

WITH DRAGONS SHE WALKS

by

Brit Darby

Legend

Deep within, the Dragons exist.
Hot blood mingles, heat embraces.
Two hearts melt, steady and strong.
Fire consumes, power inflames.

Wings take flight, faltering steps vanquish.
They dance, perform silent melodies.
In ways of old, challenges overcome.
Fierceness possesses, might unfolds.

Dragons whisper, their songs she hears.
Like minstrels warning, of future uncast.
Her will theirs, her soul complete.
In absolute trust, with Dragons she walks.

Prologue

Northumbria - 892

CAILIN STUDIED THE ROOM. Within seconds she spotted Lachlan, her twin brother.

She smiled at his attempt to hide. His arm and leg stuck awkwardly out from behind the heavy curtains, like a beacon of light pointing him out. Even when he was more creative with his hiding place, Cailin always knew where he hid; she knew what he was thinking and feeling much of the time. Her connection to Lachlan went beyond the mirror image his face reflected. Yet, she also understood there was a difference between them, a difference she couldn't explain.

With a deep sigh, Cailin continued playing along. "Oh, I wonder where he is. Lanny, where are you?" She turned in circles and heard a muffled giggle behind the curtains.

There was no challenge in the simple game, but Lachlan loved it. He begged to play it over and over. More than anything, she loved her brother. So she endured the boredom, trying not to suggest they do something she would enjoy — like playing with the toy wooden sword left neglected in the chest.

Father carved the miniature sword for Lachlan for their eighth birthday this year, but he was scared of it. He happily traded the sword for the rag doll Mother made for Cailin. They only swapped toys when others were not around. They knew the grown-ups would not approve.

As badly as Cailin wanted to play swordfight now, she wouldn't ask Lachlan. It was always the same when they played her games, he ended up in tears. She hated when he cried. Almost as much as she hated the other children who laughed at him.

Cailin tagged Lachlan's arm and called out, "Your turn." He peeked out from the curtains, looking surprised she had found him.

He smiled wide, his violet-colored eyes bright with excitement. “I’ll close my eyes and you go hide, Linny. I bet I’ll find you quicker this time.”

Cailin skipped off. “I bet you don’t,” she challenged, with a quick glance back to check he wasn’t peeking. She heard their mother’s voice just outside the nursery door — it must be bedtime.

Just as the door swung open, Cailin hurried into the small adjoining bedchamber where she slept. She slid beneath her bed. It was fun to hide from Mother so she could stay up later. She saw her brother through the door from her hiding place. Lachlan stopped counting and uncovered his eyes, but he didn’t move. He was staring at something in the doorway. Cailin felt the hairs rise on the back of her neck.

“Please, no.” Mother’s voice was strained, a frightened plea. “You can’t.”

Cailin saw her auburn-haired mother back into the room, spreading her skirts protectively, as if shielding Lachlan.

A tall, muscular man stepped through the doorway. Cailin had never seen him before. His clothing was strange. He looked dressed for battle, not like the local villagers. A broad, double-edged sword hung across one shoulder, the hilt catching the flickering candlelight. A knife dangled from a leather sheath on his belt. An axe with a large curved blade swung back and forth and clanked with each stride he took towards Mother. This man was neither serf nor lord; he was a warrior.

Cailin stared, both fearful and yet fascinated. She knew the long shirt he wore was metal; it clinked when he moved. His crimson cloak was held in place by an intricate gold pin at his shoulder. He wore a helmet, nose and cheek pieces covering most of his face. He took it off and tucked it under one big arm. Long, blond braids fell past his shoulders and a pale beard covered

his jaw and chin. Cailin remembered seeing men dressed like this before, when the village held the harvest faire. They came bringing furs, amber, and ivory to trade. Mother had called them *Vikings*. She had warned Cailin and Lachlan to stay far away from them.

“H-how did you find me?” Mother stammered.

He did not answer her question. “Give me my son.”

The man spoke English too, but his accent was strange.

“No,” Mother cried, pulling Lachlan against her. She hugged him tightly against her side. He was frightened. He snapped out of his daze and started to cry. When the big man stepped closer, Lachlan wailed louder.

“Keep the boy quiet,” the man barked.

Mother smothered Lachlan’s sobbing with her hand. “You cannot take my child. I will not let you.”

“I’ll have the boy, woman.”

“Why?” Mother continued to back away from him, pulling Lachlan with her. The stranger lifted a hand in warning and she stopped. “It’s been eight years. Why now?”

“I need a son. It is my right, he is my seed.”

Cailin absorbed the words they spoke. This news caused her no surprise. Somehow, deep down, she sensed the man she called Father until his death a year ago was not the one who sired her and Lachlan.

“He’ll lack for nothing. I’m a rich man now, a *jarl*, a merchant.”

Mother grimaced. “You’re a murderer and a violator of women.”

The stranger scowled at her insult, his eyes narrowed. “I’ve no need for *fara í viking* any more. The old ways are fading and I, too, am growing old. I’ve great wealth now, and I need a

son to pass it on to before I die. Get his things.”

“No.” Mother’s whisper was defiant. With raw courage she faced the huge warrior who towered over her, yet she trembled so Cailin heard her teeth rattling even from the other room.

“Do it, woman,” he said as he grabbed Mother’s arm, “or by Thor’s bones, my men will slaughter every man, woman, and child in this village.”

Mother stared at him, weighing the threat. Then she nodded. “At least let me pack him some warm clothes.”

He grunted and let her go. “Hurry.”

Mother pulled Lachlan with her into the bedchamber, shutting the door partially behind her. It blocked the man’s view as Cailin rolled out from beneath the bed and stood. Mother looked surprised to see her, then relieved.

“Cailin,” Mother whispered beneath Lachlan’s sobbing. “You are my brave one, my strong one. I must ask something of you.”

“Yes, Mother.” Cailin’s heart pounded fiercely. She sought the tear-filled green eyes she knew so well, as Mother knelt and framed her face in her hands.

Mother drew Lachlan beside Cailin. “Take your brother and climb out the window, as you two do in your games. Run as fast as you can to the village for help. Do not stop; do not look back. Do not let go of Lachlan’s hand. You must keep him safe.” Cailin did not hesitate. She took Lachlan’s hand in hers. “We’re going to play some more, Lanny; we’re both going to hide from Mother this time.”

He stopped blubbering at the promise of his favorite game. “You must keep quiet,” Cailin whispered to him. “Whoever is quietest wins a special prize. Now, let’s go.”

Mother helped Cailin ease open the window just far enough for them to wriggle out.

Together they lowered Lachlan down first. He crouched in the high grass outside, staring up at them with huge eyes in the moonlight. Cailin pressed a finger to her lips to remind him to be quiet. As she swung one leg over the sill, the door slammed back against the wall.

The Viking strode into the room, bellowing with fury. Cailin looked back and saw Mother turn and face him, her frame slight in his ominous shadow.

“Run,” she screamed at Cailin, but her warning was short lived. A giant fist shot out and felled her. Mother crumpled to the ground, red skirts pooling about her like blood.

Fear spurred Cailin on and she climbed over the sill to jump after Lachlan.

Big hands grabbed her and dragged her back inside. “I’m losing patience, boy,” the Viking barked, tossing her to the floor. “Now get dressed, we must go.”

As Cailin scrambled to her feet, she realized he did not know she was not Lachlan. She and her twin wore matching nightclothes, and her hair was only slighter longer. Everyone had trouble telling them apart when they dressed alike. She looked at Mother lying unconscious on the floor, and heard Lachlan’s faint whimpering outside. At once Cailin knew what she had to do.

She went and pulled on some of Lachlan’s clothes and boots. “Is my mother all right?”

Impatient, the Viking picked her up and turned to leave the moment she was dressed. He clutched her under one arm and his helmet under the other. “Was but a tap on the chin, boy. Moira will be fine when she wakens.”

Cailin had no choice but to believe him as he carried her from the room. When her mother was no longer in sight, sadness and loss filled her heart. Despite everything, she could not still her curiosity and twisted about to look up at the man to ask, “Where are we going?”

He glanced down at her, looking surprised. She defiantly stared back into his ice-blue

eyes.

“Home, boy.”

“My name’s not ‘boy,’ it’s Lachlan,” she lied, hoping he believed her.

“We’re going home, Lachlan. Home to Hedeby.”

His long strides carried her quickly out the door into the darkness, down twisting stairs in the corner turret and out into the bailey. Cailin looked back as the tower keep was left behind, the black maw of night swallowing them. Then she saw him. Edwin, her own uncle and the village priest, standing there watching as a stranger carried her away.

SHE STARTED TO CALL out to Uncle Edwin for help. But something froze the words in her throat. Edwin looked furtive, glancing about as if to see who else might be watching. He made no attempt to stop the Viking or help her; he merely stepped back into the shadows as if to disguise his presence, his black cassock swirling in the wind. Cailin’s confusion gave way to instinct. *Uncle Edwin betrayed us*, she thought.

Cailin knew Uncle Edwin disliked her and Lachlan. She remembered his words about twins during one homily at Mass: “*Evil, unnatural soul-sharing.*” Now she recalled other angry words she overheard between him and Mother. Many times Uncle Edwin tried to persuade Mother to give their property to the Church since Father’s death. She refused, reminding him it was Lachlan’s inheritance.

Uncle Edwin’s motives were obvious: he wanted Lachlan out of his way. Bringing the Church such a large, profitable estate was sure to earn him a long-coveted bishopric. Land equaled power, Cailin knew that.

She remembered asking Mother about her uncle’s persistent attempts to claim Tynemoor,

both the village and the keep of the same name. Mother shrugged off her worry.

“Edwin will never get Tynemoor, Cailin. Your father made sure of it before he died.”

“Couldn’t he seize it anyway, in the name of Rome?” Cailin asked. She had heard of such things. The Church was very powerful.

Mother shook her head. “Edwin is only a village priest. Tynemoor is held in trust by the MacGregors now until Lachlan comes of age. Your father did not trust Edwin and rightly so. He is a greedy man despite his pious airs. If anyone tries to take the keep or the village by force, or anything suspicious happens to us, my people will raise arms. Your uncle knows it. Even he is not foolish enough to cross the MacGregors.”

Well, for now, his plans were thwarted. Lachlan was still heir apparent. Uncle Edwin could not steal everything, at least not yet and not so easily. That gave Cailin some small satisfaction.

She still worried about Lachlan. He was often timid, frightened, but even more so without her. Her twin depended on her. Now his life depended on her ability to allay this Viking’s suspicions. She knew her gentle, sweet brother would not survive this journey, or the brutal warrior who thought nothing of snatching a child into the night.

More than anything, though, she wondered what lay ahead. A twinge of guilt struck her. Somehow, she felt more excited than afraid.

THE VIKING’S LONG STRIDES took them quickly from the castle grounds and down to the rocky shoreline. Cailin couldn’t stop her curious questions. “How are we getting to Hedeby?”

“On my ship,” he said, never slowing his gait.

“A longship, with a great Dragon’s head?”

He glanced down at her, again surprised. “Yes,” he muttered. “How did you know?”

Cailin chewed her bottom lip. Perhaps she had said too much. “I see it,” she cried out, drawing his attention away from her in the nick of time.

Never had she seen such a thing — except in her dreams. Cailin dreamed she would leave one day aboard a strange ship with a Dragon’s head. When she told Mother about her dream, she remembered Mother had turned pale and seemed upset. It made sense now.

The Viking’s narrowed eyes still studied her. “Aren’t you afraid?”

“Afraid?” Cailin’s chin went up. “I’m never afraid.”

“Good. You’re my son then. I had doubts when you were bawling and hanging on your mother’s skirts. It’s as if you were a different boy now, Lachlan.” He laughed for the first time, loud and long.

They rowed out to the big ship in a smaller boat, and then the Viking made her climb a rope ladder and handed her over to the watch of another man who stood on deck. Other crewmen scurried about making preparations to leave Brittany’s shores. The hearty laughter of the man who said he was her real father rang out above the din of noises. He was clearly the leader of these men, and bragged to the others that his son spawned from a Celt’s loins was never afraid.

Cailin regretted her boasting. “Well,” she amended, scuffing her boot on the ship’s deck as his tough-looking crew looked her over, “I’m almost never afraid.”

“No matter, son. I’m just relieved I don’t have to coddle you all the way home. Can’t stand a sniveling child.” The Viking tousled Cailin’s hair in a rough show of affection.

The ship moved swiftly out to sea, like a sleek caterpillar whose legs dipped into the dark sea in rhythm to crawl across to a new land. Cailin watched the shoreline disappear, and a pang of guilt clutched her, remembering her mother lying unconscious and Lachlan whimpering with

fear.

Someone tugged on her sleeve. Startled, Cailin turned and faced an old woman who was not much taller than her.

Pale eyes, the color of stones washed nearly colorless by weather, studied her. Gray streaked a head of dark hair, neatly twisted into two long braids that framed a weathered face. The woman looked ancient to Cailin, and her bony fingers painfully poked her in the ribs.

“Owww,” Cailin protested. “Come, sit with me,” the old woman ordered in the tongue Cailin understood. Then she sought cover in the makeshift tent set up in the middle of the ship’s deck. She never even looked back to see if Cailin followed, it was assumed she would. So she did.

“There,” the old woman pointed with her stick-like finger, then lowered herself onto the deck floor piled with furs.

Once they had settled themselves, she once again stared at Cailin, pale eyes boring into her. Stubbornly, Cailin refused to glance away from the piercing stare, but she fidgeted uncomfortably in the furs.

The crone’s lips pursed, the wrinkles in her cheeks deepening into folds of leathered skin. Then, without speaking, she scooped up a pile of polished rocks; beautiful stones marked with strange markings and colored red. She chanted, and though the words were strange to Cailin, it sounded like a prayer. The woman cupped the stones before her, as if offering them up to some unknown being. She finished and tossed the stones onto a leather skin and exclaimed, “*Urd! Verthandi! Skuld!*”

The hag gazed for a long time at the scattered rocks then moved one as if to see it better. She cackled, a dry hack spewing from worn-out lungs. The cackle turned into laughter, like the

caw of a raven drifting above the constant swishing of the oars.

The Viking was drawn by the sound and he came and peeked beneath the tent. He saw the stones scattered upon the floor and sobered. “What do the runes say, Hulda?”

Her laughter stilled, but a crooked smile cracked her face. “The runes tell me that *Loki* has tricked you.”

His expression darkened. “What do you mean?”

“This child is *not* your son, Thorvald.”

Cailin felt her heart lurch. *How did the old woman know she was not a boy?* She looked at the stones, the strange rocks called runes. Somehow they had told her. Was it witchcraft?

The Viking called Thorvald turned his anger on Cailin. “You are the child of Moira of the MacGregors of Alba, are you not?”

“Yes.”

He turned back to Hulda, his words biting. “Your stones have told you wrong. Perhaps age is stealing your powers of Sight.”

Again, she cackled, seemingly unconcerned by his anger. “You are insolent, nephew. I said this child is not your *son*. I did not say she was not of your loins.”

The news hit Thorvald like a blow to the stomach. Air whooshed from his lungs and he stilled. His eyes widened with incredulity. “She. You said *she*, Hulda.”

“I did.” Hulda nodded, but offered no further explanation.

Thorvald turned rage-filled eyes on Cailin. She did not shrink away; she hoped no fear showed on her face. She reminded herself she was never afraid. Well, almost never.

“You are not my son Lachlan?” he bellowed.

“No.” She decided it would do no good to lie. What if he challenged her and ordered her

stripped and examined — he might well do so. “I am Cailin.”

“A daughter,” he spat, making the word sound dirty. “The priest lied. He said I had a son.”

He yanked her roughly to her feet, enraged. “You and your mother deceived me, you little brat. I shall throw you into the sea for this.”

Hulda stood fast despite her age. “Stop! You cannot, will not do such a thing.”

“I went for my son, Hulda. I have no use for a daughter.”

The old woman’s eyes narrowed on him, and not for the first time Cailin sensed the Viking’s unease. He clearly respected and feared this woman, whoever she was.

Hulda ordered him to put Cailin down. He did so, dropping her just as roughly. Cailin felt tears fill her eyes.

“It is how it should be,” Hulda said. “The runes have spoken.”

“No.” Thorvald folded his big arms across his chest, refused to accept it. “What good is a mere female? It is a son I need.”

“You cannot change what has been done. It’s the will of *Odhinn*.”

He grimaced. “I’ll take her back then.”

“It’s too late, Thorvald. By now, the alarm has been raised, everyone has been alerted — we will all be killed if you return now. Even you cannot go against the will of the gods.”

Cailin understood something by Thorvald’s reaction. A son was every man’s dream; a daughter of no consequence. A single tear fell from her eye and Cailin angrily wiped it away. No man, not even her real father, would make her cry.

Hulda saw her tear and placed a protective arm about her shoulders. “This *dottir* you reject will be more of a son to you than your other sons who died. Destiny has brought her to

you, Thorvald. Make of it what you will. Do not let your male pride destroy this gift from the gods.”

“Bah,” he bellowed. “Age has begun to addle your mind.” Thorvald threw up his hands and turned away. “I wipe my hands of her, old woman.”

Chapter One

Hedeby, Denmark - 906

CRACK! THE WHIP SCORED a devastating path across Drake Talorcan's back. Already marked with numerous welts — some old, some new — the fresh laceration cut deep into the swollen, tender flesh. Drake hoped the painful sting would eventually lessen, the scars toughen against the lash.

He was wrong. It hurt like the fires of hell were laid on him.

Drake gritted his teeth, bracing against the pillory for the next strike. Though the autumn day was cool, sweat trickled down his forehead, burning his eyes. He kept a calm demeanor, despite the excruciating pain burning through him. Never would he break, no matter the punishment and degradation he suffered. He would die before submitting.

He knew his rigid countenance and refusal to cower only provoked the man wielding the whip to work harder at his task.

The flogging stopped unexpectedly. Drake glanced over his shoulder and tried to lock gazes with his punisher, but the slaver's attention was now focused elsewhere. Instead of the normal sadistic delight, Drake saw something like embarrassment in the Arab's eyes. He wondered what could possibly cause such discomfort in the cruel slave trader. Then he saw. Not what, but who.

A tall, willowy woman stood there, watching as Drake where he stood shackled to the pillory. She commanded everyone's attention on the docks, including his own. The whip, the Arab, the punishment — Drake forgot everyone and everything at her sudden appearance. She looked young, but her demeanor and stature showed maturity.

He saw her delicately-pleated chemise and intricately embroidered tunic were the finest linen. Her tunic brooches were silver and gold, like the mixture of necklaces adorning her slender neck. Rings and bracelets graced her wrists and hands, her fur cloak held in place with a richly decorated pin set with gemstones.

Her hair was neatly braided in a thick, single rope over her shoulder, but its color caught the sparkle of the sun, revealing deep auburn strands mixed into lighter flaxen blond. An unusual color foiled by her rich outfit. She was a sight to behold.

Her gaze focused on Drake. Despite his direct stare, she did not look away, but held his gaze boldly, casually. Only the slightest flush to her cheeks hinted she was even aware of him.

Drake felt his cousin's nudge, the younger man risking a step closer now that the slaver's whip had stilled. "*À lainn,*" Leo said; the Gaelic word for 'beautiful' meant for Drake's ears only. He heard Leo's deep, wistful sigh. Drake grimaced a smile through gritted teeth, but when the flush on the woman's cheek deepened, he suspected she might have understood, as well.

"Your punishment seems to have little effect on this man, Ichbar."

The woman addressed the slaver in Arabic. Drake glanced back at Ichbar and saw her comment made the little man uncomfortable, but he suspected it was more her proud manner and rich garb that caused beads of sweat to pop out on the slaver's forehead. Here was someone wealthy, someone influential enough to make or break his trade in flesh.

Still panting from the exertion of flogging Drake, Ichbar mopped his sweaty brow with the end of his soiled turban. "This one is nothing but trouble, my lady. I must whip him or he does not obey."

The woman mulled this over, her gaze breaking from Drake's for a moment. She walked around him in a circle. When she faced him, he straightened as best he could and heard a soft

gasp. He felt the rivulets of blood, dried and fresh both, trickling down his flesh. No doubt the sight of blood distressed her delicate female constitution.

She completed her circle and addressed the slaver with cool authority. "He is for sale?"

"Yes, but I fear it is a hopeless case. Who will want such a malcontent?"

When Drake glanced back over his shoulder, he saw she looked thoughtful. "Perhaps some men are not meant to be owned."

Her retort surprised Ichbar. His mouth opened as if he might protest such an outrageous opinion, especially coming from a woman. But he slammed it shut, confirming Drake's idea she was a woman of wealth and position.

"In time, this thrall will learn what he is and behave," Ichbar muttered.

"With time," she said, her eyes narrowing on the slaver, "and sufficient punishment?"

Ichbar heard the insult behind the words. Drake saw the Arab's dark eyes flash, but he said nothing more.

"What is his name?" she asked Ichbar.

"Drake Talorcan." Drake cleared his dry throat and answered for himself, ignoring the Arab's scowl when he did so. "At least, that is my true name."

Only a slightly raised eyebrow revealed she was surprised by his fluent Arabic. She said nothing and the moment dragged on, time suspended, the others gathered around seeming to fade away. He wondered what silenced her; she seemed so confident only moments before.

"Dragon," she murmured, perhaps meant only for her own ears.

"Aye, that is what I am called," Drake said. "'Tis the meaning of Drake."

"Yes, I know."

Again, their gazes met and held. Suddenly, a haggard old woman pushed through the

crowd, and the spell between them shattered. She spoke querulously in Norse.

“Cailin, what keeps you?” “Nothing,” the younger woman replied, turning away from Drake. With only a cursory last glance back at him, she followed the other woman and disappeared into the crowd.

“Who was she?” Drake asked Ichbar, who still stood, whip in hand, unmoving.

This brought the slaver’s attention back to him — perhaps not a good move on his part.

“No business of yours, slave.”

He moved to strike Drake again, lifting the whip high, but his hand stilled. Doubt plagued the little man as he looked in the direction the beautiful stranger had gone. She was nowhere in sight, yet now he seemed nervous, as if afraid to punish Drake.

For that, Drake was grateful.

CAILIN HURRIED AFTER HULDA. Despite her advanced age and bent back, the old woman seemed to fly through the crowded town. Hulda’s dark blue cloak floated behind her, giving her an ethereal look, as if she glided on air. Her hardwood staff, carved with the sacred runes and capped with a bronze mounting, thumped along the wooden walkways as she progressed through the hoard of people.

Hulda paid no heed to the merchants and their table of wares; fine Chinese silks, Russian furs, and Indian ivory. The fish seller’s fresh catch didn’t even make her pause, nor did the soapstone bowls or glass brought from the East. Smoke hung heavy over the town, but the tang of salt from the sea mixed with the smoldering air as they moved along the docks. They were filled with workers as each merchant unloaded his *knarr* of cargo brought back from foreign ports around the world. There were many ships, each distinctive with its colored flags and sails, but

Cailin did not see the *Dreki Logi*.

She tried to suppress her worry, yet the nagging thought was unyielding in its persistence. Why hadn't Thorvald's ship returned by now? Her pace slowed as she looked out past the palisade and wondered if her premonition came to pass — danger and betrayal clouded her mind.

“Cailin,” Hulda called again, frustrated at having to continually stop and wait.

Quickening her pace, Cailin caught up again. Hulda's glance made it clear she was not pleased; she didn't approve of Cailin lagging, much less stopping and interfering with the slaver.

Cailin's actions surprised herself as much as Hulda. Still, she had done it, and she wasn't about to let Hulda's over protectiveness take away the small bit of satisfaction she felt from stopping the brutal whipping on the docks. A temporary respite, perhaps, but maybe Ichbar might be less inclined to punish the man called Drake so savagely. Ichbar knew she was *Jarl* Thorvald's daughter. Her father's position demanded fear and respect, no less than the man himself.

“Dragon,” Cailin muttered to herself. But though she whispered the word, Hulda stopped dead in her tracks. The familiar puckering of her lips warned Cailin a scolding would follow. Still, even Hulda's warning look could not banish the image of the man — the Dragon. The Pict's height. His broad shoulders. Brooding eyes the color of dark topaz, the golden flecks within their mysterious depths like molten fire. Dark hair, a shade short of black, cropped like a proper thrall's. And, of course, the tattoos.

Despite the fact the man called Drake was a thrall, she saw his pride. Even shackled to the pillory, he did not cower. No amount of punishment would ever change that, she sensed. Something inside her tightened with premonition. Or was it a warning?

Hulda's querulous voice brought her back to the present. “Why, *dottir*? What possessed

you to make such a scene?”

“You know how I feel about slavery. Why does one human need to own another?” Cailin asked. She didn’t defend her actions to Hulda, but she couldn’t suppress the sudden rush of emotion as the image in her mind painted a lifetime of cruelty the man would suffer because of his stubbornness, his refusal to submit. “It’s shameful and wrong. I couldn’t stroll by as if nothing was wrong.”

Hulda sighed, took Cailin by the elbow and they walked on. “You’ve a big heart, Cailin. I know slavery upsets you, but you mustn’t interfere in men’s business. It can only bring trouble.”

Cailin’s lip curled and she scoffed. “Men’s business.”

“That’s what I mean, Cailin. No wonder you’ve not found a husband. You are too outspoken, rash. And well past marrying age.” She clucked and her lips puckered again. “*That is* shameful.”

Hulda’s remark made Cailin stop, sheep bleating behind them as animals wandered freely among the people. She raised her voice above the din to be heard. “I haven’t a husband because there is no decent man here I would consider taking to my bed!”

Hulda snorted. The sound reminded Cailin of the pigs rooting in the streets in search of food, adding to the menagerie of noise. “You’ll be an old crone like me, with no man to warm you on cold winter nights, no children to fill your woman’s heart. It’s not meant for you, my dear. I cannot let you be so foolish.”

“You never married, Hulda. What’s so bad about being independent, with no man to order you about, no children to tie you down?”

“It’s lonely. I’d not recommend it.”

“You have me. Oh, Hulda,” Cailin’s mood sobered. “I hope, despite not being your child,

I am as much a daughter to you as you have been a mother to me.”

“*Ja*,” the old woman admitted in a softer voice, “you are like my own child.”

“I couldn’t have survived if it weren’t for you.”

Hulda looked up at Cailin, her gray eyes full of tears. “Thorvald loves you, Cailin. He just doesn’t know how to show it.”

Cailin shrugged. “Does any such man exist, Hulda? One who knows how to show his love, his need, his caring? I think not.”

“Thorvald was once such a man. I remember a man who was kind and giving to his family. But when his wife and three sons died of the fever, he died with them. He turned bitter, and feared loving anyone as he once loved them. It’s best you stop trying to win his heart, child. He hasn’t one to give and it will only bring you sorrow.”

Cailin was thoughtful. “Is that what you think I’m doing, Hulda? Buying Thorvald’s love?”

“Isn’t that the real reason you are having the swords made?”

“I don’t know.” Was it? Cailin wasn’t sure. At first, it was her excuse, a gift for Thorvald for Winternights. But now, the reason seemed totally different, a haunting vision cast in steel for her two hands to wield, not her father’s.

Arm in arm they walked past the tannery, the shoemaker’s, and another fisherman’s stall. There Hulda stopped, patted her hand and said, “I must hurry home now, someone is coming to have their runes read today. Do not dally. Pick out some fresh fish and bring it back for supper, Cailin.”

Cailin promised to do so and as soon as Hulda left, she walked to the artisan’s shop instead. She ducked through the open doorway of the forge, where an ash twig was carefully

placed over the sill to ward off evil.

Hammering on an anvil, Erik looked up from his work, a large smile breaking across his craggy face. “Cailin, you came to see my creations. Good. I believe them my finest yet.”

Overjoyed to show off his work, Erik proudly brought the swords over to a table that sat in the middle of the room. Almost lovingly, he laid out the twin steel weapons and removed the silk wrap from each one.

Although Cailin dreamed of the Dragons her whole life, their splendor drew a gasp of surprise when she saw the images come to life before her. Erik crafted them from a drawing Cailin gave him, but never had she imagined they would be so magnificent.

The intricate gold and silver pattern work in the hilts was a work of art in itself. But the emeralds carefully inlaid into the design of the Dragons flickered like tiny stars of green light, their twin ruby eyes flashed red fire. They came alive. Never had she seen swords so exquisite, and she had seen many over the years from working in trade.

She marveled that instruments of death were so beautiful. Hesitantly, Cailin touched each in turn. She sensed the strength, the grace, the heat. They spoke to her.

Erik picked one sword up and handed it to her. Cailin wrapped her hand around the hilt and stepped back, swinging the blade through the air. Its balance was perfect. Even the steel of the blade was etched with runes and swirled decorations, its edge honed to glossy sharpness. As it sliced through the air, the sword’s song filled her ears — its power touched her heart.

She picked up the second sword in her other hand. Though the blades were equal in size, each Dragon was posed a different way, distinct in its look. Even their wind songs sounded in different keys. With a sword spinning in each hand, she felt the energy surge through her.

The artisan waited, impatiently, for her comment. Carefully, she fit the two swords

together, seeing one entwined with the other seamlessly. When joined, they slid into the single scabbard effortlessly. She gently laid it back onto the table and nodded her approval.

“My Dragons are complete.”



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