birthers to help her when her time comes."

"Will you two stop talking about me as if I wasn't here? I decide if I go or stay."

"You gave me your word. Do you rescind it?" Kallaayt asked.

"Yes!" Her eyes were bright with tears and he knew she lied.

“Gwen, hush!” Madame Lou sank down on the divan and took Gwen’s hand in hers. “You’re in shock. Not the time to make these hasty decisions.” Kallaayt gave her an appreciative smile. Wise woman. “You rest up.” She squeezed Gwen’s hand. “And I’ll have a word with this wandering peddler of yours.” Her voice and the look she gave him challenged him to better her opinion.

“I cannot leave and you know that, Madame Lou. Convince Kall.”

“I’ll talk with him, pet, but as for convincing him of anything other than his wish to take you away...time will tell.” She patted Gwen on the shoulder. “Stop fretting, you need to rest.”

Gwen shook her head. “I must finish dinner. Ella is alone in the kitchen. Tonight the engraver’s guild is coming.” She tried to swing her legs to the floor.

Madame Lou’s bulk blocked her. “You’re not the only person in the house who can cook. I’ll send two of the wenches to help Ella. If she ever appears with the barley water and cloths your intended ordered.”

“He’s not my intended.”

“I am, Gwen. And I have no intention of releasing you from your promise.”

As Gwen repeated her objections, Ella appeared, and while Kallaayt held the glass and urged Gwen to drink, Madame Lou sent the child off for blankets.

“You’ll rest, or I’ll know the reason why!” Madame Lou said in a voice that brooked no argument. “Stay off your feet for two hours by the sandglass, and you’ll be fit enough to go back to the kitchen. Start moving around and you’ll faint on us again.” Her admonition ended with a smile and a quick kiss on Gwen’s forehead. “You,” she said to Kallaayt. “I’ll see you in my office before the sands are halfway run.”

“Kall,” Gwen began even before the door closed behind Madame Lou. “I cannot leave with you, even if I would.”

“It is not far, my love. I can take you there in less than one day.” If he shifted and flew. “And I swear not one of my kin will ever speak a word in approbation.” He brushed the golden hair off her face and looked deep in her eyes. “Can you truly say you do not love me?”

She shook her head. "Kall..."

From the corners of her eyes, twin tears fell. He gathered them on the tip of his finger and licked the salt of her sorrow away. "Talk no more of us breaking faith. We are promised, and that, my love, is that."

When she started to protest, he kissed her. Her soft, sweet mouth opened under his with a quiet sigh, sorrow and worry fading in their kindling passion. She reached up and held his head, pulling him closer as their tongues met. It had been far too long, but their bodies remembered. His hand slid down to cup her breast, now full and hard and luscious to his touch. He needed her, wanted her, and he had no doubt Madame Lou was standing outside, timing him.

Gently he eased off her mouth, holding her close as he dropped a gentle kiss on her cheek. "Rest, my love. When I've convinced Madam Lou I'm not a disreputable nomad, I'll return." And tell Gwen his secret. "We'll ready ourselves to leave at dawn."

"I cannot, Kall! You do not understand! I am forbidden to leave this house. If I do, I'll be flogged in the market square."

His anger went cold as the frost in northern lands. "Who says this, Gwen?"

"The new bishop. He pronounced me tainted and impure after I fled here."

"Gwen, we leave together, never fear."

"We cannot, Kall. If I could sneak unseen through the alleys, the new gates are guarded by day and sealed by night."

"Gates will not stop me, and you need never set foot on these inhospitable streets again. Believe me, Gwen. We leave together." He placed his hand on her belly. "The three of us." He kissed her again, and this time willed sleep to her. Her eyes were closed as he walked towards the door.

Gwen dozed, half-asleep, half dreaming. If only his words were as true as he believed them to be and she could flee with him...but she knew, only too well, the ways of the town. She would never leave here. Ever. But forever she would remember the love who returned for her. Too late to save her but not too late to renew her faith in him. Her

hopes of a life with him were shattered but her dreams of her love, Kallaayt, she'd carry in her heart until her dying day.

Madame Lou waited, arms crossed on her chest. "She's resting?"

"Asleep."

She raised an eyebrow but said nothing as Kallaayt followed her into a small study. She took one chair by the now-empty fireplace and offered him another. He looked around as he sat. This room was as comfortable as where he'd left Gwen sleeping. A chimney fireplace and a glazed window, woven cloths on the wood floor, accommodations here were far better than anything the Flowing Flagon offered.

"Not what you'd expected in a wench house?"

"In truth, Madam Lou, I never gave the matter any thought." That she appeared to doubt. "I thank you from the bottom of my heart for giving Gwen refuge. But I'm afraid you must find a new cook. Gwen leaves with me, before dawn."

"Spoke with her on this, did you?"

"Yes, and in her dazed, shocked state she insists she cannot leave the city."

"She's not dazed. She can't."

"And who would stop her?"

"The Bishop's constables. And they'd delight in it." He caught the meaning in her stone-cold words.

"What happened that the bishop holds such sway?" He remembered a benign, doddering old man.

"You want the recent history of Llanbarra, or to talk about Gwen?"

"Seems they are linked."

Madame Lou nodded. "True. Everything changed when the new bishop arrived."

"What happened to the old one?"

"Bishop Alriv?" She shook her head. "That was a sad day. He fell down at the altar with paralysis. A good man. He only preached against my house at the beginning of the penance season, and his priests always treated my wenches with respect. Once, a young

deacon got over-rough with one of my wenches, and when I complained, the bishop himself reprimanded him and sent his own healer to tend her.” She sighed. “But all that changed.”

She got up and walked over to a small cabinet, returning with two small glasses filled with tawny liquor. “I need this, even if you don’t,” she said, handing him one. She raised her glass. “Prosperity to you and your kin.”

Kallaayt echoed her toast and sipped. Briefly. Unsure what he was drinking and unwilling to disturb her narrative by asking.

“Many new laws came with the new rule.”

He’d encountered one already. “The taxes at the gate.”

“Just one of many. We have bishop’s constables now, reporting, sneaking and prying into honest folks’ lives.” She shrugged. “It’s bad. Girls and lads flirting on the streets are hauled into his courts and chastised. Dancing and singing are forbidden on holy days.” She took another sip. “Your poor Gwen was brought before the courts as a wanton and shamed in front of the whole town, but Morgan the Miller strides the streets as an honored tradesman. When Gwen claimed he’d raped her—and there were witnesses who’d seen her bruises and Mari stood up and swore she heard her screams and saw Morgan in her room with his clothes awry. Bah! The bishop declared only a wanton would lure a man that way, and threatened Mari with the pillory and flogging as a liar if she persisted in her slander.” By the time Madame Lou finished she was red-faced with anger. “Anyone with half a brain and one eye could see Gwen is no wanton.”

“Mari claims it was a trap set up by innkeeper Karil. Gwen refused Morgan in marriage, so she was cast out.”

“A sharp girl, that Mari.”

And an honest and noble one too. She deserved better than the silver coin he’d given. “It is high time Gwen left a town where she was so maligned.”

“And the bishop’s fiat that she may not set foot on the streets?”

“That will not stop us.”

She looked at the still full glass in his hand and nodded. “Gwen is willing to go with you?”

“She says no but that is shame and pride speaking. I will convince her.”

Madam Lou gave a little lopsided smile. “That I don’t doubt, but does she know what you are?”

“A trader, yes.”

“The fools in the town believe that. I know otherwise.”

Kallaayt met her eyes. “What do you fancy you know?”

Her laugh came soft and free. “No fancy. But in truth I’m uncertain what I saw. When you carried Gwen from the kitchen, I glimpsed another you. Stronger. Powerful beyond a man. Whatever you are, you walk in the form of Kall the trader.”

Dragons never lie, but when knowledge can harm or kill, needs must be economical with truth. “My true form would ever be unwelcome here.”

“A shifter?”

He nodded, still unsure of her and unwilling to implicate her as accomplice, if truth be ever outed.

“Best tell your beloved then. Such news needs be shared.”

“I came back to tell her.” And would do so with all speed.

“Give me your word you will not take her away against her will.”

“I swear it.”

She seemed content with that.

“How did you see?” No mortal eye had ever penetrated a dragon’s shift.

She chuckled. “I, too, am not entirely what I seem. My grandmother was burned as a sorceress, and her grandmother was one of the Priestesses of the Old Circle.”

“One of the Goddess’s Chosen?” It had been many decades since any mortal had formed the Sacred Circle.

“Hush now!” Madame Lou raised her hand as if to quiet him. “Never say her name aloud. By fiat we only worship gods now.”

“Another decree of the bishop?”

“The enforcement is his. The law was ever so in my lifetime but the old bishop turned a blind eye, believing all prayer went heavenward. But now, the constables destroy any symbols of the old religion and brand those possessing them.”

What blasphemy! The sooner he took Gwen from this clutch of heretics, the better.

“Will you not come with us? A descendant of one of the Goddess’s own would be ever welcome among my kind.”

“I cannot desert those who depend on me. Take Gwen, if she wills, and use your powers to spirit her away.”

“I will, and ever be grateful.”

Leaving Madame Lou in her study, Kallaayt strode back to the parlor. He opened the door quietly so as not to disturb Gwen, and found the room empty.

He found her minutes later, in the center of kitchen activity and seeming no worse for her shock. He stood in the doorway and watched as she sent a girl to the root cellar for turnips and onions, and a gangly lad to the yard for more wood for the stove. As they left on their errands, he was alone with Gwen in the vast kitchen. She looked at him, chin up. A spark of something he couldn’t quite measure flashed in the dark of her eyes.

Before either of them spoke, Madame Lou appeared with two wenches in tow. “I thought as much! Truly, Gwen, have you no consideration for my reputation? What if you collapse again and I’m accused of working my cook to exhaustion? Adele and Bron here will take over. You—” she shook a plump finger at Gwen, “—will go and rest. And you—” she turned to Kallaayt, “—better make sure she stays in her room.”

Kallaayt had no quarrel with that commission.

How would Gwen accept it?

Gwen acknowledged Madame Lou’s dictum with a nod. After removing her apron and wiping her hands on a drying cloth, she walked out the door, well aware of Kallaayt’s footsteps echoing hers on the uncarpeted stairs. Her heart ached beneath her bodice. Oh, if she could only leave with him! He spoke truly and from his heart, but love alone could not prevail against the power of the bishop and his constables. She paused in the hallway at the top. Several doors opened off the scrubbed wood floor.

“Kall,” she began, “there is no need for this.” In fact, the sooner he left her the better, so she might weep in seclusion.

“There is every need, Gwen. We must talk, and our child needs you to rest. Which is your room?”

Recognizing he would not give up—yet—she led him into her chamber, wondering how he saw the small, neat room, with a narrow bed and a woven cloth on the floor.

Gwen paused in the middle of the room, looking out of her window and the darkening sky beyond. If only she could go with him, to see the world again.

Kallaayt closed the door behind them. He took her hand and led her to the bed. He sat down on the smooth white cover and motioned her beside him. She sat, but not close.

“When we parted,” he said, “I promised to return for you. I am here and would take you with me, if you still will.”

Why did he not leave? Each time he spoke, he raised hopes that were immediately shattered by the reality around her. “Kall, do you not listen? My will is pointless now! I cannot leave the town.”

“Your bishop and constables are nothing to me. If you will come with me, we leave.”

“And when they stop us?”

“They cannot stop me, Gwen.”

Little did he know. They would stop them at the first barrier, kill him and take her to the guardhouse and use her worse than any wench under Madam Lou’s employ. Or even use her first and make him watch before cudgeling him to slow death. She could never risk him enduring that. “Are you more powerful than the bishop and his constables?”

“Yes.”

Tears stung the corners of her eyes. “Wishing does not make it so, Kall. I am condemned to stay here, and when my babe is born, they will take him and give him to his father.”

He grabbed her shoulders in his strong hands. “Never!”

“Kall, how can we defy them?”

“Listen, Gwen—” He paused. She’d swooned at the sight of him—what would she do on learning his true nature? No matter. Before he could convince her, she had to understand his power. “I come to Llanbarra in the guise of a trader. If I came as I am, they would never let me enter the town.”

“Why?” She gasped but looked him in the eye. What did he mean? “Are you a spy? One of the pirates from across the water?”

“Neither. My kin live to the north, in the great fire mountain, Cader Bala.”

That was not possible. “Cader Bala? That is an evil place. They say demons live there.”

“No demons, Gwen, dragons: the first of the Goddess’s chosen. We live on the riches of the great fire mountain.”

She shook her head. What could this possibly mean? “Kall, your words make no sense. How could you live among dragons?” If they indeed existed beyond the old tales that few told these days.

She heard the deep breath. Was it frustration, irritation or a longing for her agreement? Perhaps all three but she had to make him see. “It’s not possible, Kall. Don’t tease me or raise false hopes.”

“That I would never do, my love. To hurt you would be to hurt myself. I live there because that is where I belong.”

She stared. Was he drunk? Had he inhaled the vapor of bad tobacco?

“I’m not a human man, Gwen. I come in the guise of Kall the trader but my true name is Kallaayt. My forbearers and kin are dragons and so am I.”

If only! But hadn’t she asked him not to tease?

She spoke slowly, as if to a dimwitted child. “Kall, I wish you were a dragon who could carry me away.”

He couldn’t hold back a smile. She hadn’t recoiled at the idea. Hope bloomed in his heart. “I speak truly, Gwen. Look, will this convince you?”

He meshed his fingers with hers and raised their joined hands, turning his wrist so his hand was level with her eyes. “Watch.”

He invoked the Goddess's power, and one finger at a time, transformed the hand that grasped hers. Her work-worn fingers pressed against the slowly forming soft scales on his hand. Her lips parted as she watched, shock, horror and delight mingling in her wide eyes.

Gwen let out her breath in a sharp gasp, not having realized she was holding it. What she just witnessed was impossible. Could never happen, but... "Dear heaven." She barely heard her words, her throat was so tight. "It is true." She looked up and saw the deep, dark depths of his green dragon eyes. They said dragons were ravagers, destroyers, worms from the fiery pit bent on harm and horrors, but all she saw was kindness and his love. "You can truly take me away."

"Will you come?" His voice came deep and rough as hope rose and she smiled at him.

"Oh, Kall!" She dropped his hand and wrapped her warm arms round his neck. "How could I not?" Her belly pressed close, and the child within kicked and punched. She pulled back, looking up at Kallaayt, doubt still clouding her eyes. "But your kin, how will they welcome me, carrying another's child?"

"My kin welcome all young. They are rare among us and when they come, they are precious to everyone."

"Oh dear, Kall, this child. You know who the father was? An evil, rough person. A foul liar. All you are not. How can you take this child as yours?"

She still did not understand, confused as she was by these perverted values. "Gwen, my love. This child is yours, growing under your noble, courageous heart. How could he or she be guilty of their father's crimes? You and your babe will be welcomed. I give you my word."

"But Kall—"

"Kallaayt. Call me by my full name and you will be ever mine."

"But Kallaayt—"

He stopped her mid-sentence with a kiss, slowly opening her mouth with his lips. She sighed with sweet pleasure as he pressed harder, capturing her mouth under his. He

cupped his hand around her head and held her steady as his tongue found hers. Her little whimper of happiness was swallowed by his kiss. As he pressed his advantage, she relaxed in his arms. His fingers slid over her full breasts and the voluptuous curves of her ripening body. Sweet Goddess! Gwen was riches beyond dreaming, and she'd accepted his nature.

He wanted to bind her to him by his body, but not with this mortal shape. After her babe was born, he would take her as dragon. They had eternity for loving, but for now...

An arm around her shoulders, he eased her back on the smooth linen spread. She lay looking up at him from the pillows. He leaned over her, kissing her eyelids and the smooth curves of her cheeks and jaw. Brushing her hair aside, he nuzzled the soft skin of her neck. As she sighed with pleasure, he eased open her shift, and her full breasts fell free.

"Kallaayt?" she said.

Just hearing his dragon name from her sweet lips was joy to his soul and being.

"What...?" Her question was lost in a long, slow moan of delight as his tongue curled round her nipple. His hands cupped her ripe breasts. Soon they would suckle her child, but for now, these breasts were his. And he took them, tasting the sweet richness that would nourish her child. A child for Cader Bala.

He groaned as he ran his hands over her belly and down her thighs, before lifting her skirts to fix his gaze on her ripe belly, long legs and the soft glistening curls between. She was ripe and ready, and he caught the scent of her need. He longed to take her. To feel her warmth and softness grasp his cock, but that must wait until after they were sung to the mating pavilions in the heart of the fire mountain.

Now was for Gwen.

Gently he ran his hand up and down her legs to part them. When she offered no protest, he kissed her belly, resting his face against her to hear the strong, young heartbeat within. His heart seemed to swell within his chest. Mortal frame was too restricting. He needed to roar his joy aloud, but contented himself with cupping her warm sex.

She started, and sat bolt upright. "Kall!"

The panic in her voice reminded him she'd been traumatized. It was up to him to obliterate her horror with loving, replace pain with pleasure and shame with joy.

"Hush, I will not hurt you, Gwen. I could not. It would kill me to harm you or this babe. Trust me."

He watched the muscles of her throat undulate as she swallowed. Slowly. She nodded. "Oh, Kall!"

"Kallaayt. I want to hear you say my true name. You are the only soul in this town to know it."

"Kallaayt." She spoke slowly, testing the syllables with her tongue. "Kallaayt."

"Yes." He pressed gently against one shoulder. "Lie down."

"Kallaayt," she repeated as he settled between her legs.

Gently he smoothed his fingertips along the insides of her thighs. She shivered. From fear or desire? Desire! A fire kindled inside him as he smelled her passion. Her desire was as clear as the scent of her arousal and the moisture gathering on her sex lips. He opened her as gently as he knew how and was rewarded with a sweet murmur of want. He smiled against her thigh. She'd do more than murmur before he was done.

He stroked her softness, testing her wetness and venturing just a nail's length into her channel. He dared't enter deeper, not until the babe was born. He bent his face closer, breathing softly on her moistness until she sighed again. He lapped her with the flat of his tongue, tasting her sweetness and need. Her hips bucked under his touch. He lapped again, slower this time, caressing her from fore to aft and back again. Gwen grabbed his head "Kallaayt? What are you doing?"

"Loving you," he replied, and bent back to her need. He narrowed his tongue, fluttering her lips apart before flicking his tongue back and forth until he found her pleasure nub. She hardened under his tongue, and he played her. Drawing her desire higher and wilder as she tossed under his touch.

Muttering and moaning, she grasped his head and shoulders. Her passion was rising in every pore of her skin. Her sweetness flooded onto his tongue. His lips pressed into her

warmth. Muffled whimpers followed as she climbed her peak, but when she reached her crest, she called out, "Kallaayt! Kallaayt!"

With a great shriek, she climaxed, and he knew he'd won her.

She looked up at him with drowsy eyes. "Oh, Kallaayt, I love you. I'd go with you to the ends of the earth."

"No need, my love. Cader Bala is far enough."

"When?"

"Before dawn. I must settle my affairs at the Flagon, but I'll return. Rest now. The flight is long."

"I will come whenever and go wherever, if you are with me."

Was this what Arragh felt when Myfanwy promised to him? Joy strong enough to engulf? The joy of Gwen? Kallaayt reached into the neck of his tunic.

Gwen pressed her white hand against his. "I would see you naked," she said.

"When I return, you will see me as dragon." He kissed her fingertips and slipped a narrow chain of dragon gold from around his neck. Suspended on the fine links was the ring Granned had wrought. "This ring is a token of my love."

"Kallaayt, it is too fine."

"Nothing is too fine for you, my love."

"No one has a ring such as this." She turned the golden circle in her fingers. "Not even the bishop's wife."

"She is not beloved by a dragon."

"No." Gwen smiled. "She is not."

"Rest here awhile, my love, until I return for you. Is there a ledge on the roof where you can wait?"

"There is a flat space."

"Be there, my Gwen." He slipped the ring on her finger. "Wear it with pride as a dragon's bride."

"Yes."

So little a word. So great a promise. “I’ll tell Madame Lou she must needs find a new cook. We’ll be gone from here where the bishop and his minions would never dare follow. You and your child will be safe. You have the word of Kallaayt of Cader Bala.”

She accepted it unquestioningly.

As, to his relief and surprise, did Madame Lou.

A short nod and “Sure of yourself now, are you?” were the only acknowledgment of cries that must have echoed even downstairs. But given the nature of the establishment...

“I will return soon. Can you help Gwen up to the roof? That way you can swear no one entered your house, but she was stolen by a dragon. That should keep the bishop and his constable pondering.”

She nodded. “I’ll see she has covers against the cold. You’ll guard her well?”

“With my life and honor.”

“Long enough. Can you not leave now?”

“We must wait until full dark, and I have affairs to settle.” Setting fire to the mill and the Flowing Flagon was part of it. A dragon fire that would burn slowly enough for all to escape, could not be extinguished but would burn itself out. Arragh would caution against it, Kallaayt knew, but humans understood revenge, and Gwen was due hers.

Kallaayt strode through the streets towards the Flowing Flagon. He had little enough time to do all: settle his script with innkeeper Karil, take care of the contents of his wagon and light up the sky over Llanbarra. He’d take his trade goods over to Mari. She was sharp enough to sell them for profit and perhaps gain enough to set herself up away from the inn.

As he entered the yard, he stopped in shock. His cart was overturned and three constables were rummaging through his goods strewn across the straw.

“What are you doing?” Kallaayt demanded.

“Inspecting for taxes,” one replied as he pocketed a string of Myfanwy’s carved buttons.

The second one pulled out a set of forks in fine copper. “You underpaid when you entered the gate,” he said with a grin. The forks disappeared into a deep pocket.

Another tossed one of Granned’s fine goblets onto the ground. The sight of gold-rimmed fragments on the cobblestones roused Kallaayt’s ire. This was wanton destruction! He reached to rescue the next goblet, but as he stepped forward, the third man punched.

As dragon, he could have taken them on. As mortal, he was little stronger than they were. Against three, he had no chance. Kallaayt fought, but a stout cudgel smashed the back of his head, and he fell, senseless, to the straw.

He came to in the dark. A faint beam of moonlight penetrated the chinks in the walls. How far into the night was it? And where was he? Prison? He had to break out. If not as mortal, as dragon, and damn the town or discovery, but as he tossed back his head to roar, weakness sucked him under. An iron band circled one ankle. The mortal-forged metal sapped his strength. He couldn’t shift unless he could break the iron.

The heavy links tethered his ankle to a stone in the floor. He would not sit here while Gwen waited. He tried lifting the rough-hewn stone, but other than budging it a few thumb-spans, his efforts were useless. Ignoring the pain and pressure on his ankle, he explored his jail. The walls were wood. As was the roof. Was he in part of the inn, or the stables? Not stables. No smell or sound of horses.

Exploring the limits of his chain, he found nothing but a damp dirt floor, some sour straw and the all-pervading smell of—he sniffed the air as best he could with mortal sense—stale blood. He was in the byre near the kitchen, where they tethered animals before slaughtering them.

He sent a mind call to Kallauwn, but sensed the power sapped by the cursed iron that chafed his weak human skin as he dragged the chain behind him.

Outside, he heard footsteps, but any hope of rescue faded with the drunken shouts and yells.

“Stay there and rot, peddler!” one surly voice yelled in reply to Kall’s calls. “We’ve sport here, that’s none for you!”

Kallaayt sank down on the stone and shook his head. What now?

Above the clamor, he caught the shriller cries. Some poor woman had fallen prey to the intoxicated revelers. He heard screams, drunken laughter, the sound of flesh slapping flesh, more cries and high-pitched screams.

The Goddess protect the poor woman. This town was no place for anyone to linger. And he, Kallaayt, dragon of the fire mountain, was helpless.

A great shudder racked Kallaayt. He had to elude his captors. Cut off his foot if need be, and hope transformation would heal him. But what could he use to do the deed? Pacing his prison by the length of the chain, he searched for a fragment of glass, a sharp stone, anything that might loosen the bonds that kept him from returning to Gwen.

All he found was a bucket and a can of water, but the bucket had a rickety handle, and with a little effort he might make himself a pry bar.

The noise outside had quieted, no doubt a drunken stupor had replaced the revelry. Kallaayt worked at loosening the handle. One side he wrenched free, but as he worked at the second rivet, footsteps approached his prison.

And paused outside the door.

Unwilling to relinquish his only hope of a weapon, Kallaayt grasped the loose end of the handle. If he went down this time, he’d take one or two with him. He stepped as close behind the door as his chain permitted.

For several slow breaths, he heard nothing, then the faint scrape of wood on wood. His enemies lifting a bar that blocked the door? Should he try to rush them? There was a sound of a bolt rasping back, and a soft voice called, “Kall?”

A woman. Not Gwen. “Who is it?”

“Mari. Hush.”

The door opened a chink and a slim figure slipped in the gap before the door closed.

Mari stood an arm’s length away, peering into the dark. “Kall?” she repeated.

He took a step sideways. “Here.”

She turned in surprise. "You are well! I feared they had killed you."

"Not yet. But—" he rattled the chain, "—seems certain persons wish to prevent me from trading."

"Certain persons wish to drag you before the bishop's tribunal in the morning and confiscate your goods."

"I hope to disappoint them."

"You will disappoint them!" She spoke with a ferocity that surprised him.

"Mari, you risk too much."

"I have nothing left to risk! But you are my friend, and the friend of my friend, and for that..." She motioned him closer. She had a bundle in her hand. "Sit and give me your leg. I will remove your chain."

She had pincers and a small hammer.

"Let me." He would not sit while she knelt in the fetid straw.

She handed over the tools. "Do you need a light?" She produced a small lantern from the bundle.

"No need. Why alert any outside?"

"I think we are the only ones awake."

"What happened?" he asked as he began to pry up the pin that locked his ankle iron.

"They emptied your pockets while you were unconscious, took your purse and drank the inn dry with the contents."

Praise the Goddess he'd given Gwen her ring. If those sad specimens of humanity had found it... He tapped the iron again and withdrew the pin. The iron ring fell open. He threw it as far aside as he could and rubbed his still-numb flesh.

His strength returned as he flexed his leg.

"You must go," Mari whispered. "Now! I brought you a little food." She had a hunk of bread and a slice of cheese, both of which he devoured.

"My eternal thanks, Mari." He longed to roar, but feared he'd terrify her. Instead he asked, "Will they blame you for my escape?"

She gave a tight laugh. "I do not care if they do. What is the escape of a friend compared to what they will accuse me of in the morning?"

"It was you they abused?"

"And I am the one they will accuse of wantonness. It is the way things are now. Go!" she insisted. "I do not want the bishop's men to take both my friends."

"You must not stay here."

"Where can I go?"

"With Gwen and me. My people will welcome a woman of your courage." And he could name at least three dragons who would vie for her hand.

She shook her head. "Kall..." she began.

He heard the footsteps before Mari did. As the wooden door flew open, he pulled her behind him as Morgan the Miller stepped into the byre.

"No!" Fear and pain laced her cry. She clung to Kallaayt, her trembling fingers pinching his shoulder.

"Ah, little Mari!" The miller leered into the darkness. "You fought me but went running to the traveling peddler. Shame on you!" He gave a lascivious smile. "He can watch me fuck you again. No wandering trader is taking two women from me!"

"I never took Gwen, Morgan," Kallaayt said. "She was never yours in any way. What you tried to take by force is not and never will be yours."

"And never will be yours! I've seen to that."

Debate and argument were pointless. Protecting Mari from this beast was paramount. "Gwen will never be yours and neither will Mari."

"I've had them both first!"

Kallaayt smiled. "Why boast of your infamy, Morgan? You shame the Goddess and the woman who bore you."

"You blaspheme! The courts will deal with you!"

As Morgan stepped into the byre, Kallaayt glimpsed two others hovering outside. They thought the odds on their side, but this time he was prepared. He stepped aside, pulling Mari with him. As Morgan turned, Kallaayt's foot swept Morgan's from under

him. He fell backwards, hitting the hard floor with a dull thud. Kallaayt's roar echoed across the yard as the other two rushed him.

He roared again. His power surged. He caught one man as he gaped in fright, hitting him over the head with his own cudgel. The other Kallaayt dragged back as he tried to flee, and he fell gibbering to the straw.

Morgan rose to his feet, but Mari upended the rusty bucket on his head and as he reached up to remove it, kicked him square in the balls. As he fell with a scream, she grinned at Kallaayt. "That should save the next maid from his attack!"

Kallaayt grabbed her hand. Courageous as she was, this might send her fleeing. "Stay with me, Mari. I will not harm you, but this is not what you expect." He roared again, and shifted.

"Sweet heavens!" Mari gasped, staring as he shifted to dragon form.

The two not groaning, screamed. One made to scramble and run. Kallaayt blocked the door.

"Come," he said, and pulled Mari out into the stable yard. A dog howled at the sight of him. Kallaayt ran three, four paces across the cobbles, and leapt. His wings snapped open, and he flew over the stable roof, carrying Mari with him.

In seconds, they were lost from sight in the dark of the night. He sensed Mari's fear as she clung to his arm. "You're safe."

"Safe?" she repeated. "Among your people, safe must have a different meaning. We are miles above the ground!"

She was only mortal after all, and had never seen a dragon in full flight. "Not miles. We're just above the rooftops." She let out a little whimper so he pulled her closer. "You are truly safe. I will never let you fall." He suspected falling was the least of her worries. A creature out of the legends had snatched her from her home. Myfanwy's words and warnings echoed in his mind. "I'm taking you where they can't find or harm you."

"Where?"

"To my younger brother. He will take care of you while I return for Gwen."

If he could take her away like this, he could truly rescue Gwen.

“Is your brother a dragon too?”

“Of course.”

“Two dragons! Wonder of wonders.”

At her acceptance, Kallaayt headed north towards Tintawn. It was still full night. Good. Now, if only Kallauwn was near.

“Where are we going?”

“To a safe place. In the hope my scrubby young brother is there to protect you until I return with Gwen. I will not leave her among that nest of heathens.”

“Scrubby, am I?” Mari gave a yelp as the dark shape came at them from the east. “Slander me, would you, brother, as I wing to your aid?”

“I take it back,” Kallaayt replied. The Goddess bless his brother’s wings! “Mari, meet my brother, Kallauwn. Kallauwn meet a brave and honorable lady, who helped rescue me when I was bound by human iron.”

Kallauwn winced at the thought. “I am honored, lady. Kallaayt has oft spoken of your great worth.”

“You eggling, I have not! It’s Gwen I spoke of. This is Mari! Another mortal of courage and virtue.”

“I am still honored, lady,” Kallauwn said.

“As I am,” Mari replied in a rather tight voice.

“Where is Gwen?” Kallauwn asked.

“I return for her. You must carry Mari.”

“With pleasure, brother.” Kallauwn grinned and held out his arms.

To pass her between them was easy enough, but might well terrify even her brave heart. “Let us land. There, in the grove ahead.”

Kallauwn landed first, Kallaayt moments later, Mari shivering in his arms. She looked from him to Kallauwn and back again. “One dragon is more than I ever dreamed existed, but two!”

“There are more of us, lady,” Kallauwn said.

“How many?”

“Scores now. Once we numbered in the thousands.”

She took a deep breath. “Then the tales of dragons in the west are true.”

“And if the Goddess wills, will always be so,” Kallaayt said.

Kallauwn noticed her torn and bloodied clothes and the darkening bruises. “Dear Goddess! What happened, lady? Was the fight that fierce?”

“The fight was not what they expected, since Mari had freed me,” Kallaayt replied. “But she’d already suffered at the hands of my attackers.”

“Seems,” Kallauwn began, “we have a story worth the singing.”

“If I don’t start back soon, there will be one less to sing it, Kallauwn. You must carry Mari back to Cader Bala for me. Give her into the care of the women. She is in need of Allayne’s healing.”

“They harmed her!” Kallauwn let out a growl enough to wake the trees around them.

“Grievously!”

“Then permit me to return with you and teach those town dwellers a lesson.”

“I go alone. This is my quarrel.”

“If I may speak!” They both turned to the small, disheveled figure between them. “It would shame us all if Gwen remained in the House of Wide Open Legs because you argued until sunrise.”

Kallauwn inclined his head in her direction. “Then, if you permit, lady, I will take you on your way.”

“Yes,” she said to Kallauwn. “For Kall will not leave until we do, and my dearest friend awaits him.”

Kallaayt marveled at her trust. At his words, she would go into the unexplored, with an unknown dragon.

Kallauwn seemed delighted at his charge. “Lady, I would bear you to the ends of the earth.”

“Allayne’s cave will be quite far enough!” Better remind Kallauwn Mari was not his. Even if he was bearing her home. “And if she isn’t there before me, you can answer to me!”

Kallauwn laughed. "As you commission, brother. But promise to leave those town dwellers a reminder of dragon ire."

"They will not forget this night."

Mari took Kallauwn's hand and turned to wave farewell. Kallauwn ran several paces towards a gap in the trees. Seconds later, they were airborne and flying west.

Kallaayt hesitated no longer. Facing the opposite direction, he set back towards Llanbarra.

As promised, faithful Gwen was waiting on the roof ledge. Asleep. Wrapped in a thick quilt to protect herself and her babe.

She woke as he approached, smiling as her dragon neared in all his wild glory.

"I heard cries in the street and the watch calling for your surrender."

He pulled her as close as her belly permitted. "To you, Gwen, I would surrender my heart and mind, but to those heathens, never."

"I was afraid some mishap befell you."

"We had trouble, but by Mari's bravery, all is well."

"Is she well? What happened?"

"Too long to tell all now. Trust me that she is safe and on her way to Cader Bala. In a short while we follow."

"Why delay? Will it not be dawn soon?"

"I will make early dawn and avenge you and Mari. Wait here until I return."

"I have waited too long already. I would come with you. It is my vengeance too."

She paused. "Will you kill them?"

"No, my love. Dragons do not kill, whatever your tales and legends say to the contrary, but I want them to live long and remember the sting of dragon's ire. Carrying you would endanger us both. When I come back, we will away."

She nodded, but as he readied to leave, pulled him close. "As Kall, I loved you. Now as I see you in your splendor, Kallaayt, but I sensed your greatness even as it was hidden."

“Yours is the greatness, Gwen, and soon you will be among those who will cherish you for your worth.”

He allowed himself one kiss. “I must away. Watch the night sky and you will see dragon fire.”

She gasped as he leaped from the ledge, but he sensed her eyes following as long as she could in the dark. In minutes, he landed on the mill roof. After tonight, the smaller mill to the north would enjoy an increase of trade.

Standing tall, Kallaayt roared in warning to awaken any inside. He breathed fire along the ridge of thatch and along each eave. In the still of the night, the flames burned slowly, but burn they would, without ceasing and without spreading beyond the limits Kallaayt set, until Morgan the Miller was dispossessed.

Leaving two scared apprentices running round the mill yard for buckets, Kallaayt flew back to the Flowing Flagon. Bands of constables still roamed the streets. Kallaayt swooped with a roar, and they ran as they never had from Kall the trader. With a twist he flew back towards the inn. After waking all within with a chorus of roars, Kallaayt turned the roof of the Flowing Flagon into a beacon to be seen for miles around.

Let disrespectful mortals remember this night and the Goddess's fire that turned the night into dawn!

As a last token to the town, he fired the bishop's house too. The town and the bishop would not soon forget this, and Karil and Morgan never. And Gwen was waiting.

She all but leapt into his arms. “You have set the town afire!”

“No, sweet. Just the bishop's house, the mill and the inn. For you and Mari.”

“What happened to Mari?”

“Morgan ill-used her as he did you.”

Gwen gave a little cry of anguish. “Oh, Kallaayt! I feared for her but hoped no one would harm her with me gone.”

“No one will ever harm her now. She is on her way to my home. Our females are great healers. She will be well.”

“Then let us go, at once. I have said my farewell to Madame Lou for her kindness.”
She stood up on the ledge. “Take me home with you.”

With Gwen’s legs wrapped around his waist, he leapt into the night air, winged towards the west and the true dawn rose behind them.

About the Author

To learn more about Rosemary Laurey's work, please visit www.rosemarylaurey.com for news of coming releases, excerpts, and contests.

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An ancient prophecy comes to life in an erotic tale of forbidden love.

Mylari Chronicles: Eyes of Fire

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The Mylari Chronicles Book 1

Talia's visit home turns upside down when dark, frightening creatures appear seemingly from nowhere and transport her to another world. The faerie world. In this mystical paradise, she finds her life and honor threatened for reasons she does not understand.

When Calion Sáralondë, Prince of the Calen'taur Elves, rescues the human female from an orcan stronghold, his attraction to her is immediate and strong. And the feeling is mutual. Though their love is sardai—taboo—Calion can't bring himself to send her back to her world. Her presence sets a fire in his soul only mating with her can tame.

And their passion could be the answer to an ancient prophecy that saves his world.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Eyes of Fire:

“Can you tell me of your dream?” he asked. “It may help.”

Shuddering, she tightened her hold on him, glad he was there. She needed to be held. “I was back in that horrible place. It was dark and my hands were tied again.” She felt his hands move soothingly up and down her back. “The orcan king came to me and he—” She swallowed heavily. Just the thought of the nightmare made her gorge rise.

“Shhh... Remember you are safe and here with me. What did he do, Talia?”

“He touched me,” she burst out, her tears flowing again. “He touched me, and this time you weren't there to stop him.”

Calion pulled her against him. He muttered soothing words as she wept. He cradled her, so she'd know he wouldn't let anything hurt her. “It was a dream, *Tia maer*... Just a dream. I did come for you. You are in my arms now. They cannot hurt you anymore.” He kissed the top of her head and then her brow, and soon felt her tears lessen. As he stroked

her arms gently, she began to relax against him. He brushed his mouth over her fragrant hair and her forehead again.

Unable to stop himself, he continued, his lips erasing the tears from the corners of her eyes and down her nose. He took her face in his hands, and kissed slowly over her eyelids, her soft cheeks, feeling her shudder in his arms until he couldn't fight himself any longer and captured her mouth with his own.

Oh, she wanted this. This joining of lips, the feel of his body sliding against hers. In the quiet of the night it felt so completely right. He was so gentle, so tender. His hands moved over her, touching...cherishing. Talia's open and seeking heart overflowed. Something moved within her, accepting...knowing.

She loved.

She'd loved him from the beginning, from the first moment his startling eyes looked into hers. She had been waiting for him all this time. It didn't bother her love came so quickly. She believed in love at first sight. And now she'd found it. After so many years of loneliness, she had found him at last.

It was a heady feeling and she lavishly gave him everything. She melted against him, and her surrender was like setting a flint to dry tinder.

Calion groaned, knowing he crossed an invisible line when he took her lips like a starving man. His tongue plunged into her mouth again and again, before he retreated, to nibble on her swollen lips. Muttering passionate words in his own tongue, he kissed down her smooth neck and then back up again. He nipped at her earlobe, causing her to cry out in surprise, but he gentled her with his lips, tracing the shell of her ear with his tongue, making her moan with pleasure. His hands were everywhere. He couldn't get enough of touching her.

He continued his assault on her senses, wanting to bring her to the same agony of need he himself was in. His people were sensual lovers, and he'd enough experience to know what he was feeling now surpassed anything he felt before.

It scared him, but the urgency in his body to make her his blinded him to everything else. He went back to her mouth, wanting the taste again, already addicted to the

sweetness he found inside. Groaning, he moved over her, pressing his hard body against hers.

Talia floated in a world of sensation. Her body sang in arousal with every move he made. The world spun away, her whole being caught up in the touch of his heavenly mouth. She wanted to pull him to her, but her arms were useless and heavy with passion.

She instinctively responded to his demand, spreading her legs so his erection could fit between her thighs. The feel of him throbbing against her sent a pool of heat coiling in her loins. Unconsciously, she arched her back, pushing against him.

The movement tore at his barely held control. His body reacted for him, grinding his cock against her mound in an agony of need. Lifting off her, he dragged the sleeping gown from her body, his eyes feasting on the beautiful flesh he could see in the flickering candlelight.

She had high rounded breasts, with nipples the color of ripe peaches. They were drawn and pointed with arousal, and he bent and took one in his mouth, luxuriating in the feel of her. She cried out his name, pulling his head against her. He laved the bud, making it harder and more pointed as he sucked. She trembled beneath him as he kissed and nibbled. Moving to the other breast, he gave it the same loving attention, and soon she writhed beneath him, her body lost to the passion he stirred in her.

Calion too was lost, his body aching, his cock throbbing. His control slipped even further when she pulled his head back to her, joining him in a deep, searching kiss. Their tongues danced frantically, each seeking out the place that would bring most pleasure.

Talia wanted to stroke him like she'd thought of doing earlier, but when she ran a trembling hand over his rock-hard chest and touched one of the flat male nipples, he came up off the bed. She watched, her mouth dry, as he bicycled his legs to get his breeches off. It was too dark to see anything, but his intense face showed his eyes beginning to glow in the flickering light. He was back on her in a flash, his hand taking hers before she could caress him again.

“No,” he growled, his voice rough with desire.

She watched him as he fought for control. Wanting only more of what she was feeling, she began to kiss him wherever she could reach. She covered his face and

shoulders with wet, passionate kisses. She heard him groan his need, as he lay back down on her, his knees edging her soft thighs apart.

There was nothing between them now as she felt him pulse against her. He dominated her with his size and strength, yet she felt no fear. She wanted it...wanted him.

Reaching down between their bodies, he stroked her gently. He ran his callused hand over her breasts and down her body, making her shiver with needs she barely understood. Taking her mouth again in a hard ravaging kiss, he carefully brought his hand down her hips and into the soft curls at the apex of her thighs. As his fingers made contact with her moist nether lips for the first time, Talia moaned into his mouth.

She felt him struggle for control, going still as he panted against her. Then, moving into her soft folds, he rubbed in circular motions as he parroted the action with his bulging shaft against her thigh. Going deeper, he discovered the small nubbin swollen from desire. Gently, he plucked at it, making her cry out in longing. She felt the coil in her loins, tightening higher and higher. Her body wasn't hers; it belonged to him, just as her heart did.

Abruptly, she couldn't stand it anymore, and reaching down she grasped him where he throbbed against her. Calion reacted as if he'd been struck. He jumped and grabbed her hand, growling her name as he felt her fingers move against him.

"Please," was all she could manage. "I want you."

His control snapped. The mating hunger blazed out of control, and he could only pray he wouldn't hurt her. Forcing her legs apart, he settled himself between them, groaning out loud as he felt the moist heat of her press against the head of his cock. He pushed and felt the head slip just inside.

The feeling was so exquisite he paused to relish it, fighting not to bury himself in her in just one thrust. He wanted this to last. She was his. He would be breaking *sardai* by lying with her, but she would be his. His body would allow nothing else.

Talia's eyes were closed tight as she felt him push just inside her body. Even that little bit stretched her. Could she do this? He felt so big, so thick and so alive. He moved again and her eyes flew open. His face was close to hers, his features drawn with the

needs of his body. She moaned in delight at all the sensation. Calion's eyes opened, and she gasped in wonderment.

“Beautiful,” she whispered in awe, her hands going up to frame his face. “Your eyes, Calion... Your eyes are on fire.”

A love transcending race and culture...a secret that could cost everything

The Wolf's Sister

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Elite Fey'na warrior Shan is driven only by hatred for Gilliad, the Lord of River Holt, the human responsible for the brutal slaying of his innocent sister. Vengeance will be his as soon as he can find a way to confront his enemy. His mind is set; his path chosen. Then he meets Jeren...

Jeren of River Holt flees for her life, desperate to escape the clutches of her brother, Gilliad, before his misuse of magic consumes what remains of his sanity. She finds safety and protection with Shan...but only so long as she hides her kinship with the Lord of River Holt. As they are pursued across the northern snow plains, their deepening trust turns to love.

A love that could shatter when he learns who, and what, she is.

Warning: This title contains violence, torture, and a wolf-lover's worst nightmare. Readers may find their imaginations hopelessly ensnared in a beautiful and terrible world of magic.

Enjoy the following excerpt for The Wolf's Sister:

Shan knew he should have left the girl there in the wreckage at the foot of the cliff. He should have kept on walking. Then he would never have become involved in the vagaries of the Holters' world.

But Shan'ith Al-Fallion had never been able to abandon a soul in trouble. The silver wolf padding at his side, once a starving cub lost in the snow, gave testimony to that. Her breath misted the evening air, and she nuzzled his hand in an effort to distract him from the shattered carriage.

"Stop Anala," he said. "I'll just take a look." The wolf growled but remained with him, pawing impatiently in the snow.

They were all dead but for the girl, and she wouldn't be long in joining her

companions. The marks of the Snow Child cast blue tones in her skin.

He knelt at the survivor's side, aware of her shallow breath, the feeble rise and fall of her chest. He hesitated before touching her—a Holtwoman and, judging by her delicately embroidered clothes, one of some standing. Silver threads depicting jasmine and ivy encircled her throat and wrists, sewn into the deep green velvet by an expert hand. Girl was probably wrong too. She looked old enough to be judged a young woman by the Holters' terms. And a beautiful one at that, fine-boned and elegant. But to his people—the Fair Ones, the Fey'na—most humans never reached an age where they would be considered adults.

Voices carried on the breeze from men climbing down from the road. Relieved to be free of the niggling sense of responsibility for the girl, Shan readied himself to dart into the safety of the trees. Then his sharp ears caught what the men were saying.

“Bloody stupid misadventure. Who'd survive a fall like that, anyway? They're already dead, I tell you. No one's going to come back from that drop.”

“We have our orders,” said another voice. “Make sure they're all dead.”

Shan frowned and glanced towards Anala. Part totem animal, part companion, the wolf knew what Shan's soul told him to do, and she liked the idea even less than he did. She heaved out a breath, shaking her head rapidly. But that didn't change anything.

If those men reached the girl, she would die.

It never paid for any of Shan's people to deal with humans. The cost was always too high. Had not one the humans counted as a great leader, a lord of many tributes, murdered Shan's sister, Fa'linar?

But what choice did he have? Leave her here, helpless, to die?

Shan's own nature conspired against him. He lifted the girl like a bundle of old rags, her chestnut hair tumbling over his shoulder. She felt so light in his arms, like a bird. He retreated with swift but cautious steps, retracing his own footsteps through the snow, until a copse of trees hid him. The green of the girl's travelling dress aided him, merging with the shadows.

The wolf's look branded him an idiot. Still, she followed him, nose to the ground.

More men arrived, taking the narrow path which wound sedately down from the road

rather than the sheer climb undertaken by the first pair. They carried torches, the light staining the snow with ruddy tones.

Shan grimaced. He could not remain hidden here for long. “Can you find some shelter, Anala?” he whispered to the wolf. “Somewhere safer?”

With a whine of pure frustration, Anala whirled away and bounded through the snow-laden trees.

Four heavily armed guards laboured through the snow surrounding a man cloaked in ermine. A jagged wound ran along the left side of his jaw. Though unencumbered by armour, he clearly held command. He scoured the wreckage with flint-like eyes.

“The girl’s missing,” the first assassin reported. “If news of this reaches River Holt...” The underling’s fear reeked, pungent on the night’s air. It was like watching a lesser wolf before a lead male.

Flint-eyes studied the trees, as if aware that he too was being watched. Shan resisted the urge to move. He became part of the trees, part of the snow, concentrating on invisibility, or at the very least, camouflage. It wasn’t enough.

“They’re in the trees.” Flint-eyes’ voice was as remorseless as his eyes. “Over there! Get Lady Jeren back, or you’ll all be sending my greetings to the Death Goddess.”

Shan fled, slinging Lady Jeren over his shoulder. She cried out at such rough treatment, but he ignored her groggy protests. The need for speed outweighed all others. A shape in the snow ahead gave him a single hope.

“Anala! Shelter, safety, now!”

The wolf launched herself forwards, throwing up snow in her wake. Shan ran, tearing madly across the snowfield, making for the rising hills. Fluid as shadow, Shan followed Anala, trusting the wolf’s instincts even above his own.

Behind him, guards scrambled through the trees, hampered by snow. Shan bared his teeth in a tight grin. They were weak, slow. He was not.

An arrow grazed his face, so close he could swear he felt the brush of the fletching against his cheek.

Pain erupted in the back of his leg. His knee buckled and he went down with a cry, Jeren underneath him.

A voice rang out across the snow. "He's winged, my lord!" Flint-eyes didn't respond.

Another arrow punched into the ground by Shan's face and he threw himself back, rolling to his feet once more. His leg almost went beneath him, but he knew if he stopped now they'd both be dead. Jeren struggled against him as he lifted her.

"Hush, little one," he murmured as gently as he could through his clenched teeth. "Trust me now."

Wounded and carrying her over his shoulder, he didn't know where he found the strength to run. Anala dwindled to a black speck in the distance, heading north towards home. Shan fixed his eyes on the wolf, ignoring the sounds of pursuit. He could outdistance any man, but even a trickle of blood would leave a trail a child could follow.

The hills were the key. He knew them well. Up there, where the land was riddled with caves and tunnel, he could hide, dress the wound.

Right now, he couldn't think.

I need rest and warmth, that's all.

Pain lanced up his leg again, and he felt the barb of the arrow deep inside the soft flesh. Only his own kind could help him. If he didn't find someone to get the arrow out, it would kill him.

The wind rose and Shan felt his determination falter. Anala had vanished. He could smell the snow coming, the air sharp and bitter. And when the weather broke...

It happened far sooner than expected.

The blizzard clawed at his limbs and tore at his braided hair. Only Jeren's warmth kept him alive at this point, just as his body sustained her. They were one, dependent on each other, breathing as one, moving as one. He could hardly recall a time when his arms had not held her, when her arms had not held him. The nagging sense that she belonged there grew on him second by second. He pushed such foolish thoughts away with a determined will, putting it down to the cold and the wind addling his wits.

Shan could run no longer, even if he could see where they were going. It became harder to put one foot in front of the other. As the last of his strength slipped away, he dropped to his knees.

“I’m sorry, little one. There’s no more in me.” Her grip tightened for a moment. A brief surge of comfort passed through him. He buried his face in her hair, inhaling a scent like spring flowers in sunshine. As quickly as it came, the comfort bled away, replaced by wind and snow. “Who are you really?” he murmured. “Why did they want you dead?”

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