

A Queen for a King

By
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She flitted among the trees like a dragonfly. Her dress glittered, alternately sheer and opaque in the piebald light rippling over the forest floor. She laughed, and he heard bells.

He didn't stop to wonder what she would be doing in delicate skirts in the middle of Newborough Forest. He *should* stop, of course. His father's voice vibrated in his head, a lifetime of pious warnings jumbling around his skull. But he followed her anyway. He was eager to see her clearly, the freckles on her nose, whether her teeth were crooked, whether her eyes were blue or green.

She peeked from behind a tree, waving him forward. Mist shimmered in the evening air. The beach must be near, down the trail and over a sand dune. Fog cloaked the clearing, the trees on the other side barely visible.

She danced in the middle of the clearing, the mist a soft-focus filter, like a storybook enchanter beckoning him into her world.

Temptress, his father's voice whispered. *Do not follow where she leads.*

He could not hear the music, but it vibrated in his bones. The tune was lilting, pipes playing in a Shakespeare fantasy. He tapped his hiking boot in time.

The song changed, as though the unseen DJ segued the beat from strip club teaser to money-maker. The bass notes his ears could not discern rumbled up his legs, pounding in his gut. Sly tones massaged his ribs, shimmied over his nipples.

The girl's body swayed, bumped, pumped, and shook. The wispy skirt rode up over her thighs, the gauzy blouse rubbed tautly over her chest.

She stretched out an arm, asking him to dance.

Evil. Death. Hell. Damnation. His father never let a day pass without linking these ideas to Newborough Forest. As a boy, he'd watched fearfully from their farmhouse as tourists, campers, and dog walkers boldly came and went.

No one ever screamed, however. No one ever disappeared, or staggered out, their limbs reduced to bloody stumps.

This is not evil, he thought. *This is a girl. This is music and dance and maybe a little fun, but nothing here is evil. Surely.*

Perhaps she would catch him in a dancing spell for a year and a day, leave him jiggling happily with no memories. That was the worst his hidden library books had ever told him about the forest.

So today, on his eighteenth birthday, he stepped forward. Jutting his chin, he

walked into the clearing.

The music hit him first. No longer just a humming in his skeleton, it thrust into him. It lifted his feet, flailed his arms. The rhythm, hard and savage, reached deep into his loins, tugging them. He danced.

The clearing faded away, the trees retreating, the fog dissipating. The sky blackened, lit by occasional lightning pulsing in time with the beat. In the flashes he saw a structure over him, a ceiling as high as treetops, vines and brush hanging down. Stone walls surrounded him, overgrown, pumping like heart chambers in the music and the light. It was like someone had set up a nightclub in a decaying cathedral.

The prudent side of him stopped his feet. He stood, still and staring, as the thumping played on.

Turning, he sought the girl. She was gone, nowhere in the hall, no sign of her pale skirt or milky skin. But he was not alone. All around him men danced, their limbs jerking like string puppets, slaves to the beat. Perhaps hell was a grinding dance club with no women.

He pushed through the flailing men to the edge of the dance floor. Not one noticed his presence.

His shoes ground through a fine, filmy dust coating the floor. Taking in the dazed, joyous faces, he wondered what drug they were on. He must be on it, too - the girl must have slipped him something.

In the forest? a voice in his head asked. *How did you get here, then?*

He was certain the police would burst on the scene at any moment, breaking up the drug-riddled party. Father would implode.

He felt along the wall in the darkness, his eyes unable to adjust, and strained to remember where he could have been poisoned.

He remembered walking the lane to the forest, stepping over the speed bumps. The signposts indicated in crude spray-paint they were actually "Fairy Tunnels," their Tinkerbell silhouettes far from the demonic images Father described. He remembered finding a trail, taking a sip of water, and setting off.

Then she had appeared. The wood was a popular place, and he hadn't expected to be alone. But she was so strange, with her bare feet and her skimpy clothing, and so beautiful, her smile and her laugh seeping through him like honey.

He tried to pick out when she had drugged him. A drink? A prick of a needle? An inhalant?

But he couldn't place it. He'd been there, and now he was here, and his mind found no stopover in between.

His hands hit air. A break in the wall. He hurried through it, casting the heaving dancers behind, and the music immediately released him.

He was on a path, dirt packed, narrow and crowded with undergrowth. It could have been the trail he'd hiked in Newborough, save the hulking piles of stones rising among the trees. They were built around the trees, through them, the forest forming a crude frame for the hidden structures. Most were without roofs, open to the glittering night sky, carpeted with forest litter, decorated with vines.

Movement. His eyes widened. It was like coming through that curtain of fog in the clearing all over again. The structures that had seemed like ruins were teeming with life. Beautiful women, each wearing less than the last, jumped and skipped on, over, and

around the buildings.

No, not jumping. Flying. The girl in the forest had had no wings he could see, but every one of these had a set of sheer wings on her back like a costume in a Vegas sideshow.

The ground between the buildings was occupied as well, as men walked along the paths. They had no wings, and they were fully clothed, but the pureness of their skin was the same, the shine of their eyes no less captivating.

He moved closer, and that's when she dropped out of the sky.

"Oi! You've made it out, then?" She didn't land, hovering in front of him. He couldn't be sure, but she looked like the same girl who had lured him in the forest.

He glanced back toward the club, where the lights licked out of the open doorway. "What did you do to me?"

"I knew you was the one." She laughed and moved to clasp his elbow under her arm. "You'd best come with me."

"I don't think I will," he began, but she'd already lifted him from the ground.

Flying wasn't as fun as it appears in the movies. He'd always wondered how Superman could keep Lois Lane afloat with just a fingertip of contact. Peter Pan's charges had pixie dust to lift them. This girl just flew, dragging him along with her.

By the time they landed in a dark, empty alley, he thought his arm might fall off. She dropped him, and he rubbed his shoulder, hoping his arm would eventually shrink back to normal length.

"What is this? What drug did you give me?"

"*Shhh!*" She clapped a hand over his mouth. "There's folks being private 'round here. Come on."

She tugged him out of the passage, and he stumbled after her, his pupils still not enlarged enough to pierce the darkness. He heard a moan, a shriek of what was probably laughter, and an organic slapping. Puzzled, he peered into the building as the fairy dragged him past. Through a crumbling, barely cloaked doorway he glimpsed an expanse of flesh, open mouths, eager orifices, groping limbs, and mindless need. He turned his gaze ahead, mentally compiling his list for confession, while another more practical part of his brain filed the images away for future use.

"I'm Seren, by the way." She rubbed his arm, his sleeve muffling her touch. "First time I ever seen one o' you come out of the Factory. What's your name, then?"

"Mabon. Where am I?" The dirt-packed streets were brightening as the moon rose over the wall. He suddenly regretted asking the question.

"You're in Niwbwrch." She moved her hand up his arm. He started to sweat, chilling in the night breeze. "You came here, you know. I didn't do nothing to you. But I could, if you wanted me to."

He saw the glowing, sharp pearls of her teeth as she grinned.

The moon rose, her cool white light spilling into the darkness. Mabon froze, his eyes wide, his pants growing small.

He'd read about places like this. He'd heard about them from schoolmates fresh from oat-sowing tours of Europe. Well, he'd heard about places that emulated it through pot and absinthe.

It writhed. From above, the roofless structures must have looked like a labyrinth full of seething snakes, each twisting over a dozen other bodies, all rubbing together. A

book ten times the breadth of the Bible could not have proscribed the acts he saw.

In one room he saw a naked man chained to the wall, his muscular arms pinned above his head. Three fairies surrounded him, their backs to him, their wings beating his entire body.

In the next window of sin, a perfectly human couple copulated noisily as a fairy floated overhead, sprinkling them occasionally with an iridescent green powder.

Through other doorways: a dwarf whipped a giggling fairy with silver fronds; a woman no less than twenty feet tall laughed joyously as a band of tiny men with pointy ears tickled her toes; and pixies buzzed here and there, poking erogenous zones and fleeing.

Mabon shook his eyes loose from the scenes, turning to his escort. "Where in hell am I?"

"Told you that already, silly git."

"How did I get here?"

"Can't tell you that, specifically, I mean. Wouldn't be much fun being a fairy if human sorts knew what we was doing the whole time."

Her freckled face shining, she shoved him backward. He fell into one of the rooms, the beaded curtain clacking like a flock of rosary beads, and landed on his butt. He clenched his eyes shut against whatever debauchery the room contained.

"Who do you have here, Seren, my siren?" The new voice was scratchy and low, a nightclub crooner after her shift.

Mabon cracked an eye. She was taller than Seren, wingless. Where Seren had the sexuality of a naughty schoolgirl, this woman was the temptress, the madame, the teacher. Her dark hair and red lips promised sensual touches, while her fresh skin and warm eyes reminded him of bedtime stories and tales of redemption.

Seren knelt at the woman's feet, snaking a caress around her calf. "Broke free of the dance, he did."

Mabon noticed for the first time the opulence of the room. Gold linens lined with sparkling gems covered the bed, and she lounged in an ornately framed velvet settee.

"Did he now?" The temptress leaned over him, her earthy scent and soft hair enveloping him. Her eyes captured his, and he was startled to see they were an ordinary, rather human brown.

He blinked and shuddered. A woman of sin in a mad forest should not conjure memories of his father's brown eyes narrowed in anger.

"Has anyone ever said you have the eyes of the fey?" she whispered.

"I - I was told I have my mother's eyes. She was a nurse."

She smiled, and whether it was magic or imagination, he heard the opening notes of a symphony.

"Seren, perhaps you'd like to bring your guest to our show tonight." She pulled back, and a cold emptiness scratched over Mabon's skin.

"Sure thing, Rhiannon." Seren floated upward, her wings flapping. Rhiannon offered her lips, and Seren touched them with her own.

Mabon cleared his throat, feeling sure God could hear his thoughts, even in this place so far from his father's descriptions of Heaven.

Rhiannon smoothed Seren's hair, and the fairy sighed. Purred, almost.

"Tonight, then," Rhiannon said.

Seren nodded, her eyes filmy. She floated out of the chamber, clutching Mabon's collar and dragging him along even as his body strained toward Rhiannon.

"Who was that?" he asked when she finally released him in the courtyard. He stood, righting his clothes.

"That was our Rhiannon."

Mabon shifted uncomfortably, feeling his sinful thoughts rise in his pants. He touched the crucifix hanging at his throat. It was not singeing his flesh with the damnation of hell, so he thought he was safe as of yet.

"Listen, sprite girl-

"Fairy. Sprites are into the really dirty stuff, see, like them over there with the nettles-

"Fairy, then!" He would not allow his eyes to follow her pointing fingers. "Fairy girl, I would very much like to go home now, thank you."

She pressed herself to him, the tips of her wings brushing his nose. She wrapped her arms around his neck. He sneezed.

"You don't like it here?" she asked.

"I - I need to keep my soul intact."

He stepped back, hoping to end the contact. His soul might not give in to temptation, but his body had other ideas.

But she stayed with him, stretched from head to toe along his torso. The courtyard wall was right behind her - just a step and he could have more.

He stripped her arms away. "No! I need to get out of here."

"You want a private room?"

Mabon started down the street, so far away, through so much pleasure. "Not pleasure, not pleasure," he mumbled. "Fires of hell. Fires of hell are very, very hot."

Using his cupped hands as blinders, he pushed his feet along the path.

Behind him, Seren laughed, that sweet, lilting, devil-woman laugh that pitched him into this cesspool to begin with. "You're not leaving are you, Mab? Aw, love, did we scare you away?"

He refused to answer, shuffling along. He peeked, caught an eyeful of nipple, and slapped one hand over his face.

Seren followed, her wings fanning a cooling breeze over him. "How old are you, anyway? Don't tell me you never. Or do you fancy a boy? Is that it?"

She ran her own inspection. In his self-imposed blindness, he had no warning. Just a sudden vise on his zipper-region.

He shouted and twisted from her grasp, dropping his hand.

Seren hovered in front of him, her smile broadcasting the demon desires within. All around them, in falsely private alcoves, lovers paused, ticklers stared, whippers held their lashes.

Mabon's blood rushed upward, heating his face and mottling it red and purple. He hoped enough would be called away to deflate the pillar of temptation below. He stomped away, not bothering to shield his eyes.

Seren followed, plucking at his sleeve. "You still want to go to the show, don't you?"

"No. No, thank you. I have to go home." He gripped his gold cross and headed for the edge of the city.

Seren sighed, but did not follow.

He reached the city boundary, feeling as though God might reach down through the trees to give him a big pat on the back. Stopping, he turned to stare one last time at Seren.

Nothing but forest behind him. An owl landed on a low branch, something squirming in its beak.

Mabon smoothed his shirt front. He turned back to the trail.

The trail was gone. Before him was the fairy city. The stones, the flickering light from the dancehall, the hum of inebriated voices laughing maniacally, all beckoning him into the center.

"What do you think would happen if you could just come and go like that, you nit?"

Seren perched on the stone wall next to him, her arms crossed.

"How do I get out then?"

She hopped down to him and took his arm, promenading him back into the city. "Well, if you was a fairy, you'd go by water. That's why we're such a happening place you know. Port city. We get all kinds."

"But I'm human -"

"Pixies got dust," she went on. "I don't know rightly how it works, but it pops them out anywhere they want." She ticked them off on her finger. "Dwarves come by earth, giants however they want, but humans got to be invited. Not many are, you know. Buncha prudes. We only just got rid of the last missionary what snuck in to preach at us."

They turned onto a broader path, cleared of vegetation. A boulevard. Lights glowed from every surface, blinking idly like lightning bugs seen from across a field. Mabon looked closer; they *were* lightning bugs. They formed outlines of nude fairies, undulating and glittering, or blinked out lewd messages. Mabon concentrated on not reading every one of them.

"So," he attempted again, "how would a human get out?"

"A fairy takes him."

"Then take me."

"Don't want to. I never had a human before."

"I'm not a pet!"

"Pets always think that."

Mabon took her arm, thrilling at the smoothness, and turned her to face him. "I am a human being with a soul. I'm not here for you to pat and rub, and, er, uh—" He paused while he considered why he would not be up for such things. "My father will absolutely go off."

"How about I take you back after the show?" She ran a hand through his hair, and he couldn't recall head-patting ever being named as a sin, so he let it pass.

"I don't know."

"Aw, come on. What's one night going to hurt?"

He twiddled with his shirt buttons. "What kind of show is it?"

"You'll see." She grabbed his hand, tugging him along behind her, her feet not even touching the ground.

As they approached the city center, the path became crowded. Pixies, fairies and

humans alike moved in the same direction, toward a large natural amphitheater. The ground dropped away into a rounded pit, with shaped boulders and fallen logs for seating. One stage-sized slab lounged in the center of the theater.

Moonlight bathed the crowd as they flew, strolled, or tumbled to find suitable seats. Mabon let out a guttural "Sodding - Fatherforgiveme" as he whacked his shin on one of the stone seats.

"Not here." Seren urged him forward. "We get seats up front."

They found their spot, the stage close enough to touch. Mabon hardly had time to avert his eyes from the crowd's warm-up activities before a fairy dropped onto the center of the stage. She carried a male fairy, setting him gently on the stone. She curtsied to her package, then ascended to her exit.

The crowd hushed. The male fairy was so fair he was almost translucent, his hair silver, his eyes softened to a mossy green. He provided his own light, his skin painted with a glowing dust. He wore no clothes. Mabon studied the fairy's exposed anatomy, grateful to look at anything that would not tempt his sinful desire.

The fairy stepped forward, his dingle dangling ten feet from Mabon's face. Mabon's gratitude recoiled.

"Welcome!" The fairy raised his arms. Even his underarm hair was white.

"Welcome to the Lunar Theater, and our monthly exhibition. I know many of you have come far and wide to visit with us here in Niwbwrch. You, my friends, will travel back to your territories and kingdoms with a story like no other.

"Thousands of years ago, before even I was born-" the audience laughed "-my very resourceful forebear Gwyn ap Nudd built this great city. In time, it became world-renowned for the quality of magic and the quantity of pleasures. Pleasures I see some of you continue to enjoy as I speak."

He paused, grinning widely. Several cries of "Rock on, Rhi!" rose from the crowd. Mabon did not turn to see who the fairy king was referring to.

"Our most magnificent Rhi Gwyn ap Nudd not only founded this city we know and lust, he began the tradition, nay, the machine, that fuels our magic. Men of the Otherworld abandon their earthly cares once they hear the heartbeat of the Factory. They dance with the joy of release for a year and a day. The dust worn from their shoes embodies that wild freedom, and we return it to you, you rakes, in your bottles, in your chambers, in your lovers."

Another cheer went up, this time with raised jars and a merry flinging of magic dust. It sifted over Mabon, and his skin tingled, his loins throbbed.

The fairy king took a swig from one of the offered bottles. He waited, still, until the crowd hushed, waiting for him to continue.

When he did, his voice was low, intent. "Many of you witnessed the last Change. We cannot set dates for the Change. We cannot send out messages or book tickets. We can only wait for the One to emerge from the Factory, to renew the cycle of love that balances the lust we all take so much for granted. Either you are lucky enough to be here, on the spot, when the Change occurs, or you must hear about it and wait another human lifespan for your chance."

This time the crowd murmured. Necks craned, looking about for the One. A few young pixies shot up into the night sky in unbridled excitement. Mabon peered around, but could see no one who appeared any stranger than anyone else.

"Your colleagues and relations may have tales of debauchery and pleasure galore." Shouting, leaping about the stage, the fairy king's speech became fire, like a preacher violently selling his wares. "They may regale you with scintillating interludes of bare flesh and pixie-dust-enhanced reverie. Ladies and gentlemen-" a small rumbling went up, and he paused, smiling "-and others, your experience tonight will exceed them all a hundredfold."

He stepped back, indicating a spot on the center of the rock stage. Mabon squinted at it, but it really was just stone, free even of any naughty pictograms.

Then the air center-stage shimmered, wavering in the cool moonlight like heat off a desert highway. Seren palmed his thigh, squeezing. She trembled at his side, and he rubbed her hand.

The shimmer shook. It danced. It was a hint of a form, then the suggestion. It was a swirl of light, like dust motes on a lazy afternoon.

Mabon first spied a breast. A thigh, curving up to a buttock. The back of a calf.

Seren yelped, and he let go of her hand. She shook the blood back into it.

"Sorry," he whispered, his eyes never abandoning the emerging body.

There she was. The light faded, the motes seeming to sing a high note as they melted away. They left her standing in their wake, her sheer skirt barely reaching upper thigh, her breasts protected by strategic patches.

"Rhiannon." The crowd breathed it as one. Mabon felt movement all around him, silky and warm, and tore his eyes from her sinful form for a mere moment.

The writhing was back. It was as though they had all been sprayed with uber-potent pheromones. As soon as Rhiannon coalesced into view, they all fell to suckling one another.

"Thought you weren't up for it," Seren whispered in his ear.

Mabon removed his hand from her bum. Seren did not remove her bum from his lap.

"Rhiannon does that to people." Her breath was sweet on his face, wet and soft. "Niwbwrch thrives on her. We make a living on the dust, but we *need* her."

Mabon didn't look. "Why?"

"Like the Rhi said, for balance. For love."

Love was cuddling in a hammock. Love was wedding bells and children. Nothing Mabon saw in Niwbwrch resembled love. "I don't understand," he said.

Seren sighed. "You will."

The fairy king took Rhiannon's hand, modeling her at the front of the stage. "My friends, I present your queen, your changling. Your Rhiannon."

The assembled debauchers cheered, their shouts slicing Mabon's ears. He looked up at Rhiannon standing tall above him. With moonlight dancing on her skin, she radiated warmth, heat.

Then he saw her face. She was not showing herself off to her fervent admirers. She was frozen in fear. Her lip trembled, and a line of tears cascaded down one cheek.

"What are they going to do to her?" he asked Seren.

Seren, quiet for the first time, shook her head sadly at him.

Mabon lifted the fairy off his lap, clutching her shoulders. "What do you demons do to her? Sacrifice her womb? Do you sell her to the highest bidder?" Mabon gagged at the horror even as the teeming masses around him fed off Rhiannon's presence. He

threw Seren aside, not wondering at how easy it was, or noticing the satisfaction in her smirk.

He leaped to the stage. Rather, he tried. After a brief scramble and a helpful push on the bum from Seren, he stood tall and screamed at the pulsing bodies.

"The devil has taken you all! Your souls have been swallowed by evil, by temptation and depravity! Do you not fear for your everlasting life?"

"We're immortal, you git!" someone hollered. Those who raised their heads to listen tittered.

"Then have pity on those who aren't," Mabon returned. "The humans you have captured here are but ants to you, dying in a day. But we have souls, minds that are wasted as you use us as nothing more than fuel sources and. . . and whores!"

He trembled on the last word, his muscles backfiring.

A hand fell on his shoulder. The fairy king spoke softly, but his voice was heard in every corner of the theater. "My son, you do not yet know our ways. I understand your fear, but in time you will come to embrace us, to embrace our life-

"You will not swallow my soul, old timer." Mabon threw the hand off, his face flushed. "Nor will you swallow hers!"

He rushed madly at Rhiannon, the poor trapped soul enchanted by their demon magic. He threw her over his shoulder, intending to race off into the darkness, a hero and a saint.

But her curves overwhelmed him. He could not lift her from the stone.

"How about I just go with you?" she said. Her voice thrilled him with renewed vigor.

"Okay."

Together they jumped from the stage and threaded their way through the staring audience. No one moved to stop them. No one cried out. Mabon saw smiles, even. Several fairies exchanged high fives, and the giant uttered a wistful sigh that blew a handful of pixies out of the theater.

They reached the top of the open air theater, and Rhiannon stopped. She turned back to the audience, waving and blowing kisses.

"What the hell are you doing? We have to get out of here."

"Hush. And wave."

Befuddled, he raised a tentative hand. The crowd erupted with cheers and hoots. On stage, the fairy king lifted one arm in a fond salute.

"That's enough," Rhiannon said. "Nobody likes an endless encore." She skipped down the hill, heading toward the edge of the city.

Mabon ran to catch up, to protect her from the devils who would seek to take her back. He huffed, his lungs unused to magic dust-polluted air.

Rhiannon stopped at the city boundary. "All right then. Let's go if we're going to go."

"You know how to get out of here?" Mabon asked.

"Yes, but I can't get us out. I'm still only human."

"So am I."

"Are you now?"

Mabon consulted his body. "As human as I have been my entire life."

"That's what I thought. Get us out then."

"I just told you! I resent the accusation. My soul is still intact. I did not succumb to the demon-temptresses-"

"Stop blathering." She rolled her eyes and reached for him, turning him to face the empty forest. "Close your eyes. Picture it. Your forest, in your mortal world. Are the trees different? The smells? The animals? Go there in your mind."

She wrapped her arms around him from behind, her flesh caressing his back. That certainly wasn't part of the forest he remembered. Suddenly he was glad she was pressed to his back, and not his front. That could have gotten awkward.

"Come on." Her throaty whisper penetrated his ear, prickling his neck. She rubbed his chest in slow circles. "For me?"

Swallowing, he closed his eyes. He pictured the daylight-dappled trees, the squirrels, the ravens. He imagined the asphalt on the roads, the speed bumps, the campsites. He felt his boots grinding over the sandy floors of the dunes sheltering the beach, heard the waves roll, smelled the tang of the salt.

"On your first try, too." She released him, and he staggered. "I'm impressed."

Mabon opened his eyes. The Menai Strait opened before him, the waters of the Irish Sea separating them from the Welsh mainland. They stood atop a sand dune, sand slipping over their feet, at the border between forest and beach.

He turned around. Niwbwrch the Fairy City was gone, fallen to the ordinary Newborough Forest. His heart sank even as his mind harrumphed with satisfaction.

Rhiannon took his hand, and he turned his attention to her. The chilling breeze nipped at her, playing with her daffodil hair and her milky skirt.

"Home, then?" she asked, her mouth turned in a superior smile. "I'd like to meet Father."

"How. . . ?"

"I'll give you a hint. I'm not the fairy."

Mabon blinked. Understanding slipped through him, and he stretched to feel his shoulder blades. "No wings," he panted.

"Males have no wings, silly."

He shook his head fervently. "No, no I am not one of those devils. I can't be."

"And yet you know it is true."

Mabon slumped to the sand. "I don't believe you. They tampered with your mind."

"Maybe doctrine has tampered with yours." She sat beside him. "Maybe if you grew up where you were born, and I grew up where I was born, things would be different. Maybe I'd be worried about my soul, and you'd be the king of Niwbwrch City, feeding pleasure to the magical creatures. But the system doesn't work that way. There has to be a trade. Once a generation, there has to be new blood."

Mabon shook his head. He pressed his fingertips all over his scalp, searching for a tender spot. "I fell. I tripped in the forest. I hit my head, I dreamed. All those childhood stories. My dad said they were the work of the devil. I never should have - It's very nice of you to help me, miss."

"You really are something, you know that?"

Mabon looked into her brown eyes. He longed to have brown eyes. He could almost feel the green of his, the spark, the otherworldliness that capered within him.

"I can't be what you say," he said. "Not that."

"Changlings are revered in the realm."

"They are nothing but tales in the real world." He shook his head. "In a day or two, this will have faded, this dream, this concussed nightmare."

Rhiannon touched his knee. The skin under her fingers tingled. "Was it really so hellish for you?"

A traitorous hand moved up her arm. "Sin without repentance. . . what would you call it?"

"Living." She leaned into him. "Tell me, Mabon, what happens if you give in to these sins?"

Her lips brushed his, and the betraying protrusion of his body reached toward her.

"You ask for forgiveness."

"Then let's ask for it tomorrow." She met his yearning, bearing him back to the sand.

Oh, hell, he thought.

"Okay," he said.

Nine months and a day later, they stood over a crib, staring down into innocent brown eyes.

"He's perfect," Mabon said.

Rhiannon agreed, squeezing his hand in hers. "She's a lovely baby."

Mabon started. "*He*, Rhiannon. We have a son, not a daughter. "

She patted his cheek. "Wait until tomorrow morning."

She left him standing in the nursery, feeling his head for lumps.