

ELLORA'S CAVE XANADU



An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



www.ellorascave.com

Even Sex Faeries Get the Blues

ISBN 9781419920158

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Edited by Briana St. James.

Cover art by Syneca.

Electronic book Publication March 2009

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EVEN SEX FAERIES GET THE BLUES

Mary Hausen

Dedication

To my online friends who encouraged me to write about elves.

To Viv who loaned me her name.

To Bree who persevered with me.

To Christian who is always there for me.

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Prologue

Muriel picked up the file and looked at it skeptically. "It looks easy enough," she said, wondering why her boss was personally delivering such a mundane project.

The wizard seated opposite smiled benevolently in the manner to which they were partial. A patronizing look, which could only mean there was more to this than met the eye.

Muriel gulped and considered turning down the case. She could improvise a family emergency or a sudden illness.

Only Garald's eyes were daring her to do just that.

She wouldn't give him the satisfaction.

Her boss had the reputation of being a total egoist and goal-orientated to the point of obsession. He hadn't wanted her in his department in the first place, but the appointment had come from over his head. He wasn't going to let her forget that. Not in this century, anyway. If he had the chance, he would send her back to the Tooth Faeries.

Muriel wasn't going to play along. She loved being a Sex Faerie.

"And you came to me especially?" She flicked through the pages, trying to find a hint as to why her fellow faeries had failed to turn up for work today. Why she was the only one in an office that usually buzzed with a hundred voices.

The file gave no clues. The girl on the photo was of medium good looks, had all her teeth and appeared to be of normal intelligence. No problem that she could see.

"Well, you are the Patron Faerie of Virgins," the wizard replied evenly. "And I do believe the girl is a virgin."

Which still didn't explain her boss's presence in her office.

"And that's all?" she asked suspiciously. "You came all the way over from your office to give me this when you could have sent a pixie or ordered me over?"

She'd caught him out. She saw surprise flash through his eyes before it was covered up by a scowl. Imperiously, he rose from his chair and glared down at her. "You have a week and no more. Should you fail to have the girl deflowered by Friday, you needn't bother appearing for work on Monday. Do you understand?"

Without waiting for an answer, the wizard swiveled on his heels and left.

Good riddance.

Turning her attention back to the file, Muriel opened up to the cover page and read. Viv of Hogsmeade Farm, twenty-three years of age and a milkmaid by trade, wished to lose her virginity.

No problem there.

Unfortunately, the girl lived in The Valley, the most backward of all the seven dimensions and the one Muriel hated the most. Having gone to Faerie School in The Valley, Muriel was well aware how conservative and prejudiced the locals could be.

Maybe this job was going to be more difficult than it seemed.

And she only had a week.

Chapter One

There was a crush at the marketplace that had nothing to do with the new delivery of ribbons and laces. Between the eggs and cheeses of the goodwomen, a gaggle of young girls and more mature matrons had gathered to share the latest gossip.

Viv, who had been fingering a bolt of fine fabric in a particularly flattering shade of blue, paused as she heard a familiar name fall in the conversation. Could it be they were speaking of Elwood, the man whose very name caused her heart to beat faster, her palms to grow sweaty?

"They say he's very good. They say that his songs sit in the ear and that he can sing as high as a woman."

Yes, they had to be talking about Elwood. The troubadour's high voice was legendary, as too were his good looks. Not that anyone in the village had actually seen him. His concerts were a rare thing.

"Perhaps he is a woman?" a second girl suggested. "After all, has anyone ever seen him naked?"

"I heard that rumor too," a woman with a basket of carrots said after the laughter had ended. "But I don't believe it. You know what I think?"

All the girls leaned forward to hear the woman's words and Viv edged closer. She desperately wanted to hear what the women had to say. Elwood couldn't be a woman. He just couldn't. If he were, that would spoil all her hopes and dreams.

Despite a quick sidestep around a street monger's cart, she missed the next words of the conversation. From the amused shrieking of the females, the woman's theory must have been very good.

"An elf? No!"

"I don't believe it! Aren't they creatures of fable?"

An elf? That was unexpected. Viv considered what she knew about the race and drew a blank. Hearsay described them as tricky and selfish. Her da would kill her if he knew she'd even spoken to one. He loathed all magical creatures with a deep ingrained hatred that he chose not to explain. Not that Da ever talked to her. As a daughter, Viv was considered of even less value than his wife. He'd certainly made it clear she would never receive a dowry.

And without a dowry, she would never escape a life of drudgery. Or so she had thought until the dreams had begun.

The women were still talking, Viv realized. She pushed aside her own thoughts and concentrated on their words.

The woman, whom Viv had dubbed 'the carrot woman', shrugged her shoulders and deposited her hands upon her ample hips. She was obviously very pleased with all the attention she was getting. "They say that except for what's on their heads, elves have *no* hair on their bodies."

"What? Not even down there?"

"So they say," the carrot woman assured her audience. "A hairless cock. Imagine that."

A horseman rode past and forced the group to disband. Pushed against the wooden structure of the stand, Viv muttered an apology as bolts of fabric tumbled down, one upon the other. Ignoring the rather colorful tirade of the saleswoman, Viv clutched her basket and hurried along the line of stands. She didn't want to miss a word.

Carrot woman and company had regrouped further on in front of the vegetable stall and were already in animated speech.

"Yes, at the Horse and Whip tonight. They say he always draws quite an audience."

The Horse and Whip? Why, that was within walking distance of home. If she could slip away unnoticed, if she wore her best dress, then surely he would notice her. It had to be. Her dream had been very specific. A stranger would find her and teach her the ways of love.

It had to be Elwood. What could be stranger than an elf?

She gulped and stroked a lock of hair back into place. From the words of the others, she wasn't the only one excited at the imminent visit.

"Well, I'm going to be there," one particularly thin blonde said, adjusting the bodice of her dress over her non-existent bosom. "I hear he's very talented between the sheets and I could do with a change of scenery from my Albert."

Another woman snorted. "Don't think you'll have a chance!" The way she slid her hands over her own well-proportioned curves suggested that she alone would have her way with the famous troubadour. "I've heard he likes a little bit more to hold on to."

A third woman, bearing more resemblance to a craggy mountain than a member of the gentler race, added rather facetiously, "well-rounded, but not fat."

The second woman spun around and accosted the speaker. "Are you saying that I'm fat?"

Viv turned to leave. She'd heard enough. Elwood was coming to the village and that was all she needed to know. In the meantime, there was a wealth of work waiting at home and she daren't leave it undone if she wanted to slip away unnoticed.

It was a long walk back to the farm. Five miles down a long and dusty road that quickly turned into a quagmire when rain fell. But rain had not fallen in a long time and Viv was able to sink into her thoughts.

The dreams had begun a month ago with a tower of frightening black stone in a night of perpetual dark. Magic had prickled along her skin and the fog had seemed to push her forward toward the building.

Then there had been the cold.

The cold had remained long after she had woken. It had clung to her limbs like mud, binding her to another reality, another world beyond her own.

And yet the dreams had not released her. Night after night they had returned until she had summoned enough courage to cross the door and enter the tower. Old and forsaken, she had believed it empty of life until she had heard the familiar sounds of a spinning wheel.

Part of her had known what she would find in the upper chamber. It hadn't been any knowledge she had learnt in this life, but some hidden part of her had provided her with the word. *Fates*.

"I see you know us, child." The old woman who had spoken had not so much as broken the rhythm of her wheel. "Come in and dispel the chill of mortality from your bones."

True, the fire had been inviting, but Viv had hesitated. What did the Fates want from one such as her? She was only a milkmaid.

"She fears us, sister." The blind woman combed back the weave of her cloth with a strength that belied her fragile appearance. "For she knows naught of her birthright."

Her birthright? Hogsmeade Farm was not hers to inherit. The land would belong to her brothers. She had nothing to her name but three dresses, one pair of shoes and a comb. She looked between the three women. One was blind, one was deaf and the other was dumb. But there was nothing in the world that passed without their knowing. That's what people said.

Or was this a dream?

"Good Mothers, please do not dally with a young maid. Pray tell me what you wish from me?"

Despite her lack of eyes, the blind hag had looked at her directly, seeing goodness knows what. "Destiny, my child. We weave the cloth of your destiny. Your True Love searches for you. Will you let him find you?"

The spinner had added, as though in an afterthought. "Big and strong, kind and generous, he will protect you from all evil and teach you the ways of love."

The third hag, being dumb, had spoken in Viv's mind while her fingers dunked shards of wool into pans of dye. "*He alone can guide you to the destiny you have lost.*"

And that had been it.

She'd woken up in her bed and her life had continued as normal.

No more dreams.

Until she had heard of Elwood's imminent arrival in the village, she'd almost convinced herself the meeting with the Fates had never happened.

But Elwood's arrival changed all that. Her True Love was searching for her and she would let him find her. Excitement bubbled in her stomach, a feeling that was both pleasant and frightening.

Her heart missed a beat, and despite her weary limbs, she felt the urge to skip along the dusty road.

Elwood! Elwood was coming to rescue her.

With Elwood as her husband, she could hold her head up high at the markets. The fabric woman would woo her with the latest fashions and the young man who sold the vegetables would deliver to her home.

Just what that home would look like, she didn't know, but it wouldn't be a farm, of that she was certain. She would spend her days eating strawberries upon a silken cushion and every night Elwood would come home and make love to her.

And he would be a great lover.

Of course.

Having been sidetracked by a vision of Elwood's mouth kissing her own, it took Viv a while to realize she was being harassed by a pesky mosquito. Despite flinging her hands around, the insect refused to leave. Instead, it settled down in front of her and grew larger.

Sweet Mother, that didn't make any sense.

Viv shook her head and looked again. The mosquito really was getting bigger, turning into a blonde haired woman with wings protruding from between her shoulder blades. Huge wings that were the same color as frost on a winter's morn, interlaced here and there with gold.

A faerie!

At least she thought it was. The Valley was populated with all sorts of magic folks, but few of them ventured to the remote village in which Viv lived. Still, Viv's weekly visits to the market had brought her a wealth of stories and warnings. One such warning had regarded faeries. The beasties liked to play tricks on the unwary and were gloriously vain.

Or was that elves?

Viv's first instinct was to run, but she repressed the urge. Just as she had found the courage to enter the home of the Fates, she needed to find out why this faerie was appearing at such a crucial time in her life.

It was possible the faerie was a messenger from the Fates.

And yet, as the magical being reached full size and her dress did not, Viv felt the twinge of uncertainty. The faerie was barely dressed at all. And you could see through what was there.

Accurately interpreting Viv's pink ears, the faerie stared dejectedly at her see-through lingerie. "It's a negligee. It hasn't been invented in your dimension yet. I know it's not quite regulation, but I was seducing my boyfriend and didn't have time to change." Clapping her hands to indicate her readiness to work, the vision continued. "Right then, Viv of Hogsmeade Farm, your prayers have been answered. How can I help?"

Viv blinked. It was one thing to assume the Fates had taken up her cause, it was another to hear the words spoken out loud by a third party. "My prayers have been answered?"

"Obviously."

"But you are not a Fate."

From the look on the faerie's face, Viv could see she had said the wrong thing.

"Do I look as though I spend my days weaving in a dark tower? Of course not, I am Muriel, your Faerie Godmother."

"Faerie Godmother?" Viv had heard the term before, even if she couldn't quite place it.

"Well, not exactly a Faerie Godmother, but definitely related. Actually, I'm a Patron Faerie. The boss, I mean overseer, considers *Godmother* old fashioned and he's trying to be modern. So, although they used to call us Faerie Godmothers, we're now Patron Faeries and I am the Patron Faerie of Horny Young Virgins. I get to run around and grant your wishes, so long as said wishes are somehow connected with defloration."

Viv shook her head. How could anyone speak so much so fast and say nothing? "Sorry, I heard the words, but I didn't understand a thing."

Muriel sighed, and this time when she spoke, she enunciated her words slowly. "It means, so long as you want to get fucked, I'll help."

Startled at Muriel's vocabulary, Viv blinked and then cleared her throat. She didn't want to be fucked, she wanted Elwood to make love to her, teach her about loving, take her away from it all and so on and so forth.

"I think you've got the wrong maid," she said, stepping around the faerie and continuing on her way. Surely the Fates would not have sent such a crude creature to help her.

But the faerie did not give up so easily. She fell into step with Viv and continued talking. "Viv of Hogsmeade Farm? Milkmaid by trade?"

Despite her decision not to have anything to do with this faerie, Viv nodded.

"Then there's been no mistake. I'm on your case and am here to help."

Viv said nothing.

The faerie continued, unaffected by the snub. "It's the dress, isn't it? Look, how about if I change it?" There was a flash of blinding light and when Viv recovered her eyesight, Muriel the Faerie was dressed in a fantastic gown of silver cloth, a bell skirt cascading from a tiny waist. It was exactly the type of dress that Viv wanted.

Maybe it wasn't such a bad idea to let the faerie help after all.

"There's a man," Viv began hesitantly, loathe to talk about her feelings for Elwood. "Or maybe an elf. In any case, he's coming to the village tonight and I have to meet him."

"No problem."

Viv continued. "He'll be looking for me. He's my own True Love."

"Exactly," the faerie agreed, clapping her hands together. "I'll bring the two of you together and we'll let nature take care of the rest."

Viv cleared her throat. How could she explain her dilemma? "Well, it's a little more complicated than that. You see, although he's my True Love, we haven't actually met. Yet."

The faerie stopped. Viv did too. She didn't like the way Muriel was scrunching up her forehead. "You don't know the man you want to fuck you?"

"He's my True Love," Viv explained. "Didn't the Fates explain?"

Muriel took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Was it always so difficult to work with magical beings, Viv wondered. Had the Fates not told Muriel about Elwood?

"True Love?" Muriel said finally, uttering the word like it left a bad taste. "There is no such thing. And even if there were, it's not in my jurisdiction. I am a sex faerie. I help young virgins with sex. I offer a life-long help-line should you have any difficulties later on. So let's just forget about the love bit and tell me what you need."

Viv considered the question. "Well, he's playing tonight at the Horse and Whip and there's bound to be lots of people."

Muriel nodded, interrupting Viv's flow of words. "Right, I'm with you, I can get you access."

"And I'll need an outfit. I can hardly go in this homespun."

Muriel studied the rather sad, rather stained dress in plain brown homespun and sniffed snootily. "Not a problem." She whipped her wand out of her holster and waved it from side to side. Viv waited for something to happen. Nothing did. Not a flash of lightning, nothing but an itch upon Viv's skin.

Excitedly, Viv looked down, hoping to see herself adorned in a spectacular gown. Disappointed, she stared at her work-a-day frock, which was looking as bedraggled as ever. "Is there something wrong with your magic? I mean, I'm still wearing the same rag."

Muriel didn't look in the least perturbed. She shrugged her shoulders, smiled at her wand and slid it away. "Underwear. That's what's missing in this dimension. It drives men mad, you know."

Viv blinked, not trusting herself to respond. No one she knew wore anything under their outside clothing. Cloth was an expensive thing and not wasted on unnecessary garments. But Muriel hadn't noticed Viv's chagrin. The faerie was still chattering on.

"It's not the outside that matters. Have a look."

Gingerly, Viv pulled out the bodice of her dress, not really knowing what to expect from *underwear*. Underwear, it seemed was a red shiny cloth wrapped tightly around the body. What was the point?

"What is it?" she asked the faerie.

Muriel sighed and studied her perfectly manicured nails. "It's called a corset, finest red silk topped with black lace, black silk stockings and frilly red lace knickers. It'll drive him crazy, don't worry."

Viv didn't want to appear ungrateful, but what did it matter what she wore underneath if Elwood didn't find the outside package appealing? "But I actually wanted a new outfit," she protested. "You know, a pretty dress like yours."

Muriel flounced around in a circle, wagging her derriere as she went. "Sorry, I can only do the sexy underwear thing for customers, and shoes, of course. Speaking of which, here are a matching pair."

The shoes Muriel handed over were nothing more than a few strips of red leather adorned with sparkly stones and the highest heels Viv had ever seen. They were beautiful and Viv adored them. Even if they were impossibly impractical, she would cherish them forever.

Muriel was still chattering on about the underwear. "Those are the rules. No dresses. And red is just the ticket for your shade of brunette. Trust me. I know what men like. As soon as you take off your dress, he'll be on you like a shot."

That sounded a little too brutal for Viv's taste. She'd keep the dress on, thank you very much, and the shoes. She wouldn't let them out of her sight. "There's still one more problem."

"And that would be?"

"My parents won't let me out of the house. They're rather strict."

Shrugging shoulders which were visible through the lacework of her gown, Muriel flipped a bottle out from between her breasts. "Take this powder and put it in their drinks. They won't wake up until the sun comes up and it's time to milk the cows."

Viv looked at the bottle suspiciously. "It won't kill them, will it? I mean, they're not very nice to me, but they are my family."

"This is my job, you know. I do know what I'm doing."

"But how am I going to get there? I mean, I can hardly walk in these." Viv paused and indicated the shoes she was clutching to her breast with one hand. "And if I go barefooted, my feet and these black hose will get dirty."

Muriel looked thoughtful. "Well, I could summon a unicorn, I suppose. He can pick you up at sunset. But they only listen to virgins, so if everything goes according to plan, there's no way you'll be able to get home. But then again, you could insist on your friend bringing you back in the morning. Yes, I like that idea. Now if there is nothing else I can do for you, I'll be on my way."

Unicorns? There really were unicorns?

Viv swallowed, wanting to ask more of Muriel. But the faerie had vanished as quickly as she had arrived.

Leaving Viv alone on a dusty road with a basket of food in one hand, a pair of shoes in the other and a head full of worries.

* * * * *

Despite the feelings of guilt that dogged her movements, it was an easy thing for Viv to lace the evening beer with Muriel's potion. Within minutes, the heads of her parents and brothers had fallen down onto the table and their snores had filled the room.

No doubt they'd wake in the morning thinking they'd had one too many. It wouldn't be the first time, after all.

It was too late to turn back.

With a deep breath, Viv laced herself into her best dress and plaited her hair into two silky braids that reached down to her waist. She hoped Elwood would like her, but she could not be certain. The farm did not boast luxuries such as a looking glass and she had no friends to tell her whether she was attractive or not.

Still, he had to find her attractive. Had not the Fates promised him to her?

As the first purple streak appeared in the sky, there was a knock at the door and Viv found herself face to face with a real live unicorn. Featuring a rather sharp looking horn in the middle of its head, it could have stepped out of the tapestries at the local castle.

The beast preened a little, tipping his head from one side to the other. "Beautiful, isn't it?"

He could speak!

After everything that had happened today, the poor maid didn't know why she was surprised. Of course he could speak, he was a magical being and all of that ilk could speak. Couldn't they?

She found her composure quickly enough. "Unicorns, you mean? Well, yes, they are rather beautiful, I suppose."

But the beast was not to be pacified. "Not unicorns, you fool. My horn! The longest and thickest in the family. I am a stud, the family pride, and you dare to insinuate that I am like all other unicorns?"

Viv took a step back into the room. It was true then that unicorns were quick to anger. Oh dear. She needed to calm him and quickly.

She swallowed down the fear that wanted to claw its way out of her breast and reached out a pacifying hand. "But of course you are. Truly you are the most stunning creature I have ever seen. One glance and I can see your breeding and grace."

Maybe she was laying on the compliments a little too thick, but the unicorn was lapping it up. "I can't wait to see how fast you are," she added hopefully. "No doubt you can run all day, all week and not tire..."

As her last word faded, the unicorn blinked, strode into the room and poked at her brother Patrick with his horn. The redhead fell to the floor with a groan, rolled over and began to snore again. That potion from Muriel was truly effective.

The unicorn indicated the vacant chair with his horn. "Sit down, maid."

Viv didn't want to sit down, she also didn't want to talk to the unicorn any more. Nervously she stared out the window, wondering how long the ride would take to the publican's house. "Well, delightful as it would be to talk to you, we really need to be going. There's a troubadour playing..."

"I know that," the unicorn interrupted. "And I don't want to talk to anyone as stupid as you either."

Shocked, Viv stared back. "Then why should I sit down?"

The animal pawed the floor, leaving gouge marks behind. "Sit down."

Viv sat. Barely had her bottom made contact with the wood when a great head was laid in her lap. "Stroke," he commanded.

Not feeling as though she had any choice, Viv caressed the soft fur of his head. Eventually he emitted a long sigh and instructed her to sit upon his back.

Finally.

Rattling around on the back of a unicorn was not the most comfortable way to travel. There was nothing to hang onto but the silken mane and Viv slipped from one side to the other. It was a miracle she didn't fall off altogether, considering the animal's penchant for stopping for no good reason and wild swerving to avoid trees. By the time they arrived in front of the publican's house, the inner muscles of her thighs were screaming their discomfort and the elegant dismount she had imagined metamorphosed into a controlled fall.

And her back was killing her.

Worst of all, their arrival had attracted a great deal of interest. There were faces she recognized and others to which she could place a name. Her parents were going to hear about this, that was a certainty.

They would know that she had spiked their drinks.

Still, she tried to rescue what she could. Tonight the lies just seemed to be welling up like water from a mountain source. "He found me on the road, he did. Insisted on taking me the rest of the way. Lovely, friendly creature."

Considering the creature in question had just bitten the wife of a well-known patriarch, she doubted anyone believed her words. They'd be talking about this incident for years.

All the more reason to persuade Elwood to take her away from here before she got a reputation for consorting with magical beasts.

The relief she felt when Muriel met her at the door of The Horse and Whip was overwhelming. After a unicorn, a faerie in mini-format was a mere misdemeanor and once she slipped into Viv's pocket, Muriel was all but invisible.

"Is it normal to want to throw up?" Viv whispered in the faerie's direction as they entered the establishment. Apart from the serving staff, they were still alone in the room.

Despite her minimal stature, Muriel's voice came over loud and clear, earning Viv a few surprised looks from the direction of the bar. "Completely normal. Keep your head up and stop ramming your hands into your pocket. I'd prefer to keep my head intact." And a moment later. "Take the table over there, the one to the left of the stage."

"I can't," Viv said, ignoring the strange glances in her direction. "It's already been taken. Someone's left a cloak there."

"I left it there," Muriel replied. "Now sit down, you ungrateful wench."

Viv did as she was told. Anything to silence the faerie.

"Now put on the cloak."

"I can't, it's not mine."

A pint of beer suddenly appeared and the young barmaid, who had understood Viv to be ordering, put out her hand for a gosling. Reluctantly placing her last coin in the girl's hand, Viv took a big gulp of beer before she glanced around. It was cold and placated the rising unease in her stomach somewhat. The place was filling up, but no one else had sat down at their table. They probably think I'm mad, she thought glumly. *They* were quite possibly right.

"Put on the cloak," Muriel said, distinctly louder.

Viv looked around. No doubt about it, people were still staring at her. People were recognizing her. Tentatively, she reached out and picked up the cloak. It was soft, sensuous, wonderfully red and it would cover her best homespun beautifully. It was the solution to all her problems. No one would recognize her and Elwood would think her royalty. Reverently, she swung the garment around her shoulders and let it settle.

It felt even better than she had anticipated, warm without being heavy.

Muriel immediately flew up to Viv's shoulder and slipped into the high collar. "Oh, this is much better, I can *see* from here."

Just as Viv opened her mouth to shush her, Elwood sauntered in to a fanfare of cries and squeals. A girl shrieked and another swooned. One particularly desperate woman threw her arms around the troubadour's neck and kissed him. Immediately, two beefy guards arrived and carted her, screaming and protesting, away from the stage.

Elwood took the adulation as his due. Holding his arms outstretched, he slowly turned so that the whole room, and in particular the adoring women, might admire his plentiful assets. And what assets they were.

In those tight hose, Viv could see every single muscle in his thighs and his butt was a dream that made her want to sigh for no good reason.

Never before had Viv seen such hair, so black and long. By contrast, his eyes were a vivid blue, his face as pale as a daisy. If there were any fairness in the world, such perfection would look feminine, but there was nothing feminine about Elwood. His lean frame reminded Viv of a large black cat.

His perfect backside made her fair want to swoon.

She wanted to lick those pointed ears.

Elf.

Handsome elf.

"Sweet Mother," she whispered, pressing her hand to her chest. "He's perfect." Quietly she sent a prayer of thanks to the Fates above. She couldn't have selected a more perfect husband for herself if she had tried.

She was so excited that she barely registered Muriel's protests. "Not Elwood! Tell me you don't mean Elwood." The faerie flew out of the upright collar and straight into Viv's ear. "Tell me it's not Elwood."

"But of course I meant Elwood," Viv whispered back to the faerie, her eyes still full of the elf's beauty. "Is there anyone else so perfect?"

"By the Deities, I should not have taken on this case," Muriel whispered. "Elwood is a scoundrel."

But Viv ignored her. Nothing was as important as this elf on the stage with his harp and dreamy eyes. At that exact moment, Elwood turned his head and looked at her. The smile on his face caressed her, warmed her and caused her breasts to swell.

Still holding her captive with his eyes, he began to sing.

He sang to her. He sang of love, a love so pure that even the Deities above looked on with a smile. Love, in whose path no obstacle could impede. A love above all others. Their love.

It was a sign.

He had been looking for her, just as the Fates had said.

The air stuck in Viv's throat and her heart beat as fast as the wings of a captured bird. He was staring at her.

Viv lifted her hand to stop her words from carrying. "He keeps looking at me, Muriel. He recognizes me."

"No, he doesn't," the faerie hissed in reply, not even trying to hide her annoyance. "You're wearing his cloak."

Shame filled Viv and a heat that had nothing to do with sex, but a great deal with embarrassment spread up her back. "What? You said..."

"Yeah, yeah," Muriel interrupted, "with all the other horny girls in this room, I couldn't rely on his sense of smell alone. And it worked. You've got his full attention now. Not that you really want it. You might want to reconsider your wish."

"Shh, I think he can hear you," Viv whispered as Elwood grinned at her, his head dropping a mock salute.

"Of course he can, he's an elf."

Of course. She kept forgetting that elves had heightened senses. But it didn't matter. Elf or not, Elwood loved her and would care for her forever. She knew it. Hadn't the Fates themselves decided it would be so? Had he not sung to her and only to her?

And he would teach her the ways of love.

The ways of love. Oh, Sweet Mother, she had no idea about the ways of love.

But then again, wasn't that why Muriel had been sent to aid her? Muriel would know what to do.

Muriel would help her.

It was her destiny.

Announcing his final song of the evening, Elwood blew a kiss in Viv's direction. Her heart stopped beating altogether and the air in her lungs vanished. Please, Sweet Mother, don't let her faint.

The song finished and Elwood bedded down the harp in its box with great aplomb. Immediately a series of infatuated girls accosted the singer and blocked Viv's view. Without his eyes upon her, she was able to breathe again, the air clearing her mind and wiping aside her infatuation.

Immediately doubts filled her. What was she thinking? Bedding down with a stranger was a foolish act. Everyone would know and there could be no return to the farm.

May the Fates forgive her, her courage was not great enough to do this thing.

But the path to the door was blocked by females clamoring to reach Elwood. There was no chance of escape, no room for second thoughts.

As though by magic, the throng parted and she saw Elwood's beautiful face focused on her. Her doubts fled and the warmth in her bosom grew with every step he took toward her.

He stopped in front of her and she rose to greet him, eager and wanting.

"You smell horny," Elwood said after a close perusal that left Viv flushed and expectant. He picked up her hand as though she were a lady and placed a kiss on the inside of her wrist. "It's my favorite scent."

She frowned. These weren't the first words she wanted to hear from him.

If her silence surprised him, he didn't say, instead his attention focused on her shoulder and the miniature figure lounging there.

"Is that Muriel I see?"

Viv tried to speak. She wanted to tell him how much she admired him, how much she adored him and of her dreams. She cleared her throat, but all that came out was a squeaky voice. "Yes, do you know her?"

"You could say that. She's frightfully bossy, isn't she?"

Viv felt the faerie stamp her heels and then her voice emerged from behind the collar. "I'll have you know that I can hear you, Elwood, you big lump!"

Quick as a flash, Elwood's hand streaked out and grabbed the wriggling creature. "Oh, go stamp your foot at my brother, Muriel, and let me have my own fun here." With nothing more than a gentle blow in the faerie's direction, Muriel vanished. Poof and she was gone.

"Sweet Mother," Viv said, impressed at this display of magic. "That's amazing."

"Yes," Elwood nodded sagely, "She means well, but she does get in the way, does she not?" He slid his fingers along the curve of Viv's jaw. "So, what are we going to do about you and that divine wetness between your legs? Shall I do you alone or would you like to take a friend along? Your choice, male or female, I'm quite happy to follow your wishes."

She didn't have the foggiest idea what he was going on about. He confused her, confounded her with his crude expressions and desires. But then again, maybe this was the way of love as the Fates had foretold. "Well, I..."

"Yes?"

"Well, I think there might just be a small misunderstanding."

Elwood's face fell. "You mean you don't want to get laid?"

"No...no," she hastily reassured him, while wondering if all magic folks talked so nonchalantly about sex. "It's just that I'd prefer it to be just you and me the first time."

"The first time?"

If nothing else, the look of dire panic told her she'd made a mistake. He was going to send her away if she didn't rescue the situation immediately. "I mean the first time with you. That's all. You are still interested, aren't you?"

Elwood immediately perked up in more way than one. He turned his back on the rest of the room, and ran his hand over the curve of Viv's body from breast to hip. Heat followed his touch, leaving Viv in a state of delightful bliss. This was good, this was very good, divine actually.

Then he ruined it by placing her hand over the front of his legwear.

Over his erection.

Viv had seen cocks before.

Living on a farm, it couldn't be helped, but never had anyone placed her hand on his own personal exemplar as a form of greeting. Maybe it was an elven thing.

Yes. That would be the answer. It was an elven greeting.

Not knowing the appropriate response, Viv gave an appreciative stroke or two and then let her fingers slip away, suppressing the urge to wipe her hand very carefully as she did so.

If his grin was anything to go by, her actions had been appropriate. "Oh, I'm interested," he said, "I'm very interested indeed."

He bestowed another smile upon her and then ruined it by leering at her breasts.

Something was very wrong.

"Here is my key." He fished it out and placed it carefully in her palm. Warm fingers closed around hers as he raised her hand to his lips. Yes, that was in keeping with her expectations—romantic, caring. She smiled her approval while he continued to give instructions. "It's the suite at the top of the house. Why don't you go on up and slip into

something a little more flattering? Or at least out of that unflattering homespun. A little sexy something if you have it. I'm rather partial to garter belts, myself."

Garter belts?

Viv didn't even know what a garter belt was and she didn't think she wanted to. True, she was still wearing the garments Muriel had provided, but ...

But what? If Elwood was her true love, her soul mate, she should be happy to make love to him, to be made love to.

If?

Where had that thought come from. Of course he was her soul mate, the Fates themselves had sent him.

Had they not?

"Just one last thing."

She stopped, turned around and faced him. "Yes?"

"It wasn't you who arrived on that unicorn, was it?"

Viv contemplated her answer. She usually spoke the truth, but tonight was already an exception. What was one more lie on the list of deceit? "Not me, no. I walked all the way."

And she had walked all the way into town this morning. So in a way, it wasn't really a lie at all. And now she was lying to herself. That made her feel sad.

"Good," he said, not even noticing her struggle with her conscience. "Because unicorns mean virgins and virgins aren't my thing."

Virgins weren't his thing.

Virgins weren't his thing.

The words echoed in her mind as she worked her way through the maze of corridors, breathing in musty air laden with the scent of stale beverages. Had Elwood not expected his True Love to be a virgin? Had he not known that his search was at an end? He was altogether too frivolous for a man searching for his destiny. It was almost as though he didn't know about her, about fate.

Maybe that was the problem. Maybe he didn't know.

She rested against the rough wood of a corridor as she spied yet another hall of endless doors and another flight of stairs. The old publican's house was bigger than she had expected and the higher she climbed, the more worries began to surface. She clutched the key tightly in her hand as if it were a talisman, a charm that would keep all bad things away. She would not give up this close to her destiny.

Carefully Viv placed her foot on the next step, ignoring the noise of protest the wood gave in return, and continued her ascent. She would tell Elwood of their destiny and he would recognize the truth in her words.

But in the meantime, she would need some assistance to help with the tightness in her chest, with her difficulty in breathing and who better than the messenger of the Fates?

"Muriel?" she called out. "Muriel! I need you. Where are you?"

The faerie did not appear.

Had Viv truly believed that help would come so quickly? Actually she had but it wasn't until she had reached the top of the stairs and the one lone door with its golden lock, that Viv heard a reply.

"What?" The voice was rude, almost incoherent but definitely belonged to Muriel. Viv caught the words "boyfriend" and "inconvenience" amongst the tirade of words that swam around the landing. But no faerie appeared.

With a shaky hand, Viv slipped the key into the lock and pushed open the heavy wooden door while she continued her pleas. "Please, please Muriel, please show yourself. It's important, I'm afraid. He doesn't know he's my True Love. Or he doesn't want to know and I'm confused and I wish you were here. And he doesn't like Virgins. He doesn't."

There was a commotion in the air as a decidedly tousled head appeared. "Whatever it is, can it wait?"

Somewhat taken back, Viv frowned, couldn't Muriel see how urgent this was? How desperate Viv was? Was the magical being totally lacking in feelings? "No, it can't. You're here to help me, you said so, and he could be here any moment."

The silly grin vanished in favor of a frown. "Okay. Right. First of all, calm down. It's perfectly normal to feel nervous."

"It is? And this feeling of wrongness? Of wanting to run home?"

"Perfectly normal for a first-timer. Deep breathes will help."

Desperate for a miracle, any miracle, Viv was ready to take any suggestion even one from a faerie wriggling through a hole that had appeared from nowhere. But it took a whole series of deep breaths before Viv began to feel even remotely better.

Muriel was now full size and, despite the foot tapping, seemed far more amenable, even helpful. Viv wiped her hands on her dress and whispered, "Help me, please."

The frown on the faerie's forehead deepened, the beat of shoe against wood sped up. She was not a happy faerie and that did nothing to reassure Viv.

"So, what's the problem?" Muriel said finally. "You wanted Elwood, against my better judgment, I might add, and I got you Elwood."

"But that's just it. Elwood doesn't like virgins."

"He doesn't?" Muriel was looking at a space in thin air as though she could see something Viv couldn't. Was she all right?

"No, he told me so."

"So don't tell him."

Viv took another deep breath as she considered the advice. Lying was wrong, she'd told enough lies tonight and each one weighed heavily upon her. Then there was the other thing as well. "But won't he notice the blood?"

The faerie's honk was distinctly unfeminine. "Elwood wouldn't notice such a small thing. Just act confident."

"But that's just it. I don't know how."

The faerie focused back on Viv. "Take off that dress for starters. Any self respecting female wouldn't be seen in such a thing. He'll love the red stuff, you'll see. Oh, and a blowjob would help as well. Give him a blowjob and he'll forget about everything else."

Viv was busy toting up the information in her head, but when she got to the last suggestion, she stopped. "A blowjob? What's that?"

Muriel looked pointedly at the ceiling as though seeking aid from the Deities above. "Don't you know these things? Girls in your situation have usually done a little research, spied a little bit, eavesdropped even. It's quite simple, really. When he comes in, push down his legwear, pull out his cock and suck it as though it's a marrow bone."

Had the faerie had her brains addled? Only whores did such things and Viv was not a whore. "Suck his what? I don't think so. I seriously don't think so. I think Elwood and I need to talk." She needed to tell him about the Fates and her virginity. Mentioning her family might also be a good idea.

The frown on Muriel's face deepened even further. "Believe me, Elwood won't want to talk until afterward. Elves are fixed on sex, so if you want to talk, you'll have to give him a blowjob first."

Viv's first instinct was to refuse just as vehemently as before, but then she reconsidered. Maybe she was looking at this the wrong way. Elwood was an elf and did things differently. It was possible that blowjobs were perfectly normal for his folk. "Is it an elven custom?" she asked.

"So to speak," Muriel replied. She smiled and the wrinkles on her forehead melted away as though they had never been. "Yes. A blowjob will put him in the right mood for a serious discussion. If you start off with all that love stuff, he'll throw you out."

That made sense. Sort of. Well, not really, but with Elwood's imminent arrival, Viv thought it advisable to acquire as much information as possible. "So I should blow on it?"

"Suck."

"But I thought you said it was a *blowjob*?"

Muriel shook her head. "No need to be pedantic, lick and suck, okay? He'll love it, you'll see."

Muriel began to fade away and then reversed the process until she was in focus again. "Just remember, once you have been deflowered, I am no longer available for immediate assistance."

Was it Viv's imagination or was there something menacing about that last statement? Something was wrong. Something was very wrong. Even her stomach knew it.

She wanted to throw up.

Panic overwhelmed her and she ran to the window. It was a long way down. Too far down to jump without serious injury and she didn't want that. Okay, okay, she'd have to use the door. If she was lucky, she might even be able to catch the unicorn again.

As for Elwood. If he were her own True Love, he would find her and woo her as the custom dictated.

"You're not thinking of leaving, are you?"

Viv turned and saw that Elwood was already in the room. How on earth had he managed to get in here without making a noise? Without making a single creak on the stairs? That was creepy.

But maybe not for an elf.

She had a lot to learn about this folk.

The more she thought about it, the less she liked the idea of being married to an elf. Maybe an elf wasn't the ideal partner after all.

Maybe Elwood wasn't the husband for her.

Where had that thought come from? Of course he was her own True Love, the Fates had sent him and truly there was no such thing as coincidence.

"Well, no," she said, crossing her fingers behind her back and hoping he wouldn't see. "I was just admiring the view."

"Ah ha," he said, staring pointedly at her homespun dress. "I too was also hoping to admire the view. I was thinking of ample tits and high heels."

These were hardly the words she had been expecting to hear. Now they were alone, she'd expected him to drop the pretense and treat her as a lady, declare his love or something. Tell her that she was the one he'd been searching for all his life. But then again, maybe there was a test involved. In the faerie tales, there were always tests. You had to prove your worthiness first. Maybe this blow/suck job thingy was the test.

She grasped at the proverbial straw. Yes, this was a test.

The Deities always tested you to see if you were worthy.

Viv was worthy. She could do this.

But that would mean getting undressed. No one had ever seen her naked before. She hadn't even seen herself without clothes. What if he thought her too thin? Or too fat? What if...

"I'm waiting."

"Sorry." She fumbled with the ties of her dress, her fingers feeling swollen and clumsy. Finally, with a wrench, the cloth came apart. Under the watchful eyes of the elf, she pulled the gown over her head and clutched it to her bosom.

He didn't look impressed. "We need to work on the strip-tease." Fishing the bundle from her hands, he flung it to the floor and slowly walked around her. "Nice body, nice underwear. You can stay."

She let out the breath she didn't know she'd been holding. "I can?"

Amused at her response, he nodded. His tunic came off and he crossed the room to a seat upholstered in a brilliant red velvet. Comfortably seated, he beckoned to her with one hand. "Come and show me what you can do."

What she could do?

She swallowed, surprised she was still able to. In her dreams, her lover had always guided her and not the other way around. But this was a test, she reminded herself. She needed to prove herself worthy of Elwood, of her destiny. She wet her lips with her tongue, feeling uncomfortable at the way he watched her. "What do you want?"

"Come here."

Walking had never seemed so difficult. The shoes on her feet were altogether too high and the heels too thin. How had she ever thought them adorable?

Less than a step away from him, she stumbled and fell forward into his lap.

"I like an eager woman," he purred.

Eager wasn't quite the word that sprang to mind. Embarrassed and confused were the more obvious choices. "Sorry," she said, trying to catch her balance and extricate herself from his lap. He, however, smiled and cocked his head to the side.

"Have you never been with an elf before?"

"No." That at least was the truth.

"Then you won't know about this."

Before she could say anything to the contrary, he pulled down his hose and revealed his cock.

It was an impressive thing, hard, painfully swollen and pointing at her accusingly.

She didn't know what to say. 'Cover up' was probably not what he was expecting, so she kept her mouth shut and stared.

Misunderstanding her shock for admiration, he ran a light hand down the erect shaft and smiled. "Not a single hair to tickle your dainty throat."

Before she had fully recovered from the sight of her first elven cock, his hand curled around the back of her head and hauled her in for a kiss. He had the softest of lips, that was true, soft, pretty and wet. Wet hadn't been in her imagination, either. Wet she associated with lots of unpleasant things. *Wet* was not romantic and she had to use all of her willpower not to wipe her lips on her forearm when he finally pulled away.

And what had all that tongue business been about?

Her fantasy lover hadn't done that either.

"And we'll have to work on the kissing skills as well."

She needed kissing skills?

Before she could respond, he pushed her down onto her knees and positioned her head in the general direction of his cock.

He wanted her to do that thing that Muriel had said.

Just think of it as a ritual of greeting, Viv told herself, some people shake hands, some kiss and others give blowjobs. Or was that a suck job?

Well, if that was what elves did, she would have to get used to it. She wouldn't want her husband-to-be to be disappointed with her social skills.

She stared at the organ in question. During their kiss, it had swollen to far greater dimensions and she did not know quite how it would fit into her mouth. She also wasn't sure about what she was supposed to do. Was it a suck job and did she therefore have to blow? Or was it a blowjob with sucking the operative word?

Suck or blow?

Neither really seemed an option when his cock was so large.

Wait! Hadn't Muriel mentioned licking?

Licking wasn't a problem. Tentatively, she reached out with her tongue and stroked his flesh. Warm and surprisingly silky, it twitched beneath her administrations. Licking was manageable.

A moan escaped from Elwood's throat.

"Are you all right?"

With his head tipped back and his fingers clenching the armrests, he was the very picture of a tense man. Maybe she was doing something wrong.

"Fine, just fine. Do that some more, take me into your mouth, spoil me with your lips."

As far as instructions went, they were not particularly illuminating and once again she was faced with the dilemma of suck or blow. How she wished that Muriel was here. On the other hand, there was someone else present to ask.

"Elwood?"

"Shhh...whatever it is, tell me later." Then his hand appeared around the nape of her neck and his cock was invading her mouth. She had known that it wouldn't fit in. It was far too big and as impossible as fitting a cat down a mouse hole. She raised her hand and grabbed the base before he could push it in too far.

Suddenly, marrying an elf didn't seem such a good proposition at all. She tried to tell him, but all that came out was a sound reminiscent of a choking goose and his damn cock went down even further.

"More, darling, take me in all the way."

All the way? He had to be joking. She raised her head to tell him, but as soon as her mouth came free, he pushed her down again.

"I've changed my mind!"

Only it came out as a howl and instead of releasing her, the elf moaned in even deeper pleasure.

"Let me go!"

"Oh baby, keep on talking, the vibrations are fantastic."

This was getting ridiculous.

Viv was a patient woman. She had learned at a young age that it was better to keep silent and get on with the job. Eventually the work was done and she could rest. But there were times when she rebelled and then even her brothers ran for cover.

This was going to be one of those times, she could feel it in her bones. If he wasn't going to let her up, well then, she would just take things into her own hands, so to speak. Tentatively, she sought one of his balls and squeezed hard.

His reaction was immediate.

A sensation of speed and dizziness and Viv found herself sprawled on the floor with an angry elf standing over her.

At least his cock was flaccid was her first thought. There would be no more greetings tonight.

Chapter Two

The bad thing about having an elf for a lover was he expected sex all the time. Or maybe that was the good thing. After all, Muriel was a sex faerie. Sex was as important to her as breathing.

And the sexual appetite of elves was also a phenomenal thing. Which meant they were perfectly matched.

In any case, it was sex that had gotten Muriel into her current pickle. There could be no argument about that.

When Elwood had sent her back to her flat with a boomerang spell, she had intended to turn around and head back to oversee the actual act. It was her job, after all.

Only Elwood had sent her back to her boyfriend and Elton was practicing solitary sex in her bedroom. It was such a fascinating sight that Muriel could only stare.

And then stare some more. Not only had he lit the many candles scattered around the room, but he'd stripped off her pink velvet duvet and lit the oil burner. Her room was like a theatre and Elton was center stage and naked.

Wow.

Even after twenty-five years, his body still excited her. It had something to do with the length of his fingers and the way they felt upon her skin. When he touched her, something awakened and rose to meet him halfway. When he focused on her with those forget-me-not eyes, she wanted to bask in their warmth forever.

Muriel's breath caught in her throat and her hand fluttered up to her heart. She had to calm down before he heard her.

She didn't want him to find her. Not yet, not until she had seen what he was up to. And if the size of his cock was any sign, a whole play was about to unwind in front of her eyes.

With a hurried look, she glanced around the room for a hiding place and settled upon the door knob. It was far enough away to deaden any noise she might accidentally produce and of a shape to provide at least a little comfort.

It was also hard and cold, she realized a few seconds later. Not to mention slippery. But none of that mattered as she turned her attention back to her naked elf and the luscious scent that permeated the room.

What was he heating in that burner?

As if in answer to her question, his hand dipped into the bowl and came out dripping a substance that was the color and texture of honey.

Oil. Elton was warming up his own special brand of oil.

Or maybe it really was honey. You never knew with Elton, he was an elf of many surprises. A honey-coated Elton—now there was a thought to be put away for a rainy day. One thing was certain, no matter the base mixture, with his knowledge of herbs, there was bound to be more than one aphrodisiac in there. She could smell the soothing scent of lavender and rosemary. Rosemary was known for its invigorating properties, not that Elton needed any invigoration, and lavender because it was her favorite.

Her favorite?

Mmm. Had he blended this for her as a special treat? Elton was good at romance and lethal with oil in his hands. Her heart beat faster. Yeah, he was trying it out for her and tonight, when she came home, she was in for a special treat

She liked that thought. It made her tingle like a glass of champagne. Well, she wouldn't ruin his surprise, she'd just sit here and watch quietly. It wasn't like she had any other pressing calls. Viv and Elwood would even now be doing the two-backed-beast and apart from the one file, her desk was clear.

She was technically off-duty and spellbound by his fingers and the cock upon which they played. The candles caused the oil to glisten, so that Muriel could follow the progress of Elwood's fingers as they stroked the glands and skimmed over the head of his impressive cock.

In her humble opinion, Elton's cock was perfect. It was alabaster in color, as was the rest of his skin, with a head that was the palest pink of an untouched rose.

And then there was his distinctive lean to the right which should have made him look ridiculous, but didn't. Muriel loved that lean. It touched places inside her vagina that had never been touched before. Maybe that was the secret to their relationship, the reason for their fantastic love life.

Muriel squirmed on her perch, wanting to touch that cock almost as much as she wanted to watch.

It was a difficult decision that was fortunately rendered null and void by the hand that reached out and tested the oil.

With a wicked smile, he poured a measure onto the curve of his stomach. His muscles tightened under the sudden heat, an undulating movement that lifted his back from the mattress and showcased his dexterity.

It sent her wings a-fluttering just wondering what it would be like to settle on that stomach and in that warm pool. But she would restrain herself for the moment and watch.

The liquid rolled down, a stream of rich amber on alabaster, pooling slightly at the concave hollow at his hip and then gathering up speed to race toward his groin. It must have felt good, because Elton moaned somewhere deep in his throat, a sound that made Muriel shiver in anticipation. Unhindered, the liquid sped past his cock, sliding sensuously down to coat his balls in dripping honey.

One hand cupped his balls, catching the oil before it slipped onto the sheet, and then rubbed it upon his chest until the skin gleamed.

His whole trunk glowed golden, wonderfully sweet smelling and enticing. The scent of lust filled the room and Muriel realized that most of it was coming from her. In an attempt to reduce her own longing, she slipped hands into her bodice and massaged her nipples to a peak.

She wanted this elf so badly, wanted him even more than she wanted sex itself.

And that was definitely a foreign thought for a sex faerie, she realized.

But why think at all when the show was continuing. She barely refrained from clapping her hands as Elton's hand grabbed the rest of the oil and tipped it steadily over his erect cock. A gasp escaped his lips, luckily cloaking her own as the mass slid down his skin. What had it felt like, Muriel wondered? What would it feel like to rub it in with her own body? Would he welcome her intervention or would he curse her for invading his oh-so-precious privacy?

But wait! This was her apartment and her bedroom.

Her bed and her elf.

His hand circumnavigated his cock and began a slow up and down motion. Far too slow...

She wiggled impatiently on her perch. She could do it right, she knew what pleased him and what he needed. She knew how to handle him, how to spoil him. She would make it good for him. And then he'd make it good for her.

"Pleeeeeease..."

Wait! Did that pleading voice belong to her? Did she have no shame, no self-control? Obviously not and the chance that Elton hadn't heard her plea was non-existent. Elves had such good hearing. Her heart tapped out the same crazy tattoo as her wings while she waited for his reaction.

To her surprise, he did nothing. No twitch of his lips, no tensing of his shoulders, he didn't even look in her direction. That was a weird reaction for one of the best hunters, best soldiers in The Valley. So weird, in fact, that Muriel could draw only one conclusion.

"You knew I was here!"

He lifted his big blue eyes to where she was hovering above the doorknob. They were the same color as the forget-me-nots and just as effective. She loved staring into those eyes, loved watching them cloud over with passion and lust.

"From the moment you started to get horny. Your delectable scent drives me hard, as you know."

"But I've been aroused from the moment I arrived."

"Yes."

"And you didn't say a word."

"No."

She wanted to hit him and she wanted to love him at same time. Was that normal? Whoa, when had the 'love' word invaded her mind? Love was not high on her agenda. At one hundred and twenty-three years, she was still young for a faerie. Besides, love was terrible on the figure and lethal to the job. And, most importantly, sex faeries never fell in love, just into lust and that on a regular basis.

Sex faeries were incapable of love. She had to remember that.

"You could have told me," she said, pouting sensuously at him, not wanting to anger him but annoyed anyway.

"And spoil all the fun?" The elf jerked on his cock, redirecting Muriel's attention to the matter in hand. Forget strange looks and emotions, there was nothing in all the dimensions more important than mind-shattering sex.

"Come here, Muriel."

She fluttered closer to where one oil-slicked hand was still working that elegant cock. She hovered, full of expectations and yet unable to decide where she should participate, let alone in what size.

"Oh no, not there. Come and hover over my face, faerie. I want you normal size and I want the panties off so I can lick your clit." Then as an afterthought, he added, "leave the bodice on, I like the way your boobs hang out."

She gave one last look at Elton's cock and obeyed. True, she loved to lick cock more, but what female in her right mind would say no to an offer of cunnilingus from an elf? None, not in any of the dimensions. Of that, Muriel was sure.

And Elton was so good. It wasn't even his technique that made him a master of the task, although his tongue certainly knew its way around her pussy and how to tickle her clit. No, Elton loved the whole physical thing, the scent, the touch, the wetness on his mouth. He'd told her often enough after all.

Far be it for Muriel to complain.

Not while he kissed her cunt and slid a moist tongue into her vagina and not while she was treated to the sight of him handling his own cock with masterful and strong motions.

No, she wasn't going to complain.

An unexpected mental voice interrupted her thoughts. "Muriel? Are you there? I need you." With a groan, Muriel recognized the voice of her client.

Viv!

Muriel really needed to answer, but her body was aroused past the point of no return. She'd ignore Viv until she came. Yes, she would.

Elton pressed Muriel's clit with his tongue. She almost came then and there. Almost, but not quite, thanks to that annoying voice in her head.

"Muriel, Patron Faerie of Virgins, hear me in my hour of need."

Oh no, the milkmaid was praying. Muriel was duty-bound to answer. It was The Lore. How was she going to tell Elton that she had to go to work right now? He was going to be mighty peeved. He hated to be interrupted in the middle of sex.

As if he had heard her thoughts, Elton spoke, "Is there something wrong, lover?"

"No," she said, cringing at the lie. Elton hated lies even more than mixing work with pleasure.

Maybe it wouldn't take too long. Surely it was only a small hitch that could be solved quickly. Darn it to the Deities and back, she couldn't orgasm with this voice in her head.

"Then why did you stop moving?"

Oh dear, her hips were truly still. That wasn't like her at all. Should she tell him? No, if she told him, there wouldn't be any more sex today and probably not a lot over the next week. Better to tell another lie.

"Sorry, I have to go to the bathroom."

"Right now?" Elton sounded mighty peeved.

"Ah, yes...right now," Muriel replied with a shake of her wings. In her current size, she couldn't fly and her horny state made it difficult to clamber down from the bed in an elegant manner.

"Won't be a moment." Instead of looking reassured and understanding, he crossed his arms across his chest and glared back at her. Damn it, it was getting harder and harder to fool Elton.

"Muriel!" And that girl's voice in her head was making Muriel just plum crazy.

As soon as she reached the bathroom, Muriel opened a window between the dimensions. "What on earth is wrong?" she began and then stopped. Where was Elwood and why was the girl still dressed?

Viv wrung her hands in the skirt of her homespun. "He doesn't like virgins, Muriel! He doesn't like them and I have no idea what to do."

Muriel opened her mouth to speak, but was interrupted by the pounding on the door behind her. Her elf had tired of waiting. "Muriel? Let me in."

Not while she was in the middle of a call, she wouldn't.

"Muriel," the girl before her said, "Help me, please. Tell me what to do."

"Muriel," Elton called behind the locked door. "I want this door open right now."

Caught between the two, Muriel tried to come up with a solution and failed. She had to get rid of Viv right now. "Give him a blowjob, for goodness sake. It'll fry his brains and he won't even notice the virgin thing."

Viv frowned. "What's a blowjob?"

By the blessed Deities, how could she not know? "Pull down his legwear, free his cock and suck! Got it? He'll love it, you'll see." Behind her, the doorknob rattled yet again. "Don't worry about the nerves, it's normal. You'll be fine." Closing the window

on the nervous girl, Muriel spun around just in time to see the door click open and Elton appear. Muriel was surprised, but relieved he had waited so long to use his magic.

"Are you working in here, Muriel?"

"No, not at all," she mumbled. And she hadn't been working, she'd only been offering advice.

He looked skeptical, as well he might.

"Actually," she began nervously, "it was my friend, Fiona." Fiona, the Patron Faerie of Firefighters, was her best friend, they'd grown up together and shared many an adorable man. "She's having problems with her latest."

Elton relaxed his stance ever so slightly. "I too have a massive problem."

She followed his glance down to his weeping cock. Despite the interruption, Elton hadn't wilted in the least. A tingle of expectation sped down her spine, making her forget Viv and everything else. "I can see that," she whispered. "Shall I take care of it?"

He didn't reply. Instead, he lifted her up onto the vanity. Automatically her thighs slid open so that he had a perfect view of her rosy labia and clit. His eyes widened appreciatively, and before she could think of a clever retort, his cock was inside her.

He filled her perfectly. His generous length touched places no other lover had ever found. The muscles of her vagina clenched, holding him tightly while her arms encircled his back and pulled him closer so that her breasts were flattened against his chest.

Her ankles linked over his luscious butt.

"Fuck me, Elton," she sighed against his collarbone.

His hands slid around her bum, fingers sinking into the flesh as he eased her even closer. "With pleasure, my love." His thrusts were slow and steady, bringing pleasure, but no satisfaction. Muriel squirmed and tried to thrust her hips forward. Anything to hurry him up, anything to increase the friction.

She clutched his shoulders and bit his ear, offering her own neck to his caresses.

"Let me come," she demanded when she could stand it no longer. "Faster, harder."

His fingers bit into the soft flesh of her butt as he heeded her demands. The next thrust ripped a cry from her lips, almost but not quite sending her over the edge.

His lips settled over hers and she welcomed his tongue against her own, effectively claiming her scream as she came with an overwhelming surge of pleasure.

* * * * *

Muriel crawled up the satisfied elf before settling her head in his armpit. Her bed was a mess and the duvet was history, but she didn't care.

Just one thing bothered her.

It had always bothered her.

Elton had no scent of his own.

The herbs had masked this shortcoming only too well, but now as the oil dried on their sated bodies, she remembered. Elves smelt of nothing more than sunshine on a mountain lake.

It disturbed her. She would so love to have a scent to mark him by, to recall when times were bleak. And it upset Elton that she was disturbed.

Tentatively, she rubbed a finger over the skin in his armpit. Elton threw her a wicked look. "I do wish you would stop doing that. You know I don't smell. You know I *can't* smell. Stop being so critical." His annoyance was there in his voice. Just a smidgeon and a wise faerie would shut her mouth right now. Only Muriel had never been wise.

"Yes," Muriel responded, "and you know I find it uncanny, unnatural somehow. There should be something, you know. Something to please the nose and haunt the memory."

He sat up abruptly, an unsettling look back in his eyes. She really should have taken her own advice. Time for a distraction, sex, for instance.

"No, I don't know.

Muriel pouted, trailed her fingers down his chest only to be stopped by Elton's hand. Don't be such a crybaby. I wasn't criticizing in the least. You know that you make me very happy and in case you've forgotten – it's my apartment."

He sighed, kissed her hand and then closed his eyes.

She waited for him to say something, but he didn't. It looked like he'd gone to sleep. But that was impossible. An elf would never prefer sleep over sex. Muriel moved closer and stared down at his closed eyes.

She was almost relieved when he spoke a good while later. "Stop wriggling those wings around, they're tickling my nose."

"I can't help it. I keep thinking I've forgotten something important." And that wasn't a lie. In fact, she was certain she had. Only what could it be?

"Muriel, you haven't been cooking again, have you? You promised."

Now it was Muriel's turn to get annoyed. She wished he wouldn't go on about that accident in the kitchen. It had, after all, only been a tiny fire. "Of course not. Real sex faeries don't cook. We're above that sort of tedium."

Muriel sat up with a start. "Oh no," she cried. "That was it, I *am* on duty!" Her wings began to flutter and she rose a few centimeters from the bed. "Oh dear, it's all your fault."

Elton's face shut down immediately.

"My fault? Why is it always my fault when something goes wrong?"

She looked at him. Didn't he understand how breathtaking sex was with him? Didn't he understand that he only had to look at her and all thoughts of work or duty

just flew out the window? "Because you're male, isn't that enough? Now where's my dress?"

Elton remained steadfastly in bed.

He'd crossed his arms again. And closed his eyes.

So not a good sign.

"Well, aren't you going to help me look?"

"No, you've just insulted me. Why should I?"

"Because I need you, that's why. How can you be so selfish?" Muriel finally located a silver-spangled, lycra-enhanced mini-dress and slipped it on over her head.

Diving under her bed, she battled the dust bunnies to locate her wand. If Gerald ever discovered she'd let the thing out of her sight, there would be trouble.

Viv! How could she have forgotten the girl? And why had she not received mental notification of her defloration. She had a really bad feeling about this.

A really bad feeling.

She glanced back at Elton, but he was facing the other direction, obviously sulking. Why did he have to choose the here and now to be so childish? He was usually so understanding.

"Well, I thought you might be a little bit more fraternal. It is, after all, your brother who's not performing!"

That comment got to him. He pushed the tangled sheets away with distaste and leaped out of bed. "What did I tell you about using my brother for your career advancement? Isn't it enough that your job keeps getting in the way of our relationship?"

As if sex faeries had relationships.

Elton was being unfair. She couldn't just give up her job as he wanted. Faeries needed to work. They needed fulfillment. What would she do at home all day?

Elton had to understand that just as he could not produce a scent, she could not change. She was a sex faerie and sex was as important to her as breathing.!

Whoa! She'd been so obsessed with her emotions, she hadn't even noticed the stomach staring back at her in the mirror. She looked closer. Was that possible a curve where only flatness should be? Was that quite potentially the beginning of a bulge?

"Elton, do I look fat in this?"

He looked at her as if she was out of her mind. Didn't he understand the importance of appearance?

"No, you look fine."

"Define 'fine'. Does that mean I look good for my age, good compared to the rest of the female population, or are you just trying to placate me? I mean, you haven't even looked, have you?"

He smacked his hand against his forehead, a most inelegant move for an elf. "You look beautiful and unbelievably sexy, as always. The only reason why your stomach looks big is because you are sticking it out."

Muriel paused and considered his words. "So you're saying that I have a big stomach. I suppose you want me to go on a diet now?"

Elton had heard enough, it would seem. It looked as though he was going to explode at any moment. He jumped out of bed and began to pace restlessly from one end of the room to the other, his family assets jiggling in a silly way. It detracted from his argument.

She didn't have time for this nonsense.

"Can't we leave this until I've finished my project?"

He was still yelling when she opened a portal into the publican's house and stepped through. The last thing a hard-working faerie needed was an elf who didn't understand her. Maybe it was time to start looking around for a replacement.

Work didn't look any better. She had expected to find Viv and Elwood in a state of post-coital bliss, but the two of them were glaring at one another. Elwood was sitting on the bed and looking at Viv in a bewildered manner. Viv, standing a few meters from the bed and still clothed in her new corset, looked as though she might burst into tears at any moment.

Muriel clapped her hands together and decided to put on a cheery face. There was no need to take her domestic problems with her to work. She'd have this fixed in a jiffy.

"So, how are things going here?"

Elwood immediately clasped his hands over his nether regions and jumped off the bed. His hands, fortunately or unfortunately, were not up to the job of covering the necessary area. "Muriel, do you mind? I haven't got any clothes on!"

"It's okay, I've seen it all before."

"No, you haven't."

"Yes, I have."

"Muriel, you may have seen it on my brother, but you haven't seen mine."

"I just saw it now."

Muriel threw a look of exasperation at Viv and was disappointed to see that she got no response in return. So much for female solidarity. "Well, you're twins, aren't you? You're identical. Which means I would have seen it all before even if I hadn't just got an eyeful."

"We are not identical, Elton is right-handed and I'm left-handed. There are small differences."

Muriel stared pointedly at his impressive attributes. "So I see, his bends to the right and yours to the left. Other than that, you are identical."

Elwood had the sense of mind to look more than a little flabbergasted. He gulped air a couple of times. Not being in the mood for continuing the conversation, Muriel turned to Viv.

"So, Viv, how is he treating you? Did you have fun?"

Viv, who had been edging toward her homespun in the course of the conversation, said. "No, I've changed my mind. I think the Fates made a mistake."

"What?"

"What?" repeated Elwood, who looked as if someone had slapped him in the face with a fish. "What have the Fates got to do with this? And why are you here, Muriel. There are no teeth to be picked up."

"Teeth?" This time it was Viv who spoke. "Was I supposed to have used my teeth?"

Some days it wasn't worth getting out of bed and this was obviously one of them. Viv was inching toward the door, Elwood was looking confused and Muriel didn't know what to do or say.

"I want to go home," the girl said finally, her hand on the doorknob. "I've changed my mind."

"But you can't," the elf replied. Then looked at Muriel. "Can she?"

Muriel was beginning to feel sorry for the elf. Perhaps she should have told him that Viv was a virgin. But the woman had seemed keen, a fan even. Hell, he shouldn't even have noticed. Pulling the rulebook out of her bodice, Muriel flipped through until she came to the page on changing your mind at the last minute. It was indeed there in the small print.

"The virgin retains the right to say no and stop proceedings at any point. Sorry, Elwood, you'll have to find a replacement."

"But what about her lingerie?"

"Lingerie?"

"You know, sweet intimate garments made of lace and satin and things. Come in all the colors of the rainbows."

"I do know what lingerie is, Elwood. I just don't know why you want them."

Taking her arm, Elwood swiveled Muriel away from Viv and whispered in her ear. "I collect them."

Why on earth was nothing making sense? "Why?"

Wiggling his eyebrows around, he hissed, "You know."

His bare foot was only centimeters away and she felt the very real need to stomp on it with her stiletto boots. "No, I don't. Spit it out and stop pulling faces." Then the gosling dropped. Shocked, she stared at him. "You don't wear women's panties, do you?"

Now it was his turn to look upset. "No, I do not. I am an elf and I have my dignity."

"Then why do you collect women's underwear?"

He glanced over their shoulders, and obviously satisfied that Viv wasn't trying to listen in, he continued. "For the lads, as proof."

"Of what?"

"You know that I got lucky."

Muriel shook her head. This was getting ridiculous. "Look, Elwood, this is all very well and good, but I have a client to take care of. Why don't you take you and your little perversions home while I get my job done."

"But I can't. I haven't got any panties. I'll be the laughing stock."

A flash of her wand and she handed him a brand new pair of red silk undies just as the door slammed shut behind them. A glance told Muriel the bad news. Viv had flown the coop.

How could she have let herself get so sidetracked?

"Viv, wait," Muriel called as she pounded down the stairs, but the girl neither hesitated nor did she glance backward.

It stood to reason that a farm girl was fitter than a slightly out-of-shape faerie who skipped aerobics for sex every chance she got but Muriel was seriously winded before she'd descended two floors. Viv kept on running.

"Stop Viv stop!" she cried, clutching her side and fighting to catch her breath."

She'd start that exercise regime tomorrow. Really she would.

Breathing heavily, Muriel eventually caught up with Viv as the girl wrestled with the rusty lock of the front door.

"Viv, I'm sorry. I made a mistake. Please, please, can we talk about this?"

Shaking her head, Viv increased her efforts to open the door. Muriel took some very big breathes and supported herself with her hand against the wall. "Please Viv, please talk to me."

Viv's hands stilled on the knob. "It was horrible, Muriel. Horrible."

Liquid shimmered in the girl's eyes and even though Muriel was winded and her side ached, she realized the poor lass was going to burst into tears at any moment. Muriel so did not like emotional customers, they made her want to cry and she wasn't wearing waterproof mascara.

It wasn't a selfish thing. She was a sex faerie and it was her job to look good.

"I tried to do that suck job thingy," Viv said, "but it was awful, so I grabbed his balls and squeezed."

By the Deities above, Muriel thought as she forced back a laugh. That would be about the only way to stop a horny elf. She couldn't wait to get back to Elton and tell him all about it. Just as soon as she'd sorted things out here.

"Look, I understand, but maybe we can talk about this quietly."

Viv shook her head vehemently. "I don't think so. I want to go home. It may be horrible, but it's better than being with *him*." With a last tug, the door came open and

the girl slipped out through the slim gap. By the time Muriel passed through with her more generous form, the only thing to be seen or heard was the pounding hooves of a retreating unicorn.

Too late.

Wearily, she changed size and flew upstairs.

"I hate these no-sale days," Muriel told Elwood as she sat down on the bed next to his prostrate form. "I'll be up all night mixing a 'this-was-all-a-bad-dream-spell and it's all your fault."

He sat up immediately. "Why is it my fault?"

"She was a virgin, you fool. You should have been gentle."

"Gentle? Gentle is not my cup-of-tea and how was I supposed to know that she was a virgin?"

"Well, I am the Patron Faerie of Virgins."

He blinked once, he blinked twice and then he leapt off the bed as though her profession might be contagious. His face, pale at the best of times, was whiter than freshly fallen snow. "But Elton said you were a Tooth Faerie."

"That was over twenty years ago, Elwood. Don't you keep up?"

Before he could answer, there was a slight ripple in the air and Elton appeared. His sudden appearance surprised her. What was he doing here? Had he followed to apologize? Her initial surprise was quickly followed by embarrassment. She glanced at Elwood who was still as naked as the day he was born. How could she explain a naked elf in the same room?

No matter what she said, it was going to sound bad.

And it looked bad enough already.

She jumped up at the same time as Elwood guiltily covered his family jewels, with the gifted underwear no less.

She opened her mouth to speak and then closed it again. What could she say? It's not what you're thinking? Yeah, that would really make things better.

Elton, on the other hand, seemed to have no problem finding the right words. "Either of you care to tell me what's going on? Or shall I make my own assumptions?"

Chapter Three

Garald was waiting for Muriel when she flounced into her office on Monday.

"Good morning." She smiled and dumped her new Gucci bag onto the desk. No use making things worse by assuming a problem where none existed.

"That's not what I hear," the old wizard returned, frowning at her latest leather asset. "And I hope you're not going to take that *thing* into another dimension? If I had a gosling for every complaint I have to fence about the illegal transfer of technology between the dimensions, I'd be rich."

"Ah," Muriel said dramatically and flopped down on her chair. Elton hadn't looked her up all weekend and she really didn't need hassle from her boss on top of everything else. Lack of sex was a very sad and potentially dangerous state of affairs for sex faeries. She'd give Elton a week and then she'd have to look around for a replacement. He surely couldn't expect her to go without.

For some strange reason, that thought didn't make her happy.

It was okay, though. She'd get over it. Sex faeries always did.

But in the meantime, she had a more pressing problem. One that was dressed in pastel blue with a silly hat on his head. "I am permitted to take each and every item with me to the Ministry," she told Garald. "That's the Lore. Otherwise it stays at home. And no, you can't borrow it."

Garald raised one bushy eyebrow and clasped his hands around a knee as he continued to sit. An ominous silence followed.

Eventually she conceded pride to diplomacy and cleared her throat. "I guess you heard what happened at The Horse and Whip?"

Slapping a folder down on the desk in front of her, Garald glared at her through his round spectacles. Not that he needed them, but it was an affectation he had assumed over the years. The Deities knew why. "The Union of Unicorns made an official complaint. One of their number was forced to carry a sullied girl."

An unladylike expletive lay on the tip of Muriel's tongue, but she bit it back and congratulated herself on her self-control. She needed coffee, she needed chocolate and, most of all, she needed Garald out of her office or something was going to give. Who gave a damn if the unicorns were upset? *She* was upset. Elton had left *her*!

But she would get over it because she was a sex faerie.

"We know how unicorns are. The girl was a virgin, she had a right to be carried. That's the Lore."

"But to an assignation? Muriel, you cannot continue to stretch the regulations in such a way. Unicorns are pure creatures and not to be sullied. That too is the Lore. It'll be a black mark on your reputation."

"Fine," Muriel replied rather halfheartedly.

"You can be happy that the unicorns didn't go over my head. I, at least, can arrange for the paperwork to go missing."

"Fine."

"Is something wrong, Muriel?"

Muriel shook her head. She was not going to share her personal problems with a wizard. She was especially not going to talk to him about sex. Elton would come back, and if he didn't, there were other fish in the pond.

End of story.

So why was she feeling so down? Where was her bounce? Why was she consuming so much chocolate ice-cream? All very good questions to which she had no answers.

"Then why is Viv still a virgin?"

Muriel pulled the girl's file halfheartedly out of her drawer, hoping to at least look professional. "I'm working on it—okay? Let's just say it's not quite an open and closed case. The girl doesn't really want to be deflowered. She wants more. She's confused."

And she wasn't the only one. This was an unusual case. And Muriel had certainly never met anyone as remotely difficult as Viv.

"More?" The wizard lifted his hat and scratched the few solitary hairs that remained on his head. "What more is there than good sex?"

Drumming her fingers on the desk, Muriel replied. "Love. I think the girl is confusing sex with love I think she really expected Elwood to fall for her. She kept talking about True Love and destiny."

"Love?" Her boss pulled a face. "Love is a human delusion. See that the girl is deflowered by Friday." He left the room with a swirl of his sky blue gown.

Honestly, didn't he know that pastels were out this year?

Left alone, Muriel stared absentmindedly at the file on her desk. Five days, she had five days left to close the case on Viv. With her normal levels of energy, she wouldn't worry about keeping her deadline, but today she was as fatigued as a snail left out in the sun. She needed an easy solution and that meant calling in a favor from a friend.

Baltram.

Of course, why hadn't she thought of him before?

The man was a ranger, one of the few who chose to live as far away from people as he could. In the Enchanted Forest, he could be certain he wouldn't have many visitors—nobody went there if they could help it. Not even the Fae. But Baltram was a friend and, more importantly, he had a cock. Twenty five years ago he had been a horny bastard and Muriel hoped he hadn't changed.

* * * * *

"So you see, Baltram, I really need a favor."

Baltram looked up from the fire where he was stirring his midday stew with a wooden spoon the length of his arm.

"Oh, I see all right. I just don't see what's in it for me."

Muriel pouted. "Well, if you play your cards right, you might just persuade her to move in and clean up this dump."

Baltram looked around the small room as if seeing the dust for the first time and then shrugged. "It's relatively clean. It doesn't need either curtains or bunches of flowers all over the place. I don't need a woman on a permanent basis. I never have, neither in this dimension nor in any other."

She blinked at that word. It wasn't one she would ever have expected to hear from a human throat. "Other dimensions, Baltram? I didn't realize you were a traveler in the dimensional sense."

"There are a lot of things you don't know about me, Muriel." He said that with a wink that was almost sexual. By the Deities, had the room heated up or was it coming from her?

She looked at him, really looked at him through his aura of sexual attraction. It was true, apart from the fact that he was great in bed and hugely endowed, she knew nothing about him. Of course, their relationship had been based purely and simply on lust. She knew he liked his sex alfresco, insisted upon delivering multiple orgasms, was able to fuck for ages and showed no signs of kinkiness. His music interests or past hadn't really been important. But still, how could she know so little about a person with whom she had spent two weeks?

Oh, right. She was a sex faerie and sex faeries only ever thought about sex, lots of it, with as much variation as possible. That was their purpose in life.

It was therefore perfectly natural to find Baltram attractive.

Maybe she shouldn't wait for Elton to come back, maybe she should start back up with Baltram. He'd almost been as good as *her elf* and perhaps with a bit of training...

Whoa, where had the "*her elf*" come from? Elton didn't belong to her and she certainly didn't belong to him.

As if he could read her thoughts, Baltram grinned at her. He really was one hot ranger.

No wonder she'd fallen for him.

Hard, as she recalled.

The more she thought about it, the more she wanted to throw off her clothes and find a convenient rock to lean over. And she would have if Elton hadn't been lurking in her mind.

She shook her head, but the grinning visage of her lover just wouldn't subside. That grin was seriously diluting her attraction to Baltram.

"So...ah, you've traveled the dimensions?"

She shut the blinds on Elton's face and wrestled her mind back to Baltram and his inter-dimensional travel. It wasn't that she didn't believe him. After all, lots of magical beings partook of that pleasure. Faeries did, of course, so too did elves and all the Deities. The Fates could, but rarely left their tower, and Wizards generally found a favorite dimension and stayed there. Pixies were just plain too lazy to go anywhere.

Humans, being non-magical, could not travel without aid. So that meant either Baltram had been with someone else or he was not human.

"It's kind of fun to watch when you think. It's more entertaining than television."

"You know about television?" Televisions were another attraction of Earth. She wouldn't have thought any human in The Valley would have had an inkling on the subject. It was proof enough he had traveled.

So, was he human or not?

She was beginning to think he wasn't. And if he wasn't human, why couldn't she sense it? Was he perhaps a half-breed? Still, she should have had some inkling. They'd fucked, for goodness sake.

He turned his attention back to his stew. Carefully, he added a handful of freshly chopped herbs. See, that was another thing, she had had no idea that he could cook, and from the smell of it, he could cook very well.

He hadn't cooked for her. Although once he had shown her all the stars in the sky. To this day, she couldn't remember a single one, but she could recall the way he had fucked her silly between stars.

"Do you think about sex all the time, Muriel?"

The cheek of him! To assume she would think of anything else. She was, after all, a sex faerie.

He held up his hand as if to ward off an attack. A very wise move under the circumstances. "It wasn't a pick-up line, dear Muriel, it was just a question. You see, your eyes were glazing over and you had that silly grin pasted on, the one that used to come shortly before you did."

Silly grin? "I'll have you know I don't have a silly grin. I don't have a silly bone in my body."

"Of course not." He was silent for a moment, took a taste of the wicked smelling stew and, unsatisfied, added some salt. "I told Elton the same thing yesterday when he was recovering from a rather nasty hangover." He shook his head as though trying to dislodge an unpleasant memory. "Elves as a race can't hold their alcohol. It's time they realized that."

A sudden roaring began in Muriel's ears and starlets danced in front of her eyes. She was not going to faint. She wasn't. "Elton was here?"

Putting the spoon aside, Baltram faced Muriel. "Elton needed some male company, company that would understand what he's going through and he figured, even if you missed him, you wouldn't look here. I'm kind of surprised to see you myself after twenty-five years."

The rushing in Muriel's ears slowed down and stopped. It felt as if all her weight was centered in her feet. Without asking, she sat down heavily on one of the chairs. "Where is he now? Is he here?" Automatically, her eyes sought the door to the bedroom, not knowing whether she wanted him to emerge or not. She felt odd. Maybe she was getting ill.

"He left this morning."

So close and yet so far. Frustration, thy name is Muriel!

All thought of Viv went out of the faerie's head. As so often in the past two days, she could only think of Elton. *Her* darling elf.

She had to stop with all of these possessive words. It wasn't good, it wasn't normal for a sex faerie. She had to be getting ill.

"Will he be back? Did he say anything about me? It was all a misunderstanding, you know. The underwear and things. I was just doing Elwood a favor. Elton should know that I would never cheat on him, and even if I did, I wouldn't be so foolish as to take his brother as my lover. I don't even like Elwood."

Oh by the Deities, why couldn't she shut up? Why was she jabbering on like an idiot? Where was her composure?

"Elton's jealous, Muriel."

Muriel thought hard, but could not think of a single thing of which Elton could be jealous. "Of what? I don't understand. His brother?"

"That too."

"That too?"

"Think, Muriel. I know you can do it if you put your mind to it."

His words reeked of sarcasm. Now she remembered that such had always been his preferred form of humor. Okay, so now she knew why she'd left him after two weeks. No one likes someone who makes you feel like you're missing a digit from your intelligence quotient.

Or had he left her? Mmm, why had she not kept a diary back then? But she shouldn't let herself be diverted. What was the question? Right, of what could Elton be jealous? She had never given him a reason, nothing at all. She couldn't even remember looking appreciatively at a male in his presence and she certainly never talked about other males. When she was with him, she concentrated on him and gave him a great time. As sex faeries were wont to do.

"I don't know."

"You."

"Me?"

"Yes, you. You, your job and the fact that you're a sex faerie."

She still didn't see. Why would Elton be jealous of her and her job?

"Elton loves the fact that I'm a sex faerie. He told me so. He likes the fact that I'm so adventurous, direct and more than slightly naughty."

"I'm sure he does. Sex faeries are wonderful in bed. Everyone knows that, don't they, Muriel?"

Muriel frowned. "Of course. It's a well known fact."

"The question is why, Muriel. Why does everyone know?"

It was a difficult question. Why was the sky blue? Why was the grass green? Faeries were great in bed. It was simply the way of the world. But the way that Baltram was asking suggested something else. Something unpleasant. Only she couldn't quite put her finger on it.

"I don't know, Baltram. By the Great Ones who live Above, please tell me. Why is Elton upset about me?"

Instead of answering, Baltram picked up a bowl and ladled out the hot stew. Heavenly though it might have appeared before, the very potent scent almost turned Muriel's stomach. She began to gag and realized, to her horror, that she was going to throw up. Forgetting all honor, all elegance, she ran outside as fast as her pretty legs could carry her.

Baltram sidled out a little later, the steaming stew in one hand, a spoon in the other. "Under the circumstances, I didn't bring any for you."

Having settled her stomach down, Muriel was grateful. She watched him sit down on the bench, as far away as possible. Either out of consideration or because he didn't trust her to keep her breakfast down. After a couple of mouthfuls, he picked up the conversation where he had left off.

"Faeries are butterflies that flit from male to male, tasting here, drinking there. Irresistible, they are welcomed everywhere, but choose freedom rather than settling on a single flower."

Muriel nodded in agreement. The allusion was good. Faeries had beautiful wings and loved variety. Every flower was beautiful in its own way and the best honey came from different sources.

"Except for you."

"Me?" What did he mean by that? Was he implying that she wasn't attractive enough or sexy enough? Or Deities above, not talented enough? "I've had enough males, thank you, Baltram. You are even on my list, if you recall."

He gave her his wolfish grin. "I recall very well, Muriel. There's nothing wrong with *my* memory."

And there was something wrong with hers?

"And how many have there been since me?"

"Well, Elton, of course."

"Of course."

"And..." She stopped and considered. There had to be some mistake. Surely there had to have been someone else.

"So there you are. You're a faerie who's settled on one flower and that flower is both addicted and terrified that one day you're going to buzz away to another. You've become something of an anomaly in The Valley, everyone is waiting for you to move on. The stress is killing Elton."

It was true, she realized. She hadn't even looked at anyone else since she had met Elton. How could she not have noticed that fact?

"He loves you, Muriel. He needs you to commit."

Struck dumb, she stared at Baltram. Faeries didn't commit. They didn't love. It wasn't in their nature. They were fun girls, the life and soul of every party. They flitted and flirted, but they did not commit. Ever.

Nor did elves.

But it seemed for the past twenty odd years, there had been no one else for either of them.

Baltram's words made sense. It explained a great deal about the temper Elton had recently developed. Even his reaction to finding her with Elwood slotted into place.

"By the Blessed Deities," she whispered, covering her face with her hands. "What have I done?" And by that she didn't know whether she meant the little aberration with Elwood or her seeming disregard of the virtues of other males.

"Well," she said, grabbing at straws, trying to prove that the matter wasn't as serious as it sounded. "I think you're one hot piece. I could do you anytime."

Baltram laid his stew aside, slid across the bench and leered at her. "So if I asked for a blowjob here and now, you'd drop to your knees and do me?" To further underline his request, his fingers fell to the leather laces holding his trousers together.

She looked at his face, at his raised eyebrow, at his busy fingers. The offer was there, sex with a male she found attractive. A normal faerie would be on her knees, but Muriel just felt ill. That was the second time in less than an hour. Either she was getting sick or Baltram was right—she had fallen off the faerie-wagon without realizing it. Her one-elf spree of the last twenty-five years had wheeled her trolley right out of the kitchen.

"Maybe later," she said, the constriction in her throat making her words sound broken up and forced. "Ahm, I'm just a little cut up at the moment. Stress at the office and all that. A difficult client. Nothing to do with Elton at all. Not that I don't appreciate the offer because, of course, I do but..."

A gentle pressure on her shoulder alerted her. She stopped, catching her breath as she saw his face so close to hers. "I understand, Muriel."

And he did. In those forest green eyes, she could see a wisdom that went deeper than a mountain lake. She smiled back. "I've been a fool, haven't I?"

"No. Just superficial and exceedingly fluffy as faeries tend to be."

Then he kissed her.

Muriel didn't know who was more surprised. Her body stiffened and readied itself for a battle. Then she realized that there was no passion in this kiss. It was a kiss between friends, a touching of lips and no more.

How sweet.

It made her feel better. She fluttered her wings, feeling new strength pass through her body, good will and joy that lifted the sadness of the past few days. It was a drink of spring water, pure essence of life.

She had been right. Baltram was no ordinary ranger, no ordinary human, but something else. "What are you?" she asked when he drew back from the kiss.

"A good friend," he whispered back, cleverly sidestepping her question. "I'll even help you with the girl. Now go and find that elf of yours and tell him that you love him."

Love? Could this feeling of lightness and joy possibly be love? This urge to jump, skip and float over the meadow in front of Baltram's house? This need to find Elton and never let him go? But everyone knew that love was merely a human delusion. It didn't exist. It couldn't. Especially not for fae folk.

Her happy mood lasted as long as the trip to the edge of the woods. Leaning against the trunk of an ancient oak was a familiar face with an unfamiliar expression on it. Anger wasn't good. In the time they had been together, she had only seen anger on his face three times. The first time had been after her little accident in the kitchen and the second time had been last Friday.

"Elton, what's wrong?"

When he didn't reply, she hurried on until his face came into focus. He looked bad. His eyes were ringed with black. It was such an unexpected look on one who prided himself on his appearance that, at first, she felt duty-bound to tell him about the little mishap with the mascara, but then she realized those rings were similar to her own. He hadn't been sleeping either.

"You look terrible."

"Is that all you can say? I catch you in bed with my brother *and* kissing Baltram and all you can say is I look terrible? Of course I look terrible."

"But it's not the way it looked," she protested. "Ask Baltram, he was helping me."

"I could see that for myself."

He turned sharply and began to walk away. Another few steps and he would vanish into the woods as was the way of elves. She couldn't let that happen, not after she had found him again.

"Wait, Elton. Wait."

He stopped, but did not turn back to face her.

Bad sign.

"What?"

"I just wanted to say..." Damn it, what the hell did she want to say? She bit her lip while trying to say something appropriate, knowing that everything was riding on her next words. "I didn't have sex with your brother. Ask him. He'll tell you."

"I already did."

His tone of voice told her more than his words. Whatever his brother had said had done nothing for her case. Trust Elwood to ruin things for her. "Well then, he must have told you about Viv, the girl. He just wanted my panties because she wouldn't leave hers behind."

"And that's supposed to make me feel better?" He turned around, his boots soundless on the forest floor. "And your kissing Baltram was just an accident? Can't you say no? Do you have to please every male you meet?"

His anger was affecting her now. What did he want from her? Couldn't he accept her the way she was? "It doesn't hurt to be friendly. You never know when you might need to call in a favor."

The way he pursed his lips told her that she'd put more than a foot wrong. "It's my job, after all," she said, trying to save what could be saved. "I *am* a sex faerie."

He shook his head. "I'm sorry, Muriel. I don't think I can handle this relationship any more. I can't share you with every male you meet."

Desperately, Muriel tried to think of a rejoinder. Something, anything to make things better. Sadly, not a single word came to mind. All she could think of was how empty her weekend had been. An entire life without him would be unbearable.

With a sigh, he turned around on his hand-made leather boots and marched silently into the Enchanted Forest until not even his sexy butt could be seen.

"I love you," she said finally, her voice no louder than a whisper. "At least I think I do."

But it was too late.

Chapter Four

When Elton took it into his head to vanish, he did just that. Goodness knew where he had gone, but hours later, Muriel had made no further progress. No one had seen him, he wasn't at any of his haunts or visiting any of his friends.

Exhausted, Muriel spent a restless night and arrived at work the next morning with an excess of make-up to hide the rings under her eyes.

She looked terrible, but for once no one made a comment on her appearance.

Why did elves have to be so difficult, so vain? So unwilling to forgive?

If she had found Elton with another woman, she wouldn't have jumped to conclusions. She wouldn't have assumed the worst.

Scrap that.

She would too have jumped to conclusions. She would have been mighty mad and her fury would have made a hurricane look tame.

Oh Sweet Mother, what had she done? And why was she thinking so much about things other than sex and her job? Where was the off switch on her brain? She didn't like thinking at all. All she wanted was her nice superficial life back. With Elton, it went without saying.

And good sex.

Of course.

She looked down at her fingers. She'd nibbled off three nails, giving her hands a lop-sided look. She had to stop thinking about Elton. She had to stop thinking full stop.

And in the meantime, she still had a job to do. A job, she reminded herself, at which she was very good.

"I haven't yet failed." She liked hearing the words out loud. They made it more real somehow. "I may be unhappy, but I won't let it interfere in my work. I am a good Patron Faerie. It is my responsibility to right Viv's woes."

Pulling the open folder closer, she picked up her quill and wrote. *Tuesday, new lover found = Baltram, ranger. Shall attempt to introduce the two tonight. Need to convince Viv to continue.*

Convincing Viv might just be the hardest stepping stone of all.

If only she had remembered to make and send a forget-it-all spell. If only she could turn the time back to Friday.

Well, she hadn't and crying wasn't going to fix anything. She would convince Viv because she had to.

And because it was her duty.

* * * * *

Hogsmeade Farm was typical of the farms in the area, only more unkempt and more run-down than most. The simple wooden structure of the house showed signs of decay and the shutters were hanging askew from the windows.

Avoiding a hovering magpie, Muriel flew in through an open window.

"Hello? Viv?"

There was no one home but a disgruntled old hag in the kitchen. On the hearth, a cauldron of hot soup bubbled away while the grey-haired woman chopped an assortment of green things. The good smelling, wholesome, homemade soup reminded Viv of Baltram's stew and she felt the urge to throw up again. If things continued in this manner, her famous curves were bound to diminish.

"Greetings, Goodmother."

There was no response from the hunched woman. Thinking that the good woman might be just a little hard of hearing, Muriel tried again, only louder. "Greetings, Goodwoman."

The knife continued without breaking its rhythm. "No need for yelling, Faerie. I am not deaf."

Shaking her wings of excess dust, Muriel positioned herself in front of the fire, all the better to warm her derriere. "Well, why didn't you answer?"

"We in this house have no dealings with odd ones. No elves, dwarves, witches and, in particular, no faeries."

The hag, who might not have any use for other folks, did have urgent need for a dentist. A true pity that there were none in this dimension. Muriel continued smiling while doing her best to close her nostrils from the stench.

"Don't you think that's just a little shortsighted, if not just a touch xenophobic?"

"There's nothing wrong with my sight and I can tell that you're one of them sneaky faeries and not a xeno-thingy."

Muriel opened her mouth to correct the woman, but decided against it. There was no arguing with people who were convinced they were right. "Actually, I dropped in to speak to Viv."

"She's not here." There was no mistaking the hostility in that voice, but Muriel had been hardened by years of wrestling teeth away from unreasonable children. "Very well. I'll be off then. Unless, of course, I can wait around until she comes back."

The woman gave her a look that would have killed a fly at twenty-five meters. "Not bloody likely. If my Goodman finds ya here when he gets back, there'll be serious trouble."

Of that, Muriel was certain. Uneducated and drunk people were unpleasant at the best of times, give them a cock and they managed to convince themselves of their own

divinity. She nodded at the old hag and headed out the way she had arrived. If the goodwoman wouldn't cooperate, she'd do her own investigation.

After a strenuous number of circuits around the farm buildings, Muriel finally found Viv milking a cow in the barn. She rubbed her hands together and decided to go for the optimistic approach.

"Good morning, Viv. Ready for another go, then?"

Astonished at the voice that appeared out of nowhere, the maid jumped up from her three legged stool, knocking over the bucket in the process.

"Oh, damn," Viv cried, picking up the spilled container and staring at the remnants of milk inside. "My ma's going to kill me, and after that fiasco the other night, she's not very happy, anyway."

"Fiasco?" Muriel asked. "What fiasco was that?"

Viv gave her a look that Muriel had last seen on the village idiot before they had hung him up by the feet in a tree – disbelieving. "Are you totally mad? You remember, the whole unicorn thing and that perverse elf."

"Ah," Muriel replied, picking up a hint of dissatisfaction in Viv's voice. "It's all how you look at it, really, and I would be the first to admit that I made the teensiest of mistakes."

The maid stopped milking. That was a good sign, wasn't it? Might as well continue in the same vein. "And so did you."

"I did?"

Careful, careful, Muriel reminded herself. Not too much accusation, spread the guilt around, keep it gentle.

"Your mistake was choosing Elwood."

The girl's eyes narrowed at the mention of the elf's name. Muriel could sympathize. She really could.

"He was inappropriate for a number of reasons."

"He didn't love me."

That "love" word again. This discussion was not going the way Muriel wanted and yet she was also intrigued. This young human seemed to be so certain and so knowledgeable on the subject. Perhaps she should listen to her for a while. By the Divine Graces, Muriel might even learn something useful.

"He was supposed to love me."

Taken back at Viv's assurance, Muriel transformed back into full size and settled down on a second pail. She had the feeling this conversation was going to take a while, she might as well make herself comfortable.

"Viv, dear, why would he love you?"

The girl shrugged her shoulders and continued milking.

Muriel waited, listening to the sound of the milk hitting the metal receptacle. It was a relaxing, slightly hypnotic sound. Peaceful even. Eventually the girl spoke. "I kept having these dreams about the Fates."

The Fates? They were way over Muriel's head and, despite beliefs to the contrary, very rarely interfered in the lives of an individual. Only important people could be assured the eye of at least one of the Fates. Muriel couldn't think of one reason why the gruesome three would be interested in her charge. Milkmaids weren't their style. Therefore, the girl had to be delusional.

Viv continued speaking. "About love. About leaving all this behind, of being rescued by my True Love."

Glancing around the barn, Muriel could understand how all of these dreams might indeed have come to pass. If she had been born to this, she too might have hallucinations. And for a moment there, she had hoped to learn something about her own situation with Elton. How could she break the truth to Viv? She took a deep breath.

"Love is a delusion, Viv. There is only lust, an attraction. Either a male appeals to you or he does not. Eventually it's over. You have to enjoy it while it's there, but it will pass. It always passes."

And what about Elton? Was that also a delusion? Over twenty years when a few months was the standard.

The rhythm of milk slowed down and stopped. Viv turned around so that Muriel could see the tears in the girl's eyes. "You think I'm stupid, don't you? You think I'm imagining this?"

Actually Muriel did, but if she wanted to win Viv over, then she had to be more diplomatic. Instead of responding to the question, she took a different line. "Not at all. I'm the stupid one here. I managed to lose my lover of twenty-something years. And it wasn't until I lost him that I realized I loved him."

Or something close to love. Something very painful in any case. In the region of her heart.

Fishing a handkerchief out of her pocket, Viv dabbed the cloth at first one and then the other eye. "You didn't know you loved him?"

Muriel shook her head. "Well, no. I stayed with him because he was so good in bed. He's the best lover I've ever had, to be perfectly honest, and he's kind. And funny too." She sniffed, realizing that she was close to tears. This was ridiculous. Faeries were tough, faeries didn't cry. Faeries swapped partners the way that other folk swapped their underwear. Okay, better not to think of panties. Better to be practical and face the facts. Her time with Elton was over. She needed to move on.

If things were so simple, by the Deities, why was she crying?

Accepting the slightly damp rag from Viv, Muriel wiped her eyes and pursed her lips. She was not going to cry any more. She had a job to do.

With a shy smile, Viv reached out and touched Muriel's hand. Unused to a kind gesture from a girl of all things, Muriel suppressed the urge to pull away. "We complement one another, don't we?"

Complement? What did the child mean?

"I see love where there is none and you, you cannot see the love that is there."

An uncomfortable silence stretched between them and, looking somewhat embarrassed, Viv let her hand fall from Muriel's.

"You're right," Muriel said at last, not wanting the maid to guess how accurate her words had been. "I confused love with great sex, never knowing that sex cannot be great without love. The silly thing is that my partner knew. He knew that I loved him. He was trying to make me admit it." She let the air swell out of her lungs in the longest of sighs. "And I think he loved me."

"Then you are truly gifted, for I have never known love at all."

"But your parents?"

Viv shrugged.

Come to think of it, the old hag in the kitchen didn't look caring and if the father was worse... Not completing the thought, Muriel nodded. "I'm sorry, truly I am. But what made you choose Elwood of all the gorgeous beings in The Valley?"

Viv considered the question. "In my dreams, the Fates told me I would find my True Love. Or rather, he would find me and I would know when we met. He would be good and kind and strong and big. That's what they said in my dream. And there's no one of that description around here. So when I heard all the good women at the market talking about how great Elwood was, and they were always talking about him, well, I was convinced that he was my True Love." She sighed sadly. "And I was convinced the Fates had sent him to me, but I was wrong. Maybe I was wrong about everything."

Muriel tried to cheer up the maid. "Well, he does sing well and he's handsome."

"Strong too," Viv added.

"But selfish and definitely not big."

"Well, part of him seemed pretty big." Viv giggled.

It took Muriel a second to realize the maid was talking about Elwood's cock and she too laughed. It was a bonding moment, perhaps the first between Muriel and a client.

But their tinkling laughter attracted unwanted attention. The door to the barn opened and two bumbling youths came in. Before the eyes of their visitors could adjust to the darker light, Muriel shrank down to the size of a mosquito and hid behind the cow.

She wasn't going to take any unnecessary chances.

"Viv?" The taller of the two sturdy young men was speaking. "Have you lost it completely? Why are you laughing?"

"And you've spilt the milk again. Ma's not going to be very happy." That was the younger of the two, whose head was topped with hair the color of strawberries and a few freckles over the nose to complete the picture.

Viv didn't let her brothers destroy her joy, but she did stop laughing. "I was talking to the faerie again."

Redhead looked around and, seeing no fantastical beings, sniggered. "Away with the faeries, more like."

"Neglecting your work," said the other one, who had the misfortune to be endowed with a nose that clearly resembled a turnip. "There are still three cows to be milked and the barn needs to be mucked out."

"Honestly, Viv, you're the laziest sister in the family."

"I'm the only sister in the family," Viv retorted and Muriel gave her the thumbs up sign, although at her current size, the chance of her customer actually seeing the gesture was remote. The chance that Viv would smack her brothers in the face for their shameful bossiness and colossal laziness was far greater.

To Muriel's surprise, Viv showed no sign of protest. Instead, her shoulders hunched over, she sank her gaze to the filthy floor and muttered an apology. The boys, obviously satisfied that they had ruined Viv's happiness, slapped one another on the back and walked back out into the sunshine.

Fortunately they shut the door behind them and the two females were left alone.

"So those are your two brothers?" Muriel asked after she had resumed a human size.

Viv nodded. "Patrick and John. Patrick's the redhead."

And John was the stupid one, Muriel added to herself. "Well, you can be glad you haven't got their looks." In fact, with her gentle looks and slim figure, Viv resembled neither of them, nor did she take after the woman in the kitchen. Perhaps she took after her father? "But why do you let them treat you so badly?"

Shrugging, Viv tucked her hanky up a sleeve. "It's easier that way." She turned her attention to the second cow and set up pail and stool. "If I protest too much, they hit me."

Hit her! Muriel was so stunned that she was momentarily lost for words. "Well, I can see why you wanted the Fates to intervene. But what I don't understand is this, if you were so convinced that the Deities themselves were responding to your situation, why send a request for my services?"

"I didn't."

What did she mean, she hadn't sent a request? That was unheard of, that was against the rules. No, Viv had to be wrong, or have forgotten. Yes, forgotten, that was the most likely explanation.

The milking sounds began again. It was time to shake a few memories loose.

"Well, of course you did, otherwise I wouldn't be here. Maybe a silent prayer sent heavenward, a letter laid under a pillow, a confidence given to a friend? Sometimes girls don't realize they've made a wish at all."

"No."

Impossible. "Not even the tiniest of wishes?"

"No."

Muriel stared at the girl. If what she was saying was true, then Muriel was skating on very thin ice. She had no jurisdiction to be here, no permission to interfere. But the file had been brought by Garald, personally.

And no one else had been in the office.

There had been no witnesses.

Muriel thought hard, forced her brain into overdrive. Someone must have sent the request, but if it hadn't been Viv, then who?

The Fates?

Muriel's heart started to race faster than it ever had in the gym. The urge to run, to flee, to put as much distance between herself and Viv as possible, was overwhelming. If the girl hadn't made any wish, then Muriel was within her rights to just leave. That was the Lore. But if the Deities had requested her intervention and she reneged, then punishment would not be long in the keeping.

Nobody in their right mind refused the upper echelons.

There were rumors about faerie folk who had vanished without a trace. Some people said that they had displeased the gods above. No one was quite sure which one but it didn't matter did it? The point was that they had never been seen again.

Muriel didn't want that to happen although a small part of her wondered if Elton would be upset if she disappeared.

Would he cry? Would he cut off his long tresses and throw them into the ocean as a sign of his sorrow? Quite frankly, Muriel didn't want to find out, she'd much rather have wonderful sex than a wonderful funeral.

And all she had to do was to get Viv laid.

Only Viv didn't want sex, she wanted love, a savior. That was a specialty about which Muriel knew so very little.

Without love, Viv didn't want to lose her virginity.

If the maid hadn't lost her virginity by Friday, then Muriel was in big trouble with Garald and whoever was in charge up there. Maybe the god who was responsible for making people vanish permanently.

She didn't want to think about it.

There was only one way out of this impossible dilemma. She had to find Viv's True Love.

Sweet Mother.

How was she going to do that in four days? She'd needed over twenty years to realize she might possibly, potentially be in love herself. How could she find someone else's True Love in four short days?

"Listen, Viv. I need to apologize for Elwood. I should have known that he wasn't what you were looking for. It's my job, after all. And...well, I'd understand if you wished to dispense with my services."

Was she crazy? Had she offered to back off? The Fates would kill her and Garald would destroy the rest.

She'd vanish and Tony would steal her nail polish collection.

Viv stopped milking, wiping her hands in the long apron hanging from her waist. "No."

Well, at least one of them had sense. Muriel let out the breath she had been holding. For a moment, she had seen her own rocky descent to the Tooth Department on the tenth floor of The Ministry. Or a shallow grave in a dark wood.

"I need you to help me find my True Love."

Two crazies on the loose.

"But, I can't, Viv. I wouldn't know the first thing about how to find True Love. I'm a professional Patron Faerie. My job is introducing virgins to sex, holding their hands, giving them tips, banishing their fears. That's as far as it goes."

Letting a hand slide over the flank of the cow, Viv turned her big brown eyes on Muriel. The faerie hated it when people did that. Compassion wasn't part of the job. Emotion wasn't part of the job. But those eyes were so gentle, so full of pain and hope.

It was the hope that did it. How could she destroy that?

"Okay, okay. I'll make an exception. But just this once and don't tell anyone."

Viv's smile was reward enough. It was pure sunshine and here was Muriel thinking that the girl was plain.

"I can't guarantee anything, mind you. I'll do my best, but True Love isn't as easy to find as sex."

"I believe in you, Muriel. You know what? I think the Deities sent you to me. So I'll just place myself in your hands. It's the right thing to do, I know it."

Inspecting her fingernails, Muriel was devastated to see that she'd chewed off another two nails. When had that happened?

"So how do we proceed?"

Muriel sighed. That was the very question she had feared. "Well, I'm not really sure. This is as new to me as it is to you."

Viv wrinkled her forehead. "But you must have had a plan when you came here."

She thought of Baltram. The plan had been simple. Bring Baltram and Viv together, let nature take its course. Somehow that no longer seemed the right thing to do. Baltram was strange, probably even scarier than Elwood in his own way. He lived in the middle

of the Enchanted Forest, for goodness sake. He was rude and direct about matters of sex. He was, quite frankly, not True Love material.

"We may need to change our plans a little." At the girl's obvious disappointment, Muriel quickly added. "But that doesn't mean we can't start straight away." She assessed the girl for attractiveness. Much as she hated to admit it, the girl had been right when she'd suggested a dress might be more important than sexy underwear and it wouldn't hurt to condition the hair a little bit. Right, they'd start on the girl's appearance. She'd ask her friend Tony to help. As Patron Faerie of Faeries, he was bound to have a dress or two squirreled away. He was just about the right height and width.

"First of all, we need to get you away from here and clean you up a bit."

Nodding her agreement, Viv leaned forward, her face a study of concentration. "Do I get a dress?"

"Yes, you get a dress and a bath. I can meet you at the hot pools at sunset. Will that give you enough time to get thoroughly clean and wash your hair?"

"Yes, yes." The girl's smile was a little sun on its own. "I'd like a blue dress if possible, with flowers."

"I'll see what I can do. In the meantime, I'll do my best to distract your brothers so you can slip out the back and into the woods."

Seizing Muriel's hands, Viv pressed her lips against the faerie's cheek. "Thank you, Muriel, you're my best friend."

Maybe Viv's happiness was contagious, but Muriel could feel a lifting of the bleakness around her own heart. For the first time since Friday, hope nudged its way back into her soul. In this dingy barn, on this run-down farm, all things suddenly seemed possible.

Chapter Five

Elton was soaking away his problems in the hot pools.

Centuries of falling water had created this miraculous place. Numerous springs of boiling water issued at the top of the incline, collected, ran and danced into a series of deep fissures before widening out into a collection of basins.

Elton had chosen the final, largest pool with its comfortable temperature, and it was here that he sought to make sense of the last few days.

Thoughts of Muriel kept getting in his way. Much as he tried to stay logical, emotions kept interfering. Whether or not he wanted to acknowledge it, he was in love with that foolish, fluffy faerie.

And love was something you could not switch off.

It had been a shock to find himself in love with the most infamous of the sex faeries. At first it had been fun, a romp around the bedroom with a talented faerie and not just the bedroom. Her appetite for sex had been almost as insatiable as his.

Good days, great sex, silly conversation.

Then one day she had not been available and he had sought a little pas de deux with someone else. To his embarrassment and subsequent dismay, his cock had refused to perform at the crucial point. That had been a first. Elves could always perform, it was in their nature. And had been since the beginning of time.

Still, he had not made the connection between the two events.

That had come a lot later. Far from this session remaining an anomaly, he had found himself impotent every time Muriel left on business. She'd found his switch, all right.

He hadn't liked anyone having that sort of power over him. He hadn't liked having feelings for her, still didn't like them. But the jealousy he had felt in the pub on Friday and on Monday outside Baltram's hut had been the worst of all. He had wanted to kill his brother, he had wanted to decapitate his friend in the most painful possible manner. As for Muriel, he would have chained her up so that she could never betray him again.

No, feelings were not a good thing.

Damn it. Sadly, his fist hitting the water did not diffuse even the tip of his anger. And that was the main reason why he was avoiding Muriel. He knew she was searching for him methodically and with a desperation of which he had not previously thought her capable.

But he was not yet willing to be found, not until his emotions were back under control, not until he could be certain he wouldn't throttle her pretty little neck.

"Good day, Fair Elf."

Shocked, Elton realized that his unfettered emotions had blinded his senses to the approach of a bumbling human and not just any human at that. He was staring at *the girl*. The one who, gossip would have it, was Muriel's client.

A juicy apple to fall into his lap.

Maybe the answer to his prayers.

"Good day, young maiden."

He could pay Muriel back. Let her feel how it was to be betrayed.

It was a good plan, simple, but effective.

Blushing, the girl stared down at her feet while Elton inspected her figure. Hard to believe that one of her abundant charms had managed to protect her virginity for so long. Although slimmer than he liked, her breasts were a good handful. Truly, he would not mind helping out Muriel with this one.

After all, if she going around kissing rangers and handing out her panties to all and sundry, well, he could help her out with a quick fuck. It would be no problem at all. Unless his cock refused to perform.

That just might be a slight hindrance.

But damn it. His cock would damn well perform.

Some of his emotions must have been on his face, for the girl looked nervous and undecided. "Forgive me for disturbing your bath. I will leave."

No, that wouldn't fit in with his plans at all. Leaving the ledge, he swam a few strokes toward her, far enough for his feet to settle on the muddy ground. "Stay, I pray."

Again she blushed, the charming redness giving her pale face a beguiling touch of color. Seducing her would be no hardship at all. *Look at me!* He sent the thought out as a nudge, a gentle touch that brushed against her face.

To his pleasure, she looked up, but instead of admiration, horror crossed her face. "Elwood?"

Damn it. How could he have forgotten about Elwood?

Still, all was not yet lost. With a smile on his face, he waded closer. "No, I am Elton."

Her hands on her hips, she assessed him as he had inspected her. The sight of his naked chest did not, however, cause her to smile or make approving sounds of admiration.

"Well, you look just like Elwood."

He came one step closer, even more determined than ever to win this girl over. "That might just be because we are brothers. Identical twins, to be precise."

She wasn't falling for it. Whatever else she was, this girl wasn't a fool. Slipping as she took a step backward, Elton surged forward to catch her, but at the last moment she

rescued her balance. So much for playing the hero. Still, there were other ways to win over maidens.

"Stay away from me, you pervert."

Unless, of course, she thought one a pervert.

Pervert? What on earth had his brother done to this girl to frighten her so much? One thing was for sure, he was going to have to tread extra carefully. Holding his hands up in the air, he dove back the way he had come. *Tis a successful hunter who bides his time.*

He had time.

Resurfacing, he noted with satisfaction that Viv had not left. Round one to him, then. "Your virtue is safe with me."

She didn't look convinced. Had he lost his charm along with the faerie he loved?

"Well, I'll be leaving you to your ablutions." To his amusement, she curtsied and turned to retrace her steps through the steamy landscape.

No, he couldn't permit it.

"Come bathe with me." He spun the words with a spell of desire, of lust. She had responded to his first subtle command, she would respond to this one.

Only she didn't.

She stopped with her back toward him, her spine straight. Damn, she was one of the few humans who could resist elven magic. Interesting, if somewhat frustrating.

"Let it be, Elwood. I do not wish to have sex with you, I do not wish to give you another suck job."

"Blowjob." What *had* Elwood done to the poor maid?

"Whatever. The point is that you are not my True Love and I do not have time to play these games with you. I must search for him and I must bathe."

Most of what she said made no sense. No one in The Valley waited for love and very few women rejected the chance of sleeping with an elf, with or without magic. That was the reality.

This little lady intrigued him. But not necessarily in a sexual manner and that was a good thing because Elton had never had to force a female in his life and he didn't want to start now.

Well, seduction had been a bad plan anyway. He had let his anger carry him away.

"I am sorry. It was wrong of me to try to influence you. But I spoke the truth when I told you I am not Elwood. Elton is the name given to me."

"Prove it."

For a moment he was tempted to laugh. He and Elwood were truly identical until they opened their mouths and spoke. If she hadn't figured it out now, then the only thing he could offer was an erection that leant to the right. Only, as a quick glance southward showed, his body wasn't cooperating.

"For that you will need to turn around."

She didn't want to, he could see it in the way she squared her shoulders. But she wasn't a scaredy-cat either. He swam closer, stood up straight so that the water barely reached his hips. With one more step, his loins would be exposed.

"What will I see?"

He took the final step as she turned around.

She looked, she stared, and in the end, his carefully prepared explanation was not needed at all.

"Elwood's wasn't like that."

"I'm sure it wasn't." If his brother had any sort of erection problems, at least one of his many lovers would have blown the whistle. Sexual inadequacy didn't stay secret for long in The Valley.

"His stood up straight and was longer and thicker."

"I'm sure it did." Elton was a male, he didn't really want to get into this conversation. On the other hand, the girl was looking slightly relaxed. Time to back off literally and cover his inadequacy.

"Why is that?" Had she taken a step closer or was it his imagination? Trust her to be interested as soon as the possibility of sex became non-existent. And what was with these questions? Had she no experience at all?

"Because you don't excite me."

"Excite you?"

He sighed long and loud, wishing that Muriel was there and they could enjoy this bath together. She would wash his hair and whisper naughty nothings into his ear and there would be sex of the athletic kind involving wings and balancing skills. Instead he was here with a virgin.

And a cock that refused to show interest in anyone but Muriel.

Well, at least he had company. Why not explain things to the girl. From the way she was nervously hopping from foot to foot, she wasn't in a hurry to go anywhere either.

"Has no one ever explained how it is between a male and a female?"

She shook her head. "Tell me."

His neck was beginning to ache. "I will tell if you join me and I am no longer forced to stare upward. I am fair getting a crick."

She looked down at the ugliest dress Elwood had ever seen. "But that would mean getting undressed."

"Quite."

She wasn't looking at the least reassured. "Look, if it's any help, I'm a friend of Muriel's. A good friend and I'll even wash your hair."

That suggestion perked her up. "My hair does need some help."

He looked at the tired brown curls. They certainly needed attention and a good pair of scissors. Pity he didn't have any on him.

"Let me help."

Maybe it was something in his voice, certainly it wasn't magic, but she didn't move as he rose from the steaming water and circled her.

"Beautiful. You know, you could be really beautiful if you tried a little harder."

"Do you think so? Do you really think so?"

She had a dimple in one cheek when she smiled. With a clean face and a new hairstyle, she would really be a knock-out. A pity that this dimension wasn't into make-up. He could have done some wonderful things with make-up.

"Yes, I do. For a human, you are exceptional. Come, let us wash off all this dirt and bring out the real beauty underneath."

She stood completely still as he untied her apron and pulled the gown over her head. And what a treasure he found underneath. Viv was slim and muscled, but curved in all the right places.

A stunner.

She was almost enough to reconsider his decision not to seduce her. Hopefully, he stole a glance downward. No help there, his penis was still on strike. Still waiting for Muriel.

"Come into the water, pretty one, and I will tell you all my secrets."

She giggled. "You *are* different from your brother, aren't you?"

"Good gracious, yes. Who would want to be like him?"

Laughing, she barely noticed him leading her into the water. "Okay, I'm here now, so you have to answer all my questions."

"Within reason."

"Agreed. Tell me about True Love? How will I know when I have found it?"

He considered her question and found he didn't know the answer. Or rather, the answer was so complicated there was no way he could package it into a sentence or two.

"Come over to the side of the pool. There are blossoms over here that secrete a scented substance. Combined with water, they make excellent soap."

"And what would that have to do with love, fair elf?"

"Nothing, but if you begin with such difficult questions, then I will need a little while to collect my thoughts."

She responded to the sensation of his fingers in her hair, losing herself in the sensuality of touch. And Elton, concentrating on a manual task, found the words to answer her question. "Love is a rare and great gift, bestowed on very few. Most are satisfied with a mixture of lust, warmth and friendship."

"You are so knowledgeable."

"Let us say that I have spent much time searching the old books on this topic."

"Do you know love, Elton?"

"Yes," he said eventually, "but I am not a good example. The one I love chooses not to see what I feel. She chooses not to see what she feels. It is a reason for much heartache."

Silently, he washed the foam from her hair, the blossoms floating away disregarded as he wrung the water from the heavy mass.

"And if you gave her another chance?"

His hands stilled. "Alas, she may hurt me once again. I fear it may be better to turn away completely rather than stay, constantly reminded of what I may not have."

She turned in his arms, her face furrowed with concern, her brown eyes brilliant with unshed tears. Incredible that one so human could be so empathic. Even the hand that touched his chest was motivated by pity and the need to heal. Yes, this Viv was a special being. Placing his hand over hers, he smiled down at her.

"You are special, Viv. Never let anyone tell you differently."

He knew the exact second when she realized where she was, realized she was in the arms of an elf, a naked one at that. And she herself was also naked. He should have released her, really he should have, but instead of doing the right thing, he felt an insatiable urge to kiss her. No, he didn't fancy her any more or less than earlier, his cock hadn't suddenly recovered from its tantrum, he just wanted to feel the softness of those lips, to share a moment of joy with her.

Really, she should have pulled away. Had she made the slightest attempt to move, he would have released her. He was not rough. But she didn't. It hardly seemed in character, but instead of seeking the farthest edge of the pool, she stayed where she was, hand on his chest, face uplifted to his own.

"Sweet, sweet Viv."

Then he kissed her.

Kissing Muriel was different. This had all the romance of kissing a female relative. He kept his mouth shut, his lips soft and warm and his eyes damn well open. He figured that so long as his cock was still committed elsewhere, he wasn't going to close his eyes.

Viv closed her eyes, though, kept them closed until she shuddered and released his lips with a sigh.

"That was nice."

Such an innate word and yet it covered the situation perfectly. Nice. Nothing more and nothing less. Yet it was enough of a kiss to distract him from a second person's approach and the voice that seemed to arrive out of nowhere.

"So, would you like to tell me why my lover is fooling around with my client? Or shall I draw my own conclusions?"

Still numb from the best kiss she had ever received, it took Viv a while to realize what was going on.

Muriel had arrived.

Muriel and Elton were a pair. He was the one Muriel loved.

She was the one he loved.

"Your lover?" Vivienne asked, using the opportunity to step away from Elton. He didn't even notice. Furious or not, he only had eyes for Muriel.

"Yes, *my* lover." Muriel stomped, her attention likewise fully fixed on the upset elf. Viv could stand on her head and they wouldn't notice. She didn't know whether to be relieved or not.

"Your ex-lover," Elton corrected. "The relationship was over the moment I found you kissing another man. I might have forgiven the faux-pas with my brother, but the farmer was one too much."

"Ranger," Muriel countered. "And it was only a kiss, no tongues involved. Not the way you and Viv were delving into the depths."

"I likewise did not use my tongue with the girl. It was just a kiss between friends."

"As was mine with Baltram."

"The only difference being that he was once your lover, one of many."

There was a moments silence while both parties caught their breath. Viv's attention flitted between the couple, between Muriel's heaving breasts and Elton's bobbing erection. Now it looked similar to Elwood's. She wondered if she should tell them?

But no, they weren't interested in anything she had to say.

"Not *every* man in The Valley. No more than a handful. And anyone who says otherwise is a liar. Besides, you weren't exactly a virgin yourself."

"But that's different."

"No, it's not."

There was another pause and then Muriel began again, "Why were you kissing her?"

The elf threw his curtain of black hair over his shoulder in an elegant movement. Even if she didn't feel anything for him, Viv had to admit that he was very handsome. "I was helping you."

"Helping me?"

"All of these overtime hours, all the stress. I thought I'd take matters into my own hand. You needed someone to deflower the girl and I decided to do it. I thought once the job was over, things might go back to normal."

"Deflower me?"

Viv wanted to point out that there had been little chance of that, but neither were listening to her.

The two needed to be alone, and in her stomach, the now familiar pull began again. Somewhere out there was Viv's True Love and he was waiting for her.

It was time to leave.

Chapter Six

Muriel stared at the naked elf. This couldn't be happening. This was turning out to be the worst day of her life. She'd come out of the barn and immediately slipped into a little something to impress Viv's brothers. Being simple folk, she'd chosen a see-through creation from Victoria's Secret. With all of its ruffles, it was definitely two years out of date and everyone knew that white was no longer on the list as far as color went, but she doubted that anyone in The Valley would know that.

The young men didn't know it. They were too busy ogling her boobs to even realize what color she was wearing.

"See anything you like, boys?" she purred while assuming a provocative pose. Their jaws dropped and their cocks sprang to life, stretching out the fabric at their crotches, fabric which was already dark and threadbare from sweaty palms.

Red Head took a step toward her, one filthy hand stretched outward. There was no way that Muriel would let him touch her, but he managed to close in to less than a meter before she shrank down to twenty centimeters and whizzed out of his reach. "Oh no, boys. The fun is in the catching." She smoothed her hands over her hips and pouted with her red painted lips. "Come and get me."

She continued to shrink until she reached a mere five centimeters and took off. True, she could slip down to half an inch but such a size greatly reduced her speed and she had a feeling that speed might be very important.

She was right, the young men were faster than she would have expected from their bulky appearances.

Red Head seized a fishing net, which lowered her chances of eluding them even further. John, the stupid one, grabbed a small milk pail and began chasing her as well. Although it was fun to watch them run around in circles, bang into one another and generally act in the manner of idiots, the strenuous physical activity began to take its toll. She just wasn't used to this level of non-horizontal exercise and the fact that she always had to go pee during her Fit Faerie-robics lesson meant that her lung capacity was pretty low.

She pressed a hand to her aching side and flew upward, away from the danger.

She reached no more than an altitude of two meters before she was stopped rather forcefully by a piece of string caught around her neck. She caught at the hindrance, trying to pull it away, but only managed to tangle herself even further and then she was falling, falling faster than any self-respecting faerie should.

Thump!

Who would have thought the ground to be so hard?

"I got her! I got her!" Red Head danced around in a circle, the net in which she was caught rotating with him. Muriel felt dizzy. No, she felt more than dizzy, she felt nauseous. A burning sensation in her throat warned her to tip her head away from her lingerie before she threw up.

"Oh, that's disgusting." Stupid One said. "Look, she's thrown up."

His words made Muriel regret her vomiting. If only she had waited for a second or two, she might have been able to aim for his face. Said face was peering at her through the strings of the net, the dirt-engrained pores of his skin resembling empty vats of fat. Muriel squirmed around, trying to reach her wand, but failed miserably. One of her wings was folded at a strange angle and one string was slicing her bum with all of the discomfort of a tanga two sizes too small. She was caught in the hands of wanton boys, or rather, wanton young men.

Every faerie's worst nightmare.

That could be a problem.

Red Head prodded her with a finger that had been in something disgusting and which had not been wiped off in the interim. "Go on. Show us your stuff. You promised."

"Let me out of here this instant. Let me out of here."

"No, show us your stuff first."

Muriel took a deep breath and began again. "Gentlemen, this is an extremely degrading position for a faerie. Unfortunately, I cannot show you any of my..." she paused and rolled her eyes around, "stuff, because I am in the unfortunate position of not being able to move. If you were to be so kind as to help me out of my distress, then I would be extremely grateful."

This speech was beyond the intellectual capacity of Stupid One. "What'd she say?"

Red Head swung her closer to his face. "She said that if we let her out, she'll let us fuck her." His words were accompanied by a blast of bad breath. If she could have, Muriel would have turned her face, but she was immobilized in her string prison.

"Not bloody likely. I'm not letting either of you two near me. Do you hear? You're not my types. And even if you were, I wouldn't out of principle."

Stupid One turned his attention upon his brother and held up the milk pail in his hand "How about we put her in here until she changes her mind?"

"Sounds good to me."

"Well, it doesn't sound good to me," Muriel protested. Only no one was listening to her. Red Head placed the net over the pail and she fell into the dark depths with a plop. Fortunately, the pail was a small one, designed to hold a mere pint, and the damage to Muriel's body was confined to a few bruises and a sore butt. An eye appeared at the top of the pail.

"Is she dead? She's no good to us dead." Red Head, checking on his investment.

"Nah. She's moving. I'll just put the lid on and leave her there for a bit to cool off." The small patch of blue sky vanished as a solid-looking piece of metal lodged into place.

It was dark inside the pail, dark and hot. Muriel pulled herself up into a sitting position and slowly went through all her major muscle groups. Nothing seemed to be broken except for her left wing. Not a good sign. Her hand slid to her waist, to where she had hung her wand in her holster, a special creation with embedded diamonds and a few emeralds. Her hand groped emptiness. That couldn't be! Her wand was missing and there was no way she could get out of this bind without her tools.

She tried to ignore the encroaching walls around her, the sudden lack of oxygen. She was a trained faerie, she would not panic in the face of danger. She lasted all of ten seconds before she marched the three steps to the wall and began to pound. "Let me out. Let me out. I hate dark places. Please let me out."

From outside, she heard mocking laughter. Continuing to pound, she added the soles of her stiletto boots to the attempt and was rewarded with a thud that made the tin shake.

"Quiet in there, you hear. We'll let you out when we're ready and then you'd better be ready for a couple of pieces of prime beef."

Oh, by the Deities, she was going to be the first faerie ever to be raped. She'd go down in history as a laughing stock. The Faerie Queen might even take her wings away.

"Oh Sacred One, deliver us!"

The Sacred One was a little too busy for the prayers of a mere patron faerie and the day remained devoid of thunder bolts and other useful assistance. If Muriel were to survive unharmed, then she would have to rescue herself.

But without her wand?

Muriel settled her hands onto her hips. This was not the time to doubt her own ability. She could do this. She needed to focus. Where was the pail? She seemed to remember a small stool. Yes, the boys had put it down on a stool. All she needed to do was make the pail fall from the stool and then she'd be free. She considered for a moment. Okay, she might be free, but then again, she might be dead as well or, even worse, she might still be locked in this tin, but on the ground. Okay, things could get worse, but she had to try *something*.

She reached up and focused her weight forward. The container moved and then settled again.

Damn.

She tried again, raising a knee slightly and fluttering with her uninjured wing. She rose a few inches and then fell forward, willing the pail to fall over. It rocked and then, shortly before the law of physics said it should fall, it settled again. Frustration lent her the strength of at least one and a quarter faeries. She shimmied up the flat wall with the aid of her uninjured wing and tried again. It teetered on the edge, began to fall back as Muriel threw herself against the wall.

Yeah!

The receptacle fell and so did Muriel, landing head first against the metal as they hit the ground. A crack of light showed through the top of the pail and she crawled toward it. The sunlight was bright, but nonetheless welcome as she emerged and collapsed exhausted onto the ground. This was so obviously not her day.

Red Head and Stupid One had their backs to her and were enjoying a pipe of weed while they waited for her to calm down. Well, there was no way that anyone was going to calm down on this day. The sky would flash and the wind would blow.

Just as soon as she located her wand.

It was lying a few yards away, being inspected by a curious hen. Usually Muriel had no fear of animals. She was, after all, the proud owner of a beautiful and effective pair of wings, not to mention a lethal wand, but in this instance, she felt a cold shiver of fear travel the length of her spine. She was in deep trouble.

The hen, who had the nastiest, beadiest pair of eyes, glared down at Muriel, moving her head so that the faerie could see her sharp beak. Muriel gulped, and after throwing a glance in the direction of the smokers, marched toward the hen.

The bird watched her approach with interest, the small comb quivering with excitement. Trying to keep her authority, Muriel marched forward with a confidence she didn't feel, whispering a mantra under her breath. "It's only a hen. It's only a stupid bloody hen." That worked fine until she was an arms length away from her wand. The hen, suddenly realizing what the faerie was planning, screeched and placed one claw over the tiny emerald encrusted treasure.

Muriel yelled and dove, the hen tried to peck at the flying object and missed. The brothers, hearing the cacophony, whirled around in time to see the hen fly through the air and hit the barn door. Before they could close their mouths, a full-sized and angry faerie appeared in front of them. Their jaws dropped down to their chest and they quivered in fear, or maybe it was just lust at the sight of a naked boob hanging out of the negligee.

"So, you thought you'd have your way with me, did you?"

Red Head, the more intelligent of the two, evaluated the situation relatively quickly. He fell to his knees, placed his hands together in prayer and began to whine. "Oh great Muriel, Patron Faerie of Virgins, help us in our hour of need, for we are virgins true."

Muriel sneered for all of a second before she remembered that sneers were the main cause of nose wrinkles and stopped. She started to tap her toes instead. "Give up. It's a well known fact I only work for poor deprived female virgins. If you guys want to get laid, I suggest you work harder, lose weight, do something about your lack of charm and buy a toothbrush.

Red Head regained his surly attitude, stood up and sized up Muriel. "Well, we're still two and you have a broken wing, not to mention those stilettos on your feet. How fast can you run, faerie?"

The faerie smiled at them, raised her eyebrows and showed them her wand. "You forgot about the wand."

Stupid One nudged his brother. "What is a wand?"

"It's a stick, that's all." He took one menacing step and Muriel immediately went into combat position—one foot forward to give a slim silhouette, shoulders back so her boobs became a diversionary tactic and wand at the ready.

"I'm warning you. One more step and you'll regret it."

Red Head dared to take another step and his brother, sensing an easy kill, followed him.

"Don't say I didn't warn you." Muriel swung the wand and Red Head found himself dressed in nothing but a pink thong with a fluffy crotch. As he gasped and clutched his groin, the faerie attempted very hard not to laugh and failed. The man in front of her was as white as a plucked chicken and just as unsavory. Pimple craters were scattered over his thin back while his huge beer-fed stomach hung down a far way over the waistband of his new underwear.

He could have been a girl, the way he screeched and scrunched over to hide his near nudity. "Get her, get her. Get that faerie."

"When I get my hands on you, you meddling faerie, there won't be enough of you left to put in an envelope. No wonder your boyfriend left you, you're a menace to all free males."

Had everyone in The Valley heard about her little disagreement with Elton? She wrinkled her nose in distaste, almost missing Stupid One's advance, but she recovered well before he entered the danger zone.

One more wave of the wand and Viv's brother was wearing a sexy latex outfit with little cut outs for his abundant male boobs and another one for his dick. It was hard to say which one of the brothers began to shriek more. Pleased with another piece of excellent work, Muriel slid the wand back into its holster and began to walk away as fast as her stiletto boots would allow. The pace in question wouldn't have been much of a challenge for a snail, therefore the faerie was not surprised to hear the rush of running feet behind her.

Without even looking around, she whipped the magic tool out of her holster and wagged it over her shoulder.

"Oh, the Blessed Heavens! What is this form of torture?"

Muriel continued walking. "It's called a cock ring. Well, sort of. It was a cock ring until I upgraded it. You might call it a Cock Ring à la Murielle."

"And how do we get it off? I swear my dick's swollen so hard, it's painful."

Whine, whine, he was as pathetic as a boy caught with his pants down. "It doesn't come off. And so long as it doesn't come off, your dick stays hard. It may even get harder."

"Have mercy, have mercy, Faerie Muriel. Please!"

Stupid One added his own pleas to his brother's. "I swear I will never be mean to faeries again. Please take this contraption off."

As if she would listen to the promises of little wankers. "Well..." she began.

"Yes?"

"There is a way to make them come off."

"How? We will do anything."

Muriel kept on walking. "Wait."

"Wait?" she heard an unbelieving Red Head say. "Wait for what?"

"Three hours. I built in a little timer, you see. It will come off in three hours."

"Three hours! I will never last that long. This is excruciating."

Muriel stopped and pivoted on her heels. She blew a kiss to each of the boys in turn. "Just dues for boys who wanted to rape a faerie."

"You bitch!" Stupid One had caught up with his brother. Nature had compensated for the man's lack of intelligence with a more than generous sized cock. No one would ever want to try it out voluntarily, considering the rest of the package, but at least it showed that Mother Nature tried hard. Muriel made a mental note to congratulate her next time she saw the being. "You bitch. Just wait until I get my hands on you."

Muriel lifted her right eyebrow. "I could raise that to ten hours. You wanna try?"

If Muriel was a bad person, she would have enjoyed the look of fear that crossed his face. She wasn't a bad faerie, but she enjoyed it anyway. Then, facing away from her two would-be assailants, she raised her wand and slipped through the fabric of space and back into the Ministry.

Chapter Seven

Janet was in Muriel's office, rifling through the piles of books and files on Muriel's desk.

"Looking for anything in particular?"

Janet, a human of Harvard from the dimension of Earth, clutched her heart and jumped back in surprise. "You almost killed me, Muriel. What do you mean, sneaking up like that?"

Muriel cocked her head at the well thumbed copy of the Kama Sutra in the human's hand. "Just looking for a little light reading, I see." Her voice was sugary sweet, hiding the chocolate-coated steel below. Any other being in the universe would have flown for its home, but graduates were obviously fearless. "You know, you should ask first before you borrow things. And now that I think of it, I'm missing a very valuable first edition Marquis de Sade with illustrations."

Blushing red, Janet looked at the book in her hand as though seeing it for the first time, as though her finger just happened to be caught between the pictures. "Oh my goodness. This is filth, isn't it?"

"Not really. It's information. You might call it a manual." Muriel flopped down into her chair. For a faerie with an impaired wing, it wasn't the best position, so she readjusted her pose and suppressed a moan of pain. "Now, what can I do for you, apart from lending you reference material?"

Janet was the holder of a masters from an esteemed university. A university was something similar to Faerie School with less sex and a masters meant that Janet was an expert in her field. Unfortunately, Muriel had never been able to find out just what "Business Studies" meant, because Janet never seemed to do much but sit around and drink coffee. But so long as the woman kept her long nose out of Muriel's business, Muriel didn't really care what she did.

"Well, it's more what I can do for you. I have been assigned to you this week, in case you forgot."

Muriel raised her eyebrow.

"Garald sent you a mail. Didn't you get it?"

Considering Muriel didn't know what mail was, she couldn't really say either way. When in doubt, play it cool. It was good advice and Muriel used it.

Janet sighed. "It said that I am to accompany and observe you this week."

"I don't like being watched."

"It's for your own good. I'm here to rationalize the department."

"Rationalize?" Muriel looked around the otherwise empty office. "There's only me. I'm the Patron Faerie of Virgins. I and no other."

"Yes, I know that." Janet had a habit of rubbing her nose when upset. She was rubbing it now. "But that's the problem, don't you see? You're the only one, so you need to work more efficiently."

"Efficiently?"

Janet indicated the files and assorted papers that decorated Muriel's desk. Some of them had reached mind-boggling heights and would soon join the other mountains obscuring the beech floorboards. Muriel found it important to have a clear view to the window.

"Well, this is so obviously not a system."

Muriel lifted her right eyebrow to join her left one, sometimes you just had to risk a wrinkle. "I have a system. Virgins express the desire to be deflowered, I find a male entity to do the trick and job finished."

"But what about job satisfaction, what about extending yourself, building out your services?"

"I create happy and satisfied women. I give them great tips to get the most out of their sex lives. They can call me up any time."

"And how do you know they're satisfied? I mean, what sort of control systems do you have in place?"

"Control systems?" The only control systems Muriel knew of were found mostly in dungeons, and frankly, Muriel disliked inflicting pain. That was so not in her repertoire. She cocked her head and stared at the young woman dressed in a gray business suit, white blouse and wearing her brown hair up in a bun. The mandatory glasses graced her face and the ugliest of court shoes finished the outfit. How had Muriel missed the signs, she was slipping badly here. Apart from anything else, a woman with biceps had to be a dominatrix.

"Ah...Janet. Do you like sport, Janet?"

"What has that got to do with the matter at hand?"

Nothing, absolutely nothing. Really, Muriel reminded herself, she had a job to get on with, a boyfriend to find or replace, emotions that needed to be dealt with. She didn't need any other complications in her life. But Janet had long been a festering problem in the department. Repressed as the woman was, nobody liked her.

Efficiency! Life was not about efficiency. Life was about... Muriel had been about to say 'good sex', but the very thought opened a torrent of emotion that sought to drown her. Good sex meant Elton and Elton was nowhere to be found. She had to stop thinking about him. She needed to concentrate on other things. Janet, for instance. If Muriel could solve the Janet problem, she'd be doing the department a good deed.

"I think it's an easy question" she said to the graduate. "Humor me."

Pulling herself up to her full five foot eight, Janet announced proudly, "I was the captain of the hockey team and a member of the rowing team."

Sport, muscles, a fascination with de Sade and sex manuals, yup, all the symptoms were there. Nodding, Muriel suppressed a self-satisfied smile. "That's what I thought."

"What? What did you think?"

Standing up, Muriel readjusted her negligee over her hips. There was no way she was really going to tell Janet what she had been thinking. There was no time for hysterics and the resulting visit from Garald. "That I should be somewhere else."

Janet was about to respond when the door to the office opened and a familiar head appeared. Long black hair, pale blue eyes. Muriel's heart lifted. Had Elton come back? Had he forgiven her? The vision of an elf pushed open the door and walked in with a self-confidence second to none, his left hand still resting on the knob.

Left hand, not right.

It was Elwood.

With a sudden shudder, her heart slowed back down, her breathing relaxed.

She wanted to burst into tears.

"Oh my God!"

Muriel had forgotten how much of an impact elves made upon human women. Under different circumstances, she would even have been amused by the open mouthed, bulging eye impression of a frog that Janet was making, but Muriel's misery was so great that it left no room for other emotions.

"Hello, gorgeous." Even his voice was the same, low and musical. The sort of voice that was designed to turn a woman into jelly.

"Hello, Elwood." She checked her tights, her wand and her nails, tried to look professional. "I'm afraid I can't help you. Doesn't matter what it is. I have a client waiting. I'm sure you understand."

Elwood wasn't one to be offended by flimsy excuses. He closed the door behind him and looked around. "Nice office." His eyes settled on the red chaise lounge at one end. "Very practical for in-between." His accompanying leer made it obvious to what purpose he meant. Or maybe he was hinting at the times Muriel and Elton had shaken the innersprings to the point of disintegration? Had Elton told? Muriel swallowed. She would never have thought so, but the events of the past few days told her that she really didn't know her lover at all.

"And the point of your first and last visit would be?"

Elwood moved across the floor with the sexy gait of a prowling elf. "And who is this beautiful lady?" To make it clear he didn't mean Muriel, he picked up Janet's hand and raised it to his lips.

Janet was swallowing the whole thing, hook, line and sinker.

"Your first elf?" Muriel asked Janet in order to break the spell.

Janet ignored her while Elwood bowed over the hand of his willing victim. Poor, unprepared woman. Muriel bet they hadn't taught Janet how to resist an elf in that ivy-covered university she'd visited.

"Your name?"

"Janet..." the poor woman stumbled over the sounds of her name as though she had never heard them before. Janet was a goner, jelly knees, red blush—the works. Muriel almost felt sorry for her until she remembered all the disruption Janet had introduced and hardened her heart. Let the woman cope as well as she could.

Completely in his element, Elwood turned over Janet's hand, pressing a kiss to the wrist. Janet almost swooned. Well, they deserved one another.

"Sorry to interrupt and all of that. But I am now officially late for an appointment and I still have to have my wing seen to before I can leave. So hop to it, would you, Elwood, and come back in a century or two."

Still placing kisses along the length of Janet's arm, the elf did not respond. Strictly speaking, that wouldn't normally be a problem, but so long as the two of them were blocking the exit, Muriel couldn't leave.

She tried again. "Why don't you let Janet show you the archive?"

"What a very good idea." He was still holding Janet's hand and the lady in question was pink with pleasure. Foolish woman. "Would you care to show me the archive?"

Had Janet learned the elven tongue at her university, she would have been aware that Elwood was inviting her for a bit of hard and fast action against a solid wall in a sound-proofed room. Well, she'd find out soon enough.

Muriel cleared her throat and the two of them ignored her.

This was getting ridiculous.

"Considering what happened on Friday night, perhaps I should warn the two of you that Janet is a..." Before Muriel could bring out the word "virgin", Janet had stomped on her foot. Furious, Muriel moved away from the danger zone. If Janet thought she could handle the elf, well then, let her.

"I'm off. Don't wait for me."

She was at the door when Elwood called after her. "Wait, Muriel, I almost forgot."

"Your head? Your brains?"

"No, the reason I'm here."

That was almost worth waiting for. Almost, but not quite. She was, after all, a working faerie and she had a job to do. "Sorry, Elwood, gotta fly."

Which meant she was halfway down the labyrinth of faerie offices when she heard Elwood scream after her. "But what about your panties? My brother says I have to give them back and apologize for compromising you."

Looking back in the direction of her humble glass enclosed office, all she could see was a forest of faerie heads peering out of doors. Then the laughing started, loud and

rollicking. Putting her stiletto boots to the test yet again, Muriel charged back the way she had come, back to the elf who was waving around her red silk knickers as if they were the flag of a marauding company.

"Put those away," she squealed in an un-faerie-like manner. "Everybody can see."

Elwood had the grace to look just the slightest bit chastised before he recovered and grinned from ear to ear. "They're yours. I brought them back."

Muriel blushed scarlet and wrenched the dainty lingerie out of his hand. "I'll get you for this if it's the last thing I do." Pivoting around, she raised her voice and directed it toward her colleagues. "Show's over, folks. Join us tomorrow for our ongoing saga of life in the nuthouse."

Her fellow employees were reluctant to return to the tedium of their daily grind, but one look at Muriel's face had them heading for the safety of their fluffy pink chairs.

"Back in the office," she yelled at the elf, slamming the door behind them so that the whole wall shook.

"Why are you really here, Elwood? Who paid you to come here and wave my knickers around?"

"Elton said..."

Muriel cut him off before he could say another word. "Elton? Elton is behind this attack on my professional honor?" Tears tried to squeeze out of the sides of her eyes, but she stopped them with a single conscious thought. She would not permit herself to cry in front of Elton's messenger. "After twenty-five years, I thought I knew him. I thought he liked me despite my big bum. I mean, I believed him when he said it didn't matter." Hobbling over to the window, she stared at her view of the celestial plane. "You should never trust an elf. Everyone knows that. You should never, ever trust one."

Elwood cleared his throat. "I say, that's a bit tough, isn't it? "I mean, neither Elton nor I ever called you fluffy or foolish, even though you're a faerie. Elton never complained about the way you hogged all the hot water and left your makeup utensils all over the vanity. He even went shopping with you."

That was true. Elton always went shopping with her and he never complained about how long it took. He zipped up dresses, he assessed bulge potential and had an eye for flair and color. He was truly a shopaholic's best friend.

"...And he always went with you, even though he hated it."

Muriel looked aghast at Elwood. "Whoa... let's back up a bit there. Elton doesn't hate shopping. He loves it."

The elf shook his head from side to side. "No, he hates it. He's always hated it. Especially in malls and especially on Earth."

In her stomach, a ball of fire threatened to burn its way out. Why hadn't Elton told her? Why?

Janet interrupted the silence that fell between the elf and the faerie. "But why did he have your knickers?" The question wasn't posed in a friendly manner. This wasn't a

girly-girly conversation in the ladies' loo, this was a territory-staking question, as in 'what the hell is the guy I'm interested in doing with your underwear?'

"It's a long story," Muriel continued to stare at Elwood.

Elwood took up the challenge. "She gave them to me."

"Because I felt sorry for him."

"The girl ran out on me."

"Because you pulled out a knife. Don't you think that was just a touch scary? Especially for a virgin?"

"She didn't tell me she was a virgin. You didn't tell me she was a virgin."

Neither blinked, neither was willing to admit defeat.

"I'm the Patron Faerie of Virgins, Elwood, what else would she be?"

That gave him something to think about. He almost dropped his eyes. Almost, but not quite. "I thought you were a tooth faerie. Didn't you tell me once you were a tooth faerie?"

And they said faeries were stupid. "That was twenty years ago. I've been a Patron Faerie for five years, Elwood. I've almost finished my probation time. Only another five years."

Silence.

"Twenty years ago?" Janet said again. Muriel supposed she couldn't really be angry at the girl for sticking around and listening to their private conversation, not when they were blocking the doorway. "That would have been about my time. You know, once I had to wait a whole month before the tooth faerie came."

Okay, one more comment like that and Muriel would help the woman leave by the window. "Complaints are on the first floor. No reclamations."

"I brought the knickers back because I felt bad."

Had she heard right? "You felt bad? About what?"

"About the little misunderstanding with Elton. He won't talk to me at all."

Muriel crossed her arms. "Understandable, I should take the same course of action."

"So I thought, under the circumstances, I should bring them back."

"Well, that's big of you, isn't it? You wave my underwear around in the office so that everyone thinks we've done the double dog..."

"Double dog?" Janet piped up.

"Raucous sex," Muriel explained automatically. "And you call that an apology. Jeez!" She would have said more had not Garald arrived in a cloud of smoke that had everyone coughing. And that despite the fact that the union had long since declared the entire building to be a smoke-free zone.

Not to mention ignoring the ban on teleportation within the Ministry.

Garald smoothed down his silken gown as though nothing had happened. "Hello, my dears." He beamed his smile around the semi-circle of belligerent faces. "This is cozy, isn't it?"

Multiple glares were his only response. Noticing that he wasn't making quite the impression he had hoped for, he reached into the pocket of his voluminous robe and pulled out a long scroll. "Muriel, I've just received yet another complaint."

"Garald, I really don't have the time for this. I have a job to do."

"Quite, quite. So why do I have a complaint here from the village doctor concerning..." He held up the piece of paper to his eyes and squinted through his ancient glasses, "intentional restriction of blood flow to the penis."

"They asked for it."

"Really?" That was Janet, or rather, the closet dominatrix inside.

Garald gave her a look of surprise before frowning down at Muriel. "Two times? Let me guess, they both asked for it."

"Exactly. They both asked for it." She turned around so that her wing could be clearly seen. "Look at this. Look what they did to my wing. It was self-protection."

Garald sighed. "There will be an internal investigation. I can't hide this."

"You could try putting it under one of the piles in here," Janet suggested maliciously.

There was only so much a faerie could take. If she was in for a gosling, she might as well be in for a goose. So what if she didn't have permission to use magic within the building? This was a personal emergency. She pulled out her wand and vanished in a puff of silver smoke – the perfect illegal exit.

Chapter Eight

If a faerie was injured, she had a number of choices. Usually she would heal herself, but if this was beyond her abilities, a wizard or deity might be consulted. As the deities cherished their privacy, wizards were usually the first port of call. If the faerie in question had offended every wizard of their acquaintance, their last alternative was the sexual healing of the sprytes.

Fortunately, sprytes were generous beings, generous of time and skill, and the Ministry boasted a sickbay which was tended at all times. It was here that Muriel emerged from her illegal jaunt. She should have exited outside in the corridor, but her bad temper, the stiletto boots and her damaged wing insisted on this second breach of protocol.

"You know that foreign magic severely curtails my abilities."

Muriel blinked at the on-duty spryte. He was definitely a spryte rather than a sprite. The skin-tight jumpsuit in a rainbow colored fabric did nothing to hide the impressive lines of his additional "y". Muriel gulped and looked away. Cocks caused nothing but problems and she so didn't need any more.

"Sorry," she mumbled. "I didn't know."

"Second year, Faerie School. You did attend, didn't you?"

"Of course I did." Only not the lecture on sprytes. It had been sprytes or a hair appointment. The hair appointment had won hands down. Pity about the black hair, though, it hadn't suited her in the least.

The spryte didn't believe her, she could tell. Why didn't he give her a break, couldn't he tell that she was injured? Just her luck to pull a dud.

He continued to stare.

"Well, I may have, you know, missed part of it...okay, all of it. Only I did a lot of private research and felt I knew enough on the topic. I did pass the exam."

Where were all these lies coming from? She hadn't done any research, she hadn't read a single book on the topic, but everyone knew that sprites and sprytes were the divas of the universe. Easily offended, easily bored and with a flair for the dramatic and an even worse sense of fashion than the wizards.

Everyone knew that—so why sit through a boring lecture?

"I am Syd."

The spryte indicated a table, half hidden behind a large palm. "Please make yourself comfortable and I will attend to your needs."

Her needs? Her needs? Surely he didn't mean... Surely sprytes didn't actually fuck their patients? Maybe she should have stayed for that lecture.

Gentle hands touched her wings and she flinched automatically.

"Relax."

Not really an option as long as she didn't know what was going on.

"Have you never been attended by a healer before?"

"Sure, just not a spryte."

Skilled fingers teased the line of her injured wing, his touch creating a buzzing sensation that held long after his hand had passed. "Wanton boys, I assume. There has been a spate of them lately."

"Men, actually."

"Of course. Of course. I'm quoting from Shakespeare. *I did attend all my lectures.*"

Muriel had no idea what he was talking about, but the way he was vibrating her wings was, well, incredible.

The gentle stroking stopped and the buzzing sensation lessened. Pity, it had felt seriously good.

"Yes, this is where the wings were bent double, blood flow lessened, but not completely stopped. You're lucky, Muriel, you could have lost this one completely with just a little bit more pressure." The snap of his fingers ricocheted off the walls as if it were a bullet with evil intentions.

Muriel? How did he know her name? Did she know him? Had they been introduced? She couldn't recall. She was sure she didn't know a single spryte.

"Do I know you?"

"No. We have not had that pleasure."

"Then how do you know my name?"

"My, you really didn't attend that lecture series, did you? I take it the test was multi-choice?"

It had been, but why was that relevant? "Then how do you know me?"

"You need to lie down flat on the table. A simple massage should see you healed."

Muriel looked at the table with distaste. It was long, narrow and of a height that guaranteed an inelegant scramble. "I refuse to move until you tell me how you know me."

The spryte heaved a sigh, encircled her waist with his hands and lifted her onto the surface. Almost as though he had read her thoughts. But they couldn't do that, could they?

"Fiona was in here this morning."

Fiona was a friend of Muriel's and a fellow faerie. Her area of expertise was fire fighters of the muscled variety. Unfortunately, she was also the worst of gossips. If Fiona had been in here, then Syd would know everything there was to know about her.

"What did she tell you?"

"That your lover dropped you after he caught you in bed with his brother. His twin brother!" He pushed her back down flat on the table and deftly removed her negligee with a pair of scissors. "Please don't move around so much, you need to relax."

Relax! That was the last thing Muriel was thinking about. Explode, yes, that seemed a possible option, but relax, no.

A scented oil dripped down her spine and she inhaled the scent of camellias. The knotted bunch of muscles between her wings lengthened, softened under the pressure of strong fingers. He was very good.

"It wasn't my fault. It wasn't, really."

Syd leaned forward to catch her murmur and she was inundated with a musky, but not unpleasant smell, his scent. It was as intoxicating as a bottle of good champagne.

"Of course not. I'm sure it was a misunderstanding. After all, if they are identical..."

Other knots in her back were discovered and eliminated. Syd's hands were truly a monumental asset. She could feel her problems disintegrating.

"Not as identical as they think and I have never fancied the brother. He's an arrogant swine as far as women are concerned, while *my* twin is an elf in a million."

"Sounds to me like love."

She jerked upward, wanting to correct the assumption. "No, not love. I'm a sex faerie, you know. We can't love, it's impossible. But we have been in lust for a while. I guess we just got used to being around one another. We're not bonded or anything. You know how it is, so many males, so little time. There's no sense in restricting yourself until you're really sure and we're not. At least I'm not and I'm sure he isn't either. Actually, we've just broken up." And that thought made her eyes burn again.

"Methinks the lady doth protest too much."

"What?"

"Shakespeare again. You know, the great poet from the dimension called Earth? No?" Oiled fingers touched a place on her spine and Muriel found herself flat on her stomach again. How did he do that? "Well, I think you care for this elf a little more than you're willing to admit."

He was probably right. She had never worried about a partner leaving before. Even before they left, she was generally eyeing up possible replacements. There was always a pair of muscles she wanted to stroke, a pair of eyes she was dying to stare into. Only this time was different. She hadn't wanted Elton to leave, she wasn't over him yet and there was no one out there who could hold a light to him, but surely that would change in another century or so. So it wouldn't be fair to say that she loved him, because love was forever, wasn't it?

Meanwhile, the hands of the spryte had reached her wings. The buzzing began again, deliciously relaxing.

"Don't worry. He'll come around. It's hard dating a faerie when everyone knows that they are always between sexual encounters. It's a lot to live up to, even for an elf. You need to give him a sign that he's important to you."

What did he mean, "everybody knows"? He spoke of her kind as though they were nymphomaniacs. Which they were not.

Definitely not.

"Relax."

Okay for him. She had been relaxed until he'd started calling her names. Everyone knew...indeed.

"Actually, can it go a little faster? I'm already late for an appointment with a customer, a difficult customer."

"Vivienne of Hogsmeade. Yes, I know."

Was there anything this being did not know? No wonder Fiona was always so well informed about the goings-on in the Department. Were all sprytes such terrible gossips?

"A rather difficult customer, I'm sure." There was a pause before he continued, "be careful of Vivienne, she is more than she seems."

"More than she seems? Does this mean you are interested in helping, Syd? Just tell me if you are and I can arrange a meeting."

He managed to look stern and disgusted at the same time. "Do lie back down and stop moving. You would not want me to damage your wing at this critical time. As to Vivienne, if you had attended your lectures, you would know that my kind do not care for big bosoms and bums. "Give me a willowy sprite any time."

Well, this was a conversation more up her alley. Anything was preferable to talking about Elton, and sex was always a delicious topic to discuss.

Willowy? "So what makes a female of your species attractive to a male?"

"It is more than just appearance, although long legs are considered to be extremely erotic, as is a long neck."

"You mean you treasure her for her conversational abilities, warmth and understanding, her intelligence?"

"Actually, we savor the bendiness of our sprites." The word sounded more like spreets than sprites, leaving Muriel wondering if spreets were a third category after sprytes and sprites, or if this was the true pronunciation.

"Bendiness?" She, in turn, stretched out the last syllable into a sigh of bliss as Syd spread more warm oil over her back, the liquid slipping and sliding slowly down the length of her back until it pooled in the small of her back. Unbidden, a vision of Elton and his oily adventures came to mind and was vehemently pushed aside. She had other more important matters to concentrate on and she most definitely did not want to burst into tears.

Warm and dexterous fingers followed the path of the oil, dipping and skipping, knowing instinctively just where to touch. Hell, this spryte didn't need to fuck a woman to make her happy, not when he could induce an orgasm with his fingers.

"Oh, yes." His fingers continued to work in a sensuous manner. "We greatly covet the spreet's ability to bend into every possible position, the number of variations are simply mind-boggling." Muriel risked a glance at the body beside her. It did look rather fit.

"At least ten positions before breakfast, that's our motto. Does wonders for keeping up our stamina and blood pressure. It imbues us with energy and exercises the heart. We make the human's Kama Sutra look like an exercise plan for the elderly."

If his hands hadn't been quite so sensuous, quite so perfectly pleasing in every way, Muriel might have made a comment. Instead, she added smugness and exceptional self-confidence to the list of spryte qualities.

"So tell me, why was Fiona the Fire Faerie here?"

"Suffice it to say that before one gives over to lust, one should turn off the oven first."

"Ouch."

"Indeed. Sometimes one gets the feeling that faeries are ruled by their sexual needs."

Which was the pot calling the kettle black, but Muriel bit her tongue instead of telling him so.

Ten positions before breakfast, indeed.

"Did you realize that the orgasm takes place in the brain and not in our genitals?"

"Mmm?" Muriel managed to grind out, far too concerned with the orgasm building between her legs rather than between her ears.

"Yes, most people assume that it is the friction caused by the act itself which results in the orgasm." Which was pretty much the way that Muriel had always summed it up—fucking orgasm. "But it is quite possible to experience le petit mort without even touching the intimate areas."

Which didn't sound quite as promising as half a minute earlier. And since when had sprytes endeavored to learn French? The world was truly a mystery, as the wizards were prone to say. But who cared as long as Syd was doing wonderful things to her feet, wonderful things that were causing her nipples to pucker and her pussy to pulse. It was truly a bugger that the spryte wasn't attracted to females with a figure.

"And the foot is connected to some very interesting places in the brain. He continued to demonstrate and Muriel found her skin warming in what could only be described as a sexual manner.

"Ohhh," she moaned, finally understanding what the spryte was attempting to do. "You want to make me come just by massaging my feet."

"Full points to the faerie with the busted wing. I thought you'd never realize."

"I'm not stupid, you know." Pride dictated that statement. She could not stomach being considered dumb by the blonds of the universe.

"We are also not dumb."

"I didn't say that."

"No, but you thought it." Real hurt in his voice made her sit up and turn around. Syd was still holding her foot in her hand.

"You can read thoughts?"

"When I'm full of sexual energy, yes. Why do you think we come ten times before breakfast? What do you think is the source of our magical ability?"

"Sex?" Muriel offered, beginning to feel a right twit. What on earth had she been thinking since she arrived in the sick bay?"

"An awful lot of derogatory things about sprytes and sprites and spreets."

Aha, so there really were three different genders, just as she had thought.

Syd sighed, adopted a pose of long suffering male and pushed her back down flat without even touching her. Gods above, these beings were dangerous.

"Only when someone upsets us. You see, Muriel dear, we spend half our lives doping up on sexual energy and the other half expending the energy in form of magical healing." He continued to work on her foot, rubbing the pads under her toes until she wanted to cry out in ecstasy.

"Well, I hope I didn't upset you. You see, I didn't actually attend..."

"The lectures. I know and I think you were right."

"About what?"

"Black is definitely not your color."

She would have answered, but the cognitive part of her brain was quickly disintegrating into a pool of oatmeal. She didn't know how this was going to heal her wing, but By the Faerie Queen, it sure felt good.

Her orgasm came forcefully, almost painfully, with blood shooting through the newly healed vessels in her broken wing. She squealed and flung her arms around her waist until the last shudders passed away.

"Are you all right?"

She shook her head and accepted the handkerchief he proffered. "I feel so lonely."

Syd patted her head gently. "He'll come round. You'll see. I've never met two people more compatible than the two of you."

"Do you think so?"

"I know so."

Chapter Nine

With red eyes and a multitude of good advice from a sympathetic spryde, Muriel arrived hopelessly late for her rendezvous with Viv.

Ready with apologies of every kind, she approached the steamy landscape that was the hot pools and carefully maneuvered her way around the pitfalls. The greatest pitfall was the humidity itself that could easily clog her wings with excess moisture. Still, she had made a promise to Viv and she intended to keep it.

She would find the girl's True Love and then Muriel would see about winning her own lover back.

There had to be a way to make the stubborn elf see that she loved him, was even willing to forfeit her single status and bond with him. Before the Deities and all their friends if necessary.

Therefore, she was totally unprepared to find out that Elton was cheating on her.

On her!

And with Viv, no less. It couldn't be, it couldn't be.

Pride and hurt exploded in her chest. After all she had been through this week, this was indeed the straw that broke the camel's back.

How could he? How could she? How could *they*?

Furious, she launched herself into battle. "So, would you like to tell me why my lover is fooling around with my client? Or shall I draw my own conclusions?"

And while Viv had the grace to look embarrassed, if not downright shocked, Elton adopted his cool elf-about-town manner. It was a look that annoyed Muriel so much that she didn't even need to think about throwing a tantrum, the tantrum arrived of its own accord and struck down everything in its wake.

When the red haze had passed and the air had returned to its accustomed path, Viv had disappeared and Muriel was alone with her ex-lover. Had Elton felt this way when he had found her with Elwood?

"You can't go around deflowering my clients," she told him with more vehemence than she had planned.

He waded toward her, slowly, as though he had all the time in the world, which for immortal beings was fairly much the truth. Despite herself, Muriel let her eyes slip down the hairless chest, past the navel and slightly left to where the hip bone edged outward and the resulting groove led downward to his pleasure trove. How she loved to lay her head on that spot, on skin so soft and smooth, her hand cupping his balls absentmindedly as she drifted off to sleep.

"Are you speaking from a professional point of view or from a personal one?"

As if there was any difference. "From both. How does that look if my lover does the dirty deed? That makes me look desperate, as though I can't do my job or something." She paused to take another breath and he moved closer again, his lips slightly swollen from kissing. He damn well knew that he had the most kissable lips on the planet. She had told him often enough. "And from a personal point of view..." She stuttered and stopped. How could she communicate the black chasm that had opened beneath her feet and which threatened to swallow her whole, the pain in her chest, not to mention the mess non-waterproof mascara had made to her face. "I...I...I."

"Yes, Muriel?"

"Yes what?"

He was doing it again. He was acting stupid on purpose just to make her mad, really mad. He even crossed his arms in front of his chest so that his cute brown nipples with their hard little nubs vanished from view.

"How do you feel from a personal point of view? How do you feel when you see me with another female?"

How did he think that she felt? "I don't like it when you're with another female. I want to rip her head off." There, she'd said it. Let him interpret the words as he liked.

A smile spread over his face, transforming him, making him even more beautiful if that was possible. How dare he be happy when she was so miserable.

"And ripping off my customer's head wouldn't be good for business. I'm still on probation for another five years, you know."

His grin disappeared, but the satisfaction she had expected to feel failed to surface. Hurting Elton caused her pain. If only she knew what she wanted. What was more important? The career or this elf?

"So, it's all about the job, is it? It's all about Muriel. Muriel this and Muriel that. Do you know how sick I am of your egotistical, self-centered ways?"

He was using his low voice, the one he reserved for serious matters. If Muriel had had any sense, she would back down, back down and reassess her situation.

Only Muriel wasn't good at making calculated decisions. All of her decisions were made on gut-feeling or, if desperate enough, by her pussy. From time to time, she even based her decision on her daily horoscope, but as she had had no time to consult the stars this morning, she was forced to rely on her organs. Her stomach was ready to throw up and her pussy was...expectant.

"Me, egotistical? Moi?" She used a finger to point to her chest and thereby breaking her last nail. "That's not true. I always think about you. A blowjob a day keeps a horny elf happy, healthy and ready to play."

And then, because she didn't want him to think that she was obsessed about sex, she added, "and I..." She had one of those famous blank-outs where she couldn't

remember what she wanted to say. There had to be millions of things she'd done for him in the years they'd been together. "And I..."

"Yes, Muriel?"

She expelled her breath and scrunched up her face. "I cooked..." she stopped because actually she had intended to cook for him quite often, but had never actually managed to get past the cookbook and the one time she had...well, the less said about that, the better. "I buy you wine."

"And drink it all yourself."

She pouted. "That's not true and what about the time I cut your hair for you?" She knew that that was a bad example as soon as it was out of her mouth.

"Have you ever seen an elf with a fringe? I was the laughing stock of The Valley!"

"Okay, okay, bad example. I bathe with you, I brush your hair, I let you use my shampoo and all of my moisturizers and things."

"Which I do not need. Shall I mention your hair in my comb?"

This was a silly game, a very silly game. The faerie hated games that she couldn't win. "I'm really not in the mood for these petty shots. I have a customer to deflower, so if you'll excuse me."

She turned around, determined to leave the pools with her back straight and her pride intact, even if her hastily patched heart was breaking all over again. She would not let him know how he affected her.

She was therefore unprepared for the sudden pressure behind her knees. Before her newly rejuvenated wings could respond, she fell into the pool, fully dressed and mouth wide open.

She sank beneath the water, involuntarily drinking a lungful of water before a hand clasped the front of her negligee and pulled her up. As her face reappeared above the surface, the fabric gave way, revealing the white lacy nothing below. Elton caught her with his other hand before she could return to her watery prison. She spluttered in his arms, thrust the hair out of her eyes and glared at the face that was mere inches away from her own.

His lips were slightly parted, and if circumstances had been different, she would have taken it as an invitation to kiss him. She applied pressure to his chest, a symbolic protest rather than an effective measure, because everyone knew how strong elves were, even if they had the look of saplings. He permitted her to set her feet upon the muddy, slimy and totally unhygienic bottom of the pool, but did not loosen the arm around her waist.

"How dare you!" Muriel began. "How dare you pull me into the water! Just look at my outfit, it's my most expensive piece of nothing and you ruined it. You can't go around ripping the bodices off females, you're not the hero of some paperback romance, you know."

Casually, Elton flung his long mane of hair over his shoulder in very much the manner of a pirate or a Scottish lord. In another time, in another dimension, he would indeed have made a fortune gracing the covers of numerous books. And he knew it, he knew the effect he had on females, he knew the effect he had on her.

"Are you wet yet, Muriel?" It wasn't the water he was talking about. No, not the water that warmed them, that rendered her wings, the one advantage she had over him, inoperative. He referred to the flood of liquid that oozed from her vagina in ready expectation.

"You are not going to win me over with your voice and you will not use your magic on me."

He pulled her closer so that she was flush against his body. "I need no magic with you, Muriel. I need only to touch you and you melt in my hands. It has always been that way."

Sure, it was true, but it made her as mad as hell to be reminded. "You will not get around me with sex. I have a right to be angry with you."

He smiled, but did not answer, because they both knew he had every intention of using sex as a means of getting what he wanted. The two of them only needed to be in the same room and sparks would fly. Her body was already sending off all the right signals; her clit was rubbing along his thigh and her nipples against his chest, her hands were entwined in his hair.

"This doesn't mean that I forgive you," she pouted.

Raising his thumb, Elton wiped away the mascara that had maltreated her cheeks. "I wouldn't dream of assuming you had, my dear. And by the way, I have not forgiven you. This is just an exercise in tension release. It's just sex."

Muriel smiled. "Just sex? Well then, shall we agree on a truce for the duration of an orgasm?"

"At least one," Elton agreed. "Until both parties are sated or until midnight, whichever shall come first."

"Agreed." The faerie leaned forward and sealed their contract with a deep tongue-probing kiss that put her body on standby.

Elton ripped off the remains of her negligee and flung it over their heads. It landed on the rock surface with a subdued plop that neither heard. Her bra went the same way and the knickers vanished completely, probably to be found downstream at some future date and used by ignorant boys as a slingshot. Elton's fingers, familiar and firm, glided across her chest and enclosed her breasts, taunting them with practiced ease. The elf damn well knew what buttons to push. He knew exactly how to move his thigh so that the muscle would rub on her clit.

Or maybe that was her.

"Do you remember the day we met?"

“As if I could forget.” It had been winter and Muriel had been wearing an outfit in white, edged with the softest of feathers. She had been a dream of a faerie and had attracted a lot of interest.

But she had been focused on a certain elf with languid eyes and a body to kill for. He’d been sitting in the corner of the pub with a group of his mates. Baltram had been there as well, if she recalled rightly. She had been there with a group of faeries. They had been celebrating her thousandth tooth or something similar. Or maybe it had been her thousandth drink? In any case, the little group of females had boldly drunk beyond their limits – the sin-energy of a large group.

Between drinks, she had looked up and seen him staring at her legs. Instead of covering up her flesh, she’d adjusted her bottom so that he could see the creamy skin between the silk tights and the garter belt. He’d looked. He’d more than looked, and when she’d excused herself to powder her nose, he’d followed her as she had known he would.

Without a word, he’d led her outside and into the alley, into the forgiving shadows. Mesmerizing her with a look of lust, he’d silently opened the fly of his trousers and pushed them down, revealing the lithe muscles of a fully grown elf and a cock that would have done a man proud. Okay, not quite in the same league as Baltram, but then again, nobody was.

She still remembered how the elf’s cock had glistened in the moonlight. A soft breeze had wandered through the alleyway, lost on its way from the ocean to the mountains. She had meowed her pleasure as though she were a cat before a plate of cream and he had grinned in understanding.

Bracing his back against the rough hewn wall, he’d opened his legs and pulled her into the valley between, her mound against his erect penis and her breasts against his chest. Long fingered hands had gathered her dress together, crushing the fabric terribly until her naked buttocks had been exposed and skin contacted skin.

Her loud breathing had filled the air between them, expectant, wanting. There had been no cradling, no kissing, no fondling. He’d cupped her buttocks and lifted her with ease, aligned her with his jutting cock and then lowered her down slowly. Gravity and wings had eased his entrance until she had been engorged with all he had had to offer.

He had been the perfect fit, wide enough to caress her walls, long enough to reach her womb. And Muriel had relished the sheer naughtiness of being taken against the wall in a dark alleyway.

By the Sacred Mother, she had been horny.

She had continued to flutter with her wings, cooling them both down as he upped the tempo, pushing her away and then letting her fall again. She had held on with her hands, playing with the hair that had fallen forward onto his chest. Only when she had leaned forward to kiss him on the lips had he pulled away. Kissing had not been part of the fantasy – at least not part of his.

He had come with a guttural moan and she with a quiet whimper.

Her dress had fallen back into place, none the worse for wear apart from a number of wrinkles, and he had buttoned up his crotch. With his hand around her waist, he had accompanied her back inside, leaving her in the hall where he had found her. Returning to his friends, he had not given her a single look for the rest of the evening.

She had never expected to hear from him again, although she had hoped. Of course she had hoped—what red blooded female wouldn't have wanted that stunning package?

He had approached her for dinner less than a month later. And the rest, as the saying went, was history.

Now she looked into Elton's eyes and grinned. "It was the hottest night of my life. 'Stranger in the alleyway'. What girl wouldn't find it hot to live out a fantasy?"

"And what about the faerie in the pool fantasy?"

Muriel winked. "I can't remember ever fantasizing about another faerie."

"Who says we're talking about your fantasies? This one is mine."

He lifted her under the armpits and Muriel shrieked. In full size, she was no lightweight and her wings were out of order until they'd dried.

"You're not that heavy. Be still."

He carried her over to the jutting ledge, and now that the faerie was closer, she could see that the surface was covered with a soft bedding of moss. It was soothingly cool after the heat of the water and she shivered as her skin settled on the plants.

"Cold, Muriel?" He said the words with a look she could not place. Gone was the genial partner, the thoughtful lover, and in his place was a predator determined to catch his prey. It reminded her of that time at the pub. Perhaps that was his intention—to finish their relationship as they had begun, by living out a fantasy.

Not that she wanted to finish this relationship, but Elton...what the hell did Elton want? She thought she'd known, thought she'd known him, but this...this was not the Elton she knew. She hated to admit it, but maybe it would be better for her to tell him how she felt, how she missed him.

"Elton..."

"Shh..."

"But I have to tell you..."

A finger silenced her with the lightest of pressures. But that was enough to make her lips burn with pleasure. "Not now, my sexy little faerie. No time for talking."

Those spectacular blue eyes of his held her captive as he slid his hands down her waist and repositioned her on the edge of the ledge. His torso towered over her and she was forced to arch her back if she wanted to keep looking in his eyes.

And she wanted to, even if only to understand the emotions flickering there. She knew lust when she saw it, but there was more, pain and the need to possess, to dominate.

And sadness.

Something dark.

"Elton?" A tingle shot down her spine, spun around and galloped back up again. His cock touched the narrow opening between her legs, then pushed in, no touching, no licking.

A salty liquid dribbled into her mouth. Blood! At the moment of entry, she had bitten down upon her lip—a reflex.

Or fear?

He pushed her down lower, her wet wings touching rock and fluttering uselessly.

"Elton, my wings."

But Elton did not appear to hear, his eyes had glazed over in pleasure, his brain switched off. Still, he did not push her any further, even permitted her to wiggle around until she fitted him entirely and he groaned. Tightening her muscles, she gave thanks to the Deities for love beads, the only exercise she executed diligently on a daily basis. From his moan, she knew that she had evened up the score at least a little. So she applied pressure yet again, not failing to notice that he was harder. Their relationship couldn't possibly be over if she could still turn him on.

Could it?

When she released him, he pulled back, her wetness easing the way, her tightness and his size providing a friction second to none. He was magnificent and she was at least as good. His first thrust was hard and fast, there was none of his usual reticence, none of his caring pre-party attention. He simply thrust into her as though she were a receptacle for his pleasure and, to her surprise, Muriel loved it.

Even though, apart from the occasional quickie, her idea of perfect sex was a large bed, lots of candles, champagne and at least seven orgasms, the first two to be delivered orally or manually.

But this, this was selfishness incarnate—his lust, his enjoyment. So why was she liking it? Perhaps because her vagina was merely wet and not sopping, because she could feel him in all his grandeur, because she would still feel him long after he had finished and, in the next days, she would continue to feel him every time she clenched her muscles.

Branded.

Yummy.

But there was still that look in his eye. The one that told her he had a secret agenda, that he was worried, sad.

He could have been a stranger.

He came with a yell of triumph that was lost in the trees surrounding them, in the steam rising around them, but he had given it, a stag marking his territory, a challenge to all others. His cry pushed her over the edge, although whether in pleasurable agreement or in burning anger, she could not say.

And with this cry, the familiar Elton returned. Gently he cradled her in his arms, submerged her in the warm water, held her to his chest, kissed her hair. It was the perfect moment until he ruined it.

“Do you remember the night at the pub, Muriel?”

“Of course, darling. We’ve already had this discussion. It was the best sex I’d ever had.”

“Well, it wasn’t me.”

Chapter Ten.

What did he mean, it hadn't been him? Did he think she would fall for these foolish tricks? She had been there. Of course it had been him. Who else looked like him, talked like him, walked like him? It *had* been him.

Hadn't it?

Unfortunately, Elton hadn't stayed around to answer her questions. He'd performed the classic example of coming and going with not a second to spare. Apart from dropping a bomb into their love life and shattering her delusions.

And if it hadn't been Elton, then it could only have been...

Elwood.

Of course.

The only other elf who came into consideration was Elwood.

She'd fucked her lover's brother.

And the gosling hadn't dropped, because back then she hadn't known any of Elton's little idiosyncrasies. It had been the last thing on her mind to check out the direction in which his cock leaned. The degree and direction of lean wasn't necessarily the first thing you thought about with a new lover. Imagine if, in the throes of passion, she'd whipped her wand out of her holster and started measuring.

She'd been fucked by Elwood and Elton had known about it.

More than that, Elton had hated the fact, had loathed the fact that she had referred to that night as the best sex she, a sex faerie, had ever experienced. That must have rankled, knowing that she had been talking about his brother while he had given his all to satisfy her over and over again. When she thought of all the nights spent in a daze of passion, desire and unadulterated pleasure, Elton's determination to pleasure her...

It had all been an attempt to trump his brother, to replace that one memory with something better. Rough and ready had not been part of that repertoire because she had espoused her love of long and slow lovemaking.

But she'd gone on and on about a rough quickie in the alleyway behind the pub.

Poor Elton.

For the first time in quarter of a century, she felt that she finally understood the elf who shared her bed. Elton was jealous of Elwood. Elton believed Elwood was better in bed. Somewhere deep inside slumbered the fear that Elwood could steal her away. She shook her head at that. If only he knew, if only she could tell him how much she disliked Elwood and his perverse little games. No wonder Elton had hit the proverbial

roof when he had seen her panties in Elwood's hand. For him, it had been a nightmare coming to life.

Damn, damn, double damn.

Then he had caught her with Baltram, the man with the biggest cock she had ever seen. The man who single-handedly caused more inferiority complexes amongst the males of The Valley than any other. The man with whom no other male wanted to pee when communal peeing was such an institution.

Bummer. Why was she so silly sometimes? Why hadn't she guessed? She was a faerie, after all, and faeries were...well, they were faeries.

How she wished she could turn back time and tell Elton how much she loved his lovemaking, his wild imagination, his consideration and his romantic streak.

She wished she could tell him she loved him.

Oh Sweet Mother, it was true, she loved him.

Slowly, sadly, Muriel pulled herself out of the water and settled down on a rock to dry. Love, she was in love with a being who was no longer interested in her. Because if there was such a thing as a good-bye-fuck, then that had been it.

It was so unfair.

Someone had to pay.

No, not someone. Elwood had to pay.

He was the cause of all her problems, both personal and job-wise.

Absentmindedly she fluttered her wings. It would take them a while to dry, plenty of time to think of an appropriate revenge.

* * * * *

Elwood lived on the outskirts of town as elves were wont to do. Despite their love of social intercourse, or just plain intercourse in Elwood's case, in the evening elves loved to relax in the boughs of a tree with good food and good drink.

Well, this evening, Muriel thought as she stood under his home, things were going to go a little differently. In order to diffuse a little anger, she had flown here using her wings rather than slipping through the dimensions. She didn't, after all, want to kill anyone. She just wanted Elwood to suffer as much as she was suffering, as Elton was suffering.

There was a small problem with her logic, but for the life of her, she could not figure out what it was. It wasn't important. She needed to concentrate on her plan.

On revenge.

Yes.

Elwood had not locked his door, but the spiraling staircase was a little more than she could handle in her emotionally charged state, so she backed out and took the aerial

route, fully intending to enter by the balcony. It would have been a dramatic entry had the door not been closed.

"Muriel? Is that you? What on earth happened?"

Muriel indicated with a rough gesture that he should open the door or suffer the consequences. Speaking wasn't exactly her forte in times of intense pain and intense pain was definitely what she was experiencing.

The elf opened the door and reached out with a helping hand. "Come in and let me take a look at that nose."

She suffered the hand on her elbow only because the stars in front of her eyes made walking and navigating extremely difficult. Leading her into the kitchen, Elton sat her down on one of the barstools. To his credit, he did not insist on placing a tea-towel down first and that was something, considering the foible for cleanliness that tended to dog the elves.

He didn't even put on gloves for the inspection. "Bruised, but not broken." A tea towel appeared in front of her face while he pinched the bridge of her nose with finger and thumb.

"It won't take a moment."

He was right, the trickle of blood slowed and then stopped. "Almost as good as new. The bathroom is through there if you'd like to tidy up."

That was his way of saying she looked a fright.

He was right and the mirror confirmed it.

She wiped off the blood, she even patched up the damage to her makeup and corset with the wave of her wand, but her pride was not so easily healed. She might as well go around with a huge neon light on her butt with the word "idiot" in flashing letters. Damn bloody door.

Damn bloody Elwood.

Why did he have to be so nice to her right now?

She reminded herself she was here with a job to do on that two-timing, faerie-fucking twin out there. She was here to teach him a lesson and she wasn't going to let a dented pride and a bloody nose get in the way.

His kindness had been purely accidental. He wasn't a nice elf.

He deserved everything he got.

She wiggled her butt back out into the spacious living area, not sparing a glance for the magnificent view of woods and valley. In her absence, Elwood had seated himself on the leather settee and was sipping on a goblet of red wine. Generously, a second one had been left on the coffee table between the two identical sofas.

"Take a seat, Muriel faerie. I know you like red wine."

Yeah, that's what she'd been drinking in the pub that night. She'd been dating a twin for a quarter of a century, why had she never thought of the possibility of a trick,

of a dare between the two? Because wasn't that what twins did? Didn't they double-date the same girl?

She accepted the wine demurely, already planning how she could get the ball back onto her side of the playfield. She crossed her legs and watched as his eyes fixed on their length. They might be short, but were otherwise perfect and adorned with the perfect fuck-me shoes. When she thought he'd stared enough, she uncrossed them and then crossed them again in the other direction. He averted his eyes, but they didn't make it any further than her breasts. Boobs had that effect on males, weaklings, all of them.

The ball was back in her court.

"Why are you here?"

"Do I need an invitation to visit my boyfriend's brother?"

"Ex-boyfriend's brother."

Why did everyone have to keep harping on about that? "Why did you visit me at work today?"

He shrugged and took a sip of his wine, not taking his eyes off her once, as though she might vanish into smoke at any time. "I told you earlier, I wanted to return your panties. It didn't seem right, somehow. I didn't want my brother to think that I was poaching in his territory."

"Although we've already had mind-boggling sex with one another?"

There was a pregnant pause in which anything could have happened, but nothing did.

Elwood broke the silence. Gone was the fun-loving, slightly perverted elf and in his place was a serious, contemplative being who delved through the layers of her mind and understood. "So Elton told you."

"You could say that."

Return of the silence. Muriel picked up her glass and took a mouthful of the rich, red liquid. Elwood stared at her lips, pouted his own and then sighed.

"What do you want from me, Muriel? It was just the once before you met Elton, and as for Friday night...I've already apologized. I'm sorry." He waved his free hand around as though he had to catch a stray thought. "And congratulations on your promotion to Patron Faeries. Now that I know your area of competence, you can be rest assured that I won't fall in with your schemes any more. I dislike virgins. Of course, if you had thought of letting me in on your little plans, I might just have helped you out this once. When I think of..."

He stopped and shook his head. "I'm sorry, but I had no idea Viv was a virgin."

"So it's my fault that you tried to pull another one of your lusty perverse tricks on my client and scared her to death?" Honestly, the cheek of this male, trying to put all the blame on her. Any sympathy she had felt for him melted into liquid and vanished down the proverbial drain.

"That's not what I said, Muriel."

"But you implied it."

"By all the Faeries, I can understand how you exasperate my brother beyond all logical thought."

"That's below the belt."

He leered across the divide. "You're not wearing a belt, Muriel."

She slammed the goblet on the table. "Why didn't you tell me that it was you at the pub? Why did I have to wait twenty-five years to find out?"

He was unmoved, even if his eyes traveled to the generous décolleté in front of him. "What was there to tell? You and I spent five minutes together before you met Elton. Of course, I recognized you when Elton made the introductions and I even filled him in on our little act of passion."

"He was the one who told me I was not to tell you. He seemed to think, and rightly so, that you would assume we had planned the whole episode. And it's not as though I intended to further our relationship." He put up his hands in defense as though warding off an attack. "Don't get me wrong. Of course I fancy you physically. Elton and I are twins and we have the same taste in females, but I didn't have any intention of taking our relationship any further."

"And why not?"

It was pride that spoke. If a man fancied her, but didn't want to sleep with her, then she wanted to know why.

"You're too vanilla for my tastes, Muriel."

"Vanilla? As in vanilla pudding?" Perhaps he was referring to the way she tasted down below.

"No, vanilla as in having classical tastes in bed. You know, candles, missionary position, doggy on Sundays. Boring."

There were lots of adjectives that Muriel would use to describe her love life—exciting, passionate, full of variety, but boring and banal were two that had no place on the list.

"Whereas yours is strawberry and chocolate?"

"More marzipan, nougat and pistachio." He said the words smugly.

"Known to the rest of us as perverted, odd and downright questionable."

Her sarcasm was wasted on him. He emptied out the rest of his glass and switched back to his bastard elf impression. "So now that we've got that straightened out, you can leave, Muriel. I do hope you get back together with my brother—he's even more vanilla than you are."

He turned his back on her with a this-talk-is-over-move and walked over to the kitchen area.

"I'm not leaving, Elwood. The fact is that you've been a very bad boy and you need to be punished."

The change in him was astonishing. His hand stopped in midair—less than a inch away from the bottle of illegally imported Cabernet Sauvignon. He turned around slowly and looked at her with eyes of disbelief. The air fairly crackled with sexual tension. "Yes, I've been very bad and I definitely need to be punished. Are you offering?"

That wasn't quite the reaction that Muriel had been expecting, but it fitted in with her plans. She placed her hands on her hips and gave him a practiced look of disdain. It was a look she'd stolen from a movie on Earth. She couldn't quite remember which one, but who cared? She tapped her foot on the ground and wished that she had worn her long boots, the ones that covered her knees and crept up her thighs. She contemplated doing a quick change, but decided against it. It wasn't as though she was actually going to indulge in an S&M session here. She wouldn't even know where to begin, even if she owned the complete works of De Sade, the über-sadist himself. Elwood was looking at her expectantly, his cock knocking against the silken cloth of his trousers.

"Strip for me."

He cocked his head to the side as if scenting her nervousness and she repeated her words with more force. "Strip, now."

He moved his hands to his tunic. The fingers vanished through the gap between the buttons and the fabric fell aside, revealing a perfect chest. Then stopped, looking at her for a response. So what was she supposed to do now?

It was pure reflex that had her pulling out her wand and tapping it in concentration. The whites of Elwood's eyes were clearly visible. He ran his tongue over his lips and waited. Could it be that he had a fantasy involving a faerie and her wand? Of being walloped?

"I said to strip, Elwood. Do I have to repeat myself?"

He shook his head, still fixated on the rhythmic thumping of the wand. The tunic slipped to the floor as she traced the hard muscles of his stomach with her wand, letting it slide down to his waistband.

"And the rest?" Slowly she was beginning to see the attraction of such games. She strode around the elf, letting her wand complete its own journey across taut flesh until she was standing in front of him again. "Don't make me hurt you."

"And if I don't?"

His eyes communicated something, not despair, not fear, but something else—anticipation. He *wanted* her to up the stakes. She didn't know why that surprised her, she had long suspected that Elwood was into pain and humiliation.

"Do you seek to thwart me, slave? Eyes down, and stop looking at me with such contempt."

"And if I refuse?"

That was a good question. What was she to do if he refused? Faeries alive, was she glad she'd run through all the possibilities in her mind before she had arrived here.

"I'm giving you one last chance, slave. Strip for me or suffer the consequences."

His fingers moved to the buttons adorning his trousers, flicking them open one after the other, his eyes still fixed on her, taunting. He thought he knew the rules to this game, he thought her ignorant, he was permitting her to command him just to see how far she would go.

He was wrong. This was her game. Her revenge.

Buttons open, he let his fingers drop.

"You are not naked, slave."

"No."

"You have not lowered your eyes in my presence."

"No."

"You have no intention of obeying my commands."

"No."

"Then you must be punished."

"Yes."

Then he stared at her, waited for her next move.

He'd forgotten about the wand or he'd assumed she would not use it outside of her work sphere. Illegal use of wands was a serious offence. What he didn't know was that he, Elwood, had entered her working world. He was to play the major role in her next project and this time he wouldn't mess it up.

She pointed her wand at him and murmured the necessary words. Smoke rose theatrically, and when it had cleared, Elwood was on his knees, his hands handcuffed behind his back and a look of blatant surprise upon his face. It was certainly one for the records, so she snapped a picture with the backside of her wand.

"For the family album."

He sneered. "And now? You don't have the backbone to pull this off."

"Quiet, otherwise I'll have to gag you."

"I doubt you could. Because, Faerie, you'd have to get up real close to do that."

He was asking for it, that much was clear. She approached him, walked up close until she was mere inches away and he was forced to bend his neck back.

"You know what?" Her voice was low and sexy. "I think you'd like it too much. Which is why I'm not going to do it."

"I could scream."

"Why would you? Someone might come and rescue you."

He mulled the thought over in his mind and smiled. "Point taken. Are you going to keep me kneeling all evening?"

"It's a thought, isn't it, but no, it doesn't fit in with my plans."

He slid his head to one side. "You mean you planned this punishment?" He laughed. "I thought you just improvised. Elton says that you give a great blowjob. Why should I be the only one in The Valley to miss out?"

By the Great Patron Faerie of Faeries, had everyone heard about her specialty? Before she could even think, she raised her free hand and slapped him across the cheek. With horror, she stared at the red imprint that was fast forming on his pale skin. She'd man-handled a customer, no, not a customer, her future brother-in-law.

Elwood seemed not in the least offended. "I'd prefer you to whack my butt."

It was strange hearing those words out of the mouth of a being who could have doubled as an angel.

"I'm the director here, mate."

"Yeah, well, you're doing a lousy job, so I thought I'd help."

"I don't need any help" She stepped behind him and encouraged him to stand up by raising the handcuffed arms."

"Careful, you're going to break them."

"Not if you stand up fast enough."

He obeyed and, before he could protest, she pushed a chair into the back of his knees and used a second pair of handcuffs to secure him. There he sat, a gorgeous hunk of an elf with a naked chest and fully at her mercy. Really, he was a sight to behold.

With the aid of two tea towels, she anchored his feet to the chair.

Perfect.

"I underestimated you, Muriel."

She grinned at the compliment and pulled out her cell phone. As with all technical machines and appliances, its presence was illegal in The Valley, but tolerated so long as it was concealed by a spell. Muriel's took the form of a brooch in the shape of a dragon. A second spell ensured that it worked well despite the lack of a network.

Janet answered after the first ring. It didn't take a genius to guess that the woman was doing overtime to earn a few brownie points. She probably wouldn't even write up the hours.

It was time the girl learnt a few of the ropes.

"Janet, Muriel. Look, darling, I'm sorry about the way I treated you this afternoon. Hormones, you know."

"Yes, right." Janet was non-committal as always.

"Anyway, you wanted to accompany me and learn what I do?"

Elwood started to look worried, not in the least pacified by the little wave she gave him. "What the hell is going on, Muriel?"

The faerie threw him a little look of annoyance. "Quiet."

Janet's voice emerged from the small pink receiver. "Is something wrong, Muriel?"

"You could say that, Janet, but with your help, I should be able to get things back under control."

Elwood began to go distinctly pink. The gosling finally dropped. "Muriel, release me this instant."

Muriel grinned. "It's about Elwood, as you can hear."

"Elwood?"

"Yes, Elwood, you know the elf into whose eyes you were looking far too deeply this afternoon."

"He said I was fat."

The faerie looked across at the elf. "He called you fat?" Elwood had the grace to look slightly uncomfortable and began squirming in his seat. "That wasn't diplomatic, but it's his way of getting rid of unwanted attention."

"I cried all afternoon."

Muriel didn't have time for all this emotional stuff. Much as it delighted her to see the mighty torn down from their thrones and bathed in mud, she needed a strong Janet if things were to succeed. "That is understandable. Anyway, I need you here right now. Do you think you could come?"

"Where are you?"

"Elwood's place. Do you know where it is?"

"I'll find it."

"That's my girl. And don't forget your riding crop."

Ending the call, she pinned the piece back onto her bodice. "Calling her fat wasn't your best move."

Elwood continued to look at the faerie in disbelief.

She pushed his hair over his shoulder and placed a kiss on his forehead. Strange, when she kissed Elton, things began to buzz. With Elwood, there was nothing, just skin against skin. "There's nothing worse you can say to a woman from Earth. And now that woman is on her way over here."

"Let me go, Muriel. I mean it."

She tutted. "No, Elwood. That's not the way it works. I'm going to head off now. I've a meeting with someone very important, but you won't be alone for very long. I figure Janet will be here in under ten minutes and I'm going to leave a little surprise for her." She laughed and flicked back her own locks, inspected her nails and slid her wand back into its holster. "And now I think it's time to gag you — don't you agree?"

Chapter Eleven

Eventually Viv realized she was lost.

At first she did not feel in the least alarmed. Why should she? She had ranged over these woods all her life. Eventually she would find a familiar path and follow it all the way home.

Not that home was a welcoming place these days. Not having yet forgiven her for the incident with the unicorn, she doubted her parents would understand her adventure this afternoon. Not while the milk had been left to sour.

No, she would rather not go home, but she had no choice.

When the undergrowth thickened and the trees grew closer, when the moon and stars were cloaked from her view, she realized she had wandered in the wrong direction. She had never seen such a forest.

Panic came silently with the hoot of the owls and the low-flying assaults from bats. She had never spent a night outside in her life.

By all things holy, at this point she'd even welcome her brothers.

But even they would not stray into the woods at night. They were afraid of spiders and snakes.

So was she, actually.

It was not a reassuring thought.

Up ahead a wolf howled, reminding her that not all the beings in this forest were her friends. She swallowed and sought a weapon on the forest floor. Her eager fingers curled around a branch. If it came to a fight, she would not go down easily.

A man's voice cut through the darkness.

"There's no one there, Wotan. Quiet."

The wolf-like yodel broke off into dog-like groveling.

"I tell you there is nothing of interest out there. Come in and be quiet."

A final whining tone was cut off by the bang of a closing door.

Nervous, but no longer deathly afraid, Viv rose to her feet, the branch still in her hand. A human voice meant safety, warmth and food, but it could also mean something more sinister. She had not recognized the voice, but at least it had been human, not elven or dwarf or faerie.

Nor unicorn.

A swooping owl persuaded her to try out her welcome. Anything was better than spending a night out in the woods without the security of a fire.

It was a small clearing, barely large enough to harbor the house and the smaller outbuilding behind. But it was shelter and she was here. Assuming a look of confidence she did not feel, she hurried across the yard and hammered upon the door.

Inside, Wotan barked frantically. The door opened and a pair of shoulders filled out the opening.

Big.

Big but beautifully proportioned was her second impression and she doubted that she would change it. Wide shoulders, narrow hips, strong thighs, passionate face with the whiskers of a man who had forgotten to shave this morning. Eyes that, even in this light, were as green and as changeable as the forest around them. Hair and skin an indiscriminate shade of brown, as though he had been hewn from the forest floor.

Here was a man who knew what he wanted and how to get it. A dangerous man.

"Yes?"

She took a deep breath to speak, but no voice emerged.

A dog's snout shoved itself into her crotch. Glancing down in shock, she saw a dog that was larger than a small pony and a grin that could tear her apart or love her to pieces.

Just like his master.

The man put a steadying hand on the dog's ruff and looked pointedly at her.

She licked her lips, threw another nervous look at the dog and cleared her throat. What was wrong with her? A child would not act so foolishly.

"I'm lost."

A frown wrinkled his forehead while he assessed her state of dress. "Who sent you?"

Some female instinct raised her hand to push an errant strand of hair behind her ear.

"No one." And because he did not seem to believe her, she began to stumble over the events of the evening. "I was mad, I didn't look where I was going...Then it was dark and I couldn't find my way home. I found a path and it brought me here." There was no need to mention Patron Faeries and horny elves. That was a part of the story that Viv herself was only too willing to forget.

"You look human enough."

"I beg your pardon?"

Wotan, picking up his master's belligerency, growled deeply in his throat.

Viv took a step backward.

"This place cannot be found by humans. It is hidden by magic."

Magic. Again.

"I can assure you," she said with yet another step backward, "that I am not in the least magical. I am a milkmaid and nothing more. Forgive me for disturbing your evening. I'll be on my way."

"Stop!"

His words greeted her not an arm's length away from the forest edge and was accompanied by Wotan's impossible grin. The hound dog herded her back into a rock hard chest and a shock that struck her dumb. Not a shock at the sturdiness of his chest—although there was that—no, a real thread of pure lightning that surged through her body and disappeared as abruptly as it had arrived. It had hurt and it hadn't, but in any case, it had had the feel of magic about it.

Wrenching herself away from the source of her discomfort, she stopped when she realized he was as stunned as she. Whatever it was, whatever had struck them at that moment of contact, was as strange and unexpected for him as it had been for her.

"I think we should go inside and discuss this, don't you? Oh, and you can leave that branch outside."

His house was rudimentary, smaller than her own and with a large stone fireplace dominating the main room. It was ensconced in front of this fire, with bowls of thick venison stew in their hands, that he began his questioning.

"So tell me, young Vivienne of Hogsmeade Farm, how is it that a milkmaid finds her way through the Enchanted Forest to the magically concealed home of a ranger?"

"Enchanted Forest?" The spoon fell from her suddenly lifeless hand into the bowl. "But...that's impossible."

The Enchanted Forest was the most feared property in all The Valley. It was said that those who ventured in never returned and Viv believed it. Despite the abundance of wild game inside the boundaries, even the most daring of poachers left it alone.

"Yes."

"The Enchanted Forest is over a day's march away from the Hot Springs. There is no way that I could have traveled so far."

"No." He ladled another spoon of the rich stew into her bowl, carefully avoiding any skin contact. "Not unless you used magic. So what exactly are you?"

"I am a virgin."

She regretted her words the moment his rolling laughter filled the room. Blood rushed to her face and she stared fixedly into her bowl so he could not see her blush.

"It's nothing to laugh about, I'll have you know."

He sobered immediately. "No, I guess at your age, it wouldn't be. You are no longer the youngest."

"I'm only twenty-five."

"Really? So old? I thought you younger. Are you sure you do not have Other blood."

"No. I am human. My parents are human and so too are my brothers."

"Harald of Hogsmeade Farm..." He considered the names she gave him. "Definitely human." The derogatory manner in which he spoke Da's name seeped through to Viv. She sat up straight and looked him directly in the eye.

"Who are *you* to judge my parents, to judge me? You haven't even told me *your* name."

He took the bowl away from her hand, but gave her no answer. Instead he busied himself with the pouring of mead and settled a tankard into her hand. "Drink."

The honeyed drink was delicious, but despite his intention to the contrary, it did not divert her from her question.

"Who are you?"

"A ranger."

"Without a name?"

"To know one's name is to hold power over them."

"For which one would need the magic I do not possess."

He smiled and toasted her with his tankard. "And the bolt of lightning outside? That did not come from me and therefore I will reserve judgment on the question of your magic until a later time. Until then, you may call me Baltram as others do."

She puzzled at his answer. "Is that not your name?"

"It is one of my names, and for now it will suffice."

"And what are you? You look human enough."

His own words, thrust back at him, caused him to laugh. "I am human...for the most part."

And that was all she was going to get out of him. She could tell in the way he held himself, in the way his eyes held hers.

"We will sleep now."

Sleep? Viv didn't think she would be able to sleep anywhere in the vicinity of this man. He was simply too large, too commanding and he sucked all the air out of the room so she could not breathe.

"I will sleep here upon the hearth," she said, "if you have a blanket to spare."

He shook his head. "You are my guest and you will sleep in my bed."

"But I cannot force you from your bed."

"Then I will share it with you."

The breath caught in her throat and she gulped it down with an audible noise. "But I can't do that."

With a light pressure from his fingers, he lifted her chin so that she was forced to stare into those strange green eyes. "Are you afraid, Viv?"

Very much so, both of him and of her traitorous body, but before she could share her answer with him, heat flashed away from her chin and spread through her body.

Definitely pleasurable this time.

"What the fuck?" He released her, staring at his fingers as though he had never before seen them. "What gift of magic was that?"

She shook her head and stumbled onto her feet. "It wasn't me."

"And it wasn't me."

They stared at one another, combatants with hastily drawn boundaries, neither believing the words of the other.

"But it felt good." He gave her a wolfish grin that reminded Viv of Wotan. Two wild beasts who lived in the middle of an enchanted forest.

"Yes."

When he finally turned away to bank up the fire, Viv sighed with a sense of loss. It physically hurt not to see his face and the urge to reach out and stroke his back was so strong that she grasped one fist in the other.

Damn magic.

"Go to bed, Viv. I will follow later."

The bedroom was not difficult to find. It was the only other room in the hut and was filled with the largest bed Viv had ever seen. But Baltram was a large man. In his arms, pulled tight against that massive chest, a woman would feel protected. There would be no room for fear in her life. What must it feel like to be allied to a man who would give his all to protect her? The thought made Viv shiver and she was not certain it was a good feeling.

She sat down on the bed, feeling tiny against its vastness. She tried to picture Baltram lying there, his arms and legs spread out in sleep. Yes she could imagine him filling out the area completely. Any woman who joined him there would find herself covered by some part of his body. This time her limbs shivered in pleasant anticipation, imagining his hand against her stomach, his legs intermingled with her own and his breath in her hair. She closed her eyes, suppressing a groan.

"Shall I help you with your gown?"

She hadn't heard him return, not a single foot fall. And he accused her of magic.

"My gown?"

He struck a match and lit another couple of candles to augment the light from the fire in the next room. "Surely you do not mean to sleep in your clothes?"

Yes, how had she forgotten? He had sent her to this room to ready herself for sleep and she had done nothing but fantasize about him. She looked down at her workday

dress. Countless washings had rendered it grey without removing the number of stains. And there was another problem, one he could not have guessed. "I am not wearing anything under it."

His indrawn hiss was loud, but he made no comment and for that she was grateful. Rooting around in a large chest that took up the entire space between bed and far wall, he shoved a soft linen shirt into her hand. It was well-worn, but the quality was still plain to see. "Wear that. It will suffice."

"Thank you, you are too kind."

"Not really."

She rose her gaze to him, seeing a heat in his that warmed her private parts better than any fire. She moistened her lips to speak but no tone came out.

"Don't look at me like that," he growled. "The thought of you lying naked next to me is almost enough to test my self-control but the want in your face would have me break my promise to myself, throw you down on this bed and fuck you senseless."

Shocked, Viv dropped her eyes immediately, seeking comfort from the feel of his shirt between her fingers. She tried to find something to say, something scathing or hurtful. But for the life of her, the only words she wanted to yell were "yes" and again "yes".

Maybe he took her silence as a sign of disgust, for his next words were softer again, as though he had gained some control over his raging beast. "But I made a promise to myself not to touch you and I shall keep it if you so desire. But I must warn you there is only so much that even the strongest of men can take."

In the silence that ensued, she dared to meet his eyes and gasped. Sense told her that the flames she saw there were but a reflection of the candles and yet, she would swear they originated from him.

Desire, pure unadulterated desire for her.

She had been staring too long and too hard. Only a fool would fail to see her own desire, her own longing for Baltram. She should look away, but the fresh green of his eyes promised a haven, a paradise. "I wish Muriel was here."

"Muriel? Muriel?" Whatever he intended to say was lost in a rolling laugh that had him sag down onto the bed beside her. Another glance her way and he fell into another fit of laughter.

"I'm sorry," he said when he had finally gained control of himself and laid a hand on Viv's arm to reassure her.

Zing. The magic spark was still there.

Viv tried to move away, but a gentle pressure said he wouldn't permit her to move, while her traitorous body asked her why she would ever entertain the thought of escape. Her body liked being zinged.

"It's just Muriel..." He choked on another laugh and ended up shaking his head. "You're the girl Muriel wanted me to f—ahem, I mean, make love to."

"Fuck is fine." The blood shot into her face and she wished fervently that the night would simply vanish and she would awake with her head ensconced on Daisy the cow's flank. If only this were yet another of her daydreams. "I mean, yes, Muriel was helping me."

His hand on her arm began to move. It was a comforting gesture, it was also warming her up no end so that she wanted to throw herself into his arms and hide her face in his chest. "Typical Muriel to mess up everything so completely."

"Do you suppose that it was Muriel who helped me through the woods?"

He placed his head to one side. "Muriel could bring someone with her, but she could not send them alone. Her magic just isn't that strong—but don't tell her that, I'd rather retain my balls."

"And this zingy thing?"

"Zingy thing?"

"The way we feel when we touch?"

"Ah yes, I see what you mean with zingy thing. No, that is definitely top echelon magic. There's no way that Muriel could produce that sort of effect. No, if I had to guess, I would say that the Fates are weaving a special cloth for us to wear."

The Fates! Her dreams! How could she have forgotten? Hadn't they promised her a man who was good and kind and big? He was definitely big and despite his initial suspicion, he had been nothing but gentle to her.

"If my guess is true, one of the gods has taken a special interest in our futures. Our destinies are being altered as we speak and resistance is pointless."

"Resistance is pointless." It sounded good to her. It sounded better than good. His lips were so close and so warm and she wanted him to kiss her with every ounce of her being.

"Indeed." And then he kissed her.

Finally.

His lips were far softer than she could ever have imagined and his stubble tickled against her chin. Gently, he urged her mouth open, nudged her lips, stroked her tongue until she was panting and aching for more. She even whimpered when he pulled away.

"Please..."

"The gods want this, Vivienne, for whatever selfish reason. I doubt they were thinking of our pleasure, of our needs, when they decided this. If we tread this path, we may never return to what we were. And the path they send us on, may indeed be dangerous. You must choose."

Vivienne thought of the farm, of days of exhausting work, hungry winters and the ever-present criticism of her brothers. She thought of her desire for change, for something beyond the everyday churn of work, her wish to be needed and desired and, dare she hope it, to be loved. This man had given her more in the last hour than anyone else in all her life to date.

"I don't want to go back to that. I choose you."

His groan was painful to hear and not what she expected. His hands on her buttons were more promising. "You don't know what that means."

"Yes, I do," she assured him, pulling his shirt from his breeches. "I've been having lessons all week."

Buttons came away in his hands and fell to the wooden floor unheeded. Her bodice slipped down over her shoulders and caught at her elbows. There was no chance of exposing her breasts while her hands were in his breeches, but Viv just couldn't pull away. She had to touch the naked skin of this man or go crazy.

"If we let the gods into our lives, there will be all hell to pay. We should resist." He himself resisted all of a heartbeat before he took a handful of fabric in each hand and tore it all the way down to her waist. Her breasts were in his hands before Viv could protest at the destruction of her garment. She had never felt anything similar in her entire life. His skin was rough and gentle at the same time and her nipples stiffened eagerly in his palms.

"Perfect, just perfect."

His mouth clamped over one proud pink nipple, effectively rendering any further speech incomprehensible while his hands and body guided her back onto the bed. She urged him on, arched her spine to keep close to him while her own hands worked ineffectively on his garments.

Naked, she had to get him naked or suffer the consequences.

But whilst he had solved the dilemma of her gown with male strength, she had to be satisfied with the flesh she could reach beneath his shirt, the muscled back and massive shoulders. It was not enough. She wanted, nay needed, to get closer to this man. Or truly she would die.

"The gods be damned..."

It was the only phrase he brought out before finding her second nipple and bringing it as much pleasure as its twin. So hot.

"Please," she murmured, clutching his head to her wanton breast and grinding upward against his body. "I need you naked. Naked. Please."

Chapter Twelve

Janet stared at the phone in her hand. She wasn't a fool, there had to be a reason why Muriel was ringing her and it wasn't because of work experience. Janet knew that faeries were small, mischievous and fascinated by sex. Garald had made that clear the moment he had signed her on. He'd also told her she'd need a particularly thick skin to last even a week. Well, she'd lasted four months and she was determined to hold on for at least that long again. The Ministry needed her, whether or not they were aware of the fact.

They'd still written their reports by hand when she'd arrived. They'd used fountain pens and ink, for goodness sake. And the archives! The archives were just as disorganized as Muriel's office!

Of all the faeries, Muriel had been the hardest nut to crack. The faerie was convinced that she didn't need to change in the least. She ignored every memo placed on her desk, read glossy magazines rather than mail, spent more time on her nails than on her reports, missed meetings and basically did as she pleased.

And everyone forgave her. That was the fact that Janet couldn't stomach. Why did everyone love a female who was a walking disaster? Why did Garald not read her the Levites, or at least permit Janet to do so? It just wasn't fair that Muriel had long blonde hair and pale wings of overwhelming beauty. It wasn't fair that she had a magic wand and unlimited credit. It wasn't fair that she had an elf as a lover.

No one looked at Janet the same way they looked at Muriel. Janet wasn't even sure that they noticed her at all. With her bun and glasses, people scarcely looked at her twice. And Muriel hated her, of that Janet was sure.

On the other hand, here was the perfect opportunity to prove her worth, and at the home of Elwood, no less. Her body was still tingling from the aftermath of her encounter with him. Of course, Muriel had interfered and chased him away, but at least he had seen her hidden beauty, if at least for a short time.

Then he'd ruined it all by calling her fat.

Bastard.

She looked down at her jeans and t-shirt—they weren't really the sort of clothing to impress, but on the other hand, Muriel had sounded slightly out of breath. Janet bit her lip. The whole matter had seemed urgent, she'd better go and hope that her clothing was not unsuitable. Her keys were lying on the commode next to the door. She already had them in her hand when she realized she didn't have the code for the elf's house.

Traveling through the dimensions was a simple experience once you had the technique down pat. Faeries, sprites and elves, being at home between the various strands of the universe, were able to navigate their way around by sheer willpower.

The rest of the worlds' inhabitants were forced to use the slower, mathematical equation. It was, Janet thought as she tapped the necessary information into her PDA, quite an incentive to pay attention at school, because any miscalculation resulted in transfer to an unsavory place which closely resembled Dante's hell. Satisfied that she wasn't going to end up in a roaring fire this time, Janet transferred the equation into her key via Bluetooth. Now all she needed to do was push the button and "poof."

"Poof", the interim between places, was something that Janet would never get used to. The first time she had traveled in such a manner, she had thrown up. Now, every time she reached the interim with its swirling nothingness where neither gravity nor physics had any hold, she feared that her vomit would return to haunt her.

It didn't. Not this time. With a noiseless "plop", she landed on the grass outside Elwood's residence. It was the first time that she had entered The Valley. The faeries had made it clear that this was not a place for her, as if faeries knew everything, the arrogant little so-and-sos.

Not that this place looked any different from Janet's own dimension. Cleaner, greener and certainly more wholesome than New York, but she could imagine that there were similar places elsewhere on Earth.

Maybe England, perhaps, or Connecticut or some other out of the way place.

Elwood's house, for instance, was the sort of place that rich people built for weekends. A crazy type of treehouse that fitted perfectly into the environment.

She hadn't suspected that Elwood had that type of money. It reminded her of the huge difference between her fellow students at Harvard, who had all had retreats, while she, the scholarship recipient, had spent her summers in the library.

There was no sign of Muriel, but that was no surprise. The faerie wouldn't even think of coming out and greeting her. Not that it mattered. She found the staircase and began to climb. Five minutes later, fully out of breath and dizzy from the strain of climbing fifty stairs a minute, she arrived in front of a wooden door. She knocked and waited. There was no reply, so she knocked again.

Still no answer.

Typical. Muriel had moved on and forgotten to tell Janet where she was going. The whole thing was a hoax designed to humiliate the outsider.

Then the door swung open—all by itself. The matter would have been scary had Janet not been used to magic.

"Hello, Muriel? Are you there? Hello?"

She walked inside. There was no one in the hall nor in the kitchen. She even checked the toilet and the downstairs bathroom, both of which, she noted, were

violations of the technology transfer rule. No wonder the faeries didn't want her to visit The Valley. They probably had such illegal depositories all over the place.

From overhead, a vague tapping noise traveled down the stairwell. It sounded almost like branches on the window. Hell, it probably was but curiosity to see the rest of Elwood's house, urged her on. What could it hurt?

There were no branches at the window, that was Janet's first thought as she entered the brightly lit living area. Her second thought was, *what in hell am I wearing?* Gone were the jeans and t-shirt she'd slipped on at home. A black leather corset that looked vaguely familiar had replaced them. It didn't take Janet long to realize she had seen an almost identical version strapped around Muriel's body often enough.

What the hell was going on here?

The corset was teamed up with a pair of knickers that were edged in down feathers, a stark contrast to the fishnet stockings and the over the knee stiletto boots. Her riding crop was still in her hand, along with her handbag.

She ditched the handbag and kept the crop. A weapon was always a good idea.

Her third thought concerned the elf who was tied up to a chair and looking as though he might explode. It was he who had been the cause of the thumping noise as he attempted to break free of his bonds.

"What is going on here?"

His eyeballs bulged and incomprehensible words emerged from around his gag.

"Are you responsible for the spell on the door?"

This time she could swear he swore, but the tea towel muffled most of the words. "Because this isn't the sort of get-up I wear. I don't go in for the slutty look, so if you don't mind, I'd like my normal clothes back."

He turned red and beamed bad vibes in her general direction. Janet was fortunately immune. "If I take off your gag, would you help me?" He nodded, closed his eyes and then opened them again.

The knot on the tea towel was tighter than expected. She wrestled with it ineffectively before admitting defeat.

"Sorry, can't do it."

He looked at her in disbelief and rolled his eyes around. Strangely enough, he was still attractive, maybe even more so than this afternoon.

His blue eyes were so very bright...

"That doesn't mean that I'm giving up, of course," she said as she forced her mind back to the issue at hand. She'd try again just as soon as she'd hitched up the front of this slutty corset. Speaking of which, her boobs looked huge. A 'C' was not, strictly speaking, small but then again it wasn't normally in the Pamela Anderson league.

"Do you think there's a push-up bra in here?" she asked Elwood while she prodded around in her bodice. "One of those wonderthings?"

But the elf was being extremely unhelpful. He rocked the chair a few inches across the wooden floor, his face still a bad shade of red. Selfish, that's what he was. Here she was wondering about a possible further illegal spell and all he could think about was himself. "I was only asking. There is no need to be so rude. I'll just find something in the kitchen."

The pair of scissors she eventually unearthed were of no assistance whatsoever. "Well," she reported eventually after assessing the situation. "I could cut behind the knot, but I'd be likely to take a fair bit of hair as well."

He shook his head vehemently. His hair was truly magnificent. Whatever products he used to make it shine like the wing of a raven, would be worth its weight in gold back on earth.

It might even help her own limp brown offering.

"You don't want to risk your hair?" He nodded his head.

"You do want me to cut your hair?" He shook his head so that the tendrils flew.

"Well, make up your mind." She stood in front of him with her hands on her hips. "Shall I cut your hair?" She enunciated each word carefully so that there could be no misunderstanding.

He shook his head slowly.

"Okay. I won't cut your hair." His relief was tangible.

"Well, if the scissors won't work, I'll have to use a knife, then."

Again he shook his head. Honestly, the elf didn't seem to know what he wanted at all. Janet decided it was time to take the lead. "Look, I'm going to use a knife and you are going to sit still." She leaned forward and smiled at him. "You wouldn't want me to cut off those beautiful ears, would you?" To demonstrate what she meant, she ran her finger along the tip of one. "I've always found elven ears to be fascinating. They are so beautifully formed and..."

He moaned.

She looked at him in disbelief and then at her hand.

Just to be sure, she stroked him again, this time tracing the length of his ear and watching his face at the same time. There could be no doubt that she was causing him serious pleasure. His eyes stilled and his naked chest flushed with color. And in his trousers, his cock stirred.

Janet was still a virgin, a disgraceful state in which to be, considering she had attended college with a number of horny young men. Between jobs and study, however, she seemed to have found no time to develop a relationship. She hadn't even had time for a quickie between classes. She had wanted to, especially with a certain long-haired lout who had majored in fucking with a minor in partying. He, however, hadn't noticed her and the fellow nerds who had realized, between computer shutdowns and startups, that she was a woman hadn't measured up to her expectations.

Why should she settle for anything but the best?

She was an old maid at twenty-eight with no hope of rectification except for this bound elf in front of her. The smile she sent in his direction was as old as mankind itself. Who was she to reject what the Fates had dropped into her lap?

Speaking of laps, his was burgeoning quite nicely. With an eager hand, she brushed his bulge. "What's this?" As far as pick-up lines went, it was unoriginal and downright ludicrous, but she didn't care in the least. She was running the show. All tied up, there was no way that he could stop her. He couldn't even talk.

"Do I actually want you to talk?"

He glared at her, his eyebrows drawing close together.

"I mean, I quite like you available and aroused. It turns me on in a way I would never have expected" Her hand found the buttons on his trousers and the scissors in her hand, clattered forgotten to the floor.

"And you called me fat this afternoon." She inserted one hand beneath the waistband while her second wrestled with the button. "That's not a word I want to hear."

The button came free and she targeted the second one. "You're going to make up for all the pain and degradation I've been forced to suffer since I took on this job." She stopped and considered her words for a moment, enjoying the sensation of her fingers on the warm skin of his groin. Wouldn't you know, the elf wasn't wearing any sort of underwear. Wow. "In fact, you are going to make up for all the suffering I've ever had to suffer at the hands of the male race."

A shake of the head displayed his reluctance to participate, but Janet didn't care. If anything, his staged reluctance made her all the keener. Wriggling her fingers around in their golden cage, she brought her face to within a hairsbreadth of his and whispered. "Do you really think that I care what you want? No one has ever cared about me and my needs, and you know what, buster? Tonight I'm not going to think about anyone but myself."

She flipped open the third button and let her fingers wander to the hard shaft that fought valiantly for space. "My, you are built, aren't you? I'm so glad I didn't find myself a dud because, you know what? If I'm going to get fucked today, then I really want to know it. When I sit down, I want to feel tired and strained muscles for a week."

Button number four.

"And you know what amazes me? Or perhaps it shouldn't amaze me at all after the innuendoes Muriel was making this afternoon. You're still hard." She let the final button pop out of its hole and admired the hairless sight of an elven crotch before seeking out his cock with an eager hand.

Freed from restraint, his cock rallied skyward in a twelve o'clock position. Janet sat back on her heels and admired the perfect organ. The length, width and proportion would have done any of the old masters proud, and to top it all off, he had no hair. She recalled how the other girls, the ones with rich daddies, had always complained about

hair between their teeth or, even worse, the impossible tickling of one in the throat. There would be no risk here.

"Really, any normal guy would be having a seizure by now. But look at you – tied up, gagged, naked chest, exposed sex and your cock is so hard that you could hammer in the proverbial nails with it." She reached out and encircled him with her hand, pressing down with her thumb on the perfect heart at the top.

"You know what, Elwood? I think you are enjoying this too much." He responded with a vehement shaking of his head and a wiggling of his bottom.

"I prefer to believe the evidence in hand."

His eyes narrowed and he glared at her.

"What's wrong, elf-boy? Can't take what you dish out?" She giggled, surprised at finding the sound in her repertoire at all. "I didn't know that cocks could be so hard and so soft at the same time. What a contrast." Under her administrations, a pearl of semen had appeared on top. She used her finger to smear the moisture further.

Elwood groaned and rolled his eyes around.

"Do you like that? You know what?"

The elf wasn't interested in anything she had to say, but as he couldn't close his ears, he had to listen anyway. "I think I like it too. Playing with your dick is causing my insides to melt into a pile of goo. Or maybe it's because you're tied up. You know, I stole a wonderful book from that mess that Muriel calls an office. It was all about kinky stuff. And you know what?"

He still wasn't interested in listening, but on the other hand, he was still tied up and harder than hard. "That stuff really turned me on."

A wild look of alarm appeared on his face and she stroked his cock gently to reassure him. "Not all that really violent stuff, but the other stuff, the bondage and humiliation. That really got me going."

A cramp in her leg forced her to stand up. She circled around him, slipped her arms around his neck, let her hands wander across his chest and then rested her head on his shoulder. "Your chest is just a tad on the skinny side, but I guess, being an elf, that you can hold out more than most humans. Shall we try?" She underlined her request with a kiss on the lobe of his ear, pulled it into her mouth and sucked on it hard. He shuddered and she laughed.

"But first, we need to get those darn trousers off." Crouching back down at his feet, she lifted the fabric. The quality fairly screamed its designer origins. "Tut, tut, Elwood – have we been breaking the 'No Transfer of Goods between Dimensions Rule'? That could get you into one hell of a lot of trouble with the powers that be. A word in Garald's ear and..."

He had beautiful calves and equally beautiful leather boots on his feet. These were the work of skilled elves and in the top was an equally well-worked knife.

"What's this, O-elf-of-every-girl's-dream? Don't tell me that this is the knife that you kiss?"

She was getting good at reading his expressions and this one was a how-the-hell-do-you-know-look. Janet shrugged her shoulders. "You know how it is in the Ministry—the girl told the unicorn and the unicorn told Garald. Garald managed to keep it secret for all of about five minutes. Not many people go around kissing their knives. Although..." She leaned forward in a conspiratorial manner and spoke, "some of us thought it might mean that you kissed your cock. Now that would be interesting."

Janet slid the knife out of the ankle holster and held it up. Well balanced, it was a blade used for throwing, with a polish and sharpness that betrayed the attention lavished upon it by its owner. "Looks awfully sharp."

A devil of an idea caused her lips to curl. She slid the knife under the fabric of one leg and, irreverent of how much the designer garment had cost, she let the knife slice through. The fabric could have been butter left out in the sun for all the resistance it gave. Elwood squirmed in his seat.

"Do keep still, darling. I wouldn't want to hurt you." He closed his eyes in response, every muscle in his body tense.

"You wouldn't be afraid of this little ole' knife now, would you? Or is it me?" The knife arrived in the delicate crotch position. It certainly was a good thing that his organ was pressing against his stomach, because its former home had now been decimated. In order to ease the way over the tighter areas, Janet lifted up the fabric with her free hand and guided the knife centimeter by centimeter. She didn't really want to injure this male whom the gods had so generously dropped into her lap.

The second leg of the trousers went the way of the first, leaving him as naked as the gods had intended.

As naked as Janet wanted him.

"You sure are one hell of a sexy elf."

His erection had wilted just the slightest and now pointed at her in an accusatory way, head partially enclosed by his foreskin

"Now I wonder why that happened? Is it because I'm holding a knife close to your balls? Or is it because you are afraid for your knife?" She put her head to one side and considered removing the gag. It had been fun until now, but really, she needed to kiss him, to thrust her tongue into his mouth and explore the warmth inside. There was, however, a good chance that he might bite her and she didn't want to risk it. Not yet.

"So how about if I put this knife back where it belongs?"

He relaxed visibly as soon as the beloved object was inserted back into the top of his boot. His biceps no longer strained in an attempt to free himself. Or was it his triceps? Never having been able to afford a fitness club, Janet wasn't that well informed about the male physique.

His cock remained at attention. That was surely the most important thing.

"I didn't realize that elves could wilt. You know, I've heard the most amazing things about them, but obviously the reality is somewhat lacking."

His muscles tensed up again and his cock gave a little jump of protest. Laughing, Janet leaned forward and took him into her mouth. Just because she hadn't been with a man didn't mean that she knew nothing about sex. She'd read so many manuals in her time that she could probably write her own.

She just needed practice.

The reality was different; sexier, harder, softer. How could you describe colors to a blind man? And the taste of him! The heat! She sucked him into her mouth and he rose a few centimeters from the seat, a moan escaping from around the gag. Pain or pleasure, she couldn't be sure, but his cock was hard and she was enjoying herself. Her tongue sought out the tiny slit on top of his crown, seeking more of the delicious tasting cum. An explosion of aniseed balls and sweetness filled her mouth. Perfection. Letting him fall from her mouth, she explored the prominent blue vein, liking the way his organ bobbed and twitched, his moans.

She liked it all.

Dipping her head, she sucked in as much as she could take, until he prodded her throat, and she promised herself she would learn to deep throat if it was the last thing she did. But right now she couldn't, so she had to be satisfied with encircling the rest with her hand and finding a rhythm that satisfied them both.

Power, yes. She felt powerful and she liked it.

Eventually, though, she'd had enough. She didn't want him to come yet and there was so much more left to explore. First on her list was the gentle weight of his balls. Soft and smooth, she had never felt anything so good. Best of all, he mewled like a kitten when she stroked them just right.

Whether he wanted to be or not, the man was a great teacher until he realized she had no intention of bringing him off. He stopped groaning and pinned her with a glare.

It didn't faze her in the least.

"Well, that was kind of fun, wasn't it? Only I'm not going to let you come until I've come myself, at least once." Her hands skimmed over her leather-enclosed curves until she reached the silk knickers below the corset. Dropping her finger, she rubbed it over her clit in a leisurely manner until the moisture began to seep through the fabric. Elwood, she was pleased to see, was fascinated by the show.

"You have a thing about knickers, haven't you? Well, you can have this pair—they're well and truly ready for the wash." She inserted her fingers in the side of the lingerie and then laughed. "Oh, silly me. How can I get them off when I'm wearing this garter belt?" She shook her head and pretended to think. "I know—I'll have to borrow your knife again."

This time his erection didn't wilt as she reached for the knife. It pressed boldly against his navel, the naked head flush with blood. Such a pretty shade of pink.

Since he liked it so much, she made a show of cutting the silk, grateful that Muriel had given her shorties rather than a tanga. Wiping the silken rag over her crotch once more, she threw it in Elwood's direction.

It landed on his nose. He looked ridiculous, but instead of shaking it aside, he stayed very still and breathed in her scent.

It made Janet want to groan.

"My, you are hopelessly perverted, aren't you?"

He didn't respond in the least, his attention centered on the piece of silk covering his face.

He started in surprise as soon as she mounted his legs, sliding forward until his cock was squashed between their stomachs. The knickers slipped from his face and into the generous décolleté of her corset. He murmured sounds that might have been "By the Goddess, you're heavy" or maybe it was a curse in his tongue. Janet preferred to think it went more along the lines of "By the Goddess, you're beautiful." So she kissed him just to say thank you.

Truth to tell, it wasn't much of a kiss. It was certainly difficult to have a satisfactory kiss when the other person's face was stuffed full of cloth, but Janet played with those delicious lips that tasted of wild strawberries with just a touch of lime. And so long as he was gagged, there was no risk of him biting her.

He, on the other hand, wasn't looking quite so happy – although his cock was still telling a different story. Just to show her appreciation, she stroked it a few times to keep it happy and hard.

"Do you know what I intend to do with this wonderful piece of manliness?" She'd actually meant to say man-meat, but the word just hadn't made it out of her mouth. It seemed that her mother's upbringing had left behind the desired effect. Doomed to be a lady, even in moments of great sluttiness.

"I'm going to mount it and ride it and there is nothing you can do about it."

Another moan—he really did like the idea of being a prisoner of lust. Mmm, Prisoner of Lust, now that would be a great name for a book. Not that anyone would ever believe that Janet had held an elf prisoner against his will.

"The unpleasant part is that I'm still a virgin." His nostrils flared a little. "I know, I know, virgins are not your thing. It's written on your visiting card, for heaven's sake. But I don't really care. I've made it more than clear that I desire satisfaction today. So you're just going to have to put up with it."

A little nervous despite her brave words, Janet stood up and positioned the swollen head of his cock to her entrance. She knew that it was supposed to hurt the first time, but the reports from both reliable and unreliable sources had shown vast discrepancies on the amount of pain and blood involved. And it wasn't as though Elwood *Virgins-are-not-my-thing* would have a great deal of experience in the area.

His cock didn't seem to mind, seeking to enter her every time her pussy passed.

She did it the favor, slipped him in a few millimeters and then a few centimeters. It was a strange feeling as he stretched her, her muscles enclosing around him, tighter than a fitted glove. A few more inches and he reached her barrier. An unpleasant sensation spread out along her womb and she winced. She contemplated stopping, but then two hands appeared on her hips and pulled her down.

She screamed in pain, one long loud note that faded away to nothingness.

Then the hands were upon her hair, fingers that pulled out the pins in her bun and let her tresses down from their imprisonment. Hands that massaged her scalp as lips fastened upon her own and kissed her expertly.

Janet began to melt at the same time as her brain warned her to be careful. Somehow, Elwood had escaped his confinement. If that wasn't enough of a miracle, he touched her as though he meant business, pleasurable business.

Shoving the front of her corset downward, he slid his hands over her aching breasts and followed closely with his mouth. Desire exploded as he pulled one aching nipple into his mouth and sucked hard.

If sex was this good, why had she waited so long?

His roughness excited Janet, as did the hands on her butt. Talk about a one way ticket to heaven and back.

"You wanted to ride me, I'm waiting."

His voice was elven low and elven sexy in her ear.

"I'm not sure how."

"Don't give me that foolishness. You were confident up until now – don't turn into a spineless ninny, otherwise I'll throw you out my front door."

He was right, she had coped well and she had no intention of leaving this place without a good fuck. She contemplated what Lou Paget, the author of her favorite sex manual, would suggest in this situation, although she seriously doubted that Lou Paget had ever been fucked by an elf.

Poor Lou!

Friction was probably the word of the moment. She needed to correct a suitable amount of friction in her vagina and that meant movement. She tensed her vaginal muscles experimentally.

"Yes," her partner muttered. "Do that again."

Doing that again was strenuous. There had to be an easier method. She pulled in her stomach muscles and pushed her pelvis against his, thrusting forward as though she were a man and he the woman.

"Try circular motions."

Which took even more muscle control than her previous attempt. She could see that if she were to keep the upper hand in sex, she would need to get a little bit fitter. Her feet caught on the crossbeams of the chair, raising her knees and providing her with an object against which to apply pressure. It worked well. Janet began and, more

importantly, was able to keep up a rhythm that had her insides turning outward and her outward melting away all together. His hands on her hips, Elwood pulled her closer and raised his hips at the same time so that he went as deep as possible.

Janet came with a scream that would have attracted the attention of the police had any been around. The orgasm took her by surprise. It also made her speechless.

And boneless.

It was like nothing else on earth.

Elwood thrust into her another couple of times and joined her.

It was the best sex that Janet had ever had.

It was the only sex that Janet had ever had.

Hot breath ticked her ear, pleasantly warm and sexy. A devil inside her sated self encouraged her to turn her head ever so slightly and bite his lobe. He shivered in pleasure. "Beast."

She continued to caress his back. He grappled with the ties on the back of her corset.

Eventually Janet found her voice. "How did you get free?"

"I come from a long line of smiths. Influencing metal is in my blood. It just took me a while to figure it out. I'm not exactly in practice and a naughty wench kept sidetracking me." He held up his hands to show where the metal had thinned in the middle of the chain, leaving two cuffs to decorate his arms.

"And when exactly did you come free?"

"Round about the time you cut off your knickers. That was sexy."

She laughed and hid her face in his shoulder. He was, she realized, growing harder inside her. "But you didn't say a word."

He lifted her as easily as a box of feathers and headed off across the room. "And spoil the fun? No way."

Chapter Thirteen

Big.

Bertram was big.

Well, of course big men were bound to be well endowed, it stood to reason, but Viv stared all the same. For a moment, she forgot all about her craving to lick him all over.

He was also hairy.

His chest was covered in a brown fur which faded to a faint trickle on his stomach before thickening into a v-shaped nest of coarse brown hair. She was beginning to see why the women at the market had been so overjoyed at the thought of hairless cocks. If he demanded a suck job, she was really going to get hair in her mouth. Maybe he wouldn't want one. Maybe only elves liked that sort of thing.

She'd cross that hurdle when she came to it.

"You're huge."

Bertram's breeches slid from his hand to the floor. He stared down at the piece of anatomy in question. "Longer than some, thicker than most."

"I really don't think it will fit."

She crossed her legs and pulled down the skirt of her dress over her knees just in case he thought of checking personally. It was rather a foolish gesture, considering that her breasts were uncovered, her bodice mere rags about her waist, her lust a tangible scent.

He scowled and took a step toward the bed. "It will fit, my love."

"Love?"

"Aye, love."

Viv had daydreamed of falling in love, dreams which had centered around a certain singing elf. She hadn't expected to fall for a man at all, certainly not one of his ilk.

Not a big and hairy one.

And not so fast.

"I'm scared."

He stopped and frowned. "And you think I am not? Until this evening, my life was ordered and fairly predictable and then the gods send my True Love and I don't know why. I only know my body desires yours so strongly that the only thing I can think of is sinking my cock into your luscious cavern—and now you're sitting there with crossed legs and telling me you've changed your mind." He paused and stroked his cock. "I don't think that's an option, Viv, not unless you lock me up in shackles, and even then, I might find a way out. I have to have you."

"Oh."

"Indeed."

"I think I feel the same way. It's just I'm a ..."

"Virgin," he finished for her. "I think the whole Valley knows that by now."

"And this is going awfully fast."

He stroked his cock thoughtfully. "I don't think stopping is an option. Whatever god is orchestrating this deal may up the odds and you will find yourself wild with desire—"

"I'm pretty wild already."

"And thrust yourself upon me with such passion that you end up hurting yourself."

She thought about his words. They sounded reasonable, as reasonable as any words could sound when her body was singing its need in a loud and demanding manner. "That doesn't sound good."

"No."

"So what do you suggest?"

"That I take you while I still have some will power left, that you trust me to bring you pleasure, that you let me love you as well as I can."

He was close enough to touch, but merely stood there at the end of the bed, cock hard and purple, his clenched fists showing the strength of his self control.

Tentatively from her perch on the bed, Viv raised her hand, sensed the magic that pulsed between their skin and sighed. He was right with his words; whatever this charm, whatever this spell, it was becoming stronger the longer they waited. She had to touch him.

Zing.

Embedded within the hair on his chest, she found a nipple that seemed every bit as receptive to touch as her own. She stroked it to a tiny peak and then, without even thinking, dropped her head and licked. The hair tickled her tongue.

His groan was reward enough. Her stomach fluttered, clenched, desired more. She liked this sense of power.

"If it is your intention to torture me unduly, then truly you have succeeded."

"Shall I stop?"

"No, my love, for that would be certain death."

She knew what he was talking about. Only with touch, only by pleasuring him, could she reduce her own longing. She had to touch him, *had to*. Her hands sank lower, further and then stopped on his hips.

His cock stared at her accusingly. He was so big, she doubted her hand could fully encompass him, but she wanted to try just to see. No, not just to see, she wanted to bring Baltram pleasure and she knew that he was waiting, waiting for her to make the first move.

Finally she stretched out a finger and ran it down his length. "Strong," she whispered. "Strong and hard, yet soft at the same time. So different from..." She hesitated and stopped before she let slip Elwood's name. "I mean, so different from anything else."

He bent down and placed a kiss on her lips. "Muriel spoke to me, I know about Elwood. Forget it. It is of no importance. The elf is of no importance."

"Teach me how to pleasure you, Baltram. Show me."

He groaned and closed his eyes. When he reopened them, all sign of anguish was gone. He took her hand and placed it around his cock, covered it with his own and showed her his own special rhythm.

"You see, my love, it is a beast easily tamed with a kind voice and a firm hand. You need not fear him, you need not fear me."

Her smile in return was warm and trusting. "It pleasures me to pleasure you. I would have more of you if you were willing to give it."

"I would give you anything you desire, my love, anything."

"Kindness and love are enough, I think," she replied, her hand slipping out from under his so that she might grip his hips and invite him into bed. "Although my body clamors for far more. Show me, Baltram. Show me."

Baltram needed no further encouragement. He picked her up and threw her down in the middle of the giant bed so that pillows and blankets slipped over the side and were lost, just as she was lost in the endless green lust in his eyes.

"We have to do something about dressing you more appropriately, but right now I have to get rid of this monstrosity." One long tear and the skirt ripped all the way to the hem, fell from her body and was thrown aside by a grinning Baltram.

She moaned her way through a symphony until one of his fingers found a way into her vagina and she discovered that there was more to their magic than *zing*, there was a whole orchestra of sensation.

"The gods play with us, beloved."

So he'd felt it too. She wanted to tell him that she didn't care about the gods, nor the whole Valley for that matter, she only cared about him, about her and the joy the two of them generated. But he covered his mouth with hers and slipped in a second finger, stretching her vagina, preparing her with sweet patience.

"I don't think I can take much more of this."

They were her words, but his voice. Whatever was building between them sought a climax, wanted release.

"Take me, Baltram."

Burying his head in the hollow between neck and shoulder, his words carried muffled to her ears.

"But I am big and you are not nearly ready enough."

"If the gods truly want this, then they will help, but if you do not mount me now as a man mounts a woman, then I fear I will perish."

He did not need more encouragement. With a swift movement, he settled between her legs, hip against hip, pelvis to pelvis. It felt so right that she did not mind his weight at all.

"You are so tiny, I will crush you."

"You confuse me with someone else, Baltram. I am strong enough to hold you thus and gladly."

He kissed her deeply while she arched her back to rub intimately against his rigid cock.

"Are you sure, beloved. Are you sure?"

"Fuck me, Baltram," she whispered into his ear. "Take me, I am yours. Yours."

He entered her slowly, making her squirm with impatience. She wanted him inside her, deep inside. She wanted to be one with him, had to be one with him.

"Faster, Baltram. I need to feel you."

"I don't want to hurt you, beloved."

She grabbed his face between his hands. "You won't hurt me."

Despite her brave words, his sudden thrust did indeed hurt, so that her back arched up from the mattress and her fingers clawed the muscles in his shoulder. He covered her mouth with his, taking the scream before it could escape, turning it into a moan with his kisses and caresses. Satisfied that the pain was gone, he continued to caress her until she grew accustomed to his intimate invasion, to his size, to being one with him.

"Baltram!"

"Ssh, beloved, I swear it will never hurt again, I swear it upon my life." His shaggy head bent to tease her nipples back to pointed peaks

"But it feels wonderful. It feels..." she paused, unable to find the words to explain this feeling of completeness, of union, of homecoming. "It feels magical."

He raised his head long enough to catch her gaze. "Not magic, Vivienne, not magic, but love."

He was right. This warmth, this rightness, this was more than magic, more than anything she had ever known. It had to be love.

"Love."

"Yes."

"Show me, Baltram, show me your love."

"I would be glad to."

Although he had promised there would be no more pain, she had not truly believed him, but he was right, there was nothing but pleasure. His cock touched places and caused sensations that rendered her speechless, leaving her eyes to do the talking while

her nails dug into his back and her legs rose to clamp around his buttocks and pull him closer.

"So wet, so unbelievably tight, you are a wonder, Vivienne."

"More, Baltram. Give me more." It wasn't until the words were out of her mouth that she even realized what she had said. Baltram's slow and careful strokes were no longer satisfying. Something within told her there was more than this and his face confirmed it. Contorted with self-control, he seemed to be suffering more than enjoying.

"Let go, my love."

"I am so afraid of hurting you."

"You will not hurt me, Baltram, I am as strong as a milkmaid. I will not break."

He stilled his movements completely, a move which almost left her screaming with frustration.

"I am a big man, Vivienne."

She lifted her head and playfully bit his lip. "I noticed, Baltram, and now fuck me."

He closed his eyes and murmured a few words in a language she did not understand. When he opened them again, the irises had grown in size so that very little white was left.

No longer pure human, Viv could not say what else he was and truly did not care. He would tell her when the time was right, of that she was sure. Instead of asking difficult questions, she stared into the vast greenness that were his eyes whilst he rearranged his weight on his arms.

"I trust you."

His only response was a low growl that sounded in the bottom of his throat and then a thrust that made her catch her breath. He pulled almost all the way out before thrusting back inside her with a sigh.

She should have been shocked at his strength, nervous at the very least, but his moves generated a new height of pleasure, reducing her to a mewling bundle of pure nerves and sensation.

"I don't know how much of this I can take, Baltram," and then, when he lessened his impact, "don't you dare stop doing what you're doing. Please!"

"Need to...slow down. Going to hurt you."

"Never, no...don't stop."

But he did. As soon as her vagina walls contracted around his cock, as soon as the heavens opened up and sang, as soon as an astonished moan fell from her lips, he stopped still and covered her face with kisses. Then licked her lips and bit her shoulder playfully until she floated back down to earth.

"That was incredible."

"You are incredible."

"But you didn't come."

"Not yet, no."

If her own orgasm had been special, then Baltram's was a revelation. True, Viv's only previous experience of male orgasm had been with an elf and she hadn't been staring at his face, but Baltram's face lit up from the inside, his eyes shone and, for a moment, he didn't quite seem to be there at all.

"That's not normal, is it?" she asked tentatively when he was lying next to her, his finger lazily tracing patterns on her heated skin.

"No. Not normal – no."

"And the zingy thing has stopped."

"Abated, perhaps, for a while. We will see. I fear the gods will reinstate that incentive should the need arise."

"But why would the gods want us to make love?"

He shrugged. "Somebody wants us together, that is certain. More I cannot say. No doubt the gods will let us know eventually."

Turning onto her side meant using a lot of muscles that would rather have been resting after their work-out. Viv tried to suppress a wince, but Baltram caught it anyway.

Alarmed, he reached out and stroked the inside of her thigh. "I have hurt you. I am sorry."

"No, do not apologize. It was incredible and I do not regret it one whit."

His stroke softened to a caress burning into her skin, burning deeply until her blood began to thunder in her ears. "Not one whit?"

"No."

"But I do, beloved. I regret it deeply."

Alarmed, she blinked back the tears that threatened to spill down her cheeks. "You regret making love to me?"

With a smile that waylaid all her fears, he bent down and licked her navel. "No, I regret not marrying you first."

"Marry me?"

"Aye, I'm afraid I'll have to – you see, I've despoiled you and I'm willing to pay the price."

It was more than she had hoped for. Viv of Hogsmeade Farm and a rich ranger from the Enchanted Forest, what would people say? What would her mother say, or her father?

Her father! Da was going to kill her.

No, he wasn't. Because she wasn't going to tell him. She was never going to go back. She was going to stay here, safe in Baltram's arms.

But Baltram wasn't on the same wavelength. "I will talk to your father and ask for your hand in marriage. You will have a wedding worthy of you."

She sat up abruptly. "Da won't let me marry you. He won't have anything to do with magical beings and when he hears that you live in the Enchanted Forest, he'll refuse to let me even see you. Can't we just stay here and never go back? Please, Baltram, I want to stay with you. I don't want to go back."

Baltram frowned. "Your family will worry if you don't return."

"They will worry about the work being left undone. They do not care for me, Baltram. Please."

Shaking his head, he rolled onto his back, taking her with him so that she was sitting astride his stomach. "I want to do this right, Vivienne. I must ask your father for your hand, but I will not let him take you from me."

Knowing the argument was lost, Vivienne shook her head slowly. "I fear, my love, you do not know Harald of Hogsmeade Farm."

Chapter Fourteen

Revenge was a cold bedmate.

Muriel woke up alone in her own pitiful flat. Not that the rooms were in any way poorly furnished, but on this day, Muriel found no joy in the opulence. The golden statues of faeries that Elton had given her for her last birthday stared at her with accusation in their eyes. The designer leather furniture was cold and unwelcoming. Even her wardrobe yielded nothing satisfactory.

She sat in the kitchen with her bowl of cornflakes and contemplated her options. She was very tempted to reduce her size to that of a mosquito and drown herself in her breakfast. What was the use of living? She'd found love, but lost her lover, she'd upset her boss, her career was in ruins and she was the laughing stock of The Ministry.

Still, suicide seemed a little bit drastic so long as she had no clean underwear to put on. There was no way that her body was going to be touched by strangers so long as her knickers were dirty or non-existent. Even she had some shreds of decency left.

Elton...

Why did losing him hurt so much?

She downed her cornflakes and followed them with a whole slab of Lindt, her favorite chocolate in all the dimensions. What did it matter if she got fat, no one loved her anyway.

Muriel arrived in the office with all the nerds and no-hopers who were willing to put in extra hours to curry favor. Her attempt to reach her office unseen was foiled as soon as she entered the foyer.

"Morning, Muriel." It was the security guard, a troll with the heart of a lamb and the fist of a pneumatic hammer.

Muriel nodded with a tight smile, trying to hide beneath the chic French beret in a particularly unsubtle shade of bright orange. Not for the first time, she cursed the laws that forbade all magic within the building. Not only could she not travel inter-dimensionally into her office, she couldn't transform into something small and unnoticeable.

Syd was waiting for her at the elevators with a smile on his face and a semi-hard cock in his green and orange pants suit. "Oh look, we match today. Isn't that a coincidence?"

Muriel figured that he was talking about her orange bell skirted, tight-bodied dress rather than the expression on her face. "Sorry, Syd. I'm not feeling well today."

Adopting a look of professional concern, Syd enquired as to the problem. "You could pop into my rooms for a quick massage. I'd have you up and better quicker than you could say orgasm."

The faerie waved away his suggestion. "Sorry, Syd, I'm not in the mood for third party orgasms today."

"I take it your lover hasn't come back yet?"

She shook her head, grateful when the lift arrived and they went their separate ways. At the third floor, namely the canteen, the doors opened and Fiona the Fire Faerie walked in. Muriel nodded a greeting, hoping that Fiona wouldn't want to be seen with a huge box of doughnuts. Fiona, not realizing that she was holding a caloric bomb in her hands, immediately greeted her fellow colleague.

"Muriel! Long time no see. How are things?" Poor Fiona had been assigned to the Fire Force on Earth for so long that she had acquired not only their eating habits, but also their slang.

"Fine." The smell of freshly baked doughnuts wafted under her nostrils, causing Muriel's resolve to weaken.

"Want a doughnut?"

Truly Fiona was a devil in disguise. She lifted the lid so that Muriel was forced to endure the sight of double chocolate, filled caramel and coffee-cream flavored doughnuts. She swallowed with some difficulty, her throat dry as she reminded herself that she had already used up all of the day's calories. "No thanks. I'm on a diet."

Fiona raised an eyebrow. "Oh and I thought you'd have something to celebrate."

"Celebrate?" Muriel snorted, so that's what they were calling instant dismissal these days. Well, Fiona would know, she knew everything.

"I'd hardly call it a celebration."

"You're just too modest."

Muriel eyed up her fellow faerie, resplendent in a gown of red and yellow. Fiona was known for her good nature. Okay, so she was a gossip, but she was reluctant to spread malicious gossip unless under pressure. That made her unique amongst the faeries. Muriel wondered if the burn to Fiona's bum had perhaps addled her brain or her personality.

"So, how's your bottom, Fiona?" she asked, trying to point the conversation in another direction until they reached the ninety-ninth floor.

"Fine," she chuckled with a smile. "I was trying out a new recruit and forgot to look where I was." She licked her lips in a less than subtle manner. "Can't wait to get back and finish off the job."

Muriel smiled. Well, her mouth smiled, but her eyes were no doubt red from all the crying she'd been doing. Fiona noticed.

"You don't know, do you?"

"Know what?"

The wand in Fiona's hand began to ring. Shoving the box of calories into Muriel's hands, she lifted her wand from the prescribed holster, listened attentively for a while and then replied in the affirmative.

"Sorry, Muriel. Gotta run. It's been nice talking to you." And then she vanished between the dimensions. It must have been important, because Fiona was only allowed to use her dispensation in dire emergencies.

Muriel wasn't allowed to leave the building via inter-dimensional travel even in emergencies. Garald had informed her that Virgin Faeries didn't have emergencies. But, then again, she feared that Garald had never had a broken heart. That was truly an emergency.

How did humans put up with it?

Still puzzling that mystery, the elevator finally reached the ninety-ninth floor and the doors slid open. No sooner had Muriel stepped out of the contraption than she was inundated by faeries who patted her on the back and helped themselves to doughnuts.

"Where's the champagne?" Tony, the Patron Faerie of Gays, asked in his squeaky voice. He was wearing a familiar red nail polish that should have been in Muriel's desk. Tony had been borrowing again. That should have made her mad, instead it made her want to cry.

"Champagne?" she asked.

"To celebrate."

Muriel dumped the now empty box in a convenient bin located at the secretary's desk. Not that the pixie ever came down to earth long enough to actually do anything, but Garald had insisted on helping out an old friend. Pamela hadn't arrived yet and neither had her giant bosom, so the area was empty of bustle and peeping toms.

"I've had this conversation before, Tony, so if you don't tell me what's going on, I'm going to start locking my top drawer. So what'll it be?"

Tony opened his mouth to reveal his beautifully aligned teeth with their inset diamonds. He intended to reveal a whole lot more, only Garald stormed in wearing, of all things, a new gown in orange. The exact same shade as Muriel's dress. By the Goddess, she hoped the color didn't make her look quite as sallow as Garald.

"Muriel, my dear. Do accompany me to my office."

He was smiling, a scary look at the best of times. Wizards rarely smiled unless they were about to blast a demon. Muriel rolled her eyes at Tony, who gave her the thumbs up. Although, she thought as she concentrated on not stepping on Garald's train, that particular gesture might have an entirely different meaning in Tony's crowd.

"Do take a seat, Muriel." Garald indicated a chair on the far side of his office where Muriel duly sat, as nervous as a suspect in a crime show. The feeling intensified into a ball of volcanic rock as she observed groups of people gathering around desks. Something was definitely up and she was in the middle of it.

"Well, my dear. I'm sure you're feeling on top of the world today."

Muriel couldn't stand it any longer. "What have I done wrong this time, Garald?"

Garald looked at her in astonishment, then tugged on his long white beard. "You really don't know, do you?"

"What? What don't I know?" In her excitement, she jumped to her feet and began to pace the small fishbowl of an office. "Ever since I arrived this morning, people have been making snide innuendoes. I had a disaster of a day yesterday and I don't want today getting any worse. If you're going to fire me, then please just go ahead and do it without all of these mind games."

"Fire you?" The wizard managed to convey concern and amazement at the same time. "Why on earth would I want to fire you? I don't know what you think happened yesterday, but I can assure you that it wasn't as bad as you think. A little unconventional, but the results speak for themselves."

Muriel placed her head in her hands, impervious to the damage inflicted on her hairstyle. "Would someone please explain to me what's going on?"

A hastily opened drawer, a rustle of paper and the *Magical Kingdom* appeared on the edge of Muriel's field of vision. She pulled the newspaper closer and viewed the top story. It showed a picture of two young men dressed in nothing more than fur lined g-strings and a rubber costume with circles cut to show the rude bits. She recognized the underwear first and then the wearers—Viv's brothers and they weren't looking very happy. Whether it was due to their clothing or lack thereof, or the guard leading them away, Muriel couldn't be sure. Her eyes flicked back to the headlines, *Peeping Toms Caught. Faerie to receive Commendation.*"

"I don't believe it."

"It's true. The parents called in the guard to complain about the unfair treatment of their sons and to help them detach the boys from the railings. The faerie in question had done a good job in securing them." He paused to send a smile in her direction. "And the guards recognized the men who have been frightening the female population for months."

Muriel thought of the liberties the two brothers had tried to take with her. "Frightening?"

"Among other things. They were stealing as well, but mostly they lurked around and leered at women undressing. But, of course, you'd know that from the newspaper."

The faerie didn't want to tell him that actually she never read the paper—not apart from her horoscope and the comic strips, so she kept quiet.

"And, of course, that's not all."

"It's not?" She tried not to look too vacant, but gave up. She had no idea what was going on.

"I don't know how you did it, but we received confirmation that Viv is no longer a virgin."

That was good news, Muriel had to admit, surprising but good.

"I have to praise you in particular for that solid piece of faerie work, Muriel. I knew that you wouldn't fail. I even placed fifty golden geese on you in the departmental book."

"Whoa there!" This was all going a bit too fast for Muriel. There was only so much a person could take on a bowl of cornflakes, a banana and a slab of chocolate. "What book?"

"Tony's betting book."

The scales fell from the faerie's eyes. "You guys had a bet running on whether or not I'd succeed in having Viv deflowered? I can't believe it."

"It was only a bit of fun, Muriel. There's no need to get upset." Garald continued to stroke his beard in a relaxed manner.

No wonder he was looking smug. "So what was the going rate?"

"Fifty to one that you wouldn't finish within five days."

"Fifty to one?" Muriel tried hard to multiply in her head. "That's...that's..."

"I think two thousand, five hundred golden geese is the sum you are looking for."

That was more than Muriel earned in half a year. She held out her hand. "One hundred golden geese."

"For what?"

"For winning."

He mumbled under his breath, but even he could see that she was being reasonable. He put his hands into the voluminous folds of his robe and pulled out a handful of coins. "Consider it a bonus."

Muriel pocketed the coins before he could change his mind. At least she'd be able to restock her personal credit. She stood up, ready to leave the office.

"That's not all."

Muriel raised an eyebrow.

"Two in a day. That's something of a record and no complaints from the public. That's what I call an honest day's work."

"Two? Two?"

"Janet."

"Our Janet?"

"The very same."

"Janet was really a virgin?" That wasn't a very professional comment. Reassembling the shards of her professional demeanor, she excused herself. "Well, of course, I'm a little behind on the paperwork, but Janet did inform me that the matter was urgent, so I worked her into my agenda."

She crossed her fingers behind her back as she told her little lie, wondering when she could get out of the office and head over to Elwood's house to find out what had

happened last night. She had intended Janet to be her instrument of revenge; she just hoped that the matter hadn't backfired.

Surely Janet hadn't been so dumb as to untie the foolish elf?

Garald was still droning on. Muriel would be awarded the Faerie Fan for services above and beyond the call of duty. Shrugging her shoulders, she tried to look cool while her insides crawled with worry.

"Well, it's been lovely chatting to you and all, but I'm afraid I've got work to do."

Continuing to drone on, it took Garald a good five minutes to realize that his employee had left.

After rushing down eleven flights to an approved take-off room, Muriel arrived at Elwood's house out of breath. Claspings her heaving bosom, she checked out Elwood's living room for signs of violence. The chair upon which she had bound Elwood was lying on its side and the elf was nowhere to be seen.

The kitchen area was a mess, which wasn't normal for an elf.

Thank the Deities there was no sign of blood. Oh, why hadn't she thought of checking out proceedings the night before instead of drinking the best part of a bottle of scotch?

"Muriel?"

It was him. The elf.

"We're in here."

He didn't sound in the least bit angry, but it could have been a trick. Knowing him, it probably was. Elves did not normally sound happy at this time of the morning. It wasn't even normal for them to be awake.

She drew her wand from the holster as she advanced toward the bedroom door. She wasn't taking any risks.

"Is Janet in there with you?"

"She is indeed."

"Is she alive?"

There was a very feminine laugh that had to be Janet, unless he had a second female in there. Threesomes were not exactly alien to the elf's repertoire. Or so she'd heard.

"She is indeed. Come in, Muriel. We're not mad at you."

It still could have been a trap. Muriel calculated the risk at seventy percent, but her curiosity was stronger than her sense of self-preservation. If it was the last thing she did, Muriel had to know what was going on in there.

It was worse than the faerie expected.

Who would have thought that the girl had the figure of a sprite—long, thin, lithe and skin to die for. To make matters worse, the girl had no cellulite. And all of this had been hidden behind ugly suits and blouses buttoned up to her chin.

It was enough to make a full-bodied sexy faerie jealous.

Elwood was equally naked and the scent in the air left no doubt as to what the two had been up to before they'd transported the contents of the bread bin and fridge onto the bed.

"You could at least cover yourselves up – have you no shame?"

Janet lifted a piece of bread to her lips, her teeth appearing even whiter against the red of the jam. If Elwood was anywhere as good as his brother, she guessed that Janet had well and truly earned her breakfast.

"In the words of a famous faerie – you've seen it all before."

"But not yours and certainly not hers."

Elwood laughed and popped a grape into Janet's mouth. Muriel was being spared nothing today. "Sure you have, mine's just the same as Elton's, only..."

Janet joined in to finish the sentence. "Only his bends to the right and Elwood's bends to the left."

Muriel put her hands on her hips. "Is everyone making fun of me today? Is this what I get when I run after a client and colleague to make sure she's okay? Is this what I get for bringing the two of you together in the first place?"

The two lovers looked at one another. Janet shrugged her shoulders and fed Elton a strawberry. Of course, no one thought of offering Muriel one. "Well, that's true. She did bring us together. She also lent me that book."

Muriel didn't really think it appropriate to remind the woman that the book had been stolen and not lent. She watched Elwood lick Janet's finger in that sickening way that lovers do. "That's true," he said when he'd licked all the way down her finger and continued on to her breast. "Good spot, Muriel." At least she thought that's what he said, it was hard to tell with his mouth full of breast.

Muriel turned around on her ballerinas. "Well, I'll be off then."

Elwood caught up with her as she was just about to open a portal, his sex bobbing between his legs.

"Thank you, Muriel."

"Think nothing of it. It's my job." If she didn't get out of here quickly, she was going to burst into tears.

"Muriel," he caught her by the arm and swung her around. "I'm sorry about my brother. I really am. If I can do anything to get the two of you back together, just let me know."

She considered his offer and then rejected it. "I don't think tying him up is going to have the same effect on him as it does on you. If he loves me, he'll come back; if he doesn't love me, then I'll have to move on."

"Don't give up, Muriel, he's worth fighting for."

She stepped into the Interim with tears in her eyes, tears that she didn't want Elwood to see.

Chapter Fifteen

In the end, Muriel went along to the pub with her fellow faeries. It wasn't every day that a faerie received an official commendation from the powers-that-be and everyone wanted to celebrate. Translated, everyone was going to get drunk and Muriel would be left to foot the tab. With sagging purse strings, she went with the flow, wishing that she had got another hundred golden geese off her boss. Garald, probably anticipating such an operation, had vanished for the day. Undoubtedly another emergency of the Scrooge kind.

Janet hadn't turned up either, which was another reason to celebrate for the faeries. It wasn't that they disliked the girl—okay, so they did dislike her, but only because she couldn't understand that faeries were, by definition, unorganized. Organization and rules ruined their instincts and suffocated their emotions. Faeries needed to be free in order to function.

They also needed the occasional alcoholic drink and were permanently strapped for cash.

Which was where Muriel came in.

She could have refused, she supposed, but then no one would have talked to her for months and anything was better than spending yet another night alone with a bottle of gin.

At least faeries could talk, gin bottles could not—although they made pretty good listeners.

The Horse and Whip was unusually busy for a Wednesday, but that didn't bother the faerie folk. There was a separate, and supposedly secret, room reserved for magical beings out the back. The humans in the front room were deliciously unaware that the heroine of the day was less than a stone's throw away.

Muriel hauled her butt onto one of the bar stools and surveyed the room. Everyone was there, including some people she had never seen in her life. Toby the troll was holding up a corner of the roof with his shoulders. Fiona had brought along a young man who seemed overwhelmed at the presence of so many magical beings. He was probably the recruit Fiona was training. With his broad shoulders and slim hips, he was very cute.

Had she been over Elton, Muriel might even have suggested a little threesome as a fun way to test his cardiovascular ability. As it was, the man's butt reminded her of Elton's perfect example of rear attributes.

Damn it! Would she never get over her elf?

"Muriel!"

She turned around to find herself face to face with Syd the Spryte. "Hello yourself," she returned, with a smile that fooled nobody. Her eyes slid to the two Sprytes standing behind him and dressed in exact copies of Syd's orange and green jumpsuit. Syd immediately jumped to attention and wrapped his arm around the shoulder of the nearest creature.

"Syda, this is the faerie I was telling about. My favorite faerie of all."

Syda pouted at Muriel. It was a very feminine gesture for one who had a flat chest and just as much in the crotch area as Syd. Maybe even more. Trying not to stare, Muriel shook the hand proffered and enjoyed the light massaging stroke returned by the Spryte or Spreet or whatever. A sense of well being shot up her arm and then vanished.

"You're right, Syd, she is hurting badly." Syda turned her attention to Muriel. "You should come and visit us some time—we could stop the pain. But come in the next week, after that time we will need all our powers for our offspring."

Muriel stared at Syda's flat stomach. There was nothing to be seen, but that was normal so early in a pregnancy.

"I can see that congratulations are in order." She beamed her approval in both their directions.

"Actually," Syd countered. "Sydon is the one who is with child." Sydon, the quiet one who had not yet spoken, stepped forward and offered her hand. Her grip was strangely soft and empty of the sensation that Muriel associated with Sprytes/Sprites/Spreets. And to add confusion to misery, Sydon was sporting a little something extra in the crotch area and neither bosom nor belly.

"Congratulations," Muriel stammered out. Boy, missing those lectures was really the worst thing she had ever done and Elton was no longer available for blonde questions.

"There are such things as encyclopedias."

She'd forgotten that Syd could read thoughts. She wondered if the others could as well. Was she herself an open book that all of Syd's kind could browse through at leisure?

"No, it's just me. I'm the only one within our partnership that can read thoughts."

"Although he usually tells us what he finds out." Syda said the words with a friendly punch in Syd's ribs. Sydon looked on with a peaceful expression on her/his face.

It was all a bit too much for Muriel. Was this a threesome or a twosome, and what was female and what was male? Maybe they were all both or neither?

She waved at the barman, who scurried over in double quick time, his instincts alerted to the fact that this was the faerie who was paying the tab tonight. Or maybe he'd found out along the grapevine. Pixies generally knew about things even before

they happened. And because they always knew what terrible things might happen, they solved the dilemma by doing as little as possible.

"A Bloody Mary." The Patron Drink of Patron Faeries.

It came faster than the buzz of a bee. To save time, he'd probably made a half dozen at once. Muriel took a sip—it tasted different, good, but not the usual. She raised an eyebrow at the hovering pixie, who was waiting for the gesture.

"It has a shot of mint in it. Makes it refreshing and a little bit surprising."

A second sip, yeah, it had potential.

"I call it a Bloody Muriel."

She almost spat out the drink in surprise while the pixie scuttled to safety at the other end of the bar.

The Spryte/Sprite/Spreet trio were laughing at her expense. But so was the rest of the room. Did no one care about her feelings? Did no one know she was suffering? Her emotions were a mess, her heart aching and irreparable. And everyone was laughing at her.

She was ready to flounce off home and dig out the gin bottle when a familiar movement wrenched her attention away from the laughing audience. Long black hair tied back with a piece of leather, eyes bluer than a summer sky and a body with the grace of a Greek god, only far better looking. It was Elton. Or was it Elwood?

He was sitting in the corner booth—in the exact same spot as he had occupied all those many years ago. It had to be Elwood out for revenge. He felt her staring, felt her shock and the sudden stillness that emanated from her—or it may have been his fellow elf who prodded him in the ribs and pointed in her direction. His eyes held no recognition, only unveiled appreciation of her curves and a level of lust that caused her to shudder. Her nipples jumped to attention, her pussy quickened.

Strange, she had never felt lust for Elwood over these past twenty five years. Except for that one time.

What the hell did he think he was doing?

What on earth was her body thinking?

Without even considering the consequences, Muriel downed the concoction in her hand and waved at the Pixie to send her a second. The Syd/Syda/Sydon group mumbled farewells and faded into the background. That was okay with Muriel. She had some serious drinking to do here. She was seeing things that weren't there. She was feeling things that she shouldn't feel.

Despite what he had said this morning, Elwood was taking his revenge. Janet must have upset him.

Or Elton was teasing her.

Or she was going mad.

None of the possibilities appealed.

"Are you okay?" Tony had crept up beside her and perched himself on the neighboring bar stool.

"I want to throw up."

Tony raised his eyebrow. "Actually I thought the Bloody Muriels were pretty good. Kind of Phil to name a drink after you."

She opened her mouth to tell Tony exactly what she thought of the pixie and a burp came out. Thank goodness only Tony was close enough to catch the unfaerie-like sound. That's what came from consuming tomatoes in liquid form.

"Tony?"

"Of course I won't mention it, darling. Your secret is safe with me." He crossed his heart dramatically with a carefully manicured finger. His finger polish was lime green—the latest color this summer. Muriel had queued for hours last week to get one of the coveted bottles. She had to admit it looked pretty good, even if she had wanted to wear it first.

"What secret?"

Tony lifted the straw out of his drink and licked the bottom of it. Anyone watching him could have no doubt as to where he had learnt that particular technique. The Faerie wasn't exactly subtle and he had more experience cock-sucking than Muriel. "All of them, Muriel, but in particular your tendency to fart when excited. That is a secret between you, me and Elton. Although," he cocked his head to the side, "Baltram would probably know about it as well."

Muriel leaned in closer to her colleague. "I do not fart when I am excited."

Tony didn't appear to be the least bit fazed. In his department, he probably saw a lot of things that normal people didn't know about. "Of course you do."

"Do not!"

"Do too!"

"Not!"

"Too!"

This was getting just too childish for words. Muriel waved at Phil and held up two fingers. "Let's just forget about it." This last comment was directed at Tony and not at Phil.

Tony shrugged his scantily clad shoulders. "Fine, no problem."

"I need you to do me a favor."

"Say it, it's yours."

"In the corner—tell me what you see."

Toni took one of the Bloody Muriels that had appeared in front of them and turned around casually. "A troll and couple of dwarves playing cards."

"Not that corner," Muriel hissed, "the other one."

Tony, who was used to Muriel's little temper tantrums, shrugged his shoulders again and looked in the other direction. "A couple of elves drinking some moonshine schnapps."

"And is *he* there?"

"*He*?"

"*Elton*, you fool. Is *Elton* there in the corner?"

"No."

Muriel sank half the drink in one go and signaled toward Phil for yet another one. "I knew it. It's Elwood. He's got it in for me because I tricked him."

Adopting a concerned look that was the cornerstone of his brilliant career, Tony glanced at Muriel and then at the corner before shaking his head yet again. "Neither Elton nor Elwood are in the corner—just a couple of elves from the kitchen."

Not believing him, Muriel twirled around on her seat and pinned the responsible corner with a stare that would have caused any other wall to crumble. The four elves seated at the table looked up as one and raised confused eyebrows and shoulders. One checked his hair while another checked his nose for hanging debris. Elton, or Elwood, or whoever it was, was no longer sitting there.

"He was there, I swear it." Her words were barely above a whisper. She stared into Tony's kohl-enhanced eyes. "I saw him. He was there."

Very carefully, but very definitely, Tony removed the glass from her hands. "Just how many of these have you had to drink?"

Muriel grabbed for the cocktail before it was out of reach and missed. With the result that the remaining liquid became airborne and splattered onto the bodice of her dress."

"Tony," she wailed. "Tony, look what you've done!"

Her fellow faerie pulled out an immaculate handkerchief and began to mop up the red mess until Muriel pushed him away. "Gay or not, if you don't take your hands off my boobs, I'll zap you into the Interim."

Tony stopped immediately, knowing with his impeccable instincts just when he should back off. Now was the perfect time.

Muriel slipped off the bar stool, grabbed her matching handbag, checked that her wand was in place and headed for the Ladies. If she was going mad, she didn't need any witnesses. One of the twins had been sitting there as sure as her name was Muriel. Or had they?

She needed a holiday.

She almost fell over a smooching couple in her hurry to reach the back door in super quick time. Fiona looked up from her recruit's lap and purred her greeting. "Muriel, what a surprise!" A toss of hair redder than a fire engine, the purr of a voice that dripped sex. "Have you met Jason yet?"

Jason didn't look at the least interested in meeting anyone, not while he had his hands on the boobs of a faerie. He didn't even stop his pawing as his strangely vacant eyes settled on Muriel. Unidentifiable words came out of his mouth before he bent his head and pulled the pink nipple back into his mouth.

Some faeries had no sense of modesty and Fiona even less than most.

Muriel smiled and pointed toward the restroom. Fiona turned back to her recruit and her liturgy of sweet nothings.

It was less than five paces to the privy and Muriel was already breathing the sweet air of freedom, even if it was tinged by cigarette smoke and unwashed bodies. Until someone stepped forward, blocking her path.

It was Elton.

Or maybe it was Elwood.

Or maybe she was imagining it again.

"I saw you watching me." His voice made her melt. She couldn't imagine a voice, could she?

"You were watching me." She put her hands on her hips to show that she meant business.

"And I liked what I saw." A slow smile spread across his face, lazy, horny and incredibly sexy. This couldn't be Elton, could it? Not her kind, loving, ever accommodating elf. It had to be Elwood.

"You turn me on."

"Look, Elwood, I'm sorry about what happened last night. But just think about it as a blind date. I knew that Janet and you were well matched. She's what you need. She's just as kinky as you. I should know, I've been working with her for long enough."

The elf wasn't listening. He was coming closer. So close that Muriel had to step back to stop him from touching her. Excitement began to flow in the bottom of her belly.

That wasn't good, was it? She had never been into kink and fear before.

He stepped forward.

She stepped back.

Her hands began to get sweaty. "Elwood, this isn't funny."

He just grinned the grin of psychotic killers and came closer.

Hell, this wasn't right. No one intimidated a faerie, not so long as she had her powers intact. Shaking fingers sought her wand, but he caught her wrist before she could pull it out.

"Elwood, you're hurting me. Stop it, do you hear me?"

Behind them, the back door swung open. Cool night air brushed over her back and then over her whole body as they stepped outside into the alley.

She'd been here before.

Twenty some years ago.

"No, Elwood. No!"

He kicked the door closed with his foot and propelled her against the brick wall. Only last time he'd had his back against the wall. This time, it was her back, her wings that were pressed against the roughened surface.

Not good.

She began to struggle. "If you don't let me go—I'm going to scream."

It was more than an empty threat. She wasn't going to let him rape her. She might be a faerie, but she wasn't easy. Okay, she was easy, but she still got to pick her partners and she certainly didn't want anything in her that had previously been in Janet's vagina.

"But this is the way you like it, Muriel, hot and quick against the wall of a pub, in a swimming pool, a telephone box, a stable. This is the stuff of dreams. The stuff of *your* dreams."

He was right, but whereas the scenario worked quite well in dreams and in the reality from time to time, she was slowly coming to the conclusion that it was the person she was with who made the fantasy come true. If this were Elton, she'd be happily humping his bones, but there was no way she was going to have a repeat performance with Elwood.

She didn't even like Elwood.

She opened her mouth to scream and found her air supply cut off by the elf. He kissed really well. He kissed with the same intensity as Elton. Elwood hadn't kissed her at all that first time. They had kept contact down to the necessary.

So maybe this was Elton? Maybe *this* was their goodbye fuck. Maybe the one at the hot springs hadn't been enough. It surely hadn't been enough for her.

And maybe Elton just couldn't let go. Maybe this was another chance to correct some wrongs, to tell him that she had been a fool.

Or maybe Elwood had been comparing notes with his brother.

"You know I'm pretending you're Elton, don't you?"

He stopped outlining her lips with kisses. He listened.

"Because I love him."

He raised his head and stared her straight in the eye.

"I've been a fool putting my career first."

The hands that had been scrunching up the skirt of her dress slowed down and stopped.

"Elton is my life. Without him, there is no joy, no light, no warmth."

Closing his eyes, the elf rested his head on her shoulder and Muriel thought he might even let her go. But then his hands touched bare skin under the cotton cloth of her panties. A sudden tug and the cool night air swirled around her bare crotch.

Sweet Mother, he was going to go through with it.

"I won't ever forgive you, Elwood. I love your brother and I won't let him leave my life without a fight. I'll chain myself to his bed if necessary."

Suppressing a moan as he bit the sensitive part of her lobe, she continued, "If he wants me to, I'll even give up my job. There is nothing as important to me as Elton in all the dimensions."

Now it was his turn to moan, his erection pressing against her stomach. Hard, long and eager.

There was something about that cock, something important that slipped away each time she tried to focus.

"I'm ready to bond if he'll still have me."

"Even if that means giving up all other males?"

"Yes, even then," she panted, trying her best to suppress her body's reaction.

"In all the dimensions?"

"Yes."

"Then take a good long look at my cock."

She didn't want to. She really didn't, but her eyes went there of their own accord. Magnificent, proud and with a distinct lean to the...right. It was all the evidence she needed.

"Elton!"

She didn't need to look up to know he was grinning. "Take a good long look, lover, because this is the only cock you're ever going to see in this life."

Adopting a sultry look, she clasped his penis with one hand. "Well, that means you're going to be one busy elf, and since you're already in position, how about if we start now?"

"You took the words right out of my mouth."

Placing a kiss on her neck, he lifted her with enough finesse not to injure her wings, and enough savoir-faire to position himself at her vagina.

Just right.

"You know I would have known as soon as you fucked me."

"Would not."

Clasping her legs around his hip and butt, she wiggled until his cock entered and filled her completely. She sighed at the sensation, grateful and happy that the Deities had seen fit to return Elton, that he had given her another chance. "There is only one being in the world who can fill me so completely, only one cock that rubs the exact right place."

"And?"

"And when you start to thrust, I could pick you out among a million. There is no one who thrills me with his rhythm as you do."

"Not even Elwood?"

She arched her pelvis suggestively. "Especially not your brother. The only reason I considered that fuck to be so special was because I thought it was you. I thought it was us."

"Us?" The word caught in his throat.

"Yes, us, Elton. Please forgive me."

"I already have darling, but you still need to forgive me."

Wrinkling up her forehead, Muriel considered what she had to forgive. She couldn't think of a single thing. "For what?" Then an alien thought hit her. "You haven't got another, have you?"

"How could you think such a thing? No, forgive me for letting my jealousy of Elwood turn our relationship sour. Forgive me for not taking your career seriously. You were a fantastic Tooth Faerie and an even better Patron Faerie. You work hard and I am proud of you."

A warmth that wasn't the least sexual spread in Muriel's stomach.

"Do you mean that?"

"Of course."

"Then we should celebrate."

"With champagne?"

"No, with a good fuck."

He was willing to please and from his very first thrust she knew that she would never regret her words tonight. Strong and attractive, he was all she would ever need.

The sensation he created with each and every thrust was all she needed. He was that damn good.

And the expression of unadulterated bliss on his face was all she needed to push her over the edge and into a chasm of pleasure.

He cupped her butt as she let her legs slide down. Still enthralled in the heat of their loving, he continued to hold her long after she was stable on her feet while his strong palms massaged her bum the way she adored.

"I love you, Muriel. Bond with me. We can even marry if you want."

"Just as they do on Earth?" she asked, naming the dimension to which she was particularly attached.

"Any way you want."

"With a white dress and veil and everything?"

Elton sighed again. It must have been difficult for him to suppress the noise during his masquerade. Elwood rarely sighed whereas Elton was forever expressing his exasperation in this time-honored manner. If he had sighed just once, the game would have been over.

"If you wish. I would prefer green woods or a sunset on the beach. But as you will only marry once, I will permit you to arrange things to your satisfaction."

"Then I guess we had better buy a ring."

"A ring? What on earth do you want with a ring?"

"Elton, you promised I could have whatever I wanted and you are as rich as Crocus."

"Crocus? Who the hell is Crocus?"

Chapter Sixteen

"Is it much further?"

Seated in front of Baltram, Vivienne shook her head and a lock of hair rose and tickled his nose. "I fear it is not far enough away. Let us go back, Baltram. I am afraid."

She did not need to say what she feared. She had already told Baltram of her father and his anger.

Baltram did not know Harald of Hogsmeade Farm, but he knew of others similar in character. Even before Vivienne had described her life, he had read between the lines. Lazy and slothful, Harald was the type of man who avoided work as he would the plague, using lies or threats to force others to carry his share of the load. Such men were without honor and one of the main reasons why Baltram chose to live in the forest.

In the forest, there were predators. Baltram was one himself, but they took only what they needed, killed only when necessary. There was a code to which all creatures held – unlike men. Men such as Harald took everyone's share.

One thing was certain, Baltram would not permit Vivienne to return to that life. Her place was at his side and that was where he wanted her to be. He did not know why the Deities had chosen to send him a wife, he only knew that waking this morning he had never been happier. He should have been wary, alert and suspicious, but instead he was filled with happiness.

"I will protect you, beloved. You are mine now."

She shivered at his words and he felt his cock stir instantly. They had made love numerous times in the two nights and one day they had been together and only her weary muscles had stopped him from claiming her more often. He only had to look at her to want her.

And he was sure she felt the same.

"Just beyond the hill lies Hogsmeade Farm."

A long time had passed since Baltram had last passed this way. He doubted Viv had even been born then and another farmer had farmed the fields of Hogsmeade. When Old Will had died, the farm had been sold to Harald. That was all that Baltram had needed to know. He much preferred the company of Other-blooded to those who prided themselves on being fully human.

"There's something wrong. Why can't I see any smoke from the chimney? Ma always has a fire burning. Something bad must have happened. Oh Baltram, can we go any faster?"

Baltram kicked his stallion into a canter. He was not surprised at Vivienne's sudden concern for her family. It was one thing to dislike them, it was another to wish them bodily harm.

"Hush, beloved, we will be there anon."

* * * * *

"Looks as though they're leaving."

Hogsmeade Farm was in an uproar. The horse had been hitched to the cart and furniture had been loaded on top, together with any number of household goods. As they came closer, Harald exited from the barn, the cows in tow behind him.

"I don't understand. We've always lived here. Why would they leave?"

Baltram reined in his horse. He stilled Vivienne with a touch as she made to slip down from the saddle. Being mounted gave them an advantage. Until he knew what was going on, Baltram was willing to use every advantage to tip things in his favor.

"Going somewhere?"

Harald reached the cart and began to tie the cows onto the hook at the back. "We're leaving." He didn't spare a glance for his daughter as he concentrated on the knot. "Come on, woman, we haven't got all day."

Loaded down with a sack of flour, Vivienne's mother appeared at the door. She eyed up her visitors with distaste before flinging the burden in with the rest of the household goods.

"So ya came home, did ya?" The woman paused to dust her hands on her skirts. "The bad penny always rolls up. That's for certain."

"What's going on, Ma? What's going on, Da?" Only Baltram's hand on her thigh stopped Vivienne from flipping her leg over the stallion's head.

Ignoring his daughter's words, Harald stared at Baltram with a look of pure dislike. "What are you doing here, anyway?"

Fury rose in Baltram. If there was one thing he loathed, it was bad manners. No matter how poor people were, there was no price on friendliness. "I've come to ask for the hand of your daughter in marriage."

The old hag laughed, revealing a mouth in which housed a few molars. "You want to marry her? You, the fine ranger, wishes to marry our Viv?"

"There'll be no dowry. We're poor folk."

Baltram could have pointed out that the last time he'd seen Hogsmeade Farm, it had been one of the better farms in The Valley. It wouldn't have taken much to keep it in that state. "I desire no dowry. Vivienne is all that I want."

Baltram, who could see the man valuing the fine horse, the well shod and clothed ranger, Viv's new dress, waited for the inevitable.

"You can't have her."

Baltram stiffened in the saddle. Vivienne sucked in a mouthful of air.

"Da! I love him!"

Harald spat out a mouthful of chew tobacco between his feet and the hooves of the horse. To anyone else, it appeared no more than a disgusting habit, but Baltram knew that it was a challenge, the proverbial glove.

At their feet, Wotan, who had been quiet until now, growled deep in his throat. Hackles rising on his back, he took one threatening step forward.

"Call the dog off."

Baltram had to admire the fact that Harald kept his cool. Wotan could be quite intimidating at the best of times.

"Wotan, heel."

If Vivienne had expected any support from her mother, she was sorely disappointed. "Love? Love? What's the likes of us gotta do with love?" She put her hands on her ample hips. "Hard work and an early grave—that's where love gets ya. It's a jail without any hope of freedom."

Still eyeing the horse, Harald took a different stance. "She's our responsibility, so says the law. She'll be coming with us."

In the heat of the moment, the question behind the rapid loading of the cart, the hurried collecting of portable goods, had been forgotten. Now it appeared again of its own will.

Vivienne looked between her parents. "Where are you going? And where are Patrick and John?"

Poking another fingertip full of chewing tobacco into his mouth, Harald shrugged his shoulders. "Away from here. That's all you need to know."

"But the farm?" Vivienne made an agitated attempt to dismount and Baltram laid a restraining arm around her waist.

"Gone." The word was said without emotion., uncaring. "All gone."

Vivienne still did not understand and Baltram did his best to explain. "Debt. There's probably debt on the farm. Gambling debts, drinking."

"Put the neighbors up against us, she did." Her mother's jeering finger pointed in Vivienne's direction. Baltram had never felt so sorry for anyone as he did for his beloved at this moment. He could feel the wild beating of her heart and the stiffness of her spine. Never would he leave his woman here in the hands of these cruel people, even if he had to break the Lore to do so.

Nothing was more valuable to him than this woman.

Vivienne's mother wasn't finished. Her finger stabbed holes in the air, her voice pained their ears. "You and that goddamn faerie. You have any idea what she did to my boys? Dressed them up like toys, dressed them up like fools with their dicks swollen so purple, I thought they would pop." Shifting her attention to Baltram, the old hag

continued. "The best sons a woman could ever have. Never caused me a day's worry in their lives. Not like her! She's bad and lazy. Has been from the day we got her."

"Quiet, Nan."

Harald had spoken. His wife looked in his direction, sank her eyes to the ground in recognition of his authority and mumbled something.

"She's our daughter and she's going with us."

Greed and not love was doing the talking. Baltram sensed that the old woman would be happy to see the back of her daughter, but her husband was determined to drive the best bargain possible. "Doesn't seem to me that you care for her much. I could be doing you a favor by taking her off your hands."

Harald didn't even bother to deny the allegation. "With our boys in jail, who's going to do the work?"

Not Harald obviously—he was the master on his own farm. The others did the work. "There are laborers and maids to help out—supposing you find another farm."

"Paid help costs money."

"So does a new farm."

Baltram held Harald's eye. The man looked away first and Baltram suppressed a grin of victory. Instead, he made an offer that Harald could not refuse.

"One hundred golden geese."

The farmer tried to look unimpressed, but failed. Whatever sum he had anticipated, Baltram had surpassed it. The ranger didn't care, he wasn't in the mood to bargain.

"She's worth more."

Vivienne sucked in her breath as well she might. "I can't believe..."

Leaning forward, Baltram reassured her with a gentle touch before whispering in her ear. "Trust me." He took a pouch from his belt, weighed it lightly in his hand and then threw it down. "One hundred golden geese. Take it or leave it. That's all I have."

Greed shone from the older man's eyes as he stared at the bag. His mouth continued to chew on the tobacco while he contemplated the offer. He looked at his wife, the way her jaw sagged in disbelief and then at the ranger. In the end, he smiled. It wasn't a pleasant smile but then again that was something Harald of Hogsmeade Farm had never pretended to be.

"I could take the money and still call out the guard."

It was a bluff and Baltram called it. "They might be more interested in your unpaid debts than in chasing an innocent lass. You wouldn't risk it. You might lose your new fortune. On the other hand, I know most of the captains by name and I have influential friends."

Vivienne's father didn't even bother to reply, merely spat out his tobacco and picked up the pouch. "You can have her."

"Ma? Da?" Vivienne had remained silent all this time. Now she turned to her parents as though unable to believe her ears.

Instead of giving reassurance, a declaration of love, the old hag put her hands on her hips and glared. "You've been nothing but trouble from the day they left you here."

Suddenly seeing his money vanishing as quickly and as unexpectedly as it had arrived, Harald took a threatening step in the direction of his wife. "Shut up, woman." In reply, his wife cowered as though she were a dog that had been beaten once too often and skulked away toward the doubtful shelter of the doorway.

But Baltram was made of sterner stuff. "What does she mean?" he asked, turning his full attention on the snarling man. "Who brought Viv here? Who left her?"

The man shoved the pouch of gold into his shirt. "Damn foolish woman doesn't know what she's talking about."

"Wotan!"

Hearing his name, the dog leapt to his feet and growled at Vivienne's father. The man cringed back and Wotan followed. Saliva dripped from the hound's bared teeth. For a man without a weapon, he was a fearful sight.

"Call off the dog."

"Not until you explain yourself."

"I've given you the girl. What more do you want?"

"The truth."

Another shrug. A spit of tobacco. Eyes that never left the dog in front of him. "Nothing to tell."

"Then tell it."

"She's not our daughter."

Baltram snapped his attention to the old woman who had blurted out the information. Her face was shadowed by the doorpost, her hands kneaded the filthy cloth of her dress. "Continue."

But the farmer was not of the same opinion. "Shut your face, woman. Shut it or I'll shut it for you."

Wotan disliked the aggressive tone in Harald's voice. He closed in on his prey, his growls reaching a higher level of menace.

"Call the bloody dog off or I won't answer no question."

Not that he had been keen on answering them before, but Baltram decided to give him the benefit of the doubt. He called back Wotan and the dog obeyed instantly.

"Tell me the whole story."

Reassured that Wotan was not going to turn him into minced meat, Harald wiped his hands on his shirt and fixed Vivienne with a look of distaste. "Like the old woman told you. She's not ours. They left her here, not more than a bawling bundle of rags. Said they'd be back for her." He sneered unpleasantly. "Well, obviously they didn't."

Probably glad to get rid of her. Never heard another word from them and we were left with their little 'un."

Vivienne turned in the saddle. She was looking for reassurance and Baltram gave it to her.

"I am your family now, beloved." He pulled her close and kissed the top of her head.

"Who were they? Who are my family?"

The old hag, Nan, Baltram seemed to remember her being called, stepped forward. "It was dark. They were in a hurry. Arrived on horses and asked for water and food. Him...." A nod in the direction of her husband assured them who was meant. "Him wasn't here, so I gave them what we could spare. They paid in gold. Generous, they was."

Now that he could see her better, Baltram thought he could see the ghost of the girl she had once been. She'd worked herself to the proverbial bones, probably lost as many children as teeth and had received no loving in return.

"Continue."

"Come a long way, they had. Horses were tired, one was limping. Baby was crying and no woman to feed 'er. One bled. A slash across his leg. I tied it for him, asked about the baby." The words came rough and unformed over her lips as though she were unused to speaking. Remembering the way her husband had barked at her, Baltram feared it was true. He spoke gently with her.

"You're doing well. What happened next?"

She stepped out into the light, her grey hair greasy. "The one what was wounded. He asked for the baby. A right gentleman, he was. Good cloth, his clothes. He cradled the baby like he was her mother. Put a handkerchief in a cup o' milk. Real linen, it was. She did suck at the cloth, so hungry she was, the poor mite. Tol' the gentleman I could nurse the babe. Tol' him that I had a babe and enough milk for two."

Harald interrupted. "Fool of a woman."

Nan studied the earth between her feet. "Fed the babe, I did. The men talked in their own language for a bit. Asked me if I could care for her. Just for a few weeks. Gave me five golden geese." She paused as if in awe of the sum. In a good year, Baltram doubted that they made so much.

Harald completed the story. "Never came back, as you can see. And we was stuck with the brat. Attracts trouble, that one. Should have sold her off to a husband long ago."

Baltram felt fury rise in him on Vivienne's behalf. "Only she was too useful slaving around the farm, while your boys were out peeping into the windows of other people."

Vivienne's voice was soft and apologetic. "But who were they?"

Nan shrugged. "Dunno, no names. They spoke a heathen language and wore expensive clothes."

So they weren't from The Valley. That much was clear. Baltram would speak to the faeries and the elves. They knew more about life beyond The Valley than he did. If anyone were to know, then it would be Muriel. Tooth faeries had access to every home in every country. Maybe he could find Viv's parents for her, but he'd need a clue of some sort.

"Did they leave anything else behind?"

Harald swung himself up into the cart. "We gotta be going. Get in, woman, or I'll leave you behind."

With great difficulty, Nan climbed in beside her husband. "Just the baby. I kept the clothes and the toy, though. Viv knows where they are."

The cart trundled out of the muddy forecourt, the cows following in its wake. After they vanished from view, Baltram slipped from the horse and held out his arms to the woman he loved.

She slid down gracefully, her long fingers resting on his shoulders. She barely came up to his chin and Baltram felt a surge of protectiveness well up inside him. *His*.

He claimed her lips with his own, reveling in their softness, in her warmth and scent. He did not know why the gods had granted him this woman, but his gratitude would be eternal. Her lips parted beneath his own and he felt the tentative touch of her tongue against his own. He shuddered, overcome by the zing of recognition that flowed between their bodies. He wanted to lie her down on the ground and make love to her, but not here, not in this hideous home she had been forced to endure.

Reluctantly he pulled away, smiling at the expression of lust on her face. His darling Vivienne was a woman of passionate depths. Depths he was determined to explore at his leisure. Perhaps, if he lived one hundred years, he might indeed find the very last one.

But not now. Not in this place.

As though sensing his discomfort, Vivienne turned to face the house. "I can't believe no one told me. I never felt as though I belonged, but I thought everyone had similar feelings. I thought everybody has fantasies of being left behind by a rich and mysterious stranger."

Her hair smelled of jasmine and he breathed in the scent, wondering at her perfection. Somewhere close by, a woodpecker was hammering on a tree trunk. "You are free, Vivienne. You are free to go with me."

She covered her mouth with her hand. "You gave them all your money for nothing. You didn't need to buy my freedom at all. They're not my parents."

He let his hand slide down her arm. "I have more, Vivienne. You will not marry a poor man."

Her eyes did not quite reach his. Guilt, he supposed – after all, he had given away more money than she had ever seen in her life. How could he make her understand that

he would have given twice that amount to call her his woman, his wife. He would have given it all away for her.

She stepped out of his embrace and headed toward the door of the hovel. "I think I know what she meant. There is an old chest. She kept her special things in the bottom drawer. That must be what she meant."

'She', no longer 'ma'. It would take time for Vivienne to accept this change in her life, but she wouldn't be alone. He would help her every step of the way.

The main room was a mess. Drawers had been pulled out and emptied, items had been discarded and no one had taken the time to put anything away. Vivienne clucked with her tongue and began to pick up the wooden platters and place them on the table before Baltram removed them from her hands. "You are no longer the servant in this house. Where is the clothes press?"

The press was in the bedroom. Vivienne entered the room with the awe usually reserved for churches. Baltram doubted that she had ever been welcomed into this room. Nervously, she crossed over to the press and opened the bottom drawer. The wood groaned and complained, taking two or three attempts before it slid outward. Wrapped in a piece of rough homespun cloth, Vivienne removed tiny items of clothing, leg-wear, shirt and a bonnet. Knitted garments followed—all of them white, all of them intricately worked.

"White is an impractical color for children." She said the words in a whisper, not daring to believe the implication. She was gentleborn—a lost daughter of a well-to-do man.

"We will take them with us. Perhaps the faeries can help us find your parents." He kept to himself the fact that failure to return had probably also meant the failure of mother and father to survive their problems.

"No, Baltram. You are my family now. I don't want to chase a rainbow. But we will take these things with us. I would like to keep them."

Vivienne moved to close the drawer.

"Stop. Wait." Baltram had caught sight of something golden tucked in the back of the drawer. He reached out and extracted the object. It was a small chest no larger than the palm of his hand. Intricate designs had been etched into the metal. It was unlocked.

"Do you know what this is?"

Vivienne nodded. "It's a magical toy. Da...I mean my foster father, used to take it out and play with it at times."

"How does it work?"

"Quite simple. Inside the chest are pieces of gold. If you take one out, it turns to tin and then crumbles into dust. My father." She hesitated, and then corrected herself. "My foster father always hoped that one would stay golden, but of course they did not."

Baltram opened the chest. As Vivienne had said, five pieces of gold were lined upright in the chest. Instead of the customary goose, they were etched with a dragon.

He lifted out the closest coin. It remained whole long enough for him to admire the outstretched wings and then it crumbled and fell to the floor.

"I have heard of such chests, although I have never before seen one." Carefully, he placed the object on her lap. "Take one."

She looked at him with an expression that released a surge of lust in his loins. Surely she was innocence incarnate. "But... I'm not allowed to touch it. I might break it."

"Trust me—take one."

The second coin slid out of its holder and lay flat in her palm. Seconds ticked by, and then minutes.

"It's still whole."

"Yes."

Those long lashes. Those eyes of endless honey. "But how? Why?"

Baltram slid the coin from her numb fingers and placed it on the floor. "There is a protective charm. Only the true owner can take the coins. The true owner is you."

A touch of color burned on her cheeks. "Five golden coins? That's a lot of money."

Her skin was soft under his fingers. He traced the line of her jaw before answering. "If I am correct, the chest will create money infinitely." He closed the lid and then opened it again. The missing coins had indeed been replaced.

"You, my love, are rich indeed."

Chapter Seventeen

Muriel rested her head on Elton's stomach. It was as smooth as marble, subtly muscled and warm. With one hand, she grazed over the jutting pelvis, wandered past the replete cock and stroked his thigh.

It was good to be home again.

The sex had been rewarding, peaceful and slow.

Elton had forgiven her. More importantly, he seemed to have forgiven himself. The memory of his brother was erased from both their minds.

"Elton?"

The tips of his fingers were heaven in her hair. She breathed out, enjoying the expert massage.

"Yes, my love?"

Love? The word made her tingly inside. She'd never been anyone's love before. It was an intoxicating thought.

"Mmm. I was thinking."

"Is that a sensible pastime while you are off-duty?"

"Don't interrupt! I'm being serious."

"Serious? That's a dangerous thought. Perhaps I should do my civic duty and alert the fire brigade?"

"Elton!"

He noted the undertone in her voice and adopted a serious stance of his own. His hand continued to rub her scalp. If she were a cat, she would have started purring."

"I want to know about sprytes and things."

The pause in rhythm was the only sign of his surprise.

"What exactly do you want to know about them? I wouldn't think that you'd have many as customers."

"Clients, Elton. I have clients."

"Good, but I still wouldn't bet that you have any."

"None, actually, but that's beside the point."

"What is the point then, exactly?"

Muriel sighed, kissed the navel in front of her and heaved herself back into her second favorite position. Head on his shoulder, leg entwined between his and wings generating the lightest of breezes. "How do they do *it*, actually?"

"Do what, Muriel? Cook meals, plant trees, work their healing magic?"

She wondered if he was being obtuse on purpose. Perhaps their sexual marathon had fogged his brain. "How they do IT."

"Sex?"

"Yes."

"Same principles as us. Maybe a bit more athletic. They're known to be very bendy."

"But there are three of them and they all have cocks."

Elton raised his head and stared at her with his pale blue eyes. "Muriel, didn't you cover this at school?"

She traced a heart on his chest, teasing his nipple as she passed. "I missed the lesson, I'm afraid. I didn't think I needed to know." This last bit was more wail than statement.

"And what has piqued the sudden interest?" His hands headed down to her butt. Always a good place to be heading and they could always be certain of a welcome.

"Couldn't you just tell me?" She wagged her butt in encouragement.

"I could, but what do I get in return?"

"A blowjob? Anal sex? A nice oily massage with extras?"

"Hmm." He kissed her nose and claimed her lips. She melted into the heat of his mouth, as good as liquid chocolate with whipped cream on top. He pulled away far too soon and rubbed his nose against hers. "But I get them all the time, anyway."

This was a new Elton. Suspiciously, she raised herself on one elbow. "What do you want?"

He grinned at her, cheeky as a newborn pixie. Instead of replying, he reached down below the bed and held up an item for her inspection. It was a pair of handcuffs.

"You want to handcuff me?"

He shrugged, his smile remaining resolutely in place. "Sure. Elwood seems to like it."

"Yes, but Elwood is a pervert. He kisses his knife, for goodness sake."

Elton let the cuffs swing back and forth in front of her face. "Have you never wondered?"

There was something hypnotic about the things. She shook her head to stop herself from staring at them.

"Wondered, yes, the same as intimate piercing, and rejected it."

They moved in front of her face, scary in the extreme. "No handcuffs—no information."

Honestly, wherever Elton had discovered this infuriating part of himself, he should pack it back again. "I have wings, Elton."

He raised a recently shaped eyebrow. "You are a faerie and faeries have wings. Yes."

She sighed loudly, bent over and sucked his nipple. He groaned and wiggled under her administration. "If I lie down on my back, I could damage my wings. Therefore, you cannot cuff me to the headboard."

"Who said I wanted you to lie on your back? There are other places I could tie you. So what do you say?"

"I want to know about the spryte connection." He winced as she bit his nipple.

"You'll let me tie you up?"

"Only if you release me if I really hate it."

"Deal."

She grinned at him, mounted his thighs and took his cock into her hand. She did so enjoy having something to play with when listening to a bedtime story. "So tell me about the sprites/sprytes and so on."

"The spryte is the male of the species."

"I knew that!" She bounced up and down slightly, his penis slipping through her hands.

"Shall I continue, then? Or shall we proceed to the part where I handcuff you and have my wicked way?"

She pouted. "Go on."

"The sprite is the female and the sprete is neuter."

Muriel's forehead wrinkled. "Neuter? But it had a cock, I saw it?"

"Did you?"

Sliding her hand over his cock, she caressed her way down the semi-erect organ. "Well, not in person—just in her, I mean its, trousers. But it was definitely there. And I know what I'm talking about."

A cloud passed over his face. "Yes you do, don't you, Muriel?"

She stopped for a second while she contemplated his words, then started again. She was too much of a professional to be diverted from the truly important things in life. "And the point you want to make is...?"

He sighed. It sounded awfully sad, but Muriel was taking her calls from the piece of male flesh between her hands and that was definitely on the up and ready. "I mean, my girlfriend knows more about hand jobs and blowjobs than any other female in The Valley. Every time I mention your name, some male wants to tell me about the best blowjob he ever had. Do you know how that makes me feel?"

His cock was still growing in her hand. It never ceased to amaze her how fast it could grow, the sheer difference between standby and on duty. "It's part of my job."

"No, Muriel, knowing about sex is part of your job, blowing the brains out of half the population of The Valley is not part of it."

"I haven't blown anyone since I met you. I have been faithful. And anyone who says otherwise is lying."

"And what about Baltram?"

Ohhh—now she knew what he was talking about—male jealousy, pure and simple. "We have a history, you know that." She cocked her head to the side and smiled at him. "And he offered, you know, to help me get back onto the proverbial horse but..."

"But?"

"I turned him down. The very thought made me want to throw up."

"So from now on, when you're stressed, I can expect you to eat chocolate, same as every other female in all the dimensions, rather than sucking cock."

Refusing to let him rile her, she smiled sweetly. "Shall I suck yours?"

"I am not a piece of chocolate." But his cock had reacted instantly at the thought, full and hard in her hand.

"But it certainly tastes just as good." She leered at him and pouted her lips.

He groaned somewhere deep in his throat, a sound he only made when fully aroused. "I thought you wanted to learn about the sprytes?"

So she did. "Sorry, I promise to be good." She raised herself and mounted his erect organ, easing herself down his cock until she felt his balls touch her skin.

"What are you doing?"

"Just occupying the best seat in the house."

His tongue moistened his lower lip.

"I'm ready. You can continue the lecture."

"Well, then. The sprytes are male because they produce the sperm with half of the genetic information. This is released into the womb of the spreet."

"The spreets being the neuters?"

He nodded.

"And in addition to having a womb, they also have a penis."

Another nod. "A tiny penis. Perhaps only four inches when fully erect."

"But still a penis."

"Yes."

"And the point of having a penis in this case would be?"

He shrugged. "Something to play with when they're nervous? Hell, Muriel, why would you not want to have a penis?"

"A clitoris is better."

"Give me one reason why a clit is better than a cock?"

She squeezed her muscles around his cock and twirled her hips. His cock spoiled places on the inside of her vagina. Delicious. By the Virgin Faeries, did she love this cock and the elf attached to it, but that didn't mean that she wanted one of her own.

"Because we don't pee with it."

He gave her a long hard look and changed the subject. "Shall I continue?"

A semicircle in the other direction. "Please do."

"The spryte ejects the male sperm into the womb of the sprete. And the sprite ejects the female sperm."

"Whoa. You mean the sexual act really is a threesome?"

"Yes. How can you be over one hundred and twenty years of age and not know where little sprytes come from? I thought every child knew that. What did they teach you behind the bike shed at school?"

She leaned forward so that his cock almost slipped out of her vagina, took the lobe of his ear into her mouth and bit it slightly. "I learnt that elves are incredibly horny and if you bite them just right, they'll come immediately."

He grinned at her, cupped her butt and rubbed his chin between her boobs.

"You are a very naughty faerie."

"I do try, beloved."

He smiled at her. "So, any more questions before I flip you over and take you doggy-style?"

Grinning, she settled back down on his cock, enjoying the friction, enjoying the fact that she could. "Let me just see if I've got this right. The spryte and sprite both shoot sperm into the sprete and the sprete carries the offspring."

"Correct, my love."

"And why is the sprete considered to be neuter if she does the nurturing?"

"Because all she does is nurture. Her body provides an egg that has no genetic information at all. The offspring has DNA from the father and the mother. The sprete is nothing more than the nanny. She also has no magical powers." He lowered his voice as though a sprete might hear and take offence. "They are particularly simple beings, not exactly noted for their intellectual capacity."

Forgetting the danger of wrinkles, Muriel screwed up her forehead. "That's weird, that's really weird. And the only one who has a vagina is...?"

"The sprete," he finished for her. "And shocking as it may seem to you, that's no excuse to stop moving."

She did him the favor and then he flipped her over and took her doggy-style, just as he'd promised.

Later, much later, the handcuffs came into play.

* * * * *

Friday morning was the same as any other morning. Muriel arrived late at work.

"Well, you look as though you've just fucked an elf." Tony leered as he lurched in her direction with a pile of files. She looked pointedly to the side and noticed a group of her fellow workers standing around in front of the large plasma screen television.

Pornos again, obviously.

She threaded her way through co-workers and visitors alike. "Make way, faerie coming through." Her words worked as well as Moses parting the red sea. She straightened her wings and went through to the front of the crowd.

Just in time to see Elton pull her down onto his cock.

"And I reckon it was Traeton. He favors those tight black trousers." The voice behind her belonged to a stranger. She wanted to hit him anyway.

"Well, Muriel's here now. We can ask her."

For a moment, Muriel thought that they had recognized her. But a second look at the film told her that the angle and the number of shadows in the alleyway had successfully hidden the color of her dress. The only thing to be seen here was two people having sex in a seedy alley. Or to be correct, an elf and a faerie.

"Where did this video come from?"

"The security camera at the Horse and Whip." Fiona was watching with great interest. "Do you recognize the cock, Muriel?"

Visibly riled, Muriel snapped. "Why would I know, Fiona? I haven't done every guy in The Valley."

"You haven't?" Fiona's red eyebrows shot up into the vicinity of her hair.

Muriel pushed the stop button on the machine and pulled out the video. "Whoever installed the security camera at the pub had better dismantle it before Garald finds out. You know what a stickler he is for keeping The Lore. The Lore quite clearly says that technology is to be kept out of The Valley. What we can't do with magic won't get done."

"I couldn't have said it better myself." Muriel turned around and smacked straight into Garald's chest.

"Hi, boss."

"Hmm. Did you have a good time last night?"

She nodded, not liking the expression on his face. In the meantime, everyone had disappeared back into their offices and corners as if they had never been there.

"It wasn't me."

"Of course it wasn't. I take it you wouldn't have filmed yourself and then left the evidence around for everyone else to watch. You may be slightly silly, but I've never noticed any exhibitionist tendencies." He leaned in a little closer. "Now, if it were Fiona, it'd be different."

Muriel felt her cheeks grow warm. "If you'll excuse me?"

"Actually, I was looking for you."

"Aha."

"There's a unicorn in your office. A rather unhappy one. I suggest you find out what he wants before he ruins the furnishings."

Unicorns in the building were not a normal event. Muriel had never heard of one actually visiting a place outside of The Valley.

That wasn't a good sign.

And why did he want to talk to her?

Damn.

The unicorn was busy putting holes in the wall. He'd already bored in five and was working on the sixth one when Muriel walked in.

"What are you doing?"

He pulled his horn out of the plaster and stared at her. "This is not an appropriate setting for a unicorn."

She didn't debate the fact.

"I was required to walk through the building and use something called an elevator. People actually patted me and offered me carrots." He threw back his head and shook his mane. "I am not a horse."

"So why are you here?"

"Returning a favor for a friend. You needn't think that I'm doing it to help you."

Unicorns were always rude. That was part of their character. Muriel backed away toward the window, being careful to keep her butt out of the reach of his teeth. "So maybe you should do whatever it is you're supposed to do and you can leave."

The unicorn considered this option and nodded.

"I have an invitation attached to my mane. If you would be kind enough to remove it."

She did as he asked, even though it meant coming back into the general vicinity of his teeth.

The embossed card was beautiful, her name written in ink on the front.

"Well, aren't you going to open it?"

"I thought you were leaving?"

"Well, as I'm here, you might have the decent courtesy to tell me what it's all about."

Well...Muriel was just a tad curious. She broke the seal and opened the heavy paper. It was an invitation and it said —

*You are cordially invited to attend the weddings of
Baltram, ranger of The Valley, to Vivienne of Hogsmeade Farm
And
Elton, elf of The Valley, to Muriel, Patron Faerie of Virgins.*

The ceremony shall take place at 3pm on Saturday 28th June at the Party Meadow.

RSVP.

And underneath in writing she recognized as Elton's were the words, sorry darling, couldn't wait for you to organize it after all.

Muriel squealed so loudly that the unicorn began to pound his head into the wall again. Garald arrived in a puff of smoke, closely followed by Fiona, Tony and the rest of the faeries. It wasn't until they had wrestled the invitation out of her hands that they understood what was going on.

Muriel was truly getting married.

About the Author

Growing up with two older brothers taught Mary Hausen the meaning of the word survival. It also taught her that there was a world of “beyond” into which neither her brothers nor her sister could follow. A world just for her.

Now grown up and living in Europe with her husband and two children, Mary’s World of Beyond has matured into a playground of romping elves, marauding Vikings and the occasional vampire.

When not writing, Mary can be found in her garden or travelling the world for inspiration.

The author welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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