

STRONGER THAN TIME

Patricia C. Wrede

THE KEEP ROSE HIGH ABOVE THE RING OF BRUSH AND briars choking the once-clear lawn around its base. Even when the sun was high, the tower's shadow lay cold and dark on the twisted mass of thorns, and at dusk it stretched like a gnarled black finger across the forest and up the mountainside. Arven hated walking through that somber dimness, though it was the shortest way home. Whenever he could, he swung wide around the far side of the keep to stay clear of its shadow. Most people avoided the keep altogether, but Arven found its sunlit face fascinating. The light colored the stone according to the time of day and the shifting of the seasons, now milk white and shining, now tinged with autumn gold or rosy with reflected sunset, now a grim winter grey. The shadowed side was always black and ominous. Once, when he was a young man and foolish (he had thought himself brave then, of course), Arven had dressed in his soft wool breeches and the fine linen shirt his mother had embroidered for him, and gone to the very edge of the briars. He had searched all along the sunlit side of the keep for an opening, a path, a place where the briars grew less thickly, but he had found nothing. Reluctantly, he had circled to the shadowed side. Looking back toward the light he had just quitted, he had seen white bones dangling inside the hedge, invisible from any other angle: human bones entwined with briars. There were more bones among the shadows, bones that shivered in the wind, and leaned toward him, frightening him until he ran away. He had never told anyone about it, not even Una, but he still had nightmares in which weather-bleached bones hung swaying in the wind. Ever since, he had avoided the shadow of the keep if he could.

Sometimes, however, he miscalculated the time it would take to fell and trim a tree, and then he had to take the short way or else arrive

home long after the sun was down. He felt like a fool, hurrying through the shadows, glancing up now and again at the keep looming above him, and when he reached his cottage he was always in a bad temper. So he was not in the best of humors when, one autumn evening after such a trip, he found a young man in a voluminous cloak and a wide-brimmed hat sitting on his doorstep in the grey dusk, waiting.

"Who are you?" Arven growled, hefting his ax to show that his white hair was evidence of mere age and not infirmity.

"A traveler," the man said softly without moving. His voice was tired, bone tired, and Arven wondered suddenly whether he was older than he appeared. Twilight could be more than kind to a man or woman approaching middle age; Arven had known those who could pass, at twilight, for ten or fifteen fewer years than what the midwife attested to.

"Why are you here?" Arven demanded. "The road to Prenshow is six miles to the east. There's nothing to bring a traveler up on this mountain."

"Except the keep," said the man in the same soft tone.

Arven took an involuntary step backward, raising his ax as if to ward off a threat. "I have nothing to do with the keep. Go back where you came from. Leave honest men to their work and the keep to crumble."

The man climbed slowly to his feet. "Please," he said, his voice full of desperation. "Please, listen to me. Don't send me away. You're the only one left."

No, *I was mistaken*, Arven thought. *He's no more than twenty, whatever the shadows hint. Such intensity belongs only to the young.* "What do you mean?"

"No one else will talk about the keep. I need—I need to know more about it. You live on the mountain; the keep is less than half a mile away. Surely you can tell me something."

"I can only tell you to stay away from it, lad." Arven set his ax against the wall and looked at the youth, who was now a grey blur in the deepening shadows. "It's a cursed place."

"I know." The words were almost too faint to catch, even in the

evening stillness. "I've... studied the subject. Someone has to break the curse, or it will go on and on and... Tell me about the keep. Please. You're the only one who might help me."

Arven shook his head. "I won't help you kill yourself. Didn't your studies teach you about the men who've died up there? The briars are full of bones. Don't add yours to the collection."

The youth raised his chin. "They all went alone, didn't they? Alone, and in daylight, and so the thorns killed them. I know better than that."

"You want to go up to the keep at *night*?" A chill ran down Arven's spine, and he stared into the darkness, willing his eyes to penetrate it and show him the expression on the other's face.

"At night, with you. It's the only way left to break the curse."

"You're mad." But something stirred within Arven, a longing for adventure he had thought buried with Una and the worn-out rags of the embroidered linen shirt he had worn on their wedding day. The image of the keep, shining golden in the autumn sun, rose temptingly in his mind. He shook his head to drive away the memories, and pushed open the door of his cottage.

"Wait!" said the stranger. "I shouldn't have said that, I know, but at least let me explain."

Arven hesitated. There was no harm in listening, and perhaps he could talk the young fool out of his suicidal resolve. "Very well. Come in."

The young man held back. "I'd rather talk here."

"Indoors, or not at all," Arven growled, regretting his momentary sympathy. "I'm an old man, and I want my dinner and a fire and something warm to drink."

"An old man?" The other's voice was startled, and not a little dismayed. "You can't be! It didn't take that long—" He stepped forward and peered at Arven, and the outline of his shoulders sagged. "I've been a fool. I won't trouble you further, sir."

"My name is Arven." Now that the younger man was turning to go, he felt a perverse desire to keep him there. "It's a long walk down the mountain. Come in and share my meal, and tell me your story. I like

a good tale."

"I wouldn't call it a good one," the young man said, but he turned back and followed Arven into the cottage.

Inside, he stood uneasily beside the door while Arven lit the fire and got out the cider and some bread and cheese. Una had always had something warm ready when Arven came in from the mountain, a savory stew or thick soup when times were good, a vegetable pottage when things were lean, but since her death he had grown accustomed to a small, simple meal of an evening. The young man did not appear to notice or care until Arven set a second mug of warm cider rather too emphatically on the table and said, "Your story, scholar?"

The young man shivered like a sleepwalker awakened abruptly from his dreams. "I'm not a scholar."

"Then what are you?"

The man looked away. "Nothing, now. Once I was a prince."

That explained the world-weariness in his voice, Arven thought. He'd been raised to rule and then lost all chance of doing so before he'd even begun. Probably not long ago, either, or the boy would have begun to forget his despair and plan for a new life, instead of making foolish gestures like attempting the keep. Arven wondered whether it had been war or revolution that had cost the young prince his kingdom. In these perilous times, it could have been either; the result was the same.

"Sit down, then, Your Highness, and tell me your tale," Arven said in a gentler tone.

"My tale isn't important. It's the keep—"

"The keep's tale, then," Arven interrupted with a trace of impatience.

The prince only nodded, as if Arven's irritability could not touch him. "It's not so much the story of the keep as of the counts who lived there. They were stubborn men, all of them, and none so stubborn as the last. Well, it takes a stubborn man to insult a witch-woman—even if he was unaware, as some have claimed—and then refuse to apologize for the offense."

Without conscious thought, Arven's fingers curled into the sign

against evil. "The count did that? No wonder the keep is cursed!"

The prince flinched. "Not the keep, but what is within it."

"What?" Arven frowned and rubbed the back of his neck. Trust a nobleman to make hash of things instead of telling a simple, straightforward tale. "Go on."

"You see, the count's meeting with the witch-woman occurred at his daughter's christening, and the infant suffered as much or more than the father from the witch-woman's spell of revenge. Before the assembled guests, the witch declared that the girl would be the last of the count's line, for he would get no more children and his daughter would die of the pricking of a spindle before she turned sixteen. When the guards ran up, the witch laughed at them and vanished before they could lay hands on her.

"The count made fun of the curse at first, until he found that half of it at least was true. His daughter was the only child he would ever have. Then he raged like a wild man, but it did him no good. So he became wary of the second half of the curse, more because he did not wish his line to end than out of love for the girl.

"He was too stubborn to take her away, where the witch's power might not have reached. For seven generations, his father's fathers had lived in the keep, and he would not be driven away from it, nor allow his daughter to be raised anywhere else. Instead, he swore to defeat the curse on his own ground. He ordered every spindle in the castle burnt and banished spinners and weavers from his lands. Then he forbade his daughter to wander more than a bow shot from the outer wall. He thought that he had beaten the witch, for how could his daughter die of the pricking of a spindle in a keep where there were none?

"The count's lady wife was not so sanguine. She knew something of magic, and she doubted that the count's precautions would save her child. So she set herself to unravel the doom the witch had woven, pitting her love for her daughter against the witch-woman's spite."

"Love against death," Arven murmured.

"What was that?" the prince asked, plainly startled.

"It's something my wife used to say," Arven answered. His eyes prickled and he looked away, half out of embarrassment at being so

openly sentimental, half out of a desire to cherish Una's memory in private.

"Oh?" The prince's voice prodded gently.

"She said that time and death are the greatest enemies all of us must face, and the only weapon stronger than they are is love." Arven thought of the grave behind the cottage, with its carpet of daisies and the awkward wooden marker he had made himself. He had always meant to have the stonemason carve a proper headstone, but he had never done it. Wood and flowers were better, somehow. Una would have laughed at the crooked marker, and hugged him, and insisted on keeping it because he had made it for her, and the flowers—she had loved flowers. The shadows by the wall wavered and blurred, and Arven rubbed the back of his hand across his eyes. Love might be stronger than death or time, but it had won him neither peace nor acceptance, even after five long years.

"Your wife was a wise woman," the prince said softly.

"Yes." Arven did not trust his voice for more than the one short word. The prince seemed to understand, for he went on with his story without waiting for Arven to ask.

"The countess was not skilled enough to undo the witch's curse completely, but she found a way to alter it. Instead of death, the prick of the spindle would cast her daughter into an enchanted sleep, never changing. The witch's curse would turn outward, protecting the girl for one hundred years by killing anyone who sought to enter her resting place. One hundred years to the day after the onset of the spell, a man would come, a prince or knight of great nobility, who could pass through the magical barriers without harm. His kiss would break the spell forever, and the girl would awake as if she had slept but a single night instead of a hundred years."

"And meanwhile men would die trying to get to her," Arven said, thinking of bones among briars. "It was a cruel thing to do."

"I doubt that the countess was thinking of anything but her daughter," the prince said uncomfortably.

"Nobles seldom think beyond their own concerns," Arven said. The prince looked down. Arven took pity on him, and added, "Well, it's a fault that's common enough in poor folk, too. Go on."

"There isn't much more to the story," the prince said. "Somehow, on the eve of her sixteenth birthday, the girl found a spindle and pricked her finger, setting the curse in motion. That was over a hundred years ago, and ever since, men have been dying in the attempt to break it."

"*Over* a hundred years? You said the curse would last a hundred years to the day."

"That's why I need your help." The prince leaned forward earnestly. "The curse was only supposed to last for a hundred years, but the countess wasn't as skilled in magic as she thought she was, and mixing spells is a delicate business. She was too specific about the means of breaking the curse, and now there is no way I can do it alone."

"Too specific?"

"She tied the ending of the curse to a precise day and the coming of a particular man. It would have worked well enough, if the right prince had been a steadier sort, but he was... impetuous." The prince looked down once more. "He arrived a day too soon, and died in the thorns."

"And thus the curse goes on." *The young are so impatient*, Arven thought, *and it costs them so much*. "How do you know all this?"

"He was... a member of my family," the prince replied.

"Ah. And you feel you should put his error right?"

"I must." The prince raised his head, and even in the flickering firelight, naked longing was plain upon his face. "No one else can, and if the curse is not broken, more men will die and the countess's daughter will remain trapped in the spell, neither dead nor alive, while the castle crumbles around her."

"I thought the girl would come into it somewhere," Arven muttered, but the image touched him nonetheless. He and Una had never had a child, though they had wanted one. Sixteen—she would have been full of life and yearning for things she could not name. He had known children cut off at such an age by disease or accident, and he had grieved with their parents over the tragedy of their loss, but now even the cruelest of those deaths seemed clean and almost right compared to this unnatural suspension. He shuddered and took a

long pull at his mug. The cider had gone cold. "How do you hope to break the curse, if the right time and the right man both have come and gone?"

"I've studied this spell for a long time," the prince replied. "Two men can succeed where one must fail."

"How?" Arven insisted.

"The curse is really two spells muddled together. A single man, if he knew enough of magic, might hold it back for a few hours, but he couldn't clear a path through the briars at the same time. Sooner or later, his spell would falter and the thorns would kill him. With two men—"

"One can work the spell and the other can clear the path," Arven finished. He gave the prince a long, steady look. "You didn't really come looking for me to get information about the keep."

"No." The prince returned the look, unashamed. "But you wouldn't have listened if I'd begun by saying I wanted you to help me get inside."

"True enough." Arven considered. "Why at night?"

"I can only work the spell then."

Arven glanced sharply at the prince's face. He knew the sound of a half-truth, and that had been one. Still, there had been truth in it, and if the prince had additional reasons for choosing night over day, they could only strengthen his argument. Arven realized with wry humor that it did not matter any longer. He had made up his mind; all that remained was to nerve himself to act. That being so, hesitation would be a meaningless waste of time. He looked down and saw with surprise that his plate was empty; he had finished the bread and cheese without noticing, as they talked. He drained his mug and set it aside, then rose. "We'd best be on our way. Half a mile is a far distance, in the dark and uphill."

The prince's eyes widened. He stared at Arven for a long moment, then bowed his head. "Thank you," he said, and though the words were soft, they held a world of meaning and intensity. Again Arven wondered why this was so important to the younger man, but it made no real difference now. Whether the prince was trying to make up for the loss of his kingdom, or had become infatuated with the

sleeping girl of his imagination, or truly wanted to repair the harm his unnamed uncle or cousin had done, Arven had agreed to help him.

"You take the lantern," Arven said, turning to lift it down from the peg beside the door.

"No," the prince said. As Arven looked back in surprise, he added a little too quickly, "I need to... prepare my mind while we walk. For the spell."

"Thinking won't keep you from a fall," Arven said, irritated. "There's no moon tonight."

The prince only looked at him. After a moment, Arven gave up. He took the lantern down, filled and lit it, and carried it outside himself. He was half-inclined to tell the young prince to go on alone, but each time the words rose in his mouth he bit them back. He shifted the lantern to his left hand and picked up his ax, then glanced back toward the door. The prince was standing on the step.

Arven jerked his head to indicate the direction of the keep, then turned and set off without waiting to see whether the prince followed him or not. If the prince wanted a share of the lantern light, let him hurry; if not, it would only be justice if he tripped and rolled halfway down the mountain in the dark.

Thirty feet from the cottage, with the familiar breeze teasing the first fallen leaves and whispering among the beeches and the spruce, Arven's annoyance began to fade. It was not the prince's fault that he was young, nor that he was noble-born and therefore almost certainly unaware of the perils of a mountain forest at night. Arven paused and looked back, intending to wait or even go back a little way if necessary.

The prince was right behind him, a dim, indistinct figure against the darker shapes of the trees. Arven blinked in surprise, and his opinion of the young man rose. Prince or not, he could move like a cat in the woods. Arven nodded in recognition and acceptance of the other man's skill, and turned back to the trail. He was annoyed at having been inveigled into misjudging the prince, but at the same time he was grateful not to have to play the shepherd for an untutored companion.

The walk up to the keep seemed to take longer than usual. The prince stayed a few steps behind, moving so quietly that Arven glanced back more than once to assure himself that his companion was still there. Mindful of the prince's comment about preparation, Arven did not try to speak to him.

At the edge of the briars, Arven halted. Though the keep was all but invisible in the darkness, he could feel its presence, a massive pile of stone almost indistinguishable from the mountain peaks, save that it was nearer and more menacing. "What now?" he asked as the prince came up beside him.

"Put out the light."

With more than a little misgiving, Arven did so. In the dim starlight, the briars reminded him of a tangle of sleeping snakes. Frowning, he untied the thongs and stripped the leather cover from his ax, feeling foolish because he had not done so before he put out the light. A breath of wind went past, not strong enough to ripple the prince's cloak cut more than enough to remind Arven of the clammy fear-sweat on the back of his neck. *I'm too old for this*, he thought.

"Hold out your ax," the prince said.

Again, Arven did as he was told. The prince extended his hands, one on either side of the blade, not quite touching the steel. He murmured something, and a crackle of blue lightning sprang from his hands and ran in a net of thin, bright, crooked lines across the ax blade.

Arven jumped backward, dropping the ax. The light vanished, leaving a blinding afterimage that hid the ax, the briars, and the prince completely. Arven muttered a curse and rubbed at his eyes. When the dazzle began to clear, he bent and felt carefully across the ground for his ax. When he found it, he picked it up and slid a slow finger along the flat of the ax head toward the cutting edge, brushing off leaves and checking for nicks. Only when he was sure the ax was in good order did he say, "Your Highness?"

"I'm sorry," the prince's voice said out of the night. "I should have warned you."

"Yes."

"It will help with the briars."

"It had better." Arven wiped one hand down his side, then transferred the ax to it and wiped the other. "What else do you have to do?"

"I will restrain the thorns so that they will not harm you while you cut a path through them. I must warn you; I can only affect a small area. Beyond that, the briars will remain... active. The sight may be disturbing."

"This whole venture is disturbing," Arven grumbled. "Very well, I'm warned."

"One other thing: do not look back until you reach the castle gate. Your concentration is as important as mine; if you are distracted, we may both be lost."

"You're a cheerful one." Arven paused. "Are you sure you want to do this? I'm an old man..." *And you are young, with a long life, perhaps, if you leave this lunacy undone,* he thought, but did not say, because it was the same advice his elders had given him when he was young. The prince would probably pay as much attention to it as Arven had, which was none at all.

"You're the only one who would come with me," the prince said, misinterpreting Arven's question and confirming his opinion at the same time.

"You've about as much tact as you have sense," Arven said under his breath. He twisted the ax handle between his hands, feeling the smooth wood slide against his palms, and his fear melted away. He had worked these woods all his life; he knew the moods of the mountain in all times and seasons, and the moods of the keep as well; he had cut every kind of tree and cleared every kind of brush the forest had to offer, over and over. This was no different, really. He turned to face the briars, and said over his shoulder, "Tell me when you are ready."

"Go," said the prince's voice softly, and Arven swung his ax high, stepped forward, and brought it down in a whistling arc to land with a dull, unerring thump an inch above the base of the first briar.

The stems were old and tough, and as thick as Arven's forearm. He struck again, and again, and then his muscles caught the familiar rhythm of the work. A wind rose as he hacked and chopped and

tossed aside. A corner of his mind listened intently for the warning creak of a tree about to fall in his direction, but otherwise he ignored the growing tempest.

All around, the briars shifted and began to thrash as the wind ripped their ends from their customary tangle to strike at air, straining against their roots. Where Arven stood, and for thrice the length of his ax in all directions around him, the air was calm and the briars inert. The only motion within the charmed circle was the rise and fall of his arm and the shifting of the cut stems as he pushed them aside. The sounds of the wind and the thrashing briars were clear but faint, as if they came from outside the walls of a sturdy house. The thud of his ax, the rustle of the briars as he passed, and the crunch of his boots against the mountainside were, in contrast, clear and precise, like the sound of Una's singing in a quiet room. Dreamlike, Arven glided onward, moving surely despite the gloom. His ax, too, never missed a stroke, though as the keep drew nearer, the night thickened until the faint light of the stars no longer penetrated its blackness.

Arven had no idea how long he spent carving his path through the snarl of briars. His arms grew tired, but his strokes never lost their rhythm and his steps never faltered. Even when he came to the ditch that surrounded the castle, three man-heights deep and nearly as wide, and so steep-sided that a mountain goat might have had difficulty with the climb, his progress slowed only a little. The briars grew more sparsely in the thin soil that veiled the rocky sides of the ditch, and now and again Arven left a stem in place, to catch at his sleeves and the back of his coat and help keep him from slipping.

He reached the bottom of the ditch at last and paused to catch his breath. He could feel the keep looming above him and hear the rushing wind and the thrashing of the briars, though he could see none of them. He wondered what would happen if he lost his direction, and was suddenly glad of the ditch. It was a landmark that could not be mistaken, even in such blackness; if he climbed the wrong side, his mistake would be obvious as soon as he got to the top, and he would only have to retrace his steps.

"Go on," the prince's voice whispered in his ear.

Arven jumped, having all but forgotten the other's presence. There

was exhaustion in that voice, a deeper exhaustion by far than the world-weary undertone it had had when Arven first heard it, and in his concern he almost turned to offer the prince his arm. Just in time, he remembered the prince's warning.

"Put your hand through my belt," Arven said, forgetting his own fatigue. "We've a climb ahead, and you'll keep up better if I tow you a way."

The prince did not answer. Arven waited, but he felt no tug at his belt. "Stubborn young fool," he muttered. Holding back the briars must be more tiring than the prince had expected. Arven tried not to think of what would happen if the prince's magic failed before they got to the keep. Well, if the prince was too proud to admit he needed help, Arven had better finish his part of the business as quickly as he could. He raised his ax and started forward once more.

Climbing out of the ditch took even longer than climbing into it had done. Arven's weariness had taken firm hold on him during the brief rest, and his arms were nearly too tired to swing his ax. His back ached and his legs felt as if his boots were weighted with lead. He let himself sink into a kind of daze, repeating the same movements over and over without thinking.

The jolt of his ax striking unyielding stone instead of wood brought Arven out of his trance. He cursed himself for a fool; that stroke had blunted the ax for certain. He probed for a moment with the flat of the blade and realized abruptly that this was no random protruding rock. He had arrived at the outer wall of the keep.

Arven felt along the wall a few feet in both directions, but found no sign of a gate or door. The briars grew only to within two feet of the wall, leaving a narrow path along the top of the ditch. Without looking back, he called an explanation to the prince, then turned left and started sunwise around the keep, one hand on the wall.

He had not gone far when the wall bulged outward. He followed the curve, and as he came around the far side he felt the ground smooth out beneath his feet. The wind that whipped the briars ceased as though a door had been shut on it, and silence fell with shocking suddenness. A moment later, the prince said, "This is the gate. We can rest here for a few minutes, if you like."

Arven looked over his shoulder. The night seemed less dense now;

he could just make out the prince's silhouette, charcoal grey against midnight blackness. He stood squarely in the center of an arched opening through which Arven had passed without noticing. Though the prince's voice was more tired than ever, Arven could see no trace of weariness in his stance.

"What else must we face?" Arven asked, leaning against the crumbling wall.

"Only finding the count's daughter and waking her," the prince said. "Whatever is left in the keep is not dangerous, though it may be unpleasant."

"Then there's no point in lingering," Arven said.

"Light the lantern, and we'll start looking for the girl."

There was a long pause. "I didn't bring the lantern."

"Young idiot," Arven said without heat. He should have thought to mention it; he was old enough to know better than to rely on an untutored and romantically inclined youth to think of practical matters. He smiled. He was old enough to know better than to try and penetrate the briars around the keep, too, but here he was. "I suppose we could just wait for dawn."

"No!" The prince took a quick step, as if he would shove Arven on by main force. "I can't—I mean, I don't—"

Knowing that the prince could not see him, Arven let his smile grow broader. "Well enough," he said, trying to keep the smile from showing in his voice. "I can understand why you'd be eager to have this finished. But while we look for your girl, keep an eye out for a torch or a lamp or something. I've no mind to come this far just to break a leg on the stairs for lack of light."

"As you wish," the prince said. "Are you rested?"

Arven laughed. "As much as I'm likely to be." He pushed himself away from the wall and started off. He kept one hand on the stone as he walked, feeling the texture change as he passed under the supporting arches. Despite his care, he stumbled and nearly fell a moment later. When he felt for the obstruction that had tripped him, he found a well-rotted stump of wood leaning against a heavy iron bar—all that was left of the first door. With a shrug, he rose and entered the outer bailey.

As he did, something brushed his face. He jerked and swiped at it one-handed, and found himself holding a handful of leaves.

"Ivy," said the prince from behind him, and Arven jumped again. "It's not the climbing sort; it grows in the cracks between the stones above, and hangs down."

"I know the plant," Arven said shortly. He threw the leaves away and looked up. A few yards ahead, the curved sides of the inner gatehouse rose dizzily above him and flattened briefly into the inner wall before bulging out into the round corner towers. This close, the gatehouse blotted out the shapes of the mountains. Its dark surface was broken only by the darker slots of the arrow loops and a few irregular clumps of ivy, swaying gently.

Arven blinked and realized that the darkness was fading. He could see the stars behind the towers, and there was a faint, pale haze in the sky that hinted at the coming of dawn in an hour or two. Somewhere a bird chirped sleepily.

"We must hurry," the prince said. "Come." He started for the twin towers of the inner gatehouse, and Arven followed. His part in this adventure might be over, but he had earned the right to see the end of it.

"There is work for your ax here," the prince called from the tunnel that led between the towers to the inner part of the keep.

Arven snorted at himself and quickened his step. When he reached the prince's side, the difficulty was clear. The first portcullis was down, but closer examination showed that the iron bands had rusted and sprung apart and the wooden grate was all askew and rotten besides. A few careful ax strokes cleared the way with ease. The second portcullis, at the far end of the tunnelloike entrance, had fallen and jammed partway. Arven ducked under the spikes and stepped out into the inner bailey.

Another bird chirped from somewhere on the wall above his head, and another. Arven had never understood why birds insisted on chattering at each other from the moment the night sky began to lighten. Surely dawn was early enough! He turned to point out the perversity of birds to the prince, and did not see him.

"Your Highness?"

"Here." The prince waved from the door of the gatehouse. "There are candles."

"Good." The door was half-ajar. Arven shoved it wide and peered in, then recoiled. Two skeletons lay sprawled across the table in the center of the room, white bones protruding from rotting shreds of livery. Arven looked reproachfully at the prince. "You might have warned me."

"I didn't think." The prince sounded as much worried as apologetic. "They are only dead, after all."

"Next time, get the candles yourself, then," Arven snapped. He went in and retrieved two fat, stubby candles and a rusty iron holder, fixed one of the candles in place, and lit it with some difficulty.

The prince was waiting for him in the bailey. "The count's daughter will be somewhere in the great hall, I think," he said, pointing. "I... expect there will be more such as those."

"Dead men, you mean."

The prince nodded. "The spell—the curse—should have protected the whole of the keep, but it has gone on too long. I doubt there is anyone living, except the girl."

"Let's find her, then, and leave this place to the ghosts."

The prince winced, then nodded again. "As you say. Lead on."

"I?"

"You have the light."

Arven shot a glare at the prince, though he knew the effect would be lost in the darkness. There was nothing he could say to such a reasonable request, however, so he did as the prince had suggested.

The door to the great hall was made of solid oak planks, a little weathered but still more than serviceable. It took most of Arven's remaining strength to wrestle it open. He threw another glare in the prince's direction; the man couldn't be any more tired than Arven, no matter how wearing magic was. The prince did not seem to notice.

Inside, the main room was eerily still. On the far side, the window glass had shattered, letting in starlight and the small noises of wind and birds. Closer by, long tables filled the center of the room and the candlelight struck glints from gold and silver plate. Around the

tables, and sometimes over them, lay a collection of black, shapeless figures. A faint, sweetish odor of decay hung in the air, and Arven grimaced. He skirted the edge of the room, avoiding the tables and taking care to shield the candle so that he would not see the details of the anonymous forms.

"There will be stairs in the corner," the prince said.

Arven found them: a narrow stone spiral built into the wall of the keep itself. He started up, his shoulders brushing the wall on one side and the central pillar on the other. The steps were as steep as the rocks of the upper mountain, and the climb was awkward. More than once, Arven wished he could lean forward a few inches more and climb on all fours, as if he were going up a ladder or scaling a cliff. He wondered whether castle folk ever became accustomed to the tight, circular ascent. Did they think no more of it than Arven did of shinning up a tree to cut away an inconvenient branch that might affect its fall? The prince, at least, did not seem bothered.

Around and around they went, passing one door after another, until Arven lost track of how far they had come. At each door, Arven stopped to ask, "This one?" Each time, the prince shook his head and they went on. Finally, they reached the top of the stairs. This time, Arven pushed the door open without asking; there was, after all, no other place to go.

He found himself in a narrow hall. "The far end," the prince said, and Arven went on. He found a door and pushed it open, and stopped, staring.

The chamber was small and cluttered. Broken boards leaned against one wall, some carved, others plain. A stool with a broken leg was propped on a circular washtub; next to it was a chair with only one arm. A stack of table trestles filled one corner, and a pile of rolled-up rugs and tapestries took up another. Old rope hung in dusty loops from a peg beside the window, and the window ledge was full of dented pewter and cracked pottery.

The center of the room had been cleared in haste by someone unconcerned with niceties of order. In the middle of the open space stood a broken spinning wheel. One leg was missing and two of the spokes were broken; the treadle dangled on a bent wire and the driving cord was gone. Only the spindle shone bright and sharp and

new. Beside the spinning wheel, a girl lay in a crumpled heap, one hand stretched out as if to catch herself and a tumbled mass of black hair hiding her face.

Arven set the candle holder on top of the stack of table trestles and bent over the girl. Gently, he slid an arm under her. His work-roughened fingers caught on the heavy, old-fashioned brocade of her dress as he lifted her and turned her shoulders so that he could see her face.

She was beautiful. He had expected that; noblemen's daughters were nearly always beautiful, protected as they were from the ravages of sun and illness and general hardship. But he had not expected to find such determination in the pointed pixy chin, or such character in the fine bones of her face. Arven tore his eyes away and turned to the prince.

The prince stood in the doorway, watching the girl with such love and longing that Arven almost averted his eyes to keep from intruding on what should be private. "Well?" Arven said gruffly.

"Kiss her," said the prince, and looked away.

Arven stared, astonished. "Do it yourself. That's why you came, surely."

"I can't." The prince's voice was hardly more than a whisper.

"Can't? What do you—" Arven broke off as the prince raised his hand and stretched it toward the candle. Suddenly the pieces came together and Arven knew, even before he saw the candle gleaming through the translucent flesh, even before he watched the prince's hand grasp the holder and pass through it without touching. *No wonder he would not carry the lantern, Arven thought, no wonder he could only work the spell at night*, and marveled that he could be so calm.

"Please, it's almost dawn," the prince said. He gestured toward the window. The sky beyond was visibly paler. "Kiss her and break the curse, so that I can see the end of this before I must go." His eyes were on the girl's face again, and this time Arven did look away.

"Please," the prince repeated after a moment.

Arven nodded without looking up. Awkwardly, he bent and kissed the girl full on the lips.

For a long moment, nothing seemed to happen. Then there was a grinding sound from somewhere below, and a loud crash, and the girl heaved a sigh. Her eyelids flickered, then opened. As she looked at Arven, an expression of puzzlement crossed her face. She sat up, and glanced around, and saw the prince. Their eyes locked, and she stiffened, and Arven knew that, somehow, she understood.

"Thank you," the girl said.

"Thank him," said the prince. "He broke the curse. I did nothing."

Arven made a gesture of protest that neither of them saw.

"You came back," the girl told the prince with calm certainty. "That is a great deal more than nothing."

The prince went still. "How did you know?"

"I know." She rose and brushed her skirts, then gave the prince a deep and graceful curtsy. The prince stretched out a protesting hand, and the girl smiled like sun on morning dew. "And I thank you for it."

"You should blame me. If I had done it right the first time, there would have been no need for these makeshifts."

"True." The girl's smile vanished and she looked at him gravely. "I think perhaps you owe me something after all, for that."

The prince gave her a bitter smile. "What is it you want of me, lady?"

"Wait for me."

The prince stared, uncomprehending, but Arven understood at once. It was what he had asked of Una, at the last. *Wait for me, if you can.*

"It won't be long," the girl continued. "I can feel it."

"You have a lifetime ahead of you!" the prince said.

"A lifetime can be two days long; it needs only a birth at the beginning and a death at the end." The girl smiled again, without bitterness. "By any usual reckoning, I have had more than my share of lifetimes."

"The spell..."

"Was unraveling. If you had not come, I should have slept another

hundred years, or two, dying slowly with no company but dreams. I have learned a great deal from my dreams, but I prefer waking, if only for a week or a month."

"I see." The prince reached out as if to stroke her hair, but stopped his hand just short of its unattainable goal. Arven could see the curve of the girl's shoulder clearly through the prince's palm. He glanced at the window. The sky was lightening rapidly.

"Then, will you wait?" the girl asked again.

"I will try," said the prince. He was almost completely transparent by this time, and his voice was as faint as the distant breeze that rustled the trees outside the keep.

"Try hard," the girl said seriously.

Arven had to squint to see the prince nod, and then the sky was bright with dawn and the prince had vanished. The girl turned away, but not before Arven caught the glitter of tears in her eyes. He rose and picked up the candle, unsure of how to proceed.

"I have not thanked you, woodcutter," the girl said at last, turning.

"Forgive me, and do believe I am grateful."

"It's no matter," Arven said. "I understand."

She smiled at him. "Then let us go down. It has been a long time since I have seen the dawn from the castle wall."