

HEARTSPELL

by

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Rain splashed noisily into the puddles in the soot-streaked alley lying between the Silver Spur tavern and the Wayfarer's Rest Inn. Shivering, Branwyn Stormgerd turned her mount off the main street and halted him at the opening of the alley, peering into the dimness from beneath the dripping hood of her cloak. "Well, Cinder, here we are. I suppose I'd better get to it."

The massive black ox she bestrode whuffed inquiringly, as though asking whether she *really* wanted him to enter such a dark, noisome place. In answer, Branwyn tapped her mount's shoulder with the rowan switch that served her as a cattle goad. "Hup, Cinder. There's a shed at the end where you can wait, out of the rain."

Reluctantly the ox splashed forward, grunting a complaint, but obedient to Branwyn's command. When they reached the rickety lean-to, the young woman slid off, then guided the gigantic beast within. "Stay, Cinder," she told him, resting a hand between his eyes in a gesture that was part caress, part signal. "I won't be long. I hope."

Drawing the sodden folds of her cloak about her, Branwyn made her way back up the alley, skirting puddles as well as she

might in the dimness. A sullen rumble of thunder made her start. *Stop it*, she ordered herself sternly. *This is no time to lose your nerve.*

As she approached the tavern door, it burst open and two men, laughing raucously, reeled out. The taller slipped in the mud and fell full-length, but his mishap only made his companion roar louder. After hoisting his soaked comrade to his feet, the two staggered away, arm in arm.

Branwyn, who had stepped into the shadow of the massive rain barrel for concealment, watched them go, her resolve failing again. *What if they're all like that in there? I couldn't bear it! Rum-soaked breath, sweaty hands . . . perhaps I should go back. Maybe becoming one of the witches of Estcarp wouldn't be so terrible . . .*

But that would mean leaving behind all that she'd struggled to keep and build for the past eight years, ever since her mother had died and she had been left, a child of ten, to fend for herself.

Branwyn had hired herself out to Squire Barkas as dairymaid, so she could pay the lord-tithe and the taxes on her little farm until she had saved enough to hire someone to help her work it again. Leaving Ravensmere would mean abandoning the sleek cattle she had raised from orphan calves and that the squire, in gratitude, had given her over the years. Cinder, and Callie, Goldhorn, Primrose, and little Ebony Star—all of them like her children, with their patient brown eyes. Her animals loved her, and she could not—*would not*—abandon them!

Squaring her sturdy shoulders beneath the sopping cloak, Branwyn opened the door and entered the taproom. She paused for a moment in the shadows, unseen, to peel off her mantle, her eyes wandering over the men sitting sprawled at the tables, drinking. Most of them were strangers, in town for the spring horse-fair. Tavernmaids circulated among the patrons with slopping mugs on trays. Branwyn's eyes widened at the expanse of bosom the girls' slack bodice lacings revealed. *Is that what attracts these men? I could never, never, in a thousand years . . .*

But after a moment of indecision, she unbuttoned the first few inches of her embroidered blouse, then tugged at her own

laces, until a hint of cleavage showed. *That will have to do. Now, which one shall I choose?* Head high, Branwyn moved out into the lights, trying without much success to assume the hip-swaying walk the other girls used.

Conversation in the Silver Spur died to a mutter as most of those present swung to look at her. The young woman felt her face flame, but she held her chin high, and her eyes were busy, studying each male face as the patrons gradually lost interest in her and resumed their drinking. *That one? No, too drunk . . . that one? No, look at those rotten teeth—ugh! How about the black-bearded one in the green jersey, he's—no, no, I once saw a bull with eyes like that, and the poor creature was as mad as a pack of rasti . . .*

Slowly she picked her way across the greasy floor, treacherous with wine sloppings, until she had scanned each of the faces. *There's no man here I'd sell a freemartin heifer to, much less . . .* She sighed, as she sat down at an empty table. *Blessed Gunnora, what shall I do?*

One of the blowsy tavernmaids tapped her on the shoulder, making her jump. "What'll it be, dearie?"

Branwyn shrugged, trying to look casual, as though she frequented taverns all the time. "Oh, wine I guess."

"Red, white, or mulled?"

"Mulled?" Branwyn repeated doubtfully—she'd never had spirits in her life.

"That's hot wine with spices, dearie." The tavernmaid gave her a reassuring smile. "Goes down good on a night like this, I can tell you."

"Mulled, then," Branwyn said gratefully. *I'll drink my wine, and give them all one more glance. Then I suppose I'll have to try the taproom at the Wayfarer's Rest . . .*

"Here you be, dearie." The tavernmaid set a steamy mug down before the young woman.

"Thank you." Branwyn laid a silver coin on the table. "Keep the rest for your trouble." She sipped the hot wine, feeling its warmth rush through her body, making even her toes tingle. *Must be careful, or I'll end up falling over in the street like that fellow outside.*

"May I buy you another of those, mistress?" inquired a light voice from behind her.

Branwyn turned with a start to see a man standing at her elbow. He had not been in the taproom when she'd originally entered, for his face was not one she could have overlooked. His well-cut features were typical of the Old Race—long, oval countenance, black hair and dark gray eyes, but the dour expression shared by most of her countrymen was missing. This young man—it was impossible to tell his age, but Branwyn thought he could not be much over thirty—wore an impish grin, revealing excellent white teeth.

Branwyn gaped at him, forgetting his question. "Where did you come from?"

One black eyebrow lifted sardonically. "Where do all men come from, mistress? I claim no more extraordinary origin than they, I assure you." He made a mocking half bow.

"I mean—I meant—" Branwyn sputtered. "I didn't see you before," she finished lamely.

"That is because I wasn't here." He swung a leg over the bench and settled down beside her. "I was in the back room, educating some of the local farmers in the finer points of dicing."

Branwyn glared at him, irritated. *She* was a farmer. "You mean cheating, most likely."

His faintly derisive smile never wavered. "I assure you, no. I reserve my cheating skills for worthier opponents."

"Then you're a gambler, by trade." *He might be the one, she was thinking. True, he's as full of conceit as an egg is meat, but he looks clean, and he has all his teeth. And a gambler will be gone tomorrow, never to bother me again.*

"No, actually I'm a horse trader. My name is Lorin. And you, mistress?"

"Branwyn," she told him absently.

"Are you from Ravensmere, Mistress Branwyn?"

"Yes." *He's not drunk, and that's something unusual in this crowd. I'll probably do no better at the inn . . .*

"Really? With that dark red hair, I'd have taken you for a Sulcar lass. On my travels I've seen sailors with that shade of hair."

She smiled. "My father, Rannulf Stormgerd, *was* Sulcar. He met my mother at Eslee Port, when she came up to the fair there."

"And they married and he gave up the sea." His smile broadened. "He settled down to live happily forever, farming."

Branwyn met his gaze squarely. "For two years, he did. Then he went back to sea, and his ship was lost. There are worse things than farming."

Lorin nodded sober agreement, but his eyes still held that spark of mockery. "To be sure, Mistress Branwyn. May I buy you another drink?"

"No, thank you," she said, feeling her heart pound. She'd made her decision; best get on with it. "I should be heading home. Would you like to join me?"

He looked a bit startled, then laughed. "Of course. But perhaps we'd better settle the business end of the deal first." He touched the purse hanging at his belt and she heard the jingle of coin. "How much?"

Branwyn gaped at him, shocked. *He thinks I'm a trull! A whore!* Part of her mind argued that the assumption made sense on his part, but that small, reasoning voice was quenched in a flood of indignation. "How *dare* you!" she gasped, jumping up from the table. "I'm not—I've *never*—" She swung at him, furious, but he caught her wrist, stopping her blow in midair. "Let go of me!" she raged, breaking his grip.

Without looking at him again, Branwyn whirled and fled for the door, snatching her wet cloak off its peg and around her shoulders.

When she reached the street, she paused for a second, trying to gather her wits. The outrage that had pulsed so hotly through her veins died, leaving her shivering with the cold and wet. *I can't go through with this*, she realized, looking over at the Wayfarer's Rest. *I just can't. The witches will just have to take me—or perhaps I can run away, hide myself . . .* But she knew that was a very forlorn hope. The witches were pitiless and determined, with men-at-arms to do their bidding. It was highly unlikely that one auburn-haired dairymaid would be able to—

"Good even' to you, mistress!" A steaming blast of rum-

soaked breath nearly knocked Branwyn down, but a brawny arm swept out to encircle her, keeping her on her feet. "I heard what ye said t' the young cockerel in there, an' how he insulted ye. But don't cry, missy, ol' Tomlin here'll be glad t' go home with ye!"

A black-whiskered face tried to nuzzle her own, and Branwyn pulled back with a choked cry, recognizing the man from the tavern. In the faint light from the tavern window, his eyes gleamed small, vicious—and madder than ever. "No!" Branwyn pulled away with all the strength of her wiry muscles. "Stop it!"

"Now come on, sweeting!" Give ol' Tomlin a kiss!"

Realizing she would gain nothing by struggling, Branwyn let him pull her toward him. At the last possible second before his mouth captured her own, her knee shot upward with all her might.

The blow was hampered by her heavy, wet skirts and did not land true. But it staggered her would-be escort enough so that Branwyn was able to send her small, hard fist crashing against the side of Tomlin's jaw. He wavered, then sat down hard in a puddle. Snatching up her skirts, Branwyn ran.

Even as she approached the shed where Cinder waited, she could hear the oaf following her, bellowing with rage and pain. "Cinder!" she cried desperately, dragging the great beast out of his shelter by tugging at his ear.

Branwyn usually mounted by ordering the ox to kneel, but there was no time for that now. She flung herself at Cinder's back, higher than her own head, her legs thrashing wildly as she forced her body upward, sobbing for breath.

As she clawed, teetering for purchase, a brutal hand seized her ankle. Branwyn shrieked, kicking frantically at Tomlin, as she was pulled down off the ox. She landed in a filthy puddle with a yell, then struggled to get up. Tomlin moved toward her, chuckling.

Beside Branwyn, Cinder bawled as he swung his great head around, catching the man between his horns. His huge shoulders rippled as he flung his head—and Tomlin—to the side. The black-bearded brute sailed into the air, flying clean across the alley. He struck the wall and slid down it, to lie there, unmoving.

Branwyn darted over to feel the man's pulse, reassured to find that he still lived. "Let me up, Cinder," she commanded the ox, tapping his knee with her cattle goad. Ponderously, the big creature knelt, and the girl scrambled up.

Then, grunting in concern, Cinder sniffed the fallen man anxiously. After a second, the ox began licking the black-whiskered face.

"By the Sword Arm of Karthen the Fair," said a voice. "I rushed out here to see if you needed help, but I guess you don't. Not with *that* monster fighting for you, mistress. I swear, I never saw anything like it!"

Lorin the horse trader stepped out of the shadows.

Branwyn leaned over to pat the ox. "Good Cinder. Thank you, baby. You'd better stop licking him, or he'll not have a face left on the morrow when he wakes up." She glanced over at Lorin. "Their tongues are as rough as any cat's," she explained, and saw the white flash of his teeth as he grinned.

"I know," he replied. "That ruffian deserves worse than a flayed face if he hurt you. Did he?"

"No, I'm all right." Branwyn gathered her cloak around her, remembering suddenly the scene in the tavern. "I'm sorry I tried to hit you . . . and my thanks for trying to help. I'd better be getting on home."

Lorin walked over to gaze up at her in the rain. "I want to beg pardon for what I said in there. I should have known just to look at you that you weren't . . ." He cleared his throat delicately. "But I don't understand why you . . . I mean . . ."

"It's a long story," Branwyn told him, feeling her face grow hot despite the cold rain.

"Are you in some kind of trouble? Perhaps I can help."

Branwyn gazed down at him for a long moment as the rain spattered onto his upturned face. Finally she nodded, then held out her hand. "Very well. Come on up."

They did not speak during the ride; Branwyn concentrated on guiding Cinder through the wet streets, then down the muddy back road, and Lorin sat behind her, head huddled into a fold of her cloak. She wondered if the man regretted his impulse to help her, but the idea of talking to anyone—even a cheating horse trader—about her dilemma brought such relief

that she did not turn and invite him to climb down. No one in all Ravensmere had dared offer her even sympathy in her plight . . . the witches were still too feared.

Cinder finally stopped before a dark, slate-roofed stone cottage. The little house nestled behind a clump of trees, making it invisible from the main road, even in daylight. A flash of lightning revealed fenced meadows stretching behind the house and outbuildings. "Get off here, Trader," Branwyn directed. "I'll take my ox on to the stable. The door's open, and there's a lamp ready for lighting on the table to your right as you go in. Have you a striker?"

"Yes."

When Branwyn returned from the barn minutes later, she found the lamp lit, and Lorin crouched on his heels before a snapping fire that was rapidly spreading in the huge fireplace. "That was fast work," she said, hanging up her cloak. She went into her small bedroom to change her dress, then came out to stand beside him, warming herself before the hearth.

Branwyn frowned when she saw the puddle of water growing beneath him from his soaked clothes. "You're wet through! You should have at least taken your cloak before you bolted out to go a-rescuing!"

He climbed to his feet, regarding his dripping jerkin and breeches ruefully. "You have the right of it, Mistress Branwyn, but when I saw that black-bearded brute follow you, I forgot the rain, in truth."

"Well, let's see." Branwyn went into the bigger bedroom, the one that had been her parents'. "Here you go," she called, handing him a shirt and a pair of trousers. "I sold everything else, but I couldn't bear to part with Dad's work clothes. Put these on until your own things dry."

Minutes later Lorin emerged from the bedroom, looking much abashed, holding up the waistband of the pants with both hands. "I forgot you said your father was Sulcar," he said, shaking his head. "They're a tall, brawny lot, aren't they?"

Branwyn giggled as she spread her long hair over her shoulders to dry. "You probably needn't have bothered with the breeches," she said. "The shirt would no doubt cover you decently enough!"

His rueful laughter mingled with hers. "Do you have a rope to serve as belt?"

Minutes later, a hemp cord holding the sagging trousers around his slender waist, Lorin sat before the fire, sipping a mug of tea and looking about him at the whitewashed walls with their smoke-darkened beams, the raised stone hearth with the black cat curled up asleep, the caned chairs, and the colorful quilt padding the seat of the hand-carved oak chest. Herbs hung in bunches from the beams in the small kitchen, their sharp, spicy scents warring with the smell of wet homespun and earth. "I like your cottage, Mistress Branwyn. Reminds me of the place I grew up in."

"A farm?"

"Oh, yes. I was the eldest of six, and I learned to feed the stock and scythe the wheat before I could recognize gold from brass."

"Why did you leave?" Branwyn sat down on the hearthstones, trying to draw him out. Now that he was actually here, she found herself with a strange desire to postpone telling him about her dilemma . . . she wanted to know him better, before she confided in him. After all, what if he laughed at her? She didn't think he would, but still . . .

Lorin hesitated for a moment before replying, and Branwyn knew that he was not the sort of man to speak easily about things close to his heart. "Two reasons," he told her finally, a strange mixture of wistful longing and contempt shadowing his handsome features for a moment. "I wanted to see the world, and I wanted to control my own destiny.

"For my folks, the world consisted of their few acres and naught else, and they were forever at the mercy of the weather, or the weevils, or the whims of those in power. I had no mind to live my life grubbing in the fields all day with my head cocked over my shoulder, just waiting for someone with authority to appear and take whatever of mine they pleased."

He leaned over to nudge his tall leather riding boots away from the fire so they would dry without cracking. "I'd always had some skill at riding and tending horses, so I joined a traveling horse trader who came through one spring, and I never went back."

"How old were you then?"

"Fifteen." He looked down, picking at a loose thread in the hem of the old shirt. "I've wondered often how they all fared, but"—he shrugged—"somehow my wanderings have never taken me back to the village of Torview."

"Are you afraid to go back again?"

He gave her a hard, quick glance, startled out of his studied indifference. "Afraid? Of course not! Why do you say that?"

"Farming gets into one's blood," she said quietly, pouring more tea. "Mayhap you miss it, but won't admit that to yourself. If you went back, you might find yourself wanting to stay."

Lorin shook his head in a quick, dismissive manner, then had to push his damp black hair out of his eyes. "Not me. I like roving."

"But don't you get tired of never having a place to call your own? It seems to me that even traveling might lose its lure, given enough of it. Haven't you ever wanted to build something, make some kind of dream come true?" Branwyn gazed intently into his gray eyes.

He smiled at her, a crooked smile that held genuine warmth, no mockery. "A dream? Well, yes . . . but I've never spoken of it to anyone."

Branwyn said nothing, only waited, listening.

"I'd like to breed a new kind of horse, one combining the beauty of the small southern stock, the size and strength of the tall northern breed, and the speed and endurance of the horses from the fens of Tor. I have some southern mares, and a northern stallion, but horses of the Torgian breed are rare, and expensive. There was a man with a fine Torgian stud at the horse fair today, but he wanted twice what I could offer. But someday, perhaps . . ." He shrugged, then shook his head wonderingly. "You are amazingly easy to talk to, mistress."

"I enjoy listening to people talk about dreams. I have"—*had*, a jeering inner voice reminded her—"a few of my own."

"But enough of me. I came here to help you." He patted the seat beside him and she sat down. "You inherited this place from your parents?"

Branwyn nodded, then quickly explained how she had hired out to earn enough to keep the farm, how she had nearly saved

enough money to work it again, and how Squire Barkas had generously given her the orphaned calves she'd raised throughout the years, so that now she had the beginnings of a small herd of her own. "And folk don't know how I do it," she concluded proudly, "but they say the milk, cream, and cheese from my cows is the sweetest and best they've ever tasted. If I could just stay on here, I know I could do well and be happy!" Her fists clenched against the faded homespun of the old housegown she'd put on in place of her wet dress.

"I assume that brings us to why you were out at the Silver Spur tonight. What did you hope to gain there?"

Branwyn shrugged. "I thought I made that perfectly clear. I came to find a man to bed tonight, and I picked you."

Lorin choked on his tea. "You picked—why *me*?" he sputtered, his face reddening, whether from embarrassment or from the tea that had gone down the wrong pipe Branwyn wasn't sure.

"Because you were the best of the lot in there," she said calmly. "I'm only too aware of the results of poor breeding, and if I had to take the chance of bearing a child from the night's bedding, I wanted it to have the best sire possible. No cast-eye or lackwit for me! Your eyes were clear, you appear to be in good health, and it was obvious to me that, however shaky your honor when it came to dicing, your wits are sharp enough."

He gazed at her with unconcealed dismay, then chuckled halfheartedly. "Well, I suppose I should feel flattered, but I don't. Especially after that slur on my honor. You mean you wanted a man to bed just for a night, and not after? Why?"

Branwyn sighed. "Because of the witches of Estcarp."

She saw Lorin's unwilling start and the look of horror he wasn't quick enough to hide. "Oh, yes, whatever you've heard, I can tell you that the real thing is worse. Just to stand near one of them made me tremble—I could feel the Power emanating from her! It gave me chills. She came through Ravensmere with her escort three days ago, on one of their Searches. I'm nearly eighteen, and have never been tested, because I take after my father in my looks."

Branwyn loosened a tangle in her hair, then began brushing out the heavy mass as she continued: "I suppose they never before guessed I might have the Talent, because I don't look at

all like the Old Race. My hair is auburn, my eyes are green, my face is round—nothing could be further from the way they look. From the way *you* look,” she said, studying his features in the firelight. She wondered why they seemed faintly familiar, when she was certain she had never seen him before . . . “One would expect the Talent more from you, if you weren’t male,” she added.

Lorin’s eyes were hooded, his expression bland. “Yes, of course. But everyone knows men can’t have the Power. Go on with your tale, pray.”

“Well, since the Turning—you’ve heard of the Turning, haven’t you?” she asked.

“You mean when the witches combined their Power to shake the border mountains to keep Duke Pagar from invading? Of course, that’s an old story by now. It happened when I was a babe in my cradle.”

“Well, you’ve been traveling in far lands, so you may not know that the witches still haven’t regained their former strength. Many of them died or lost their Power that night, and in recent years, they’ve been combing the country for girl children with any spark of the Talent. So it was that, when the witch came through with her mounted guards this past time, I was one of those summoned to lay finger upon her Jewel of Power.”

Lorin was listening intently, his face still void of any expression, but Branwyn sensed that her story, while it had shocked him, came as no surprise. “The moment I touched the stone, it began to glow softly, changing from a plain gray rock to a thing of shining beauty. The witch took down my name, telling me that I have a touch of the Talent, and that I had three days to settle my affairs here in Ravensmere, before I must travel with her back to Es City.”

“And you don’t want to go,” Lorin finished for her.

“I hate the idea!” Branwyn burst out. “I’ve worked so hard here to make a place for myself, and to see it all plucked away—well, it’s just cruel! I don’t want to be a witch! I’ve always thought that someday I’d like to wed, have children. And there are my cows—I’ve raised them all from the moment they were born, and they depend on me!”

"So what does all this have to do with finding me in the Silver Spur?"

Branwyn pulled her hair over her shoulder and began braiding it into a loose rope, not meeting his eyes. "Everyone knows that if a witch lies with a man, she loses her Power. Then the witches wouldn't want me anymore."

Lorin leaned back in his chair, the firelight throwing the angles of his face into sharp-chiseled relief. His eyes were still half-closed, their expression unreadable. "What about the Lady Jaelithe? She wed Lord Simon Tregarth, their union was fruitful, and yet she still retains her Power."

"That's what folk say, but don't forget that they also say Lord Simon is an outlander with his own brand of Power, from some distant land—some even say from another world altogether! Mayhap the Lady Jaelithe's feat is a result of that." Branwyn shrugged, rising to her feet to pace up and down the well-swept stone floor. "Maybe it wasn't such a clever notion, but it was the only thing I could think of."

"And now?" he looked up at her. "What will you do now?"

"Go with the witch tomorrow afternoon," she said miserably, then raised her eyes to his. "Unless you would consider, uh . . ." Her voice died away as her gaze dropped. She stood smoothing her skirt with shaky fingers, blushing hotly.

Lorin thumped his mug down on the hearth with a muffled curse. "No, I won't. I'm not sure I even . . . could . . . knowing I'd been chosen with no more warmth than I'd select a stallion for one of my mares. And there's something else you should know, my dear Branwyn. All those old grandsire tales about the Power are naught more than the same stuff you rake out of Cinder's stall each morning! It's likely true enough that a woman who is taken by force is so shocked and brutalized that her Power departs, but when a man and woman lie down together with love, or at least liking, such is not the case! I know."

Her green eyes were puzzled as they met his. "How could you possibly know that?"

"Because *I* have a touch of the Talent myself!" he burst out. "It runs in my family. My two younger sisters had it, too. The three of us lived in well-justified fear that we'd be discovered."

Before the witches took Betha and Jennis, my sisters warned me never to reveal that I had it, lest I be persecuted by those thrice-cursed bitches who rule in Es City! I've never admitted *this* to a living soul, either, and I'm damned if I know why I'm telling you now, but it's true!"

Lorin stood up abruptly, then had to hitch awkwardly at his sagging trousers to keep them from skidding down around his shanks, but somehow Branwyn felt no desire to laugh. The horse trader's eyes blazed with a strange intensity, and something uncanny thickened and curdled the air around him. The girl had a sudden, sharp memory of the witch who had tested her . . . the woman had carried the same aura of dangerous, waiting Power. She shivered.

Lorin's voice softened as he noticed her fear. "I've always been able to whisper wild horses tame, diagnose lameness just by looking into an afflicted animal's eyes, control mounts with neither rein nor spur—inspire even the shoddiest animal to show to its best advantage while I'm astride it." He grinned wryly. "I can also tell you what the weather will be like on any morrow, and start fires without a striker . . . as I did tonight." He gestured at her hearth. "But most of my Talent, such as it is, is linked to horses, which should be nothing new to you. It's my guess you've been doing similar things with your cattle without realizing it for years."

"A *man* with the Power?" Branwyn whispered, dazed. Her mind was rocked by this admission, so opposite to what she'd grown up believing.

"Yes, and there are enough women who could testify to that to let me know that you won't lose your Power by bedding someone any more than I did."

Branwyn sank down onto a bench. "Oh . . . and to think that I almost—" She began to tremble, remembering.

He came over to kneel before her, take her hands in his. "It's all right. Nothing happened. Here, I'll get you some tea."

She was nearly sobbing with anger and frustration. "I don't want any tea. When I think what I nearly did, in desperation, it makes me hate the witches all the more! That horrible Tomlin! I feel st-stupid," she finished, her teeth beginning to chatter.

"You're just worn out with worry, and feeling the reaction

from tonight's danger," he said, urging her up out of her seat. "Come on, lie down, and you'll feel better."

"You'd better stay here tonight," Branwyn said as she stretched out on her parents' bed and he pulled the quilt over her. "You can sleep in the little bedroom."

"It *is* late," he admitted, "and my clothes and boots are still wet. Not to mention that I couldn't find my way back to town in the dark."

Branwyn grinned wryly as she settled her head against the pillow. "I can't get lost. I suppose that's part of my Talent."

"I suppose," he said soothingly, brushing her hair away from her face as though she were one of his mares who had been frightened.

"Lorin," she said suddenly, urgently, "do something for me. There's a loose stone on the right side of the hearth. Pry it up and bring what's beneath it to me."

He gave her a wondering glance, but obediently left the room. He was back in a moment with a small, heavy bag. "Silver," he said, peering inside.

"My savings," she told him. "I want you to have it. I won't need it where I am going tomorrow. Buy that Torgian stallion you saw. I want you to have your dream. At least that way one of us will."

"I couldn't!" he protested, shoving the bag beneath her pillow. "No, Branwyn. Rest now. Get some sleep."

"Please," she whispered, sitting up to press the bag into his hand. "I want you to have it, Lorin. Otherwise the witch will probably take it, for the treasuries in Es City."

"They would, wouldn't they," he murmured bitterly. "Well, all right. Thank you. Now lie down again, and good night." He stood up to blow out the candle, and then the room was lit only by the faint glow from the fireplace.

"Will you be here tomorrow?" Branwyn whispered as he turned to leave.

He sat back down beside her, shaking his head. "Tomorrow will be a fine sunny day, and I'll be gone before dawn, so this is good-bye, Branwyn."

"I know," she whispered, searching out his features in the dimness. She could barely make out the planes of his face,

edged by the fireglow. The dark lock of hair had fallen down over his brow again, and she reached up to push it back, her fingers trailing blindly down his cheek. "You're a kind man, Lorin, even if you don't let yourself realize it."

He cleared his throat. "I'd better leave. If you need me, call."

But before he could stand up, her hand came out to close on his forearm. "No," she whispered, and, when he turned back to her, repeated it. "No, don't go. Stay with me, even if just for tonight. For no other reason than that I want you to stay, Lorin. After tonight, I'll be alone for the rest of my life. I want to be able to remember you, when I'm alone."

He hesitated for many heartbeats. "But, Branwyn . . ."

"Stay."

Her arms came up to encircle him, draw him down. Their mouths met in a long kiss that was the antithesis of the chill, wet loneliness outside, and after that, Lorin argued no more, but stayed.

Branwyn awoke before dawn, as she did every day. She lay facing the window, seeing darkness still outside. The rain had stopped, as Lorin had promised. *Lorin . . .*

She lay there, thinking of him, of their hours together, loathe to roll over and start the day. For as soon as she turned over, she knew she would find the other side of the bed empty, naught but a dent in the pillow where his dark head had rested; but until she did that, she could pretend that he was still there, beside her, and that everything would be all right.

If only it could be so, she mused, remembering the warmth of his lean, muscled body, his gentle, knowing hands. *But such things don't happen, only in love ballads sung by songsmiths*, her rational mind argued, mocking her fantasies. *But it happened to my parents!* Branwyn thought defiantly. *They loved each other, they did!*

Tears threatened her eyes, and she fiercely blinked them away. *You have too much to do today to lie here abed, dreaming of things that can never be. Get up!* Resolutely, she turned over and sat up, forcing herself to touch the other pillow.

The opposite side of the bed was empty, of course.

Branwyn went out to milk her cows, talking to each of them as she did so, soft words of farewell, of well-wishing. When she was finished storing the pails of milk in the cold cellar, the sun had risen, so she turned each animal out to pasture with a last pat. After cleaning the stalls, she swept the aisle, making sure the whole byre was neat and clean. Squire Barkas would be coming by later to take charge of her place, and Branwyn wanted to leave everything in order.

She let the chickens out of the henhouse, scattering feed for them. Then she went into the cottage and made the bed, fed Jet, the cat, then swept and dusted the house. She had no appetite for breakfast, but forced herself to eat, remembering she would be traveling all day.

Finally, chores done, she stripped and washed, putting on her best dress, which had dried overnight. After putting a change of clothing into one of her father's old sea bags, she was ready. She packed nothing of a personal nature—the witch had warned her that ties to her old life were not permitted.

When everything was done, Branwyn sat on the edge of her swept and tidy hearth, trying vainly to think of other chores she could do to fill the hours until the witch arrived. While she'd been busy, she had been able to focus her mind on the task at hand, pushing away the grief. Now, with nothing left to do, it threatened to overwhelm her. Her throat tightened and her eyes filled.

Outside, in the back pasture, Cinder lowed mournfully. Branwyn wiped away her tears. *What ails him? Could he be hurt?*

Catching up the cattle goad she used to signal and guide her beasts, Branwyn went out. She stood for a moment on the front step, shading her eyes against the morning sun, looking down the lane that led through the trees to the road. There was no sign of the witch, but she was not due until after noon.

Cinder bawled again, and Branwyn hurried around the house, past the neat rows of her vegetable garden, back to the cow pasture. The ox was standing against the rails of the gate, as close to the cottage as possible. When he saw Branwyn coming, he bawled again, butting his enormous head against the

fence. "Poor Cinder," she whispered, "you know something's wrong, don't you?"

She patted his head, then scrambled up onto the top rail to administer his favorite caress, using the pointed goad to gently scratch the big hump of muscle behind his neck. Soon Cinder stood, eyes half-closed in ecstasy, sighing with pleasure.

Perhaps I can take this with me, Branwyn thought, looking down at the cattle goad. *It holds so many memories for me, but to anyone else, it would seem naught but a length of rowan wood with a pointed end. Perhaps the witch won't—*

Her thoughts broke off as she stared down at the goad, suddenly remembering a piece of old, half-heard lore. *Rowan . . . what did they always say about rowan? That it is a bane against all magic, light or dark!*

A kernel of an idea began nibbling at the fringes of Branwyn's mind. She was still staring at the cattle goad, bemused, when she heard a hail from the front of the cottage. Her heart seemed to halt its beating. *She's come early! Blessed Gunnora, help me!*

Grasping the goad firmly, the girl ran back up the short lane from the pasture and around the house to find the witch just dismounting from her horse. Three men-at-arms sat at attention back near the end of the lane. One of them held a placid-looking gelding on a leading rein.

Branwyn curtsied. "Good morning, lady."

"Are you ready?" The witch was a woman in her mid-twenties, slightly above middle height, slender, with well-cut features and beautiful dark gray eyes. Branwyn had forgotten she was so young—perhaps because there was no youth left in those eyes. She wore a divided gray riding robe and traveling cloak, with the Jewel of her Order on a silver chain around her neck.

Branwyn curtsied again, her hand holding the rowan stick down amidst the folds of her dress. "I am ready, lady, but mayhap you no longer want me," she said, her voice pitched for the ears of the witch alone.

"What do you mean?" The woman's eyes flashed, and Branwyn could feel the Power coiled within her, waiting.

The girl took a deep breath, trying not to blush. "Lady, I have lain with a man since last we met. Everyone knows that a woman who does so loses her Power."

Anger raced across the witch's features, then was replaced by such coldness that Branwyn shivered, despite the bright sunlight. "Indeed," said the witch. "And why would you do such a thing?"

Before last night, Branwyn might have dared to answer, "because I did not want to go with you," but now she found herself responding, with equal truth, "Because I loved him, and I knew there would be no other chance."

The witch's lips thinned contemptuously, but she did not speak. "So you see, lady," Branwyn continued breathlessly, "I am no longer fit to become one of you. I might even be with child," she added as the thought struck her for the first time.

"Think you we are fools?" the witch spat. "Do you imagine, girl, that you are the only one to try such desperate measures to thwart us? The Jewel will tell me if you still hold Power within you. Touch it!"

Branwyn hesitated, eyeing the stone.

The witch thrust her Jewel of Power at the girl. "Now!"

The fingernails of her right hand digging into the wood of the rowan stick, Branwyn put out the forefinger of her left hand, laying it upon the dead, gray stone.

No Power. Quench the fire, don't spark! the girl thought desperately, feeling sweat bead her forehead. *No Power, none! Good rowan, help me!*

Beneath her touch the stone glimmered, glowed faintly, then, as Branwyn and the witch watched, the inner fire died out, leaving the Jewel gray and cold as yesterday's ash.

Branwyn pulled her hand away. *I did it! I kept the Jewel from glowing!* The effort of will she had expended had drained her—she had to use the last of her strength not to stagger with exhaustion. "See, my lady?"

"I see," the witch said, her voice colder than any winter's blast. "I see that you have more Power than I thought, girl. It is no small accomplishment to extinguish the fire in a Jewel of Power." Her hand came up to catch the girl's chin, hold it past any effort Branwyn could make to break free. "I also see that you are not lying about bedding a man, but that makes no difference. If the Power still resides in you, we care naught for your maidenhood. And if you should be with child, we will deal with *that*, too. Now fetch your things."

A small cry of dismay came from Branwyn's lips, but she forced herself to walk calmly as she went to obey. As she picked up her bag, she took a last look around her home, then, squaring her shoulders, went back outside, latching the door behind her.

The witch beckoned her toward the man-at-arms holding the palfrey. But even as Branwyn raised her foot to the stirrup, she paused, hearing trotting hoofbeats—many hoofbeats!

The girl lowered her foot back to the ground, staring, puzzled, at the lane leading to the road. Two mounted figures came into sight, each leading three riderless horses.

Branwyn shielded her eyes with her palm, squinting in the bright sunlight. *Who can that be?* Her dazzled eyes made out a youth with shaggy brown hair, perched atop a tall, heavy-boned, snorting stallion. The other was riding a dun-colored stallion, and he had black hair and a crooked grin—

"*Lorin!*" Branwyn gasped. She rubbed her eyes, wondering if the witch had put her under some kind of spell—was this an hallucination of some kind?

"Branwyn!" shouted her supposed illusion, then swore lamentably as his stallion nipped at one of the led mares.

"*Lorin!*" Branwyn cried, her immobility broken. She raced toward him, laughing and weeping at the same moment, completely forgetting the witch and her men-at-arms. "You came back!"

"Of course I did," he said testily. "I swear, you give me no credit at all. Where can we put the mares?"

"In here," Branwyn said, dropping the rails on the eastern pasture gate. The small, delicate-boned horses trotted inside and began cropping the grass within hungrily.

"Gareth"—Lorin swung off the dun-colored stallion and handed the reins to the lad—"put the stallions up in the barn for now."

Branwyn looked at Lorin's horse closely for the first time, then grinned excitedly. "The Torgian! You bought him!"

He grabbed her hands and exultantly swung her around, then stopped, his hands on her shoulders. "Thanks to you, my lady. Are you willing to make a partnership of it? My horses and your cows? We work the farm together?"

"A partnership?" Branwyn wasn't quite sure what he meant. And for the first time, she remembered the witch. "But I have to leave. The witch is already here."

"You're not going anywhere," he said.

"You came back to help me," she murmured, still barely able to believe it. "Why?"

"That should be obvious," he told her, his dark eyes dancing with all the mockery she remembered. "Or do you value yourself so lightly, my lady? Your Power isn't confined to cows, Branwyn. You've managed to ensorcel my heart completely."

Bending down, he brushed her mouth with a kiss that, brief as it was, made her lean against him. Then he slipped an arm around her, and together they turned to face the witch, who had walked down the lane to confront them. "This woman and I are handfasted," he declared. "We will be wed as soon as we can have the local squire witness our troth. She stays with—"

Lorin broke off, stiffening as he gazed fully at the witch, who was also staring at him, her eyes wide with shock.

"Betha!" he whispered. "It's you!"

Even as he spoke, the witch drew herself up, the coldness sweeping back down over her features, leaving them as stony as her Jewel. "This woman has been selected," she told him. "She must come with me. Now."

Lorin shook his head dazedly. "I never thought to see you again. That day that they carried you and Jennis away, I thought they had taken my heart with them. I left home myself less than a month later. I couldn't bear to stay there without you. How is Jennis? Is she well?"

"Jennis is dead," the witch told him, expressionlessly. "The training is difficult, and often dangerous. She did not survive the novitiate."

"Jennis . . . dead . . ." His features crumpled. "No . . ."

"Come, girl," the witch told Branwyn. "Get on the horse."

"But—" Lorin recovered himself with an effort. "Didn't you hear me, Betha? Branwyn is my betrothed. I love her. We will be wed—"

The witch ignored him. "Get on the horse, girl, or I'll have you carried."

"No!" Lorin pushed between them. "What's happened to

you, Betha? Don't you remember what it was like, that day they took you and Jennis? Would you do the same thing to me, now, as they did to you? Sister"—he reached out to touch her arm, imploringly—"listen to me! Are you dead, too? Don't do this!"

Something flickered behind the witch's eyes. "I have no family anymore. I am sworn. I have a duty to bring the girl with me."

"Betha . . ." Lorin's voice was still soft, but his expression was now as unyielding as the witch's. "I won't let you take her. I'll fight until your men slay me, if it needs must be that way. Don't do this, I beg you."

The witch stood staring at him, for a time measured only by the frightened thumps of Branwyn's heart. Finally the woman stirred. "My Jewel *did* die," she murmured, as if to herself. "Mayhap her Power *has* left her . . . 'twould not be the first time . . ."

"Oh, please!" Branwyn begged softly. "My Power is only with cattle—it would do you little good. Please, lady!"

The witch turned to her, and for the first time a real person gazed out of those beautiful eyes, so like Lorin's. "Very well," she said, finally. "But there will be a price."

Branwyn turned to Lorin, saw fear in his expression that echoed her own. She clutched his arm, almost ready to tell him no, it could not be worth it, but he was already saying, "Whatever it is, we agree, Betha. Name it."

That spark of humanity in the witch's eyes increased, until Branwyn almost thought she saw tears there. "Lorin, I charge you to go home, see to our parents' welfare. I am permitted no contact with them, though they receive money each year from the Council."

"I swear," Lorin said, relief filling his voice. "Torview is only a few days' journey, and I was planning to see them soon. I swear they will never want for aught."

The witch nodded. "Then farewell, Lorin. We will never meet again."

"Fare *you* well, dearest sister," Lorin said, his arm tightening about Branwyn's waist. "I will thank you all my days."

The witch turned and walked away without a backward

glance, mounted, beckoned to her men-at-arms, then they clattered out of sight.

They watched her go, then when the lane was empty, turned to each other. "You came back for me," Branwyn whispered, and then added irrelevantly, "you have the most beautiful eyes."

He chuckled, drawing her close. "Shall we travel to see my parents as soon as we've visited the squire?" he asked. "I must keep my promise to Betha."

"Who will watch the stock?"

"My stable lad, Gareth. He grew up on a farm, too."

Branwyn's heart felt so light she fancied giddily that it might rise straight up, pulling her into the air. "Very well," she agreed. "We'll leave the day after tomorrow, then."

"I can hardly wait to see my people again. It's been more than ten years. And they'll be twice as surprised to see me come home with a bride!" His eyes began to twinkle with the old mocking glint. "Wait till I tell them how we met . . . that you picked me up in a tavern. What a story that will make! Wait till our children are old enough to hear it!"

Branwyn's mouth dropped open in mock horror. "You wouldn't *dare!*"

Lorin winked over at the youth, who had come from stabling the stallions to join them. "Wouldn't I? Gareth, this is your new mistress, my lady Branwyn. Would you like to hear the story of how we met? It was a dark and stormy night . . ."