

The background of the cover features a knight in medieval armor, including a chainmail collar and a dark tunic, holding a long sword. He is looking directly at the viewer. Behind him, a woman with long blonde hair in a yellow and white patterned dress is seen from the side, looking away. In the upper left, a red dragon is flying against a cloudy sky. The setting appears to be a rocky coastline with waves at the bottom.

KARA GRIFFIN

*To win a woman's heart,
one must have a dragon...*

PENDRAGON'S
PRINCESS

MYSTIC MAIDENS OF BRITAIN - BOOK ONE

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DEDICATION

SKS may you always be adventurous and love books.

If the sky could dream, it would dream of dragons.
LLONA ANDREWS, Fate's Edge

PENDRAGON'S PRINCESS

Mystic Maidens of Britain - Book One

To win a woman's heart, one must have a dragon...

He is the last of his kind. King Rhydderch Pendragon guards his secret: that he rules the last dragon in the kingdom. But when his dragon falls ill, he cannot figure out what ails her. As Rhyder's wedding day draws near, he's apprehensive about retrieving his betrothed. And with the recent murders in his kingdom, there's no time to woo a princess.

As the youngest daughter of King Raedwald Baldach, Katriona is the only one who can save their kingdom from embarrassment. When her sister runs away rather than wed the dragon prince, Katriona is substituted as Pendragon's bride. Now grown and with druid blood in her, Katriona accepts her destiny, especially when his forlorn emotions beckons her heart.

Rhyder vaguely remembers meeting Katriona at their betrothal, but their reunion sparks unexpected passion. When Katriona reveals a secret of her own, she does more than claims his heart. Is love the answer to his dragon's plight and Pendragon's Princess's acceptance?

PROLOGUE

Kingdom of Deverdoeu

In the early age of Anglo-Saxon Britain...

The dragon is coming! The dragon is coming!

“They say the dragon prince eats his foes and that he breathes fire and burns entire villages with just a sigh. When he turns into a dragon, he flaps his mighty wings and uses his sharp talons to pluck people from the ground and then he gobbles them up.”

Katriona slunk down on the bench, fearful at her sister’s words. Tears gathered in her eyes, and she stifled a whimper. She didn’t want to get eaten.

“Aye, and when he takes his fill, he feeds the remains to his beloved dragon friend. All except the eyes. Eyes are his favorite.”

Katriona stood upon the chair and screamed with a force from her toes to her mouth. The screech called her mother’s attention.

“Sweet Goddess Frige, save me. Cease giving your sister a fright, Mali. She’ll wet her clothes again and I have only just changed her.” Mama scolded her sister before she turned back to the chore of readying the keep for their imminent company.

Mali made a teasing face at her, stuck out her tongue, and snickered. Her sister always told scary stories of the dragon king and his son, the prince. Katriona always believed her too. Her sister was wise, being she was twelve summers, seven more than she.

“Eat your morning fare, Katriona. We must make haste this day. If the Goddess Frige aids me, I shall get all readied in time.”

But Katriona didn’t want to hurry. Fear kept her from eating. Their guests would soon arrive, and she swore she’d be on her best behavior. She promised Papa, and she always tried to keep her promises to him. Papa was the biggest, meanest, bravest warrior in the kingdom. Everyone had to obey him, and that included her four brothers and three sisters. Even Mama rarely disobeyed him unless he angered her.

Being the youngest of King Raedwald's brood, Katriona often went unnoticed. That was well and good since she liked to listen to the adults. She heard Papa say Heloise, who was supposed to wed the dragon prince, did something atrocious. Not that she understood what atrocious meant. She felt sorry for her sister because Heloise was sent away. Many said she was the prettiest of her father's daughters, but also the wickedest.

One day Katriona would be a lady and she wanted to be as graceful as Heloise, but she would never be as pretty, for Mali told her so many times.

Katriona slunk lower on the bench when the massive door of their keep opened with its loud creak. Papa returned. She held her breath and took a quick peek to see if their guests arrived. Mali told her the dragon prince had a scaly face and horns on the top of his head. Although she'd like to see that, the thought of it frightened her.

She was suddenly plucked from the bench and lifted high. Her squeal sounded only until she saw Papa's face.

"My wee Katriona. Why are ye hiding beneath the tablecloth?"

She pressed her small hand on his whiskered chin and giggled at the tickle. Mali snickered from the other end of the table.

Her mother saved her from having to answer, "Mali's been telling her frightful stories again. Mali, you shouldn't scare her. Now finish your meal and keep silent."

Papa gave her sister a look of disapproval. Katriona set her arms around Papa's neck and smiled because Mali would get what was coming to her. Papa always punished her sister when she teased her. She hoped he'd send her to bed this night without supper. That would serve her well.

But he said nothing. Katriona let out a small sigh of disappointment.

"Papa, why do I get the gift and Mali doesn't? Is it because she's bad?" She'd heard Mama and Papa talking the night before, and they spoke about a gift she would receive. Yet they gave her nothing, and she wondered what it was. Perchance it was a new doll stuffed with Master Elman's hay. He had the softest hay of all the farms near Papa's lands. Or perhaps the gift was what she'd asked Mama for, a pup of her own.

Papa laughed boisterously. "Oh, my sweet wee one, the gift isn't something we give you. It's something you're born with. Aye, ye have the gift for I see it in your eyes. Your grandmother would be pleased, for you got the gift from her. You have her mark. Mama will give you the pouch and explain when you're older, when you can understand." He kissed her forehead and smiled.

Katriona rubbed the leaf-shaped mark on her wrist. It bothered her not, but she was glad to be the only one bestowed with Grandmother's mark. She was more interested in the gift though. "But why can I not have it now, Papa? I want the gift now. What's in the pouch?"

"Not yet, my sweet. We have no time to discuss this. Our guests are arriving. They're coming up the last incline. We should prepare." He pressed her face back with a forceful kiss on her cheek. "Ah, wee princess, are you excited to meet your betrothed?"

She wasn't at all excited. The dragon prince would eat her. Yet she wouldn't disappoint Papa and nodded. If she was a good lass, maybe he'd give her the gift now instead of waiting until she was older. Mayhap the dragon prince wasn't hungry. And perhaps he wouldn't eat her.

"Do I gots to meet him? Can I see him on the morrow?"

Papa let out a bellowed laugh. "Aye, my wee, Katy. This day, you will meet your husband. He shall be pleased with ye because you are the most beautiful lass in the kingdom."

Katriona couldn't hold back her smile because Papa said that about all his daughters. Only Papa praised her beauty though. Mama always chastised him too, because she said his compliments would turn her head. She didn't know what Mama meant, and so, she kept her head still and her gaze on her handsome papa's face.

"Let us hope Lord Pryce accepts her. I am disheartened, my love, at Heloise's behavior. The lass fled with only a note of her abhorrence of the prince. What an embarrassment. I am gladdened we remedied the tragedy." Papa tightened his hold on her.

Mama folded a cover and set it aside. "We must hold hope they accept Katriona. I worry for Heloise for there's been no word of her whereabouts. I fear something dreadful happened to her. Do you deem she wedded the man she professed to love?"

Papa frowned. "She is no longer a daughter of my heart. Och, she likely seduced the lad and did so on purpose so she wouldn't have to wed King Pryce's son. Her man should've come and gained our approval before she hailed off with him. If I ever find out who he is, I will lay him through for defiling our daughter and causing us such turmoil. She did it just to be spiteful."

"Heloise did no such thing. She wrote that she is in love. You know how foolish one can be when love is involved. I wish I knew she was safe and well. My darling, let us not speak of such matters in front of the children. All will be well. Besides, we didn't name which daughter we offered in the treaty. Katriona is the only one unattached, for Mali's betrothal is well placed. Graciously, the prince is only a half-a-score older than Katriona."

Papa grumbled, and Katriona felt the rumble in his chest. "Aye, aye. By the time he takes Katriona as his wife, he will be a man, mature, and capable of protecting her. Still, I am not pleased to send my baby so far from home. The lands to the west are dangerous. But we need this treaty to keep our borders secure. I will not have our lands marauded again, our people killed, or those barbarians setting foot on our soil."

"Be calm, my darling. Worry not, for the Pendragon's will accept the treaty and the betrothal. Need I remind you, they want the treaty as much as we do?" Mama took up the bowls on the table and said, "Mali, wash your hands and take your sister outside. We will gather to greet our guests."

Papa set her on her feet. She skulked by his side and held on to the hem of his tunic. Katriona didn't want to go outside, and she didn't want to meet the dragon prince. "Please, Papa, do I got to meet him this day?"

Papa smiled and caressed her face. "Aye, my sweet baby, you do. He'll be pleased with ye too, so cease your worry. You will bring him joy and laughter, for you always make me cheerful. Now be a good lass and stay with Mali."

"Keep yourselves clean," Mama called when Mali took her hand. "Stay away from the puddles for it rained earlier."

Katriona tried to pull away, but her sister held her hand in a tight grip.

Outside, many gathered near the keep. Their small kingdom was home to many families. Katriona usually liked celebrations and gatherings. Mostly because her parents were often kept busy greeting people or joining in the revelry. That left her free to wander. She liked the freedom and often got into mischief. Her siblings were all older, and they never played with her. She didn't mind because she spent her time at the stables or in the barn.

The steward spoke of a new litter of wolfhounds that were born the day before, when he'd given his morning report to Papa. She was supposed to be sleeping, but she liked to rise early. Katriona often sat on the keep's stairs and watched the bustle of servants and warriors in the early morning.

She didn't want to meet the dragon king or his son. She didn't want to be eaten either. What she wanted was to see the pups. If only she could sneak away when her parents were busy, but too many watched her.

Mali squeezed her hand and hurt her fingers. She tried again to dislodge her sister's hand, but Mali wouldn't let go. Her eyes widened when the most beautiful horses cantered into the courtyard. Some horse's manes were cut short and stood straight like blades of grass during a dry spell of no

rain. Others had pretty ribbons weaved with laces in the long tresses of the mare's manes. She was in awe at the ladies who sat upon the horses too. They wore exquisite garments, gowns of beautiful colors which gleamed with beads and jewels.

Mama and Papa came out of the keep and stood at the base of the steps. Her brothers and sisters, those who still lived at home, took the second step. She and Mali stood behind them on the third step. That suited her just fine because she could hide behind her siblings. Once everyone focused on their visitors, she would sneak away. That was if she could get Mali to release her hand.

Papa's booming voice rose in greeting the dragon king, "Pendragon, my comrade, Lord Pryce, welcome. It is good to see you and your family. I hope the journey was uneventful, for you have arrived safely." He clapped the dragon king's shoulder.

"Aye, there was nothing of account on the journey, graciously the travel was swift. Lord Raedwald, old friend, it is good to be here and to see you again."

Katriona squeezed between her youngest brother, Raen, and her third brother, Eric, to see the dragon king for herself. She gasped and took hold of a lock of her hair and twisted it. The dragon king was taller than Papa and he looked meaner too. He had light hair and dark eyes, as dark as a dragon's. He didn't appear frightening except for his size. She craned her neck, her eyes wide in amazement.

Katriona watched the king present his family. After he introduced his wife, Queen Arrian, he turned and then the giant placed his hand on the shoulder of a lad. She held her breath, knowing he was the one she was supposed to marry—the dragon prince. Mama told her she would make him a fine wife, but Katriona didn't understand what marry meant or what a wife did. She shook her head when the lad gawked at her.

Papa called her name and Mali shoved her forward with a poke between her shoulders. Katriona tripped on the edge of her frock and fell into Eric who caught her and set her to rights.

Mama practiced with her of what she should say and do, but she was too nervous and forgot everything. She fiddled with the ribbons that laced her frock and she clung to Papa's leg.

"My sweet daughter, Princess Katriona." He nudged her forward.

"She has beauty and grace, Raedwald. We're pleased with the treaty. Let us finalize the details and covenant over a drink," the dragon king said. "I thirst for something strong, mayhap a cup of wine?"

“Aye, we have prepared a fine feast and have plenty of wine. Our ale is not bad either. Our brewer has made the sweetest mead as well. We shall celebrate this eve and lift our cups in cheer,” Papa said and gestured toward the door.

Katriona wanted to close her eyes. She was sure the giant king would pluck her from the ground and take a bite of her. When she peeked at the lad, she remembered... She was supposed to lift her frock and bestow a curtsy. Her small fingers clasped the edge of her hem, and she raised it slightly. But she lost her footing and fell head-first toward the giant dragon king.

She screamed loud enough to wake Freyja, her favored Goddess. Katriona knew the goddess slept during the day and wove her magical love at night. At least, that’s what Mama told her. With her eyes scrunched, she felt herself being placed on her feet. When she opened her eyes, the dragon king’s eyes glared. He wasn’t pleased with her, nor were her parents. She heard their gasps of displeasure but she dared not to look at them.

The big man laughed, and his large hands released her. She breathed a sigh of relief when he didn’t set her near his mouth. The lad who stood with him frowned. A sob caught in her throat, but she couldn’t stop the rest. She wailed, and tears streamed her cheeks. The lad glowered. She didn’t think much of him either. He had to be as old as her brother Eric who was ten summers older.

From behind her tears, her blue eyes widened when he smiled. Well, it was as much of a smile as he would allow. The dragon king’s son was tall and his face wasn’t yet covered with whiskers like Papa’s. He had dark hair that curled. Mama told her that Papa scared her once and caused her hair to curl. She wondered what frightened the dragon prince enough to curl his hair. Maybe the dragon’s fiery breath or perhaps the dragon’s wide wings knocked him down? She wanted to ask, but she kept quiet.

“She’s a beautiful lass and my son will honor her. Won’t you, Rhydderch?”

The lad didn’t appease his father or acknowledge the question with an answer until his mother prodded him. “Is she not lovely, Rhyder? Have you not a gift for her?”

“She’ll do as well as any, I suppose,” he granted. He pulled a rope with a shiny object dangling from it and approached.

Katriona wanted to flee, but she also wanted to see what the object was. She tilted her head when he placed the rope over her head. The glint of the purple and white amethyst sparkled in her eyes.

His father grunted in approval. “Come, we shall toast to our prince and his princess.”

Papa walked next to the dragon king and all the others left her standing on the steps alone with the young dragon prince.

“You’re a wee thing and gawky. Aye, you will listen to me, lass.”

“Bother you. I don’t have to listen to you unless Papa tells me to.”

“You’ll obey me starting now. I’ll be your lord and husband. Did I not give you a gift?”

Katriona didn’t like the way he spoke, and she pouted her lips. “Fie on you. I don’t want your gift.” As much as she wanted to keep the stone, she pulled it over her head and tossed it back to him. She wouldn’t let him make her weep, but his abruptness made her want to cry.

She took off in a sprint and ran as fast as her little feet would carry her. Tears dampened her cheeks. The barn was just ahead. It was the perfect sanctuary. She’d hide there until the unwanted guests left, which she hoped would be soon.

When she entered the dark barn, the sound of puppy yips called to her, and she rushed to their pen. She’d forgotten all about them. There, four tiny gray wolfhound pups squealed and yapped. Their mama lay near and wagged her tail. She smiled gleefully and was about to reach for a pup when voices came. Katriona slunk back and hid behind a crate. They entered the barn and stood near the pen.

“I tell you, Rhyder, I saw her come in here.”

“What do I care, Sawyer? Let her be.”

“The lass is too young to be left on her own. Your father commanded your protection of her. She’s to be your lady love,” his friend chortled. “Best start looking after her now.”

“Stop teasing me or I’ll thrash you.”

Katriona hurried to hide in the upper loft. She took the rungs and climbed the ladder. They’d better not touch the pups. She sat at the edge of the platform overhead and watched them suspiciously and hoped they would leave. The dragon prince didn’t look as tall from where she perched on the platform.

“At least she isn’t unsightly,” Sawyer said and laughed. “I’d wager she still wets her nappy.”

“She is fairly young. I’d rather not have her as my lady, but the choice is not mine. I don’t need a lass to help me rule.”

Sawyer snickered and knelt next to the pen. He retrieved a pup and held it against his chest. She was about to call out because they were her pups, not theirs.

“You heard what your father said on the journey. It’s a good match and alliance. Not only will our eastern borders be protected, but we protect their western lands. What does it matter? You have years before you will take her as your wife. Mayhap by then, she’ll grow bosoms?” Sawyer snickered.

Rhyder ignored him and petted a pup. “I know we need the treaty, but I don’t want her or any lass. I’d rather fight with the soldiers and lead my father’s army. But I must obey my father for he is the king.”

She listened to their harsh words. Even if she barely discerned what they spoke of, she understood the vehemence in their tone. The dragon prince was angry.

That made Katriona happy. She leaned forward to peer at them and spotted the biggest, fattest, ugliest spider crawling in the nearby hay. Its black hairy legs moved fast, and she gasped and drew the attention of the dragon prince.

“There you are. Come down here at once.”

Katriona shook her head.

“I order you to come down now. You will heed me.”

“Nay.”

“Nay?” Rhyder sounded appalled.

“I cannot.” Katriona’s eyes widened as the vile spider moved closer.

“You will obey me, wee lass. I won’t put up with your disrespect.”

The spider moved even closer, and she crept sideways, nearer the edge of the platform.

Sawyer had a good laugh. “You should beat her for her disobedience.”

The dragon prince turned a dark glance at his friend. “Be quiet, Sawyer, you’re scaring her. Lass, come down before you hurt yourself.”

She gulped a breath when the hairy spider ran up a board two inches from her arm. Katriona flung herself backward and tumbled through the air. Her eyes squeezed shut and her arms and legs flailed.

The dragon prince caught her.

He held her in his arms.

Sawyer laughed and filled the barn with his loud chortle. “’Tis a good start, Rhyder, she’s already falling for you.”

Rhyder glared at his friend and set her on her feet and brushed hay from her hair. “Are you harmed?”

She shook her head. “There’s a big spider up there. Kill it.”

Sawyer grinned and said, "She's already giving you orders."

Rhyder shoved his friend's chest and took the ladder. He smashed his hand against the spider. "There, lass, it's dead." He climbed back down. "Killing a spider is nothing compared to taming a dragon."

Katriona screamed loud enough to evoke the God Thunor and ran from the barn, positive the dragon prince was getting hungry.

CHAPTER ONE

Dinas Emyrys Hamlet, Britain
Fifteen years later...

Wails resonated from below. Rhydderch Pendragon, Rhyder to those closest to him, lord of all the lands within a two-day ride, stood with his hands on the wooden rail along the overlook of his solar. As far as the eye beheld, rocky slopes trailed downward toward the great waters. Barren crags buffered the hale winds from the vast sea. Caves speckled the edifice of the mountainous incline and housed creatures of great renown. One of which Rhyder held dear. Shrisy, his beloved dragon, hadn't shown herself in days. Her absence worried him because all Rhyder had to do was whistle and his friend would come.

Shrisy was the last of her line. Someday soon, there'd be no dragons to bring good fortune to his lands. In the years since their arrival, his family coveted the prosperity the dragons brought. Instead of fearing them or killing the creatures, his ancestors befriended them, worshipped their strength, and found them to be tame. That was unless something irked the beasts and riled their tempers. Dragons had fierce tempers and training them to do one's will wasn't easy for the beasts had minds of their own. Yet his friendship with Shrisy was coveted, even if his dragon wasn't always obedient.

He leaned over the protective rail of the overlook and searched for Shrisy. With a shrill whistle, he called again, but his dragon didn't show herself. He heard nothing but the wails he'd caught in the wind the last few days. Even though he couldn't see Shrisy, the yowls confirmed what he'd suspected. Rhyder feared age might be his dragon's woe.

"Your Grace, we were to meet in your chamber this morning."

He turned at the voice of his longtime friend and commander-in-arms, Sawyer, and nodded. "Aye, I must've forgotten."

"It's unlike you to forget anything. No matter, we can speak here." Sawyer leaned against the rail and peered below. His dark, almost black eyes, surveyed the land beyond. "What kept you, your vigilance for Shrisy?"

“I awoke early and exercised my sword arm. These days I get little use with the sword for it’s the truth, I wield a quill more than a sword.” Rhyder glanced back at his friend before he returned his gaze to the incline.

“It’s the forfeit of ruling the kingdom and overseeing an army. There’s no sighting of Shrisy yet?” Sawyer set his hands on his hips in a stance he often took.

“None and I loathe to admit my worry...”

“Your worry is warranted, Your Grace.”

Rhyder shook his head. “I told you not to address me formally when we’re alone. You’ve been my most trusted friend for years. We’re practically cousins since my uncle took you as his son when he found you and raised you as his own.” He regarded his comrade’s unkempt garments and his black hair scraggly as if he’d been on the trail for a fortnight.

“And grateful I am that your uncle happened upon me. I wish I remembered that day, but I was newly born. I would have perished in that bog, if not for my father.”

“Uncle David favored you and said he was blessed with the bravest of lads.” Rhyder smiled and recalled fondly his uncle’s benevolent nature. Sawyer had more of a cynical and unforgiving arrogance, the complete opposite of the man who had raised him.

Sawyer laughed and stood near. “Och, well, since I was his only child, he would’ve boasted of my prowess. You are my king and I won’t be insolent, Your Grace. Shrisy still won’t come at your call? Is there nothing we can do to lure her from the cave?”

“Nay, there’s nothing. I shall think about it and will find a way to entice her to come. Either that or I will need to scale this wall and find her myself.”

“Such a thing would be mighty risky and dangerous. It is too windy to try such a feat. At least, await until the weather calms. You might reach her by way of the beach. Some caves are accessible from the sands. Best wait until the beast is ready to come out or perhaps bait her with a fat deer.”

“A deer would entice her if it was tethered near the caves. I sense Shrisy is hurting and needs aid. Her woe fills my soul. I must find her and help if I can.”

“Even if you might find her, Your Grace... What could you do to aid her?”

Rhyder closed his eyes in objection to such a thought. The matter brought forth his frustration, and he’d gotten little sleep in the last few days in ponder of a solution. Restlessness overtook him. “I don’t know, but I must do something. I cannot let Shrisy die without at least offering comfort.”

“I detest then to burden you with more ill-tidings.”

“What is it?” He continued to peer over the edge of the rail, and his jaw clenched in defeat.

“Another man was found murdered in his bed.”

Rhyder fisted his hands. Intense anger came upon him and forced a harsh breath from his nose. “Another one? That makes four men in my army killed in their beds within a fortnight. What is going on?”

“I know not, Your Grace. Someone is intent to lessen your army. Greyor was stabbed whilst he slept. His family will lay him to rest on the morrow. Men are hollowing the ground now for his descent.”

He shook his head in disbelief. “Why would someone in my kingdom want to lessen our army and numbers? Greyor was a fine soldier, too. Triple the night watch and inform his family I will attend his burial. All should be watchful.”

“Aye, Your Grace, I will. You received a missive from King Raedwald.”

“And what does our good ally say?” Rhyder continued to watch for Shrisy, and his attention waned with his preoccupation of the wayward dragon.

Sawyer stepped sideways and closer to redirect him. “It is of import. We have an urgent matter to discuss and it is probably good we do it here, in private.”

“Is Raedwald’s lands in danger? Is he being invaded by Wulfar again? Wulfar is never satisfied with the plunder he takes. Tell me it is not so. I suppose I must aid King Raedwald as we agreed, but now is the worst time to attend to such a task.” He was ready to set out and take command of his soldiers and head east, but Sawyer stopped him and blocked his path.

“Nay, Your Grace, we are well protected. Our sentry reported no breach and King Raedwald does not speak of war or needing aid. Wulfar has been quiet of late. I suppose he raids other lands, hopefully to the north or the east. At least we squelched the last invasion.”

“Merica’s king is a thistle in my arse. You would think his vast lands would content him, but he covets more. Is that not why the Romans fled? Aye, they had land aplenty but wanted more and couldn’t defend against the many invasions and uprisings.”

“You detest Wulfar because of his treachery against your parents and my father. He’s a murderous knave. We should have confronted him long ago and slaughtered his people as he did ours.”

Rhyder lowered his gaze. Talk of his parent’s deaths always brought sadness and regret. “I would have sought justice, but our kingdom needed me. I couldn’t hail off to war when our people suffered at the loss of their king and queen. The kingdom comes first, all else second. Wulfar will

pay for his murderous deceit one day, when the time is right. If it is not Wulfar that concerns us, who do you wish to speak of, tell me your news?"

Sawyer pulled away from the rail and faced him. "It's not politics I wish to discuss, but more of a personal matter."

"You hesitate which tells me I will not like it. Come and tell me this news." Rhyder shifted his gaze and focused on his friend's face. His comrade's expression turned serious, more somber than he'd ever seen.

"He writes your bride is on her way and you have shirked your duty in sending for her. King Raedwald is displeased you didn't answer his requests for visitation to discuss the matter. He means to honor the pact he made with your father and insists you honor it as well. His daughter will cross our border on the morrow."

"My bride?" He wanted to laugh but refrained from doing so. Instead, he knelt and picked up a large rock and tossed it over the edge. The rock skidded over the rocky incline and landed hundreds of feet beneath. He'd hoped the noise might provoke his dragon's curiosity, but only wails came from below and on the wind that fluttered his tunic.

"Aye, Your Grace, your bride. You remember her, do you not? The princess you pledged yourself to years ago." Sawyer chuckled. "The very one who swore you would eat her."

Rhyder smiled at the remembrance. "Aye, I remember. How can I forget the silly lass? I also recall you having a dislike of her, but she was wee then, barely a handful of years."

"She is to be your lady. My dislike of her is and was insincere. You have my complete loyalty, as does she." Sawyer bowed his head in respect of his pledge.

"Your devotion pleases me, but it is unnecessary to claim it so passionately. I know you're loyal and I will never question your faithfulness." He slapped his friend's back and nodded. Although of late, his comrade was as absent as his dragon, for he'd searched for Sawyer countless times and had to give up his search. Rhyder wanted to ask his friend about his whereabouts, but with Shrisy being his only focus, he'd put it off.

Sawyer smirked and settled his hands on his hips. "Many years have passed since your betrothal. She's a grown woman now. Regardless, she's on her way and expects to be greeted by you, her husband. We should make preparations for the ceremony and feast. We need to call the priest."

Rhyder pressed his tired eyes and hoped to ease the sleeplessness from them. He'd slept likely two hours at a time since his dragon's absence. "I am in no mood to entertain."

“You never are, but entertain you must. Surely the lady expects a lavish wedding. She is a princess, and one from a wealthy kingdom. Lest you forget, she is marrying a king.”

“She cannot come at a worse time.”

Sawyer grinned. “Aye, no time has ever been good, but we cannot turn her away now. I’ll ask Merrion to help prepare for her arrival and to plan the feast.”

“My sister will be pleased to use her talents. Be sure to tell her I requested it. You know how she is when you try to command her.” Rhyder grinned for his sister could be difficult, especially when dealing with his commander. They had a love/hate relationship and were more brotherly/sisterly than what he had with her. She wouldn’t ever disobey him or voice any complaint in his presence.

“Don’t I know it? I suggest we go at the earliest light to meet the procession. We’ll need to take a guard to present a show of protection. I should hasten and make ready for our leave.”

Rhyder leaned his forearms on the wooden beam in front of him and shook his head. “I cannot leave. You will go and meet her. Ensure her safety for the rest of the journey.”

“She will expect you, Your Grace. I would—”

“Make whatever excuse you will. But I must see to Shrisy. Until I am assured of her wellbeing, I will not leave the hamlet. Make haste, Sawyer.”

“Very well, Your Grace, yet I cannot think of a credible reason you won’t meet her. She will be disappointed. And from what I recall of the princess, she was a mite outspoken.”

Rhyder shrugged his shoulder. “Princess Katriona was a wee lass and an undisciplined child. Hopefully, she’s learned to quiet her tongue and curb her restraint. But she’s bound to be disappointed in the union. This marriage has always been a convenience...an alliance for both our kingdoms. I doubt she will care if I greet her or not.”

Sawyer bellowed a laugh. “Convenience or nay, she will care. Women are funny that way, Your Grace. I just hope for your sake she’s at least grown bosoms since we last saw her.”

He shoved his friend’s shoulder at his jest. “Take a good number of men with you. It will help to show we care even if a little. And don’t forget to tell Merrion to make preparations. Ensure it befits the lady’s station. Just because the marriage is a convenience, it doesn’t mean the marriage is insignificant. As you said she is to be my queen.”

Sawyer set his hand on his shoulder. “I hope Shrisy shows herself soon.”

“As do I.” Rhyder kept watch over the cliff and thought about the woman he was to wed.

He hadn't thought of Katriona Baldach in a long time, not since his father's passing. Then, his father reminded him of his duty with a covenant attached to his coronation. Try as he might, he couldn't recall what the princess looked like. She was mayhap five or six when he and his family journeyed east and made the treaty. He remembered her falling from the loft in the barn. That memory had fixed itself and he'd never forgotten how fearful he'd been at the time. She could have been killed in the fall if he hadn't caught her.

If it wasn't for his dragon's absence, he might be pleased she was coming and perhaps excited for the celebration and union. But his heart wasn't in it and he realized he'd have to make a show of mirth. He wouldn't want his wife's displeasure even if he'd jested about it. Rhyder took his vows to his kingdom, and any pledges he made, sincerely. Even a marriage he wasn't at one time thrilled about. But now being of a score and a half, he needed to think of his lineage. The family line his father boasted of repeatedly must, at all costs, continue.

Shrisy's untimely ailment forced him to admit one era was ending, and another was beginning. If he lost Shrisy, his lands and kingdom were subject to misfortune. That was the last thing he wanted, but he would face whatever would come.

Loss and acceptance stiffened his resolve. A Pendragon never backed down from any challenge be it from a woman, enemy, or dragon.

CHAPTER TWO

Katriona kept her eyes closed. She tried to sleep, but with her arrival at her wedding, rest was impossible. That and the jarring ride in the carriage kept her from slumber. The envoy stopped, and a knock came upon the door. At once it was opened. Her brother Raen stood with his blond hair covering his left eye. Katriona longed to cut his long locks, but her brother wouldn't let her near with a dagger.

He smiled and leaned his shoulder on the wooden frame. "We will stop and rest here overnight. We are not far off and should reach Pendragon's lands on the morrow. Tents are being erected, sister. Make haste." He helped her from the carriage, and then assisted her sister Mali.

Katriona returned his smile. "I'm pleased to hear that. This journey is wearisome and long. The road was bumpy and I fear my backside will be bruised for a fortnight."

"Aye and we're sure to have headaches for a sennight." Mali giggled and rubbed her temples.

Raen laughed at their jests. "Try riding a horse the entire journey and tell me your complaints then, sisters. You want to talk about bruises. My balls—"

Katriona slapped a hand over his lips. "We know well that you love speaking about your balls, dear brother, but we care not to hear how bruised they are."

That was the way of her siblings. They had a tolerant nature. Not only did they hold affection for each other, but they also cherished their friendships. Their banter and rapport came easy, given their restricted upbringing. Many of the young ones on their father's lands were allowed to run free and play until they reached the age where they'd be given duties.

Being the king's children, they were forced to endure a more rigid existence. Her father believed learning was of the highest import and they were given duties earlier than most. The lads were sent to the woods to chop down trees, to plow the fields, or to the barracks to train with spears. The lasses were kept in the house and learned to weave fabrics, to tend the gardens, and to the kitchens to learn to brew ales, meads, and make cheese.

Katriona turned and took Mali's hand and almost lost her footing when her dog bounded from the carriage. "Oh no, Wynn has escaped. Raen, will you please get him?"

“Your dog is a pain in the arse,” he grumbled under his breath and waved a hand at two soldiers who stood nearby. “See that the dog is found and returned. I wish Father never gave you that beast or allowed him to come on this journey.”

“He’s just excited. Wynn is probably hunting for food. I’m certain he hasn’t gone far, but my thanks, brother, for having him fetched.”

Her sister linked her arm with hers. “Are you not too fearful to rest? I am. Who knows what your husband is like? We’re certain to be abused by the heathens.”

“Shush now. We don’t know what religious piety they have. Lest you forget before father converted us to Christianity, we were heathen as well. I just hope they still revere the old ways because I’m more a heathen than anyone.” Katriona thought her remark humorous. She pulled her sister along and laughed merrily at Mali’s appalled look.

“Do not jest, sister. Just because you revere the old ways...”

“I speak the truth, Mali. Until I learn what my husband’s devotion is, it is best to keep such things from him. And you should be fearful. Were you not the one who teased me unmercifully as children about dragons and how barbaric my betrothed was? It’s your own fault for your fear. Cease or you’ll make my eyes tear from laughter.”

“Oh Lord, I had forgotten. Forgive me for being so wretched.” Mali turned and forced her to stop. “What if it’s true though? What if your husband is a dragon and changes when the moon lights the land? What if he breathes fire? He’ll scorch you for disobeying him.”

“Nonsense. None of that is true. He is not a dragon. Besides, I shall not disobey him and incur his wrath, now shall I?” How she managed to say that with a straight face, she’d never know.

Mali bent with laughter. “Oh aye, you shall challenge him even if you swear to be a dutiful, perfect wife. You cannot help yourself, sister. But he’s the dragon king and he must have a dragon to win your heart. Is that not so?”

“You’re being silly. Of course he doesn’t have a dragon. And even if he did, he might win my heart regardless. Still, wouldn’t it be incredible to see a dragon?” Katriona got a weird sense when the mark on her wrist burned. The leaf-shaped mark always burned or itched when something dreadful was about to happen to someone nearby. As much as she wanted to ignore the call, she turned to assess the men. Agony overtook her senses. She held a hand up to indicate she needed a moment. Mali understood. Her wisdom hummed in her ears. Pain throbbed just above her foot, and she huffed from it. She closed her eyes and concentrated on the suffering.

“I must go.”

“Wait, come back here,” Mali said and ran after her.

“A man is hurt. I must warn him of the injury.” Katriona approached a group of men and reached the man she sought. “Your ankle...you’re in distress?”

The man, a low-ranked soldier in her father’s army, grimaced and nodded. “Aye, Milady, it’s been hurting all day. I wounded it early this morn and twisted it on a tree root.”

“Remove your boot and legging so I may view the damage.” He did as she bade, and she assessed the injury and noted the swelling and redness. “Be still.” Katriona rubbed her hands together effectuating a heat and placed her palms on the man’s naked ankle. Most would be appalled at such forthright behavior, but her father’s soldiers revered her healing power. “The warmth should soothe the pain for a short time. You must stay off your foot. Put this wrap,” she reached inside her satchel and pulled out a long thin strip, “around it. Keep it as still as possible for at least a fortnight. If you don’t, you will strain it further. It’s not broken but badly strained, blessed you be. I shall send you a salve to help ease the pain.”

“It feels better even now, Milady.”

Raen stood behind her and took her satchel. “Do as my sister says. You will be given a horse to ride for the rest of the journey.”

The soldier thanked her and did as she directed.

Her brother raised a brow. “It always amazes me...how you know. Come and get settled for the night’s rest.”

Katriona followed her brother and sister, and the further she got from the man, the more the pain eased from her wisdom. She detested the feelings she sometimes got, especially when a wound was grievous. Then it often took her breath away, and usually, the wisdom remained for a day or two.

Upon reaching the tent, Raen handed her satchel back and lifted the flap. “Rest well, sisters. I’ll see what I can do about retrieving Wynn.”

Katriona nodded and took a moment to gaze at the dimmed sky. The night was upon them, and soon it would be too dark to move about the camp. At least it wasn’t as cold as the previous nights.

Mali entered the tent and sat upon the soft bedding they’d share. “That man is fortunate you were nearby. Let us get back to our discussion... You are being brave. I would be shaking were I you. You’re to wed the dragon king.”

Once she removed her boots, she grabbed her satchel and retrieved the container she kept her herbs in. She set the salve nearby to give to Raen when he brought Wynn back.

Katriona slid under the light cover and sighed. Travel made her weary, much more than any story her sister told her of the dragon king. “Honestly, will you cease with the childish tales? I am looking forward to my wedding.”

Mali settled next to her and set her arm over her stomach. “That’s only because you’ve seen with your sight what’s to come. If I had your gift...”

Katriona smiled to herself. The only thing her night visions had shown her was the soft brown eyes and winsome smile of her betrothed. She didn’t discern his face or body. Yet his smile alone attested that she shouldn’t fear him. The vision came so long ago and since she tried to evoke it again. Only strange visions came, and those were unaccountable. Fanciful dreams of flying beasts and their deafening screeches, and a man’s hand gently touching her face, came upon her on more than one occurrence. What did it mean? Were her sister’s stories true?

“Let us sleep, Mali. Raen is sure to wake us at an unfortunate hour on the morrow.”

Wynn ran into the tent, circled twice before he settled next to her. Her pet never strayed far and had returned faster than she thought he would. She cherished her dog and petted him affectionately. Katriona closed her eyes and willed herself to sleep. Fortunately, no night visions came.

Someone poked her shoulder.

“Katriona, ‘tis time to go.”

She groaned at being awakened. “Oh, it’s morning already? Why did you not wake me sooner?” She gave a cross glance to her sister and shuffled to leave the bedding. “I wanted to take time to get ready and mayhap bathe before I dressed. Tell Raen we will be a wee bit longer.”

“He won’t be pleased.” Mali disappeared through the tent flap with a grumble.

Wynn groaned when she gave him a small shove. “Come, my pet, we must rise.” He licked her face and almost knocked her over with his large body when he jumped from the bed. Katriona quickly collected the bedding and piled it near the exit. She grabbed the salve and pulled her cloak over her shoulders. Sewn inside the fabric were her most prized possessions: various bird feathers, a small branch with bells, a crane pouch that held her runes, eggs that hardened and were unbreakable, and other medicinal gifts left for her by the Gods. The Gods’ protection was assured, and she went nowhere without her cloak.

After she was ready, she rushed outside, followed by Wynn, and in a sleepy haze looked to Raen for direction. She thrust the salve container at him and he took it. “For the soldier’s injury. Water...?”

“Good morn to you too,” he said pleasantly and laughed.

“Which way?” she grumbled.

He pointed in the direction she should go. Katriona flung her satchel over her shoulder and rushed forth. Ahead through the low-lying brush, a burn meandered. The stream’s cold water instantly woke her when she collected handfuls to splash her face.

Wynn drank his fill, caroused by the shallow water, and awaited her.

Mali joined her and handed her a drying cloth. “This morn is not as cold. I filled a bowl with pottage for you. You can eat it in the carriage. We should have fair weather this day. Hopefully, the ride won’t be as bumpy. I am gladdened the journey ends.”

“I am gladdened to see winter’s departure. Aye, and soon we will celebrate the spring festival. I must think of what I will sacrifice to Goddess Esotre. It must be something worthy so she will bless my marriage.” Katriona finished her morning toiletry and yanked off the overdress she’d worn the day before. She hastily donned a bright green dress with golden ties and pulled on the softest brown boots Mama made for her. She wanted to appear fetching for her husband.

As much as she’d miss home, she was excited to see Rhydderch again. From her childhood memories, she cherished their one and only encounter. Try as she might, she could no longer recall his face, but he’d been a lad and likely changed. He was now a man, one who hopefully had a good nature and was tolerant. And if the goddesses blessed her, he’d be handsome.

“Raen says you have a moment or two and then we must go.”

“I shall hurry. Help me with my hair.” Katriona retrieved her hair strings and handed them to her sister.

Mali clucked her tongue and quickly twisted her locks and had her hair secured. “You’re fortunate to have wavy locks. Aye, for mine are straight as a taut bow and with no appeal.”

She laughed at her sister’s comparison. “You are lovely, Mali. None have such dark, rich strands as yours. How you resemble Mama.”

“You jest, sister, for your waves are spun with gold and bounce with the breeze. Mine whips my face as if to punish me. All men want such a comely woman. What lass wouldn’t want to look akin?”

She hugged her sister close. “I shall miss you, you dingleberry.”

“And I’ll miss you, you tart, especially that winsome face. Who shall I tease? Raen is too sullen and doesn’t get my jests.”

Of all their siblings, Raen and Mali were the only unmarried who remained at home. Although, Raen bespoke of being interested in a woman that lived nearby. “We will send missives. Aye, and you will tell me all. Promise?”

“I shall. Now come along. All are ready and are probably irked at our dally. We delay them and Raen is eager to get you delivered in one piece.” Mali linked her arm.

Katriona laughed. “That’s only because he has someone awaiting his return.”

Mali frowned and cast her eyes to the ground.

“Oh, I apologize. I didn’t mean...”

“I know you didn’t. It is not your fault my betrothed was killed. He died doing his duty.”

“You miss him. I understand. Why don’t you stay with me awhile? At least, until Halegmonath? Once winter comes around again, it shall be too cold to travel. We can spend the summer together.” Katriona hoped she’d agree.

“I will think about it. Let us go before Raen starts shouting. You know how temperamental he can be in the morning. He’s a grumpy goat.”

They laughed as they exited the woodland. Wynn ran ahead of them and stopped before he reached the guard. He growled low in his throat, a sign of protection. She quickly grabbed his collar to prevent him from attacking the unfamiliar men who stood close. The soldiers swiftly surrounded her and Mali with their swords drawn and positioned themselves to defend. She peered between them and regarded the handful of intruders that faced her brother. Raen spoke with a tall man, but she couldn’t grasp any of their words. A moment later, Raen waved him forward.

Two of her father’s soldiers advanced and took hold of Wynn’s collar. Her pet whined and wanted release. Katriona’s knees shook. After envisioning the moment for so long, it was finally upon her. Meeting Rhydderch again brought forth a conundrum of nerves. As soon as the king approached, she curtsied and kept her eyes lowered until he gave her leave to rise.

“Princess, you are lovelier than I remembered.” The tall man knelt on one knee and set his hand over his heart. His gaze lingered and caused a shiver down her spine.

When she took a moment to look at him, she scowled. She didn’t mean to appear cross, but his manner wasn’t that of what she imagined. The man she thought to wed had kindness in his eyes, not dark penetrated depths that seemed to read her thoughts. He didn’t have soft brown eyes or the winsome smile of her imagination. She barely saw his lips beneath the thickness of his beard. He extended his hand but his touch didn’t evoke the hopeful longing she’d had in her vision.

“I...I am...pleased to be here.”

He rose and bowed to her. “All will celebrate your arrival. Let us get you home.”

Katriona hastily turned and walked away. She entered the carriage and sat back. Her heart raced and beat frantically in her ears. She wouldn’t say she was fearful. Yet her stomach twisted like a

washrag. He was definitely not the lad...man...she remembered or envisioned. Dejection further tensed her shoulders and chest.

Mali slid next to her on the carriage bench. "I deem a short visit might be in order given your reaction to him. He is rather dark and foreboding."

She nodded but otherwise didn't retort. Although she was gladdened her sister would stay. More than that, she'd have an ally in an unknown land. Her reaction was oddly unnerving since she had nothing to compare him to.

The carriage door opened, and Wynn trounced in. He sprawled on the floor and set his head atop her feet. She leaned to pat his head and was relieved she brought him. Albeit, she wouldn't have left her pet behind and was pleased Papa had put up little argument about it.

Throughout the rest of the morning, Katriona gazed through the window at the most enchanted land she'd ever seen. Besides the glens and lochs, beautiful prairies of fields stretched out. She leaned on the opening of the carriage window and thought she had entered the fairy folk's land. A dense mist rolled atop nearby hills and appeared to creep down the slopes. It was magical and almost as if the fairies welcomed her. Her chest eased at the thought.

Sweet Goddess Freyja, please bless me.

The gravel road ended at a large wooden palisade that seemed to go on for miles. Banners waved in the slight breeze and newly sprung wildflowers speckled the dell leading toward the hamlet walls. The hamlet erected on the highest ground and boasted its turrets of stone left by the Romans. Twin gates stood at least twenty feet high and opened at the whistle of the king's man-at-arms.

Their procession continued onward. Many long buildings situated inside the high walls and their edifices erected with wood and stone and the roofs thatched heavily. Cottages dotted the grassy areas and were many. How grand her new home appeared.

As soon as she stepped from the carriage a strange odor came. It wasn't unpleasant, just unfamiliar. She wrinkled her nose and tried to figure out what caused it. Two soldiers took Wynn and secured him. Her dog howled at being confined. Katriona patted his head to reassure him it wouldn't be for long.

Raen sidled next to her and took her elbow. "The fortification is well protected. That will relieve Father. You smell the salt, aye? 'Tis the scent of the sea. They're located close to the waters."

"I should like to see these waters. I have heard they go on forever." Being far from the sea, she'd never traveled close enough to the great water. She'd always longed to be near the waters because the stories told were of the beauty, captivation, and the dangers of the sea.

The king approached. "In good time, Princess. For now, let us get you settled. There will be a grand feast to celebrate the union and your arrival. By this eve, you will be wed. Let us get inside." He tried to take her arm to guide her up the step, but she hung back and wouldn't allow him.

She followed him inside the largest building. He led the way and didn't remark on her rejection. Katriona wasn't ready to receive insight into his character. Her gift gave her the ability to sense one's emotions or demeanor when she touched them. She was used to Mali and Raen's emotions and manner, but she feared what she might learn of her future husband's.

The king smiled, and despite the kindness of his words, his eyes lingered again. She didn't know why he made her uncomfortable, but his gaze wasn't what she was used to. Mayhap she made more of his dawdled glance than she should. He wasn't a bad sort, especially when he smiled. Perhaps life wouldn't be as discouraging with him as a husband. She had to have faith.

Sweet Goddess Freyja, bless me.

She bowed, and he left her upon entering the great hall. Katriona took the time to study the chamber. The tables were lavishly decorated with sprigs of flowers and a good many bowls of fruits and other mysterious foodstuffs. The farthest wall lined with barrels likely filled with ale or wine. Given the number of barrels, the king expected many celebrants.

She realized the hall was prepared for the wedding feast. That thought brought forth a mire of emotions. Nerves had to be kept in control. She wouldn't allow herself to appear unbecoming.

A dark-haired woman approached and her manner was as staid as her father's when she'd done something wrong. She was dressed in a richly colored red gown, and her hair was twisted and tied behind her neck and entwined with lavish ribbons that fell to below her hip. Katriona remembered how grand the ladies dressed from their visit when she was a child. The memory had fixed itself, and Mama often remarked that their dress was too lavish and not sensible.

The woman's blue eyes regarded her. "You have arrived, I see. I will show you to a chamber where you can make ready. I hope you don't intend to wear that hideous garment for the wedding. The ceremony will take place in a few hours when the priest arrives. Father Matthew will come right away at the king's behest, but it will take time since he journeys from afar. That should give you plenty enough time to bathe and rest."

Katriona pulled Mali along and followed the woman to the upper solar. The woman's gruff manner finally forced her to submit to nerves. She was anxious enough about being in a new place and meeting new people. A cold shiver washed through her, and her hands shook.

“I am Merrion, keeper of this house and sister to the king. I see to all the needs of His Grace and this house. Best you remember that.”

Katriona raised a brow. She kept quiet and listened to the woman prattle on about the night’s activities and what was expected of her. Mali’s eyes widened from across the chamber. She joined her on the bed and they sat with arms linked and listened.

“And then the priest will bless His Grace’s bedchamber. Fear not, for the king probably won’t bed you this night. He has more important matters to attend to and rarely leaves his chamber. ‘Tis likely you’ll remain untouched for a time. I will leave you to make yourself ready. Don’t dally.”

The door closed with a bang as she left the chamber.

Katriona flopped back upon the bed and breathed a sigh of relief. “Well, that was about the most pleasant reception I’ve ever received.”

Mali laughed boisterously. “You’ve never had a reception before. But aye, obviously the woman has no fondness for you. Did you hear what she said? Imagine discussing bedchamber matters so openly. Mama would wash her mouth with soap. Either that or stuff her mouth with horse manure since she’s talking sh—”

Katriona slapped a hand over her sister’s mouth. “Shhh. We won’t speak discourteously here. Someone might overhear and mistake your jests. I am happy you are staying. We should tell Raen so he can be on his way.”

Mali shook her head. “He won’t leave until the morrow, after the festivities. He told Papa that he would ensure you were wed properly before he left...and happy. Honestly, you’re fortunate to be the baby because Papa cares more for you than the rest of us.”

“That’s nonsense and you well know it. Papa cares for all of us. Well, apparently there won’t be a consummation of this marriage. Not that I mind because I...” She couldn’t bring herself to admit that she didn’t get a romantic stirring from her future husband. Katriona untied the strings of her overdress and reached for her satchel. Perhaps she would grow to love him given time, a lot of time...years probably. “I’m not looking forward to sharing a bed with the lord.”

Mali squeezed her hand. “Have courage, dearest sister. Perhaps he will finish quickly and you can hail to your chamber. Await to dress for I shall call for a bath and food. We will make them wait if need be until you are more than presentable. That woman will swallow her tongue when she sees you in your fine garments and how beautiful you look. She’ll regret her hurtful words.”

“You always say the merriest things to cheer me. Have Wynn fetched for I’m sure he’s having fits by now.”

“I’ll see to him.” Mali left and quietly closed the door behind her.

Katriona opened her satchel and pulled out the beige-colored gown embellished with silk flowers shaded in rosy hues and the green stitched vines. After her bath, her sister would need to help her dress because the gown was cumbersome. She placed it on the bedding and tried to press the wrinkles from it. Mama made the dress for her wedding and she sighed at the thought of home. How she wished her parents attended her wedding, but alas, they had too many pressing matters to see to at home.

She pulled the gown to her chest and recalled Mama saying it would be the most beautiful garment any bride ever wore. Any woman would appear striking in it. At least she would impress the lord when she met him at the altar, if that was at all possible.

CHAPTER THREE

Shrisy flapped her great wings and hovered near the cliff. Rhyder whistled to her, but she wouldn't come. From what he could tell, there was nothing evidently wrong with her. She appeared strong and uninjured. Yet he got a sense something was wrong. His dragon wouldn't come when he called. She kept her distance, and her eyes glowed with a reddish glint. Usually, her eyes shone light green and bore a friendly manner. After a few minutes, she flew away and left him more perplexed at her strange behavior.

Rhyder returned to his solar to finish readying for his wedding. He tied the last strings of his leather tunic and pulled a matching leather belt around his waist. All he needed was the ceremonial sword and then he'd be ready. Once they took the vows, he'd give the sword to her brother as a gesture of good faith and his vow to join their families.

He was pleased no one bothered him in the last hour. Shrisy concerned him, and yet, he thought of nothing to give her aid. What was wrong with her? Obviously, she wasn't hurt, but something bothered the great beast. It wasn't like his dragon to avoid him. Shrisy was his cherished friend and never acted so oddly toward him. Such thoughts needed to be cast aside. His wedding guests waited, and he needed to do his duty.

Sawyer entered the chamber quietly and handed him the sword. "Are you ready? The guests have arrived and the priest awaits you, Your Grace."

"As ready as I'll ever be. Where have you been? What's kept you? I expected you earlier." He shoved the sword in the scabbard and motioned for his friend to go forward.

"Distractions, but nothing important or that which bears my confession." Sawyer headed to the door and turned abruptly when he stopped him with a grasp of his arm. "Your Grace, are you coming?"

"Tell me about her."

His friend grinned. "You'll be pleased."

He shoved Sawyer through the opening and into the hallway. Voices reverberated from below which indicated the guests grew impatient for the ceremony to begin. "That's all you have to say?"

"She has bosoms."

Rhyder laughed and the force of it shook his chest. “I needed that laugh. But och, we shouldn’t speak disrespectfully of her. Is she kind?”

Sawyer leaned against the wall and grinned. “I can only say I’ve never seen a more fetching woman. When I say her blue eyes are beautiful... They are more enticing. When I tell you of her pert nose, lush lips, and rosy cheeks...”

He punched his arm in mirth. “Do not tease me. What do her eyes bespeak besides enticement? Kindness or malice? Is she tenderhearted?”

Sawyer scoffed. “You speak not of beauty. Is that not all a man wants?”

Rhyder shrugged his shoulder. “There is beauty and there is beauty from within. Aye, most want a comely wife, but I need to know if she will treat our people with compassion. That she will be trustworthy and devoted.”

“You place our clan above yourself as always, Your Grace. Aye, she’s kind and mayhap tenderhearted. She speaks with a gentle voice. Not only is she comely in her face, but the princess is lovely from within. She’s a beauty to be sure both outside and in.”

“I see she’s besotted you. That is good for she will win the hearts of our hamlet and kingdom.”

Sawyer flashed a big grin. “Aye, and mayhap your heart as well?”

“My heart won’t be as easily won over like yours. There is only one living thing that besots me. Besides, there are more important things in life than love, Sawyer, and leading our people is the only thing that concerns me. That and solacing Shrisy so she’ll continue to bring good fortune to our lands.” Rhyder nodded for Sawyer to start down the steps.

“God favors you, Your Grace, more than you know. Even if you choose not to love, love will choose you.”

“You speak nonsense. Love is a matter of fools.” Rhyder clipped the flooring with his heels in his haste to get to the great hall.

His friend’s enthusiasm brought forth his curiosity. He wanted to view the princess for himself and assess whether he was favored. As he cut through the guests, he spotted the priest near the hearth and makeshift altar. The elderly clergyman wore gilded vestments and held a thick tomb, ready and waiting to seal his fate with the word of God.

Sawyer led the way to the altar where a woman bowed to his friend. She didn’t take notice of him and kept her gaze on his commander. Her golden hair was pulled back from her face and swept her shoulders in a mass of curls. She was lovely.

“King Rhydderch, I am pleased with the celebration and look forward to our union,” she said to Sawyer.

He raised a brow at his friend whilst he listened to her pleasant voice. The woman was confused, and he scowled to get his commander to correct the error. “Sawyer, what—?”

Sawyer stepped back with his appall. “Princess, I’m not the king... Ah, allow me to present your betrothed... King Rhydderch Pendragon, His Grace.”

She gasped and raised her brightened face. Her blue eyes darkened with discomfiture.

“Princess,” he said and bowed. “I am pleased to see you again, Katriona.”

She pitched forward, and he caught her before she hit the floor. He turned to Sawyer and with a blank expression said, “I haven’t made a good impression, have I?”

Sawyer chuckled but he wouldn’t dare reproach him. “Perhaps not, Your Grace.”

Rhyder lifted the woman and carried her toward an antechamber. “Keep all away.”

Before his commander could clear the antechamber, a woman appeared and tried to push him aside. “I will not keep away. I should tend to her.”

“Are you her maidservant?” Rhyder wouldn’t let her pass until she answered, and the woman huffed in frustration.

“Nay, I’m her sister. Please let me make sure she’s not hurt.”

“She’s not injured. Why don’t you get a cup of wine for her?” Her sister hailed off and he turned back to find Katriona’s eyes fastened on him. “You’re not injured, are you?”

She shook her head.

He signaled to Sawyer with a wave. “I don’t want to be disturbed. None are to enter.”

Sawyer stood at the entry with his back to them and blocked the antechamber from the onlookers and intrusion.

“It has been many years since we’ve seen each other, Katy. Why did you think Sawyer was me?” Rhyder leaned against the wooden beam near the chair and waited for her to speak. “Have you forgotten me?”

Katriona folded her hands in her lap and appeared serene. “I wasn’t certain what you...looked like, and I thought, that is...he never introduced himself and I thought he was...you.”

“Should I reprimand him for being deceitful? I vow he misled you on purpose.” He jested, but she didn’t catch on.

“Oh nay, please don’t punish him. I’m sure he didn’t mean to mislead me... It was my mistake.”

“You’re too kindhearted in your concern for him. Sawyer likes to tease and I suspect he purposely led you to believe he was me to rattle you. I assure you, I’m Rhydderch, Katy.”

“Why do you call me Katy? I’m Katriona.”

“I will call you Katy. I recall your father calling you by the endearment.” He’d always thought of her as Katy, especially after hearing her father calling her by the nickname at the betrothal feast so long ago.

“Only he calls me that. Your home is—”

“You must call me Rhyder, but only when we’re alone. Otherwise whatever is proper. What did you call your father?”

She smiled and set a hand on his and gasped. “I called him father or papa. Such formality here... I shall call you My Lord or Your Grace, as you wish.”

He bellowed a laugh and drew Sawyer’s attention. Rhyder never was at a loss for words but the enchanted lady riddled him senseless. She had fortitude, and beneath that, benevolence. Sawyer was right for she was lovely. If the guests weren’t impatient for the celebration and feast to begin, he might gawk at her for the rest of the night.

“Katy, I don’t want you to fear me.”

“Why would I fear you, My Lord?”

He grinned at the memory of when they’d first met and her outrageousness. “The last time I saw you, you swore I was going to eat you. I vow I’m not barbaric.”

She smiled in return. “Oh, that was childhood foolishness. I was young and my sister teased me... Surely you won’t hold that against me.”

“Nay, but one day you will tell me why you thought I would eat you.”

“Mayhap I shall.”

“For now, I’ll be content if you tell me why you keeled over. I won’t wait for that explanation.” He tried not to intimidate her but his words came out with force. Her faint troubled him. Rhyder hoped it wasn’t because she reviled him. That would be a terrible start to their marriage.

“Very well, My Lord, I was overcome that your commander wasn’t you.”

Rhyder’s chest tightened. Her face remained impassive when she insulted him. He was taken aback at her disregard. No one dared to offend him but she seemed not to care. He wanted her to be pleased with him and because she apparently wasn’t, he tensed and stood braced for more slights.

“I’ve done it again, haven’t I? You misunderstand me, My Lord... I am pleased he is not you and you are you, if I’m making any sense? And I suppose the journey has wearied me.”

“Katy, I have permitted you to call me Rhyder when we’re alone. I want you to say my name.” He squeezed her hand to get her acceptance.

“Your full name? Mama made me memorize it, but I—”

He laughed and the sound seemed strange to him. It had been a long time since he’d let himself enjoy being in anyone’s company. “Nay, not my full name, just call me Rhyder.” He pulled her to stand in front of him, and she gasped when he clasped her hand.

She gazed at him with the loveliest blue eyes, eyes that bespoke passion, love, and understanding. Her face was pretty with light brows and slightly rosy-tinged cheeks. But what held his attention were her lips, softly glistened and flushed. At that moment, he knew kissing her would be pleasurable. He didn’t want to be captivated or taken in by her, but his reaction to her disordered him.

“Rhyder...”

He lifted her chin with gentle fingers. “Aye, good. You finally learned to obey. The priest awaits. All wait. We shouldn’t keep them waiting.”

“I vow to make you a good wife.”

“You will? We shall see.” He felt the tension ease from his shoulders. “Come and let us get the sacrament behind us.”

When they entered the great hall, all quieted and watched them proceed to the altar. Rhyder wasn’t religious, at least, not in the Christianity sense of religion, and the rite was more ceremonial than anything. Ever since his parent’s deaths, he lost what faith he had. Although, he still revered the old druid priest who resided on his land. But the druid priest was more a healer and a mystic than a God-fearing cleric.

He stood braced and ready with his head bowed. With a glance, he noticed his betrothed wore a serene expression on her face and her body relaxed. She wasn’t apprehensive about their wedding after all. That was a good sign.

Before Father Matthew began, Katy handed the elderly man a silken cord, woven with ribbons. “Please use this tie for the binding ceremony and these words.” She placed a rolled parchment in his hand. “My Mama wanted me to be wedded with them. It is important to me.”

Rhyder nodded at the priest and gave his approval. He cared not about the trivialities, only that she would be joined to him.

Father Matthew announced the sacrament and Godly words. He joined their hands and lifted them for all to see. With the silken cord, he set it over their wrists and began reciting the words from the parchment:

May your love be like the earth: rich, natural, and deeply rooted.

As strong as a rock, yet soft as sand. Always growing and ever-patient.

The priest frowned because the binding words were primitive and more akin to a pagan ritual than Christian. Rhyder smiled for it gave him insight on who Katy was. She revered the old ways, even though the church grew ever more disapproving of such rites.

Father Matthew then set the knot atop their knuckles and continued in a strained voice:

May your love be like fire: passionate, intense, and energetic.

A flame that never dies. As radiant as the morning sun, and as warm as an evening embrace.

Rhyder tightened his hold on her hand and turned to peer at her. Passionate, intense, and energetic, indeed. He almost groaned aloud at the priest's proclamation. The romanticism of the words struck him at the reality of their vows. She smiled and returned the embrace of their hands. It was then that he noticed how richly garbed she was. The gown she wore was graceful and fit her to perfection. He turned back as the priest continued in his deeply strained albeit affronted tone:

May your love be like water, constantly moving and ever-changing.

Never still, never stagnant.

As vast as the ocean and as fresh as spring rain.

Father Matthew overlapped the tie and put another knot in the rope, and after clearing his throat, he continued:

May your love be like air: the sharing of dreams, ever fragrant, and always lighthearted.

Found in the breeze of a whisper or in the breath of a kiss.

Another tie bound them further.

May your love be like all elements: physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually entwined.

The priest harumphed, but fastened one last knot and was silent for a moment. His bulbous nose reddened likely with ire. The mention of elements visibly instigated his discord.

As intertwined are these elements so shall your hearts interweave.

The words Katy wanted spoken were poetic and romantic. Rhyder was neither poetic nor romantic, and he feared he would disappoint the beautiful woman.

Father Matthew began his Christian sermon on the duties of marriage and what their pledge meant. Rhyder shifted his stance because the priest was overlong with his lecture. For several

moments, his mind drifted to Shrisy, hamlet matters, Sawyer's enamor of his new wife, and how grand the hall appeared. He took a deep breath and refocused on the clergyman's words.

After a few more blessings, the priest shouted for all to hear, "You are now husband and wife. Go forth with God's blessings. If you wish to share a kiss to seal these vows..."

Rhyder waited for Father Matthew to undo the ties that bound their hands together. As soon as they were freed, he pulled her forward and settled his mouth on hers. The kiss, although modest, sparked a desire in him. He didn't want to end it, but wouldn't be crass in front of the priest or his followers.

"Did you feel that?" he whispered so only she caught his words.

She stared into his eyes. "Aye, I did."

He retook her hand and led her to the feast. At the end of the great hall stood a massive wooden table, covered with a velvet red cloth, woven with golden embellishments. The table lavishly adorned with candles and settings of platters and goblets. He bid her to sit and took the chair next to hers. She appeared discomfited at being the focus of all those in the hall. He took pity on her and decided to get the last ritual over with so they might enjoy their supper.

Rhyder stood, held up his hand, and called forth her brother. "Raen of house Baldach, as a gesture of my good faith toward Princess Katriona, now Her Grace of Pendragon, I gift this sword to you, her family, the Baldachs. May it serve well: power, protection, authority, strength, and courage when needed."

Raen bowed and took the sword from him. "We give you thanks, My Lord. My father has sent six fine steeds and two oxen, along with a pouch of gold, in faith that our treaty will remain. He desires that you serve his daughter well as a husband."

With the bride price paid and accepted, rounds of cheers arose from his followers. Several of his soldiers shouted well wishes and raised their cups with glee. The revelry began, and the meal was at last served. Servants scattered the hall and placed large trenchers of meat, vegetables, and other dishes before the guests and one for him and Katriona to share. With all focused on the meal, his wife eased and she didn't seem as tense, although she had yet to look at him.

Rhyder wasn't hungry and only ate a small amount. He continued to watch his wife and suspected she might be coy for she hadn't said a word since they took their chairs. It was another insight into his wife's complex nature. The last thing he was skilled at, was wooing a shy woman. He hadn't had to woo in many a year, and most women he interacted with had experience in dealing with men.

“You are not hungry?” he asked and noticed she ate as much as he.

“Not very.”

“Our lives changed forever this day because of the treaty. I take our vows without reservation as I hope you do. I promised to honor you, protect you, and do everything to make you happy.”

She turned to face him. Her small hand settled over his. “I am pleased to hear that, Rhyder. I vowed the same all those years ago.”

At that moment, a large beast ran into the hall and caused a ruckus. Several women screamed as the dog ran between them and almost knocked a few people over in his dash. The dog stopped at the table and whined when Katriona reached out.

“Oh, Wynn, you bad dog. How did you get loose?” She took a hunk of meat from her trencher and tossed it on the floor. “Down. Be a good dog for once.”

“Your pet, I take it?” Rhyder almost laughed because his wife was embarrassed by her dog’s intrusive entrance.

Her face brightened, and she appeared apologetic with stoic eyes. “Aye, but not for long if he doesn’t behave. I am sorry he’s disturbed our wedding feast. I will find a place where he’ll be kept.”

Rhyder leaned to the side to glance at the beast. The animal wasn’t stout but lanky with long legs and a long tail. The dog’s hair lay wavy and scraggly, but he was a handsome fellow. “He’s rather large. Is he harmless?”

“He is when all is well, but if someone threatens me or tries to harm me... He’s been known to growl and once he did attack. Wynn seems to like you for he hasn’t bothered to judge you.”

“You have my permission to keep him inside then.”

She raised her dainty brow. “Thank you, My Lord, for your consent.”

Her words didn’t portray her gratitude but sounded more sarcastic. Rhyder wouldn’t address his displeasure at the tone of her remark. He wanted to leave the celebration. All he desired at that moment was to be alone with her. He needed to kiss her again without restraint and to make her as desirous as she’d made him. “We should retire.”

She turned to face him and her pretty blue eyes stared. Her cheeks brightened with an endeared blush. “The celebration hasn’t ended.”

“It has for us.”