



ROWAN WOOD

By

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Dedication: To Ric. Just because.

Chapter One

What little sunlight made it through the heavy canopy of the trees danced along the ground as their leaves were ruffled by a slight breeze. Arwyn fancied she could hear the giants that towered above her whispering to one another, their words too softly spoken to be fully understood, but loud enough to leave an impression of countless secrets being told. Outside the forest the sun had been merciless, making her wish fervently that she had not chosen to wear a dress of such thick material, but it was her favorite dress and she always dressed her best when she came to see the spirits of the wood. This deep into the forest, all was cool and dark and she could completely forget about the outside world. The torment she endured at the hands of the other residents of Edgemoor, the teasing, the whispers about her sullied bloodlines, her absent father, all could be forgotten. Here, nothing mattered except her tree. Her deer-skin boots made no sound as she walked along a path well trampled into the moss covered ground by years of similar journeys into the depths of the Elderwood. Arwyn soaked in the silent tranquility that surrounded her, wishing she could stay here forever but knowing at the same time that that could never be. No one could live in the Elderwood. It was forbidden. To enter it as she did, to come so far into it, was bad enough. Perhaps that was what drew her in, though, time after time? The lack of other humans in an unspoiled world all her own.

Her mother had told her once that the Elderwood was the oldest forest

on the face of Dun-da-har, the only place where ax had never struck, and she could well believe it. It would take eight large men to wrap their arms all the way around one of the smallest rowan trees on the outskirts of Elderwood. Further inside, in places where none of the villagers from Edgemoor, her home town, would dare think of going, Arwyn knew of trees easily four or more times that size. Her destination, in fact, was, to the best of her knowledge, the largest tree of them all. The tree had drawn her even as a young girl. She could still remember the first time she laid eyes on it. Naylee and Mar, girls, it seemed, that had always had a particular hatred for her, had been teasing her again. She had run away into the woods, running for safety in a place she knew even at that time that she should never go, where no human was considered safe. Nothing had impeded her passage, as was claimed things would. No monsters came to eat her. They were all back in the village, laughing at her. When she had finally stopped running, she found herself beneath a tree so large she could not imagine that it had ever been any smaller. She had felt safe beneath it, safe for the first time in her life, from all of the people who still waited outside the forest to hurt her again, but would never come here to do so. The forbidden forest had opened itself to her, and when she finally decided to go home to her mother, the path back seemed clear as day to her, as though the trees she had run around in her haste had moved ever so slightly to the side that she might find an easy way out. In her youth, this had seemed a perfectly natural belief, but as she grew older she realized that she had to have been mistaken. Since that time, though, she came always to that great tree and made all of her wishes upon it.

She wasn't certain why she was so convinced that the spirit of this tree favored her enough to consider granting her wishes. Despite having wished

earnestly as an adult for a loving mate, or at least to not be such an outcast, aside from the silly wishes she had made as a child, Arwyn had yet to get anything at *all* she had wanted.

She thought she had, once.

“Nadir...” Even the name hurt, but after having formed the thought, the whole humiliating, agonizing event came back in a rush.

She had wished so often that Nadir would notice her. He was so handsome, tall and strong. It was the dream of every girl in the village to marry him and she had certainly been no exception. It would have solved so many of her problems... When he finally did notice her, she believed that all of her wishes had at last come true. Nadir told her he loved her, that he had wanted so often to be with her. He claimed that he did not care what the others said, that none of them really mattered. Her spirit soared. She left herself completely open to him, told him how she felt, how she had always felt, ever since she was a little girl. He had been one of the few people who did not tease her, who had never seemed to hate her, and she had loved him for that as much as for his dimpled smile. That night, when he told her he had something special planned, that he had something important to ask her, Arwyn thought he meant to ask her to marry him. She had fantasized so long about that moment, had even decided years ago how she would accept.

“Stupid, stupid, stupid. You should have known better!”

He did not actually have any thing in particular to say. It was more something he wanted to *do*. They made love to each other under the stars and lay for hours in each other's arms, and while his professions of loved had already stopped, hers continued to flow like water from her lips. Mortification did not quite cover something of this immensity.

The next day, Arwyn had wandered around in a daze of bliss. It was

easier to ignore the way the others whispered when she was around because she knew the most handsome boy in town loved *her*. However, as hours went by without a single sign of him, she started to worry. Arwyn looked all over town for him. She found him, much later, not far from where they had lain the night before. With his pants down. On top of Aurease.

“I just didn't make the right wish, that's all. I was *too* specific,” she assured herself.

Part of her wanted to wish that night had never happened, but she knew nothing could ever change the past. Not even wishing for it. The best thing, she knew, was to make a wish that might be granted, as everyone else's wishes were. The problem was Arwyn had never been around the other girls when they *made* their wishes. She was not welcome there and when she felt the inclination to go, resisted curiosity, knowing where that might get her. She knew well the advice her mother always gave, but knew too that her mother had not seemed to have any more luck at it then she. After all, her mother was still unwed. Could she possibly know any better how the wish was to be made? She had always said to be specific, that the wood spirits would sometimes play tricks on those who were not. She had even admitted once that it was being too general in her wish that had caused her own heartache, and though she would never say anything else about it, Arwyn suspected she was referring to her father.

“Lack of a father.” Just because no man claimed Arwyn as kin, that did not mean she had no father at all. Ever since the incident with Nadir she had suspected her mother had made a similar wish, which just meant that her father knew who he was but refused to claim her. It was a shame and dishonor to be born out of wedlock, but there was nothing she or her mother could ever do about that. *Sullied bloodlines*.

Chapter Two

“Focus Arwyn, focus! Maybe, they just wish for a husband. *Any* husband. Doing that instead is worth a try, right?” *Right*. The problem was she did not want just any husband. She wanted a great one. All things considered, there were no men in Edgewood she would ever *want* to be married to. She had already decided it would be best to wed someone from outside, since someone from a large city would be less likely to care about the circumstances of her birth. Someone from outside who would be willing to settle here? It seemed unlikely, even to her, but she could never leave her forest.

“I’ll do better this time.” A voice in her mind told her she would no doubt spend her next ten years as she had her first, wishing for a man who did not exist. She was not even entirely sure that having a husband would make anything better. It certainly would not if he was at all like the others.

“I’m not losing anything by trying. Not really. I’ll try again. I have to. What other choice is there?” She pushed thoughts of leaving for a larger town from her mind. Of course she had dreamed of that often, had even tried to leave several times, but the Elderwood drew her back time and again. She knew in her heart she would be miserable living away from it. It was already all she could do to live near the edge of wood instead of inside forest.

Forcing all feelings of doubt from her mind, refusing to acknowledge them any further, Arwyn stopped, looking around at the ancient trees.

“Only a little further.”

Closing her eyes and breathing deeply, she allowed the serenity of the forest to flow through her, easing her mind and body. Even here, with her tree still out of sight, the spirit of the wood brought her feelings of security.

“Things will be different this time. I *know* they will.”

With a new sense of resolve, Arwyn started off again. She heard small birds chirping in the trees above her, caught a glimpse of movement from the corner of her eye, a squirrel perhaps, gone long before she could turn her head toward it. Within moments, the tree she had come so far to see loomed before her. Its branches blocked out the sun, allowing little of it to escape to light the cool darkness below. Other trees grew some distance away, encircling it, but none encroaching. Arwyn imagined they stayed back out of respect for their greatest member, but it could have simply been that nothing except moss could grow in its ever-present shadow. As she smiled up at her wishing tree, she was immediately engulfed in the same sense of comfort she had felt the first time she had come across this tree, so many years ago.

“I have returned!”

Pulling the long blue ribbon from her hair, allowing her long locks to tumble loose down her back, she stood on the tips of her toes, reaching for and tying her ribbon around the tree's lowest limb. With her face upturned, she peered into the tree's uppermost branches, looking for the spirit she felt certain was present, in spite of his silence.

“I bet you think you know what I will wish for today. That last wish did not work out so well, as I am sure you will recall.”

She had found herself here that day, so many weeks ago. Crying against the tree's trunk, with no memory of how she had come to be here. She had felt comforted then. The tree was the only one she had told anything

to, had admitted her heart-break to. Arwyn had spent the rest of that dreadful day here, but had not been back since, until now.

“That hardly matters now, though, does it?” she spoke more to herself than to the spirit before her. “You know I love you anyway, right? I know that it was not your fault. I was mistaken, that is all. I thought you had finally granted my wish, but I know now that you did not.” She breathed deeply, closing her eyes, trying to clear her mind, knowing that concentration was key to her success, or lack there of. She thought hard about how she should word her wish. Several minutes later, words in mind, she spoke her wish aloud.

“I wish someone from Eire or Milay would come to Edgemoor and fall hopelessly in love with me.”

Arwyn turned sitting and resting her back against the tree. Looking up into its branches, she imagined what it would be like if this wish came true. *Would a man from the city really be willing to settle in a place like this for the sake of his wife?* She thought about the one visit she had made to Eire, the closest town. It had been several years ago, but she remembered it as though it were yesterday. The brightly painted houses, the strangers in their fine clothes, the huge fountain at the town's center.... What she remembered most, though, was what she liked most about the place. No one at all paid her the least bit of attention. It was so wonderful to be able to blend in. She would have gladly gone there to live the rest of her days if she had not felt the pull of the forest calling her home.

Milay was on a large island off the coast which she had overheard a merchant speak of. She knew just enough about it to know she never wanted to go there, but she felt sure the men there had to be as good as the ones everywhere else.

Surely a man from one of those large towns would be more likely to accept me? They certainly would know nothing of her shameful birth, and she was not so sure that in a large town such a thing would even matter like it did in the village.

Yes, it was a good thing to wish for. Closing her eyes, she let the calm of the forest settle over her and she slept.

Chapter Three

Rowan had felt her presence for so many years, heard so very many wishes. At first, he had not granted her wishes because she had not seemed at all to need what she asked for. Knowing she could only ever have *one* granted, he had held on to it, waiting for her to need it. As time went on, he found himself looking forward to her visits. Her voice was so gentle, her touch tender. She spoke to him as though he were her only confidant and he was happy to hear of her life, even found himself offering what comfort he could when she seemed to need it. He soon found that he was never really happy when she was not with him, a feeling that at first surprised and puzzled him. He wished she would wish something broad enough to allow him to become a man, something that would allow him to finally *see* her, to allow him to *know* her.

A man from Eire or Milay.... Perhaps it was cruel of him not to grant her wish this time. Perhaps it was selfish. The problem was he did not believe that any human man could possibly love her more than he did. Was that not what she had wished for most? A man who would love her? No, he would not be granting this wish either. It simply was not broad enough to allow him to give himself to her, since he had never actually heard of either of those places and was definitely not from there.

The feel of her warm body against his trunk sent a thrill through him that rustled the very leaves in his branches. Her flesh was so soft and giving

against the harshness of his bark, and he worried she might hurt herself against him. *If I were a human, that would not be a problem.* But he was not a human and could never be one unless she wished it. *What would she look like if I could see her?* He knew in his soul she must be the loveliest creature alive.

Sight was not something trees normally thought about, it being beyond them to see. It was not normal for a tree to think of touching something. He himself had never actually thought about either of those things before she came along. Now it was almost all he ever thought of. Seeing her, touching her, holding her.... She told him often how much she loved him, but he had never been able to tell her how he himself felt.

She is not full blooded. She just can't hear me. She was a half breed, and although that shocked and horrified many of the trees around him, it made him long all the more to see her. *A half breed.* He knew her father well, had often heard his tale of woe. He had been a man, once, and he would give anything to be one again. He warned the others, told them of the pain he now felt, but even this tale was not enough to deter *him*. He wanted too much to be with the owner of that gentle voice. How could such a beautiful creature ever hurt him? The key was to wait for the right wish.

But will she ever make the wish I need? Content for the moment just to have her beside him, he listened to her breathing and wondered at the feelings he sensed as she slept.

* * * *

“Where have you been?”

Her mother, hands on her hips, stood in the middle of the room, red faced. A stew was boiling over the cooking fire but both of the chairs were still under the table, an indication her mother had not sat for some time. The

aroma of the stew made Arwyn's mouth water and she choked. The floor still had several wet spots from its recent scrubbing. A pile of clean dishes were sitting beside the small sink and she could hardly remember the last time her mother had nervously washed them all.

She's been pacing the floor, waiting for me. The realization shamed her. Arwyn had been trying to think up a plausible explanation for being so late ever since she woke up beneath her wishing tree. She could tell by the gloom that hours had passed and though she knew the forest well, finding her way home through the dark was not something she had ever had to do before. Everything looked different and horribly frightening. It seemed like a nightmare she could not wake from even though she knew it was childish to be afraid.

Arwyn had run as fast as she could given the circumstances, but it was difficult finding her way to the edge of the Elderwood in the dark. Although the field outside was fairly clear, making it possible for her to run full out the rest of the way, it was all ready so late by the time she had reached it that she knew she would be in trouble when she got home. *I shouldn't be. I'm old enough to get married, after all.* The problem was she knew her mother had been worried about her. She had always worried whenever Arwyn was out late. Somehow, it seemed comforting to know that someone cared that much about where she had been. *Usually. Now....* She knew her mother deserved the truth, but it hurt so much to tell it and she knew it would hurt her mother to hear it.

"I was at my tree, making my wish. I guess I got a little distracted and lost any sense of the time, that's all."

"I have been looking all over for you! You weren't with the other girls. I know, because I *looked* for you there. You weren't any where to be seen.

Where *were* you? Why weren't you with the others?"

"I--I was in the woods. A little way." She could tell by the narrowing of her mother's eyes that she did not believe her.

"I called and called! If you had been anywhere *near* where you were supposed to be you'd have heard me!"

Arwyn said nothing, knowing there was nothing she *could* say to that. It was a well known fact that her mother had the loudest voice in the whole village. If she *had* been anywhere near the edge of the woods, she would definitely have woke up when her mother called.

"Arwyn? Speak up! I want to know where you were. How can you worry your mother this way? What if something had happened to you? Why can't you just *tell* me?" Pulling a chair from the table, she sat down with a groan, her gaze falling to the floor.

It seemed as though she had grown older while Arwyn had been away. *Maybe it's been like that. Maybe I just didn't notice. Or didn't want to notice.* She felt so ashamed. *I did this to her.* Years of hard life had certainly not helped matters. She knelt beside her mother and put her head in her lap.

"You were in the deep wood, weren't you?"

"I'm sorry, mother. I didn't mean to worry you--"

"Well, you did! Why weren't you with the other maidens? Where you were supposed to be?" Her voice was sharp, but Arwyn could detect a tremor in it. She knew she would have to tell her mother the whole truth, that she would never be happy with a partial.

"They don't want me anywhere near them."

Her mother was silent for several moments, gently stroking Arwyn's hair, before finally sighing softly. "You told me things were getting better."

"I *lied*." Bitter tears came unbidden to her eyes and she wiped them

away angrily, refusing to take her gaze off the floor. “None of them wants anything to do with me. No one does! I’m an outcast. I--I went in to the deep wood to wish on the biggest tree I could find. That’s where I’ve always wished. As much as everyone hates me, I figured it would take a big tree to make one of them love me.” Her voice cracked several times and she hated herself for being so upset, for letting the others get to her this way. Her mother’s hands in her hair was comforting, and she felt again as she had when she was a little girl, crying against her mother because no one would play with her.

“Shh...Don’t cry. It’s all right.... You’ll get your wish tomorrow, or the next day maybe. Just wish on one of the smaller trees, near the outskirts of the forest. They’ll grant your wish. They always do. Just make sure you’re specific enough and I promise it will work for you, just like it works for everyone else.”

The promises all sounded hollow to Arwyn, but she just could not let go of her dream of one day being accepted. Doubt clouded her mind, but she fought hard against it. It would be easy to just declare that no wish ever came true, that it was all foolish hopes and dreams, superstition. That would mean she had been wasting her time all along. It would mean she was only fooling herself when she went into the forest, when she thought she could feel the trees welcoming her. It would mean there was no way she would ever find acceptance by anyone. She would spend the rest of her life with her mother, living in squalor, and when her mother was finally gone she would have no one at all.

Chapter Four

“They'll grant your wish. You'll see. If not tomorrow, soon.... For the time being, living with your mother isn't really all that bad, is it? You're still young. Why, many of the girls were older than you when their wishes were granted!”

Already well past her twentieth year, Arwyn knew of no one older than she who was not already wed. Still, she chose to accept her mother's comforting words. A moment later, a plan had taken root in her mind and Arwyn knew how she would wish on the morrow. Her mother would definitely not have approved of what she had planned, but she had to believe that this might be the one.

Pulling herself up, she went to the sink to wash her hot face. By the time she had finished, her mother had already dipped up her stew and had it sitting in her spot at the table. They ate in silence.

* * * *

Specks of dust swirled in the thin ray of light that shone through the crack in the homespun curtains over Arwyn's makeshift window. She rolled out of bed, haphazardly tossing her blanket over her spot, but not pausing to straiten it out. After splashing water over her face and collecting her comb, she sat on the edge of her bed, the only furniture in her room aside from the washstand, and pulled the comb through her hair. It only caught two knots, the first of which was so unexpected as to make her cry out, no doubt caused

by the rough night she had had. Quickly tying a pink ribbon in her hair, she pulled on a simple white dress. She hardly glanced in the mirror above the washstand before dashing through the kitchen past her mother and out the front door. She had been thinking all night about how she would make her next wish and did not particularly wish to be held up for breakfast. She caught a few words her mother shouted out the door at her, but she was in too much of a hurry to stop.

Today's the day. She knew just how she would make her next wish. She had thought about it a long time, had stopped herself from doing it numerous times because she wanted something specific. Not this time. This time, she would wish for something broad. *If it doesn't work this time....*

Running past a number of a people in a decidedly unladylike way, she was brought up short by an all too familiar voice. She caught her balance quickly, cursing silently at the distraction. The field between the village and the forest was in plain view and she longed to ignore the voice and go to her tree. Against her better judgment, she turned, meeting Aurease's smugly smiling face.

“Ah, there you are!”

Arwyn stared. Aurease stood before her in one of her many lovely dresses, her long golden blonde hair bound in a tight braid. The thin smile she had plastered across her face, as usual, did not touch her eyes. Still, her beauty was undeniable and Arwyn could grudgingly see why all of the men in town stopped to stare when she passed. Her looks did nothing at all for her personality, but no one else seemed to notice that. *Or perhaps they just don't care.* Before she could think of anything to say, or even if she wanted to say anything to her given what she had done, Aurease continued talking to her, as though they were on friendly terms. *Of course. Why would she see*

anything wrong with that? She's not the one who got hurt.

“Where have you been? I've been looking all over for you!”

Too stunned to think of anything to say, Arwyn stared at her blankly.
Me?

“I suppose you've already heard the good news?”

This last snapped her out of her surprise and she was too curious as to why Aurease was even talking to her to ignore her.

“Good news?”

“About Nadir and I?”

The last time she had seen either of them, they were--she tried not to think about that. *How could any news involving them be good news to me?*

“You haven't heard, have you?” Aurease smiled smugly. “We're getting married tomorrow. Oh, I do hope you'll come. I know you used to have a crush on Nadir-- Oh don't deny it, everyone knows it! We were all a little surprised when he told us about it you'll understand, that whole class-- Oh! I am so sorry. Did I say that out loud? Really, there's nothing wrong with not knowing who your father was! It makes no difference at all in your class in a growing city like Edgemoor. I swear, the things people talk about. Anyway, I wanted to invite you to our wedding. Nadir didn't like the idea, you'll understand, but I know nothing ever happened between you two. You're just not his *type*. I'm not at all the jealous sort, so I see no reason why you should be the only person in town not allowed to come! You will come, won't you? You don't have to worry about giving us anything. Everyone knows you don't really have enough for yourselves, let alone anyone else. Don't worry about not having a man to escort you, either. Everyone understands why you don't. There's no real *shame* in you coming alone, or even with your mother if you'd like.”

“I--I don't think so, no.” Arwyn actually felt a little tickled at the shocked look that came over Aurease's face and she had to try hard not to giggle, knowing it would come out in hysterical waves if she did. At the same time, she felt like crying, but she walked away slowly, stiff-backed, and refused to give in to her emotions. *He told her. He told her everything.* There was no other explanation for her knowing what she did. He had probably told everyone else, as well. She would have been horrified about the loss of her honor if she had ever been credited with having any. As it was, she was simply mortified that he had told, and just as angry at Aurease as she was at him. *She expected me to come and watch so she could rub my face in it.*

She could hear Aurease huff, almost caught what she knew would be a snide remark, but she held her pace as she walked to the edge of town. Once there, she was no longer able to hold back, not on the tears and not on the desire to lose herself in the comfort of the Elderwood. She ran as fast as she could, disregarding the pain in her lungs and the blur in her eyes her tears caused. She did not stop running until she had come at last to her tree, collapsing against it and crying bitterly, all of her plans forgotten.

“I wish-- I wish I wasn't so alone. I wish I had a man that loved me, a man that would marry me. I--I wish....”

Chapter Five

Arwyn squeezed her eyes shut, resting her cheek against the rough bark of the tree. “Please, spirit, grant my heart's desire. Give me a husband. One--one able to see me for who I really am. A man who'll love me and be with me for the rest of my life. Please....”

A heavy rustle of leaves from above drowned out her sobbing, drew her attention upward. Opening her eyes, Arwyn sought the source of the disturbance, half expecting the squawk of a squirrel as she did. A movement of the trunk of the tree directly above her head drew her attention, riveting her to the spot. As she watched in a mix of horror, pure terror, and almost as much fascination, a face slowly pressed its way out of the trunk. As it did it opened deep green eyes that met and held her own. A scream died on her lips before the world turned black and Arwyn fainted backward into oblivion.

* * * *

Quick to thrust out his arms, Rowan caught the swooning girl, pulling her up against his chest even as he pulled himself completely free of the trunk. He lifted her into his arms, carrying her some distance away and laying her on a soft bed of moss before kneeling beside her.

She is beautiful. Even more beautiful than I ever could have imagined. He brushed one of her long black locks from her face, admiring the way the rest of it splayed across the ground and around her heart-shaped face. He lifted and rubbed a lock between his newly formed fingers, marveling at its

silkeness. Dropping the lock, he ran his fingers across her rosy cheek, wiping away a rivulet of wetness that puzzled him, down her tiny jaw to her full red lips. He felt his manhood begin to throb as he studied over the rest of her body, particularly when his eyes fell on her breasts, half exposed by the angle at which she lay.

He had almost given up. After the way she had come to him crying, he had decided to give her the very next wish she made, hoping for her own happiness even if it meant he would never have his own wish. Seeing her now, at last, feeling her body so close to his, he realized that being close alone was not enough. He felt an urge to get even closer, to touch her smooth skin, an urge to delve inside of her, somehow. Her face seemed so peaceful now that he almost forgot how horrified she had been moments earlier.

Will she accept me? The idea that she might not had never entered his mind before. Now that it had, he had no idea what to do. It was not possible for him to ever go back to being a tree. Even if it were, he knew the moment he lay his new eyes upon her that he would never want to be without her again.

Leaning in close, following an instinct he knew was part of his new body, he pressed his lips against hers, thrilling at the shock of the touch. A gasp and a flutter of coal black lashes alerted him to her state of wakefulness.

He tried, but could think of no words to encompass how he felt, no words for what he wanted to say to her. He studied her face, watching the look in her eyes go from confusion to fear. He was relieved when it finally became what he believed to be curiosity. As her gaze moved along his body, he felt it react as though he had been touched. A shiver traveled along his spine, awakening nerves throughout his body. When her cheeks grew a

darker red, Rowan again gave in to the urge to touch her, leaning over her and pressing his lips against hers, running his tongue along her lips and inside her welcoming mouth, sending a shock through to his very core. He tore away, leaning back, trying to catch his breath. He puzzled again over what to say. Arwyn solved his dilemma for him.

“Who--*what*, are you?”

“I am...Rowan.”

“Rowan? That's an unusual name.” Arwyn tried to smile, but it appeared more like a grimace to Rowan. “I'm sorry. It's just--well, it looked like you...but that's impossible. I know this is going to sound crazy, but for a moment there, I thought you came out of that tree over there.”

“I did.”

“But that's im--“

“I am a wood spirit. You wished for a husband to love you for the rest of your life. I granted your wish.”

Arwyn's mind was still reeling from the kiss they had just shared. She could still feel the tingle of it on her lips, could still taste him. This new information was almost too much to handle. She could not stop her gaze from roaming over the man's body. His skin was as pale as her own, but she could see muscle rippling under his skin when he moved. *No hair....* Aside from having no hair on his head or face, as far down his body as Arwyn would allow her gaze to travel, there was no sign of it anywhere else. Aside from that, he had undeniably, sharply pointed ears. She felt certain that he must be telling the truth, for she had never in her life even heard of a pointy-eared, hairless man. *It finally worked...I...I finally got my wish!* It was almost too good to be true and she half expected to wake at any moment.

She met his gaze and could not look away from them. They were the

darkest green she had ever seen, like the new buds formed on a tree in spring. She imagined she could see his unveiled soul staring longingly out at her through them, and the look sent shivers down her spine. She was struck by how relaxed she felt in his presence, as though she had known him all her life. *Could my wish have really come true at last?*

“You're not happy.” His eyes clouded as he made the statement and started to pull away, but Arwyn grasped his arm, releasing it almost immediately as the thrill of the touch startled her.

“No. I mean, yes! I mean--I just didn't expect...*this*,” she gestured at him. “I've never heard of anything like this ever happening before.”

“It did once, not long ago.”

The hairs on the back of Arwyn's nape stood on end as she realized the implications. *Mother's wish....* But it could not be, could it?

“Please. How long ago did something like this...happen?”

“How long ago? I'm...not sure. We do not have time.... I do however know that you are the result of that wish.”

“My mother....”

“Your father was a wood spirit.”

Chapter Six

“But *how*? Why didn't my mother ever tell me? How do *you* know about it?”

“I know, because we of the forest speak to each other.”

So, he knows...my father. She had wanted for so many years to know her father, to at least know *of* him. Knowing now that her father was a wood spirit.... *Where is he?* The truth was almost too much to handle, given everything else that had already transpired, but she could not resist finding out more. Her voice, when it came, was barely a whisper.

“Why did he go away?”

“We can only grant what is wished for, and no one gets more than one wish....”

“Where is he now?”

“Near the edge of the forest. I could take you there if you'd like. I'm fairly sure I could find the way. I have waited such a long time for you to make the wish you did today.”

“Why? Why didn't you grant any of the other things I wished for first?”

Rowan sat back on his heels and would not meet her gaze. She sat up herself, brushing the hair from her eyes.

“I guess...selfishness. I wanted to be able to see you. If I had granted any of your other wishes, I would never have had the chance.”

“You...wanted that much to see me? Why?”

He met her gaze and the look of desire in them sent an electric thrill down to Arwyn's toes. “I love you. *Have* loved you for so very many years.... I just...I just could not bring myself to grant your wish, knowing I would never see you again. That you would never come back again....”

On a sudden impulse, Arwyn wrapped her hand around the back of Rowan's neck and pulled his face close to hers. They looked deeply into each other's eyes for several moments. Rowan leaned in, his hard lips brushing lightly against hers in a kiss that raised goose-bumps all over her flesh. His scent, light and musky, reminded her of fresh leaves and bark. A *good smell*, she decided, one she'd smelled often enough in this place. His hands wrapping around her back, he lowered her to the ground, moving his body over hers. She went without protest, without thought of one, feeling a pleasurable tension possess her as his weight settled over her. Where ever he touched her, her body tingled, became alive as it had never been before, seemed almost to reach out to him to seek his touch. She moaned in pleasure and encouragement as his lips grazed her own, caught her breath on a shaky gasp as he ran his tongue lightly over her lips, stoking the fire inside her.

The hard length of his manhood strained against her leg as he rubbed himself against her. His hand sought the flesh beneath her dress, found it and skated over her suddenly fevered skin, pulling the hem up along with it. Arwyn gasped as his hand brushed against her inner thigh, her body seeming to thrash of its own accord. Thought escaped her as her body responded by flooding with moist warmth. She ached for something unnamed, something her body desired infinitely.

He broke their kiss, his lips caressing her jaw, finding their way down to her neck. The nibble he placed there sent a weakening rush of fire through

her blood. His breath hot against her bared flesh, he kissed his way down her throat to the collar of her dress. Arwyn had a sudden, fervent desire to be rid of her clothes, to feel his flesh against her own.

Rowan seemed to read her mind, pulling her against him and unfastening her dress, pulling her bodice open and exposing her breasts. Laying her back down, he pulled one hard nipple into his mouth, sending a shock wave through Arwyn she felt sure would melt her very soul. His other hand moved between her thighs, his fingers seeking and finding the bud of her clit and rubbing against it maddeningly slow. Rowan repositioned himself to lie between her legs, Arwyn parting them willingly, gasping as his hard cock slid along her inner thigh. His mouth moved slowly over her body and his hands found her breasts, his fingers working magic on her nipples. He brought his mouth over her neck, nipping the soft flesh along her jaw. His hard erection nudged her clit, sending waves of electricity through her. She lifted her hips and gasped as the large head of his cock entered her. He shuddered above her, and she cried out as he withdrew it.

He began thrusting his engorged flesh against the sensitive folds of her woman's flesh, the hard, rounded head of his cock rubbing maddeningly against her clit. She rubbed her hands up and down his muscular back, finally stroking his firm buttocks. Cupping it in her hands, she pulled him toward her, desperate to have his cock fully inside of her.

He lowered his head to her breasts and ran his wet tongue over her hard nipples. He thrust himself into her slick mound, sending a shock of pleasure through to her toes. Over and over again, he plunged inside of her, his rock hard cock filling her like she'd never dreamed possible.

Gasping, she thrust her own hips hard against his, grinding her clit against him, quickly climbing to an all consuming orgasm. With a shudder,

she released it, moaning loudly against his ear.

He pulled himself out of her with a grunt, resting his slick manhood against her thigh. Burying his face momentarily between her breasts as his body shuddered, his cock jerked as the juices of his own orgasm ran down her leg. He lifted his head and looked deeply into her eyes. His lips caressed her skin in a light kiss before he slowly lifted himself from her and settled beside her on the moss, pulling her snugly against him.

I can't believe what I just did. Though she had been with one other man already, she felt truly fulfilled for the first time in her life. Arwyn looked over at the side of Rowan's face, at the look of contentment on his unlined face and felt the desire well up again inside her. She allowed her hand to wonder aimlessly across the hard ridges of his stomach muscles, thrilled at the heady aroma of his scent and his still heavy breathing. Though his eyes were closed, Arwyn knew they would still hold the glaze of pleasure they had shared through their love making. A smile curved his lip as she ran her hand up to and along his jaw. *I still can't believe this is actually happening.* A sudden thought killed her ardor and sent a chilling fear through to her core.

“Rowan?”

“Mmm?”

“You won't--I mean, you aren't going to leave me, are you? The way my father did my mother?”

Rowan pulled himself up, leaning on his elbow and looking down into her face. Arwyn tried to look away, but he caught her chin and turned her face up to his own.

Chapter Seven

“I love you. I will never leave you. Don't you remember what you wished for? A husband, to love you, to be with you for the rest of your life?”

“But, my father--“

“Your mother didn't make a wish for a husband.”

“What? What do you mean?”

“She wished for a daughter. That's all.”

Relief flooded Arwyn, along with more than a little puzzlement. “I don't understand. I thought she wanted a husband, too.”

Rowan shook his head. “I only know what she wished for. The spirit that granted her wish would have gladly stayed with her forever. He loved her dearly. Unfortunately, our powers are very limited. We can only grant what is wished for.”

“But...she always seems so unhappy when anyone mentions husbands. I thought”

“You get what you wish for. What you wish for is not necessarily what you want. Do you understand?”

“I... think I do. She always told me to be specific in my wishes. I guess she was trying to protect me from making her mistake.”

“So it would seem.”

“That would make me a half breed, wouldn't it? So everything they say about me is true. Everything they've done--“

“Was wrong. They had no right to treat you so poorly. You are a child of the forest. Forget about them. There isn't a man in that whole village that deserves a woman like you.”

Arwyn laid her head on Rowan's shoulder, truly content for the first time in her life. *A love of my own. But do I love him? He loves me....* She did have definite feelings for him and felt that there was definitely a lot to love about Rowan. That he loved her already was only one of his strong points. *Love....* Her thoughts became more disjointed the harder she fought to keep hold of wakefulness. The lids of her eyes feeling heavy, she drifted off to sleep.

Rowan turned over slightly, pulling her against himself. His eyes moved lazily across her pale face, taking in every detail, memorizing her features. *I could not, in my wildest dreams have imagined such a woman.* The pain he had heard in her voice pained and angered him greatly. *It would serve them right if none of them ever got another wish.* It was definitely something he intended to mention to the others. *If I ever see them again.* He realized there was a distinct possibility he never would. For some reason, looking down at her face, that did not bother him one bit. Laying his head against hers, breathing in the scent of her hair, he closed his eyes and gave in to slumber.

* * * *

Arwyn started awake. She could see Rowan's face out of the corner of her eye. Smiling, she rolled over, running her hands lightly against his smooth chest. *I could lie here forever, just like this.* Only, she could not, and she knew it. Sighing, she sat up, careful not to wake him, and stretched the kinks from her shoulders and back. Her eyes roamed over his chiseled face and down his muscular body. *I should get you some clothes. You can't come*

into the village looking like that. The thought of him walking into town in all his naked glory, drew a chuckle. Half the town would want to run him off. The other half, the females, would likely crowd around and do their best to touch *it*.

I'll let him sleep. I can tell he needs it. She thought momentarily of the reason he might need rest, and blushed from remembered pleasure she tried to put from her mind, knowing she could easily sit the rest of the night thinking about it, if not seeking more of the same. *It should not take me long. I'm sure I can find something that will fit him.*

She got to her feet, straightened her clothes, and moved swiftly down the forest path, trying not to look back. It seemed brighter than it had been earlier, but she could not tell how much time had passed. *It's the next day, surely. But how early is it?* Considering how much her stomach hurt, she knew she had missed at least two meals, maybe even three. *I should bring him some food. I wonder if he's ever had anything at all to eat.* It did not seem likely that he had, but she had no idea what it was like being a spirit. Perhaps they did not need food? Maybe they had food so good that everything she could possibly offer him would pale in comparison? *I'll have to ask him about that when I get back.* She hoped he would still be there, sleeping, when she returned. The thought that he might not be, sent a sudden chill through to her core, but she ignored it. *He'll be there. He has to be. He loves me, doesn't he?* With her thoughts back in the clearing on the man she had left sleeping on a bed of moss, it took less time than it usually seemed too to reach the edge of the forest.

Looking out on the field, she could see the sun was well past its zenith. It shown hotly through the cloudless sky, but the pleasantness of the day seemed to mirror perfectly her mood. She hardly noticed the people she

passed on her way home, did not even notice when several women stopped talking at her approach, but a sudden thought struck her as she came before the door to her home. *What will mother say?* The thought stopped her momentarily, but it was easily decided. *I should wait to tell her. I'll find him something to wear and bring him home to meet her. I'm sure she would like that better than having to walk through the woods.*

If she were honest with herself, she knew there was little chance she could ever convince her mother to follow her out there without telling her of what had happened. She also knew her mother would do everything she could to stop her from ever going back. She could not bare it if such a thing happened. *Would he be able to find me here? Could he possibly find his way out of the forest?* She had no idea what powers a wood spirit might have, but she feared it might be limited to the forest where his tree grew. If so, there was no way he could know which path to follow to get out of the woods. Was there?

She opened the door to the house slowly and peeked inside. Seeing no movement, she opened the door wider. "Mom?"

No answer. She walked inside and looked around, relieved to find her mother was absent. *Out looking for me?* She felt guilty to think her mother might well have been out all night looking for her, scared that something had happened to her. *I'll make it up to you, mother. I swear it. I know you'll love Rowan just as much as I do.* Would finally having her daughter married off to a man she loved be enough, she wondered? Surely the children that would follow would?

Looking in a cupboard, she took out a basket and slipped it over her arm. She pulled out what was left of the bread and cut it in half, putting part in the basket and replacing the rest. *What should I take him to drink?* She

pulled off a little of the bread and nibbled on it while she looked for something. *I guess water will have to do.* Wine would have been better, but there was only a sip left and she saw no point in bringing back that little. She hated that there was no cheese to bring him, but knew she was lucky enough that there was still bread in the house, stale though it was.

Chapter Eight

Clothes.... There was nothing in the house that could possibly pass as men's clothes, something she had known all along. *I'll bring my sheet. We'll just wait until night and sneak into town. I'm sure mom will be able to find some actual clothes for him.* She would be willing to, would she not? Given that that Rowan was the man her daughter would soon be wed to? A quick trip to her room and she stuffed the sheet into the basket over the food and jug of water. She wished there were some way that she could let her mother know that she was alright, that she would be back that night, but she could not risk looking for her. *She would never let me go back into the Elderwood. It would take too much time for her to be distracted so I could sneak off. There's no telling where Rowan would be by then.* Would he wait for her in the clearing? She could not chance it. *Someone will tell her they've seen me around, won't they?* Doubtful, but she had no real choice.

She was so intent on getting back to the clearing before Rowan could notice she'd left that when she pulled open the door and rushed out she hit her face on something hard and was knocked backward several steps. Regaining her balance, she flushed when she saw who it was.

"Arwyn. I've been looking for you."

"What do you want Nadir? I'm busy."

"Not too busy for me? I came all this way just to talk to you. Of course you want to hear me out?"

The way he was suddenly blocking all routs of escape gave Arwyn a bad feeling in the pit of her stomach, but she tried not to let her emotions show.

“I'm not interested in anything you have to say Nadir.”

“Come on. Let's go inside. I want to talk to you in private.”

“Anything you have to say to me, you can say out here.” Arwyn managed to shut the door with one foot, but had to plaster her back against it to keep from being uncomfortably close to Nadir. *To think I would have given anything to be this close before....* Now, it made her ill.

His smile became more of a sneer as he looked down her bodice at her breasts and she had the distinct feel of bugs crawling over her flesh. *I used to like him...used to think I was in love....*

“I told you before I've always had feelings for you. I know I'm getting married tomorrow, but I don't love her like I love you. I'm not really getting any choice in the matter. I'm sure you've heard about my... difficulties... and you know how well off her family is. I just wanted to show you, one last time, just how much I really love you. That's all.”

“Love? You call that *love*! I'm not interested, Nadir.” *As though you have ever felt love in your whole life!*

He grabbed her shoulders, pressing his body against hers, but she kicked him in the shin, tearing away from his grasp, ignoring the rip of her sleeve when he failed to let go. She ran as hard as she could toward the Elderwood.

“Fine!” he shouted after her, “go on! I only did it to you before out of pity! Who in their right mind would want something as *worthless* as you are anyway?”

Her heart racing at the close call she had had, Arwyn had to stop half

way through the field to catch her breath. Her lungs were burning and she was shaking all over, horrified at what might have just happened. *If he had come up on me while I was still inside the house--* She looked over her shoulder several times as she hurried on to the forest, fearful that he might pursue her and unsure she could manage to get away if he did try it again.

“What a--bastard! How could he...to think I would ever *willingly*....”

She continued into the woods. She had not gone far, when she heard a noise behind her, followed by a shout. Turning, she came face to face with her mother.

“Mother! What are you doing here?”

“What are you doing here? I have told you over and over again not to come out here like this! Haven’t I told you never to come this far into the woods?” Tears were streaming down her face, and Arwyn could tell by the redness in her eyes that she had actually been crying for some time.

“Haven’t I told you how dangerous this place is?”

“Mother, I--”

“No! I will hear no arguments! We’re going home.” She suddenly seemed to register the basket in Arwyn’s hand. “What is that? Why are you dragging that into the woods? Tell me you weren’t planning on spending more time out here! Tell me you weren’t--” She grabbed Arwyn painfully by the arm and pulled her, trying to drag her back in the direction of the village, hardly pausing for breath, “tell me you weren’t planning to worry me even more than you already have! I know I didn’t raise such an inconsiderate--”

Arwyn pulled away, but her mother’s hand was a vise. “Mother, please, let me explain!”

She did not get the chance. They both turned at the sound of rustling behind them. Her mother’s grip became lax and fell away completely as she

stared in shock and not a little horror at the man who came toward them from the bushes.

“Rowan!” The basket slipped out of Arwyn’s hand as she ran over to him, throwing both of her arms around him as he pulled her against his chest.

“Arwyn! Where did you go? Why did you leave me? I was so worried--”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to worry you. I didn’t mean to worry anybody.”

“Who is this woman?”

Arwyn positioned herself in front of Rowan, trying hard to cover his vitals, overly conscious of his nudity and wary of offending her mother further.

“Mother, this is Rowan. He’s a wood spirit.” Her mother’s eyes grew wider with every sentence, and she felt bad for dropping it all on her at once. *But she deserves to know everything.* “We’re going to get married.” She rushed forward and caught her mother as she started to swoon. Rowan was right beside her, helping to lower her mother to the earth.

“I have waited a long time to meet you. I have heard much of you from Tehran, who came to you from our world many years ago.”

Chapter Nine

“What?” she asked weakly. “Tehran? Tehran! You know Tehran? Where is he?”

“He is in our world, waiting for us.” He paused and looked into Arwyn’s eyes. “I gave him my word before I left that I would do everything I could to reunite him with your mother, whom he has missed these many long years. Will you go with me, both of you, to my world?”

Arwyn felt faint herself and sank to the ground beside her mother.

“Go with you? Into the spirit world? *How?*”

“The tree is the entrance. I will show you what you must do, only--”

“Only...what?”

“If you come with me, if you come into my world, there will be no coming back.”

No coming back. Would she really miss this world? It was the world where she had been born, but she had never felt like a part of it. *Would it be any different in Rowan’s world? Mother would be there, wouldn’t she?* She looked over to her mother and saw the answer in her eyes. She wouldn’t go without me, but she wants to go so badly. She met Rowan’s eyes and could not speak, so she nodded instead. *I will go with you, where ever you may lead me.*

Rowan offered them both a hand and pulled them up, pulling Arwyn against him even as he released her mother.

“Come, we haven’t much time left.”

Arwyn put her arm through her mother’s for support and they both trailed behind Rowan as he led the way.

“All this time, you’ve been coming here, in spite of my warnings.”

“I’m sorry, mother. I wanted to tell you, I really did. I just couldn’t. I’ve always loved the Elderwood. I never really belonged in--”

“*Stop*. What I meant to say was...thank you. Thank you for not listening to me.” She leaned her head on Arwyn’s shoulder.

The tree in its clearing loomed up before them. It was smaller than the last time Arwyn had seen it. *Why?*

“The portal is closing.” His words surprised her, especially since she did not know she had even spoken aloud.

He took her hand in his and she looked at them, amazed at how small her hand was compared to his. His palm was warm and slightly rough, and she thrilled at memories of what he could do with that hand.

“Hold on to each other and follow me.” He placed his free hand on the trunk of the tree and pushed into it, walking forward and pulling them both behind. Soon, there was nothing left of him except the hand that held hers. Her own hand disappeared into the tree and she bit back a gasp. *So warm!*

She stepped forward and into a world of green mists and cool shadows. She looked around, spotting a man she had never before seen, who seemed somehow familiar. Behind her, her mother gasped, dropping her hand.

“Tehran!” Her call was a sob. She ran to him and they embraced. Arwyn smiled to herself, her heart overflowing with happiness. *Mother. Father.* Rowan pulled her into his arms and his passionate kiss was one she returned tenfold. *We’ll all be together now.* She knew that this time, it would

be forever.

The End