



The Princess and the Curse

By
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This is an adaptation of a Celtic myth.

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Chapter One

Nolan Tremaine smiled as he strolled the cobblestone streets of his village of Baile Beag, headed for the White Ship Tavern, for he enjoyed whiskey, women, and a good time--not always in that order. Part of having a good time was relating his travels as a fisherman, and if he embellished his tales a little, so what? No one could call him a liar. He merely exaggerated a bit.

Passing a fabric store and a shoe repair shop, he reached the tavern where a few men stood outside, talking about the weather and their crops. He exchanged greetings, since everyone knew him here in the village. He pulled at the heavy oaken door and stepped into the crowded room, filled mostly with men but also several women, all talking and laughing, drinking ale or whiskey. A few patrons were eating a late meal of mutton, boiled cabbage, and oat bread, apparently oblivious to the smoke of countless pipes that hung over the room like a fog. Nolan found an empty table and drew out a chair, smiling and nodding to the others he knew, which included just about everyone in the room. Aware that the evening was young and hopeful that others would soon join him, he didn't mind sitting by himself for a short while, as long as he had company later. He loved people, whether friends or strangers.

He ordered a shot of whiskey from Betha, the pretty, buxom barmaid whose favors he'd enjoyed more than once. She brushed his hand as she took his order, and when she returned a few minutes later, she bent low, giving him a good glimpse of what she had to offer, as if he could forget! He hoped this evening would bring more than a glass of whiskey.

The door opened and a stranger stepped into the room, a tall man whose sun-bleached blond hair glinted gold under the lamplight. He had a commanding mien about him, like one accustomed to giving orders. He peered around the room, his gaze settling on Nolan.

"Mind if I join you?" the stranger asked as he reached Nolan's table and pulled out a chair.

Nolan inclined his head. "Happy to have you. Don't like sitting by myself."

"Neither do I." The stranger sat down and caught the barmaid's attention, gesturing toward Nolan's whiskey glass. Soon he joined him in a drink. "So tell me," the stranger said, "how do you spend your days?"

Nolan grinned. "I see you're a stranger in this village. Everyone knows I'm a fisherman. Got the biggest catch today you'd ever want to see. Why, I caught so many fish in my net, I feared my boat would sink."

"Is that so? Where do you fish to get such a catch?"

Nolan gestured widely. "Miles and miles away, far out in the ocean, where sea monsters prowl the deep, and mermaids greet me from the rocky islands." He grinned. "The mermaids and I have become *very* good friends, if you know what I mean."

"Is that so?" the stranger repeated. "Hmm, mermaids. How do you, uh, how can you--"

"We manage," Nolan replied with a smile. "Ah, yes, those mermaids know how to please a man. They can hardly wait to see me." He winked. "I give 'em what they want." So intent Nolan was in telling his tall tales, the noise and laughter faded away, replaced by enjoyment in hoodwinking the man. From the corner of his eye, he saw occasional glances thrown their way, for visitors were rare in the village. He guessed that those nearest him were listening to the conversation.

The stranger raised his eyebrow. "Does your wife know about these mermaids?"

"Oh, I'm not married. Having too much fun as a bachelor." When he *did* marry, he could support a wife very well, aye, could even afford a maid, for he'd saved much silver over the years, money he kept in a locked box under his bed. But marriage lay far in the future.

"Sounds as if you live an exciting life," the stranger said. He drank his whiskey. "But what if I told you I've been to Connachta and back? What would you say to that?"

Nolan wanted to sink into the floor. He'd never heard of Connachta, but he'd walk the streets of Baile Baeg stark naked before he'd admit his ignorance. "So you've been to Connachta and back. Nothing special about that. I could sail there any day."

"Is that so?" the stranger said for the third time. "Well, next time you go, be sure to fetch the Blessed Bell of Bellarmine and bring the bell here. That will prove you've been to Connachta and back."

Nolan snapped his fingers. "Easy to do." *But where in hell was Connachta? And what in hell was the Blessed Bell of Bellarmine?*

"So can I assume you're going to Connachta?" the stranger asked, not waiting for an answer. "When do you intend to return?" He gave him a cool smile, as if aware of Nolan's dilemma.

Excuses raced through Nolan's head. "Depends on the weather." He waved his hand airily. "I'll not sail in a strong wind. Any fisherman worth his job knows better than that."

"Of course. Well, then. I shall be here at the next full moon. By that time, I'll expect you to have returned." He wagged his finger at Nolan. "But don't forget to bring back the Blessed Bell of Bellarmine. In that way, I'll know you've been to Connachta."

"You doubt I can bring the bell back?" A trace of belligerence crept into Nolan's voice.

"We'll see." The stranger smiled enigmatically. "If you bring the bell back, that will be proof enough. Shall we make a wager? If you don't return with the Bell of Bellarmine, or if you don't give up the bell to me, I shall tell everyone what a liar you are. I'll take your boat, your net, everything you own."

Now you've done it, Nolan lamented. *You've gone too far this time*. But he'd never admit his mistake. By this time, he knew everyone around him heard their talk and would judge him by it. "Agreed! I'm a man of my word, as you'll find out, soon enough." He drained his whiskey glass with a flourish.

"Well, then." The stranger finished his own glass. He shoved his chair back and stood. "I'll see you next full moon."

Shortly after, Nolan left and approached the men gathered outside the tavern, but none of them knew where Connachta was. He trudged home toward his empty cottage, his heart heavy.

The sun was sinking in a blaze of gold and coral, a breeze ruffling his hair and

cooling his face. His booted feet scuffed along the dirt road, kicking up clouds of dust. Trees and bushes lined both sides of the road, here and there a cottage. The wind picked up, and a few faint stars twinkled in a sky that was rapidly turning from light blue to gray. So deep was Nolan in thought and misery, he jumped when an owl hooted from a tree limb, then he laughed at his foolishness. He bit his lip, and for a moment he considered forgetting about the challenge. He'd stay away from the tavern and let the man fret while he waited in vain. But no, he couldn't reveal himself as a braggart and one who went back on his word, even if he didn't know where Connachta was. When would he ever learn not to tell tall tales? And when would he learn to admit his ignorance? His skin chilled as he dwelt on his plight. He could hardly put out to sea when he didn't know which direction in which to sail. He gazed up at the full moon, as if he could find an answer there, but was cheered by the fact that he had another month to complete his quest. A long time!

Suddenly, he remembered a wise old man who lived on a hill in Tailitu, not far from his own house. This might be his last chance to discover where Connachta was, and if the old man didn't know, then Nolan was out of luck, out of his house and all that he owned. In the distance, the hill rose above him, and soon he reached his destination. Stepping over boulders and thick tree roots, he climbed the steep incline, his long legs stretching, dislodging stones.

The wise old man sat on a boulder at the summit, looking for all the world as if he'd been waiting for him. He wore a flowing black robe, his white hair ruffling in the wind, a mysterious air about him.

He greeted Nolan with a nod and a smile. "Well, son, how can I help you? For it's obvious you've come to me with a question."

"A question, yes." He bent to brush the dust from his trousers and smooth back his hair, giving him time to think how he should phrase his query, for he suspected he couldn't fool the man with subterfuge. "A stranger has challenged me to sail to Connachta and back, but I have no idea where the place is."

The old man stared at Nolan. "Connachta! A country on the other side of the world! So it doesn't matter if you sail north or south. Whichever way you go, you'll find it."

The other side of the world! Nolan swallowed. He wished he'd never met this stranger at the tavern, never bragged about the places he'd never visited, nor the mermaids he'd never seen.

"How many days will it take to get there?"

"Hard to say," the wise man replied. "I've never been there myself. Depends on the weather, your skill in handling a boat, oh, many things."

How could he get out of this task? He might not come back, might be attacked by sea monsters, his body left to rot.

Another question consumed him. "What about the Blessed Bell of Bellarmine?" He held his breath and then let it out slowly. *Cursed Bell of Bellarmine is more like it.*

The wise old man shook his head. "Don't know anything about that."

Nolan thanked the man and headed down the hill as worries and problems chased themselves in his mind. By this time, complete darkness had fallen over the countryside, prompting him to step carefully. He grimaced. If he fell down the hill and broke his leg, he'd have an excuse for not sailing to Connachta.

* * * *

Early the next morning, Nolan loaded his boat with ample supplies of food and water, for no telling how long it would take him to reach Connachta and return home. He climbed into his boat and hoisted his sail, and soon the boat was skimming across the waves. In the east, the sun shone bright, a great ball of fire, its rays glistening on the water, and he shaded his eyes against the glare. He tried to look on the optimistic side of this endeavor. He was going to a place he'd never visited, journeying far beyond his home and village. Just hope I meet a few women in Connachta, he mused, his thoughts already on bedding them. Yet he wondered how he'd know the waters of Connachta when he saw them.

Time lost all meaning as he sailed on, the ocean a never-ending expanse of salt water and waves, the wind filling his sail. He frowned as a sea mist settled around him, his worry increasing as he sailed on, for the mist showed no end, no sign of lifting. Strange, though, that the wind continued to fill his sail as he cleaved on through the blue waters. He owned no timepiece, but it seemed to him as if minutes and hours were measured differently the farther out he sailed.

Abruptly, the mist lifted, and a sandy yellow shoreline stretched in front of him. He looked far ahead, where the land stretched on and on with no end. Dark green trees and colorful flowers lined the shore, a welcome relief after the many hours he'd spent on the ocean. Wooded hills rose ahead of him. But where was he?

Reaching the shore, he stepped into the water that lapped up to his knees, then brought his boat far up on the sand, for now leaving his supplies aboard. He looked around to see if the place looked familiar. An old woman sat on a rock by the beach, a sight so odd he blinked his eyes and nearly jumped. What was she doing here? Clad in black, her shoulders were bent, a yellow shawl draped around them.

His booted feet sank into the sand as he approached the woman, hindering his steps. A warm breeze tossed tree branches and rustled the grass and flowers.

He stopped beside the woman, praying she'd understand his language, for if not, he was in trouble. How could he ask her where he was, or how to find Connachta? He inclined his head as he stopped by the crone perched on a rock. "Good day to you, madam. I hope you speak Gaelic." Countless wrinkles tracked her weatherbeaten face, her hair white and falling to her shoulders.

"*Bannaghtyn!*" she said in greeting.

He breathed a long sigh of relief, happy beyond words that she spoke his language. Yet that fact presented a new worry, for if she spoke his language, he might have merely returned to his own country again.

"What land *is* this?" he cried, convinced he'd embarked on a lost cause. Would he never find Connachta?

She gave him a wary smile. "What land do you seek?"

Afraid to hope, he replied, "Connachta."

Her smile widened. "This is it."

Nolan released a long sigh, wanting to shout, dance, sing with joy. But another question pressed against his mind, like a headache. "Where do I find the Blessed Bell of Bellarmine?"

The woman snickered. "You're asking a lot of questions, young man."

"Questions for which I need answers." After all this, would he still fail in his

search? If she didn't know, then he feared he was lost. "I have promised someone I would bring the Bell of Bellarmine back to my own country."

She nodded in understanding. "You can't go back on your word. Just follow this path," she said, turning to point behind her, "and it will take you to the king's palace. There you will find what you are looking for." Then she stood and was gone, just like that! He couldn't swear she had disappeared, for he'd followed her gesture toward the path. Still, it seemed strange that she had vanished so quickly.

Mentally bracing himself for the short trek--for he'd never seen a king's palace--he followed the rocky path, breathing in the scent of the ocean and the fresh aroma of grass. The luscious fragrance of lavender drifted his way, their tall stalks covering the ground and bending in the breeze. He saw a grand palace a short distance ahead, its walls shining golden in the brilliant sunlight. From one of the turrets, a flag whipped in the wind, a flash of purple and gold against the blue sky. A few white clouds floated overhead--a lovely day, if only he found the bell. The deep green wooded hills came into closer focus. Here and there wooden houses dotted the hills. He came upon a red brick path that led up to the palace, quite the most magnificent home he'd ever seen. Could he just walk inside, or did he need the king's invitation? He shrugged and decided to brazen through the task.

The doors to the palace stood open, and he entered, trying to look inconspicuous, a difficult task, his plain clothes a drab contrast to the rich silk and satin costumes. The noblemen and their ladies crowded a vast room, dancing on a marble floor while musicians on a dais played a merry tune. Tables loaded with food lined two sides of the spacious room, enough bounty to feed the entire population of his country. Nolan stood and stared in wonder. Round tables were set at the edge of the room, where nobles and their ladies sat and drank from gold goblets. The chatter of countless voices filled the room. Crystal chandeliers glittered above him, with no need of candles, for bright sunlight streamed through the open door, bringing everything into clear focus. As Nolan moved farther into the room, he caught the aroma of ham, cheese, and fresh fruits, and his stomach grumbled. Gods, was he ever hungry!

He saw an old woman standing near the entrance, not twenty feet from him. He glanced at her twice, for she suspiciously resembled the woman by the shore, but this one was wearing a green shawl.

With an air of nonchalance, Nolan strolled across the marble floor and stood before her. He gestured toward the men and women dancing, the band on the dais, the tables of food. "What's happening here?"

She gave him a look of surprise and pointed across the room. "Why, sir, the king's daughter is getting married."

Nolan followed her gesture and saw the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen, adorned in a fine white bridal dress, the silk dotted with gleaming pearls and diamonds. But she didn't look happy, her red-rimmed eyes revealing only sorrow.

"Why is she so sad?" he asked the woman, "when everyone else here is happily celebrating?"

"Ah, little do you know. She is being married against her will, for she has no love for her future husband. Just look," she said, nodding her head in the other direction. "Now perhaps you'll understand why she doesn't want to marry the man."

He gulped as he looked in the direction she indicated. There, at one of the tables

along the wall, sat an evil-looking man with a hooked nose and green skin, his face covered with leprous spots. Fat and squat, with sausage-like fingers he raised his goblet to his thick lips. Nolan all but burst with amazement and pity for the princess. He forgot about finding the Bell of Bellarmine, forgot everything but his sympathy for the princess.

“How can the king marry his daughter to that?”

The old woman shrugged. “Why don’t you ask her?”

Before Nolan could reply, she disappeared from the crowd. He stood, rooted to the spot, for the second time that day stunned by a woman’s quick disappearance.

Seeing the princess by herself, he gathered his courage and walked across the room, surprised no one accosted him or asked his business, for he was as out of place in a palace as a horse in an herbal shop.

He stopped beside the princess. Taken aback by her beauty, he found himself speechless, and he feared she’d think him a mute. Her honey-blond hair brushed her shoulders, and her eyes were the bluest he’d ever seen. Yet his heart turned over at the grief etched on her face. The fresh scent of camomile wafted around her, the pearls and diamonds on her silk gown dazzling his eyes. The gown’s décolletage gave a hint of her full breasts, and the silky fabric hugged her slim, shapely hips. Her fingers were long and delicate. She had white, dainty hands with smooth, unblemished skin. Despite his worry at her dilemma, a new feeling swept over him, an emotion so new, he could scarce define it.

She looked up at him in joyful surprise and then turned away for a moment, as if afraid to hope for any rescue from her terrible plight.

He bowed low. “Forgive me, lady, for approaching you like this, but it saddens me to see such a lovely lady so unhappy.”

“Well, can you blame me?” She inclined her head toward her future husband, who sat at a table gobbling a slice of ham, then stuffing his mouth with grapes. His face held a look of evil intent, as though he’d destroy the palace and everyone in it. “You think I want to *marry* him?” Her mouth tightened. “I *won’t* marry him.”

“Then why are you doing it? If your father loves you--and how could he not?--surely he would consider your wishes.”

“Ah, if only you knew!” She paused, brushing her hands across her reddened eyes. “You see, a curse has been placed on our land--”

“A curse?”

She turned away for a moment, then faced him again, blushing. “That ... that the women will all remain barren until the curse is lifted.”

“But what does your marrying that man have to do with lifting the curse?”

“Prince Maccus--he’s the one who placed the curse. And he won’t lift it until I marry him.” A sob escaped her. “I have no choice! What can I do?”

Steeped in her sorrow, he nevertheless realized he hadn’t introduced himself. “If only I could help you, dear lady, but I’m only a poor fisherman from Ban Fearann. Nolan Tremaine, at your service, and I fear I don’t know your name.”

She inclined her head. “Leslie, Princess of Bellarmine.”

“Bellarmine!” He jerked, remembering his quest. “Perhaps you can tell me where to find the Bell of Bellarmine?”

She frowned in thought and then her face brightened. “Sir, you are seeking not a bell that rings, but a ‘belle,’ which is how many of my father’s subjects refer to me.

Many call me the Belle of Bellarmine.”

“Then, lady, you are the one I have come for!”

Chapter Two

'You are the one I have come for.' What did the stranger mean by that? She'd been so lost in her troubles, she'd paid him little attention, but she would amend that omission now. Several inches taller than she, he had a strong, sinewy build, evidence he did physical labor. But of course, he had said he was a fisherman. Light brown hair and hazel eyes complemented an attractive face, albeit tanned, another sign of physical labor. He had high cheekbones and a strong chin, giving his face a definite character. A network of fine lines tracked his eyes and mouth, whether from laughter or anger, she wasn't sure, or perhaps from constant exposure to the sun. His hands appeared strong and workmanlike. The man was definitely not a social dandy. His drab clothes alone would give him away, his short-sleeved tunic a plain light brown, his trousers black. She liked his voice, deep and resonant with a trace of huskiness, although he had a different accent.

"Lady, do I meet with your approval?"

Her face warmed. "Sorry to be staring. I fear I have lost my manners." *As I have lost all hope of deliverance.*

"Come, my lady, let us dance," he said, taking her hand. "I realize you have little reason for joy, but try to smile and pretend you are happy. I'll wager you have a lovely smile."

Nolan led her out on the dance floor while the band played a merry tune, one she recalled from childhood, the words and music a sharp counterpoint to the misery that imprisoned her. She fought the tears that threatened to spill. For now, she'd be the greatest actress in the realm, suppressing the sorrow that clutched at her heart.

He danced with more vigor than skill, weaving his way through the pairs of other dancers who crowded the marble floor, the men and women blurring before her eyes. He guided her closer to the palace entrance. What was his aim? Did he think he could help her escape? Hardly! Before she could say "evil prince," he had her out the door and onto the brick path, headed for the shore. She lifted her gown as she raced with him, the bricks hard and unyielding beneath her satin slippers. Her heart burst with happiness, yet fear tempered her optimism. They'd never make it, never escape. She prayed to all the gods that no one had detected their flight, yet already she heard shouts behind her. *No, please let us get away!*

Booted footsteps pounded on the brick walkway, the shouts louder, louder.

"Stop! You won't escape!"

Nolan's hand still clasped hers as they reached a boat. Out of breath, she gasped, "Where are you taking me?" Of course, she wanted to escape the prince, but with this stranger? She had no choice!

He pushed the boat out into the water, calling over his shoulder. "I'm taking you home with me, to my country of Ban Fearann."

No! She didn't want to go to his country with him, but she had to get away.

He rushed back for her and lifted her as if she had no weight, then placed her in

the boat. His movements were quick and jerky, as he continually looked behind him. Grasping the oars, he began to row away.

"Oh, look!" she cried, "Prince Maccus!"

High in the sky, the prince rode astride an oak branch, flying through the air. They'd never get away, not now!

Nolan glanced behind him, rowing faster, faster, his muscular hands and arms straining as they moved farther out into the water. The veins on his hands bulged, his fingers white from gripping the oars. But her rescuer could never outrace the prince.

Her heart sank. "No hope for us now. The prince is an evil wizard." Despair overwhelmed her and she swallowed hard. "Nothing can save us now."

"We'll see about that! *Mannanan!*" he cried. "If ever I needed you, I need you now."

"Mannanan?"

"The god of the sea," Nolan said with a grim face. "He has to come," he murmured. "He must!"

Leslie prayed as she had never prayed before, to her own gods. She would jump over the boat and drown before she would surrender to the wicked prince.

The ocean roared, a horrendous noise, coming from everywhere. A thick sea mist fell like a curtain, obliterating everything but the boat and this brave fisherman who had come to save her.

Her heart pounded. She clenched her hands, staring in every direction. "What does this sea mist mean?"

Even through the fog, she saw his smile that lifted her spirits. "Have you forgotten that I'm a fisherman? I prayed to the god of the sea, begging for his aid. If he can't help us, no one can."

He looked around nervously. "So far, it seems as if Mannanan heard me." Yet his face held a look of doubt.

An eerie, howling wind picked up, like a banshee, the cry of death. The fog remained as thick as ever.

"Let's let the wind work for us." Balancing himself, Nolan stood to hoist the sail, and soon they were speeding across the water, but to where, she didn't know and didn't care. She wanted only to get away! The wind tugged at her hair and molded her silk dress to her body. She smelled the briny scent of the water, felt the lift and pull of the water as they crested the waves, heard the slap of the waves against the boat. She thought about her plight. Here she was in her white silk wedding gown, sailing on a simple boat with a fisherman she'd met only an hour ago. The haze still hung heavy over them, the sky as dark as night, but the wind had died down.

A sudden, nameless terror gripped her, a horrible fear that they would be lost at sea, drifting through these cursed waters until the end of time. And suppose this fisherman found a safe harbor, in what country would they land? Were they going to the end of the world? Surely it must be so!

As they sailed on for a time beyond reckoning, she forced herself to deal with other matters, and she thought about her father, missing him already. Her mother had died years ago, and grief had weakened her father's heart since the day of her death. She feared her disappearance would only worsen his condition. A desperate fear churned inside her. She might never see him again. Gods, how could she bear it?

“Look!” she cried. “Land ahead!”

He looked behind him, then turned back to her, disappointment etched on his face. “Land, yes, but not my own.” He sighed. “Let us hope it will serve for our salvation, no matter what.”

Even from a distance, she saw straggly trees and yellow grass, but no flowers. Where *were* they? Were they safe from the prince now?

The water rushed and crashed on the shore, the foamy waves lapping up on the sand. Nolan skillfully maneuvered the boat close to the shore. First taking the sail down, he stepped out in ankle-deep water and reached for her, lifting her in his strong arms, as if she were light as air. “Come, my lady, let’s hope this land brings us deliverance.” He carried her up on the beach, then went back to draw the boat farther along on the sand.

Up on the beach, the hem of her gown brushed against the sand, the silk damp and clinging to her legs. She looked around in wonder, praying for sanctuary. “Is this an island, or what?”

“Don’t know, my lady, and I don’t care, as long as we are safe now.”

For the first time that day, she thought deeply about her future. She would always remain grateful for Nolan’s rescue, but a niggling doubt about his livelihood teased her mind. How in the world could she link her life to the dubious prospects of a fisherman? She would be heartbroken if she didn’t get back to Connachta, didn’t see her father again. Suppose she never again saw Connachta? She would get by on her own. She would tear the diamonds and pearls from her gown and sell them, then make her own way in the world, maybe as a seamstress. How would she tell Nolan that she would eventually leave him, after all he had done for her? Not for the world did she want to hurt him, but better to realize now that nothing could ever exist between them than to join her life to his and have them both suffer throughout the years. Yet, he’d said nothing about marriage, a question she would deal with later.

So lost was she in her thoughts that she didn’t at first see the old woman sitting on a rock. She nudged Nolan’s arm as he joined her after beaching the boat. She spoke in low tones and tilted her head in the woman’s direction. “Look at the old woman on that rock!” In the name of all the gods, what was the old crone doing there?

Nolan frowned. “She looks familiar, but she couldn’t be the same.”

“What do you mean?”

“Wait a minute, and I’ll tell you.” He turned to rearrange the provisions in the boat, many of which had overturned in the storm-tossed sea.

He straightened up again. “I’ve seen an old woman in my travels, but this one must not be the same. This one is wearing a blue shawl.”

“And so?” This quandary was getting weirder and weirder.

He scratched his chin. “Means it’s not the same woman.” He frowned. “She couldn’t be the same, because there’s no way she could have followed us. I last saw her at the palace.” He lowered his voice. “Unless she’s a witch.”

“A witch!” Leslie glanced at the woman again and found her still staring at them.

Nolan spoke under his breath. “Lady, please let me do the talking. I don’t know where we are, and frankly, I don’t know how I’ll find my own country again. But I will,” he said with more confidence than he felt.

She wondered how certain he was that they would ever reach his land, but she kept her doubts to herself. He took her arm to guide her along the sifting sand, and soon

they came face to face with the woman.

“*Bannaghtyn!*” he said. “Greetings, old woman.”

She snorted. “Huh!” She gestured toward the princess. “Young man, you’re in terrible trouble for stealing the prince’s promised wife.”

“How did you know ...,” Leslie began, but Nolan shushed her.

“Best you leave, and leave *her* here,” the old woman said with a stern look. “It’s wrong to steal.”

A look of indignation crossed Nolan’s face. “I didn’t steal her. She came willingly.” He turned her way. “You came willingly, didn’t you?”

“Indeed, yes. Old woman, if you think I’ll marry the prince, let me set you straight. I would drown myself before I would wed that creature.”

The old woman laughed cruelly. “Well, let me tell *you* something. This island belongs to Prince Maccus.” She pointed toward the sky. “And look, here he comes!”

Oh, no! After all they’d been through, she’d be captured, after all!

* * * *

Prince Maccus came down from the clouds, his face twisted with evil intent. Nolan gasped, heartsick and tormented out of his mind. The prince had outwitted Mannanan, god of the sea.

The prince strutted their way, and his eyes gleamed with malice. He glared at Nolan. “You thought your god could trick me, didn’t you? Well, it looks as if I’ve had the last laugh.”

“You leave me alone!” the princess screamed. “I wouldn’t marry you for all the gold in the kingdom.”

“Oh, shut up!” Prince Maccus snapped his fingers. “No one wants to hear your carping! No more sound from you unless I tell you that you can speak.”

A stunned look crossed her face, prompting Nolan to wonder what had happened. He found out soon enough. The princess tried to speak, but no sound emerged. She opened her mouth again and again, a look of helpless terror on her face. Gods, what had happened here? A fresh well of sorrow and pity claimed Nolan, but anger, too. He wanted to kill the evil prince, wanted to pound him into the ground ’til nothing was left of him but his bones. Gods, how he hated the fiend!

At the sight of the voiceless princess, the prince doubled over with laughter, a harsh, grating sound that went on and on. The old woman scurried away, and soon disappeared.

“Mannanan!” Nolan cried to the sea god again. “Help me!”

The prince giggled. “It looks as if your god has forgotten about you, not that he ever cared. My powers are *so* much greater.”

“Why, you ...,” Nolan raised his fists to strike the goddess-damned fiend, but nothing happened. Fierce hot fury pulsed through him. Every muscle tensed, and his heart pounded.

“You see?” The prince snickered. “Nothing and no one can prevail against me.”

From the corner of his eye, Nolan slid a glance at the princess, the look of horror on her face. A fresh spate of fury swelled inside him. “If you didn’t have your powers, you wouldn’t dare strike a fisherman from Ban Fearann.”

“You want to see my power?” The prince pointed a finger at him that sent Nolan flying backward, landing on his rump.

“You damned bastard!” Nolan pushed himself to his feet. “Help me, Mannanan! If you can’t aid the princess, can’t you at least help me?”

A roaring sound filled the air, and a tempest churned up in the sea. A splendid foaming chariot emerged from the waves, propelled by two white horses. Prince Maccus stepped back, *his* face now holding a look of terror.

“No!” the prince cried. “No, no!” He pulled at his hair, his movements jerky, his short, squat legs shuffling backwards.

Nolan sighed loudly with relief, but anger overrode every other emotion. “*Now* you come! Why didn’t you come to me sooner?” He gave Mannanan a harsh look.

“That’s no way to talk to a god! But just so you know, you must call me three times before I can answer you. Now best you take the princess and set sail.”

Nolan slid a glance at Prince Maccus, and saw the little man slinking away. “What about him?”

“I’ll take care of him,” the sea god said, his voice urgent. “Leave now, for this island is going to sink into the waves. Now hurry!”

Nolan grabbed the princess’ hand, and together they raced for the boat, the vessel already floating off-shore. He didn’t even wonder how it had gotten out to sea. Mannanan, obviously. He lifted the princess into his arms and rushed her to the boat as she clutched her long silk gown, her other arm wrapped around his shoulder. Her hair hung in wild disarray, the hem of her gown soaked, but she was as lovely as ever.

A terrible roaring, crashing noise sounded behind them. Her eyes widened as she pointed toward the shore. The island was sinking, the prince with it! Prince Maccus screamed in fear and horror, and he sank beneath the sand, until only his head was visible, and soon, his head sank, too. Then the trees, the grass, everything disappeared into one gigantic hole, and the ocean covered all, as if the island had never been. The waters stilled, the sea calmed, and Mannanan had vanished.

“Well, what do you know!” Speechless, Nolan stared and then hurried to get in the boat, for the water was rising, lapping past his knees. He grabbed the oars and began to row, his arms pulling at the oars. “Let’s hope we can find our way home.”

But where was home?

Chapter Three

"I wish I knew where we are," Nolan said to the princess, who sat across from him, frowning with worry. "Everything seems different in this part of the world. Time is different. But I will try my best to get you back to Connachta." But how?

The princess tried to speak, but no words came. She remained under the evil prince's spell, even though Maccus had perished. Using fierce gestures, she indicated that she wanted to return to her own country. If he took her back to Connachta--assuming he found the way--he'd never see her again, for there was no future for him outside of Ban Fearann. Everything and everyone he knew existed in his own country. Still, he couldn't bear to disappoint her. The waters stretched on and on, the waves lifting and lowering the boat, the salt water smell a constant irritant.

"I fear we are lost ... for now," he added quickly, his heart turning at the look of sadness on her face. He studied the sun, yet it seemed as if the whole world had shifted, along with every country in it.

Since the waters were calm, he reached into a basket at his feet and found a pastry flavored with cinnamon and filled with raisins. He handed half of it to her. "Here, this will help fill you up for a long time, so you won't feel so hungry." While he chewed on the sweet morsel, he studied her long, shapely fingers, the ivory skin unblemished. Mindful he was staring, he turned away, his gaze on the boundless ocean. He retrieved a stoppered pitcher from his wooden basket and poured a cup of cider for her. After she finished drinking, she handed the cup back to him, and he quenched his own thirst with the tart drink, better than ale or whiskey to soothe his parched throat.

The wind picked up and the waves lapped around them. The sea darkened the farther out they sailed. The air cooled. The wind strengthened, the boat tossing and turning from side to side. A frightened look crossed Princess Leslie's face, and he tried to hide his own disquiet. Balancing himself again, he took the sail down, while the boat all but capsized and nearly threw him overboard. The sky blackened and the wind howled, a tempest such as he'd never endured. He had to escape this course, had to find land! The princess clutched her wooden seat, her eyes wide with fear. He looked helplessly in all directions. After all they'd been through, would they both lose their lives to the sea?

No! He hadn't come this far only to have them both perish. He strained his eyes, looking off to the west. A sea gull flew overhead, crying its raucous call. There! "That must be land!" he cried. *Mannanan, let it be so!*

The wind died down as suddenly as it had come up, and Nolan rowed on toward his distant destination. His arm and back muscles burned from rowing. His fingers were stiff from clutching the oars.

The land came into view more sharply now, covering such a great expanse Nolan wasn't sure if it was an island or a continent. Clusters of green, leafy trees and thickets of bushes dotted the area. They entered shallow water, and he drew the boat up close as foamy waves washed up to the shore, then the waves gradually pulled back again. He

brought the boat into shallower water and carried the princess to dry land. Setting her down, he clutched her to his chest for one moment all too brief, wanting to give comfort, for here they were in an unknown land, perhaps never to return to her own country again, and she was without speech, unable to express her fears. Yet even in that brief moment of closeness, he warmed to the feel of her breasts against him, to the pressure of her waist and hips molded to his body. Ah, how he wished she could stay in his arms, make the moment last.

An old woman sat on a rock, as if waiting for them. Why should he be surprised? The witch again, this time wearing a purple shawl. Did she think she was fooling them with each appearance by wearing a different colored shawl?

"Greetings, old woman," he called, leading Princess Leslie by the hand. He tried to act nonchalant, but a shiver raced down his back. He wanted nothing to do with sorcery, but in this case, he had no choice. Sliding a glance at the princess, he saw a look of wonder on her face, but something else, a hint of defiance.

"Ah, I've been waiting for you, Nolan Tremaine of Ban Fearann." She frowned in annoyance, as if he had upset her.

He stopped a few feet from her. "What do you mean, waiting for me? And tell me how you always manage to arrive ahead of me, no matter where I go, as if you know where I'll be?"

She grinned slyly. "Haven't you guessed by now?"

He turned to the princess. "See, I told you she was a witch." He spoke with more bravado than he felt, increasingly leery of her magical powers.

"A witch who wants to help you. But we're wasting our time. You must bring the princess to my home."

"Must? You know, I don't like that word. So far, I can't see that you've done anything to help either of us. All you've done is appear ahead of me, wherever I go." Except for the time she showed him the way to the palace, he mused.

"Believe me," the woman said with sincerity in her voice, "I do want to help you and the princess."

"But why do you want to help us?" Nolan didn't understand this woman--witch!

"Ah, young man, when you get to be my age, perhaps things will become plainer to you. Sad to say, I've made so many mistakes in my life that I try to make up for these mistakes as best I can," she said with a winsome smile. "And if I can help you and the princess, well, so much the better." She stood and motioned to them. "Now come with me, and by the way, you may call me Rhiannon."

Nolan shrugged while exchanging looks with the princess as the crone walked on ahead. "Best do as she says," he murmured, "and let us pray that she can help you." His heart ached at the sight of Princess Leslie, still mute. She squared her shoulders and made a gesture, as if to say 'Let's get on with it.'

The crone led them along a rocky path and up a steep hill, where boulders and thick tree roots hindered their passage. Trees and bushes stretched in all directions, and woodsy scents of pine and soil filled the air. The princess clutched her gown, the silk spotted with salt water, the hem dark with dirt. He wondered if Rhiannon had a spare dress for her, for the poor princess had traveled in her wedding dress since they'd left the palace. Soaked with sweat and salt water, his clothes stuck to him, and all he wanted was to have a long soak in a in a tub of cool water, with soap to wash himself.

The sun shone brightly in the western sky, and he shaded his eyes against the glare. How many days had passed since he'd left his own country of Ban Fearann? He shook his head, puzzled by the passage of time.

Strange birds squawked from the trees, with bright plumage of yellow and black. He clutched the princess's hand, careful she didn't fall. Dear princess! The seams of her satin slippers had torn, her toes showing through. What a different life this was from what she was used to. He alternately cursed and blessed the old woman whose black figure strode on ahead of them, unsure if she would prove their salvation, or if their troubles would only worsen the more their lives became entwined with hers. As they neared the summit, he looked out over the land, an island set in the middle of the ocean.

They viewed the house ahead, at the top of the hill. A neat frame cottage, it had a thatched roof that reflected the glow of the late afternoon sun. A flower garden in front presented a lovely tapestry of color. An enticing fragrance filled the air. Reaching the house, Nolan looked down to the other side of the hill, where a river meandered southward, a promise of bathing, if he had a chance.

The woman opened the door. "Come on inside. My house may be plain, but it's clean." Sparkling sunlight poured through one open window, revealing a brick fireplace, its chimney blackened with use, a table and chairs beside an open door that led to a bedchamber. A wooden counter stretched one length of the small room, with shelves above it and a larder to the side. Embers burned in the hearth, adding to the heat of the room. Two kettles and implements hung from the fireplace, many of the utensils unfamiliar to him. The scent of fresh bread and apple pie floated through the air, another reminder of how little he'd eaten since he'd left his home, such a long time ago. A wooden bowl of apples sat on the table, and he was tempted to grab the fruit now and bite into it.

Rhiannon tilted her head toward the table. "Sit down and make yourselves comfortable, while I set out tea and food for you. I'll wager you're hungry."

Nolan held a chair for the princess and helped her get settled. "Indeed, madam, we've had little to eat."

"Eat as much as you like. I've more of everything." She set plates, spoons and knives on the table, then added a couple of earthenware mugs from a shelf. She spooned tea leaves into each mug, then poured boiling water from the kettle. Nolan caught the aroma of cinnamon, the steam rising from the mug, thinking nothing had ever looked or smelled so good. From a larder, the woman set out a wedge of cheese, then drew a loaf of bread from a shelf in the oven. A jar of honey already sat on the table, completing their simple meal.

"Now eat," she said, "and when you're done, I have an apple pie for you."

Nolan hesitated. "And you, madam, aren't you going to eat?"

She waved her hand airily. "Not now, maybe later." She disappeared into the adjoining room and closed the door behind her.

With the sharp knife, Nolan sliced a piece of cheese and set it on the princess's plate. She smiled, but fatigue and misery etched her face. He placed a thick slice of wheat bread on her plate, the bread still warm and fragrant from baking. Gods, he was hungry! He savored the nutty taste of the bread, the sharp flavor of the cheese, as if this were the finest meal he'd ever consumed, a banquet!

Despite his hunger, every thought lingered on the princess. He touched her soft

hand and offered her an encouraging smile. "All will be well." He hoped he'd injected enough confidence in his voice, for he had no assurance that all would be well, or that he would ever find his country again ... or hers. She might never regain her voice, might never return to her family. What if they were destined to live on this island forever, never see their homes or friends again? Gods, no! He'd get them off this island and return the princess to her family. A terrible sadness clutched at his heart, for he couldn't imagine never seeing the princess again. She had worked her way into his heart, this woman so different from others he'd known.

He chewed on the bread and cheese, washing them down with his hot tea, feeling much better than he had before their arrival on this island. The princess ate more daintily than he, another indication of the difference in their classes, one more reason to return her to her homeland, for she could never find contentment in his.

* * * *

Leslie tried to act cheerful for Nolan's sake, but she wondered if she'd ever get back to her own country and her dear father again. But worse than that, what if she could never speak again? Strange that the wicked prince's spell still fettered her, even now that he was dead, thank the gods! She had many things she wanted to say to Nolan, this dear man who had done so much for her, rescuing her from Prince Maccus. And she must find her way back home, there to see her father again, to live again. He must be out of his mind with worry over her.

The room darkened with the setting sun. Shadows crept into the corners of the room. A cool breeze blew in through the open window, and crickets chirped in the darkness outside.

Opening the bedchamber door, Rhiannon reentered the room and drew out an apple pie from a shelf in the oven, holding the pan with potholders. The sweet, spicy scent of apple pie drifted through the air, a welcome ending to a simple but substantial meal, for she and Nolan had finished the loaf of bread between them, albeit he'd eaten a larger share.

No matter how much she fought her fatigue and sleepiness, a yawn escaped. When had she last slept? She couldn't remember. It seemed as if she had sailed forever, landing first at the prince's island, then sailing through a different time and dimension, and now landing here. She noted the tiredness on Nolan's face and knew they were both ready for bed, but where would they sleep? Surely not in the same room and definitely not in the same bed!

Finished with her slice of pie, she started to rise from the chair to set the plate in an iron tub that rested on a counter, but the crone laid a hand on her shoulder.

"No, no, dear lady. I'll take care of the dishes. Best you get settled in bed now. I have a nightgown that should fit you, aye, and another dress for you to wear on the morrow. I've a daughter about your size. Ah, you didn't know I had children, did you?" She gestured toward the princess's wedding gown. "You've been wearing that dress long enough."

Since forever, Leslie wanted to say, but smiled in acknowledgment. The room darkened further, and Rhiannon lit a lamp to guide her to the bedchamber. Nolan rose to pour himself another mug of tea while she fought to keep her eyes open.

Inside the bedchamber, the old woman rummaged through an oak chest and drew out a cotton nightgown, old and tattered by the looks of it but clean, with the fragrance of

lavender.

Leslie indicated the narrow bed that hugged a far wall, then raised her eyebrows in question, for she wondered where the old woman would sleep.

“Don’t worry about me,” said the crone. “I can sleep on the floor here, and your man can sleep on the floor in the kitchen.” He’s not my man, Leslie wanted to tell her, although he’d done more for her than any other man had ever done, except for her father. She gestured that she’d be willing to sleep on the floor, but the crone shook her head.

Rhiannon turned down the blanket on the narrow bed and fluffed the pillow, talking all the while. “I’ll be fine sleeping on the floor, and it won’t hurt your man to sleep in the kitchen. Tomorrow, I’ll see what potion I have that will help you speak again.”

Potion. What kind of potion? she wondered with a twinge of fear. She’d accept any help she could get, as long as it would enable her to use her voice once more. But how in the world could a potion help her regain her speech? If this woman was indeed a witch--and who could doubt it?--perhaps she possessed powerful charms beyond human understanding. Leslie wanted to ask her why they couldn’t try the potion tonight, but she was almost asleep on her feet. Besides, the potion might require a bit of preparation, a demand on the woman’s time and skill.

Rhiannon gestured toward the bed. “Chamber pot under the bed.”

With smiles and gestures, Leslie tried to express her gratitude for all Rhiannon had done for her and Nolan. If the woman could enable her to speak again, that would be a miracle beyond measure.

A miracle, if only it would happen.

Chapter Four

The following morning dawned bright and clear, with sunlight streaming through the bedchamber window. Leslie awoke and stared around the room. Where was she? Then it all came back to her: their journey across the endless ocean, landing here on the island, their supper at the witch's--correction!--Rhiannon's house. She's still a witch, Leslie mused, turning onto her side, but she must be a good witch. Leslie had slept soundly all through the night. Now she hoped and prayed she would regain her speech. How, she didn't know. And if she didn't? She wouldn't even think about that calamity. Her wedding dress and silk shift hung from a peg on the wall, finery that brought back bitter memories of the evil prince.

Looking toward Rhiannon's sleeping space, she found the place empty, the blanket folded and pillow pushed to the side.

After a light tap, Rhiannon slowly opened the door and peeked inside. "Ah, you're awake now," she said, stepping into the room. "Your man woke up a short while ago, so I'll set out breakfast for the two of you. I already ate." She bustled across the room and opened the oak chest, and the scent of lavender floated through the air. Rummaging through the clothes, she dug out a dress and handed it to Leslie. "Here, you get dressed, and by the time you come out to the kitchen, I'll have breakfast ready for you and Nolan."

She still thinks Nolan is my man, Leslie thought, dredging up a bit of humor in her situation. She smiled her thanks and slipped out of her nightgown, then drew the fresh dress over her head, a brown linen frock with a fitted waist and ties at the bodice, the plainest dress she'd ever worn. She sighed, telling herself she should be grateful for all that others had done for her, first Nolan in rescuing her from the palace, now the old woman in sheltering and providing for her ... and Nolan.

"Good morning." Nolan stood as she entered the kitchen and pulled out a chair for her, then sat back down. They exchanged glances, while she tried to hide the terrible fear that she might never find her voice again. He squeezed her hand, as if to say he understood.

With his touch, a strange warmth stole over her, a sensation so new she couldn't identify it, only that something had changed between them, a hint that things would never be the same with Nolan. Best not to think about him anymore, or think about what her life would be like if she weren't a princess. Besides, she thought, what in the world could they ever have in common? No, she could never find happiness or contentment with a mere fisherman, no matter how much he had helped her. She scolded herself for her snootiness, but there it was, and she couldn't help her feelings.

Catching the aroma of cinnamon tea and fresh buttered toast, she realized how hungry she was, how little she had eaten within the past few days. Rhiannon stood at the counter, cutting up an herb or vegetable. Leslie couldn't tell which but wondered about its use. A potion for her?

Finished with breakfast shortly after, Nolan pushed his chair back and stood.

“Rhiannon, I noticed you have a vegetable garden in back. I’d be glad to pull weeds and pick any ripe vegetables. It’s the least I can do after all you’ve done for us.” He stood tall and straight, his tunic tight across his broad chest, his arm and leg muscles revealing a lifetime of hard work. His hair fell just below his ears, and the sunlight through the open window cast golden lights on the strands. As if aware of her scrutiny, he raked his fingers through his hair and shoved a few locks away from his forehead.

Rhiannon turned from the counter. “Indeed, that would be a big help if you would check the garden. The tomatoes are ripe, I don’t doubt. And while you’re outside, I’ll give the princess a potion. Let us hope it will work.”

“Oh, yes!” He squeezed her hand, his skin rough and calloused. “Ah, Princess Leslie, I pray that you find your voice again.” His face held a look of hope, an expression that mirrored her own dearest wish. “Nothing would make me happier.”

Nor I, she wished she could tell him. But she merely smiled and returned his squeeze. Her heart pounded with anticipation, with the anticipation that she would soon speak again. She said a quick prayer to the gods, calling on divine intercession.

He threw the old woman an anxious glance. “What if I stay here and see if--”

“No! Best if you go outside. You’ll only distract the princess. We’ll find out soon enough if this concoction will work.”

He hesitated and gave Leslie a long look full of meaning, then finally withdrew, closing the oak door behind him.

“Now,” Rhiannon said, “I want you to drink this.” She set a mug in front of her, and a strange smell rose from the potion, combining the aroma of pine with cloves and another scent she couldn’t name. Rhiannon frowned, her hands clasped in an unconscious gesture of prayer.

Leslie took a deep breath. Her heart thudded, as though to burst from her chest. Gods, she prayed again, please let this brew work. Her hand trembled so she feared the contents would spill, but she raised the mug to her mouth and drained the liquid, then set the mug back on the table. She waited, but nothing happened. She tried to speak, but no words came. Perhaps she needed to give the potion time to work? Why, yes, that was it. She’d always been impatient. Hadn’t her father told her that time and again? She needed to give the brew enough time to have its effect on her. Glancing up at the old woman, she saw the hopeful look on her face. With a helpless gesture, she shook her head.

“Oh, dear,” the old woman said, her shoulders slumping. “I was so sure of this blend. Well, we will keep on trying until we find the mixture that works.”

But it was the same story the next day. Nolan spoke optimistic words, telling her how happy he’d be to hear her dear voice again. Not as happy as she would be, she wanted to tell him. She tried to hide her depression, to stifle her tears. What in the world would she do if she never spoke again? She could never tell Nolan of her appreciation, never express her gratitude to Rhiannon, but more than anything, could never return to her royal duties, even if they found the way back.

Toward the end of the second day, Nolan entered the house, his face shiny with perspiration, several ripe tomatoes in his hands. Already aware of the failure of Rhiannon’s second potion, he glanced her way and gave her a look of such deep sympathy, it was almost more than she could bear. Nolan set the tomatoes on the kitchen counter while she sat in a chair, mending one of the dresses Rhiannon had retrieved from the clothes chest. It was the least she could do in payment for the old woman’s many

kindnesses. Even if she can't cure my muteness, she lamented, resolved to suppress her bitterness, for her distress would gain her nothing and help no one. She took a careful stitch of the cotton frock in her lap and vowed to smile more, if only for Nolan's and the old woman's sake. Rhiannon sat across from her, slicing a stalk of celery. The luscious fragrance of vegetable stew drifted from the hearth, and the meal needed only the celery slices to be ready. The old woman had already added seaweed to the stew, an addition, she told Leslie, that gave the stew flavor and thickening.

Nolan came to stand beside her and patted her shoulder, as though he could read her mind, aware of her deep depression. She flashed him a smile, one he returned, giving him an endearing, boyish look. Her heart thudded with the realization that when and if they got off this island and she returned to her royal duties at the palace--if she regained her speech--she would miss him very much.

"Going down to the river to bathe," Nolan announced. "Just wish I had clean clothes."

Rhiannon set her knife down and stood. "Young man, you should have spoken sooner, and I should have thought of clothes for you, too." She wiped her hands on her apron, then headed for the bedchamber. She came back shortly with a fresh linen tunic and a cake of soap, also a razor. "Here. By the time you return, I'll have supper for you."

* * * *

Treading a winding path that led from the front door around to the back and then down a hill to the river, Nolan strode past trees and bushes, with the scents and sounds of the forest surrounding him, for the old woman's house with its garden was the only clearing in the vast expanse of woods that covered the entire island. He stepped warily, the ground warm but rough beneath his bare feet, since he'd left his boots outside the cottage. Branches snapped against his face, and he pushed them aside, the woods dark and gloomy. After a walk of about a half-mile, he stopped beside a hemlock at the bottom of the hill to shed his clothes. Why does no one else live here? he pondered as he drew his tunic and undertunic over his head and carried them to the river to wash. He stepped down the rocky bank and splashed out in the water knee-deep. *Could this be a magic island?*

Despite the heat of the day, the water was cold, but never mind. He was glad to bathe again and wear clean clothes. He dipped his garments in the water and rubbed them with soap, then rinsed them and wrung them out. Stepping onto the bank again, he draped the clothes over a bush. By tomorrow, they'd be ready to wear. He splashed out into the river again and began soaping his body, thinking all the while.

When would they get off this island, or were they destined to live out their lives in this isolated wilderness? If they *did* leave--if he could find the princess's country again--then what? She meant so much to him, every waking thought centered around her. How he wished he could spend the rest of his life with her. As if they could have a life together! Why, yes, he could see her agreeing to marry him, providing they ever got back to Ban Fearann.

"This is my wife," he would say to the villagers. "Oh, by the way, she's a princess from the faraway country of Connachta." He could hear their laughter, their gasps of disbelief.

Yet he knew he had much to offer a woman, if he ever married, and he vowed someday he would. Years ago, he'd taught himself to read, then a few years back he'd

made a two-shelf pine bookcase, where he kept a few prized classics. He enjoyed reading these volumes on Sacred Days, when he didn't go fishing. He smiled to himself as he crouched in the water to rinse his hair. He'd picked up a few fancy words from his reading, words he would never use around his friends, for they'd think he was trying to impress them.

He soaped his face and shaved, thinking about Leslie, a woman he couldn't drive from his mind. He couldn't deny, even if only in the deepest reaches of his soul, how he wanted her in his bed, not just for one night, but for all the nights for the rest of their lives. In spite of the cold water, his body warmed, his arousal at a peak. He loved her, might as well admit it, this woman who could never be his. Splashing the water over his body, he tried to douse his passion, then stepped onto the riverbank again.

Above all, he must remember his wager to the stranger, that he would bring the Blessed Belle of Bellarmine back to his land. How could he ever forget, and how could he get around it? But he hadn't known at the time that the Blessed Belle was a woman. He'd thought it was a bell that rings. One thing was for sure--he would not turn the princess over to the stranger. Never!

What if the princess never regained her speech? The dear lady, how she must suffer, unable to express herself, not knowing if she'd ever speak again. He'd give the world, aye, would sacrifice himself, if only she could find her voice again. Would she ever regain her speech?

* * * *

Will I ever regain my speech? Leslie agonized, waking up on the third day. Through the closed door, she caught the scent of frying bacon. She dressed and opened the door to see the table set with scrambled eggs, fried bacon, and cinnamon tea. Always the gentleman, Nolan rose and held a chair for her, his hand brushing her shoulder as he eased her chair in. She threw him a smile, warming to his touch. Rhiannon stood at the counter, her back to her, cutting up an unfamiliar herb whose pungent smell teased her nostrils.

He scooped up crisp bacon and fluffy eggs for her and himself, and despite her frustrations, she realized how hungry she was. Only two places were set on the table, and she wondered if the old woman ever ate.

Finished with his breakfast shortly after, Nolan rose and commented he was going to the forest to cut trees for firewood. He left the house with a smile of encouragement, but nothing could lift the depression that had settled over her like a ton of boulders.

Yet another problem taunted her--Prince Maccus's curse on her land, the spell that had made the women barren. How could that spell ever be lifted?

A pot of water simmered over the hearth, and Rhiannon added the herb to the water, stirring the blend. After a few minutes, she poured the concoction into a mug and indicated Leslie's empty plate.

"Do you want any more to eat, Princess Leslie?"

Leslie shook her head and made a gesture of thanks, once more afraid to hope, once again with the certainty she would never speak again. She drained her mug of tea, so eager to see if the potion worked, she couldn't eat any more, even had she wanted to.

Rhiannon set the mug in front of her. Steam rose from the mug, the pungent smell stronger than ever. "Well, then, drink this and go lie down, for this concoction will make you sleepy."

A thrill of alarm jolted her. What if she didn't wake up?

It seemed that Rhiannon could read her mind. "Don't worry. I'm not giving you poison. But this is a stronger brew than the ones I made you before."

A brief hesitation later, Leslie held the cup to her lips and blew softly to cool the liquid, then sipped a bit, shuddering with its bitter taste. The brew burned her lips, and she blew again, wanting to get this ordeal over with. Waiting a short while, she raised the mug to her lips and drained it. She waited ... and waited. She blinked her eyes as dizziness swept over her, a disorientation.

Rhiannon put her arm around Leslie's waist. "Here, let me help get you settle in bed. And let's hope that when you wake, you will have your speech back."

Leslie tried to pray, wanting to tell all the gods she wanted her voice back again. But a fuzziness hazed her brain, her thoughts muddled. On shaky legs, she trudged to bed, grateful to have Rhiannon's arm around her waist, for the room spun around her. She flopped down on the bed and shut her eyes as darkness closed around her.

* * * *

While the princess slept and Nolan remained in the woods, Rhiannon fetched a crystal ball from the bottom of the oak chest. She took it out to the kitchen where she could sit and benefit from the bright light that poured through the window. Seeking a clear head, she pushed her hair from her face and concentrated. She waited long minutes, swiping her hand across the ball, then stared again. Gradual images formed in the ball, finally coalescing into a complete picture.

She raised her head and stared around the room, wondering how she could tell the princess the sad news.

Chapter Five

Nolan returned from cutting wood in the forest, walking the dark and winding tree-shaded path to the cottage. Climbing up the rocky hill, he carried an armful of logs, his mind constantly on the princess. Gods, he prayed, please have her regain her speech. He missed hearing her sweet voice, but more than that, he wanted to see her happy, to know that her troubles were behind her. Once she had her voice back, they could leave the island, if only they could find their way back to Connachta. Doubtless the old woman will know, he thought, stepping over a tree stump. Rhiannon seemed to know everything, leaving no doubt that she was, indeed, a witch.

Perspiration drenched his clothes. His arms glistening with sweat. Leaves and bits of twigs stuck to his tunic, and he looked forward to another bath in the river after the evening meal to soothe his tired muscles. After repeated trips to the forest, he emerged from the dark woods for the last time and noted the sun sinking below the horizon, its bright rays glittering on the water. Far out, the ocean stretched on and on, ending--where?

His stomach growled, a reminder that he should have taken a more filling snack when he'd set out this morning for the forest. He hoped Rhiannon would have the evening meal ready.

He propped the heavy door open with one of the logs and stepped inside to set a pile by the hearth. In spite of the heat from the fireplace, the cottage seemed cool after the warm sunshine.

Rhiannon sat at the table, peeling potatoes, her gnarled fingers clutching a paring knife. His heart lurched. Where was the princess?

"Sleeping," the old woman said, obviously reading his mind. She set the knife down and shoved the peelings aside, raising her gaze to his. "I gave her a very strong potion. By the time she wakes up, she should have her voice back."

He feared to hope, but a worse fear crushed him. What if she never woke?
"You're not sure the potion will work?"

She shrugged. "Son, nothing in life is certain. But I have high hopes this time." She smiled grimly. "No promises, though."

He looked around helplessly, then stepped outside to bring more of the logs inside, building a neat pile. He wondered how Rhiannon got logs on her own; conjured them out of thin air, no doubt.

Rhiannon resumed peeling potatoes, but she frowned, as if somber thoughts weighed heavily on her. For the second time, she laid her paring knife down and gave him a long, thoughtful look.

"You know I'm a witch, don't you?" Her expression blended concern with wry amusement.

Her query sent chills down his back. Of all the things he'd expected her to say, this was absolutely the last. Of course, he suspected she practiced witchcraft, but the concept frightened him, just the same.

“Well, young man, has a spell made *you* speechless, too?”

He pulled out a chair and sat down. “I ... I supposed you were--are--a witch. I haven’t seen that you’ve done us any harm, so I assume you are a good witch.”

She nodded. “I try to be.” She picked up the knife in her knotted fingers and grabbed another potato. Her gaze caught his. “But did you know I have a crystal ball?”

“Crystal ball?” He clenched his hands under the table.

She continued paring the potato with deft movements, and the peeling fell away in a circular motion. “I can see things I would have no way of knowing otherwise.”

His skin chilled, his throat went dry. “I see.”

“While you worked in the woods and the princess slept, I looked into my crystal ball. I wanted to see what awaited her when she returned to her country. I fear I have bad news for the princess, and I think it best if you tell her. She means a lot to you. That much is obvious. Oh, don’t deny it,” she said, apparently catching his stunned look, “a lovely lady such as she would attract any man.”

“Your news?” He clutched his hands so tightly his fingers ached.

She pushed the peelings aside and gathered up the potatoes, shoving her chair back. “First, I want you to promise me you’ll wait ’til after the evening meal before telling her. She should be waking shortly and be hungry, I don’t doubt.” She stood to dice the potatoes into a pot over the hearth, her face shining with the heat from flames. She turned her woolen apron around so it wouldn’t catch fire. “Poor lady, she’s been through so much.”

Nolan wanted to smash the table and chairs. “The news!” He glanced fearfully toward the bedchamber, afraid he’d wake the princess.

“Well, when I looked into the crystal ball...”

A few minutes later, Nolan eased the bedchamber door open and stepped quietly inside. His heart ached with love for this dear woman. Now he had to tell her that her father was dead.

“She should be waking soon,” the witch had said a few minutes ago. “Go see how she fares. And I hope she has her voice back,” she said under her breath.

He approached the bed as shadows darkened the room, and the princess stretched and yawned. A remnant of daylight from the window above the bed touched the princess, her hair in the most glorious disarray, her linen shift clinging to her body, her nipples pressing against the fabric. Desire surged through him, hot and deep, but he suppressed all thought of wanting her, for Rhiannon’s sad news must evict every passionate thought from his mind.

She looked around the room, a dazed expression on her face. “Where am I?” She pulled the sheet up to her chin, as if aware of her dishabille.

He knelt down by the bed. She could talk, praise the gods! “Princess Leslie, don’t you remember when we came to this island a few days ago, after fleeing the prince?”

“Ah, yes, I remember now!”

“He placed a curse on you, but you have your voice back now, thanks to Rhiannon.” *And the gods.*

She smiled that beautiful smile of hers, a smile that could melt the heart of a fiend, of anyone but the wicked prince. “Yes, it all comes back to me now. The prince is dead, thank the gods! May they forgive me for my unkind thoughts, but Prince Maccus

was truly wicked. And Rhiannon has given me back my voice.”

He smiled. “And I’ll wager you’re hungry. Do you want to get up now for the evening meal?”

An embarrassed look crossed her face. “Yes, but ...”

His face warmed. He should have thought of her needs. “I’ll leave you alone now, and when you come out to the kitchen, the old woman will have vegetable stew ready.” He grinned. “I hope you’re not getting tired of vegetable stew.”

“Nolan, I am so happy for all that Rhiannon has done for me--for us--I wouldn’t care if she gave us nothing but bread and water for the evening meal.” She smiled. “Well, I wouldn’t complain.” She placed her hand on her stomach. “Right now, I’m starving.”

He stood, so happy to see she was her lovely, endearing self again, not that her speechlessness had rendered her any less lovable, but it was so good to hear her mellow voice and see that winning smile. He left and closed the door behind him, but the dread of imparting the sad news returned full force, the message he’d managed to suppress for a short while.

She emerged from the bedchamber a few minutes later where two lit oil lamps revealed the soft lines and faint hue of her blue linen dress, a plain garment she wore like a queen. Her blonde tresses fell across her shoulders, shining golden in the pale light. “Rhiannon, I want to thank you for all you’ve done for me, for both of us. I can speak again, praise the gods!”

The old woman waved her hand. “Just hearing you speak again is thanks enough for me. Now sit down and eat!” Grabbing a wooden bowl from the table, the old woman spooned up the stew and set the bowl down for Leslie, then did the same for Nolan. Steam and a spicy scent of pepper and oregano rose from the stew, making Nolan’s mouth water, despite the sad news that pressed against his mind.

With a sly grin, Rhiannon took up a bowl for herself. “Surprised you, didn’t I? You thought I never ate.” She took her seat at the table and passed a fresh loaf of wheat bread to the princess. In contradiction to her flippant remark, her face turned somber again, prompting Nolan to realize her thoughts dwelled on the princess, too.

Nolan tried to eat, yet in spite of his hunger, the food stuck in his throat. After an eternity, he finished the meal as Leslie took a last bite of bread, her bowl empty.

He pushed his chair back and stood. “Princess Leslie, will you step outside with me for a while? ’Tis a lovely night with only a slight breeze.”

“Why, yes, of course,” she said with a look of surprise as he held her chair for her.

Outside, he looked up at the sky. A waxing moon shone in the east. Leading her several yards away from the cottage, he stopped by a sprawling oak tree, its magnificent branches stretching out, touching a hemlock. A fragrant pine scent wafted in the breeze, but too many problems taunted him. He recalled the stranger’s wager, and how he must return with the Blessed Belle of Bellarmine at a full moon. But how could he? He must take her back to her own country. The breeze tossed tree branches and lifted the princess’s hair from her shoulders, fluttering her dress around her ankles. The lamplight from the cottage cast a dull glow from the window. If only he could be inside with the princess now, reveling in her company, now that she had her voice back. But no, he must complete his task.

He cleared his throat. "My lady--"

"Oh, please call me Leslie. After all we've been through together, we don't need to use titles."

"Very well ... Leslie." He paused. "We both know that the old woman--Rhiannon--has special powers and--"

"She's a witch," Leslie interjected, "so why not just say the word? But she's a good witch, I'm convinced, after all she's done for me, restoring my speech."

"Indeed." Dread roiled inside him, his stomach muscles clenching. "Did you know she has a crystal ball and can see things without being there--where things are occurring?"

"No, I didn't know," she said with a puzzled look.

"Yes, well...." He raked his fingers through his hair. "Oh, I'm not telling this right, not right at all!"

She laid a hand on his arm, sending a spurt of heat through him, a passion he must stifle. "Nolan, will you say what you want to say?" Her eyes looked into his, her gaze warm and tender. Or did he only imagine an affectionate look? No matter, she was a princess, he but a fisherman, albeit one who must help her through the trying time to come.

He placed his hands gently on her upper arms, wanting to hold her, kiss her, tell her he never wanted her out of his life.

"Nolan?" she asked in a frightened voice.

"Prin--Leslie, the old woman told me only a while ago, shortly before you woke, that your father has died." Gods, if he could only have spared her this news!

Her hand flew to her mouth. "My father!" She turned away from him for a moment, then swung her gaze back to him. "She saw this in the crystal ball?"

"Yes." He bowed his head, his voice choking. "I am so sorry."

"But it may be a false image, nothing that actually happened." How he wanted to agree with her and tell her she had no one to grieve over.

"Leslie, we both know she is a powerful witch, able to see things denied the rest of us. In this case, I fear we must take her word."

She leaned back, nearly losing her balance. He caught her shoulders so she wouldn't fall. "My father ... he ... he developed a weak heart after my mother died. But I didn't know ... I thought he would live" She bit her lip, her face twisted in agony. "I never thought ... never thought he would d--die so soon." She cried then, a cry of sorrow and despair. "Oh, gods, I can't believe it!"

Tears flowed down her cheeks. She raised her hands to her eyes, her shoulders shaking.

"Oh, my dear." He drew her into his arms, letting her cry her heart out. She wept, her tears dampening his tunic. What could he say to comfort her? Nothing, he realized with a fresh spate of despair. There was nothing he could say or do to make her feel better, to ease the ache in her heart.

She leaned against him, her breasts cushioned against his chest, her soft warm body pressed close to his. Even now, he desired her, wanted her more than life. But just as quickly, he realized anew that there could never be anything between them, nothing but a friendship forged in mutual adversity. He held her and patted her back, too well aware he gave little condolence, yet it was all he knew to do, to give.

He sighed with the enormity of the task that awaited him. "I must find my way back to your country and--"

"No!"

He drew away. "No?"

"Can't go back." Her face shone in the moonlight, her cheeks wet with tears, but she looked as lovely as ever. Her voice was thick, heavy with grief.

He gathered his thoughts, unsure of her meaning. "Leslie, why can't you return? Don't you have a brother who will take the throne?"

"That's just it, no brother." She shook her head, her eyes welling with tears again.

Shock rendered him speechless, but not for long. "Then *you* will inherit the throne?"

"No, you don't understand." She brushed her hand across her eyes. "I'm not expressing myself well. Women can't inherit in Connachta. We are forbidden by law. My father's cousin is the closest relative, so he will become king."

"But you will still want to return to your country to see"

"No! My father's cousin is a widower, and he has had his eye on me for a long time, even before his wife died. Had it not been for Prince Maccus's evil curse, my father would have pledged me to Bran. My father has--had--a fault, some might call it a virtue. He could never see the baseness of others. His cousin is very clever, acting the gentleman in the company of others. But whenever he found me alone, he touched me in ... in improper places, trying to lure me into his bed." She sobbed. "No, I'll not return to my country!"

He kissed her tenderly on the top of her head. "Then where do you intend to go from here?"

"I don't know!"

Chapter Six

She hated to sound so indecisive, but her father's death tormented her, all the more heartrending for its unexpectedness. Now what could she do? Where could she go? Not back to Connachta, for the reasons she gave Nolan. Or could she go back? For a brief moment, she considered returning to her country incognito, but she knew her father's cousin would have spies everywhere, cunning and acquisitive man that he was. Besides, everyone knew her in most of the villages, and much as they might have loved her, she couldn't keep her presence a secret from them, or expect them to keep the secret.

The prince's curse still taunted her, the spell that made her countrywomen barren. She must ask Rhiannon if the crystal ball had revealed anything about that spell. Gods, she wanted to weep for her country, especially since she couldn't return.

The moon was rising, and a multitude of stars lit the heavens. The breeze picked up, cooling her face and lifting strands of her hair from her shoulders. Branches rustled in the wind, the dark forest stretching beyond them. The piney scent of the woods blew their way, blending with the delicate fragrance of the flowers in Rhiannon's front yard.

"Leslie?" Nolan's voice jerked her back to her dilemma, and just as quickly, she decided her fate. "If Rhiannon will have me, I'll stay here and keep her company, help her in her tasks."

Nolan shook his head. "'Tis no life for a lovely lady such as you, to live with an old woman in a cottage, and no one else on the island." He paused, and despite the darkness, she saw his face set in worry. "Have *you* seen anyone else on the island--any proof that others live here?"

She sighed. "No, I'm afraid not."

"Besides, we have no reason to believe she lives here all year long. I suspect she comes and goes as she pleases, by what manner of travel I'd hate to guess." He paused again, looking thoughtful. "Let me make a suggestion. If I can find my way back to my country, I can take you to my village of Baile Baeg--no, hear me out!" He didn't like the mutinous look on her face. "I know an elderly woman who lives alone, a much different woman from Rhiannon, neither better nor worse, mind you. I know she'd enjoy having a companion, because she's mentioned it to me."

What a comedown for her, a princess who'd been raised in a palace with an abundance of love, her every wish gratified. Yet this prospect was better than living in isolation with Rhiannon.

"--you know, someone to talk to, someone to read to her," Nolan continued, "since she has failing eyesight. You would do no housework, you understand. She has a maid, a young girl from the village who comes every day. But this young girl isn't much company, for she can't read, nor even speak well. And of course, there are other villagers, friendly people you could get to know. It's not as if you'd be tied to the house all day long. So what do you say? Do you want to think about it for a while?"

She swallowed. "Yes, I'd like to consider your suggestion, and I thank you for it."

“Good!” He eased her close to him, his arm around her waist. She looked into his eyes, wishing she could read their meaning. She leaned closer, raising a tentative hand to his face, feeling the slight stubble on his cheeks. Suddenly, she was in his arms, his embrace a tight band of iron, his hard body pressed against hers. He kissed her, at first probing, a bare touching of lips. This was a new experience for her, for no one had ever held her like this, nor touched his lips to hers. His kiss hardened, and she lost track of time as she lost herself in his embrace, her breasts against his chest, their bodies as one. Something hard pressed against her stomach, a pressure so strange, so new, but so wonderful. His kiss went on and on, his hands drawing her closer to him, straying down her body, cupping her buttocks. Gods, she hadn’t known anything could be this wonderful.

“No!” As suddenly as his kiss had begun, he released her. She felt bereft, lost, as if the world had turned to ice. “Ah, Leslie, forgive me! That I should take advantage of you now, in your grief! How could I have done such a thing!” Desolation framed his face, yet she knew his regret matched hers, that the kiss had ended.

“What is there to forgive?” she asked simply. “I wanted the kiss as much as you.” She placed her hands flat on his chest and felt his heart beating beneath her fingers. “Please don’t blame yourself for anything, Nolan. I certainly don’t.”

“As you say.” He sighed heavily. “Do you want to go back inside now?”

She shook her head. “I’d like to stay outside for a while.” *To think, to plan, to relive the touch of your lips on mine.*

“Would you like me to stay with you?” She gazed into his face, so free of guile, like the man himself, a simple, sincere fellow who had done so much for her.

“No,” she murmured. “I’d like to be by myself, if you don’t mind. But I want you to know how much I appreciate your many kindnesses, truly I do.”

“Anything for you.” He rubbed his hands on his tunic and looked around, as if he had more to say. “Don’t go beyond the house,” he advised. “No telling what animals may prowl the woods.”

“I’ll stay here,” she promised.

“Very well.” He turned and walked away, his steps plodding, and soon disappeared from sight as he strode into the cottage and closed the door behind him.

By herself now, memories of her father tortured her, all the good times they’d shared, his loving arms and gentle voice. A lump clogged her throat, and she pressed her fist to her mouth, sobbing breathlessly, as if she could never stop. Vague recollections of her mother brushed her mind, the dear woman she’d lost when only five. She leaned against the tree as the tears flowed on and on, as she wept for all she’d never have again, for the country and her people she would see no more.

She drew away from the rough bark and wiped the back of her hand across her eyes. *Stop feeling sorry for yourself.* Both Nolan and Rhiannon had shown her such kind solicitude, a balm for her troubled heart in a world turned upside down. She had her health and an intelligent mind. She could get by in the world. If the woman in the village didn’t like her, she had her sewing ability and would seek a position as a seamstress. And don’t forget about the diamonds and pearls on your wedding dress, she reminded herself. Those gems alone should fetch a goodly amount, enough to live on until she obtained a position.

So intent was she in dealing with her sorrow and her future, she’d forgotten one

big hurdle, a hindrance that bore on every other concern. How would she and Nolan find their way back to his country? What if they sailed the vast ocean for weeks or months before they reached land? What if they never reached land? She must trust to Nolan's seafaring skills and place her faith in the sea god.

Burying her worries of what the future might bring, she drew away from the tree and headed for the cottage, her mind made up.

She would leave with Nolan as soon as possible.

* * * *

"How will we find our way back to my country?" Nolan asked the following morning as the three of them shared a second mug of tea after breakfast. Gods, he hated to admit his ignorance, but he couldn't go sailing out into the ocean without any idea of where he was going. He was a fisherman and should not have to depend on anyone else for directions, but time and distance apparently had a different meaning in this part of the world.

Leslie set her cup down. "Yes, that question has pressed on my mind."

When--not if--he got back to his own country, he would not turn Leslie over to the stranger. He would prove that he had kept his word in finding the Blessed Belle of Bellarmine, but that was the most he would do. Nor would Leslie want to go with the stranger, of that he felt sure.

He stole a glance at Leslie, remembering last night's kiss, her embrace he could never forget. It had taken him a long time to get to sleep last night, aching for her, his body hot from wanting her. How lovely she looked this morning with the sunlight glowing on her hair, the tresses still damp from an early morning bath, before breakfast. The scent of lavender clung to her hair and clothes. But grief still marred her dear features, the sorrow over her father's death.

His mind jerked back to the problem. "Had enough trouble getting this far," he muttered. "Can't sail off with the princess and get lost again."

Rhiannon set her mug down and waved her hand. "Don't worry. I can show you how to find your way back."

"How?" Leslie's voice joined his. A magic spell, he suspected, and witchcraft still intimidated him, in spite of her cure of the princess. Or maybe she'd give them an oak branch to ride over the water, as Prince Maccus had done. The thought brought a smile to his face, one he quickly erased at Rhiannon's questioning glance.

The old woman drained her tea and shoved her chair back, standing to fetch an object on one of the shelves, set behind the wooden bowls. Grinning slyly, she sat back down and placed the object on the table. It was a plain, round stone, smooth, to be sure, but as lifeless as any rock in the forest.

"A magic stone." She beamed with supreme confidence. "Here, it looks plain, like any other stone. But when you take it out on the ocean, it glows red when you sail north, and glows green in any other direction. It just so happens you want to sail north, anyway." She hesitated, frowning. "One thing I must tell you--it must be kept fairly flat. The princess can hold it in her hand while you sail." She grinned. "Yes, that should do it."

"But how can we take it with us?" he asked. "Surely you will want it?"

"What need have I for a magic stone?" Another sly grin captured her face. "I can find my way on my own, without benefit of sail, as you may already have guessed." She

looked up at the open window, where sunlight streamed, bringing all the room's objects into sharp focus. "We've been lucky so far, what with dry weather and no rain. But no telling how long your luck will last." She gave him a frank look. "Best you start back, young man, lest you get caught in a storm."

"Yes, of course. We'd better be on our way." He drained his mug and pushed his chair back.

Rhiannon rose from the table again. "I'll pack you food and drink." She glanced at Leslie's feet, at the torn slippers she still wore, a remnant of her wedding finery. "I have shoes that might fit the princess. Should have thought of that sooner."

A hundred questions bombarded him, but he spoke the one that hit him first. "How long will it take to reach my country again?"

She shrugged. "Who knows? You'll find out when you get there."

A big help that was, but he kept quiet. She'd done so much for them already. He only wished he could repay her in some way.

He tried to put his wishes into words as she grabbed a wooden basket from a corner of the room. "Rhiannon, if I ever get back this way ..."

"Most likely I won't be here."

He exchanged glances with Leslie. "Where will you be, if I may ask?"

"Who knows?" she said one more time. With pot holders, she reached into an oven shelf for a warm loaf of bread, then wrapped it in a linen cloth and placed it in the basket. She grabbed a wedge of cheese from the larder, adding apples and oatcakes flavored with cinnamon and dotted with raisins. It appeared to be a plentiful amount of food, but keeping his worries to himself, he questioned if it would last them the entire journey.

One good piece of news lifted his spirits, but Leslie's, especially. Earlier, she had asked Rhiannon to look into the ball again and discover if the curse still lay over her country. Miraculously or through the intervention of the gods, the curse was lifted, many of the women already with child. The princess's happiness shone through with her every word, every gesture. He knew what a relief this was for her.

"One more thing I must tell you," Rhiannon said, arranging the food in the basket. "Sometime after you reach your land again, you might find an old woman selling a bag of herbs by the roadside. Be sure to buy a bag of herbs from her."

"Very well." Nolan wondered what need he had of herbs but had learned not to question Rhiannon. And he knew who the old woman would be, so he assumed the bag of herbs would figure into the scheme of things. But how or why? He tossed that quandary aside, relegating the question to his list of lesser concerns.

The old woman set linen napkins in the basket, prompting Nolan to wonder how a woman such as she, who appeared to have little wealth, could acquire such fine items, much less give them away. She reached for a pitcher from another shelf and filled it with cider, talking as she worked.

"Keep that tunic I gave you, Nolan, and you, Princess Leslie, I no longer have need of the dresses. I'll give you a couple scarves to wrap the clothes in."

"But your children," she protested, "surely they visit you now and then. They will want these clothes."

Rhiannon stopped for a moment and stared off into space, then resumed the packing. "Aye, they visit me sometimes, but they have made their way in the world and

no longer need such plain garments.”

“Then we thank you,” Nolan said, mindful his words were inadequate to express his gratitude.

“Oh, yes,” Leslie added. “All the wealth of my kingdom could never be enough to repay you for all you’ve done for us. I have my voice back, thanks to you!”

The woman’s face reddened. “Well, now, I suppose I did have something to do with that. I’m a healer, after all.” She looked around the room, as if she wanted to say more. “Best you be going now,” she said briskly. Tears filled her eyes as she handed Nolan the basket. He glanced away, not wanting her to see that he witnessed her sorrow at their leaving, her reaction surprising him. There was certainly more to Rhiannon than he’d thought upon first meeting her.

“Don’t forget the magic stone,” she added, “and that you must sail north.”

He reached for the stone from the table and placed it in his tunic pocket. He looked around the room, at a loss for words, doubting he would ever see her again, unless she really would be selling herbs by the roadside. Taking Leslie’s hand, he murmured, “Let us leave now.”

Chapter Seven

Brilliant sunlight lit the ocean, the waters undulating, glittering like crystal as Nolan rowed rhythmically hour upon hour. Here and there dolphins popped out of the water and grinned at the humans, then disappeared within the ocean's depths.

Leslie cradled the magic stone. "It's still glowing red," she remarked.

"Good," Nolan said. "The witch hasn't led us wrong so far." His muscles worked as he rowed on the calm sea, dipping and lifting the oars, a continual labor he feared he'd be doing in his sleep--if they ever reached land.

The two of them talked more than they ever had before, as if to make up for all their past worries, when he feared she'd remain speechless for the rest of her days, although he'd never expressed the dreaded possibility to her.

Now she had her voice again, thanks to Rhiannon and the gods. With the old woman's assurance that the curse on Leslie's country had ended and the women of Connachta no longer remained barren, he could breathe more easily, although other problems taunted him, Leslie's adjustment to his country foremost among them. But he wouldn't reveal his concerns to her. The gods knew, she must have enough of her own. Instead, he aimed to cheer her, to bring that captivating smile to her face, that smile that could banish his morose thoughts and make him want to forget there could never be a future for them together.

"And wait 'til you hear this," he said, beginning one of his tall tales. He bit his lip and stopped. He should have learned his lesson by now, should know better than to elaborate on his stories. On the other hand, his exaggeration had prompted the stranger's wager and had brought Leslie into his life, if only temporarily.

"Hear what?" Leslie asked, bringing him back to the moment. "You were about to tell me of one of your adventures."

"Yes, well, I'm afraid I talk too much. Enough of my tales. Let's talk about *you*. What shall we tell my people when--" not if, he silently mused "--we reach my village?"

"I don't want them to know I'm a princess," she said, trailing her hand in the water.

"Aye, you are right. I've thought about that too, how to explain your presence." The boat swayed and rowed up with a wave, then dropped down again in a continual flow of the foaming waters. When would they reach land? Would they ever, or were they lost at sea for the rest of their lives, despite the magic stone? "Why not say you lost your parents in a plague and need a home now and a livelihood? The truth, almost."

She frowned in thought. "Better not mention a plague. Just say my p-parents are d-dead." Her voice trembled on the last word, and his heart ached for her. She turned away for a moment as her eyes filled with tears.

"We'd better have a more complete story." Every one of his muscles ached, making it difficult to think. Mindful that her grief prevented clear thought, he elaborated on her background and how they met. "We can say your father owned a store, and after his death, you took over the business. I met you there. How does that sound?"

“Sounds good to me. As for my name, just say I’m Leslie O’Connor. We’d better work on more details of our meeting, before we reach your country. We don’t want to trip up on our story,” she said, sighing. “I do hate to tell lies, but in this, I don’t see that we have a choice.”

He nodded. “True.”

“But what about my being the Blessed Belle of Bellarmine? How does that gibe with the rest of my story?”

“I see no contradiction,” he said after a brief moment of silence. “Since you are so beautiful,” he said with a warm look her way, making her blush, “everyone in your city referred to you as the Blessed Belle of Bellarmine. So yes, that story should work just fine.”

“All right, then, we shall keep that part of the tale.” She glanced down at the magic stone in her hand “Nolan! The stone is green!” A look of panic crossed her face.

His heart jumped. “Are you sure? Could it just be the reflection of the water?”

“No, of course not.” Her voice quivered. “The stone was red only a short while ago.”

“Gods, no!” Here they were, out in the middle of the ocean, with no land in sight. Lost!

Chapter Eight

Bitterness blasted Nolan's mind and evicted every other thought. How could he have failed Leslie! He ran his tongue along his cracked lips, his throat parched. The sunshine beat down on them mercilessly in the unrelenting heat. Spots danced in front of his eyes, and every muscle ached, from his hands to his shoulders and arms, down to his stomach, legs, and feet. Drenched with perspiration, beads of sweat running down his face and into his eyes, he thought longingly of home, of his cottage, his village and friends.

He saw Leslie's gaze on him, her eyes accusing.

"Not your fault," she said, as though she could read his mind. "I should have kept my eyes on that stone. Perhaps I could have seen sooner when we went off-course," she said in a trembling voice.

"Don't blame yourself. I suppose it is no one's fault, but I must still correct our direction." He let his mind drift. He was home now, eating a delicious meal of marinated pork, with a casserole of kelp and barley. Now he drank at the tavern with his friends, glass after glass of whiskey, as much as he wanted. He laughed and joked, and they slapped his back, telling him how much they enjoyed his company and his tales.

A wind picked up, snapping him back to their calamity, and he balanced himself to hoist the sail. Once that was done, he sat back down, every muscle screaming with relief. He prayed as he had never prayed before, adjusting the sail, praying that he had set for a northerly course once more.

Hours passed, a time that seemed to have no meaning, as if they had stayed in the same spot on the ocean. And Mannanan, perhaps they had!

As they sailed on, he continually adjusted the sail. The wind increased, lifting the boat and dropping it again, like a discarded toy. *Not another storm!* Leslie clutched at her seat, her eyes wide with fear. Water lashed the vessel and drenched their clothes.

Take the canvas down! Hurry! But as he stood to do so, the wind died down.

Her hair dripping and falling against her face, her dress clinging to her, Leslie looked down at the stone again. "Red! The stone is red!" Joy brightened her face, as if she had been granted every wish in life. And indeed, this was the greatest wish either of them could want.

He sagged with relief, until then unaware of the tenseness of his muscles, his clenched hands and taut stomach. "Thank Mannanan and all the gods!" He stared ahead as his eyes tried to focus. High overhead, seagulls cried and flapped their wings, a promising omen! He concentrated his gaze again. Did he see land ahead, or merely a mirage?

The foaming waves rose and fell. The water changed color from a deep blue to a lighter blue-green. Nolan squinted his eyes, viewing vague outlines of distant wooded hills. Here and there, houses dotted the hillsides, the coastline just as he remembered.

Fierce elation gripped him. His heart pounded with a greater joy than he'd ever known.

“There it is! My country! Ban Fearann!”

* * * *

Leslie followed Nolan’s gesture as he pointed landward. Mixed emotions clashed inside her. Incredibly relieved to make land again, she wondered how she would manage in this alien country, living among strangers. She thought again of Nolan’s suggestion that she serve as a companion to the widow. What if the widow didn’t like her? If not, she hoped she could soon find a position and a place to live. Her long hair hung loose, and she tried to set it to rights, sweeping the strands away from her face, combing the tresses with her fingers. Sea water drenched the bottom of her blue linen dress. Her plain leather shoes were soaked and sticking to her feet. How far she had come from a life of luxury at the palace, a life she would never return to! She drew a deep breath and told herself she must learn to adjust, must be thankful for all Rhiannon and Nolan had done for her.

They neared the shore, sailing into shallow waters, the occasional house clearly visible. One person ran to the shore, then another and another. Soon a crowd gathered, everyone yelling and cheering.

“Nolan! Nolan Tremaine!” Tremendous satisfaction poured over her, for it boded well that everyone liked Nolan.

Grinning, Nolan stepped out in ankle-deep water and reached to lift her, but she shook her head. Best if he treated her like an ordinary woman, not a princess. He nodded to indicate he understood. After removing her shoes, they waded hand-in-hand onto the shore. The warm water lapped up on her bare feet, soothing her muscles. The breeze caressed her face and cooled her body, but hunger and thirst plagued her, a relentless craving. At the same time, her pulse raced as countless questions churned inside her. What was she getting into here? What would her life be like with these people? Although she tried to dismiss the thought, she wondered how often she’d see Nolan.

Nolan waved wildly. “Ho, there!” He rushed back to haul the boat farther up on the shore, then returned with both bags that contained their clothes and set them down on the sand.

Men, women, and children stared at her, as if they had never seen a lady. Dressed plainly, the bare-legged men wore faded dark tunics, the women in shapeless dresses of brown or black with dark scarves tied about their heads. They all crowded around her and Nolan, at least twenty people, talking among themselves, their weathered faces revealing wonder mixed with pure joy.

One old man hugged Nolan, his appreciative gaze on her. “Nolan! We thought you were dead!” His gaze slid over her again. “And we see you brought a wife back with you.”

Nolan looked uncomfortable. “It’s a long story, and I’ll tell you later. She’s not my wife, but she *is* a lady.”

Another man slapped him on the back. “You’ve been away for weeks!” He turned to the others. “How many days?”

“Twenty-five days!” one of the men replied, the others agreeing.

Nolan exchanged incredulous looks with Leslie. “Twenty-five days! How can that be?”

The back slapper assumed a smug expression. “Well, now, Nolan, can you

count? One, two, three--"

"Yes, yes, I see what you mean." Nolan looked her way again. "It hasn't seemed that long, has it?"

"I can't believe it." Yet it must be true. Why would these people lie? How could so much time have passed? Where had all the days gone? Unable to solve that dilemma, she knew the conundrum would taunt her for days to come. She discarded the puzzle for now as shyness claimed her. She scolded herself for her bashfulness, as though she'd never met strangers before. But this was all so new, so different from anything she'd ever encountered. Her bare feet sank into the wet sand, the sand squishing between her toes. "Let's move farther up on the shore," she murmured to Nolan.

"Yes, why are we standing here?" He placed his hand under her elbow and gestured for the others to move to dry ground. Once there, she brushed the bottom of her feet and held onto his arm to balance herself to slip her shoes back on. Her stomach rumbled, but she felt sure no one heard above the chattering.

"Now, Nolan," one of the men said with another complimentary look her way, "you can't keep us wondering about this lady. So who is she, and where is she from?" He bowed slightly in her direction. "Madam, we're sure you can speak for yourself, but perhaps you'd feel better if our friend here gave us your background?" He looked Nolan's way. "Just a few words, Nolan. We know you want to get settled."

She smiled his way, appreciating his thoughtfulness, and considered that she'd already made a little headway in acceptance by these villagers. She caught Nolan's gaze on her, conscious that he was sifting their story through his mind.

He folded his arms across his chest. "Well, I sailed to a faraway country--" He didn't say which one, she noted. "--and this lady's parents had recently died." He continued with the story they had agreed upon, she nodding now and then. Everyone stared at her, and their faces indicated that they accepted his story.

"What is her name?" an older woman asked.

"Leslie O'Connor." He touched her arm, as if to give comfort but reluctant to appear too familiar. "But please, it's been a long trip and I want to help her get settled. The Widow Lachlan would like company, I doubt not, and I thought she and the lady would suit each other just fine."

He grabbed the two bags of clothes and leaned closer, speaking quietly. "I'll take you to the widow now, if that's all right with you."

"Yes." Tension clutched at her stomach, so many questions besetting her.

He caught the attention of a young boy, eleven or twelve, she guessed. "Morfran, please run ahead to the Widow Lachlan, tell her I'm bringing a young lady to keep her company."

"Aye, Nolan." The young boy ran ahead, his bare feet stirring up dust along the dirt road, and soon became a small speck in the distance.

The others began to disperse, heading in different directions. "Nolan," the older man said, "best we leave you and Leslie O'Connor. We want to see you tomorrow night, hear your tales." He grinned wryly, prompting Leslie to wonder how many tales Nolan had told. "See you at the tavern tomorrow."

For the second time that afternoon, Nolan looked uncomfortable. "One of these days. I've much to catch up on."

"We'll see you when we see you." Soon everyone strolled off, leaving them

alone.

Keeping her there with him, Nolan spoke in low tones. "Can't go to the tavern yet, not for a while." He licked his lips. "How can I explain?"

Apprehension stirred inside her, a definite warning that trouble lay ahead.

He set the bags down again, his face set in contemplation. Pausing now and then, he explained about the wager with the stranger in the tavern, and how he must turn her over to the man. "But I won't!" he declared. "Let everyone call me a liar, or one who goes back on his word. I will not surrender you to the stranger."

She drew back, shocked beyond words. "Well, I should hope not! Not on your life! I'll not go to a stranger."

A look of indignation crossed his face. "Never!" He cracked his knuckles. "Yet I must think of a way to get out of this predicament." He wrapped his arm around her waist and eased her close. A thrill of joy made her heart jump as his breath brushed her cheek. "I'll not give you to someone else." He dropped his arm, a look of embarrassment on his face, as if he had never held her close before, or kissed her to drive her out of her mind!

"Let's go now. The sooner we get you to the widow's house, the sooner you'll have something to eat and a place to rest. You are tired, I don't doubt."

"Indeed." And so hungry and thirsty she could eat and drink for the rest of the day. She imagined succulent slices of venison, mounds of mashed potatoes and piles of green beans, with cherry tarts for dessert and glasses of sparkling wine.

Nolan's voice jerked her from her reverie. "Twenty-five days! It doesn't seem possible."

She shook her head, as puzzled as he was. "The only explanation I can think of" She hesitated, unsure how to proceed.

"...is that time is measured differently in that part of the world."

"That's it! No other explanation makes sense." He sighed. "But I've much time to make up, many fish to catch."

They trod the winding path, each deep in his own thoughts. Here and there a cottage squatted on a small plot of land. A medley of flowers added color in front and a vegetable garden flourished in back. People emerged from the houses and waved at them, greeting Nolan's return. The sun was sinking toward the west, a glare that made her squint and shade her eyes. Dust stirred as they trod the dirt road, an occasional rock or thick tree root making them step to the side. A stray mongrel dog wandered out from behind a bush and trotted ahead of them, wagging its tail as it look right and left.

A few minutes walk brought them to their destination. The Widow Lachlan lived in a small frame cottage with bushes and a flower garden in front, but a much larger garden than Rhiannon's, Leslie could tell at a glance. She looked upward to the thatched roof where a mock cat posed, to scare rats away, she assumed. The widow stepped outside, a smile of welcome on her face. She wore a lavender dress, a beige crocheted shawl around slim shoulders, her white hair drawn into a bun. Bent over slightly, she walked with a cane.

Alongside Nolan, Leslie strode up the brick walk, praying to all the gods that the woman would like her.

"Nolan," the widow said with a welcoming smile her way, "Morfran tells me you've brought me company." She switched her gaze to Leslie. "What is your name,

child?"

Child? "Leslie O'Connor." She lowered her head a little, then raised it again, fearing to reveal her royal background. Resolved to act the humble servant, she reminded herself she was the woman's companion, if the widow would have her. A maze of wrinkles stalked the widow's fair face, her eyes a clear blue. As she held the shawl with her other hand, Leslie noticed the age spots that dotted her skin.

The widow opened the door. "Well, come inside, both of you. 'Tis much too hot to stand outside and talk. It just so happens I have a pot of tea brewing and raisin cakes that Una baked yesterday."

Thank the gods! Leslie doubted she could go for one more minute without something to eat and drink.

Nolan held the heavy oaken door as the two women stepped inside to a cool parlor with a stuffed sofa, chairs, and an occasional table with oil lamps set atop lace doilies. More fatigued than she could remember, Leslie wanted to flop down on the sofa and never get up, for every muscle ached. Her mouth was so dry she could barely swallow. Hunger pangs tormented her. Years of practiced decorum came to her rescue, and she sat sedately onto a chair with a needlepoint cover after the widow sat on the sofa. Nolan waited until the ladies got settled, then sank onto a chair opposite her. Leslie glanced his way, at his muscular arms and tanned skin, his light brown hair glowing in the sunlight that beamed through the lace curtains at the wide front window. *Gods, how wonderful he looks, like no other man I've ever known.* He caught her look and winked, as if they shared a secret. A shaft of heat darted from her heart to her stomach and farther down, where it lodged as a pleasant ache, a new and wonderful experience. She shifted her position and turned away from him, resisting further temptation.

As if on cue, a young girl in a black dress and white apron entered the room with a wooden tray laden with a teapot and cups, raisin cakes and cream and sugar.

After dismissing the girl, the widow poured the tea into fragile porcelain cups and passed the cakes around. Leslie forced herself to take a dainty nibble of the cake, wanting to devour the whole sweet in one bite. She sipped the clove-flavored tea and sighed inwardly, feeling better than she had in a long time. Her gaze caught a bookcase in the corner of the room, prompting her to wonder what books they held, for reading gave her much pleasure.

The Widow Lachlan set her cup down. "Nolan, we all gave you up for dead. But 'tis glad I am to see you safe and well again. I must confess I missed your visits, those talks we had now and then."

"Ah, I missed them, too, and 'tis happy I am to be back." He shook his head. "I can't tell you how much."

Talks with the widow? Leslie was learning more and more about this fisherman, discovering more facets to his nature every day. A look of gravity settled over his face, and she knew he was thinking the same as she, of all the time spent at Rhiannon's, when she had lost her speech, and their days on the ocean, when they both feared they'd never see land or people again. A bond was forged between them, an indefinable link that could never be broken, no matter what further tribulations they must surmount.

The sun sank lower as they talked, 'til only semi-light drifted through the front window. Una came in to light the lamps, and the room acquired a cozier appearance, the lamplight touching each object with a dim glow.

Leslie watched Nolan as he conversed and saw the many expressions that crossed his face. How little she knew about him, even after the days they had spent with Rhiannon, not to mention the time on the ocean. Would she see more of him in the coming days? She hoped so, then quickly reminded herself he was but a fisherman. There could never be anything between them, nothing but the days they had shared. Nothing more.

Setting his teacup down, Nolan stood to take leave, reminding everyone he must sail again tomorrow, for he needed to resume his livelihood. "But fear not," he said with a grin, "this is not the last you will see of me." He bowed to both of them. "And I look forward to seeing both of you ladies in the coming days."

Despite every warning that told her to think of him only as a good friend, she clutched his words to her heart, counting the days until she would see him again.

* * * *

Satisfied that he'd done enough for Leslie, at least for the present, Nolan left the widow and headed home along the dirt path. Night had fallen, and lightning bugs flitted in the air that was cooler now. He passed a few isolated cottages and reached his own, stepping inside to pitch black darkness and a house that smelled stuffy. He opened the front window and lit an oil lamp, then sank down on the edge of his bed as all energy drained from him. Thoughts raced through his mind, of all that had befallen him since he'd left his village so many days ago and traveled to the other side of the world. And Leslie, always Leslie. He sighed, mindful there could be nothing but friendship between them, for a lovely lady such as she--a princess!--deserved a doctor or a wealthy merchant, someone who could give her the kind of life she was accustomed to. He hoped another man would court the princess, that is, if she had the opportunity to meet other men. A lovely lady such as she should never remain a spinster.

He looked around his cottage, as if seeing it for the first time. His home consisted of one large room, with a stone fireplace, table and chairs on one side, and a double bed--a luxury in the village--on the other. The pine bookcase he'd built stood in one corner, two rows of books neatly stacked, volumes he hoped to read again soon, if he could find the time on Sacred Days.

Some day he would marry, a day far in the future. How he wished he could wed Leslie, for he loved her more than ever, more than he'd thought possible. He shook his head, too well aware that such happiness could never be his. No, far better if he wed a fisherman's daughter, or perhaps Britta, whose father owned the fabric store. When he married, he'd like a bigger house to offer his bride, maybe adding on to this one or purchasing another, more substantial one, such as the Widow Lachlan's, if one were available. With the coins he'd saved over the years, he could afford a nicer home.

He stood to light another lamp, then fetched a book from the bookcase, since it was far too early to go to bed and he dared not go to the tavern. The stranger might be waiting for him there, asking him to surrender the Blessed Belle of Bellarmine.

Settling himself at the kitchen table, he tried to read but found concentration impossible, his every thought on a lady he could never forget. *Leslie, what am I going to do about you? How can I live without you?*

Forget about her, his mind warned his heart. He'd gain nothing but misery by dwelling on her, wanting her. He must focus on his livelihood, starting tomorrow. He hoped the next day would bring fair weather and calm seas, for he intended to set out in

his boat as soon as the sun rose.

He got his wish, for the next day dawned bright and clear, not a cloud in the sky. The weather remained fair the following day, with just a few clouds drifting in from the east. Both days he garnered goodly catches of mackerel, which earned him more silver coins.

On the third day, he strode down to the beach and set out with his net, pushing his boat to deeper waters. He climbed in and grabbed the oars, rowing in the vast expanse of rippling water, far out in the ocean. Every muscle moved rhythmically, and recollections of his recent journey returned, bittersweet memories he must lock in his heart, as he had day after day.

The wind increased, and he hoisted his sail, the boat skimming the blue waters. Casting his net, he caught several mackerel, a good beginning for the day's work. The air cooled suddenly, surprising him, for he couldn't recall such a quick drop in temperature. He'd seen no evidence of a storm when he left his house, and over the years he'd become a good judge of the weather. Storm clouds darkened the sky, and the wind churned the water, tossing the boat from side to side. His stomach clenched with alarm as he stood to draw down the canvas. The wind strengthened, the sky so dark he could scarcely see his boat. How had this storm come up so quickly, just like that? Alarm turned to panic, the fear he would never see land again. Never see Leslie again.

The wind thrashed the boat, the vessel almost keeling over. The seas whipped up, and buckets of water drenched him, all but sinking the boat. *No, gods, no!* Nolan looked around in helpless terror. He'd never escape this storm. He would drown at sea, never see Leslie again, nor hear her sweet voice, touch her warm skin. Never hold her and press his lips to hers.

Lightning pierced the coal black sky, followed by rumbles of thunder. Rain fell, gallons of water. The boat flopped to one side, then the other. Water flooded the vessel.

No! No! He didn't want to die. He had so much to live for. And Leslie, how he wanted to see her again!

"Mannanan!" he cried. "Save me!"

But the sea god didn't answer.

Chapter Nine

Leslie wondered when she would see Nolan again, missing him more than she had thought possible. Only a few days had passed since he'd brought her to the Widow Lachlan's house, yet she found herself dwelling on him far too much. She had many things to keep her busy at the woman's house and found to her pleasant surprise that they got along quite well. Since the widow had failing eyesight, the lady enjoyed having Leslie read from the many volumes that filled her bookcase. Besides that, the widow had kept up an extensive correspondence with the many friends and relatives scattered throughout the country, and entrusted the writing to Leslie.

On a clear afternoon a few days after her arrival, she and the widow sat in the parlor, embroidering flower designs on pillowcases for a niece about to wed, talking while they worked. She had always enjoyed needlework, and the widow had promised to teach her to knit and crochet, activities she looked forward to, diversions to keep her from thinking about Nolan.

"Do you know what Keelin Brady told me just the other day?" The woman rummaged through her embroidery basket for the right shade of floss, then drew out a skein of bright blue. "Keelin is a wealthy widower, you know, but much too young for me," she said with a keen look at Leslie. "He said he'd like to marry again someday, since he needs a mother for his two young children. Hmm, perhaps I should invite him over for dinner one of these days?"

Leslie smiled but said nothing. After Nolan, any other man seemed bland. She took a careful stitch in the muslin, then held the hoop away to admire the bright green leaves, the peach-colored dahlias.

If she couldn't live in a palace--and the gods knew she never would again--this snug cottage at least provided a measure of comfort. The cozy parlor with its stuffed green velvet sofa and two armchairs gave the room a homey touch, a place that offered a warm welcome. The brick fireplace dominated one wall, a hearth that surely got much use in cooler weather. A cluster of deep red peonies adorned a crystal vase, its sweet fragrance blending with the scent of lemon oil, for Una had polished the furniture earlier that morning.

It was too much to expect that she would have her own bedchamber. Leslie had never shared a bedchamber before, and of all the adjustments she'd had to make since coming here, she found this sharing the most difficult. In this small sleeping space, she had precious little privacy and trouble sleeping besides, for truth to tell, the widow snored loudly.

She had to admit, if only to herself, how much she missed her life as a princess, a life of wealth and luxury. But more than anything, she missed her father.

Suppressing her sorrow, she sighed, resolved to forget her life as a princess and adjust to a different way of living here. After all, she had no choice.

Leslie frowned as the room darkened, forcing her to squint. Glancing up from her embroidery, a thrill of alarm clutched at her heart. *Look at the darkening sky! Nolan!*

Surely he was out fishing today, for the morning had begun quite nicely, with no sign of a storm.

The widow looked up from the pillowcase, her gaze shifting to the front window. "See how dark it's gotten and so sudden!"

A gust of cool air flapped the lace curtains, sending a draft throughout the parlor. "Oh, my dear, please close the front window. It's much too windy!" With gaunt fingers, she tugged at the shawl around her shoulders.

"Yes, ma'am!" Leslie sprang from her chair to crank the casement window closed, staring out at the dark gray sky and the churning ocean waters off in the distance. The skies blackened, the temperature plunging. She lit one oil lamp, then moved to the other, her hands shaking, all but knocking the lamp over. She pressed her hand to her heart. Gods, she prayed, please take care of him!

Leslie sank back down in her chair and clenched her hands, unable to continue with her embroidery, to think of anything but Nolan. She loved him, a fact she'd tried to deny for so long. She couldn't live without him. All the times they'd shared--good and bad--repeated themselves in her mind, as if he were there with her. She recalled their first meeting at the palace and how he had danced her across the ballroom and out the door, then took her off to his boat, away from the evil prince. The memory of his kiss heated her body and brought an ache to her most private part. *Nolan, please come back to me!*

She caught the widow's sympathetic gaze on her. "He is bound to return to us," the widow said. "A steady fisherman like Nolan won't let a storm get the best of him." Did the widow know how much she cared for Nolan? Had she made herself so obvious?

Leslie forced a wan smile, catching the doubt in the woman's voice. Now, when it was too late, she realized how much she loved him. How could she live without him? *He is not coming back to you*, her heart warned her. *Gods, help me to bear it!*

* * * *

"Mannanan, save me!" Tossed overboard, Nolan clung to the boat, his catch at the bottom of the ocean. The water was pulling at him, dragging him down. Soon, he would be swept away, drowning in the ocean's vast depths. His lungs felt about to burst, his hands and arms aching. Gods, he didn't want to die! He wanted to live, to see Leslie again!

"Mannanan, help me!"

"Well, that's better!" Amid the foaming waves, a tall, bearded man stepped out from a magnificent chariot drawn by two white horses. His long hair blew in tangled disarray about his face, his white robe whipping in the wind. Yelling over the roar of the storm, he lifted Nolan and set him back in the boat. "Forgot already? You must call me three times!" He shook his head in mock reprimand. "'Tis another difficulty you have gotten yourself into." He raised both arms to the sky. "Hear me, stop the wind and rain. Let the sun come out again!"

The wind died, the dark clouds dissipated, and the sun made a hesitant appearance, in no time brightening the sky. Soon, the waves rolled gently, rocking the boat. Speechless, Nolan stared at the sea god, so thankful for his deliverance, the words wouldn't come.

The sea god returned to his chariot and gathered up the reins. "Well, Nolan, have you nothing to say?"

Nolan searched for the right words. He sat in the boat, his clothes soaked, every muscle sore, but so grateful to be alive. He flexed his aching hands and fingers. "Th-thank you."

Mannanan gave him a look of reproof. "Is that all?"

He lifted his arms. "What more can I say? Mannanan, you saved my life! What kind of recompense can I ever make for what you have done for me? Just name it, and I will do it, if it is within my power."

"Really?" the sea god said. "Hmm, I'll remember that." Nolan stared at him, wondering at his words.

Mannanan grinned slyly. "I'm sure I'll think of something. You might see me again, and very soon." He shook the reins, and the chariot and horses sank into the sea, soon disappearing as if they had never been.

With a weary sigh, Nolan took up the oars to row back home. Mixed emotions collided inside him. So grateful for his salvation--for life!--he dreaded the coming days. His intuition told him that the sea god's demands would bode ill for his future.

* * * *

"Look, the sky is clearing!" Leslie jumped up from her seat and rushed to the window, her heart pounding with happiness. One minute thick clouds blackened the sky, the next minute the sun shone, the sky clear again. "Mannanan," she murmured.

"What did you say, child?"

Leslie turned from the window. Her face warmed, and she wondered if the widow had heard her last remark. "I'm just surprised at the change in the weather. See how the sky is clearing." Surely Mannanan had saved Nolan again! She couldn't live without him. Her eyes strained as she gazed out to sea. Was that a boat bobbing in the ocean?

She pressed her face against the window, as if sheer willpower could make her wish come true. *Please, please, let it be Nolan.*

She turned back to Widow Lachlan, her heart thumping. "A boat on the ocean--" Nolan! *He* was the man with whom she wanted to share the rest of her days. Yet he'd said nothing of marriage, she reminded herself, her spirits plummeting once more. He'd probably marry a fisherman's or shopkeeper's daughter. No doubt, her snooty attitude had scared him away. But what if we did marry, she wondered as her pulse raced with the thought? A hint of unease crept into her thoughts and diluted her earlier joy. Even if Nolan did care enough to marry her, she couldn't desert the widow she had so recently come to serve. She gazed out the window, praying that her eyes weren't fooling her, that this was not a trick of her imagination.

The boat neared the shore. Yes, yes, Nolan! She had to see him, had to meet him when he came ashore. She spun away from the window, a question on her lips. Her heart beat so fast, she felt every pulse throughout her body.

"Yes, child, run to him, if you are sure it's Nolan out there."

She ran to the door and hurried down the path. She jumped over rocks, nearly tripping on a thick tree root. "Nolan!" she cried. "Nolan!" Her skirts flew about her legs, her shoes sinking into the mud as she raced the distance separating them. Out of breath, she arrived at the shore as Nolan stepped out of the boat. He stared at her, a look of joyful wonder on his face.

"Leslie?" He shook his head. "Am I dreaming, or is it really you?" His gaze

never leaving her face, he pulled the boat farther up on the shore.

Caution overcame her. Worried he'd think her a brazen hussy, she took careful steps down to his boat. "No dream, Nolan. I was so fearful for you"

Then she was in his arms, his hard body pressed to hers. He was soaked, smelling of fish and sea water, but oh! so good.

"Leslie." He kissed her, drawing her ever closer as his arms moved across her back. A wave of passion weakened her, a desperate wanting like nothing she'd ever known. She returned his kisses, so overcome with desire her legs trembled. Her dress was soaked now, yet nothing mattered but Nolan. As with the other time he'd kissed her, she felt a burgeoning pressure against her stomach.

He drew away and gazed down at her. His hands cupped her face. "Leslie, tell me now. Do not play with my feelings--"

"Oh, no!" She shook her head in fierce denial. "Never!"

"Do not play with my feelings," he repeated, as though afraid to believe she might care for him. "'Tis crazy I am for you, Leslie, and I could not bear it if--if--"

"But I *do* feel the same. Ah, Nolan, please believe me! For the longest time, I've admired you, thought of you so much. Then today, I ... I feared I'd lost you--"

"Mannanan! He rescued me once more."

"I knew it!" Damp from his clothes, she feathered kisses on his forehead, his cheeks, and pressed her mouth to his in a long, lingering kiss, putting all her love and longing in the kiss.

"Sweetheart!" He eased her ever closer, his hand caressing her breast, his movement slow and leisurely. Ah, she would go out of her mind with wanting him.

"If this is only for the moment ...," he murmured in her ear.

She slid her arms around his neck, tangling her fingers in the wet locks. "Please believe me, this is for all time. I will care for you for the rest of our days. Dear Nolan, my I-love for you is not a passing thing."

He pulled back and looked at her beseechingly. "You do love me, then?"

She smiled, her eyes filling with tears. "You know I do. Don't ever doubt it."

His eyes lit up. "Then you will be my wife?"

"Yes, yes, yes!"

"To think that you could love me--a fisherman!--when you could have any man in my kingdom."

She placed her hands on his shoulders. "Darling, I've learned much since meeting you. Even if I wed the richest man in the kingdom, it would mean nothing if I didn't love him. And I could never care for anyone else, not after knowing you." She smiled winsomely. "See what you have done to me? You have spoiled me."

He spoke close to her ear, his voice low and persuasive. "When we are wed, you will have ample chance to prove how much you love me." He drew her nearer, his strong hands cupping her buttocks, moving his body against hers. "Umm, there's much I will teach you."

Her face heated as passion washed over her like the waves on the shore. No use denying; she wanted him to teach her now. Yet even while she trembled with desire, with the wonderful warmth that made her want to take off her clothes and lie with him on the beach, a trace of unease tainted her thoughts. It was all too good to be true.

His arm around her waist, he led her away from the beach. "We have much

planning to do and little time to do it in. I will *not* turn you over to the stranger. Believe me, I won't. But I must return to the tavern to prove I am not a liar. I want to present you to everyone as my wife, so there can never be any doubt of our love and devotion for each other."

"Poor Widow Lachlan," she said. "I feel guilty leaving her, now that she has found a companion."

He stopped and looked down at her. "You don't have to leave her, my darling. I'll not have my wife slaving in the house all day. I can afford a maid. I should have made that clear from the first. So you can still go see the widow during the day as long as you are with me at night." He drew her close again, his voice low, deep with longing, then resumed walking again. "When the children come--and dear, I do want children--let us hope by then she has found someone else to keep her company. I feel sure she will."

"Now," he said briskly, "I must make wedding arrangements with the druid here in the village." He paused. "Tomorrow is Sacred Day, so I won't go fishing. I will see if the druid will wed us tomorrow. Before you know it, we will be man and wife," he said with a loving look her way. "And we will be together for the rest of our days." He drew her close and hugged her. "Ah, darling!"

Leslie smiled to match his enthusiasm, but a deepening suspicion lurked at the back of her mind. The gods had a way of playing tricks on mortals, but what form their chicanery would take this time, she had no idea. Something told her she would soon find out.

Chapter Ten

"A nice wedding, was it not?" Nolan opened the door to his cottage and led Leslie inside, after one of the villagers had driven them home in his carriage.

"Very nice." The Widow Lachlan had hosted the wedding, with only a few of the villagers invited. Nolan had told Leslie he would have liked to invite the entire village, but scant space in the widow's house had precluded that event. Still, it was a fine occasion, with the druid performing the solemn ceremony that made them man and wife. After sponging her white silk gown with its pearls and diamonds, she'd rendered it presentable, and now the gems sparkled in the dim light of Nolan's house. She wore her hair in its usual style, unpinned and grazing her shoulders.

Her gaze took in this humble dwelling with its sparse furnishings and meager space, her mind already planning how to make the house more livable.

"I can afford a bigger house," Nolan said, as though reading her mind. "I've much silver saved up over the years. We can either add on to this one--the best idea, I think--or buy another one with more rooms."

She gestured toward her gown with its glittering gems. "Dear husband, I intend to sell the pearls and diamonds on this gown"

He shook his head. "Ah, no, I'd not have you spoil your lovely gown."

"The gems are no good to me just stuck to this gown. Might as well put them to good use. They will fetch a pretty penny, I doubt not."

His face grew pensive. "Very well. We shall see." He drew her close in his arms. "My darling, why are we talking of houses and gems? There are other things we can do."

Her gaze shifted to the bed. She had thought about this moment throughout the day, and indeed, since yesterday, when he'd proposed. She knew so little about the married state, and what happened between a man and woman in bed.

His hands cupped her face, his expression solemn in the pale light. "And you mustn't worry, dearest, for I will be gentle with you. That's a promise."

Ah, he *could* read her mind, or else was very sensitive toward her feelings. Perhaps both.

With loving hands, he helped her undress and hung her gown on one of the wooden wall pegs while she stepped out of her shoes. She stood before him in her silk shift, unsure what to say or do.

By now, the sun had set, a full moon rising in the east, and the cottage darkened, thank the gods. Emboldened, she raised her hands to caress his face, his features more visible as her eyes adjusted to the dim light. She drew her finger along his cheek and lips, tracing every ridge, every line on his face, looking into his eyes, his gaze meeting hers.

He touched her shift, his strong hands lingering on her shoulders. "And now this," he said in his deep voice, raising her shift over her head. She lifted her arms to help him, thankful for the nighttime, for she stood before him naked. Much of her

shyness dissipated, replaced by pride in her full breasts and slim hips. Yet bashful hesitation still lurked within her, trepidation for what was to come.

"Ah, Leslie." He enclosed her in his arms, his hands playing across her back. Easing her ever closer, she felt every muscle of his body but especially his hardness pressed against her stomach. He cupped her buttocks as he gave her a long, lingering kiss she wished would go on forever. Caught in the wonder of his lovemaking, she responded, returning kiss for kiss, touching his skin, her heart pounding.

He lifted her and set her on the bed. She waited for what was to come, watching him remove his clothes and hang them on a peg. He sank down on the bed beside her, the mattress shifting under his weight. As he reached for her, she went into his arms, wanting his lovemaking--wanting him!--more than she had ever desired anything in her life. Never mind that she was unschooled in the ways of love. Something told her Nolan would be a capable teacher.

"My dearest." He smiled at her in the darkness, his eyes crinkling at the corners, his gaze full of love. He nuzzled her cheeks, her throat, telling her how much he loved her and how he wanted to spend the rest of his days with her. "'Tis happy I am that you are my wife."

"I'm happy, too," she whispered, but then his lips were on hers, kissing her like she had never been kissed before, his tongue licking her bottom lip, seeking entrance. She opened her mouth, welcoming the sweet invasion, while his hand cupped her breast, kneading her warm skin. His breath quickened, his hand roaming her body, touching her everywhere, delighting her in strange, wondrous ways she'd never imagined, not even in her wildest fantasies.

Never had she dreamed that lovemaking could be so wonderful, this closeness between a man and a woman. She felt his body trembling against hers, felt his heart beating close to her. She returned his kisses as a liquid heat spread to her lower belly, a desperate yearning. Stroking his warm skin, feeling every muscle, she ran her fingers down to his hips. Daringly, she touched him, reveling in his moans of pleasure. Feeling a wetness in her most private place, she could think of nothing but having him inside her.

He kissed one breast and the other, licking the nipples, then he slid downward, kissing her abdomen and hips. His hands and fingers worked their magic, an entrancing sorcery that made her gasp and long for more.

"Please," she said. "I want you so much."

"I want you, too," he murmured, raising himself next to her. His breath warmed her cheek, his voice low and sensuous. He eased her onto her back and raised himself above her, his arms at her sides.

"Just this once it will hurt," he murmured in her ear, "then no more."

He entered her, moving slowly. She sensed his forbearance, his consideration of her, and she loved him all the more for his concern. A stab of pain made her jump.

"Ah, Leslie, I'm so sorry."

"No, darling, don't be. I do want you, surely you know that?"

She followed his movements, meeting thrust for thrust, the pain gone until only desire remained. Gods, how she loved him, this man who was her husband. Waves of heat washed over her, and a desperate longing seized her, a fulfillment not to be denied.

"Ah!" She cried out with pleasure as his climax joined hers, a blending of rapture like nothing she'd ever known. The pleasure flowed on and on, well-nigh unbearable in

its intensity. The passion gradually died down, replaced by fierce happiness to know she could give and receive such pleasure.

As their breathing returned to normal, he slid from her and gathered her in his arms.

"There now," he said, and she caught the joy in his voice, "shall we do that again sometime?"

She leaned closer, well aware her breasts taunted him. "Anytime, sweetheart."

He turned a little to look into her eyes. "I'm sorry that I hurt you at first."

She smiled. "A pain that didn't last long. I think I recovered very quickly."

"Ah, so you did. And darling, this I want you to know: I will always try to make you happy, in every way. What a comedown this must be for you, a princess raised in a palace."

"And happier now than I have ever been in my life. Darling, don't ever doubt my love for you. We have much happiness to give each other, and the rest of our lives to give it." She meant every word.

* * * *

"We must go to the tavern this evening," Nolan said the following day before he went fishing. Earlier, he'd told her about losing his net, but one of the local retired fisherman had sold him his. "'Tis still a full moon we have. I expect the stranger will be waiting at the tavern, for me ... for us." He embraced her, speaking in her ear. "Don't worry about him, darling. When he sees we're married, there's no way on the gods' earth that he can claim you. Besides, I want to present you to everyone as my wife."

She visited the widow after he left, but the prospect of meeting the stranger weighed on her mind and disturbed her peace. The day appeared to drag while she waited for Nolan to come home, yet paradoxically, his return came all too soon. After the evening meal, they left the house.

"We will have to see about a maid for you," Nolan said as they set out for the tavern while the sun made its westward trek. "Perhaps you can ask the widow if she knows of any young girls who need the money. I'm sure there are many who do."

"I hope so, for I know nothing of housekeeping or cooking."

He hugged her. "Ah, but your charms make up for that lack."

She returned his hug, her face warming. If every night could be like last night...

Fortunately, the widow had given her a portion of ham, a loaf of bread and a wedge of cheese to take home with her, along with a cherry pie, all tucked neatly in a basket. She couldn't expect such a generous gift every day and could scarcely wait until she had a young girl to cook and clean.

For now, finding a maid was the least of her worries, and she could think of nothing but Nolan's wager with the stranger. Gods, she prayed, please don't have the man claim me. Despite Nolan's optimistic words, she feared the man might bind her husband to the agreement.

Nolan squeezed her hand, giving her an encouraging smile. "You *are* my wife, and my wife you will stay. I'll not permit a stranger to claim you." Yet he frowned. She sensed the anxiety he attempted to hide.

"But what if he demands that you turn me over to him?" She found her voice rising and tried to calm herself. "He will remember the wager, surely."

"A wager I made before I fell in love with you." His voice became vehement. "A

wager I made before I knew the Blessed Belle of Bellarmine was you, my dear love, when I thought it was a bell that rings.”

A little mollified but not completely convinced, she tried to assume a contented manner for her husband’s sake. Besides, if the man saw how much she and Nolan loved each other, he surely wouldn’t insist that Nolan stick to the bargain, would he?

After walking about a half-mile, they viewed an old woman standing on the edge of the road. Rhiannon! How could she have reached these shores? Leslie exchanged glances with Nolan and saw the look of surprise on his face, an expression that changed to calm acceptance, coupled with joy. *I shouldn’t be shocked, either, she mused, for ’tis obvious she is a witch.*

The old woman held a small cloth bag in her hand and greeted them with a smile. “Well, if it isn’t the princess and Nolan Tremaine! Strange how we meet in unexpected places.”

A wry smile skimmed across Nolan’s face. “Yes, isn’t it?”

Leslie hugged her, so happy to see the witch again. “As you see, we arrived here safe and sound, thanks to the magic stone you gave us.”

Rhiannon’s face reddened. “Now, now, I’m just so happy to see you two again, and if the magic stone helped, so much the better.” She lifted the bag. “Buy this bag of herbs, Nolan. Who knows? It may hold a cure for you.”

He shook his head. “There is no cure for the trouble that weighs on my shoulders.” Leslie knew he was thinking of the wager, prompting her to realize it worried him, despite his previous brave words.

“Ah, we all have troubles,” Rhiannon said. “It’s part of life. It’s the solving them that matters. Or accepting them.” She wagged the bag in front of him. “Perhaps this bag of herbs will help.”

Leslie nudged his elbow. “Buy it, Nolan, after all she has done for us!”

“Aye, you are right.” He dug into his tunic pocket and drew out a copper coin. “I hope one copper is sufficient. I need to watch my expenses. Been away from fishing for a long time.”

“A copper coin is fine,” she said, handing him the bag, which he dropped into his pocket. Then she disappeared, just like that!

They looked at each other in shock, and Leslie pressed her hands to her face. “Where did she go?”

He gave a nervous laugh. “We both know she’s a witch. Nothing she does should surprise us anymore.” He touched his pocket. “And what use I’ll have for this bag of herbs, I know not.” Sighing, he took her hand again. “Come, not far now to the tavern.”

They plodded on in the early evening heat, the sun a blazing ball of fire in the western sky. A breeze stirred trees and bushes, bringing the scent of lavender that blossomed along the roadside. Leslie breathed in the fragrant air, thinking she could easily get used to country living.

She saw the village ahead, with its shops and inns, the cobblestone street that traversed the center of town. Nolan’s steps slowed, then stopped, a look of consternation on his face. She followed his gaze, and there on a rock sat a man, gazing at them. A warning flashed through her mind. The stranger! She flinched but determined she would not be cowed by this old man. She squeezed Nolan’s hand in encouragement, telling

herself they would face this challenge together. And win!

The stranger stepped down from the rock. "Well, Nolan Tremaine, I see you are back." His glance took in Leslie. "And I see you are not alone."

She raised her chin defiantly but decided to let her husband do the talking.

Nolan drew her close, his arm around her waist. "I have been to Connachta and back, yes."

The man looked her over again. "So this is"

"The Blessed Belle of Bellarmine."

"Hmm, and it looks to me as if you don't want to part with her. Mind telling me why?"

Nolan's hand tightened around her waist. "We love each other. She is my *wife*. If I must, I will fight you for her."

The man laughed. "No, no, I'll not separate a man from his wife, but I will demand compensation."

"Compensation!" Nolan's jaw dropped. "I am but a fisherman. If I could, I would give all the gold in the world to keep this dear woman with me. But I don't *have* all the gold in the world."

The stranger stroked his chin. "Well, now, let me see what you can give me instead." His eyes lit up. "Peppermint! Nothing pleases me more than peppermint tea. Best cure I know for a cold."

"Peppermint?" Nolan exchanged a worried look with her. "I have no peppermint with me, nor do I know where I can get any."

She grabbed his arm. "The bag of herbs! The bag you just bought from Rhiannon. I thought it had a minty scent!"

Nolan drew the bag from his pocket and opened it, the scent of peppermint wafting through the air. Pure joy transformed his face. "Ah, yes, peppermint." He handed the bag to the stranger. "There now, this makes us even."

The stranger took the bag. "I'm glad I picked you for this venture, Nolan Tremaine."

"Picked me? What do you mean?"

The man laughed. "I like to play tricks on others--nothing harmful, mind you. Life gets boring here on the ocean. It's good to lighten things up once in a while." Before their eyes, his visage changed. His hair turned white, a beard sprouting from his chin. A white robe enfolded his body, its rich fabric billowing in the breeze. He waved and headed for the beach. "Goodbye, Nolan Tremaine. Perhaps we will meet again sometime." A great chariot awaited him, with two white horses, their hooves splashing the foam-capped water. The stranger climbed into the chariot and waved one last time before disappearing into the water.

* * * *

Nolan sagged with relief, wanting to dance, sing with joy. So the stranger was Mannanan all along! Hard to accept, and if someone else had told him this tale, he wouldn't have believed the story.

The tavern came in sight among a row of taverns and inns, here and there an occasional shop. He gave Leslie a sidelong glance, eager to see her reaction to his village, but her face held a look of nonchalance. He wondered what was going through her mind.

Although he had no urgent need now to visit the tavern, still he wanted the other villagers to meet his wife. A scattering of thoughts tripped through his mind as he clutched Leslie's hand in his. Leslie, his wife. His bragging had prompted the wager from the stranger and had introduced Leslie into his life. But the gods were capricious, a fact brought home to him all too realistically.

He could still hear Mannanan's voice, could see him disappearing into the waves. What the gods had given him, they could easily take back. Not for the world would he surrender Leslie.

To think that she could love him, a fisherman! But wait! He'd had the courage to sail to Connachta and back. He had rescued a beautiful princess from the clutches of an evil prince, bringing home this dear woman, now his wife.

He eased Leslie close to his body. "I hope I've learned my lesson."

She gave him an inquiring look. "Lesson?"

"To stick to the facts and not exaggerate. For what the gods have given us, they can just as easily take away. I'll not tempt fate again. I'll not take a chance on losing you."

There outside the tavern, he embraced his wife, catching the inquisitive and amused glances of the villagers gathered in groups. He opened the door and smiled as the raucous laughter stopped and everyone stared at them.

He draped his arm around his wife's waist. "Greetings, everyone! May I present my wife?"

The End