

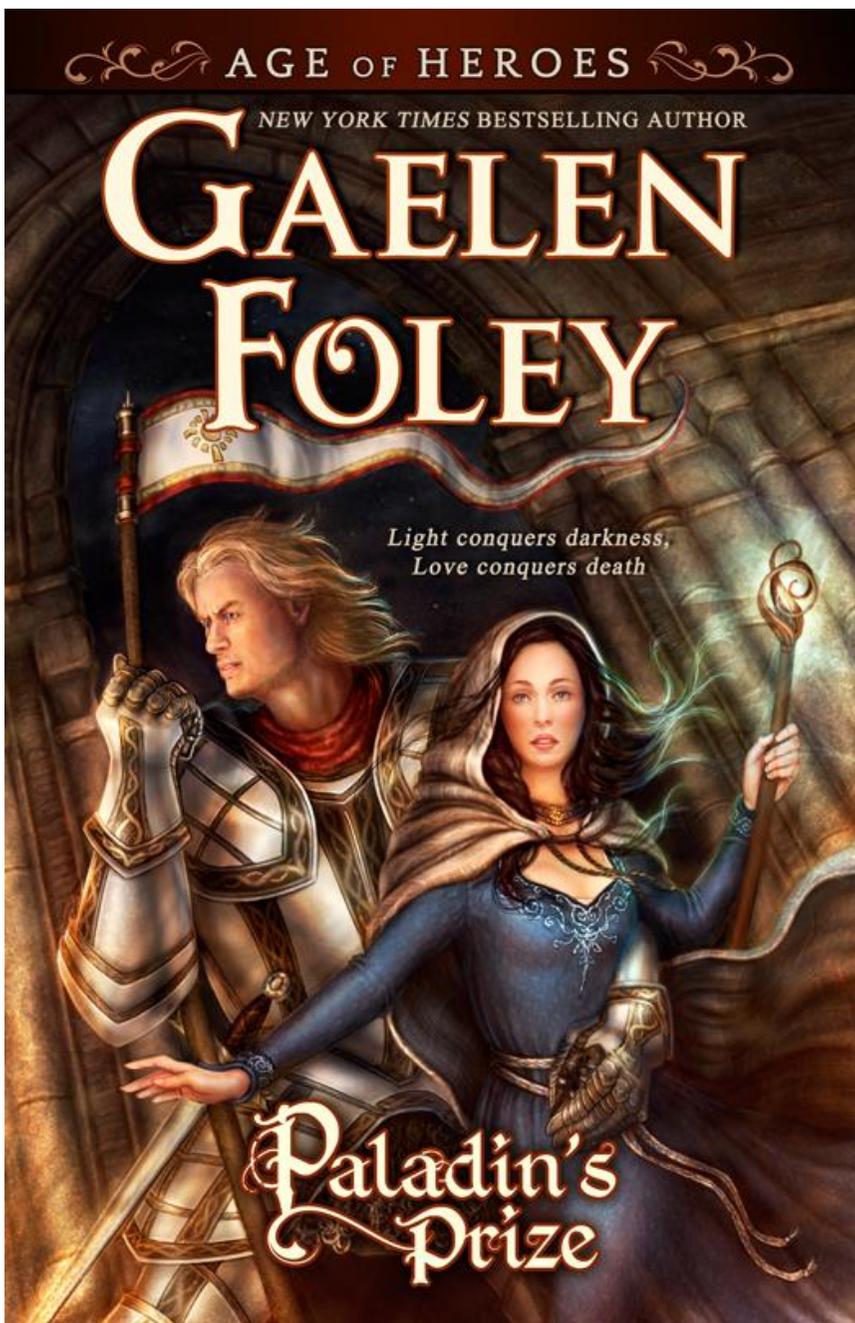
AGE OF HEROES

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# GAELEN FOLEY

*Light conquers darkness,  
Love conquers death*

Paladin's  
Prize



AGE OF HEROES, BOOK 1

# Paladin's Prize

GAELEN FOLEY

*My good blade carves the casques of men,  
My tough lance thrusteth sure,  
My strength is as the strength of ten,  
Because my heart is pure.*

~Alfred, Lord Tennyson, "Sir Galahad"

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*About the Author*

## Chapter 1

# Kiss of Life

The Golden Knight lay dying on the starlit field where he had made his stand alone against the bestial horde. He had wreaked mayhem on the enemy, but had paid a terrible price.

Even now, the thirsty spring ground drank his noble blood like some dark pagan sacrifice to the old gods. Rainless rumbles from the dark sky, however, voiced the indignation of the deity under whose banner the paladin had won so many battles. Ilios, the Father of Lights, however, was not without *other* votaries in the area...

From the moment she had heard the distant clamor of the melee, the young healer had understood her mission and obeyed.

Shouldering her satchel of supplies, she had lifted the loose, wide hood of her gray gown, grasped her walking staff, and left her hermitage atop the mountain.

Twilight had darkened to nightfall while she trekked down through the wind-rippled woods, her tiny fey familiar hovering by her shoulder.

The lady Wrynn du Mere tried not to listen overmuch to the battle sounds echoing up from the farmer's field below as she went. Shouts. Roars. Ugly porcine squeals. The clatter of weaponry.

What would her parents say, she wondered, if they knew she was heading *toward* the danger rather than away from it? A small frisson of worry crept through her. For she knew what probably awaited her down there.

Everyone in Mistwood knew all too well about the Urmugoths rampaging through the countryside this past fortnight.

She was just glad the good-for-nothing king had finally yawned

himself awake enough to send soldiers to deal with the beasts. Finally, somebody had bothered enough about their sleepy northern province to *do* something about the brutish raiders.

Whatever was happening down there, it reached a fairly swift crescendo. She only paused when a flash of brilliance suddenly lit up the night.

A thunderclap and a man's lionlike roar shook the whole valley. Her fairy shrieked at the sound and dove into her satchel, but Wrynné's very soul had gone quiet.

The hairs on her nape tingled as she sensed divine power in the air.

*Of course.* It could only be Sir Thaydor at the head of the king's troops, she thought in relief, still holding her breath. His devotion to the Light was said to flood the paladin on occasion with supernatural fighting ability, much like her healing.

And then he became practically invincible.

*Well, then.* An embarrassing flutter of giddy schoolgirl eagerness flitted in her belly to see the famous knight. There was obviously nothing to worry about.

"You can come out now," she told Silvertwig. "Don't worry, the king's champion is still undefeated, last I heard."

The Urms would rue the day they'd ever come crashing through the North Gate of the kingdom once they found Sir Thaydor waiting to put a stop to their bloody rampage.

Sure enough, the battle sounds had gone abruptly still.

*Victory as usual, Sir Thaydor?* she thought with a slight smile. She did not have the highest opinion of knights, in general. Most seemed thickheaded brutes who only lived to kill people and break things, but a paladin was another matter.

A paladin had a purpose and a code.

Reassured that he had matters well in hand, Wrynné told Silvertwig to hold on and banged her enchanted staff lightly on the ground, using a *hasten* spell to teleport the rest of the way down the mountain. There was no time to lose if she was to aid any of his men who'd been wounded in the battle.

Moments later, she stepped out of the woods onto the edge of her neighbor's pasture. It was now quite dark, but a few dropped torches burned here and there, and she shuddered at the carnage revealed by their eerie, flickering glow.

Dead Urmugoths everywhere. But where were the knights?

Archers? Soldiers? *Anyone?*

Heart pounding, she scanned the field in confusion until the realization slowly sank in. It was not a troop of soldiers that had done this.

It was *one man*.

She stared across the battlefield, awestruck.

She had seen many things in her twenty-three years of life, but never so much death, and never such mad courage.

The Golden Knight had come alone.

Then she drew in her breath, for she saw that he had fallen—the hero of the kingdom, the favorite of the gods.

He was unmistakable in his bright armor, the silver steel of his breastplate, as well as his tattered white surcoat adorned with the sun symbol of Ilios in gold. By his position on a slight rise, surrounded as he was by the slumped, hulking bodies of Urmugoth warriors, she realized that Thaydor had not permitted himself to drop to his knees until every last foul thing sent against their people had been slain.

She started rushing out across the field, but unfortunately, some of the raiders were still clinging to life. She could sense the presence of evil ahead—or rather, brute malice, in their case.

A monstrous race of semi-primitive, nomadic barbarians, Urmugoths roamed the wastelands beyond the kingdom's northern border. Seven feet tall on average, clad in spiked armor, they adorned themselves with the bones of past enemies and wielded giant maces, clubs, and poleaxes. The stump tusks they sported on their lower jaws proved they were indeed descended from ogres, just like the nursery tales warned—to say nothing of their cannibalistic tendencies.

How a raiding party of some twenty Urms had got through the North Gates in the first place was the great mystery of the day, along with why the king failed to send troops to destroy them.

All Wrynné knew was that after somehow breaching the border, the Urms had raged across the countryside from farm to farm and village to village, plundering and killing, ripping the peasants apart, until, thank Ilios, justice had caught up to them this night.

Sir Thaydor had clearly lured them here, away from the people in the nearby hamlet and the people there, to fight them in this field.

Now all twenty of the hideous brutes were either dead or dying. Wrynné shook her head in wonder as she proceeded past them at a more guarded pace, just in case any of the beasts were still capable of attacking her.

As she walked by, she looked around at the litter of bodies and was still profoundly shocked at Sir Thaydor's obvious ferocity. He was known back in her hometown, the capital city of Pleiburg, as a decidedly gentle soul. Enemies might quake at his name, but at festivals after his victory parades, she had personally seen little children climb on him as if he were a great, tall, affable golden tree.

And now this bloodbath.

Well, she thought with a nervous shrug, the bards said the Paladin of Ilios could do this sort of thing when the power of the Light flooded him with a blinding, holy wrath and his famous blade, Hallowsmite, began to glow—but who believed bards?

It seemed they had been telling the truth for once.

*Go to him. Hurry. He needs you,* said the voice of the Light, deep within her heart.

Before going any closer to the dying Urms, Wrynn closed her eyes to the bloody scene before her and summoned forth the trancelike state of indomitable bliss that she would have to draw upon to heal whatever wounds the paladin had sustained.

That she do so was obviously the will of the god they both served in their two different, confraternal orders—he as the first of the Sons of Might, she as one of the Daughters of the Rose.

Ilios clearly wanted him alive, and no wonder. The man was a walking, talking force for good upon the earth, and she had a feeling in her bones that he was important to their country in ways yet to be revealed.

With a deep breath, Wrynn flicked her eyes open, ready to proceed. Her tranquil stare fixed on him, she set out across the battlefield, pulling more deeply into the peace within herself with every stride. He had used his gift to protect her and everyone who lived here; now she would wield hers to save him.

Time seemed to slow all around her. Ignoring the stench and severed limbs, the gore of spilt entrails, the low animal groans rising up here and there, and the baleful yellow eyes that watched her pass, she focused on the Light spreading through her body. The radiant path was the way of love and beauty...

The ugliness receded. The healing power unfolded within her like a flower, and at each spot where her bare feet trod the bloodstained ground, the crushed and trampled grass began to rise again, the delicate shoots of clover unbending.

The hem of her pewter-gray gown was edged with crimson by the

time she knelt down beside him. "Sir Thaydor?"

No response.

She glanced at the arrow in his side, which had somehow found one small, vulnerable chink in his armor between his back and breast plates. She laid her hand gently on his chest and gazed at him in sorrow. Wrynnne was a compassionate but not a sentimental woman. No healer could afford to be. One had to learn to steel oneself in order to work calmly and swiftly in the midst of human suffering.

But even she was shaken by the sight of the kingdom's greatest warrior lying defenseless on the ground, no one here to protect him now but her. She glanced around uneasily to make sure no more enemies were coming.

*Strange.* She could not shake the feeling that something was still out there that wanted him dead.

If they came back to finish him off, what could she do? She was no warrior.

*I have to get him out of here.*

With her tiny winged companion whispering anxiously in her ear, Wrynnne took the rolled-up Aladdin stretcher out of her satchel. A rare and very expensive item, it had been a gift from her proud parents upon the completion of her healing studies. All the way from the exotic bazaars of Arabia, the magical floating stretcher had been made by djinn weavers from the strands of a flying carpet.

"Let's get him onto this," she murmured.

Silvertwig assisted as Wrynnne hurried to unfurl the thick, tapestry-like cloth. Without it, she had no hope of transporting the warrior off the battlefield. His armor weighed a good four stone, and that did not include the solid muscle of the tall, broad-shouldered body underneath.

Oh, and they could not leave Hallowsmite behind. The longsword was heavy, too. She was a little afraid to touch it, just in case it had another thunderbolt stored in there somewhere, waiting to fly out.

*Don't be silly,* she thought. The power came from him, not from the sword itself.

Once the stretcher was unrolled, Wrynnne used the golden strap of the hand-loop to make it rest on the ground.

Whether or not he could hear her, she gave her patient fair warning of the movement to come. "I'll try not to hurt you." It seemed an odd thing for a petite woman to say to a large man who had slain dragons, but she got to work anyway, quickly tucking it under the length of him.

Silvertwig fluttered her wings with all her might, helping Wrynn to budge his inert body upward on one side to get him onto the stretcher.

Unconscious, the heavy, powerful knight lay like a dead weight. Wrynn winced as the slight motion made the blood seep faster from around the arrow sticking out of his side.

Meanwhile, half a dozen of Silvertwig's tiny fey kinfolk had come flying out of the forest and gathered around to see what was happening. Even the fairies had been frightened of the Urmugoths, but now that they were dead, the curious little pranksters came out to gawk.

They twinkled like fireflies, hovering around the Golden Knight. Wrynn did not chase them off. Their colorful glow would help provide light for her next task.

Once she got Sir Thaydor onto the stretcher and ready to be evacuated to safety, it was time to assess his condition more fully.

Bracing herself, she took hold of his helmet. She could already see blood on the visor and a dent on the crown. If this was as bad as it looked, he might already be dead in there, but he did have divine protection, so...

"Shh," she whispered in surprise when he stirred a little, his metal-gauntleted hand reaching slowly but automatically for his dagger. "It's all right, Sir Thaydor. I've come to help you."

He groaned and dropped his hand back into the mud.

Carefully, Wrynn removed his helmet. Then she stared at him, ignoring the chiseled male beauty of his face in shock at the severity of his head wound.

Silvertwig sobbed and turned away.

He'd taken a chop from a poleaxe to the skull. It must have been a glancing blow, or it would have taken a chunk of his head clean off. Instead, he was left with a gaping skull fracture.

Wrynn took one look and felt slightly queasy. Oh, she could heal it, but it would take everything she had, and then what about the rest of him?

As her gaze moved over the fallen knight's imposing form, she felt her throat close when she saw the condition of his breastplate. The left side bore the dents of at least two full-force blows he had taken to the chest, possibly from a mace. Perhaps the blood running into his eyes from the head wound had blinded him before he could block them.

She let out a trembling exhalation. *This is so much worse than I thought.* Broken ribs and a collapsed lung would be the least of his worries. It was not just the blunt, shattering force of such massive blows themselves,

but being encased in metal that made these types of injuries so devastating.

A great resounding blow on plate armor reechoed through the body with concussive force strong enough to rupture organs. Thus, if the head wound didn't kill him, the body blows would.

Sick with fear, she debated how to use her limited skills. She could choose one major wound or the other to heal immediately—the head wound probably being the more dire—but, unfortunately, then she would be spent, her magic depleted with nothing left to give him for at least an hour.

An hour Sir Thaydor didn't have.

That didn't even begin to address his lesser wounds, all of which were awful, starting with the arrow. The man was a mess.

Inspecting him, she also found his left leg broken below the knee, probably from a hideous side blow from a war hammer. Black streaks charred his left gauntlet and the vambrace protecting his forearm, where one of the Urmgoths must have clubbed him with a torch.

Wrynn found herself feeling slightly dizzy. Glancing up at the stars, she took a breath to steady herself. *Oh, Ilios, I fear you've picked the wrong healer.*

She had never dealt with such grievous battle wounds before. In her two-year tenure as local healer in this quarter of the province, she had stitched up many limbs from accidents with wagons and farming implements, made gallons of medicine, delivered dozens of babies, lanced boils, pulled teeth, performed a couple of sickening amputations, and even cured ten cases of the plague.

But nothing like this.

"He's a dead man," Silvertwig opined in the peculiar, chiming language of her people, like the jingle of tiny bells.

"No," Wrynn whispered, straightening her spine. "Not yet. Not if I can help it."

There was still *one* way to save him...

Heal all his wounds at once in a single, massive discharge of the most sacred and powerful magic she had ever learned at the Bastion.

But it would require a sacrifice on her part that she had not realized she'd be called upon to make this night.

The *Kiss of Life* was based on empath magic and was such a potent spell that a healer could only work it once in a lifetime. It was said to forge a deep bond of some sort between the two people involved, whether they liked it or not, and of course, there was always a price to pay when using

magic.

It would leave her gift for healing others fully intact, but if memory served, it would strip her of her magical ability to heal *herself* quickly whenever she was sick or injured.

If she did this, she'd be vulnerable in the world in a way she had never been before. It was a frightening prospect.

Knowing she could cure herself at any time had ensured she never stopped to think twice about going in to help a fever-ridden village, for example. After this, she'd still have to go, only now, she might catch it like everybody else and there'd be no one to heal *her*. For a fleeting moment, she wrestled with herself—with a twinge of selfishness.

Maybe there was some other way. And what if he was already too far gone for even the mighty *Kiss of Life* to work? She'd end up sacrificing her self-healing power for no reason. That was hardly worth it.

"Sir Thaydor?" She touched his lips and still felt weak puffs of breath rising up to warm her hand. His skin was clammy but not yet cold unto death as she laid her hand on his cheek.

He startled her just then by opening his eyes.

Stark, brilliant blue eyes stared out at her from his blood- and grime- and sweat-streaked face. Eyes glazed with suffering, but keenly intelligent and aware.

*Sanctus solis*, what strength was in this man? she wondered. What tolerance for pain, that he could be the least bit conscious in his condition without screaming?

"I'm here," she said softly, taking his heavy steel hand. "You're not alone. Ilios sent me."

He was shaking as his agonized gaze took in the light-gray sackcloth of her simple pilgrim's gown and the pewter necklace of her order—a choker of delicate, coiled chain mail links, with a Celtic rose knot at her throat and a small sun pendant dangling down from it to her chest.

He stared gratefully at it, visibly comforted by the familiar holy symbols, and let her take his hand. "Sister," he forced out.

It was difficult to find her voice. "You've done well, my brother." Gently, she removed his right gauntlet and took his hand between her own, skin to skin. The healing was so much more powerful that way.

She knew in that moment that she would do anything to save his life.

The price was high, but how could she deny him? Sir Thaydor hadn't stopped to count the cost when he had thrown himself between the

people and their enemies. Nor would she. "I know you're in massive pain right now, but I am going to help you."

He tried to shake his head. "No. Let me die."

"Thaydor," she chided softly. "We need you."

"Please," he rasped, staring at her in confusion, obviously concussed. "I can see Elysium... The portal's open. Can't you see it? Let me go."

"No. Stay with me." She ached for his suffering and placed her hand against his cheek. "Thaydor, listen to me. You've taken a bit of a knock to the head—"

He laughed, barely audible, at that.

"But I am going to fix it," she insisted, falling quite irrevocably in love with him from that very moment, she suspected.

For, honestly, how could the man laugh at a time like this, with his skull cleaved open and his brain peeking out?

*Divine madman. Holy warrior. Crusader.*

She shook her head at him with a chiding smile, then took the canteen out of her satchel and poured a small drip of water into his mouth. He welcomed it with parted lips. She wetted a bandage from her bag next and tenderly wiped the blood out of his eyes.

"There, now. Be as brave as you always are for just a little longer. In a moment, the pain will be gone and you'll sleep for a couple of days. I will take you to safety and attend you till you wake. No harm will befall you in my care, you have my word. Now, close your eyes, son of Light."

He either obeyed or simply passed out again. Probably the latter.

There was no time to lose. What she knew about using the *Kiss of Life* spell—what *she* would have to go through to take his wounds from him—frightened her, but she ignored her misgivings. Who could be more worthy of the gift than he?

Besides, this was obviously the whole point of why Ilios had led her to settle out here in the middle of nowhere in the first place, much to the vexation of her fashionable mother. Lately, Wryne had started wondering herself what she was doing here, living like a hermit on some mountaintop.

Well, now she knew. Knew beyond all doubt.

Ilios had put her in place two years ago, lining up everything just right, making sure there'd be someone on hand who'd obey him when the time came to save his paladin.

She swallowed hard. This was a great honor...and a huge

responsibility. With a sense of destiny sending chills down her spine, Wrynn vowed she would not fail.

But she couldn't do it alone. She'd need a little help from the only assistants on hand: the fairies.

This was not a terribly encouraging prospect. They were not known as the most dependable of folk. Of course, she knew she could rely on Silvertwig. She just hoped the other little tricksters would cooperate, because once she worked the *Kiss of Life* spell, she would be incapacitated for twelve to twenty-four hours.

Fortunately, the Aladdin stretcher made patients heavier than Thaydor light enough that even a child could maneuver it, simply using the golden hand-loops to guide it as it floated over the ground.

She glanced up at the cloud of small, winged onlookers. "Everybody, could I please have your attention? I need a favor. Sundew, Treegriddle, Plumbeam. You too, Mooncurl. Everybody listen. If you'll do what I ask, I'll make you a whole mound of saffron cakes tomorrow."

This got their full attention. They started cheering, zooming closer in excitement.

"Saffron cakes!"

"With honey?"

"Of course with honey," she said. "As much as you want."

"Hooray for saffron cakes!"

"I'm hungry!" Plumbeam whined.

"We want them now!" Treegriddle demanded.

"No, first you have to help me," Wrynn said.

"What do you want us to do?" the little lemon-yellow one, Sundew, asked.

"This man is badly hurt. He needs my strongest magic, a very potent spell. It will heal him, but he'll be out cold and so will I. This is where you come in. I'm putting Silvertwig in charge. Everyone has to listen to her."

"Aw!"

The others didn't like that, but Silvertwig preened and flew up higher, hands on her waist as she grinned at her cousins.

"As you can see, we got the knight on the stretcher. Once I do the spell, you'll all have to work together to float him up the path to my sanctuary. I know you know the way. Be careful with him," Wrynn said. "Don't get him caught on anything. And don't drop him. He's important. Like a prince. When you get him up the mountain, put him in my bed. All

right?"

They nodded and hovered around, wings whirring.

"Now, here's the important part," she continued. "After you've done all that, don't forget to come back for me. I'm going to be unconscious, too. And it's...not safe."

With an anxious gulp, she glanced around meaningfully at the dead and dying Urmugoths. Some of them still moved every now and then. Still groaned. Still watched her with murderous intent.

She turned back to the fairies with a twinge of desperation. "Please don't leave me here. Bring the Aladdin stretcher with you when you come back to get me. Shove me onto it and carry me home, just like you did with him. Promise you won't leave me here...with them."

Silvertwig patted her reassuringly on the shoulder. "I won't forget you, Wrynnay."

"Thanks. Then I might as well get started." She looked at Sir Thaydor and asked in nervous humor, "You ready?"

He was still unconscious, lingering at death's door.

*Elysium, indeed.* No doubt he'd earned a palace there in the celestial realm, an eternity of peace with no more enemies trying to kill him. Maybe it was wrong to drag him back into this life...

But the world needed such men so badly, especially in these dark times.

She went over the spell in her mind. She had an excellent memory, but she double-checked it in the book, considering she had never expected to use the *Kiss of Life* and would only have one shot to get it right.

Satisfied that she was ready, she cupped the paladin's cheek while the fairies looked on. He wasn't awake any longer, but she talked to him anyway. "I'll see you on the other side of all this, Thaydor."

*I hope.*

"I'll have to take the arrow out first before we begin," she went on. "It's probably going to hurt. I am sorry. Don't worry, though, it will all be over soon."

*Provided this works.*

Then she grasped the shaft of the arrow, nervously flicking her fingers around it. He groaned as she pulled it out of his flesh.

"I'm so sorry!" she whispered, while the blood began to pour afresh out of his side. Normally, she'd have a pile of bandages on hand and herbs to slow the bleeding, but this case was anything but normal.

The sacred incantations were already on her lips as she quickly

borrowed Thaydor's knife, raised her left forearm, and cut herself. She clenched her fist, wincing, and felt the hot blood run between her fingers. She concentrated harder on the prayers, speaking the short lines over and over again, becoming them.

*"Vincit tenebris lux, amor vincit mortem..."*

Eyes closed, she began to sway slightly, the power of the Light intensifying as it took hold of her, tingling in her veins. When she unclenched her hand again and opened her eyes, still repeating the incantation, even she was amazed to see how the blood pooling in her palm glistened. The great red droplets glowed with ruby sparkles as the magic activated. She reached out her hand and let the light-spangled blood from her slashed forearm drip into Thaydor's open head wound.

Her blood mingled with his, an offering freely given. Now there was only one momentous step left, and after the tales she had heard, she was scared to do it, but she blocked out the fear, whispering the words over and over endlessly.

*"Vincit tenebris lux, amor vincit mortem..."*

*Light conquers darkness, love conquers death...*

Heart pounding, she lowered her lips to his and kissed him.

For a moment, she lingered with her mouth pressed softly to his, her warm breath mingling with his pained, shallow panting. Then she squeezed her eyes shut and willed all her healing power, her very life force, into him.

In the shattering blast of Light between them, the transfer took place. Radiance flashed out of all the places where he had been broken and torn while a wave of crimson pain washed through her. Wryne gasped, sitting up with a small cry.

Nothing could have prepared her for the next few seconds as agony unfurled and then wrapped around her like a cloak.

She threw her head back, a scream tearing from her lips as the physical pain of Thaydor's wounds bloomed like evil flowers through her body, though she did not suffer the actual damage.

Even so, it was far worse than she could have imagined. First came the sensation of fire scorching up her left arm. Next, the arrow plunged into her side. She gasped at how real it seemed; she could almost feel the tip deep inside her innards. She tasted blood.

Third, a bone-cracking bash to the side of her leg knocked her to the ground. She felt his moment of panic, the loss of control as the enemies closed in—then blinding pain crashing down on top of her head.

Last, like the double knock of doom at the door, a sickening *thud*,  
*thud* to her torso that folded her over in agony, robbed her of breath.  
The world started going black. Dark as the grave.  
Obsidian terror swallowed her up.  
Whether the fairies kept their word, whether the *Kiss of Life* spell  
had even worked, Wrynnie did not know.  
She simply passed out.

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