

When the world began, God created three beings: the Angels, born from light, the Jinn born from flame and Men born from clay. God granted each its own world. The Angels remained with God in His heaven. The Jinn were given the beautiful green mountains of Kaf and Man was made master of all the earth. To each race he gave other gifts as well. His presence was his gift to the Angels, a measure of His power came to the Jinn and to Man, He gave his love. Each race coveted the gifts granted to the others and so God decided to divide them. This story begins one thousand years ago, when the gates between the worlds began to close.

If he so wished, each Jinn might journey to earth, might tour that land as earth's young privileged inhabitants once toured the continent called Europe. Convinced he would find peace nowhere in Kaf, at the age of twenty-eight Darius, its ruler, decided to walk the earth to forget the dead.

He packed his things in haze of pain, anguish his constant companion since the night he lost his sweet wife, Corrine, and unborn daughter, Serena. Among them, the Jinn possessed little experience of grief but Darius knew the effort of maintaining a pretense every day, every night, every moment would soon drive him mad. He could no longer pretend to be calm, sane, happy, when inside he was still screaming. He could not bear to remain among his own kind but instead had to get away. He had understood this would be necessary perhaps a fortnight after the death of his family, but he also understood an immediate departure would not be possible. So, he had to endure another month of torture before all was prepared. He spent much of the time trying to convince his brother, the council, the nobles, he must go and, moreover, that his departure could be managed.

He named his younger brother Stewart regent and granted him all authority to govern the

realm. Before setting off he not only settled all the small pending disputes but left detailed instructions on how the kingdom ought to be handled in his absence. At long last when all was arranged and he might leave this place with too many painful memories, Stewart accosted him.

“Brother, for heaven’s sake do not do this,” Stewart begged. He packed some few items for his trip while his brother looked on, desperate. “I have no desire to rule even temporarily. I have no training, no skill with diplomacy. I will likely bring everything to the point of collapse in half a year. Please.”

Darius stopped packing, regarded his brother and sighed. He did seem pitifully young, younger even than his twenty years. Darius, eight years Stewart’s senior, often felt more like a second father than a brother, especially since the death of their own father five years before. Stewart was broad shouldered, his hair the same warm brown as their mother’s and his brown eyes the same as their father’s. His face, unlike their mother’s or father’s, reflected his every thought.

“You have enough training. At twenty you are far more skilled at diplomacy than I could ever be and I am certain the kingdom can withstand a mere year of your rule. Lord Ramsey will put you right if you stray. Rely on his advice. No good ruler ever wanted to be one, Stewart. I was compelled and so shall you be.”

“Darius- “

“Stewart, I cannot rule. Not now. If I do not have some peace I will slip into insanity.” Never before had Stewart seen such naked pleading in his brother’s eyes. That his sibling, always so strong, should be so weakened, stirred him. It was a plea he could not turn away from. He sighed inwardly and accepted the burden of ruling. At sunset that very day, Stewart and all the Jinn turned out to bid farewell to their young ruler.

Over the next months, Darius saw much of the land and learned much of the people. While he did not achieve peace, he did attain a certain level of calm. After a time, he developed an appreciation of the earth for its own sake and not only as a place of refuge. The world turned from his personal Lethe to a place of discovery, even adventure. The earth and its people started to intrigue him but nothing and no one intrigued him as much as Colleen O'Banyon.

As he rode, on the northern border of a small kingdom called Brenmere one day, a woman's screams of pain filled the air. Screams which made his blood run cold and brought back the hellish night when wife and child passed from his life. Whipping his horse into a gallop, he headed toward the sound. Not sure what to expect, he found a small cottage set in a neat little clearing. It was from this structure the terrible sounds issued so he spurred his mount forward, determined to offer what assistance he could.

"Hello," he called, as he approached and slowed his horse to a brisk trot. "My name is Darius. Might I be of help?"

For mere a heartbeat, he thought he was seeing an angel. He had a fleeting impression of ebony hair set against creamy skin and a slender, yet well endowed figure. She was petite, several inches below average height, so the top of her head just reached his shoulder but it was her eyes that captured him, eyes so green they rivaled the mountains of Kaf and so very full of life. This vision was of an exasperated angel, his distracted mind belatedly realized, bearing a distinct air of dishevelment. For several long seconds he could not find his tongue.

This did not turn out to be a problem, however, since she found hers with little difficulty. "I have no idea who you are, sir, but birthing is woman's work. So I'll thank you for your kind offer and ask you to be on your wa..." Her voice trailed off as her eyes met his. She swallowed,

the sound audible to her own ears, but did not continue, her voice gone now too.

Never had she seen a man so beautiful. He was six feet tall and well muscled, with black hair that was straight and sleek, blue eyes, her giddy senses informed her. There was an air of calm, competent assurance, of strength about him mixed with a kindness too that made her feel if she told him her troubles all would be well.

Darius cleared his throat and attempted to speak past the lump lodged there. "I have some skill at healing and I have attended at many births. Perhaps I might do something to assist." While he spoke, the girl not only recovered her wits but also seemed right on the point of seeing him out. In a most obliging fashion, the patient chose this precise moment to scream.

"I know I am a stranger but since your patient appears to be in considerable distress..." He let his own words trail off so she might make her own decision.

She peered regally at him from her height of all of five feet, two inches, then stated, "Well, come in then if you think you can be useful."

She ushered him into a small but well-kept cottage and closed the door behind him. She led him straight to the back bedroom where a young girl lay. Wasting no time, his angel strode with firm purpose to the mother and spoke to her. "This man here says he can help, Meg."

Without warning, a young man materialized out of the dark. "Colleen, do you know this man? I do not. I am not sure I want to put my wife in the hands of a stranger."

"Do not be ridiculous, Bryan. He wants to help and to be frank, her condition is beyond me. I can do nothing more for her." The woman, Colleen, spoke in a firm, no-nonsense voice which apparently got through to the man. At any rate, he stepped back allowing Darius to approach his wife.

Darius took off his coat, rolled up his sleeves and turned to Colleen. "How long has she

been in labor?"

"Over forty-eight hours. I do not know how much more she can take but the baby's turned and I suspect she is bleeding internally," replied Colleen in a low voice so that her patient could not hear.

There followed a swift but thorough discussion of the labor thus far and all that had been done, by the end of which Darius judged his angel more than competent. "You have done very well to keep her and the baby alive so long. Let's make sure they remain so, eh? Here's what I need you to do."

After six more hours of hard effort, the baby was ready to be born at last. "All right, Meg, we need you to push, now. Push as hard as you can. When I say go. Ready? One... Two... Three... Go," Darius ordered. Meg lifted her head and with an awful groan pushed with every last ounce of her strength. Then the air filled with the wails of a new life joining the world.

Tears of relief and joy ran down her face, but Colleen did not feel them. She cleaned the babe, swaddled him and placed the child in his mother's waiting arms. "It's a boy, Meg. Bryan, you have a fine son." Bryan picked Colleen right up off of her feet and swung her around the small room causing the little table nearby to rock in a precarious fashion. Laughter and tears mingled and Bryan ended the moment by giving her a hearty smack right on the lips.

Colleen blushed and batted him away. "All right put me down then you ninny, and kiss your wife." Bryan did as he was bidden, kissing Meg with enthusiasm. Then he touched the small, tousled head as though it were glass, delicate and breakable.

After a few brief minutes, however, Colleen shooed him out so the new mother might rest. As both the mother and son slept comfortably, Darius could see Colleen's weariness threatening to overwhelm her even as she smiled down at them.

“You should rest. I can look after them for a while,” he ventured.

At length, Colleen’s eyes traveled up to his, her gaze a trifle unfocused. “No, I should stay with them to make sure they are well.”

“Colleen, you are dead on your feet. You have been up for two days. You must rest. I insist.”

“It’s Lady O’Banyon to you and...” She paused, her certainty of second before gone in a heartbeat. “I guess I could do with a bit of kip. For an hour or so, maybe,” she admitted.

“Come on, there’s a nice sofa in the kitchen that strikes me as perfect,” he replied, taking her arm and steering her in that general direction.

“Be sure to wake me in an hour,” she warned through a jaw cracking yawn. He murmured his agreement, helped her to recline then grabbed a warm throw from a rocking chair nearby to cover her. As he made his way to check on mother and child, he turned back and saw she already slept.