

## **Sir Gwynfor's Lament**

by

James Oswald

It was her voice that he first noticed, so beautiful that he quite forgot why he was walking through the lower forest. She was singing a sad song, the notes hanging in the air like winter smoke. Shaking it from his head, he slipped silently through the trees, searching for his prey. But the song wouldn't leave him. It filled him with both sadness and joy. Every time he turned away, it tugged at him, pulling him further and further from the hunting grounds, closer and closer to the forest edge, the world of men. Entranced, he had to find her, had to see what creature could know such perfect melancholy.

The river gave counterpoint to the song as it splashed down Madog's hill and emptied over a short waterfall into a shallow pool at the forest edge. It was here that Sir Gwynfor finally spied her. She was kneeling at the edge, bent over with her long, brown hair trailing into the water. From the other side, he watched as she plunged her head beneath the surface. Her song had been so sad, he thought she meant to drown herself. He almost leapt from his hiding place, meaning to swim across the pool and save her, but at the last minute he managed to stop himself. And then she threw her head back, long hair whipping out of the water like an osprey.

She squeezed the water out, twisting her braids until they shone like burning rope. And as she did so, her song came back, so haunting, so sad, so perfect; each piercing note a stab to his hearts. It was magic of a kind he had never known. Sir Gwynfor settled into

his hiding place, content just to watch. He had never seen beauty in people before; now he couldn't imagine how anything else could compare.

The song died mid-note. 'Is there someone there?' The girl asked, her hand still halfway down her hair. Gwynfor's hearts leapt into his mouth. Had he made a sound? Could she possibly have seen him?

'Tom Baldry, is that you a-spying on me?' she said. 'I'll tell your Da, and you know what he'll do to you.'

She seemed not to be looking so much as sniffing the air, tilting her head this way and that as if trying to catch a sound. Gwynfor thought he had mastered the art of hiding; he could hold still until a young buck walked right into his grasp. And yet now he didn't doubt that the girl could hear his hearts hammering away in his chest.

'Please, be not alarmed,' he said as quietly as he could, his tongue tripping over the unfamiliar words of the Saesneg. 'I did not mean to spy... I - I heard your singing. It was beautiful.'

'Who are you?' the girl asked, and her voice was as pure as her song; a lilting, swaying thing like the play of the wind through long grass, the melody of evening nightingales.

'I am Sir Gwynfor.'

'A strange name. And though you speak our language well, I'd guess it's not your native tongue.' She rose, turned and walked swiftly through the trees, her hands reaching out to caress each one in turn. As she went, she took up her song once more, the notes coiling around him like a snare, tugging him from his hiding place and into the clearing. Only as his talons dipped into the water did he realise he was following her. It took an

effort of will to stop himself and he stared for long minutes at the space where she had been.

Gwynfor swooped through the air, feeling the wind at the tips of his wings. The sun was a swollen orange globe split in half by the horizon as he sped over the forest. Ahead of him, the mountains rose up out of the green like islands in a leafy sea, and on top of the tallest, the great castle grew from the rock, pinning the sky to the ground.

He loved to fly, loved the freedom it gave him. He was master of the air, more accomplished than many dragons ten times his age. And yet even as he soared upwards on the evening currents, his mind was full of the girl and her song.

Gwynfor had tried to forget her, but she was always there. She haunted his dreams and filled his mind when he should have been practising the subtle arts. His lessons went by in unremembered haze, his mind full only of the sight of her pale, slender form. He found himself gently humming her song under his breath, and he longed to see her again.

The castle loomed ahead of him, and with a few well-practised wing-beats, he slowed, reared and landed perfectly in the courtyard. Few of the other novices paid him any attention, but his master had noted his return. Old Sir Flisk walked slowly across the yard to where Gwynfor stood.

‘Nothing again, I see,’ he said. ‘It seems your prowess at hunting has deserted you, young Gwynfor.’

‘The animals have grown wary of me, master.’

‘Or your mind is on other things. You’ve been spending a lot of time in the library of late. Is there anything in particular you’re looking for there?’

Gwynfor looked up at his master. The old dragon might seem absent-minded at times, but nothing in the academy got past him. Well it was true that he had been going through the library, and there was a particular magic that he was looking for. Perhaps, Gwynfor thought, it would be better to just come right out and ask.

‘Master, is it true that a skilled mage can assume the form of another creature?’

‘And what, young Gwynfor, is wrong with the shape you have now?’

They left the courtyard and walked along a corridor towards the dining hall. Other apprentices stood around in small groups, talking, or hurried past, keen to finish their chores before sundown and the evening meal.

‘I thought it might be useful,’ Gwynfor said. ‘For hunting perhaps. If you could assume the shape of a stag, for instance, then surely the hinds would run to you, not away.’

‘But you’d need to do more than just look like a stag. You’d need to smell like him, behave like him, think like him. You’d have to become a stag. And then you’d run the risk of being hunted by someone else. Besides, you’ve never had any trouble catching deer before, Gwynfor. Why do I think that it’s not them you’re interested in mimicking?’

‘Well, what if I wanted simply to observe a creature, without alarming it unduly?’ Gwynfor asked. ‘What if I wanted to walk among its kind unnoticed, the better to understand them.’

‘You’re talking of men, I take it,’ Sir Flisk said. ‘And yes, it’s possible to take on their appearance, for an hour or two.’ And before Gwynfor’s eyes, his master’s features shimmered and shrank, changing until what appeared to be walking alongside him was an old man.

‘Can you teach me how to do this, master?’ Gwynfor asked, aware that around him the chatter of the other apprentices had stopped. All eyes were on Sir Flisk.

‘This is relatively simple,’ he said, reverting to his natural form. He flexed his wings slightly, shuddering as if he had been squeezed into too tight a space. ‘But it requires a great effort of will. Even a powerful mage can only maintain the illusion for an hour or two.’

She didn’t come to the pool the next week, nor the week after that.

Each day Gwynfor would take up position where he had hidden before and wait, his ears pricked in readiness for her song. And each day, as the sky darkened at evening’s approach, he would hide his disappointment as he flew back to Sir Flisk’s great castle. He practised the spell of illusion, building up the image of what he assumed was a handsome young man until he could take the form with ease. But always the effort began to show after an hour. He could feel his body trying to reassert its real shape, his wings trying to burst from his back, his fangs piercing his thin, soft, human lips. And each time, as he reverted to dragon, a great weariness swept over him, as if he had not slept for a month.

The subtle arts had no meaning for him anymore, beyond the ability to change his appearance. If it was light, he longed to be outside, down by the forest edge. Come evening, he would take up his books and read, but the words were meaningless, his mind preferring to play over the memory of the girl’s sweet, sad song, the shape of her face and her long, flowing hair. Sir Flisk kept silent on the matter, and the other apprentices carried on as if nothing had changed, but inside, Gwynfor felt that he was no longer part of the academy.

Then, on the third morning of the fourth week, the girl appeared. She was singing a more hopeful tune this time, and Gwynfor felt his hearts leap at the sound. He watched her approach the edge of the pool, her hands once more touching each tree trunk softly before passing on to the next. Willing himself calm, he focussed on the illusion he had created and changed himself into the form of a man.

‘I was beginning to wonder whether you’d ever come back,’ he said, stepping out of his hiding place. She stopped her song, tilting her head towards him as he made his way around the pool to where she stood.

‘Sir Gwynfor?’ She asked. ‘Is that you? You sound different.’

‘I feel different,’ Gwynfor said, seeing the girl for the first time close up. Her skin was soft and flawless, her dark brown hair hung in long, shiny braids. Her eyes were emerald green, but they stared through him, past him as if he were not there at all. ‘I waited for you,’ he added. ‘I came here every day.’

‘That was silly,’ the girl said, her voice trilling with laughter. ‘Why didn’t you come down to the village? They’d have told you where I lived.’

‘I... I didn’t know your name.’

‘You should have asked where the blind girl lived. Someone would’ve shown you.’

Blind. It took Gwynfor a moment for this to sink in. Then it made sense: the way she touched each tree in turn; the way she cocked her head as if listening rather than seeing; the way she stared past him as if he weren’t there.

‘Oh,’ he said, and at the same time she said ‘Oh.’

‘I didn’t realise,’ they both said together, and then she added: ‘You didn’t know?’

‘No,’ Gwynfor admitted. ‘I saw you here, alone. I assumed, well, I mean... It never occurred to me.’

‘Does it bother you?’

‘No,’ he said. ‘I mean, yes, it bothers me that you can’t see all the wonderful things in Gwlad. Don’t you long for sight? Don’t you miss it?’

‘I can’t miss what I’ve never had. I was born this way, it’s what I’m used to.’

‘You bear your burden with such good grace. It shames me.’

‘Shames you? How?’ As they spoke she moved closer to him, close enough that he could smell the scent of flowers in her hair, and a stranger, more alluring and exotic aroma that was her skin, her self. And once he first breathed that smell, he could focus on little else.

‘I... That is, it shames me that I’ve complained about my own small troubles when someone such as yourself...’

‘Hush, Sir Gwynfor,’ the girl said, reaching her hands out and feeling his face.

‘Let me see what manner of man you are.’

Her touch was as delicate as snowfall from a windless sky. Her fingertips were warm, but they brushed his skin so lightly he could barely feel them. They covered his mouth, lingered around his ears, felt the ridge of his brow and stroked the line of his nose. And all the while her intoxicating smell filled him with an indescribable joy.

And then he began to feel his true self reasserting itself. A dull pain flowered in his head; his shoulders began to feel cramped and constrained. He could hold on for a few minutes, but no more.

Quickly he reached up and took the girl's hands in his own. They were so slender, so elegant. He could have snapped them like twigs. He wanted to bury his face in them, to drink in her smell forever.

'I have to go,' he said instead.

'So soon?' She pulled back from him, turned her head away. But not before he saw those emerald eyes shining with sudden tears.

'My... master awaits me. He's old and I must attend him. But I'll come back. Tomorrow. I promise.'

'Then I'll be here waiting,' she said as he reluctantly backed away. Already he could feel his back splitting open, his feet changing to taloned claws, his whole centre of balance tipping so that he might have fallen headlong into the pool. He had to get to the safety of the trees, even if the girl could not see him. Then he remembered.

'I still don't know your name.' His voice was cracked, different as he changed back into dragon form.

'Anwen,' she said, smiling. She seemed to stare straight at him.

'Just Anwen?'

'Just Anwen.'

'You seem very tired, Gwynfor. Have you not been sleeping properly?'

Sir Flisk's library was high in the west tower of his great castle. Outside, the setting sun painted the clouds blood red like an omen.

'I've been practising hard, master,' Gwynfor said. 'But lately I've been finding it hard to concentrate. And there's so much to learn.'



‘Patience young dragon. The Grym is not a force to be controlled with an unfocussed mind. You’ve hundreds of years, thousands even to master the subtle arts. Even great Rasalene himself, though he lived for countless aeons, never hoped to know everything that could be known.’

‘You’re right, of course, master. But still there are things that intrigue me. This magic of transformation, for instance. I can make myself appear as a man, and hold the illusion for upwards of an hour. But always in the end it’s too much. The spell is exhausting.’

‘What is it about these men that fascinates you so, Gwynfor?’ ‘They’re so simple, yet they have the capacity to be so much more. Is it true that Rasalene created them to be our servants?’

‘Ha! I don’t think so. What need had he of servants? No, men have raised themselves up from base beasts on their own. But they’ve still a long way to go before they can hope to understand the subtle arts. There’s no magic in them. They can’t even see the Grym, let alone bend it to their will like we do.’

‘I’d like to study them more,’ Gwynfor said. ‘But I can only go amongst them for an hour before I have to leave. And I can’t go down where there are many of them together. They would soon see through my glamour.’

‘What is it you want, Gwynfor? To become one of them?’

‘Is that possible? Is there a way?’

‘There’s a very difficult working. If you thought that your illusion was hard, the mental discipline required to make a substantial transformation is infinitely harder. There are many risks to understand, many safeguards to master before you can even attempt it.’

‘But will you teach me? Do you know how it’s done?’

‘Ah me, Gwynfor, I only wish half my apprentices had your youthful enthusiasm. But it betrays you. You’re too young to learn this, you don’t have the worldly experience, and you can’t begin to understand the risks. You don’t know yourself well enough to try and be someone else.’

‘But I...’

‘No buts, young dragon,’ Sir Flisk said. ‘Come back to me when you’re a bit wiser.’

‘How long must I wait?’

‘At least a hundred years,’ Sir Flisk said. ‘Until you no longer need to ask.’

Gwynfor walked through the long grass, past grazing sheep and cattle, the sun on his smooth-skinned face a pleasant new sensation. It had taken all his nerve to leave the protection of the trees. He had slowly improved at his spell-casting until he could maintain his illusion for nearly two hours, but this was the first time he had come so far. The further from the forest he went, the longer it would take him to get back.

Anwen walked ahead of him, pulling him along by one hand as she made her way along a rude path. Her blindness seemed to be of no consequence to her and she was full of an excitement that was intoxicating.

‘It’s not far now,’ she said. ‘I can hear the wind through the thatch.’ And as she spoke, he caught his first glimpse of the cottage.

Tucked away in a shallow coomb, it was small but sturdy; a plaster-filled heavy wooden frame topped with a thick roof of straw and bracken. The yard around it was tidy,

and a small garden boasted rows of neatly organised vegetables. A wide track lead away from the cottage, downhill through open fields. Following its course, Gwynfor could see the view open up over the valley below. Thin blue smoke rose into the morning air over a mile away, marking the nearest settlement.

‘Do you like it Gwynfor?’

‘It’s wonderful,’ he said. ‘This is where you live?’

‘My home, where I was born. My father used to farm this land, my mother would tend the garden.’

‘What happened to them? Where are they now?’

‘The Shepherd took them. There was a plague. I was only sixteen.’

It took Gwynfor a moment to work out what she was saying. He had read much about the world of men, but never understood their reverence for this mythical being, The Shepherd.

‘I’m so sorry,’ he said. ‘Do you live here alone, then? Who tends the animals, who looks after the garden?’

‘I do what I can. The villagers come out here from time to time. They use the grazing now, and in return they give me food, firewood and carry out any repairs that need doing.’

‘Wouldn’t it be easier to move into the village itself?’

‘Not everyone’s as tolerant of my blindness as you, Sir Gwynfor,’ Anwen said, her voice sad. ‘They don’t mind my being alone up here, but they’d not be happy if I lived among them.’

‘Why?’

‘They think I’ve been cursed by The Shepherd. He took my sight for some ill-deed my parents committed.’

‘But that’s monstrous.’

‘It’s their way,’ Anwen took his hand in hers once more. ‘But come inside. Let me get you something to drink.’

‘I can’t stay long. My master...’

‘You should bring him here. He’d always be welcome.’

Gwynfor followed Anwen into the cottage. It was dark, but as his eyes adjusted to the gloom, he could make out a large open room taking up the whole of the ground floor. At one end, a fireplace glowed with the light of banked embers. Moving easily past the sparse furniture, her fingers dancing lightly on every surface, Anwen went to it and threw on some dry logs. In minutes the flames had sprung up. She hung an old iron kettle on a hook over the heat.

‘What is it your master does in the woods?’ Anwen asked as she made a pot of tea. She placed it on a large oak table and gestured for Gwynfor to sit. He settled onto a bench and she slid in beside him.

‘He is a great mage,’ Gwynfor said. ‘He studies nature. I’m learning from him.’

‘So you know healing?’

‘A little. I’ve studied herblore and I know all about treating wounds.’

‘We had a healer in the village until a few years ago,’ Anwen said. ‘She died of the plague.’

‘What do you do now, if someone get sick?’

‘We pray to The Shepherd. If it’s His will, then the ill will get better.’

‘Do you really believe that?’

‘If the Shepherd wanted to curse my parents, why did he blind me?’ Anwen asked by way of an answer. ‘They’re dead now. They can rest with his flock in the Spring Pastures. But he never thought to give me sight once he’d claimed them.’

Gwynfor could see tears welling in the corners of her eyes as he sat beside her at the old oak table. He put out his hand to touch hers, and before he knew what was happening, she had flung her arms around him and buried her head in his shoulder.

Her smell was intoxicating, the warmth of her body pressed against his even more so. He was unsure what to do, but found himself stroking her long, smooth hair, saying nothing as she sobbed. They sat like that for long minutes and he was strangely conflicted. Happy to be in such close contact with her, and yet miserable that she was so sad.

Finally, she released her hold on him, pulling back.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said. ‘I should never have... I’ve no right.’

‘Hush.’ Gwynfor laid his hand upon hers, not quite knowing why it seemed the appropriate thing to do. ‘It’s all right.’

‘You’re a kind man, Sir Gwynfor. No-one else wants to put up with the moaning of a poor blind girl.’

‘Then they’re fools. Their prejudice makes them blinder yet, if they can’t see your beauty.’

She stilled at his words, her eyes almost focussing on his face as if her sight had been restored. ‘You mean that?’

‘You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever laid eyes on,’ Gwynfor said, but as he did, he could feel the first twitching of muscles, the first inkling of tiredness that heralded the onset of his reversion. Anwen must have sensed it in him, for she reached out and took his hands in hers.

‘You have to go, don’t you.’

‘It’ll be dark soon,’ he said. ‘My master will be waiting.’

‘You will come back.’

‘If I may.’

‘Of course,’ Anwen said, feeling his face like she had done that first time they had met. Then she leant forward and kissed him on the lips.

Gwynfor was not sure how he escaped the cottage in time. He wanted to stay forever, but he knew he had to leave. Halfway to the forest, his wings burst from his back, his tail snaked out into the grass and he could feel his fangs growing out past his leathery lips. The weariness was almost unbearable, but he knew he had to get back to the castle. He tried to work the spell that would carry him home, but his mind was too full and too tired. Without focus, the Grym could take him anywhere, or worse, everywhere. He would have to go the hard way.

Cattle and sheep scattered in alarm as the great dragon rose up out of the pasture and clawed his way into the air.

The castle was silent as he trod stealthily along the corridor to the West Tower. There had been a feast that night, and all the other apprentices were asleep. Even Sir Flisk had

retired, having taken one goblet of wine too many. Only Gwynfor was sober and awake, much as he had planned it.

The library was protected by charms, but he knew how to bypass them. Inside, the air was heavy with the subtle arts and the ever-present miasma of the Grym. He drank in its power, feeling like he could do anything. It was more potent than any wine, more intoxicating than the strongest of spirits. Here anything was possible, but there was only one spell he needed to know.

All he had to do was find it.

There were countless books and parchments in Sir Flisk's library. It was a collection that had been amassed over several thousand years, augmenting an even earlier repository. A dragon could spend his whole lifetime here, and never read the same words twice. And yet somewhere in it all was the knowledge Gwynfor needed.

He had scant hours to find it, but he had studied with Sir Flisk for decades, and he thought he knew some small part of the way the mage's mind worked. For weeks he had been asking about the secret of substantial transformation, and although Sir Flisk still refused to share the knowledge, it was likely that the old dragon's own curiosity had been piqued enough for him to seek it out. Gwynfor began his search at the mage's ancient reading desk.

It was piled with parchments, and heaps of books were stacked all around it. Spread out in front of the comfortable chair was a scroll, weighed down in the corners by heavy leather-bound books. Gwynfor scanned the scroll, then flicked through each book in turn, never finding what he was looking for. He went through the stacks that sat beside

the chair, but again without success. Finally, as the glow of dawn began to light up the windows, he sank back into the chair in despair.

And then he saw it. A thin bulge in the parchment. There was a book underneath it that he hadn't noticed by candlelight. Quickly he slid it out from its hiding place, flicked open the cover and saw the title:

*On the subject of transformation, substantial and insubstantial by Maddau Teul Gorllewyn.*

Settling back in Sir Flisk's comfortable leather reading chair, he began to read.

Walking through the long grass with the sun on his face, Gwynfor wasn't sure whether he actually felt different from his earlier transformations or if it was just his imagination. He could feel his heart – just one heart – hammering away in his chest, and the leather bag that swung from his shoulder was far bulkier than he remembered. He had taken the book with him, unsure whether or not he would be able to recall how to transform himself back. And he had packed a few herbs and medicinal preparations, as well as his hunting bow and knife. They seemed overlarge in his new hands, but he wasn't worried. All was good in the world and soon he would be with Anwen again.

Stepping into the yard, he noticed a horse tied to a post by the gate. It whinnied at him as he approached the house, and as he neared the door, he could make out Anwen's voice.

'You think you can just ride out here and do what you will?' She said. 'You think that no-one will mind. It's just blind Anwen.' Even though her words were defiant, Gwynfor could hear the wavering fear in her tone.



'No-one *will* mind,' her companion said. He spoke in a lazy drawl that oozed arrogance. It was a voice that wasn't used to being denied. 'No-one will know. It'll be our little secret. And if you complain, well, who's going to defend a useless, pathetic scrap like you? Who's going to believe the witch over the Alderman's son?'

'I might,' Gwynfor said, pushing open the door and stepping into the room. A young man stood on one side of the large oak table, Anwen on the other, her back to the fireplace, trapped. The carcass of a lamb lay between them.

'Who in The Shepherd's name are you?' the man asked.

'I might ask the same of you,' Gwynfor said, dropping his heavy leather bag onto the floor. 'I am Sir Gwynfor, son of Sir Caradoc. What business do you have with the lady Anwen?'

'Tom Baldry was bringing this months payment,' Anwen said. 'His father's animals graze my fields, and in return he supplies me with meat.'

'And what do you supply her with, Sir Gwynfor?' Tom Baldry asked, emphasising the title with unnecessary weight. Gwynfor felt the first stirrings of anger, and thought for a panicked moment that his spell was wearing off. But this was a different sensation, prickling up his back and neck, making him flex his arms. His hunting knife was in his bag, but he knew that he didn't really need it to win a fight with this man.

'You can go now, Tom,' Anwen said, her voice diffusing the silent tension that had grown in the room. 'And thank your father for this lamb.'

Sullen, the young man kicked his way out of the cottage. Gwynfor watched him climb onto his horse, then kick it savagely into a gallop down the track towards the village. He felt Anwen close by his side before he turned to see her.

‘You came at just the right time,’ she said. ‘I remember when Tom was just a lad. Even then he bullied everyone and expected always to get his way. Now he’s a man...’

‘You’ve nothing to fear from the likes of him,’ Gwynfor said. ‘I will protect you.’

‘But your master?’

‘Has discharged me from my duties. He’s returned to his home and I’m free to do whatever I want.’

‘And what do you want?’ Anwen asked. She stood beside him almost shaking. Gently, he reached out and touched her cheek with his fingers.

‘I want to be with you.’

Gwynfor lost count of the days, the weeks, the months. Time had no meaning whilst he was with Anwen. He was content enough to work in the fields and hunt in the forest as long as he could come back to her at the end of the day. They would talk of Gwlad, of the ways of men. He learned more from her than he could ever have imagined, and the more he learned, the more he loved her.

There were times when he would watch birds and remember the thrill of flight; times when he missed the camaraderie and thirst for knowledge of his fellow students. He felt a step removed from the Grym, though he could still feel its power around him and in him. Occasionally he would go to the cupboard where he had stored his bag, take out the

book and set it on his knees, but he never opened it. Always the thought of Anwen pushed any regrets from his mind. He would put the book away and go to her willingly.

‘Tomorrow we must go to the village, my love,’ Anwen said as they sat together by the fire one winter’s evening. Outside a cold wind rattled the windows, but inside everything was perfect.

‘Why?’ Gwynfor asked. He didn’t much like the villagers. They looked at Anwen as if she were less worthy than the animals with which they shared their ramshackle cottages; at him as if he were some dangerous creature come to slay them in their sleep.

‘We must speak with Alderman Baldry. It’s been months now since he last sent anything to us.’

‘We don’t need his meat. I can hunt enough to feed us both.’

‘That’s not the point. He uses my land, so he should pay for it. But that’s not the only reason we must speak with him.’

‘Oh?’ Gwynfor asked. ‘What else can he do for us?’

‘He can bless our union. In the eyes of The Shepherd.’

‘I thought you didn’t believe in The Shepherd.’

‘I don’t. But they do. I don’t mind them cursing us as lost souls, but we must be wed or they won’t recognise the rights of our child.’

‘Child?’ Gwynfor said, and at his words Anwen tensed, drawing away from him slightly.

‘You’re angry with me?’

‘I could never be angry with you, my love. But... child? I never... That is... When did you discover...?’

‘I wasn’t sure before. Once, I could have ignored, twice and I still wasn’t certain, but it’s a week past time now, and three months since I last bled.’

‘Then I’m to be a father.’ Gwynfor said, bewildered and elated in equal measure. ‘I’m going to be a father.’

The village was little more than a collection of small cottages, clustered around the point where a cobbled track forded a narrow river. Only two houses had more than one storey: the mill house where the smith had his forge; and the Alderman’s house on the edge of the village green.

Winter’s first snow dusted the ground as Gwynfor and Anwen made their way down to the village. Gwynfor could feel the cold in his feet and legs as they went. He tried to reach out and draw warmth from the power of Grym as he had always done in the past. Only now it took a considerable effort of will. He could see it well enough, if he concentrated. It still floated like a web, linking every living thing, but through his man’s eyes it wasn’t as vibrant as he remembered, and yielded up its heat grudgingly to his call.

Alderman Baldry’s house was quiet. For a moment Gwynfor thought it might be empty as he and Anwen stood in the swirling wind outside. But finally the door opened and the Alderman himself looked out.

‘What d’you want?’ He asked, his voice as weary as his face. His eyes were bloodshot and puffy, his face grey, a shadow of stubble prickling his cheeks and chin. He was dressed in a simple cloth shirt and baggy cotton trousers, quite unlike his normally fastidious appearance.

‘Is something the matter, Alderman?’ Gwynfor asked.

‘It’s my son, Tom. He’s sick. He took to his bed three days ago and hasn’t stirred since.’

‘Might I see him?’

‘Why would you want to see him? Come to gloat, have you?’

‘I’ve some training as a healer,’ Gwynfor said. ‘Perhaps I can help.’

The Alderman stood in the doorway, considering this for long moments before he stepped aside, letting them in with a defeated sigh. Gwynfor took Anwen’s hand as they were lead through the house, upstairs to a small room under the eaves. As he stepped inside he could smell the reek of sickness, and one look at the pale form of Tom Baldry was enough to convince him that the young man was gravely ill. His aura was thin and red, hanging around him like a funeral shroud.

‘You say he’s been like this three days?’ Gwynfor asked, kneeling by the bed and taking Tom’s hand. It was cold and clammy, the pulse weak. Spasms shook his body at regular intervals. ‘Has he eaten anything?’

‘Nothing stays down,’ the Alderman said. ‘Not even water.’

Gwynfor looked deeper and saw the source of the sickness, spreading through Tom’s body like rot. It was bad; unlikely that any human healer would be able to save him.

‘He’s poisoned, probably from eating bad meat. I need to gather some herbs that will help. Anwen, stay with him. Try to get him to drink some melted snow. The cold will help with the fever.’

By the time Gwynfor returned to the Alderman’s house it was getting dark. He made an infusion and took it up to the room where Anwen was wiping the sick man’s

brow with a moist cloth. The Alderman stood by the tiny window, wringing his hands, helpless.

‘We need to get this medicine into him,’ Gwynfor said as he spooned the steeped herb broth into Tom’s lax mouth. ‘It should purge the poison from his blood.’ It was nonsense, of course. The herbs would at best sedate him; he would need to focus the power of the Grym to undo the damage the poison had already done.

As a dragon, the subtle arts had never been difficult to Gwynfor. Even the complex working that made him fully human had been simple enough once he had understood what he was trying to do. But as a man, he found the Grym slippery and difficult to command. And all the while he had to pretend it was simple herblore he used. Men had no knowledge of the subtle arts, and he knew too well the way they treated things they didn’t understand, the things they feared. Inch by inch, spoonful by spoonful, he pushed the sickness from Tom’s body until, finally, it was gone.

Gwynfor looked down on the sleeping form of Anwen, then over to the cot. It was a full year now since their wedding, six months since the twins had been born. And two more different twins it would be hard to imagine. Caradoc, named after Gwynfor’s father, was fair, his hair golden and his eyes piercing blue. Llyswen, named after Anwen’s mother, was dark, her eyes jade, her hair shiny and black. Gwynfor had never known such joy as they brought to his life.

He stepped quietly from the room, making his way downstairs and out into the yard. Hefting his leather bag over his shoulder, he set off across the fields towards the forest, in search of the herbs he would need to make medicines.

It had been less than a week after he had healed Tom Baldry that the first of the villagers had made their way up to the cottage for his help. Now it was a regular occurrence; whenever anyone fell ill or hurt themselves, they would send for him to heal them. With time, he had grown stronger in manipulating the Grym, but he was still nowhere near as powerful as he had been before his change. The simple herblore he had learnt as a hatchling was often more useful than the subtle arts anyway. The human form was ill-suited to such magics.

A shrieking call grabbed his attention as he neared the tree-line. Looking up, Gwynfor saw a hawk stoop and dive at a fat pigeon that was heading for the safety of the branches. As they swooped and turned, he remembered the feeling of flight, the whistle of the wind through his scales, the sense that he was master of the air. He felt a sudden longing to be up there with the hawk, searching the horizon for prey, gliding over the endless forest. Free.

Transfixed, he watched the struggle unfold. Each time the hawk dived, the pigeon would swerve out of the way at the last minute, then resume its desperate flight for the trees. It avoided one attack, then a second, and then a third. Closer and closer, sanctuary was just a few wingbeats away. The hawk swooped around, climbing for another dive, but surely it was too far away. It would never reach its prey in time.

And then with a muffled thud, the pigeon exploded in a mess of feathers, tumbling towards the ground like a dropped rag doll. In a blur of motion the hawk plunged down once more, catching the dead bird and carrying it aloft. Only then did Gwynfor see what had happened. The hawk had been herding the pigeon, manoeuvring it into a position where its mate could make the kill.

He watched the two birds circle each other, calling their excitement at the kill as they flew up to their nest. The chicks would be well fed today, he thought, as he ducked under the trees and resumed his search for herbs.

Gwynfor wasn't sure where the time went. One moment the twins were tiny babies needing constant attention, the next they were running around, chasing the livestock and getting into places they shouldn't. Caradoc in particular, was a handful. Just yesterday he'd managed to climb into the pigsty and play with the piglets. Even now, scrubbed clean with soap and hot water, he still had a slightly porcine whiff about him as he sat with his sister at the kitchen table, practising his letters.

'I've finished, father,' Llyswen said, putting down her pen and turning the parchment around so that he could see it. Her writing was perfect, for all that it was Saesneg symbols and not Draigiaith runes.

'That's beautiful, Llys,' Gwynfor said, and he could see the glow of satisfaction that his praise brought to her aura. 'And what about you, Caradoc? How are you getting on?'

'Bored of letters,' Caradoc said. 'Drew a picture instead.'

Gwynfor looked at what his son had drawn. It was a fair representation of the cottage and the yard. And over it all, Caradoc had scratched a web of lines, like some mad spider had crawled across the parchment.

'What are these lines for?' Gwynfor asked, not daring to hope that he knew the answer.



‘I don’t know,’ Caradoc said. ‘They’re just there. Sometimes they’re hot, sometimes cold. Sometimes they talk, sometimes they sing.’

‘You can see them?’

‘Course I can. Llys can too, can’t you.’ He turned to his sister who nodded.

‘How long have you been able to see them?’

Caradoc looked puzzled by the question. It was his sister who answered.

‘They’ve always been there.’

‘Do you know what they are?’

Both twins shook their heads.

‘They’re called the Llinellau Grym,’ Gwynfor said. ‘They link every living thing on Gwlad together. If you have the skill, you can use them to do magical things.’

‘Will you show us, Da?’ Caradoc asked, his eyes wide with excitement. ‘Will you teach us?’

Gwynfor looked at his children with renewed wonder. Humans had never been able to see the Grym; they had no magical ability. But then his children weren’t entirely human.

‘I’ll teach you,’ he said. ‘But you mustn’t speak of this to anyone. It must be our secret.’

On the fifth anniversary of his change, Gwynfor left Anwen with the twins, saying he was going hunting. He took his heavy leather bag, with its spell book still inside, and made his way back to the pool just inside the forest. He had no intention of leaving his wife and children behind, but he had to know that he could still be a dragon.

Beyond the pool, there was a small clearing hidden from view. Here Gwynfor set down his bag, pulled out the book and settled himself down to read through the spell that would transform him back.

He couldn't understand a word.

The scratchy runes were familiar to him. He knew them. But for the life of him he couldn't decipher the meaning behind their marching ranks. Page after page, he flicked through the book, but his eyes saw only lines.

All thoughts of Anwen, Caradoc and Llyswen fled his mind as the horror of his plight dawned on him. He was stuck as a man. Men lived but short lives. Would he grow old and die in mere decades? Men had no mastery over the air. Would he never again know the feel of the wind in his wings? The sun seemed to darken then, a stiff breeze whipping up from nowhere as Gwynfor stared stricken at the book in his hands. His human hands.

'There you are, young apprentice,' a voice said. And it was a familiar voice, deep and kind, it's words measured and clear. Not the rough Saesneg he had come to know as his own tongue, but the cultured poetic tones of Draigiaith. Gwynfor looked up from his misery and into the eyes of Sir Flisk.

'Master,' he said. 'I... I've... That is...'

'Did I not tell you this spell was more than you could hope to work?' Sir Flisk asked. 'Did I not caution you against it?'

'Yes master.'

‘And yet you did it anyway. And better by far than any apprentice of mine should have been able. But why, Gwynfor? What could possibly have driven you to want to live among men.’

Gwynfor didn’t answer. He couldn’t find the words to explain.

‘It’s no matter,’ Sir Flisk said. ‘Come, give me the book so I may change you back. We’ll go together to the castle and feast your return.’

Change you back. Gwynfor heard the words like a blessing. He wasn’t trapped. He could change back. But guilt poured cold water over him almost as fast. He had a wife he loved, and who loved him in return; two children who depended on him. Even the coarse villagers were his responsibility now. He had taken on the mantle of healer; he couldn’t leave them to the whim of their imaginary Shepherd.

‘I can’t,’ he said, the Draigiaith tripping his tongue.

‘Don’t be a foolish hatchling now, Gwynfor,’ Sir Flisk said. ‘You’ve held this form long enough. Keep it for too long and even I won’t be able to reverse the change.’

‘How long?’ Gwynfor asked. ‘How long before it’s irreversible?’

‘I don’t know. Another few years, perhaps more. But the longer you stay a human, the more you’ll start to think like them, become one of them. It will be far harder to be a dragon with a human mind than a human with the skills and knowledge of a dragon.’

Gwynfor thought of the castle, hundreds of miles away across the forest and high up in the mountains. His time there with the other students was almost a dream. Already it was difficult to imagine that life. He thought of Anwen, asleep in the old armchair; of Caradoc chasing the chickens around the yard; of Llyswen patiently practising her

needlework; and both of them growing stronger every day in their understanding of the Grym and the subtle arts. They needed him more than anyone else, to guide them safely to adulthood.

Standing, he closed the book and handed it over to Sir Flisk, noticing for the first time just how big the old dragon was. Above him, through the trees, clouds partly covered an egg-blue sky that he longed to explore.

‘I’m sorry I took it,’ Gwynfor said. ‘Please, have it back.’

And before Sir Flisk could say anything, he turned away, walked out of the clearing and back to his wife and children.

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