

Swallowing Darkness

Laurell K. Hamilton

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Chapter 1

HOSPITALS ARE WHERE PEOPLE GO TO BE SAVED, BUT the doctors can only patch you up, put you back together. They can't undo the damage. They can't make it so you didn't wake up in the bad place, or change the truth to lies. The nice doctor and the nice woman from the SART, Sexual Assault Response Team, couldn't change that I had indeed been raped. The fact that I couldn't remember it, because my uncle had used a spell for his date-rape drug, didn't change the evidence – the evidence that they'd found in my body when they did the exam and took samples.

You would think being a real live faerie princess would make your life fairy-tale-like, but fairy tales only *end* well. While the story is going on, horrible things happen. Remember Rapunzel? Her prince got his eyes scratched out by the witch, which blinded him. At the end of the story,

Rapunzel's tears magically restored his sight, but that was at the end of the story. Cinderella was little better than a slave. Snow White was actually nearly killed four different times by the evil queen. All anyone remembers is the poisoned apple, but don't forget the huntsman, or the enchanted girdle and the poisoned comb. Pick any fairy tale that's based on older stories, and the heroine of the piece has a miserable, dangerous, nightmarish time of it.

I am Princess Meredith NicEssus, next in line to a high throne of faerie, and I'm in the middle of my story. The happy-ever-after ending, if it's coming at all, seems a very long way away tonight.

I was in a hospital bed, in a nice private room, in a very nice hospital. I was in the maternity ward, because I was pregnant, but not with my crazy uncle's baby. I had been pregnant before he stole me away. Pregnant with the children of men I loved. They'd risked everything to rescue me from Taranis. Now, I was safe. I had one of the greatest warriors that faerie had ever seen at my side: Doyle, once the Queen's Darkness, and now mine. He stood at the window, staring off into the night that was so ruined by the lights from the hospital parking lot that the blackness of his skin and hair was much darker than the night outside. He'd removed the wraparound sunglasses that he almost always wore outside. But

his eyes were as black as the glasses that hid them. The only color in the dim light of the room was the glints from the silver rings that climbed the graceful line of one ear to the point that marked him as not pure blood, not truly high court, but mixed blood, like me. The diamonds in his earlobe sparkled in the light as he turned his head, as if he'd felt me staring at him. He probably had. He had been the queen's assassin a thousand years before I was born.

His ankle-length hair moved like a black cloak as he came toward me. He was wearing green hospital scrubs that he'd been loaned. They had replaced the blanket from the ambulance that had brought us here. He'd entered the golden court, to rescue me, in the form of a large black dog. When he shape-shifted he lost everything, clothes, weapons, but strangely never the piercings. The many earrings and the nipple piercing survived his return to human form, maybe because they were part of him.

He came to stand beside the bed, and take my hand – the one that didn't have the intravenous drip in it, which was helping hydrate me, and get me over the shock I'd been in when I had arrived. If I hadn't been with child, they'd have probably given me more medicine. For once I wouldn't have minded stronger drugs, something to make me forget. Not just what my uncle, Taranis, had done, but also the loss of Frost.

I gripped Doyle's hand, my hand so small and pale in his large, dark one. But there should have been another beside him, beside me. Frost, our Killing Frost, was gone. Not dead, not exactly, but lost to us. Doyle could shapeshift to several forms at will and come back to his true form. Frost had had no ability to shape-shift, but when wild magic had filled the estate where we'd been living in Los Angeles, it had changed him. He had become a white stag, and run out the doors that had appeared into a piece of faerie that had never existed before the magic came.

The lands of faerie were growing, instead of shrinking, for the first time in centuries. I, a noble of the high courts, was with child, twins. I was the last child of faerie nobility to be born. We were dying as a people, but maybe not. Maybe we were going to regain our power, but what use to me was power? What use to me was the return of faerie, and wild magic? What use was any of it, if Frost was an animal with an animal's mind?

The thought that I would bear his child and he would neither know nor understand made my chest tight. I gripped Doyle's hand, but couldn't meet his eyes. I wasn't sure what he would see there. I wasn't sure what I was feeling anymore. I loved Doyle, I did, but I loved Frost, too. The thought that they would both be fathers had been a joyous one.

He spoke in his deep, deep voice, as if

molasses, and other, thick, sweet things, could be words, but what he said wasn't sweet. 'I will kill Taranis for you.'

I shook my head. 'No, you will not.' I had thought about it, because I had known that Doyle would do just what he'd said. If I asked, he would try to kill Taranis, and he might succeed. But I could not allow my lover and future king to assassinate the King of Light and Illusion, the king of our enemy court. We were not at war, and even those among the Seelie Court who thought Taranis was mad or even evil would not be able to overlook an assassination. A duel, maybe, but not an assassination. Doyle was within his rights to challenge the king to a duel. I'd thought about that, too. I'd half liked that idea, but I'd seen what Taranis could do with his hand of power. His hand of light could char flesh, and had nearly killed Doyle once before.

I had let go of any thought of vengeance at Doyle's hand when I weighed it against the thought of losing him too.

'I am the captain of your guard, and I could avenge my honor and yours for that reason alone.'

'You mean a duel,' I said.

'Yes. He does not deserve a chance to defend himself, but if I assassinate him, it will be war between the courts, and we cannot afford that.'

'No,' I said, 'we can't.' I looked up at him then.

He touched my face with his free hand. 'Your eyes glow in the dark with a light of their own, Meredith. Green and gold circles of light in your face. Your emotions betray you.'

'I want him dead, yes, but I won't destroy all of faerie for it. I won't get us all kicked out of the United States for my honor. The treaty that let our people come here three hundred years ago stated only two things that would get us kicked out. The courts can't make war on American soil, and we can't allow humans to worship us as deities.'

'I was at the signing of the treaty, Meredith. I know what it said.'

I smiled at him, and it seemed strange that I could still smile. The thought made the smile wilt a little around the edges, but I guess it was a good sign. 'You remember the Magna Carta.'

'That was a human thing, and had little to do with us.'

I squeezed his hand. 'I was making a point, Doyle.'

He smiled, and nodded. 'My emotions make me slow.'

'Me, too,' I said.

The door behind him opened. There were two men in the doorway, one tall and one short. Sholto, King of the sluagh, Lord of that Which Passes Between, was as tall as Doyle, and had long, straight hair that fell toward his ankles, but the color was white-blond, and his skin was like

mine, moonlight pale. Sholto's eyes were three colors of yellow and gold, as if autumn leaves from three different trees had been melted down to color his eyes, then everything had been edged in gold. The sidhe always have the prettiest eyes. He was as fair of face as any at the courts, except for my lost Frost. The body that showed under the T-shirt and jeans he'd worn as part of his disguise when he came to save me seemed to cling to a body as lovely as the face, but I knew that at least part of it was illusion. Starting at his upper ribs, Sholto had extra bits, tentacles, because, though his mother had been high-court nobility, his father had been one of the night-flyers, part of the sluagh, and the last wild hunt of faerie. Well, the last wild hunt until the wild magic had returned. Now, things of legend were returning, and Goddess alone knew what was real again, and what was still to return.

Until he had a coat or jacket thick enough to hide the extra bits, he would use magic, glamour, to hide the extras. No reason to scare the nurses. It was his lifetime of having to hide his differences that had made him good enough at illusion to risk coming to my rescue. You do not go lightly against the King of Light and Illusion with illusion as your only shield.

He smiled at me, and it was a smile I had never seen on Sholto's face until the moment at the ambulance when he had held my hand, and told

me he knew he would be a father. The news seemed to have softened some harshness that had always been there in his handsome body. He seemed the proverbial new man, as he walked toward us.

Rhys was not smiling. At 5'6", he was the shortest full-blooded sidhe I'd ever met. His skin was moonlight pale, like Sholto's, like mine, like Frost's. Rhys had removed the fake beard and mustache he'd worn inside the faerie mound. He'd worked at the detective agency in L.A. with me, and he'd loved disguises. He was good at them, too, better than at illusion. But he'd had enough illusion to hide the fact that he only had one eye. The remaining eye was three circles of blue, as beautiful as any in the court, but where his left eye had once lain was white scar tissue. He usually wore a patch in public, but tonight his face was bare, and I liked that. I wanted to see the faces of my men with nothing hidden tonight.

Doyle moved enough so Sholto could put a chaste kiss against my cheek. Sholto wasn't one of my regular lovers. In fact, we'd only been together once, but as the old saying goes, once is enough. One of the children I carried was part his, but we were new around each other, because in effect we'd only had one date. It had been a hell of a first date, but still, we didn't really know each other yet.

Rhys came to stand at the foot of the bed. His

curly white hair, which fell to his waist, was still back in the ponytail he'd worn to match his own jeans and T-shirt. His face was very solemn. It wasn't like him. Once he'd been Cromm Cruach, and before that he'd been a god of death. He wouldn't tell me who, but I had enough hints to make guesses. He'd told me that Cromm Cruach was god enough; he didn't need more titles.

'Who gets to challenge him to the duel?' Rhys asked.

'Meredith has told me no,' Doyle said.

'Oh, good,' Rhys said. 'I get to do it.'

'No,' I said, 'and I thought you were afraid of Taranis.'

'I was, maybe I still am, but we can't let this go, Merry, we can't.'

'Why? Because your pride is hurt?'

He gave me a look. 'Give me more credit than that.'

'I will challenge him, then,' Sholto said.

'No,' I said. 'No one is to challenge him to a duel, or to kill him in any other way.'

The three men looked at me. Doyle and Rhys knew me well enough to be speculative. They knew I had a plan. Sholto didn't know me that well yet. He was just angry.

'We can't let this insult stand, Princess. He has to pay.'

'I agree,' I said, 'and since he brought in the human lawyers when he charged Rhys, Galen,

and Abeloec with attacking one of his nobles, we use the human law. We get his DNA, and we charge him with my rape.'

Sholto said, 'And what, he will risk jail time? Even if he would allow himself to be put in human jail, it would not be enough punishment for what he has done to you.'

'No, it's not, but it's the best we can do under the law.'

'Human law,' Sholto said.

'Yes, human law,' I said.

'Under our laws,' Doyle said, 'we are within our right to challenge him and slay him.'

'That works for me,' Rhys said.

'I'm the one he raped. I'm the one who is about to be queen, if we can keep our enemies from killing me. I say what Taranis's punishment will be.' My voice grew a little strident at the end, and I had to stop and take a breath, or two.

Doyle's face betrayed nothing. 'You have thought of something, My Princess. You are already planning how this will help our cause.'

'Help our court. For centuries the Unseelie Court, our court, has been painted black in the human world. If we have a public trial accusing the king of the Seelie Court of rape, we will finally convince the humans that we are not the villains of the piece,' I said.

Doyle said, 'Spoken like a queen.'

'Like a politician,' Sholto said, and not like it was a compliment.

I gave him the look he deserved. 'You're a king, too, of your father's people. Would you destroy your entire kingdom for vengeance?'

He looked away, then, and there was that line to his face that showed his temper. But as moody as Sholto was, he didn't hold a candle to Frost. He had been my moody boy.

Rhys came to the bedside. He touched my hand, the one to which the IV needle was taped. 'I would face the king for you, Merry. You know that.'

I took my free hand and held his, and met that one blue-ringed eye. 'I don't want to lose anyone else, Rhys. No more of that.'

'Frost is not dead,' Rhys said.

'He is a white stag, Rhys. Someone told me that he may only keep that shape for a hundred years. I am thirty-three and mortal. I will not see a hundred and thirty-three years. He may return as the Killing Frost, but it will be too late for me.' My eyes burned, my throat grew tight, and my voice squeezed out, 'He will never hold his baby. He will never be a father to it. His babe will be grown before he has hands to hold it with, and a human mouth to speak of love and fatherhood.' I lay back against the pillows and let the tears take me. I held onto Rhys's hand and let myself cry.

Doyle came to stand beside Rhys, and laid his

hand against my face. 'If he had known that you would grieve him most, he would have fought it more.'

I blinked back the tears, and gazed up at that dark face. 'What do you mean?'

'It came to us both in a dream, Meredith. We knew that one of us would be sacrificed for the return of faerie's power. An identical dream on the same night, and we knew.'

'You didn't tell me, either of you,' I said, and there was accusation in my voice now. Better than tears, I supposed.

'What would you have done? When the Gods themselves choose, no one can change that. But it must be a willing sacrifice; the dream was clear on that. If Frost had known it was his heart you held most dear, he would have fought more, and I would have gone for him.'

I shook my head, and moved away from his hand. 'Don't you understand? If it had been you changed into another form, and lost to me, I would weep as much.'

Rhys squeezed my hand. 'Doyle and Frost didn't understand that they were the front-runners, together.'

I jerked free of his hand, and glared up at him, happy to be angry, because it felt better than any other emotion inside me in that moment. 'You're fools, all of you. Don't you understand that I would mourn you all? That there is none of my

inner circle that I would lose, or risk? Do you not all understand that?' I was shouting, and it felt much better than tears.

The door to the room opened again. A nurse appeared, followed by a white-coated doctor whom I'd seen earlier. Dr. Mason was a baby doctor, and one of the best in the state, maybe in the country. This had been explained to me in detail by a lawyer whom my aunt had sent. That she had sent a mortal and not one of our court had been interesting. None of us knew what to make of it, but I felt that she was treating me as she might treat herself if our situations were reversed. She had a tendency to kill the messenger. You can always get another human lawyer, but the immortal of faerie are scarce so she sent me someone whom she could replace. But the lawyer had been very clear that the queen was thrilled at the pregnancy, and would do all she could to make my pregnancy a safe one. That included paying for Dr. Mason.

The doctor frowned at the men. 'I said not to upset her, gentlemen. I meant it.'

The nurse, a heavyset woman with brown hair tucked back in a ponytail, checked the monitors, and bustled around me while the doctor scolded the men.

The doctor wore a wide black headband that looked very stark against her yellow hair. It made it more clear, at least to me, that the color wasn't

her natural shade. She wasn't much taller than me, but she didn't seem short as she came around the bed to face the men. She stood so that she included Rhys and Doyle by the bed, and Sholto, who was still in the corner near the chair, in her frown.

'If you persist in upsetting my patient, you will have to leave the room.'

'We cannot leave her alone, Doctor,' Doyle said in his deep voice.

'I remember the talk, but you seem to have forgotten mine. Did I or did I not tell you that she needed to rest, and under no circumstance be upset?'

They'd had this 'talk' outside the room, because I hadn't heard it. 'Is there something wrong with the babies?' I asked, and now I had fear in my voice. I'd rather have been angry.

'No, Princess Meredith, the babies seem quite' – there was the smallest hesitation – 'healthy.'

'You're hiding something from me,' I said.

The doctor and nurse exchanged a look. It was not a good look. Dr. Mason came to the side of the bed opposite the men. 'I'm simply concerned about you, as I would be for any patient carrying multiples.'

'I'm pregnant, not an invalid, Dr. Mason.' My pulse rate was up, and the machines showed that. I understood why I was hooked up to more machines than normal. If anything went wrong with this pregnancy there would be problems for

the hospital. I was about as high profile as you got, and they were worried. Also, I'd been in shock when they brought me in, with low blood pressure, low everything, skin cold to the touch. They'd wanted to make sure my heart rate and such didn't continue to drop. Now the monitors betrayed my moods.

'Talk to me, Doctor, because the hesitation is scaring me.'

She looked at Doyle, and he gave one small nod. I did not like that at all. 'You told him first?' I said.

'You're not going to let this go, are you?' she asked.

'No,' I said.

'Then perhaps one more ultrasound tonight.'

'I've never been pregnant before, but I know from friends I had in L.A. that ultrasounds aren't that common early in pregnancy. You've done three already. Something is wrong with the babies, isn't there?'

'I swear to you that the twins are fine. As far as I can see on the ultrasound and tell from your blood workup, you're healthy and at the beginning of a normal pregnancy. Multiples can make a pregnancy more challenging for the mother and for the doctor.' She smiled at that last. 'But everything about the twins looks wonderful. I swear.'

'Be careful swearing to me, Doctor. I am a princess of the faerie court, and swearing is too

close to giving your word. You don't want to know what might happen to you if you were forsworn to me.'

'Is that a threat?' she said, drawing herself up to her full height and gripping both ends of the stethoscope around her shoulders.

'No, Doctor, a caution. Magic works around me, sometimes even in the mortal world. I just want you and all the humans who are taking care of me to understand that words you might say casually may have very different consequences when you are near me.'

'So you mean if I said, 'I wish,' it might be taken seriously?'

I smiled. 'Fairies don't really grant wishes, Doctor, at least not the kind in this room.'

She looked a little embarrassed then. 'I didn't mean ...'

'It's all right,' I said, 'but once upon a time giving your word and then breaking it could get you hunted by the wild hunt, or bad luck could befall you. I don't know how much magic has followed me from faerie, and I just don't want anyone else hurt by accident.'

'I heard about the loss of your ... lover. My condolences, though in all honesty I don't understand everything I was told about it.'

'Even we do not understand everything that has happened,' Doyle said. 'Wild magic is called wild for a reason.'