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TIMESCAPE

Diana L. Paxson
LADY OF LIGHT

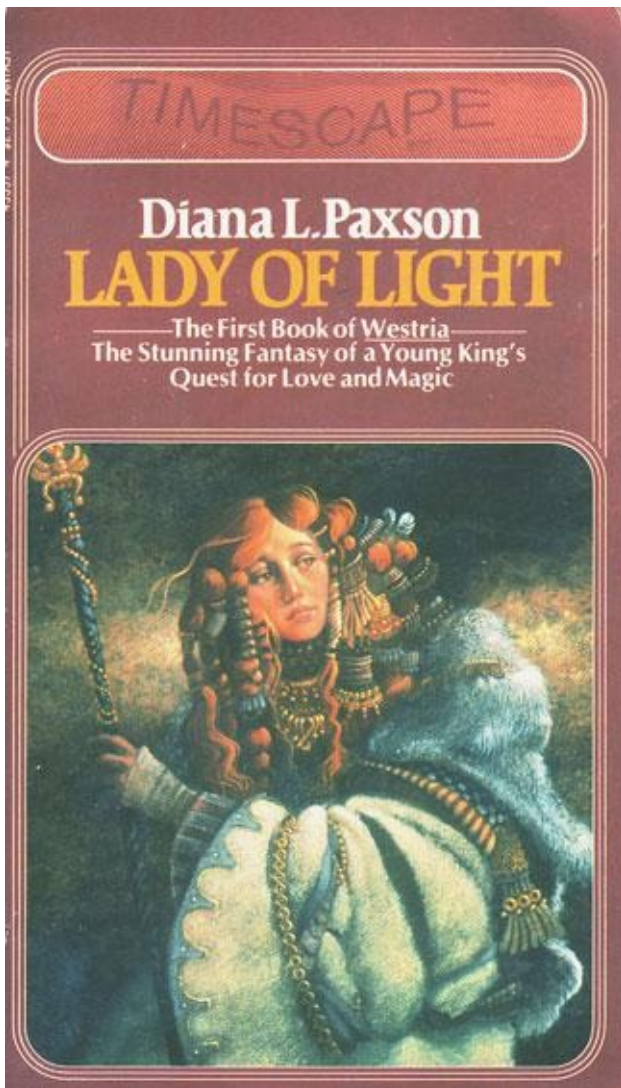
—The First Book of Westria—
The Stunning Fantasy of a Young King's
Quest for Love and Magic



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A TIMESCAPE BOOK



Prologue

From the interaction of light and darkness, of spirit and matter, the world was made.

In the beginning, a spark whirled in the void. It slowed, cooled, became a sphere where the sovereign elements of earth, water, air, and fire combined and recombined in an endless dance. Continents grew, rivers carved paths to the sea, soil was formed, and living things appeared.

Each thing that came into existence followed the pattern of its kind, yet each was unique. Everything possessed awareness—a continuum of consciousness from the smallest particle to the Mind that had created all. Then the lesser minds, which were both cause and effect of the aggregate individuals, became aware of themselves and of each other and walked upon the infant world. They were the Guardians of their kinds. And above them all there was in every region a Guardian of the land itself, whose spirit determined its character, just as the Guardians were the patterns for the kindreds they ruled.

Species were born and disappeared. A new creature walked the earth who imprisoned consciousness in words, and whose name, in whatever language it made, was Man. For millennia men remembered their beginnings, revering the Guardians and living upon the earth without marring it. But at length the people began to change and desired to bend the earth to their own wills. Sooner or later in every place the new races pushed those who held to the old ways to the very edges of the habitable lands, and the Guardians withdrew from the knowledge of men.

Yet a time came when the land itself rose against men: earth trembled, and fires were fanned by the winds until the waters stilled them, and every plant and animal was at war with Man. Then the remnant of humanity cried out to the Creator for fear that men would perish utterly.

And the Maker of All Things commanded those Guardians who were the souls of each land to appear. For each region a new Law was made, appropriate to its nature, but however the countries of men were henceforth to differ, in all of them it was decreed that humans should no longer be masters, but only the tenants of the land.

On a fair coast washed by a sunset sea, the survivors made a Covenant with the Guardian, and wishing to forget the past, they called Her, and their country, Westria. Those who remembered the old skills and the old rituals that would help them to live at peace with the land were made their teachers and they began to build a world that was at once very old and very new.

Two centuries after the Cataclysm human wars threatened the Covenant of Westria. In those days a priestess made four Jewels of Power, one for each sovereign element, and her son wielded them to heal the land. In the years that followed there was always an heir of that line to bear the Jewels and to rule Westria.

In the sixth century of the Covenant the Estates of Westria petitioned the King to marry, for he had no child. And so the King and his companions set out to find a Lady for Westria—a woman who might be equally the mistress of the King's heart, and the Mistress of the Jewels.

I

Stormfire

Light slashed across the darkness, illuminating in bas-relief the snow-powdered mountains and the outworks of the Hold, the glimmer of Faris' face in the window she had just pushed open, and the living scar that twisted up the inner side of her left arm. She took a deep breath of damp wind, blinking as the radiance faded and night swept back over the world. Thunder crashed and rolled around the fortress and Faris jumped, though she had been waiting for it to come.

“May the Lords of the Elements have mercy on the King, for surely they are at war tonight.” Faris heard her friend Rosemary speak behind her, the customary calmness of her voice belying her words.

“Perhaps he has taken shelter somewhere,” said Faris’ brother, Farin. A few fragile harp notes echoed his words as he picked up the melody he had been playing when the thunder came. Reflected in the windowpanes she glimpsed a stretch of frescoed wall, Rosemary’s owl on his perch, the gleam of the fire.

A gust of wind lifted Faris’ dark hair away from her face. She heard the trees sighing in the walled orchard below as they stretched their arms to the storm, and a few petals, whirled up by the wind, clung to her hand. She wondered if any blossoms would be left for the Festival of the Lady of Flowers.

“Jehan promised my father he would be here in time for the ceremony tomorrow,” said Rosemary. “It would be a pity if he missed it—every girl in the Corona is hoping that the Lady will help her attract the King,” Farin replied.

“Not me—Faris is more beautiful, let her be Queen!”
“Hush, Rosemary! Don’t encourage her to think such things. She will only be hurt.” Farin’s voice came too clearly as the wind eased. “Our family gained honor enough when our sister Berisa married your brother, who will be Lord Commander of the Corona one day.”

Rosemary sighed. “You all protect Faris too much. No man worth marrying would care about her arm.”

Automatically Faris tugged her sleeve down. Her eyes blurred and her disfigured arm throbbed as if the lightning had seared her flesh and not the sky. *My father cares... . Berisa was right, I should have stayed at home!*

The wind was rising once more. Faris blinked as lightning flashed again and again above the white peak of the Father of Mountains, glowing through the boiling clouds. As if to escape Farin’s words, she thrust the window fully open and leaned out into the rain, gasping as energy pulled her fine hair into a cloud about her head and tingled over her skin. The charged air dizzied her. *I must not do this,* she thought, but already her spirit was surging to meet the storm.

Thunder billowed around her, but it was a deep, unhuman laughter that Faris heard. She saw the sky people, bombarding each other with handfuls of cloud, spinning themselves out in lines of light that shattered as the lightning struck, then taking shape again. The elementals were playing, an abstract sport of force and pattern that she almost understood. Her spirit danced in the vortex of the storm, and she stretched out her hands to its power.

The heavens gathered themselves around her, then were torn asunder as if the fabric of the world had been rent to reveal the glory it veiled. Faris cried out and fell back as earth and heaven quaked to the thunderbolt.

“Faris! What are you doing? Do you want to get a fever again?” The ancient glass of the window rattled as Farin slammed it shut.

“Your hair is soaked—let me get you to the fire.” Hardly aware of her own body, Faris felt Rosemary’s strong arms half carry her toward the hearth. Her eyes followed the swing of the other girl’s golden braids as Rosemary bent to poke up the fire and then pulled a shawl out from under the sleeping sheepdog and drew it around Faris’ thin shoulders.

Now she could feel water trickling down her neck and the ache in her fingers as the circulation began to return. *A moment ago my hands had the strength of the storm,* she thought, ignoring her brother’s scolding. *What a weak thing this body is. My father was right to forbid... .* She closed her eyes against the memory of his words. Her mother had had the power to call the winds and talk to the trees, and her mother had died.

“That’s better,” said Rosemary, giving a last rub to Faris’ damp hair.

“Please, Rosemary, I’m not one of the wild creatures you nurse so well.” Faris found herself laughing as the owl’s head swiveled and one golden eye blinked down at her. She could hear faint snufflings as the rabbits stirred in their wicker cage on the other side of the room.

“You might as well be,” said Farin, but he had taken his seat again, and already his dark head was bent over his harp as he tested and tuned its horsehair strings.

“Father said that if the King did not get here before mid-evening, he would go out after him,” said Rosemary.

“Then I’m going too,” said Farin. “I wouldn’t miss the sight of all the fine lords from Laurelynn half drowned in the rain.”

“Don’t laugh too loud. Eric of Seagate is coming with him, and some of the others who fought with Jehan against Elaya. And of course he’ll have the Seneschal, Caolin. I doubt that *he* would be flustered by a second Cataclysm.”

“But the Master of the Junipers is already here,” put in Faris, thinking of the little grey-robed man she had seen at supper, sitting like a still rock in the midst of a busy stream.

“Yes, he had to prepare for the Festival.” Faris remembered the wind whipping the starry branches of the almond trees. This was the second week of February, but the winter had been a stormy one, and it was hard to realize that it was already time for the Festival, hard to believe in the coming of spring.

In the distance thunder muttered like a bear balked of its prey. Faris shivered, wondering how the King and his men fared now.

Thunder crashed as if someone had clashed two shields together above Jehan’s head, and his horse plunged sideways, almost unseating him. The King swore softly as the clamor faded.

“Stormwing, you white donkey—I thought this kind of weather was your element! What are you afraid of, my swan? See now, it’s going away... .” Still talking, he gentled the horse with firm pressure of knee and rein. He saw his squire, Rafael, watching him anxiously and smiled.

Somewhere behind him he heard a squeal, followed by confused shouting. *Another horse down, he thought. I should have stopped at Badensbridge. What fool’s pride made me believe I could get everyone to the Hold ahead of the storm?* But the place had been too small for all the lords and clerks and officers, the men-at-arms and supply train that the King of Westria must drag about with him in his quest for a Queen. *And I was a fool to agree to that too!* he thought, but he was past thirty now, and the Council had demanded that he choose a Lady for Westria.

Lightning flared, and for a moment he saw the confused mass of men and animals spread along the muddy curves of the road. Beyond them the land rose gently toward the mountains that gave the Province the name of the crown of Westria, dotted with scattered stands of liveoak and stunted pine. At least they were still going in the right direction!

Stormwing shook his head anxiously and the King loosened his rein, letting the stallion take a few steps up the road while he peered through the freezing rain. They must find shelter soon, but where? *When I was taking my training at the College of the Wise, I knew every twist of the road between here and Laurelynn. ... But that was a long time ago.* The border with Normontaine was quiet, and Theodor was an able lord. Without need to call him there, Jehan had not found time to visit the Hold more than twice in the fifteen years he had been King. The next flash showed him jagged outlines on the horizon, and he pulled the stallion to a halt. The ancients had built a great city here, destroyed when the earth moved and the dam below the Father of Mountains gave way, but he remembered some ruins that

might give shelter. Had he seen them just now? Caolin, who knew everything about Westria, would surely know. He reined Stormwing around to find the Seneschal.

Caolin pulled his hood forward and hunched a little more in the saddle, his long legs gripping the brown mare's sides, his strong fingers steady on the reins. His body was settled to a patient endurance, his mind, having determined that there was nothing he could do to make sure that the dispatch cases were dry, was focused on the next move in a chess game he had been playing with himself since they had left Badensbridge.

Then he heard his name called by the one voice that could always reach him. As he lifted his head to look for the King lightning struck again so close that he could smell it. In the flare of bluish light he saw a horse rearing and Jehan urging Stormwing forward so that he could grasp the bridle and bring the other animal down, his eyes shining and his face intent as he forced the beast to stillness and spooked the trembling rider.

"You're not hurt, are you?" The lightning bolt had struck a pine tree beside the road, and now it blazed like a torch despite the rain. Caolin saw the boy whose horse the King had caught shake his head as he tried to smile. "Well then, see to your mount," Jehan went on. "He's frightened out of his skin!" The boy laughed then, for even in that dim light he could see the twitching of the horse's lathered sides.

"My Lord!" came a call. "Are we going to Hell or to the Hold?"

"I am going to the Hold." Jehan grinned. "But you are welcome to stay here! I'm just as uncomfortable as you are, but we'll get to shelter soon, so don't despair!"

Caolin saw the King's eyes gleam in the flickering light and thought that although he was cold, wet, and concerned for his men, the opportunity for action exhilarated him. The Seneschal sat still on his horse, watching as the King moved among his men.

"*Don't despair*, he says," came an anonymous voice behind him. "Why doesn't he use the Jewels then? He's their master; surely he could handle a little thing like a thunderstorm!"

"The Jewels of Westria?" came a shocked whisper in reply. "He would be breaking the Covenant he used them to control a natural storm!"

"What's the use of having them then? In the old days men were masters of this world."

"Well, in the end this world mastered them. Leave well enough alone," his companion answered him.

Caolin peered through the darkness, but he could not see who had spoken. He had trained himself to ignore discomfort, but still he could sympathize with the first man's complaint. There had been many times, when villages were flooded or crops destroyed by fire, that he had wished for the power to protect them. The College of the Wise preached a slavish obedience to the Covenant, but Caolin owed no service to the College now. In other lands men lived by different laws—how different? he wondered. How much could men do without endangering Westria?

The wind shifted, flinging rain against his unprotected face, and lightning stalked across the horizon. Caolin huddled back down in the saddle. *Earth and water, wind and fire—there are the real powers. Might a man truly wield the lightnings if he bore the Jewels of Westria? But Jehan never uses them, so I may never know....*

"Caolin." The Seneschal started, turned, and saw the King. "We must find a place to stop. The men are tiring, and I'm afraid we'll wander off the road. Aren't there some ruins near that would protect us?"

Caolin closed his eyes, memory laying out before him the map of Westria with its four Provinces and the red lines of the roads. He could see the Free Cities spaced along the Dorada River like beads on a string, and fortresses like the Hold, where Lord Theodor ruled the Corona. His map showed also mines and grain fields and the ruins of dead cities, where they found metal and glass and sometimes books and strange mechanisms whose use no one in these times cared to know.

“Yes,” he said finally. “The Red City lies this way, but there’s hardly one wall left standing there now.” He looked back at the King. Jehan was standing up in his stirrups, straining to see down the road. The Seneschal pushed back his hood, oblivious to the rain, and thought he heard a distant trumpet call.

A smile was growing on Jehan’s face. “It doesn’t matter now—don’t you hear them? When we fought Elaya together three years ago, I got to know the note of Sandremun’s horn—he and Theodor have come out to look for us!”

The King slumped in the saddle, allowing himself to feel the weariness of the long ride now that Lord Theodor and his son had taken over the responsibility for seeing them all to shelter. The excitement of battling the storm had worn off, and his shoulders ached as if he had been carrying half Westria. Now even Stormwing’s steps had grown slow. More storm clouds were moving in from the southwest, but for the moment they were assailed by nothing worse than a cold, steady rain.

The lanterns of Theodor’s men bobbed to either side of the line of horses, casting a fitful light on the road and briefly illuminating their Commander’s beaked profile as he talked to Caolin about the economics of the wool trade with their northern neighbor, Normontaine. Seen in silhouette, without the jutting silver beard to betray his age, Theodor’s erect figure could have been the shadow of his son’s. Certainly the elder and younger lords of the Corona shared the same relentless good cheer. Jehan grimaced. His breeches were chafing him, water had somehow penetrated his boots even though they were laced halfway up his thighs, and Sandremun had not stopped talking in the two hours since the escort had found the King.

*“I took the road to see the world
When spring was fair and green,
But now the winter winds do blow
And I’m for home again. ...”*

Jehan turned to look for the singer and glimpsed the slight shape of a dark-haired young man who had come with Theodor. Sandremun broke off in the middle of a description of the perils of hunting deer on horseback in the mountains to join in the chorus.

*“But I’ll not care for wind and rain
Nor will I fear the storm,
If food and fire are waiting, and
My love to keep me warm. ...”*

Jehan sighed, remembering the soft curves of the woman he had left in Elder and wondering whether he should have brought her along. But it had seemed discourteous to bring a mistress when he was supposed to be searching for a bride, and he doubted her temper would have withstood this journey in the rain.

The creaking of saddles and the splashing as the horses plodded through the puddles made a rhythmic accompaniment to the singing. Forcing his attention back to the present, Jehan glanced back along the line, marking his men. Eric of Seagate's broad shoulders were unmistakable even in this gloom, but he did not recognize the smaller man riding beside him. He heard a familiar name and moved his horse closer.

"It is a pity we do not see people from the other Provinces more often," said the strange voice, the accent of Laurelynn overlaying the more relaxed speech of the north. "These visits provide such a useful opportunity to share our problems."

"I wouldn't know," said Eric. "This is my first trip around Westria."

"But you were down in Las Costas with the King, were you not? The Lord Commander Brian is such a fine man—such a valiant fighter, and with so many valuable ideas too. Did you spend much time with him when you were there?"

"We met."

Jehan grinned in the darkness. It was Brian's name that had attracted his attention, and remembering the instant hostility between the Lord Commander of Las Costas and the Lord of Seagate's son, he wondered how long Eric's restraint would last.

The stranger continued, "Yes, Brian is a truly admirable leader. I trade in furs from the Corona and even Normontaine, and I've visited all four Provinces. It is a pity that the King has not had time to know them as well. Some of the rulings imposed by that precious Council of his really display no knowledge of local conditions. In the circumstances it hardly seems right to insist on central control.... That's why I mentioned Lord Brian. He's a strong man, and with a little support from the younger lords like yourself, he might win more independence for all of the Provinces. Don't you agree?"

"No, I *don't* agree!" Eric exploded. "I would remind you that Brian is a member of that 'precious Council' himself, as is my father. Let Brian take his valuable ideas to the King. He may find he is not as strong as he thinks!"

The other man opened his mouth to reply, looked beyond Eric, and saw the King. Without answering, he bowed and reined his horse away.

Eric looked around in confusion. "My Lord!" He glanced back at the empty space beside him. "Do you hear what he said?"

"Sandy," said Jehan, "who is the little man in the green cloak who just rode down the line?"

Sandremun turned, not needing to rise in his stirrups to see over the heads of most of the men. "Oh, that's only Ronald of Greenfell—Ronald Sandreson—he's a cousin of ours. Was he talking like a fool again?"

"With all respect to your family, he was talking like a traitor, my Lord," said Eric grimly.

"Treason, Eric?" asked the King.

"Well, sedition, at any rate. All about more freedom for the Provinces, and the like!"

"But, Eric, everybody knows how untrustworthy the Lord Commanders can be," Jehan said seriously, then grinned as Eric's face relaxed into a rueful smile. Sandremun was roaring with

laughter.

~~“Only some of them, only some of them, Jehan!”~~ said Theodor’s son. ~~“And only the loyal ones come to the Hold.”~~ He gestured up the hill, where an irregular outline bulked against the storm. A second cloud front was moving down on them quickly now, and Jehan thought they would be lucky to reach the fortress before the lightnings were playing about them once more.

The clear baritone of the singer soared above the roar of the storm as they began the last pull up the hill.

*“And wanderers upon the road,
And caravans and Kings,
Are but the vagrant children of
The Maker of All Things ...”*

Sandremun put his horn to his lips, and Jehan winced as the sound echoed back and forth between the walls that curved down from the protected side gate that was opening for them now. The Hold loomed over them in a confusion of walls and towers, built from every material and in every style known to the past three hundred years, according to no plan the King had ever been able to discern.

He kicked his weary horse after Sandremun’s. People were pouring out of the gate now, waving torches, and Stormwing snorted and reared. The air was full of thunder and the rush of rain. As Jehan fought down the prancing horse, the movement of a window opening drew his eyes upward to the chamber above the gate.

Then the lightning came. Walls and towers sprang into being around him, and in the midst of them a girl’s white face framed in a cloud of dark hair.

For a long moment her eyes met his, as if time had been halted by that light, then the vision was gone. Dazzled, Jehan let Stormwing carry him under the arch of the gate, hearing the echo of hooves on stone and the cheers of the people of the Corona. When his sight cleared, he saw only torchlight and the welcoming smile of the Master of the Junipers.

The Master of the Junipers paused in the doorway of the paneled chamber they had given the King. Jehan’s squire was helping him pull off his wet tunic. Boots, cloak, and sheepskin jacket already steamed before the fire, and the air was pungent with the smell of wet leather and wool. A partly demolished chicken carcass and a loaf of brown bread lay on a platter on the table beside a stoneware pitcher of mulled wine.

“Jehan?” He came into the room and let the door close behind him.

The King emerged from the tunic, still gnawing on a chicken leg, and reached for his blue robe. “My friend! Thank you for coming to me. I suppose you ought to be resting up for the Festival”—he grimaced—“and I should be in bed. But we’ll have no time to talk tomorrow, and we—I thought we had better talk before you went up to the College of the Wise.”

The Master had already seen Caolin, leaning against the battered blue leather of the King’s traveling chest, blazoned with the radiant silver star of House Starbairn. Somehow the Seneschal had already managed to change into a dry tunic and to sleek back his short pale hair. He lifted his mug to

the Master in ironic salute, his gray eyes veiled.

Jehan wrapped the robe around him, poured steaming wine into a mug, and eased down into a chair covered with fox pelts gathered over several seasons' rationed hunting. His squire hung the tunic on a hook to dry and took up a position by the door.

"Rafael," said the King without opening his eyes. "You need to get dry too. And when you've got your wet things off, go to bed."

"Yes, my Lord." The young man flushed beneath his brown skin, then bowed and went out.

The Master sighed and sat down in a straight chair across from the King. "I will visit the Mistress of the College as we agreed," he said, "to inform her about the problems in Laurelynn and Rislin and to have her report—"

"To have her reply!" corrected Caolin. In the firelight the straight folds of his robe glowed as crimson as the red stone on his right hand.

"The Mistress has ruled the College for over ten years, Caolin. I do not think she needs to be told her job." The Master kept his voice low, avoiding dangerous ground.

"She is a member of the King's Council, and accountable. This must be settled—my Lord, don't you agree?"

"Forgive me." Jehan looked up, but Caolin's glance fell too quickly for his expression to be read. He realized that the King had not been listening.

Jehan is tired, thought the Master, and I think he did not choose to have this meeting now.

"Do you agree that we must make a clear distinction between the areas of authority of the College of the Wise and of the Crown?" repeated Caolin.

"I thought we were discussing jurisdiction," the Master of the Junipers said quietly. "The only authority involved is that which both Crown and College exist to serve."

Caolin shrugged. "Call it what you will. But when you go to the Mountain tomorrow, tell the Mistress of the College that we will tolerate no more meddling. Take the case of the priestess in Elden who murdered her child—surely you will agree that no matter who commits it, murder is a civil crime?"

The Master shook his head. "You choose your examples poorly. You know my doubts that something so symptomatic of spiritual illness as deliberate murder can ever be merely a 'civil crime.'"

The King eased off his golden circlet and ran his fingers through his dark hair, lines of patience hardening his face. The Master paused, knowing that Jehan had heard this argument too many times before, but there was a principle here he could not betray.

"Then what of the case where the Commander of the garrison in Rislin was arrested for having ordered his men to cut wood?" Caolin leaned forward, and the firelight burnished his hair to the same ruddy gold as the King's circlet. "The wood was on Crown land, the man was an officer of the Crown and his removal jeopardized the defense of a major city of Westria."

"Crown land? A Crown officer?" asked the Master wryly.

The King frowned abstractedly and poured another mug of wine.

"The officer was appointed by Jehan," continued the Master, "but the man himself is responsible for his exercise of that trust. Jehan holds the land on behalf of those who live here. *All* of them. You speak of wood, Caolin, but those were living *trees* until that man cut them down!" The Master remembered the fallen branches he had seen in the orchard. Surely the land was hard enough on itself without the intervention of man. His awareness, tuned to the tides of the earth, felt the movement of the clouds overhead, the hidden rising of the moon.

“So much that is wrong in Westria today comes because we forget that,” he went on more quietly. “~~The King’s authority, the duty of the College, the very survival of humankind—all depend on our~~ keeping the Covenant our ancestors made with the Guardians of the other kindreds after the Cataclysm that destroyed the civilization the ancients made.

“We may not take a life—of any animal, of any creature of air or sea, of anything that grows from the earth herself—without apology or need. Not without need!” His voice grated and he tried to soften it for the sake of the King. Jehan was sitting with his head in his hands, and the Master remembered the many times he had counseled and comforted him since the boy of seventeen had become King. But he could not help him now.

“You need not repeat the Oath of the Covenant, *Master!*” snapped Caolin. “I too have studied at the College of the Wise!”

The Master’s attention jerked back to the Seneschal, and his lips closed firmly on the words he would not say, knowing that Jehan heard him anyway. But Caolin could not communicate in that way. Caolin had not left the College voluntarily—he had wished to become an adept as the Master had done, but though his work had been brilliant, he had been denied. The Master had been in Laurelynn at the time, serving the old King. He had had no part in the decision, but he represented the College, and it seemed to him that Caolin had always resented him for that.

The King leaned forward as if he could protect Caolin physically from the memory. “We all live by the Covenant.” His voice had deepened. “Assure the Mistress of the College that I have not forgotten what I swore when I first put on the Jewels.”

The Master and the Seneschal both looked at him, seeking reassurance in his face, seeing the flicker of pain in the King’s blue eyes at their disharmony. Jehan cleared his throat and went on. “Tell her also that confusion results when communication fails. May the Lord of All forbid that I should usurp the responsibilities of the College, but I and my officers must know what the College intends so that we can know how to respond. If we do not, both Crown and College will forfeit the people’s trust.” Slowly, holding their eyes, he replaced the circlet upon his brow.

“My Lord King ...” Caolin bent his head.

“I will carry that message gladly, Jehan,” said the Master gently. He thought, *He is still Caolin’s master—I should not have feared.*

“It grows late,” said the King. “You must lead the Festival tomorrow, and Theodor has lined up every horse in his stables and every landholder in his Province to meet me. We both need sleep!”

“Yes.” The circled cross of Westria on the Master’s breast glittered gold in the firelight as he sketched a blessing. “Rest well, in the name of the Maker of All Things.”

Jehan remained stretched out in his chair before the hearth after the Master of the Junipers had gone, staring into the flames. Images swam before his eyes as the glowing oak logs became coals, and coals fell into ash, fulfilling the natural life cycle of fire. Light and darkness patterned his vision. He saw again the bright face and dark hair of the woman who had appeared in the window when the lightning came. With such hair she was no kin of Theodor’s. If she was real...

“He was right. You look half asleep, my Lord, go to bed,” said Caolin.

“No.” Jehan sat up and poured himself more wine. He could feel its warmth burning in his belly, but it did not ease him. His fingers twitched with undirected energy. He wanted to escape from the circlet that bound his brow, from the round of ceremony that would close upon him tomorrow, but he did not want to rest.

The sanded boards of the floor creaked as Caolin came toward him. He felt the other man's strong hands close on his shoulders and knead the taut muscles there. After a moment he let his head drop, trying to relax.

"I thought so," said Caolin. "Well, I can help you get rid of the effects of tension at least, even if the moment I can do no more about its causes." He gave the King's shoulder a light slap. "Well?"

"I suppose so." Jehan got to his feet, pulled off the rest of his clothes, and stretched out face-down on the bed. The laced thongs of the bedstead gave to his weight as he eased down. Appreciatively he breathed in the spicy scent of the fine grass that stuffed the mattress, and the perfume of the rose petals that had been folded with the well-washed cotton sheets.

Caolin rummaged in the traveling chest and took out the flask of oil, tested it on his hand, and set it beside the fire to warm. Then he came back to the bed, lifted the King's dark hair gently to one side, and began to work on his shoulders again.

"I gather that Lord Theodor has planned quite a celebration."

"Yes, it's been a long time since I was here," answered the King. "It shouldn't take an order from the Council to get me to the far corners of the Kingdom." He remembered what Ronald Sandreson had said to Eric on the ride to the Hold. He ought to tell Caolin that Brian was playing politics, but he knew how the Seneschal would reply. Tomorrow would be soon enough to hear it again.

"Sandy wanted me to sit up and drink with him," he said instead, "but I have too clear a memory of the effects of Berisa's mead, or rather too unclear a memory."

Caolin laughed. "Sandremun *is* the sort of man one calls by his milk-name for the rest of his life, isn't he?" He went to the fireplace for the oil, returned, and poured it across the King's back. Jehan felt hard fingers dig into the sensitive spot beneath his shoulder blade and winced.

"You're resisting it—remember to breathe."

Jehan grunted, releasing his breath and trying to draw it in again with the steady rhythm he had been taught at the College, letting go of all the worries that nagged him, letting tense muscles ease.

"Theodor will likely try to match you with his daughter. At least she has the family's golden hair," murmured Caolin.

Jehan shook his head a little. He had met Rosemary several times when her family came to Laurelynn for Council meetings and thought her a nice girl, but she was too tall for him.

"Or he'll find someone else for you," the Seneschal's cool voice continued evenly, inconsequentially, blending with the steady rattle of rain against the windowpanes.

Jehan let the steady murmur lull him as Caolin's fingers traced out the long muscles of his arms, worked down each finger until his hands lay nerveless at his sides. *Did I really see a girl at the window?* he wondered drowsily. *Or was it only a trick of the light?*

"Did you take care of that woman in Elder?" he asked suddenly. Thinking of her, he saw the shining waves of her black hair, but her face was already becoming vague in his memory.

"Yes," answered Caolin impersonally. "She had the bracelet and was escorted safely home."

Jehan smiled to himself. He was aware that Caolin often took the King's women to his own bed for a night before he sent them away. Jehan saw no reason to object to that, since none of the ladies had ever complained. They had, he thought cynically, probably been glad to cling a little longer to the source of power, however vicariously. Did Caolin know that he knew? Sometimes Jehan thought that his friend hardly seemed to remember it himself, as if the satisfaction of his body's needs was unrelated to the life of his mind and soul.

Caolin's hands moved down the King's legs, loosing the knotted muscles of the calves, compressing the nerve endings in his feet. Jehan felt a sweet singing in his veins as his blood flowed

freely once more. His body remembered the many times Caolin had done this before, and yielded gratefully. *Only one of the many things he has done for me*, thought the King, knowing that Caolin's steady support had been perhaps the best thing in his life during the past fifteen years.

"You can turn over now."

Jefaan roused himself enough to ease onto his back and smiled up at Caolin. "You should get some rest too," he said.

A little unaccustomed color rose in the other man's face as he returned the smile. "This is one of the few useful things I learned at the College of the Wise," he replied. "It rests me too."

Jehan let his eyes close as Caolin's fingers probed gently at the tightness in his forehead and the clenched jaw muscles beneath his short beard, then moved down his neck and began to work carefully around the old sword scars on the King's shoulders and chest.

The darkness behind his eyelids was shot with flashing lights that formed the face of the girl in the window, her hair full of stars. Darkness was her setting, but she was made of light. *My lady of light*. . . Words faltered in his consciousness and fell away.

He scarcely knew when Caolin finished and pulled the heavy quilts over him, carefully tucking them in. The darkness deepened as the other man blew out the lamp. He heard the click of the door latching and Caolin's soft good night.

Good night, Jehan. Caolin's own words reverberated in his awareness as if he had spoken them aloud. The palms of his hands tingled with the memory of Jehan's flesh; he brought them up to cover his eyes and breathed in the sharp savor of Jehan's skin. Dizzied, he leaned against the plastered stone of the wall next to the King's door.

The image of that hard, compact body filled his vision; the shape of every bone and muscle was imprinted in the nerves of his hands—he could have modeled the King's body from memory.

"Jehan, Jehan ... my Lord and my King," he whispered, then pressed his clenched fists hard against his eyelids as if to suppress both touch and sight. *He is dreaming now and does not even know that I have gone*, thought Caolin. A shudder thrust him against the hard stone.

Once, Jehan would not have gone to sleep after Caolin had worked on his body. That contact might have turned to another kind of touching that would have eased them both. But it had been a long time since Jehan had needed that from him.

"It does not matter!" Caolin said aloud. "What he needs now, only I can give to him. It is enough ... it is enough for me!"

Slowly he lowered his hands to his sides and made his fingers uncurl, mastered his breathing, and waited for the pounding of his heart to still. He looked around to see if there was anyone in the corridor. Somewhere above him someone was playing a harp. Caolin could hear the notes faint but clear in the stillness of the sleeping fortress, like a memory of love.

Music had been one of the first bonds between him and Jehan. As he walked along the passageway to his own door, the Seneschal smiled.

Farin sat in the window above the side gate with his harp cradled in his arms, looking out at the steady rain. Rosemary and Faris had gone to their chamber long before, but though the long cold ride to bring the King to the Hold had tired him, he could not sleep.

“I sang to the King!” he told the harp triumphantly, “though he may never know it was me!” His fingers brushed the horsehair strings, drawing out the melody of the marching song, embellishing it with the little touches of harmony that his voice could not supply.

Then he stopped, plucked one string again, and reached for his tuning key. The harp was an old one that he had found in a storage room at home, and though he had oiled it, filled its cracks with resin, and carved new pegs for the strings, the sound was still a little dull sometimes and the strings went easily out of tune.

“But I would not dare to sing to him in public. You are not good enough, old friend, and neither am I.” Here at the Hold they praised his playing, but Farin was too painfully aware of the times when his fingers stumbled, or his voice was a little less than true. The others heard the music that came from his fingertips but not the resplendent harmonies that soared in his heart. His hands dropped to the strings once more, plucking out the first lively chords of a war song.

“How splendid the King looked, shining like a star with the lightning around him. He would be wonderful in battle—I wish I could go with him to war! That would be something to sing about!” Realizing what he had said, Farin laughed. *What a fool I am*, he thought. *I can never make up my mind whether my hands are for the harp or for the sword.*

The lamp was flickering fitfully as the oil burned low, and the fire had sunk to red coals. Farin yawned, pushing his black hair back from his eyes, and gently set the old harp down.

Caolin sat at the table in his chamber and picked up the book of the stars he had brought from Laurelynn. It was very late, but he had less need for rest than most men, and only the use of his mind could ease him when tension kept him wakeful as it did now.

He turned the pages carefully, for the volume had been printed before the days of the Cataclysm and was held together only by its covering. The language had changed since the ancients described the workings of the stars—he was still puzzled by the distinction they made between astrology and astronomy—but he had become adept at translating it and at preserving pages that threatened to fall to dust in his hands.

He drew out his notebook, consulted it, then looked at the book again. It had taken him years of study to correlate the Westrian calendar with that of the old civilization. He was only beginning to trust his interpretations. Names, customs, even the contours of the land might have been changed by the Cataclysm, but the stars remained.

Caolin sighed, relaxing as he contemplated the mathematical beauty of the heavenly movements. Here was an order far removed from the confusions of men, yet governing them in a pattern that was plain if one had the wit to see.

There—the planet Venus was riding high in Cancer, the King’s sign. But other forces were present across the horoscope stretched the baleful influence of Mars. Caolin frowned, suspecting danger for Jehan. But from what source? In the years since the Cataclysm, Westria had become a Kingdom of four Provinces that honored the Guardians and kept to its Covenant. Normontaine, to the north, was ruled by a Queen and shared many customs with the people of Westria; they had always been allies. To the south lay the Confederation of Elaya, where instead of mixing, the peoples of different blood had formed five nations uneasily united under an elected Prince, who were always ready to fight Westria when they were not bickering with each other. But that border, like the wasteland of mountains between Westria and the Brown Lands to the east, had been quiet for some years now.

From where then could danger come? Was Lord Brian of Las Costas planning some treachery? For

a moment, intent upon the chart before him, the Seneschal smiled like a cat who waits for a mouse to pass his hiding place. ~~Let Brian only try. He and Caolin had an old rivalry, but Caolin's ally was the King.~~

Then he sighed, checking the chart against the book again. The power of Mars would be brief and then Venus would reign. Was Jehan destined to find a bride here in the Corona after all?

Carefully he closed the book, eased it into its silken case, and pushed back his chair. He brought his thumb and forefinger together around the candle flame. For a moment he held them so, savoring his own awareness of pain and watching the point of fire thin and lengthen as it sought to escape his touch. Then he smiled faintly and pinched the candle out.

Surefooted in the darkness, Caolin moved to the window, pulled aside the wooden shutters, and unlatched the multi-paned window to see into the night. The wind was hurrying the storm northward, and between the dim masses of cloud great patches of night sky showed now, strewn thickly with stars. Venus had set long ago, but for a moment he glimpsed the red wink of Mars. He stood still, dizzied by the glory that was alternately veiled and unveiled before him.

"When the Masters of the College of the Wise taught us to read the heavens, they never told us how to see the future there. Do they know? Is that a part of their secret lore?" Caolin spoke softly to the night.

"I may always lack the power to link mind to mind, and so they had an excuse to send me away, but I have this knowledge now, and I am not afraid to use it to guard the Kingdom and the King." Unvoiced came the memory of the one time that the doors of his spirit had been unlocked by another—by Jehan.

"Knowledge is power," he cried, "and with that power I can lead this land to a glory it has never known." Caolin spread his arms as if he would embrace the sky.

The Master of the Junipers spread his arms to the east, then slowly traced a star before him that his trained awareness perceived as a flowing pentagram of light. "O Thou Guardian of the Powers of Air..." he murmured a Name, "guard Thou the words of my lips and of my heart."

He turned then to the south, making the sign of warding again. "O Thou Ruler of the fires of Earth and Heaven, keep life's fire burning within me until I return to this body."

Moving again, the Master faced the west and, signing it, commanded the Lord of the Waters to maintain him in harmony with all cycles and tides. Then he shifted to the north, lifted his arms once more, and drew the line of light down and up to the right, left and down and up to the point again, finishing the star.

"O Thou Protector of Earth, my foundation, maintain the bond between my spirit and my body until I take it up once more."

He bowed, then seated himself in the center of the circle he had made, legs crossed and hands open upon his knees. His thoughts were still busy with the tasks of the day, and for the moment he let them run freely while he controlled his breathing and relaxed his muscles one by one.

He had spent the afternoon rehearsing tomorrow's ceremony with the priestess from the town below the fortress. He had learned all of the major ceremonies when he was at the College, of course, but it had been long since he had been a celebrant. They seemed to think that it would be an honor for one of the Masters from the Father of Mountains to officiate. It surprised him, for in the old days even the head of the College had made a point of performing one of the rituals somewhere at least once a year.

He turned his thoughts to the Lady of Flowers whose festival tomorrow would be, trying once more to bring Her into focus as he had not been able to that afternoon. She was not a physical being, even in the sense that the First People who guarded the plant and animal kindreds could be. He had been presented to the Lord of the Trees during his training, and once, on a journey to the sacred valley of Awahna, had glimpsed the Great Bear, and he knew that they could appear in many forms. But the Masters at the College still argued over the origins of the gods.

Some said that the great Powers, like the Lady of Flowers or the Lord of the Winds or even the spirit of Westria Herself, had returned to Westria after the Cataclysm. Others believed that they had always been there, and only those of the ancients who knew how to worship them had been able to survive to found the new nation. And there were some who felt that in truth, the gods were images that men used to focus and contact the universal forces by which they lived. The College itself did not require that men believe—only that they keep the Covenant.

But the Master knew that, whatever their nature, the powers he called upon were real. But in order to call upon the Lady of Flowers he must see Her clearly, and so he sought guidance where he had always found help before.

He straightened a leg that had been cramped by stillness, then crossed it over the other again. Smoothing his features into passivity, he deepened his breathing and willed it to resume the careful rhythm to which he had trained body and spirit to respond.

“In Thy Name, O Thou Source of All, and to Thy glory...”

Imperceptibly his open hands relaxed upon his knees. Images swirled across his consciousness and were banished. Releasing its grasp on the world of forms, his awareness retreated until all knowledge of his body was gone.

Within the darkness in which he floated now, he perceived a single point of brilliance. As he rushed forward it expanded until it dazzled his inner sight. Then he waited while the other world took shape around him, until at last he saw his Guide approaching, robed in light.

Light danced with darkness, and Faris’ dreaming spirit soared on the wings of the storm. All her troubled dreams had resolved to this—the world spread out beneath her, the sleeping valleys of Westria where scattered points of light marked the dwellings of men, the mountains whose sheer peaks thrust against the sky, oblivious to the tumults below.

I am free! she shouted. *Nothing can hold me now.* Not the anger of her father, her sister’s solicitude, nor her own fragile body could stop her flight. Higher she rose, and yet higher, lifting her arms to the stars.

Then a bolt of lightning arched across the heavens toward her. She swooped and darted like a frightened dove but she could not escape.

But it was not lightning, it was a falling star, and when it struck, her flesh was ignited and she and the star burned with an equal flame.

Faris cried out as the force of its fall bore her downward, and she and the star upon her breast plummeted earthward in a single bolt of fire.

II

The Lady of Flowers

Faris shivered, feeling a draft though all of the windows in Rosemary's chamber were shut tight. She reached for the mug of green-gold yarrow tea that Rosemary had just poured for her, hoping that no one had noticed her chill. Steam rose from the mug in white curls that twined lazily in the thin morning light.

She swallowed gratefully as the warmth of the tea filtered through her, and pushed her breakfast about upon her plate so that it would look as if she had eaten. But she knew better than to try. She was paying now for her exaltation of the night before and for the dreams that had followed. Darkness and splendor warred in her memory, dimming the morning light.

Something grey and furry slipped by her. She stifled an exclamation as Rosemary's raccoon hooked a honeycake from the platter and, unimpeded by the splint on his hind leg, hopped back to the floor.

"Scatter!" Rosemary glared at the animal. "What shall I do with you? You need a good smack, but I don't want to spoil my doctoring!"

"If he tries to wash that cake it's going to come apart," said Farin, watching the raccoon warily. "And if he goes after my breakfast I will smack him!" He picked another sausage from the platter as deftly as the animal had taken the cake.

The Master of the Junipers laughed. He looked very much at home here, with the sunlight glowing in his face—a face not so much worn as lived-in, as if its owner had come to terms with his own strengths and failings long ago.

I wish that I could. Faris pushed her plate aside and picked up her embroidery again, frowning as she set neat stitches around the neck of the tunic she was making for Farin. *Life would be easier if I could just accept my flaws.* She shook her head to hold back tears.

"Faris, are you all right?" asked Rosemary. "Berisa will send you home if you fall ill."

"Then don't tell her!" Faris answered rebelliously. She admired her older sister's dark beauty and the efficiency with which she had managed their home after their mother died. Now Berisa bore the keys of the fortress, which Sandremun's mother had been only too happy to give up to her, but when she was near, Faris felt what little confidence she had slip away.

"I didn't sleep well," she added shortly.

"Well, that's no wonder, in such a storm—but at least the Lady has given us some sunshine for the Festival." Rosemary had finished eating and was feeding her animals. The gopher snake coiled in its basket needed no attention, but the cageful of mice were glad of the cake crumbs, Rosemary's maid, Branwen, was feeding two orphaned lambs in a pen near the fire. The old sheepdog, who had been asleep with his head across the feet of the Master of the Junipers, thumped his tail on the floor as she went by,

"And we brought the King here safely, after all!" said Farin proudly. When he had come in last night with the others, he had been shaking with cold, but he seemed to have recovered his spirits now. "What a rider Jehan is! The horses were half crazed with fear of the thunder, but whenever anyone needed help, he was there. Rosemary! Are you listening to that owl or to me?"

Rosemary looked at him over her shoulder while the owl swiveled its head forward to pick at the bits of sausage she was offering it.

"Huw talks very good sense sometimes, and he has excellent manners!"

The King. Faris could avoid thinking about him no longer, and the vision of the rider on the rear

white horse whose eyes had held her own replaced her awareness of the room, as it had blazoned itself across her dreams. Had he seen her as well?

“They say Jehan is a fine fighter. I wonder if he would take me into his service,” Farin went on.

“Shall I arrange for you to sing for him?” asked Rosemary.

Farin looked horrified. “No! He heard me last night, of course—but that was only a marching song and he could not have known it was me. If I could be trained at the College of Bards, I might learn enough to perform for him... but Father would never let me go.”

Branwen set down the bottle that had been emptied by one of the lambs and reached for another. Faris saw that she could not grasp it without losing her grip on the second lamb and got up to hand it to her.

“Thank you, my Lady,” whispered the girl.

“Let me help.” Faris sat down on the bench beside Branwen and coaxed the lamb to suck. She ran her hand across the soft wool of its back and felt her tension ease.

“Faris, you don’t have to do that!” exclaimed Rosemary. The Master of the Junipers glanced over at her with one of his sweet smiles.

Faris tried to laugh. “Really, I am all right—it’s just lack of sleep.”

Her brother looked at her sharply. “Are you getting sick again, or did you have a dream?” She could not evade his eyes—he knew her too well. “What was it, Faris?” he said.

Faris stared at him, images and warnings conflicting in her memory. There had been a confused succession of visions of fighting—Farin had been in them, and the King. But she must not tell that. Once, she had dreamed that her mother was leaving her, and told her dream, and seen her mother die.

“Faris.” His voice was soft, his eyes a mirror for her own. She heard his thought—*I will make her dream into a song*—and envied him, for in Farin all the intimations of power that tormented her had been channeled into the one gift of music.

“So that you can have something new to sing about?” she asked bitterly. Now she remembered her final dream, like an extension of the storm. “Very well. I dreamed that I was struck by a falling star—use that if you can!”

“You must not be afraid,” the Master of the Junipers said gently, though his eyes had grown intent at her words. “Such abilities can be very valuable if they are trained. Didn’t they tell you so at your Initiation? The College of the Wise would be glad to teach you.”

Faris shook her head. She had gone through the classes that prepared all Westrian children to assume their adult names, terrified that the teacher would find out. But there was such peace in the Master’s face. She gazed mutely at him, wondering how it would feel to enter the world of the spirit as a citizen.

“You don’t know our father, or Berisa,” put in Farin. “They would never let her go.” A horse whinnied outside and hoofbeats echoed on the stones of the passage beneath the chamber. Farin sprang to his feet and went to the window to see.

“The King is riding into the town this morning so that everyone can see him, since there’s not room for them all to come to the Festival,” explained Rosemary.

The Master nodded. “That reminds me, it is time I went down to the Hall. Mistress Elisa wants to go over the litany again.”

“And we should be going down to the orchard to see what blossoms the wind has left for us to use in the ceremony,” said Rosemary. “If we hurry, perhaps we can see the King ride out.” She began a hunt for the pruning knife while Branwen shut the lambs back into their pen and took down cloaks from the hooks on the wall.

Faris got to her feet slowly, finding herself curiously reluctant to go with them. She was still dazzled by the vision of the King's face in stormlight, and she did not want to see him grown ordinary in the plain light of day.

"Eric, will you go over to the stables and see if they have gotten Stormwing saddled yet?" asked the King, squinting into the sunlight. The rear guard of last night's storm clouds still trailed across the sky—towering silver-edged masses like floating fortresses, driven northward by a chill wind. But the sun shone with blinding clarity through air washed clean by the rain. Jehan breathed deeply, watching Eric stride through the puddles.

He turned to Caolin, who stood beside him on the porch that overlooked the courtyard. "Now that Eric's gone, I need to talk to you."

"I wondered when you would tire of his company," replied the Seneschal. He stood straight and still, the early light polishing the smooth planes of his face. "He is good-natured, but limited in his interests. I suppose it is a function of his rather appalling youth."

"I was appallingly young when I met you—don't you remember?" Jehan grinned. He had been thirteen when he had gone to be trained at the College of the Wise, where Caolin was a senior student. He had been only sixteen, back in Laurelynn with his ailing father, when Caolin, having astonishingly failed to complete his pilgrimage to Awahna and become a Master of the College, had appeared in the capital to take a post with the old Seneschal. Accepting no rebuffs, the prince had tried to penetrate the young clerk's loneliness. But it was in the following year, when King Alexander died and left Jehan to bear the crown, that Caolin had realized that Jehan needed *him*, and the bond between them had begun to grow.

"As a matter of fact, I find Eric's innocence refreshing," the King went on resolutely. "I wanted to talk to you alone just because I don't desire to disturb it. The Great Rebellion has finally approached him." Two of Theodor's men bowed as they passed and Jehan saluted them. Caolin waited until they had gone down the steps to reply.

"Oh? And what did he think of it?"

"Highly indignant, of course. You know how he feels about Lord Brian."

"I also know how Brian feels about him. They are too alike in strength and temper, and Brian is older. Was Ronald of Greenfell the one who spoke to him?"

"Yes—how did you know?" Jehan rubbed at his beard, realizing that this was not such news to Caolin as he had expected.

"I've talked to him enough to find out he is Brian's man. Anyone who travels around the Kingdom as much as he does naturally interests the Seneschal's office, so I cultivated him. Hopefully he will keep me informed of his progress. He may be Theodor's cousin, but I doubt that the Lord Commander knows what he's up to."

The King nodded, remembering the light in the old man's eyes when he had greeted him. "I don't doubt Theodor's loyalty. Normontaine is too near, and the outlaws in the no-man's land between the Kingdoms nearer still. He would not be able to stand alone." *How cynical that sounds*, he thought. *Am I becoming like Caolin, to suspect lies whenever men offer loyalty?*

"Jehan, come down." Sandremun's call brought him back to the present. "The horses are waiting outside."

The King gave Caolin a quick smile, grateful that for once the Seneschal had forbore to accuse Brian of treachery. Then he ran down the broad stairs, clutching at his green cloak as the wind filled

to keep from being blown away.

Faris hurried across the courtyard after Rosemary, head bent into the wind. She stumbled, then threw herself backward as hooves clattered like thunder and a dark bulk reared over her.

“You fool! If you don’t know any better than to run under a horse’s hooves, you should go back to your burrow in the hills!”

Gasping, Faris looked up, saw a large young man reining an equally massive black horse in tight circles, cursing her and the animal equally as it bucked and snorted, fighting his restraint. She knew that her cheeks were flaming, but she could not get breath enough to reply.

“There now, that’s a boy—hold still. Maybe she’s never seen a real horse like you.” The stallion came to a halt at last and the young man’s words died away as he focused on Faris standing there.

“My Lady,” he said finally, after a moment of stunned silence during which his face became as red as her own. For all his size, Faris realized that he was scarcely older than she.

“I’m Sir Eric of Seagate, at your service. Did Thunderfoot hurt you?”

She shook her head. Why was he staring at her? Someone called from the gate. Eric looked around distractedly, then back at her. “Are you sure? Will you be at the Festival?”

Faris nodded, smiling, wondering how long he would keep her standing here. Then his name was called again, and she took advantage of his preoccupation to gather her skirts and cross the courtyard before he could call out to her.

She slipped through the orchard gate and latched it firmly behind her, then stood still for a moment, catching her breath. It was very quiet here, out of the wind. Faintly she could hear shouts as the King’s party set off toward the town, and more clearly, the voices of Rosemary and Branwen discussing which branches should be cut for the Festival.

She sighed, grateful to be alone. The plum tree before her was just coming into flower. She rested one hand lightly on its trunk, gazing into the lacy branches. She could feel a light throbbing through her fingertips—was it the response of the trunk to the wind, or the life of the tree flowing beneath her hand? Her breathing deepened, and the flush faded from her cheeks.

Looking from one tree to another, she let the memory of her encounter with Sir Eric slip easily from her mind, and with a greater effort banished the vision of the King. Here among the trees she could escape from the complexities of men.

Her ears buzzed with cold. Her eyes began to water, and the blossoms before her blurred. She blinked, looked up, and was suddenly still. For a moment in which she did not breathe she saw before her not a grove of trees, but a circle of maidens veiled and crowned in white, stretching out their arms to her.

Fear and longing warred within her. Her breath rushed back and, dizzied, she fell to her knees with her palms sunk into the soft earth and her forehead against the trunk of the tree. The air warmed around her and she recognized a subtle perfume. There was a moment then when she might have gained her feet and run away. But she did not move.

The Presence she had sensed approaching grew greater and the heat increased. A sweet fire melted all her stiffness. Faris kept her eyes shut tight, afraid of what she might see.

But words welled unbidden from the depths of her spirit. *Lady! Make me whole . . . let me be free!*

There was reassurance in the warmth that enfolded her, like a mother’s arms. Faris bowed her head upon her crossed hands in wordless wonder, beyond self-awareness and beyond time. She heard distant laughter like a chime of silver bells, and the strange heat faded gradually away.

“Faris ... Faris ...” How far away the voices seemed. She did not want to move, but she made herself sit up and look upon a world whose splendor was once more veiled. And for that moment she knew that what she saw was only the appearance, and what she had sensed, the reality.

“Faris, what are you doing? We must get these flowers to the Hall, and then it will be time to dress for the Festival.”

Faris slowly focused on Rosemary, standing before her with her arms full of starry flowers.

“Faris, you look so strange. What happened to you?”

But Faris could only shake her head and hold her face to the clean wind.

Wind swept the great Hall of the Hold, fluttering women’s veils and ribbons, plucking white petals from the branches of almond and plum that garlanded the long room as the big double doors at its end were opened and shut again. People turned to see who had come in, asking each other if the families from the holdings on the northern border had arrived.

Jehan and Rosemary stood at the edge of a swirl of dancers, sipping white wine. “My Lord, I must apologize,” said Rosemary, smoothing her azure gown a little nervously. “Things may begin on time in Laurelynn, but we are less precise in the Corona.” The Festival had been scheduled for midday, but it was now halfway into the afternoon, and Theodor had told the musicians to start playing while they waited for the latecomers.

The King turned to her, lowering his voice. “Believe me, a more leisurely pace is very welcome. I am glad of the chance to learn more of the Province from you. For instance, you could tell me the names of some of the dancers. Only the heads of households were presented to me, yet I may have to lead their sons in battle, or ...”

“Or their daughters in the dance?” Rosemary laughed.

For a moment Jehan’s answering grin was as open as her own. “Your pardon, Lady Rosemary. I had not meant to be devious. It is a habit one gets into in Laurelynn.” He met her steady gaze.

A boy came by with a wicker tray of sweet white cakes molded in the shapes of moons and flowers, blushing as the King took one and nodded his thanks.

“To be frank, the ways of the capital hold little interest for me. We live more simply here in the north. The companionship of the Master of the Junipers is the only thing I envy you.”

“Yes, your father told me you study with him when he stops here on his way to the College of the Wise. I wish I could spare him more often, but my chaplain is like a peaceful clearing in the midst of very tangled wood, to which I have sometimes great need to repair.”

The music changed to the dance called the peacock, and the King offered his hand to Rosemary. Together they paced the length of the hall, the swirl of his dark blue mantle echoing the sway of her skirts. Across the room he saw the crimson splash of Caolin’s robe and noted that the Seneschal was talking with Ronald of Greenfell. His gaze passed on, seeking among the dancers one white face framed in a cloud of dark hair.

“The couple ahead of us are Andreas Blackbeard, who is squire to Charles of Woodhall, and Woodhall’s daughter Holly. Sir Charles is one of the latecomers we are waiting for. I think you know Allen of Badensbridge, and of course my brother and his wife, Berisa. Sir Eric is dancing with my companion, Branwen.” Rosemary paused, scanning the crowd. Colors flowed and blended as the dancers moved, parting for a moment to reveal a white figure like a lily in a field of wildflowers.

Jehan’s breath caught for a moment, but the rhythm of the dance carried him on. “And the dark-haired girl in ivory, dancing with the young man who so resembles her?” he asked softly.

“Oh, did I leave them out?” Rosemary looked at him speculatively. “They are relatives of Berisa, from Hawkrest Hold. She is Faris, and her brother is called Farin.”

“Fair she is indeed, and her brother looks a likely lad,” Jehan replied neutrally. “He is not knighted yet? How old is he?”

“He’s nineteen, but he says he will not accept knighthood until he has earned it. I’m afraid he’s had little chance to be a hero. Here, he’s known for his skill as a singer and upon the harp.”

“A singer? Of course, now I remember. His singing was the only thing bearable about last night’s ride.” Did Rosemary suspect that Jehan’s real object of interest was Farin’s sister? He was almost certain Faris was the girl he had seen.

The music ended with a flourish of flutes, and Rosemary gathered her azure silk skirts in a courtesy. Jehan escorted her back to her father, and for a moment they exchanged civilities. Her mother, Lady Amata, found events of this kind too great a strain, so Rosemary was acting as her father’s hostess. As they talked someone came to her asking whether they should put out more cakes and wine now, or wait until after the ceremony, and Jehan took advantage of the distraction to move away.

He looked around him. The Seneschal had disappeared, and perhaps that was as well, for the King found himself unwilling to seek Caolin’s help in meeting the girl in the moon-colored gown. A formal introduction would attract unwelcome attention, and he did not wish to embarrass her. But what about a chance meeting in the dance? Jehan cut through the crowd to find the Master of Musicians.

Soon the hands of the dancers were filled with flowers. Men and women danced together until the melody changed, then each must wander alone for a few measures until the music altered once more, and each gentleman offered his spray of flowers to the lady of his choice and took her as a partner... until the music changed again and it was time for the ladies to choose anew.

Like wanderers in some enchanted wood, each one sought the face he or she desired.

Sunlight slanted through the long upper windows, shafting through the dust motes in a haze of light. Dazzled, Faris peered at her partner, recognized him as Allen of Badensbridge, then laughed without replying as he asked her whom she had expected to see. Her pale gown swirled about her like a cloud as they moved forward. She moved as lightly as a cloud, as if she were dancing with the wind.

Ever since that moment in the orchard she had been acutely conscious of the insubstantiality of the veil between the worlds. And now the trees had come into the Hall to dance with her. Faris laughed again, forgetting her aching feet, answering the music. Nothing could touch her now. When the music lifted her, there were no more choices to be made, only the instinctive movement toward harmony.

The melody changed. Her partner left her and Faris waited, poised in the music, dizzied by the flowers’ faint perfume. Sunlight blinded her. Then someone drew her into the shadow, and when she could see again she met the blue gaze of the King.

She took from him the spray of flowers, trembling suddenly so that only the steady pressure of his hand kept her from faltering in the dance. She fought for self-control, fear shattering her exaltation as she understood who her partner was.

They turned, and her unfastened sleeve fell back, revealing her scar.

The King turned to face her, almost breaking step. “You have been hurt!” His voice beat heavily across the music. Faris nearly fell, waiting for him to show everyone her shame.

“How did it happen?” he asked softly. Still terrified, she looked up at him and could not look away. She found herself telling him the story that she had tried to forget, as she tried to forget her scar.

“It was long ago ... our housekeeper had a baby whose gown caught fire. When I beat out the flames, I was burned too.”

“Were you afraid?” asked the King, guiding her around the circle. “How old were you?”

“I was six,” she said simply, held by his still gaze. Suddenly all that had happened to her seemed very small and far away. “I was afraid afterward, but when it happened everything was very clear, and I knew what I had to do.”

The King gave a little sigh and nodded, his gaze releasing her to fix inward on some memory. “It like that in battle sometimes.”

He knows! Faris’ heart shook in her breast. *He has seen my scar and still he is dancing with me.* She glanced at him beneath her lashes, and her breath caught as she realized that he was not only the King, but beautiful.

The music swept them forward, but breathless, she could not speak now. She let him lead her, attending neither to the figure nor to her own steps, for it seemed natural for his movements to be reflected by her own. The measure was endless, like music in a dream.

And then, like a dream, it stopped and left them standing together while all around them couples drew apart.

The King’s hand tightened, as if he would have drawn Faris through the door behind them. But the breaking of the music had frightened her. Startled, she hung back. Immediately the pressure ceased and he raised her hand to his lips instead. Her left hand. Then he released her and was gone into the crowd.

Horns called, their clear summons dissipating into a buzz of comment as word spread that Theodor had tired of waiting and ordered the ceremony to begin.

Rosemary took Faris’ arm and pulled her into place in the line of young women, but Faris scarcely noticed what she did, for even as the first notes of the processional began, the print of the King’s lips still burned upon her hand.

“In the Name of the Lady of Fire, be this place purified and made sacred to our purpose here....”

While Faris stood dazed, the two priests and the other priestess had already sanctified the room with incense and water and salt, and now they formed three points of a square surrounding the altar where they had placed the most perfect of the flowers. The fire priestess finished her circuit, moved to the altar, where she used her taper to touch the tall candles to flame, and then took her place at the southern corner of the square.

“Thou earth, thou sky, thou sun, thou sea—I am the center of thy circled cross, be thou represented equally in me!” the people cried.

Mistress Elisa and the Master of the Junipers faced each other before the altar, mantled alike over their black and white robes in capes of pale green worked with embroideries of butterflies and flowers.

“Who is this that appears with the dawning?” the Master of the Junipers began the chant. “She is clothed in mist, Her hair is pearled with dew.”

“She emerges from the sea, She rides upon the wind,” the priestess answered him.

“Her strength is the strength of the seedling surging toward the sun; Her beauty blinds the eye.” Back and forth ran the litany.

“Her beauty is as clear as water, Her fragrance stirs the heart like a distant song.”

Yes... Faris breathed in the scent of the flowers. *I have heard Her ... I have felt Her touch upon my soul.* The words of the celebrants blended with her memory of the orchard. Overlapping visions

dazzled her. Was she surrounded by tree trunks or the carved and painted pillars of the Hall?

~~“When wind whispers in budding branches and the new moon swings through the sky, She is here~~

~~“When blossoms open to the sunlight and earth receive the gentle rain, She is here.”~~

The Master of the Junipers turned to the people, opening his arms. “Oh my brothers and my sisters we are gathered here to celebrate the coming of spring and to invoke the blessing of the Lady of Flowers. But winter’s sleep was peaceful, demanding nothing. Are you willing to wake, to grow, and with the world to face both the joy and the pain life brings? Is it your will to call the Lady here?”

“Yes! We will it, let the Lady come!” came the answer from a hundred throats, shaking the air and setting chills through Faris’ flesh.

Do they understand that She will come? thought the girl, *that She is already here?* Abruptly she was afraid.

The Master stood before the altar, lifting his arms as a supplicant, and began to call upon the Lady by names that Faris knew and by others that she had never heard before. Tension charged the air like gathering of lightnings as he focused the energies of all those in the room into one cone of power. The hair lifted on the back of her neck. The Master’s voice rang like a bell in the stillness, names became images, and images a single shining form that stood before the altar, arms outstretched, veils floating upon an invisible wind.

Her cloak was a shimmering fabric of leaves like pale wings, like flames, like the petals of flowers, through which Her body shone like the new moon in a dawn sky. Her eyes were fixed on Faris with a terrible clarity, and Faris could not look away. This was the vision she had feared in the orchard, but she could not refuse it now.

Lady... . The words trembled on her lips, but no sound came. *What do You want of me?*

Did no one else see Her? The Master of the Junipers stood rigid before the altar, arms lifted in adoration. His face was filled with light. Transfixed by his own vision, he had no help for Faris.

The priestess stepped past him to give the blessing, but Faris saw her slight figure cloaked in the Lady’s glory. Her words sounded in the stillness of Faris’ soul, answering her.

“I am the kernel in the husk and the seed in the ground. I am the shoot piercing the stone and opening its leaves to the sun. Come to Me, and grow....

“I am the rain in the cloud and the tides of the sea. I am the wind of heaven that bears seed to the earth and inspiration to men. Come to Me and bring forth beauty... .

“I am the lightning in the storm and the star in the dark.

I am the fire of earth in the coal and the fire of love in the heart. Come to Me and I will light the eternal flame within your soul...”

The words thundered and reverberated through the spaces of Faris’ spirit, opening before her vista that she had never dared to look upon.

The herders were coming up to the altar now, bringing the firstborn lambs for the Lady’s blessing white and bleating with wide, curious eyes. The landholders came, bearing the sacks of seed they would soon put into the ground. Men and women came, smiling, with their children in their arms.

“The Lady blesses you. What will you give to Her?” asked the priestess.

In the midst of the people the unmarried men stood with crowns of flowers in their hands. As they came forward Rosemary led the young women before the altar to face them. “As we are all dresses of the Lady, so we accept your offerings in Her name,” she said.

With her back to the altar, Faris was able to focus on her surroundings, though still she felt the Lady behind her as though she stood before an open fire. The men were grouped unevenly before them. Andreas Blackbeard came forward and, after a moment’s hesitation, set the wreath he carried on

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