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Chapter One

There were only forty-six of his kind left. Tearach Bruce paced the floor of his cottage and ran a shaking hand through his hair. For eight years, he'd racked his brain for a way out of this catastrophic dilemma. As leader of the Goblin faction, it fell to him to find a way to save his people. But how? It had been suggested that mating outside their own race might be the answer. Not only had it proved futile, but it had resulted in tragedy. Within the last month, another Goblin woman had died while attempting to give birth. And three more Goblin children had been stillborn. For eight years, the same sad tale had repeated itself over and over. Some of the babies had lived the length of a day, but those instances had been rare.

He couldn't order his people to quit mating or take precautions to keep from bearing children. They believed one child might survive. And if that one babe lived, so might others. But the deaths were taking their toll on their morale. He might very well be the last leader of a race which was thousands of years old.

He slammed his fist into a table. It threatened to collapse from the force of the blow. "There *has* to be a way," he angrily muttered. "I won't let this be the end."

He walked to the door, pulled it open and strode toward the center of the nearby forest. The Druid Sorceress might have news regarding the latest physical tests run on him and his people. And if there wasn't anything in *those* tests, he'd have their physicians run more. As long as he breathed, he'd never give up. At least, not yet.

As he approached the castle where the Sorceress of the Ancients resided along with her staff, Tearach heard a noise behind him and stopped. Another of his kind was near. He waited several minutes for the person to step forward and make their presence known. When they didn't do so, he lost patience and quickly turned toward whoever was hiding.

"Come out," he tersely ordered, "and be quick about it." He watched as a lovely, slender woman moved out of the bushes, toward him. She did so in such a way that she was almost invisible.

"Tearach, I-I wanted to see you again," she half-sobbed.

He held out his arms and welcomed the Goblin woman into his friendly embrace. "Mabb, what is it? Why are you so upset?"

Mabb gazed up into his face, hoping the adoration she felt for her leader would show. "The Sorceress has ordered me away from the Order. I don't know where I'll be sent, but she told me her command had something to do with you." She shook her head in misery. "Why would she do such a thing?"

Stupefied, Tearach couldn't answer. He simply held her close and tried to come up with a response to this newest outrage.

"You k-know how I feel about you. Did you ask the Sorceress to s-send me away? Why w-would you do such a thing?" she asked.

"Mabb, I can assure, I've done no such thing. I don't know what this is about, but I was on my way to see the Sorceress. I'll get an explanation."

"The guards are to escort me away tonight." She wiped the tears from her face. "I don't understand."

He pushed her long black hair off her lovely green face and shook his head. "It must be some mistake. Shayla's never sent anyone away from the Order without good reason, but you've done nothing wrong."

"Except love you," she murmured, and laid her cheek against his broad chest.

Tearach gently pushed her away. "Mabb, I've told you dozens of times, I can't return your feelings. All my energy and time must be devoted to seeking a solution to our problems. I don't have it in me to think about matters of the heart. Not now. Our people are dying and that outweighs anything else in my mind."

"I know. But must our love die with our race?"

He sighed and shook his head in frustration. "I've never uttered any words of love. If I've led you to believe my feelings were more than the concern of a friend and leader, I beg your forgiveness with all that's in me." He'd told her these same words many times, but she refused to listen.

She sniffed and moved a few inches away. "If this damned curse wasn't on us, I know you'd be in my arms. I know you could love me."

"I-I don't know how to respond. I don't know what I would or wouldn't feel because it's been so long since the horror of Exmoor. Please believe me when I tell you that some days my heart seems empty. I don't think I even know how to love anymore."

"Don't say that. You're just confused and feeling the weight of this tragedy. That's the mark of a great leader. I know you can love, and I know I could fill the emptiness in your heart. I think the Sorceress does, too. She must feel I'm a distraction and that's why she's sending me away."

He ran his hands over her hair. "I'll get to the bottom of that right now. As for your feelings, please don't put hope in me. I've done nothing to deserve it. For now, do as the Sorceress says."

"I can't stand being away from you for even a few hours. I'll go mad, Tearach."

Upset that her feelings were so deep and he'd never reciprocate them, all he could do was gently kiss her forehead and offer what words of comfort he could. "Go now. I'll confront Shayla. I can't believe she'd give a command to remove you from the Order and not so much as offer me an explanation."

Mabb hugged him as hard as she could. Then, she turned to go, but she stopped and glanced back over her shoulder. "I'll never love anyone but you."

As she walked away, Tearach felt the last strands of his patience being torn asunder. Shayla had no right to send one of his people away from the group. The only comfort they found nowadays was in each other's presence, and it was far safer to keep Mabb and the other Goblins within the confines of the Order. Added to the pain of this latest edict, Mabb still harbored a deep desire for him and her to be together and it worried him. He couldn't see to his own happiness when all his people suffered.

With renewed anger, he stalked toward the castle. Sorceress or not, Shayla had some serious explaining to do.

* * * *

"Come in, Tearach, I've been expecting you," Shayla Gallagher motioned him inside the expansive library.

Tearach glanced at the shelves of books lining all four walls, the oak floors, and the Gothic chandeliers. The room held no appeal for a woodland creature such as himself. In his current mood, *nothing* held any appeal. He stiffly walked to the center of the library and stopped. "Why is Mabb being sent away? What wrong has she done? And if it isn't too much trouble, is there any word on the latest blood tests?" he angrily asked.

Shayla noted the expression of rage on Tearach's face. Every muscle on his massive frame appeared tightly coiled, and he'd clenched his hands as he spoke. "As to why Mabb is leaving, you'll find out in a few minutes. I have my reasons for having her elsewhere and won't have them questioned. And, yes, the blood tests have come back. By the way, *hello* to you, too," she sarcastically added.

He took a steadying breath and willed himself to be patient. It would do no good to anger the powerful Sorceress. "I'm sorry if I seem a bit impatient, but my people are running out of time."

"If you think my interest has been elsewhere, you're mistaken. I've been worrying over the problem as much as you. So have the leaders of the other factions. With their counsel, I've come to a decision."

Tearach watched the Sorceress walk to the fireplace. She held out her elegant hands and the logs burst into flames. He was used to seeing the Druids command powers over elements such as fire. But perhaps his imagination was working overtime, or his anxiety was causing him to see *other* things. For a moment, he thought he'd beheld reluctance in her silver gaze. He watched her smooth her long, gray hair with one hand and then turn to face him again.

"Perhaps you'd better sit down," Shayla instructed. She and the other faction leaders had all agreed on a course of action that Tearach wasn't going to like.

"I'll stand, if you don't mind." The look on the Sorceress' face caused something in his chest to tighten ominously.

"Very well." She walked toward him. "When our physicians compiled all the physical data, they found nothing genetically wrong with any of your people. You're all as healthy as can be. But there's another element which can't be so easily quantified."

"Go on," he encouraged.

"A great many people have been working very hard. Every medical test known has been secretly conducted so outsiders don't find out about our existence. Working under such conditions takes time. The results of all these tests have led our physicians, the faction's leaders and me to one conclusion."

"Yes?"

"We believe that new blood is in order."

He shook his head. "What do you mean?"

"Simply put ... a combination of stress and the complete hopelessness of your situation may be killing the children."

"Stress caused by the murders in Exmoor?" he angrily questioned.

She nodded. "Yes. It's believed that the events from eight years ago are the cause of today's problems."

Tearach raised his hand in a frustrated gesture. "And how do you propose to introduce this 'new blood'? You know we've tried breeding with other races and nothing works. And what does Mabb have to do with all of this?"

Shayla heard his impatience and decided to hold her own impatience in check. "I'll explain my actions with Mabb after I've fully explained our course of action. So, back to the point. Outsiders caused this problem, and I believe their influence is necessary to solve it."

Tearach stared at her for a long moment, and his heart began to pound. The conversation had taken a decidedly repulsive turn. "What, *exactly*, are you suggesting?"

She expelled a loud, frustrated breath. "Very well, man. I'll cut to the point. One of your people will have to attempt to mate with an outsider. We believe that if that mating is successful, it will end this terrible hatred your people have over those in the outside world. And once that hatred and fear is gone, the Goblins can begin to put their lives back in order—start to live for the future and not dwell on the past."

"You *can't* be serious!" He ran his hands through his hair and stalked to an open set of French doors. The woods outside those doors were green and calming. It took every ounce of willpower he had not to bolt from the room.

"I'm quite serious. Your people are so afraid of the outside world that they're unable to exist with it. And, if they won't exist *with* it, they'll perish. Do you understand?"

"This is too abhorrent to even consider. There's got to be another way. There *has* to be."

"No, I'm afraid not." She paused. "The decision has been made. As leader, I know you'd never ask one of your people to do something you were unwilling to do yourself."

The full impact of her words struck him. He slowly turned away from the doors and stared at her. Bile rose in his throat. "You want me to ... to mate with..." He shook his head.

"It is my command."

He began to pace, suddenly realizing why Mabb was being sent away. Her romantic feelings for him might hinder the Sorceress' plans. As Shayla's so-called solution began to sink in, he couldn't utter a single word.

Anger invaded every cell in his body. Eight years before, a Goblin water supply had been poisoned by outsiders. Hundreds of his kind, including his own family, had died. Nothing had been right with his people since. Now the Sorceress expected him to *lie* with one of those murderous savages and get her with child. Dispatching Mabb, the one woman away who might complicate matters, was Shayla's first step toward that goal. The entire scenario was too nauseating to even contemplate.

"Even if I could stomach such a thing, how do you propose to get an outsider here?" he spat. "Placing one of those butchers among us would endanger every magical creature still in existence. It also violates the very law you, as Sorceress of the Ancients, enforce."

"If you recall, we've had outsiders among us before. You killed one of your own people so that an outsider might be safe. Further, you've conveniently forgotten that outsiders were also poisoned when that toxic waste was dumped into your sacred pools at Exmoor and seeped into the ground water. Nearby villagers drank it. Most of those villagers affected by the poison were children. I've had their situation monitored and it isn't getting any better. Can you so easily forget all but your own sorrow?"

Tearach hung his head at the memory of the newspaper article he'd read and the accompanying photos of those children's faces. And he couldn't dispel the awful memory of having to shoot an arrow into his friend to keep an outsider safe. But that situation changed when the outsider in question had turned into a magical creature that could easily live among them. She had as much to lose from discovery as the rest of the Order. Still, none of those terrible memories could diminish his pain for his people. Outsiders were solely to blame for all these problems.

Shayla saw Tearach's expression change, from anger to extreme pain. Not about to give him time to

contemplate further, she quickly continued. "The faction leaders have agreed that bringing an outsider here may be the only way to save your race, so I'm making an exception to the law."

"And what if this backfires and the child from such a union still dies? Then what happens?"

"You'd better pray to Herne this *does* work, Tearach. There's no medical reason for your children to die." She pointed to his chest. "The problem lies in here, and if one more baby perishes, I'll hold you responsible for not helping your people relinquish their hatred long ago. It's poisoning you as horribly as that water ever did. The fear from this situation has pushed Mabb to the point she would never allow an outsider near you, and she isn't even living in reality most days. She speaks of having a child with you when I know you've tried to tactfully dismiss her feelings on numerous occasions. She has told others that she's planning your handfasting and has expressed a hatred for outsiders that's quite dangerous." Shayla sadly shook her head. "The entire outside world is *not* responsible for the deaths of your friends and family. It was three men."

"They'll never hurt anyone else," he declared.

"No, you killed them, and your revenge should have stopped there. But you and your people insist on keeping the incident an open, festering wound," she admonished.

"Should we turn the other cheek?" he sarcastically responded.

"I'd have thought you'd realize how very precious life is, and that each day should be celebrated. For you, every sunrise brings the Goblin race one step closer to extinction. That's the way you see it, so that's the way things are. And your babies die because the adults have no hope. This mating must take place. It's a new chance."

He glared at her, clenched his hands into tight fists and said lowly, "You of all people know how vulnerable my race is when we mate. You're aware of what happens to us, and yet you'd still expose that secret to an outsider who could use that knowledge to advantage? Is such a highly personal moment to be exploited on your whim, and on a hope that this insane idea will actually work? How much indignity must I and my people suffer?" He dragged his hands through his hair, wanting to scream in fury.

Shayla watched him closely, but she let him vent. His anger was almost tangible, and she knew her command to send Mabb away was for the best. The girl had a romantic desire for her leader that bordered on obsession. It would be difficult enough to control Tearach, never mind a lovesick Goblin woman.

Finally, Tearach dropped his head, closed his eyes and spoke slowly. There was no use trying to keep the disbelief and outrage from his voice. "You've commanded me to do this and I will obey. But I'll never forgive you, Sorceress. Never! I can only hope we don't live to regret this decision."

* * * *

"Uncle Tearach, one of the Fairies brought these from Shayla."

Tearach watched as his niece placed a stack of files on the table, and then he continued to sharpen the blade of his boot knife.

"Aren't you even going to look at them?" she asked.

"No, Cairna, I'm not."

She was silent for a moment, and then she ran a slender finger across the top file. "I'll bet these are the women you're supposed to choose from."

By now, everyone in the Order was aware of Shayla's edict. They'd expressed every emotion from absolute revulsion and pity to congenial acceptance and encouragement. For some odd reason, his niece fell into the latter group, and that infuriated him. He loved the eighteen-year-old with all his heart, but her own parents had died in Exmoor eight years ago.

"Will you hand me that other knife?" He waited for her to retrieve it from the farthest end of the table and deliberately ignored the files next to him.

"At least she's giving you a choice." Cairna smiled at him and handed him the blade.

Tearach remained silent, refusing to be drawn into a discussion about the hateful subject. Cairna moved up and down the length of the table, staring at the files as she did so.

"Sit down, girl. You'll wear a hole in the floor," he ordered, annoyed. But the command lacked bite. He always kept his tone soft when speaking to her. She complied by pulling a chair to where the cursed files were stacked and sitting directly in front of them. He sighed wearily and shook his head.

Cairna's father, his older brother, had practiced the same annoying habits. If there was a subject about which they disagreed, Traed would provoke him by staring straight at him. That usually resulted in a fight. He almost smiled at the memory of some of their silly, boyhood arguments. How he wished his older brother was alive again.

Then there had been Furlon and Tressa, his younger brother and sister. The twins were never far from each other and always in trouble. But it had been fun to watch his parents' attempts at figuring out which of them had committed some minor offense.

His mother and father had loved them with fierce devotion. But they had all died on the same horrible day. His heart had been so badly broken he lost the ability to love anyone. Anyone but little Cairna. She was only ten when her world collapsed. She'd cried for days, wanting her parents. But they were gone, and he hadn't known how to explain what the outside world had done. And there had been no time to learn to become a parent.

He watched her finger the edge of the top file and tried to continue being annoyed with her. As usual, he couldn't. The girl had him firmly wrapped around her little finger. He stood, walked across the room and placed a pot of water in the fireplace. "Would you like some tea?"

She shook her head and looked down at the documents in front of her. She was going to be a beauty like her mother. Long black hair framed an elfin face, and her eyes were black as midnight. Fairy and Goblin men already vied for her hand. Sometimes, two would come calling on the same day, and he'd have to separate the suitors before a fight broke out. When she finally decided to take a mate, she deserved more than to watch her newborn children die.

"Hand me those damned things." He sighed and motioned toward the files.

Cairna grinned, jumped up and brought the entire stack to him. "It'll be all right, Uncle Tearach. Shayla has never made any decision that didn't turn out for the best. And maybe one of these women will be different from most outsiders."

"They're *all* the same, Cairna. I've tried to understand them, but I always come back to one conclusion. They're careless, insensitive beings who'll do anything to get what they want. Be it animal, plant or man, they hurt whatever gets in their way. They even kill each other with such ease that it's horrifying."

She placed a consoling hand on his arm. "Surely, not all of them are like that. Shayla wouldn't give you a

choice of women who were so terrible. I simply can't believe every one of them is evil."

He looked down at the files for a long moment and remembered his dead family. "If you think that, why don't *you* choose one for me? It doesn't matter which one." He handed her the stack and walked out of the cottage.

Cairna watched him go, tears clouding her vision. "All right, then. *I'll* pick one," she whispered. "Someone who'll make you smile again."

She placed the folders on the table, sat down and began to read.

* * * *

"This is your choice, Tearach?" Shayla placed the file on her desk, sat and perused the contents.

He shrugged, unwilling to admit he hadn't even looked at the papers. Cairna had given him the file, informing him the woman described within it was "perfect." Ecstatic, his niece had begged him to look at the woman's information and picture, but he'd steadfastly refused. It was enough that he was giving up his freedom and pride to lie with this outsider, forced to breed like a prized bull. And there wasn't a remote guarantee this sick experiment would even work. If that happened, what would they do with the outsider?

He glanced around the library, wishing he were anyplace else in the world. "How did you plan on getting this woman here? Since their kind doesn't even know about us, I assume you have a plan?"

For the moment, Shayla ignored him and smiled as she read the file. "I must say, this woman is a *marvelous* choice. Outstanding, really. Our researchers have outdone themselves. I must remember to reward them properly."

"Shayla?"

"Yes." She finally looked up.

"I asked how you plan to get this woman here. And what makes you think she'll go through with this, especially when she sees me?"

Her gaze scanned his perfectly honed body and she grinned. "Why, what's wrong with your looks, man? A number of women, myself included, believe you're quite ... acceptable."

He stared pointedly at her. "I'm *green* ... for starters."

"Well, what possible difference does *that* make?" Shayla asked indifferently.

The Sorceress wasn't fooling him. The woman was far too intelligent not to have given this entire matter some very serious thought. The safety of an entire compliment of magical creatures was at stake. Nothing quite like this had ever been attempted, and the consequences could be devastating.

He leaned upon the desk and looked down at her. "When she sees me, she'll run from this forest screaming. Every farmer, shopkeeper and law enforcement officer from here to Scotland will know about us. Now, I'll ask again. What are your plans?"

She stood and stared into his black eyes. "The women we chose as possible mates all had a number of things in common. First, they were all near your age and in excellent physical condition. Second, they've no one in the entire world who'll come looking for them if they went, shall we say, missing. Finally, they all have some skill or ability that will be useful to the Order and the temperament to handle a challenge. I

don't think the particular woman you've chosen would run away screaming, as you put it, unless she felt very threatened. Her personality profile indicates otherwise." She walked around the desk to stand in front of him. "If you'd *read* the damned file, you'd have known that." She threw the documents in question on the table in front of Tearach.

He didn't bother addressing that particular accusation. "Your researchers had better be very sure about their facts. We could end up on the front page of every major newspaper in the world."

He turned to leave, but he stopped when another thought occurred to him. "By the way, what did you mean by no one will come looking for her if the woman went *missing*?"

"You're going to bring her here."

He felt his jaw sag, and then he recovered enough to speak. "How am I supposed to do that?"

"During their daily lives, people often fall into a routine. We're going to find out what hers is and ... intercept her."

"*Herne's blood!*" Tearach gasped. "You want me to kidnap the woman."

She waved her hand dismissively. "Kidnap is such a harsh word. I prefer to look at it as ... as an assisted change of environment."

Chapter Two

Up until the last minute, Tearach believed there *had* to be some other way of saving his people from extinction. He'd spent days attempting to change Shayla's mind, as well as those of the other faction leaders, but his efforts fell on deaf ears. That they had decided to allow an outsider among them was proof of how seriously they took this whole crazy scheme. It had all been planned down to the smallest detail. Now, the final step was up to him, and he detested it.

He sat silently in the front seat of the parked sedan and waited. "This can only lead to tragedy," he muttered. "The whole thing is insane!"

From the driver's side, Cairna placed her small hand over his larger one. "You wouldn't be so apprehensive if you'd just take a look at her file."

When she attempted to hand it to him, he threw it in the back seat. "It doesn't matter who she is, what she looks like, or her background. She's an *outsider*."

Cairna sighed in disgust. "By the Goddess, you're stubborn! You don't even know the woman's name."

They sat in angry silence, and Tearach stared out the windshield. The parked car ahead of them was driven by the Fairy Leader, Lore. Shayla, and her assistant, Hugh, sat in back. The London jogging trail they watched was empty. An occasional, early morning delivery van drove by. Other than that, there was no one in the park. The trees on either side of the road offered concealment. A thick fog hung in the air and matched Tearach's foul mood. He was about to get out, approach the occupants of the other car and tell them to take the entire idea and put it somewhere daylight never entered. This whole idea was preposterous. The very idea of sleeping with an outsider made his skin crawl.

"It's time, Uncle," Cairna breathed as she saw Lore step out of his sedan.

He heaved an angry sigh as he and Cairna exited their own vehicle. Shayla nodded at him from within the first car, and Hugh stepped out of the front passenger side.

"Go, Cairna!" Lore urged, keeping his voice low.

As she'd been instructed, Cairna entered the tree line and found the nearby trail. She began to jog. Tearach watched her go and his throat tightened. The girl was dressed in blue sweats and, in human form, she looked like any other city dweller out for an early morning run. If any part of this plan backfired, his niece would be the first one in danger. But no one had wanted to listen to *that*, especially since the girl had been so insistent about participating.

Lore took his position on one side of the trail. Cursing beneath his breath, Tearach took his position opposite the Fairy. Because the trail circled their location, Cairna passed them twice without any sign of their quarry. On the third pass, she was being followed by another jogger. The tall, slender figure in gray was about a hundred yards behind. When Cairna reached Tearach's and Lore's position, she pretended to fall.

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Kathy Parker saw the dark-haired girl go down and grab her left ankle. The trail was full of ruts and could easily trip a careless runner. The fog wasn't making it any easier to see. She picked up her pace in an effort to reach the other jogger and help. Panting, she slowed and stopped beside the girl. "Are you all right?" she asked.

"I-I don't know," Cairna said. "I think it's sprained." She grabbed her ankle in pretended pain.

"Here, let me see." Kathy knelt beside the younger girl to look at the injured ankle.

Two men leaped out of the trees, and Kathy immediately realized she'd been setup. She fought with all her might as a very big man with long black hair grabbed her from behind, pinned her arms to her body with one arm, and covered her mouth with the other hand. A tall, blond giant tossed his ponytail over his shoulder, pulled something from his pocket and walked toward her. She was able to get one good kick against her attacker's shin and heard him curse. The blond man placed a gauze pad over her mouth and nose. A sickly-sweet smell entered her nostrils, and she tried to pull the hand from her mouth. But the arms around her were too strong. It was either breathe in the substance on the gauze or suffocate. Her senses began to dull and she felt the world tilt.

"Don't *hurt* her!" the girl cried, as if from a distance.

Kathy continued to fight. She tried to scream, bite, and do anything else that would get the attacker to let her go. The last thing she remembered was looking into a pair of eyes so black they seemed demonic.

When the woman finally collapsed, Tearach let her fall against him and then slid his arm under her knees. Long blond hair, bound at her nape, spilled over his bicep. He stopped and stared at her face.

"Well, come *on*, man! Before someone else comes down the trail," Lore ordered.

He and Cairna led the way back to the cars. Tearach carried the woman, amazed that a female so slender could put up such a fight. Still, he could feel strong, well-developed muscles in her back and thighs.

"Did everything go all right?" Shayla asked as she walked toward them.

"Yes, but she fought like a wild cat!" Tearach muttered. His shin and ribs were still hurting.

"Hurry! Get her in the back seat and stay with her." Shayla motioned to the car. "Lore, you drive them. Hugh and I will follow behind to make sure we're not being followed. Now *go!*"

Lore opened the back door and Tearach slid inside. The woman's body lay motionless in his arms. Cairna sat in the front, and Lore soon had them speeding away from the park. Everyone was silent until they were well away from London.

"We've done it!" Cairna smiled and looked back at Tearach.

He simply glared back in silence, refusing to look at the woman's face again. Her head rested against his shoulder, and all that long, blond hair pooled on the leather seat. Because his shin still ached from her kick, he held her body with one arm, and reached down to rub the wound with his free hand. "Damned woman. I'll probably be limping for days."

"Did you expect her to just get in the car and come with us?" Lore grinned, looking at Tearach in the rear-view mirror. "Her behavior is exactly what I would have expected from someone who fought fires and saved lives for a living."

"Uncle Tearach doesn't know anything about that. He wouldn't read her file," Cairna informed the Fairy and glanced back at Tearach with a smug expression.

She was a *firefighter*? The woman didn't look big enough to carry the kind of equipment that job required. Reluctantly, he looked down at her face. She certainly didn't look like a fireman. Her

complexion reminded him of fine Irish porcelain. Full pink lips sat beneath a small, classic nose. Her high cheekbones boasted a faint scattering of freckles only visible from close up. And he'd caught a glimpse of aqua-colored eyes. All this was contained in a heart-shaped face.

"She's breathtaking, isn't she?" Cairna smiled at her uncle's scrutiny of the woman in his arms. "But you wouldn't have anything to do with her file, or you'd know that and a lot more."

He sighed in exasperation. "All right, Cairna. That's enough. Just hand me the damned file. I suppose I should at least know her name."

"It's Kathleen Parker. She was a firefighter/paramedic until about eighteen months ago. Her father and fiancé were also firemen and died on the job. It's all in here."

She handed him the file. He cradled the woman closer so he could free one hand to read. When he was sure Cairna and Lore had their eyes on the road, he dropped his gaze back to the woman's face. It would be easier to ignore her if she was plain, but he was certain the Sorceress had considered her looks an added incentive for him to breed. His victim could have graced the cover of any fashion magazine, but for some reason, she'd decided to make a living by running into burning buildings. *Crazy*. Even most animals wouldn't do such a dangerous thing. But since he regarded outsiders as some of the most ignorant creatures on Earth, it stood to reason some of them would have to save their sorry lives.

Still, he almost felt sorry for her. She'd suffered recent tragedy in her life and was now a kidnapping victim. They were both being used, and he had no idea what the future held. At least, one way or another, she had a future.

And what would happen tonight when she awakened? Unlike Lore, he and Cairna could only maintain human form for a day without resting, and then Kathleen Parker was going to get the surprise of her life. Getting her to the point where she'd accept her current circumstance could take months, or she might never come to terms with her kidnapping. Then what would the Sorceress do?

He shook his head at the futility of the situation, opened the file and began to read.

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The hours went by slowly. Like all of his kind, he detested being confined in the automobile for so long. He felt himself tiring and knew he couldn't hold his human form much longer. When he saw Cairna drop her head and heard her moan, he knew her endurance was waning as well. They were very near the Shire, as they called their sacred woods, but not close enough. Nature couldn't be put off, and if they didn't change on their own, it would happen anyway. Kathleen's breathing was lighter now, an indication she'd soon awaken, and either she or a passing motorist would see them.

"Stop the car as soon as you find some woods," he instructed Lore. "Cairna and I have to make the change."

Lore nodded. "I'll signal Shayla and Hugh."

When it was safe to do so, both cars pulled to the side of the road. Tearach and Cairna quickly exited the sedan and dashed for the thick forest to their right. Tearach scanned the area. Once their appearance altered, they wouldn't be able to assume human form again for hours. They'd have to hide if anyone came upon them. But hiding was something Goblins did with an uncanny expertise.

He nodded to Cairna as soon as he determined it was safe for her to alter. Helpless while the change took place, he let her go first and stood guard. She knelt, lowered her head and let the transformation happen. When she stood, he took his turn. The relief at letting go of that odious human form was

immediate. The weak feeling caused by maintaining human appearance left, and his strength returned. He stood in time to see Hugh and Shayla walking into the woods.

"I've left Lore with the woman. She'll be awake soon," Shayla advised. "I wouldn't put in an appearance until you're able to do so in human form. You might be able to safely travel to the Shire from here, but I'm not taking any chances. I'll send a car for you after dark. Will the two of you be all right?"

He looked at his niece and saw her nod. "We'll be fine. But I wonder why you even ordered us to come along. If something had happened to the car, or we'd been delayed for some other reason, Cairna and I would have been hard pressed to hide ourselves."

"I haven't obtained my position by being an idiot, man! Both of the sedans were thoroughly serviced before we ever left the Shire and our route to and from London was carefully planned. And both of you were needed. Cairna presented a non-threatening decoy. You were along because a second man was necessary. That woman is an athlete. If she'd somehow escaped, you and Lore are two of the fastest runners in the entire Order." Shayla paused. "Besides ... she's to mate with *you*. Your people need to believe you'll do anything to try to help them, even if it means placing your own safety at risk."

His head shot up proudly. "I *would* do anything! But this plan to mate with an outsider is asinine. I expect the worst."

She sadly shook her head. "Then, that's all you'll get, Tearach. And all your people will get as well."

He watched her turn away. Even some of his own advisers had agreed to this travesty, and he pounded his fist against a nearby tree, never feeling so alone in all his life. The only day of his existence that had been worse was in Exmoor.

"Uncle, *please!*" Cairna begged. "Our lives are cursed. If outsiders placed the curse upon us, then maybe an outsider can take it off. Kathleen won't ever let you near her if you insist on acting like this."

"I could just rape her and be done with it!" he snarled. He turned to look at Cairna and saw a disappointed expression on her face he'd never seen. There were tears in her eyes, and she began to walk away. He placed his hand on her shoulder. "Where are you going? We have to wait here."

She slowly turned and quietly said, "I'd rather be anyplace else on Earth but with you right now."

Shocked to the core, he dropped his hand and stared at her for a long moment. "You've never said anything to me like that. *Never*. You're all I have, Cairna. My only family."

"I can remember a time when you smiled often. You were gentle and sat near the fire and told the children stories. You'd laugh and sing." She stopped and stepped closer to him. "Papa once said you were the peacemaker of the family. He said that since you'd been born a middle child, you were the one destined to be the best negotiator, and he envied your ability to see all sides of an issue and compromise. Where has that man gone, Uncle? Please don't tell me he died at Exmoor, because I couldn't take that. I couldn't take losing anyone else I love."

He closed his eyes and bowed his head. The tightness in his throat made it difficult to speak. "I love you, Cairna. But I'm being *ordered* to ... to lie with an enemy and a complete stranger. What would you have me do? Her people have decimated ours. And if I could find a reason to smile again, don't you think I would? Do you really believe I want to live the rest of my life like this?"

"Of course I don't." She grasped his hands. "But what bothers you most? Is it the fact that she's an outsider or an enemy?"

"There is no difference between the two," he insisted.

"What if you're wrong? What if *this* woman is different?"

He shook his head in frustration. "If it was even possible to befriend this woman, we've destroyed that chance by kidnapping her."

"If we're very patient and give her the opportunity to see us at our best, maybe we can win her over. Use those powers of negotiation Papa bragged about. We have to give Shayla's plan a chance. It may be our very last option."

He wearily passed a hand over his face. "Cairna, this isn't something that can be negotiated. The woman has been brought here to lie with a Goblin and bear his child. *My* child. I can't see her ever being willing to do such a thing. And a child from such a union may not live any longer than the others."

"What if it does? What if you could get her to *want* to give you a baby and it lives? Wouldn't that make you happy?"

He sat upon a nearby rock and stared into the distance. "To hold my own healthy child? Watch it grow and love it? Yes, that would be worth living for."

"And what would the woman who could give you this child be worth?" she asked, sitting beside him.

"Anything. I'd give *anything* to have such a woman. It's just that ... I'd always imagined she'd be one of us."

"Would it matter who she was, if you loved her?"

"Love? Except where you're concerned, I don't think I'm capable of that emotion anymore. And I'm *certain* I could never love an outsider."

His niece didn't reply and he didn't want to see her disappointed expression. She was young and wanted to believe in happy endings. But his belief in happiness had come to a halt in Exmoor. He stared into the darkness and waited, sensing her hurt and confusion.

When he couldn't bear the silence any longer, he finally said, "What do you want me to do, girl?"

"Would you promise to try to keep an open mind? Please?"

"All right, Cairna. For your sake and for the sake our people, I'll *try*."

The sound of an approaching car alerted them. They hid at the edge of the woods until they were sure it was someone from the Shire. When Lore stepped from the vehicle and waved, they left the shelter of the trees and joined him. The drive back to their sacred land was a short distance, but it seemed the longest of his life. No one spoke and Tearach felt as though the weight of world was crushing him. Tomorrow, he and the woman he'd helped kidnap would meet. She'd hate him and he'd feel the same way. She'd probably scream, rant, rave and cry.

But he was a Goblin and the luxury of such outbursts was denied him. All he could do was follow Shayla's commands and the will of the Order. The last thing he and his people had was their pride. Now, even *that* would be gone.

Chapter Three

As Shayla had instructed, he arrived at the great hall of the castle in human form. He could hear voices on the other side of the library door. *This is what a prized stud feels like as it's being led to breed.* He wondered if the Sorceress would go so far as to send witnesses to watch the unholy event. *Just like a Thoroughbred.* Would there be papers to sign and a veterinarian present? To someone else, it would be laughable, but Tearach angrily shook his head and tried to unclench his fists. It was all so seedy and heartless. Especially when he'd have to reveal how vulnerable he was during the actual sex act. He'd be left with no dignity at all.

Bitterness engulfed him. Of course, he wouldn't be ordered to rut with the woman now. That would come later, when she was more acclimated to the situation. Perhaps the Sorceress would drug her to make the deed more palatable. He made a mental note to ask for the same drug. A *double* dose.

The doors opened and Shayla walked toward him. "Are you ready to meet Kathleen?"

"We *have* met. I was the one who held her while she was being sedated, remember? Why not save time and get the whole thing over with tonight, Sorceress? You and some of your Druid friends can even watch if you like. That way, you can make sure I've done my part." Her eyes narrowed, and he realized he'd pushed her patience to the limit. But she could only kill him once, and that alternative was becoming more and more appealing.

"Step into the library," she tersely commanded.

He walked through the double oak doors and she followed. As he turned to face her, the doors slammed shut behind her without being touched. The sound echoed through the room and shook the arched windows. He'd never seen her so angry. The knowledge that her fury was directed at him didn't matter anymore.

"You impudent, arrogant fool," she bit out. "This is the last chance to save your people, and your niece told me you'd made her a promise to keep an open mind where the outsider is concerned. If you haven't the integrity to honor it, then leave and let the fates do with your race what they will."

"I'll honor my promise to Cairna. Now, take me to the woman and let's get on with this charade," he ground out between clenched teeth.

"Very well," she muttered. "Be assured your insolence *will* be dealt with. Come with me."

The library doors flew open with the same violence he'd witnessed earlier. Shayla walked through them and up the gray marble staircase. He mechanically followed. She stopped at one of the doors on the second floor.

"The woman inside this room has shown more reason and logic than you've a right to expect. But go in and make an ass of yourself, Tearach. You do it so very well." The Sorceress stormed down the hall and yet another door slammed.

Eight years ago he'd never dreamed of behaving in such a manner, but now, there was nothing the Sorceress could say or do to threaten him. He squared his shoulders, turned the key in the lock and walked inside.

The woman stood by the fireplace. She wore a pale blue bathrobe. Her blond hair was loosely piled on top of her head, and an image of Venus entered his mind. She was tall, lean and moved toward him with

the grace of a cat. The tightly belted robe revealed a small waist and high, full breasts. But it was the color of her eyes which captured him. They were the same unusual aqua shade he'd glimpsed during the kidnapping. In them, he saw wariness and curiosity. But no fear. For some strange reason, that intrigued him. He imagined she'd be cowering in a corner, begging to be set free.

Kathy would remember this moment for the rest of her life. Well over six feet, this man's long, straight hair had an unearthly, blue-black sheen to it. It fell in sheets across exceedingly well-developed shoulders and chest. Strands of the thick stuff fell over eyes so dark there seemed to be no pupils at all. Even his skin was dark, as if he spent time in a tanning salon. The line of his jaw was square and his full lips were set in a determined, straight line. His clothing seemed ordinary enough for someone who kept themselves outdoors. He wore a blue cambric shirt, half open and tucked into blue jeans. His footwear consisted of some kind of leather moccasin. Probably the type that laced up to the knee.

But it wasn't his clothing that revealed the most about him. Her gaze went back to his face. Something about his eyes weren't quite right. The black irises were too large and covered more of the white part than normal. Unless this man was on some kind of drug, there was something wrong with them. She'd never seen anything quite like them and wouldn't have noticed under normal circumstances. But this godlike brute had kidnapped her. She wanted to remember everything she could.

"You're one of the men from the park." She addressed him first, holding her head up higher as she did so. He wasn't going to get *any* satisfaction from watching her lose control. That's typically what a kidnapper wanted. To control his victim.

"Yes. Have you been told anything about why you've been brought here?"

She swallowed hard at the sound of his deep, masculine voice, which held a note of menace. But she'd been in tough situations before. "I've met someone named Shayla. She's spent most of the day trying to convince me that I can be more useful here than in London ... wherever *here* is. But she won't explain just what it is I'm supposed to do or why you people want me."

She spoke in a low, clear tone. There was nothing in her voice to indicate she was frightened. Tearach moved toward the open windows of the narrow room. A cool breeze blew the filmy curtains to one side. Normally, it would have been calming. In the small room it only set his nerves on edge. When he turned, the woman was right behind him. Her proximity was unexpected. A Goblin's senses were keener than most, and his seemed to have temporarily deserted him.

"Can you tell me what this is about?" she asked.

Damn you, Shayla Gallagher. He should have known the Sorceress would leave everything for him to explain. "I'm not sure how much I can reveal. But I *can* tell you that you won't be harmed."

She nodded. "I know that. If you'd wanted to hurt me, you'd have done it by now. I wouldn't have been given five-star meals, a beautiful room with a lovely garden view, or a pure silk robe to wear. Someone wants me to be very comfortable. And someone has *excellent* taste in wine. So, I know you don't want me dead. How am I doing so far?"

Tearach was absolutely floored. This woman was taking her abduction in perfect stride, and he found the fact greatly irritating. She should at least be crying or begging to be set free. To take some of the wind out of her sails, he resorted to being blunt. "You'd better sit down, Miss Parker. What I have to say isn't going to be easy to hear."

"So, you know *my* name. Care to share *yours*? Or should I just call you predator?" Kathy sat in the nearest chair. Whoever muscleman was, if he thought he was going to turn her into a helpless, blubbing

victim, he had another trick coming. Whatever his plans were, someone wanted her alive. Kathy saw his strange eyes narrow and wondered if she'd gone too far.

He walked slowly around the room. The Sorceress could have explained *something* to the woman. How was he supposed to tell her about the creatures in the woods outside, or that she was seeing him in an altered form? He decided the basics would be enough for this first meeting. "My name is Tearach Bruce. You're here to help us."

"I wish I could say it's a pleasure, but you'll understand if it isn't?" She smiled sarcastically and crossed her arms over her chest. "And who exactly is *us* and where is *here*?"

He sighed and ran a hand over his face. The little baggage had a temper, though she was controlling it. At the moment, he wasn't so manageable. Grudgingly, he had to give her credit for nerve. His promise to Cairna came to mind. He took a deep breath and tried to be tactful. "I can't tell you where you are. As to who *we* are ... You might say you're in the middle of a world of misfits, Miss Parker."

She nodded, stood up and looked him straight in the eyes. "You know someone's going to come looking for me, don't you?"

"Actually, I'm fairly sure they won't. You're new in London, your rent and utilities are paid by bank draft, and you currently work as a temporary secretary. You have no family or friends here. Your employer will replace you with someone else when you don't show up. In short, Miss Parker, no one is looking for you."

He had the satisfaction of seeing her eyes widen and her jaw slightly drop. Then he saw a nerve in her jaw pulse and pain darken her gaze. But it was quickly hidden and her mask of controlled anger slid back into place. He gave her points for composure.

"All right. Whoever you are, you've done your homework. Since you know all about me, you know I have no money or anything else of value." She stalked to the windows and stared outside. "What could I possibly do to help you, and what incentive would I possibly have for doing so?"

"Perhaps the incentive to survive?"

She slowly turned and her gaze was icy. "There are worse things than not surviving, Mr. Bruce. You'll have to do better than that. And, as I've already pointed out, if you wanted me dead, I would be."

He knew there truly *were* worse things than death. What event had taught this haughty beauty that particular lesson? She wasn't hiding her emotions any longer. She was enraged and that made her dangerous. Looking into those glacial eyes, he truly believed the threat of harm wouldn't work on her. She simply wasn't wired that way. He tried another tack. "I'm not in a position to promise you anything. But if you cooperate, I can try to get you released from this room."

"What would my cooperation entail?"

"A promise to not try to escape. It isn't as if you'd get far at any rate. The forest surrounding this building is very large and well guarded."

She shook her head. "I'll run the first chance I get, and I'll fight anyone who tries to stop me."

"Why not lie and tell me otherwise?" he asked, intrigued by her honesty.

"My part in this little play requires that I try to escape. That's the way it works. You kidnap someone, and they try to get away." She paused. "Now, I'm going to ask again. What on Earth could you want

with me? I'm a *secretary*. I don't have access to national secrets, affairs of the royal household or the weather forecast. Why was I kidnapped?"

Herne, she was bold! As the minutes ticked by, he found himself impressed with her when he didn't want to be. It irked him no end. "In time, you'll understand everything."

He quickly turned to leave before she could say anything else he didn't want to hear. Something else that could actually make him admire her grit.

"What about your offer to let me out of this room?"

"What about *your* promise to try to escape?" He stopped when he reached the door, giving her time to relent. She stared at him, and he felt a measure of satisfaction when her gaze finally dropped.

"All right," she sighed, "I won't try to run ... for *now*."

He didn't believe her for an instant. Kathleen didn't know that Shayla would let her out of the room sooner or later anyway. It was pure pride that made him want to hear her concede, and he was confused as to why it mattered. But it somehow did. "I'll come for you tomorrow evening. Shayla will see you have the proper clothing."

He walked out the door and locked it behind him. More guards would have to be posted. Kathleen Parker wasn't beyond using bed sheets or anything else she could find to get out of the castle.

* * * *

"I suppose it's too soon for her to see us as we really are," Cairna said.

"That would be a reasonable supposition," Tearach replied. "Everyone she sees will remain in human form until Shayla says otherwise."

"But what about those who *can't* alter their appearance?"

"That's Shayla's problem. She started this; she can see to the details." Tearach shrugged into his leather jerkin. If he couldn't appear in Goblin form, he was going to make himself as comfortable as possible. In the Shire's sacred forests, the inhabitants had always worn leather clothing for protection and because it was tradition. No outsider was going to make him change that habit. Sooner or later, the invincible Miss Parker was going to get a good look at all of them the way the Goddess intended. Having to rearrange their nocturnal customs for one woman was aggravating. Better to let her see what and who they were, but Shayla wanted to spare the poor woman's sensibilities. *Hah!* Kathleen Parker needed *sparing* the way a cat needed extra claws.

"Uncle Tearach, you'll try to act civilized, won't you? And do you really need that?" she asked, watching him slide his knife into one tall boot.

He stopped what he was doing and glared at her. "So I'm uncivilized now?"

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean that. I just thought if you made a good impression..."

He was about to tell her he didn't give a flying bat's ass whether or not he made any kind of impression on Kathleen Parker. But he'd made a promise to try to keep an open mind. Right now, he was having a very difficult time understanding how to go about it and keep a semblance of pride. "I'll try not to kill anything with my teeth and eat it in front of her. Will that do?"

"I'm sorry, Uncle Tearach," she whispered. "That was incredibly rude. I didn't mean it the way it came

out."

Immediately sorry for his sarcasm, he sighed heavily and hugged her. "Why does my relationship with this woman mean so much to you, Cairna?"

She shrugged. "I just want things to work out, that's all."

He tilted her head up with one finger. "Sweetheart, when she finds out what we are, there'll never be any relationship."

"But you're supposed to..."

"I *know* what I'm supposed to do with her. Everyone keeps forgetting one small detail."

"What's that?" Cairna asked as she straightened his leather collar.

"No matter what anyone wants or orders anyone else to do, all the gods and goddesses of the forest can't make this woman bear a child she doesn't want."

He kissed Cairna's forehead and left the cottage.

The Sorceress was in for a rude awakening when this whole thing failed. Even if his mind was as open as the sky above, no one could control Kathleen Parker's. Why couldn't Shayla see that? He'd always attributed the Sorceress with extraordinary wisdom, had always insisted that his people honor her position and power. But his respect for Shayla was rapidly waning. The Sorceress' actions even had his beloved niece questioning him. And that hurt.

He walked through the evening forest toward the castle. What could he say to this woman, this outsider? Nothing in his life had prepared him for this task. Maybe he could turn his head and let her escape. But he wouldn't put it past Shayla to go find her. Or find someone else to take her place.

A guard outside the main entrance unlocked the door as he approached. He made his way to Kathleen's room, knocked and heard Shayla's voice bid him enter. Evidently, the Sorceress had been speaking to the woman. When he entered the room, Shayla gave him a stern look and then stalked out. Since their altercation, she didn't even take time to act civilly. That was a bridge best left burned.

Kathy noticed the tension between the two people. She filed it away for future reference, thinking it might get her closer to freedom. "Is this what you people normally wear?" She lifted a hand to indicate her clothing and his.

Tearach was surprised to see her wearing black leather pants, matching doe skin boots and a black, long-sleeved jerkin. The garments hugged every curve of her slender body. Front strands of her hair had been pulled back and tied. The rest cascaded down her back in a golden cloud. His mouth went dry and the lower part of his anatomy responded to her. The thought occurred to him that, if he had to eventually lie with her, some carnal part of him might enjoy it.

Kathleen wondered what activity these people were involved in that required them to wear medieval garb. But the leather *was* soft and would offer protection if she had to escape through the woods.

"This is the traditional clothing of those who live here. If you'd rather have something else to wear, I can have someone..."

"No," Kathy interrupted, "these clothes will do."

Tearach watched her run one graceful hand down a shapely thigh. Something in his veins heated. Did she have to be so damned beautiful? Where was his resolve? "We'd better go before I change my mind about this."

Kathy nodded and followed him out the door. She gasped when they got outside and she turned back to see her prison. "So, I've been in some kind of renovated castle?"

"Comes with the clothes." Tearach shrugged and began to walk. He didn't alter his long stride, but she kept abreast of him with no problem. She seemed interested in her surroundings, and Tearach wondered if she was making mental notes for her escape. He walked for several minutes and finally stopped in a small clearing. The moon was out in force, and the stars vied with it for attention. He ached to be in his true form. The Sorceress would have his head on a parapet if he changed. But that *would* be one solution to his problem. The outsider would take one look at him in his alter ego and either run or go crazy.

"You aren't very talkative, are you?" Kathleen remarked.

"I'm your captor. What could I say that you'd want to hear?"

"If you feel that way, why did you offer to let me out in the first place?" She stopped, sat on a rock, pulled one leg up and hugged her knee.

He stopped and took a seat upon a nearby tree stump, crossing his arms over his chest. "Perversity. Maybe I want to keep you guessing about what's to be your fate."

She snorted. "My *fate*? Unless you're going to offer me as a sacrifice to some god, I don't think I've got too much to worry about."

Now that dug deep into his masculinity. He was large enough to break her swan's neck with one hand, and she sat there declaring she hadn't too many cares. "And why *wouldn't* you worry?"

"Do you know what that Shayla person did today? She had someone come to my room to do my nails and hair. Then she let me pick out my clothing from a large assortment of medieval attire, served me another sumptuous meal and offered to let me use the library." She reached down, pulled a long blade of dried grass from the ground and thoughtfully chewed on the end. "You know, if this is someone's idea of kidnapping, I should have gone jogging more often."

He swore under his breath and stood. "Do you think this is all a *game*, woman? Whatever Shayla does has no bearing on *me* or what *I'm* capable of doing. It might serve you well to remember that. This can be a deadly place. Especially since not everyone here wants..." He stopped talking and turned away.

She jumped up and moved in front of him. "I *knew* it! You don't want me here, do you? I've been listening to Shayla tell me how wonderful everything is around here. Then you come along and tell me there are guards everywhere and paint this picture of doom."

"I never said as much," he denied.

"Yes, you did, if not in words, then certainly by your expression and body language. You didn't even want to be in my room."

He simply stared at her, wondering if Shayla's researchers had an inkling of how intelligent this woman was or that she was as crafty as a vixen. She'd been sizing them up since her arrival and had correctly perceived his unwilling participation in this whole ordeal. And he'd expected a weeping, tormented victim. "All right, I don't want you here and never did. The idea of having you in my presence is ... is..."

"Revolting, isn't it?" she finished and smiled slyly.

He took a deep breath and looked in another direction. He'd have not been so ungallant as to use that particular word in her presence but, since she'd said it, it was fine with him.

She stepped in front of him, trying to force him to look at her. "Why would I be so distasteful to you? Vanity aside, not many men have used that word to describe me. But this is a very special circumstance, isn't it? There's something about you that just isn't quite ordinary. I can't put my finger on it, but I'll figure it out.

"And what about that Shayla person?" Kathy walked around him thinking out loud. "Shayla *does* want me here. Very badly. Everyone who came into my room seemed a little in awe of her. Unless I've missed my guess, she isn't just some kindly older woman helping me acclimate to my terrifying ordeal." She punctuated the terrifying part with sarcasm. "I think ... I think she's in charge of the whole operation. *She* wanted me here, and she's forced *you* into helping her."

Tearach watched her walk and listened to her analyze. She'd have made a magnificent general. She had a tactical mind that rivaled any Order leader he'd ever read about. "So what do you intend to do with this knowledge?"

"We could strike a bargain."

"What kind of bargain?"

"You don't want me here. I don't want to be here. Regardless of the fine accommodations, I've still been kidnapped and I want to get back to London." She paused and looked him straight in the eyes. "It's simple. Help me get away. Your problem is solved and so is mine."

He slowly shook his head. "I can't, Miss Parker. The situation isn't as simple as you think."

She stared at him for a long time. "Why? What could she possibly have on a man like you to force you into committing a major felony?"

The woman started pacing again. He could almost hear her mind compiling details, critically reviewing the information to which she'd been exposed. It was a little frightening. Were all outsiders this astute? He quickly discarded that ridiculous idea. This one was an exception.

She stopped and faced him. "Why hasn't the other man who helped kidnap me been to see me? He had as much a role in all this as you."

Tearach kept silent. For some odd reason, warning bells went off in his mind. She remembered Lore, and he wouldn't go to see her because his contribution to the scheme was complete.

She began to tick off a list on her fingers. "You don't want me here. I'm revolting to you, but you came to see me anyway. Shayla wants me here, but she doesn't seem to care about the other man's role in this. When she talks, she speaks of you, not him. I know you and she are angry with each other for some reason. When you're in a room together, the looks you exchange could kill."

Kathleen chewed on her lower lip and tapped the fingers of one hand against her face. Suddenly, she stopped and glared at Tearach. "She wants you and me together for some reason, doesn't she? And you don't like the idea at all."

He swallowed hard and gave up. That computerlike brain floored him. "Yes, she wants us together. No, I don't like the idea one bit." He watched her expression change from contemplative to downright

outraged.

"Could you please define the term *together*?" she snapped.

"You're a smart woman. I think you've got the picture," he solemnly replied. He watched Kathleen's head turn back toward the castle. Anger emanated from the top of her blond head to her leather clad feet. She fairly shook with it.

"Why ... *that ... sick ... old...*"

"Careful!" Tearach warned and pulled her away from the tree line. "We're being watched and our conversation is probably being overheard as well."

Like conspirators, they moved closer together and lowered their voices.

"What hold does she have on you? You look like a man who can take care of himself. Who *is* she?" Kathy put her hands on her hips and glared at him.

"Nothing here is as it seems, Kathleen," he said, using her given name. "You've no idea how powerful Shayla is."

"She's *one* woman. Why would she want us, two complete strangers, to enter into a sexual relationship? That *is* what we're talking about, isn't it?"

"I don't think I can explain. But trust me when I say that Shayla could summon more power than any army on Earth. Don't anger her. And don't let anyone hear you speak ill of her," Tearach warned. A second later, he wondered why he'd given the warning. She could have hung herself by saying something tactless to Shayla and he'd have been rid of her.

"Here I was thinking she was a kindly woman, just trying to help." Kathy glared back at the castle, her hands clenched.

His conscience prompted him to defend the Sorceress. Even though her current plans had him half mad, she'd kept the Order safely hidden for years. "She *is* trying to help. It's just that when she's fixed on an idea, she won't let it go."

"And what, exactly, is she fixed on that involves you and me getting ... together? We're total strangers. I'm not some whore off the street."

The acidic tone of Kathleen's voice had him worried, although he couldn't imagine why. If the Sorceress was angry enough, this particular outsider would never be seen or heard from again. But Kathleen had courage and the uncanny ability to correctly size up a situation. He could respect those attributes, even if they were exhibited by someone he considered an enemy.

"Listen to me," he urged. "I know you're furious. I was bloody crazy over this whole thing. But I've already got Shayla angry with me. There's no sense in you jumping into that particular fire. Believe me, Kathleen, you do *not* want her after you."

Kathleen watched Tearach sit down on a stone, run his hands through his hair and hang his head.

"You feel helpless. She's got you trapped somehow, hasn't she?"

"This isn't just about me. This has to do with all my people. Shayla is just trying to stop a tragedy. But it can't be averted by kidnapping you and forcing us to do something against our will. There has to be

another way to solve the problem."

"Your *people*?" She sank down beside him. "I don't understand."

"I know, and I can't explain right now. The whole thing is so damned complicated."

"You may as well tell me everything. So help me, I'm going to figure it all out anyway."

"You will, won't you?" he acknowledged with a nod. "You've got all the rest of it right."

He stood up and held out his hand. Without hesitating, she placed hers within it and followed where he led. They walked away from the clearing into a dense part of the forest. Moonlight flooded even the thickest growth. Finally, Tearach turned and placed his hands upon her shoulders. "Shayla is going to have my head for this, but you may as well see who you're really dealing with."

He stepped away from her, lowered himself to the ground and made the change. Up to this point there had been no histrionic outbursts, no crying or complaining about her situation. She'd had a perfect right to indulge in any of those behaviors, though they wouldn't have gotten her anywhere. Instead, the woman had chosen to use her head and logically work things out. But what she was about to see had no place in the world of logic. If Kathleen could deal with him in his true form, she could handle anything.

He slowly stood, faced her and waited for the inevitable scream or for her to faint. She backed against a tree and stared. In the sunlight, his appearance would be even more startling, but she could see well enough to know he wasn't like her. Wasn't like anything else on Earth. For a long time, Tearach waited. He didn't move a muscle or speak. He just stood and let her have a good, long look.

Kathy tried to slow her breathing. Hyperventilating would get her nothing but a face full of grass and leaves when she passed out, and a headache from hitting the ground. Everything in her told her to run like hell and not look back. But some part of her brain—she assumed it was the hemisphere where curiosity and obstinacy originated—wouldn't let her go. The thought that had been in her consciousness all along seeped in. *He doesn't want to hurt me.* A creature the size of three normal men could surely have pulled her apart if he'd wanted to. She pushed herself away from the tree and, still breathing hard, walked right up to him.

"What the hell are you supposed to be?" she choked out.

He tilted his head in wonder. "You're not going to scream?"

"While that might do something for you, it won't help my situation one bit. And I'm not giving you the bloody satisfaction. Now, answer my question!"

She had more nerve than sense. Once again, he grudgingly awarded the little outsider points for courage and control. "I'm a Goblin. One of the very last, as it so happens."

"That's crazy. There's no such thing."

"I should damned well know what I am, woman!"

"Well, you'd better think harder and try another story, because there's no such thing as Goblins," she repeated and thrust a finger against his chest.

"You just saw me *change*," he gasped and spread his hands in frustration.

"If you're a Goblin, then I'm the bloody Queen of England," she snapped and placed her hands on her

hips.

This outcome had never occurred to him. He was standing in the middle of the sacred forest with an angry woman who demanded that he tell her anything *but* the truth. "I ... am ... a ... Goblin." He enunciated each word as clearly and precisely as he could. "My race is thousands of years old, and I'm the leader of all those like me."

Kathy had seen and heard enough. She turned on her heel and stalked back the way she'd come.

"Where do you think you're going?" He caught up with her, grabbed her arm and held on.

"You people are in so much trouble it isn't even funny! I'm going to start out by filing every criminal charge I can. Then, I'm going to get the best attorney in London and sue all of you back into the Stone Age. When all that's finished, I'll make sure you're locked so far away that not even God will find you!"

He dropped his hold on her arm and began to pace. "What deity in what forest did I piss off enough to deserve this? You are the most contrary woman I've ever met in my entire life!" He stopped long enough to point a finger at her and continued his agitated walking. "I can't believe Shayla put me in the middle of this insane situation. Out of all the women in the world, I have to be saddled with you. Hang it all!" He threw his hands up in despair.

Kathy watched the man's tirade come to an end. She'd seen circumstances where all kinds of people had come to the end of their proverbial rope. Tearach Bruce, whatever he thought himself to be, was at such an end. He stood with his back to her, shaking his head. He was in the same wobbling boat as she, and neither of them would come any closer to solving their problems by losing control.

"I'm sorry," she quietly relented, "but I haven't had a lot of experience with *green* people. I'll bet you don't get to see much of my kind, either."

He turned around and stared at her. The last time he'd been this close to outsiders was eight years ago. It was an experience he never wanted to repeat. "No. My people avoid yours at all costs."

"Is Shayla one of you?"

"She isn't Goblin, if that's what you mean."

"Then what..."

"Direct the rest of your questions to her. We've both had enough for one night." He wrapped his fingers around her arm and began to walk back toward the castle.

Chapter Four

"So, how did it go?" Cairna asked.

Tearach drank his morning coffee and looked across the table, noting her anxious expression as she chewed on her bottom lip. "She doesn't think I'm a real Goblin; she wants Shayla's head on a spike; and as soon as she gets back to London, she's filing a lawsuit. Any more questions?"

Cairna's dark eyes widen in shock. "*She knows about us?*" Cairna ignored the rest of his sarcastic remark. "I thought the Sorceress said we weren't supposed to..."

"I know what the Sorceress said, Cairna. Shayla Gallagher doesn't have a clue as to how intelligent this woman is. That outsider probably has an I.Q. that's out of orbit. In the short time she's been abducted, Kathleen Parker has just about figured out the full extent of what goes on here. I can practically hear the gears turning when she thinks." And that could make her very dangerous, he reminded himself.

"And she knows about ... about ... you know..." Cairna shrugged and lowered her head in embarrassment.

"Yes. She even knows Shayla plans to breed the two of us like livestock. She's as furious about it as I am." He threw down his napkin, left the rest of his breakfast untouched and walked to the door.

"When may I meet her?" Cairna stood and walked toward him.

Tearach looked at his niece in surprise. "Why would you want to?"

"Well, she'll sort of be my aunt, won't she?"

He took his hand off the doorknob, placed it on Cairna's shoulder and gently pushed her into the nearest chair. Kneeling so they were at eye level, he tried to explain the situation yet again. She just didn't want to see the full impact of this entire mess. "Cairna, this woman doesn't want to be here, and *I* don't want her here. Don't make something romantic out of this situation. If she won't cooperate Shayla may see her as a threat. And if by some miracle she *does* cooperate, I'll be in a relationship with someone I don't even know and consider an enemy. And Kathleen will hate us all. She won't see us as friends or family. If a child should come from this farce, it will likely die as all the others have done. Then, probably, so would Kathleen. There would be no reason for Shayla to keep her safe anymore. So, there's no way out of this for any of us. But I *will* keep my promise to you. I'll try to do the best I can."

Cairna frowned. "If Kathy decides to have your baby and it lives, you won't know what to do. You haven't thought that far ahead, have you?"

"So, it's Kathy is it? You don't even know the woman and you're shortening her name as if you were friends."

Cairna angrily slammed her fists down on the arms of the chair. Unused to such a show of emotion from her, Tearach simply stared.

"You're so good at looking for the *worst*, aren't you? Well, I hope Kathy shocks the Goddess out of you, has your baby and the wee babe lives. Then you're going to owe the biggest apology of your life to me, Shayla, and everyone else who's trying to help us." She quickly stood, causing Tearach to do the same, and then he backed up. She stormed out of the kitchen, up the stairs and slammed the door to her bedroom.

Tearach let out a long breath. It was good to be young and have dreams. Good to think there was some way out of the situation they faced by simply following Shayla's plans. But he couldn't see it happening the way Cairna envisioned. The fates weren't with his people. If this last desperate attempt failed, there would be no Goblins left in sixty to seventy years. Cairna would never hold her own child more than a few hours before it died, and part of the magic that still existed on Earth would be lost forever. He wanted to cry out in rage and fight, but how did one fight against time, against the inevitable?

He left the cottage and made his way to the castle. There was no reason to change to human form. Kathleen might as well see him for what he was, in the cold light of day. If the Sorceress of the Ancients didn't like it, so much the better.

When he got to the castle, the guards asked him to stop. Tearach ignored them and quickened his stride. By the time he arrived outside Kathleen's door, the entire castle had been alerted. The place fairly buzzed with staff who attempted to find Shayla and tell her he was at the outsider's door in Goblin form. He didn't care. The key to Kathleen's door had been removed. He assumed she was under less restraint, and he raised his hand and knocked.

* * * *

Kathy came to the door expecting to see Shayla. They'd had a long talk that morning which had resulted in a longer argument. She'd finally asked the older woman to leave her room when an impasse had stopped all civil discussion. She pulled the door open and almost choked. "*Tearach!*"

"In the flesh ... so to speak." He leaned one shoulder against the door frame. "May I come in?"

For a moment, she stood still and tried to gather her wits. The moonlight hadn't done justice to the previous night's macabre change in his appearance. She nodded, stood to one side and watched as he walked by.

"Still don't believe in Goblins?"

Kathy swallowed hard, took a deep breath and willed herself to sound calm. "I guess I was wrong about that." She wondered how much more of reality, as she knew it, would be tested.

"So, the ingenious Kathleen Parker admits to being wrong. Shall I mark this on my calendar as an event of stellar importance?"

His sarcasm was exactly what she needed to regroup. "Now I know why your eyes were so different."

"My eyes?" he asked, shaking his head in confusion.

She moved closer to him and began a more clinical inspection. Truth be told, this was an opportunity of a lifetime to study a creature unknown to anyone else. Her logical mind superimposed itself over the frightened part. "In this form, you have no sclera. Probably so you can see at night better and distinguish distance more clearly in the day."

"What in blazes are you talking about? And quit studying me like I'm an insect under a microscope, woman!"

She shrugged and continued her perusal in silence. Along with having only black orbs for eyes, his ears were pointed and his incisors had lengthened. She'd seen the green skin in moonlight, but it seemed a darker shade today. This could possibly give him an advantage when hiding in forest undergrowth. The leather jerkin he wore was sleeveless and showed taut, highly developed muscle in his biceps and pectorals. A creature built for speed, strength and agility. Some part of her brain registered that the man

was just plain *built*.

"Are you quite through examining me?" he ground out.

"Well, you showed up here so I could get a good look. That's exactly what I'm doing," Kathy explained.

"My appearance still doesn't frighten you?"

"Ohhhhh, you'd like that wouldn't you?" She smiled, placed her hands on her hips and imitated him.

"What did you do today, Tearach? Well, I showed up at that human's door all green and menacing. You should have heard her scream. Why, I'll wager they heard it all the way to Buckingham. Parliament is up in arms!"

For a split second, he almost smiled. The woman had an outrageous sense of humor, even if it *was* at his expense. "Are you *done*?"

"No," she sighed, "I've got some questions I'd like to ask."

"About me, I presume?"

She nodded. "How is it you're able to manifest different appearances? Last night, you seemed to have to concentrate to make this change."

"I *do* have to concentrate unless we've been in human form too long. Then the change happens whether we want it to or not."

She placed her hand to her chin and studied him again. "So you can only maintain human appearance for a limited time?"

"Yes, but there are others who..."

"*Enough!*" A voice echoed off the walls and shook the windows.

Tearach and Kathleen quickly turned to see Shayla standing in the doorway. She was in the traditional white robe of her Druid forebears. Several staff members and guards stood behind her.

"Tearach Bruce! What could you *possibly* be thinking to come here and show yourself in Goblin form? My instructions specifically forbade you from doing such a thing." Shayla walked into the room and glared at him.

"She isn't stupid, Sorceress. Kathleen noticed some unusual things about me before I ever showed her my true form."

"Be that as it may, you did *not* have my permission to come here like this." She raised one hand then dropped it to indicate his full length.

"Fine! Punish me if you wish, but it won't change the fact that she'd have found out everything sooner or later. That was one of the drawbacks to bringing an outsider here. A choice *you* decided to make."

"*When* she was supposed to find out was not up to you, Goblin. That was my decision and you've undermined plans that could negatively impact the very survival of your race."

"Excuse me, but the *she* you're speaking of is standing right here and doesn't like being discussed as if she were a nonentity!" Kathleen snapped. "And how could my knowing who he really is impact the survival of his race?"

"Quiet, woman!" Shayla spoke, using her powers over the elements. The amplification of her voice resounded through the room.

Kathleen raised her hand, pointed an index finger at Shayla and moved forward. "Wait just one damned minute..."

"Kathy, stop!" Hearing the anger in her voice, Tearach caught her by the shoulders and held her back. He'd inadvertently used the abbreviated version of her name, but she was too irritated to notice. If he'd let her step any closer to the Sorceress, the outsider would only be a memory.

Shayla turned toward the younger woman. "You've seen him like this before, haven't you? Was it last night?" When Kathy didn't answer, Shayla raised her voice again. "Answer me!"

"What happened last night isn't any of your business," Kathy said belligerently.

"You insolent creature. With a wave of my hand I could..."

"Yes, Shayla, you *could* do a lot of things," Tearach interrupted. "All of them quite terminal I'm sure." Before anyone could utter another word, Tearach grabbed Kathy's arm and pulled her toward the door.

"Just where do you think you're going? I'm not finished with either of you," Shayla declared.

"Kathy and I are going to the woods for a while. She needs to understand who you are. You need to remember she was brought here against her will. And *all* of us need a break." With that, he stalked to the door. When Kathy began to protest at the indignity of being half-dragged, he took a firmer grasp on her arm. "Not *now*, Kathy!"

* * * *

As soon as they were outside the castle, Kathy jerked her arm free. "That woman..."

"Could easily end your life," Tearach finished. He kept walking toward the woods.

"She told me all about being some kind of Druid Sorceress with powers over the elements. I suppose, if Goblins exist, so can Druids."

Tearach stopped walking. "When did she tell you this?"

"Earlier this morning. But I started asking too many questions, and we had an almighty row."

"You mean you *knew* about her powers and argued with her anyway?"

Kathy shrugged. "I wasn't sure I believed in her powers any more than I believed you were a Goblin. When she's angry, however, your Sorceress can certainly rattle windows and enhance her voice well enough. Now, I'm certain she does have powers. I argued with her only because I dislike being treated as if I'm some lower life form. Just because I don't have control over the elements and can't change my appearance doesn't make me inconsequential. And, for some reason, she certainly thought enough of me to abduct me, though I still haven't figured out why *I* was chosen."

Tearach shook his head. "I don't get you. Even when you're furious, your mind still keeps analyzing."

She walked by him, held her hands up and sighed. "Can't help it, my Goblin friend. It's the way I'm made."

Tearach stared at her. Were they friends? Had their forced relationship proceeded to that point so quickly? It was true they had enough in common. Neither of them wanted to be in their current dilemma.

But she was still an outsider. Her kind had all but destroyed his. It wasn't possible to be friends with one of them. Or was it? He quickly caught up with her. For some time they walked in silence. Knowing others were close, he risked yet another reason for Shayla's wrath.

"Did Shayla tell you anything about the other inhabitants of this forest?"

Kathy stopped to face him. "Yes. Having seen Shayla's powers and yours, I'll believe what she says about them is true. I got the impression she wouldn't have told me about the Fairies and all the rest except she was leading up to revealing your situation. I pretended to be quite shocked by all her descriptions of mythical creatures lurking about. She had no way of knowing I'd already been flummoxed by you in Goblin form."

Tearach seriously doubted this woman had ever been flummoxed, as she put it, by *anything*. Except for the times she'd been provoked, Kathy seemed to be in total control. How did a person get so mentally harnessed? His desire to see her shrink in terror was gone. Somehow, he didn't want to make her fear him. But why? She was his people's enemy. "Why didn't you tell Shayla you'd seen me as a Goblin last night?"

"It was between you and me." Kathy left it at that. Some instinct had told her that Shayla wouldn't approve of him revealing his form. Had that same instinct prompted her to protect him? He was her abductor, albeit an unwilling one. Why should she care what a Druid Sorceress did to him?

"Well," he tossed his hair back over one shoulder, "I've put my foot in it by trying to show you *anything*."

"I gather she thinks it's her business to reveal this forest world." She lifted her hands toward the surrounding scenery.

"By rights, it is. And you should try and remember she's very powerful. Provoking her isn't wise."

Kathy laughed in disdain. "She won't do anything but scream a lot. That woman's got plans for you and me. Besides, I don't see *you* walking on egg shells around her."

"That's different. There's not much she or anyone else can do to me anymore."

Kathy noted the sad tone in his voice. They walked further without seeing anyone, and she realized it might be due to her presence. Instead of feeling trepidation, there was a kind of excitement in being in a place so unreal. She found herself wishing the others would show themselves.

Tearach glanced at Kathy. She was wearing the same kind of clothing as some of the women in the Order. But she was so very different. She had no powers save those of her mind. Considerable as that brain of hers was, things could get very dangerous for her. For *all* of them. Still, there was a kind of exhilaration about her. The first time she met a Fairy, they'd probably be answering questions all night. He wouldn't put it past her to ask to touch their wings or gather up some Fairy glamour to study. Goddess help them if she ever got her hands on a microscope and a field notebook. The scene, as he imagined it, almost caused him to smile. Kathy would do exactly what pleased her. The woman seemed to approach life fully. No apologies or explanations, so why had she stopped saving lives and buried herself in a city where she had no friends and worked at a job that offered little challenge? He stopped walking, sat on a downed tree and invited her to join him. It was time for her to answer a few questions.

"So tell me about yourself."

She shrugged, pulled at a tall blade of grass and looked away. "What's to tell?"

"Did you know the Sorceress and her staff did extensive research on your background? They wanted to know who they were dealing with before deciding to kidnap someone."

"So I've gathered." She turned to look at him. "If you know all about me, why are you asking?"

"Maybe because I've been volunteering a lot of information and getting nothing in return. I don't want Shayla's version of your history, however thorough that may be. I want to hear it from you."

"Hear what?"

"All right, you seem to handle things bluntly so I'll just come right out with it. Why did you stop saving lives to become a temporary secretary?"

She turned away. "Shouldn't we be getting back? Your Sorceress might have her people looking for us."

He pulled her around to face him. Her expression was shuttered, but he gently persisted. "You aren't worried about her. Answer me."

Kathy took a deep breath and studied her feet. "I decided I ... wasn't able to help anyone anymore."

Tearach softened his tone. "Because you saw your father and fiancé die?" He watched her hands clench.

"Your Sorceress *is* thorough, isn't she," came her breathy response.

"What happened, Kathy?"

She swallowed very hard. "There was only one other person who used to shorten my name, you know. Everyone else always calls me Kathleen."

"*Talk* to me," he quietly insisted.

"My dad. He always called me Kathy. All my life I saw him pick up his gear and go to the station. To me, he was a hero. I never wanted to be anything else but a firefighter, just like him. When I graduated from the academy, it was one of the happiest days of my life. Daddy was so proud." She stopped and sadly smiled. "We even managed to get stationed together."

She sat on a stump and looked into the distance. Tearach wondered if she'd finish. It seemed she was fighting for control. He'd done it often enough to recognize the signs.

She eventually continued. "Steven was a paramedic as well as a firefighter. He convinced me to get paramedic training, and we found ourselves becoming ... very close." She stood and wrapped her arms about her chest. "We got a call one night. It was very late. There was a high-rise apartment complex on fire. People were trapped inside. My father and Steven were the first two men in the building. When they got to the top floor, the roof collapsed. I was in charge of the medical team outside. There was nothing anyone could do. End of story."

Something in his heart twisted. "You have no one else? No family?"

"You know I don't. My mother died when I was little. There's no one else."

"I'm sorry, Kathy."

"So am I. But it can't be changed. While neither my father nor Steven would have wanted me to dwell on it, I just didn't want to watch it happen to someone else. So, I left the department. It was over for me when they caught the men who set the fire."

"It was arson?"

She nodded. "The apartment building was occupied by foreign nationals. Some people on the block wanted to run them off. But they didn't consider the full consequences of their actions. They didn't give a single damn!"

Tearach noted how she ended the story on a bitter note, belying that the tragedy was really over for her. How similar their circumstances were. Both of their worlds had ended because of someone's illegal, careless actions. Shayla's researchers were very good indeed.

"So now you know everything." She sat back down beside him. "It's your turn. Tell me why the Sorceress wants us in a relationship."

Before that story could be told, Tearach needed to have some space. Adding his sad tale to hers wasn't going to make the day go any better, and it had already started badly. "I will. But I want you to meet someone first."

When he stood and offered Kathy his hand, it seemed the most natural thing in the world for her to take it and go with him. She was often confused by his behavior. One moment it seemed he didn't want to have her anywhere near. The next, he was sharing confidences that had him in trouble with his so-called Sorceress.

"By the way, does it bother you if I call you Kathy instead of Kathleen?" he asked.

She seemed to contemplate the matter. "No, I think I like the short version better. It's less pretentious."

They walked into an area where the undergrowth was at its very thickest. Tearach pushed brush aside and a path suddenly appeared. It was well hidden and meandered past a source of running water. She could hear a waterfall and wished it was visible through all the green shrubbery. The leather clothing and tall boots served them well. Kathy finally understood the need for the leather clothing.

"We're here," he announced and pulled her out of the shrubs and into a small clearing.

Kathy gasped. In the middle of a perfect little meadow sat a two-story Tudor cottage. It had a thatched roof, stone walls and a split rail fence around the yard. The windows were framed, crisscross fashion, to form elongated diamond shapes in the glass. Flowers grew from well tended beds, and birds ate seed from various feeders. Smoke wound in a welcoming spiral from one of several chimneys.

"This is beautiful," Kathy breathed. "Whose is it?"

"Mine. And there's someone inside I want you to meet. She's the love of my life." He eagerly walked forward.

Kathy hung back for a split second. No one had said he was involved with anyone. Why in the world would Shayla want *her* kidnapped if Tearach was in love with someone? Some small part of her didn't want to know who was in the cottage. She'd assumed, wrongly it seemed, that the Goblin was alone. When he turned and motioned for her to catch up, she did so with great reluctance.

"Cairna," he called out and pushed the front door open, "I've brought someone for you to meet."

As Kathy stepped inside, she heard a sound from the staircase, and she turned to see a beautiful young girl descending. She was dressed in the same kind of medieval clothing she and Tearach wore, but her elfin features and long black hair were striking. And like Tearach, the girl was one-hundred percent Goblin.

When Cairna saw Kathy, she grinned and launched herself into Tearach's embrace. "Ohhhhh, you brought her."

Kathy stared at them. This was growing stranger by the moment. This girl *wanted* her here? She was still a teenager, and Tearach had to be twice her age. He didn't seem the type to cradle-rob, but what did she know about the Goblin social structure?

Tearach gently disengaged himself from Cairna's hug and turned her toward Kathy. "This is Cairna," he introduced.

Cairna stepped forward, smiled and held out her hand. "I've wanted to meet you properly, but I had to wait for Uncle Tearach to give his permission."

Uncle Tearach? Kathy felt a little silly. And why had the thought of someone being in Tearach's life bothered her? It wasn't as if she was going to consent to Shayla's crazy scheme and have sex with him. "Hello, Cairna. Tearach didn't tell me he had a niece." She smiled back and shook hands with the girl.

"I'm sure he's had a lot on his mind." Cairna shot an accusing glance toward Tearach.

"You two have met before. Remember?" Tearach looked pointedly at Kathy.

Something about Cairna *was* very familiar. Then it hit her. "You're the girl on the trail. The one pretending to be hurt!" Only *that* girl had looked human.

Cairna lowered her head and nodded. "I'm sorry about that, Kathy, but Shayla said we had to get you into the car. It seemed safer if you were stopped when Uncle Tearach grabbed you. If you'd been running, he might have had to knock you down."

Kathy wanted to be furious at the girl's part in her kidnapping, but logic told her if Cairna hadn't participated, Shayla would have had someone else do the job. "I don't suppose you had much choice in the matter."

"Neither of us did," Tearach answered for her.

Kathy looked at them, shook her head and sighed. "It's water under the bridge now. Shayla seems to be calling the shots for everyone."

As if the whole matter were a minor inconvenience, Cairna smiled again and grabbed Kathy's hand. "Come into the living room. I'll make us some tea. If Uncle Tearach had said you were coming, I'd have spruced the place up a bit."

Kathy followed the girl, looking around as she did so. The cottage was immaculate. The walls were white, furniture polished and book shelves dusted. Pots of flowers crowded windowsills, and of all things, a blue stuffed cat rested on the sofa. Cairna picked it up, flopped onto the cushions and hugged the cat to her. It could be any cottage in any meadow anywhere in Great Britain. Cairna could have been any teenager sitting on the sofa with her stuffed animal. But it was a *Goblin* home in the middle of some enchanted forest. Kathy began to wonder when she was going to wake up and find her dreamworld had disintegrated. She sat on the sofa next to Cairna. Tearach threw himself into a larger chair near the fireplace and propped his booted feet on the coffee table. Much to Kathy's amusement, Cairna leaned over, pushed them off, and glared at him.

"We have *company*," she growled from between clenched teeth. "Anyone would think you'd been raised in a barn!" She turned and smiled at Kathy as if nothing had happened.

"*Oh, for the love of Herne,*" Tearach muttered in exasperation, got up and went into the kitchen.

Kathy had to bite her lower lip hard to keep from laughing. It was priceless to see the Olympian-sized Goblin verbally trounced by his pint-sized niece. Green or not, these people seemed to live their private lives much like anyone else.

"You *will* stay for lunch, won't you?" Cairna addressed Kathy and ignored her uncle's lapse of decorum.

This was getting sillier by the moment. While Cairna's etiquette was impeccable, Tearach had suddenly reverted to acting like a cave dweller. "Well, um ... of course. I'd love to, if it isn't an inconvenience," Kathy responded, still trying to hold back her mirth.

"Cairna, I'm starving," Tearach yelled. "When do we eat?"

Kathy watched him walk back into the living room munching an apple. He nonchalantly leaned against the wall and waited for Cairna to answer. Kathy wasn't fooled a bit. He was behaving boorishly on purpose.

Cairna let out a loud sigh and responded with barely controlled irritation. "If you'd be so kind as to set the table, I'll be right there. Kathy and I are conversing."

"Since when do we set the table? We usually eat standing over the sink?" he innocently replied.

"*Uncle Tearach!* We have *never* eaten while standing over the sink. Kathy will think you're an ill-mannered boor." Cairna stood up, dropped her stuffed cat onto the sofa, and stalked toward him. "You'll have to forgive him, Kathy. For some reason, my uncle seems to have forgotten how to *spell* deportment. Let alone *practice* it!"

When Cairna grabbed the apple away from him and stormed into the kitchen, Kathy buried her head in her hands and laughed to the point of tears. She finally looked up to see Tearach staring at the floor and shaking his head.

"She seems to think this is all some fairy tale. That we're all going to be happy and everything will work out. I've tried talking to her, but Cairna just doesn't want to listen."

Sounds of pots being furiously banged against each other reached them. Kathy pushed her hair back and tried to compose herself. "Forgive me for saying so, but she's young and trying to make a good impression. Provoking her isn't going to help."

He raised his eyebrows. "What makes you think I was provoking her? For all you know, we really *do* eat meals over the kitchen sink."

"Maybe *you* do, but it looks to me as though someone raised that girl with perfect manners."

He stared at her for a long moment. "Thank you. I did my best."

Kathy was stunned into silence. "*You* raised her?"

"We're all that's left of our family." He paused, and then he deliberately changed subjects. "And you needn't sound so shocked. I *can* spell deportment."

She smiled at him and he almost returned it.

"Lunch is ready," Cairna walked back into the living room, grinned at Kathy and held out a welcoming hand. When Tearach would have followed them into the kitchen, Cairna put her palm in the middle of his chest and stopped him in his tracks. "*Yours* is sitting out on the stoop."

While Kathy and his niece ate a lunch of chicken salad, fresh fruit and lemonade, Tearach sat outside choking down a very dry sandwich. He didn't have a right to feel sorry for himself. Goblin women were known for their terrible tempers and he'd tried Cairna's patience to the limit. Without warning, the humor of the situation sank in and he almost smiled. For the first time in years, he felt some emotion akin to optimism.

Then, the solemnity of the situation hit him like a brick. They were all pretending they could remain friendly when there was no future for him or Kathy; no future for Cairna and her offspring; and no future for the rest of his people. Kathy's presence was a diversion, taking time away from a problem that wasn't being addressed. He tossed his sandwich aside and watched a flock of sparrows descend on it. As he listened to the women talking in the kitchen, his fury over his race's plight returned with intensity. The Sorceress was playing them for fools, and there was nothing anyone could or would do to stop this travesty. Now his beloved niece was involved and it tortured him to raise her hopes.

He stood and walked purposely toward the peaceful woods, silently praying that Herne would present a solution to his people's tragedy. There was no help from any other source as he saw it. Everyone had abandoned him with the monumental task of saving an almost extinct race. It seemed the horror of the matter only registered with him. He'd never felt more utterly alone in his entire life.

"Damn you, Sorceress! Damn your ideas and me for having any part of them!" he muttered and realized his people's welfare would have been better entrusted to his older brother. It was too bad Traed hadn't survived instead of him. If he could have changed places, he gladly would have.

Chapter Five

Tearach left Cairna and Kathy alone. He took his time meandering in the woods, then among the beds of flowers in the cottage garden. Later, he watched the sun set. The women didn't appear to miss his presence, and he'd just as soon be alone for a while. Events in his life seemed so out of control.

The women's loud laughter brought him out of his reverie. He had work to do, and Shayla would be waiting for him to bring Kathy back. Going back to the castle and facing the Sorceress wasn't appealing. He sighed, walked back to the front of the cottage and pushed on the heavy oak door. The women were sitting at the kitchen table as he presumed they had been for hours, nattering on like old friends. Cairna's pretty face was animated as she spoke. Kathy's chin rested in the palms of her hands as she intently listened. The afternoon sun glittered through the prism windows and lit her blond hair. It was like seeing a thousand tiny diamonds firing the gilt tresses. In that instant, he knew there were enchanted women of the Order whose beauty couldn't compare with Kathy's. But she was an outsider. Under any other circumstances, she might have been put to death for setting foot inside this sacred realm.

He'd have to tell her what Shayla obviously hadn't. Maybe the Sorceress was waiting for the proper time. Since Kathy would never agree to Shayla's plan, there was no sense in putting it off. Besides, he'd already promised to explain why Shayla wanted them intimately involved. Cairna looked up and smiled at him. He could see she was over her anger at his ridiculous display of bad manners.

"Uncle Tearach, sit down. I'll make some tea," she invited.

He held up his hand, declining the offer. "No, thank you, sweeting. I have to get Kathy back to the castle." He saw Cairna's expression change from cheerful exuberance to quiet thoughtfulness.

"I was thinking. Maybe ... maybe the Sorceress would let her stay with us." When both Kathy and Tearach murmured their mutual misgivings, she quickly continued, "The spare room next to mine is all ready. It has a lovely view, and it's less oppressive than that drafty old castle."

"Cairna, the Sorceress is concerned that ... well..." Tearach looked at Kathy for assistance.

"She knows I'll try to escape. That's why she's holding me under lock and key, where I can be guarded," Kathy told her.

"But if you promised *not* to attempt such a thing, maybe she'd let you stay with us." Cairna looked from one to the other, watching for any sign of concession.

"Even if I made such a promise, what makes you think she'd believe me?"

"Uncle Tearach could vouch for you."

Kathy looked at Tearach for an explanation.

"That means that I'd be punished if I let you get away," he supplied. "And you *did* promise to try that very thing."

Kathy nodded in agreement. "Yes, I did."

"May I walk back with you, then? If Kathy can't stay here, at least I could have a little more time with her."

Tearach nodded his permission. The two of them could talk, and he could continue his contemplation of

these strange, depressing events. This entire situation would have been so much easier if Kathy were less approachable. Less open-minded. If she'd only screamed and carried on hysterically at the outset, the Sorceress would have seen how futile all this chicanery was. But the outsider was so damned curious, letting her mind rule her emotions. And that was making everything so much more difficult. Now, Cairna was befriending her. He could only see that friendship ending in sorrow, and his niece was going to get hurt. No good could come of any of this.

The walk back didn't seem to take any time at all. When they were finally inside the castle entrance, the connecting doors to the library opened and Shayla stepped out.

"It's about time you brought her back. Another half hour and I'd have sent Lore and some of the Fairy guards after the both of you," she angrily declared

"Uncle Tearach just brought her to see the cottage, Sorceress. I'm sure Kathy doesn't like being cooped up."

Shayla snorted. "Take Kathleen upstairs, Tearach. Come with me, Cairna."

Tearach's concern for his niece made him want to stay with her. What did the Sorceress want with Cairna? If something was amiss and Shayla was angered about it, *he* should take the consequences. Not his beloved niece. Something in his expression must have alerted Cairna. She put her hand on his arm, nodded and smiled.

"It'll be all right. Take Kathy upstairs," Cairna said. Then she bid Kathy good night and followed Shayla into the cavernous library.

When they entered Kathy's room, she immediately turned to Tearach. "Your niece shouldn't be involved in any of this. She's just a young girl, trying to be friendly. I don't know what Shayla wants with her, but you'd better get back down there. Cairna can't be blamed for anything we've done or said."

His first emotion was shock. Kathy was expressing his exact feelings. Under normal circumstances, Shayla would only be offering his niece tea and conversation. But the situation wasn't normal. The Sorceress had been furious with Kathy and him earlier. He tried to believe Shayla wouldn't take her anger out on Cairna, but his concern couldn't be assuaged. Shayla might use any leverage to get him to comply with her wishes. Still, it was contrary to everything Tearach knew about outsiders for Kathy to be concerned for Cairna, a young Goblin girl she'd just met.

"Why do you care?" he asked.

Kathy huffed in irritation. "Look, I know you don't want me here and I'm pretty certain you don't even like me much, but I'd never want to see Cairna or anyone else hurt because the Sorceress has a bone to pick with you and me." She paused and stared at him. "You must think I'm some kind of monster not to give a damn about Cairna's feelings or about what happens to her. She's just a kid."

"You've only just met her."

"That doesn't mean I can't care about her. Since I've been here, Cairna is the only one who's been sincerely kind. And I don't know your Sorceress very well, but it stands to reason the girl might be used against you. It's obvious you love her and would do anything for her."

"You've learned a great deal in such a short time," he conceded.

"Any dolt could tell how you feel by watching you when you look at your niece. Now don't waste any more time and get downstairs."

He was turning to go when the bedroom door opened. A smiling Cairna waltzed in and began to gather the few personal things provided for Kathy's comfort.

"What are you doing?" Tearach asked.

"The Sorceress says Kathy can stay with us. And you're not to have a word about it," she quipped. "I'm getting her things together so she can come back to the cottage tonight."

Kathy and Tearach gawked at one another in surprise.

"Cairna," Kathy stopped her by stepping in the girl's way. "What are you talking about?"

She shrugged. "I just told the Sorceress that Uncle Tearach would vouch for you and that there would be no problems."

Tearach groaned, sat in a chair and put his head in his hands.

"You wouldn't try to escape and get him into trouble, would you, Kathy?" the girl innocently asked.

"I'm not sure I could get him into any more than he's already in."

Cairna shook her head. "If you try to escape, the woodland guards will only bring you back and Uncle Tearach would be tied and beaten in front of the whole Order. You wouldn't do that to him." She continued to collect things from a wardrobe.

Kathy walked to where Tearach sat and spoke to his still bent head. "Is that true? Would Shayla do that to you?"

"That's the ancient punishment, or judgment, as we call it, for letting a prisoner escape," he confirmed.

"Cairna, put my things back. I can't go with you."

Cairna stopped what she was doing and stared at Kathy. "Don't you *want* to come?"

"It isn't a question of whether I want to stay with you or not. I have to get out of here, and I *will* try to escape."

"But you wouldn't try such a thing if you were with us at the cottage. Would you?" the girl pointedly asked.

"No. I wouldn't get your uncle hurt, but..."

"That's all I needed to hear," a voice from the doorway solemnly pronounced. "I can't have people watching you day and night, Kathleen. They have other responsibilities. You'll go with Tearach and Cairna. If you even attempt to leave these woods, I'll have Tearach so badly beaten he might not live. Is that clear?"

Kathy angrily stalked toward Shayla, but Tearach caught her halfway across the room. "Let it go, Kathy. Just get your things and let's get out of here," he ordered.

Cairna quickly gathered the rest of Kathy's meager belongings and the three of them walked out of the room.

They made their way back to the cottage in complete silence. Tearach didn't know who was worse, the Sorceress or his niece. One of them was deliberately forcing him and Kathy together, and the other

assisted through innocence. Having Kathy so near wasn't the issue. At least, that's what he kept telling himself. The real matter was his frustration at being thwarted again and again. The Sorceress seemed to have her way no matter what he did. Even Kathy unwittingly helped by not looking frightened.

It was late when they reached the cottage. Cairna bounced up the stairs inviting Kathy to follow. He didn't want to be there. Without telling Cairna his intentions, he left the cottage to replace the first man he found on guard duty. He decided to stay on duty every night until the Sorceress saw this new tactic wouldn't work. He'd sleep during the day when Kathy was awake and guard the woods while she slept. They'd see very little of each other. Cairna would be upset with him, Shayla would be incensed, and Kathy ... probably wouldn't give a hang either way. The woman might even attempt her escape, and Shayla would have to pronounce judgment. Except for Cairna's welfare, it made very little difference what happened to him. His niece was old enough to care for herself. The girl would eventually take a mate, and then she wouldn't need him at all. What would he have left? He'd be the leader of a doomed people, Cairna included.

As he saw it, things were going from bad to worse. The Sorceress seemed so intent on this latest plan, and she was unwilling to take any other course of action into consideration. Each day that passed meant less time to discover the reason why their children died. For the thousandth time in eight years, he questioned why his people were being persecuted. So far, he'd done nothing—not one single thing—to give his people a reason to hope. And he didn't have a clue what to do next. Mating with Kathy was not only inappropriate, it was impossible.

He found a Fairy guard to replace and let the man go home to his warm mate. Positioning himself next to a giant oak, he peered into the darkness. By the time all this was over, he'd be very popular with the men who stood nightly guard duty. The darkness was peaceful, and in its presence, he might be able to contemplate the utter chaos Shayla had made of his life.

* * * *

Three days later, Kathy was standing in the lovely pale green and white guest room she'd been given. Her window overlooked the garden, and flower scent permeated the air. But no matter how enchanting the cottage and the scenery were, she was still a prisoner. Escaping was out of the question since doing so would endanger Tearach. She told herself her abductor's welfare shouldn't matter. Under any other circumstances, the very hounds of hell could have been tied outside and not stopped her from leaving. But Tearach was as unwilling a partner in this ordeal as she, and she didn't have it in her to hurt Cairna. Shayla's maneuvering had firmly entrenched her into Tearach's home, but he had instituted his own bit of strategy and stayed away most of the time. While she noticed his absence, the affect it was having on Cairna was devastating. The girl constantly stared toward the forest and moped. Kathy helped with the garden and housework and tried to stay out of the woods. On several occasions, people stopped by. But as Cairna introduced them, she explained that they were in human form, and they never stayed long enough for Kathy to get to know them. Kathy's innate curiosity about the place, its origins and the people kept her asking hundreds of questions. Cairna answered those she could. Other things, she seemed to want Tearach to explain.

She was in the garden, helping Cairna gather herbs, when Shayla and several men appeared at the edge of the woods. Cairna shaded her eyes from the sun with one hand. She ran forward, met Shayla halfway across the little meadow, and walked with her to the cottage. Kathy only caught the last part of their conversation.

"Yes, child. I'll see to it," Shayla said to Cairna and then turned toward Kathy. "Are you settling in well enough?"

"Why does it matter? I'm here against my will," Kathy quickly replied. She was tired of being

outmaneuvered by the older woman.

"I've promised Cairna that her uncle will be home more often. It's poorly done of him to leave you when he knows what must be done."

Kathy opened her mouth to ask Shayla just exactly what she meant. Tearach had promised to enlighten her about this *relationship* between them, and then he'd disappeared into the greenery. And Cairna was a clam on the subject. Kathy held her questions when the subject of their discussion came walking across the meadow with four large men. It looked as though he was being escorted, and the expression on his face could only be described as thunderous.

"I was told you wanted to speak with me?" Tearach bit out as he neared their location.

"You'll cease these nightly wanderings of yours, stay home and take care of business, Tearach. When it's your turn to stand guard, someone will be sent to fetch you. Do you understand?"

He responded with a silent glare.

"Furthermore, Cairna will be staying at the castle," Shayla informed him. She raised her hand to stop his ready protest. "When you've done your duty to your people, Cairna may return home and not before."

Tearach couldn't believe what he was hearing. What would the Sorceress have him do? Throw Kathy to the ground and have his way with her? Forcing them to live together wasn't going to solve the problem. Kathy wasn't ever going to comply even if he wanted to. And he most certainly did not.

"Cairna, get some things together. You'll be leaving with me," Shayla instructed.

Cairna murmured her response and went inside the cottage. Kathy kept quiet, trying to ignore her growing sense of apprehension. She'd been alone with Tearach before, but not in such close proximity as the cottage allowed. Still, his mutinous expression at Shayla's pronouncement should have calmed her fears. To get the situation over with, however, he might just do whatever he deemed necessary.

Kathy stood on one side of the garden gate and Tearach on the other. Neither of them spoke as Shayla, her staff, and Cairna left. His glacial expression assured Kathy that he found the scene distasteful, embarrassing and infuriating. Would he take that anger out on her?

Ignoring Kathy, Tearach stormed through the gate, threw the door to the cottage open and went inside. In the kitchen, there was a large bottle of very old whiskey. Assuming Cairna had replenished his stock, he only intended to have one drink to take the edge off his roiling emotions. The whole Order would hear of this. He'd either be the object of pity or a joke. People would talk for weeks about how the Sorceress had forced him home to bed the outsider. It was too humiliating for words. The last of his pride was being stripped away like old wall paper.

"What are you doing?" Kathy asked as she watched him toss down half a tumbler of the whisky.

"I should have thought that was obvious." He reached into the cupboard, pulled down another glass and offered it to her. To his surprise, she took it and poured herself a large measure of the golden liquid. For some strange reason, the whiskey sent a tingling sensation down his windpipe long after it had been swallowed. He'd never remembered spirits affecting him thus. Uncharacteristically, he found he wanted yet another glass of the strong alcohol.

"What's this all about? Why does Shayla seem so intent on getting you and me into bed?"

He picked up the bottle and moved toward the living room. Kathy waited as he lowered his large frame

onto the sofa, and then she sat in a comfortable chair across from him. Tearach stared into his glass and seemed to contemplate his response. She sipped her own drink and winced as it burned its way down her trachea. But the stuff immediately warmed her whole body. It seemed she'd never had whiskey that was so full-bodied and inviting. She immediately wanted more.

"Eight years. Eight long, damnable years," he muttered.

"Tell me," she encouraged. It seemed like he wouldn't answer. He filled his glass a second time before the story began.

"Eight years ago, my people journeyed to a sacred site in Exmoor. It was the time for celebrating *Lughnasadh*, or the festival of first harvest. Our traditions mean everything to us. The way we dress, our religion, the length of our hair, and our rites of celebration are all that's left of our ancient ways. We cherish and honor them even unto death." His voice softened, and he stared into the distance as he took another drink. The alcohol was amazingly enticing.

Kathy kept very still. Tearach was in another place and time. She desperately wanted to know the reason for her being in this strange situation. What was her part in it? Why *her*?

"Part of the ceremony requires drinking water from a sacred pool. The children fill their cups first, then the adults. When the leader gives the signal, everyone drinks together. Those who are too old or too young to drink by themselves are assisted." He gripped his glass tighter. "I and a small band of Goblins were to attend a handfasting, or wedding ceremony, near Stonehenge and then join the rest at Exmoor. Heavy rain slowed us down. The others must have thought we wouldn't get to the sacred pond at all."

He stood and walked toward the window. The next part was so painful he believed he'd die in the telling of it. He sipped yet more whiskey and found it comforting. "When we arrived, there was this horrible, shrieking sound. Not knowing what had happened, I ordered some of the men and women to stay with the children of our group and protect them. The rest followed me to the pond. We ... there was ... death. Everywhere! Those who weren't dead yet writhed in agony. There was nothing we could do. It was only later we found out the pond had been poisoned. Our people drank, not knowing that outsiders from a nearby chemical company had dumped pollutants into the water. Every man, woman and child who drank that water died. There were less than fifty of us remaining. It took us days to secretly transport the bodies back here and burn them. My father, mother, and three siblings were all there. My oldest brother, Traed, was our new leader and Cairna's father. Cairna would have been dead as well, but she begged her parents to let her come with me to Stonehenge. She was only ten years old."

"Tearach," Kathy whispered, "I'm so sorry!" She gulped down more of the exotic whiskey which seemed to dull the horror of the story only a little, and moved toward him.

"I found the men who did it!" he continued as if he hadn't heard her. She placed a hand on his arm, but he took no notice.

Kathy could not imagine what he'd done to them, and she didn't want to know. He turned his face away and his entire body shook. She couldn't tell if his response was due to rage, grief, or a mixture of both.

"Since that time, our women haven't born a single child that survived. The babes either die at birth or shortly thereafter. There are Druid doctors who have practices in the outside world. They've used their laboratories to secretly run every conceivable test that exists, and there doesn't seem to be anything physically wrong with any of us. But our children die. Sometimes, the mothers also die while trying to give birth."

For Kathy, his explanation didn't make sense. Scientifically, it wouldn't follow that future births or the

lack of them would hinge on the events of that day. Still, she was in a world where some kind of environmental catastrophe might cause Tearach's people mental and physical stress so great as to affect the birth rate. Knowing very little about the psychological outcome of such events and even less where Goblins were concerned, she simply accepted the facts as they were. "Shayla thinks an outsider has to put a stop to the deaths?" It would follow, in their world of magic and myth, that the source of a presumed curse might also hold the cure.

He nodded.

"She believes one of you has to mate with an outsider and try bearing a child?"

He turned and stared into her blue-green eyes. "You're finally beginning to get the gist of it."

"You ... and ... me?" Kathy choked.

"Yes."

"Tearach, that's crazy! Why on Earth would she think a child from such a union could survive any better than the others?"

He threw one hand up in frustration. "That's what I keep asking. But the Sorceress insists it's the only way. She thinks that Goblins are afraid to go on living with outsiders surrounding us. That only an outsider can give us back the life force taken from us."

Kathy shook her head in disbelief. "That's just ludicrous."

"I know. That's why I've been trying to thwart her at every turn. As leader of my people, I promised I'd try to do what I could, but this won't work. Obviously, the woman who'd do such a thing should be ... agreeable. Since I can't ever see that happening, Shayla has had you kidnapped unnecessarily. And she's neglecting any other option which might offer a solution."

"Maybe something will present itself in time..."

He interrupted by raising a hand to silence her. "We don't have time. There are only forty-six of us left."

Alarm filled her. "You mean forty-six in this *area*, right?"

"No, Kathy. Forty-six on the entire planet."

"*Oh, my God!*" She backed up and sat down on the sofa.

Her stricken expression confirmed that there was no way Kathy would agree to have a child with him. The whole idea was a terrible waste of time. Plus, there was an outsider among them. Someone who could bring the entire world right down on their heads. He knelt in front of her.

"Kathy, you have to listen. I'll get you out of here ... anything you want. But I'm *begging* you, don't ever tell anyone about us. If you do..."

"They'd lock me up and throw the key away, Tearach. No one would believe me."

"Someone might. There are those people who chase stories of strange phenomenon all over the country. It doesn't take much to get people with that mindset started. Can you imagine what would happen to us? To the children?"

She nodded and sighed. "Yes, I'm afraid I can. But there's no sense worrying over what I would or

wouldn't do. I promised Cairna I wouldn't leave. Shayla would kill you if I did."

"There are worse things," he muttered.

"Like getting into bed with me?"

"I didn't mean ... That is..."

"Never mind. I promised Cairna I wouldn't leave and that's an end to this particular discussion."

"You don't understand, Kathy. The Sorceress isn't beyond drugging us or ... or something equally heinous."

"Then we'll just have to be on our guard." She arched a brow when an idea occurred to her. "What if we tell her we've ... you know ... *done* it?"

He shook his head. "She'll know if we're lying."

"How?"

"She won't be satisfied until she sees you're carrying my child."

"Shayla can't *force* me."

"No, she won't do that. Not exactly. Like I said, some night she'll slip us some herbal concoction or one of her people will. The next thing you know we'll be more than willing to..."

"I get the picture," Kathy interrupted, stopping Tearach before he became too graphic. The scenes her mind were conjuring left her confused. The idea of Tearach making love to her was too erotically disturbing. The man was all male, despite the fact that he was green. Every muscle rippled when he moved. Unlike most large, well-built men, he had the grace of a large jungle cat. And the perfect face of a mythic god, even when he was angry or frowning—which was most of the time. All that only added to the mystical, untouchable quality he radiated. In any other situation, Kathy would have found herself physically attracted to him. There was absolutely nothing wrong with her hormones. Any woman with eyes and a normal sex drive would want such a man. To some, the green, Goblin thing might even be *exciting*. But to be kidnapped and brought here to breed like an animal was degrading, demoralizing, and damned maddening. The Sorceress had to be crazy. Crazy or very desperate. And why, of all the women in the world, was *she* chosen? Outside of the fact that no one would miss her, there had to be a particular reason.

They sat in silence for a long time. Finally, Tearach stood and poured them more whisky. It seemed that drinking the alcohol was making him less wary. Less depressed.

"We'll just have to think of something else to thwart Shayla's plans. In the meantime, just let her think she's getting her way."

They downed their drinks in unison and stared out the window. The bottle was finished by the time either of them was ready to speak again.

Kathy was feeling decidedly woozy. "What gets people so hung up on an idea they won't let it go?"

"Stubborn attitude, I guess."

For a while, Kathy thought about his plight. It explained why, at times, he seemed to hate her. "I *am* sorry, Tearach. I wish this hadn't happened to your people."

"There are times when I'd like to kill every..." He stopped, realizing he was speaking to an outsider about what he'd like to do to them.

"I don't blame you, but I'm not one of the outsiders who killed your people. We're not all the same."

"You sound like Cairna. She wants to believe the best about everyone. But she didn't see her father when he choked on his last words. Thankfully, I had her hiding so she wasn't there when we found the children, huddled next to their parents. Their mouths were foaming, bodies convulsing like dying insects..."

"Stop it!" Kathy cried out, dropping the glass. She stood and turned for the safety of her room. The explicit scenes Tearach related were too vivid and far, far too disturbing. The part about the children broke her heart. They all must have suffered horrendously. The symptoms he described were exactly like those of victims of herbicide or organic phosphate poisoning. She knew enough about the subject to realize that kind of death was ghastly.

Tearach's anger sought release. How dare she turn away as if *she* were the injured party! He stepped in her way. "Maybe I *should* just take you. Why should I show any more concern for you than was shown to my people?"

He stared at her and saw some flash of passion in her lovely eyes. He immediately recognized that his own ardor was out of control. Some instinct told him that something was wrong with this sudden surge of erotic reaction to her presence. His body was already responding, as if he were her lover. He couldn't stop his excitement from building and began to suspect they had, in fact, been drugged.

The alcohol Kathy had consumed was affecting her in a bizarre way. She'd had whiskey before, but it hadn't caused such wetness between her thighs. For some inexplicable reason, she suddenly found Tearach, even in his anger, more attractive than any man she'd ever gazed at. Unable to control her actions, she moved closer, grabbed him by the front of his jerkin and kissed him hard. Her mind told her she was behaving like an idiot, or maybe that should be strumpet, but her body seemed to crave his. The kiss might not make sense, but she had to taste him. She had to feel those full lips against hers.

His mouth met hers in a searing kiss. She grasped his shoulders, and the sensation was like holding onto green granite. His chest was as muscular as the rock-hard arms surrounding her. As the kiss went on, something changed. His touch became less urgent and more yearning. His strong hands began to caress, and a primal impulse within her responded. Instead of fighting her feelings, Kathy looped her arms around his neck and plunged her fingers into his long, black hair. A low moan rumbled from his chest. Their tongues parried and she could feel the tips of his incisors. Their sharpness excited her.

Tearach pulled his mouth away to trail fiery kisses down the length of Kathy's throat. She was soft and warm, and it had been eight long years since he'd touched a woman. It didn't matter if it was the alcohol or the sweet, low sounds coming from the back of her throat. All that mattered was how his body and this woman were responding. He envisioned himself wrapped up in that glorious golden mane, saw himself plunging into her over and over. It would be *his* name she'd shout into the night. He could envision her mounting him and purging this burning anger inside him. All he had to do was remember she was an enemy to his kind, do the deed and let nature take its course. It's what he'd promised the Sorceress. Once the task was done, maybe he could convince Shayla to order more tests and genetic studies. The Sorceress would be satisfied he'd done his best.

Before she could protest, he picked Kathy up and carried her toward the cottage door. His desire drove him to the woods and a place sacred to his kind. Oddly, she didn't object or struggle. Her arms went about his neck and her body melded to his. She kissed his neck and ran her hands beneath the open, leather jerkin he wore. His blood boiled. The woman couldn't possibly know that, to the men of his race,

such small caresses were tantamount to complete acceptance. *So be it.*

He strode through the door and into the night, and Kathy clung to him as dew clings to a leaf. Some small part of him wanted her to want him. *To want what was about to happen.*

He mentally shoved the last of his conscience aside and kept moving. What difference did it make what she wanted? Honor, dignity, pride and chivalry were gone. Shayla had taken the last of those qualities when he'd been ordered to become no more than a breeding stud.

Filled with both self-loathing and pure lust, he moved deeper into the forest, and Kathy snuggled further into his embrace. The insistent idea kept hammering through his brain that they'd been drugged. Still, he couldn't stop himself. He didn't want to stop.

Eventually, he heard the sound of a small waterfall. At its base, was a bubbling pool. Fireflies blinked in the surrounding brush and wild flowers scented the air. The Moon Pool was one of the last sacred places left to his kind. It derived its name from nights like this. Light from heavenly bodies cast a silver sheen upon the water's surface. The effect was ethereal. Instead of being cool like the night sky, the water originated from a hot spring. But steam never rose from the surface. Nothing ever blocked the moon's glow and the place was magical. Kathy lifted her head from his shoulder and gasped.

"It's beautiful," she murmured.

"No outsider but you has ever seen this place." He gently dropped her feet to the ground, but he kept her close to him. "We'll finish this here and now."

"If you're expecting me to go screaming into the night, don't hold your breath, Tearach. I won't give you the satisfaction."

Again, he was amazed by her self-control. Even in her captive state, she knew what was about to happen and faced him like an Amazon. "Am I to surmise you're agreeable?"

Kathy's response was to lean into Tearach, pull his head down to hers and kiss him very hard. All she could think about was having his hands on her body. She longed to explore the acres of muscle beneath his clothing. Green or not, his glorious body was too inviting. Women would kill for a man built like Tearach Bruce. Why should she be denied what her heated senses craved? She was tired of always being sensible. It was time to throw the rule book away. Her abdomen tightened with expectation.

He broke the kiss, gently reached for her shoulders and buried his face in her hair. "I've three times the strength of a human male, Kathy. That means three times the endurance. Do you understand?"

"Shut up and prove it," she goaded.

Tearach growled, pushed her away so he could undo his belt and rip off his jerkin. Kathy's hands immediately covered his chest. Her lips followed. His head dropped back when she teased his nipple. The world, time and all sense of reality stopped. They tore at each other's clothing. Kathy's moan of pleasure filled the small clearing when he massaged her breasts. Her slender, perfect body molded to his. His hands greedily stroked and caressed. She seemed as out of control as he.

The only part of his clothing left to remove was the soft leather pouch covering his erection. Kathy stared at it as if she was mesmerized. He reached to untie the string with one hand while cupping her shapely rear with the other. All he could think of was entering the silken, golden curls between her creamy thighs—stroking himself long and deep within her body.

"No, not yet," she commanded and palmed the leather. "I like this."

Her graceful fingers stroked the pouch and Tearach's mind left him. "*Herne, help me!*" he gasped.

"Herne isn't here. It's just you and me," she whispered.

He gripped her hips and pulled her against him. He pushed his covered erection into the mound of curls and felt her push back. Finally, she let him loosen the string and release the pouch. She reached for him again, but he picked her up and quickly carried her toward the Moon Pool.

"The first time we take one another is in the water. It's tradition," he explained.

"Hurry, Tearach. I need you." Kathy felt every part of her body responding to his touch. And she'd never felt so alive in her life.

The mating lust was upon Tearach so strong nothing could stop him. As with all the men of his race, his vision began to blur, and all his senses shut down except those necessary to mate. He carried her into the water and carefully lowered her. They kissed and fondled each other for only a few short moments before he lifted her straight up then let her slide onto him. They both cried out as the ecstasy of the moment claimed them. Her long legs wrapped around him, and he began to slowly thrust. With each movement, his heart beat harder.

There was nothing for Kathy but Tearach. He was heavy and hard within her vagina. Touching every part of her. After only a few minutes, her control shattered with an overwhelming climax. It seemed to go on and on. Nothing so intense had ever happened to her, and she thought she'd die from the pleasure. *This* was how a man and woman were made to love. When the peak finally faded, she was completely and utterly spent. Only Tearach's strong grasp kept her from falling into the warm water.

Tearach stroked three more times before exploding. No woman had ever pulled such a strong response from him, and it tore through his heated body like an electric charge. His vision completely left him for several moments. Only her warm, soft body kept him sane. It was almost as if his mind tried to leave his sated body. His arms closed around her. He could feel her heart beating against his own breast. But, she was barely conscious.

This was the only time in a Goblin's life when he or she was completely helpless. It was one reason members of his race chose to make love in very secluded places. An enemy would have no problem destroying even the best warrior during the mating lust. Something must have alerted Kathy to his physical state because her hands came up to his face and he heard her soft, surprised exclamation.

"Tearach, your eyes are glowing! It's like looking into cat's eyes when the light reflects from them."

It would only take a few moments for his vision to return. Then, because the act had been so very satisfying, his blood would heat again. "I can't see, Kathy. This is what happens when we mate. It's a very private and intimate thing. We expend all our energy pleasing our partners. Were I with a Goblin woman, she'd be unable to see me as well. We could only feel and hear each other. Our sight would return only when our passion subsided. Because we're stronger than normal, we expend more energy in the act of making love. It's been this way since our race began."

"You're virtually helpless, aren't you?"

He noted the soft tone in her voice. Something in it begged him to trust her. He really had no choice. He *was* helpless. "Yes, Kathy. All my senses are attuned to you. I can't see anything."

Kathy's heart softened. Her incredible climax was due to his giving everything he had. She doubted she'd pleased him nearly as much. But here he was, a helpless giant in her arms. Kathy wondered how much it

had cost him to admit such a thing to someone he considered an enemy. "I'll never tell another living soul, Tearach. Even if every creature in these woods already knows it, I'll never say anything to anyone. I swear it on my life."

Tearach's heart warmed. Kathy had no reason to make such an earnestly phrased promise. They were alone. Some part of her must care a little about him. *But why?* He'd kidnapped her, brought her into a world of magic and myth. How in the world could she possibly give a damn about him?

His vision began to return. Droplets from the waterfall must have fallen onto her face. The moisture couldn't be tears. Kathy simply didn't lose control enough to cry. Certainly, she wouldn't cry over the problems he and his people suffered.

Kathy quickly buried her head against Tearach's shoulder to hide the fact that she was weeping. His vulnerability drew upon a protectiveness she couldn't begin to explain. She began to softly kiss his neck and his body tensed. His skin began to heat. She gently pulled his earlobe between her lips, and then she kissed the tip of his pointed ear. From his shuddering response, Kathy knew she'd found a very sensitive part of his body and stored that information for future reference.

Tearach groaned, slid Kathy's legs from around his waist and pulled her into a tight embrace. His incisors lengthened, and he gently nipped a path of small bites across her shoulder. "Forgive ... forgive me. I-I can't help..."

Kathy felt him bite deep into her shoulder. Instead of feeling pain, an intense contraction began within her vagina. It seemed to circle and caress deep within her and move outward. Her hands clasped his hips, pulling him close as pleasure overtook her. She must have lost all sense of reality because the next thing she felt was his arms around her, and she heard his voice calling her. Another climax claimed her as he laid her upon some soft surface and embedded himself deeper within her body. If this was what it was like to be taken by a legend, there was good reason for those old stories to still exist. The universe reeled away from her.

Tearach placed Kathy upon a moss-covered bank and plunged into her sweet body. His hands grasped her small waist and held her steady. Pleasuring her was more amazing and fulfilling than he could have possibly dreamed. She responded with passion and an ardor all her own. No Goblin woman could have pleased him as much. She was a taste of the forbidden. Being an outsider, it made making love to her more exotic and exciting. And they *were* making love. No sexual liaison he'd shared had been so gratifying. So extreme.

Finally spent, he lay beside her on the moss. Sleep was almost upon him. Kathy was already in some far off place, dreaming peacefully. Her long, glistening hair covered her shoulders and chest. He took a fist of it in his hand and brought it to his lips. Then he stroked her lovely body with his hands and kissed it gently. After resting, he'd bathe with her in the warm water and hold her close. Something deep within him had changed. His anger was completely gone, and without it, he was filled with confusion.

He gazed at her once more and saw the marks his incisors had made. Two small drops of blood had trickled down from the puncture wounds on her left shoulder. He vowed he'd be much more careful with her in the future. She wasn't Goblin and hadn't the ability to withstand such insistent lovemaking. But, he'd felt her searing pleasure his loving had caused, and her response had motivated him to extremes. She *enticed* him, and there were thousands of delights for them to explore. This proud, defiant woman was in his blood. He was already obsessed with having her again.

Tearach turned on his side, pulled her toward him and cradled her against his chest. His hands automatically lifted and caressed her full breasts. She fit against his body perfectly. It was as if they'd

been made for one another. Much needed sleep came, and for the first time in years, he slept without nightmares of the past.

Chapter Six

It was either very early or very late depending upon how one looked at it. Midnight had long since passed. Tearach rose on one elbow to stare down at Kathy's lovely face. The moonlight made her look like some forest goddess. She moaned and turned into his chest.

"Mmmm, warm," she breathed against him and sensuously stretched out on the soft bank.

"Are you all right, Kathy?"

Kathy slowly opened her eyes and gazed up at the muscular giant looming over her. "Yes. I'm *very* all right," she replied and smiled.

Deep inside, Tearach felt a glowing warmth at her response. He had satisfied her well and that left him feeling at peace. "I warned you. Goblins have a great deal more stamina than humans. At least, that's what we've always been told." He pushed her hair away from her face and wrapped his arms about her shoulders. Her fingers began a steady stroking motion over his biceps. He considered not telling her that the whiskey they drank was probably spiked and he feared the very thing he'd warned her about had been accomplished. Shayla had been up to her tricks. The newfound stillness in his heart had him waiting for just the proper moment.

Kathy took her time looking him over. "Where did all this muscle come from? Do Goblins work out?"

"There are a great many ways to keep in shape here, most of them related to work. And having great physical strength helps us survive. It's how we've withstood thousands of years of war, famine and any number of adversities."

She snuggled deeper into his embrace. "You've never told me what you actually do for a living. Is your work that physically demanding?"

"It can be," he said as he stroked her hair again. "Goblins are makers of weapons. My specialty is making just about any kind of knife. I also help mine semiprecious stones used in the Druid arts."

Kathy sat up. They were talking as if nothing unusual had happened. As if they were two lovers passing the time in conversation until they were ready to make love again. Seeing his perfect body made her abdomen flutter. He was just too masculine to be real. All this had to be a lustful dream of some kind. She'd wake up back in her London apartment and laugh at herself and her depraved imagination. Imagine lying in some primeval forest, making love to a mesmerizing creature who wasn't supposed to even exist.

He sat up next to her, stroking her back as he did so. "What's wrong? Don't you remember what happened last night?"

"Yes," she murmured, "I remember everything."

"Then you realize I didn't force you."

"No. I'm responsible for my own actions. I've just never behaved like this before. It must have been all the whiskey."

He sighed heavily, briefly closed his eyes and decided to tell her what he suspected. "I don't know how to say this tactfully, but I have more than a hunch that we were drugged. I don't usually drink spirits the way I did. Shayla and the Druids know of certain herbs that can induce a person to drink more than they should. I hate to even believe she'd sink that low, but I doubt I'm wrong about this. I couldn't put the

alcohol down which leads me to believe there was some tampering."

His soft, low-timbered voice caused chills to go up and down her spine. "If she did such a thing, and I get my hands on her..." she angrily began.

Tearach placed his fingers over her lips. "There's nothing we can do about the circumstances now. We have to live with what's been done. It's my fault for not being more careful. I should have checked all the food and beverages in my cottage. Shayla is nothing if not determined."

"What if I'm pregnant?"

"Then Shayla will have gotten the results she sought," he grimly responded.

Kathy sat up and stared into the distance. That Shayla would actually use some kind of magic or conjuring to induce a sexual situation was despicable. Still, something in her heart didn't reject the beauty of the encounter. She was still furious, however, that the Sorceress would stoop this low.

Tearach moved slightly away, waiting for her enraged response. He saw several confusing expressions pass over her face and couldn't fault her almost perfect control. He couldn't read how she now felt, but he wasn't about to admit regret over their sexual encounter. It had been exciting.

"I won't say I'm sorry, Kathy. It would be a lie if I did." At one time, that admission would have been impossible to share or even accept. She was supposed to be his enemy. But, he wasn't the same person as the day before. He doubted he'd ever be the same again.

She kept her silence and watched as he clenched and unclenched his hands. The muscles on his magnificent body rippled as he moved. Every curve, line and plane screamed power, endurance ... and pleasure.

He let out a slow breath, called upon his reserve of patience then stood and held out his hand. "If you're pregnant, I'll be beside you. You won't have to go it alone. I'd never do that to a woman."

She stood beside him and placed her hand in his outstretched palm. "If what you say is true, I can't blame either you or me for what that Sorceress of yours has done. And she'll take the consequences."

He shook his head in warning. "Let me deal with her, Kathy. You still don't understand the depth of her powers. This time she went too far, and I'm the one who needs to confront her."

She considered him for a long moment. "Tearach?"

"Yes?"

"I'm not going to say I'm sorry, either." She lifted her chin. "I'm not. But that woman can't manipulate people this way. It isn't right."

"I agree on that point." Tearach stood very close to her. Her blue-green eyes searched his face as if she were looking for something in his expression. Not for a single instant did she show any sign of losing her damnable, stoic control. It riled him. His body already ached for her again, and the woman stood there gloriously naked and seemingly oblivious to his growing erection. Worst of all, he couldn't even blame it on an herbal inducement this time.

"Come with me," he softly murmured and led her back into the Moon Pool. After taking several steps into the water, he turned and held out his hand for her. She hesitated only a moment.

"What are we doing?"

He led her into the middle of the pool before answering. Spray from the tiny waterfall drifted over them both. The water was warm and inviting. It only reached breast level on him. Although she was a tall woman, Kathy had to tread water. He reached for her and pulled her against his chest. Her arms looped around his shoulders as though it were the most natural thing in the world.

He cupped some of the water in one hand and let it run across the bite wounds on her shoulder. "Does this hurt very much?"

"No, just stings a bit," she breathed.

"You might have been hurt."

She gently touched the area he bathed. Nothing would ever make her admit how wonderful that bite had been, what it had done for her. Even now, the slightest pressure against the wounds caused her insides to melt with expectation. She was beginning not to care so much about the drugged whiskey, but she wouldn't admit it for the world.

"What purpose does it serve? The biting, I mean."

He stopped his ministrations. "Don't tell me you didn't feel that bite go through your entire body. I was holding you when it happened, remember? It's for stimulation. For eliciting the exact response you had. Though I didn't know it would work the same on a human woman."

All right, so he knew how intense the orgasm had been. He couldn't possibly know how much she wanted it again. But, the games they were playing could prove dangerous. If he hadn't already gotten her pregnant the next time could end up that way. Previously, their excuse had been coercion through drugged alcohol. If they made love again, there'd be only themselves to blame. And yet, the idea didn't frighten her. Her hand automatically dropped to her abdomen.

Tearach didn't miss the movement. He looked for the concern in her blue gaze and saw only wonder. Turning her body in his arms, he pulled her back against him and began to stroke the place where her hand lay. Fear took the place of any other emotion in him. If she carried a child, it wouldn't live. She'd be put through months of waiting only to see her baby die. No. It would be *their* baby. The death would be on both their heads. Until he was certain about her condition, Tearach vowed not to leave her side. And, if she was pregnant, he'd do everything in his power to help her through it. While the baby was sure to pass from this life, he might be able to save Kathy's. He was the one ultimately responsible for the sexual relations they'd shared. He knew the Sorceress' determination and should have been more careful. Kathy's life shouldn't be forfeited because of his mistake.

"I told you, no matter what happens, I'll be with you Kathy. If you're worried, we'll think things out. You might not even be pregnant."

His strong arms kept Kathy very warm. The water relaxed her. She closed her eyes and leaned back against him. The palms of his powerful hands gently pressed against her abdomen and it felt wonderful. How many women friends had she heard complaining about the careless natures of their husbands or lovers. As soon as those men found out their relationships had resulted in pregnancy, the love interest was over. Through the weight gain, sickness and pain, the men had often found other places to be and, sometimes, other women to bed. Her own fiancé had talked her into delaying marriage when she discussed starting a family.

Something deep inside Kathy told her Tearach was different. What would he do for the woman who was

able to give him a healthy baby? What would it be like to hold one in her arms? A sweet, helpless little thing born into the world with magic and legend as its heritage. What would such a child look like? Her or Tearach? It didn't matter who it looked like because she'd love it no matter what. It amazed her that she could rationally think about such things when she should be frightened or angry or both. What was happening to her?

Tearach couldn't begin to guess what Kathy was thinking. As usual, she was a complete enigma. Any other woman would have been crying or flying about in a helpless rage. Truth be told, he wouldn't have blamed her if she had fallen apart. Look at what had happened to her. All because she'd taken a morning run in the wrong place, at the wrong time.

Kathy took on the thoughtful expression he was so used to seeing and he knew she was beginning a logical, practical break down of the problem at hand. For the thousandth time, he wondered what it would take to finally see her lose it entirely. What catastrophic event could elicit a real, bonafide outburst from her?

She turned in his arms and rested her head in the crook of his shoulder. Some ancient feeling of bonding stole through him. "The sun will be up soon. We should get back to the cottage and send for the Sorceress."

"I don't think that's a good idea. I'm afraid I won't be able to control my temper if she admits she drugged us. Besides, we'd be playing right into her schemes if we admitted what we've done."

"We have to talk to her nonetheless. She can tell us whether or not you're carrying a child."

Kathy shook her head in disbelief. "That's just not possible. She couldn't tell so soon."

"It *is* possible, and she extracted a promise from me to send for her after we mated. If it ever happened at all, and I never intended it would."

"You mean that because of a chemically induced loss of inhibition, you're going to fill her in on all the sordid details? Have her perform some archaic ritual in which she tells me if I'm pregnant or not?"

"It's the way things are done here, Kathy."

"But I'm not one of you and shouldn't be expected to play these infantile games."

He stared at her. "Thank you for relegating what happened to us as a childish contest!" He turned away and reached for his clothing.

Kathy hadn't meant to put it so tactlessly. But they wouldn't have engaged in such exotic sex if it hadn't been for Shayla's antics. They wouldn't have had sex at all. She began to shiver. Despite the water's heat, she suddenly felt cold and very alone. She watched him dress before exiting the pool herself. He picked up her clothing and handed the garments to her. She accepted them though he made no eye contact.

"While you're so concerned about what has happened to you, the Sorceress is concerned about what happens to an entire race. Despite the fact that I've vehemently disagreed with her on the matter of bringing an outsider among us and her shenanigans since, I made a promise to her. If you're pregnant, there won't be a repeat of any '*infantile games*.'"

Some part of Kathy was hurt. This whole situation was the result of a command which had been forced upon him. Because of her tactless remark, maybe she deserved his anger. But she'd already heard his enthusiastic yet careful acknowledgment over their tryst. Goblin or not, he was all male. And men usually wanted more sex from a woman, even if they had been tricked into the initial encounter. For that reason,

she'd never allow another sexual scenario like the one they'd just shared, no matter how satisfying.

"You're right. There certainly *won't* be another night like this one, whether I'm pregnant or not."

Kathy's sarcasm was the final straw. Tearach turned on her, ready to say something scathing, but he couldn't do it. She was as much a victim as he was. But he'd actually felt some softness in their lovemaking, and she obviously hadn't, despite her words to the contrary. That was the human part of her showing its ugly side. He needed to remember her race probably couldn't look beyond Shayla's tampering and consider the exquisite nature of their encounter.

"I'll be waiting in the next clearing. Get dressed," he said tersely.

Kathy watched Tearach push through the shrubbery and felt remorseful. She shouldn't have been so damned heartless with her words. But it hurt to think that, despite their drug-induced state, he might only want to have sex to make good on his promise. Worse, that he'd run and tell Shayla everything they'd done was infuriating and the real cause for her anger. They shouldn't let the older woman know she'd won or she'd try other divisive means to control them. And how many others in this forest would know all about their sexual business before another night passed? To her, it was something between them. Something sacred and private. Not an occasion Shayla Gallagher needed to gloat over and analyze. Time would ultimately tell if she was carrying a baby. Not some Druid-dressed mystic.

She pulled on her clothing, raked her fingers through her wet hair and walked toward the nearest clearing. Tearach leaned against a tree, his arms folded across his chest. Without a word, he turned and walked away. She followed. The thought came to her that she could bolt and run. Using the brush and trees as obstacles, she could easily outdistance a man Tearach's size. She'd often done so when training with the other firefighters. But Cairna's words came back to her. Tearach would be beaten, possibly to death, if she left. And there were guards everywhere. One of them might be able to catch up with her.

Cowardice wasn't in her nature, but the reality of the situation was rapidly sinking in. She didn't even know where she was. These people could be crazy. If she was pregnant, what would happen to her baby once she had it? What would happen to *her*? Hadn't ancient Druids made human sacrifices to their deities? Maybe that was the real reason the Sorceress wanted a child of mixed blood.

All sorts of doubts began to emerge. She was frightened, but it would never do to let her captors see it. Above all else, she wasn't anyone's victim. Her father had raised her to be strong and independent and to use her wits when things got rough. She held her head up, pulled her shoulders back and walked on. There would be time for a decision later. For now, she'd play out the charade with the Sorceress.

* * * *

They reached the cottage in silence. The sun was just beginning to rise. From the movements in the woods, Tearach knew the guards had been watching his home. They'd probably watched as he'd led Kathy away from the Moon Pool. Everyone would surmise the mating ritual was done. He wouldn't have to send for the Sorceress after all. He was sure she would come on her own. Rumors would inundate the entire forest in no time.

He began to see why Kathy didn't want anyone to know about their tryst. Why she'd been so sarcastic about sending for Shayla. They'd both be the center of gossip. Not because they'd made love. That kind of thing went on with regularity in these woods. But they'd both be held up to severe scrutiny. Just like insects under a microscope. First, everyone would wait to hear if Kathy was pregnant. Then, they'd watch to see if the pregnancy progressed normally, as Shayla had promised.

As they entered the cottage, he decided it wasn't fair to either of them. And he was still cursed with the thought that their child, if one existed, would die. Tearach's insides felt like rock and his heart sank. His

pride was completely shredded. Was Kathy feeling the same way? How in the world would he ever know? She didn't seem to need him or anyone else, and she was keeping her opinions to herself. He watched as she pulled the curtains aside and looked out the living room window. Even an untrained eye could see movement in the trees and bushes outside.

"Have they been watching us all night?" she angrily muttered.

He sighed wearily. "No, Kathy, they're not *voyeurs*. They just watched long enough to figure out we've been to the Moon Pool. It's a sacred place for mating. I wouldn't have taken you there, but it's Goblin tradition. And we've little enough of that left to us." He purposely avoided the topic of the whiskey, and how they'd made it to the pool to begin with. That wouldn't help their situation now.

"So, when does she get here?"

"The Sorceress will be here soon. I'm sure word got back to her quickly."

"It's too bad your communication system can't be put to use in the real world. There are people who'd pay good money to have a network so efficient."

He passed a hand over his face, mental exhaustion taking its toll. "Spare the sarcasm, Kathy. I don't like this any better than you."

Again, he'd confirmed his dislike of the entire ordeal, and his scowling expression confirmed his words. She turned back to the window and decided to keep her mouth shut. If she wasn't declared pregnant by whatever hocus-pocus Shayla used, Tearach would be expected to do his duty until she was. The Sorceress might even use more than drugs to make them more amenable, and it would certainly take some kind of altered state of mind for her to repeat last night's performance. Her mind was made up. Promise or not, she had to leave. Tearach could accept the consequences. As hard as it was for him to make love to an outsider, perhaps he'd find a good beating more acceptable. She wasn't going to be anyone's science experiment.

"She's here," Kathy said as she turned away from the window.

"Whatever's going on in your head, don't anger her, Kathy. It won't make things easier for you."

Kathy tossed her head and snorted. "You don't seem to mind getting on her bad side."

"I'm a creature of magic and belong here. As much as Shayla and I might argue, she respects me and the fact that I'm the leader of my people. I'm not so sure she'd allow you the same leniency, even if you are carrying a child."

That did it. She was out of this place as soon as it got dark. His declaration had just convinced her no permanent harm would come to him. She, on the other hand, might not be so lucky. She walked to the center of the room and kept to herself.

The door to the cottage opened as if some magical, unseen wind had unlocked it. The Sorceress walked through. Behind Shayla, Tearach could see members of the Order gathering around the cottage. They'd all come to hear what the Sorceress' announcement would be. He began to pace. His nerves had withstood enough.

"I hear you've both come to some arrangement regarding the situation," Shayla proclaimed.

"There's no arrangement. He and I had sex in a pond. That's what you wanted, isn't it? You put something in the whiskey we drank, didn't you? Just to get us there," Kathy quipped.

Tearach quickly pushed Kathy behind him. Her sarcasm would get her punished. "Perhaps it's best we get on with the ceremony, Shayla. I want to know about her condition."

"And what of you, Kathleen? What do you want?" Shayla's brows rose imperiously. "And, yes, I did put something in the bottle of whiskey. What's done is done."

Kathy could have easily hurled something at her, but she wasn't going to give the older woman the satisfaction of seeing her go ballistic. "You want to know what I want? Well, I want to be left alone. I mean *completely* alone," she furiously responded.

"Sorceress, please. Just get on with this," Tearach pleaded, effectively silencing Kathy's outrage.

"Very well. Move aside, Tearach. Kathleen, come here."

Kathy's first inclination was to ignore the command. One look at Tearach convinced her to just get it over with. He looked as if he had one nerve left and she'd just trounced on it. She sighed heavily, stalked to where the older woman stood and waited.

Shayla closed her eyes and placed the palm of her left hand across Kathy's abdomen. She smiled and took a shiny, quartz crystal from the pocket of her voluminous white robe. It was attached to a silver chain. Shayla dangled the sparkling gem in front of Kathy's stomach.

"A girl child. You'll have a fine, healthy daughter. Both of you should be immensely pleased. This will break the curse upon your people, Tearach. You've done well." She placed a hand upon his cheek and smiled, brilliantly.

"No," he murmured, "it will die."

"You believe in my ability to predict this birth, do you not?"

"Yes, Shayla. I believe there's a child. But your magic doesn't extend so far as to save the baby's life. If you could have done so, you'd have saved the other children." He hung his head in sorrow. There was nothing to be done but wait for his baby to perish.

Kathy watched his expression and shook her head. "Tearach! You don't honestly think she knows I'm pregnant? That's just superstition."

"Silence!" Shayla waved her hand and the entire cottage seemed to shake. "You will have respect for our ways, young woman. You aren't in the outside world anymore. Their rules don't apply here. You *are* bearing Tearach's child. You've seen what he is and you still won't accept that magic exists here? That all this is real?" Her hands lifted to encompass a circular direction around her. "Just to make sure you understand I'll send Cairna along with a pregnancy test. Perhaps your analytic mind will register the results of that."

Kathy swallowed hard. The building was only beginning to settle down. "Fine. Do whatever the hell you want."

"And when that test registers you're with child, what will you do, Kathy?" Tearach asked.

She honestly didn't know, especially since he believed any child of his would die. He looked as if the weight of the entire world rested on his shoulders. How horrible to have convinced yourself that your baby didn't have a chance to live. Worse, what if he was right? She watched him shake his head, lower himself into a chair and press the heels of his hands against his eyes. It was a gesture of utter defeat.

Shayla placed a hand upon his shoulder. "I tell you the baby *will* live, Tearach. Your job now is to keep Kathy and her child safe. You will forgo any of your normal duties until the baby comes. It will be delivered under the Dolmen, as Goblin tradition dictates."

He nodded without looking up. "As you wish."

Shayla raised the palm of her right hand. "I offer you both Blessings. This is the beginning of a new era. Of a race stronger than before. The Goblins will flourish and so will their power."

The door opened behind her. The Sorceress turned and whisked through it, and then the door closed. Several moments later cheering erupted outside. Tearach knew the others had been told and believed Shayla's prediction. But he couldn't. He'd seen so many children die. Kathy's human blood couldn't make that much of a difference.

"Shayla has told everyone, hasn't she?"

"Yes, they were waiting to hear the news. I should imagine they'll all celebrate."

"Tearach, there's a fifty percent chance that I'm not..."

"You *are* pregnant, Kathy. The Sorceress has never been wrong about such a thing. But even the Sorceress of the Ancients doesn't have the power to save a life when there's no apparent cause for the death."

"All right, let's say, just for the sake of argument, she can predict such things and that I'm pregnant. Why would she seem so sure about the safety of your child?"

"I don't know. Perhaps it's because that's what she wants to believe. But my child doesn't have any better chance than the others, and they all died. In this case, I believe only science can give us the answers we need. It has something to do with Exmoor. The Sorceress and her people should be concentrating on looking for the source of the medical or environmental problem."

Kathy listened to his contradictory words in amazement. On the one hand, he accepted there was enough magic to predict a pregnancy, but not enough to predict a healthy birth. Kathy was completely confused, but his logic in looking for another source of the problem was inescapable. Mixing her blood and his wouldn't ensure a healthy baby. She turned and mounted the staircase.

"Where are you going?"

"To my room. I'm tired and I've had enough commotion for one day."

He mounted the stairs two at a time until he caught up with her. "That might be best. Come along."

Kathy followed, expecting to be led to her room. He took her arm and urged her straight toward *his*. She balked, staring at him as if he were insane. "What do you think you're doing?"

"From now on, you'll stay in my room where I can keep an eye on you." When she gasped in surprise and tried to back away, he took her arm and gently pushed her through the door. "I'll sleep on the floor if it makes you feel any better. But my bed is bigger than yours. You'll be more comfortable there, especially when the baby begins to grow."

"You're too bloody much! If you think I'm staying in here with you, then..."

"Enough!" Tearach slammed his fist into a small table. It crumbled beneath the blow. "Between you and

the Sorceress, I've had all I can take. After last night, we both need uninterrupted rest. Now, sleep there..." He pointed toward the massive bed. "...or, by Herne, I'll pick you up and tie you in the damned bed. It makes no difference to me."

She raised her hands in a mock gesture of defeat. "Fine, have it your way. For now. But, if you think this is going to go on, you'd better stock up on furniture." She pointed to the shattered wood on the floor.

Tearach angrily pulled a blanket from a chest, threw it on the floor, and then proceeded to undress. Kathy turned her back, sat on the edge of the bed and pulled off her tall, doeskin boots. That was the extent to which she'd undress. She fell back against the pillows, pulled half the forest green spread over her and faced the other side of the room.

She now understood what it meant when people said there was a deafening silence. Over an hour later, she laid rigidly still, waiting for some sign Tearach was resting. When she couldn't stand it any longer, she carefully slipped from beneath the covers and reached for her boots.

"Planning on a walk?" Tearach asked, without changing his position.

"I have to go to the washroom, *if* you don't mind."

"You don't need your boots for that, Kathy."

"Fine! The floor is cold. I'll just get pneumonia or something. I'm sure you don't care."

His only response was to pull the blanket further up around his granitelike shoulders. He was facing away from her when Kathy saw the vase. It, like everything else in the huge room, was heavy and large. A man's room to be sure, the place was beautifully decorated with geodes, crystal collections and pottery. Rugs were scattered about the floor and warmed the otherwise cold, oak space. There was a wall-sized fireplace at one end of the room surrounded by a marble mantle and frame. It was really lovely. And she hated that she was going to have to break what looked like a hand-cast, pottery vase. But break it she would. Right over Tearach's head.

She padded toward the doorway, making enough noise to appear as if she couldn't care less what he thought or if she disturbed him. Any furtive or suspicious movements would immediately alert him. She picked up the vase, and before she could change her mind, threw it. It flew toward the back of Tearach's skull.

The moment it left her hand, Kathy felt so much guilt that she almost cried out. But as Tearach had told her, he was three times stronger than a human. It would take three times the force to overcome him. The vase struck him, and she watched him attempt to push himself up. Then he landed against the floor with a resounding thud. His arms were stretched out, away from his sides and there was no other movement.

"Don't let him be dead. *Please!*" Kathy uttered as she rushed toward him. She quickly knelt and checked his pulse and the rising lump on the back of his head. He'd live. But she didn't want to be here when he woke up. There would never be another chance to get away.

She grabbed her boots, pulled them on and glanced at Tearach's still form once more. She'd have never gotten away with this if it wasn't for his arrogant belief that he was better and more agile than a human. That was a weakness she'd counted upon.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, "but the games are over. You people can play house without me."

She quickly made her way downstairs, took a deep breath and plotted how she'd get out of the forest. Any direction would do. The only way she'd pull off this next part was to act as if she belonged exactly

where she was.

Kathy walked outside and stretched as if she were getting up from a morning sleep. She ambled slowly through the garden, knowing she was being watched. The sun was well up and it would make her flight all the more difficult. That couldn't be helped. She stopped and pretended to study some of the flowers and herbs while moving ever closer to the trees. Tearach wouldn't stay unconscious forever. She had to make a run for it. Speed had always been an asset while running. She had outdistanced men in every firefighter competition and during training. Kathy had always loved to run. Now it wasn't a hobby or a way to keep fit. It was a way to freedom and away from this crazy fantasy world. She waited until talk high up in the trees told her that whoever kept watch had begun a conversation and were off their guard. She bolted like the very hounds of hell were after her. There wasn't a time in her entire life she'd ever moved faster.

Chapter Seven

Tearach felt as if the pounding in his skull would never stop. It seemed to be coming from everywhere and was gradually accompanied by voices. He sat up and tried to keep the room from spinning.

"There you are, we've been looking ... By the stars, man, what's happened?" Lore pushed the bedroom door wide open and rushed in to help his friend.

"Some *demon* hit me," Tearach grouched as he tried to stand. He was only able to do so with the Fairy Leader's help.

"Would that demon have a name?"

"She certainly would! The little..."

"Uncle Tearach!" Cairna charged into the room and helped Lore lead Tearach to the bed. "What's happened? Where's Kathy?"

"I believe Kathy *is* what happened," Lore explained. "She's bludgeoned your uncle and run."

Cairna shook her head until her long hair swirled. "No, that's not possible. Kathy promised me she wouldn't leave."

"Darling, when are you going to realize that she's an outsider and a promise means nothing to them," Tearach said as he rubbed the back of his throbbing head.

"But she knew the Sorceress would punish you."

Tearach could forgive Kathy for hurting him, even admire her ingenuity. She was, after all, a captive. If he were in the same situation, it would be his duty to try to escape. Hurting Cairna with a lie, however, was unforgivable.

"Quit fussing about, you two. I'll be all right. Where is the Sorceress? Kathy's made a run for it and Shayla should be told."

"She knows, Tearach. Shayla and I were in the woods when we saw her running. Men have been sent to fetch her back, but the Sorceress is angry over how Kathy was able to get past you and out the door. Of course, no one had any idea you'd been knocked unconscious," Lore explained.

"Kathy wouldn't do this. She just wouldn't," Cairna softly denied as she gently probed her uncle's injury until she found the fist-size lump on his head.

"Stop defending her, girl," Tearach reprimanded. "This might have been you."

"I thought, she ... that she ... w-would never do such a thing," Cairna burst into tears and hugged Tearach.

"There, there, darling. It's all right." Tearach hugged her and swore Kathy would cry next. "Why don't you go fix me some of that herb tea? You know, the stuff for headaches."

Cairna sniffed, swallowed hard and nodded. She left the room just as the Sorceress barged in.

"Damned, my room is seeing a lot of traffic today," Tearach muttered more to himself than anyone else. He saw Lore smile, but there was nothing funny about this situation. When Kathy was retrieved, he

intended to have the first fifteen minutes alone with her. Anything the Sorceress would plan would pale in comparison to what an angry Goblin could do.

"What have we here," Shayla walked forward and inspected his injury. "Ahhhhh, so that's how she did it. She just pummeled you when your back was turned. Really, Tearach! That's incredibly clumsy of you, though I was ready to throttle you myself for letting Kathy run off." She turned to Lore. "Leave us. I'll have a word alone with Tearach.

After the other man left, Tearach voiced his anger. "Where have you got her? Just let me have her before you do anything."

"Kathy isn't here."

Tearach looked up, forgetting about nursing his injury for a moment. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that she's probably on her way to London by now."

"What?" He stood up so abruptly that his head began to spin again. Shayla pushed him back to the bed and then sat beside him.

"I'm saying she got away and she'll be left alone for now."

Tearach stared at the older woman, dumbstruck. "She could bring the entire outside world down on us."

"Yes, she could, but she won't. In fact, we won't have to lift a finger. Once she accepts that she's pregnant, she'll be back on her own."

"What makes you think that? She may run even farther, and it's *my* child she's carrying."

"The child is yours *and* Kathy's. And she *will* come back. I forbid you to go after her or to send any of your people to get her. Is that clear?"

"You can't expect ... after what she's done ... I can't just sit here and let her get away with it."

"Come, man. The injury is painful, but you'll recover. You've had much worse."

"It isn't what she's done to me. It's what she's done to Cairna. My niece trusted her and Kathy took advantage of that trust."

"Cairna's young. I'll speak with her. But I want your word on this, Tearach. You're to leave Kathy alone. My people are already keeping track of her every move. If we need her back before she discovers her pregnancy, I'll have her retrieved. Do you understand?"

"This is a dangerous game you're playing, Shayla. She could destroy us all."

"That's my wish ... my *command*. And I will have it obeyed. Do you understand?"

"Fine! But I'd like to be kept informed of everything she does." I've a score to settle with that she-cat, he added silently.

It occurred to him that this was the first time Kathy had shown one of those outbursts he'd so wanted to see. The lesson he'd learned was to never turn his back on her again.

* * * *

Kathy couldn't believe her luck. It was almost *too* convenient. Having exited the forest with a band of

guards on her heels, she was able to flag down a passing farmer and hitch a ride into London. The man had conversed with her very little and hadn't commented on her medieval style, leather clothing. He hadn't even asked about her sudden appearance on an abandoned farm road. The more she thought about it, the more opportune it all seemed. Had Shayla been behind it? If so, why not bring her back?

She went straight to her apartment and found everything just as she'd left it. No one seemed to have even noticed her absence. But she didn't stay long. Shayla knew where she lived and would send someone after her.

Grabbing what clothing and belongings she needed, she made a resolution to keep moving. The Sorceress was bound to consider her a threat and would never leave her alone.

Days later, Kathy was in her fifth hotel room when a wall calendar reminded her to count back. She was definitely late. She purchased a pregnancy test and waited nervously for the results. When she finally looked down at the test stick in her hand, a lump formed in her throat. It was positive. There was no need to guess about the accuracy. Something in her heart told her the truth even if she wanted to deny the evidence.

She stood up and looked out the window. The scenery consisted of an alley where cats fought over stray garbage scraps. It was a lonely, forlorn sight. Here she was, in a seedy hotel with a pregnancy test kit. There wasn't a single person she could go to. No one to tell who'd believe her or help. More than likely, repeating her story would only get her locked away. And what would happen to the baby then?

"Oh, my God! A *baby*," she whispered. Kathy sat and stared at a wall resplendent with tacky, rust-red paint. Tears formed in her eyes and she began to sob. She finally decided it was time to stop wallowing in self-pity and think rationally. An abortion would solve the problem. She wouldn't have to answer any questions. But could she live with that? If she decided to have the baby, what would it look like? Her or Tearach? There would be no way to explain a small, green infant. There was no birth defect or condition that could possibly cause such a thing.

Keep it or not. Those were her only choices. Abort the baby and run. Keep it and she'd have to return to that forest. A half-human, half-Goblin baby wouldn't have a chance in her world. If Tearach was to be believed, the baby wouldn't survive anyway. At least, in his forest, the baby would know some measure of peace, however long it lived.

She lay upon the hotel bed and thought for hours. That evening it occurred to her that she hadn't been afraid in that magic forest. There she'd resolved herself to the possibility of having and loving a child, no matter what color it might be. Why, then, was it so difficult here? Was it because of the utter loneliness she felt? Was there something about that enchanted woods that took away fear and let a person think clearly? Was she so changed by that environment that any place else seemed frightening? Or was it not so much a place as the person involved?

Tearach. He'd promised to be there no matter what. Why? Why would he give a damn when he thought the baby wouldn't survive? And where was the control she so desperately depended upon? Thoughts filled her mind, crowded and pushed. Kathy got up off the bed, looked into the cracked mirror that occupied one wall and shook her head.

"You idiot!" she said to her reflection. "This baby is going to have a chance. How could you even remotely consider giving up? That might be all right for someone else. Not for you."

Her hand protectively covered her abdomen. Once the decision was made, her fears fled. To have even considered any other course of action made her ashamed of herself. She was no coward. The baby she carried was an innocent life, a life she wanted to bring into the world. But not just any world. Her child

needed a clean, quiet place of magic and beauty, not some back alley hotel room, or somewhere in some city that could breed fear and loneliness. That kind of place had taken away all the people she'd ever loved. It wasn't going to have her baby as well.

* * * *

Tearach stalked toward the edge of the forest. Since being told Kathy had returned, all he could think about was finding the witch and avenging his niece. Cairna had cried herself to sleep almost every night during the weeks Kathy had been gone. The younger girl had actually convinced herself that Kathy would stay, would be a part of their family. Her gentle little heart had been wounded by Kathy's betrayal.

Before Exmoor, his race had been the gentlest creatures on the planet. They loved life and all living things. Their world was one of peace and quiet grace. Angered, however, they were incomparable warriors. Only beings of peace knew the necessity of ending a conflict decisively to avoid further discord and violence. He intended to end this conflict with Kathy for good, though she had now provoked him to warrior behavior. He tried to hold onto the last of his patience and vowed to make her understand. Whatever it took, his baby needed the chance to eventually die without having any more conflict and turmoil in her unborn life. But his temper was almost out of control. He had Cairna to think of, too, and the hurt Kathy had inflicted on her was unforgivable. For that, Kathy would answer.

He entered the last clearing before reaching the forest's edge. Shayla, Lore and several others stood there. In their midst was a tall, wraithlike beauty with long blond hair. It surprised him that not only had Kathy reappeared, but that she was wearing the traditional leather clothing in which she'd escaped. It didn't matter how she'd come back or why. She was forever his enemy. Seeing Tearach's grim expression, Shayla stepped forward before he could reach Kathy. But Kathy put her hand on Shayla's arm and stepped around her.

"This is between us. Please, leave us alone," Kathy pleaded.

It might not be safe, Kathleen," Shayla warned. "He's quite angry with you."

"He won't hurt me."

Tearach stopped just beneath a huge oak. He glared at Kathy "She's right. This is between us."

"Tearach Bruce, you have the ability to start a new future or throw it away. Keep that in mind when you speak. Don't let your anger destroy something that could be very precious." With that, Shayla motioned those around her to follow and they all left.

Tearach kept his eyes on Kathy and ignored the Sorceress. He waited until his keen senses told him the others were far away. To her credit, Kathy's gaze never fell. She didn't show any fear, but neither did she show remorse. She stepped boldly toward him.

"Will you give me a chance to explain?"

"I can't wait to hear it," he drawled sarcastically.

Kathy took a deep breath. This wasn't going to be easy. "I left because I was afraid."

"*You? Afraid?* It would be easier to elicit that emotion from a brick. You're not the type."

"You have me all pegged, don't you?"

"It isn't us you have to fear. Those in our world live by a few simple rules. Chief among these is that we do no harm except in self defense. It's *your* world that should frighten you."

"You're right. It does. That's one reason why I'm back. The other is that I don't want my baby born into it."

"So having discovered you *are* pregnant, I'm surprised you didn't abort it or later give birth and throw it into a trash receptacle like some of your kind do."

She gasped. "You think I'd do that?"

"You tell me. You never considered an abortion?"

"I did, but that decision isn't right for me."

He moved toward her until only the span of a breath separated them. "Why not, Kathy? That kind of thing is done all the time? Why wouldn't you just kill it?"

"According to you, it's as good as dead anyway. But I'm not giving up like *you*, Tearach. I'm back because I believe in trying until the end. Quit blaming the people in my world for killing children when you've decided to bury your own child before it's even born!"

He was momentarily taken aback. She'd turned the conversation against him. Now, he was the one on the defensive. Before he could think of a response, she started to walk away.

"Where do you think you're going?"

She turned back around. "To find Cairna. It's obvious you won't accept an apology. Maybe she will. In your family, she seems the more levelheaded person."

Pure, raw fury gripped him. Latching onto her arm, he pulled her against his chest. "You're judging me? It wasn't so long ago you agreed that there was no proof this baby would survive."

She hung her head in shame. "Yes, I did agree with that. But my mind has changed in the last few weeks. This baby is going to live no matter what it takes. You're not going to use it as an excuse for your hatred, though I'm sure you'll find some other reason. People who hate always do."

For a long moment he stared at her. The rage he felt had no voice. There was no way to articulate it. He'd hated no one until Exmoor had given him cause.

Kathy pulled away from him and walked into the forest, and he yelled after her, "Stay away from Cairna. You've done enough to hurt her."

Kathy was on the verge of delivering a sarcastic retort when the subject of their discussion emerged from the woods. Cairna stood in front of them, glancing from one to the other.

"I want to hear what she has to say, Uncle Tearach. I want to know why she attacked you and broke her promise to me."

"Go on, Kathy. Explain it to her." Tearach leaned against a tree and belligerently crossed his arms over his chest.

Kathy turned toward the younger girl and spoke softly. "There's no excuse for my having broken my promise. I guess I panicked. I didn't believe I was pregnant, and I thought the Sorceress would do whatever it took to make sure I conceived. Having your life manipulated that way isn't acceptable. And it's more than just a little frightening."

"Go on," Cairna encouraged.

"You're not going to believe anything she says, are you, Cairna? She's an outsider. They don't know the meaning of keeping their word." Tearach snorted. He remembered how upset Cairna had been, and now her expression said she was about to fall into the same trap again. Her heart was too soft, too forgiving.

"I want to hear Kathy out." Cairna responded.

Kathy took a deep breath. "It was wrong of me to leave. Wrong of me to attack Tearach. I'm sorry for it, and I want to come back, especially now that I'll need your help so very much."

"You mean ... with ... with the baby?" Cairna asked.

"Yes. Please help me, Cairna. I need someone who wants this baby to live."

Tearach pushed himself away from the tree and pounded the trunk with one massive fist. "You think I don't want my own child to survive? That I want to see its body cremated like all the others?"

Cairna came to Kathy's defense. "You've only said that it won't live about a hundred-thousand times. And I heard Kathy when she told you that she had the chance to abort it and wouldn't. I believe her. She wants to come back and have her baby here."

That did it. Kathy had placed a divisive wedge between him and Cairna. He wouldn't have it. No one was taking away the only family he had left. The one thing he loved more than all else. "Cairna, you listen to me..."

"No! I love you Uncle Tearach, but I trust the Sorceress. And Kathy wants the same thing everyone else does. Everyone wants this but you. You're the one who sees the future all black and hopeless. I can't ... do it." She began to sob. "I j-just can't see it that way. I want a baby of my own some day. I don't want to think like you. You're hateful!"

He moved forward to pull her into his arms, but it was Kathy she turned to. It was Kathy who held and comforted her. Tearach backed away feeling as though he'd been struck the cruelest blow of his life.

Kathy saw the sorrow on Tearach's face and felt overwhelming pity. He had hated for so long it was all he had left besides his beloved niece. Now, he'd lost Cairna.

"She's upset, Tearach. I'm partly to blame." The girl continued to sob against her shoulder as Kathy held her and stroked her back. "She'll feel differently, later."

"No, I won't," came Cairna's muffled cry. "It's better if he just leaves. He won't listen to anyone."

"Cairna, darling." Tearach moved toward her. "I..."

Cairna raised her tear-streaked face and interrupted him. "Don't! I don't want to hear anything else. You accused Kathy of breaking her promise, but she's sorry. *You've* broken your promise to me, too, but you don't even care."

Tearach felt his heart cracking into pieces. He had to get Cairna back. "Sweetheart, what promise? What are you talking about?"

"The one you made to me about trying. Remember?" She sniffed and fresh tears started.

That seemed like such a long time ago. He'd promised her he'd try to believe in what the Sorceress was doing. Perhaps part of what Cairna said was true. But the chance he'd given the outsider had resulted in him almost having his skull crushed in, having Cairna disillusioned, and in endangering everyone in the

entire Order.

"Cairna, let's go home and talk about..."

"No. I don't want to be around you anymore. J-just go away. It hurts too much to know you don't want your own baby." She began to cry in earnest.

Tearach backed away. Cairna had never spoken to him like this before. She was crying so hard he was afraid she'd be ill and all he wanted to do was hold her. The only other time she'd been so distraught was when her parents had died, and she had always come solely to him when she needed comfort. Now, she not only didn't need him, but she didn't want him. That hurt worse than anything since Exmoor. It was as if he was reliving that horror all over again.

Kathy's vision blurred with tears when she saw Tearach's expression go blank. He turned and quietly walked into the forest, and her heart went with him. She hadn't meant for this to happen. She hadn't expected Cairna to forgive her and turn against the only family she had. But Cairna wanted a future, and Tearach had put her in the horrible position of deciding between her loyalty and love for him and a family of her own one day. Since her uncle couldn't bring himself to see anything but death and destruction ahead, Cairna made her choice on the side of hope.

* * * *

"I've given her something that will make her sleep," Shayla explained as she descended the stairs toward Kathy. "Some of our people are still looking for Tearach. Only a Goblin could have left this place without our knowing."

Tearach had been gone for more than a week and Cairna blamed herself. The girl was so upset she'd refused to eat or drink. Kathy had become so concerned for her health that she'd finally called into the nearby woods for someone to send for Shayla. There had been a small rustling in the treetops and the Sorceress had appeared less than twenty minutes later.

Kathy carelessly pushed her hair back. "Where do you think he could have gone? Cairna says he can't take human form for more than a few hours. What if he gets caught somewhere while in Goblin form?"

Shayla stood at the bottom of the stairs and quizzically watched the younger woman's pacing.

"Why would you care?"

"Whatever else you think of me, I'm not a monster. I don't want anything to happen to him."

"If I thought you were anything other than what you are, I'd have never allowed you into these sacred woods," Shayla proclaimed. "As for Tearach, I can't imagine too many protected harbors for him. But if anyone can stay safe, he can." She paused and then said, "You still haven't told me why you'd care what happens to him."

"I was hoping to work things out with him, get past my having run off to London. By the way, you've not only just admitted it, but I'd long since figured out that you more or less manipulated my escape."

Shayla kept silent, stepped off the staircase and walked to the liquor cabinet. She poured herself a sherry.

Kathy continued without waiting for her comments. "I'm a fast runner, but everything happened too conveniently. My guess is that you were gambling on my running and coming back when I confirmed I was pregnant. What I don't understand is how you knew I wouldn't walk into some clinic and have the baby aborted."

"You were chosen to come here because of your ability to reason. The last thing we needed was an outsider who had no control over her emotions or judgment."

"I wasn't thinking all that clearly the day I ran."

"But you came back, just as I knew you would. And you're still carrying the baby." She paused and shook her head. "Tearach is a fool. He has every reason to be celebrating, yet he's still consumed with thoughts of death. He can't bring himself to believe that eight years of tragedy are over."

"Maybe he isn't able to accept he could be happy," Kathy quietly responded.

Shayla was about to raise her glass and sip when someone pounded on the cottage door. Kathy rushed forward and opened it. Lore was there, and several large men stood behind him.

"We've found him. Actually, he was returning by himself. When he was approached and asked where he'd been, he refused to answer. One of the men persisted, and I'm afraid there was an almighty row," Lore told them.

"He fought?" Shayla asked as she lifted her drink and finished it with one swallow.

"That's a gentle way of putting it. Three of my men are hurt. The way they tell it, Tearach went crazy. Tearach is one of my closest friends, Sorceress, but his behavior has to be addressed. I can't have him beating my people to a bloody pulp."

Shayla slammed her glass down upon a nearby table. "Put that damned man in a room from which he can't escape. If he tries anything else, clear some supplies out of the castle dungeon and throw him in it. Chain him if you have to."

Kathy gasped in disbelief at the medieval command. "What are you going to do to him?"

"I told you that if you ran away while in Tearach's care, I'd have him beaten. I might have rescinded that order because you attacked the man while he slept. But I won't have disrespect and unprovoked fighting among our people. Tearach is a leader and should know better. Whatever his problems are, he can't go about attacking others."

Kathy watched as Shayla stalked out the door and away from the cottage. She barely registered footsteps racing down the stairs.

"I heard everything. She didn't give me nearly enough herbs to make me sleepy," Cairna blurted. "You have to stop her, Kathy!" Cairna came to a halt in the open cottage door. The Sorceress was nowhere in sight. She turned, covered her face with her hands and collapsed onto the floor, sobbing.

"Hush, Cairna. We'll find a way out of this. She doesn't want him dead or the guards would have already done the job." Kathy knelt and fiercely hugged the crying girl.

"Go to him," she begged. "Please, talk to him so he doesn't do something worse. He's never been like this. I don't understand. Is he doing this because I told him to go away?"

"No, darling. I think he's angry with the entire world. But I'll go and talk with him right now."

"Will you, *please*?"

"Yes, right now," she repeated while using a soft, even tone. It was a technique she'd found helpful as both a firefighter and a paramedic. When someone was very frightened, they needed a steady presence.

But she was frightened, too. "I want you to go upstairs and wait. I'll be back as soon as I can."

"I want to come with you."

"Why don't you see Tearach in the morning? He and I need to straighten some things out between us. All right?"

Cairna nodded. "I understand."

Kathy walked toward the door. "I won't let anyone stop me from seeing him, Cairna. That's a promise I won't break."

"Tell him I love him and that I'll be there to say so in the morning."

Kathy pasted on a smile she hoped would look comforting. "I'll tell him. Now try and get some rest. He wouldn't want you so upset."

She watched as the girl walked up the stairs. Then she threw open the door and walked determinedly into the night. If Shayla tried to keep her from Tearach, she'd tear the entire castle apart, brick by brick. Kathy had never before been so afraid for anyone, or so angry *with* anyone. She didn't stop to analyze the contradiction of feelings. The closer she got to the castle, the more urgent it became to see him. She began to run.

Chapter Eight

Kathy pounded on the double oak doors with the brass leonine knocker. It created a sound that could have awakened the dead. An elegant, older man she recognized as the Sorceress' assistant, Hugh, opened the door and let her in.

"I'm here to find Tearach. Will you take me to him?"

The man nodded. "Shayla thought you'd come. I'll take you to him, but don't be surprised if you find him uncommunicative. He wanted to fight again, and she had him restrained."

As the man led her to the back of the castle, Kathy imagined all sorts of barbaric rituals or tortures the older woman would inflict. The hierarchy in this place seemed to be loosely based upon some kind of feudal system, although she realized it might have been the only way these people had survived.

They entered a wide, stone stairwell that led down from the first floor. The deeper it went, the more she imagined a cold, leaking cell where rats nested and a Goblin lay shackled in heavy, iron chains. She remembered Cairna telling her that Goblins didn't do well in enclosed places and preferred the open air. The cottage had been built, therefore, with large open windows where cool breezes blew through the house. Kathy could almost smell the dankness of the dark abyss ahead.

But it wasn't dark. The stairwell was lit with modern fixtures, and the air was comfortable and seemed to be circulating. There were no vermin, no leaks, and no cries of the tortured echoing from cold, stone walls. She could have been on a tour of any old castle in the British Isles. By the looks of it, this particular castle was in much better repair than most.

They finally came to a long hallway. She was astonished to see well-appointed offices that contained the latest computer equipment. It could have been any office building in London. The hallway branched off and Hugh turned left. Several feet ahead of them was a heavy metal door containing a coded locking device. Hugh quickly punched in some numbers and the door opened.

"This area is where we keep our medical supplies for emergencies," Hugh explained. "It also serves as a makeshift operating room if the necessity should arise. All of this level was once a dungeon. It makes a perfect workspace and keeps our day-to-day operations more secretive. When no one is working down here, the entrance to the entire level is sealed with a series of coded locks much like the one on this door."

Kathy was impressed. She felt silly for having envisioned some barbaric dungeon, but the Sorceress' own words had led her to that conclusion. She'd imagined Tearach tied mercilessly in some horrible, dark place.

As if he gleaned some of her thoughts, Hugh smiled and said, "We do have some dungeon spaces left, but the Goblin isn't in 'em. At least, not *yet*."

Kathy didn't want to think about what would happen if Tearach's behavior got him hauled off to those dungeons. Hugh led her down a shorter hallway. Kathy saw a fully equipped scrub room on her left and a room with autoclaves and other medical equipment on her right. Her guide stopped in front of the last room. Before she could ask questions, he nodded toward the door. "He's in there. One of our physicians is with him. I'll go in and let them know you're here."

When Hugh left, Kathy expelled an amazed breath. Everything about this place and these people was one big contradiction. They wanted to keep most of their traditions alive, yet they had access to the latest

technology. In the one room containing the medical equipment, there was a laptop computer sitting on a clean work bench. Kathy walked toward it and stared. The wallpaper design depicted a Merlin-like figure casting a spell. Fairies watched in awe from shadows, and elfin creatures huddled within the Sorcerer's robes. She might have laughed at someone's ironic sense of humor, but her concern for Tearach overrode that indulgence. She walked back to the hallway and waited.

A moment later, Hugh looked around the corner of the door and nodded. "You can come in now."

Kathy walked into the room. A tall man with shoulder-length brown hair was leaning over a hospital bed. His back was toward her, and he was trying to hold down a very angry Goblin.

"Damn you, stay still! I'll shoot you so full of sedatives you'll wake up in the middle of someone else's life. Now calm down!" the man ordered.

"Let me up, Owen! Take these bloody restraints off me or, by Herne, I'll kick your Druid ass when I get free." Tearach let loose a string of curses unfit for even the walls to absorb.

Kathy could feel his anger. It was almost palpable in its intensity. The doctor turned, and she was struck by the man's attractiveness. He smiled at her and held out his hand.

"I'm Owen Delaney." He glanced over his left shoulder. "When I'm not subduing wild men, I'm a doctor practicing emergency medicine at Lady of Mercy hospital in London."

"I suppose you know who I am," Kathy smiled and offered her hand in return, letting it linger in his a little longer than necessary. His bright smile was very inviting. After everything that had recently happened, it was like seeing a ray of sunshine.

He nodded. "Yes, everyone knows who you are. And I'm sure you'd like to talk to Tearach alone." He looked at Tearach. "Mind your manners, or I'll be in with enough sedation to bring a draft horse to its knees."

He smiled again at Kathy, gently touched her shoulder and left. Hugh nodded to her and followed the doctor.

Tearach glared at Owen's retreating figure. All he could think about was getting free and tearing into him. Then Kathy walked into the bedside light. He lay back, closed his eyes and hoped the action would be enough to will her away. She was the last person he wanted to be near. For her to see him trussed up like some penned hog was demeaning to the core. Not that he had much pride or dignity left as it was.

"What do you want?" he ground out.

Kathy glanced at the nylon restraints holding him to the bed. There were triple the amount a human would need, but Tearach wasn't human. His hands clenched and pulled at the constricting wristbands. "I was hoping there was a way to get you out of here and take you home. Cairna almost made herself ill from worrying over you. The Sorceress has had to sedate her."

His eyes shot open and his gaze met hers. "She's all right, isn't she?"

"For the moment. But she won't stay well if this keeps up. It isn't just her physical state. Her emotional state is pretty fragile. She thinks your present predicament is her fault."

He shook his head. "This has nothing to do with her."

"Where have you been? Everyone's been worried."

"That's none of your concern or anyone else's," he snapped.

Kathy paused for a moment before continuing. "Lore says you throttled some of his men when they asked the same question." She saw a contrite look pass briefly across his handsome face, and he stopped struggling with the restraints.

"I *did* hurt them."

"I'm sure you're not very popular right now. Why did you fight them?"

He closed his eyes again. "I ... I don't know." Frustration ate at him. He was consumed with both it and his guilt at having struck out at people who were his friends. It was as though everyone and everything in the world had become an enemy. His people were dying and he'd failed them. At every turn, he'd failed.

Kathy pulled a chair up to the bed and sat down. "You can talk to me or not. But I won't leave until things are settled between us." When he remained silent as stone, she tried again. "All right. I'll stay here and annoy the hell out of you until you talk. You can fight or scream obscenities until the walls melt, but I won't leave. All you'll succeed in doing is having that doctor come back in here with a needle the size of a ten-penny nail. It'll be filled with a sedative, and I'll still be here when you wake up. So, what's it to be?"

"Damned your white hide!" he spat out.

"Okay. We'll start there. Are you angry because I'm *white* or because you're *green*?"

He raised his head and shot her a murderous glare. She just stared back. "Go away!"

"Are you angry with Cairna?"

"I love Cairna. I could never be angry with her."

"But she hurt you. Is that why you're fighting people?"

"*No!* Go away!" He pulled at the restraints again.

"You're acting like a child."

"Then leave and you won't have to put up with it," he growled.

She took a deep breath and silently counted to ten. "I'm sorry I ran away from you. It was one of the most stupid, juvenile, cowardly, mean ... You can stop me anytime, you know."

The soft tone of her voice was like ice on a burn. He didn't want to listen. It was as though he was being compelled to do so. "I don't really blame you for that. At least, not anymore."

His response encouraged her. She leaned forward and placed her forearms on the bed. "Talk to me."

He swallowed hard, took a deep breath and tried to begin. "It's ... so ... I don't know..."

"Just start anywhere," she softly murmured.

"I was angry with you for hurting Cairna. Hurt because she sided with you, and I..." His voice cracked.

Kathy gently placed her hand upon his strong chest. She could feel his heart racing and the look in his eyes was so heartbreaking. Granite would crack before that ungodly, sorrowful look.

"I went back to Exmoor. There's still not one living thing there." He paused long enough to gain a little

control. "My people are dying. The Sorceress thinks she can wave a metaphorical magic wand and make the problems go away. And the worst thing of all is that my own baby will go on a fire with the ghosts of hundreds of others. I don't want to see the look on your face when I take it away. It'll be the same look I've seen dozens of times before. I'd rather be dead than see that horrible gaze one more time."

Tears filled her eyes and she leaned toward him. "There's more, isn't there?"

Tearach forced back the lump in his throat, ignored the pain in his chest and kept going. "As hard as I *think* the entire process is on me, the parents of all those dead children are left behind with empty hearts and no hope. My people will die. We were here before the ancient Celts. My own bloodline sat at the right hand of King Arthur. We walked with the sun upon our faces and our heads held high. Humans were our equals. Now, we hide in shrubs and take their leavings, grateful for even that."

He took a deep breath and growled out the rest. "I feel like ... like a hunted animal trapped against a wall. I know everything I am, all I care for, is going to perish, and all I want to do is fight until the end. That's how I felt after returning from Exmoor. I just wanted to fight anyone or anything that got in front of me."

Kathy wanted to crawl into some hole and weep. Apparently, no one had once given a thought to what this man had gone through for eight long years. He had been expected to do his duty, regardless of the toll it took on him. The families of the dead had some small comfort with each other. Tearach had no one to whom he could turn. Kathy was certain he'd never shared what he was feeling with another living soul. He'd have considered it a gutless weakness. Especially in light of the suffering others endured. His next words confirmed her conclusion.

"There you have it," he finished. "My poor answer to an unsolved problem. I wish with all my heart that I could have been a better leader."

Tearach didn't steel himself for her response. He no longer cared. Having emptied his heart, there was nothing left but a dark hole in his chest. Nothing left to hurt. The rage it took to strike out was gone. So, almost, was the will to even take the next breath. He made one last resolve. When his child died, so would he. A poor leader could save his pride, and that of his people, by choosing death. In centuries past, this resolution would have been expected, even demanded, from him. The decision calmed him as nothing ever had. His race needed someone who wouldn't falter in the face of despair.

But Kathy's response wasn't what he'd expected. She slowly untied the restraints and pulled them away. Then, as soft as a warm breeze, she pulled him to her and held him close. There were no tears or words. She just held him for a long time.

Finally, she moved away and placed a gentle hand against his cheek and whispered, "Let's get you the hell out of here."

* * * *

When they emerged from the room there was no one in sight. They left the castle without anyone questioning their movements. Kathy would have commented upon the ease with which Tearach had left, but she knew the Sorceress would come looking for them eventually.

The second Tearach opened the cottage door, Cairna pounced down the stairs and leapt toward him. She wrapped her arms about him in a crushing embrace. "She's brought you back. Oh, Uncle Tearach, I was so worried about you. I'm sorry for what I said. I'm so sorry..."

"It's all right, Cairna." He hugged her back. "Let's not speak about it again. Besides, I've decided you were right. I want to see the baby born, and I'm ashamed of my attitude. I've only been thinking of

myself."

Kathy watched Tearach's face when he made his apology. He was telling Cairna what he thought would end her fears and mend the rift between them. She knew nothing had changed as far as his real feelings were concerned. His eyes, when they met Kathy's, were cold as winter. For some reason he was going to play the charade to the end, and Kathy feared his motives.

He and Cairna comforted each other for several more minutes. Tearach finally sent the emotionally spent girl to bed, promising to talk about the baby in the morning. When the door to her room closed, his facade dropped. He walked into the living room, poured himself a very large measure of scotch and drained the glass.

"Why are you lying to her?" Kathy stood behind him and waited for his answer.

"It's what she wants to hear." He shrugged. "If everyone wants to believe this curse, or whatever it is, is over, then let them. It's not worth tearing people apart any longer."

"What will you do? Pretend you believe everything will be all right for the next few months?"

"If that's what everyone wants, then why not? I can't and won't fight this anymore. I'm through trying."

The despair in his voice almost broke her resolve to stay calm. "What will you really do when the baby comes?"

"Hold it for as long as I can and love it forever." He wearily turned toward the staircase. "I'm going to bed. Wake me when the Sorceress gets here. I'm sure she'll come around sunrise."

Kathy wanted to go after him and make him talk to her. There was a deadly calm about him that seemed surreal. Even the anger in his gaze was better than the empty shell he'd become.

She'd once seen a man jump from a bridge. He'd had that same glass-cold look just before taking the leap. She didn't know when or how, but she sensed Tearach was planning the same ending.

Her heart constricted at the thought. "Like hell you'll die," she whispered. "You're too loved to end up like that. Whether you believe it or not, you're going to live and so is this baby."

* * * *

Sleep came surprisingly easy for Tearach. He'd heard Kathy enter the room across the hall and, for some odd reason, was glad she wasn't fooled by his actions. He hated pretending for Cairna's benefit, but it was the only option he had. The sun was almost up when, as he predicted, the Sorceress and her men came pounding on the cottage door. He quickly dressed, made his way downstairs and saw Kathy and Cairna waiting for him. The door was still closed.

"There's no sense in keeping Shayla outside. She'll open the door herself, if you don't," he warned.

Cairna slowly opened the front door. Shayla walked in, her expression inscrutable.

"Why can't you just leave him alone?" Kathy asked.

"This matter doesn't concern you, Kathy." Shayla turned to Tearach. "Will you come with us or do the guards have to bring you?"

Tearach shook his head. "No, I won't fight."

Shayla stood aside and Tearach walked out of the cottage ahead of her.

Cairna placed her hand upon the Sorceress' arm, and Shayla patted it and said, "Rules have to be followed, dear. Your uncle's behavior has to be addressed. He's threatened the safety of others, shown the greatest insolence toward me and the Order. His disrespectful attitude can't be tolerated. I've had enough of his belligerence. If I let this go, worse things will happen in the future. He knows the rules as well as anyone."

Cairna nodded. "I wasn't going to ask you not to do this. I was going to ask if we can bring him home afterward."

Shayla's expression softened. "Yes, child. Once the punishment is done, it's history, if Tearach will stop fighting me at every turn."

Kathy watched Shayla leave and then gripped Cairna's shoulder. "What's happening?"

Cairna took a deep breath. He's being taken to the great clearing for punishment. When someone defies the Sorceress the way he has, the punishment is a public beating. Remember, she told you this would happen."

"Is this because I ran away? I thought Shayla said Tearach wasn't responsible for my knocking him in the head to escape."

"It isn't just that, Kathy. It's everything. Uncle Tearach has publicly defied the Sorceress and ridiculed her ideas. Then, there's the fighting and everything else he's said and done for months on end. To top it off, he left the sacred woods without permission. This was bound to happen. I just wish there was something I could have said or done to make him happier, to make him stop his misbehavior." She hung her head and walked out the door.

Kathy followed, unable to believe such things happened. She'd just been shown a castle which boasted a modern, technologically adept people. Now, they were back in the Middle Ages again. The extremes in their society were maddening.

They walked for half an hour and came to a clearing surrounded by huge oaks. Kathy gasped at the number of people surrounding the area. Apparently, whatever Shayla was going to do was very public indeed. Kathy had no idea there were so many people living in the forest. If any of them were creatures of magic, they were in human form. All but the Goblins. They grouped together at one end of the clearing near two huge oak trees. Tearach stood between the trees, and two burly looking men tied thick ropes to his wrists. The ropes were then stretched and wrapped around the two tree trunks. His jerkin had been removed leaving him bare to the waist. She and Cairna moved closer. His expression was blank. He showed no sign of fear or anger.

A man with a leather horse whip approached Tearach from behind. Kathy's mouth went dry and she spun to face Cairna. "She's actually going to have him whipped?"

Cairna nodded. "It's our way," she said simply. When Kathy would have moved forward to interfere, Cairna pulled her back and shook her head. "It'll only cost him more lashes."

"She can't do this. There are laws..."

"These *are* the laws here," Cairna told her. "The sooner it gets started, the sooner we can take him home."

Shayla approached Tearach's stoic form. "Have you any words to say, Tearach Bruce?"

Tearach remained as silent and still as green Connemara marble. There was nothing left to say. And there

were far, far worse things than a beating. Nothing she could do would hurt as much as his own wretched thoughts.

"Very well." Shayla turned to the Whip Master. "When the sun reaches the treetops, give twenty-five lashes or until he cries out."

"He'll never cry out in pain." Cairna looked at Kathy and lifted her head with pride. "He's still the leader of our people. He'll take all twenty-five and the Sorceress knows it. You'll see."

"Cairna how do we stop this? It's barbaric."

"We don't. Uncle Tearach wouldn't want us to."

A low murmur started through the crowd. Kathy looked around to see what might have started the commotion. "What's wrong now?"

Cairna swallowed back tears, "They're just realizing no one has ever been given more than ten lashes."

Kathy's heart fell into her stomach. Movement from behind them caused both women to turn. Lore and some other men approached. One of them, a huge, handsome young Goblin with flowing dark hair, accompanied them.

"Cairna, I've only just got back from Salisbury. I came as quickly as I could," the Goblin said. "Tearach doesn't deserve this."

Cairna ran to him and embraced him as a lover would. "Rome, thank Herne you're here. Everything's been so crazy."

"There now, sweetheart. I'll talk to the Sorceress. Perhaps I can get her to lighten the punishment a bit. Twenty-five lashes is unheard of. The man just doesn't deserve that kind of beating."

"I've already talked to the Sorceress," Lore spoke up. "Tearach apologized to my men while he was being led from the castle. No one wants this. If he publicly apologizes to Shayla, I'm sure the Sorceress would end this right now. She doesn't want to see him beaten any more than the rest of us. That's why she gave him an opportunity to speak."

Cairna pushed away from Rome. "Let it be. Both of you. You'll end up shaming him in front of everyone. I don't think he'll ever apologize to her, anyway."

"Isn't that better than risking his life, darling?" Rome rested his hands on Cairna's shoulders. Cairna didn't respond, except to move into his embrace again.

Kathy watched the two young Goblins. It was obvious they were in love, but no one had ever mentioned Rome's name. Perhaps Cairna had been keeping a few secrets of her own.

Kathy turned back to the clearing. The sun was just above the tree line, and the Sorceress gave an imperceptible nod. The Whip Master moved forward. The hulking giant hesitated and said something to Tearach that was too low to overhear. The whip wielder's face appeared contrite.

Kathy heard Tearach say, "It's all right, Legion. You've nothing to apologize for. It's just the way it is."

The large man shook his head, as if he was reluctant to begin, and then he rolled up his whip and walked to where he was facing Tearach's back again. He looked toward Shayla, who nodded yet again. Legion raised the whip.

Before he could strike, Shayla's voice echoed through the woods. "Stop! I was hoping for some public sign of remorse. Seeing none apparent, I won't make a martyr of a man who wishes with all his heart to accept that role." She moved forward and beckoned the Whip Master back.

Kathy felt her own breath leave her body in relief. She heard others around her murmuring thankful prayers to different gods and goddesses.

Shayla held her hand high and spoke again, using her powers of amplification so all could hear. "Tearach Bruce, others came to me in the night and begged forgiveness on your behalf. Were you half the leader you once were, you might have realized how your friends have been affected by your behavior and the grief you've caused."

Tearach kept his gaze pointed straight ahead, but her words seeped into his mind nonetheless.

"Your family would be shamed by your actions were they alive to witness them. Your self-pity has certainly earned you the beating, which is the ancient punishment for your behavior. But I will commute your sentence for the sake of those who love and care for you. Your actions were thoughtless, and you put all the members of the Order in danger. Still, they pled for leniency on your behalf. To that end, I relent and bestow another, lesser sentence. It will, however, be a duty that is commensurate with your actions while aiding those you harmed."

Kathy chewed her lower lip while anxiously waiting for what the Sorceress would say next.

"You will be assigned the most base, vile duty I can mete out," Shayla said. "You will, by yourself, dig and clean every septic system within the Shire and take the effluent to the treatment plant at the border of the woods. Then, you'll start over and do it again until every tank, line and drainage field is perfect. You'll test the microbe levels in the tanks and be responsible for fixing any problems. I'll assign guards to watch you, but they are forbidden to help. You won't go home until all the work is done. When you need rest and food, you'll take breaks in an assigned room at the castle."

Tearach saw flashes of red in his line of sight. He'd literally be cleaning the crap from each cottage septic system to suit the Sorceress' demands. Her new sentence was far, far worse than the beating might have been. The last vestiges of his dignity and any prestige his position held were trampled beneath the Sorceress' feet. Like an onion, she'd peeled away the last layer of his pride right in front of everyone.

Shayla turned to the crowds. "Any man, woman or child who's caught so much as handing him a shovel will answer to me. The Goblin Leader has chosen to make a foul excrement of his life. For having hurt those of you who begged for mercy, he'll be humbled. It's my hope that once his work is done, and done to my schedule, he'll reevaluate his attitude. If not, the beating will most certainly be forthcoming, along with confinement for thirty days and removal from the rank of leaders."

Kathy watched as Shayla regally stalked away with her minions following. She wasn't sure what to make of the new punishment assigned, but she had a notion that Shayla would have never beaten him in the first place. Still, Tearach had days of unbelievably difficult work ahead of him. It was better than seeing his blood flow because of the whip, but she didn't think he'd view it that way. He was being belittled in front of the entire Order.

Men rushed forward to untie Tearach. He was led toward the castle, and didn't even have time to speak to Cairna or Kathy. No one spoke to him, though they might have had he taken the time to even look up. His embarrassment was such that he kept his gaze lowered and walked quickly. While each household was responsible for the upkeep of their own septic system, he was now in charge of that less-than-desirable duty. Until he could complete this odious punishment, he wouldn't be the leader of the Goblins, a noble and old race of warriors and craftsmen, but Lord of Excrement. He wished, with every

step he took, that the Sorceress had just gone ahead whipped the hell out of him.

* * * *

Without acknowledging another living soul, Tearach worked day and night for the next few weeks. He took very little rest. Every time he thought the entire job was finished, the Sorceress would find some minor detail he needed to inspect or another line or pipe to install. It was the filthiest job in the world made worse by an injury that wouldn't heal.

While digging one day, he scraped his left hand and arm. Working with effluent should have made him more careful, but he wanted to see the disgusting job to its end. He ignored the minor warning signs of an infection and kept laboring. He didn't think about anything but digging and cleaning. There were times when he wished he was dead, but never more so than when the once minor wound became so badly infected that a fever developed. The fever got worse, as did the wound. It throbbed and ached horrifically every time he moved. He wrapped it or wore long sleeves to conceal the injury so the Sorceress couldn't accuse him of being weak. She'd already done that by assigning his current duties and besmirching his leadership before his people. Still, he kept up his pace.

Once angry and heartily resentful over Shayla's choice of punishments, he decided to beat her at her own game and refused to complain. Neither she nor anyone else would get the satisfaction of hearing him whine about anything, including his infected wounds.

He was burying the last of the tanks he'd cleaned twice when a bout of nausea and dizziness hit him hard. If the smell of excrement hadn't been enough to sicken him, his wounds now did. He dropped his shovel and reached for a water bottle as a grayish darkness narrowed his vision. Someone shouted, but he didn't know why. He felt himself hit the ground and remembered nothing more.

Lore was the first to reach his side. "Tearach, can you hear me?" He saw the beads of sweat on his friend's face and quickly pulled Tearach's jerkin off to cool his body. When he did, he saw the length of gauze wrapped around Tearach's left arm and slowly unwound it. "Someone get Shayla," he shouted.

When Shayla heard the summons she responded quickly. After seeing the serious extent of Tearach's wounds, she ordered him taken to his cottage immediately and sent for the physician. But Kathy was the first to meet her at the door.

Alarmed by Tearach's pallor, Kathy glared at the Sorceress. She refused to vent her anger over what had caused his illness, and decided to watch in tactful silence as he was taken upstairs to his room. There, the men undressed him and lowered him to his bed as they explained his wound. She could see Tearach was sweating profusely, and she worried over the depth of the infection. Taking a cursory glance, she grit her teeth and considered the job it would take to clean the arm. Whatever she could do for him before the doctor arrived might make the difference in his recovery. She'd sent for Cairna and hoped the girl got here in time. Tearach could very well be in septic shock. If that was the case, she didn't know if he could be dragged from unconsciousness. She had no antiseptic and didn't know the extent of the Order's pharmacy.

Someone handed her a steaming bowl of soapy water and a clean cloth. She sat these on a nearby table, ready for use, but still said nothing to the Sorceress. Finally rolling up her sleeves and gathering the courage to take a much better look, she shouldered her way through those standing around Tearach's bed, and gently took his arm in her hands.

"Thank you for bringing him home," she graciously said to those of his friends who were still in the room. "I'll handle things from here, at least until the doctor arrives."

The men murmured their hopes for Tearach's safe recovery before leaving. Only Shayla stayed behind,

just as Kathy knew she would.

"There are easier and cleaner ways to kill a man," she said bitterly, glaring at the Sorceress.

"Leave it alone, Kathy," Tearach weakly commanded.

She looked down as Tearach attempted to raise himself off the bed. She sat down next to him and gently forced him to lie down. "Don't move. I've got to wash the filth off you, then clean and bandage these wounds. After that, you're going to get some rest. You're not to move for the next week, if that soon."

When Tearach lapsed back into unconsciousness, Kathy assured herself he was not going into shock. Then she turned on the Sorceress. "I hope you're damned proud of yourself. You're supposed to look after your people, not kill them," she furiously accused as Shayla stood to one side and watched. "How the hell could you send a man to do that kind of work, and not give him the proper clothing or protection to guard against infectious hazards? What were you thinking?" she boldly continued. "If he dies, it'll be on your head. He wasn't even allowed to come home, and heaven only knows when he ate last. It looks as though he's lost at least fifteen pounds."

Shayla arched one eyebrow and glared at her. "You've had your say, my girl. Now, I'll have mine. Our rules are strict, to be sure, but Tearach and all the others know why those rules have to be followed. We walk a fine line in this place. Any deviation from what's kept us safe might mean instant discovery by the outside world. Our people can't go about fighting at will and disrespecting the laws which have kept us all united. Fighting leads to more fighting, and disrespect of my position could cause anarchy. And *that* would most assuredly lead to our demise. Only I have the powers necessary to keep this place safe. Besides all that, if Tearach had told someone he'd been infected, I can most certainly assure you he'd have been immediately relieved of his duties and tended to."

"You're telling me you didn't know about this?" Kathy asked.

Shayla sat on the edge of the bed and gently stroked his cheek. "I did not."

Kathy could see the anxious look on the Sorceress' face and knew she told the truth. "I-I guess it'd be just like him not to say a word."

Shayla gazed down at Tearach and nodded. "He's so damned stubborn. I pray to the Goddess that he overcomes this illness and that his pride hasn't caused permanent physical harm. He has never known how loved he is. By all of us."

Her tenderly spoken words made Kathy remorseful. "I-I'm so sorry. I can't think what caused me to believe you'd let him suffer with an injury like this. But you must have known he'd never come to you for help." She snorted. "He'd never come to any of us."

"That, my dear, is his entire problem. His doubt and cynicism have been his downfall for years," Shayla softly uttered. "I was trying to force him to reevaluate his attitude, but it seems he'd rather be dead. Even before seeing his child born." She pointed outside the window. "There are hundreds out there who depend upon me. Men, women and children. There are creatures that would perish from the world without my protection. Your people aren't yet ready to offer it, so I must. And I will do whatever is necessary to that end. I will have order, and I will punish defiance or rebellious behavior. But I'm not the shrew you'd paint me. And I'm not Tearach's enemy though he'd make it seem so. Do you understand?"

Kathy took a deep breath before responding. "It's a sad state of affairs that you have to hide to survive, and that there truly are people in my world who'd destroy you. But I can't stand by and watch someone take abusive treatment of any kind and like it. No matter what the reason. Do *you* understand?"

"No one liked it, Kathleen. But no one is likely to behave in such a way as to deserve this kind of punishment, especially when they know I will order it."

"So you just made an example of him?"

"That wouldn't have been possible if he'd acted like the leader I know him to be."

The two women stared at each other. Kathy saw great strength of purpose in the older woman's gaze. And something else. Pain. There was no evil in Shayla's silver-gray eyes, only sadness, especially when she gazed down at Tearach's still form.

"Take care of him well. I know you have the skills to do so, but I'll have Owen stay tonight instead of going back to London."

Kathy nodded. "He'll be needed."

Shayla squeezed Tearach's hand before she quickly left to find the doctor.

Kathy carefully pulled Tearach's long hair back so she could continue to clean his wounds and his body. The scratches weren't horribly deep, but the infection had to have caused him excruciating pain. Enduring it so silently was a feat of pure will. She both admired and respected such an ability, even if it had been stupid and dangerous.

Tearach had heard bits and pieces of the conversation, though he was sure the two women had thought him out of it. "You shouldn't speak to Shayla so bluntly," he croaked.

"You heard?" Kathy asked in amazement.

"Some of your conversation," he responded. "You need to check your attitude with her."

"Look who's talking," Kathy softly responded. "You have no problem telling her where to get off and never have."

"And look where my mouth has landed me."

She said nothing and carefully tended his wounds while he rested. His expression was so shuttered; she couldn't guess what he was thinking.

Kathy's touch was infinitely tender. Fingers touched Tearach's flesh like dragonfly wings skimming the surface of a pond—graceful and sure. He closed his eyes and again recalled what he could of Kathy's conversation with Shayla. No one had ever defended him so bravely, and certainly not against the Sorceress of the Ancients. If Kathy only knew the consequences for speaking so boldly could equal his own punishment, perhaps she wouldn't have come to his defense. It puzzled him why she'd do so at all. And he was beginning to see definite chinks in her wonderful control. It made her seem more approachable. At one time, he would have relished the thought. Now, it didn't make any difference. He stretched out and concentrated on the movement of her hands. The pain diminished a bit and soon he drifted into darkness.

* * * *

When a frantic Cairna arrived, Kathy took time to calm the girl down and gave her busy chores to do so she wouldn't fret. The doctor arrived a few minutes later. He complimented Kathy on her treatment of Tearach's wound and gave her medication to give to Tearach. Some time later, she began to see some improvement in Tearach's condition. As the hours went by and the antibiotics were administered, Kathy noted how his body's immune system seemed to do most of the work. The doctor left later that night with

an assurance that Tearach would recover though he might not have had he waited a few more days. Kathy had seen firsthand how septic shock could take a life. That kind of demise wasn't for Tearach. And she was more determined than ever that he was going to survive and hold his healthy baby moments after it was born. Cairna and she took turns watching him through the night and into the next day. Then, another three days passed. They took turns caring for him when he awakened, and Kathy hoped that since Tearach was now bedridden, he'd listen to some common sense concerning his anger and erupting temper.

It was almost a full week later when Tearach became much more aware of his surroundings, though he was currently sleeping. Kathy gently brushed his hair and then got up to open the large picture windows. The midmorning sun was warm and shimmered on the garden. But the scene lost its beauty in light of what had happened in her life. She looked back at the tall, green figure on the bed and regretted having gone jogging one morning. It would have been easier to have never known about this place, these people and this man. The negative emotions they caused were too painful.

And now she had a baby to think about. She wanted to know more about the race whose blood her baby would share. She had a thousand questions and knew Tearach wouldn't answer any of them.

She sat on the bed beside him and checked his pulse, which was strong, steady and normal. At least, it was normal by human standards. She studied his body and the half of his face she could clearly see. He was handsome as sin and about as deadly, but she wondered if he'd ever smile.

There was a soft knock, and Cairna stuck her head inside the room. "Need some company?" she whispered.

Kathy nodded and walked to a large window seat. She patted the cushion as an invitation for Cairna to join her. "He's still asleep. I think the pain drained him badly as well as the antibiotics the doctor prescribed."

Cairna nodded in agreement, glanced at the bed and then joined Kathy. "I was afraid for him. Uncle Tearach has never been ill a day in his life. I don't know why he didn't just go to the infirmary."

"Does this kind of thing go on with any degree of regularity?" Kathy asked, a touch of sarcasm in her voice.

"If you're asking about his stubborn behavior, it happens more than I should admit." Cairna shrugged. "But even Rome has been punished. In fact, when I think of it, most of the men who show any gumption have been punished at one time or another. It isn't that they want to be insubordinate to the Sorceress. It's just that anyone with the characteristics necessary to lead or to be good defenders seems to get into trouble more often than not."

"Rome. Forgive me for prying, but it seems you two are together a lot. Doesn't he live in the forest? Is that why he was in Salisbury?"

"We're in love," Cairna admitted, "and Rome asks the Sorceress to let him perform chores conducted away from the forest. You see, we want to handfast during one of the lunar celebrations. It's how we get married," she explained. "But Rome didn't want Uncle Tearach knowing how close we were. He was afraid he'd be banned from seeing me. I would have told you sooner, but I really thought it was appropriate that my uncle should be told first." She nodded toward Tearach. "I hope you don't mind."

She shook her head and smiled. "So, Tearach doesn't know anything about you and Rome?"

Cairna coyly ducked her head. "No, and you can't imagine how difficult it was to hide our relationship.

Rome hated doing it, but we couldn't tell Uncle Tearach. You see, too many Goblin women have died trying to give birth, and my uncle knows I want to have a family." She paused and smiled brilliantly. "But our fears are over now. Your baby will be all right. When I decide to have one, mine will be, too. Rome and I don't have to hide our relationship any longer."

"Cairna ... um ... that might not be a good idea right now."

"Why? Everything will be all right. Uncle Tearach can't have any objections now."

Cairna was eighteen, Kathy reminded herself. Girls her age married all the time, but she didn't realize Tearach would never share her sunny outlook on the future, no matter how she connived, coerced or begged. "Well, when is this next lunar celebration?"

"The next Goblin ceremony will fall on Samhain or All-Hallows Eve. But Rome and I will wait to be handfasted in the early spring, especially since Samhain is when your baby will be due. I'll need to be with you to help with the little one. It's a very sacred time for the entire Order, and we'll all be celebrating together.

"Won't it be exciting, Kathy?" Cairna grabbed Kathy's hands and smiled again. "Your baby will come on one of our most important celebrations. The curse on our people will be over, and Rome and I can plan our family. I can't wait, can you?"

Kathy forced a smile in return. She did want her baby, but Tearach wouldn't see things the same way. "No, I can't wait. But how can you be so sure about the baby's date of birth?"

"The Sorceress has predicted it."

The Sorceress again. Everything in this place came back to her. Kathy shook off the feeling of frustration and said, "I have a lot of questions. There are so many traditions I don't know about, and I'll need to be more educated about Goblins and the Order as well. Although I've picked your brain endlessly as it is, I need more facts. Will you help me?"

Cairna hugged her and laughed out loud. "Of course I will. What do you want to know?"

Cairna's infectious laughter made Kathy grin. "When the Sorceress pronounced me pregnant, she said something about a ... What was the name she used? *Dolmen*. She said Tearach was to take me there when it was my time to deliver. Do you know what she meant by that?"

The girl nodded. "All Goblins are born outside. We're creatures of nature, and it's easier on the baby and the mother to be close to the earth. The Dolmen is an upright, granite structure that looks something like a door. There's a stone top supported by large, upright stones. In this case, there are three stones."

Kathy had certainly remembered reading about such places and seeing pictures of them, but she couldn't remember the specifics. "I know what you're talking about. How does Tearach come into it?"

Cairna's eyes widened in surprise. "Why, Kathy, he delivers the baby." Then she laughed. "Of course, you wouldn't know that. All our men are taught such things from the time of their thirteenth birthday. The fathers are expected to deliver the babies under the Dolmen and keep the mother and child safe there for three days. As next of kin, I'll be the one to make sure the supplies are at the Dolmen when it's time. Uncle Tearach and you will have everything you need. Then, you'll come back home and there'll simply be tons of celebrating. Since this birth is so very special, the celebrations will probably go on for days and days.

Kathy felt her heart drop. She wasn't sure she wanted a man near her who couldn't believe the baby

would survive, not at the time of delivery. She glanced back toward the bed. Some kind of arrangement had to be made. Tearach would have to promise more compromising behavior, which was more than his attitude suggested he could give. All of this would probably have been explained to her sooner had it not been for his punishment. But she simply hadn't known to ask. She and Cairna had never actually gotten around to speaking of the birth in such detail. Or maybe Cairna had thought it was Tearach's place to explain it.

Cairna squeezed Kathy's hands. "I'll let you be for now. If you don't mind my saying so, you're looking a bit tired and need your rest. I'll be in my room. Later, you can ask anything you want. Just relax for now."

Kathy watched Cairna glance at Tearach again and then leave. For an eighteen-year-old, Cairna showed an amazing amount of maturity at times. Then, when she was excited, her youth showed through.

The breeze picked up and warmed the room to a level that was becoming uncomfortable. She wondered if it seemed so hot because her nerves and patience were both coming to an end. She pulled off her jerkin and placed it over a leather chair. Her long-sleeved, cotton blouse was still so warm that she rolled the sleeves up to the elbows. Concern for her patient made her check his pulse again. His respiration and skin color seemed normal compared to what she'd learned by using Cairna's vital signs as a gauge. The heat, however, had caused a fine sheen of sweat to break out on his forehead and arms. She retrieved a cloth from a bathroom cabinet, wet it and sat on the edge of the bed.

She stared down at him and carefully blotted the sweat from his skin. He had the body of a god, and memories of the night they made love came back. It had been breathtakingly beautiful and satisfying beyond words. She put her hand to the tiny scars where he'd bitten her. That bite had caused intense pleasure. It was as though she could still feel it pounding through her body. As if she were in a trance, Kathy pulled down the covers and stroked the top of one very well developed thigh. He still seemed sound asleep. Her hand moved higher and her pulse responded to the feel of him. She convinced herself her next actions were purely for his sake, as a patient.

She carefully slid the cloth over the flesh of his abdomen and almost to his penis, enjoying every small inch she cleansed. The treatment was helping him cool down, but it was bringing her temperature ever higher. Still, she continued. He moaned and, thinking she might be disturbing him, she stopped.

"Don't stop," he whispered. "Keep going."

Shocked, she almost got up and left the room. How long had he known she was touching him in such a way? What had happened to her professionalism? She had never taken such advantage of a man before, and never of a patient in her care. That's what he should have been. Not some green, forest god lying there for her pleasure and use.

"I'm sorry, Tearach. I shouldn't be pestering you." She got up to leave, but he caught her arm and pulled her back to the bed.

"I'm not sorry and there's no reason for you to be. Don't stop," he softly repeated.

She was just cooling him down and trying to prevent dehydration. It was a common enough medical practice. Kathy tried to justify it in a hundred different ways. Her hand kept moving over his body, the cloth still cool enough to give comfort from the heat.

Kathy was undoing Tearach one nerve at a time. She was temporarily taking away the pain of the infected wounds and heating his blood all at once. After a few more moments, he could feel nothing but her incredibly, soft touch. Trying to focus on controlling his thoughts and body didn't work. He'd almost swear there was magic being conjured. His hands clenched and his hips pressed deeper into the soft bed.

His full erection must surely be springing straight up for her to see, yet he didn't care. He sank into the thickness of the soft coverings. It felt good when he moved his hips. He finally turned so he was facing her. Kathy leaned toward Tearach wanting to be so much closer. Her logical mind kept telling her the man was recovering, that she could be doing more harm than good. With a will of its own, her head moved toward his. His mouth met hers in a hungry kiss.

She responded by pushing his hair back and gently sucking his tongue. Their breathing came in rasping gasps.

Tearach reached up with his uninjured arm and tore her blouse, and she hurriedly shrugged out of the tattered remains. He pulled her down beside him and lay facing her, his injured arm cradled against his side.

Her hand stroked his hip. She couldn't wait to have him closer, nearer. He rose up enough to unbuckle her belt, and then proceeded to kiss his way down the valley between her breasts to her abdomen. His tongue ran across her skin there. With one hand, he pulled her trousers further down. Kathy managed to kick them and her boots off with amazing ease.

"Open for me," he demanded.

"Tearach, you can't be serious. Some very light petting and a little kissing is one thing, but you've just had a serious bout with an open wound."

"Look at me," he said as he glanced downward, toward his erection. "Somehow my lower body doesn't seem to register what happened to my left arm. We'll just go slow," he instructed. "I like it that way anyhow."

Kathy did so, moaning as he moved lower still. Finally, his tongue flicked at her most sensitive flesh. She was careful of his bandaged arm, but her back still arched off the bed as wonderful sensations tore into her. Before she could reach full climax, he was inside her, but resting his weight on his one good arm. She was filled with him and had never been so well loved. Only with this man had she experienced such intense waves of pleasure. They took her to a reality where nothing and no one existed except the two of them. If the world outside their room had stopped, she would have been totally unaware of it. More, it wouldn't have mattered. When he cried out with pleasure, his eyes had that unearthly gleam.

Tearach rested his head against Kathy's shoulder and let her hold him. He pulled her into a tight embrace, using his good arm. There was nothing that dwelled outside the space of this bed. His senses only registered the woman in his arms. How incredibly soft and smooth her skin seemed. The weeks away from her had made her seem more feminine. The heat that had caused their passionate encounter seemed to dissipate. A gentle wind lifted the ends of Kathy's long hair. The strands settled around his head and neck like an enchantress weaving tendrils of a love spell. It grew cooler. She shivered, and he pulled her closer and tugged a blanket over their entangled bodies.

Gradually, his senses returned. Kathy's deep breathing told him she was fast asleep. She had pressed her cheek against his chest, and he scooted away only far enough to rest most of his weight on one side. It was a warm and restful nest they shared. It had been a long, long time since anything had felt so right, so remarkably peaceful. He looked down at her abdomen. Was he imagining she was showing signs of the life growing within? The life that would break his heart when it left his presence? He gently touched that area of her body and tried to force that horrible thought from his mind. The drugs he'd been given had taken more out of him than he thought, however. Despite his terrible thoughts, sleep came to him. In his dreams, he saw Kathy in the garden with a tiny girl. They laughed and chased lightning bugs the way he and his siblings once had. The scene was enchanting. What a wonderful dream it was. He felt warmth

and comfort in the space around his heart. If he could only have them in his life, a woman who was not only lovely beyond words, but whose intelligence matched her beauty. And the little girl who would grow up to be a heartbreaker. Like her mother, she was breathtakingly exquisite. A tiny little poppet with both her parents' best attributes.

He awoke with a start and looked down at the woman sleeping in his arms. He *wanted* her. Not just because of the magnificent sex, but because she was everything that would make life complete. He knew she'd defend all those she loved with a passion and intensity even one of his own kind would envy. In his heart, he also knew she'd be a wonderful mother.

But, she'd come to hate him. The moment their child withered away and died like all the rest, she'd blame him and rightly so. He'd taken her from her world and forced her into his. She moaned softly in her sleep. He gathered her to him. "One day, I hope you'll forgive what we've done to you," he whispered. "I hope you forgive *me*."

He rested his head beside hers. She wasn't an enemy any longer, and he made a silent pledge that as long as she bore his child, he'd treat her as if all would be well. Maybe if he left her with some good memories of him, she'd forgive him when the time came for him to join their dead baby.

In years past, he'd had a gentler nature, a kinder soul. Perhaps there were some of those feelings left. It struck him that, in many ways, he'd become like the very men who'd killed all those he loved. He'd wrongfully abused others and had carelessly treated Kathy as if she'd been personally responsible for the loss. Perhaps he could salvage some honor and walk with dignity into the fire. With this resolve made, he finally slept once more.

Chapter Nine

Kathy awoke warm and comfortable. Tearach was holding her so gently, careful not to rest his full weight upon her. She tried to ease his body weight aside, but she only succeeded in rousing him. "I'm sorry, Tearach. I didn't mean to wake you. And I shouldn't have come on to you when you're still so ill. Something came over me. It's inexcusable, really and I..."

"It's all right, Kathy," he interrupted. "If I hadn't wanted it, I wouldn't have responded." He paused to choose his words carefully. "Truth is, maybe the Sorceress actually worked some sense into me. After you fell asleep, I did some evaluation of my behavior. I realize I've wrongly blamed you for circumstances, and I want to make amends. I'm not the bastard I've been acting like."

"I never thought you were."

He arched his eyebrows, leaned on his elbows and looked down at her. "You're a horrible liar."

She smiled up at him. "All right. I *did* have some uncharitable thoughts about you."

"Under the circumstances, I'm surprised you haven't murdered me in my sleep. You've had more than one chance."

She slowly shook her head, gazed into his black eyes and said, "I don't want you dead. You've done nothing to me I haven't allowed."

"Even kidnapping you?"

"Well ... there *was* that, but you were forced into it. If you hadn't done it, someone else would have."

He looked into her aqua-blue eyes for a long time before asking, "Where does that leave us?"

"Maybe we should just take things one day at a time. See what happens."

He nodded in agreement. That wasn't asking so much. Not after all that had happened between them. He lifted her toward him and gently hugged her. "No more fighting, Kathy. Life's too short."

Part of her was elated, but something in the way he said it alerted the logical part of her brain. He was playing the same game with her as he had with Cairna. Pretending to acquiesce when he truly had some other agenda. She wished he would smile or show some sign of happiness. But this was a start. She had months to bring him around, to try to make him accept what everyone, including herself, believed. Their baby would live.

* * * *

The days that followed were strange for Kathy. Tearach was loving, attentive and never showed any of the ready temper she'd come to associate with him. Cairna talked him into fixing a spare bedroom into a nursery. At nighttime, he'd take Kathy into the garden and they'd sit and talk for hours.

One evening, she said, "Tearach, when can I see the people of the Order as they really are? Other than the Goblins, I mean?"

There was no reason why she shouldn't. He and the Sorceress had literally dragged her into their world. Why not show her the whole of it? "On the next full moon, there'll be an herb gathering. Everyone will be milling about the woods near the great clearing. I'll take you to them. But, be warned, Kathy. There'll be a lot of magic used that was never meant for outsiders to see. Stay close to me and remember where you

are. If you see anything you question or that concerns you, tell me and I'll try to explain."

She smiled and nodded. The moon would be full within a week. Kathy vowed to sleep all day so she could stay awake and see the wonders of these enchanted woods. She found herself growing more and more excited. It would be like walking into a fantasy.

The day of the herb gathering, Cairna brought her a dark green Druid robe. "It's tradition to wear forest-colored clothing for an herb gathering, and you'll find Druid clothing more comfortable as the baby grows," she explained.

"Thank you, Cairna. It's lovely." She wondered if Tearach had noted her expanding waistline. When she came downstairs wearing the robe that evening, his gaze registered approval.

He carefully placed his hand over her abdomen. "This color suits you, and you'll feel less constrained. But I think I'll have Cairna find something in blue. It will match your pretty eyes."

Though he hadn't smiled when he'd said it, it was the first time he'd ever paid her a compliment. She'd truly believed he'd never care a smidgen whether a woman grew round with his child. In her world, some men found pregnancy a turnoff. As Tearach led her toward the great clearing, he was infinitely careful about where she stepped and coaxed her to take her time. When they neared the clearing, Tearach found a bed of ferns in which they could sit and watch. He looked at Kathy and placed his hand upon her abdomen again. His child ... no ... *their* child was growing within her. He could feel a life force so strong it was mesmerizing. It was as if the tiny baby was already claiming part of his heart, and he was helpless to stop it. More, he didn't want to. That new life reminded him of all his people had lost and all they would still lose. It reminded him of poor Mabb and how she'd been sent away from her people to keep from interfering with his and Kathy's relationship, such as it was. And he remembered his family that was gone forever. His baby would be with them someday soon, as well as he. The tragedies kept piling up and he was helpless to stop any of it. Still, he didn't want to deaden his heart to the baby he'd carry into the fire. Joining her would ensure that her little life would be led to his ancestors. He'd be the guide for their journey of death.

Kathy noted his frown, even in the moonlight. She placed her hand over his. "It's amazing, isn't it? I've gotten big so quickly. But, I've heard that can happen sometimes."

His fingers gently pressed inward on her abdomen. He almost believed he could feel the baby's tiny heart. It seemed so strong.

"Cairna says you'll deliver the baby." Kathy waited to hear his response and watched for his reaction.

"If that frightens you, or you'd rather have a doctor, we can go to the castle."

"No. Your father delivered you, didn't he? That's what Cairna told me."

"Yes, but I can't impose any more of our beliefs on you, Kathy. Especially when it comes to something so personal. You'll have to decide what's right for you."

"Will you take me to the Dolmen and let me see it before my time comes?"

He nodded. Something in him was glad that such a tradition didn't frighten or repel her. But Kathy was a strong woman. It was part of what attracted him to her more and more each day. "If that's what you want."

For a time, they sat in companionable silence. He pulled her against him so she could rest. As night fell about them, Fairies began to play music and other creatures began to stir. Then the bushes began to

rustle with activity. Kathy looked about her, anxious to have her first glimpse into another realm. She gasped when three beings walked into the clearing ahead of them.

"I'm sorry, Tearach. We didn't know you had this part of the clearing to yourselves," a woman said as Kathy noticed the two figures in the ferns.

Tearach rose and held out his hand to help Kathy stand. "It's all right, Clove. Kathy wanted to watch an herb gathering." He turned and almost smiled when he saw Kathy's awed expression. Even in the dark, Kathy could see Clove and her two children had a full set of wings.

"*Tearach!*" Kathy gasped. "They're ... they ... Oh, how lovely."

Clove smiled. "I take it she hasn't seen us with in our true form, yet."

"No," he responded. "Kathy, this is Clove and her two children, Merry and Timmon."

"Say hello to Kathy, you two," Clove instructed.

The children dutifully repeated a greeting, but Kathy wanted to get closer. She knelt in front of them. Not only were the three Fairies sporting wings, but she suspected their skin color was unusual. It was too dark to see what the colors were, though she imagined their wings would probably match some sort of camouflage.

"You're the very first Fairies I've ever seen," she breathed.

Timmon moved forward and placed a hand on her shoulder. "You're pretty," he announced.

Kathy laughed. The boy couldn't be more than four or five years old. From years of experience in dealing with pediatric emergencies, she knew that children that age generally spoke whatever was on their minds. That they were Fairies didn't make their curiosity different. "Thank you. Are you helping gather herbs tonight?"

"Uh-huh. Merry and me are helping Mum." He paused and moved closer to her. "You can touch my wings if you want. It doesn't hurt."

Kathy looked at his mother for approval. Clove smiled at her and nodded. Kathy gently stretched her fingers out toward the outline of the wings. As soon as she made contact, a strange feeling came over her. It was as though her heart felt lighter than it had in years.

Seeing her older brother getting special attention, Merry moved forward and turned her back toward Kathy. "Touch mine, tooooooo," she pleaded.

Kathy laughed and did so. Again, the feeling of euphoria came over her. "You two are darlings," she crooned, then instinctively hugged them both.

The little boy looked up at Kathy and stretched out his arms. He loosely looped them about her neck. "You're gonna' have a Goblin baby, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am." Kathy tousled his long, dark hair.

"Can we play with it when it comes?"

"The baby will be quite small at first," Clove informed him. "When it gets a little bigger, maybe you can play in the Goblin Meadow together."

"I think that would be splendid," Kathy smiled at the boy. "You can be her very first friends."

Timmon beamed. "Tearach, did ya heard?" he said. "Kathy says Merry an' me can be the baby's *first* friends."

Tearach had no response. Many others would be hurt when the baby didn't survive. Everyone in the woods always took the death of a child so very hard. He lifted the boy up and hugged him. Having known him since he was a tiny baby, Timmon hugged him back with trusting abandon.

"Up too, up too." Merry raised her little arms.

Tearach scooped her up with his free arm, and Merry gifted him with a kiss on the cheek. If only his child could survive. But it would be easier to catch a ride on a comet than hope one more time in vain. His heart couldn't take it.

Kathy watched him cuddle the children and talk to them. Even in the dark, she could see how careful he was not to crush their little wings. He was patient when answering their questions and held them lovingly. A child would be very safe with him. Safe and loved. She was enchanted with the whole picture and wanted so much to see him hold their baby.

"I'd better get these two to collecting herbs or they'll be asking you questions forever," Clove said with a laugh. "Come along, darlings."

"Wanna' stay wif Tearach," Merry announced, with a slight lisp.

"Go with your mother, my sweet. I'll see you later," Tearach promised as he carefully lowered the children to the ground.

"They're so adorable," Kathy said. "And they seem to trust you a great deal."

He shrugged. "I love children. They sense that and respond accordingly."

Kathy watched the retreating figures. "I wish I could have seen them in the light. They must be beautiful beings."

Tearach watched her expression. With his amplified powers of vision, he saw nothing but wonder and awe on her face. There was no sign of someone wanting to view what, in the outside world, would surely be deemed freaks of nature. Kathy simply saw beauty and wanted to embrace it. It made his heart soften toward her that much more and made their dark future all the harder to accept.

Chapter Ten

For a time, Tearach walked with her. Neither of them said a thing. It was as if Kathy was content with the magic of the moment, and he was equally occupied by wallowing in his own dark thoughts. Soon, they approached the lights of small campfires. Kathy gasped as she caught full view of some of the denizens of their enchanted realm.

Fairies hovered and talked with one another, their skins colored to match their wings. Small Elves, Imps, Pixies and others moved in and out of the firelight. "Oh, Tearach, how wondrous. Living with these people must be the most gratifying experience. I wish others could see this. If people only knew..."

"They *can't!* At least, not the way the world is now," Tearach quickly responded. "Not everyone would be inclined to be as open-minded as you. You must always remember that. And, no matter whatever happens, you must never tell another outsider what you've seen here. Promise me this." He gripped her forearms, demanding she comply.

"I'll never be the cause of anyone being harmed here. You must believe that."

Surprisingly, he did. He knew she'd never been anything but honest with him, even when she'd run away. She was too strong, too iron-willed, to resort to guile or subterfuge. She'd given him fair warning that she would try to escape, so his anger about that incident was over, especially since Cairna was at peace. "All right. But be careful what questions you ask of anyone. Some may only accept your presence here because the Sorceress orders it so."

She nodded and followed him closer to the firelight. A tall figure approached, and though she had never seen him in his true form, she recognized Lore. A flowing, silver-white mane of hair drifted down his back. His skin was a lighter shade of green than Tearach's, and his wings could only be described as ethereal. They erupted from his back in a kaleidoscope of blues and greens. Like Tearach, the tips of his ears came to a point, and his eyes had an exotic tilt to them as well. As were all the men in this fantasy world, he was built to fight. Kathy was speechless.

"First taste of the Fairy realm I take it," Lore said as he saw Kathy's wide-eyed expression.

"You're just ... I have no words..."

Lore laughed outright. "Too magnificent for description, eh? Not to sound conceited, I've been described that way before," he remarked. "Come along, Kathy. I'll introduce you to some of the others."

The tall, green man led an all too ready Kathy away. Tearach watched in silence. Predictably, her awe was eventually overcome with curiosity, and she began asking a million questions. Some of the men and women allowed her to touch their wings, and they conversed with her in such an extroverted fashion that it seemed she would soon count many of them as friends. Truth be told, when they weren't arguing over some point, Kathy had a wonderfully open personality. She was tactful, intelligent and kind. She was brightness to his despair. If only things in the world were different. *If only.*

As he looked on, Tearach soon perceived a lurking presence. Either no one else felt the threat, or the Elves and Fairies were unconcerned. Still, common sense told him no good came of a person creeping about so stealthily.

Though the figure was well-hidden, his keen eyesight could certainly see the being's approach. Slowing tracking the moving body, he began to recognize a woman of his own kind. Then he understood who it was and relinquished an automatic hold on his belt knife. As ever, she was tall, voluptuous and looked

angry. He was immediately alerted to the unannounced, abrupt nature of her appearance. Had she been brought back to the Order, or had she escaped and come back on her own? If she had, Shayla would punish her, and that would be another crime on his conscience. The Sorceress had no right sending her away in the first place.

"Mabb, what are you doing here?" he asked as he quickly walked toward her.

"You don't sound happy to see me," she gruffly replied. "And I hadn't heard you missed me all that much."

He noted her voice's sour tone and felt guilty for not having thought of her plight more often. "I wasn't aware you were allowed back. But, of course, I'm very glad to see you. I would have argued for your return more forcefully, but you may have heard that Shayla and I haven't been very agreeable of late. My words hold no importance any longer. Still, you're most welcome home." He smiled and patted her shoulder in a brotherly way. His poor greeting and pitiful excuses wouldn't make up for her being sent into temporary exile.

Mabb slowly looked him over. "Shayla said I could finally come home. The curse, it seems, is over." She gazed at Kathy and frowned. "She's as lovely as everyone has said. Quite stunning. But that was the Sorceress' intention all along, wasn't it? To find some pale-skinned beauty to make it easier for you to wallow with?"

Something warned him to be very careful. Mabb had a horrifying temper, and the look she cast in Kathy's direction was malicious. "If you're angry about something, talk to me about it, Mabb."

"Why should I be angry?" she snapped back. "Her kind all but destroyed us, and you had to lie with her and get her with child. How *should* I feel?"

"If you truly believe the curse is over, you should be elated, just like everyone else seems to be." He waved a hand toward the crowds now surrounding Kathy.

Her expression softened a bit. "You've done your duty. It couldn't have been very palatable to have sex with her." She moved close to him. "There's nothing to keep you from being with a woman of your own kind now. A woman who can satisfy your appetites *and* give you an heir of pure blood."

Tearach looked down at the hand she placed upon his bicep. "What would you have me do? Abandon her and the baby?"

"She's trash, as far beneath us as anything slithering under a rock. The baby will be a half-cast. It probably won't even have powers that can benefit the Order." She paused and gazed up at him. "You don't owe the Sorceress anything else. I'll give you the children we both want and need."

"Abandoning a child and mate isn't our way. It isn't *my* way. And you and I have never had any relationship that warrants this reaction, Mabb. We've spoken of this many times."

"She isn't your mate, *darling*," she sarcastically pointed out. "You haven't handfasted with her. She's carrying your seed, not your heart. Or am I missing something?"

He ignored the gist of the question. "As shattered as my reputation already is, what kind of minuscule honor would be left to me if I did such a thing? I won't abandon those who ... those in my care," he quickly amended. "It isn't our way," he repeated. "Yours is the kind of talk I would expect from an outsider."

Mabb paused and stared at him for a long moment. "You want to be with her, don't you?"

"What I want doesn't enter into it. You're suggesting I leave a woman who's carrying my child and go off into the woods with another. I'd be trash, Mabb. There's no other word I can think of to describe a man who'd do such a thing."

She put her hands up in a supplicating gesture. "You only did it to end the curse, didn't you? Well, it's done. Come to me. If you're so insistent about doing the honorable thing, we can raise the outsider's child together while awaiting the birth of our own. Once that baby is born, your little Kathy won't have a thing to do with it anyway, especially if it looks like one of us."

In the deepest part of his heart, Tearach knew that wasn't true. Kathy had already had a chance to end the child's life and had rejected that option. She *did* want her baby. *Their* baby. It disturbed him that Mabb, a woman of his own race, would suggest such a thing. It seemed outsiders weren't the only ones who could commit or condone an act of dishonor.

Shayla had once reminded him that he'd killed one of his own kind to let a human live safely among them. The man he'd killed, his best friend, had spoken the same words of hatred Mabb did now. He feared for the Goblin woman's future if she didn't relinquish her bitterness. He'd already been made an example of, and he wanted no other Goblins to suffer for their opinions of humans. Enough was enough.

"Go home," he brusquely commanded. "If you believe the curse is truly over, there are a few eligible Goblin men left who'd want you as a mate. Handfasted or not, Kathy *is* the same as a mate to me, and I won't do wrong by her or the child she's carrying. End of subject!" He swiped his hand in the air to punctuate the point.

They'd been so deeply entrenched in their discussion he hadn't registered the approach of the very woman whose fate was being discussed. "Yes, *Mabb*, go home. My life, my baby's and Tearach's are our business. Our future isn't something to be manipulated by some jealous woman bent on having her own way. If you cared about Tearach, *really cared*, you would want him to be happy."

"And you think *you* have what it takes to make him so?" Mabb snorted, derisively looking Kathy up and down.

Kathy looked straight at Tearach. "That's between the two of us. But one thing I know. He cares about people too much to ever find happiness doing what you suggest. Tearach has too much dignity."

Tearach was deeply moved that she thought such a thing about him. Especially after his humiliation in front of the entire Order.

Mabb turned to him. "When you're ready, you know where to find me." She stalked off into the night.

Almost visible strands of envy, pain and jealousy followed Mabb as she left. Tearach walked to Kathy and looped his arm about her shoulders, giving them a reassuring squeeze. He was aware that many of the Order had overheard the exchange, and it galled him that something so private would be the newest gossip. But then, so would Kathy's compliment. "I'm sorry about this. In other times, Mabb would have never behaved in such a way. The past eight years have been a living hell for all of us."

Kathy smiled. "You have nothing to apologize for. I shouldn't have said what I did. She's one of your people, and I can't hold it against her or anyone else that outsiders aren't viewed with particular favor. It isn't right that all of you have to hide like this."

"As I said earlier, there are others who might feel the same way as Mabb. It might not be a good idea to be alone among them as yet." He glanced toward the part of the forest in which Mabb had retreated. "Make sure me, Cairna, or Rome is with you at all times."

She raised her eyebrows. "It took you and Lore to kidnap me. Do you think I'm incapable of defending myself, or that it might be necessary? What about the Sorceress' command that I be left alone?"

"It's best not to put yourself in harm's way. And you don't want anything to happen to the baby, do you?"

Her hands went protectively to her abdomen. "You think someone would want to hurt it?"

"It's just a precaution."

"And what difference would it make to you if, as you say, the child's going to die anyway?" she accused.

"While it lives, I'll keep it safe!"

She moved very close to him. "Then you'll be protecting it for a very long time, because it's going to outlive *us*. I know you don't believe that. So, I'll just have to believe enough for the both of us. But there's one thing I want."

"And that is?"

"To see the look on your face when you realize you're going to be the father of a healthy baby. I know you want to give up, to be some kind of martyr. I'm afraid it's going to be quite a shock when you finally get it through your hard head that everything will be all right."

"Kathy, I'd give my very blood to be shocked in such a way. But until that moment comes, I'll keep you and the baby safe."

"I know, I know." She sighed in resignation. "Your honor demands it."

She turned away and walked toward a group of newly arrived Druids. They were standing around the stump of a large oak, drinking. Owen was among them. She was soon smiling, laughing, and joking with them. She seemed so at ease with everyone. When the Druid doctor placed his arm around her shoulders, it took everything in Tearach not to walk over and knock the Druid on his ass. He disliked having Owen touch her. Probably some protective instinct from bygone days. Owen was, after all, a doctor. No doubt Owen would want to examine her in the months ahead. But he'd insist on one stipulation. Kathy wasn't to be examined by anyone without him being present. With that thought in mind, he quickly moved to her side.

"Good evening, Tearach," Owen greeted and handed him a measure of ale.

"Delaney," Tearach acknowledged, purposely using the man's last name. He took the goblet of ale and tossed it down his throat in one gulp. It seemed to him that the Druid watched Kathy too closely and his eyes roamed over her body too often.

"I was just asking Kathy how things were going," Owen told him.

"I'm as well as any pregnant woman can be," Kathy responded with a grin. "Can I book an exam with you? I've neglected doing so far too long as it is, though Shayla keeps assuring me everything will be fine," she said with a bit too much sarcasm.

"Of course." He smiled engagingly and offered her some fresh fruit cider. "I'll be here Tuesday. Come by any time."

Tearach helped himself to some more ale. "We'll be there."

"Good," Owen said with a nod. Then he turned his attention back to Kathy. "You're beginning to show

nicely. That's a good sign things are progressing well." Owen moved forward and lifted his hand. He was just about to place it on Kathy's abdomen when Tearach stopped him.

He gripped Kathy's shoulders and pulled her just out of the man's reach. "If you don't mind, I don't think that's particularly appropriate," he muttered, ignoring Kathy's look of annoyance.

"Tearach," she gasped and pulled away from him. "He's a doctor, for God's sake."

"Really, old man," Owen said with a smile. "I wasn't about to do anything I don't do with any other pregnant woman. I was just going to see if I could feel the baby's position."

Tearach ground his teeth together. "Not *here*. And not *now*. And I don't care what you do with other women, just be careful with Kathy," he warned.

Kathy turned and was about to deliver an angry retort when Owen raised his hand and stopped her.

"It's all right, Kathy. It's been so long since a Goblin baby was expected here that I'd completely forgotten that their fathers are exceedingly cautious. It's in their blood. No harm done. Help yourself to some more cider, and I'll see you Tuesday." Owen nodded at her and walked toward some of the other Druids.

Kathy rounded on Tearach. "What was that all about? You sound just like that Goblin woman."

The inference that he was like Mabb was embarrassing, but he couldn't help himself. "I don't want you ever seeing him without me being present. Is that clear?"

Kathy tilted her head back and glared into his dark eyes. "You don't tell me what to do."

He moved very close to her. "When it comes to this baby, I do."

"I'm not your property, and this baby is just as much mine as it is yours. If I need an exam to make sure this pregnancy progresses successfully, I'll do it at my convenience."

"I told you I'd be there," he angrily responded.

She sighed in frustration. "There may be times when you can't. Something might come up. And I guess you never stopped to consider that I might not want you there. Those kinds of exams can be very personal."

He ran a hand through his hair. "I can't think of too many personal things we haven't already shared. I'd have thought you'd want me there. You shouldn't be alone when undergoing something that's, as you say, very personal."

She slowly shook her head. "Not if you think this baby won't survive or if you're going to start a fight with the only doctor within hundreds of miles. Cairna can go with me."

"My patience will go a damn bit farther if you'll just relent on this. Besides, Goblin men are taught how to treat their women at times like these. We know what has to be done, and that includes any gynecological exams. Cairna couldn't do anything to actually help you."

"Fine." Kathy put up her hands in resignation and took a deep, calming breath. "If you really want to help, change your attitude. I don't want to go through the next few months with a man who's waiting for death and fighting everyone around him. I can't handle that and everything else I'll be going through."

Tearach watched her stalk toward a group of nearby Elves. By the time she got to their circle of fire, her

beautiful smile was back. It seemed she had more patience for total strangers than him. But he really couldn't blame her. She didn't understand what was going to happen. She hadn't seen what he had. All the hope and determination in the world wasn't going to change the situation. She wasn't any different than the other women who believed their child would survive. As the Goblin Leader, he'd been called to watch as, one by one, their dead babies were placed in their arms. If his attitude was bad, it was the result of years of sorrow. That lovely smile would leave her face and never return. Her outlook would become as bitter as his. What would happen to her then? The Sorceress wouldn't let her go back to her own world, knowing what she did. He'd be with his dead daughter. What would become of Kathy? For her sake and that of his unborn child's, Tearach vowed to try and keep his misery to himself. In the near future, there would be more than enough sorrow to go around.

* * * *

Long days followed Tearach's vow. He watched the child growing within Kathy, who had blossomed. If she'd been lovely before, she became as brilliant and radiant as any flower in the garden. She and Cairna busied themselves with preparations for the baby. They decorated the nursery he'd constructed, but he always found some excuse not to enter it and look at their work.

To his surprise, Timmon came by often. Each time, the little boy wanted to know if the baby was there yet. Kathy laughed, snuggled him close and told him he must wait a little longer. Other children stopped by as well, and she sat with them, told them stories, and played games until she became very popular with the toddlers. He watched with his heart in his throat. Sweet dreams could so easily turn into nightmares. There was nothing on Earth more heartbreaking than a mother whose child dies. He'd seen so many of them. Those memories haunted his every waking moment. There were times when he believed he'd go insane before the baby came.

Still, he held Kathy close at night. There was no question about the sleeping arrangements. He had to be with her, including those times when Owen stopped by. His examinations pronounced her and the baby continuously healthy. But instead of placating Tearach, it only added to his concern. Kathy seemed to grow more settled and happy.

One day, after the doctor left, Kathy came to him and asked, "Could you take me to the Dolmen? I want to see it."

"Do you feel up to a long walk?"

She nodded. "I think some exercise would do me good. I haven't had all that much lately."

Cairna packed them a lunch and they set off. Several times he attempted to make her rest, but she insisted on going on. By midday, they entered the clearing that circled the structure.

Kathy stared in amazement. "It's much larger than I thought it would be. And the flowers here are lovely."

"It's meant to calm the mother and the baby," he explained. "We try to keep it aesthetically pleasing. And the size of the structure shelters the new family if the Druids can't control the elements."

"They have that kind of power?"

"To some extent. Shayla's the most powerful when it comes to such things, but even she can't control it all."

Kathy sat on a rock and arranged her blue Druid robe around her. She closed her eyes, and a great sense of peace and joy came over her. It was as if the place held many happy memories and evoked those same feelings. "It's so quiet here."

"Yes," he murmured. "All of us were born here. My parents, grandparents ... all the way back for hundreds of generations."

"I want my baby born here, too," she said and smiled.

"You're really not afraid, are you?" He took a seat beside her.

"No. Well ... that's not exactly true. I guess I'm as afraid of the pain as much as any woman would be. But since women have been doing this for centuries, I'll get through it."

"You'll feel less pain here than anywhere else. And there are chores I'll do to help."

"Such as?"

"Brew special teas for you to drink. I can even take a certain amount of the pain into myself by holding you. It's not much, but it will help."

"Can I ask something of you?"

He took one of her hands in his. "Of course."

"Promise me that no matter what you believe the outcome will be, you will never let anyone take the baby away from me."

He was stunned. "Why would you think anyone here would do such a thing?"

"I heard what Mabb said. I'm not Goblin. There may be those who think a baby with Goblin blood should be raised away from an outsider. Maybe even Shayla."

Tearach dropped to his knees. "Kathy, I won't let anyone take the baby away from you *or* me. Not so long as it lives."

"You *swear*?"

He quickly pulled a knife from his boot and sliced it across his palm.

Kathy gasped as she saw him draw blood.

"On my blood oath, Kathy. As long as the baby lives, I'll never let anyone take it away from either of us."

Kathy covered his slashed palm with her own. "Thank you," she whispered.

He pulled her to him and held her for a very long time. He silently cursed Mabb for her tactlessness. "A baby belongs with its parents. With people who'll love it always. For whatever time it has, it's ours. Yours and mine."

The rest of the day was better than any Tearach could remember. Kathy asked him about his family and spoke of hers. They were about to leave when she gasped and placed her hands over her rounded stomach.

"The baby can really kick!" She grabbed his hands and placed them where hers had been.

Tearach gazed into the blue depths of her eyes, straight into her soul, when he felt the tiny life move. "She's so strong," he whispered.

Kathy nodded and smiled. She placed her hands on his cheeks. "Just you wait and see. She's stronger

than you know. And Cairna tells me she heard that Goblin babies are supposed to develop certain motor skills much faster than human children. Of course, since ours has both ancestries, the baby's powers might be different. But it doesn't matter to me if she has none at all."

He closed his eyes and leaned against her shoulder. No matter what happened, Kathy had to survive this. She must. *She* was the strong one. His physical force paled in comparison to the strength in her heart. She deserved more than what she was being given. So much more.

* * * *

A week later, Tearach was standing in the garden. Kathy sat upon a bench embroidering a tiny white gown for the baby. He was left to his own thoughts, and he was the first to see Clove racing across the meadow, a still form lying in her arms.

He bolted over the fence and met her halfway. "What's happened?"

"It's Timmon," she said, weeping. "He was climbing a tree and fell. Yours was the closest cottage so I..." She broke down, unable to speak more.

Tearach saw the boy's arm dangling at an awkward angle. He carefully took the child from her and turned in the direction of the castle. If Owen wasn't present, the Sorceress would know what to do.

"No!" Kathy loudly commanded. "Bring him into the cottage; he shouldn't be carried around if he fell."

Remembering Kathy's experience in emergency medicine, he did as she asked. It might be better to bring help back. He could travel faster without the boy anyway, and she was right about not jostling him about.

"I'll get help. Do what you can," he told her as he laid the boy on the living room sofa.

Kathy and Clove knelt beside Timmon as Tearach tore out of the cottage.

"How far did he fall?" Kathy asked.

"Perhaps ten feet, but he hit his head hard. I saw the whole thing." She began to sob uncontrollably.

Kathy felt for a pulse and found it to be strong and steady. Timmon moaned slightly and opened his eyes.

"Mummy," he murmured and began to cry.

Kathy asked him simple questions which he was able to answer, and that was a good sign. Timmon had a dark spot over his left eye and his left arm was definitely broken. "How long was he unconscious before you got to us?"

"Perhaps five minutes. No longer."

Clove began to gain more control, as most parents did, when their child began to show signs of responding. Kathy checked for other breaks or more serious injuries, but she couldn't feel anything else wrong. Without x-rays, it was impossible to tell for sure. She calmly began to talk to the boy, reassuring him. He was able to move his other limbs and seemed to show more signs of awareness as the moments passed.

Using a medical kit she found in the upstairs bathroom, Kathy immobilized his injured arm. The head injury concerned her the most, but that wasn't what worried the little boy.

Timmon took one look over his shoulder and began to cry in earnest. "They're all torn up, Mummy!"

"Your wings are the least of my worries right now, little man. We'll talk about them later. For now, just let Kathy look at you. All right, darling?"

It wasn't long before Tearach arrived with Owen and several other men, including Lore. Though they had no wings showing, Kathy surmised they were Fairies. One of them, a tall blond man, rushed toward Clove.

"What happened, sweetheart?" He pulled her to him with one hand, and he began to stroke Timmon's hair with the other.

"Look at my wings, Daddy? They're all torn," Timmon cried again.

"Don't worry, Timmon. We'll take you to the castle and let Owen look at you in the infirmary," his father told him.

Owen looked Timmon over and praised Kathy's efforts to stabilize the boy's injuries. Then Timmon's father gently lifted him and the entire group headed toward the castle. Word quickly spread that Timmon had been injured and a crowd was already gathering when they arrived. The Sorceress led them inside and toward the emergency room. Kathy began to understand how serious an injury could be when a patient was so far away from a hospital. Realizing Owen or one of the other physicians might not always be available, a plan began to form in her mind.

She accompanied Owen into the emergency room. A portable x-ray machine showed no other breaks or serious problems other than the broken arm.

Away from Timmon's hearing, Owen spoke to the parents and the others. There was little point in patient confidentiality since the entire woods seemed to know what had happened and would ask questions about the little boy's accident. It seemed their culture was a great deal more close-knit than anything Kathy was accustomed to. She listened to Owen's assessment.

"He'll be right as rain in no time. His wings, however, are another matter. As you've seen, they're badly torn, and I don't know of any way to repair such damage. I'm sorry."

"It will have to be enough," Timmon's father responded. "He's lucky he wasn't killed. I'm afraid Timmon will be quite upset about it, though."

Kathy turned to Tearach and quietly asked, "Do his wings matter that much?"

"Once torn, they'll wither away. He simply won't have any one day. It seems like a minor thing compared to his concussion or a broken arm, but he won't exactly be a Fairy anymore. It'll be hard on him. Wings to a Fairy are as important as an arm to you and me."

Kathy swallowed hard. Given what Tearach had told her, maybe trying something unheard of would be an acceptable course of action. She walked back to where Timmon sat crying and pitifully looking over his shoulders at the tattered remains of his green wings. No amount of comfort was able to soften his despair. Kathy decided to offer what help she could. Giving up just wasn't in her nature.

"Please, may I look at his wings?"

Clove and Timmon's father looked at one another.

"I don't see why not. You certainly can't harm them now," Clove sadly responded.

Kathy adjusted the operating room light so she could see straight through the wings. She studied the torn

parts and began to think.

Tearach wondered what was going on in that brilliant brain. They watched Kathy gently unfold the torn, gossamer wings and survey the damage. The next words out of her mouth sounded ridiculous.

"Could someone bring me tweezers, fishing line, some lightweight paper, an embroidery needle, paste and some slabs of very light weight wood?"

"What are you thinking of, Kathy?" Owen shook his head at the incomprehensible list.

"Well, if you can't make a thing worse, then the only course of action is to try. So, I'm going to do something radical. That's if you approve," Kathy directed this last remark to Timmon's parents.

"Go ahead," Clove replied. "What will you do?"

She shrugged. "The best I can."

Twenty minutes later, Tearach stood back and watched as Kathy began to work. She took the tweezers and gently unfolded the boy's torn wings. With the light shining through them, she carefully matched each shred with its counterpart. She then threaded the clear fishing line through the embroidery needle, and began to carefully sew the tears back together. At that point, everyone gasped at the progress she'd made. The wings almost looked good as new. Apparently not satisfied, Kathy took the paste and began to gently spread it over the wings. She then glued rice paper on both sides of the two appendages. Over this, she placed square pieces of Balsa wood and tied more fishing line around them to hold them in place. Timmon now looked as if he had two boards on his back. *If* the wings grew back together, the paper could be easily torn away and the filament cut. Just like stitches. It was a very unique kind of bandaging.

"Well, this might not work, but it's better than letting these lovely wings waste away," Kathy said with a shrug.

"Kathy, you're *brilliant!*" Owen remarked. "Nothing in my training allows for such ingenuity. It's nothing short of genius.

When Timmon's parents began to respond in kind, she stopped them. "We have no idea if this will work. Let's just hold the applause until he's better and we can unwrap his wings."

"How long will it take to know?" Timmon's father asked.

"When his cast comes off, we'll check the wings. That should be enough time, don't you think, Owen?"

"If it isn't, then they won't heal at all," he agreed.

Tearach stood in the corner with some of the other men. The little boy lay sleeping on the operating table. Immense pride filled him. Kathy was amazing. If he'd looked the world over, he couldn't have found a more resourceful, intelligent woman. And he knew he was deeply, hopelessly in love with her. Instead of the realization bringing him joy, it was one more stone around his burdened soul. While she helped someone else's child, she'd be helpless to save her own.

He left the room and walked outside. He needed to be near the forest, to glean what comfort he could from it.

Kathy saw Tearach's departure and quickly excused herself from the others. She followed him outside. "Tearach, wait!"

He turned and let her catch up with him. "That was a wonderful thing you did, Kathy, whether it works or not. Only a very caring mind could conceive of such an idea."

"He's just a little boy. He shouldn't suffer the rest of his life for climbing a tree. I just wanted to help him."

They walked on in silence. Why couldn't things be different? Why couldn't he have a normal life and raise a family with her? More than anything, he desired that these wishes could come to pass.

He suddenly turned, pulled her into his arms and kissed her hard. She responded with equal ardor. They walked back to the cottage with their arms about one another, keeping their thoughts to themselves.

From the edge of the woods, Mabb watched closely. A burning hatred welled within her against the woman Tearach held. The child she carried should have been hers. The Goblin Leader should be *her* mate, warming *her* bed and loving *her*. Tearach had once killed one of his own people so that a human could live. Now, he was lying with an outsider and looking at her as if she could do no wrong. Had he forgotten what they'd done to the Goblin race? Had he forgiven the sins of Exmoor so easily?

Tears clouded her vision and a malevolent idea began to form. "Hold him while you can, human. Hold him while you can," she viciously muttered.

Chapter Eleven

Each hour that passed, Tearach fell more and more under Kathy's spell. Word of her attempt to save Timmon's wings reached the rest of the Order. People stopped by to speak with her and even show her some of the magic they possessed. She had been accepted. There were even a few more injuries she helped treat, though none so serious as to warrant more than consoling words and bandaging. The fact that she was there for them prompted Owen to suggest she be given more surgical training and medical supplies. Kathy was ecstatic about the idea, saying it was a niche she could fill and be doing a job she loved.

"I feel needed here," she remarked.

You are, Tearach silently agreed. *I need you more than anyone.*

Weeks went by, and it was finally time to remove Timmon's cast. It had been a difficult chore for his parents to keep him subdued enough to let his arm heal, let alone his wings. But, they'd soon know what the outcome would be. Would he have a usable set of wings?

Tearach was among those present as Kathy unwrapped her makeshift bandaging. When the paper was peeled away and the filament cut, Timmon was able to flutter a perfectly healed set of small wings. Under scrutiny, his parents were unable to tell where the actual tears had ever been. To them, Kathy was nothing short of a heroine. Tearach watched as she humbly accepted their thanks.

Outside, the weather grew cooler. Samhain approached and his anxiety grew. Kathy and Cairna became closer and made plans for the baby. Tearach loved Kathy so much he'd give his own life to see her happy. He held her tenderly at night, but he was sure she didn't have a clue as to his romantic feelings. She did perceive, however, that he was still consumed by the impending death of their baby. For that reason, there was a mixture of subdued anger and determination in her gaze, but she didn't voice her opinions as long as he didn't vent his.

He sadly checked the supplies Cairna would take to the Dolmen. A time that should have been filled with joy became a living nightmare. If Kathy died trying to have his child, it would be his fault. One more life on his conscience.

Because Tearach was so immersed in himself, Kathy turned to Cairna to ask for more information about the traditions of the Goblin people. Tearach had become so silent and withdrawn that having a normal conversation with him was almost impossible. He would only answer in monosyllables and respond automatically. Thankfully, Cairna seemed oblivious to his mental state.

Despite his withdrawal, Kathy was determined to have him deliver their baby. More than anything, she wanted to be alone with him when the time came, to have *him* be the first to hold their child. She felt a growing sense of anticipation. Owen assured her everything was absolutely normal. Only a problem with the delivery could stop the baby's safe arrival, and she trusted Tearach. She knew where her heart lay.

The night before Samhain, Kathy heard singing and other sounds of celebration break out in the woods. She'd been showered with gifts which, due to her anxiousness, she'd been unable to open, and Tearach had been too distracted to help. She stood at the window of their room, listening to the celebration when her water broke. She gasped and grabbed for the bedpost. Before she could say a word, Tearach was beside her.

"I'm here, Kathy. I'll be right here," Tearach crooned. "We need to make our way to the Dolmen. Are you ready?" His heart pounded in his ears, and he had never been more frightened. But Kathy must

never know. It wouldn't help her delivery.

She took a deep breath and nodded. "Remember your promise, Tearach? That no one will take the baby away?"

"I remember, love. I remember."

Love? It was only an expression, Kathy told herself. He was just afraid for the baby and it had slipped out. She ignored the small endearment, changed into a fresh Druid robe with Tearach's help, and made her way to the door. Cairna hugged her once more and smiled.

"Peace go with you, Kathy. This night begins a new life for us all. I'll be here to help when you get back. The nursery is all ready. I can't wait!"

Cairna's exuberance showed, but Tearach did a good job of looking calm. Kathy knew he was anything *but* calm. He led her away from the cottage and toward the Dolmen. On the way, pain almost forced Kathy to her knees.

Tearach carefully lifted her into his arms. "It'll be better when we reach the Dolmen. I promise."

By the time they reached the structure, Kathy's pains were coming half an hour apart. There was still time. He took off his jerkin and readied a bed for her beneath the ancient structure. When he was sure it was as comfortable as he could make it, he helped her out of her robe and heaped warm blankets around her. With a sigh, she settled within them and closed her eyes. He started the traditional fire. It must burn continuously for three days. It would supply Kathy with needed warmth and both of them with hot food. The night air grew colder. Perfect weather for a Goblin, but not for a human mother giving birth to one.

About the Dolmen, he placed sacred plants such as club moss for blessings and protection, feverfew to ward off fever, and silver fir for protection of a mother and her unborn child. Then he readied herbal tea to help Kathy rest. For him, there was a large bottle of scotch. He hadn't drunk much alcohol since the night they'd conceived the baby. Before this ordeal ended, he felt he'd have need of the entire bottle.

Kathy moaned as another pain came. It was excruciating, but not as bad as before they'd reached the Dolmen. She wasn't as afraid of the pain as how she'd respond to it. Cairna had told her Goblin women could withstand as much or more pain than their men. It was a matter of pride that she do her best, especially since Mabb was sure to hear and remark about her lack of endurance. The Goblin woman had made herself scarce, but Kathy knew she'd be back. And she'd come to tear apart what little there was of Kathy's and Tearach's relationship.

When the pain became too intense, Tearach was beside her in an instant. He gently lifted her so that she rested against his chest, and then he stroked her lower back. "Breathe deeply, Kathy. Try not to push yet."

She knew the routine. How many babies had she delivered for other women? Now she understood why there was so much screaming. "Tearach," she gasped, "this sort of hurts."

For her to admit it told him she was in a great deal of discomfort. She tried to make a joke of it by smiling, but it wasn't funny. It was time to take some of her pain into himself. "Take my hand, close your eyes and concentrate on my grip," he instructed.

Kathy did as she was told. At first, his grip was brutally strong. The more she squeezed back, the more the pain seemed to diminish, so she squeezed even harder.

Tearach felt Kathy's agony. It was like her womb was being ripped apart. It shot through his own abdomen like a knife. Every instinct he had was for her safety and to help her, but there was only so much pain he could take from her. The rest she'd have to endure on her own. Gradually, she began to breathe easier. The spells surrounding the sacred site were taking over. It had just taken a little longer, maybe because she wasn't a creature of magic. Thousands of years ago, her kind had used the old ways, but the mythological practices were forever lost in the outsider's technological world.

"Better?" he asked.

Kathy nodded and rested against Tearach. For a very long time, he held her and she silently prayed for her baby's safety. Though they took some time to come, the next wave of contractions weren't so hard to take. Sometime later, they came much quicker. She closed her eyes and felt Tearach lower her back into the nest of blankets.

He lifted the coverings from the lower half of her body and placed himself between her thighs. There was no sign of the baby's head. Kathy writhed and began to push. He coached her as he'd been instructed. She screamed and pulled against the blankets. Her agony was his. He spoke softly and crooned to her. Anything to make the pain more bearable. Much later that evening, she cried out, and he could finally see the baby's head. Months of concern were overshadowed by the pure awe of seeing his child making its way into the world, of seeing its mother valiantly trying to deliver a healthy baby.

Kathy pushed as hard as she could. She wanted the baby out of her as soon as possible. Even with the effects of the magical Dolmen, the agony was overwhelming. Then she heard a baby crying. She laughed and cried as the pressure abated and she knew the baby was breathing. Tearach was saying something, but everything went dark.

Tearach quickly washed and dried the baby with spring water, then wrapped it in a very warm blanket. Kathy would awaken in moments. Until then, he held his little daughter and wept. Except for her mother, she was the most beautiful little thing he'd ever laid eyes on. She was a pale green, sported a thatch of thick, black hair and was so tiny. She couldn't weigh more than five pounds, and he could hold her in one hand. Her small limbs flailed at the injustice of being torn from her mother's womb and pushed into a cold, harsh world. Finally, she ceased her crying and stretched. He brought her close to his heart, kissed her forehead and sobbed.

"Welcome into the world, sweetheart. Now ... stay with us. *Please, please stay!*" As if to tell him she had no intention of going anywhere, she grabbed the thumb and little finger of his hand and gripped hard.

"Let me have her," Kathy said as she groggily awoke and tried to push herself into a sitting position.

Tearach supported Kathy with one hand and handed her the baby with the other. "I'm afraid she looks like me." He felt the need to explain her green skin before Kathy actually saw her.

"I don't care what she ... Oh, Tearach! She's perfect. Look at this sweet little face."

It didn't surprise him that, for Kathy, it was love at first sight. She had always wanted the baby. She really didn't give a damn about its color.

Dragging his gaze away from his lovely little daughter and resuming his responsibilities, Tearach took action. He quickly checked to see if Kathy's bleeding had stopped, then if her breathing and the baby's still seemed normal. Everything was exactly as it should be, but this had happened before. Some of the babies had shown every sign of surviving then, during the first night, they'd all stopped breathing.

Kathy was so busy fussing over the baby, counting fingers and toes that he couldn't bring himself to ready

her for what he knew would come. "Please, Kathy, can I hold her once more?"

"Let's both hold her," Kathy suggested and leaned against him.

He wrapped his arms around them both and looked down at the wonderful child they'd produced. "You're right. She *is* perfect. The most perfect little baby I've ever seen." Then, he paused. "It ... it really doesn't bother you that she doesn't seem to have any of your features? Except for her lighter coloring, she's all Goblin."

She stared at him. "You know it doesn't!"

He nodded. "Yes, I guess I do know. I suppose I just wanted to hear the words. I'm sorry."

Kathy touched his face and then hugged him. "It's all right. I understand."

She continued to croon over the baby and cuddle her. He watched her fight off the sleep she desperately needed. An hour later, her efforts finally failed, and she slipped into a deep slumber. The child was tucked into her arms. Tearach carefully took the baby into his embrace and rocked her before putting her back into Kathy's embrace.

It was just past midnight. He looked into the night sky and saw a bright orange moon. A Goblin Moon, as those of the Order called it. His people had always believed its appearance predicted the best of luck. He swallowed hard and settled himself back beside Kathy. His hand rested on the baby's head. He was determined not to leave the infant's side until everything was over. If Kathy still slept, he'd let her sleep on. Then, he'd steal the dead baby away and have Cairna take Kathy back to the cottage. Neither Kathy nor Cairna would ever see him again. It would be over before anyone could stop him. The fire would be built, and he and the baby would be gone.

But as the night wore on, a puzzling, ridiculously wonderful thing happened. The baby kept breathing. She squirmed now and again and yawned, but her respiration seemed perfect. Near dawn, Kathy woke and lifted the baby to her breast. The child drank like she was starving.

Kathy sighed in relief. "I hadn't expected my milk to come so soon. Maybe that has something to do with bearing a little girl with Goblin blood, but there seems to be so much of it." When she realized Tearach was staring at her in shock, she asked, "What's wrong?"

"None of the others ... they never took milk."

She grinned. "What did they drink? Whiskey?"

"No." He shook his head. "They never ate. No one could get any of them to take anything."

"Well, our daughter is taking quite a lot."

Have I been wrong? Was the Sorceress right? His heart began to pound. As soon as the baby quit nursing and Kathy burped her, he held out his hands. Kathy readily handed the little bundle over.

He gazed at the baby and kept doing so until the first rays of light touched her face. "*She'll live,*" he whispered.

"I wish I could say I told you so, but it wouldn't be very kind, would it?" Kathy said softly, realizing Tearach was almost in a state of apoplexy. Having convinced himself that gloom and doom lay ahead, he didn't know how to respond to being happy. It had been so long since he'd had a reason to feel that emotion, she feared he might not know how to deal with it.

He raised his head and gazed at her through a curtain of tears. "What a coward I am."

"No. No, you're not! And don't you ever say that again," Kathy reprimanded. Then she began to cry for them both as she pulled Tearach to her and hugged him fiercely. "You're just someone who lost hope for a while. Now you have it back."

He cradled the baby and held on to Kathy as if his very life depended upon it. There was so much to be said and done. He'd been an idiot! How did he begin to make up for all his stupidity?

When they'd gained some semblance of control, he lowered Kathy and the baby back onto the blankets and tucked them both in. Soon, they were asleep, and he was left to do some serious thinking about the course of his life—past, present and future.

Now that he had a future to plan, his whole body shook with emotions that had been bottled up since Exmoor, and he actually wept as eight long years of pent-up emotions poured out.

The next time Kathy awoke, the morning sun was high in the sky. It was a perfect autumn morning and the baby cried for her feeding. As the little one nursed, Kathy looked up to find a very tall man walking toward her with a pot of tea. It looked like Tearach, but his face had completely changed. The angry, disparaging look had disappeared. As handsome as he'd been, *this* man was heart stopping.

"*Tearach?*"

"Yes, Kathy?" He smiled as he lowered himself next to her and gazed at the baby.

Her heart almost broke in two. She'd never seen him smile, and no nova could have been brighter or more perfect.

He poured her a cup of tea and then picked up the baby. "It's my turn to hold her now. You relax. I'll have food ready in no time."

She watched him lift the baby up and kiss her. The expression on his face was filled with pure love and total devotion. He began to hum something like a lullaby in a low, wonderful baritone.

"What's that song?"

"Something my parents sang to us when we were little. It's ancient. There may have been words at one time, but I don't remember hearing them. Still, the tune is nice. Let's see if she likes it." He began to hum a little louder.

Kathy watched as their newborn daughter turned her head and listened to the sound of her father's voice. It was the sweetest scene she'd ever witnessed, and Tearach's voice filled the air more beautifully than any opera aria. He'd never said he could sing, but then, he'd never had a reason to do so until now.

The baby made small noises and he laughed. "I think she likes it. What do you think?"

She smiled and nodded. The lump in her throat wouldn't allow her to voice the love she felt. With his heart torn asunder, he'd appeared older and more worn. Now, years fell away. She felt it was the first time she'd truly seen the real Tearach. Yes, he was green with pointed ears, his incisors were a little longer than normal, and he was larger and stronger than the average man, but he was all the more precious to her because of it. He was going to make the most gentle, kind and patient of fathers, and he'd probably spoil his little girl rotten.

That brought something else to mind. They couldn't keep calling the baby *it* or *her*. She had to have a

name. Among the customs Cairna had taught her, it was the mother's privilege of naming the baby. It hadn't seemed fair, but Cairna insisted that this was the mother's gift to give the newborn, and her right after carrying it for many long months. Under other circumstances, Kathy would have spoken with Tearach about the subject, but he'd been so depressed she hadn't dared say anything. Now, it was high time the baby had her name bestowed upon her. She hoped Tearach approved of her choice.

"May I hold Tearyn while you get us something to eat? I'm starved."

Tearach slowly lifted his head and gazed at her. "What did you call her?" he whispered.

"Tearyn. Her name is Tearyn." She almost laughed at his comical expression. She'd never seen anyone so taken aback.

A slow smile spread itself across his face. "You ... you gave her a derivation of *my* name?"

Kathy nodded. "It didn't seem fair that I was supposed to name her and you had no input, so I chose something I thought we'd both like. I think it's pretty and unusual. Don't you?"

He reached out a hand and stroked her cheek. "It's a wonderful name. Thank you, Kathy."

The satisfied gleam in his dark gaze meant everything. She almost cried with happiness. He slowly handed the baby back, holding onto her cherubic hand as he did so. For some moments he gazed down at the baby, and then he looked back up at her.

"I'll get you something warm to eat and ... and *Tearyn* something soft to wear."

Tearach turned away and then glanced over his shoulder at his woman and his child. If this was all a dream, Herne help him, he didn't want it to ever end. His heart had never been so full or his spirit so high. There was nothing he couldn't accomplish. With the weight of eight horrible years drifting into the past, he could only see days of sunshine ahead. Was it possible that he could love Kathy and their baby any more? With each minute that ticked away, he was determined they'd know how much more love he could give.

* * * *

The next days were a kind of heaven on Earth. Tearach held Kathy and the baby as much as he possibly could. Kathy returned each caress and gesture with sweet abandon. To just blurt out that he was in love with her wouldn't do, especially when she'd probably attribute such a proclamation to the baby's survival. The time, place and circumstances had to be perfect. More than anything, he now wanted Kathy to handfast with him. She deserved to be treated like the beautiful, intelligent woman she was, not the outsider he'd only pretended to tolerate. To this end, he made plans. Conceited as it might seem, there wasn't a woman alive who could defend herself against a Goblin man's romantic advances. He smiled thinking of it.

"What are you grinning about?" Kathy asked with a laugh.

"Nothing. Just thinking," he said. "It's almost time to go home. Are you ready?"

She turned around to look at the Dolmen and the surrounding clearing once more. "I shall always love this place."

"So will I," he agreed, and he made himself a promise that they'd come back for the birth of more children. She didn't know it yet, but she was about to be swept off her feet and right into his arms and life forever. He watched her cradle the baby in her arms as they slowly made their way back to the Goblin Meadow and the cottage.

The closer to home they got, the louder the sounds of celebration became. Tearach knew every citizen of the forest would come calling. Protective instincts drove him to take an alternate route and hurry Kathy and the baby through the back door. Throngs of well-wishers were already gathering in the nearby meadow.

Kathy laughed at his cautiousness. "Why are you so concerned? They only want to welcome us home."

He shrugged and sheepishly smiled. "I can't help it. I want the both of you to myself for a while longer. I'm selfish."

"You're no such thing. But maybe you're right. I would like a chance to get the baby settled in first."

"Then, you'll have it. We'll keep everyone away for a few more days. I'm not sure what Shayla will say, but that's a problem best dealt with later."

"Could you make an exception for Cairna? She *is* the baby's cousin and this is her home, after all," Kathy teased.

Would he ever stop smiling? Tearach wondered. It was a special honor for Kathy to allow Cairna into the home first. It spoke of a loving trust and bond between the women he found endearing. "Of course. I'll have someone send for her." He paused and pushed a strand of hair off her face. "Let's get you and Tearyn upstairs so you can both rest."

After he saw Kathy and the baby safely upstairs, he unashamedly locked all the windows and doors. When the first visitor came, he ignored the pounding on the front door and impishly yelled at those outside. "Damn your eyes, they're *mine!* Go get a woman and baby of your own!"

Upstairs, Kathy was getting into bed with Tearyn. She smiled when she heard his laughable plea go unnoticed. Someone yelled back at him, but the voice was so muffled she couldn't determine who the person was.

"All right, but just you two," Tearach replied and opened the front door. He quickly closed it again after Cairna and Rome rushed in. Outside, perturbed voices complained and begged entry, but he was adamant. "Go away! Let us have some time, will you?"

Cairna bounced up and down with her hands clasped in front of her. "Please, let me see the baby and Kathy."

Tearach smiled and hugged her. "You can go upstairs, but quietly. Rome, help me get this crowd away from the cottage so Kathy and Tearyn can sleep."

"Tearyn!" the two younger Goblins exclaimed in unison.

Without conscious effort, he felt his chest stick out like a Highland mountain. "She named the baby after me."

"It's perfect," Cairna squeaked. "And ... you're actually smiling. Oh, Uncle Tearach, it's so good to see you smile!"

He felt remorse and shame at having behaved so badly. Cairna had felt the brunt of his fear for all these years. "The future is all I'm concerned with now. It has to be. I've lived life too long in the past, and I'm sorry for it, sweetheart."

She wrapped her arms around him and kissed his cheek. "We can be a family now?"

He nodded. "We can. And, unless I'm mistaken, Rome will soon be family, too, won't he? Did you two actually think you could hide your feelings from me, even when all those other young rogues came to call and you rejected them?"

She sheepishly turned her head away and rolled her eyes.

Rome stepped forward and held out his hand. "Cairna has agreed to handfast with me. I'd prefer it was with your blessing."

Tearach laughed. "You have it. Just make sure when the babies come that Kathy and I be allowed in the house first."

"Babies are a project I intend to work on right away." Rome sent a searing look in Cairna's direction.

"You'll buy the cow before you get the milk, mister." She stared at the two men before continuing, "Now, if you two are through with this inappropriate subject, may I please go up and see Kathy and the baby?"

Tearach cleared his throat and nodded. He hid a grin behind one hand when Cairna shot Rome an angry glance. Then she turned and bolted up the stairs.

"Well. I guess she told me." Rome laughed. "I'm going to have my hands full with that one."

"Come on. Before we chase everyone away from the cottage, let's pour ourselves a whiskey and celebrate."

"I'm with you," the younger man replied.

In the woods, far away from the revelry, sat a lonely figure who wrapped her arms about herself and wept. There was no joy in her life and never would be. All she'd cared for was gone. Mabb had nothing left to lose and intended to make others suffer as she did.

Chapter Twelve

Two days later, Tearach cheerfully despaired of keeping Kathy and the baby to himself. No work was being done because everyone was waiting to see the new Goblin child. Looking down at her, he couldn't blame them. "You're as lovely as your mother, poppet. And I love you very, very much."

Seconds later, Kathy entered the room and stopped to watch Tearach lift the little girl into his arms. Arms that could probably crack granite were infinitely tender with the baby. Hands that had killed were as gentle and protective as any angel's against her tiny body. But he'd held *her* that way too. Kathy knew whatever he'd done in the past had no bearing on how she felt right now. She had to be certain. His love for their child was unquestionable. What of *them* and their lives together? There might come a time when he'd regret her presence.

Tearach turned when he heard her move behind him. "Are you sure these were the last of the gifts?" He tilted his head toward the latest pile of presents bestowed upon the baby. They lay, carefully sorted, upon the bed."

Kathy nodded. "That's it. And I've written thank you notes, but you should sign them as well."

"You should check again, Kathy. We might have missed something." He grinned mischievously.

Kathy walked back toward the bed and began to lift wrapping paper and leftover ribbon. "No, I don't think there's anything ... Wait, there *is* one more. But there's no card."

"Open it," Tearach said as he rocked the baby and tried to keep the impish look off his face.

Kathy carefully examined the small square box. It was a lovely copper color with a bronze, gauzy ribbon tied around it. All of the other packages had been appropriately wrapped for a baby girl. This one was more seasonal and romantic looking. She carefully untied the ribbon, lifted the lid and pushed back tissue paper. Silver flecks shimmered within the folds. Someone had added Fairy dust. She smiled at the black velvet box nestled within. "This doesn't look like a baby gift," she murmured.

"Maybe it isn't."

He was trying so hard to appear nonchalant that Kathy knew the gift was meant for her. She quickly took the velvet box out of its coppery container and opened it. She gasped when sunlight hit the gemstone within. It was a perfect, two-inch long aquamarine. It had been faceted to look like a quartz crystal and hung on a lacy, silver chain. The craftsmanship was so delicate and refined that it could have only been handmade. For *her*. "Where ... Tearach ... You?" she babbled as she looked at him.

He slowly smiled and gently lowered the baby to the bed. "I thought it matched your eyes."

She looked down at the most precious gift she'd ever owned and tears filled her eyes. "Will you put it on me?" She slowly turned as he took the necklace from her shaking hands.

With one hand, Tearach lifted the golden curtain of hair off her neck and draped it over her shoulder. Then, he brought his arms around her and fastened the catch. Grasping Kathy's shoulders, he slowly turned her around to face him and deliberately laid the stone between her full breasts.

"I had to guess at the length of the chain. I think my reckoning was correct."

She gazed up into his dark eyes. "Aside from the baby, I've never been given any gift so rare. And both gifts came from you. Thank you, Tearach. I'll never take it off."

She placed her hands on his shoulders and stood on tiptoe to kiss him. He wrapped his arms around her and let the kiss go on and on. It was sweet, deep and full of promise. That she considered the baby a gift from him filled his soul with happiness. Still, the feelings within them hadn't been voiced. But the time would come when they'd both be ready. He wanted that time to be special.

In the weeks to come, the weather would grow much colder. The snow would fall, and they'd be able to make love to keep each other warm. He treasured the images he had of holding her very close in front of a warm fireplace, with the baby sleeping snugly nearby, and she'd wear nothing but the sparkling gem around her neck. No matter how cold it grew or how deep the snow drifted, his home would be warmer than any other place he'd ever known. As would his heart. Kathy must feel the same way. He was determined to make her understand his life was hers.

She finally broke the long, searing kiss, but not her hold on him. "I have nothing to give you."

"Do you call that kiss nothing? And what about that little piece of magic over there?" He nodded toward the baby.

"I meant something you could carry with you always." She grinned and looked down at the sparkling blue-green stone. "Like this necklace."

He covered his heart with his hand. "What I want is in here. And I'll always have it with me."

Kathy swallowed back the large lump in her throat. She moved toward him again. The emotions she felt for him needed to be voiced. He needed to know. No man from her world could have ever spoken his thoughts so eloquently. Sadly, most of them had lost the ability. But Tearach was different in so many ways. It wasn't just his physical appearance or his magic abilities. He had such deep, abiding passions within him, and he wasn't afraid of expressing them, though the cost of doing so had sometimes been painful and humiliating. She'd always know where she stood with him.

"I ... we need to talk. There's something I want to tell you ... it's..."

She was interrupted by a loud commotion in the hall. Cairna and Rome were trying to keep someone from coming up the stairs. Voices erupted in an argument. Tearach quickly pushed Kathy behind him.

"Take the baby," he commanded and drew a dagger from his boot top.

Kathy scooped up the baby and backed as far away as she could. Whoever was in the hallway sounded very angry. The door to the room burst open, and Shayla stood before them.

"What's all this I hear about you keeping the others from seeing the baby? And just how long were you going to wait before bringing her to me?" Shayla angrily demanded. "I've left you alone and given you your time together, but now you must present yourselves to the rest of the Order."

Tearach heard the wind pick up outside and the air around the Sorceress fairly sparked with magic. "I wanted some time with them to myself. Is that so wrong, Shayla?"

"And what were you planning to do with *that*?" Shayla pointed toward the dagger Tearach held in his right hand.

He expelled a long breath. "Nothing! I just wasn't sure who was tearing through the house or why." He quickly sheathed the knife. His senses were so focused on the baby and the need to protect her that he'd scarcely known when Kathy had entered the room earlier. Right now, he couldn't seem to feel any member of the Order, as he should. Long ago, his father had taught him to expect such a reaction to his child's birth. His ability to sense those around him would return in due time.

The wind abated and Shayla walked forward. "Given the way Goblin men behave with their newborns, I'll forgive you." She smiled. "Let me have the baby."

"What do you want with her?" Kathy backed away, cradling the infant closer to her body.

Shayla lowered her voice and sat upon the bed. "Come and sit beside me, both of you." She paused and turned her head toward the hallway. "Rome and Cairna, go back downstairs and quit lurking about like Gremlins. And the next time you try to stop me and my men from entering a home, I'll separate you for a month so that you can consider the foolishness of doing such a thing."

"Yes, Sorceress," came two disembodied and contrite voices.

"Don't blame them," Tearach explained, "I asked them to keep everyone away."

"Sit down," Shayla told them again.

Tearach nodded to Kathy and they both sat on either side of the older woman. They waited for Shayla to gather her robe about her in queenly fashion. "Now, then, I want to see this new little blessing. I won't hurt her, Kathleen." She stretched her arms out for the baby.

When Tearach nodded, Kathy slowly handed Tearyn over to the Sorceress. He watched Kathy nervously chew her bottom lip and her eyes never left the infant. They were full of fear. He knew that if Shayla did anything Kathy perceived as a threat, whether real or imagined, she'd die trying to get her baby back. It was very important that he comfort her and quickly. All Shayla wanted to do was look at the baby. It was a right she held as Sorceress. But Kathy couldn't understand that at the moment. "Come sit by me, love. It's all right," he held out a hand to her. Kathy quickly stood and moved to him. He pulled her to his side and wrapped his arms protectively around her.

"You must think me a monster, girl." Shayla paused and looked adoringly down at the baby. "I'd never hurt a child, and this little one is very, very special. Aren't you, pet?" She began to carefully rock her. The baby responded by turning her head slightly toward the sound of Shayla's voice. "See, I think she knows who loves her. Don't you, sweet thing."

Tearach watched as Kathy stared at Shayla. The expression on her face showed complete confusion. Here was the Sorceress of the Ancients, Druid Mistress of the enchanted forest, acting like a favored grandmother. The older woman was cuddling the baby and making the silly faces that most people did around newborns. Tearach would have laughed outright, but Kathy was strung too tightly. His hands felt the tension in her body, and he remembered the promise he'd made that no one would ever take the baby from them. It was quite possible she thought that was what would happen.

"Kathy, darling," he soothed in a low voice, "no one's taking Tearyn away."

Shayla looked up and stared at them both. "Where, in Herne's name, would you get an idea like that?"

Kathy swallowed hard and stared back. "I don't know. Maybe it came to me when I saw you punish Tearach in front of his people and the rest of the Order. Or how you've manipulated us at every turn. It would be a short stretch of the imagination to believe you'd take our baby away."

"Kathy," Tearach warned. His heart skipped a beat at her constant defense. The Sorceress was trying to offer friendship and Kathy's behavior could get her into trouble.

"You'll never forgive me for Tearach's punishment, will you?" Shayla's voice took on a sad note.

"He could have died from his infection. Had he been less physically strong, he would have. And you

come bursting into our home like a bat out of hell expecting us to condone your behavior? All you've ever done is use Tearach, and you've coerced Cairna into pushing us together. How do I know what you'll do with our baby?

Shayla smiled. “*Our* home? *Our* baby? It sounds to me, girl, like you've put down roots and want to stay. Is that so?”

Kathy gazed at Tearach. “This *is* my home now,” she murmured. “Everything I want and care for is here.”

“That's all I needed to hear. No amount of pushing, prodding or chicanery on my part could have brought you to this point if you didn't want to be here.” Shayla carefully handed the baby back to Kathy. “Now, take this little one, put her to bed in a proper nursery and have a bit more time to yourselves. And you get some rest, Kathleen. But remember there are people out there who need the hope seeing this child will bring.”

Kathy took the baby and watched as Shayla walked to the bedroom door. “Shayla, wait.”

The older woman paused and turned.

“It ... it would be nice if the baby had someone ... well ... a sort of grandparent.”

Shayla slowly walked to where Kathy stood and spoke in a quiet voice. “Did you have someone in mind? If not, I'd very much like to apply for the position.”

Kathy began to cry. “I just want for us to live in peace. I want to know Tearyn and I won't have to ever watch her father be denigrated again, and that we won't be ostracized because I'm an outsider and the baby is only half Goblin.”

Tearach moved to comfort her, but Shayla waved him away and put her arms out. “Come to me, Kathleen.” She wrapped her arms around Kathy's sobbing form and stroked her hair. “There now, dear. No one will ever take your baby away. I'll warrant Tearach will never act so foolishly as to earn a punishment I never wanted to give in the first place. And while I live and have dominion over these sacred woods, no one will ever harm any of you. After all, a grandmother with magical powers has a certain obligation to look after her family, does she not?”

Kathy nodded, still crying too hard to speak. The baby began to cry as well.

“And you don't *really* hate me, do you?”

All Kathy could do was shake her head and move deeper into the Sorceress' embrace. It had been so long since she'd had an older woman to turn to. It was like having a mother again. A mother she badly needed right now. Her emotions seemed to be so radically altered. Her intellect told her this was the result of childbirth, but her heart told her to seek the respite of a good cry.

“Hush, girl,” she comforted. “The baby senses your fear and it's upsetting the both of you. There's no cause for you to ever worry.”

Tearach desperately wanted to hold Kathy and the baby. As if she sensed this, Shayla gently pushed Kathy into his embrace and quietly walked toward the bedroom door.

“By the way,” she spoke as she left, “I love the baby's name. *Tearyn*. It's very appropriate. You'll announce it to everyone when the child is presented.”

Tearach heard the door creak as it closed behind the Sorceress. All his attention was focused on Kathy. He tilted her head up, wiped the tears away with the pads of his thumbs and held her until she and the baby were quiet.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes," she sniffed, "I don't know what came over me. Maybe it's one of those postpartum things you hear about."

She tried to make light of it, but it wasn't anything to laugh off. As strong as Kathy was, she wasn't superhuman. She and the baby needed all the rest and support they could get. "Why don't I run a hot bath for you?"

"That sounds wonderful. I'll put Tearyn in her crib."

He tilted his head. "What crib?"

"The one Cairna and I found in the attic. It's in the nursery."

He shook his head in confusion. "Show me."

She pushed her hair back with one hand, cuddled the baby and walked to the door which separated the nursery from the bedroom. Tearach followed. Surprise all but crippled him when he saw the end result after his carpentry work. Selfishly, he'd left the room and never looked back when the basic woodwork was done. Everything about the task had been too painful.

The walls had been painted a very pale shade of green, and tiny dragonflies had been stenciled here and there along with a medieval forest, complete with castle. A circular, green rug covered the floor upon which sat an old oak crib. Memories flooded his mind. How could he have forgotten the very crib he and his siblings had all rested within? He reached out a hand and stroked the well polished wood. Beautiful little blankets lay within its depths, and they were hand embroidered with more dragonflies.

Kathy was busily searching through the drawers for something the baby could wear. She turned and stopped when she saw his expression. "You haven't been in here since we painted, have you? It hurt you too much to think Tearyn would never sleep here." She stated the last part as fact.

He nodded. "I don't even remember doing the woodwork. I just wanted to get it done and get out as fast as I could. That time was wasted in self-pity and can never be retrieved. Can you forgive me, Kathy?"

"I'll forgive you if you'll forgive yourself." She walked to him and touched his chest. "It isn't your fault you *survived*, Tearach. You understand that, don't you?"

He swallowed hard and nodded. "I'm beginning to."

The baby began to squirm. "I think she's hungry. Could you hold this while I feed her?"

Tearach took a tiny garment from Kathy's hand and watched her settle in his mother's old rocking chair. She dropped the shoulder of her dressing gown and began to nurse the baby. It was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. Her golden tresses flowed over one shoulder while a green little infant hungrily drank milk from one full breast.

"What do you think of our decorating?" she asked.

He walked around the room, lovingly touching each dragonfly and piece of furniture. Then he knelt in

front of the rocker. "It's the most wonderful place, Kathy. You and Cairna must have worked very hard."

"We wanted it to be special. Cairna says that in the spring and summer the Pixies will fly through the open window and watch over the baby."

Tearach looked toward the large picture window with its billowy white curtains and grinned. "They will. Pixies love babies. It's said they once watched over human infants until they were all chased away."

"That's so sad," Kathy murmured and stared out the window.

"Maybe they'll do so again one day." He could only hope for such a world.

They gazed at each other for several moments. Then Kathy stretched out her hand. "Could I have her gown?"

He looked down at the little sleeper he'd clutched in his hand. Kathy had spent a great deal of time sewing it and other garments for the baby. She'd done everything without him. "If you change her, I'll bring the crib into the bedroom. She can sleep by the fireplace where it's warm."

While she busied herself with the baby, he lit the fire, positioned the crib a safe distance away and then ran a warm bath for Kathy. All these were mundane tasks that, for any other man, would have been normal duties. But he took each job to heart. It made quite a difference when you never thought you'd have a child and a beautiful woman to love. And very soon, he'd tell Kathy how much he loved her.

When he was sure everything was perfect, he went into the nursery to find Kathy playing with the baby by crooning to her instead of dressing her. She laughed when he pretended to swat at her behind, and chased her off to her bath. He laughed at his own inability to resist dawdling with Tearyn. She was too cute for words and sheer joy filled him when he touched her. Even as a newborn, the baby seemed to smile a great deal. At least, that's how he chose to translate her little expressions. The only thing she could actually do was grasp his fingers and focus on the sound of his voice, but she knew he was there. It was as if Tearyn was trying to bond with him as much as he was with her. "You know I'm your father don't you, sweetheart. No man will ever love you the way I will. Not in this life or any other." He kissed her tiny hands and feet and cuddled her close.

Kathy heard his voice and tried not to start crying all over again. He was going to make one hell of a father. And when a young man walked through the garden gate one day to take his little girl away, there was going to be an almighty fight. Walking into the bathroom, Kathy was amazed to see a tub full of scented bubbles. She'd have given a lot to watch Tearach laying out the fluffy white towels stacked neatly nearby, or preparing the basket filled with luxurious soaps, scents and fripperies a woman so loves. Gifts, no doubt, from Cairna. She cheerfully dropped her robe and wasted no time taking full advantage of the luxury.

After positioning the cradle where he could watch it, Tearach walked into the bathroom. Kathy's eyes were closed and she leaned back against the end of the tub. Her shining hair was piled on top of her head and she was chin deep in bubbles. He'd never get over how lovely she was. From the first, he'd acknowledged it, but now he was free to indulge in fantasies. He vowed that, as soon as a doctor said she was ready, they'd make love until neither of them could move. So long as the lady was willing. It was his pleasant task to make sure she was.

He knelt beside the tub and began to massage her shoulders. She took a slow, deep breath, exhaled and moaned her approval. Gently, he lowered his hands to her milk swollen breasts and carefully squeezed.

As his hands worked their wonders, Kathy's breasts felt less achy, and she arched herself further back.

Soon, his hands began to massage other parts of her. His touch was so soothing, yet her body responded as though an electric current were running through it. She wanted more. She opened her eyes, looked deeply into his and raised her arms for his kiss. It was slow, lingering and full of potential. She drew a deep groan from him before he pulled slightly away.

"Kathy, we shouldn't go further. Your body needs to heal."

"I want you," Kathy heavily breathed, surprised she could have such a physical reaction so soon after birth. It might be part of the magic of this enchanted place or the man himself. Maybe a combination of the two. Right now she felt no pain, only a slow, burning passion for this green giant of a man.

"Never doubt that I want you, too. But we need to wait. These herbs are a special mixture." He waved his hand at the tub and grinned. "Their purpose is to help ease your pain and for relaxation. Maybe they're doing the job too well."

She brought shaky hands to her face and tried to still her body's desires. Tearach loosened her hair and let it fall. Using a pitcher, he washed it with a luxurious witch hazel shampoo, rinsed it, then towel dried and brushed the thick waves until they glistened.

"Stand up," he instructed.

She could only listen to his voice and do as he requested. Every part of her seemed to relax, yet screamed for more of his touch. It had been one of the most intimate experiences in her life, and stopping seemed like a crime against nature. Without opening her eyes, she leaned into him and felt herself being cocooned in a large soft towel and gently dried. Sleep came to her almost instantaneously.

Tearach lifted Kathy from the tub, carried her into the bedroom and lowered her onto the soft mattress. Then he lovingly pressed downy covers around her. After checking on the baby once more, he returned and took a moment to gaze down at Kathy's beautiful face and the golden hair shimmering on the green satin pillow. He undressed then lay beside her. His hands caressed her shoulders in a soft circular pattern meant to ensure a deep sleep.

He focused everything within him on her comfort. From puberty, the men of his race were trained to see to the new mother's welfare, the minimization of pain and her total happiness. It was a gift bestowed out of the purest love and a way of helping the givers of new life recuperate as quickly as possible. Three rules were always followed. First, a woman who'd just given birth was never left alone. Second, she and the baby were respected and given a period of quiet with the baby's father so they could all bond. And third, if the situation should arise, the father would give his life protecting his mate and their infant. With his heart more open than at any time in his life, Tearach was prepared to give everything. He felt the strength to fight off the entire world if he had to. Happiness lifted him to a place so unfamiliar it became overwhelming. His hands and body shook with emotions he struggled to control.

Kathy sighed in response to his caresses and he carefully pulled her close. During the night, he'd check on his newborn daughter and gently hold her. In this way, alternating his attentions between the baby and the mother, the two of them would know they weren't alone, that a safe, caring presence was always near. It was meant to be a time of intimacy, of great sharing and love.

* * * *

When Kathy awoke, there was a light scent of flowers in the air. She slowly opened her eyes and saw a vase of the most beautiful salmon-pink miniature roses on a nearby table. She grabbed her bathrobe off the end of the bed and got up to admire the bouquet. There was a card lying beneath the blossoms. In a bold masculine hand, a message was written in quotation marks.

"The moving finger writes; and, having writ, moves on; nor all your piety nor wit shall lure it back to cancel half a line, nor all your tears wash out a word of it."

She thought for a moment and then remembered the source of those familiar lines. Tearach was trying to assure her he was accepting the horrors of his life as being in the past, that things couldn't be changed and life had to go on. She clutched the note to her heart and tried not to cry. Her body might ache, but her heart felt like dancing.

"Good morning, Kathy. Did you sleep well?" She turned to see Tearach holding Tearyn in his arms, rocking her.

"These are beautiful." She glanced at the tiny roses. "And the note..." Her voiced trailed away as words failed her.

He walked toward her. "A small gift compared to what you've given me."

"Not small to me. I ... it's amazing." She attempted a small laugh, though the lump in her throat prevented it.

"What?" He smiled encouragingly.

"A Goblin quoting Omar Khayyam."

"It's amazing that I exist at all, isn't it?" He paused. "Do you want to know the *really* strange part?"

"What?"

"A firefighter who *reads* Omar Khayyam!"

She burst out laughing and stretched up to kiss him. "I deserved that."

For a moment, he grinned back. There would never be a better time than now. "Kathy ... I've wanted to talk to you." Hearing her mother's voice, the baby began to cry for breakfast. Tearach shook his head and sighed. "I guess you'd better feed her. If she takes after me, she'll have a larger appetite than any three babies."

Kathy took Tearyn and cuddled her. The baby was so like her father and Kathy couldn't have been more pleased. She loved them both so very, very much.

Later, while she rested, Tearach read to Kathy from several of his favorite books. She was discovering quite a few things about the strong, caring man who had abducted her. He loved good books, quiet times and being with those for whom he cared. And she knew he *did* care for her and the baby. It was only a matter of time until he spoke the words. It had to be in his own time and in his own way. Until then, she'd wait. Tearach would time things right, of that she had no doubt. When he decided to speak up, she would tell him how her own feelings had changed. They'd both progressed from enemies to allies to friends. Now lovers. She considered all this while listening to his deep, calming voice. She fed the baby once more and then felt almost compelled to sleep.

A soft knock upon the door broke Tearach's perusal of the sleeping Kathy and their child. *Their* child. After he called permission to enter, Cairna came into the room bearing a large box.

She smiled and glanced toward the sleeping mother and baby. "I have the things you'll need. They're all ready."

"Thank you, sweetheart. I guess, since everyone is celebrating the baby's arrival, a spectacular entrance will be called for."

"Of course! *I just can't wait!*" she whispered and hopped up and down in excitement.

He couldn't help laughing at her exuberance. He was feeling a little giddy himself. And Kathy deserved to be presented to the crowd in a superb fashion. She'd saved his people—saved *him*. And she deserved to take her place as his mate and as a leader before his people. Before the night was over, he'd ensure they all knew and respected her for what she'd done.

Remembering the concerns Kathy had voiced to Shayla, he was determined to make sure she felt accepted and protected. One way he hoped to accomplish this was to show her how highly regarded she'd be. He hoped the boxed gift would not only please her, but enable her to meet the members of the Order with the royal dignity due his mate.

He opened the large box and smiled. "Exactly as I wanted. Thank you, Cairna." He was rewarded with a large grin from his niece. She nodded and quietly left the room, peeking at the baby again before she retreated. With his heart filled to the point of breaking, he picked up Tearyn and sat by Kathy, eager for her to awaken.

Chapter Thirteen

When Kathy awoke, it was to find Cairna sitting in a chair by the bed.

"Good afternoon. How are you feeling?" the girl asked, getting up to sit beside Kathy. A hot pot of tea steamed invitingly nearby.

"Hello, Cairna. I feel wonderful." She smiled. "How do you like your new cousin?"

Cairna shot her a bewitching smile. "Oh, Kathy, she's the most beautiful baby. I think she loves to be held. She's so cuddly, and I want one too."

Kathy shook her head. Youth had a way of romanticizing a great many things. There would be times when the baby was sick or teething. She'd cry a great deal and patience would be necessary to get through the day. "Just don't hurry it, honey. You and Rome have time. Take some of it for yourselves, first."

"I hear what you're saying, but it's hard," Cairna said and reluctantly handed the baby to its mother.

"Where is Tearach?" Kathy asked as she looked around the room.

"He didn't want to leave you, but tonight is very special. He had to get ready and asked that I help you and the baby. You should have seen his face. He just can't stop smiling. And it took every ounce of conniving Rome had to get him downstairs."

Kathy tilted her head as she nursed the baby. "What happens tonight?"

"The baby will be presented to everyone, and we have special clothing, food, music ... Oh, Kathy, it'll be wonderful."

Kathy nodded when she remembered the stories about the naming ceremony. Then she looked down at the bundle in her arms. "Well, I guess she is pretty special."

Cairna gently gripped the baby's tiny hands. "Was it very painful? Having her, I mean."

She nodded. "It hurt like nothing I've ever been through, but nothing good ever comes easy. You'll see one day."

"Were you afraid?"

She thought for a moment. "Not for me. Certainly I was for her." She nodded at the infant.

"I don't know how I'll go through it. You're braver than me. Will you help me when I get pregnant someday?"

Kathy pulled her forward and hugged her hard. "Of course I will. We're family, aren't we?"

Cairna threw her arms around her. "Oh, Kathy, I don't know what I'd have done if you hadn't been on the trail that day. I love you."

Swallowing the lump in her throat was hard. "I love you too, honey." She hugged Cairna hard and then gently pushed the girl back. "Now help me and the baby get ready. I don't exactly know what I'm supposed to do. I know you must have told me about all this, but I'm sure I've forgotten almost everything."

Cairna grinned and walked to where a large box sat in a chair. "I'll go over it while we get ready. First, this is for you and this is for the baby."

The girl held up two, dark green velvet garments. One was a Druid robe, exquisitely trimmed in silver. The other was a bundling blanket for the baby that matched. "They're lovely!" Kathy exclaimed and got up to examine them closer.

"Wait until you see Uncle Tearach. He'll be so grand you won't even recognize him," Cairna boasted. "Rome is helping him get ready as tradition dictates."

In a crowd of a billion, Kathy knew she'd recognize Tearach. With her eyes shut and a storm sent from hell blowing around her, she'd recognize the man that had captured her very soul.

* * * *

Tearach paced, accepted another goblet of ale, and then turned to pace some more. The men with him made jokes about his new status as a father. But it was all done in congenial fun, and he laughed with them. It felt so good to do so. Right now, however, he was wondering where in hell Kathy and the baby were. The sun would set soon. He wanted his woman with him when he walked into the Goblin Meadow to present his family for the first time.

It was over! Eight years of heartache, loneliness, and fear were over. He would never forget the horror of Exmoor, but this was where life started again. And he vowed to make his and Kathy's lives right. He'd start by showing off the baby and soon he'd accept Kathy as his handfasted mate. Then they'd make an entire house full of babies. All running, playing, fighting, and loving under the same roof. He wanted endless noise and excitement.

"Will you quit pacing, man? You'll walk yourself to China, then where will you be?" Lore quipped.

"On a very fast boat back, I'll wager," Rome joked, and the other men laughed.

He laughingly waved a hand in dismissal. "The rest of you wait until your babies are born. Then it'll be my turn." He pulled at the green gauntlets he wore and refilled his goblet. "Where can they be?"

"Ah!" Rome said as he saw commotion in the forest. "I think I'm being hailed."

Tearach started to follow, but the rest of the men grinned and held him back. "Not yet," Lore said. "You wait until you're asked to follow."

He took a deep breath, jokingly cursed those around him and started to pace all over again. Some of their traditions were very old. And because so much had happened, it fell to him to make this celebration as meaningful for all the others as it was for him. But his patience was rapidly ending. "Herne's balls! What's taking so long?"

The other men laughed heartily and Tearach grinned along with them. To them, he must look like one large bundle of nerves. Nothing at all like the leader he needed to be. *Hang it all!* He needed Kathy and the baby. If they weren't here in the next five minutes, he'd defy tradition, go back to the cottage and fetch them himself.

Finally, he turned to see Rome motion him forward. Tearach took a breath and walked toward him. The other men suddenly became quiet. It seemed they would finally honor the occasion with the solemnity required.

Tearach walked silently with Rome. They entered a small glade far away from the revelry. There, Kathy stood with the baby. Her eyes gleamed with the brilliance of sapphires. Cairna stood behind her dressed

in the dark green robe of his Goblin Clan. His niece's clothing, however, was not trimmed with silver. This designated her place within his household as the younger female member. Kathy's status, and that of his child, came first. And his own clothing matched Kathy's. Had Cairna explained the significance of their matching clothing? Did Kathy realize that she was being publicly presented as his mate and their baby as his first heir?

Kathy almost gasped aloud when she saw Tearach. He was absolutely resplendent in a long-sleeved leather jerkin and pants. His tall black boots made those muscular legs seem even longer. And the green gauntlets he wore had silver stag horns embroidered on the backs. His jerkin was open, revealing acres of muscular green chest, and its edges had been trimmed in silver, matching the edges of her own robe, hood and gloves. She felt like some medieval queen being presented to a fairy tale court. When Rome, dressed in black leather, took his place beside a beaming Cairna, Tearach offered his arm to Kathy.

"We are away, my love. This night we present our child to the Order. May her life be guarded by Herne and protected by every living thing."

"*Blessed Be,*" Cairna and Rome replied in unison.

All Kathy could do was try not to lose the control she so dearly needed. She felt like breaking down, running straight into Tearach's powerful arms and weeping for hours. Everything was so wonderful. The place, the man, and these people were in her blood. And she thanked God that her inclination to stop jogging hadn't been on the day Tearach kidnapped her.

She placed her hand on Tearach's arm and let him lead her forward. In silence, they approached the Goblin Meadow. Kathy could see torches everywhere, and every living being in the entire Order seemed to circle the grassy clearing. At the far end, Shayla stood with her Druid staff behind her and she was stunning in a silver Druid robe. Her hair had been braided and a crown of fall flowers circled her regal head. As they moved toward her, Kathy could see her beguiling smile, and she opened welcoming arms to them. They stopped within feet of her, and when Shayla spoke, her amplified voice could be heard throughout the entire area.

"This night, we celebrate the end of sorrow and the beginning of a new era. The closing of one door and the opening of another." She paused. "Who brings this child before the Order?"

"I and her mother do," Tearach proudly proclaimed.

"And who are her guardians?" Shayla asked, gesturing toward Tearach's family.

"I am her guardian, as she is of my blood," Cairna loudly replied.

"And I am her guardian, as she is of my heart," Rome responded after Cairna.

"So be it. May you love this small life as your own. Cherish her presence with reverence, laughter, patience and tolerance. For so she is taught, so she will do." Shayla held her hands up and a cooling breeze blew through the meadow.

"*Blessed Be, Blessed Be, Blessed Be,*" chanted the entire Order.

"Now it falls to the mother to give the child a name." She walked toward Kathy and held out her hands.

Without hesitation, Kathy handed the Sorceress the baby. She watched as the older woman smiled down at the tiny, green-wrapped bundle. Then, Shayla lifted the baby over her head toward the stars.

"What name do you give this child?" she asked.

"Her name is Tearyn," Kathy responded. Amazingly, it seemed her own voice echoed throughout the area.

Shayla smiled and spoke toward the sky. "The stars will record this child's name for history. Forever after, she is known as Tearyn."

"*Blessed Be, Blessed Be, Blessed Be,*" the Order chanted again.

Shayla carefully lowered the infant. Tearach moved behind Kathy and held out his arms for Tearyn at the same time as Kathy lifted hers. In that way, they both took the baby, and Tearach's solid presence protected them.

"Now is the time for merriment," Shayla said to the crowd. "Be ye at peace. *Bi subhach!* Celebrate. And let nothing come between you and the happiness this night brings." She lifted her hands toward the sky again and the crowds cheered loudly.

Tearach quickly pulled Kathy and the baby against him as well-wishers pushed forward to see the infant. The Goblins were first. He introduced each of them to Kathy.

Then there were throngs of other creatures whose shapes and sizes varied, from the tiny, ethereal Pixies, to the oversized, rocklike Ogres. Kathy, poised and gracious as ever, thanked them all. If their appearance shocked her, she hid it behind a brilliant, breathtaking smile. And Tearach's heart soared. He could have prayed to Herne forever and never have found such a mate.

Soon, it became apparent that he and his family would never get any peace or food if he didn't signal for his guard. When he raised his right hand, a score of strong men moved in and led them to a nearby table. He laughingly sat Kathy and the baby at the table, standing until Cairna and Rome found their places opposite them. He ordered the food brought forward for Kathy first and held out his arms for Tearyn.

"Let me hold her, love. It's tradition that no one can eat or drink until the mother does."

Kathy nodded and waited for the succulent roast chicken to be placed before her. She took a small bite and everyone moved to tables to begin their partying. Still, there were hoots and shouts in their direction. Tearach smilingly answered back, and Kathy thought her heart would burst with love and pride.

When someone proposed a toast, he lifted a drink to his lips and wrapped his free arm around Kathy. "I'm afraid it will be like this most of the night, Kathy. It's been such a long time since we were able to celebrate."

She leaned toward him so he could hear. "It's all right. I love the attention," she joked. "And the baby doesn't seem a bit bothered."

Tearach looked down into the sleeping face of his little girl and laughed heartily. "She knows she's loved."

Kathy ate the most wonderful meal of her life, and she kissed Tearach with passion when he gave her an expensive box of chocolates, which she shared with the others at the table. She had never felt more alive in her entire life. At one point, she leaned toward Cairna, to hear what the younger girl was saying. When she turned back, there was a small, pink box sitting in front of her.

She looked at Tearach. "What's this?"

"For the baby," he murmured and kissed her cheek tenderly.

Kathy quickly opened the box. Inside was a small, pink heart made of smooth rose quartz. There was a

green velvet pouch to place the heart within, and a cord on it to tie it around the baby's neck.

"I know it seems like a strange thing to give a baby. But, when she's older, we can give it to her and tell her she carries our heart wherever she goes," Tearach said.

Kathy's eyes misted over and she quickly lowered her gaze. Her throat tightened so much that words wouldn't come.

Tearach pushed the hood of her robe back and lost his breath. Kathy's hair gleamed like silver. Evidently, Cairna had helped her put Fairy dust into it, and it glittered like there were a thousand tiny lights within the thick, long waves. For a long moment he stared at her profile. "By Herne, you're so beautiful, Kathy!" He cupped her face with his hands and lifted it. The kiss he gave her set off rounds of cheers from one end of the meadow to the other.

Kathy broke into a tearful laugh. Tearach pulled her and Tearyn very close, never dropping his gaze from her aqua-colored eyes. It was Rome's subtle movement that made Tearach finally look away. The younger man was reaching for his knife.

Tearach jerked his gaze toward Rome and followed the other man's alert stare. Several feet behind Kathy, a darkly clothed figure moved closer. Every instinct he had screamed for his family's safety. He quickly stood, his own knife in his hand before he knew it. "Who's there?" he shouted.

Every man within yards moved forward with weapons drawn. They surrounded Kathy and the baby before Tearach could even give the order to do so. Glancing around to see that Kathy was safely protected, he strode forward. He was ready to kill if necessary. Old ways died hard, and there was always the threat of a crafty outsider making it through the perimeter guard.

"It's only me," a soft voice echoed from the dark forest perimeter.

Tearach let out a slow breath. "Come forward, Mabb. Why are you skulking around like an enemy?"

"I-I just wanted to see the baby," she answered as she stepped into the torchlight.

"All you had to do was come out here and ask. You could have been killed!" Tearach shook his head and angrily berated himself for not attending to the safety of his family better. At a time like this, however, it was hard for a Goblin to take his attention off his mate and child. His senses were so attuned to them, he couldn't safely concentrate. That was the main reason for the guards surrounding him.

Mabb swallowed hard and stared into Kathy's intent gaze. "I didn't think *she'd* allow me to see the baby," she angrily explained.

Tearach looked back at Kathy. Rome stood to one side, his blade ready. Two men flanked her other side. Cairna stood behind them. Even his niece's own knife was drawn. Cairna remembered what he had taught her and was ready to defend from the rear. He waved his hand. The weapons were quickly sheathed, and the guardians slowly took their seats again. Pride flowed through him that they would show such alertness and loyalty, even if the supposed intruder turned out to be only Mabb.

"Come over to the table," he told her. "Don't sneak about like that again. You know how our men are around a baby," he chastised.

"How would I remember?" she defended. "It's been so long."

He took Mabb's arm and drew her toward Kathy. Tearach watched as Kathy held the baby protectively and glared daggers at Mabb. "Kathy, all Mabb wants to do is look at the baby."

Hesitantly, Kathy lowered the baby so her face could be seen. Mabb moved forward to look. Something about the woman wasn't right as far as Kathy was concerned. It wasn't just her jealousy over Tearach. It went further than that. There was a kind of wild, haunted look in her eyes. It was as if the Goblin woman was just shy of losing her grip on reality, and Kathy instincts told her Mabb could never be trusted.

"S-she's beautiful," Mabb whispered.

Tearach stood behind Mabb.

Kathy knew he couldn't see the Goblin woman's face, but she saw Mabb's expression change from varying degrees of tortured angst to enraged malice.

Mabb glared at Kathy with all the hatred she felt. When she turned to face Tearach, however, there was nothing but breathy supplication in her voice. "Oh Tearach," Mabb held out her hands to him, "I'm so happy for you. Happy for us all."

Tearach clasped her outstretched hands, then hugged the woman and grinned. "Everything will be all right now. We'll have children running around all over the place before you know it," he joked. "And I know two Goblin men who'd fight to the death for you. Scores more if you wanted to mate with someone outside our race."

Mabb cast a malicious glance back at Kathy. "Oh, I'll be making plans very soon." The look she bestowed on Tearach was nothing short of angelic. "But you two have a nice time. You deserve everything that's coming to you," she gushed.

Kathy didn't, for a moment, miss the inference. The woman meant to cause any kind of trouble she possibly could.

Tearach hugged Mabb again. While he was so close, Mabb pushed her hand lingeringly through his thick hair and nuzzled his cheek in anything but a sisterly fashion. Finally, Tearach gently disengaged himself from her embrace. Mabb slowly let her hands trail inside his jerkin, and down his bare, muscular chest. Then she slowly sauntered off. When Tearach moved closer to Kathy, he seemed oblivious to the tender touches and endearing looks Mabb had bestowed. Kathy wasn't fooled.

"You see, love? Mabb wants to let bygones be bygones." He lifted a strand of her hair and looped it between his fingers.

Tearach looked happier than he'd probably been in many years. Trying to disillusion him about Mabb would result in an argument, and that would suit the Goblin woman's purposes just fine. So Kathy moved into his arms and lifted her face for a deep, long, hot kiss. If Mabb was watching, and Kathy was fairly certain the woman was still hanging around, she'd see the two of them locked in a lover's embrace.

Tearach pressed close to Kathy. He'd never wanted someone so much in his life. "I'll have to keep my hands very busy, love."

Kathy tilted her head. "What are you talking about?" she innocently asked. Then gave him the most coquettish look she could possibly muster. She could feel his arousal all the way through the thick Druid robe she wore.

He dropped his head back and laughed loudly. Then he pulled Kathy so close that only she could hear. "I'll be in a cold shower every fifteen minutes if you keep looking at me like that. Or I'll have to find someplace where I can be alone."

"You don't have to be alone." She nibbled at his ear and mischievously grinned. "Until I'm recovered

enough to make love, I have two strong hands."

Tearach's smile suddenly turned sensuous and feral. "I might just take you up on the offer."

Their gazes locked and Kathy felt the world was about to spin out of control. She could imagine the scene their words had just painted. She would sit between his metal-like thighs and stroke him until he cried for mercy. But there would be none. And this green god of the forest would be hers for the taking. She'd have him at her total command and begging for more.

He gripped her shoulders tightly, glanced down at their sleeping baby and whispered, "When Tearyn's asleep, I want you to..."

"Uncle Tearach ... Kathy," Cairna called out. "Come back to the table. You're missing your own party."

Tearach tore his gaze from Kathy's, glanced toward his niece and then back at the woman before him. He took a deep, cleansing breath. But the thoughts of what Kathy had offered careened through his brain like an out of control meteor. He desperately needed her hands on him.

Kathy placed one hand over his pounding heart. She surreptitiously slid it down his chest, to his abdomen and rested her palm against his groin. They were standing so close, she was sure her robe hid her actions. "Later. I promise," she whispered, and kissed his full lips.

He almost groaned in agony when she smiled seductively and walked away. His body might ache for her, but at least he had something to look forward to. He shook his head to clear it and tried to sit comfortably next to Kathy. All the while, his manhood endured the strain of the leather pouch he wore. It didn't help matters that she wrapped her lips around a strawberry as if the fruit were a particular part of his anatomy.

Tearach ordered a triple glass of whiskey. When an Elf happily sat the drink before him, he threw it down his throat without hesitation. "Don't tease me, Kathy," he murmured into her ear as she joyfully kept up her antics. "Goblin men have limits, and I'm rapidly reaching mine."

Kathy leaned against him and fed him a berry. All right, so she was jealous. But the green woman *did* have a hidden agenda. It was to Kathy's benefit that she had a way to completely capture Tearach's attention. She impishly continued to experiment on how to do so. "I don't know what your problem is," she sweetly replied. Under the table, she delighted in stroking his powerful thigh. "I told you, I'd take care of you. *Later.*"

Tearach swallowed hard and tried to concentrate on conversation, the food, drink ... anything. Finally, he could bear her soft caresses no longer. He smiled wickedly when a thought occurred to him. "Cairna, Kathy needs to leave the table for a few moments. Tell everyone we'll be right back." When his niece smiled and nodded at him, Tearach grabbed Kathy's hand.

Kathy swallowed her cider and looked up in surprise, "But I..."

"Come on, darling," he interrupted. Tearach smirked at her confused expression as he took the baby from her, carefully gripped one of her arms and led her into the nearby forest. When he found a quiet spot, he knelt and pulled Kathy down with him. "Now, finish what you started."

Kathy watched as he carefully placed Tearyn in a soft bed of leaves, wrapped the coverings around the baby more tightly and then turned his attention back to her. "I guess I really shouldn't have teased you," she admitted.

"No. It's not a good idea to bedevil a Goblin man in such a way. We have very strong drives." His breath

was coming in gasps. "Please, Kathy. Touch me."

The light in his eyes revealed how very close he was to losing control. Kathy had only wanted to make sure Mabb couldn't waltz in and destroy the relationship they were building. Now, however, Tearach desperately needed to have her caress him.

Her hands slid to his waist, slowly undid the leather belt and unzipped the front of the green leather pants. When she reached inside the garment, her hands came in contact with a very full erection. It was tightly encased in one of those black leather pouches she loved so much. Kathy smiled and pushed his body until he was on his back. His breathing was rough.

"Please, hurry," he whispered brokenly.

She quickly untied the leather binding him and caught her breath when he sprang forward. "You're marvelous," she whispered.

Tearach held his breath as her mouth descended on him. With all his heart, mind and body, he tried to let the moment last. But her touch was so soft and enticing, and it had been such a long time since they'd been able to make love. Somewhere in his lust-slaked brain, he acknowledged they could have been doing things like this all along. At first, he'd been so determined that their relationship was wrong. Then there was the threat that the baby wouldn't survive. He'd brought on his own problems, but he was determined to never let those demoralizing feelings enter his heart again.

As her tongue flicked over him and her long fingers encircled his swollen member, Tearach knew he'd never want another woman touching him as long as he lived. There was no one else in his universe. Only Kathy and the intoxicating response she elicited.

Kathy watched Tearach take one long breath and then moan as his hands gripped the earth beside him. His release wracked his body. And Kathy kept up her ministrations until the end.

She gently stroked him as the light in his eyes dimmed and went back to normal. "Better now?" she asked softly.

Tearach took a deep, shaky breath. "Much." Then he smiled sensuously and let her hold him for a time.

"Tearach, I hate to stop this, but we'd better get back," she advised.

He nodded. "You're right. But tell me this won't be the last time we sneak off like this, that you'll play with me like that again."

"I don't think you could keep my hands off you."

"Mmmmm, you own me," he breathed against her lips.

"Not yet," she said as her hand smoothed over his flat abdomen. "In a few weeks, though, I'll do my best to make it so."

"Thank you, love. That was unbelievable." He touched her face and sighed.

"You're welcome. And I'm sorry I teased you."

"Don't be too sorry."

She playfully pushed him. Then Tearach stretched as he watched Kathy stand and pick up the baby. "Is Tearyn still sleeping?"

Kathy chuckled as the tiny baby stretched out her arms and peacefully yawned. "Like a little bug."

He quickly rose and redressed. "Let me have her." When Kathy handed him the baby, he cradled Tearyn in the crook of one arm. Then he took Kathy's hand in his and kissed the back of it. "Loop your arm through mine, and never walk beside me without touching me. All right, Kathy?"

Something in his voice seemed wistful and urgent. It was as though walking together as a unit meant a great deal to him. "All right, I won't"

He leaned toward her, gently touched his lips to hers and led the way back to the meadow.

Storming through the woods, Mabb bounced into one tree and then another as tears of galvanizing rage blinded her. "He's mine ... mine," she uttered over and over. She couldn't exist without Tearach. She wouldn't. And if that meant Kathy had to be confronted, so be it. The quicker her plans went into action, the better.

Chapter Fourteen

The days drifted by remarkably fast. After the night of the naming celebration, visitors were frequent and welcomed. Tearach savored each memory and filed them away in his heart. Laughing came easily, and he promised himself that Kathy would know what it was to be swept off her feet and boldly loved. When he made his vows, there would be no doubt in her heart or soul that they were meant to be together forever. Not just for the baby's sake, but because together is where two people in love belonged.

She awoke in his arms each day, and Tearach began to gradually shift her schedule and his to staying awake nights. That was how the Goblin world worked. The daylight was for resting, the night for work and celebration. Kathy seemed to embrace his life and customs with joy and continual curiosity.

Cairna and Rome planned for a handfasting during *Imbolc* or the traditional first day of spring. The entire household was turned upside down in preparation, and Tearach loved every moment of it. His baby grew, and he couldn't imagine his life without her precious presence. He bonded with her so powerfully that nothing could ever break their ties. It seemed everything would be as he had never dreamed possible, and word came to him that other Goblin children were expected. There was no doubt in anyone's mind that they, too, would flourish.

It soon came time for him to take his place and guide his people back into the work force. The Order demanded that all of its denizens carry the weight of assigned tasks, so he gathered his small band of Goblins and apportioned work. But even that was a pure joy. Unable to concentrate on anything but survival, their share of the burden had been carried by others for too long. It was time to live.

Tearach listened as Kathy walked down the hallway. He held the baby in his arms and waited for her to join him, Cairna, and Rome for the evening meal. But the very breath left his lungs when he saw her descend the stairs. She was back in her leather clothing, the same clothes she'd worn when he'd first seen her. Though he knew her figure was back, he hadn't seen her in anything but the comfortable Druid robes many of the women loved to wear. The leather hugged her slender form perfectly. It seemed she might even be a bit thinner. The pendant he'd given her nestled seductively between her full breasts.

She laughed when she saw his face, held up her hands and turned for his inspection. "What do you think? The pants fit fine, but my breasts are still huge."

With the baby wriggling in his arms, he mounted the steps two at a time and gazed down into her eyes. "You're beautiful, Kathy. When do you think you'll be ready?"

Kathy draped her arms over his shoulders, knowing he meant sex. It was a subject they'd talked about for weeks. "You've got a one-track mind."

"It's the right track as far as I'm concerned. *When?*" he persisted.

"It's been seven weeks. Usually women are told to wait about eight. But I can go to Owen tomorrow and make sure, if you like."

He slowly nodded. "I *like*." But that meant he'd have to hunt for the herbs men of the Order took to prevent pregnancy. He couldn't have Kathy carrying another child so soon. Her body wasn't ready, and they hadn't talked about when or *if* they'd create another life. That was a discussion he'd take up with her when they were handfasted properly. He hoped to do so on the same night Cairna and Rome were joined. It would have special meaning for all of them.

"Come on, you two. The food is getting cold," Cairna called out from the dining room.

Tearach placed the baby in her cradle beside the fireplace. With one hand, he set it to rocking, tucked in the blankets and walked toward the table. Pot roast, seasoned potatoes, fresh broccoli and hot tea waited, and he wasn't about to let that empty-pitted Rome start without him.

"What are you smiling about?" Rome asked.

"I was just thinking it would be good to get your cottage built so Kathy and I could have this one all to ourselves."

Kathy pretended to frown at him. "They can stay with us as long as they want." She turned her attention to the younger couple. "Don't listen to him. He just wants the entire roast to himself."

Rome looked at Tearach. "Actually, I was thinking of borrowing some tools from the Loft and start building this weekend. Would you help?"

"Of course," Tearach responded. "We can draw out a plan tonight if you want, and discuss it on guard duty tomorrow evening."

"What's the Loft?" Kathy asked.

The three Goblins looked at one another and burst out laughing.

"I'm sorry, Kathy," Tearach said. "I thought someone would have told you about it by now. With everything that's been on my mind, it didn't occur to me that there are a lot of places you've never seen. The Loft is what we call the building where the artisans work. These are the people who make the textiles, artwork, and everything else we sell to the outside world."

Kathy nodded. "I remember Cairna telling me something about all that. Could I see it?"

Tearach lifted his hand and gently caressed her cheek. "Of course, you can. I've been so protective of you and the baby, it didn't occur to me you've been cooped up in the cottage for weeks. It's past time for you to see some more of our world." He leaned forward and gifted her with a slow, steady kiss.

Cairna tactfully cleared her throat. "While this is highly romantic, you think you guys could get a room or something?"

Tearach broke the kiss, leaned back into his chair and raised an autocratic eyebrow in his niece's direction. "Pay attention, little one. You might learn something."

"Oh, it's nothing she doesn't already know," Rome blurted. Realizing his tactical error, he swallowed his food and quickly pretended his broccoli was very interesting.

Tearach shot the man a pointed glare.

Cairna turned a bright shade of pink.

Kathy looked around the table and sighed. "Leave them alone, Tearach. You and I aren't even talking about handfasting, and we've got a baby lying over there in a crib. Don't get all self-righteous with them."

"She's got a point," Cairna said.

"A definite point," Rome chimed in.

Tearach threw down his napkin, stared at Kathy's winning smile and threw in the proverbial towel. "All right, all right. But I don't want to know what the two of you are up to." He momentarily put up his hands

in mock resignation. Then he helped himself to some more pot roast and silently promised Kathy, *Oh, we'll get around to handfasting. Don't you worry you're lovely head over it.*

* * * *

"Where are we going?" Kathy asked for the fifth time. She watched as he gathered things for the baby.

He soundly kissed her as he walked by. "You'll see. Hand me her blanket, will you?"

Kathy grabbed up the blanket and passed it to him. "Are you taking me to the Loft?"

He winked playfully. "You've got it. I want you to see what keeps this place running."

Kathy chewed her lip in anticipation. "Is anyone going to mind if I ask questions?"

"Could anyone stop you?"

"No."

"Then, they won't mind." Tearach cheerfully grabbed her hand. "Come on. I want to show off the two of you."

The day was cold, but the afternoon sun shone down on them like an orange, Chinese lantern. They walked through the forest while leaves fell and squirrels scampered in front of them, vying for the last of the nuts. As Kathy walked, she couldn't get over the change in the man she lived with. Compared to that grim, grief-stricken, person, this new man was a kind, roguish beau. She knew that when the doctor finally gave her the thumbs up, her love life was going to be spectacular. Unless he took the herbs Cairna told her about, they'd have a family so large the cottage would have to double in size. But, if all their children ended up like him, Kathy would have no complaints. It would be wonderful to grow old with this green knight by her side. And she knew he wanted her there. Why hadn't he said the words?

Before she could contemplate the question further, they rounded a corner in the path and Kathy was amazed to see a large Tudor mansion in front of them. It looked like an expanded version of their own cottage. She knew many of the homes in this forest had a wonderful fairytale look. They were small, quaint and cozy. But this place spread over several acres. It was beautifully landscaped and people came and went. They carried boxes and hoisted them into several large, unmarked vans parked on a nearby dirt road. Kathy surmised that this must be how they got their supplies in and out of the area.

Tearach walked toward two large oak doors in the center of the building. "There's someone I want you to meet. You might hear him called the Craftsman, but he's just Gawain O'Malley to everyone who knows him."

Kathy followed Tearach inside the building. There were offices on the first floor as modern as any she'd ever seen. The second floor contained large rooms where workers crafted fine woolen items of beautiful Celt design. Everyone smiled and wanted to see the baby, but they all appeared in human form. Kathy remembered Cairna saying that those who could shape shift disliked being in their true forms until after dark. It wouldn't do for a satellite to take pictures of, or someone in a plane to see, the creatures of this amazing and wonderful place. If the world ever learned of it, Tearach's and her baby's lives might be in jeopardy. And that must never happen. The world warred among those of its own kind, seeing threats everywhere. These gentle people with their magical ways would give suspicious human minds fuel for anxiety.

"I'm going to show the baby around, Kathy. Look at anything you want."

She watched Tearach walk toward the end of the building and go from one worker to the next. Then she

turned her attention to the workers. They seemed to love what they did. She stopped by one large loom and admired a blue-green afghan. The items she saw would be sent all over the world, without anyone ever knowing their new treasures were crafted by creatures of magic. Kathy remembered a wool sweater with shamrock designs she'd purchased on a trip to Ireland. She wondered if it was one of the items from the sacred forest. Then she recalled that some of her grandmother's handmade furniture came from this part of Britain. Wouldn't it be wonderful to learn that those heirlooms had been made by the very people she now lived with?

That reminded her that she needed to tell Cairna and Rome they could have their pick of her things from the storage room in the castle. Shayla had sent for her household furnishings and had them put there. Some of her mother's and grandmother's furniture would make a lovely edition to a new cottage. And like all newlyweds, Cairna and Rome would need help getting started. Since she had a cottage full of wonderful woodwork, and a wonderful man to go with it, it didn't seem right to leave her belongings where no one would use them.

Her musings kept her smiling and moving from one craftsman to the next. Her eye was captured by a bolt of aquamarine cloth. She ran her hand over the silky fabric and dreamed of having a summer dress made that would make a certain Goblin's mouth water. In her mind, she could see it. A lot of back and cleavage would show. And the wind would blow it lightly around her body and tempt him horribly.

"You should have it. It matches your eyes."

Kathy quickly turned to see a very tall bodybuilder. His long, medium brown hair set off dark blue eyes. He had a sexy stubble of beard on his face. That was something she wasn't used to seeing. Goblins didn't have facial hair, so Tearach didn't shave. But this giant not only sported a rakish beard, he even had a gold earring looped through one ear. He looked like a bronzed pirate. Kathy quickly dropped the cloth she'd been examining. "I'm sorry. I couldn't resist looking at the material."

He smiled and regarded her curiously. "You must be Kathy. I'm Gawain O'Malley. And you can look at anything you like. But *this* has got to be yours. It's the same color as your eyes," he repeated and lifted the cloth up to her face. "Yep. The same."

Kathy laughed. The man's expression was so friendly, and he looked as if he smiled a lot. "I'm sorry, and I know this is going to sound strange, but ... have we met before?"

"You may have seen him. He's quite famous, Kathy." Tearach approached and held out his hand. "I'm sorry you couldn't make it to the baby's naming ceremony."

"I am too." He shook hands with Tearach. "I was off in the south of France. But I want to congratulate you both. The child is a pure miracle, and I've been waiting to get a good, long look." He eagerly stretched out his hands for the infant.

To Kathy's surprise, Tearach handed Tearyn over without a qualm, and when Gawain took the baby in his arms, his face softened and his dark blue eyes lit from within. *This big man loves children*. That was the first thought that came to Kathy's mind. He was so gentle, and he looked down at Tearyn with an expression of complete love.

"She's the most adorable thing I've ever seen, Tearach. You should be the happiest man on Earth. You've got a lovely woman and a sweet little girl." He carefully cuddled the baby and took one tiny hand between his index finger and thumb.

"Yes," Tearach answered. "And I *am* happy."

"The baby seems to really like you," Kathy said as she eyed her daughter's response.

"Oh, I love kids." He grinned. "I want a cottage full someday. I come from a big family myself, and I wouldn't know what to do without a lot of people around. But *this* little one is very special. She's going to be a heartbreaker for sure. Look at those dark little eyes. Goddess, she's a beauty!"

Kathy immediately liked Gawain. It wasn't just his stunning looks, but his gentle, unaffected way. He spoke right from the heart. Then it suddenly occurred to her where she'd seen him before. "Oh my ... you're *DeForest*, the famous artist, aren't you?"

"Guilty." He smiled and shrugged. "Here, I'm just Gawain."

"Don't let him fool you, Kathy. His work is known all over the world. The sale of a single piece of his artwork can keep this place running for months. A great deal of our medical equipment came from him, as well as food, supplies, computers..."

"All right, all right, man. Don't go blathering on like that. Kathy will think I've got a huge ego."

"You *deserve* to have one," Kathy said. "Some of your artwork has been exhibited in the Louvre. You've created some of the most splendid works I've ever seen. But I don't understand how you can get away with it." Kathy was in awe.

"You mean, keep my real identity safe?" He laughed and gently put the baby on his shoulder to rock her.

Kathy nodded. She remembered the newspapers reporting this man to be secretive, ultra-private and exceedingly eccentric. "But that's how it works, isn't it? You pretend to be so self-involved and egotistical that people can't or won't get near you. And there are rumors about a lot of women, but you don't let reporters too near."

"That's the way he does it all right." Tearach snorted. "But don't believe anything you may have ever read about him, Kathy. He's not at all like the newspapers and tabloids have depicted him."

"Yes, I am," he contradicted. Then he held the baby up over his face and grinned at her. "I'm a womanizing devil. Yes, I am, little green pea."

Tearach looked at Kathy and smirked. "He's a real wretch."

Kathy burst out laughing. She had read incidents about his throwing public tantrums when the press got too close. But he kept his identity secret, choosing the pseudonym DeForest. And, as she now realized, his pretended artistic flares of temper were probably staged to keep the media away. They also sold a lot of wonderful art. Being eccentric added a lot onto the price tags. His crafts were always beautiful pieces, using crystals and fantasy designs. She also knew where he got his inspiration. Living in the middle of an enchanted forest would inspire anyone.

"Why don't you two look around some more and let me play with this little bunny," Gawain urged. "You want to come with me, don't you sweetheart." The baby took that opportune moment coo loudly. "See, she wants to stay with me for a while."

Tearach shook his head and laughed. "I'll show Kathy the rest of the building. We'll be back in half an hour. Is that all right with you, Kathy?"

Gawain gently turned the baby around and faced her toward Kathy. "Tell her it's all right, pumpkin. You and I will sneak off and I'll show you some pretty crystals. Tell Mummy she can take all the time she wants."

Kathy was enchanted with the man. He was both breathtakingly handsome and cute as a puppy. "I think she'll be safe with you."

"Snug as a bug," Gawain grinned and walked away. He went from artist to artist, playing with the baby and making people laugh.

Kathy chuckled at his antics. "He's a charmer."

"You'll never find a better man," Tearach proclaimed.

"He must be a good friend. You've never handed the baby to anyone but Cairna, Rome or the Sorceress."

"I'd trust him with my life."

"Well, I know another man just as good as Gawain," she said and walked away to look at a piece of pottery.

Tearach smiled and followed her as she made her way from one room to the next. Then they moved to the upper floors. She asked intelligent questions and received promises from several artisans to show her more of their work. There just didn't seem to be much that Kathy wasn't interested in. If their baby had half her mother's intellect, the child would be a genius.

* * * *

"It's getting late. I'd better pry the baby away from Gawain. I have to be on guard duty tonight."

Realizing it would be their first night apart, Kathy's heart tightened, and she felt a sense of trepidation. She shook off her misgivings and waited for Tearach to collect their daughter. They walked back to the cottage in silence. As soon as they got through the door, Tearach began to gather the items he'd need for the night. "I hate leaving you. You know that, don't you?"

She nodded and hugged him hard. "You'll be back in the morning. I'll just have to keep warm all alone."

He touched her cheek. "No, sweetheart. My body may not be here, but my heart will." He softly kissed her, then quickly left.

For a few moments, Kathy walked with the baby. When Tearyn began to show signs of wanting to nurse, she took her upstairs and fed her. After putting the baby down to sleep, she picked up a book, deciding to read herself to sleep.

The cool, late winter wind blew around the cottage, making the fire seem warmer and friendlier. Kathy was on the third chapter of one of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's stories, when a loud knock sounded on the downstairs door. She jumped and almost woke up the baby. "Well, no more of Sir Arthur, that's for sure," she muttered to herself.

The clock on the mantle chimed midnight, and Kathy wondered who could be calling at such a late hour. Then she remembered where she was and looked out the window. A smile spread across her face when she saw Clove, Merry and Timmon standing on the moonlit stoop.

"Come in," she urged, throwing open the door. Their company was always welcome. It seemed Goblins weren't the only ones who kept strange hours in this place.

"Hello, Kathy. I wasn't sure you'd be awake. We were passing by and saw the light on upstairs. Timmon and Merry have been pestering me to see the baby. I know it's late, and I told them..."

"It's *fine*," Kathy broke in. "I'm really glad for the company."

She led the small procession up the stairs to where the baby lay snug in her cradle. The children stared down at her face in awe, and Kathy chuckled. "They've never seen a Goblin baby before, have they?"

"I decided to wait until after the naming ceremony and your life went back to normal before bringing them around." Clove looked down at the baby. "Oh, Kathy, she's such a pure blessing. You must be so very proud."

"I am. She's good as gold, too."

"Can I touch her?" Timmon asked in a hushed, subdued voice.

"Son, I don't think Kathy would like that. You might wake her up."

Kathy shook her head. "It'll be fine, Timmon. She's a very sound sleeper."

Clove, Merry and Kathy watched as Timmon carefully slid one index finger under the baby's hand. In her sleep, the infant curled her tiny fingers around it and smiled sweetly.

Timmon gazed down at her with his heart in his eyes. "No one will ever hurt you, Tearyn. I'll make very sure," he promised. "You're *soooooo* pretty."

"Uh oh," Clove said, smiling, "someone's got a crush."

Kathy beamed. "I can't wait to tell Tearach she's got a new protector."

"Can I be a protector? Can I really, Kathy?" Timmon asked. His eyes grew as big as two moons.

"Of course you can. And, when she's big enough, you can take her to the Goblin Meadow to play."

He looked back down at the infant and whispered, "Hear that, Tearyn. We're gonna' be *bestest* friends."

After feeding the children some cookies and promising she'd bring them to see the baby soon, Clove led them off into the night. She'd told Kathy there were always more herbs to gather, and she was still teaching her children how to do so correctly. Kathy couldn't wait until Tearyn was old enough to learn some of the same tasks, but she had a great deal to learn herself.

She felt much better after Clove's visit. There were friendly people all around her. She had been through some trying times, even violent ones, but, like all new mothers, she wanted the safest conditions for her baby. She again shook off the silly feelings of trepidation and picked up her book. Someone pounded on the door again. Thinking Clove had returned for some reason, Kathy bounced down the stairs, smiling. She threw open the door to find Mabb standing there, glaring maliciously. Kathy tried to slam the door shut, but the Goblin woman pushed her way inside and knocked Kathy to the floor.

"I saw Clove leave and knew you'd be stupid enough to just open the door again without looking," she bit out. "Too bad you aren't more conscientious. A Goblin woman *would* be."

Kathy scrambled to her feet. "What the hell do you want? Get out of my house!"

"*Your* house? Hah! This is Tearach's home. As one of his clansmen, I have every right to be here. *You're* the one who's the interloper. *You're* the one who should leave."

"You can go straight to the devil. I'm not going anywhere, and you're damned well not welcome here."

Snarling, Mabb drew her right arm back and threw what she hoped would be a bone crushing punch at Kathy's jaw.

Only self defense training at her father's insistence prompted Kathy to move back at the same instant the strike would have landed. She immediately countered with a punch of her own. It was better aimed and hit Mabb right in the middle of her face. The surprised Goblin woman shrieked in anger and lunged at Kathy with both hands out. Blood dripped from her nose.

Kathy was knocked backwards onto a coffee table. It collapsed beneath their combined weight. The two women rolled, clawing and punching at one another as they did so. Too late, Kathy remembered that Goblins were much stronger than humans. Still, she told herself she could make up the difference in strength with the element of surprise and the gift of a superior intellect. She was able to knee Mabb away from her and quickly stand up.

Backing away to give herself time to think, Kathy angrily said, "What do you want, Mabb?"

Mabb pushed herself off the floor. "I want the baby. She's Tearach's and should have been mine."

"You're out of your mind if you think I'm going to let you get anywhere near Tearyn."

"It doesn't matter what *you* think. The baby needs to be with those of her own kind," Mabb growled. "Tearach will come to realize that sooner or later. I've even taken herbs to lactate. I can nurse the baby and be her mother."

"Not in this life," Kathy ground out between clenched teeth. She charged Mabb again and hoped, in the back of her mind, someone would hear the commotion and come running. There had to be guards nearby. But no matter what, no one was taking her baby from her.

She pushed Mabb against the wall and struck her in the stomach as hard as she could. Mabb doubled over and fell to her knees. Knowing, if Mabb ever got up, she'd probably kill her, Kathy picked up a poker from the fireplace and threatened the woman by shaking it at her. She prayed she wouldn't have to use the heavy wrought iron. "Want to steal someone's baby? I'll show you what happens when you do! Now, get out."

Ignoring the poker and Kathy's anger, Mabb lunged at her again, managing to grab her by the lower body. She wanted Kathy dead and the baby in her arms.

Kathy dropped the poker and wrestled as best she could. She finally got herself in a position to deliver several uppercuts to the woman's midsection. Because Mabb wouldn't relent, she kept fighting. The only thing in her mind was saving her baby. She kept swinging until she felt herself being hauled off the other woman by a pair of super strong arms. She fought back without caring who it might be. All she could think of was getting to the Goblin before her child's safety could be compromised. If Mabb got to the baby, she'd never see her daughter again. Desperation such as she'd never felt filled her.

"*Stop it, Kathy!*" Tearach cried out. "You're *killing* her!"

"She wants the baby!"

Tearach pinned Kathy's arms to her side and dragged her back against him. "Get Mabb out of here and see to it that she gets medical help," he ordered.

Kathy watched as Rome and another man carefully lifted Mabb's battered body and carried her out of the cottage. Cairna was standing by the door when they left. She glanced questioningly at her uncle and Kathy.

"Should I stay or go?" she quietly asked.

"You'd better leave, honey. At least until I can get Kathy calmed down and find out what happened."

Cairna nodded. "I'll go upstairs and make sure the baby is all right."

When the girl left the room and Tearach was sure Kathy had sufficiently calmed down, he let her go and spun her around to face him. "What in the name of Herne's balls do you think you're doing?"

Kathy stood facing him. Her hands involuntarily clenched and opened. She breathed heavily and tried to gain some sense of composure. "I told you. She wanted Tearyn. I was trying to keep my baby from being carried off into the night."

Tearach stared at her for a moment. "You caught Mabb trying to take Tearyn?"

"No! The witch came to the front door, bold as bloody hell, and told me the baby didn't belong here and she was going to take her."

Tearach watched her chest heaving. There was a wild look in her eyes that boded poorly for anyone who crossed her at this moment. "All right, Kathy." He tried to remain calm. "I have to make sure Mabb will be all right. Stay with Cairna and I'll be back as soon as I can."

Kathy swung her hair over one shoulder and headed for the stairs.

He caught her upper arm just before she got past him. "Are you all right? Did she hurt you?"

Kathy glared at him. "She wasn't capable of hurting me."

"She has three times your..."

"I *know* she's supposed to have three times my damned strength," Kathy angrily interrupted. "But someone forgot to tell her I have three times her I.Q." She stormed up the stairs, slamming the bedroom behind her.

Tearach blinked, pushed his hair back and surveyed the damage in the room. There was a great deal of blood on the floor. Apparently, none of it was Kathy's. He quickly made his way out of the cottage and into the forest. Mabb was so beaten she would need to be taken to the castle. Kathy had to have caught her off guard or the fight would have ended the other way around and Kathy would probably be dead. He picked up his pace and began to lope. He needed to find out what happened before the Sorceress did.

Chapter Fifteen

Owen exited the room and shook his head when he saw Tearach standing in the hall. "It's lucky she isn't dead."

"She's that badly hurt?"

"No, but any woman attempting to take another's child is asking for death, don't you think? At any rate, one of Mabb's ribs is broken. There's some bruising to soft body tissue and internal organs, and her nose is broken."

"Son-of-a-bitch," Tearach gasped, closed his eyes and passed a hand over his face. "Does the Sorceress know about this yet?"

Owen nodded. "Everyone knows."

"Can I see her?"

He nodded. "She can't talk much. I've given her something for the pain and to make her sleep. Don't stay too long, Tearach." Owen glanced back at the room where his patient lay. "Kathy must have been frightened out of her wits to have fought a stronger woman so well."

Tearach let the comment go as he quietly entered the room and approached Mabb. She was lying on a bed, and her face was a bruised mass. There was a bandage over the bridge of her nose, and she moaned when she saw him. "How are you doing?"

"*Why*, Tearach?" she tearfully murmured. "I just came to say hello and asked to see the baby. The next thing I knew, she was hitting me. I-I don't understand?"

"Hush, now." He pushed back her hair and gently spoke to her. "What did you say to Kathy?"

"Nothing," she brokenly whispered. "I just tried to talk to her and she attacked. Y-you know if I'd gone there to hurt her, she'd never have been able to do this to me. I was caught off-guard. I d-didn't expect anything like..." She stopped, moaned loudly and placed her hands over her abdomen. "It hurts, Tearach. It really hurts."

"There, there, Mabb. It's all right now," he comforted. "You'll heal. As to Kathy, there must have been some misunderstanding. I'll talk to her and we'll work it out, all right?"

"I don't understand why she hates me." She cried harder and turned on her side, groaning as she did so.

Tearach sat with her until she slept. His mind couldn't fathom what had happened. Surely, Kathy wouldn't just swing blindly at someone without provocation. The woman he loved had never exhibited such lack of control. But Mabb had a point. There was no way Kathy could have beaten her so thoroughly without taking Mabb by surprise. The door swung open and he looked up to see Shayla quietly walking toward the bed.

"How is she?" Shayla asked.

"She'll be all right, but it'll take some time for these injuries to heal."

"What did she tell you about the fight?"

Tearach didn't want to relay it. He was silent for several moments until the Sorceress sat down and fixed

her silver gaze on him.

"Out with it, man."

"She said she came to visit Kathy and the baby and that Kathy attacked her."

"Just like that? No provocation? I find that hard to believe."

"So do I."

"Did you see any part of the fight?" Shayla asked as she stared down at the beaten woman.

"Some guards in the forest heard the commotion in my cottage. They summoned me. When Rome and I got there..."

"Go on," Shayla urged.

He took a deep breath. "Kathy was pummeling Mabb as if she wanted to murder her. I had to pull her off."

"And Kathy wasn't injured?"

"She says she's fine. I couldn't see a mark on her."

"Well, I'm sure there's more to the story. Go home. See if you can get Kathy to talk about this. It's not good to bottle up these kinds of feelings."

He nodded. "Tell Mabb I'll be back when she's feeling better."

Tearach left the room and hurried back to the cottage. The lights were on. Not that he'd expected Kathy to have gone to sleep. When he would have gone inside, Clove and her two children were waiting by the front fence and stopped him.

"Is Kathy all right?" Clove glanced at the upstairs light and back to Tearach. "We heard what happened."

"She's fine, Clove. Thank you for asking."

"It's just such a horrible thing to have happened. We saw her earlier tonight. The children wanted to see the baby."

"Was Kathy anxious for any reason? Did she seem upset at all?"

"Well, she *did* look a bit spooked when she came to the door, but that didn't last long. I gather she wasn't expecting someone to come calling so late. I forget she isn't used to all our ways."

"Did you happen to see Mabb?"

"Yes. She was on the path to the cottage. We passed her a short time after leaving Kathy."

Tearach took a deep breath. He hated to ask these questions, but the Sorceress punished people harshly for fighting. He remembered his well-deserved sentence for having done that very thing. "How was Mabb?"

"She was smiling and happy. Nothing seemed amiss. That's why this is all so disconcerting. Something terrible must have happened between Kathy and Mabb."

"Mabb said she was going to visit the baby, too," Timmon chimed in. "Tearyn's a pretty baby."

Tearach ruffled the little boy's hair. He nodded at Clove, and then he walked inside the cottage. Cairna was in the kitchen making some tea.

"Is everything all right, honey?"

She nodded. "The baby's fine, but Kathy hasn't spoken a word. I think she's really furious. You might try talking to her, Uncle Tearach."

"I will. I just can't figure out why the fight started. Mabb says Kathy just attacked her."

Cairna gawked at him and rolled her eyes. "You don't believe that pig swill, do you?"

"It doesn't make any sense. But if Mabb came here to start something, I just don't see how Kathy got the drop on her. Mabb is too physically strong."

"You doubt my word?" Kathy's low, angry voice came from the other room. She entered the kitchen and glared at him.

"Kathy, love, I don't doubt anything. I'm just trying to get to the bottom of Mabb's behavior."

She raised her eyebrows and put her hands on her hips. "Apparently mine, too."

"The Sorceress is asking questions. You know what she does to people who fight."

Kathy walked forward and stared up at him. "Would you excuse us, Cairna? Tearach and I have some things we've got to straighten out." She waited until the girl left the room. "I don't care what Shayla thinks. I don't give a farthing about what Mabb told you. She came here to take the baby, and I told her what I'll tell *you*. Nobody takes Tearyn away from me. Nobody."

"Then we'll deal with Mabb later, Kathy. You'll have to tell your side of the story to Shayla. I'm sure she'll be..."

"Never mind about *her*. I want to know what *you* believe."

"I believe you. I just want to know how you were able to beat Mabb so badly."

"I've already told you. She may be strong, but she's stupid. I learned how to defend myself after the first time I got the bloody hell beat out of me by a drug addict, in the back of an ambulance."

"Herne's blood, sweetheart. I wasn't that far away. You could have called out."

"There wasn't time. And even if there was, I can take care of myself. Or haven't you figured that out yet?"

He took a long, deep breath. "You shouldn't have to take care of yourself. I'll always be here for you and the baby."

"Are you sure about that?" Kathy walked past him, shouldering him aside as she did so.

"What are you saying?"

"You promised no one would ever take the baby away. You swore the night she was born. Remember?" When he nodded, she continued with, "How do I know there aren't more of your people out there who'll try what Mabb did? She told me the baby should be with her own kind. She said she even took some

kind of herbs so her milk would come and she could nurse the baby herself."

"She actually told you that?"

Kathy nodded. Her entire body shook with angry emotion.

Tearach's sympathy for one of his kind was at an end. It wasn't that he hadn't believed Kathy. It was just that he had seriously miscalculated her ability to defend herself. More, she was defending her baby. And she must have been frightened out of her mind to have kept after Mabb the way she did. Apparently, Mabb had greatly misjudged her intended victim as well. He pitied the man or beast who ever tried to come between Kathy and Tearyn. He walked up behind Kathy and pulled her against him. "Don't worry, Kathy. I'll have Mabb sent to the farthest reaches of the Earth. She won't ever touch Tearyn, and I'll make very sure no one else does either." He paused and slowly turned her to face him. "I'll make it right with Shayla, too. You won't suffer for Mabb's behavior."

Kathy gazed up into his eyes. "But you doubted me."

"No. I guess I just didn't want to believe that Mabb was capable of such a thing. It's hard to understand why someone you've known for so long would betray you in such a way."

"That's exactly why I don't think you can control the others any better. You want to trust them."

"Why shouldn't I trust them? They're my people. The rest of them can't be judged based upon what Mabb did."

"Well, you'll excuse me if I don't buy that. You didn't trust outsiders based upon what only three of them did. And you told me yourself that I should stick by you and not get too close to magical beings I couldn't understand. That was before Tearyn was born. Now, I don't know who I can trust anymore. The first thing you did was chase after Mabb. The baby and I needed you after what she did, and you weren't here. There may be others out there who think just like she does." She walked away and stood with her back to him. "You can't be here every minute of the day. If I'm going to see to Tearyn's safety by myself, then I might as well be someplace of my own choosing."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I'm going to ask Shayla if I can move into the castle. There's no sense in sitting in the middle of the woods where anyone can approach whenever they bloody well want to. At least the castle has guards. No one goes in or out without Shayla and her staff knowing about it. The baby may be safer where there are no Goblins."

"You can't be serious. I've told you things will be all right. Mabb's just got some kind of mental problem that needs to be dealt with, and she'll be sent away."

"You'd better pray she does go and that I don't see any threats from any other source. I swear, Tearach, I'll kill the next person who comes near my baby without my permission. That includes Mabb."

"She's my child, too. Or have you forgotten?" he calmly reminded her.

She slowly shook her head. "No, I haven't forgotten. But just like Mabb, you and everyone else looks at her and sees a Goblin baby. Everyone seems to forget that she's half human, too." She defiantly put a finger to her chest. "I'm her mother, and I shouldn't have to put up with some insane woman coming to my door in the middle of the night, forcing her way in and threatening what I love. Yet you stand there asking questions about *my* behavior and talk about discussing *my* actions with Shayla. It's as if any action I took warrants such an examination. You should know me enough by now to trust me. You should

believe me when I tell you something is true."

"But you don't trust me, Kathy. At least, that's what it sounds like. I've told you that this will all blow over, that everything will be all right. But you're carrying on like you're paranoid."

She faced him, lifted her head and met his gaze. "Why in hell would I have any reason to feel like that, Tearach? I was kidnapped, sedated, brought here against my will, subjected to Shayla's machinations, and ended up drugged and pregnant with a child whose safety seems to be of little importance." She paused. "Why in the world would you believe I'm paranoid?"

Tearach just couldn't understand her attitude. While he did remember advising her to be wary of others in the woods, that warning came at a time when he'd been convinced Tearyn would not survive. The whole world had looked forbidding and dark, and he had ranted on about not trusting outsiders because of what a few had done. To her, it must seem as if he was now being impossibly hypocritical. But hadn't Kathy seen the change in his entire outlook? He'd tried so hard to let her know he was a different person than the one she'd first met. And where was the love he was so sure she felt for him? Why was her logic and damnable control flying out the window?

He ran a hand over his face and realized he couldn't forbid her to leave. She'd simply pack up and take the baby with her when he wasn't around, and Shayla would probably go along with her wishes. It was as if a different person had taken Kathy's place. As he saw it, their roles had almost reversed. Perhaps, if he gave her the time she needed to understand that the baby was safe, she'd relent and come back home.

He sighed in resignation and hoped he could make some sense of everything. "All right. I'll take you to the Sorceress as soon as Mabb is moved from the castle. I'm sure Shayla will find some other place for her if she knows you'll be around."

"Fine. Until then ... just give me some space. I'll stay inside the cottage with Cairna and the baby."

Tearach lifted his head, took a deep breath and slowly exhaled. "If that's what you want."

She nodded and started to leave the room.

"Just one thing, Kathy."

She looked over her shoulder at him.

"I won't be kept from Tearyn. Is that understood?"

Kathy turned away, left the kitchen and went upstairs. She bolted the door to the bedroom behind her.

* * * *

For seven days, Tearach waited for Kathy's anger to abate. Finally, Mabb was moved to a cabin on the outskirts of the woods, and Kathy took up residence in the castle. She seemed more determined to keep Tearyn away from the Goblin population than ever. Tearach didn't have the slightest idea what to do. Shayla told him to keep trying and lectured him on his responsibilities. Even Cairna put in her opinion about how he should approach the situation.

It was of little comfort that the remainder of the Goblin faction and the entire Order were horrified by Mabb's actions. They saw Kathy as a sort of savior. But Kathy couldn't know how they felt, because she kept herself cloistered behind the castle walls. It was doubtful she'd listen to any logical explanation in her current mood. Tearach stared at her window during the nights, hoping he'd catch a glimpse of her. He made arrangements to visit the baby, but Kathy was never present. He'd been told she sought Owen's companionship, and she'd even found a way to be of use to him with the medical supplies and minor

emergencies that arose.

He began to imagine she might prefer the Druid doctor's presence to his. Druids, after all, were human. They just had special powers. Of all the creatures of the Order, Kathy would be most likely to relate to them best, particularly Owen. They shared a common bond in their medical background.

The more he thought about that situation, the less he was able to control his frustration. Kathy should be with him. They should be making plans to handfast. His agitation drew him to visit the source of the problem. If Mabb's intent was to drive a wedge between him and Kathy, she was succeeding. But he vowed he would remove that impediment, get Kathy back and make a home for his family.

Deciding to try and talk to Kathy once more, Tearach left his work at the Loft and walked toward the castle. Shayla stopped him outside the main entrance. The short story the Sorceress told him finally made sense of Kathy's behavior. Tearach angrily stalked to the far side of the forest, intent on finishing the entire incident. As he approached the cottage where Mabb was recuperating, the guards the Sorceress had placed there acknowledged him and let him enter. Mabb, still bruised and hurt, looked up from where she rested.

"I've been wondering why you haven't been to see me." She rebelliously shook back her hair as she saw him enter the room. "You need to hear the rest of..."

Tearach raised his hand to interrupt whatever she would have said. He stiffly stood before her. "No more lies, Mabb. I know Kathy didn't attack you. I wanted to believe you weren't capable of such a deed. That you wouldn't actually go into someone's home and try to take an innocent child away from her parents."

Mabb stared at the floor. "You'd rather believe her than one of your own kind?"

He slowly shook his head. "Kathy *is* my kind. And there's something very wrong with you, or I'd ask the Sorceress to do worse than just send you away." When she opened her mouth to speak, he turned his back on her. "As far as I'm concerned, you're no longer one of us. You don't exist. You'll be sent to a small section of woods in Germany. At the Sorceress' request, some Gnomes there will make sure you don't leave."

She gasped and tried to rise from her chair. "Tearach, don't do this. That woman isn't worth it."

"Kathy will be my handfasted mate, and there's nothing you will ever do to stop it. I won't have you near her or the baby."

"*She attacked me.* Why won't you listen? I'm one of your own people. That woman's kind all but destroyed us. She'd say anything to have you, but you should be with me. I'm the one who ... Tearach! Wait, don't go. Tearach!"

He slowly walked out of the cabin and never looked back. As badly as he felt for Mabb, and as ashamed as he was of her behavior, her shouts fell on deaf ears. If there weren't so few of his kind left, Mabb would have already been subjected to a worse punishment than banishing. But he was now convinced she actually believed Kathy had attacked her. It was probably the only way the woman's mind could reconcile the beating she'd received from an outsider. He finally understood Kathy's attitude. She'd seen some ill intent in Mabb that he and others hadn't. Until now.

Mabb was so far into another reality that she posed a real threat. Word had come to Shayla that the Goblin woman was trying to convince others that Kathy shouldn't keep the baby or remain safely within the Order. According to the Sorceress, Mabb even told her guards how she planned to kill the outsider

and tried to enlist their help to do it. That no one was listening didn't seem to stop Mabb's malicious plotting. She didn't even realize that reports of her schemes and odd behavior had finally reached the Sorceress' ears, as well as his. Mabb should have been aware something was very wrong when no one, including the Sorceress, visited her. But her mind was gone. Hatred had destroyed the better part of it. Just as it had almost destroyed his.

Despite it all, Tearach could still summon a small amount of sympathy. Upholding his former bitter beliefs was partly responsible for the way Mabb had acted. Because of this, he felt serious remorse for his own behavior and contrition for Mabb and her predicament. And he knew it was good she was being sent away instead of being killed. But Herne only knew what would have happened if Kathy hadn't fought like a wild animal. Their baby might never have been found, and the woman he loved might have died. He picked up speed and ran most of the way to the castle. Kathy was going to listen to him if he had to tie her into a chair and sit on her.

He ran through the castle door, up the stairs and down the hall to where he knew Kathy's room was located. He was just in time to see Owen leaving her quarters. Something in his blood began to boil. He had been through enough. All he wanted was to be with his woman and child, to live as normal a life as they could, under the conditions that existed within the Order.

"Is there something wrong with Kathy or the baby?" he angrily asked, his eyes narrowing. Owen had no business in her room unless there was a very good reason. Tearach recognized the feeling tormenting him as jealousy. Its pettiness wasn't worthy of him, but the emotion was still there.

"No. In fact, I'd say they're both in excellent health. I just gave them an exam and can't find a single thing wrong with either of them."

Tearach's hands clenched. When he spoke, his voice conveyed frustration, anger and impatience. "Maybe I should have made it clear that Kathy wasn't to be examined without my being present."

Owen looked him over. "Don't use that cocky tone of voice with me, Goblin. If you're looking for a fight, you just might get one. And in case you haven't heard, Kathy is quite capable of making her own decisions."

"That's right," Kathy replied as she opened door and stared at both of them.

"I have to talk to you," Tearach said as he turned to face her. "Alone."

Owen put his hands on his hips and glared at him. "Shall I call the guards and have him hauled off, Kathy? We can always take him back down to the dungeon."

She rolled her eyes and let out a long breath. "No, Owen. Please, just leave us alone."

Owen glanced at them both. "All right. But just give a shout if you need anything."

Tearach refused to move and Owen was forced to shoulder his way around him. Kathy pursed her lips and moved back into her room.

Tearach followed, closing the door behind him. "Why didn't you have someone come get me?"

"For what?" Kathy feigned innocence.

"You know what I'm talking about," Tearach muttered between clenched teeth.

"If you're talking about Owen and my exam, I told you that I'd do it at my convenience. There was no

need to pull you away from work. Besides, you don't tell me what to do.” Kathy leaned against a bedpost and stared at him.

Tearach pushed his hair back in exasperation. “Is that the way things are going to be? Each of us defying the other just to make a point? Expounding on our rights instead of talking about how we feel?”

Kathy sighed heavily and walked toward a window. “What do you want, Tearach? You didn't come here to argue about Owen. You know he's just a friend.”

“Do I?”

She turned quickly around. “You're not jealous, are you?”

He walked toward her. “What if I am? What if I'm a big, insecure, green idiot who doesn't want another man looking at you? Ever.”

She tried, unsuccessfully, not to smile. “Well ... if it's a jealousy thing, you don't have any reason to worry. I'm not interested in him that way. And green would be the right color for that emotion.”

Tearach ignored the last part of her statement. “I trust you, Kathy. It's him I'm worried about.” He walked toward her until she backed into a wall. When she could go no further, he placed his palms against the wall, on either side of her head.

Kathy didn't resist. Her gaze met Tearach's, and his dark eyes were mesmerizing. “Why did you come?”

“To stop this insanity.” He slowly smiled and brushed his lips across her forehead.

Kathy couldn't be angry with him when he smiled like that. She grinned at his blunt statement. “And, um, what insanity would that be?”

“You know,” he responded. “This business where you keep yourself locked away, and I have to pray to Herne just to get a glimpse of you.” He slowly lowered his head, but Kathy ducked under his arms and walked away.

“I hear what you're saying, but that's not going to do it. You can try using that magnificent charm, but that isn't what I want from you.”

He slowly turned away from the wall, determined that she would know how serious he was. “I'm sorry, Kathy. Sorry I didn't completely accept your word about what happened.”

“Go on,” she urged. She raised one eyebrow and crossed her arms over her chest.

She wasn't going to make it easy. “I apologize for letting Mabb get between us. You were right. Her current state of mind makes her a definite danger. I should have listened to you the night the fight occurred and stayed by your side. “But you were wrong about one thing. The rest of the Goblins aren't like Mabb. Since the incident, all they've done is express their remorse and disgust over her actions. I know you didn't come to this place willingly, but no one wants to hurt you or the baby. There'll be no more of Mabb's plotting or manipulations. The Sorceress is sending her away, with my full approval. And part of what happened is my fault. Mabb's anger toward outsiders is a reflection of the way I once felt. If I'd been a better leader, maybe she'd have been more tolerant. But I'll say it again. Mabb was on her own when she came to the cottage. No one wants to take Tearyn away or hurt her.” He paused and pointed out the window. “There are people in the woods out there who don't even know you yet, and they'd give their lives to protect you, the baby and anyone else in the Order.”

Kathy took a deep breath, sat on the bed and gathered her thoughts. It meant a great deal that Tearach was admitting he no longer felt the same about all outsiders. At the moment, his logic created more peace in her heart. "I was scared, Tearach."

He sat next to her and took her hand in his. "Tell me," he softly coaxed. He lifted her hair from her shoulders and let it fall back in soft waves.

"All I could think of ... Tearyn means more to me than my own life. I'll never let anyone hurt her. And I began to think of what might happen to her later. We might not be there. Someone might..."

When she stopped, he nodded encouragingly. "Go on."

She looked down at the floor. "Someday, someone might hold it against her that she's half outsider. She might grow up with that being thrown in her face day after day. And what if someone wants to take it further? You know, do something to get even with the world by taking out their anger on her? No one can predict anyone else's actions. Not you or the Sorceress. I just don't want to live being so frightened for her. Even the outside world is a threat. What if she can never change into a human form the way you can? What if someone *sees* her? Mabb's attack suddenly got me to thinking about a lot of things. I was really scared of all the possible outcomes. Not just what one crazy woman might do." She paused. "Reality is sort of hitting me in the face, and I don't know what to do about it."

He placed his arm over her shoulders. As far as her own safety was concerned, Kathy feared nothing. But when it came to Tearyn's safety, her emotions and logic had been thrown into turmoil. "Kathy, I can't ever remember anyone in the Order taking their anger out on a child. It just isn't done. We love *all* our children. Mabb's behavior is an aberration. The Sorceress is only letting her live because there are so few Goblins left. Mabb's state of mind isn't stable. She's no longer responsible. As far as the rest of the Order is concerned, I just can't fathom anyone doing anything but loving our little girl and protecting her." He pushed back a strand of her hair. "Think of Timmon and Merry. They'll always be her friends, and so will the other children. You don't see or hear them mentioning their differences, do you?" When she shook her head, he went on. "There'll be a great many Goblin children born in the future. They won't always have pure blood. It'll have to be that way for the Goblins to survive."

She gazed deeply into his dark eyes. "Does that bother you?"

"At one time, it might have, but not anymore. Maybe ... maybe this is the way it was supposed to be. Not the deaths at Exmoor," he denied. "There can never be an excuse for that. But the mixing of blood and powers may be our only chance to survive a great many difficulties. Not just for the Goblins, but for the entire Order. The Sorceress was right all along. And who knows what might happen in the years to come? If Tearyn can be one of those to help break down the walls between our world and yours, it might be that our little girl and the Order's other children will be able to go anywhere they want, without having to change to human form." He paused to kiss her hand. "Wouldn't that be something?"

Kathy marveled at the complete transformation in him. The man she first met would never have said such a thing. "Are you sure we can afford to be so magnanimous? The outside world can be a terrible place sometimes."

"That's true. But we all stick together here. No harm will come to Tearyn. I know this as surely as I've ever known anything. Mabb stands alone in her actions, Kathy. There are no others."

If he could place his trust in the future, when everything he loved had died, then she could do no less. Besides, Tearyn couldn't live her life locked up in the castle. Kathy got up and began to gather the baby's belongings.

He watched her and a slow smile spread across his face. "Does this mean you're coming home?"

She nodded. "I don't like feeling threatened. You've just made me realize the only person who can change those feelings is me."

Chapter Sixteen

Once he had Kathy and the baby firmly ensconced in his life again. Tearach began to work his way back toward what they'd had. Mabb's chicanery had left its mark. Kathy was fearful of strangers, but she valiantly made the effort to trust again. Each evening, he made his way to work, and Kathy helped Owen at the castle. Searching his heart, he knew the only person who could chase Kathy to someone else was him.

He desperately wanted to make love to her, but that was her choice to make. He would give her time and hope his patience could withstand the wait. Secretly, he went ahead with his plans to handfast with her on Imbolc. Cairna and Rome spent all their free time together, which left his and Kathy's free hours to find that special place they once shared. And he felt it was coming back quickly. Mabb was gone, and there was no further barrier to stand between them.

Early one morning, Tearach came back from the Loft. He and Rome had been forging a special set of swords to be sold in Scotland. Usually such items went to special collectors. Outsiders paid a high price for his work. He was especially happy with the small herb knife he'd made for Kathy. It was to be a gift. She could use it when, on the next full moon, he took her and the baby to hunt for winter herbs. There were places to find them, even when the snow fell and the world turned all white and glittery. And Kathy loved to go into the forest at night. She seemed to thrive on doing chores that were mundane to the Order, but unusual to her. It was one more aspect of her character that made him love her even more.

As he approached the cottage, warm candlelight brightened the early dawn windows. Frost on the leaded panes made the glow look ethereal. He could almost smell the pastries and sweets he knew she had baked. His heart was as warm as the fireplace they shared each night. And Kathy had expressed a desire to make love again. This would be the morning. After going without her sweet body for so long, he was amused and a bit mortified to find himself responding like a sixteen-year-old boy. He was rigid just thinking about what they'd do. As cold as the winter wind blew, his body was that hot. Thinking of her made it so.

When he pushed open the door of the cottage, Kathy came bounding down the stairs and threw herself into his arms. She kissed him thoroughly and Tearach could stand the wait no more.

"Where is Cairna?" he breathed against her heated lips.

"She went off with Rome. And the baby is asleep." She led him toward the stairs and they walked up, their arms around each other.

When they reached their room, Tearach began to undress, even as he looked down at Tearyn and spoke soothingly to her at the same time. Kathy went into the bathroom, so he occupied the time by trying to keep his mind on the baby. She was so sweet in her little crib. He kissed his index finger and gently placed it on her cheek. "Sleep well, little love. I'm hoping that by this time next year, your mother and I will be working on a brother or sister for you," he whispered.

Kathy shrugged out of her bathrobe, took one more look in the mirror and went back into the bedroom. In Tearach's gaze, she could see her efforts at making this occasion special weren't wasted. He definitely appreciated the midnight-blue satin gown Cairna had helped her sew.

Tearach swallowed hard and walked toward her. The dark gown clung to her body like a second skin. Kathy's full breasts were barely covered, and, as always, she wore the necklace he'd given her. It rested in her cleavage like a star in a winter sky.

"Do you like the gown?" Kathy asked, watching his feral expression.

"Very, very much." He pulled her to him and she pushed the heavy, black robe he'd donned away from his chest. The instant her hands moved over his pectorals, Tearach knew he was lost. His mouth closed over hers in a wild, hot kiss. It had been too long for both of them.

Kathy moaned as Tearach's lips moved down her throat to her cleavage. Then Tearach's kisses seemed to soften. He lifted her hair off her shoulder and nuzzled her neck. She felt his incisors lengthen as his mouth moved downward. Then, he sank them deep into her shoulder. Kathy cried as an immediate orgasm shook her entire frame. Only his strong arms kept her from falling to the floor. She'd forgotten how powerful that bite could be. When she heard his voice, Kathy looked up to find him resting on top of her and her gown had been removed. He must have picked her up and carried her to the bed. She had no recollection of his doing it.

Tearach stroked her hair away from her face. He barely touched her skin with his fingertips. "How was it, Kathy?"

She smiled, sensuously. "You know how it was, you hedonist. You just want to hear me say it."

"I want to hear everything you like. From every touch to every breath we take together. I'll do anything you ask. Anything your imagination can dream up. All you have to do is tell me what's right for you. Understand?" He lowered his tongue over her left nipple and tasted warm, sweet milk. "No wonder the baby stays so hungry. You taste wonderful."

She closed her eyes as he lowered his head again and moved his attention to the other nipple. He sat up and straddled her torso, skimming his fingertips over every part of her flesh. Kathy could feel the goose bumps rising as he touched so lightly and blew a soft breath over those areas he touched. When he kissed his way down her midriff, to her navel, the moisture between her thighs began to pool again, and every cell in her body screamed for him to move lower still. She opened her thighs, inviting him to touch her.

"Tell me what you want," he whispered. He flicked his tongue over the sensitive flesh of her left thigh, then the right. Her hips rotated invitingly and her head dropped back. Her breath came in shaking gasps.

"Tearach, more. Please, taste me."

"Mmmmm, my pleasure," he moaned and did as she asked.

Kathy's hands clenched the soft blankets beneath her. There was nothing else on the face of the Earth, or in the cosmos but Tearach. He separated her flesh with his fingers and gently explored her with his tongue.

When Kathy's body began to shake with pleasure, Tearach slid his hands under her soft bottom and lifted her for deeper penetration. He was rewarded by hearing her cry out his name over and over. Her beautiful, soft body rocked and undulated as the deep orgasm went on and on. Finally, when he was sure she was spent, Tearach lowered her back to the bed. Her eyes were closed and she almost sobbed out each breath. He moved over her, rested his weight lightly on her slim frame and gently kissed her lips and face. "Tell me, Kathy. Do you like what I do to you? The way we are together?"

She opened her heavy eyelids and met his deep, burning gaze. "Yes. Oh, yes," she breathed.

"Good, because I'm just getting started. I'll burn my way into your mind, soul and entire being. You'll never dream of anything but being in my arms. I swear it." He pulled her into his embrace and held her

against his shoulder until her breathing seemed normal again. Then he skimmed the inside of his leg against the outside of hers. He pushed his full erection against her abdomen and dragged it across the wet, swollen flesh between her thighs. All the while, his hands caressed her back, trailed down to her hips and circled lightly over her bottom.

Kathy's entire body and every part of her consciousness craved him. When Tearach suddenly moved away, she almost cried out. It was as if something vital had been torn from her being. But he had only moved away to turn her on her stomach. She had no idea what he planned, but she trusted him to make his next move gentle and thrilling. It was both. His hands moved softly over her back and thighs, and his fingers made small patterns which had her moaning for more. Suddenly both his hands moved under her, flattened against her abdomen and lifted upward. His knee carefully nudged her thighs apart while he rolled her nipples between his index fingers and thumbs. Kathy understood he meant to enter her from the rear and raised her backside while arching her back.

"You're breathtaking," he gasped. "But don't lose it yet, love." He dragged his erection over her wet flesh again.

"No, Tearach, I can't ... c-can't stand it. Please," she begged for him to enter her and pushed against his burgeoning manhood.

"All right, my proud beauty. I told you that I'd do anything you want." Tearach took a deep breath and pushed slowly into her. For several moments, he couldn't find his voice. She was so wonderfully hot. His blood began to boil, and he pulled back, then thrust in again. Each time he did so, he went a little deeper and faster. Soon Kathy's body rhythms matched his and they careened into a dimension where nothing but exquisite sensations existed. Kathy opened her thighs wider and he plucked at her nipples with one hand while touching where they joined with the other.

When Kathy felt the waves of pressure begin, she put her head down and bucked against Tearach. Deep cries of pure satisfaction and joy ripped from her throat as she heard him answer, then spill into her vagina. They fell back to the soft surface of the bed, spent and replete. He held her tightly against his body and panted. They were both covered in a fine sheet of sweat. Kathy turned and his arms loosened only enough to allow her to face him. She could see the unearthly glow in his eyes, and she pushed his heavy hair off his face and shoulders. She held it up and softly blew against his neck and chest.

"Mmmmm, that feels good," Tearach murmured, then nuzzled his cheek against Kathy's. There was so much he wanted to say, but the simple words of love didn't seem enough. There was so much in his heart where nothing but pain and emptiness had once ruled. How did you tell a woman of such strength and beauty that you loved her with every last fiber of your being? How could he convey those emotions with only words? Across the room, a lovely little girl slept. Her mother loved her enough to fight for her very life. Of all women on the planet, Kathy had been chosen for him. It was no mere accident—no random choice of a file or one of Shayla's strange maneuvers. This woman was meant to be with him. He knew it in the very deepest part of his soul. She was a spirited, vital lover, a friend, a confidant, and a protective, loving mother. No one could ever have enchanted or captured his heart more. Now was the time. He had to tell her the words men and women spoke to one another when their hearts were ready. And though their spirits were joined, she needed to hear his full declaration of love and devotion.

His vision finally came back, and Kathy's lovely aqua eyes gazed at him with such sweet tenderness his heart lurched. He opened his mouth to speak, but was interrupted by the baby's wake-up cries.

"I'd better see what's wrong," Kathy smiled up at him and lovingly stoked his cheeks with her fingertips. "She's probably hungry."

He grinned and nodded. "I'll have to make it up to her if I've nursed all your milk."

Kathy playfully pushed him aside. "That's not remotely possible. I have enough for the both of you and then some."

He laughed out loud, rolled aside to let her up, and then leaned on one elbow to watch her. She gently picked the baby up, talking to her in that ridiculous, lovable baby-talk she used, and checked her diaper.

"I think she just needs changing. I'll be right back." Kathy winked and walked toward the nursery.

Remembering the gift he had, Tearach placed the small herb-knife on her pillow, then put his hands behind his head and stared at the ceiling. "We've got the rest of the day to make love. And I'll tell her everything," he murmured to himself.

"Did you say something," she called from the other room.

"Only that I want you to come back to bed," he answered.

Kathy laughed as she came back in the room bouncing the cooing baby against her shoulder. "You're insatiable."

"Here. Let me hold her."

She held out the smiling infant and placed her against her father's chest. He kissed her tenderly and stroked the black hair that was just beginning to curl.

"I've never seen a Goblin baby with curly hair, and she was certainly born with a head full of it," he observed. "That's your Mommy's gift, sweet pea. And if you're only half as pretty as she is, I'll have to dig a trench around the house when you get older. Maybe that will keep all those young warriors away."

Kathy crossed her arms and raised her eyebrows. "Do that, and you'll never be a grandfather."

He looked into Kathy's eyes. "That would be something, wouldn't it? We'd have memories to carry into the years."

"That reminds me. I have something for you." She went to the bureau, opened the top drawer and took her gift out. Then she sat beside him and handed him a small, flat package wrapped in glittering tissue.

Tearach laughed. "What a coincidence. I have something for you, too." He nodded toward her pillow, and Kathy gasped in delight.

She grabbed up the knife and smiled. "This is an herb knife, isn't it? I've seen the other women using them and hoped I might be able to get one." Kathy smoothed her hand over the beautiful, shiny surface and noted how sharp it was. The handle was oak and engraved with different rune symbols. "You made this, didn't you?"

"Yes, the symbols are for luck, happiness, health and love."

Kathy swallowed hard. "Thank you, Tearach. This means I can go with the others and learn to gather herbs. It's like owning a piece of art." She leaned forward and gifted him with a long kiss. Things made by hand, gifts from the heart, were very special to her. And the knife was a wonderful work of craftsmanship. That he had such skill filled her with pride. She blinked back tears. "Now, you open yours."

Tearach tore open the wrapping and found a green velvet pouch within. It had two stag horns

embroidered in silver on one side. He knew the horns represented Herne, God of the Hunt and Protector of the Forest. When he opened the pouch, he found two strands of hair braided together. One of purest gold, the other jet black. The ends had tiny, silver apples attached. In the world of the Order, these were the charms of love everlasting.

She shrugged. "It's mine and the baby's hair. Cairna helped me make the silver apples from an old spoon. I thought the amulet might bring you luck."

For a long moment he struggled with the lump in his throat. It was the most precious thing anyone had ever given him. "I'll carry it with me always. Thank you, Kathy. I love it."

The soft look he sent Kathy was priceless. She was madly, deeply in love with this green Adonis. Contrary to what she'd once thought, Kathy actually began to regret that he hadn't kidnapped her much earlier. She was about to tell him so when a loud pounding sounded on the door downstairs. Shouts for him to come to the door could be heard from the forest.

Tearach carefully handed the baby back to Kathy and pulled on his pants and boots. "Wait here, love. Whatever is happening sounds pretty urgent."

Kathy's eyebrows knit together in worry. She quickly put the baby back in her cradle and tucked her in. Then she pulled on her own brown leather pants, boots and a dark green, long-sleeved jerkin. When she got to the bottom of the stairs, Cairna and Rome were standing on the stoop with other men and women. Tearach turned to her and there was a look of anxious trepidation on his face. "What's wrong?"

"There's a bad fire at the Loft, Kathy. I have to go. Clove is bringing some of the children here while their parents try to put it out. Cairna and you will stay as well."

Simultaneously, Cairna and Kathy protested being left behind.

"I don't have time for arguments, ladies. Stay put and watch after the children." Tearach moved quickly out the door with Rome and some of the other people.

Cairna and Kathy were left standing there. Kathy stared at the girl for a few moments before she asked, "Is it that bad?"

Cairna nodded. "Someone said there was a horrible explosion and part of the building was demolished. There are workers there who stayed late with Gawain. They may be trapped inside."

The girl's horrified expression told Kathy as much as the words themselves. "Cairna, do you think you and Clove can see to the children by yourselves?"

"Kathy, you can't go. Tearach wants us to stay here."

Before she could voice an argument, Clove appeared with five other women. They each shepherded a number of toddlers and children toward the cottage. "It looks to me like there are plenty of people to watch after the little ones. But they don't have anyone who knows how to fight a fire like that. I do. I *have* to go, Cairna!"

Cairna glanced at the approaching crowd. "They'll have plenty of caretakers for the babies. I'm coming with you."

When Clove, the children, and some of the other adults were in the cottage. It took just a few short minutes to get everyone situated and comfortable. Anxious about what was happening, Kathy announced she was leaving for the Loft. Without waiting for a response, she turned to Clove. "Tearyn is upstairs in

her crib. I'm leaving her in your care."

Clove placed a reassuring hand on her arm. "Don't worry, Kathy. That baby will be as safe as one of my own. I promise."

From the look of absolute determination in the woman's eyes, Kathy knew what Clove said was true.

Any fears she might have had regarding the baby's safety immediately fled. These people would cherish and care for all the children or die trying.

Timmon stepped forward. "I'm her protector," he said as he bravely thrust a tiny thumb into his chest. "Nothin' happens to baby Tearyn."

Kathy knelt down to him. "You promise, Timmon?"

He gravely nodded and put his fists on his hips.

She ruffled his hair and walked out the door with Cairna. They loped toward the Loft, and as soon as they smelled smoke, they ran. Heavy dark clouds of it hung in the air like smog. Kathy winced and coughed as the acrid stuff displaced almost all of the oxygen. It even seemed to block out the morning sun.

"We've still got some distance to go, Kathy. If the smoke is this bad here, the fire must be horrendous. The building is so large that it'll burn for a long time."

"Let's pick up the pace then. There are bound to be people hurt." She ran like the devil was on her heels. Cairna trailed her by only a few yards. Even if she didn't know the way, the billowing smoke would lead her. And if Tearach was in the middle of a fire, she was damned well going to find a way to protect his magnificent, green carcass. He had no right ordering her to stay behind, no matter his motives. This was her home, too, and she knew a bloody sight more about protecting people in a fire than he did.

When they rounded a final curve in the path, the heat from the blaze almost knocked them both down. Kathy looked, in horror, at a building almost entirely engulfed in flames. The western end seemed the only part the fire hadn't consumed. But it was moving that way rapidly. The roof hadn't collapsed yet, but Kathy knew it would. Anyone trapped inside would die instantly, if the smoke hadn't already killed them.

People were filling buckets of water from a well, and she shook her head in disbelief and shock. "Cairna, someone has to call the fire department. You can't put out fire with buckets full of water."

"There was an automatic sprinkler in the building, Kathy. Obviously, it couldn't do the job. But even if the fire department could get into these woods with their equipment, the Sorceress would never allow it. They'd see too much."

Kathy watched the younger woman get in line with the others and fight the fire using a method that predated those used at the turn of the twentieth century. "This isn't right," she muttered to herself. Looking around to see what else might be done, Kathy grabbed a pile of blankets someone had placed in the back of one of the delivery vans. She dunked these in the well and began to hand them out. When the others saw her beating at fires which erupted around the building, they followed her example. The structure was a total loss, but the woods stood a very good chance of catching fire. Although Kathy could respect the Sorceress' decision not to call the fire department, the whole countryside would know if these woods caught fire. Not to mention how many people would be unable to hide themselves due to the loss of forested land.

She handed her blanket off to a younger girl and looked back at the building. There was no sign of

Tearach or Rome. She prayed they were safe. A commotion caught her attention. People gathered around several men who were trying to drag air into their lungs.

"They're still inside," one man gasped. Then he coughed and tried to breathe normally. "We tried to get to them, but a support beam came down between us and we just couldn't go any farther. The flames and smoke made it impossible."

Kathy ran to him. "Who's inside?" When the man simply looked at her, she grabbed the front of his leather jerkin and shook him. "Who is in that damned building?"

"The Goblin Leader, one of his men, and Gawain O'Malley. They were trying to get to some workers at this end of the building, but a beam fell between us and we couldn't get to them," he repeated.

Kathy slowly turned back toward the burning, massive frame. Smoke billowed from the western end where she now knew Tearach, Rome and Gawain were trapped. The lower floors would be engulfed with smoke. If they couldn't get to a window or find a room where oxygen wouldn't pull the flames toward them, they'd die. The way the fire was burning, their only choice was to head toward the roof. Kathy's heart turned to ice. She'd watched as the same thing happened to Steven and her father. She moved toward the building until the heat forced her back. Strong hands gripped her upper arms and dragged her even farther away. When she turned, she saw Shayla in front of her. Owen was the one who had grabbed her, and he immediately tightened his grip.

"You couldn't be thinking of trying to get in there?" He adamantly shook his head.

She looked at Shayla. "Tearach, Rome and Gawain are in there, maybe others."

Shayla stared at the building. "My staff is composed of some of the strongest Druids. We'll summon the rain, but it could take time to call enough to douse this blaze, girl. If they're still alive, they'll fight their way out. I know it." She raised her hands and clouds gathered overhead. Others soon joined her and beckoned toward the sky.

Kathy watched the billowing clouds turn dark and ominous. She now understood why no fire department was necessary. What the sprinkler system failed to control, Shayla and the Druids might compensate for, but would it be too late? To her trained eye, the flames had probably erupted as soon as the explosion had occurred. Shayla and her people had responded quickly, but the wood was old and burning fast.

The lower floors on the western end were fully engulfed now. As she had predicted, any survivors would have to make their way up. She tilted her head toward the roof and strained to see through the smoky air. The clouds continued to grow darker, and the air should have been bitterly cold, but the heat from the building was far too intense. That meant it was being fueled by a great many sources from inside. Unless the artisans used only natural materials, the fumes would be toxic.

"I need your help, Kathy," Owen cried out. "We've got people here who've taken in too much smoke, some burns and other injuries."

She slowly turned to look at him. Then she glanced once more over her shoulder. "Please, Tearach, don't die," she softly murmured.

Then she followed Owen and rolled up her sleeves. In her heart, she knew this was what Tearach would want her to do. Without a self-contained breathing apparatus, full turnout gear, and a compliment of trained firefighters with equipment, there was nothing she could do to fight the fire. She had never felt so helpless. She moved a short distance into the woods. The wind blew the smoke away from the spot Owen had wisely chosen to use as a triage area. He busily cut clothing away from burns and tended to

what injuries he could. At the moment, there weren't enough men and women to pull from the forest fires to take the injured to the castle, so they'd have to make do. Kathy grabbed a first-aid kit and set to work with a vengeance, but her eyes frequently drifted back to the top of the building. The upper floors were now smoking. Tears filled her eyes and her chest hurt. If Tearach and the others were still alive, they should have made it up to the roof by now. Her hands shook and she desperately wanted to ask someone if they might have seen Tearach elsewhere, but she was afraid of the answer they might give.

A horrifying groan of timber resounded through the forest. Everyone moved back as centuries-old wood gave way and the ancient building began to collapse. The roof caved in, the outer walls crumbled under the weight of debris, and the entire structure fell, in a huge flaming mass. Kathy covered her face with her hands, and fell to her knees. "No!" she screamed in anguish.

Owen grabbed her and wrapped his arms around her body. "We have to keep going, Kathy. Tearach wouldn't want us to stop helping the others. They need you."

She looked at him in shock. His voice didn't quite seem to make it to the logical part of her brain.

"There are many who are hurt. They need you," Owen repeated. "I can't do this without help. Other than me, you've got the most experience here. Help us, Kathy." He gently shook her.

Like an automaton, Kathy stood and did as he asked. She dressed wounds and wrapped sprains, but she couldn't respond to any questions or conversation. The day turned into night. Finally, the rain came. It started slowly and then picked up. Gusts of cold wind and air beat the flames down in the forest. The building, however, would take days to burn out, even if it rained for some time. The embers, coals and burning shards of wood glowed an eerie, horrible orange. Kathy imagined that was exactly how hell looked. The image would remain in her mind forever.

When Owen approached her sometime later, Kathy heard him say something about getting the injured out of the elements. He also mentioned something about how the flames would have been seen by the rest of the countryside, despite Shayla's sorcery, and that some lie would have to be told to account for the fire. He mentioned other points of concern, but most of it just didn't sink in. She silently followed him back to the castle. Men and women carried litters with the injured safely secured to them. Her mind tried to stick to their plight, but it drifted back to the memories of that early morning.

The love she and Tearach shared was timeless. Nothing could ever take that away. And she had their daughter to comfort her in the years to come. But with each step she took, her anger grew. People shouldn't have to hide and live like criminals just because they were different. They shouldn't have to hope medical help could get to them in time, or do without a fire department or an ambulance. What kind of world was it when humanity forced these loving, kind people into hiding and let monsters walk the streets? It made no sense.

As soon as they were inside the castle, the Sorceress began issuing commands and placing the injured in various rooms where her staff could tend them. Kathy sneaked away, found a quiet place, and screamed out her pain and anger. Suddenly, she remembered Cairna. The last she'd seen of her, the girl had moved into the woods to help with the fires there. Surely she was safe. But did she know about Rome? If he was the man who was with Tearach and Gawain, he was dead too. She had to find Cairna. The girl was family and another link to Tearach. They could console each other. Kathy rose and made her way back into the foyer. She found Cairna sitting on the main stairway, silently staring at the floor.

"They're dead, aren't they?" she quietly asked. Then she brought her gaze up to meet Kathy's. The girl's dark eyes were full of misery and pain.

"Yes," Kathy choked out.

"What will we do?" Cairna's voice broke, and she wrapped her arms around herself.

Kathy sat beside her and pulled the girl into her embrace. "We go on, baby. That's all that's left."

They sat in silence for some time. Neither of them heard their names being called nor would they have cared if they had. Their world was gone.

"Where have the two of you been? We've been looking everywhere." Shayla waved a hand as she walked from a side hallway. "If you two want to talk to those men of yours, you'd better get a move on. They're being sedated."

Kathy slowly looked up and stared blankly at the Sorceress. Cairna didn't even respond with a glance.

"What's the matter with the both of you?" Shayla pursed her lips and clasped her hands. "Didn't you know they'd been brought here?"

Kathy swallowed hard, stood up and dragged Cairna up with her. "They're not dead?"

"Of course not. Tearach and Rome pulled Gawain out from under some burning timbers, and then they all jumped out a third story window in the back of the building." She stared at them for a long moment. "I sent a man to tell you as soon as I learned of it. Obviously, he didn't find you. Come along, I'll explain as we go. They're down in the basement infirmary."

"They're alive, Kathy?" Cairna whispered.

"Come along, child," Shayla urged. "Rome has been asking for you."

With Cairna still clinging to her, Kathy followed the Sorceress toward the basement.

"Pull yourselves together. Both of you," Shayla softly suggested. Then she proceeded to explain. "When I learned of the explosion, I had my staff call in some of our physicians. Two got here about the same time the rain began. Because Gawain was bleeding so badly, he was brought straight to the castle. Those who saw them jump from the window decided, and rightly so, to bring in Rome and Tearach at the same time. Our physicians here have had their hands full with tending to Gawain, Tearach and Rome. As I said, we tried to find the two of you."

Kathy's heart beat faster with each step. She wanted to run ahead and find Tearach, but her whole body was shaking so badly it was all she could do to walk. She and Cairna were both openly sobbing by the time they got to the infirmary.

"There, there, you two," Shayla comforted. "Rome has a nasty burn on his leg and a broken right arm. Tearach has a few broken ribs and a broken left leg. They both have some nasty bruises and a few wounds. Gawain, however, was very near the explosion. Owen and the other physicians are trying to help him now. And, I believe they might need you to assist, Kathy. Go to Tearach first. I'll send someone when you're needed."

When Shayla pointed to a door at the end of the hall, Kathy moved quickly toward it. Cairna followed her into the large room. Tearach and Rome were lying in hospital beds some distance from each other. The two women went to their respective men.

Tearach took one look at Kathy's face and knew she had believed the worst. Her lovely eyes were filled with tears as she stood at the end of his bed. The morphine he'd been given was taking its toll. "Come to me, love."

Kathy went to his open arms like nothing else in the world mattered. "I-I thought ... you never came out." She sobbed against his shoulder, never wanting to leave that warm, safe place.

"There now, love. Don't cry so. Hush. Please, Kathy. I'm sorry you saw the building go down. It must have been horrible for you to relive what your father and fiancé went through." He held her close and thrust his hands into her hair. The soft, golden strands were covered in soot and ash. "I knew the moment I ordered you to stay home that it was pointless. I shouldn't have wasted the air." He glanced at his niece and saw that she was in much the same physical state.

"You know I don't like being told what to do," Kathy reminded as she took several deep breaths.

When she lifted her head and he could look into her face, Tearach knew he'd forgive her anything. Nothing mattered but that they were safely back together. "Where is Tearyn?"

"She's with Clove. I know she's safe." Kathy's hands were still shaking so badly Tearach must surely feel it. As if to confirm her thoughts, he pulled her back against his chest and held her. She finally pushed herself away to look him over. "Whatever made you think you could go running into a fire with Rome and Gawain? That's the craziest thing I've ever heard. None of you knows a damned thing about firefighting," she gently chided and then kissed him to take away the sting in her words.

"We went in to get Gawain out. There were six others trapped in a room, and Gawain wouldn't leave until he'd reached them. He was very near the explosion and was so badly torn up that we had to force him to leave. He just wouldn't go without those people. You see, it wasn't as if we had a choice."

She gently kissed him again. "And jumping out the window? That sounds like your idea."

"It was. We didn't have any other way out. By the time we made sure everyone was gone, there was no place left to go except out the window. Luckily some dense bushes broke our fall and Gawain sort of landed on Rome and me."

"I think you probably planned it that way." Kathy glanced down at his plastered leg. "So long as you're alive."

He tried to shake off the drug, but it was no use. The room just kept getting darker. He could hear Kathy's sweet voice and clung to the sound. He wanted to tell her how the loving charm, woven with her hair and the baby's, had brought him a great deal of luck. He remembered clutching the small pouch as he jumped from the window. One of those rendering first-aid to him said they'd had to pry it from his hand. It now lay safely in the table drawer beside his bed. He held fast to all these thoughts, and the sound of Kathy's soft, musical voice, as he fell into a dark, empty place.

For a few moments, Kathy watched as Tearach slept and perused his injuries. They were bad, but nothing that wouldn't heal. Kathy looked up to find Cairna smiling back at her from across the room.

"It'll be all right now, Kathy." She stroked Rome's shoulder as he slept. "Everything will be all right."

Kathy nodded, closed her eyes and silently thanked God for the second chance they'd been given. As soon as Tearach woke, she promised to tell him all the words that should have been said. She'd never again assume there would be enough time to do so. Her heart was finally beating at a normal pace, and the world was in order again. But she knew from firsthand experience that things could have gone so differently.

The door to the room opened and a man beckoned to Kathy. She glanced at Cairna, who gave a reassuring nod that she would stay with both men. Kathy went into the hall where the agitated stranger

was twisting his hands together and pacing.

"What is it?" She placed a calming hand on the man's shoulder to stop his anxious movements.

"Owen needs you in the surgery. They have to ... please come quickly," he begged.

Kathy nodded and followed him through a series of corridors. They finally stopped outside the surgery doors. The man held up his hand, gesturing that she should stay put. Then he went into the room while she waited. Tearach was alive but others needed her. Kathy wouldn't fail them.

In a few moments, Owen stuck his head out the door and held it open for her. Kathy walked through and saw Gawain lying on a surgical table. A brunette woman was scrubbing up on the other side of the room. The man who had summoned her was gathering autoclaved equipment and surgical instruments. He put these on a tray.

"Can you scrub up and assist, Kathy?" Owen asked as he walked across the room and began to disinfect his hands and arms.

"Yes. I know the equipment and can follow any directions you want."

"Good. There are some surgical gowns in the next room. The man who summoned you is Bennet. He'll have the antiseptic you'll need laid out. This is Maureen." He nodded toward the woman who was still washing up. "She'll be doing some invasive work, trying to stop Gawain's internal bleeding, and I'll have to work on his arm. If you can hand us equipment, it'll save time."

She nodded as years of professional training took over. "Right."

Without waiting to be told anything else, she went into the next room, found her gown and proceeded back to the scrub station Maureen and Owen had used. When she turned, Maureen was ready to help her put sterile gloves on. Kathy nodded in thanks and raised her mask. Under the circumstances, they were all doing the best they could, but the castle wasn't a hospital. She didn't know what kind of surgery would take place, but there didn't seem to be an anesthesiologist anywhere.

"Ready?" Owen looked at the two women. When they nodded, he approached the unconscious man.

When Owen pulled the sheet away from Gawain's body, Kathy stared at him in shock. There was a terrible wound in his lower left abdomen where something was impaled. His right hand, what was left of it, was hanging on by fragments of fascia and tendon. "You're going to have to take the hand, aren't you?"

Owen looked up. "You see how it is, Kathy. There's nothing left to save. If Tearach hadn't used his belt as a tourniquet, Gawain might have bled to death." He took a deep breath. "We'll need the tray. Ready, Maureen?"

Maureen nodded and Kathy glanced quickly from one to the other. "Where is the anesthesiologist?"

"There isn't one. I've given Gawain morphine, so we're going to have to work fast."

Kathy swallowed hard and checked Gawain's motor responses and circulation on his good hand and his feet. Then she took his pulse and reached for a blood pressure cuff and a stethoscope.

"You were right, Owen. She *does* know what she's doing." Maureen stared at Kathy and nodded in approval.

"Right." He nodded. "Let's get started. I'm told the other physicians have just arrived. But we've got some serious smoke inhalation victims. They'll have to be monitored. If there's time, we'll have some help here. But, as I said, we're going to have to work fast."

Kathy watched as the surgery began. She checked Gawain's level of consciousness to make sure he wouldn't come out of his drug induced state. Then there was an intravenous line to run, blood pressure, circulation and respiration to be checked. She did all this every five minutes. The doctors were the best she'd ever seen. A London emergency theater, fully staffed and equipped, couldn't have done a better job. Maureen finished first. The bleeding was stopped, and she sutured the wound closed and checked the intravenous line.

"Good job on this, Kathy. First rate." She picked up a vial, drew some fluid into a syringe and handed it to her. "Can you bolus this? It'll help fight off infection."

Kathy nodded, plunged the needle into the I.V. spigot, checked the intravenous bag and needle again, then watched as Owen finished. He discarded torn tissue and the remains of Gawain's hand in a trash receptacle and Kathy's eyes filled with tears over the tragedy. She prayed the loss wouldn't permanently affect the smiling, affable man she'd met.

Kathy turned to Owen. "What kind of explosion did this?"

"I was told the main kiln blew up and took almost half the building. The eastern end of it anyway. Gawain was supposed to have been working late with about fifteen others. Nine were killed instantly. Six got out, thanks to his, Tearach's and Rome's efforts. I suppose that's why this brute wouldn't leave." He waved a hand at Gawain's body.

"Do you think he knew his hand would have to be taken?"

He shook his head. "Not the way I was told he moved about, even with his injuries. I'm sure he was operating on pure adrenaline. I don't believe he knew he was so badly hurt. Sadly, he'll certainly find out when he awakens."

Maureen walked to the door. "May I leave to check on some of the others, Owen?"

"Certainly. I'll stay with Gawain for a while and make sure he's stabilized. Will you help me, Kathy?"

"Go ahead, Maureen, I'll be here," Kathy acknowledged and watched the other woman leave. "She's quite a surgeon."

"The very best," Owen quickly responded.

Kathy watched his gaze. He stared at the doors through which Maureen had walked. She'd bet her very last farthing that the man was in love with the woman.

"Gawain once told me he has a family." Kathy held Gawain's hand and pushed the brown hair off his burned and bruised face.

Owen picked up a tube of antiseptic and proceeded to apply it to his less severe burns. "A very large one as it happens. He has a sister and five brothers, and his parents should be here shortly, if they're not here already. I believe they were abroad. Shayla's staff had to notify them."

"I only just met him. He seems like such a kind man."

"He's the best. His artwork paid for just about everything we used tonight and then some. Now that this

has happened...” Owen stopped and shook his head. “I don't know if he'll want to continue with his art. But I hope so.”

Kathy shook her head in sadness. Sometimes life didn't seem very fair. First, all those lives had been lost. Now, Gawain lay injured with his hand amputated. She slowly helped Owen wrap the remains of his arm in a clean, sterile bandage. He might not thank Tearach for saving his life when he awoke. Not that the missing hand was something to die over, but amputees sometimes didn't see it that way. Some of them, when they found out what had been done, irrationally wanted to die. It often took counseling and patience to get them to see that life went on, and that their abilities hadn't diminished. Gawain would simply have to learn how to do things a different way. Surely, with such a big family, he'd find the love and support he needed. The kind she would share forever with Tearach.

As the minutes ticked by and Gawain showed signs of stabilizing, Kathy took a few moments in a nearby restroom to gather her wits. Serious matters began to cross her mind. All the goods that supported the Order's existence were being crafted within the Loft. Kathy stared at her reflection in a mirror, and felt a sudden kind of foreboding. So many beings depended on those art pieces and saleable goods. Others were now dead, killed while crafting them.

What would the Sorceress be able to conjure in the way of compensation? Not even *she* could replace all the materials and tools. Certainly, Shayla could do nothing to compensate the families of the dead. For them, life as they knew it stopped tonight. Before any other work could begin, the grieving families would have to be comforted. She'd been so very close to being one of them.

Kathy raised her eyes to the ceiling. “Please, help those who lost loved ones tonight. I know what they're feeling, and they'll never stop hurting. These people may call you by other names, but I know they're praying to the same god. Be with us all now, I beg you.” With her rendition of a prayer finished, she slid to her knees and wept.

Chapter Seventeen

"Tearach, darling. You need to wake up," Kathy said, touching his face.

Tearach took a deep breath, forced his eyes open and found himself in his own room, propped comfortably against soft pillows. "How did I get here?"

"I thought you might recuperate better if you were home. And I'm sure you wanted to see Tearyn."

A slow smile spread across his face. He tried to lift his arm, but he did it too quickly. A sharp pain came from deep within his chest. "What in the bloody damn did I do to myself?"

"You've a nice set of broken ribs and a broken leg to go along with them. That means you're going to be around the cottage for a very long time."

"That won't do. I have to be up and working with the other men. I can't just lie about."

"Well, you don't have a choice, my love. You're going to stay put until you're better, and that's the Sorceress' direct command."

"I don't think you understand what's happened, Kathy. Everything was in that building. All our tools, the goods we were going to sell this year."

"Not to mention nine people who didn't get out," Kathy sadly informed him.

Tearach's heart dropped. "Nine didn't..."

She nodded and waited for him to take in the information. "Their families have already set up altars to mourn them. I saw one in the woods yesterday. It was heartwrenching."

His throat ached. "I thought ... after we got the workers outside, we made our way to the far end of the building and checked. We thought everyone was gone. By then, the fire was on us and we had to find a window to ... Herne, help us! I didn't know others were still there."

"You're misunderstanding, darling. They were lost when the kiln blew up. They were already gone when you got there. Didn't you know about it?"

Tears filled his eyes. "I was just told about Gawain and the six others."

She stroked his hair and then his cheek with one hand. "I know how their families feel, though I wish I didn't. It's a pain that will never go away. In time, it'll be bearable, but only just."

He swallowed the lump in his throat while remembering Kathy's loss of her father and her intended husband in a fire. How horrible it must have been for her and for the families of those who never came out. They'd stood by and watched, unable to do anything. His heart felt like lead.

Kathy took a deep breath. "If the list of dead had included you, I couldn't have stood it. Especially because I never told you..."

He tilted his head and gazed at her. "Never told me what, sweetheart?"

She scooted closer and wrapped her arms about his shoulders. "I love you, Tearach. I should have said it so long ago. Please, forgive me. I think I have a head as hard as yours."

He buried his face in her clean, flower-scented hair and held on. "I love you too, Kathy. I should have learned a vital lesson at Exmoor, but it seems I'm still being taught."

She pulled back far enough to look into his black eyes. "What lesson?"

"That you should never wait to tell someone you love them. They should hear it every day of their lives."

"I guess we thought we had all the time in the world," she whispered.

"I wanted things to be perfect. On Imbolc, I was going to find some quiet place and ask you to handfast with me." He put his hands on either side of her face and kissed her. "Now, I won't even be able to walk to the ceremony with you. And it will be a time of grief, not happiness. Not after losing so many." He sighed and hung his head in sorrow.

She kissed his forehead. "I already consider myself your mate, Tearach, and there'll always be Spring Equinox. We can be handfasted then. After the pain of all the loss isn't so new."

For a long time, he clung to her. Then he asked, "Does anyone know exactly what happened? Has there been time figure it out?"

Kathy shook her head. "I don't know. Shayla will stop by tonight. We can ask her then. I'm just so glad you and Rome got out safely." She nuzzled her cheek against his and murmured endearments to him for a very long time.

He thankfully remembered Rome's escape with him and Gawain, but not much else. He also remembered that Kathy couldn't have seen it because he was at the back of the building. She needed his comfort and he needed hers. "My heart will always be with yours, Kathy. No matter what happens, you need to know that," he consoled and held her as close as his injuries would allow. Finally, he gently pushed her away. "How long have I been home?"

"Two days. But you were pretty heavily sedated. I don't think Owen wants you moving about too much."

"As much as I'd love to stay right here with you and never leave, I need to get back to work and help."

She caressed his shoulders. "Tearach, even if you could, the building is still hot. Wood there will be burning for days until the rain and the cold can get through all that rubble. And you're not going anywhere," she firmly reiterated.

"Is Rome up and about? Was he injured badly?" He waved a hand, in frustration, at the cast on his leg.

"Yes, he's just as hurt. And Cairna is having a hard time getting him to stay put. He's just as hardheaded as you."

"All those people dead," he murmured, and turned his head away so she wouldn't try to bear his pain as well as her own.

Kathy pulled him into her embrace again and held on.

For a long, quiet time, they clung to each other. A steady tattoo of rain and sleet gently pelted the window panes. Tearach wanted to bury himself into her embrace and never come out. She stroked his back and whispered soft words of love and comfort. Then she drew slightly away and placed a hand on one of his cheeks. Her thumb caressed his lips. "I'll bring Tearyn in for you in a minute. First, I'd better tell you the rest."

Tearach took one look at her sorrow-filled eyes and wondered what other horrible news he'd hear. Something deep inside made him wish he was in another place.

"Gawain will live. You and Rome saved his life. But Owen had to take his right hand."

He took a deep shaky breath and felt his mouth go dry. "How did he respond?"

"He doesn't know yet. I assisted during the operation. Owen will keep him sedated to let his internal injuries heal. A piece of wood, from the explosion, embedded itself in his abdomen. He'll recover fine, but I don't know how he'll deal with his missing hand. You know the man better than I."

For several minutes, Tearach didn't speak. "He's a warrior. Gawain will fight, but it might take him time."

"I want you to rest, Tearach. There'll be time enough to sort all this out." She paused. "Just know that I love you with all my heart, and we'll get through this," she reminded, wanting to say it as many times now as she could.

"Yes. So long as we're together." He paused and stared at her. "I now know why Cairna chose you to be my mate, Kathy. I understand why she picked your file out of all those the Sorceress offered."

"I've sometimes wondered about that. What was so special about me?"

"She knew, even by looking at your photo and your file, that I could never want another but you. I needed a strong, beautiful enchantress. A woman of intelligence and grace who had love enough to see us both through my stubbornness and heartache. Without you, my life is nothing. I'll carry your love with me everywhere I am, in whatever corner of the forest I'm working and into whatever future we share."

"Oh, Tearach," she sobbed and tried to wipe away the tears. But he took her hands in his and kissed them away instead.

"It's all right, my heart. Cry if you want to, and I'll hold you until it's over."

His warm arms wrapped around her and Kathy knew it was the only place in the world she'd ever feel so safe and happy. "You know," she sniffed, "that damned file the Sorceress had on me didn't tell you everything."

"It didn't?" he breathed.

"It never said that my favorite color in the whole world is green."

Tearach smiled through the tears in his own eyes. If he'd listened to his heart sooner, it would have told him so.

* * * *

Many weeks later, Tearach's cast was removed, and he was almost back to his old self. He worked in the mines for part of the day, and then he helped clean the rubble from the burned remains of the Loft. He saw Gawain each day and, as Kathy told him might be the case, the man wasn't taking the loss of his arm or his co-workers easily. He blamed himself for not checking the equipment better, though everyone told him it wasn't his fault. Tearach feared Gawain would never turn out another piece of stunning artwork. He refused to touch his tools and spent a great deal of time alone. But the Sorceress was working with him, and Tearach knew if anyone could alter a person's outlook or change their destiny, Shayla was the one to do it.

Each evening, he held the baby in his arms and sat by the fire. They waited for Kathy to come upstairs

with the evening meal. Having their meals in their room, where it was cozier, became a habit when Rome and Cairna decided to finish their own cottage. They stayed away a great deal, but the arrangements would only be temporary. The younger couple was also planning their handfasting which, like so many others, had been postponed until *Oestre* or the Spring Equinox. Luckier than most, they had a house full of beautiful, well-made furniture that Kathy had given them. Cairna had joked that Kathy just wanted them out of their cottage sooner so the new babies would have more room. And he knew there would be new ones one day.

When he heard Kathy approach, Tearach put the baby in her crib, amazed at the rate she was growing. Time seemed to move so quickly. One day soon, Cairna and Rome would have babies of their own. The Sorceress had been right about so many things. He smiled thinking of how she'd had to make him dig septic tanks so he'd see sense. If he'd trusted her all along, the anguish he'd put himself and his people through would have been unnecessary. But Kathy was right about his head being hard. Connemara marble would be soft in comparison.

"What are you smiling about?" Kathy asked, grinning as she placed their evening meal on a small table.

"How time has a way of changing people's minds. Of opening them, I should say."

She offered him a glass of wine. "This has been the strangest year of my life. But I wouldn't change a moment."

One eyebrow raised in surprise. "Nothing?"

"All right, maybe just a few things. Like how you felt when you found out I was pregnant, and the time when you got punished. Then there was that time I ran away, and the time you got caught in the fire and almost died."

He took a deep breath and lifted his glass. "Here's to not changing a thing."

She raised hers in return. "But I still love you, the baby, Cairna, Rome and the people in this wonderful, magic place."

He lifted a length of hair off her shoulder and studied it for a moment. "You know, we could save that roast chicken for later." He gave her his most seductive stare and hoped she would respond accordingly.

Kathy glanced at the chicken and then back at Tearach. "Well, I love cold chicken."

They drank their wine, put the glasses down and moved toward one another. It looked as though another hot night of experimental lovemaking was about to be under way. But Tearyn had other plans. She let out a loud, playful laugh.

Kathy's eyes widened in surprise. Tearach sent her an equally shocked look. The baby had never been quite so loud or forceful. Kathy walked toward the crib. "Now, then little Miss Bruce. What is so important that you'd ... Tearach, get the Sorceress."

The hypnotized expression on Kathy's face immediately alerted him. "What's wrong, love?"

"Just get the Sorceress. Quickly!"

He watched as she picked up the baby, blanket and all. Tearyn was still gurgling happily, so there couldn't be too much wrong. So, why was his heart beating so hard? Why was Kathy's expression so galvanizing?

Tearach ran to a window, threw it open and yelled for the nearest guards. Voices in the treetops responded when he called for the Sorceress' presence. He turned back to Kathy. "She'll be here soon, love. Now ... what's wrong with the baby?" He held out his hands and Kathy handed the swaddled infant to him. When he looked down, a white little girl with blue eyes looked up at him. Her pointed ears were gone and her dark hair had lightened to a soft, medium brown.

"Tearyn!" he shouted and almost dropped her. Kathy ran forward and reinforced his grip. The baby looked up at them both and laughed as though the world was one big playground and she was the only child in line for the swing.

"Whatever this is ... w-whatever is happening ... she doesn't seem to be in any pain. S-she isn't frightened," Kathy stammered.

"Goblin children can't change this young. Most don't do it until they're shown how," Tearach insisted.

"Well, she didn't come with a rule book pasted to her rump, Tearach. No one told her. Besides, you keep forgetting. She's half human."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean it to sound that way. It's just that, well, look at her." He raised helpless eyes to Kathy.

She took a deep breath. "Okay. Let's get a grip here. Tearyn is just a little early at this. At least we know she has the power to change now. Maybe she was provoked into it somehow. Maybe I did something while trying to play with her earlier today." Kathy thought for a moment. "She seemed interested in that stuffed bear Cairna gave her."

Tearach stared at her. "Stuffed bears don't cause us to change form."

"Well, I'm pretty new to this, Tearach. I'm just trying to find a reason why she'd do this now. Why she'd do it at all."

He began to calm down. "She doesn't seem to mind."

"No, she doesn't."

He studied her for a moment. Tearyn smiled up at him and he felt a sense of complete joy. "She's all right. Why do I get this impression of ... It's like she's playing."

"That's probably because she is." Shayla stood in their open bedroom door. "Hand her to me. I've been wondering if she'd be able to change earlier than normal. I've sensed abilities within her that are unusual. She's developing much faster than I'd have expected."

Tearach handed the baby to the Sorceress and waited for her assessment. Kathy stood beside him, and he wrapped his arms about her tightly.

"You were right to send for me. Luckily, I was near, or you two would have certainly made an incident out of nothing. Why, I could hear you both carrying on from outside." She took a look at the baby and laughed. "You're a little bug, aren't you?" She cooed to Tearyn and rocked her. The child laughed and chortled as if the entire world loved her and she knew it.

"My daughter just changed colors and you're telling us not to carry on?" Kathy put her hands on her hips.

"When Tearach said she was playing that was a correct analysis. I thought she might have this ability early on because of Kathy's blood. But there was no sense mentioning it since I couldn't be sure." She tickled

the baby's tummy and received a loud cry of glee. "This little minx is playing with the both of you. For some reason, she wants attention and has found a way to get it. I suspect she's tried it before, and just wasn't able to get it right until now."

"She's just a little baby," Tearach pointed out. He ran his hand through his hair. "How could she consciously make a decision like that at this age?"

"I don't know that it *is* conscious. She's doing what makes her happy and gets her attention, just like any baby," Shayla explained.

"And in her case, that's changing colors." Kathy put her fingers on either side of the bridge of her nose and shook her head.

"And what's so wrong with that?" Shayla asked. "No one on this Earth is the same exact color."

"Even her eyes changed," Tearach pointed out.

Shayla walked toward him, carefully bouncing the baby against her shoulder. "Is having a little girl who isn't green offensive to you, Tearach? Tearyn's eyes are now like her mother's. Does that bother you?"

"Of course not," he bit out. "She's my little girl and I don't care if she's purple with horns and a tail."

"That's good," Shayla responded. "Because she could be able to stay this way for a very long time. Longer than any Goblin has been able to."

Tearach looked at the older woman suspiciously. "If I suspected you of being crafty, I might say that's what you intended all along, Sorceress."

"If that's what you think, then why don't you try it yourself and see if my craftiness has worked."

"What are you suggesting?" He instantly knew the older woman had cornered him into something, and he was about to find out what. The Sorceress' next words confirmed his suspicions.

"Why don't you change into human form and stay that way as long as the baby does?" Shayla taunted.

"Can that hurt him?" Kathy asked as she put her arm over Tearach's."

"No. If he can't stay in human form for any length of time, he'll automatically change back, whether he wants to or not. No harm done." She handed the baby to Tearach. "Take her hand and change. Let the baby's power guide you."

Reluctantly, Tearach knelt. He watched Kathy back away, and he held the baby close to his chest. "If this works, and I can stay human for longer than normal, I'll dance in the dark for you, Sorceress. Nude."

"Well ... that's a wager I simply can't refuse." Shayla smiled. "Can I bring a few of my lady friends to watch?"

He rolled his eyes. "Whatever."

Kathy put her hands to her face as Tearach changed into human form. It had been so long since she'd seen him that way, it actually looked strange. It was like seeing an entirely different person. But the advantage of being able to shift into human form, and to stay that way for as long as he needed to, was obvious. He could go anywhere. It was worth the time it took to experiment.

"I'll see you in the moonlight, Tearach. I'll pick the place and time." Shayla happily stole a small roll from

his dinner plate, popped it into her mouth and walked out.

Kathy looked at the baby. She was still as white as a pair of dove's wings. And Tearach was very human. Except for his dark eyes. "Well, now what?"

He gazed down at Tearyn. "I really don't care, you know."

"Don't care about what?"

He shrugged. "That she looks more like you. She's beautiful and I love her."

"I know that. And so does she."

He sighed. "Well, I guess the wager is on, eh?"

Kathy took a deep, cleansing breath and exhaled slowly. "We might as well eat. It doesn't look as though our daughter is going to change back any time soon."

Tearach nodded in agreement, put the baby back in her crib and sat down next to Kathy. Neither of them spoke through the entire meal. They just watched the baby, each of them trying to get used to the change in her appearance.

* * * *

The length of a day came and went. Then, five days passed. Word of what was happening flew through the forest like a fall leaf. It was the focal point of all the gossip. The Goblin Leader, aided by his infant daughter, was able to sustain human form for longer than had ever been done. On the afternoon of the sixth day, Kathy woke up and quickly checked to see which Tearach slept beside her. She was quite used to keeping Goblin hours, as she referred to their nocturnal habits, but she was unused to sleeping with a humanlike Tearach.

She pushed back her hair just as Tearach sat up. "How long have you been awake?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. Half an hour maybe."

She rubbed the sleep from her eyes. "Why didn't you wake me?"

"I like watching you sleep. And I think I'd better come clean about something."

Kathy's eyebrows shot up. "And what is that?"

He nuzzled her cheek and whispered into her ear, "I've never made love in human form. I like it."

Kathy burst out laughing and turned her face into the pillows. "Stop joking around." She wiped tears of mirth from her eyes. When she looked again, Tearach wasn't laughing. He just stared down at her with a feral gleam in his eyes. "You're not kidding, are you?"

"No. When I make love in this form, I don't have the stamina, but I don't lose my ability to see either. And..."

"And what?"

He smiled, wickedly. "I like the way it feels. It's a bit ... exciting."

"Shayla has created a sex fiend?" she joked.

"Which way do you like it, Kathy?"

She chuckled. "My darling man ... my dearest, deepest heart ... I like it any way you can give it to me."

He smirked. "Then I'll give it to you every way there is."

"On that note, I think I'd better move, or we won't get anything done." Kathy playfully pushed him away, got up and went toward the crib. When she got there, she took one look at her laughing, *green* daughter and chewed her lower lip. "Tearach?"

"Hmmm?" he moaned as he stretched.

"Come look at what our daughter has done."

Hearing the strange tone in Kathy's voice, he quickly got up and looked at Tearyn. "How long has she been green again?"

"She may have changed last night. But you're still human." She paused for a long moment and thought it out. "That means you can probably shift into human form, and stay as long as you want, without the baby's powers. Whatever those are."

"This is Shayla's doing. She knew the baby's power, or influence, could cause this. But I don't understand how it works."

"Neither do I. Maybe we're not supposed to. A Goblin has never mated with an outsider. Anything could have happened."

"I wonder if Tearyn can change back to being a human child again."

"I'm pretty sure she can. Why?"

"Because, dammit! As soon as Shayla hears about this, she'll call a halt to this insane wager. I'll be dancing naked on her lawn for her and her friends to ogle."

Kathy put a hand to her face and tried to cover her grin.

"It's not funny."

Her shoulders began to shake.

"Do you want a lot of women watching me dance nude?"

"I-I'm sorry, Tearach. The Sorceress said I could watch, too."

He grabbed for her, but Kathy ran into the bathroom and closed the door. He had to listen to her laughing all the way through her shower. Tearyn smiled innocently, lifted her tiny arms toward him and kicked her feet. "Why would you do something like this to Daddy, poppet?" He ruefully smiled, shook his head, and prepared to let the Sorceress know she was right. Again.

* * * *

"Before I begin, I just wanted to let you all know that I'm doing this as an apology to the Sorceress. I've disobeyed her commands in the past. And wouldn't believe that she ... that she knows what's best." He took a deep breath and hoped he could survive the humiliation ahead. "Without further ado, I hope you enjoy the performance." He walked into the nearby woods to take off his clothes. Surprisingly, Tearach was met there by many other men of the Order.

Kathy chewed on her lower lip and listened to the Fairy harpists and those who played the drums, or *bodhran*, prepare. Women sat on the garden walls, drank wine and hooted for the evening's entertainment to start. She wondered if there was time to talk the Sorceress out of making Tearach do this, but he kept insisting that a wager had been struck and he would honor it. Lore, the Fairy Leader, and several others had teased him mercilessly. Even Rome had joined in the fun, but Tearach, stubborn and defiant, had insisted his word would be kept. She really wasn't comfortable watching these women stare at Tearach's nude body, and she turned to the Sorceress who sat, as regal as any queen, among her cronies.

"Shayla, I was joking about joining you in this. You know that don't you?"

She held up a hand and flicked it through the air in dismissal. "Wait, watch, and learn Kathy. Tearach is about to do something that will give more joy than you can imagine."

Frowning, Kathy couldn't conceive of how humiliating Tearach, her proud lover, could possibly do anyone any good. As other musicians gathered, her concern grew.

Soon, the women became anxious. Their shouts and hoots became more aggressive. She was reminded of a male strip club some friends had once asked her to attend. It was all in good fun, but no one knew those men. They performed in the nude for a living, not to end some silly bet.

Kathy was about to stand and put a halt to it. Tearach was leader of his people and had been through pure hell these past months. This, as far as she was concerned, was the final disgrace. Suddenly, the women applauded and began to shout.

"Look, Kathy," the Sorceress called out, "Tearach isn't alone."

Torch light appeared from the woods. Tearach led a group of scantily clad men toward the shouting women. Some wore only a leather pouch, like the one Tearach sported, or loin cloths. Each of them looked like a Pagan god, coming to seek pleasure. The music began and the men circled. One of the Druids raised his hand toward a pile of firewood in their midst. The fire started slowly, then rose. The torches were thrown into it. Women joined their men and began disrobing in careless abandon. Kathy looked on in amazement. This wasn't something Cairna's teaching had explained. What custom was this?

By the firelight, she recognized some of the men and women. Even Cairna and Rome were there. Owen danced wildly with Maureen. Their bodies all undulated to the sensual beat of the drums. Thankfully, there were no children present. Shayla had instructed some of the younger girls to collect them all, including Tearyn, and take them to the castle nursery. She'd understood it was so Tearach wouldn't be seen by eyes too small to understand such adult activities. It seemed, however, that many of their fathers joined in the dancing, along with mothers, lovers, and anyone who could find a willing partner. The night might be cold, but bodies glistened with perspiration. It seemed they'd keep warm through dancing—or other activities.

She scanned the crowd for Tearach and tried to blend in, though it was becoming increasingly difficult to do so with her clothing still on. "Dammit, what's going on?" she muttered to herself. Strong arms embraced her from behind. Kathy let out a cry of surprise, and turned to give whoever it was a well-placed knee to the groin. But Tearach stood there grinning boyishly. It seemed he looked ten years younger and Kathy couldn't help staring.

"I guess all this came as a bit of a surprise, didn't it?"

"Will there be some kind of orgy or something?" She glanced around at some of the people dancing totally nude. Wine flowed freely and men carried women into the nearby woods.

"I guess it must seem that way. But let me explain."

"Please do," she urged.

"Let's go somewhere a little less public." He waved a hand at the careening dancers, and propelled Kathy toward a garden wall. Once they were in a more secluded spot, he began. "When I went into the woods to undress, some of the men met me there. It seems they didn't want me dancing nude in front of their women. I explained that since I'd opened my big mouth, I was honor bound to face the consequences. So it was agreed between them that we'd all dance nude. I was shocked, but it made me feel like I wouldn't ever have to go through anything alone again." Tearach shrugged, and then he laughed gleefully. "These people are my friends. I've only just realized that I was never alone, even when the worst was happening. Even the men I fought when I got back from Exmoor were there. They've forgiven me. I can make mistakes, and it's all right to do so. More importantly, the Goblin race will survive. You and Tearyn have given us the gift of life and a way to move safely about in the world. And I can't hate the outside anymore for what three men did. There are good people out there. People just like you. And I know it's really over. Like you said, I-I finally don't blame myself for having survived Exmoor."

Something in his expression was so sweet. It was as if the last of the horrible weight he carried fell completely away. Kathy threw her arms around his neck and clung tightly to him. He lowered his head and kissed her deeply. Then, she pushed away from him and began to undress. "If these people can find a way, through all their fear, to celebrate life, then who am I to judge?"

For the thousandth time, he was reminded of her intelligence and tolerance. When she was undressed, he led her into the firelight and they joined the others. It was, as she said, a celebration of life. A way to deal with the sorrows of loss and tragedy. Nothing sordid or vulgar. In nine months, Tearach believed a great many new lives would spring from this night. Where there was life, there was hope. But hope had really begun for him when he kidnapped a captivating woman from the outside world and brought her into one of myth and magic. Forever was a word he cherished, because Kathy would be there with him.

* * * *

Shayla watched as Tearach took Kathy into the crowd and disappeared. Their handfasting would be a special occasion, marked by great celebration and happiness, as it should be. In the years to come, the Goblin race would know a great revival, and Tearach would be remembered as their greatest leader. The stars had forecast all this and more.

She turned away from the revelers and looked up into a window of the castle. A lone figure stood there, unable or unwilling to join the festivities. His life was shattered. Even from this distance, she could feel his pain and guilt, though the feelings were misplaced and unwarranted. Even those he loved had been unable to breach the wall he'd constructed around his heart. It would take a great deal of patience to bring him back to life. But mending hearts and souls were her specialty. His case would be a challenge. He'd done so much for others. Now, it would be his turn to have someone do for him. He was a proud warrior and would resent the help, but she meant to give it.

Gawain saw the Sorceress of the Ancients look up. The light in his room was out, but he knew she still sensed his presence. He slowly backed away from the window. Those who joined in the celebration couldn't begin to comprehend the hard months ahead. Shayla was allowing this night of merriment, before things became desperate, to soften the blow that the Order's financial losses would ultimately bring. All because he hadn't done his job right. He'd carelessly let the lapse of a simple safety procedure cause the deaths of nine good people. All he'd had to do was make sure the kiln's fuel lines weren't leaking. He'd neglected that small chore. The fuel had somehow come in contact with an open flame and that was the end of the Loft. At least those cleaning the remains of the Loft had surmised that was what caused the explosion and the fire. Gossip had brought the information to his door though he knew the Sorceress

hadn't wanted him to know.

A right hand was a small price to pay for such neglect. His left hand stroked the lower part of his right arm to soothe the throbbing there. For some reason, he fashioned he could actually still feel his missing hand. The empty space actually hurt.

Phantom pain. That's what Owen told him it was. But nothing could equal the pain in his heart.

"Dance and be happy while you can," he muttered to himself. "There'll be little enough when your stomachs are empty and no medical supplies arrive."

His left hand clenched. He lifted his head up and silently prayed the Goddess would find some way to repair the damage he'd done. The Craftsman, as they knew him, was gone. He could help them no more.

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