



Stone Heart

Candace Sams

One

Scotland Three hundred years ago

"Get out of my way you stupid, useless idiot!" Angus swung a half-empty tankard of ale at the serving boy. "You are no' worth the mud I kick off my boots."

"Here now, there's no call to be talking to the lad like that. He cannot help it if he is slow," the tavern owner said, defending the boy.

"Hold your whist, old man, or you will take the beating meant for him!"

The tavern owner stepped back and shook his head. "You are as mean a curse as ever beset the world, Angus MacGregor. You will be punished for your brutish ways."

"And who will do the punishing, old fool? You?" Angus dropped his head back and finished the last of the bitter ale. Raising a massive forearm, he swiped the foam from his lips and pushed the tavern boy to the floor. "Keep this half-wit cripple out of my way, or I will make sure he never fouls my presence again."

The boy scrambled to his feet and ran as fast as his twisted left leg would allow.

One of the serving wenches wrapped her arms around the child's tiny frame when he stumbled into her. She looked at the boor of a man who had frightened the boy and muttered a rude oath under her breath. She, the tavern owner and the child, walked away before the big man found another excuse to lose his ready temper.

Angus watched their retreat as he pulled a chair toward his mountainous body. He slowly turned the heavy wooden chair backwards and straddled the seat, eyeing anyone else in the room who might make a complaint. Everyone in town knew which table in the tavern was his. They knew the time of day he used it, and no one got in his way when he had a thirst. In fact, no one got in his way. Ever. As far as he was concerned, the town and its surrounding countryside might be owned by the local farmers and merchants, but he was in control. People stepped out of his way when he approached. If he wanted the few coins they carried, he took them. If they had food, horses or clothing he needed, these became his without question when he raised his sword. And that was as it should be. None of them had ever done one thing for him. So he gladly returned the favor.

The current Sorceress of the Ancients, Maeve Donald, pulled her cloak more tightly about her and sat in the corner of the tavern, sipping her grog. She watched and waited, making sure MacGregor could not sense her presence. All that she had seen thus far bore proof to the tales she had heard. He was a bully, and she knew what had to be done, though she was unsure how to go about it. Her attention was distracted by a raven-haired girl of sultry beauty. The young woman walked from the back of the tavern to where MacGregor sat. She stood behind him, twisting her long fingers together, as if the nervous action would give her courage. She wore an expression of anxiety and fear. Finally, the girl took a deep breath and moved to stand in front of MacGregor.

"Angus, I must speak wi' you," the girl pleaded, in a trembling voice that plainly

related her stress.

Angus smiled. He put his hand on the girl's shoulder and slowly slid it down to her left breast. Regardless of those who might see, he caressed her as he raised his mug for a passing wench to refill.

"I have been wondering where you were, Bridget. My bed could use warming this night."

She pushed his hand away and stepped closer. "Please, Angus. Can we no' go outside where we can talk in private?"

"Aye, lass. If that is what you want. We can . . . talk," Angus said, emphasizing the last word suggestively. Then he rose to follow Bridget outside.

The Sorceress followed them out the tavern door and stood in the shadows cast by the clouded night sky. She heard the girl say, "Angus, I have an urgent need to speak wi' you. I . . . I have missed my monthly time. I fear our dallying might have me wi' child."

"Your dallying might have you with anyone's child, girl. What is that to me?" He leaned back against a nearby tether rail and grinned.

"Angus," she gasped, "I have ne'er lain wi' a man but you. You know that."

"I know I was the first. Doubtless no' the last. But whether you are wi' child or no', we can make use of the night." He grinned and reached for her, his body already responding to his need.

"Do you no' care for your own babe? Do you care no more for me than to use me as a common whore? I thought . . . I thought . . ."

"You thought what? You little tart! Did you think I wanted more than the few nights we shared? That I loved you? Cared for you?"

The girl recoiled at his sneering comments, and she winced when his harsh laughter filled the air.

"No," she muttered. "You bedded me only to serve your rutting needs. You never cared for me at all. I see that now. How could I have been so blind?"

"How indeed? Did I ever promise you anything, Bridget? Did I ever say I wanted more than the heat between your legs, you stupid wench?"

She shook her head, tears streaming down her cheeks. "But what am I to do? Where will I go? The townspeople will turn me away."

"Here," he said, reaching inside a leather pouch tied to his belt. "Never let it be said that Angus MacGregor dinna' pay a willing whore her due."

"You are made of stone, Angus MacGregor. Your heart is rock. One day I hope someone hurts and defiles you as you have done me," she spat out.

With a cruel laugh, he tossed the coins to the ground in front of the girl and walked away.

The Sorceress had seen enough. She watched as Bridget put her hands over her face and ran into the darkness.

Maeve knew it would take time to follow Angus. She was getting on in years and could not move as fast as she once did. And MacGregor was a monstrously large man with a lengthy stride. He'd make it to his horse long before her, but follow him she would. The girl's comment had given her the idea for the judgement that

would come.

"The punishment will fit the deed," Maeve whispered.

Angus made his way to his mount. He had suffered enough clumsy tavern urchins and whining whores for the night. It was time to get back to his camp. Unlike the farmers and tradesmen, he disliked sleeping beneath a roof. Especially if there was no soft body to share his bed.

What did he care if the trollop carried his by-blow? If it was his. And what if it fared no better than he had? Why should he care? The townspeople had made him what he was, so let them deal with his bastard. Bridget's recently deceased parents had not have even given him a scrap of bread when he was a small lad. Why should he show their daughter any mercy?

He let his mount find its own way out of town. The horse knew the road well enough. The ale and bad company were taking their toll. He was nearly asleep in his saddle when he heard soft crying coming from the road's edge.

He reined in his mount and let his keen senses search out the darkness for the source. Then he saw her. The little girl could not have been more than six years of age, and she was standing near the roadside, clutching a ragged cloak about her too slim body. He turned his horse in her direction and stopped when he was but a short distance away.

"What ails you, little fleabag? Why are you out in the night air and no' abed?"

At the sound of his roughly phrased question, the little girl raised her tear-stained face. "He took my Holly from me?"

"Someone took a shrubbery from you, and you are weeping over it?"

"Holly is my kitten, and he took her," she told him, then began to weep harder.

Angus dismounted and stood over the girl. "Explain."

"I . . . I stole a piece of bread from the baker's shop and ran. But the baker followed me to the barn where I sleep. He took my kitten away to punish me. He said he was going to put her in a sack and drown her in a pond to teach me a lesson."

Against his nature and better judgement, Angus felt a place in his heart twist. An old wound there opened up. Once upon a time he had been like this little girl, and he remembered a soft brown puppy which had perished under the wheels of the careless baker's cart. He softened the tone of his voice. "Where are your parents, waif?"

"They died when everyone was so ill this winter past. Please, do not let him drown my Holly. She is all I have, and I am so afraid."

The little girl threw herself at one of his legs and clung to him like the night dew. Some of the granite wall around Angus' cold heart crumbled a bit, though he could not imagine why he should give a damn.

"What is your name, little one?"

"Elspeth," she told him in a tiny voice.

"Wait right here, Elspeth, and dunna' move. Understand?"

After she nodded, Angus mounted his horse and rode toward the baker's cottage. It was only a short distance from where he had left the little girl. If he was too late, perhaps he could give the child a coin to make up for the loss of her beast. Again,

he questioned himself as to why he should care. No one had concerned themselves about him and his losses when he was that age. But something made him want to try to help this child.

When light from the baker's window came into view, he dismounted and walked to the door. He raised his fist, pounded upon the thick wood, and was rewarded with cursing coming from within. It seemed the baker was about to find rest for the night and was upset by the disturbance. So much the better. The man would get a thrashing as well as no sleep. The fat man opened the door with a crash.

"What in the name of creation do you . . ."

Angus grabbed the man by his bedclothes and dragged him out into the night air.

"Where is the beast you took from the little girl, you slovenly ass?"

"I . . . What . . . Who . . . MacGregor? It is y-you!" the man spluttered.

"I will no' repeat myself you lazy, addled fool. Where is the beast you sought to drown? The one you took from the little girl?" Angus ground out between clenched teeth.

"In . . . in yon barn. The night was too dense with fog for me to safely find my way to the pond."

"You may consider your life saved by that fact, you oaf. And in the future, dunna' ever hurt that little girl or her beast again or you will answer to me. If she hungers, you will feed her the bread she needs. Do you understand?"

"Aye, MacGregor."

"Aye, what, you mindless coward?" He shook the man to make his point.

"I will not touch the girl or her beast. Not ever."

"And?"

"And I will see she does not want for food."

The baker trembled in terror at MacGregor's threat. The hulking brute was quite capable of delivering his promise. Everyone knew he was not to be thwarted in any way.

"Good," Angus snapped. "Now, get out of my sight before I tie you in an old flour sack and throw you in a pond!"

Angus pushed the portly man into a nearby mud puddle. He laughed as the man scrambled to his feet and found his way back to the safety of his cottage. When the door of the dwelling slammed behind the baker, Angus turned and strode to the barn. He jerked the door open and was met with the sound of a mewing, frightened kitten. It was, as the little girl said, tied in a sack and waiting for its watery fate.

He grabbed the sack, walked to his horse and mounted. Within a short time, he was back where he'd left Elspeth. She looked up at him and smiled, obviously hearing the frightened animal crying. After dismounting, Angus untied the sack, pulled out the tiny gray bundle and handed it to its mistress. It purred loud and strong at being delivered back into the arms of the one who kept it well.

"Thank you, MacGregor! Oh, thank you! I shall not forget what you have done. Not ever or ever!"

"You know my name, lassie?"

"Aye. Everyone knows you. They say you are a brute and a bully, but I do not believe them. I think you are the most bravest man I have ever known. And I shall not forget what you have done. Not ever."

Angus was unaccustomed to such a declaration, and though childishly made, it was sincere. He was uncertain how to take it. She had unknowingly insulted while heaping praise. The little girl pulled upon the hem of his jerkin. Angus bent down to see what she wanted and received a small kiss upon one of his unshaven cheeks. Then she cuddled her kitten tightly and ran off toward the village. At that exact moment the clouds seemed to fly away and the moon shone brightly. He could see her golden curls glisten in its light as she ran. For an instant, he smiled. Then the old hatred came back, and he cursed himself for being all kinds of a fool. Why should I care? It only hurt to do so.

He quickly turned, mounted his horse and rode to his campsite. He should not have become involved in the matter. The only things that concerned him were those that could increase his power or wealth. He had wasted good sleep over an incident which had gained him neither.

After arriving at his camp, he settled himself near the circle of stones that served as a fire pit. He tuned his senses to make sure no one was near then raised his hands and uttered the ancient spell of making. A bright blaze suddenly came alive in the pit. His magic would keep the fire burning all night and ensure a warm sleep. A deerskin served as a blanket and would also help ward off the dew. Now that the clouds had blown away, the night promised to be cold.

He raised his hands to the blaze to warm them and felt a strange sensation.

Another of his own kind was near. He threw off the covering and stood, gazing into the darkness.

"I know you are there. Show yourself," he commanded. "What is your name, and what do you want?"

"Who I am does not matter. You already know why I am here," Maeve told him as she pushed the hood of her cloak back and walked toward the firelight.

"Ah, you are a member of the Order. Others have come and I have defeated them all. Why do you people keep troubling me?" He crossed his arms over his chest and stared at the woman.

She saw the defiance in his stance and his gaze. She sensed that his magic was great. But not so great that he could not be defeated and punished. He had misused his power and had to be stopped.

"The ones who came before told me how strong you are, Angus MacGregor. Do not think, however, that you will send me away like a whipped pup, as you have all the rest. This time you will be punished. The only reason you have not been destroyed is because you have kept your powers secret from the village folk. They do not yet know that you have used magic against them for your own purpose."

Angus smiled. "I dunna' know of what you speak, old woman. Be quick about your business so that I may send you back to the Order as I did the others. The night grows cold and I am weary."

"You are a liar, MacGregor. You know exactly what I speak about. Do not play the

buffoon with me. You may not know my name, but you do know that I am Sorceress of the Ancients. You also knew that I would eventually find you when the others I sent could not do as I bid them."

Angus dropped his careless facade and bellowed in anger, "I dunna' care that you are the Sorceress! Your laws dunna' apply to me, since I have never gained benefit from them. The Order cast out my parents and left them to die among the village people. The Order left me to fend for myself among sheep-witted peasants who could no' find it in their miserly hearts to give succor or food to the child I was. And they have paid for it since."

"We did not know your parents would take you when we cast them out, lad. They had been ordered to leave you behind. When we found out you were missing, we sent emissaries to find where your mother and father had hidden you. By then, they had died in the disease-ridden countryside, and you were as wild as the wind. You had already learned how to fight, steal and bully those around you. No amount of diplomacy worked. We tried to help you, to bring you back into our midst. You know that."

"Bah!" Angus shouted, rudely gesturing with the middle finger of his right hand.

"Your emissaries cared nothing for me. They only came because they feared I would use my Druid powers and let the world know about the Order. I can only imagine the chaos that would befall all of you if your precious world were revealed to mankind. If it became known that an Order of Fairies, Druids and Goblins lived in the nearby woods, the villagers might have soldiers sent to hunt you down like the weak prey you are. But my parents wanted to make contact with the villagers, try to make them understand who and what the Order is. They tried to let them know magical creatures existed nearby and meant them no harm."

"That could never be allowed, Angus. You must know that," the old woman insisted. "Your parents could have been put to death for their attempts to reveal their magic to the outside world. Instead, we tried to show compassion and let them live."

"You should have saved your compassion!" Angus growled. "Instead of killing them outright, you banished them, and the verra' same villagers they tried to befriend let them starve. My parents had no coin with which to buy food. Too weak to fight off the illness that ravages the countryside each winter, they died within hours of each other. I was but a young boy and had to dig the holes in which to bury them. Where was your precious Order then, Sorceress? Where were you when I fought for every scrap of food I could find?"

"Your parents should have left you behind as they were ordered . . ."

"What decent parent would leave their child, old woman?" he interrupted. "I remember the day they were banished from the Order, though I was barely past my fifth year. I owe you, the Order and these cursed townspeople nothing. Nothing! Do you hear? You cast my parents out of the only home they had ever known. And the townspeople would not even acknowledge that they lay dying in a hovel. They were without food or warm clothing. None of you ever cared a whit

for the child my dead parents left behind. So I learned to care for myself and no one else. I learned how to take what would no' be offered to me."

"And to make the lives of everyone around you a misery?" she asked. "Is this also what you learned, MacGregor?"

"Yes. All this I did learn. And I learned it so well that I now command the town and everyone in it. They fear me as they fear nothing else that exists. I take what I want and no one stands in my way. They are shown the same mercy they showed my parents and me. And as for the Order, they can rot. I care nothing for any of you!"

The old woman bowed her head and sighed. "Part of what you say is the truth, MacGregor. We should have been more persistent in our efforts to bring you back to the Order. It was poorly done of us to leave you among the abusive townsfolk. But your hatred and the use of your magic to run this town makes you dangerous."

"These simple-minded fools dunna' know that I use magic. Mostly I use these." He held up his two gargantuan fists and shook them. "They are what these ignorant peasants best understand. I only use magic to ruin a crop or two when someone will no' pay me what I ask, or give me clothing or livestock I want."

"And you think what you do is just and that the townsfolk do not make a connection between you and the loss of their livelihood?" she asked.

"What if they do? They still dunna' know that I am Druid or that the Order exists. Let them think me a black witch or demon. I care not."

"It is a wonder that you have not told them about us outright. Why have you not done so?"

Angus smiled. "They are ignorant and frightened by that which they dunna' understand. If I told them about the Order and they believed me, they would pack up in horror and move to distant places. They would no' tolerate knowing Trolls and Gnomes were living in the woodlands so near their homes. And, if the people left, I could no' have the vengeance against them which is due me. It is better to let them think I am the most powerful being that ever besieged them. I may one day be powerful enough to come back to your Order and avenge my parents, as I have avenged them by terrorizing these simple fools."

He saw the Sorceress' eyes narrow and knew he had gone too far. Still, he did not fear her. If she had wanted him dead, her minions would have been sent to do the deed long ago instead of being sent to bring him back to the Order.

"I hold my temper no longer, Angus MacGregor. I am here to pass judgement. You misuse your powers in the world and would threaten the very Order from which you came. Your hatred has left nothing of your heart but a blackened abyss. I can find no redeeming quality in you. And the worst of it is, your parents had so much love in them that they wanted to share their magic with the world. Even though they knew such a thing was not allowed, they were willing to risk their very lives in their cause. As noble as their purpose may have been, I cannot approve what they did. But I can admire their courage. You have shamed them and their efforts. They would have hated the man you have become and you are dangerous. So I

must pass judgement upon you."

She raised her arms and began to speak in Gaelic. "Clach, clach," she chanted. She summoned the ancient magic for transforming the man into stone.

Words as old as time wove a spell around the place where they stood. The fog, which had earlier disappeared, now reappeared and circled the campsite. Though it grew colder, the wind did not blow. No creature made a sound.

For the first time since he was a child, Angus knew fear. He felt an iciness creep over him. It began at his feet and moved up his legs. He was unable to move or speak. Each second that elapsed seemed like an eternity as he grew more and more frigid. He thought he would freeze. Perhaps that was what the Sorceress intended to do. To kill him with the frosty air which penetrated the deepest part of his lungs.

Soon his sight dimmed and failed. He wanted to cry out in rage and horror. But that was a luxury denied to him. He could still hear the Sorceress' voice wielding her enchanted powers, but he could do nothing to stop her. His magic was not as strong as hers, and the spell had come upon him too suddenly.

"As it was with your parents, I do not have it in my heart to destroy you," she told him. "I acknowledge that part of what you have become is due to my negligence." She paused and regarded her handiwork. "You will exist as you are, able to hear all that occurs around you, but you will never be able to see or respond. If, on the three-hundredth anniversary of this enchantment, one soul will come forward, and utter the exact same words used to bewitch you, then the spell will be broken. Perhaps in that time you will learn how evil hatred is. Since you have not endeared yourself to a single being, I fully expect you will spend eternity as you are. A statue of stone. Hideous in appearance, and devoid of any friendship or human contact."

The Sorceress turned and walked away. Her head hung and her shoulders slumped. It would have been less cruel to kill him outright. Unless the small presence she sensed would come to his aid, he would spend the rest of time in this entombed state. But the spell was cast and her job done. She made her way back to the forest from which she came.

Minutes later, nearby bushes began to rustle. Elspeth walked forward and stood before the horrifying statue. She tilted her head as she looked up at the monstrosity, but she was not afraid.

"I heard everything. What the old woman said was not true. You are not a bad man. You saved my Holly, and I will never forget." She knelt and placed a dead flower at the foot of the statue. "I ran back from town to bring you a flower. I picked it several days ago, and I am sorry it is not so pretty as when it was growing. I was coming to give it to you when I saw what the old lady was doing. I kept as quiet as a mouse and listened. She is gone now, so do not be afraid."

Elspeth stood and backed away. Then she clasped her hands together. "I promise I will not forget. We will always be friends."

She turned and walked away, as the night grew colder and the wind began to blow. But Elspeth was determined to come back each and every day to talk to her

friend, even though he could never answer back. She repeated the words of the spell over and over as she walked. The words had to be exactly right. She must remember all of them. She had made him a promise, and it had to be kept.

As Elspeth had promised Angus, she came back the next day and every day thereafter. She spoke of life in the village and how everyone wondered what had happened to The MacGregor. She was always there and time passed.

Years went by, and Elspeth's voice changed from that of a tiny child to a young girl. She brought flowers, laid them at his feet and described them to him. He wondered when he would go insane from not being able to communicate. Neither hunger nor thirst plagued him, but he felt as if he would starve from the lack of real contact. Only the girl's daily presence kept him from losing touch with reality and going completely mad.

In time, someone decided to build a cemetery around him. Those who passed by could be heard to comment on how hideous he was and speak of finding less, unwholesome scenery. Still, Elspeth came and never sounded as though she was afraid of his appearance.

When she spoke, no news was too trivial. She told him everything. Then she told him she had met a young lad from a neighboring village, and she had found work there as a cleaning woman. Angus feared he would lose his only friend altogether. Perhaps she sensed his fear, for she reassured him the walk from the nearby village was not far. She would still come. He need not have agonized, for she kept her word as she always had.

She married her lad and bore him children. She described each of them to him. She shared her hopes for the future and her plans for a new home and her life. And time went on.

She came to him in tears one day when her husband and oldest son had been killed in a senseless war. He knew the countryside was besieged because of the weeping he heard. Many loved ones had been newly buried in the surrounding graveyard, killed before their time. He regretted, with all his heart, that he could say not a single word of comfort to her. Still, she came.

One day, almost sixty-one years later, Angus waited for her. The afternoon grew into the evening, and he felt the night mist upon his stone flesh, but Elspeth did not come. The next morning, he knew what had happened. The faithful little girl who had turned into a woman would come no more. His only friend had passed from this life into the next. He could hear the voices speaking of her as her body was lowered into a nearby grave. Had the mourners taken the time, they would have seen one lone tear slide its way down the face of the moldy statue he had become. He could not even grieve for her properly.

Days passed by, and he mentally begged the Goddess of the Earth to take his life. He had been able to handle the loneliness as long as Elspeth came, but not any longer. The only caring person left to him was gone, and it hurt far too much to bear. So he came to know what it was like to be afraid and alone again. Just as he had when he was a child. In his utter despair, he did not sense the boy's presence

one sunny morn, some weeks after Elspeth's passing.

"My grandmother told me about you. My name is Andrew. She knew her time was near, and she made me promise to come and speak to you every day. She told me that real men always keep their promises, and so I shall. I am sorry I did not come sooner, but I had to get permission to walk here first."

Angus guessed the child could be no more than the age Elspeth was when he first saw her. The little boy talked on and on, and Angus listened to every syllable the child uttered. His friend had not forgotten. She had kept her word, and now there was a new person to keep him company. No one could ever take Elspeth's place, but she had sent a new generation to help him tolerate the long days.

That boy, and Elspeth's descendents who followed, seemed to believe that speaking to the gruesome statue was a kind of game – a family tradition to pass from the oldest of one generation to the youngest of the next. Angus felt the joy of learning to love each life that came to him. And he learned the pain of losing each one as well. He learned a great deal.

One day strangers came into the cemetery. One of them spoke of moving him, saying he was an eyesore and a detraction from the new cemetery gardens. Using ropes and equipment, Angus was moved from where he stood and horror followed. He was placed in some out-of-the-way spot where no voice ever came. Again, he wanted to die. This time he believed his wish might be granted. There was certainty in his heart that no one remembered the enchantment to set him free, even if he could be found. Each day brought him closer to the three hundred years which marked his enchantment. Dying was his only hope. He prayed for such release.

Loneliness. It was a horrible thing to be alone. Not to just feel that way, but to actually know there was no living being within hearing distance.

There was no way he could stand the torture for another moment. If only they had cracked and broken him as he was being moved. Surely that would have destroyed him and he could know peace. His mind cried for companionship. Any kind of company. Even the birds did not sing where he had been placed.

Was this the kind of cruel anguish others had endured because of him? Out of his hatred, he had done horrifying things, and this was his atonement. Hundreds of years of it. This had to end soon. It must or he would go mad. He would not only be alone in a dark stone world, but he would be quite insane there. He would will himself to death.

"Someone help me," his agonized mind begged. "Please let this end soon. Goddess, please!"

Two *Present day*

"I'm sorry, Miss Matthews. All we can do is see that she's made comfortable," the

doctor consoled.

Karen swallowed hard and lowered her voice. "How long?"

The doctor looked at Karen's aunt, who lay on the bed, then back at Karen.

"Maybe a week. No longer."

"Thank you," she said. "I don't know what I'd have done without your help."

The doctor paused before picking up his bag and leaving. "And how are you feeling? Did the prescription I gave you help?"

She nodded. "Oh, yes. The pain isn't nearly as bad now."

"Maybe you'd better let me have a look at you. All this worry over your aunt hasn't done you much good, I'm afraid."

"No," she said and waved a hand in refusal. "There's no need to fuss over me. We both know what the verdict is where I'm concerned. There's no point wasting your time."

The doctor sighed and nodded. "Karen, I wish I could move you ahead on the transplant list, but the way things are, a donor might not match anyhow . . ."

"Don't! There's no sense going into all that again." She smiled and tried to act brave. "I've been ready for a long time."

The doctor sadly shook his head and took one of her hands in his. "If I can do anything – arrange for hospice care, or another nurse . . ."

"I've let the nurse go." When the doctor started to object, Karen held up her hand.

"I know, I know. I shouldn't be stressing myself. But Aunt Agatha did everything in the world for me after my folks died, and I want to be with her now. She shouldn't have a stranger in the room when the end comes."

"And who'll be in the room with you?" he asked. "I can arrange for someone to come talk with you. No one should have to go through this alone, Karen. There are people who can help."

She shook her head. "I don't want a stranger in the room with me, either. I-I'd rather be alone."

"Are you sure about that?"

"Yeah." She grinned and tried to make a joke of it. "Besides, maybe I'll surprise you and live to be an old, old woman."

The doctor didn't return her smile. "I wish, with all my heart, that you could."

After a moment of silence between them, the doctor walked to the door. He turned, looked as though he was about to speak, then shrugged and quietly left.

Karen swallowed hard and tried not to be afraid. Time and her illness were catching up with her, just as Aunt Agatha's had. The difference was, Agatha had been blessed with a long life before succumbing to a faulty heart. Karen was at the age where most people were really just beginning their lives, but there was no sense ranting and carrying on about the unfairness of it all. The deck had been cut from the day she was born. It had only been a matter of time thereafter. In fact, she was on borrowed time, according to the cardiologist.

A soft moan tore her from her morbid thoughts. She walked toward the bed where her aunt lay, and she slowly lowered herself to sit beside the old woman. She placed a frail hand on Agatha's head and gently pushed back her brown hair.

Faded blue eyes looked up at her.

Agatha smiled up at Karen. "I heard what he said, baby. Don't you listen to him."

"Hush, Aunt Aggie. Just rest."

"Remember the promise you made?"

"Yes, I remember. But you don't need to be talking about that right now. You should sleep."

"Repeat it back. Everything I told you." The old woman tried to sit up.

Karen carefully pushed her back against the pillows, fluffing them as she did so.

"Will you go to sleep if I do?"

Aggie nodded.

"All right." Karen sighed. "You want me to go to the bank, open the safe deposit box and look at what's inside." There was no sense pretending her aunt wasn't going to die and that everything would be all right. Agatha had accepted it, and so must she.

"The rest, girl. Tell me the rest," Aggie insisted.

"I'm supposed to follow your will and all your instructions to the letter."

"And your promise, Karen? You'll keep it?"

Karen grinned. For the thousandth time, she made the same promise. "I'll do exactly what the will says. Okay?"

"Promise me, honey."

She leaned over her aunt and softly whispered, "I promise. I swear it."

Aggie took a deep breath and slowly smiled. "Good. A Matthews always keeps their word."

"So, you'll go to sleep?"

She nodded. "I'll go to sleep. Only . . ."

"Only what?" Karen tilted her head and gazed into her beloved aunt's eyes.

"Don't you listen to that old quack tell you about your bad heart anymore, baby. He's wrong."

"Aunt Aggie, let's not go into . . ."

"No!" She raised her voice. "You will get better. I know you will."

Karen tried to blink back the tears. "All right, Aunt Aggie. Hush, now." Her hands went to the old woman's shoulders as she tried to calm her. According to the doctor, her aunt had only hung on as long as she had due to her worry over Karen's condition.

"You do as you promised me, Karen. There's a place where you'll be with friends. A wonderful place. There are all kinds of wonderful creatures. Fairies fly, and I know . . . I know you'll . . ." She stopped when a round of coughing racked her body.

"All right now, darling. Go to sleep. Hush," Karen softly crooned, stroking the old woman's face.

As Agatha slipped into a deep sleep, Karen fought hard to keep back the tears. Her beloved aunt's fantasy world had been the cause of many debates with the doctors. They had wanted the old woman institutionalized, stating it would be better considering Karen's own failing health. But Karen wouldn't listen. Aggie was all

she had. Her aunt had devoted her entire life to raising Karen and seeing to her education. If it meant giving up luxuries or things for the house or the car, then that was the way it was. Karen had always come first.

"I promised to love you, darling," Aggie had said. "And we must always, always keep our promises. Besides, you make it so easy to do."

Karen had heard her aunt say those words a thousand times. There was no way in hell she was going to let someone put Aggie in a cold white room just because she had some quirky beliefs. Besides, Agatha's stories and strange convictions had never hurt anyone. There had been a few embarrassing moments, but if you loved someone the way she and her aunt loved one another, you put up with it. What did hurt was Aggie's refusal to accept that Karen's heart was giving out. Every time it was mentioned, the older woman had retreated even more deeply into her fantasies. Apparently, dreaming was easier to deal with than the fact that her niece would follow her in death very soon.

Karen carefully arranged the blankets around her aunt, kissed her good night, and sat up with her for a while. Eventually, her own failing strength forced her to the cot on the other side of the room.

It was about three o'clock in the morning when something made Karen wake up and throw the covers off. She turned on a lamp and walked over to Aggie's bed. There was a serene smile on the older woman's face, but her breathing had stopped. Karen felt for a pulse, knowing there would be none. She dropped her head, leaned against her aunt's shoulder and cried. Whether it was for Aggie, herself or both of them, Karen wasn't sure. It just seemed that life hadn't played fair. There were so many things they'd planned. Now, neither of them would ever see any of their dreams come true. Worse, there would be no one to care.

Karen took off her black gloves and waited for the bank manager to leave. When she heard the door close behind him, she sat and looked at the box in front of her. There was no use putting it off. Aggie's will was inside, though there wouldn't be anything of value to keep. Even if there was, there would be no sense in doing so. She just didn't have much time left.

She quickly unlocked the box, reached inside and began to read the strangest letter of her life. Karen began to wish she hadn't made any promises regarding the contents of her aunt's will. Since she had, there was nothing to do but follow through. In her mind, poor Agatha had turned a fairy tale into something real. The most surprising thing of all was an account book in the bottom of the metal box. In it, there were records of deposits made over a very long period of time. Seven thousand dollars was a lot of money, but it was all to be spent as Aggie stipulated. Even if Karen wanted to back out of her promise, which was unacceptable, the money could only be used as her Aunt's will instructed. It was to be spent on a wild goose chase.

Karen sat for a very long time and thought it over. It could be done. She had promised, and a Matthews never went back on a promise. Suddenly, she began to smile. Regardless of the bizarre request her dying aunt had made, Aggie had given

Karen a way and the means to have one great adventure. One wondrous time to look back on before her illness overcame her.

"What the hell!" Karen muttered to herself. What in the world did she have to lose? It was the craziest thing she'd ever heard of, but Aggie had scrimped for years so Karen could keep an insane promise. "I'll do it!"

With that, she got up, left the bank and went home. If it took every bit of knowledge she possessed, she'd use her extensive education in computer sciences to verify some information. Then she'd sell everything she owned and book her tickets. For the first time in her life, Karen threw every bit of caution to the wind and decided to live her remaining days with passion.

"Excuse me. Can you tell me how to get to Glen Darach from here?" Karen held out a map to the hotel concierge and pointed to it. She hoped the pronunciation of the Scottish village was correct, and she pretended not to notice when the man gazed at her a little too long. The concern in his eyes was quickly masked, and professional courtesy took the place of any pity he may have felt.

She was used to it. Being ill for so long had left her with a decimated appearance. Her honey-colored hair was dry and lifeless. Her face too pale and her body far too thin. The few friends she had left hadn't been able to emotionally deal with the situation. She recalled them all as, one by one, they'd made their excuses to stop visiting. Some hadn't understood the malady was congenital, not contagious. But she felt no malice toward them. Watching someone waste away wasn't easy.

She mentally pulled herself back from her thoughts as she heard the concierge say, "There's a car rental company not ten minutes away, and you can follow the road southwest out of town, Miss. The lanes are clearly marked all along the way. I'll ring the rental company and have a car delivered, if you like."

She nodded. "Get me the biggest car they've got. Loaded. With all the extras." The man smiled. "Right you are, Miss." He turned to make the call.

Karen took time to peruse the hotel's interior. It was quite lovely. Antiques decorated every conceivable space, and medieval tapestries hung on the walls. Inside and out, the accommodations reminded her of an old castle. She'd never have chosen something so extravagant, but this would be the last trip she would ever take. She would splurge on everything.

When the car was delivered, she took the time to familiarize herself with how to drive on the wrong side of the road. It was noon. She judged the distance and guessed she would get to her destination about sunset. Perfect timing. Three hundred years to the day.

She had begun this trip as the end to a promise, and as she'd been taught, promises were to be kept. The lovely green hills made her feel more and more like a tourist waiting to discover something new just around each bend. Why not enjoy it.

Tonight, after she read the words her aunt had scribbled down, the promise would be kept. Maybe she could spend the rest of her time just driving and seeing something of the world until her illness stopped her.

Her chest began to hurt again, something that was occurring with more frequency.

She pulled to the side of the road, took her medicine and waited for it to take effect. When the pain stopped, she drove on and made good time. Occasionally, someone would herd sheep across the road, but she'd planned for contingencies such as losing her way or flat tires. Aggie had been very specific about reciting the little poem on this day. Tomorrow would be too late. Karen had sworn over and over to do this. It was a crazy promise, but when she was a little girl and Aggie had taken care of her, nothing had been too hard or demanding for her aunt. She owed Aggie, and the more she saw of the beautiful country, the more content she was with her decision to come. When it came time for her to join Aggie, she'd be in one of the most picturesque and oldest countries on Earth. People died in much less glorious surroundings all the time. At least luck was with her in being able to pick her spot.

Hours later she slowed down and parked on the side of the road. She paused to check her bearings. The information she had hacked from the computer files indicated the statue was in a cemetery. And the cemetery was near the town of Glen Darach. She saw a cemetery on one side of the road, and a sign indicated she'd arrived at the outskirts of that town. A narrow dirt road led into the woods across the street. She turned her car into the cemetery and began to search.

After an hour of looking, there was no sign of the statue. The cemetery was big, but something the size she was looking for should stick out. All she saw were rows and rows of old gravestones. Strangely, she began to panic. Perhaps the statue had been destroyed. If that were the case, then her promise to Aggie couldn't be kept. "Please let me find it," she murmured. "Please."

Another half hour of looking proved that the statue just wasn't there. Karen felt emotionally sick. It was such a small thing Aggie had asked, and all that money had been socked away with the thought of completing this task on this particular night.

As the sun began to sink, Karen gave up hope. She slowly made her way back to the car and noticed a dirt road opposite the cemetery. Perhaps there was an older, unmarked section of the burial grounds down that old road. She got back into the car and began to drive. When the road became impossible to navigate, she stopped and turned off the engine. A quick inspection of the car's glove compartment revealed a flashlight the rental company had thoughtfully provided. She decided to walk as far as her stamina would allow.

Judging by the neglected branches, logs and bushes growing in the road, no one had been to the area in quite some time. Karen had to pick her way around all the debris, hoping she would find the statue nearby. Owls began to hoot, and scurrying sounds in the underbrush made her nervous. The place was eerie.

The dirt road dwindled down to a path. This abruptly ended about one hundred yards from where she had parked the car. A thick tangle of brush lay directly before her. What if she was wrong? But how could the information she had hacked be bogus? So far, everything else in her computer search matched the information she'd found in Agatha's safe deposit box. The small, out-of-the-way town existed. There was a cemetery. The statue had been described in detail, along with the silly

story surrounding its existence. So, where was it? Karen refused to believe she'd come all this way for nothing. This was for Aggie. She had to find the stupid statue and say the ridiculous words in Agatha's note.

She pushed through the brush knowing the exertion would cost her, but she had her medication in her pocket. This was alongside Aggie's old note on how to recite the poem. Suddenly, the last of the brush was behind her, and she stood in a glen about twenty feet in diameter. There was nothing there. She almost wept in disappointment. Karen turned to walk back to the car. That was when she saw it. The statue was the most disgusting, horrifying thing imaginable. Excluding the stone pedestal upon which it stood, it looked to be almost seven feet tall. The gray, moss-covered stone only served to make the thing look more wretched. Its face was that of some relentless demon. Horns jutted out from its forehead and its mouth gaped open in a silent, fiendish howl. It was a gargoyle. But not like the protective kind she'd seen in pictures. This statue appeared to exemplify everything that was evil. Its body was that of some clawed, four-footed beast poised to pounce. Its massive size made a joke out of two tiny wings mounted to its back. It was as if the beast wanted to fly. Lacking the wings to do so, it sat and snarled at the world instead. Around its legs wound chains made of stone. Maybe its creator meant to symbolically bind the statue to its location forever.

Karen stood and looked at it for some time. Instead of being frightened, she felt sorry for the thing. That made her smile. Why she'd waste time feeling sorry for a hunk of stone didn't make any sense. As she continued to stare at the statue, she realized it had probably been moved from the cemetery because of its demonic appearance. She imagined most people wouldn't want to be near it very long. But to stick the statue in the woods and let vines, moss and insects have it seemed sad. The movers could have put it somewhere less obscure. Perhaps someone might have moved it to a secluded garden where the thing wouldn't have offended church-minded parishioners. She sighed. No matter how it ended up in this godforsaken spot, she was happy to have found it.

Angus heard the soft sigh. He knew someone had made their way toward him from the sounds in the undergrowth. Perhaps they would take a hammer to him. As he prayed it would be so, he hoped they would speak first and let him know that he was not alone. Just one more sound of a human voice, and he would be more than ready to leave this life.

"You're not the most attractive thing I've ever seen. Whoever carved you had one sick battery upstairs," a voice muttered.

A woman. She had the dulcet tones of a dove. Would she speak more? Or would she go away and leave him alone again?

Speak. Let me hear that sound again. I beg you . . . Please! he silently screamed.

Karen took the paper out of her pocket. The moon would be almost full tonight, but the twilight was only just beginning, so there was still enough light by which to see. In case it got dark quickly, however, she had the small flashlight in her pocket. She unfolded the note and glanced at it for the umpteenth time. Then she put the paper away. The words were in her memory. She wouldn't need light or

prompting to recite them.

"This is for you, Aggie. I hope you can hear me and know I kept my word," she whispered. "Here goes nothin'.

'I look not upon you as a man. Centuries part you from your land. Three hundred years to live apart, because you had a cold, stone heart.'"

Karen waited for several minutes. Nothing happened. What had she expected? It was a promise extracted from her by a sick woman living in a state of dementia. This whole idea had been silly, but her promise had been kept. Now she could go on with what was left of her life, such as it was.

She nodded in recognition of completing the task. Then, she turned to walk away. From behind her, a thick fog crept toward her feet. It was an unearthly green and reminded her of a horror film she'd once watched. Nothing had ever frightened her as much as this fog. Not even her own mortality. It was one thing to slip quietly away while sleeping. Quite another to encounter some strange phenomenon in the middle of a country steeped in legend and myth.

She heard a sound like the splitting of rock. Her chest began to throb with pain, which wasn't surprising. Unexpected anxiety could cause it to come on suddenly. Turning to face the statue, she saw the thing had cracked in a dozen places, and green light glared from deep within the cracks. It was as if something was trying to break out of the stone.

"Holy crud!" she croaked. "Oh, Aggie, you weren't crazy."

She backed away, shaking her head in disbelief. There were no such things as enchantments and the magic creatures Aggie had told her about. Those stories she'd told were just fairy tales her deluded spinster aunt had dreamed up. They couldn't be true. They just couldn't.

The moment the words had been spoken, Angus' heart cried out for joy. I am released! Someone had come to find him. He thanked the Goddess and all creation for giving him a second chance. He would not waste it. And he would forever be a grateful slave to the one who had set him free.

As the stone fell away and he began to feel the weight of his own body again, his happiness knew no bounds. His sight began to return, and he could smell the green of the earth and feel the cool breeze of the night. He would never again take such things for granted. And he would never again harbor such hatred in his heart that others would suffer for his discontent.

As the world cleared before him, he saw a woman standing in the clearing that had been his home. The last of the stone fell away. He stretched his arms toward the stars and spoke for the first time in three centuries. "Thank you, Goddess! I will pledge myself to your service. Blessed Be!"

He leaped from the remains of the pedestal and landed before the woman. First, she stared at his chest, and then her gaze moved slowly up to his face. Before he could utter another word, she fainted.

Shayla Gallagher read over the last of the documentation they had received. Her companion, Hugh, watched as she finished. Within the hour, their plane was due

to land in Edinburgh, and they both had to know the entire story as it had been recorded. "This is entirely unacceptable, Hugh! This information should have been given to me much sooner."

"Aye, but we've had so many people entering information into the new database, none knew what the others had. All this has just been correlated." He waved a hand at the paperwork. "And no one would know about it now except someone broke into the records. When our archivists started piecing together why anyone would want to know where an old statue was . . . Well, it took time, but everything started to fall into place. Still, it makes no sense. Without the proper incantation, what good does having this knowledge do anyone?"

"That's what worries me. Perhaps they do have it. Why an outsider might have the means to break an enchantment, when one of our former Sorceress' didn't even bother to record it, is a mystery. She wrote down everything else about the damned punishment and the man himself."

They immediately stopped talking when a flight attendant came by to offer drinks. Hugh was amazed when Shayla ordered a neat double whiskey. Clearly, the Sorceress of the Ancients was disturbed and angry.

"I believe she never meant for this Druid to see the light of day again, Shayla. It's the only reason for not writing down the means to break the curse. The records have also been scattered in different areas of the library. Had you not ordered that all the written documentation be placed in one central database, the knowledge of this man's existence would forever be sitting on the library shelves, gathering so much dust."

"That's no excuse, Hugh. Unless someone found him, his three hundred years is up. Our chance to help is over. The poor bastard will remain in his current form forever. I'm responsible for what happens to all our people. That includes this MacGregor fellow. I should have ordered more thorough research done on all our past records. Perhaps there might have been some way to help him . . ." Her voice trailed away as she looked out the window.

Hugh sighed and lowered his voice to a whisper. "This isn't your fault, my love. There's no way you could have known some previous Sorceress would take such pains to hide information of this nature. Besides, what can be done?" He paused.

"This man seems to have been quite a bastard. It's a wonder the Sorceress who cursed him didn't just pass a judgement of death."

"It would have been far better if she had. What kind of woman could think up such a thing?" Shayla took his hand in hers. "Not all of us who've succeeded to the office of Sorceress are cold-blooded, you know. The man was a cur and that's no doubt. But three centuries! Goddess only knows what he has been through."

"No one believes you have a cold heart," he raised her hand to his lips and kissed it. "You're doing the best anyone can with thousands of years of information stored away in vaults, libraries and scribbled in ancient manuscripts."

She sighed. "The least we can do is move the statue into the Order. Perhaps something can still be done. Whatever happens with him is one matter, but I want to find the person responsible for hacking into our database. I want to know how it

was done and why.”

“Aye, those are points of concern. But imagine. The poor brute can hear everything that’s going on around him, and he has been in that condition for hundreds of years,” Hugh said as he shook his head. “I can’t fathom it.”

“Get some sleep, Hugh. I have some thinking to do, and I’ll need you to be sharp when we get to Scotland.”

“Aye, Shayla. If you don’t mind me making a suggestion, you’d better get some rest yourself. This whole affair promises to be quite tasking.”

Shayla watched as he put his head back against the reclined seat. The sun shining through the window glittered off his thick white hair and made his shoulders seem even broader. He was quite a figure of a man even though he had passed fifty some time ago.

She sighed and unbound the long braid that normally kept her own silver tresses in place. They were both older than they used to be, but they shared a relationship that could only be described as blazing. Hugh made love like a man half his age and satisfied every desire she could possibly dream up. Since she trusted him implicitly, this wasn’t the first time they had shared such an adventure. She was glad of his stalwart presence, because something about this particular matter was unnerving. No one should be able to get information about the Order so easily. She’d been told their computer system was impenetrable. If one industrious outsider could get into their database, so could others. Even though all information was being filed as though it was nothing more than collected works of legend, it was still dangerous for any outsider to see it. The only reason she’d set the damned database up in the first place was so that her staff could do their required research from any location in the world. It was safer to access the computer than to speak over the phone about magic artifacts or archeological digs that threatened to expose them.

To fight the outside world and its continual encroachment of their existence, state-of-the-art technology had been employed. And someone was going to pay dearly for breaking into that technology where they had no business.

Three

Angus wasn’t surprised that the woman fainted. Seeing him transform would shock the most stalwart soul into a state of unconsciousness. He carefully lowered her to the soft grass and knelt beside her.

“You are the first human I have laid eyes upon in three hundred years. Little Elspeth’s promise of friendship was forever true. She must have passed down the words to undo my enchantment. And, as she was a true friend, so shall I be to you, lady.”

The sound of his thick brogue seemed unfamiliar to him. It had been so long since

he had spoken. He stood and looked around, taking a deep breath as he did so. The night grew colder, but the air in his lungs seemed wonderful after so many years in his stone shell. Again he knelt by the woman and grabbed a fist of earth. He brought it to his nostrils and took in the pungent smell of it. Everything was new.

The woman moaned and he took one of her small hands in his. She was a pretty creature, though far too thin and pale. He sensed illness within her. All of his kind were sensitive to physical maladies, and some were even able to cure certain sicknesses. But this woman was well on her way to death. And that grieved him immensely. That his benefactor would come to him so ill, and that she would give her precious time to come and recite the enchantment that freed his body, was a gift from the Goddess herself. It was, as some were fond of saying, nothing short of a miracle.

He considered the state of the woman before him. Her long tawny hair, captured by a circle of some kind of ruffled material, hung over her left shoulder, cascading in a straight, neatly bound line. He guessed her age to be well over twenty years, but she still looked very young. Perhaps times were not so harsh on men and women as when he last walked the land. Her eyes fluttered open. Even in the coming darkness, he saw the blue of them and smiled. Her eyes were like Elspeth's.

Karen sat bolt upright and tried to scoot away. Her chest was pounding and all she wanted was to get away from the huge man. His dark hair hung almost to his waist and he had a thick, dark beard to match. A black, long-sleeved leather shirt covered all but the front of his massive chest. Undone laces of the shirt emphasized bulky pectorals. Black leather pants and boots matched his thick hair. She could imagine his eyes were just as dark, though she couldn't see the exact color from where she was.

"Aggie, what in the name of God have you got me into?" she whispered.

"Please, lady. Dunna' be frightened. I could never harm the one who set me free. I am forever your servant."

That deep voice. Did voices sound like that in dreams? This had to be a dream. It just had to be. "Wh-who are you?" she stammered.

Angus tilted his head in surprise. "You spoke the words undoing my spell. Do you no' know me then?" He backed away so she might feel more safe.

"I came as a promise to a dead relative. She told me a wild tale about some man who'd been turned to stone by a Druid."

"Aye," he nodded. "I am Angus MacGregor and I was imprisoned by a Druid Sorceress three hundred years ago to the day. A child from my village knew my plight, and promised to befriend me in my helpless state. She and her kin did keep me company through many long, lonely years where I stood. Then someone moved me from my original place, and I was left in this spot where you found me. You are that child's kin?"

"I . . . I don't know. I suppose so. According to my aunt, that story has been passed down from one generation to the next. But it was only a story. Until now," Karen

murmured as she looked up at the mountainous figure before her.

"'Twas no pointless tale. I am real, lady. But your manner of speech is strange to me. Are you no' a countryman?"

"American," she said as she slowly scooted farther away. Maybe she could make her way back to the car and forget any of this had ever happened. She could blame it on a bad prescription.

"Please. Dunna' be frightened." He moved closer. "'Tis natural you would be, but I will no' harm you." Angus held out his hand to her. He didn't know what an American was, but if she was an example, he was intrigued.

Karen's chest hurt in earnest now. She plunged her hand into her left pocket and brought out the small vial of pills that would stop the pain. She popped the lid off, took one pill, then shrugged and took another one. The shock had almost been more than she was physically able to handle.

Angus watched. While he didn't know what it was the lass took, he knew enough to perceive that she was consuming a pain remedy. The last thing he wanted to do was cause further illness in the one who had saved him. He looked around and saw wood lying nearby. It took him only a few moments to gather enough for a fire. While he reveled in the feel of cold air, the night might well be too cold for a woman who was unwell.

"If you are ill, lady, I will take you to those who might help."

"No. No, I'll be fine in a few moments." Karen watched as he piled the wood for the fire. If she thought events so far were impossible, she was in for a bigger surprise. He moved his hand over the wood and a warm blaze sprang up. That was it! No matches. No lighter. Nothing.

"How did you do that?" She looked at him and felt her blood grow cold.

"I am Druid. The same as the one who imprisoned me. We are able to control elements such as fire. Did you no' know that part of the story?"

She remembered reading what Aggie had written about Druids. Another part of the incredible story that had been passed down over the years. It was all part of Aggie's fantasy world, although not so much a fantasy now. "I was informed you used to be a member of some Order of mythical creatures. That's where the Druids are supposed to come from."

Angus nodded and watched as her expression changed from one of fear to absolute panic. He guessed that the woman had been told the story, but she had never believed it. He surmised that, like some of the ancestors who had come after Elspeth, she was only keeping a whimsical promise to carry on a strange and silly tradition.

She became more pale and he began to fear the woman would really fall upon Death's door. It would be poorly done of him to let her come to harm after her kin had kept their promise for these hundreds of years. He had not been entombed without learning some sense of honor and loyalty.

"Please, lady, come closer to the fire and worry no more. No harm will befall you on my account. Nor will any other being harm you. This I promise, on my life." He moved away as he spoke.

For some minutes, Karen just sat on the ground and stared at the fire. This wasn't happening. There were no such things as Druids and entombed bodybuilding Scotsmen and Orders filled with Fairies, Pixies and who knew what else. But her aunt hadn't been crazy after all. Aggie hadn't extracted Karen's promise to come to Scotland because she was demented. She'd done this because everything she'd said was true. But how had Aggie known? What had made her believe some old family story was real?

Karen sighed. If it was all true and she wasn't imagining it, what a way to go! She'd probably seen something no other living mortal had ever seen. Her sense of logic and adventure began to take over. After all, what was the worst that could happen? She looked up at Angus and slowly put her hand out. "I'm Karen Matthews. Forgive me for behaving like a raving idiot, but I wasn't exactly expecting what happened."

Angus smiled and closed his fingers about her small, cold palm. "You are braver than most, Karen Matthews. As I said, I am Angus MacGregor, and I will warrant fair few have ever seen what you have."

He helped her off the ground and led her closer to the fire. To keep from endangering this newfound friendship, he moved to the other side of the blaze. She was like a frightened doe, and he dared not move too close or quickly in case he might chase her away. Karen was his first friend in this new world. Friendship now meant a great deal to him. Another lesson he had learned from being alone. Karen held her hands out to the fire. She was beginning to feel warmer though she couldn't shake the feeling of amazement and excitement. Magic existed. Angus was proof. Would she have enough time to learn more? She prayed so.

"Angus, tell me more about what happened. Tell me about you," Karen urged in a small voice.

Happiness filled him. He had someone to talk to. Someone with whom he could share secrets and his feelings. Such a thing would never have occurred to him before, but he was not the same man he once was.

"I lived in a world that was often violent and harsh. The curse you broke was placed upon me because I was a bully and a brute. But I have come to learn some things. One of them is that the power of a friend is everlasting. This I know well."

"You mentioned something about a child befriending you?"

"Aye. Little Elspeth." He smiled. "I did a small kindness for her and she considered me a friend. When she saw the Druid Sorceress cast the enchantment upon me, Elspeth promised to help. Until she grew old and finally died, she came each day and spoke to me. Of course, I could no' respond."

Karen watched as his eyes began to shimmer with unshed tears. According to Aggie, their ancestors had come from Scotland. It was likely she was kin to the little girl Angus spoke of. Clearly the child had touched his heart. Despite his size, he didn't seem anywhere near as menacing as he did when she'd first seen him leap from the pedestal. He seemed a little sad and alone. Feelings she knew very well.

"What did you do for her that inspired such loyalty?" Karen asked.

He shrugged. "I saved her wee kitten from drowning."

Karen smiled and watched him gaze into the fire. What a sweet thing to do. "How could anyone want to turn you into a stone statue. You don't seem like the bully and brute you've described. Someone like that wouldn't help save a little girl's pet."

Angus looked away from the fire and stared directly at her. "You haven't known me but a brief second in time, lass. I was once a rogue. I did unspeakable things." Karen watched as his gaze dropped and pain etched itself onto his face. Whatever he had been, the man had had time to change. Three hundred years. Still, something in him had drawn him to a child in need. "So your imprisonment was to punish you, like the story says?"

"Aye. I believe the Sorceress who bewitched me dinna' ever intend the spell to be broken. But Elspeth saw and heard what happened and knew the words to repeat for undoing the spell. She must have passed the exact spell from one generation to the next. You came on the proper night and spoke those same words. Loyalty and love are strong in your clan. You are proof."

"My aunt Agatha told me the legend. Actually, she wrote it all down. Before she died, I promised her I'd do as she asked. She wanted me to find you and recite this silly little poem. I just never imagined . . ."

As her voice trailed off, Angus smiled. "You never imagined your aunt told you an old legend which was true?"

Karen looked at him and nodded. "So . . . You're a real, live, honest-to-goodness Druid, huh?"

"I am. And I want to show you the things in this world forbidden to all others, Karen Matthews. There are wonders so great and beautiful the mind may reel from just imagining them. Would you like to see such things?"

"You're talking about this mythical Order, aren't you?"

"'Tis no myth. And because you and your kin have befriended me, I will show these things to you. Will you trust me to take you to my Order? I have need to be with them now." He held his breath and watched as she clasped her hands and stared down at them. He desperately wanted her to say yes. By caring for Karen Matthews and nurturing the first real friendship of his life, it was his way of repaying a small portion of what Elspeth had done. Suddenly, she looked up at him and her blue eyes glowed with sincerity.

"I have to be completely honest with you, Angus. I'm not well." She snorted. "Of course, anyone looking at me can see that."

"Aye," he quietly responded. "This I know. I sensed your sickness."

She stoically continued. "I don't know how much time I have left."

He lowered his gaze as deep regret filled his heart. Then, he gazed into her blue eyes and saw acceptance. He also saw a courage that was rare among men and women. "None of us knows the time we are given. But since you are one who knows you are short on this commodity, we should waste no day. I would show you my world and the magical beings there. If they still exist and if this is what

you truly wish."

Karen scrutinized his face, watching for the response to her next question. "If I sometimes have to stop to rest, that wouldn't matter to you? You'd still let me see where you came from . . . your Order?"

He solemnly nodded. "And if you would rather no' speak of your illness, then I will no' as well. We will take our journey as it comes – moment by moment." With that offer, he was rewarded with a brilliant, lovely smile.

"Good. I don't want pity."

"I will offer you friendship," he softly told her, "and through your eyes, I will see a new world."

Karen sighed in acceptance. "All right, Angus MacGregor. This is the strangest night of my life. I don't know you from a hole in the wall, but I haven't anything to lose. So . . . show me whatever you want."

"We must go to England where the main body of my kind once existed. I no longer sense anyone near this place with magic in them. I am no' sure the Order will be in the same location. Much time has passed."

She looked at him for a long time, wondering what kind of fool she was. The man could break her neck with one large hand. But if he'd wanted to hurt her, he'd had plenty of opportunity to do so, she told herself. Besides, what could he do that a few more months wouldn't? The knowledge that she was already on borrowed time gave her courage.

"God help me, I don't know what I'm doing, but it's like you said. We'll take it moment by moment."

She was rewarded with his dazzling smile and knew her world would never be the same again. What would he show her? Could the world that Aggie had described really exist? And what would happen to Angus if it didn't? He'd be the only one of his kind. In time, she wouldn't be here anymore. And after three hundred years of being entombed in stone, she instinctively knew he couldn't be left to live alone. There had to be some place for him. She felt a certain sense of responsibility for bringing him into a world he didn't know and couldn't understand. After all, the man had been a statue for three centuries. Even if her ancestors had kept him company, he couldn't know a lot about history and the way today's world worked.

She pushed her long hair away from her face and stared into the night. This is all so crazy. But what a last adventure it would be.

Angus looked around the clearing. "I will make you a safe haven for this night. Stay close to the fire. I'll be gone but a wee time."

Karen smiled at the sound of his thick accent and moved closer to the fire. She looked up into the star-filled heaven. "Aunt Aggie, you ought to see this," she whispered to herself. "Who knows? Maybe you can."

Angus soon returned with his arms full of soft evergreen boughs. He placed them on the ground then looked at her and smiled. Karen thought her heart, even if it were healthy, should have stopped beating. Man, what a devastating example of testosterone.

“‘Twould be better if I had a soft blanket to warm you. Perhaps your long garment would work well enough.”

Karen looked down at her coat and slowly shrugged out of it. Though she was warmly dressed, the cold night air hit her body and almost took her breath away. She shivered and wrapped her arms about herself.

“Come quickly, lass. Bed down upon the boughs. You’ll warm soon enough. Hurry now,” he insisted.

Karen did as he requested and stretched out on the greenery. He draped her coat over her, then went to the fire and swept his hands over the top of the flame. It immediately grew higher and the heat reached her makeshift bed. It was a strange feeling to have someone looking after her.

Here she sat, or rather lay, on some evergreen branches, letting a three-hundred-year-old Druid look after her. Aside from her own illness, Karen’s life had been very ordinary. She worked from her home, designing computer programs and software. It had allowed her and Aggie a decent living, and it was an occupation that didn’t physically tax Karen’s ailing heart.

Because she had relentlessly confirmed Angus’ whereabouts, and eventually found the information by hacking into a new archival database, here she was — sitting under the stars with a giant of a man chattering away as if he couldn’t shut up. She smiled. As he rattled on, Angus MacGregor just didn’t seem threatening at all. Why anyone would have cast such a horrible spell and left him alone was unconscionable. Now, he was in a world centuries ahead. It must be like being reborn. And Karen wished there would be time to see what would happen to him. Would the magical creatures that might exist in this world embrace him or cast him aside? If that happened, what would this poor giant do? How could he possibly survive?

Karen silently made one last promise. If his plans on going back to this Order didn’t work out, she’d find someplace for Angus to fit in. If she hurried, there was time. A very long time ago, someone must have given a damn about this man, especially since they’d passed down an old legend from one generation to the next. Karen didn’t see her responsibility as stopping when the curse was broken. Angus had to have a home, someplace where people would care for him. In that way, there would also be someone left who would remember her. It would be as though she’d done something really extraordinary, and her existence wouldn’t be forgotten. Oh, she didn’t doubt for a moment that Angus was grateful for what she’d already done. Who, in his place, wouldn’t be? But the man needed to be safe and happy as well. She couldn’t just leave him in a world where he’d be misunderstood or hurt.

Some little well of energy formed inside her. Here was a reason to keep trying for a while longer. She wouldn’t just quietly give up. She’d fight for every moment her heart could keep. For every memory she could make. When she finally rested, maybe those memories could follow her into the next life. She looked up to find Angus staring at her with a kind of lost puppy look in those beautiful dark eyes.

“You were far away in thought, lass. Do you miss your home and kin?”

She slowly shook her head. "There's no one left to miss. They're all gone, I'm afraid."

Angus frowned. "'Tis sorry I am. I, too, am without kin." Then he smiled as a thought came. "We could be a family, could we not? We share a common history, if no' blood. And one thing I have come to know. No one should be alone. No' ever."

Karen tried to hold off the tears. "No. No one should ever be alone."

"Then give me your hand, wee Karen. We will make a pact, you and I. We will be family and will go forth, as such, from this place. Each of us will protect, care for and carry the memory of the other through the ages."

Karen smiled broadly and placed her hand in his. "It's a pact then."

Angus let out a heartfelt laugh. "In my time, such a pact would have been toasted by drinking from a quaich."

"A what?"

"A cup decorated with designs of my ancestors. 'Tis shared by those who make an agreement or who celebrate," he explained. "Wine or ale would be poured into the cup and we would drink and seal our promise."

Karen snapped her fingers. "I have wine. Food, too. I had it packed for the trip so I wouldn't have to stop along the way."

Angus grinned broadly. "Lady, truly you are an emissary from the Goddess herself. Where is this bounty? I will bring it to the fire."

"It's on the back seat of my car."

Angus tilted his head. "What is a . . . car?"

It was Karen's turn to smile. "I'd better show you . . ."

"No, Karen. You should stay by the fire and keep warm. Just tell me where to find this thing and I will retrieve our feast."

She pointed toward the path and road beyond. "It's a big, silver box with wheels. A form of transportation."

Looking in the direction she pointed, Angus nodded and was off before Karen could say another word. He had to push his way through thickets of gorse and undergrowth, but the chore was a pleasure after being encapsulated for so long. Finally, he found the monstrosity called car. He slowly approached and walked around the thing. "An amazement," he muttered. He carefully placed one hand, then another, on the silver hood. The moon seemed to make its silvery color glow. "'Tis like a cart without horses." He shook his head in wonder. "I will learn to use this thing. Perhaps Karen would show me."

His stomach growled and reminded him of the task he had been sent to complete. Karen had said there was food and wine on the back seat of this beastie. Looking inside, he could indeed see that there was some kind of long seat inside and another behind. On the second seat, there was a basket. Undoubtedly that was the food, but how did one go about getting inside car. He scratched his head and thought.

Once he'd seen a nobleman being driven in a fancy coach. The liveryman had opened the door to let its rider out. Angus assumed there must be a similar way

inside car. He ran his hand down the side of the silver body until he felt a metal hinge of some sort. Sliding his fingers beneath the metal, he pulled and the door swung out. Angus jumped back, looked around to make sure no one had seen him jump, then grinned like a fool. He quickly reached inside car, pulled out the basket and stepped back. If one could open a door, then it stood to reason it could be shut. He gently pushed the door away from him and watched it close. He repeated the procedure several more times until he was satisfied.

"There. I have mastered opening and closing this great beastie." He pointed at it before turning to walk back. "I shall learn all there is to know of you, car. Since you are a way of transport, carry us well and I will see to it you are fed proper." He nodded, then walked toward the clearing and Karen.

Karen heard him returning, but she was so warm and cozy in her green bed that she just didn't want to get up. "I see you found the car," she said as he set the basket between them.

"Aye. And a wonder it is. There are many questions about it and other things I must ask. But I know not where to begin."

Karen laughed. "First, let's eat. I'm hungry." It occurred to her she hadn't eaten a thing since breakfast. For some reason, her waning appetite seemed to have returned with a vengeance. She arranged the food and chuckled when Angus openly stared. The man was almost drooling. At her request, the hotel had packed crisp, homemade bread, fruit, cheese and wine. She wasn't supposed to have the alcohol, but what the hell. This was her adventure, and she was going to live it to the fullest.

"I'm afraid they only packed one wine glass, so we'll have to share," she told him. "Do you mind?"

"Sharing with you?" He beamed. "It will be my honor, lady. And the glass you hold will be our quaich."

Karen grinned back at him, uncorked the wine with the complimentary cork screw and poured some into the little glass. She lifted it in a toast to Angus. "To our friendship. We're a family forever!" She sipped a little of the sweet, red drink and handed the glass to Angus.

He carefully took it from her, lifted it in her direction and added to the oath. "To family and friendship. Achaidh, m'cridhe." Then he sipped the warm fluid and let it flow down his gullet, warming him to the core.

Her eyes met his. "What did that mean?"

He shrugged his shoulders and slowly smiled. "A simple toast that we remain steadfast friends forever," he lied. It had actually meant something more intimate. But how could he explain the Gaelic words for "forever my heart?" Those words would frighten her. She would take the meaning wrong. Their friendship was too new to explain what he felt. Rather, he had never had the practice expressing himself in such a way. This frail, little creature would never know how precious her gift of companionship was. How rare and wondrous that a family like hers could keep a promise after so many years. For the rest of his days, she would hold his heart in her hands. It was hers to do with as she pleased. Angus only hoped he

could be worthy of this new life she had given him. He vowed to never cause her regret for coming to this place and freeing him.

"You go first." She broke off a huge hunk of bread and handed it to him.

The food and the wine were the best he had ever eaten. The company was far grander than any he had ever kept. Angus would never forget a single moment, nor a word or a gesture which passed between them. It would all play in his memory forever. He wanted to dance, sing and shout the joy he felt. Through her line, little Elspeth had sent him a new life. The child's promise had been kept. To honor Karen, as the last of that line, he would show her the gifts of magic forbidden to the outside world. Ironically, Angus knew it would probably cost him the very life she had come to save. The life he now treasured. But what was his sorry existence compared to those who had tried, for centuries, to help him. He owed them everything, and it was a debt he meant to pay. Whatever the cost.

Four

"It's obvious what has happened, Hugh. Someone had the proper enchantment to release MacGregor and used it." Shayla paced around the remnants of Angus' shattered pedestal.

"We can alert our people to be on the lookout for him. They can sense his presence, even if they don't know what he looks like." Hugh stood with his hands on his hips and viewed the surrounding area. "The campfire is still warm. MacGregor can't be that far ahead of us."

As a cold breeze blew, Hugh watched Shayla close her eyes and hold out her hands. She tilted her head as if trying to glean information from the surroundings themselves. Then she opened her eyes, shook her head and smiled. "We won't have to find him. I think he's coming to us."

"He'll be back here?" Hugh turned to her as she walked toward their car.

"No. I mean he's trying to find his way back to the forests in England. It will only take him a few days to discover we're where we've always been. But he's with the person who released him from the curse."

"You can sense all this?" Hugh asked, awed for at least the hundredth time at how powerful Shayla was.

"If one of us had found a way to free this man, I'm certain that person would have reported it to me and the faction leaders. I highly suspect MacGregor is traveling with the same person who hacked into our database, and I want to know how it was done. Our survival might depend upon it." Once she reached the large sedan in which they traveled, she paused and took one more look around the area. "As soon as you're able, send someone to destroy the remnants of the pedestal and every sign that anyone was present. For some reason, MacGregor is extremely sloppy. It's as if he just doesn't care if outsiders find out about his presence, or he's in a hurry."

"As you command," Hugh said, nodding in agreement. He opened the passenger door for the Sorceress then got behind the wheel. Their destination was the deep forests in England which protected the Order.

"'Tis an amazement!" Angus shook his head as he watched the scenery go by. "I heard these machines on the nearby road, but I never knew that what I was hearing was cars. And never did I think to actually ride in one."

Karen smiled for what seemed like the thousandth time. Everything was new and wonderful to him. Since leaving the little clearing, she and Angus had driven south. They occasionally stopped to consult a map and let Angus view the countryside. This, he claimed, was to get his bearings. A task more easily done when the car was stopped and he could actually get out and look around for some familiar landmark. She suspected he was more disconcerted at riding in a car than he let on. The speed at which they traveled had him gripping the edge of the seat until his knuckles turned white. She knew he'd never admit it frightened him, and she didn't dare tell him that she was considered a conservative driver by anyone who'd ever ridden with her. There were people in her neighborhood back home who jogged faster than she was driving.

Watching him quickly turn his head to view the cottages that whizzed by, Karen smiled and pulled the car into a parallel parking spot. The village they were passing through was small, but it had a lot to offer a man who had been without contact for so long. "Come on, Angus. I've got a sweet tooth."

He tilted his head as she got out of the car, then opened his own door and stood on the walkway. "Does it hurt, this sweet tooth?"

"It's an expression." She laughed at his confusion then walked around the car to where he stood. Boldly grabbing his arm, Karen half-pulled him into a confectioner's shop. "Get whatever you want, it's on me."

"Ah, this is another expression," Angus said, understanding. "The sweets are no' . . . really . . . on . . ." His voice trailed away.

Never in his life had he seen such beautiful bounty. There were small biscuits decorated with icing, flowers and sparkling bits that reminded him of the Fairy dust he had seen as a child. There were cakes, tarts, pies and nuts whose particular origins were unknown to him. And everywhere, there was an aroma that could put a god on his knees. A woman behind the counter was dipping a white, puffy round object into a vat of dark, dripping goo.

"What?" he breathed, as he pointed at the woman and then turned to Karen.

It was so hard not to laugh, but Karen managed to contain her mirth. Angus' eyes were as large as twin moons. If she didn't get him something to sample soon, he'd probably start foaming at the mouth.

"It's called a marshmallow. And she's dipping it into chocolate," Karen whispered. There was no one else in the shop, but there was also no sense in alerting the employees to Angus' ignorance.

The woman behind the counter looked up, took one look at Angus and presented him with a blinding smile. "Would you like a sample?" she asked, holding up the

marshmallow she'd just dipped.

Karen smirked. The woman was twice his age, but that didn't seem to matter. A man who looked like Angus would have a way of attracting any woman's attention. Even if they just stopped for a traffic light, or slowed to let another vehicle pass, ladies in the vicinity stared. She was glad there were punk rockers who wore similar leather clothing, or he really would cause some commotion. Still, he could do with some less conspicuous garments.

"Aye," he sighed. "I would definitely love to sample." His eyes never left the dripping marshmallow.

"Here ya' go then, love. I make the best candies in the area and that's a fact," the woman gushed as she handed Angus the treat.

Angus carefully took the offering. When he put it in his mouth, a feeling came over him not unlike what happened when he bedded a loving wench. His manhood even responded the same way. The warm chocolate ran down his throat. He closed his eyes and chewed the gummy morsel, then licked his sticky fingers. And as his mouth became used to the flavor, Angus thought he had died and been delivered into the hands of the Goddess herself. "You are right, kind lady. 'Tis the best thing I have ever put in my mouth and that's a pure fact!"

Karen held back a snort of laughter as she watched the woman blush and hand Angus yet another sweet to try. "If you would, let him have a little of anything he wants." She handed the woman a large bill. "If that isn't enough, let me know." "What about you, lass? Won't you have something?" Angus held up a small brown cake the clerk gave him.

"Just a small glass of water. Maybe some shortbread."

Angus nodded in approval. If he could get her to eat more, then she might feel better. And if she couldn't find something in this heavenly place to tempt her, there was simply nothing on Earth that could.

An hour later, Karen stopped trying to hold back the laughter. Angus and the counter help were engaging in a joking conversation having to do with what he hadn't sampled yet. At last, he turned to Karen and rubbed his stomach. "Ach, lass. I believe I am catching this sweet tooth malady. 'Tis a wonderful sickness." "I hope you haven't overdone it," she replied.

"There is no such thing. A man canna' overdo bliss."

Karen's shoulders shook in mirth. "I've created a monster. You're a chocoholic!"

"Is that a bad thing?"

"Not really. There are some people who think that life without chocolate isn't worth living."

"Wise they are," he agreed, slapped his hand on the table then downed a tall glass of ice-cold soda.

Karen picked up a napkin, leaned over to wipe a small bit of chocolate from the corner of his mouth, and Angus grabbed her forearm. He placed a kiss on the inside of her wrist and smiled wickedly. She felt herself blush deeply and slowly pulled her hand away.

"There are other things just as tempting to a man." He winked.

Karen pursed her lips and raised her eyebrows. "If you think flattery will get you more chocolate . . . well, that's where you're probably right." She broke into a grin. "For now, we'd better get back on the road."

He nodded, took her hand and led the way out of the shop. As they walked down the street, Angus saw no signs of the abject poverty that had ravaged the countryside in his time. People seemed well-clothed and happy. Houses were constructed to withstand the elements and shops seemed to thrive. Some of the passersby even smiled. He acknowledged their greetings and realized that it made a difference to act as though he was friendly. It was something which garnered kind responses in return. And it felt wonderful just to have a stranger tip a hat, or offer a "good day," for no other reason than that he had grinned at them. Life must have changed a great deal. As he looked up into the sky, he couldn't help laughing out loud. He had a new life full of possibilities.

"Well, you look very pleased with the world," Karen remarked as she watched his face light up.

"I am. Verra' pleased indeed."

When they reached the car, Karen opened the driver's door, but Angus paused. She watched as he leaned across the hood and sent her a boyish smirk that almost knocked her boots off.

"I would learn to drive this beastie," he said, and swiped his hand over the hood.

"You've got to be kidding."

"Oh, not here in the village," he admitted looking around at the passing folk, "but out on some lane where I would do no harm."

Karen thought for a moment. Had they just met? Or had she known this man for a lifetime? It seemed so ridiculous to have ever feared him. So far, he hadn't shown a mean or malicious bone in that huge, gorgeous body. She sighed, then shrugged.

"Ohhh . . . what the hell! Let's go for it."

"That's the spirit, lass." Angus broke into what felt like a face-splitting grin and got in the passenger side.

As soon as they were outside the boundaries of the village, Karen turned off the ignition, pulled the car over and got out. Angus got out, too, and walked to the driver's side. Karen chuckled as she watched him rub his hands together in expectation.

"All right. This is the gas." She pointed to the appropriate pedal. "This makes the car go forward. The other one is the brake. That makes it stop."

"And the wheel steers the thing, aye," Angus eyed the interior with a determination long denied him. "I will master this. After all, I tamed many a wild horse in my time. This can be no worse."

"I should think it will be a lot easier. But go slow. It takes a while not to overcompensate with the steering wheel." Karen remembered the first time her aunt had taken her driving, and she had almost put the car in a ditch. Thankfully, this road was bordered by open pasture on either side.

Angus sat behind the wheel. Karen showed him how to adjust the seat and the steering wheel to suit his much larger frame. She walked to the opposite side of the

car, got in and nodded.

"Gently then?" Angus asked.

"Aye," Karen mimicked.

Angus slowly pushed on the gas pedal and the car moved forward. Then he touched the brake and it stopped. "I can do this, Karen!" He felt excitement course through him. He tried again, then several more times to get acquainted with the equipment. He listened intently as Karen explained some of the other devices.

Angus slowly drove the car several hundred yards, successfully mastered a left-hand turn then stopped. "I would never, in all my born days, have imagined doing such a thing."

It was hard for Karen not to feel excitement for him. Angus' face had a wonderful way of illuminating when he was all worked up. "Go further now. Don't worry about going fast yet. And if you see something you want to look at, just pull the car to the side of the road and stop."

Angus took a deep breath and moved the car forward. The roads were bumpy in some places, but it tested his newfound skills. Karen watched his movements, slowly guided him by obstacles and even a farmer with a trailer full of fat pigs. He could see how people might be better off with cars of different kinds. If livestock could be moved more quickly, and in greater numbers, it stood to reason food would be more plentiful.

And Karen was the most patient of teachers. She never seemed to mind if they hit what she called a "pot hole," or if he had to take a turn very slowly. She praised what he did, and something in his chest hurt a little. No one, except his parents, had ever done such a thing. If he had a chance to undo only one wrong thing, he vowed to never criticize where encouragement would gain so much more. This descendent of Elspeth's was a sweet, feisty woman of quality. What would his previous life have been like if he had known such a generous heart sooner?

They stopped several times to check their bearings and once more to get something to eat. Karen wondered if Angus really knew where he was. "Why is it we seem to need to stop so often?" she asked as she cast a look at him from the corner of her eye. "Has the landscape changed that much?"

"Aye, it has in some places. There were many more trees then. And I was a small boy when I left the Order in England. Still, it should no' take us verra' much more time." He turned to look at her. It seemed she was battling fatigue. Her shoulders slumped, and there were dark circles under her eyes. "We should stop for the night and find rest."

"That might be a good idea. We won't be able to see anything of the countryside after dark," she agreed.

Karen found a hotel nearby and guided Angus' efforts at parking. Surprisingly, he did a very good job although it was a little slow. Then, she booked a single room with two double beds for them. After spending so much time in his presence, she just couldn't feel threatened. And what if there were a fire or some other emergency? How would he know what to do? At least, that's the excuse she used

to rationalize their sharing a room.

While they waited for room confirmation, Angus didn't ask many questions. But he did stare at things like the computer the desk clerk used, the blue carpeting on the floor and the decorations. She tried to hide her amusement as the hotel staff openly stared back. A vivacious young girl tossed her blond curls in such a way that someone who was catatonic could have picked up on the sexual message.

Angus beamed at her though Karen hoped it was only friendliness on his part. The staff wore hotel clothing that he mentioned looked like some kind of 'Breatannach uniform'. The word Breatannach, she surmised, was someone from England. They could work on his inappropriate use of dialect later. If she was around long enough to help him.

When they made their way to their room, she was so tired the very act of standing was almost too much. She fumbled with the electronic key card. Angus was carrying her small travel case and an overnight bag. He didn't seem at all concerned when a passerby looked him over as if he were an oddity. Indeed, that's how he seemed in the black leather outfit he wore. One person muttered something about him probably being in one of those heavy metal rock bands. Karen vowed to find him something more suitable to wear. Common sense told her they shouldn't be drawing so much attention to themselves. After all, Angus didn't have any I.D., and the police might want to find out who he was. Especially since he looked like he didn't belong.

When she pushed the door to her room open, Angus tossed her bags on a nearby chair, picked her up and placed her gently upon the bed. She was so tired the energy to object to his actions wouldn't come.

"Sleep sound, Karen. I will be verra' near."

Karen smiled up at him then fell into the deep sleep someone who is desperately ill needs. It didn't occur to her to be afraid or send Angus to the adjoining bed. By now, she realized he probably wouldn't leave her alone, even if she insisted.

Angus took off Karen's shoes, covered her with a blanket from the closet, and began to inspect every item in the room. The air was much warmer than that which was outside. Perhaps there was a heater in the room. The same kind as Karen used in the machine called car. What a strange world he had awakened into. There was a box in the room which was black and had a grayish curved glass in the front. He looked at the thing and noticed a small elongated device sitting upon its top. He picked this up and poked at several buttons. The box in front of him seemed to come alive. There was a man within it who was speaking right at him. Angus dropped the small object he had been holding and backed away. He looked at the bed but Karen did not awaken. His heart quickened. "What sorcery can this possibly be?" he whispered.

After several moments of watching and slapping at the black box, he determined that the man inside was not a small version of the Elf Clan. He wasn't really there at all. He stopped and listened. The man in the box spoke of the weather and pointed at various spots on a map of the British Isles.

"This is more magic than I shall ever have," he murmured as he sat in a nearby

chair and leaned forward.

After some time, Angus picked up the elongated object he had dropped and pushed at the buttons again. The smaller object seemed to control the larger box and its images. Angus glanced at the bed again to make sure the noise was not disturbing Karen's rest. He pulled the chair closer and proceeded to make an attempt to master this strange new beastie. There was no going back in time. This was his time now, and he must learn all he could.

Karen woke slowly and heard a child's voice. She pushed herself up and turned toward the sound. It was all she could do to keep from laughing out loud. Angus was leaning forward in a chair, his attention trained upon the TV. He was nodding in agreement with the youngster in a commercial. Long dark hair made a curtain which partially hid his face.

"Aye, I think I should try this thing called a hamburger," he murmured and nodded at the television. "'Twould no' be wise to add so many onions, though."

"Having fun?" Karen smiled, trying her best not to laugh at him.

Angus quickly turned his head and grinned. There was no sign of embarrassment on his face. Just the expression of a man experiencing the sheer joy in being alive. He slowly rose, stretched his massive frame and walked toward her.

"This machine is verra' informative," he said as he pointed at the television.

"How did you learn to turn it on?"

"'Twas by mistake." He shrugged and smiled again. "Could you tell me how it works?"

"I'll tell you what I can. First, I need a shower and some hot food. How about you?"

"Two large hamburgers, with bacon, cheese and a . . ." he thought hard searching for the correct words, "a side order of French fries with a chocolate shake." He nodded and grinned at his successful request for food.

"Oh, God! You stayed up all night watching that damned thing didn't you?"

He just smiled and shrugged again. "I've had three hundred years of rest. I want to see, know and do everything."

"First things first." Karen stood up and moved toward the bathroom. "When I'm through, you can have the bathroom all to yourself. I'll raid the fast food place across the street while you're showering." And hopefully find you some new clothes while I'm at it.

He tilted his head and looked at her. "You will ruaig?"

"Do what?"

"You will go hunt or raid for food?"

Karen had to stop for a moment until her sleep disoriented mind caught up. Then she shook her head and tried not to smile. "It's another expression. I meant I would just go across the road and buy us some food while you clean up . . . um, wash up," she corrected.

"Oh." he nodded. "May I ask another question?"

Now she grinned. "Angus, you can ask anything you want."

"Good. What is a bathroom?"

Karen put her hands to her mouth and tried not to choke on her response. "Why . . . why d-don't I just get cleaned up, then I'll show you. All right?"

Angus shot her a broad grin and nodded. "Aye."

Angus watched her retrieve some clothes from her luggage, go into a small room and close the door. He sat back down to watch more on the black box. He abruptly stood again when a man began to speak about 'crop circles of unknown origins'. Then the box showed him pictures of some of the circles. Maybe they weren't known to the man in the box, but they were definitely known to Angus. In centuries past, the intricate patterns made in fields of grain, the designs plowed into the landscape, and patterns carved into large stones, were how transient members of the Order had communicated with one other. He knew exactly where he was going now. The circles were telling him how to get to his people. They knew he was coming. He was surprised to learn the Order had not moved in three hundred years, and that some of their communication stayed the same. No outsider would ever be able to translate the beautiful patterns in the grain fields, but his parents had taught him many ways of the Order. He only hoped the ruling Sorceress would accept him. At least as long as it took to keep his promise to Karen. He looked toward the room where he heard water running and felt his heart begin to ache. After being entombed for so long, his senses might be wrong. Though she'd told him otherwise, her situation might not be that desperate. Cures might exist she knew nothing about. He shook his head, hoping the action would chase away any morbid thoughts. There had to be a way to help her. He had seen a healer inside the box who spoke of amazing medicines. Between the outside world and the magic of the Order, there would be a way to help Karen. There must be! Like her kin, she was patient and kind. The world needed people like her. There would always be tyrants like he had been. Men who cared nothing for anyone but themselves.

"What are you looking so solemn about?" Karen asked as she walked into the room.

She was wearing a pink fluffy garment made of some thick fabric and drying her hair with a white cloth. She should eat more. But she is still a beauty. "I was just thinking about the past."

She walked over to him and had to tilt her head back very far to look into his face. "There's nothing anyone can do about the past, Angus. You have from now until the end of your life. And I'm so glad I'm here. I wouldn't have missed knowing you for anything in the world."

He angled his head. "You mean that don't you, lass? None of this frightens you any longer?"

"No. It's going to be one great adventure." The very last one.

He couldn't help staring at her. The sun came through a small slit in the curtains and landed on her honey-colored hair. It glistened like lantern light on precious metal. How was it that someone as contemptible as he was allowed a second chance, and a kind, sweet soul like Karen was so dreadfully ill? He quickly turned

away before she could see the emotion he could not hide.

For a moment, she didn't speak. Then she placed a small hand on his arm. "Come on. I'll show you how the bathroom works. There are even some spare razors and some other stuff you can use if you want to."

He turned back toward her, and when she smiled at him, he let himself believe everything might be all right. He smiled back. It was good to have her as a friend. How could he have ever come so far without her?

Karen allowed herself the small luxury of staring at Angus' beautiful face before leading him to the bathroom. She stood at the door, took a deep breath and led him in by the hand. "This is the faucet where you can get water to drink. On and off." She demonstrated, then let him try it for himself. When he nodded, she went to the next device. "This is the shower for bathing. Again, there are handles for hot and cold water. Test the water first so you don't burn yourself."

"Hot and cold water . . . right inside a room, without it being carried." He shook his head in bewilderment that men had achieved so much. "And that?" He pointed toward the commode.

This was the part she dreaded. "Let's just say that's an indoor privy."

Angus didn't respond, just tilted his head and stared.

"Outhouse? Water closet? Latrine? Loo?" Karen tried every euphemism she knew besides the more obvious, coarse versions.

"Call me a dimwit, lass. I have no idea what you mean."

Oh, Lord! She inwardly groaned. "It's where you go to . . . when nature calls. You know."

"Ah! I see." He finally did understand. But it puzzled him that anyone would do such a thing without a chamber pot.

"Good! That's fine," she sighed. "I'll be on my way." She started to walk out of the bathroom when he grabbed her upper arm and held her.

"I still dunna' know how to use it, lass."

Karen put one hand to her face, leaned against the vanity and let out a long breath.

"You sit, do your business, or stand if you're a man and have to urinate. Then you do this." She pushed the handle down and flushed.

Angus practically stuck his head inside the bowl. "Iongantach! Where does it go?"

He watched the water swirl around and drain out.

Karen gazed at the floor. "Away, Angus. It goes away."

"And you have no need for soft grass or leaves?"

Karen quickly reached for the roll of toilet paper, pulled some off and handed it to him. "Use this."

Angus held it in his hand for a moment, put it to his face and rubbed it against his cheek. "Ahhh, super absorbent. I remember. That is what the man in the box said."

Karen pressed her lips together, patted him on the shoulder and tried to walk out of the bathroom. Again, he stopped her.

"You have something for my beard?"

Stifling an urge to laugh at a situation Angus clearly couldn't help, Karen picked

up one of several complimentary razors on the vanity then put the plastic-handled razor down. Looking him over, she knew the disposable blades wouldn't be nearly sharp enough to tame the thickness of a long beard. "I'll be right back," she told him.

Angus watched her walk away, only to return a few moments later with a pair of scissors in her hand. They were very small, but looked exceedingly sharp. This was something with which he was familiar. "Ah! Scissors are still used."

Karen handed him the scissors from her portable sewing kit, and when he put them in his hand correctly, she was satisfied he knew how to use them. Glad she'd packed the kit when her first inclination had been to leave it behind, she realized it might be a small gift she could bestow on him. Something of hers he could keep and remember her by. Still, the immediate problem wasn't solved. He'd need the complimentary razors in the vanity basket sooner or later.

She picked up one of the pink plastic-handled razors again and methodically took the cap off and put it back on several times. "The cap is to keep you from being accidentally cut. You have to be careful not to nick yourself because it's sharp."

"That wee thing canna' be too sharp," he commented. "And the color is like something a woman would prefer."

"Well, the color doesn't matter and it is sharp. So be careful," she warned. "You can use as many of these razors as you need. Try them in the shower or the sink with plenty of soap and water, after you've used the scissors to do away with most of your beard." She then demonstrated how the razor actually worked by pretending to shave her face. Then she put the razor in his hand and picked up several more items to show him. "Here's shampoo to clean your hair while you're in the shower, and the conditioner is to put in your hair after you shampoo. Towels for drying are right there." She pointed to the towel rack over the commode. "Deodorant is for, uh, underneath your arms so you don't offend anyone with a foul smell?"

"Do I offend?" he asked and automatically lifted one arm, sniffing his arm pit loudly.

Pressing her lips together hard, Karen shook her head. "You're fine so far. There's a bar of soap here you can also use in the shower." Then she continued with the instructions. "The toothbrush is for cleaning your teeth and toothpaste is to put on the toothbrush." Again, she demonstrated yet another bathroom procedure.

"Anything else?" she asked as she unwrapped several items, and showed him how to remove and replace caps on individual tubes and bottles.

He looked around and grinned. "This will be a new experience."

"Brother, tell me about it," she murmured, and tried again not to burst out laughing. She quickly walked out of the bathroom when he proceeded to undress. Karen only turned to face the small bath area again after she heard the door close. When she heard the shower running and Angus hoot in glee, she quickly dressed in soft cotton underwear, a Kelly green sweater, jeans and hiking boots. Then she picked up her purse, extracted a brush and ran it through her hair.

Seeing Angus' leather pants, shirt and boots lying just outside the bathroom door

where he'd carelessly tossed them, she picked them up. "Hmmm, no underwear," she mused, and wagged her eyebrows suggestively as a wicked scene of leather against his privates ran through her imagination.

Knowing he wouldn't dare leave the room without clothing, he would be safely confined until she returned. And there might be some store where she could use his leather garments to figure out his correct size. As she walked down the hallway later, her mouth twisted into a grin and she started laughing hard. Thank God I didn't have to demonstrate a bidet.

Karen was still laughing when she walked out into the sunshine. Down the street from the hotel, there was a row of shops. Since this was the first and last time she would ever shop for a man, nothing in the world was going to keep her from getting exactly what she pleased. "Angus, my man, you are gonna' stop traffic."

Angus took a lengthy shower, luxuriating in the feel of warm water, clean hair and skin. He congratulated himself for using most of the items Karen showed him in what he surmised was their proper order. Then he finished toweling with the thick cloth, and looked at himself in the counter-length mirror. For a moment the image confounded him. Never had he seen himself so clearly. He thought himself a striking figure of a man, but he did not know if the rest of the world would share that opinion. His hair was the same length as when he was cursed but his beard was now gone. The remains of it lay in the water of the beastie Karen referred to as a commode.

He felt his age was the same thirty and three years as it had been when the curse befell him. For him, all things had stopped on that fateful night. But the rest of the world had certainly moved on. He ran one hand over his face. "For Karen's sake, I hope I look well. More to the point, I hope I act well," he softly muttered to himself. "She should share her time with a better man. Not some savage brute like me."

For a long time he stared at his own image and remembered some of the horrible things he'd done. But he couldn't reconcile where that man had come from. The former Angus MacGregor simply didn't exist, though the deeds had still been done. He was still responsible.

Angus finally finished his bathing chores and cast one last glance in the mirror. He touched its surface and shook his head in wonder. "Never could I dream of such things in one single, small room. I have so much to learn." When he opened the bathroom door and couldn't find his clothes, he grew alarmed. Karen said she was going out for food. Nothing was mentioned about relieving him of the only clothing to his name. He glanced down at the towel which was tightly tied about his hips. "A man canna' go about like this. I will catch my death."

He paced the room, waiting for her to make an appearance before deciding to tidy up in the bathing area. The last thing he did was to flush the remains of his long beard down the commode beastie. The hair swirled away, but made a strange gurgling sound as it did so. He tilted his head, considered that was probably normal, then forgot about the matter altogether, when he heard approaching

voices in the outer hallway.

Angus quickly exited the bathroom and grabbed Karen's robe off the bed. He held it against himself as she walked in carrying bundles and bags. She shot him a radiant smile, walked on by him and dropped her parcels on the nearest bed. Two uniformed men walked in behind her and placed more bags beside the others. It occurred to him that modesty had not been one of his previous characteristics, but he was in a strange world. What might these people think of him with only a small piece of cloth to cover his manhood?

One of the men heard the strange gurgling coming from the bathroom and glanced through the door. "Hey now!" he cried out. "You've got a bad mess in 'ere, lady. I'll 'ave to call maintenance to 'ave a look at the plumbing."

Karen rushed to the bathroom door and saw water running from the commode and onto the white-tiled floor. Remains of long dark hair mingled with the water. Immediately knowing what happened, she closed her eyes to block out the unsightly mess. Then she opened them and walked back toward the main room. The other porter was rushing out the door without so much as a tip, leaving his companion to deal with the bathroom overflow.

Karen said nothing as she watched Angus move forward to see the mess the remaining man was trying to clean. The big Druid looked back at her with such a woeful expression that she simply couldn't help herself. She burst out laughing. Angus quickly approached Karen and stood so close to her that the man in the bathroom couldn't hear his words. He pointed toward the bathroom door. "Did I cause that mess, lass?"

With tears of mirth clouding her vision, Karen couldn't respond. She just sat on the bed while the hotel porter got on the phone, called maintenance, then went into the bathroom again. Presumably, he was still attempting to clean up the mess. The poor man was mumbling what sounded like curses as he did so.

"'Tis verra' sorry I am, Karen. I dinna' mean this to happen."

"I-it's not your fault, Angus. It's mine." She laughed.

"How can you find this amusing? That poor man has to clean up my mess," Angus guiltily muttered. "And 'tis my fault. No' yours," he insisted.

"No, it isn't. I should have told you to put your beard into that small basket by the commode. It's called a waste basket. You throw things in it that aren't supposed to be flushed down the commode," she explained, then began to laugh again and had to turn away to cover her face with her hands. Poor Angus looked so confused and embarrassed. And the man now cursing loudly in the bathroom wasn't helping matters. But it was still one of, if not the most, hysterical situations she'd ever been through. In fact, the entire bathroom experience for the day was causing her so much merriment that she actually had to reach into her jeans pocket and pull out her prescription bottle. Her chest began to hurt from laughing so hard.

Angus quickly sat by Karen and watched her take whatever medicinal aid she now swallowed. Ignoring the loud complaints coming from the bathroom and other men rushing in from the hall to help their companion clean up his mess, he softly spoke to her. "Are you all right, Karen?" He put one arm around her shoulders.

She leaned into him, looked up and smiled. "I've never had so much fun in my entire life. You're wonderful."

"I hardly think the men in yon room think the same, lass. I should go and help them if you are sure you are all right."

"No. Just stay put. The plumbers will handle it. They've got equipment for emergencies like this."

He hung his head. "I know not what a plumber is. But I do know I have caused you much trouble this day. You'll be wishing you had never heard of me or the spell to set me free. I canna' think why you would call me wonderful."

She turned to him and took one of his hands in hers. "Angus, everybody has caused messes in bathrooms. Nobody is perfect, and everybody screws up."

"What is 'screws up'?"

"It's what people nowadays call making a mistake." She leaned her head against his shoulder. "And it's okay. Really. I've done the same thing in my house back home."

"You are only saying that to make me feel less like a hapless fool."

"No, I'm not. I've had to call the same kind of people to come clean up my messes in my own bathroom several times. Sooner or later it happens to everyone. So, it's over. Don't even worry about it any more. Okay?"

He gazed down at her. "'Tis so verra' sweet you are. I wish the whole world could know you."

Looking into his dark eyes, Karen began to wish, too. She wished she were healthy and could be with him for more than just a few more weeks. Unshaven and up close, he was captivatingly handsome. So many wishes passed through her brain, even as Angus lowered his head and planted a very soft kiss against her mouth.

"You are like a bright little star in the darkest sky," he whispered. "No matter what happens, you still shine and always, always will."

Stupefied into silence by the most breathtaking compliment she'd ever received, Karen sat there for some minutes gazing into his eyes. She couldn't move, and he seemed equally as entranced. Some minutes later, she had no idea how long it really was, Karen barely heard a loud voice from the doorway. One of the hotel employees was saying something to her. She slowly turned her head in his direction.

The plumber repeated what he said. "Did you 'ear me? We've got the mess cleared up and the commode seems to be in order, Miss. Try not to flush anything down the pipes like that load of 'air again, will you?"

She stood up, grabbed her purse and tipped the men very well. "Thanks very much. You've no idea what I'm talking about, but you've just given me one of the best clogged toilets of my entire life."

The plumber grinned. "Whatever that means, good on you, Miss. 'Ave a nice evenin'."

Karen watched as the plumber and his companions left the room. She quietly closed the door behind them and turned to face Angus. "So, how was your shower?"

He burst out laughing the same time she did. It took a long time for him to get his laughter under control, but it was as she had said. The incident was over and they were the closer for it.

Suddenly remembering she had been gone for quite some time, Angus eyed the bags sitting on the bed. "I assume you employed those men to help you with all these bundles?"

"They're hotel porters," Karen explained. "I couldn't carry the food and everything else, so I got them to help me."

"I canna' find my clothing."

"Your things are in one of those bags." She pointed to the parcels on the bed.

"First, let's eat. I think the food is still hot."

Angus watched as she picked up one of the bags, placed food on a small table and pulled up two chairs. The aroma that filled the room almost had him on his knees. Whatever the food was, it smelled as though the gods and goddesses had a hand in its making. "What have you brought?"

She crooked one finger, beckoning to him. "Come see."

Angus dropped the robe he had held against his body and approached. He stopped suddenly when Karen's eyes grew twice their normal size and she began to ogle. He looked down and remembered that only the thick cloth covered the area below his hips. He backed away. "'Tis sorry I am, Karen. I had nothing to wear. If you will but show me m'things, I'll dress quick."

And miss eating with Hercules? Karen tried not to stare, but it was impossible. She'd never seen so much pure, unadulterated man in her entire life. Not that she had any experience in that area, but surfing the 'Net and perusing the stud sites had been a late night hobby once upon a time. None of what she'd seen could possibly compare with a man only a few inches short of seven feet. A man whose body was so finely crafted that it seemed a sin to bother with the oversized towel. Muscle rippled, biceps flexed, and those pectorals made her mouth go dry. His body was almost free of hair except for a soft fine line running down the middle of his chest. The line divided small pillows of abdominal muscle, and Karen could only image what lay below those abs. And the flesh on his thighs and calves bulged. Yes! I can die happy.

"Lass?" He arched an eyebrow and put his hands on his hips.

"HMMMM?" she responded.

"M'clothes?"

Karen jerked herself back into reality and raised her gaze from where it had been.

"It's okay. You . . . you can sit and eat just as you are."

Angus tossed his hair back over his shoulders and tried not to laugh again. He reasoned that Karen probably wasn't used to seeing an almost nude man. There was a time when he would have taken total advantage of the situation, but not now. And certainly not with a woman who might be innocent about how to handle a man's basic needs. Besides, her body was frail. Instinct told him pleasuring her might cause more harm than happiness. So, he slowly sat and waited for her to push some of the food toward him. As she did so, he ignored her hot stares.

Putting her attention on the food, Karen said, "It's hamburgers, fries and a chocolate shake. Just like you wanted." She watched his face break into a broad grin as he unwrapped the meal.

Angus' eyes closed for a moment as he bit into his first hamburger, tasted the French fries and almost guzzled the chocolate shake. "The food here is better than any king in my time could have feasted upon. I dunna' believe I will ever get enough of it. Forgive my manners if I eat hearty."

She chuckled as he stuffed himself. Something about the way he ate made her happy. So many people took such things for granted. It would do them good to see someone who had probably fought for every scrap of food he could get. He'd said the past had been harsh. She believed him.

Karen ate as much as she could, then let Angus finish off the rest. She cleared away the empty wrappers and walked toward the bed. "Now, I've got some surprises for you."

"More than the food?" He glanced at the parcels. "I am unworthy of such treatment."

"You have to have some more clothing. So, I got a few things," she responded and shrugged, as though her gifts were nothing of consequence.

Angus shook his head. "There are a wee bit more than a few things here."

Karen was almost giddy with excitement. She couldn't wait to see what he'd look like in the new clothes. They were all conservative, meant to blend in with everything other people would wear. After seeing him with only a towel on, she knew it was an exercise in futility. Angus MacGregor was going to stand out, no matter what he did. But he'd do it with simple class.

She rifled through the bags until she found what she wanted. "Here, we'll try these today."

Angus took the garment from her with a barely concealed air of anticipation. No one had ever done so much for him. He had no way to repay her. No coin or property. But he could show gratitude for the offering and be thankful. He ran his hand over the soft blue pantaichean, or pants, and held them up to his body.

Karen eyed him critically. "I think those are going to fit fine."

"What is this fabric called? The cloth is soft, unlike anything I have ever felt."

"They're called blue-jeans, or just jeans for short. They're made out of cotton. And I think this will look great with them."

He placed the jeans on the bed and took the shirt. It was a soft gray color and reminded him of the kitten he had saved for Elspeth. "I verra' much like this color," he said.

"The cloth is called flannel." She tried to hold it up across his chest. They both laughed when she had to stand on her toes just to hold it against him. Then, she stumbled and lost her balance.

Angus caught her and pulled her against his chest. For a long moment, they stared at each other. Three hundred years was a very long time to be without a woman, and he'd already tasted one sweet kiss from her this day. Though she was thin and pale and he knew he should not excite her, Karen was still a lovely creature. Were

it not for her illness, she would be absolutely enchanting. There were lochs in Scotland that reflected the same blue in her eyes. She was short next to him, but taller than the women he had known. Her lips were pink, full, and trembled just a bit. If I could but taste of them again. He slowly lowered his mouth toward hers. "I'm sorry, Angus. I can't kiss you again. Before, it was different. Those hotel employees were in the room and nothing could come of it. Now that we're alone, the excitement might . . ." Karen let her voice trail away, swallowed hard and pushed herself out of his embrace. It was one of the hardest things she'd ever done. But no woman should ever play around with a man like him. Whoever did would be in heaven and hell. Heaven because of how it would feel to be with him; hell because it would end. In his time, Angus probably had the choice of any woman with a pulse. The present would be no different. They would flock to him, and Karen couldn't compete. Not only did she consider herself physically unappealing, but the doctors told her sexual relations were out of the question. So, it was best to not even go there. Angus would be a friend. That was all. Most importantly, her main goal now was to get him to someplace where he could safely live. She couldn't do that if she was physically incapacitated.

"I understand, Karen." He changed the subject "If you would show me how this clothing is worn, I will put it on," he murmured, trying to get over the moment. But she was so adorable in her innocence, and his body still craved closer contact and was actually shaking because of it.

Karen looked up, gave him a tentative smile and picked up the jeans. "You put these on like your leather pants, except I'm sure you're not familiar with this." She showed him how the zipper went up and down.

He gave a mock shudder. "That is a mantrap!"

Karen burst out laughing. "You'll just have to be very, very careful, won't you?"

"Aye," he agreed, "else I will be hurt."

"Then, there are these." She held up a pair of cotton, athletic underpants with the longer legs. "I didn't know what kind you might like, so I picked something I thought would be comfortable," she lied. She'd picked the damned things because she could imagine how great he'd look in them. Karen tried not to think about the bikini briefs, pouches or thongs she had considered. Lord only knew what he'd have done had she bought those.

Angus admired the soft, black short-pants. "These go underneath?"

"Aye." She jokingly tried to mock his deep voice and accent.

He laughed. "I'll have you talking Albannach, or Scottish, in no time." Angus picked up the clothing and headed to the bathroom.

"Don't forget the socks," she tossed him a pair just before the bathroom door closed.

Angus quickly donned the garments, brushed his hair again and looked himself over in the mirror. "I like these things." They were soft, comfortable and allowed him to fit into a world where his own clothing might not.

"Did you say something?" Karen called out.

"I said that I think you will be pleased," he responded, and opened the door.

Angus saw her blue eyes widen with amazement. She was pleased. There was the unmistakable spark of desire in her gaze. The same as when he had so badly wanted to kiss her.

Karen tried not to look as captivated as she felt. His long hair was parted on the side and neatly draped down his back. The gray shirt was tucked into his jeans. And they hugged him everywhere she shouldn't look. But the fit was perfect. Or it was the man who made the clothes look like perfection. Either way, the impact was the same.

"Now, all I need is m'boots," he walked across the room, sat and pulled them on. Underneath the soft cloth of the jeans, they would look like any other man's boots instead of the Highlander gear they were.

"Very nice." Karen looked him over and hoped she'd concealed the wistful tone in her voice.

"Thank you for your gifts. The fabric and colors are wondrous. I have never owned such fine garments."

"You're more than welcome."

Angus stood and walked toward her. Again, there was a moment when something more should be said or done. Clearly, Karen was afraid to let that moment happen. She turned and began to pack up the parcels.

"We should get going. I'm sure it's a long drive."

"We should." Though it would not take so long as she thought. The crop circles would show them the way.

Five

They still had miles to drive before reaching England and finding the mysterious place where Angus wanted to go. But lunch time approached, so Karen stopped, more to stretch her legs than anything else.

Angus' appetite was unbelievable. He easily downed four hamburgers and a large plate of French fries. Then he drank two chocolate shakes. Karen had to promise to serve him the same thing for supper before she could get him to leave the restaurant. Apparently, these were what he considered staples in his new diet. She shook her head and had to smile. Three hundred years without food would make her hungry, too. But that was the only thing that would. She hadn't felt like eating a real meal in many weeks. The doctors told her that was to be expected. It didn't occur to her until now that her pain medicine wasn't quite so necessary. She'd relied on it less since meeting Angus and seeing his former, hideous form the first time.

As if he could read her thoughts, Angus turned to her and paused before asking, "Was I verra' offensive looking?"

"What? What are you talking about?" she glanced at him as she sipped her bottled water.

"As a statue. Was I that hard to look upon? I heard villagers speak ill of my

appearance while I still stood in the old kirk yard. 'Tis why they moved me. And you remarked upon my appearance just before you bespoke the spell. Tell me true, Karen."

She wanted to be tactful, but he was watching her closely. "Well . . . you were a gargoyle."

"Aye. I knew this from villagers who spoke around me while I was cursed. But how did I look?"

She sighed, shrugged her shoulders then let him have it. "You were pretty revolting. But then . . . a lot of gargoyles affect me that way. In my opinion, they all look sort of menacing."

"Tell me more," he insisted.

"All right." She paused and wished he hadn't asked. "You had a leering devil's face, horns on your head, two stupid-looking, tiny wings on your back, and there were stone chains wrapped around four heavy, lion-like legs." She waited for him to respond, but he didn't right away. It seemed as though he was contemplating this information before commenting.

"The Sorceress who bespelled me wanted my stone appearance to be a reflection of the life I led. She succeeded."

"I don't believe that. You've been a complete gentleman with me and anyone else we've encountered. There's nothing menacing about you, except your size. You have half the people in the restaurant smiling at you. Even the woman at the hotel desk thought you were a hunk. A complete side of beef." Karen added the last part as a way of expressing her own opinion without his knowing.

"What is the meaning of the word hunk and why would the lass have thought me something fit to be served as a meal?"

Karen laughed. "Those are compliments. I'm telling you that the girl thought you were extremely attractive. You were kind and irresistibly handsome. Didn't you notice how she looked at you?"

"Ah, yes. I noticed her expression, but was not sure she really thought me handsome so much as she simply lusted. She should be more careful casting suggestive looks. I ignored her, but someone else may not. Someone, like the man I once was, might take advantage of the looks she did cast. That would no' be something she bargained for."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying, lass, that I once would have taken advantage of a girl who looked upon me in such a way. Whether she wanted my affections or no'. That is one of many reasons why the Sorceress saw fit to make a horrifying sight of me. The face you saw was that of a lecher. The leer represented my lack of propriety, and the wings were made small to represent my fall from whatever grace exists on this Earth. The chains bound me in that state and were meant to hold me forever."

Karen shook her head and her hair swung over her shoulder. "I don't believe that! The person you're describing wouldn't have saved a little girl's pet and earned her lifelong devotion. And if the Sorceress had thought you were that bad and she had the power, why didn't she just kill you?" Whatever anyone else thought of him,

this kind giant was incapable of any sort of harm, as far as she could tell.

"What she did was worse than kill me. I wanted to die. Many times." He paused.

"Then you came and I knew redemption. I have had a very long time to think over the wrongs I have done to others. I will spend the rest of my life trying to purge them."

"I don't care what you say, or what you've done in the past. You're not capable of hurting anyone. I won't ever believe that."

His heart warmed at her words of loyalty though he knew they were misplaced.

"You don't know me a'tall. Believe me when I tell you I have done unspeakable things, Karen. Nothing was beyond me. Nothing."

"Even if I believed what you're saying, that was then. It was a long time ago," she argued. He looked away as if the landscape was more interesting than the conversation they were sharing. Before he did, she glimpsed a terrible pain in his eyes. There were so many questions she wanted to ask him. Questions about her ancestor and what had happened while he was cursed. But clearly, he didn't want her to continue the conversation.

After traveling for another hour, and practicing his driving skills some more, he stopped on a hillside near an open field. He quickly opened the door and scanned the horizon. She got out and gasped in surprise.

"A crop circle! Oh, Angus, isn't it fantastic? I've seen pictures of them, but I never thought I'd actually get to see a real one." She was about to say she wished for a camera, but what would be the point in taking pictures she couldn't enjoy for long?

"Aye. It also means we're verra' near where members of the Order exist, and that I'm to proceed with caution."

"These things are made by the Order?" she whispered, as she gazed in wonder at the intricate design. The grain crop had been flattened to form three increasingly larger circles connected by a straight line. There were small, evenly spaced crescent shapes fanning out from either side of the middle circle.

"They are made by the Order," he confirmed, "and we're being warned."

"You mean we in a general sense don't you?"

He shook his head. "You and I are being told exactly how to proceed and to do nothing which endangers the Order."

Too late, he saw her eyes widen and an expression of alarm cross her face. Too much excitement was not good for her, and the last thing he wanted was for Karen to come to harm. He carefully guarded his next words and kept the tone of his voice quiet. "'Tis the same for anyone coming into the Order after a long absence," he lied. "We are always warned to be careful, no' to lose our way and to draw no attention."

"How could they know we're here? How do they know about me?"

"Someone may have come looking for me on the three-hundredth anniversary of my curse. Having nowhere else to go and no means of surviving, being with my own kind is only logical. They know that I would seek them out. But dunna' fear. If they wanted to harm us, they would have found us and done so." He waved his

hand in the direction of the field. "They simply want us to be careful and no' alert the authorities to our presence. In my time, no outsider knew of the Order." He looked the circle over again. "I believe this must still be the case."

"Oh, I'm certain know one knows about them. The way communication is today, that kind of news would be all over the world in hours. But you're taking me to them," she pointed out. "I'm an outsider."

He smiled and pushed a strand of hair out of her face. "We are both being invited. So much time has passed that their rules about certain outsiders must have changed. Perhaps they will allow some outsiders to find them if they are trusted. In any case, you will no' be harmed." He would never allow it.

She shook her head. "I'm not worried about me, Angus. I don't want you in trouble with these . . . people . . . because of me."

It was suddenly very important that she knew something of what she would be seeing. The shock could hurt her. He led her back to the car and motioned her back behind the wheel with a nod. When they were inside and he knew he had her full attention, he tried to think of the words he would use. He would have to draw on very old memories and hope his descriptions were still accurate. "Karen, when you broke my curse, you said something about your knowledge of the Order. Tell me again what you know."

"I was told what I thought were a lot of fairy tales about magical beings. Fairies, Gnomes, Trolls . . ." her voice trailed away. For several moments, his expression revealed his struggle to tell her without causing stress, and she suspected he was trying to avoid a repeat of the fainting incident she'd had on the night his spell was broken. For the first time since her childhood, her congenital heart problem caught up with her, and Karen felt cheated. Since there was nothing Angus or anyone else could do about her health, she didn't want to be coddled to save her from pain.

The end would come one way or another. Pity was an unacceptable response. It made her angry. She wanted to spend the last of her time being treated as a normal person and to hell with what happened. No pity and no regrets.

"Angus, just tell me and quit treating me like an invalid. I'm not at that point, yet, and I don't like being treated as if I am. You and I both know how ill I am, so babying me isn't going to make things better. It'll just piss me off. Now tell me everything," she demanded.

How brave she is. In that moment, he knew he had never met anyone more spirited or courageous. His heart broke a little. "All right, Karen. I'll tell you what I remember." He didn't tell her that he didn't, for a moment, believe the present Sorceress would have changed the old rules which allowed an outsider to come among them. Not without a price. But the invitation had been issued. That much he had read in the crop circle's design.

Angus told her of the different creatures he could remember. He tried to relay the Order's hierarchy so that she would understand the Sorceress and her absolute position of power. Still, he realized that things within the Order itself may have changed. They could not have survived in this world of new wonders without having done so.

Karen appeared to take the information in stride. She displayed no fear, or any outward sign of reluctance. As far as he was concerned, this was to her credit. He realized that true strength was not a quality which came from force. Rather, it was a virtue born of a heart full of kind and gentle courage. Karen had a great deal of this. She seemed unafraid of anything, and Angus greatly admired her spirit. He would try to instill this characteristic in his own personality.

When they stopped for the night again, Karen and Angus were laughing and joking as if they'd known each other for years. When Karen approached the registration desk at the small hotel, the clerk looked up, did a double-take at Angus, and quickly proceeded with getting their information.

Angus started to lift Karen's luggage containing some of his new things, and a bag of what Karen referred to as 'take out' food.

"No need for you to carry all that, sir," the registration clerk informed him. "I'll have someone take it up to your room." He motioned toward several porters in the lobby, and an attendant came forward.

Angus nodded and turned to find a young girl ready to take their things. "Ach, I canna' let a bonny lass like this carry m' things when I am perfectly capable of doing so." He picked up the baggage to keep the girl from lifting them.

The girl blinked at him, then looked at the registration clerk.

He, in turn, looked at Karen and she burst into laughter. She realized she had never laughed quite so much in her life. Metaphorically, that was a very good thing for her heart. "It's okay. He'll take our things for us." Karen watched the girl porter look at Angus. There was a mixture of confusion and admiration in her gaze.

"Well, sir, uh . . . What . . . Whatever you say, then," the registration clerk stammered, cleared his throat then loudly snapped his fingers at the girl. "Lead them to their room, Julie. And don't be as lazy about it, as you usually are."

Angus put the luggage back on the ground, approached the desk and looked straight into the man's eyes. He tried to remember things were very different in this new world. Still, time and his punishment had taught him that human beings should be treated with more care. "Please, sir. Do no' snap your fingers at the lass as if she were nothing. Do you no' pay her a wage?"

"Well, certainly . . . that is, the hotel does. But I'm the manager . . ." the man began.

"Then she is in your employ," Angus interrupted, "and you should show that respect which you would want given to yourself. Where I come from, snapping fingers at another is reserved for the lowliest dog. And calling someone lazy in front of others is an insult. Ya' ken?" He tried to keep his voice soft and calm. There was no use starting an incident. But he recognized a bully when he saw one. He had personal experience.

Karen looked around. There were several porters and some cleaning staff standing nearby. They openly grinned at the lecture the manager received, though they lowered their heads and pretended they hadn't heard. In truth, Angus had

tactfully tried to keep the reprimand quiet, but he was such a commanding figure that others stopped to stare. The lack of bustle caused his voice to carry into the lobby. Karen only hoped the incident would go no further.

"Of course, sir. The customer is always right," the man sharply replied.

Angus shook his head, picked up the luggage again and turned toward the girl. He smiled and nodded. "If you will be so kind as to lead on, lass. We will follow." The clerk was not repentant. Just afraid of making a customer unhappy. There would always be men like him. Just like Angus, himself, had once been. And he suddenly remembered a little serving boy who couldn't get out of the way fast enough, and the faces of those near when he had berated the lad. Angus hung his head in absolute shame. He was no one who should be giving others instruction on humane treatment. In his previous life, he'd done much worse than the man behind the counter.

Karen saw the intense look the defended girl bestowed on Angus. It was nothing short of reverent. In fact, the entire staff would probably gossip about the incident and watch every move they made. Karen was wondering if the little scene would cause them undue attention, but she couldn't fault Angus' behavior. His defense of a publicly humiliated employee was an uncommonly proper thing to do. But she immediately dragged her thoughts into the present situation when the elevator doors closed behind them. Angus was grabbing the elevator railing with ferocity. As the elevator rose, his grasp became so tight that his knuckles were white. She could see him swallowing hard and gazing about the interior of the elevator anxiously.

The porter looked at him. "It's just the motion of the elevator, sir. Are you not used to it?"

Karen opened her mouth to speak for him, but Angus was quicker.

"There are none where I come from, but I am fine," he assured her, then he smiled at Karen.

When the girl let them into their room, Karen tipped her well. She was about to open her suitcase when the porter turned at the door and spoke to Angus.

"I wish I came from where you do, Mister. Seems like people have a few more manners there." She smiled brilliantly and left.

"No, she would no' like to be where I am from. Women were treated like property," he muttered. "And I see some men still consider them such in this time."

Karen shook her head in amazement. "You'll have the entire hotel staff thinking you're a knight in shining armor."

"Bah!" He waved away the compliment. "I only did what I thought right."

"Well, Sir Angus, have a hamburger as a reward for being so chivalrous," she joked, and handed him the sack containing their meal.

He rubbed his palms together in anticipation. "If that is the reward, then I shall strive to be more knightly." Angus reached for the bag and felt his mouth water at the thought of the hamburgers.

Karen was tired, but after a good meal and a refreshing shower, she felt as though some of her energy had returned. It helped that Angus seemed more than eager to take turns driving along the winding roads and narrow lanes.

After he showered, while singing some bawdy song about a bar maid's escapades, Karen watched him come out of the bathroom looking like the world was his oyster. He wore a smug grin and a hotel bathrobe. He made her laugh once again by modeling it in front of her as he'd seen someone do on the TV. Then he quickly grabbed up the remote control and turned on the television.

"I am anxious to hear what news there is," he explained.

"You're getting very good at operating certain mechanical things," she happily remarked.

"'Tis necessary to learn," he shot back.

Karen indulged herself by opening a bag of potato chips and opening up a soda. Angus plopped down beside her, dug into the bag she offered and munched loudly.

"These are verra' good."

"These are verra' fattening," she mocked and shoved his shoulder.

"Good! I like fattening," he quipped.

A movie started and Karen tapped his shoulder to get his attention. "Oh, look! It's a movie about King Arthur."

Angus sat up and stared intently at the screen. "What is a movie?"

"It's like a play. There are actors and they pretend to be men and women who lived in that time period."

"Ah, I understand. Are there other plays like this movie?"

She nodded and stuffed her mouth with more chips. "Sure, they come on the television all the time."

"And that is what this beastie is? Tele . . . television?" He tried to pronounce it correctly.

"Yep. And if it's hooked up to a lot of channels, you can sit and never watch the same program twice."

He shook his head. "I think 'twould make poor company if it canna' answer questions and hold a decent conversation. A man could spend too much of his time watching the thing."

Karen leaned against him and motioned toward the black box. "You're right. Too many people do just that."

To prove his own point, Angus quickly became engrossed in the play. There were inaccuracies in the story, but it was a very well told tale, nevertheless. When it was over, he shot Karen a questioning look.

"What?" she asked.

"King Arthur did no' give his sword to Percival to throw back into the lake."

Karen almost choked. "What do you mean?"

"When the good King lay dying, he gave his sword to the Green Knight to take back to the Lady of the Lake. But the Lady bid the noble knight to keep it himself until such time as it was needed."

"Are you totally serious?"

"Aye," he answered. "Why would I no' be?"

"Are you telling me that story is true?" She widened her eyes in surprise.

"Aye. Did you not know this?" he asked.

"The world thinks it's just some kind of old legend."

"So, I believe, am I. Yet here I sit. Eating out of yon bag of . . . of . . ."

"Potato chips," she supplied.

"Aye, potato chips." He reached into the bag, grabbed a handful and shoved them into his mouth.

"But Arthur would have lived centuries before you. How could you possibly know any of that story is true?"

"As a young boy in the Order, I was taught it was so. My parents told me everything. And there are some who said that many of the Order were descended from Arthur's counselors. That they were even accepted among the outside world at one time. And I remember being told that Excalibur was later given to the Sorceress of the Ancients herself when the Green Knight could no longer keep it safe."

Karen sat up on her knees. "Get outta' Dodge!"

"Get out of where?"

She exhaled. "It's another expression. It means that I just don't believe it!"

"S'truth." He nodded.

She leaned back against him. "Do you know what people would give to find out this stuff?"

"This could be why the Order has never wanted to have outsiders know of them. There is great magic among its numbers. Great knowledge of things past."

Karen thought for a moment and distractedly handed Angus a can of soda.

"Angus, are you sure it's all right for me to see this place?"

"If it were no', I would no' take you there, lass. We have been invited, so we must go."

"And you're absolutely sure you won't be in trouble for doing so?"

Angus gently turned her to face him. "You are worried for no reason, Karen. No harm will come to you."

"It's not me I'm worried about . . ."

"Hush, you." He pulled her against his shoulder. "Tomorrow, you will know the truth of what I say."

"We're that close to the Order?"

"We are."

Karen swallowed hard. She wished they had gotten lost on the road. The last few days had been the very best of her life, and she didn't want their journey to end. Somehow, the man had become much more than just an obligation. More than a friend. Her life had been like a sad, dead end without him. When he was near, she could almost pretend she was normal. He made her laugh and certainly caused her to change her beliefs about many things. But not one moment of their relationship had ever been dull. If it was adventure she sought, Angus had certainly fulfilled a

great many dreams. She just wished, with all her heart, they could have a little more time alone. Recalling the reason she was helping him in the first place, she realized that wish was rather selfish. The man needed a place to belong. And soon. Sensing some of her confusion, Angus pulled her against him and wrapped his arms around her. She soon fell asleep, as if she'd been in his embrace a thousand times before. In his life, he had never done one thing to deserve such acceptance and friendship. Even after such a short time together, she trusted him. It was so unusual that someone would do so. I will be worthy of this woman's loyalty and her family's sacrifice. Or die trying.

"This is it?" She stood in front of the car and looked into the thick woods.

"Aye, apparently our kind live as they always have. The wooded area was once known as The Shire. It protects all those in the Order, including those who are not able to change their appearance at will. And Druids, who are humans with power over elements, are most comfortable when they commune with nature," he reminded her.

Karen wasn't having a hard time believing in the shape shifting capabilities Angus had told her about. Many cultures believed those powers existed, and she had the additional proof of what she had seen with her own eyes. She had, after all, watched Angus come to life from stone. To stretch that knowledge a step further and believe in other magical creatures wasn't, therefore, that difficult. She now believed in everything. But it was still exciting and that caused her blood pressure to rise. She took deep, calming breaths and closed her hand around the prescription bottle in her jacket pocket. The pain in her chest could sometimes strike hard. She recited a silent prayer that it wouldn't come. In the short time they'd been together, Angus was already too protective. "What happens now?" she asked.

"We wait right here. If the Sorceress is in residence, we will soon know." He stopped to tune his senses into the forest. "There are those of the Order near. They will let her know we have come."

"I won't ask how you know there are people out there," she murmured. "Just let me know what to do and when."

He took her hand in his. "Just rest easy, lass. All will be well."

They sat in the car and didn't make a sound for the next half hour. Karen watched him stare intently into the forest. Her heart might be bad, but her eyes were in perfect condition. And though she couldn't see a sign of anything other than the trees and the birds that flitted between them, she didn't have to be psychic to know they were being carefully scrutinized. The hair on the back of her neck told her so. She swallowed hard when Angus sat up a little straighter and leaned toward the windshield.

"Stay here, Karen," he commanded.

"Where are you going?" She couldn't see anything, but Angus' behavior indicated he had.

"I will no' leave your sight, but I need to go toward the woods alone."

Angus knew they were there. It had been a very long time, but his senses still worked. They fairly tingled with the power that emanated from the forest.

Whatever happened, he wanted to be the first to make contact with the Order.

Something was not right about Karen being issued such a blatant invitation. While her identity was clearly unknown, it was correctly inferred someone traveled with him. In the message of the crop circle was a clear command. She who served as the current Sorceress of the Ancients wanted his traveling companion here. Whoever that Sorceress was, the woman would have to kill him to hurt Karen.

"Peace Be With You. Blessed Be, Angus MacGregor."

A calm but strong voice addressed him. He turned to see a tall, imposing figure of an older woman. She had long, silver hair which hung loose. She wore a white Druid robe like her predecessors of centuries past. Beside her stood a tall man, well built despite his older years. The woman's consort? If so, they made a striking pair. Angus knew he was being addressed by the Sorceress herself. Her silvery gaze perused him cautiously. The older woman was, like all her kind, enchanting and lovely. And deadly if the situation demanded.

Centuries earlier, he would have said something annoying, turned and walked away. He might have even said something altogether obscene. While he could forgive what had been done to him, he could not so easily dismiss what had been done to his beloved parents. The old urge to rebel welled up within him again. But he had Karen to think of. Goddess only knew what would happen to her if he behaved in an inappropriate manner. Besides, this woman was not the Sorceress who had chased his family out of the Order, leaving them to die alone. All things were new, including his life. And this he now cherished.

He knelt upon the ground and lowered his head, as he had been taught as a child. Even if that practice were archaic, he would be forgiven the faux pas as a show of fealty. "I am known to you, Sorceress? The Order knows my name and story?"

"We only just learned of it, MacGregor, or we would not have left you where you were. We went to Scotland to find you. You must believe that. But you were gone when we arrived, and we didn't have the incantation to reverse your enchantment at any rate. Though it's obvious someone certainly did." The Sorceress waved a hand in Karen's direction.

He turned to look back at the frail figure standing beside the car. "Is it safe for my friend to approach? Will you permit her to step onto this sacred land?"

"Bring her to me," Shayla told him. She watched as Angus walked to the pale looking woman and brought her forward. Even from a distance, the Sorceress could see there was something very wrong with MacGregor's companion.

"Look at the lass. She's a wee, fragile thing." Hugh nodded toward Karen. "How do you think she came to have the spell to undo MacGregor's punishment?"

"We'll soon know, my love. Right now I'm worried that if that man hasn't learned anything from his ordeal, he'll be a danger to us all. Look at the size of him!"

Shayla knew the power Druid men possessed was often directly proportional to their size. And Angus MacGregor was enormous.

Angus walked toward Karen, forcing himself to relax and smile. Karen was the most intelligent person he had ever met. She would detect a lie or ruse if he was not careful. He did not want her to know how frightened for her he was. "'Tis all right, lass," he said in a low soothing voice. "The Sorceress, the Order's leader, asks you to come and meet her."

Karen swallowed hard and gratefully accepted Angus' large hand when he offered it. It felt wonderfully strong, rough and warm. She clung to it with all her failing strength.

"Come here, girl," the woman she assumed was the Sorceress said, motioning her forward with a graceful wave of her hand.

Karen walked forward and knew she'd never seen such a lovely woman for all her advancing years. "My name is Karen Matthews. I guess you'd better know that I'm the one who released him from his . . . uh . . . spell."

Shayla took Karen's hand and tried not to show emotion as she sensed how truly ill the young woman was. She smiled brilliantly and introduced herself. "I'm Shayla Gallagher, Sorceress of the Ancients. I'm but the most recent leader." She turned to her left. "This is my companion and trusted advisor, Hugh McTavish." After shaking both their hands Karen addressed them. "I'm overwhelmed at this honor. Despite what Angus has told me, I'm certain I'm not supposed to be here." "And what did he tell you?" Shayla asked in a friendly tone.

Angus stepped forward, but Shayla bid him stop with a mere look.

"He said that I'd been invited, but I'm not crazy enough to believe you'd really want me here. From your perspective, I'd be a threat. Though I have no intention of causing you or your Order harm, there's no way you'd know that. And I'm sure you haven't survived so long by taking unnecessary risks."

Hugh and Shayla looked at each other. This woman wasn't a fool. She wouldn't mince words and was responding honestly. Shayla attributed this to one of two things. Karen Matthews was used to speaking her mind, or her illness gave her courage and a sense of necessity. Shayla felt more at ease with her for it. A rational mind could be reasoned with.

"Were you the person who hacked into our computer files? The knowledge that Angus existed was only recently discovered, and his whereabouts entered into our database. Our people thought their files were quite secure."

Karen shook her head. "They're not all that secure, and I was the hacker," she admitted. "I'm very good at finding information I want."

"Succinctly put, my dear. You quite amazed and frightened our archivists," Hugh smiled at her. "Does anyone else have knowledge of what you've done?"

"No, and that's the God's truth!" Karen looked Hugh straight in the eyes. "I made what seemed like a ridiculous promise to find some statue in a Scottish village, then recite an old poem to it on a specific day. To keep from going on a wild goose chase, I wanted to verify the information I was given. There's no better way to find information that old than by accessing the Internet. Though I had to unscramble a few things, I finally got into your records. I took only the information I needed, and I never saw any harm in it. All your entries look like a lot of folklore cataloged

for research. Of course, I didn't believe anything would come of all this." She turned and looked at Angus. "Guess I was wrong."

"And where is this person to whom your promise was made?" Shayla asked.

"That was my Aunt Agatha and she's dead. I have no other family. There's no one who knows what I've done. Nobody will be looking for me." This comment was directed to Shayla herself. Under other circumstances, admitting there was no one who'd miss her was stupid. But her own future didn't matter. She didn't want Angus being blamed for something he couldn't control. If this Sorceress believed she was telling the whole truth, that what she had done hadn't compromised the Order's safety, things might go better for his future.

"You realize that if I wanted to silence you, you've just given me carte blanche?" Shayla asked and waited for Karen's response.

Angus stepped forward and placed his hands on Karen's shoulders.

Karen looked up into his face and shook her head, silently warning him.

Shayla watched this silent exchange with interest. Angus was clearly afraid for Karen. Anxiety was etched into his strong features. Something she would not have attributed to a man with his reputation.

"I'm dying, Ms. Gallagher. There's nothing you can do to me that time won't."

Defiant words, bravely spoken. As the minutes passed, Shayla was becoming more and more impressed with the woman. She was articulate, poised and strong-willed. More, the woman had computer skills that were extraordinary.

"What are your plans?" Shayla questioned using a softer, less demanding tone of voice.

Angus stepped protectively in front of Karen. "I would ask a boon of you, Sorceress. Karen's family have guarded the secret of my existence for three hundred years. From the beginning, one of them knew the words to undo my enchantment and passed that knowledge from one generation to the next. During my darkest hours they came to where I stood and kept me company. I have known scores of them. And, since you invited Karen into this ancient place, perhaps she would be allowed to see what no other outsider has? She and her kin have always kept their promises. If she tells you so, she will do the Order no harm."

Hugh raised his hand in a questioning gesture. "Even if that's true, what about you, MacGregor. Records tell us you were a complete scoundrel and a blackguard. The worst wretch to ever defile the Highlands. The Sorceress who enchanted you did so for good reason. How do we know we can trust you?"

Karen pressed her lips together to keep from saying something totally tactless.

Nothing she'd hacked into indicated that Angus was so bad. There were just general bits and pieces of information about how he'd angered someone and had been cursed. If she was to be honest with herself, however, she really hadn't read all that much about Angus himself. She had perceived his enchantment as a silly legend. Wanting to save time, there wasn't a reason to really go into his background. As she had told the Sorceress, her only real interest in their computer files was in making sure a statue, as her aunt described, was located in Glen Darach. But Angus was being too quickly judged. They didn't even know him.

These people hadn't seen the smile on his face when he looked at a bird or when he ate a French fry. They hadn't seen him build her a fire, or seen the gratitude in his eyes over a simple gift of clothing. Deep in her soul, she knew Hugh's characterization of him was a mistake. And if they thought Angus would cause trouble, would they do worse than turn him into a gargoyle?

"I pledge my life on my promise to do no harm," Angus offered.

That got Karen riled. Angus shouldn't have to justify himself based upon a lot of trumped up garbage someone might have written three centuries ago. As far as she was concerned, it was a lot of crap used to defend a curse placed on this sweet, gentle man. How did they know the person who wrote all that, if the records existed at all, wasn't lying? "He has had ample opportunity to hurt me and hasn't lifted a finger to do so," Karen angrily defended.

"Perhaps three centuries gave you time to think, eh, MacGregor?" Shayla asked.

"Aye, to think. And to feel the blackness forever cast upon my soul for those I did harm." He hung his head in shame. "I wasted that time. Karen has given me another chance."

Shayla studied him for a few minutes before speaking again. Waves of despair flooded her senses. The man who stood before her felt great remorse and pain. The emotions she sensed were so strong they were almost crippling. He wasn't trying to hide anything. To worsen matters, he would soon suffer the death of his only friend and that was breaking his heart. She looked at Hugh and knew he pitied them both as much as she did. Heartache had its own special aura, and its overwhelming presence struck Shayla and Hugh like a hammer. Even the most insensitive creature could feel the sorrow Angus felt about his past and would feel again when Karen died. The girl, on the other hand, had accepted her fate with courage. Shayla sensed dignity and loyalty from Karen Matthews. In keeping such a seemingly silly promise to find a statue and utter idiotic words, she showed a faithfulness beyond measure. Very rare in the world, at any time.

"What American State are you from?" Shayla asked. "Indiana," Karen replied. She knew there was no mistaking her American accent.

"Are you sure that no one knows you entered into our database?" Shayla asked once more. She had to be sure. To sense what the girl said was, in fact, true.

"No one knows anything about it."

Shayla nodded. She was convinced the girl was telling her the absolute truth. The overwhelming power of something spoken from the heart was, in this case, indisputable. Hugh's words confirmed her own senses.

He smiled and softly said, "You're a brave lass to come so far. To a strange place and with no companion."

"I have a companion," she said as she looped her arm through Angus' and smiled up at him. "I was never afraid while I was with him."

Angus looked down into her upturned face and had to grin. She was a little liar. She had been frightened almost literally to death that first night. But she had persisted despite her fears. And she had been frightened for him. He put his free hand over hers. He would never have such a fine, devout friend.

"I'll make a deal with you," Shayla addressed them both. "Angus, you may show Karen everything within the forest she wants to see, if she'll agree to shore up the holes in our computer system. I don't want anything like this to ever happen again."

Karen looked up at him and eagerly nodded. Her blue eyes reflected confidence and the expectation of a wonderful adventure. He didn't know what this computer was. Much of their conversation about it confounded him. But her response satisfied him it was something well known to her. There was only one question in his mind. He did not want to ask it in front of Karen. "Excuse me one moment while I speak with the Sorceress," he told her.

Shayla walked a short distance with Angus while Hugh stayed behind and talked with Karen.

"What's on your mind, MacGregor? The girl seems quite willing to enter into this agreement," Shayla said.

"When she has done what you request of her . . . What then, Sorceress? Will you no' pass judgement upon her for coming into the sacred forest and seeing members of the Order? Will she then be put to death?"

"I see no point in that, MacGregor." She hasn't got much time anyway. "She'll be left in peace to wander where she will, and I will command that no one harms her in any way. Does that satisfy you?"

"So, it is as I thought. The old ways are still enforced. Outsiders who find their way here are still put to death." He paused, looked back at Karen and saw that she was still speaking with Hugh. "I surmise it is the way you have survived all this time. But tell me, Sorceress, you would have put her to death if she had no' been dying. Would you not?"

Outsiders would be brought into their realm under very specific circumstances. And only when necessary. But Shayla wanted this powerful man to understand that protection of the Order from the outside world would always take precedence. Because of his history, Angus mustn't do anything to ever jeopardize their security. "Our survival is paramount. But this is a very special case. Because she poses no threat, I won't pass judgement on either of you. As I see it, you had no control over who freed you."

Angus looked away from Karen and brought his gaze back to the beautiful silver-gray eyes of the Sorceress. "I will tell you the full truth of the matter, lady. I care no' what you do to me. I want to live and was grateful to be free of my imprisonment. But I know how fragile Karen's health is. When she was amazed by the magic during my transformation, I offered to bring her here. If she had been healthy, I would have tried to send her away and would never have let you know who had freed me. It would have been poorly done of me to place her in danger after she and her kin had befriended me for so long. I now treasure my life, but no matter what eventually happens to me, I will never let anyone harm her. Never!" Shayla was impressed. The man had been willing to give his own life to keep his companion safe, no matter what had happened when he'd reached the Order. "If she'd insisted on coming here and hadn't been so ill, you would have brought her

anyway." It was a statement rather than a question.

"Aye. I would have tried to send her away. Failing that, I'd do anything she asked. Anything. And I would have defended her life with my own."

"If these events had transpired, how much do you think she'd have seen before she was destroyed?" Shayla questioned.

"I would have let no one harm her. No one!" he insisted.

"Those are bold words, my man. Would you have challenged me?" There was an intentional thread of anger in her voice.

"I would have kept her safe," he responded. "She is no' and never has been a threat to this Order. All she did was keep a promise. It isn't in her to harm anyone or anything. My experience is vast on the subject of one being's ability to harm another."

"It isn't your right to bring her here just because she may have insisted, MacGregor. But what's done is done. The point is moot since I feel that the girl has little time left. I've promised you safety and she may stay until her end. But you will swear loyalty to this Order and to me as its safekeeper. You'll do this in private and in front of the other members of the Order. And you'll not leave the confines of this forest without my express permission. Is that understood?"

He knelt before her. "Aye, Sorceress. You have my promise of fealty. I told you this because I wanted no deception between us. Had Karen wanted to be here, I would have brought her. No matter the state of her health. I wanted you to know that she will always have my protection."

So, the so-called murderer cared about someone so much he would risk his own life. But it seemed that MacGregor wanted no part of subterfuge or lies, though it would have been more tactful to have kept his mouth shut. That didn't match the information she'd been given. Perhaps he'd used the time, centuries of it, to change. When he would have walked back to where Karen stood, Shayla placed a hand on his arm and stopped him.

"There's just one more thing I'd like to know, MacGregor. How, with your reputation, did anyone come to care for you enough to keep your secret and eventually release you?"

He sighed, not wanting to repeat the story to her. Her expression told him she would not be put off. "I saved a child's kitten from drowning. That child was, as best we can tell, Karen's ancestor."

Shayla stared at him. She'd been led to believe the man would have been more likely to wring such a helpless creature's neck and drown its owner.

Her expression must have shown the astonishment she felt, because he said, "I promise you, Sorceress, no one was more dumbstruck by that deed than was I."

As he walked back to where Hugh and Karen stood, Shayla smiled. She had read the Order's records about him and his family. Deep inside, he had been badly hurt. That hurt had led to anger toward those he thought were responsible. With all his rage and brutality, some tiny bit of goodness had been in him. Perhaps the Goddess of all things had known this and provided a way out of the true bondage which had been his anger and pain. But had a way out been provided . . . or was

the worst pain yet to come?

Six

As they walked toward the center of the forest, Shayla watched Karen and Angus. The huge Druid kept her very close. His right arm was draped protectively over her shoulders. She and Hugh kept pace behind, occasionally giving directions as to which way to proceed. Shayla placed an arm over Hugh's, indicating they should slow up a bit and increase the distance between the couples.

"Keep an eye on them when we go to the great clearing tomorrow, Hugh. The others know we're coming, though I doubt everyone will be aware there's to be an outsider among us."

"You expect trouble?"

"Not with everyone. But you know as well as I that I'm breaking so many rules and traditions that there's bound to be some concerns raised."

"You're Sorceress. No one would dare do more than ask questions. It's your discretion how to enforce law."

"I'm not so sure, my love. Not everyone realizes that different situations require alternative solutions. Just bringing MacGregor here is enough to cause some fear. I've asked Lore to spread word of his existence and that Angus' punishment is at an end. But I've also asked the Fairy Leader to keep silent about the outsider. Word will spread soon enough, and I want to watch our people's responses."

"What was Lore's response?" Hugh asked, knowing the Fairy was an intelligent man.

"You know Lore. He's as loyal and steady as any man could be. And he has the utmost respect from all the Fairies, no matter what their origin."

"I talked with O'Connor as you asked. He supports you entirely."

"Ah, yes. Gryphon." She smiled. "He and Heather are staunch allies. I'll have their complete cooperation. None of the Druid warriors dares question them."

"As I've said many times, Shayla. You are the lawgiver. Your wisdom is beyond question. Times are changing and those of the Order who don't understand must be made to. If you decide to let this outsider into our realm, then no one should utter a word against your judgement. After all, Gryphon's own mate was once an outsider. Now she's completely accepted."

"She was accepted only because magic changed her into one of us. Karen's case is different. The fact that instead of killing this outsider I let her come among us won't be viewed with such complacency. But before this situation ends, I will know where loyalties lie. The millennium has passed. We should take our place with the rest of the world's population instead of skulking about in the woods like frightened sheep. After all, we once walked the earth without hiding. Perhaps this situation will allow us to test how an outsider, without any use of magic, responds. And how our people will respond to her."

Hugh realized that part of the problems concerning loyalty and fears of the outside

world originated with recent decisions Shayla had made. The Sorceress' authority had been violently challenged by a rival Druid, a woman whose practice of the black arts had led to a battle to the death. Before that woman died, however, she attacked their main population in England. Two men had died while others had been seriously injured.

Trying to ensure the same thing would never happen again, Shayla established a new section of the Order in the United States. Rumors circulated. Members of the Order were frightened about being attacked again and had to watch as some of their number left for other lands. All the upheaval had left the Sorceress with the need to validate faction loyalties. It had also established the fact that it was dangerous to continue existing the way the Order had for the past thousand years. Keeping all the people in one or two sacred forests, instead of spreading them out, was insane. An enemy could destroy all of them in one well-planned attack. And keeping all outsiders ignorant of their existence was becoming more and more difficult. It was the Sorceress' covert plan to find certain outsiders and let them know about the Order. They would be handpicked and unquestionably loyal. Their specialized skills in science, medicine, art, and technology would be necessary in the coming years.

Silently considering these matters for a time, Hugh finally spoke. "I'm the only one who knows what you're planning and why. Shouldn't leaders like Lore, Gryphon and Tearach be told? If they knew what you planned for the future, surely . . ."

"No. I want to know who stands loyal without question. It's essential to our survival. This situation between Karen and Angus will be the first of several tests I must give." She paused. "The Goblins are almost extinct. Every year our lands diminish, and it becomes increasingly difficult to communicate in a technologically advancing world and hide our existence. Karen's ability to ferret out our secret files are a case in point."

"Not advising our leaders of your plans could cause the very same divisiveness you don't want," Hugh argued as he raised his hands to make his point.

Shayla stopped walking and turned to speak. "Are you saying you don't agree with my plan? If I don't have your support, Hugh, how can I possibly ask it of the others? I must know that we all stand united. We'll never be able to stand strong among outsiders if we can't do so among our own kind. And there may come a situation when there's no time for a debate about what I command. I must have loyalty."

He took her hands in his and spoke reassuringly. "Of course you have my full, unquestioned support, my love. But the faction leaders would support you if they knew why you're about to make so many abrupt changes. I'm certain of it."

"When I know who'll stand with me without question in this matter of MacGregor and the girl, then I'll truly know who is worthy of moving into the future. We'll stand or fall united. This is the way it must be, Hugh. Promise me you'll let me handle this without telling the faction leaders anything. Besides, Lore, Gryphon and Tearach deserve to know who will stand with them as well. They are our bravest and best. The time for testing ourselves, in every imaginable way, is upon

us. You've read the runes as well as I."

Hugh continued walking beside her. "I have. But what may come in this new millennium frightens me, Shayla. I won't pretend it doesn't."

"Fear can be a good thing, my heart. Our mettle will be tested in how we meet the challenge. I'm willing to let our people prove themselves worthy of continued existence. But whether they like it or not, changes will be made."

"Aye," he agreed, "they must be."

Karen looked over her shoulder, and noticed the seriousness of the conversation between Hugh and Shayla, though she couldn't begin to guess the subject matter. She glanced at Angus and knew he was aware of their discussion as well. "Angus, I don't want to be the cause of any trouble here."

He took her hand in his. "If the Sorceress dinna' wish it, your presence would not be allowed. In the past, the Sorceress' word has always been the law. She and her predecessors are the most powerful and revered of all the beings here."

"May I ask how she got so powerful?"

"It has been a long time since being instructed in the ways of the Order, but I recall being told that each Sorceress chooses her successor depending upon the power displayed and the hardiness of nature exhibited. And the replacement must show wisdom beyond her years. She must be an expert in the traditions and laws of the Order, for it will fall to the successor to enforce and teach these things."

"And the leader is always a woman?"

"Always." Angus smiled. "Women are the givers of life and are treasured here."

But his smile faded when he recalled how he'd misused them and betrayed their trust. Not once, but over and over.

"What's wrong?" Karen asked, noticing Angus' darkening expression. When he didn't respond, she rightly guessed he was remembering something he'd rather not. She tightened her grip on his arm and changed subjects.

"How do you like this century so far? Besides television and hamburgers, I mean?"

He shook off his foul mood and smiled again. "It is remarkable. I fear I will never catch up with what I must know. Perhaps you can help me." He stopped suddenly and pushed her behind him. He stared into a small glade when a new presence became apparent.

"It's all right, Angus. I've promised no harm will come to her," the Sorceress spoke from behind them.

Confused by what seemed like minutes of total silence and Angus' complete lack of movement, Karen glanced back at the two Druids. "What's wrong?"

"MacGregor is not convinced," Hugh shrugged and smiled. Beside him, Shayla seemed unconcerned and sat upon a nearby tree stump.

"Show yourself," Angus commanded as he stared into the glade.

"Don't get your knickers in a knot," a small voice replied. "I'll come out when the Sorceress says so and not before. Oaf!"

Karen watched Hugh hide a grin behind one hand. Shayla shook her head and sighed. Whoever was there was absolutely camouflaged, yet Angus had known

someone was present without being able to see anything at all.

"Come out, Pluck. This is Angus MacGregor. I'm sure you've heard about him by now," Shayla said. "And the girl is Karen Matthews. She is here at my invitation."

"She's pretty. He's still an oaf!" the voice repeated.

"Sorceress, order him out of hiding!" Angus growled. "I dislike Elves lurking about."

"Pluck, behave yourself and come out. What will Karen think of you?" Shayla smiled.

The bushes near Karen's right moved, and out stepped a tiny man no taller than three feet in height. He wore a green pointed cap upon his head and a brown leather jerkin with matching pants and boots. The clothing was made to hide him and did its job well. His slightly tilted brown eyes were emphasized by a set of sharp ears and a pointed beard.

"Hello, Karen Matthews. I'm Pluck O'Reilly. But we seldom go by last names here. So I'll call you Karen, and you can call me Pluck." He took off his cap, bowed and grasped her hand.

Karen was enchanted with the man Angus called an Elf. "Ohhhhh, you're wonderful! Forgive me for being so surprised. Of course, I've never seen an Elf before and you're so good at hiding. I wouldn't have found you in a million years."

Pluck smirked broadly and proudly stuck out his chest. She couldn't have known she'd paid him a high compliment indeed. Elves regarded their ability to hide as one of their best qualities. "She thinks I'm wonderful," he addressed Hugh and Shayla.

They laughed at the smug expression on his little face.

Karen knelt to Pluck's level. "Isn't he adorable, Angus?"

"She thinks I'm adorable, too. What do you think of that?" Pluck put his hands on his hips and glared at Angus, challenging the large Druid to say something. Elves and Druids usually only tolerated each other. The small woodland denizens were considered a pain in the arse as far as most of his kind were concerned. In years past, Angus would have had some scathing remark to make. Now he simply held his tongue and gave the vexing creature a dirty look. That earned him a reproachful glance from Karen. Clearly, she was besotted with the little man. A predicament Angus hadn't bargained for. He assumed she'd be frightened by the appearance of such a presence. Again, her heart reflected her spunk. She was smiling and her eyes glittered brightly with mirth.

"We can be friends can't we, Pluck?" she asked. "You don't mind me being an outsider, do you?"

Shayla held her breath. Pluck wasn't known for his tactfulness. But as tactless as he could be, Karen was that direct. Shayla watched as Pluck tilted his small head and considered the matter.

"We all have to be something." Pluck shrugged. "I'm an Elf, you're an outsider who's very pretty . . . and he's never going to be anything but a big oaf!" Pluck directed a thumb in Angus' direction.

Hugh and Shayla were trying hard not to laugh at Pluck's obvious attempts to annoy Angus. That was the Elfin way. As far as Pluck's race was concerned, the bigger and more dangerous looking the adversary, the more annoying the Elf would act.

Angus glared at Pluck. "You'd do well to distance yourself from this creature and his ilk, Karen. If they are no' causing trouble for themselves, they frequently relish causing it for others."

Pluck addressed Karen, completely ignoring Angus. "You're an American, aren't you? I caught the accent."

"Yes. And you have a wonderful brogue. I've always loved the Irish. They have such a great history." Pluck boldly took Karen's hand and began to lead her slowly away as he spoke.

"Don't wander far," Angus warned her.

"She's with me, witless. I'll see she comes to no harm," Pluck snarled back. "The Sorceress has allowed her here at any rate. That means she's safe."

Heedless of Angus' concern, Karen continued walking away with Pluck. Angus turned to Hugh and Shayla only to see them grinning. "Karen should stay near me. Anything could befall her here."

"Pluck will take care of her," Hugh promised. "His word is his bond."

"Why am I no' assured?" Angus groused as he watched Karen walk farther away. Shayla watched Angus' expression of fear and concern turn to . . . could it be . . . jealousy? Her own smile faded as she realized how connected Angus was to the girl. How would he deal with her eventual death? The man had nothing to look forward to but heartache. Though he'd caused much of his own unhappiness as an adult, he'd had nothing but sorrow in his early life. Would he even know how to be happy without Karen's presence?

"Pluck!" Shayla called, "Find Lore, Gryphon and Tearach. Have them go to the large clearing at sunset. For now, we should find a place for Angus and Karen to rest. They've had a long journey."

Pluck nodded to Shayla, doffed his cap to Karen and dashed into the forest. Like all of his kind, his movements were efficient and fleet.

Despite Karen's smile, Shayla sensed the girl's weariness. She raised her hand, indicating they should stop.

Angus sensed Karen's lethargy as well. He quickly took her to a moss-covered log and lifted her onto it. "You shouldn't tire yourself too much," he admonished.

Karen leaned against his chest and smiled up at him. "When can I meet more of the people here?"

"Tomorrow," Shayla replied for him. "For now, the both of you need rest. There's a cottage near here. It's across a meadow on the other side of the glade. You'll see it. Supplies have been provided. Hugh and I will see you both in the morning. If you need anything, Angus will know how to find us."

Hugh nodded his farewell and followed Shayla into the forest.

To Karen, it seemed the green of the shrubbery swallowed them despite the fact they were wearing white robes. The kind anyone would expect a well-dressed

Druid to wear. She grinned thinking about what a TV fashion commentator might say about the dapper Druids and effervescent Elves . . . What would they wear for the Fall season? It was a silly thought, but she was tired and a bit giddy. When Karen started to jump down from the log, Angus picked her up in his arms and carried her toward the cottage. "I can walk," she protested.

"Hush, you. Rest. 'Tis but a short distance and you've had a long journey."

She must have been more exhausted than she realized. The next thing she knew, Angus was lowering her to a small bed beside a fireplace. She wondered how they had gotten to the cottage so soon. She tried to sit up, but he gently pushed her back down and covered her with a blanket. With a slight move of his hand, the fire lit up and quickly warmed the room.

"We'll eat later. For now, sleep," he told her. It was still early in the afternoon but Karen was exhausted. He waited until he was sure she slept peacefully, then he took his own rest in a bed across the small room. In his joy at being released, he hadn't slept much. The lack of it was catching up with him. No matter what his physical condition might be, he resolved to keep the door to the cottage barred and adapted his senses for beings who weren't friendly. Karen's safety was his responsibility. Certainly not that annoying Elf's.

Karen awoke just as darkness was falling. A fire warmed the little, white-walled room and smoke from the fireplace curled up a small chimney. She'd taken two of her remaining tablets and had kept her movements discreet while doing so. Angus watched her like a bodyguard. While it warmed her soul to know she'd have a friend, it made her apprehensive about his future when she was gone. In short, the man had to get a life. Hers was waning. But she'd promised the beautiful woman who called herself Sorceress that the backdoor she'd opened into the Order's secret computer files would be closed. For the sake of all the creatures inhabiting this strange place, and to make sure Angus could live a semi-normal life, she'd survive long enough to do so. Again, she'd made a promise which she intended to keep. The last thing she wanted to be remembered for was leaving someone a way to hurt these seemingly gentle people. What would happen to all the little Plucks and others here if the world knew about them? She pondered the subject and came to the conclusion that the world rarely got along with its own kind, never mind a forest full of refugees from Camelot.

"What concerns you so?"

She looked up as Angus' baritone voice reverberated from across the room. She turned to see him smiling and rising from his own bed. "I'm just thinking about how to make the Order's computer system as rock-solid as I can. I don't want someone doing what I did and finding bewitched men like you standing all over the countryside."

"Little chance of that." He laughed. "I'm probably the only one. But tell me again. What is this computer of which you and Shayla speak?"

Karen ran her hands through her hair and thought for a moment. How did a person go about describing the most meaningful invention of the last century to a

man several centuries old? "Well, it's a way to communicate with the rest of the world, and store and search for information to be used later. It's kind of like having many books stored in a box. And the box has a way to help you contact anyone in the world in just a few seconds. And those other people may have different books stored in their boxes or computers. That's how information gets passed along." Not a very accurate description, but it was the best she could do. He tilted his head and came to sit before her. "Such things are possible?"

"When the Sorceress takes me to someplace where I can show you, you'll see what I'm talking about. You'll be able to learn all about the past centuries just by pushing some buttons. I'll show you how and you can explore the world whenever you want."

He saw her eyes light with enthusiasm. Here was something which held much interest for her. In truth, he was interested himself. "Could I find out what happened to people in the past? Or about places?"

"That's very possible, as long as the information is on a database somewhere or someone has entered the information telling you where to go get it. Is there something particular you want to know?"

"'Twas just a question," he lied. "But if such a device exists, how could the Sorceress have wanted information about the Order placed where anyone could find it?"

She shrugged. "Like I said, storing information can open a way of communicating instantly with one another. Or maybe she's archiving data for future use. I'll find out and try to make it more secure for her. And trust me, If anyone can do that I can. I shouldn't brag, but I'm very good with the latest technology. Computer work isn't all that physically draining, so it was something I got good at."

"I canna' imagine being able to speak with someone across the Earth in a matter of seconds. It took days to go from Glen Darach to the next village. Weather permitting."

"Well, big guy, you're gonna' love this!" She put a hand to his cheek and smiled. Angus loved speaking to her thus. Despite her failing body, her mind was as sharp as any he'd ever known. He could learn much from her. It occurred to him this was the first time he could recall having such a thought about another being, especially a woman. In his previous life, they were only to be used. Not beings capable of teaching. His own Sorceress had even been a subject of scorn.

He rose and threw another log on the fire. "Are you hungry? I am about to starve to death. Let us see what the Sorceress has rationed."

After several minutes of rummaging through enough foodstuffs to last for weeks, Angus decided on warming a cold roast chicken found within something Karen called a refrigerator. He made her sit before the fire with a mug of hot herbal tea while he worked. She smiled at him often and tucked her legs underneath her while warming her hands around the crockery mug. The entire scene was one of tranquil domesticity and he loved it. Someone needed and trusted him for the first time in his life. He felt so very protective of her, but he would not let his mind wander to the inevitable. It was not as if she would let him think on it anyway. She

was as full of questions about the Order as he was about the present century and its machinery.

He had to let her work a can opener for him, but the potatoes he could peel for himself. He finally had some boiling in a kettle over the fire when a knock sounded on the door. "Stop, Karen!" he warned when she would have risen and unbarred the door. "Always be sure who is there first. Because this is an enchanted place does no' make it safe. No' everyone here is as harmless or friendly as Pluck." He moved toward the small kitchen area, and Karen was alarmed to see him pick up a large butcher knife. "You're not going to use that on someone?" she choked out. When he didn't reply, she moved to the safety of the farthest corner. Like a large, graceful cat, he silently glided to a window and looked out. She saw him release a sigh of relief mixed with obvious irritation. Then, he put the knife on a nearby table before opening the door. She didn't realize she'd been holding her breath the entire time.

Angus immediately turned to her and offered a sincere apology. "Sorry I am to have frightened you, Karen. 'Tis just a plague at the door."

Pluck walked into the cottage. "I've brought your luggage. Your transportation will be taken back to the rental company tomorrow." Pluck grinned as Karen came forward. "And Shayla says you're to wear this and drink this." He handed two bundles to her as he spoke.

"Hello, Pluck," Karen said. "Won't you come in and join us? We're about ready to have some dinner."

The Elf watched Angus' darkening expression, saw the large man cross his arms over his chest and decided he'd goaded the giant enough for one day. "No, thank you, Karen. I've already eaten. But I'll see you tomorrow. I'll be here bright and early to lead you to the large clearing. Everyone is anxious to meet you." He ended the statement with a sneering look at Angus, tipped his hat to Karen, then ran into the woods.

Angus dragged her luggage into the room, slammed the door and re-secured it.

"What is it with you two?" she asked with a laugh.

"If you recall, I did nothing to provoke his behavior," Angus said, defending himself.

"That's true, you didn't. But why doesn't he like you?"

He shrugged as if the matter were of little concern. "Elves are intimidated by size. The larger someone is, the more they feel the necessity to prove themselves unafraid."

"And his attitude annoys you?" She grinned.

He returned her smile. "It should not, I know. But the little blackguard is attracted to you and I am jealous."

She knew he was teasing. But it made her day to hear the poster man for worldwide bodybuilders say such a thing. She felt a thrill of elation, but quickly changed subjects.

"By the way, you weren't going to actually use that on someone, were you?" She pointed to the butcher knife he'd held.

"I will put this back," he said, putting off answering. She did not know he had wielded weapons of a much crueler nature for less reason than self defense. On several occasions she had reiterated her belief that he was incapable of such things. The truth would chase her from him. And he dearly wanted her near.

"Open the packages the Sorceress sent with Pluck. I shall see to our meal."

Karen wasn't fooled by his evasiveness when it came to the subject of the knife. But it was clear he didn't want to discuss some habits which were connected to his past. Before all this was over, she'd find out more about him. Angus wasn't the brute or as savage he purported to be. He couldn't be.

She took the packages to a wooden table, which served as the dining area, and tore the brown paper from the smaller of the two bundles. It was an unmarked, black cannister. "Wonder what this is?" she mused, as Angus walked toward her.

He opened the container, sniffed the contents and nodded. "You shall have some of this with your meal. It is a special blend of herbal tea. It will help you relax and sleep soundly."

"And not you?" she questioned.

He laughed. "Perhaps she meant for me to drink some as well. What is in the other package?"

She tore through the second larger bundle and unfolded a white robe much like the ones Hugh and Shayla wore. There were matching doe skin boots as well. The fabric felt soft and warm. It would also make her feel more like a part of this semi-medieval world. The robe was expertly sewn and had tiny silver oak leaves embroidered around the cuffs and hood. "This is beautiful," she whispered. "But why would she want me to dress as one of the Druids?"

"To be more easily accepted by them, perhaps." He fingered the soft material knowing it would look good on Karen's slight frame.

"What about you? You are Druid. I wonder why you weren't given one?"

"The Sorceress knows I would no' wear it. Long ago I disassociated myself with my heritage. Though I have pledged myself to the Sorceress, my Druid ancestry is for me to reclaim when I am ready."

"And you're not?" she asked.

He noted the sad tone of her voice. "First, there is much I would amend and atone for. I will know when I am fit to reenter this life completely. The robe would make no difference to my feelings. I must earn my place here."

"Angus, please, let the past go. Let me help you," she pleaded and took one of his hands in hers.

"Since you ask, I will try." He smiled. "Now, put this garment and the boots on. They will keep you warm and offer protection from the forest plants."

"Will we be going out tonight?" She asked with a sense of rising expectation.

"Aye, after we've eaten. And only for a short distance. You should see the forest and some of its inhabitants by moonlight. The magic is truly missed otherwise."

Angus almost gasped when she gifted him with a smile that was bright enough to light any pit in a dungeon. He watched as Karen quickly grabbed up her new clothing and made her way to the small bathroom. Had he a fraction of her

courage, he would have requested a robe on the morrow. But there was much he wanted to know first. His questions would wait for the daylight.

Karen debated about leaving on her underwear, but guessed the Druids probably wore none. They seemed strictly the back-to-nature types, so she decided to follow suit. She lifted the robe over her body and let it fall into place. Nothing had ever felt more natural or comforting. She ran her hands over the soft fabric and lifted the hood in place. There was a full-length mirror on the back of the door. It reflected an image she hardly recognized as her own. She was still too thin, but she looked less ill in the robe. She smiled and brought her long hair forward and over her shoulders. Then she pulled on the soft leather boots which seemed to fit perfectly.

Angus was putting the meal on the table when she walked into the room. "What do you think?" She extended her arms and turned around for his inspection. The difference was astounding. It was as if she belonged in the garment, and she appeared so much less frail than before. He would have thought it would swallow her tiny figure. But she only seemed more alive. More vital somehow. Her face glowed with joy.

"It suits you well," he murmured. "Many will no' easily sense you are new here." "Like you said, maybe that's why Shayla sent it." She paused. "Should I refer to her by her given name or as Sorceress?"

"Since she introduced herself to you as both, you may use either." He moved closer to her and looked down into her eager face. "Whenever we are out of this cottage, you must stay near me. Promise me this."

"I will," she nodded. "I'm on your turf now."

He was not exactly sure what that meant, but she was sincere in her promise.

"Good. Now, let us eat. Then I will change my garments and we will venture forth."

Karen had packed his leather clothing with hers. There was no question in her mind as to why he'd want to wear his former clothing. Medieval surroundings demanded the same mode of dress. She was sure, in his mind, he'd feel more secure in them. While he was changing in the bathroom, she unpacked her own things and placed them in a small bureau located on the side of the room. She supposed, since he'd made an issue of staying so near her, that the arrangements were firmly made as to quarters. And that was fine as far as she was concerned. Having Angus around was as comfortable to her as the Druid robe she wore. His huge presence would have been forbidding to some. All she experienced was a sense of protection. It was sort of like having armor surrounding her, and it was a security she was beginning to like. It was also rather peculiar how quickly he'd become nonthreatening and so endearing. Especially since they'd known each other such a very short time and how fierce he'd first seemed.

"I am ready," he announced as he entered the room.

And she'd just been telling herself how comfortable she was with him. The breath left her body for an instant. He was positively primal. His loose hair caught the

firelight and reflected blue-black strands. The leather jerkin, pants and boots he wore clung to his perfect form as though he had been poured into the clothing. All he needed was a sword. Some Excalibur piece of equipment with which to slay any enemy insane enough to get in his way.

For this moment in time, she'd be the damsel he'd chosen to protect. And for the rest of her life, however long that might be, she'd never forget how he was holding out his hand, bestowing her with a beautiful smile and asking the perfect question for that moment.

"Shall we go forth, lady?"

Seven

Karen looked up into the cobalt-colored sky. The moon hung like some huge garden lantern. Angus took her arm and led her a short distance from the cottage. He found a stone for her to sit upon. The night breeze was surprisingly cool, but the robe she was wearing protected her. Dew hung on the plants like thousands of tiny diamonds. If there was anyplace in the world that could be truly called enchanted, Karen knew this forest was such a place. They were in a small vale where ferns and wild flowers crowded each other at the feet of ancient oaks. In the light of the moon, the flowers glowed like everything else. She couldn't tell what varieties were there, but their sweet scent lingered.

"In this place, time seems to stop," Angus whispered. "This is a home for the Pixies and Sprites. I can sense them near."

"Will they let me see them?" she asked as he sat and wrapped an arm around her torso.

"I believe they will. They fear nothing here. No prey threatens them in this protected place. You may verra' well be one of the first outsiders to have ever seen such a thing." Though he did not add the words and live to tell about it.

"What could possibly want to harm such creatures?"

"The biggest fear they have is of being caught by some kinds of birds. Owls love making tasty morsels of them. Then, there are cats people keep as garden pets. They stray into the forest from some nearby village and toy with the wee folk before pouncing. Occasionally, a frog or toad mistakes one for an oversized insect. I believe a few have probably met their fate on the front of one of your cars."

"Angus, that's horrible!" Her hands covered her face. Then she felt him shaking with laughter and Karen punched him in the arm. "That wasn't funny!" She playfully pushed him away.

He tried to stop chuckling. "They have no natural enemies except man. You can imagine what might happen if people were to know of them."

"On the grill of a car? That's disgusting!" She tried hard not to laugh at his twisted humor, but she wasn't succeeding very well. "You're a sick man, MacGregor."

"Aye, just a little Druid humor." He smirked.

"A very little." She tried to keep the mirth out of her voice. She didn't want to encourage him. "If they heard what you just said, they'll never show up."

"They will come in but a few moments."

"What's the difference between Fairies and Pixies?" she asked. Again, she felt him quiver again with laughter.

"About three lengths of my arm, I should imagine."

"What?"

"I'll introduce you to some Fairies tomorrow. We're here to see some of the wee folk tonight."

"Well, you're in a rare mood." His good humor was infectious, even if it was a little bizarre.

He suddenly held up his hand. "They approach."

From a distance, tiny bells tinkled. Then the sound grew closer. Lights, which might have been mistaken for fireflies, approached from everywhere and soon surrounded them. The sound became more like small wind chimes in the evening air.

Angus pulled her very close and wrapped his arms about her. "Dunna' move."

Karen did as he instructed and froze in his embrace, but she was so enthralled he needn't have bothered with the order. Tiny beings, each about five or six inches in height, flew from one flower to another. Their wings were like colored cellophane and they carried tiny baskets. Light emanated from the baskets much the way a night-light would glow from behind a sheer curtain. They came in all shapes and sizes. Some were in various stages of undress, their tiny garments no larger than a doll's. "What are they doing?" she barely whispered.

"Gathering nectar for various drinks and medicines," he loudly announced.

From the ambient light created by their small baskets, she could see him grinning mischievously. The Pixies didn't seem at all concerned about their presence and continued with their chores as though nothing was unusual. "You told me to be quiet." She pushed her hood back and glared at him.

"I told you not to move. I said nothing about being quiet," he reminded.

"You're an ass!" She openly laughed with him. "What's gotten into you?" She'd never seen Angus in an outright silly mood.

"I dinna' know 'twould feel so good to be back. I have had no contact with these creatures since I was a small boy. One day, I would like my own children to know such joy and wonder."

His own children. Of course he would want a family of his own. That had never occurred to her. Just because he'd recently rejoined the world didn't mean he wouldn't eventually want as normal a life as possible. But why did the thought of it hurt? Because she knew he'd have a future with someone else when she was gone. There were probably dozens of women who would stand in line to get their chance to have him. And that's what she wanted for him. Wasn't it?

Angus had never thought or felt things like this before. Women had only been a means to satisfy his lust, none had been considered worthy as a life mate. Three hundred years. It had taken him that long to feel what others felt. Then he

remembered fathers who had not come home again because of him. And what had become of the child or children that might have been his? That was one of the reasons he had asked Karen about researching the past. As more of his history flooded his consciousness, guilt heaped upon him. It was as the old Sorceress had said, his parents would have hated what he had become, and all that he had done in the name of vengeance.

Karen felt his light mood slip away. Hers was gone, too. The Pixies were lovely, graceful creatures, but their magic was suddenly lost on her.

"Angus, can we go back now?"

"Aye, we should," he readily agreed.

He led her back to the cottage. Karen did not seem in any better mood than he was, though he'd meant for the evening to be a treat for them both. Something had gone wrong the instant he had mentioned having a family someday. He knew what disturbed him. But what could have curbed her happiness so suddenly? Then a thought occurred to him. He abruptly stopped walking and faced her. "Karen, please forgive me," he begged. "I am an addle minded ass!"

"What? What are you talking about?" She looked up at his face in surprise. It was so dark she couldn't see his expression, but she could hear the contrition in his voice.

"There are many times I speak without thinking. That matter I brought up about having children . . . I dinna' think . . . That is I . . ."

"Angus, it's all right. Just say it." She put her hands on his chest.

He took a deep breath and tried to phrase what he wanted to say without hurting her further. As good as his intentions might be, he was unpracticed in matters requiring great tact. "Your condition does no' appear to leave you physically able to . . . well . . . and I babbled about children and bringing them to see Pixies and . . ." His voice trailed away.

Understanding crept in. Angus believed he'd hurt her feelings by mentioning childbirth and reminding her of her inability to bear children. Part of his reasoning was true. She'd known all her life pregnancy wasn't something that would be possible. Doctors had said so. But it was really the thought of someone making love to Angus night after night, some stranger whose face she might never know, that suddenly bothered her. It was the thought of another woman giving him children that hurt. She pondered that eventuality for a moment. Angus would probably be the kind of man who would spoil a pregnant wife, hold her close in the night and stroke her aching body when the pain of labor came. And Karen was sure he'd love his children endlessly. He'd bring them to see the Pixies, and they'd have beautiful summer evenings together. He, his children and some beautiful, unknown woman.

The need to set his mind at ease was more important than her own inevitable situation. So she did something she rarely did. She lied. "Oh, Angus!" She raised a hand in dismissal. "You mentioning children had nothing to do with my sour mood. It's just that, all of a sudden, I was afraid whoever I meet tomorrow won't tolerate my being here as readily as the Pixies seem to. And . . . I'm a little scared,

that's all."

He pulled her to him and hugged her. "Ach, dunna' trouble your heart, little one. Nothing will go amiss. I promise you."

"I'm hoping you do have lots and lots of children. I think you'd make a great father." She hugged him back, wondering about how easily the lie came.

His mood brightened considerably, and she rambled on about what the next day would bring and her false, trumped up fears of what might happen. Her heart warmed with each of Angus' assurances that nothing bad would occur, that he would be with her the whole time. Giving him a reason to protect her seemed to be what he needed. All the while, it never seemed to occur to him there was precious little anyone could do to harm her. She hated pretending to be such a coward, but it was better that than to have Angus know how his eventually being with someone else hurt her. Somewhere along the short journey they had traveled, he'd become far too important. Far too necessary.

Angus arose before Karen and decided to make use of the small bathroom and its wondrous hot and cold running water. There were some things about this century for which he was exceedingly grateful. Standing beneath the sparkling spray and lathering himself with clean-scented, herbal soap was one of them. He grabbed the razor Karen had loaned him and, for some odd reason, felt the depression from the night before wash down the drain with the foaming bubbles. Feeling so clean was not something he had been used to. Lice and other vermin were common in his time. Magic could do nothing to chase some of the horrid beasties away. To be without the threat of them was wonderful.

Karen sat up and stretched. It wasn't quite dawn, but Angus' booming baritone voice would have awakened anything within a hundred yards of the cottage. The song he sang was about the Highlands and was probably as old as he. She grinned as she grabbed up her bathrobe and quickly slipped into it. The previous night, she'd taken advantage of the small, clean bathroom to use as a changing facility. Her pink bathrobe covered the cotton nightshirt admirably, but it would somehow be humiliating for Angus to appear and catch her wearing a shirt with glow-in-the-dark fireflies on the front. It seemed a silly thing for her to have chosen to wear, sillier still for her to worry over it. But that was the way she felt. Last night, she'd purposely removed her robe beneath the covers so the iron-on designs wouldn't glow in the dark. Karen looked down at herself and suddenly wished for a killer body and a sexy blue negligee. Something like models wore on the covers of catalogs. Then she grinned and shook her head. Right! Like I'd know what to do with either the body or the gown. She listened to a few more minutes of his singing before shouting a warning. "Hey, don't use all the hot water."

"I will be but a moment longer," he loudly returned, "This shower is a marvel."

"But not your singing, you oversized waste of space! Hurry up and get a move on. The others will be gathering in the great clearing soon," a familiar voice shouted from outside the cottage wall.

In a few moments, the bathroom door crashed open and Angus bellowed out the

little man's name. "Pluck! We will be ready when Karen has broken fast and no' before. Insolent little lizard-faced . . ."

Karen tried not to laugh as she moved past the large, towel-clad man who was currently blocking the bathroom door. "He's goading you, Angus, and you're helping him."

"Take your time, Karen," Angus raised his voice so the Elf could hear every syllable, "I will dress and make tea."

A half hour later, Angus watched Karen emerge from the bathroom in her Druid robe, towel-drying her honey-colored hair. "You remind me of a lily with dew upon its petals," he blurted without thinking. Then he congratulated himself on saying something kind and worthy instead of what he might once have done in the same situation. He watched an attractive blush blossom over her face.

"Thank you, Angus. What a sweet thing to say." She watched him lower his eyes and turn to fill a mug with freshly brewed tea. Karen spied warm scones in a basket on the center of the table. After placing the towel upon a bathroom rack to dry, she joined him.

As they sat together and exchanged a warm smile before sharing their food, Angus felt the air in the tiny room was suddenly too warm. The thought came, unbidden, that it would be grand to wake each morning with someone across the table.

Someone sweet, generous and courageous enough for them both. Such was not his lot. Things of that nature came only to those who were deserving. Not to someone with his history.

"Don't suppose those are blueberry scones?" a voice squeaked from outside the cottage door.

Angus stared at Karen when she softly laughed and then looked at him with the most adorable expression. Her blue eyes pleaded with him to let the Elf inside.

"Karen," he warned, "Elves are like cats. If you feed them they will never go away. Especially the Irish variety."

"Please?" she softly pleaded and smiled her brightest smile.

How could he refuse her anything? She was so sweet and winsome. He reluctantly sighed, got up and opened the door. Pluck bounced in and took his chair. He would have grabbed the little jackanapes right there and thrown him out like so much wash water, but for Karen's presence and the winning smile she bestowed upon him. "I'll get another chair and mug," he grouched.

Breakfast proceeded without further incident. It alarmed Angus to see how very little Karen ate. Even the gregarious Elf noticed and glanced at him, his expression relaying the same sentiments. Neither of them said anything. The pale woman seemed unable to eat a healthy portion and harping on the matter would neither change it nor endear them to her.

"Everyone should be in the clearing by now. Are you ready?" Pluck asked as he glanced at the large Druid.

Angus nodded and Karen got up to place her plate in the kitchen sink. They all walked out into the sunshine together. For the first time, Angus was glad of the other man's presence. Pluck chattered and constantly insulted him as they walked

through the woods. While Karen kept her attention on the little man, Angus was able to watch her and attempt to gauge how she felt – physically and emotionally. It was almost as if Pluck planned the situation to give him the opportunity to do so. His suspicions, where the Elf's actions were concerned, were justified when the man turned to him and sent an unmistakable message of concern with his expression.

"We should rest here, Karen. The overstuffed oaf is having a hard time keeping up," Pluck said.

Karen laughed and sat upon a nearby log. Forever after that, Angus would never question Pluck's actions nor be angered by his impotent insults. Angus had been walking behind them both, and Pluck was using Angus' lagging as an excuse to give Karen a chance to rest. Angus suspected the ruse only worked because Karen believed Pluck was just taking another opportunity to insult Angus.

In that moment, the Druid and Elf shared a meaningful, short gaze which cemented them as friends. And Angus suddenly realized that from the start the smaller man had only been goading him to make Karen smile. Such was the nature of most of the Order's inhabitants. Their ability to sense another being's pain or fear was uncanny. It shamed Angus to realize he was unable, or had been unwilling, to perceive what Pluck had been doing. Again, he resolved to change and be the man worthy of little Elspeth's devotion. And of Karen and her kinsmen and their dedication to a promise.

Angus caught Pluck staring at him intently. It was as though the Elf was waiting for some sign that Angus understood there were no hard feelings as far as Pluck was concerned. "Stone is hard and unmovable, my small friend. But given time, the smallest brook will wear even the largest mountain away."

Pluck grinned and nodded. The message was understood. Angus wouldn't fight with him anymore. The large Druid finally understood his goading.

Karen glanced at Angus and Pluck. What was that all about? She had the feeling something monumental had just passed between the two men. During the rest of the walk, no more arguments or insults pierced the morning air. Angus and Pluck joked with each other as though they'd been friends forever. She not only noticed, but silently questioned, the sudden camaraderie.

Their journey continued for almost another hour. Karen was thankful when they rested quite often, and Pluck took the time to point out landmarks she would have missed. Along the route, there were large stones scattered about the forest floor. These were covered with moss or ivy. Angus pushed some of the growth away to show her the marks of Celtic presence which were centuries old. Elaborate circles and knots had been carved into the stones, each with a precise meaning. They reminded her of the crop circles, and she wondered how many other historical markings could be attributed to these people – markings and drawings which the world thought of as inexplicable. And she was surprised by the sheer size of the forest itself. Breathtaking oak trees, which were hundreds of years old, canopied most of the paths. All the while, she had a sensation of being watched. The fauna was thick enough to hide almost anything. Perhaps even an army of magical

creatures. Altogether, it was the exact kind of place where myths were born. A place she was fortunate to see. Karen understood the gift that was being bestowed upon her and respected it. She prayed the memories of this ancient woods and its inhabitants would follow her into the next life. Finally, Pluck held up his hand, and she knew they stopped for the last time.

"Wait here, Karen," Pluck directed her to a stone where she might sit in the warm sun. "I'll go forward and announce us. It's just a formality."

Angus came to her, knelt by her side and took her small hands in his.

"Frightened?"

"No. Well, maybe just a little," she conceded.

"That's a brave lass," he crooned. "In my time, outsiders believed these woods were enchanted, though those outsiders who lived near dinna' know what existed within. None would enter."

"How do you remember so much?" she asked as she squeezed his hand.

"I can recall a great many of the things my parents taught me, though I have forgotten so much more. It seems that being here has awakened memories."

It was the first time he'd spoken of his family and she wanted to learn more. Then she thought of Aggie and wished with all her heart that the woman who'd raised her could be here to see what she would. But that was all right. Her beliefs let her gain comfort in the thought she'd soon be able to see her aunt and tell her about every magical creature that existed in this place.

Angus suddenly stood and looked down the path. "It's time, lass. We are bidden." She glanced in the direction he stared, then back at him. The emotion on his face was a peculiar mixture of apprehension and stoic acceptance. A bit like a condemned man going to the gallows. She couldn't understand why he'd have such feelings of trepidation. He should feel happiness at being back with his own kind. Unless, because of voicing her false concerns the night before, he was worried for her sake. That she wouldn't have. She wanted Angus to be happy. She'd brought him back to this world, and it was so very important that he find his place. She stood up and firmly took both his hands. He also stood and jerked his head in her direction, as if he'd lost connection with her presence for a moment. She smiled up at him. "You've seen a little of my world. Now let's see some of yours."

He took a very deep breath and exhaled slowly. "Aye."

Karen was glad when he looped her arm through his and slowly walked forward. The path stretched out a hundred more yards, then opened into an enormous clearing. This was flanked by trees even more massive in size than those she'd seen before. Hundreds of people stood within the clearing and all were facing them. Shayla, Hugh and three of the biggest men she'd ever seen stood in front of the rest.

"The men you see are faction or clan leaders, though I am unsure who they represent," Angus murmured. "I believe it is their intention to make sure I mean no harm."

"Of course you don't," she responded. "Why would they think that?"

He shrugged. "My reputation precedes me, and my size makes me a threat. If the situation was reversed, I would feel the same."

She noted the men's expressions. They were concerned. They spoke to one another and critically eyed Angus as though he were being sized up. One of them, a tall man with long, blond hair, rested his hand upon a wicked knife sheathed at his side. He and the two megaliths beside him were dressed in the same medieval garb as Angus. Many of the people there were similarly attired. Had she not known better, Karen would have believed she'd stumbled into a troop of Renaissance actors.

They walked about halfway across the clearing and stopped. Angus knew that if the lions of the Order were going to pounce, this was where it would occur. The Sorceress could only guarantee their safety if the others feared or revered her enough to do her bidding. And while his safety was of no concern, no one would hurt Karen. He had power of his own and would use it. It might be that the three men before him sensed this. From the stances they took, they mistakenly perceived his protection of Karen as a direct threat to them and the rest of the Order. The numbers of their kind had increased since he was last among them, though he saw only what they chose to present in human form. That fact came as no surprise since Karen was an outsider.

"Do you come among us in peace?" Shayla asked as she stepped in front of the men. Her powers over air and wind magnified her voice so that all could hear.

"Aye," Angus replied, using those same powers in response. He felt Karen flinch and tightened his hold on her arm. He knew she stared up at him and was only just remembering he had powers, too.

"You have once spoken fealty. I will ask you again in the presence of this company." Shayla paused. "By your blood, do you swear allegiance to me and to the Order?"

"I so swear."

"So be it. Blessed Be." Shayla raised her hands, the wind rose and blew through the trees around them then slowly died.

The Sorceress turned to the three men behind her and Hugh stepped forward. "Do the honors and present our leaders, Hugh."

Hugh nodded, then motioned the blond man forward.

Karen could see he was about Angus' age. His bare arms were muscular and his gymnast-like build indicated a man of immense strength and agility.

"This is Lore. He is head of the Fairy Clan. You will see him in his true form tonight, Karen."

Lore held out his hand and smiled the sweetest smile she'd ever seen. "Shayla has told us about you. You've shown courage coming here. And courage is greatly admired among our kind."

"You're a Fairy?" she gasped and gawked at his wall-like frame. When the others laughed, she bit her lip in consternation. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to sound so incredibly ignorant. It's just that I thought Fairies would be . . . well . . ."

"Small?" The second of the three men finished for her and stepped forward.

"This is Gryphon O'Connor, leader of the Druid Clan." Hugh waved his hand toward the new man.

Gryphon took Karen's hand and grinned. "You'll meet my handfasted mate later. She'll be helping you with our computer files."

Karen liked this new man immediately. Where Lore's coloring reminded her of shining sun, this man's darkness personified midnight itself. "Handfasted?" she asked in bewilderment.

"My wife," Gryphon supplied. "That's how we refer to our life mates here."

Gryphon turned to the third man and paused for a moment. "This is Tearach."

Karen didn't miss the hesitation in the large Druid's introduction. She turned toward the last of the giant men before her. Where the others had been more than friendly, pure hatred emanated from this man. Black straight hair fell in ebony thickness from a center part and long bangs all but covered his midnight eyes. His jaw was square and his face indicated that it might have been a very long time since he'd ever smiled. But for his dour expression, he'd have been as breathtakingly handsome as the others. But there was a brooding, haunted quality about him which darkened the lighter mood of those who stood nearby. Tearach stepped forward, but didn't hold out his hand as the others had.

"I'm Tearach Bruce, leader of the Goblin Clan." He looked at Shayla before continuing. "I'm here at the Sorceress' request."

Obviously, the last part of his statement was emphasized to let everyone present know he wasn't there of his own free will. Karen wondered why he'd bothered coming at all if her presence or Angus' was so offensive to him.

Angus sensed the man's animosity and immediately stepped in front of Karen.

"We have the Sorceress' promise of protection."

"Yes, they do," Shayla pronounced in a clear voice.

"I'll abide by her wishes. But the southernmost part of the forest is allocated for Goblin use only. Our sacred ponds are off limits to . . . outsiders," Tearach said as he looked Angus up and down then barely glanced at Karen. He rudely turned his back on them. "I have pressing business which needs my attention, Sorceress. With your permission?"

Shayla nodded. Tearach and several other men and women strode swiftly away from the big clearing. They walked into the woods without a backward glance. Shayla sighed in resignation before speaking. "Forgive his rudeness. I counseled him about his behavior, but as far as greeting people properly is concerned, I'm afraid what you've been subjected to is the best he can do. You need not fear him. If that man says he will abide by my wishes, then he will. He's one of my most trusted guardians."

Karen was overwhelmed when the rest of the forest denizens circled around them and offered hearty greetings. The dark moment surrounding the Goblin's dour presence might never have occurred.

Angus wondered what the members of the Order knew about him, if the Sorceress had enlightened them as to all the reasons why he had been turned to stone. But there was plenty of time to forge his own future. For now, Karen's plight was what

concerned him most.

Shayla, Hugh and the others led them to wooden tables which had been set under the shade of oak and rowan trees. Food had been set out in a traditional banquet of welcome. Angus remembered the custom had been honored in his own time, and he fought back thoughts of how there must have been an abundant supply of provisions here while his own parents suffered. He shook his head, trying to drive away memories of things best left dead. As though she sensed some of his feelings, Shayla came to him and placed a gentle hand upon his right arm.

"Merry come," she greeted him in the ancient way. "Bitter thoughts produce a bitter harvest. This is your home now, Angus. These are your people. We'll help you relearn our ways and take your place among us. Stay close to Karen. She won't understand much of what she'll see. And, when she's well rested, I'll take you both to the estate house and she can begin her computer work there."

"The old place still stands?" he asked in wonder.

"With a few improvements, yes. Druid ancestors handed the building down from one generation to the next. It's currently owned by the fifty-first Earl of Glen Rowan. Of course, no one knows he's a Druid or that he comes from a long line of them."

"No' even the King, himself?"

"Not even the Queen," she corrected. "To outsiders, the Earl is simply a titled subject of her majesty, enjoying his lands and holdings. And sharing them with reclusive friends."

"You must be powerful indeed to have kept the secret of the Order for all this time. Especially when so many new machines exist in the world." He paused before continuing. "I have but recently become familiar with indoor plumbing." Shayla laughed and patted his arm. "Eat hearty, Angus. And try to get Karen to do the same. The woman is far too thin."

"Aye," he nodded in agreement as the Sorceress walked away. Then he looked toward Karen. She was sitting by Pluck with her head tilted toward the little man, intrigued by some story Pluck told her. She placed her elbows on the table, cupped her small face in her hands and nodded at something he said. Her eyes danced with happiness. Her waiflike appearance made him want to protect her all the more. A young Fairy sat down near her. The blond man was about Karen's own age, and he offered her a goblet of wine.

"No!" Angus shouted before he could think. "You must no' drink Fairy Wine, Karen. No' ever. It does strange things to those bereft of magic. Even Druids find drinking it unwise." He quickly walked toward her and took the wine away.

"It wasn't Fairy Wine, MacGregor," the younger man quietly replied. "It's a measure of heather ale and was brought specifically for Karen." The Fairy looked at Angus meaningfully.

Angus realized the drink had been meant to help Karen's heart problem. Shayla had probably ordered it. Glancing around, he could see everyone staring at him. Some bore expressions of annoyance. Probably because he would think a Fairy would give the girl something so potent. Others shook their heads and looked as if

he had just broken some sacred rite of hospitality by shouting so.

"I am sorry, friend. My mouth sometimes governs my thoughts," he apologized and handed the goblet back to Karen.

"No worries." The Fairy nodded in acceptance of the apology. "I'm Wade. I belong to the tribe of Cairn Fairies."

Angus shook the man's hand. Everyone appeared to go back to their eating, drinking and merrymaking. Angus sat across the table from Karen and passed her and the younger man a plate of fruit and cheese.

"What's Fairy Wine?" Karen glanced between the two men.

"It's magical and only drunk by our kind," Wade explained. "Depending upon the season, all kinds of herbs, fruit and spices are fermented to make it. And Angus is right. You should never drink any. But heather ale won't hurt you at all. In fact, you might find it relaxes you a bit."

Karen glanced at the goblet she now held. What the hell. It wasn't as if it would cause her heart problems. She grasped the pewter goblet and sipped. "This is wonderful. Where does the heather come from?"

"The Highlands, of course. There's no better plant for the fermentation of this particular drink," Wade smiled and cut a large portion of bread for her.

"How is it that each of you knows what the other is?" Karen asked. "I mean, everyone looks just like anyone else in the world. Yet you seem to know who's Fairy or Druid."

Wade shrugged. "We can sense each other's emanations. To you, I guess it would be like feeling certain vibes. You just sort of . . . know." He laughed at her look of confusion. "Sorry, I don't know how to explain it any better than that."

Angus tried to compare the matter to something he knew of the outside world. Something Karen might more readily understand, even if she had never had the experience herself. "'Tis like when you canna' trust someone, lass. It is instinct."

Karen nodded. There were people she'd met, like Tearach Bruce, who just didn't give her the warm fuzzies. That was the kind of instinct they were probably speaking of. Except, of course, their elemental feelings had been augmented to recognize magical attributes.

Angus watched the people milling around him and filled a large mug with stout. He felt the coolness of the pottery as it rested against his palm. Then he paused to get a smell of it before drinking the whole thing down. "'Tis a verra' long time since last I had a good brew."

"Do you like it?" Wade asked.

"'Tis a fine drink," Angus grinned and refilled the mug.

For a time, they ate in companionable silence. Pluck occasionally walked by and refilled Karen's mug. The Fairy was right about the heather ale. Karen felt more relaxed than she had in a very long time. Eating even seemed more enjoyable. She ate more than she had in weeks. When the plates were taken away and mugs were refilled, Karen decided to go ahead and ask more questions. Her lightheadedness might be attributed to the drink, but she just didn't care. She felt damn good.

"I hope I'm not being rude, but I wanted to know something," she directed her

query to Wade. "I always thought Fairies were little tiny creatures who had wings. Why do you look like normal people?"

Wade grinned. "We're not and we do."

"Pardon?" she asked, glancing at Angus for support.

Angus attempted to explain. "Fairies have the ability to change their appearance, though they're always as large as humans. 'Tis a myth that they are all verra' small. Only some factions are wee folk. Like the Pixies. You don't see his wings because he is in human form right now. As I remember, they sometimes dislike showing their true form during daylight. Tisna' safe for them."

Wade nodded. "Exactly. You'll see us as we really are when the evening fires are lit by the Druids," Wade told her.

"You really have wings and can fly?" Karen gasped.

Wade took her hand in his. "Yes to both questions. Although we can only fly for very short distances and it's really more like gliding."

Something in the way the Fairy took her hand bothered Angus. The man was taking liberties with a woman he barely knew. And Wade was looking at her as though she were an offering of succulent sweets. "If you want to witness the fire-lighting, Karen, you should get some rest." Angus stood up and walked around the table to where she sat, determined to remove her from the current company.

"All right. I don't want to miss anything," she agreed and stood up to stand by Angus.

"I'll see you tonight then." Wade smiled at her. "I'll give you a close up look at my wings, and even show you some Fairy dust if you like."

"Oh, yes. Please!" She smiled at him.

"Come, Karen," Angus insisted, and took her by the elbow as she nodded good-bye to Wade. He walked to a nearby stand of rowan trees, and gently helped her sit among some soft young ferns.

"Angus, this is all so amazing. I can't wait to see everything. And Wade is so friendly. Just like Pluck. I hope I can meet so many more of your people. I wish my Aunt could see this." She realized she was babbling a bit, but everything was so phenomenal. She couldn't get enough.

Angus' disturbance over Karen's camaraderie with Wade was quickly forgotten. Her excitement added to his own. It had been so long since he had seen these things himself. "Aye, little one. You'll see everything you wish to. Just rest now. You'll need your strength for tonight."

He leaned back against a tree and pulled Karen into his embrace. She turned to him, and it felt quite natural to him that she did so. Then she snuggled against his chest. Her head rested over his heart, and Angus wanted to hold her there forever. Her life was worth so much more than his own. He protectively tightened his arms around her.

Karen noticed others were lying nearby. It was kind of like having a nap after a picnic and the fireworks would come later. Everyone was storing up energy for the night. "Angus?" she murmured as fatigue and heather ale caught up with her.

"Hush, you. Sleep." He stroked her hair.

"Why do they light fires in the woods? Don't people in nearby towns see the flames?"

"'Tis a type of magic, lass. The firelight can only be seen by those in The Shire. Rest now." She sighed and he cocooned her within the safety of his arms. He could never remember holding something so delicate and, as he was beginning to understand, so very precious to him. He tried to clear all thoughts of the future from his mind. Karen and he still had time together. But was she becoming more than a friend? Before long, he could not help drifting into a relaxed state of slumber himself. Her warmth was like a spiritual blanket to a man so long without contact of any kind.

Eight

Angus woke with the sunset. Birds had ceased their calling to one another in lieu of nocturnal creatures which would take their place. Already, he sensed the Pixies, Nymphs, Gnomes and Trolls nearing the clearing. Even when he was a boy, he was taught the clearing had been a gathering place for centuries. Karen rested gently against his chest. He was loathe to wake her, but she would see the wonders he had promised only by night. Distant lights of varying colors heralded a Rade or a procession of wee folk. Such processions were held for any number of reasons. Any excuse was usually appropriate, for the smallest of all the Fairy Clan loved their Rades. He did not want Karen to miss such an event. Indeed, he felt his own expectations arise. It would be the first Rade he had witnessed since leaving the Order. "Karen, awaken," he said as he gently stroked her cheek with one finger. She sighed and turned into his chest, burying her face against him. "Hmmm?" "The Pixies are on a Rade. You dunna' want to miss this." She sat up, pushed her hair back and smiled up at him. Angus' heart melted. She was so very sweet and frail. He helped her into a sitting position, then pulled her against him. Her back was against his chest, her legs rested between his. His whole body felt good just having her so near.

"Watch." He pointed toward the approaching lights and was awarded with a gasp of surprise and pleasure from her.

"Ohhh, Angus. What are they doing? It's so wonderful!"

"'Tis called a Rade. The smallest of the Fairy world gather themselves together and go a-trooping in their finest garments. In this way do they celebrate some special event."

"What event?" Karen asked as she kept her gaze glued to the little band of Pixies flying, walking, leaping and running by them in a frenzy of merriment.

"They need little if any excuse. Sometimes it is the bronzing of the leaves. Other times they express joy at the making of a new wine or someone has given birth to a healthy child."

"What do you suppose they celebrate tonight?"

Angus turned his head so he could see her expression. Her eyes were like starlight in the passing lanterns of the Fairy procession. "Let us ask."

"Can we do that?" she whispered.

He grinned. "We can do anything we please, lass. You are with me."

"Ho, People of Peace. Where go you this fine night in such splendor?" Angus addressed them.

To Karen's surprise, several of the little people stopped, looked up and grinned. One of them, a little man in a brown jerkin with a pointed hat, held up a mug no larger than a thimble. Judging by the foam on top, it appeared to have some sort of ale in it.

"We go to a nearby burgh to sign a pact made between us and the large Fairies. They will allow us to dwell within and under their cottages this winter, and we will keep the vermin away for them. It seems a small thing, but we are safer nowadays living nearer larger protectors of the Order."

"Your safety has been threatened?" Angus asked in alarm.

"All of the Order is at risk. Outsiders close in on us more each day. No offense meant to your lady," the little man doffed his cap to her.

"No offense taken," Karen replied. "I hope you don't find offense with my being here."

"Shayla is wise beyond measure. If she says you are welcome. Then you are. We will see you at the clearing later tonight." The little man turned to go, snapped his fingers, then turned quickly back. "I beg your pardon, MacGregor. I know who you are, and it was rude of me not to offer a welcome at once. I'll make amends if you'll allow it."

"I thank you for the welcome, sir." Angus' heart felt like it was doubling in size. So many had been kind. Apparently, they only knew of him what Shayla had chosen them to know. Maybe he still had a chance to fit in.

"Here is your official welcome back to the Order and a special gift for your lady," the Pixie said as he jumped high in the air.

Karen saw a momentary flash of light, then glittering dust fell over both her and Angus. It had the consistency of fine powder and an opalescent glow.

"Merry Meet!" the Pixie cried as he landed back on the ground and ran to catch up with his friends.

"Merry Part!" Angus called after him and laughed.

"Ohhhhh, this is beautiful!" she exclaimed, holding up her glistening hands and arms. "What is it?"

"Consider yourself Pixie dusted, lass. It will last the whole of this night and only disappear with the new day's light. Do you like it?"

Karen felt as if she'd never stop smiling. "Like it?" She ran her hand down the white robe she wore and watched the dust sparkle. "I love it. No one has ever given me anything so special. It's like wearing a million gems."

Angus felt like singing, so light was his mood. "Come, little one. We will see more if you wish."

"Just try and stop me." She stood up and held out her hand to help him. The gesture was a small one. But the thought of such a small woman helping someone of his brutish size was laughable. So he grinned like an idiot and allowed her to take his hand. But he rose using his own strength.

"What did the Pixie mean by 'your lady'? Is that how I'm considered?"

"'Twas a way of identifying you. Men who walk through these woods with a woman oftentimes . . . Well, they have carnal knowledge of one another. They will seek some quiet glade or pond and . . ." He let that particular subject drop.

"Tradition dictates the man is usually the protector and needs to be acknowledged by name. The woman is referred to, by strangers, as his lady. Unless, of course, she has given permission to have her given name spoken aloud. 'Tis a custom I remember from my childhood, though I was no' aware it was still upheld."

Karen's eyes widened in surprise. "You mean, there are men and women out here having sex in the woods?" She ignored the customary greeting Angus explained in lieu of the juicier tidbit about sex.

He grinned and could easily see her asking about that for the rest of the night.

"Aye. At least, that is the way I remember."

"Did you ever . . ." She stopped in mid-sentence. "I'm sorry, that's none of my business."

He wanted to be honest with her. For some reason it was important that she have the answer to her half-phrased question. "I have never known a woman in these woods, Karen. I was but a child of five years when I was last here."

"I don't understand. You're a Druid, aren't you?"

"Aye. But I left this place with my parents."

"Where did you go? I thought the Sorceress at that time imprisoned you. That's the legend and what you've told me."

"So, you dunna' know what happened before I reached my present age? The reason why I became such a rogue?" he asked.

She shook her head, then wished she hadn't probed. The moment of happiness seemed to have passed.

Angus turned away from her before he spoke. His shoulders slumped and he hung his head. "My parents wanted to make contact with the outsiders, tell them who and what we are. But that is and always has been forbidden. The Sorceress in those days had the right to have them put to death." When he heard Karen's gasp, he quickly added, "Keeping this place and those within it a secret is necessary. Even the Pixie who we did see moments ago remarked upon how the outside world threatens. The magic of the Order could be used unwisely by outsiders were it not protected."

Karen placed a hand on his arm. "What happened, Angus?"

"The Sorceress dinna' want to kill my parents. I believe 'twas her intent to make of them an example. So she allowed them to live, but they were forever cast out of the Order and forbidden to use magic or speak of it to anyone. They were also ordered to leave me behind. Of course, they could do no such thing. The Sorceress sent her guards to retrieve me, but my parents kept them away. That same year the winter

was bitter. In a plague which ravaged the countryside, my mother and father fell ill and died within hours of one another. I survived, but I dinna' let the Sorceress or her minions find me for a long time."

"But they eventually did?"

"Aye. They tried to take me back to the Order as I grew older, but I fought them and ran. I blamed them for sending my parents away without proper nourishment or coin for warm lodging. I became as hateful to them as I did the nearby villagers, none of whom would help as my parents lay dying. Then I began to use my powers over the elements to destroy the lives of all I would call enemy."

"But you were just a little boy. How did you survive all of this?"

The tone in her voice was tender. He wished he had heard it those many years ago.

"I have always been a bully. My size guarantees I win most battles and that I could take what I want. As a child, I took from other children. As a man, I took from anyone who crossed me and many who dinna'."

"So the Sorceress . . ."

"Bespelled me as punishment," he finished. He did not want to turn around and see Karen's expression. The sun would be down in a few moments. Only then would he face her. Such deliberate evasion was the act of a coward, but that was what he had really been. A brute committing cowardly acts.

Karen stepped in front of him. "Angus, all of this happened a long time ago. You had to spend lifetimes entombed. You've paid for your crimes. Besides, I said it before and I'll say it again, any man who would help a little girl the way you did can't be that bad. You just can't be."

But she did not know all of it. Judging by the reaction of the rest of the Order, they did not either. He could not hope they would be that forgiving. But the last thing in the world he wanted was to lie to the one person closest to him.

"Karen, there is more . . ."

She stood on her toes, reached very high and placed her fingers against his lips to silence him. "I know enough. I know you're kind, gentle, considerate and have a wonderful sense of humor. There are worse people in the world, Angus MacGregor. And you're damned well not one of them!"

When he wouldn't speak, she took his hands in hers and pulled him down to her level. Placing her palms against both of his cheeks, she bestowed a light kiss upon his full lips then smiled. "Are you saying that little girl you helped was wrong?" Dumbfounded by her actions, Angus could barely speak. "No . . . She . . . No."

"Then take me to see the rest of your world. And, if anyone asks if I'm your lady, I'll say yes, whether you like it or not."

Her smile was so sweet. His heart would break into thousands of pieces the day she left the world. Perhaps that was what he had always been guarding against, why he had been so angry when his parents died. Was anger a way to avoid the pain of losing those he loved? But anger had not kept the pain at bay. Not when his family was gone, not when years of Karen's ancestors had kept him company and died. And it would not help him when she left this life. Nothing would.

He gripped her shoulders and pulled her into a tight embrace. "You are my lady."

For we walk together this night and for as many nights as you please.”

Karen heard the barely concealed break in his voice and hugged him back. For the first time in her life, she began to pity herself for the illness that plagued her. There was so much she wanted and would never have. Someone else would lie in the woods and make love to Angus, for her heart was too weak to allow that. Someone else would give him children, and in time, she’d be a memory. Just someone he knew and would miss. She was someone he felt gratitude toward. For her, there was so very much more.

They silently broke the embrace and walked toward the clearing. From a distance they began to hear music. Pipes, drums, recorders and bagpipes all joined together in a harmony Karen recognized as Celtic. There was no other music like it on Earth. It was meant to touch the heart, stir the soul and inspire dreams. At this particular moment, it conjured visions of rowdy dancing and merrymaking. Before they entered the circle of firelight and could see whose voices were raised in song and cheerful banter, Angus turned to Karen and stood before her. “You must close your eyes.”

“Why? Is it some kind of tradition or something to do with magic?” she murmured.

Her eyes widened in expectation and Angus smiled. He knew he was behaving like a small child, but he could not help the innocence she gifted to his heart. “No, I just want you to close your eyes.”

“All right.” Karen grinned and did as he asked. The man exhibited a playful nature at times. One more sign he wasn’t the horrible person he thought himself to be. She felt him take her left hand as he carefully led her forward. The voices and music became louder with each step. She wondered if everyone in the whole countryside could hear.

“You may open your eyes now and see wonders to dream of,” Angus said, then stepped out of her vision.

“Oh, Lord!” she gasped, and swallowed hard. Before her, scattered about the clearing by the hundreds, stood every conceivable creature she could imagine. It looked as if someone had opened a child’s book and let the fairy tale contents spill everywhere. Great bonfires illuminated their bodies and made them all seem more magical. There were great hulking creatures of gray which looked like living rocks. They lumbered from one table to the next and conversed with tall winged men and women of such beauty that it shook her senses to the core. There were people like Pluck who darted from place to place, and still smaller beings who flew, danced or hopped their way around in an effort to find choice bits of food or greet someone in particular. Everyone was dressed in medieval garb. Given the population of this mixed-up world, it seemed the only appropriate clothing. She would definitely have stood out in her jeans and hiking boots.

All the men seemed to sport hair that was much longer than usual, and those with wings wore no shirts or jerkins. The women bearing similar appendages wore diaphanous gowns too revealing to be considered decent. Their clothing was styled in halter fashion so their backs were bare and their glistening, Fairy-dusted

skin glowed. Some of their wings were opaque, some clear as glass. None were the same, as individual as the creatures themselves. Karen saw skin colors in every conceivable hue. Black, white, blue, green and every shade in between. Her heart couldn't stand the excitement, though she had tried to remain calm.

Her hand went to her chest and she dropped to her knees.

"Karen!" Angus dropped to his knees along with her.

She groped for the pocket deep within her Druid robe and found the small bottle of medicine. Years of practice made it easy for her to pop the lid, and swallow one of the tablets without ever taking her gaze from the assembly before her.

"I'll be okay in just a minute," she gasped. "Just w-wasn't ready for this."

"Will she be all right?" a soft, feminine voice asked from behind them.

"Yes," Karen replied as she turned her head. "Just give me a few seconds."

The most lovely woman Karen had ever seen stepped toward her and knelt down. She was a Fairy with flame colored hair. Every part of her sparkled with a glittery substance and, in the light of the campfires, Karen could see almond shaped blue-green eyes and skin as clear and fine as bisque. Her gown was forest green and shimmered. Her wings were the same color and shaped like those of a dragonfly.

"I'm Amber. I saw her collapse. Can I help?" she asked.

"Please," Angus nodded.

"Pluck," Amber called, "bring some heather ale."

In a moment, the small Elf appeared with a pottery mug. "I saw what happened. Are you going to be well enough for the festivities, Karen?" Pluck asked.

Karen noted the concern in all their voices, and she was determined not to let her illness stop her from seeing everything. The medication began to take effect and she straightened her body from its slouched position and carefully stood up.

"I'm sorry. Please, don't fuss over me. The pain is gone."

"Maybe you'd like to find a table where you can sit and watch more comfortably?" Amber suggested.

"Yes, that would be fine, thank you." Karen turned toward the Fairy woman and got the first real impact of her statuesque appearance. "You're breathtaking," she gasped.

Amber smiled warmly. "And Shayla was right. You're very intelligent for an outsider. I like you already."

The two women smiled at each other and Angus knew Karen had made yet another friend. It seemed so easy for her. But he could not deny the truth of her words. As wondrous as most Fairies were, Amber was striking.

"Come with me. You can sit at my table." Amber took Karen's arm, nodded toward Angus and led them to an oak-hewn table a short distance away.

"I'll set extra places and bring food," Pluck said as he sprinted away.

"You've made quite an impression upon that Elf, Karen." Amber nodded toward Pluck's retreating figure. "He's been speaking of you all day long. You too, Angus."

"I can only imagine," Angus half-grinned. "'Tis obvious the Sorceress has told

everyone we would be here tonight.”

“Yes. She has also said that you’re to begin training tomorrow and has assembled some men and women for the task. Karen is to go to the estate home and look into our computer glitches.”

To Karen, it seemed incongruous to speak of such modern things as computers in the midst of such magical happenings. But that was why she’d been allowed to come here. She didn’t, however, understand the reference to Angus. “What training?” she asked.

“Angus needs to be reintroduced to our ways, find something he’s good at and given a job so that he can contribute to the Order. Each of us has something we do in that respect,” Amber said as she motioned them to sit and help themselves to food and drink. “I help dye wool which is loomed into fine fabric and sold in London. Of course, outsiders think our textiles come from the Highlands or Irish weavers. But our fabrics are the best in the world. We have an intricate network of salespeople who carefully filter our goods into the marketplace. Trolls make heavy pottery, Irish Fairies hook intricate lace, and herbs are gathered by some of our Druids, as well as crystals from underground caves. Some Goblins turn the crystals into jewelry and make fine musical instruments and knives. Everyone has something they do which contributes to keeping our way of life secret and functioning. We even have Druids and Fairies who attend universities and become physicians, chemists, historians and all kinds of professional people.

Karen felt her eyes widen. “This is all so amazing. Tell me more. Tell me what some of these creatures are and why all the Fairies look so different? Why aren’t they tiny like Pixies? How did all this start? Will Shayla and Hugh be joining us?” Amber laughed at Karen’s enthusiasm. “One question at a time. Why don’t you tell her what you remember, Angus. It’ll give me a chance to evaluate your knowledge so I can pass it along to those who will be training you.”

“I remember more than I believed possible,” he replied as he looked around the clearing. But then he’d had hundreds of years to stand and think.

“The large hulking creatures are Ogres. They dunna’, as I recall, have the power to change their appearance except to become as rock.”

“Change their appearance?” Karen choked out as she swallowed a large portion of homemade bread. Then she remembered Lore telling her he would appear in his true form and Angus speaking of shape shifters. Looking more closely, she began to recognize some of the Fairies as those people who had appeared human in the daylight.

“Aye. Fairies and Goblins are among those who can shape shift. Druids have no need of such powers. The Trolls are the small grayish or greenish folk with pointed ears and teeth, the Goblins are there.” Angus pointed to a gathering of men and women several tables away.

Karen’s breath almost left when several of the Goblins turned and walked slowly toward her. One was taller than the others, massively built and vaguely familiar. His black hair was long and straight. It drifted gracefully in the evening breeze. While his expression was solemn, the faces and body language of the others

appeared threatening. The men's hands clenched into fists, their strides quickened as though they were approaching the scene of a battle. Unlike their appearance in the daylight, they were all a shocking dark green. Their ears were pointed and their eyes were solid orbs of black. Some of them appeared to have incisors which reminded her of vampires. Amber and Angus immediately stood, and Karen could almost feel their concern.

"It appears Tearach and some of the other Goblins have a bone to pick," Pluck murmured as he returned with some more food. He positioned himself to Karen's right, stood on the bench beside her, and protectively placed his hand on her shoulder.

"That's Tearach Bruce? The man I met today?" Karen asked.

Pluck nodded. "It is."

Karen watched the tallest of the men. It was true. He was as dark green as the others. His eyes were slightly slanted and had no pupils or irises that the many fires in the clearing could illuminate. Those eyes reminded her of renderings she'd seen of aliens from other worlds. And when he spoke to one of his companions, his incisors appeared as long and sharp as any cat's. While the picture was frightening at first glance, something about him emanated power and pride. Perhaps it was his strong posture or almost lordly bearing. Though he was smaller than Angus, he was taller than Karen would consider normal. His body was muscular and athletic looking. Tearach might have been as handsome as any mythic god were it not for his expression of hatred. An expression directed toward her.

"Will you and your friends join us, Tearach?" Amber motioned toward an empty bench, trying to diffuse a threatening situation.

"We keep to our own, Fairy. You know that. Or are you already forgetting our ways in the company of an outsider?" one of the men said, pointing a bony finger toward Karen.

"Hold your tongue and be civil, Roland." Tearach held up his hand. "The woman is here with the Sorceress' permission."

"You said yourself that . . ."

"I know what I said, man. I'm the leader of our clan and I'll do the talking. Is that clear?"

Angus watched as the Goblin Leader turned and looked each of his clansmen in the eyes. He remembered Goblins as being formidable opponents. And while there was nothing they would not do to keep their own kind safe, they had always been fiercely loyal to the Order and their leader. As each of the men and women present looked their superior in the face, their heads fell in submission. A testament to Tearach's authority and absolute power.

As far as Angus knew, there was no one in the Order who wished to be on the wrong side of a Goblin. Especially not one of their leaders. In the past, they were known to have been cunning beyond belief and would fight to the death, if the occasion warranted such action. Clearly, there was resentment of Karen's presence within the Order and Tearach was siding with Shayla on the issue, though he probably resented doing so. The man's next words confirmed Angus' suspicions.

"I don't approve of having an outsider among us. Everyone knows this, and I make no apology for my beliefs. My people feel the same." He gestured toward the other Goblins. "But Shayla has given orders that the woman is to be left alone and so it shall be. But, as I said earlier today, there are parts of this forest that are sacred to us. Any who are members of the Order are welcome there. She isn't." He nodded toward Karen. "I've come to reiterate the point. Do whatever it is the Sorceress bids of you, MacGregor. But keep your outsider — friend — away from us. Is that clear?"

"Verra' clear, Goblin. And you hear this. Keep your minions away from Karen. Whatever quarrel you have with other outsiders has nothing to do with her."

Angus raised his voice so the rest of the Goblins could hear.

"Best to mind your tongue when speaking to our leader, MacGregor." The Goblin referred to as Roland glared at Angus.

"Enough!" Shayla's voice resounded as loud as thunder and shook trees around them. "I will have peace here."

The entire assemblage, every man and woman, stopped and turned toward the forest. Shayla stepped from the inky blackness into the light of the many fires. Karen saw a glow around her like something spectral, and everyone who was standing knelt. Hugh stood slightly behind her and glared at the Goblins. Shayla walked forward and spoke in a low voice so that only those near Amber's table could hear.

"Tearach, if you cannot control your people I will. Take them to your part of the forest and stay there. I will speak with you about this atrocious behavior later. Now go."

"I take responsibility for my clan, Shayla. I've promised none of us will bother the outsider and it's a pledge which will be kept. But her presence is an offense beyond belief. After what her kind has done to my people, don't ask us to be considerate."

The Goblin quickly turned and stormed off. The rest of his band followed, their hateful expressions revealing similar attitudes. While Shayla felt pity for their circumstances, the world and everyone in it wasn't responsible for those humans who had almost destroyed them. Certainly, Karen Matthews was no threat to them.

Shayla turned to Angus. "Tearach will abide by his word. The man is angry, but he isn't disloyal. He won't hurt Karen or allow anyone else to do so."

Karen was tired of being spoken about as if she weren't present. "Please, if my being here is this disruptive, then maybe I should go. You know I won't tell anyone about this place."

Shayla turned to look at her. "You made me a promise. The security of our computer files need to be tightened. Some of our people, who are outside, are depending upon you to keep their records and, therefore, their identities secret. You must do this for us, Karen. Or someone else could enter those records as you did."

"I can do that without offending anyone, Shayla. Just give me someplace to work and I'll keep my distance. It seems to me you have enough to worry about without

adding my presence to your list of problems.”

“You are no’ the problem, little one. The Goblins are.” Angus took her hand. Aware that the confrontation had forestalled the celebrations at hand, Shayla turned and raised her hands. “Blessed Be. Resume your merriment. There is always time for anger. Little enough for sharing happiness.”

Fairies, Druids and all the others present resumed their music playing and dancing as if the incident had never taken place. Shayla and Hugh sat beside Amber. Angus sat close to Pluck and Karen. He poured more heather ale for her.

“Drink and eat hearty, Karen. Ask what questions you will. What I dunna’ remember, Pluck or one of the others will,” Angus encouraged.

She did as everyone else was doing and tried to forget Tearach Bruce and his attitude. But she wanted to know why he hated outsiders so much. Clearly, there was a reason to fear the outside world. She couldn’t imagine what would happen if they knew about the Order and all their magic powers. But someone in it had specifically disrupted the Goblins’ lives so much that they couldn’t even endure being near a human. Maybe some of her answers would be found in their computer records.

She ate and drank more than usual because Angus urged her to do so. The effect the heather ale had on her was mellowing. Soon she was enjoying the merriment as if the incident had been a dream.

Angus was determined that Karen would enjoy herself. That anyone would confront her the way Tearach and his companions had was unconscionable. Karen was not responsible for their problems any more than the whole world had been responsible for his own parents’ deaths. But it had taken him lifetimes in confined agony to learn this. If the Goblin Leader wasn’t very careful, the man could find himself being cursed by Shayla. He sensed much greater power in her than in the woman who had held that position three centuries earlier. At any rate, no harm would come to Karen. None. If the Goblin Leader or his minions wanted a fight because of her, they would get one.

“Angus,” Karen leaned over and placed a hand on his arm, “is that who I think it is?”

His gaze followed hers and he smiled. “That depends upon who you think it is.”

A tall man approached the table. He was powerfully built, light green in color and had long silver-white hair. He stopped before Karen and grinned.

“I see you recognize me,” the man spoke.

“Lore?” Karen squeaked and turned red when everyone at the table laughed.

“You should see your expression. It’s priceless.” The Fairy laughed.

“Incredible. It’s just incredible,” Karen repeated. And for a few moments, she was able to closely examine Lore’s blue-green wings and was even allowed to touch them. As hateful as the Goblins had been, Lore was that much more patient and friendly. He answered questions willingly and let her ogle him like a specimen. Finally, Karen reigned in her curiosity. “I apologize for my touching you as if you were under a microscope, Lore. Please chalk up my behavior to being an ignorant outsider. I just wish the world could one day see you through my eyes and know

how beautiful you are."

Lore simply bowed his head, took her hand and kissed the back of it. "Thank you. Perhaps the world will see all of us one day. And before I forget, I have a message to pass on to you. A mutual friend, Wade, would have been here to show you his true form as well, but we have men and women who nightly serve as guards around the perimeter of the forest. Unfortunately, he drew that duty this very night and has asked me to send you his warmest regards and apologies for his absence."

Angus watched their exchange with another bout of jealousy where Karen was concerned. But Lore was behaving like a perfect gentleman. It would not go well with Karen if he could not behave at least as well. So, he sat and smiled as if the Fairy Leader's presence was as wondrous as Karen believed it. Their conversation went on and Angus began to envy Karen's ability to talk so easily with everyone. Finally, the Sorceress stood.

"I think we've had enough merriment for one night," Shayla nodded to Hugh. He promptly got up and held his hands over the nearest campfire until it died. All over the clearing, other Druid men and women came forward to extinguish the blazes, ending the night's revelry.

"It's time for us all to get some rest," Shayla said as she turned to Karen. "I want you to stay at the estate home from now on. It's closer to the clearing than your cottage and our computers are there. You can begin work tomorrow if you feel up to it."

Karen nodded in agreement. "Of course. The sooner I begin, the better."

"Hugh, will you show Angus and Karen the way? Angus may not remember it, and I have business to attend with the Goblins." She turned to Lore. "Will you accompany me?"

"Of course, Sorceress." Lore turned toward the woods and took Shayla's arm at the same time.

Angus watched Shayla and the tall Fairy disappear like wraiths. He nodded toward Amber when she excused herself. Pluck already lay asleep beneath an oak sapling, snoring like a small bear.

"I think he's drunk too much again," Hugh grinned. "It's a habit when there's a celebration. But Elves are as sober as judges the rest of the time."

Feeling tired herself, Karen took Angus' arm as they left the great clearing behind and followed Hugh along a moonlit path. Only a short time later, they walked out of the woods and toward an open area where Karen stood still and gawked. In front of her stood what appeared to be a restored castle. In the moonlight, it assumed a gargantuan shape and looked like it could house hundreds of people. Its gray, stone walls appeared sturdy enough to hold off any siege.

"'Tis no' as I remember it," Angus remarked. "The grounds are better kept and the towers have been rebuilt. I remember them crumbling and too dangerous to live within. It is far more grand."

"Thank you," Hugh replied. "We refer to this place as the estate house or just the estate. While the owners are away, as they currently are, I'm the caretaker. Over

the years, we've had the entire structure restored. In fact, I see to all the grounds and the forest itself. I buy land to add to the forest and keep all the accounts."

"You obviously take your duties very seriously. All of this is wonderful." Karen waved her hand in the direction of the structure. "I can't believe I'm going to spend my time in an actual castle, along with everything else I get to see and do. I'll never be sorry for coming here. Never."

"Nor shall I." Angus solemnly announced.

Karen turned to look at him and smiled.

"Come, let me show you your rooms," Hugh told them. "Tomorrow we can have a better look at our art collection and the rest of the home itself."

A short time later, Angus closed Karen's door behind him. He knew Karen had been much more tired than she would admit. The merriment of the evening was lost to him as he stood outside her door and rested his hand against the carved oak wood. He had never stayed in a place so fine as a castle, but she deserved to be here. Unused to being indoors, he walked until he found himself on the front lawn. His heart was in turmoil. Caring for someone so much and sharing wondrous events with her as she was dying was terrible. Seeing her fade more and more each day, watching her face become more pale and her eyes lose their shine, would be more horrible than his own curse. Her time was short, but he would have a lifetime to remember her.

For all he had done, for all he had lost and the crimes he had committed, there was no more fearsome curse than the one he was now living. Karen's sweetness would forever haunt him. And for this one instant in time, he wished he could be someone else. Or that he could know nothing and that his mind would be a blank space, void of memory. He even wished himself dead. But if he was suffering now, how much more suffering had he caused?

Angus cursed the fates that allowed a man like him to live while a good woman died. After Karen was gone, he could end his own life and stop the pain that would always be in his heart. But that would undo everything Karen had accomplished. He was very sure she would hate him for even considering such a thoughtless, selfish act.

He stared into the blackness of the nearby forest. His heart felt just as dark.

Nine

Angus leaned against a stone wall meant to divide one level of the lawn from another. Smells from the forest assailed him as he closed his eyes and differentiated between plants, animals, and magical creatures that fell into neither category. Then he sensed one whose presence was closer than the rest.

"Who is there?" he called as he opened his eyes and slowly turned.

"It's just me, Angus." Amber strode from behind some fir trees and walked into the moonlight. "I was walking by and saw you. Have I disturbed your thoughts?"

He frowned. "My thoughts could no' be in more chaos. I am in need of company." She moved closer to him and leaned against the wall. "Tell me what's troubling you."

"You know the matter."

"Karen." She stated it as a fact. Then she placed her hand on his arm in a gesture of comfort.

For a time he did not speak. But his fears finally found a voice. "I dunna' want her to die. Part of the reason I did bring her to this place was in the hope of finding some curative for her ailment. In my heart, I know there is none."

"No, there isn't. And I'm so sorry. Shayla told me about why she's here, what she did to help you. She's a sweet and generous woman. And anyone who's shown the kind of loyalty her family has, deserves more."

"Aye," he readily agreed, "she does."

"In fact, Shayla has told everyone the story. I can't imagine what you've been through. But you're home now and safe. And for her remaining time Karen will be safe, too."

"Unless that Goblin has his way before her illness does," he snorted.

"Don't judge Tearach too harshly. His past has been terrifying. Perhaps worse than yours."

"Tell me. I would know why he hates outsiders as much as I once did."

Amber looped her arm through his and leaned against the wall with him. "I don't know how many of his kind there were before you were judged. There are only forty-eight left in the world now."

He gasped and stared at her in amazement. "There were once as many as there were Druids. They lived in every part of the moors and hillsides from here to Scotland and Ireland. What happened?"

"They've suffered destruction of their sacred places, war and disease. But Tearach's father was changing things for them. The population was rising after his father gained control over the Goblins. There was hope. Then, in one single night, everything ended." She paused. "During one of their water ceremonies, hundreds died drinking from a sacred pool. Some outsiders illegally dumped toxic waste there. The Goblins who drank that water died in agony. Except for his niece, Tearach lost the rest of his family and the woman with whom he intended to handfast. I remember Shayla summoning everyone to Exmoor to retrieve the bodies. We had to burn them. The only reason some Goblins survived is because they arrived late for the ceremony, and Tearach was among that surviving group. When they saw what happened . . . It was horrifying. Tearach took control of the clan and tracked down the men who poisoned the water."

"What did he do with them?" Angus didn't have to ask, but he wanted to hear it.

"They're dead," Amber told him. "I don't know exactly what he did, but their bodies were never found. I don't think they ever will be."

Angus shook his head. "I can begin to understand now. I canna' imagine what I would have done in his place."

"Tearach's youngest brother was among the last to be burned. I remember seeing

Tearach holding him close and weeping as if the world were crushing him. I'll never forget that as long as I live." She shook her head as if the memories could be held back by doing so.

Angus remembered that for a Goblin to acknowledge pain, in any form, was unheard of. For one to show anguish indicated the horror of the situation. As a very young child, Angus had played among the Goblins and knew they were taught iron-like control. Of all the members of the Order, they were the most envied in that respect. "What about the babes? They were no' . . ."

"Almost all of them died, too. It was the most monstrous situation anyone can ever remember. Even the decimation of the Order in King Arthur's time pales in comparison."

Angus shook his head and passed a hand over his face. "Ach, my pain is but an instant in time compared to the Goblins'. My parents died knowing the risks they took. It took me many years to accept that. But to die in such a way as you have described is murder. If I were Tearach, I dunna' know if I would show as much control as he did this night. Still, Karen was not responsible for his loss. And her kin's devotion tells me that evil dwells no' within a race. 'Tis a weakness born of ignorance, and all individuals are susceptible to this frailty. I, myself, complied with its demands because it was easier than forgiving."

"You're a wise man, Angus. I believe you and Tearach could be great friends one day. He had a kind and loving nature once. And if he says he won't harm Karen, he won't. He can be trusted."

"I can protect her from any man or beast, but no' the weakness in her body. 'Tis no' fair that the innocent should suffer while evil abounds. So verra' much is no' fair."

"No one promised us a fair life. And though I've only known Karen briefly, I don't believe she'd want you to grieve for her. And she isn't dead yet. Make good use of the time you have. Some, like Tearach, are given no time at all. He never got the chance to say good-bye or see his family and friends again."

"Aye." The man was to be pitied though Angus knew Goblins scorned that emotion.

After a few moments of silence, Amber wrapped her arm about his waist. "Come on. I'll show you some places Karen might like to see."

The morning was beautiful, but Karen had to force herself to notice the lovely flowers and birds within the garden. From her window the previous night, she'd seen Amber and Angus walk toward the woods. She remembered Angus telling her that those who did so would make love. Of course he'd have wants and needs after so many years alone. But that didn't stop the shards of jealously tearing at her insides. What would it be like to lie with him in the forest? Would he be gentle, his hands tender upon soft flesh? Or would his long celibacy drive him to lustful extremes?

She closed her eyes and conjured images of what he and Amber had been like together. Their exquisite, writhing bodies would rival any work of art. The bold

beauty of that mental image caused her mouth go to dry.

"Ah, there you are." Shayla walked around a hedge holding a bouquet of fresh herbs.

Karen's eyes opened and her hands covered her face. Who knew what psychic powers the Sorceress might have. She desperately prayed that if the woman could divine her thoughts she'd be tactful enough to never mention it. "H-hello, I was . . . was just admiring the beautiful garden."

"Are you in pain, child? You look flushed." Shayla place her hand upon Karen's cheek.

"A little too much sun, I guess."

"Perhaps you should come into the study and out of the heat. Our archivist is there and ready to help you with your work."

"That's a good idea. I need to work."

"You're sure you feel up to it?" Shayla asked.

Shayla's concern made her feel guilty. On this occasion, the problem wasn't with her heart. Not in the physical sense. "I'm fine. Really. Just show me where you'd like me to go."

Shayla smiled and nodded. They walked back to the building, through French doors and into a huge library. Polished oak shelves held thousands of books, marble-topped tables displayed antiques and treasures from every era. The room itself was rectangular with a massive fireplace filling one end. Near the fireplace sat an antique desk with the most modern computer equipment Karen could have ever ordered.

"This is magnificent," she said as she slowly turned and viewed her surroundings in awe.

"Heather O'Connor, our archivist, will be along shortly. You've met her husband, Gryphon. If there's anything you need just ask."

"Will Angus be coming by?" she blurted.

Shayla smiled. "Yes, later today. He's in the clearing with some of the others. He has asked me to tell you not to work too hard. And so you shouldn't. Take any breaks you need."

"Thank you, Shayla. I promise to make your computer files as secure as I possibly can. But that might mean downloading some data onto discs and not allowing general access to research."

"Advise Heather of everything you do." She walked toward Karen slowly. "I'm placing the safety of everyone here in your hands, child. That includes Angus. Our people should have been more careful with our information and have been reprimanded for their carelessness. We're relying on you."

She nodded. "You won't be sorry. I swear it. I won't let anything happen to him . . . uh, all of you."

Shayla studied her for a long moment. "He means a great deal to you, doesn't he?"

Karen didn't bother pretending who the he in question was. "Yes."

Shayla placed the herbs she was carrying in a basket. Then she looked up and held

Karen's gaze. "It's obvious there's no future in it, girl. I don't mean to seem cruel."
"You're not. You're just stating a fact. He'll remember me as a friend and go on."

"I was speaking of your feelings toward him."

"No offense, Sorceress, but my emotions are my own and will die with me. I've a right to them. But I'll make sure they don't hinder Angus in any way. He won't ever know how I really feel. We're just friends and that's the way it'll stay." She was now convinced Shayla had sensed something of her thoughts in the garden. Shayla stared at her for several moments before speaking. "I believe you. You're strong."

"No, I'm not strong." She shook her head. "Just determined not to make things harder for him."

"You know," she said with a sigh, "if you weren't so ill, I'd be greatly tempted to let you go."

Karen grinned. "No, you wouldn't. You'd turn me into a spider or something to ensure I never told anyone about the Order."

"That's absolute rubbish! I've never turned anyone into a spider." She paused.

"Not yet."

Karen watched the older woman smile and walk away. She wasn't fooled. Shayla would do whatever it took to keep her people safe, and that included a great deal more than casting a few Halloween-like spells.

She settled herself behind the desk and began to get familiar with the equipment. A woman entered the room and Karen rudely stared. The girl was only a bit older than herself and breathtakingly lovely. Brown hair fell about her shoulders in soft waves and her unusual, silver-blue eyes sparkled. She wore a dark green jerkin and leather pants and boots to match.

"Hi. I'm Heather O'Connor, and I've heard a great deal about you from my mate and Shayla." She held out her hand and smiled.

"American?" Karen almost shouted when she heard the woman's accent.

"New York born and bred. And you should see your expression," Heather merrily remarked.

Karen smiled at her. "Oh, this I've gotta hear." The very idea there would be an American among all the British, Irish and Scottish creatures was too strange. She'd wrongly assumed there were no New World members of the Order.

"How I got here is a long story, but I'll tell it while we work. If you're up for a good fairy tale that is."

"At this point, I'm up for anything," Karen acknowledged.

"The man swings a Claymore the way others wield a toothpick. And he's good with a sword and long bow as well," Hugh reported. "As unfortunate as it probably was for many poor bastards, he has had a great deal of hands-on experience with ancient weapons. Much more than any of us."

"That's to be expected. He's from an age when those weapons were the only defenses he had available," Shayla explained. "And since we still use them here, he can help train the other men in their proper use."

"It's a good job for him. Look at the size of the brute." Hugh turned toward the clearing where Gryphon O'Connor was having a difficult time holding his own against Angus. The two men were bare to the waist, swinging broadswords. Others had stopped to watch. Sweat glistened from their bodies as they fought. But the smiles and good-natured taunts they exchanged belied the seriousness of the encounter. Bystanders cheered them on as it became clear neither man would give up.

"How long have they been at this?" Shayla asked.

"All morning. Neither of them wants to be the first to stop."

"Testosterone!" Shayla snorted and shook her head. "What would men be without it and women do to attract it?"

"Aye, it makes the world go 'round." Hugh grinned as he watched the men flail away. "They're loving this."

"Very well, then. If they're going to beat each other catatonic, give them a real challenge." She paused. "Have Lore and three of his best men feign an attack. Let's see what the two of them do against the Fairies."

Hugh rubbed his hands together in anticipation. "Now that'll be a fight worth goin' a mile to see!"

Shayla watched as Hugh approached Lore and the other Fairies. When they realized a game was afoot, hoots of excitement came from the winged men around the clearing. Tankards of ale appeared and minor bets were placed on the outcome. The two Druids continued their mock battle, too absorbed to notice they were being encircled by four smiling Fairies.

Shayla shook her head again. "Men! Goddess help us all." She took a seat to watch the mock battle.

"They're upon you, lads. Druids, dion!" Hugh shouted the Gaelic word for protect.

Angus and Gryphon finally paused long enough to see four new attackers enter the clearing. Like boys on the same team, they nodded at each other then turned back to back. They now faced the Fairy threat. Lore lunged forward first. Then the other Fairies followed him into the battle.

Shayla viewed the mock war with a critical eye. Taking over from his own father, Gryphon would soon be leader of the Druid Clan and was warrior class. If he accepted Angus, so would everyone else. She could simply have ordered that Angus be allowed to join them. But this was a matter of pride. Angus had to earn their respect and know he deserved it. After this, there would be no doubt about his place within the Order. No one but Lore had ever had the endurance to swing a broadsword so long against Gryphon O'Connor.

She let them fight on for another half hour, and then she stepped forward. The men were tiring, and competitors who swung poorly could inadvertently cause severe injury. The purpose of the match was accomplished. "Halt! I call a draw." She used the wind to magnify her voice so that no one misheard.

The men immediately stopped and handed their blades to bystanders. Angus and Gryphon slumped, placed their hands upon their knees and panted heavily. It took

minutes more before they had sufficiently recovered to make the walk toward her. She watched them grin like imps. "Testicles! But for a woman's needs, I think men would sometimes be better without them," she muttered to herself. "How long were the two of you going to keep it up?"

"Till he stopped," they both replied at the same time and laughed like children.

Karen had stood beside Heather and watched. Steel had met steel in one crushing blow after another. When they'd finally stopped swinging, it occurred to her that she had been holding her breath. One wrong move, one misjudged lunge, and any of them could have died. During the exchange, her heart had begun to pound, but the medicine she'd swallowed would take effect soon. The bottle had come out of her pocket the moment the clearing had come into view. The mock battle had been frightening and exhilarating all at once. Afterward, Heather had run joyfully forward and jumped up to hug her gorgeous husband's neck. The woman evidently appreciated the fine showing Gryphon had made and seemed unconcerned about his safety. Then Karen had watched as Gryphon bent down and kissed Heather soundly. It seemed Gryphon had enough energy for other things as he urged his wife into the woods, holding her close. It didn't take magic or a crystal ball to divine what the two of them would be doing for the rest of the day. Karen envied their love and freedom. She was about to step out of the shadows and walk toward Angus, when Amber closed the distance first. The Fairy woman handed Angus a towel and smiled impishly. His reward for a battle well-fought. Angus hugged her and then stepped away to dry his body with the towel.

Karen's heart plummeted and a lump formed in her throat. Tears stung her eyes and she turned away. Thankfully, no one seemed to notice. Her pride was still intact. She made her way back to the estate home and into the library. Heather had told her about ancient weapons being part of the Order's tradition and had agreed to show Karen the men's training. No one told her about the women who would desire Angus as the warrior he obviously was. And Amber was far too lovely for a man with Angus' virility to resist. Karen tried telling herself to be happy for him. She spent the rest of the day and into the evening working furiously. One of the most recent files dealt with Angus and needed to be copied onto a disc. She opened it and began to read. What it contained was the most horrific account she could imagine. It detailed the many men he'd killed, the crops destroyed and the women who had been used. Several children had been attributed to him, all of which had subsequently died during birth or shortly thereafter. Some of the village girls had been disowned by their families for carrying a child outside of wedlock. Roaming the countryside without proper nourishment had probably contributed to some of their deaths and those of their infants. The story related how some of the women had approached Angus for help only to be physically or verbally abused and turned aside. One girl, Bridget, had taken her own life. Some of the others had simply disappeared. While it was thought he had killed them, no one knew for sure as he had gone missing. Apparently, that was when the Sorceress

saw fit to punish him. Karen couldn't blame the woman for her judgement of Angus. If what had happened was true. But the man she knew could not have committed the crimes in the file. He wasn't capable of such devastation.

"You are working too hard."

She looked up to find the subject of her thoughts standing in the doorway.

The moment Angus saw her face, he knew she aware of everything. She gazed at him as though she had never seen him before, as though she was assessing him as a threat. "So, the truth comes out."

"I've been reading," she spoke softly.

"From that box?"

She nodded. "This is a computer. There's just about any kind of information in here a person could want. I told you about that, remember?"

"Aye. And some information you would rather not know?" he asked in a soft voice.

She simply nodded.

"What do you want to know, Karen? Ask me. No' that machine."

She slowly stood and pointed at the screen. "Tell me this isn't true and I'll believe you. Just say the words."

He strode to where he could see the print on the screen. "I canna read verra' well, so you will have to tell me what the words say. I ken they relay the truth, lass."

"Those things aren't true. You didn't do them, Angus. You didn't kill the women you slept with. Someone believed you may have after you and some of the women disappeared from the village."

His gaze met hers. "That 'twould be correct, Karen. I dinna' kill those lasses. But aside from that, whoever wrote what is in your computer most likely got the main parts right. I've tried to explain to you time and again why I was punished."

"The Sorceress who cast the spell upon you wrote what happened. Someone else copied that information into the computer so it wouldn't be lost. I was hoping the information had been incorrectly interpreted. If it wasn't, knowing what I do about your culture I don't understand why the Sorceress back then didn't kill you. There were all kinds of foul things attributed to you. A girl named Bridget even killed herself because of how you treated her. Do you remember that?"

The pain of that knowledge cut him in two. Though he knew he deserved it, hearing Karen's condemning voice produced a deep wound to his heart. "I have wanted to die because of my deeds. Many times. But I dinna' know Bridget killed herself and I have long wondered what became of her. She is one reason I wanted to see if people from the past, those no' of the Order, could be traced." For a very long time Karen didn't speak and Angus thought she wouldn't. "You hate me and I canna' blame you."

"I don't understand you." She turned her back to him as she spoke. "No matter what I imagined, I would never have attributed these things to the man I know. Why did so many die, Angus? Why?"

"If you want me to give you excuses, there are none. Not then and not now. My actions were the product of hate." He paused as memories overwhelmed him. "Do

you think, for three hundred years, I dinna' agonize over the children I seeded? Sometimes I did hear women weeping over the graves of children. From the responses of the mourners, some of those bairns would be missed. Others would be treated as one less mouth to feed. I heard grave diggers make comments about some of the bastard children they buried. But no one was there to weep for those babes. The men threw dirt upon their wee bodies, laughed and drank. Some did worse to the little ones. I could hear them . . . hear their coarse remarks."

"Angus, stop." Karen put up her hands to halt his words. But he continued.

"Sometimes they even took these unloved babes from their coffins and used the boxes for other children. Children whose parents could afford to pay for the wood. And every time one of those fatherless children was buried, I imagined it was mine." He covered his face with his hands, then slowly lowered them. The memories of those abhorrent burials weighed upon him.

"Angus . . ."

"Unwed girls who lay with men and died were treated in much the same way. They would be buried in the ground and no marker would have been placed. Those burying them would often slake lusts with the bodies first. The women might have died of disease or for the want of a loaf of bread. I remember much would be offered to a man to stave off hunger for another day. Then there were the babes and women who died because I took away their men. They had no one to care for them, their fields or livestock. I once knocked a boy to the ground because he was lame and could no' move out of my way quickly enough."

He spoke as if he were in some kind of trance. She watched him gaze into the distance as though he were back in that time. Remembering. Tears fell from his horror-filled eyes.

"Karen, someone as good and kind as you could ne'er cause so much grief if you lived a thousand lifetimes," he murmured. "I did it in a few short years. Even little Elspeth's family might have been victims of my hate and temper. That sweet child . . . She did nothing but care for me."

"Stop it! It was a long time ago, Angus. I have no right to judge you. No right." She rushed forward to hold him. He fell to his knees before her and buried his head against her shoulder. "Shhhh, Angus, hush."

She stroked his hair and held him for a long time. He made no sound, but he trembled as he clung to her. She crooned stupid, senseless things her aunt had said to her when she was a child and had been very afraid. For the first time in her life since Aggie died, someone desperately needed her comforting. Discounting the fact she had uttered a silly poem to set him free, Angus needed someone to help him live with what he had done. Given what he was remembering, it could take a lifetime. She didn't have a lifetime to give.

"Angus, listen to me." She held him close. "I've told you this before. You must listen. There isn't one damned thing anyone can do about the past, but there are things you can do now to help your people. I've read a great deal about some of the problems they've been having. And one of the things they seem to worry about right now is your power."

"They fear me?" he asked, his face still nuzzled against her shoulder. She nodded. "Shayla's been communicating with Druids in England, Ireland and Scotland. I'm not sure if she realizes I'm able to get into those files. But it seems that your size has something to do with her fears."

He raised his head slightly. "'Tis natural I would be seen as a problem because of my past actions."

"But what has your size got to do with anything?"

He looked at her and shrugged. "Larger size means more power. Have you no' seen the size of most of the men here? Have you no' noticed I am measurably larger?"

"Pluck isn't big." She smiled at him in an attempt to illicit a similar response, but he didn't smile back.

"I was speaking of the Druids, Fairies and Goblins. And Pluck is large for an Elf. And you'd be surprised at the power Elves wield at any size."

"Then we're just going to have to prove you aren't the horrible man who was cursed all those years ago. Because you're not. That was another Angus. My Angus isn't like that. He's sweet and kind and does nothing more threatening than eat too many hamburgers."

"I am your Angus?" he asked, gazing into her blue eyes.

She grinned and hugged him again when she saw the ghost of a smile touch his full lips. "I found you. That makes you mine. And I'm sorry I judged you, Angus. Please, forgive me?"

When he turned his head to speak, her lips were only a breath away. "There is nothing to forgive. You judged that other man rightly. I will do whatever it takes to earn trust and keep it. And I dunna' want anyone in the Order fearing me. Those who fear a man will no' befriend him. I am in need of many friends."

"I trust you and I'm your friend, Angus. I'll always be your friend. We're like family, remember? We made a pact." She placed her hands on either side of his face and kissed one cheek.

He knew, in that instant, he would do anything to make her happy. Whatever deity had bestowed this sweet woman upon him would have his gratitude forever. He hurt so much inside. The past would always be there. But a few people had seen something within him worthy of salvage. Elspeth had been one; Karen was another. And the Sorceress herself seemed willing, even though she feared his power, to give him a chance. One chance was all he needed. He swore no one would ever have cause to regret his being here. No matter what it took, his time would be spent helping others the way he had been helped. He would follow the most sacred creed of the Order. Do as you will . . . harm none.

"I would think you'd be tired. Especially after all the swordplay earlier today." Shayla spoke from behind him.

"Karen and I had much to say to one another," Angus responded with a shrug. He slowly turned away from the garden view to properly address the Sorceress.

"She worked very hard, too. Is she feeling well?"

Angus nodded. She had gone to bed very drained, insisting on finishing their conversation first. "She learned the whole truth about what I've done. Just, I'm sure, as you intended."

"And that bothers you?" Shayla watched him closely.

"I was afraid I would lose her. But now that she knows the whole truth, I am relieved."

Shayla moved to stand beside him. Moonlight flooded the garden and they had a beautiful view from the balcony where they stood. "She still sees you as her friend?"

"Aye. Such a man as I does no' deserve her. She is everything that is good," his voice softened.

"And how do you feel about the rest of us?"

"I have come here to become a part of the Order and to use my powers to protect it. I will never raise my hand against you or the others, Sorceress. No' unless you order me to do so. The man of three centuries ago is dead. He died, piece by piece, every time he harmed another."

She studied him for a moment. "From the moment we met, I sensed deep pain within you, Angus. But I need to make very sure about your heart. You truly regret your past?"

"I regret the lives I wasted, including my own. I can never purchase that time back. But I can make use of that which is left to me. Give me some task, lady. Let me prove my worth and earn some measure of dignity and honor. Let me garner a bit more of that trust which has been warily given, and I will earn every bit of the rest with every drop of blood in my body. This I swear."

She patted him on the shoulder and draped her arm around his back. "Do you know what Gryphon said about you this afternoon?" He looked at her and she said, "He says you're the finest swordsmen he has ever seen. We still use those weapons today, you know. They're silent, deadly and very difficult for the authorities to trace."

"I had believed there was more sophisticated weaponry. If the old armament benefits those who dwell here, then such weaponry is appropriate. And I am pleased O'Connor thought well of my swordsmanship. He is a good man and I would value his friendship."

"That's easy. To have a friend, be one. And as far as the weapons are concerned, sometimes the old ways are best. We've even found ways of making money by having our people sell armor to collectors. But finding someone who knows about the more obscure fighting techniques is difficult."

"I lived life with the old ways of defense. If you would allow me, I could help your people train in these techniques."

"I was hoping you'd volunteer. Our younger members seem to believe we can't defend ourselves without outsider weapons. But guns are loud and draw too much attention. It is too easy to kill with them, as the world well knows."

"There are times, when I was stone, that I heard weapons being fired. I came to know of them from listening to others speak. There are more silent ways to

adequately defend oneself."

"Good, you have the right idea. Gryphon and Lore can help you set up some kind of training schedule. If you need anything, ask."

"There is only one thing I would ask of you, Sorceress. A favor."

She noted the pain on his face. "Go on."

"Tonight . . . Karen . . . I canna' say it." He shook his head and walked a few steps toward the balcony. His fingers curled around the white marble rail and gripped it hard.

"Angus, there isn't anything you can't come to me and speak of. Whatever it is, we're all here to help you."

He took a deep breath and tried again. "After our meal tonight, Karen wanted to know if . . . She wants to know if she can pick a spot in our sacred woods to be buried. She says she would like to spend eternity among all the magic creatures. I told her I would ask you for your permission."

Shayla let out a breath and shook her head. "Herne's teeth! I wish some of our people had her courage. As ill as she is, that child has more backbone than any four Ogres I've ever met. Tell her that she may pick anyplace she chooses."

He dropped his head. The subject was so painful he could not guarantee keeping any degree of composure. "I will tell her she may choose anywhere except the Goblin's sacred ground."

"I said anyplace! That is my command. If the Goblins don't like it, Tearach can take it up with me."

"Thank you, Shayla. I wish . . . I would give my life for hers, if I could. I was once told 'twould serve me right if someone hurt and defiled me. I can think . . . I can think of nothing worse than losing Karen."

She heard the break in his voice and wrapped her arms around him. Nurturing instincts took over. The man had suffered too much pain for one day and one lifetime. Though his own actions had brought him to this point, he was suffering three times what he had dealt others. Traditions of the Order led them to believe this is what happens when you harm others. Especially when there was no cause for that harm. Added to his pain was the fact that Karen had reminded Angus her end was nearing.

"There, there, my lad. Time has a way of altering a great deal of pain into good memories. If she can be brave, then don't make it harder for her."

For the second time in the same day, he was comforted by another. His resolve to keep some dignity fled and he let Shayla hold him. It seemed that his first thirty or more years of life had been spent in the pursuit of making others weep. Now he was the one doing so.

Ten

Angus mumbled a curse. Karen wouldn't allow him to be near her and it angered

him. No matter how he argued or how many excuses he made to stay near the castle, she insisted that he go to the clearing and work with the other men and women. To make her point, she had closed the doors to the library and ordered him to stay out until they were opened in the afternoon. For several more days, that pattern repeated itself. He was able to share evening meals with her, but she refused to go to the clearing. Angus suspected she didn't want another encounter with the Goblins. And, except for an occasional dirty look, Tearach's men avoided him.

"Damn it all, man! Do you want to lose an arm?" Gryphon grouched as he pulled his blow to the left. He lowered his sword and wiped the sweat from his face.

"Sorry," Angus apologized. Then he gazed back toward the castle everyone referred to as the estate.

"Look, if you want to be with her, then go."

"She won't let me."

Gryphon snorted. "I'm guessing she's roughly one-third your weight. What did she do, throw you out?"

Angus ignored him and stared at the path which lead out of the clearing.

Gryphon saw Angus's worried expression and decided they'd both had enough practice for one day. "Let's walk." He took their swords and laid them upon a nearby table. Then he grabbed Angus's arm and deliberately pulled him away from the clearing.

They walked for the better part of an hour and neither of them said a word.

Gryphon led, and Angus followed. Leaving the proximity of the estate, Angus' thoughts began to clear. "I am sorry to be such poor company. My thoughts have been elsewhere."

"Were I you, I don't know that I'd be much better company. Maybe even worse. But there are a couple of things you'd better know. Now is as good a time as any to tell you."

The seriousness of the man's voice captured Angus' attention. "Speak on, O'Connor."

"You know my mate, Heather, has been working with Karen."

Angus nodded then took a seat upon a nearby log. Gryphon straddled the opposite end.

"Heather came home last night crying like a baby. She had to help Karen pick a burial place yesterday."

Angus gasped. "I . . . I would have thought she would have . . . have done that with me."

"Then, the task comes as no surprise to you?"

"It does no'. Karen has spoken with me about it. But the thought sickens me and I will speak of it no further."

"Perhaps that's why she wanted Heather to help her. Maybe she senses your pain and reluctance about the matter."

"If it were your mate who was dying, how would you feel? The woman with whom you have handfasted is lovely. How would you feel knowing, in a short

time, you would be lowering her into the ground? Knowing you would never hear her voice or hold her or . . .” He stopped as his voice quivered.

“For a man who doesn’t feel like talking, you’re very eloquent. And I can’t imagine losing my Heather. She’s my next breath and I love her with all my heart. Are you saying you feel the same way toward Karen?”

Angus stood and walked several paces. Was it possible that, somewhere in their short time together, his loyalty and unwavering gratitude toward Karen had turned to something else? Or was he misinterpreting the situation because of the sorrow he felt over her illness?

Gryphon waited for the impact of the question to sink in. “I’m only trying to help you, man. I know what it’s like to be alone. Before I met Heather, the world was a prison for me. I’ve come to the conclusion that any love we can find is to be thoroughly embraced. And . . . I brought you here because this is where Karen wants to be buried. Heather asked me to show this place to you so you would know.”

Angus shook his head. His thoughts were still jumbled over his feelings for Karen. “What? What are speaking of?”

“Karen. This is where she wants to be buried.” Gryphon lifted his hand and gestured toward a nearby glade.

Angus swallowed hard. In that moment, he’d have given the arm Gryphon’s sword had almost lobbed off not to go into the little clearing. But something drew him there like a magnet draws metal. One slow step followed another until he stood within a small, fern-bordered circle of grass. Trillium and violets bloomed within the ferns. A moss-covered branch arched overhead and the tiniest spring-fed pool gently bubbled beneath it. Pixies and Sprites would play there at night. And there was a white granite boulder near the pool. It was almost as if Karen were considering the seating arrangements of someone who might want to come visit. There was just enough open ground near the pool to dig a hole. Angus had never known illness in his life until now. Bile rose in his throat. He turned and ran. If O’Connor was still there it didn’t matter. Angus left the lovely little glade far behind. How could someone be so casual about their imminent burial place? How could she treat the subject as if it were no more important than where to have a day’s outing?

He ran until his lungs could draw in no more air, and then he stopped and leaned upon a tree for support. “’Tis no’ fair,” he whispered, then began to sob. “’Tis no’ fair.”

Roland spoke slowly, his voice filled with intense rage. “You can’t allow this, Tearach. An outsider wants to be buried on our sacred land, and you sit there and tell me the Sorceress has commanded it. This is the cruelest insult we’ve suffered since the poisoning of our water eight years ago.”

Tearach slammed his hand down upon the table. When he’d summoned his second-in-command to his cottage, he’d known a confrontation would follow. And most of his own emotions ran the same course as Roland’s. But a promise had been

made to do the outsider no harm. "I don't like it any better than you, but Shayla gave the girl her word."

"Let the little baggage find another place to rot. None of us was asked our opinion. It's as if Shayla doesn't give a bloody damn about the Goblins. It can't be allowed, Tearach. It can't."

Tearach rose and faced the angry man now pacing in front of him. "Watch what you say about the Sorceress, Roland."

"I lost my entire family. My babies . . . I can still see their faces," Roland raged on. Tearach lowered his voice. "We all lost those we loved. I'll go to Shayla and speak with her again. Or I'll go to the girl and convince her to dig her deathbed elsewhere."

"Why? Why should you have to beg to keep a filthy outsider off our sacred land. Are we no better than animals to be treated this way?" Roland raised furious fists to the air.

"Calm down, man. Nothing will be gained by angering the Sorceress."

"The Sorceress be hanged! I say we find the outsider, kill her ourselves and take her body where it will never be found."

Tearach knew the man was losing control. "You will stay within the boundaries of our own land until this matter is settled. And you'll not touch the girl. Is that clear?"

Roland stopped his pacing and stared at his leader. "How could you look upon that woman and not see the twisted bodies of your family? How? They died writhing in agony."

"I see them every second of every day," Tearach choked out and struck his fist against the table again. "But say one more word against the Sorceress, and I'll bind and gag you and stick you in the nearest cave until this thing is settled. Do you understand?" He emphasized the last three words.

Tearach watched Roland's eyes glaze over as he stormed out of the cottage. It didn't help matters that his own emotions ran hot over this latest development. Tearach found himself agreeing with everything Roland had said, and he found it increasingly difficult, given the situation, not to disrespect Shayla himself. What she was doing amounted to throwing fuel on a fire. Flaunting an outsider's desires in the face of those who had lost so very much. He grabbed his cloak and set out to speak with Shayla one more time. Many of his faction felt the same as Roland, and he feared the outcome if Karen Matthews was buried on their land.

From nearby shrubbery, Roland watched Tearach leave the cabin. If his own leader would take no definitive action against the violation of Goblin land and this outrage, then he would. Druids were not the only beings in The Shire who could wield magic. But his particular variety would be deadly.

"Why are you sitting here all alone, Karen?"

At the sound of the soft, masculine voice, she turned. The handsome Cairn Fairy she'd met during her first gathering at the great clearing was constantly hanging about the castle, cleaning, repairing or planting something. And he was always in a

good mood while doing so. "Hello, Wade. I was just enjoying the garden." In truth, her chest was throbbing and her medication was taking longer than normal to stop the pain. Her left arm was numb and there was a strange, tingling sensation in her jaw.

"It's a lovely day, isn't it? Where's your protector?" Wade asked.

She forced a smile and ran her right hand up and down her left arm. "If you mean Angus, he's off in the woods with Gryphon O'Connor. At least, that's what Heather told me."

"And how does your work go? You're not overdoing, are you?" He placed a concerned hand on her shoulder.

Karen knew he was just being friendly, but it would be wonderful to think a man so handsome could see her as something other than an ailing, decimated caricature. His green eyes and long, sandy-colored hair reminded her of a fresh, spring day. Why not fantasize? If Angus could walk in the woods with Amber, certainly she could be forgiven a little daydream.

"While going through the computer files, I've learned a great deal about some members of the Order. Including the Fairies."

"And what have you learned?" he asked, gently taking her hand.

"You're fierce fighters but can be quite gentle, too. Your history goes back thousands of years. Almost every fairy tale I was ever told had some basis in truth."

He smiled and nodded. "That's the way of most myths. You know, it's said my race was once very adept at enchanting outsiders from their world into ours."

"If I were the outsider in question," she readily admitted, "I think I'd let one of your race enchant me into any reality he wanted. I might even let you talk me into drinking some of that Fairy Wine you advised me against."

Wade tilted his head and studied her for some moments.

"What?" she asked, raising her eyebrows over his scrutiny.

"You've a gentle heart and a wise soul, Karen. And Angus is a fool if he can't see what a treasure you are."

"Me? A . . . a treasure?" She ducked her head to hide her expression of delight. No man had ever said such a thing to her. And here she was in the middle of a Fairy garden being complimented by a dream-man.

He lifted her chin with his index finger, forcing her to look at him. "Karen, I'd like for you to walk with me tonight."

"Walk?"

"Yes, in the woods. I've wanted to walk with you since I met you."

How on Earth had this happened? Why would a man like Wade want to be with her in a way she understood was meant to be intimate. She barely knew him. And she was no beauty in her present state, probably never had been.

"Why are you asking me this? I know what the offer means."

"You're the most courageous person I've ever met. You've come to this place and touched us all. If you're an example of what's in the outside world, then there's hope for the Order to continue. And when I look into your eyes, I see such

goodness." He placed both of his hands on her shoulders. "I want to be with you, Karen."

"You feel pity, that's all. There isn't really much about me that could attract someone like you. Fairy women are the loveliest I've ever seen, and you could choose any of them."

He shook his head. "Karen, there are other, more important things to attract a man besides the purely physical aspects."

She grinned. "If it's my mind you're after, why do you want to go into the woods?"

"Because, dammit! Someone needs to hold you and whisper things that you deserve to hear. No matter what else is wrong in your life, Karen, you're a desirable woman and deserve to be treated as such. And I'd be gentle with you. Very gentle."

She looked at him sadly. Even if her health would allow it, her soul wouldn't. It belonged to someone else. "I'm sorry, Wade, but I can't. And you'll never know how difficult it is for me to say so. I've always dreamed of having someone care for me in that way."

"Then why not come with me?" he pleaded.

"I just can't."

He regarded her in silence, then nodded as if he understood. "It's MacGregor, isn't it? You're in love with the man, and he's too full of his own problems to see it. He can tend to his desires and needs, but not yours."

"Don't say that about him, Wade. He and I have never had that kind of relationship."

"That's because the man is so self-involved." The volume of Wade's voice rose in proportion to his anger. "He pities himself because he's losing you, but he can't bring himself to make use of the time you have left. Time to give you some measure of happiness. I've seen only sorrow in his eyes when he looks at you, heard it in his voice when he says your name. He should be feeling joy in knowing you, in having you in his life, and celebrating the fact. If I were him, I'd spend every moment I could with you. I'd bring you the joy you deserve and have no regrets in doing so. But that's all MacGregor will have. In the months to come, he'll wonder what else he might have done. And he'll regret a lot."

"I'm already regretting much, Fairy!" Angus had been careful not to reveal his presence to the perceptive Fairy. And he had heard enough to know that the man would never touch Karen. It was not his right. Karen should only be with him. No one else. Not now, not ever. And if loving was what she needed, he would be the one to hold her to his breast. Not some young, overzealous Fairy without the patience it would take to give her the experience she deserved.

At the sound of Angus' deep voice, Karen and Wade stood in unison and turned. Angus stood behind them, tall as a castle parapet. His face was a solemn mask. Wade was the first to regain his composure. Karen watched the Fairy's expression grow dark with anger as he looked Angus up and down.

"Since you've probably overheard what was said, I won't repeat it. But I will say

this, MacGregor. Karen should come first and last in your life. You haven't a clue as to what she has given up for you. She'll never see her homeland or her friends again. She's working her bum off to make the world a little safer for us, and you walk about giving her nothing but more grief!"

"Wade, stop it!" Karen cried, placing her hand on the Fairy's arm.

Angus raised his hand. "No, lass. Let him finish. He has a right to speak his mind."

"And I intend to." Wade walked forward. "She should know what it is to be cared for. Really cared for. She's too precious to be someone's pitied afterthought!"

Wade turned and walked back to where Karen stood. He gently tilted her head up and placed a gentle kiss on her mouth. "The offer will always stand, Karen. There are wonderful, joyous things in these woods. Things I could show you without worrying over the future. That can't be changed, but the present can."

"She will no' go with you," Angus said and glared at him. He pointed at Karen.

"She is a woman and she needs a man. No' a boy. Now, leave us before I forget that you're half my size and that I am trying to get over a verra' violent past."

Wade turned and walked away without so much as a backward glance in Angus' direction, and Karen swallowed hard. "Angus, don't be angry with him. He didn't know I asked you to stay away so I could finish my work."

"And have you?"

She noted the very low tone of his voice. "Yes. I've done everything I can with the computers. I finished a few hours ago. Please don't be angry with Wade," she repeated. "For some silly reason, he thinks he cares about me. Other than the few times I've seen him around the castle and that time we met at the clearing, the man doesn't even know me."

Angus walked slowly toward her. "He does know you. The part that really matters."

"What do you mean?"

"I am saying that the man is right. I have been more concerned over my future loss of you than what the present holds. You are still here, still vital and caring. And, if now is all we have, now is what we should take."

"W-what are you saying?" she asked and heard her own voice break. She knew exactly what he was saying.

He cupped her face with his hands. "I'm asking you to come into the woods wi' me tonight, lass."

She swallowed very hard and tried to stop the tears from welling in her eyes. "I d-don't want your pity, Angus. Not yours, Wade's or anyone else's. Besides, it would hurt Amber."

"'Tis no' pity, my sweet. And what has Amber to do with this?"

Karen had to draw in a long breath before she could speak. "You're only asking me to go with you out of gratitude. Because I helped you. And I saw you and Amber walk in the woods together. If you're becoming involved with her, I don't want to spoil that relationship."

Angus tilted his head. "I dunna' know what you saw, but sometimes a man and a

woman only walk in the woods. Walk and talk."

"Are you saying that you and she didn't have sex?" Karen looked up into his dark eyes.

"Since being cursed, I have no' touched a woman in that way, lass. But tisna' for lack of wanting to. I have needed you and only you. But several times you did put me off when I would have taken you. Part of my reluctance to push the matter was as the Fairy said. I dinna' want to hurt you. Part of it was because I wanted to know you really wanted me. That you dinna' hate me because of what I was in another life."

Karen was flabbergasted. Two godlike men were proclaiming to want her in the same day. One of whom had her heart. "Then you and Amber aren't . . ."

He slowly shook his head. "Amber is a friend only." He stepped closer. "It was you we spoke of when we went in the woods. She said things much like what that Fairy did say. That I should care for you here and now. And that I should let you decide what is to be between us. So, I am asking, lass. Will you walk wi' me tonight?"

"And this isn't out of gratitude?"

"No. While I am grateful to you, there is so much more. So much that I would say to you while the moon shines upon us." He knelt before her and took her hands in his. "Please, my lady. Come into the woods with me. And I dunna' mean only to talk."

All she could do was nod. But sudden thoughts of his life after her death made her speak about the inevitable situation. She'd tried to put this off, but it couldn't be ignored any longer. "Having sex could kill me, Angus. I think you've always known that. If nothing else, the way I look should tell you I haven't got long and that any physical activity of the kind we're talking about might push me too far. But I want to be with you more than I've ever wanted anything in my life. So, whatever happens, I want you to remember this is my choice. You're not to blame yourself if I'm ill. I want it to be the happiest experience for both of us. Almost every situation we've been through together has been filled with joy and wonder. However long I have, I'll always be overwhelmed with happiness to have known you. Will you remember that? Will you remember the laughter and the fun things that happened to us? Will you go on and live happily for me, no matter what happens tonight?" she insistently asked. "If you can do that, I'll gladly go with you."

Determined not to let his sorrow show, Angus nodded, smiled up at her and pulled her into his embrace.

Karen knew if she did die tonight, it would be the happiest ending she could have ever wished for.

Angus slowly stood. "I will see you later, sweet lass. For now, I must find a spot for us that will be perfect." He kissed her and made it slow, long and hot. He wanted to wipe away all trace of the Fairy's touch from her lips. And to show her what it would be like with a man who really wanted her. But he was unprepared for the impact that kiss had on his own body. Angus wasn't ready for her soft,

hot-blooded response. Before he lost control, he moaned and pulled away. Then he turned back and smiled at her. His heart knew the truth of it. He wanted this sweet woman more than life itself. It took everything in him to leave. "Until later, my heart."

Karen lips trembled as she smiled at his retreating form. She damn well wanted this night. She just hoped and prayed that Angus had asked her to be with him because she was special and not because she was sick and he felt some kind of obligation. That would hurt far worse than saying no to him. But she'd find out what his real reason was, because tonight was hers. Karen vowed to make it the best experience of her life and the most unforgettable of Angus'. "Whatever it takes. Heart, don't fail me now," she muttered to herself. She suddenly broke into a grin. For someone with no time left, this was a magic place where a few last wishes could be fulfilled.

"Is it ready, old woman?" Roland looked at the bent hag before him and gritted his teeth. Between the brewing cauldron and her body odor, he was both repulsed and nauseated.

"No good will come of this, Goblin," she croaked.

"But it doesn't seem to bother you enough to refuse the money, does it?"

The old woman stooped over her boiling plants and sniffed loudly. "Shayla and her people don't give me enough pension to buy my ingredients any more. She says we all have to cut back, and that I can make better potions with forest herbs. But there are some things, like what I'm making for you, that can't be made from normal ingredients. Concoctions that are thousands of years old and that only I know how to make. It takes a skilled artist to mix herbs just so. The Sorceress doesn't appreciate me enough and never has." She stirred the mixture again and watched it turn green. "Besides, if I don't give you what you want, you'll go somewhere else to get it. Am I right?"

"You are," Roland admitted.

"Then it's just as well that I sell this to you and get from it what I can. Besides, it's really none of my business what you do with the stuff."

Roland grinned. "Right again, old woman. It isn't." He watched as the crone dripped some of her brew onto the ground. It sizzled and popped as she did so.

"It's ready, young pup. But remember, you didn't get it from me. Is that clear?"

He raised his hands up in agreement. "Absolutely!"

"Because if I thought Shayla would find out I'd been brewing such things . . . Well, let's just say there are many ways to get into a man's house. Things I could easily put into his food or drink. Or in the very clothes he wears." She paused and waited for her message to sink in. When he didn't respond, she turned away from her brew and toward him. "Do you understand my meaning, Goblin?"

Roland's eye narrowed as he gazed at the older woman. "Perfectly."

"Good." She picked up a green bottle, ladled some of the fluid into it, then poured the rest onto the ground. "Here is what you wanted."

"And this will work? You're sure?" he asked as he gazed at the bottle.

"It'll work. There's nothing on Earth like it." She pulled the bottle out of his reach when he would have taken it. "I'll have my payment, first."

"All right, you old crone. Here's your payment," Roland sneered as he pulled out a hunting knife and plunged it deep into the woman's breast. He watched as she choked on her own blood. Her eyes rolled back in her head and she fell, lifeless, to the ground. "There'll never, ever be anything like it on Earth again. And no damned cure, either."

He looked around the small clearing, threw the body over his shoulder and made his way deep into the part of the forest where the bogs oozed. The fog which hung over them would hide his presence. The thick mist and the bog would hide a body forever.

Eleven

Karen thought the anticipation would keep her from resting properly, but she knew it was necessary if they were to continue with their planned tryst. Sleep, however, finally came. The pain in her arm subsided, but hadn't entirely gone away. Her energy was failing, and she couldn't lose the sense of impending doom. And yet, she wanted so terribly to be with Angus. To be treated like a desirable woman and not an invalid. To that extent, Karen was willing to risk anything. As she'd thought so many times before, there was no way to stop what was happening to her. Whether in a sick bed days from now or in Angus' arms, the end would come. Much better to be with Angus, being made love to and happy. She sat up in bed and watched the sun setting outside the estate house. Her room was four stories up and gave her a perfect view of orange sky above tree tops. She showered, reached for her Druid robe, and brushed her hair. She had just decided to leave it loose when someone knocked on her door. "Come in." Angus opened the door and stepped into the room. She tried to catch her breath when he appeared, bare-chested, before her.

"Are you ready, lass?" he asked as he moved toward her.

She knew complete joy when he placed his hands upon her shoulders and pulled her to him. "Angus, tell me once more you're doing this because you want to. Not because you feel some obligation."

He leaned back enough to gaze into her eyes. "I do want this, Karen. My fear for your safety kept me distanced. But as the Fairy said, I should have considered what you might want. And if you are happy, then I will know endless joy."

He hugged her to him and she placed her head over his heart. "I'm ready," she whispered.

"As am I." He lowered his head and gently kissed her. She was sweetness and light itself. He would deny her nothing. Karen knew the risks, but much was revealed to him by her throwing those risks to the wind. First, he knew she cared for him

enough to give what she had given no other. And this was being done despite what she knew of his past. Second, she wanted to be with him at the end, even if that should come this night. It was an act so profound that he knew his heart would never want another.

He stepped away from her and took her hand. In silence, they walked from the castle and into the woods. Angus had picked a very special place. One he knew Karen would like. To anyone else, the location would have been ironically morbid. Angus himself had run from the place. But she had picked it to take eternal rest. Here, he would know her as a woman, and here she would be buried. It would become a place of both joy and sorrow. A place with memories of their time together. And maybe not so sad because of those memories.

Karen looked around her. "You know, don't you. You know this is where I want to be buried."

"Aye. O'Connor brought me here." He paused for a moment. "At first, it frightened me."

"No, Angus," she said as she took his hands in hers. "Don't be frightened of it. You brought me here so we could make a beautiful memory. And I want you to come here and think of this night. Will you do that for me?"

"Aye," he whispered, hoping the twilight hid the tears in his eyes, "I will remember only the love we share here tonight. For I do love you, my heart. I always will."

"Oh, Angus, I-I love you too!" she cried as she walked into his open arms.

He picked her up and carried her very near the small pond. There, he placed her gently upon a bed of Irish moss and stretched out next to her. "I want to show you all that is in my heart, little one. Tell you all the things I have never said to another soul."

She placed her palms against his cheeks and slid her hands into his black, silken mane. "Kiss me, Angus. Please, kiss me."

At first, he lowered his lips to meet hers in a slow, gentle manner. But he wasn't prepared for the passion which suddenly poured from her. It was as though a lifetime of holding back was being released into one fiery moment. It had his mind spinning. What a fool he had been! This should have happened much sooner. He matched her desire with his own. In his lifetime, he had never thought to know such union, such perfect harmony with another life.

Their tongues met and the kiss deepened. Her hands caressed the contours of his back and shoulders. She moaned and it drove him over the edge. He sat her up and pulled the gown over her head in one fluid motion. Even in her frailty, she was lovely. Small breasts fit exactly into his palms as he carefully cupped them. Lean thighs opened, begging him to take what he so desperately needed. For three hundred years, he had waited for a moment of bliss. A moment of perfect union. As he lowered her back to their mossy bed, one of his palms left her breast to smooth her inner thigh. Then higher. "It's like stroking the breast of a dove," he gasped.

She grasped his shoulders and pulled until he moved over her. Her hair fanned

out in a silken halo of honey-gold, gilded by the moon's light. He kicked off his boots then removed his leather pants with one hand. Then both hands found the juncture of her thighs and he gently stroked with his fingertips. When she cried out and thrust against him, he almost lost himself. Something in his conscience deliberately made him slow the pace. Karen must enjoy the moment as much as he. He had to be sure they were not moving too fast.

"Calm, you," he crooned. "The night is young."

"Please, Angus. I don't want to wait. I can't. I . . ."

He watched her back arch and her head go back. She thrust herself against his hands and moaned. His fingers made small circular motions against her so she might know more pleasure. Her wetness told him she was ready. She grasped his wrist to hold his hand to her. Then her thighs opened more and he lowered his head. Karen cried out as he gave her the most intimate of kisses. He heard her call out his name over and over. Then she collapsed upon the ground and lay very still. His heart almost stopped in fear. Slowly, she lifted one of her small hands to cover his. He pressed his palm to her soft, woman's place to warm her.

"Angus," she breathed.

He moved over her to cradle her within his embrace. But she opened for him as he did so. Thrusting into her seemed the most natural thing in the world. Her maiden head tore and she cried softly in pain. Then she smiled slowly and sweetly. As perfect as any smile he had ever seen.

"You're magnificent," she said, kissing his neck and chest.

He felt her heart beating far too fiercely beneath his palm, but she moved with him, urging him. "You are so verra' small, my sweet." He had to stop and catch his breath. "Do I hurt?"

"No," she panted, stroking his back. Her legs circled him.

He slowly pulled back, then moved into her again more fully. In order for her to feel him more thoroughly, he was deliberate with every move he made. Each caress and circle of his hips was meant to pleasure her. Because of his need, sweat beaded upon his body. Even though he wanted to take his time and luxuriate in the feel of her around his shaft, she sheathed him tightly. Angus found he needed release soon. It had been so very long. He could hold himself only a little more. It was too hot and far, far too good.

"Stop holding back, Angus. Let it happen, my love. Let it happen."

Her soft entreaty destroyed his efforts to control himself. His release came swift and hard. His cry of completion was loud and long. Then he collapsed over her resting only enough weight on his arms and thighs so as not to crush her. But enough of his body met hers to keep them in intimate contact.

He lay, replete, in her arms. Nothing had ever been so clear to him as his love for this wonderful woman. It consumed and captivated him. She stroked every part of him her hands could reach and he lifted her into his embrace. Then a sensation of pain came to him. He felt his chest ache horribly. It was like some kind of weight was crushing him and squeezing his heart all at once. It radiated in all directions and Angus realized he was physically sensing the result of Karen's efforts.

Their connection was that strong.

"My love?" He quickly sat up and pulled her carefully against him.

"It's all right," she gasped. "Everything will be all right."

Her smile was bright despite the darkness and waves of pain he knew she endured. "Tell me what you want, Karen. I will do as you say."

She felt him trembling with fear. If the choice were left to him, they'd be heading back to the estate and Shayla or some herbalist would be called to help her. But this was their time and she wanted nothing to interrupt it except the end. She knew it was near, but happiness filled her to the core. "Let's stay here, Angus. I want to stay right here with you. Only you. I want you holding me."

He rocked her and nodded. "Then it shall be so."

"I'm so happy. You have no idea how happy."

He felt it mingle with the pain. Deep, peaceful emotions poured into him. Never had he felt anything so fulfilling. Tears coursed down his cheeks at the sheer bliss and sadness of the moment. He pulled her robe toward them and covered her.

After a time, Karen slept. He was sure the intensity of her climax had taken from her the very strength to stay awake. Her sleep brought him a measure of relief because he hoped she would feel no pain in that state. The pain which he had sensed from her earlier was no longer present. And her heart slowed to a more normal pace as she quietly lay there. Still, she was too cold.

Lowering her to the ground from his embrace, he found wood nearby and piled it for a fire. A pass of his hand sent flames into the air and warmth through the small clearing. Angus stretched himself beside her, and Karen softly moaned. She instinctively turned into his arms for warmth and protection. These he gave her without pause. His fear for her would not allow rest. So he held her and pressed her breast against his that he might feel her frail heart beating.

I might have killed her. How could he survive without his heart? As though she could sense his fear, she comforted him. She rolled upon her back, pulling his head against her soft breast. Then her hands stroked his hair and shoulders. All this as she still slept. Angus let her hold him. He turned his head, nuzzled her breasts then, miraculously, found sleep himself.

Karen woke with a pounding in her veins that made her want to scream. Angus' embrace tightened around her and much of the pain left. He slowly lifted his head to gaze into her eyes, and she reveled in the sheer masculine beauty of him. For a long time, neither of them said anything. Then Angus rose, carefully pulling her with him.

"You will be my mate, Karen. As soon as you are able to walk, we will find Shayla and be handfasted. If you are too weary, I will carry you."

She grinned. "What if I say no?"

"You will not!" he growled playfully and nuzzled her cheek against his.

"Then, I guess I'd better agree."

"This time of the morn, the Sorceress will probably be near the great clearing. Can you travel that far?"

"Just try to keep me from it," she said, kissing him until he moaned. There wasn't much time. Now Karen's heart was beating far too slowly. They must find Shayla soon. He became obsessed with the idea that she should be his mate before another hour passed. He would pledge himself to her, and she would have the last things he could give. His love and his name. He helped her dress then pulled his own clothing on. Determined to save her strength, Angus picked her up and cradled her to him. The clearing was not so very far and, afterwards, they could return to the small glade as mates. And there they would stay until she finally passed from this life.

"Where could Roland be, Tearach? It's as if the man has disappeared from the face of the Earth." Pluck sighed. He had to run back and forth to keep up with the pacing Goblin Leader.

"I told him to stay on our land. But . . . and trust me on this . . . if a Goblin doesn't want to be found, then he won't be."

"You think he's up to no good, don't you?"

"He's half-crazed with anger over the Matthews woman. I don't know what he might do. I tried to talk sense into him."

"The Sorceress, Hugh, and some of the others should be here soon. Goblin or not, we'll find him," Pluck declared.

"Let's hope so, before he does something insane." Tearach ran a hand over his face in frustration.

As he spoke, Shayla and a large group of followers walked into the clearing. Tearach hadn't wanted to involve the Sorceress. But it was better that Roland be punished for disobeying his leader than for doing something worse. The expression on Shayla's face boded poorly for Roland.

"How long has he been missing?" she asked, as she approached the Goblin Leader.

"Since last night. He was supposed to take his turn standing guard over the eastern forest perimeter and didn't show up."

"But you have an idea what he might be doing, don't you?"

He noted her imperious look and ominous tone. The Sorceress was enraged. "I hope I'm wrong, but I believe he may be planning something against the little outsider."

"For your sake, as well as his, you'd better pray to Herne he doesn't touch that girl!" Shayla turned and addressed the others. "Find him. I want him back here before noon. And find Karen Matthews and Angus MacGregor. Doubtless, they'll be together. Take them to the estate and have them wait there until Roland is found."

"There are Angus and Karen now," Pluck's voice rang out as he pointed to the edge of the clearing.

"What has happened, Sorceress?" Angus asked as he walked forward and slowly lowered Karen. She leaned against him for support.

"Roland is . . . What has happened to her?" Shayla rushed toward Karen and

placed her hand upon the girl's shoulder. Karen was far paler than normal and struggling for breath.

"Please, I'm all right," Karen weakly announced.

Angus held Karen close. He momentarily forgot his initial confusion about the large gathering in the clearing. His greatest concern was for her. "I have come to have you handfast us, Sorceress. Will you do this?"

Shayla was silent for a moment, considering this most surprising request. She opened her mouth to speak when a cry of alarm rang out.

"Roland, no!" Tearach shouted.

Angus turned to see what had alerted the Goblin Leader. Tearach was racing toward the opposite side of the clearing where a lone figure stood, placing an arrow to a bow. The next few moments passed in agonizing, slow motion. With dawning horror, Angus realized Roland meant to loose his arrow on Karen. He grabbed her body and tried to step in front of her. He wasn't prepared for her response.

With a strength born of love, Karen twisted out of Angus' grasp and pushed him away. The arrow struck her in the back and she fell at his feet.

"Noooooooo!" Angus' agonized shout rent the air.

Too late, Tearach descended upon Roland and struck him to the ground. Angus neither saw the Goblin Leader's actions nor cared. He knelt and clutched Karen's form to him. A single drop of blood dripped from the corner of her mouth. Much more soaked the back of her garment. He pushed her hair back and gently supported her head. "Help me," he begged, to anyone who was near.

Shayla rushed forward with some of the others. "Let me see her," she commanded.

Though Angus would not release his hold, he turned her body so the arrow could be pulled from the wound in her back. Gryphon O'Connor tore off his tunic and handed it to Shayla as a compress. The Sorceress placed it against the wound and the blood seemed to slow. Karen slowly opened her eyes and came back to consciousness.

"He . . . didn't . . . hurt . . . you?" she brokenly whispered as she gazed up at Angus. She saw the tears in his eyes. Strangely, the pounding in her chest had stopped. There was no pain anymore.

Angus shook his head and sobbed. "'Twas no' me he wanted, lass. 'Twas you."

"He . . . hated that . . . that much?"

"He will neither hate nor breathe again. I swear!" Angus growled, even as his tears fell upon Karen's face.

"No, Angus!" Karen placed her hands on his cheeks. "You're not . . . not that man. Not . . . anymore!" she coughed and struggled to sit up.

"Hush you, lass. We will mend your wound and . . ."

She stopped him with a slow shake of her head. He held her closer. Blood had now soaked through the makeshift compress and covered his hands. He shook with grief.

"Promise me," Karen gasped. "Promise me . . . Don't hurt him . . . So few left."

Angus was overcome with agony. He could not bear the pain tearing into him. If only the arrow had struck him. If only so many things had been different. A picture of Elspeth flashed in his mind. He could hear the child saying, as she had so many years before, "They say you are a brute and a bully. But I do not believe them." Karen's eyes were so like Elspeth's. They had always kept their promises. Always. And he had failed to keep his. Karen was dying because he had not protected her.

"For you, my heart. I will promise to do anything you ask." He almost choked on the words.

Slowly and so very sweetly, she smiled up at him. "Love . . . you . . ."

"And I love you, Karen. Always."

Angus watched her draw one more breath. She smiled at him once more, then closed her eyes and drifted away. He buried his head against her shoulder and wept, uncaring who looked on.

Shayla sadly shook her head and quietly murmured. "We are dishonored! I promised no harm would come to her." She slowly turned away choking back tears as she did so. "Gryphon, help Angus take Karen to her room in the castle." Gryphon moved toward Angus and placed a hand on the grieving man's shoulder. Pluck walked forward and did the same. Like Angus, the little Elf openly wept. Finally, Angus stood and held Karen's form close to him. "I will carry her."

Shayla watched them walk away and waited until she could see them no more. Tears burned in her throat. "That girl didn't deserve this!" Her fists clenched, she angrily rounded on the growing crowd. Thunder, caused by the anger she felt, rolled through a clear blue sky. But Shayla was beyond caring about the effect her emotions were having over the elements.

Hugh's gentle arm fell across her shoulders. "Shayla, Tearach has bound Roland. They are waiting for you."

She looked into his eyes and saw sorrow there. "What would you counsel, Hugh?"

"I will support whatever decision you make, my Sorceress." He bowed his head as he spoke.

Shayla took a deep breath, slowly released it and forced herself to remain calm.

"Very well. There can be only one outcome for treachery so vile."

She turned and walked toward the Goblin Leader. Roland was on his knees at Tearach's feet. His hands had been bound behind him with a leather belt. For several minutes Shayla regarded the kneeling man before she spoke.

"What have you to say, Roland?" She paused and slowly circled him. "How brave you must feel! It took a great deal of courage to kill an unarmed, sick girl, didn't it?"

The Goblin looked up. "She was an outsider. The only good outsider, is a dead one!"

"How very original," Shayla shot back. "I can imagine anyone from Hitler to your garden variety white supremacist saying much the same thing. Shall I rank you among their numbers?"

"If you're going to pass judgement, you old crone, then do it. Or do you intend to bore me to death?" Roland growled.

Tearach grabbed the man by the collar and threw him at Shayla's feet. "Hold your tongue, fool!"

"Very well, coward!" Shayla angrily addressed him through clenched teeth. "I will pass judgement. But not just yet. There has been enough blood spilled for one day." Shayla motioned Lore and some of the Fairy faction forward. "Take him to the deepest part of the castle dungeons. Guard him day and night, and don't let anyone near him without my permission."

Tearach jerked Roland to his feet. "I will take him, Sorceress."

"You will stay right where you are. Roland isn't the only one who'll be judged, Tearach Bruce!" Before continuing, Shayla waited until Roland had been led away. Then she approached Tearach so that only he could hear her words. She was aware of Goblins standing some distance away, waiting to see what would happen. Tearach raised his head in pride. "I accept responsibility for Roland, Sorceress. I'll do as you wish."

Her heart softened only a little. Tearach was not Roland. The man was a good leader, but his reinforcement of an eight-year-old hatred had led to the death of an innocent. Tearach would suffer a punishment befitting his actions. "Three days from now, Roland will be put to death."

Tearach let out a slow breath, closed his eyes and bowed his head. "As you command."

"On that same day, you will be judged as well. Men and women are led by example. Your only example has been a legacy of hatred."

"What else have we been left, Sorceress?" He lifted his head. "Do what you must. I will accept whatever punishment you deem fitting. Perhaps, by the end of the week, you'll only have forty-six of us left to trouble you!"

Shayla gasped at his audacity. "Remove yourself from my presence. Your punishment shall be the very worst thing, short of death, that I can imagine."

"As you command." He bowed, then turned to walk away. But the Sorceress' next words stopped him.

"Before you go, you should know that the outsider begged for Roland's life just before she died. She has not only shamed you, but outclassed you as well." She saw both confusion and remorse in his expression. Shayla almost felt pity for the Goblin Leader. Clearly, her revelation deeply disturbed him. He slowly turned away. She watched as he strode into the forest. His faction followed.

Hugh walked forward to stand beside Shayla. "Tearach's heart is full of poison, but I knew him when he wasn't like this. Surely, deep down, he's sorry for what Roland did."

"I don't know, Hugh. If he isn't, I can promise you he will be."

Twelve

Angus stared out the window. He didn't see the beautiful sunset or the dark green of the trees. A gentle breeze blew and lifted his hair, but he couldn't feel its warmth. There was nothing left to feel. Every single thing he had ever loved had been systematically taken from him—from a tiny brown puppy that died beneath a baker's cart so many years ago, to all those who had ever cared for him. And now he was simply supposed to go on. How? How could he ever care about another soul only to have that being torn away? He took a deep breath and turned.

Karen lay so still. Oddly, there was a peaceful, almost joyful expression upon her face. Without the constant pain haunting her every hour, she was exquisite. It seemed she grew more so with each hour that passed. As soon as the Sorceress gave permission, her frail form would be lowered into the ground. Then he recalled why he had been looking for Shayla in the first place. He strode to the bedroom door, swung it open until it hit the wall, and saw Gryphon O'Connor standing guard.

"Please ask the Sorceress if she would come."

Gryphon nodded, then walked away. Angus watched him leave. He had made two promises this day. One was not to seek vengeance upon the cowardly Goblin who had taken Karen's precious life. But the other . . . that promise was an earlier one made between himself and the dead girl lying on the bed. He had yet to make good on this.

He began to pace, anxious for the Sorceress to arrive. His request would not be denied. After all, what harm could there be in it now? When voices sounded in the hallway, he knelt beside Karen's body and took her hand. It was strange, but she should be colder. He was no novice to death, and Karen's hand seemed warm. As Shayla entered the room with a questioning expression on her face, he thought no more about Karen's body temperature. His mind was too focused on doing for her what he had promised.

Shayla stopped at the foot of the bed and clasped her hands before her. Watching Angus holding Karen's hand, she couldn't imagine he would ever get over the loss. She spoke quietly. "What would you ask of me, Angus?"

"Remember what I asked you in the clearing? Just before Karen . . . Before . . ."

Shayla was momentarily confused, then she understood. "You wanted to handfast with her."

"Aye, and I still do. I made her a promise. We exchanged oaths of love in the forest. Surely you could have no objection to our handfasting now. She canna' be considered an outsider, for her life is gone."

She shook her head. "Angus, you can't be serious. What possible reason could you . . ."

"I beg you," he said as his voice broke.

She studied him for several long moments and then sighed. "All right, man. You shall have your handfasting." She turned and went to the door. "Come in, all of

you. I need witnesses."

Hugh, Lore, Gryphon and Heather O'Connor filed into the room. Almost lost in the crowd, Pluck forced his way forward. Shayla raised her hand for silence. "This night, Angus O'Connor wishes to handfast with Karen Matthews, an outsider who came among us in peace. As tradition demands I have asked you to witness this joining of souls, and I ask if there are any who would challenge this mating?"

Angus looked at the stunned faces of those standing around the room. Some lowered their heads as if they might better hide their sorrow. When no challenge was made, he began his pledge. He took Karen's hand in both of his.

"I pledge you my honor, love, loyalty and life. For now and all time." He finished the promise with a soft kiss upon Karen's lips. When he looked back at the assemblage, it appeared they had been carved from stone. No one moved or made a sound. Angus carefully placed Karen's hand back by her side and rose. Some small part of him began to feel again and the emotion was not unpleasant. In fact, it was warm, as if a tiny part of his heart mended. If only just a bit.

"As they have promised their love, I bind them," Shayla said as she raised her hands. A warm breeze blew through the room. "Blessed Be!"

Gryphon was the first to speak. Though he did so softly in reverence of the moment. "This is well done of you, MacGregor. You're a man of honor and I'm proud to call you friend. Well done!"

The two men clasped arms, and then the rest of those present began to speak. They offered words of comfort and invited him to their homes. Angus came to realize he had not lost everything. He had actually made friends. But, no matter how these people befriended him, his heart would always ache for what might have been.

"Angus." Shayla placed a calming hand upon his shoulder. "Go with Lore and Gryphon to make her place ready. Heather and Amber will cleanse and properly attire Karen. When they're through, Pluck will stand guard outside the door, as tradition requires. We'll lay her to rest tomorrow."

Angus glanced back at Karen and nodded. This had to be done. And the sooner it was over, the sooner he could be alone with her again. He would keep her company in the little glade and tell her everything that would go on in the years to come. The same as her kin had done for him for centuries.

Angus swallowed hard. He and a great many others stood in the hallway outside Karen's room. They awaited his permission to enter and retrieve the body for burial. Only he, as Karen's acknowledged mate, could give such permission.

He nodded. "Let this be done."

Pluck, as guardian, turned to open the door and moved to let Angus through first. Angus slowly walked into the room. He glanced at the bed and his heart almost stopped. "What has happened to her?" He began to gasp for breath. It was as though he had run an incredible distance and a sense of panic seeped into him. It was terrifying. He turned as the Sorceress and some of the others entered the room. "She is no' here. Someone has taken her!"

"That's not possible," Pluck declared as he entered the room. "After Heather and

Amber left her, no one entered. No one!"

Hugh quickly walked to the window. "There's simply no way anyone could have entered through here and taken her. We're four stories up and the wall is unclimbable."

"Karen is gone. Someone has to have taken her," Angus growled, then pushed Hugh aside to look out the window himself. He already knew what he would see. The same view as he had the day before. He ran from the room to inspect the ground below. Lore and Gryphon were close on his heels.

"Heather, Amber, when did you last leave this room?" Shayla asked. The expressions on the women's faces could only be described as numb.

Heather and Amber looked at one another.

Finally, Heather found her voice first. "It was just before midnight. And I don't think there's a way on this green Earth anyone could have taken Karen down the side of the castle. Even if such a thing could be done, how would it happen without someone in the forest knowing?"

"Exactly!" Shayla muttered. "Everyone follow me." She and the crowd made their way to the ground beneath Karen's window. Lore, Angus and Gryphon were searching every inch of the grass.

Lore stood from his kneeling position and faced Shayla. "There isn't a sign of anyone having been here. Let alone someone carrying a body."

"Someone has taken her!" Angus gasped. He was beside himself with anger. He thrust his hands into his hair and stared into the forest.

"Sorceress, Angus has had about as much as one man can take. I suggest we take him inside, and give him a potion to calm him. Then we can start a proper search," Gryphon tactfully murmured.

Shayla watched as Angus began to pace. Sweat poured from him, and he had the look of someone about to go mad. "I agree. You and some of the others take him inside. Tie him, sit on him, or whatever else you have to do. Don't let him go into the woods until I say so. Hugh and I are going to have a talk with Tearach."

"You suspect he might know something about this?" Gryphon asked.

"I don't know, but, by Herne, I'll find out!"

Angus tried to fight them. All he could think of was that someone had taken Karen's poor body and was even now defiling it. Again, three-hundred-year-old words came back to haunt him. "I hope someone hurts you..."

"Come with us, man. There's nothing you can do the Sorceress won't." Gryphon said, trying to encourage him to stop struggling.

"Why?" Angus looked into the other man's face. "She could no' harm another now. Karen was no threat. Why . . . would . . . Why?"

Gryphon sighed. He and the other men renewed their grip on the larger man's arms. "I don't know, Angus. But we're your friends. We'll help the Sorceress find out, I promise. Just stop fighting us and come along."

Angus stopped struggling and glanced at their faces. There was nothing left in his brain but a darkened cavity. He could not summon the wits to take action. Truly, this was another punishment sent by the Goddess. One as bad or worse than

anything he had ever known.

"Karen?" he whispered and gazed into the woods. The others shoved him into the castle. Angus would never remember the hours that followed. It was as though all conscious thought shut down.

Shayla and Hugh made their way to the southern part of the forest. They knew the Goblins were well aware of their presence. It wouldn't be long before Tearach was notified and made an appearance. Of all the creatures in The Shire, Goblins were the most suspicious and kept their guard vigilant.

"I'm here, Sorceress," Tearach called and emerged from a dense thicket. He nodded to Hugh in greeting. "There's a problem?"

"As news here travels fast, I'm sure you know all about it," she responded. "You must also know the question I've come to ask. Do you know anything about Karen's disappearance?"

"You're right. I have heard what's happened. Some of the Pixies sent word through the woods as you made your way here. And that you would remotely suspect my people or me of taking the girl's body is the lowest insult, among many, we've suffered lately." He paused, trying to calm his anger. "I've already ordered my best trackers to begin searching with the Fairies. Is there anything else before I join them, Sorceress?"

Shayla slowly walked forward until she stood within a foot of the Goblin Leader.

"If an apology is warranted then you will have it. But if any of your people took that girl to keep her from being buried on Goblin land, you'll join Roland in death!"

Tearach watched as Shayla and Hugh walked away. Threats to his life meant nothing. His was a dying race. All the Goblins had left was their honor, and that he would salvage. Rumors were already spreading that the Goblins had scavenged the body. He turned on his heel and quickly reentered the forest. He was determined to clear his people of any suspicion.

Two days later, no sign of Karen's body had been found. Finally, Shayla released Angus from his forced confinement. Angus immediately bolted into the woods and began to search every inch of ground from beneath Karen's window to the forest. He systematically widened his search to no avail. He neither ate nor drank. He occasionally came across groups of Fairies, Druids or others who had no better luck. In agony at having failed her, he retreated into himself and avoided all contact. He made his way to the little glen where, even now, she should have been resting in peace.

"Forgive me, my love. I should have guarded you myself. I should have never left your room," Angus cried as he plunged his hands into his hair and dropped to his knees. "This canna' be happening."

He would rest only long enough to slake his thirst at the little spring-fed pool, and then he'd begin the search again and never stop. If it took the rest of his life, he would find out where she had been taken and why. It was no accident that Goblins

had not crossed his path. He was sure Shayla or their leader had ordered them to avoid him at all costs. In his present state, he could quite easily start a confrontation that would last until someone lay dead.

He dipped his hands into the clear water of the pond. One drink and he would begin searching again. The cool liquid ran down his throat, but it did little to calm his shattered nerves. His hands shook so hard he could barely bring more water to his lips. He gazed down at his reflection. "Damn you," he cursed himself. "You should never have brought her here. Never!" He stood and turned to leave.

"Angus?"

For a second, he believed he must have imagined the soft, strange voice. It was accompanied by a tinkling. As if crystals were striking against one another. And yet, there was something familiar in it. For several moments, he remained absolutely still.

Nothing. No sound could be heard at all.

Angus shook his head. I must be going mad. Perhaps it would be easier to exist in such a state.

"Angus. Help me."

He began to shake. His senses now told him there was a strange being near, but it was unlike anything he had ever encountered. It was a presence so strong and magical that it had him on his knees again.

"Who is there?" he whispered. Since the sound seemed to come from all around him, Angus was not sure he could trust his senses to discern a location.

"I-I'm frightened."

A reflection in the water caught and held his gaze. He looked up. No words would come. His throat tightened and a mist of tears covered his vision. Above him, curled on the arched branch of an oak, was a vision. For surely that was what it must be. She stretched out a hand toward him and long silver-blond hair fell over her shoulder. Her blue-green eyes held and bewitched him.

"Please, tell me how I got here. What in the world happened to me?"

"Karen!" he shouted. "By all that's sacred . . ."

He stood, stretched out his arms and she placed her hands on his shoulders. He pulled her from the tree, crushed her to his chest and believed he was insane.

"Oh, Angus," she wept. "It was so dark. I was so afraid!"

For a very long time, he held her without moving or speaking. He was afraid she would vanish and he would be alone again. Surely, existing in this sweet madness would be better than the last few days of his life.

Finally, she pushed herself away far enough to gaze up into his eyes.

Angus barely noticed that she was wearing some kind of gauzy, silver gown. It was virtually translucent. But he did notice that her body was no longer gaunt, but luscious and healthy. Full, rounded breasts pressed against him, and her legs were incredibly long and perfectly formed. His hands skimmed a tiny waist and stroked her back. He brought them up to cup her face, then plunged his fingers into the pale mane of waist-length hair. He gasped at the sight of her sweet, pointed ears. She had undergone some magical transformation, but she was still his Karen. He

lowered his head and slanted his mouth over hers. Their tongues met and they sank to the ground.

Angus' hands tore her gown apart and his breath came in gasps. "I dunna' know what enchantment this is. If my mind is crazed, then I want no part of sanity." She helped him shed his own garments, their hands grasping at each others flesh. Her back arched over one of his powerful arms and he took his fill of her breasts. She moaned his name over and over. The palm of his free hand stroked the insides of her thighs and she opened for him.

"Take me, Angus," she cried.

His body demanded he do so. Any thought of gently entering her fled with his urgent need. He lowered her onto a patch of Irish moss, covered her, then thrust hard. Her entire body responded to the joining. She matched his rhythm perfectly and their eyes never lost contact. She screamed his name. Seconds later, he responded by spilling his seed into her and collapsing upon her warmth. When he tried to push away she held him fast.

"Don't. Don't pull away just yet. Let me feel you."

The tinkling which accompanied her voice had him entranced. Their sweat-glistened bodies fit together perfectly, despite the fact that her womb was so very tight. Panting, she pushed his hair away from his face and began to place small kisses upon his neck and chest. He cradled her against him and knew perfect serenity.

"You're crying," she whispered as her fingertips brushed away his tears.

"'Tis happiness causes me to weep. I thought I had lost you."

"Lost? What do you mean?"

He looked into her azure eyes and saw a measure of innocence there that alerted him. "Karen, my heart, what do you last remember?" He watched her gaze scan his features, then saw an expression of horror pass over her face.

"That man . . . that Goblin . . . he had a bow and arrow. I saw him aiming at us."

She stopped to think. Angus comforted her and spoke soothingly.

Karen knew there was more, but she just couldn't recall it. "That's all I remember. Then I woke up on that branch when I heard your voice." She pointed to the limb of the oak which arched over them.

"Is there nothing else you can remember?" He stroked her gently and cocooned her body with his.

"No. But, like in a dream, it seemed I could hear voices. As if they were coming from a distance. Some seemed sad. And I think I heard you. I wanted to come to you, but everything was so very dark." She buried her head against his shoulder, but he held her so close she wasn't afraid anymore.

Angus sat up and pulled her onto his lap. He held her as he would a small child and crooned to her for a time.

She smiled up at him and placed his hand over her left breast. "Whatever happened, I'm not sick anymore. Can you feel how strong my heart is beating? There's no pain. I feel as though I could make love to you for hours," she said and smiled brightly.

"That is no' all that has happened. You have . . . changed . . . a wee bit." He pulled a thick portion of her long hair forward so she could see it.

"My hair was never this long! And it wasn't this blond, either." She sat up slowly, but Angus kept his arms around her. She looked down at her body, cupped her own breasts and slid her hands lower. "What's happened to me?"

"Come, sweetness. Let me show you." He stood and lifted her into his arms as though she were a piece of fine crystal. Then he slowly lowered her at the pond's edge. "Look at your reflection."

Karen looked down into the water. She stretched out a hand toward the image.

"That isn't me. It can't be." She turned to him in alarm. "Angus, what's going on?"

"I dunna' know, little one. But magic has been used upon you." He looked up at the darkening sky. "We will stay here for the night, and I will try to fill the gaps within your memory. But you must promise me something."

"Anything."

He pulled her fiercely to him. "Promise to never be frightened. For I will fight any demon for you, and I will hold you so tightly that nothing ever threatens you. And no matter how I explain about what has happened, trust me and know that I love you."

"I trust you and as long as you're near, I'll never be afraid of anything again. I love you, too. So very, very much!"

Angus held her and carefully explained the details from the time Roland had loosed his arrow. Karen patiently listened. It was eerie, hearing about her own funeral arrangements. She surmised that the voices she'd heard were those people coming and going out of her room. When he got to the part where she turned up missing and how everyone searched for her, she could see the utter anguish in his eyes. She wrapped her arms around his neck and softly stroked his massive shoulders. The story finally stopped when he decided to come to the glade. And that part she remembered. He choked on the next words and Karen's heart broke for him.

"I thank the Goddess we dinna' bury you. You were only enchanted, no' dead. If we had gone through with the burial . . . I canna' think of it!"

"Hush, my love. Hush. It didn't happen." She was glad it was her turn to offer comfort. He nuzzled her neck and she could feel him shaking with raw emotion. Once Angus calmed her fears, the logical part of her mind began to work again. She'd never felt so strong, vital and alive. "Angus, there must have been something on the arrow, something Roland did with it that changed me. I would have died otherwise." She felt him shudder.

He slowly pulled away and stared at her beautiful face. High cheekbones were set below those incredibly colored eyes and her pink, full lips were hauntingly soft. "I dunna' care where the magic originated. You are here and that is all that matters. For this night, I will love you senseless. Tomorrow, we will go to the Sorceress and ask our questions."

Karen slowly dropped back upon the mossy bed and spread her thighs. Angus moaned and kissed her from one ankle up to her abdomen. His fingers began a

sensual stroking that soon had her arching off the ground. Their need was too great to be denied. They loved until their cries rent the air. Finally, Karen fell into a deep sleep in his arms and he soon followed. But there was never an instant, even in slumber, when he let her break his embrace. She would never have the chance to disappear again. So close was his body to hers, he could listen for every breath she took, every sigh she made.

With the first light of dawn, Angus slowly awoke. Karen's presence assured him that he had not dreamed her back into life. She was real and his heart sang with joy. Her warm body pulsed with health and vitality, and he wondered how he, Shayla and the others could have thought her dead. But since magic had been used to transform her into whatever creature she now was, it was highly possible her deathlike slumber could not have been detected. He closed his eyes and nuzzled her silken hair. How had she come to leave her room? The Sorceress might be able to solve the mystery after seeing Karen again. She took a deep breath and cuddled closer to him. Then her beautiful eyes opened, and she smiled so brightly his heart almost broke with happiness. "You are too sweet, my love."

"So are you," she said with a sigh. She stretched against him, unwilling to leave the safety of his muscular arms.

"We should find the Sorceress and have her call off the search. Every faction of the Order is out looking for you."

"I had a strange dream. I remember being in the dark and trying to find some light. I was climbing up something. But I don't remember anything after that. It's all a blur."

They sat up together, he gently kissed her. "Dunna' trouble yourself, Karen. There is a reason for all that has happened. We will find Shayla and she will help us make sense of it."

Karen nodded and stood up with him. She looked down at herself and smiled. "I don't think I should show up like this. Do you?"

"If it were up to me, you'd never wear another thing. But, since I want no man perusing your pleasures but me, I will find someone along the way to bring clothing for you." He grinned. "Preferably someone female."

After pulling on his leather pants and boots, he protectively wrapped his jerkin and then his arms around her. They walked away from the little glade, stopping often to kiss or hug. And when a passing Pixie caught Angus' attention, he sent her ahead of them with a message for Shayla to bring clothing and meet them at the cottage Angus and Karen had shared when they first arrived.

Shayla burst into the library of the estate. Hugh looked up and knew something monumental had occurred. Shayla's expression could only be described as incredulous. "What has happened?" he asked.

"Word has just come to me that Karen has been found. Angus is bringing her back to their cottage."

"Why there? Has he any news of who might have taken her body?" Hugh placed the ledger he'd been reading on a table and stood.

"You're probably not going to believe this any more than I do, but Karen isn't dead!"

"What?" Hugh gasped.

"Apparently, Angus found her semiconscious in the woods. Nude. In a tree."

Shayla stopped to lean upon a desk. "I don't believe anyone took her away at all."

Hugh shook his head in disbelief. "This is impossible. We saw her die. All of us."

"No, my man, we saw her shot with an arrow and only thought she was dead."

Shayla paused and paced the length of the room, thinking. "Hugh, summon everyone to the great clearing. Have Lore and Gryphon bring that toad, Roland, from the dungeon."

"Aye, Shayla." He nodded and left the room.

"Extraordinary! This whole thing is just unbelievable," Shayla muttered as she left the room to find clothing for Karen.

Angus opened the door to the cottage before Shayla had to raise her hand to knock. "Sorceress, I am pleased to see you."

Shayla stepped through the door and almost collapsed. There, sitting before the fireplace drinking tea, was Karen Matthews. But the woman had morphed into a creature whose like she'd never seen. Karen stood, wearing nothing but a blanket. Shayla sensed great magic in her, but it was very soft and ethereal. Unlike anything that existed in the Order.

"Come forward, child. Let me look at you," Shayla commanded.

Karen walked toward her. "I guess it would be an understatement to say I've changed a little," Karen remarked. "I don't know what happened to me. One minute I saw that man about to shoot an arrow toward us, then I woke up in the branch of a tree looking like this." Karen opened the blanket so that Shayla could see her body.

Shayla tilted her head and listened when she heard the musical sound accompanying Karen's voice. She immediately moved forward and placed a palm against Karen's cheek. Then she lifted the younger woman's hair and saw the pointed ears and noted the change in eye color as well. "Take my hands, Karen." Karen let the blanket fall to the floor and did as Shayla bid. The Sorceress closed her eyes and seemed to concentrate. A wave of sensations flooded Karen and she also closed her eyes. In her mind, Karen saw a large fir tree outside the roof of the estate. She saw herself climbing down it and running for the woods. Then a mist appeared. It gradually began to clear and she saw handsome men and stunning women resting within the branches of trees. They were clothed in transparent garments of the most amazing colors. The women wore sensually crafted gowns and the muscular men wore little more than loin cloths. By lifting their hands and concentrating, they were able to materialize more of the magical cloth they wore and change the color of the shimmering fabric to fit their surroundings. She understood this metaphysical ability helped conceal them in the lush growth of the forest or could even express a mood. The presence of the cloth was accomplished with nothing more than pure thought and will. It was magic in its most elemental

form.

Karen slowly opened her eyes and Shayla was staring at her in wonder. "You know what I've become, don't you? Are there others like me?"

"Sadly, no. The last of them died a millennium ago. They were known as Dryads." Shayla smiled at her and stroked her hair away from her face. "It seems, one of them is among us again. My dear, dear Karen."

Karen frowned for a moment. "I was dying, now I'm well." She paused and tilted her head. "How did I become this . . . Dryad? What is a Dryad and how was I healed?"

Shayla motioned for them to be seated as she took a chair beside Karen. "No one knows why they disappeared. Like so many of our kind, there may have simply not been a place in the world for them any longer. They guarded the sacred trees of our lands, lived in them to ensure their protection. They were among the most elemental of all the creatures here and had powers which helped all plant life flourish. And they heartily disliked being indoors for too long. When you came up missing, I believe your instincts drove you to a place where you felt safe, peaceful. Whatever was done to you originated from dark magic. And if my guess is correct, that magic somehow backfired and produced . . . you."

Karen thought for a long moment. She was aware of Shayla and Angus watching for her reaction. "Then, I'm not exactly an outsider any longer, am I?"

Shayla laughed. "I should say not, my girl. Your kind were here before Druids ever set foot upon this soil. They were, in many respects, the teachers of what we now practice as Druid magic."

Karen smiled and looked at them both. "Then I can stay with Angus? We can be . . ." She searched for the word Angus had used. "Handfasted?"

"Angus has already handfasted with you," Shayla said and laughed at her expression of surprise.

"I remember his asking you if we could, but we never actually got to do it."

"Uh, yes we did, lass," Angus responded. "When I thought you dead, I had the Sorceress handfast us in front of an entire room of witnesses."

"You did that believing I was dead? Why?"

"Because 'twas a promise I made you. And I love you. So shocked was I at finding you alive and in a tree, I suppose I must have forgotten to tell you," he explained with a shrug.

"Don't worry, Karen. We'll redo the entire ceremony properly. And you'll be able to actually respond this time."

Shayla patted her hand and smiled.

Karen stared at Angus. "That is the most incredibly romantic thing I think I've ever heard. You married me, even though you thought I was dead?" She jumped into his embrace. "Oh, Angus, I love you so much!"

"You had better, I will never let you go," he replied, kissing her soundly.

Shayla tactfully rose to leave. "I'll let you two have some time together. Then I want Karen dressed and both of you in the great clearing within the hour. I've left a bundle of clothing outside that should fit."

After Shayla quietly left and closed the door, they made love in front of the fireplace. Angus had to force himself to break the tryst. "We must hurry and dress, love. I believe Shayla means to have an answer as to what happened to you." "However it happened, I'm so grateful to be alive. I'm so happy about everything." She hugged him again and placed her head against his chest. "Aye, lass, so am I. So am I," Angus replied and hugged her fiercely.

Thirteen

"Bring the wretch forward," Shayla demanded as Lore and Gryphon pulled Roland to the center of the clearing. Hundreds of Druids, Fairies, and others stood in a circle, waiting to see what would be the Goblin's fate. "Untie him." Shayla watched as the two larger men cut Roland's leather bindings.

He rubbed his wrists at the chafing the bindings caused. "It doesn't matter what you do to me, Sorceress. I've seen an outsider die and avenged my family."

"And it didn't matter to you that the girl had nothing whatsoever to do with the deaths of your loved ones?" Shayla asked.

"They all carry blame. They allow that putrid waste to be manufactured, and then they dump it where they will just to save some precious money. They should all die and leave the Earth to those who will respect it."

"Tearach, step forward," Shayla ordered. The Goblin Leader did as he was asked and stood beside Roland. "I hear his hatred and find it repeated among those of your faction. You, as their leader, have the power to condemn this poisonous thinking, but you let it fester. Why?"

Everyone became quiet. Tearach held his head up proudly and spoke in a strong, deep voice. "I've just received word from Salisbury that three more Goblin children were stillborn. One of their mothers died trying to give birth." The crowd gasped and he waited until the impact of what he was saying sank in. "Since the poisoning of our sacred water in Exmoor, not one newborn child has lived more than a few hours. In an attempt to strengthen our blood, we've tried mating with Druids, Fairies, Brownies and anyone in the Order who would make the mistake of loving us. But the babies still die. None of the Druid physicians or scientists seem to have an answer. No one offers us any explanation. Eight years ago, hundreds of us were slaughtered. And the dying goes on. In one horrifying day, we lost most our loved ones to outsiders, and they are killing us still. Along with our families, they took something no one can restore." He paused. "They took hope!"

He circled the area and looked into the faces of those who watched. "I don't condone Roland's actions. The Sorceress gave her word the outsider would be safe, and her word is law. But you can't blame him for what he feels. As the Sorceress said, I am his leader and I, too, feel the hatred and absolute outrage in being the last of our kind. With the death of the Goblin mother, excluding the stillborn

Goblin babes, there are now only forty-seven of us left. If there's to be judgement passed today, let me receive it. For I can't order my people to forgive, much less forget!"

There were murmurs in the crowd. Shayla raised her hand to silence them. "So be it, Tearach. You stand in place of your second-in-command. But before I pass judgement, I want one thing from Roland. I demand that he tells me what kind of magic he used when he shot his arrow into Karen Matthews."

Tearach turned to Roland. "If you used some kind of enchantment, tell her."

"I'll take my punishment, Tearach. There's no need for you to do this. I don't care what happens to me anymore," Roland loudly declared.

"The thing is done. Now, I command you," Tearach persisted. "Tell the Sorceress what she wants to know."

Roland relented. "I wanted to make very sure the outsider died. There's a potion known to me that's made from all the most poisonous plants and trees. Once introduced into a body, it leaves no trace of its existence. I could have put it in her food and no one would have been the wiser. But I didn't care who saw me use it. I wanted to be very certain it got into her and that I was there to see her face. And to make doubly sure the concoction worked, I prayed to Herne to bless it and give it the power to undo the course of the outsider's life. Then I dipped the tip of my arrow into the brew so she would suffer before she died."

"You took no chances," Tearach sarcastically responded.

Shayla watched the Goblin Leader's expression. While Roland had spoken, something like repulsion crossed Tearach's face. Perhaps his heart wasn't as hard as even he believed. Shayla turned and gestured with her hand. The crowd parted. Gasps of surprise and utter shock echoed their way around the clearing when Angus walked forward with Karen. She was wearing a Druid robe of pale blue. It accentuated her shimmering beauty. But, even with the changes in her physical appearance, there was no mistaking who she was.

"No!" Roland cried out. "My aim was true. There was no way she could have survived."

Shayla turned to him. "You're a fool. In your hatred, you forgot two things. First, you cannot ask a deity to harm anyone and hope that such a request will be fulfilled. Second, when you requested that Herne undo the course of her life, you stopped Karen from dying. She had a terminal heart condition. That was the course of her life. She was supposed to die, and you asked Herne to undo that." For a moment, Roland looked confused, then plunged his hands into his dark hair. "No! There's no place for her here."

"Look at her Roland. Look into the face of the woman you would have butchered. Whatever words you uttered or potion you used, they have changed her. This is Herne's answer to your hatred. She is now a creature of absolute peace and beauty. Nothing you do can harm her." Shayla paused. "And I will know where you gained the knowledge for such an insidious potion."

Roland screamed in rage. Before anyone could stop him, he pushed a nearby Fairy to the ground and grabbed the man's dirk from his belt. Then he ran toward

Karen. He raised his hand as Angus stepped forward, shielding Karen with his own body. A whooshing sound was followed by a resounding thud. Roland's face took on a sickening, surprised look. He turned around and women screamed.

Karen buried her head against Angus' shoulder and he held her.

Roland looked at Tearach. The knife penetrating his back had been thrown by his own leader. "Tearach ... my ... friend ... "

Tearach ran forward and caught Roland just before he hit the ground. "I'm sorry, Roland. Forgive me. I had to stop you."

"I-It's all right, my leader. I'll see my babes this night. We'll be together again ... We'll be ..."

Roland gasped hideously. His eyes rolled to one side and he died in Tearach's arms. The Goblin Leader gently lowered Roland to the ground and removed his knife. When he stood, everyone was absolutely quiet. There were tears clouding Tearach's vision. "Now, only forty-six."

"I'm so sorry. This is all my fault," Karen wept as Angus held her. They sat on a sofa in the library. A fire burned brightly at one end of the room, and Angus chose a comfortable place for them both to be near it.

"Ach, lass, dunna' fash yourself so. 'Twas Roland's own hatred which caused this, believe me. Hatred is a subject in which I once excelled. Hush you, now."

"Angus is right, Karen. There's nothing to be done about it now," Shayla agreed and pressed a glass of wine into the girl's hand.

"Why did Tearach stop him. I'd have thought he would want to see me dead."

Shayla lifted a hand in denial. "I don't believe so. Not anymore. And I've summoned him here to force him to talk. Do you mind?"

"No, Shayla, I think ... I think I'd very much like to talk to him."

Angus spoke up. "If you don't mind, Sorceress, Karen has been through too much. 'Tis I who should speak with the Goblin Leader. I know more about what he is going through than any other person alive."

She considered his request. "All right. I'll have a room made ready for Karen."

"No." Karen stood up and shook her head. "I can't stay inside. Please. I feel like I need to get out of this building or I'll go out of my head." She began to shiver and every cell in her body cried to be outside in the fresh air.

"Karen, It will be all right, lass. Let me ... "

She pushed Angus' arms away. "No! I have to get out. Someone, please listen ... I have to go."

"There, there, child," Shayla came forward and held her. When Shayla saw Angus' look of concern, she smiled to alleviate his fears. "She has been inside for too long. I should have remembered that, but I've never had a Dryad in our midst before. It will take a bit of getting used to. And this one will have to adjust." Shayla pushed Karen's hair back. "Come along, dear. I'll take you back to your little glen."

Karen didn't know what was wrong and she began to sob. There was just too much happening. A man was dead while she was miraculously alive. But she had been changed into something her mind and body just couldn't accept as yet. All

she wanted was for Shayla to hold her and to get out of the building. Even Angus' murmured consolations did no good. She was frightened. No one had ever wanted her dead before. This dream world was quickly becoming a nightmare.

As Shayla was preparing to leave with Karen, Angus tried to follow. They got as far as the foyer when Karen stopped and turned to face him. "Angus, please stay here. I-I want to be with Shayla. Or Heather. Please, don't follow me tonight. Please?"

"Why, lass? We should be together." Angus was mystified over her request. Shayla held up a hand in a calming gesture. "This has to be very traumatic for her, Angus. Let her have some space."

For a long moment, Angus gazed into Karen's eyes. "All right, love. I will do anything you ask."

"Thank you," she whispered in response.

"Stay here, Angus. Wait for Tearach and tell him whatever you think will make a difference," Shayla advised. "There are some papers on my desk which include copies of computer photos. You might know them as pictures or images. You'll see what I'm speaking about. Karen found them while working and brought them to my attention. The pictures aren't very pleasant, but it might help you decide how to approach Tearach."

"Aye," he responded and watched them walk away. When he could see them no longer, Angus walked into the library, helped himself to some Scotch and waited for the Goblin Leader's arrival. He looked over the scattered papers on the Sorceress' desk and felt bile rise within him. What he saw among the images on the desk was heartbreaking. And he immediately connected the faces in those images with the Goblins' plight. He did not consider himself an eloquent man, but the words he would say had to be well considered. Much was at stake. He could almost feel the Goblin Leader's pain and had no right at all to judge the man. But, if his behavior indicated the man's true feelings, then Tearach still considered Karen a threat. Angus knew he could not be with her every second. Until she discovered what powers might be hers to command, her safety was still uncertain. Another of the Goblin faction might do to her what Roland hadn't. As their leader, Tearach had it in his power to order his minions to stay away from Karen and enforce the command better than he had previously done. The Goblin Leader's attitude toward that enforcement would go a long way toward engendering peace. Angus looked at the faces in the images once more, shook his head in sorrow and turned away.

There was a knock on the door and Hugh walked in. "Tearach Bruce is here, as Shayla requested."

"Have him come in," Angus instructed. He poured out two glasses of whiskey and waited to hand one to the large Goblin.

When the Goblin walked into the room, Hugh turned to them both. "I'll be right outside if either of you need anything. Shayla has instructed that neither of you is to leave this room until there is an understanding over Karen and her safety. Is that clear?" When both men nodded, Hugh left and closed the heavy oak doors

behind him.

"Drink this and talk to me, friend. I think you will find Karen isn't nearly so threatening as you might think."

Tearach looked at the other man suspiciously. He placed his hand over a dagger at his waist. "I'm not here to speak with you. Nor am I your friend, Druid."

Angus noticed the man's right hand. A Goblin could throw a dagger with such deadly accuracy that an intended victim would never have time to cry out. There was a Claymore over the fireplace. But, no matter how fast he moved, Angus knew he would never have time to reach it. "I am unarmed, Goblin. Is it your tradition to respond to courtesy with a blade?"

"What could we possibly have to say to one another? One of my men, my second-in-command as it happens, is dead. He was trying to kill your woman. I can think of no words you and I could share to undo what has been done."

"No, that is true," Angus sighed. "But we might drink together instead of laying on arms. 'Tis a better way to remember the dead if we are no' going to talk."

Without smiling, Tearach took the whiskey Angus offered and downed it in one swallow. He walked to the liquor cabinet and refilled the glass. As he turned to the Druid, he perused the golden-colored whiskey within the crystal glass he held. "I can't apologize for what Roland did."

"Nor should you," Angus agreed. "You are no' he."

Tearach paced the length of the room several times while Angus continued to drink his own whiskey. Finally, he was unable to stand the tension any longer. The Goblin slammed the glass down on a table and rounded on Angus.

"Why are you wasting my time? I have to make arrangements to put another of my clan on a funeral fire and I stand here drinking with you." He leaned against the table and glared at the larger man. "What do you want, Druid? Shayla has sent word that I'm to compensate you for the wrong Roland did. What can any of us have that you'd want? We haven't a great deal of money. Except for a little land here and there, our most sacred areas are polluted. All we have left is the food on our tables and the clothes off our backs. Name your price so I can get back to burying my friend."

Angus shook his head and poured the man another whiskey. It went untouched as Tearach continued to glare at him. "I once knew a man verra' like you. He hated outsiders to the point that he fought them, destroyed their livelihoods, lay with their women and left them to bear his children. He would no' even recognize his offspring as his own. This man left his own babes to whatever fate could throw their way."

For a moment, Tearach looked at him. "What's your point, Druid. I've a friend to burn."

Angus slowly lowered the glass he studied. "The point, you green fool, is that I was that man. And you will suffer the same consequences as I if you dunna' learn to let the hatred go."

"When I want your opinion, I'll ..."

Angus quickly stalked to where the man stood, picked him up by the jerkin and

shoved him into a wall. "You will listen, Goblin. The world is no' your enemy any more than it was mine. Any more than I would be. I am trying to help you."

Tearach twisted free from his grasp and pushed the larger man away. "Why, by Herne's teeth, would you give a damn? No one else seems to."

"Aye," Angus nodded. "I have said those same, self-pitying words many times. But I believe there are those outside this forest who would no' fear us. Those who may one day stand with us when the time comes. They are no' all like those who killed your people."

"The outside world doesn't, and never has, given a single damn about anyone or anything but themselves. Why else would they dump poison on private land so they wouldn't have to pay to have it disposed of properly? None of them were ever hurt by it."

"And they murdered hundreds of your loved ones," Angus softly responded. "I have heard the sorry tale."

"Murdered?" Tearach began to pace again. "You have no idea what they did. You can't begin to imagine the horror of it ..."

"Let me show you something?" Angus turned and walked to the Sorceress' desk.

"The waters that were poisoned were in Exmoor, were they no'? That is where some of your pools used to be."

"Yes." Tearach angrily nodded. "Exmoor was our most sacred place."

"You had best look at these images the Sorceress left for me. I canna' read well, but think you are probably quite able in that regard. So you should look over the papers accompanying the images. I ken your people were no' the only ones who suffered." Angus handed him some of the papers from the desk top and waited. Tearach looked at him suspiciously, then he took the sheets of paper from Angus. He slowly sat down as he read each page. Then he swallowed hard when he got to the press pictures, or images, as Angus called them, that accompanied the papers.

"Look at their faces, Goblin. Tell me they dinna' love their children as much as you loved yours. That those little ones suffer less than yours."

Tearach looked up at him, then he slowly looked over the photos again. For a full half hour he gazed upon the horror he thought had been left behind eight years earlier. "I ... I didn't ... I never saw these."

"Karen found those images when she was doing her computer work. She gave them to the Sorceress. As I said, I canna' read verra' well. But looking at them, I think I understand what happened. You tell me if I have guessed wrong, Goblin."

Angus paused. "I recognize the land as being somewhere near Exmoor. It has been a verra' long time, but the area was once described to me by my parents. My own mother was raised near there and loved it so." He momentarily stalled memories of his mother's soft, kindly voice. "While I can see much has changed, the images are no' that old and the men and women are certainly outsiders. I think they have been poisoned by the same water your people drank. The poison placed in your sacred water must have seeped underground. At least, this is what I can guess from the images. There are many of them showing what is left of one of your pools and the damage done to them. It was no' difficult to figure out the story these

images tell." Angus handed him some more papers off the desk.

Reluctantly, Tearach looked. His throat constricted at the site of a three-year-old girl, an outsider, battling the effects of chemotherapy. Underneath the picture, the caption read, 'The Tragedy of Exmoor'. He wanted to look away, but couldn't. The girl's ravaged face was haunting. Beside her, there was a picture of the child's parents. They were openly weeping and the father's fist was raised in the air in anger. The caption below it stated that he wanted those responsible in hell. But no one had been able to find the men the authorities linked with the poisoning. Of course, they never would. He had killed them and disposed of their bodies. Angus had gleaned everything correctly just from looking at the pictures. Even if the Druid could, he hadn't needed to read the words at all.

"You know the men who did this dinna' care who they hurt. You have told me they poisoned the water to save money. This was not a case of outsider against Goblin. It was pure greed, and greed does no' have a race. Look at the picture and tell me you are glad that wee lassie is sick, Tearach. Can you? After all, she is an outsider is she no'?" Angus waited. When there was no response, he continued. "Or is she just an innocent babe? Just like the ones Roland and the others lost? You thought none of the outsiders were effected. But there are other images on the Sorceress' desk. Each tells a story just as sad and horrible. 'Tis likely your sacred pools will never recover in one man's lifetime."

For a very long time Tearach sat, looking at the papers and photos. "I had no idea," he spoke softly. "I didn't know. I ... I'm not a man who hates children."

Angus saw the expression on the Goblin's face and knew Tearach was telling the truth. No one had bothered to give him all the information. Or maybe they thought he just didn't care. Angus bowed his head and started to walk away.

Tearach held out a hand to stop him. "Wait, I'd ... like to talk."

Angus nodded and walked back to the where the Goblin sat.

"Is anything being done about this?" Tearach asked. "Did the Sorceress say anything about these people?"

"I know nothing more," Angus responded.

"You might find this difficult to believe, especially after my behavior, but I could never wish anything like this on anyone." He pointed to the pictures. "And never a child."

Angus placed a hand on his shoulder and sadly smiled. "I believe you."

Tearach put aside the papers and photos. He slowly stood, walked toward the fireplace and stared into its glowing depths. "If you're asking me to just forgive a world that can let this kind of thing happen ..."

"I am asking you to think long and hard on the effect of what you are doing,"

Angus interrupted. "What effect hatred will have on you and your people. It is obvious that you canna' hate the way you think you can. It is eating you alive."

"What in the name of the Goddess would you have me do, then? Forgive and forget?" Tearach whispered.

"No. But hate the action and those who committed it if you must, no' a whole people. Those children in the images dunna' hate. They are no' even old enough to

know what that is. And dunna' hate Karen because she is one of them. For three hundred years, her family kept the secret of my existence. They kept a promise, as I must now keep mine to her where you are concerned."

"What do you mean?"

"She does no' want any ill will because she is present. And she is beside herself with grief because a man is dead. Hers is a kind heart. She nor I want a thing from you but a promise to live in peace. A promise that no one else will die or that blood be shed."

For a long moment Tearach stared at Angus. "I told you earlier that I couldn't apologize for Roland, but I am responsible for my peoples' actions. What he did was because of me and the feelings that I have expressed. And while I can't say that I'll ever harbor good will toward an outsider, I no longer consider Karen as such. She's a creature of magic now. None of my people will harm her or you. I swear it on my life. After all, she's one of a kind. Even more rare than the Goblins." He took a deep breath, then slowly released it. "Does she like the small glade where she was supposed to be buried?"

"Aye. She feels a need to be near the trees there."

"As a Dryad, she'll protect it?"

"Always."

"Then she may have it. But I insist on one condition," he said as he raised his index finger.

Angus smiled. "Thank you, Tearach, and you may name any condition."

Tearach was surprised at the trust that statement revealed, especially after what Roland had done. "I have a very inquisitive niece. She's the only family I have left, and she has been pestering me to death to meet the Dryad ... er, Karen," he amended. "I gave her a command to stay away from the both of you. I'd like to rescind that order."

Angus nodded. "I think a meeting can be arranged." He watched a ghost of a smile touch the other man's lips. "And you need no' be a stranger. Or your people. All we want is to live in peace."

Tearach looked at the other man and held out his hand. "My word is the only thing I have to give you. Since Roland dishonored us once, I won't let it happen again." He paused after Angus shook his hand. "If you had known him eight years ago, you'd have seen a different person. Roland didn't have it in him to hate anyone then. I saw him once leave small gifts outside a cottage for the outsider children within. The family was very poor, and he went out of his way to make trinkets for the little ones. Of course, they never knew who had done it. Perhaps that was why he changed so dramatically when his own children died at the hands of outsiders." He stopped to remember that man from long ago. "But everything that happened . . . It forever altered us all."

"Hate has a way of doing that, my friend. I am an expert on the subject. Your heart and mankind would be better off without it."

"Maybe one day. Maybe." Tearach nodded. He thought for a moment about the consequences his next words might bring. But the Druid was trying to help him.

"You should know that Roland killed an old Druid herbalist. My people found what was left of her in the peat bogs on the other side of the forest. We think she made the potion he used, and that he killed her because he didn't want her to give anyone an antidote, so we'll never know exactly what was on his arrow." Tearach picked up his glass of whiskey and drank it down. "He has dishonored us several times over. It was hard for my people to believe he'd sunk so low. Before eight years ago, murdering an old woman was an action Roland would have considered vile. It's as you said. Hatred has a way of changing people. I've a taste of it in my own mouth. And I knew Roland when we were boys, playing together. I wish ..."

His voice trailed away. There was no use in wishing. It had done him no good. He took a deep breath, nodded to Angus, then slowly walked out of the room. Angus shook his head. "It will take a hard lesson to teach you to let all that anger go, Goblin. Your head is as hard as mine ever was," Angus murmured to himself.

"Do you well, Karen?" Angus asked as he took her outstretched hands. Karen walked into his embrace. "I'm much better now. I'm sorry for all the hysterics before."

"'Tis no' your fault, m'love. I have had some experience being changed into something the likes of which are unknown. And it is fair hard on a body." He pulled her into the small glade and sat with her beneath a tree. "Where is the Sorceress?"

"I told her I'd be fine. She has much more important things to do than baby-sit me."

Angus hugged her hard and smiled at the bell-like quality of her voice. He knew he would never get used to the wondrous sound of it. After a time, she pushed herself away from him.

"Watch what I can do." Karen stood, closed her eyes and concentrated. Her Druid attire began to glow and sparkle. A diaphanous, transparent gown of light green took the place of her robe. As she had hoped, it did absolutely nothing to conceal her form. Karen opened her eyes and saw Angus' stunned expression. "Remember that silver gown I was wearing? The one you tore off me when you pulled me from the tree?"

"I thought it was some garment placed upon you for ... for burial."

She shook her head and laughed. "No, it was a little sheer for that. This is called Dryad gauze. The Sorceress and I experimented with some powers and I found out I could make the gauze appear. I just wanted to see if I could make an entire gown from a Druid robe. Somehow, I made that first one when you found me in the tree. It's more comfortable than anything else."

"Aye," he whispered and ran his hands down the length of her body, "it does feel good!"

While Karen watched, Angus took his clothing off as quickly as he could. It was as if it burned his skin to have it on any longer. He pulled her roughly to him, teased the tips of her breasts until she cried out, then kissed lower still. She writhed against him and called his name over and over. It seemed the very heavens were

with them. A perfect night sky glittered with a billion stars as Angus lifted the sensuous fabric off her body and picked Karen up. He impaled her on his rigid manhood and moaned deeply as she took every inch of him deep within her womb. His need was too great and there was an urge to waste no more time. He thrust over and over and willed that his seed take root, that he would give her a babe they could raise in love. Her body went rigid against him and she dropped backward onto his hands and forearms. Karen's hair made a beautiful curtain as it fell to the ground before him. Never, in his entire life, would he see such a beguiling thing. Her full breasts bounced as she began to undulate. And when her final cries rent the air, Angus let himself go and felt her body grasp and release his manhood. Then he pulled her to him and sank to his knees. He murmured sweet, soft things to her over and over. Finally, Karen looked up at him with her beautiful eyes full of love. She softly kissed his jaw and lips, then rested her head against his shoulder. Angus smoothed the long hair down her back, cupped her bottom with his hands and held her body to his. Connected. They were as one being, resting in each other's arms. Then Karen began to softly cry.

"Here now, what causes you to shed tears, love?" Angus rocked her back and forth.

"Happiness. I'm going to live and love you for a lifetime!"

"Then 'tis I who should be weeping. You have taken a gargoyle who once had a stone heart and turned him into a man who loves you. Each breath I take grows stronger from loving you and life. And if we should be so blessed, I will cherish our babes."

Karen gazed deep into his dark eyes. "Oh, Angus. With everything's that's happened, I didn't think of that! Wouldn't it be wonderful to have lots of children?" She placed her hands on either side of his face and kissed him slow and long.

When she finally broke the kiss, he gazed back and told her his heart's newest wish. "I would love to have strong Druid sons who eat too many hamburgers, and sweet Dryad daughters to pull from tree tops and to feed chocolate. A luaidh, my only love." He gently pulled her down to their mossy bed.

Karen snuggled against his shoulder and soon drifted to sleep. Angus made yet another silent vow to earn the happiness and second chance that had been given to him. He looked into the night sky and spoke softly to one small star. It seemed to drift a little further from the rest.

"I promise that my first-born daughter shall be called Elspeth. They called me a bully and a brute. But you saw more and dinna' believe what they said. You were my very first friend, and I will no' forget. No' ever or ever." He thought he saw the little star twinkle a bit brighter. He smiled, then fell into a deep, peaceful sleep beside his Karen.

From the secluded circle of Stonehenge on Salisbury Plain, Shayla looked into the night sky and sighed. It would be easier to consult the stars if she didn't have to sneak into a barricaded sacred stone circle like a thief in the middle of the night.

But that was the way of their world nowadays. She couldn't just walk in and conduct her magical ceremonies as many of her predecessors had. The place was a major tourist attraction. It was one more thing about the outside world the Order found hard to accept. Every religious place where they once freely practiced was now under scrutiny. The threat of discovery was ever present. Her faction leaders complained about this bitterly, and it was a point of concern well taken. They were fighting to keep ancient customs alive in a world of advancing technology. Always fearing what would happen if they left some trace of their existence behind, the smallest forgotten sacred tool or amulet could begin an investigation that might well have them cornered by the outside world. And because of the guarded nature of this site, borrowing Fairy dust had been necessary. Blowing a wee bit into the eyes of the guards caused them to fall into an unconscious state until morning. Even having to do that small thing aggravated Shayla's sense of fair play. Her kind had always had use of the place without interference. But covert actions were their mainstay these days, and that was why she knew her next actions would be viewed as demented by some of the Order. It was the greatest of risks she'd be taking. Still, it must be done. But carefully, with great deliberation.

One from the outside must come into their realm. One who was unchanged by magic and who would remain so. The stars from the heavens above had sent her signs and portents. They had shown her what must be done. And visions from Stonehenge, the most sacred of all places, must never be denied.

But prophetic omens, however they were obtained, wouldn't sway the Goblin Leader. None of what must be done would come easy for him. In fact, Shayla's command would probably drive him to renounce his allegiance to the Order. It was a chance she was taking with a good man's future. A man who had suffered as much or more than Angus MacGregor ever had. But she saw no other course of action. She turned to Hugh and held out her hands in a supplicating gesture.

"Comments?"

"He'll absolutely refuse to do this." Hugh shook his head in despair. "And I don't want to think about how the rest of the Goblins will respond."

"There simply isn't any other way. And Tearach will keep his people and himself under control or suffer the consequences. If I'm to bear the ridiculous charade of breaking into one of the Order's very own sacred sites, then Tearach will do as I say."

"Aye. I hear you, my love. But he'll still make you beat him half to death before agreeing. Or perhaps he'd rather be dead altogether. I know the man. And there was never a stone standing in a circle that was harder than Tearach's head."

"And well I know it," she agreed as she clasped her hands before her. "But the plans are in motion. I'll simply give him no choice. I've found the perfect woman, though I'll need help taking her. Whether he agrees or not, Tearach Bruce will be mated to an outsider before the next year is up. Even if I have to treat him like an ancient offering, tie him to a recumbent stone with chains, and watch the mating take place myself. It will be done."

"Herne's balls! I'm not sure I want to be there when you give him the command."

I'm not sure I even want to be on this planet." Hugh exhaled and ran a hand through his hair.

She raised her eyebrows and turned back to the large alter stone which, after so many centuries, lay in ruins on the ground before her. "If it's a test of wills, he'll find me a worthy adversary. My mind is made up. Come, my love. We've things to do."

"Aye." Hugh sighed as he watched her walk into the darkness. The illusory image of Tearach Bruce's expression, after being given the command, etched itself into his brain. He could easily predict that the Goblin would see Shayla's order as the most odious command of his entire life. "I'd better lay in a supply of very strong chains and find an old alter stone somewhere."