

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

The Twelve Quickies of Christmas



Book 11

Elf Song
Samantha Winston

ELF SONG

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ELF SONG

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"Christmas in the Sugar Plum Fairy's castle has been a magical moment ever since the Sugar Plum Fairy performed a ballet for the Nutcracker Prince. It started when a young mortal girl, Clara, freed Prince Branagh from the Nutcracker spell cast upon him by a wicked magician. Since then, he comes each Christmas to see us perform and to take part in the Christmas feast."

Melle watched as the guests followed Miss Gwen, the dance instructor for the fairy ballet troupe, around the castle. She had overheard Miss Gwen's speech at least a hundred times already, and if she heard it one more time, she would shove a candied apple down Miss Gwen's throat. Miss Gwen had started practicing her speech in August, and by November, most of the people in the kitchen where Melle worked and where Miss Gwen insisted on practicing her speech, wanted to skewer her with a carving knife.

Melle set to work chopping dates. Thank Mistral, Miss Gwen had finally gone out of earshot. Melle's hands flew, and soon the dates lined their trays, ready to be coated with sugar and spices. A glance at the wall showed the date—December twenty-third. The prince would arrive tonight in his sleigh, in secret, as usual.

She'd love to get a glimpse of the prince. She'd never been able to before, always claiming to be too busy in the kitchen with the feast. But this year she'd decided to see him. Those who had, said he put all the men in the castle to shame. She wanted to see for herself. She didn't dare tell anyone though. They would only make fun of her, Melle, the kitchen elf, trying to catch a glimpse of the Nutcracker Prince—a prince from the fairy kingdom, heir to the throne of Hivernia.

Carefully, Melle carried her trays of dates to the drying cupboard and slid them in their holders. Then, looking around to make sure no one saw her, she grabbed her shawl from its hook, slipped out of the back of the cupboard and through the window

leading to the pantry. After that, it took only a minute to tiptoe down the holly and ivy-decked hall, across the frosty courtyard, and into the main building.

Bright-leaved holly with red berries hung in gorgeous swaths along the banisters, mistletoe sprigs dangled over doorways, candles dipped in golden glitter lit the hallways, and the castle echoed with Christmas carols and laughter.

The dancers would be in the ballroom, rehearsing with the musicians. The kitchen staff would never miss her; she'd volunteered for clean-up duty, not cooking and serving. Besides, it wasn't as if she got noticed a whole lot.

The Sugar Plum Fairy would be in her quarters, along with her court. From what Melle had heard, the Nutcracker Prince arrived in the evening for the dance, stayed for dinner, then left the next morning at dawn to be at his uncle's palace for the family's traditional Christmas Eve dinner. If she hid in his guest room, she would get her chance.

Her heart pounded and she shivered with fright as she slipped into his room. The poinsettia flowers she'd arranged sat on the mantel. She'd twined holly and ivy together with sugared pears and apples to create a stunning centerpiece on the table. But if anyone caught her in here now, she'd be banished from the palace.

The Nutcracker Prince was a mysterious man, secretive and silent, and his aunt, the Sugar Plum Fairy, had decreed he be left alone. Some said he'd been terribly wounded in his fight against the Mouse King. Others said he'd never gotten over losing Clara—though he'd been just a lad when the adventure had happened. Clara had gone back to her land, and with the evil magician dead, the door had sealed forever between the two worlds. For Clara the adventure had been nothing but a dream, but for the prince it had been a terrible trial, ending with the final battle against the Mouse King. He'd freed the land from the tyrant king's grip, but some said that he'd lost his will to live in the process.

Melle rubbed her head, suddenly tired. The battle had taken its toll on her life too. From archer in the elf militia, she'd gone to assistant cook and maid in the palace. But it

had been her choice, a way to get away from the stress of facing her elf kin and seeing her pain reflected on their faces.

Why think of the past at all? She could not call her family back from the dead, why dwell upon the pain? Better to think of the present. She straightened her shoulders and looked around the room. It needed warming.

The winter's chill seeped into the room despite the heavy curtains and thick rugs. So, she would light a fire in the fireplace. Surely the prince would appreciate a cozy fire?

After the fire blazed merrily, she hid behind the curtain, curling up on a cushion in the casement of the window. She wrapped her shawl around her shoulders and cuddled into its softness. The fire's warmth reached her and she yawned, rubbing her eyes to try to stay awake. It seemed too great an effort to keep her eyes open.

* * * * *

Myst and Glyf tossed their narrow, white heads and neighed loudly. They picked up their pace, trotting faster, behind them the sleigh silently gliding through the falling snow.

Branagh lifted his head and peered through the gloom. Although he wouldn't admit it, his shoulder ached painfully, but the sight of the castle appearing out of the gray lifted his spirits. All year long he looked forward to these few days when he left his parents' palace and paid visit to his subjects by himself. Christmas, for him, brought very mixed feelings.

It meant the end of the crippling spell that had frozen him in nutcracker form, the end of the evil magician...and the end of his archenemy, the Mouse King. It had also brought him Clara to whom the evil magician had given him—in his nutcracker form—as a gift. The magician had thought to get rid of Branagh once and for all. But Clara had fallen in love with him and ended the spell. Then he'd gone back to his land and fought

the Mouse King and won. Yet when the battle ended, he lost Clara for all time. After the victory celebration and the Christmas festivities, she'd gone back to her world, and he'd stayed in his. Christmas time was a time of joy and sorrow for him, but now, most of all, a time of peace and quiet.

His aunt, the Sugar Plum Fairy, knew more than anyone the hurt he'd suffered at the hands of the Mouse King. She'd tended his wounds and had made Clara and him welcome in her palace after the battle. To hide his infirmity, she made sure that his sleigh arrived in secret by a back entrance to the castle. As his horses trotted under the arched doorway, she stepped out of the shadows and took their reins.

"How are you, my dear boy?" She patted Myst and Glyf, and then pretended not to notice as he stumbled getting out of the sleigh, his bad leg buckling as he stepped down.

He caught Glyf's harness and stayed upright, feeling a hot rush of frustration. A crippled fae prince-was it any wonder he preferred to stay hidden?

"Branagh, I shall take you to your room. Tarquin will care for the horses and Darwi will bring your bags." His aunt turned and strode towards the palace.

Gritting his teeth with the effort, he stretched his stiff legs and followed her into the castle. After a good rest, he would be able to fix his glamour in place. The spell concealed his infirmity and made him appear perfectly normal. But fatigue made it impossible to keep up, so he hurried through the empty hallway to his room. "Thank you, Aunt Serena," he said, taking her hand and kissing it.

"Would you like to come to my rooms and relax for a while? You're here early this year." Her voice ended on a slight questioning note. She'd certainly heard his parents' decree and wanted him to tell her about it.

He adored his mother's sister. But he couldn't talk to anyone about it. Not just yet. "Thank you, I'll rest here. Don't worry about me, I'll be fine."

Her pale, delicate eyebrows lifted, but she said nothing. With a nod, she left for her rooms, which always teemed with giggling young women, flirting courtiers, genteel

ladies-in-waiting, and of course, all the most trendy and fashionable people of the land. He'd always felt so out of place at court, even his parents' court. No wonder he'd left in search of his own adventure, and how unfortunate that he should have fallen into the clutches of the evil magician.

He opened the door to his room and stopped. The fire had been lit, and pleasant warmth greeted him. With a contented sigh, he stood and warmed his hands in front of the chimney, feeling the ache in his shoulder and knee subside a bit. A knock sounded, and old Darwi came in with his bags. The old elf disappeared into the dressing room to hang up the clothes. Just as quickly he reappeared, threw Branagh a quick glance, nodded in satisfaction towards the fireplace, and left the room. Branagh locked the door behind him to keep out any curious wanderers. With the palace full of guests, best to keep the door locked and the key in a safe place.

Branagh turned back to the fire, and a faint whiff of cinnamon spice caught his nose. Looking around the room for the source, he saw nothing, so he shrugged and went to the bathroom to run a bath. He adored the huge, copper, claw-footed tubs here, and the bathrooms were vast, with thick, plush towels and wonderful handmade soaps. Not that his own palace lacked refinement, but his aunt took elegance to the limit. Invitations to her Christmas celebration were coveted throughout the land, and his place of honor in the dance hall was jealously desired.

He peeled off his tunic and shirt, stripped off his boots and leggings and left everything in a heap on the floor. Then he climbed into the tub, sighing as the warm water enveloped him. Steam rose, and in the mirror facing the bath, he saw his reflection. As always, without the glamour, it showed a pale young man with light brown, haunted eyes and a twisted shoulder. With the glamour spell, he became what everyone thought a prince should be—straight as an elm, with a confident gaze and no limp. Here though, he could let his guard down and be himself.

The warm water loosened his muscles and he felt himself relaxing. He rubbed a bit of sandalwood soap onto a cloth and washed his legs and shoulders, and then he knelt

and washed his cock. It surprised him by growing heavier in his hands, and a pang of desire made him groan aloud. What he'd give to have a fair maiden kneeling in front of him, oblivious to his wounds, ready to take him into her eager mouth or sex. There came another whiff of cinnamon, and then the sound of the door handle turning quietly.

He paused, and then in silence, he eased out of the tub and peered into his bedroom. There, staring worriedly at the door stood a small elf woman. She wore elf garb, not as colorful as fairy dresses, but possessing a simple beauty; a shawl the color of night fringed with silver and a dress of forest green, made of softest leather that hugged her breasts and hips before flaring into a long, supple skirt. And a sprinkle of sugar on her dress spoke of her job in the kitchens. Her hair caught the firelight and held it in its auburn depths, but he couldn't see her face or tell what she looked like.

What matter? She was there. She'd obviously been sent by his aunt, who knew about a man's needs. But an elf? Far shyer and more serious than fairies, elves seldom strayed from their forest home. Hmm. Perhaps his aunt had a good idea. An elf would be a welcome diversion, and more importantly, an elf would keep his secrets.

He stepped further into the room. "Why keep your clothes on? Take them off now, that I may see you better."

At his voice, Melle whirled around. She'd thought to creep out of the room, but the door had been locked.

She'd woken to the sound of running water. Her heart had nearly stopped. She'd come to see the prince. She just hadn't counted on getting such a good look. But she'd taken a deep breath, tiptoed to the door, and peeked in. The most magnificent man she'd ever seen lay in the steaming water, his hair tousled, his eyes shadowed with fatigue. Then he'd knelt in the tub and taken his cock in his hand, and as it had hardened, her whole body had been hit by a spasm of desire so strong it nearly sent her

to her knees. What would it be like to feel that cock sinking into her wet cunt, driving into her body in a hard, steady rhythm until she sang in pure delight?

Reality hit her like a frozen snow bank. A fairy prince, heir to the throne, didn't make love to an elf woman. Bowing her head, she crept to the door and turned the handle. It didn't open. Someone had locked it, and the key was nowhere to be seen. Panic iced her spine—she would be banished for sure! Then a low voice from behind her said, "Why keep your clothes on? Take them off now, that I may see you better."

She froze, and then turned slowly. He stood, naked, water dripping from his body, the firelight turning his skin to molten gold. Her knees trembled. His deep, purring voice had struck a chord in her. What would it sound like when he cried out in pleasure? Gooseflesh prickled on the back of her neck.

"I said, take your clothes off. Don't be shy. Did my aunt send you?" He smiled and she saw his body waver a bit, as if he tried to cast a glamour spell. A glamour spell? Why would he need one? She saw then that one of his shoulders dipped a bit, as if in pain, and that his right leg sported a vicious scar from knee to ankle.

Lifting her eyes, she noticed he stared at her, his eyes hooded with obvious desire. He didn't look angry at all that she was in his room. In fact, his eyes had a predatory gaze, as if he watched a choice morsel. She lost the power of speech as he approached. Her heart thudded so hard her body shook. Gently, he took her chin in his hands and tipped her head up.

"Such a shy creature you are. No, don't say anything. I prefer silence." He stroked her cheeks with his thumbs, his fingers cupped under her jaw. "What incredible eyes you elves possess. We fairies can be jealous of no one but elves, for you far surpass us in beauty."

Melle gave a start. Who was he fooling, *she, beautiful*? His words fell as if from honeyed lips and, entranced (perhaps she had been caught in a spell!), she tipped her head up for a kiss. She'd never wanted anything as badly—not food, not water, or even

sleep. A kiss, she wanted a kiss, and then she would die happy. Her toes curled in anticipation.

A spark danced in his eyes and he bent, brushing her lips with his. At his touch, a shock seemed to leap from his lips to hers. Had he felt it? He gave no sign, but his eyes darkened and his mouth grew soft. A whimper escaped her as her nipples began to tingle and a terrible craving grew in her belly.

He kept his hands on her face, holding her to him, his mouth suddenly more insistent. Her lips parted beneath his probing tongue and she felt his velvety touch as he drew his tongue teasingly along the inside of her lips. He tasted of wintergreen, with a hint of spice and mulled wine. Fire followed his touch, and longing. He moved closer still, and the tip of his penis touched her belly. He hesitated, then pressed it a bit harder, letting her know just exactly what he wanted. Its rounded tip burnt like a firebrand.

Fire burned in his eyes too. Honey-colored in the firelight, they gleamed golden as a lion's eyes and just as hypnotizing. His stare burned into her as he thrust his tongue slowly into her mouth. At the same time, he brought his whole cock into contact with her belly, sliding closer until he pressed against her, thigh against thigh, his thick erection like an iron bar between them.

His tongue found hers and began a subtle dance. Teasing with the tip, he thrust it in and out of her mouth, slowly working it deeper, until their mouths seemed melded together and she couldn't tell where his lips left off, or where her tongue began. Her breath came in gasps now; she felt as if she could hardly breathe. His breathing deepened as well, and his cock flexed against her belly, igniting another fire, this time deep inside her cunt. A spasm shook her, and a surge of wetness flooded her passage.

When he lifted her dress, she moved back and opened her legs to give him access. Her silken shawl slid from her shoulders and pooled at her feet. She kicked off her deerskin moccasins and unbuttoned her dress, pulling her arms out of the sleeves—somehow without letting go of the prince—letting it slip off her hips to the floor. Naked, she stood for a minute, trying to catch her breath. But the sight of Branagh's

golden body, glowing incandescent in the firelight, stunned her. Her heart pounded so hard she thought it would crash right out of her chest.

She shouldn't be doing this, but how could she not?

Swiftly, he dipped his hand between her thighs and found her aching cunt. She drew breath with a hiss as his fingers pushed into her slick, swollen flesh. Sharp tingling followed his fingers' movements. He teased her gently, his rough fingertips skimming against her clit until she thought she'd scream. Deeper! She clutched at his wide shoulders, her hands slipping on damp skin, as she tried to press him closer.

He gave a soft moan, and then slid two fingers into her heated passage. An echo of his moan tore out of her belly and rose to her throat. Spasms of longing loosened her muscles to let his fingers in deeper. Faster now he stroked, pressing, searching. Twisting and gently rubbing, as if feeling for the spot that would give her the most pleasure. And...oh yes, there!

A song throbbed behind her lips as his touch sent waves of heat through her body. Molten honey ran through her veins, her body strained towards him, and a shockwave of pleasure shook her from head to toe.

Then he drew a shaky breath and pulled his hand away. As he pulled his fingers out of her body, liquid ran down the insides of her thighs. A primal, musky odor filled the air, along with the scent of sandalwood and cinnamon spice.

An ache of pure emptiness nearly sent her to her knees. Now! She wanted him now! It had been too long, far too long! When her husband had been killed in battle she'd wanted no one—no one until now. The memory of his lovemaking woke her senses, brought tears to her eyes, and cracked the ice around her heart. Something struggled in the deepest depths of her soul, something desperate to live again, to feel, even if it turned to pain.

She had loved before, and she would love again. The song of the elf swelled in her throat.

He must have sensed her urgency, for with a violent thrust, he plunged his cock between her labia, driving it into her tight passage with two great thrusts.

A cry of sheer pleasure burst from her lips, and she tilted her head back and let herself melt into his strong embrace. His arms held her tightly and he buried his face in her neck as he pounded into her, his hips driving like pistons. Wrapped in his arms, Melle reveled in the sensations rushing through her. His hands, so hard and yet gentle, cupped her buttocks, keeping her in place. He kissed the vulnerable skin of her neck, and his eyelashes brushed her cheek. His cock, long and thick, speared her and withdrew in a steady rhythm, spurring her towards the pinnacle of pleasure. Over and over, he plowed into her, lifting her senses higher, ever higher, until she felt she could go no higher and not shatter.

His cockhead hit her womb with each long, hard plunge into her. Pain merged with pleasure until her muscles clenched, and then a flutter began in her belly. Her cunt pulsed wildly as a blinding orgasm ripped through her and a high, pure note left her throat as she began to sing.

Elf song! The sound wrapped around them and bound them together. Each long spasm in her cunt echoed in a note rising from her throat. Part of her soul left her body in the song, part of her heart. Ripples of music washed over her, shivering down her back and legs, wrapping around their bodies in an almost visible cloak of music.

A small part of her tried to stop it, but the song swelled, grew in force, blinding her with its intensity. All her longing all her pain and joy at finding a new partner revealed itself in her song, a song unlike any she'd heard since her beloved had died.

Branagh thought his threshold for pleasure had been reached. But that was before this evening. He'd had sex, but not like this. Not without speaking, without hesitating. He'd always felt dissatisfied, even as he accomplished the act. Nothing had ever grabbed him and shaken him as much as this shy, yet uninhibited woman. Her body seemed made for his hands alone, his cock drove into her heated pussy as if guided by

fate, her eyes, so cool one minute, blazed with desire the next. She needed no speech, her body spoke for her. Her kisses set him on fire, her lips as sweet as spiced honey. Her hands clutching at his shoulders urged him on, faster, harder.

Coherent thought fled, all sensation gathered in his loins and started to build. Soon, all that mattered was his cock, driving to her womb, and each second, each minute seemed to lengthen and then crystallize, hardening in his loins.

She began to quiver, her cunt clasped his cock in a frantic throbbing... And then she began to sing. Music burst from her throat in a symphony of emotion. The song pulled him into her orgasm, pushed him over the brink. As he spilled his seed into her body, each long, powerful burst of seed accompanied her song. His body and hers became one, he lost himself in her sensations, or rather he joined her. She sang their passion, and the wall he'd so carefully built around him broke with the sharp crackle of shattering ice.

Elf song. He'd never heard it, only rumors of its enchantment. Now he knew the stories to be true. There had been pure joy in that song, yet an echo of pain had shaken his bones. Hot desire surged through his body at the clear notes, and each time he'd ejaculated, the music seemed to draw it out until it lasted forever. When it stopped, she fell beside him, her body shaking, and he slumped onto the floor, too exhausted to stand or keep his glamour in place.

His heart thudded painfully against his chest. What must she think of him, now that she'd seen his deformity? She'd destroyed his defenses in an instant...and yet...in their place a deep peace settled. He gathered the strength to open his eyes, and he saw her staring at him pensively. Stripped of his glamour, he had the impression she weighed him in her gaze. "What is it? Haven't you ever seen a —"

She put her hand lightly over his lips, hushing him. "Why do you use the glamour with me?"

He frowned. Surely she could see that he needed to hide his misshapeness. "A fairy prince must be perfect." He narrowed his eyes. "How did you know I used the glamour? No one else has ever seen me use it."

"Elves can see through glamour. Didn't you know that?"

"No, I didn't." Truth be told, he'd never thought about it. Magic surrounded the fae like the air they breathed. Elves' magic centered on nature, he knew. Other than that, he didn't know too much about elves. They kept to themselves. He turned over and winced as pain shot up his arm.

She gave him a shy smile. "You don't need the glamour, you're quite handsome enough without it. I see how your shoulder pains you. Lie on the bed, and let me rub the ache away. I have not the spell of beauty, but I have good hands and can take away much of your pain. Why did you not ask for help before?" She helped him to his feet and eased him onto the bed.

He lay on his back and she went into the bathroom. He heard the sound of splashing in his bath, and when she came back, she had a towel wrapped around her body and her hair looked damp. She held up a washcloth. "Don't move, let me clean you."

He raised himself on his elbow. "Tell me the truth. My leg and my crooked shoulder don't bother you?" He held his breath. Now that her haunting song had broken the walls around his heart, he had to know.

"No. They are scars from a battle you won against great odds. You should be proud to show them."

Proud? He'd never thought of it like that. Always the scars had been a humiliation, proof of the indignity he'd suffered at the magician's hands and the fight with the Mouse King. "If I hadn't been so foolish as to leave the palace, the magician would never have captured me. I would have been strong enough to face the Mouse King."

"The story would never have been the same." She slid onto the bed and touched his shoulder then his knee. "You would never have met Clara, and perhaps the battle

would have gone otherwise. Your rage to vanquish was tied to your love for Clara. Without it, perhaps you would have lost everything.”

“I hear your words in my heart.” Unbearable pain mixed with joy. The same notes as in her elf song. They stirred him in a way he thought he’d never be touched again.

Softly she drew the cloth over his belly and thighs, wiping away the signs of their lovemaking. Then she took his cock and tenderly laved it with the wet cloth, stroking it until he found himself hardening again.

She looked at him, her eyes sparkling. “What’s this? You’re still aroused?”

“You excite me.” He gave a lazy grin. “What is your name, elf?”

A shadow seemed to darken her eyes, but she gave a smile. “Melflouise. Everyone calls me Melle.” Her voice had a little catch in it, a faint roughness that stirred the hairs on the back of his neck. The sexiest voice he’d ever heard.

“Melle. It suits you. Soft, yet determined. No, don’t stop. I want you to make me hard. I want to make love to you again, Melle. I want to love you all over. This time I’ll know your name, and I will shout it as I come.” He lowered his eyelashes. His heartbeat pounded in his chest and throbbed in his cock. Her hands must have some magic, for at her touch, it seemed a spark leapt out and touched his head then traveled straight to his cock, stiffening it almost unbearably.

Elves had a wild, enthralling beauty that fairies adored, and their eyes...he could stare at their eyes forever and never grow tired of them. Her dark red hair, cut short, curled around her head. Her pointed ears tempted his hand to caress them, and her full mouth must have been made for...“Suck me,” he ordered, raising his hips suggestively. “I want to see your lips on my cock.”

She looked at him, and his breath caught in his throat. Such eyes! Melle’s eyes were pure gray with frost over them, like the shimmer of snow on dark ice.

“I will be glad to, but first, turn over so that I may ease your pain.”

“Fine, but don’t tarry, pretty Melle. With each touch of your hands I’ll be thinking of your mouth sliding over my cock.” He gave a low growl, and then turned over, his hard-on pressing into the bedcovers. He heard the swish of her towel slipping off, and then she slid her thighs on either side of him, settling her naked buttocks on top of his. Her pussy, with its neatly trimmed, curly pubic hair, tickled his ass. He moaned as he suddenly felt the hot touch of her labia brush against his skin as she leaned forward.

“Relax,” she breathed in his ear. Her hands rubbed his sore muscles, concentrating mainly on his twisted shoulder, pushing and easing it into place. He knew she could never make it better, but already the constant pain lessened.

“That feels wonderful,” he murmured, as her hands kneaded his sore muscles. His cock gave a massive jerk as she pressed her breasts against him, sliding them up and down the top of his shoulders. Her nipples hardened, skimming his back like hot pebbles. As she leaned forward, her legs opened and her damp pussy came in contact with the sensitive skin on his ass. He closed his eyes, imagining his cock sinking into that wet heat. Shivers trilled down his spine as she scraped her fingernails along his back.

He swallowed hard. He couldn’t touch her, his cock was buried in bedcovers, not flesh, and he couldn’t even kiss her in this position. He concentrated on her breasts teasing him, her hard nipples like small fingers on his back, and her cunt—hot now, and wet and getting more slippery—as she moved her hips back and forth. He clenched his ass, driving his cock harder into the bed.

“All right,” she said, getting up. “Roll over.”

He did, his cock pointed stiffly at his belly. He gripped her wrists and pulled her to him. “I want you to suck me.”

She knelt between his knees and lowered her head.

“No, not like that. Turn around.” He propped a pillow under his head and pulled her hips towards him. “Open your legs. Put one knee on each side of my head.”

She did, and now he had a view of her magnificent cunt positioned right over his face. Excellent. He grabbed her ass with both hands and pulled her down to him. With a groan of delight, he thrust his tongue into her cunt, pushing in and out as if using a cock. Her flesh hugged his tongue, and he licked upwards until he felt the little bone-hard protuberance of her clit.

With a little cry of delight, Melle bent forward and took his cock into her mouth. Her lips slid over it, while her tongue tickled the hypersensitive spot right behind the head. She touched his balls with her fingertips, stroking them with light feather-touches. Her nipples drew across his belly and a nerve jumped in his groin. His balls contracted as she tickled, while her hot, hot mouth pulled and sucked his cock. He grabbed the covers in his hands; he had to anchor himself on the bed or he'd fly right off it.

His cock grew harder, and at the same time, juice flooded her pussy, running down his chin. He reached over her buttocks and holding her tightly, used his thumbs to spread her pussy wide open. Her clit stood up, straight and hard. He nibbled on it with his lips, and with the tip of his tongue he thrummed it fast and hard. Pointy, it rubbed against the tip of his tongue, vibrating as she writhed against him. Another rush of liquid honey surged from her pussy, and he lapped it greedily, now thrusting his tongue deep into her passage. Honey and spice, salt and musk—her taste and scent captivated him. More, he wanted even more of her. He wanted to bite her flesh, mark her for his own.

Her lips tightened on his cock and she grabbed its base with both hands while at the same time, she used her tongue in swirling motions while sucking voraciously. The steady pull of her mouth nearly made him lose control. He wanted to explode into her mouth, but not yet, not so soon. First he wanted, no, he needed, to hear her sing.

He flicked her clit with his tongue, and then plunged it deep into her cunt, going back and forth between her tight, throbbing passage and her hard clit. He used his fingers to penetrate her, pushing her up higher so he could watch. Her juices coated his

fingers and he nudged his forefinger against the tight rosebud that was her ass. A little cry escaped her, and a new flood of wetness welcomed this touch.

Oh, she liked that did she? He pressed harder, and slipped past the tense ring of muscle. Her ass clamped down on his finger and she uttered another loud moan. An urge to make her his, all his, to possess her in all ways took hold of him. Heat enveloped his finger, a tight, deliciously wicked heat. He pushed harder, encouraging her to accept him. Both passages suddenly relaxed and opened, and his fingers plunged to the hilt. Wild shivers shook him at the sight of his fingers dipping in and out of her slit and her ass nearly pushed him over the edge, but he clenched his teeth and managed to contain his orgasm until she leaned hard against him, a wave of pulsations rushing from deep within her and shaking her entire body.

A high note poured from her throat, and vibrated against his penis. Her hands wrapped around him tightly, her mouth fastened to his cockhead, while her song trilled from the tip of his cock the whole length of his body.

Like a crystal glass, broken by the highest note, he burst. Crying her name, he bucked against her, thrusting into her mouth as he came. He poured his seed into her, while she gasped and pressed her cunt even harder against his fingers and mouth.

His whole body shook with the force of his orgasm. It lifted his hips skyward, his muscles straining as he shot stream after stream of his seed into her avid mouth. Greedily she closed her mouth around his jerking cock, milking him dry while he held her cunt firmly to his face, his roar as he came muffled by her swollen flesh.

* * * * *

Chest heaving, he looked at the woman curled by his side. An elf. He'd just had the most incredible sex in his life with an elf. The unexpectedness of it, his sudden devouring passion and her total acceptance stunned him.

She lifted her head and looked at him, her eyes bright. "You are incredible."

"I was just thinking the same about you." He touched her lips gently with his finger. "Such a talented mouth. I can't understand why you're not the toast of the court."

She lowered her eyes. "I have no wish to become the toast of the court. We elves are not like you. We are not as...free with our charms."

Did she regret that, or did she disapprove? He wished he knew. "I know, you think us frivolous and decadent." He shrugged. "But we are all different. I prefer to satisfy my needs in private."

"I would love to satisfy your needs in private whenever you wish." The sparkle had returned to Melle's eyes and he felt absurdly happy. His bubble burst a second later. He had to get ready for the night's entertainment, and regardless of his delight in Melle, there was still his parents' decree.

With a muffled curse, he rolled over and got out of the bed.

"What is the matter? Does your shoulder still hurt you?"

At the mention of his shoulder, Branagh realized he hadn't thought about it, or his glamour spell. The strain of keeping his spell in place had evaporated.

Tentatively, he rotated his shoulder, feeling the muscles loosened and hardly any pain. He looked at Melle, and saw the worry in her eyes. "No, it feels much better, thank you." He paused, and then nodded towards the bathroom. "I have to get ready for the festivities. Would you accompany me tonight?"

A red flush stained her cheeks. "I'm sorry, I cannot."

"Why?" He frowned. Any woman in the palace would be falling over herself in an effort to have an invitation from him. *Oh right, as if you ever wanted to ask anyone.* The only woman since Clara he wanted to accompany him was refusing him.

Had she just slept with him to satisfy her curiosity? A shiver of trepidation ran down his spine. No, he'd felt something with her that he'd never experienced before, and she had sung! But there wasn't time to dwell upon it. He shook his head. "Never

mind, you don't have to explain anything. Why don't you stay here though, and I'll rejoin you later, after the fete. Would you like anything to eat? I can have one of the kitchen staff send you something."

"I am kitchen staff," she said dryly. But a smile played about her full lips. "I'll be glad to stay here and keep your bed warm." Her eyes grew dreamy. "I can't believe you want me to stay."

By the snows of Mistral—she had doubts of her own. Doubts he'd have to overcome. "Of course I do." He cocked an eyebrow at her and gave a lascivious grin. "You suit me perfectly, Miss Melle. I'll have to thank my aunt for her Christmas present."

She opened her mouth to speak, but he needed to hurry. "Whatever it is, it will have to wait," he said, entering the bathroom and closing the door behind him.

He washed quickly, then dressed in the clothes he'd hung in the adjacent dressing room. Finest leather pants and a linen shirt, an embroidered, red coat went over that, and then he pulled on his riding boots. No time to fuss with his hair. He hated fuss anyway. He ran his hand through his curls and then as an afterthought, glanced in the mirror.

A tall fae prince stared at him gravely. The lines of pain had vanished from his face, and his eyes had lavender shadows not from suffering, but from a good, long round in the sack. His lips looked faintly swollen from hard kisses, and there was a love-bite on his neck. He grinned at his reflection and shook his head. His grin faded though as he thought of his parents' decree and what it meant for him...and for Melle. His clenched his fist. Damn! Why did he have to meet her now? Why couldn't he have met her years ago, or never?

He turned away from his image and stood for a moment, head bowed. How could he escape a royal command? He couldn't. That's all. He stepped out of the dressing room into his bedroom and gazed at Melle. She slept. Softly, he leaned over and kissed

her lips. She didn't stir, even when he drew the covers over her shoulders and put another log in the fire so she wouldn't get cold.

The empty corridors echoed with his footsteps. He hurried, for he must already be late.

The banquet had already started, but his aunt didn't reproach him. As he entered the long dining room, a crier announced him and he stood a moment, to give everyone time to gawk their fill. Guests filled the room, and he recognized most of them. His aunt's table stood on a raised dais, and he saw his two cousins, Rath and Lothar, and other important members of his aunt's council there. Who was the stunning fairy woman dressed in purple who sat next to his cousin, Rath?

His aunt patted the chair on her right. "You must have been exhausted. I gave orders not to disturb you. Did you have a good rest?"

A rest? Is that what she called it? He took her hand and kissed it. "Wonderful, thank you."

"This is Princess Yvattia," said his aunt, and he bowed to the beautiful woman on his right.

As usual, everyone stared at him openly, and some waved. He gave a nod towards the guests sitting below and, after shaking hands with everyone at the table and greeting his two handsome cousins, he sat.

"You look tired," said Rath, spearing slices of smoked ham and melon. "Have a good trip?"

Before he could formulate a reply, Lothar asked, "How're your parents?"

"Everyone is well. They send their greetings and hope to see you soon." Branagh grinned at Rath. "The trip was hellish, as usual. When are you going to clear out that forest?"

"When hell freezes over." Rath paused, smiling brightly at the princess next to him. "Princess Yvattia is from North Umlerland. We've decided to marry, so you'll have to

abandon your hermit ways this summer and come to our wedding. I expect you to eat, drink and be merry, and not hide away somewhere all alone." He grinned and reached behind Yvattia to clap Branagh on the back.

Yvattia sweet smile reminded him of Melle's. "I am so pleased to finally meet you, Prince Branagh. Rath has told me so much about you."

"I'm sure he has. I only hope he didn't scare you too much." Branagh took some melon and tried to look interested as everyone spoke of the latest gossip and festivities. His mind kept straying to the woman he'd left in his bed. He wished she'd have come with him. He would have loved to have her here, at his side, just as Yvattia sat next to Rath.

As the evening wore on, Yvattia and Rath exchanged amorous caresses, and Branagh saw Rath slip his hand beneath her bodice to stroke her breast. Her nipples hardened, poking against the silky, violet cloth, and a flush appeared in her pale cheeks. Rath gave a wicked grin as he saw Branagh watching.

"She's hot as embers," he said. "Watch. She loves to share too."

As soon as he said this, the lights dimmed in the dining hall and soft music started to play. The curtain rose and the ballet started. The troupe pirouetted onto the stage and began the beautiful ballet.

Branagh had his eyes riveted on his cousin, though. He watched Rath as he unfastened Yvattia's robe in order to expose one of her breasts. Her cream-colored skin flushed with pleasure as Rath tweaked her nipple. Her breathing quickened and she moaned softly.

Elsewhere in the room, guests fondled their partners. During dinner, it was never overt; that would be considered crass. But after dinner, when the lights had dimmed and when the ballet had started, barely stifled sighs and moans sounded among the tinkle of crystal and silverware. Bared breasts were a common sight then, as were guests disappearing beneath the table to pleasure their partners. Hands dipped between spread thighs, cocks sometimes surged out of pants, coaxed by hands or mouth.

Yvattia sighed deeply as Rath's hand vanished below the table. She pushed her chair back, giving Rath clear access and also giving Branagh a view of her legs opened wide. Her dress bunched around her hips as Rath deftly parted her blonde pubic hair and dipped one finger into her swollen cunt. She grabbed his hand and pressed it harder to her. Rath chuckled as he pushed two fingers into her slit and wriggled. Running her tongue over her lips suggestively, Yvattia reached over and grabbed Branagh's hand as well. Rath made room for him, pulling his fingers out of her cunt with a sucking sound.

Branagh, never one to deny a lady pleasure, slid his fingers into her wetness and she moaned and opened her legs wider. "You too, cousin."

Rath joined him, thrusting his finger in and out of her sex, and gave him a wink. "She's about to come," he mouthed.

Branagh could feel it, too. Her clit vibrated beneath his thumb, and the muscles in her passage swelled and tensed. One after the other, they pumped her heated cunt, Branagh pushing in while Rath pulled out. Their fingers slipped and slid together, until Yvattia grasped their wrists and held on. Her hips suddenly jerked and her cunt twitched, then contracted painfully hard around his finger. She uttered a high cry that blended into the sound of the orchestra's flute.

Rath gathered his betrothed into his arms, holding her trembling body to his chest and Branagh turned away to give them some privacy.

"Why Branagh, have you at long last decided to take part in the festivities? And what's this? You've finally decided to let drop your glamour? What happened that made you finally decide to join the land of the living?" His aunt's words may have been teasing, but Branagh heard a definite questioning note in her voice.

He turned and smiled at her. "I have to thank you for that. The elf woman you sent, Melle, is very special. I wish I'd met her sooner." As his words left his mouth he realized how true they were, and a sharp pang of sorrow stabbed him, for they could never be together.

A muscle twitched in his jaw. He'd never see her again. "Why did you send her, if you knew of my father's decree?" He couldn't keep the bitterness out of his voice.

His aunt looked at him and a frown pulled her eyebrows together. "Melle?"

"Yes, Melle. She waited in my room for me." Anger and regret spurred him on. "Why today? Why did she have to come into my life now? You could have introduced us before, or never let her near me."

"An elf?"

"I know. Who would have believed I'd..." He broke off and brought his fist down on the table with a crash. His plate broke in half and the guests looked up as conversation stopped. Shocked silence descended over the dining room, but a red fury submerged him. "I will not follow the decree. As soon as the dinner is over, I'm leaving for home. My father will listen to me." His voice rang out over the crowd.

"Like when you left the first time, only to be captured by the magician?" His aunt, he realized, could snarl as fiercely as an ice bear. She waved her hand and the broken shards disappeared from the table. "It seems you are good at breaking things. But this decree shall not be broken." Embarrassment washed over him, but just for an instant. Then his frustration returned.

"I'm no longer a hot-headed adolescent." He narrowed his eyes. "I *will* have a say in my future."

"But an elf! They have never ruled the fae, they chose the forest, leaving us the responsibility of ruling and protecting this land."

A loud murmur sounded through the crowd and his aunt stood and faced them. "Would you accept an elf as queen?"

Shouts of 'Never!' and 'No!' echoed through the hall.

Heart pounding, Branagh pushed his chair back and stood before the assembly, making no attempt to hide his wounds with the glamour. Icy fury filled him. "Don't

belittle her for what she is. The elves fought as bravely as the fae. Besides, her heart belongs to me. By Mistral's snows, by Thaw's flowers, I swear it's true!"

His aunt drummed her nails on the table. Even in the dim light, Branagh could tell his words had upset her.

"What is it?"

"Would you wager your future on that?" She stared at him, her eyes bright with malice. "Would you let me test the elf and find her wanting?"

"What does she have to do?"

"Declare her unconditional love for you, in front of all."

"And if she does?" He leaned over the table, refusing to be intimidated. She might frighten some fae—but he'd fought the Mouse King, and by Mistral, he'd fight her if he had to.

"We summon your parents and challenge the decree."

Could it be possible? Was this a way out of the decree? "Yes. I accept. What do I have to do?"

"Nothing. Wait here." She stood up and left, walking quickly.

Branagh watched her leave, fighting a prickle of unease. She left to go get Melle, and would certainly bring her into the hall. Would his pretty elf fail him? No, he knew she loved him. It had poured out in her song, and his bones still vibrated with it. Truth had been in her song; now they needed time, time to heal, time to get to know each other. But would his father let them? Could he challenge the decree and win?

"Are you sure of yourself, cousin?" Rath asked worriedly.

"Very sure." Branagh ignored the shocked looks some of the guests gave him and turned back to the ballet. On stage, men and women in filmy garb still twirled and leapt, their movements flowing beautifully in time to the music.

Suddenly, the vast dining hall and stage became dark as the torches, lamps and candles all blew out at once. An uneasy murmur swept the hall. Branagh frowned. What could this be?

A pale glimmer appeared in center stage. It grew in brightness until it showed a room. With a start of surprise, Branagh recognized his room, and in his bed slept Melle. Her face in repose was as pure as an angel's. Another whisper sounded, this time appreciative. Fairies loved beauty, and Melle's naked body curled in the covers made a stunning sight.

As he watched, the door burst open.

"Wake up! Get out of that bed! What do you think you're doing?"

Someone shrieked in her ear, and Melle's eyes flew open. Shock took her voice away, and she sat up, gaping at the Sugar Plum Fairy, sparks of fury in her eyes, standing at the foot of the bed.

"Answer me. Who gave you permission to come into this room?"

Melle clutched the covers to her chest, too horrified to speak. What could she say? Her heart crashed against her ribs and her stomach clenched in fright. "No one," she finally managed to stutter.

"I suppose you think he loves you now," the fairy spat, leaning over so that her nose was inches from Melle's. "Did he tell you what his parents decreed last week? Did he?"

"No." Melle managed a whisper.

"He is to marry the Princess Sapphire on Christmas day."

The words rained upon her like blows, ripping her newfound happiness to shreds. "I never thought he'd marry me, or that he loved me." Melle found her voice and drew herself up, sitting as straight as possible. She would never give the Sugar Plum Fairy the

satisfaction of seeing how she'd been hurt by this news. But the fairy's next words stabbed her in the heart.

"Guards, seize her!"

Melle leapt to her feet but too late to escape the three guards. If she'd been in the forest she might have gotten away, but in the room, her feet hampered by covers, she tripped and the guards caught her easily.

"Take her to the dungeon, put her in chains, and give her a lesson she won't forget." The fairy spun on her heels and swept out of the room, her violet robes floating behind her like purple smoke.

Melle kicked and struggled, but the guards remained impassive as they dragged her to the dungeon. The stairwell seemed endless as it spiraled downwards, and the dark made Melle's very soul shrink with fear. Then the guards flung her against a stone wall, and as one held her tightly, the other two fastened iron chains to her wrists.

To all fae, elf and fairy alike, iron stings worse than nettles. Melle shrieked in pain as the iron handcuffs locked in place around her fragile wrists. Then the guards jerked on the chains and she found herself dangling against the wall. She scrabbled to get her feet under her and shivered as the damp stones brushed against her skin.

"A lesson, said the mistress?" One guard laughed as he uncurled a long whip from around his shoulder.

"Give it to her good. She needs to know what suffering is," another guard said.

Melle knew what suffering was. She'd lost her home and her family in the war against the terrible Mouse King—the same king who'd so grievously wounded Branagh. After the war, she'd found a second home in the palace of the Sugar Plum Fairy. She had thought to bury her anguish and sorrow by working in the palace kitchens. But she'd never imagined she'd finish like this.

The whip whistled through the air and a tongue of fire seemed to flay the skin off her buttocks. Melle screamed in pure agony and pulled hard against the chains. Another slash fell, this time across her back. The sting brought a flood of tears to her

eyes and ripped another cry of pain from her throat. Twice more the whip fell, each blow stinging like a sword cut.

"That should teach the elf her place," said a guard in a thick voice. He leaned close to her and whispered, "Next time, stick to your own kind." He put his hand on her buttocks, squeezing hard. Then they left her alone in the dark.

She waited until she no longer heard their footsteps then she tried to wriggle out of the chains and handcuffs. It did no good, and the iron hurt more and more each second. Finally she stopped struggling against the chains and tipped her head back.

"I don't care what anyone says," she screamed to the uncaring walls. "I never would have hurt him. I only wanted to ease his pain!" Her voice cracked and her body slumped, her arms cramping in protest against the pain.

"I swear, I love him," she whispered brokenly. "I sang for him. I gave him my elf song." Tears coursed down her cheeks.

Suddenly the chains holding her vanished, and the stone wall turned into smoke and blew away. She found herself in a small room with just one narrow window, a torch burning in a wall sconce, and the Sugar Plum Fairy standing before her. Flickering firelight made her appear menacing.

"What is going on?" Melle rubbed her wrists where a fleeting whisper of pain faded. The pain in her back left her as well, as if the whipping had never taken place.

"My nephew is precious to me." She paced back and forth in front of Melle, her voice as sharp as cut glass. Crimson sparks of anger seemed to follow her swirling robes, and then she stopped and pointed a trembling finger at Melle. "I want only the best for him."

"And I suppose the best would never be me," Melle spat.

"Why should my nephew interest you? Why, you don't even approve of us! You call our festivities licentious and immoral."

"I never..." Melle's voice trailed off. Perhaps she had, on occasion, mentioned fairies' behavior as wanton. Had it been jealousy at seeing the other women's excitement? She blinked away humiliated tears. "No one ever invited me," she whispered, an agony of embarrassment washing through her.

"Probably because you are an elf." The fairy waved her hand dismissively. "My nephew must marry someone who will be an advantage to him and to the kingdom." The Sugar Plum Fairy glared at her, her eyes flashing.

"He can choose for himself, can't he?"

The fairy shook her head. "Alas, no. He is heir to the throne. Have you forgotten?"

Shock rendered Melle speechless for a second. "I'm sorry. I didn't think. Of course, he is prince, not just any man." She knew she spoke the truth. There had never in the history of Hivernia been an elf ruler. And yet, elves and fairies married and had children. They shared many traits and some of the same blood and ancestors. One people had embraced all magic and had become fairies, the other had turned to nature. Her chest felt suddenly hollow; however, she lifted her head proudly and met the Sugar Plum Fairy's gaze. "I will leave the palace. He need never know where I've gone."

"Where will you go, Melflouise? Your family is gone, is it not?" The fairy spoke softly.

"I have distant relatives in the west. They may take me in. If not, I can enroll in the elf guard. Once I was a fair archer."

"I know. You fought bravely, as did your husband and parents during the war..."

"Stop! I beg you, say not another word." Melle stared at the darkness outside. Snow fell, glittering as it fell past the lighted window. She would miss the palace, and Branagh...her heart contracted. How could she leave without a farewell?

"Would you see him one more time?" The fairy's voice was gentle.

"Yes." The word came spontaneously. She blinked, and then nodded slowly. "Yes, I would see him."

The fairy waved her arm in a large circle, and a sphere of light left her fingertips and grew. It lit up the stage, where they stood, and it lit the dining room where a thousand guests sat in stunned silence.

Prickles of consternation rushed over Melle's naked body. Her nipples hardened and her naked skin tingled with gooseflesh, but she stood squarely, her chin lifted in defiance.

A sigh ran through the crowd. In the strange light, everyone's eyes seemed to sparkle like diamonds. Then someone sniffed loudly, another person uttered a muffled sob, and she realized that tears filled their eyes. One by one, they got to their feet.

"Melflouise Fairnight, Archer of the Vinewood militia. Do you love Prince Branagh?" The Sugar Plum Fairy's voice seemed to rock the very foundations of the palace.

"Yes." Melle straightened her shoulders and faced the crowd squarely, seeking the one she loved. She saw him almost immediately. He stood out among all others, his eyes bright, his expression one of wonder. Four disheveled guards held him fast. A rent in his tunic and a cut on his face showed he'd been struggling.

"I had to keep him from leaping to your rescue," the fairy chuckled, nodding to the guards, who stepped back.

"I don't understand." She couldn't tear her eyes from Branagh.

Freed, Branagh leapt over the table and scattered guests in his haste to reach her. Once at her side, he took her in his arms, holding her so tightly she could hardly breathe. "I don't understand either," he said huskily, "but when I saw the guards take hold of you, I nearly went mad." He nuzzled her throat. "I care not that you are not of fairy blood. An elf is what I want, and you are what I need. Melflouise, I love you too. I will give up my throne for you if I must."

A roar sounded from the crowd. "No! Prince Branagh!" At the same time, a clap of thunder flung open the doors. Into the hall strode the king and queen of Hivernia. Snow glittered on their silver-fur cloaks, and around them frost swirled in a

shimmering mist. "Give up your throne? I think not." The king's voice raised the hair on the back of Melle's neck. "You will marry Princess Sapphire and forget this woman. She is an elf, and elves have always left ruling to the fairy king. I won't change my decree."

"She is my chosen one," Branagh said, his arms cradling her in a protective circle. "I will not follow your decree and marry the Princess Sapphire. What other choice have I but to abdicate?" An icy wind seemed to chase his words around the vast room.

"So be it. Leave now." The king's voice betrayed no emotion at all, but Melle felt a tremor run through Branagh's body while stunned whispers swept the hall.

"No!" she cried, and tried to pull away. When Branagh would not let her go, she turned to him. "You can't give up your inheritance for me. Let me go, I beg you."

"Never!" His voice stopped her in her tracks. "If you must leave, we leave together."

She'd never been so terrified in her life. Lightning and thunder played about the roof of the hall as father and son faced each other. The guests cowered in their chairs, while the queen rushed to her sister.

"You would leave all this behind?" The king swept his arm wide, and a clap of thunder shook the hall.

"With pleasure." Branagh's voice dripped pure ice. He took Melle's arm and pulled her out of the room, slamming the door behind them.

Once in the empty corridor, Melle twisted out of his grasp. "What are you doing?"

"Did you lie? When the chains bound you and the whip cut your back to ribbons, did you lie?"

She shook her head, tears flying from her eyes. "No. But I can't let you throw away your life for me."

He took her chin in his hand and tipped her head up to his. "Throw it away?" A strange look crossed his face and he shook his head. "Nay, tonight I take my life in my

hands and I live it. I stop hiding behind glamour, stop trying to be perfect, someone I am not. You opened my eyes, Melle. I leave now, and you are coming with me."

Melle hardly felt her feet as they walked to his room. While he tossed his clothes into his bag, she found her clothes and put them on—her best dress and her mother's fringed shawl and her archer moccasins, relics of a past life. Dressed, she hesitated. If she ran away now he might stay and claim his rightful place. She had no right taking that away from him. She put her hand on the doorknob.

"Will you leave me, Melle?" She whirled around. His eyes flashed at her. "Well? Will you run away from me?"

Lifting her chin, she met his brooding gaze. "Not if you tell me you love me. You've said you wanted me, and that you're taking me with you. But do you love me, Branagh? I need to know, because when we cross the threshold, I want to be bound by more than just infatuation and misfortune."

"Fortune's fools," Branagh said, his low voice a shivering caress. "Is that all we are? I think not." He knelt at her feet and took her hand. "Melflouise Fairnight, I love you. I long to hear your elf song again, each night and day of my existence. Will you stay by my side, Melle?"

She closed her eyes. Images of her husband assailed her and the terrible pain of his loss tore a sob from her throat. But in front of her a man knelt who would assuage that pain. She knew it. Her future weighed heavily on her shoulders, but she would trust her own strength. "Yes." One tear slid down her cheek.

"I know how you feel. I too have loved and lost, but that doesn't mean we can't love again... Or that we won't lose again," he added in a quiet voice.

* * * * *

Sparkling gusts of snow, borne upon a harsh wind, stung their faces. Trees leaned, their branches whipping across the sides of the sleigh as Branagh urged the horses

faster through the forest. Myst and Glyf picked up their pace, sinking to their knees in the drifts. Clouds scudded across the moon, making shadows to race the sleigh.

"Where are we going?" Melle's eyes gleamed from under her hood in the pale, silvery light cast by the full moon.

"I know of a place with shelter for the horses and we can stay in the sleigh. Tomorrow we'll go north. There are people I know. We can stay with them until I figure out what to do. Rest now."

While Melle dozed, warm and snug in her furs, Branagh guided the horses along a winding path, taking the trail he'd discovered as a youth through the deepest part of the forest. At the foot of a great cliff, a dark cavern beckoned. A cavern, large enough to hold a sleigh and two horses. Branagh always kept fresh fodder and firewood handy, for he stopped here often. He jumped out of the sleigh as they arrived, but Glyf and Myst knew the way and trotted into the echoing cavern. Branagh unharnessed them and spread their hay on the floor. Then he broke the ice in the spring so that they might drink. Afterwards, he built a fire in the hearth, a ring of large stones with two flat ones placed like a bench.

Melle woke then, blinking as the flames lit the cave. "How lovely," she breathed.

It was lovely. Stalactites and stalagmites hung from the ceiling or grew from the floor in glittering splendor. A frozen pool shimmered in the center of the crystal cave, while the firelight warmed the air and cast mysterious shadows into the depths of the cavern.

"Come, sit by the fire." Branagh took her hand to help her out of the sleigh.

The smile that had blossomed in her eyes froze on her face. Glyf and Myst let out terrified neighs and bolted from the cavern. Branagh whirled.

And came face to face with an ice demon, its fangs bared in fury. Taller than a man, the nearly transparent ice demons usually leapt upon their prey and tore them with long, razor-sharp claws. This one snarled, pale blue light running through its strange, icy body. Standing still, they resembled ice statues, but when they moved, their bodies

flexed and twisted, as if ice water had suddenly come to life. And they hated fae and elves with a passion.

“Melle, my sword’s in the sleigh!” He picked up a rock and hurled it at the creature to keep it back. The demon snarled, and lunged towards him, teeth snapping wickedly.

“Here Branagh!” Melle tossed him his sword and he caught it. The leather-wrapped guard slapped into the palm of his hand and he swung the shining blade at the demon, catching it on the leg. Blue ice-blood spattered from the wound and the demon howled.

“Get out, and don’t come back, and I won’t have to kill you,” Branagh ordered. He didn’t think the monster would listen, they never did. You’d think—he dodged another swipe of the creature’s claws and slashed its arm—they’d learn. But no, they never quit, they only knew to fight to the death. This one was no different, and it snapped and scratched, eyes shooting sparks of rage, until he could get close enough to deal it a deathblow.

As he cleaved the demon’s head off, the beast slashed upwards with a clawed foot. He dodged, but his bad knee buckled, throwing him a hair off balance. Instantly, searing pain exploded in his hand, and ice shot up his arm, freezing his chest. The ice demon died, its body disintegrating into a flurry of ice-crystals, but an ice crystal had lodged in his hand.

Stinging pain blinded him, and chills made it impossible to breathe. He reeled, trying to keep his feet, but the pain drove him to his knees.

Arms held him. A sweet voice called his name, but he saw nothing.

“Melle,” he whispered as he sank to the ground. Why did he have to leave her like this? Couldn’t the fates have given him another chance? He tried to fight against the blackness and cold, but knives of frost stabbed him, the pain making coherent thought impossible. When the darkness came, he nearly welcomed it. By Mistral, if only he’d been quicker...

* * * * *

Huddled in the sleigh, Melle wished for her bow and arrows, but she'd long since put them away. Why would an ice demon be so close to the palace? She hated those beasts, but hadn't seen any for years. That one came here now boded no good. They kept to the far north, in normal times. What had chased it south? She frowned. Ice demons feared next to nothing. Whatever had driven it from its territory had to be terrible indeed.

Branagh kept it at a distance with his sword—by Mistral he could fight! Her blood sang as he parried and blocked the creature's blows, keeping it on the defensive. Its bite could kill in an instant, and its claws were razor sharp. Poison ran in its veins. Luckily its intelligence was limited, and it snarled and snapped at the sword, while Branagh maneuvered for the kill. The deathblow came unexpectedly, and the creature probably didn't know what had hit it. Its head flew across the cavern, its body exploding in a scintillating shower of frost.

"Well done!" Melle flung herself out of the sleigh and rushed to Branagh's side. "What is it? What's wrong?" Fear laced her words, for Branagh stared at her unseeingly, the color draining from his face. She flung her arms around him, but he staggered, and then fell to his knees. His head lolled against her shoulder. His breathing was labored, and his body shivered uncontrollably.

"What happened?" she begged, cupping his face in her hands. His eyes had turned black with pain and he didn't seem to hear her. Frantic now, she laid him on the cave floor and searched for a wound. His chest and legs seemed fine, and then she caught sight of his sword hand. "No!" she whispered. It had turned blue and when she touched it, cold penetrated her very bones. An ice crystal from the demon had lodged beneath the skin and poisoned his body. She had very little time to save him.

She needed the power of the fire and of the earth united, and as an elf, the magic of nature would help her gather those things. But she needed assistance, and for that she had to call her kin. Were any around? Would they come when summoned? She ran to

the cave entrance and sang into the night. "By the stars and by the moon, I call for aid. By the glen and by the grove, I call. By the snow and the frost, I call you this winter's night. I, Melflouise of the Fairnight clan, do summon help."

The words and music would have gone unheard by human ears. But the song rose through the treetops like a harsh winter's wind, like the sound of ice falling from the branches.

Her muscles tensed as she waited, eyes probing the night. Then a slight sound alerted her and she stepped out into the snow to greet three elves that came out of the night like shadows.

"Melflouise Fairnight. Too long has it been since we heard your song," said the tallest elf. His black hair fell like a raven's wing over one eye, for he'd lost it during the war. He put his bow down and hugged her. "Too long has it been, though my pain has not lessened."

"I know, Llewellyn." Melle could hardly bear to see her dead husband's twin, but at the same time her heart sang—he had great powers of healing.

His companions embraced her as well. "We've missed you, sister." Her brothers, Merlin and Sebring, had grown since she'd seen them last, and she realized with a pang how much she'd missed them.

They looked at her warily, and she knew that her leaving had hurt them. She had no time to explain, though she longed to hold them in her arms and tell them everything. "I'm so glad you're here," she said, fighting back tears.

"Why have you called?" Llewellyn asked, his good eye flashing in the starlight.

"Prince Branagh has suffered a wound from an ice demon and I fear for his life."

The three men looked at her, and she saw curiosity in their gazes, but they said nothing. As one, they strode into the cavern and knelt over Branagh's still body.

"Merlin, we will need balsam, and Sebring, you must find wintergreen and a handful of earth from under a yew tree." Llewellyn looked up at Melle. "We may not be

able to save him. Someone should go to the palace and warn the fae." He broke off and shook his head. "It will not be easy to explain, and they will not appreciate one of us breaking the bad news."

"I think we'd better try to save him first and bring him back to the palace with us, if we cannot," said Merlin, getting to his feet and putting his bow and quiver on the sleigh. "I saw two horses not far from here; they trembled with fear, but have found shelter in a clearing. I shall fetch the balsam and the horses."

He left without a sound, and Sebring kissed Melle on the cheek and whispered, "Don't worry, we will save your lover. I see how you ache for him. Never fear, Llewellyn will do all that is in his power." Then he too left, slipping out of the cave into the night.

Melle hardly dared look at Llewellyn, just the sight of him hurt. Softly, he touched her shoulder.

"I loved him too," he said gently. "He is gone now, let him go, please. When you left to shut yourself up with the fae, it tore your brothers apart. You were the only one they had left. Now, you must come home. Bring your lover, if you wish. He will be welcome as one of ours."

She nodded, too overcome to speak.

"Your life is with this man now," he said. "Sing for him. He needs you."

Melle's heart lurched at the sight of Branagh. So pale, so cold now. Could they save him? "Earth magic, I summon you," she sang, laying her hands over Branagh's wounds. "Mother Earth, bearer of life, come heal this man." Her voice grew in strength, and then Llewellyn joined her. "Mother Earth, we conjure you."

Sebring came in and put the handful of earth on Branagh's chest. When he pressed upon it, a soft glow emanated from his hands. He placed the branch of wintergreen on Branagh's lips and blew upon it softly.

Tears gathered on Melle's lashes. She sang the healing song, while Llewellyn and Sebring passed their hands over Branagh's body.

Then Merlin came with Myst and Glyf, and the balsam. He singed it in the fire, and laid the burning branch directly on Branagh's hand.

The four elves sang together now, and Melle's heart swelled in gratitude for their goodness and their acceptance of her love. "Fire magic, we beseech you, come and heal this man. By your purifying powers, cleanse the poison from his hand."

The song ended and silence washed over them. Drained, Melle sagged against her brothers' shoulders. They put their arms around her, and heads bowed, they waited while Llewellyn pressed his hands to Branagh and murmured the spells of healing.

When he finished, Llewellyn stood and leaned heavily against the sleigh. His angular face reflected his exhaustion, but he smiled at Melle. "Don't worry, we didn't fail. Look, already your lover's heart beats stronger and his cheeks are flushed with life."

Melle blinked and the tears she'd barely held in check spilled down her cheeks. Branagh's face came sharply into focus. "Greetings from the land of the dead," he said, his voice a mere whisper.

As if she'd been a puppet held up with strings and they'd been cut, Melle slumped over his chest. "Branagh! You're back! Praise Mistral!" She couldn't let go of him, even when he groaned and sat up.

He flung his arms around Melle and squeezed her tightly. "In the darkness, a song called to me and lured me out of the pain. I heard your voice, Melle, and knew I would be saved."

Melle found her breath and leaned back. "Why do you close your eyes, Branagh?"

"Is my hand still there?" He sounded frightened still.

"Yes, can't you feel it?" A pang of worry stabbed her.

He opened his eyes, glanced at his hands, and then grinned crookedly. "I didn't want to look." Flexing his hand, he shook his head. "I was so afraid you'd had to cut it off. That's the only way I know to stop the poison."

"I thank you," he said, looking at her kin. He got to his feet, swayed, and then caught Melle's arm to steady himself. "Prince Branagh at your service. I owe you a great debt."

"I am Llewellyn Fairnight, and these are Melflouse's brothers, Sebring and Merlin Winterhelm."

"I see the resemblance between you and Melle," Branagh told her brothers. "Fairnight? Are you related to Melle then too?"

"Her husband was my twin. How are you feeling now?" Llewellyn asked gravely.

Melle heard the anguish in Llewellyn's voice. He and his twin had practically breathed as one. Even now, he must feel as if half of his body had been cleaved off. But he'd never run off, as she had. He'd stayed, and taken care of her brothers.

Gratitude and shame warred in her mind. But part of her whispered, *you had to leave. Llewellyn has always loved you, and you would have destroyed him had you stayed.* A violent shiver ran through her body.

There. She'd faced it. The true reason she'd had to leave. If only she could make Llewellyn and her brothers understand. But how could she?

Then Branagh's eyes met hers and the warmth and love in them melted the frost in her heart. He was the one for her.

"I'm afraid the poison has chilled me to the bone." He grinned, but it looked strained, and his hand tightened on Melle's.

Llewellyn nodded. "The fire needs more logs, I will get them. Melle, take Branagh to the sleigh and warm him beneath the furs."

"We will take the horses and ride to the palace. Help will be here by daybreak," said Merlin.

"I doubt that—I gave up my title and kingdom for Melle and my father banished me," said Branagh as he crawled into the sleigh. Even though Melle covered him with all the furs he shivered violently.

The three elves looked startled, and then Sebring said, "It won't matter. When he finds out you are hurt, your father will forget his hasty words."

"Besides, strange things are afoot," said Merlin. "The ice demon is only one happening that has caught our attention. The fae will have to listen to the elves for once. Our ears are closer to the forest and we hear much."

Afraid Branagh would take offense, Melle started to admonish her brother, but Branagh kissed her. "Peace," he said. "Your brother speaks the truth. Let them go to the palace. Even if my father won't have me back, he should know about the ice demon and listen to the elves." He broke off, and to Melle's relief, he gave an easy grin. "If you hurry, you'll catch the end of the festivities."

Her brothers leapt onto the horses' backs and without saddle or bridle, streaked off towards the palace. Llewellyn disappeared into the darkness to get more wood, and Branagh pulled Melle into his arms.

"I don't want to let go of you."

"Then don't." She leaned back into his embrace.

"Thank you for saving me." He paused. "Your husband's twin is quite handsome."

"Not as handsome as you." She felt a weight lifting from her soul. She'd loved her husband, but a new life had begun and her love now belonged to the fae prince by her side. "You mustn't be jealous. I love only you."

His eyebrows rose in comic surprise. "Fae are never jealous. I simply made a statement. He is handsome, and you know it. As for loving me, I have no doubts on that subject." He kissed her, his lips lingering on her temple. "You know, coming back from the dead has a strange effect on me." Branagh's voice tickled her ear, at the same time he reached down and stroked her inner thighs. She stiffened, and then let him push her thighs apart with his strong hands. He snuggled deeper into the furs and pulled her buttocks to him. She could feel his hard cock rubbing against her.

"I have a confession to make," he whispered. "I hope you will not think me horrid, but when you hung by your arms, naked in the dungeon, I dreamed I stood behind you holding a whip. When I hit you, you begged for more."

"In your dreams, Branagh." But even as she spoke, thinking about Branagh standing behind her with a whip brought a flood of wetness to her cunt. He drew his finger along the inside of her swollen labia, touching the dampness, and he chuckled.

"Can you feel that?" His erection jutted against his breeches, and Melle swallowed hard as a jolt of heat rocketed through her. She couldn't suppress a moan. Branagh didn't have to ask her. She reached down and undid his pants, releasing his erection. Then, careful not to disturb the covers, she wiggled out of her dress, straddled his thighs and pressed herself down upon him, impaling herself on his hard shaft. The sensation of his flared cockhead sliding into her nearly made her faint—the fae had cockheads that flared enormously when aroused, almost like mushroom caps. She sank to the hilt, and she felt the swollen head hit the back of her womb.

"Can you control the shape?" she asked, trying to speak without moaning in pleasure.

He flexed his thighs, holding her by the waist, driving his cock even further into her body. "I can, yes." His voice sounded no steadier. He gave a shudder, and she felt the tip of his cock swell inside her, scraping the sides of her vagina. Oh by Mistral! His cock, rock-hard and swollen, pulsed with desire inside her cunt.

"More!" she cried, then gasped as the edges of his flared cockhead caught on her ribbed flesh and quivered. Moisture ran down her legs as she creamed with pleasure. She braced her hands on his thighs and moved up and down on his lap, seeking to appease the hunger she felt deep inside her. Melle's breasts ached and a terrible longing grew in her cunt. She wanted him to quicken his pace, and she wanted it to last all night.

Contractions rippled through her belly as she drove herself as hard and as fast as she could up and down his shaft, rocking the sleigh with their movements. Her orgasm

pulled a trill of elf song from her throat, but she wanted more. Branagh still thrust into her, and her body still burned with need for him.

"I need to come again," she said, writhing. "Please, make me come again."

"Hush, be still. You won't peak so high; you can't so soon after an orgasm. But I can bring you down slowly, and give you another. Let me show you." He lifted her up off his erection.

As he slid out of her body, she groaned in frustration. Then he turned her around so that she faced the cave entrance. "Relax, let me take you somewhere you haven't been before." Branagh's seductive voice didn't prepare her for the feel of his cock pressed against her anus. Wet with her juices, his cock slid slowly into her body, slipping past the tight ring of muscle before she could even gasp. His cockhead felt smooth and narrower, without the wide flare.

"Now, lean back." Bit by bit, he penetrated her ass, stretching her flesh, until he was fully sheathed within her. Huge waves of excitement threatened to cut off her air supply. She could only whimper as new sensations shook her body from the soles of her feet to the top of her head.

Then Branagh slid his hands down her throat to her breasts. He pinched each nipple, gently pulling on them until they hardened, then one hand dipped between her legs and he drove his fingers deep into her cunt, searching for the place that pleased her most.

The muscles in her vagina grew harder and rippled, and she gave a little cry. There, he'd touched it. His fingers pressed against the ribbed wall inside her, and there came a hard jolt of pleasure just before the tremors started. Her body tightened then relaxed, and a rush of thick liquid surged from her vagina.

Suddenly she caught sight of Llewellyn coming back into the cavern. "Wait, Branagh!"

"I can't." His voice ragged, Branagh clasped her tightly as he came, his seed spurting into her. He buried his face in the crook of her neck, his hands clutching her as

his cock jerked, echoing the deep quakes she felt inside her belly. As hot seed surged into her buttocks she had the impression her entire body filled with the essence of her lover.

Another rush of heat flooded her body. All at once, thrumming started in her cunt and spread like wildfire through her veins. Her heart nearly pounded out of her chest, and her vision went black as an orgasm ripped through her like a cyclone. She couldn't stop to save her life. Elf song poured from her throat, fast and furious as her own orgasm submerged her, rising like a giant wave and crashing over her. Long, hard, wrenching shudders ran through her as her voice made the crystal cavern ring with sound. It left her panting and slumped against Branagh's chest like a limp rag while the echo of her song lingered in the cave.

Self-conscious, she raised her eyes and looked at Llewellyn. Instead of the sardonic stare she expected, all she saw in his gaze was a naked longing so intense it knocked the breath out of her. He put the wood down with hands that trembled. Melle felt an answering quiver in her belly.

Branagh pulled out of her and nuzzled her neck. Sliding his hands beneath her bodice, he fondled her breasts. "Llewellyn has quite the hard-on," he whispered. "Aren't you going to put him out of his misery? I expect to share you. It's our way."

"It's not our way, though perhaps someday I will accept your offer." She turned and put her hand to his cheek. "I need to speak with him. Will you be all right here?"

He nodded, his amber eyes shadowed with fatigue. "Go to him. I'll be fine here beneath the furs, where I can still feel the warmth of your love."

She waited until his eyes had closed in sleep, then she wrapped her shawl around her, stepped out of the sleigh and made her way to the fire, where Llewellyn sat, his back to her.

"I know why you left," he said, his voice so quiet it seemed part of the night. He turned to her, his face half in shadow.

"You always faced things head-on. I never could."

He paused, his good eye glittering in the firelight. "You're stronger than all of us. I would have made you miserable, and your brothers were old enough to understand why you had to go."

"Yes, but do they?" Disquiet made her heart pound. "Did you tell them why?"

"That I would have died to make you mine? That I needed you like the air I breathed and the water I drank?" His voice trailed off and he shook his head. His hair swung, revealing the dark hole where his eye had been. "No. I never told anyone. But when Elloran died I only wanted to bring him back. Becoming him was the only way I could imagine.

"I'm sorry I drove you away, Melle. I'll never forgive myself for that. Your brothers came to me, not the other way around. They are like you, too sensitive to others' pain."

"You didn't drive me away. I left because of you, yes, but because of me too. I knew that if I stayed I would have turned to you, and I would have made you into Elloran. You are not Elloran, you are Llewellyn, and deserve a life of your own."

He gave a laugh, or maybe it was a sob. In the flickering light, she couldn't read his expression. "It took me years to understand. Now I am Llewellyn, and the sight of you still feels like a knife in my heart. No," he said, putting his hand on her lips. "It's not like before. Now I see my brother's wife, and I feel his loss. But at least I've come to comprehend I can never bring him back."

"No, we can never bring him back. Nor any of the ones we lost." Melle kissed his hand then held it tightly. "I am so glad you are here, Llewellyn. And seeing my brothers has lightened my heart."

"Love has lightened your heart." He looked down at their fingers, entwined, then gently pulled away. He gave her a crooked smile. "Branagh is a fine man, and you will be very happy together, I can tell. Come as soon as you can. My door will always be open."

"Thank you, Llewellyn. I will. Tell my brothers to expect me before the next full moon. We have much to catch up on."

"Peace, Melle. May Mistral light your way." He got up, stretched like a cat, then left the cavern as quickly and silently as he'd come. The vast cave seemed to echo after he left, as if it too felt his absence keenly.

Melle added more wood to the fire and sat a while. It would take a while for the sharp edges of her emotions to dull, but Llewellyn had set her mind at ease. Though he looked at her with hunger in his eyes, she knew his brother's loss had ceased to torment him. He would heal and find someone else. She sighed and rubbed her eyes. Fatigue made her lightheaded, but peace had stolen into her soul.

She undressed and washed in the spring. Elves might be impervious to cold, but she knew the fae needed their warmth. She dried in front of the fire before crawling into the sleigh and curling up in Branagh's arms.

* * * * *

The sound of hoof beats woke him. He opened his eyes, still groggy with sleep. Furs covered him, Melle lay in his arms, and a faint ache in his hand told him that it hadn't been a dream. His cock stiffened as he remembered Melle's lithe body writhing in pleasure and the tight, hot feel of her ass. But then a trumpet sounded and he sat up instantly awake.

His father stood in the cavern's entrance. Darkness still showed at the mouth of the cave, but Branagh saw a faint line of gray marked the horizon where the dawn would come.

"I have come to apologize," said his father, before Branagh could utter a sound. "I was wrong to cast you from your home, and if you will forgive me, I wish to..." His voice died away as Melle sat up.

Branagh put his arms around her protectively and kissed her. "Apologies accepted. You owe one to Melle, too. And I won't change my mind. Melle is my chosen one."

Gently but firmly, Melle pushed away from Branagh. Naked, she stood before the ruler of Hivernia.

"I am an elf, and never has an elf taken the throne of Hivernia," she said in a clear voice. "I cannot change what I am, but my love for your prince is part of me now and will never let go of my heart."

His father looked at her, and for a second it seemed a shadow fell over his eyes. But then he nodded gravely and said in a ringing voice, "Melflouise Fairnight, perhaps it is long overdue that an elf sits on our throne. For generations, fairies have ruled this land. We need new blood, strong elf blood. The peace in our kingdom is threatened. Uniting the fae-blood thus can only make us stronger."

Melle looked at him and a faint expression of alarm flickered across her face. "Will you elaborate?"

"Not here. Shadow calls to shadow, and this discussion needs daylight and clear heads." His father shifted on his horse and Branagh saw fatigue etched on his features. He must have ridden all night long to get here.

Branagh stepped from the sleigh, rubbing the soreness from his hand. "We will accompany you to the palace, sire. And we will discuss this when the sun is bright, and shadows aren't listening. Whatever the danger, we will confront it together and win."

"Thank you, son." His father's shoulders slumped and relief flooded his voice.

Melle still stood, her chin lifted proudly. Her strength and kindness shone from her like a bright glow from within. He had no doubts she would make a remarkable queen for his people, and they would grow to love her almost as much as he did.

Branagh took her hand and looked deeply into her eyes. "I love you, Melle, for your courage and your compassion. Will you be my queen? My kingdom needs you, and I need you."

A quiver ran through her body, but her gaze never wavered from his. "Yes."

Branagh wrapped his arms around her, filled with a joy so keen it hurt. He looked towards the future, and all he could see was brightness. The shadows would be chased away by all the fae united.

* * * * *

Melle woke and blinked as the pale light, reflected off sparkling snow, dazzled her eyes. Snow drifted along the windowsills and frost designed glittering arabesques across the glass.

For a second, she forgot where she was, and which day it was. She didn't recognize the rich tapestries hanging on the walls, or the soft flannel sheets hugged to her skin. Then a faint chuckle alerted her and she turned her head. Branagh pulled himself onto his elbow beside her, his face lighting up in a wide grin. "For a minute, I thought it had all been a dream."

"It wasn't though. Last night you gave up your kingdom for me, you fought an ice demon and you nearly died."

He pulled her to him and nuzzled her neck. "But I'm still alive, thanks to you, and you're still here. And someone lit the fire. I bet if we pull the bell rope, someone will bring us breakfast in bed. What do you think?"

"I think it can wait a while." Melle pushed a lock of hair out of his eyes. "You look like a dissolute lion."

"And you look good enough to eat." He leered at her and grabbed her nipple with his mouth, tugging hard.

"Easy tiger." She giggled, when he flung the covers back and reared over her. His erection jutted towards her thighs, its tip nearly purple with need. He flared the cockhead out and a rush of hot moisture soaked her cunt. Need, intense and sudden, nearly made her cry out.

"I thought you said lion." Then he gave a growl and pushed her legs apart with his hands. "Lion or tiger, I want you right this second, Melle."

Her cunt gave a massive twinge and she raised her legs, wrapping them around his waist to draw him to her. "Well then hurry!"

He groaned as he thrust into her. "This is going to be a quickie."

"That's fine with me." Already spasms shook her body as his cock stroked into her, its motion almost frantic. He flared his cockhead even more and a mad pulsing began in her belly. "Oh Branagh!" She tossed her head from side to side on the pillow, conscious only of his cock filling her to nearly bursting and the huge tremors rushing through her.

She shot up to the heavens and burst, elf song spilling out into the morning light as her body convulsed around him. Her song joined them in a way more binding than any ceremony and united them forever.

Slowly she floated down to Earth to find herself wrapped in Branagh's arms, his face in the crook of her neck, his breath hot on her throat.

"I think I'm going to die of exhaustion way before our wedding," he said in a hoarse voice.

"When will it be?" Melle opened her eyes. The room had stopped spinning, and her heartbeat slowed to almost normal.

"Tomorrow." Branagh rolled off her and laughed. "Why wait? We'll have a Christmas wedding at the Sugar Plum Fairy's palace, is that all right with you?"

Melle's heart swelled and she lay her head on his shoulder. "A Sugar Plum Fairy Christmas wedding. It sounds like the start of an amazing fairy tale."

Branagh kissed her tenderly on the lips. "Yes, one that ends with 'happily ever after.'"

About the author:

Samantha Winston is the pen name for Jennifer Macaire, an American freelance writer/illustrator. She was born in Kingston, NY and lived in Samoa, California and the Virgin Islands before moving to France. She attended Parsons school of design for fine art, and Palm Beach Junior College for art and English literature. She worked for five years as a model for Elite. Married to a professional polo player, she has three children.

After settling in France, she started writing full time and published short stories in such magazines as Polo Magazine, PKA's Advocate, The Bear Deluxe, Nuketown, The Eclipse, Anotherealm, Linnaean Street, Inkspin, Literary Potpourri, Mind Caviar and the Vestal Review. One of her short stories was nominated for the Pushcart Prize. In June 2002 she won the 3am/Harper Collins flash fiction contest for her story 'There are Geckos'.

As Jennifer Macaire, she has written a series of seven fiction novels based on the life of Alexander the Great – the first, Time for Alexander published by Jacobyte Books in April 2002. Book two, Heroes in the Dust, will appear in March 2003, also with Jacobyte. Her science fiction novel Virtual Murder will be published by Novel Books, Inc. in March 2003, and Angels On Crusade, a fiction novel about the ill-fated eighth crusade, will appear in October 2003.

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