

IOWA UNDER SIEGE

by Mickey Zucker Reichert

AN AUTUMN BREEZE ruffled Kyle Holcomb's hair, luffing beneath the thick, sandy waves to tickle ears roughened by weather. He looked out over his fields: cornstalks battered and broken by the combine, starlings fluttering down to snatch remaining kernels from the tire-pocked earth, and surrounding tree lines awash in amber, scarlet, green, and lavender. This time of year he appreciated the animals he battled all summer. Even the deer became welcome visitors after the harvest. Every leftover kernel they ate meant one less volunteer corn stalk stealing nutrients from next year's crop of soybeans. Wisps of cloud shielded the sun just enough to keep the temperature from soaring, and Holcomb appreciated the cool serenity of this fall day. For now, it left his bare arms awash in gooseflesh. Hours later, he would not have the slimy discomfort of a T-shirt wringing sweat, hair clinging to the back of his neck, or the beet-red pain of a sunburned face.

Pulling on his weathered gloves, Holcomb approached his John Deere tractor, its cheery green façade faded and chipped beneath a layer of dust and grime. He double-checked the plow's three-point hitch, glancing over circular blades still clutching last year's divots. Everything appeared ready. He trotted to the front, put a foot on the step, and heaved his bulk toward the driver's seat. In midair, he spotted a stranger already sitting there.

Startled, Holcomb lost his grip and fell, jerking to keep from slamming his chin against the foot plate. He managed an awkward landing on the ground that spared him any injuries. He squinted upward, looking for the one who had surprised him. No one occupied the tractor seat, just his grubby cap dangling from the backrest. *What the hell?* Holcomb blinked, trying to reform an image of the person he had glimpsed only for a moment. *Female*, his mind told him, *small and thin*. He conjured nothing more than that hazy impression.

"Farmer?" The bell-like voice came from behind Kyle Holcomb. He spun to face a small, sweet-faced woman with fine features and long hair in a brilliant shade of blue. He had seen teenagers with multicolored hair before, every shade from bleached white to hot pink, orange and purple, to Labrador retriever black. All of them had looked silly—outrageous attempts to demand attention while, at the same time, denouncing those who stared. This woman looked older, perhaps his own age, in her early forties. And, oddly, the color suited her perfectly. In fact, he had not even noticed it the first time he had glimpsed her on the tractor seat. If nothing else, he should have remembered the hair.

Realizing he was gawking stupidly, Holcomb glanced at his scratched, faded work boots and cleared his throat. "Name's Kyle." He held out a hand.

The woman made a garbled sound, more like a sneeze, though she did not close her eyes or cover her mouth. No spit flew out. She ignored the proffered hand.

Holcomb blinked, arm sagging to his side, and found himself staring again. He had never seen a grown woman so delicately boned and petite. She seemed insubstantial, as if she might break if he touched her. Her eyes had a slight slant to them but lacked the epicanthic folds that usually accompanied such a feature, and the irises perfectly matched her hair. She wore a simple dress, brown in color, with an enormous real daisy at the waist attached by its own long stem rather than a belt. "Are you . . . all right?" he asked, feeling huge and ungainly in her presence.

The stranger looked herself over with delicate grace. "I'm fine. Why do you ask?" She added carefully, "Ky-el."

Holcomb liked the way she said his name; it sounded like music. "I just . . . you made that funny sound . . . and I couldn't tell . . ."

"Funny sound?" Her head cocked to one side as she considered, then laughed. "You mean . . ." She repeated the noise.

Holcomb nodded briskly. "Yes, that one."

"That's my name. I thought you wanted it when you gave me yours."

“Name?” Holcomb’s stare grew even more intense, despite his best efforts. “What an odd—” He caught himself, not wanting to sound offensive. “I mean, I’ve never heard anything like it.”

Her head bobbed like a marionette’s, free and loose yet with clear grace. “Of course not. You’ve surely never met a sprite before.”

Holcomb rubbed his gloved hands together, uncertain where to take the conversation. “A . . . sprite? Like . . . like the soda?”

Now it was her turn to look confused. “Soda? Is that what you call creatures of Faery?”

“Creatures of . . .” Holcomb rolled his eyes, laughing nervously. Suddenly, the whole thing made sense: the cerulean hair, the oddities of speech, the whimsical spirit that caused her to skip from place to place when she clearly belonged elsewhere. *She’s crazy*. He had seen far too much of that lately. Chris Barnholdt had become outcast since he started babbling about some Jack-and-the-Beanstalk giant shouting gibberish in his pasture while the cows huddled in the barn. The Weingards had moved to the area from the city with their sweet little daughter and seemed reasonably normal until last year when the mother gave birth to a terror of a son. Devon, they named him, but the locals called him Demon. His bulbous head with its shock of red hair little resembled his parents or sibling, and eyes like charcoal seemed out of place amid his father’s blue and his mother and sister’s green. He had started walking at six months of age and never stopped moving, usually to shove someone down a staircase or against a hot stove with that otherworldly, screeching laughter.

Mind working quickly, Holcomb softened his tone, as if speaking to a toddler. “Ooooh. A creature of Faery, eh? Thaaat kind of sprite.”

The woman studied Holcomb, head bobbing as she looked him over from head to toe. “What are you doing?”

Holcomb stepped toward her, reaching for an arm. “Taking you home, wherever that may be.”

She dodged him with barely a motion. “You can’t walk me home, Human. Only magical creatures can enter Faery.”

“Right,” Holcomb said, humoring her. “I’ll just have to walk you as near as I can.” He reached for her arm again.

The self-proclaimed sprite placed both hands firmly on her tiny hips. “Kyle, you moron. You think I’m crazy, don’t you?”

Trained not to offend, Holcomb found himself cowed by the directness of her question. “Well, now. Not exactly ‘crazy,’ ma’am. Just a little . . . confused.”

She opened her mouth to protest, but Holcomb forestalled her with a raised hand. “Not that it’s your fault or anything, ma’am. There’s a lot of craziness going around these parts. I think something got in the water supply or the air blowing in from the Quaker Oats factory—”

The sprite did not wait for him to finish but raised both arms with a keening wail. The sound ripped through Holcomb, physically painless but mental agony. It set his teeth on edge, raised every hair on the back of his neck, and sent him pawing at his ears as if to rip them from his face. It reminded him of the dying scream of a rabbit but was more intense and desperate, more piercing and violent. The sound of twisting metal followed. The tractor jerked, then seemed to melt. Its chipped green paint flowed, distributing evenly over metal turned to softer material that closely resembled flesh. The headlights became eyes, the tires legs, and the plow a massive, club tail. The loader stretched into a wide and toothless grin.

Holcomb gasped, back-stepping wildly until he hit the power pole and fell on his butt. The tractor swung its front end toward him. The headlights glinted wickedly, and the loader curled into a snarl. It gathered its tires to spring.

Covering his face with a protective arm, Holcomb screamed. He braced himself for a tonnage of attack that never came. When he peeked around his arm, the tractor had returned to its natural form, its front wheels twisted as if making a tight turn, the color no longer spotty and chipped but evenly spread, so that it looked a sickly pea green all over. He scrambled to his feet, heart pounding wildly, glancing repeatedly from tractor to sprite. He wanted to speak, but nothing emerged from his gaping mouth.

The sprite’s utter calm seemed a wicked counterpoint to Kyle Holcomb’s panic. “We have tried to

communicate in the past, but we chose our ambassadors poorly.”

Holcomb found himself incapable of anything but gawking. He kept his attention mostly on the sprite, but his eyes strayed frequently to the tractor.

“The pixie thought she could get her point across with magic. The giant’s English was, apparently, too ancient a dialect. The changeling . . .” The sprite waved her hand dismissively. “. . . well, what can one ever expect of changelings.”

Holcomb’s heart continued to hammer. He remembered Chris Barnholdt saying the giant’s words reminded him of the Pink Floyd song “Several Species of Small Furry Animals Gathered Together in a Cave and Grooving with a Pict.” Just suggesting that any musical group would give a song such a title made Barnholdt seem mad by itself, but Holcomb had been curious enough to look it up and find that such a song really existed. However, the tale of the giant was too fantastical even for him. He had worked cautiously around Barnholdt since that day; and, now, it seemed, he owed the other farmer an apology. “So,” he finally managed through lips that felt rubbery. “You . . . speak English very good.” The sprite made a gesture toward the tree line. “It’s my job to color the leaves in autumn, so I spend more time around humans than most of the others. I hear them talking from the treetops.” She shrugged. “Without realizing it, I learned the language.”

Holcomb swallowed hard. He had finally recovered from the ordeal with the tractor, and he felt certain the whole encounter had to be a dream. Unobtrusively, he pinched himself several times, feeling only the pain. He did not awaken. “Why—why did you folks need to talk to us?” He concentrated on the colors around him, the feel of the breeze, the gurgling of his stomach over its scrambled eggs breakfast, details that did not exist in dreams.

“Well, we’re immortals, you know.”

Holcomb did not know, but he did not interrupt.

“Over the millennia, we’ve simply outgrown our space and we need a bit of yours.”

“Of . . . mine?” Holcomb managed.

“About this much.” The sprite’s arms flashed outward, and lines of light erupted from them. They flew far beyond Holcomb’s fields to encompass part of Muscatine County, all of Johnson, and some of Louisa. Holcomb did not know how he knew the boundaries of the sprite’s indicated territory; it went far beyond his line of sight. Yet, somehow, he could see it as clearly as a map. “That’s a fair piece of Iowa.” It seemed like a stupid thing to say, yet he could think of nothing better.

“The world of humans is huge. Surely, you won’t miss a bit.”

The sprite had a point. Most of the world would not care about this fragment of Iowa, mostly farmland sprinkled with towns and even a few small cities. “I would sorely miss it. And eighty or ninety thousand other humans as well. It’s our home.”

The sprite tipped her head, and the mass of blue hair slid sideways. “Plenty of room elsewhere for you in the human world. We’re only taking a very small piece.”

Holcomb found his gaze straying to the tractor again, its new coloring a reminder of what he had seen. If these creatures could turn machinery into living weapons, what chance did he have to stop them? He cleared his throat, hoping to make his point without antagonizing the sprite. “Ummm, a small piece, yes; but it is our home. We cannot just let you . . . take our property. Our houses. Our farms.”

The sprite shook her hair back into position. “We are informing you humans of our plans as a courtesy. Whether or not you move willingly is your decision.”

It was the gentlest threat Holcomb had ever heard, yet he sensed the menace behind it. “You’re saying this is nonnegotiable?”

“It is.”

“And if we don’t leave?”

“We will remove you forcibly.”

Holcomb wondered what exactly that would entail. *More changelings? Sharing our houses with elves?* Then, he glanced at the tractor and started to imagine the potential of such magic. He had once seen the devastation an SUV left after the driver used the gas pedal in lieu of the brake. It had smashed out the glass front of a pet store, bending beams, breaking shelves, and shattering merchandise, leaving a

trail of squashed bunnies in its wake. He envisioned an army of minivans assaulting Iowa City, cars chasing children down the bloody streets, tanks stomping through Kalona, swinging their gun turrets like trunks. Tiny Tinkerbells twined through the massacre, exhorting their larger companions as their wands set rooftops alight. Giants lashed clubs at humans and animals or flung boulders that mowed down forests like bowling pins. A corps of gremlins, grinning and gibbering, swallowed down animals and fleeing humans in enormous, sharp-toothed bites.

His own imagination set Holcomb to trembling. He wanted to run, screaming, to alert all of Iowa to this terrible danger. Instead, he remained in place, willing himself to remain calm. No one would believe him. He would find himself imprisoned in a mental institution while the folk of Faery ran amok. "I . . ." he started and stopped. "Why . . . why now? You said you'd been around for thousands of years."

"Immortals rarely reproduce. After a few millennia, however, that small reproduction becomes significant enough to require more space."

It made sense to Holcomb. In the same few millennia, humans had brought their numbers from thousands to billions. "But isn't there somewhere else—"

"No," the sprite said, with her first show of impatience. "We have chosen here. Be gone by the morrow." She turned wispy.

"Wait!" Holcomb shouted.

The sprite's slender form became solid again. "What?"

"What exactly is 'the morrow'?"

The sprite smiled, rolled her pale eyes. "Tomorrow. Usually in the morning."

Holcomb wondered how many shocks his heart could take before bursting. "You want us all gone by tomorrow morning?"

"Please."

Please. Just like that. What a polite turn of phrase for "get out of your homes, or we'll kill you."

"There's no way." Holcomb shook his head at the enormity of the task. First, he would have to convince someone in power of the truth of his allegations. Then, they would have to prepare for war or move everything they owned. *To where?* "We need more time."

"Fine. Three days, then," the sprite said dourly, with the air of one who has no intention of taking "no" for an answer. Before Holcomb could say another word, she disappeared.

Kyle Holcomb sank to the ground. And began to sob.

A half hour later, Kyle Holcomb sat in Chris Barnholdt's tiny kitchen, cupping his hands around a Farm & Fleet mug. He could feel the warmth of the cocoa seeping through the calluses on his palms and fingers but did not bother to take a sip. The scrambled eggs were still churning in his stomach, and anything on top of them might make him violently ill.

"So," Barnholdt said cautiously, as if afraid any word might send his neighbor skittering away in panic. ". . . what can I do for you, Kyle?"

Holcomb whispered into the steam rising from his mug. "I believe you."

"What?"

"I believe you. About the giant."

Barnholdt's weathered cheeks turned pinkish. "Oh, that old thing. I'd nearly forgotten."

It was a blatant lie. The folks around the rural route would never let him forget it. They started whispering the moment they saw him until he drew near enough to hear, then slipped into that same creepy style of speech that Holcomb had used when the sprite had first named herself a creature of Faery. They indulged him, and they pitied him. Now Holcomb felt guilty even though he had not done any of the talking. He had not stopped it either.

"No, Chris. I mean it. I know it really happened." Barnholdt brought his own mug to his mouth, a chipped, flowered one deeply stained but clean. He could not have drunk for as long as he held it up there, or it would have burned his lips.

Holcomb closed his eyes, about to tell his story for the first time. He could think of no one less likely to laugh at him, yet he still worried for his neighbor's reaction. "Chris, I talked to a sprite today. And she

told me it was true.”

Barnholdt’s eyes widened over his mug. Holcomb thought he might spit the contents all over the rickety table, but he did not. He simply stared, the mug still at his mouth.

Holcomb also waited in silence, worried Barnholdt might think he was being baited. They had known one another too long for that kind of meanness, had shared balers, rakes, and combines, along with smaller tools when the need arose. Though they lived two miles apart, they were one another’s nearest neighbors. They were also both bachelors, Holcomb because he had never married and Barnholdt after his divorce. Finally, he broke the hush. “She had blue hair, Chris. Natural blue. And she said an army of magical creatures was going to take our land if we didn’t hand it over peacefully.”

Barnholdt finally lowered his mug. “Are you bullshitting me, Kyle? Because, if you’re bullshitting me, I’m going to kick your ass right now.”

Holcomb could understand his friend’s consternation. “I’m not making this up, and it wasn’t a dream. A goddamned blue-haired fairy came to my house and turned my tractor into a living thing. She also mentioned your giant.”

Barnholdt continued to study Holcomb’s face, as if waiting for the moment he would crack and admit his prank. “You know, if we hadn’t been in the bar when I mentioned that giant, I’d be rotting in the loony bin right now. But I wasn’t drinking when I saw that critter in the pasture.”

“I know.” Holcomb hoped he sounded suitably sincere.

“And I heard it using some bizzaro language—”

“—an ancient form of English,” Holcomb finished, then added, “she said.”

“Kyle.” There was real vulnerability in Barnholdt’s tone.

“Yeah?”

“Do you reckon we’re both crazy?”

“Nope,” Holcomb answered honestly. “But I do reckon anyone we tell this story to will think so.” He amended, “Except maybe the Weingards. Turns out Devon’s a changeling.”

“Really?”

Holcomb thought back to exactly what the sprite had told him. “And, apparently, someone was approached by a pixie. But whoever that was isn’t talking.”

“That . . . would be me.”

Holcomb’s eyes widened. “Why didn’t you mention it?”

“Would you of?”

“You talked about the giant.”

“And look where it got me.”

Barnholdt had an undeniable point. “Well . . .” Uncertain where to take the conversation, Holcomb let it hang as he considered. “I guess we can assume that whatever doorway these creatures use to come to us is either on your land or mine.”

“I reckon so.” Barnholdt took another sip of cocoa. “Blessed, aren’t we?”

Holcomb’s mind raced. Only half listening, he replied vaguely, “Yeah, blessed.” Their next step seemed obvious on the surface. They needed to contact the governor or the president, someone with authority to reason with aliens and either dissuade them from war or fight them.

“It won’t work, Kyle.”

Jarred from his thoughts, Holcomb looked at his fellow farmer. “What?”

“I know what you’re thinking, and it won’t work.”

Holcomb shivered. “You know what I’m thinking?”

“Did you happen to see the movie *National Treasure*?”

Holcomb shook his head. He rarely bothered to drive the thirty-five miles to Coralville, especially to watch a movie alone.

“Nicolas Cage and a buddy have to convince the powers that be that someone is going to steal the Declaration of Independence because it has an invisible treasure map on the back of it.”

Holcomb considered the task, realizing that any agency contacted would believe the claim preposterous. They would get laughed out of the offices, if not locked up for their own safety. That got him thinking

about their own predicament. *Who in his right mind would believe that creatures of Faery are coming to steal the better part of three counties in Iowa?* “You’re saying there’s no way Tom Vilsack is going to believe us.”

Barnholdt lowered his mug again and leaned across it, the steam puffing into his face. “I’m saying our own mothers, God rest their souls, would cart our asses off to University Psychiatry in a minute.”

It was the sanest single thing Kyle Holcomb had heard all day. “All right, then. What did Nicolas Cage and his buddy do?”

Barnholdt rubbed a finger along the mug, tracing the flowers. “They had no choice but to handle the problem themselves.”

Holcomb closed his eyes. He was more interested in controlling pests and weeds, improving his corn and soybean yields, than becoming a hero. “I was afraid you were going to say that. How did they do?”

Barnholdt cringed, his mouth a grimacing line. “Let’s just say it worked out in the end.”

Knowing Hollywood’s propensity for gunplay and explosions, Holcomb thought it best not to ask for details.

The Weingards lived on a hill surrounded by forty acres of untillable sand. Painted white with pale blue trim, the house sat amid a sea of oak trees. Piles of raked leaves filled the areas between the trunks, most with ragged outlines and flattened tops that revealed children had leaped into them. A fluffy, off-white dog greeted Barnholdt’s battered pickup in the circular driveway, tail waving merrily in greeting. The crisp aroma of barbecued meat filled the air, and Holcomb’s mouth watered. He could not remember the last time he had cooked himself a decent meal; even his scrambled eggs came out lumpy. Barnholdt pulled the truck around, then cut the engine.

The family sat on a three-season porch, finishing their lunch and watching the farmers approach.

Holcomb appreciated that the sprite had come to him on a Saturday. Otherwise, Mr. Weingard would be at work and Mrs. Weingard might not feel comfortable meeting with two large male farmers alone.

Now, Holcomb opened his door and leaped out to find parents and children waving an eager greeting.

He waved back and forced a smile as Barnholdt also climbed down from the truck.

Mr. Weingard opened the door, his daughter Emily hiding demurely behind him. Devon shoved past both and charged down the stairs, his tiny legs shockingly coordinated for a child of his age. He stormed a leaf pile, diving into it with a gusto that sent oak leaves spiraling in all directions. The father called enthusiastically, “Hi there, neighbors!”

“Howdy, Mike,” Barnholdt said, clearly trying to sound cheerful. “Would it be all right if we talked with you and your wife for a bit?”

“Sure.” Weingard held the screen door open, then addressed his daughter, “Emmy, why don’t you and Devon finish destroying my morning’s work while I talk to Mr. Barnholdt and Mr. Holcomb.”

Emily smiled shyly. “Excuse me,” she said politely, starting down the stairs to join her rambunctious brother.

Holcomb could not help smiling at the little blonde as she tripped quietly down the stairs in her pink shorts and plastic Dora sandals. A family did not seem part of his future, but he most missed the possibility when he thought about having a sweet daughter to call him “daddy.” He would spend hours pushing her on a swing set made with his own hands, would let her gather eggs from her little, banty flock while he worked on the tractor. They would both laugh when he affectionately touched her nose, leaving a smudge of grease. Her mother would look on with a long grin stretching her face, shaking her head at their antics. He already knew he would name her Elizabeth, after the grandmother she would never meet. The two farmers came up the stairs, work boots clomping hollowly against wood. Each stepped around Weingard, who still held the door open, to join Mrs. Weingard on the tidy, little porch. A picnic table took up most of the space. Mrs. Weingard had gathered the dirty dishes, but a plate of hot dogs in buns still sat in the middle of the table. She gestured toward them. “Please, help yourselves. I can get some plates.”

“Don’t trouble yourself, ma’am,” Barnholdt said for both of them. Holcomb wished he had spoken first. He had had nothing to eat since breakfast. Now that his stomach had settled, the hot dogs, brown with

black grill marks, looked nearly irresistible. “We have something important to talk to you about that will sound kind of off the wall.”

Holcomb reluctantly took his gaze from the food to look squarely at Mrs. Weingard. “Cait, Mike, you’re going to think I’m loony for saying this, but . . .” He tried to gauge the woman’s reaction. “I know for a fact that Devon is a . . . a . . .”

Mrs. Weingard closed her eyes with a deep sigh. “What did he do this time?”

All friendliness left her husband’s face. “A what? What are you about to call my son?”

Barnholdt stopped Holcomb with a gesture. “Mike, we have nothing against Devon. We’re not trying to insult him or you. We just got hold of some information about him that might help explain a few things.”

Mrs. Weingard took her husband’s arm. “Let them talk, Mike. The doctors can’t figure it out.”

Weingard was a tall man, thinner than the two burly farmers, his hair nearly black and his eyes a pale blue. A mechanic, he had hands as crusty and calloused as theirs. His face flushed, and he spoke through gritted teeth. “What can they possibly know that hasn’t already been considered?”

Mrs. Weingard apologized for her husband. “We’ve been through a lot with Devon. The doctor said his red hair could come from buried genes on both sides, though neither of us could think of any redheads—”

“Cait,” Weingard hissed. “They don’t need to know our—”

She continued as if he had not spoken. “—but two light-eyed people can’t make a dark-eyed baby, so they tested Mike and—”

“Cait!” Weingard snapped. “This isn’t something—”

Holcomb knew what had to come next. “He isn’t the father.”

“The *biological* father,” Weingard said in a flat tone that betrayed his anger. “I *am* Devon’s father.”

Mrs. Weingard did not allow the exchange to derail her explanation. She clearly had waited a long time to unburden herself from this story. “But I knew I had never, would never cheat—”

“You’re not the biological mother either,” Barnholdt finished.

As the bombshell dropped, Holcomb seized the moment to grab a hot dog.

Finally, Mrs. Weingard lost her momentum. “How . . . how could you possibly . . . know? It seems our baby was switched at birth.”

Barnholdt looked at Holcomb, clearly expecting him to explain. After all, he was the one to whom the sprite gave the information.

Caught squeezing a line of mustard onto his purloined hot dog, Holcomb glanced around the table. “He’s a changeling.”

“A what?” both Weingards said together.

“A changeling.” Holcomb put down the mustard and clutched the hot dog in one beefy hand. Dirt rimed the lines of his palm. “As I understand it, magical creatures exchange a monster for a human baby.”

Weingard slammed his fist on the table so hard it startled Holcomb. He dropped his hot dog, and it fell from the bun, smearing a yellow line across the table. “My son is not a monster!”

Barnholdt gave Holcomb a hard glare. “He didn’t mean a monster, Mike, really. He just picked a poor word to describe a . . . a . . . mischievous . . . um . . . being.”

The farmers had looked up changeling in the dictionary together, and Holcomb distinctly remembered the word “monster.” He glanced at his hot dog, but it seemed uncouth, under the circumstances, to worry about food.

Mrs. Weingard grabbed her husband’s arm so tightly that she bunched wrinkles into his shirt. “Mike, that would explain everything.”

Silence followed her proclamation.

She continued, “The MRIs, the chromosome studies. Everything!”

When no one spoke for several moments, Holcomb quietly gathered his hot dog and bun. Taking a napkin, he started cleaning up the mess.

Weingard finally broke the hush. “But this is crazy, Cait. Can’t you see that?”

“What I see, Michael Weingard, is answers to questions that previously had none.”

Weingard threw up his hands. “*Crazy* answers, yes. Any difficult situation could be explained by the

supernatural, but doesn't it make sense to exhaust all of the scientific possibilities first?"

Mrs. Weingard finally raised her voice. "Haven't we done that already? Medical science can't explain this, and we're not blood related to any other child born at Mercy Hospital around the same time as Devon."

Holcomb took a bite of the hot dog. The cold meat tasted of charcoal and wood, but it made his gut growl for more.

Weingard stared at his wife with catlike intensity. "So you're just going to believe that evil spirits stole our baby and replaced him with a monster?"

"With a . . . mischievous being," Mrs. Weingard corrected, using Barnholdt's softened description.

As if suddenly remembering they had an audience, Weingard turned his attention to Holcomb. "And how do you know this?"

Holcomb deliberately took another bite of the hot dog while he considered. He needed time to properly word his reply. But, the food ran out too soon, and he was forced to say the only thing he could. "A sprite told me."

"A sprite," Weingard repeated incredulously. "A sprite told you."

"Yes," Holcomb said, wiping his mouth on his sleeve. "I'm not crazy, Mike. I know what I saw and what I heard." An idea came to him and he spoke it before fully exploring it. "Now, you can help us out and possibly get your real son back. Or you can call us insane and lose him forever."

Every eye went to Holcomb. Even Barnholdt stared. They had never discussed the idea that they might recover the baby. The dictionary said nothing about what creatures of Faery do with the human babies they take in trade for their changelings. For all he knew, they might have killed and eaten it already.

Adding more difficult chores to an already impossible task seemed utter madness. Yet he could think of nothing that had happened that day that would not already qualify.

Mrs. Weingard said softly, "Count me in."

Weingard looked stricken. "In what?"

"In whatever it takes to recover our natural-born son."

Two days of library and Internet research brought Kyle a pounding headache. He leaned back in the library's plush rolling chair and rubbed his temples. He could find nothing definitive. Stories of fey creatures came from every part of the world. Each called them something different: elves, dwarves, fairies, pixies, nixies, naiads, dryads, ogres, bugbears. The list went on, seemingly without end. It was all conjecture, all stories, all explanations for reality that did not, at the time, have an understandable cause. The changeling stories haunted him. Most involved severely beating, drowning, or burning the changelings in the hope that their cries would bring back the devil, demon, or nixie to return the human child for her own. He hoped the Weingards would not resort to any of these methods, assuming they discovered the same sources he did.

Most of the stories seemed like explanations for congenital or environmental conditions that ancient peoples did not understand. Infants with large heads and coarse features might have connective tissue or chromosomal disorders. Autism, cerebral palsy, muscular dystrophy, cystic fibrosis. Surely, all of these syndromes existed throughout history, and people created stories to tease logic from the baffling. What better way to explain the loss of the perfect baby imagined by parents in-utero than that a hill dwarf had replaced it with one of her own?

It took force of will to look at these myths as truths, to thrust aside the mind-set of an ancient peasant seeking answers to find the reality of a sprite on his tractor. The tales contradicted one another, even within the same mythological context, even within the same source. And none of them placed the entrance to Faery in a farmer's field in Iowa. In fact, the stories all seemed older than America.

Holcomb lowered his head. He had read enough and gleaned very little. He only hoped the others' searches had proven more fruitful than his own.

They met at the tree line dividing the southern edge of Kyle Holcomb's land from Barnholdt's. The Weingards had chosen the location without explanation, and the two farmers waited anxiously for the

couple. Dressed in his best-fitting Carhart overalls, clutching his favorite deer rifle, Holcomb crouched beside his fellow farmer. "Do you think they'll give us a chance to talk?"

Barnholdt lit a cigarette. "I reckon so. I mean, they tried to talk to us three or four times and didn't give an ultimatum till they dug up one who speaks our language." He stuck the cigarette between his lips.

Holcomb moved upwind. He hated the smell of smoke, and imagined it was what had driven Mrs. Barnholdt to divorce. "We don't know that for sure."

"What d'ya mean?" Smoke dribbled from Barnholdt's mouth with each syllable.

"Who knows what the others said or tried to say?"

"Yeah. But they didn't attack, did they?"

"No," Holcomb had to admit. "They didn't attack." Nervously, he checked the chamber and the safety.

Barnholdt took another puff. "What's that for?"

"The hunting rifle?"

"Yeah."

Holcomb gave his neighbor a look to which he had grown accustomed over the past several months.

"Did you forget a magical creature that can turn tractors to life threatened us?"

Barnholdt blew out a plume of smoke. "So what's the gun gonna do, huh? Get turned to a snake and bite us?"

The other farmer had a good point, but Holcomb felt safer with it in his hands. The technology might catch the creatures of Faery off their guard and gain him a few seconds in a brawl. With or without it, the entire situation seemed hopeless. What chance did four regular folks have against an entire army of fantastical creatures, with inhuman strength and magic at their disposal? Again, he tried to imagine the methods of their enemies, ignorance further enlarging the task. There was no possible way to know what powers these creatures might have. They might call down lightning or fire from the sky, perhaps the sun or moon itself. They could hurl mighty goutts of ice or rock. They could fry a man's blood from the inside out. Perhaps they had dragons with breath like a nuclear explosion or magical bombs that could level all three of their chosen Iowa counties with a word. "We should have pleaded with the governor. Got him to call in the National Guard."

"Yeah, right." Barnholdt blew smoke out his nose this time, the cigarette burning in his grip. "That would've worked."

"We could have tried." Holcomb knew Barnholdt was right but clung to the possibility from fear. "*We could have tried.*"

The appearance of the Weingards walking toward them saved Barnholdt from a reply. He dropped his cigarette and crushed it into the dirt. "They've got a child with them."

Holcomb looked more closely, only then noticing the small figure waddling at their side. "It's Devon."

"That's odd. Why would they bring a child—?"

The answer came to both men at once, though Holcomb gave it voice, "They're going to try to exchange him."

"You think?"

"Don't you?"

Barnholdt bobbed his head as the trio drew within earshot. "But you think they told *him*?"

Devon pointed to a spot several yards to Holcomb's left, and the family veered toward it. "This way," Mr. Weingard said.

Holcomb studied the boy. Gel plastered his brilliant, red locks neatly to his head. He wore a clean, collared shirt, striped, and a pair of dark blue dress slacks. The impish twinkle that usually filled his dark eyes had gone out, replaced by a more mature light. The child had clearly changed. Caught staring, Holcomb smiled gently. "Hi, Devon."

To his surprise, the normally taciturn boy replied, "Hi, Mr. Holcomb."

Holcomb jerked his head to Mrs. Weingard, who smiled.

"When we did our research on-line, we discovered a common theme about changelings. If you boil water or beer in egg shells, it makes them talk."

Barnholdt recovered first. He gave the boy a genuine smile. "Hey, Devon. So you can talk now?"

“Actually, Mr. Barnholdt,” Devon said in a voice like a rusty spigot, “I’ve been able to talk for a very long time.”

Under ordinary circumstances, Holcomb might have laughed. *How long is a very long time to a one-year-old boy?* “I see,” he said.

“And I know where the entrance is to Faery.”

Holcomb’s nostrils flared. Still clutching the rifle, he pointed to the same place Devon had indicated earlier.

Mr. Weingard nodded.

Holcomb wondered how much else the Weingards had found out about changelings. Perhaps they planned to beat or burn or drown the boy right here, where his original parents might take him back in exchange for the human baby. He bit his lip, hoping Devon would not pay the biggest price for the sins of Faery. The boy had his problems, but few in this world deserved actual torture.

“Are you ready?” Devon asked.

Mr. Weingard looked around the group. Holcomb nearly asked, “For what?”—but before he could, Weingard gave his son a gesture.

Devon pursed his toddler lips and made a piercing sound like nothing Holcomb had ever heard before. It echoed across the open fields and seemed to stretch to the horizon.

The sprite appeared suddenly from the indicated spot in the tree line. Her long, blue hair fell in waves to her waist. Her belt now consisted of woven, multicolored leaves. She looked the four adults over, then stated, “You’re still here.”

“We have another day,” Holcomb reminded her.

Mrs. Weingard added, “And we’re not leaving without our baby.”

“Your baby?” The sprite’s pale gaze leaped around the gathering to land on Devon. “Ah, of course. I suppose it’s only fair to trade you back your young one.”

“No,” Mr. Weingard said with the same force his fist had displayed on the table. “You don’t understand. We aren’t giving up Devon either.”

The sprite stared, her canted eyes growing into the shape and size of Brazil nuts. “You mean . . . you want to keep . . . the changeling, too?”

“His name is Devon,” Weingard said. “And he is our son.”

Holcomb could scarcely believe what was happening. He had once had control of the situation, only to surrender it to a family whose personal strife apparently drove them to suicide. He looked at the sprite, and a sudden understanding gripped him. These creatures of Faery were immortal. They could not die of age, but legend suggested they could be killed. Creatures accustomed to living for all eternity, who took millennia to substantially reproduce, would have to fear death more than any mortal. To kill one meant not a waste of decades but potentially of millions of years. His hand tightened on the rifle, and he raised it cautiously.

The sprite clearly took no notice. “You know this creature is a changeling, yet you still call him son?”

Tears filled Mrs. Weingard’s eyes. “We do not just call him son. He *is* our son. We love him as much as any parent can ever love a child, and that love is never bounded. It is a forever love, without conditions. His biology, his past, his future, do not matter. Devon is our son. And so is the baby boy you exchanged for him.”

Holcomb now understood why the creatures of Faery had given the humans so many chances. Fairies, elves, and pixies thought little of humans, whose short lives passed like moments to the immortals. To chase them off of property meant nothing, like poisoning mosquitoes for the comfort of a midnight party. It might only take the death of one creature of Faery to drive the point home. Humans could and would fight back. Was the life of even one immortal worth the battle? Holcomb took aim.

The sprite continued to glance wildly between the Weingards, including Devon. “And you, changeling? You wish to stay with these humans?”

The little boy cleared his throat and spoke in plain English. “They do love me, despite what I am and what I’ve done. They have sacrificed their joy and time for me, have done everything possible to make my life and my future happy despite my shortcomings, of which I have many.”

Holcomb's hands shook. Such long words had emerged from the mouth of a toddler. A toddler who was not quite, perhaps not at all, human.

Devon continued, "Love of that intensity, of that caliber, is something a creature of Faery rarely experiences."

The rifle grew heavy in Holcomb's hands. He could fire at any time, but he needed to hear the end of the exchange first.

"You . . ." The sprite's face became a wrinkled mask of confusion. "If you stayed, you would become . . . mortal." She pronounced the last word with such distaste, it sounded like a curse. "Is that . . . what you want?"

Every eye went to Devon. Even Kyle Holcomb gave up his sighting to see the changeling's reaction.

"Better a life with the beauty and grandeur of a shooting star than an eternity of steady yearning for those golden moments only a mortal can experience. Without sorrow, there is no joy. Without pain, no healing. So, too, without death, one can never truly live. I would not trade this trueness of spirit, this highest evolution of love, even for immortality."

For several moments, no one moved or spoke. Holcomb wondered if their minds went in the same direction as his own. For humans, immortality could only be a forever of the life they knew.

Contemplation of his own death terrified him. To imagine that something of great beauty arose from that fear, to see eternal life as the dull existence of rocks and time, to know that these immortal beings knew little of love and sacrifice, of heroism and bravery, floored him.

"Come with me, changeling," the sprite said softly, her expression every bit as touched as the humans'.

"The king will wish to speak with you."

"No!" Mrs. Weingard grabbed her son and wrapped him into an unbreakable embrace.

Mr. Weingard stepped between the pair and the sprite. "No," he repeated, more softly but with equal force. "You will not have him."

Devon's muffled voice held a note of joy despite the tenseness of the situation. "They won't keep me, Mommy. Daddy. I'll come back, but I have to go."

Holcomb wondered whether the boy's excitement stemmed from the opportunity to teach or to rejoin the magical beings who had spawned him. The rifle felt like a lead weight in his arms, nearly forgotten. To his surprise, Mrs. Weingard released Devon as soon as the words left his mouth.

As Devon walked past him, Mr. Weingard reached to grab him, stopped by his wife's gentle touch on his shoulder. "If you love something," she said so softly that Holcomb could barely hear, "let it go." Tears blurred her eyes to pools of emerald.

As the humans watched the sprite and changeling disappear into the tree line, Mrs. Weingard collapsed, wailing. Her husband knelt at her side, holding, rocking, whispering encouragements.

Barnholdt turned to Holcomb, looking equally lost. "So what about the gun?" He inclined his head toward the rifle again. "Have you decided what you're going to do with it?"

Holcomb lowered the barrel, suffering the sting of blood returning to his arms. Glad to discuss a subject other than the family's pain, he explained. "Immortals aren't used to death like we are. I thought if one got killed, they might decide war's not such a great idea."

Barnholdt nodded thoughtfully. "Well, if you're gonna do it, I'd say to get this king of theirs, if you can."

"Yeah." Holcomb bobbed his head in rhythm, no longer certain he could pull the trigger. He had shot his share of raccoons, possums, and skunks; more than 80 percent of the ones in their area were rabid. He had even done in a swamp rattler that had dared cross onto his property. Shooting the sprite, or any being so like a human, seemed too much like murder.

The sprite returned at the side of a creature who closely resembled a skinny, fine-boned man. He shared the sprite's canted eyes, though his were a bright red-orange. He had flat-brown hair that hung in wisps to his shoulders, and delicately pointed ears stabbed through the cascade. Though he bore no wrinkles or gray hairs, he still carried an aura of great age. The sprite made a grand gesture toward her new companion. "This is King . . ." She followed with strange clicking noises that apparently comprised his name.

Holcomb supposed he ought to bow, though he found himself standing frozen, staring. Barnholdt reacted

exactly as he did, and the Weingards managed only to decrease the volume of their grief.

The king spoke in a fluid singsong that sounded more like music. The sprite translated. "He says that centuries have passed since the folk of Faery have walked among men."

The king said more, the sprite passing along his words, "In the past, humans have treated us badly. They warded us away with herbs and invoked religious customs and gestures. They slaughtered us in horrific ways, with silver knives, wooden stakes, or fiery pyres. They beat or boiled our changelings to make us rescue what they considered monsters and replace them with the babies they had lost."

Monsters. The words stuck with Holcomb, the same one he had read in the dictionary.

Barnholdt nudged him in the ribs so suddenly that Holcomb nearly dropped the gun. His neighbor jerked his head toward the king.

He wants me to shoot, Holcomb realized, but he was too interested in what the king had to say to obey. Yet.

More translated speech followed, the creatures apparently oblivious to the farmers' exchange. "Humans have changed, and it is finally time that we do the same. Tolerance has grown beyond measure."

Although some humans would disagree, Holcomb knew the words for fact. People of varying colors and faiths who once despised or mistrusted one another now lived, not only in the same cities, but in the same homes as family. Despite persistent cries of racism, sexism, and bigotry, the truth was that the world had clearly and strongly changed for the better, even just over the last half century.

"You have learned to love our children as your own. You made no attempt to harm us, even as we threatened you."

Holcomb's face flushed, and he hastily lowered the rifle's butt to the ground, glad he had hesitated for so long. Had he killed the sprite or the king, an unwinnable war would, in fact, have become inevitable.

"If you can shower this kind of unmistakable love upon us, it seems that we can, once again, interact with at least some of you. Since we can safely come and go from your world, we no longer need to take over a part of it." The king made a flourishing gesture as the sprite formed the appropriate, accompanying words. "We declare this skirmish over before it begins."

With those words, the sprite and the king disappeared without fanfare or smoke, revealing the two small figures standing behind them. Devon held the hand of a thin, blond boy with skin so pale it looked like milk. Before either managed a single step, they found themselves enwrapped in their parents' arms: Mrs. Weingard clutching the new toddler and Mr. Weingard embracing Devon with the same exuberance. The farmers looked at one another. And smiled.

No longer worried for dragons' fiery breathes, for giants stomping cities to splinters, for fairies transforming army tanks into lumbering monsters, Holcomb turned his thoughts to the joy of discovering pixies in the woods and sprites in the treetops. He wondered how the populace would take to these new-found neighbors and hoped the world would handle the fey creatures better than he had. He looked across his fields, at the harvested cornstalks standing like broken soldiers, and nothing seemed less important than working. As the Weingards headed home, Holcomb glanced at his other neighbor. "So, Chris. Is that *National Treasure* movie still playing?"

Barnholdt pulled the pack of Marlboros out of his pocket, stared at it, then returned it without removing a cigarette. Usually, tense situation made a man more prone to smoke, but Barnholdt clearly did not see this as a day for ordinary behavior either. "Naw, it's long gone. But I bet we can find something else interesting at the Coral 1, if you can afford to take off another day."

"I can," Holcomb said, not bothering to consider whether or not he spoke the truth. Regardless of the weather, despite whatever required doing, he needed some time off the farm. "I'll meet you in an hour. I've got this sudden hankering to find a wife and start a family." He looked longingly after the Weingards, who fairly skipped across the field. "Maybe, just maybe, today's my lucky day."

"Graced by the King of Faery," Barnholdt said, smiling, "I think we can count on it."