

Nora Roberts - Winter Rose

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CHAPTER 1

The world was white. And bitter, bitter cold. Exhausted, he drooped in the saddle, unable to do more than trust his horse to continue to trudge forward. Always forward. He knew that to stop, even for moments, in this cruel and keening wind would mean death.

The pain in his side was a freezing burn, and the only thing that kept him from sliding into oblivion.

He was lost in that white globe, blinded by the endless miles of it that covered hill and tree and sky, trapped in the frigid hell of vicious snow gone to icy shards in the whip of the gale. Though even the slow, monotonous movements of his horse brought him agony, he did not yield.

At first the cold had been a relief from the scorching yellow sun. It had, he thought, cooled the fever the wound had sent raging through him. The unblemished stretch of white had numbed his mind so that he'd no longer seen the blood staining the battleground. Or smelled the stench of death.

For a time, when the strength had drained out of him along with his blood, he'd thought he heard voices in the rising wind. Voices that had murmured his name, had whispered another.

Delirium, he'd told himself. For he didn't believe the air could speak.

He'd lost track of how long he'd been traveling. Hours, days, weeks. His first hope had been to come across a cottage, a village where he could rest and have his wound treated. Now he simply wanted to find a decent place to die.

Perhaps he was dead already and hell was endless winter.

He no longer hungered, though the last time he'd eaten had been before the battle. The battle, he thought dimly, where he'd emerged victorious and unscathed. It had been foolish, carelessly foolish, of him to ride for home alone.

The trio of enemy soldiers had, he was sure, been trying to reach their own homes when they met him on that path in the forest. His first instinct was to let them go. The battle had been won and the invasion crushed. But war and death were still in their eyes, and when they charged him his sword was in his hand.

They would never see home now. Nor, he feared, would he.

As his mount plodded onward, he fought to remain conscious. And now he was in another forest, he thought dully as he struggled to focus. Though how he had come to it, how he had gotten lost when he knew his kingdom as intimately as a man knew a lover's face, was a mystery to him.

He had never traveled here before. The trees looked dead to him, brittle and gray. He heard no bird, no brook, just the steady swish of his horse's hooves in the snow.

Surely this was the land of the dead, or the dying.

When he saw the deer, it took several moments to register. It was the first living thing he'd seen since the flakes had begun to fall, and it watched him without fear.

Why not? he mused with a weak laugh. He hadn't the strength to notch an arrow. When the stag bounded away, Kylar of Mrydon, prince and warrior, slumped over the neck of his horse.

When he came to again, the forest was at his back, and he faced a white, white sea. Or so it seemed. Just as it seemed, in the center of that sea, a silver island glittered. Through his hazy vision, he made out turrets and towers. On the topmost a flag flew in the wild wind. A red rose blooming full against a field of white.

He prayed for strength. Surely where there was a flag flying there were people. There was warmth. He would have given half a kingdom to spend the last hour of his life by a fire's light and heat.

But his vision began to go dark at the edges and his head swam. Through the waves of fatigue and weakness he thought he saw the rose, red as blood, moving over that white sea toward him. Gritting his teeth, he urged his horse forward. If he couldn't have the fire, he wanted the sweet scent of the rose before he died.

He lacked even the strength to curse fate as he slid once more into unconsciousness and tumbled from the saddle into the snow.

The fall shot pain through him, pushed him back to the surface, where he clung as if under a thin veil of ice. Through it, he saw a face leaning close to his. Lovely long-lidded eyes, green as the moss in the forests of his home, smooth skin of rose and cream. A soft, full mouth. He saw those pretty lips move, but couldn't hear the words she spoke through the buzzing in his head.

The hood of her red cloak covered her hair, and he reached up to touch the cloth. "You're not a flower after all."

"No, my lord. Only a woman."

"Well, it's better to die warmed by a kiss than a fire." He tugged on the hood, felt that soft, full mouth meet his-one sweet taste-before he passed out.

Men, Deirdre thought as she eased back, were such odd creatures. To steal a kiss at such a time was surely beyond folly. Shaking her head, she got to her feet and took in hand the horn that hung from the sash at her waist. She blew the signal for help, then removed her cloak to spread over him. Sitting again, she cradled him as best she could in her arms and waited for stronger hands to carry the unexpected guest into the castle.

The cold had saved his life, but the fever might snatch it back again. On his side of the battle were his youth and his strength. And, Deirdre thought, herself. She would do all in her power to heal him. Twice, he'd regained consciousness during his transport to the bedchamber. And both times he'd struggled, weakly to be sure, but enough to start the blood flowing from his wound again once he was warm.

In her brisk, somewhat ruthless way, she'd ordered two of her men to hold him down while she doused him with a sleeping draught. The cleaning and closing of the wound would be painful for him if he should wake again. Deirdre was a woman who brooked no nonsense, but she disliked seeing anyone in pain.

She gathered her medicines and herbs, pushed up the sleeves of the rough tunic she wore. He lay naked on the bed, in the thin light of the pale gold sun that filtered through the narrow windows. She'd seen unclothed men before, just as she'd seen what a sword could do to flesh.

"He's so handsome." Cordelia, the servant Deirdre had ordered to assist her, nearly sighed.

"What he is, is dying." Deirdre's voice was sharp with command. "Put more pressure on that cloth. I'll not have him bleed to death under my roof."

She selected her medicines and, moving to the bed, concentrated only on the wound in his side. It ranged from an inch under his armpit down to his hip in one long, vicious slice. Sweat dewed on her brow as she focused, putting her mind into his body to search for damage. Her cheeks paled as she worked, but her hands were steady and quick.

So much blood, she thought as her breath came thick and ragged. So much pain. How could he have lived with this? Even with the cold slowing the flow of blood, he should have been long dead.

She paused once to rinse the blood from her hands in a bowl, to dry them. But when she picked up the needle, Cordelia blanched. "My lady-"

Absently, Deirdre glanced over. She'd nearly forgotten the girl was there. "You may go. You did well enough."

Cordelia fled the room so quickly, Deirdre might have smiled. The girl never moved so fast when there was work to be done. Deirdre turned back to her patient and began carefully, skillfully, to sew the wound closed.

It would scar, she thought, but he had others. His was a warrior's body, tough and hard and bearing the marks of battle. What was it, she wondered, that made men so eager to fight, to kill? What was it that lived inside them that they could find pride in both?

This one did, she was sure of it. It had taken strength and will, and pride, to keep him mounted and alive all the miles he'd traveled to her island. But how had he come, this dark warrior? And why?

She coated the stitched wound with a balm of her own making and bandaged it with her own hands. Then with the worse tended, she examined his body thoroughly for any lesser wounds.

She found a few nicks and cuts, and one more serious slice on the back of his shoulder. It had closed on its own and was already scabbed over. Whatever battle he'd fought, she calculated, had been two days ago, perhaps three.

To survive so long with such grievous hurts, to have traveled through the Forgotten to reach help, showed a strong will to live. That was good. He would need it.

When she was satisfied, she took a clean cloth and began to wash and cool the fever sweat from his skin.

He was handsome. She let herself study him now. He was tall, leanly muscled. His hair, black as midnight, spilled over the bed linens, away from a face that might have been carved from stone. It suited the warrior, she thought, that narrow face with the sharp jut of cheekbones over hollowed cheeks. His nose was long and straight, his mouth full and somewhat hard. His beard had begun to grow in, a shadow of stubble that made him appear wicked and dangerous even unconscious.

His brows were black slashes. She remembered his eyes were blue. Even dazed with pain, fever, fatigue, they had been bold and brilliantly blue.

If the gods willed it, they would open again.

She tucked him up warm, laid another log on the fire. Then she sat down to watch over him.

For two days and two nights the fever raged in him. At times he was delirious and had to be restrained lest his thrashing break open his wound again. At times he slept like a man dead, and she feared he would never rouse. Even her gifts couldn't beat back the fire that burned in him.

She slept when she could in the chair beside his bed. And once, when the chills racked him, she crawled under the bedclothes with him to soothe him with her own body.

His eyes did open again, but they were blind and wild. The pity she tried to hold back when healing stirred inside her. Once when the night was dark and the cold rattled its bones against the windows, she held his hand and grieved for him.

Life was the most precious gift, and it seemed cruel that he should come so far from home only to lose his.

To busy her mind she sewed or she sang. When she trusted him to be quiet for a time, she left him in the care of one of her women and tended to the business of her home and her people.

On the last night of his fever, despair nearly broke her.

Exhausted, she mourned for his wife, for his mother, for those he'd left behind who would never know of his fate. There in the quiet of the bedchamber, she used the last of her strength and her skill. She laid hands on him.

"The first and most vital of rules is not to harm. I have not harmed you. What I do now will end this, one

way or another. Kill or cure. If I knew your name"-she brushed a hand gently over his burning brow-"or your mind, or your heart, this would be easier for both of us. Be strong." She climbed onto the bed to kneel beside him. "And fight."

With one hand over the wound that she'd unbandaged, the other over his heart, she let what she was rush through her, race through her blood, her bone. Into him.

He moaned. She ignored it. It would hurt, hurt both of them. His body arched up, and hers back. There was a rush of images that stole her breath. A grand castle, blurring colors, a jeweled crown.

She felt strength-his. And kindness. A light flickered inside her, nearly made her break away. But it drew her in, deeper, and the light grew soft, warm.

For Deirdre, it was the first time, even in healing that she had looked into another's heart and felt it brush and call her own.

Then she saw, very clearly, a woman's face, her deep-blue eyes full of pride, and perhaps fear.

Come back, my son. Come home safe.

There was music-drumbeats-the laughter and shouts of men. Then a flash that was sun striking off steel, and the smell of blood and battle choked her.

She muffled a cry as she caught a glimpse in her mind. Swords clashing, the stench of sweat and death and fear.

He fought her, thrashing, striking out as she bore down with her mind. Later, she would tend the bruises they gave each other in this final pitched battle for life.

Her muscles trembled, and part of her screamed to pull back, pull away. He was nothing to her. Still, as her muscles trembled, she pit her fire against the fever, just as the enemy sword in his mind slashed against them both.

She felt the bite of it in her side, steel into flesh. The agony ripped a scream from her throat. On its heels, she tasted death.

His heart galloped under her hand, and the wound on his side was like a flame against her palm. But she'd seen into his mind now, and she fought to rise above the pain and use what she'd been given, what she'd taken, to save him.

His eyes were open, glassy with shock in a face white as death.

"Kylar of Mrydon." She spoke clearly, though each breath she took was a misery. "Take what you need. Fire of healing. And live."

The tension went out of his body. His eyes blurred, then fluttered shut. She felt the sigh shudder through him as he slid into sleep.

But the light within her continued to glow. "What is this?" she murmured, rubbing an unsteady hand over her own heart. "No matter. No matter now. I can do no more to help you. Live," she said again, then leaned down to brush her lips over his brow. "Or die gently."

She started to climb down from the bed, but her head spun. When she fainted, her head came to rest, quite naturally, on his heart.

CHAPTER 2

He drifted in and out. There were times when he thought himself back in battle, shouting commands to his men while his horse wheeled under him and his sword hacked through those who would dare invade his lands.

Then he was back in that strange and icy forest, so cold he feared his bones would shatter. Then the cold turned to fire, and the part of him that was still sane prayed to die.

Something cool and sweet would slide down his throat, and somehow he would sleep again.

He dreamed he was home, drifting toward morning with a willing woman in his bed. Soft and warm and smelling of summer roses.

He thought he heard music, harpsong, with a voice, low and smooth, matching pretty words to those plucked notes.

Sometimes he saw a face. Moss-green eyes, a lovely, wide mouth. Hair the color of dark, rich honey that tumbled around a face both unbearably beautiful and unbearably sad. Each time the pain or the heat or the cold would become intolerable, that face, those eyes, would be there.

Once, he dreamed she had called him by name, in a voice that rang with command. And those eyes had been dark and full of pain and power. Her hair had spilled over his chest like silk, and he'd slept once more-deeply, peacefully-with the scent of her surrounding him.

He woke again to that scent, drifted into it as a man might drift into a cool stream on a hot day. There was a velvet canopy of deep purple over his head. He stared at it as he tried to clear his mind. One thought came through.

This was not home.

Then another.

He was alive.

Morning, he decided. The light through the windows was thin and very dull. Not long past dawn. He tried to sit up, and the movement made his side throb. Even as he hissed out a breath, she was there.

"Carefully." Deirdre slid a hand behind his head to lift it gently as she brought a cup to his lips. "Drink now."

She gave him no choice but to swallow before he managed to bring his hand to hers and nudge the cup aside. "What-" His voice felt rusty, as if it would scrape his throat. "What is this place?"

"Drink your broth, Prince Kylar. You're very weak."

He would have argued, but to his frustration he was as weak as she said. And she was not. Her hands

were strong, hard from labor. He studied her as she urged more broth on him.

That honey hair fell straight as rain to the waist of a simple gray dress. She wore no jewels, no ribbons, and still managed to look beautiful and wonderfully female.

A servant, he assumed, with some skill in healing. He would find a way to repay her, and her master.

"Your name, sweetheart?"

Odd creatures indeed, she thought as she arched a brow.

A man would flirt the moment he regained what passed for his senses. "I am Deirdre."

"I'm grateful, Deirdre. Would you help me up?"

"No, my lord. Tomorrow, perhaps." She set the cup aside. "But you could sit up for a time while I tend your wound."

"I dreamed of you." Weak, yes, he thought. But he was feeling considerably better. Well enough to put some effort into flirting with a beautiful housemaid. "Did you sing to me?"

"I sang to pass the time. You've been here three days."

"Three-" He gritted his teeth as she helped him to sit up. "I've no memory of it."

"That's natural. Be still now."

He frowned at her bent head as she removed the bandage. Though a generous man by nature, he wasn't accustomed to taking orders. Certainly not from housemaids. "I would like to thank your master for his hospitality."

"There is no master here. It heals clean," she murmured, and probed gently with her fingers. "And is cool. You'll have a fine scar to add to your collection." With quick competence, she smeared on a balm. "There's pain yet, I know. But if you can tolerate it for now, I'd prefer not to give you another sleeping draught."

"Apparently I've slept enough."

She began to bandage him again, her body moving into his as she wrapped the wound. Fetching little thing, he mused, relieved that he was well enough to feel a tug of interest. He skimmed a hand through her hair as she worked, twined a lock around his finger. "I've never had a prettier physician."

"Save your strength, my lord." Her voice was cool, dismissive, and made him frown again. "I won't see my work undone because you've a yen for a snuggle."

She stepped back, eyeing him calmly. "But if you've that much energy, you may be able to take some more broth, and a bit of bread."

"I'd rather meat."

"I'm sure. But you won't get it. Do you read, Kylar of Mrydon?"

"Yes, of course I- You call me by name," he said cautiously. "How do you know it?"

She thought of that dip she'd taken into his mind. What she'd seen. What she'd felt. Neither of them, she was sure, was prepared to discuss it. "You told me a great many things during the fever," she said. And that was true enough. "I'll see you have books. Bed rest is tedious. Reading will help."

She picked up the empty cup of broth and started across the chamber to the door.

"Wait. What is this place?"

She turned back. "This is Rose Castle, on the Isle of Winter in the Sea of Ice."

His heart stuttered in his chest, but he kept his gaze direct on hers. "That's a fairy tale. A myth."

"It's as real as life, and as death. You, my lord Kylar, are the first to pass this way in more than twenty years. When you're rested and well, we'll discuss how you came here."

"Wait." He lifted a hand as she opened the thick carved door. "You're not a servant." He wondered how he could ever have mistaken her for one. The simple dress, the lack of jewels, the undressed hair did nothing to detract from her bearing. Her breeding.

"I serve," she countered. "And have all my life. I am Deirdre, queen of the Sea of Ice."

When she closed the door behind her, he continued to stare. He'd heard of Rose Castle, the legend of it, in boyhood. The palace that stood on an island in what had once been a calm and pretty lake, edged by lush forests and rich fields. Betrayal, jealousy, vengeance, and witchcraft had doomed it all to an eternity of winter.

There was something about a rose trapped in a pillar of ice. He couldn't quite remember how it all went.

Such things were nonsense, of course. Entertaining stories to be told to a child at bedtime.

And yet- yet he'd traveled through that world of white and bitter cold. He'd fought and won a battle, in high summer, then somehow had become lost in winter.

Because he, in his delirium, had traveled far north. Perhaps into the Lost Mountains or even beyond them, where the wild tribes hunted giant white bear and dragons still guarded caves.

He'd talked with men who claimed to have been there, who spoke of dark blue water crowded with islands of ice, and of warriors tall as trees.

But none had ever spoken of a castle.

How much had he imagined, or dreamed? Determined to see for himself, he tossed back the bedcovers. Sweat slicked his skin, and his muscles trembled, appalling him-scoring his pride-as the simple task of shifting to sit on the side of the bed sapped his strength. He sat for several moments more, gathering it back.

When he managed to stand, his vision wavered, as if he was looking through water. He felt his knees buckle but managed to grip the bedpost and stay on his feet.

While he waited to steady, he studied the room. It was simply appointed, he noted. Tasteful, certainly, even elegant in its way unless you looked closely enough to see that the fabrics were fraying with age. Still, the chests and the chairs gleamed with polish. While the rug was faded with time, its workmanship was lovely. The candlesticks were gleaming silver, and the fire burned quietly in a hearth carved from lapis.

As creakily, as carefully, as an aged grandfather, he walked across the room to the window.

Through it, as far as he could see, the world was white. The sun was a dim haze behind the white curtain that draped the sky, but it managed to sparkle a bit on the ice that surrounded the castle. In the distance, he saw the shadows of the forest, hints of black and gray smothered in snow. In the north, far north, mountains speared up. White against white.

Closer in, at the feet of the castle, the snow spread in sheets and blankets. He saw no movement, no tracks. No life.

Were they alone here? he wondered. He and the woman who called herself a queen?

Then he saw her, a regal flash of red against the white. She walked with a long, quick stride-as a woman might, he thought, bustle off to the market. As if she sensed him there, she stopped, turned. Looked up at his window.

He couldn't see her expression clearly, but the way her chin angled told him she was displeased with him. Then she turned away again, her fiery cloak swirling, as she continued over that sea toward the forest.

He wanted to go after her, to demand answers, explanations. But he could barely make it back to the bed before he collapsed. Trembling from the effort, he buried himself under the blankets again and slept the day away.

"My lady, he's demanding to see you again."

Deirdre continued to work in the precious dirt under the wide dome. Her back ached, but she didn't mind it. In this, what she called her garden, she grew herbs and vegetables and a few precious flowers in the false spring generated by the sun through the glass.

"I have no time for him, Orna." She hoed a trench. It was a constant cycle, replenishing, tending, harvesting. The garden was life to her world. And one of her few true pleasures. "Between you and Cordelia he's tended well enough."

Orna pursed her lips. She had nursed Deirdre as a babe, had tutored her, tended her, and since the death of Queen Fiona, had stood when she could as mother. She was one of the few in Rose Castle who dared to question the young queen.

"It's been three days since he woke. The man is restless."

Deirdre straightened, rested her weight on the hoe. "Is he in pain?"

Orna's weathered face creased with what might have been impatience. "He says not, but he's a man, after all. He has pain. Despite it, and his weakness, he won't be kept to his chamber much longer. The

man is a prince, my lady, and used to being obeyed."

"I rule here." Deirdre scanned her garden. The earlier plantings were satisfactory. She couldn't have the lush, but she could have the necessary. Even, she thought as she looked at her spindly, sun-starved daisies, the occasional indulgence.

"One of the kitchen boys should gather cabbages for dinner," she began. "Have the cook choose two of the hens. Our guest needs meat."

"Why do you refuse to see him?"

"I don't refuse." Annoyed, Deirdre went back to her work. She was avoiding the next meeting, and she knew it. Something had come into her during the healing, something she was unable to identify. It left her uneasy and unsettled.

"I stayed with him three days, three nights," she reminded Orna. "It's put me behind in my duties."

"He's very handsome."

"So is his horse," Deirdre said lightly. "And the horse is of more interest to me."

"And strong," Orna continued, stepping closer. "A prince from outside our world. He could be the one."

"There is no one." Deirdre tossed her head. Hope put no fuel in the fire nor food in the pot. It was a luxury she, above all, could ill afford. "I want no man, Orna. I will depend on no one but myself. It's woman's foolishness, woman's need, and man's deceit that have cursed us."

"Woman's pride as much as foolishness." Orna laid a hand on the staff of the hoe. "Will you let yours stop you from taking a chance for freedom?"

"I will provide for my people. When the time comes I will lie with a man until I conceive. I will make the next ruler, train the child as I was trained."

"Love the child," Orna murmured.

"My heart is so cold." Tired, Deirdre closed her eyes. "I fear there is no love in me. How can I give what isn't mine?"

"You're wrong." Gently Orna touched her cheek. "Your heart isn't cold. It's only trapped, as the rose is trapped in ice."

"Should I free it, Orna, so it could be broken as my mother's was?" She shook her head. "That solves nothing. Food must be put on the table, fuel must be gathered. Go now, tell our guest that I'll visit him in his chambers when time permits."

"This seems like a fine time." So saying, Kylar strode into the dome.

CHAPTER 3

He'd never seen anything like the garden before. But then, Kylar had seen a great deal of the unexpected in Rose Castle in a short time. Such as a queen dressed in men's clothing-trousers and a ragged tunic.

The result was odd, and strangely alluring. Her hair was tied back, but not with anything so female as a ribbon. She'd knotted it with a thin leather strap, such as he did himself when doing some quick spot of manual labor.

Her face was flushed from her work and as lovely as the flower he'd first taken her for. She did not look pleased to see him. Even as he watched, her eyes chilled.

Behold the ice queen, he thought. A man would risk freezing off important parts of his body should he try to thaw her.

"I see you're feeling better, my lord."

"If you'd spared me five minutes of your time, you'd have seen so before."

"Will you pardon us, Orna." She knelt and began to plant the long eyes of potatoes harvested earlier in the year. It was a distraction, one she needed. Seeing him again stirred her, in dangerous ways. "You'll excuse me, my lord, if I continue with my task."

"Are there no servants to do such things?"

"There are fifty-two of us in Rose Castle. We all have our places and our duties."

He squatted beside her, though it caused his side to weep. Taking her hand, he turned it over and examined the ridge of callus. "Then I would say, my lady, you have too many duties."

"It's not for you to question me."

"You don't give answers, so I must continue to question. You healed me. Why do you resent me?"

"I don't know. But I do know that I require both hands for this task." When he released her, she continued to plant. "I'm unused to strangers," she began. Surely that was it. She had never seen, much less healed, a stranger before. Wouldn't that explain why, after looking into his mind, into his heart, she felt so drawn to him?

And afraid of him.

"Perhaps my manners are unpolished, so I will beg your pardon for any slight."

"They're polished diamond-bright," he corrected. "And stab at a man."

She smiled a little. "Some men, I imagine, are used to softer females. I thought Cordelia would suit your needs."

"She's biddable enough, and pretty enough, which is why you have the dragon guarding her."

Her smile warmed fractionally. "Of course."

"I wonder why I prefer you to either of them."

"I couldn't say." She moved down the row, and when he started to move with her, he gasped. She cursed. "Stubborn." She rose, reached down, and to his surprise, wrapped her arms around him. "Hold

on to me. I'll help you inside."

He simply buried his face in her hair. "Your scent," he told her. "It haunts me."

"Stop it."

"I can't get your face out of my head, even when I sleep."

Her stomach fluttered, alarming her. "Sir, I will not be trifled with."

"I'm too damn weak to trifle with you." Hating the unsteadiness, he leaned heavily against her. "But you're beautiful, and I'm not dead." When he caught his breath, he eased away. "I should be. I've had time to think that through." He stared hard into her eyes. "I've seen enough battle to know when a wound is mortal. Mine was. How did I cheat death, Deirdre? Are you a witch?"

"Some would say." Because his color concerned her, she unbent enough to put an arm around his waist. "You need to sit before you fall. Come back inside."

"Not to bed. I'll go mad."

She'd tended enough of the sick and injured to know the truth of that. "To a chair. We'll have tea."

"God spare me. Brandy?"

She supposed he was entitled. She led him through a doorway, down a dim corridor away from the kitchen. She skirted the main hallway and moved down yet another corridor. The room where she took him was small, chilly, and lined floor to ceiling with books.

She eased him into a chair in front of the cold fireplace, then went over to open the shutters and let in the light.

"The days are still long," she said conversationally as she walked to the fireplace. This one was framed in smooth green marble. "Planting needs to be finished while the sun can warm the seeds."

She crouched in front of the fire, set the logs to light. "Is there grass in your world? Fields of it?"

"Yes."

She closed her eyes a moment. "And trees that go green in spring?"

He felt a wrench in his gut. For home-and for her. "Yes."

"It must be like a miracle." Then she stood, and her voice was brisk again. "I must wash, and see to your brandy. You'll be warm by the fire. I won't be long."

"My lady, have you never seen a field of grass?"

"In books. In dreams." She opened her mouth again, nearly asked him to tell her what it smelled like. But she wasn't sure she could bear to know. "I won't keep you waiting long, my lord."

She was true to her word. In ten minutes she was back, her hair loose again over the shoulders of a dark

green dress. She carried the brandy herself.

"Our wine cellars were well stocked once. My grandfather, I'm told, was shrewd in that area. And in this one," she added, gesturing toward the books. "He enjoyed a glass of good wine and a good book."

"And your

"The books often, the wine rarely."

When she glanced toward the door, he saw her smile, fully, warmly, for the first time. He could only stare at her as his throat went dry and his heart shuddered.

"Thank you, Magda. I would have come for it."

"You've enough to do, my lady, without carting trays." The woman seemed ancient to Kylar. Her face as withered as a winter apple, her body bowed as if she carried bricks on her back. But she set the tea tray on the sideboard and curtseyed with some grace. "Should I pour for you, my lady?"

"I'll see to it. How are your hands?"

"They don't trouble me overmuch."

Deirdre took them in her own. They were knotted and swollen at the joints. "You're using the ointment I gave you?"

"Yes, my lady, twice daily. It helps considerable."

Keeping her eyes on Magda's, Deirdre rubbed her thumbs rhythmically over the gnarled knuckles. "I have a tea that will help. I'll show you how to make it, and you'll drink a cup three times a day."

"Thank you, my lady." Magda curtseyed again before she left the room.

Kylar saw Deirdre rub her own hands as if to ease a pain before she reached for the teapot. "I'll answer your questions, Prince Kylar, and hope that you'll answer some of mine in turn." She brought him a small tray of cheese and biscuits, then settled into a chair with her tea.

"How do you survive?"

To the point, she thought. "We have the garden. Some chickens and goats for eggs and milk, and meat when meat is needed. There's the forest for fuel and, if we're lucky, for game. The young are trained in necessary skills. We live simply," she said, sipping her tea. "And well enough."

"Why do you stay?"

"Because this is my home. You risked your life in battle to protect yours."

"How do you know I didn't risk it to take what belonged to someone else?"

She watched him over the rim of her cup. Yes, he was handsome. His looks were only more striking now that he'd regained some of his strength. One of the servants had shaved him, and without the stubble of beard he looked younger. But little less dangerous. "Did you?"

"You know I didn't." His gaze narrowed on her face. "You know. How is that, Deirdre of the Ice?" He reached out, clamped a hand on her arm. "What did you do to me during the fever?"

"Healed you."

"With witchcraft?"

"I have a gift for healing," she said evenly. "Should I have used it, or let you die? There was no dark in it, and you are not bound to me for payment."

"Then why do I feel bound to you?"

Her pulse jumped. His hand wasn't gripping her arm now. It caressed. "I did nothing to tie you. I have neither desire nor the skill for it." Cautiously, she moved out of reach. "You have my word. When you're well enough to travel, you're free to go."

"How?" It was bitter. "Where?" Pity stirred in her, swam into her eyes. She remembered the face of the woman in his mind, the love she'd felt flow between them. His mother, she thought. Even now watching for his return home.

"It won't be simple, nor without risk. But you have a horse, and we'll give you provisions. One of my men will travel with you as far as possible. I can do no more than that."

He put it aside for now. When the time came, he would find his way home. "Tell me how this came to be. This place. I've heard stories-betrayal and witchcraft and cold spells over a land that was once fruitful and at peace."

"So I am told." She rose again to stir the fire. "When my grandfather was king, there were farms and fields. The land was green and rich, the lake blue and thick with fish. Have you ever seen blue water?"

"I have, yes."

"How can it be blue?" she asked as she turned. There was puzzlement on her face, and more, he thought. An eagerness he hadn't seen before. It made her look very young.

"I haven't thought about it," he admitted. "It seems to be blue, or green, or gray. It changes, as the sky changes."

"My sky never changes." The eagerness vanished as she walked to the window. "Well," she said, and straightened her shoulders. "Well. My grandfather had two daughters, twin-born. His wife died giving them life, and it's said he grieved for her the rest of his days. The babes were named Ernia, who was my aunt, and Fiona, who was my mother, and on them he doted. Most parents dote on their children, don't they, my lord?"

"Most," he agreed.

"So he did. Like their mother, they were beautiful, and like their mother, they were gifted. Ernia could call the sun, the rain, the wind. Fiona could speak to the beasts and the birds. They were, I'm told, competitive, each vying for their father's favor though he loved them both. Do you have siblings, my lord?"

"A brother and a sister, both younger."

She glanced back. He had his mother's eyes, she thought. But her hair had been light. Perhaps his father had that ink-black hair that looked so silky.

"Do you love them, your brother and your sister?"

"Very much."

"That is as it should be. But Ernia and Fiona could not love each other. Perhaps it was because they shared the same face, and each wanted her own. Who can say? They grew from girl to woman, and my grandfather grew old and ill. He wanted them married and settled before his death. Ernia he betrothed to a king in a land beyond the Elf Hills, and my mother he promised to a king whose lands marched with ours to the east. Rose Castle was to be my mother's, and the Palace of Sighs, on the border of the Elf Hills, my aunt's. In this way he divided his wealth and lands equally between them, for he was, I'm told, a wise and fair ruler and a loving father."

She came back to sit and sip at tea gone cold. "In the weeks before the weddings, a traveler came and was welcome here as all were in those days. He was handsome and clever, quick of tongue and smooth with charm. A minstrel by trade, it's said he sang like an angel. But fair looks are no mirror of the heart, are they?"

"A pleasant face is only a face." Kylar lifted a shoulder. "Deeds make a man."

"Or woman," she added. "So I have always believed, and so, in this case, it was. In secret, this handsome man courted and seduced both twins, and both fell blindly in love with him. He came to my mother's bed, and to her sister's, bearing a single red rose and promises never meant to be kept. Why do men lie when women love?"

The question took him aback. "My lady- not all men are deceivers."

"Perhaps not." Though she was far from convinced. "But he was. One evening the sisters, of the same mind, wandered to the rose garden. Each wanted to pluck a red rose for her lover. It was there the lies were discovered. Instead of comforting each other, instead of raging against the man who had deceived them both, they fought over him. She-wolves over an unworthy badger. Ernia's temper called the wind and the hail, and Fiona's had the beasts stalking out of the forest to snarl and howl."

"Jealousy is both a flawed and a lethal weapon." She angled her head. Nodded. "Well said. My grandfather heard the clamor and roused himself from his sickbed. Neither marriage could take place now, as both his daughters were disgraced. The minstrel, who had not slipped away quickly enough, was locked in the dungeon until his punishment could be decided. There was weeping and wailing from the sisters, as that punishment would surely be banishment, if not death. But he was spared when it came to be known that my mother was with child. His child, for she had lain with no other."

"You were the child."

"Yes. So, by becoming, I saved my father's life. The grief of this, the shame of this, ended my grandfather's. Before he died, he ordered Ernia to the Palace of Sighs. Because of the child, he decreed that my mother would marry the minstrel. It was this that drove Ernia mad, and on the day the marriage took place, the day her own father died in despair, she cast her spell.

"Winter, endless years of it. A sea of ice to lock Rose Castle away from the world. The rosebush where flowers had been plucked from lies would not bear bud. The child her sister carried would never feel the warmth of summer sun on her face, or walk in a meadow or see a tree bear fruit. One faithless man, three selfish hearts, destroyed a world. And so became the Isle of Winter in the Sea of Ice."

"My lady." He laid a hand on hers. Her life, he thought, the whole of it had been spent without the simple comfort of sunlight. "A spell cast can be broken. You have power."

"My gift is of healing. I cannot heal the land." Because she wanted to turn her hand over in his, link fingers, feel that connection, she drew away. "My father left my mother before I was born. Escaped. Later, as she watched her people starve, my mother sent messengers to the Palace of Sighs to ask for a truce. To beg for one. But they never came back. Perhaps they died, or lost their way. Or simply rode on into the warmth and the sun. No one who has left here has ever come back. Why would they?"

"Ernia the Witch-Queen is dead."

"Dead?" Deirdre stared into the fire. "You're sure of this?"

"She was feared, and loathed. There was great celebration when she died. It was on the Winter Solstice, and I remember it well. She's been dead for nearly ten years."

Deirdre closed her eyes. "As her sister has. So they died together. How odd, and how apt." She rose again to walk to the window. "Ten years dead, and her spell holds like a clenched fist. How bitter her heart must have been."

And the faint and secret hope she'd kept flickering inside that upon her aunt's death the spell would break, winked out. She drew herself up. "What we can't change, we learn to be content with." She stared out at the endless world of white. "There is beauty here."

"Yes." It was Deirdre that Kylar watched. "Yes. There is beauty here."

CHAPTER 4

He wanted to help her. More, Kylar thought, he wanted to save her. If there had been something tangible to fight—a man, a beast, an army—he would have drawn his sword and plunged into battle for her.

She moved him, attracted him, fascinated him. Her steady composure in the face of her fate stirred in him both admiration and frustration. This was not a woman to weep on a man's shoulder. It annoyed him to find himself wishing that she would, as long as the shoulder was his.

She was an extraordinary creature. He wanted to fight for her. But how did a man wage war on magic?

He'd never had any real experience with it. He was a soldier, and though he believed in luck, even in fate, he believed more in wile and skill and muscle.

He was a prince, would one day be a king. He believed in justice, in ruling with a firm touch on one hand and a merciful one on the other.

There was no justice here, where a woman who had done no wrong should be imprisoned for the crimes and follies and wickedness of those who had come before.

She was too beautiful to be shut away from the rest of the world. Too small, he mused, too fragile to work her hands raw. She should be draped in silks and ermine rather than homespun.

Already after less than a week on the Isle of Winter, he felt a restlessness, a need for color and heat. How had she stayed sane never knowing a single summer?

He wanted to bring her the sun.

She should laugh. It troubled him that he had not once heard her laugh. A smile, surprisingly warm when it was real enough to reach her eyes. That he had seen. He would find a way to see it again.

He waded through the snow across what he supposed had once been a courtyard. Though his wound had troubled him on waking, he was feeling stronger now. He needed to be doing, to find some work or activity to keep his blood moving and his mind sharp. Surely there was some task, some bit of work he could undertake for her here. It would repay her in some small way, and serve to keep his mind and hands busy while his body healed.

He recalled the stag he'd seen in the forest. He would hunt, then, and bring her meat. The wind that had thrashed ceaselessly for days had finally quieted. Though the utter stillness that followed it played havoc with the nerves, it would make tracking through the forest possible.

He moved through a wide archway on the other side of the courtyard. And stopped to stare.

This, he realized with wonder, had been the rose garden. Gnarled and blackened stalks tangled out of the snow. Once, he imagined, it would have been magnificent, full of color and scent and humming bees.

Now it was a great field of snow cased in ice.

Bisecting that field were graceful paths of silver stone, and someone kept them clear. There were hundreds of bushes, all brittle with death, the stalks spearing out of their cold graves like blackened bones.

Benches, these, too, cleared of snow and ice, stood in graceful curves of deep jewel colors. Ruby, sapphire, emerald, they gleamed in the midst of the stark and merciless white. There was a small pond in the shape of an open rose, and its flower held a rippled sheet of ice. Dead branches with vicious thorns strangled iron arbors. More spindly corpses climbed up the silver stone of the walls as if they'd sought to escape before winter murdered them.

In the center, where all paths led, was a towering column of ice. Under the glassy sheen, he could see the arch of blackened branches studded with thorns, and hundreds of withered flowers trapped forever in their moment of death.

The rosebush, he thought, where the flowers of lies had been plucked. No, he corrected as he moved toward it. More a tree, for it was taller than he was and spread wider than the span of both his arms. He ran his fingertips over the ice, found it smooth. Experimentally, he took the dagger from his belt, dragged its tip over the ice. It left no mark.

"It cannot be reached with force."

Kylar turned and saw Orna standing in the archway. "What of the rest? Why haven't the dead branches

been cleared and used for fire?" he asked her.

"To do so would be to give up hope." She had hope still, and more when she looked into Kylar's eyes.

She saw what she needed there. Truth, strength, and courage.

"She walks here."

"Why would she punish herself in such a way?" he demanded.

"It reminds her, I think, of what was. And what is." But not, Orna feared, of what might be. "Once, when my lady was but eight, and the last of the dogs died, breaking her heart, she took her grandfather's sword. In her grief and temper, she tried to hack through that ice into the bush. For nearly an hour she stabbed and sliced and beat at it, and could not so much as scratch the surface. In the end, she went to her knees there where you stand now and wept as if she'd die from it. Something in her did die that day, along with the last of the dogs. I have not heard her weep since. I wish she would."

"Why do you wish for your lady's tears?"

"For then she would know her heart is not dead but, like the rose, only waiting."

He sheathed his dagger. "If force can't reach it, what can?"

She smiled, for she knew he spoke of the heart as much as the rose. "You will make a good king in your time, Kylar of Mrydon, for you listen to what isn't said. What can't be vanquished with sword or might can be won with truth, with love, with selflessness. She is in the stables, what is left of them. She wouldn't ask for your company, but would enjoy it."

The stables lined three sides of another courtyard, but this one was crisscrossed with crooked paths dug through or trampled into the snow. Kylar saw the reason for it in the small troop of children waging a lively snow battle at the far end. Even in such a world, he thought, children found a way to be children.

As he drew closer to the stables, he heard the low cackle of hens. There were men on the roof, working on a chimney. They tipped their caps to him as he passed under the eaves and into the stables.

It was warmer, thanks to carefully banked fires, and clean as a parlor. The queen, he thought, tended her goats and chickens well. Iron kettles heated over the fires. Water for the stock, he concluded, made from melted snow. He noted barrows of manure. For use in her garden, he decided. A wise and practical woman, Queen Deirdre.

Then he saw the wise and practical woman, with her red hood tossed back, her gold hair raining down as she cooed up at his warhorse.

When the horse shook its great head and blew, she laughed. The rich female sound warmed his blood more thoroughly than the fires.

"His name is Cathmor."

Startled, embarrassed, Deirdre dropped the hands she'd lifted to stroke the horse's muzzle. She knew she shouldn't have lingered, that he would come check on his horse as it had been reported he did twice daily. But she'd so wanted to see the creature herself.

"You have a light step."

"You were distracted." He walked up beside her, and to her surprise and delight, the horse bumped his shoulder in greeting.

"Does that mean he's glad to see you?"

"It means he's hoping I have an apple."

Deirdre fingered the small carrot from her garden she'd tucked in her pocket. "Perhaps this will do." She pulled it out, started to offer it to Kylar.

"He would enjoy being fed by a lady. No, not like that." He took her hand and, opening it, laid the carrot on her palm. "Have you never fed a horse?"

"I've never seen one." She caught her breath as Cathmor dipped his head and nibbled the carrot out of her palm. "He's bigger than I imagined, and more handsome. And softer." Unable to resist, she stroked her hand down the horse's nose. "Some of the children have been keeping him company. They'd make a pet of him if they could."

"Would you like to ride him?"

"Ride?"

"He needs the exercise, and so do I. I thought I would hunt this morning. Come with me."

To ride a horse? Just the idea of it was thrilling. "I have duties."

"I might get lost alone." He brought her hand back up, ran it under his along Cathmor's silky neck. "I don't know your forest. And I'm still a bit weak."

Her lips twitched. "Your wits are strong enough. I could send a man with you."

"I prefer your company."

To ride a horse, she thought again. How could she resist? Why should she? She was no fluttery girl who would fall into stutters and blushes by being alone with a man. Even this man.

"All right. What do I do first?". "You wait until I saddle him."

She shook her head. "No, show me how to do it."

When it was done, she sent one of the boys scurrying off to tell Orna she was riding out with the prince. She needn't have bothered, for as they walked the horse out of the stables, her people began to gather at the windows, in the courtyard.

When he vaulted into the saddle, they cheered him like a hero.

"It's been a long time since they've seen anyone ride," she explained as Cathmor pranced in place. "Some of them, like me, never have." She let out a breath. "It's a long way up."

"Give me your hand." He reached down to her. "Trust me."

She would have to if she wanted this amazing treat. She offered her hand, then yelped in shock when he simply hauled her up in the saddle in front of him.

"You might have warned me you intended to drag me up like a sack of turnips. If you've opened your wound again-"

"Quiet," he whispered, entirely too close to her ear for comfort, and with her people cheering, he kicked Cathmor into a trot.

"Oh." Her eyes popped wide as her bottom bounced. "It's not what I expected." And hardly dignified.

With shouts and whoops, children raced after them as they trotted out of the castle.

"Match the rhythm of your body to the gait of the horse," he told her.

"Yes, I'm trying. Must you be so close?" He grinned. "Yes. And I'm enjoying it. You shouldn't be uneasy with a man, Deirdre, when you've seen him naked."

"Seeing you naked hardly gives me cause to relax around you," she shot back.

With a rolling laugh, he urged the horse to a gallop.

Her breath caught, but with delight rather than fear. Wind rushed by her cheeks, and snow flew up into the air like tattered lace. She closed her eyes for an instant to absorb the sensation, and the wild thrill made her dizzy.

So fast, she thought. So strong. When they charged up a hill she wanted to throw her arms in the air and shout for the sheer joy of it.

Her heart raced along with the horse, continued to pound even when they slowed at the verge of the forest that had been known as the Forgotten for the whole of her lifetime.

"It's like flying," she mused. "Oh, thank you." She leaned down to press her cheek to the horse's neck. "I'll never forget it. He's a grand horse, isn't he?"

Flushed with pleasure, she turned. His face was too close, so close she felt the warmth of his breath on her cheek. Close enough that she saw a kind of heat kindling in his eyes.

"No." He caught her chin with his hand before she could turn away again. "Don't. I kissed you before, when I thought I was dying." His lips hovered a breath from hers. "I lived."

He had to taste her again; it seemed his sanity depended on it. But because he saw her fear, he took her mouth gently, skimming his lips over ones that trembled. Soothing as well as seducing. He watched her eyes go soft before her lashes fluttered down.

"Kiss me back, Deirdre." His hand slid down until his arm could band her waist and draw her closer. "This time kiss me back."

"I don't know how." But she already was.

Her limbs went weak, wonderfully weak, even as her pulse danced madly. Warmth enveloped her, reaching places inside that had never known its comfort.

The light that had sparked inside her when their hearts had brushed in healing spread.

On the Isle of Winter in the snowy rose garden, beneath a shield of ice, a tiny bud-tender green-formed on a blackened branch.

He nibbled at her lips until she parted them. And when he deepened the kiss she felt, for the first time in her life, a true lance of heat in her belly.

Yearning for more, she eased back, then indulged herself by letting her head rest briefly on his shoulder. "So it's this," she whispered. "It's this that makes the women sing in the kitchen in the morning."

He stroked her hair, rubbed his cheek against it. "It's a bit more than that." Sweet, he thought. Strong. She was everything a man could want. Everything, he realized, that he wanted.

"Yes, of course." She sighed once. "More than that, but it starts like this. It can't for me."

"It has." He held her close when she would have drawn away. "It did, the minute I saw you."

"If I could love, it would be you. Though I'm not sure why, it would be you. If I were free, I would choose you." She turned away again. "We came to hunt. My people need meat."

He fought the urge to yank her around, to plunder that lovely mouth until she yielded. Force wasn't the answer. So he'd been told. There were better ways to win a woman.

CHAPTER 5

She spotted the tracks first. They moved soundlessly through the trees, and she was grateful for the need for silence.

How could she explain or ask him to understand, when she couldn't understand herself? Her heart was frozen, chilled to death by pride and duty, and the fear that she might do her people more harm.

Her father had made her in lies, then had run away from his obligation. Her mother had done her duty, and she had been kind. But her heart had been broken into so many pieces there had been none left for her child.

And what sort of child was it who could grieve more truly for a dead dog than for her own dead mother?

She had nothing emotionally to give a man, and wanted nothing from one. In that way she would survive, and keep her people alive.

Life, she reminded herself, mattered most. And what she felt for him was surely no more than a churning in the blood.

But how could she have known what it was like to be held by him? To feel his heart beat so strong and

fast against hers? None of the books she'd read had captured with their clever words the true thrill of lips meeting.

Now that she understood, it would be just another precious memory, like a ride on horseback, to tuck away for the endless lonely nights.

She would decide later, she thought, if the nights were longer, lonelier, with the memory than they were without it.

But today she couldn't allow herself to think like a woman softened by a man's touch. She must think like a queen with people to provide for.

She caught the scent of the stag even before the horse did, and held up a hand. "We should walk from here," she said under her breath.

He didn't question her, but dismounted, then reached up to lift her down. Then his arms were around her again, her hands on his shoulders, and her face tilted up to his. Even as she shook her head, he brushed his lips over her brow.

"Deirdre the fair," he said softly. "Such a pretty armful."

The male scent of him blurred the scent of the stag. "This is not the time."

Because the catch in her voice was enough to satisfy him, for now, he reached over for his bow and quiver. But when she held out her hands for them, he lifted his eyebrows.

"The bow is too heavy a draw for you." When she continued to stare, hands outstretched, he shrugged and gave them to her.

So, he thought, he would indulge her. They'd make do with more cabbage tonight.

Then he was left blinking as she tossed aside her cloak and streaked through the trees in her men's clothes like a wraith-soundless and swift. Before he could tether his horse, she'd vanished and he could do no more than follow in her tracks.

He stopped when he caught sight of her. She stood in the gloomy light, nearly hip-deep in snow. With a gesture smooth and polished as a warrior, she notched the arrow, drew back the heavy bow. The sharp ping of the arrow flying free echoed. Then she lowered the bow, and her head.

"Everyone misses sometimes," he said as he started toward her.

Her head came up, her face cold and set. "I did not miss. I find no pleasure in the kill. My people need meat."

She handed the bow and quiver back to him, then trudged through the snow to where the stag lay.

Kylar saw she'd taken it down, fast, mercifully fast, with a single shot.

"Deirdre," he called out. "Do you ask yourself how game, even so sparse, come to be here where there is no food for them?"

She continued walking. "My mother did what she could, leaving a call that would draw them to the forest. She hoped to teach me to do the same, but it's not my gift."

"You have more than one," he said. "I'll get the horse."

Once the deer was strapped onto the horse, Kylar cupped his hands to help Deirdre mount. "Put your right foot in my hands, swing your left leg over the saddle."

"There isn't room for both of us now. You ride, I'll walk."

"No, I'll walk."

"It's too far when you've yet to fully recover. Mount your horse." She started to move past him, but he blocked her path. Her shoulders straightened like an iron bar. "I said, mount. I am a queen, and you merely a prince. You will do as I bid."

"I'm a man, and you merely a woman." He shocked her speechless by picking her up and tossing her into the saddle. "You'll do what you're told."

However much she labored side by side with her people, no one had ever disobeyed a command. And no man had ever laid hands on her. "You- dare."

"I'm not one of your people." He gathered the reins and began to walk the horse through the forest. "Whatever our ranks, I'm as royal as you. Though that doesn't mean a damn at the moment. It's difficult to think of you as a queen when you're garbed like a man and I've seen you handle a bow that my own squire can barely manage. It's difficult to think of you as a queen, Deirdre," he added with a glance back at her furious face, "when I've held you in my arms."

"Then you'd best remember what that felt like, for you won't be allowed to do so again."

He stopped, and turning, ran his hand deliberately up her leg. When she kicked out at him, he caught her boot and laughed. "Ah, so there's a temper in there after all. Good. I prefer bedding a woman with fire in her."

Quick as a snake the dagger was out of her belt and in her hand. And its killing point at his throat. "Remove your hand."

He never flinched, but realized to his own shock that this wasn't merely a woman he could want. It was a woman he could love. "Would you do it, I wonder? I think you might while the temper's on you, but then you'd regret it." He brought his hand up slowly, gripped her knife hand by the wrist. "We'd both regret it. I tell you I want to bed you. I give you the truth. Do you want lies?"

"You can bed Cordelia, if she's willing."

"I don't want Cordelia, willing or not." He took the knife from her hand, then brushed a kiss over her palm. "But I want you, Deirdre. And I want you willing." He handed her back the dagger, hilt first. "Can you handle a sword as well as you do a dagger?"

"I can."

"You're a woman of marvels, Deirdre the fair." He began to walk again. "I understand developing skill

with the bow, but what need have you for sword or dagger?"

"Ignoring training in defense is careless and lazy. The training itself is good for the body and the mind. If my people are expected to learn how to handle a blade, then so should I be."

"Agreed."

When he paused a second time, her eyes narrowed in warning. "I'm going to shorten the stirrups so you can ride properly. What happened to your horses?"

"Those who left the first year took them." She ordered herself to relax and pleased herself by stroking Cathmor's neck again. "There were cattle, too, and sheep. Those that didn't die of the cold were used as food. There were cottages and farmhouses, but people came to the castle for shelter, for food. Or wandered off hoping to find spring. Now they're under the snow and ice. Why do you want to bed me?"

"Because you're beautiful."

She frowned down at him. "Are men so simple, really?" He laughed, shook his head, and her fingers itched to tangle in his silky black mane rather than the horse's. "Simple enough about certain matters. But I hadn't finished the answer. Your beauty would be enough to make me want you for a night. Try this now, heels down. That's fine."

He gave her foot a friendly pat, then walked back to the horse's head. "Your strength and your courage add layers to beauty. They appeal to me. Your mind's sharp and cleaves clean. That's a challenge. And a woman who can plant potatoes like a farmwife and draw a dagger like an assassin is a fascinating creature."

"I thought when a man wanted to pleasure himself with a woman, he softened her with pretty words and poetry and long looks full of pain and longing."

What a woman, Kylar mused. He'd never seen the like of her. "Would you like that?"

She considered it, and was relaxed again. It was easier to discuss the whole business as a practical matter. "I don't know."

"You wouldn't trust them."

She smiled before she could stop it. "I wouldn't, no. Have you bedded many women?"

He cleared his throat and began to walk a bit faster. "That, sweetheart, isn't a question I'm comfortable answering."

"Why not?"

"Because it's- it's a delicate matter," he decided.

"Would you be more comfortable telling me if you've killed many men?"

"I don't kill for sport, or for pleasure," he said, and his voice turned as frigid as the air. "Taking a man's life is no triumph, my lady. Battle is an ugly business."

"I wondered. I meant no offense."

"I would have let them go." He spoke so softly that she had to lean forward to hear clearly.

"Who?"

"The three who set upon me after the battle had been won. When I was for home. I would have let them pass in peace. What purpose was there in more blood?"

She'd already seen this inside him, and knew it for truth. He had not killed in hate nor in some fever of dark excitement. He had killed to live. "They wouldn't let you pass in peace."

"They were tired, and one already wounded. If I'd had an escort as I should, they would have surrendered. In the end, it was their own fear and my carelessness that killed them. I'm sorry for it."

More for the waste of their lives, she realized, than for his own wounds. Understanding this, she felt something sigh inside her. "Kylar."

It was the first time she'd spoken his name, as she might to a friend. And she leaned down to touch his cheek with her fingertips, as she might touch a lover's.

"You'll rule well."

She invited him to sup with her that night. Another first. He dressed in the fresh doublet Cordelia brought him, one of soft linen that smelled lightly of lavender and rosemary. He wondered from what chest it had been unearthed for his use, but as it fit well enough, he had no cause to complain.

But when he followed the servant into the dining hall, he wished for his court clothes.

She wore green again, but no simple dress of homespun. The velvet gown poured down her body, dipping low at the creamy rise of her breasts and sweeping out from her waist in soft, deep folds. Her hair was long and loose, but over it sparkled a crown glinting with jewels. More draped in shimmering ropes around her throat.

She stood in the glow of candlelight, beautiful as a vision, and every inch a queen.

When she offered a hand, he crossed to her, bowed deeply before touching his lips to her knuckles. "Your Majesty."

"Your Highness. The room," she said with a gesture she hoped hid the nerves and pleasure she felt upon seeing the open approval on his face, "is overlarge for two. I hope you'll be comfortable."

"I see nothing but you."

She tilted her head. Curious, this flirting, she decided. And entertaining. "Are these the pretty words and poetry?"

"They're the truth."

"They fall pleasantly on the ear. It's an indulgence to have a fire in here," she began as she let him escort her to the table. "But tonight there is wine, and venison, and a welcome guest."

At the head of the long table were two settings. Silver and crystal and linen white as the snow outside the windows. Behind them, the mammoth fire roared.

Servants slipped in to serve wine and the soup course. If he'd been able to tear his gaze away from Deirdre, he might have seen the glint in their eyes, the exchanged winks and quick grins.

She missed them as well, as she concentrated on the experience of her first formal meal with someone from outside her world. "The fare is simple," she began.

"As good as a bounty. And the company feeds me."

She studied him thoughtfully. "I do think I like pretty words, but I have no skill in holding a conversation with them."

He took her hand. "Why don't we practice?"

Her laugh bubbled out, but she shook her head. "Tell me of your home, your family. Your sister," she remembered. "Is she lovely?"

"She is. Her name is Gwenyth. She married two years ago."

"Is there love?"

"Yes. He was friend and neighbor, and they had a sweetness for each other since childhood. When I last saw her she was great with her second babe." The faintest cloud passed over his face. "I'd hoped to make my way home for the birthing."

"And your brother?"

"Riddock is young, headstrong. He can ride like the devil."

"You're proud of him."

"I am. He'd give you poetry." Kylar lifted his goblet. "He has a knack for it, and loves nothing more than luring pretty maids out to the garden in the moonlight."

She asked questions casually so he would talk. She was unsure of her conversational skills in this arena, and it was such a pleasure to just sit and listen to him speak so easily of things that were, to her, a miracle.

Summer and gardens, swimming in a pond, riding through a village where people went to market. Carts of glossy red apples-what would they taste like? Baskets of flowers whose scent she could only dream of.

She had a picture of his home now, as she had pictures in books.

She had a picture of him, and it was more than anything she'd ever found in a book.

Willing to pay whatever it cost her later, she lost herself in him, in the way his voice rose and fell, in his laugh. She thought she could sit this way for days, to talk like this with no purpose in it, no niggling

worries. Just to be with him by the warmth of the fire, with wine sweet on her tongue and his eyes so intimately on hers.

She didn't object when he took her hand, when his fingers toyed with hers. If this was flirtation, it was such a lovely way to pass the time.

They spoke of faraway lands and cultures. Of paintings and of plays.

"You've put your library to good use," he commented. "I've known few scholars as well read."

"I can see the world through books, and lives through the stories. Once a year, on Midsummer, we put on a pageant. We have music and games. I choose a story, and everyone takes a part as if it were a play. Surviving isn't enough. There must be life and color."

There were times, secretly, when she pined near weeping for true color.

"All the children are taught to read," she continued, "and to do sums. If you have only a window on the world, you must look out of it. One of my men-well, he's just a boy really-he makes stories. They're quite wonderful."

She caught herself, surprised at the sound of her own voice rambling. "I've kept you long enough."

"No." His hand tightened on hers. He was beginning to realize it would never be long enough. "Tell me more. You play music, don't you? A harp. I heard you playing, singing. It was like a dream."

"You were feverish. I play a little. Some skill inherited from my father, I suppose."

"I'd like to hear you play again. Will you play for me, Deirdre?"

"If you like."

But as she started to rise, one of the men who'd helped serve rushed in. "My lady, my lady, it's young Phelan!"

"What's happened?"

"He was playing with some of the boys on the stairs, and fell. We can't wake him. My lady, we fear he's dying."

CHAPTER 6

Afraid to move him, they'd left the boy covered with a blanket at the base of the stairs. At first glance, Kylar thought the child, for he was hardly more, was already dead. He'd seen enough of death to recognize its face.

He judged the boy to be about ten, with fair hair and cheeks still round with youth. But those cheeks were gray, and the hair was matted with blood.

Those who circled and knelt around the boy made way when Deirdre hurried through.

"Get back now," she ordered. "Give him room."

Before Deirdre could kneel, a weeping woman broke free to fall at her feet and clutch at her skirts with bloodstained hands. "My baby. Oh, please, my lady! Help my little boy."

"I will, Ailish. Of course I will." Knowing that time was precious, Deirdre bent down and firmly loosened the terrified woman's hold on her. "You must be strong for him, and trust. Let me see to him now."

"He slipped, my lady." Another youth came forward with a jerky step. His eyes were dry, but huge, and there were tracks of tears still drying on his cheeks. "We were playing horse and rider on the stairs, and he slipped."

"All right." Too much grief, she thought, feeling waves of it pressing over her. Too much fear. "It's all right now. I'll tend to him."

"Deirdre." Kylar kept his voice low, so only she could hear over the mother's weeping. "There's nothing you can do here. I can smell death on him."

As could she, and so she knew she had little time. "What is the smell of death but the smell of fear?" She ran her hands gently over the crumpled body, feeling the hurts, finding so much broken in the little boy that her heart ached from it. Medicines would do no good here, but still her face was composed as she looked up.

"Cordelia, fetch my healing bag. Make haste. The rest, please, leave us now. Leave me with him. Ailish, go now."

"Oh, no, please, my lady. Please, I must stay with my boy."

"Do you trust me?"

"My lady." She gripped Deirdre's hand, wept on it. "I do."

"Then do as I bid you. Go now and pray."

"His neck," Kylar began, then broke off when Deirdre whipped her head around and stared at him.

"Be silent! Help me or go, but don't question me."

When Ailish was all but carried away, and the two of them were alone with the bleeding boy, Deirdre closed her eyes. "This will hurt him. I'm sorry for it. Hold him down, hold him as still as you can, and do nothing to interfere. Nothing, do you understand?"

"No." But Kylar shifted until he could clamp the boy's arms.

"Block thoughts of death from your mind," she ordered. "And fear, and doubt. Block them out as you would in battle. There's too much dark here already. Can you do this?"

"I can." And because she asked it of him, Kylar let the cold come into him, the cold that steeled the mind to face combat.

"Phelan," she said. "Young Phelan, the bard." Her voice was soft, almost a crooning as she traced her hands over him again. "Be strong for me."

She knew him already, had watched him grow and learn and be. She knew the sound of his voice, the quick flash of his grin, the lively turn of his mind. He had been hers, as all in Rose Castle were hers, from the moment of his first breath.

And so she merged easily with him.

While her hands worked, stroking, kneading, she slid into his mind. She felt his laughter inside her as he pranced and raced with his friends up and down the narrow stone steps. Felt his heart leap inside her own as his feet slipped. Then the fear, oh, the terror, an instant only before the horrible pain.

The snap of bone made her cry out softly, had her head rearing back. Something inside her crushed like thin clay under a stone hammer, and the sensation was beyond torment.

Her eyes were open now, Kylar saw. A deep and too brilliant green. Her breath came fast and hard, sweat pearled on her brow. And the boy screamed thinly, straining under his grip.

Both made a sound of agony as she slid a hand under the boy to cup his neck, laid her other on his heart. Both shuddered. Both went pale as death.

Kylar started to call out to her, to reach for her as she swayed. But he felt the heat, a ferocious fist of it that seemed to pump out of her, into the boy until the arms he held were like sticks of fire.

And the boy's eyes opened, stared up blindly.

"Take, young Phelan." His voice was thick now, echoed richly off the stone. "Take what you need. Fire of healing." She leaned down, laid her lips gently on his. "Live. Stay with us. Your mother needs you."

As Kylar watched, thunderstruck, color seeped back into the boy's face. He would have sworn he felt death skitter back into the shadows.

"My lady," the boy said, almost dreamily. "I fell."

"Yes, I know. Sleep now." She brushed her hand over his eyes, and they closed on a sigh. "And heal. Let his mother in, if you will," she said to Kylar. "And Cordelia."

"Deirdre—"

"Please." The weakness threatened to drag her under, and she wanted to be away, in her own chamber before she lost herself to it. "Let them in so I can tell them what must be done for him."

She stayed kneeling when Kylar rose. The sounds of her people were like the dull roar of the ocean in her head. Even as Ailish collapsed next to her son, to gather him close to kiss Deirdre's now trembling hand, Deirdre gave clear, careful instructions for his care.

"Enough!" Alarmed by her pallor, Kylar swept her off the floor and into his arms. "Tend the boy."

"I'm not finished," Deirdre managed.

"Yes, by the blood, you are." The single glance he swept over those gathered challenged any to contradict him. "Where is your chamber?"

"This way, my lord prince." Orna led him through a doorway, down a corridor to another set of stairs. "I know what to do for her, my lord."

"Then you'll do it." He glanced down at Deirdre as he carried her up the stairs. She had swooned after all, he noted. Her skin was like glass, her eyes closed. The boy's blood was on her hands. "What did she risk by snatching the boy from death?"

"I cannot say, my lord." She opened a door, hurried across a chamber to the bed. "I will care for her now."

"I stay."

Orna pressed her lips together as he laid Deirdre on the bed. "I must undress her. Wash her."

Struggling with temper, he turned to stalk to the window. "Then do so. Is this what she did for me?"

"I cannot say." Orna met his eyes directly when he turned back. "She did not speak of it to me. She does not speak of it with anyone. Prince Kylar, I will ask you to turn your back until my lady is suitably attired in her night garb."

"Woman, her modesty is not an issue with me." But he turned, stared out the window.

He had heard of those who could heal with the mind. But he had not believed it, not truly believed, before tonight. Nor had he considered what price the healer paid to heal.

"She will sleep," Orna said some time later.

"I won't disturb her." He came to the bed now, gazed down. There was still no color in her cheeks, but it seemed to him her breathing was steadier. "Nor will I leave her."

"My lady is strong, as valiant as ten warriors."

"If I had ten as valiant, there would never be another battle to fight."

Pleased with his response, Orna inclined her head. "And my lady has, despite what she believes, a tender heart." Orna set a bottle and goblet on the table near the bed. "See that you don't bruise it. When she wakes, give her some of this tonic. I will not be far, should you need me."

Alone, Kylar drew a chair near the bed and watched Deirdre sleep. For an hour, and then two. She was motionless and pale as marble in the firelight, and he feared she would never wake but would sleep like the beauty in another legend, for a hundred years.

Even days before he would have deemed such things foolishness, stories for children. But now, after what he'd seen, what he'd felt, anything seemed possible.

Still, side by side with the worry inside him, anger bloomed. She had risked her life. He had seen death slide its cold fingers over her. She had bargained her life for the child's.

And, he was sure now, for his own.

When she stirred, just the slightest flutter of her lashes, he poured the tonic Orna had left into the cup.

"Drink this." He lifted her head from the pillow. "Don't speak. Just drink now."

She sipped, and sighed. The hand she lifted to his wrist slid limply away again. "Phelan?" she whispered.

"I don't know." He brought the cup to her lips a second time. "Drink more."

She obeyed, then turned her head. "Ask. Ask how young Phelan fares. Please. I must be sure."

"Drink first. Drink it all."

She did as he bade, and kept her eyes open and on his now. If she'd had the strength, she would have gone to find out herself. But the weakness was still dragging at her, and she could only trust Kylar to the task. "Please. I won't be easy until I know his condition."

Kylar set the empty cup aside, then crossed the chamber to the door. Orna sat on a chair in the corridor, sewing by candlelight. She glanced up when she saw him. "Tell my lady not to fret. Young Phelan is resting. Healing." She got to her feet. "If you would like to retire, my lord, I will sit with my lady."

"Go to your bed," he said shortly. "I stay with her tonight."

Orna bowed her head and hid a smile. "As you wish."

He stepped back inside, closed the door. And turning saw that Deirdre was sitting up in bed, with her hair spilling like honey over the white lawn of her nightdress.

"Your boy is resting, and well."

At his words, he saw color return to her face, watched the dullness clear from her eyes. He came to the foot of the bed, which was draped in deep red velvet. "You recover quickly, madam."

"The tonic is potent." Indeed she now felt clear of mind, and even the echoes of pain were fading from her body. "Thank you for your help. His mother and father would have been too distraught to assist. Their worry could have distracted me. More, fear feeds death."

She glanced around the room, a little warily. Orna hadn't laid out her nightrobe. "If you'd excuse me now, I'll go see for myself."

"Not tonight."

To her shock he sat on the side of the bed near her. Only pride kept her from shifting over, or tugging up the blankets.

"I have questions."

"I've answered several of your questions already."

He lifted his brows. "Now I have more. The boy was dying. His skull crushed, his neck damaged if not broken. His left arm was shattered."

"Yes," she said calmly. "And inside his body, more was harmed. He bled inside himself. So much blood for such a little boy. But he has a strong heart, our Phelan. He is particularly precious to me."

"He would have been dead in minutes."

"He is not dead."

"Why?"

"I can't answer." Restlessly, she pushed at her hair. "I can't explain it to you."

"Won't."

"Can't."

When she would have turned her face away, he caught her chin, held it firmly. "Try."

"You overstep," she said stiffly. "Continually."

"Then you should be growing accustomed to it. I held the boy," he reminded her. "I watched, and I felt life come back into him. Tell me what you did."

She wanted to dismiss him, but he had helped her when she'd needed his help. So she would try. "It's a kind of search, and a merging. An opening of both." She lifted a hand, let it fall. "It is a kind of faith, if you will."

"It caused you pain."

"Do you think fighting death is painless? You know better. To heal, I must feel what he feels, and bring him up-" She shook her head, frustrated with words. "Take him back to the pain. Then we ride it together, so that I see, feel, know."

"You rode more than pain. You rode death. I saw you."

"We were stronger."

"And if you hadn't been?"

"Then death would have won," she said simply. "And a mother would be grieving her firstborn tonight."

"And you? Deirdre of the Ice, would your people be grieving you?"

"There is a risk. Do you turn from battle, Kylar? Or do you face it knowing your life might be the price paid at end of day? Would you not stand for any one of your people if they had need? Would you expect me to do less for one of mine?"

"I was not one of yours." He took her hand before she could look away. "You rode death with me, Deirdre. I remember. I thought it a dream, but I remember. The pain, as if the sword cut into me fresh. That same pain mirrored in your eyes as you looked down at me. The heat of your body, the heat of your life pouring into me. I was nothing to you."

"You were a man. You were hurt." She reached out now, laying her hand on his cheek. "Why are you angry? Should I have let you die because my medicines weren't enough to save you? Should I have stepped back from you and my own gift because it would cause me a moment's pain to save you? Does your pride bleed now because a woman fought for your life?"

"Perhaps it does." He closed his hand over her wrist. "When I carried you in here I thought you would die, and I was helpless."

"You stayed with me. That was kind."

He made some sound, then pushed himself off the bed to pace. "When a man goes into battle, Deirdre, it's sword to sword, lance to lance, fist to fist. These are tangible things. What you've done, magic or miracle, is so much more. And you were right. I can't understand it."

"It changes how you think of me."

"Yes."

She lowered her lashes, hid the fresh pain. "There is no shame in it. Most men would not have stayed to help, certainly not have stayed to speak with me. I'm grateful. Now if you'd excuse me, I'd like to be alone."

Slowly, he turned back to her. "You misunderstand me. Before I thought of you as a woman-beautiful, strong, intelligent. Sad. Now I think of you as all of that, and so much more. You humble me. You expect me to step away from you, because of all you are. I can't. I want to be with you, and I have no right."

With her heart unsteady, she looked at him again. "Is it gratitude that draws you to me?"

"I am grateful. I owe you for every breath I take. But it isn't gratitude I feel when I look at you."

She slid out of bed to stand on her own feet. "Is it desire?"

"I desire you."

"I've never had a man's arms around me in love. I want them to be yours."

"What right do I have when I can't stay with you? I should already be gone. Both my family and my people wait."

"You give me truth, and truth means more than pretty words and empty promises. I wondered about this, and now I know. When I healed you I felt something I've never felt before. Mixed with the pain and the cold that comes into me so bitter there was- light."

Watching him, she spread her hands. "I said I did nothing to bind you to me, and that is truth. But something happened in me when I was part of you. It angered me, and it frightened me. But now, just now-" She drew a breath and spoke without a blush. "It excites me. I've been so cold. Give me one night of warmth. You said you wanted me willing." She reached up, tugged the ribbons loose from the bodice of the nightdress. "And I am," she said as the white gown slid down to pool at her feet.

She was a vision. More than he could have dreamed. Slim and small, she stood in the glow of candle and firelight.

"Will you give me a night?" she asked him.

"Deirdre. My love. I would give you a lifetime."

"I want no pledges that can't be kept, no words but truth. Only give me what can be, and it will be enough," she replied somberly.

"My lady." He felt, somehow, that the step toward her was the most momentous of his life. And when he took her hands, that he was taking the world. "It is the truth. Why or how I don't know. But never have I spoken cleaner truth."

She believed he meant it, in this time. In this place. "Kylar, lifetimes are for those who are free."

So she would be, he promised himself. Whatever had to be done. But now wasn't for plans and battles. "If you won't accept that pledge, let me pledge this. That I have loved no other as I love you tonight."

"I can give that vow back to you. I thought it would be for duty." She lifted her hands to his face, traced the shape of it with her fingers. "And I thought the first time, it would be with fear." She laughed a little. "My heart jumps. Can you feel it?"

He laid a hand on her breast, felt the shiver. Felt the leap. "I won't hurt you."

"Oh, no." She laid a hand on his heart in turn. They had brushed once before, she thought. Heart to heart. Nothing had been the same for her since. Nothing would be the same for her ever again. "You won't hurt me. Warm me, Kylar, as a man warms his woman."

He drew her into his arms. Gently, gently. Laid his lips on hers. Tenderly. There once more, she thought. There. That miracle of mouth against mouth. Sighing out his name, she let herself melt into the kiss.

"The first time you kissed me, I thought you were foolish."

His lips curved on hers. "Did you?"

"Half frozen and bleeding, and you would waste your last breath flirting with a woman. Such is a man."

"Not a waste," he corrected. "But I can do better now." With a flourish that pleased them both, he swept her into his arms. "Come to bed, my lady."

As she had once longed to do, she toyed with his silky black hair. "You must teach me what to do."

His muscles tightened, nerves and thrills, at the thought of her innocence. Tonight she would give him what she had given no other. In the candle glow he saw her face, saw that she gave him this treasure without fear, without shame.

No, he would not hurt her, but would do all in his power to bring her joy.

He laid her on the bed, rubbed his cheek against hers. "It will be my pleasure to instruct you."

"I've seen the goats mate."

His burst of laughter was muffled in her hair. "This, I can promise, will be somewhat different than the mating of goats. So pay attention," he said, grinning now as he lifted his head, "while I give you your first lesson."

He was a patient teacher, and surely, she thought as her skin began to shiver and sing under his hands, a skilled one. His mouth drank from hers, deep, then deeper until it was how she imagined it might be to slide bonelessly into a warm river.

Surrounded, floating, then submerged.

His hands roamed over her breasts, then cupped them as if he could hold her heartbeat in his palms. The sensation of those strong, hard hands on her flesh shimmered straight down to her belly. His mouth skimmed the side of her throat, nibbling.

"How lovely." She murmured it, arching a little to invite more. "How clever for breasts to give pleasure as well as milk."

"Indeed." His thumbs brushed over her nipples, and made her gasp. "I've often thought the same."

"Oh- but what do I-" Her words, her thoughts trailed off into a rainbow when that nibbling mouth found her breast

She made a sound in her throat, half cry, half moan. It thrilled him, that sound of shocked pleasure, the sudden shudder of her body, the quick jolt of her heart under his lips. As she arched again, her fingers combed through his hair, gripped there and pressed him closer. The sweet taste of her filled him like warmed wine.

He rose over her to tug his doublet aside, but before he could satisfy himself with that glorious slide of his flesh to her flesh, she lifted her hands, ran them experimentally over his chest.

"Wait." She needed to catch her breath. It was all running through her so quickly that it nearly blurred. She wanted everything, but clearly, so that she might remember each stroke, each taste, each moment.

"I touched you when you were hurt. But this is different. I looked at your body, but didn't see it as I do now." Carefully she traced her finger along the scar running up his side. "Does this trouble you?"

He felt the line of heat, took her hand quickly. "No." Even now, he thought, she would try to heal. "There will be no pain tonight, for either of us."

He lowered to her, took her mouth again. There was a hint of urgency now, a taste of need. So much to feel, she mused dreamily. So much to know. And with the warmth of him coursing through her, she enfolded him. There was a freedom here, she discovered, in being about to touch him, stroke, explore, with no purpose other than pleasure. The hard muscles, the pucker in his smooth skin that was a scar of battle.

The strength of him excited her, challenged her own so that her hands, her mouth, her movements under him became more demanding.

This was fire, she realized. The first true licks of flame that brought nothing but delight and a bright, blinding need for more.

"I'm not fragile." Indeed she felt alive with power, nearly frantic with a kind of raging hunger. "Show me more. Show me all."

No matter how his blood swam, he would be careful with her. But he could show her more. His hands roamed down her body, over her thighs. As if she knew what they both needed, she opened to him. Her breath came short, shivering out with quick little moans. Her nails bit into his back as she began to writhe under him.

He lifted his head and watched her fly over that first peak of pleasure.

Heat, such heat. She had never known such fire outside of healing magic. And this, somehow, this went deeper, spread wider. Her body was like a single wild flame. She cried out, the wanton sound of her own voice another shock to her system. Beyond control, beyond reason, she gripped his hips and called out his name.

When he plunged into her, the glory of it was like a shaft of lightning, bright and brilliant. There was a storm of those glorious and violent shocks as he thrust inside her. She locked herself around him, her face pressed against his neck and repeated his name as that miraculous heat consumed her.

"Sweetheart." When he could speak again, he did so lazily, with his head nuzzled between her breasts. "You are the most clever of students."

She felt golden, beautiful, and for the first time in her memory, more woman than queen. For one night, she told herself, one miraculous night, she would be a woman.

"I'm sure I could do better, my lord, with a few more lessons."

She was flushed, all but glowing, and her hair was a tangle of honeyed ropes over the white linen. "I believe you're right." He grinned and nibbled his way up her throat, lingered over her lips, then shifted so that she lay curled beside him.

"I'm so warm," she told him. "I never knew what it was like to be so warm. Tell me, Kylar, what's it like to have the sun on your face, full and bright?"

"It can burn."

"Truly?"

"Truly." He began to toy with her hair. "And the skin reddens or browns from it." He ran a fingertip down her arm. Pale as milk, soft as satin. "It can dazzle the eyes." He turned so he could look down at her. "You dazzle mine."

"There was an old man who was my tutor when I was a child. He'd been all over the world. He told me of great tombs in a desert where the sun beat like fury, of green hills where flowers bloomed wild and the rain came warm. Of wide oceans where great fish swam that could swallow a boat whole and dragons with silver wings flew. He taught me so many marvelous things, but he never taught me the wonders that you have tonight."

"There's never been another. Not like you. Not like this."

Because she read the truth in his eyes, she drew him closer. "Show me more."

As they loved, inside a case of ice, the first green bud on a blackened stalk unfurled to a single tender leaf. And a second began to form.

When he woke, she was gone. At first he was baffled, for he slept like a soldier, and a soldier slept light as a cat. But he could see she had stirred the fire for him and had left his clothes folded neatly on the chest at the foot of the bed.

It occurred to him that he'd slept only an hour or two, but obviously like the dead. The woman was tireless-bless her-and had demanded a heroic number of lessons through the night.

A pity, he mused, she hadn't lingered in bed a bit longer that morning. He believed he might have managed another.

He rose to draw back the hangings on the windows. He judged it to be well into the morning, as her people were about their chores. He couldn't tell the time by the light here, for it varied so little from dawn to dusk. It was always soft and dull, with that veil of white over sky and sun. Even now a thin snow was falling.

How did she bear it? Day after day of cold and gloom. How did she stay sane, and more-content? Why should so good and loving a queen be cursed to live her life without warmth?

He turned, studied the chamber. He'd paid little attention to it the night before. He'd seen only her. Now he noted that she lived simply. The fabrics were rich indeed, but old and growing thin.

There had been silver and crystal in the dining hall, he recalled, but here her candlestands were of simple metal, the bowl for her washing a crude clay. The bed, the chest, the wardrobe were all beautifully worked with carved roses. But there was only a single chair and table.

He saw no pretty bottles, no silks, no trinket boxes.

She'd seen to it that the appointments in his guest chamber were suited to his rank, but for herself, she lived nearly as spartanly as a peasant.

His mother's ladies had more fuss and fancy in their chambers than this queen. Then he glanced at the fire and with a clutching in his belly realized she would have used much of the furniture for fuel, and fabric for clothes for her people.

She'd worn jewels when they dined. Even now he could see how they gleamed and sparkled over her. But what good were diamonds and pearls to her? They couldn't be sold or bartered, they put no food on the table.

A diamond's fire brought no warmth to chilled bones.

He washed in the bowl of water she'd left for him, and dressed.

There on the wall he saw the single tapestry, faded with age. Her rose garden, in full bloom, and as magnificent in silk thread as he'd imagined it. Alive with color and shape, it was a lush paradise caught in

a lush moment of summer.

There was a figure of a woman seated on the jeweled bench beneath the spreading branches of the great bush that bloomed wild and free. And a man knelt at her feet, offering a single red rose.

He trailed his fingers over the threads and thought he would give his life and more to be able to offer her one red rose.

He was directed by a servant to Phelan's room, where the young bard had his quarters with a gaggle of other boys. The other boys gone, Phelan was sitting up in the bed with Deirdre for company. The chamber was small, Kylar noted, simple, but warmer by far than the queen's own.

She was urging a bowl of broth on Phelan and laughing in delight at the faces he made.

"A toad!"

"No, my lady. A monkey. Like the one in the book you lent me." He bared his teeth and made her laugh again.

"Even a monkey must eat."

"They eat the long yellow fruit."

"Then you'll pretend this is the long yellow fruit." She snuck a spoonful in his mouth.

He grimaced. "I don't like the taste."

"I know, the medicine spoils it a bit. But my favorite monkey needs to regain his strength. Eat it for me, won't you?"

"For you, my lady." On a heavy sigh, the boy took the bowl and spoon himself. "Then can I get up and play?"

"Tomorrow, you may get up for a short while."

"My lady." There was a wealth of horror and grief in the tone. Kylar could only sympathize. He'd once been a small boy and knew the tedium of being forced to stay idle in bed.

"A wounded soldier must recover to fight another day," Kylar said as he crossed to the bed. "Were you not a soldier when you rode the horse on the stairs?"

Phelan nodded, staring up at Kylar as if fascinated. To him the prince was as magnificent and foreign as every hero in every story he'd ever heard or read. "I was, my lord."

"Well, then. Do you know your lady kept me abed three full days when I came to her wounded?" He sat on the edge of the bed, leaned over and sniffed at the bowl. "And forced the same broth on me. It's a cruelty, but a soldier bears such hardships."

"Phelan will not be a soldier," Deirdre said firmly. "He is a bard."

"Ah." Kylar inclined his head in a bow. "There is no man of more import than a bard."

"More than a soldier?" Phelan asked, with eyes wide.

"A bard tells the tales and sings the songs. Without him, we would know nothing."

"I'm making a story about you, my lord." Excited now, Phelan spooned up his broth. "About how you came from beyond, traveled the Forgotten wounded and near death, and how my lady healed you."

"I'd like to hear the story when you've finished it."

"You can make the story while you rest and recover." Pleased that the bowl was empty, Deirdre took it as she stood, then leaned over to kiss Phelan's brow.

"Will you come back, my lady?"

"I will. But now you rest, and dream your story. Later, I'll bring you a new book."

"Be well, young bard." Kylar took Deirdre's hand to lead her out.

"You rose early," he commented.

"There's much to be done."

"I find myself jealous of a ten-year-old boy."

"Nearly twelve is Phelan. He's small for his age."

"Regardless, you didn't sit and feed me broth or kiss my brow when I was well enough to sit up on my own."

"You were not so sweet-natured a patient."

"I would be now." He kissed her, surprised that she didn't flush and flutter as females were wont to do. Instead she answered his lips with a reckless passion that stirred his appetite. "Put me to bed, and I'll show you."

She laughed and nudged him back. "That will have to wait. I have duties."

"I'll help you."

Her face softened. "You have helped me already. But come. I'll give you work."

CHAPTER 8

There was no lack of work. The prince of Mrydon found himself tending goats and chickens. Shoveling manure, hauling endless buckets of snow to a low fire, carting precious wood to a communal pile.

The first day he labored he tired so quickly that it scored his pride. On the second, muscles that had gone unused during his recovery ached continually.

But the discomfort had the benefit of Deirdre rubbing him everywhere with one of her balms. And made

the ensuing loving both merry and slippery.

She was a joy in bed, and he saw none of the sadness in her eyes there. Her laughter, the sound he'd longed to hear, came often.

He grew to know her people and was surprised and impressed by the lack of bitterness in them. He thought them more like a family, and though some were lazy, some grim, they shouldered together. They knew, he realized, that the survival of the whole depended on each.

That, he thought, was another of Deirdre's gifts. Her people held the will to go on, day after day, because their lady did. He couldn't imagine his own soldiers bearing the hardships and the tedium with half as much courage.

He came upon her in her garden. Though the planting and maintenance there was divided, as all chores were in Rose Castle, he knew she often chose to work or walk there alone.

She did so now, carefully watering her plantings with snowmelt.

"Your goat herd has increased by one." He glanced down at his stained tunic. "It's the first such birthing I've attended."

Deirdre straightened, eased her back. "The kid and the she-goat are well?"

"Well and fine, yes."

"Why wasn't I called?"

"There was no need. Here, let me." He took the spouted bucket from her. "Your people work hard, Deirdre, but none as hard as their queen."

"The garden is a pleasure to me."

"So I've seen." He glanced up at the wide dome. "A clever device."

"My grandfather's doing." Since he was watering, she knelt and began to harvest turnips. "He inherited a love for gardening from his mother, I'm told. It was she who designed and planted the rose garden. I'm named for her. When he was a young man, he traveled, and he studied with engineers and scientists and learned much. I think he was a great man."

"I've heard of him, though I thought it all legend." Kylar looked back at her as she placed turnips in a sack. "It's said he was a sorcerer."

Her lips curved a little. "Perhaps. Magic may come through the blood. I don't know. I do know he gathered many of the books in the library, and built this dome for his mother when she was very old. Here she could start seedlings before the planting time and grow the flowers she loved, even in the cold. It must have given her great pleasure to work here when her roses and other flowers were dormant with winter."

She sat back on her heels, looked over her rows and beyond to the sad and spindly daisies she prized like rubies. "I wonder if somehow he knew that his gift to his mother would one day save his people from starvation."

"You run low on fuel."

"Yes. The men will cut another tree in a few days." It always pained her to order it. For each tree cut meant one fewer left. Though the forest was thick and vast, without new growth there would someday be no more.

"Deirdre, how long can you go on this way?"

"As long as we must."

"It's not enough." Temper that he hadn't realized was building inside him burst out. He cast the bucket aside and grabbed her hands.

She'd been waiting for this. Through the joy, through the sweetness, she'd known the storm would come. The storm that would end the time out of time. He was healed now, and a warrior prince, so healed, could not abide monotony.

"It's enough," she said calmly, "because it's what we have."

"For how much longer?" he demanded. "Ten years? Fifty?"

"For as long as there is."

Though she tried to pull away, he turned her hands over. "You work them raw, haul buckets like a milkmaid."

"Should I sit on my throne with soft white hands folded and let my people work?"

"There are other choices."

"Not for me."

"Come with me." He gripped her arms now, tight, firm, as if he held his own life.

Oh, she'd dreamed of it, in her most secret heart. Riding off with him, flying through the forest and away to beyond. Toward the sun, the green, the flowers.

Into summer.

"I can't. You know I can't."

"We'll find the way out. When we're home, I'll gather men, horses, provisions. I'll come back for your people. I swear it to you."

"You'll find the way out." She laid her hands on his chest, over the thunder of his heart. "I believe it. If I didn't I would have you chained before I'd allow you to leave. I won't risk your death. But the way back-" She shook her head, turned away from him when his grip relaxed.

"You don't believe I'll come back."

She closed her eyes because she didn't believe it, not fully. How could he turn his back on the sun and risk everything to travel here again for what he'd known for only a few weeks? "Even if you tried, there's no certainty you'd find us again. Your coming was a miracle. Your safe passage home will be another. I don't ask for three in one lifetime."

She drew herself up. "I won't ask for your life, nor will I accept it. I will send a man with you-my best, my strongest-if you will take him. If you will give him good horses, and provisions, I will send others if the gods show him the way back again."

"But you won't leave."

"I'm bound to stay, as you are bound to go." She turned back, and though tears stung her throat, her eyes were dry. "It's said that if I leave here while winter holds this place, Rose Castle will vanish from sight, and all within will be trapped for eternity."

"That's nonsense."

"Can you say that?" She gestured to the white sky above the dome. "Can you be sure of it? I am queen of this world, and I am prisoner."

"Then bid me stay. You've only to ask it of me."

"I won't. And you can't. First, you're destined to be king. It is your fate, and I have seen the crown you'll wear inside your own mind and heart. And more, your family would grieve and your people mourn. With that on your conscience, the gift we found together would be forever tainted. One day you would go in any case."

"So little faith in me. I ask you this: Do you love me?"

Her eyes filled, sheened, but the tears did not fall. "I care for you. You brought light inside me."

"'Care' is a weak word. Do you love me?"

"My heart is frozen. I have no love to give."

"That is the first lie you've told me. I've seen you cuddle a fretful babe in your arms, risk your life to save a small boy."

"That is a different matter."

"I've been inside you." Frustrated fury ran over his face. "I've seen your eyes as you opened to me."

She began to tremble. "Passion is not love. Surely my father had passion for my mother, for her sister. But love he had for neither. I care for you. I desire you. That is all I have to give. The gift of a heart, woman to man, has doomed me."

"So because your father was feckless, your mother foolish, and your aunt vindictive, you close yourself off from the only true warmth there is?"

"I can't give what I don't have."

"Then take this, Deirdre of the Sea of Ice. I love you, and I will never love another. I leave tomorrow. I ask you again, come with me."

"I can't. I can't," she repeated, taking his arm. "I beg you. Our time is so short, let us not have this chill between us. I've given you more than ever I gave a man. I pledge to you now there will never be another. Let it be enough."

"It isn't enough. If you loved, you'd know that." One hand gripped the hilt of his sword as if he would draw it and fight what stood between them. Instead, he stepped back from her. "You make your own prison, my lady," he said, and left her.

Alone, Deirdre nearly sank to her knees. But despair, she thought, would solve no more than Kylar's bright sword would. So she picked up the pail.

"Why didn't you tell him?"

Deirdre jolted, nearly splashing water over the rim. "You have no right to listen to private words, Orna."

Ignoring the stiff tone, Orna came forward to heft the bag of turnips. "Hasn't he the right to know what may break the spell?"

"No." She said it fiercely. "His choices, his actions must be his own. He is entitled to that. He won't be influenced by a sense of honor, for his honor runs through him like his blood. I am no damsel who needs rescuing by a man."

"You are a woman who is loved by one."

"Men love many women."

"By the blood, child! Will you let those who made you ruin you?"

"Should I give my heart, take his, at the risk of sacrificing all who depend on me?"

"It doesn't have to be that way. The curse--"

"I don't know love." When she whirled around, her face was bright with temper. "How can I trust what I don't know? She who bore me couldn't love me. He who made me never even looked on my face. I know duty, and I know the tenderness I feel for you and my people. I know joy and sadness. And I know fear."

"It's fear that traps you."

"Haven't I the right to fear?" Deirdre demanded. "When I hold lives in my hands, day and night? I cannot leave here."

"No, you cannot leave here." The undeniable truth of that broke Orna's heart. "But you can love."

"And loving, risk trapping him in this place. This cold place. Harsh payment for what he's given me. No, he leaves on the morrow, and what will be will be."

"And if you're with child?"

"I pray I am, for it is my duty." Her shoulders slumped. "I fear I am, for then I will have imprisoned his child, our child, here." She pressed a hand to her stomach. "I dreamed of a child, Orna, nursing at my breast and watching me with my lover's eyes, and what moved through me was so fierce and strong. The woman I am would ride away with him to save what grows inside me. The queen cannot. You will not speak of this to him, or anyone."

"No, my lady."

Deirdre nodded. "Send Dilys to me, and see that provisions are set aside for two men. They will have a long and difficult journey. I await Dilys in the parlor."

She set the bucket aside and walked quickly away.

Before going inside, Orna hurried through the archway and into the rose garden.

When she saw that the tiny leaf she'd watched unfurl from a single green bud was withering, she wept.

CHAPTER 9

Even pride couldn't stop her from going to him. When time was so short there was no room for pride in her world. She brought him gifts she hoped he would accept.

And she brought him herself.

"Kylar." She waited at his chamber door until he turned from the window where he stared out at the dark night. So handsome, she thought, her dark prince. "Would you speak with me?"

"I'm trying to understand you."

That alone, that he would try, lightened her heart. "I wish you could." She came forward and laid what she carried on the chest by his bed. "I've brought you a cloak, since yours was ruined. It was my grandfather's, and with its lining of fur is warmer than what you had. It befits a prince. And this brooch that was his. Will you take it?"

He crossed to her, picked up the gold brooch with its carved rose. "Why do you give it to me?"

"Because I treasure it." She lifted a hand, closed it over his on the brooch. "You think I don't cherish what you've given me, what you've been to me. I can't let you leave believing that. I can't bear the thought of you going when there's anger and hard words between us."

There was a storm in his eyes as they met hers. "I could take you from here, whether you're willing or not. No one could stop me."

"I would not allow it, nor would my people."

He stepped closer, and circled her throat with his hand with just enough force that the pulse against his palm fluttered with fear. "No one could stop me." His free hand clamped over hers before she could draw her dagger. "Not even you."

"I would never forgive you for it. Nor lie willingly with you again. Anger makes you think of using force

as an answer. You know it's not."

"How can you be so calm, and so sure, Deirdre?"

"I'm sure of nothing. And I am not calm. I want to go with you. I want to run and never look back, to live with you in the sunlight. To once smell the grass, to breathe the summer. Once," she said in a fierce whisper. "And what would that make me?"

"My wife."

The hand under his trembled, then steadied before she drew it away. "You honor me, but I will never marry."

"Because of who made you, how you were made?" He took her by the shoulders now so that their gazes locked. "Can you be so wise, so warm, Deirdre, and at the same time so cold and closed?"

"I will never marry because my most sacred trust is to do no harm. If I were to take a husband, he would be king. I would share the welfare of all my people with him. This is a heavy burden."

"Do you think I would shirk it?"

"I don't, no. I've been inside your mind and heart. You keep your promises, Kylar, even if they harm you."

"So you spurn me to save me?"

"Spurn you? I have lain with you. I have shared with you my body, my mind, as I have never shared with another. Will never share again in my lifetime. If I take your vow and keep you here, if you keep your vow and stay, how many will be harmed? What destinies would we alter if you did not take your place as king in your own land? And if I went with you, my people would lose hope. They would have no one to look to for guidance. No one to heal them. There is no one here to take my place."

She thought of the child she knew grew inside her.

"I accept that you must go, and honor you for it," she said. "Why can't you accept that I must stay?"

"You see only black and white."

"I know only black and white." Her voice turned desperate now, with a pleading he'd never heard from her. "My life, the whole of it, has been here. And one single purpose was taught to me. To keep my people alive and well. I've done this as best I can."

"No one could have done better."

"But it isn't finished. You want to understand me?" Now she moved to the window, pulled the hangings over the black glass to shut out the dark and the cold. "When I was a babe, my mother gave me to Orna. I never remember my mother's arms around me. She was kind, but she couldn't love me. I have my father's eyes, and looking at me caused her pain. I felt that pain."

She pressed her hands to her heart. "I felt it inside me, the hurt and the longing and the despair. So I closed myself off from it. Hadn't I the right?"

There was no room for anger in him now. "She had no right to turn from you."

"She did turn from me, and that can't be changed. I was tended well, and taught. I had duties, and I had playmates. And once, when I was very young there were dogs. They died off, one by one. When the last- his name was Griffen-a foolish name for a dog, I suppose. He was very old, and I couldn't heal him. When he died, it broke something in me. That's foolish, too, isn't it, to be shattered by the death of a dog."

"No. You loved him."

"Oh, I did." She sat now, with a weary sigh. "So much love I had for that old hound. And so much fury when I lost him. I was mad with grief and tried to destroy the ice rose. I thought if I could chop it down, hack it to bits, all this would end. Somehow it would end, for even death could never be so bleak. But a sword is nothing against magic. My mother sent for me. There would be loss, she told me. I had to accept it. I had duties, and the most vital was to care for my people. To put their well-being above my own. She was right."

"As a queen," Kylar agreed. "But not as a mother."

"How could she give what she didn't have? I realize now, with her bond with the animals, she must have felt grief as I did for the loss. She was grief, my mother. I watched her pine and yearn for the man who'd ruined her. Even as she died, she wept for him. His deceit, his selfishness stole the color and warmth from her life, and doomed her and her people to eternal winter. Yet she died loving him, and I vowed that nothing and no one would ever rule my heart. It is trapped inside me, as frozen as the rose in the tower of ice outside this window. If it were free, Kylar, I would give it to you."

"You trap yourself. It's not a sword that will cut through the ice. It's love."

"What I have is yours. I wish it could be more. If I were not queen, I would go with you on the morrow. I would trust you to take me to beyond, or would die fighting to get there with you. But I can't go, and you can't stay. Kylar, I saw your mother's face."

"My mother?"

"In your mind, your heart, when I healed you. I would have given anything, anything, to have seen such love and pride for me in the eyes of the one who bore me. You can't let her grieve for a son who still lives."

Guilt clawed at him. "She would want me happy."

"I believe she would. But if you stay, she will never know what became of you. Whatever you want for yourself, you have too much inside you for her to leave her not knowing. And too much honor to turn away from your duties to your family and your own land."

His fists clenched. She had, with the skill of a soldier, outflanked him. "Does it always come to duty?"

"We're born what we're born, Kylar. Neither you nor I could live well or happy if we cast off our duty."

"I would rather face a battle without sword or shield than leave you."

"We've been given these weeks. If I ask you for one more night, will you turn me away?"

"No." He reached for her hand. "I won't turn you away."

He loved her tenderly, then fiercely. And at last, when dawn trembled to life, he loved her desperately. When the night was over, she didn't cling, nor did she weep. A part of him wished she would do both. But the woman he loved was strong, and helped him prepare for his journey without tears.

"There are rations for two weeks." She prayed it would be enough. "Take whatever you need from the forest." As he cinched the saddle on his horse, Deirdre slipped a hand under his cloak, laid it on his side.

And he moved away. "No." More than once during the night, she'd tried to explore his healing wound. "If I have pain, it's mine. I won't have it be yours. Not again."

"You're stubborn."

"I bow before you, my lady. The queen of willful."

She managed a smile and laid a hand on the arm of the man she'd chosen to guide the prince. "Dilys. You are Prince Kylar's man now."

He was young, tall as a tree and broad of shoulder. "My lady, I am the queen's man."

This time she touched his face. They had grown up together, and once had romped as children. "Your queen asks that you pledge now your loyalty, your fealty, and your life to Prince Kylar."

He knelt in the deep and crusted snow. "If it is your wish, my queen, I so pledge."

She drew a ring from her finger, pressed it into his hand. "Live." She bent to kiss both his cheeks. "And if you cannot return--"

"My lady."

"If you cannot," she continued, lifting his head so their gazes met, "know you have my blessing, and my wish for your happiness. Keep the prince safe," she whispered. "Do not leave him until he's safe. It is the last I will ever ask of you."

She stepped back. "Kylar, prince of Mrydon, we wish you safe journey."

He took the hand she offered. "Deirdre, queen of the Sea of Ice, my thanks for your hospitality, and my good wishes to you and your people." But he didn't release her hand. Instead, he took a ring of his own and slid it onto her finger. "I pledge to you my heart."

"Kylar--"

"I pledge to you my life." And before the people gathered in the courtyard, he pulled her into his arms and kissed her, long and deep. "Ask me now, one thing. Anything."

"I will ask you this. When you're safe again, when you find summer, pluck the first rose you see. And think of me. I will know, and be content."

Even now, he thought, she would not ask him to come back for her. He touched a hand to the brooch pinned to his cloak. "Every rose I see is you." He vaulted onto his horse. "I will come back."

He spurred his horse toward the archway with Dilys trotting beside him. The crowd rushed after them, calling, cheering. Unable to resist, Deirdre climbed to the battlements, stood in the slow drift of snow and watched him ride away from her.

His mount's hooves rang on the ice, and his black cloak snapped in the frigid wind. Then he whirled his horse, and reared high.

"I will come back!" he shouted.

When his voice echoed back to her, over her, she nearly believed it. She stood, her red cloak drawn tight, until he disappeared into the forest.

Alone, her legs trembling, she made her way down to the rose garden. There was a burning inside her chest, and an ache deep, deep within her belly. When her vision blurred, she stopped to catch her breath. With a kind of dull surprise she reached up to touch her cheeks and found them wet.

Tears, she thought. After so many years. The burning inside her chest became a throbbing. So. She closed her eyes and stumbled forward. So, the frozen chamber that trapped her heart could melt after all. And, melting, bring tears.

Bring a pain that was like what came with healing.

She collapsed at the foot of the great ice rose, buried her face in her hands.

"I love." She sobbed now, rocking herself for comfort. "I love him with all I am or will ever be. And it hurts. How cruel to show me this, to bring me this. How bitter your heart must have been to drape cold over what should be warmth. But you did not love. I know that now."

Steadying as best she could, she turned her face up to the dull sky. "Even my mother did not love, for she willed him back with every breath. I love, and I wish the one who has my heart safe, and whole and warm. For I would not wish this barren life on him. I'll know when he feels the sun and plucks the rose. And I will be content."

She laid a hand on her heart, on her belly. "Your cold magic can't touch what's inside me now."

And drawing herself up, turning away, she didn't see the delicate leaf struggling to live on a tiny green bud.

The world was wild, and the air itself roared like wolves. The storm sprang up like a demon, hurling ice and snow like frozen arrows. Night fell so fast that there was barely time to gather branches for fuel.

Wrapped in his cloak, Kylar brooded into the fire. The trees were thick here, tall as giants, dead as stones. They had gone beyond where Deirdre harvested trees and into what was called the Forgotten.

"When the storm passes, can you find your way back from here?" Kylar demanded. Though they sat close to warm each other, he was forced to shout to be heard over the screaming storm.

Dilys's eyes, all that showed beneath the cloak and hood, blinked once. "Yes, my lord."

"Then when travel is possible again, you'll go back to Rose Castle."

"No, my lord."

It took Kylar a moment. "You will do as I bid. You have pledged your obedience to me."

"My queen charged me to see you safe. It was the last she said to me. I will see you safe, my lord."

"I'll travel more quickly without you."

"I don't think this is so," Dilys said in his slow and thoughtful way. "I will see you home, my lord. You cannot go back to her until you have reached home. My lady needs you to come back to her."

"She doesn't believe I will. Why do you?"

"Because you are meant to. You must sleep now. The road ahead is longer than the road behind."

The storm raged for hours. It was still dark, still brutal when Kylar awoke. Snow covered him, turning his hair and cloak white, and even the fur did little to fight the canny cold.

He moved silently to his horse. It would take, he knew, minutes only to move far enough from camp that his trail would be lost. In such a hellish world, you could stand all but shoulder to shoulder with another and not see him beside you.

The man Dilys would have no choice but to return home when he woke and found himself alone.

But though he walked his horse soundlessly through the deep snow, he'd gone no more than fifty yards when Dilys was once more trudging beside him.

Brave of heart and loyal to the bone, Kylar thought. Deirdre had chosen her man well.

"You have ears like a bat," Kylar said, resigned now.

Dilys grinned. "I do."

Kylar stopped, jumped down from the horse. "Mount," he ordered. "If we're traveling through hell together, we'll take turns riding." When Dilys only stood and stared, Kylar swore. "Will you argue with me over everything or do as your lady commanded and I now bid?"

"I would not argue, my lord. But I don't know how to mount the horse."

Kylar stood in the swirling snow, cold to the marrow of his bones, and laughed until he thought he would burst from it.

CHAPTER 10

On the fourth day of the journey, the wind rose so fierce that they walked in blindness. Hoods, cloaks, even Cathmor's dark hide were white now. Snow coated Dilys's eyebrows and the stubble of his beard, making him look like an old man rather than a youth not yet twenty.

Color, Kylar thought, was a stranger to this terrible world. Warmth was only a dim memory in the Forgotten.

When Dilys rode, Kylar waded through snow that reached his waist. At times he wondered if it would soon simply bury them both.

Fatigue stole through him and with it a driving urge just to lie down, to sleep his way to a quiet death. But each time he stumbled, he pulled himself upright again.

He had given her a pledge, and he would keep it. She had willed him to live, through pain and through magic. So he would live. And he would go back to her.

Walking or riding, he slipped into dreams. In dreams he sat with Deirdre on a jeweled bench in a garden alive with roses, brilliant with sunlight.

Her hands were warm in his.

So they traveled a full week, step by painful step, through ice and wind, through cold and dark.

"Do you have a sweetheart, Dilys?"

"Sir?"

"A sweetheart?" Taking his turn in the saddle, Kylar rode on a tiring Cathmor with his chin on his chest. "A girl you love."

"I do. Her name is Wynne. She works in the kitchens. We'll wed when I return."

Kylar smiled, drifted. The man never lost hope, he thought, nor wavered in his steady faith. "I will give you a hundred gold coins as a marriage gift."

"My thanks, my lord. What is gold coins?"

Kylar managed a weak chuckle. "As useless just now as a bull with teats. And what is a bull, you'd ask," Kylar continued, anticipating his man. "For surely you've seen a teat in your day."

"I have, my lord, and a wonder of nature they are to a man. A bull I have heard of. It is a beast, is it not? I read a story once-" Dilys broke off, raising his head sharply at the sound overhead. With a shout, he snagged the horse's reins, dragged at them roughly. Cathmor screamed and stumbled. Only instinct and a spurt of will kept Kylar in the saddle as the great tree fell inches from Cathmor's rearing hooves.

"Ears like a bat," Kylar said a second time while his heart thundered in his ears. The tree was fully six feet across, more than a hundred in length. One more step in its path and they would have been crushed. "It is a sign."

The shock roused Kylar enough to clear his mind. "It is a dead tree broken by the weight of snow and ice."

"It is a sign," Dilys said stubbornly. "Its branches point there." He gestured, and still holding the reins, he began to lead the horse to the left.

"You would follow the branches of a dead tree?" Kylar shook his head, shrugged. "Very well, then. How could it matter?"

He dozed and dreamed for an hour. Walked blind and stiff for another. But when they stopped for midday rations from their dwindling supply, Dilys held up a hand.

"What is that sound?"

"The bloody wind. Is it never silent?"

"No, my lord. Beneath the wind. Listen." He closed his eyes. "It is like- music."

"I hear nothing, and certainly no music."

"There."

When Dilys went off at a stumbling run, Kylar shouted after him. Furious that the man would lose himself without food or horse, he mounted as quickly as he could manage and hurried after.

He found Dilys standing knee-deep in snow, one hand lifted, and trembling. "What is it? My lord, what is this thing?"

"It's only a stream." Concerned that the man's mind had snapped, Kylar leaped down from the horse. "It's just a- a stream," he whispered as the import raced through him. "Running water. Not ice, but running water. The snow." He turned a quick circle. "It's not so deep here. And the air. Is it warmer?"

"It's beautiful." Dilys was hypnotized by the clear water rushing and bubbling over rock. "It sings."

"Yes, by the blood, it is, and it does. Come. Quick now. We follow the stream."

The wind still blew, but the snow was thinning. He could see clearly now, the shape of the trees, and tracks from game. He had only to find the strength to draw his bow, and they would have meat.

There was life here.

Rocks, stumps, brambles began to show themselves beneath the snow. The first call of a bird had Dilys falling to his knees in shock.

Snow had melted from their hair, their cloaks, but now it was Dilys's face that was white as ice.

"It's a magpie," Kylar told him, both amused and touched when his stalwart man trembled at the sound. "A song of summer. Rise now. We've left winter behind us."

Soon Cathmor's hooves hit ground, solid and springy, and a single beam of light streamed through trees that were thick with leaves.

"What magic is this?"

"Sun." Kylar closed his hand over the rose brooch. "We found the sun." He dismounted and on legs weak and weary walked slowly to a brilliant splash of color. Here, at the edge of the Forgotten, grew wild roses, red as blood.

He plucked one, breathed in its sweet scent, and said: "Deirdre."

And she, carrying a bucket of melted snow to her garden, swayed. She pressed a hand to her heart as it leaped with joy. "He is home."

She moved through her days now with an easy contentment. Her lover was safe, and the child they'd made warm inside her. The child would be loved, would be cherished. Her heart would never be cold again.

If there was yearning in her, it was natural. But she would rather yearn than have him trapped in her world.

On the night she knew he was safe, she gave a celebration with wine and music and dancing. The story would be told, she decreed, of Kylar of Mrydon. Kylar the brave. And of the faithful Dilys. And all of her people, all who came after, would know of it.

On a silver chain around her neck, she wore his ring.

She hummed as she cleared the paths in her rose garden.

"You sent men out to scout for Dilys," Orna said.

"It is probably too early. But I know he'll start for home as soon as he's able."

"And Prince Kylar. You don't look for him?"

"He doesn't belong here. He has family in his world, and one day a throne. I found love with him, and it blooms in me-heart and womb. So I wish for him health and happiness. And one day, when these memories have faded from his mind, a woman who loves him as I do."

Orna glanced toward the ice rose, but said nothing of it. "Do you doubt his love for you?"

"No." Her smile was warm and sweet as she said it. "But I've learned, Orna. I believe he was sent to me to teach me what I never knew. Love can't come from cold. If it does, it's selfish, and is not love but simply desire. It gives me such joy to think of him in the sunlight. I don't wish for him as my mother wished for my father, or curse him as my aunt cursed us all. I no longer see my life here as prison or duty. Without it, I would never have known him."

"You're wiser than those who made you."

"I'm luckier," Deirdre corrected, then leaned on her shovel as Phelan rushed into the garden.

"My lady, I've finished my story. Will you hear it?"

"I will. Fetch that shovel by the wall. You can tell me while we work."

"It's a grand story." He ran for the shovel and began heaving snow with great enthusiasm. "The best I've done. And it begins like this: Once, a brave and handsome prince from a far-off land fought a great battle against men who would plunder his kingdom and kill his people. His name was Kylar, and his land was Mrydon."

"It is a good beginning, Phelan the bard."

"Yes, my lady. But it gets better. Kylar the brave defeated the invaders, but, sorely wounded, became lost in the great forest known as the Forgotten."

Deirdre continued to work, smiling as the boy's words brought her memories back so clearly. She remembered her first glimpse of those bold blue eyes, that first foolish brush of lips.

She would give Phelan precious paper and ink to scribe the story. She would bind it herself in leather tanned from deer hide. In this way, she thought with pride, her love would live forever.

One day, their child would read the story, and know what a man his father was.

She cleared the path past jeweled benches, toward the great frozen rose while the boy told his tale and labored tirelessly beside her.

"And the beautiful queen gave him a rose carved on a brooch that he wore pinned over his heart. For days and nights, with his faithful horse, Cathmor, and the valiant and true Dilys, he fought the wild storms, crossed the iced shadows of the Forgotten. It was his lady's love that sustained him."

"You have a romantic heart, young bard."

"It is a true story, my lady. I saw it in my head." He continued on, entertaining and delighting her with words of Dilys's stubborn loyalty, of black nights and white days, of a giant tree crashing and leading them toward a stream where water ran over rock like music.

"Sunlight struck the water and made it sparkle like diamonds."

A bit surprised by the description, she glanced toward him. "Do you think sun on water makes diamonds?"

"It makes tiny bright lights, my lady. It dazzles the eye."

Something inside her heart trembled. "Dazzles the eye," she repeated on a whisper. "Yes, I have heard of this."

"And at the edge of the Forgotten grew wild roses, fire-red. The handsome prince plucked one, as he had promised, and when its sweetness surrounded him, he said his lady's name."

"It's a lovely story."

"It is not the end." He all but danced with excitement.

"Tell me the rest, then." She started to smile, to rest on her shovel. Then there came the sound of wild cheering and shouts from without the garden.

"This is the end!" The boy threw his shovel carelessly aside and raced to the archway. "He is come!"

"Who?" she began, but couldn't hear her own voice over the shouts, over the pounding of her blood.

Suddenly the light went brilliant, searing into her eyes so that with a little cry of shock, she threw a hand up to shield them. Wild wind turned to breeze soft as silk. And she heard her name spoken.

Her hand trembled as she lowered it, and her eyes blinked against a light she'd never known. She saw him in the archway of the garden, surrounded by a kind of shimmering halo that gleamed like melted gold.

"Kylar." Her heart, every chamber filled with joy, bounded in her breast. Her shovel clattered on the path as she ran to him.

He caught her up, spinning her in circles as she clung to him. "Oh, my love, my heart. How can this be?" Her tears fell on his neck, her kisses on his face. "You should not be here. You should never have come back. How can I let you go again?"

"Look at me. Sweetheart, look at me." He tipped up her chin. "So there are tears now. I'd hoped there would be. I ask you again. Do you love me, Deirdre?"

"So much I could live on nothing else my whole life. I would not have had to risk yours to come back." She laid her palms on his cheeks. Then her lips trembled open, her fingers shook. "You came back," she whispered.

"I would have crossed hell for you. Perhaps I did."

She closed her eyes. "That light. What is that light?"

"It is the sun. Unveiled. Here, take off your cloak. Feel the sun, Deirdre."

"I'm not cold."

"You'll never be cold again. Open your eyes, my love, and look. Winter is over."

Gripping his hand, she turned to watch the snow melting away, vanishing before her staring eyes. Blackened stalks began to crackle, break out green and at their feet soft, tender blades of grass spread in a shimmering carpet.

"The sky." Dazed, she reached up as if she could touch it. "It's blue. Like your eyes. Feel it, feel the sun." She held her hands out to cup the warmth.

On a cry of wonder, she knelt, ran her hands over the soft grass, brought her hands to her face to breathe in the scent. Though tears continued to fall, she laughed and held those hands out to him. "Is it grass?"

"It is."

"Oh." She covered her face with her hands again, as if she could drink it. "Such perfume."

He knelt with her, and would remember, he knew, the rapture on her face the first time she touched a simple blade of grass. "Your roses are blooming, my lady."

Speechless, she watched buds spear, blooms unfold. Yellows, pinks, reds, whites in petals that flowed from bud to flower, and flowers so heavy they bent the graceful green branches. The fragrance all but made her drunk.

"Roses." Her voice quivered as she reached out to touch, felt the silky texture. "Flowers." And buried her face in blooms.

She squealed like a girl when a butterfly fluttered by her face and landed on a tender bud to drink.

"Oh!" There was so much, almost too much, and she was dizzy from it. "See how it moves! It's so beautiful."

In turn, she tipped her face back and drank in the sunlight.

"What is that across the blue of the sky? That curve of colors?"

"It's a rainbow." Watching her was like watching something be born. And once again, he thought, she humbled him. "Your first rainbow, my love."

"It's lovelier than in the books. In them it seemed false and impossible. But it's soft and it's real."

"I brought you a gift."

"You brought me summer," she murmured.

"And this." He snapped his fingers, and through the arch, down the path raced a fat brown puppy. Barking cheerfully, it leaped into Deirdre's lap. "His name is Griffen."

Drowned in emotion, she cradled the pup as she might a child, pressed her face into its warm fur. She felt its heartbeat, and the quick, wet lash of its tongue on her cheek.

"I'm sorry," she managed, and broke down and sobbed.

"Weep, then." Kylar bent to touch his lips to her hair. "As long as it's for joy."

"How can this be? How can you bring me so much? I turned you away, without love."

"No, you let me go, with love. It took me time to understand that-and you. To understand what it cost you. There would have been no summer if I hadn't left you, and returned."

He lifted her damp face now, and the puppy wiggled free and began to race joyfully through the garden. "Is that not so?"

"It is so. Only the greatest and truest love, freely given, could break the spell and turn away winter."

"I knew. When I plucked the rose, I understood. I watched summer bloom. It came with me through the forest. As I rode, the trees behind me went into leaf, brooks and streams sprang free of ice. With every mile I put behind me, every mile I came closer to you, the world awoke. Others will come tomorrow. I couldn't wait."

"But how? How did you come back so quickly?"

"My land is only a day's journey from here. It was magic that kept you hidden. It's love that frees you."

"It's more." Phelan wiggled his way through the crowd of people who gathered in the archway. He gave a cry of delight as the pup leaped at him. "It is truth," he began, "and sacrifice and honor. All these tied by love are stronger than a shield of ice and break the spell of the winter rose. When summer comes to Rose Castle, the Isle of Winter becomes the Isle of Flowers and the Sea of Ice becomes the Sea of Hope. And here, the good queen gives hand and heart to her valiant prince."

"It is a good ending," Kylar commented. "But perhaps you would wait until I ask the good queen for her hand and her heart."

She dashed tears from her cheeks. Her people, her love, would not see her weep at such a time. "You have my heart already."

"Then give me your hand. Be my wife."

She put her hand in his, but because she must be a queen, turned first to her people. "You are witness. I pledge myself in love and in marriage, for a lifetime, to Kylar, prince of Mrydon. He will be your king, and to him you will give your service, your respect, and your loyalty. From this day, his people will be your brothers and your sisters. In time, our lands will be one land."

She let them cheer, let his name ring out along with hers into the wondrous blue bowl of sky. And her hand was warm in Kylar's.

"Prepare a feast of celebration and thanks, and make ourselves ready to welcome the guests that come on the morrow. Leave us now, for I need a moment with my betrothed. Take the pup to the kitchen, Phelan, and see that he is well fed. Keep him for me."

"Yes, my lady."

"His name is Griffen." Her gaze met Orna's, and smiled as her people left her alone with her prince. "There is one last thing to be done."

She walked with him down the path to where the reddest roses bloomed on the tallest bush under thinning ice. Without a thought, she plunged her hand through it, and the shield shattered like glass. She picked the first rose of her life, offered it to him.

"I've accepted you as queen. That is duty. Now I give myself to you as a woman. This is for love. You brought light to my world. You freed my heart. Now and forever, that heart is yours."

She started to kneel, and he stopped her. "You won't kneel to me."

Her brows lifted, and command once again cloaked her. "I am queen of this place. I do as I wish." She knelt. "I am yours, queen and woman. From this hour, this day will be known and celebrated as Prince Kylar's Return."

With a gleam in his eye, he knelt as well, and made her lips twitch. "You will be a willful wife."

"This is truth."

"I would not have it otherwise. Kiss me, Deirdre the fair."

She put a hand on his chest. "First, I have a gift for you."

"It can wait. I lived on dreams of your kisses for days in the cold."

"This gift can't wait. Kylar, I have your child in me. A child made from love and warmth."

The hand that had touched her face slid bonelessly to her shoulder. "A child?"

"We've made life between us. A miracle, beyond magic."

"Our child." His palm spread over her belly, rested there as his lips took hers.

"It pleases you?"

For an answer he leaped up, hoisted her high until her laughter rang out. She threw her arms toward the sky, toward the sun, the sky, the rainbow.

And the roses grew and bloomed until branches and flowers reached over the garden wall, tumbled down, and filled the air with the promise of summer.

The End

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