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The Changeling

By Jenna Franklin

Cait picked her way through the bracken and heather till she reached the hill's bottom, then followed her own trail home. Rain clung to the air, leaving a skirt of mist to waver in the forest's sprawling roots.

She heard the screams before she saw home. Each one like demons sharpening blades against rocks. Her feet pounded earth, but when she reached the threshold she couldn't enter. Blood and sweat soured the place.

"Cait!" Eithne said, "Get ye inside and close the door before ye let in the rest of them."

Her mother was spread across the bed naked. Her belly reared up from the mess of sheets like a seal's silky head erupting from undulant depths. Eithne pushed her hands in between the great swollen legs, elbows working furiously. Cait couldn't watch. She couldn't think. She stumbled to the hearth and grasped the moist, blackened stones, wishing she had not run home, wishing she had stayed in the golden heather.

She covered her eyes. Births were always grueling, but never so horrible as this time. Her mother rocked and roared on the bed, there was a fleshy smacking sound, and then a baby's fleeting cry. Cait lifted her head from her hands to see Eithne shroud the baby in a blanket and set it on the table.

"Is she well?" Cait asked, refusing to look at her mother. She knew she would look like a rabbit's bladder, pressed and emptied.

"Aye," Eithne said. "I think so."

Cait walked over to the baby who wasn't crying at all, and Eithne was helping mother. Its lack of movement was surprising. Cait had seen her mother's other newborn babies, the ones that came after her but died a few days later.

She pulled aside the flap of cloth covering his face and screamed. Instead of a child rosy from crying, the baby boy was as green as pale ferns.

“Lord, child!” Eithne grabbed Cait’s arm and wrenched her away from the table. “Ye can’t help it. “

She turned back to mother. “Don’t touch it, Cait. Go outside.”

Cait didn’t move. She couldn’t stop staring at her brother’s nose, already thin and straight like her father’s had been.

“Ye mean, he’s” Now Cait understood. Why this birth had been so hard for mother. Why it took so long. Why Eithne had told her to close the door before letting any more of them in.

“Make yourself useful or get ye gone,” Eithne said. “Ye do no good by staying here.”

Cait gave the green baby a last agonizing look, then ran from the house before her mind had time to tell her feet not to move. The hills swallowed her and spat her out at the loch’s edge. This place could do that, take you in so that you didn’t know which way was east and which west, then leave you somewhere you never meant to head to. These hills had devoured Cait’s father in that way, leaving him dead on Culloden battlefield in naught but his thick skin.

Cait supposed that was part of the danger her people always talked about. A danger she’d never truly encountered until this day. Changelings were common enough. The fairies were always playing tricks on people. They’d steal food and trick travelers into getting lost. But, feared above all, was when a fairy mother stole a human baby and left her ugly child in their place. Cait had never been able to understand that; it just didn’t make sense. She would certainly never give her baby to somebody else.

Cait leaned back against a boulder to watch the little curls of water fold into the mud at the shore. Thin green plants waved at her from beneath the surface. He was not ugly like most fairy babies. He was only green. That couldn’t be so bad. Perhaps he would grow out of it like saplings grow strong bark over their soft limbs. That little girl at the market in Inverness last summer, she’d had a green to her. Eyes like yellow siskin.

When Cait’s stomach roared too loudly to ignore and the sun blazed red across the loch, she headed home. She found

her basket and re-collected the herbs from where she had dropped them earlier. The stinging nettle and ginger would help Eithne fight mother's pain. The smell wasn't so bad when she returned. She walked past Eithne sitting on the hearth to where mother slept wrapped in blankets. Damp springs of holly-berry hair framed her slackened face. Cait was relieved to see that she no longer hurt.

"Where's the wee thing?" Cait asked Eithne, setting down her basket and looking around the house.

"Gone for now, but he'll be back."

"What do ye mean?" Cait said as a cold prickling grazed her neck, "He's a babe, he can't go out by himself."

"Ye should understand these things, Cait. This is how it happens. Ye can't get attached."

"But, he's not ugly. He's only green!"

"Cait, hush. Ye'll wake up your mother."

"Did ye tell her?"

Eithne's eyes seemed to cloud with something like mercy, but Cait was unwilling to see anything but frozen will within them. "Aye, she asked me to. It's the only way. If the creature's true mother comes for it, she'll bring back your brother. She'll switch them back."

Cait shook her head, thinking of her brother's delicate nose and quiet stare. She couldn't believe that. "He's so tiny. Somethin' will eat him. The owls and wolves . . ."

Eithne reached out a hand and moved toward Cait. Cait wrenched through her ice shackles and stepped toward the door, glaring as hard as she could at Eithne, believing the devil's hate itself to ooze from her burning eyes.

Eithne's face was wooden, carved into that hateful, solemn mask that said she was ready to do what she must . . . what women in these hills had always been prepared to do.

"It isn't your brother," she said, "ye must agree. A good woman like your mother could never have given birth to a monster."

"He is not a monster!" Cait yelled. "He's going to die out there!"

A moan from mother stopped Eithne from lunging at

Cait. Eithne got to mother first and swiped a bony hand across the fresh dew beading upon her forehead.

“Ye sure she’s well?” Cait asked, leaning over her mother’s pale face. Her whole countenance was a glaring moonbeam, a shining whiteness that throttled the dark.

“She needs rest.”

“Is she dying?” Cait asked, fighting the rising lump in her throat. “Like father, Eithne, is she goin’ now?”

Eithne’s jaw tightened. “Stop askin’ silly questions. Go outside.”

“I will not.” Cait didn’t know where this rage came from but it boiled hot and heavy in her chest.

Eithne’s eyes met Cait’s and she didn’t have to say anything. Cait understood.

“Birthin’ a fairy baby is dangerous,” Eithne said.

The slight tremor in her voice only made Cait angrier.

“He’s my brother,” Cait said, opening the door and stepping outside, “not a fairy. And he, at least, is goin’ to survive.” She slammed the door, ignoring Eithne’s shouts, and fell into the hills. She didn’t want to think about mother. Mother could not have told that horrible midwife to leave Cait’s only baby brother in the Highlands with nobody to protect him.

Thorns and gnarled twigs tore through her skirt and stockings as she ran. Darkness seeped into the forest, trickling down through the canopy to cast fingers of shadow across a once familiar landscape. Cait stopped running, knowing that to hunt blind was useless. Hugging shaking arms around her stomach, she did her best to push away the terrible thoughts. Mother lying dead in darkness. Mother not coming back, a slippery seal sliding away through the water. Away from Cait. And her brother, where was he? Cait breached a hill and spied orange, dancing dots in the distance. The faint drone of a hunting horn wailed. Why would the clan be hunting now?

She trudged on. Guilt nagged her, begging her to turn back. Get home. Maybe mother isn’t dead yet. Get ye home now.

“No,” Cait screamed at the owl who swooped overhead, “She needs me no more.”

As the ghostly bird faded into shadow, Cait heard the feeble whimpers of a baby. She found him on the next hilltop where the lack of thick bush offered no shelter from the wind. She pressed his little body into her chest, praying that her throbbing heart would warm his blood.

She sat at the top of the hill and faced the round winds, wanting to feel everything on her body and nothing within it. She knew well the touch and smell of her land, but she knew not the pain and strangling uncertainty of life. But they were one in the same. Her people knew that.

“Ye best be movin’ on,” a voice said.

Cait scrambled to her feet, clutching her brother. A grey-haired woman with skin like beaten hides was watching her.

“That lady, ye ken. She’s got the whole village after ye about that child ye’re holdin’. Ye wouldn’t want to be here when they arrive.”

With a lurch like falling timber, Cait realized then what the clan was hunting. They were after her. Her blood and the blood of her brother.

“You’re in a bad way now,” the woman grunted, leaning against an oak with hands on her hips. “There’s talk of witchcraft.”

“Who?” Cait asked.

The woman raised a thick, brooding eyebrow. “You, of course. Messin’ with a changeling is a sure sign of your demon ways.”

Cait stood rooted, watching the woman pick at a scab on her bristling chin.

“They. . . they think I’m a witch?”

“Aye.” The woman scooped the scab into her long fingernail and flicked it away.

Cait pressed back the wisps of blond hair the wind had tugged from beneath her head cloth and swallowed hard.

“What should I do?”

The woman sighed deep and looked her over.

Men’s voices loomed from the woods below. Feeling frantic, Cait rushed to the hill’s crest and looked down. Patch-

work kilts and flaming heads of hair pushed through the undergrowth, rising as a fiery creature- ancient and powerful- from the quaking depths below. They were armed and Cait's father had taught her that armed men were always dangerous.

Ice plummeted in Cait's chest. The time to run had come. She looked back at the old woman who was studying her with eyes that swallowed.

"Ye come with me." She beckoned a bony hand and Cait followed her quickly down the hill, away from her people. Would they burn her alive? She was only fourteen, but worse things happened. Perhaps they'd bind her hands and toss her into the loch to see if she'd float. A shudder of dread rattled her. No woman - witch or no- survived that test. And then a horrible possibility came to her. Was she a witch? Wasn't it possible? She shook her head. She had no scars. She was pure, so the devil had no power over her. Yet she had just committed a sin, stolen a baby. What made her do that? She looked down at her brother's nose, still flecked with blood from her mother's hot belly.

The ominous reheat of the hunting horn bellowed through the woods and the old woman quickened her pace, a grim determination visible in the way she plunged through the wild.

"What's your name?" Cait asked, hoisting her baby brother higher onto her hip. He was getting heavy, but Cait didn't dare slow down. The howls of hungry men dogged their step.

"Daracha."

"Why've I never seen ye before? Ye don't go into the village?"

"They don't want my company."

"Why?"

Daracha shrugged, thrusting aside a patch of fern in her path.

Cait's stomach let out a thunderous growl. Daracha looked back at her with a shrewd frown, then gave a low guttural "mmph."

Cait's nerves began to lessen once the voices of men died away. The woods were silent and got even quieter as the

light dissipated. She watched the stars emerge one by one to join the moon in a yawning blue sky.

Daracha turned abruptly into a thicket of heather. Cait shielded the baby's body, taking the thorns into her own flesh. On the other side was small glen where a stone hut nested, smoke rising in thin rivulets from its crooked chimney. A herd of goats lay in a moon-washed huddle nearby.

Cait followed Daracha into the house and had to restrain herself from collapsing into a chair by the glowing hearth. Bundles of herbs and grasses hung from the ceiling. A cabinet of dishes stood nestled between the hearth and a table strewn with bottles, little boxes, and other utensils. A large bed sat in the opposite corner. Daracha nudged Cait into a chair and she adjusted the baby into her lap.

"Does he still need bathed?" Daracha asked, stooping over the hearth and stirring something in a pot suspended over the fire.

"Aye," Cait said.

Daracha left the hut and returned with a bucket of water. In seconds, she had shoved a bowl of steaming stew into Cait's hands. Cait gobbled it down, not caring that it burned her mouth. She minded after all when Daracha gave her hard bread crust and her mouth was too raw to chew it.

"Ye shoulna eaten so fast, but I expect ye were hungry."

"I was. I think . . . I think the baby will be hungry too, but I dinna know what to give him as I've no milk."

Daracha nodded. She grabbed a wooden bowl and left the cabin. Her absence left the house in an unruly, animate solitude that caused Cait to shrink closer to the warm hearth. She hastily turned her attention to the baby, pulling back the blanket to see his pudgy green face. He was asleep. Exhausted, Cait knew, but alive. His breath came in faint drones, like the wheeze of muffled bagpipes on a wet wind.

The realization slowly dawned on Cait. She was alone with a motherless baby. She was motherless. She was alone. She and he were all that was left. Cait raised a finger and gently touched his face. Skin soft as moss. Green as moss. Maybe she was a witch. She'd acted out of spite and fury. She'd stolen this

baby. She'd left her dying mother without saying goodbye. Yet, she loved this thing in her arms, this green child. Witches could not love, could they?

Daracha returned with a bowl full of milk.

"Don't wake him yet. He'll be up and screamin' for a bit soon." She set the bowl next to the fire to keep it warm, then dropped into a chair and stared at Cait.

Cait stared back.

"Thanks," she said.

"I couldn't leave ye, could I?" Daracha grunted, "Not with the child and the men after ye. Where are ye from?"

"Near where ye found me. Inverness is a few miles away."

"That's not your child," she said, lifting a twisted finger to point at the baby sleeping in Cait's arms.

"My mother's."

"Thought so. Well, and where is she?"

Cait shook her head.

Daracha nodded. "Well, that's life."

A few moments passed in which Cait stared into the fire, ashamed and angry that the tears seemed determined to spill out of her.

"He isn't a changeling," she said finally, glad to hear a steady voice from her numb lips.

"They never are."

"But he is green."

"We'll, there'd have to be somethin' about him that wasn't right. He's a boy baby. Can I see him?"

Cait handed over the bundle and Daracha let out a low whistle. "Green as spring in a basket."

"Is he sick or just . . . like that?"

"Aye, he's a bit sick, I've seen it before."

"What can we do for him?"

"Ye can't do anythin', especially in the state you're in. Why don't ye rest and I'll care for the wee bairn."

"I can't do that," Cait said, getting to her feet despite the heaviness in her eyes and pain in her feet.

Daracha gave Cait a piercing glare. "What's yer name,

lass?”

“Caitriona.”

“And his?”

“He doesn’t have one yet.”

“Well, ye brood on that while I fix him up.”

“I’ll watch.”

Daracha grunted. Cait joined Daracha at the table where she lay the baby down and started rummaging in the cabinet. Cait was surprised when Daracha pulled out a carrot.

“What’re ye goin’ to do with that?”

“Boil it in the milk,” she said, grabbing a small metal instrument with tiny holes in it. “It’ll do fine.”

She rubbed the carrot across the holes, peeling off little scraps of bright orange. She then scooped the bits into a kettle and poured the milk in after.

“Why carrots?”

Daracha let out a laugh so rough and cracked that it sounded as if it must have risen from very deep down and lost vitality on the journey up. “Why anythin’?” she asked.

She hung the kettle over the fire so the juice would cook into the milk.

“Will he drink it?” Cait asked.

“Aye, he should, though babes like him don’t like to eat much for their first few weeks. You’ll have to work with him. Now, will ye sleep? I can bathe him.”

“No, I want to.”

Cait gently removed the blanket in the creases of which dried stains stuck like spider webs. Her brother’s tiny green body was cloaked in blood. With trembling fingers, Cait siphoned off that which her mother had left behind. She scraped the redness into her fingernails, relishing the gritty texture, and lowered the baby into the bucket of warm water. As his body submerged, his yellow eyes opened in surprise. Cait kissed his nose and said that everything would be all right, that she would always take care of him. Daracha hovered near the table, but Cait ignored her until she was offered a clean blanket to wrap him in.

Cait fell asleep on the rug next to the hearth, her brother

tucked neatly against her chest. The next morning, she awoke to find his eyes already open. He must have been hungry, but he didn't cry. Cait retrieved the kettle of milk, scooped out the carrot bits, and set the baby in her lap. She dipped a cloth into the kettle and nudged it close to the baby's mouth. He looked at it, then back at Cait.

"Do ye no' want to eat at all?"

"I told ye he wouldna feed without strong encouragement," Daracha said, stomping into the house and setting three brown eggs on the table. "Make him."

Cait dipped the cloth back into the kettle and brought it to the baby's mouth, sticking a finger between his supple lips to make them open. Reluctantly, he swallowed a few drops. She continued to pester him until nearly half the kettle was gone, then joined Daracha to eat a breakfast of boiled eggs and bread.

The baby sat still as a rock, ravenous yellow eyes surveying them as they ate.

"I don't think I'm a witch," Cait said.

"Is that so?"

"Aye."

Daracha gave the baby a wink and energetic nod. "Well, I suppose that's good news, eh?"

"I've named him," Cait said.

"And?"

"Donald," Cait said, feeling the warmth of the name for the first time.

"Like MacDonald, then?" Daracha said, raising an eyebrow.

"Aye. He watches us, acts as if he rules the whole world."

Daracha looked at the staring creature thoughtfully.

"That he does."