



Lady of Maragorn
by J. C. Wilder

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As long as she lived, she would never kiss another man.

WHACK!

Nia attacked the small pile of leafy herbs with her butcher knife, releasing the pleasing scents of basil, rosemary and sage. Considering she was immortal, *as long as she lived* meant an eternity without kisses.

She cast a mournful glance at the row of stone statues lining the rear of her worktable. Her gaze followed the statues around the small, comfortable room. Small groups of stone creatures crowded the corner pantry, the bookshelves over her bed, the fireplace mantel and the shelves above her windows and doors.

Finally, after having run out of shelves in her cozy cabin, she'd resorted to placing the wee beasties in rows before the fireplace. During the cool evenings, she'd prop her feet on their little ugly heads and warm her toes.

In fact, there were so many of the creatures surrounding her that there were times when she felt like she were suffocating. The cabin she'd called home for the past two hundred years was bursting at the seams with her victims.

Her victims.

Her shoulders slumped. It was her fault. These men, mortal men who had been lured into the woods by stories of the Lady of Maragorn—a healer of unsurpassed skill, a she-elf of incomparable beauty—were turned into gargoyles. It was said that a man could find paradise in a single kiss. They came to her, at least four to five a year, wanting only to kiss her, to touch her. But at the first touch of her lips, they'd been transformed into stone statues of hideous little gargoyles.

She looked at two sitting on the edge of the mantel over her eastward window. Some of them, like Ran the Dark and Nikolaz of Riverhaven, a fellow elf, she'd truly loved. In her heart of hearts, she'd believed they could be the one to set her free.

Dream Quest: Nine Spellbinding Paranormal Romances

According to the story her mother had told her from her deathbed, the only action that could release her from this endless curse of immortality was true love's first kiss. Only, for her, it hadn't worked. Both men had turned to stone at the touch of her lips, leaving her alone and heartbroken.

But today was going to be different. Today she was taking her fate into her own hands.

Nia squared her shoulders and set the knife aside. Today, on her two hundred and twenty-second birthday, she was going to end her curse by taking her own life.

Outside the window over her workbench, a soft, late spring rain fell. The scent of wet earth, loam and growing plants teased her senses. How she loved the spring, the ripening of nature after the release from winter's icy embrace. The creatures coming back to life, the newborns to be found in the woods, it was like magic.

Just like herself.

Humming under her breath, she added the chopped herbs to her conjure bowl, which was already half-filled with the ingredients she'd gathered fresh from the woods earlier in the day. Taking her pestle, she began grinding the contents into a fine paste. As she worked, she chanted the sacred words, passed down by her mother, under her breath.

Megrew lithra arowen nighlie.

The familiarity of the chant and the soothing movements calmed her soul. For months she'd been contemplating taking her own life, and now that the time was near, she felt oddly calm. Almost as if she knew she was doing the right thing. It was time to end the torment and loneliness she endured every day of her life.

Two hundred years was a long time to spend with only the woodland animals as companions.

But first, before she could complete the job, she had to free her victims from their cursed existence. Leaving them to dwell as statues forever while she took her leave was something she could not bear. Over the years she'd tried numerous times to reverse the spell to no avail. She was hoping that upon her death, she could turn everything to right and undo all of the damage she'd inflicted upon these men. It only made sense that, if she were dead, all of her spells would reverse.

When the herbs had reached the desired consistency, she put aside her pestle. Taking up the bowl, she approached the first row of statues. She sprinkled a small amount of the herbs over their little stone heads. As she moved along the rows, she spoke her incantation.

*Goddess of dark and light,
Upon my death, set this wrong right.
Break this curse and set them free,
For now, forever, so mote it be.*

She repeated the incantation several more times as she worked her way around the room, taking care to not miss a single stone creature. When she was done, she placed her empty bowl on the workbench.

In less than an hour, she would be dead and these men would resume their physical form. Both her curse and theirs would be ended. She cast a final glance at the two statues of Ran and

Nikolaz. Shoving her regret into a corner of her heart, she turned to the cupboard where she stored her clothing.

From the depths of the narrow space, she retrieved a floor length, white beaded gown. Her mother's wedding gown. With great reverence, in the flickering light of the low fire, the material glowed with an unearthly sheen. It was surprisingly heavy and she ran her fingertips over the myriad of pearl and glass beads that covered the dress.

If she wasn't mistaken, the Wood Elves of Siravar to the north, the people of her mother's line, had made the material. Her mother had told her on many occasions that when she was cast from the tribe, she'd taken only the material, her hunting bow and the silver crown that now rested on Nia's head. She'd never seen any of her kin in all her years, but Nia had seen fine elven material before. If she wasn't mistaken, this was some of the finest.

Shedding her simple cotton gown, she pulled the wedding dress over her nude body. Her mother had made the dress in the hopes that Nia's father would marry her, but instead Nia's mother had been rejected. Love had turned its back on Kara twice as it had her daughter. Her mother had never worn the gown, but her daughter would.

Nia straightened her shoulders and tilted up her chin. Instead of wearing the gown to her wedding, she would wear it to her death.

Turning away from their staring stone eyes, Nia felt a sharp pang as she exited the cabin. She was angry that her life was ending like this. As a child, she'd had such high hopes for life, love and a family. Instead she was doomed to carry the curse of a bitter man who'd mistakenly believed himself wronged. Turning away from his own true love, her father had destroyed so many lives.

The ground underneath her bare feet was wet, the grass springy and soft. The rain had slowed and she let her head fall back to receive the caress of the earth mother's precious gift one last time.

Over the years, she'd tried to kill herself twice before. Each time she'd awoken from her folly to find herself hail and disgustingly hearty.

But this time would be different. She could feel it.

At the far end of the clearing was a narrow line of trees and beyond them were the forbidding cliffs of Maragorn. Just past the trees, the grass faded to sparse weed then nothing but the rocky edges of cliffs paved the way. The wind blowing in from the sea tugged at her gown as she beheld the stormy gray of the ocean before her.

The cliffs were sheer, flat rock walls for hundreds of feet with the ocean roiling amongst large boulders at the bottom. Once she fell, there was no way to scale the cliffs and her body would be pulled out to sea. She would find her peace in the ocean's embrace.

Nia lifted her gaze to the heavens. Images filtered through her mind, the names and faces of hundreds of people she'd known. Her mother's beloved face came first, then was followed by each of the people she'd treated over the years. No matter how cursed her life had been; she'd saved the lives of thousands with a mixture of elven magic and her herbal healing skills. That was reward enough. She'd done well and now it was time to rest. She was weary, unutterably weary.

Taking a deep breath, she stepped to the edge. Drawing a cloak of serenity around her, she closed her eyes.

Freedom...

She lifted her foot and her body swayed with the breeze. She lost herself in the peaceful embrace of her pending death, when the sound of a man's gruff voice shattered her serenity.

Dream Quest: Nine Spellbinding Paranormal Romances

“E went this way.”

Startled, Nia’s eyes flew open. Who would dare to come to this lonely place and interrupt her death? For the most part, people didn’t come to Maragorn unless they were seeking her help.

“Why would ’e come this way? Everyone knows the Witch of Maragorn lives yonder. This place is cursed.” The last was said in a loud hiss.

Nia stomped her foot as she scowled in the direction of the voices. Cursed? Little did this blathering fool know about curses, but she’d be sure to show him. Education was the path to enlightenment and she was about to educate this trespasser. She turned in time to see a man stumble through the trees toward her.

He was a big man, tall and broad, his hair darkened by the rain. He wore black from head to toe with a gold link belt around his waist. This was no common hunter, his belt alone proclaimed him to be a man of worth. His garments were mud-splattered and, in his right hand, he carried a massive sword. Her eyes widened when she recognized blood coating the blade.

His face was deathly pale and his eyes were midnight blue against his unnatural pallor. He caught sight of her and swayed before falling to his knees almost at her feet.

“Please, milady,” he gasped. “Help me.”

Nia ran forward and caught him before he pitched face first onto the rocks. Staggering under his weight, she fell backward and his upper body landed across her legs, pinning her to the ground. She shifted beneath him and barely managed to maneuver him to his side.

She laid his head in her lap and sheltered his face from the soft rain with her bowed head. He was a handsome one. His hair was long, his features rugged. Thick lashes created shadows against his cheeks and his skin was cool to the touch. A scar marred his left temple and cheek. But, even with that blemish, he was a very handsome man. And his lips looked so... kissable...

Nia felt her gut clench and her breath left her in a rush. The urge to lean down and press her lips to his was overwhelming. To breath life into him or to feel his flesh against hers, she wasn’t sure. Almost as if in a trance, her head descended to his.

“Wot’s this?”

She’d been so engrossed in looking at the man, she’d neglected to listen for the owners of the voices she’d heard. Two stocky figures approached, their swords and shields in hand. They were barely as tall as she and dressed in dirty brown leather jerkins with darker brown clothing beneath and heavy laced boots.

Her eyes narrowed. They were dwarves.

“A woman in the woods?” said the first. His knotted, filthy beard wobbled with each word. “What do you suppose she’s doing ’ere?”

“I dunno,” said the second. He had no beard though he was no less as filthy as the first.

The bearded one stepped forward. “Woman, what business ’ave you ’ere with our man?”

Nia’s gaze flicked from one to another. Dwarves were, at best, full of bluster. The animosity between elves and dwarves had existed for centuries. The reason for the animosity was lost in the shadows of years long past. But Nia knew both she and her new patient could be in some danger if she made one wrong step.

She lowered the man’s head to the ground, then rose to face the newcomers.

“I live in these woods.” She linked her hands at her waist. “I must ask you what business you have here.”

“Yew dunna live ’ere,” the second one said. “Only the Witch of the...” His voice trailed away as his eyes grew round.

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Nia glanced from one to the other, allowing them to draw their own conclusions. The first one looked from the unconscious man, to her and then back again while the second took several steps back toward the safety of the dense woods.

“She-elf,” the first one spat. “We’ll just take our friend and be gone.”

“Indeed.” Nia looked down at the man, seeing for the first time the large smear of blood on her dress and the sword wound on his side. “Your friend seems to be a bit ill-used.”

The dwarf gave a loud guffaw. “He ran afoul of some shady characters—”

“Helped along by you, no doubt. And this is why your sword is stained with blood?” She shot a pointed look at his sword. “You’ll have to excuse me if I don’t believe your tale. I think, if I were to compare his blood with that on your sword, they would match.”

The false smile faded and his expression grew dark. “I dunna care what you think she-elf. Take your parlor tricks and be on your way as we’ll be taking ’im with us.”

“Branch—” the second man’s voice held a note of warning.

Parlor tricks?

Nia pulled inward to concentrate on the beat of her heart. Once she had the rhythm firmly in her mind, she allowed it to expand throughout her being. With each thump, her physical body lengthened and she *expanded*. Within seconds she’d gone from just over five feet tall to well over eight feet.

“Dwarf, do you mistake me a mere conjurer of childish tricks? A jester like those at the markets who entertain the offspring?” Behind her, she heard a crack of thunder as black thunderheads rolled overhead. Within seconds, the landscape around them was as dark as night. “To do so will spell your dooommmmmmm.”

“AHHHH!” The second dwarf screamed as he turned tail and ran into the woods as fast as his stubby legs could carry him. Branch’s mouth dropped wide open as his bladder let loose and he urinated on the front of his grimy pants.

“I would suggest that you hasten back to whatever hovel you’ve come from.” She towered over him, her nose wrinkling at the rancid smell of unkempt dwarf and fresh urine. She poked him in the chest with one finger and his sword hit a rock with a clang as he dropped it.

“Now,” she said.

He spun and ran, disappearing into the woods after his cowardly partner.

Nia covered her mouth lest her laughter be heard. The clouds departed as fast as they’d arrived, and she shook her head. Turning back to the unconscious man, she scooped him into her arms. In her enlarged form, she could easily carry a grown man.

After casting a mournful look at the sea, she headed in the direction of her cabin. It would appear that she had more work to do before she could take her leave.

* * *

When Ranulf opened his eyes, two things became abundantly clear—he was dead and he was in Ador, the underworld of the damned.

He blinked several times but the scene before him didn’t change. He turned his head as much as his aching skull would allow, and the leering stone faces above him did not move. Weary, he closed his eyes to take stock of his situation.

Every inch of his body, from his toes to his eyebrows, hurt. He moved his arm experimentally and felt a sharp pull in his side that took his breath away. A dull throbbing on the

side of his head was making him nauseous. But other than that litany of complaints, he felt good. He snorted with laughter and immediately regretted it as the sound rang through his abused skull.

Beneath him, he felt the comfort of a wide bed that crackled slightly as he moved. Spring grasses maybe?

What had happened to him? Vaguely, he remembered hunting in the forest alone. He'd sent his men back to the keep even though he'd known it was dangerous in this time of upheaval. But he'd been on his own land and had thought himself safe for a few hours at least. He'd wanted some time to himself and it was a rainy spring day, the kind he enjoyed.

He'd come across a stag near the falls. But, as he'd prepared to take aim, something had struck him on the back of the head. After that he remembered nothing, only vague snatches of imagery. A dwarf running at him with a sword, a sharp pain in his side, trees flashing past as he ran, the cliffs of Maragorn and a woman in a white dress that had looked suspiciously like a wedding gown.

Had he married? His eyes flew open and he jerked upright, almost immediately sorry he had done so. Pain rocked his body as bile burned his throat. He moaned and fell against the pillows as black spots danced before his eyes.

"Ah, you're awake, I see."

A haunting, melodic voice rose to his right. Gritting his teeth, he turned his head toward the unearthly sound. His gaze wavered before righting itself to focus on the figure approaching him.

For a moment, the sunlight pouring through the open window obscured her, making it appear as if she had a halo of golden light pouring from her long, pale hair. As she leaned over him, he could finally bring her into focus.

She wasn't very big, barely over five feet. Her hair was straight and the palest gold he'd ever seen. Her skin was cream pale and her features were slim, almost delicate. Soft winged brows, thick-lashed emerald green eyes and a soothing smile. She was exquisite. Around her head she wore a woven silver band and in the center dangled an emerald as green as her eyes.

The design of the band heralded her as member of the Nellwyn, one of the Wood clans. She was an elf.

She placed a cool hand upon his brow, her thumb gently stroking the knot above his temple. "You're alive and now you're awake, though I'll warrant you wish you were dead, my friend." Her voice was musical, lulling in tone and accent. She stoked his forehead and the pain began to recede.

He tried to speak, but his throat was so dry, no words could form. The woman gave an understanding smile before she turned away to retrieve a mug from a table across the room.

"I've brewed some tea for you. Drink and you'll sleep. When you awaken, you'll feel new once more."

Ranulf tried to smile his thanks, but failed miserably when she had to aid in raising his head. Everything hurt so much, he couldn't think straight and forming a coherent sentence was out of the question.

The bitter flavor of the tea was softened by a liberal dose of honey. Thankful for anything wet to ease his thirst, he gulped down the liquid. Afterward she gave him a drink of cool water to wash away the bitter aftertaste.

She eased his head onto the pillows and wiped his lips as tenderly as a mother would a child. When she was done, she stepped back and that odd halo created by the sunlight returned.

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She was possibly the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. She-elves were known for their ability to bedazzle mortal men, but they'd never had an effect upon him as this one was.

His eyelids grew heavy and suddenly he was afraid that, if he slept, this bewitching creature would escape. Before he would allow himself to drift off, he had to know her name.

He forced his eyes to remain open. "Milady," his voice was slurred. "My name is Ranulf the Hunter and I will have your name before I take my rest for you are the most beautiful creature I've ever seen."

The woman's expression turned sorrowful. "You're mistaken for I am as plain as a fish, milord. But since you asked so sweetly, I am called Nia, the Lady of Maragorn. Fear not, for I sha'nt bewitch you. You'll leave these woods as you have entered them, a man."

Ranulf's eyes slid shut, his mind barely comprehending what she'd said. This beautiful creature was the one known as the Witch of Maragorn? He gave a slight grunt of amusement... or at least he thought he did.

Impossible. The stories of the Lady were a parent's tool designed to make youngsters obey their edicts. He himself had heard the stories of the beautiful witch-elf as he'd sat on his father's knee. This wasn't possible as the woman didn't look old enough to have been the living here when he was a child.

With a mighty yawn, Ranulf the Hunter, heir to the throne of Leavendor, Steward of Malian, slept.

* * *

Nia stirred the contents of her cook pot and the savory aroma of rabbit stew rose with the steam. Almost the entire day had passed and her patient should be waking up soon. She'd feed him, keep him until morning and send him on his way before she did anything stupid like kiss him. The last thing she needed was one more victim with which to contend.

Her gaze strayed to the stranger sleeping in her bed. Was there ever a man who'd had a mouth to be kissed like his? His color had returned and now he slept the peaceful slumber of exhaustion.

His cheeks and chin were dark with stubble and thick lashes cast dark shadows across his cheeks. His dark hair had dried and she delighted in its natural wave, so unlike her own straight locks. His mouth was full with the lower lip slightly larger than the top. And they looked soft... warm...

She groaned and set her spoon on a plate on the hearth. No, never again. She'd made her vow to never kiss another man and she'd keep that vow if it were the last thing she'd do. She looked at the row of stone creatures lining the hearth. She had no choice.

The gentle rustle of sheets turned her attention back to the bed. Her heart gave a jolt when she saw the stranger's dark blue gaze fastened on her. A shiver of longing snaked through her abdomen and she pushed it away. She needed to get him well and on his way as soon as possible, for his sake.

"Are you feeling better?" She approached the bed.

"Yes, much." His voice was husky from disuse.

"Feel up to eating something?"

"Um," he glanced around the room. "I need to answer the call of nature, if you'll direct me that is."

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Nia smiled at the rush of color tinting his cheeks. Men, they were so predictable. King of the mountain while they were on their feet, but when you lay them flat on their backs and unable to help themselves, they turned prudish. Imagine what the world would be like if women acted so squeamishly about a simple bodily function. From the pantry, she retrieved a pitcher she kept for such a purpose.

“You take care of this and I’ll dish up some food. You must be ravenous.” Handing him the container, she turned away to ladle stew into a bowl, adding crackers made from lentil beans on top. After drawing a mug of fresh water, she carried his dinner to him.

“Thank you, milady.” His blush was still in place when she set his dinner on the table by the bed.

“Eat.” She took the pitcher from him. “I think you’ll find that when you’ve eaten, you’ll feel like your old self again.”

“It smells delicious.”

Nia didn’t miss how the stranger literally fell on his food. Humming with satisfaction over a job well done, she escaped outside to empty the pitcher.

On her way back from the stream, she saw Fern, her sometimes horse. She gave a low whistle and the horse ambled toward her. She called the creature that because she didn’t own her, rather they shared a mutually beneficial relationship. Fern would give an occasional ride while Nia would return with a weekly brushing and apple or carrot snacks.

In the morning, she’d need the mare to assist her in taking the stranger back to wherever he came from. Together, they walked to the cabin. When she entered, she was pleased to see the stranger sitting up in bed.

“Are you finished?” She indicated the clean bowl.

“May I have more?”

“Of course.” Nia refilled the bowl and handed it to him. His hearty appetite was a very good sign indeed.

“Where am I?” he asked.

“Just north of the Woods of Leavendor near the cliffs of Maragorn.” She indicated the horse who’d just stuck its head through the open window to nibble on drying herbs. “In the morning, you can borrow my horse to aid you in your journey back to whence you’ve come.”

“Sending me off already?” She caught the amusement in his voice.

“It is what’s best for you.” She picked up the pallet she’d been sleeping on since the stranger had arrived. Spreading it out before the fire, she sat to begin her evening ritual of brushing and braiding her long hair. She removed the silver crown and placed it beside her on the pallet.

The man continued eating, but she was aware of his avid gaze as she separated the strands with her fingers.

“Why do you live in the woods alone, Nia?” His voice was low, sensual. “Don’t you get lonely?”

Her eyes closed as a powerful longing swept through her. What did it matter if she told this man the truth? He’d leave in the morning and she would be gone shortly thereafter.

“My mother died many years ago, so I’ve been alone most of my life.” Deftly she wove her hair into two long braids to avoid tangling while she slept. “I barely remember anything different.”

“Then why do you remain here?”

“Because I can’t live anywhere else.” She tied a faded blue ribbon at the end of one braid.

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“Why is that?”

“I am cursed.” Her voice erupted more bitterly than she’d intended. “Surely you’ve heard the stories of the Witch of Maragorn?”

“Of course, they’re fables designed to scare children into behaving.” He placed the empty bowl on the bedside table.

“They aren’t fables. They’re true, for I am she.”

“You aren’t nearly old enough—”

“I’m over two-hundred years old.” Nia dropped the brush onto her pallet and turned to face him.

His head was cocked to the side as comprehension dawned across his face. “Of course you are. Many elves are immortal.”

She frowned. If elves were immortal, this was the first she’d ever heard of it. Her mother had been an elf and she was as dead as any mortal.

“My mother was not immortal,” she said. “The only reason I’m still alive is for the curse.”

“But you wear the amulet.”

Nia looked down at the pendant she’d worn for all of her life. It was small, just slightly larger than the tip of her pinky. Of woven silver strands, it contained a milky moonstone at its heart, the stone of the Nellwyn according to her mother.

“It was a gift from my mother.” Her fingers closed around the pendant. “I’ve always had it.”

“All of the Nellwyn wear the same pendant. It is said to represent their immortality. If they choose, they can give the pendant to the one they love and forsake their immortal life for a mortal one.” Ranulf settled deeper into the bed, still facing her. “How can you not know anything of your people?”

“They cast out my mother many years ago.” Nia stretched out on her pallet. The flickering of the fire and the dim room was making her relaxed. “I’ve never met another Nellwyn.”

“Why did they cast her out?”

“According to her, because she dared to love a mortal, Megros of Litharia. They had a great love affair and, when she became pregnant, they shunned her.” Nia settled her cheek against her hands. “But Megros was a jealous man who didn’t trust anyone. When Mama came to him and told him she was pregnant with me, he believed she’d cuckolded him. He, too, cast her out and the curse was cast upon me.”

“Tell me about the curse.”

Nia yawned. She wasn’t sure why he was so interested, but since it didn’t matter if he knew or not, she continued. “The curse is that I am to live an immortal life until love’s first kiss sets me free. What they failed to tell my mother was, should I kiss anyone other than my one true love, they would be turned into a gargoyle.”

“A gargoyle?” There was a heavy pause. “You mean like the statues around the room?”

“Exactly. You’re surrounded by my victims.” She closed her eyes. “I’m tired of talking about me. Tell me about your life, Ranulf.”

“What do you want to know?”

“Is there anyone waiting for you to return home?” She heard the rustle of sheets.

“My men, my family and my people. I have no wife, if that’s what you’re asking.”

Nia allowed a small smile. She couldn’t deny the feeling of relief that washed over her.

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“Tell me about your childhood.” Her voice was heavy with exhaustion. She’d slept little since she’d found Ranulf. For the first time in many years, it felt good to have someone sleep under the same roof as she. As she drifted into sleep, lulled by the sound of his voice, she dreamed of a dark haired man and a blonde woman running through a field surrounded by their children.

* * *

“You seem to be in a hurry to see me gone.” Ranulf sat on the edge of the bed, watching Nia scurry around the room straightening up.

“It’s for your own good.” She tossed his clean leather jerkin in his direction. “It wouldn’t pay for you to dawdle here for long. Better men than you have met an untimely end here in the woods of Maragorn.”

“You don’t scare me, she-elf.” He laughed. “I am a fearsome warrior—”

“And that has been said to me before,” she shot back.

“I will do as you desire, sweet Nia.” He rose, putting out a hand to steady himself as the floor tilted beneath his feet. He was almost feeling like his old self again. Only his head seemed to still give him problems. He picked up his sword and slid it into its sheath. “I will leave your home in the woods, but I think you will not forget me so easily.”

“You overestimate your powers of attraction.” Her tone was dry.

“Do I?” He towered above her, crowding her near the foot of the bed where she couldn’t move away. He dipped his head until his lips brushed her ear and he could feel her shiver beneath that light touch. “I think not.”

With that, he moved away. He needed to get home before he did something foolish like kiss her. He cast a glance at the odd little statues before the fireplace. There was something in her story that didn’t quite ring true, and he needed to speak to his steward before he returned.

The horse stood a few feet from the door and its ears flicked forward as he approached. Lacking both saddle and bridle, he gripped her mane and vaulted onto her back. Beneath him, the horse moved and he soothed her with his hands and soft words of encouragement.

Nia stood in the doorway, her arms wrapped around her slim waist. “Travel well, Ranulf the Hunter.”

He tipped his head in her direction. “Thank you again, Nia, Lady of Maragorn. I shall return your horse tomorrow.”

She shook her head. “There is no need, just turn her loose and she will return to me.”

“Do all creatures return to you, Nia?”

Her expression turned cool. “Only those who wish to become cursed as well.”

He gave her a curt nod and wheeled the horse around. As they left the clearing and entered the woods, he whispered under his breath, “Fear not, Milady, for I shall return.”

* * *

The first gift arrived early the next morning. As she opened the door, Nia found a package on her doorstep. Wrapped in plain brown paper and coarse string, she picked it up and carried it to her table.

It was probably a gift from the family she’d aided last week with their ailing daughter. While it wasn’t unusual to receive an offering, it was unusual for it to be left on her doorstep.

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Most people left them near the edge of the clearing at the base of a tree stump. While they weren't afraid to approach her when they needed something, rarely did they do so to leave an offering.

She tugged on the rope and the knot pulled free. She removed the brown paper and her breath caught as she beheld the gift of emerald green velvet. She ran her hands over the mound of soft fabric. Surely there was enough here to make an entire dress or a cloak. Beneath the fabric, she found a note.

Cloth to match the color of your eyes...

Even though it was unsigned, Nia knew who'd sent the present. Ranulf. But how could a mere soldier afford a ransom's worth of precious velvet fabric?

He was wily, that one.

She refolded the fabric and tucked it away, safe in its paper wrapping. Too bad she wouldn't need it as it would have made a lovely cloak.

Now that she had no patients and she'd put her cabin back to rights, there was no reason to not to take the leap from the cliffs as she'd planned. Her fingers closed around the pendant and a soft shiver moved up her arm. What if Ranulf was right and the pendant was the key to her immortality rather than the curse?

She frowned. But why wouldn't her mother have told her? Surely she wouldn't have kept such a thing a secret. Not that it mattered now. Even if the pendant was the secret, the curse still remained. When she kissed a man who was not the love of her life, he turned to stone. That alone was something she could live with no longer. The thought of an eternity alone was more than she could bear.

Nia stripped off her clothing and removed the white gown from the clothing cupboard. The beautiful fabric had survived its shabby treatment. After a good cleaning and allowing it to dry in the warm sun, it looked as beautiful as ever.

She pulled it over her head. The gown felt heavy as it settled against her skin, not as comfortable as it had the last time she'd donned it. Why was that? What had changed?

Ranulf.

She exited the cabin, her heart thudding in her chest as she walked through the soft grass. He was the only thing that had changed in her life. Since meeting him, she'd felt out of sorts. Almost as if—

A spark of sun glinting off something caught her eye. As she neared the small boulder, she spied a delicately embroidered pair of ladies slippers. Her lips formed an O as she took in the tiny seed pearls sewn around the edges.

She lifted them to reveal a note underneath.

Slippers for your beautiful feet...

With trembling hands she slipped them onto her feet, reveling in the sensual caress of the fur lining. Never had anyone given her such a grand gift as the velvet *and* slippers. Usually she received gifts of food, a length of homespun. Once she'd received two gold coins, not that she had any use for them, but they were pretty when the light hit them just right.

Straightening, she continued her journey, stopping to admire her new footwear from time to time. As she neared the trees, she saw something in the trees reflecting the sunlight. When she

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drew near, she saw an emerald pendant on a narrow silver chain. A note was attached to the chain.

Emeralds to match your eyes...

Nia couldn't help the feeling of joy as she read the card. She lifted the pendant and fastened it around her neck along with the moonstone. Had her soldier snuck through the dead of night hiding these gifts for her? How could he have afforded them? Had he stolen them?

She wove her way through the woods and, as she neared the clearing, a flash of red caught her eye. From a tree branch hung a ruby red velvet cloak. Never had she seen anything quite so lovely. Silver embroidery edged the front and the hood. The clasp was shaped like a horse's head and was made of sterling silver.

She removed the cloak and another note fluttered to the ground.

To protect you from the elements...

Nia clutched the cloak to her chest as her gaze scanned the area. How many gifts had he left for her? She slipped the cloak over her shoulders and began searching.

Within two hours, she'd unearthed a myriad of gifts. A large basket of food, a length of sapphire blue silk for a dress, a collection of silk hair ribbons in every color of the rainbow, an emerald ring as well as a saddle and bridle for Fern. Trip after trip she made back to her cabin carrying her bounty.

With all of the gifts piled on her bed along with a stack of notes, she admired the king's ransom she'd received. As beautiful as the gifts were, they didn't compensate for an eternity of loneliness. Lengths of velvet and precious jewels were a poor substitute for love.

Nia exited the cabin a final time. She could only hope that whoever happened upon her cabin could use the things she'd left inside. When she reached the cliffs, a voice rose from behind her.

"There you are, my fine witch."

* * *

Ranulf nudged his horse into a canter. He couldn't wait to get back to Nia and see how she liked the presents he'd left her. It had taken two of his men over an hour to hide them in the area around her house.

Ever since he'd left her home the day before, she'd occupied his thoughts completely. He could think of nothing else but her.

He was in love with her.

Yes, it was folly to love someone he'd only met a few days before, but it was true. His mother had always told him that, when he met his soul mate, there would be no doubt in his mind. With Nia, there wasn't one. Witch or not, elf or not, she was the woman for him.

As the woods thinned, to his left were the cliffs where they'd first met. He pulled his horse to a stop when he heard voices coming from the cliffs. Recognizing Nia's cool, melodic tones, he leapt from his horse and moved to a tree that would shelter him from view.

His heart leapt into his throat when he saw her poised at the cliff edge, her back to the sea. The winds from the sea tugged at the red cloak. Her expression was composed as she faced two dwarves who looked oddly familiar.

The shorter of the two was armed with a bow and a short sword still in its sheath. The taller, more aggressive one stood closer to Nia. His sword was in its sheath, but he held a jeweled dagger, one that Ranulf recognized as being his father's. One that had been missing since his ill-fated hunting trip.

These were the two who'd attacked him in the woods that day.

He ran his hand over the bindings that still covered his sword injury. Nia's healing skill had the wound almost healed. These two had tried to kill him, and now they had the woman he loved cornered.

Anger simmering, he moved through the trees until he stood almost directly behind the taller man. Careful not to make a sound, he withdrew his sword from its sheath and advanced.

Nia's eyes widened when she saw him, but she made no effort to acknowledge him.

"I said, whatcha 'ave to say for yourself, woman?" The taller man jabbed his dagger in her direction, but she didn't flinch.

"I fail to see why I have to answer you," she said. "I was but minding my own business the day you chased the stranger here upon this cliff. It wasn't my fault you lost your prey."

"'E was a rich one, 'e was, and we mean to collect on our 'ard day's work." He jabbed the knife at her again. "I know he's probably stashed at your place. You'll just 'ave to take us there."

"And if he's not?" she asked. "What then?"

"Then we'll just avail ourselves of you and teach you a lesson about meddling where you're not wanted. We'll just toss them skirts over your 'ead and see 'ow well you like it." The taller one glanced at the shorter man and laughed. "You'll be our consternation prize."

"I believe you mean *consolation*." Amusement laced her words.

"Humph." He grabbed her arm and began hauling Nia toward the woods and her cabin beyond the clearing.

"There's no need, gentlemen, for I have come to you." As Ranulf spoke, both men jumped. Spinning, they turned to face him. He jabbed the tip of his sword into the soft earth, then braced his hands over the hilt.

"You," the taller one said.

"Yes, 'tis I. I believe you were asking the lady about me?"

The shorter one took a half step back, clearly unwilling to face a healthy, armed man this time.

"We came only to bid 'ello to the beautiful lady." The taller one smiled, revealing a mouthful of rotting teeth. He pulled Nia closer. "Good friends, you see."

"Indeed." Ranulf's gaze flicked to Nia's expressionless face. "You'll have to forgive me if I think the lady disagrees with you."

The taller dwarf shifted her until she stood in front of him as a human shield. His dagger was placed against her throat, but Nia seemed unconcerned.

"As if we care what you 'ave to say," the man snarled. "Now, give us your money or I'll slit 'er throat."

Ranulf gave him an unpleasant smile. "Come and get it." He removed his money pouch from his belt and held it out, sure to give it a good jingle so the men could hear the coins clinking together.

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“Get it,” the taller one said to the shorter man.

He started, then stopped. “But he’s armed.”

“Step away from your sword, milord. I’d ’ate to cut ’er throat if you made any sudden moves.”

Ranulf inclined his head toward the man and stepped away from his sword. With the bigger man’s gaze fastened on the bag, his dagger moved away from Nia’s throat ever so slightly, giving him a chance to save her. But before he could pull his own boot dagger and hurl it at the man, Nia had grasped his arm and slid beneath it.

“Wench,” the bigger man snarled.

Nia grabbed his cheeks and, to Ranulf’s surprise, gave him a quick, hard kiss on the lips. Stepping back, she ran her hand over her mouth as if to remove the taste from her skin.

The dwarf gave an odd scream that cut off in mid syllable. Instantly, he was transformed into a gargoyle statute, a particularly ugly one at that. The smaller man gave a strangled scream and headed for the woods, the bag of coins and his friend forgotten.

“I guess you were right,” Ranulf said.

Nia’s brow crooked. “You’ve seen my home and still you didn’t believe me? I’m cursed and I have been from the day I was created. Thank you for the lovely gifts, but you’ve wasted your time.” She indicated the squat stone creature at her feet. “I can’t risk this happening to you. You’re better off without me.”

He shook his head. “I will never be better off without you, Nia. I love you.”

She turned away and stepped to the cliffs. Already she was slipping away. Her gaze was fixed on a distant spot out at sea. “I cannot love you, Ranulf. I cannot love anyone.”

“Nia, what are you doing?”

“Taking my life. I cannot live this half-life any longer.” Her voice was dreamy, as if she were hearing voices he could not.

“Don’t do this.” He stepped closer and she put up her hand as if to warn him off.

“It’s better this way—”

“How can it be better? How can I live without you?” He took another step. “You said yourself that your true love can free you from this curse. How can you believe that I’m not your true love? What if I’m the one and you’re about to make the biggest mistake of your life?”

She looked at him, her emerald eyes awash in tears. “And what if I kiss you and you turn into one of them?” She gestured at the statue. “I couldn’t bear it.”

Ranulf kicked the statue off the cliff and he heard her gasp. “And what if I don’t?” he shot back.

“But they all have, don’t you see?” she wailed. “All of them, some of them I’d loved, and all of them I’ve lost. I cannot bear it again.”

“Kiss me, Nia. I beg of you to kiss me. If I turn into a statue, then pick me up and hurl both of us off this cliff. But don’t—I beg of you—don’t jump without kissing me first.”

Tears left shiny streaks down her cheeks. Her chin dropped and he used the opportunity to pull her into his arms. She came to him on a sob. They fit, just as he knew they would. Her head came to rest just below his chin, her slim body leaned into his.

“I cannot bear this—” Her voice broke.

“I can.”

He tipped her chin up and lowered his head. Their lips met and he laid his claim to her. A jolt of pleasure rocketed down his spine as her lips parted and their tongues tangled. Her mouth not only looked good, it tasted sweet as well. Her hands clenched and released against his chest

as he plundered her mouth. Overwhelmed by the sensation of her soft body leaning into his, he wanted nothing more than to reverse their positions and lay her on this cliff and sink into her.

She moaned a protest as he broke the kiss. His heart stopped as she went rigid. Her eyes rolled back in her head and then she went limp in his arms. He caught her and lowered her to the rock, his body sheltering hers. Tucking her head into his shoulder, he held her close, waiting for either everything or nothing to happen. Other than being dizzily happy, he felt only love for the woman in his arms.

After a few moments, her lashes fluttered. He stroked flyaway hairs from her face as she awoke. Her eyes were confused when they focused on him.

“You’re still you,” she whispered.

He smiled and ran his finger over the soft curve of her cheek. “And you’re still you.”

“Oh, my...” She burst into tears.

He hugged her tighter until the tempest passed and she cried two hundred years of loneliness onto the front of his jerkin. When she calmed, he released her so he could look into her beautiful face.

“Nia, you aren’t immortal, either.”

She frowned. “Of course I am.”

“No.” He ran his finger over the pendant. “This makes you immortal, the sign of your mother’s people. You’re a halfling, half human and half elf. I think your mother forsook her immortal life for you by giving you this. She knew you couldn’t be immortal on your own, thanks to your mortal blood.”

Her eyes again filled with tears. “Oh, Mama,” she whispered. “If I’d only known.” Her hand fisted around the pendant.

“If you choose a mortal life, you have only to remove the pendant and cast it away.”

She sat up so fast she came close to cracking him on the nose with her head. She fumbled with the chain until he took over and removed it from her neck before handing it to her. He rose from his crouched position and pulled her with him. The sea breeze tugged at her long golden locks as she took his hands in hers.

“I love you, Ranulf.” She released his left hand and held up the pendant. “And I choose a mortal life.” With that, she tossed the pendant over the cliffs.

He slid an arm around her waist as the waves seemed to part to receive her gift.

After a few moments, she spoke. “Let’s go back to the cabin. I need to see what—if anything—happened to my victims.”

Ranulf retrieved his sword and they walked toward the trees. “Why would something have happened to the statues?”

“I cast a spell to free them, of course.”

Author’s Note: If you want to see what happens to Nia’s victims, check out *Paradox III*

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