

A Word of Disillusionment

His words jolted her from the feigned indifference she was trying so hard to maintain.

"You won't be living with me?"

"I will be making other arrangements," he answered without looking up from a parchment he was viewing. "You will be required to make certain responses at specific times during the Ceremony. Mother will instruct you. You will, of course, conduct yourself as befitting my mate, and not in your usual outlandish manner."

"You jerk, how do you expect me to act at my own wedding? I'm not a simpleton, you know!" She couldn't believe his gall! "What are you expecting, naked dancing and bungee jumping?"

He looked up from the parchment and gave her a hard, glacial green stare. "I expect you to act in an honorable way, but I fear I will be disappointed in that area again."

"You know, you really are the biggest ass I've ever met," she said, standing up, clenched fists at her side. "If you'd just let me explain about ..."

He cut her off with a chopping motion of his hand. "Sit down, Korrene. Your dramatics are wasted on me. I know all I need to know. The subject is closed."

"You told me you loved me."

"That was before I knew you to be the traitor and liar that you are. I thought you an honorable woman. I was wrong..."

The Binding

by

PhyllisAnn Welsh

NBI

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This is a work of fiction. While reference may be made to actual historical events or existing locations, the characters, incidents, and dialogs are products of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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DEDICATION

My Husband, for believing in me...

My Children, for putting up with me...

My Parents, for giving me a love of books...

PROLOGUE

Mac Lir enjoyed a practical joke just as well as the next deity, but this one had gone far past the humorous stage, and had slipped into antagonistic millennia ago.

Eons before, when the Seven Cella Worlds had been young, the gods had created children to populate and develop them, each race living in harmony with the others. Mac Lir's children were

the Silvan ones—the Elves.

Too many years had passed for Mac Lir to remember when the joke had started, or even which deity had first suggested it. However, all had agreed it would be amusing to see which race of children would dominate and rule the others.

No, amusing it was not, Mac Lir decided, especially since his Silvan children could no longer be found on the world called Earth. The only traces remaining of them were a few stories and songs. Very occasionally however, about once every twenty generations, a drop of Silvan blood resurfaced in a human child.

These special children rarely lived long. If they did not meet with tragic accidents when their magical powers began to manifest, they were hunted down by frightened and suspicious humans. It was easy for Mac Lir to see the emerging pattern of total extinction. Some deity's hand was behind it, and Mac Lir suspected it was his archenemy Tuawtha, the demon god.

Now the pattern of his children's extinction was beginning on another world, Tylana. Mac Lir was determined to stop it. The threat had already touched his children of the waves, the Sea Elves. The truly insidious part of Tuawtha's plan was using the Night Elves against their brethren to do his evil work. But once the Sea Elves were gone, the demon god would turn his evil attention to the Night Elves, eliminating them as well. Tuawtha would not rest until all the silvan children were exterminated.

Mac Lir had a plan to save his children. He would use his most powerful high priest and a human woman from the world of Earth. Together, these two would strengthen the elves and begin a new race; a people better able to survive the evil of Tuawtha.

For generations Mac Lir waited for just the right human child to be born. That female child had to have a drop of silvan blood or else the magical transition, the binding of two souls for eternity, would kill her. Once found, she had to be protected from mysterious accidents, suppositious humans, and nurtured in a tolerant environment.

Finally, Mac Lir's wait was fruitful. A human female was born one November morning in a place called Greensboro, Indiana. She had the requisite trace of silvan blood—everything was in alignment.

With a smug smile, and a determined but mischievous glint in his eyes, the god Mac Lir began to meddle.

CHAPTER ONE

"Tavern keeper," the woman spoke over her shoulder, loud enough for all in the large room to hear, "I require a hot meal, a hot bath, and some information. I'm looking for a place named Shalridoor."

The screaming silence that greeted her words was suddenly broken by the potboy's squeaky voice.

"Great lizards, lady! Nobody goes there! That place is haunted by dead elves!"

~~*

Korrene Greenwood stared at the computer screen with a combination of wonder and disgust. Try as

she might, those words played through her mind over and over, like last year's number one song. And now she had actually typed them—'haunted by dead elves'. She'd never planned on that.

As she moved the cursor to delete the words, an uncanny feeling of unease inched up her spine and tingled her scalp. Feeling foolish, she turned to look behind her.

Of course, no one was there. She was alone in the apartment, as always.

Running her fingers through her short curls, she pushed her chair away from the computer console, stood and lunged for the office door. She needed a distraction.

Her bare feet made a soft whisper on the pale blue carpet as she checked the answering machine next to the couch. She always put it on when working, so no one would disturb her. No messages. Good. She didn't feel like talking anyway.

Going into the tiny efficiency kitchen, she poured herself a cup of day-old, burnt coffee and rummaged in the cabinet until she found a box of fudge cookies, her mind still trying to dissect the words and put them into some kind of order in the story.

As she sipped and munched thoughtfully, she sauntered back into the living room and stared sightlessly out the bay window. Her toes dug into the soft carpet by habit. What was it about this story that seemed to absorb all her thoughts—waking and sleeping?

She padded over to the couch, sat and was swallowed up immediately into its comforting depths. She tucked her right leg under her bottom and leaned against the over-stuffed armrest, her mind still busily pondering her fascination with an alien race.

The plot of the manuscript was strong; it held danger, intrigue, magic, romance, and some twists that surprised even Kory. It even had an endangered species, for heaven's sake. The story detailed the account of an elusive tribe of elves from the sea who were slowly dying. The major conflict was about how they would solve their dilemma with the help of Mac Lir, the god of the sea.

Especially fascinating to Kory was her main character and hero Rendolin—a five-foot eleven-inch, green-eyed, blond-haired, magic-wielding package of sensual masculinity—who seemed so real that sometimes it felt like he was in the room telling her his life story. He was more alive and believable than any character she had ever created before.

Maybe a little too alive.

He was beginning to haunt her dreams to the point that it disturbed her sleep. She knew occasionally a writer could create a character that just seemed to jump off a page and breathe life into a story. Her elf was such a character.

Rendolin was very easy to write about and even easier to picture. So engrossed was she in her leading man and the strange, unbidden phrase, Kory didn't notice the room darken as the sun sank behind the Vermont hills.

When she first thought about creating Rendolin, she knew he would be a strong, masculine personality—a hero of a romance had to be! She had an idea of what he would be like, but to know somehow that his green eyes would turn gray with anger, that his favorite color was turquoise, or that his hair was the texture of soft silk rather than crisp linen, surprised her.

Sometimes it seemed as if he paced up and down the room while she typed, as if he were dictating how the story *should* go rather than her making it up as she went. It was a very disconcerting feeling.

He didn't like the track the story was taking. She often felt as though he was frustrated and impatient with her. That she was supposed to be writing or doing some elusive thing she couldn't quite grasp or comprehend.

"Now, that's ridiculous, Kory!" She leaped off the couch in agitation, knocking the coffee and cookies onto the floor. Fudge melted into the spilled coffee, forming a sludge-like substance that seeped into the carpet, making a soggy pile of brown goo.

"What a mess!"

As she bent to clean it up, the telephone rang. She let the answering machine pick up as she finished cleaning the carpet.

"Kory, are you there? This is Patty. Answer the phone if you can hear me, girl."

Kory smiled as she dumped the spongy mess in the garbage and dove for the phone. She always enjoyed talking to her sister-in-law.

"Hi," she answered, breathless. "What's up?"

"Well, I haven't heard from you in a week or so, and I wanted to check to make sure you're still alive!" The sound of Patty's familiar voice brought a lump to Kory's throat. She didn't deserve to have a sister-in-law like Patty. Kory worried that she'd jinx Patty, too.

"Yeah, I'm alive. I've been busy working on my book. You know how it is."

"How's it going?" Patty asked. "Have you thought of a title for it yet?"

Kory chuckled with Patty at the inside joke. A title for her stories was always the last thing she did. She swore she had no talent for it.

"No, but I'll come up with something before it's done. I've been having a little trouble with my characters."

"Trouble?" Patty asked. "Anything I can help you with?"

"Not unless you can tell me why I think my hero is stalking me," Kory said with a nervous laugh.

"What?"

"Oh, I can't explain it. Never mind. How's the family?"

For the next twenty minutes Kory listened and commented as her sister-in-law told her about life as a mother and wife. Patty and her family were the only relatives Korrene had since her husband, Herb, died three and one half years ago after a freak hiking accident. Kory had been twenty-three; Herb at twenty-five had been much too young to die.

He had survived the accident, but had been in a coma and on life support for seven months before he quietly died one spring morning. He had never regained consciousness. After all the bills had been paid, Kory worked part time while she wrote her first novel. The sales from that book, along with a modest pension from Herb's life insurance, had allowed her to sell the fixer-upper they had bought the year before to raise the family they planned. She then rented a small efficiency apartment in Vermont, and took a year off from her usual secretarial positions to work on her latest book.

The one that was driving her crazy.

"So, I wanted to invite you down this weekend." Patty's voice brought Kory back from her memories with a start.

"I'm sorry, Patty. What did you say?"

"I said, Mike's best friend is in town for the week, and he's a military gamer like you. He likes to pretend to be an ancient medieval soldier and try to figure out new strategies for old battles, just like you and Herb did. So why don't you come down on Saturday and meet him? I bet you'd like him."

"Playing matchmaker again, huh? No dice, Pat."

"I thought you'd say that, but what's the big deal? You haven't been down to see your niece and nephews in months. I could use the female companionship. Come on!"

"No thanks. I'm not interested." Kory began to feel uncomfortable, as she always did when Pat tried to get her to visit. Her stomach clenched, and the too familiar pain clutched at her heart.

"Kory, we worry about you up there, living all by yourself. What if something should happen and there's nobody to help you?"

A light sweat broke out across Kory's forehead. "Pat, I've had self defense training. I'll be fine."

"Oh, right! An eight-week class at the local YMCA is really going to do you a lot of good if you get mugged! You should be with your family."

"Pat, I said no." Something like panic clawed up her chest, closing off her breath and making her throat tight. Family. Something she had no right to claim. Every time she loved someone too much, she jinxed him or her and they died.

Changing tactics, Pat tried again.

"Kory, Herbert has been dead for nearly four years. It's time to stop mourning him. Look, I was his sister and I say it's time to get on with your life. You can't shut yourself up and live in a fantasy world you've created. It isn't natural, Kory."

"Patty," she began, gulping air, "I know you're trying to help, and I love you for it. But please believe me when I say I'm not mourning Herb any more. I just don't have time to drive down to Massachusetts for a weekend. I have to get this first draft done. My publisher gave me a deadline and I have to meet it. Maybe some other time."

Kory knew Patty would see through the excuse, but she hoped her sister-in-law would understand.

"Okay," Patty said after a brief, disappointed pause. "If you have a deadline to meet, we understand."

Kory let out the breath she didn't know she'd been holding.

"But we're not giving up on you, girl! You're coming down to visit us before the snow flies, you hear me?"

"Yeah, I hear you. I promise to get down before you take the shovels out of storage. Give everyone a hug and kiss for me, and thanks for the call, Pat."

Kory slowly placed the phone on the hook, glanced at the clock and sighed deeply. Man, she was tired. And lonely, but it was best this way.

Turning off the lights, she headed for the bedroom.

~*~

"Oh damn, Herb," Kory said to the dishwasher. "I had another dream about that elf last night."

Sitting at the table in her ratty rose velour bathrobe, eating a bagel with cream cheese and sipping a Swiss mocha latte, she could still feel the elf at the edges of her mind, poking and probing.

Reminding her how lonely she was.

Actually, to dream of her characters and the story wasn't unusual. In fact, dreams were an important part of her creative process. Each night after she was in bed, she would consciously induce images of her current work. Allowing her mind to roam in any direction produced some of the best ideas. But last night had been different.

The dream started off well. Since her story was about a fantasy island of elves, she had gone to sleep calling forth the sea and a soft, beautiful, peaceful island named Sasheena.

She remembered the sound of the surf crashing against rocks, and sea birds sailing through a bright blue sky.

She had felt a gentle breeze caress her cheek, playing with her hair as it lulled her into a relaxing sleep. And soon she saw him rise up out of the sea, like a lost soul walking back into her life.

Rendolin's strong, lithe body glistened in the sun where millions of drops of sea spray caught the light as he stepped from the waves. His long hair dripped rivulets of water that coursed around the muscles and planes of his chest, as he came towards her with the delicious languid grace of a sensuous animal. His bronzed skin was cool and smooth as he took her in his arms and pressed her to him. The taste of the sea was on his lips.

Lifting his head, he looked deeply into her eyes. With a gentle touch he smoothed a tendril of hair from her face before breathing her name like a prayer.

"Korrene."

With a start, Kory awoke and sat up in bed. The raw emotion in that one word wrenched her heart with a physical ache. For a second she thought she could still smell the tang of the sea, but it was gone in an instant. Her body was wet with perspiration, and her loose gown clung uncomfortably to her breasts.

He was supposed to whisper her *heroine's* name, not hers.

It had taken her a long while to fall back asleep....

Reflecting upon the dream now, sitting in her sunny little kitchen and sipping lukewarm coffee, Kory guessed it wasn't such an unusual dream. True, Rendolin was supposed to be in love with Feenix, but since it was her dream it was only natural that he seemed to be making love to Kory instead. That made sense. It was just that his presence seemed so real. Her body still tingled at the thought of his touch.

"Maybe Patty is right," she said to herself. "I need to get out more and meet real men."

She reached across the table and took a notebook from the pile she always kept there, flipped to a blank page and picked up a pen. Before the dream faded completely, she should make a few notes. She had just finished the last words when she looked up and saw him.

Rendolin was wearing a pearl gray robe that fell open to reveal his smooth, muscular chest. Muscles and sinew rippled beneath golden tanned skin, and she found herself wondering what it would be like to touch him. His lower body was encased in a pair of tight black leggings that hugged his strong thighs. On his feet was a pair of tooled brown leather boots that only reached to his ankles. His long golden hair was held back from his face with a leather headband, adorned with a polished piece of glistening pink coral.

It wasn't immediately apparent that Rendolin was of a different race. His elfin blood showed only in the delicate features of his face, and perhaps the lean planes of his body. His mesmerizing green eyes were slanted only a little, and certainly his near six feet height didn't proclaim him an elf. But Kory knew that if she lifted his hair, a pair of perfectly pointed ears would give him away. She knew because he was her creation.

He moved gracefully, put his fists on his hips, and braced his feet in a wide stance, for all the world like an ancient king surveying his domain. Then slowly, a smile blossomed across his beautiful face, revealing a deep dimple in his left cheek. Kory could almost smell his salty, musky scent, and she couldn't help smiling back at him.

"My word, what an imagination I have!" she said with an appreciative chuckle.

"Aye," he answered, quietly, "and 'tis a good thing for me that you do."

"You know," she reflected, "I shouldn't be sitting here in my nightgown talking to a figment of my imagination. Especially this early in the morning. People might get the wrong idea and lock me up."

"None will know except myself." His musical voice held a deep timbre and a caressing quality that sent tingles rushing to her toes.

Suddenly losing patience with herself, Kory closed the notebook with a bang.

"This is crazy," she mumbled, standing up from the table. She hurried across the room and put her empty cup in the sink, keeping her back to the apparition.

"I must be working too hard. Maybe I should take that trip south to see Patty and the kids. It'll get my mind off this stupid story and that elf."

She turned on the water to do the dishes, hoping some good manual labor would put a stop to these disturbing visions of a totally make-believe character.

Suddenly a tiny wisp of air moved the hair against her cheek and disturbed the hem of her robe, making it sway gently. All her instincts warned her she was not alone, but she dared not turn around.

"I am honored that your mind is on me. However, I must disagree with your opinion regarding my world. To me, it is of vital importance, and the fate of my people is at stake."

Slowly, almost fearfully, Kory turned from the sink and faced the source of the words. Rendolin leaned against the counter, an amused look on his handsome face. Blinking three times quickly did not get rid of him. Her knees began to shake as she realized she was having visions.

"Do not look so upset, my sweet," soothed her hallucination, as he picked up the toaster and inspected it closely. "You may trust my word that you possess all your faculties. A son of the House of Hiloris would never lie."

She wiped her soapy hands on her bathrobe and tried to ignore Rendolin as she made her unsteady way back to the table and collapsed in a chair. Dropping her face into her hands, Kory ordered herself to

think clearly.

"What should I do? Who should I call? If I call 911 what do I tell them?" she wondered out loud.

She huddled over the table as if trying to hide herself from a ghost. Her bare toes gripped the rung of the chair, clinging to a lifeline.

"Tell them nothing, Korrene." He walked over to the refrigerator and examined the papers and pictures she had cluttering the front. Then he experimented with the door handle before opening it to peer inside. "There is nothing wrong with you." He closed the 'fridge and turned his attention to her. "I am truly here." His gentle voice only made her shake harder.

She tried to straighten up a bit, but couldn't make her body respond to her demands.

"Okay, Kory," she said to herself, fighting to regain control. "Remember your stress control training. Breathe deeply. Come on. Inhale...."

"Korrene," he pleaded, "listen to me. There is no need for panic."

She winced at his voice. "...exhale. Good, good. He's not real. Now again. Inhale...."

"Korrene, stop this. I cannot bear to see you so upset! I will go, do you hear me?"

Kory covered her ears with her fingers; she wanted to crawl inside herself, hide somewhere, anything to get away from this nightmare. She was so frightened, and her heart was banging so violently, she thought she was going to die of a heart attack. It was almost like when she learned Herb was going to die. It had taken her eleven months to get over those anxiety attacks. She didn't think she could take it if they came back.

"Exhale ... Oh, why do I still hear him?" Tears dripped between her fingers and her chair wobbled as she shook harder. "Again! Inhale..."

"Very well. By the god's beard, I will leave you for now. But I will be back," his voice was desperate. "Hear me now, Korrene. I will be back!"

"Exhale... Come on, Kory. You can do it. Inhale...exhale. Breathe deeply and slowly. It's working. I don't hear him any more. Breathe. One more time."

Kory dared a look between her fingers and searched the kitchen. Rendolin was not there. She dropped her shaking hands, and looked into the living room. Gone.

She stood on unsteady legs and ventured around the corner into her bedroom. It was empty, too. With a sigh of relief, she plopped back down into the chair and broke into noisy sobs.

"What am I going to do, Herb? I'm going insane."

CHAPTER TWO

The sea was the same as always. The calm. The peace. The rhythmic rolling of the waves...

Unable to bear the wait any longer, Feenix began pulling at her clothes like a woman possessed. In her urgency to dive into the crashing surf before *The Change* took place, Feenix ripped her clothing and tossed it aside like ragged flotsam.

As her body arced in a graceful dive over the water, *The Change* came with a burning rush, and her blood sang in her ears as the cool waves parted for her glossy snout. The god, Mac Lir, had worked his magic once again, and she wondered briefly why she ever fought him, or this transformation into a sleek dolphin.

Then all was forgotten except the exquisite feel of water caressing every inch of her bare skin, as she cut smoothly through the waves in a joyful dance of exaltation.

Korrene was free at last.

~*~

Gasping for breath like a drowning woman, Kory leaped out of her chair and groped for the edge of the old desk. Slowly the images of surf and sand began to dim, and the glare of her computer terminal forced her eyes into focus.

Her labored breathing drowned out the soft purr of the computer, and she could actually feel the blood pound in her ears, almost like the echo of the rising surf.

What in the world was happening to her? Every time she tried to get down to work on this book, she either had visions of people that didn't exist, or she became part of the story.

"This is not how a professional author should be acting," she reprimanded herself. There had to be a logical explanation for it.

Yet she could have sworn she had been in that water, swimming and leaping in the foam. It seemed so real! But it couldn't have been. It just couldn't.

Kory saved what she had written, then shut the computer down. Glancing at the clock, she was surprised to see it was after four o'clock. Then her belly rumbled.

"I'm out of here," she proclaimed as she slipped her feet into well-worn brown loafers and grabbed her purse. She'd go into town for some early supper. She needed to put space between herself and the book.

~*~

It was a rare and glorious autumn evening, the kind where the air still held on to a lingering summer's warmth, so after eating her burger Kory decided to take a walk. Despite the weather, there weren't many people out, and her amble took her in the direction of the little town common.

Kory thought her Vermont hometown was one of the most charming in New England. From her reading of its history, Kory knew that cows and sheep used to graze on the 'common land' of the town; these days, only a few birds and a stray squirrel or two invaded her privacy. She'd always found it a good place to think.

She brushed off a crimson leaf and sat on a park bench looking around. The setting sun cast golden rays through the old maple trees. The leaves were just beginning to turn red; most of the bright yellows and oranges from earlier in the season were already gone. The dark branches, some almost completely bare, carved the deepening blue sky into jigsaw puzzle pieces. She could smell a wood stove burning somewhere. Autumn in New England was like no other place on earth.

"Aye, 'tis nothing like Sasheena."

The musical, masculine voice shattered the peace and calm she had tried so hard to gather around her.

"I might have known you'd find me," Kory said in disgust, refusing to look up at him.

"I will always find you," his soft words were a gentle caress.

Reluctantly she looked at him, and a jolt hit her somewhere in the region of her lower abdomen. Rendolin was breath taking, even if she had created him herself. He was seated cross-legged on the ground in front of her, playing with an orange maple leaf. As he twirled it between his finger and thumb, Kory's mouth went dry imagining what those same long, tapering fingers might do to Feenix, the heroine in her story.

"Well, that's no magic trick," she said to him, wrenching her eyes away from his hands. "Since you're nothing but a figment of my imagination, I guess I'll always carry you around with me. What I can't figure out is why I keep thinking about you, and even imagine seeing you when I don't want to!"

"Ah," he said, tossing the leaf aside. "I suppose that is why you fear for your sanity when I visit."

"I'm not afraid of you; I just don't understand why I'm seeing you."

"I choose for you to see me."

"Oh, sure you do. And since you're my creation, I guess I choose to see you, too. In fact," Kory continued thoughtfully, "since I'm talking with you, I guess you could say I'm only talking with myself so I shouldn't worry about it."

He rose up into a kneeling position, his golden hands resting on rock-hard thighs.

"You are not talking to yourself, Korrene. I am really here, and I say the words I choose to say, not what you would like to hear."

"That's impossible!" Rising from the bench in agitation, she walked over to a statue of a mustachioed soldier garbed in a Union uniform. "You are a character in a story of mine. I created you. I gave you your name..."

"Not so," he broke in with a grimace. "You wanted to call me Robard."

She bit back a smile. "That was just a working name until I got the feel of your personality. I named you Rendolin and I created a brother for you named Thelorin—"

"Who you wanted to be younger than me," he spoke into her left ear. "If you remember correctly, I told you he was the elder, and was in fact the leader of my people. Not me, as you had originally planned."

She turned and faced him, slightly taken aback at his nearness. She thought she detected the faint smell of the sea, but dismissed the fancy with a shake of her head.

"That was a brilliant plot twist, created for the readers' enjoyment."

"Indeed," he answered with a twinkle in his green eyes. "I shall have to explain to my mother that her pregnancies were arranged for someone's amusement the next time I speak with her."

"You don't have a mother," she said with elation. "I didn't give you one!"

"Then where, my silly goose, do you think I came from? Everyone has to have a mother."

"I mean," she said angrily, "that I'm not going to write about her in the book, so you don't, technically,

have to have one."

Rendolin moved to stand in back of the chiseled statue and peered down at her from over the soldier's granite shoulder. "Mother will be so disappointed."

"She's not important to the story," Kory said, trying to hold back a smile.

"But you see, my sweet," he said seriously as he came around and stood before her. "She really *is*, and that is one of the reasons I must speak with you."

"Why don't you go back to where you came from and aggravate Feenix instead of me?"

"Ah ha!" he said, "exactly. I do not want to aggravate Feenix. Nor do I want to do anything else with her. It is the reason I have come to your world to find you."

"What are you talking about?" Kory asked, totally confused.

"I have come to take you back to Sasheena with me. While I am sure Captain Feenix is an admirable woman and knows her business of warfare well, I believe my people's quandary needs a female with a bit more compassion and gentleness. And since you yourself understand our plight, both inside and out, who better to help us combat our problems?"

"Who better?" Kory echoed faintly.

"Good," the elf said with a satisfied nod. "Now if you do not have any questions, we can proceed to Sasheena without delay. I am anxious to return to my own world." Looking around him at the strange buildings and the loud, smelly vehicles moving on the road, he continued, "Your world, Korrene, does not make sense to me, and I find it very noisy."

"Wait a minute," she said, holding up her hand like a traffic cop. "You want me to go to Sasheena with you?"

"That is correct."

She blinked a couple of times and dropped her arm to her side. "You want me to go to a fantasy world I created to help you solve your people's problems?"

"The world is real, Korrene, not a fantasy. But yes, I want you to come with me."

"No!"

She turned on her heel, making a motion with her hands as if to push his words away, then hurried from the statue and the little park.

"I won't listen to you any more. If the story needs some tighter plotting, then I will do it in a completely logical way! Not by conjuring up one of my characters and talking it out with him. And certainly *not* by going to visit a place that only exists in my mind! Besides," she flung over her shoulder as she scurried away, "what could you possibly have to say that would be new and original to me?"

"How will you ever know?" he shouted in anger after her. "You have not given me a chance to say much of anything!"

She turned down Main Street, almost at a dead run, panic threatening to overcome her again. She had traveled almost three blocks before she looked up to see where she was. At least Rendolin hadn't followed her. How would she explain an elf to anyone she met in this small town?

"Don't be stupid," Kory scolded herself. "He's only in your imagination! No one could see him. They'd just hear you talking to thin air, and then you'd have some explaining to do!"

She slowed down and walked another block, thinking about her problem. The way she saw it, the book had become secondary in importance. The most important thing right now was to find an answer as to why Rendolin was appearing to her. If it turned out she was ill in some way, then she needed professional help. But she didn't feel like anything was wrong with her.

At least not until the elf appeared.

What should she do?

"Okay, Kory," she encouraged herself, "do a little research before you commit yourself to some loony bin!"

~*~

The sign read, "Martin H. Allen, L.I.C.S.W.," She had asked right after her arrival what the letters stood for, and the superior receptionist had not hesitated to educate her. Licensed Independent Clinical Social Worker. Kory closed the door softly behind her as she left the office, then rested her head against the cool wood.

Martin Allen had confirmed all of her worst fears. She was crazy. Well, maybe not crazy, but certainly on her way to becoming so if she didn't do something immediately. He offered to refer her to a psychiatrist who specialized in depression with psychotic reactions. Mr. Allen felt strongly that she needed more help than he alone was able to provide. At his mention of anti-depressant medication, Kory shuddered and declined the offer at once.

Her trip home was made in a complete fog. She didn't even realize she had driven the seven miles to her apartment until her car pulled into the driveway, almost by itself. "At least that blasted elf didn't come along for the ride!" She didn't think she could have made it home without an accident if he had.

As she let herself into the darkened apartment, Kory could feel the tears gather in her eyes. She willed them away, but they refused to evaporate. By the time she flipped on the light and sat down at the old kitchen table, her vision was lost in an ocean of tears. She dropped her head down on her arms and the tears poured out. The effort of holding them back was more than she could summon.

She didn't know why she was crying. She was afraid of losing her mind, but she was angry, too. Martin Allen had said her visions were triggered by the emptiness of her life since her husband's death. When she felt lost and alone, her defenses were down and she experienced psychotic episodes. But that didn't ring true. Kory *liked* the independence and feeling of being empowered that living alone allowed.

She had truly mourned for Herb when he died, but she knew she had gone beyond that point long ago. So what if she occasionally talked to him? Besides, she could have told Mr. Allen that she was a jinx and anyone she got too close to died. She was very happy living alone, so who was it hurting?

Kory cried until her head pounded and her nose was all red and swollen. She cried until the tablecloth had a big, dark spot the size of a serving platter. She cried until she felt she had no more water in her.

Then she made the decision.

Mr. Allen said she had to do something immediately, and Kory agreed. They just didn't agree on what that something was. Every logical conclusion she thought of told her she was going insane and she needed professional help. But everything in her heart and soul told Kory that it was not her imagination at all.

"It's the story," she said, lifting her head and wiping her cheeks. "I have to get rid of the story, Herb. For some reason, I'm too emotionally involved, and I must get rid of it."

Quickly, like a sick woman reaching for a cure, she made her way to the computer console and called up the stored text; all twelve and one half chapters of it. For a while she scrolled it down and simply read the too familiar words. Her eyes lovingly lingered on the names of places, people and things she had worked so hard to create. Her fingers lightly touched the cold screen when Rendolin's name appeared.

"Korrene," his voice murmured from behind her right shoulder. "I need to speak with you."

This was her creation. Her baby. For her to do what she contemplated seemed beyond her strength. But she had to destroy her creation. To merely put it aside would mean she would be free to work on it again. When? A month? A year? Sooner? To put it aside would mean Rendolin would still haunt her days and nights, and she had to completely uproot his hold on her. The only answer to her sanity was total destruction.

"Korrene," the voice came from behind her again, trying to gain her attention. She could hear concern and a trace of confusion in his beloved voice. "Speak to me, Korrene. You look lost. What is it? Tell me."

"Okay. I'll tell you," she answered firmly, never taking her fingertips or her gaze off of his name on the screen. "I'm exorcising you from my life."

She calmly stored the text to file. A lone tear escaped rolling down her cheek as the screen in front of her changed. "I'm saying goodbye to you, so that I can sleep again at night, and so I won't be afraid of my own thoughts."

She placed both hands above the keyboard and keyed the sequence to delete the story from memory. When the screen cleared, she released a sad sigh. "I'm so tired of imagining you wherever I go, no matter what I do."

Without wavering, she shut down the computer. The screen went blank as she dropped her hands into her lap.

"But Korrene, I have told you repeatedly that you are not imagining me. I am real. I shall prove it."

She was surprised to hear his amused voice, but his light touch on her shoulder startled her so badly she knocked the keyboard off the desk.

"You touched me!" The terror in her voice was reflected a hundred-fold in her wide eyes. She stood on unsteady legs then, trying to put as much space as possible between herself and Rendolin, Kory backed into a chair, toppling over a stack of reference books and note pads.

"Peace, my sweet. I will not hurt you."

"You touched me," she said again in disbelief. She picked up a large thesaurus and held it in front of her chest, as if it would protect her from his further advances. "That's impossible! You can't touch me," her voice rose as she became angry. "You're a damned character in a damned story, for god's sake!" Shaking the book at him, she stepped towards the apparition. "You don't exist! Leave me alone!"

"Korrene, please. Let me speak." Rendolin put his hands up in a gentle gesture and moved to meet Kory's advance.

"I said go away!"

Kory threw the heavy book at Rendolin's head and then made a dash for the door. But before she could reach the exit, the elf had clasped her forearm firmly, while holding the thesaurus in his other hand. For a moment they stood thus, stunned by the feel of warm flesh against warm flesh. It seemed to her that heat burst from his hand and shot up her arm, bathing her face in a hot flush. A low groan tore itself from the back of her throat and Kory pulled out of his grasp, diving for the upended pile of books and papers.

"Korrene! What is the matter?" Rendolin's voice was full of confusion and fear. As she tore a small stack of paper in half, he looked at her as if she had lost her mind. "What are you doing?" He tossed the book aside and bent down at her side.

"Getting rid of all of you," she breathed. She picked up another pile of paper, ripped it in half, then threw the pieces aside.

"I don't understand," he said in confusion.

"Well, I'll make it clear then," she panted as she attacked another pile of paper. "Since you're still here, then it's obvious just dumping the story from the computer won't do the trick. So if I have to destroy every shred of the story, every page to get rid of you, then that's what I'll do!"

Suddenly Rendolin grabbed her arms and forced her to drop the paper. His strong fingers sent a white-hot streak of energy to her chest, nearly stopping her breath. He pulled her to her feet and met her angry brown gaze with his cool green one. Again a shock of contact spiraled through her. Kory fought to ignore it.

"How can you say that I am nothing when you stand here in my grasp?" His voice was rough with emotion. Kory wasn't sure if it was anger or something else. Shaking her gently, he demanded, "Can you deny the feel of my fingers on your arms?"

Stunned, she could only stand and stare at him.

"Can you?" When she remained mute, he let her go almost roughly. "I thought not."

"How can you be real?" she asked, sitting down heavily in the chair, feeling suddenly bereft at the loss of the warmth of his hands. "I created you. I thought you up, I must truly be deranged."

"Enough of this talk about going mad."

His outburst thoroughly surprised her. One small part of her writer's brain noted that he had a temper if pushed too far.

"You are not insane, and I am not just a name on a piece of parchment." He tossed some pages of the manuscript into her face as he continued, "I am Rendolin, Son of the House of Hiloris. I live. I breathe. And if wounded, Madam, I bleed. I am alive."

She watched in amazement at the change that took place in him. Gone was the patient, gentle elfin male trying to persuade a slightly confused woman to his way of thinking. In his place stood the proud elf lord, Rendolin of Hiloris, High Priest of the people of Sasheena. This was the Rendolin she knew well from her story. He glared at her from beneath slanted brows and folded his arms across his bare chest. Feet spread, his green eyes now flashing gray steel, he was a force to be wary of.

The writer in her loved it.

The woman in her trembled.

"What have you done, woman?" he demanded, taking up his royal stance. "If it has anything to do with my people, I warn you, it will not go well with you."

"I'm getting rid of you."

"So much you have said, but you speak in riddles. Here I stand and here I will remain until you tell me how you plan to 'get rid' of me, as you say."

"I have deleted your story from my computer, and now I am destroying the written pages, since purging the computer didn't seem to work. When I have completely destroyed the entire story, it will no longer exist—you will no longer exist—and I can get on with my life."

His stormy gray eyes pinned her with an icy glare. Bending towards her, he asked in a crisp voice, "You are deliberately trying to destroy my people? A whole race of beings?" The magnitude of her act slowly penetrated his stunned brain. "You would commit genocide?"

"Now hold on here," she bristled. "I wouldn't put it that way! I'm just throwing away a story I've decided not to finish. It's not like I'm committing mass murder!"

"By the god's blood, that is exactly what you are doing! The total annihilation of my people! And this evil comes as easily to you as breathing!" He turned from her, then shook his head in disgust. "You are not the person I had thought you to be, Korrene."

"Wait a minute." Grabbing his arm, she pulled him around to face her again. "I don't know what you think about me, buddy, but I'm saving myself and my sanity. If flushing your story down the tubes and burning the manuscript is going to save my mind, then that's exactly what I'm going to do." She angrily brushed a stray curl of black hair from her face before jabbing her finger into his muscular chest. "And don't try to tell me that my actions will destroy an entire race of beings! I created those beings, and I can damn well *un*-create them!"

"I see you speak what you believe to be truth, but you know nothing of that which you have created. To create means to allow something to be. If you build a ship, you create it; you can sail it, therefore it is real. If you create a person, you can feel him, speak to him, touch him. Therefore he is real. If you create a world and the people on it, they exist. They live. They breathe. They die. And I can not allow my people to die."

While he was speaking, another subtle change took place across Rendolin's face. The anger had dissipated. In its place was grim determination.

Kory dropped her hand and backed away.

"What are you going to do?"

"Fear me not, Korrene," the elf said as he stalked her across the paper-strewn room. "By your own words I do not exist, so you have nothing to fear." He grinned without humor at his lame joke.

Fear touched her again, this time for a wholly new reason.

"Rendolin, go away."

"Make me, Korrene," he whispered softly, moving with all the grace her pen had endowed to him. The words were a seductive challenge Kory dared not meet. He reached out and his strong fingers encircled her delicate wrist in an iron ring.

"No!" she yelled, trying to break his hold. "You can't do this to me. I created you, and you must obey me!"

He laughed a dark, ruthless laugh, and reached for her once more with the other hand.

"Hold on, my sweet," he growled to her. "You are going to visit my home, which does not exist."

Her own scream was the last sound she heard before the world went black.

CHAPTER THREE

Silver voices blending in a capricious melody penetrated the gray, foggy reaches of Kory's awareness. The words dipped and soared just out of reach, the way a kite bobs on a breeze. The haunting music of ghostly instruments was the first to fall together, forming a pattern in her brain. Tears trickled from her closed eyes at the beauty of the melody.

Slowly, so slowly, the words dropped into a melodic net and formed themselves into an order Kory could understand. She smiled through her tears as unearthly voices sang her own words. Voices she had never imagined would speak her words.

It is night.

Sea mist rises to greet the moon;

Flecks of lunar light journey on the water

Drowsy gulls sleep with wings tucked;

Solitary lovers draped in gray

The waves, like silver satin, ripple

And caress the shore in endless invitation

Impatient foam rushes the land to timidly withdraw

As a blushing maid from a mate's textured touch

The wind scurries a cloud across the sky;

Black velvet shadows the shore

It is night.

Join me.

As the last note shimmered and drifted away, Kory slowly released the breath she had been holding, afraid to let go lest the music disappear. With the last lingering echo of music, the world came rushing back to her. The whisper of distant surf and the smell of sea-washed sand softly penetrated her consciousness.

She opened her eyes a fraction and tried to focus on her surroundings. She was lying on a firm, but comfortable mahogany bed, and felt quite rested and safe.

Until she remembered Rendolin's threat to take her to his world.

She must have been working too hard. Maybe she was coming down with some sort of illness. The truth was no made-up character from a book could take her any place. What she thought she was seeing and hearing were only in her imagination. She must be having a dream.

A dream she didn't really want to wake up from just yet.

Throwing back the creamy, silken covers from the bed, Kory rose in a fluid movement, putting her bare feet to the floor. The room appeared to be lit by diffused light, coming from the very walls. Warm, dry air caressed her cheek as it circulated around the room.

A weird feeling of *déjà vu* stole over her as she recognized the room. She had written this very scene this scene, except Feenix was supposed to wake up to it, not her. Without looking, she knew she wore a loose, warm gown the color of coral. The simple dress had a square neckline with an embroidered bodice just a shade darker in color. The gown hugged her hips suggestively before falling gracefully to brush against her ankles. Her own clothes were missing, but again, that didn't surprise her. Kory smiled in spite of her agitation and took inventory of the place she had only seen in her mind.

The spacious room was formed entirely of some delicate stone-like substance, which made up the ceiling and floor as well as the walls. This thin stone surface allowed a soft, diffused light to glow everywhere. Kory knew if she placed her hand on any of the walls, it would be warm to the touch, just as the floor was to her bare feet.

For her comfort, the room held the intricately carved bed, its headboard designed to look like two leaping dolphins, a cresting wave between them. There was also a wooden chair, a stool, a small chest with a similar dolphin motif, and a carved table holding a tray with various covered plates. By the delicious aromas wafting from that direction, broiled fish was on the menu.

No doors were visible, but a huge window, open to blue sky and an occasional plump cloud, took up most of the southern wall. A slight sea breeze blew clean, fresh air through the opening and set the bed covers to swaying gently. Kory stepped toward the opening, knowing what she would find.

The building itself sat high atop amber and gold colored cliffs, and far below a gleaming white beach stretched towards a greenish blue ocean. Anchored in the harbor were many silver-sailed ships bobbing on the surge of the waves.

As she watched, figures moved in and out on the decks of the ships and along the unblemished shore. Kory knew they were elves, magnificently built and simply clad in the same type of comfortable outfit Rendolin had worn in her kitchen, but each in a different shade of glowing color. The beauty of the scene below, framed by the azure blue of the sky and the turquoise green of the sea, brought stinging tears to her eyes. Such a sight could only come from a dream...or from her imagination.

"I see you are recovered."

Whirling around in surprise, Kory encountered the piercing green eyes of Rendolin.

"Welcome to Sasheena, Korrene," he said, stepping into the room as if he owned it...as she supposed he did indeed.

As she brushed away the moisture from her eyes, she realized she had never before noticed his delightful

accent. English words were foreign to his native tongue, but Rendolin had somehow taken the trouble to learn her language. The words did not belong in his own fantastic environment, and his unique musical inflection shot a flutter of desire to the pit of her stomach.

"How did you do it?" she asked in awe. "How did you bring me here, or is this another dream?" A smile of comprehension spread across her face. "Of course! I'm dreaming this, and I'll wake up soon and be in my own bed."

"No, Korrene." He watched her carefully. "This is not a dream. You are truly in Sasheena. You are in my home."

"I know where I am," she exploded. "I made this place up, remember?"

"I remember. I remember everything."

Puzzled at his attitude, Kory moved back towards the bed. Rendolin pulled up a carved stool and perched atop it. He crossed his arms over his chest, tilted his head, and continued to probe her with his intense, green gaze.

Perplexed, she asked, "So what happens now? Why did you bring me here, if indeed I am at Sasheena and not in Vermont?"

"You were trying to kill my people. I have a better use for you."

"I was just dumping some made-up scenes I had been writing. You make it sound like something horrible! It wasn't a big deal!"

Slipping from the stool, the elf moved to within an arms length of Kory, sending a shiver of apprehension slicing through her body. Despite her fear, she stood her ground and looked him in the eye.

For a figment of her imagination, he wasn't hard to look at.

"It *is* something horrible, Madam," he said, his tone low and menacing. "You seem to think reality is something to which only *you* have a claim. Reality to me is my god, my people, and this island."

He took another menacing step, forcing Kory to back up until the back of her legs brushed the side of the bed.

"My reality is learning a trusted friend—you—are set upon destroying my entire world."

While he had a little trouble with pronunciation, she couldn't deny his vocabulary was superb.

"My reality," he continued, trailing a long golden finger down the back of her hand, along her middle finger, "is that I had to stop you. Your reality, Korrene, is that you are now in my world."

Kory jerked her hand from his touch and squirmed against the bed, trying hard to ignore the implied threat. He wasn't leaving her any room to move, physically or emotionally.

"I don't know how you did it," she admitted reluctantly, "but I guess I'm really here. So what are you going to do?"

"Keep you here." He leaned closer, putting his left hand on the bedpost and using his height to intimidate her.

"Right. And how do you plan to do that? I know everything about you, your home, and this island. You

can't force me to stay here, and you know it."

His scent made her lose her concentration. A combination of salt air, musky male and some other elusive smell...

A slight smile teased his full lips, as if he had a secret and was enjoying keeping it from her. "Again you speak the truth, as you know it. You know I am a priest of the god Mac Lir."

"And your point is?" Her eyes closed as she tried to identify the pungent scent.

"Mac Lir has given me magical powers—"

"I gave you those powers," she corrected, with eyes still closed. Mint? No. Sage? She wasn't quite sure.

"Regardless from whom I received them, the fact is I shall use them to good advantage." His warm breath tickled the hair at her temples.

"Rosemary!" she blurted as her eyes popped open. "You smell like rosemary."

His nearness startled her. He was looming over her. She lost her balance and plopped down onto the bed. The smug look on his handsome face and the laughter glinting in his eyes caused a surge of embarrassment to flood her cheeks. She put her hands on his chest to push him away and felt a deep rumble as a chuckle sneaked through his body.

"Well, Rendolin, Son of the House of Hiloris," she began, forcing him back a step and standing to her full height of five feet, five inches. "I command you to release me immediately so I can return home!"

"Is that so?" he asked politely, crossing his arms. The laughter in his eyes was even more pronounced.

"Yes, that's so. People will miss me! My publisher expects an outline in a few days! There will be consequences! I can make your life here miserable, and I will if you don't let me go home."

Rendolin sobered for a moment as he considered her words. Scowling like a prodded bull, he answered. "Your words churn and foam like the angry sea in the throes of a violent storm, but their threat is as harmless as a tidal pool's ripple. Your family is far away and will not miss you for many weeks. Your publisher has other writers of words. The loss of one unknown will hardly be noticed. As for your importance, it is non-existent here in Sasheena."

Kory couldn't believe her ears. The elf had more brass than a marching band and made just as much noise. Incredulous, she looked at him for a moment before she erupted in a flurry of blind rage.

"*Unknown!*" she yelled as she slammed the heel of her palm into his shoulder. "My book received an award for most promising newcomer in its genre, you stupid ox!" Her blow failed to move him, so she clenched her fists and proceeded to pummel his chest with both hands. "And as for my importance on this pitiful excuse for an island—"

"Ah, careful my sweet. 'Tis *your* pitiful excuse of a creation, remember." His smug tone unleashed an unexpected rage from within her.

Something in her eyes must have warned him, because as Kory raised her arm, Rendolin's strong hand caught her wrist and easily prevented the intended slap.

For a split second, Kory stared at the long, sun-browned fingers that imprisoned her hand. She noticed how smooth and firm was the skin stretched across the corded muscles of his wrist and forearm. Tiny

golden hairs disappeared under the sleeve of his robe. Her glance naturally traveled to his wide shoulders and up to the cords of his neck. In fascination, she watched his firm jaw tighten as he took a deep swallow. She realized he watched her as intently as she studied him.

Her blush didn't have time to race up her neck to stain her cheeks before she noticed his knowing smile. It was as if he dared her to continue her inspection, and so she did.

With equal parts bravado and shyness, her eyes slipped to his full lips, where a tiny dent in the middle of his bottom lip made her want to taste it. Then she examined his delicate nose, which might be considered too dainty for a human male, but somehow seemed just right on him. She watched in wonder as his nostrils flared slightly, as if he were inhaling her scent.

Her eyes traveled past the strong cheekbones to his slightly tipped ears peeking from between strands of gold hair, and then back to his firm square jaw. She was close enough to note the tiny pores and fine texture of his skin, as a muscle quivered and his lips slid into a smile.

Finally, almost shyly she looked into his eyes. For a heartbeat, she thought she would fall into their churning depths. They were no longer clear green as they had been earlier, but had changed with his emotions to a smoky gray. She had seen desire often enough in her husband's eyes to recognize the darkened passion lurking in Rendolin's, mixed with a touch of scorn, directed at...who?

Kory's mouth went dry, and she felt the need to swallow, but her throat wouldn't work.

"You can't keep me here," she whispered, mesmerized by the slight tilt of his eyes and the building heat she found there.

"And why is that?" he asked, returning her intense gaze. The soft pad of his thumb gently caressed the sensitive flesh of her palm. The rhythmic stroking sent shock waves up her arm and through her body.

She took a deep breath and tried to answer. "It's not in the story."

Kory dimly noticed that his other hand had come up and his lean fingers were sifting through her dark curls. She didn't realize her own questing fingers were busy doing the same to his golden mane.

His lips quirked into a derisive leer. "Nor is this," he whispered harshly as his eyes dropped to her full lips.

His mouth suddenly captured hers in a firm kiss. The warmth of their lips meeting for the first time melted any resistance Kory might have had. She was chocolate next to his flame. Rendolin seemed to turn to stone for a heartbeat, then they both instinctively deepened the kiss, straining to learn each other's taste.

She felt Rendolin's tongue seek entrance to her mouth, and gratefully, hungrily, Kory opened to him, giving herself up to the sensations he offered. He tasted like hot honey and lemon with a touch of cool mint. It had been so long since a man had kissed her; she was surprised at how much she had forgotten—like the slippery satin of a male mouth, and the heart-pounding texture of an exploring tongue.

Her hands slid up his chest and under the robe he wore, reveling in the feel of satin smooth, golden flesh. She thought she heard a low groan before Rendolin placed shaking hands on her shoulders and firmly broke the kiss.

"You did not write that, Korrene."

Stunned by the scorn in his voice, she watched Rendolin turn from her and, without a backwards glance, walk quickly through the north wall as if through a mist of water. The wall shimmered and glistened, then

became solid and firm as he left the room.

For a second she was confused and disoriented, until she remembered that this was a feature of the House. Using special elfin skills and magic, the House had been built to accommodate the wishes of its inhabitants. It was actually a simple yet sentient being, and to leave a room and enter into another merely required a low level mental query, and the House would allow it.

But Kory wasn't interested in the finer points of the House.

She had a real live elf to think about.

"Damn, Herb. What have I dreamed up now?"

~*~

Rendolin wanted to strangle her with his bare hands. He wanted to put his strong fingers around her lovely neck and shake her until she was forced to admit that he was real and alive.

He also wanted to kiss her again. The mixed emotions Kory aroused were unexpected and unwelcome. As he stormed out of the House and made his way to Mac Lir's temple, he tried to put the human woman out of his mind.

Working in the sanctuary of the gods always calmed him. The repetitive prayers, the ancient ceremony, the soothing music, all combined to a comfortable familiarity that brought peace to his soul. Being the High Elfin Priest of Mac Lir meant he had many underlings assigned to perform the mundane rituals, but Rendolin found a peace and solitude in doing the ceremonies himself, allowing him to drift into a mild trance where he could think and ponder the problems of his people. And they were many.

Long years ago, when the Sea Elves of Shalridoor had been attacked by the Night Elves of the Underworld, a few escaped the massacre and fled to the distant island of Sasheena. It was a long and perilous journey by sea; made even more dangerous by the fact that most of the young and strong males had either died in the battle or elected to stay behind to cover the survivors' escape. Only the females, the very old, or very young had made it to the safe shores of Sasheena, and then only by the divine deliverance of the god, Mac Lir.

Sasheena had been a haven and outpost for many years before the immigration of the survivors, but it had not originally been intended to be the home of a race of people. Every surviving soul worked to make Sasheena a safe and comfortable home. Even the youngest helped haul stone, dig pits and feed livestock. Eventually, with the help of the god, and using their inbred talents of magic and communication with fish, the Elves of the Sea made Sasheena into a tiny jewel in the vast Tylana ocean. Knowing the Night Elves had every intention of completely exterminating the race of Sea Elves, Rendolin's people let it be known on the mainland, by the planting of a few well-placed rumors, that all the Sea Elves had perished in the massacre of Shalridoor.

To further protect themselves, they adopted a "Policy of Invisibility."

The Sea Elves did not believe in violence or the shedding of blood except in the defense of their families and homes. But if a human sailor washed up upon its shores, he was required to remain in Sasheena—or die. These few men found a kind home, and despite strict taboos and laws, most had mated with females of the island, ensuring their loyalty to Sasheena's defense. For almost three hundred and fifty human years, the Sea Elves had been safe and undetected.

However, the elves were now fighting another battle that threatened their very existence, and the enemy

was not as easily out-witted as the Night Elves had been. The new enemy was the Sea Elves themselves.

No pure elfin child had been born to the survivors in more than two hundred and fifty years, and the race was slowly dying out. The only children born on the island were those of forbidden human and elfin mixed blood. They were born outside of the law and the Ruling Houses, and so were not taught the customs, rituals and beliefs of the Houses. Consequently, the knowledge of many things, including elfin magic and the secret of communing with the fish, would be lost forever if a solution was not soon found.

Rendolin was the High Elfin Priest of all the Sea Elves. He was the chosen of their god, Mac Lir, and the Second Son of the House of Hiloris, the Ruling House of Sasheena. As the spiritual leader of his people, he had the responsibility of interpreting the god's wishes and making them known to the people. His was a heavy responsibility, and he took it very seriously.

Rendolin bent his head, feeling the weight of his people's dilemma. Due to centuries of inbreeding among the Five Houses, few children had been born to the People of the Sea for many years, and those few surviving babes were so weak and sickly that no amount of skill or magic from the Healing House of Olewis could save them.

But there was a ray of hope for the elves—if they could be persuaded to embrace an idea many would find distasteful, a violation of their ingrained belief in their race's superiority. Mac Lir had given Rendolin the solution to the problem. It was the High Priest's responsibility to make the people see the wisdom in the god's direction and accept Korrene as part of that plan. It would not be an easy chore to set aside ancient law and a race's prejudice.

The task was made doubly hard by the fact that Korrene refused to admit Sasheena—with all its people, creatures and customs—existed. She still clung to the belief his world was a product of her fertile imagination.

She was a stubborn human, but by the god's right toe, the woman was lovely. Her soft brown eyes held an intelligence and depth of feeling he couldn't resist. And while her body and face were more beautiful than he could have imagined, it was her pure soul and deep-rooted loneliness that drew him to her. Try as he might to ignore it, there seemed to be an invisible golden thread uniting his heart with hers.

Impatient with the direction his thoughts were taking him, Rendolin knocked over a simmering vial of beeswax. He had been preparing a special unguent to be used in a sacred ceremony, but now he would need to start over. He cleaned up the mess quickly and proceeded to prepare a new batch as his mind wandered back to his problem and Korrene.

His own upbringing and traditions rebelled against the god's plan. To accept a human into his life, to become intimate with her and live with her for an eternity, was foreign and hard to imagine. And just a little bit revolting, he must admit. However, he had to push his personal feelings aside. His duty was clear. For his people's sake, he would do his god's bidding. Thankfully, the woman's beauty made the god's command easier to swallow.

Again he remembered the kiss they had shared. He had only meant to make the point that she was not in control of him or his people, and that he was real flesh and blood. But his actions had backfired. It was Rendolin Hiloris who suddenly realized he was not in control. The thought terrified him as much as his fear he would let his people down.

Somehow, he had to convince Korrene to accept the god's solution because without her cooperation, all would come to naught. The People of the Sea would eventually dwindle away, and Rendolin could not allow that to be.

CHAPTER FOUR

"I thought I'd come and take a look at Rendolin's precious human female."

Kory spun around in surprise. She found herself looking at a human woman dressed in skin-tight leather leggings, with a wide, lizard skin belt at her waist. She wore a black leather vest stretched tight across an ample chest. A mint green robe reached to her calves. The woman stood as if poised for a fight; hands held away from her body, feet planted, knees bent to take the brunt of an attack. The hilts of daggers peeked out of the top of both her boots, the handles well worn and smooth.

The intruder's hard, blue eyes watched Kory as though waiting for something. She held her square chin at a belligerent angle, and her full, rosy lips were pulled tight in a frown of dislike. A long, dark braid hung from her head past her hips. It was tied off with a leather thong and decorated with a beautiful shell.

Kory recognized her immediately.

"Oh, lord," she said in shock. "You're Feenix."

"And you're Korrene," the woman answered. "You don't look that special."

Feenix's voice was deeper than most women's, and had a rough edge to it. Not surprising, Kory thought, since she made her living screaming at raw recruits and teaching soldiers their trade.

Sauntering further into the room, Feenix slowly walked around the stunned Kory, hands on hips, assessing her assets in an insolent, insulting way. "You're certainly no warrior," she continued with contempt. "By Mac Lir's right eye," she laughed, finishing her inspection, "you're nothing more than a flat-chested wench!"

"My god," Kory breathed, still in shock, "you're real, too, aren't you?"

"What? Are you daft?" Feenix laughed even louder. "Oh, that's good! Rendolin has himself a daft, flat-chested wench."

Without warning, the warrior woman drew a dagger and became deadly serious.

"What the hell does my elf want with you?"

Kory supposed she should have expected Feenix to be here on Sasheena—after all, she had created the warrior woman, too. But to come face to face with her like this was a shock, and she was having a hard time trying to grasp this new development. It was almost impossible for her to accept the idea that something she created could actually come to life and speak to her in such a disrespectful way.

"I'm waiting, wench," Feenix demanded. "Why are you here?"

Kory walked to the bed—ignoring Feenix—and sat on the side. "Put away the knife," she said.

"Don't give me orders!" Feenix growled as she marched to the bed and ripped the delicate coverlet to the floor. With a surgeon's precision, she sliced open a large, over-stuffed pillow like the belly of a fish. "Answer my question, princess, or I'll cut out your heart!"

The threat was so melodramatic, Kory couldn't hold back a laugh, and she tried to smother the sound in a pillow. As her shoulders shook with mirth, she bounced lightly on the bed, setting downy soft feathers

to float on the sea breeze. The ensuing feather storm caused her even more humorous distress.

"Oh, please!" she managed to get out between rollicking laughter, "I haven't heard such drivel since my junior high creative writing class!"

Feenix jumped away from the bed as though burned by poisonous acid. "You dare to laugh at me?" she fumed, feathers frosting her hair. "You dare mock a captain of the Sasheena Army?"

Kory held up her hand in a signal for the incensed warrior to stop. "Please," she gasped at the sight of white goose feathers decorating the warrior's eyebrows. Feenix looked like a demented Groucho Marx. "Oh, please stop! My stomach is killing me!" She rolled around the bed laughing hysterically, oblivious to the danger of Feenix's knife.

"No one laughs at me, wench."

Feenix's voice was dark and menacing. In a flash she grabbed Kory by the arm and hauled her off the bed. Kory landed on the floor amidst the majority of feathers, but was promptly pulled into a standing position. The warrior's fingers dug into her tender flesh, bruising it to the bone. Kory's laughter died on her lips as she met the murderous, icy gaze of Feenix.

A stinging pain from the dagger at her throat made Kory realize she was in grave danger. Her life was once again spiraling out of control.

"Now you're going to die, wench, but first you will tell me why Rendolin has brought you here."

It only took a moment or two before Kory reacted in a move she had practiced countless times in a Vermont YMCA. She grabbed the baby finger of the hand in which Feenix held the dagger. She pulled up and out, putting pressure on the joint of the finger. She was surprised at how easily the bone snapped, and disgusted at the sickening feel of living flesh bending where it was not meant to bend.

Feenix howled in agony, uttering oaths and swear words Kory never knew existed, and relaxed her grip on the knife. As it clattered to the floor, Kory kicked it away before stepping forward, twisting out of the warrior's grasp. She darted across the room, putting the bed between them.

Feenix was in such pain, she never even made a move to stop Kory's escape.

"How the hell did you do that?" she demanded, nursing her throbbing and crooked finger. "Well, by Mac Lir's toes, you'll live to regret it."

Kory held her hands in front of her, motioning for Feenix to keep back. "I didn't know it would work so well," she answered, "but I've learned a trick or two. Now why don't you put the knife away, and we'll talk. I know you don't want to hurt me."

"I don't, huh?" asked the warrior in a grim voice. "Woman, you know nothing if you think I don't want to hurt you. Let me show you how much I want to hurt you."

Feenix slipped the other dagger out of her boot with her good hand and moved towards Kory, sidestepping the bed and the linen strewn around the floor. She held the dagger in a threatening way, low and to the side. The cruel smile on her face confirmed Kory's worst fears. She broke out in a sweat as she remembered just who Feenix was and what she could do to an enemy.

A captain in the Tylana Army, Feenix was trained in all phases of warfare. She could disembowel an opponent with one swipe of her sword as easily as gutting a fish with her dagger.

The dagger with which she now stalked Kory.

Not only was Feenix an expert with most weapons of war, she was ambidextrous and could kill with either hand. Feenix was an experienced killing machine, and Kory didn't stand a chance in any sort of combat with her. The most she could hope to do was defend herself from an attack and escape as quickly as possible.

"Listen, Feenix," she began, trying to control the tremor in her voice. "If you'll just put the knife down, I'll tell you all I know."

"You'll tell me all right," said the furious captain, "and I'm not going to put the knife down. I think I'll keep it just so you'll tell me the truth."

Feenix had moved to within five feet of Kory when she suddenly lunged, the knife aimed at Kory's chest.

Without thinking, Kory dodged the knife and grabbed Feenix's other wrist, twisting over and back while putting pressure on the broken finger. Pulling back on Feenix's arm, she quickly slapped her other hand between the fighter's elbow and shoulder and pushed, using a maneuver she never thought would work outside of the "Y".

Feenix had no choice but to bend over or have her arm dislocated. The pain was terrible, but the more she struggled, the more secure Kory's hold became.

"Drop the knife," Kory said, applying constant pressure on the elbow and shoulder and trying not to think of the pain she was inflicting. "Now," she insisted with another nudge.

"Damn!" yelled Feenix, trying to stand up. "Get your hands off me, woman, or you'll regret it."

"I'm sure I'll regret it if I let you go," Kory answered with a thin smile. "If I let you go, what's to stop you from killing me?"

"Nothing!"

"That's what I thought. Drop the knife and then we'll talk."

Feenix reluctantly let the dagger slip from her fingers. Kory kicked it under the bed.

"Now, we're going to sit down and discuss this situation in a calm manner," Kory explained. "Move to the bed."

"Go to hell, wench!"

Kory calmly applied more pressure, and the warrior screamed in pain-washed fury. "I'm going to really enjoy killing you—slowly!" But despite Feenix's brave words, she walked reluctantly to the bed, cursing all the way.

"I'm going to let you go," said Kory, "but first you're going to swear on your honor that you will not harm me."

"How do you know I'll keep my oath?"

"Because I know you, Captain Feenix. I know you will not break an oath given, even one given under duress."

"You don't know me, wench. I've never set eyes on you until today."

"True. Nevertheless I know you well, Feenix of Port Marcus," she said with a smile. "Now swear on your honor."

"How can you know of my life?" asked Feenix in surprise, again trying to stand to look at her captor.

Kory held her easily. "Swear," she commanded with another light push, "and I'll tell you."

She held her breath, waiting for Feenix to make up her mind. If the warrior decided to put up a fight, Kory knew she would not be able to escape another attack. The element of surprise that allowed her to defend herself twice was gone.

Feenix was too good a warrior to make the same mistake again.

Short of holding the fighter in the arm-lock for the rest of their lives, the only chance Kory had of surviving this encounter was if she could convince Feenix to talk rather than fight. Kory hoped Feenix had the same sense of ingrained honor she had tried to write into the character.

After a long moment of silence, the tension seemed to drain out of Feenix and she sighed.

"I swear on my honor not to kill you. Today." The curses she swore under her breath brought new meaning to the term "gutter language."

Kory released her opponent and stepped back, biting back a smile at the fighter's stipulation. Feenix slowly lowered her arm and rubbed the assaulted shoulder.

"I could have gotten out of that hold any time I wanted to," she blustered as she sat on the bed. "I was just humoring you."

"Right," Kory agreed as she pulled up a stool and sat facing her come-to-life heroine. Fighting the tremors that were the aftermath of their confrontation, she added, "I would have broken your arm if you'd tried."

Looking into each other's eyes, the two women frowned at what they saw. A stranger entering the room would have mistaken them for sisters, for they were of the same height and had the same hair color. Kory's hair was short and curly, while Feenix's was long and straight. They even had the same general facial features—upturned nose, square jaw, and full, pouting lips. But whereas Kory's eyes were brown, Feenix's were a startling ice blue. While it could be said that Kory had a fine figure, Feenix's was the stuff dreams were made of. To say she was well endowed would not be an exaggeration. Her vest threatened to pop open, spilling the well-rounded contents with every breath the fighter took.

Feenix saw a pretty, dark-haired woman who lacked the physical strength and stamina to actually be a threat to her. Kory's pale complexion and smooth, clean hands spoke of an idle life spent mostly indoors. The fighter could not hide her contempt.

The writer recognized herself in Feenix's countenance. Kory was surprised that so much of her own personal essence had been transferred into Feenix, but she realized much of what an artist creates comes from within. An author would be no different. Her heroine looked very much like her because in a way, Feenix was what Kory wished to be.

"Are you going to sit there gawking at me all day," Feenix growled after a few moments of silence, "or are you going to answer my question?"

"Oh. Sorry." Kory blinked and shook her head, trying to clear it of unwanted thoughts. "What was the question?"

"You really are a daft woman!" said the exasperated Feenix. "Why did Rendolin bring you here?"

"He wanted to stop me from destroying your world."

Feenix looked at Kory as if she had two heads. Then a wary look came into her eyes, as though she began to truly believe that the young woman in front of her was touched in the head.

"Don't be ridiculous," she scoffed. "How could someone as pitiful and puny as you destroy Tylana? I won't be held by my oath if you refuse to answer my questions!"

A deep voice startled them.

"What oath is that, Feenix?"

Both women had been so engrossed in their conversation, neither had noticed Rendolin's appearance in the room. He was dressed in his usual dove gray pants, but he had changed his robe for a black, silky shirt with billowy sleeves and a wide silver sash at his trim waist. The shirt was open, revealing rippling cords at his neck and a tantalizing glimpse of his tanned chest.

His flowing golden hair was tied back with a leather thong, neatly exposing his pointed ears. His clear green eyes slanted up towards his ears, but only enough to be considered exotic. He'd stand out in a crowd, Kory thought, but not merely because of his unusual appearance. His beauty, combined with some mysterious internal power, would always cause eyes to be drawn to him.

Rendolin embodied the word charismatic.

Feenix jumped to her feet at the elf's words, but Kory remained seated on the stool. As she fought with herself to appear calm and relaxed, her body slowly grew taut with tension, just as though invisible hands were tuning her muscles like a violin. She even felt her face pull into a tight smile that was more like a grimace, she was sure.

"Rendolin," Feenix greeted him with a warm smile. "We didn't hear you come in."

"Do not state the obvious," he said, taking in the way Feenix tried to hide her injury and the barely suppressed anger on her face. "What oath did you make, Feenix?"

"I swore I would not kill this woman. She wanted to talk."

Rendolin darted a glance towards Kory, then his gaze sliced back to the warrior woman. "You, on the other hand, wanted to fight."

"Well, yes," admitted Feenix with a grin. "It seems you know me well, my Lord."

"We do not believe in the taking of blood, unless it is in defense of our homes or our families. You know this, Captain Feenix, yet you would threaten a guest in my brother's House? By what authority do you do this? Unversed as she is in the ways of war, has this guest posed a threat to you, great warrior that you are?"

The contempt in his voice made the fighter bristle and straighten her shoulders. Anger flashed in the ice blue eyes. "This puny wench is no threat to me! I could kill her in a blink of an eye!"

"And yet," murmured Kory, "I was able to disarm you, twice."

Rendolin's shocked eyes met Kory's again. The amazed smile that sneaked across his face, revealing the delightful dimple in his left cheek, warmed her heart. "This is true? You disarmed a captain of my

personal Guard?"

"She got lucky," Feenix said as she stepped between the two. "I wasn't expecting such a weakling to have a trick or two up her sleeve. Next time she'll not fare so well."

"There will be no next time, Feenix," the High Priest said. "Korrene is a guest in this House, and as such you will treat her with respect."

"By the god's right ear," Feenix swore. "You are arrogant indeed if you think you can dictate to me who I should respect! I give respect to those who have earned it, not at the bidding of some puffed-up elf!"

"Is this the way captains from Port Marcus repay the hospitality extended to them in foreign lands? You threaten and terrorize those who are weak and defenseless?"

"She can take care of herself," Feenix stormed. "By the god's left eye! She broke my finger!" Holding up the offended hand, Feenix waved her baby finger in front of his face. "How do you expect me to do my job with a broken finger?"

"Oh damn, I've had enough," shouted Kory, getting to her feet and facing the warrior squarely. "You rave about respect, like you know what the word means. Yet you come storming into my room, without so much as a knock on the door, and start making demands and ordering me around like I was no more than dirt under your boots!"

"I see the woman knows her place," Feenix said to Rendolin.

"You don't know who I am or why I'm here, and yet you have the nerve to start waving your knife under my nose!"

"I'd know if you'd answered my questions, wench."

"Stop calling me wench," Kory exploded in her face. "Lady, you don't have a clue about who you're dealing with here! I created Sasheena and everything on it, and if I wanted to, I could erase you from this world with a touch of my finger!"

As Feenix opened her mouth to make a scathing retort, Rendolin raised his hand and ordered silence.

"Enough of this bickering. Korrene is a guest in this House, and as long as you are here, you will treat her with dignity and respect. Do you understand me, Feenix?" he demanded.

"Just keep her out of my way," said the sullen warrior.

"Stay out of my room then, Captain," retorted Kory.

Turning to Kory as if the women hadn't interrupted his lecture, Rendolin continued, "And you must not break any more of Feenix's fingers. Agreed, Korrene?" A glint of barely suppressed humor danced in his eyes.

Kory felt an answering smile tug at her lips.

"I'll try to restrain myself in the future," she promised.

"Excellent." Rendolin nodded. He turned to Feenix and continued, "Let me see your finger. I will heal it for you, then you must go prepare for dinner. The Five Houses are assembling to meet Korrene."

"I'll be damned if I'm going to sit through another boring state dinner making small talk and watching

what I say. Have the dinner without me, Rendolin. I've already met your precious Korrene."

"Peace, Captain," he soothed. "Give me your hand."

After a slight hesitation, the warrior shoved her hand at Rendolin. He gently stroked his fingers over the injury, humming a strange tune under his breath. Kory thought she detected a dim glow around his hands, but it could have been the sunlight from the large window. A faint trace of musky rosemary wafted to her on a breeze, and a warm feeling of contentment seemed to settle on her shoulders.

As Kory watched, Feenix relaxed at the healer's touch and actually closed her eyes in a sleepy, sensuous way. A tiny smile played around her full lips and the stress in her face relaxed into an almost child-like mask. Rendolin slowly stroked her fingers for the last time, and Feenix let a contented sigh escape her lips. Then she opened her eyes and smiled.

Kory was stunned at the beauty of the smile. A complete transformation had taken place during the time Rendolin had used his healing magic. In place of the hard, embittered warrior, a soft, gentle woman emerged. For a moment, Kory glimpsed the person Feenix could have been if a life full of suffering and brutality had not been the profession that had been forced upon her. As she watched, Feenix seemed to shake herself and come back to reality. Like a door closing on a glimpse of heaven, the woman pulled her dignity and worries around her like a cloak, and the belligerent persona slipped back into place.

"Go to the infirmary and have the finger bandaged," Rendolin instructed her gently. "Keep the covering on for two days, and do not use your hand during that time. Your finger will be well."

Kory watched Feenix try to hide her feelings from the elf. "She's in love with him," she thought, "but he doesn't have the slightest interest in her, other than as a patient." She didn't know why this knowledge surprised her. After all, Kory had written a story with Rendolin and Feenix as lovers. It was only natural the heroine fall in love with the hero. So why was Feenix' attachment to the elf making her feel a little sad?

She was trying to puzzle out her feelings when Rendolin spoke again, interrupting her thoughts.

"We would be honored to have you attend the dinner, Captain Feenix. But you must do as you deem fit. If you are not coming to dinner, then I will bid you good night now."

Still holding the warrior's hand, Rendolin bent gracefully at the waist and made a formal bow, kissing the back of Feenix's hand. As he released it, he turned to speak with Kory. Even she, as mixed up and confused as her trip to this world made her, could not mistake the gesture. Rendolin had just dismissed Feenix as regally as a prince. Without a word, Feenix vanished through the wall, leaving Kory and Rendolin alone.

CHAPTER FIVE

"Are you injured?" Rendolin asked.

Puzzled, Kory stood and shook her head gently. "No. Why? Should I be?"

He stepped towards her with a smile. "You were in a disagreement with Feenix. She escaped with a broken finger. I wondered what wound you had sustained."

"You automatically assume I'm hurt, just because I had a fight with that woman? I can take care of myself."

"So Feenix said, but still, you are not trained for combat as she is, and I worried for you."

"Well you needn't worry about me. We know a few things back in my world, you know!" How dare he think she was a weakling and needed someone to fight her battles?

"Peace, sweet," he said gently. His green eyes held compassion and understanding. His mouth twitched into a slight smile. "I only meant to help you if you needed it, not argue with you."

"Well you can help me by sending me home. I don't want to be here and it's time for me to leave."

"Ah," he said smugly. "So now you do believe my world exists. I thought I would convince you in time." His self-satisfied look made her blood boil.

"Look, elf," Kory said, jabbing a finger at his chest. "I don't know how it happened, but I concede that I'm here in Sasheena. All right? Are you happy? Now send me home!"

Rendolin turned from her and walked to the window. He was quiet as he looked out at the ships on the sea.

"Did you hear me?" Kory demanded as she stomped to the window, grabbed his arm and spun him around. "I said I want to go home. Now!"

"I am afraid I can not grant your wish, Korrene."

"It's not a wish, damn it!" she shouted. "It's a command! I demand that you send me home. Now, do it!"

"You of all people should know of the crisis Sasheena is going through, Korrene. I must use all the resources in my power to prevent the extinction of my people. I cannot send you home. I need you."

"Listen, Rendolin," Kory began, trying to make him see reason. "I don't belong here. You have Feenix to help with your problem. In fact, send me home, and I'll make sure I write a happy ending and you and your people get to live forever, okay?"

"You can not write a happy ending for us, Korrene. I know what the ending must be to save my people. Now I must see it is carried out. If I send you home, there is a possibility you will finish the job you started; that you might destroy my world, and I cannot let you do that. No," Rendolin said, shaking his head, "I cannot take the chance. You will remain here at Sasheena."

"You can't do this! You can't hold me against my will!"

"We do it all the time, Korrene. As you know, any who stumbles across our island is required to remain here for the rest of their days, to protect the secret of our existence. You would be no different than those people."

"I *am* different! I won't be going to Port Marcus where your secret would be discovered. I'll be going home to my world, and believe me," she snorted, "nobody there is interested in you."

"Maybe so, but I still cannot take the chance that you would finish destroying my world. No. You must stay here."

A plan, born of desperation, came to her head. While reluctant to put it into action, Kory knew she had to find something to use as leverage against him. "You're forgetting, my fine lord, that I know everything there is to know about Sasheena, your people and you. I created you, after all! If you force me to stay here, I'll undermine your plan and make sure any attempt to save your people fails. I made you and I can

break you."

"You will not do that, Korrene," he said in a matter-of-fact voice.

"And what will stop me?"

Rendolin gazed at her intently for a moment before answering. When he spoke, his answer nearly ripped her heart from her breast. "Can a mother destroy her child? We are your family, Korrene. You will not destroy us."

Tears welled up from deep inside, and Kory turned from him, walking blindly to the bed where she hung on to a post. Her lifeline to sanity. How could he be so cruel to remind her of her loneliness and barren life?

"Please, Rendolin," she pleaded. "Send me home. Can't you see that living in a world of my own creation will drive me insane—if I'm not there already? To know everything that will happen, to guess every word that will be spoken to me...I will die of boredom. Don't you see, Rendolin? I need to create. I need to write. Here there is no place for me. There are no surprises. I know it all."

"How wrong you can be, sweet," he said, reaching for her shoulders and turning her to look at him. Her brown eyes glowed with tears and her chin trembled with her effort to keep a sob from escaping. "Have you not learned yet? You are no longer in control of our lives. What of your trip here? What of your argument with Feenix? Did you know these things would happen?"

"No," she answered with a watery sniff.

"Is that not a mystery great enough to keep even you interested? Is not a quest to save—nay!—to create an entire new race of people, not an adventure for even the boldest woman?"

"I'm not a brave woman. I just write about them. My life is no adventure, but at least I have some surprises in it!"

He placed a warm palm against her cheek. His thumb gently smoothed the frown line from the edge of her top lip to her jaw. His touch was electrifying—it was all Kory could do not to pull away. Or did she want to fling herself into his arms?

"Here you would be a heroine, Korrene. Here you would have all the adventure your heart desires. Stay here." She watched his strong jaw clench and some unknown emotion flit across his face. "Stay with me."

His eyes mesmerized her. They were the color of the green sea, with flecks of gold in them. She loved the way they changed color with his moods. The shape of his features intrigued her, too. She had a strong urge to run her finger over one of his golden eyebrows, but forced herself to keep still.

Unshed tears burned her eyes and the back of her throat. A pressure in her chest felt as if it would rip her body into millions of shards, but she held her control. She hadn't cried since Herb's funeral.

Well, no, that wasn't true. The last time she cried was over this elf. And the story. Suddenly she remembered where she was and who she was with. Rendolin, the hero of her story. Rendolin, who belonged with Feenix.

Kory stepped away from his hand and hastily brushed away the tears that had escaped. She took a deep breath before answering his entreaty.

"How did I get here, Rendolin?"

He dropped his hand to his side before answering her. "I brought you here using my magic. It was a simple teleport spell."

"How could you use magic in my world? It doesn't exist."

He smiled at her as if she were a precocious child. "Magic exists in your world, Korrene. How else would you know of it?"

"But you are not of my world. I created you out of thin air. How could you affect my world—me—if you are not of it?"

"The magic I called upon came as a gift from my god. I used magic from my world, which allowed me to visit your world in my physical body. The same magic allowed me to bring you home."

"I don't understand," she said, bewildered. She sat on the bed and raised her eyes to him.

"I already explained about creating and making things," he said in exasperation. "Can you not accept the fact that my magic and I exist? You are here, and here you will stay. Now, shall we get on with the problem of my people?"

She was surprised at the coolness in his tone. She was ready to wallow in self-pity a little while longer, but it appeared as though Rendolin had had enough.

"You already know how to solve your people's problems," she said in a surly tone. "I don't see why you need me. You have Feenix."

"Feenix was your idea, Korrene. Not mine." His voice remained aloof, and he kept his distance from Kory as though he was reluctant to come close to her. "For now, you must get yourself ready to attend dinner. The Five Houses of Sasheena will come to pay their respects to you this night. I would like you to appear at your best."

She knew what the topic of conversation at the dinner would be. The Binding. Kory didn't think she was up to attending. She had no desire to watch Rendolin introduce Feenix to the assembly as his candidate for the Binding Ceremony.

Because Kory had outlined most of the original story, she knew that a Binding hadn't taken place among the People of the Sea for over a hundred and fifty years. She also knew the Ceremony was only performed for very special reasons, and to very important people.

Kory snorted. There weren't many on Sasheena more important than Rendolin. And the god's decree had made Feenix extremely important to the cause of the elves' survival. Rendolin and Feenix were the perfect couple for a Binding Ceremony. She knew, because she had written it so.

Kory's heart seemed to drop to the floor.

The mating vows most people took were vastly different from the Binding Vows. Similar to wedding vows on Earth, mating vows united a couple for the duration of their lives. A Binding Ceremony would unite the couple irrevocably for eternity. Nothing could break a Binding. Not even death.

The Ceremony process began like a wedding ceremony. The couple exchanged vows with each other. But then the Binding part of the Ceremony began.

Each would be required to shed blood, which would be gathered into a special, sacred chalice. An ancient spell, secret from all but the High Priest, would be placed upon their mingled blood; then

magically, their blood—and their lives—would be joined for all eternity.

But the process was draining...and very, very dangerous.

Kory wasn't up to going to dinner and watching Feenix and Rendolin state their intention of Binding to each other. She knew it was the right thing to do to save Rendolin's people, but she didn't want to have to see it.

Kory was confused about her feelings for the elf. She had created him for Feenix, and yet now that she had met him and kissed him, her feelings were different. She didn't know why she felt as if he now belonged to her. She tried to fight the completely illogical emotions.

"I don't think I'm up to coming to dinner, Rendolin," she said to the waiting Elf Lord.

"You must attend. The Five Houses have been summoned to meet you and to hear the god's solution to our troubles. You will be there, Korrene."

He had turned all lordly on her again, and she wasn't at all happy about receiving an order from him. Kory had been living on her own for over three years, making her own decisions, and except for an occasional obligatory visit to her Massachusetts relatives, she came and went as she pleased. Even when married to Herb she had never been his slave. They made decisions together. She always had a say in her life.

Rendolin was trying to take away all control in her life. He had forced her to leave her home. He practically held her as his captive. Now he was dictating when and where she would eat her meals. Kory wasn't about to take it.

"I said I don't want to go to dinner, Elf, and that's what I meant. Now go away and leave me alone." She pointed to a wall that she thought might be the door.

Rendolin closed the distance between them. She looked up into his stormy eyes, and the blood drained from her face.

"You will come to dinner, Korrene, and meet my people."

"And if I don't?"

"I will make you."

There was nothing veiled about his threat.

"You can't force me to go to dinner, Rendolin. And even if you called someone in to carry me down, you can't make me eat something. And you sure as hell can't force me to make polite conversation with any lords of your precious Five Houses!" Her anger was beginning to make her head pound.

"Oh my sweet," his voice took on a satin tone, "my god and I can make you do whatever we want you to do." His soft breath touched her hair, like light fingers brushing a few stray tendrils. The timbre of his voice had dropped to a low rumble and held the promise of something Kory could not quite understand.

Gently his fingers stroked her smooth cheek and trailed down the column of her neck, begging an invitation. His eyes grew soft and smoky green, hinting of forbidden delights. The delicate trace of rosemary—apparently coming from everywhere and nowhere—teased her nose.

Without conscious thought, Kory turned her cheek into his touch, closed her eyes, and felt her body lean

towards his warmth. Her brain tried to put a stop to such nonsense, but her body turned traitor and refused to obey her unspoken command.

Rendolin met her body's movement and brought his other hand up to caress her hair. She couldn't stop herself from sliding her arms around his waist and resting her cheek against his chest. The slow, powerful beat of his heart was like a magic drum, soothing her concerns and pouring serenity into her heart and mind.

He spoke a few foreign words barely above a whisper. She didn't understand them, but thought they were words of comfort and peace. The stress and strain of the past few days ebbed from her body, leaving in their wake a warm feeling of contentment and well being.

"You will come to dinner, Korrene."

It was more of a statement than a question, but Kory felt the need to respond in a reassuring way.

"Yes, Rendolin."

"And you will prepare yourself to meet the Lords of the Five Houses, as befitting my special guest."

"Yes." Again she responded to his words.

"It is well, sweet," he approved. Holding her away from his chest, he placed a light kiss on her forehead. "I will return in time to take you down to dinner."

Kory stood in the middle of the room, confused and disoriented. She had been talking with Rendolin just a moment ago, but now he was nowhere to be found. Their conversation was about...she couldn't remember *what* it had been about, actually. Strange, she thought, but since she was so hungry, it didn't really matter. She needed to bathe and dress for dinner. A stone bathtub had been carved from the wall and was now filling with warm, scented water. A beautiful gown of turquoise silk was spread across the bottom of the bed, and beside it lay a delicate necklace of raw pearls, strung on a silver filigree chain.

She touched the gown with reverence, then carefully picked up the necklace, and held it against her throat. The pearls were warm and seemed to pulse with a life of their own.

"How lovely," Kory said. "I will wear them tonight at the dinner, and Feenix will wonder where I got them."

After putting the jewelry down, she turned, slipped off her gown, glided to the tub and stepped in. The water was luxuriously sensual against her skin and, with childish delight, she lowered her body into it. A sigh escaped her lips as she leaned back against the sloping sides of the tub and sank down into the water to her chin. Closing her eyes, a feeling of peace and contentment overwhelmed her, and she gave herself up to pleasant dreams of Rendolin.

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"You did what?" Elawae's usually calm and serene voice rose on a note of alarm.

"I enspelled her with a minor charm," Rendolin repeated. "She will come to dinner as planned."

The diminutive elfin woman paced across the beautifully appointed room, obviously upset by Rendolin's announcement. She had the same golden hair, the same delicate nose, even the same dramatic dimpled cheek, as her son. Both mother and son wore identical expressions of determination.

"How could you treat a guest so, my son? It goes beyond all bounds of hospitality." She spun around and met her son's stormy green eyes. "You must remove it immediately."

"Mother, it will wear off within a day, and if I remove it, she will not come to dinner. You know what hangs in the balance tonight. Korrene must be at the dinner for our plan to succeed."

Elawae smiled sweetly at her son and motioned him to sit in one of the handsomely carved chairs set in front of the fireplace. She took an overstuffed high-backed sofa, allowing the full skirts of her gown to settle gracefully around her. She looked like a queen holding audience, her son thought.

He was still smarting from the argument with Korrene. She was one of the most obstinate and stubborn females he had ever encountered. She knew what was at stake for his people, and yet she refused to cooperate. Well, she would cooperate tonight at the very least, and maybe by tomorrow she will have learned some obedience.

"Rendolin." His mother's words broke into his thoughts. "You know it is unwise and unfair to manipulate someone's will. Especially someone who has no defense from your magic. I cannot believe you have forgotten your training. That is one of the first things a priest is taught."

While there was no mistaking the love and concern in her voice, disappointment laced her words. "How could you have allowed yourself to treat a guest so?"

"Mother, she would not be reasoned with. The woman simply refused to come to dinner and meet the Five Houses. She knows the importance of this evening, and yet she would not even listen to reason."

"Did you try to reason with her, my son, or did you simply put on your High Priest aura and demand she attend?"

"I should not have had to demand anything!" he said, getting up from the chair and pacing in front of her. "She should have seen her duty and accepted her fate. 'Tis not so horrible after all."

Rendolin moved to the cold fireplace and leaned against the pink marble mantel. Only occasionally did the people of Sasheena need to employ the use of fireplaces to keep warm. The House could usually supply the warmth and comfort its occupants needed. But during rare winter storms, the cheerful warmth and glow of a fire added to the pleasure of a room. As with all the architectural wonders in Sasheena, the fireplace was unique and special. With one word of command, it would light itself and burn continually until its usefulness was no longer needed.

Rendolin picked up a silver-gray shell adorning the mantle and absently turned it in his hands. It was carved in the shape of twin dolphins rising from a cresting wave, but his eyes did not see its beauty today.

Elawae watched her son from her perch on the sofa. She knew the peril her people faced, and she was aware of the god's plan for their survival. She had her own qualms and misgivings about the plan, but she was faithful to her god and knew her son was a true disciple. She knew the words Rendolin would speak tonight came directly from Mac Lir, but she was elf enough to wish there were another alternative.

"Did you ever think, my son, that Korrene does not see this solution to our troubles as her duty? This is not her world, Rendolin, and so it has no claim on her. And certainly, we are not of her people."

He turned from the contemplation of the figurine. "But we *are* her people, mother. Somehow, she was a part of our creation. Many would say that she is a god, and has a responsibility to us, her children. While I do not understand fully how this came to be, I do know Korrene is a vital part of the solution to the problem of our extinction. In a way, we are her children, and she should feel the need to protect us.

Instead, all she feels is the need to return to her dull world, where magic is only in legends and adventure is something one reads about."

"Give her time, Ren," his mother said. "How would you feel if someone had ripped you away from all the familiar things and people in your life? Kory is lost and confused, and needs time to become accustomed to us."

"By the god's beard," her son stormed. "We do not have time! We must act now, or all could be lost!"

"There is no need of vulgar language, Rendolin," she admonished him. "I was not suggesting we wait forever. But the poor girl needs a few days—at the very least—to feel comfortable with us."

"I do not believe we have a few days. Mac Lir was specific that the People be informed of his decision as soon as possible so that plans and preparations could be put into action. You know as well as I, Mother," he said with a worried look, "there will be many people of the Houses who will oppose this solution. Many will claim I do not speak for the god."

This was Elawae's biggest fear, that the solution to the elves' extinction would cause civil unrest amongst the People of the Sea. For years uncounted, the elfin races had held themselves aloof from humanity. Many of silvan kind believed humans were little better than the beasts of the field. To ask them to take a human to their breast—to actually accept humans as part of the solution to their crisis—was going to take a lot of explanation and diplomacy. It was fortunate the People of the Sea looked to their High Priest, Rendolin, for direction from their god, and had done so for more than a century. His word would carry much weight with them.

But Elawae had another concern. If Korrene was a key to the god's plan, then Rendolin needed her cooperation. What would Korrene do when she discovered he had used magic upon her to charm her into submission? A woman with as much independence as this one would not take kindly to the knowledge that she had been duped. Elawae was sure Korrene would be furious with her son when she found out, and perhaps never forgive him for his duplicity. She needed to convince Rendolin to remove the spell and tell Korrene of his involvement.

She doubted it would be an easy chore.

"Rendolin," she said. "What do you think Korrene will do when she discovers that you enspelled her so that she would come down to dinner?"

The question hung on the air for a long moment before he answered.

"She will be very angry with me, I believe." His words were softly spoken, but his mother had no trouble hearing them.

"And how do you propose to convince her to cooperate with us after her trust in you has been broken? Why should she pledge herself to our cause after being treated thusly?"

"It will not be an easy job, I grant, but she will help us. I feel it. She considers us her children. She will do all in her power to protect us. Besides," he added, "the god, Mac Lir has said that she is the one. The god does not betray. She will pledge herself to the plan."

"You are very sure of her," said Elawae. "Or very sure of yourself."

"I am the High Priest of Sasheena, Mother. The god has spoken to me. As he speaks, so shall it be. Korrene will agree to the Binding."

Elawae prayed to Mac Lir that it would be so. Her people had no other choice. The plan had to work, or they would all perish. A small sigh passed her lips, and she turned the discussion to other matters, despite the uneasiness she felt. The god would provide.

CHAPTER SIX

A young female servant arrived to show Kory down to dinner. A lightly tinkling bell sounded throughout the room, not unlike wind chimes on a gentle breeze. The sound vibrated through the walls and floor.

The servant led her through the wall and along various corridors. The entire building appeared to be made out of the same soft glowing material that composed Kory's own room. The House was warm and welcoming, and as she followed the elf, she felt the House humming a soothing tune.

The servant motioned Kory into a beautiful room on the ground floor. Obviously it was meant to be a room in which people were encouraged to relax and enjoy each other's company. The walls were the pale pink of the inside of a conch shell. Chairs, exquisitely carved with intricate patterns, and luxurious over-stuffed sofas had been placed around the room at angles to allow easy conversation.

Decorated in pearly grays, blues and greens, the effects all directed the eye to the focal point of the room—a large, detailed fireplace. The great mantle was of pink marble, veined with black and silver flecks of quartz.

The spacious ceiling arched overhead, glowingly painted with delicate sea scenes. Beneath her feet, the same material as the walls and ceiling stretched before her in an unbroken span. Kory's first impression was that the room had been cut out of the cliff's living rock; however, large open windows on two sides of the room belied the room was a cave.

A tiny beautiful elfin woman rose from a sofa close by the fireplace as Kory entered the gorgeous room. Kory knew immediately by her features she was Elawae, Rendolin's mother.

Glorious rippling hair the color of golden silk floated around her delicate face. The most beautiful turquoise eyes Kory had ever seen gazed at her with intelligent curiosity, and just a hint of humor. The diminutive woman made Kory feel large and clumsy, but the woman's smile was warm and welcoming. Kory smiled tentatively and accepted the unspoken invitation to join her on the sofa.

As soon as they had seated themselves, another servant entered, carrying a silver dish laden with sweet smelling fruit. When he left the room, Elawae turned to Kory and smiled radiantly. Kory was dazzled by its brilliance.

"So you are Korrene," the beautiful elf spoke. "My son has spoken well of you. He said you had created me for the sole purpose of providing a son for the entertainment of many unknown people." Her soft words held a strong element of humor, and Kory blushed.

"That was a misunderstanding, Lady," she said, privately vowing to kill the elf when she had the chance. The jerk was deliberately trying to embarrass her!

"My name is Elawae," the woman said, holding out her hand, "and I have been anxious to meet you, Korrene."

Kory didn't know whether she should shake the dainty hand or kiss it. She elected to give it a slight shake, then quickly withdrew her hand. "I'm very pleased to meet Rendolin's mother, my lady. I didn't

know he had one."

Kory put her fingers over her mouth and blushed again at her thoughtless words. What would his mother think of her? She was acting like a foolish schoolgirl.

"Yes. So he said," answered Elawae with a twinkle in her eyes. "But here I am, and here you are. Let us get acquainted a bit, shall we?"

Kory couldn't help the feeling of dread that spread through her body. Rendolin was right. She never could have expected this turn of events. Maybe she *wasn't* dreaming.

She clamped down on that frightening thought. She had to be dreaming. This just couldn't be real.

Before the two women could continue their conversation, Rendolin stepped into the room and strode to their side. Bowing gracefully to his mother, he raised her hand to his lips and greeted her.

"Mother. You are radiant as always. And I see you have made the acquaintance of our guest, Korrene."

Turning towards Kory, he made the same graceful bow, and raised her hand to his lips. The touch of his soft lips on the back of her hand sent a tingle of anticipation and fear down her spine. She could read nothing in his dancing eyes as he met her gaze.

"Yes, my son. Korrene and I were just getting acquainted when you made your entry. Go away and come back in a few moments so we may have the privacy we need to discuss you at great length." Her voice was soft and filled with love as she chided her son. Kory found herself smiling at the elf woman's words.

"Alas, Mother, I fear I can not accommodate you lovely ladies. Our guests are waiting for us in the Great Hall."

Kory was charmed by the light banter between mother and son, and found herself wishing to be part of it. She wondered what it would be like to belong to a family such as theirs.

"Very well," Elawae sighed with feigned reluctance. "Our little talk shall have to wait for another time," she said to Kory. Taking Rendolin's proffered arm, she continued, "Come along, my dears. The representatives of the Five Houses await."

Rendolin captured Kory's hand and, tucking it into his other arm, he bent down and whispered into her ear. "Courage, Korrene. 'Tis but a dinner."

With a beautiful lady on either side, Mac Lir's High Priest proceeded into the Great Hall.

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The first things that registered in Kory's mind, as she stepped into the Great Hall, were the smells and the buzz of conversation. Each wall supported a large, open window, allowing the evening breezes to waft through the room, bringing a tang of the sea to mingle with the savory aroma of broiled fish, fresh baked breads and exotic flowers. Blooms were heaped upon the tables, vying for room with the mounds of food awaiting the guests' pleasure.

The next thing that registered was surprise. An elf identical to Rendolin excused himself from a group of people, and met the newcomers midway into the room. As he came closer, she noticed that he wasn't an exact twin to Rendolin after all. His eyes were the color of newly forged blue steel. The color reminded her of the cold blade of an unused sword.

At his side, clinging to his arm, strolled a striking female with long black hair and silver eyes. He bent to speak something in his companion's ear, then smiled as she laughed delightedly at his comment.

Rendolin squeezed Kory's hand reassuringly, and Elawae gave her a heartening smile. Before introductions could be made, the unknown elf raked his eyes over Kory, starting at her toes, up to her face, then back down to linger at her breast. Tilting his head back slightly and gazing down his nose with a look of mild distaste, he spoke.

"Well, brother. I can understand your desire to bed it, but how could you contemplate mating to it for life, much less Binding to it?"

Kory was stunned. The fact that she had just been insulted by a snobbish elf hardly registered in her numb brain. What screamed through her soul was the word 'Binding.'

She turned her head to stare at Rendolin with horror. What the hell was going on here? This was definitely *not* in her manuscript!

"Thelorin!" Elawae stepped forward in great agitation and dismay. "You dishonor the House of Hiloris with such insults to our guest! Apologize immediately!"

"Really, Mother," Thelorin answered with an amused chuckle, "Rendolin can not be serious! The creature is not even civilized."

Kory angrily opened her mouth to demand an explanation. Before she could speak, Rendolin pulled her behind him as he stepped towards his brother, effectively shielding her. But instead of letting her go, the arrogant elf maintained a firm grip on her arm—almost as if he was afraid she'd run.

"Thelorin," he said in a low, deadly voice, "if you were not my own flesh and blood, by the god's right eye, I would force those words back down your throat."

His grip on Kory's forearm was painful, but she barely noticed. Since her first waking moment in Sasheena, she had been confused, disoriented, and half-believing she was insane. She didn't know if she was angrier at Rendolin for his highhanded interference, or with his pompous brother for the insults. One thing was certain. She was going to take her life back into her own hands, where it belonged.

"Look, brother," she heard Thelorin say. "Even you, with your soft heart, can not deny this human does not belong here among the Five Houses. How can you not see that a Binding with such a creature will pollute our race? It is not to be tolerated."

"Everyone knows a human is not an intelligent being," said the female at Thelorin's side in a venomous voice. "They are little more than Mer Folk."

"If you can not control your mate, Thelorin, perhaps you should leave her in your rooms in future." Elawae's soft, threatening words surprised Kory. She hadn't expected such contempt from the elf lady.

Thelorin spoke a foreign word to the female, and she reluctantly left his side, looking at Kory with hatred as she sauntered away to join a small group by the table.

"What is he talking about?" Kory asked Rendolin, but he ignored her question, never even glancing her way. Instead, he continued to cast a withering glare at his brother, releasing his hold on her to rest his fists on his hips. The tension in his straight back and braced legs told the story of his effort to stay in control of his rage.

"You can speak to me of the pollution of our race?" he asked between clenched teeth. "I find it amusing

that you feel as you do, considering the many evenings you spend in the slave pens."

Though the words were spoken softly, the circulating air carried them clearly to all present in the hall. Someone gasped, and more than one woman sank dizzily into a chair. Thelorin's face darkened and a thunderous scowl appeared on his face. His expressive eyes turned as black as stones, and his mouth hardened into a thin line.

Gripping the handle of his ceremonial dagger, Thelorin growled, "I should kill you for that, little brother."

The menace in his voice sent a chill up Kory's spine.

"Oh dear," said Elawae sadly. "This is beginning to get out of hand."

Before the older woman could further react to her sons, Kory found herself advancing on Thelorin, anger spurring her forward. "I don't think there will be any killing done tonight, although I could gladly wring your neck if you gave me half the chance!"

Where had those words come from, Kory wondered before realizing that she had said them. Kory crouched in a defensive position, gracefully balancing on the balls of her feet slightly in front of Rendolin, but to his right. Thelorin had to pass her to get at his brother.

Thelorin looked at Kory, then glanced back at his brother. "Ah, now I see," he said thoughtfully as though a great puzzle had been solved. "Not only will it warm your bed, but protect your backside as well."

"Wrong, scum," yelled a deep voice from behind them. Kory barely had time to move out of the way as Feenix jumped between Kory and Thelorin. "That's my job, and a mighty fine backside it is," she commented with a jaunty grin. "Care to test your luck, Lord Thelorin?"

Time suddenly seemed to stand still for Kory. Dimly, from the corners of her awareness, she watched the stunned dinner guests as the horror on their faces mirrored their helplessness.

She watched in fascination as Thelorin, ignoring Feenix's presence, stepped towards his brother with every intention of inflicting damage and harm. It was the faint smell of rosemary that first alerted her. She turned to look at Rendolin. He stood gripping an amulet in his left hand, holding it high above his head—a look of pain and sadness on his handsome face. She knew he was going to call upon the power of the god and smite his brother in some terrible way. A foul taste rose in Kory's mouth as she realized that she was the cause of conflict between the brothers.

What was going on? She never wrote this!

"ENOUGH!"

Elawae's command snapped Kory from her trance and stopped everyone in the room.

"Never, since our people have been on Sasheena, has there been blood spilled here intentionally! And rarely, since time uncounted, has brother fought against brother. What of our Oath of Peace?"

Rendolin slowly lowered his arm, surprise washing over his face as he looked at the amulet in his hand. Thelorin too eased his stance and lowered his weapon, a calmer expression masking the rage Kory sensed was still blazing in his heart. Only Feenix stood her ground, holding her dagger before her, eyes never leaving Thelorin.

"I am ashamed for you, my sons. Ashamed to be called your mother. Is this the way the House of Hiloris

leads the People of the Sea? Did your father, and the rest of the brave *shalen* who followed Leondrilik to protect Shalridoor, give up their lives for naught?"

Her words echoed around the Great Hall, draping a blanket of shame and embarrassment on the shoulders of all who heard. Kory watched Feenix slowly stand to her full height and drop her aggressive stance. The blade in her hand instantly disappeared into the top of a boot, but she continued to keep a wary eye on Thelorin.

Everyone in the room began to fidget and shift uneasily, many whispering to their immediate neighbors in soft voices. All felt uneasy at witnessing a family squabble of such intense magnitude.

In an attempt to break the awkward moment, Kory moved to Elawae and spoke softly. "My Lady Elawae, I apologize for my rude behavior and seeming lack of social graces. I can only offer as an excuse fatigue and my recent arrival. I ask your forgiveness."

"Well spoken, my dear," the older woman said, "but no apology is needed. You are a guest here in my House, and should not be forced to listen to rude insults. It is your host who should make the apologies." With a meaningful scowl at her eldest son, she concluded, "We will not eat dinner until his words have been retracted."

It seemed that everyone in the room held their breath for a heartbeat, but then Thelorin slowly sheathed his dagger and turned a devastatingly charming smile on Kory. It nearly took her breath away. How could he suddenly appear to be so friendly and concerned? The elf was a chameleon.

"My mother, as usual, is right. Please accept my humble apology for such appalling behavior. I know I can never erase my coarse words, but if you will allow me to make amends in some small way, I will be forever in your debt."

As he made a move to take her hand, Kory stepped back defensively. The smile, she noticed, did not reach his eyes.

"Korrene has no need for your empty words, Thelorin," Rendolin said, again stepping forward to shield her from his brother. "Merely apologize."

For a fleeting second, Kory saw a flicker of some dark emotion in Thelorin's eye as he looked at Rendolin. Then, masking his feelings once again, the older brother bowed to them both.

"I am sorry, Lady Korrene, for my rudeness and unkind remarks. Please accept my apology, and be welcome in my House."

Elawae beamed approval on her son, pleased with his gracious words. Kory merely inclined her head in his direction.

"Don't believe that snake," Feenix said. "That one can't be trusted."

"Enough, Captain Feenix," Rendolin ordered. At his words, Feenix flushed and lowered her gaze. Kory could still hear her mumbling beneath her breath.

Elawae turned to Rendolin and spoke sternly, "You will apologize also, Rendolin."

"Apologize?" he asked in amazement, "Why am I apologizing?"

"You will apologize for losing your temper and flinging insults at your brother. Let me tell you," she continued in a slightly confidential manner, "they did nothing to defuse the tense situation."

"Are you suggesting that *I* was the cause of this argument?" Rendolin's normally musical voice was stiff with indignation. Kory felt the urge to smile at his childish amazement, but fought to control her lips.

"Oh, do not be such a child," his mother said, losing patience. "It does not matter who started it." She looked from one son to the other. "You both certainly did your best to insult each other and embarrass us all. Now the only civilized and dignified thing to do is apologize to everyone so we may sit down to our dinner, which, I might add, is getting appallingly cold!"

Chastened by his mother's scold, Rendolin straightened his shoulders. "Apologies, Brother," he said, with a curt bow of his head in Thelorin's general direction. Then he turned to Kory and stared into her eyes for a long moment.

She was reminded of a little boy caught stealing from the cookie jar as he reached out and raised her hands to his lips, kissing them.

"Korrene," he said softly against her knuckles, bringing all of that 'little boy charm' into play. "Please forgive my rudeness and overbearing behavior. My mother is correct. I am a beast. Am I forgiven?"

The slight touch of his lips on her skin brought memories of his kiss. Those lips had done such wonderful things to her this morning when she had awoken. A blush raced up her neck and filled her cheeks with color. She lowered her eyes at his intense gaze and bit her lip. How could she not forgive him?

Raising her gaze to meet his again, she answered, "Yes, but only this once." His eyes twinkled with amusement. "And I expect you to tell me what Thelorin was talking about when he said you were going to Bind with me," she added for his ears only.

The green twinkle dimmed as he dropped her hands and straightened. "Thank you, Korrene. I shall tell you later as you wish."

"Excellent," said the Lady of the House. "Rendolin, escort Korrene to the table—and Thelorin," she said to her other son, "you may seat me."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Dinner was going to be painfully boring, Kory could tell.

After she had been introduced to all the members of the Five Houses in attendance, everyone sat down at the large dining table. Befitting their rank, Thelorin, Lord of the House, sat at the head of the table, and in her capacity as Lady of the House, Elawae sat at the foot. Kory gained great satisfaction from the knowledge that Seleena, Thelorin's female, did not appear to be pleased with this particular seating arrangement.

Rendolin and Kory were placed on Elawae's right at the end of the table, Kory between mother and son. The remaining family members were seated in no particular order of rank, as far as she could tell, but truthfully, she didn't give the matter much thought.

Her head hurt with the strain of trying to figure out what Thelorin had meant about the Binding. She was well aware of what a Binding was; she had invented it, after all. But Feenix was supposed to Bind to Rendolin, and Kory should have no part in the Ceremony.

And every time she tried to question Rendolin, he either changed the subject or pretended he didn't hear her...

She stifled her annoyance and forced herself to concentrate on the conversations flowing around her. Unfortunately, it seemed to all be about the same subject—the Binding, and if it should take place—but nothing was being said to answer the burning question.

What did the Binding have to do with *her*?

Many of the elves were greatly opposed to the Binding. Shooting her covert looks when Rendolin wasn't looking, they allowed their derogatory remarks about the inferiority of humans and how silvan and human kind should not mix to reach her. She was definitely beginning to feel very uncomfortable and ill at ease.

She watched as Feenix tucked into her food with a gusto that many men would find intimidating. Kory was amused at the single-minded way the Captain attacked her food, all the while ignoring the controversy swirling around. She wished she could ignore the comments as easily as the warrior woman seemed to.

Elawae tried to include Kory in much of the conversation, but the duties and demands of her station often forced her attention to other places. Rendolin tried to make pleasant conversation with her, though still not answering her questions about the Binding. She refused to make his task easy and answered his comments and questions with monotone, one-syllable noises, hoping he'd get the hint and answer her questions, or else leave her alone entirely.

"There are five ruling Houses of Sasheena, Korrene," he said quietly to her. "Hiloris is the Ruling House and my brother, as the Lord of Hiloris, is the Governor of the island. He and I together share the responsibility of both the temporal and spiritual well being of the People of the Sea."

"How nice for you," Kory said in a bored voice.

Undaunted by her lack of enthusiasm, the elf continued his lecture. "The House of Celeborne is the Harvest House. They know the secrets of earth lore and magic. Nolawin is Lord of Celeborne," he said with a gesture of his head in the direction of a handsome, dark-haired elf two seats from her. "The House of Celeborne mines the richest stones and metals on the island."

"The Healing House is the House of Olewis," he continued. "Many great healers and priests come from Olewis."

She couldn't contain her curiosity. "You are from the House of Hiloris. Why are you High Priest instead of one of them?"

"I was called to the god's service when I was a babe. It was foreordained that I be Mac Lir's High Priest. But it was in the House of Olewis that I learned much of the healing art. Selrin is a wise and learned lord."

Kory met the kind eyes of an elderly elf mid-way down the table. She remembered meeting Selrin and was grateful for his seeming kindness. She wondered just how old he was. Elves could live to be almost one thousand years old. With his pure white hair and deep blue sparkling eyes, Selrin didn't look a day over 750 years.

"The House of Elarin is the Sea Lore House. They are great builders of our *lunteena*—our silvan ships. They also know how to communicate with the animals of the sea. Theirs is the only House that has that special ability."

"They talk with whales?" Kory asked in surprise.

"Yes, and with the dolphins as well as with the Mer folk."

"Mer folk? You mean like mermaids?"

Rendolin smiled at the amazed look on her face. "Do you find it so difficult to believe in the Mer folk?"

"Well, I didn't put any in my story," she blurted out before she could stop herself. "If your people talk with fish," she continued, poking a tender fillet with her fork, "how can you eat them?"

"Korrene, you must pay attention," Rendolin gently chided, as if she were five years old. "I said the House of Elarin speaks with the animals of the sea. Whales, dolphins, and Mer folk are mammals, not fish. Fish do not have the intelligence for speech."

"Well, excuse me for not splitting hairs."

He stared at her for a moment, looking for something Kory couldn't identify. Then giving his head a little shake, he went on, "Zelanor is Lord of Elarin, and his daughter is the most gifted when speaking with the sea folk."

Kory sighed and turned her head away to watch Feenix wolf down a large piece of fish while carrying on a conversation with an elf by her side.

"The fifth House is the House of Helarn. This is our Military House, although due to our Oath of Peace, we have not fought any battles in many years. Not since Shalridor..."

His voice trailed away, and Kory brought her attention back to him. She was caught by the distant look in his eyes, and before she could stop herself, she reached across the table and placed her hand over his in comfort. The gesture startled both of them.

"The great hero, Leondrilik, was a son of the House of Helarn. My father followed Leondrilik to his death at Shalridor."

"I'm sorry, Rendolin. I know how sad it is to lose a father. Mine is dead, too."

For uncounted moments they shared their grief in silence and forged an unexpected common bond. For the first time, she felt as if she might have something in common with this elf.

Rendolin was the first to break the spell. He slipped his hand from hers and continued with his lesson.

"Mithris is Lord of Helarn, and under his guidance we do have an island patrol which keeps Sasheena safe from unwanted visitors. In fact, it was the patrol that found Captain Feenix and brought her to us."

Kory pounced on the change of subject. "Yes, about Captain Feenix. I want to ask you about her, Rendolin. Since you are going to Bind with Feenix, what did your brother mean when he said you were going to mate and Bind with me?" A hot flush crept up her neck to her cheeks. After his kiss, Kory almost wished Thelorin wasn't mistaken about the Binding.

"I am not going to Bind with Feenix," the elf answered her.

"You're not?" Kory's heart gave a little flutter. "Then who are you going to Bind? You have to take some human woman to obey the god's command."

He tilted his head slightly to the side and looked at her with sleepy, languid eyes. His mouth slipped into a sensual grin, and he raised her hand to his lips. Turning her hand over, he answered, "Why, I will Bind with you, of course, my sweet."

Then Rendolin lowered his mouth to the palm of her hand and kissed its center.

Stunned, Kory sat in silence for a few heartbeats, enjoying the delicious tingle his lips had sent coursing through her body.

Until his words penetrated her bedazzled mind.

"I don't think so, elf!"

She jerked her hand from his grasp and turned her head away. With determination, she ignored the deep chuckle that floated from him at her side. Kory picked up her fork with a nonchalance she didn't feel, and tried to ignore the curious looks she was receiving from around the table. If she ate in silence, maybe he would leave her alone.

Although the dinner was delicious, and included some of her favorites, Kory's appetite was not very good. She fiddled with her eating utensils and looked around the room in curiosity. As she noted earlier, it was a very large hall. Each of the three outside walls supported a huge window that took up most of the wall space, allowing the night breezes free access to the faintly rounded room. Long panels of creamy silk had been hung beside each opening, and now were dancing and billowing in the wind like partners in an exotic dance.

The dining area was set up in the western end of the hall, and the view from the window was magical. The sun had set long ago, but the stars and moon reflecting on the water cast a silver glow across the horizon. Somewhere, tiny bells were tinkling in the wind, adding to the mesmerizing effect of moonlight, glistening water and balmy breezes. She thought of a dull, gray-washed memory of a week spent in the Caribbean with Herb. The scene here on Sasheena was alive with color and other sensory delights. A moonlight night in the Caribbean couldn't compare with this.

Kory closed her eyes against the memory, letting the conversational buzz wash over her. So much had happened in such a short time. She needed time to sort things out and get some control back in her life.

What was she going to do if Rendolin couldn't or wouldn't send her back to Vermont? Would she die here in the make-believe world she had created? Could she possibly live on this island and not have Rendolin for herself? Would she have a place here in the lives of the People of the Sea?

She hoped they served coffee after the meal. She could certainly use some—black and strong. Better yet, chocolate! Had she invented chocolate in Rendolin's world? She couldn't remember. Oh, what she wouldn't give for a piece of smooth, creamy chocolate right now to soothe her nerves.

Suddenly, the jarring notes of a woman's laughter brought her back to the situation at hand. Looking down the table, she met the smug and amused face of Seleena. She was again hanging onto Thelorin's arm and had obviously been laughing at something he'd said. Kory was sure it hadn't been anything pleasant. Thelorin's intense stare drew her attention to him. A shiver ran down her spine. This elf was dangerous. No, more than that. He could be deadly. Kory made a mental note to keep a close watch on him.

Thankfully, Elawae chose that moment to again engage her in conversation. Kory was able to turn her attention to the older woman without the fear of Thelorin believing he had stared her down.

"Pay no attention to that one," Rendolin's mother told her, indicating Seleena. "She is ever jealous, and rarely pleasant. The only times I have ever seen her truly smile is when she is with my grandchild."

"You're a grandmother?" Kory asked in shock.

Elawae's laughter was a tinkling of tiny chimes. Kory couldn't believe such a sound actually came from a

living person.

"Yes, Thelorin and Seleena presented me with a grandson some time ago. J'laris is a delightful handful, who has inherited his love of the land from his mother's House of Celeborne."

"J'laris was the name of your husband."

Elawae turned to Kory in surprise. "Yes. Did Rendolin tell you that?"

"No, I just seemed to know," she answered, wondering how much Elawae knew about her role in all their lives. Kory searched her mind for something to say. "Then if you have a healthy grandson, Madam, perhaps your people are not dying off as Rendolin has said."

"Often, things are not as they seem, Korrene." As her attention was diverted further down the table, Kory was free to ponder Elawae's last words.

There was a mystery here, and Kory was sure it had something to do with Thelorin's mate. What could have caused the sweet Elawae to hold her son's mate in such contempt? Seleena's only saving grace, if Elawae's tone was any indication, was that she had mothered a son.

The puzzle would require further thought, but not tonight, Kory decided. She had enough on her mind without thinking about someone else's secrets.

Kory let her eyes and mind wander again. Seeing her imagination come to life in the hall's beauty, she experienced a feeling of pride.

She noticed that, although it was full night outside, not a single candle nor torch burned in the hall. Kory smiled in delight as she remembered the source of the light.

As in her bedroom, a soft, diffused light caused the walls to glow, allowing full visibility in the room. That effect, added to the iridescence of the dome, bathed the hall with light.

Kory knew that this phenomenon resulted because the elves had found a way to light the Houses with the natural light of the sun, moon and stars. This was another unusual facet of the House.

Looking up, she admired the craftsmanship of the ceiling. The entire hall was covered with a delicately painted and etched dome, making the room appear as if it were inside a huge shell. The dome looked like mother-of-pearl, with the ceiling awash in color and giving off an iridescent light. The swirling hues of blue, green, silver, and coral rippled gently down the sides of the Hall, painting the walls with muted shades that eventually faded to the creamy white of a delicate shell.

As she was admiring this creation, dinner came to a close.

"Rendolin, take Korrene for a walk," Elawae said, rising gracefully from her chair. "I am sure there is much you two wish to discuss."

Kory agreed, but she wasn't too crazy about the fact that the elf's mother had to point it out to him. If he tried to give her another history lesson instead of answering her questions about the Binding, she was going to hit him.

"We will respect Rendolin and Korrene's privacy," the elf lady addressed to the rest of the guests. "There will be entertainment in the music hall. Thelorin, lead us out, if you please."

Kory watched Thelorin offer his arm to his mother and led her from the hall. Once again, the company

broke into groups, some making quiet conversation, a few wandering off on private business, and the rest following the Lord and Lady of the House to enjoy the evening's entertainment.

Kory breathed a sigh of relief. At least she didn't have to endure any more rude stares and comments.

"Come, Korrene. I would show you something beautiful."

"I think I'll go to my room, Rendolin," she said, refusing to take the hand he offered.

"The night is young, and I have a need to speak with you. Come, do not make a scene."

Kory had often read that particular phrase in romance novels, but no one had ever said those words to her. A smile pulled at her lips as she realized how absurd they sounded. Rendolin helped Kory to her feet and led her outside. As they left, delicate music began to fill the room, floating out into the night with them like a companion.

Kory turned to him, "What about this Binding Thelorin was talking about?"

Rendolin placed a finger on her lips and answered, "We will speak of it shortly. First, I want to show you something."

They walked in silence for some minutes; she barely noticed where he was leading. So absorbed in her thoughts of the Binding, she was surprised when he stopped without warning. She looked around herself and immediately recognized their destination.

Swaying before them in the gentle night breeze was an ocean of glistening flowers, bowing and bobbing, casting magical shadows and glitter across the night and into the air. Like fairy dust, Kory thought.

The air was filled with the heady scent of the pale blossoms, and it tickled her nose as she inhaled deeply. Never had she smelled such a scent. It was a bit like the combination of a sweet rose and the earthy smell of wet autumn leaves. So unusual, but so feminine and delightful....

Closing her eyes, she waited for the flower she knew Rendolin would place in her hand. The flower she had written he would give to Feenix.

"Do you like it?" She opened her eyes and saw him offering the blossom with a tender look on his face.

His simple question filled the night air with warmth. A soft thrumming began in the pit of her stomach. Kory quivered. Yet she didn't know how to respond. This did not seem real. He should be asking Feenix that question. Why was he asking her?

"Yes, I love the Moonlight Garden," she answered, because she knew he was waiting.

Rendolin smiled crookedly and dropped the flower on the path. "I should have known you would recognize the Moonlight Gardens," he said. "When did you create them? How many pages of paper ago?" His voice dripped sarcasm.

"Does it really matter, Rendolin?" Her head ached and she wanted to go to bed. "Tell me what your brother was babbling about in the Great Hall. What did he mean about you Binding with me?"

"Why do you ask? You seem to believe you know all there is to know about my people. You must know the solution." His voice sounded curt and rough with anger.

"The solution I wrote was that you and Feenix would Bind together and create a new race—a people that are half elf and half human. In this way, your race wouldn't dwindle to extinction because the human

blood would bring strength to your bloodlines. The Five Houses have interbred too many times, and for your people to survive, new blood must be introduced."

"I do not need a history lesson, Korrene. I know our situation well, and I know what I must do to save my people. But Feenix plays no part in this. My god has picked you as my mate."

Stunned, Kory was rocked to her soul.

"You lie, elf," she spat at him.

"A Son of the House of Hiloris does not lie, human." His voice was steel.

She knew he was right because she had created him with an unwavering sense of honor. The High Priest of Hiloris was not capable of deceit, but what he said could not be true. How could a nonexistent god dictate her life? It was impossible.

"If you don't lie," she said, "then you're at least mistaken. Your god can't have any bearing on my life. He doesn't exist to me."

"You are infuriating, woman," he growled. "Simply because you refuse to acknowledge a fact, does not mean it does not exist. Have you not learned yet that your life is not what it was? Are you so blind to change that you can not see that you are no longer the person you were?"

"What do you mean? Of course I'm the same person. I have the same memories, feelings, everything," she shouted back at him.

Spinning around with his arms held wide, Rendolin yelled at her, "Look around you! This is not where you lived two days ago. You no longer belong to that world, Korrene. You now belong to Mac Lir."

"No, I belong to nobody!" She tried to run from him, but he wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her back against his chest. "Let me go! I don't belong here and I want to go home!" Kory had all she could do to keep from crying.

"Mac Lir has chosen us, Korrene, and he gifts us with a great honor," he patiently explained to her struggling back. He wrapped his other arm around her chest, pinning her arms to her side and preventing her from clawing his neck and face.

"Some honor!" she yelled. "I don't want the honor, so tell Mac Lir to send me home. I'll not be your brood mare, elf!"

"You have no choice. You have been chosen. We can not run from our destiny."

"Listen, you big jerk! He's your god. *You* deal with him. I'm going home, now let me go." She kicked his shin with the heel of her boot, causing him to moan in pain and loosen his hold on her.

Like lightning, Kory was off, running down a winding stone path towards the sea. Rendolin was close behind, demanding in an angry voice that she stop. Kory raced on.

Just as she took two steps onto the sandy beach, his hand reached out and grabbed her gown, pulling her backward. With a heavy thud, she landed on her bottom in soft, powdered sand. In seconds he was on top of her, pinning her to the ground.

Their chests rose and fell, touching each other with every breath. Kory could feel her blood galloping through her veins like a runaway horse. She knew Rendolin could feel every beat, just as she could feel

his.

She struggled to throw him off, but he easily held her arms above her head, and sat squarely on her belly. Her legs and feet could do no damage to him, and she reluctantly realized she was helpless.

Rendolin grinned down at her—a warrior victorious—his teeth white against a tanned face. He looked like a jack ‘o lantern.

"So now what?" she demanded of the smiling pumpkin face.

"Now you will listen to me," he answered, shifting slightly against her tummy. She closed her eyes and tried to imagine herself somewhere else.

His strong thighs wouldn't let her.

The heat of his body was a contrast to the cool, damp sand beneath, causing a shiver to race through her frame.

"You must accept your fate, Korrene. You will not return to your world." A gentle breeze stirred the hair around his face, as if an invisible hand tenderly caressed, then lifted the silky weight of it before letting it wash, like a golden waterfall, through transparent fingers. His green eyes looked dark and mysterious in the moonlight.

She sensed a change come over him as he looked down into her face. In place of the teasing look, a primeval emotion glittered in his eyes—reflected moon glow, hot and urgent. The heat from his body scorched her heart, and a molten reaction jolted through her. She read the surprise on his face. He must have felt it, too.

Instead of slowing, Kory's pulse continued to pound in her ears, and its timpani touch beat a savage flutter in her pelvis, where Rendolin's weight centered. A blush crept up her neck and bathed her cheeks in flame as she pictured his body joined with hers.

There was no sound except the swish of the sea foam sweeping the beach and their harsh breaths mingling together. When he adjusted his weight slightly, her thighs began to tingle with anticipation, and warmth suddenly spread from her belly to her groin. It had been far too long since she had allowed that part of her body to feel anything. The sensations Rendolin evoked were almost too much to endure.

"Get off me!" she shouted as she lifted her hips and tried to buck him off.

Ignoring the demand, he settled himself more comfortably before capturing both wrists easily in one hand, bringing the other up to brush back her hair and dust sand from her cheek. "By the god's right eye, Korrene," he whispered, "you are beautiful."

His touch was warm and tender, sending another wave of heat to sear her body.

"Stop it." Mesmerized by the smoky depths of his eyes, she watched some emotion swirl within them as he lowered his lips to taste the pulse behind her ear. At her sharp intake of breath, he looked up and smiled sensuously. Dipping his head again, he slowly licked the base of her throat to the point of her chin.

"Please, Rendolin," she pleaded, "I want you to stop." But her body had ceased its struggles and betrayed her words by lying under his weight in stilled anticipation. Her body cried out for his touch, while her mind screamed its protest.

His fingers slid up her collarbone to her jaw, wrapping around her ear and holding her head firmly as he

slowly nipped the side of her mouth and chin. Each sharp bite ignited a burst of flame in her womb.

She smelled the sea so close by, its tang mingling with his clean scent of musky male, the flower he had crushed earlier and the ever-present hint of rosemary. She watched his nostrils flare as if he, too, were breathing in the scent of her. Kory wondered what she smelled like to him, and then the fleeting thought was gone as she felt his fingers slip into her dark hair and begin to massage her scalp lightly.

Again his weight shifted, and she could feel his male body press against her traitorous pelvis and stomach. Without conscious thought, she felt her hips moving against him as if they had a mind of their own. A soft moan slipped past her lips before she could bite it back. Trembling with the effort, she reminded herself that this wasn't real; it was probably a dream she was having back home in her own safe and familiar bed.

She felt Rendolin's lips stretch in a smile at the small sound. An answering growl vibrated against her cheek where his lips traced a fiery path to her left eye.

"You belong here, sweet," he breathed on her closed eyelid. Then his tongue flicked out and touched long lashes, like the touch of a butterfly wing. He kissed her nose. She almost smiled.

"We have work to do, Korrene." She wasn't sure if she heard his low voice, or the whisper of the sea. "But for now," he said in her ear, just before nipping her lobe and then drawing it past his lips to gently suck, "it is the time to learn of each other."

His mouth moved to her neck, directly under the assaulted ear, and across to the front of her throat.

Kory couldn't stop the sigh that pushed past her lips, nor did she have command of her body. Rendolin repositioned himself yet again; this time to gently nudge her legs apart with his knee and stretch himself full-length upon her trembling body. She arched up to meet him, rubbing her softness against his rigid body. A deep moan tore from his throat, but still he teased her.

She felt the cool night air bathe her hot face when he finally pulled back and gazed upon her.

"Look at me, Korrene," he demanded, and she opened her eyes. The raw passion she found on his face was reflected tenfold in the depths of his stormy eyes. She felt as if she would burn to a crisp under the touch of his smoldering gaze.

"Touch me, Korrene," he ordered, and she felt her freed hands sliding up his shoulders. Shyly, she traced the cords of his neck up to his jaw, then slipped into the depths of his golden mane, like a miser fondling gold pieces. His hair seemed to have a life of its own as she felt the silky smoothness of it caress her sensitive fingertips.

Lowering her hands, she dipped her palms into the folds of his shirt to feel the warm, smooth strength of his chest and shoulders. Like molten gold, smooth and hard, all over. He gave another low growl as her hands explored his chest and brushed against his nipples.

"I am real, Korrene," he said, watching as the emotions she felt chased across her face. "Feel me," he ordered.

He lowered his mouth to catch the tip of her right breast with his teeth. Startled, Kory's body jerked at the unexpected pleasure as he continued to tease with his tongue and suck on the tender nipple through the thin material of her gown. She threw back her head, making a deep keening sound from the back of her throat, and pressed her breast into his face.

"Let us not waste any more time, sweet," he breathed against the damp material. "Let me show you who

I am."

Rendolin traced the outline of her full lips with the tip of his tongue, then nipped the corner of her mouth again. As she opened her mouth to release another soft moan, he captured her bottom lip with his teeth, gently pulling and then sucking just as he had done with her nipple.

"Let me show you who you are, Korrene." She heard his words just before his mouth finally claimed hers with his kiss. As his lips came down, his hand cupped her swollen breast and his hips began to rock between her legs.

Kory couldn't remember when she had been so aroused. Passion encompassed her and swallowed her up, leaving only the sense of touch in its wake. His kiss reached her soul, drawing her inner being up through mists of despair, darkness, and depression, to emerge triumphantly into a bright, sunlit garden.

His mouth tasted of the sweet wine they had drunk at dinner, mingled with mint and lemon. His tongue teased the smoothness of her cheeks, tickled the roof of her mouth, then plundered and dueled with her own in a frantic, erotic dance. Instinctively Kory met his advance, then gently sucked when she succeeded in capturing his darting tongue. His whole body jerked, and another deep growl escaped him at the unexpected act.

As his kiss continued, Rendolin's fingers played across her sensitive skin, igniting still more flames where they touched. Kory responded to his kiss and touch like a woman possessed. She didn't think she would get enough of him, could open wide enough for his entry, could hold all his golden fire at once.

Perhaps she'd die in the attempt.

She didn't know how her gown had come off her shoulders and pooled at her waist. She vaguely remembered helping Rendolin out of his shirt. As she dropped her hands to his belt to release his straining flesh from its prison, he quickly stopped her. She whimpered a protest, but was soothed with soft words.

"Hush, my sweet. Not now."

Kory heard the pained reserve in his voice, and disappointment cut through her heart like a sharp knife, bringing her back to earth. As he returned his attention to her breast, she wondered at his reaction. The searing flames of passion slowly died as she searched for a reason for his reluctance to take their passion to its logical conclusion.

"Why?" she managed to get out.

He was nuzzling her neck again, and his hands were sliding between her legs, searching for the hottest part of her. "Because we are not yet Bound," he answered against the racing pulse at her throat.

Kory's whole body stilled for a second then tensed like a coiled spring. So he would use her own sexual longing and enforced abstinence to manipulate her to do his will.

Before Rendolin had time to react, she jammed her stiffened fingers into the side of his neck, below his ear.

Rendolin bellowed in pain and rolled to the side, holding his throbbing neck.

"Don't you ever touch me again, you jerk!" she yelled jumping up, and thrusting her arms back into her gown. "Tomorrow I'm leaving here, with or without your help!"

Rendolin watched her retreat up the path, back toward the House. He rose, dusting sand off his chest

and arms and shook his head in confusion.

"I thought she'd never leave."

Whirling around, he saw Feenix step out of the shadow of an overhanging cliff.

"Close your mouth and tuck in your shirt, elf. We have work to do if I'm going to whip those sorry excuses for guards into shape."

There were times when Rendolin wondered if having Feenix in charge of his men was worth the aggravation of her caustic tongue. He cast one last glance after Kory's retreating back, and then motioned to Feenix with a resigned sigh.

"Lead on, Captain."

CHAPTER EIGHT

The cries of gulls and the whisper of the sea woke Kory as the sun broke the horizon. She opened her eyes to a purple and pink sky and clouds dancing on the surf.

Kory's head was heavy from lack of sleep and her eyelids felt as if they were made of sandpaper. After leaving Rendolin on the beach the night before, she returned to her room and stormed around, punching pillows and kicking the bed.

All of which she wanted to do to the elf.

How dare he use his body to manipulate her into a Binding? How dare he even think he would be successful? But he had been successful. If she hadn't come to her senses when she did, she might now be making plans to become Bonded for eternity to the arrogant, pompous jerk.

She blushed, remembering her lack of control last night in his arms. How could she have let her guard down like that? It was all more than anyone could take.

Kory was still in a frenzy over the way Rendolin had used her, when a servant requested her presence downstairs in Elawae's solar. Fighting to control her emotion, she followed the servant and entered the brightly lit room full of fragrant flowers and trees. Elawae was waiting, and graciously welcomed her.

"Well, my child," she said with a warm smile, "I hope you slept well?"

"Thank you, yes." Kory's hope that the small woman wouldn't see through her deceit was soon shattered.

"You do not look at all rested, Korrene. Was the room not to your liking?"

"The room was fine. Such a beautiful room."

"Then what is the matter?" It appeared Rendolin's mother was not going to let the matter drop. "Did my son upset you last night?" After a brief pause, she continued, "I see that he did. What did he say that has you in such a state?"

Kory didn't want to discuss why she was so angry with Rendolin or the fact that she found him so attractive. Frankly, it would be too embarrassing discussing those topics with his mother.

"It was nothing. I just miss home, I guess."

Elawae gave her a shrewd look and motioned her over to a comfortable looking chair. "Please be seated, Korrene, and let us discuss this."

"There's nothing to discuss," said Kory, sitting in the chair, tucking her feet under the seat. "I want to go home. Your son won't let me. Period. End of discussion."

"Did Rendolin explain why he does not want you to go home?"

"He said he needed to use all his resources to solve your people's problem, and I'm one of his resources. Which is total bunk, and I told him so."

"Bunk?" Elawae asked delicately. "What is Bunk?"

"Oh, you know. Foolishness. Something that isn't real or true. Rendolin doesn't need me. He knows all he has to do is send me home and I'll make sure your people live happily ever after."

The beautiful woman gave Kory a strange, questioning look and asked, "How would you do that? You would not be here to help us."

Kory suddenly realized Elawae did not recognize Kory's true identity—creator of Sasheena and the whole elfin race. Obviously, Rendolin had not taken the time to fill his mother in on their guest. Well, Kory sure as the world wasn't going to do his job for him.

"It's a long story, ma'am. Ask your son to tell you someday."

"Very well." Elawae let the subject drop and opened a new topic. "I wanted to ask if you would like to accompany me on a tour of the House? I thought you might enjoy learning something of it and our people."

The smile and goodwill coming from the tiny woman touched Kory. "I'd love that."

They toured the vast complex for most of the day, while Elawae instructed Kory in the duties of a lady of a House. Rendolin's mother was kind as she gently introduced her visitor to the ways of The People of the Sea. Kory had the impression she was giving her the opportunity to learn as much about them as possible. And that reason could only be the Binding, she was sure. The tour was just another idea of Rendolin's to manipulate her into doing his will. Well, she'd look over the House, but Kory was keeping her own will, thank you very much.

Late in the afternoon, after viewing more of the House than Kory ever imagined existed, Elawae brought her into a hall that was different from the rest. The atmosphere was hushed and still, as if waiting for some person to breathe life into it.

"This is the House of Sanctuary," Elawae said. "And this is the master of the House, Celanor."

A very old elf stood up from behind a pile of parchments and books. Kory hadn't known anyone was there, the mountain of paper hid him so well.

"Celanor is going to share some of our history with you, aren't you, Celanor?" the Lady asked with a kind smile as she embraced the man warmly.

"Yes, indeed, my lady," he said, returning her smile.

"This was Rendolin's idea, I suppose," remarked Kory with disdain. She really was in no mood for yet

another history lesson.

"No. Actually it was my idea." Elawae's voice held a hint of displeasure, a first when speaking to Kory. "I thought you might feel more comfortable while you are here if you understood us a little better."

Kory blushed. How could such a little lady seem so forbidding and disapproving all of a sudden? And why should it matter, since she wasn't real in the first place?

"Thank you, ma'am. It was thoughtful of you." She was relieved to see Elawae smile.

"Let us sit down, and Celanor will tell us a story."

As if by magic, two servants brought out chairs for the women, they settled themselves comfortably, and the ancient elf began his tale.

"Ages ago, when the world was born, The People of the Sea did not know death. Families remained together always, for no member ever went beyond the sea. But then the Dark Hunter was released from the abyss, and elves began to grow old and eventually die. Even the sea elves were not immune to the Hunter's spear."

The old and cracked voice of Celanor whispered through the sanctuary, and Kory could tell he was an experienced storyteller. Even though she knew where the story was going, she found herself enjoying it.

"The god, Mac Lir, saw his children's sorrow at the parting of loved ones, and he in his wisdom provided a way that enabled a mated pair and their children, if they so desired, to be together even beyond the sea, beyond the abyss, and for all time. It is the Binding."

Kory found herself curious about the ceremony. When she had planned the Binding between Rendolin and Feenix, only the outline was complete, not the actual event. She had a vague idea what would happen, but no details.

"How can such a thing be possible, you might ask," the old elf spoke to her. "I have heard it said humans believe that when a person dies, the spirit rots and dies along with the body." His kind old eyes held a glint of humor, mingled with something akin to pity for such a misguided race.

"'Tis true that the body will cease its function—that of housing the spirit," he went on, "but the death of a body does not mean the death of the spirit. It lives on."

She smiled indulgently. This was beginning to sound like a Sunday school lesson from when she was a young girl.

"How is that?" Kory asked skeptically.

"Korrene," Elawae said. Kory had almost forgotten her presence. "The essence that makes each one of us individuals does not lie in how we look or walk, or the trappings we place on our body. The thing that makes you who you are is your spirit. Look at my sons. To the unobservant, Rendolin looks and sounds almost identical to Thelorin. Yet I think you would have to agree that they are two distinctly different individuals."

"You'll get no arguments there," agreed Kory.

"What makes them different?" asked their mother.

Smiling, Kory decided to play along. "Their personalities. The way they think about things."

"Correct. But you cannot see or touch those personalities, for they are intangible. It is their spirit. And a spirit cannot be killed. Once a spirit has been born, it will live forever," explained Elawae.

More and more like church. Kory hadn't known those Sunday school lessons had taken such a firm root in her subconscious mind, but they must have for her to create such an elaborate theology.

"It is the spirit," continued Celanor, "to which you will Bind, for as Rendolin's spirit will never die, so too will yours live on, even after your physical death."

"Wait a minute," she said impatiently. "You're telling me that during this Binding thing, a spirit is Bound, or married, to another spirit, and since spirits live forever, the marriage will last forever?" This was never taught in Sunday school, she was sure of it.

"Yes, Korrene," said Elawae gently. "The whole family, when you and Rendolin have children, will be Bound together forever, and throughout eternity. You will always be a family."

All this was beginning to be more than Kory could take. This spirit thing was something she had never given much thought to, but in her experience, once a person was dead, that's the end of it! She should know. Herb had gone and died on her. Everyone she loved died on her, leaving her all alone. That was how it worked. This was nonsense, and it was making her feel uncomfortable.

Before Kory could ask another question, a servant entered and handed a note to Celanor.

"Please excuse me, Lady," he said with a bow after reading the missive. "I must attend to this."

"Of course, Celanor. Thank you for taking the time out of your day to speak with us."

"Yes. Thank you." Kory bobbed a little curtsy that was more a bow than not. So difficult to know exactly how to act with these people, she thought.

Elawae led Kory from the hall, speaking softly as they went. "I am sure you are fatigued from all our exploration." Her smile still stunned Kory, and she wondered if she would ever get used to it.

"Well, I *would* like to grab something to eat and then check out the beach."

The elfin woman looked at her blankly for a moment, as if trying to translate Kory's words into something she could understand. After a second or two, she blinked and smiled faintly. "I will have one of the servants bring a meal to your room."

"Thank you. You have been very kind, Lady Elawae, and I want to thank you for showing me around and telling me about your home."

"It was my pleasure, Korrene." She placed her hand gently on Kory's arm. "I am very pleased Rendolin found you, my dear."

Before Kory could respond, Elawae walked away, leaving her in the corridor outside her room.

As soon as she finished a light meal, Kory escaped to an isolated beach for some soul searching. This whole spirit thing had to be a bunch of bunk. Where had it come from? She hadn't written anything like that. She couldn't believe it was a product of her own imagination; it was just too foreign an idea for her.

Thinking of what she had heard that afternoon, she began to wonder just where a person's thoughts and personality *did* go after they died? She had always thought they left the dead body. But to go where? Did they just evaporate like a puddle in the sun? Even the puddle went somewhere. It reformed into a cloud,

which then produced raindrops, returning to the earth as water.

Was she to believe that somewhere Herb's personality, his spirit, still existed? That his thoughts were floating around some nimbus existence, waiting for her?

No; besides, the old elf said that spirits only stayed with each other if they were bonded to each other. So, if that were true, then Herb's spirit and hers wouldn't be together after she died. Did elfin spirits go to heaven? And where was heaven, if it even existed? Her church leaders never could answer that question to her satisfaction.

Kory's confusion and unease mounted as she realized she had not written this twist to the story. It was totally new and she again had the unsettling feeling of being completely out of control.

It was a feeling she didn't like at all.

Fine, she decided. If the elves were right about their spirits (she wasn't ready to include *her* spirit in the equation, not just yet) leaving the dead body and going somewhere, how much fun and excitement could you have bound to someone you couldn't see or touch, especially if you're a spirit too? Who would want to spend an eternity tied to something they couldn't touch? Or was it different wherever those spirits went, and touching wasn't such a big deal?

She tried to imagine being Bound to Rendolin, but not being able to touch his magnificent body, or to be touched by him—not to feel his arms holding her, or see those gloriously green eyes devouring her with desire. No. Such a thing would be too much to ask. This Binding thing had to be a figment of the elves' imagination. A false belief that the god had planted in their heads for some purpose of his own. The whole thing was ridiculous.

So Kory's thoughts went round and round, blinding her to the beauty and peace around her. She wanted to go home, to her safe, comfortable, predictable home. But Rendolin wouldn't send her, and she didn't have any idea how she could accomplish the deed without him. Unless, of course, she was already home and in the throes of a major delusion. That possibility scared her to death.

Nevertheless, wasn't that possibility better than the one Rendolin would have her believe? Was she really in some other world? It was hard to believe she had imagined his kiss last night.

The cry of a gull close by brought her attention back to her surroundings. The sun was setting. She'd better get back before it got too dark for her to see. She didn't know what time of year it was, or even the time of day. *When did the sun set*, she wondered.

Kory had the feeling she was being watched as she started the climb up the trail leading back to the House. It was probably just Rendolin checking to make sure that she wasn't trying to leave the island. She began to feel uneasy and fearful as she climbed, which was totally stupid; what kind of danger would she be in, here on an island that was her own creation?

Even as that thought crossed her mind, a large boulder crashed down the side of the cliff, bouncing on the trail above, careening towards her. Without thinking, Kory ducked and rolled to one side, narrowly missing a drop from the ten-foot high cliff. The boulder bounced down the steep embankment and landed where she had been standing seconds before.

After a few terrified moments, Kory cautiously climbed back onto the trail and resumed her journey to the House. Her knees felt like butter and her hands shook uncontrollably. It seemed to take hours to walk the winding path, and by the time she reached the House, she'd convinced herself that she had been a fool to take a walk on a dangerous path with which she was unfamiliar.

It wouldn't happen again, she vowed. She was going home.

~*~

"May I come in?"

Although the words were polite, the inflection and tone of voice was laced with contempt.

Kory whirled around from the mirror where she stood trying to tame her wild curls. She was surprised to see Thelorin step into the room.

He was impeccably dressed, and stood insolently leaning against one of the bedposts. At his side hung a jeweled sword.

"Do I have a choice?" she asked, annoyed. "It *is* your House."

"True," he answered.

She felt her muscles tense. What could Rendolin's elder brother want with her?

His shiny steel-gray eyes roamed over her body in an assessing way. She imagined his gaze leaving a filthy trail where it touched. She couldn't suppress a shudder of revulsion. An angry flush washed over her face as he smiled smugly at her obvious distaste.

"What do you want, Thelorin?"

Pushing himself away from the bed, he took a couple of steps towards her. His right hand brushed aside his open robe, and he rested his fist on his hip in a movement she had seen his brother make often. A sour taste filled her mouth.

"We need to talk."

"Oh? What could we possibly have to talk about?" She purposely forced a light tone into her voice while refusing to mask the dislike in her eyes.

"I do not think you have a clear understanding of your position here in Sasheena. My brother has put you in great peril."

"Thelorin, if you have something you want to say to me, do it and get out. I don't have the patience for your petty theatrics and thinly veiled threats. Say what you came to say and leave."

Kory moved away from the mirror and put the bed between them. She felt safer with an obstacle in his direct path to her.

"My, you are a rarity, my dear," he said with a smile that didn't reach his eyes. "A female who comes right to the point without subtleties!" At her impatient gesture, he continued, "You yourself have to agree that a Binding between two different races is nothing short of obscene. I am here to warn you that many of my people will not stand for it. In fact, most will not. I am afraid you may be in danger if you go through with this travesty."

"Your mother doesn't consider the Binding to be a travesty," Kory replied, fighting down the rage building inside.

Taking another step towards her and putting his hands out in a helpless gesture, Thelorin said sadly, "My mother is not as young as she used to be, and alas, I fear her judgment has been suspect in a number of matters."

If Elawae heard her eldest son speak about her like this, Kory knew she would blister his ears with her reaction.

"Your mother seems to be a woman of remarkable intellect and understanding," she said. "And your disloyalty in speaking about her in this manner would shame her."

A shadow of emotion flitted across his face, gone before it was identified. Forcing a light-hearted laugh and a charming smile, he spoke again.

"The fact remains, woman, that this Binding should not take place. I believe you have voiced a desire to return to your homeland immediately. I am here to offer you that opportunity."

Chapter Nine

Kory couldn't believe her ears. There had to be some kind of catch. Thelorin hated her, so why was he offering to help?

"Why would you help me? What do you get out of this?"

He stared hard at her for a moment, as if weighing his words, then gave a small, curt nod. "Since we are speaking so bluntly: I want you gone. You are a threat to my people and to my brother most especially."

"How can you say I'm a threat to your brother? How could I hurt him?"

His nostrils flared in distaste. "Your very presence here on Sasheena taints our people. The thought of you and Rendolin Binding forever cannot be tolerated. Your blood will pollute our race and I can not allow that to happen."

Again, a feeling of *déjà vu* swept through Kory as she listened to Thelorin's words. He was supposed to be trying to get rid of Feenix, not her. But of course she wasn't supposed to be in this stupid story. For a second, she felt faint, but the dizziness quickly left as she blinked at the elf.

All right. Thelorin was offering her a way home. Perhaps she didn't like the source of her transportation, but why should she quibble over minor details? If she could use him to get home and away from this strange and confusing situation, so much the better.

She didn't stop to think that if she were indeed insane, as she suspected, she was already home and nothing an imaginary elf did would bring her back to reality. Kory believed Rendolin's brother could send her home so she was willing to negotiate.

"Let's skip over how I will pollute your people and get right to the point, shall we? What do I have to do?"

Thelorin smiled at her easy capitulation. "Be ready to depart tomorrow evening after dinner. I will have a servant come for you one hour after the meal."

Kory wasn't a fool, and could sense a trap just as well, if not better, than the next intended victim. She had no doubt Thelorin was up to something. Her interest in ancient battles and dispute negotiations had been the source of many long hours of enjoyment with Herb. They had belonged to the New England Chapter of War Gamers International and had devoted a whole room of books, maps, histories and gaming space to their mutual hobby.

"How are you going to send me home?" she asked.

"You need not trouble your mind with the details," he said, dismissing the question. "Suffice it to know that you shall be sleeping in your own bed tomorrow night."

"Somehow that doesn't reassure me. I want to know how you can send me from your world to mine." A horrible possibility presented itself to her. "How do I know you'll send me back to my world and not just some other place?"

The elf's smile slipped into a sneer. "You do not."

"What a piece of work you are! Do you honestly think I'd go with you, knowing you'd rather slit my throat than look at me? *You* must be the insane one!"

"Whatever else I may be," Thelorin said, stepping around the bed and moving closer, "I am a son of the House of Hiloris. I do not lie. I do not want you here, but you will be safe in my care. Much to my regret," he added with evident disgust.

"Do you expect me to believe you have the same sense of honor as your brother, after the way you insulted me? Get real."

"I do not expect much of anything from a human," he growled, his voice thick with disdain. "You know nothing of the honor of your betters, woman. Let us get back to the subject at hand." He had moved to within an arm's length of her. Cornered between the bed and the wall, Kory felt the familiar demons of anxiety claw their way from her belly to her chest. "You want to leave," he continued, "I want you gone. What is your price for leaving tomorrow night?"

"What do you mean, my price?" It was beginning to dawn on Kory that he was offering money for granting her heart's desire. But at what cost to her?

"I am prepared to give you gold for your departure from Sasheena. In return," he continued, "you will not speak of this to my brother, or to my mother. Do we have an agreement?"

"And what about your brother? As soon as I leave he will be on the next train to Vermont, demanding I return with him."

"I have taken care of that. He will not follow you because he will believe you have died."

"*Why* will he think I'm dead?" Her question was heavy with distrust.

"It would be so much easier if I did have you killed," Thelorin snarled, "but I have given my word and I keep my oaths. I will arrange for a body that matches your general description to be found at the foot of the cliffs. The creatures of the sea and the rocks will have removed much of the facial features, but I will make sure my brother has no doubt it is your body that is found."

As Kory listened to Thelorin's cold-blooded plan to deceive his brother, her stomach churned and her hands grew cold.

"I don't want anyone killed so that I can return home. What kind of a monster are you, that you can coolly murder someone to take my place?" Horrified at the idea that she might be a party to murder, Kory sidled along the wall, moving away from the elf as she frantically looked for some sort of weapon.

"You insult me with your suspicions! People die every day in the slums and cities of the mainland. I will have one of my people find such a body to be used for our purpose. That is why it will take until tomorrow to prepare our plans." Seeing the disgust on her face, he continued, "If such a plan is abhorrent to you, then I suggest you devise your own plan for keeping my brother away from you."

Kory's mind balked at the thought of using some poor dead woman for her escape, but it was the best chance she had for leaving—because she knew Rendolin wasn't about to send her home. If she managed to get there on her own, she had no doubt he would follow her. However, it put her teeth on edge to think she had to accept help from Rendolin's brother.

"I suppose I have to trust you, Thelorin. Although all my instincts tell me not to." She watched a pleased look move across his handsome face. "You just make sure your people don't hasten some poor woman's death. There will be no killing on my account! Do you understand? Now, go away. I think I'm going to be sick."

"Your faith in me is humbling, lady," said the elf with heavy sarcasm. Without another word, the Lord of the House of Hiloris turned on his heel and walked through the wall. The House swallowed him up, leaving a lingering odor of refuse.

Kory turned to the window and sucked in two great gasps of sea air. That elf made her skin crawl.

Her pounding pulse began to slow, but still her nerves jangled a warning. An icy shiver trickled down her back and she hugged herself for comfort. Thelorin was a very dangerous man; of that she had no doubt. Of course, she had to accept his offer to send her home. Once home, she would wake from this fantastic dream and get on with life.

It was obvious she couldn't stay here and Bind with Rendolin, knowing his brother hated her and wished her ill. Well, she couldn't Bind with Rendolin even if Thelorin welcomed her with open arms. That idea was just ridiculous. Kory wasn't even here, was she? She was probably lying in a hospital bed somewhere and Pat and Mike were very concerned about her, hovering, worrying, crying.

Kory hated to admit it, but it was beginning to feel more and more like Sasheena was real and her other life was the dream. She mentally shook her head and forced herself to plan for tomorrow's journey.

Man, what she wouldn't give for a mocha latté, or even just a straight coffee right now.

~*~

Rendolin was waiting for her when she entered the reception room the next morning. Standing by the large fireplace, he held the dolphin figurine. Kory wondered if it was a family treasure, or just a pretty statue he liked.

He was wearing tight black leggings and a wrap-around, cream-colored shirt. The neckline came down in a low 'v', allowing a good view of the swell of muscles under it. Over the shirt was the ever-present long, open flowing robe. Today it was a celestial blue that shimmered in the light. The color complimented the deep golden tones of his skin and hair. He wasn't wearing it tied back and the strands spilled down his shoulders to rest on his chest like curtains of spun gold.

As she entered the room, he looked up and a slow, lazy smile crept across his lips. His glorious green

eyes darkened with an emotion both deep and mysterious. The dimple in his left cheek appeared and for an instant, Kory thought she saw the little boy he must have been.

She watched his long fingers absently stroke the delicate dolphin he held, and the movement sent a ripple of excitement down her spine. Kory remembered the love scenes she had planned for Rendolin and Feenix and how she wanted to put those fingers to work. Suddenly she was shy and ducked her head as her cheeks felt as if they burst into flame. She was acting like a fool.

"Good morning, Korrene," he said, as he put the statue back on the mantle. "Did you sleep well?"

She was wearing the clothes she had arrived in and felt almost like her old self. Her feet were encased in comfortable walking shoes, their rubber soles proof against rocks, sand, and long hikes. She wore her favorite pair of denim jeans, soft and faded. Her blouse was actually an old flannel shirt that had belonged to Herb. She offset its baggy fit by tucking the shirttails into her jeans and blousing it out all around. It was easy to move in and warm enough for those late New England fall days.

"Yes, thank you. Did you?" Kory was pleased to see a touch of embarrassment pass over Rendolin's face for an instant. It was quickly replaced by curiosity as he noted her clothing.

"I wanted to wear my own clothes," she said at the question in his eyes. "These are comfortable for exploring."

"Exploring?"

"Yes. I want to do some sightseeing. You know," she went on when he didn't seem to understand the term, "I want to visit certain places and check them out. Do you have a problem with what I'm wearing?"

He stepped to her and raised her right hand to his lips. Looking at her over the top of her own knuckles he answered, "No, my sweet. You look charming."

Kory didn't know how to react to his flirtation—especially after the fiasco of the other night. It seemed that a roll on the beach, ending with a sock to the jaw were common occurrences to him, if his attitude this morning was anything by which to judge. It had been so long since a man had bothered to flirt with her, she was at a loss. Actually, if she were truthful with herself, it was more like she had shut herself off so she didn't have to deal with any man's admiration. Perversely, she wished she'd been practicing for when Rendolin came into her life.

He released her fingers as she tried to pull her hand back.

"This is a wonderful coincidence," he said. "I was going to invite you to share a picnic with me. I wanted to show you some of my favorite spots. There are some beautiful places on Sasheena I think you would enjoy seeing."

"Thank you for your gallant offer, Lord Rendolin, but I would rather explore on my own." She hoped the formality of her words would prevent him from pressing his offer.

"I regret to say that I can not allow you to wander on your own, my sweet. You could become lost and then I would not have the opportunity to apologize for my behavior."

"Don't be ridiculous," she scoffed. "I know this island like the back of my hand, or did you forget?"

"You do not know it as well as you think, Korrene. I would be greatly upset if something were to happen to you. Please let me accompany you to assure that you come to no harm. Besides," he said with a charming twinkle in his eye, "it would be a shame to waste the delicious meal the cook has prepared for

us."

It was hard to resist the boyish look on his face. He seemed as eager as a puppy to accompany her. With plans for leaving tonight in place, this might be the last time she would be alone with Rendolin. Her heart whispered that she owed it to him to give him a pleasant day to remember. The guilt she felt at plotting with his brother made her uneasy. If spending one day in the company of this charming and handsome elf would make up in some small way for her betrayal, it was a small price to pay.

"Okay, Rendolin," she said with a smile. "I always was a sucker for a picnic. Lead on!"

Kory thought he would take her to the ocean to walk the cliffs and dunes, or perhaps show her the beautiful, graceful ships called *lunteena* in the Elfin language. Instead he took her hand and led her away from the shore. Soon they traveled a well-worn path that wandered through delicious smelling trees and shrubs, and up a slight incline that led into the heart of the island.

His warm hand cradled hers as they walked. Experimentally, she rubbed her thumb over the back of his hand, surprised at the smoothness. With the warmth from the sun beaming over them and the slight exertion of walking up the hill, she would have expected his palm to be moist, but again she was surprised. The overall sensation she had holding Rendolin's hand was one of comfort and security.

"Where are we going?" she asked after a time of silence except for the sounds of the island. Sea gulls vied for space in the sky with sweetly singing finches, jays and sparrows. The breeze rustling through the shrubby leaves and the tall grasses provided a background thrumming to the birds' lilting warbling.

"I want to show you my favorite place on all of Sasheena. Are you tired?" he asked.

"No, I could walk like this all day," she answered, startling herself when she realized she spoke the truth. It had been years since she had hiked. A memory of Herb touched her heart lightly, then flitted away like the birds overhead. Rendolin's smile caused a little lurch in her stomach.

The flowering shrubs gradually gave way to towering trees dripping with emerald moss, similar to the Spanish moss found in an Alabama bayou. Tucked randomly amid the flowing greenery were little pink star-shaped flowers that gave off a heavy perfume. Its cinnamon and vanilla scent filled the air with a romantic scent. Kory sliced a sideways glance at the elf and smiled when his eyes met hers. Again her stomach jolted and a tingle started at the base of her neck.

"What is this place?"

"I thought you knew all there was to know of Sasheena, my sweet," Rendolin teased.

"Well, okay. I was wrong. Just answer the question."

He smiled at her impatience and gave her hand a gentle squeeze. "We are entering the Forest of Hielaborn. It goes on for more than two miles and in its heart is one of the wonders of my world."

"Is that where we're going?" She couldn't help the little thrill of excitement that jumped through her veins.

"It is."

It was obvious not many people ventured into the Forest, she thought, as the path became nothing more than a trail. It soon became impossible for them to walk side by side so Rendolin let her hand go with a gentle squeeze and took the lead.

The trees became more numerous and the air seemed to vibrate with a vitality that was almost audible. It

was as if someone, who was excited to see them, watched them. With each step, her own excitement and anticipation rose. She felt like a little girl visiting a carnival for the first time.

Something wonderful was in store, but she didn't quite know what it was. Kory could hardly contain her excitement.

"If you look closely," he said, pointing to something through the trees, "you can just begin to see the Joyous River."

She squinted in the direction of his finger, but couldn't see the water. "I can't see. Where?"

"You will be able to see it clearly when we reach that rise," he indicated with a sweep of his hand. "Can you hear it?"

"What? The river?"

"Yes. Can you hear the river, Korrene?"

Tilting her head to the side, she frowned before answering. "All I can hear are those noisy birds. I never realized there were so many birds on Sasheena." Lifting her face to the treetops she continued, "I can hear them, but I can't see them."

A chuckle escaped the elf and she turned to look at him, a question in her eyes.

"What you are hearing, Korrene, is the river."

"But it sounds like a bunch of birds chirping and singing!"

"Come," he said and started off again.

Rendolin led the way to the top of the rise and stepped off to one side of the trail, making room for Kory. She stopped beside him to catch her breath and then looked to her right. Sunlight dancing on water dazzled her eyes and she raised her hand to block the glare.

Below them stretched a river of silver, gracefully bent and rolling through the thick, ancient trees. Emerald green moss draped the banks of the river, tendrils trailing in the silvery water like young maidens washing their hair. Black and gray boulders dappled the water's surface, looking like old men in their baths, as the water rushed and foamed around and over them.

"Oh, Rendolin, how beautiful!"

He smiled at the delight and awe on her face.

"Listen to the water," she cried. "It sounds like it's laughing at us!"

Something tugged at his heart as he stood and watched her expressive face. If he had to do the god's bidding, then at least he would be doing his duty with a female that attracted him. And perhaps Binding with a human would not be all that bad, he thought. After all, Mac Lir did say she had a trace of silvan blood in her. Perhaps it would be enough. Perhaps.

"Now you know why we call it the Joyous River," he said with a smile.

"Oh, I've never seen anything like it! Can we put our feet in?" she asked like a little girl.

"Come," he said, taking her hand again. "There is a place further on where you can put your feet into the

water. It is not very far."

Kory was delighted. It was as if she were walking inside a Hildebrandt painting. The vibrant colors of the trees, plants, and birds almost brought tears to her eyes. The silver sheen of the water reflecting the sun's sparkle was like a priceless necklace. Even the air she breathed into her lungs had an aroma and taste that conjured up health and vitality. The smell of crushed herbs and flowers, along with the moist scent of the river, followed their progress further into the forest. With every step the river chuckled and laughed encouragingly, leading them on.

Kory's feet danced along the trail as she struggled to contain her excitement. All she wanted to do was rush towards the source of the merriment, but Rendolin's firm grip on her hand prevented it. For a second, she was annoyed with his restraint, but his easy grin banished her impatience in a twinkling.

Suddenly they stepped out of the trees. Before them was a velvet green meadow, dotted with rainbow hued flowers, their stalks waving hello in a gentle, warm breeze. Beyond the meadow the Joyous River rioted down a mountain side, forming a slender amethyst waterfall that pooled in a granite and crystal basin before overflowing and running off through the forest.

"Welcome to the Heart of Sasheena," Rendolin said.

She couldn't resist the lure of the river any longer. Ignoring his command to wait for him, she threw her arms into the air and ran into the meadow, laughing like a child.

Kory hadn't felt so free in almost a lifetime.

CHAPTER TEN

Kory raced across the meadow towards an inviting swath of deep green grass, ignoring Rendolin's shout to stop. Laughter bubbled up inside and spilled over her lips as the wind rushed through her hair, lifting dark curls off her face. She felt like a little girl again.

She hadn't been this happy since she was eight years old and her family was still alive. The last time she had laughed for the pure joy of it had been the family camping trip. They had set up their tent in a field next to a trout stream. So many happy memories. So long ago.

The sun shining down from the royal blue sky warmed her skin and heart. Becoming warm from the hike earlier, she had unbuttoned her flannel shirt. Now she pulled it off and tossed it into the wind, leaving only a faded blue tee shirt for modesty's sake.

Just before reaching the inviting patch of grass, Rendolin's worried shouts finally began to penetrate her bemused brain, slowing her mad dash.

Which was probably what saved her life.

"Korrene! Stop! That grass will kill you!"

As the words of danger finally sank in, Kory came to a stop, but not before taking five steps into the harmless looking vegetation. The sweet herbal scent of a freshly mown lawn met her nose—the exact moment razor sharp pain stabbed her feet.

"Do not move!" Rendolin commanded as he raced to her, stopping just outside the swath of grass.

"My feet," she cried. "What's the matter with my feet?"

"No, do not sit to look at your feet," the elf commanded when Kory made a move to sit. "Do not turn around. Do not move your feet!"

The fear in Rendolin's voice jolted Kory. Just what had she gotten herself into this time?

"Well, I can't stand here all day," she shouted over her shoulder. "Do something!"

"Hush, Kory. I *am* doing something."

Kory thought she detected annoyance in his voice. If anyone should be annoyed it should be her. "Well, whatever it is you're supposed to be doing, hurry it up! My feet feel like they're being eaten alive! What is this stuff?"

"They are Blades of Grass. Deadly vegetation that grows in patches on Sasheena."

"What the hell are you doing, taking me to a place that is deadly? I thought we were going to have a picnic lunch!"

"I did not know the Blades had grown in the meadow. It has been a long time since I have been here. My duties do not allow me to go on picnics often. Here," he said close behind her. "I am going to throw this blanket to you. See if you can catch it."

She turned her head towards his voice and caught the heavy wool blanket just as it came hurtling towards her. "What am I supposed to do with this?"

"Fold it in half, then again length-wise. Now carefully drop it on the ground a step away from you."

Feeling a wave of weakness wash over her, Kory stumbled a half step as she dropped the blanket. White-hot pain shot up her leg. Biting her lip until she tasted blood, she fought to remain standing.

"Good," his voice soothed. "Now step onto the blanket, Korrene. Carefully. Do not fall and do not step onto the grass."

"Rendolin," she said, her voice wavering with pain as she did as he told her. "Why am I feeling so weak?"

"It is the poison, Korrene."

A flare of terror rushed through her body, almost causing her to collapse. "What poison? Am I going to die?"

"No, my sweet." His voice calmed her fears somewhat, and she was surprised to feel a slight surge of energy. "You are doing well, Korrene. Now step towards me, but stay on the blanket."

While her back had been turned, he had made stepping-stones out of the different items he had found around him. Her flannel shirt, folded into a neat square, was the 'stone' after the blanket. The backpack Rendolin had been carrying their lunch in lay on the ground closest to him. The food was scattered all around the ground, ignored in his attempt to provide safe footing.

"Come to me, Korrene," he urged. "Carefully step on your shirt, then the pack."

Again a surge of weakness washed over her, and she wavered. "I don't think I can do it."

"Yes, you can! Look at me, Korrene." Kory met his intense gaze. "You can do it." He seemed to be

pushing his will through her, giving her no option but to obey. "Come to me."

He raised his hands, reaching out to her. A bolt of pure energy poured through her, and a trace of rosemary teased her nose. She was surprised to be able to stand upright and walk to the edge of the blanket, although her feet screamed in protest.

"Come."

Her legs trembled as she stepped onto the shirt, with barely room for one foot. Tears streamed down her face unheeded.

"One more step."

As Kory obeyed his command, she felt herself falling into a swirling tunnel of colors and lights. The trip lasted forever.

~*~

Rendolin was surprised to see his hand shake as he eased Kory's sneakers from her bleeding feet. The rubber soles had been cut to ribbons, allowing the dangerous Blades of Grass to inject lethal pollen. If the poison in her bloodstream was not neutralized soon, she could die. The death would not be an easy one.

He carried her to the edge of the river, where the waters gathered in the basin after spilling over the falls. Laying her gently on the grass and removing what remained of her shoes, he hurried to the River and dipped a linen napkin into the cold, clear water. The cook who had packed their lunch had not intended that the piece of material be used as a bandage, but Rendolin was glad it had been packed.

Tenderly he cleaned the bottoms of her feet, softly speaking ancient words as he did so. As he worked, he could not keep his thoughts from the human woman stretched unconscious on the ground.

Why had she not stopped when he commanded? Her constant flaunting of his authority grated on his patience. His hand clenched around her foot in frustration, causing a little moan to escape from Kory's lips. Self-consciously he loosened his grip.

What had Kory been thinking as she rushed to the meadow? His jaw ached from clenching his teeth so tight. By the god's right toe, she had been beautiful as she raced the wind down the gentle slope. The clothes she wore reminded him of the curves and soft flesh contained in those strange breeches. His fingers had tingled with the remembered texture of her warm skin.

The warm skin he held in his hand now.

He paused in his ministrations to look closely at the foot in his hand. It was a small foot, with beautifully shaped toes. The nails were pink and healthy. Kory's arch was well defined, like the supple curve of a young birch. Softly he traced a blue vein that started under the delicate anklebone and disappeared up a curvaceous calf. The texture of her skin was as soft as a dove's breast, but he noticed that the creamy peach color was awash with an evil yellow tinge.

His heart skipped in alarm and he sucked in a quick breath. "Foolish woman! What if I had not been here? You would be dead and the god's commandment would not have been fulfilled."

Rendolin was surprised at the strength of his feelings for Kory. He had not planned to become attached to her, but he supposed it was only natural that he be concerned about her welfare. After all, Mac Lir had given her to him; she was his responsibility and he had been careless of his charge.

"I will take better care of you, Korrene," he spoke as he continued to clean the poison and blood from her feet. "The Binding must take place."

"I'd appreciate it if you would stop mumbling over my feet," said Kory in a weak voice.

"Lie still," he commanded. He did not expect the wash of relief that her words delivered to his heart and mind. It was as if a tidal wave of soothing solace rushed through his body, leaving him weak, but calm, in its wake. "I must clean the cuts completely before I heal you." His voice sounded strained to his ears, and he hoped she didn't notice.

"Heal me?"

"Yes. I must call upon Mac Lir to neutralize the poison in your blood before it reaches your heart. Now be quiet and rest. This will not hurt or harm you."

Rendolin was surprised but pleased to see her relax again upon the grass. He did not expect her to obey him without an argument. The poison must be working on her nervous system already. He needed to act quickly.

Taking three cleansing breaths, he closed his eyes and sought the center of his being, while calling upon the god to lend his powers and heal the human woman. He touched the talisman in his headband and activated the magic. The words of the spell came clearly to his mind and passed through his lips in a melodic, singsong chant. The scent of rosemary, Rendolin's personal magical essence, danced with the magic and raced through his blood. Energy pulsed at his fingertips and surged through his pores.

Gently, the High Priest pressed his palms against the soles of Kory's feet, and for a heartbeat the surge of energy passing into her body was liquid fire.

Then the fire was banked, and comfort and peace flowed into her flesh. Rendolin's smile reflected the innocence of a child as the healing took place.

~*~

As the heat in her feet subsided, Kory felt a warm, comforting presence envelop her whole being. She knew she had been seriously injured, been poisoned in fact, but she couldn't detect any worry or fear. It was as if some powerful person had taken her hurts and fear and just thrown them away. The feeling reminded her of when she was a little girl, hurt or frightened, and her mother or father would comfort her. She knew everything would be okay because they were there to protect her. Kory hadn't felt that since she was eight years old. Not since her parents were killed.

Dimly the sound of Rendolin's voice penetrated her befuddled mind, and while she couldn't understand the words, she knew he was soothing her body and mind with his song. The smell of rosemary hung heavy in the air. He was casting a spell. She was beginning to recognize the scent of his magic.

It was strange. She never realized magic had an odor, but every time Rendolin used his magic, Kory remembered smelling the herb. It was there when he had healed Feenix's finger, and it was there when he had invited her to dinner—

Kory sat up suddenly, jerking her feet from Rendolin's gentle grasp.

"You conniving swine!"

The surprise of her words and movement shocked Rendolin out of his spell. For a moment he did not react, and she was on her feet in a second.

"You used magic on me! How dare you manipulate me in that way?"

"Korrene," he began, "be careful. Your feet are still very tender and raw. You could do yourself damage. Here," he motioned to a comfortable looking patch of grass. "Sit down and I will bind your feet so they will not get infected."

"Forget my feet," Kory shouted. "You used magic on me to get me to go to that boring dinner, didn't you? Don't try to deny it," she continued, "I know you used magic, you underhanded, dirty sneak!"

"I do not know why you are so upset. I merely persuaded you to come to dinner."

"You persuaded me by putting a spell on me! I remember it all now," she turned her back on him and blushed with the memory of primping and preening for him. The long, luxurious bath she had taken, and the amount of time spent on her hair and appearance. She chose to ignore the fact that she would have enjoyed the bath and probably would have spent the time on her appearance any way. She was angry that he had taken the choice out of her hands when he used the spell.

Remembering what had happened after the dinner, when they had gone for a walk, she wished the ground would open and swallow her completely.

"You planned it all, didn't you?" Turning to face him, Kory waited for an answer, but he merely looked at her in a confused way. "You planned to seduce me so that I would agree to the Binding. How could I have been so dense?"

"I merely planned to speak with you, reason with you, Korrene. What we shared... what happened on the beach was as much a surprise to me as it was to you."

"Don't you come near me," she shouted as he took a step in her direction. "I can't believe I fell for your spell without a blink of an eye! You're lower than pond scum!"

"Pond scum?"

"I said get away from me! I never want to see you again as long as I live!"

Ignoring her command, Rendolin took another step towards her and drew himself up into his most royal presence. "Korrene, close your mouth! I would speak."

"Why you, you..."

"Hush, I said, or I shall be forced to place a silence spell upon you so that you may hear my words."

"You wouldn't dare," she breathed in total fury.

"Speak again and we shall see." A hint of rosemary wafted her way.

Kory's brown eyes snapped in frustration, but she bit her lips to keep from spewing the words on her tongue.

"First, sit and let me finish healing your feet." Before she could refuse, he bellowed, "Sit!"

Kory hastily plopped down on the grass, keeping her eyes on the angry elf's face.

Kneeling at her side, he continued the job he had started on her injured feet. "You must not put pressure on your feet for a few days, until they are completely healed. It would be too easy for the cuts to reopen and infection to set in."

"They feel fine," she said, trying not to flinch at his touch.

"They are not fine. The magic has cleansed the poison from your system and closed the wounds, but your flesh is too tender to withstand your weight and pressure for long. You are not to walk for three days."

"Three days? I'm going home as soon as possible—"

His fierce glare cut her off. "Three days." Seeing that she had nothing more to say for the moment, he continued, "I am going to carry you to the pool and you will soak your feet in the river while I explain about the spell."

She was surprised at how easily he scooped her up into his arms and walked to the water. She put her arms around his neck to steady herself, and inhaled his scent. A strand of his hair teased her face, and it was all she could do to keep from burying her face in its golden depths.

Carefully Rendolin put her down, lowering her feet into the cold water. Almost immediately Kory felt a tingling, not unlike an electrical charge, begin in her feet and race up her legs and throughout her entire body.

"What was that? It felt like a shock."

"The Joyous River holds healing properties. If an ill person drinks from its waters, the disease is cured. Wounds are healed when soaked in the waters. You are feeling the magic of the river."

"So you did not need to cast a spell to heal my feet," she asked, skeptical.

"The spell was to stop the spread of poison in your blood. And to close your wounds. The river will continue to heal you as you sit here." He tossed her an aggravated glance. "Must I cast that silence spell?"

"Fine! I'll shut up!" Kory folded her arms across her chest and turned her face towards the violet-hued waterfall. "You don't have to tell me twice," she grumbled. "I'm not deaf."

The elf sighed deeply and sat beside her on the riverbank. However, he didn't put his feet into the water, but folded his legs and made himself comfortable. When the silence and tension had stretched almost to the breaking point, Rendolin finally spoke.

"I was wrong to cast the spell on you."

For a moment Kory thought she misunderstood his words. She had expected to hear a defense for the use of magic, and his explanation of how important it was to do the god's bidding, yadda, yadda, yadda. She swung her head around and gaped at him.

"What?"

Rendolin looked uncomfortable and cleared his throat, obviously ill at ease. "I should not have cast the spell on you to force you to go to dinner. Please accept my apologies."

"Why?"

"By the god's left ear, does it matter?" he demanded angrily. "I said I was wrong. Can you not just accept my words and move on?"

Kory couldn't quite comprehend his reasoning for offering an apology. Somehow it didn't seem to fit his character.

"I want to know why you cast the spell in the first place."

He sighed again, as if complying with her question was the hardest thing he had ever done. "You would not come to dinner, and it was important that my people saw you." His exasperation was obvious. "I am asking much of my people to accept a human as my Bonded mate. They needed to see that you are beautiful and intelligent enough to fulfill your duties as my mate, and that you are worthy of me."

Swallowing her annoyance at the implication she might not be good enough for him, Kory couldn't help but ask, "And am I? Not that I'm going to Bind with you," she added hastily.

"Yes, Korrene," he answered quietly. "You are worthy."

She couldn't ignore a tiny thrill of joy at his approval. "You could have explained that to me. I can be reasonable, you know."

Rendolin shot her an incredulous glance before continuing, "I asked you to come. You refused. A Son of the House of Hiloris does not beg."

No, Kory didn't suppose one did. A Son of the House was used to commanding respect and receiving immediate obedience. For the first time Kory realized his world had been thrown completely into confusion just as much as hers. A Binding wouldn't be easy for him, either.

With that revelation came an overwhelming desire to enjoy these experiences on Sasheena to the fullest. It didn't matter if she was insane or not. What mattered was that finally a man she admired, and to whom she was attracted, wanted her in his life. Had in fact gone to great lengths to insure that she was safe and comfortable and tried to meet all of her needs.

Suddenly Kory knew she was going to stay with Rendolin. She would tell Thelorin this evening she wouldn't go through with their plan. She was sure he would give her a hard time, but in the end, what could he do? If she refused to go home he would have to honor that decision.

In the meantime, it was a glorious afternoon. The sun was warm, the meadow a romantic spot for a picnic and even the river provided a symphony of gentle chuckles that created a descant for the songbird's music. Most importantly, the man of her dreams was within arm's length, and he wanted to become her mate for eternity.

"I'm hungry."

Rendolin blinked at her change of conversation. After a second he gave her a tentative smile. "Are you ready for our picnic, then?"

"Yes, unless you tossed all the food into that lethal vegetation when you emptied the backpack." She smiled into his green eyes, and was rewarded with his heart-stopping dimple as he returned her smile.

Getting to his feet he said, "Wait here. Let me see if anything can be salvaged."

Kory watched him trot to the edge of the velvety Blades of Grass. She loved to watch the way he moved, all graceful lines and sensual angles. If this was a dream, she prayed she would never wake up.

He was soon back, carrying food wrapped in the blanket. As they spread the cloth and set it out, they continued to smile shyly at one another, as if they shared a secret.

He unwrapped a package of cold broiled fish, and Kory asked, "So what happens after the Binding takes place?"

His hand outstretched to offer her a portion of the fish, Rendolin's body stilled. Slowly a light seemed to begin to ignite in his eyes, and his face took on a glow with an indescribable emotion.

"What are you saying, Korrene?" She barely heard the quiet words.

She took the food from his hand. "When will our Binding take place?" Then she bent her head to lick the spicy juices from his fingers.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The woman was indeed insane. Rendolin stood and looked down at Kory in pure bewilderment. One minute she was raving about how she does not want to see him again, and the next she was agreeing to Bind with him.

He would never understand humans.

"Are you saying you have changed your mind and will now Bind with me?" He needed to make sure he understood.

"Why are you so surprised? I thought you'd be pleased."

"You *did* say you would Bind with me?" He still could not quite take in the possibility.

Kory sat up straight and put on a belligerent face. "Why? Have you changed your mind and don't want to now?"

"Woman, do you know how to answer a question without asking another?" He was surprised at how angry he was becoming. As the high priest of Mac Lir, he was proud of his self-control, but this human woman shredded that control as easily as a fish swam.

Rendolin watched Kory as a deep flush crept up her neck and anger made her eyes spark. By the god's right eye, she was lovely. But he must find out what her words meant.

Forcing himself to concentrate on the subject, he asked again, "Do you agree to Bind with me?"

"You are the most irritating person I know! Why are you getting mad at me? I'm the one who was hurt, you know," Kory said as she slammed a piece of fish down on the ground. Rendolin jumped to his feet and began to pace the riverbank in quick, angry strides.

"You are acting like a child, Korrene." He inhaled deeply, trying to regain his calm. He stopped his pacing and turned back to face her. "Simply answer my question—will you Bind with me?"

"Yes!"

The shouted word startled the jays in a nearby tree into flight. The noise of their cries barely penetrated Rendolin and Kory's awareness. Both were intent on staring the other down. Her face was red with anger and embarrassment. His tanned face was set in hard lines and a deep scowl. Neither seemed to be aware of the word she had uttered until the last ringing echo of it died on the breeze.

Rendolin was amazed at the relief he felt when he finally realized what she'd said. Suddenly unsure of what to do, he stood taller, placed one hand on his hip, and cleared his throat.

"Well. Good." He felt like a fool, although he did not know why. "It is well."

Korrene looked as if she were waiting for something. Was she expecting something more from him? He glanced around, trying to figure out why she was sitting there so still and quiet. It was not like her, and it made him nervous.

"Good," he said again. Then, with another nervous glance her way, he walked back to the picnic area and sat down. "Good." He picked up an apple and bit into its juicy flesh.

Kory sat as if stunned for another moment. She didn't know what she was hoping for when she accepted his proposal, but it certainly wasn't the reaction she was getting.

"Good?" She watched him closely, but he continued to eat the fruit with maddening calm. "I tell you I will Bind with you for eternity and all you can say is, 'Good'? What kind of reaction is that? *Good?*"

With a sigh Rendolin put the apple down and looked at her. She could see he was trying to humor her, annoying her even more. After a few moments of silence in which she patiently waited for him to say something else, she pushed up onto her knees and threw a carrot at him.

"Well?"

He ducked as the carrot flew past his left shoulder, to land with a plop in the water.

"Do not throw food, Korrene. It is not polite."

"Not polite?" she sputtered, barely able to control the urge to throw herself at him and batter his chest with her fists. "Who in the world is here to see if I throw food or not?" She picked up the first thing her hands touched and waved it in his direction. "I'll throw food if I want," and this time her aim was true.

Rendolin looked down at his chest, watching with disgust as greasy fish flaked and dripped slowly to land in his lap, spreading an oily stain across the front of his leggings. Kory watched in amused horror as he slowly looked at her with a steely stare.

"You should not have done that, human."

His words were clipped and hard in the soft air around them. Kory began to think she had made a mistake. Perhaps one doesn't throw food at a high priest. She sat without breathing, hardly knowing what to do as he rose in royal indignation. She felt like a rabbit caught in the gaze of a hungry wolf.

"Sorry," she said, but the word never made it past her lips before he moved with the sleek grace and agility of a panther.

Kory found herself knocked off balance and on her back. The sweet tang of crushed grass mingled with the aroma of sticky nut cake. It slowly dawned on her that the smell of the cake was coming from the goo on her face. He had actually thrown the dessert in her face!

She wiped frosting from her eyes and saw him standing over her, straddling her body with his long, lean legs, a merry grin lighting his eyes and face. As she lay there, pieces of fish dripped onto her stomach and crumbs of cake rolled off his fingers.

"You shouldn't have done that, elf."

She wiped more of the cake from her face and slowly licked her fingers clean. She suddenly brought her right leg up, hooked her foot behind his left leg and pulled, knocking him to his backside. In a flash she was on him, holding his shoulders down and sitting on his chest.

"Now what are you going to do?" she asked, chuckling as she looked into his face.

His green eyes sparkled like polished emeralds and the dimple she loved tucked into his left cheek. She wanted to press her fingertip there to measure its depth. His full lips were drawn back in a wide smile, and white, pearly teeth glowed against his tanned face. A deep rumble of laughter reverberated through his chest before finding its way out of his mouth.

"If I tell you," he laughed, "it will not be a surprise."

"Nothing you do, Rendolin Hiloris, would be a surprise to me."

He quirked a slanted eyebrow at her and pretended to frown. "Are you sure, Korrene?"

"I'm sure, elf. What will you do? Roll over and pin me beneath you? Like you did the other night?"

Suddenly, the laughter fled from his eyes. She watched them turn a deep green and then slide into smoky-gray. Kory felt the change of mood descend upon them like a warm blanket.

In a twinkling she was again on her back, but Rendolin did not allow her to stay there. He slipped his arms under her knees and arms, stood in one fluid motion, then carried her to the river.

"What are you doing?"

"It is a surprise."

"No! Don't you even dare do what I think you're going to do!" Kory struggled in his arms, but they were like bands of steel. The river chuckled its amusement, making her think that it was enjoying her dilemma.

Rendolin had walked to the riverbank, where the water gathered beneath the falls. For a moment he held her in his arms without moving. Kory began to relax, thinking that he had only meant to frighten her.

Then, with no warning, without a word, he pitched her into the pool.

The clear water closed over her head as she screamed. As her bottom hit firm river bed, a part of her realized that the water wasn't as cold as she'd thought, nor the pool as deep as she'd feared. She lunged back towards the surface.

"What did you do that for?" she yelled as she erupted from the river and stood in chest deep water that sent tingles all through her body. It felt alive, as if every drop was a living cell, every rivulet an artery and the current of the water was the pulse of the river's heart. Surprised by the sensation, the words she planned to fling at him were stopped in her throat.

Rendolin smiled at her like a little boy.

"What *is* this?" The awe she felt was beyond any experience she'd ever had.

"This is the Heart of Sasheena, Korrene. The Joyous River is alive."

~*~

Rendolin watched Kory standing in the river, a wondrous look on her face. The rays of the sun streamed through the branches of the nearby trees and touched the rising spray from the waterfall, creating a rainbow halo around the woman. He realized as he stood there in the midst of Mac Lir's creations that this moment was a spiritual experience he would never forget. All the words the god had spoken concerning this woman burst upon his mind in one crystal, clarifying instant.

Rendolin knew in the innermost core of himself that Korrene had been meant for him.

She stood in the middle of the river's stream, with the living water chuckling and churning, her head tilted as if listening to a delightful song. Black curls clung to her head and face, dripping water down her back and between her breasts. The pale blue garment she wore molded to them and clung to her hardened nipples like a second skin. The restless water reached to just under the rounded curves, causing them to bob slightly with the current and waves. She seemed oblivious to everything except the sensation and sound of the water. Rendolin's mouth went dry at the thought of touching her again.

"What do you mean, it's alive?"

Her words jarred him from his thoughts, and the magical moment was gone. Nevertheless, a lingering sense of destiny and purpose confirmed his belief that the god had just spoken to him in some spiritual way.

"The river itself is alive. The water is not like other water. All the droplets of this water make up the being that is the river. Can you not hear it speaking to you?"

At first he thought she was going to deny his word, then a wondrous look came over her face and she gently smiled.

"Yes. I do believe it *is* speaking to me." She looked up at him with happy brown eyes. "At first I thought it was the birds, then all I could hear was the river laughing at me. But now, I think I hear words. How can that be?"

The joy glowing on her face caused a tightening of his stomach muscles. His reaction to her did not surprise him.

She was beautiful.

And he wanted her.

"The river is a being, Korrene, just as you are. The only difference is that Mac Lir created it differently than you or I. Instead of flesh and bones, the river is made of water and a mystical essence. I do not know how it came to be. I only know that it is. What does it say to you?"

"Well, you can hear it, you tell me."

"It speaks differently to each person. The words and songs it sings to me are not the ones it tells you. But this I do know. You are approved of, or the river's sound would not be like the chuckling song you hear, but rather like the roaring floods."

Her smile spread further across her lips and she bent to listen more closely. After a moment, the smile slipped from her lips and a look of amazed concentration crossed her face. She stood thus for long moments before nodding her head once and standing erect.

"What did it say?" he asked. She looked as though something of great importance had been spoken. He thought he could see fear as well as awe in her eyes.

"It called me by a name." Her voice was barely loud enough to carry over the river's laughter.

"What was it, Korrene?"

"*Glenowaeli*."

He shouldn't have been surprised, but the name shocked him. Here, then, was yet another confirmation that this human had been born to save his people. "Do you know what it means?" he asked.

"I'm ... I think so." The fear in her eyes and voice was more than Rendolin could stand. He stepped into the water and stood in front of her.

"Say it."

"Rendolin," her voice trembled and broke. "I'm afraid."

"Say it." He had to hear her say the words. Then he would know with surety that Mac Lir's will would be done.

The tip of her pink tongue darted out and licked her lips. Kory's eyes darted behind him, then to the left and right, but returned to his emerald gaze.

"Say it, my sweet."

The Joyous River nudged the back of her knees and laughed a melodious song. The sun rested upon her shoulders like a golden blanket and the forest hushed to hear the words.

"Mother of Nations."

Kory barely got the words out before Rendolin caught her up in a strong embrace, kissing her mouth like a man claiming a long awaited prize.

~*~

By the time they returned to the House, it was twilight. Rendolin insisted upon carrying Kory the entire way because her feet were too tender to withstand the hike back.

She hadn't realized his strength and endurance. Not once had he stopped for a rest and she never detected a loss of breath from the effort of carrying her. She nestled in his arms and placed her head on his shoulder. It felt as though the hollow from his collar to his shoulder had been made specifically for her head.

Their conversation on the way back was minimal. Occasionally he asked if she was comfortable and she would ask if he needed to rest. It was almost like they had become strangers with little in common. Kory knew that wasn't true. Ever since she had agreed to Bind with him, a strange shyness had come over her, making her feel unsure of herself.

Except when they had been fighting and arguing. Then she had forgotten her timidity and enjoyed the battle to its fullest. Until he had dumped her in the river.

Kory thought about the experience of being immersed in the water. Never had she felt such a sensation. It was as if her whole body had been taken in and welcomed by a living, sentient being. The feeling that the river heard her words and thoughts and enjoyed her company was too foreign a concept to completely grasp. But that was minor compared with the sound of the river's voice.

How could a river speak to her? Had she imagined the words—the name—the river had given her? While her brain told her such a thing could not happen, her heart and soul knew it had. It seemed that while she was in Rendolin's world, logic was a useless commodity. Every time she tried to apply it to her situation, nothing made sense. Perhaps faith and trust were better skills to hone.

They approached the House from the northwest and the sight of its airy walls rising from the living limestone overlooking the sea took Kory's breath. The setting sun reflected off the massive walls, giving the entire building and surrounding cliffs the effect of having been dipped in molten gold. Flowers and herbs had been cultivated around it, softening the severe angles of stone and sea.

Before Rendolin reached the door, people ran to meet them, and questions were asked faster than Kory could keep track. Rendolin explained that she had fallen into a patch of the deadly Blades of Grass. He gave instructions to have the vegetation dug up and eliminated the next day.

As they made their way into the House, Elawae met them at the door. Ushering them inside the massive entry, she ordered a hot meal be prepared and taken to Kory's room, and quickly following as Rendolin carried Kory towards the bedroom.

"Oh my dear," Elawae said in a concerned tone, "what happened to you?"

For the first time in what seemed like hours, Kory roused herself from the contemplation of the day's events. Her head felt heavy and fuzzy, as if she had had too many drinks.

"I cut my feet," she replied.

"Korrene stepped in Blades of Grass, mother," said her son as he carried her into the bedroom. "I have given her a healing, but she needs to rest."

"Yes, indeed." Elawae sent a servant for bandages and herbal salve, and continued to follow her son.

Before the wall swallowed them up, Kory glanced over Rendolin's shoulder and met the eyes of Thelorin, who was standing by the sweeping staircase watching the scene before him. Her heart thudded in alarm at his furious look. Perhaps changing her mind was not going to be as easy as she hoped.

Rendolin carefully placed her on the bed, stepping back as his mother began to fuss around Kory.

"How did you get all wet, my dear?" she asked, opening a chest and pulling out a warm looking robe. "We must get you out of those damp clothes."

"I took her to the Heart, Mother."

Elawae's head came up with a start. She shot her son a questioning glance, then looked at Kory with her turquoise gaze. "And did the river speak to you, child?"

"It named her."

"Korrene can speak for herself, can she not?" Holding up the robe for Kory to put on, she motioned Rendolin to move to the far side of the room. "Turn your back, Rendolin," she admonished. "Well?" she asked Kory when her son had done her bidding.

Feeling awkward about disrobing in front of Rendolin's mother, Kory tugged off the tight, wet clothes and slipped into the welcome warmth the woolen robe gave.

"What is this name my son says the river gave you?"

"*Glenowaeli*." Kory trembled as she spoke the word. If it was true, then half the responsibility of an entire race rested on her shoulders, and it scared the living hell out of her.

Kory watched the color drain from Elawae's face; the dainty elfin woman sat on the bed as if her legs would not hold her slight weight. The name seemed to bring fear even to Rendolin's mother.

Rendolin had returned to the side of the bed when Kory said the silvan name. Now he watched as his mother tried to collect herself and regain her usual dignity.

"It is true, mother," he said to her, with a tender glance at Kory. "The river has named her Mother of Nations. None can deny the god's will now."

"What does it mean?" Kory could no longer keep the questions from spilling out of her mouth. It was like a dam had burst and words tumbled forth without control. "*Who* can not deny it? What does that name have to do with anything? Will someone please tell me why I have this terrible feeling that my life will never be the same again?"

"I think it would be better if Rendolin explained it to you, my dear," said Elawae. She stood and embraced her son before turning to Kory with a smile. She bent, placing a gentle kiss on her cheek and dropping into a graceful curtsy. Kory was so stunned by the gesture, she didn't hear the elfin woman's farewell.

"Why did she do that?" she asked, when Elawae had left the room.

"She paid homage to you, my sweet."

"Why would she do that? I don't like it. I'm nobody special, Rendolin. Tell her not to do it again—it makes me uncomfortable."

Rendolin sat on the edge of the bed, taking her cold hands into his own. He began to rub Kory's hands between his, warming the chilled fingers.

"You underestimate yourself, Korrene," he said as he worked on her fingers. "Mac Lir has chosen you and you can not run from your fate. You are very special indeed."

Kory pulled her hands from his grasp. "I don't want to be chosen by Mac Lir, or any god. I don't want this name that your river has given me. Can't I just be me?"

"Did you mean what you said at the meadow today, Korrene? Will you Bind with me?"

She had trouble following his change of subject. "What does that have to do with it?"

"Our Binding will change you, and it will change me. Our souls will be sealed together for eternity. We will have a responsibility to Mac Lir and to our people. We are not ordinary people, Korrene." He moved closer to her on the bed and took one of her hands again.

"Do you know why the name *Glenowaeli* had such a strong effect on my mother?"

"No, tell me."

"There is an ancient legend among my people that one will come from a far land and save our people from untold danger and evil. This heroine will be as a tool for the gods and bring great destruction and chaos before bringing peace. Most believe the legend to be simply a tale to while away the long nights."

Kory looked at him and he appeared misty through a glistening of unshed tears. "And does this unlikely heroine have a name?"

"*Glenowaeli*, my sweet. Her name is *Glenowaeli*."

Her eyes filled to overflowing, but she ignored the wet path the tears made down her cheeks.

"I don't want it, Rendolin. I won't accept it." She wouldn't be responsible for a whole race of elves dying.

"You will not be alone," he said, wiping the tears away with the pad of his thumb. "You do not have to do this alone, Korrene. You and I will be Bonded, our souls fused as one. While *Glenowaeli* is your name, so it will be mine. The name, when spoken of you, is translated 'Mother of Nations'. But *Glenowaeli* can be applied to me. The word can mean 'Father of Nations'. When we are Bonded and our souls are as one, the literal translation of the word will be 'Sacred Parents'."

"But we don't know each other, Rendolin. I thought I knew you, but today showed me how wrong I was. I don't know what you're like in the morning after a bad night's sleep. I don't know what you do during the day, how you support yourself, what your hobbies are—nothing! And you don't know that I talk in my sleep, I leave the towels on the floor, and love my coffee hot and black. How can we Bond forever when we might be totally incompatible?"

"It is true we do not know everything about one another. But consider the things we do know." His voice was reasonable and soft, holding that deep timbre she had come to love. "First, we have both been chosen by the god, have we not?"

"So you say, but as far as I know, this whole thing isn't real!"

He gave her a stern look. "I thought we were beyond that, Korrene."

"Oh, right. I forgot. And, of course, since you said it, it has to be the gospel according to Mac Lir."

Kory watched his struggle to keep his temper.

"You would not be here were it not by the god's plan. I wear his mark here, on my shoulder."

He lifted her hand and placed it inside his shirt on the smooth warm skin of his chest. She could see and touch the mark, about the size of a quarter, on the swell of his chest where his shoulder met his body. "Of course you can not see the other mark," he whispered.

"What other mark?" She was beginning to feel warm and languid, relaxed yet completely aware of him as a male.

"The brand on my heart."

Looking up in surprise, she was caught by his intense gaze. The beautifully exotic eyes were again dark with passion, smoldering with a fire deep within, but banked and held in check. The heat from his body wrapped around her, and she forgot to breathe.

"What brand?" she barely got out.

"The one you put there when I was not looking."

Rendolin leaned towards her and covered her lips with his own. The kiss was gentle, tentative, questioning. She answered by bringing her hand up to fondle his hair, forcing a deeper contact.

After a moment, he released her mouth and pulled her onto his lap. Her passion-filled eyes were the color of polished mahogany, reminding him of his favorite season, autumn.

As Kory closed her eyes with a sigh, he noticed the long, full lashes splashed tiny shadows across her cheeks. The shape of her eyes fascinated him. They were not slightly tilted out like the people of his race.

Instead they were wide and evenly balanced above her pert nose, as if the god had placed them there with great precision.

Leaning close, he bent and lightly kissed a closed eyelid, tasting salt from a forgotten tear, before her eyes fluttered open.

"Do not be afraid of our destiny, Korrene," he said tenderly. "It is a gift from the god." He nipped her full bottom lip, then the side of her mouth. "Do not be afraid to love when you find it." He gently suckled her earlobe. "It is the greatest gift bestowed by the gods."

"I'm afraid to love, Rendolin. I don't know very much about it," she whispered, her arms entwined around his neck. "All I know is love causes pain and death; loss and anguish. Those are terrible things for the mother of a race to give to her children, wouldn't you say?"

"To know life, one must know death." He kissed the little valley of her full lip, just below her nose. "To know love, one must know hate." He captured her bottom lip and sucked gently.

"Everything has its mate, my sweet." His whispered words soaked into her skin as he nuzzled the hollow of her throat. She smelled sweet, like vanilla and nutmeg. "Good has evil." He nipped her collarbone. "Love has hate." He licked the sweet flesh between her breasts. "Joy has sorrow," he breathed on her silky skin hotly, "and Korrene has Rendolin." His questing mouth found her swollen breast and caught the nipple with his lips. She tasted even better than she smelled.

Kory felt that her body would shatter into thousands of splintered pieces at the exquisite sensual pleasure his lips, teeth and tongue gave.

"I hate your brother," she gasped as he slid his long fingers under her robe and down a smooth thigh. His hands ignited a fire in her blood wherever they touched.

"I know, sweet," he soothed against her taut nipple. "We will move after the Binding." His voice, thrumming through her sensitive flesh, made her tremble.

"Does that mean I love you?" she asked in a daze. He was driving her to distraction with his tongue and his hand, and she didn't know what would come out of her mouth next.

"Yes," he answered into her flesh, then brought his head up, forcing her eyes to meet his. "And I love you." The look she saw in his eyes was a combination of passion and surprise.

Her control broke into fragments, and hot tears spilled over her lashes to splash against their skin.

"I'm terrified."

He felt the words rather than heard them, but he understood her fear.

"I'm joyful," he answered, then gathered her into his arms, rocking her until the tears were spent.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Kory stretched luxuriously and smiled like a cat with a bowl of cream. She must have slept a long time, for she felt warm and rested. Eyes open, she looked around the room for her elf. When she realized she was alone, a sense of emptiness came over her, but she quickly told herself she didn't have time for that sort of nonsense. There were too many things to sort out.

She was torn by emotions. One part wanted to giggle and dance for joy. She was in love and he loved her back. She hadn't expected to find love again after losing Herb, but here she was in love again, and loved in return by an elf. An elf, of all things!

But the other part, the deepest part, said it wouldn't last and she would be alone again just when it was least expected. That part of her didn't want to be in love; didn't want to put her faith and trust in another being. That way led to pain and rejection.

She stretched again, biting back a yawn. Her nose detected the aroma of food, and she soon discovered her dinner on a little table next to the bed.

She put her feet gingerly to the floor and slowly stood up. The throbbing in her tender feet was just bearable, and she hobbled to the table to peek under the cover of a delicate ceramic pitcher. Hot water! Piping hot water! Why couldn't it have been coffee?

With a disappointed sigh, she picked up a glass of juice and thought about how tenderly Rendolin had carried her all the way back from the meadow, and how much she wanted to make this new life work.

"Well, Herb," she said, sitting back on the bed. "I didn't go looking for it, but I hope you can wish me luck with my new life."

"With whom are you speaking?" Thelorin's voice startled her into spilling the chilled, sweet juice she was sipping. The red liquid spilled into her lap and across the creamy expanse of the coverlet.

"Don't you people ever knock before coming into a room?" she demanded while trying in vain to stop the stain from spreading.

"Knock? Why?"

"Oh, I don't know! How about letting a person know you want to come in? What would you have done if I had been naked, or in the tub, or something?"

"There is no need to become vulgar," he said with disdain. "If you were in a state of undress, the room would simply not allow me to enter."

"Oh, never mind," Kory said. "You probably wouldn't understand the concept of manners, so let's just get on with this, okay?"

He walked to the foot of the bed, glancing around as if looking for something.

"Are you ready to depart?"

"No. In fact, I'm not going home. I...I've changed my mind." Kory rushed to say the words before she lost her nerve.

Bristling like an angry badger, he scowled his displeasure. "I will not change our plans. Prepare to return to your home."

"Listen, Thelorin." She wished she could leave the bed and move away from him. He made her nervous. "I know I told you I wanted to go home, but your brother and I have come to an understanding. I'm going to stay and Bind with him."

Kory didn't know how it was possible, but Thelorin pulled himself up even straighter, and the rage in his eyes nearly took her breath away. Instantly, a trace of mint reached her nose, and she was certain he was

about to call forth some sort of magic to strike her dead where she sat. A chill ran down her back as she watched him wrestle with his emotion.

"I should have expected you not to keep your word. Humans are nothing but lying animals, with no sense of honor." He stepped around to the side of the bed. "However, you are mistaken if you think I will allow this Binding."

Trying not to show fear from the threat the elf radiated, Kory pushed back against the headboard, trying to look regal. "Get out of here, Thelorin! You can't make me go, and we have nothing more to talk about."

"Oh, can I not?" he ground out between clenched teeth. "This is my House. I come and go as I please, human."

A startled squeak escaped from Kory as Thelorin grabbed her wrist and tossed back the covers, scattering the remains of her meal over the room. "What are you doing? Get away from me!"

Terror coursed through her as he dragged her to her feet. The pain almost brought her to her knees, but she would be damned if she'd show such weakness to him. She tried to pull free of his bruising grip, but he continued to drag her away from the bed.

"I will not allow you to pollute my race! My brother will come to his senses when you are gone. When he learns of your death he will no longer have this unnatural desire to Bind with a human."

Fear fluttered like a captured bird in her belly as Kory realized she couldn't put Rendolin through the pain of thinking that she was dead. She knew how devastating that was.

"What about the god's command?" She barely got the words out. "Rendolin will never go against Mac Lir's wishes." She fought to keep tears out of her voice. "How can you defy your own god? Isn't that sacrilege?"

"Sacrilege is human blood tainting our race. I will not allow it."

"You're going to disobey a god?"

"I do not believe Mac Lir could possibly have commanded my brother to do this thing. Rendolin must have misunderstood."

Shaking her head in disbelief, Kory asked, "How can someone misunderstand something like that? I think you're jealous of your brother."

She was sure he would hit her when she saw him raise his hand, but somehow he controlled himself.

"You know nothing about it, and it no longer concerns you."

Thelorin reached into his robe and pulled out a leather band with something attached to it. She couldn't identify it for a moment, but then she recognized Rendolin's headband with the beautiful piece of coral. The last time she had seen it had been that afternoon in the meadow where they had fought, laughed...and found love.

"That's Rendolin's." Again Kory tried to pull away, although her feet were so painful she could barely stand, never mind run. "What have you done with him?"

"Do not turn melodramatic, woman. My brother has no idea I borrowed his little piece of god magic.

After I get rid of you, I will return it to him and all will be well."

Panic threatening to overwhelm her, Kory forced herself to breathe deeply and slowly. "Are you going to kill me?"

Thelorin gave her a genuine smile before shaking his head. "As much as I would greatly enjoy eliminating you as a threat to my people, I am a Son of the House of Hiloris. I honor my oaths. I will not kill you, but merely send you back to the sewer from which you came. Even as I waste my time explaining this to you, several of my trusted people are arranging for your 'accident'. Your body will be found tomorrow morning at the foot of the cliffs, as we planned. Unfortunately, you will be safe and sound in your own world, where my brother will not find you."

Taking a deep breath, she looked him squarely in the face.

"He'll find me, you know. He'll come for me and then return and confront you."

His dark eyes narrowed and he gave a humorless bark. "Do not try to threaten me, human. I do this for my brother as much as for my race. I can not stand by while he ruins his life."

He dragged her into the middle of the large room. "No, he will not find you because he will be too grief stricken to fully question and investigate your untimely death."

Kory's heart ached for the pain Rendolin would suffer when he discovered she was gone. No one should have to go through that hell.

"My people will have ample time to cast the appropriate spells which will ensure the corpse is identified as yours." He smiled cruelly. "No. Do not look for my brother to come, human. You will be forever disappointed if you do."

Making sure that his grip on her wrist was strong, Thelorin raised the magical headband and called out strange words. Kory felt an overpowering panic claim her. She opened her mouth and a high, piercing scream echoed through the room. Her heart cried out for Rendolin before the blinding lights and crushing darkness of teleportation claimed her.

~*~

"Rendolin, my son."

The High Priest turned from putting his robes of office away to meet the sorrowful eyes of his mother.

"Mother. What is it?" Noticing the tears glistening in her turquoise eyes, he quickly moved to take her hands and pull her into the room. "Why are you upset? What has happened?"

Elawae pressed her lips together as if not saying the words would make them less true. Whatever she had to say to him was tearing her apart. Her obvious pain sent a bolt of fear searing through his heart.

"A body has been found at the base of the cliffs." She placed her hand on his cheek. "It is Korrene, Rendolin."

His brain did not register her words for a split second; time enough for his heart to drop to his toes. Korrene had been safe in her room not more than twelve hours ago. It was a mistake.

"It must be some other woman," he said. "Korrene is resting in her room. Her feet are too tender for her to be walking on the cliffs."

"No, my son," his mother said, a tear slipping down her cheek. "Korrene is not in her room."

He brushed Elawae aside and hurried from his room. There had to be some mistake. Korrene was part of Mac Lir's plan. She could not be dead. The god would not allow it.

"Korrene," he called as he stepped into her room. Unable to breathe, he searched the empty room. She was not there. The bed was neat and looked as though she had never lain there. The room had the feel of disuse, with no lingering traces of the human woman. Not even the hint of her scent clung to the air.

It was as though Kory had never existed.

Elawae stepped into the room quietly and watched her son as the truth began to dawn on him. If she ever had any doubts as to Rendolin's feelings about Binding to the human, they were laid to rest as she watched his disbelief turn to despair.

"Where is she?" he turned to her and asked.

"They have taken her to the Healer's House, to Selrin. But he could do nothing for her," she called after him as he raced from the room.

Minutes later he burst into the Hall of Healing and confronted Lord Selrin himself.

"Where is she?" Rendolin demanded. "What have you done for her?"

The aged elf shook his head sadly, sending his flowing white hair scattering across his shoulders. "I am sorry, Rendolin," he said, his bright blue eyes filled with compassion. "All of our healing arts can not bring someone back who is dead. There is nothing I can do for her."

"No! There must be something you can do. The god would not allow her to die before the Binding!"

The pain in his chest surprised Rendolin. His throat felt as if it were closing up and preventing air from entering his lungs. His mind whirled, searching for some shred of hope in a forgotten cure or spell, but could find nothing.

Selrin put his hand on Rendolin's shoulder in an effort to comfort the distraught elf, but he shook it off impatiently and glared at the healer.

"As the High Priest and healer, Rendolin, you know there is nothing that can be done once a person is dead. Especially if the corpse is not whole." His voice trailed off.

"What?" Rendolin did not think he could take many more surprises today. His mind did not seem to be functioning properly, and he was not sure if he had heard Selrin correctly. "Not *whole*?"

"Rendolin," the healer began kindly and with a great deal of sorrow, "the body must have been in the sea for many hours. As you know, the surf pounds the base of the cliffs unmercifully; anyone caught in the current is battered to death within minutes."

Rendolin covered his face with his hands as Selrin's words penetrated his pain-filled mind.

"Added to that, sharks and other sea creatures..."

"Stop!" Rendolin's sharp command cut through the hall like a knife. "I do not want to hear it." He paced the hall, only to return to stand in front of the older elf. "If what you say is true, how do we know it is Korrene and not some other poor soul?"

Selrin hesitated before answering. "The body was identified by the clothes it wore, as well as its hair and the fact that it is human, of course. There is no other human missing on Sasheena. Your Korrene can not be found." Again he placed a gentle hand on Rendolin's shoulder. "I am afraid it is Korrene. I am sorry."

After a moment of silence, Rendolin asked, "May I see the body?"

"I am sorry, Rendolin," Selrin said again. "There really was not much to see. I have disposed of the body. But the clothing is still here, if you wish to look at it." He motioned towards a table that held a soggy pile of cloth.

If Rendolin had any doubts left, all of them fled when he examined the clothing. The light blue jeans and the shirt with red and black squares she had worn yesterday on the picnic were shredded, but still identifiable.

He picked up the remaining scrapes of blue shirt material she had worn under the larger red and black one. His eyes blurred as he remembered how it had molded to her body after he had dumped her into the Joyous River. The blue material had clung like a second skin, and she had looked so happy standing in the water, listening to the River's voice.

Gods! How could she be dead?

Turning on his heel, he left the hall without a backward glance. His only thought was to go to the sanctuary and ask the god how he could have let this thing happen. It did not make any sense, and above all else, Rendolin needed sense and order in his life. The god would answer his questions.

~*~

Sunlight played across Kory's face. The bright red glow forced consciousness up from the depths where it had been slumbering. Eyes opening, the glare of the sun blinded her, sending white-hot light into her brain.

"Oh," she moaned, and rolled over onto her side to escape the nagging light. She was only partially successful; the sun's beam continued to shine on the left side of her face. Kory opened her right eye and waited for the morning blur to recede.

Slowly she recognized her own bedroom. The pale pink walls were decorated with soft pastel flower prints in oak frames. The antique oak bureau stood against the wall, cluttered with personal treasures. Family photos leaned drunkenly against each other; perfume jars emitted musky scents from opened tops; costume jewelry strewn haphazardly; a silk flowered Hawaiian lay sprawled atop manuscript notes; car keys dangled from a drawer.

The bathroom door stood open and exposed a view of a large pink and white striped bath towel balled up on the floor, next to a pair of inside-out blue socks and black running shorts that had somehow had missed the hamper. A bra was hanging on the doorknob. Laundry day was Monday.

Kory's eyes popped wide open and she sat up.

Home! She was home!

Immediately her joy was replaced by the feeling of total loss. Rendolin. She had lost Rendolin. He thought she was dead.

For a fleeting second she thought perhaps the whole thing had been a dream—until she stood, and the pain in her feet reminded her of the picnic the day before. Looking down, she realized she was not

wearing her normal attire. A long coral-colored robe brushed her ankles and the light shift under it had not been bought at the local Sears store.

No dream then. Sasheena was real, and so was her elf.

Her brain registered the familiar ache of loss. Yet again, when she had learned to love, Kory was left alone.

"I must be cursed, Herb," she cried aloud, sitting on the bed. "Why do all the people I love die? Am I a jinx?"

Grabbing a pillow, she wrapped her arms around it, pressed her face into its softness and let the heartbreak wash over her. The tears wracked her body, burning her throat and causing her chest to ache. Her temples throbbed with every beat of her heart.

"Why must I always be left alone?"

The heart-wrenching question hung in the air unanswered.

Kory gave herself up to complete despair.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The god was not speaking to Rendolin. He had spent the better part of an entire day in the sanctuary on his knees, pleading for answers, but Mac Lir remained silent.

Rendolin was lost and confused. He did not think it possible. Mac Lir had instructed him in the Binding ceremony; he had prepared the sacred instruments and retrieved Korrene from her world...only to have her killed in his.

It did not make any sort of sense.

"I should have been there to recover the body," Rendolin muttered to himself as he knelt on the stone floor. The stones were worn smooth from years of wear and tear, but they were uneven. The High Priest's knees were callused from frequent kneeling. Rendolin's legs began to cramp, and he shifted slightly to ease the pain.

"Perhaps I could have done something if I had been there." His thoughts returned to Korrene's death. "At the very least, I could have looked upon her face one more time before her body was laid to rest."

He shifted again, immediately trying to focus on his devotions. He had been taught years ago as a child how to ignore painful knees and legs, and to concentrate on the god. Lacking his usual devoted concentration was a nagging irritation in the back of his mind. He pushed thoughts of Korrene from his mind and again focused on the god.

"O, Lord of the Sea and all within," he prayed. "Grant unto thy servant the knowledge of thy will. For what purpose did I bring the human woman to our world, if she was to die before the Binding?" Again he waited for the answer to his prayer, as he struggled to keep a strange ache in his heart from consuming him.

"Did I displease thee somehow, Lord? Is that why she was taken from me? Did I not fulfill thy every command? Why hast thou elected to punish thy servant in this way?" His voice rose in volume and

despair. "Why didst thou permit me to begin to care for the human woman? To love her?"

Rendolin jerked his head up in surprise. Love? The word should have seemed alien to his mind when used in conjunction with Korrene—instead it felt right. Love. Is that the feeling he had for the human woman? True, he had told her in the meadow he loved her, but that was during the heat of the moment, and Korrene had been injured. He had merely comforted her—had not he? Rendolin admitted that he was attracted to her, and in a way that would make the Binding for eternity possible. It certainly would have been a great sacrifice if the god had expected him to spend eternity with someone he was not attracted to.

But love?

Tentatively he examined the hollow ache in his heart. He remembered the vague feeling from long ago when he was a very small child. It was the same sense of loss he'd experienced when his mother told him his father was dead and would not return to them. Grief for words left unsaid, hugs not given, laughter not shared, would be with him always.

Now, the loss of Korrene seemed greater than that long ago loss of his father.

Rendolin rubbed his cheek when an itch became too annoying to ignore. He was surprised when his fingers came away wet. Silently a tear had crept out of his eye, rolling down his lean cheek. Tears...for a human?

He was stunned to discover the truth. He loved Korrene. He would be lost and lonely without her.

An echo of his anguished cry rolled through the cavern of the sanctuary, disturbing the young priests in their studies. Some of them lifted their heads from the heavy tomes they were copying and raised questioning eyes to the instructors. The teachers, with sad shakes of their heads, motioned for the students to continue, for they knew that their High Priest was in the greatest agony—and only the god Mac Lir could take away his pain.

~*~

The ringing of the telephone brought Kory out of the well of misery she had crawled into. The jangling noise wouldn't go away, and its insistent nagging cried out to be answered. She had succeeded in ignoring it for what seemed like the past half-hour, but her brain wouldn't allow it to go unanswered. She wished she had put the answering machine on before she had collapsed in tears.

"Hello," she said in a dispirited voice.

"Kory!" A voice on the other end shouted in her ear. "Where the hell have you been?"

"Pat."

"I was about ready to send the police to your house to find out if you were dead!" Pat's voice held a curious mixture of anger, relief and annoyance.

"I'm here. What do you want?"

"I want to know where you've been for the past four days, and why you haven't answered the phone."

"Four days?" Kory was having difficulty concentrating on Pat's words. "What do you mean, four days?"

"The past four days. Are you all right? Never mind," she continued before Kory had a chance to answer,

"I can tell you're not. I'm coming up there."

"No! No, Pat, please. I'm fine. Don't bother coming all the way up here."

"I'm on my way, girl. I'll see you in about five hours."

The line went dead before Kory could refuse the offer again.

Damn! What was she going to tell Pat when she got here?

"That I'm in love with an elf from another world and I'll never see him again? I'll be locked up in the loony bin for sure!"

Kory found it mildly amusing that all the time she'd thought she was insane in Sasheena, she had actually been fine. Now that she was home, the chances of her being labeled insane were far, far greater.

Her smile slipped into a painful frown and tears began to flow again. Where was all this fluid coming from? She hadn't cried this much when Herb died. Why was Rendolin's loss so hard on her?

As much as she had loved Herb, they hadn't connected as well as she and Rendolin. Herb was caring and kind, but his kisses didn't rock Kory to her toes the way the elf's did. When she thought about her husband, the word that came most often to mind was "nice." Herb was nice.

Rendolin, on the other hand, was adventure.

Kory hadn't realized she craved adventure. Where had she learned to welcome the thrill and excitement of the unknown? She would have thought, after all those years of being bumped from one foster home to another, she would have been cured of any craving for adventure and excitement. But those years hadn't really offered her anything other than insecurity and the fear of not being wanted.

Rendolin wanted her. She knew that. He wanted her on more than just one level. She was the key to his people's salvation. Kory knew that now with all her soul. But there was more.

Rendolin wanted her as a woman. The way he touched her, kissed her, and looked at her told her he found her desirable. She knew she made him tremble with want and need. The knowledge had given her a feeling of power, which she had never felt with Herb.

Herb had been her friend, a buddy.

Rendolin could have been her lover, her soul mate.

Kory grabbed a box of tissues and made her bleary way to the sofa. She pulled the quilt off the back of the couch and wrapped herself in its comforting folds. Tucking her feet up beneath her and hugging a yellow checked gingham pillow to her chest, she released the sobs she had been holding back, and proceeded to saturate the little pillow.

Five hours later, when Kory failed to answer Pat's repeated knocks, her sister-in-law used her key to open the door and found Kory asleep on the sofa. Pat was shocked to see her red and swollen, tear streaked face. Dark curls were plastered to cheeks and chin, and looked in need of a good washing. Pat stepped back, closed the door with a soft click and went into the kitchen to start some coffee.

It looked like they were both going to need it before the night was over.

~*~

"What will we do now?"

Elawae watched her youngest son as he stood at the window, looking with sightless eyes out to sea. He had spent the entire night standing at the window without speaking, without eating, without moving. She was worried about him, but did not know what to do to ease his pain.

"About what, mother?" She was surprised to hear him answer. She had almost thought he was in a trance and could not hear, but she felt she needed to make some sort of effort to reach him.

"About the Binding and our people."

When the silence stretched to more than ten minutes, Elawae walked to his side and placed her small hand on his arm. "What shall we do about the Binding, Rendolin?"

"The Binding will take place."

His mother was confused. They had lost Korrene. How did her son think the Binding could take place without her? She stroked his arm gently and lovingly, thinking he was in shock and did not remember that the human was dead.

"Korrene can not Bind with you, my dear."

Rendolin looked down at her with eyes that held no life. "I know that, mother. I am not some child who has gone into denial." At his words, she closed her eyes hoping he could not see her distress.

"Another human female will be found. The Binding must take place."

"Has the god spoken to you, my son? Korrene was named *Glenowaeli*. Another will not survive the Binding. And neither will you."

He looked back towards the sea and she watched him try to stifle a sob.

"The god has not spoken to me, but his command remains. I must Bind with a human female to save our people. It is the only way."

Elawae turned from the window and moved to a table laden with things to entice Rendolin's appetite—he had not eaten for almost two days. She picked up a pear...then put it back. "Do you think that is wise, my son?"

Startled, Rendolin turned to face her. The sun shining into the room cast his hair ablaze with golden lights. His face was in a soft shadow, but Elawae could still read the sadness and despair on his handsome face. She sighed at the sight.

He and his brother looked so much like her dead husband, J'laris. How she missed him still. Could Rendolin's pain compare to the loss she still felt for her dear companion? She had not thought his emotions had been so strong for the human, but perhaps she had been wrong.

"Of course the god's command must be obeyed. Another human will have to do."

A slight smile curved Elawae's mouth. Rendolin's strong sense of duty mirrored his father's, and nothing she could ever do or say would sway such purpose.

"You know your brother's feelings regarding this Binding," she began, but he cut her off with a motion of his hand.

"Thelorin is wrong. Just because he is the Governor of Sasheena does not give him the right to disobey a command of Mac Lir. The Binding is the only way our people will be saved. We have been over this time and again. I have no patience to explain it again."

"There are many of our people who agree with your brother."

"Ah, these purists! They do not understand the true situation. They do not know what evil they court if they do not allow the god's will to take place."

Elawae was startled. "What do you mean?"

Rendolin moved further into the room and placed his hands on his hips. She recognized the stance; it was one he used when he was agitated or trying to exert his will on someone.

"There is more at stake than just our people, mother. Mac Lir has told me our destruction is merely a small part of a large plan to eradicate the entire silvan race from our world."

Although the words did not make much sense to her, she could see that he was serious. Who would plan to destroy a whole race, Sea Elves, Night Elves and Woodland Elves? It did not seem possible. Had not the Night Elves been successful in almost completely destroying her people before they found the haven of Sasheena? Had not her beloved J'laris been killed by those foul silvan kin? Had not enough strong Sea Elves met their fate at the hands of their own cousins?

"Perhaps Thelorin is right, my dear," she said to Rendolin. At his look of astonishment Elawae continued, "Perhaps you misunderstood the god. 'Tis an easy thing to misinterpret the words of deity."

"No! I cannot be mistaken, Mother. I can not."

Elawae flinched at the anguish in her son's words. She knew he carried the heavy responsibility of the people on his shoulders—had done so since he had been called to the priesthood as a small child. She watched him battle his own doubts and insecurities and wept silently. If she could spare him this pain, she would.

"No. There is no doubt. The god was explicit. His instructions are clear, mother. I told you about the vision and the experience I had soon after it happened. You believed me then; why not now?"

With the death of the human female that could have saved her people, Elawae had found Thelorin's words to be more enticing and believable than words spoken through a vision. Where was her faith in her son and her god? It seemed to be as fleeting as the sea foam.

She ached for the pain her son was feeling. She did not understand why she believed, other than Rendolin was the god's chosen. She had even supported her son in his attempt to fulfill the god's decree.

"I am sorry, my son," she said, bowing her head in shame. "I do not know what has come over me. I know that your vision was true, and that the god should be obeyed. Please forgive me."

Through a veil of tears, she watched the anger melt as he realized she was truly sorry for her words. He reached for her and she stepped into his embrace. Together they clung to each other, each giving the other strength and hope.

"It is all right, mother," she heard him say into her hair. The top of her head reached only to his collar bone, and he tucked her into the protection of his arm. "I, too, have moments when my faith waivers. But I know what I saw. I know my god spoke to me. If I were to deny that fact, then I would have to deny my very existence. I cannot do that. Mac Lir has told me what to do. Now I must find a way to

accomplish his command."

"But, Ren," she said, stepping back and looking up at him. "It is such a hard thing to accomplish. How can Mac Lir expect you to succeed?"

He was silent for a moment, searching for an answer. Finally, with a smile, he seemed to find the answer. "He would not give me a task that was impossible to complete. I will do all I can to fulfill his command, and he will bless my efforts. All will be as he has decreed, mother. The Binding will take place, and our people will be safe. You shall see."

He pulled her back into his arms and she rested her head against his chest.

"You shall see," he said again...but his heart cried *Korrene!*

~*~

"So, let me get this straight. You're in love with an elf, who you've just spent four days with on an isolated island."

Pat's matter-of-fact voice didn't offer much comfort to Kory as they sat at the little kitchen table, sipping hot coffee. The looks she was giving her only proved to Kory that Pat was sure she had gone around the bend.

"Pat, let's not talk about it any more. I'm tired and my feet are throbbing."

"Yes. Your feet. Let me have a look at them." She bent down, picking up one of Kory's feet. Pat sucked in her breath when she saw the angry red marks that laced the bottom of her feet. There were no open sores and no healing scabs, but the red welts looked to be painful, even though they obviously were clean and healthy.

"Holy cow, girl," Pat said. "It looks like the bottoms of your feet were in a meat grinder!"

"I told you, I cut them and Rendolin had to heal me. They were poisoned."

"Right. You almost died. I remember."

"Listen, Pat. You're not going to believe anything I say, so let's just drop the subject, okay? You won't take my word for it, even though you can see my feet are in bad shape. You won't even admit that this stupid get-up I'm wearing isn't from around here. Where do you think I got it if not in Sasheena?"

Pat gently put Kory's foot down as she tried to wipe the concerned look off her face.

Kory wasn't fooled. She knew Pat was going to try to placate her.

"Isn't it possible that you *made* it, Kory? It looks really comfortable, just the thing to wear around the house while writing your book." At Kory's stormy look, she continued, "Speaking of the book, how's it going?"

"I destroyed it."

Pat blinked at her for a second. "What?"

"I destroyed it. I didn't believe that Rendolin was real either, and so I ripped it up, thinking I'd stop having hallucinations if I just got rid of the stupid book."

"Well, that's good, isn't it? And he went away, right?"

"Oh yes. He went away, but he took me with him. He didn't like the idea of me destroying his world."

They sat in silence, sipping their coffee, as Pat tried to figure out what she could do for her very confused friend. Something had happened in the house; that much was obvious. The office was a mess. Papers were strewn all over the place, along with books and files. It looked like a hurricane had been released in the small area. Perhaps Kory had stumbled upon an intruder and they'd fought in the office. Maybe she had been hit on the head and that's why she was acting the way she was. Yes. That was a logical explanation.

"Were you hurt any place else besides your feet, Kory? How's your head?"

"My head's fine! I'm telling you, I wasn't here. I was with Rendolin in Sasheena and damn, Pat," Kory's voice broke as tears threatened again, "I miss him so much and I didn't even know what I had when I had him." She folded her arms and put her head down, sobbing.

Pat put her arm around Kory's shaking shoulders and tried to ease some of her pain. Whether she was imagining it or not, Kory's heart was broken and there was no denying the pain she was going through.

Pat moved to the phone, called her husband, and made arrangements to stay with Kory a couple of days until she could convince her to come home with her. Then Pat sat back down next to the crying woman and tried to soothe away the pain.

It was going to be a long night.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The High Priest of Sasheena felt like death. His eyes stung from lack of sleep; his mouth was dry and his stomach cramped from lack of nourishment. His soul felt withered and crushed from the loss of Korrene, but still he continued with his duties in the sanctuary. Rendolin knew the god would show him the way to save his people, if he only continued to have faith.

The dawn was breaking on the third day since the discovery of her body. Three days without arguing with the human woman, without hearing her laughter. Rendolin bent his head, using the pain in his knees to help focus on the words of the ancient prayer. He found perverse pleasure in the stinging pressure, knowing the ache in his legs was only minor compared to the constant ache in his heart.

Korrene, the mate the god had chosen for him, was dead. Yet, the Binding had to go on. His people's lives depended on it. He had to find a replacement to Bind with.

What was the purpose of finding Korrene, of the vision, of the unrest and torment his people had recently experienced, if the god was just going to take her away again?

"Why, Lord? Why take her before the Binding?"

The words of a familiar prayer gave no comfort as he performed the tasks he had done a thousand times before. He let his mind wander back to the day before—when his brother had sought him out during evening prayers.

Learning that Rendolin still planned to go through with the Binding, Thelarin had come to try to dissuade him from the ceremony. Rendolin frowned slightly at the memory of that discussion.

"Well, little brother," Thelorin had said. "I hear that you intend to go through with this charade."

Rendolin was preparing the altar for an upcoming minor ceremony. He swung around to look at the older elf in surprise.

"Thelorin." Rendolin's voice reflected his astonishment. "You must be worried indeed to venture into the sanctuary. It has to be at least fifty years since you last came to worship."

"More like fifty-five," said Thelorin, stepping further into the hall. "But I did not come here to worship or commune. I came to find you and try to talk some sense into you. Mother tells me you intend to continue in this ridiculous Binding, even though your Korrene is dead."

Turning back to the task at hand, Rendolin resumed folding a heavy cloth of black silk, embroidered with gems and gold thread. He did not answer right away, using the simple chore to hide his pain.

He wondered what his brother was up to.

Mac Lir knew it took a certain temperament to be a lord, and another to be a priest. He had given each brother a job that suited his individual personality. They had always held differing viewpoints, but each respected the other's ways. Lately, however, Thelorin had been almost insolent towards their god and towards Rendolin's office of High Priest. Rendolin would no longer condone this lack of respect to the god.

"Thelorin," Rendolin said, smoothing a wrinkle from the cloth before turning to face his brother. "I know you do not agree with the idea of a Binding with another race, but I do not understand your refusal to comply. It is the commandment of our god. He is not something to trifle with."

"Well, you see," the other elf answered lazily, "I do not believe Mac Lir has commanded you to Bind with a human. I think you are blinded by the power of your office, and you have misunderstood what the god commanded."

Thelorin rested one booted foot on the cover of a heavily bound trunk. Leaning his forearm on his knee and bending slightly forward, he lowered his voice in a friendly and confidential way.

"I think you have been without a mate, or bed partner, for far too long, Ren. It worries me." His leering grin was enough to anger Rendolin.

"That is enough, Thelorin! I would not poke too closely into another's sleeping habits if I were you. Yours would not hold up very well under an examination, I believe."

Pushing the heavy chest away with his foot, the older brother stood straight and moved closer to Rendolin with a sneer on his handsome face.

"At least *my* appetites are normal, and do not lean towards alien freaks!"

"Have a care, Thelorin," the Priest said, trying to control a growing anger. "I but obey the god's command, as is my duty."

Thelorin laughed at Rendolin's intensity.

"Need *you* be reminded that the Night Elves are our mortal enemy, and not *shaleeni*—mindless whores—to slake your lust on?" Rendolin continued. "Have you forgotten what they did to our people? To our own father? To flaunt your visits to the slave pits is to dismiss J'Laris's death as meaningless, and does not speak well of your relationship with your mate."

"My relationship with Seleena is none of your affair. And I need no reminder, little brother, of the evil deeds of our enemies. But the Night Elves you should be concerned with are not the slaves. They, at least, are of our own race. You intend to pollute our noble blood by intermingling with an inferior creature. Have you no pride?"

Rendolin took a deep breath, trying to calm his anger. Arguing with Thelorin was not the way to win him over to Ren's way of thinking. The only weapon he had in his arsenal was reason, and he needed a clear and level head for that, not one filled with anger and frustration.

"I understand your concern for our people, Thelorin," he said calmly. "You are the Governor of Sasheena and are understandably interested in preserving our heritage."

With an impatient wave of his arm, Thelorin yelled, "Do not try your priestly tricks on me, brother! I am not a child to be soothed and murmured over. Your condescending tone insults me!"

"I am merely trying to explain to you Mac Lir's will in this, so that you may understand."

"I am aware of what you say is the god's command, but it does not make sense to me. Why would the god of the silvan people wish for us to interact with humans? Why would Mac Lir want to pollute his children with such as those?"

"Because regardless of your feelings in the matter, you can not deny that our people are dying out. There have not been any pure silvan babes born to our people since before our exodus to Sasheena."

"The birth of my son disproves your theory, brother!"

Rendolin looked at his brother in silence. Was Thelorin so blind? Could he not see the evidence of Mac Lir's logic when he looked at his mate and son? Rendolin shook his head sadly before continuing, "One child born every three hundred and fifty years will not save our race, Thelorin. Humans are a stronger people than ours. They have the capacity to overcome many situations that silvan can not. A race bred with human strength and abilities, along with the silvan race's magic and longevity, will be a race able to withstand the many rigors and threats that beset them from outside forces."

"What outside forces? You speak in riddles," Thelorin growled.

"The Sea Elves are not the only silvan race that is in danger of extinction, Thelorin. The god has told me there is a plan to eradicate *all* silvan folk from the face of the world. The Sea Elves are the first, but the Night Elves and Woodland Elves will also see extinction if we can not stop this evil now."

A look of astonishment flashed across Thelorin's face, only to be replaced with one of disbelief and rage.

"By all the sands in the sea! Not only would you taint our race with filthy alien blood, but now you twist the words of our god to force your will! This is sacrilege, and even the High Priest of Mac Lir can not commit such a crime and go unpunished!"

Thelorin's gray eyes were the color of boiling thunderclouds beneath his golden brows. An angry sneer was on his face as he stared at the younger elf.

"Thelorin, you do not understand," Rendolin began.

"I understand well enough," Thelorin cut him off. "As the Governor of Sasheena I should, by all that is decent, have you stripped of your office and held for trial." Sorrow replaced the rage, and he continued in a coaxing tone, "But because you are my brother, and I am convinced you are not in your right mind, I will delay your arrest until tomorrow. I know you will come to your senses tonight and announce that the

Binding will not take place, and no one need ever know of this terrible crime you contemplate."

His smile turned Rendolin's stomach. "The only person with authority to remove me from office is Mac Lir, as well you know," Rendolin answered in a low, angry voice. "If you have the audacity to have me arrested, I will not stand trial. The god will see to that!" His voice rose with each word, as the strength of his faith and conviction grew. "And if you were to put me to death, my brother, this merging of human and silvan races would still take place, for it is the will of the god, and a mere elf such as yourself can not stop this destiny!"

"You disgust me." Thelorin was furious. "All the Houses will stand with me on this. Already many of our people have stated their loathing of this Binding. Our people are arguing amongst themselves; uneasiness prevails throughout the countryside. If you persist in this charade—this abomination—there will be civil unrest and bloodshed will result. Would you have this on your hands, brother?"

"You could put a stop to it by simply siding with me. Mother believes in my vision. If you would but ask the god, he would make it clear to you, also."

"I will not lower myself to ask our god such a foolish question. You are misguided, priest. As for our mother believing you, it is quite simple. She has always pampered you, and since the death of our father, it has grown worse. I knew her coddling would warp your thinking someday, and obviously that day has arrived. I will not allow you to pollute our race, Rendolin. I order you to renounce this false vision, or by all you hold dear, I will see you in irons, god or no god!"

With that threat, Thelorin stormed out of the sanctuary, leaving Rendolin alone.

A night full of prayer and meditation had brought no answers to his questions, and he was forced to admit his brother's reasoning would attract followers.

The questioning voice of a young priest forced Rendolin's thoughts back to the present. He quickly dealt with the minor problem so he could return to his contemplation on how to serve both his people and his god.

Then, like a dragon landing on a daisy, a name crashed into his mind.

Feenix.

Of course. Korrene had told him she had created Feenix to fulfill the human requirement for the Binding. In fact, she had intended that Rendolin and Feenix be Bound as a means to save his people. Rendolin knew that Mac Lir was the creator of them all, of course, and that the god was the true author of this particular story. However, he also knew that Mac Lir had sent Feenix to Sasheena for some purpose. Why could it not be for this? However misguided Korrene had been in her thinking, Feenix was not immune to him, he knew. The warrior woman had let it be known on many occasions that she was interested.

Rising to his feet, his stiff legs protested the quickness in which he left the sanctuary to search for the human woman. If he could convince her to Bind with him today, the ceremony could take place immediately.

A part of him rebelled against the thought of Binding with anyone other than Korrene. The ache in his heart pulsed in time with his breathing. But his duty was clear. He had to save his people, and the only way was through the Binding.

Rendolin searched the practice grounds where he knew the captain could be found teaching the young

adults the art of warfare.

It was ironic that a woman versed in death would hold the key to his people's life.

Watching the warrior woman block a fierce sword thrust, sending her opponent into the dust, Rendolin smiled thinly and advanced into the yard.

The god's will be done.

Feenix saw Rendolin approaching and moved to meet him.

"Hello, my friend," she greeted him. "What brings you to the training grounds? By the way, I'm sorry to hear about the woman. I didn't like her much, but I know you had plans for her."

Feenix wiped her sweaty face on a dusty tunic and ran her hands over her hair, pushing damp tresses away from her face while she was talking. Long hair bound in a plait hung down her back. Some of the tendrils had worked loose and the moisture had caused them to curl and cling to her cheeks and forehead. Those curls reminded Rendolin of Korrene.

The sight of the warrior woman squeezed his heart and he was convinced he would die from the pain. In fact, Feenix put him in mind of the other human woman. They had the same pert nose, long neck, full lips and dark hair. Feenix's eyes were the deep blue of a lake, where Korrene's were a delicious brown. Feenix's complexion was clear of the small freckles that graced Korrene's nose.

Ignoring her remarks about the dead woman, Rendolin took her by the arm, moving away from the enclosed area.

"Hey," she said, pulling her arm from his grasp, "what's the matter? Where are we going?"

"Captain Feenix," he began in a firm voice, "I have a need to speak with you. It is a matter of great importance."

Rendolin watched her face, detecting concern, worry and speculation, but nowhere did he read annoyance.

"Let me wash up and I'll join you at the House in an hour."

"Aye," he agreed before turning and walking away, his mind already on the difficult task of persuading his people to accept the Binding with a human, and with Feenix as that human.

In a little less than an hour, Feenix joined him in the large sitting room where his mother and Korrene had first met. He pushed the memory roughly from his mind and concentrated on the duty ahead of him.

"Welcome, Captain Feenix," he said, holding a glass out to her. "May I offer you some wine?"

"Thank you," Feenix said, taking it. "What was it you wanted to talk about?"

True to form, Feenix went right to the heart of the matter. Rendolin had hoped for a little small talk to help calm his jitters. No wonder she was such a success against her opponents. She did not allow them time to plan a strategy.

"Are you aware of the Binding that was to take place between Korrene and myself?"

"I had heard something, but I'm not sure my information was correct. Why don't you tell me about it?"

In as few words as possible he explained the situation. He told her of his people's problem and how the god had given him the solution. He briefly explained about the Binding and how it was to have fused Korrene and his souls together for eternity so that they could form a new race, stronger and better able to survive.

When he finally stopped speaking, she turned from him and took a deep sip of the wine. He watched as she swallowed the rest in one large gulp.

"So what does this have to do with me?" she asked, holding her glass out to be refilled.

"As you know, Korrene's body was discovered a few days ago," he explained, ignoring her glass. "She was the chosen of the god to Bind with me. I need to Bind with another human in order to save my people. I would ask if that woman would be you."

"Damn, elf, you're not asking too much, are you?" Feenix took the bottle from Rendolin's hand and poured another glass of the pale wine. "What makes you think I'd want to Bind with you?"

"I know you find me...interesting. It is enough for me."

"Well, I don't know if it's enough for me! Why would I want to be stuck for all eternity with an elf who is in love with some other woman?" Gulping the second glass down, she glared at him over the rim of the delicate crystal glass.

While he had admitted to himself that he loved Korrene, he was not ready to hear that truth from anyone else. Her smile angered him and he wanted to wipe it from her face.

"Nothing has been said of love, Feenix. While it is true I do not love you, I find you attractive and intelligent. I believe we would deal well together. For my people's sake, I would be willing to try."

"For your *people's* sake," she repeated flinging the glass against the stone mantle. "I could not care less about your damned *people*, Rendolin! What about *me*? What do *I* get out of it?"

Rendolin watched her put the bottle to her lips and drink deeply. Some of the liquid trickled out of the side of her mouth and dripped off her firm chin onto her breast. He had never noticed before that Feenix was much larger than Korrene. He much preferred a firmer and tauter breast than the heavy load the captain carried. He closed his eyes in despair as he remembered the feel and weight of Korrene's breast in his palm. His mouth went dry. The loss squeezed his heart in despair.

"You," he began, wetting his lips to allow the words to be spoken. "You will have all the honor and respect due to my Bonded Mate, along with the undying gratitude of my people." Seeing the sneer begin to move across her face, he quickly continued. "You will live much longer than most humans, for your blood will have been mingled with silvan."

"Great! I will live a long and prosperous life with an elf who does not love me. Just what I've always wanted." She looked him in the eyes, and he thought for a moment that he detected regret. "No thanks, elf. I won't Bind with you. Find yourself another human."

Her words surprised him. While he did not particularly want to Bind with Feenix, he had been sure she would agree. The god's will must be done, and she was attracted to him, he knew it.

"Why?"

"Why indeed?" she said under her breath, as if trying to understand her own words. She took another deep drink from the bottle before answering him. "You were right, you know, about me wanting you."

I've watched you, Rendolin. I've longed for you to take me up on my offers, but you always found a polite way to put me off. I've dreamed of you holding me, of us in my bed, of what you could do with those beautiful hands, and I wonder at myself for not taking your deal and keeping my mouth shut. But I can't do it. Even I have more pride than to take the leavings of another woman. Find yourself another human to breed your new race. This one won't be your brood mare."

Rendolin watched as she wiped the wine from the corner of her mouth with the back of her hand. Tipping the bottle up, she realized it was empty. With a snort she tossed it onto the couch and turned to face him squarely. She stood with feet planted, hands slightly away from her body; yet close enough to reach her sword if the need arose.

He was struck again by the similarities in the women. A deep part of him was thankful she had refused his offer. It would have killed him to be Bonded for eternity to a constant reminder of his lost love. Even for his people and his god, he did not think he had it in him to survive such torture.

"Then my people are doomed," he said softly.

"You give up pretty easily, don't you, elf?" Her words struck him like a slap in the face.

"What do you know of such things? You, who fight and kill at the command of others, who hire out to do the dirty work of her superiors? You have no idea of the importance of this Binding. There is no other human female to fulfill the commandment."

"Easy, elf, or you'll find out I don't do *all* my killing at the bidding of someone else. I can kill on my own, too."

He watched her rage simmering under the surface, and knew she was close to losing her temper completely. Just as bewildered and confused as she was, Rendolin understood some of her pain and rage.

"I have not given up, Feenix, but I admit I am at a standstill right now."

"So go meditate or commune or whatever the hell it is you priests do when you're looking for answers. Just don't expect to find your answers here. This human female wants none of your leftover duty."

Captain Feenix swept out of the room with the grace of a queen.

He stood in the middle of the room, staring at the spot where she had been swallowed up by the wall. He could not commune. He could not think. He could not meditate. Even if the god were trying to answer his prayers, he could not hear him... because all he could hear was his heart telling him how much he missed Korrene. The memories were poignant and potent. They were overpowering and he could not escape from them.

What was the use of running from them anyway? If he locked them up in his heart and never let them out, they would overpower and destroy him. Better to face the memories and pain head on. Perhaps that way he could come through the other side of the grief in one piece.

Suddenly Rendolin lifted his head and his breath caught in his throat. If he could not escape them, and if he was going to face them, the best place to do that would be in Korrene's home. He would go back and take his grief to a place where he could be alone to work through it. He would go to where her scent was overwhelming and the sight of her possessions could ease his pain. Or kill him with its weight. It did not matter much to Rendolin. He would go to Korrene's world and wrestle his demons.

He touched the headband and spoke the magical words.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"Kory, I'm back!" Pat called from outside the closed bathroom door. Kory had decided to take a hot bubble bath to relax her sore and tired muscles. She was still weepy every time she thought of losing Rendolin, but at least she was beginning to function again.

They had sat up throughout most of the night, until Pat had convinced Kory to go to bed and get some rest. Pat made the couch into a bed and both women had slept until noon.

After finding nothing to eat in the kitchen, Pat decided to go to the market. They had made up a list of things they needed. Number one on Kory's list had been Double Chocolate ice cream and lots of chocolate and caramel candy bars. Pat's included more nutritional needs such as milk, eggs, bread, a couple of thick steaks and salad makings.

A salad wouldn't be out of order, Kory supposed as she got out of the bathtub, although she was looking forward more to the chocolate.

Kory dressed and made her way to the kitchen where wonderful smells were stealing through the air. Her stomach growled and she realized she hadn't put anything in it for more than twenty-four hours, other than coffee. A decent meal would go down pretty well, she decided.

"Feel any better?" Pat asked as she tossed the salad and munched on a piece of cucumber.

"Some. But my head is killing me."

"Sinus headache," Pat nodded. "I always get them when I have a crying jag. After you eat you'll feel better."

"Do I look as bad as I feel?"

Pat looked at her then grinned a bit. "Not if you like swollen eyes and red noses."

"Thanks, Pat. You always were good for my ego."

"I bought two extra boxes of tissues, just in case."

"I don't know how to thank you," Kory replied dryly. *I must be coping*, she thought to herself; *I'm getting my sense of humor back*.

Depressed at the thought, tears stung her eyes again.

The women ate the meal mostly in silence, each deep in her own thoughts.

"Where are those candy bars?" Kory asked as she got up to clear the table.

"In a bag above the refrigerator. I thought I'd put them high up. You know, 'out of sight, out of mind'?"

"No such luck, Pat. The only thing that's going to keep me from that chocolate is a miracle."

They cleaned up the kitchen together, Kory breaking down only once as she remembered doing dishes at the sink the first morning Rendolin appeared. The realization that she would never see him again, except in memories, caused her to head for the bathroom with a new box of tissues, leaving Pat to quietly finish drying the dishes and start another pot of coffee.

"I'm going to check out the news," Pat called to Kory as she walked into the living room. "I want to see what the weather is going to—who the hell are you?"

Pat's scream startled Kory. Jumping up from the edge of the tub, she rushed into the living room and stopped dead in her tracks.

"Korrene?" The shock of seeing her was in Rendolin's voice and mirrored in his face. For a fleeting second pure joy made his eyes glow with love and tenderness, but that glow was quickly replaced with anger and disbelief.

"Rendolin," she cried and ran to him, expecting him to open his arms and welcome her.

"You know this guy?" Pat's words barely registered as the rage in Rendolin's eyes stopped Kory.

Kory ignored her sister-in-law as she looked intently into Rendolin's beloved face. Tears of joy threatened to spill down her face.

Rendolin made no move to welcome her into his arms.

"I'm so glad you came for me, Rendolin," Kory said with a tentative smile. She didn't know what he was waiting for, but the look on his face and his silence were beginning to worry her. "How did you find me?"

"I came to mourn the death of a woman I thought I knew," his normally musical voice sounded hoarse and gruff. "Instead I find her very much alive. I find a traitor and a liar."

The pain couldn't have been fiercer if he had hit her in the face. She thought for a moment she would collapse under the weight of his rage and disgust. But her legs stood firm and her mind screamed at her to say something—anything—to take away his disdain.

"What's he talking about, Kory?" Pat demanded. "Who the hell is this guy and why is he throwing insults at you?"

Like a little bantam hen worrying over her chick, Pat stepped between Kory and Rendolin in an attempt to get their attention. Ignoring her, they continued to stare at each other—he with rage and derision, she in longing and sorrow.

"I don't know who you are, buddy," Pat yelled at Rendolin, "but if you don't leave right this minute, I'm calling the cops!"

Rendolin merely continued to look over her head at Kory, a sneer marring his normally beautiful features. His lovely emerald eyes had turned a flat green, the left eyebrow raised in disdain. "When did you and Thelorin make your plans, woman? How long did you plot behind my back for the ruin of the god's plan?"

"No," she whispered, taking a step towards him. "It wasn't like that at all. I..."

"Silence! I will hear no more lies from you, Korrene."

"I didn't lie, Rendolin! You knew all along that I wanted to return to my home."

"You told me you accepted the Binding." His eyes changed again, to a deep moss green. "Was that a lie? Were the kisses lies, too, Korrene? Did you lie in my arms, gritting your teeth as you waited patiently for Thelorin to save you from me?"

Kory felt numb, like a boxer who should have thrown in the towel two rounds earlier. Too much had

happened in such a short time.

"That's it! I'm calling the police."

Pat moved towards the phone, but Rendolin prevented her from reaching it with a flick of his hand and a strange word. The smell of rosemary permeated the room, and Kory realized he had used magic to halt her sister-in-law's movement.

"What did you do to her?" Kory raced to Pat's side. The terror in Pat's eyes sent a chill down Kory's spine. "Undo the magic right now, Rendolin! Pat has nothing to do with our quarrel."

"She will come to no harm. The spell will dissipate in a few minutes." He stepped toward Kory and made a move to clasp her arm, but she ducked and avoided his reach.

"I want to know why you think I plotted with your brother." Surprised to realize she still had some fight left in her, Kory was relieved to know she hadn't turned into a complete wimp on his appearance.

"On Sasheena it is believed that you are dead. The body of a woman washed up beneath the cliffs and she wore your outland clothes. Tell me you know nothing of this, Korrene."

"Well, yes I knew..."

"The only person with the power to teleport you here who had a reason to stop our Binding is my brother. He could not have accomplished this without your aid."

"I admit that when he first offered to send me home I said yes, but that..."

"And did you plan with him to substitute another woman for yourself, to make me think you were dead?"

"I knew he was going to fake my death so you wouldn't follow me here, but he assured me the woman was already dead and that was before..."

Rendolin cut her off with another chopping motion of his hand. "So you deliberately deceived me in an attempt to prevent me from obeying the god's command."

"Will you let me explain? The day of the picnic..."

"Ah. Yes, the picnic. The day you pledged to Bind with me. The day I began to believe we could find eternal happiness together. What a fool I was!"

Kory couldn't bear to see the loathing and hatred in his eyes. She needed to let him know that her return home had been a mistake. That Thelorin had forced her to return.

She moved to stand a hair's breadth away from him and put her hand on his chest. Looking up into his angry face, she tried to explain one more time.

"I changed my mind the day of the picnic, Rendolin. I had decided not to go home. I wanted to stay with you. But Thelorin wouldn't listen to me! He forced me to return here."

She could see he didn't believe her and that her words were not helping the situation.

"If you do not stop spouting lies, madam," he said in a deadly quiet tone, "I will silence you permanently." Again the faint trace of rosemary wafted to her nose, and she knew he would make good on his threat.

"Rendolin," she tried again, "please believe me!"

He stepped away from her hand, as if contact with her somehow contaminated him. "Madam, I will never believe another word that comes out of your mouth."

"But the Binding—your people—what will you do?"

"Never fear, a Binding will take place. Even believing you were dead could not stop the command of the god."

Her stomach sank as Kory realized he planned to Bind with someone else. Had she meant so little to him that he would find someone so soon after her death?

"Feenix." The name set her teeth on edge. "You asked Feenix to Bind with you, didn't you?" The anger that raced through her body shocked Kory. How could he Bind with that bloodthirsty woman?

"When you told me your first lie, Korrene, you gave up any right to participate in the planning of the Binding Ceremony."

Kory couldn't believe his voice could be so cold.

"A Binding will take place, with or without your consent."

"So what are you doing here?" she asked sarcastically. "Why aren't you back at Sasheena making happy with Feenix?"

For a second she thought she detected confusion in his eyes, but it was quickly replaced with another emotion she couldn't name.

Rendolin looked around the room. "Is there anything you want to bring?"

"What do you mean?" She couldn't prevent the little leap of joy her heart made. She must have misunderstood him. "Where am I going?"

"I am taking you back to Sasheena. Mac Lir has decreed that I am to Bind with you, and so it shall be."

"But you just said you will never trust me, so why would you want to Bind with me?" Kory wouldn't trust herself to believe her good luck. He wanted her!

"I did not say I wanted to Bind with you." He turned to look at her with contempt. "I said Mac Lir has ordered it. I shall obey him."

Again her hopes were dashed. She was sure this yo-yo of emotions was going to be the death of her.

"I've changed my mind. I don't want to Bind with you after all." Never would she admit to him again that she wanted eternity with him.

He stalked across the room and clasped her narrow wrist in his long fingers, causing a frisson of chills to run up her arm and trickle into her belly.

"You have no choice, Korrene. I ask again. Is there anything you would bring?"

Damn him, and damn her heart. She wanted to go with him more than she'd ever wanted anything in her life. She couldn't refuse him again. Even if he hated her for the rest of her life, being with him was better than life without him.

"What about Pat? What will happen to her?"

"As I said, she will be well. The spell will be gone in a few more moments."

"Can she hear us? Does she know what's been going on here?"

"She has all her faculties except movement."

Kory looked over at her friend. "Then why can't she talk?"

"Because she can not move her mouth or throat." He gave her another impatient look. "Are you ready to leave?"

"Wait." Kory moved towards Pat, and Rendolin let her go. Kory knew she couldn't leave her without an explanation. "Pat, please forgive me. I love you, but I have to go. I hope you understand." She thought she saw confusion and sadness in Pat's eyes, but she also believed she read understanding.

"I love him," Kory whispered to her. "I don't know why, but I have to be with him. Even if he hates me. Maybe later, when he's not so angry, I can convince him that I didn't lie to him." She waited, hoping for some sort of sound or sign, but none came other than a tear glistening in Pat's eye.

"I love you, Patti. Take care of yourself, and give the kids a hug and kiss for me." Kory leaned over and wrapped her arms around the only friend she'd ever had for longer than three months. "I'm gonna miss you, girl." She wiped a tear from her eyes and smoothed the hair back from Pat's face. "Think of me, happy and content, living in my own world." She kissed the still cheek. "I love you."

"Are you ready?" Rendolin asked as she stepped away from Pat. He averted his eyes when she looked at him.

"Give me a minute. There are some things I want to take."

"Be quick about it, woman," he commanded. "We must return and prepare for the Binding."

Kory walked into the bedroom with a disgusted sigh. "Your precious Binding can wait five minutes!"

There was little in her life Kory felt important enough to take. All her family was dead, except for Pat and her children. Being passed around from one foster home to another for so many years precluded any close friends she might need to contact. She had nothing of value other than her computer, which of course she could not bring. But she did want to remember her loved ones.

Kory headed straight for her cluttered bureau and picked up two of the photos that nestled there like drunken soldiers. She picked up a family portrait in an antique silver frame. Tentatively she touched the face of a smiling, dark-haired man. He had laughing blue eyes that crinkled in the corners.

"Dad," she whispered. "I miss you."

Her gaze moved to the tiny woman at his side. She had short curly brown hair. She was laughing at the camera, and her brown eyes were closed. But Kory remembered the exact shade of brown; like a polished piece of amber, they used to glow when she was happy. Her father had his arm around her mother's shoulders, and it looked like he was holding her up because she was laughing so hard. He had been.

"Mom, I miss your laugh. I wish you were here to tell me what I should do." Then Kory smiled mistily. "I guess I wouldn't take your advice, though."

Her fingertip slipped down to the blond youth standing next to her own eight-year-old self. The camera

had caught him in the act of pulling her shoulder length hair. He was sticking his tongue out at her, and she was captured forever in the act of tickling him.

David had been a wonderful big brother. They had fought, played and laughed together every day. He taught her how to climb trees and catch snakes. She taught him how to jump rope and dress a baby doll. Davy. She never had such a friend as her brother. She didn't think she ever would again.

The photographer had been her Gramma Kiteridge, her mom's mom. Kory remembered that day. They had all gone to the zoo and then to the park for a picnic. Kory had always loved picnics. It was only about seven months after that day at the zoo that her family was killed in the car accident. Gramma Kiteridge had died a few months later.

Next Kory picked up a picture of herself and Herb on their wedding day. She wore white, of course. The dress had come from a second hand store and she'd made the veil. It had been a beautiful dress, though, long, full of imitation pearls and lots of lovely lace. She had felt like a fairy princess in it.

"Herb," she said to his smiling face. "I've found someone new." She smiled and went on, "Actually, I don't know if you'd call an elf *someone*. But I've talked with you about him before. It's Rendolin. You know, the hero of my story? Well, I don't exactly know how it happened, but he's real and I love him." She touched the picture. "I'm going to take you with me because I don't want to forget you. I'll always love you, but now it's time for me to start a whole new life. I know you're happy for me. I can feel it."

She hugged the picture for a moment, then looked at it again. "I miss you, hon."

Kory picked up both photographs and walked back into the living room. Rendolin was standing where she had left him, with his feet braced apart and his hands on his hips. The look on his face was one of long suffering.

"Are you ready?"

"Yes. No!" she answered. "Just one more thing." And she jogged into the kitchen.

Reaching up to the top of the refrigerator, Kory took down the brown paper bag that held about ten chocolate and caramel candy bars.

Turning to the counter next to the sink, she opened the cabinet, took down a large unopened can of coffee, and put it into the bag. She thought about the coffee pot, but remembered there would be no electricity where she was going.

She returned to Rendolin's side and nodded.

"That is all you will take?" he asked, surprised at how little she had.

"I don't care about the rest," she said. "Pat can do what she wants with the stuff."

He took her wrist again, but this time his grip wasn't as strong. With a last look around the apartment she had called home for the past two years, Kory was ready.

"Goodbye, Pat," she called to her stiff sister-in-law. "I'll miss you."

Then Rendolin touched his headband and spoke his foreign words. Kory's nose was assaulted by rosemary and then her world dropped out from under her feet. She closed her eyes and felt her body spin, and then there was nothing.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"By the god's right ear!"

Rendolin threw the goblet of wine across the room and watched it drip down the wall. "She lied to me, mother! She deliberately plotted with Thelorin to keep me from performing the god's will."

He stood with his back to Elawae, his arms crossed and his back straight as a plank. He wanted to return to her room and shake Korrene until her teeth rattled. Instead he forced his hands to be still by tucking them under his arms.

"Perhaps Korrene did not understand the importance of the Binding, my son," Elawae tried to reason with him. "Or perhaps she simply wanted to go home, back to her own people."

He swung around to face her, mouth tightly drawn in an effort to keep unwanted, unexpected tears of rage at bay. "She understood the importance, mother. How could she not? Whether she knew it or not, for months she has been doing the god's bidding, tapping into our world, preparing herself for this Ceremony. The very fact that she thought she created our world—created this situation—shows that the god has been preparing her."

"Then perhaps she was not ready to accept the god's will. Not everyone is as duty bound as you, my son. Has the god ever spoken with her as he speaks to you?"

Rendolin waved her question away. "He only speaks to his priests, as you should know. But I myself explained the Binding to Korrene. She understood the importance of it. She agreed to Bind with me." He swallowed deeply, trying to free himself from the threat of tears. "We came to an understanding at the meadow. The Joyous River named her, mother." To his dismay, the effort to keep the tears at bay caused his voice to crack.

Turning away from her, he continued, "She knew what she was doing as she plotted with Thelorin to fake her death. I will never trust her again. How can I Bind to her if I can not trust her?"

He knew his mother was looking at him in pity. Gods, how could he have been so blind as to expect a *human* to abide by an agreement? Had he not been warned? And by his own flesh and blood.

But the god had told him Korrene was his soul mate. He had felt the attachment, the beginning of love and trust. The god would not lead him astray. Korrene was his mate, and for the sake of his people, the Binding would go forth.

But by Mac Lir's beard, how could he give his heart to her when she had proved to be so deceitful?

"Where is Korrene now?"

"She is in her room sleeping. For some reason, teleportation seems to have a strange effect on her. She always arrives unconscious. She will awaken in a few hours."

A tense silence blanketed the room as Elawae watched her youngest son wrestle with his emotions.

"What will you do now?"

In three quick strides he moved to the fireplace and leaned against the mantle. Picking up the dolphin figurine, he fought the urge to fling it against the wall as he had done the goblet. He had never behaved so

violently in his entire life. His life as a high priest had not prepared him for the anger and rage that he felt at Kory's disloyalty. While he was angry with Korrene and dismayed at her betrayal, he was consumed by unreasonable rage towards his brother.

"I must confront Thelorin, of course."

"Oh, Ren. Please wait until you have calmed down. Nothing good will come of it if you face him in anger."

"I fear there is not enough time in eternity for me to calm down. Not only did my intended mate lie and deceive me, but my own brother planned to make a fool of me. More than that, mother, he deliberately plotted to disobey our god. And he then had the audacity to accuse me of misusing my office!"

Rendolin could not sit or stand still. The thought of his own brother causing so much turmoil and potential harm to his people made his blood boil. "How can he think he is doing right by our people? I do not understand what he is thinking."

"When will you speak with him?" At the sound of his mother's worried voice, Rendolin felt a pang of guilt. He knew she hated to have her sons at odds. But this issue was too important to the Sea Elves and to the god to let pass without some sort of confrontation. As much as he loved his brother, their difference of opinion on the subject of the Sea Elves' possible extinction had to be resolved.

"I have sent for him to meet me here as soon as possible. I know you do not like to see us argue, but I would greatly appreciate your presence during our talk." He did not know how he could keep from coming to blows with Thelorin, but if their mother were here, he'd have a better chance of controlling his anger.

"I will stay, for I too have something to say to your brother. But I will be very displeased, Rendolin, if you two do not settle your differences in a civilized manner."

He smiled a thin smile at his mother's words. Thelorin might be the Lord of Sasheena, and Rendolin might be the High Priest of Mac Lir, but Elawae was the Lady of the House of Hiloris and few could say no when she issued a command, including her children.

"It shall be as you wish, but I am still sorely tempted to pummel some sense into him!"

Elawae turned the topic of discussion from her sons' confrontation to that of the impending Binding. "When will the Ceremony take place?"

"I have spoken with Lord Selrin and he agreed that the Ceremony should be two days hence."

"Selrin will officiate?"

Finally sitting down, Rendolin tried to concentrate on his mother's words. "Yes. He holds the highest office in Mac Lir's service, beside myself."

"And you can not very well officiate at your own Binding," his mother agreed.

"I do not see why not," Thelorin spoke from the other side of the room. "Rendolin seems to think he can do anything. Why not officiate at his own Binding?"

Fighting the urge to defend himself from his older brother's barbed words, Rendolin stood glaring at his brother. The need to be on the defensive with Thelorin was becoming a habit he did not enjoy. His frustration at his brother's lack of support, coupled with his fear of failure to save his people, resulted in

Rendolin always feeling inadequate around the older elf.

It had not always been so. Before the god's command to find the human woman and Bind with her, the brothers had shared a strong and loving relationship.

Just as Rendolin was the spiritual leader of the People of the Sea, Thelorin was their ruler. Thelorin had always before been able to look at a problem and find the best solution. Rendolin looked up to his brother and admired the just and fair way he governed. However, their relationship had been more than the hero worship of a younger brother toward an older one.

Rendolin had been a young boy when their people had been forced to flee their ancient home in Shalridor to the hidden island of Sasheena. He could still remember his fear on that dreary morning in his childhood when Thelorin woke him and instructed him to hurry and get dressed.

The city had been under attack from the Night Elves for months. Many young and brave elves had met their death or been captured by their evil kin. The Sea Elves did not have the expertise in combat to successfully defend their home. They were a peaceful people, content to till the fertile land around their city, fish the seas and build beautiful magical ships, called *Lunteena*. They also traded with other seaports, and life was very good and pleasant.

The Night Elves had decided to wage war on the peaceful community, and were winning. They had always been a bloodthirsty people, often hiring out their swords as mercenaries to any country or land-hungry lord who could afford the fee. Suddenly without warning, they had turned their blood lust on their own cousins, and the war had not gone well for Rendolin's people.

On the morning he was abruptly woken, a small contingent of sea elves had decided to take the battle to the heart of the Night Elves' own city, Cragamore. Led by the hero, Leondrilik, the small band of brave elves had staged a battle, allowing the women, children and old ones to silently board a *Lunteena* and escape to Sasheena.

None of Leondrilik's company, which included Rendolin's father, had ever made their way to Sasheena. It was believed they had all given their lives to allow their people a chance to reach the island.

Rendolin remembered the grief and pain he had felt upon learning his father was dead. The only thing that made that time bearable was his brother, Thelorin.

The older brother became like a second father to the young elf. Thelorin taught him how to use a spear, how to sail a *lunteena*, and had been there when his younger brother drank too much wine and made his first pass at a woman. It was to Thelorin that Rendolin went when the god, Mac Lir, first chose him to be his servant. The High Priest remembered well the feeling of pride and joy when Thelorin had proudly proclaimed to the Five Houses his brother's calling.

His heart was heavy at the loss of that camaraderie, but as Mac Lir's servant, Rendolin could not allow Thelorin to upset the god's plan. His duty was clear and it saddened him that his brother would not, or could not, support him in this. In all the years of admiring and honoring his brother, he had never realized how narrow-minded Thelorin was when it actually came to other races. The knowledge sickened him.

"Lately I have noticed, Thelorin," Elawae's voice broke through Rendolin's thoughts, "that you have acquired the unfortunate habit of insulting your brother as soon as you walk into a room. It is a habit beneath the dignity of the Lord of Sasheena, and as your mother," she paused for breath, "I know you were taught better manners."

The two brothers glared at each other and ignored the diminutive woman. Drawing the dignity of

countless years as the Lady of Sasheena, Elawae's piercing turquoise eyes glared at her eldest son, drawing his attention back to her.

"Thelorin, apologize immediately to your brother."

The Lord of Sasheena made a formal bow to his mother, then straightened to his full height.

"As much as it pains me to disobey you, mother, I can not apologize to my brother. Rendolin has somehow developed an ego of grandiose proportions," he said stiffly, "and I feel it is my duty, as governor, to put a stop to this ludicrous plan to Bind with a human female."

"And you care not how you achieve this goal, do you, brother?" Rendolin's voice whipped through the air and jerked Thelorin's attention back to him. "Even at the cost of your honor!"

"What do you remember of honor, little brother?" scorned Thelorin. "You would lower yourself to actually mate with a human! You are not fit to be the spiritual leader of our people—you who would pollute our blood with such filth!"

Intent upon forcing the slur against Korrene down Thelorin's throat, Rendolin charged across the room—only to be stopped by Elawae as she stepped between the furious men.

"Enough of this," she ordered. "By all that is holy and held sacred by our people, I have never heard such words spoken, brother to brother!" She placed her small hands, one on each of their chests as if her slight strength could force them apart.

"What would you have me do, Mother?" Thelorin demanded. "As the Governor of Sasheena it is my duty to protect our people and administer to them in their best interests. The mingling of human blood with silvan is not in our people's best interest. I must put a stop to it!"

"Mac Lir has spoken to me, his High Priest, and has commanded that this thing must take place in order for our people to survive! In my office as High Priest to our people," Rendolin continued, "I must see to the interests of our people. The god has commanded. It is our duty to obey. There is no alternative, Governor."

Thelorin turned away in frustration, walking a couple of paces towards the mantle before turning back to face his family.

"How can you even consider Binding with a human, Rendolin?" he asked in a confused tone. "I do not understand how you can stomach the thought of such a thing."

"It amazes me that I could have raised a child who is so blind," Elawae murmured as she stared at her eldest son.

"There is no choice," Rendolin answered his brother. "The god has commanded this. I must obey. You know this, for you confirmed me at my calling and vowed to uphold my office as the head of Mac Lir's church so many years ago. I do not understand why you will not support this decision."

"I will not support the contamination of our people with this proposed obscenity. I do not believe the god would ask it of our people, and I will do all in my power to prevent this abomination."

"Even to the plotting with the human woman against me to betray my duty! Tell me, Governor," Rendolin said with a sneer he had learned from Thelorin. "Did you kill the human found at the bottom of the cliff yourself, or did you have one of your 'purist' followers do your dirty work?"

"Why, you snot-nosed, sanctimonious idiot," his brother snarled. "There are ways of attaining one's goal without resorting to violence, which I would think a pious, self-righteous fool such as yourself should already know."

"Thelorin!" Elawae said in great concern. "You did not have that young woman killed, did you?"

Her eldest son gave her a disgusted look before answering.

"Of course not, Mother. Rendolin is just letting his overactive imagination run away with him. Much like he must have done when he convinced himself the god had chose him to save our people by this abomination of a Binding."

"I believe him," Elawae said simply.

Rendolin watched his brother's face go from disbelief to anger.

"So! He has somehow beguiled *you* into believing this hoax as well? Well, neither of you will change my mind on the subject, madam, and I regret the necessity of a rift between us, but I will fight this Binding with every ounce of strength in me!"

"And what of your duty to our people?" Rendolin asked him. "You would deliberately act in a way that would cause civil unrest between our people? What of your oh so honorable oath to protect them?"

"It is not I who has chosen a course that will bring shame and dishonor to our people, High Priest. You have it in your power to stop this unrest before it becomes civil war." Thelorin looked at his mother, and Rendolin saw sorrow reflected on his brother's face for a moment. "Renounce this vision you claim you had, brother, and there will be no reason for division between our people, or us."

Suddenly Rendolin felt very tired. The disagreement between them would never go away until something drastic was done. He was very much afraid blood would be spilled over the issue, and his heart was heavy over the thought.

"I can not renounce what I know, Thelorin. The vision was sent from Mac Lir. I know it, as I know my own name. I could no more disavow our god than I could deny you are my brother. No, Thelorin," he said, shaking his head, "I have my duty to perform, as you have yours. I will go through with this Binding, for it is commanded by Mac Lir."

Rendolin met his brother's angry gaze, defiance in his stance and the pain of betrayal in his heart. What he would not give to have his brother stand by him and support him in this duty. However, he knew that could not be. Thelorin was too set in his ways and in his intolerance. Strange to think that before he knew Korrene, Rendolin had been as prejudiced as his narrow-minded brother.

The thought of Korrene brought even more heartache to him. Not only had he come to realize his bias against humans was ill founded, he had come to care very deeply for her. His ingrained sense of honor would not allow him to lie, even to himself. He had fallen in love with her. He did not know how it had happened, but he could not deny the fact.

He watched, as Thelorin's look abruptly changed, as if he had suddenly solved a problem that had been worrying him for some time.

"By the god's right ear," Thelorin breathed in disbelief. "You are in love with that human! You poor, misguided fool."

Thelorin turned and walked through the wall, shaking his head sadly.

Rendolin was left to silently agree. He was a fool.

He stood in the middle of the room for a moment, then wearily threw himself onto the couch. Elawae moved to one of the upholstered chairs opposite him. He felt her concerned gaze upon him, but he was too tired and discouraged to speak. How had things gotten so out of hand? All he wanted to do was obey his god and do his duty. Somehow, the situation had become so complicated he did not know what to do to accomplish his goals.

What price, duty? The price of his brother's love? The price of his honor?

The price of his people's blood?

It was too much to ask. He was not up to the challenge. He would never be strong enough to fulfill this obligation to his god, and at the same time satisfy his commitment to his people.

For the first time in his life, Rendolin found that service to his god was not a welcome thing. He realized he had never truly understood the term *sacrifice* when referring to his god before.

Rendolin was afraid he would have total understanding of the term before his duty was discharged.

Again his mind turned to the human woman sleeping in an upstairs room. What of his love for her? Could he ever come to trust her again? What if he tried to make her fall in love with him? Would he then be able to trust her? But how could he do that? It was obvious she had no feelings for him, or she would not have plotted with his brother to betray him.

How could he Bind with a woman that had no feelings for him? The thought of an eternity Bonded to a person who did not love him was more than he could bear to consider. What alternative did he have? In order to save his people, Korrene and he must Bind. Again, the word *sacrifice* flitted through his mind. Sacrifice for his people.

Remembering the feel and touch of Korrene's body, the way she walked, the freckles sprinkled across her turned up nose, the way her eyes crinkled when she laughed, he thought that perhaps eternity with her would not be such a hard sacrifice.

But, oh, how much more satisfying it would be if she could come to love him, even just a little.

"Rendolin," his mother spoke softly to gain his attention. "We must make plans for the Ceremony. You will obviously hold it in the sanctuary hall, but whom will you invite, and where will the Celebration Feast be held? I can not believe your brother will allow the Feast to be held here in his House."

He dragged his thoughts back to the present. His mother was right. Plans had to be made, and she was the logical one to organize everything.

"Where would you suggest we hold the Celebration? You are right. Thelorin will forbid it to take place here. In fact, I am surprised he has allowed Korrene and me to remain in the House, knowing I intend to go through with this 'abomination' as he calls it."

"He would not throw his own brother out of the House, Rendolin," she said in shocked tones. "It would not be an honorable thing, even if you are at each other's throats at the moment. Perhaps we should think of removing Korrene to another House for now. I do not want him being rude to her, and I am sure he would not hesitate to insult her again should he meet her in the dining hall or here in the sitting room."

"Perhaps Selrin would extend the courtesy of his House's hospitality until the Binding takes place. After, we will need to have a place of our own, of course."

"Have you given much thought as to where you will live?"

Actually, Rendolin had. Under normal circumstances, he would have brought his mate to live here in the House of Hiloris, but with his brother's attitude towards Korrene, such a thing was totally out of the question.

"I have, mother, but I would prefer to wait and see if it is possible to accomplish before I say anything."

Elawae looked a little surprised that he would keep such a thing from her, but she agreed to wait for the location. She did not want to push this overwhelmed son of hers too far.

As they stood to leave the room, each with their own duties and occupations to attend to, Feenix burst upon them.

"If you don't want to have a riot on your hands," she yelled, dirt and dust covering her face and clothes like a shroud, "you'd better get your sorry ass out there and put a stop to your brother's speech! He's telling the people you have lost your mind and are misinterpreting visions from the god!"

Wonderful, Rendolin thought as he rushed from the room. His brother was not wasting any time in doing his duty! What would his god require of him next?

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Kory had written scenes similar to this in many stories. The heroine wakes up in an unfamiliar place, confused and disoriented until she gets her bearings or until the hero comes along and makes everything clear.

But, like so many other things she had learned lately, reality wasn't anywhere close to fiction.

Kory knew exactly where she was. She didn't have to open her eyes and look at the large, spacious room, see the carved bed or even look toward the wall with the open window. She could tell she was back in Sasheena just by the smell and the sounds.

Soft whispers of waves kissing wet sand and foam racing across the beach reached her ears, bringing back a memory of a passion-filled evening on the same beach. Faintly, the calls of gulls wheeling in the air made a sweet melody sung in time with the waves.

And the smells...drifting through the window on a gentle breeze was the clean, fresh scent of ocean air, an odd mix of salt tang with a dash of fish. It was strange how she had come to love the pungent aroma of Rendolin's home. Kory couldn't remember having such a strong sense of smell before coming to Sasheena. Perhaps it had something to do with the magical island itself.

She sniffed a few times, but could not detect her elf's personal scent of salt, musk and rosemary. Rendolin wasn't in the room, so it was safe to open her eyes.

Another fallacy she had written many times was that upon waking, the heroine always became immediately aware of some great event or catastrophe which had taken place just prior to losing consciousness. Her awareness of Rendolin's disgust had never left. Even while unconscious, her mind wrestled with the heartbreaking knowledge that he hated her. He believed she had plotted with his brother to thwart the completion of his duty.

Kory sat up and angrily brushed away the tears that had come unbidden yet again. She was tired of crying! What good did tears do when the man she loved thought she was beyond contempt? She had always hated women who turned into watering pots at the drop of a hat, and here she was acting just like one.

Well, enough was enough! Starting today, she was going to start taking back her life and live it the way she wanted.

And she wanted to be right here in Rendolin's home.

She also wanted to have his love. Unless she could get him to listen to her, that wasn't likely to happen. She didn't want to reveal that his brother was as low as a snake, but if never trusting her again was the alternative, then Kory would make sure Rendolin knew Thelorin was Kipling's Kaa personified!

She smiled, remembering Kipling's stories and in particular, *The Jungle Book* about Mowgli and his adventures in the jungles of India. All the animals had a name, and Mowgli's name for the nefarious serpent he had to overcome was Kaa. She felt it was appropriate for Thelorin, and determined to think of the older elf that way from then on.

The first thing she was going to do was change into something pretty and comfortable. She enjoyed her jeans and worn shirt from home, but if she was going to live here for the rest of her life, she might as well start looking like a native.

The next thing to do was hunt down Feenix and have an old fashioned heart to heart with the hussy. The only human female who was going to be doing any Binding with Rendolin was Kory. Although Rendolin said he was going to Bind with Kory, she wanted to make sure Feenix was clear on that issue!

She folded her old clothes and put them into the chest at the foot of the bed. She also stashed her supply of coffee and candy—after breaking off a piece from one of the chocolate bars and popping it into her mouth. It was all well and good to decide to take back one's life, but everyone needed a little boost to accomplish the impossible.

As she changed her clothes, a small problem surfaced. She had not thought it important to bring extra clothing because they were available on the island. Now she realized that she had only one bra and one pair of panties, with no idea what to use when they inevitably wore out; she Kory wondered if elves even wore such things! Who would she ask about such a thing? When she had been here before, she had washed her delicates by hand and hung them to dry over night, to be worn again the next day. Such a thing wasn't going to cut it for eternity—they'd wear out within a month!

Well, her underwear was the least of her problems right now, she supposed. She needed to find Feenix and put her straight. Then she'd chase down Rendolin. Perhaps he had cooled off enough to talk reasonably.

Before Kory had a chance to even begin her hunt for the warrior woman, a servant stepped through the wall. She noticed the last time here that all the servants in the House had a darker complexion than Rendolin and his family. This particular female elf had pure white hair, eyes of pale blue—crystal blue, Kory thought—and skin the color of watered-down coffee.

Although young, the elf was beautiful in an exotic way, with lean, high cheekbones and the beginning of an ample chest. She wore a short tunic reaching to just below her knees, and on her feet were what looked like house slippers. The only other interesting thing about her was a white tattoo on her left calf depicting a dolphin cresting a wave, similar to the headboard of Kory's bed and the statue on the mantle she had observed Rendolin fondle.

"Pardon, lady," the elf spoke in a quiet tone. "Lord Rendolin wishes to speak with you and I am to instruct you to follow me."

Kory clamped down on the initial wave of rebellion that surged through her blood at the servant's words. Feenix could wait while she spoke with Rendolin. Perhaps he wanted to apologize for his angry words. More likely, she thought, he wanted to berate her some more and then browbeat her into agreeing to the Binding again.

"Where is he?" she asked the young elf.

"Follow me, please." The servant turned to lead her through the many corridors and halls of the House.

Kory smelled it long before she entered the room where Rendolin was waiting; leather, ink, and the scent of old, musty books floated on the air like dust particles in a sunbeam. As she stepped through the living rock she found herself in a large library, its walls covered with shelves and row upon row of scrolls, leather books and even some plates of metal bound together by large iron hooks.

Kory didn't know why she was surprised to find a library on Sasheena. She knew the elves were intelligent and logical people. Somehow, she hadn't thought about how they would keep their records or if they read. She now realized how naive that was.

"Come in, Korrene," Rendolin said with a wave of an elegant hand. "Please be seated. We have much to discuss."

From his tone she knew he had not forgiven her yet, and she didn't think he would. He appeared to have an agenda for this discussion and she was pretty sure it was about the Binding.

She came further into the room and sat in a large, leather and wood chair placed to one side of his own huge chair. There was a desk for writing, but it was over toward a wall containing another of the House's unusual open windows. It was a cheerful place to have a desk, Kory thought, within easy reach of a number of books, yet far enough away from the center of the room to offer privacy.

On the other side of the room, clustered in a comfortable group to encourage discussion, were three chairs and a small sofa of buttery leather, with light blue and green pillows tossed on top. Kory recognized Elawae's hand in the decoration of the room.

As she sat waiting for Rendolin to begin his discussion, she noticed an odd decoration on the wall above the desk. She had no idea what it represented, but it was made of feathers, shells and what looked like delicate bones. It almost had the feel of an American Indian artifact, but she'd bet her last candy bar that it had nothing to do with earth.

"Mother will join us shortly, but before she arrives I wanted to have a private word with you."

His voice was aloof and cold. She could find little of the passionate elf she had laughed with in the meadow.

"The Binding will take place tomorrow evening..."

"Why so soon?"

He frowned before answering her question. "My brother and some of his purist followers incited a riot yesterday after I brought you back. Once the Binding is done, their displays will cease."

"Was anyone hurt?" Was she ever going to be free of the curse that always hurt people?

"Not seriously," he said, unconcerned, turning the subject back to his agenda. "As I was saying, until the Binding, you will be the guest of Lord Selrin. Your things are being moved to the House of Olewis as we speak."

"Thoughtful of you to ask my permission." If he was going to continue to be a jerk, so would she.

Rendolin cast her a scowl and continued.

"After the Binding we will not be living here in my brother's House. I am making arrangements for a home to be provided for you."

His words jolted Kory from the feigned indifference she was trying so hard to maintain.

"You will not be living there with me?"

"I will be making...other arrangements," he answered without looking up from a parchment he was viewing. "You will be required to make certain responses at specific times during the Ceremony," he continued, as if she had not spoken. "Mother will instruct you. You will, of course, conduct yourself as befitting my mate, and not in your usual outlandish manner."

"You jerk, how do you expect me to act at my own wedding? I'm not a simpleton, you know!" She couldn't believe his gall! First, he ordered her about as if she were a child, then insulted her about her conduct. "What are you expecting, naked dancing and bungee jumping?"

Rendolin looked up from the parchment and gave her a glacial, green stare. "I expect you to act in an honorable way, but I fear I will be disappointed in that area again."

"You know, you really are the biggest ass I've ever met," Kory said, standing up, clenched fists at her side. "If you'd just let me explain about..."

The elf cut her off with a chopping motion of his hand. "Sit down, Korrene. Your dramatics are wasted on me. I know all I need to know. The subject is closed."

She stood looking at his granite expression. Nowhere was there a softening. He had closed his mind and his heart to her, and nothing she could say would make it change.

"You told me you loved me."

His eyes hardened, giving the appearance of green chips of ice. "That was before I knew you to be the traitor and liar that you are. One who could plot with my brother against my god's wishes. I thought you an honorable woman. I was wrong."

His words were like daggers thrown at her heart. With the stiffness of an old woman, Kory eased back into the chair. There was nothing to say, for it felt like life was ebbing out of her wounded heart and she would surely die of it.

"As I was saying," he resumed, "Mother will instruct you on your part in the Ceremony. An appropriate gown will be found for you and anything else that you may require. She will take care of all those annoying details."

Annoying. He found this Binding to her *annoying*? A duty that had to be performed in order for him to do his job? How humiliating that the greatest love of her life thought she was nothing more than a duty.

"During the Binding, in order for the magic to work, we will be required to endure a bit of pain."

She lifted her head and looked at him in surprise. "What kind of pain?"

"Nothing dangerous, Korrene. Lord Selrin will open a vein and collect our blood in a sacred goblet. He will use his magic to quickly heal the wounds. There is no danger to either of us."

"What happens to the blood?"

"By the power of Mac Lir, it will become magically transmuted into properties that will allow our souls to be merged for eternity. We will both then partake in drinking from the goblet in order for the Binding to be complete."

She blinked like an owl. Had she heard right?

"I have to drink blood?" At the barely discernible nod she exclaimed, "And you people think *humans* are barbaric? At least we don't drink each other's blood at our weddings. Forget it, Rendolin; I'm not drinking anybody's blood." Kory shook her head in emphasis.

"It is not truly blood. It will have been altered by the power of Mac Lir into the agent that affects the Binding. You will drink from the goblet, Korrene, or the Binding will not be performed."

She swallowed bile. "Why does it have to be our blood? Couldn't it be blood from a cow or a fish or something?"

She saw that Rendolin did not really want to answer her questions, but he was trying to be considerate and allay her fears.

Perhaps all of his feelings hadn't been killed...

"The Binding is actually a spell. All spells have special ingredients—components—that must be exact in order for the spell to work." He crossed long legs and rested his arms on the arms of the chair, then looked out the window and relaxed into an instructor mode. "The components for a Binding include certain herbs with special properties, such as yarrow, angelica, sage, mugwort, basil..."

"And rosemary?"

He turned his head and looked at her with an expression in his eyes she didn't dare to identify. "And rosemary," he agreed.

"That's *your* herb."

His face relaxed a bit, and she thought she saw a hint of a smile tug at his mouth. "Aye, it is." His gaze flickered to her mouth for a second, and Kory couldn't prevent her heart's erratic beat. "Rosemary is for purification and for...remembrance."

Kory could feel the heat as his eyes changed color yet again. The ice chips seemed to be melting as she watched his gaze take on a smoky green hue. Her breath came in quick little puffs, and she tried not to squirm in her seat from the body tingles.

Her movement seemed to break the spell, for he cleared his voice and continued. "Your herb is motherwort. It is a stimulant."

She wrinkled her nose. "What an ugly name—motherwort. It sounds like a fungus that grows on mothers."

He laughed at the description and she smiled. "It is also said to gladden the heart."

Kory didn't know what to say to that. Rendolin always seemed to be able to put her off balance, so she looked down at her clasped hands and asked another question.

"What are the minerals used in the Binding?"

He was silent for a moment and when he spoke, his voice was again devoid of emotion.

"They are mostly ground gems such as rose quartz, garnet and ruby. A pearl or two."

"I have to drink rocks?" She looked at him again, surprised at the answer.

Again he smiled indulgently. "Only the merest dust from each. You will not even notice they are there, Korrene."

Why did he have to be so handsome and have such glorious hair that made her always want to run fingers through it? If she was going to spend eternity with a mate that distrusted and hated her, why did he have to be so gentle and kind and why, oh, why did he have to have green eyes that tilted up and a dimple in his cheek you could drive a truck through?

Again she felt her body responding to his gaze. His left eyebrow was quirked in a teasing way, and the glint in his emerald eyes invited her to share his amusement at her question. How could he smile with her if he distrusted her? Kory didn't think he knew what he really wanted.

Perhaps, given time, Rendolin might begin to love her again, and life wouldn't be so very bad.

"What does the blood have to do with the Ceremony?" she asked in an attempt to keep her thoughts from getting too excited.

"The blood has many purposes in the Ceremony. First, it is symbolic." Rendolin's eyes had again changed, from clear green to a deeper, darker shade. "It is also a fixative for the magic." His gaze dropped to her lips, then traveled slowly down her chin and neck. "It acts as the catalyst." His voice trailed off as if he had run out of breath.

She watched him position himself more comfortably. Kory licked dry lips before asking the next question.

"A catalyst for what?" Her whole body seemed to be vibrating to the timbre of his voice.

Rendolin wiped his palms on his thighs. He uncrossed his legs, and then quickly crossed them again. He looked uncomfortable sitting in the chair, so she was not surprised when he quickly stood and walked over to the desk.

"The blood mingles and becomes the impetus that causes the merging of our souls," he said with his back to her. He had picked up a quill and was absentmindedly running the soft feathers through his long fingers.

Kory's breath caught as she imagined the texture of that feather and his hands on her skin.

She stood and moved towards him; drawn to his side by an invisible thread of such force her will was totally subjugated. He sensed her presence and turned as she stepped to the desk.

"Why?"

Her question might have been about any number of things unspoken between them, but he chose to remain on the topic of the Binding.

"As I have explained before, when we Bind you will become, in a sense, one with me, and I with you. Your mortal blood will mingle with my silvan. You will have magical blood running through your veins, and I will have mortal." He touched the feather to her jaw and traced her jugular vein down to the cleft between her breasts. His eyes followed the feather's path hungrily. She stood perfectly still, experiencing the touch and feel.

"Why must it be our blood? You never answered that question." Her words were no more than a whisper, and he bent closer as if to hear them. She smelled his delicious scent of musk, sea and rosemary. Her knees felt weak, but she stiffened them for fear she would fall.

"The blood must belong to the two who are Binding, so that when it mingles in each body, the heart will recognize it." He dragged the feather slowly over her breast to rest where her heart was beating wildly. There was no doubt in Kory's mind that the emotion in his eyes was pure lust. She was sure her need mirrored his.

The urge to touch the strong column of his neck was overpowering. Giving into it, she ran her hand up the side of his neck and then slipped her fingers under his hair, stroking the powerful cords at the back of his neck.

At the first touch, his eyes darted back to hers with a fierce penetrating look. She wanted to melt into his lean body from the heat of his gaze, but she forced herself to remain a body-width apart.

She dropped her eyes to his mouth, sucking in her breath at the seductive smile she saw hiding there. Kory felt her own lips tremble in anticipation of his kiss, for she knew he would kiss her.

Rendolin brought his other hand up to cup her cheek in his warm palm. Kory closed her eyes, turned her face into the embrace to breathe in the aroma of his sun-browned hand. She smelled ink, herbs, and fresh moist earth. He must have been working outside, she thought as she nuzzled his skin with her lips.

He brought the quill up to play against the other side of her face, flicking it gently from temple to ear in a slow, erotic motion. A sigh escaped her lips and was met by his deep chuckle. He was proud of the response his hands had coerced.

Two could play at this game, Kory thought as fingers entwined around golden hair, then slipped to his firm jaw and around his ear. Gently she rubbed the pad of her thumb against his cheek, before finally touching the still quirked eyebrow with an index finger. Her fingertips were so sensitive, she felt him close his eyes before she began to explore the texture of his skin. His heart danced a quick tempo, and her own matched his pace.

Rendolin dropped the feather and his other hand snaked around her head so that his hands held her firmly, thumbs tilting her face up for his kiss. She opened her eyes and knew she couldn't escape the impending onslaught of passion if her life depended upon it. He held her still for what seemed an eternity as he searched her face. For what, she didn't know. She knew her heart must be in her eyes. He had to see the love she felt for him. Still he held her without moving.

"Rendolin," she whispered, barely able to get the words out, "if you don't kiss me I'm going to die," and for all she knew the words were true.

Uttering a word she didn't recognize, he crushed her body to his, covering her lips with his hot mouth. All the hurt, pain and desire he had held pent up within was unleashed, and Kory thought she would be consumed by his urgency. His tongue flicked fire through her being as his hands trailed flames over her body.

She clung to his shoulders—a woman without the power to stand. She felt his muscles bunch and ripple as another wave of passion swept over her.

Without conscious thought, she rubbed her hips against his hard body and he moaned into her mouth as if he were in agony. Suddenly he released her mouth and used his lips and teeth to nip and lick a path down her neck to the cleft of her throbbing breasts. With an impatient motion he swept the robe aside and kissed his way to her hard nipple. She thought she would die of pleasure as he took it into his mouth.

Her hands were busy trying to explore every inch of chest and back. Somehow she had succeeded in opening his shirt and it hung half on, half off. When she pinched one nipple between her finger and thumb at the same time she suckled his ear lobe, he groaned, lifting her off her feet, sitting her on the edge of the desk.

Her arms were suddenly empty as he dropped to his knees and lifted her gown to her thighs. He slipped her soft leather boots from her feet, pulling her stockings off in a rush. Kory dipped her fingers into his long hair and massaged his skull as he kissed first one instep and then the other. He ran hands up the outside of her legs and cupped her buttocks as she sat on the old wooden desk. She couldn't stand it anymore. Threading her fingers through his long locks, she pulled his head up to look into his eyes.

All control seemed to be gone from their stormy depths. His lips were moist from their kisses, and the only emotion she could read on his face was of great need and desire. She searched, and although she saw a trace of tenderness in his look, she could find no love.

It would have to be enough for now.

Kory loosened her grip on his hair, releasing him. He bent his head and kissed the inside of her knee, using his shoulder to nudge her legs further apart. A flame of desire leaped through her, and she trembled at the touch of his lips and tongue. She tried to bite off a moan of pleasure as his mouth sent hot tremors up her thigh, but the sound reverberated around the room before she could stop it.

Rendolin halted his assault on her leg and became absolutely still; a statue of a knight kneeling in homage to his lady. Then slowly, reluctantly, he lifted his head and she saw reason returning as he forced his ardor to subside.

"Please," she whispered. He knew what she was asking. She could see the comprehension in his face, but he carefully pulled her skirt down and gently arranged it around her legs.

She grabbed two fists full of hair to prevent him from rising. "Rendolin, make love to me." Never had she asked that of a man. Herb had been her one and only lover and she had rarely instigated lovemaking. It shamed her that she was not strong enough to keep from asking this elf.

He took her hands from his head and stood in a graceful movement. "We can not," he breathed on her palms as he placed a kiss on each.

"Why? We are both adults, and we're going to be Bonded tomorrow! Who would it hurt?"

She could see the passion ebbing from his eyes, but could also plainly see that he was still aroused and in need.

He took a deep breath before answering. "There must be virgin blood for the Binding spell to work properly."

She slid off the desk and wrapped her arms around his waist. "I'm not a virgin, Rendolin. I was married, remember?"

He took a step back, as if putting space between them would help cool his blood's fever.

"I know it well, Korrene. It is I who have never made love before." She couldn't quite believe her ears. "I am the virgin that will Bind to *Glenowaeli*. If we continue as we have been, Korrene, the Binding will kill us both."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

It was very late by the time Kory had the opportunity to eat dinner, and she barely touched the exquisitely prepared meal. Too many things had transpired that day, and her mind was in turmoil.

Within minutes after Rendolin's shocking declaration that he was a virgin, his mother had joined them in the Archives. Kory admitted to herself that it was a good thing he had stopped their love making when he had, or else Elawae would have walked in on a very embarrassing situation.

The elfin woman had been happy to learn Kory was alive, and had spent the entire afternoon with her, instructing her on what would be required at the Ceremony, on the Binding etiquette, who would be in attendance, and what she would wear.

Kory stood for over an hour, as a lovely foam-green silk gown was measured, pinned and sewn. Personally, she thought the pale green was not a good color, and that she would look better in something vibrant, or perhaps a white gown with a hint of blue. However, there wasn't any time for the seamstress to fashion a brand new gown, so she had to make do with a makeover from some other woman's wardrobe.

Two times a bride, Kory thought, and two times hand-me-down gowns. What kind of an omen was that for an eternity with Rendolin?

After the seamstress had left, Kory had been taken to temporary lodgings at Lord Selrin's House. Selrin's mate, Lady Zelani, greeted her and showed her to the room she was to occupy for the evening.

The House of Olewis was built in the same manner as Rendolin's home, only much larger. Zelani explained that part of the House was used for the Healing Hall where the People of the Sea went for medical problems, as well as where the young elves answering the Healing call were trained. As a result, there was need for many rooms to house the trainees and sick.

Selrin's House was not situated above the cliffs, as the House of Hiloris was. Instead it was nestled among a small forest of evergreen trees, in a level area not far from the cliffs but still within easy reach of the ocean.

The room wasn't as spacious as the one Kory had occupied in Hiloris, but it would be more than ample for one night's stay. She found her few possessions inside a beautifully carved chest bound with copper bands. Zelani gave her the key so she could feel that her things would be secure during her stay. She had no doubt that even if she left the lid open, no one would touch her things, honor being so ingrained in the silvan culture, but she took the key with a smile and thanks.

Time hung heavy on her hands as she was left alone to rest and prepare on her own for the coming Ceremony. She had no idea what they thought she should do to prepare. When she had married Herb, she spent the night with Pat. They went to a nightclub to celebrate her last night of freedom and got drunk, dancing with male strippers and laughing until their stomachs hurt.

Compared to those memories, this was pretty dull.

Kory had hoped to spend this evening with Rendolin, but it was obvious she was destined to be disappointed. After their little groping session this afternoon, she didn't really expect him. Still, it would have been nice to have someone to talk with.

She paced the room, looking at the sparse but tasteful decorations. A braided rug on the floor added a splash of yellow, green, blue and violet in the otherwise neutral colored room. There was no window, but the room was large enough so that she did not feel closed in.

Just when Kory thought she would go crazy from boredom a servant entered, announcing that her presence was requested in the sitting room. Surprised, but relieved she didn't have to stay by herself all night, Kory followed the servant through the House.

Waiting for her were Lord Selrin and Lady Zelani from the House of Olewis, Rendolin, Elawae and five or six people she had met at the dinner she had attended so many days ago. It seemed like years had passed since that night—the night Rendolin had touched her with passion for the first time. She put the memory aside and tried to concentrate on the introductions.

Elawae came forward and took her hand, leading her further into the room. She introduced Kory to Lord Mithris and his Lady Noela of the House of Helarn. They nodded and smiled pleasantly.

Next came Lord Zelanor and his Lady, Leoni, from the House of Elarin. Neither of these august personages deigned to greet her, but merely stared hard and remained immovable. Kory felt like she was a bug they had inexplicably found on a dinner plate.

Elawae introduced her to the last elf in the room, a priest by the name of Elaris; who, in a formal voice, expressed great pleasure in meeting her.

Lastly, Kory met the eyes of Feenix, who was standing far back in the room in a shadowy corner. When Elawae made the introductions, Feenix merely said, "We've met."

"Indeed we have," Kory agreed, casting the warrior a heated look, which was met by one of contempt.

"Now that all the introductions have been made," Rendolin said in a take-charge voice, "we have things to discuss before tomorrow's ceremony. Please be seated, everyone, and make yourselves comfortable. I fear this will be a long meeting."

"I prefer to stand," said the Lady Leoni of Helarn. "My Lord and I can not spare more than a few minutes, so please, High Priest, get on with what you have to say."

"Here now," her husband blustered, turning red with embarrassment. "I think we can spare time to hear the lad out, my dear. Give the boy a chance."

He reminded Kory of Sir Ector from the Disney version of T. H. White's *The Sword in the Stone* with his full white mustache and stout physique. He was the perfect foil for his Lady's stern, willowy figure.

"Thank you, Lord Zelanor," Rendolin said. "I will try to be as brief as possible."

Kory found a chair where she could watch the different faces in the room. Most looked at Rendolin, as he stood in the middle of the room, with interest and hope; but *their* looks were of concern and doubt. Obviously Rendolin had his work cut out for him, whatever it was he had in mind.

"As you know, there have been some incidents, in the past day or so, of fighting among our people. The

cause of this contention is the fact that I intend to Bind with a human female, thus obeying our god's command." He looked around the room at each person, but none spoke. "I am aware that my brother, Lord Thelorin, and a number of citizens..."

"A *large* number of citizens," Lady Leoni interrupted.

"A large number of citizens," Rendolin repeated, with a nod to her, "believe that this Binding is not in the best interests of our people. That, in fact, I have not been commanded by Mac Lir to do this, and am abusing my office as High Priest."

"Well you must agree," said Mithris, "that it is a bit unusual for an elf to Bind with a human."

"Unusual perhaps," agreed Elawae in her mild voice, "but not forbidden. My son is merely fulfilling his duty as the High Priest of Sasheena."

"There are some who would say your son is merely fulfilling his own perverted desires, Lady Elawae," Lady Leoni spoke again.

Rendolin's mother glared at Leoni, causing that lady to squirm uncomfortably. "Those who say such things would be wrong."

Rendolin moved to Kory's side. "I pray that this Binding will prove to be successful for both Korrene and myself." He placed his hand on Kory's shoulder. "But make no mistake," his tone turned stern, "I go into this Binding as a servant of my god and not for any personal reasons or gain."

"That's all well and good," said Feenix, striding over to the group, "but the fact remains there's going to be trouble tomorrow, and we're here to discuss how to keep it at a minimum."

"Captain Feenix is correct," injected Lord Selrin. "I do not want to have the Healer's Hall crowded with kin, due to a riot over this Binding."

"We are all in agreement with that, Selrin," spoke Mithris. "I have alerted my people to the possible threat, and the military will stand ready to keep the peace—from both sides of the issue," he added with a meaningful glance around the room.

"Has my brother requested that the House of Helarn back him in his attempt to thwart Mac Lir's plan?"

"No, Rendolin," the leader of the military answered. He was a trim, fit man with an impressive bearing. His golden hair was cut short and he wore a copper band around his head. "However, as the Governor of Sasheena, it is his right to do so. I am just grateful to Mac Lir that so far I have not been called upon to choose on which side of this disturbance my House would stand. I hope the House of Helarn will remain neutral in this."

"How can you remain neutral when the god has made his command known?" asked the priest, Elaris. "It is clear that our duty is to obey, for we are his children and have pledged to honor him."

Kory thought she heard the makings of a zealot in the priest's tone. Elaris' eye shown with an excited light that could have been the beginning of fanaticism.

"Not everyone is as convinced as you, Elaris, that our High Priest has correctly interpreted the god's command, begging your pardon, Rendolin," said Selrin with a friendly grin and twinkling blue eyes.

"Thelorin and the others who follow him feel that the god would not ask an elf to Bind with a human...especially an elf of such high standing as the High Priest."

"A god's will should not be questioned," insisted the priest. "It should be obeyed."

"This is getting us nowhere," Feenix commented. "We need to have a plan of defense for tomorrow. I suggest we stop this damn useless arguing and get down to business."

"The Ceremony will be open to any who want to see it," Elawae said. "If someone wanted to hurt Korrene or Rendolin, it would be easy for them."

"Close the sanctuary, then, and keep all but invited guests out," suggested Lady Noela.

"That is not tradition, Lady Noela," Rendolin explained. "The people should be allowed to see their High Priest Bind with his mate."

"The hell with tradition," Feenix shouted. "We're talking about the safety of people here! Close off the sanctuary as the lady said, and let in only invited guests. It's the only way to make sure there isn't a riot in the middle of this Ceremony."

"Hold your tongue, woman," Lord Mithris commanded. "You may be the head of the High Priest's guard, but I am the Lord of the House of Helarn. You have no authority to make military decisions. That is my job."

"Well, any fool can see that if the public is allowed to attend this event, the risk of a riot or worse is great. What do you suggest? Ask the assembly to please refrain from fighting during the service?"

Kory was pleased to see that the abrasive warrior woman was just as irreverent to Mithris as she was to her. Apparently none were safe from Feenix's caustic tongue.

"That is enough, Feenix," Rendolin spoke.

She straightened her shoulders and backed away from the group. It was plain Feenix didn't like retreating, but would obey Rendolin's order.

"What did you have in mind, Lord Mithris?" Elawae asked politely, attempting to soothe tempers and restore order.

"A guard of about eight soldiers should be posted outside the sanctuary to watch for any trouble makers. The people should be allowed to attend the service, but as soon as the Ceremony begins, the doors should be shut and none allowed entrance.

"In the sanctuary proper, another guard of approximately ten or twelve will be posted around the area. In case there is any move to stop the Ceremony or trouble of any kind, these guards can quickly act and remove the offensive party."

Everyone seemed to agree Mithris' plan was a sound one. However, Feenix again didn't keep quiet.

"There should be more guards outside the sanctuary. If a concerted effort to storm the proceedings is made, eight soldiers are not going to be enough. And the doors should be closed before the Ceremony begins. Anyone who wants to stop the Binding would naturally want to be in place before the excitement starts. Close the doors at least a half hour before everything begins."

"A good point, wouldn't you say, Lords?" said Elaris, giving Kory the impression he was worried about his own skin.

"Your point is well taken, Captain," said Rendolin. "Perhaps more soldiers guarding the doors would be

in order, Mithris. However, I agree that the doors should remain open to allow as many into the service as possible. When the Ceremony begins, the doors will close."

Kory was sure she heard Feenix swear under her breath, but no one else seemed to notice. Feenix might be an obnoxious bore, but she did appear to know her business.

"Feenix and her guard will be in the sanctuary, covering the proceedings closely. With all these provisions made, I do not see how the Binding can be prevented. Even if there is an outburst, the Ceremony will continue."

Rendolin looked around the room again, waiting for anyone to offer another suggestion or comment. When none were forthcoming, he nodded briskly and thanked them for coming.

Acknowledging their host and hostess, the guests took their leave. Soon only Elawae, Rendolin, Selrin, Zelani, and Kory were left. Kory had not uttered a word during the meeting. Instead, she had watched the dynamics of the group, interested in the subtle plays for power that had gone on.

The fact that the Houses of Celeborne, Elarin and Hiloris—except for Rendolin and Elawae, of course—had been absent from the meeting told her that more people were against the Binding than for it. Mithris had made it plain that while he and his lady had attended the meeting, the House of Helarn intended to remain nonpartisan, and they could not look there for any support other than the bare minimum.

"Is it really as bad as it seems?" Kory spoke for the first time since being introduced to the guests.

"I fear it is, Lady *Glenowaeli*," Selrin answered.

The use of her elfin name surprised Kory, for she was not used to being addressed by it. She didn't know if she liked it or not.

"We have been busy most of the afternoon, performing healing on many who received hurts in the altercation today," explained Zelani. "It saddens me greatly to see kin fighting kin."

"No one was killed, I hope!"

"Do not worry, Korrene," said Elawae, patting her hand in a reassuring way. "Rarely is someone killed when hit with a fist or kicked in the shin."

"So far. But if my brother continues to incite the people with his damaging remarks and allegations, it will not be long before someone takes up a bow or knife and does some real damage."

Kory watched as the concern and fear for his people washed across Rendolin's face. Her heart twisted and she ached to comfort him, but didn't know how. Despite today's passionate lapse, he still distrusted her and believed she had conspired against him.

"That is why this Binding must take place as soon as possible," Selrin agreed. "Once it has been performed, there is nothing Thelorin or anyone can do to prevent the god's will from being fulfilled. The Binding must proceed tomorrow without any problem."

Rendolin turned to Korrene and asked, "Do you understand all that will be required of you tomorrow?"

"Yes. Your mother explained everything, and I've practiced the words. I think I'll be fine."

She wished the beautiful words had real meaning to them both, but it was enough to know he at least

desired her physically. That was something, she supposed.

"The gown is lovely on her," Zelani said with a smile. She had seen it when the seamstress had delivered it for the final fitting. "She will make a beautiful mate for you, Rendolin."

"It is getting late, Ren," Elawae said with a smile. "I believe Korrene should get some rest before the excitement of tomorrow."

"Yes, of course," he agreed. "I will escort her to her room, if you have no objections." This last was said to Kory, but she was under the impression she really had no say in the matter. He obviously had something on his mind he wanted to share with her.

"That would be fine," she said. Then smiling at them all, she said her good nights and accompanied Rendolin from the room.

When they reached Kory's bedroom, Rendolin came in and paced up and down, as if reluctant to come to the point. He looked like a man who didn't relish the job ahead of him.

"Okay, Rendolin. Just spit it out. What's this all about?"

He shot her a hard look. "You certainly do have a coarse way of speaking, do you not? You and Captain Feenix are similar in that."

"Just get to the point. I'm tired and want to get some sleep." Kory sat at the edge of the bed, giving him the option of sitting in the room's only chair if he wanted. "And I don't like being compared to that woman, thank you very much."

Rendolin ignored the chair and continued to pace.

Finally he stopped his movement and turned to speak. Still he seemed to be struggling to find the words he needed to say.

"If this is about the incident in the library," she began, "there's no need for you to apologize. I was just as much at fault as you."

"Apologize?" he asked in amazement. "Why should we apologize for acting upon our mutual attraction? Did I do or say something that warrants an apology? I do not remember having done so."

She wasn't sure if she should feel glad at his comment or angry. Kory decided to think about it later when she was in bed.

"Well, if it isn't about this afternoon, it must be about the Binding. What?"

He rubbed his palms against his legs and took another turn around the room before stopping in front of her again.

"The Binding is dangerous, Korrene."

"You've told me that, but you also said I'd be fine because Selrin would heal my cut immediately."

"I am not speaking of the incision to let your blood. I am speaking of the Binding itself—the magical process that will take place in your body." He looked worried and nervous.

Kory decided she'd better start worrying too.

"How dangerous?"

He ran his hand over his face and through his hair in a nervous action she had never seen him display. Rendolin was very worried. Kory began to shake.

"If the spell components are not precise, are not exact, then a Binding can kill the participants." He watched her face.

"Oh great," she said, getting off the bed and doing some pacing of her own. "You're telling me that if Selrin uses too much rosemary or too little ruby powder, we'll die?"

"No. The amounts of herbs and minerals do not have to be that precise."

"Then what the hell are you saying?" Kory demanded.

"Do you remember our talk about the blood?"

"Of course! And I remember you told me virgin blood was needed in order for the magic to work." She gave him a startled look. "You're not going to tell me that some time between this afternoon and now you stopped being a virgin, are you?"

"Of course not," he snapped at her. "There will be virgin blood in the goblet."

"Then what are you trying to tell me?" She was very close to losing her patience.

"A Binding will not work with pure human blood."

He stood in front of her, watching intently to see how his words would affect her.

Kory was confused. "What?"

"The Binding will kill the participants if even one of them is of pure human blood."

Kory stood in the center of the room with her head tilted to the side, trying desperately to understand what Rendolin was attempting to say. She had the distinct impression he was about to rock her world in a way she never could have expected.

"Are you telling me that after all the fuss that has been going on about this stupid Binding thing, you and I are going to die tomorrow?" She couldn't quite grasp his meaning.

"We will not die, Korrene."

"But I'm a human. You just said if one of us is a human, the Binding will not work and we'll die. I don't understand this!"

"I said if one of us had pure human blood, we would die. You have been chosen by Mac Lir because you have a trace of silvan blood running in your veins. It will be enough to protect us."

He was serious. He actually believed she had elfin blood. Where could he have gotten such a ridiculous idea?

"Rendolin, I am a human. There are no such things as elves on earth. They are make-believe. Children's stories. Nothing more."

"Where did your children's stories come from, if there are no silvan people in your world? There are

many legends and songs about magic and elves in your world, correct?"

"Well, yes, but they're just made up."

"No. When the gods made the Seven Cella Worlds, they created children to live on them, to till and tend the soil. The silvan ones are Mac Lir's children. They were placed on all the worlds, just as humans, mer folk and others were." He watched to see if she was taking in his words.

"Unfortunately, the silvan folk of your world, of Earth, have been hunted down and are now extinct. Much like the way our people on this world are being eliminated. Mac Lir could not stop the extinction of our people in your home world, but he determined to end it here. That is why we were chosen, *Glenowaeli*. You and I will be the beginning of a stronger silvan race, one that can endure many hardships and overcome most trials thrown our people's way."

She shook her head as if in a daze. "If elves are extinct on earth, then how can I have silvan blood? It doesn't make any sense."

"Every once in a while, over many generations, a child is born with a trace of silvan blood, but they usually do not survive."

"Why not?"

"The forces working to obliterate our people see to it that accidents happen. And if that does not work, they are often hunted down and killed by your own kind."

"What are you talking about?" She was really having a hard time taking in everything he was telling her.

"Humans have no tolerance for anyone different or strange, and so many times they would provide the means by which the one with silvan blood would be killed."

"I've noticed elves aren't overly fond of different peoples either, Rendolin!"

"True, but elves usually allow the strange ones to go their own way. We do not massacre humans just because they are different from us."

Kory returned to the bed and sat. He had given her much to think about, but her curious nature needed more information before she could make a decision about believing him or not.

"This is a fascinating story, Rendolin, but what does it have to do with you and me?"

He sat in the room's only chair, moving it closer to the bed as if he was about to impart a great secret.

"You are such a child, Korrene. Mac Lir has protected you all your life so you would grow into the woman you are now. He has a need for us. It is our destiny." At her skeptical look, he continued. "Have you never wondered about all the accidents that happened in your life, where people were killed but you were never touched?"

Once again Kory felt the pain and anguish of the loss of her family and Herb. The burden of guilt she carried around with her because she should have died with them had been a heavy load.

"That wasn't destiny; that was just luck."

"No, Korrene," Rendolin said, taking her hands in his. "That was Mac Lir protecting his child. You were destined to become *Glenowaeli* because you have the blood in you."

She pulled her hands from his. "If that's true, then how come I can't do magic like the rest of you elves? And don't tell me it's because I was on Earth, because I've been here for days and I've never so much as felt a whiff of magic!"

He smiled at her lack of silvan knowledge.

"Not all elves have the gift of magic, you know. But in your case, the silvan blood is so thin, so slight, that it would not allow an outward sign of magic. However," he continued, "you have always been in touch with your magic."

Again Kory shook her head, refusing to believe his words.

"When you were in your world, writing your story about elves, how did you know of me and Sasheena? How could you describe so accurately Feenix and me and places here on the island?"

His question rocked her. She hadn't given it any thought since she'd realized she wasn't insane. How *did* she know about Rendolin and Sasheena and all the rest? If she didn't create it out of thin air, then where *did* her knowledge come from?

Taking pity on her completely confused expression, he continued his explanation.

"With Mac Lir's help, you tapped into our world. The faint trace of silvan blood coursing through your veins allowed you to slip behind the veil of worlds and see Tylana. The scenes you wrote down in your book were scenes you saw here in my world. You were merely recording what you saw."

"Then I didn't create any of it? I'm not a good writer?"

"I did not say that. You certainly have more creative imagination than anyone I have ever known before. And as far as you being a good writer, did you not tell me you had written a previous book?"

"Well, yes," she said sadly, "But it wasn't really that good. It was just drivel tied up in a romantic bow. This story was to be my masterpiece! And I didn't even think it up!"

Kory was feeling very inadequate and totally off guard. She had just learned she was probably an elf, never mind how many times removed, and then she was told that she didn't create the world of which she had been so proud. That she, in fact, had no impact on the people or times. It was a very lowering thought, and one that would take some time getting used to.

He let her think about his words for a while. The silence in the room stretched to long minutes, but it wasn't an awkward quiet. Kory felt completely safe and at ease. She didn't feel any of the tension she would have expected, given that she adored him and he could not care less about her.

Finally she asked, "Okay. If I have silvan blood in me, then why is this Binding so dangerous to me?"

Rendolin seemed pleased that she had accepted his words and was now inquiring about the Ceremony.

"The trace of silvan blood will preserve your life, but your body will still undergo a traumatic change, and the stress could cause complications."

"What kind of complications?"

"I do not know, Korrene. This type of thing has never been attempted, to my knowledge. But," he rushed on when he saw the fear on her face, "Mac Lir would not protect and nurture you for so many years, then command me to find you and Bind with you, if he did not know that all would be well."

"You have a lot of faith in this god." The doubt in her voice was unmistakable.

"I have seen him, Korrene. He has spoken to me. He has told me what we must do. I know that if I obey him, all will be well."

"I wish I had your confidence."

Suddenly she felt tired and drained. The thought of climbing into the big bed, slipping under the covers and closing her eyes to everything was like a siren call.

Rendolin must have seen the weariness on her face.

"I will leave you now," and he arose from the chair. "I will be back tomorrow to escort you to the sanctuary. May Mac Lir give you pleasant dreams," he said and then kissed her tenderly on the cheek. Before she had time to respond, he disappeared through the wall.

He was such a puzzle, she thought. One minute regal and stern, then distrustful and angry, then tender and caring. It would take an eternity to figure him out, she decided just after climbing under the covers and closing her eyes.

Kory slept the sleep of the innocent and knew nothing more until morning.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Kory looked over the balcony railing and down into the sanctuary hall.

People were filing in and greeting friends, but the feeling in the Hall wasn't what one would normally find at a wedding back home. The atmosphere was thick with tension and low murmurs. Her neck and back muscles were tightening and stretching, nagging at her mind like a taut bowstring.

Rendolin was at her side, as was Elawae, but for some reason she felt all alone. A stranger in a strange land. Where had she read that? Never mind.

She felt like an observer outside her own body as she scanned the room. This wasn't real, it was some sort of weird dream, and she'd wake up in a little while.

Except she'd been dreaming the dream for almost two weeks, with no signs of waking up.

The balcony where she and the Binding party stood was about twenty feet above the Hall, and large enough to hold at least thirty people. Elawae had told her it was where all the ceremonies were held, so the people could see and hear the proceedings clearly. Kory thought the altar area of most churches on Earth was more 'homey' and accessible to the public, but to each its own, she guessed.

It was almost time for the Binding to begin. She was surprised at not having second thoughts or cold feet. It was almost as if she knew in her heart that this was the path she had to follow, although it made little sense to her head. How could she contemplate living forever with a guy she'd only known for two weeks? But she just knew it was right.

Well, really she'd known Rendolin for longer than two weeks, if you count all the weeks she had been writing about him. *Actually, I know Rendolin more intimately than I knew Herb when we got married,* she thought. *Describing him on paper so often gave me a more intimate feel, so to speak, than I ever had with Herb.*

Kory could feel her face begin to simmer as she thought about the elf's body. Is a Binding night like a wedding night? Her stomach did a little flip as she looked over towards Rendolin.

He was speaking with Lord Selrin, going over the ceremony and last minute details. Selrin would be performing the ritual, and although she had only known him a short time, Kory trusted the older elf completely. With him there, as well as Rendolin, she knew she would be as safe as humanly possible.

Except they *weren't* human and, if she could believe Rendolin, neither was she. Completely.

"Are you all right, my dear?" Elawae's gentle voice broke through Kory's thoughts.

She smiled at the older woman and nodded. "When will the Ceremony start? I'm getting tired of just standing here with everyone gawking at me like I was some sort of freak."

"Oh, not a freak, dear. Just a bit...unusual. There has not been a Binding on Sasheena since we first settled here. This is an opportunity to remember the old times and to teach the younger ones. They cannot help but stare, Korrene. You are an answer to our prayers."

"I never wanted to be an answer to anyone's prayers," she muttered. "I'm just not used to all these people and all this foolishness."

At Elawae's slight frown, Kory felt shame.

"Okay. It's not foolishness; but really, Lady Elawae, I wish we could just do this Binding thing quietly without all this pomp and circumstances."

"Pageantry has its uses, Korrene. I think you need to learn those uses if you and my son want to successfully forge a new race. And dear," she continued with a soft pat on Kory's arm, "since you will shortly become part of our family, could you find it in your heart to call me Elawae, or perhaps even Mother?"

"You would allow me to call you *Mother*?" Kory was touched. She didn't know Rendolin's mother had accepted her so completely. Tears threatened as she realized how much she wanted to call this beautiful and regal elf *mother*.

"Mother," she said quietly.

Elawae's own eyes were suspiciously wet, but the smile she gave Kory was pure sunshine. "The Ceremony will begin soon. I must go and take my place, but you are not alone anymore, Korrene. Remember that." And she was gone, leaving a faint trace of roses in the air.

Kory searched the crowd below. There was no sign of Thelorin, but that didn't mean much. She was sure he would wait until the Binding began to make a dramatic entrance. It was his style.

She fidgeted with the sleeves of her gown and tried to remember the words she was supposed to say. Her thoughts shied away from the actual Binding itself. She never liked needles, and having a splinter removed was equivalent to major surgery in her mind. Letting someone cut open a vein in her wrist, without the benefit of anesthesia, was more than she cared to contemplate.

Instead, she thought about the times Rendolin had touched her and held her. The many times they had laughed together and argued.

Kory loved him. It was as simple as that.

She knew he was only going through with this Ceremony for duty's sake, and it tore at her heart to think he did not return her love. Something had happened to her here in his world. Kory had found faith in her instincts and in her own emotions. She would act upon that faith by committing herself for eternity to an elf who did not love her, and who would probably always secretly consider her beneath his touch. She prayed to whatever god or gods existed that somehow she would be able to endure it. Somehow, Rendolin would come to love her, just a little bit, even if that love was only based on gratitude for her sacrifice. It would be enough.

"It has to be enough."

"Pardon, Korrene. Were you speaking to me?"

Rendolin bent his head to her, his formal politeness effectively dousing her fragile hope with ice water.

"When will this thing start? I'm getting tired of standing here like a statue for that gawking crowd. And my feet hurt."

"Are you nervous?"

"Of course not!" She made the mistake of looking directly into green eyes that brimmed with skepticism.

"Oh, all right. Maybe a little. I don't like needles."

"There will be no needles. Just Selrin's knife."

"Wonderful."

"Lord Rendolin." He turned as the priest, Elaris, hurried to him. "Captain Feenix ordered me to fetch you, Lord."

Kory shook her head slightly at the priest's self-important air. As Rendolin and the other elf moved away, she heard him complain about Feenix's highhanded behavior, but Rendolin's response was lost to her.

He didn't even excuse himself before leaving her side, she observed. Some lover.

She reached inside a pocket and pulled out half a candy bar. As inconspicuously as possible, she unwrapped the paper and popped a piece of the chocolate into her mouth. Caramel dripped from her bottom lip, but she flicked her tongue out to catch it before it could spot her gown. Instantly, the warm sweetness melted on her tongue, and she felt it begin to soothe her frazzled nerves.

Nothing like a good old American candy bar to calm you down. Now, if she could just indulge in a hot cup of coffee, she'd be ready for this Binding when Rendolin finally decided it was time.

Suddenly, music began to play from directly underneath the balcony. As the first few notes of a lute thrummed in the air, the crowd began to settle and their murmuring became whispers. Rendolin returning to her side, linked his arm in hers to lead her towards the altar where Lord Selrin was waiting in a jewel-encrusted robe.

Kory had never seen so many pearls sewn onto a garment. She wondered how much it weighed.

They stood with the balcony on their right, their profiles to the audience. They faced the altar and Selrin. Rendolin was closest to the railing and Kory was inside on his left. The audience did not have a clear view of Kory, but they could all watch their High Priest as he performed his part of the ritual.

The massive doors to the sanctuary had been closed and the crowd in the back by the doors was standing, straining to see. Music from lutes and pipes filled the hall with a haunting melody. There were hundreds of candles around the room, placed on the altar, in wall sconces and in tall standing holders, lending their warmth to the heat already radiating from the pressed bodies below. The smells of incense and beeswax mingled with the pungent odor of herbs and flower—all combining into a cloying, nauseating pall, reminding Kory of a funeral.

A light buzz began in her ears, as if an army was marching around in her head, behind her eyes. She gulped a great mouthful of air, which tasted of incense and smoke. Her hand rested in Rendolin's. She could feel a trickle of perspiration roll over her palm and seep between her fingers. How embarrassing! Her palms were wet and clammy, and she was trembling like a spoonful of Jell-O.

She straightened her shoulders, drawing another deep breath of air. Holding it to the count of four, she then slowly released it through pursed lips, straining for composure; but she only succeeding in trembling more.

Rendolin released her hand to crumble some dried leaves into the pink crystal goblet resting on the altar. It seemed to be a monstrous thing with a sinister look, waiting patiently for Kory to take a drink. She could almost see demonic eyes gleaming malevolently at her in the pattern of jewels embedded along its rim. Her heart began to race and bang against her ribs like a prisoner trying to burst from jail.

The buzzing in her ears became even louder, drowning out Lord Selrin's words. She was afraid she would miss her cue and muff her lines. Desperately she watched his lips, trying to read the words as he spoke.

The army in her head was now doing drills at double time, and a giant's hand in her stomach clenched, forcing the air from her lungs as cramps slammed into her. When her blood began to run first fiery hot, then icy cold and her head became light, she knew she was on the point of a major, full-blown anxiety attack. She groped for Rendolin's arm, hoping his strength would keep her standing if her legs were to give out.

As he turned to look down at her in concern, she caught a flash of movement in the crowd to Rendolin's right. Before it had time to fully register in her mind, a blur of black and white erupted from behind Selrin and slammed into Rendolin. The force pulled Kory down along with him.

Instantly, pandemonium broke out. Women were screaming and men shouting. Steel clanged against steel; grunts of pain added a strident harmony to the symphony of voices. Kory knew civil war had broken out in earnest.

The altar cloth went up in flames as a candle was dislodged from the tapers. She watched as Selrin beat out the fire with his bare hands, and the smell of burnt meat combined with the cloying sent of wax and herbs.

All this Kory absorbed in the matter of seconds before she noticed that Rendolin was not getting up, and that the black and white shape that had hurled itself at him was in reality Captain Feenix.

A yellow-feathered arrow protruded from the captain's neck, leaking crimson blood all over her leather vest and splashing onto the granite floor of the balcony.

A woman's voice rose in a high, piercing wail, driving spikes of agony through Kory's mind...before all became black and the screaming stopped.

Rendolin could not move. A great weight on his chest pinned him to the ground, and his head felt as if it were going to shatter into a thousand pieces.

What happened?

Noise began to register in his brain, and he opened his eyes to try to find its source. Somewhere a woman was screaming hysterically and he was afraid it was Korrene. He needed to get to her and keep her safe. The Binding must be performed.

The Binding.

Suddenly his memory returned, clear and sharp. The Ceremony was being performed when Captain Feenix yelled something and jumped at him, knocking him sprawling onto the hard granite floor. He must have hit his head. He moved—and red and gold sparks shot through his head behind his eyes. A moan escaped his lips.

"Rendolin! Lord Rendolin!"

Through the haze of pain, he heard Selrin's worried voice. He opened his eyes again, squinting against the orange haze.

The heavy weight was lifted from him and he sat up slowly.

"Where is Korrene?" The words were thick and heavy on his tongue. His heart leaped into his throat and he felt as if it were going to choke his breath off.

He cleared his throat and tried again. "Is Korrene safe? What happened?"

Selrin pushed someone out of the way and knelt beside the High Priest, gently checking the back of his head for a bruise. His personal scent of mint tickled Rendolin's nose, reminding him of his many years apprenticed to this kind and generous man.

"She has fainted, but will be well," Selrin answered him. "Right now I am more concerned for you. Do you hurt any place other than your head? Can you move your legs and arms?"

"Fainted?" Rendolin demanded. His heart continued to beat timpani against his chest, and he was amazed to see his hands shake. "Are you sure she is well? Leave me be!" he commanded, pushing Selrin's hands away. "I only hit my head. See to Korrene. Make sure she is well."

If anything happened to her after he had already mourned her death once, he would personally tear apart the person responsible for her injuries.

"She has been removed to my home," said the older elf, helping Rendolin up. "She will be well taken care of there. Your mother is with her. I fear Captain Feenix may not fare as well."

For the first time, Rendolin noticed a young priest staunching a nasty wound in Feenix's throat. Beside her lay an arrow broken in half, fletched with yellow feathers.

Only Thelorin's personal guard fletched their arrows with yellow.

"Is she yet alive?" he asked Selrin. The older elf moved to take the place of the young priest, not answering Rendolin immediately. He watched as the Lord of the Healing House quickly applied herbs and went into a trance. Mint overpowered the acrid smell of burnt material and stale incense.

He did not have long to wait. Within a moment or two Selrin opened his eyes and looked at Rendolin

with a worried glance. "She is near death. We must remove her to my home. I have stopped the flow of blood so she will not lose any more life force. If she survives the transport, we have a chance of saving her. But we must hurry."

While the other healers were busy treating the wounded on the balcony, Mithris's soldiers and Feenix's guards had brought order to the Hall. It now stood empty of all except the guards, as Rendolin and the healers escorted Feenix's limp body to the House of Olewis. Rendolin noticed a puddle of blood in the center of the Hall. His face was a grim mask as he walked into the sunshine.

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Kory couldn't get anyone to tell her anything. She was beside herself with worry about Rendolin, but even Elawae didn't know if he was safe.

Every time Kory moved her hands, it felt like she was being jerked by a marionette string; they were shaking so badly she couldn't hold a glass to her lips without spilling the liquid down the front of her gown. She put the drink aside for fear of ruining the beautiful material.

Kory had awakened in the little room where she had spent the last night, in Selrin's home. Elawae was with her, and tried to reassure her, but Kory could see that Rendolin's mother was just as worried and upset as she was.

"I'm not going to wait here like a good little girl until someone remembers to tell us something," Kory said with a firm set to her mouth. She stood on unsteady legs, and ignored the dull ache still felt occasionally in her feet. "Come on. Let's go find out for ourselves."

Elawae shot her a swift, questioning glance, then seemed to make up her mind. "You are right, Korrene. We will not wait until someone comes for us. We might be helpful." She gathered her gown in her hands and marched from the room. Kory smiled grimly and followed.

Kory was surprised to find order and quiet in the Healing Hall. She had expected it to be a beehive of confused activity. Instead, it was almost deserted except for activity in the far, well lit corner. The two women hurried in that direction, fearful of what they might find.

Rendolin suddenly stood and Kory thought she would faint for the second time that day. Elawae made a soft sound, deep in her throat, as she threw herself into his arms.

"My son," she cried, touching his face and patting his shoulder. "I was afraid you had been killed."

"I am well, mother." Kory watched him wipe a tear from his mother's face before dropping a kiss on her cheek. Then, with a gentle but firm motion, Rendolin moved his mother away from him, and stepped back from the table where a black clad figure was laid out.

Kory watched Selrin and two other elves busy working over the body, before it registered in her mind that it was Feenix lying so still on the table.

Then the scene was blocked from view as Rendolin enveloped Kory in his arms.

"Are you truly well?" he asked the top of her head.

Kory pressed her cheek against the scratchy material of his robe and nodded. She didn't dare trust her voice yet, not with the mountain of unshed tears backing up in her chest and throat. She breathed his scent in deeply and realized nothing in any world smelled as good as sea spray, lemon, musk and rosemary.

"You smell so good." Her voice was muffled against his chest, but he understood her words, nonetheless. He put his hands on her shoulders and stepped back to look into her face.

"I was worried that something had happened to you, Korrene, and all you can tell me is that I smell good? What sort of greeting is that?"

She saw the worry in his eyes slowly fade as amusement took its place, and an answering smile tugged at her lips. "It's the best greeting you're likely to get, elf, unless you want me to collapse at your feet with relief. I thought you were dead, Rendolin. I saw a movement in the crowd and then you dropped like a ton of bricks with an arrow sticking in you." She touched the side of his face and neck with cold fingers. "I should have known you'd be too stubborn to lie down and die like any normal person."

She touched his chin where the dimple lived, then looked up. He seemed to be fighting some emotion deep inside himself, but he didn't give her the time needed to determine what before his lips crashed down on hers and he stole her breath away.

His hands roamed her shoulders and back, seeking to reassure himself that she was indeed fine. When his fingers entwined in her dark curls at the back of her head, she couldn't restrain a moan of pain.

"You have been hurt!" Rendolin held her away from him and looked at the back of her head.

"I just knocked my head when I went down, Rendolin. It's just a bump."

"A bump the size of a goose egg," he said with concern. "Let me heal it."

"The healers already did. I don't even have a headache anymore. Besides, you should be taking care of Feenix," she reminded him. Now that she knew he was okay, she felt a little guilty about not asking how the captain was doing. "How is she?"

"Selrin and the healers are doing their best to heal her. He has stopped the bleeding, but the danger is that the arrow was poisoned and it struck the artery that carries the most blood to the heart."

"The jugular."

"Aye. And since it is so close to the heart, some damage has already been done. It will be some time before we know if Selrin can reverse the effects of the toxin." He looked down at the woman in his arms with a worried frown. "She will need our prayers, Korrene. Will you join me as I pray?"

No one had ever asked her to pray with them, and it seemed a little embarrassing to her. She didn't often pray herself, but she knew it was a large part of Rendolin's everyday activities. Whether she believed they'd do any good or not, he obviously did.

"I would love to," she said, putting her hand in his. Before taking more than two steps away from Elawae and the working healers, a thought came to her. "Why is Feenix wounded and you are not?"

He stopped dead in his tracks, still as stone, before he glanced back at the healers. A tense look settled on his face. "She saved my life, Korrene. She leaped in front of me and took the arrow that was meant for me."

He released her hand.

Kory wanted to weep at the pain on his face. His next words almost ripped her heart from her breast.

"The arrow was my brother's." He turned a stony face in her direction and looked at her with dull eyes,

as if seeing her for the first time. "My own brother tried to kill me."

Kory had no words to comfort him.

"But you already knew that, did you not?" The pain and hatred in his eyes nearly stopped her heart.

CHAPTER TWENTY

How could Rendolin forget the woman's deceitful nature, even for a moment? Had the fear of losing her wiped all her lies from his mind? What type of man was he, that a pair of brown eyes could obliterate a lifetime of honor and duty? When had Korrene slipped into his heart and carved a room of her own? How could he have allowed her?

Well, it would not happen again! Thank Mac Lir's right eyebrow, he had come to his senses. Korrene would never again get past his defenses with her creamy white skin and those tiny dots dancing across her nose. He would shut his mind the next time she let loose with her sensuous laugh in his direction. He was the High Priest. He had learned control of his body and emotions years ago. That training would enable him to ignore her charms and perform his duty.

"Are you implying that I had something to do with Feenix's injury?" Kory fumed.

Gods, how innocent she sounds, he marveled. He could not be taken to task too severely for succumbing to her will and losing his own. She had a stronger magic than he had ever encountered.

"It was no mere injury, Korrene, as well you know. That arrow was meant for me and if my brother did not pull the bow himself, he had someone do it for him."

All his life he had been taught humans were not to be trusted. He knew they would betray their own mothers to gain what they wanted. What had made him think Korrene was any different? Was it because the god had chosen her? Or had he convinced himself that the trace of silvan blood coursing through her veins prevented her from dishonoring her pledge?

He did not know. Ren only knew that he felt hurt and betrayed, and instinctively wanted to hurt her in return. Rendolin wanted her humiliated and crushed, the way he had been in front of all his people at the Ceremony. His next words were flung with all the skill and accuracy of a huntsman's spear.

"When did you and my brother have time to plan? Last night after I left your room? Or was it the night I brought you back from your world? What did you pay for his services, Korrene? Was it your body, knowing I would be unable to tell since I am a virgin and you are not?"

He watched her eyes widen in surprise and her lips thin with anger. Even in deceit she was beautiful, and he felt his body respond. He clamped firm control over his desire and the tendril of guilt drifting through his conscience. Despite everything, he still wanted her. He knew his lust would never be slaked in one night of mating. Not in one night, one month or one year. It would take an eternity, and he hated himself for such weakness.

Rendolin turned away, hoping to hide any trace of weakness. He might be dying inside, but he'd be damned if he would let a human see it.

Kory watched Rendolin's hands clench and unclench as though he wanted to squeeze her neck in a vise-like grip. There was no trace of the charming dimple as his mouth pulled down into a fierce frown. His eyes were the dull gray of thunderclouds; his brows pulling together in a single band across his

forehead.

"Wait a minute," she sputtered. How could he even think she would plan something like this? Didn't he know she loved him? Hadn't those hot kisses and passionate touches meant anything to him? "What makes you think I had anything to do with it? I can't stand your brother!"

"Yet you plotted with him to lie to me and send you home. Is this just another way for you to be free of me and go back to your miserable existence?"

"I tried to explain about going home, but you won't listen! I had already decided not to leave you when..."

"I will hear no more lies, Korrene," Rendolin said, turning his back and leaving her standing in the middle of the Hall.

"Wait just one minute, buddy!" she shouted, grabbing his arm and trying to spin him around.

He shook her off, continuing on his way.

"Hey!" She had to run to keep up with his long strides and her feet were really beginning to hurt, but she scrambled in front of him and shoved him with all her might. "Don't you dare walk away from me, you big jerk! I'm tired of trying to explain myself to you when you won't listen, but if you expect me to Bind with you, you'd better listen to what I have to say."

"And if I refuse?" He lifted a golden eyebrow in a disdainfully attractive manner.

"Then I will not Bind with you. Ever."

Kory watched him cross his arms over his chest and stare down his nose at her. He looked like he was observing an insect crawling on his boot.

Her chest rose and fell from her exertion and her feet felt as if they were on fire. If he didn't respond to her ultimatum soon she was going to embarrass herself and collapse yet again on the ground.

Before he could answer, the priest, Elaris, hurried up to them and spoke to Rendolin.

"Lord Selrin says Feenix is resting easy now. If she survives the night, she will most likely live."

Rendolin clapped the priest on the back, turned from Kory without a word, and the two started down the path without a look back in her direction.

"Where are you going?" She had to get off her feet, and the fact that she couldn't follow him made her even more frustrated.

"To pray." He continued without a falter in his regal stride.

"I thought you wanted me to go with you."

"I changed my mind," he threw over his shoulder, like a king scattering coins to his subject.

Then he turned the corner of the building and was gone from her sight.

"Damn!" She sat down in the middle of the path.

And they say women are stubborn! Rendolin could give lessons to a mule!

With all the insight she had gained about him while writing her story, Kory couldn't figure out why he was so pig headed about her wanting to go home. She thought they had resolved that in the meadow and at the River. She told him she loved him and would stay and Bind. He had told her he loved her. She had believed him, more fool she.

When she went to college, why hadn't she majored in psychology instead of journalism? Maybe then she could figure out how to get him to remember that he loved her.

She was sure he loved her. He had to. She wasn't about to throw away everything she knew and risk her future happiness unless he loved her—as much as she loved him. Now all she had to do was convince him.

Within a few moments, Elawae emerged from the Healing Hall and walked to her. "Why are you sitting on the ground, Korrene?"

"Because my feet are killing me and I can't walk back to the House by myself. Do you think you could get someone to help me?"

"Where is my son? He could carry you back."

Kory wasn't fooled by the innocent look in the lovely turquoise eyes gazing down at her. She knew Rendolin's mother was aware they'd had another spat. It galled her to have to tell Elawae what happened, but perhaps she should be told just what a jerk her precious son really was.

"He left me here because he thinks I plotted with Thelorin to kill him today! Have you ever heard anything so ridiculous in your life?"

Elawae stood there, just looking down at her for a minute before asking in a quiet voice, "And did you?"

Kory fell back, but caught herself by placing her hands on the ground behind her. What a wedding day this was turning out to be. Her loving groom accused her of attempted murder, and her future mother-in-law wanted to know if Kory had plotted to kill her son. Was she the only sane one here? Was everyone else crazy?

"Of course not!" She felt like Rendolin had punched her in the stomach and then his mother came along and kicked her in the kidneys for good measure. "How could you think such a thing?"

"Well, you have never said that you loved him, and you have continually expressed your desire to go back to your own world. I suppose killing him would be a permanent solution to your problem."

"I would never kill anyone, and I'm insulted that you would think I could! Besides..." she started to add, but then thought better of it. "Never mind."

Elawae tilted her elegant head to the side slightly, a thoughtful look on her face.

Kory thought the silence stretched on forever as the elfin woman studied her.

"Do you love my son, Korrene?"

Kory opened her mouth to deny the charge, but somehow the words just wouldn't come out. How could her voice desert her at such a time? She cleared her throat and tried again to explain that liking someone was not the same as loving him.

"Yes."

Where in the world had *that* come from?

Kory waited for Elawae's smile of approval, but it didn't come. Instead, a slight frown washed across her face, to be replaced by a worried look.

"Then why have you plotted against him?"

"I never plotted against him," Kory denied hotly. "I would never hurt him!"

"Yet Thelorin sent you home and then staged your death so that Rendolin would believe you gone forever. That is not plotting against him?"

Her stern voice brought back Kory's feelings of guilt over the episode. Perhaps Elawae would listen to an explanation, even if her stubborn son wouldn't.

"I did agree to let him send me back, but that was before I spent the day with Rendolin at the Joyous River. I had decided to tell Thelorin I had changed my mind before we got back. But Thelorin wouldn't listen to me. It must be a trait that runs in your family, Elawae. Anyway, he refused to let me back out and forced me to return. I couldn't stop him!"

She watched emotions flit across Elawae's face faster than a hummingbird's wings. She couldn't tell what the elfin woman was thinking.

"Thelorin is very determined when he makes up his mind to something."

"I tried to get away from him, but my feet were so sore I could barely stand, never mind run." Kory hoped Elawae would believe her. She had to get someone to understand what happened. "He grabbed my wrist and pulled me to him. Then he touched Rendolin's headband..."

"He had Rendolin's headband?" Elawae's voice was sharp with disbelief.

"Yes. He said he borrowed it so the god's magic would work for him. He said he would put it back before Rendolin missed it."

"You are sure it was Rendolin's and not some other headband?"

"No, it was Rendolin's. Thelorin said it was." She was puzzled at Elawae's concern. While it wasn't very nice of Thelorin to use Rendolin's property without permission, he evidently had returned it, sneak that he was, and so no harm came to Rendolin. "Is it important that he used Rendolin's headband?"

"Yes. It explains why there was no trace of new magic in your room, especially no trace of Thelorin's magic. He did not use his own, he used Rendolin's."

"I didn't know you could detect magic or even who used it."

"Magic has a distinct odor, Korrene, and all persons using it have their own scent. Have you never noticed Rendolin's magic scent is rosemary?"

"Well, at first I thought it was because he used that herb a lot, but then I realized it was strongest when he cast a spell."

"A good tracer can follow a magic trail like a dog follows a rabbit. The tracer can tell who the magic user is by the scent, along with other senses. Thelorin did not use his own magic, so there was no scent for anyone to notice, other than Rendolin's. Since Rendolin had used his magic in your room a number of times, no one questioned its presence. My eldest son is very clever."

While there was pride in her voice when she said it, Kory also heard worry and regret.

"You don't really think Thelorin tried to kill Rendolin, do you?" Kory couldn't stop from asking the question. If anyone knew Thelorin's mind, surely it had to be his mother.

"Rendolin is convinced his brother tried to kill him, and I do not know what the consequences will be. Feenix is near death and that, of course, is a terrible thing. But even worse would be brother fighting against brother. This incident must not be allowed to get out of hand."

"Why is Rendolin convinced Thelorin was behind it? Anyone could have shot that arrow."

"The arrow was fletched with the yellow feathers of Thelorin's House. It is a very distinguishing color. There is no mistake; the arrow was Thelorin's."

"But you don't believe he did it, do you?" Kory had been watching Elawae closely. She was pretty sure the older woman didn't believe her eldest son would harm the youngest.

"No, Korrene. I do not." Elawae dusted off a large boulder by the side of the path and sat daintily, not very far from Kory. Kory couldn't help but compare her own clumsy decent into the dust to the way Elawae gracefully alighted upon the rock. If elephants walked upon two legs, their name would be Kory.

"As you said, anyone could have shot that arrow. If an assassin wanted Thelorin implicated, it would not be such a difficult thing to steal the yellow-feathered arrow and use it. Also, there was poison on the point. The People of the Sea do not use poison. That is a trick the Night Elves perfected many years ago."

Kory's heart began to beat with excitement. Of course! It made perfect sense. Even she knew Thelorin's sense of honor would not allow him to kill his own brother. "Are you saying that the Night Elves shot Feenix?"

"No. I am saying it is the type of deed they would do." She looked off to the distance. Kory followed her gaze. Waves were pounding the rocks below the cliffs. The wind picked up, bring the taint of rain. But Elawae wasn't looking at the surf crashing on the rocks. Her eyes searched beyond the horizon, beyond the cliffs of Sasheena. Kory was sure she was seeing her homeland of Shalridoor in her mind's eye.

"If it wasn't Thelorin, and it wasn't the Night Elves," Kory prompted, "who was it?"

Elawae sat as if she hadn't heard the question; beautiful eyes unfocused and far seeing. The scent of roses wafted on the salty air.

Was the elfin woman casting a spell? Kory couldn't tell. Looking around, she assured herself there were no roses close by to be the source of the smell.

"I will send someone to assist you to the House," Elawae said. Then she stood and hurried back toward the Healing House.

Before Kory could respond to her words, Elawae was gone and Kory was left sitting in the dust waiting for the rain to come.

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"I tell you, brother, I did not try to kill you!"

Thelorin's voice was like the roar of a sea lion. Rendolin did not want to listen, but his mother had

insisted that this meeting take place. To give her credit, she made sure Lord Mithris and some of his most trusted soldiers were also in the hall. She knew her sons, he thought with a wry twist of his lips.

"Is this not your arrow?" Rendolin asked, thrusting the broken piece of wood with the feathers still attached in Thelorin's face.

"You know it is, but I did not shoot it, nor did any of my people."

"You lie, brother." Rendolin threw the arrow to the floor. When would Thelorin and Korrene stop trying to deceive him? "You did not want this Binding to take place, and you would do anything to keep it from happening. Including killing your own brother."

"If I were going to kill anyone," the elder elf shouted, "it would be that human you brought here, not my own flesh and blood!"

"You already tried that." Rendolin sneered in Thelorin's face. "When you and Korrene plotted to fake her death so that I would not be able to obey the god's command. But you learned then that nothing would stop me from my duty. You realized the only way to stop me would be to kill me."

It was all Rendolin could do to keep his hands from his brother's throat. Never had he felt more prone to violence than when he realized Thelorin was the author of the intended assassination.

The only thought that kept returning to him was how much enjoyment he would get from punching his brother in the face a few times.

But Mac Lir's High Priest must not allow his baser passions to overrule his head; a healer does not resort to violence. But by the god's right toe, just one fist in Thelorin's lying mouth would feel so good.

"I admit that my people and I thought if you believed the human woman dead, you would put aside this abhorrent idea of Binding with a human. We miscalculated."

Thelorin was standing beside an old, carved oaken table. He leaned one hand on it as if the only thing keeping him from tumbling to the floor was its solid weight.

Rendolin looked closer at him and noticed for the first time that his brother's face was a pale, unhealthy color and that his left arm hung limp at his side.

As much as he tried, the healer's intuition in Rendolin could not be silenced. Instinctively he sent a small divining spell out to discover the cause of Thelorin's problem.

And was surprised at what he found.

Thelorin's collarbone was broken, he had a knife gash on his upper arm that was the cause of a great amount of blood loss, and he was suffering from a slight concussion. Rendolin was amazed his brother was able to stand there and argue with him in a coherent manner.

His first instinct was to have Thelorin sit down, but anger and pride kept him from showing such compassion. Instead, he turned to Mithris. "Would you have a servant bring some wine, Mithris? I find that pulling the truth from my brother is a hard, dry business."

Rendolin pulled out a chair from the table, straddled it, and laid his arms across the wooden back before returning his attention to the wounded elf. "Sit, brother."

As he thought, Thelorin refused.

"Sit or I will have the guards force you down."

A flash of color flooded Thelorin's face as his anger surged, but after a moment he sat. A hiss of pain escaped his pinched lips, but Rendolin pretended he had not heard.

"So," he said quietly as his brother shifted to a more comfortable position. He did not think Thelorin would be at ease until the shoulder was healed. "You insist that you did not try to kill me. Yet the arrow was yours. Explain to me how this could be. And how a man who professes to hate humans can plot murder with one."

Thelorin banged the goblet down on the table, slopping the red wine over his hand. "I plotted with no human! They do not have the intellect for espionage."

"Another lie, brother! You planned and executed her return home with Korrene. A human. Or was it *she* who planned the entire thing and you merely did her bidding?"

He knew nothing could have been more calculated to raise Thelorin's ire than to suggest he did the bidding of a female, and a human female at that.

"Unlike some I could name," his brother snarled, "I am not led around by the nose by a pretty pair of eyes and a comely figure. The plan was mine!"

"More lies! Korrene wanted nothing except to return to her home. What did she promise you for the service?"

Against his will, visions of Korrene's soft flesh lying beneath Thelorin's hands nearly sent Rendolin over the edge. His hands itched to pull his sword, or to cast a lightening bolt in his brother's direction. Taking deep breaths, he barely contained his rage. He would not let it get the better of him.

"She did not come to me, I went to her. I told her I wanted her gone from Sasheena and would send her home if she agreed to help me fake her death so you would not go looking for her like a love sick bull. She was happy to agree. It seems your human did not take to you as much as you did to her."

Thelorin's red-rimmed eyes searched his brother's face, and his mouth stretched into a dreadful leer. He licked his parched lips before continuing. "She could not wait to get away from your pitiful embrace."

Rendolin's heart faltered. He knew the exact moment it had died. Like a tidal pool in the sun, it shriveled up and withered away, leaving a cold, hard lump. Its only use was to pump blood through his body. He wished it would cease that function as well.

Korrene wanted nothing to do with him.

"Since you refuse to admit the truth about your part in Captain Feenix's injury, you leave me no choice but to use my magic upon you."

Thelorin straightened in the chair. "You can not use a Truth Spell on me. I am stronger than that."

"Under normal circumstances, I would agree that you could hold out for a very long time, brother. But in your current weakened condition, I believe I will get to the heart of the matter in short order. You have lost a lot of blood."

"Cast your spell then, little brother. You will see that I have spoken true about your human agreeing with my plan."

Rendolin had no doubt of that truth. What he needed to know was if his own brother had tried to kill him.

"And what else will we learn?"

He knew Thelorin was close to collapse. The loss of blood and the pain from his collarbone had taken a great toll on him. That the spell would work, he did not doubt. But Rendolin prayed his brother would not make him use it and shame him. He watched as his brother closed his eyes and dropped his head into his hand.

Thelorin took a ragged breath and his body shuddered before he spoke again. "Korrene did not want to go back to her world. I forced her."

Rendolin did not know what he expected his brother to say, but it certainly was not this.

"Do not lie more to me. Korrene had been plaguing me to go home for days. I am surprised she did not ask you sooner to send her home."

"It is true. I made it very clear that I would do anything to get rid of her. She knew I spoke the truth. I outlined how we could fake her death. She was not happy with that, fearing that someone would be hurt, but she finally agreed to the plan."

"Then by your own words she plotted against me," Rendolin said, as he poured himself a glass of wine from the decanter. Thelorin reached across for the bottle and splashed the red liquid into his own goblet, making a puddle on the smooth surface of the wood. "How can you say she had changed her mind?"

Thelorin drank deeply of the wine before answering. "When I came for her that night, she said she had changed her mind and would stay and Bind with you. I could not let that happen, so I forced her to come with me."

"How?"

"She could not move very fast because of her injured feet, and I was able to capture her easily. I used your headband to teleport to her world. Fortunately, she fainted during the transport."

"She has no constitution for teleportation," Rendolin observed fondly. Even with the proof of her deceit before him, she had the power to generate warm thoughts in his mind, curse her soul.

"When we reached her world she could not argue or fight. I left her lying on her bed and came back. I knew if she had been awake, bleeding feet or no, she would have fought like a bull seal to come back to you."

A little thrill of hope blossomed in Rendolin's heart. Could it be that the day in the meadow and at the Joyous River had changed her mind? Could she have really meant it when she agreed to Bind with him?

"If what you say is true, brother, you have much to answer for."

"I know that well. I have acted in a way that would bring shame to our father's eyes. But I swear to you I did not try to kill you, little brother. I would sooner cut out my own heart than harm you. You must know that. I have always taken care of you; even from the time our father was killed by the Night Elves. It is a habit of mine." He smiled wanly, but the putty color of his skin worried the healer.

It was true that Thelorin had always taken care of his little brother. He could remember countless times when Thelorin had let him follow him around; times when he had taken the time to teach a younger brother fighting skills and to hone his sword play. To Rendolin, it was as if his older brother had taken the place of his father. It had put his soul in agony, thinking Thelorin had planned to kill him.

"Then explain how it could have happened, brother."

It seemed to Rendolin that Thelorin sagged with relief, that he welcomed the opportunity to speculate possibilities and work out solutions with him, as they had done countless times before.

"I think someone wanted you to die, and wanted everyone to think I had done the deed. We are fortunate that Captain Feenix was so vigilant and acted quickly."

"You would give some credit to a human, Thelorin?" Rendolin could not help tease his brother just a bit.

"I give credit where it is due," answered the elder without a trace of amusement. "It would have been simple enough to steal an arrow or two from the armory," he continued as if Rendolin had not spoken. "An archer hidden in the sanctuary before the Ceremony would be no hard feat."

"The guard searched the hall before any were allowed in, and they found no one."

"There are nooks and crannies aplenty, Rendolin. Do you forget the times we hid and played amongst the statues and carvings? A man determined to remain undetected could have succeeded."

Rendolin nodded. When he wished to be alone to commune with the god, the High Priest could make himself invisible in the hall.

"Of course, whoever the assassin is, he took a chance on the poison," Thelorin added.

"How so?" While his brother was busy talking, Rendolin had taken the opportunity to finish monitoring his wounds. The most serious was the gash the knife had made, but while it continued to bleed sluggishly, nothing vital had been touched. Once the wound had been sewn and healed, Thelorin would be fine. Setting the collarbone would be painful, but that, too, was a minor wound.

"Who would believe that the Lord of the House of Hiloris would stoop to poison? That is an evil trick that thankfully has never been adopted by the People of the Sea." Thelorin took another drink, then continued, "But, little brother, I swear by Leondrilik's sword, that whoever it was that tried to kill you, I will hunt down as justice demands. I make you that oath."

Before Rendolin could comment, like a gust of wind from a mountaintop, Elawae swept in and stopped in the middle of the room. Her youngest son watched as she quickly took in Thelorin's state, then turned to monitor his own state of mind.

"You are correct, my son. It was not any of our people who shot that arrow."

She looked around at the men in the room and Rendolin saw a grim smile tug at her lips. With a start, he recognized the look of hatred in her eyes. It was a look she got only when remembering the loss of her husband, and the terror of Shalridoor.

"The Night Elves have found us."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

"What the hell are you doing here, woman? Can't a person die in peace without finding you hovering over them?"

Feenix's voice was rough and husky from pain, but Kory had no problem understanding the words.

She'd been sitting beside the fighter's bed for the past two hours, hoping Feenix would wake so they could talk.

"Back to normal, I see," Kory commented, putting aside the quill and parchment she had been using. "Now that you've recovered your wit and charm, it won't be long before you're whacking people with your sword again."

"Be quiet. My head hurts and your dulcet tones are not doing it any good." Feenix put her hand on her head and tentatively felt around. "Am I alive? What happened?"

Kory offered Feenix a glass of cool water, before answering. "Yes, you're alive, but just barely. You took an arrow that was meant for Rendolin. Do you remember?"

Feenix seemed to be searching her memory, when suddenly her eyes focused and she grinned slightly.

"I remember. The Binding was about to take place when I detected a fishy character in the back of the hall. He moved out from behind a column, and raised a bow. I only had time to push Rendolin down before the arrow was loosed." A worried look came into her eyes. "How is he?"

"He's fine, but you've been unconscious for almost two days."

"From what? An arrow's scratch? I've taken worse hits and kept on fighting for hours!" The captain seemed completely baffled by the thought that a mere arrow would incapacitate her.

"Well, *this* arrow was poisoned, and hit you in the neck. How do you feel, by the way?"

Feenix touched the bandage on her throat and winced a bit. "Perfect. I shouldn't be lying here in bed. I have work to do. Did they find the scum who shot me?" She moved to sit up, thought better of it, and laid her head back down with a little moan.

"You need to rest more—Rendolin's orders."

"Blast that elf! What the hell does he know?" Feenix closed her eyes; the exhaustion on her face proved to Kory the elf did know what he was about.

"Feenix, I know you're tired, but I wanted to thank you. If it hadn't been for your quick action, Rendolin might be dead." And Kory would have lost yet another loved one. The thought of how close she had come to losing the man she loved scared her to death. Elves were supposed to live forever!

"You don't have to thank me, wench," Feenix's voice sounded soft and weak. "And don't go getting all mushy on me. I was just doing my job. That's what I get paid for. Now go away and let me sleep."

"You can't lie to me, Captain. I know Rendolin means more to you than just a job." She watched as Feenix opened one eye and scowled. "And I'm grateful. He means a lot to me, too."

"Well, you have a damn poor way of showing it!"

Kory had made her mind up before visiting with Feenix not to lose her temper. She was finding it difficult to keep that promise. The abrasive warrior woman was about as warm and cuddly as a porcupine, and just as touchy.

"Well, never mind. I just want you to know if you ever need anything, I'd like to repay the favor."

"Then answer my question—did they catch the scum that shot me? Was it one of Thelorin's people?" Feenix' voice was giving out and her face was pinched and drawn. Kory thought she should send for a

healer, but she knew she owed Feenix an answer.

"Thelorin swears it wasn't any of his people, even though the arrow was from his armory. He and a bunch of soldiers are out searching for the assassin." Her words didn't seem to have any effect on the woman in the bed. Feenix's eyes remained closed, but Kory knew she was listening.

"Where is Rendolin?" Kory could barely hear the words.

"He's been cooped up in that sanctuary of his, praying to his god since yesterday afternoon." She hoped her voice didn't sound as whining to Feenix as it did to her own ears.

Feenix forced her eyes open and sent Kory a disgusted look. "Still haven't made up, have you? Why don't you just throw yourself in his arms and kiss him to unconsciousness? That's what he wants, you know."

Kory felt herself blush. "How do you know?" She felt like a junior high school pre-teen with a first crush.

"Don't be more of an ass than you already are, Korrene." Kory didn't know how Feenix could continue to speak, her voice sounded so weary. "I see things. He wants you." She closed her eyes again and her breathing became deep and more regular.

"But does he love me?" Kory asked herself before leaving the sleeping woman.

As she was leaving the Healers' Hall, Kory heard Rendolin call from the entrance of the sanctuary. As she watched, he stepped into the sunshine and hurried towards her. Great. She didn't feel like another confrontation with the stubborn elf, but supposed it was inevitable. Better to get it over with.

She watched the sun play across his face, casting shadows as he moved in and out from under the trees along the path. His hair was molten gold and the long tresses bounced and danced with his hurried steps. The day was warm and his robe was open, revealing his bronzed chest, for he wore no shirt beneath. His muscles rippled from exercise, and she longed to smooth her palms over his warm skin.

As he drew near, she could detect the odor of stale incense clinging to his clothing, reminding her of the aborted Binding. Her heart jumped in her chest at the grim set of his beautiful mouth. He was going to argue with her again.

"I need to speak with you, Korrene."

"I thought as much." Her stomach was doing an aerial routine of flips and dips, using her heartstrings as the trapeze.

"Will you come with me to my home? We would be more comfortable." She couldn't detect any anger, but neither could she identify what emotion he was feeling.

He took her arm, guiding her along the path, walking at a comfortable pace for her.

"How are your feet coming along?"

"Better. Selrin did another healing on them." Kory peeked at him from beneath her lashes. "I opened the cuts again the other day chasing after you."

"Aye."

That's all he was going to say? She should have known the arrogant jerk wouldn't offer an apology for all the pain and worry he put her through. Fine.

They soon reached the House, and he led her into the sitting room and motioned for her to sit. She sat on the couch without a word, waiting for him to start the conversation.

She had never felt so awkward with him before. It might make it a little easier if she only knew where she stood with him. She didn't know if the things he had said that day at the River had only been words to get her to agree to the Binding or not. She watched him pace around the room and knew that he was also feeling ill at ease.

Suddenly, Kory began to feel better. He wasn't in complete control, which eased her tension.

"Thelorin has found the assassin."

She hadn't expected him to speak with her about his brother. "Good."

"The assassination attempt was planned by our ancient enemy, the Night Elves."

"Oh."

"I owe you an apology." He looked at her expectantly.

"Yes?" She'd be damned if she'd make this easy for him.

"Are you going to answer me in one syllable words all day?" Rendolin pushed his hair back from his face with an impatient gesture. She almost smiled. "You are not going to make this easy for me, are you, Korrene?"

"No." She was enjoying herself immensely.

Kory could see it was taking all his restraint to keep from storming out of the room. She gave him credit for mastering his frustration and anger.

He stood over her, obviously trying to ruffle her calm. Like a big bully, she thought. She smiled innocently, and blinked twice while holding her breath.

With an angry sound, he continued pacing. "I was wrong about Thelorin plotting to kill me." He stood with his back to her, his hands clasped behind him. He looked like he was expecting her to hit him.

"You were wrong about me, too."

He didn't turn, but the tight leggings he wore enabled her to see muscles bunch in his legs, then relax. His shoulders, too, seemed to sag a little before he took a deep breath. The silence stretched for long minutes before she finally heard his voice.

"Aye. You, too."

She smiled at his back, content to wait him out.

Again the silence lasted an uncomfortably long time. Kory could have written two full pages, in long hand, before his voice shattered the stillness.

"How long are you going to make me suffer?"

It took all her resolve not to give in to the forlorn little boy voice. She knew he wasn't a child, and if she was tempted to think he was, all she had to do was remember the way he had kissed her lips until her toes curled, or the strength of his arms as he carried her home. No, he was not a child, and if she had any

hope of making her life with him work, he had better learn she expected the same courtesy and degree of trust from him that he expected from her.

"Almost as long as you made me suffer. Let's see...a week should do. You earned it, you know."

Turning from the window, he dropped his hands to his side. The sun was at his back, throwing his face into shadow, but she could see the chagrin on his face as he moved to stand in front of her.

"Aye. I earned it." Reaching down, Rendolin took her hands and guided her to her feet. "I was a fool not to believe you, and am deeply sorry, Korrene." His velvet voice trickled down her spine, sending hot white sparks to her soul. "Please forgive me."

Kory bit her lip and tried to steel herself against his charm. It wasn't impossible—she knew it wasn't *impossible*—but it was close.

"And that's it? You say you're sorry and I melt into your arms?" The arrogant jerk. "It doesn't work that way with me."

"How does it work? What do you want, Korrene? What do I say for your forgiveness?"

As much as she could tell, he was sincere. Certainly the worried look in his eyes was real.

But was he worried he couldn't win her around in time to Bind, or was he worried he'd lost her love? She couldn't tell.

"Why do you want me to forgive you, Rendolin?" She held her breath, waiting for his answer. "Is it just because you need me for this Binding?"

"You know how vital the Binding is for my people's survival. It is my duty."

This was like gathering a bucket of water using a sieve. Why couldn't he just answer the question, without all the side trips to duty and country?

"You once told me a Son of the House of Hiloris never lied. Stop sidestepping the issue, Rendolin, and just answer the question. Why should I forgive you?"

She tried to restrain her temper, but he was pushing. She knew her patience was close to an end. If he didn't give some reason other than that blasted Binding—if he couldn't give some assurance that he, Rendolin, wanted her—needed her—loved her—then Kory was going to get up and walk out the door. Maybe she couldn't go home, but she wouldn't give herself to a man who had no love for her. She wouldn't sell herself for so little ever again.

She could feel the tension in his whole body. She knew this wasn't an easy thing for him, but she had to know.

"I need you."

She barely heard the words, but they were a start.

"Why? So you can do your duty to your god? I want more than that."

"By the god's right toe, what do you want, woman?" She thought maybe that she had pushed too far.

He released her hands and scraped his hair from his face, then planted his feet, stuck his hands on his hips and glared at her. "I have told you I am sorry..."

"Sorry for what?" she interrupted.

"Sorry that I falsely accused you of plotting with my brother to kill me."

"You have no choice since you found out he wasn't the one who wanted you dead."

"What do you want, Korrene? Tell me and I will give it to you."

Her heart beat with the fear of her own vulnerability. She knew her entire life's happiness depended upon what was said here in the next few minutes. After so many years of being afraid to give herself to any person, to love anyone, just the thought of telling Rendolin that she loved him scared her to death. It felt like she was standing beside Niagara Falls without the guardrail to keep her from falling.

"I want to know how you feel, Rendolin. I want to know if you can trust and love me. I need to know if spending eternity with you is going to be worth my while. Is loving you going to kill me?"

There. She'd done it. Now Kory needed the courage to wait for his answer. Please, God, let it be an answer she could live with.

"I told you, at the Joyous River, that I loved you." He stopped and searched her face. She willed him to go on. "I still do, Korrene." He took her hands again. "Only Mac Lir knows why, but I am destined to always love you."

She ducked her head so he would not see the joy shining in her eyes, or the happy smile she couldn't bite back. His words weren't enough.

"Do you still think I slept with Thelorin?"

She looked up in time to see the pain in his eyes, which was reflected in her heart, but she had to know what he thought. There was no way she was going to spend eternity with a guy that thought she had made it with his brother.

"Ah, Korrene," he seemed to drag his words from his soul, "I was angry and worried, but most of all I was insane, thinking he had touched you." The words washed over her like a balm. "I thought he had betrayed me and it hurt so much, I wanted to hurt someone else. You were an easy target, much to my shame. Please forgive me." He bent his head and kissed her knuckles, then laid his cheek along the backs of her hands.

Pulling one of her hands away, she slipped her fingers around the nape of his neck. His hair was cool to the touch, but his skin was warm.

"Were you really jealous?" She couldn't help asking. She had a feeling it would be a rare occasion when Rendolin would be this humble and contrite. She didn't think she'd want to see him this way very often, but it was comforting to know this side existed.

"Aye."

He breathed the word on her skin, then pulled her down with him to the couch where he could wrap his arms around her comfortably. Kory decided, as arms and spine danced with goose bumps, that she had punished him enough for one day. It was probably time to put Feenix's advice to the test.

Kory cupped his face with her palms, in the same manner he had done to her, and pulled his lips to hers. Her kiss was gentle, soft and he simply accepted it without demur.

"I love you, Lord Rendolin Hiloris." Her next kiss became more demanding. Rendolin came alive, taking over the course of the embrace.

His tongue played across her bottom lip until she opened for him, and then he stroked her soft mouth in a way that set her body to trembling.

She loved the way he tasted. She savored him like a Belgian chocolate, kissing chin and neck, then down the strong column to his chest. When her teeth found his nipple, he groaned into her hair and held her mouth tight against its taut peak. His smooth skin excited her, and his hands lit a flame in the center of her that threatened to destroy her. She moaned in pleasure.

He raised her face to kiss her lips again, then sat back, dragging great breaths into his lungs.

"Before this goes any further, Korrene, we must talk."

"I don't want to talk," she said, reaching for him again.

Gently he held her away from him, and smiled at her. "We must. It is important."

With a frustrated growl, Kory dropped her hands from his body and sat up.

"The Binding, I suppose."

His smile widened. "The Binding."

She adjusted her clothing and tucked her leg under her bottom. "Okay. What's on your mind?" If they got this talk over with quickly, maybe she could convince him to take up where they had left off.

Not a likely goal, but certainly worthwhile.

"I do not mean to rush you, Korrene, but the Binding must take place immediately. We have learned that the Night Elves know Sasheena exists, and that they are planning to attack in the next few weeks."

"How did you find that out?"

"Thelorin questioned the assassin and his accomplices. They had been *geased*, but my brother's magic soon broke through the spell and he discovered the plot." Rendolin clenched his fists and bit his lip in agitation.

"What's a *gease*?" She wasn't up on all this magical terminology and she might as well start her education now.

"When a *gease* spell is placed on a person, he is compelled to obey the caster's command. If the caster commands that the enspelled person perform a service, they do all in their power to obey and complete the service. A powerful Night Elf cast a spell on this man to kill me. Luckily, Feenix foiled the plan."

"But how were they able to find someone from Sasheena to make the kill? I thought the Night Elves were unaware it existed."

"Apparently, one of our people was captured the last time he visited the mainland."

Kory was confused. "But I thought you didn't go to the mainland, for fear of being discovered."

"Periodically we make runs to Tylana for information and goods. We do a brisk trade with a few select citizens of Port Marcus. One of our people was captured, enspelled, and sent back with orders to cause

as much dissension as possible. The Night Elves ordered him to kill me, knowing that if the High Priest were killed, Sasheena would be thrown into confusion until another was appointed. They hoped it would be just enough time for them to attack and finish the massacre they started at Shalridor so many years ago."

With a start, she realized that her turning up and causing such unrest among the people who believed, as Thelorin did, that humans and elves should not mate, only lent itself to their stratagem.

Instead of being the salvation of these people, Kory had almost been their destruction.

A cramp clutched her stomach as she realized she had almost jinxed a whole race. "What are we going to do?"

"First we must have the Binding. That is key to our success. The god has set many things in motion so that you and I could complete this command. If it is well with you, I would like the Ceremony to be this evening."

"Tonight?" She was stunned. Was she ready for this? She had gathered her courage to go through with it a few days ago, but could she summon the strength of will to try it again?

"It will be a small gathering, sweet." Rendolin had taken her hands again and was rubbing his thumb in a circular motion over the sensitive pads of her fingers and palm. It was driving her mad with its itchy tingle. "Only our immediate family and the heads of the Houses will be there."

"What will I wear? The gown was ruined, what with all the blood and dust...and wrinkles..."

Rendolin had dipped his head and was now licking the fingers he had just been massaging. If he was a virgin, where did he learn such skill at making love?

"Mother has been working on another gown," he said as he nipped each fingertip with his white teeth. Kory couldn't think. "She says this one is blue," he nipped the pad of her thumb, "and should look well on you." He captured her middle finger with his tongue and pulled it into his mouth, then proceeded to suckle on it like a baby with a pacifier.

"Rendolin?" She was mesmerized by the blissful look on his face as he feasted on the finger. Every time his tongue swirled around, electric shocks jolted through her body.

"Hmmm?" He set that finger aside and laid waste to her pinkie. Then he slipped the other hand up her leg and cupped her hip, caressing it with the same rhythm as his tongue on her finger.

"If we're going to be Bonded tonight," she could hardly think with his mouth and hands setting her heart a new tempo, "shouldn't we be getting ready?"

He released her fingers and kissed her nose. "There is time to get reacquainted, sweet." He moved to her chin, then nipped his way to the hollow above her breasts. "I've missed you, Korrene."

Kory closed her eyes, letting herself enjoy his ministrations. He moved closer, pulling her almost underneath him, and captured her lips again. Her heart was so full of love for him she thought it would burst. She prayed that he would always love her and never leave her.

She slipped down onto the couch to lie back, and he followed, positioning his body over hers, nudging her knees apart with one of his own. Her hands dove beneath his robe, opening it for her hungry view. Just as she ran her hand down the length of his thigh, he became deadly still.

"Korrene," he said, his voice filled with the effort to gain control of his breathing. "We have company."

Her eyes flew open and searched the room frantically, until they came to rest on a figure standing just inside the room.

"Don't mind me," said Captain Feenix as she moved further into the room. "Just go on with what you're doing. I'll wait until you're done."

Kory felt like slapping the self-satisfied grin off the warrior's face.

"I see you took my advice. Good thinking," Feenix said as she sprawled into the closest chair, seemingly content to watch the show.

Like a little girl caught looking at her brother's nudie magazines, Kory pushed Rendolin away, scrambling to a sitting position. Rendolin casually adjusted his shirt before rising to greet Feenix.

"Are you well enough to be out of bed, Feenix?" he asked politely.

"Oh, yes. Don't worry about me. I was tired of just lying there when there's a war to plan. When do we go over strategies?"

Kory's face began to cool, although her pulse was still doing the one-minute mile.

Why was it she and Rendolin were always interrupted before they got started?

"You should be in bed, Feenix. You were at death's door just yesterday." She didn't have much hope of convincing Feenix to go away, but she had to try.

"What's the use of living with elves if you can't get them to heal your wounds? I'm healed." Feenix looked at Rendolin with delightful expectation. "Where's the scum that shot me? I want his liver."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The deep blue gown shimmered in the light of hundreds of flickering candles. Kory had never worn anything as exquisite as the silk that draped her body. The dark sapphire hue complimented her smooth complexion, adding a luster to her eyes she didn't know she possessed. Of course, she knew some of the luster was from the knowledge that Rendolin really did love her. She had never been so happy in her life.

Or so frightened.

The sanctuary was empty except for the few invited guests standing on the balcony with Kory and Rendolin. The great hall below was dark and silent. Lord Selrin was officiating.

She knew her elf was happy that his brother was at his side this time. She glanced across Rendolin's chest at Thelorin, and caught the smug grin of Feenix.

Somehow, the warrior woman was under the impression that the Binding wouldn't be taking place without her advice. That's how much she knew, muttered Kory to herself.

The first part of the Ceremony was similar to a wedding back on earth. Music was sung, prayers were said to invoke lasting love and fertility, and vows were made to each other.

Kory had wanted to write something profound and moving to say, which would prove to Rendolin's people she was worthy and would impress them for generations to come. She was a writer. She should have been able to come up with something.

In the end, her vow was simple, but sincere.

"Rendolin, in front of all these witnesses, I promise to love you forever and to honor you and our people for eternity."

The dazzling dimpled smile she received from her beloved set her heart racing.

When his turn came to speak his vows, she barely dared to breathe for fear she wouldn't hear his words.

"Korrene, *Glenowaeli*—I pledge my life to you, now and forever. I cherish you as my heart, and protect you as my body. My soul is yours throughout eternity."

Kory couldn't stop the tears streaming down her face as she smiled back at him.

When that part of the ceremony was over, Selrin brought forth the rose crystal goblet, and Kory's stomach seemed to drop to her feet. She was so afraid of this part. What if she didn't *really* have any silvan blood in her? What if she died?

Or worse, what if she caused Rendolin to die?

She didn't know what insane idea made her think she could go through with the Binding. It was barbaric! Draining blood from her wrist and being expected to drink it—even if it was magically changed into something else. What sort of people were these, anyway? Why hadn't she done some research into elfin folklore or something? She'd never heard of such a ceremony where the bride and groom exchanged blood and vows. She had to get out of here before her blood wasn't enough—they might decide to chop her up and serve her as the wedding feast!

Rendolin must have seen the panic on her face. He slipped an arm around her waist, pulling her into his chest. Kory felt herself stiffen and tried to push him away, but his velvet voice was in her ear, soothing her with its musical tones.

"Hush, sweet. I am here. All will be well. Shhh."

His long fingers traced her jaw and slipped into the dark tresses of her hair. The stroking of his fingers on her scalp had a calming effect.

"Rendolin, cast a spell on me so I won't know what's going on. I don't think I can bear to watch." Kory didn't know how she got the words out of her mouth, past her dry tongue.

"I can not, sweet," his loving voice whispered to her. "You must be totally aware of the path you have agreed to take. Any magic except for the god's could be deadly. Have faith. The god will not forsake us."

"Faith," she muttered into his chest. "I've never had much faith, so how the hell am I supposed to get some now?"

She felt him drop a kiss on the top of her head before tilting her face up with his fingers to meet his eyes. "Have faith in me, Korrene. Have faith in our love. It will be enough."

"You're asking a lot, elf."

"Aye."

"By the god's left eyebrow, will you just kiss her and get on with it! I have a war to plan."

Everyone looked at Feenix in varying degrees of shock and horror.

Kory couldn't stand it. She burst out laughing. At the sight of the Captain's silly grin, she whooped even harder and doubled over, holding her belly. Leave it to Feenix to put things into perspective.

Gaining some control, Kory threw her arms around Rendolin's neck. "You heard the Captain. Stop wasting time and kiss me! She has a war to plan."

Not waiting for Rendolin to act, she pulled his face down, capturing his lips with her own. It was all he needed to become an active participant. She was pleased with the response she received. His kiss vanquished most of her terror, and she knew she would complete the Binding.

"Now, Selrin," Rendolin said, returning Kory to her place beside him, "let us continue with this Binding." With a quick grin to his brother and one to his soon-to-be mate, he continued, "We have a war to plan."

~*~

The knife was a thing of beauty. She'd never seen a gold dagger before, and wondered if the soft metal would hold an edge sharp enough to make a clean cut.

The hilt was bare of any design or ornamentation except for a large red jewel set in the end. As the knife flashed in the candlelight, Kory could see that one edge of the blade was etched with runes and sea creatures.

Selrin's hand was firm and unwavering as his long fingers held the dagger above her wrist. She could see the fine hairs that covered the back of his hand, bleached white from the sun.

A light blue cloth was folded neatly and draped over his forearm, like the towel waiters in fine restaurants have for mopping up spills.

Was the blue cloth for cleaning up her blood?

Rendolin held Kory's arm still, exposing the wrist to Selrin's knife. Was she expected to do the same to Rendolin—offer his veins like a sacrifice to his god? Would she even be alive to hold his arm after she let the elf slit her wrist?

She didn't understand the words that were being chanted by Selrin and the other priests. There was a loud ringing in her ears, and she felt lightheaded. She couldn't get enough air into her lungs to breathe properly, but that was the least of her problems. In three seconds she was going to bleed to death, and there was no one on this world or in the human world, to mourn her death. How could she have allowed herself to be put in this position?

The gleaming gold of the dagger blurred with the golden whiteness of his hand as Selrin touched her skin with the knife. She jumped, but Rendolin knew his job—he held her arm steady. She couldn't take her eyes from the knife.

It was funny how everything seemed to move in slow motion as she waited for the bite of the blade. She'd read about that in countless books, but had always thought it was some sort of contrived bit for the reader's fascination.

Now Kory knew it was true. She felt like screaming at Selrin to hurry up and get it over.

The tip of the dagger disappeared as it dipped into the tender skin of her wrist. She watched as a thin red line appeared, and dark, hot blood swelled around the blade and surged over her white flesh. Quickly, Rendolin turned her wrist so the thick liquid would spill into the goblet held under their joined hands.

Kory was surprised she felt no pain. Not a prick, not a sting, not a thing. Her body must be in shock, just like her brain.

Five...six...seven.

Kory counted the drops as they splashed into the crystal goblet, knowing that seven was a special number and all that was required.

Quickly, Selrin used the blue cloth to blot the blood seeping from her arm, applying a firm pressure as Rendolin continued to hold the arm still. Then, just as the hint of burning agony began to gather itself along the arm, Selrin drew his thumb along the seam of the gash, and the crisp scent of mint filled her nostrils.

She watched as his thumb moved across her wrist, leaving behind smooth flesh. Not a trace of the cut remained. Even the blood that stained her skin was gone. The only evidence that her lifeblood had been tapped was the small puddle of red in the bottom of the goblet, and a few smudged stains on the blue cloth.

Magic.

She lifted her eyes in awe and caught the kind and warm gaze of Lord Selrin. He smiled reassuringly at her and turned to Rendolin.

Quickly, the same service was performed on Rendolin, with Kory trying to hold his arm as firmly as he had held hers. Again she watched the knife slice open a thin line, and counted as the drops of blood joined hers. The wound was quickly healed and not a trace of the act remained. She wasn't even light headed any more.

Rendolin hadn't lied to her. She hadn't died.

Kory let go a deep breath she didn't know she had been holding.

Rendolin placed a warm kiss on the inside of her wrist, just where the knife had sliced. He was so proud of her, he had to offer some physical approval. As his tongue touched the tender flesh, he heard her take a sharp breath. He smiled, knowing he had ignited a flicker of desire.

Rendolin knew that for Korrene, the most terrifying part of the Binding was over. She had been afraid that she would bleed to death. That was not his worry, for he knew Selrin would never endanger their lives.

He was worried more about the mingling and transformation of their life force into the sacred and magical potion that would bind their souls for eternity. It was imperative that Korrene have silvan ancestry somewhere in her genealogy. If not, the Ceremony would kill them both.

As he crushed the aromatic herbs and listened to Selrin chant the words to the sacred spell, his thoughts were on Korrene's safety. There was no way to tell how this would affect her. A Binding had never been performed where one of the participants was not a full-blooded elf. His instincts told him she would be strongly affected, but in what way eluded him.

He had seen to it that a bed had been made up in the antechamber of the sanctuary, just a few feet from the altar area. If she collapsed and needed attention, there would be a place where she could be comfortable.

Every priest and healer had been alerted to the possibility of danger. His mother and Thelorin had insisted that he take similar precautions for himself, because once he drank the potion, there was a good chance that he, too, would be in danger. That was minor. He would survive; he was Mac Lir's tool and was needed for the survival of his people. As was Korrene.

While his faith assured him they would both live, it was the measure of danger to Korrene that had him in such a state of unease.

The pungent aroma of the herbs, mingled with the liquids in the goblet, brought his attention back to Korrene. His mate. The thought was a delight to his heart.

He watched her observe the proceedings as if she were going to write about it later. Her brown eyes were wide with wonder, and her nose wrinkled as the bitter smell met her nostrils. He was looking forward to making her his, completely. He had dreamed about the consummation of the Binding for days. Rendolin found it difficult to wait.

"Lady Glenowaeli. Lord Rendolin." Kory started at Selrin's use of her elfin name.

She had best become used to it, Rendolin thought with a smile, for an entire race will remember her by it.

"Together you must hold the chalice and repeat the remaining words of the spell." Selrin bestowed a fatherly smile on each of them, and Rendolin wished for a moment that his own father had lived to see this day.

His mother had worked long and hard with Korrene to teach the correct words and phraseology. It was of the utmost importance that the spell be completed correctly. Usually this was not a concern during a Binding, since both participants were familiar with the ancient language of spell casting.

But Korrene was not. If her inflection was off slightly, if even one word was mispronounced, the spell would be wasted, and the Binding would have to begin again. Rendolin sent a quick prayer to Mac Lir that all would go well. He didn't want to wait for his mate any longer than necessary.

The ancient words were spoken in soft, firm tones into the hushed reverence of the sanctuary. Rendolin felt the presence of Mac Lir clearly, becoming stronger with each word, until the god's closeness was like a mantle settling over the assembled company.

Korrene's stunned eyes, filled with unspoken questions, met his over the rim of the chalice. His chest swelled with pride as she continued the spell, although he knew she would have liked to stop and ask questions. He tried to reassure her with the warmth of his smile, putting his whole heart and mind into the curve of his lips.

As the echo of the last word of the spell floated away on the scent of mint, Rendolin heard The Voice. The words filled his mind and heart, reaching down to comfort his soul.

*"Well done, my son. This union is blessed as the sea kisses the land, forever.
Receive the soul of Glenowaeli unto your own."*

The time had come. With the god's blessing still ringing throughout his being, Rendolin lifted the goblet high, bowed towards the sea, and drank from the cup. The potion tasted as pure and clean as spring water bubbling from the earth. Its coolness soothed his throat and calmed his mind. All would be well.

Then, as the ancient rite decreed, he offered the chalice to Korrene—Glenowaeli—and she took it from his fingers without a tremor. As she repeated his actions and then raised the crystal goblet to her lips, she held his gaze steady with her own before taking her share of the magical potion.

Her face mirrored her surprise at the first taste of the pure potion. Joy washed over her countenance as she swallowed.

Rendolin took the goblet from her hands...at the exact moment she closed her eyes and collapsed into Feenix's arms without a word.

"Korrene!"

Rendolin quickly placed the cup on the altar and moved to take her from Feenix, worry filling his mind. Before he could reach his mate, he too dropped to the ground as stillness stole over his being.

~*~

Kory was in the Joyous River, swallowed up by the water's soothing embrace. Floating there effortlessly, unconcerned about the need to breathe or the concerns of her world.

All was well; she was content to let fears and worries float by as if nothing touched her.

A Voice was speaking to her, of comfort and love, of family and peace. She knew her life had changed and she was now Rendolin's mate. She was connected in some way to him. She knew he too floated in the River, listening to the Voice, and while she was looking forward to being with him soon, she knew for now she must wait and she consented to this.

As the Voice spoke, music, like tiny bells and chimes, tinkled in the background, exactly like the sound she'd always imagined stars must make in the black universe as they twinkle and speak to each other. One part of her knew such an idea was ludicrous because stars are large gaseous something-or-others and no noise can be heard in space. But that part of herself was slowly becoming quiet as the other part—the silvan part—became more and more alert and alive.

The Voice spoke to her of forests and streams, oceans and mountains, magic and music. She felt as if a part of her had been waiting eons for the truth and knowledge the Voice imparted. She reached for the knowledge as if her soul was a sponge and the truth the water of life.

Kory had no way of counting the hours, or days, she spent floating within the River. It did not matter, for within the River there was no night and everything was the day of existence.

But eventually, when her mind and soul were filled with the River's truth, Kory began to float to the surface, and the River released her with a soft caress and a promise of eternal love.

~*~

"*Glenowaeli*?"

There was a sound buzzing around her head and she wanted it to go away.

"Korrene, wake up."

The sound was nothing like the soothing Voice of the River. Maybe if ignored, it would go away and leave Kory in peace, while she pondered the truths of the River.

"It is time, Korrene. Wake up and look at me."

She couldn't hold on to the Voice and the peace she felt in the River. The sound was becoming too insistent, and the truth seemed to be slipping away. Kory fought to stay in the warm comfort of the dark nothing, but light began to intrude her mind and her eyes opened a crack.

The light was blinding, and she lifted her hand to shield the brightness.

"Korrene. Wake up. I am here."

She recognized the voice, but couldn't put a name to it. She knew she should know, but it slipped away from her like a pickle in a pond.

"Please, sweet. Come back to me."

There was such longing and worry in the sound, Kory decided she needed to know where it came from. She opened her eyes again and blinked to focus on the sound. A face came slowly into focus and she finally had a name to put to the noise.

"Rendolin."

She felt his hands on her face, smoothing away her hair and tracing the line of her jaw as if he wanted to memorize the feel of her. "Rendolin, am I alive?"

"Aye, my sweet. You are alive, thank Mac Lir." He kissed her full on the lips, as her hands wandered up to caress his neck and hair.

"What am I doing in bed?" The dream of the River and the Voice was slipping further away, but the knowledge that she had changed in some fundamental and permanent way stayed with her.

"You have been in a coma since the Binding."

"A coma?" She couldn't remember. "Did we complete the Binding?"

"Aye, *Glenowaeli*. You can never escape me now." She loved the grin on his face, but was amazed at the tears in his eyes. They looked like polished emeralds at the bottom of a pool of still water. She reached out, caught a tear on her fingertip, and brought it to her lips.

"Why are you crying, Rendolin? I'm fine."

He put his head down on her chest, his cheek resting against her soft breast. "You were gone a long time, Korrene. I thought I would lose you for eternity."

She stroked his golden mane and noticed silver at his temples, above where his deliciously pointed ears touched his head.

Silver?

"How long have I been in a coma?" She had heard stories where people were in comas for years and years, only to wake up and find their entire life had slipped by.

"The Binding took place five days ago, Korrene. I feared you would never wake up."

"Five days?"

It didn't seem long enough for Rendolin to get gray hairs, but if he was worried about her, perhaps. Then she knew—somehow just *knew*—that Rendolin's gray hairs didn't come from worry over her. The

Binding had changed him, just as it had changed her.

"Look at me, Rendolin." Something in her voice must have warned him that she had guessed something was different. He lifted his head and turned to meet her eyes.

Kory was shocked as she looked into his dear face. Tiny lines spread away from the corner of his eyes, where smooth, firm skin had always been. She had not been mistaken. There was a touch of silver at his temples and his golden hair had lost some of its sheen.

"Oh god, Rendolin. What has happened to you?" She reached out to touch his face, tracing the lines to convince herself they were really there.

"The Binding has taken a toll on us, Korrene. Your mortal blood has aged me some, but not to worry," he hurried on at her distress. "I shall be around for many, many years. I am just a little older, and perhaps wiser."

His attempt at humor tore at her heart. "Oh, my elf. What have I done to you?"

Would her love always destroy those she loved?

"What are a few years of my life, when I shall have eternity with you? I would willingly give up fifty years, to love you for one day."

He drew her into his arms and she wept on his shoulder. The comfort he offered her was sweet and so necessary. He stroked her hair and murmured words of love and comfort to her; she selfishly took all he offered and wanted more.

Gradually the full extent of his words settled in her mind and made sense. He had said 'toll on both' of them. What was her penalty for loving beyond her world?

"Rendolin?" She was afraid to ask, but knew she must. "What is the toll the Binding took on me? Am I all here?"

He looked at her and smiled his little boy grin. "Can you not feel that you are all here? I can barely keep my hands off you, my sweet, for I have waited to consummate this Binding for years, it seems." He kissed her nose. "Do not worry. You are all here, and I shall prove it in just a little while."

"But tell me how I've been affected. I can take it," Kory said, although she wasn't sure she could.

He smoothed her hair back from her brow. "Your hair has changed, Korrene."

"My hair?" She raised her hands to her head, but he wouldn't let her touch it. "What's wrong with my hair?"

"Nothing. I think it is very beautiful, but I think you will be shocked until you get used to it."

"Get used to what? What are you trying to tell me?" If he didn't come out with it soon, she'd run screaming to the nearest mirror. Was it so bad that he was having trouble saying it? "If you don't tell me right now, elf, I'm going to hit you!"

She wanted to smack the smile from his lips, but decided to wait until he told her the terrible truth.

"The magic was a shock to your body—your system. Your hair has lost its beautiful curls, Korrene, and it has turned the color of silver."

She stared at him in shock. Silver? Was she an old woman? How could that be in just five days?

"I'm old?"

"No, sweet," he said with a chuckle. "Your hair has merely changed, but you have not. In fact, because of the magic and the mingling of our blood, you will now live almost as long as any elf. We have many years together, Glenowaeli. Many nights to enjoy."

"Really? I'm not an old hag?"

"Really. You are still as beautiful as you've always been, but now your hair is like burnished silver shining in the sun."

"And straight?" She couldn't quite believe it.

"Aye. 'Tis straight. I am sorry for that, sweet."

She stared at him for a moment then blinked two times before a laugh escaped her throat. It felt so good to laugh.

"What's so funny?" Feenix swaggered into the room. Bracing herself against the bedpost, arms crossed and smug smile still in place, the captain continued, "Going to have another pillow fight?"

"You couldn't know it, but I've always hated my curly hair. That's why I wrote Feenix's hair as long and straight!" Kory buried her face in her pillow and laughed until her stomach hurt.

"You better look after your human, elf," Feenix commented. "I don't think she's right in the head."

Kory suddenly sat up and threw the pillow across the bed, hitting the warrior full in the face. "Get out of here, Captain. Go plan your war. The elf and I have a Binding to consummate!"

Feenix flipped the pillow back on the bed and turned with a sassy grin. "About time, too!"

And the wall swallowed her up without another sound.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Something in the room was stalking her.

Kory opened her eyes, and even though it was the middle of the night and the room's glow had been doused, she could easily see the chest with her belongings and the rug on the floor. She blinked, thinking someone had put a night light on, but no light shone from the walls at all.

The colors in the room looked washed out, as if they were hiding behind a window painted gray, but she could distinguish between blue and red, as well as yellow and brown. Never experiencing anything like this before, it worried her at first. But then, like the memory of a Voice from the beginning of time, she realized she was looking at the world through silvan eyes. This must be how Rendolin and all his people saw the world. Had the Binding given her silvan sight?

Before she could explore this new development further, Kory heard the beast again.

Something was with her in the room. The menacing sound of a beast's hot, cruel breath—in and out, in and out—paralyzing her with fear as she tried to identify where the monster could be. It was like great

bellows pumping the fires of hell—but search as she might, she could find no trace of it.

Then other sounds became audible, each as loud as the breathing, and all assaulting her ears as though an amplifier was attached to her head. Nothing was distinct and it came from every direction; she couldn't get a grip on any one sound. A cacophony of noise, that wouldn't be silenced, came from every direction.

Kory huddled under the covers with a pillow over her ears, but the terrifying racket continued unabated.

She thought of finding Rendolin, but she was still in Selrin's home, and her mate was on the other side of the island. He had decreed that she should rest one more night in the Healer's Hall and their Binding Night and celebration would take place tomorrow, when she was fully recovered.

For now, she was alone...and terrified.

And then the whispering began. Distant and quiet at first, compared to the pandemonium in her room, but insistent in its persistence to enter her mind. Not just one distinct voice, but several...many...and then hundreds, all vying for attention at once.

Kory strained to listen to a single voice, but could only discern jagged conversations, a little at a time:

"...the fires for baking..."

"...Ah! Mother..."

"...Aye, now it is..."

"...dead! All dead and nothing to do..."

The words all came from different voices, but none completed a sentence and nothing made much sense. Now that the Binding had taken place, was she truly going insane?

What was happening?

The voices held fear, joy, horror, and the entire gamut of emotions assaulted her senses with a power that she'd never before experienced. They threatened to crush her with the combined weight of their intensity. It felt as if her ears were bleeding from the pressure of all the sounds. She moaned, and tears sprang to her eyes at the pain.

A wind came up from nowhere and swallowed the whispering, but the beast's breathing intensified and with it came a million other sounds to bombard her sanity.

Oh, God, what was happening?

Eventually, after what felt like hours, the pillow seemed to have a dampening effect and the bedlam in her head quieted. The beast, she now realized, was just the ocean surf, but it beat upon her brain with the same ferocity it battered the cliffs of Sasheena.

Her racing heart settled down to a heavy pace, and the fear-induced body sweat cooled. With the pillow firmly in place, Kory found that the noise was barely manageable. She prayed it would soon go completely away.

When the servant appeared the next morning with a bowl of fruit and hot water for coffee, Kory was still in bed, huddled against the headboard with the pillow over her ears. At the servant's gentle voice questioning her health, Kory's head nearly split in half. The words banged and echoed around inside her

head as if she were standing inside the bells of Notre Dame. She dared not even utter a moan of agony for fear her head would shatter like a crystal glass under too much pressure.

The servant scurried away, only to return in a moment with Lord Selrin and Lady Zelani. One look at Kory's huddled form, and they seemed to know exactly what to do.

Zelani smiled encouragingly, sitting on the bed, wrapping her arms around Kory; she couldn't believe the comfort and calm that washed over her at the touch of her hostess. But it wasn't until Selrin moved his hands lightly over her forehead and temples, leaving behind the scent of crushed mint, that the pandemonium ceased.

Afraid to move lest the clatter return, Kory sat still, holding her breath, waiting for the next wave of screaming din—but nothing happened. Selrin removed his hands and patted her on the shoulder. Zelani continued to hold Kory, rubbing her back in soothing circles, murmuring soft, comforting sounds.

"I can hear you and it doesn't hurt," Kory whispered to the woman.

"It is well, Korrene," reassured the older woman. "You are only experiencing the Awakening. All will be well soon."

"All silvan children go through it," Selrin added in his deep baritone. "I should have anticipated this, Korrene. I am sorry you had to endure it alone. Because of your human blood, I did not expect this to take place, but I was wrong."

"I have sent for Rendolin," Zelani said.

Gratefully, Kory shut her eyes and fell asleep, trusting that her mate would set things right.

~*~

"Why is this happening to me?" Kory asked Rendolin.

He had come early in the morning. He woke her and carried her to his room in his brother's House. She felt safe and protected, and she never wanted to be away from him again.

"All silvan children experience the Awakening when their magic powers start to mature. Instead of experiencing your powers a little at a time, allowing you to become accustomed to them, you are having to endure the full brunt of your powers at once."

"Has this ever happened before?" She knew she sounded like a scared little girl, but she couldn't help it. That experience last night had been more than she could ever have imagined.

And the truly terrible part of it was that Rendolin hadn't been there to help her through it.

"It has been known to happen, but rarely. But fear not, Korrene. The dampening spell Selrin placed upon you will keep the worst of it back until you are strong enough to control it yourself." He smoothed the hair from her face and gave her a glorious smile.

"How long will that take?" She had to know how long an awakening lasted. If it was only a matter of a few weeks or months, she could handle it. If he was talking years, she didn't know how she would be able to cope.

"That depends upon you, sweet. I will lessen the spell a little at a time, until you have learned to control and handle the magic."

Wonderful. If puberty was anything to judge by, he was talking years!

"What if your spell wears off and it all crowds in on me? I don't know if I can go through that again, Rendolin."

He took her hand and placed it on his heart. Kory was comforted by its strong, steady beat. "I will not leave you alone again. I will be there and you can depend upon me to shield you. Always, Korrene."

How long had it been since someone was there for her?

Rendolin enfolded her in his arms and stroked her hair. Kory felt the heat from his body, and its warmth seeped through her bones.

In what Kory was sure was an effort to take her mind off the experience, he asked, "Will you feel up to the Binding Celebration tonight? Mother has been driving the servants unmercifully. Even Thelorin and I are afraid to come within a room's length of her, for fear she will have us out cutting flowers or moving tables in the dining hall."

She chuckled against his neck. It was easy to picture Elawae directing an army of servants like a tiny general. The thought of stuffy Thelorin moving furniture around like a common laborer turned the chuckle into an open laugh.

"I take it Thelorin has made himself scarce."

"Oh, aye, my sweet," he said, kissing her temple and nibbling down to her cheek. "He is busy with Feenix and Mithris."

She knew he was referring to the campaign against the Night Elves, but didn't want to spoil the mood with talk of war. Kory was grateful for that.

"Rendolin?" His lips and tongue were busy on her neck, just below her ear, and somehow his hands had found their way to the bare skin of her back and shoulder.

"Hmmm?" He didn't stop his sweet attack, but instead leaned into her and forced her to fall back on the bed they were sitting on. She discovered that her hands were busy on his nape and back, too. His lips drove her crazy.

"Will you make love to me now?" She didn't know she was going to ask that question, but once it was out, was glad. It seemed like she'd been waiting forever for him.

She'd had plenty of time to think about her Binding Night. If she'd been back on earth, the union would already have been consummated. But thanks to the coma, everything had been put off. The extra time only caused her to become nervous and unsure of herself.

Although she had been married for more than three years, and she considered her love life normal, Kory was beginning to wonder if making love to an elf was different. And if so, how?

She knew they were compatible biologically, but what if elves were turned on by some really weird thing? What if, with all her experience, she was not able to satisfy Rendolin? What if his first time was a total failure because she didn't know what he needed?

She'd never loved anyone the way she loved him. She could see now that what she had with Herb had been mostly friendship. Their love was comfortable and safe, fulfilling her needs at the time. What she felt for Rendolin rocked her world. Sometimes she didn't think her heart was big enough to hold all the

emotion he inspired.

Rendolin stopped nibbling on her neck and cupped her face in his large hands. She thought she could fall forever in the green depths of his eyes.

"Ah, Korrene. I want to make love to you one thousand different ways." She sucked in a breath, heart galloping unchecked. "And when we have finished, I would start all over again."

Rubbing his thumb across her lips, he traced her eyebrows with a long, tapering finger. "But we need to go slow, sweet." He kissed her lips. "I would not want to hurt you."

"Hurt me?" For the first time, Kory sensed that he was unsure of himself. She detected a bit of unease in the way that he held her and she could see doubt lingering in his eyes.

"You would never hurt me, my love." Tears pricked her nose and threatened to fall. "I'm the one who should be worried. Do elves make love differently than humans?"

He wrapped his arms around her holding her tight. Then, to her immense loss, let go. "Korrene, you know I have never made love. But all my research has confirmed that elves and humans are compatible sex partners." His dimple rode his cheek brazenly, as he wiped a tear from her face.

"Then make love to me, Rendolin. We've waited long enough."

With gentle hands, he proceeded to remove her gown, kissing and touching each inch of flesh as it was bared to view.

"You are lovely, Korrene," he said, when her breasts were bared to his eyes. Lifting them, he smoothed his thumbs over sensitive peaks. Before continuing, he nuzzled his cheek against her heated flesh, then suckled each tip.

Heat like liquid fire shot down her body to pool in her womb. His lips and tongue were creating sensations that sent tingles all the way down to her toes. She cradled his head in her hands and pushed her breast against his mouth, silently begging for more.

She uttered a groan of distress as his mouth reluctantly left its feast, hands skimming down her sides to finish removing the gown bunched at her waist.

"I want to see all of you, my sweet," he said with a rakish grin. She moved to help him, but he waved her hands away. She lay back quietly; a little embarrassed at the ministrations, but content in the knowledge that soon it would be her turn to apply the slow torture.

Soon he had the gown off and on the floor. She fought the urge to cover herself with her hands. No man had seen her nude in a long time. She worried he would not find her attractive. That perhaps she couldn't compete with the tiny elfin perfection that seemed the norm on Sasheena.

"Oh, gods, Korrene," she heard him whisper. "I have never seen anything so beautiful in all my life." His words brought tears to her eyes, and before she could speak, his hands were on her body, touching, exploring, loving.

Again she wondered where he had learned how to make love, since he had never had sex before. But as his fingers did magical things up and down her belly and thighs, she decided it didn't matter.

"My turn," she said, struggling to sit up. Immediately he dove for her lips and slid his hard body on top, pinning her to the bed.

"Let me see you," she finally said when he broke the kiss and nipped her neck. Her hands were busy tugging at his shirt, but he didn't seem interested in removing his clothes. All he seemed to want was to taste and touch her all over.

"I want you, Korrene," he murmured against her ear. The smell of the sun in his hair and the taste of rosemary and lemon on his lips were driving her into a frenzy. His fingers and hands were everywhere and his glorious mouth knew exactly where the attention was needed most.

"I need to feel your skin next to mine, Rendolin."

Kory's words sent a bolt of white heat searing through his body. It was all he could do to keep himself in control and not embarrass himself like a youth in the thrall of the Awakening. He had to slow down.

He felt her heart racing beneath his hands and he knew his echoed her beat. Fighting to steady his breathing, he sat back, giving her hands the freedom they needed to open his shirt.

He closed his eyes at the touch of her cool hands. His flesh was so hot; it was surprising her hands did not burn where they met his skin. He had never dreamed what her hands could do to him. How could a mere touch send his senses wild? It made no sense, but most things having to do with his Korrene did not make sense.

She smelled of vanilla and woman. And the beginnings of some darker, muskier scent that he knew would be her magic. Selrin had effectively shielded it, but he could feel it, smell it, working its way through the cracks of the spell. If he was not careful, he could send her spinning out of control in the grip of a far more dangerous experience than just sex. If her magic came out all at once, without a chance for her to become used to it gradually, the resulting tempest of power would devour her mind.

Rendolin could not, would not let that happen.

He ripped the shirt off, impatient with its confining buttons and folds. When the cool air of the room hit his over-heated skin, he regained a bit of control. Until he made the mistake of gazing down at her body, displayed in its entire rosy glow for his eyes to feast upon. By Mac Lir's beard, how did he become so blessed as to have her for his Bonded mate?

He could not stop the groan that slipped past his lips as her hands came up and smoothed over his chest. Her fingers sought out his nipples, as his had done to her earlier. She rose up and captured one in her mouth, teasing it with her tongue before sucking gently. Again white fire bathed his loins, and he felt himself become heavy and urgent, straining against the material of his leggings.

Suddenly his body bucked and his brain went blank as she brought her hand down his chest and massaged his throbbing shaft. The combined pain and pleasure nearly undid him. He felt her fingers working on the opening of his leggings, and a voice inside his head screamed at her to hurry.

Finally he was freed, and she was there to catch him. "Ooh, love. Your hands," Ren moaned in delight. She had magic in her hands.

He helped her get rid of his leggings, and then they were lying on their sides, flesh to flesh for the first time. She was so smooth and cool, curves fitting just right against his hard planes. Could Mac Lir have made anything more perfect than her body?

He became aware of little sounds coming from Korrene's throat. She sounded like a small kitten, begging for attention, and his entire body ached to for his own release, but first, he must pleasure her so that his clumsy attempts later would go unnoticed.

He hoped. He prayed.

When she had released his rigid shaft from his leggings, Kory was amazed at the weight and size of him. His hot smoothness felt so right, so familiar. She couldn't wait to see his golden body bared completely, and soon the leggings were lying on the floor on top of her gown.

He had tiny golden hairs on his thighs and legs, and their slightly abrasive feel against her skin heightened an already oversensitive system. Kory had never noticed how erotic a man's body felt against her own. She couldn't get enough of his touch or the feel of him. She wrapped a leg around his thigh and his shaft pulsed against her stomach. Her body was awash with desire.

"Hush, my sweet, hush," she heard him say, as he changed position and she found herself on her back again. She wasn't aware of making noise, but then she hadn't been aware of anything except a need for him.

His mouth nipped her waist, finding her hips as his hot hands slid up the outside of her thighs, cupping her bottom.

Kory knew what he intended, and her body trembled with anticipation.

"Please, Rendolin," she wasn't sure what she wanted, but it seemed he did. Her body bucked at his first caress, and then she was lost in sensations that were more powerful than any she had ever experienced. She felt as if she were breaking apart in a million sparkling rainbow colors. His mouth set off an erupting volcano that had been lying dormant within her body for uncounted years.

Kory was lost in a velvety black world of sensation that sparkled with glittering jewels. The only thing that existed was the sense of touch, and it was so intense her body exploded over and over, each explosion feeding upon the next. She thought her heart would stop and she'd float forever in the velvet sensation, waiting for the next glittering eruption.

Dimly becoming aware he was cradling her against his chest, she spiraled down from the giddy heights of the volcano. "Oh, Rendolin," she managed to speak. "I love you so much."

He kissed her eyes and her chin, then suckled on her lips, flicking his tongue until she opened for him. He tucked her beneath his body and nestled himself between her legs. Without thought, she brought her legs up, opening completely for him.

Ren broke the kiss and raised himself up on his elbows. He trembled, and she could see the questions in his eyes. All Kory could think to do was try to soothe his fears.

"Please, my love. Now. Love me now."

Still he hesitated, although she could feel his need. Ruthlessly, she hooked her leg around his hip and moved beneath him. His thick shaft met her soft mound, and with a groan he entered with one swift stroke.

Kory arched and met his thrust with her hips, matching stroke for stroke, and again she felt the fires within build. She ached to reach the velvet place, and her breath caught as he followed, knowing instinctively that he would be there with her, would experience the explosion just as she would.

Then he was *there*. Not just in spirit, but there. In her mind. In her soul. And together they spiraled through the velvet and forged a link stronger than the physical act of love.

Kory's human awareness stepped back as the Silvan Bond claimed her. Together forever, she knew that

Rendolin would always be with her and she with him.

"Aye, I am here, love."

"Rendolin? What is happening?"

"The Bonding, Glenowaeli. We are one. For eternity, my love. For eternity."

~*~

The Binding Celebration taking place in the dining hall of the House of Hiloris could be heard in the Archives, where Rendolin, Thelorin and Feenix had escaped the noisy revelry to discuss their plans.

Kory found them huddled over a map.

"What are you doing in here? The party is out there."

"Come in, my love," her mate said, moving to meet her and kiss her hand. His touch in her soul was as soft as a butterfly wing, as strong as the sea. *"My love."*

Thelorin and Feenix smiled a welcome, then resumed their inspection of the map.

Since their experience earlier in the day in their room, Kory's senses were sharper, and her awareness more acute. She knew Rendolin wanted to protect her from worry and danger, and she was aware that the other two thought she would only be in the way while they planned their people's survival.

But they were her people now too, and there was no way they were going to leave her out of the plans.

"So, what have you decided?"

Thelorin returned to the map before answering. "We know the Night Elves plan to attack Sasheena in twenty-five days. Our spies have confirmed this. We will take the initiative from them."

"How will we do that?" How many times had she huddled over a map, playing military games with Herb? Perhaps even then, Mac Lir was preparing her for Rendolin's world.

"We will take back Shalridor and attack them in their own home," explained her love, meeting her eyes with a secret smile. "They will not be expecting an attack from us, and perhaps the surprise will be enough to carry the day."

"And if it's not," put in Feenix with a look of utter glee, "we'll take as many of the scum with us as we can!"

Kory watched the three of them as they discussed strategy, planned attacks and worked together for the good of their people.

The desire to be needed and useful had become almost a compulsion during her life on earth. Kory hadn't been needed there; no one depended on her for survival; no one's happiness depended on her love. Even when her parents were alive, it seemed now that she had been merely biding her time until Rendolin would come and claim her as his own.

"For eternity," she heard his musical voice whisper in her mind, and the comfort the words gave seeped into her soul.

She would never go back to earth; that world where she felt unwelcome and unsafe since she was a little

eight-year-old girl. Home was this world, and an island of elves that was now part of her life. Family was Rendolin, and a race of people yet to be born.

"Well then," she said, moving to look down at the map, "I guess we'd better get started. If we have a whole race to parent, Rendolin, we'll need a home for them."

"Aye, my sweet. That we will."

"For eternity."

EPILOGUE

"There are a few things from my world I wouldn't want to give up, Rendolin."

The two newly Bound lovers were enjoying a few stolen moments alone in their suite of rooms. The House had strict orders not to let anyone intrude on their privacy.

The room was filled with the aroma of sea-washed sand, dozens of flower petals crushed beneath them on the bed, and the mingled essence of their individual magic.

"And what would that be, my sweet?"

The elf was busy memorizing every dip and swell of her body, using eyes and hands, to Kory's exquisite torment.

"Oh, coffee and chocolate come immediately to mind."

"I do not know how you can stand that dark brew," he said, tracing her ribs with a long finger. "But the chocolate; now that is something almost as delicious as you."

Kory allowed him to kiss her deeply before pulling away and resuming her train of thought. "We have a tradition where the husband and wife go away all by themselves for a while. To get to know each other without others around."

"Mmmm. This tradition sounds promising."

"It's called a honeymoon. And I want to have one."

"Another sweet idea." He nibbled her fingers. "I suppose you want it now rather than after the war."

The smile she gave him seemed to light the room with a million candles. "That would be wonderful, but I was thinking more along the lines of after things settle down a bit."

She let the fingers of the other hand wander down his body. "We're needed here. If we're going to be the parents of a new nation, then our place is here helping our people prepare for war."

"Mac Lir chose well," Rendolin said, kissing the tip of her nose. "You are a wise and noble woman, Korrene. Our people are blessed to have you with us."

She blushed at his compliment.

"After we're victorious and at peace, we will have our honeymoon."

He sighed deeply as her searching fingers found what they had been questing for. "I am honored you feel that my people are now yours. I know Thelorin and Feenix can be relied upon to make all the preparations without me..."

"Without *us*, Ren. I intend to be as involved in this as you are."

"Without us, my sweet, but I feel the need to be with them in their decisions."

"I never doubted it, my love." Her hands had been busy in their exploration. He was smooth and hard and she shivered with anticipation.

Rendolin cupped her breast in his hand, running his thumb over the nipple. "I believe I know exactly where we shall go."

She shuddered at his touch and tried to concentrate on his words despite what his fingers were doing to her. "Where would that be, my Lord?"

"We shall visit the Joyous River for our Honeymoon."

Kory wrapped her arms around his; pulling his head down for another kiss, she said against his moist lips. "You won't regret it, elf."

~*~

The sea god, Mac Lir, looked down upon the lovers and was pleased. His children of the sea now stood a good chance of survival. He was ready to begin the next phase of his plan.

He cast his eyes to the north and west. The Wood Elves had also been fighting a lost cause for decades against the Night Elves. They must be brought to safe harbor before the demon god, Tuawtha, could be defeated.

It would require cunning and skill. And an unlikely catalyst.

Mac Lir again looked to the island of Sasheena and smiled. He had an unwilling servant in the warrior woman, Feenix, but she would do his work, he had no doubt.

His smile deepened. The next few millennia would not be boring at all.

The End of Book One of the Sylvan Wars Saga

Glossary

People, Places & Things of Tylana

Ashilor — Ancient home of the Wood Elves of Tylana. Also, the name of a large area of forest northwest of the Backbone Of The World mountain range.

Carthig — Large, yellow moon. Generally, the first of Tylana's two moons to rise.

Chee'ar — Magical aura around a person. Can only be detected by a Tracer.

Cheetamuk — A tall tree, bearing cheenuts as fruit. The leaves of the tree are veined, broad and dark green; the wood is easily cut and shaped within the first few days of harvesting, but dries quickly in the shape it has been fashioned. The dry wood of a Cheetamuk tree is very hard and resistant to cuts, nicks and insects, making it the most prized of all hard woods. The flowers emit a delicious vanilla/cinnamon scent that is highly prized as a perfume. Rumored to be a potent aphrodisiac.

Cragimore — Ancient home of the Night Elves of Tylana, located in The Backbone Of The World mountains.

Draelu — Dark Serpent god. Creator of all reptiles and crawling creatures.

Elemjiah — Human god, creator of all humans.

Eon — Small blue moon. Generally, the second of Tylana's two moons to rise.

Grounding — The ceremony where a Wood Elf comes of age by surviving a specific amount of time (usually 2 to 4 weeks) on the ground, fending for themselves. Prior to the Grounding, a Wood Elf spends their entire life among the trees of Ashilor.

Illoytae — Sacred meeting ground; Glen of Peace.

Kestrel — Flower bearing plant only found in fertile meadows throughout Tylana. Plant grows to approximately 6 to 7 centimeters in height, bearing blue star-shaped flowers that emit a fresh scent. Plant has potent healing properties; may put an unsuspecting person to sleep if the flowers are crushed and the scent inhaled for too long.

Lunteena — Delicate, magical sailing ships.

Mac Lir — Silvan god, creator of all magical humanoids, including elves, faeries, nymphs, pixies and the like.

Naesi — Mystic god/goddess, creator of all magical creatures, including unicorns, phoenixes, selkies, Pegasus, and the like.

Pensifyre — Double lute instrument, strung with pure silver strings, played with two hands.

Pitar — Fabled magical feline, said to have telepath and empathic powers. Fierce and deadly, these creatures are rarely, if ever, seen.

Sasheena — Magical island where the Sea Elves found sanctuary during the Silvan Wars.

Shalen — Band of young, male silvan warriors.

Shaleni — (slang) Camp follower; female who follows military

encampments and earns a living as a prostitute, often preying on the casualties of war; female of low morals.

Shalridoor — Ancient home of the Sea Elves of Tylana, located on the southeastern coast.

Tilsark — A person of irregular, inferior, or dubious origin; an obnoxious or nasty person.

Tracer — Person able to detect the origin of magic, using all six senses.

Tuawtha — Demon god, creator of all dark humanoid creatures, including demons, ogres, trolls and the like.

Viln — Avian god, creator of all non-magical flying, warm blooded creatures, such as hawks, sparrows, gulls, and the like.

About the author of The Binding

When she was three years old, PhyllisAnn stood in the middle of her grandmother's cement birdbath and enchanted an audience at a family reunion by telling stories of her magical world where little girls were actually fairy-princesses, and all brothers were trolls. When she was eight she invented a community of gnomes that lived in the attic of their old, 1756 New England farm house. Many years later, she is still weaving stories of magic and beauty.

PhyllisAnn is the mother of 4-1/2 children (5th adoption not yet final) ages 8 to 20, and the wife of her high school sweetheart. They all live together with a cat and a Cocker Spaniel (both named for her characters) in central Massachusetts, along with various romantic characters who don't believe an author needs to sleep.

She loves to hear from her fans, and can be reached at phussey@net1plus.com, or visit her web site at: <http://www.sff.net/People/GrandDuchess/Phyllis.htm>

The Dragon's Horn

by:

Glynnis Kincaid

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