

THE WITCHING HOUR

Prologue

In a distant time, in a distant place, the great island of Twylia swam in the vast blue Sea of Wonders. It was a land of mountains and valleys, of green forests and silver rivers, of wide fertile fields and quiet lakes. To those who lived there, it was the whole of the world.

Some said that once, in the dawn of beginnings, there was a bridge of land that led to other worlds, and back again to Twylia. A bridge of rock and earth conjured by the great wizardgod Draco, and so destroyed by him when the world beyond became a battlefield of greed and sorrow. For on Twylia peace and prosperity prevailed for a thousand seasons.

But a time came when men—some men—sought more. When the more they sought was riches not earned, women not wooed, land not honored. And power, most of all—power not respected.

With this avarice, war and death, treachery and fear infected Twylia so that Draco, and those who came from him, wept to see the green fields stained with blood and the valleys echoing with the cries of starving children. He vowed, as he stood on the peak of Sorcerer's Mountain, in the light of the moon, on the night of the solstice, that peace would return to the world.

It would come through blood, and courage, through pure love and willing sacrifice. After dark days, the light would shine again. And so he cast his spell.

There will be one born in the darkest hour of the darkest night who will wield the power and bring the light. The Crown of Stars only one will wear to prove this be

my one true heir. Through blood and valor, through grief and joy, the True One shields what greed would destroy. But one seeks another,

woman to man, heart to heart, and hand to hand. So warrior, witch, daughter, and son, will complete what has begun. If there is strength and hearts are pure, this land of Twylia will endure.

The midnight hour will forge their power to free this world of tyranny. As I will, so mote it be.

From the peak of Sorcerer's Mountain, to the Valley of Faeries far below, across the fields and lakes and forests, the length and breadth of the island trembled from the might of the spell. Wind swirled and lightning spat.

So Draco sat atop his mountain and watched in glass and fire, in star and water as years passed.

As Draco bided, the world struggled. Good against evil, hope against despair. Magic dimmed in all but the secret places, and some grew to fear as much as covet it.

For a time, a short time, light bloomed again when good Queen Gwynn took the throne. The blood of the sorcerer ran in her veins, as did his love for the world. She was fair of face and of heart and ruled with a firm and loving hand beside her husband, the warrior-king Rhys. Together, they worked to heal the world, to rebuild the once grand City of Stars, to make the forests and fertile valleys safe again for the people of the world. Hope shimmered into light, but its opposite lurked, and plotted. The shadows of envy and greed slithered in the corners and the caves of Twylia. And those shadows, under the guise of peace and reconciliation, armed for war and treachery. They marched into the City of Stars on a cold December morning, led by Lorcan, whose mark was the snake. And he would be king at any cost.

Blood and smoke and death followed. Come the dawn, the valiant Rhys lay dead and many who had fought with him slaughtered. Of the queen there was no sign.

On the eve of the solstice, Lorcan proclaimed himself king of Twylia and celebrated in the great hall of the castle, where royal blood stained the stones.

Snow fell instreams of icy white. It chilled to the bone, but she didn't curse it. It would blind any who pursued, and cover the trail. The bitter white cold was a blessing.

Her heart was broken, and her body nearly done. But she could not, would not yield. Rhys spoke to her, a spirit whisper in her mind that urged her to be strong.

She did not weep for his death. The tears, a woman's tears for the man she loved, were frozen inside her. She did not cry out against the pain, though the pain was great. She was more than a woman. More even than a witch.

She was a queen.

Her mount plowed through the snow, surefooted and loyal. As loyal, she knew, as the man who rode in silence beside her. She would need the loyalty of the faithful Gwayne, for she knew what was coming, what she could not stop.

Though she hadn't seen her beloved Rhys's death, she knew the instant the usurper's sword had struck him down. So inside her cold and shattered heart she was prepared for what was to come. She bit back a moan as the pain tore through her, breathed fast through her teeth until it eased again and she could say what needed to be said to

Gwayne's silence.

"You could not have saved him. Nor could I." Tears stung her eyes and were viciously willed away. "Nor could I," she said again. "You served him, and me, by obeying his last order to you. I regret . . . I'm sorry that I made it difficult for you to do so."

"I am the queen's man, my lady."

She smiled a little. "And so you will continue to be. Your king thought of me. Even in the heat of battle, he thought of me, and our world. And our child." She pressed a hand to her heavy belly, to the life that beat there. "They will sing songs of him long after . . ." The pain ripped a gasp from her, had her fumbling the reins.

"My lady!" Gwayne grabbed her reins to steady her mount. "You cannot ride."

"I can. I will." She turned her head, and her eyes were a fierce and angry green in a face as pale as the snow. "Lorcan will not find my child. It's not time. It's not yet time. There will be a light." Exhausted, she slumped over the neck of her horse. "You must watch for the light, and guide us to it."

A light, Gwayne thought, as they trudged through the forest. Night was falling, and they were miles from the City of Stars, miles from any village or settlement he knew. Nothing lived in these woods but faeries and elves, and what good were they to a soldier and a woman—queen or no—who was great with child?

But here, into the Lost Forest, was where she'd ordered him to take her. She'd fought him, that was true enough, when he bowed to the king's command and dragged her from the castle. He had no choice but to lift her bodily onto the horse and whip her mount into a run.

They fled from the battle, from the stench of smoke and blood, from the screams of the dying. And royal command or not, he felt a coward for being alive while his king, his people, his friends were dead.

Still, he would guard the queen with his sword, with his shield, with his life. When she was safe, he would go back. He would slay the murderous Lorcan, or die trying.

There was murmuring under the wind, but it was nothing human, so didn't concern him. Magic didn't worry him. Men did. There may have been sorcery in Lorcan's ambush, but it was men who had carried it out. It had been lies as much as spells that had opened the doors for him, allowed him to walk into the castle under the flag of diplomacy.

And all the while his men—those as vicious as he, and others he'd gathered from the far edges of the world and paid to fight in his name,—had prepared for the slaughter.

Not war, Gwayne thought grimly. It wasn't war when men slit the throats of women, stabbed unarmed men in the back, killed and burned for the joy of it.

He glanced toward the queen. Her eyes stared straight ahead, but seemed blind to him. As if, he thought, she was in some sort of trance. He wondered why she hadn't seen the deception, the bloodbath to come. Though he was a queen's man in spite of her reputed powers rather than because of them, he figured sorcerer's blood should have some vision.

Maybe it had something to do with her condition. He didn't know anything about increasing women, either. He hadn't wed, and didn't intend to. He was a soldier, and in his mind a soldier had no need of wiving.

And what would he do when the time came for the babe? He prayed to every god who walked or flew that the queen would know what to do—in the way he assumed a woman knew of such matters.

The heir to Twylia born in a snowbank in the Lost Forest during a winter storm. It wasn't right. It wasn't seemly. And it terrified him more than any enemy's sword.

They must stop soon, for their mounts were near exhaustion. He would do what he could to make a shelter for her. Build a fire. Then, gods willing, things would . . . progress as nature demanded they progress.

When it was done, and they'd rested, he would get them— somehow—to the Valley of Secrets, and the settlement of women—some said enchantresses—who lived there.

The queen and the child would be safe, and he would go back—go back and drive his sword through Lorcan's throat.

He heard a sound—it was like music through the sougning wind. And looking to the west, he saw a glimmer of light through the stormy dark. "My lady! A light."

"Yes. Yes. Hurry. There isn't much time."

He pushed the mounts off the path, so they were forced to wade through the sea of snow, to wind around ice-sheathed trees toward that small flicker of light. The wind brought the smell of smoke to him, and his fingers gripped the hilt of his sword.

Ghosts slipped out of the dark, with arrows notched.

He counted six, and his soldier's sense warned him there were more. "We have no gold," he shouted. "We have nothing to steal."

"That's your misfortune." One of the ghosts stepped forward, and he saw it was a man. Only a man, and a Traveler at that. "Why do you journey here, and on such a night?"

Travelers might steal, Gwayne knew, for the sport of it. But they wouldn't attack unprovoked, and their reputation for hospitality was as

renowned as their love of the road.

"Our business is our own, and we want no trouble from you, but only some of the warmth of your fire. I have a lady with me. She is near her time. She needs women to help her with the birthing."

"Throw down your sword."

"I will not. Nor will I raise it against you unless you seek to harm my lady. Even a Traveler should honor and respect a woman about to give birth." The man grinned, and under his hood his face was brown as a nut and just as hard.

"Even a soldier should honor and respect men with arrows pointed at his heart."

"Enough." Gwynn threw her hood back, gathered her strength to raise her voice. "I am Gwynn, Queen of Twylia. Have you not seen the

portents even through the storm of snow? Have you not seen the black snake slither over the sky this night to snuff out the stars?"

"We have seen, Majesty." The man and those with him lowered to one knee in the snow. "My wife, our wisewoman, told us to wait, to watch for you. What has happened?"

"Lorcan has overthrown the City of Stars. He has murdered your king."

The man rose, laid a fist on his heart. "We are not warriors, my lady queen, but if you bid it, we will arm and band and march against the snake in your name."

"So you will, but not tonight, and not in my name but in the name of one yet to come. Your name, sir?" "I am Rohan, my lady."

"Rohan of the Travelers, I have sought you for a great task, and now I ask your help, for without it, all is lost. This child seeks to be born. Draco's blood runs through me, and through this baby. You share this blood. Will you help me?"

"My lady, I and all I have are yours to command." He took her horse's halter. "Go back," he shouted to one of his men. "Tell Nara and the women to prepare for a birth. A royal birth," he added, his teeth flashing in a smile. "We welcome a cousin." He pulled the horse toward the camp. "And enjoy a fight. Though Travelers pay little mind to the changing wind of politics, you will find none among us who has love for Lorcan."

"Politics play no part in murder done under a flag of truce. And your fate is tied to what happens this night."

He looked back at her and fought off a shudder. It seemed her eyes burned through the dark and into him. "I give you my sympathies for the loss of your husband."

"It is more than that." She reached down, gripped his hand with an urgency that ground bone to bone. "You know the Last Spell of Draco?" "Everyone knows it, my lady. The song of it is passed generation to generation." And he, a man who feared little, felt his hand tremble in hers. "This child?"

"This child. This night. It is destiny, and we must not fail to meet it."

The pain seized her, and she swooned. She heard voices, dim and distant. A hundred voices, it seemed, rising up in a flood. Hands reached for her, lifted her down from her mount as the birth pangs ripped a cry from her throat.

She smelled pine, and snow and smoke, felt something cool pressed to her brow. When she came back to herself, she saw a young woman with bright red hair that gleamed in the fire light. "I am Rhiann, sister of Rohan. Drink a little, my lady. It will ease you."

She sipped from the cup held to her lips and saw she was in a rough shelter of branches. A fire burned nearby. "Gwayne?" "Your man is just outside, my lady."

"This is women's work, and men are useless here, be they warrior or scholar."

"My mother," Rhiann said. "Nara."

Gwynn looked at the woman busily tearing cloth. "I'm grateful to you."

"Let's get this baby into the world, such as it is, then you can be grateful. Get that water on the fire. Fetch my herbs." The orders were snapped out as Gwynn felt the grip of the next pang.

Through the blurring of her vision she saw movement, heard chatter. More women. Women's work. Birth was the work of women, and death, it seemed, the work of men. Tears she'd conquered earlier now began to spill.

More voices spoke to her, inside her head, and told her what she already knew. But they were small comfort as she fought to give her child life.

"Midnight approaches." She turned her head against Rhiann's bracing shoulder. "The solstice. The darkest hour of the darkest day." "Push," Nara ordered. "Push!"

"The bells, the bells strike the hour."

"There are no bells here, my lady." Rhiann watched the cloths go red with blood. Too much blood.

"In the City of Stars, Lorcan has the bells rung. For his celebration, he thinks. But they ring out for the child, for the beginning. Oh! Now!" Rearing back, she pushed the child into life. She heard the cries and laughed through her own weeping.

"This is her hour, this is her time. The witching hour between night and day. I must hold her." "You're weak, my lady." Nara passed the squalling baby to Rhiann.

"You know as well as I, I'm dying. Your skill, Nara, your herbs, even your magic can't stop my fate. Give me my child." She held out her

arms, and smiled at Rhiann. "You have a kind heart to weep for me." "My lady."

"I must speak to Gwayne. Quickly," she said as Rhiann put the baby in her arms. "There's little time. Ah, there you are. There you are, my sweet girl." She pressed a kiss on the baby's head. "You've healed my heart, and now it tears in two again. Part to stay here with you, part to go to your father. How I grieve to leave you, my own. You will have his eyes, and his courage. My mouth, I think," she murmured and kissed it, "and what runs in my blood. So much depends on you. Such a small hand to hold the world."

She smiled over the baby's head. "She will need you," she said to Nara. "You will teach her what women need to know." "You would put your child into the hands of a woman you don't know?"

"You heard the bells."

Nara opened her mouth, then sighed. "Yes, I heard them." And she had seen, with a woman's heavy heart, what would pass this night. Gwayne came into the shelter, fell to his knees beside her. "My lady."

"She is Aurora. She is your light, your queen, your charge. Will you swear your fealty to her?" "I will. I do."

"You cannot leave her." "My lady, I must—"

"You cannot go back. You must swear to me to stay beside her. Keep her safe. You must swear on my blood that you will protect her as you have protected me." She took his hand, laid it on the child. "Gwayne, my white hawk. You are hers now. Swear it."

"I swear it."

"You will teach her what a warrior needs to know. She will stay with the Travelers. Hidden in the hills, and in the shadows of the forest. When it is

time ... you will know. you will tell her what she is." She turned the child so he could see the birthmark. a pale star. on the baby's right high. "All she is. Until then. Lorcan must not know of her. He will want her death above all things."

"I will guard her. on my life."

"She has her hawk. and her dragon watches from the highest point of the world," she murmured. "Her wolf will come when he's needed. Oh, my heart, my own." She pressed her lips to the child's cheeks. "This is why I was born, why I loved, why I died. And still, I grieve to leave you." She drew a trembling breath. "I give her into your hands." She held the baby out to Gwayne.

Then she held out her own, palms up. "I still have something left in me. She will have it." Light spun over her hands, whirled and caught the red, the

gold from the fire. Then with a flash, what lay in Gwynn's hands became a star and a moon, both clear as ice. "Keep them for her," she said to Nara.

The good queen closed her eyes and slipped away. The young queen wailed in the arms of a grieving soldier.

Seasons passed, and the world suffered under the harsh reign of King Lorcan. Small rebellions were crushed with a brutality that washed the land with blood and sent even the valiant into hiding. Faeries, witches, seers, and all who dwelt within the Realm of Magicks were outlawed and hunted like wild beasts by the mercenaries who came to be known as Lorcan's dogs.

Those who rose up against the usurper—and many who didn't—were executed. The dungeon in the castle filled with the tortured and forgotten, the innocent and the damned.

Lorcan grew rich, lining his coffers with taxes, increasing his holdings with land taken by force from those who had held it, worked it, honored it for generations. He dined off plates of gold and drank his wine from goblets of crystal while the people starved.

Those who spoke against him during the dark times spoke in whispers, and in secret.

Many of the displaced took to the high hills or the Lost Forest. There magic was practiced still, and the faithful searched the sky for portents of the

True One who would vanquish the snake and bring light back to the world.

There, among the farmers and merchants, the millers and artists who had become outlaws, among the faeries and elves and witches with bounties on their heads, the Travelers roamed.

"Again!" Aurora thrust with the sword and thrilled to the ring of steel against steel. She drove her opponent back, parried, pivoted. "Balance," Gwayne warned.

"I have my balance." To prove it, she leapt nimbly over the sword swept at her feet, landed lightly.

Swords crossed, slid hilt to hilt. And she came up with a dagger, pressing the point to his throat. "And the kill," she added. "I like to win." Gwayne gave her a little poke with the dagger he held to her belly. "So do I."

She laughed, stepped back, then gave him a courtly bow. "We both died well. Sit. You're winded." "I am not." But he was, and he rested on a stump while she fetched a skin of water.

She has her father's eyes, he thought. Gray as woodsmoke. And her mother's soft and generous mouth. Gwynn had been right—about so many things.

The child had grown into a lithe and lovely young woman, with skin the color of pale, pure honey, hair black as midnight. A strong chin, he judged, murmuring a thanks when she offered the water. Stubborn. He hadn't known a girl-child could *be* so stubborn.

There was a light in her, so bright he wondered that those who looked on her didn't fall to their knees. She was, though garbed in hunting green and worn boots, every inch a queen.

He had done what he had been asked. She was trained in the ways of a warrior. In sword and arrow and pike, in hand against hand. She could hunt and fight and ride as well as any man he'd trained. And she could think. That was his pride in her.

Nara and Rhiann had schooled her in women's work, and in magicks. Rohan had tutored her in scholarly matters, and her mind, her thirsty mind, soaked up the songs, the stories of their people.

She could read and write, she could cipher and chart. She could make the cold fire with a thought, stitch a wound, and— these days—take him in a sword fight.

And still, how could a girl of barely twenty seasons lead her people into battle and save the world?

It haunted him at night when he lay beside Rhiann, who had become his wife. How could he honor his vow to keep her safe and honor his vow to tell her of her birthright?

"I heard the dragon in the night."

His fingers squeezed the skin. "What?"

"I heard it roar, in my dreams that were not dreams. The red dragon who flies in the night sky. And in his claws was a crown of stars. My wolf was with me." She turned her head, smiled at Gwayne. "He is always with me, it seems. So handsome and strong, with his sad eyes green as the grass on the Hills of Never."

Even speaking of the man she thought of as her wolf had her blood warming. "We lay on the floor of the forest and watched the sky, and when the dragon came with his crown, I felt such a thrill. Fear and wonder and joy. As I reached up, through a great wind that blew, the sky grew brighter than day, stronger than the faerie fire. And I stood beside my wolf in the blinding brightness, with blood at my feet."

She sat on the ground, resting her back against the stump. With a careless gesture, she flipped the long, fat braid she wore behind her shoulder.

"I

don't know what it means, but I wonder if I will fight for the True One. If his time draws near. I wonder if I will, at last, find the warrior who is my wolf and stand with him to lift my sword for the true king."

She had spoken of the wolf since she could form words— the boy, and now the man, she loved. But never before had she spoken of seeing the dragon. "Is that all the dream?"

"No." Comfortably, she rested her head against his knee. "In the dream that was not a dream, I saw a lady. A beautiful lady with green eyes and dark hair, and she wore the robes of royalty. She was weeping, so I said, My lady, why do you weep? She answered, I weep for the world while the world waits. It waits for the True One, I said to her, and asked, Why doesn't he come? When will he strike at Lorcan and bring peace to Twylia?" Gwayne looked into the forest, gently stroking her hair. "What did she say to you?"

"She said the True One's hour is midnight, in birth, in death. Then she held out her hands, and in them were a globe, bright as the moon, and a star, clear as water. Take them, she told me. You will need them. Then she was gone."

She rubbed her cheek against his knee as the sadness she'd felt came back on her. "She was gone, Gwayne, and I ached in my heart. Beside me stood my wolf with his green eyes and dark hair. I think he was the True One, and that I'll fight for him. I think this dream was a portent, for when I woke, there was blood on the moon. A battle is coming."

Gwynn had said he would know when it was time. He knew, sitting in the quiet forest with spring freshening the air. He knew, and it grieved him. "Not all battles are fought and won with the sword."

"I know. Mind and heart, vision and magic. Strategy and treachery. I feel . . ."
She rose, wandered away to pluck up a stone and cast it into the silver water
of the river.

"Tell me what you feel."

She looked back. There was silver, bright as the river water, mixed with the gold of his hair, and in his beard. His eyes were a pale blue, and it

seemed to her there was a shadow in them now. He was not her father. She knew her sire had fought and died in the Battle of the Stars, but Gwayne had been her father in all but blood all of her life. There was nothing she couldn't tell him.

"I feel . . . as if something inside me is waiting, as the world is waiting. I feel there is something I must do, must be beyond what I am, what I do know." She hurried back to him, knelt at his feet. "I feel I must find my wolf. My love for him is so great, I will never know another. If he's the one of prophecy, I want to serve him. I honor what you've given me, Gwayne. You and Rhiann, Nara and Rohan and all my family. But there's something inside me, stretching, growing restless, because it *knows*. It knows, but I can't see it."

She rapped a fist against his leg in frustration. "I can't see. Not yet. Not in my dreams or in the fire or the glass. When I seek, it's as if a film covers my vision and there are only shadows behind it. In the shadows I see the snake, and in the shadows my wolf is chained and bleeding."

She rose again, impatient with herself. "A man who might be king, a woman who was a queen. I know she was a queen, and she offered me the moon and a star. And while I wanted them with a kind of burning hunger, I feared them. Somehow, I know if I took them, everything would change." "I have no magic. I'm only a soldier, and it's been too long since my courage was tested. Now I taste fear, and it makes me an old man."

"You're not old, and you're never afraid."

"I thought there would be more time." He got to his feet, just looked at her.

"You're so young." "Older than your Cyra, and she marries at the next equinox."

"The first year of your life I thought the days would never end, and time would never pass." She laughed. "Was I so troublesome an infant?"

"Restless and willful." He reached out to touch her cheek. "Then time flew. And here we are. Come, sit with me on the riverbank. I have many things to tell you."

She sat with him, and watched a hawk circle in the sky. "There is your talisman. The hawk." "Once, long ago, and most often behind my back, I was called the queen's hawk."

"The queen?" Aurora looked back sharply. "You were the queen's man? You never told me. You said you fought with my father in the great battle, but not that you were the queen's man."

"I told you that I brought your mother out of the city, into the Lost Forest. That Rohan and the Travelers took us in, and you were born that night in the snow."

"And she died giving me life."

"I didn't tell you that it was she who led me, and that I left the battle with her on orders from the king. She did not want to leave him." Though his words were spoken softly, his gaze was keen on her face. "She fought me. She was heavy with you, but still she fought like a warrior to stay with her king. With her husband."

"My mother." The breath caught in her throat. "In my dream. It was my mother."

"It was cold, and bitter, and she was in great pain. Body and heart. But she would not stop and rest. She guided me, and we came to the camp, to the place of your birth. She wept to leave you, and held you to her breast. She charged me to keep you safe, to train you, as she charged Nara to train you."

To keep the truth of your birth from you until the time had come. Then she gave you to my hands, she put you in my hands."

He looked down at them now. "You were born at midnight. She heard the bells, miles away in the city. Your hour is midnight. You are the

True One, Aurora, and as I love you, I wish it were another."

"How can this be?" Her heart trembled as she got to her feet, and she knew fear, the first true fear of her life. "How can I be the one? I'm no queen, Gwayne, no ruler."

"You are. It is your blood. From the first moment I held you in my hands, I knew this day would come. But beyond this I can see nothing." He rose, only to kneel before her. "I am the queen's man, and serve at your hand."

"Don't." Panicked, she dropped to her knees as well, gripped his shoulders.

"By Draco and all the gods, what will I do? How could I have lived all my life in comfort, never knowing true hunger or hurts while the people of the world waited? How can I stand for them, free them, when I've hidden away like a coward while Lorcan rules?"

"You were kept in safety, your mother's dying wish." He stood, taking her arm to pull her up with him. "You have not been a coward. Nor will you shame the memory of your mother, your father, and play the coward now. This is your fate. I have trained you as a warrior. Be a warrior."

"I would fight." She slapped a hand to her sword as if to prove it. "I would pledge sword and magic, my *life*, without reserve. But to lead?" She drew a shaky breath and stared out over the river. "Nothing is as it was only a moment ago. I need time to think." She shut her eyes tightly. "To

breathe. I need to be alone. Give me *time*, Gwayne," she said before he could argue. "If you must break camp and move on, I'll find you. I

need to find my way. Leave me." She stepped aside as he reached out to touch her. "Go."

When she knew she was alone, she stood by the banks of the silver river and grieved for her parents, her people, and herself. And longed for the comfort of the lover she called her wolf.

She walked deep into the forest, beyond the known and into the realm of faeries. There she cast the circle, made the fire, and sang the song for vision. She would see what had been— and what would be.

In the flames, while the moon rose and the single star that dogged it blinked to life, she saw the Battle of the Stars. She saw the bodies of servants, of children as well as soldiers. She saw the king—her father—fight like a demon, driving back the greater forces. She heard the screams, and smelled the blood.

Her father's voice came to her ears, a shouted order to Gwayne, who fought beside him, to get the queen, and the child she carried, to safety. To do this thing, as a soldier, even against the queen's orders, for the world. For the True One.

She saw her father's death, and her own birth. She tasted her mother's tears, and felt the force of love beam through the

magic. And with it, the force of duty. "You will not shirk it."

"Am I enough?" Aurora asked the image of her mother.

"You are the True One. There is no other. You are hope, Aurora. And you are pride. And you are duty. You cannot turn from this."

Aurora watched the battle, and knew it was what would come, not what had. This blood, this death, would be by her own hands. On her own hands. Even if it meant her end, she must begin. "I have power, Mother, but it is a woman's power. Small magic. I'm strong, but I'm not seasoned. How can I lead, and rule, with so little to offer?" "You will be more. Sleep now. Dream now."

So she dreamed again of her wolf, her warrior with eyes as green as the hills. He was tall, and broad of shoulder. His hair, dark as her own, swept back from a face of sharp planes and angles, and a white scar slashed through his left brow like a bolt of lightning. She felt a curling in her belly that

she knew for desire, one she had felt for no one but him.

"What will you be to me?" she asked him. "What will I be to you?"

"I know only that you're my beloved. You and you alone. I've dreamed of you through my life, waking and sleeping, only of you." He reached out, and she felt the brush of his fingers over her cheek. "Where are you?"

"Close, I think. Close. Are you a soldier?"

He looked down at the sword in his hand, and as disgust rippled over his face he shoved its point into the ground. "I am nothing."

"I think you are many things, and one of those is mine." Giving in to curiosity, following her own will, she pulled him to her and pressed her lips to his.

The wind swirled around them, a warm wind stirred by the great beating of faerie wings. The song rose up inside her, and beat in her blood. She would have love, she thought, even if death followed.

"I must be a woman to become what I am to become." She stepped back, drew off her hunting tunic. "Teach me what a woman knows. Love me in visions."

His gaze swept down her as she stood before him, dressed only in moonbeams within the shimmering circle of magic. "I've loved you all my life," he said. "And feared you."

"I've looked for you all of mine, and come to you here, fearing everything. Will you turn from me? Will I be alone?" "I'll never turn from you." He drew her to him. "I'll never leave you."

With his lips on hers, he lowered her to the soft floor of the forest. She knew the thrill of his hands, the taste of his skin, and a pleasure, a deep and

drugging pleasure that caused her body to quake. Flames leapt beside them, and inside her.

"I love you." She murmured it as she raced her lips over his face. "I'm not afraid."

She rose to him, opened to him, entreated. When he joined with her, she knew the power of being a woman, and the delights. When she woke at dawn, alone, with the fire gone to ash, she knew the cold kiss of duty.

. . .

"You should not have let her go alone."

Gwayne sat honing his sword while Rhiann scolded and made oatcakes. The morning sounds of the camp stirred around them. Horses, dogs, women cooking at pots, children chattering, and men readying to hunt.

"It was her wish." He spoke more sharply than he intended. "Her command. You fret over her like a mother." "And what am I to her if not a mother? Two days, Gwayne, two nights."

"If she can't stay two nights alone in the forest, she can hardly rule Twylia."

"She's just a girl!" Rhiann slammed down her spoon. "It was too soon to tell her of this."

"It was time. I gave my oath on it, and it was time! Do you think I have no worries? Is there anything I would not do to keep her from harm, even to giving my life?"

She blinked back hot tears and took his hand. "No. No. But she is like our own, as much as Cyra and young Rhys are. I want her here, sitting by the fire, putting too much honey on her oatcake, laughing. It will never be like that again."

He set aside his sword to rise and take his wife in his arms. "She is not ours to keep."

Over Rhiann's head, he saw her come out of the forest, through the mists of the morning. She was tall—tall for a girl, he thought now. Straight as a soldier. She looked pale, but her eyes were clear. They met his, held.

"She is come," Gwayne said.

Aurora heard the murmurs as she walked through camp. They had been told, she thought, and now they waited. Her family, her friends,

stood beside their colorful wagons, or stepped out of them to watch her.

She stopped, waited until all was quiet. "There is much to be done." She lifted her voice so that it echoed through camp, and beyond. "Eat, then come to me. I'll tell you how we will defeat Lorcan and take back our world."

Someone cheered. She saw it was young Rhys, barely twelve, and smiled back at him. Others took up the shouts, so that she walked through the celebration of them on her way to Gwayne.

Rhys dashed to her. "I'm not going to have to bow, am

I?"

"You might, but not just now." She ruffled his mop of golden hair. "Good. When do we fight?"

Her stomach clutched. He was a boy, only a boy. How many boys would she send into battle? And into death? "Soon enough."

She stepped to Gwayne, touched Rhiann's arm to comfort her. "I've seen the way," she said. "The way to begin. I'll need my hawk." "I'm yours." He bowed, deep. "Majesty."

"Don't give me the title until I've earned it." She sat, took an oatcake, and drenched it with honey. Beside her, Rhiann buried her face in her apron and sobbed.

"Don't weep." Aurora rose again to gather Rhiann close. "This is a good day." She looked at Gwayne. "A new day. It's not only because of what's in my blood that I can do this, but because of what you've taught me. Both of you. All of you. You've given me everything I need to

meet my destiny. Rhys, will you ask Nara and Rohan to join us and break fast?"

She pressed a kiss to Rhiann's cheek as Rhys ran off. "I've fasted for two days. I'm hungry," she said, and with a wide grin she sat to devour her oatcakes.

He had known her all his life, in his mind, in his heart. She came to him first as a child, laughing as she splashed in the silver river of a deep forest.

In those days they played together, as children do. And when he knew hunger and hurt, cold and a loneliness sharper than a blade, she would comfort him.

She called him her wolf. To him she was the light.

When they were no longer children, they walked together. He knew the sound of her voice, the scent of her hair, the taste of her lips.

She was his beloved, and though he thought her only a fantasy, he clung to her for his sanity. She was the single light in a world of darkness, the only joy in a world of despair.

With her he watched the dragon roar across the sky with the crown of prophecy in its claws. Through the magic light that followed, he saw the blood stain the ground at her feet, and he felt the smooth hilt of a sword in his hand.

But he dared not hope that he would be free, at long last, to lift that sword and serve her. He dared not hope that she was real, and that someday she would belong to him.

"Will you give me the gifts from my mother?" Aurora asked Nara.

"I've kept them for you. Rohan made this box, to keep them." An old woman with a face scored by many seasons, Nara held out a box of polished applewood, scribed with the symbol of star and moon. It had been the royal

seal of Twylia before Lorcan had ordered all such symbols outlawed. "It's beautiful. You honor my mother, Rohan."

"She was a great lady."

She opened the box and saw the clear globe, the clear star lying on dark velvet. Like the moon and star she'd seen in the night sky. "Conjured from love and grief, from joy and tears. Can there be stronger magic?"

When she lifted the globe, the light exploded in her hand. She saw through it, into the glass, into the world. Green fields sparkling in summer sunlight, wide rivers teeming with fish, thick forests where game grew fat. Cities with silver towers.

Men worked the fields, hunted the forests, fished the rivers, brought their wares to the city.

The mountains speared up, white at the peaks where the snow never melted. Beyond them, the Sea of Wonders fanned out. Other lands rose and spread. Other fields, other cities.

So they were not the world, she thought. But this was hers, to guard, to rule.

She took the star in her other hand and felt its heat, the flame of its power, fly into her.

"And the star shall burn with the blood of the dragon. Come as a lamb, mate with the wolf. Under truth is lies, under lies, truth. And valor holds its light under the coward's guise. When the witching hour comes, when the blood of the true one spills on the moon, the snake shall be vanquished, torn by the fangs of the wolf."

She swayed, lowered the crystals in her hands. "Who spoke?"

"You." Gwayne's voice was thin as he stared at her. Her hair had flown out as if on a wind, and her face had been full of light, her eyes full of power. Power that struck even a warrior with edges of fear and superstition.

"I am who I was. And more. It's time to begin. To tell you, tell everyone."

"I had visions," Aurora said when everyone gathered around. "Waking and dreaming. Some were shown and some were told to me, and some I know because it is my blood. I must go to the City of Stars and take my place on the throne." "When do we march?" Rhys shouted, and was lightly cuffed by his father.

"We will march, and we'll fight, and some of us will fall. But the world will not be freed by only the slice of a sword. It is not only might that will win what was taken from us."

"Magic." Rohan nodded. "And logic."

"Magic, logic," Aurora agreed. "Strategy and steel. And wiles," she added with a sly smile. "A woman's wiles. Cyra, what was most talked of in the village where we last stopped for supplies?"

Cyra, a blooming sixteen, still struggled not to stare at Aurora with awe. "Prince Owen, son of Lorcan. He seeks a bride among the ranking ladies across Twylia. Orders have gone out for any knights or lords still with holdings to send their eligible daughters to the city."

"So Owen can pick and pluck," Aurora said with disgust. "There will be feasting, and a grand ball, will there not, while ladies are paraded before the son of the snake like mares at auction?"

"So it's said, my . . . my lady."

"My sister," Aurora corrected, and made Cyra smile. "I will go as the lamb. Can you make me look the lady, Rhiann?" "To ride into the city unarmed—"

"I won't be unarmed." Aurora looked at the crystals, and the sword she'd laid beside them. "Or alone. I'll have an escort, as befits a lady of quality, and servants." She tugged the hem of her hunting tunic. "And a wardrobe. And so . . . garbed, I will gain access to the castle. I need men." Excitement rose in her. What had been stretching inside her had found its shape. She bounded onto the table, lifted her voice. "I need men to ride out, to find the pockets of rebels, of soldiers whose swords grow dull and rusted, of their sons and daughters who would follow the True One. Find farmers willing to set aside their plows, and craftsmen willing to forge weapons for them. They must be trained, they must be forged, even as the weapons are forged, into an army. In secret, in haste."

She looked into the forest, into the deep green of summer. "I swear to you, before the first frost bites the air we will take the city, we will take the world, and I will have the head of the snake in my hand."

She looked down at Gwayne. "Will you raise my army?" His soldier's heart thrilled. "I will, my lady."

"When it's time to strike, I'll send you a sign. You'll know it. Rohan, I need your maps, and your logic." "You'll have them."

"Rhiann." Aurora spread her arms. "I need a gown."

She was groomed and tutored, gowned and schooled. Even as Rhiann and those she deemed could run a passable seam worked on silks and velvets, Aurora practiced with sword and arrow.

She gritted her teeth as lotions were rubbed into her skin, as Cyra practiced dressing her hair. And she planned her strategy over bowls of mead, read dispatches from Gwayne, and sent them.

It was the far edge of summer when she set out, garbed in a traveling cloak of dark blue, with Cyra and Rhiann as her handmaidens and Rohan, young Rhys, and three other men as her escorts.

She would play her part, Aurora promised herself. The gods knew she looked the pampered lady. She would charm and beguile, seduce if need be. And she would take the castle from the inside, while the army Gwayne was training came over the city walls.

It was a long journey, but she was grateful for the time. She used it to hone her vision, gather her courage, strengthen her purpose.

The fields were still green, she noted, whoever ruled. But she'd seen the fear, the distrust, and the anger in the eyes of men they passed on the road. She'd seen the crows picking at the bones of those who had been unlucky enough to be set upon by thieves, or Lorcan's dogs. Children, their faces pinched with hunger, begged for food or coin. She saw what was left of homes that had been burned to the ground, and the desperate eyes of women with no man left to protect them.

Had she not looked so closely before? Aurora wondered. Had she been so content to run through the forest, to sing in the hills, that she hadn't seen the utter despair of her people, the waste of her land?

She would give her life to put it right again.

"It seems so strange to see Grandfather garbed so richly," Cyra said. "You must not call him Grandfather."

"No, I'll remember. Are you afraid, Aurora?"

"I am. But it's a good fear. The kind that tells me something will happen."

"You look beautiful."

Aurora smiled, and struggled not to tug at the confining gown. "It's only another weapon, and one I find I don't mind wielding. A sprinkle of witchcraft and . . . he'll look on me, won't he, this son of a demon? He'll look on me and want?"

"Any man would."

Satisfied, Aurora nodded. While he looked, and wanted, she would seek another. She would seek her wolf. He was there. Waiting. She felt him in her blood, and with every league they traveled, that blood warmed. She would find her love, at last, in the City of Stars.

And her destiny.

"Oh, look!" Cyra bounced in her seat. "The city. See how the towers shine."

Aurora saw it, in the distance, the silver and gilt that spread up into the sky. The grand towers of the castle gleamed, and on the topmost, the black flag with its coiled red snake flew.

She would burn it, she vowed. Burn it to ash and hoist her family crest in its place. The gold dragon on its white field would fly again. "Twenty men on the castle walls," Rohan said quietly as he rode his mount sedately toward her.

"Yes, I see them. And more at the city gates. He will have a personal guard as well, others at the castle gates. Some will slip away once

Lorcan is dead, some will certainly join our cause. But others will fight. We'll need to know the castle, every foot of it. Gwayne's drawings are a start, but it's likely Lorcan has changed some of it over the years."

"On the sweat and blood of the people," Rohan agreed. "Building fine rooms and thicker walls." He had to remind himself not to spit. "However fine the gilt, he's turned the City of Stars into the pit of a snake."

"And I will bury him in it."

She fixed a bored expression on her face, and watched everything, as they rode through the gates of the city.

In the stables, Thane groomed the roan mare. He worked alone, and the work was endless. But he was used to that, to the aching muscles, the weary bones at the end of the day.

And he had come to prize his solitude.

He loved the horses. That was his secret. If Owen and Lorcan knew he enjoyed them, they would cast him out of the stables and the dim quiet that brought him some measure, at least, of peace. They would find him other drudgery, he thought. It pleased them to do so. He was used to that as well.

He'd learned as a very young boy to keep his words and his opinions to himself, to do his work, expect nothing—unless it was the heel of a boot in the ass. As long as he controlled his temper, his fury, his hatred, he had the gift of alone.

And those he loved were safe.

The mare blew softly as he ran a hand over her silky neck. For a moment, Thane laid his cheek to hers, shut his eyes. He was exhausted. Dreams plagued him, night after night, so that he woke hot and hard and needy.

Voices and visions ran through his head and gave him no answers, and no relief.

Even his light, his love, brought a strange restlessness to him.

He could not war, could not find peace, so there seemed nothing for him but hours of work.

He stepped away from the mare, ran a hand through his unruly black hair. He would have gone to the next mount, but something stirred in his belly, a kind of hunger that had nothing to do with desire for food.

He felt his heart thudding in his chest as he walked past the stalls, toward the stable entrance, where the light fell like a curtain of gold.

He lifted his hand to shield his eyes from the glare and saw her, his vision, mounted on a white stallion. Blood roared into his head, made him giddy as he stared.

She was smiling, her lashes downcast. And he knew—he *knew* the eyes they hid were gray as smoke. Dimly, he heard her voice, heard her laugh

—how well he knew that voice, that laugh—as she offered Owen her hand.

"Servants will see to your horses, my lady . . ."

"I am Aurora, daughter of Ute of the westland. My father sends his regrets for not accompanying me to honor you, Prince Owen. He is unwell." "He is forgiven for sending such a jewel."

She did her best to work up a flush, and fluttered her lashes. He was handsome, with the look of a young, golden god. Unless you looked in

his eyes, as she did. There was the snake. He was his father's son.

"You flatter me, sir, and I thank you. I must beg your indulgence. My horses are precious to me, I fear I fret over them like a hen over chicks. I'd like

to see the stables, if you please, and speak with the grooms about their care."

"Of course." He put his hands around her waist. She didn't stiffen as she wished to, but smiled prettily as he lifted her down.

"The city is magnificent." She brushed a hand over her headdress as if to fuss it into place. "A country lass like myself is awed by so much"—she looked back at him now deliberately provocative—"glamour."

"It dulls before you, Lady Aurora." Then he turned, and she saw his handsome face go hard with temper and those dark eyes gleam with hate. She followed his glance and felt her world tilt.

She had found her wolf. He was dressed in rags, with the sweat of labor staining them. His dark hair curled madly around a face smudged with stable dirt. And in his hand he carried not a sword but a currycomb.

Their eyes met, and in that single instant she felt the shock of knowledge, and of disbelief. He took one step toward her, like a man in a trance.

In three strides, Owen stormed to Thane and used the back of his hand to deliver a vicious blow that drew blood. For an instant, only an instant, rage flamed in Thane's eyes. Then he lowered them, as Owen struck again.

"On your knees, worthless cur. You dare cast your eyes on a lady. You'll be whipped for this insult." Head down, Thane lowered to his knees. "Your pardon, my lord prince."

"If you have time to stand and stare at your betters, you must not have enough to do." Owen pulled out his riding crop, raised it. To Aurora's disappointment, the wolf of her visions stayed down like a cowed dog.

"Prince Owen." Her knees shook, and her heart thundered. Every instinct had to be denied. She couldn't go to him, speak to him. She must instead play the pampered lady. However it scored her pride, Aurora laid the back of her hand on her brow and pretended to swoon. "I can't bear violence," she said weakly when he rushed back to catch her. "I feel . . . unwell."

"Lady, I'm sorry you had to witness such a . . . display." He looked down on Thane with derision. "This stableboy has some skill with horses, but too often forgets his place."

"Please, don't punish him on my account. I couldn't bear the thought of it." She waved a hand, and after a moment's confusion, Cyra rushed forward with a bottle of salts to hold under Aurora's nose.

"Enough, enough." Aurora nudged her away as the salts made her eyes water. "If you could assist me, my lord, out of the sun?" "Forgive me, Lady Aurora. Let me take you inside, offer you some refreshment."

"Oh, yes." She leaned against him. "Traveling is so wearing, isn't it?"

She let him lead her away from the stables. Her heart was heavy to find her wolf, at last, and learn he had neither fang nor claw.

Feigning light-headedness, she let herself be led across a courtyard and into the keep. And she noted every detail. The number of guards and their weapons, the richness of the tapestries and tiles, the placement of windows and doors and stairs.

She noted the stone faces and downcast eyes of servants, and the demeanor of the other women, other ladies brought in like broodmares for display.

Some, it seemed to her, were pleased to be considered worthy of Prince Owen's regard. In others, she saw fear lurking in the eyes. Women were chattel under Lorcan's reign. Property to be owned by father, husband, brother, or any man with the price. Any suspected of witchcraft were burned.

Women were lesser creatures, Rohan had told her, in Lorcan's world. All the better, she thought. He would hardly suspect that the True One was a woman, and that she bided under his roof until she could slit his throat.

She fluttered and flushed and begged Owen that she be taken to her chambers to rest away the fatigue of the journey.

When she had safely arrived there, she balled her hands into fists. "Simpleton. Bully. Bastard." She took a deep breath and fought for control. "Calling him prince makes my tongue ache."

"He was cruel to that boy," Rhiann murmured.

"It wasn't a boy, but a man. A man without a backbone." With a hiss of rage, she dropped into a chair. The man of her dreams would not

grovel in the dirt. She would *not* love a man who would beg pardon of an ass.

So she would forget him. She had to forget him and her woman's heart, and do what came next. "We're inside," she said to Rhiann. "I'll write a dispatch to Gwayne. See that it's sent today."

Aurora dressed with great care in a gown of blue velvet piped with gold. With Cyra's help her heavy hair was tamed into a gold snood. She wore small blue stones at her ears, a delicate pearl cross at her throat. And a dagger strapped to her thigh.

After practicing her smiles and simpers in the glass, she deemed herself ready. She wandered the gallery, knowing that the art and furnishings there had been stolen from her parents or looted from other provinces. She gazed out the windows at the gardens and mazes and lands that had been tended by her forebears, then taken by force for another's pride and greed.

And she noted the numbers and locations of guards at every post. She swept down the stairs, meandered into rooms, watched the servants and guests and courtiers.

It pleased her to be able to move freely through the castle, around the gardens. What threat was a woman after all, she thought as she stopped to smell the golden roses and study the rank of guards along the seawall. She was simply a candidate for Owen's hand, sent to offer herself like a ripe fruit for the plucking.

"Where is the music?" she asked Cyra. "Where is the laughter? There are no songs in Lorcan's kingdom, no joy. He rules shadows." "You will bring back the light."

"I swear that I will." Or die in the attempt, she vowed silently. "There's such beauty here, but it's like beauty trapped behind a locked glass. Imprisoned, waiting. We must shatter the glass."

She rounded a bend in the path and saw a woman seated on a bench with a young girl kneeling at her feet, weeping. The woman wore a small crown atop her golden hair. She looked brittle and thin in her rich robes, and though her face held beauty, it was pale and tired.

"She who calls herself queen." Aurora spoke softly and fought to keep the fury out of her eyes. "Lorcan's wife, who was my mother's woman. There's time before the banquet. We'll see if she can be of use."

Folding her hands at her waist, Aurora stepped forward. She saw the queen start, saw her hand close tight over the girl's shoulder. "Majesty." Aurora dropped into a deep curtsy. "I am Lady Aurora, and beg pardon for disturbing you. May I help?"

The girl had shut off her tears, and though her pretty face was ravaged by them, she got to her feet, bowed. "You are welcome, lady. You will excuse my behavior. It was only a childish trifle that had me seeking my mother's knee. I am Dira, and I welcome you to the City of Stars and our home."

"Highness." Aurora curtsied, then took the hand the queen offered. "I am Brynn. I hope you have all that you require here."

"Yes, my lady. I thought to walk the gardens before the sun set. They are so lovely, and with summer nearly done, transient."

"It grows cold at twilight." Brynn gathered her cloak at her throat as if she could already feel the oncoming winter. When Brynn rose, Aurora noted that her eyes were strongly blue, and unbearably sad. "Will you accompany us inside? It's nearly time for feasting."

"With pleasure, my lady. We live quiet in the west," she continued. "I look forward to the dancing and feasting, and the time with other women."

"Partridges and peahens," Dira whispered.

"Dira!"

But Aurora laughed over the queen's sharp rebuke, and glanced at the girl with more interest. "So we must seem to you, Highness. Country girls parading in their finery with hopes that Prince Owen will show favor."

"I meant no offense."

"And none was given. It must be wearying to have so much female chattering about day and night. You'll be happy, I'm sure, when the prince has chosen his bride. Then you will have a sister, will you not?"

Dira looked away, toward the seawall. "So it would seem."

A shadow crossed the path, and Aurora would have sworn the world went still. Lorcan, self-proclaimed king of Twylia, stood before them.

He was tall and strongly built. His hair, nearly copper in color, spilled to the shoulders of his purple cloak. Jewels glinted in his crown, on his fingers. His sharply ridged face had the devil's own beauty, and so cold was the blue of his eyes that Aurora wasn't surprised to feel

the queen tremble beside her.

"You dally in the garden while our guests wait? You sit and dream when you are commanded to take your place?"

"Your Majesty." Going with instinct, Aurora lowered herself to one knee at the king's feet, and used a small dash of power to draw his attention and thought to her and away from his wife. "I most humbly beg your pardon for detaining Queen Brynn with my witless chatter. Her

Majesty was too kind to send me away and she sought to soothe my foolish nerves. I am to blame for the lateness of her arrival." She looked up and put

what she hoped was the slightest light of flirtation in her eyes. "I was nervous, sire, to meet the king."

It was, she realized as his taut mouth relaxed, the right touch. He reached down, lifted her chin. "And who is this dark flower?" "Sire, I am Aurora, daughter of Ute, and the foolish woman who has earned your displeasure."

"They grow them fair in the west. Rise." He drew her to her feet and studied her face so boldly she didn't have to fake a blush. Though it came more from temper than modesty. "You will sit beside me at tonight's banquet."

Luck or fate had blessed her, Aurora thought, and laid her hand on his. "I am undeserving, and grateful for the honor, sire."

"You will entertain me," he said as he led her inside, without, Aurora noted, another glance at his wife or daughter. "And perhaps show me why my son should consider you for wife."

"The prince should consider me, sire, so that I might continue to entertain you, and serve you as a daughter would, all of your days." He glanced back at Dira now, with thinly veiled disgust. "And how might a daughter serve me?"

"To do her duty. At the king's pleasure, sire, and at her husband's. To bear strong sons and to present a pleasing face and form. To do their bidding day and . . . night."

He laughed, and when he stepped inside the crowded and brightly lit banquet hall, Aurora was at his side.

Thane watched from the spy hole in the secret chamber beside the minstrel's gallery. From there he could look down on the feasting, and the lights and the colors. At the scent of roasted meat his empty belly clutched, but he was used to hunger. Just as he was used to standing in the shadows

and looking out on the color and the light.

He could hear women's laughter as the ladies vied for Owen's attention and favor, but there was only one who drew Thane's interest. She sat beside the king, smiling, sampling the delicacies he piled on her plate, flirting with her eyes over the rim of her goblet.

How could this be the same creature who had come to him in dream and vision the whole of his life? The woman who had offered him such love, such passion, and such shining honesty? This coy miss with her sly smiles and trilling laugh could never make him burn as her light made him burn. Yet he burned, even now, just watching her.

"Your back needs tending."

Thane didn't turn. Kern appeared when and where he chose, as faeries were wont to do. And was as much bane as blessing. "I've been whipped before. It'll heal soon enough."

"Your flesh may." Kern waved a hand and the wall between them and the banquet hall shimmered away. "But your heart is another matter. She is very beautiful."

"A fair face is easy beauty. She isn't what I thought she was . . . would be. I don't want her." Kern smiled. "One doesn't always want destiny."

Thane turned. Kern was old, old as time. His long gray beard covered plump cheeks and spun down to the waist of his bright red robes. But his eyes were merry as a child's, and green as the Lost Forest.

"You show me these things. This woman, this world, and you hint of changes, of restoration." Frustration edged Thane's voice and hardened his face. "You train me for battle, and you heal my hurts when Owen or Lorcan or one of their dogs beats me. But what good does it do me? My mother, my young sister, are no more than prisoners still. And Leia—"

"She is safe. Have I not told you?"

"Safe, at least." Struggling to compose himself, Thane looked back at the feasting, at little Dira. "One sister safe, and lost to me, the other trapped here until she's old enough for me to find sanctuary for her. There will never be one for my mother. She grows so thin."

"She worries for you, for her daughters."

"Leia bides with the women in the Valley of Secrets, at least for now. And Dira is yet too young for the snake to pay her mind—or to plan to marry her off to some slathering lackey. She need not worry for them. She need not think of me at all. I am nothing but a coward who hides his sword."

"It's not cowardice to hide your sword until the time comes to wield it. The time draws near."

"So you always say," Thane replied, and though he knew that Kern's magick kept those who were feasting from seeing him above them, he felt Aurora's gaze as it scanned the gallery. He knew she looked at him, just as he looked at her. "Is she a witch, then, and the visions between us an amusement to her?"

"She is many things."

Thane shook his head. "It doesn't matter. She isn't for me, nor I for her. That was fantasy and foolishness, and is done. It's Dira who concerns me now. Another two years, then Lorcan will seek to marry her off. Then she must be sent away from here, for her own safety. My mother will have no daughter to comfort her, and no son to stand for her."

"You are no good to them dead." Kern's voice went sharp as honed steel. "And no good to any when you wallow in pity."

"Easily said when your time is spent in a raft, and mine in a stable. I gave up my pride, Kern, and have lived without it since my seventh season. Is it so surprising I should be ready to give up my hope?"

"If you do, it will be the end for you."

"There are times I'd welcome the end." But he looked at Dira. She was so young. Innocent and defenseless. He thought of how she had wept to find him beaten and bleeding in the stables. It hurt her, he knew, more than the lash hurt him. Lorcan's blood might have run through her, but she had none of his cruelty.

She was, he thought, his only real pleasure since Leia's escape. So he would hold on to his hope a while longer, for her. "I don't give up yet," Thane said quietly. "Not yet. But it had best be soon."

"Come, then, let me tend your wounds."

"No." Thane rolled his shoulders, welcomed the pain. "It reminds me. I have work." "When it's done, meet me. It's time to practice."

Fingertip to fingertip, Aurora circled with Owen in a dance. The music was lively, and pleased her a great deal more than her partner. But he couldn't have known of her displeasure as she smiled at him and sent him a laughing glance over her shoulder when the set parted them. When the music brought them together again, he stroked his thumb over her knuckles. "The king has favored you."

"I am honored. I see much of him in you, my lord."

"When it's my time to rule, I will outreach him." His fingers squeezed hers.

"And I will demand much more of my queen than he of his." "And what does your father demand of his queen?"

"Little more than obedience." He looked over to where Brynn sat, like a statue, with her women. "A comely face, a bowed head, and two pale daughters will not be enough for me."

"Two?"

"Dira is the youngest of Brynn's whelps. There was another, but she was killed by wild beasts in the Black

Forest." "Wild beasts!" Though she couldn't manage a squeal, Aurora clasped a hand to her breast. "Do not fear, my lady." He smirked. "There are no beasts in the city—none that walk on four legs."

The figures of the dance parted them again, and Aurora executed her turns, her curtsies, and counted the beats impatiently until she faced Owen once more. With her head saucily angled, she stared into his eyes. "And what would be enough for you, my lord, for a queen?" "Passion. Fire. Sons."

"There must be fire in bed to get sons." She lowered her voice, and spoke with her face close to his. "I would burn to be the mother of kings." Then she stepped back, dipped low as the dance ended.

"Walk with me."

"With pleasure, sir. But I must have my woman with me, as is proper." "Do you do only what is proper?"

"A queen would, when eyes are on her."

He lifted a brow in approval. "A brain as well as beauty. Bring her, then."

Aurora put her hand in his and gestured carelessly with the other so Cyra followed them out onto the terrace. "I like the sea," she began, looking out over the cliffs. "The sounds and the smells of it. It's a wall to the back, protection from enemies. But it's also passion, and possibilities. Do you

believe there are worlds beyond the world, my lord prince?"

"Tales for children."

"If there were, a king could rule them all, and the sons of such a king would be gods. Even Draco would bow." "Draco's power is weak, so he sulks in his cave. This"— Owen laid a hand on the hilt of his sword—"this is power." "A man's power is in his sword and arm, a woman's is in her mind and womb."

"And her heart?" Now he laid a hand on her breast.

Though her skin crawled, she smiled easily. "Not if she gives that heart away." She touched her fingers lightly to his wrist, then eased away. "If I were to do so, my lord, to offer you my heart and my body, my value to you would diminish. A prize easily taken is little prize at all. So I will bid you good night, and hope you consider what I hold to be worth the winning."

"You would leave me with so many choices?" He gestured toward the women in the banquet hall as Aurora moved away.

"So you will see them . . . but think of me." She left him with a laugh, then turned to a mumbled oath when she was certain she was out of

earshot. "Empty-headed, fat-fingered *toad!* He's a man who thinks first with the lance between his legs. Well, there is little warrior in him. I've learned that much at least. Cyra, I need you to talk with the other women, find out all you can about the queen and her daughters. What are

they in this puzzle?" She cut herself off as they walked past guards and began to talk brightly of the feasting and dancing until she was back in her chambers.

"Rhiann." She let out a huge sigh. "Help me out of this gown. How do women of court bear the weight every day? I need the black tunic." "You're going out again?"

"Yes. I felt eyes on me when I was at banquet. Eyes from above. Gwayne said there was a spy hole next to the minstrel's gallery. I want a look. Would Lorcan station guards there during a feast? He seems too sure of himself to bother."

No, it had not been guards watching her, Aurora knew. It had been the grass-green eyes of her wolf. She needed to learn why he'd been there. "And I need to see how the castle is protected during the night." She pulled on her tunic. "I have enough magic to go unnoticed if need be. Did you learn anything of use?" she asked as she strapped on her sword. "I learned that Owen went back and beat the stable hand after all." Aurora's mouth tightened. "I'm sorry for it."

"And that the stable hand is Thane, son of Brynn, whom Lorcan took as queen."

Aurora's hands paused in the act of braiding her hair, and her eyes met Rhiann's in the glass. "Brynn's son is cast to the stables? And remains there? His father was a warrior who died in battle beside mine. His mother was my own mother's handmaid. Yet their son grovels at Owen's feet and grooms horses."

"He was not yet four when Lorcan took the throne. Only a child."

"He is not a child today." She swirled on her cloak, drew up the hood. "Stay inside," she ordered.

She slipped out of the chamber, moved silently down the corridors toward the stairs. She drew on her magic to bring smoke into the air, blunt the guards' senses as she hurried by them.

She dashed up to the minstrel's gallery and found the mechanism Gwayne had described for her to open the secret room beside it. Once inside, she approached the spy hole and looked down at the hall.

It was nearly empty now, and servants were beginning to clear the remnants of the feast. The queen had retired, and all but the boldest ladies had followed suit. The laughter had taken on a raucous edge. She saw one of the courtiers slide his hand under the bodice of a woman's gown

and fondle her breast.

She hadn't been sheltered from the ways of men and women. The Travelers could be earthy, but there was always a respect and good nature. This, she thought, had neither.

She turned away from it, and focused instead on the essence of what had been in the room before her. One that was human, she thought, and one that was not. Man and faerie-folk. But what had been their purpose? To find out, she followed the trail of that essence from the room and out of the castle. Into the night.

There were guards posted on walls, at the gates, but to Aurora's eyes they looked sleepy and dull. Even two hundred good men, she calculated, could take the castle if it was done swiftly and with help from inside. As she worked her way along the wall, she heard the snores of a guard sleeping on duty.

Lorcan, she thought, took much for granted.

She looked toward the south gate. It was there that Gwayne had fled with the queen on the night of the battle. Many brave men had lost their lives so that her mother could escape, so that she could be born.

She would not forget it. And she would take nothing for granted.

Her senses drew her toward the stables. She smelled the horses, heard them shifting in their stalls as she approached. Though she scented man as well—sweat and blood—she knew she wouldn't find him there.

She stopped to stroke her horse's nose, to inspect the stall, and others.

Whatever Thane was, he did his job here well. And lived poorly, she noted as

she studied the tiny room that held his bedding, the stub of a candle, and a trunk of rough clothes.

Following the diagram in her mind, she searched the floor for the trapdoor that led to the tunnels below the stables. One channel ran to the sea, she remembered, the other to the forest.

It would be a good route to bring in her soldiers, to have them take the castle from the inside. If Lorcan hadn't found it and destroyed it.

But when she opened the door, she felt the air stir. Taking the candle stub, she lit the wick and let its wavery light guide her down the rough steps. She could hear the roar of the sea, and though she was tempted to take that channel, just to stand by the water, to breathe it in, she turned toward the second path.

She would have Gwayne bring the men through the forest, split into companies. Some to take the walls, others to take the tunnels. Attack the walls first, she calculated, drawing Lorcan's forces there while the second wave came in from under—and behind.

Before he could turn and brace for the second assault, they would run him over. And it would be done.

She prayed that it could be done, and that she would not be sending good men to their deaths for nothing.

She moved slowly through the dark. The low ceiling made it impossible to stand upright, and she could imagine the strain of a man making the same trek in full armor.

And it would be done not after a night of feasting and dancing but after a hard march from the hills, through the forest, with the knowledge that death could wait at the end of the journey.

She was asking this of her people, and asking that they trust the fates that she would be worthy of their sacrifice. That she would be a worthy queen.

She stopped, bracing her back against the wall of stone and dirt as her heart ached. She would wish with every ounce of her blood that it was not

so. That she was only an ordinary woman and could leap onto her horse and ride with the Travelers again, as she had always done. She would wish

that she could hunt and laugh, love a man and bear his children. Live a life that she understood.

But to wish it was to wish against the fates, to diminish the sacrifices her parents had made, and to turn her back on those who prayed for the

True

One to come and bring them back into light.

So she lifted her candle again and headed down the tunnel to plot out her strategy.

When she heard the clash of steel, she drew her own sword. Snuffing out the candle, she set it down and moved soft as a cat toward the narrow opening.

She could see them battling in the moonlight, the young man and the old. And neither noticed as she boosted herself out of the tunnel and crouched on the floor of the forest.

Here was her wolf, and she thrilled to see him.

He fought with an icy focus and relentless strength that Aurora admired and respected—and envied. The skill, yes, the skill of a warrior was there, but it was enhanced by that coldblooded, cold-eyed style that told her he would accept death or mete it out with equal dispatch. The faerie was old, it was true, but a faerie nonetheless. Such creatures were not vanquished easily.

She could see the sweat of effort gleaming on Thane's face, and how it dampened his shirt. And she saw the blood that seeped onto the cloth from the wounds on his back, still fresh from a lashing.

How could a man wield a sword with such great talent and allow himself to be flogged?

And why had he watched the feasting through the spy hole? It was his gaze she had sensed on her. And his essence she had sensed there. His, and that of the old graybeard he battled now.

Even as she puzzled it over, two columns of smoke spiraled on either side of Thane. And became armed warriors. He blocked the sword of the one on his right and spun away from the sword of the one on his left as it whizzed through the air.

Raising her own, Aurora leapt. She cleaved her blade through one of the warriors and vanished it back to smoke. "Foul play, old one." She pivoted, and would have struck Kern down if Thane hadn't crossed swords with her.

"At your back," she snapped out, but the warrior was smoke again with a wave of Kern's hand.

"Lady," the faerie said with an undeniable chuckle, "you mistake us. I only help my young friend with his training." To prove it, Kern lowered his sword and bowed.

"Why am I dreaming?" Thane demanded. He was out of breath as he hadn't been during the bout, and the surging of his blood had nothing to do with swordplay. "What test is this?"

"You are not dreaming," Kern assured him.

"She's not real. I've seen her now, in flesh. And this is the vision, not the woman." Love, lust, longing knotted inside him so that he fought to ice his words with annoyance. "And neither holds interest for me any longer."

"I'm as real as you," Aurora tossed back, then sheathing her sword, she twisted her lips into a sneer. "You fight well. For a groveling stableboy. And your sword would be all that interests me, if I believed you'd gather the courage and wit to use it on something more than smoke."

"So, no vision, then, but the simpering, swooning female." He lifted the cape she'd tossed aside when she leapt to his defense. With a mocking bow, he held it out. "Go back to your feather bed, else you catch a chill."

"I'm chilled enough from you." She knocked his hand aside and turned on Kern.

"Why haven't you treated his wounds?" "He doesn't wish it."

"Ah, he's stupid, then." She inclined her head toward Thane again. "Whether you are stupid or not, I regret you were beaten on my account." "It's nothing to do with you." Because the beating still shamed him, he rammed his sword back into its sheath. "It's not safe for

a woman alone beyond the walls. Kern will show you the way back."

"I found my way out, I can find my way back. I'm not some helpless female," she said impatiently. "You of all men should know—" "I do not know you," Thane said dully.

She absorbed the blow to her heart. They stood in the dappled moonlight, with only the call of an owl and the rushing of a stream over rocks to break the silence between them.

Even knowing the risk of mediation, Kern stepped up, laying a hand on Thane's shoulder, the other on Aurora's. "Children," he began brightly. "We're not children any longer. Are we, lady? Not children splashing in rivers, running through the forest." It scored his heart to remember it, to remember the joy and pleasure, the simple comfort of those times with her. To know they were ended forever. "Not children taking innocent pleasure in each other's company."

She shook her head, and thought how she had lain with him, in love, in visions. Him and no other. "I wonder," she said after a moment, "why we need to hurt each other this way. Why we strike out where we once—where we always reached out. And I fear you're right. You don't know me, nor I you. But I know you're the son of a warrior, you have noble blood. Why do you sleep in the stables?"

"Why do you smile at Lorcan, dance with Owen, then wander the night with a sword?"

She only smiled. "It's not safe for a woman alone beyond the walls." There was, for just an instant, a glint of humor in his eyes. "You watched me dance."

He cursed himself for speaking of it. Now she knew of the spy hole as well as the tunnels. And one word to Owen . . . "If you wish to make amends for the beating, you won't speak of seeing me here."

"I have no reason to speak of you at all," she said coolly. "I was told faeries no longer bided near the city."

At her comment Kern shrugged. "We bide where we will, lady, even under Lorcan's reign. Here is my place, and he is my charge." "I am no one's charge. Are you a witch?" Thane demanded.

"A witch is one of what I am." He looked so angry and frustrated. How she longed to stroke her finger over the lightning-bolt scar above his eye. "Do you fear witchcraft, Thane of the stables?"

Those eyes fired at the insult, as she'd hoped. "I don't fear you." "Why should an armed man and his faerie guard fear a lone witch?"

"Leave us," Thane demanded of Kern, and his gaze stayed locked on Aurora's face. "As you wish." Kern bowed deeply, then disappeared.

"Why are you here?"

"Prince Owen needs a wife. Why shouldn't it be me?"

He had to choke down a rage, bubbling black, at the thought of it. "Whatever you are, you're not like the others." "Why? Because I walk alone at night in the Black Forest, where wild beasts are said to roam?"

"You're not like the others. I know you. I do know you, or what you were once."

He had to curl his hand into a fist to keep from touching

her. "I've seen you in my dreams. I've tasted your mouth. I'll taste it again."

"In your dreams perhaps you will. But I don't give my kisses to cowards who fight only smoke."

She turned, and was both surprised and aroused when he gripped her arm and dragged her around. "I'll taste it again," he repeated.

Even as he yanked her close, she had the point of her dagger at his throat. "You're slow." She all but purred it. "Release me. I don't wish to slit your throat for so small an offense."

He eased back and, when she lowered the dagger, moved like lightning. He wrested the dagger from her hand, kicked her feet out from under her before she could draw her sword. The force of the fall knocked the wind out of her, and she was pinned under him before she could draw a breath. "You're rash," he told her, "to trust an enemy."

She had to swallow the joy, and the laugh. They'd wrestled like this before, when there had been only love and innocence between them. Here was her man, after all.

"You're right. The likes of you would have no honor."

With the same cold look in his eyes that she'd seen when he fought, he dragged her arms over her head. She felt the first licks of real fear, but even that she held tight. No groveling stableboy could make her fear. "I will taste you again. I will take something. There has to be something." She didn't struggle. He'd wanted her to, wanted her to spit and buck and fight him so he wouldn't have to think. For one blessed moment, not to think but only feel. But she went still as stone when he crushed his lips to hers.

Her taste was the same, the same as he'd imagined, remembered, wished. Hot and strong and sweet. So he couldn't think, after all, but simply sank into the blessed relief of her. And all the aches and misery, the rage and the despair, washed out of him in the flood of her. She didn't fight him, as she knew she wouldn't win with force. She remained still, knowing that a man wanted response— heat,

anger or acquiescence, but not indifference.

She didn't fight him, but she began to fight herself as his mouth stirred her needs, as the weight of his body on hers brought back wisps of memories.

She'd never really been with a man, but only with him in visions, in dreams. She had wanted no man but him, for the whole of her life. But what she'd found wasn't the wolf she'd known, nor the coward she thought she'd found. It was a bitter and haunted man.

Still, her heart thundered, her skin trembled, and beneath his, her mouth opened and offered. She heard him speak, one word, in the oldest tongue of Twylia. The desperation in his voice, the pain and the longing in it made her heart weep. The word was "Beloved."

He eased up to look at her. There was a tear on her cheek, and more in her eyes where the moonlight struck them. He closed his own eyes and rolled onto his bloody back.

"I've lived with horses too long, and forget how to be a man."

She was shaken to the bone from her feelings, from her needs, from the loss. "Yes, you forget to be a man." As she had forgotten to be a queen. "But we'll blame this on the night, on the strangeness of it." She got to her feet, walked over to pick up her dagger. "I think perhaps this is some sort of test, for both of us. I've loved you as long as I remember."

He looked at her, into her, and for one moment that was all there was, the love between them. It shimmered, wide and deep as the Sea of

Wonders. But in the next moment the heavy hand of duty took over.

"If things were different . . ." Her vision blurred—not with magicks but with a woman's tears. It was the queen who forced them back, and denied herself the comfort. "But they aren't, and this can't be between us, Thane, for there's

more at stake. Yet I have such longing for you, as I have always. Whatever's changed, that never will."

"We're not what we were in visions, Aurora. Don't seek me in them, for I won't come to you. We live as we live in the world."

She crouched beside him, brushed the hair from his brow. "Why won't you fight? You have a warrior's skill. You could leave this place, join the rebels and make something of yourself. Why raise a pitchfork in the stables when you can raise a sword against an enemy? I see more in you than what they've made you."

And want more of you, she thought. So much more of you. "You speak of treason." His voice was colorless in the dark.

"I speak of hope, of right. Have you no beliefs in the world, Thane? None of yourself?"

"I do what I'm fated to do. No more, no less." He moved away from her and sat, staring into the thick shadows. "You should not be here, my lady. Owen would never select a wife bold enough to roam the forest alone, or one who would permit a stable hand to take . . . liberties." "And if he selects me, what will you do?"

"Do you taunt me?" He sprang to his feet, and she saw what she'd hoped to see in his face. The strength and the fury. "Does it amuse you to find that I could pine for one who would offer herself to another like a sweetmeat on a platter?"

"If you were a man, you would take me—then it would be done." If you would take me, she thought, perhaps things would be different after all. "Simply said when you have nothing to lose."

"Is your life so precious you won't risk it to take what belongs to you? To stand for yourself and your world?"

He looked at her, the beauty of her face and the purpose that lit it like a hundred candles glowing from within her. "Yes, life is precious. Precious enough that I would debase myself day after day to preserve it. Your place isn't here. Go back before you're missed."

"I'll go, but this isn't done." She reached out, touched his cheek. "You needn't worry. I won't tell Owen or Lorcan about the tunnels or the spy hole. I'll do nothing to take away your small pleasures or to bring you harm. I swear it."

His face went to stone as he stepped back, and he executed a mocking little bow. "Thank you, my lady, for your indulgence." Her head snapped back as if he'd slapped her. "It's all I can give you." She hurried back to the tunnel and left him alone.

She slept poorly and watched the dawn rise in mists. In that half-light, Aurora took the globe out of its box, held it in the palm of her hand. "Show me," she ordered, and waited while the sphere shimmered with colors, with shapes.

She saw the ballroom filled with people, heard the music and the gaiety of a masque. Lorcan slithered among the guests, a serpent in royal robes with his son and heir strutting in his wake. The black wolf prowled among them like a tame dog. Though his eyes were green and fierce, he kept his head lowered and kept to heel. Aurora saw the thick and bloody collar that choked his neck.

She saw Brynn chained to the throne with her daughter bound at her feet, and the ghost of another girl weeping behind a wall of glass.

And through the sounds of lutes and harps she heard the calls and cries of the people shut outside the castle. Pleas for mercy, for food, for salvation.

She was robed in regal red. the sword she raised shot hot white light from its killing point. As she whirled toward Lorcan, bent on vengeance, the world

**erupted. The battle raged—the clash of steel, the screams of the dying. She
heard the hawk cry as an arrow pierced its**

heart. The dragon folded its black wings and sank into a pool of blood.

Flames sprang up at her feet, ate up her body until she was a pillar of fire.

And while she burned, Lorcan smiled, and the black wolf licked his hand.

Failure and death, she thought as the globe went black as pitch in her hand.

Had she come all this way to be told her sword would not stand against Lorcan? Her friends would die, the battle would be lost, and she would be burned as a witch while Lorcan continued to rule—with the man she loved as little more than his cowed pet.

She could turn this aside, Aurora thought returning the globe to its box. She could go back to the hills and live as she always had. Free, as the

Travelers were free. Content, with only her dreams to plague or stir her.

For life was precious. She rubbed the chill from her arms as she watched the last star wink out over Sorcerer's Mountain. Thane was right, life was precious. But she couldn't, wouldn't, turn away. For more precious than life was hope. And more precious than both was honor.

She woke Cyra and Rhiann to help her garb herself in the robes of a lady. She would wear the mask another day.

"Why don't you tell her?" Kern sat on a barrel eating a windfall apple while Thane fed the horses. "There's nothing to tell."

"Don't you think the lady would be interested in what you are, what you're doing. Or more what you don't?" "She looks for heroes and warriors, as females do. She won't find one in me."

"She . . ." With a secret little smile, Kern munched his apple. "Does not seem an ordinary female. Don't you wonder?"

Thane dumped oats in a trough. "I can't afford to wonder. I put enough at risk last night because my blood was up. If she chatters about the tunnels, or what passed between us—"

"Does the lady strike you as a chatterbox?"

"No." Thane rested his brow on a mare's neck. "She is glorious. More than my dreams of her. Full of fire and beauty— and more, of truth. She won't speak of it, as she said she wouldn't. I wish I'd never seen her, touched her. Now that I have, every hour of the rest of my life is pain. If Owen chooses her . . ."

He set his teeth against a flood of black rage. "How can I stay and watch them together? How can I go when I'm shackled here?" "The time will come to break the shackles."

"So you always say." Thane straightened, moved to the next stall. "But the years pass, one the same as the other." "The True One comes, Thane."

"The True One." With a mirthless laugh, he hauled up buckets of water. "A myth, a shadow, to coat the blisters of Lorcan's rule with false hope. The only truth is the sword, and one day my hand will be free to use it."

"A sword will break your shackles, Thane, but it isn't steel that will free the world. It is the midnight star." Kern hopped off the barrel and laid a hand on Thane's arm. "Take some joy before that day, or you'll never really be free."

"I'll have joy enough when Lorcan's blood is on my sword."

Kern shook his head. "There's a storm coming, and you will ride it. But it will be your choice if you ride it alone." Kern flicked his wrist, and a glossy red apple appeared in his hand. With a merry grin, he tossed it to Thane, then

vanished. Thane bit into the apple, and the taste that flooded his mouth made him think of Aurora. He offered the rest to a

greedy gelding. Alone, he reminded himself, was best.

Wrapped in a purple cloak pinned with a jeweled brooch, Lorcan stood and watched his son practice his swordsmanship. What Owen lacked in style and form he made up for in sheer brutality, and that had his father's approval.

The soldier chosen for the practice had a good arm and a steady eye, and so made the match lively. Still, there were none in the city, or in the whole of Twylia, Lorcan knew, who could best the prince at steel against steel.

None would dare.

He had been given only one son, and that was a bitter disappointment. The wife he had taken in his youth had birthed two stillborn babes before Owen, and had died as she'd lived— without a murmur of complaint or wit— days after his birthing.

He had taken another, a young girl whose robust looks had belied a barren womb. It had been a simple matter to rid himself of her by damning her as a witch. After a month in the dungeons at the hands of his tribunal, she'd been willing enough to confess and face the purifying fires.

So he had taken Brynn. Far cousin of the one who had been queen. He'd wanted the blue of royal blood to run through the veins of his future sons—and had he got them, would have cast his firstborn aside without a qualm.

But Brynn had given him nothing but two daughters. Leia, at least, had possessed beauty, and would have been a rich bargaining chip in a marriage trade. But she'd been willful as well, and had tried to run away when he'd betrothed her.

The wild beasts of the forest had left little more than her torn and bloody cloak.

So he had no child but Dira, a pale, silent girl whose only use would be in the betrothing of her to a lord still loyal enough, still rich enough, to warrant the favor in two or three years' time.

He had planted his seed in Brynn again and again, but she lost the child each time before her term was up, and now was too sickly to breed. Even the maids and servants he took to his bed failed to give him a son.

So it was Owen who would carry his name, and his ambitions turned to the grandsons he would get. A king could not be a god without the continuity of blood.

His son must choose well.

He smiled as he watched Owen draw blood from his opponent, as he beat back his man with vicious strikes until the soldier lost his footing and fell. And Lorcan nodded with approval as Owen stabbed the sword's point into the man's shoulder.

He'd taught his son well. A fallen enemy was, after all, still an enemy.

"Enough." Lorcan's rings flashed in the sunlight as he clapped his hands. "Bear him away, bind him up." He waved off the wounded soldier and threw his arm around Owen's shoulders. "You please me."

"He was hardly worth the effort." Owen studied the stain on his blade before ramming it home. "It's tedious not to have more of a challenge." "Come, the envoys have brought the taxes from the four points, and I would speak with you before I deal with them. There are rumbles of rebellion in the north."

"The north is a place of ignorant peasants and hill dwellers who wait for Draco to fly from his mountain." With a glance toward the high peak, Owen snorted in disgust. "A battalion of troops sent up to burn a few huts, put a few of their witches on the pyre should be enough to quiet them."

"The talk that comes down is not of Draco but of the True One."

Owen's mouth twisted as he gripped the hilt of his sword. "Tongues won't flap of what is forbidden once they are cut out. Those who speak of treason must be routed out and reminded there is only one king of Twylia."

"And so they shall be. The envoys brought six rebels, as well as the taxes. They will be tried, and executed, as an example, as part of your betrothal ceremonies. Until then, the tribunal will . . . interrogate them. If these are more than rumbles, we will silence them."

They strode through the gates of the castle and across the great hall.

"Meanwhile, preparations for the rest of the ceremonies proceed. You must make your choice within the week."

Inside the throne room, Owen plucked a plum from a bowl and threw himself into a chair. "So many plums." He bit in, smiled. "All so ripe and tasty."

"There's more to your choice than a pleasing face. You may take any who stirs your blood into your bed. You are the prince, and will be king. Your bedmates may slake your lust, but your queen must do that and more. You must have sons."

Lorcan poured wine, and sat by the fire that burned even so early in the day for his comfort. "Strong sons, Owen. So you must choose a woman who will be more than a pretty vessel. Have any here found your favor?"

"One or two." Owen shrugged. "The latest arrival interests me. She has a bold look in her eye."

"Her dowry would be rich," Lorcan considered. "And her father's lands are valuable. She has beauty enough, and youth. It might do." "The match would tie the west to us, and as Ute's land runs north along the hills, such positioning would be strategic."

"Yes, yes." Lorcan rested his chin on his fist and considered. "The Realm of Magicks still thrives in pockets of the west, and too many men run tame there who preach of Draco's spell and the True One. It's time to look to the far west and north, and smother any small embers of treason before they flare."

"The Lady Aurora's father, it seems, is unwell." Owen took another bite of his plum. "If we were wed, he might sicken and die—with a bit of help. And so his lands, his fortifications, his wealth would come to me."

"It might do," Lorcan repeated. "I'll take a closer look at this one. If I approve, your betrothal will be announced at week's end at the masque. And you will be pledged the following morning."

Owen raised a brow. "So quickly?"

"With the wedding ceremony to take place at the end of a fortnight—by which time every man in the world must render a token to mark the events

—the masque and the wedding. The shepherd must render his finest rams, the farmer one quarter of his crop, the miller a quarter of his grain, and so on, so as to provide their prince and his bride with the stores for their household."

Lorcan stretched his booted feet toward the fire. "If the man has no ram, no crop, no grain, he must render his oldest son or if he has no son,

his oldest daughter, to serve the royal couple. Craftsmen and artisans will bequeath a year of their time so that your home can be built on the western border and furnished as befits your rank."

"Some will not give willingly," Owen pointed out.

"No. And the business of persuading them to do their duty to their king will bury all mutterings of the True One, scatter rebellious forces, and forge our hold on the west. Yes." He lifted his goblet in toast. "I think it may do."

Under the guise of serving his mistress, Rohan walked with his head humbly bowed. His heart was full of rage edged in fear. He kept his eyes lowered as he moved past guards and into the sitting room where Aurora gathered with the women to take rose tea and chatter about gowns and the upcoming masque.

"Your pardon, my lady."

Knowing her part, Aurora spared him a single disinterested glance. "I am occupied." "I beg your pardon, my lady, but the lace you requested has arrived."

"A full day late." She set her cup aside and shook her head at the women who sat closest to her as she rose. "It will probably be inferior, but we'll see what can be done with it. Have it sent to my chambers. I'll come now."

She walked out behind him, careful not to speak to him or to Rhiann, who followed in her wake, until they were behind doors again. "Lace." She sighed heavily, and poured ale to rid her mouth of the oversweet taste of the rose tea. "How I am lowered."

"Lorcan's envoys returned today with taxes levied against the four points." Aurora's mouth thinned. "He will not keep them for long." "They brought also six prisoners."

"Prisoners? What prisoners are these?"

"They say they are rebels, but four are only farmers, and one of them is aged and near crippled, while another is no more than a boy. The other two must have been set upon and taken while scouting. One of them is Eton."

Aurora lowered herself slowly to a chair as Rhiann bit back a cry. "Our Eton? Cyra's betrothed?"

"Eton was wounded, and all are being kept in the dungeons." He curled his hands helplessly into fists. "They're to be questioned by the tribunal."

"Tortured," Aurora whispered.

"It's said they'll be executed for treason within the week. Flogged and branded, then hanged."

"Compose yourself, Rhiann," Aurora ordered when the woman began to weep.

"It will not happen. Why were they taken, Rohan? How are they charged with treason?"

"I can't say. There's word among the servants that rebellion is brewing, that the True One is coming."

"So Lorcan strikes before he is struck." She pushed to her feet to pace as she brought the positioning of the dungeons into her mind. "We must get them out, and we will. We have a week."

"You can't leave them there for a week." Rhiann struggled against fresh tears. "To be tortured and starved."

"I have no choice but to leave them until we are ready to attack. If we try to free them now, we could fail, and even if we succeed, such a move would put Lorcan on alert."

"Eton may be dead in a week," Rhiann snapped. "Or worse than dead. Is this how you honor your family?" "This is how I rule, and it is bitter to me. Eton is like my own brother. Would you have me risk all to spare him?"

"No." Rohan answered before Rhiann could speak. "It would not honor him if you spared him pain, or even his life, and Lorcan continued to

rule." "Get word to him if you can. Tell him he must hold on until we can find a way. Send a dispatch to Gwayne. It's time. They are to travel in secret. They must not be seen. How long will it take them? Three days?"

"Three—or four."

"It will take three," Aurora said firmly. "I will meet him in the forest, near the tunnel, at midnight when he arrives. I'll know what must be done." "Cyra." Rhianne grieved for her daughter. "How will we keep this from her?"

"We won't. She has a right to know. I'll tell her. She should hear it from me."

She went out in search of her friend, hoping she would have the right words, and met Owen as she stepped into the courtyard. "Lady Aurora." He took her hand, bowed over it. "I was about to send word for you."

"I am at your pleasure, my lord prince."

"Then you'll honor me by riding out with me. I've been busy with matters of state all morning, and wish for a brisk gallop and your lovely company." "I would enjoy nothing more. May I meet you in an hour, my lord, so I might find my maid and change into proper attire?" "I'll wait. Impatiently."

She curtsied, tipping her face up with a saucy smile before rising and hurrying away. She found Cyra in the kitchens, her eyes bright and round with gossip.

"I require you," Aurora said coolly, then turned away so that Cyra had to rush after

her. "I've learned all about—"

"Not now," Aurora said under her breath. "I'm riding out with the prince," she said in a clear voice. "I'll want my red riding habit, and be quick about it."

"Yes, my lady."

Only Aurora heard Cyra's muffled giggle as the girl rushed ahead to the bedchamber. And only Aurora hoped she would hear Cyra's laughter again.

"And be quick about it," Cyra mimicked with another giggle as soon as Aurora closed the door behind her. "I had to bite my lip to keep from laughing. Oh, Aurora, I've learned all manner of things. The kitchens are fertile ground."

"Cyra, sit down. I must speak with you."

The tone had Cyra stopping to look at Aurora as she lifted up the red habit.

"Do you not ride out with Owen, then?" "No. Yes, that is—yes." Aurora pushed at her hair. "Yes, within the hour."

"It'll take nearly that long to get this done. A lady of your station would have her hair dressed differently for riding. It has to suit the hat, you know. We'll get started and exchange our news. Oh, Aurora, mine is *so* romantic."

"Cyra." Aurora took the habit and tossed it aside so she could grasp Cyra's hand. "I have word of Eton."

"Eton? What of Eton? He's in the north, scouting for Gwayne." The rosy flush was dying on her cheeks as she spoke, and her fingers trembled in

Aurora's. "Is he dead? Is he dead?" "No. But he's hurt."

"I'll go to him. I have to go to him."

"You can't. Cyra." She pushed her friend into a chair, then crouched at her feet. "Eton and five others were taken by Lorcan's soldiers. He was wounded. I don't know how badly. He was brought here, to the dungeons."

"He's here, in the castle? Now? And he lives?"

"Yes. They will question him. Do you know what that means?"

"They will torture him. Oh." Cyra squeezed her eyes shut. "Oh, my love."

"I can do nothing for him yet. If I try . . . all could be lost, so I can do nothing yet. I'm sorry." "I need to see him."

"It isn't safe."

"I need to see him. They send food down to the jailers, to the tribunal, and slop to the prisoners. One of the kitchen maids will let me take her place. If he sees me, he'll know there's hope. It will make him stronger. He would never betray you, Aurora, and neither will I. He's proud to serve you, and so am I."

Tears swam into Aurora's eyes, then she pressed her face into Cyra's lap. "It hurts to think of him there."

"Then you must not think of it." She stroked Aurora's hair and knew that she herself would think of little else. "I will pray for him. You'll be a good queen because you can cry for one man when so much depends on you."

Aurora lifted her head. "I'm so afraid. It comes close now, and I'm so afraid that I'll fail. That I'll die. That others will die for me." "If you weren't afraid, you'd be like Lorcan."

Aurora wiped her eyes. "How?"

"He isn't afraid because he doesn't love. To cause such pain you can't love or fear, but only crave." "Cyra, my sister." Aurora lifted Cyra's hand and pressed it to her cheek. "You've become wise."

"I believe in you, and it makes me strong. You must change or you'll be late and annoy Owen. You need to keep him happy. It will make his death at your hands all the sweeter."

Aurora's eyes widened. "You talk easily of killing."

"So will you, when I tell you what I've learned. Hurry. This will take some time."

"Brynn was one of your mother's women, and her friend," Cyra began.

"I know this. Now she sits as queen. Though not happily, by all appearances." Aurora turned so Cyra could unhook her gown. "She—Brynn—was widowed in the great battle. Thane was but three. In the year that followed, Lorcan decided to take a new wife. It's said— whispered—that she refused him but that he gave her the choice between giving herself to him and her son's life." "He would murder a child to win a wife?"

"He wanted Brynn, because she was closest to the queen, in spirit and in blood." Cyra helped Aurora into the riding habit and began to fasten it. "I only know it's said that Brynn wept to another of the handmaidens—the mother of the kitchen girl who spoke to me. She swore her allegiance, and gave herself to Lorcan for his promise to spare her son's life."

Aurora sat at the dressing table, staring at her own face, and asked herself what she would have done. What any woman would have done. "She had no choice."

"Thane was sent to the stables, to work, and was not allowed inside the castle from that day, nor to speak a single word to his mother." "Hard, hard and cold. He could have taken Brynn by force and killed the boy. He kept him alive, kept Thane alive and within her reach, never to touch or speak. To make them both suffer, to cause pain for the sake of it. Payment," Aurora said aloud as she let herself drift into the nightmare of Lorcan's mind. "Payment for her first refusal of him."

"This is his way," Cyra agreed. "A way of vengeance and retribution. Brynn married Lorcan, and twice miscarried his child before she gave birth to a daughter, who was Leia. Three years after, she bore Dira."

"She had no choice, but Thane . . . he's no longer a child."

"Wait, there's more." Cyra brushed out Aurora's hair and began to braid it.

"When Thane was but seven, he ran away—to join the rebels, it's said. He and a young friend. They were caught and brought back. The other boy, the brother of the maid who told me, was hanged."

The horror of it cut through her heart. "By Draco, he hanged a half-grown boy?"

"And forced Thane to watch it done. Thane was beaten and told that if he insulted the king again, another would die in his place. And still he ran away, less than a year later. He was captured, brought back, beaten, and another boy his age was hanged."

"This is beyond evil." Aurora bowed her head. "Beyond madness."

"And more yet. Lorcan took the baby, Dira, his own daughter and half sister to Thane, to the stables where Thane was shackled. She was only days old. And he put his own dagger at the baby's throat. If Thane ran again, if he spoke ill of Lorcan or Owen, if he disobeyed any law or displeased the king in any way, Dira would die for it, then Leia, then Brynn herself. If he did not submit, any and all who shared his blood would be put to death."

"Could he kill his own?" Struggling to see it, Aurora rubbed a hand over her troubled heart. "Yes, yes, he could do it. She is only a female child, after all," she said bitterly. "And how could a brother, a boy, a man, risk it? He could run, and now he could escape, but he could never forfeit his sisters' lives, risk his mother's."

She thought of what she'd seen in the crystal. The wolf walking like a tame dog, while his mother and sister were chained to the throne.

And the ghost of another sister stood trapped behind glass. "No, he could not run, he could not fight. Not even for his own freedom."

"He never did so again," Cyra confirmed as she rolled the braid into a thick knot at the base of Aurora's neck. "He speaks little to others, stays among the horses."

"He makes no friends," Aurora said quietly, "except a girl in a vision and an aged faerie. Because to make friends puts them at risk. So he's always alone."

"It breaks my heart." Cyra dashed a tear from her cheek. "They think he's beaten—Lorcan, Owen, everyone. But I don't believe this is so." "No." She remembered how he'd looked in the forest with a sword in his hand and the cold fire of battle in his eyes. "It is not so. He has buried his pride and given more than half his life to the waiting, but he is not beaten." She reached back to take Cyra's hand. "Thank you for telling me."

"A man who would humble himself to save another is a great man, greater perhaps than one who fights."

"Stronger. Truer. I misjudged him because I didn't look beyond my own eyes, into my heart. This wolf is not tamed. He stalks. I have fresh hope." She got to her feet, turned. "Go see your man, but take care. Take great care. Tell him, if you can, it won't be long. Three days, no more than four, and we will bring a flood to the City of Stars. I swear on my life, Lorcan will drown in it."

She stepped in front of the looking glass, and her smile was a warrior's smile. "Now we'll go flutter and preen for the son of the devil, and see what use he is to us."

Aurora hurried to the stables, hoping for a moment alone with Thane. Her horse and Owen's were already saddled. Owen's personal guard stood at the riding gelding's head.

She moved to her own mount as if inspecting the horse and the tack.

"You, there." She approached the stables, clapped her hands imperiously.

"Stableboy!"

Thane stepped out. He kept his head lowered, but his eyes lifted, and the hot resentment in them blasted her face. "My lady."

For the benefit of the guard, she crooked a finger and moved to her mount's far hind leg. She bent as if to inspect the knee, and as Thane did the same, she whispered. "I must speak with you. Tonight. I'll come to the stables."

"There is nothing more to say, and you put yourself and me at risk."

"It's urgent." Risking a touch, she brushed her fingers over the back of his hand. "Beloved."

She heard the clatter of armor and sword as the guard snapped to attention.

Giving her horse a light pat, she straightened and turned to smile at

Owen.

"Do you have some trouble with this . . . thing?" Owen demanded, sneering at Thane.

"Indeed, no, my lord. My mount seemed to favor this leg when we rode in. I was complimenting your boy on the care of my horse. I'm very fond of my horse."

Deliberately, she reached into her purse and drew out a copper. "For your good work," she said and handed the coin to Thane. "Thank you, my lady."

"It isn't necessary to give him coin, nor to speak to him."

"I find such small boons ensure good care." She moved, subtly, so that she stood between Thane and Owen, and sent the prince her brightest

smile. "As I said, I'm very fond of my horse. Will you help me mount, my lord? I am so looking forward to a gallop."

Owen shoved the mounting block aside and set his hands on Aurora's waist. She laid hers on his shoulders and let out a flirtatious laugh as he vaulted her into the saddle.

"You're very strong, my lord." She gathered her reins. "I also have a fondness for a strong man." With another laugh, she clicked her tongue and sent her horse flying away from the stables.

Owen, she discovered, was a mediocre rider on a superior mount. She reined herself in to keep pace with him. It was good, despite the choice of company, to ride. To feel the freshness of the air on her skin and to be away from the clatter of the castle and the smells of the city.

Her men, she thought, would come from the northwest, using the forest for cover and keeping off the roads. Then the hills would ring with the battle and, when it was done, with victory.

"You look thoughtful, Aurora." Owen studied her as they slowed to a trot at the edge of field and forest.

"Only admiring the beauty of this country, my lord. And wondering how pleasant it is to know that all you see is yours." "The woman I choose will have part in that."

"If you will it," she said carelessly, and walked her horse along the forest path. "There is rich land in the west, as well. My father tends what's his with a firm hand and a clear eye. The hills reach high there, and the cattle grow fat on them."

"The name of my bride will be announced at the masque, at week's end."

"So I am told." She slid her gaze toward his, quirked her lips. And slid her power over him like silk. "Do you know it?"

"Perhaps I do." He reached to take her reins and stop her horse, then leapt from his own. While she raised her eyebrows, he circled, then lifted his arms to pluck her from the saddle. "But a prince must take care in selecting a bride. One who will be queen."

She laid her hand on his chest. "So he must—as a woman must take care, my lord, in who takes her favors."

"I want a woman who will stir my blood." He pulled her closer and would have taken her mouth if she hadn't laid her fingers on his lips.

"A man's blood is easily stirred. And if a woman gives him what he desires before a pledge is made, the woman is a fool. What man, what king, wants a foolish wife?"

"If you give me what I desire, and it pleases me, I will make the pledge. Lie with me now, and you will be queen."

"Make me queen." She played her fingers along his jaw. "And I will lie with you. I will give you sons, and great pleasure in the making of them."

"I could take you." He dug his fingers into her hips. "You couldn't stop me." His breath came short as he lifted her to her toes. "You belong to me, as every blade of grass in the field beyond belongs to me. I am your lord. I am your god."

"You have the strength, and the power." And though she had a dagger beneath her skirts, she couldn't afford to use it, not even in defense against rape.

"Why take by force today what would be given freely in a few days' time?"

"For excitement."

She only laughed, and tapped his cheek. "To hump like rabbits in the dirt? Hardly befitting you, my lord, or the woman who wishes to sit by your side, and lie by it. The waiting will, I think . . ." She traced her fingertip over his lips. "Hone appetites."

"A sample, then." He circled her throat with his hand, squeezed, then covered her lips with his in a brutal kiss. She tasted his desire, and his delight in force. With all her will she swallowed revulsion and fury, and let him take.

She thought of how he would pay for this, and for the thousands of cruelties to her people, for his part in humiliating Thane. For every lash

Eton might suffer.

When his hands pawed at her, when they clamped bruisingly on her breasts, she neither struggled nor winced. For he would pay.

"My lord, I beg you." She hoped the quaver in her voice could be taken for passion rather than the rage she felt. "Indulge me and wait for the rest. You will not be disappointed, I promise."

"Would you rather I nibble some housemaid to sate my appetite?"

"Such a man as you would have great appetites. I will do my best to meet them, at the proper time." She broke free. "Your kisses make me tremble. It will break my heart if you only toy with me."

He grasped her waist and tossed her up to the saddle more roughly than necessary. "You'll know my answer at week's end." Bastard, she thought as she gathered her reins. But she smiled, with her lashes lowered. "And you, my lord, will know mine."

She wanted to bathe, to rub her lips raw so that there was nothing left of the taste or feel of him. But she laughed and talked her way through another night of feasting. She lifted her cup to the king in toast. She danced, and pretended only feminine flusters and objections when Owen pulled her into the shadows and touched her body. As if he had the right.

Her mind was too troubled to speak of it to Rhiann as she removed the ball gown and put on her nightdress. She watched the sky, careful not to venture too close to the window, as the world quieted toward sleep.

Then, donning cloak and hood, she slid out into the night, to the stables.

She knew he wasn't there. She understood now that part of her would sense him, would always sense him. So he hadn't waited for her, as she'd asked.

Once again she took a candle and followed after him through the tunnels, and into the forest beyond. He stood in the moonlight. It showered over his ragged shirt, his unkempt hair, the worn boots.

"I told you not to come."

"I need to speak with you." She blew the candle out, set it down. "To see you. To be with you." He stepped back. "Are you mad, or simply sent here to ensure I will be?"

"You could have told me when I asked why you stay here." "It's nothing to do with you."

"Everything you do, everything you are, and think and feel, all of you has to do with all of me." "You rode with him."

"I do what needs to be done, as you do. Thane." She reached out a hand as she moved to him, but he turned away. "Will you be wedded to him, and bedded to him? Does that need to be done?"

For the first time in days a smile that came from her heart curved her lips.

"You're jealous. I'm small enough to enjoy that. He will never have me as a man has a woman. You already have."

"I haven't. I won't."

"In dreams you have." She moved in, laid her cheek on his back and felt his body go taut as a bowstring. "You've dreamed of me." Both heart and body strained toward her. "All of my life, it seems, I've dreamed of you."

"You love me."

"All of my life." He spun back, held her at arm's length when she would have embraced him. "You kept me alive, I think, in dreaming of you."

The

loving of you, and being loved. Now, by the gods, you'll be the death of me."

"No one lives forever." She took off her cloak, spread it on the ground. Then, standing in the moonlight, she drew off her nightdress, let it pool at her feet.

"Live now."

He reached out, wound her long, dark hair around his fist. He could walk away from this, still had the strength. Or he could take love, one precious moment of love, and have its comfort and torment with him the rest of his days.

"If hell awaits me, I'll have one night in heaven first."

"We'll have it." She waved a hand and around them cast a circle of protective fire. The light of it shimmered in golds as a thin mist covered the ground in a pure white blanket.

"I've waited for you, Thane." She touched her lips to his, fit her body to his.

"Through the light, and through the dark." "For this one night with you, I would trade a thousand nights alone. Bear a thousand lashes, die a thousand deaths." "Midnight nears." She smiled as he lowered her to the soft and misted ground. "It's my hour."

"It will be ours. Aurora." He kissed her tenderly, very tenderly. "My light."

Sweet, so sweet, that merging of lips, the brush of fingertips over flesh. She knew his taste, his touch, so warmly familiar, and yet so gloriously new. The feel of his body, the hard muscle, the ridged scars, aroused her, as did the gleam of his eyes in the glow of witch fire. "Thane. My wolf." With a laugh, she reared up and nipped at his chin. "So much better than a dream."

Their lips met again, a deep search that had her trembling beneath him, and shifting restlessly as needs heated in her blood. Her heart thundered under his palm—the hard callus of his labors, then under his mouth—the hot brand of his need. And her belly began to ache as if with hunger. Her own hands became more demanding, tugging at his worn shirt. The sound of cloth ripping was only another thrill.

He wanted to go slowly, to draw this night into forever. She could vanish, he knew, when the sun struck, and he would be left with more misery than he thought he could bear.

But his need for her was impossible, enormous, and the love that stormed through him stole his breath. The urgency built with every touch, every murmur, until he was half mad.

Whatever he took, she gave, then only demanded more. She cried out his name when he drove her to peak, then clung relentlessly with her mouth like a fever on his.

The empty well of his life flooded full, and he knew for the first time something he would kill to keep.

His hands clamped on her wrists. He looked down at her with eyes fierce and gleaming green. "You'll never belong to him. He'll never touch you like this."

"No." Here was power, she realized. Another kind of female power. "Only you. It is the woman who gives herself to you, and only you." She heard the bells begin to strike the hour. "Mate with me, join with me. Love with me. We'll be more together than either can be alone."

He plunged inside her, watched the power and the pleasure of the moment rush over her face. And felt the rough magic of it whip through him. Then she was moving under him and with him, and for him. Their fingers locked, their lips met.

Overhead, lightning flashed in the form of a dragon, and the stars flared red as blood.

When the witching hour passed, she stayed with him. But she knew the time grew short. If they were as others, she mused, they could remain like this, wrapped warm in her cloak, and sleep until dawn broke.

But they were not as others.

"I have much to tell you," she began.

He only drew her closer to his side. "You're a witch. I know. I'm bewitched. And grateful." "I've cast no spell on you, Thane."

He smiled and continued to study the stars. "You are the spell."

"We are the spell." She shifted so she could look down at his face. "I'll explain. You are a hero to me." He looked away from her and started to move.

"A man who would put all he wanted, all he needed, aside to protect others? The greatest of warriors. But that time is ending." She took his hand, brought it to her lips. "Will you stand beside me? Will you pledge me your sword?"

"Aurora, I will pledge you my life. But I won't lift a sword knowing the act will bring another down on my sister. My mother. Or some poor innocent. They hanged my friend, and he was but six seasons. His only crime was in following me."

"I know." She kissed his cheek. "I know." And the other. "No harm will come to your family, or to any in your stead." She reached out, picked up her dagger, and drew it across her palm. "I swear it, on my blood."

He gripped her hand. "Aurora—"

"She is my sister now. She is my mother now. You are my husband now."
Emotion stormed across his face. "You would take me this way? I'm nothing."

"You're the bravest man I know, and you're mine. You are the most honorable, and the most true. Will you take me?"

The world, Thane thought, could change in one magic hour. "I'll get you away to safety. I know how it can be done, with Kern's help—" "I go nowhere."

"To the Valley of Secrets, through the Realm of Magicks," he continued, ignoring her protest. "My sister is safe there, and so will you be." "Your sister? Leia lives?"

Fury flashed onto his face. "He would have sold her, like a mare. Bartered her like a whore. She was but sixteen. With Kern's help, she was taken from the castle and away, and her cloak left torn and bloodied deep in the woods. She lives, and I will owe Kern and his kind all of my days. But she is lost to me, and I can't risk getting word of her to my mother, to give her even that much comfort."

Not a ghost, Aurora realized, but a memory. Shielded and safe—and apart. She touched her fingers to his cheeks. "What did it cost you?" she murmured.

"Kern asked for no payment."

"No—what did Lorcan and Owen take from you? What scars do you bear from their anger at the loss of so valuable a possession to them? So many times, when we came to each other in visions, I saw your sadness. But you would never tell me."

"You would always bring me joy. Beloved."

"They whipped you in her stead. Laid the lash on your back because they couldn't lay it on hers. I can see it now, and that you reached through the pain, beyond it, because your sister was saved."

"Don't look." He gripped her hands when her smoky eyes went dark with vision. "There's no pain here now. And there will be none. Kern will help me get you away. You, and my mother and sister, your women. Then I'll find the rebels, and come back to deal with Lorcan and his whelp."

"You won't have to look far for the rebels. They're on their way even now. Your mother and your sister will be safe. I've sworn it. But I stay, and I fight." She laid her hands on his shoulders to stem his protest, and looked deep into his eyes. "A queen does not sit in safety while others win the world."

She got to her feet. "I am Aurora, daughter of Gwynn and Rhys. I am the Lady of the Light. I am the True One, and my time has come. Will you stand with me, Thane the Valiant, and pledge me your sword?"

There was a light around her as she spoke, as gold as sunlight and stronger than the witch fire she'd conjured. For a moment it seemed a crown of stars sat sparkling on her head, and their brilliance was blinding.

He had to struggle to find his voice, but he knelt. "My lady. I never believed in you, and still I knew you from my first breath. All that I have, all that I am is yours. I would die for you."

"No." She dropped to her knees to take his face in her hands. "You must live for me. And for the child we made tonight." She took his hand and pressed it to her belly.

"You can't know—"

"I do. I do know." Her face, her voice, were radiant. "You gave me a child tonight, and he will be king, and rule this world after us. He will be more than

either of us, more still than the sum of us. We must win it back for him, and for our people. We will take from Lorcan, in blood if we must, what he took in blood. But you must live for me, Thane. Swear it."

"I swear it." In all of his memory he'd lived with nothing. Now in one night he was given the world. "A son?"

"For the first. We will make others." With a laugh, she threw her arms around him. "They will be happy, and so well loved. And they will serve, Thane." She drew back. "Serve the world as well as rule it. This can be. I begin to see so much of what can be. I needed you to clear my vision." "How many come? What are their arms?"

"Now you think like a soldier." Satisfied, she sat on the ground. "I'll know more soon. Here, at midnight the night after next, we meet Gwayne. He is my hawk, and he brings the forces. Two of mine are held now in the dungeon. One is as dear as a brother to me. They must be freed, but

not until the night of the masque. I pray they live to see that night, and they are not to be sacrificed."

"I can get them out. I know the tunnels and underground better than any. There are others held there who would stand with you." "What do you need?"

"One good man and his sword would be enough."

"You shall have him. This must be done, and quietly, in the hour before the masque. The wounded, or those too weak to fight, must be taken

through the tunnels and away. Men will die, Thane. There will be no choice. But I want no man's blood spilled carelessly. Some would swear allegiance if given the opportunity. From what I've seen, not all who serve Lorcan do so with a full heart."

"Some serve only in fear of their lives or the lives of their loved ones." He shrugged when she studied him. "Men often speak their mind around horses. And minions."

"You are no one's minion."

"I've been less than that." His hand curled into a fist. "By the blood, for the first time since childhood I know what it is to want, more than to live, to stretch out of this skin and be. I would have served you," he said quietly. "I have seen you wear the Crown of Stars, and I would have served you in anything you asked, servant to queen. But to have loved you, as a man loves a woman, has changed everything. I can never go back."

"Only for a short time. My wolf will conceal his fangs only for a short time. I must go now. When we move, Thane, we must move quickly." She went willingly into his arms, held close. "We'll have all of our lives for the rest."

And for the rest, he thought, as he let her go, she and the child would be protected at any and all costs.

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Hoping to avoid Owen for the day, Aurora made plans to go into the city and there measure the feeling among the people— and the strategy of attack and defense. It was difficult to deny herself a trip to the stables and even a fleeting moment with Thane, but she sent Rohan to order the carriage, as was fitting for a lady of her station.

"Soon there will be no more need for pretense. Or the wait," she added and touched Cyra's shoulder. "The prisoners will be freed, and the wounded among them taken safely into the forest. I promise you."

"He suffers, Aurora. My Eton suffers. I could barely stand to see him so. Many held there don't even know their crime, and some are driven mad by the dark and the starvation."

"It won't be dark much longer. Men held there have fathers or sons or brothers. They'll fight with me. I saw the dragon in the sky last night, and the red stars." She laid a hand on her belly. "I've seen what can be."

She hooked her arm with Cyra's and started across the courtyard. And heard the clash of armor as guards snapped to attention. The heat of battle flashed in her blood even as she bowed her head and curtsied to the man who called himself king.

"Majesty."

He took her hand to bring her to her feet, and didn't release it. "A pretty light on a gloomy morning." "You are too kind, sire. But even a dank day in such a place is a joy."

"And do you ride out again today?"

"I go into the city, with your permission, my lord, in hopes to find something appropriate for the masque. I don't wish to dishonor you or the prince by arriving at such a spectacle in my country garb."

"You go unescorted, lady?"

"I have my men, sir, and my women." She fluttered up at him. "Will I not be safe enough?"

He chuckled her under the chin and made her spine freeze. "Beauty is never safe enough. Do you not seek the company of the prince?" "Always, my lord.

But . . ." She offered a slow, sidelong smile. **"I fear he may become bored with me if I am too accessible. Do you not think**

that a man desires a woman more when she is just out of reach?"

"You're a clever one, aren't you?"

"A clever mind is a valuable tool to a woman. As is amiability, so if you prefer I forgo this venture and wait upon Prince Owen's pleasure, I

will do so." She glanced over as Rohan brought her carriage into the courtyard. **"Shall I send it away again, sire?"**

"Go, and enjoy. I look forward to seeing what catches your eye in the shops."

He helped her into the carriage, and was obviously pleased when she peeked out the window and sent him one last smile.

"He makes my skin crawl," Aurora said as she flopped back against the seat.

"He would have you for himself if he could." Rhiann nodded wisely. "There's a look in a man's eye when he imagines such things. Having you for his son is his next choice."

"What he'll have is my sword at his throat. And a happy day that will be. How much have we left to spend?" she demanded. Rhiann carefully counted out the coins in her purse, and had Aurora blowing out a breath.

"I hate to waste it on foolishness, but I have to make a showing. Lorcan will expect it now."

"You can be very particular," Cyra said, and worked up a smile. "Turning up your nose at the offerings, sniffing at materials, waving away baubles." "I suppose. I'd rather be inside the taverns listening to the talk, but we'll leave that to Rohan." She glanced out the window of the carriage, and her heart ached at the sight of children begging for food. She thought of the taxes levied, all the coins stored inside the palace. "I have an idea, something that

might distract Lorcan and help our army move into the forest unnoticed. Chaos," she declared, "is another kind of weapon."

Furious, Owen stalked into the stables. He'd wanted Aurora, but she was off—with no word to him—to the city. He'd planned another ride, with a picnic by the river. And a seduction.

If he were to choose her, and his mind was nearly made up, he expected her to be available at his whim. It was best she learned that now. There were others with more beauty, others with more generous attributes. If she refused to come to heel, he would take one of them as queen, and make the intriguing Aurora a consort.

He pushed his way into a stall where Thane was wrapping a foreleg for the mount of one of the soldiers. "Saddle my horse."

Thane kept his head lowered as he continued to wrap the leg. "Yes, my lord."

"Now, you worthless nit." He struck out, slapping Thane in the face with the back of his hand.

Thane took the blow, and though he knew it was foolish, he checked his grip on the halter so that the frightened horse shied and canted, driving

Owen into the wall of the stall.

"You'll pay for that, you ham-handed bastard."

There was enough satisfaction in watching Owen go white as bone and scramble out of the stall to take all the sting out of the next blow. "A

thousand pardons, my lord prince."

"I'll deal with you later. Get my horse, and be quick about it."

As Owen strode out of the stables, Thane grinned and wiped the blood from his mouth.

"The mount's wasted on him." Thane turned and saw Kern leading the already saddled horse from its stall. "A lame oneeyed donkey would be wasted on him."

Thane ran a hand over the gleaming neck of Owen's stallion. "If the gods are with me, and I live, I will have this horse as my own. Thank you for saddling him."

"A simple matter, in a complicated time." "You knew who she was. Who she is." "The True One shines."

"She does." Thane rested his brow on the stallion's neck. "I have such love for her. Fierce and frightening love. I'll do what needs to be done, Kern, but I ask you, whatever you've given me over the years, to give it now to my family. I can go into any battle, take any risk, if I know they're protected." "You've stood as their shield long enough. I'll stand for you when the time comes."

"Then I'll be ready." He led the horse out, and stood meekly at its head while Owen berated him. "I'll be ready," he repeated and watched Owen spur the mount and ride off.

The sky stayed dim, but no rain fell. Aurora watched the dark clouds and prayed that the storm brewing would hold while her men marched toward the city. She used her time there to study the fortifications, to watch the changing of the guard under the guise of wandering among the shops.

The wares were rich, and the people starving.

"There is talk," Rohan told her as she stood by as if to supervise the loading of her goods into the carriage, "of portents. The dragon flew in the sky last night, and the stars bled."

"And what do the people make of these portents?"

"Some fear it's the end of the world, some hope it's the beginning." "They're both right."

"But those who dare speak of hope do so in whispers. More were dragged from their homes in the night and charged with treason. There are murmurs, Aurora, that Lorcan will use the masque for some dark purpose, that he plans some sorcery."

"He has no such powers."

"It's said he has sought them." Rohan glanced left, right, to be certain they weren't overheard. "That he has courted the dark. Sacrifices. Human sacrifices to draw power from blood."

"Superstitious mutterings. But we won't ignore them." She climbed into the carriage and rode back to the castle with her mind circling a hundred thoughts.

There was a time for warriors, and a time for witches. When the hour was late, Aurora stirred her power. She called the hawk, and ten of his fellows. Then twenty, then a hundred. And more, until the sky teemed with them. Standing in her window, she raised the wind and, lifting her arms, threw her power into it.

Hawks screamed, circled, dove. Guards and courtiers rushed to the courtyard and the gardens, to the city, to the walls. There were cries of fear, shouts of wonder.

The great birds flew into the castle, through window and door, and sent servants scurrying under chair and bed. The beat of wings, the call of hawk,

filled the air as in a golden mass they streaked into the treasury, plucking coins in their talons, streaming out again to drop them like rich rain on the city.

With cries of wonder and delight, men, women, and children rushed out of their homes and hovels to gather the bounty. When the call to arms came, many of the soldiers were as busy as the townspeople stuffing coins into pocket and purse. Before order could be restored, the cry of hawks was an echo, the beat of wings a memory.

The streets of the city glittered with coins.

An early payment, Aurora thought, watching the chaos below her window. The rest would come, very soon.

There was talk of little else the next day. Some blamed the strange raid on faeries, or witchcraft. It was said that the king's rage was black. Soldiers posted proclamations warning that any citizen found with coins would forfeit a hand.

Still, there was not a single coin left on the streets, and for the first time Aurora heard more laughter than woe when she listened to the city.

The confusion had kept her out of Lorcan's and Owen's way through the day, and given her time to have young Rhys slither into the dungeons with food for the prisoners while the guards gossiped.

But the time for giving food and coin to those in need was over, and the time for war was nearly upon her.

Distracted, she hurried toward her chamber to make final preparations for meeting Gwayne, and she didn't see Owen lurking. He had her back to the wall and his hand at her throat. She was already reaching for her dagger

before caution had her fisting her hand and struggling to turn the battle light in her eye to fear.

"My lord. You frighten me." "What game do you play?"

She shivered and turned her lips up in a tremulous smile. "Many, sir, and well. What have I done to displease you?"

"I did not give you leave to fritter off. Two days have passed, and you have not sought my company. I did not give you leave to travel into the city yesterday."

"No, my lord, but your father, the king, did so. I only sought the shops in hope that I might find something to please you for the ball. We have nothing so fine in the west as in the City of Stars. Please, my lord." She touched her hand to his. "You're hurting me."

"I've made it clear that I favor you. If you don't wish me to turn my eye toward another, take care, Aurora." "Your favor, my lord, is all I could wish, but your passions unnerve me. I'm only a maid." "I can make you more." He pushed his hand between her legs. "And less."

"Would you treat me so?" She wished for tears, willed them into her eyes as rage spewed through her. "Like a doxy to be fondled in doorways? Do you show your favor by dishonoring me?"

"I take what I wish. When I wish."

"My lady!" Rhiann screamed in shock and rushed down the corridor with Cyra at her heels.

Aurora broke away, to fall sobbing into Rhiann's arms and let herself be carried away into her chamber.

The minute the door was shut and secured, she stood dryeyed. "Speak of this to no one," she ordered. "No one." She looked at the hand she held

close to her side, and the dagger in it. "The prince of pigs has no idea how close he came to being gutted. I will not dine tonight. Send word that Lady Aurora is indisposed."

She sat and picked up a quill. "I have work."

She wore a high-necked gown to hide the bruises in a color chosen to blend with the night. There was enough anger left from her encounter with Owen to have her strapping a short sword at her side as well as the dagger on her thigh.

She threw on her cloak, with her mother's brooch pinned inside it.

She carried no lamp or candle, but slipped like a shadow through the castle. At the sound of approaching footsteps, she pressed herself against the wall, and through the veil of witch smoke watched two guards lead a serving girl toward Owen's chambers. The girl's face was pale as the moon, and her eyes dull with fear and resignation.

Aurora's hand clamped on the hilt of her sword, her knuckles white with rage and impotence against the metal. She could not interfere, could do nothing to help the poor girl, for to do so would risk all.

But he would pay. She vowed it. As his father would pay for his treatment of innocence.

She hurried down the steps, easing through doorways, and slipped out of the castle through the kitchen. Drawing up her hood, she made her way to the stables under the cover of darkness.

The instant she was inside, Thane pulled her into his arms. "I worry," he whispered even as his lips sought hers. "Every moment I can't see you, touch you, know you're safe, I worry."

"It's the same for me." She eased back, just to touch his face, and saw the bruises. "Oh, Thane." "It's nothing. Nothing he won't pay for."

Instinctively she touched the neck of her gown, thought of the marks of Owen's hand hidden under it. "Payment will be made. I swear it.

Come, and let's pray that Gwayne and our army await."

He lifted the door to the tunnels, but when he reached for a lamp, Aurora stilled his hand. "No. Tonight, we go by my light. It must be shown," she said as she drew the crystal star from the pocket of her cloak. "To give those who would fight hope, to let them see what they risk their lives for." The star shimmered, and the light within it grew until it pulsed pure white. It beamed through the dark of the tunnels and became as bright as day. And she was the light, burning with the power and purity of it. His throat stung, and his heart swelled with a mixture of love and wonder. "My lady. If my heart and my sword, if my life were not already yours, I would lay them before you now."

"Keep your life, beloved, for a thousand stars would never light mine without you. I need my wolf." She took his hand as they moved through the tunnels.

"My lord of the stables. You know more of courtly matters than I."

At his quick laugh she shook her head. "You do," she insisted. "I was raised as a Traveler—educated, it's true, by book, by battle, by journeys and song and story, but there will come a time when I must hold court. It plays on my nerves."

"You are every inch a queen. It's a wonder men don't fall to their knees when you pass."

"You love me." And it warmed her to say it. "So it would seem so to you. It won't just be a matter of defeating Lorcan, but of convincing the people of the world that I am true. The work is just beginning."

"I'm used to work."

It was Kern who waited at the end of the tunnel. He wore light armor and his battle sword. "They come, Lady of the Light. But first, I bring you greetings from the Realm of Magicks." He bowed low. "And request to speak as envoy." "You are welcome, sir." She glanced at Thane in confusion when Kern remained bowed.

Thane grinned, sent her a wink. He hadn't been tutored by a faerie throughout his life without learning the protocol. "You do honor to your queen, Lord of Magicks. Greetings to you from the world of men. You have leave to speak."

"Well done." Kern rose with a twinkle in his eye.

"Meaning no offense, but can we speak freely here?" Aurora gestured with her free hand. "Men and faerie folk share the forest, and the night. I am not queen until I'm crowned, and I have much yet to learn on how to be one. What word do you bring from your realm?"

"I have a lengthy and lyrical speech prepared."

"Lengthy it would be," Thane assured Aurora. "I can't promise the lyrical."

"However"—Kern shot his student a steely stare—"I'll cut it to the bone. The Realm of Magicks is at your command, Lady of the Light. We will fight with you if you'll have us."

"You haven't raised your forces or your powers against Lorcan in all these years. Why do you offer to raise them now?" "We've raised your wolf, my lady, as it was written. I am for him, and he is for you. The hour to do more had not come."

"Faeries can die at the hand of men—and more, it's said that Lorcan courts magic. Will you and yours risk all that is to come?"

"We have died at the hands of men, hands that follow Lorcan's command. And some of us have turned from truth to embrace the lies. Some from weakness, some from fear, and some from the ambition for greater powers. Our kinds are not so different in such matters, my lady. We will follow the queen into battle. Will the queen trust my word?"

Aurora turned to Thane. "I'll trust yours." "He's as true as any I know."

"Then thanks to you and your kind, Lord of Magicks. What you've said here tonight, and what you'll do on the morrow, will never be forgotten." He took the hand she offered, bowed over it. "Your hawks provided fine entertainment in the night, Majesty."

"There is little entertainment in this place. I craved some. And it served to keep Lorcan and his dogs' eyes on the city, and away from the forest." "Now your white hawk approaches."

She swung around and saw Gwayne step away from the trees, alone. Regal protocol was forgotten in the sheer joy of seeing him. She sprang toward him, threw her arms around him. "I've missed you! There's so much to say, and little time to say it." She drew back, studied his face. "You're tired."

"It was a long journey." "How many are with you?"

"We're two hundred strong, but many of those are farmers, craftsmen. Boys." He gripped her hands, squeezed. "Some are armed with clubs, pitchforks, or simply stones from the fields, but they come."

"Then they're valued for it, every one."

"They need to see, Aurora, to believe, for they're weary, and some grow frightened. Without a stir of hope, some will scatter by morning." "They will see, and they will believe." She reached back for Thane's hand. "This is Thane, who is my mate, the wolf of my visions. And Kern of the faeries, who is his teacher and brings us word from his realm of their loyalty to the True One. Take us to the army, Gwayne, so they can see. And pray to the gods I find the words to stir them."

Gwayne led them through the forest, calling a low signal to sentries already posted. The camp was rough, the faces of the men she saw pale with fatigue. Some were old, others much too young, and her heart began to ache with the knowledge of what she would ask of them.

She shook her head before Gwayne could speak. "I must do this myself. If I can't do this, I can't do the rest. They have followed you this far, my hawk. Now they have to follow me."

Gathering herself, she climbed onto a wide stump and stood quietly for a moment while the men shifted and murmured and studied her.

"I am Aurora." She didn't lift her voice, but kept it low so the murmuring stilled as the men strained to hear. "I am the Lady of the Light. I am the queen of Twylia. I am the True One. The woman I am weeps at what has been done to the world, to the people and the magicks of it. My father, the king, was slain through treachery, and my mother, the queen, gave her life for my birth. I am from death, and my heart bleeds knowing that more death will come from me. I am a woman, and have no shame of tears."

She let them fall silently down her face and glimmer in the moonlight filtering through the trees.

"I am Aurora." Her tone strengthened as she loosed her cape and flung it aside. As she drew her sword and raised it to the sky. "I am the Lady of the

Light. I am the queen of Twylia. I am the True One. The warrior in me burns at what has been done to the world, to the people and the magicks of it. I will not rest, I will fight unto death to take back what was stolen from me and mine. My sword will sing into battle. I am a warrior, and I have no fear of death when the cause is justice."

Once more she held the crystal star in her palm and drew from it, from herself, the power of light. Men fell back, or dropped to their knees as that light grew and grew until it burned like a thousand candles. Wind whipped through the forest, sent her hair flying as she held both sword and star aloft.

"I am Aurora!" Her voice rang through the night, and the bells began their toll of midnight. "I am the Lady of the Light. I am the queen of Twylia. I am the True One. I am a witch, and my rage for what has been done to the world and my people is cold as ice, is hot as flame, is deep as the sea. My power will light the dark, and it will blind those who stand against me. I am woman and warrior, witch and queen. I will weep and fight and blaze until the world is right again. And all who follow me will be remembered and honored until the end of days."

She threw back her head and punched her power toward the sky. Light carved through the black, and spun in mad circles of golds and reds and silvers. And became a crown of stars.

"None but the True One dares to wear the Crown of Stars. None but the True One can bear its weight and its heat. None but the True One can give the world back to the people and the magicks. When next the moon rises, I will fight for the world and take my crown. Will you follow me?"

They roared for her and cheered. The soldier and the farmer, the old and the young.

She sheathed her sword and passed her hand over the star so that its light slowly dimmed. "Rest now," she called out. "Rest and gather your courage and your might. I go with my hawk, my wolf, and he who serves the dragon to prepare for the battle."

When she would have leapt down, Thane circled her waist with his hands and lifted her to the ground. "A queen shouldn't jump from a tree stump after so stirring a speech."

"I need you to remind me of those small details." Her lips curved at the smile in his eyes. "And to look at me just like that, as often as possible." "I am at your service."

"And now we need to gather our forces, and our brains. Gwayne? A quiet place where we four can speak?" "May I serve here, my lady?" Kern asked, and at her nod, he flicked both wrists.

They stood now in a brightly lit chamber with a fire snapping in the hearth. Kern gestured toward a table and the chairs that surrounded it. "This is my rath, and a good private place for plots and plans. Be comfortable. Would you have wine?"

"By the gods, I would," Gwayne said, with feeling. "It's been a dry march."

"And food?" Platters of meat, bread, cheese, and fruit appeared on the table.

"No warrior eats until all eat," Aurora said and earned a proud look from Gwayne. "Your men will be fed, Majesty. We are pleased to offer our hospitality tonight." "Then eat." She slapped Gwayne on the back. "While I tell you what I know."

She told him of the masque, of the dungeons, of the threat to Brynn and Dira, and with Thane's help she drew diagrams of the fortifications and the locations of guards.

"Your father was a good friend," Gwayne said to Thane, "a brave warrior with a true heart. He would be proud to know what you have done, and will do."

"Most of my life I've felt he would be ashamed I hadn't lifted my hand."

"He loved your mother and you above all things. You have each sacrificed self for the life of the other. A man would be proud of such a wife, and such a son."

"I don't want those sacrifices to be in vain," Aurora added. "Brynn and Dira must be protected, and Leia kept safe until the castle and city are back in our hands. Brynn and Dira's presence will be required at the masque. I want at least one man each by their side, to shield them, then to escort them to safety with Rhiann and Cyra."

"There's an anteroom here." Thane pointed to the drawings. "With a passage gained by opening this panel by a mechanism in the hearth. My mother knows of it. Either she or Dira could lead the way from there."

"It must be done quickly, before Lorcan thinks to use them as a bargaining tool. Just as freeing those in the dungeons must be done quickly. And quietly. We strike there first, while the company is gathered in the great hall for the masque. When it's done, we divide our troops. Into the tunnels to strike at the castle from the inside, to the walls—here and here?" She glanced at Thane for approval.

"The weakest points," he agreed. "A breach could be made, and from those three attacks, confining Lorcan and his personal guard between." She rose as Gwayne and Thane debated battle strategy, and she moved to the fire to study the images she saw in the flames.

She could hear the beat of her own heart, and knew it beat for revenge. There was a lust in her belly for blood—Lorcan's blood.

When she looked down at her hands, they were wet with it, and in her head were the agonized screams of the dying as her sword cut viciously through flesh and bone.

And in the flames she saw the Crown of Stars go black.

"Blood and death," she declared when she sensed Kern behind her. "If I hunger for this, what manner of queen am

I?" "Having hunger and sating appetite are different matters, lady."

"I want this, for myself. His blood on my hands." She held them up, knowing Kern could see as she saw. "But it isn't for the good of the world, is it?

To seek to take a life, even such a life as his, this is not light. It is not why I was made. Not why I am here."

"To see that is power, and truth."

"And still, I know there will be blood, there will be death. Of those I love, of those who follow me. I send them into battle and to the grave. This is the weight of power. Tonight, I turned my back on a young girl, knowing she would be ill used. Because if I had intervened, I might have betrayed the greater cause. But is there a greater cause, Kern, than the fate of a single innocent?"

"I don't rule. Such questions are part of a crown."

"Yes, they are. I could do nothing else then. But now . . . It can be done another way. Am I strong enough to trust the crown instead of the sword?"

"I've tested so little of my power to put such matters to it. To call the wind, a flock of birds . . ." She wrapped her arms around herself. "That's a game, not battle."

"And you know what your sword can do."

"Yes. I spoke the truth. I don't fear death in battle, but I fear the lives that will be lost on my account. And I fear what will become of me, and the world, if I take one if there's a choice. Thane trusts you. So will I." She closed her eyes.

"Do you know what is in my mind?"

"I do, my lady."

"And you'll help me." "I will."

"Then we will plan for battle this way." She glanced back at her teacher, and her lover. "And hope for victory in another."

The castle, the city, the countryside made ready for the masque. The prettiest maids were gathered up and brought in to serve and to decorate—and, Aurora noted, to serve *as* decoration. Farmers were ordered to offer their finest crops or livestock to the king in tribute. Wine and ale were hauled in on wagons, and without payment, so that the king and his guests could revel.

Portents were spoken of only in whispers. Lights, such great lights, seen in the forest at midnight. The stars that had circled into a crown in the night sky.

Open talk of such matters could lose a man his tongue.

Lords and ladies from all reaches of Twylia traveled to the City of Stars for the celebrations rather than displease the king who held them under his merciless thumb. Some with eligible daughters sent them to the hills or into caves, or into the Valley of Secrets, risking death or poverty. Others brought the maidens and prayed that the prince would pass their daughters over for others.

There were whispers, too, of rebellion, but the king ignored such foolishness and basked in the glory of the feast to come.

The dark glass showed no man who would claim his crown. And when he drank the blood of a sorcerer to bring visions, he saw only the shape of a wolf and the delicate hand of a woman who held the world in her palm.

He ordered his best hunters into the woods and the hills to track and kill any wolf. And garbed himself in his richest robes.

Time was short, and the risk worth taking. Armed, Thane hurried through the tunnels and chanced the daylight to find Gwayne. "This isn't your place, or your time," Gwayne told him. "We are moving at sunset and still have much to prepare."

"Lorcan sent six hunters out nearly an hour ago. They'll come this way. If they find you and even one escapes, you'll fight your battle here rather than on your chosen ground."

"Are these men loyal to Lorcan?" "Loyalty is cheap here."

Gwayne fingered the hilt of his sword. "Then we'd best offer them a dearer coin."

Aurora chose white, the color of truth, for her gown. In her vision she had worn red, the color of blood. So she made this change deliberately, and hopefully. But not foolishly. The long, flowing sleeves hid the dagger she strapped to her wrist. Over Cyra's objections, she left her hair down, falling straight to her waist and unadorned. And in a gesture of pride and defiance, she pinned her mother's brooch to the gown between her breasts.

"He might recognize it," Rhiann objected.

"If he does, it will be too late." She took the globe and the star. "I'll need these." she slipped them into a white velvet purse. Turning from the looking glass, she held out her hands, one to Cyra, one to Rhiann. "You've been mother and sister to me. Whatever changes tonight, nothing changes that. I ask that you see my beloved's mother and sister safe. If the light doesn't shine for the midnight hour, you're to take them to the

Valley of Secrets, where Leia bides, and seek sanctuary. Your vow on it."
"Aurora," Rhiann began.

"Your vow on it," Aurora insisted. "I can only do what I must do with a clear heart and mind." "Then you have it. But the light will shine."

Thane waited until the mounted hunter was directly below the bough, then leapt upon him. The force sent them both tumbling to the ground, and the alarmed horse shied.

Before a breath could be taken, Thane had his sword at the man's throat. "Call out," he said quietly, "and it will be the last sound you make." "Thane of the stables?" There was as much shock as fear in the tone; "What recklessness is this? I am on king's business."

"It is a new day," Thane said, then hauled the man to his feet. "Take him off with the others." He shoved the hunter toward two of the rebels who waited in the shelter of the trees. "His bow and quiver will be useful. Tell Gwayne I've gone back. I will be listening."

With a sense of purpose in every stride, he hurried back to the stables. Whatever happened, he would not pass another night there, sleeping on the floor like an animal. Tonight his family would be free, and he would live—or die—in the service of his lady.

"You're late," Kern complained the moment Thane climbed through the passage. "I had business."

"You've had considerable here as well, which I've seen to. Guests are still arriving, and their horses require care. You might have been missed if I hadn't been here to deal with it."

"I'll tend the horses, then I am done with this. I swear if I have any say over what's done, whoever takes my place here will have decent quarters and payment for his labors."

With some reluctance Thane unstrapped his sheath.

"I said I tended the horses. You've no need to labor over them again." Lips pursed, Kern circled Thane. "It will be considerable labor to tend to you."

"What? What's wrong with me?"

Kern pinched one of Thane's ragged sleeves between his fingers. "Nothing a bath and a barber and a tailor of some skill can't fix. But we've no time for all of that. I'll just have to see to it myself."

"I don't need a bloody barber before a battle."

"You need one before a masque. But the bath first. Believe me, you can use one." Kern snapped his fingers twice and conjured a copper tub full of steaming water.

"I'm not going to the masque, but to the dungeons to help free the prisoners. I don't think they'll care if I smell sweet or not." "The prisoners are being freed even now."

"Now?" Even as Thane reached for his sword, Kern waved a hand. And Thane was naked. "For the sake of the gods!"

"You're not needed. My kind are adept at getting into locked places." Kern grinned. "We enjoy it. You'll be needed at the masque, and you won't get past the guards unless you're bathed, groomed, and properly attired. The tub, boy."

"I'll stand with Gwayne, lead—" He found himself in the tub, immersed. He came up sputtering. "You waste breath arguing. Are you afraid to go to a ball?"

"I'm not going to dance, thundering hell. I'm going to fight."

"And so you may. But if and when, you fight by her side. To get to her side, you need what I'll give you. Wash." Kern circled the tub while

Thane sulked and scrubbed. "Is this the queen's bidding?"

"No. But she will be pleased enough. It is her wish and her will to take the throne with as little blood as possible. The magicks have agreed

to aid her in this," he added as Thane's head came up sharply. "We will enchant the guards to sleep, and the walls will be breached without sword. No man will die in the city or outside the keep. But inside, Lorcan's power must be faced and vanquished, or she cannot rule. There is the battle. Dark against light. The pure against the corrupt. And there you must be."

Kern tapped his finger to his lips, considering as Thane hauled himself out of the tub. "Simplicity, I think," he stated and, wagging his finger, garbed Thane in royal blue with tiny flecks of gold. "No, no, not quite."

Thane scowled at the lace spilling over his wrists. "I feel like a fool."

"As long as you don't behave as one, we'll have no problem." He changed the blue to black, the gold to silver, and nodding, drew Thane's hair back in a short queue. "Dress swords only." He snapped and had a jeweled-handled sword in the silver sheath.

Pleased for the first time by the turn of events, Thane drew the sword. "A fine weapon. Good balance." "It was your father's."

Thane lowered the sword and stared into the eyes of his teacher. "Thank you. I fail, too often, to thank you."

"Meet your destiny, and that is thanks enough. One last touch." Kern waved a hand and covered the top of Thane's face with a black domino. "Take your place," Kern said quietly. "Stay true to your blood and your heart. The world rests on what passes tonight."

Aurora held herself straight, fixed a flirtatious smile on her face, and stepped into the great hall. Music was playing, and already lines were set for dancing. Tables groaned with platters of food, and hundreds of candles streamed light.

Dress was elaborate, with feathers and furs, high headdresses and flowing trains. She saw Lorcan drinking deeply of wine, with his queen pale and silent beside him.

The first order, she thought, was to separate them so Brynn and Dira could be spirited away to safety. Despite the masks and costumes, she had little trouble in locating Owen and staying out of his line of sight. She walked directly to the king, curtsied.

"Majesty, my humble thanks for the invitation to so lively a celebration."

"The voice is familiar, as is . . . the form." He tapped a finger under his chin, studied her smile and the eyes that looked out of a sparkling silver mask.

"What is the name?"

"Sire, the guessing is the game." She trailed a finger down his arm in a daring move. "At least until the hour strikes twelve and we are unmasked. Might I beg for a cup of wine?"

"Asking is enough." He snapped his fingers and a servant hurried over.

Deliberately, Aurora shifted to look back at the dancing, and had

Lorcan turning his back on his wife. "Would you care to take a turn of the room with me?"

"Delighted and charmed." He offered her his arm. "I believe I have guessed this game, Lady Aurora. You are, I believe, the most daring of the maidens here."

"One expects a king to be wise and clever, and you are, sire." She lifted her glass as they walked, and saw Rhiann nod. The first move would be made.

She chattered, commenting on the costumes, complimenting the music, knowing that she would soon circle toward Owen. But while she did, Brynn and Dira would be safely away. As would her own women.

"Lovely lady." Aurora's heart stopped at the voice when the courtier in black bowed in front of her. "Might I steal you away for a dance?" Struggling to gather her scattered wits, she inclined her head. "If His Majesty permits."

"Yes, yes, go." He waved her away and held out his cup for more wine. "Are you mad?" Aurora said under her breath.

"If love is madness, I am so afflicted." Thane led her across the room, and hoped it was far enough away. "But the fact is, I don't dance. Would that I did. You are so beautiful tonight." "Do something," she hissed.

"I'll feed you." He began to pile a plate with delicacies. "It's something flirtatious courtiers do for ladies at balls—so I've seen when I've spied on them. Sugarplum?" Grinning, he held one up to her lips.

She bit in and laughed. "You are mad. I'm so glad to see you. I want to touch you, and dare not. Your mother and sister are being taken to safety." "I saw them go. I can never repay you."

"Learn to dance, then one day promise to dance with me."

"On my oath. If I could, I would whisk you out on the terrace, kiss your lips in the light of the rising moon. And there would only be music and moonlight for

us." He took her hand, brushed a kiss over it. "I know what you've planned with the magicks. You should have told me."

"I was afraid you and Gwayne would never agree. You wish for blood—both of you, and you've earned it—both of you. I'm denying you your right." "I would not have agreed." His eyes lifted to hers with a sudden shock of power. "I do not agree. There are bruises on your throat, beloved. You didn't quite cover them."

"Have they any more import than those he put on you?" "Yes. Oh, yes."

"Find another kitten to stroke." Owen snapped out the order, shoving Thane aside. Even as Thane's hand gripped the hilt of his sword, Aurora stepped between them. "Sir," she said lightly to Owen, "I am no kitten."

"A cat, more like, rubbing herself against any willing leg."

"If you think so of me, I'm surprised you would spend a moment in my company." She started to turn away, resisted when Owen took her arm. With

her back to him she mouthed *Not yet* to Thane, then faced Owen once more.

"You make a spectacle of us, my lord. The king will not approve." Owen took her hand, squeezing until her fingers ground bone to bone. He leaned close and spoke in a voice like silk. "I will not

choose you. But I will have you. Had you been more agreeable, you would have been queen."

She saw two of the king's personal guards rush into the hall, heard the clamor, and knew the rebels were over the walls and through the tunnels. She stepped back and, over the shouts, spoke clearly. "I am queen."

"You will have nothing," she said. "For nothing is what you have earned. Your time is ended, and mine begins. The hour is about to strike." "No woman speaks so to me." Owen drew back his hand. And Thane's sword was out and at his throat.

"Touch her, and I will slice your hand off at the wrist." With his free hand Thane pulled off his mask. "Don't interfere," he said to Aurora. "I'm not a man if I don't stand for myself and my lady, at long last."

"Your lady," Owen spat.

"My lady, and my queen." Thane stepped back a pace. "Draw your sword."

Chaos was already reigning as guards battled the rebels who charged into the hall. Lords and courtiers dragged screaming women away from the fray, or simply left them and scrambled for cover themselves. Aurora cast aside her own mask and called out for a sword. She would have no

choice now but to fight her way to Lorcan and cut off any chance of escape.

Owen pulled his sword. "Stableboy, I will cut you apart, piece by piece, and feed you to my dogs."

With a thin smile, Thane made a mocking salute with his sword. "Will you fight, you tedious braggart, or simply talk me to death?"

Owen came in fast, striking, thrusting, and Thane felt his blood sing. Their swords crossed, slid hilt to hilt, and he grinned between the lethal vee. "I have dreamed of this."

"You dream your own death."

They broke apart, and steel flashed against steel.

Wielding a sword of her own, Aurora slashed blades aside, shoved a swooning woman into a courtier's arms, then whirled to fight back to back with Gwayne.

"Outside?" she shouted. "The walls, the tunnels."

"It's done. This is all that's left. The faeries hold them fast, and the dungeons are clear."

"Then we end this." She looked toward Lorcan and saw his sword was bright with blood. "We take him."

With Gwayne, she fought her way to the king. They battled through the panicked guests, leaping over the fallen and the fainting to be joined by others as she called them to arms. They pressed the outnumbered guards to the walls, and Aurora locked swords with Lorcan. "You may take me," she said calmly. "I think you won't, but you may. If you do, these men will cut you down. You will not live through this night unless you lay down your sword."

"You will be hanged." His eyes burned black. There was blood on his hands, she saw. As there was on hers. "You will be drawn, quartered, and hanged."

"Lay down your sword, Lorcan the usurper, or I will end this in death after all."

"There will be death." But he threw down his sword. "It will be yours."

"Tell your guards to lay down their weapons. You're outnumbered here. Tell them to lay down their weapons so you might hear my terms." "Enough!" He shouted it with Aurora's sword to his throat. "Lay down your swords. Your king commands you."

The sounds of clashing steel dimmed until there was only Thane's blade against Owen's.

"Let him finish," she said to Gwayne. "The hour has not yet struck. This is his time, not mine, and he must live it. Put Lorcan on the throne he values so much, and hold him there."

Across the hall the two men fought like demons. Winded, Owen hacked and cleaved, and cursed when Thane's sword flicked his away. Enraged, he grabbed a candlestand and heaved it, following with vicious sweeps as Thane dodged aside and spun back into attack. "You are too used to sparring with soldiers who are beaten or banished if they dare best you," Thane taunted. "Now that it's your life—" Thane slashed, and cut neatly through Owen's silk doublet to score the flesh—"You're clumsy."

"You are *nothing*! Coward, whipping boy."

"I carry your scars." Thane sliced the point of his sword down Owen's cheek. "Now you carry mine. And that is enough."

With two quick thrusts, he knocked Owen's sword out of his hand, then pressed his own to his enemy's belly. "I won't kill you, as I wish you many years of life. Years of misery and humiliation. On your knees before your Majesty." "I will not kneel to you."

"It is not to me you kneel. But to her." He stepped aside, shifting his sword point to the back of Owen's neck so the man could see Aurora standing among the fallen and the frightened.

"You are," she said to Thane, "what I have always wished for. What I will always prize. In the midst of battle, when vengeance was your

right, you chose honor."

"Whore!" Owen shrieked it. "Drab. She lay on her back for me. She—"

Thane shifted his grip on the sword and slammed the hilt into the side of Owen's head. When Owen fell unconscious, Thane booted him carelessly aside. "I'm not perfect," he said with a flashing smile, and Aurora laughed.

"I believe you may be. The hour comes." She could feel the power rising in her. "I almost wish it wouldn't. That we could walk away, and live in a cottage in the woods or ramble across the world in a wagon. I almost wish it, but it comes and I have no choice."

"A cottage, a world, a crown. It's all the same to me, if I'm with you."

"Stand with me, then." She turned and faced Lorcan as he sprawled on the throne under the swords of her men. "Lower your swords, step back. Open the doors, the windows. Let the people in, let them know what happens here at the witching hour, at my hour. Lorcan, stand and face me as you did not face my father or my mother. I am Aurora. I am the Lady of the Light. I am the True One."

She walked toward him as she spoke and flung out her arms. "Are there any here in this company, any here in the City of Stars, in the world, who will not pledge their loyalty to the True One? For they are free to leave this place, and to go in peace. There will not be blood or death." "You're nothing but a woman, a whore, as my son has said. I am king. The True One is a myth babbled by

madmen." "Behold the dragon!" She pointed toward the window, and the fire that lit the sky in the shape of a dragon.

"A witch's trick." He rose and, pushing out with his hand, shot a fierce wind through the hall. It blew her hair back, set her gown to billowing. The sharpness of it sliced her hand and drew blood. But she stood against it.

"You would match your power to mine?" She arched her brows. "Here is the world, stained by my blood, and the blood of my people." She drew

the crystal globe from her purse, threw it high so it spun near the ceiling and showered light and spilled out voices raised in song. "Take it if you dare. And here is the crown, the Crown of Stars."

She reached in her purse again and flung the star. It flew in dizzying circles and exploded with light.

She stood, draped in billowing white, unarmed, and waited while the bells began to strike midnight. "And this is my hour, the hour of my birth and beginnings. The hour of life and death, of power and portent. The time between time when day meets day and night meets night." The crown circled, beamed light, and descended toward her head.

Lifting her arms, she accepted her destiny. "And in this hour, the reign of dark is ended and the reign of light begins. I am the True One, and this is my world to protect."

The crown settled on her head, and every man and woman, every soldier and servant, fell to their knees. Outside, the people who massed could be heard chanting her name like a prayer.

"I am Aurora, descendant of Draco, daughter of Gwynn and Rhys. I am queen of Twylia."

On a roar, Lorcan grabbed the sword from a dazzled rebel and, raising it high, lunged toward Aurora. Murder was in his cry, madness was in his eyes.

And springing like a wolf, Thane leapt forward, spinning to shield her, and ran Lorcan through.

He fell at her feet with his blood splashing the white hem of her gown. With the stars still gleaming on her head, she looked down on him with a pity that was cold as winter.

"So . . . So it ends in death after all. He made his choice. The debt is paid. My father and yours." She turned to Thane, held out her hand. "My mother and yours."

The last bell struck, and the wind died. Her crown sparkled like stars.

"What was taken in blood is restored. In blood. Now let there be peace. Open the larders," she ordered. "Feed the people of the city. No one goes hungry tonight."

"My lady." Gwayne knelt before her. "The people call for you. They call for their queen. Will you go out so they can see you?"

"I will. Only a moment first. A moment," she repeated and turned to Thane. "It will be hard. After the joy, it will be hard. There will be work and sweat and time to restore faith, to bring order, to renew trust. There will be so much to do. I need you beside me."

"I am the queen's man, my lady." He brought her hand to his lips. Then with a laugh born of freedom, he lifted her off her feet, and high above his head.

"Beloved. Woman of my visions, mother of my son. My light. My life."

She wrapped her arms around him, tipped her mouth to his for the warmth and power of his kiss as he spun her in circles. "Then there's nothing

I

can't do. Nothing we can't be." "We'll be happy." "Yes. Till the end of days."

With her hand linked with his, she walked out to the cheers of the people of the world. And they raised her up to be queen, Aurora, the Light.

