

SECRETS of the WITCH WORLD

**The Key of the Keplian, The Magestone,
and The Warding of Witch World**

**Andre Norton,
Lyn McConchie,
and Mary H. Schaub**



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ANDRE NORTON
MARY H. SCHAUB
LYN McCONCHIE

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SECRETS OF THE WITCH
WORLD

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Alizon

ESCORE

Citadel of Hilaron

Keplian Valley

Gailwood

TORMARSH

TOR MOOR

Place of Stones

Jerrany's Village

Ruined bridge

Old Port

Gate

TORMARSH VILLAGE

River Isle

Place of Healing

Stone Garden

Dark Tower

Valley of Hot Springs

Undermountain Caves

GORM

SIPPAR

Place of Wisdom

ETSFORD

ES

LORMT

SULCAR KEEP

SOUTH KEEP

ESTCARP

GARTH HOLME

Lake of Krogan

Stone Forest

Forest of the Mosswives



Yle

FALCONERS' EYRIE

Valley of the Green Silences

Cynan's Hold

Cave of Volt

VERLAINE

KARS

Hawk's Holme

KARSTEN

Andre Norton's Witch World

Usturt



C o n t e n t s

The Key of the Keplian
The Magestone
The Warding of Witch World

ANDRE NORTON
& LYN McCONCHIE

the KEY of the
KEPLIAN

To those who ensured this book in some way.

To Greg Hills, who persuaded me to begin writing as an amateur.

To Steve Pasechnick of Strange Plasma, who purchased my first professional story.

To my agent, Susan James of Curtis Brown Ltd., whose acceptance of me as a client strengthened my belief in my work.

And to my friend and collaborator Andre Norton. Your books were the first in the genre I ever read. They opened new Worlds and still do. May you live and write them forever—less is unacceptable!



1

*T*he old man was dying. Once, she had thought he would live forever. Now she was older and knew that all things died in their time. This was his. His eyes met hers calmly and she knew then that he would tell her what to do.

He studied her as she crouched beside him. She was too thin for beauty but in his eyes she was not only beautiful, she was beloved: the daughter of his son's daughter and his only living descendant. The coming of another race had been hard on his people. Too many had died from diseases they had never known as free-rangers. Others had taken as starving coyotes to the firewater offered all too often.

Disease had slain his son, ill fortune the boy's daughter and her man, leaving this one alone. Other blood had mingled with that of the Nemunuh over the generations: his own mother had been half Navajo, the daughter of a white man by his Indian wife. His eyes watched the girl. Eleeri he had named her, from the ancient tongue used only by those of



power. There were few of those nowadays; in too many lines the gift had faltered and died. But in the child it had come again, flowering into the true horse-gift and into ties with other life.

The girl watched him, sorrow in the huge gray eyes. Her long black hair hung past her thin shoulder and she brushed the shining strands back with an impatient hand. As her hand lifted, powerful tendons stood out in the hollow of a wrist. The slenderness was a disguise; here was all wire and whipcord. Long, long ago, women had been warriors and accepted so by the Nemunuh. Far Traveler had trained his great-granddaughter well. In these degenerate days none of the young men could match her in bow or knife skill. Nor could any, man or woman, match her with horse or hunt. He smiled up at her, then spoke, his voice weak but clear.

“I named you Eleeri. Now you must prove my naming.”

The child was puzzled. That her name meant “Walker by Strange Road” she had always known. But what road was she to walk? The old man smiled at the wrinkled brow.

“Go into the high hills, find there the beginning of the road of the gone-before ones. That you shall walk, leaving fear behind you. Walk as a warrior. As the last of my line shall you go forth with all I can give you.” A jerk of his head indicated a small heap in the darkened corner of the room. “At sunhigh let you go with the light, and Ka-dih bless you.” He sighed softly. “Would that you could ride, but I sold the last horse. Nor can you wait too long. The woman who calls on us will come today. You must be well gone before she arrives.”

Eleeri shivered. She must indeed. It had been only her great-grandfather who had saved her six years ago. She remembered the brutalities of her aunt and uncle. Her father had not disdained the Indian blood of the bride he had taken,



but his sister and the rancher she had wed had been far otherwise. When Far Traveler died, by white man's law she would fall back into their hands, being not quite sixteen. If there was a way to flee, she would take it.

A road of the gone-before ones? Her heart leaped. Many were the stories of those ancient people; even in the school she attended the truth was known. Some of it, at least. She had read there of the Anasazi, the books reinforcing the old tales Far Traveler had first heard from his mother. But that there was a road she had never known.

Black eyes twinkled in her great-grandfather's seamed face. A face like a map of the hills and gullies of his land. Brown as the dust, yet alive as the land itself.

"Bring me my parfleche." She brought the tanned deerskin war bag and waited. From it he drew out a piece of white deerskin tanned and scraped to perfect suppleness. He spread it on the bed and she gazed down. His hand lifted, wavering a little.

"Here . . ." his fingers touched, "here is our land. Follow the stream high into the hills. Upon the hillside, there is first the white stump of a great tree struck by lightning." Eleeri nodded; she had seen that. "Farther up, there are the marks of a place where the hills fell long ago. Quartz seams the rocks above." She nodded again. That, too, she had seen in her hunting. "Leave the stream and follow the map where it shows here." Once again his fingers rested on the skin. He paused to breathe deeply and in the silence they both heard and recognized the sound that came to their ears.

Far Traveler cursed. "She comes, the meddling one. You must leave me and go."

"I will not leave you to die alone." She hurried to the door and peered out. Many miles down the road, the small red car labored to climb the steep grade. Eleeri seized a key



from the hook and ran into the yard. Swiftly she locked the gate into the yard, before running back to her great-grandfather.

“She may think we are out if we keep silent.”

The old man chuckled. “That one is like the pack rat; always she pries into every corner. No locked gate will keep her from us long. You know their customs. Once she sees me, she will have you out of here and where you cannot escape. You must run, my child. Run so fast and so far she cannot ever find you again. Only the road will hide you now.”

Eleeri set her face. “I will not leave you to die alone.”

“I do not plan to die alone,” came the low words. “Fetch to me my bow, my knife. Bring the war paint I prepared.”

Eleeri ran, to return with the items. Squatting on her heels, she watched as her kinsman rose from his bed. By the sweat on his forehead, she could tell it was a terrible effort, but she did not speak. He had lived as a warrior; it was fitting he should die as one. She watched as he stripped to breechclout and slowly donned his ceremonial buckskins. Arming himself, painted face set, the old man marched to the doorway. Fierce black eyes gazed up at the sun. On the road below, the red car was closer.

He began to chant then, softly. The death song of his race. He finished the first part of the song and turned to her. A hand gestured, then another song lifted into the clear air. Blessings on a warrior about to ride forth. The Blessing of Ka-dih and of the tribe. Then he turned again to look up into the mountains. The chant rose louder as he listed his deeds, prayed that he might be acceptable as a warrior. His song ended on a last wild cry and then his face changed. His hands lifted in greeting and he took a step forward.

As Eleeri gasped, light seemed to flow about him. She felt as if great winds beat about the house, then she cried out as Far Traveler crumpled slowly. Around her,



warmth flowed, welcoming a warrior home, comforting her who was left behind. She bowed her head quietly. It was well. Her kin whom she had loved with all her heart was gone on his final journey. It was for her now to take her own road—the road that had been his last gift to her. The red car was nearing the final bend below her. In ten minutes or so it would be at the locked gate. Eleeri remembered her uncle's hate, the beatings, the scorn for a quarter-Indian. She would die before she was returned to that. She set her teeth and with a burst of strength those who did not know her would have found hard to believe, lifted her kinsman and carried him into the house. Swiftly she laid him out on the bed, bow and knife at the ready.

Outside, the car was silenced as it reached the gate. A voice called as the gate was rattled. Eleeri seized the pack and other items laid out waiting. She had no time to look them over. She must trust that her great-grandfather had known what she would need. She stooped to kiss the withered cheek, adding the map to her possessions as she did so. Outside, the voice called again, more urgently. The girl smiled bitterly. Far Traveler had been right about that one. She would not leave without something.

Silently the girl drifted to the back door and opened it. Never settle for one exit, her great-grandfather had always said. And better if the other is hidden. A wicked smile lit Eleeri's face for a moment. She could hear the rattling of the gate as it was climbed, then the voice again, louder, nearer. The front door, too, was locked; that would slow the pack rat. She slipped around the edge of the house using the tumbledown outbuildings as cover. A section of fence lifted aside once two iron pegs were removed. Quietly she replaced it, ramming the pegs home again. That would puzzle the white-eyes. The voice rose urgently, followed soon after by



the sounds of a breaking window.

Screams followed, interspersed by cries of Eleeri's name. Feet ran to and fro, the repetitions of the girl's name become almost frantic. Eleeri was sorry for the distress; she supposed the woman meant well. But she would not allow herself to be returned to a home where she was despised. If only Far Traveler had not insisted on helping her work about the house the previous day. Not only had he aided her, he had also been in a shed several hours doing something with the door shut against her. She guessed now that he had felt his death close, and it must have been the pack she carried that he was preparing. The social worker came only once a week. Up until then they had managed to hide Far Traveler's growing weakness from the woman.

They had hoped that his strength would last another few weeks, just until her sixteenth birthday. Then she might have been permitted to live on the few remaining acres in the house the old man had built. She grinned fiercely. Her aunt and uncle would find little of benefit remaining. The land that had once belonged to the Two Feathers family was sold long ago. The personal possessions, the tiny house, and a few acres of waterless land were all that remained. Eleeri could have made a living there. She could hunt, break horses, keep alive a tiny vegetable garden, and thus survive. But to an outsider the inheritance was worthless.

She peered around a tree, eyes searching the yard below her. The figure of the woman emerged, running clumsily from building to building. Eleeri nodded to herself. It would be hours before searchers could arrive. She knew they would come. The social worker was not one to let her go in peace.

She shouldered her pack and checked her weapons. The map hung limply over her belt, ready to hand, as she leaned into the long climb. She moved with a slow confidence. She



must not wind herself in the climb. If she was followed, she might have to use all her strength to escape. Better that she did not waste too soon what strength she had. According to the map there was far to go and all of it through rough country. If they had a helicopter out looking, it would be her skill that saved her, not her strength or speed.

Below, the red car was fleeing down the mountain road. The woman who drove it was equally determined. The child must have taken to the hills. She must be found, taken to a place of safety. Her superior had been a fool to allow the girl to live with that old man. She might have known this would happen. Furthermore, typical man, her supervisor was away from the office when things occurred. She bit her lip thoughtfully: it did leave her in charge. He wouldn't be back for almost a week, and she would have the girl back by then. No matter what he said, the child was under sixteen, and her aunt had always said they would take her back. She ignored the report on file that described the treatment meted out to Eleeri under the guardianship of that same family six years earlier.

So the girl had been punished a time or two. Children needed a firm hand. She drove faster, eager to reach her office and call out those who would find the girl for her. It would take some time, but she was sure she could convince those in authority that the child was in danger. She could lay it on thick: A young girl lost in the mountains, mad with grief. A real suicide risk. If they didn't find her, it might not look good in the papers. She never looked into her own mind, never knew that she had hated a young girl and an old man for their pride, for the dislike they showed when they faced her intrusions.

There had been something in the poise of the girl that had sent a shiver down the social worker's spine. In a land



where the deaths of settlers were still remembered, she had not been the right woman to work where she did. Her family remembered even as Eleeri's uncle remembered and recounted the massacre of kin. The woman despised those under her care. That she was despised in turn infuriated her. She would find the girl, give her to a decent civilized family. They'd tame the child.

Far above her now, the "child" climbed beside the stream. Behind her the ancient weathered stump of the tree showed clear in the bright sun. Ahead she could glimpse the scars of the slide that had occurred some one hundred years earlier. They overlay others. For some reason this part of the cliff always slid every century or so. Eleeri gazed up as she neared the base of it. She was still wearing the clothes she had donned on rising. They were her oldest and almost in rags, as she had intended to clean out the rusty iron guttering. She could *spare* them, and she should rest for a while, too.

She dropped her pack well up the stream, returning toward the landslide to climb higher. Soon she was at the top, surveying the fragile crumbling rock at her feet. She smiled a little. Far Traveler had always said that a trick was worth miles to the pursued. Some time later a long rumbling roar of sound echoed around the nearby hills. A scrap of shirt showed at the edge of the new mounds of scree. If they dug, they would find more scraps deeper in. She had placed them there before she started the slide. From then on she took to the stream itself. Let them try to track in the water; she knew a place she could emerge without leaving scent easily found. She hurried now; the water was freezing.

Farther along her trail, she rested and ate some of the food Far Traveler had provided in the pack. As she did so, she explored the pack's contents with interest. Clothing, a complete case of stainless steel needles in all sizes, thread,



fish hooks, the list appeared endless. But then the pack was no mere rucksack, but one of the large, framed type which could carry a hundred pounds weight of supplies at need—and if the wearer could bear the weight. It appeared to be empty now, and she lifted it to begin the repacking. That was odd, there was still weight. She delved, turning the pack inside out to find that under a layer of cloth, there was a leather belt finely carved with a line of running horses. It bore a bone buckle, engraved with tiny prancing horses, their eyes inlaid in jet. The weight as she held it up explained the still heavy pack which might now be light enough to be truly empty. Fascinated, she turned the belt over, examining the back.

Ah! It was laced with a long sinew. She pulled that out partway and peered inside the overlapping edges. Then she sat back. How long had Far Traveler planned her escape, had he always feared his life would be ended too soon for her safety? Within the belt lay treasure. Gold, melted and cast into thin disks from the pinches of gold dust he had panned for years from this stream. It had never been worth the work to others. A week's hard labor would produce less than a fifth of one of these disks. A man could work in a better job for far better wages any day. Yet for years her great-grandfather must have toiled to gather the yellow grains and melt them into this.

She lifted the pack but still it felt a fraction too heavy to her balancing hands. She dug under the cloth lining again to come up with a small doeskin pouch. Opening it she spilled the contents onto a palm. Purple fire caught sunlight, blue and softer amber glowing among the color. Ka-dih, but the old man must have been gathering this for long. Amethyst was found in the hills hereabouts, but the pieces were usually flawed. These were not. They were small, but of the



finest, clearest color she had ever seen. Even as a semiprecious stone they were worth much money.

She studied the stones that added blue hues. They had to be sapphires. But where had Far Traveler found those? There were none of that stone in her mountains. Not that there were many here—she counted five—but they appeared to be fine stones as well. She also found amber: two pieces carrying burdens within them. Seeds of some plant she had never seen before.

She picked one out curiously. Her fingers seemed to transmit warmth to the amber, and to her surprise, it glowed. She put it down again. Perhaps her great-grandfather had known more than he had said about the road she was to follow. She had a feeling that the amethyst stones were for trade—the gold, too—but the amber might have another purpose. Idly she placed a piece of it in her pocket, then, moved by something, she placed the second piece in a pocket on the other side of her jeans. She carefully repacked her belongings and stood up. By now the woman from social services must have reached the township. The hunt would soon be raised.

In that Eleeri was only partly correct. The law there was reluctant to become involved. It was several hours before they agreed to send out searchers, and by then it was close to darkness. The hunt was held up until morning, and Eleeri gained time. Time she used well, moving along the trails at a steady stride as she kept one eye on the map. She kept moving until dusk on that second day, then made a quick camp. Carefully she rolled a half-buried stone aside and lit her fire within the hollow. She ate, drank, and studied her tiny camp. The gathered firewood would do until dawn. The rocks behind her would reflect the fire's heat to where she lay, and the plaited grass screen would help to keep the heat



in and the drafts out.

She rose at first light to eat, and drink hot tea. Then she rolled the stone back into place, hiding the ashes of her fire. She rubbed the underside of the rock with pungent leaves before she did so. That should baffle any trailing noses.

She trotted down to the trickle of water, carrying her pack. Once there, she stripped and washed. Then she packed her jeans and other clothing, taking out instead her deerskin shirt and pants. She put on the carved belt with its secrets, tucked the pouch into the front, and added the knife in its fringed sheath to the belt. Her bow and quiver were hung within easy reach on the pack corner.

She looked at the map long and hard. From here on she would be in strange country. In her hunting she had ranged far, but never in this particular direction. She must now rely on the map and her good sense. Setting her shoulders, she began to follow a faint deer trail. It went in the right direction and would make for easier walking—for a while, at least. She moved steadily on as the sun rose. At midmorning she halted to drink a little and rest a few minutes. Then she was moving on again. By noon she was deep into unknown mountains on a trail that skirted a drop far down to canyons below. She wondered what the woman from social services was doing now.

Then she turned her mind resolutely. To allow fear of pursuit to overcome one was folly, so Far Traveler had always said. It weakened the pursued, strengthened the pursuer. She was child to this land; it would not give her up lightly. She was warrior; she would not surrender easily. Far down her back trail, men dug frantically in a fresh slide. It would take them all day to be sure no child's body lay under the weight of rocks and cold earth. But the feeling she had been tricked strengthened the rage and determination of the



pursuer. The woman drove back down the road, cold fury in her eyes. She had been promised a helicopter the next morning.

Another night, another camp, and Eleeri slept soundly, but by dawn she was gone, following the map. She was nearing her destination if she had not misread, and her heart was torn. To leave her own land, her own place, never to stand beside Far Traveler again . . . she shrugged that last away. No matter if she stayed or went, her kinsman and her home were gone.

She pushed on through the day. By now she guessed that those who hunted her would have found the slide to be a trick. That would please nobody—to be made a fool of by a young girl. Still, what matter, if it had bought her another day?

It was almost noon when she heard the first sounds of helicopter blades above her. At once she ducked into a crevice. As she stretched along it, her doeskins blended into the dry brown earth. She remained motionless as the helicopter swooped overhead. Nor did she turn her face upward—Far Traveler had warned her against that.

Long ago he had fought in the white man's war. Planes then had been able to see the shade of an upturned face. They would fly low to encourage movement. She stayed facedown and silent. The sound beat away to the east and she moved then, running lightly along the trail into the cover of brush ahead. From then on, she moved with caution, one ear open always to the sky. Twice more the helicopter swept overhead as it searched. She cursed it savagely. Why were they hunting her in this direction? What had led them to think she would be in this part of the mountains?

Eleeri had no way of knowing that the woman had enlisted the aid of a rancher with dogs. It had taken long enough, but



finally they had struck her trail where she had left the stream. Now they followed, the copter ranging ahead. Twice where it could, the machine had landed, airlifting man and dogs over a rougher time-consuming area of the trail.

They were closing in on her, Eleeri thought. Somehow they were moving faster than she could. She halted in cover to stare at the map once more. There! She was to take the right-hand fork of a path that led from a certain rock. If the rock was still standing, if the path still existed. By now she was certain that the map was old, very, very old. The land had changed over the years. She could only press on and pray it had not changed more than she could recognize.

At least the rock was there. She halted to peer at it. Yes, she was sure this was the one. It had the vague outline of a hawk. There was no longer any sign of a path, but if she went to the right, there was footing through a patch of upraised rock spikes. She prayed she was on the correct path.

By now the baying of dogs carried to her ears. The copter was overhead more often, so that she could only advance in short rushes where there was cover as the aircraft swung away. But the depression she followed brought her to the next sign, a cave mouth she passed quickly. She halted for a moment in shadow to listen. The dogs must be a scant hour behind her now. Far less as the crow flew, but with the mountains as they were, only a crow could travel directly. Dark was closing in and the watcher overhead was departing.

She gazed at her map in despair. There were still some miles to go. She sank to the ground, her shoulders aching, her legs leaden. She was hungry. She must rest, eat, and hope for a miracle. She ate and drank swiftly and lay down wrapped in the soft hand-woven blanket that had been in the pack.



For a couple of hours she slept heavily, then something caused her to wake with a start. She sat up to gaze about her. Bright as the last days had been, the nights had clouded over with each dusk. Now above her the stars shone out.

For a moment she bowed her head. The gods were kind to their daughter. Now she had light for her feet: the moonlight would make a path she could follow. She must go more slowly, the shadows could be treacherous, but she could walk—and walk she would. She gathered her pack onto still-weary shoulders. Slowly she trudged down the smoother way that lay before her. This way, or so the map claimed. If she could put enough distance between her and those who followed, she might reach sanctuary before they could take her. She had no idea what she would find at the end of the road. Only that Far Traveler had been certain that, once there, she could not be followed.

She walked the moon down, then rested until faint light began to glow in the sky. Then she stood and walked again, more swiftly now, pushing herself, feeling the strength drain from her body. It no longer mattered. She would reach sanctuary and rest, or she would be taken. Either way, her growing exhaustion was of no account. She set her teeth and thrust herself onward grimly.

The water bottle at her belt was all but empty. She kept herself to small sips. She brought out the map one last time—yes, here. She had almost reached the place. She stood in slumped weariness as she stared at the trail ahead. Her eyes teared. That—*that* was her sanctuary?

Ahead, the path narrowed to nothing at the edge of a cliff. Two great rocks stood sentinel before the drop. Across them another had fallen, like the lintel of a doorway to thin air.

A trickle of water ran over the cliff face where she stood.



As one in a dream, she rinsed her water bottle, drank, and refilled it, hooking it back to her belt. A fatalism possessed her. It was ended, she had beaten them all to reach her sanctuary—and for what? For a place to die? Far below she could hear the roaring of the river. Then from behind a ridge the copter swooped. She could see a triumphant face staring out at her as it swung past.

Warrior fury rose to possess her now. Once her people had been the rulers of the land. The Nemunuh, the enemy people. Was she now to be taken like a rat in a trap—she, daughter of the people, child of a line who had tamed the horse and ridden all the plain? Far Traveler would not have sent her here to die. This was a thing of medicine, a path of power. She would trust the power. She rose and stretched almost casually; then like a sprinter she hurtled forward, pack bouncing. Within the hovering machine, triumph turned to horror. The Social Services woman shrieked wildly.

“Stop her, stop her!”

Eleeri reached the rock guardians and, still running with all her fading strength, plunged through. A flash of chill, a flare of light, and she was still running, but on green, ankle-high grass. She halted, stared wildly about her, and then her legs gave way and she sprawled onto soft turf. Behind her was nothing: no rocks, and mountains only far into the distance. The air was sweet with bird song and the scent of growing things.

Silently she bowed her head. She had been right to trust. Here she would rest, and later she would travel toward the mountains. With a deep feeling of contentedness, she laid out her food and unhooked her water bottle. Silently, as she feasted, she thanked the gone-before ones for their mercy, and for their road.

Above the mountains the helicopter had turned for town



again. In it the woman from Social Services was busy with her excuses. She'd been right, the girl *was* suicidal, it had been correct to pursue her. No doubt they would find the body when the river chose to deliver it downstream. If not, well, it wasn't important. There were other files, other people to be seen to.

The man who rode with her was silent. He knew what he'd seen. He also knew better than to speak of it. But in his mind and to the end of his time he retained the memory of a green land, only a brief flash, but it would keep him wondering as long as his life lasted. There had been something about the place, something that had called him. Still, he would say nothing. If the child *had* escaped, what was it to him? Good luck to her.



2

A bird was singing loudly somewhere close by as Eleeri sat up. Her eyes were busy about this new land. Legend had it that there was no going back, that no one who walked the road of the gone-before ones ever returned. She shrugged. She could get killed just as easily back there as here. At least here there was no welfare and her aunt and uncle couldn't reach her. She'd be careful, though. There might be worse things than those that had sent her running. She folded her blanket, putting everything but some food back in the pack tidily. Then she began to walk as she ate.

The mountains drew her as they loomed in the distance. By her calculation it was some twenty miles before she would strike the foothills. She'd skirt them and continue east; there was something in that direction which seemed to draw her. She tramped cheerfully, eyes and ears alert. The land appeared deserted. It was strange: so fertile, so rich, yet without people or homes. She scanned the grass. Perhaps



this area was like the plains her kind had roamed once. Perhaps there were other tribes here who would challenge her.

She rested and ate at sunhigh, then moved on. Slowly out of the heat haze, buildings began to appear. They were a little off to her right and she veered away, moving more slowly. She could hear no sounds. Workers usually made noise, but here there was only silence. She circled cautiously, in no hurry; this was all unknown territory—wise to be watchful. As she moved in toward the clump of buildings, however, she could see that they must be abandoned. Here and there a roof had fallen in; signs of fire showed. Finally she allowed her feet to drift up to where the main door had once kept out all intruders.

She slipped inside like a shadow, eyes flickering about. Her skin crawled. Something bad had happened here, and that not so very long ago. The wood still smelled of fire. She touched it, studying the black smudge that fouled her fingertips. She rubbed them together and sniffed. Whatever had happened here had occurred within the last year.

A wind shift brought a ranker scent to her twitching nostrils. She knew that one. It was the stink of meat close to bones. She shivered and moved quietly in that direction. Better to know what it was she faced here.

Her nose led her toward stairs that hung fire-blackened from stone supports. She padded upward, careful to test each step. Here was *not* the place to break bones.

In the largest room above she found the source of the stench and bit back a cry of horror. They'd been a family once. Now they were just bones clothed with rags of flesh, tatters of once-good clothing. From the way they lay and what she could see of clothing and bones, there'd been parents and three small children. Even for the children there'd



been no mercy from whomever had struck here.

Now that she was face-to-face with the remains, she could better estimate the age of the destruction. Perhaps six months, more than four or five for sure. Was this an everyday occurrence here, or was the land at war? Eleeri padded lightly from room to room. In each she found death or signs that invaders had searched. This may have been a prosperous place once. She'd found enough signs to know that the occupants had been decently dressed, well housed, with several servants and a dozen workers.

By then her hunt had taken her through the outbuildings as well. All had died, servants with masters; but there were no animal bones. Nor could she find, on casual search, any signs of valuables. The place had been thoroughly looted, and from the signs she suspected it had been before the bodies had cooled.

She was eager now to be on her way. It might go ill for her to be found by those who had done this. Pack bouncing, she trotted briskly away from the roofless hold. She traveled far into dusk, halting only when it was too dark to see. She made no fire; a cold camp was better than an attack in the night.

By daylight she was on her way again. The land was changing as she walked. At first there were only isolated clumps of brush, but gradually they merged into large areas that clothed the flanks of the hills before her. Large trees formed outcrops, islands in the brush and grass. Eleeri felt more comfortable with cover available.

At midday she ducked into a patch of trees and found a small stream. Here she washed, lit her fire using dry wood, and settled to eat. Once the meal was ended, she checked her supplies. Plenty of tea, powdered milk, and salt remained, but most of the solid food was gone. She must find a place



she could camp for a longer period and hunt. Meat must be dried or smoked, greens gathered, and a horse found.

She sighed for want of a horse; all her life there'd been horses. All but the period with her aunt and uncle, when they'd refused to allow her one. A horse, a horse, her kingdom for a horse. She giggled softly at the words. She didn't have a realm, but if she did, she might well give it up for a really good horse.

A week later she was still skirting the mountains, but they had turned in a curve to the east, so it was now in that direction she traveled. Several times more she had found homesteads and searched. The results left her wary indeed. No two places had been destroyed at the same time. It meant that either war swept often over this land or there were some exceptionally efficient and unpleasant bandit bands out here somewhere.

From the evidence in one of the homes she knew that the attackers had played the same games with women as that sort did in the world she had left. If she fell into their hands with not even a common language to plead in, events would be probably lethal. She reached up a hand to touch her bow. She would not be taken easily. Those who tried would pay.

By now she was well east and, from the strong breeze, she knew she was traveling toward a sea. She crested a small hill to face that wind. It blew salt air in her nostrils, a promise of fish, driftwood fires, and salt to replenish her small supply. All these were hers in another day. She stood, staring out over the gray waters, wondering who sailed them and in what sort of ships. She had always been self-sufficient, but always before she had had her parents or her great-grandfather to fall back on. Now she was alone, and while it did not frighten her, she wished for company. A horse, Eleeri thought wistfully for the hundredth time. A horse would be wonderful.



She laughed to herself. She was gaining an insight into her ancestors. This must have been how they had once felt, with all the plains spread before them and no way to travel from water source to water source except by foot. Here there was water enough. But she moved so slowly it was as if she were an ant crawling across the face of the land. With a horse she could travel more swiftly, hunt more easily, run from danger faster. She could talk to the horse, care for it, revel in the company of a friend.

She looked ahead thoughtfully. Farther on the mountains seemed to close in towards the shore. They could prevent her continuing northeast. Yet that was the way she was drawn. She shrugged. She would travel in her preferred direction so long as she was able. She did not wish to take to the higher mountains above the foothills she now traversed. Those mountain heights had a strange look to them. The land there looked almost as if it had been wrung out and dried that way.

She had continued to follow the seashore and was not surprised to see a river flowing into the salt water ahead. Rivers, of their nature, flowed seaward. Her head jerked up. People, of their nature, settled in such places. She slunk through cover and turned to follow upriver. Maybe here in this isolated place she might find those still living? She headed deeper into the mountains with every step. It contented her. Of plains blood she might be, but she was mountain-born. Here was her natural home.

A day later she stood on the riverbank, ears alert, eyes watchful. At her feet hoofprints traveled before her, three horses carrying heavy loads, but not so heavy as to indicate double-riding. So, three men, all large and probably strong. There were no signs that others had come this way in a long



time. This trio were either rovers or traders traveling to some settlement they knew upriver. But somehow she had the feeling they had not ridden this way to trade. She swung pack to shoulder, trotting swiftly but with ears alert for alien sounds. They came, a confused shouting followed by a man's scream. A horse whinnied as Eleeri broke into a run. She halted within the edge of cover, staring at the scene below.

There was a hollow here, like a sort of shallow dish. Within it were the walls of a small hold and a tiny patch of growing grain. Berry bushes showed bright fruit in a line along one side of the walls. A flowering vine climbed another. But part of the sheltering wall was broken down. Smoke had stained the roof. The violence had reached here, too, but perhaps the people had returned to guide their home into a second, weaker flowering.

Below her a man lay sprawled. Beside him a scruffy pony grazed unconcerned. Her gaze swept on to where one man battled two more. Swords flashed in the weak sunlight and even as she watched, the man on foot staggered and fell.

Both horses had overridden him in the last attack. Now the attackers swung their mounts into a turn less than a hundred yards from where Eleeri watched. She could see their faces, alight with bloodlust and cruelty. Beyond them the man reeled to his feet again, blood streaming down his face and from an arm which hung limp. She watched as he tried valiantly to raise his sword again.

Ka-dih, a warrior fights before me. Eleeri acted without thinking. Her people had always esteemed courage above most other abilities. She reached for a dried stick and broke it with a loud crack that echoed in the trees.

Both horsemen reacted. They split, each spinning in a different direction to face the danger. Experienced, the girl noted. But the only weapons seemed to be swords. There



was no sign of guns or even bows. She smiled dangerously, rustling the bushes about her in a quick line. Let them believe she ran in fear.

Like any predator, they reacted to a prey who ran from them, sending the horses in pursuit. They aimed ahead, believing they could cut off the fugitive. But Eleeri had not continued to run. Instead she had doubled back and cut to one side. The horsemen charged into the brush several yards in front of her. Her bow sang a soft death song and both men fell with screams. The first landed limp and motionless, the second thrashed, trying to get to his feet again and failing. He was hard hit but not yet dead.

The girl sprang forward, knife in hand, to be diverted back into cover as the horsemen's previous quarry reeled into view. With a shout he leaped and swung his sword, and the surviving bandit lay still. Now the swordsman peered about and it was with difficulty that Eleeri repressed a gasp as she saw his face clearly for the first time. He looked very like Far Traveler. He was old, wrinkled with age and living, his eyes were gray even as hers, and his gray hair had once been black, or so she thought. Her eyes narrowed as he swayed, then his sword fell from shaking hands.

Before she could move, he simply collapsed. Well, he would come to no harm lying there for a few minutes. Better to secure the horses before they went too far. She shed the pack and ran quickly to cut off their departure. She leaped lightly into a saddle and sent the horse trotting toward the others. With them secured, she could look about her. She beamed at her loot: three homes and all their gear, packs, bedrolls, saddlebags that bulged, weapons, possibly even food. She swung her chosen mount back to where the swordsman had fallen.

Dropping quickly from her horse, she studied the man. It



had probably been loss of blood that made him faint. The wounds were not of themselves serious. She bound up his head and tore the shirt seam. Under the torn shirt were the remnants of once-powerful muscles. *Hough!* This one had been a warrior. Remembering the scene which had brought her into the fight, she amended that. He was *still* a warrior. But not a young man anymore. He'd done better, despite his age, than the bandits had expected. One against three and he'd killed one man before they began to get the better of him. She nodded: the dead man's gear and mount would now belong to this swordsman. It was warrior right. She now had twice as much; she'd be content with that.

She looked down, wondering how she was to get the man to shelter. Perhaps a travois? Knife in hand, she moved swiftly, and soon he was back at the gate of the ruined building. Eleeri unhooked the pony and exerted all her strength to drag the stretcher in through the door. Once inside, she allowed herself to rest for a few minutes, then rifled the bandits' packs quickly. She laid out bedding and rolled the man onto it. It was filthy and probably verminous, but it would provide warmth. That was more important than a few fleas and a smell.

Both the man's wounds had stopped bleeding by now. She bathed them in water heated over her small fire, then dusted on antibiotic powder. From what she had always heard, more people in primitive societies died from infection than almost anything else. She checked the packs for food. Dried meat with a foul taste, moldy cheese, stale water. Gods, if she hadn't killed them, their food probably would have. She scraped the mold from the cheese and made soup from her own supplies. This she fed spoonful by spoonful to her half-conscious prize.

He sagged back when she finished feeding him, already



asleep again as she rose. The horses should be cared for. Then she could explore while the light lasted. Moving about the beasts, stroking, talking, she allowed herself to relax. With that came the tears. She had wondered what it would be like to kill; now she knew. It felt . . . She paused to consider her own emotions. She hadn't killed to survive. She could have walked on and left the old man to die. She'd chosen instead to fight.

She felt no guilt; the attackers had been killers, torturing and baiting a man old enough to be their father's father. Then why was she crying? She had done right, she felt no great guilt at her deeds. She decided that it was only a relief of tension. She'd been wound so tightly for so many weeks now that it was relief just to relax and be a girl. Tears didn't mean weakness here and now, she decided. Just as long as no one knew or saw.

She wiped her eyes and, with the horses roughly stabled, returned to the main house. This one was different from the others she had seen. It was bare, for one thing. No rotting tapestries, no clothes in chests—no bones, either. Perhaps being so far from the other places, so isolated up in these hills, the people had had time to flee whatever threatened. It was clear where the old man had been sleeping. The one upstairs room with an intact roof showed signs of habitation. For a good long time, too, she guessed. She drifted outside and peered at the berry bushes. She found a container and picked until it was full. Then she tasted one. It was tart but refreshing, bursting juicily under her tongue.

She ate a handful, putting the rest aside for later. She dropped more blankets over the sleeping form by the fire. Her fingers touched his forehead. No fever as yet. Good. She banked the fire carefully, leaving a large log to burn slowly, and placing other branches nearby to feed the fire as



it burned down.

Then she slipped outside with her blanket. She'd sleep in the stable. A pile of loose hay was by a door and into that she burrowed, folded blanket beneath her. It was always possible that there were more bandits around. She had no intention of being wrapped in a hampering blanket if they appeared. Hay piled on top of her would provide warmth and concealment. The blanket beneath would keep off the chill of the stone floor.

She slept lightly, but nothing disturbed the night. Waking at dawn as usual, she slipped back to the house. Her charge must have woken at least once during the night. The berry-filled pot had emptied. She picked it up and walked outside. She drifted about the bushes, enjoying the sunshine before returning with a filled container.

Old eyes surveyed her as she entered. He spoke, a slow series of words ending on a rising inflexion that seemed to signify a question.

Eleeri shook her head and spoke in turn. "I don't speak that language. But I'll learn if you teach me." She waited.

The old man looked surprised and spoke again. Eleeri could tell it was not the same tongue as before, but it was still one she did not know. Again she shook her head. A third try, and a third shake of her head. He lay peering at her in bafflement. Then his hands began to move. He reached out for the pot and tapped it, slowly speaking a word. The girl grinned, repeating it carefully. He corrected her pronunciation and moved on.

A week later she had the rudiments of a vocabulary in two languages. By then her new friend was working beside her a short time each day. Twice Eleeri had gone hunting so that now meat dried in the smoke from the hearth.

She learned of the land gradually as her vocabulary grew.



Once Karsten had been rich, thinly populated but at peace. But then invaders came and persuaded the ruler to attack some section of his people. A Horning the Ruler had called it, thrice horned to death and destruction.

Cynan, he told her, had been old even then. A neighbor had escaped to warn, and old or not, Cynan had rallied his kin to gather all they had and flee. In Estcarp, those who survived the pursuit had scattered. Grieving for those slain, the old warrior had slipped back across the mountains to hunt a different prey. His hunts had exacted a high blood-price for his dead.

He had gone back then to seek out other fugitives and with them he had traveled again to Estcarp, where distant relatives held their lands. But it was not his land or his home, and he had fretted. He had almost determined to go back when . . . Eleeri was unsure of her understanding at this point. Cynan appeared to be saying that witches had changed the mountains to trap the Karsten army. She shivered. In school they had taught her that superstition was an enemy. But when she looked at these mountains, she feared this was no superstition.

Weeks passed and became months as she stayed with the old man. Winter would be on them soon, and she must increase the food store. Grain now filled one bin, hay the loft above the ancient stable. Smoked and dried meat hung in a larder with apples and other fruit and berries put by for the snows.

From a clay deposit by the river, Eleeri had made dishes fire-baked. To those she had added cooking pots and water containers. Well-washed bedding and hay-stuffed mattresses provided comfort, and the three bandit horses were sleek with good living. Their gear shone, supple with her care, and all three would come at a call to nuzzle her



affectionately.

Cynan had noticed that right from the first the beasts had trusted the girl. She might know nothing of witchcraft, but there was power there of some sort. She was the best rider he had ever seen, but beyond that the horses obeyed her in strange ways. She spoke to them, and her requests were granted as if the words were understood.

He and the girl sat by the fire one night. It had snowed for the first time that season and the air beyond the fire's warmth was chill.

"Eleeri, be careful who you approach in this land. The memory of what was done to us lies heavily on Karsten still."

The girl raised eyebrows. "What has that to do with me?"

"Your looks," the old man said bluntly. "You may be no witch, you say you have no power, but you look like one of the race. Gray eyes, black hair." He ticked the points off on his fingers. "Your cheekbones are high and your chin more pointed than blunt. You are slender, as we tend to be." He nodded. "I know you are not of our blood, but from the outside and to one who may have only heard a description, you appear to be of Estcarp. Be very wary. Karsten blames the witches for what happened to their land."

Eleeri snorted. "Oh," she said sarcastically. "It was their duke who went crazy and ordered a massacre. As far as I can see, all the witches did was defend their land and their people."

Her friend sighed. "I know that. But after the turning of the Mountains, I think few were left in this land who were sane. The army died almost to a man in that turning. Women bereaved do not reason, they simply hate. With most of the leaders dead and our duke slain, those left turned often to violence to settle their needs. Those who escaped turned to



kill in reply. It became a cycle from which Karsten has never broken.”

“Tell me more of the Horning. Why would a ruler murder his own people?” Eleeri questioned.

The old man sighed. “It’s a long story, but I will tell you what I can briefly,” he said. “Karsten has always been a divided land in some ways. It was my people, the Witch People of Estcarp, who held a portion of it for long years before others came. But we are slow to breed, with long lives.”

“Is one the reason for the other?”

“No. It is the witch gift. The women who have it leave home and family as small children. The witches school them to the use of power.”

“Are power and gift the same, then?”

“No, my dear, but one is born from the other. The gift you have. That is the ability, the talent. But power is gathered to it over long years of work and learning. Power exists in many things also and may be tapped by one who has the gift. It is like to, say, your gift to handle horses. If you had never used it, the gift would still be there, dormant. But each time you used it, learned what you could do, it grew.”

Eleeri reflected. That made sense to her. She returned to the Horning. What had divided the people?

“Our people settled here in Karsten. The capital, Kars, grew on an excellent port where the Sulcar come. They are a race of sailors. Their women and children travel with them on all but the dangerous trips which explore unknown lands. Then others came. They took much of the land we had not used. For very many generations we lived side by side in peace.”

“But what changed it?”

Cynan sighed softly. “Nothing stays the same forever. I



think perhaps there were some who had always been jealous of the witch gift. When the Kolder came, they used power of another kind to turn the duke against us. Their power could not break us; because of our touch of the gift, our people could stand against it. To rule Karsten and the other lands they coveted, they must be rid of all with our gift. Thus they set the duke to run mad. We were thrice horned as outlaws. The hands of all were against us and no matter what might be done to us, there was to be no accounting.”

Eleeri shivered. With license like that she could well imagine some of what would have been done. Cynan touched her shoulder in understanding. “It was all a long time ago. Other things came of it all. Some were good to balance evil.”

She looked her question.

“If some of Karsten feared and resented us, others were our friends. In the days when we died for being what we were, some of Karsten stood beside us. They hid us, risked their lives and all they had to keep us safe and smuggle us away over-mountain to Estcarp. None of us forget that not all were greedy for what we had.

“Nor was that all.” He smiled gently at her. “You are not the first to enter these lands through a gate. Long before you came Simon Tregarth. He wed a woman of the gift and much power.”

“But I thought the witches had to stay virgin.”

“So they do; that is why our people grow less. It is also why the witches cast out Simon’s wife from their midst. Yet, perhaps because Simon was not of our race, his wife retained her gift.”

Eleeri flung back her head, laughing. “I bet that annoyed them.”

“It did in truth. Still Simon wed Jaelithe his witch lady. Then came an event almost unheard of among us. At one



birth she bore three children, two boys and a girl.”

“Triplets!”

“Just so. But all of that is a long story, too. Suffice it to say the girl had the gift. The witches had her away to their place of learning, but her brothers rescued her. They fled to the mountains. There to the east there is a very ancient land over-mountain, Escore. There even now they live and fight against evil.”

“What evil?”

The old man sighed. “Am I to tell you the whole history of all the lands? Generations ago, Escore was our land, in part. We shared it with many creatures, and other races, too. But adepts rose. They learned great power, and with it came evil. Some turned to the darkness to aid them. Others battled them to save the land and those who inhabited it. Still others chose to withdraw, either through gates they created or into their own strongholds. Eventually my people fled Escore. There were others who chose to remain.”

His mind wandered back. Both to the tales of his boyhood and those later stories he had heard. “There was another race. Like us but tied more strongly to the land. They chose to stay. They are led by the Lady of the Green Silences: Duhaun, Morquant, and other names she uses in the old tales. She is one of great gifts and power. Now she or one of her line rules the Valley of the Green Silences, where good strives always against the evil many adepts unleashed.”

“You said other creatures and races? Do you mean that there’s more than one? What are they like?” Eleeri was leaning forward in her interest.

“There are Gray Ones, or so the word comes. They are not men but have affinities with wolves. They fight with teeth and talons, not swords, nonetheless they are formidable fighters and intelligent to some extent.”



“Who else?”

“Keplians and Renthans. The Renthans are both beautiful and intelligent. Often they act as mounts for those of the valley. They fight always for the Light.” He sighed. “I know little of the other, the Keplians. They look like black horses in many ways. They may come to one who has lost his mount, appearing tame to the eyes. But if you mount, then they bear you away to be devoured by evil. The adepts who turned to darkness often used them as mounts. It is said that despite their beauty, the only good Keplian is a dead Keplian.”

“But what about Karsten here?” Eleeri queried. “As I came toward this place, I found keep after keep which had been destroyed. None of that was old. I’d say most of it had been done within the past year.”

“When it looked as if we’d lose, the witches turned the mountains,” Cynan said slowly. “They used the power to wring them out into new shapes. The current duke and all his army were within the mountain trails. I suspect very few could have escaped. After that, others tried to become duke. Each time they must fight against those who reject them. For more than thirty years now the people of this land have looted and been looted in their turn. Here and there men have gathered families and sufficient fighters to make some sort of peace in their lands. But those places are few. Even Kars is lawless, so I hear.”

Eleeri was bewildered. “How can people live like that? The land will end up with no one, surely.”

“In many places it has. How many living did you see as you crossed the land?”

“No one.”

“You see. To the north and east the land is empty. It is to the west and south, along the seacoast where traders still



come, that people are to be found.”

“Traders?”

“The Sulcar ships sometimes touch port. They come armed and wary, but they do come now and again.”

The girl nodded, remembering all he had told her of that race of seafarers. “What about the Falconers you spoke of? Are any of them still around?”

Cynan sighed softly. “That I know not. They left the mountains before the turning. They took service in many places and with many people. I think they would live yet as a people; they are strong fighters and proud.” His eyes met hers. “But never mind others. What do you plan? You will not stay here beyond the snows. I feel your restlessness even now. You could travel over-mountain to Estcarp. I could give you places where you would be welcome in my name.”

Eleeri blinked. “Are there still trails?” Then she snorted at her own stupidity. “Of course there must be; otherwise you wouldn’t have been able to get back. How does the land lie there?”

She watched as he drew a burned stick from the fire and drew on the stone floor. “I see,” she finally said. “If I return along the mountain edge to the west and cross north, then I’ll be in Estcarp.” She laid a slim finger on the blank portion. “What land lies here?”

Cynan was silent for a long time. When he finally answered, she was conscious of a rising desire. There was something in the name of Escore as he said it, something which drew her even as the east had originally drawn her here to this secluded valley. She studied the map silently before she spoke.

“Our river—if I followed that, I would arrive in time in this land?”

“So I think, but I do not know for certain.”



Eleeri stood and walked to her bedding. She hauled firewood, banking the fire for the night as she thought. The pull, the feeling of rightness grew stronger. She settled into her bedding and allowed her body to relax.

From his bed the old man watched her face. Just before sleep claimed them, he spoke again. "You've decided, haven't you?"

"Yes. When spring comes, I will go to Escore. Will you come with me?"

"No. I was born here in this hold. I came back to die here. But if you meet any who knew me where you go, tell them I still live."

"I will." She drifted into sleep then. A destination determined. Escore . . . she would go to Escore.



3

*T*he winter was both a time of friendship and a time of hardship for Eleeri. Cynan taught her all the scraps of languages he had picked up over a long busy life. To that knowledge he added warnings, hints, and beliefs about the places of the Old Ones, their natures, and beginnings. His mother had possessed some small gifts, so that the girl's increasing abilities failed to distress him as they might have another. The girl herself barely noticed that her gift was growing, stretching as she used it. She had always had the horse gift; it was a part of her.

But in the clear air of this new land, things were changing. Before she had been able to handle the wildest mare, soothe the most savage stallion. Foals had run to her for comfort. By the time she'd reached seven or eight, Far Traveler had been using her to start the training process for the horses he accepted. Beasts trained by her seemed to be calmer, more



intelligent and sensible. Eleeri had loved the work but hated it when each four-footed friend left again. She knew that all too many owners would treat them as cheap machines.

She loved horses, the feel of hard muscle sliding under her hands as she groomed. The rough strands of mane, the scents and the sounds. But she loved most of all the feeling of communion she had with them, their trust and returned affection. Over that winter she did not regard it as odd that this communication deepened. It had been rare for her to keep a horse past the few weeks necessary to explain their new duties to humans. With these three she had spent much time and many months. Of course they had responded. But Cynan, watching, knew that it was far more. There were times when it was as if the minds of girl and horse mingled so that beast and rider were one.

He deliberately moved onto that subject one night. “Eleeri, the power often comes as it will and not as you will it.” She glanced up, but said nothing. “You say that in your own land none have great power, only small gifts that tend to lessen with each generation.” The girl nodded. “Then think on this. Here it is not so. It may be that here the gift you have grows. I do not believe it is so small as you think, and such gifts untrained can be dangerous. If you come upon anyone who can, let them teach you.”

“Look, I don’t think I have the power you do. But”—she looked up and smiled, a smile of affection for the old warrior—“I promise I’ll get teaching if I can find a willing teacher. And”—she held up a hand before he spoke—“I’ll make sure this one is of the Light before I begin to learn, okay?”

“Okay.”

Cynan returned to the shirt he was mending and Eleeri to the deerskin trousers she was making. Over the autumn she



had hunted well, and not a hide or fur had been wasted. The quiet isolation of winter was a time for using these. She planned to leave Cynan a complete set of the deerskin garments along with a fur cloak. She knew that nowadays his old bones ached in the cold. She also planned to make a pair of special knee-high moccasins for him. The hide under the foot was to be triple-layered and the moccasins would be fur-lined. That would keep his feet warm and dry when he must go into the snow to tend the beasts next winter.

She glanced at him from the corner of her eye. It would not be easy to leave. But he would be furious if she stayed. He would know it was to look after him, and his pride would be cut to the heart. She understood the pride of a warrior. She would not wound the old man by counting him as less than he was. He had come back to this place which had once been his, to die. They both knew it. Here in a tiny graveyard higher into the hills lay the bodies of his wife and last child. The bodies of his parents, and his siblings. The hold had been the refuge for his bloodline for so long, the years faded to dust.

Her mind wandered to his words. She wasn't sure . . . perhaps her gift *was* growing stronger. But why should she have any great gift at all? It was true that there had been medicine men and women of ability in Far Traveler's line. Too many times she had been forced to bite down on hot words as her schools decried those gifts, calling them native superstition. Something snagged on her thoughts and she dimly recalled the teasing that her grandfather had given his wife. Yes . . . she concentrated, and the memories grew a little clearer.

They had been around the table: her mother Wind Talker, her father, and his parents. It was on one of her grandparents'



rare visits to Eleeri's home. Her grandfather had been speaking of Cornish superstitions and their use.

“. . . a method of control in many cases.”

“Then you don't think there was ever anything more?”

That had been her mother.

“Not to denigrate your beliefs, my dear, but no, I don't. I think that it was usually a way to handle large numbers of people. To persuade them into suitable actions. For instance, in New Zealand a tapu may be placed on shellfish to allow the numbers to recover after a bad season. The people believe they will be cursed if they touch them until the tapu is lifted. In this way their elders control them and the food supply.”

He had suddenly chuckled. “If I believed all the old talk, I'd never have married your mother-in-law.”

His son moaned. “Not that old tale again, Dad.”

But Wind Talker was interested. “Is there some story?”

John Polworth leaned back, coffee cup in hand. “Story, that's all it is, but it does show the power of superstition. Your mother was a Ree before I wed her. The old folks said that was an uncanny line. Reckoned that a long time ago the women had been priestesses of another faith and that it was bad luck to wed them. Jane's great-grandmother was Jessie Ree. They said she could call storms or calm them if they came. Lot of rubbish, but my folks didn't want me to wed Jane.”

Wind Talker leaned forward. “But you married her despite this.”

“I did indeed, my dear. I'll have no truck with such nonsense, and so I told them. Jane Ree is the one I want and that was my last word on the subject.” He drank from his cup and set it down again with a decisive thump.

His wife smiled at them. “It certainly was his last word.



But his parents never quite accepted me until John said we were leaving. He'd had the offer of a good job across the water, and maybe the people there would care less about superstition and more about the fact he loved me and I was a good wife. So we came and we've never regretted it."

Eleeri sat, remembering the feeling of warmth and love that had surrounded her then. In later years she had heard other reasons for the hasty departure of the Polworths from Cornwall to their new country. A war had been coming, and John Polworth had no time for war. It didn't fit into his plans, to die fighting in a country far from his own, for a cause he was not sure he believed in. So he'd married Jane swiftly and accepted the promised job in America. By the time war touched the United States also he was in a reserved occupation. She might have scorned him as a coward. But Jane knew it had not been that alone. He would have been no use as a fighter and he knew it.

She wondered if he had ever regretted his decisions. He had loved his wife, that had not been in doubt. He had appeared happy in his work and country, too. But did he ever wish to be back on his rock and seagirt land? She shrugged. Perhaps he'd had a wish when he knew in that last few seconds that he and Jane were about to die.

It was strange that both her parents and grandparents had died in accidents. It had been the year following that night around the table. A vacation, a crashed plane—and among the dead, the names of her grandparents.

Her parents had been killed in a car crash the year after that, when she was nine. For a whole six months she had lived—derided, despised, and humiliated—with the Taylors, her aunt and uncle. Finally she had fought back with a smuggled letter to Far Traveler. But before he could come,



her uncle had caught her releasing a horse he was breaking. She could not have helped herself; the animal's weary pain and confusion had cried out to her beyond refusal. But it had happened before. He was a man of quick and brutal temper and she was the despised Indian. He had beaten her far more savagely than he had intended, but it had saved her in the end. Far Traveler had come that afternoon.

Her relatives had made the mistake of refusing to allow him entrance. But with the rise of Indian rights and consciousness this had been more foolish than they had realized. Her great-grandfather had gone to find a man he knew. This one had spoken to others, and Far Traveler had returned with support. She had been brought out and, partly from the pain of her beating, partly with the knowledge that this might be a way out, had fainted within the circle of adults. Action had been swift after that.

She had been discussed, questioned, and refiled. Far Traveler had accepted her into his home, and certain friends had stood surety that she would be cared for. She might even have believed herself to have been safe, beyond the malice of a man steeped in hatred of her race, but for that last glimpse of him as she was taken away. He had watched, eyes bright with hatred. A long measuring look said that one day he would have his chance to pay her back for this humiliation. She had known that once Far Traveler died there would be no refuge. The Taylors would take her back, aided by social services people who would believe it was best for her.

She guessed that the years after that only distilled Taylor's hatred. That in the time before she reached sixteen he would be able to build a cage of lies that would entrap her, perhaps forever. She had made her choices, and freedom beyond hope had been the result. Maybe Ka-dih, Comanche



god of warriors, had watched over her.

She now bent to her work again. Maybe the blending of the two bloodlines had each strengthened the gift. She knew her people had often had the horse gift, but hers was stronger by far than usual. She shrugged again. It was hers; the how no longer mattered.

Across the fire Cynan watched her, unnoticed. Firelight glinted on the high cheekbones, the aquiline planes of her face. The gray of her eyes turned to black in the shadows and the black of her hair to night. She looked to be slight with the long fine boning typical of his own race, but he had seen the strength under that deceptive appearance. The girl was a warrior. He'd spent much time teaching her sword drill, but even he could teach her nothing she did not already know with bow and knife. She moved with apparent slowness, the smooth motion deceiving the eye. In reality she was swift, fast-reflexed, and controlled.

From things she had let slip it would seem that her kinsman had trained her almost half of her life. You'd have thought the man had known where she would go, what choices she would make. Cynan smiled to himself. In all probability it had only been an old man's memories. The girl had been taught as Far Traveler had been in his own distant youth. In teaching the child, he had unconsciously returned to the days when life was simpler for his people. But in so doing, he had given her an excellent education for the world she now found herself in. Maybe the gods had had a hand in it after all.

His eyes touched her with affection. She was a good child, kind and generous. He must persuade her to leave as soon as the path was clear. If she stayed too long after that, she would discover his secret. It had been only her aid that



had brought him through *this* winter. If she realized this, she might choose to stay. He would rather that she left believing him to be alive behind her. And so he would be, through the spring, the summer, and into the autumn. But he could feel the knowledge deep inside himself. As the year faded into the death season, so would he. Before first snows he would be gone. He smiled; it was time.

But he would not have her here mourning over his body. He'd seen the pain the death of her kinsman still caused her. Let her ride out knowing she'd left him well prepared for next winter. As the last days of next autumn faded into the land, he would seek out the graves of his loved ones. There he would lie down and pass to join their spirits. He would not have the child there to grieve when it happened. Nor would he have her live the next winter alone in a deserted hold.

His mind wandered. The horses: he needed none of them; she must take the three. He wished to give her a leave-taking gift, too.

He rose quietly and strode up the ancient stone stairs. He'd given almost everything of value to his far kin before he returned here. One thing yet remained. He pressed a stone in the wall, caught at the edge as it swung out. Within was a tiny casket carved of a glowing golden wood. Fingers fumbled at the catch, then the lid rose to release a sweet scent and a soft flare of light. He chuckled softly. Of all the things he could have kept, it had been this one. It would weigh nothing; she had enough weight to carry. But that she would love this he knew; it was right for her. Perhaps Another had a hand in this, too.

He replaced the stone and returned to his mending. When the time came, he would be ready. In the meantime, it would be well if the child also learned to write at least one language



in this world that was new to her. He rose again to fetch what he needed.

“What are you up to now?” Eleeri asked him. “You haven’t sat still for a minute this evening.”

Cynan looked at her thoughtfully. “There are several things I know which may help you in days to come. Two I could teach you while winter keeps us inside this hold: one is reading in the tongue of Estcorp; the other is signing.”

Eleeri jerked upright, her eyes suddenly alert. “Your people have a sign language?”

Cynan smiled. “I see yours do also. Ours developed only with the need to fight. Oh, hunters had always held some signs in use. But when we rode to war and as scouts, the language developed greatly. You learn well and quickly. If your people also had such a language, I think you would have no trouble learning ours.”

“Then I will, and I’d like to try reading as well. My great-grandfather always said that one should learn if any were willing to teach, that knowledge was never wasted.”

“He was a wise man,” Cynan commented. “Come, sit beside me and I will show you the signs. After that . . . I have only one book, but you will learn well enough with that to read.”

The winter moved on slowly, and at last the thaw started. With many months to study, Eleeri could now sign in the simple language of hunting and war as well as any born to this variation. She could also read, albeit with some stumbling over unfamiliar words.

By now she was more than ready to ride. Furs and skins had all been made into stout clothing. Saddles and horse gear were mended and oiled. She would use the horses in turn to hunt, as yet they were unfit for a long trail.



Water trickled down the stones of the hold, dripped miserably from the roof, gathering in deep sticky mud in doorways. Eleeri heaved a sigh. She hated that, but it would all pass when the weather warmed further.

It did so, and to her surprise, Cynan insisted on coming out to ride once the land had dried.

“The mud has gone and my bones no longer ache so much.” He smiled at her. “Besides, there is something I would show you.” He refused to say more, leading her deep into the hills as her sturdy pony obediently followed the tail of Cynan’s mount. They rounded the bend to find themselves in a small cup of flat land. Most of it was taken up by . . .

“The place of the Old Ones you told me about?”

“Even so, my child.” He dismounted laboriously. “Sit here on the grass and listen.” He waited until Eleeri was settled comfortably. “My people worship Gunnora. She is the Lady of fruit, grain, and fertility. Lady of love and laughter. In her name we celebrate the change of a girl into womanhood. The amber pieces you showed me are of great worth. They contain seeds and could be sold as amulets of her symbol. I think they did not come to you by accident. Guard them well. Do not show them to others, but if you can, pray to Gunnora at need.”

Eleeri considered that. It sounded as if this Gunnora was the same as the Corn Woman, goddess to many Indian tribes. She would feel no sense of wrong in praying to Corn Woman under another name.

“I can do that, and I’ll cherish the amber. What else?”

“In Escore and on your journey there will be danger. Not only from beasts and man, but also from creatures of evil. They could imperil more than your body. I would ask of those who built this place if they will grant you guards.”



The girl blinked. Was he going to ask for ghost guard dogs or magic swords?

Cynan saw her confusion. “You have seen me place the small pebbles I carry about the doors. Those are guards, in a way. While they lie in any entrance, nothing which is of the Dark can enter. Men who are wicked, that is another thing,” he added as both remembered the bandits.

“Is this Gunnora’s shrine, then?”

He shrugged. “For all the time my family has lived here, we have prayed to her. The Old Ones built this place, but if it was Hers when it was laid down, we do not know.”

Eleeri studied it. It was simple, of a spare elegant design. Merely a pavement laid out in a star made from many hues of marble. Around the edge on each star point stood a tall white pillar. Yet it breathed a tremendous feeling of peace. Of a harbor safely attained. She was drawn again, rising without hesitation to approach the edge.

“What do I do?”

“Think about your need to be guarded from evil. Then step forward to stand in the star center if you can.”

She obeyed. At first it was difficult. Cynan had told her of many creatures who fought against the Light. But she’d seen none. It was hard to create them in her mind, along with a request for protection against them. It became easier the longer she tried.

Holding them in her mind’s eye, she walked forward.

Behind her, walls of mist lifted between the pillars so that she vanished from Cynan’s sight. He relaxed. That which dwelled here had accepted her as Daughter to the Light. It might refuse her request, but she was safe.

Within the mist walls, Eleeri stepped to the star center. There she bowed her head in a polite acknowledgment.



Warmth gathered around her. So, there was something here. She would ask for help.

She did so, to receive in turn a wordless question. How much would she value this favor? After that it seemed that her mind would burst, as into it flowed a montage of evils. She saw Gray Ones run mad, killing, rending with tooth and talon all who crossed their paths. She saw odd-looking small creatures covered with a long coarse hair like roots, who burrowed to bring a slow smothering death to those who fell into their traps. Pools of evil showed as blighted blotches on the land. Into them she saw those unguarded stray and be consumed, body and soul together.

She shuddered. "What do you want?" Fear grew as the images all but overwhelmed her.

You! Slay Cynan and I will give you power over anything you desire.

"NO!" Eleeri stepped back in anger. "You're supposed to be Light."

He is dying.

"His life is his own."

There was the sensation of being gathered into strong, loving arms.

Well said, child. The guards you ask shall be given. Before her a figure grew: a woman taller than Eleeri, with shimmering hair. It flowed golden down the straight back of the figure, caressing the woman's green gown, tendrils straying outward. Without volition Eleeri knelt. Her hands were caught in long fingers as she was lifted up again. Then Eleeri's hands were turned over. Into them the woman dropped four small smooth stones.

"Cynan will show you how they may be used. Good fortune ride with you, Eleeri of another people." She began



to fade as the girl fumbled with the pouch about her throat.

“Wait, oh, please wait.”

The woman’s shape firmed again. “What is it, child?”

“A gift for a gift.” Purple and blue fire flashed in Eleeri’s hands. She held out the gems left to her by Far Traveler. Somehow it seemed right that she should offer them. The woman stooped. The green and gold seemed to deepen as she took into her hands the bright pebbles. Mist swirled, brightening in the woman’s colors as she faded once more.

“A gift for a gift indeed, child. You who bear my guards also bear my symbols. Call on me with them in darkest times. I shall not forget you. Light bless your path.” She was gone, and Eleeri felt almost bereft. Slowly, cradling her four stones, she walked from the pavement.

Cynan was waiting. He said nothing, seeing the stones and the strange look on the girl’s face. Silently he led her back to the patient ponies. That night he taught her the stones’ warding. He found it interesting how swiftly she learned. It had been a matter for gossip once. Did those who came through gates have a gift given by the passage? Or were only those with the gift drawn to gates? It was said that Simon Tregarth had had little of the power in his own land, but a far greater portion in this. Could it be that beyond the gates the power was damped, to bloom more powerfully once the gate was passed? A thought to consider over long nights.

It took a week for Eleeri to learn all Cynan could teach her of the four stones. By then she, too, was beginning to wonder about her power. Always she could remember her horse-gift. There had never been a time she did not possess that. But since her arrival in Karsten, it seemed the gift was growing, and expanding into other areas. Cynan had shared



his own questions, so that she, too, suspected many in her own world might have latent abilities. Still she did not wish to hold power. From what her friend said, it made of one too good a target. Still, the four ward stones had replaced the gems in the pouch at her throat. She suspected they would be weapons to her hand once she began her travels again.

But before that she had something she wished to do. Many things, in fact. She must hunt the yearling buck, culling out the smaller and weaker. They would be meat for Cynan. The old man had been trying to hide his growing weakness. He talked of her departure as soon as the last of the mountain snows were gone and the trails well dried. She knew why well enough, but it was his choice. If she was not there when he finally died, she could remember him as he had been to her: a strong friend and a teacher.

She hunted well. Then, closer to leave-taking, she made up her mind. The next day she would ride to the graves of his kin. She would scythe the grass short above the graves, place flowers. In her hunting she had found a brightly flowering bush with sweet-scented blooms. Now she raised one carefully. Back at the graves she gathered stone to stack along the earth that bordered where Cynan might wish to lie. She replanted the bright shrub in a mound of earth and leaf mold, next door to the grave of his wife. If he chose to lie there, it would be a fine marker for him who would have no other.

A month later, they rode down to the sea. There they gathered as much of the salt as they could scrape from the rocks. One by one they filled rock hollows above the reach of the waves. Over the next week the water would evaporate, leaving more of the priceless crystals.

With the coming of the warmth again, Cynan was



stronger. His muscles moved more smoothly, but the knowledge of his death was still there. Each season from now on would be his last for him. Still, he often forgot as he hunted with the child, raced her along the beach, horses pounding through the sand.

Spring began to shift into early summer. His larder was filled with meat both dried and smoked. His bins were full of fruit and nuts, and the gathered greens the hills provided. At last he spoke.

“The trails are dry. It is time you left.”

Eleeri nodded. “Next week.”

“No.” His head shook firmly. “That you said last week and the week before. Let you spend tomorrow with me, the next day preparing. Ride out the day after that. It is time.” His hand stretched out to touch hers. “Child, child, to all things there comes a time. This is yours—to go. It is mine also, that you know but we will not speak of it.” He eyed her sternly and nodded as he saw acceptance. It was well. He stood and yawned. “I’m for my bed, and you, too, youngling. In the morning I will show you I can yet run you into exhaustion.”

She made a small jeering noise and headed for her own bedding. “I’ll sleep eagerly to see that.”

All the next day they spent together. They talked, strolling about the upper rooms of the hold as he told her of how it had been. They picked berries, sweet and sun-warmed, laughing like children together. They waded at the river’s edge, spearing small fish. These were a wonderful evening meal spiced only with the sea salt and herbs from the hill’s bounty.

The following day they readied the horses. Eleeri would have left him the strongest, quietest beast, but Cynan refused.



“I have no need of a horse. I never needed one before they came, I do not require one when they can leave with you. Sell two of them, trade one for supplies, I care not. But they are of no use to me.” His real reason was unspoken but understood by both.

The girl said no more. Quietly she filled her pack with articles she might need. The stirrups she bound high on the two beasts she would not ride. Her chosen mount was a sturdy dun, black of mane and tail, with legs dappled high in that same shade. A good horse in hills, surefooted and sensible, with hues that allowed him to fade into the landscape.

She studied the other two. Both were more showy, one chestnut, the other gray. Both wore polished mended gear and should fetch good prices if she chose to sell. Finally she ran out of things to do and returned inside. There she blinked in surprise. From somewhere Cynan had found a large cloth. This had been placed over the huge old table. Somehow he had moved that toward the fireplace and decorated it with branches and berries. Candles spread puddles of light across the feast that lay there.

Within the doorway Cynan bowed ceremoniously. “Be welcome to my house, Eleeri, Daughter of the House of Far Traveler. Feast with me before you take your road again.” He took her hand, drawing it through his arm as he conducted her to a seat.

She ate with determined appetite, laughing at his jests and storing all this in her mind. When they were done he stood.

“Long ago I had a thing made. It was to have gone to a daughter of my House. Her gift was friendship with beasts, and I deemed this which I had made to be right for her name



day. But the turning came and she rode out to fight.” For a moment his eyes held ancient pain. “She never returned, nor could they bring her body back to me. She lies somewhere in these hills, holding still her watch against the enemy. Now I would give this gift to you, if you do not count it unlucky.” From under a leaf he produced the small gleaming casket and handed it to Eleeri.

The girl gasped. “It’s so beautiful.”

Cynan laughed. “The casket is not the gift, girl, that lies within. Open it and see.”

He watched as she gently lifted the carved lid. Her eyes lit with wonder as she twined fingers in the cord to lift the pendant free. It dangled from her hand, carved from some black stone with bright ruby eyes inset in the tiny arrogant head. A loop of silver was attached to a lock of flowing mane and through that the plaited cord Eleeri twisted in her fingers. It was a horse, and yet not quite a horse: there was something in the stance that betrayed intelligence. The eyes seemed to hold a life of their own and to look boldly up at her.

“Cynan, it’s wonderful. Where did it come from?”

“From these hills. I say that I had it made, but that is not correct. I had the loop attached, the cord plaited, the casket carved. The beast itself I found. Before the hills turned, there was a place of the Old Ones near here, perhaps an hour’s ride away. After my wife died, I went there often for the peace and comfort it brought me. One day I found that. I took it up and it seemed as if it was a gift of the Old Ones. I thanked them for it. Promised that she who would wear it was one of some power and would cherish it with respect.” He smiled. “I swear that it grew warm then in my hand. I took that as a sign it was truly right I should take it. Now it comes to you.”



Her hand closed around it tightly. “It’s the best present I’ve ever had. I’ll never part with it, Cynan, and I’ll always remember you when I see it.” She placed the cord about her neck and shifted the tiny horse to hang in front. “Now—I have something for you, too.”

She trotted away to return with a bundle clutched in her arms. “Here, shirt and breeches of deerskin and a fur cloak. You know how you feel the cold. And look, I made you moccasins to keep your feet warm. They have fur lining and triple soles.” She giggled. “Go and try them on. I want to be sure I got the sizes right.”

Cynan came down the stairs several minutes later. In the firelight she could almost believe him a warrior of the Nemunuh. His face broke into a happy grin as he advanced across the floor. He turned slowly.

“You have no need to worry. They fit well and they are warmer than any clothing I have had for more years than I would wish to number.” He straightened. “I will wear them to bid you farewell tomorrow. For now let us sleep; it is best to take the road early. That way you waste none of the day.”

It may have been a gift of the gods . . . they slept well and soundly that last night. Both had feared a wakeful night knowing this was good-bye. But their sleep was swift and their dreams kind. At first light both woke. Together they ate and drank in silence. Then Eleeri brought the horses and mounted. Beside her Cynan was dressed in the clothing she had made for him. She leaned down to take his hand.

“I will always remember you.” Her vision was blurred by tears. “I love you.” Her hand lifted. “For the feast you gave me, fair thanks. For the welcome of your gate, gratitude. To the ruler of this hold, all good fortune, and bright sun in the days to come.”



Cynan moved forward and as she leaned down, he reached up to hug her hard. “Ride in strength, warrior. May your weapons never fail and may Ka-dih bring you at last to a place befitting his daughter.” He slapped the pony firmly on its hindquarters and it started down the trail. As long as the road lay straight, Eleeri turned to watch him. At the bend, she lifted her hand and heard his final call echoing after her.

“Farewell, child. My love go with you.”

She rode on, tear-blinded, knowing she would never see or hear him again. Ahead lay an unknown future. Thus far she had prospered. What would her tomorrows bring?



4

She rode steadily while daylight lasted. By now she had learned minor spells, and with them she set up a secure camp. Gunnora was very similar to one prayed to by the Nemunuh, and Eleeri felt at home with the amber amulets and the lady. Holding her amber, she marched from corner to corner of her small encampment invoking the protection of Gunnora. The Place of the Old Ones might have vanished in the turning, but she now had her four pebbles from the ruins, a valued gift. In the half-light they glowed a soft comforting blue and she placed them with care.

To this routine she kept as the days moved past her. It may have been the amber, or the pebbles, she did not know. But she saw nothing more dangerous, as she journeyed upriver, than the occasional beast at its hunting. These she always bespoke in friendship. The only event of note was the appearance of a magnificent female falcon. The hawk was clearly hungry and Eleeri caught a brief mind-picture of



a nest full of squawking babies. She grinned in sympathy, sending friendship and tossing up a plump rabbit previously transfixed by one of her arrows. The female snatched it out of midair with a sharp cry.

As she flew with her gift, a feather fell from her. Long, sharply marked in black and white. A prize. Eleeri dropped from her pony to gather it in. Tucking it into her headband and mounting her pony again, she sat straighter. There might be no eagles in this land she had found, but a hawk's feather was good medicine, the more so since it appeared to have been a gift. She would wear it with pride, remembering her people.

Days slipped into weeks as she moved through the mountains. Often she was forced to backtrack when the trail she followed became blocked or simply vanished. But there was a growing sense that drew her always to the northwest.

It was as if she were wanted there, as if a calling grew louder as she traveled. She laughed softly at her fancies, but she held her course. It fitted with the small amount Cynan had been able to tell her of an ancient land new-found by his kin. She hunted as she went, sharing often with those of the wild. She saw a hunting falcon several times and each time Eleeri offered food. It was found acceptable, and while the birds would not come near her, she was clearly to be counted friend.

At last the river shallowed, narrowing even though the land was flatter. The girl began to scout farther from it across the broadening plains. It was on one of those side trips that she saw the village. She allowed the horses to graze while she studied it, lying flat atop a hill. Not a village, really, more one of those holds like Cynan's. It seemed to consist of a main fortified building surrounded by other, smaller homes.



Probably, if danger threatened, everyone retreated to the main protection. She'd be cautious. According to Cynan, they should be friendly, but it paid to be careful.

She called her beasts and swung into the saddle. Picking her way down the hillside, she allowed her mount to pace toward the gates. There was a considerable amount of noise coming from a fenced area behind one of the larger buildings. Over the babble of voices she heard the sudden blast of a furious horse, a whistle that rose in violent challenge. She made no attempt to resist that call, but kneed her pony around the building, there to halt in outraged fury.

Within a high-fenced corral a mare fought her captors. She was black as night, with a coat that gleamed in the sunlight. Behind her struggled a newborn foal, he, too, black, under the slime of birth. He fought to rise, but was as yet too weak to make his slender legs obey him. He fell again with a tiny squeal and the mare went crazy at the sound. Forgetting anything but the distress she witnessed, Eleeri raced her horses forward, almost trampling spectators.

Her voice rang out like a bell, "What happens here? What do you do?"

A dozen voices answered her. "A Keplian, lady. Gerae caught one of their mares."

"Why treat her so?" She noticed that the ropes holding the mare from her foal had slackened as those who held her stopped to listen.

"Why? But lady—she's a *Keplian!*" the man before her spluttered. He seemed to think that was explanation enough. Eleeri did not.

"I don't care what you name her. Is that any way to treat a beast? What evil has she ever done you?" She eyed the man who hauled hardest on the ropes. "Do you claim this mare attacked you? Did she slay kin of yours, threaten your



child? For what reason does she pay, and her foal with her?"

The man fell back at the sight of her anger. "She's just a Keplian. We kill them where we find them. They're evil." He straightened proudly. "Yes, they're of the Dark."

Eleeri was watching as the mare used the slackened rope to reach her foal with a comforting nose. "I see nothing evil here, just a mare who tries to protect her baby." From the confused babble behind her she heard a short conversation.

"... away from the hold."

"... gone to the valley. He'll not return for days."

"Then what do we do? This may be a woman of the power."

The girl hid a triumphant grin. Their lord seemed to have gone away for some time. Already this bunch looked disposed to fear her, at least a little. She sent a mental command to her mount, and allowed her back to straighten slowly. Horse and rider seemed to loom now in a martial pose, awing those who gathered about her on foot. Slowly—portentously—she removed an amulet from her shirt pocket.

She dropped lightly from her horse, walking over to where the handlers still kept a strain on the ropes. Lightly she touched the foal on his wet nose. The amber brushed the small muzzle and glowed softly.

She held the amulet high. "Gunnora has spoken: There is no evil in this one. He has harmed none and must be freed."

From the back of the crowd a man thrust his way. He was burly of build, with blond hair that glistened in the sun. He scowled viciously.

"The foal is too young to have done aught. But he will grow to be evil. All Keplians are followers of the Dark. Here we kill those who are of the Dark. Where do you come from, lady, that you do not know that?"



Eleeri returned question for question. "Where do you come from, man, that you would torture a dam and her newborn foal? Who told you they are evil, when Gunnora herself says the foal at least is innocent?"

His voice overtopped hers in a sudden roar. "Innocent? The Dark ones slaughtered my family when I was a child. A year since my brother was murdered by their kind while on a mission for those in the Valley of the Green Silences. Must we stand here while this woman seeks to take from us our lawful prey?" He moved forward.

"Are you so hot to kill that you ignore payment?" Eleeri asked softly.

The forward movement halted. "Payment?"

"Aye. Gunnora says that the foal is innocent. If she does not say the mare is clearly evil, will you release both to me in return for weregild?"

He blinked thoughtfully, diverted for this moment as he considered. "What do you offer, lady?"

Good, she was back to being a "lady" again. "I cannot offer you the worth of a family slain, a brother dead, but I can offer two for two." She waved a hand at the saddled, bridled horses that followed her.

A singularly nasty smirk spread over his face and he nodded. "Done, lady." Nor did he seem to care any longer whether Gunnora adjudged the mare. He held out his hand for the reins and both horses went to him at Eleeri's order.

"Now, lady. You get that pair out of here before sunset. You have one day. After that they're fair prey again."

"I will need to buy food, fill my water bags."

"No. You get nothing here. *We* do not traffic with the Dark. Take your 'friends' and get out before we stone you." He moved forward, with the savagery in his eyes deepening. She could see that he was delighted with his bargain but



would attack her as well if he felt safe enough. His eyes had already begun to rest covetously on her saddlebags and plump bedroll. Her hand flicked to her bow, stringing an arrow before he could close on her.

“Stand back, man. I have bargained fairly and will have that for which I have paid.” She called a sharp order to the men who still held the mare. “Release her.” They hesitated, and she moved the arrow to center on the man who stood staring. “Release her, *now!*”

He called a reluctant command and the bonds fell away. With a swift heave of her body, the mare freed herself and leaped to her foal. With a sinking heart, the girl saw that the smirk was back. What now?

“All right, now let’s see you convince that devil from the Dark to leave. The foal can’t walk.” He chuckled viciously. “The mare’ll kill you if you go near it now she’s free.”

Eleeri nodded, but her heart lifted. He’d misjudged. “Maybe, and maybe I’ll kill *you* if you don’t leave now. You are a stupid, cruel, ignorant man. If all in this village are of your kind, I will be glad to leave. Now get away from here before I lose my temper.” Her eyes flamed with rage and the man retreated. With a final sneer, he slouched around the corner, leaving a small group to stand watching. One approached cautiously.

“Lady, if Gunnora judges these, then it is not for us to naysay her. But truly their kind follows the ways of the Dark. We cannot trade with you for anything obvious. Gerae will know and make our lives hard for us. But if there is anything small we could provide?”

Her mouth suddenly watered. Her supply of salt was running low. If she had that, she could continue to feed herself easily by the hunt.

“Salt—will you trade as much salt as you can spare?”



He nodded and vanished hastily along with others. They returned bearing small hide bags containing not only salt but ground flour and some kind of sweetener. From the bandits she had killed she had taken small coins in silver and copper. These she proffered with a quiet comment.

“Of Karsten but nonetheless valuable. Those who owned them have no more use—for anything, even hunting those not of their kind.”

She could see that idea sink in. The word was even whispered in a soft hissing. “A spy—she has been spying in Karsten.”

She handed over the coinage, watching faces. They seemed to be happy with their bargain but not so delighted that she had overpaid.

“Are there other villages to the north?” She would find out what she could while they were well disposed.

“No, lady.” A hand rose to point. “That way is the forest of the Mosswomen.” A finger swung then to the northeast. “That way are the mountains again. Between those there is the river. Gerae will pursue you; best you leave the Keplians and go. Then he will kill them and leave you alone.”

“If he follows me,” Eleeri said in a hard-edged voice, “it will not be a stranger to you who dies. Thank you for your trading.” The man who had spoken for them nodded.

“Go in peace, lady. But beware of those beasts who are not truly beasts. The mare will kill if she has the chance, and so will Gerae. You are between the mountains and sea with no place to hide if you take them.” He turned away, his friends following, fingering their bounty in the Karsten coins. Eleeri turned back to the Keplians. The foal had managed to gain its feet, but looking closer, the girl could see why Gerae had been so amused. At some stage it had been struck brutally across the hocks. The small animal’s hind legs were



swollen and bruised. There was no way it could walk any distance, and even as she watched, it sank back to the dusty ground with a forlorn whicker. The mare eyed her, standing protectively over the baby. Eleeri felt a surge of anger at the people who could treat a tiny foal so cruelly, and before she had thought, she was moving closer, crooning gently.

The mare stamped warningly, and Eleeri reached out with her gift. To her surprise, she felt the tiny jet horse under her shirt give out a flare of warmth. Her fingers touched it. Strange . . . it was warmer than its contact with her skin warranted. She allowed it to fall before her throat and saw that the mare's eyes were fixed on it, wide with interest. She began to talk softly, explaining. The mare appeared to listen. Now she was trying to urge the foal to his feet once again. The baby tried and failed.

"Mare, we must leave here. That man will come back and kill your foal soon." She reinforced the message with mind-send, becoming interested in the strength and clarity of mind-pictures from the mare.

"If I lifted him onto my horse, I could walk and we could travel away from here. If you will let me help him."

From the mare she received a blast of distrust. Slowly she reached out to stroke the baby. As she did so, she allowed her mind to broadcast admiration. How beautiful he was, how strong and sturdy. How brave. It would indeed be a terrible thing to see him die. She would risk more even than she already had to prevent this. Her mind drifted to other horses she had known, and to her surprise she felt a gush of contempt from the mother, a feeling of indignation. They were *not* horses; how some human had felt about those others was nothing to her.

Eleeri smiled, sending acceptance. But whether they were horse or not, that man would return to kill. Did the mare still



wish to be here when he did? She did not. Then she must allow the girl to aid her foal or remain with him to see him die. Pictures of the mare fighting came in reply.

In return, the girl sent pictures of the mare dying, shot through with arrows and spears. Then her foal, bound, slaughtered, discarded, and dead.

Capitulation. The mare would graciously permit the human to help her. Moving with a slow smooth motion, Eleeri lifted the small beast and placed him comfortably on the bedroll-padded saddle. Taking the reins, she walked to the gate and opened it. The mare paced after.

They passed through and departed from the village. Hating eyes watched them go.

Gerae decided he would not follow too soon, or too obviously; his word had been given before too many. He would wait this day and the next. The moon was nearing full. Tomorrow as soon as the moon rose he would be on their trail. Then let the witch see if she could put him off with bribes and clever words.

His mind dwelled on her slender form, the arrogance of her voice. It would be pleasure indeed to teach her that he was not to be so despised. He spent his day making plans and preparing for a journey. It had been kind of her to give him the horses that would help him to take her.

Eleeri had learned well the lessons of war Far Traveler had taught her. He had passed along many wise sayings and warrior maxims. One might be translated as "Believe there will always be pursuit and act accordingly." She believed, and to the mare's indignation was acting accordingly.

They had struck the branch of the river within an hour's fast walking. There Eleeri led her small party into the water to travel upstream for another couple of hours. At the beginning of a long stretch of shallow water she allowed a few scattered



hoofprints to show.

Then she turned them about and they waded back downstream. Where the river forked, she took the fork to the far side and continued to wade. She suspected that Gerae would follow as soon as he could escape the eyes of his neighbors. This wouldn't make it so easy for him, particularly if he sneaked off after dark.

She mind-sent this to the mare and received a feeling of amused agreement. Something about the response caught Eleeri's attention. There had been a note of intelligence in the sending. The amusement had been more sophisticated than the simple emotion of an animal. She spoke again, sending as she did so.

"May I be favored with a name I can use for you and the small one?"

Distrust!

"It doesn't have to be your own, just something I can use. Humans feel awkward when there is no name."

Amusement again, consideration. Then *I am Tharna. My son is Hylan.*

Eleeri halted her footsteps before she realized. That had not been the mind-send of a beast. It had been the clear concise sending of an intelligent mind.

The mare's mind sent wicked laughter. *Humans! They say we wear beast shape, therefore we are beasts, and stupid. True, the males of our kind are often not as bright, but we are more than mere animals, shape or no shape.* The mare found with surprise of her own that the human was pleased with this. *Why does this information delight you?*

Eleeri tried to explain and gave it up, simply sending her emotion in a rush of feeling. Increased anger at the treatment of mare and foal, friendship that could be deeper with an intelligent mind, admiration of the pair—of the mare's



courage, of the foal's beauty. It was that last which melted the receiver a little.

My son is a fine colt. I marvel, human, that you appreciate him. Yet I suppose even a dull human can see his beauty.

Eleeri assured her she could. She glanced at the slender legs as they hung over the bedroll and a thought occurred.

“That man will pursue us all, I am sure of it. Do you know much of this land? Is there a place where you might be safe?”

If he follows us alone, there are few places. There is nothing to divert him from our trail. Nor would my kind become involved. They would see no reason to do so. I see no chance of being free of him unless he is killed.

Eleeri walked on in silence, considering. If Gerae wouldn't stop following, then he would just have to be dealt with. She'd seen his eyes on her and her possessions. If he could kill all of them, he would have a good horse, its gear, and everything else in her saddlebags. It might even be that the thought of loot pulled him more strongly than the death of the Keplians.

There'd been something else in his last look. If he took her unaware, she, too, might be a long time dying. He hadn't scrupled to torture a foal. Out here where no one would know her ending, he was unlikely to have scruples about her, either.

To take her mind from the thought, she began to question Tharna. “What do you know of the Dark?”

The mare's skin shivered in response. *There is a tower on the lands my people graze. For long and long it was empty. Half-ruined. Then one came. The Keplian stallions answer his demands. They have become still more cruel. We have always been enemies to others who share the lands. We kill them where we can, as they kill us. Now the tower



lord demands we do not do this.*

“How does he enforce that?”

He can lay on us a compulsion. At first he did so often. The stallions were used to bring humans to him.

“How did they bring humans?”

Tharna snorted in apparent amusement. *Humans love horses. Are my kind not far more beautiful? We appear tame. When we appear willing to be ridden, humans will risk much for that favor. Once on our backs, they are caught. Unable to dismount. They may thus be borne to the tower.* She whisked her tail in disgust. *I do not approve. That is, I did not. Now I think it would be well if humans were all taken to this tower lord. They are his kind. Let him use them.*

“What *does* he do with them?”

I know not. Only that they go in and do not come out again. Eleeri was left to consider that in silence. Her mind then returned to the worry of Gerae. The mare, too, believed he would follow them. He might even be able to obtain help from others if he lied with sufficient conviction.

Her eyes went to Hylan. His legs were badly bruised, and she was no trained vet. It would be at least a week before the injuries healed sufficiently for the foal to do his share of the walking. On the other hand, Gerae already had two good horses, thanks to her bargain. He could ride both into exhaustion to catch her—if he could find them at all. With luck he was floundering about on a riverbank many miles from here. She regretted giving up the horses she had cared for and loved. Gerae might ill treat them in an effort to catch up. But if she kept to her tactics of muddling trails, he would spend more time watching the ground and riding slowly. That would spare innocent beasts as well as possibly gaining her and the Keplians time and miles on him.

Tharna agreed. Not that the Keplian cared for horses, or



for humans, but the safety of Hylan was everything to her. If this man could be kept from her foal, she would agree to any idea which might work. She, too, understood the danger; with her colt unable to walk, she must reluctantly depend on the human to keep him safe. It galled her. But at least the human spoke to her fairly, treating her as a Keplian and not as one of the stupid beasts they rode.

Two days passed as they continued to follow the river road. At intervals they halted for the colt to nurse. At night they took it in turns to watch, half a night each. Both had the feeling that behind them Gerae followed.

They were right. Worse still, he was not alone but had successfully convinced two others to join him. Thus far they had been spectacularly unsuccessful in their hunt. They had chased the trail upriver, found the deliberate hoofmarks, and wasted more than a day following farther upriver as they scanned the banks. Then, fearing they had missed where their quarry had left the water, they had backtracked very slowly. They had then ridden on into the beginning of the mountains.

“She wouldn’t come here, Gerae. It’s to my mind they’ve gone on down the other fork.”

“Why would they do that?”

His companion snorted angrily. “I reckon they won’t take that foal into the mountains. It won’t be able to walk yet, not for days. No, they’ll stick to the plain. Hope to lead us into some Keplian trap. If we split up, we can check the bank on both sides at once. That’ll cut down tracking time.”

It did, but by the time they struck Eleeri’s tracks again, she and the Keplians were skirting the mountain spur. They kept within the foothills. As long as they traveled at a walk, the foal was no great burden to the horse. At first the mare’s bruises and lash marks had pained her greatly, but with the



passage of days they healed slowly. The girl's obvious concern for her, the offering of herbs to help her heal, surprised the mare. She was not used to a human who liked her. That Eleeri honestly did, and that the emotions of that liking and would-be friendship were coloring her every mind-sense, were gradually winning the mare over.

They had spoken little as they marched. Now Tharna found herself wanting to talk, to discover why this human was so different from those others she had known.

She hovered over her foal. Hylan was improving with each day that passed. Soon he would be able to walk part of the trail instead of being carried the whole time. The human's interaction with the foal had also surprised her. Hylan clearly trusted the girl and Tharna wasn't sure she approved that. But the human had helped the colt's injured legs, rubbing on the juice of mixed herbs to ease the pain. She laughed with him, stroked and patted him with affection. Lifted him with such care at each resting place. The mare watched her colt as he trusted, and slowly she, too, began to trust.

Behind them the pursuit had quickened. The three had met others, who had loaned them spare horses in their supposed pursuit of killers in exchange for their own leg-weary mounts. The trade enabled the trio to press the trail hard.

Days slipped by. The colt spent more and more of his time walking on his own legs now, strengthening with the love and care showered on him. Tharna felt strange as she watched the human throw gentle arms about him. She felt the overflow of love as Eleeri stroked her son. Without consciously deciding to do so, she had steered their trail around the Keplian lands. Thus far they had met none of her own kind.

She feared their reaction if they did. How would they see



her wanderings with this human? Worse still, how would they view the friendship between a Keplian foal and human? She could guess at that one. She had no desire to see her son slaughtered as a traitor. As they walked, she began for the first time to question her allegiances. She wanted to talk over her thoughts but feared to speak. This could still be some trick of a cunning and clever race. Perhaps the girl had fooled her. Time would doubtless show, if she made no foolish moves herself. She paced on, following the lead horse.

Unknown to Eleeri, they had been seen. Valley scouts had spotted them as they skirted the mountains, and watched the direction of their travel. They had not been close enough to see more than a girl with three horses, but they mentioned it to the next travelers they met. These were Gerae and his men, well astray to the northwest. With that information they rode hard to intersect Eleeri's path.

Do you believe we have left those behind? Tharna queried as they slowed for the trailing colt.

The girl sighed. "I fear not. Indeed I had ill dreams last night, dreams of pain and death, of evil that swooped to drink blood." She quickened her feet as Hylan caught up. "I think we need to rest for several days soon. Hylan grows stronger, but all this walking is still too much for him. He needs time to grow in peace, but where do we find such a place?" As they followed the path to the east, they had climbed around the foothills. High up as they were, all were able to see that far ahead there lay a river, glinting brightly in the sunlight.

"Perhaps there in the mountains beyond the river we can find a place to be safe. For Hylan to grow."

The mare said nothing, plodding on. That direction seemed as good as any other to her. Only let the foal be safe. To ensure that, she would travel with a human, traverse her



whole land, deal with demons and powers. Anything, as long as her beloved son survived.

She was young, Hylan her first foal. The coupling that had bred him had been, for her, a shocking experience. She had been overawed by the larger, older stallion. She had rebelled, but a bitten shoulder and several powerful kicks had subdued her. It was nature, but she was not eager to repeat the experience. At the moment she did not miss the company of her own kind.

That night as they camped, Hylan was better. Previous halts had seen him sore and leg-weary. But now, as the days passed, he was adjusting to trail life and his legs healed slowly.

This camp, for the first time he bounced as they halted. Eleeri went to him, running her hands gently down the slender legs. She massaged, stretching each leg in turn with a hand under Hylan's fetlock. He made small nickering sounds of pleasure, enjoying the attention. Released, he galloped in a wide circle, bucking as he flew past. Eleeri laughed, turning to Tharna to share the moment.

"He's improving. Soon he'll be outrunning you."

I would give my life to have it so, the mare sent soberly.

"Yes." Eleeri's mind turned back to their conversation of previous days. "Tharna, why *are* humans so afraid of your people?"

The mare was silent. Then she tossed her head. *Perhaps because we have never allied with the Light. Many stallions deliberately chose the Dark, so that we are all accounted evil. Shamans, others who seek aid to ride into darkness, all come to us. All humans know of us is that we carry them away, never to be seen again. Or that those of the Dark use us as mounts.

*Once as a foal I saw a human taken to the tower. It was



just after the lord had come there. The man fought well. He cried aloud, calling on powers and struggling to leap from the stallion's back. He failed.* Her hoof kicked idly at the turf. *I do not approve of this. Let the humans leave us alone, and we should do the same.*

Eleeri agreed with a short nod. The conversation lapsed as they turned to watch the colt again. Hylan had no time for serious discussion. He was too busy enjoying the warm evening.

The next day, across the plain they marched. If they found a ford or bridge, they could cross. If not, they must search. Something told Eleeri that safety might be found in the bordering mountains.

She had come to love the Keplian foal; for Hylan she would fight as ferociously as his dam. She was unsure about the mare, sensing Tharna's own doubts about humans still. But it no longer mattered to her. She loathed the cruelty with which the Keplian had been handled. She would fight before she allowed Tharna to fall into such hands again.

Late that night she, too, wondered how others would act if their small company was spied. Other Keplians, of the true Dark or not, would surely seek to slay them all. She roused early and ate as she saddled the horse again. There was a feeling at the back of her neck that said to hurry, hurry.

Next morning they moved out, heading directly for the river at a brisk walk. Hylan bounced along, and the sun was warm on their backs. But still Eleeri was uneasy. She felt as if hostile eyes watched. She eyed brush to her right. Was the danger there? Where?

Then from the clump of trees toward their left came wild cries. Eleeri spun to see three riders bearing down on them. In one flashing look she recognized Gerae. So, he'd found them and now he came to count coup, to take his prizes.



Tharna was racing forward to fight, but spears held her off. Her opponents laughed as blood streamed from her wounds. They would ride around her, take the foal. She could only die with the bitter knowledge she had failed him. She shrieked, rising on her hind legs. If it must be so, it must be so. Better to die fighting for her son than to live and see him die before her. She plunged forward.



5

*B*ehind her Eleeri spun her mount, then froze him with a mental command. Her hands moved even faster as bowstring snapped taut and arrow flew. She had always had an eye for bow skill, but the years of Far Traveler's teaching and her own hours of practice had refined this even more. Now she shot, whipped another arrow to bow, and shot again. The men who fronted the frantic mare went down. Neither was dead, not for those fractions of a second before Tharna reached them. After that they were not only dead but bloodily so.

Gerae had seen them fall. He fled—at the fastest speed he could goad his mount to attaining. But arrows fly faster. Tharna had started after him, and as he slid limply from his racing horse, she reached him with teeth and hooves. Not until the body was all but shredded did she desist. Hylan stood by. To a small colt untouched, it was all very exciting, but he was hungry again. He whickered hopefully.



His mother leaped for him, running her muzzle over his body. He was uninjured. She swung her hindquarters to allow him to nurse and stood, deeply contented. The girl approached and Tharna made an ugly sound, a kind of low snarling.

Eleeri looked into her eyes. They blazed a terrible red. She'd never really noticed that before. But now that she thought of it, the mare's eyes had always had a reddish cast. Oh, well, Tharna wasn't a horse; it was probably the Keplian eye color. She moved forward, crooning to the colt. Her mind reached out to her friend as she did so.

Tharna was off guard mentally. For the first time the girl's mind penetrated her surface thoughts. She swayed in shock. Ka-dih, what was this one to whom Eleeri had given friendship? A roiling maelstrom of emotion met her startled mind. Different. Terrifying. She disciplined herself. This was Tharna. They had traveled together, cared for Hylan together, fought to guard one another. This was a Keplian, she reminded herself, not a horse; she must accept Tharna's differences and cherish the friend in her.

As she struggled, the mare stood motionless, waiting, poised like a predator. With a wild effort, Eleeri subdued her fears and walked forward.

"Battle-sister, is Hylan unhurt?"

A vast surprise enveloped her so that she halted. Her emotion? No, it was the mare's emotions she felt. She lifted a slow hand to stroke the mane out of her friend's eyes.

"What is all this surprise, and is Hylan unhurt?"

The mare found mind-voice. *My son is uninjured, thanks to you and your arrows. But—* she faltered, *you still wish to travel with me?*

"How not?"



You touched my mind truly. I felt it, I felt your shock, your fear. Others of your kind have done this and always they have then turned against us to kill. Will you now hate me and mine, seek to slay? She peered down thoughtfully. *Once, when I thought of this, I wondered if reaching our inner minds sent humans mad. Humans hate and fear us as it is. Maybe to know us is to fear us even more.* Her skin shivered.

Eleeri reached out again. This time, knowing what seethed below the surface thought, she was able to control her instinctive fear. Gradually she made sense of the seething power, the blazing emotions, finding they quietened as she did so. It was as if her own lessening of fear soothed the mare's. Using that knowledge, she smoothed out their emotions until both were calm again. She stood thinking as the colt nursed.

“Tharna, it seems to me that we act on each other.”

The fine powerful head above her nodded.

Eleeri leaned against a warm shoulder, absently stroking it. “That first contact with your mind was terrible. But when I thrust away fear and returned, it was no longer so frightening. Now, as my mind touches yours without fear, your mind, too, is calm.” She deepened the bond slowly and spoke then, asking the question she had thought before.

“Are you of the Dark, battle-sister? I do not think so, but those others did.”

The mare shook her head and stamped a hoof, bringing a squeal of indignation from the foal. He hadn't finished yet. His mother should remain still.

*We are not born to the Dark, only to shade and shadow. Some make the choice to join wholly with the Dark, others do not. Long ago when the adepts warred, we were made.



Why, we do not know. They made other races, too.

Many of the stallions turn to the Dark, fewer mares. Our males are more warlike. The stallions resent humans, I think, for their fears, their hates, and for all that humans seem to have.

“Would you turn to the Dark?”

The mare lowered her head to Eleeri’s shoulder. *Not now, battle-sister. You killed your own to save mine.* A soft nose brushed against a softer cheek. *I have always refused to speak your name. Now I do. Eleeri I name you. Battle-sister you have named me. Do you also name me as friend?*

The girl’s hands smoothed the warm hide. “I do so. Neither un-friend nor half-friend are you, but friend. Sister-kin, if you will accept it so, and kin to the small one.”

Acceptance and a shy pleasure radiated from the mare. Arms about the muscled neck, Eleeri stood for long minutes, savoring the communion. She loved horses, but they could only fill her loneliness so far. But this, this was fullness. A kin-sister, a friend, one to speak with who could reply. One to care for who cared in return. She pushed herself away and took down the bag where she kept her herbs.

“A good sister would care for your wounds.” She brushed on the soothing juices with gentle fingers. Her hands admired the powerful muscles, the sleek hide, the arched and flowing mane and tail.

Under twin pleasures of hand and mind, the mare relaxed, savoring the first deep communion she had ever enjoyed. Friendship wove its way through her being. Only with her mother had she felt this acceptance before. She felt the bitterness drain away, her hatred of humans who condemned what they could not understand. This one was not like that. This one had faced all she found, and accepted.



She felt as if she floated, trusting, serene. Long moments slipped by. She loved this one, battle-sister, friend, kin-kind. The Dark whispered to her—and was rejected. Who had need of such a night when sunlight beckoned? Besides, she knew well that always the Dark betrayed. So many of her kind had been seduced by its wiles, and lived only long enough to regret that seduction. She would not be one; she was shade and shadow, but not the Dark, never the Dark now that she understood the Light.

In perfect accord, the three set out on the last mile to the river. Hylan did not understand what had happened. He only knew that his mother and friend were happy. It was enough.

Do we cross the river or follow it? Tharna queried, scanning the plain doubtfully. In her mind Eleeri saw pictures of the Gray Ones who often roamed this area.

“If this is their place, best we get away. From your mind they’re no respecters of either of our kinds.”

They trotted hurriedly along the riverbank. No crossing could be seen and the water ran deep and strongly.

“Do you know this area well?”

Tharna shook her head. *I think the river runs far. It comes from the western mountains, and I have heard of a lake somewhere to the west also. The Gray Ones avoid the area; there are ruins there which are un-friend to their kind.*

“Good. Then we’ll go that way,” Eleeri said practically. “Any place they don’t like should be right for us.” She headed her mount upriver and the Keplians followed.

Now travel together was delight. They explored each other’s ideas and the mare heard much of what a different world could be like. About them the scenery was unchanging.

Eleeri had time to muse upon Tharna’s mind-pictures of the Gray Ones and what Cynan had said of them. It was



possible Tharna's enmity for the creatures colored her impressions to some extent. Still, Eleeri thought, they did not attract her as any kind of ally. They walked upright in a slouch. The head was narrow, with tooth-filled mouth and small red eyes gleaming from shaggy, dirt-matted gray fur. From Tharna's memories Eleeri knew the brutes to be intelligent. Well, they could speak but rarely did. Their habits were such as to disgust most intelligent beings. They wore no clothes, nor did they carry weapons.

They were fighters if brought to bay, or in the grip of battle-madness. Otherwise they preferred to fight only when the odds were strongly in their favor. Like much of the Dark, they feared to cross running water. Until blood-mad, they would hold back from that.

Since they were nearing Gray One territory, Eleeri kept her bow ready now. Beside her the mare, too, was thinking. The way she and the human seemed to agree interested her oddly. The Keplians had no real legends of origin. There were only vague beliefs that they had been created by adepts during the ancient wars. Some had believed horses to have been the basis for that creation. They had been slain if they voiced that belief, though. No stallion would endure the idea. Yet it felt so comfortable to walk beside this human. So peaceful.

She watched the plodding pony. What would it feel like to bear a human like that? Not with saddle and bridle, but bare of back, feeling every shift and sway of the human's body? She thrust the idea away, concentrating on Eleeri's enjoyment of the day instead. She could read some of that. The river flowing by in crystal ripples, the stones' gray hues, the brown of river earth showing in patches where stones had shifted. Shrubs and often large clumps of trees provided



shade and shelter for many bright birds. For the first time Tharna found beauty pointed out to her, a mutual delight.

Their thoughts flowed together more casually now as they found pleasure in each other's company. Hylan, too, seemed to be gaining in intelligence. The mare wondered about that. Could it be that such communion allowed him to find potential denied to others of his sex? Stallions mated and fought—that was their destiny. But was it? She followed the horse as her mind grappled with new ideas. She was certain that no one of her kind had ever been friend and sister-kin to a human before. Or if they had, it was time out of mind ago. No legends existed of this. No human had ever been moved to accept a Keplian as friend; always before they had fled or given battle when minds touched.

But this one had done more. And it was as if Eleeri's acceptance of Tharna had opened new doors within the mare. As if—as if it were *right* that they be friends. The Great Ones of old had designed Keplians. Had it been for this, to walk as their friends? The human—no, *Eleeri*—admired her friend's beauty and strength. She spoke with pride that Tharna could outspeed the horse. There was love and friendship in her mind whenever she turned to Tharna or Hylan. Was this how it had once been intended to be?

The mare did not know, but she knew that this idea pleased her. Her kind lived in isolation even among themselves. A mare would fight savagely for her foal, but only as long as he suckled. After that, he was ignored. Would she cease to love Hylan once he grew?

She shivered her skin, to chase away the idea as she would a fly. Never. She would love her son as long as they both lived. Her head came up and, feeling the sunlight on her back, she leaped, twisting into the air. It felt good to



unkink powerful muscles. She thrust up again and with a baby squeal of excitement Hylan followed suit.

Eleeri looked back and laughed as the Keplians bucked and bounced in the clear air. With their friendship assured, it was wonderful how Tharna had become almost a different being. The colt, too, was growing, in mind abilities as well as size.

Race you to the river!

They had drifted away as the water curved slowly to their right. Now hooves pounded as horse and rider, with the Keplian mare before them, thundered toward the line of trees again. Hylan fell back, baby legs unable to keep up with even a horse as yet. His indignant cry was lost in the drum roll of hooves. They halted at the river and drank while Eleeri pattered along the bank watching the current.

“Does a stream run from this to the lake?”

As I remember, it does, Tharna responded.

“Well, we’ll stay this side of the river until we reach it. The stream should be shallower and so should the river, once we’ve passed the lake. We may be able to find a ford then.”

The Keplian stared out across the water. It was true they could not risk crossing yet. Hylan was too weak to risk him in such a current. But the river was slackening; if it continued to do so, they might be able to risk a crossing soon. She would be happy to be out of the Gray Ones’ territory. More than one Keplian foal had fallen to their teeth, even mares weakened by birthing or accident. She sent agreement and wandered on along the water’s edge.

Hylan arrived then and she licked him lovingly. He was so strong, so beautiful. Altogether a marvelous son—there had never been such a one, so wise and so clever. She



followed the water and Hylan trailed his mother as Eleeri remounted. Their pace was slow. Not that the land was so rough, but large thickets of brush were now appearing along the riverbank. Rather than force passage, the friends were detouring around these, and each took them farther from the river until they found a path back.

The brush was a nuisance, the girl thought. But it was beautiful. The leaves were a light and silvery green. Berries grew in bird-appreciated profusion, and many species feasted merrily. She leaned down to pluck handfuls for herself after checking with Tharna. The ripe globes burst sweetly in her mouth. They had the smallest touch of tartness to their taste, just enough to quench thirst as well as hunger. She ate as they traveled, and when the bushes began to thin out, she dismounted. To the surprise of the Keplian mare, her friend now dug in the earth by a bush.

What is it that you do?

The girl looked up and grinned. “These berries are wonderful. I don’t know where we’re going, but I thought it’d be nice to have them when we get there.”

As she spoke, she was carefully separating several tiny runners from their mother. She had dug out the turf in which their roots were encased and now she tucked plants and earth securely into a saddlebag. Tharna looked on, eyes wide with interest and amusement. Humans: no wonder the world changed about them. It would never have occurred to a Keplian to do that, even if they could. Yet why not? Would it not be useful to have food where you wished it?

They paced on, following the life-giving water. As Hylan tired, they rested; with the night they slept. Time had no meaning beyond that. Rain drove them to shelter until it passed, then they moved on again. As they waited, Eleeri



had chosen sticks. Now as she rode she smoothed the shafts, looking them over carefully and discarding a few. Two of the arrows she had shot at Gerae and his companions had been broken in their fall. The third Tharna had broken in her haste to ensure the man's death. There would be other dangers; best she had a good supply of arrows. She worked as she rode; with Tharna ahead, the horse would merely follow.

Within two more days her quiver was full. She continued to work. It was not hard to do; she could converse with her friends as well. But once an enemy was sighted, there would be no time to make weapons.

Later she believed that something must have warned her. The impulse to make the arrows had been so strong. By the time they were attacked, she had more than three dozen riding in quiver and bedroll. Just after daylight they paused as Tharna mind-sent.

Danger, sister-kin. The scent of Gray Ones comes to me on the breeze. They track us swiftly.

Eleeri sent her mount into a slow trot. "How far ahead is the lake stream, do you think?"

Last time the wind blew from there, it was far yet. But that was a day's travel ago. I think by now it is close, although the smell blows away from us. What should we do?

Eleeri thought quickly. It was the art of a warrior to make such decisions based on little knowledge and yet be correct. She spoke and the Keplians obeyed. Hylan leaped into a canter, running ahead of his dam and her friend. He could mind-send some distance by now, sufficient for them to know what was ahead. With luck, the pursuing pack would see that the adults kept to a steady pace, and assume the foal merely played.

Hylan raced up the shallow rise ahead, scanned the land



before him with staring eyes. Down a long slope the lake glinted ahead under the sun. A stream lightly tumbled to it from the lustier river. He sent that and ran on.

The stream could be crossed near its junction with the lake. The water was deep, but the adults would be able to forge passage; it was not that strong a current. He stood there waiting. His family was some way back by now and could not be contacted.

Within the trees the Gray Ones trotted more quickly. Ahead their prey was dawdling. They could come up with them soon, then the feasting. There were more than a dozen of the pursuers. They could overcome any miserable Keplian and human. Their mouths watered. The foal would be the most tender; the mare's despair would spice the dish. They hurried on.

Eleeri had held to the slow trot. It covered ground without tiring them, but kept them ahead. A quick flicker of her eyes to the rear and she saw that those who followed were closer. Still she kept to the pose of unwariness. Tharna crested the rise and as they started down the long slope, both received Hylan's mind-picture.

As one they leaped forward, linked in battle plan. The thunder of hooves spurred the Gray Ones to hot pursuit, but the companions were minutes ahead as they reached Hylan and stream. With flying fingers, Eleeri detached her stirrup leathers, buckling them together and looping them about the foal's belly. Then she thrust her mount forward into the water, Hylan at his side. The support would keep him close, keep his head above the water as they swam.

At the stream Tharna turned at bay. She would hold the Gray Ones while her foal crossed. It looked as if there had once been a ford here, but either the water was higher than



usual or it had altered over time. Now the water was deep enough to force Eleeri and her mount to swim, but there was still one advantage left to them. Along the stream banks, thorn bushes grew thickly; only at the ford was there a clear space to the water.

Perhaps in another place the bushes thinned, but the pursuers seemed disinclined to search it out. Tharna stood before the gap, hooves at the ready, teeth bared. Eleeri was pressing her mount as hard as was safe. Even with the thorns protecting her flanks, the mare was in a lot of trouble; those wolf things hadn't looked like pushovers to her. She splashed up the far bank, reached down to release the foal, and swung her horse back to the water. For a brief moment she sat to assess the situation.

Tharna was holding them. Not easily, but the hunt was unwilling to risk her teeth and hooves. Still the sounds were becoming more frenzied. Soon they would work themselves into a killing rage in which even death did not matter to them. If only Eleeri could break them before that occurred.

She heeled the horse downstream, where she could see the Gray Ones better and at an angle to the mare. Good. The bushes were low enough so that from the bank where it rose a little on this side, she could get a shot. She drew her bow, strung an arrow, waited as she breathed in, then loosed.

Before the hunt could react, another arrow was already in the air, then another. Thanks be to Ka-dih for driving her to making these. Crude they might be, but they carried well enough and shot straight over this slight distance. They also killed, as the Gray Ones could now attest. Within minutes four of their number were dead, three more wounded. It was enough for the pack. With yelps and threats, they withdrew. As Tharna swam to join her, Eleeri kept watch.



“What do we do about them? Will they follow?”

The mare snorted to clear her nostrils. *I think it unlikely. We have cost them dear and they like to fight only when the odds favor them. What they may do is alert any of their kind on this side. Best we leave swiftly and hide our trail if we can.*

Eleeri eyed her. Foam splattered sleek black flanks, blood dappled lower chest and one leg.

“What sort of shape are you in if we do have to run for it again?”

If we must, we must. I’ll keep up.

The girl snorted in turn. “I’d feel happier if we cleaned you up first. Rest while I do it, then we can move on. Besides, I think Hylan is hungry.”

The foal proved that at once as he slid around his mother’s hindquarters, settling to nurse. Carefully Eleeri swabbed at the slight wounds marring Tharna’s hide. They were shallow, but— a thought occurred to her.

“Tharna, those wolf-people, um—you don’t get anything from their bites, do you?”

The mare looked bemused. With that question had come a very odd mind-picture of her turning into a Gray One herself.

What is it you fear?

Eleeri felt a little foolish, but better safe than sorry. “Well, in my world there are tales. That one who is bitten by a being like that will become one each full moon.”

The mare felt a painful sensation in her chest. A constriction—her breathing began to choke—then she was making a terrible squealing whinnying sound.

Eleeri leaped forward in despair—it was happening. Oh, gods, there must be something she could do. Tharna pushed her back with a soft nose and stood head hanging down. In



high indignation the girl suddenly realized that the mare was laughing. She relaxed. She'd never heard such a sound before, but her own mouth curved into a grin as minds met.

“So it doesn't happen here. I get it.”

Oh, sister-kin. It is as well. What a thing it would be if the Gray Ones could increase their numbers in such a way. But no, the only thing that their bites do is kill you if they go deep enough. These are shallow wounds, slashes more than bites. You have cleaned them, so they will not fester. Hylan has rested and drunk; let us go now.

Eleeri mounted and sat a moment surveying the land within eyeshot. The lake was veiled in a faint mist; something told her they should travel away from it. She nudged her mount upstream and studied the river. It was shallower after the loss of the stream water. If it continued to grow shallow, they would be able to cross it with care in a few more miles. The land was beginning to rise again very slowly. Ahead lay more mountains, deeply scored by canyons and ridges. Her heart yearned toward them.

She turned back to her friend. “Is there a direction you'd prefer?”

None. Make a decision for us, battle-sister.

Wordlessly Eleeri looked forward to the mountains. They called; she would answer. Within them it might be that they would find a place to shelter. If nothing else, they would find places to hold off Gray Ones who came hunting. Her mind settled as she kicked the horse forward. It would be the mountains.

The mare and foal fell in behind her as she rode. Unconsciously the girl had mind-sent as emotion touched her. They, too, were drawn by the mountains now. The tiny group trotted forward, leaving the stream and lake behind



them. On their right the river tumbled, bright glittering water over black rock rapids.

Soon they would have to cross it before it shifted in the half circle that would drive them back to the lowlands. They reached the fork by nightfall. Eleeri reached for her stirrup leathers again and called Hylan. Tharna was puzzled.

Why cross now?

“Old saying: cross rivers before you sleep.”

The mare looked even more puzzled and the girl sent her a swift succession of mind-pictures. Of rivers that rose in the night and could no longer be forded. Of enemies who struck at a sleeping camp, leaving warriors with their backs to a river and no place to retreat safely. The mare nodded silently; agreement flashed between them. With the foal safely secured, they swam the shallow branch. It was close to dusk and they walked on to look over the other fork. There, too, the water was low.

They hesitated at its brink. To sleep here within the forks was to have a secure camp. Eleeri glanced thoughtfully at the banks and bushes. They could camp in that clump of high brush and be screened from casual view. There were large heaps of old dry wood along the riverside, tossed up by ancient floods. If she prepared a fire, it could be lit if danger threatened. Her suggestion was approved and even Hylan aided in gathering the logs. With that in place as darkness fell, all felt more secure. The wood was old and tinder dry. It would flame at the very breath of fire, and Eleeri's lighter was always nearby.

Great dark masses against the half-lit sky and stars, the mountains loomed. The girl lay looking up at them and wondering what had happened to her over the last year. She glanced down at her watch. It ran on a long-life battery and



still worked. She peered closer and smothered a sudden laugh. Today had been her birthday. She was seventeen today.

She drifted off to sleep, still smiling. It had been some birthday, running from werewolves in the company of a couple of talking horses. This last year had been a lulu. She couldn't wait to find out what the next might hold. It wouldn't be boring. . . . She giggled drowsily and sleep came down like a cloak.



6

*T*he dawn was fine again and the second river fork appeared lower. They crossed with care, trotting up the farther bank.

Into the mountains?

Eleeri still felt the drawing from the bulk that now loomed higher before them. Somewhere within that maze of upthrust crags they would find what she sought.

“Yes, but I see no need to make too great a haste.”

They strolled, enjoying the bright sun, the berry bushes, the birds that were different from those of the plains but sang as sweetly. Hylan skipped, bucking and capering from one to the other. He was growing swiftly; soon he could be weaned and independent. Tharna feared that. In her own foalhood she had seen the colts change then. They became duller, more savage, more apt to accept the Dark, to be its tools.

She adored her son, her firstborn, but she had never



been quite as the other mares herself. She had questioned, where they accepted. It was strange, traveling with Eleeri; it was as if some of the girl's intelligence was communicated to Hylan. He was more intelligent, more questioning than other colts of his age. He thought more.

They ambled on past tall trees housing squawking red and blue birds. Tharna paused to graze on a succulent patch of grass, her mind still busy. Ahead of her, Eleeri strung her bow and shot quickly. A rabbit dropped. A fat buck. Humans ate meat, Keplians ate grass, Tharna mused. Although those who accepted evil might well be fed on other, less savory foods.

Yet this was her sister-kin; she felt closer to the human than she ever had to her own kind. Hylan loved Eleeri. Keplians were like Gray Ones, Flannan, Thas, Krogran—all races made by adepts. Her mind made a sudden wild leap. Could it be—was it possible—could her kind have been made to accompany humans? Perhaps a human who loved horses greatly, one who wished for an intelligent one to walk beside him as a friend, not as a servant? She grazed absently, mind busy with this concept. In trusting the human who saved Hylan, in becoming her friend, had she unknowingly fulfilled a long-ago destiny? She decided she liked the idea, but she would not share it, not yet.

Into the foothills they moved, wandering along likely trails, investigating dead-ended canyons, and drinking from tiny streams. But always their main course was deeper into the mountains. Now and again they returned to the river, although it was greatly depleted by now, almost a stream itself. Eleeri was restless. It was as if something called her to act, but what she was to do, she did not know.

One morning before dawn, she shuffled off her bedding



and rose to walk. Her feet took her higher, out of the gully and on up the slope above it.

From the north and a little west there came a sudden wrenching pull. At her throat an answering warmth awoke. With a stifled gasp, she leaned forward, opening her shirt. The jet horse pendant swung free, eyes afire in the miniature head. But even as she watched, they changed, no longer points of fire but now the deep blue of sapphires. She blinked. The color remained. Over her settled a conviction that this was a sign. She cupped the pendant in her hand and turned away. The eyes glowed red. Back to the direction that tugged at her—blue eyes again, and now light seemed to emanate from them also.

The girl looked down. Cynan had given her this as a leave-taking. Had he had any idea of what it was he gifted? She thought not. Slowly she allowed the pendant to swing free. Then she spoke in a whisper.

“In that direction must we go to seek the Light?” The pendant flamed, a brightness that made her squeeze her eyelids shut. She opened them cautiously. This was medicine of some kind. From what Tharna had been able to tell her of this land, it was unlikely anything of the Dark could counterfeit that of the Light. Thus the pendant was probably truthful.

She touched the tiny horse with a forefinger, stroked the proud head. “As you say, so shall we do. We travel to the north and west to seek the Light. Guard our journey, bring us safe to the Light.” She did not know to whom she spoke, only that she felt them to be half friend at least, or even whole friend. That there was work for her here—that she was sure of. Did not the gods always seek human aid? It was ill to meddle with matters of the gods, but worse still to refuse an asked-for help. She paced slowly back to her bedroll. From the upper slope she had seen a single peak to



the northwest. In that direction they would travel at daybreak. She hoped Tharna would not mind.

The mare was suspicious. *How do you know that you were not tricked?*

Eleeri held out the pendant silently. The eyes still shone a rich blue in the sunlight. The color of the light, of life. The mare was silenced. Her son bounced happily. To him it was an adventure. He was more than eager to be on their way, and already he was trotting down the faint trail in the direction Eleeri had pointed out. Girl and mare sent amusement to each other, swinging onto the trail behind him. Before them the peak loomed, but they would not hurry. Thus far they had seen neither Gray Ones nor other creatures of the dark in the hills, but it was as well to be wary. There could yet be dangers not altogether of the Dark.

In these higher hills feeding was thin. The mare must graze longer to find sufficient food. Eleeri found enough small game to feed herself with far less difficulty. She used the time to explore, allowing her mount to graze with the Keplians. On foot she scrambled up and down crags, investigated caves, and thoroughly enjoyed the stretching of muscles grown stiff from riding. Slowly they neared the peak. By now the imperative was strong enough to be felt by all but the pony.

Why does it call to us also?

Tharna looked about her. *We wear no pendant; we are of the shadow. This is a thing of the Light.*

Eleeri, who was standing close, put up her arms about the sleek neck, then patted the colt as he pushed her for attention. "The pendant was changed," she said slowly, feeling the rightness of her words as she said them. "Maybe we are being led to a place where you also will be offered a change."



The mare reared back. *And if we do not wish to be other than what we are?*

“Then you shall not be,” Eleeri said positively. “It is to my mind that you are offered a gift. It is for you to take it or refuse. I will not allow you to be forced into that which you do not wish. This I swear, sister-kin.”

Tharna’s agitation subsided. *We travel with you, but if I fear this thing we seek will change us against our wishes or even yours, our roads part. Until then they lie together.* She resumed grazing. Eleeri refrained from pointing out that by that time it might be too late. If it was, it would be too late for her, too, since she would set herself against anything that menaced her friend’s wishes. She flung the thought from her with a twist of her shoulders. This seeking was of the light; she knew it. As soon as her friends had finished grazing, they would find the source of the compulsion. It could not be far away now.

After a long weary day of search, she was forced to admit her defeat.

“If this place is anywhere about, I certainly can’t see it.”

I have heard that such places may be hidden. Your pendant showed you the direction. Should you not wait, eat and rest, then call on its help? Maybe it can aid us again. Tharna was practical. Eleeri sank to the grass and dug busily in her saddlebag. From it she drew cold meat and a bag of rather tired-looking berries. From that the mare understood her advice to be accepted. She grazed, keeping an eye on the girl. If there was anything she could do to help when the time came, she would do so willingly.

Without intent, Eleeri fell asleep. The long day had been tiring, and with her stomach full, sleep came easily. She woke just as dawn flamed the sky. Her pendant slipped naturally into her hand and she gazed at it thoughtfully. Could it help



her to find this mysterious place?

The truth was, she wasn't at all sure why she was searching. Only that it had grown to be a driving force. At first it had been a quiet calling. A longing for a place to be free in safety. Later, with her love for the mare and colt, the need for a refuge had become obvious. They must have a place where Hylan could grow in peace, where they could live without fear. But under that there was still the call. As if something inside of her yearned for a home she had never known. It was foolish. She remembered her home with Far Traveler perfectly well. But this was something else. Something silly, Eleeri thought. It wasn't possible to be homesick for a place you'd never lived in. Was it?

She gazed at the land around her, foothills merging into solid higher mountains. The land was rough but not the brutalized mountains of the turning. There the witches of Estcarp had wrung out the mountains like a dishcloth, using their power. Here the land was simply ordinary mountains bordering this land of Escore. Far away over the horizon lay the Valley of Green Silences. There the lady led the fight against those of the Dark. Eleeri would stay away from the valley. It was just possible they'd expect her to join them. To conform. They might even object to Tharna and Hylan.

She shook her head. She and her friends would be better off finding a refuge of their own. She studied the pendant in her hands. Cynan, once he had seen she had the horse gift, had insisted on teaching her spells to go with the amber amulets and pebbles from the place of the Old Ones. She stared down thoughtfully. The pendant had helped her before. Would it aid now? From behind her came a soft whicker of amusement.

No answers without questions, sister-kin. Ask!

Eleeri bent her concentration on the pendant. Around it



grew a soft glow, a blue-green that brightened by the minute. Without thinking, she reached out and gently drew the Keplians into mind-link. The pendant flared, giving forth a blaze of light so great that Eleeri's eyes shut involuntarily. About her throat she felt a tugging—harder, harder—then it was gone and she opened her eyes to stare in wonder.

Before them stood her pendant made flesh, a great black stallion. No true horse, Eleeri knew. This was the spirit of horses. Intelligence shone from the sapphire eyes, pride was in the crest of his upthrust neck. Power flamed in every sinew, power both of strength and the Light.

With a leap he was away, and they scrambled to follow. Hoofbeats clattered up the trail and the girl bit back a cry of exasperation. They'd come this way the day before. There was nothing here. She scanned the earth under the hooves of her pony. It was hard-packed, probably an old deer trail. Rock walls rose on either side, as if this had been originally a stream bed. The occasional drifts of small stones within the curves suggested this was so. But the trail was dry now. Perhaps a change of direction, a landslip higher up now diverted any water.

The stallion swung to one side. Here the curve was larger, more of an angle. He stood poised. Then, before them all, runes flamed blue on either side of a gap Eleeri had not noticed before. She gaped at them, recognizing some. Cynan had drawn them for her and taught her to use them along with her pebbles. They were ward signs. Below blazed runes of Light, runes of guard against the Dark. They were reinforced by some she had not been taught. But she could guess them to be of power.

She turned in her saddle to look back along their trail. This was clever: The entrance was narrow. Any who entered on horseback would have to do so in single file. The trail to



this point was also narrow, steeply uphill and winding. Above, it steepened still further. To reach this entrance from uphill or down, those who came would be moving with slow caution because of the trail. They must then thrust through an opening just wide enough for one mount. If a good-sized area lay beyond, they might well have found their refuge. Judging from the rune-guarded entrance, it would take a very powerful creature of the Dark to force its way inside.

The stallion appeared beyond the wards. He turned to watch them.

“This is it. I know it.” Eleeri was sure now, but Tharna watched the stallion nervously. “What is it, do you fear him?”

The mare spoke softly. *Stallions often kill colts who are not their own get. I do fear him.*

“He’s not Keplian,” Eleeri said quietly. “And more than a horse, too, I think. I don’t believe he’d harm Hylan, or us, either.”

As if the great beast had heard her words, he paced toward them. A regal head lowered to nuzzle the soft nose of the foal. A half-rear, then again the reassuring touch to the foal, and he was away, back through the gap to await their decision. Before either adult could move, Hylan had followed, small neck arched in imitation. The runes flared up as he passed. Tharna eyed them with worry.

What if they will not admit me?

“Then we look somewhere else for refuge.”

Eleeri could feel her friend’s fear, but before them Hylan waited. Tharna moved toward him, step by slow step. The runes blazed higher as she approached. Slowly they changed; a more silvery hue now shone in them. The girl could feel that it was becoming an effort for her friend to move, as if she waded through deep water. Without thinking, she



touched with her mind, reassuring, comforting. With that linkage the effort was gone. Freed, the mare leaped to her son and caressed him with soft nuzzlings.

Eleeri followed, seeing in her turn the runes' light shine higher. The stallion ran on into a widening canyon and they gathered themselves in his wake. Before the far end of the canyon he paused and reared. His commanding whistle rang out, echoing from the cliffs. Again and again he warned without words: they were not to come this far until summoned. Then he was gone. Eleeri ran forward in distress. She had grown to love her pendant, gift of Cynan. Was she now to lose it?

Half-hidden in the lush grass it lay, tiny sapphire eyes winking up at them in the sunlight. With a sigh the girl plucked it from its nest and threaded the cord through the loop again. She felt a little strange with it now, knowing what it could be. Yet surely, if it had not been intended for her to take it up once more, it would not have returned to this form.

She strained her eyes to look down at the end of the canyon forbidden to them. A mist lay there, shot through with warm golden glimmerings. Power smoked from it. She would stay well away until asked; that was not something to meddle with uninvited.

She gazed about the remainder of the canyon. Surely this had been a hold once. In contrast to the outside, here the grass was lush and thick. Fruit trees and berry bushes lined the cliffsides.

Berry bushes! That reminded her. Laughing, Eleeri reached for her saddlebag to extract the tiny saplings she had taken. Then and there she dug out a square of turf in line with those other bushes. Lovingly she placed the saplings to add to the line. Water? She stared about as Hylan lowered his head; she could hear him drinking. She trotted over to



see what he had found, to be amazed by the water's container. Hidden by the knee-high grass was a spring welling up. It flowed into a marvelously carved stone basin. Yet it was not this that amazed her. The water appeared to be flowing *uphill* from the spring. She measured with her fingers. It was true.

Oh, well, as long as the water continued to flow, she should leave well enough alone. She reached for her pack and took from it some of the dried meat. She had no time to hunt; the place was of too great an interest to do aught but explore. She wandered along, staring as she walked. If in high summer there was still water and good growth, then this was indeed a suitable place for them to remain. But why had they been called here? Perhaps the answer lay in the golden mist. She'd wait; sooner or later she'd find out. There was no hurry, she reflected, the peace of this place seeping slowly into her bones. She rounded a natural buttress in the cliffs and found herself looking at human habitation. She fell back with a small cry.

Then she grinned. The doors gaped wide, rotting from their hinges, and within she could see the drifts of leaves piled up on stone floors. How long had it taken for the doors to fall away? she wondered. Yet the spring still flowed. She studied the massive stones. They needed no power to seal them; they were sufficient to themselves. Only the wooden doors had failed, and they could be replaced, no doubt.

She walked over to stand before the entrance. Would she be welcome here? She placed a gentle hand on the massive stone doorpost. Runes glowed into life, the now familiar blue. She could not read them, but a comforting warmth stole from them, like a welcoming hand that greeted a beloved visitor. She moved to the doorway and paused, speaking to anything that might hear and accept.

“To the ruler of this place, gratitude for roof shelter, no



harm from me or mine to thee and thine. I come in peace.”

The runes’ light shone a little greater so that she took it as an answer. Steadily she walked through the doors, entering the great hall which spread before her. Down the center of that ran a huge ancient table. It was carved from wood, of a type she had never seen before. Dust lay thick over it, but when she brushed that away, the wood shone, polished, a red-gold whose grain seemed to glitter before her eyes. Chairs carved of the same wood were placed along it, but they ran along one side only, that which was farthest from the door.

Two huge fireplaces were set to the rear of the wall, behind the table. Eleeri stared. It would take a man working full time just to chop enough wood. Or had that been provided by some use of power? Water ran into a basin attached to the wall near one of the hearths. She crossed to it. A horn cup on a silver link chain still remained. Then she stooped to look. The water ran into the basin, but there was no outlet. From where did it come, to where did it go? The soft plashing made her thirst greater. She lifted the cup, filled it, and drank. Then she lifted it in salute to the shadowy hall. Was it her imagination, or did something stir at that acknowledgment?

Eleeri decided she wasn’t going to question things here. She was sure she was meant no harm. That being so, it would be unmannerly to question whatever occurred. She would stay polite as a guest should and wait to be invited into the forbidden land of mist. In the meantime she was hungry, and growing tired.

She returned to her horse and hauled her gear inside the hall. She rubbed him down, then left him free to graze with a gentle slap on his shoulder. Quickly she kindled a fire in the center of one of the fireplaces and roasted a rabbit on a spit she found there. She peered higher to discover there was also a rod which swung out above the flame. She’d heard of



that. Gaily she hung her coffeepot from the upturned end and watched as the water boiled. She drank, leaned back against the stone wall, and sighed in satisfaction.

In the saddlebags she had looted from Gerae's followers, she had found a packet of dried leaves. They produced a sort of herbal tea with a taste of sweetened lemon. It wasn't coffee, but then she hadn't been crazy about coffee anyhow. This lemon tea was more to her taste. She had been running low on it, but within the lines of bushes outside she had seen perhaps four or five that looked to be the source of the tea leaves. In the morning she'd check.

Her mind moved on to Cynan. What was he doing? Was he still strong enough to manage with what she had left for him? She had liked him, and yet when the time came she had ridden, leaving him alone. She knew this had been his wish, but she regretted doing so.

Still, he was a warrior; it was for him to choose his time and his dying. That was the white-eye way to deny a warrior the right to make his own choices. To drag one off to a hospital, there to die slowly, growing more bitter as the body withered. Far Traveler had also chosen. He had not wished to die shut away from the sky, from Earth Mother, from all her scents and the sounds of the mountains.

She remembered his last moments. It was well, very well. He had died as he had lived, in the clean air, in freedom. She grasped the pendant in her left hand.

"Look down on me, kinsman. Do not forget one who will ever love you. In this strange land let your wisdom guide me as it did in that other." For a moment she felt a hand caress her hair the way the old man used to do to bring comfort to a small child. She felt his presence then, and reassurance that she, too, was loved and remembered, even from the sky trails he now followed. She sank down into her bedroll, a



smile curving her lips. She slept, and if her dreams were more than she would recall on waking, that, too, was right.

During the night it began to rain lightly. While she slept, the Keplians had entered the hall and now dozed comfortably under a sound roof.

This is a good land, kin-sister, the mare announced as Eleeri opened her eyes. *There is more grass than we can eat, the water is sweet, and no Gray One could pass the gate runes.*

“What about Keplians?” the girl teased, but the mare was serious.

I think few of the males could pass. Perhaps some of the mares, as I did. The foals: of them it seems to me that all would pass. They are innocent, having committed no evil.

Eleeri considered that. “You think that the runes measure innocence. That may be so, but what evil have you done?”

None, but we are of the shadow. The runes were not swift to let me pass until your mind touched mine. Then that which held me back was gone. Her sending softened. *I have wondered, kin-sister, if our meeting was not meant. Together we have overcome that which would have mastered us had we not stood as one. I—I feel toward you as I have never felt, even to one of my own kind. Kin-sister you are in truth.* She turned inquiring eyes toward the girl.

“I, too, feel this way.” For a moment they remained still, gray eyes meeting the flowing red fire that were the mare’s orbs. Then Eleeri chuckled softly. “All this talk makes me hungry. I plan to find a nice fat bird, to do something about that.” But as she passed the mare, her hand slid out in a loving caress. Tharna was content. Her kin-sister understood.

Over the next few days they relaxed, sleeping when they tired, eating as hunger came. Eleeri found herself constrained



to hunt outside the canyon but accepted this as common sense. In case of siege or illness, she would be grateful birds and other small game abounded within reach.

But as the time passed, they all grew restless. Hylan no longer needed to nurse, but ate the grass which abounded at his hooves.

They had been there several weeks when Eleeri and Tharna felt a drawing from the outer lands. They consulted silently. Then as one they acted, the girl calling her horse, tossing his gear up and swiftly bridling the willing beast.

Hylan remained, but together Keplian and human left the canyon and hastened down the trail toward the lower lands. They had wandered, moving slowly as they came, but now they struck straight for their goal, the river. After a day's swift travel, they were there. Eleeri climbed a ridge and stared out over the area.

What do you see?

“No reason to call us here.”

We go on?

The girl climbed down and swung into the saddle as reply. In silence they marched on along the riverbank, heading ever deeper into the Gray Ones' lands once more. Both knew this to be dangerous, but the call continued. They would be wary, and with no smaller, weaker foal to slow them, it was unlikely the Gray Ones would be able to catch them, if the two had any sort of a headstart.

Suddenly Tharna jerked up her head. At the same time, Eleeri halted the pony, seeking out the source of her unease.

“What is it?”

Death—death comes to those of my kind. She had no need to add that it was a death in pain and terror. That echoed in both of their minds. Eleeri nudged her mount into a slow trot as the sensation broke off abruptly. One was dead, but

the sensations continued, although weakened.

They rounded a long line of trees together just as the feeling faded again, then again. Now there was nothing but emotions: terror, loss, panic. There was a youngness to those, a formlessness that signaled no adults remained.

Eleeri strung her bow in one flickering movement, laid an arrow on the string, and touched the pony with a gentle heel. He edged out from behind the bushes, Tharna at his side. Before them three foals stood shivering, as Gray Ones circled. To one side, Keplian mares lay quiet in death. The Gray Ones were playing, knowing they could kill at whim. The terror of the foals provided a vicious amusement until, in one flashing second, that changed.



7

*B*eside Eleeri there was a snort of fury and a roar of swift hooves. Tharna charged down on the foals, crying for them to follow. A Gray One thrust forward to intercept her, to be sent flying with a well-aimed kick. Another slashed at her heels, only to find she had swapped ends and he was seized in savage teeth. They met through his spine as he was hurled lifelessly aside. The foals screamed in terror, leaping for the big mare. They were too young to form thoughts into words as Tharna did. Nor could they send far. But at this range they were almost deafening mare and human with their emotions. Before they had reached Tharna, Eleeri had counted enemies. Nine, with two already down.

The girl had not waited to see more. Arrows flew; Gray Ones howled in pain and fright as they died or bled. Tharna had charged. To her the babies ran desperately and she stood over them, ready. Eleeri circled, continuing to shoot as the wolf-creatures attacked her. But they relied on tooth



and claw, and the pack tactics. She swung the pony beyond them and shot again and again. Tharna was withdrawing slowly, foals clinging to her flanks.

The attackers slunk back, howling their baffled rage and frustration. Eleeri watched. They preferred to face safer odds, it appeared. She guarded the rear as her friend headed for the river again. With a sigh, the girl removed her leathers. She was getting tired of crossing this river. She grinned to herself. She'd better not say that; it was a safeguard, since the Gray Ones would not cross. She cantered after the Keplian mare and foals.

The babies were afraid of the water. They balked at the brink, but Tharna was not to be halted by juvenile intransigence. A swift nip sent a colt forward with a surprised squeal, more of fright than pain.

Eleeri pushed her pony into the water on his downriver side. He swam valiantly and her assistance was limited to a grip on his mane, which helped him find his feet again on the far side. The two younger, smaller fillies needed more. By now, too, the Gray Ones had recovered some of their confidence. But as they raced forward an arrow storm met them, so that they rolled screaming and howling. With the trembling babies behind them, girl and mare faced the remaining enemies.

"If I hold them, can you get the other two across?" Eleeri hissed.

If they do not panic, Tharna sent. *If they do, I have no easy way to aid them.*

Her friend snatched a look behind her at the two foals who cowered in their shadow. They couldn't be more than a few weeks old. Keplian foals seemed to be born small. True growth didn't come until they reached two or three months of age; then they seemed to grow as if they were being



inflated. But these two—she hooked a foot out of her leather.

“Watch the Gray Ones.”

Moving quickly, she released the stirrup leathers from her saddle and flipped one around each foal. Buckled into the last and next to last holes, they fitted. Good. Now if one did slip, the mare would have something to seize.

She swung back onto her mount. The enemy had begun to advance again, hoping she was occupied. Seeing her attention was on them once more, they backed away.

Keeping her eyes on them she signaled the mare. “Go! One at a time.” She watched from the corner of an eye as mare and foal plunged into the water.

Among the enemy there seemed to be some dissent. Eleeri thought she could hear growls and occasional snarled words. She was correct; the gray ones were furious at the likely escape of prey. But they had died in sufficient numbers to make it clear these two were not to be trifled with.

Their current leader was making the best of it. “Watch them. If we can, we pull them down. If not, we still have three dead ones to feast us.” His look boded no good to Keplian and human, though, and his memory was working busily. A Keplian with a human. It could only be the pair he had heard of a few weeks ago. A pack had hunted them, to find themselves the hunted instead. They had lost many of their pack as the prey escaped. Back in their own lands he would bespeak all packs that they should watch for these, kill if they could ever be caught off guard. It might be some trick of those from the valley. He would show them the Gray Ones were not so easily taken or tricked. His lips peeled back from fangs as he snarled his frustration.

His fellows were less interested in the escaping prey. Behind them lay enough meat to feast on for days. Longer, now that half their number was dead. The wounded were



thrust aside as the rest sought the best parts to begin their meal. The last filly gave a tiny whimpering squeal at the sight. Eleeri cursed the feeding enemy harshly and she reached over to stroke the shaking foal.

“Don’t worry, little one, we’ll get you to a safe place, and your mother can’t feel anything anymore.” The baby looked up and Eleeri was struck all over again with the red fire that swirled in Keplian eyes. Her fingers curled around her pendant, feeling it grow warm.

“Help me get her away safely,” she whispered softly. “And I hope that meal poisons the lot of them.”

Back in the old days, as she remembered, wolwers had poisoned cow carcasses with all sorts of compounds, but mostly strychnine. They’d been after stock-killing wolves, not Gray Ones, but by all the gods she’d like to see this lot killed by the very mares they’d murdered. Once, when she was a child, she’d seen a container of the deadly powder. Her hand tightened on the pendant as she recalled the descriptions Far Traveler had given her of its use and actions.

The third foal was safely across and the mare was sending impatiently. *Battle-sister—Eleeri! Stop thinking and get over here before you provoke them.*

The girl came to herself with a jolt. Wordlessly she swam her mount across the water, then led her group along the trail. One hand still gripped the pendant, its warmth unnoticed. Nor did she see that the tiny eyes glowed with a wicked fire. Long ago the girl had also seen the molecular structure of strychnine. Now that knowledge swirled almost to her conscious before subsiding again.

The Gray Ones feasted heartily before sprawling in the shade. They snapped and snarled lazily, and the wounded were careful to watch their uninjured companions. At present there was enough meat for all. When the time came that



there wasn't, they must be on guard.

Mare, human, and rescued foals were all well up the trail and out of earshot when the commotion began. A Gray One found his arms and legs had begun to shake. Then another began to twitch. The spasms increased in severity as one by one all fell into the pattern. Only the wounded that had not been permitted to eat were free of the trouble. They, in turn, trotted over; with their fellows occupied, now was a good time to feast. Their satisfaction was shattered in a short time as the first of them also began to twitch. The spasms became continuous until all gasped, unable to breathe. Finally they went limp.

Far up the trail, Eleeri still sat her mount with a hand on the pendant. Strychnine was a cruel death, so she had always heard. The worst of it was all the other deaths that led from poisoning a carcass. The stock killers died, but so did anything else that ate the poisoned meat, be it bird or beast. The wolvers had rarely bothered to clean up the lethal remains. That was wrong. No, on second thought, she would not wish such a death on even the Gray Ones, not if it meant the innocent dying with them.

Where the Gray Ones lay in death's rictus, a bird landed. It hopped to the meat and began to feed. It was joined by others. They ate eagerly and departed, to be replaced with others. All were safe. Sometimes wishes can be more powerful than the one who wishes will ever know.

In another hour the foals were beginning to falter. Eleeri consulted with Tharna and called a rest break. Then she drew the mare aside.

"What are we to do about feeding them, sister-kin? All are young. The colt might manage on grass and water; he's no doubt been eating grass as well as nursing, from the size of him. But the fillies are far too young."



The mare was serene. *Hylan no longer needs my milk. I have fed him because it pleases us both, but it was not necessary to him. Now I will feed these instead.*

Her friend surveyed her. “That’ll be a real drain on you. You’ve been nursing Hylan for months and now you switch to feeding two foals for months more.”

True, but even if I can only give milk for another month or two, they may then be old enough to manage part of the time with grass. Eleeri nodded doubtfully, saying no more. She couldn’t bear to see the foals starve, but still less did she wish to watch as her friend wasted away, her strength going to feed the babies. She glanced over to where the three slept, slumped on the grass in utter exhaustion. Poor little things would probably be grieving badly, too, as soon as their strength returned. She would push this trip as hard as they could handle. If they were tired out, they’d be less inclined to mourn.

It was so, although the foals may not have appreciated her motives. Hylan was delighted at their safe return, and with playmates. As the older, stronger, and smarter, he took leadership at once. Even the other colt deferred to him carefully. Indeed, his deference was so marked, Eleeri wondered.

Stallions kill easily, the mare enlightened her.

“Hylan isn’t a stallion, and I don’t think he’s a killer by nature, either. In horse herds it isn’t that unusual to have more than one stallion. Not if it’s a large herd.”

Tharna snuffled. *That’s horses. With our kind, the stallions are very quick to kill any who appear to defy them, mares and foals alike.* She saw her sister-kin’s eyes widen. *Yes, I tell you this. I have seen it happen. It was why I wandered far away from the lands of the Keplians.*

She saw that Eleeri was interested and continued. *I



bred to one of my kind so that I was in foal to him. He was slain by another, who would have bred me, but I was heavy in foal. If the foal died, I would come into season at once and he could breed as he wished. He would have slain my foal at birth so that none of his rival's blood survived. I knew what he would do. I knew him, too, to be vicious and cruel to mares, so I fled from our lands. It seemed then that anywhere I would have stayed was claimed by another creature. I was pushed farther and farther to the south.*

She snorted. *Then that Gerae found me. I was ready to foal, so that he was able to place ropes about me. Then he dragged me back to his village, where I and my foal were to be tortured, then slain.* Her head came up as her eyes flamed red with remembered fury. *Hylan was born and they gave me an hour to love him. Murderers, twice cruel. Then they would have killed him before me, but that I fought them.* Her sending softened. *Then you came, battle-sister. I know humans are cruel, but I will always know, too, that they can be as you are. At first I hated you, also. I accepted your help, planning to kill you as soon as we were safely away.* She saw the quirk of her friend's mouth and blinked. *You *knew*!* "It was—um—rather obvious."

Amusement gurgled between them.

Tharna curved her neck proudly. *I learned to know you, to trust. I am not ashamed to change, to alter my mind. You saved us both, but I feared some kind of trick: that you saved us only to use us yourself. Then you fought for us again, killed your own kind to save my foal. I saw that you would risk yourself. That is not the way of one who plans to use. I watched you with Hylan, saw that he loved you, that you loved him, also. I began to believe in your kindness. I, too, came to—*

Her sending broke off as Eleeri flung warm arms about



her neck, hugging as hard as she could. The girl cupped her hands over the soft muzzle, giggling as powerful teeth nibbled gently.

“I know. I love you, too, kin-sister, you and Hylan. You’re my family, and these three little ones, too, if they can accept that.” Her voice ended on a questioning note.

The fillies will love us all. They are younger, more adaptable, and prepared to love any who are kind and gentle with them. The colt I am not so sure of. He is slower of mind, more ready to sly violence if he thinks we do not see. Her sending grew sad. *I fear it may be too late for him to learn love.*

“Do you think he recalls the way here?”

No, part of the way we came in the dusk. He was exhausted and did not think to look about him. She snuffled thoughtfully. *I do not believe he even knows for certain if we went north or south.*

“Then we’ll see he doesn’t learn, if possible. But we may have to make a decision sometime if he looks like he would be a danger to us all.” Eleeri sighed softly. Things could never be simple. But that was life.

Weeks passed, then months. Outside it was winter, but within the canyon the air seemed to remain warmer. The fillies had grown, ceased to nurse, and gave their names trustingly. The colt, too, had given his, but the look in his eyes grew wilder as time went on. Eleeri marked her eighteenth birthday and taught the foals to enjoy celebrating their own. Hylan was smug; he already knew about birthdays. It was that smugness and the growing desire to dominate that thrust the younger colt into action.

Terlor flew at Hylan, teeth bared, hooves already striking out. Taken by surprise, Hylan nonetheless fought back. He was larger and stronger, but reluctant to injure his fellow.



The younger colt had no such inhibitions. He attacked with a driving fury that sent his enemy to his knees. Tharna arrived just as Eleeri came running from another direction.

“Stop it, *Terlor!* Stop it!”

Her voice went unheeded as the mare waded in. With ruthless efficiency, her teeth clamped down on Terlor’s neck as she hurled him to one side. She stood between him and her colt, eyes dangerous.

Eleeri marched up to the panting youngling. “What did you think you were doing?” His ears went back and his muzzle shot out, teeth grabbing for her. She evaded him neatly as her hand slashed across his nose. She had handled biters before. But Terlor was no horse. Even dullwitted though he seemed to her, he was Keplian. It had been a feint, and a hoof upflung caught her hard behind a thigh. She fell, rolling so quickly his next strike missed.

The mare came then in a drumroll of hooves, eyes suddenly crazed with anger. Massive hooves drove down, the colt squealed in pain and fear, the sound cut off as hooves crunched down again. Blowing through her nostrils, the mare stepped back from the body. Her mind was sad.

There was no choice, sister-kin. He intended to kill you. He was too dangerous to allow freedom. He would have been sure one of us was alone next time so help would not come.

Eleeri knelt by the body. Hands smoothed the black hide as tears stole down her face. “I know.” She stood. “But now what do we do with this? We don’t want it rotting here.”

Without thinking, she clutched at the pendant. From it a mist arose, silver, laced with soft golden glimmerings. It swept out and over Terlor. When it cleared, he was gone, as mare and human stood staring at each other.

“Automatic garbage disposal,” Eleeri said, looking stunned



What?

“Nothing. Look, Tharna, I hated Terlor dying, but you were right: he’d have killed me. If he’d stopped, we could never have trusted him. His mind was too clear just then. He wanted us all dead—you, me, and Hylan. That way he could have the canyon and the fillies.”

She said no more, but departed with bow and arrows. Hunting would soothe her, and a fat bird or two from the lower foothills would soothe her stomach. As she walked, she thought. There was a surprising difference between the colt they had rescued and Hylan. Tharna’s son was not only large and powerful for his age, he was also far more intelligent. Tharna was sure it was the constant companionship he shared with his mother and Eleeri. Colts were usually pushed away from their dams as soon as they were able to survive alone. This seemed to be partly for their own sake. A Keplian male never hesitated to kill a colt that wasn’t his own. In fact, from what Tharna had said, he didn’t hesitate long even if the baby *was* one of his blood.

As a result, the abandoned small colts learned savagery to survive. In turn they killed foals, used mares as they willed. The cruelty was self-perpetuating, and in many ways it seemed similar to the pack rule of the Gray Ones.

But what of a colt brought up with love, taught gentleness by a dam he loved, a human he trusted? Would he in the end revert to stallion behavior, or would he breed a new race of gentle intelligent Keplians? The partners to humans that Tharna thought they may have been created to be so long ago? At Eleeri’s throat the miniature gave out a sudden light, a shaft of warmth that attracted her attention. She lifted it up.

“Is that it? We were called here to change things? Is



Tharna right?" Secrets twinkled in the sapphire eyes, but she was suddenly sure her guess was correct. She grinned, strolling off along the faint deer trail. Well, it made for an interesting theory. But if they were to breed a new race with just Tharna, Hylan, and the two fillies, it would take rather a long time. Her own people had raided for children to strengthen the tribe. They'd accepted any child as Nemunuh if the children showed they wished to be and had the skills. Adults, too, had been accepted.

That sparked a thought. She'd talk to Tharna once she found meat and returned to the canyon. It sparked another as well. She found herself wondering as she trotted along: With all this breeding going on, where did she fit in? Was she to be barren, or did the plans of the someone who'd started all this include a mate for her, too?

She laughed, throwing back her head as she padded off on a fresher trail. Never mind a mate. If her other idea was right, she'd be too busy to think of anything else. She made her kills, a fat hill hen and a small half-grown buck. She could dry the meat within the huge old fireplace. There was a hook well up within the chimney, as she had discovered. In the meantime, she'd eat the hen while she discussed this new plan with her battle-sister.

The mare was interested. It would soon be spring, when trails opened again to the lower lands. It would do no harm if they merely scouted Keplian lands.

They set off together a month later. Hylan remained to care for the fillies. He was becoming a strong young yearling who thought as Keplian stallions had not bothered to do for generations. The fillies adored him. At present they looked up to him as a protective big brother. In another couple of years that would change. Meanwhile, Hylan enjoyed being left alone in the canyon with his charges. It made him feel

important and removed some of the sting of not being permitted to accompany his dam and her kin-sister.

Down in the plains once more, Tharna cantered briskly along the river's edge. *I know all the places to hide once we reach our lands. If only you can persuade that horse to cooperate.*

She regarded the pony with scorn, and Eleeri grinned. The mare despised the sturdy little dun as a mere copy of a Keplian. She would never have wounded her friend's feelings by the obvious retort.

Two days later, they were drifting unobtrusively around the fringes of Keplian country. Twice Tharna wandered toward another mare and exchanged gossip. Self-centered as their race was, none remembered that she had fled under strange circumstances almost a year ago. As long as she remained out of sight of any of the stallions, they were safe. After several days of this, Eleeri was well bored.

“What have you learned so far?”

That nothing changes.

“Very helpful. When do we do something about it?”

The mare eyed her friend with amusement. She had seen the growing boredom and expected a demand for action would come shortly. She could provide that to some extent and proceeded to explain. Eleeri was slightly surprised.

“You mean she'll come with us just like that?”

Tharna's shoulder twitched. *Not so casually as you make it sound, kin-sister. But she *will* come. For her there is no choice unless she wishes to see her foal killed at birth. Her herd lives close to the old Dark Tower. The stallion lord was recently slain by a rival, who has taken the herd as his own.*

Eleeri nodded. “So according to stallion habit, he'll kill any nursing or newborn foals not his own.”



Her friend sent sadness. *That he has already done. Only this young mare remains. She bred late and will not bear her foal for another month.*

“So she’ll come with us to give her baby a chance.”

More than that. She fears if the stallion attacks her newborn, she may not be able to prevent herself from attempting to protect it. A stallion is likely to kill her, too, for that.

For the remainder of the week, Tharna slipped out to speak with the distracted young mare. Choosing a time when the stallion was in a different part of his territory, the three trotted quietly for the river.

With the new addition safe in the canyon, the two comrades returned to Keplian lands. Over the course of a spring they added another young mare and two orphaned foals to their family. Eleeri surveyed the results with satisfaction. Three adult mares, three yearlings, and three foals. A nice balance of ages so far, yet still Hylan was the only male.

In fact, the girl had come to believe two ideas. One was that only a male foal raised with love from the very beginning would fit into canyon ways. The other was that with the way that stallions killed even tiny colts, Terlor had been something of a fluke.

Orphaned foals were simply left to stray or starve. Many fell to the teeth of the Gray Ones, others to the irritation of stallions. Life was difficult enough for a mare; few would accept a strange foal and risk shorting their own foal’s nourishment. Yet Eleeri believed most of that was learned. In an atmosphere of peace and plenty, attitudes could change in a bare generation.

Summer followed, harsher than usual down on the plains, but in the canyon, water flowed and grass grew thick and



green. Tharna and Eleeri spent a lot of their time now shadowing Keplian herds, watching and listening. Twice they managed to save orphaned foals and return with them. The girl had even made a short trip down through the lands to the southwest. There she had successfully bargained for several nanny-goats and a male. The milk might not be exactly what they were used to, but the starving foals would drink it.

By the time winter came, they were twice the number spring had counted. Still three adults, and three more than yearlings now. But the babies had increased to a dozen. At that point Eleeri had called a halt and taken the mare aside.

“Before we accept others, we need to look at what we have. How many of us can the canyon support? Even with no outside addition, we are going to start growing as soon as Hylan is old enough to be accepted as a stallion by some of the mares here. Once that starts happening, our numbers will go up like a startled hill hen.”

Before that time we may have found other solutions. I have found a strange thing, kin-sister. Eleeri waited. *At first I had great difficulty passing the runes. Now I pass freely. Our friends, too, had to link somewhat with you before they were permitted to enter. Now the mares pass as freely as I do.* She paused, then her sending became diffident. *Could it be that the power here now measures us as of the Light?*

Her eyes were hopeful on the girl who stood there. Eleeri could not answer. She, too, had noticed this thing happening and wondered. But she would raise no hopes.

“I can’t say. I’ve tried to ask the pendant, but no luck.”

The discussion turned back to herd size, but there was a sad look in the mare’s eyes. Later that night, Tharna drifted silently down to where the silver mist sparkled and coiled. What was behind it? What did it hold? She had no way of



knowing, but it drew her. Somehow she desired to be part of it, accepted as one of the Light. She had never known when this desire had begun, only that it had been part of her as long as she could remember—as long as she had the hope that there was another way of life for her kind.

She blew softly through wide nostrils. That change she had seen here; if she lived long enough, she might see the other. Her mind yearned as the mist wreathed her gently. Had there been any there to see, they might have thought it a trick of the moonlight, as for a fraction of a second her eyes appeared to glow a soft gentle blue. Then the mist folded back into itself and there was only a fire-eyed Keplian mare standing quietly, moonlight silvering her hide.



8

*W*inter came slowly that year. The snows held off, the air remained warmer, and the land gave of berries, nuts, and fruit as never before. It all made Eleeri very suspicious. The wisdom of the Nemunuh said that a time like this was Earth Mother's warning: times ahead would be hard. Store food, eat well, and prepare. She did so, gathering everything she could in the large woven baskets Far Traveler had taught her to make. Dried meat she stored in one of the rooms above the great hall.

But if times were to be cold as well, perhaps she should think of more bedding. She had more hides than she needed; those could be traded for woven stuffs at the same village as where she traded for the goats.

Tharna was reluctant. *The way is far, the road dangerous.*

Eleeri laughed. "Both true, but when the land warns, the wise warrior listens. Come part of the way with me; Hylan,



too, if he wishes.”

There was an eager whicker from the young stallion, and the friends shared amusement. The girl stood, stretching slowly, enjoying the pull of fit muscles. It was a strange life, this one she lived, but it contented her. She had friends who were as family, a kin-sister and kin-son, a strong roof, and ample food. The water was clean, the air clear, and the hunting good.

A shadow swept across her face then. Who was she trying to persuade? She loved the life, the Keplians, but she missed human companionship. No, let her be truthful in this, since it was only to herself she spoke. Years were passing. She was almost twenty; her heart cried for a mate. She watched the Keplian mares with their foals, the pride of Hylan and his gentleness. Her body hungered, but not for food. She silenced it. What would be, would be. She must live with contentment if other joys were not granted. But there were humans she could visit.

She remembered her first trip to the lake keep, two days' ride down the stream and along the lakeshore. Originally, many long generations ago, it had been lovingly built. Then it was abandoned during the adept wars. Later, those who lived there now had given it new life.

She chose gifts to take. The first time she was sure she had been closely watched, but neither lord nor lady had appeared. Instead she had been offered shelter in the same stable as her pony. No one had challenged her. But she was eyed warily all the same.

Another trip would be fun. The village about the main tower was small: just a well-fortified keep, central tower, inner courtyard, and a circle of cottages about it. In all, not more than forty people. The lord, his kin, and the three families



who served him directly, along with armsmen, lived in the central keep. Cottages served for those who raised the garden vegetables and tended the animals. It was a small but happy community as far as she had seen.

She rode in close to sundown, the dun pony striding eagerly under his load of furs and hides. This time the stableman brought an invitation as soon as the pony was relieved of his burden.

“Lord Jerrany asks if you will dine with him and the Lady Mayrin. After the meal, they would be pleased to see what you have brought.”

Eleeri’s ears pricked up at this. Interesting. Last time she had been treated with a wary condescension. Oh, the people had been polite enough. But it was clear that although they asked her no questions, they wondered at a woman who rode alone. She had conducted herself carefully, showing only courtesy and some of the lesser furs she had brought on that first trip. No sense in exciting greed. But with this invitation it was as well she had chosen to pack a couple of gifts suitable for a lord and his lady.

She waited until the man had gone, then opened her pack. She would place those carefully chosen presents on the top before lacing the tough material closed again. For a moment she lingered in the stable, brushing the pony as he leaned into the slow strokes. She had learned enough from Cynan to know that in some ways this Escore was a ghost-ridden land. It was haunted by those who had died in the adept wars, those slain by the Dark and those who served it. But with the coming of others from overmountain in Estcarp, new life had sprung up.

Cynan had said that with the newcomers the Dark had been stirred to action once more. But also small places such as this which had been long dead, had risen to new life. Her



eyes flickered about the stable. This would have been rebuilt. It looked as if the roof was new, but the stone walls were old. Her own hold was like that. Well, she would take a quick look about outside. Last time she had not wished to, in case they took it amiss.

She nodded to herself as she walked to the door to stand looking out into the growing dusk. The keep had been carefully situated by whoever had raised the ancient stone walls. It tucked into a tight curve at the far end of a lake. In addition, the builders had bounded it by digging a ditch deep into the rocky ground. This completed the encirclement, so that the entire village was surrounded by running water. A potent spell, as the girl had learned.

She walked to the edge of the stream. The water had cut deeper over the ages so that it now ran through a deep channel and must be crossed by a bridge. She studied the mechanism—clever! The bridge could be raised to prevent passage. She looked closer and grinned. The locking bar was of forged iron. So the lord and his lady knew that trick.

But then, in this land they'd be fools if they didn't.

She peered along the bridge, and her invitation to dinner started to make sense. At the far end, where she had crossed casually only a short time before, there was a new addition. It wasn't obvious from the approach side but could be seen quite clearly from where she stood.

At the far end, thin forged iron bars had been inset into the wood between the planking. They were recent; she was sure she'd have noticed them had they been there before. Ancient stone posts guarded the bridge's approaches, and from where she leaned, she could see a faint blue glow. It looked as if runes of protection had been placed there in slight hollows. They would be unseen by any approaching, even crossing the bridge. But it would take a Dark one of



considerable power to cross. And such a one would set the runes to blazing.

So that was why she was now welcomed. The keep defenses had passed her as one who, if she did not walk in the Light, at least was not of the Dark. The sun was setting. She hurried back to the stable.

Shouldering the pack of furs, Eleeri tramped into the hall. A handsome man clothed in rich fabrics—obviously the Lord Jerrany—rose to greet her, offering a guest cup.

“To the farer on far roads, the welcome of this roof. May fortune favor your wandering.”

Eleeri’s hand went up as she allowed the pack to slip to the floor. “For the welcome of the gate, my gratitude. For the feast, thanks. To the lord and lady of this roof, all good fortune and a bright sun in days to come.” As she spoke, slowly her forefinger traced signs of guard and good fortune. She allowed her mind to open to them, and the air began to glow. Jerrany would have leaped for her, but his lady seized him hard.

“No, look to them. Here is no ill-wishing.”

The signs brightened into the warm blue-green of Light as the girl stepped back. She grinned cheekily up.

“Now that we all know where we are, would you prefer to eat or look at furs first?”

For a startled moment the two gazed at her. Then Mayrin’s grin flashed into a startlingly close copy of Eleeri’s smile.

“Come, eat and be very welcome. There is always time to look at luxuries later.” She slipped around the table and walked to the girl. “Sit here.” She turned. “Don’t all stand there gaping; bring our guest food. Or do you plan to starve a woman of the power?”

Servants sprang into action guiltily. Mayrin turned back.



She eyed Eleeri's pendant with interest. "You wear no jewel. Is this what you have instead?"

She had spoken without thinking, and now her hand went up to cover her mouth, just as her Lord looked horrified.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I know that was rude and I have no right to ask such a thing. I—it's so beautiful I just asked."

A soft chuckle. "Why not?" There was no need to speak of the pendant's power. "It was a gift from a friend." A thought came then. "Are either of you kin to one Cynan of the House of Bear's-Kin?"

It was Jerrany who answered. "Cynan? I am not sure I know that name, but my mother was of the house. All that was swept away in the Horning. Her kin departed the land safely, but when they would have returned, it was too late." Eleeri looked a question. "The turning came then. Soon after, my mother and her lord chose to take horse for Escore, called by geas."

"Would she have known Cynan?"

"I do not know. It is possible, with the house on both sides of the border, there was some coming and going before Karsten ran mad. You do know there were two houses of that name?" At Eleeri's headshake he nodded, continuing then. "It was thus. The house was founded by a landless man of good blood. It was on the border where land was easier come by, since Karsten was empty and the land was wild. Many generations later, another son of the house returned to Estcarp to build there. His keep was on the other side of the border, but close by as the hawk flies."

He paused to savor the roast set before him. Eleeri and Mayrin smiled at each other as he talked.

"The house in Estcarp prospered also, and for many years there was much travel and trade between the two. My mother was of the Estcarp house. Of later years, the trade



had lessened, but she had said when danger came, her house stood by kin, as was right. I think that those of the Karsten house were given shelter, but later they moved on. I know little more. My mother herself was wed shortly before the Horning and dwelt not within the keep." He finished, reaching hungrily for the trenchers of bread.

"I thank you for that. Do you write to your mother?"

"Letters go with trade goods to other places. A letter may come to her hand in time."

"Perhaps then you could say that Cynan of her house in Karsten wished this to be known to his kin." She straightened, allowing her voice to take on an impersonal note. "I, Cynan of the House of Bear's-Kin, returned to my keep to die within those walls. The land is yet in turmoil, so I have survived. But age comes upon me, I will lie in the land that once was ours. Let my kin remember there are two houses, that one day they may return. This message I send by the mouth of one I name kin-friend, sword-sister. Aid to her at need is laid upon our house, even as she aided me when I stood alone. This I, Cynan of the House of the Bear's Kin, do swear."

She reached for her pack then, producing the two plump packages. Formally she laid them upon the table, undoing the twisted grass string which bound them. In turn she held each up so that the lord and lady might see.

"To the lord and lady of the keep, I offer guest-gifts. May they be received from one who would be friend to you and your kin."

Jerrany rose to bow. "They are received as guest-gifts," he said slowly. "Friends in this land are always good to have, but those who move too swiftly may stumble. Yet we, too, would hope to have gained a new friend."

Eleeri nodded, seeing that he did not move to take up the gifts. She laced the pack shut again and sat to continue the



next course offered. As she ate quietly, she mused on the power she had displayed to them. It was growing, it seemed. When she had arrived in Karsten, she had been no more than a child with the horse-gift. But her time in Karsten seemed to have changed her. Meeting the lady in the place of the Old Ones. The gift of the warding stones. Cynan's teaching. All seemed to have brought growth to her gift.

Once she had crossed into Escore, found her Keplian friends and her hold, things had changed further. The hold had closed about her in warmth. It was both unfamiliar and oddly familiar. As if after long wandering she had returned home. She eyed Mayrin as the woman ate. She, too, seemed to have some of the gift.

Mayrin looked up, to return the glance and smile a little. Then she reached for the gift. She laid it out, biting back unseemly groans of delight. A vest of rasti fur, and another for Jerrany. Her eyes glowed at the soft feel of the fur as she stroked it.

Jerrany reached for his own guest-gift. He had seen the quality at first glance and had deliberately taken time so as not to show his own interest. Eleeri watched as he took it up.

But Jerrany was giving nothing away. He passed her more food, pressing wine on her as well. She drank sparingly of that; water was her usual drink.

The conversation moved on to hunting and Eleeri realized with some amusement that the lord was now trying delicately to discover her home territory. His questions circled cleverly. At one time querying if certain bushes would grow in her area, at another if hill hens were within her borders. She answered truthfully. It was unlikely he would find her. The canyon was high in the mountains where few trails ran. Nor was the entrance easy to find, even for one who followed the Light.



Once the meal was concluded, she reached for her pack, unlacing the drawstrings with swift fingers. Then she began to unfold furs, some the dazzling white of the mountain leapers, others the silver-tipped rich brown of river rasti in winter. She had had to work very carefully to get those last. Rasti hunted in packs and would attack anything that was food if they hungered. They were swift, cunning, and deadly, appetites on four legs, feared by even the most skillful hunters. They could be killed. But those who fell dead were at once eaten by their kin. To have cured undamaged furs proclaimed her far and wide as a hunter of unmatched skill.

Jerrany drew in his breath. There was now no doubt, this one was of the Light, but what a hunter, also. He must indeed write to his dam and kin. He would send word also to the Green Valley and she who dwelled there. His lady caught his eyes, speaking wordlessly with tiny movements, her eyes alight with hope. He nodded slightly, hand twitching in a signal that she should move slowly. For several hours they bargained over the finest furs either had ever seen. The girl had come from the mountains somewhere, that was certain. Leaper furs of this whiteness could only have come from beasts living in snow more than half a year.

He allowed the rasti furs to slide through his hands. But this was the puzzle. These were lowland animals; this type tended to live by rivers on flat land.

Eleeri retired to the offered room for the night while he still sat pondering. She *had* to be of the Light. She'd passed forged iron, runes of ward and guard; she'd then called Light in runes herself. But the pendant his lady had admired was that of a Keplian. Those accursed followers of evil had killed many over the years. Would it be wise to broach to the girl the matter of the missing one?

He shrugged, departing for his own bed. There he found



Mayrin of no mind to let slip an opportunity.

“Where do you then think her to live?” he was queried when he confessed his bewilderment.

“I know not. She brings furs from mountain and plains. Aldred says she came from the east along the lakeside. Those rasti furs are of a kind that makes a home by rivers; maybe she followed the stream that flows into our lake. But I cannot be sure. None of us have traveled far to the east. Those are the lands of the Gray Ones and the Keplians.”

“She is not evil,” his lady was swift to point out.

“That is seen, but how she lives in such a place, I do not know.”

His lady shrugged. To her it mattered not where the girl lived, as long as she was sure of her innocence. That she was, after the demonstration in the hall. She was sure of another thing, also. Eleeri had a sense of humor. She had marked the wicked twinkle as their visitor called power to her runes. It had been as if she were saying, *There, you misjudged me*. Mayrin had felt a sudden feeling of liking flow between them as eyes met. She wanted to know more of Eleeri as a friend.

She lay curled in her warm bed, mind drifting into sleep. But even as she relaxed, her heart wept, remembering.

She loved Jerrany. He’d been her idol from the time she was old enough to admire his youthful courage. He, in turn, had been kind to the younger girl who followed him. He had told her of his ambitions, to raise up a house again. His father had died in Estcarp’s wars, and his mother fled to Escore with her new lord, a man Jerrany disliked. He would carve out new lands for himself, not be beholden to another.

That was as well, Mayrin had thought silently. Her hero’s stepfather liked the boy no more than the boy liked him. Jerrany’s mother had produced other children to her new



lord. It would be they who inherited his holding, close to Mayrin's own in a dangerous land.

She herself had been promised to another, a man she feared. But her own father was adamant.

"What if you do not like him, silly chit? You know nothing of him but his looks from afar. You will wed him and unite our houses."

But Escore, too, warred, and the man died—to her very great and secret relief. Jerrany announced soon after that he planned to seek a new home. She had been heartbroken: she would never see him again. He was brother, friend, protector, and he was deserting her.

In secret she had learned swordplay from Jerrany. Now she bent her mind to gathering other abilities: knowledge of poison, the making of arrows, the setting of guard runes. Jerrany had come and gone, bidding her a gentle farewell. Her father had begun to cast about for another lord for her when Jerrany returned, jubilant.

"I've found our home. It's all a ruin now, but most of the walls are still there. We can build it up again, Mayrin."

"What have I to do with it?" she had asked bitterly.

She had met astonished eyes. "Why, it's our home," he had said simply. "Don't you want to be with me?"

Her heart had leaped up. Without caring for her dignity, she had flung herself at him, laughing and weeping at the same time. "Of course I do. You know I do. I thought you didn't want me."

He had taken her by the shoulders, setting her back from him so that their eyes met. "I suppose I always thought you knew. I love you, Mayrin. Why else would I have been seeking land and a home for us? Now I have a place and we can be wed."

It hadn't been that easy. Her father had first forbidden



her to see *the boy*, as he had termed Jerrany. Finding that difficult to enforce, he had spoken to Jerrany himself, only to find a fighter who met him as an equal.

“I love Mayrin; Mayrin loves me. You may bring her to the altar with another. You cannot force her to speak vows, nor would such an attempt be approved in this place.”

Her father had been furious, so much so that he had tried to goad her brother into an attack on Jerrany. But Romar had refused. Jerrany had been his friend since they came to the Valley of the Green Silences. He was almost the same age and together they had trained, fought, become as brothers in blood. Mayrin had thought at this point her father would suffer a seizure.

“Defied by one whelp!” he had roared. “Then by the other. By all the gods, you may go your own way, then. But expect nothing from me. Neither bride gifts, nor aid, nor anything I have. Go your way alone, both of you!”

They had done so, with Mayrin set in the care of Duhaun herself as her brother and beloved gathered what they must have. Others had chosen to join them, the lure of new lands being great. Some from Estcarp came still to Escore, and three families of those who joined them. Here and there single men added themselves to the group, bringing what they had in the way of goods and gear. More had followed later.

Romar—she remembered his gaiety. His laughter. He had been a rover, a wanderer across this strange and ancient land. It had called to his heart so that for months at a time he had vanished into its vastnesses. It was as if he sought without knowing, as if he hungered without being satisfied. He looked at none of the girls who would have been glad for his notice. Her father had raged to no avail. Those who led here valued the boy’s skills, his reports of a land where evil was slowly being driven back.



Mayrin had loved her brother. It had delighted her heart when he chose to accompany them. But now he was lost, gone into that unknown from whence she feared he would never return.

Now from out of that same unknown a woman came. Nothing was impossible; perhaps Eleeri had seen or heard something. Maybe she could seek out some clue to Romar? Mayrin resolved to be careful, to move slowly, as her lord had said. But she would know all that her visitor knew. She *would!*

In sleep her mouth still held tight to that resolution. Romar was her brother beloved; no unknown land should reive him from her. She would befriend this traveler, leech from her any secrets she knew, use her if she must, anything to bring her brother home again.

The morning dawned bright and fair. Eleeri would have ridden homeward then, her trading complete, but that Mayrin pled with her to stay awhile. For the sorrow in the lady's eyes, Eleeri stayed. They talked and laughed together as lonely women will, finding in each other a friend unlooked for.

A day passed swiftly, and another. Glad to see his beloved so happy, Jerrany also pressed the visitor to remain. In all, Eleeri was at the keep for seven days before her need to return grew great. That last day Mayrin took her aside.

Her head hung in shame as she talked, but the younger girl smiled. "Don't look like that, Mayrin. I guessed there was a favor you needed. Whatever it is, I can promise to try if it not be against honor."

"It is not, I promise it is not." Mayrin ran lightly from the room to return with a small package. It was wrapped in a piece of fine cloth which she unwrapped gently.

"I've talked about Romar, my brother. He went from us



into the lands to the east many months ago now. Nor has he returned. I fear for him.” She stared sadly at the palm-sized painting she now displayed to Eleeri. “This was done before we left the Valley of the Green Silences. I have one of myself and my lord also. But this is dearer by far. It may be all that is left to me of Romar.”

“The favor?”

“Wherever you go, wherever your home is, let you seek, let your eyes be ever busy searching, looking for one like this. I would give all I have to bring him safely home.” Her eyes were desperate.

The woman she addressed nodded slowly. “I do indeed wander, as did your brother, sometimes to the east. I will watch for him, free him if he be trapped, bury him if I find his body, bring news to you if I have any. But only as I can. I, too, have those who rely on me. I cannot risk them for one unknown who may already be dead. But I sorrow for your grief. I will do what I can.”

Mayrin flung her arms about the slender body. “That is all I ask. Come back. With news or without it, a welcome holds for you ever.”

Eleeri turned away, but Mayrin’s fingers seized her arm. Eleeri turned, brows raised questioningly. A small object was pressed into her hand.

“Here; you did not look truly. Look now, study the face. He may have changed a little if he has been treated ill by those of the Dark. Please, remember him, find him for me.”

Eleeri looked down. At her previous glance the boy had seemed nothing special. Now she looked closer as her new friend begged. She guessed that Romar would have been sixteen when the limning was done. The same age as— She stared suddenly. No wonder she had no more than glanced. Why should she look closer? The image of this boy stood



staring imploringly at her.

“You *know* he’s alive somewhere, don’t you?” Eleeri said. “You’re twins.”

“That is so,” Mayrin said softly. “I feel him to be in great danger, but death has not touched him as yet. You are also right that we are twins. It is rare, very rare for those of the Old Race. Few there have been with any talent in our line, but Romar has an affinity with beasts. Horses in particular.” Her fingers twined and twisted frantically, although her voice remained calm and quiet. “But we have the gift of twins. I would *know* if he were dead; therefore he is not. Find him for me, Eleeri.”

For a long moment, Eleeri studied the portrait. Mayrin had changed, but not greatly since this was done. The boy here was young, untried. But there was strength in that face, pride without vice, power without the need to use it unjustly. The eyes were lonely, inward-looking. To an outsider he would have appeared as no great one to risk aught for. His face was thin, with fine bones and a determined chin. Eyes of a shade more green than gray, if the painter had not lied—but no. Mayrin’s eyes, too, were that hue. The mouth was clean-cut, modeled with almost a delicacy, but there was no weakness in the set of those lips. It was the mouth of one who acted as well as dreamed.

It drew her in a way she had never felt before. She was no child to be attracted by any pretty face. She would have shrugged off the feeling, but even that would have been to acknowledge it. Mayrin had been kind; her lord had traded fairly. They asked only that she be alert for traces of this one. It was not asked that she storm any strongholds of the Dark. She glanced down again. Hmm, a trick of the light . . . for a moment the painted eyes had seemed to implore, to focus on her. Her face came up, eyes measured Mayrin.



Witchery? No, she did not think so. Just a trick of the light.

This likeness must have been made ten years ago or more. From what her friend had said during the past week, Eleeri could piece some things together. Romar must be about twenty-seven now, Jerrany some three years older. She bit back a sound of contempt. Mayrin's father must have been an idiot. Fancy expecting a boy of sixteen to confront one who was older, more experienced, and his best friend as well. Twenty-seven—about six years older than Eleeri was now. She brushed that idea aside. His age was unimportant. Let him be a child or a grandfather, she had promised to watch for signs of him. That she would do, but no more than that.

She rode midmorning, with Mayrin and Jerrany at the bridge to wish her a good journeying. The women hugged a final time and there was a genuine friendship in that.

The keep's lady wore her guest-gift proudly, the vest of rasti fur glistening in the sun. Now and again her fingers strayed to the pockets lining the inside. How clever, how cunning. She would have these made for every gown now that she had been given the trick of them. Jerrany, too, would find them useful, in his jerkins. Romar should, too—she felt a bitter pain. Romar might never know anything she would wish to tell him. She watched until horse and rider vanished around the lake edge.

“Find him, please find him, bring him back to me,” she whispered into the air.

Eleeri rode around the lake. With all her trade pelts gone, she could ride again, and it pleased her. The walk to the keep had been long and tiring. In a day or two she would be back at the canyon with Tharna, Hylan, and the others. But as the pony trotted on, a young face intruded. Well, she would keep an eye open for the boy—man now. The gray-green eyes seemed to hang in her mind, hopeful, waiting. With a

determined effort, she banished them. Winter was coming. She had things to do other than looking for some fool who'd probably only gotten himself lost.

She slept that night in wards, but in her dreams she saw him. After that he was gone. Eleeri nodded. Her mind was her own; it would banish what it was bid. If imploring eyes watched her, after that they were ignored. So she told herself, and who is to say she lied?



9

*B*ut she did keep her promise. She raided less often into Keplian lands, but when she did, her eyes were always alert for the boy who looked like Mayrin. The Gray Ones watched her, but after several disastrous meetings, they tended to look the other way—unless they were in full pack as they were one bright spring morning after winter was banished from even the mountains about Eleeri’s canyon. They gave chase, but the tough fit pony carrying a light weight and the powerful Keplian mare stayed easily beyond their reach.

Eleeri reined in many miles later, laughing. “That gave them a nice run. Didn’t they look disappointed?”

The mare gave her whinnying laugh, then sobered. *Kin-sister, have you not noticed, this spring they have returned to chasing us again. Before the winter, they had looked aside if we were in view. Now they hunt again.*

“That was full pack,” the girl objected.



They knew themselves unable to catch us, but they still gave chase. Something builds; the Gray Ones do not hunt where the prey is worthless.

Eleeri grinned. "I wouldn't say we were worthless, precisely."

Not if they could take us, no. But they have tried often in the past, failed, and ceased to try. So why do they try again now?

"I see what you mean." She sat her pony, looking thoughtful. It *was* strange. For most of the previous year the wolfmen had ignored them both. Tharna could be right. Something was building. But what—and why? Her mind made an intuitive leap. Romar! According to Mayrin, he'd ridden off in spring last year. They'd expected him back by late summer. Could the Gray Ones have taken him, found a use for him? But what sort of use, apart from food? Or torture? her mind added grimly. The pony had ceased to nibble at the grass. Now he lifted his head alertly. Eleeri gathered in the reins.

"I suspect trouble comes. Best we leave."

The mare nodded, then stiffened as the gust of changing wind came to her nose. Her eyes met Eleeri's in deepening surprise. The pack still followed. Eleeri led them to the river. Let the evil ones stick their noses into all that running water. It might cool their brains. The river ran higher than expected, so that the girl was becoming worried. It would be dangerous to cross, it must have rained higher in the mountains last night.

Moving with decision, she swung the hunt upriver, heading now for the stream that fed the lake. That, too, was high, and the crossing was difficult. They paused to rest on the other side as the pack snapped and snarled in frustration.



“Better keep going, kin-sister. I have a nasty feeling that if we stay in plain sight, it may impel that lot to do something stupid.”

The mare shrugged. *If they try to cross, they die.*

“And if it dawns on them this stream has an end?”

Tharna looked startled. It would be well out of the territory, but there was actually nothing to prevent the pack from circling the lake to continue the hunt.

It is far—many days, even for them.

“True, but if they are driven, they might not care about that. There is food to be hunted and when they round the lake there are also humans.”

The mare nodded silently. Humans unaware of approaching danger. As they talked, they had moved away from the stream, hooves clicked dully on the rocky trail. They traveled several hours in silence, each recalling the events of the day. There was little doubt that something stirred in the land once more. Tharna was apprehensive; her kin-sister would insist on poking her nose into it, whatever it was. She would that Eleeri was better armed. Not with her bow only, but with the gift and powers. They walked slowly, so she had time to decide. A flick of her mind alerted the girl that there was something the mare wished her to consider.

Eleeri listened. The golden mist at the canyon end had almost ceased to interest her. It was forbidden to enter; nothing answered calls from without. Her pendant warned her away from it and even her own common sense advised caution there. There had been so many other adventures and paths to follow, the mist had been relegated to the back of her mind. Now she protested.

“We are still refused entry.”

How long is it since you tried?



That was a point. Eleeri thought back. Months, many months. It must have been—she counted on her fingers—why, it had been early last summer. Well, she could try again. It would do no harm as long as she was polite. At least she hoped it wouldn't.

She did try, to receive the clear impression of a barred door. Whatever was within the mist wasn't welcoming her in today. She walked away slowly. Would it ever allow her in? Was there something she was supposed to be doing to pay for the privilege? She chuckled. She didn't want to get in that much anyhow; it was just curiosity.

Farther down the canyon, Tharna waited. She noted the return and the deliberately casual air. It seemed the gate was still barred to them and her kin-sister wasn't of a mind to try again in a hurry. Tharna said nothing but returned to grazing.

Eleeri noticed both the attention, then the studied disinterest. It pricked her so that she turned on her heel and returned to the mist. There she stood formulating what she would say. The Gray Ones' unusual behavior, the sense that something was wrong in the lower lands. The feeling of an approaching storm, not of wind and sky but of power and danger. She fixed the feelings in her mind, then did what she felt was the equivalent of knocking on the mist's door.

In a burst she sent her message. Attention sharpened on her. She felt a sudden exhilaration. *That* had interested it.

Query?

She sent again her surprise at the way the wolfmen had followed them so tenaciously. This time she included all events, mental pictures of the terrain. The way they had been hounded right to the very edge of running water. The way she and Tharna had felt they should move away even that after crossing—as if the desperation of the pack to



reach them was communicated. The sudden fear that the Gray Ones might decide to circle the lake, move into territory they did not know. Endanger the humans there who were friends.

She had the impression then of having her mind winnowed. The rifler was interested in the Keplian mare. They were friends? Yes, they were, and was there anything wrong with that? was Eleeri's sharp response.

In return she received a burst of amusement. On the contrary. The mist or whatever dwelt within was pleased. Eleeri blinked, sending her own query in turn: *Why?* Now there was a sense of duality touching her, not one thing communicating, but two. Male and female. She received the impression they were human in some way, more than human in others. Adepts, then? she queried. In reply the touch vanished. The image of the barred door returned and she found herself backing slowly away again as the mist writhed and coiled.

She retired hastily to share the experience with Tharna. They stared at each other when she had finished. Wordlessly the mare began to graze again. She liked to consider things, to chew over thoughts as she did grass. Eleeri was not so eager to think about all this. In several ways she wasn't even sure she had liked the way her mind had been invaded. She had suffered no injury, but they could at least have asked, she thought resentfully. She didn't even belong in this world.

That brought her up short in her mind. Didn't she? This world had allowed her to be herself; it had given her a home, a roof and friends. Here she rode as a warrior as she could never have done in the world she had escaped.

It had been an escape. She had run here. Entered willingly



along the road of the gone-before ones. For a single moment she felt a terrible longing for Far Traveler and their home. But her great-grandfather was gone, their small home no longer hers. Even if she could go back, nothing would ever be the same. Tharna and Hylan could not travel with her; in her world they would be treated ill. She fingered her knife. She could not ride as a warrior there. That thought alone could sway her powerfully.

Life was hard in this land she had chosen. She must fight to survive, to eat. For food and trade she must hunt, and all she owned was from the work of her own hands. She drew in a deep breath of the spring-scented air. Then she marched into her keep. It *was* hers, hers by right of finding, by use. The decision had been made. For all this time in many ways she had been living as if her sojourn here were only temporary. Now she knew in a burst of wild gladness it was her home, her keep, her land. No one was going to take anything away from her without having a fight on their hands. And that, she added with mental ferocity, included any Gray Ones or their masters.

She swept inside to begin turning out winter-musty furs. Bedding she hauled to the stream and washed in the stone basins designed for that purpose. She looked properly at the basins for the first time. Clever: whoever had dwelt here hadn't intended to live without amenities. She trotted back inside to add her own clothing to the pile.

She left the grass spread with her work, as she returned to her keep. For too long she had used only the great hall. On very cold or wet nights many of the Keplians would join her there. She had never bothered to search the upper rooms.

She snorted. That had been the faint remembrances of Far Traveler's tales. Of how it was not well to accept a roof



where the owners had died. She didn't know that the owners *had* died here. It could have been far away. They could even be those who lived behind the mist, and hence not dead at all. She tramped up the narrow stone stairs. You could tell this place had been built by those expecting a war. The stairs had no rail and twisted in a way that allowed a defender free sword-arm.

Upstairs, she counted as she moved down the narrow passage. It must run the length of the keep, above the center of the downstairs hall.

No wooden furniture remained, if any there had been, but stone tables furnished several of the rooms. Hearths were placed to warm bedrooms. Two large alcoves shelved in stone may once have been linen closets. She wandered through the rooms, tapping idly at the walls. Cynan had showed her the small hiding place for jewelry in his own hold. Had they had one here? she wondered. She drifted down to the end of the passage and found, to her surprise, that it continued in a flight of stairs leading downward again. She orientated herself. Strange. She'd seen no second set upward from the lower floor.

She trod down, eyes and ears alert, hand on knife hilt. Down, down. By now she had to be below ground. She glanced up and suddenly understood. Once there was probably extra planking level with the stone floor, hiding the continuation of the staircase, probably with a hidden trapdoor there. The light had faded so that she stumbled, retreating in search of something she could use to light her way. Feet padded swiftly back up the stairs—there, that would do. She'd used branches to sweep upstairs the previous summer. Now dry, they would burn to light her way. She glanced at the armload. Would it be enough?



Surely she could manage. She hurried back down to where she could no longer see, then lit a branch. As it burned, the amount of light was small, but it did allow her to see the stairs. She padded on down until a door appeared before her. Stone, but so well crafted it could be opened by a firm push. She peered around the edge in wonderment. A vast expanse of paved floor met her gaze.

There seemed to be nothing but that floor stretching into darkness on the far side. Making a mental note that she must make better torches for this, she advanced. Stone-paved floor, stone block walls, and no other entrance. That didn't make sense. Why would they have this down here with no escape? Perhaps it had been only storerooms?

She padded around the perimeter, holding up her branch. It was beginning to die; she lit the second and continued to walk. She guessed this area was almost as large as the keep above. Something caught her eye, a rusted remnant of metal on the floor. She stooped to find she was holding a dagger. From the studs that surrounded it, the steel had once been within a leather sheath. She faced the stone wall, thinking. Was this a weapon dropped in flight, or had it a deeper significance?

Cynan had taught her several words in common usage as commands. This keep had been built as a fortress, but those who had lived here might not have used more than simple locks.

She faced the wall, lifting her voice in clear command. "Ashlin!" Eleeri said. There was a soft creaking, a grinding, as the wall opened.

Behind it, protected from time's hunger, hung weapons. Here and there were gaps as if a portion of the collection had been snatched up in haste. The woman studied the array



carefully. Bows, quivers filled with arrows, swords, daggers, honing stones, everything one could want to defend this place. She smiled. Would her word continue to work? She walked to the edge of the open section, then took two more paces sideways.

“Ashlin!” There was no response. She paced sideways again. Still no response. But on her third try the wall again quivered into life.

This time it was mail. Mail in a wonderful metal that held the sheen of oil on water. She lifted out a piece and admired the work. The mail—no, she remembered now, when it was rings like this Mayrin had said it was called chain. The chain was wrought by a master, surely. It hung heavy but limp as velvet in her hands. There was a smaller shirt there which she found her hands drawn to.

It fitted perfectly, as if some long-ago smith had made it for her measure. Once on, it didn’t feel so heavy, either. She lit the last branch—now she had light enough to leave, and that was it. Facing the open sections, she spoke the word of closing and watched as they snapped shut again. She’d be back. There was more here to be discovered. She hurried up the stairs as her branch burned low. Was it possible, her curiosity suggested, that the commands would work in some of the bedrooms as well? Were there other secrets she might have overlooked?

She soon found there were. Mayrin had taught her other commands, and these opened what must have once been clothes closets in several of the rooms. She gasped over the wealth of silks and velvets exposed to her. From the sizes and other indications, she guessed there had been a lord and lady of the keep. There looked also to have been babies.

For the remainder of that day, she trotted from wall to



wall all over the keep trying her commands. Even the kitchen yielded up cupboards of pots, pans, crockery, and other minor items. Eleeri retired to bed, her head whirling with delight. From being a beggar in someone else's keep, she now felt true ownership for the first time. It was as if the keep itself had let her in.

Early the next morning she was back down the stairs again with torches. She circled the walls, trying each of the words she knew in turn. One opened a small door to stables she had not known were there. By the afternoon, she was exhausted with her work. She retired to the great hall with a charcoal stick and a large piece of white bark. There she attempted to make a plan of the keep. As she drew, she marveled. Why had it taken her so long to explore? It was as if she had felt herself an invader. That by remaining in the hall alone she would not anger those who had once owned this place.

In some ways she understood her own actions. It had been the canyon with its runes and strange mist. She had felt that to trespass too greatly would be to see them all driven forth. But now that they had lived here for a time, she felt a gradual welcome begin to close about her. As if she was known now, recognized and accepted. The keep was hers: she would accept its gifts, its shelter, the comfort offered by the strong walls and runes at the gates.

For the next weeks she was busy going over her newfound keepdom. She began sleeping upstairs in the bedroom that must have belonged to lord and lady. The kitchen shone with burnished pots and pans hung on the walls. From cupboards now open to her searching eyes, she retrieved tapestries, hanging them with much labor and cursing. It puzzled her that the cupboards appeared to have



protected their contents so well. It occurred to her to experiment with fresh meat placed inside the closet in a bedroom. The attempt explained much to her; the meat remained fresh for weeks. After some trial and error, she found that the more often the cupboard was open, the more swiftly the meat would decay. A spell? It had to be. Some magic to preserve from time whatever was placed within. Good. The cupboards she did not need would do well to keep her food against the summer heat.

Meanwhile, the Keplians had not been idle. Hylan had taken to quiet visits into the lands his dam had once known. From there he had returned with news gleaned from his kind. The last visit, Tharna had traveled beside him. Now she came in search of Eleeri.

Kin-sister, there is news, nor do I like what I have heard.

The woman stood up to stroke the soft nose. She waited. Tharna would speak in her own good time.

In the center of our lands there rises an old shadow. Evil lairs once more in the Dark Tower. My people fear it, obey it, yet still do they fall to its hunger. It is possible it is the reason the Gray Ones hunt us far harder than ever before. More and more Keplian fall to them also.

Eleeri had known of that. The Keplians had always been small in numbers, the fault of the treatment meted out to orphaned foals by the stallions who killed so casually and the mares who refused to aid the helpless. Now she listened to Tharna and Hylan as they told of foals and birth-weakened mares taken almost under the noses of herd stallions. Even of young bachelor males pulled down by many Gray Ones working together.

They are run mad. They kill and kill until all our lands will be empty. Hylan's breath hissed in. *They even attack



the rasti. But they lose doubly in that. The rasti are not such as should be trifled with. Many died—on both sides.*

The woman smiled broadly. “It is well said that when evil ones fall out, good may profit. Let us hope they slaughter each other until none remain.”

Unlikely, the stallion commented. *They say in our lands that that which dwells in the tower spoke to them harshly, saying that if they war again, he will punish both sides.*

Eleeri glanced up. “That won’t get it far. Rasti care nothing for threats. If the Gray Ones attack them, they will fight.”

Tharna nodded. *But the wolf ones do care. They fear that which is in the Dark Tower. They will not again attack without word. I fear that it may be your friends who are to be prey next. There was some talk of a gathering of the pack, that they might hunt out far toward the edges of their territory.*

Eleeri gazed out from under the trees where they were standing. Her mind was suddenly made up: she would ride to speak of this to those of the lake keep.

That is well, kin-sister. But ride wary.

That the woman was more than prepared to do. The sturdy dun was saddled and Keplians mind-sent affection as she rode past them. The runes flared at her passage. Impelled by an impulse, she leaned over as she passed, fingers tracing the main runes of guard. A word came into her mind then as if gifted to her. By now she had learned not to speak such aloud, but in her mind she stored it against need.

As she rode from her hold, she thought about the runes. From what she now knew of the land, the gift of power was common. Even those who had little were taught to use what they had. All homes, keeps, strongholds, were warded, the



Valley of the Green Silences most strongly of all. It was an ability native to the people here.

Her mind turned to the Gray Ones. Unpleasant creatures that they were. They and the Keplians had been enemies from time out of mind. It seemed that the attempts to control them, perhaps to draw power from them, was driving them mad. The tower might demand they cease to fight; the dweller there would not wish his meager resources wasted casually in a war he did not approve, and one moreover which killed his own side only. But he wasn't having much luck there, Eleeri thought. That suited her. Friends profited when enemies fell out, Far Traveler had been fond of saying. If the Gray Ones continued to irritate the rasti, too, it would be useful.

She shivered. A rasti pack-ground was no place to be. They looked rather like weasels to her—weasels grown to three feet in length, with wonderful fur. And like weasels sometimes would in the depths of a hard winter, rasti hunted in packs.

They had no true intelligence, but they had an animal cunning all their own. Nor, if their territory was invaded, did they seem to care how many of their own kind died, so long as the intruders were expelled. The dead were food, their own dead or the invaders. She shivered, thrusting the thought from her mind.

She rode steadily downstream and along the lake edge. That night as she slept, she dreamed as she had not done in many months. A dark-haired man looked at her with a wistful hope. He had aged beyond the boy of the small painted picture. But she knew him . . . Romar, twin to Mayrin. His face twisted in his efforts to reach her, to speak, perhaps to warn.

Then strength visibly drained from him and his face went



slack. She leaned forward; her eyes studied him. He was thin, pale of skin, as one who had been indoors too long. But resolution still showed in the firm set of jaw, the folded lips. In her sleep, slender fingers slid to her throat, there to twine about the Keplian pendant. She strained to see more clearly. Warmth rose from that which she clasped.

Her dream sight cleared a little. Now beyond the man she could see a window, blue sky spread above, gray stone surrounding it. He sat held to a great carved chair by leather straps. Yet she sensed he was held by more than the bonds she saw. About him spread a circle. Runes flared red, smoked in black around the outer line. Eleeri shivered. There was no mistaking what she saw: Romar was captive to an evil that sought to use him. His eyes opened again, and in them there was a desperate appeal. The runes flared high, veiling him in a smoke that reeked even in her dreaming, of power and danger.

She pulled back. The scene began to fade, but as it did so, it shifted. Now she looked down as a bird might upon a tower below. Confirmation. That was indeed the Dark Tower, deep in Keplian lands. She rode on at daybreak, the dream repeating over and over in her mind. She feared the effect on Mayrin, did she speak of this. The woman would insist on an attack, but Eleeri felt that this would bring only death. They must be clever. Attack, yes, but as thieves in the night, not as warriors. The fighters of her people had once esteemed such battle cunning.

Her face flickered into a brief dangerous smile. She would keep her own counsel, but she would speak of the warnings her friends had brought from Keplian lands. That would be sufficient to place the keep on guard. As for Jerrany—there, too, she would not speak, she decided. He loved Mayrin



dearly, too much to hide anything from her. Once she suspected, Mayrin would have the story out of him as a sea-dog shelled sea-snails.

Eleeri rode into the keep days later. From across the bridge, her friends came running, Mayrin laughing happily.

“Oh, it is so good to see you again. What has happened since last you came? Has the hunting been good? Are you tired?”

Jerrany seized the reins. “I’ll take this fellow to be cared for. Go you with Mayrin before she bursts with her questions.” He touched her lightly on one shoulder. “She speaks for us both, though. It is good to see you once more. I’ll bring your pack to the hall.” He strode away, leading the weary pony.

Mayrin had her friend by a sleeve. For the first time she realized that there was a hard material under her fingers. “Why, what is this?” She turned up the outer fabric. “Chain, you wear chain, and such craft! Where did it come from? Have you found another place to trade? What—”

Eleeri held up a hand laughing softly. “Let me answer one set of questions before you ask me more. As for the chain, it was found, not traded. I will tell you the story another time. The hunting has indeed been good, and yes, I am both tired and hungry. I have no news of Romar, but something that may bear upon you and the keep. Feed me and I will talk with you and Jerrany of it. This is in part why I have come.”

Late into that night they talked. Jerrany did not take her words lightly.

“I will have all put in order. We do stand ready, but there are many small things which might yet be done to prepare for siege or attack.” His face grew serious as he thought. “What have you brought to trade?”



“No luxuries this time,” Eleeri assured him. “All good deerskins, sinews, and a gift for you, another for Mayrin.” She reached for her pack. “Ask me not where these came from. They are for you, a gift of Light.” She allowed the first bundle to unroll, revealing a matching chain shirt which would fit her friend. Mayrin gasped, touching it with wondering fingers. Another bundle unrolled to spread half a dozen swords across Jerrany’s feet. They were unadorned but of superb workmanship. The keep lord picked one up, closed his hand about the hilt, and tried a pass or two. Then he spoke as one who offers a pledge.

“We will ask not whence these came. That they are of the Light is enough.” He eyed his wife sternly when she would have spoken, and Mayrin’s lips closed again. “They shall be used against evil, to protect that which is good.”

He was more sober than was his custom the remainder of Eleeri’s visit. When she departed, he watched as her pony rounded the lake edge, gradually disappearing from their sight. Then he strolled inside and called for a trusted armsman. To him he handed a letter.

“Take this to the lady who rules the Valley of the Green Silences, and none other.” Hoofbeats died on soft turf as he stood at the keep door. Silently he went to his armory and from there to check provisions.

Little enough of the gift was there in his line. But now he felt the chill as of a coming storm. He had heard Eleeri’s warnings with belief. He had mentioned it neither to his wife nor their visitor, but a hunter for the keep, ranging farther than usual, had seen Gray Ones. There was more the woman was not telling, he was sure. Perhaps she was not certain of the import herself. There would be no ill reason for her silence.

He stared out over the land that lay before him as he



passed an arrow slot. It was fair: here he had planned to live, to see children grow. Would his bones lie here before his time instead? And what of Mayrin? She would not leave did he try to send her.

He looked out over the land to where blue-tinged mountains lifted far in the distance. Here they had come to build a house and a name. Here they would stay, for life or death. If the valley could send help, well enough; if not, then they would fight alone. Sunlight glinted far down the lakeside. No, not quite alone. Eleeri, too, rode to war.

He sighed. Always Romar had been his right arm. If only his friend were here now to stand beside him. His step was heavy as he left the window. Behind him there were none left to care about him, he thought. His mother had long since turned to her new lord and her growing brood. No, here were his only friends and loves. But he missed his sword-brother Romar with every fiber of his being.

He found he was standing in the middle of his bedroom studying the window once more. Through it he could see a long sweep of land toward the Valley of Green Silences. He sighed. This had been a lonely and dangerous place to choose to live. But hitherto it had been free from the Gray Ones. It was a sign the Dark was growing in strength, and a danger to all who rode for the Light.

Many years ago, a different Dark lord dwelling there had tried to seize the mind and heart of a witchmaid—the daughter of Simon Tregarth. She had been freed, and evil turned back on the man who would have used her. But the tower was a place which seemed to call to those small ones of the Dark who would be greater. A pity it was impossible to tear it down completely so that none might rise there in Dark power again. He had suggested that once; it was Duhaun

herself who told him they could not. Some reason rooted in the things of power. He had not understood half the explanation, only enough to know she was right. It could not be done without endangering the land itself.

Far down the lakeside, sunlight flickered briefly from bridle mountings as Eleeri rounded the stream bend. She, too, was remembering—a harsh-planed face weary beyond words, and gray-green eyes that pleaded for aid. Over the past few days her mind had been made up. There comes a time when a warrior must ride. Along with Romar's face, those of Mayrin, Jerrany, Tharna, and Hylan arose along with her other Keplian friends. Too many innocents. If she must don war paint, take oath to ride pukutsi, to ride slaying until all who faced her died, or she herself fell, then let it be so. She found she was humming softly as she rode. Far Traveler's death song. She smiled. She would be ready.



10

*O*ver the weeks, things settled to quiet again, but no one in keep or canyon was deceived. The feeling of danger grew as the Gray Ones were seen more often, always deeper into the lands that bordered their own. Eleeri took to sitting alone where they appeared. Bow in hand, she waited, patient pony grazing ready. From ambush her arrows slew in ones and twos until the wolfmen were nervous about the whole fringe of country toward the mountains.

Hylan did his share to make other Keplian males as wary. Twice he fought and defeated stallions given over to the Dark. He had seen their treatment of mares and foals. Now he knew why his gentle mother had fled to find refuge. All honor to her kin-sister who had protected them. As a foal he had looked up to the human; as a colt he had listened to her. Now as a stallion he spoke equally but accepted that she was the forethinker, the one who made plans, watched for consequences. Now he quite simply loved her, as did his dam.



To see a Dark-given Keplian stallion was to see power and majesty embodied in evil. To see Hylan beside one was to see the difference. He was larger still, his lines cleaner, and the power shone from him like an aura. In the canyon all bowed to his will, save his dam and her battle-sister. Even other Keplian males who met him on their land tended to back away. Unlike them, he had not struggled for food as a colt. He had not been fed by a dam thin from constant breeding, who would chase him from her as soon as possible to save his life. He had become magnificent but also intelligent. In him the potential of his kind was realized.

He glanced up from juicy grass as Eleeri passed. *Where do you go this time?*

“The river. The rasti are disputing with the Gray Ones again.” She grinned evilly. “It’s a saving on energy. If I shoot anyone at all, it’s a kill, since the opposition finish them for me.”

The huge beast was amused but worried. *When enemies fight, it is well for us, but walk warily. The rasti are stirred by all this intrusion on their territory. Even I would not wish to meet them where I could not flee.*

Eleeri could agree with that. A rasti pack was death on many feet. She had seen too many others fall to them when injured to take chances. She swung up and nodded. “I’ll be careful. You keep an eye on things here and I should be back by sunhigh.”

She was gone, cantering past the runes, which flared into life as she passed. Hylan watched, listening as the hoofbeats faded. Then he walked slowly toward the entrance. At his approach, too, the runes began to glimmer, a soft blue-green glow that strengthened, warmed. He eyed them wistfully. He was of the Light; all here in the canyon were so



acknowledged by the marks of ward and guard. Yet still he wished for more. To any eye who knew him not, he was of the Dark, a Keplian, follower of the evil. If only there was something to distinguish him in his outer form. He sighed silently, returning to his grass.

His dam wandered over several hours later. *Where did Eleeri go?*

To the river to tease rasti. The question's import dawned. *She said she would be back by sunhigh. It is past that. You worry.* The last was a statement.

His dam nodded. Both knew her kin-sister's custom. If she said she would do something, it was done. If not, there was good reason. Both were suddenly afraid what that reason might be. They looked at each other and in accord trotted from the canyon and down the rocky trail toward the river. There was no sign of Eleeri there, but her pony's scent lay on the grass. They followed, taking it in turn to guard as the other laid nose to ground. Tharna found the first place and reared to a halt.

Here there was trouble.

They scented the pony's rush of fright. His hooves had scored the ground as he leaped away. But why? Soft noses leaned downward, scoured across nearby ground in an outward circling. Gray Ones! A whole pack, as many as two dozen, perhaps, and all males. This was no casual wandering; this had been a trail. They had been going somewhere with a purpose—and the trail led toward the lake.

That is, it had. Now it led into the higher foothills as Gray Ones turned to hunt woman and pony. Eleeri had run, but no swifter than necessary, saving her mount's strength.

The Keplians trotted along in pursuit. They would find her. The scent was fresh; the wolfmen must have her cornered somewhere.



Eleeri had left that morning with no intent beyond a few enemy deaths. She fought cautiously, using the land itself and pitting enemies against one another. She had been greatly successful over the past two months. She had hunted deeper into the lands toward the Dark Tower than her Keplian friends knew. She had seen nothing of Romar, but clues told her he was held there or nearby. She had discovered the tower was guarded; that alone told her that something was there to be protected. Time and time again over recent weeks she had approached, searching out what she could find of the defenses.

But this morning the sun had been warm, the sky blue. There was no thought of towers or prisoners. She would twist rasti tails, kill Gray Ones if she could.

She allowed the pony to pick his own way downhill toward the river. For a short time she watched the rasti, but none were careless today. Far across the stream she could see movement. She pushed the pony into a steady walk as she paced the distant shifting. Curious, she crossed to move closer. From the long grass almost at her feet, Gray Ones rose up. Mad with fear, her mount leaped and whirled, fled with all the speed in a sturdy body kept fit and well fed. The Gray Ones had moved to cut her off from the running water. In his panic her mount was carrying her farther away, bearing almost directly south so that her distance from the stream widened.

She fought him savagely, driving into his mind as she never did. But this was desperate; she must send him back to the running water. A swift glance had told her the deadly danger. A full pack of males loped behind them. She turned the sweating animal in a long slow curve and reached the river. Not good: on the other side, the rasti waited; behind, the Gray Ones closed in. The pony could outrun them, but



his endurance was far less than theirs. They had only to keep between her and the water wherever she could safely cross. Split the pack and they had her. But mad with the hunt, they were not doing that—not yet. Her mind worked feverishly as she scanned possibilities.

Her hand went up to close around her pendant. Behind her the hunt faltered, and in that short time she had fled the closing ring. She thrust the unwilling pony into the water. The river was still high from spring thaw, and he protested. She understood that, but it was risk this or be eaten. She hurled pictures at him until he swam, terror at his heels. A greater terror rose before him as the rasti now gave chase, leaving the Gray Ones pack howling in frustrated rage on the bank behind them. The pony was tiring. Eleeri was a rider who knew how to lighten her own body as she rode. But he had come far and fast, with panic sapping his strength, leaching the stamina from his muscles.

He began to falter. The rasti were closing in on them now. Still he staggered on, his fear of them so strong he would run until he died on his hooves. Eleeri was turning and shooting, keeping her weight balanced. At each arrow another of her pursuers died. Those who were only wounded were swiftly taken by their companions. Each death slowed them so that the exhausted pony remained ahead, but for how long?

Eleeri counted her arrows and shivered. Without her weight, he could escape. With it, they would both die. If she'd been sure the followers would leave her if her mount went down—feast while she was free to run—she might have acted. She was deeply fond of the small horse who carried her so willingly, but she would sacrifice him to survive. A quick knife thrust would ensure he did not suffer.

But she was under no illusions. The rasti took only



minutes to eat those she slew. But always there were a few who continued without sharing the feasts. They seemed to be taking turns to eat. Would they all halt to share a far greater bounty? Somehow she was sure they would not and she could not bear to kill without that certainty. The pony reeled on, his hooves only yards away from teeth that now gaped in bloodstained anticipation.

Eleeri had decided. When the pony could no longer stay ahead of the rasti, she would act. Kill him cleanly, then run for a place where she could make a stand. The body might draw off sufficient of them for her to give a good accounting in her final battle. *Hai!* She would be able to stand before the gods as a warrior. Her lips curled back in a battle rictus. Let them come, the first to reach her should be the first to die. She hurled fear away, allowed rage to flood in. Adrenaline surged as she turned to shoot her last arrows.

From the hillside nearby came a sudden burst of sound. The Keplians had not followed far into the lands of their enemies. A wind shift had revealed enough for them to know that the hunt's direction had changed. It neared them swiftly and to their nostrils came the deaths of the rasti, the stink of blood, sweat, and terror. They could smell the growing weariness of Eleeri's mount. Below them the hunt came into view far down the mountainside. If they left the trail and followed another they knew, they might yet be in time.

The pursuit gained on Eleeri. As they moved, Tharna and Hylan dropped obliquely down the heights, gradually reaching the lower lands. So intent on the race were those involved, none looked up to see that others might be taken into account. Hylan and his dam reached a lower trail. It was smoother and they leaped into a gallop, huge bodies straining as they sped along. With their far greater speed, they reached a bend that turned in the direction of the hunt, and were still



ahead of it. They had time to see and understand Eleeri's decision. In a few more minutes the pony would go down and she would turn to die.

In the woman's battle rage she was mind-sending. Her intent struck like a sword as the pursuit raced toward the Keplians. There was an instant of wordless communication between them, a decision made. It was against all they knew, but they cared nothing for that. A friend, a kin-sister would die unless they aided her. She would do this and more for them.

Hooves blazed a path down the last slope toward her. Minds screamed warning, pictures too fast for ordinary mind-speech. In one jump Tharna ranged beside the pony, Hylan on the other side, keeping the faltering animal straight as he ran.

He shouldered hard into the smaller beast. His mind flung an order. For a moment Eleeri herself faltered—was he sure? He was! Tharna had slowed, and her hooves now shot out viciously. Teeth snapped as the leading rasti went down. Their followers swirled in eddies as they ate and ran on again. But the Keplian raced faster than any rasti could run. The unburdened pony kept up, terror driving him beyond normal endurance.

Astride the Keplian stallion, Eleeri thrilled as they outraced death. She crouched low over his withers, her weight balanced, feeling the great driving muscles under her. Her mind unconsciously reached out, seeking that oneness she had always found with a mount.

It came, in a flood of imagery and power. It was as if, reaching for water, she had drunk unwatered wine. The Keplian, too, was stunned by the union. For him it was Light, a blaze of it that lit corners of his mind, showed to him things for which he had no words. He felt it run through him,

cleansing, healing. He remembered the terror of his birth, his bewildered pain and the hatred for those who hurt him, kept him from his dam. Now all that was healed. He understood their ignorant fears. Accepted that to them he had been of the Dark, and that the Dark was killed where it was found.

Beside him the weakening pony ran. He felt only pity for it. Before, he had scorned it as a pale copy of the glory that was Keplian. He was sorry for it now; it could never have this, the power and blaze of the Light blending two into one. He had feared to take Eleeri upon his back, feared that he would feel degraded, humiliated by a rider. He flung up his head, and the wild savage scream of a fighting stallion broke forth as a trumpet blast in triumph. He was not bound by a rider; he was freed. This was not emptiness, being used. It was a fullness, and in the Light he knew at last this was his creation.

They swerved uphill, following a faint trail in the direction of the canyon. Linking by mind-touch, Tharna felt a pale echo of the ecstasy of Light the rider had brought her son. She wondered sadly if this pleasure was felt by those who carried the Dark ones. If so, then she could better understand their acceptance. Denied by the Light, they had chosen to still be greater than they were alone. She followed her son, hooves dully sounding on the rocky path. Next time it would be she who carried her kin-sister, who shared the union of Light. But she would be generous. She felt a gentle amusement at that. Yes, she would allow her son to carry a rider—sometimes.

They reached the entrance to the canyon, the rasti long since left behind. Ahead the runes flamed brighter than she had ever seen before. Higher and higher until they were as torches that lit even the day. The blue-green changed slowly to the golden shade shot with silver that was the mist of the



lower reaches. In it Eleeri could feel a gentle welcome, a tugging. She shrugged it off. Her pony had carried her, given all he had. What kind of rider would she be to leave him neglected, lathered, still saddled and bridled? She dropped from Hylan, turning to lay her head against his shoulder for a moment. Her hand reached out to pull the mare in so that they stood together.

“I know what you did.”

Tharna stirred. *He did no more than I would have done. Next time *I* will carry you. I am your battle-sister; it is right.*

Eleeri felt the faint note of questioning. She hastened to send reassurance, then love. “Next time, kin-sister. You shall both bear me as you choose. Who would be borne by a horse when they could have the greater?”

This close she could feel both thinking. The idea drifted through the three as they leaned together, touching. Maybe they had been right. Perhaps it had been for this that the Great Ones had created Keplian. Eleeri pulled herself away briskly then. “The pony—I have to see to him,” she explained to the soft complaint. Agreement came reluctantly. Her friends followed as she tended the small leg-weary animal. As she worked, they kept up an amused mind-send of comment. Finally the woman found the jests at the uncaring beast’s expense a little too much. She turned to face them, the look in her eyes serious.

“Listen to me. I know he is not Keplian. I know he has no mind-speech, no great brains, and not the speed or beauty of either of you. But he does his best always. He would have died, running to save me out there today. I value his gentleness, his hard work, and his honesty. It does not mean I value my friends any the less.” She fixed them with a stare and waited.

There was a long period of silence. The pony moved



away to graze. Hylan's head came up.

You are right. You value him for what he is, as you have always valued us. We are more, but—

His dam picked up the words. *But one does not ignore the moss just because the grass is juicy. Both are edible and of value to one who hungers.*

The woman nodded. "Just so. Now, would you keep what we have done from the rest of our friends here?"

The Keplians consulted, noses touched. Tharna turned great eyes on her friend. *Let them see; let them know. What have we to be ashamed about? If I carry my kin-sister, it is no more than my wish and hers.* Her head lifted, neck arching proudly. *I ask the permission of no one; nor does my son, who is lord here to them. Let any see. We care not!*

Eleeri knew the step they took then as she vaulted lightly to the mare's sleek back. In full view of all those who lifted amazed heads, she clung as Tharna whipped into her floating gallop down the canyon's length. As they approached the mist, it seemed to shiver, blazing in golden shimmerings that beckoned. The mare shied away, circling to race back down the grass. Eleeri bent to her neck, crooning the ancient words that tied rider and mount. Tharna did not understand the speech of the Nemunuh, but the love behind the words, the caring and affection, those she understood fully.

Two minds reached out, touched, clung closer than ever before. This—this was destined. Together they gloried. Eleeri could feel Tharna's great heart pumping, joy in the speed of her powerful legs; she *was* the mare, the mare was her. Tharna, too, explored, it was as if her mind expanded. She had never understood the concept of far time. Now she did. She saw possible futures laid out before her. All the misty worlds that could be if—she leaned into them, peering, striving to discover. She realized the relative frailty of her companion.



Eleeri must store food for winter, make herself coverings against the chill. She could not travel as swiftly as a Keplian. That was why she so valued the pony. Ah! That she now understood.

She saw their differences, and their likeness. Felt friendship course warm through both. Slowly as she halted, a picture formed which explained much to her. A human was frail in comparison to Keplians, Gray Ones, even the beasts. Therefore they must always think of tomorrow. They must make weapons, change the land they lived in to fit them so they could survive. Since they could not live naked and shelterless, they must find or make shelter, stitch clothing, store food for the places, the times when there was none close at hand.

Tharna felt strange, as if her mind were expanding, filling with new thoughts and ideas. Whole chains of logic built up and broke to re-form anew in different patterns. She stood, head hanging, a long slow shivering rippling along her body as the bonding continued.

Hylan nosed her gently. *Is all well with you?*

She roused herself, pulled back a little. *It is well, my son. So many new things, so much to think over.*

Eleeri's laughter tickled both Keplian minds. "I, too, have learned a few things I never considered. Your mind is treasure, kin-sister."

The truth of that touched them all for a moment. But the emotion was becoming too strong. The woman disengaged herself, sliding from the broad back. She trotted away across the grass toward the ancient keep. She was starving, and thirsty. She would eat, drink, and sleep on the day's events. Behind her the Keplian knew what she would do. Without discussion, they moved away to drink and graze.

That night Eleeri slept the sleep of the dead. The day



had been more than exhausting. The full sharing with Tharna had drained her until she could barely remain awake long enough to cool her throat, fill her empty belly. She fell then into a sleep so deep that she lay motionless, utterly limp within her bedding.

Into that sleep the man came walking. Tall and lean, eyes the gray-green hue, with black hair. The strong planes of his face denied the gentler molding of his mouth, matched the determined jut of chin. He was worn thin and the pallor of his skin betrayed a captivity, but pride still showed in the set of his head, in the litheness with which he yet moved.

About Eleeri's throat the Keplian pendant flared to life. In her sleep her fingers clutched at it. His mouth opened to speak and she strained to hear. Nothing. He was speaking, but she could hear no sound. It was as if a thick pane of glass stood between them, walling off all he wished to say. But she came from a people to whom the hands could speak as eloquently. Without her willing it, her fingers lifted and signed. For an instant, blue-green fire hung in the air, and his fingers rose to trace the rune. The fire deepened.

Sound came then, so faint she must strain to hear, each word seeming to drain him. Quickly she signed that he should use his hands instead, remembering the sign language Cynan had taught her. He nodded, beginning quickly so that she understood they might not have long before what they did was noticed. She knew his name, but hesitated to give her own. Names had power in this place of dreaming, perhaps even more so than in waking life. He saw her thought and nodded. Eleeri grinned then. A name common enough to catch her attention, but no name of hers, that she would give.

She touched her breast. "Tsukup." It was the Nemunuh word for an experienced warrior. One who had learned wisdom



where the arrow flew. It was a word that might draw her, but never too strongly, since it was only of her people, not of her. Then she stared at him until his eyes rose to meet hers. Silently she shaped his name with her lips. He started back, a question showing clear. She began to sign, her hands flowing in graceful dance. Ah, he was nodding again. He grasped that she had learned of him from his sister. Gradually, with much signing, they were able to exchange some information.

But all the time the sign hanging before them faded. Suddenly it was gone, and even as it faded, so did Romar. His last look was one of despair. He might have been asking himself what good they had done, save to hold out a hope that would die before the Dark.

Eleeri came blinking awake in her bedding. She sat up cross-legged to ponder. Now she knew more of Romar. His limning had showed a boy, but it had been no boy she fronted this night. A man, a warrior had faced her. The boy had shown a sensitivity, an imagination in the lines of his face. This one might yet have those, but if so, they were deep buried.

She counted over the points he had been able to tell. He was indeed captive in the Dark Tower, but who or what his captor, he could not say. He was used as a—the only word she could think of was *power-line*. Using Romar's strength, the captor fed his will to the Gray Ones and those Keplian males who served it. Recently the drain had become far greater; Romar was failing as his strength was pulled from him to serve evil purposes. If he was not soon freed, there would be no more than a brainless husk remaining. The desperation he felt had come across to her strongly, as had the despair.

She considered carefully. All her original reasoning still



applied. More so now that she knew more. From hints she had received, she could guess that Mayrin, too, would be of use to the thing. Brother and sister could be linked to be far more than either was alone. But Eleeri could not be so used. She was not of Romar's kin or blood, not even of this land. She had some of what they called the power here. But somehow she felt it was different, that the tower could not turn it against her. She marched to the beat of a different war drum. Her songs were not the songs of this place, but of another. Of a people tied to a different land, to other powers.

Best she move carefully in this. Allow the enemy no crack in which to slip a lever. She would learn what she could. Tharna had been able to tell her somewhat of the powers. She would continue to visit the keep also. Mayrin had some of the minor gift. She could tell more and Eleeri would learn. Then, when Eleeri was ready, she would try to call Romar. Two heads were better than one. With greater knowledge and some preparation, there might be a way they could free him.



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*B*ut she was not ready when Romar intruded on her dreams once more. His face was thinner, and his eyes weary. She watched as his fingers wove back and forth, paid attention to his words. Why did he waste strength so? Then she saw past the warrior who warned her of dangerous paths, to the fearful man within. He had been isolated, bereft of friends and family. He came to her out of simple loneliness, came to the only one he could reach to share with. In turn, her hands flashed in the sign language they were mutually building.

“The Gray Ones fear you,” Romar signed.

“That we have ensured. But what of your master? Does he recognize our enmity?”

Romar nodded slowly. That which used him did indeed know something opposed it. As yet it was not greatly disturbed. It was confident in its own power and strength. The deaths of the Gray Ones were minor. There were always more.



Eleeri grinned. "One day there may not be. We'll see if we can't thin their numbers to where that thing does start to worry."

"Well enough, so long as you do not cause too much notice to be taken. Better an enemy secure in its own mind."

To that she nodded. Warrior sense. She would keep a balance, kill as many of the enemy as possible without alarming the leader too greatly. The talk turned to other things. Romar was eager to hear of his keep and kin.

"You have not told them?"

"It seemed unwise."

He bit his lip saying nothing.

"Be assured that if danger rises, I will ride to warn them. They have become my friends. It is just that—" she broke off, shrugging.

"That you fear Mayrin's reaction. You believe she will demand you storm the tower for me and at once, unprepared?"

"Yes," Eleeri admitted.

Romar's head bowed a little as he considered that. "You are probably right. Keep your counsel, then, but do not forsake me, I beg of you." The last words were forced out through stiff lips and the woman was touched, although she allowed nothing to show.

"I have no intention of that. I pause to gather knowledge and test the gifts I have. Already we can talk longer and more easily. This may be of aid when we come to free you. Gather your own strength and wait. The time of your freedom may not be far from you."

Before them the sign faded into nothingness, and Romar with it. Eleeri sat in her bedding, thinking hard.

She hoped he could last out. It would be folly to attack before they knew more about the tower. To be truthful, even



then she was not sure she wished to risk all she had. Romar drew her strangely, but he was not kin for whom she must shed blood. She shook her head. Captivity wore hard on him, that was plain. She could still speak to him whenever he came. That much she could and would do. She lay back again and allowed herself to relax. Sleep claimed her once more, a restful dreamless drowse so that she woke refreshed and eager to hunt.

That night she slept peacefully, but the next night and the next, Romar was there. Gradually she came to know him until at length he was able to speak of his deeper fears. Of his pain and humiliation.

“It is as I had always imagined rape to be. An invasion not of body alone, but a tearing at the spirit. Each time it uses my power, I retreat deep within myself, yet each time the place I have free grows smaller. One day it will wrench from me all that I am and there will be nothing left but a shell that walks and talks in my image.”

Eleeri heard the bitter fear that edged the words. Without thinking, she responded. Let him know that he was not alone in his fears; she, too, had been abused and cowered beneath that terror. She spoke slowly of her aunt and uncle. Of their hatred for her blood and race.

Romar was caught by her tale. “Then you are different in the world you left?”

“So they counted me. But I am human, as were my people. They fought for their land, to keep the way of life they valued. No more than that.” Her hand movements slowed. “Too much hate; always there is hate. Why cannot people live in peace? Why must they always covet what others have?”

A tired smile broke over the face of the man. “Because they *are* people. I sometimes think the urge to own and take what you do not is inbuilt in us all. A growth upon the animal



need to hold territory.” He glanced at their sign. “Tomorrow night let us debate more of this. If naught else, it takes my mind from my own fears.” He was gone then, leaving Eleeri to her own dreaming. Two nights later, she was able to reach him once more. She had spent the time considering. Now she signed busily.

“How were you taken?”

“I do not know, I was struck on the head and remember little. I was hunting. I recall a campsite, lying down to sleep; then I was where I am now. I think perhaps I was taken as I slept. I did not know another had begun to use the tower. Therefore I slept no great distance away.” He shrugged. “It was folly. But I had hunted well and my horse was very weary. I camped to allow him time to recover. For that, both of us paid.”

Her hands went out to him as her fingers flicked through the signs. “Do not blame yourself. But what of the tower? Can you tell me more? What of he who uses it?”

Romar eyed her. “It is a place of very great power from the Dark. It seems to call to those of its kind who are lesser and would be more. They lose and are destroyed, but always there seems to be another. But I am called, dream well.” He was gone and she slept more deeply.

Nights came and went after that. Sometimes they brought Romar and together they pondered philosophical questions, shared lives, and even small jokes as friendship grew. She knew her company was enabling him to hold on with more strength. Perhaps some of her own vitality was leaching across the barrier to replenish his own store. Whatever it was, he had come to appear less worn as the nights of comradeship passed. By now they were as old friends, each comfortable with the other.

Yet still Eleeri wavered. She knew this friendship had a



claim upon her now. But so, too, did the older friendship with Tharna and Hylan. Was she to risk them, perhaps even those others who shared their home? The Dark Tower was feared by even the evil that served it. How much more, then, should those of the Light stand back from combat?

Yet in her heart she knew what held her back. It was fear, quite simply—not of dying, but of losing all she had found here. The more she put the knowledge from her, the more it returned to nag at the fringes of her mind. At length she made a decision. She would wait. Once, long ago, she had heard some joke about that sort of decision. That put off, either it would grow to where something *must* be done, or the problem would solve itself. With that decided, she was more relaxed with Romar when he came again. She did not know he, too, had seen the battle and understood it.

He would not demand of her more than she could give. He had long since realized that she was one who walked her own path. To urge her against her own wishes would only be to harden her mind against the thing he asked. Nor had he any rights in this. She was not even of his race, let alone his kin.

He studied her as they talked. She was beautiful—oh, not by some standards, but he was not of a kind which lusted after a plump and witless prettiness. He admired the swift liteness of her movements, the slender body, pride in every line. His maleness was not challenged to anger by her weapons skill. She was one to guard a man's back, to stand as an equal in an uneasy land. With her a man could be himself, not watching his tongue for fear of alarming a soft frail female.

At first he had been drawn to her by a terrible need for some kind of companionship. Now it was more. There might be for him no tomorrow, no future, but if there were, then he



wished to spend it with her. Still he allowed nothing to show, neither desire nor understanding. He would make it no harder for her than she was already making it for herself. He watched as she battled with her own fears. Watched her waver between wishing to storm the tower to his aid, and fearing she would lose all she had won in this new land.

Then the power began to draw more strongly again upon him so that for many nights he must stand alone. Eleeri guessed the reason he did not walk her dreams. Outside the canyon the Gray Ones bayed the hunt more often. The rasti seemed to grow in ferocity so that for some time she left them in peace. A warrior did not fight against foolish odds. But her heart burned to ignore the teachings of a lifetime. She soothed herself often, reminding herself of Far Traveler's tales. So many had been warnings against the impetuosity of youth. But still she longed to see the face of one who had grown to be friend. To share her mind's thoughts, to share her—No. A warrior did not fight against foolish odds. As for her heart, let it be kept for one with a better chance of life.

In her distress of mind, she roamed wider than ever before. Once she met a scout, at least so she believed him, though he said nothing of his reasons for being in the Keplian lands. She spoke with him politely before moving on. Something moved in his eyes and she was wary, keeping the pony beyond reach of any hand weapon. Tharna joined her a short time later.

He follows.

Eleeri swore irritably. "I don't like this. What's the man after?"

He hunts. Minds shared the scent of a predator on the trail. Eleeri turned over possibilities as they trotted on. Her eyes scanned the terrain they had been traversing as the man had appeared. Then she understood. Wordlessly



she conveyed it to her friend. The mare faltered in her smooth gait as she, too, eyed the land and its contours.

He saw us together. He will believe us both, then, of the Dark.

“So I think. The question is, do we attempt to lose him or will he attack?”

A mental shrug was her only answer. The woman nodded. The mare was right. They could only wait and see. One thing she decided: she would not allow them to be trailed too far in the direction of the canyon. If others found them there, they, too, might leap to conclusions. That she would not risk.

She became aware that Tharna was distressed by the human’s assumption that the mare was of the Dark. Eleeri reached out to stroke the rough mane, to scratch gently at the base of the small erect ears.

“It isn’t your fault, kin-sister. We are in Keplian lands and not so far from the tower. He would have assumed I was of the Dark even if he had not seen us together. He knows me not; my clothing is not of the kind his people wear.” She glanced down at the hackamore she used to guide the sturdy dun. “Even my bridle is not of their kind. I remade this into one I preferred, and close as we were, he could see the differences. Let him hunt; we will lose him quickly.”

But in that she proved wrong. Whatever else the man might be, he was a tracker. He was falling back as the dusk deepened, but still he clung grimly to their trail.

“Best we do not return?”

Unspoken agreement.

Eleeri swung the pony away from their homeward trail to move instead parallel to the stream. Better not to approach their ford, either. The tracker might see enough to follow that across the stream and into the hills. She wavered, wanting to drift back in to cover and slay him as he passed. The man



was a danger to all she held dear. If he followed them to the canyon, he would doubtless return with others to kill them all. Yet she was unwilling to kill him out of hand. They fought on the same side in this battle. Medicine could turn against one who killed his own.

He still follows, Tharna observed.

Eleeri shared her indecision. Perhaps if they continued they could make a wide circle around the Keplian lands, lose this one in the rougher foothills far to the southeast. That was if he would follow them on a trail for so many days. But if he would, then they might lose him without the need to slay. On that last they were in accord. They dropped to a steady walk, leaving clearer signs as they moved on. Let him trail them now—it was their wish.

That he did for two more days. But on the third night he seemed to have lost the trail. Woman and mare halted on a small hill to study their back trail.

“No sign of him. The last I saw was last night’s fire.”

Do you think we’ve lost him, kin-sister?

Eleeri looked doubtful. “There’s no reason we should have. He’s followed us through more difficult tracking than this. Why should he lose us now?”

Perhaps he has wearied of following?

“Maybe, but I have an unpleasant feeling there’s more to it. I think I’d like to backtrack.”

You think he’s run into trouble. Surely we would have heard or seen something. Eleeri considered as she recalled the night. The wind had shifted soon after dark so that it blew from them to their follower. It had increased until by moonhigh it had been blowing hard enough to take any sounds away from them with ease. By dawn it had fallen to a light breeze, but if there had been an attack on the man around the middle night . . .



Is it for us to seek him out? He walks these lands by his own will. He chose to hunt us both.

“I know that, but I’m curious.”

Her friend heaved a loud sigh, then turned to retrace their tracks. With a grin, Eleeri heeled the pony up with her again. Tharna was just as curious; she’d never say so, but she was as interested in reasons as her kin-sister. They moved cautiously, watching any cover they neared for signs any hid within.

Ahead lay the larger patch of taller trees in which their hunter had stopped the previous night. Both halted abruptly as the breeze switched directions. To their noses came the stink of blood, death, and Gray Ones.

“So now we know. Your nose is keener. Are any still there?”

None living. They moved forward slowly, both alert to danger.

Within the grove the scent became stronger. Eleeri held her nose. “What *is* that smell? It *can*’t be bodies; if the man is dead, it was only last night it happened.”

The mare fiddle-footed nervously. *It stinks now of power. Be wary.* They slid closer, eyes flicking from side to side. To their surprise, the grove was hollow, a thick triple circle of trees about an inner clearing.

I knew not that this was here, kin-sister. It is on the edge of our lands, but I rarely traveled this way.

The woman shrugged. “It feels like power, but nothing dangerous?” Silently Tharna sent doubt. Many things in this ancient land felt safe—to prove as deadly as any obvious danger. Eleeri moved closer to the bodies. She counted thoughtfully. Whoever their hunter, he had been a fighter. He lay sprawled in the clearing; around him four Gray Ones lay. Somehow she had no wish to go toward them. There

was still no feeling of danger, but something about the way the bodies lay was ringing alarm bells.

She stared at them as Tharna fidgeted. About them the turf in the clearing was short, almost groomed. The trees, then? She studied them. Interesting that it was a triple circle. Perhaps this place had once been some kind of temple.

I smell power, but no danger as yet. Let us remain still and think. Eleeri's eyes went back to the five bodies and it was then that she realized what had troubled her about them.

Although the grass was a bare inch high, the figures lying here seemed to be half hidden within it. She moved to one side; from a new perspective the view was the same. Tharna, too, stared as the idea was passed. Eleeri stepped forward delicately to pick up the hunter's sword. A soft grinding made her jerk upright. On the west side of the clearing something they had taken to be a boulder was slowly unfolding. It turned dim black eyes on them.

"Mine!" A rusty voice proclaimed. "Not take mine."

The woman bowed. Politeness cost nothing, and here it could save lives. As she straightened once more, her eye was caught by the nearest body. Surely it had slipped deeper into the grass? Understanding came. A temple of sorts, yes, a place that the dead might find honorable burial in a self-maintaining system.

She bowed again, more deeply. "Guardian of the Dead, we came only to retrieve the personal possessions of this one. We seek nothing else. Will you give them to us, then allow us to depart?"

Never mind those bits and pieces. Let's just leave, Tharna sent. Eleeri shook her head slightly at her friend. The thing that faced them might take it amiss if it believed they had come for the wrong reasons.

The grating voice came slowly. "Give gift."



Hoping she had understood that, Eleeri reached for the bundle tied to her saddlebow. It was second nature to her to hunt as they rode, even with one who pursued behind them. Three of the plains leapers hung there on a plaited grass thong. These she carefully laid out on the grass before the guardian.

“These three for the possessions of this one and free passage,” she offered.

The leapers were already sinking into the grass, so small they could be utilized at once. The dim black eyes closed and the thing began to curl into boulder-likeness again.

“I guess that means we’ve made a bargain.”

The mare snorted softly. She turned toward open land, the pony following obediently. Eleeri bent to gather the hunter’s sword and saddlebags. She wondered what had happened to his horse; the poor thing was probably meat in Gray Ones’ bellies by now. Still, it was odd none of the wolf-ones had plundered the dead already. An unpleasant thought crossed her mind. Maybe the guardian had other defenses. It had been very clear that she should not take anything without a fair exchange. She smothered a chuckle. It was possible the Gray Ones had tried that and got the worst of the bargain.

She headed for the gap through the circle of trees and turned to take one last look. By now the bodies were almost gone. Her pace suddenly quickened and she all but thrust Tharna from the grove. She continued to urge haste until they were well away from the dense growth.

The mare protested, *Why are we hurrying now? We’re away and free.*

“I know, but a few points occurred to me.”

Such as—

“Such as the bodies in that clearing were vanishing



almost as we watched. But only the bodies of the Gray Ones. I'm sure the hunter's body wasn't disappearing nearly as fast and it seemed to be straightening, almost as if it were being properly laid out."

Tharna looked baffled. *I do not understand. Why do these things bother you?*

"Because they lead to a couple of conclusions. One: If the Gray Ones' bodies vanish that fast, it is possible they were not the ones who killed the hunter. This is supported by a fact. They appeared to have no injuries. If they had fought him and been slain, surely they'd have wounds. Two: The thing in here demanded a gift before it allowed us to leave. I was able to pay, what if I hadn't been? Just how capable would it have been of punishing us?"

The Keplian was nodding by now. *You believe the Gray Ones tried to loot the bodies and leave,* she sent quietly. *You think the Guardian of the Dead killed them.*

"I have no proof, but that's what I think. I also think that grove would be a good place to steer clear of in the future—unless we have a few dead bodies we don't happen to want." She swung into the saddle. "Let's get out of here. I'm tired, dirty, and hungry. If we move fast, we can be home by dark, with luck."

They held to a brisk canter toward the mountains. During much of the hunt they had traveled in a wide curve, which they now cut across. By nightfall, they were leg-weary but safe within the canyon. Eleeri lit a candle and opened the saddlebags she had retrieved from the grove. As she ate and drank, Tharna and Hylan crowded in to see what she uncovered within the supple leather.

Eleeri paused to take another bite of wheatcake. Then she tumbled the contents across the floor. There was little of interest, just the usual small odds and ends carried by any



traveler. Nowhere could she find a name or information. But this was not like home, where every pocket carried papers, every bag identification. She turned the sword over in her hands. It was a good plain weapon, well cared for but never of great value.

She looked up at her friends. “What should I do with this?”

Hylan was practical. *There is nothing to say who this one was. He could even have been of the Dark. Pass all before the gate runes closely. If they give no warning, save the possessions. If fighting comes, one may need them. But I would speak of the human to no one, lest others come seeking more of you. He is dead and guardian-buried. Let him lie.*

It was a long speech for the stallion, but before he ended, both listeners were nodding agreement. The runes passed the rescued gear as innocent of evil. It was stowed away. Sooner or later it would be of use.

Eleeri retired to her bedding, her mind still mulling over the recent events. One thing she had not mentioned to her friends still troubled her. She was sure the hunter had been of Mayrin and Jerrany’s race. His face, too, had been thin with strong cheekbones, his body lean in the rough clothing. The wide-open eyes had been the gray of slate, and the hair black. For one horrified moment as she first saw him, her heart had slowed, then raced in fear. He had looked so like Romar. As she looked again, she had seen it was merely the likeness of kind, not kin. But that spasm of fear had chilled her. Even now as she recalled it, she shivered.

Her mind turned over this knowledge. Romar wasn’t kin to her. She owed him no kinswoman’s duty. But he had become a friend—and more?

She had known when she looked upon the dead hunter’s



face that she loved Romar. Through the long nights of talking, of sharing hopes, beliefs, and dreams, she had grown to feel for him. But was that sufficient for her to risk all she was in an effort to free him? Slowly she decided it was.

She rolled over onto her back and stared up at the stone ceiling. This new land had given her so much, perhaps now it would give her love. Her thoughts wandered to Far Traveler, who had shown her the path. She had taken it knowing that she could never return. Yet so far she had held back from a full commitment.

Gradually she made her decisions. She would need power to free Romar, help from others. The help was easy. Mayryn and Jerrany would aid as soon as she spoke of Romar's captivity and danger. It was time and past time she shared all she knew of that with them. But the power . . .

Still, the powers here had answered her in minor ways. She shook herself free of the blankets, walking steadily down toward the entrance to the canyon. There she placed her hand flat against the runes.

"I am not of your kind," she said slowly, thinking as she spoke. "But I go to do battle against the evils you guard us from. I am not of your blood, but I stand with those who are against the Dark. I am not of your world, but I choose to be now, to remain for good or ill as it befalls me."

She waited, watching as the runes showed a little more clearly. Their light grew, gathering as a soft mist sheening against the dark rock walls. Her fingers traced the signs of ward and guard.

"Show me what I should do."

The answer came in a blaze of light so great she shut her eyes against the flame. Power seemed to pool about her, to gather like a shawl across her shoulders, to drip jewellike from her hands. Then the light shifted. Before her a great



arrow stretched down the canyon. It met the golden mist and a path opened. Eleeri bowed her head. A question asked—and answered. She would follow the path the power showed. She began to walk toward the mist.



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*F*rom either side of her Tharna and Hylan came then, to walk with her. From their minds she received no fear, only a growing sense of excitement and anticipation. No fear, only the belief that beyond hope they were about to receive a greatly longed-for gift. They reached the edge of the mist and paced slowly down the path the power had carved from it. Deeper and deeper they plunged. Behind them there was no sight of the canyon, only the mist closing in. It felt strange, Eleeri thought. As if she walked in a place that was not quite of this world.

Shadows formed, to vanish as the three came near. Then one came which grew more solid as they closed in. Eleeri strained her eyes but kept to the steady unhurried walk. There was nothing to fear, nor would she show any, for the power might take that as an insult. Beside her the Keplians moved, hooves almost spurning the ground. In them the joyous sense of hope lifted higher. Before them the mist



darkened, developing edges, columns, a peaked roof carved with hanging vines and laden with fruit. The mist drew back then as they paused to stare in awe.

A sense of warmth gathered about them, a greeting to friends arrived. The Keplians waited as Eleeri moved; surely the welcome was not for them also, children of shade and shadow? A shaft of the golden mist curled out, drifting to encircle them like a lover's arms. They were welcome, thrice welcome, let them enter where others of their kind had once stood in friendship with those who dwelled here. Eleeri felt the surge of joy from her friends, and her own mind echoed it. She slowed her pace so that her friends might walk beside her once more.

By now the entire structure was clear, and they halted to study it. Unused to buildings, the Keplians had nothing to compare it with save the Dark Tower and the ancient keep in their canyon. Eleeri had seen far more in reality and in pictures. The building reminded her of the many photographs she had seen of the ruined temples of ancient Greece. It was not one of them, but had the same air—great age and a lost power hung over it. It was built from massive blocks of some warm honey-colored stone. Within the stone, silvery streaks laced the rock—the colors of the mist that had finally parted to let them in, Eleeri noted.

Was this place even here? Could the mist have become solid to show them something which in truth was not there? Her eyes came back to the entrance. She drifted forward to touch the steps. Under her fingers the stone appeared real. She lifted her head. She'd been wondering what lay behind the mist ever since she came to the canyon. Now she would find out and no fear would stay her steps. She trod forward boldly, past a great bronze door cast with detailed images,



although she would have loved to stop there, to peer at the tiny perfect scenes she saw out of the corners of her eyes.

Tharna and Hylan flanked her as she entered the great hall. It seemed to stretch forever to her startled gaze. Mist curled and lingered here so that she could not see the walls or far end of the hall. Light shimmered from that mist, brightening as they walked forward. It pooled about two oblong shapes that were raised above the floor on a small dais.

Slowly the three approached. Was this right? Were they called to this place? The welcome grew again: reassurance, friendship. This was very right, let them come forward, let them see and know.

Around Eleeri's throat the pendant became heavier. Her hands went up to lift it away. As it ceased to touch her flesh, mist gathered there also; the weight fled but before her stood the pendant's Keplian once more. The perfect stallion, eyes gleaming sapphire in the mist's light. He reached out to touch noses with each of her companion Keplians and the woman caught the wonder that filled them. Her own hands went out, not to the stallion but to her friends. Minds met with power. Around them light shone brighter and from the dais came a great cry that echoed in their minds.

Be welcome. Come to us and be welcomed, blood of our blood, children of kin.

Eleeri allowed her feet to drift forward, up the seven shallow wide steps of the dais, until she could see what lay there within the cradle of the golden stone. The stallion of the pendant, too, had moved. He mounted the steps on the other side of her and reared high. Not a threat, Eleeri noted, more as if he paid homage to those who lay there. She laid one hand on the stone bed, felt the power which ran here. Whoever these had been, they had been Great Ones.



Ah, for that we thank you, blood of our blood, but none were so great as to be invincible, be they of Light or of Dark.

Involuntarily she stepped back. They Great Ones were *not* dead. Unless—unless in this land the dead could still speak? Gentle amusement met that thought. Encouraged, she moved back to look down at the two who lay there as if asleep.

She stared, blinked, and stared again. If you took from them the clothing, the fine jewels, the aura of power that yet lifted about them, the woman looked like—she had seen her own face in a mirror often enough. They might have been mother and daughter. The man, too, looked familiar. She studied the lines on the thin face, the weariness at mouth corners. Ka-dih, but he was Romar! Romar as he might appear worn thin with living and twenty years older. She cried out then.

“Who *are* you? What do you want of us?”

Pictures came in reply, as if they happened before her eyes. No sounds came, but what she saw gripped her, drew her in so that she stood motionless.

The two before her lived, loved, and laughed in a world that had once been. Lived here in this building of golden stone, loved each other, wed in heart, mind, and body. Laughed with—ah, yes, laughed with their children, a boy and a girl, twins, barely old enough to toddle upright. She saw the enemy their bright happiness made, saw him plot and scheme to bring them down, these kin to the Light he feared and hated. She watched as their lands fell prey to the evil he sent. She saw how at first they would have reasoned with him. They wanted no enemy, no battle, no blood shed on green grass. But it takes one only to begin a war, and war came to them from this enemy adept, steeped in Dark power.



At long last they understood that in this enemy there was no mercy. They turned from laughter to tears, weeping as their friends fell, as those who looked to them for guidance were slain. They created others. Meddled in the stuff of life to find friends who might stand with them. Called on powers and ancient names for aid.

That aid was given. Keplians came to walk with them as friends and companions at need. To fight beside them, to stand against the Dark at the side of Light.

“Then how . . .”

She was shown. Saw the enemy as he crafted an answer. The Keplian had come from power which was neutral, but it could be twisted, changed. This he did, yet what had been created for the Light could not be turned to Dark save by its own will. The race were of the shadow by his evil, but of the Dark by theirs alone. Those who chose differently could turn again to that which had created them.

A surge of emotion shook her. Her friends saw even as she did. Beside her the great black mare knelt on the steps. Her mind was clear: no words, but a cry—need, longing—let them return to the Light!

Patience, child of kin, patience.

The pictures swept Eleeri away once more. She saw how the forces of Light failed. Good did not always win, or why would evil strive? She watched as the lord and lady's forces fell back until the canyon alone was held in safety. That last stronghold would not yield: the enemy knew all his power would not force its gates. But he could starve them out, keep them pent within forever. This he planned, but no plan is safe; it may be known, guessed at. And this was so. In their hall the two sat, their children playing about their feet.

The enemy had not known. One by one, two by two, they had sent those who were loyal away to safety. The



Keplians had gone, the humans, the Flannan who shared their home. Even the horses and dogs, the two cats in whose friendship the lady had delighted. The hall was empty now save for the four who sat there. Eleeri was somehow privy to their conversation, but not in words. She simply understood as they decided. The time had come to send the children, then to leave their beloved home themselves. To join friends who were also of the Light.

She saw the rainbow play of power, saw a gateway open and the small boy toddle through. Then something struck. The gate shimmered, twisted, turned aside in dimensions unknown as the tiny girl entered. There was a cry of terror from the lady. Power roared—everything two parents had to save their child. Eleeri caught a glimpse of coast, of waves that hurled themselves in unending battle with the rock. With an almost audible snap her mind recognized the scene. She had been shown photographs more than once. From those who sent her the pictures there was a rising sense of warmth. Yes, yes!

Eleeri allowed it to sink slowly into her mind. Cornwall! That had been the Cornish coast. She understood what they showed her now, and why the path of the gone-before ones had opened to her. But—why had she been called here? Was there a purpose, something she should do?

Patience. Watch.

She saw the gate fade, saw the lady slump, weeping into cupped hands, her lord comforting her. The child had lived. She would continue to live even though the world be strange to her. Their son, too, was safe with friends. But the power had gone. They no longer had enough to build another gate for their own escape, or the escape of the great stallion who was brother-kin to the lord and had remained to carry them to safety at need. They conferred. If they could not leave,



neither could that enemy which prowled outside enter. Not so long as they lived. This last place they could deny him, though they might not escape.

They chose, all three of them, to keep inviolate the home they had loved. Eleeri watched as they worked power to bind the Keplian into the small image. Something so small would be overlooked. Only when it touched the flesh of one of the blood and kin would it answer. She saw the stallion shrink, saw the lady stoop to mold a lock of mane in her fingers, add the silver loop. Silver, a metal of the Light. Any who found it would know this was no image from the Dark. They used the last of the greater power to send the pendant—somewhere. Then they stood hand in hand.

She felt their sorrow, their pain that all they had loved was gone. They would never see their children grow, never run laughing beneath the hot sun to plunge into cool water. Never blaze across the lower lands on the backs of kin-friends who bore them willingly. Slowly they turned. Power flamed about them; stone answered as they crafted the dais. A long shallow cradle topped it, a bed that might hold the last of those who dwelt here. They lay down. From them power poured upward, curved to meet in a shimmering shield, then faded into nothing. It was there, but unseen.

The enemy came boldly as it faded. He could not enter in power, but he would use the remnants of theirs. Build power again once past the runes. He would use this place as his stronghold now. He saw the dais, marched up the shallow steps, and bent to smirk at those within the cradle. He had won! He laughed, then louder until his mirth rocked the silent hall, echoed oddly from the hangings that still lined the walls. He had won! This land was his to do with as he would. The Light had failed, fallen. The Dark was triumphant. He lifted his hands to a howl of exultation. Then he stooped again.



One last thing. He would destroy those two who lay here powerless. He drew on power, smiled, and cast it from him.

It lay over them, but they did not wither from the blast. Its master had turned away, avid to see what he would get from this conquest. His eyes inventoried the tapestries, the furniture. There would be more yet in other rooms. He would have it all. Behind him power moved. He had cast off his own to enter; this was the power left within the walls. He had seized it, tried to make it destroy, but it was not for his using. It gathered, then, as he turned, it struck. He cried out, reeling from the awful blow. Stumbling, staggering, he sought safety, fleeing the anger he had raised.

Beneath him his body crumbled. The two who lay there heard the echoes of his cry, the rage at his defeat. Now only a thin film of dust lay over the floor, veiling the gold of the stones. A small wind arose, lifting it, bearing it forth past the entrance of the canyon, there to disperse it among the hills. A Great One had lost his gamble; the Light was strengthened thereby. But that malice had not died. In another form it would return, ever seeking to destroy.

In the canyon, all was silence. All that could be done had been. Now let them sleep away the years together until release came. Here the Dark could not enter. One day the Light would return—the Light, the kin, and a child of the blood. Until that day they were together; it was enough.

And the story was not quite finished. Eleeri watched as slow time took the tapestries, the delicate fabrics first. Then the wood, powdering, falling into dust, the swords that had hung on the walls slowly changing to rust, sifting to the floor. Only the stone remained. Stone of outer keep and stone of inner place. Faces flashed before her. The two here could not show her her own heritage, although that she could guess. They could show her of Romar—a little. Their son



had prospered, wed and bred sons in turn, marrying the daughter of the house that had sheltered him. Other faces, other men, all with that look of the man who lay before her. Daughters, too, of that line, with the look of the lady.

But in the end, all bloodlines fail. She was the last in direct descent of the daughter who had gone strange voyaging. Eleeri felt horror strike at her. They had not forced her life into this pattern?

It was none of our doing, far-daughter. Your life was always yours to live. We did but open the gate when we felt the call of your spirit.

“How? I thought your power was all gone.”

The answer flowed through her; tears sprang to her eyes. They had used that which had remained to them. Down the centuries it had kept their bodies intact, their spirits within them, waiting. Sensing her need, they had given all to this, their far-daughter. Even as they spoke, the bodies crumbled slowly, inexorably. Spirits strained to leave. But they had gathered the rags of power, held to await her arrival. Now she was here; she knew.

Find our far-son, free him, take this land. It goes to those of our blood to be held for the Light. Bring back the kin-friends to that Light also.

From the woman a question. Warm laughter reached out to surround her.

Mare, stallion, come forward. They did so, trembling. *Far-daughter, look now at your kin-sister, your kin-brothers.* Behind them the stallion reared high, hooves silver-shod. The Keplians lifted their heads to watch—and sapphire eyes blazed. Eleeri stared in wonder.

Amusement. *Darkness cannot live where love and Light are.* The voices pealed up in a great cry of triumph. *Behold, the kin-friends have returned to the Light. Our daughter’s



blood is come again. Great Ones, let us go now to be at peace.*

Tears flooded down Eleeri's face. "Don't go, not yet. I haven't even had time to know you."

To all things there is a time. We have waited so long to be free. Would you bind us still?

She bowed her head. "No," she said softly. "No, go in peace and I'll find Romar. I'll free him, too; half of this place is his. But"—she looked down at the golden stone—"how can I? I don't have the sort of power you had."

Love reached out. *You are our far-daughter; you will find the way. As for friends, two you have here who will fight beside you. Another who will bear you for a little. Beyond this place I think others wait. Accept them, lead them.* A hand lifted to touch her own. *May rich feasting come from this, far-daughter. Food for mind and spirit and heart. Our love to you always.*

The hand slipped away. Both faces smiled at her for an instant. Then the fires blazed up to surround them. They died—to reveal an empty cradle. Eleeri bowed her head and wept silently. Now she was alone.

Two warm noses thrust indignantly at her so that she staggered. Sudden happiness flooded her. No, she was wrong; not alone, never alone. She flung her arms about the mare, then the stallion.

"I know . . . I knew them for such a little time, but I think I'll always miss them." She sniffed and wiped her eyes. "Well, life goes on. We have to find Romar, free him, tell him he owns half of all this, and make Mayrin and Jerrany happy."

She laughed. "A mere nothing. I can do it all tomorrow."

A hoof struck stone; sparks flickered from that blow so that she stared. Behind the dais the pendant stallion



remained, his eyes glowing softly at her. What had they said? Ah, yes. *Another who will bear you for a little while.* She approached him slowly and his nose came down to touch her enquiring fingers. But when she would have touched his mind, there was only blankness there. She drew back. Surely he could not be evil, not here in this place. Not one who had been kin-friend to the lord and lady?

Denial. She nodded. Then it must be that he simply wished to stand apart.

Agreement. Along with that came a feeling. That he must do this, that they might not share minds in friendship as he, too, would have wished.

She smoothed the tumbled mane. She would trust him. She would not intrude on his thoughts save when he offered them. The mare thrust in beside her, her son at her heels. The pendant stallion moved back. Idly Eleeri wondered if he had a name.

No longer—call me what you will.

Eleeri grinned. “Then I name you Pehnane—‘Wasp’ in my tongue. Let us go forth to sting our enemies.”

Even so, far-kin.

Hooves followed her as she paced back through the mist. Once again it parted slowly before her, closed in behind. She had gone in knowing so little, been given such a treasure to fill her mind and heart. Would she be able to return, she wondered, or would the place sink now into ruins and dust behind her? She shrugged. What did it matter? The canyon, the keep, they were hers. Let the lord and lady hold the place in the mist. She would not intrude. From her friends she felt approval of that decision. Even Pehnane touched her lightly with agreement. Good. Then that was the way it should be.

She stepped from the last curls of mist and strode over the turf. The Keplian mares and foals parted for her as



astonishment exploded in their minds. She whirled to find them staring at Tharna, Hylan, and the magnificent Keplian who followed. Hiding a smile, she left her friends to explain. The day had been exhausting; she would relish a dip in the stream, then food and drink. In the morning she would ride again. They should scout the boundaries of the Gray Ones' lands, see how far the evil had moved.

But the night brought Romar to her. His eyes more desperate, face more worn, his body lean to the point of gauntness. Hands traced the sign, his voice came to her faintly.

"If you cannot aid me soon, it will be too late."

"I know where you are," she said softly. "What I don't know is how to free you safely. I could not bear to see those I love dead in this attempt."

"I will tell you of a door. My master—" his face twisted in pain and anger, "plans to move against the Light soon. You could act then."

"How much attention would it call to us?" Eleeri asked practically. A back door was all very well, but not if it had alarm bells.

"I may be able to turn his attention aside while you enter. He is stronger than I, but his power is not so much greater. That is why he uses me. Once inside, if you attack him and I also strive to be free, it may be that we will succeed." He said no more, but she understood the thought. If he died in the struggle, he would still be free; it was merely a different path. But what of her? She had no wish to die facing something of the Dark. Yet—yet this was Mayrin's brother, Jerrany's friend. Her far-kin—and she had promised the lord and lady she would try.

She gathered all her determination. "Show me all you can."



He did not speak for a long minute, but the look in his eyes was enough. Then he spoke quietly and swiftly. The door was one unregarded. Once it had been a secret, but to Romar, linked with the Dark mind which used him, knowledge had come. To use can be to let slip secrets as well, and so it had proved. With the right word it would open. Now that word was hers.

Along with it came warnings: she and whoever entered with her would be tested. She must remember that much would be illusion, but perhaps not all. Outside there would be no posted guards, although the Gray Ones roamed the area. Inside the tower there were those who served the Dark. Not all their weapons would be obvious. All the time the sign which hung in the air between them faded. Finally he had given her all he knew.

“It will take power to open,” he warned. “I cannot say how much. Go to Mayrin and Jerrany, beg their aid.” He sighed. “I would not draw them in as I have you, but without help, the Dark grows. I fear for them even if they cannot help.”

Eleeri lifted her hand to trace the sign. “I swear. I will tell them of you, and ask them to ride with me to lend what they have. I have little doubt they will come. Always they have sought you, fearing lest you had been slain.”

She said nothing of the long hours in which she had wrestled with this problem. Mayrin might be slender of body, but that slenderness concealed an iron will. Jerrany was quite simply Romar’s sword-brother as well as his brother-in-law; he would have stormed the Dark Tower on his own were there no other way to free Romar. If she spoke of the man she dreamed, this would happen. Twice she had determined to join forces with them. Each time she had returned to her canyon and seen the foals, she had weakened.



How could she risk all she and her friends were building here?

Besides that, over the months there had been long discussions with Tharna, Hylan, and the other Keplians. They had slowly learned the joy of being truly free of fear and cruelty. Now it would please them to teach others, to bring more of their kind into the canyon until they had learned kindness. The adult stallions would be time wasted. But mares and foals could be taught. Was she to dismiss all this to ride to war? She might lose everything they had gained, and win what? A single man. One she had no need of.

In those flickering seconds before she answered Romar, her mind hardened in final decision. To buy a good life at Romar's expense would be wrong. He was her far-kin. She owed him aid. Her eyes swept over a face grown slowly more dear to her.

If she left Romar to die, she would not be able to live with the decision. In the end, it was as simple as that. If he was rescued, Mayrin and Jerrany would understand her silence and forgive it. If she died, no one would know why she had said nothing for so long. Jerrany at least would understand, if he survived.

The sign faded, wisping into nothingness, and Romar was gone. She stared into the gray, remembering the desperation in his tone. The one who used him must be close to draining everything. Soon Romar would die in body and mind. Before then, she must have summoned help, taken the path to him for freedom or a clean death.

In her sleep her hand clenched savagely. If she could not win him free, she could do that. He should die at her own hands that the evil one might bind him no more. At her hands, death would set his spirit free.

There would be no time for scouting Gray Ones in the

morning. With the light she must ride. But first—her mind busily turned over various plans and supplies.

A deeper sleep claimed her then. But always as she drowsed, Romar's face watched her. Pleading for freedom, hopeful, believing in her. How could she have thought to stand back? This was a warrior. It was for her to ride with him in battle. Here was one who could accept her as she was. Her mouth curved in a smile that made her sleeping face briefly that of a child again. *Far-kin, hold on, I am coming!*



13

She woke with that determination still burning. She breakfasted, then went in search of the Keplians.

“Battle-sister, I must have speech with those at the lake. Will you come?” The mare stood thoughtfully, enquiring. “I dreamed again last night. Also I swore to my far-kin within the mist that I would aid Romar. It seems the time to fulfill that vow is come.”

Dreamed?

Eleeri smiled affectionately. Tharna always did like to hear it all in order. She began to explain. Hylan stood by in silence as he listened closely.

He found a point and broke in. Eleeri halted to hear him. In the Keplian lands Hylan had traveled widely over the past two years. He knew them as even the mare and woman did not. He was younger in battle and perhaps less wise, but he knew things they might need to learn. They listened, eyes intent on him. This would help them still further in an attempt



to free Romar.

“But I need to ride for the lake, to tell Jerrany and Mayrin all this.”

What then, battle-sister? You cannot bring down the Dark Tower by direct assault. It will need cunning. Cunning and power. Tharna queried.

Eleeri began to talk again, quietly. Her friends nodded approval as she did so. It was hazardous, precarious, a chance and no more. But no less, either. The influence of the tower was spreading, the strength of its new occupant growing. Once Romar was gone, the evil one would seek others to use. Some might even come willingly.

“Enough talk. I ride now, this morning. Do either of you come, or do I go alone?”

Unnoticed by the three, mares and foals had gathered around them. They, too, had listened. Eleeri suddenly stepped back, jumping a little as she saw them for the first time. Her eyebrows rose and she glanced from one to the other. A lean scarred mare stepped forward. Theela seldom spoke. The scars had come from a vain attempt to protect her foal from a stallion. She had been found wandering dazed, bleeding, and bereft, to be gently guided back to the canyon by Hylan. She was a loner, most often keeping to herself, but her foal by her rescuer was now half grown and one of the finest in Eleeri’s lands.

Her head lifted. *We will go.*

The words were few, but with them came a quick flow of images so that the woman understood. While she, Tharna, and Hylan had conferred, the remaining mares, too, had been in conference. They had scores of their own to settle. Forced matings, murdered foals, savaged friends among other mares. Here in the canyon they had found another way of life. Hylan adored his foals, condescending to play games with them



and treating their mothers as equals. They might understand less of the issues. But one thing they did understand: it was the way of life in the canyon, against the way of life out on the plains. To keep the new way, they, too, were prepared to do battle.

Eleeri reached out, allowing her fingers to brush the soft nose. "What of your foals?"

Grown some; others stay.

The woman leaned against Tharna as her eyes swept those who crowded about them. That was true enough. Over half the babies were of an age where down in the lower lands they would have been driven from the mares for their own safety. Here in the richer pasture even the smaller foals were larger and stronger for their age than their lowland kin. The mares had ample milk. Should any of those who came with her fall, their foals could still be fed.

From one side a colt shouldered his way to her. They had brought him back from a foray the previous year. His dam slain by rasti, the foal torn about the legs, still they had found him doing his small best to fight. The rasti had been toying with him before the kill. Eleeri's arrival had put an end to that. Now Shenn faced her, intelligence gleaming in the red-fire eyes.

He reared slightly, his hooves thumping emphatically to the ground. *I go with you. I have no foal, no dam, no mate.* He snorted. *I will carry a human, if that will aid.*

There was no intake of breath from those listening before Theela nodded. She made her meaning plain, her intent clear.

I, too, will carry a human. I will carry one so that they do not fall. I will carry one to fight. If they are injured, I will stand beside them. Bear them home again. She reared, her hooves slamming into the earth. *Kill those who murdered my foal, kill those who hurt my friends, kill the ones who



would take this place away from us.*

With each sentence her hooves slammed back to earth. The colt was the first to follow her, but others took up the cry. Hooves thundered against soil, thumped dully against rock. Eyes shone red as sweat sleeked black hides. Foals bucked and whinnied in excitement as the mind-cries went up.

Into this Eleeri's voice slashed. "You say you will bear humans—will you bear them to the rasti burrows to fight? To draw off the attention of the Dark one, to drain his power? Will you stand off those of your kind who would fight against us, even kill them if you must? Be wholly damned by them, hated and even hunted?"

Theela reared high. Her belly gleamed in the sunlight as it showed the wicked scars marring the smooth hide. *I will do all these things. What does their hatred matter? As for being hunted*—her head tossed, ears flattened wickedly—*I have been hunted before. Let them hunt if they will. They may even find me.* Her teeth were bared, her eyes madness.

If any enemies find her, they may not live to regret it, Eleeri thought, seeing the ferocity. This one will fight pukutsi when she fights. She may go down, but she will take many with her. She took a breath.

"Go, think of this. I ride now to talk with the human keep. We must make plans. An attack must be made that is coordinated so we waste none of our strength."

She saw the colt nod slow agreement to that thought. The scarred mare nodded, trotting off to graze. Eleeri noticed that she was no longer alone though. With her Shenn had gone, his flanks brushing hers as he grazed beside the mare. She met Tharna's eye and a gentle amusement flickered between them for an instant. Then the two were all business.

"Will you both come with me?"



Tharna moved closer. *I will carry you.* Her tone was a little jealous so that Eleeri was touched. Hylan crowded up.

I can carry you back?

 His mind-send was hopeful and Eleeri laughed.

“Even so, kin-brother. We are three, but I’ll have to bring the pony.” There was an irritable snort but no objection. Swiftly she saddled the willing animal, balancing packs of hides and weapons she would take for the lake keep. She vaulted to Tharna’s back and they trotted toward the canyon exit. Seemingly from thin air Pehnane materialized, eyes sapphire flames.

Where do you go?

In a few quick words Eleeri explained, guessing he wished to hear it from her, although surely he must already know. Approval came to her.

The plan may work. What of those who say they, too, will fight?

“What of them?” Her voice was hot. “They have a right to protect what they believe in.”

His sending was mild. *I did not say aught against that. Do they fight for the Light?*

 There was an odd intensity in the sending of that question.

From behind came a snuffle as Theela joined them. *I hear.*

Pehnane swung his head to her. *And you answer?*

Her head dropped as she considered, then lifted again. *To kill foals is evil. To mate with mares who do not wish is evil—wrong. To live as we did in our lands was . . .*

 she fumbled for the right word.

Tharna supplied it. *Dark.*

Yes. If that is Dark and how we live here is Light, then I fight for the Light. I die for the Light. Her sentences stopped, but her mind still sent—a bitter litany of pain and sorrows in



pictures that tore at them all. *I stand with the Light.* The mare repeated slowly, as Pehnane looked at her. Her mind sent a sort of grim satisfaction. *I know what I say. So do those others there.* Her nose indicated the grazing Keplians. *They do not hate so greatly, but they *will* fight.*

I believe. Come—follow.

Trailed by the mare, he paced slowly toward the exit. At his approach, the runes blazed into life. His nose went up to trace one, then another, and finally a third.

Do this also.

For an instant she gazed up at the flaring signs. Then her nose, too, traced over the ancient signs. They blazed higher, blue mist swirling and condensing, smoking from them to cast a veil over Theela's head. It cleared and Eleeri bit back a gasp. The mare stood proudly, her eyes yet fire, but now the clear pure blue that marked the other Keplians standing with her. The colt moved in slowly from where he had waited behind his friend. His head lifted to study her, then the signs.

I stand with Theela. He said no more, but before they could prevent it, he was tracing the first sign. Eleeri drew in her breath in wonder. The blue mist swirled out to take him in its embrace. The power knew its own and all hearts. In that fraction of a second as he touched, it judged and sentenced. A colt with sapphire eyes faced them, shivering a little still at his own boldness.

Hylan's mind-voice was dry. *If we are done here, can we now leave? Or must we wait while everyone lines up to rub noses with a wall?*

The colt pawed the ground. *I would journey with you.*

Eleeri dropped from Tharna's back and stepped toward him. Her fingers went up to stroke the mane from his eyes. Wordlessly she sent a picture. Mayrin—laughing, playing with her children. Looking down at Romar's limning, pain in



her eyes. Pictures, memories of gentle laughter, of the essence of her friend.

Shenn's ears perked. *I would carry her. She is like you.*

Theela strolled over and waited. Now Eleeri sent Jerrany, of his strength, his caring for his mate, his small ones, his anger at cruelty. His kindnesses.

A nose thrust into her hands. *I will carry this one if he wishes. If he will trust me.* Theela sent.

"Then come. At the keep you can meet him and make your decisions. Pehname?" She turned to find the stallion had vanished once more. "I wish he wouldn't do that. It's like having a ghost about the place." There was a soft mental giggle from her kin-sister as Eleeri remounted.

That one does as he will. We do not need him. She moved into a gliding walk and, followed by the obedient pony and three of her kind, paced away along the trail.

As they traveled, the woman was making up her mind. To simply arrive with four Keplians might cause some—well, surprise at the very least. It might even provoke someone into an attack before they thought. Better to ride in on the pony, explain it all to her friends, then call in the Keplians. Jerrany could be as lighthearted and as giddy as any boy. But under that he was a warrior of a warrior people. He would see the advantages to all of this.

She had only to tell them both of Romar and her dreaming. That would be to drop stones on one side of the scales. If they knew there was a chance to free Romar, to defeat the Dark Tower in the doing—to make safe their lands for a while longer—then they would go to battle with goodwill, taking allies where they offered.

She glanced sideways to where Shenn pranced, unable in his youthful high spirits to prevent himself from a few caperings. The stunning blue of his eyes struck her anew. A



sign of the Light. Seeing them, she was certain Jerrany would be able to keep any from acting foolishly once she had spoken to him. The keep had its own runes of ward and guard. The Keplian should be able to pass those also. Another demonstration that they were now of the Light. She nodded to herself. So long as she moved carefully, all should be well.

They wended their way along the trails, always keeping a lookout. Here in the higher hills they were far from the Gray Ones' ranging, but there were other things which dwelt here. Some were of minor darkness, others quite simply dangerous. The rasti colony was many miles away, but solitary males often wandered up into this area. One rasti was no danger to five warriors, but even so, a bitten fetlock would be no light problem should the teeth go deep. However, they saw no one and nothing over the several days of journeying.

They worked their way down toward the lake on the third day and the keep tower came into view as they topped a small rise. Part of the journey had been spent in discussion, so all knew what they should do. Eleeri dropped from Tharna's back, calling the pony to her. By now she was skilled in the uses of her gift. As her power had grown with experience, she was finding she could do far more than she had ever imagined. It was now that Cynan's patient months of teaching and his stores of shared information were coming into their own. She swung into the dun's saddle, leaning over to pat first Tharna, then Hylan. Then, gathering the reins, she rode down the hill to where a sentry was announcing her appearance in stentorian tones. Mayrin and Jerrany came running.

"Eleeri, welcome, but—" Mayrin paused, "you look so grim. Is something wrong?"

"Not wrong, no. But let us be private quickly." She saw the way both faces looked then. Eager, yet half afraid to



know. She swept them into the solar, where Mayrin slammed the door.

“We are private here—speak quickly. Oh, Eleeri, have you found him? Have you found Romar?”

“Yes!” Eleeri said baldly.

Then she found herself grinning as Mayrin seized her hands, dancing her about the room. They subsided, panting, as Jerrany smiled down.

“Tell us everything you can,” he requested gently. “Then we can make plans.”

Eleeri talked. Her friends listened until she was done with the tale, including those of her blood who had waited so long in the canyon. Then it was Jerrany who commented.

“We can expect no help from the valley or its lady. I have been sending information all along to Duhaun. She knows all that we know of you, Eleeri. And I have written of the spread of evil into these parts where it was not before.” He smiled. “Indeed letters have been flying like hail between our keep and the valley’s lady. We made plans should this time come. Now we move to put them into action and little time shall be wasted.”

“What plans?” Eleeri asked practically.

“For a start, the valley can’t help because they are already fighting elsewhere. The evil has grown strong near the Forest of the Mosswomen and it is taking most of their strength to protect the outlying stronghold and keeps in that direction. However the children are to be sent to the valley, to Duhaun. To help she has sent us five men-at-arms. She has also sent a gift.”

He held it out as Eleeri took it gingerly. It was a tiny lovely thing. A carved piece of crystal in which living colors seemed to swirl and blend.

“What are we to do with it?” Eleeri questioned.



Jerrany's face became almost boyish again as he grinned cheerfully. "What it is I do not know. But if we prevail, we are to break it. I told the lady we may have to storm the Dark Tower. This is her reply."

"In other words, we have to win to use it?"

"Just so."

Mayrin reached out to take it. Quietly she busied herself threading it on a chain, which she placed silently about her own neck. Eleeri hid a grin. It was clear Mayrin intended to ride with them.

Eleeri could imagine the arguments which had taken place before her arrival. Jerrany had been convinced Romar was captive somewhere. Once he found that place, he would attack. Eleeri had seen, too, that Mayrin would never allow herself to be left behind. Why should she? The woman was trained to bow and sword, and as good a rider as any. True, Mayrin was ten years older than Eleeri, but Tehnup—experienced warriors far older—had ridden to war in the days of the Nemunuh's glory. From what she had heard of Estcarp, women did not usually ride to war. With the coming overmountain to Escore, many had chosen to don breeches and take up sword.

She stood, pulled her friend into a strong warm embrace. "I greet a warrior who rides."

Mayrin's face flushed half in pride, half in embarrassment. "Jerrany doesn't approve."

He was quick to repudiate that. "I approve, dear heart. Given the choice, I would have you on my left, Romar on my right. It is the children I fear for. Who will care for them if we fall?"

His wife snorted inelegantly. "Who will care for them if you lose and evil comes howling about the keep walls? No, they will not be here but safely in the valley with Duhaun. I



will be with you.”

Eleeri patted his arm. “You’re doing the right thing.” Mayrin left the room to prepare the nurse and those men who would accompany the children. She turned to Jerrany. “How did she convince you she should come with us?”

His look was wry. “By convincing me that short of binding and gagging her, I could not keep her at home. She quite simply said that she went with me; if I refused, she would follow anyway.”

He said nothing of the hot words added to that. Mayrin had been rude in all earnest to her usually adored husband when he had suggested she remain behind. She had reminded him—in words that seared his ears—how she had chosen to oppose her father in wedding Jerrany. She had then come into a dangerous part of the land with no other neighbors, no one to stand with them should evil find them here. Shoulder to shoulder she had fought beside him to clear small darkneses and dangerous beasts. She had never complained.

In this wilderness she had made a home, borne his children, cared for their people. And for all that time her brother had been with them. Romar was her brother in blood. Her twin. Half of her heart. She had believed Jerrany cared for him, as sword and shield-kin. Through all the years of battles and hard drudgery, Romar had aided them. The keep was not his. He had no share in it, but he had hunted for food, fought beside them as if it were. Eyes flaming, she had demanded if she was now supposed to forget everything.

Jerrany had protested. They were only making contingency plans. Romar might be dead. He might be somewhere they could not find to attempt a rescue. There were no assurances that Eleeri would ever return with word of Romar. And if she did, there were no guarantees he could



he saved. If she were killed fighting beside him, the children must grow up without either parent.

Mayrin had ignored much of that. Was she to be no more than a brood mare? she had demanded. A subservient wife and keep mistress? Her father had cast her off for her refusal to wed where he chose. But he would take in his grandchildren and treasure them. Her head had jerked then, her eyes meeting his in defiance. She would *not* be lessened! He had accepted her as shieldmate as well as wife. Even Romar had been willing that she should fight beside them in those days. Now she would fight again—for her home, her brother, and the future of her children. Let him try to prevent her if he dared.

He had not. Rather, he had gathered her into his arms, filled with pride in her and fear for her.

“I would rather have no one else at my side,” he had told her. Yet within him his heart chilled. So many things could happen in such a battle. He must seek ways to ensure her safety even though she fought.

He smiled up at her as she returned now, taking her hands to draw her down beside him.

Eleeri was able to draw them maps both accurate and detailed. Once those were completed, Jerrany called an armsman.

“Take these to Ternan, tell him to make copies. I want two and they must be exact. Our lives may all depend upon it.” He glanced at Eleeri. “The man’s too old to fight, but his father was a scribe and a copier. As a boy, Ternan learned well of him. Now he serves us thus and as a tutor to the children.” He stood, moving restlessly about the room. “One set can go with the children. The other we will leave here in the muniments room as a record. I will also have Ternan write all that we plan.”



He saw the glance they gave each other. “No, I am not a fool. It is true if we die, dark may come. But think of this also. We may fall but in falling take our enemy with us. The land may be cleansed for our children and those who come after. I would have them know by whose hand and whose deeds this was accomplished.”

Eleeri nodded. To her it was natural. The Nemunuh had always sought to drag down the enemy who had slain them. To use one’s final strength to slay in turn the slayer was right and proper. She also made a mental note to visit the great room below her own keep once more. She would look for a weapon she could hide. Something unsuspected and easily hidden. If the time came she must use it, there would be something available. She hid a shiver. Better to die by her own hand if she was left helpless than to fall to that which held the Dark Tower.

Of course, she added to herself, if the enemy was so stupid as to suppose her helpless, it might approach. Her lips drew back against strong white teeth. In which case, it would not be she who died at her hands. She returned to listening as Jerrany went over the maps. Twice he called in men to give orders. Once Mayrin pattered away to return with more of the scarce paper. Finally they retired. The groundwork of their plan was laid; it remained only to add flesh to the bones.

With firstsun they were risen again, her friends watching from the bridge runestones as Eleeri saddled her pony in the courtyard behind them. She mounted, trotting across the bridge to join them.

“I will be just a little while.” She eyed those who gathered in the courtyard now. “Do not allow your people to act in haste. I swear to you these ones I bring are of the Light and will fight with us.”

Jerrany looked up, his eyes searching her face. “Always you have been of the Light, passing our runes of ward and guard. I do not think you are easily deceived, either. We will draw back to the keep when you come. Let your friends pass the bridge and they will be welcomed with all good seeming.”

She nodded, nudging the pony into a walk. Behind her Mayrin’s hand slid out to take Jerrany’s fingers in a hard grip. If these were true allies, Romar might yet be brought home. She strained her eyes as pony and rider diminished in the distance.

They waited. Then slowly something grew again before their eyes, resolving into one rider with a mount and four loose beasts who ran smoothly about them. Murmurs rolled up from those who watched; the sounds were doubtful but not yet hostile.

Taking Mayrin’s hand in a strong grip, Jerrany drew her backward. Now they stood waiting within the shadow of the arch that led to the courtyard. The group neared the bridge and from the dust began to resolve into its component parts. There were gasps of awe as they realized Eleeri was astride a Keplian mare. The mare pranced, arching her powerful neck and curveting proudly.

On the woman’s left a Keplian stallion paced, larger and finer than any could have believed. The pony trotted busily to her right. At her tail came a scarred mare and a younger stallion, only a colt yet already grown to rider size. At the runes they halted. Eleeri dropped casually from her mount to reach up toward the stone nearest her hand. The runes flared blue-green as she traced one of the signs. She stepped aside to allow the mare to approach in turn. A soft nose lifted to trace a sign, the light flamed higher. The stallion stretched out—with his touch the light became mist rising about the Keplian’s hooves. The other two closed in to touch and the



mist rose like a tidal wave to engulf them.

Then it cleared. Before the wondering gaze of the keep's inhabitants, all stood unharmed. Eleeri leaped to Tharna's back, her sword lashed free of the sheath. In the sunlight it flamed gold and silver; blue fire dripped from the edge to splash over Keplian shoulders.

"With friends, allies, kin to the Light, I come. Shall we enter in welcome?"

Hand in hand keep lord and lady moved forward. "Enter in welcome!" Jerrany's deep voice came.

Mayrin's lighter tones counterpointed his acceptance.

Hooves passed over the bridge. The Keplians stood staring about them as they reached the courtyard. From the center of his people Jerrany walked forward. His hands lifted; Mayrin stepped to his side. She, too, raised a guesting cup as in unison they spoke the words of acceptance and welcome.

Then for the first time in a thousand years they were truly answered by one of the race who fronted them. Tharna's head lifted.

For the welcome of your gates, gratitude. To the lord and lady of this house, a fair day, good fortune, and a bright sun on the morrow.

There was a long silent pause—then the cheering began.



14

*E*leeri stood back to watch. The Keplians had understood the sound, she smiled to see their surprised pleasure. Then she drew Mayrin aside.

“You have a small amount of the gift. Is it enough for you to probe into the deeps of a mind?”

Her friend shook her head. “No, not with any but kin.” She laughed then. “Although Jerrany and I do share thoughts sometimes usually at just the moment we shouldn’t.”

“Oh?”

Mayrin giggled. “It was at a dinner for the Lord Terne of the Valley of the Green Silences. He’s a nice old man but very stuffy and pompous. It was kind of him to ride all the way out here and he only came to go over our fortifications for us. But he would keep on about the importance of having escape passages. We should have at least two, one known only to us. We were both sitting there trying to look interested and he just kept on and on. The next thing, I had this



picture—” She broke off to snicker again while Eleeri waited patiently. “It came from Jerrany. It was of Lord Terne as a burrower, digging tunnels madly all underneath the keep until the whole thing fell in on him. Then this burrower with his face sat up in all the dust looking so surprised. I couldn’t help it.” She was laughing again, and visualizing it all. So was Eleeri.

“What did you do?”

“Muttered something about being needed urgently and ran. I got outside in the passage and just collapsed. Nurse came by and stood staring. That set me off all over again. It must have been almost half an hour before I could go back. Nurse said she hoped she was raising the children better. But when I told her, she was laughing, too.”

By now so was Eleeri. She’d seen burrowers. Small stout animals who did indeed have an air of surprised pompousness about them. She giggled along with Mayrin until Jerrany turned to look.

“What are you two hatching?”

His wife grinned. “Nothing—yet. I was merely telling Eleeri about Lord Terne.”

Jerrany grinned. “I remember that. I thought you were going to burst before you got out of the hall.” Then he sobered. “Since these ones say they are our allies, let us make plans with them. The evil spreads and grows as it drains power where it finds it. If we are to act in time, it must be soon.” He spoke not of Romar, but all knew what he meant. His heart ached for his friend Romar, who had always brought laughter and Light. Romar, who could not bear to be caged, and was now caged beyond his nightmares. Jerrany shivered.

“Let us make our plans quickly.”

His wife nodded. Eleeri moved forward. “The plans have

already been made. These Keplians are the friends I spoke of last night. They it is who will attack to draw off the attention of the enemy. No normal mount would approach the tower, therefore my kin-friends have consented to bear the three of us thither. But us alone. Let your men, those you can spare, ride on ordinary horses to fight beside the Keplians who distract the enemy.”

“A reasonable plan, but will these two bear us willingly? I would hear it from them.”

The scarred mare moved up to reach out with her nose, touching his hand. *I will carry you to fight evil. To strike the Dark I will bear you willingly.*

Shenn nuzzled at Mayrin’s hair. *I, too. I will carry you.* He moved back in a half rear. *But we bear no human gear. You must ride us as we stand.*

“That seems fair.” Eleeri said nothing of her thoughts: that he was yet too young to carry the weight of saddle and gear as well as that of even a light rider.

Eleeri faced her friends. “One thing I would say. Beware of seeking to force your minds into full rapport with these. Their minds are not as ours. I think it is that difference that has moved gifted humans to slay them before now.” She gestured for silence when Jerrany would have spoken. “Yes, I share hearts with my friends. But from the beginning I never saw them as evil. The first time our minds touched, I was stunned, shocked, but then I opened my eyes and saw only those I loved before me. I no longer fear deep mind-touch. But your people have responded to it with such hatred that to my belief it is better you do not attempt it. Do you agree?”

“If you are certain of this,” Jerrany said slowly, “then you are right and it is safer we do not try. But we can speak ordinarily?”



“Yes. Speak aloud, and Theela and Shenn will answer by mind as they have already done with you both.”

He nodded. “Then let us check preparations.” He called and one of the men-at-arms came running. There was a swift consultation before Jerrany turned back to the waiting women. Most of the orders had been completed. If they busied themselves before nightfall, they might be ready to ride by dawn. Eleeri grinned cheerfully. Not too fast. She would have to return to inform those of her canyon that the humans agreed to company them. Then she could ride with Tharna and Hylan to meet her friends at the stream ford.

For the next few hours the Keplians stood studying the bustling humans with deep interest. They had moved carefully to the side of the courtyard, half hidden in the shadows as the light began to fail. From a half door a girl emerged then, a child of perhaps seven or eight. Behind her came a boy bearing a sheaf of hay. A water bucket swung heavily from the girl’s small hands. She bowed politely.

“Food and drink to the travelers, in the name of the Light.”

Tharna stepped up, and drank gratefully. *Thank you.*

Shenn had reached for the hay and was happily chewing his mouthful. The small boy giggled and stroked the soft nose within reach.

“He’s beautiful. Ask them what his name is.”

I am Shenn, human.

I am Kiren and she’s Shevaun.

The young stallion meditated a moment as he chewed. *You are the lady’s foals?* With that both received a brief picture of Mayrin.

They giggled. “Yes,” the girl agreed. “But humans say children, not foals.” She, too, stroked him gently. “You’re so soft. Do all Keplians have such soft fur?”

Shenn preened slightly. Beside him Theela snickered, a mental sending received only by her kin. Shenn tipped a warning hoof at her. He was finding these humans more than he had dreamed. The four Keplians listened as the children prattled on. It amused them to find they were at once treated as friends and equals in the conversation. There was no fear smell, no distrust of those who were different. The mare peered down at the intently childish faces.

How do you know we are good?

The girl appeared surprised. “No one could pass the gate runes who was not.”

One who had great power might? A great Dark one?

The child shook her head knowledgeably. “He might, if he was very, very strong, but the runes would still warn us. I heard Mother telling nurse about you. She said the runes answered to your touch, that they showed you to be of the Light.”

Theela absorbed that. The human girl was ready to trust easily, yet who was to say she was altogether wrong? Let them see how far she would move along that path.

Would you care to ride?

There were instant squeals of acceptance. Both children scrambled onto the mounting block in the courtyard center. The mare paced alongside and small light bodies squirmed into place on her sleek hide. She carried them carefully around the cobbles as her kin watched in amusement. From the door came a heavy step as it opened to reveal an outraged nurse.

The storm broke over the children’s heads. They should have been in bed; she had been hunting for them for too long. Already her bad leg was aching, and she had much to do yet before she could rest. Even the surprised Keplians came in for a scolding. They should have known better than to keep the children up so late, no matter how they brought



up their own kind.

Still muttering, she swept the heirs away, but not before Shevaun had flung her arms about Theela's lowered neck.

"Thank you for the ride." She pattered off hastily after her brother as the mare stood motionless. So they were human foals. It was strange, and interesting, that the children had no fear of Keplians. They might have been taught to fear the abstract; but face-to-face with reality, they had trusted. Tharna had felt the first horrified recoil of her kinsister as their minds had touched for the first time. That had changed with a second meeting and acceptance. She had watched and listened earlier as Eleeri warned the keep's lord and lady. It might be that those two could never do more than read the surface safely.

But—her eyes gazed at the door through which the children had vanished—it could be that with a younger generation who had not learned the fears to hold them back . . . She reached for the remainder of her hay. There was no hurry; she would think on this for a while.

It was far into the night before all Jerrany's preparations were done. Finally he returned to the solar where Mayrin and Eleeri waited. They, too, had been busy so that a pile of carefully chosen weaponry and items were stacked in one corner. A quick conversation brought all to a knowledge of what had been done by the others. Jerrany studied the marked candle. It was late. If they would ride early they must— His comments were interrupted by Eleeri. It would be she who left, but alone. Her friends should allow her time to reach the canyon, alert the decoy party, and ride back to the stream where she would meet them all.

"Bring the extra things you think to need on a couple of packhorses. They can be held to the rear of the battle with your own beasts as spare mounts should your men require

them. Once the battle is joined, we ride hard for the tower. The Light go with us.”

At the nods of agreement she strode for the door. She would sleep, then rise to eat well. Warriors never knew when they would eat next. She left with the Keplians amid a rising clamor of excitement within the keep. Hylan had insisted on his turn to bear her. He cantered lightly over the rough ground, reveling in the dual sensation as their minds linked.

Some echo of that pleasure reached the mare and young stallion who paced them. Theela mourned it. For her there might never be a rider who could be truly kin. Her head came up. Yet, there might be, once the tower was beaten.

They reached the canyon, passing the runes that flared as mares and foals crowded around. Eleeri dropped to the ground and began to explain the plan. One by one they understood, absorbed, considered, and agreed. They had long since decided who would fight, who would remain to care for the smaller foals. Now the mares who chose thrust forward. Eleeri counted. Almost twenty would hunt beside the humans. That was well. The Keplians had an ability to handle evil at closer quarters, where humans would faint from the stench of the Dark. She went quietly to her keep. There she took up a bundle of torches twisted from dried grass around a core of a slow-, strong-burning wood.

Her steps led now to the great underground room below the keep. At her command doors opened, shelves revealed their burdens. Once again she chose weapons, mail to take for Jerrany. Then she stood allowing her mind to fall blank. It was like the sleek surface of a lake; no ripple marred the surface of her mind as she stood motionless.

In the deeps of her mind something stirred, like the movement below the waters of a huge fish that does not



break the surface. She allowed it to sink again and waited. It returned with a silvery leap and before she could lose it, she shouted aloud the word that came.

“Ceearan!”

Light blazed from points in the ancient stones. Behind her there came a slow soft grinding as one final door opened. She spun, her eyes seeking eagerly. Despair suddenly filled her. What was this? Nothing but— She peered more closely. It looked like old damp clay. Damp? Her mind queried; it must have been here since the original owners left. How could clay remain damp so long, even hidden within such a hiding place? She remembered the bespelled cupboards upstairs; this might be as they. But why would the owners hide clay in such secret? Her hands went out as her shaking fingers were drawn into the surface.

Blank-faced, hands moving in a blur, she did what was laid upon her. Then she bundled the results into a cloth. This must come with her, a geas laid, but she did not fight the command. She half understood the reason, and within the geas she had felt the touch of she who had once been keep’s lady. She would trust her far-kin. Carrying the cloth and its contents, she tramped up the stairs again to eat and sleep.

By sunhigh she was far down the mountain trail. With her the Keplian mares paced, the obedient pony following with laden saddle. Eleeri was astride Tharna as the mare pranced smugly. Hylan trotted well ahead, scouting the track as they traveled.

They reached the lower hills without incident and Eleeri halted them to rest. They would wait the night out here; at dawn they could descend the final slopes to meet with her friends at the ford. Several times as they moved she had shot leapers disturbed by the passage of hooves. Now she



paused to walk apart. Each time she had bled the beasts, and now she skinned and gutted them quickly. The entrails were buried, the bundle of skins hung high in a tree fork and covered with strong-scented leaves. If she returned safely, she would take them with her. Survival in this land required that nothing be wasted.

Swiftly she placed two of the small bodies on sharpened sticks over the fire that now crackled within a circle of stones. The remainder she jointed and placed in a pot half filled with water. To that she added such greens and herbs as she had. In the morning she would not wish to waste time cooking. But there would be no need; the stew would have simmered all night in preparation for her breakfast. She waited until the leapers were nicely roasted, then she ate, tearing the well-cooked meat from the bones with strong teeth.

In the center of the dozing group she laid out her bedroll and slipped within. Her dreams were vague but ominous. Far Traveler with grave eyes approached, his fingers gesturing warning signs. She saw Cynan and her mind focused, reaching out. He had been her friend for so short a time—but a friend all the same. What had befallen him with her going? Was he still alive? She was certain he was not. Did he, too, come to warn her? The figure faded into hills and she recognized the land about his Karsten hold. She seemed to follow as he made with faltering steps for the small graveyard that held his line.

She saw him reach out to where the flowering bush blazed in glory. The blossoms lit the sunlight to a greater beauty and his lips shaped her name. A small wind blew through the bush and bright blossoms fell to lie sprinkled upon the gray stone. There was a sense of peace, of a long journey accomplished at last. She did not weep then; it would not have felt right to mourn him. He had chosen his own time



and trail. In the end he had remembered her. She would remember him. She slipped into a deeper sleep without dreams and woke refreshed. As she ate, she conversed with the four Keplians who were closest to her now.

The breeze blew warm; the sun already betrayed heat to come. She vaulted to Hylan's warm back and the group trotted down the trail to where the rapids foamed and bubbled. Above them the water purred at the ford. Behind a clump of trees they waited until sounds spoke of their allies' arrival. Eleeri waved, to be joined by her friends then.

"Let's not waste time. My men all know what we planned. They have agreed to fight beside the Keplians."

Eleeri nodded, sending the message to those who waited. Hooves thumped as they swung to the ford. Human riders moved out to join them, those last in line now leading the three ponies hold and canyon had discarded. Eleeri turned back, opening the heavy bundle she had removed from her beast.

"Jerrany, I found this in my keep. It is twin to the one I gave Mayrin. I ask that you wear it. The one who once owned it battled the tower in his time. It would have pleased him to know he has some part in this." Under her hands the chain shirt fell free, gleaming in the sunlight. There was a subtle shimmer to the metal links, a shifting of colors like oil on water.

Jerrany reached out and donned it wordlessly. He had owned no more than the usual metal rings sewn to leather. But this . . . this was a great gift. How many of these did Eleeri have? he wondered silently. He knew of three now. Were there more yet? But he would not ask. It was enough that they all wore one, and Mayrin was safer so. That was all that was his proper concern. He glanced down, to see that their friend was not quite done.



From the same bundle she now drew daggers. The blades gleamed in the sun, a soft silver glow so that he sucked in his breath sharply.

“Silver?”

She smiled. “Silver and some way of tempering that makes them steel-keen. Wear them. They are doubly dangerous to the Dark.”

He removed his own dagger to replace it with one of the proffered weapons. Mayrin followed suit. His leather ring-sewn shirt he hung on a branch, the daggers hooked into its belt. Then he turned to the waiting Keplian. He bowed and stepped forward. Theela stood as he jumped for her strong back, then as his legs curled about her, she curveted a little, testing his seat. He laughed, stroking the proud black neck.

“I know, I am here only so long as you will it. I’ll remember.” He watched as his wife mounted, the young stallion bending his haunches to sit so she could mount, heavy in her mail.

Eleeri swung onto Hylan, sending him pacing slowly into the rushing stream. In the breast of her mail the thing she had been driven to make lumped uncomfortably. She eased it with a surreptitious hand. They left the stream and ford behind as they struck out in a direct line for the tower. Soon the decoy party would reach the rasti to begin their attack. The attention of the tower would be drawn away. They must make the best time they could without being noticeable until then. Into a growing heat they moved, hearts high.

Far to the northwest ten men-at-arms traveled with eighteen Keplian mares. One of their number was a mere boy who led the three spare mounts. The others were seasoned fighters, but their eyes were nervous as well as alert. Even the blue-eyed Keplian leader failed to completely convince



them that their companions were of the Light.

Pehnane was silent. Humans believed as they wished. So long as these fought, he cared not *what* they thought. He had joined the party just before the humans rode up. It was for him to lead this group to the rasti. Then he would leave to be with the far-daughter. He trotted slowly on toward the territory of the rasti pack. Soon he would be with those he loved.

Now burrows were appearing where the females laired to give birth. The boy's pony was sidling and stepping higher, nostrils flared. One hind leg slipped into the mouth of a burrow and the pony squealed as it staggered. Unprepared, the boy slid over the heaving shoulder to land flat on his back. Two mares whirled as with a chittering two female rasti hurtled forth to attack. Their teeth were at the boy's throat as he scrambled to regain his footing in the rough soil. Before the rasti could sink teeth into the soft flesh, the Keplian mares arrived. Flat-eared heads snaked out to seize, to crush as the rasti were flung backward. Hooves stamped the life from them, satisfaction reaching all who watched.

At the head of the column, a warrior relaxed. These might be odd allies, but allies they were nonetheless. The boy lurched to his feet. Clumsily he bowed low to the mares before remounting his sweating pony. Honor where honor was due—he owed them a debt. The group moved on in better heart, the tenuous beginnings of battle-trust established. Soon they were close to the main burrows where the soil was turned.

In the tower, that which dwelled was enraged. Had he not given orders that strength was not to be futilely wasted? He would punish these fools in such a way they would never forget. He drew on his captive to drive home his wrath on the defiant ones. His attention focused powerfully



northward, where in a running battle the Light gave good account of itself.

Both humans and Keplians had followed a suggestion of the war-wise oldest man-at-arms. Now they ducked often into the running water where the rasti could not follow. From there they could emerge to strike again and again. Many showed wounds, but none as yet had fallen. The enraged tower concentrated in an effort to discover the enemy. All its attention flowed outward to the north.

Then to the base of the tower came seven to be joined by a great stallion. His eyes glowed an incandescent blue as he reared to a halt. Into their minds came a cry like a trumpet blast.

Now, now is the time! His form shrunk and twisted. Eleeri dropped to the ground to seize her pendant. With that clutched in her hand, she approached the tower's base. Lifting the pendant, she ran a tiny hoof lightly around a block of stone, murmuring a word. A faint gleam followed the path of her pendant. The stone creaked, groaned, and slowly slid aside. Before them was a wide smooth path leading into darkness. She turned to the Keplians.

“Hold the gate for us until we return or you know our deaths.”

She reached up to hug each of them lovingly, then with squared shoulders she led the way through the arch. Mayryn and Jerrany followed. Their footsteps faded into silence as the Keplians took up guard. They would wait.



15

*O*n the riverbanks the fight raged. Trust was by now established. Too many incidents had occurred for the humans to doubt their allies further. Time and again a Keplian mare dragged a rasti from a dismounted man's throat, to be repaid with a spear thrust to the rasti hanging onto her sleek hide, its teeth relaxing only in death. The archers took toll from their position on the rise. Then, the last of the arrows fired, they joined the battle, spears stabbing viciously downward. They had been less than thirty against more than two hundred. But intelligent use of the ground had aided them strongly. As had another fact that their leaders had taken into account.

Many times their swift retreats into the running water had saved them from a massed assault. The rasti were not intelligent. They were hunger, filled with blood rage, without tactics. They fought to overwhelm by sheer ferocity and



numbers. They were now hampered by the blind anger and arrogance of the tower, which was demanding they cease their fight.

The mind there had not realized that the rasti fronted its own enemies. Rather it believed that the Gray Ones feuded once more. It drove power against the rasti, slowing them as they attacked. Mad with blood and battle rage, they ignored the orders hurled at them. But the power slowed them even as it took all the tower's attention from its own place.

Down a tunnel deep within massive ancient walls, three humans hurried. Torches flamed in their hands; they would save any power they had until it must be used. Within Eleeri's mind hung a bloodless face, strained beyond humanity. Eyes implored her to hurry, and hasten she did, trotting as swiftly as she could along the slime-covered stones. In line behind her ran Mayrin and Jerrany, daggers drawn. Finally they halted at the sight of what lay ahead.

"Are we traveling in circles?" Jerrany was bewildered. From the outside the tower was large, but not so big as all this. They'd been following the tunnel for almost half an hour in an apparently straight line. Now before them was a huge cave. Above them the roof arched out of sight. The worn path led down into its depths while at the edge runes showed faintly on the inset flagstones.

"Romar showed me the path. He was certain it led to our goal," Eleeri said quietly. "He thought it would be safe for us, since the tower is afraid of this place. Perhaps we have allies here?"

Something tugged at her throat and she slipped the pendant from its cord. Placing Pehnane on the ground, she stepped back, waving her friends to silence. Mist flickered out from the water-glistening walls to surround the pendant. It cleared and in front of them the great stallion struck the



stones with a hoof.

Follow.

They fell into line again and trod warily down into the cavern. As they traveled, all noticed that the runes on which they trod brightened with each footfall. The light seemed to spill over into tiny glittering motes which whirled up, clinging to the higher walls. Eleeri was sure these were forming other runes in turn. She felt as though she were shrinking as she walked. As if the cavern grew in size until they were insects who crawled along an endless pathway to some strange future, which insects would not understand. But ahead paced their guide, and they followed trustingly.

Without warning the motes of light coalesced before them, outlining a gray stone pillar. Nervously Eleeri halted. Were they required to do something here? She looked to the stallion, who stood motionless before the pillar. He gave no sign, so she waited patiently, eyes fixed on the specks as they crawled over the surface. She blinked. From their movement a figure was appearing—or was it a trick? At her shoulder, Mayrin drew in breath.

Eleeri turned. “What is it?”

“Long ago when I was a child, we visited Duhaun and she told me a tale of a Great One who had lived far to the other side of this land. He wasn’t a bad man, just careless. He hated the warring and in the end he withdrew after some attempt of his went wrong and hurt those he’d loved.”

Eleeri’s mind leaped ahead. “Would he have known those of my far-kin, I wonder? Could they be passage for us?”

“I don’t know. But Duhaun showed me an old limning. It had his own runes along the lower edge.” She peered at the pillar. “I thought that they looked just like this.” She pointed.

“What was his name?”

Silent, Mayrin crouched to write it in the dust that drifted



now in a thin film on the stones. Eleeri understood. She had long since learned the power of a spoken word in this land. She drew it into her, spoke it in her mind several times over until she was sure of it. Then she straightened and approached the pillar. The light had settled so that she could see there were runes indeed. The last of them was the name. This she traced gently with her finger, then she sucked in a breath.

She spoke it. Light came then in a rush like lightning. Power roared and it seemed as if some presence opened drowsy eyes to study them. She stood firm, allowing it to see, to know who they were and what they did in this place. It was gone, but in turn she saw Mayrin stagger, then Jerrany as it searched out truth. It withdrew as quickly as it had come.

At their feet runes brightened one by one, showing a path. There was a sense that while they were not unwelcome, their absence was to be preferred. But to Eleeri there was yet one thing to do.

She stepped forward, speaking conversationally as if to a friend. "You did not ask, but I am far-daughter to those you might have known." Into her mind she brought the faces of those who had once held the canyon. She felt the sudden surge of power, of interest. Carefully she allowed her mind to picture all that had happened on the day the mists had permitted her entrance. She shared her grief that she had not known more of them, had kin for less time than her heart had asked.

Now the power was alive, seeking to know her whole story. It winnowed swiftly, seeing her arrival into this world, her meeting with Tharna and Hylan. Then it returned to watch and listen again as her kin acknowledged her as far-daughter and heir to their place. It sifted through her dreams of Romar



and she could feel a dim anger that evil dwelled above its resting place.

As Romar had said, sharing is a two-way road. In turn she knew that there was little here of the person who had long since gone. Most of the power had drained away. The man this had once been had moved on seeking another home, but still some remnant had remained in the place he had loved. The man could not return, but his power had been very great. He could yet be a giver of gifts.

Her head shook slowly. "We ask nothing save passage and no ill-wishing."

Amusement at her pride. Then a memory. Her far-mother had been kin to him. Let the daughter of his line take up her right. Light motes rose to fall gently across her, weaving themselves into a covering that wholly embraced her before fading. Into her mind came words. She listened, agreed. If this one was truly of her blood, then kin-right was laid upon her. She raised her dagger and watched as the light motes sank into it. Her head turned.

"Jerrany, Mayrin, unsheath your weapons."

In turn they, too, saw the glittering points of light drift out to cover first them, then the upraised daggers.

Eleeri faced the pillar, now bowing but as befitted a warrior. "Sleep well, far-kin of my far-mother. What I can do, I will." She lowered her dagger until it pointed at the stone. "Earth, Mother. You heard my promise." The dagger lifted to point upward. "Sun, Father. You heard my words. Let me die within a season if I lie." Her hand came up in a brief warrior salute before she turned, leading the way forward.

Behind her there was a gentle sliding sound as the pillar crumbled to dust. The runes still held light, but the three humans and Keplian must hurry, already it began to fade.

They trotted swiftly. Where the stones allowed it, they



ran, dropping back to a trot when the path roughened again. Neither of her friends asked what that last speech had been about. It was none of their business, and power was an ill thing to offend. The stallion had made no sound and now he merely paced before them. Eleeri grinned to herself. They were a motley group, in truth, but maybe their very diversity would help to confuse their enemy.

Now of a sudden their road sloped upward. They passed through an arch and halted abruptly. All turned to look. At their very heels a rough rock wall faced their gaze.

“Well.” Jerrany ran fingertips across the harsh surface. “I gather we won’t be coming back this way. There’s even a different feeling in the air.”

Mayrin nodded. “This is no longer the place of our friend’s far-kin. This is the enemy’s home and our battleground. Let us go forward, for now there is no retreat even did we desire it.” Her face hardened. “And that I do not. Romar is ahead. He shall be freed or I shall die in the doing of it.” Her eyes met those of her husband.

He nodded grimly. “Your brother, my friend and sword-brother, neither of us turns back now. But what of you?” His gaze touched Eleeri.

She sought for words to make them understand. Then— “I am geas-ordered and bound by my own oath. Better I die in battle than betray either.”

Before they could ask further, she strode forward. Shod in soft calf-high moccasins, her feet were soundless on the smooth floor. Her friends followed, and none of them thought it strange that the stallion ahead made no sound as his hooves met the hard marble. He seemed rather to glide, nose seeking toward the walls. Then he signaled.

“A door?” Jerrany moved up to look. “Yes.” He thrust gently with no result. Studying it, he hooked fingers into a



carved rose and pulled back. The door swung open, allowing them a glimpse of a roiling mist that began at once to creep toward them. With a shiver he allowed the door to swing closed again.

“Not that one, I think. Spread out. Look for others.”

They obeyed, something in the feel of the long corridor making them keep silence. Twice more they opened doors which showed them nothing they sought. One opened into a vast waste of scrub, sand, and hard-packed pebbles. The air was dry and heat smote them savagely. The other opened into snow, whirling in great flakes above a black and bitter sky.

Eleeri had been walking, running her fingertips along the wall. Under them a break caught her attention. She moved in, eye intent. A prancing Keplian was carved deep into the door’s surface. She beckoned Pehnane. He looked at it. Something in his eyes was sad as his nose touched the nose of the carved beast. The door swung open.

They gazed in. Mayrin would have cried out then and run forward but for Jerrany’s grip.

“Be still, beloved. Bait a trap with what the prey desires most. Better we look this over well before we walk into a spider’s den.”

He tugged her backward, a jerk of his chin sending Eleeri to the doorway to look within. She studied the figure that lolled in the chair. To her eyes it was Romar, but—she peered closer. This Romar looked a little too well fed, too well cared for. His clothes were of good quality, his hands soft. She nodded at that. Soft, yes, but not the softness of one who had done no work with them these last months. They were the softness of one for whom they had never been bruised on labor. The wrists were not the strong-tendoned sinewy strength of a horseman, but lay weak and limp in the figure’s

lap. Softly she pointed this out to Mayrin as the woman strained against her mate's grip.

"It is not Romar."

"Then who?"

Jerrany guessed, "A fetch, a made thing to lure us in."

His wife shook her head. "Perhaps not. I have heard of images made without features. Look you at the way it is dressed. That could be the clothing of either sex."

Eleeri raised her gaze and began to concentrate as she ordered, "Turn your eyes away, quickly. Do not look until I say."

She called Cynan to memory. He was gone, his spirit in the lands he sought. She could do it no harm, but his memory might now aid them. Slowly she drew from her mind the memories. Cynan as he sat cross-legged teaching her the languages of this new world. Cynan as he groomed one of the ponies, big hands gentle on the rough hide. Cynan as she had seen him last in life. His arm upraised in farewell, his body clad in her gifts. Into that last she allowed her grief to flow. Then she stepped to front the open door. Before her on the seat Cynan lifted his head to beckon her in.

She turned away. This thing was a mockery of her old friend. She longed to destroy it, but her duty as a warrior was to her friends. She would have explained, but they had guessed.

"It wears now the face of the one you called?"

"It does."

"Then the question is, do we attempt to destroy it or pass by?" Jerrany queried softly.

"Pass by. I think it is only bait; it has no power of its own. If we are not called by it, it will wait for others to come," Mayrin answered. "The true question is, does it have some way of telling its maker that a trap has failed? If so, it is best



we hurry.” Wordlessly Pehnane moved on. They followed in haste and silence.

The corridor wound on without windows, but Jerrany was sure it rose a little with each circle. A feeling of apprehension began to possess him. About him as he walked, the walls glowed. At first the light was unnoticed; then it brightened. Eleeri gave a small cry as Pehnane faded. She ran forward to pick up the pendant.

“Why? Why would he leave us now?”

Jerrany turned, searching for a reason. “The walls,” he said quietly, “look at the walls.”

Fire crawled up the ancient stones. It smoked, leaving filthy black trails behind the dull crimson glow. He advanced a hand cautiously. “That’s power, not real fire; there’s no heat.” He glanced ahead, then back at the pendant in her hand. “Maybe he can’t pass this as he was. You can carry him past as a pendant, though.”

“Maybe.” Eleeri was worried. “But I don’t like the look of it.”

Mayrin stirred. “Nor I, but we have only two choices. Go back or go on. I will not leave here without Romar.”

Eleeri shrugged. “We go on, then, and the Light be with us.” She marched forward, followed by Jerrany, Mayrin in the rear, daggers at the ready. They padded slowly along as the fire grew about them. The blackness spread rapidly until the whole of the way through which they now walked was black laced with the fire trails that formed runes on which they did not wish to look. From the floor a mist began to rise. It, too, was black, shot with the lacing of dull crimson that was now all that gave light. Eleeri drew her dagger and dropped the pendant into the empty sheath. She was drawn. Now that she thought about it, she had had the feeling for



several minutes. Ahead lay the caller, Romar or another.

She reached out with her mind as she had learned to do with the Keplians. The calling seemed to strengthen, but she could not be sure. She allowed his face to rise in her memory. Then, walking slowly, she brought up the image of her dagger. This she touched to the face. The power flowed in with a rush.

She caught a warning. There was danger ahead, but here in the tower time was not as it was outside. If they moved forward steadily, did not falter, there was yet a chance they would be in time. Romar's strength was draining; that which dwelled here drew hard on him in its efforts to halt the battle far to the north. It would take much to turn its attention back now. Many of the tower's defenses were automatic. If they could pass them, they might come to its core unnoticed.

The sending faded, but not before Eleeri had read the weary disgust at his being so used. She clenched her hands. Better dead than enslaved to the greater Dark. If all else failed, she would pray to Ka-dih she could give a clean death as her only gift.

She turned to speak to her friends. Behind her the mist curled and shifted. There was no sign of them. She cursed savagely.

She'd allowed herself to be distracted. Could she have taken a turning they had not? Or had something crawled out of the walls and dragged them in? In a place like this, you couldn't be sure. She would have walked back, but something told her then it would be a mistake. Maybe that was the idea, get her tearing back along the way they'd come so she would forget why they were here. She set her teeth. She'd made a promise. She'd go on, alone if need be, and pray her friends found her again. She gripped her dagger and marched on, face toward the faint thread that called her.



The mist deepened, darkened, as out of it figures came. For a moment her steps faltered, then sturdy common sense came to her aid. These were dead or in another world. They could not be here. They were scarecrows raised to turn her back. She would not be so turned. Ahead of her Cynan bent a bitter smile upon her face.

“I loved you as a daughter. I trusted you and you left me to die alone.” The accusation stung. She had thought long and hard before she had left the Karsten hold. Had she gone to be free of him? Her head came up. No! Her reasons had held then as they held now. Cynan himself had agreed, sent her on her way with goodwill.

She faced the figure now. “I grieve that I left you. I grieve that you died alone. But I bear no burden for my choosing. It was yours also.”

“Because I saw I could not turn you aside.”

She shook her head. “Because you loved me. Love shuts no doors, holds not the loved one captive. I have not called you here. Go now with my love and good-wishing.” She walked resolutely forward as tears ran down her cheeks. The figure faded back into the mist and was gone. Another formed ahead. She flinched as the mean eyes fixed on her: her uncle. Mist formed a second figure to stand by him: her aunt. Cynan she had loved, therefore she had spoken gently to his image. These she had hated.

She walked forward, giving no way to them. They must let her pass or halt her as they could. She met them breast to breast as chill crept through her. Their hands gripped her wrists. Long-remembered insults hissed into unwilling ears. They despised her.

But she was no longer a child. This was a trick, an evil that sought to turn her from the proper path. She would not be driven back by these tatters of an outworn pain. She

willed their fingers to loosen. Her dagger lifted to lie as a bar between them.

“I owe you nothing,” she said quietly. “As you gave nothing, so I owe nothing. I did not call you; I do not hold you here now. Be free of me as I am free of you.”

She knew then that it was true. They had feared her strength, hated her for the spirit that did not break. She had been the stronger all along. An unwilling pity rose as she met their gaze. They thinned and were gone as her emotion made itself known. Against fear or hatred they could stand; against pity they had no shield.

Then came the figure she had expected. Far Traveler with the eagle feathers in his braids. Before her he twisted into horror. Rotting flesh on brown bone. Breath stank from exposed teeth as his voice slid into her ears. Behind him came another: the pinched face of the social services woman. It was her voice that overrode.

“Now I’ve found you, you’ll have to come with me, girl. The law says you can’t live alone so young.”

Eleeri hit back with an angry retort. The power below had given warning. Emotions could be both a weapon and a danger. She reached for calmness.

“I’ve lived here for years now. I am not a child anymore. The law has no claim on me and you have no power here.” She felt the old fear as the figure seized her arm. “The law is against you,” she repeated. “You have no law to back you in this. You stand alone.”

The figure hunched its shoulders nervously. It looked at her in disbelief. Eleeri gathered herself and flung her words at it.

“You walk in the paths of legality. Would you act against it now?”

The figure shrank back. With a look of puzzled anger, it



shook its head. She was a social worker; the law was her work.

“Then leave, or you shall face the law itself that you break.” It seemed to shiver, falling in until there was no more than another coil of mist.

Eleeri faced her last challenge as her hands went out to take those of her kinsman. Tears flooded down her face as she embraced him. She ignored the stench, the appearance; this was her protector, her teacher, her blood. She listened as he began to speak.

“Eleeri, Eleeri I named you, and strange are the paths you have chosen to walk. But there is no need for further struggle. Come with me and rest. Be my daughter’s daughter once more.”

“I follow a word given.”

“Given to one who had no right to bind you. Come with me.” The voice was full of tenderness.

“I gave the word. Shall I break my warrior oath? Is that of your teaching?”

With his arm laid about her shoulders, she looked up into the beloved face restored. Longing was in his tone then. “I miss you, child of my heart. Would you leave me to walk the spirit world forever without you? Leave these who are no true kin to you and come.”

Almost might the spell have worked, so greatly had she loved him. But for that final sentence. Gently she freed herself, drew away from those loving arms.

“Kin of mine they are, and it is for me to aid. I gave warrior oath to one who trusted me. My friends are here. Am I to leave them to fight alone? Nor will I leave one of my blood to die.”

“You stand alone. Your friends have fled.” His face moved in anger. “You were always a stubborn fool.” Now he showed



fear for her. "Do not walk this road. Come with me and be safe."

She eased her shoulders as if resuming a great load. She wept, but walked steadily forward. "I cannot. You yourself taught me that an oath may not be broken, that blood stands by blood, that even if friends betray you, yet shall you hold by the word given."

"I may not come to you again if you do this."

She dashed away the tears. "You have not done so now. You are the memory I have, but not the man I loved." She stood facing him and from her mind she banished his figure, letting him go as he had once released her. Mist billowed and was gone. Before her the passage stretched out wide and long with marble walls that showed no signs of the power. Under her moccasins the floor was stone paving.

She heard steps behind her and she spun to see her friends approaching. Both were pale, but their eyes were determined. As they came up each reached out to take a hand. For long seconds they stood there savoring friendship. They had been tested and not failed.

"I saw those I loved and feared," Jerrany said quietly. "I was offered choices."

"As was I," Eleeri confirmed. "But still we stand here."

Mayrin sighed. "I was offered some wonderful things, but nothing that included Romar. And I had to lose too many I love to accept."

Eleeri freed her hands, smiling at the two. "It seems we have all made choices. Let us move on to find out what comes to us from them."

Side by side in the wide corridor, they marched forward. Eleeri knew what she had defeated, but as they walked, she wondered what her friends had faced. What had been the "wonderful choice" Mayrin had been offered? She stole a



look at her, then at Jerrany on her other side. What had the Dark offered him to betray them all? That her friends were here showed they had turned away. But curiosity rode her as they walked. She grinned and thrust it away. It was none of her business and there was more to worry about than temptations refused.

Beside her, Mayrin also wondered. Into her mind seeped the memories of that time lost in the mist. One minute Jerrany had walked beside her, the next he was gone. She would have run shrieking his name but that she feared to call attention to herself. She had gripped her dagger and prayed to all those of the Light. Then the visions had begun.

Jerrany also remembered—and shivered in rage. They had threatened, but he had stood firm. But oh, gods, it had been a near thing. One more moment and he might have given up. He tightened his hold on Mayrin's hand.



16

*B*eside the river the fight roiled back and forth. The mud was tinged with red where the combatants had fallen. Of the ten men-at-arms, only six now lived to fight on. Being swifter, the mares had usually managed to fight free and move back when they were too badly hurt to remain. Of the original eighteen, only half swirled and struck with their human allies. One lay dead with rasti tearing at the bones; the others had fallen away from the battle to reel in the direction of their canyon. Had those who fought on not been too busy to notice, they would have seen that the eyes of all the mares were now the sapphire blue of a creature of Light.

In his clear, carrying voice the master-at-arms shouted an order. The mares obeyed, closing into a circle that faced outward. The men-at-arms were spaced around the group, spears striking out and down as rasti sought to break the



defense that bristled at them.

The tower tore at rasti minds to no avail. The scent of their dead, the stench of blood, had the plains hunters in a frenzy in which the urge to kill and feast predominated. The constant contact with beast minds had gripped the tower also. He would have them obey him. It was all that filled him as he speared into their minds again and again, demanding, ordering them to break off the fight.

He drew on his slave until even in the fury that possessed him he knew that the man was faltering. Yet he would not cease to use the fool. Let the lesser serve the greater. There were others to be had once he had time to turn his mind to them. The two he had seen in that one's heart, for instance. They had more strength than they knew. They would do very well, once this was done.

He attacked his servants anew, striving to force their obedience. His slave, however, had more strength left than he knew. With delicacy, Romar had successfully kept his master from turning to attack the Gray Ones he believed to be the other portion of the fight.

Romar had been able to detach just sufficient strength to open the ancient door his master feared. Within the depths of his mind he yet hoarded himself, his unconquered spirit and the last scraps of power. Help was coming, he knew, and had successfully kept that from his master also. He could feel the touch of the Light as his rescuers neared him. At first he had recognized his twin and fought down terror. Lords of Light, let her not fall into the hands of this one! And what if she fell to the traps along the way? He had not enough of his gift left to reach out against those. His rescuers must fight as they could to reach him.

But a tiny flame of hope was beginning to burn. Little by little he had sensed that they were moving steadily toward

him. Now and then he had felt the echoes of some struggle. But always they had moved on again. As they neared him, he could distinguish the spirits of the other two. His sword-brother, ah, gods, who else but Jerrany?

The other spirit, too, was known to him; had he not dreamed her down the long bitter months of captivity? He had seen her in his visions; now he recalled her to mind. She looked almost like one of his race to the eye, but the spirit that burned in her was different, born of another place. Not evil, just different. She was of the Light, that he knew in his innermost heart. He called up her face: his eyes caressed the strong planes, the storm gray of the eyes, the black spider silk of the hair that lifted around her shoulders.

There was a fierce pride and determination in those lines. The mouth was gentle, a mouth to kiss, to love, but below it a determined chin jutted. He smiled tenderly to himself. Such a chin betokened a stubbornness that would carry her onward in the face of any who might strive to halt her. Was this a characteristic of those who found the gates to his world? Others had come now and then; always they had been of a fierce spirit. Perhaps it was the spirit the gates recognized. He did not know. But the more he had seen of this one, the more his own spirit had yearned for her. In the old race desire wakes late, but at first sight of this lady it had woken truly.

Not desire of body alone, but heart's desire. He would walk with her. Learn her thoughts, her fears and delights. Wed her in honor to love all the days of his life—which might not be very long indeed, his mind added bitterly. He could feel the weakness stealing over him.

Still in the core of all that made him human he nursed the vision. His friend and his sister were coming for him, and that other. What she might be to him he knew not, but she,



too, fought her way toward him to buy his freedom at the point of a sword. He drew in, hoarding his dying strength.

Eleeri paced slowly along the passage, flanked by her friends. It appeared to stretch on forever. Mayrin halted to ease her sword belt.

“Do we go around in circles in this cursed place? Surely the tower we entered was not so large?”

Jerrany shook his head. “What is within may be greater than what is without; the power has always said this. The tower merely manifests that truth.” He stared down the passage before them. “But I do wonder, could it be that we are being led in circles deliberately? Does illusion trick us here?” He reached over to touch Eleeri’s cheek. “You marked your face before we entered. Do you still have some of that which you used?”

Her fingers flicked to her belt pouch to reappear with a nubbin of the red chalk that crumbled in cliffside streaks near the canyon. Silently she handed it to him, standing aside to watch with Mayrin as he moved forward. Carefully Jerrany drew a straight line down the center of their road. He paced on, then drew another, a break, then a third. But by now the two behind him could see.

Mayrin hissed softly and waved him back. He came running lightly.

“What is it?”

“The passage curves. It appears straight to our eyes when we stand together, but when you are well ahead, you are moving out of sight around a curve in the walls.”

“*Sa!*” His voice was quiet, but there was the triumph of a striking hawk in the hiss. “If illusion holds us, what else have we overlooked? It is a trick to lead us away from the whom we seek, but have we already passed him or does he yet lie ahead?”

Eleeri's fingers went to the pendant in her dagger sheath. She lifted it free. "Maybe Pehname can show us the way." But try as she might, there was no answer from the tiny figure.

"Maybe he must wait until we come to the heart of the tower," Jerrany commented. "We are all bound to the one we seek in some way. Let us link and think on him, build him in our minds as we know him in life."

Eleeri was unsure of the wisdom of that. "Could the use of power alert the enemy? This *is* the heart of his place."

"Perhaps, but what does it profit us to be unnoticed if we cannot also find?"

Mayrin reached out to lay a hand on each arm. "Listen, the enemy uses the Dark and power. What if . . ."

They listened, agreement growing as she spoke. Now it was she who stood forward, her hands reaching into her hair to bring forth an ornament. Eleeri studied it as her friend held it up and they clasped hands about it. It had been carved from a pale wood and from it came a faint sweet perfume—one natural to the wood itself, she judged. It was in the shape of a lizard, one whose skull seemed larger than those she had known. The eyes were tiny inset chips of some gold stone, and the tail curled under to hold a lock of hair.

"It was carved for my eighteenth nameday," Mayrin said. In this place she would not name the carver—names had too much power—but Eleeri nodded. Mayrin reached out to bring Jerrany's hands in upon the carving.

"Think on him. Build him in your minds. Set seeking upon this gift, that it hunt him out wherever he may be hidden from us."

Obediently they bent to the task she laid. This was not true power, but a sympathetic magic such as Eleeri was familiar with. So had her own people once hunted. This she could



do. She raised the memory of the man she had seen, limned his face in life's colors, sparked spirit in the deep-set eyes. She willed the eyes to meet hers, strained to reach out.

Beside her she was dimly conscious of the effort her friends made. Sweat beaded along her forehead as she strove. It felt as if she were forced back and away from the face she had built. She resisted savagely. She was losing all sense of time or place. It was as if she floated, suspended. Then there came a draining. Dimly she saw that the tiny motes of light that had cloaked her were leaving. They flowed down her arms into the lizard and it turned golden eyes on her. She staggered back weakly as Mayrin released the tiny creature.

It scurried back the way they had come as they turned hastily to follow.

“Concentrate on it. Keep his face in your minds,” Mayrin hissed softly.

They loped along, each carrying their dagger in readiness as the lizard sped down the halls. Jerrany halted abruptly.

“This isn't the passage we traveled,” he said, his voice certain. “Look.” His hand indicated a bright mural. Their eyes veered away from the scene in disgust. “Yes, it's ugly, but which of you has seen it before?”

He watched as both shook their heads. They turned to stare back the way they had come. There was no sign of an archway, no doors or turnings.

“More illusion?” Eleeri queried.

Jerrany glanced at her. “No, I think what we have now is reality. It was illusion we followed before.” A chirp from the lizard reminded them. “Best we follow our guide and discuss the nature of illusion later.” He trotted after the lizard as it scuttled away again. The women moved up to flank him as they ran. The return journey seemed endless as they wearied, but now they were certain they had never seen these halls or

passages before. The guide was slowing as they trotted along. Now they fell back to a swift walk and still it slowed.

“What’s wrong with it?” Eleeri whispered.

“Power only lasts so long. None of us is a Great One or even so very strong in the gift,” Mayrin muttered quietly as they marched after the slowing carving.

“Could we do what we did again?”

Her friend shrugged. “I don’t know. If we can’t find what we seek before the power fades, we’ll have to try.”

They fell silent, concerned eyes on the small guide. The lizard was almost at a standstill, yet it dragged itself along valiantly. Only the smooth marble of the floors allowed it to move; a rougher surface would have brought it to a straining halt. Then it stopped. Mayrin bit back a cry of despair. Her eyes blurred. Through her distress she felt Eleeri’s grip tighten.

“No, Mayrin, look!”

Mayrin dashed a hand across her eyes and glanced up. In its last gasp the lizard had turned to rear up against a wall. It was the carved ornament once more, but still it leaned forward as if pressing into the stone.

Jerrany was running his hands over the chill blocks. “I can’t find any entrance.”

Six hands patted, feeling along the lines of the wall stones. There was no door to be seen or felt. But their guide had not halted in midcorridor as it would have had it simply lost power. There had to be an entrance here. They would not cease to search until it was found.

Finally Eleeri stepped back. Illusions had taken them before. Perhaps now the pendant would consent to aid. She held it against the wall that blocked their path. Again came the draining, but this time the specks outlined an oblong on the stones. A patch of them clustered at shoulder height.

Moved by an impulse, Eleeri placed her hand over them. There was a slow shuddering and the stones moved under her fingers. With a gasp of triumph, Jerrany seized the edge revealed and forced it further open.

They slipped through. Behind them the door shut silently and they gulped as they found it would not open again.

It was Mayrin who shook off her fear. "We wanted to go this way. Best we do."

Eleeri lifted her pendant. "Pehname, please, is there something you can do to help us?"

From the eyes of the figure, light sprang. It touched the walls that imprisoned them, waking runes to light. They were in a cursive script unknown to any of the trio, but they served to show the way.

"Let's hurry. We don't know how long this will last," Eleeri commented as she walked swiftly along the narrow passage. In single file they moved, watching all around as they traveled. Within her Eleeri felt a growing certainty that they neared their goal at last. Sometimes she felt as if they had been within this damned tower forever. If she escaped safely, she'd not be going back in, that was for sure.

The runes ended in another wall, but this time the door was visible. Eleeri slapped her hand against a finger-worn place. That had to be how to open it. Burning pain shot up her arm. She yelped, wrenching her hand away. Blood stained the wall as the door opened silently. Did anyone who opened the dratted thing have to pay like that? she wondered. Not that it mattered. The door was open and it seemed to have caused her no real damage. She sucked the small wound and scowled as her friends joined her on the other side.

Now there was light. Not a great deal, but sufficient to see that they trod a way deep in ancient dust. Jerrany gasped as they rounded a bend and a slitted window appeared.

They jostled to gaze out, before Mayrin spoke, amazement in her voice.

“Look at the sun. It’s barely moved.”

“Time,” Jerrany said softly. “Time is different in the tower. I wondered how it was that our fighters still held its attention. But see the sun: less than an hour has passed since we entered. Perhaps only half of that. Our men swore to hold for at least an hour, two if they could. There is time yet for us to seek and find if we be swift. Come.” He studied the passage through which they moved, then pointed. “That way leads into the center, surely. This one seems to curve around, but that cuts at right-angles inward. Let us try it?”

The women nodded consent and the three ducked through into the smaller narrowed corridor. Here the light dimmed once more, but with hope they pressed on. Eleeri halted them at the next turning. Her certainty grew.

“This way.”

She was hurrying, her feet stirring up to knee level the clouds of dust which still layered the ancient stones. It was certain that no one else had traversed these ways for centuries, she thought. Romar had said she would be guided by ways unknown to the tower inhabitant. How much had he to do with this? Or had it been the aid of the ancient one who had searched her mind in the cavern below? She smiled. What did that matter, so long as she found Mayrin’s brother? There was a time to ask questions, and a time to accept without asking and do, not talk. She slowed as a hiss came from Jerrany, who led.

“Another door here, and there’s something beyond. I can hear sounds.” Eleeri felt an insistent tugging at her waist. She slipped the pendant from her dagger sheath, placing it gently upright on the floor, then stood back.

“What are you doing?”



“I think it’s time for him to help,” she hissed back. Mist pooled upward from the floor, then fell away again. In its place Pehnane stood. Eleeri stifled a nervous giggle. He looked faintly ridiculous cramped into this narrow corridor. With his gleaming flanks brushing the walls, head lowered so as not to strike the roof, hooves lifting delicately out of the dust, he met her eyes, sharing her amusement.

A lift of his nose signaled them toward the door. Jerrany touched it cautiously, listening. In turn the others came forward to lay an ear to the thin stone. Jerrany waved them back to gather around the bend, heads together.

“Those aren’t voices. Not human, anyhow.” He turned to look up at the stallion, who loomed over him. “Can you tell us anything?”

The mind-voice rolled like thunder. *It is the last one to serve he who dwells here. It is my ancient enemy. Yours is the task to face he who dwells here, to free his slaves. Mine is the facing of this servant and his final defeat. Long have I waited. Let me go now so that I may rejoin my kin-friends and be at peace.*

Within the corridor they squeezed into position. Jerrany reached around, taking hold of the door and flattening himself against the walls as he did so. The door opened silently and the stallion sprang past him. There was a squeaking as small forms scurried desperately away.

“Thas,” Jerrany identified them in disgust. With the arrival of the Keplian, the lights in the room beyond had flared brighter. Now the inhabitants fled to escape that painful light. Eleeri stared at the frantic forms as they ran to and fro. Mayrin had told her of these earth burrowers, but the reality was far stranger than she had imagined. The last of them found sanctuary from the light, vanishing into a wall which had sprung open under their beating. Behind they left a



vast, vaulted space.

Only two figures remained. Keplian fronted Keplian, stallion faced stallion. But the eyes of one glowed the blue that was power of Light, the other rolled eyes of crimson fire. Jerrany and Mayrin would have stayed to watch, to encourage Light's champion, but Eleeri seized them in a hard grip.

"Such a fight may attract attention. If the tower turns to see one enemy within, will it not look for others? Let us seek quickly while there is yet time."

Still she was the last to turn away, hearing the voice in her mind. *Seek, far-kin, and may your fortune be all good. Where I go they will remember the daughter of their blood.*

She ran then, to escape the feeling that she deserted a friend.

At the river the master-at-arms gathered his men. None were unwounded, but they were prepared to fight on. He studied the sky and frowned. His lord had hoped some sign would show when the tower was failing. His men and the mares would fight a little longer, but to continue much beyond this time was to die. Still, now might be the time to try a few wiles.

He called orders as the Keplians fell back. They made a running battle of it, with his men spreading out to harass the outliers. Twice they jumped crevices in the earth; each time rasti were lost within.

In the hall within the tower another battle raged. Both power and ordinary strength contended here. Keplian stallion reared high, screaming fury at Keplian stallion. Power blazed and seared in the air between them. They were evenly matched on that level. Well, then, they would fight in the ancient way. They leaped forward, heads snaking out to



rend and tear. Hooves hammered in body blows. Pehnane's teeth drew blood as they tore through an ear. In reply his opponent squealed, striking with razored forefeet. Glowing crimson blood trickled from the savaged ear. Blue fire flowed from a hoof-gashed shoulder.

They came together exchanging kicks in turn, then broke apart once more. Now the enemy seized Pehnane's throat, but before he could clamp down, a pawing hoof thrust hurled him back. Like maddened wrestlers, they met in the hall center. Rising, sinking, grabbing for holds only to lose them, leaving bloody fire in the wake of teeth and hooves. Twice the enemy landed blows to the rear flanks of his opponent, high on the kidneys where a sufficient strike could cripple. But each time Pehnane swerved, just a little, and the full power failed to lash home. The enemy's blood pulsed fire as it flowed down the forelegs. He was weakening and he knew it.

Both stallions spun rearing, seeking for the throat grip. They failed and landed back on their hooves again, lashing out viciously. Blue fire laced Pehnane's chest; he, too, was weakening, but there was no fear in his sapphire eyes. It was for this he had remained: to face the one who had chosen Dark power and a Dark master. He fainted, falling back in an illusion of weakness. The Dark stallion shrieked triumph, rising on his hind legs to crash home the death blow. Pehnane shied sideways and as his enemy came down off balance, the blue-laced head shot out. Teeth met in the jugular, crunched down with all the strength left to him.

Convulsively the enemy attempted to rear. He failed as his legs unlocked. Light faded from the crimson eyes as he sank to the stone. Hatred shone in his dying glare. His choice had been made very long ago; there would be no last-minute repentance.



Pehnane reared, standing almost straight on quivering hind legs. Within his mind a call resounded, to be answered as light flowed about him, silver deepening into gold as the air sliced open onto a sunlit sky. Those he loved best waited for him as he gathered his failing strength to reel forward. Hands greeted him. Behind him the gate slammed shut, light faded from the hall. The body of his enemy drifted up as a coil of blackened smoke and was gone. But in another place friends greeted friends in gladness. A task was completed.

The tower shuddered as the servant died. Blue light ran in power around the rooftop. Even from so far away as the river it could be seen. The master-at-arms reined his horse back from the blood-crazed rasti.

His voice rose up. "Break off, break off."

They fell back, leaving a gap between themselves and the beasts they fought. He waved toward the direction of the tower.

"A sign, our job is done. Let us lead these away from our wounded." He called orders as the injured who could no longer fight started up the slope. The rasti snarled low in many throats. They would not be cheated of their prey.

But far away like a spider spinning its web, the Dark knew danger. It ceased to attack the fools who fought against orders. With that withdrawal the beasts faltered. Part of their madness had been caused by the assault on their minds. With that gone, they gave back a little. Step by step, the master-at-arms withdrew his fighters, making no overquick or clumsy move to spur the rasti into automatic attack. Then the animals began to turn away, hunching their fluid way back to their burrows.

Hapwold moved his warriors more swiftly. The Keplian mares split away from the riders, moving off toward the trail to their home. Two would never return, nor would the four



men who had fallen. But they had had blood for their going, a river of it. A warrior asked no more.

They passed over the river high up on the lower hills. There they camped, dressing each other's wounds while water boiled and stew simmered.

The mares climbed their trail painfully. But the canyon welcomed them back as did their foals and friends. Only two of the babies stood bereft, whimpering their sorrow and loneliness. Other mares gathered them in. At the entrance, runes shifted into light. Full circle was achieved, and Keplian mares and foals stared at each other, wonder in bright blue eyes.

In the tower, that which dwelled within gathered its power. Enemies were inside. They had murdered its servant. But they should not prevail.

Eleeri ran up a flight of steps to face a great bronze door wrought with many panels. Each held figures which seemed to move slowly, but she had no time for wonders. Her hands leaped out to fling open the last barricade. Her friends stood shoulder to shoulder as she trod boldly in over the stone sill. A circle of chairs filled the far side of the room. Within them lolled six figures. One by one each raised its head to meet the eyes of those who stood in the doorway. Six Romars leaned forward, hope brightening their faces.



17

*E*leeri halted, eyes wide in sudden fury. Even now, even at the last, the enemy would test them. She considered. Behind her Jerrany stirred.

“What can we use to show the truth?”

“Me,” his wife snapped. “Romar’s my brother. I’ll know which is the true man.”

Eleeri nodded. “But what if they all are?” she questioned slowly. “Would it not be a fine trick to divide his spirit among them?”

That thought held them motionless in the doorway. If Eleeri was right, then to slay any of the Romars would be to lose a portion of all that made him human.

What could help them now? Eleeri listed the possibilities in her mind. The clay presently making an uncomfortable lump at her belt was to be used—but not yet. In the keep she had realized its capabilities. In his solitude Cynan had delved deep into some of the more arcane aids to magic, and passed



them along to his eager pupil. But the clay was for later, as was the crystal from the Lady of the Green Silences. But there remained the gift of Light.

She turned to study Mayrin and Jerrany. Could they now use the Light they had been given? She spoke to her friends quietly, their faces brightening as they listened. Then it was Mayrin who marched forward. She put out her hands to clasp those of the first figure in line. Around those clasped hands flared a glow.

The figure keened its agony, dissolving into a heap of thick clay dust. Mayrin moved on to the second as it shrank back. To no avail. She seized its hands in turn so that it shrieked and crumbled, even as the light flamed about them. Then the third—but then Eleeri called her back. With that last the flare of light had been almost gone. To risk a fourth might be dangerous. It was Jerrany's turn and he strode to the fourth figure, hands leaping out to seize as light flamed once more.

The figure crumbled, as did the fifth and sixth. The friends stared at each other over the heaps of clay dust.

“He wasn't any of them,” Mayrin wailed. “Why the illusion?”

“To keep us occupied,” Jerrany said grimly. “All we've seen so far has been illusion, using power drained from Romar, I suspect. If this Dark lord wastes too much, he may have none of his own. Perhaps he's delaying us, hoping to snare us in illusion or to escape before we reach Romar.” His face set hard, lips thinning purposefully. “Let us go!”

They went quickly now, trotting down the passage. Behind them the clay dust stirred into nothingness. Eleeri's guess had been right. Only evil had been affected by the touch of Light. Had Romar's spirit been within any of the

bodies, it would simply have been freed to return to his true body. But now the power given them by her far-kin in the tower deeps was exhausted.

Eleeri and Mayrin followed Jerrany. He had had enough of these childish games. Somewhere within this place his shield-brother was being tormented, used, and drained. He would find him, free him, return with him to their home, and that which dwelled here. His teeth showed in a savage grin; whatever the outcome, the dweller in Darkness was going to regret all this.

Behind him Mayrin gasped. "Wait, wait!"

He slowed so she might catch up. "Jerrany, Eleeri thinks we are being drawn again in the wrong direction."

Rage flooded him. That female, always she interfered. If it hadn't been for her example, Mayrin might not have insisted on coming. It was Eleeri who had risked his wife, Eleeri who had tricked them here to where evil might take them. Eleeri . . . His face twisted into terrible lines of hatred and he sprang. But the woman had seen the growing madness in the eyes that watched her as he halted. She sprang back, dagger flicking from the sheath. He stumbled and before he could recover, the blade touched flat across his forehead.

Jerrany groaned as pain slashed through his mind. Then his eyes cleared. "What have I done? Oh, gods, Eleeri, I'm sorry."

She held out the silver dagger. Now it glowed, a soft luminous light that soothed and comforted.

"Take this into your hand and pray to the Light."

He took out his own dagger as she spoke, taking hers in his left hand. Then he raised them to lay along his temples. The points came together to form two sides of a triangle, and as his eyes shut, light leaped from the juncture. Mayrin kept silence until his eyes opened again. Then she waved to



where a thin blade of light stretched before them.

“I think you are forgiven.”

“A signal?” He glanced shamefacedly at Eleeri. “I beg your forgiveness. I was angry at what this thing has done to my shield-brother. With that anger it seems I gave a foothold to evil. It then twisted my mind so that it seemed it was you I should be angry at.”

Eleeri had been angered at his attack, but she had wit enough to understand. This was another attempt by their enemy to divide their strength. If she had no forgiveness, then it would be she who weakened them now.

She stretched out a hand, taking his fingers in a gentle clasp. “I understand that; it was not your fault. We are all here to free one we care about.” His eyes searched hers and narrowed in sudden interest. He said nothing, but she could see he wondered. Her head came up a little in pride. If she had begun to care for Romar, what was that to him?

She hid a smile. *Begun to care* was one way to put it. In truth, she would have Romar free of the tower or die in the attempt. That was more than mere caring, but now was not the time to speak of it. Let him be won free first, then let her find he felt the same way. After that, they could speak of a future.

The beam of light showed the way for a short space before it faded. An attempt to revive it failed. They clustered in the center of the passage before Mayrin took out her own weapon. “We didn’t use this one. Maybe it can help.” She raised it to her forehead, holding the picture of her brother strongly. The light was clear but faint. Still, once more they had a guide.

This time they ran. With the extra speed, faint as the light was, they gained distance. When it finally vanished, they were at a junction in the passages.



“Great, *now* where?” Eleeri muttered to herself.

She peered down both tunnels. “Let’s try something else.” She clasped one of their hands in each of her own. “Join your free hands. Now think of Romar. Try to throw out a rope and tie it to him.”

They stood there, faces white and strained as they built the picture. At last Romar stood before them. To Eleeri’s knowledge this was the true Romar. Not the casual smiling man his sister remembered, nor the warrior Jerrany would have called to mind. This figure was pale of face, lines of pain and weariness showed clear. The clothes were worn and stained and she could feel the disgust that their dirt-thickened feel brought to him.

Hollow eyes turned in shadowed sockets to seek her. Her hands moved in a dance of signs. “Courage. Strength. Wait, help comes.” He nodded and was gone, but the feeling of a link remained. They opened eyes on the chill stone of the passage and wordlessly all turned to face the left-hand fork.

“It grows dark down there. How do we see?”

“Wait until we can’t; then we’ll think of something,” Mayrin replied tensely.

Eleeri had walked over to a nearby door. She slid it open sufficiently to peer within. Then she called them quietly.

“There’s old furniture in here. If we take as much as we can carry, we’ll have light.”

They entered cautiously to tear apart the smaller pieces. Legs from some of the chairs would do very well. Mayrin dragged down an ancient tapestry to rip into strips. These she wound about the head of each length of wood. They would catch flame more easily and their fire would in turn set the wood to flaring.

With a bundle of the makeshift torches under their arms,



they left the silent room. Ahead the passage darkened, but with fire they could see their way. Pausing only long enough to light the first torch, they tramped on into the dark, hands linked firmly. Jerrany led until the first torch was burning low. Then Mayrin's was lit and she led in turn. At the tail of the small line, Eleeri held out a sword in her free hand. She just hoped there would be enough torches to take them through the dark. It was a gamble. If they went forward until half were gone, then they would either have to turn back or risk being left in lightlessness.

She breathed in deeply. She would not turn back even if she must go on alone. One by one the torches burned until half their number were gone. The stubs were then impaled on a dagger point to be burned, lighting a little farther.

Silently Mayrin took out the next of her torches and moved into the lead. There was no discussion; all had made their decision as they walked. There was to be no retreat. Four torches remained when Eleeri muttered a swift warning.

"Something moves ahead. Mayrin, set your back against the wall and hold the torch aloft so we have light. Jerrany, let you and I flank her with swords and daggers."

They fell into the formation as something huge hulked at the edge of the light. It remained there as they stood facing the sound of its breathing. The torch burned slowly, the dark pressed forward, as the beast loomed in the shadows. Minutes passed, and they waited. A slow conviction grew in Eleeri as they guarded. This, too, was part of a plan, a Dark plan.

She began to speak even as Jerrany, too, made to do so.

"We're being—"

"This is a trick!"

"Yes." Mayrin, too, had seen what was occurring. "That thing is here to make us waste time and our torches." She



whirled the torch so that the flame leaped up. "Get out of our way, evil one." She lit a second torch and waved them in her hands, marching confidently forward. The creature slunk back before the searing blaze. Swords flashed out on either side of her as she moved faster. Now she was trotting, the flames streaming back in the wind of her pace. With a final snarl of frustration, the beast loped into a side tunnel and was gone.

They rounded a sharp bend and ahead a faint glow showed. Jerrany reached to take one of the torches, dashing it out against the floor.

"Look, that's light ahead."

Their pace picked up again as the light grew. A second bend, and they came out into a great hall. Within, candles burned while windows were muffled in heavy soft folds of black cloth. Mayrin seized a curtain and flung it backward. Through the window sunlight streamed, touching them all with a golden warmth. The candles smoked into nothingness as a scream of angry pain rang through the hall. Eleeri smiled wickedly.

"I get the feeling that something here doesn't like the sun. Let's let a bit more light in and see how it likes that."

They ran like children from window to window. At each they flung back the heavy cloth, laughing at each shriek of fury that greeted the light. Not until all windows were free of the muffling fabric did they desist.

Jerrany stood panting in the middle of the floor. A thought struck him so that he walked quietly back through the door through which they had entered. He stared down the passage. All was light; the dark had gone. Interesting. It seemed that the great hall here might control other places within this tower. Voices brought him back to where his wife and his friend ran to stare out each window in turn.



“Come and look at this, Jerrany.”

He did so. All the views were utterly strange, but a memory stirred. One looked like the place an opened door had shown them earlier. He said so. Eleeri nodded; she, too, recalled the odd desolate scene they had glanced at briefly. These must be some of the gates to other worlds.

Then she stretched. Her muscles felt strained, her legs weary with all this walking, but they had to continue. It could be more dangerous to waste time resting here. They moved on, but not before breaking more chairs into a further supply of torches. Behind them they left the curtains wide open and tied back. If Jerrany’s belief was right, it could ensure them light in the passages to come.

It seemed that his guess was right. There was no darkness as they traversed the seemingly endless corridors ahead. And all the time the linkage they had created tightened.

Finally Mayrin halted. “I can feel Romar very close now.”

“Spread out,” Jerrany ordered softly. “We move up one by one. If there is danger, best it reach only one of us.” He unsheathed his sword silently. “I take the lead, then Eleeri, then you.” Before there could be any protest, he was in motion, slipping on silent feet toward the door that was appearing in sight around a shallow bend. It was huge, a great double leafing of carved and inlaid wood. On it tiny figures danced, hunted, loved, and jested with each other.

One of them caught Eleeri’s eye. The tiny face was alive with curiosity as it watched her. A mad impulse seized her. She grinned, putting a finger to her lips. It smiled and a finger went up in turn as the tiny head nodded.

Jerrany was facing the door. They must open this, but having laid hands against the wood, he could feel it shut firmly. Perhaps a bar on the inside held it against them? He lifted his sword and Eleeri saw all the tiny figures fall back in



alarm. Her hand shot out to clutch at his arm, pulling him backward.

“No. Let me try something.”

He nodded, stepping back. Her hands went up to trace runes: the ancient signs of warn and guard that barred her own canyon keep. The miniature people clustered together, then broke apart, eyes watchful, seeming to be waiting as they stared at her friends.

“Make your own hold signs,” Eleeri suggested. Mayrin did so, followed by Jerrany. The tiny forms conferred, then the girl who had smiled at Eleeri stepped out to face them. Her hands came up and slowly, deliberately, her fingers wove the signs to match, but she did not cease there. Her hands lifted again. Some of those with her might have stopped her then, but others of their number held them back.

Once, twice, thrice, she drew the ancient runes of opening. At a signal the three before her repeated them. Again and again the repeat. Then a last time—and as Eleeri’s hands moved for the ninth time, she felt power gather and break like a wave against the doors. The doors thinned, fading into a glowing blue smoke—and as they vanished, she saw the tiny figure throw up a hand in farewell.

From the actions she had seen, the tiny people had deliberately allowed them passage—and died to do so. Cold with anger at the sacrifice, she hurled herself forward. From a littered desk a form spun, eyes wide with horrified astonishment at her entrance. She wasted no time in staring, but attacked, the knife flashing as it slashed downward. The creature died, croaking horribly as one arm tried to stave off death.

From another door more of them swarmed into the fight. Eleeri shuddered. They were an unholy amalgam of toad and human, but, she reflected as she fought, horrible as they



might appear, they were no warriors. They died too easily. Beside her Jerrany and Mayrin fought, swords cleaving the enemy until the last of them had fallen. Without pause, Eleeri made for the door from where these guardians had come. She wrenched it open, hurling herself through and to one side.

Jerrany followed, swinging to the right, sword at the ready. A man confronted them now. A man. But not quite a man, for his eyes glowed red fire in the handsome face, his proportions somehow no longer quite those of humanity. He was well enough looking, Eleeri thought. Short in stature, no more than five and a half feet at most, but well-muscled, and his movements as he leaned forward were supple. His face could have been called handsome, if one ignored the fleshy lips, the bland coldness in the eyes. Already lines of petulance were starting to show, around the mouth. It was the face of one who is usually secure in his own esteem, and self-indulgent to his own whims and appetites.

He was clad in a smooth silken material, designed and cut to show his lithe strength, and open almost to the waist in front. Eleeri could not quite say what was wrong with his shape; perhaps the arms were a little too long, the legs a touch too short. All she knew was that as he stood there summing them up even as they stared back, he reminded her of nothing so much as stepping in something squishy in the dark. She had an urge to make a disgusted sound and step back and away. His over-red lips parted.

“Oh, but you have done so well, come so far—for nothing. Did you think I would give back the one you seek at a mere word?” His face shaped a smug leer. “Yet if one of you would come to me willingly I might be generous. I might be . . . *very* generous.” He waited, but none of them spoke. “No? Well, then you are uninvited guests. Leave and perhaps



I will not call the Dark against you.”

“We have met the Dark. We are here,” Mayrin said briefly.

“I could offer you other choices—”

“Those, too, we have seen. We have rejected them,” Mayrin returned.

“I could kill the one you seek. Where, then, do you profit?”

“In death he would be free. What then of your own use of him?”

His face twisted in rage. “Then fight and lose, pawns of Light.” His hands came together in a single echoing clap that gathered sound to roll like thunder about the room. Abruptly they were elsewhere.

Their hands shot out to grasp. Fingers linked as they swung into battle formation back to back, swords out. Ever afterward Eleeri was unsure if it was their eyes that adapted to the shadowlands or light came to them from some source. But gradually they could see farther and farther although all the land they saw was in the grays of shade and shadow.

“Where are we?” Mayrin’s voice trembled a little.

Jerrany shrugged. “I do not know. Maybe someplace of the Dark lord’s devising. Perhaps a real world. But I recall once hearing a wise one from Lormt. He told a tale of a shadow world which is half in our world and half in nothingness. Those who are whole can return from it. Those who are not are refused passage. Would that not be a safe place to hold Romar’s spirit captive? He would be trapped here, unable to leave, unable to pass the boundary to return to where his body lies.”

The two women looked at each other, then nodded. Mayrin spoke angrily. “No wonder he sent us here. But what do we do?”



Eleeri grinned, a smile that was suddenly dangerous. "He thinks it a joke. We're supposed to find Romar, perhaps free him, then try to leave. When Romar can't, that so-called lord will find it very amusing, I've no doubt."

"Then why are you smiling?" Jerrany was puzzled.

Eleeri's fingers went up to touch the lump above her belt. Cynan had taught her spells and all the time she had lived in Escore her gifts had grown in strength. In this trial of her abilities everything she had ever known and all the power she had slowly gained was blending into a whole.

"Let us find Romar," she said quietly. "I may have something which will help us win him free of this shadowland."

She waved aside their queries. "Let us find him first if we can. Free him, then return here. Time enough then to ask questions."

Jerrany nodded. "Let us decide on a direction. Does the mind-rope still bind us to Romar?"

There was a brief silence as they tested. The feel of the link held yet. Jerrany led off, heading for a low range of hills deep in shadow. To either side the women moved out a pace behind him, eyes searching the terrain as they trotted. A soft whimpering caught their attention as they passed a clump of tangled, viciously thorned brambles. Mayrin turned to follow the sound. Then she fell to her knees.

"Look, he's caught." Her hands went out to aid, but Eleeri hauled her abruptly backward.

"Hold on. It may be some kind of trap."

She drew her dagger, the silver shining in the shadowlight. With it she carefully moved the brambles aside until the figure could crawl free. Then she offered the blade.

"If you are not evil, touch this."

It did so, straightening abruptly into a man only a little

less tall than they. He bowed low.

“I acknowledge a debt to Light. May I aid you?”

They studied him. With his touch on the silver blade, he had grown. He was male, but not quite human. His eyes were round and his ears long, with what looked like tufts of furry feathers atop them. His hands were three-fingered and stubby.

Jerrany stirred. “Are you born to this land?”

“I am. But neither I nor this place are of the Dark. Here both Dark and Light may abide.” He frowned. “Though we are never pleased when those who follow either side strongly intrude. We prefer peace.”

Mayrin nodded. “Why were you in the brambles?”

“Because a power is meddling here again.” His voice was soft and angry. “I was seized and entangled so that I might entangle you. But I do not choose to do this. You have seen I could touch silver. I am not of the Dark, nor do I choose to be used by it. If you will trust me, I will lead you to the one you seek. The journey on foot would be great, but I can shorten it to a breath.” He waited.

Mayrin took a deep breath. Before either could prevent it, she had taken a step forward, laying her hand in his.

“It is my brother who is captive. I trust you to take us to him, aid us to free him or at the least cause us no hindrance.”

The male smiled up at her. His hands went out to touch theirs; they gripped his tightly. There was a second of disorientation, a clap of air, and they stood on the shores of a black lake. The inky water rippled toward their feet.

“Which way now?” Jerrany was scanning the lakeshore.

A stubby hand rose to point. They trudged forward through loose black sand to where a small black marble building reared above the low slope.

Jerrany hooked his dagger through the door latch,



dragging at the weight of tightly shut wood. It yielded slowly.

Within they could see a figure sitting motionless in a great carven chair. It was bound in heavy loops of chain, but the face as it turned to them was that of Romar. But not the once-elegant, gaily clad sword-brother Jerrany had known. Nor the joyous laughing brother Mayrin remembered. It was to Eleeri he looked the most familiar as she met the exhausted enduring eyes. Resolutely she trod forward, taking his chill hands in hers.

“Well met, Romar. We have come to take you home.”

His hands closed on hers and the sudden light in his eyes lit her heart. At first she had pitied him for his slavery. Then she had grown to care for him as a friend. And finally she had known that without this man her life might be incomplete. She breathed in the air of this place. She would have him free of here or die trying. She moved aside as Mayrin and Jerrany thrust past to clasp hands with Romar. Mayrin’s face was calm, but slow tears trickled down her cheeks. The first step was accomplished. That which was lost was now found.



18

*M*ayrin was fumbling at the chains. “I can’t see any locks. How are they sealed?”

Jerrany had picked up a link and was following it around his friend. He circled, circled again, traced the links over an arm and around the chair. Finally he looked up at them.

“There are no locks. The chain has no end.”

“Damn!” Eleeri snarled. “They were put on; there has to be a way to take them off again.”

The prisoner smiled bitterly. “You are assuming that my master wanted to take them off. He plans to use me until all I am is gone. Then he will have no need to open the chains. I will no longer be within them.”

But Eleeri came of a people to whom there were no impossible problems, only unfound solutions. Touching the chains with the daggers brought reaction. The chains tightened until Romar gasped for breath. Lift the touch of silver and they slackened once more. At length she stood back.



“Romar, if the Dark lord created these, they must be wholly of the Dark. That is why they react to the silver and to anything else we bear that is of the Light. But they are stronger than anything we bear.”

She paused, thinking. Perhaps their guide could help them. “What is stronger than the Dark?”

“Love,” the creature answered.

“What buys freedom?”

“Sacrifice.”

She leaned forward, her eyes holding his, watching for the slightest evasion now. “What breaks chains to free a living captive?”

“That which you hold in common.”

Into her mind came the answer then, like curtains raised to show the sun. Her dagger flicked into her hand and with one sweep she opened the skin of her arm. Blood spilled over the chains. For one instant they tightened—she could almost hear the creak of Romar’s ribs. Then the black bindings withered, smoking away to nothingness. Her hands went out to lift him up as he took one tottering step forward. Then he was in her arms as his sister and sword-brother crowded about, holding them both.

His face bent to hers. “Tsukup?”

“Indeed.” She was half laughing as tears slid down her face. His finger gathered one in.

“Tears for me? No, now is no time to weep.” He hugged her savagely. “The three of you have done the impossible. Let us compound this and see if we cannot leave this place.”

Their guide cleared his throat. “I can return you to a certain place, should you ask it of me.”

It was Jerrany who understood that first. He straightened.



“We ask that you take all four of us to a gate from whence we might come to our own lands again.” Their guide held out a hand and at a touch they were gone. They stood swaying on short thin grass as their heads cleared. Ahead of them a faint mist alternately obscured and partially revealed a dull gray structure. Weathered stone blocks showed in a lichen-daubed archway.

Mayrin stepped back a pace. Her eyes met those of the guide. “I do thank you, good lord of this land. For your courage and your aid. Is there aught we could do for you in return? Your help has been far beyond any poor debt you might have owed us for releasing you from the brambles.”

He hesitated, then nodded. His eyes drifted to the dagger that gleamed softly at her belt. Mayrin freed the sheath, handing it to him, then she drew the dagger.

“This weapon of Light do I freely give to you. Use it with honor. May it serve you as it has served me.” She handed it to him, watching as it was sheathed once more. He bowed low to all of them in turn, then he was gone, loping away over the gray moorland. But as he went, it seemed as if his figure changed yet again, so that they stared at each other in silence.

To Eleeri it appeared as if a coyote had turned to study her with amusement as it left. She knew not what the others might have seen, but in her heart she smiled. The trickster came in many guises, as Far Traveler had always said. But they had dealt fairly and so been treated well in turn. That was as it should be, and as all legends told.

Her friends were studying the gate. It loomed, gray and massive, forbidding above them. Through the ancient arch they could see only mist.

“Well, shall we return?” Romar’s voice was almost happy.



“We can; you cannot.” Mayrin blinked. “We were told that you are only here in spirit. It takes both spirit and body to pass the gate.”

He stared at them blankly. “Then must I remain here?”

But Eleeri’s eyes had opened wide in sudden knowledge. At last there was a purpose for the clay from the canyon keep. Quickly she ran from bush to bush, then dragged out her dagger, cutting free a piece of her tunic. It was Romar who first understood. He nodded, taking the dagger from her to cut a length of his hair and spit upon the clay.

Eleeri twisted grass into thin cord, sewing rapidly. Then she held up the figure modeled from the clay. It bore a tiny dagger rough-carved from a silver wood, and was dressed in leather tunic and breeches.

“And something from all of us,” Eleeri said as she dappled her own blood across the clay, then bound her dagger lengthwise along the cut she had given herself to free Romar. Mayrin added a long strand of her hair, Jerrany spat on the clay even as his sword-brother had done. Eleeri nodded.

She beckoned Romar. “Hold this and do not let go, no matter what may happen. Lead us, Jerrany.”

He strode through the gate, sword at the ready. Behind him Romar was flanked by the women, each fierce-eyed. Light flamed about them in a blinding aura, heat seared, cold burned. But the women’s hands remained clamped to Romar’s arms. They were battered, tossed from side to side. Their fingers ached; it was as though they were dragged time and again against their hold.

Then it was over. Three people stood swaying on a stone floor within a great hall. Above, banners stirred. Mayrin shrieked.

“Romar! Romar! He didn’t come with us.”



Eleeri stooped to take up the clay figure. “He did, you know. Now all we have to do is defeat the Dark lord. Return his spirit, which is contained in this, to his body here, and go home.” She sighed elaborately. “All in a day’s work.”

The giggles that greeted her words were a touch hysterical, but better than outcry. In her hand the clay moved. She placed it on the paving, then watched as it marched forward.

“Where’s he going?”

“In search of his body, I should think. He’d have a better tie to that than any of us.” They fell in behind at a slow walk. None of the passages they traversed were dark. Runes sparkled from the walls as they paced on. The small figure was tireless, but by now Mayrin was beginning to show her own weariness, and Jerrany and Eleeri were slowing. A glance from a window as they passed told them that time had halted in the shadowlands, but now it moved on again, albeit slower than outside the tower. By the sun they had entered this place no more than two hours ago, although days seemed to have passed. Hunger and thirst plagued them all, so that they passed dry tongues over drier lips as they walked.

The pace quickened until the tiny figure before them was running. It halted the flight at a door. Eleeri groaned.

“Not another door. What do we have to do *this* time?”

Jerrany had opened his mouth to reply when the heavy wood trembled. The door crunched open, as red-tinged light spilled from the room within.

The clay figure darted past Eleeri. She gave a yelp of protest as she followed it in—only to pull up facing a long broad desk. Leaning back in a magnificent chair, the tower’s lord glared at them. At his side Romar lolled, body and face slack. In one swift glance Eleeri saw the clay figure lurking



under the Lord's desk. She moved to the right, drawing the lord's eyes. The figure scurried forward into hiding behind the chair. Red coals met hers, holding her in their gaze.

"You trespass too greatly on my kindness, woman. It seems I must take stronger action to be rid of you and yours." He spoke a word of binding. Just inside the doorway, Mayrin and Jerrany froze into immobility. Eleeri herself felt as if her body were wrapped in chains.

She must play for time. Time in which Romar might reunite body and spirit. She yawned.

"Why waste strength on one who could be an ally, Lord? I came to this land and it is barren. I have little, who would have more. What could a mighty lord offer one who could be useful?"

His look shifted to a sudden interest. "You are not of this world. Came you through a gate?"

"Yes."

He nodded, leaning back thoughtfully. "That explains why you have been hard to take, woman. Your thoughts do not follow quite the same paths. Your gods are different, your beliefs strange. But I am powerful. Do not think to challenge me."

"I do not. Not yet . . ." she added under her breath. "I merely ask what such a one as I could be worth to you."

He deliberated. From the corner of her eye Eleeri could see the mannequin climbing Romar's chair. A strange feeling distracted her then, something familiar. She kept her face blank. Somewhere within these walls friends came to their aid. The sense of knowing grew until she could recognize it.

By now the Dark lord was deep in his considerations. This woman would be most useful to him. With her power, his plans could leap forward. She could not be trusted, but



then it appeared she held some value to these with her. He held them motionless, could slay them if he wished. A promise of their safety might bend her to his will. If not, he had other powers.

Eleeri shifted her head a fraction. Jerrany was held still by the Dark lord's power, but his eyes met hers and swiveled toward the door. So he, too, felt the approach of those they knew. Her eyes shifted back to the chair where Romar lolled. The mannequin came briefly into sight as it reached the top of the chair's back. It slid into hiding behind the body's cloak collar. Good. Now if only they could distract the tower's master for a few vital seconds, they might have something of a chance.

Outside, hooves thudded along paved floors, nearing the doors. Eleeri studied the Dark one. He had made a simple error with her. Even though he himself had said she was different, and although he had seen his powers did not hold her so well, he had still not seen where that might take her.

Her mind focused, tightened into a narrow beam directed straight at her friends. **Hold! Until I give the word.** The sounds outside the door ceased. Sunk deep in greedy thought, the one before her had noticed nothing. Not yet an adept, flawed by pride and vanity, it did not occur to him any could withstand his commands. Finally he lifted his head to stare at her.

She moved her arm, drawing his attention. Blood! She was injured. He could draw on that to bind her now, at once. There was no need to offer her any foolish promises. He swelled in pride as he gathered his strength.

He remembered the day he had stood in the canyon. He had endeavored to use the remnants of power left there and it had backlashed, destroying him. Only his body had died.



But it had taken many generations before a wandering hunter had come within reach and he had gained enough strength to take over the man's body as host for his unhoused spirit. But all the time he had waited, he had grown in bitterness and hatred. Once he had been an adept, then a Dark adept. Then no more than a bodiless spirit howling in the wind. With his new body came growing power—and growing viciousness. But he refused to understand the lesson he should have learned from his past. Still more, he refused to see that his power was only a shadow of what it once had been.

He faced Eleeri, and his mind whispered warnings. He flung them off. What! Was he who had dueled other adepts to fear some wandering outworlder from an unknown people? He would take her spirit, break it to his will. Use her power to augment his own. Her friends would be useful to replenish his strength as well. They could have no ability to match his. They'd returned to him empty-handed; his slave remained chained.

He eyed Eleeri thoughtfully. There was something about her. Some vague familiarity. Then he snorted silently. What of it? She was nothing; they were all nothing. He'd regained a body, regained his own tower. Now they would pay. He flung back his head, laughing openly. Pride roared through him. He was master here. Let the insignificant ones bow to him—before he laid his power on them to compel. His eyes met hers and again the odd familiar feeling stirred. He stared angrily at the three.

Jerrany strained to move; Mayrin beside him struggled and failed even as he. From the corner of her eye Eleeri saw and understood. This task was hers. Her far-kin had opened the path to her; perhaps this was why. The Dark lord was not

able to hold her entirely. This last act which would seal her heart and spirit to the land she had grown to love. She concentrated. Her foot slid across the floor.

Seated behind the desk, the Dark one noticed nothing at first. It was not until she had advanced several feet that he saw she moved. But even as he would have laid another spell on her, Eleeri, too, acted.

Now!

Hooves crashed against the door as four Keplian heads appeared briefly. The door sprang open a little, then slammed closed in spelled obedience. The Dark one jumped slightly, covering the movement by leaning forward.

“You have friends. They won’t help you. They will merely provide me with more power when I take them.” Hooves slammed solidly into the heavy wood, distracting him. He frowned, bringing his hands up to weave a spell. He’d make the door impregnable. Then he could deal with these inside first. After that, he would go out in his wrath to show those other fools what it meant to storm the tower of a Dark lord.

Eleeri felt his spell against her fade. Not much, just enough to allow her speech now. Under her breath she began to chant. From somewhere in the depths of memory she recalled the words. A plea to the gods to grant strength to a warrior who confronted the Dark forces.

“Earth Mother, aid your daughter. Sky Father, help a warrior.

“Ka-dih, speed my arrows, let my bow not break in my hands.”

She strained to break the power that held her captive. Blood pounded in her head—becoming the drums of starlight. Within that light she could see those who watched. Warriors, black eyes gleaming from where they sat proud



horses. Warriors who nodded to her in recognition, war shields and lances upraised to acknowledge another of their blood. Her eyes widened at the salute. The starlight drums rolled louder as deep within she knew pride. Those who were gone returned to account her as child of their blood, true-born Warrior of the Tshoah.

Louder spoke the drums, and louder yet until her head rang, her body swayed to the raging beat of blood and drums. Deeper in her mind than she could ever have recalled consciously, a door slid open. From behind the barrier, words flowed, no ritual chant but one that built on she herself and all she was, and thus its power was greater.

*“With the thunder I ride,
daughter to Ka-dih, child of Tshoah am I.
Walker on strange roads,
kin to a sister, four-footed, great of heart.
I do not bow to the rule of another.
Let Ka-dih look upon his daughter with favor.
I do not halt at another’s bidding.”*

Her feet lifted a little as she swayed, stamping lightly to the surging rhythm. She allowed them to carry her forward a fraction with each stamp of a foot. Strength seemed to trickle into her with each tiny movement forward.

The Tower’s owner was layering the door with spells against the slamming hooves which threatened to smash the ancient wood. His words bound splinters together, froze hinges, jammed locks. Eleeri’s chanting grew louder as she called on the gods of her blood. She felt the answer as power poured into her. For a fleeting moment she knew the fierce pride of those who had ridden the plains, who had been



known to all as Tshoah, the enemy people.

Her head came up as her chant grew. The man spelling busily broke off his efforts. His attention slammed back to her as he shouted a word. Eleeri's voice slowed, but she forced herself to speak. It picked up speed. Now she moved forward, sword wavering in her hand. Despite further spells, her grip remained firm. The Dark one flung in all his power to hold her motionless. He failed. She slowed, but still she came on, his death glinting in her storm-gray eyes. Panicked at last, he lashed out at the wound on her arm. He would drain her blood; that would end this farce. She would learn what it was to confront a superior.

But Eleeri had bound her silver dagger over the injury as she left the shadowlands. On that the Dark one inadvertently drew, so that for seconds he convulsed in agony, silver's spirit invading his mind. He cried out, concentration quailing, and as it did so, the clay mannikin leaped out from the chair.

The tiny body powdered against the stone flooring. From it Romar's spirit rose up, entering his body as it lay flaccid against the carved wood. He remained still. He must take all the time he could to become used to it again. To allow strength to flow back into the once-empty shell. His eyes swiveled downward and his lips curved in the shadow of a grim smile.

About him yet he wore his sword belt with scabbarded sword in place. So, the evil one had been amused to allow this empty body to retain the trappings of its warriorhood. Well enough, that carelessness might come to destruction if Romar had his way—and time enough to recover. He relaxed. *If there is nothing you can do, do nothing. Fretting wastes strength*, or so his arms master had always taught him. He would wait. Hooves still struck at the door so that again and again it shuddered, booming hollowly. The very noise was



infuriating the tower's master. So, too, was this female who dared to move against him. Nor did all his shouted words of power halt her snail's progress.

He moved back unconsciously, her grimness making him nervous. It was impossible she could reach him, quite impossible. But this silent inching advance was upsetting, as was that thrice-damned noise from the door. He fed power into halting her movements, drawing more from the spell which bound her friends. They appeared frozen in terror. They would keep. It was sufficient to give them back their voices, however, and Jerrany managed to turn his head slightly toward Mayrin.

"Be ready. If they can slay him, remember the gift."

She allowed her gaze to drop down to where the faint bulge in her tunic betrayed Duhaun's crystal.

"Yes."

The increase in power had done nothing. Still chanting softly, Eleeri continued her slow advance. The room was wide, but she had covered more than half the distance. His chair grated against the stone as he shifted it backward once more. The door boomed again and again. He cursed viciously. He would stop that sound if it was the last thing he did. It offended him by its very sound, implying as it did that he was unable to enforce silence. In a fury he drew power from the spell holding Eleeri. He flung it wildly against the door. That would teach those who dared batter at the entrance when he had bade them be quiet. Silence fell at the door, but from where she stood Eleeri's chant rose again.

*"I do not halt at another's bidding.
I am Tshoah, kin to Far Traveler.
Let the gods make their choices,*



as I have made mine. I do not eat dirt at the hands of another."

She staggered a whole pace forward as the lord of the Dark Tower gaped at her. The sword length gleamed in her slender hands.

"On strange roads have I walked of my own will. I do not walk with another's feet.

I do not strike at another's word.

I am myself and my own."

The sword lashed out.

"*Ahe!*" The coup cry of her hard-riding line. The sword's point brushed the Dark one, the keen blade slicing through cloth and leather to score across the hairless chest. Blood trickled down. In shock, fury, and a sudden deadly terror, the Dark one stared at his own blood. She had injured him—she had dared! He flung himself back as the sword hummed toward him again.

He fell back still farther, frantically searching for something which might halt her creeping advance. With her gone, he could deal with those others who dared oppose him. It was only this one he feared.

The sword sliced at him once more. Again he shifted back, giving ground. The word of power came to mind then. It was risky. It might take him with it, but he had no choice. At least they'd all die with him; none should survive to count a victory. He opened his mouth to shout it in triumph—and choked. The agonizing pain in his back was more than he could bear. He choked again, his head turning sideways



to stare at the figure behind him.

Romar had risen to his full height. In two hands he had taken his unsheathed sword and driven it home. Now he slumped against the seat that had been his for too long. The Dark one glared at him in hatred and drew in a final breath. He would not die alone; he would take a revenge such as would be remembered down all the years to come. He opened his mouth to shout the word.

But even as Romar had struck, Eleeri had drawn back her blade again. It sang in flight, the tip slicing across his throat, destroying unspoken the word that might have doomed them all.

Drum thunder bellowed in her head. Somewhere beyond the room she saw the stone-headed lances toss high in salute to true-kin. Her voice lowered, deepened with triumph as she chanted the final words.

"I am myself and my own.

I am Tshoah—and thus do we serve our enemies.

I give thanks to the gods above, to Earth and Sky, to thunder.

I who am daughter give thanks to Ka-dih."

Before her the body of the Dark one spilled blood. The light of hatred had faded from his eyes, life from his body as it slipped slowly, bonelessly toward the chill floor. Across the table, her eyes met those of Romar. A faint smile moved his lips. Hers curved in answer.

Released from the spells, Mayrin moved first. Her fingers flashed to tear open the lacings of her tunic. From within she lifted the crystal sent her. Raising it above her head, she dashed it against the floor, watching as bright splinters flew.



About them the tower began to shudder. All that had been wrought by the one they had slain was failing. Only Romar knew how much that would be. It was he who seized Eleeri and his sister by the hands.

“We must leave, now and swiftly. There is a backlash of power when a master dies. Best we are gone before it builds too high.” His own strength was still small, but with the women’s aid he could stagger.

Eleeri grabbed at him. “No, look.”

Where the body of the Dark one had lain, mist was rising. A growing mist that shaped into the face of the man it had once been. His eyes flamed rage, hatred, vanity challenged and beaten. But from where the bright rainbow splinters lay, another mist arose. It wrapped the face in mist, enveloped it, closed in smaller and smaller until at last it thinned to reveal—nothing.

Romar breathed in deeply. His voice broke then. “That which was here is gone forever. The tower is cleansed. We have still to evade traps that may remain. But my master is no more.” His hand tightened on Eleeri’s. “I hail a warriorborn. I greet a friend.”

Eleeri grinned. “Save the speeches for when we *are* out.” Her head jerked around as the door boomed and splintered. Four Keplian heads poked inside.

Sister, are you going to stand and talk forever, or may we leave this accursed place? Tharna sent.

Eleeri grinned again and strode to join her friends. Behind her, Romar gaped. They had spoken of the Keplians. She told him of her belief that they had once been created to stand with humans in friendship. But never had he realized the majesty of the great beasts with their now sapphire eyes. Eleeri was hugging all four at once and checking for injuries.



She wasn't sure what that last silencing spell might have done.

Nothing, battle-sister. It simply forbade the door to make sounds when struck.

"And he wasted power for that? It killed him."

Romar chuckled. "Thus does evil often defeat itself—with a foolish indulgence. The noise maddened him so that he used power to silence it. That power used released you somewhat, and your sword in turn drove him back to mine." He reached out to take her hand. "You know my name, but as yet I do not know yours—only that you have called yourself Tsukup. Will you favor me with it?"

His eyes were warm on her so that she felt her spirits rise. This was a warrior, wise in that he gave credit to another. She had not been able to tell him all the story. He knew not as yet that they were far-kin. But for now that was not what he asked. In turn her fingers tightened on his hand.

"I am Eleeri," she said quietly. "Now let's get out of here." Laughing, he leaned on her shoulder as she guided him through the door.

"I shall look forward to a round tale later. Also the Valley of the Green Silences must hear of all that has happened. But"—his face sobered as he gripped her arm—"I know what you risked to save me. Thanks are pitiful in contrast, but they are given."

"And unnecessary."

"But spoken nonetheless," he insisted gently. "But I would share more than gratitude."

She glanced up, to meet a look that sent blood to her face. She smiled up at him then. Well, she'd wondered if she was to be the only barren one in her canyon. It now appeared this might not be so. With a light heart, she shouldered more

of his weight as they moved down the passage. There was much still to do, and perhaps in times to come, still more to be. But for now let them concentrate on escaping this trap.

Behind them, Tharna sniffed. *I scent water. Battle-sister, would it not be well to drink? The male you aid is weak from thirst.* Eleeri turned and nodded silently, gesturing the mare to search for the source. Hooves thudded lightly on marble pavement as Tharna moved to seek. Her nose poked out toward a circular spot in the blank wall.

Here.

Eleeri stepped up to lay the dagger against it. The wall seemed to writhe, then opened in a slow twisting motion. A basin protruded with a spout above. Water poured into the basin as the girl swirled her knife through it.

“No change.” Her eyes questioned the others. “Safe to drink?” Romar nodded slowly, then bent forward, holding the dagger within the basin as he drank. “It seems so. Let us drink lightly and move on.”

They drank one by one as the basin continued to fill. Then all shied back as from overhead came a faint slow creaking. It was as if the roof groaned at the weight of the keep above it. Jerrany glanced up worriedly.

“I think it best we move on. Sometimes when the owner is defeated, the building he commanded falls completely.”

Eleeri shivered. “Then let’s try to keep marching. I’d prefer not to be under this amount of stone if it does fall.” The last of the Keplians had slaked its thirst and Tharna sent agreement. The corridors passed by as they marched. Eleeri had shouldered Romar’s weight again; he could continue to walk, but only if he was aided.

Yet although she was growing weary, she continued to support him, trying to share with him her own strength.



Hunger grew, both of body and heart. She felt warmth flow through her where his body leaned against her own. She had little to offer him, perhaps. He was son to a wealthy man, even though that one in his folly had scorned him. She was stranger, not of his blood completely. Would that matter to him? She recalled the moment when their eyes had met over a slain enemy. Nothing had mattered then, nothing but that the enemy was dead and the captive freed.

She prayed silently to the gods now: *Let it continue so. Let us be one as more than far-kin.*

The corridor was slowly opening out into a wider hall with great windows high along one side. Through these, sunlight streamed, making pools of warmth on the chill paving they walked.



19

*A*s they passed one of the great windows, Romar drew Eleeri toward it. He stared hungrily at the landscape. So long, so very long since he had seen grass, felt the breeze or the sun, smelled the scents of his land. His face tilted so he could look at the woman beside him. There were some who would not see the beauty there, but he was a warrior, a hunter; to him, the strength, the lithe grace were beauty, and the clean lines of her face, the proud tilt of her head. She was as lovely as a fine sword, as graceful as a wildcat. He desired her, but more than that; over the nights when only their talking had kept him sane, he had come to love.

He eyed her wistfully as they rested. He had so little to offer. He was brother-in-law to a keep lord, but all that brought him was friendship. Mayrin would give him gifts if he wed, but they would get nothing from the grim old man who'd fathered them. Last word had been that he had wed again, some girl left husbandless by a sword in battle. She brought



to him one child. Rumor had it that another would soon come, and that the old man had promised her the keep as regent if so.

True or not, to claim his birthright he would have to return to his father's hold. Give up the wild lands out here which he had come to love so strongly. No—let this girl and her heir keep what was promised. He'd make a holding out of these lands and name them his.

If only . . . if only this one beside him, her flank warm against his, would accept a penniless hunter. He watched her face; he did not think she would be swayed by greed. She was not of that kind. But all women desired homes, and he had none to offer her. He wondered briefly where it was that she lived. Somehow they had never spoken of that in their dreams. She had probably feared to give a clue to her hiding place, should he break under the Dark one's use. Curiosity claimed him then. Where *did* she dwell out here in the wild lands? Once they were free of the tower, he would ask. If it was big enough for two, maybe she would share. He could bring a hunter's skills, a warrior's training, some little gear and goods. He gathered himself as Jerrany signaled the end of resting. Gods, let them just be free.

They marched with a slow, wary care. But the passages remained light, the traps unprung, if traps there were. Nor did the distance seem as far. It was only Romar's weakness that slowed them. He had to rest often. Each time was an opportunity to catch up on what their friends had done.

Tharna spoke for the Keplians, as usual. *We waited, but you did not return. The signal came, so that we knew our kin would have ceased to hold that one's attention at the river. When you still came not, we became anxious for you. The door in the outer tower wall was yet open, so we entered. Some of the passages were too small for us, but we could



follow others. We could feel our sister, and that tie we followed until we reached the place where you confronted the evil one.*

“You did not pass through a great cave far below?”

The mare looked surprised. *No, we moved upward always. It took little time before we found you.*

The humans blinked at each other with interest. This place was a maze, Eleeri thought. You really *could* get there from here—and anywhere else, too, it seemed. Not that it mattered much; she’d be delighted if she never saw the tower again, let alone tramped its endless corridors. They came to another just as Romar stumbled, dragging her almost to the ground as she sought to hold him up. They rested a little then Tharna poked a sly nose at her. *I could carry your mate for a while, if he would permit?*

She had not mind-sent to Eleeri alone, so that all turned to stare, first at the mare, then at the blushing woman.

Jerrany grinned. “Ha, spring has come early, it seems.” His wife flung herself at Romar and Eleeri, almost sending them to the ground again. Jerrany’s hand caught them, lending a moment’s strength.

“Careful, Mayrin, or he won’t be in any shape for a wedding.”

Eleeri’s blush deepened. “Hoi, I haven’t been asked; don’t let anyone’s mounts run away with them.”

“Not been asked, eh? Romar must be getting slow in his old age.”

Romar straightened. “Thank you, brother. I can speak for myself.” His eyes sought her face and read the answer to his wonderings. Gently, he took her hand and pulled her to front him. “Would you consider a man who has nothing? I can bring no lands, no wealth; I have little of the power, and no one has ever called me handsome. Nor am I any longer so young. I might have some possessions, did I return to my

father's keep and bow to him. But that I will not do, even for love."

"Nor would I wish you to!" Eleeri broke in hotly. "Mayrin told me all about it. He's a fool not to see what sort of a son he had."

Romar's eyes lit up. "I have nothing," he warned again.

"You have strength and courage, intelligence and sense. What more do you need?" Her face turned away a little shyly. "I understand you are supposed to wed for lands here. I can bring those, but they are half yours already." She watched as he peered at her in bewilderment.

"Let's take Tharna up on her offer. I'll explain as we move." They marched on, with Eleeri talking, telling of her journey into the mist and the tale as it had been told to her. At the end he drew a deep breath.

"So this canyon and keep are ours by birthright?"

"So our far-kin said."

He reached down for her hand. "I would not wish to live there alone, nor to drive you out." His voice faltered. "I am no great catch, so my father assured me. Yet if you would share my life and all else, I would love you. I—I *do* love you, my most valiant lady." He was forcing his words now. He had spoken lightly to women before, but never seriously. Never opening his heart to one for whom he cared as he did for this slender gray-eyed daughter of another people.

"You're sure you don't just want to have things convenient? The keep is half yours, and—"

His hands shot out to grab her shoulders. His distress gave him sudden strength so that he shook her a little. "No, I do *not* want to have things conveniently arranged. I *love* you! If you don't love me, if you don't want me, then the lands are yours. I'll remain with Mayrin and Jerrany. I know I have so little to offer; I know—" It was his turn to halt as he realized that her eyes were alight with laughter.



“I believe you, I believe you. Just don’t shake me to death. It’d be a poor start to a betrothal.”

“You will—I mean, you really do—you’re sure you—”

Eleeri put a gentle hand over his mouth. “I mean, I love you, I will wed you, and will you stop talking long enough to kiss me?” There was a long silence, broken only by whoops of approval from their friends.

As they broke apart, Tharna pushed her nose curiously toward her kin-sister. **Does this mean you’ll foal now?** she queried.

Eleeri started giggling helplessly, joined by Romar and his kin.

“Give me a chance, Keplian,” Romar found breath to answer.

I am Tharna.

“Thank you. Then give me a chance, Tharna, and my thanks also for carrying me. As for foal”—he smiled down into Eleeri’s eyes—“I think there may be a foal or two in years to come. Just don’t rush us.”

The mare nodded, starting to walk on. Eleeri walked beside her, her fingers tight within Romar’s hand.

All journeys must end, and this one did so into bright sun. Romar shaded his eyes and allowed himself to slip from the broad back onto the sweet-scented grass. He dug his fingers into the earth, studying the brown, crumbling soil in his hand. He’d feared he would never see this again. But beyond hope, on the other shore of despair, one had come to bear him back. No, not one alone; his sister, his sword-brother, and, beyond belief as well, four Keplians. He grinned, laying back on the soft grass.

“I think I’m dreaming all this.”

Eleeri dropped down beside him. “Then dream this, too.” She laid her mouth against his, kissing him with love and passion.



He grinned, folding his arms about her and returning the kiss. Then Jerrany cried out, looking upward. As they spun to follow his look, they saw that the tower was slowly crumbling. The top eroded, the door through which they had entered and departed slammed shut. Behind it they could hear stone falling in a long, slow rumble that echoed far into the distance, as if it receded into immeasurable dimensions.

“I think it best we leave here,” Jerrany muttered.

There was no disagreement with that as they scrambled onto Keplian backs. At a steady canter, they swept over the plains toward the mountains. There was no hesitation; Romar was not fit to be aught else but abed for a while. They would return to the lake keep until his health and strength returned. This they did, as Mayrin and Jerrany rode on to the Valley of the Green Silences to make report of events and reclaim their children.

They returned with pack ponies and a tail of riders. Eleeri flew out to meet them, Romar at her heels. “It’s good to see you back, sister. But what’s all this? Have you looted someone’s hold?”

Her sister-to-be laughed. “No, but we paid a visit to my father.” She giggled as her brother’s head came up sharply. “We dropped hints about Romar’s wealthy bride and how she had lands and a keep. He said that he would not be shamed before you. So he—ah—sent a few things as bride gifts.”

Eleeri surveyed the pack ponies with awe and amusement. “Just how much of this is for us, then?”

Jerrany, too, was smiling widely. “All of it. It isn’t as much as it looks, mostly bulk rather than riches, but I think you’ll find it all useful. The ponies should go back, both of them, and you could add a few of those furs of yours as a

kin-gift in return.”

She nodded. The last load she'd brought here had been hides and weapons from the ancient keep armory. There were still many furs safely held in the canyon, well cured and tanned in a variety of sizes and types. Out here they had little value, save to be used. But in the valley, surrounded by more civilized holds and holdings where such furs were no longer obtainable, they were of greater worth. She could make up a pack of the finest, including several of the rasti pelts. That would make eyes open.

Meanwhile, Mayrin had seized her brother's arm. “How are you? Are you completely well? You still look pale. Are you eating enough?”

He hugged her. “I am well, I eat like a snowbear, and I will be brown soon enough.” He turned just in time to catch his balance as an avalanche of two children descended upon him. He had been gone almost a year, but neither had forgotten their adored uncle. By the time the excitement had died down a little, they were all within the main courtyard, helping unload the ponies. Eleeri glanced at Mayrin.

“Who are these new people? More to add to your menie?”

“No, to yours. They'll stay here for a few weeks so we can teach them sense about the lands. Then those who wish will come on to your keep. Here they can also meet the canyon Keplian and see they mean no harm.”

Eleeri hesitated. She had never considered that they must do more than continue to camp out in the large building. If she would take up the lands, it must be run as a proper holding. She sighed softly. Life was about to change again.

Then she drew back her shoulders. The last change had been for the good. She had found a land to live in, a mate to love, family, friends, and something to fight for rather than against. She would not fear more change. She turned to look



at Romar as he pulled another bundle from the pony. If all changes brought her such joy, then she would run to meet them.

He must have sensed her eyes, for he turned to look at her. Then he handed the package to Jerrany and strolled across. His hands gathered her against his heart. Eleeri looked up as he bent his head to kiss her. She would not fear change. She was a warrior. She would meet it as she had met so many other changes these last few years.

And now she would meet nothing alone. Beside her Romar would stand—swordmate, shieldmate, and beloved. She smiled, relaxing against him. And in her heart she breathed a silent prayer of thanks to the gone-before ones. Their path had in the end brought their daughter home.

Thus this story is recorded in the records of Lormt, where word came many months later. Strange things come out of the ruined lands of Karsten since the turning. This tale is one more. Nor is it likely to be the last. For when powers stir deeply, old secrets rise again.

THE
MAGESTONE

ANDRE NORTON
& MARY H. SCHAUB

To the loving memory of my mother,
Deane R. Schaub,
who encouraged the writing, listened
to each chapter as it emerged, and
sometimes said, “That middle part could
be somewhat clearer.”

—Mary H. Schaub



CHAPTER 1

Mereth of Ferndale—her private journal
during the voyage to Estcarp
(Dales calendar: Month of the
Fire Thorn, Year of the Horned Hunter)

My valiant Doubt—if you could see me writing this journal, you would smile. No, not merely smile; I am certain that you would laugh to behold this aged Daleswoman wedged below decks at the height of a winter storm, striving to impose some order upon what the Sulcar fondly term their cargo accounts.

I should have been reduced to fingering my tally sticks in the dark had I not recalled the clever bracket you crafted to steady a lamp no matter how violent the motion of a ship. Persuaded of its virtue by my sketches, Captain Halbec ordered his carpenter to construct several brackets for our cabins. Expecting the winter drafts that surge through every passageway, he had prudently stocked ample numbers of horn-shielded lamps.

While my lamp light is thus fairly assured, my perch on this writing bench is erratically precarious. I must wield my quill most deliberately to avoid frantic blots and smears. I vow the effort is more frustrating than writing on horseback;

at least while riding, I was always able to curb my horse. Would that this heaving ship were governable by bit and bridle! The Dames who taught me in childhood would be sorely disappointed by the appearance of this page. It is fortunate that the secret trade script you and I devised so long ago requires no fine sweeps or flourishes. If I am jarred much more often, not even I shall be able to make sense of these marks.

Oh, Doubt, I *miss* you. I cannot number the times I have thought and written those words these twenty years past. With every new dawning, I long for the sound of your voice, the touch of your sleeve against mine at the work table, the glint of sunlight on your hair.

The way of life we once shared together has been ripped away. What now prevails is beyond any of my earlier imaginings. So much has changed . . . but not the ache of parting from you. That pain gnaws as if it were only hours ago, not years, that you kissed my hand in farewell. Just as my Clan duty forced me to preserve what I could of our family trading business, so yours drew you to defend your home Dale against Alizon's ravening Hounds. Unlike all of our previous partings, from that final one there was to be no joyful return.

When that unspeakable year broke upon us, we might as well have been stricken by the very scourge of its Year Name: the Fire Troll. Our Dales were seared in spirit as well as flesh when the invading Hounds boiled ashore. I heard accounts of the metal-sheathed man-carriers supplied by their Kolder allies, creeping monsters that spouted liquid fire and battered through gates and walls along our coast. I thank the Amber Lady that your death was clean, by swordblade. Even now, when my dreams are troubled by fragments of remembered



battles, I burn with regret that I was not at your side, to live or die together with you.

But I was away, traveling far inland when Vennesport was attacked and our trading storehouses were plundered. Those were times of waking nightmares. As I fled toward the western mountains, a fellow refugee passed me word of your fate. I think if I had been alone, I would have turned back then, to seek my death in the fighting—but I could not ignore my Robnore clan obligations. Uncle Parand was among those killed in the sacking of Vennesport. All of Mother's remaining brothers and most of our coastal trading colleagues were suddenly gone. The surviving remnants of the Clan turned to me for leadership. Grieving and distressed, I felt they were making a hopeless choice, but I could not deny their pleas for direction.

For weeks of torment that stretched into months, I scarcely ate or slept or paused to think. Always, *always* I longed for you. I stumbled onward, forcing myself to envisage what you would have done to meet each new crisis. Memories of you served as my anchor; without them, I would have been overwhelmed by despair.

Constantly, I reminded myself that we had been separated more often than we had been together. You said once that our letters linking us while apart could comprise an ample chronicle—except no scribe could read our secret script. Despite the turmoil of the war and my travels since, I have preserved some few of your letters, together with the little sketch of you that Halbec made during your long-ago trading voyage aboard his ship. These documents are my most treasured possessions—your lasting legacy to me.

Another very different legacy has driven me to endure



this unseasonable voyage. I suspect that you would shake your head ruefully at the surface appearance of my recent behavior. You would ask how, after more than sixty years as a trader, I could turn my back on all that I knew to pursue the flimsiest of hopes? I can hear you say it—chasing moonbeams or catching snowflakes would be more profitable than this journey promises to be. Yet if only I could lay my reasoning before you—of all the people I have ever known, you would be the most likely to understand why I must dare this quest. I believe you would urge me to seize this chance, however slight or foolish it seems.

Dear Doubt . . . you were always an eminently cautious, deliberate man. Uncle Parand once said you were the most prudent risk-taker he knew, for you constantly weighed every possible gain against any potential loss before you committed yourself. No matter what later obstacles arose, you would press on until you accomplished your task.

I had observed a similar strain of persistence in my mother. It was her force of will that converted Father's improved breed of sheep into the foundation of our trading success. I have been told that I am as obstinate as she was, so the three of us shared the trait, for I recall times when each of us accused the others of excessive willfulness.

Habits honed in one's work, especially when rewarded, often spill over into other aspects of life. I think of the hours you and I spent together compiling kinship lists. How excited you were to discover that one of your forebears claimed blood-ties to our Robnore Clan. You rode leagues to search for verifying documents, and brought half the dust from an abbey's archives back with you. We pored over lists for so many families. I shall never forget those parchments stored



in the wax-lined sea chest from Wark. You said there could be no doubt of that clan's devotion to their trade, since every bundle of records for generations reeked of fish!

Here am I, all these years later, still asking questions about kinship. But these particular questions do not concern missing names from the kin lists of other folk; these questions concern my own kin, and the farther I pursue them, the more my disquiet grows. I cannot rest until I find answers. For years, I did not know where to search. I had only guesses, suspicions, fragments that made scant sense by themselves. It was as if I sought to plan a trading journey without knowing where I was to ride, or what goods I should take.

Then, nearly two months ago, in the Month of the Shredbark Tree, Dame Gwersa's letter reached me at Vennesport. I am certain she did not intend it so, but her news was the firebrand that ignited my accumulated store of worries. From your visits to Rishdale Abbey, you would recall the Dame's special devotion to the preservation of old records. Since the war, she has endeavored to restore the archives at her own abbey as well as several others tragically damaged in the fighting. Dame Gwersa is now very old and blind, but she dictates occasional letters to me, her student from almost seventy years ago.

A visitor to Rishdale Abbey this past summer had brought her word of an amazing discovery across the sea in Estcarp. Two years before, in the Year of the Kobold, an unprecedented quaking of the earth was wrought by Estcarp's Witches to halt an invasion across their southern border from Karsten. One of the subsidiary results was the destruction of parts of the walls and towers at Lormt, the ancient citadel famed for its archives. Previously unknown storage rooms and cellars

were exposed beneath the rubble, adding an untold wealth of documents to those already prized by kinship scholars.

The moment I read Dame Gwersa's account, I knew that I must journey to Lornt. Until then, I had felt like a jeweler attempting to assemble a chaplet of Ithdale pearls, but lacking most of the significant gems needed to complete my pattern. My missing pearls were of two sorts: kin-facts, and knowledge about a very different kind of jewel. What better place could I seek both than Lornt?

Two primary questions had been—and still are—hammering in my mind: who was my true father, and whence came my mother's chief legacy to me, that curious jewel she termed my betrothal gift?

From childhood, I had always assumed that I knew who I was. On the day I first met you, I identified myself on my writing slate—Mereth of far Ferndale, speechless since my birth in the Year of the Blue-horned Ram. You said that was an appropriate Year Name for one engaged in the wool trade, and a script as clear as mine should be as useful to a trader as a voice, yet far less likely to be misunderstood. I was seventeen then, and grateful for your kindness. Not many busy traders would pause to read my slate, or have the time or patience to answer my questions.

From that initial meeting, you were distinctively different from all the other traders, and not just because of your singular courtesy. I was bemused when you confided that you had two names: Lundor, given you by your parents, and Doubt, bestowed on you by the trading community. I recall thinking what a strange name Doubt was, so I wrote on my slate, "Why 'Doubt'?"

You smiled, and replied that it was due to your deplor-



able habit of foreseeing all the possible objections to proposals—all the reasons why suggested plans might not work.

That night, I wrote queries to Mother about you. She laughed aloud, and said you also peppered your speech with frequent doubts. Assuming a severe expression, she imitated your deep voice, “Oh, I doubt we shall acquire any usable wool from that Dale this season—excessive rains spoiled their grazing land. Besides, I doubt they’ve yet repaired the only bridge allowing access by our wagons. This venture you propose will go ill, I’ve no doubt.” For all your gloom, she added, you were a very keen trader, and the Clan was fortunate to secure your service.

By the time two years later when Mother’s own trading wagon was swept away in the mountain landslide, my acquaintance with you had expanded from chance encounters to joint ventures. When I discovered that you shared my interest in kinship tracing, it was a pleasure to pass on to you some of the requests for kin lists from the merchants and landholders we met in the course of our regular trading work. Soon we were helping each other trace our own family histories. Your folk had clustered for generations in the coastal Dales near Seakeep, while Mother’s Robnore Clan had traveled from town to market to trading fair.

Mother first met Father at Twyford, whence both were drawn by the great annual wool fair. From her few remarks years later, I judged that she had been immediately impressed by his knowledge of the finest wool bearers. He confided to her his desire to locate the fabled blue-horned sheep of the western crags, for he was convinced that he could use them to improve the quality of the Dales’ wool. Knowing Mother, I expect she gave deep thought to his likelihood for success



before she consented to wed him and accompany him on his search inland well past Uppdale and Paltendale.

Mother said to me once, with a fond but exasperated sigh, “Your father was a good man, but too enwrapped by his dreams of breeding the perfect sheep. To be fair to him, I must say I never met his equal for tracking and caring for sheep. Still, he needed to attend more to the trading side of the matter. Not my Dwyn—always off over the next ridge to snare yet one more wildling to add to his flock. Would that he had possessed more of the trading blood of his forebear Rodwyn of Ekkor! Yet each man must weigh what wool he can shear, and tally his own accounts.”

Father (as I then believed him to be) was a third son and distant lord-kin to the House of Ekkor. I remember him only dimly, since I was scarcely four when he set out during a storm to search for a lamb and never returned.

After his death, Mother placed me with the Dames of Rishdale Abbey to see if they might cure my muteness. They could not, but Dame Gwersa taught me diligently for six years. Mother came for me when I was twelve. Although the Dames offered to accept me for training as a religious scribe, Mother said that my writing skill would be of more use to her in trade. When the Dames objected that my muteness would be a disadvantage beyond the shelter of their cloisters, Mother asserted that on the contrary, it would be a positive trading advantage, since I could neither tattle secrets nor offend customers with unwise chatter.

I soon found that in Mother’s trading business, I had a talent for handling accounts, determining values, and locating goods. A far rarer talent—uncommon among Dalesfolk—was my ability to find lost articles, especially if I could touch



some other object belonging to the owner.

In those days, too, I experienced occasional vivid dreams. All I could recall upon waking were flashes of bright colors and snatches of strange music. When I was about fifteen, I wrote haltingly about my dreams one day when I was alone with Mother. She was always occupied; her hands were never idle longer than it took for her to snatch up a new hank of wool or the next bundle of tally sticks. That day, when she read my slate, she actually dropped her knitting in her lap and sat rigidly still. I vow her face paled beneath its ruddy sun-warmed hue.

In a manner quite unlike her usually brisk speech, she said slowly, "I once had peculiar dreams for a time . . . before you were born. After your birth, they stopped. I had not thought of them for years." She shook her head, and resumed her knitting. "Such things are mere night vapors, banished by the light of day. Put them from your mind."

It wasn't long after that incident that Mother first mentioned my betrothal gift. I had found for her a missing bracelet, one of a pair she prized, for she loved fine jewelry. In her pleasure at the recovery, she told me that there was one very special piece—a gift—put away for my betrothal.

Excited, I wrote on my slate, "Whose gift? See it now?" but she only paused at the door on her way out. "No," she said firmly, "you may not see it until you are promised to be wed. It is an old and valuable gift from a . . . secret source that I cannot name." I was disappointed at the time, but in the subsequent press of work, I gradually forgot about the gift until the accident in the mountains reft Mother from me.

You were assisting Uncle Herwik then at our base in Ulmsport, while I was in Vennesport, a week's travel to the south.

Mother had argued for a second trading base there, and had only just shifted her chief residence to the port—if she could be persuaded to halt in any one place long enough to be said to reside there. I was almost twenty when she died. You and Uncle Herwik's party had been delayed by storms, so I employed the time of waiting by sorting through Mother's possessions, setting aside those items she would have wanted to be given to various relatives and friends.

In the course of my sorting, I chanced upon a parcel tightly wrapped in dark blue leather. The instant I touched it, I *knew* that my betrothal gift lay within. It had never been listed among the family treasures, and no other person in the family had ever mentioned it. I assumed that Mother must have acquired it in her trading, instead of inheriting it.

Curious to view Mother's secret gift, I pried loose the lacings and uncovered a pendant jewel set in silver. The stone was an unusual blue-gray color, the size of a hen's small egg, cunningly polished to sparkle and flash as the light fell upon it. When I reached to pluck it out of its soft leather nest, my fingers were jolted as if I had plunged them into snow melt. Had I possessed a voice, I am sure I would have cried out. As it was, I snatched back my hand without picking up the stone. After a breathless moment, I folded the leather around the necklace and retied the lacings.

On previous occasions, I had welcomed opportunities to handle fine brooches or belt buckles because I could somehow sense, often in later dreams, images associated with the objects' former owners. On this day, however, I wanted no more contact with Mother's pendant. I remember thinking that if I should hold the jewel in my hand, I would be unbearably reminded of our separation. I did not want to be any



more forcefully linked to nightly visions of her than I already was in unguarded waking moments. In haste, I packed the leather roll away with other precious items to be stored in our protected treasure room, and fled outside as if pursued by demons.

I never had the opportunity to show you that jewel. You were busily traveling between Ulmsport and Vennesport, and I was frequently away from our main Vennesport storehouse. It never occurred to me to retrieve that particular locked casket until nearly twenty years later when you raised the subject of marriage. You were so deferential, so shy about asserting yourself, that I wonder you managed to utter the word “wedding.” Had we been left in peace, I would surely and gladly have shown you the pendant. Any bride would have been proud to bring such a jewel to her lord-to-be. Yet those days were fated to be far from peaceful.

You had been concerned for some time by rumors of trouble stirring across the sea, and tried to convince Mother’s brothers that our trade links were being affected. You expressed alarm when strangers from far Alizon arrived at several Dales’ ports in the guise of traders, skulking about, asking too many questions. I listened to you, and shared your disquiet. I wrote Uncle Parand several times, warning him of the danger, but in those days of willful blindness, seemingly no words could be found to rouse the Dales.

We suffered sorely from our lack of leadership—the separate Clan lords refused to recognize the threat to all, and would not cooperate or plan together until it was too late. When Alizon’s invasion broke upon us from the sea, just as you had warned it would, all that we had built in Vennesport was destroyed. When next I saw our storehouse years later,

only a burned-out shell remained. Thus Alizon robbed me of both my betrothal and the gift that should have graced me as a bride. You had been killed, and the jewel—there was no way to discover what fate had befallen it.

The more I thought about the jewel, the more convinced I became that it had to be an object of Power. How else could I explain my immediate aversion to its touch? I thought at the time I was distressed because of its association with Mother, but I was even then touching items she had used regularly—her tally sticks, her hair brush, her favorite writing quills. My dreams were undisturbed by any painful intrusions linked to those objects.

I knew little then about Power, except that Dalesfolk have always been deeply uneasy discussing it, and even more averse to experiencing the use of it. Our Wise Women possess knowledge of the uses of Power, but their own exercise of it is of the personal kind, tending ills or sensing would-be outcomes by consulting their rune-boards. We prize our Wise Women's herb lore and healing skills, but any Dalesman recoils from the thought of the raw Power wielded by the Witches of Estcarp across the sea, or the storied mages of ancient Arvon.

When Mother died, I still thought of myself as wholly of the Dales—although I had only to glance at my image reflected from burnished metal or water to observe my marked outward variance from my fellow Dalesmen, including my parents. Not for me their red-brown hair that bleached in the sun, or their green or blue-green eyes. From my youth, my hair was dark gray-brown, like rare lamantine wood, you used to say, and my eyes a very pale clear blue. My skin, too, was pale, and refused to darken during the hot summer



months. My appearance, as well as my muteness, set me apart as a child.

Some of the Rishdale Dames muttered about me until Dame Gwersa made plain that I was under her special protection. Only once I heard a kitchen maid hiss at me, "Spawn of Arvon," but I had no idea what she meant. When I wrote the evident insult for Dame Gwersa, she pursed her lips and said that some folk preferred to invent troubles when there were quite enough under foot to deal with day to day. I subsequently searched the abbey archives for lore on Arvon, but could find few references to that daunting land beyond the mountains bordering the northernmost Dales. Dame Gwersa would say only that no Dalesmen traveled there because the Arvon folk were close-knit and preferred their own company. She also conceded that there were Powers and Forces in Arvon that were best avoided by prudent men. Many years later, I attempted to trace vague rumors of rare weddings between folk from Arvon and the Dales. The suspected children of such unions were shunned in the Dales, as if they were somehow different from us. I suspect I began then to wonder whether my own strangeness could be ascribed to a blood-tie to Arvon. I had, after all, been born in a remote Dale near the borders of both Arvon and the shunned Waste.

I made a list of my peculiarities: my muteness from birth, my un-Daleslike appearance, my strange dreams (possibly similar to the odd dreams experienced by my mother), my ability to find lost objects. It occurred to me that Mother's betrothal gift might have originated in Arvon. I could no longer ignore the inference that my real father might not have been Dwyn of the House of Ekkor.

One other piece of evidence had to be included in my

list. When I was sixteen, Uncle Parand borrowed me from Mother to accompany him on coastal trading voyages. He said I should be able to learn much, while keeping his records for him. After those first short trips, he pronounced me useful and trustworthy (and also happily not subject to illness due to the motion of our trading vessels). He then invited me on the much longer voyage across the sea to the eastern lands, whose great ports I had only heard about—Verlaine, Sulcar-keep, and Estcarp's inland river port, Es City.

While I was walking alone near Es Castle, I encountered a solitary Witch of Estcarp. I was eighteen then; Uncle Parand had warned me to defer to any lady of the Old Race garbed in the distinctive gray robes of the Witches. I drew well to one side of the path to allow her ample room to pass by. She seemed not to have noticed me at all initially, but as soon as she passed me, she stopped abruptly, turned, and made a sign in the air with her right hand. To my amazement, the very lines her moving fingers sketched flared with a blue light (I have since been told that this indicated I was not tainted by the Dark). The Witch shook her head dismissively, and walked away without speaking a word to me. She therefore failed to see the delayed secondary glowing of her sign in the air—first red, then orange, then yellow—before it faded away entirely. I did not report this incident to my uncle, nor did I write any account of it for anyone else until now, as I marshal my arguments to persuade . . . I suppose I seek to persuade myself. My stalwart Doubt—if you were here, I believe you would accept my reasoning.

When I arrive at Lormt, I intend to request leave to search their archives for any records concerning jewels of Power. Captain Halbec has described for me the appearance of the



Witch Jewels of Estcarp; they are cloudy, smooth-cut gems, not at all like my betrothal gift. Surely, however, Power can reside in different kinds of stones. I shall also search for lore about Arvon and whether any other folk like me have been described in kin lists.

If only the winds would rage this forcefully on a steady tack, we should complete our passage in far less than a month. But I must strive to be patient, and hope that the vessel holds together amid the storm waves. It will be good to see the sun again—and to be able to stand still, and get dry!



CHAPTER 2

Kasarian of Krevonel—his account of
the Baronial Assembly, Alizon City
(Alizonian calendar: 5th Day, Moon of the Knife,
the 1052nd Year Since the Betrayal)

I first saw the magic-cursed jewel when it was placed upon a silver chain around the neck of my sire's murderer. It was the fifth day of the Moon of the Knife, in the One Thousand Fifty-second Year Since the Betrayal. All land barons of Alizon were required to attend the New Year's Assembly for Presentation to the Lord Baron of that year's noble whelps come-of-age.

I was standing not two spear lengths from the throne when Lord Baron Norandor raised his sword to amend the customary order of procedure. Except for his eyes, his face was concealed by the white-furred Lord Hound's mask. He was a thinner man than the previous Lord Baron Mallandor, his dead littermate, so his voice echoed within the mask as he summoned Baron Gurborian to approach the throne.

Any matter concerning the murderer of my sire demanded my most wary attention. Gurborian's schemes had for years permeated all of Alizon. Only the slowest-witted barons were unaware of his ambition to seize the Lord Hound's mask for



himself. Four moons before, I had received a private letter from Volorian, my sire's elder littermate, complaining that Gurborian's hirelings were prowling near our northeasterly estates. Could yet more threats against our Line be straining at Gurborian's leashes?

When Gurborian had knelt before the throne, Norandor arose, sheathing his sword. "Worthy Gurborian of the Line Sired by Reptur," the Lord Baron proclaimed, "my unfortunate littermate esteemed your counsel, as do I. For your able warfare in the Dales across the sea, as well as for other valued services, he allowed you to bear this singular token of Alizon's approval."

The torchlight in the Great Hall seemed to ignite a coal of blue fire in the Lord Baron's outstretched hand. I edged forward to secure a better view. The light glittered from a jewel the size of a moor hen's egg, and flared between Norandor's fingers as he stooped to attach the stone to Gurborian's baronial neck chain. "Now I, Norandor, Lord Baron of Alizon," he continued, "reaffirm that approval by conferring upon you his notable prize, to be borne by you during your lifetime."

A muffled snort erupted from the elderly baron standing next to me. "As soon as Gurborian's dead," he muttered, "Reptur's pack had best hasten to return that bauble before the Lord Baron's guard break in to claim it."

I was the only one near enough to hear the remark, but I gave no sign that I had. I was fairly certain that old Baron Moragian was not a member of Gurborian's current faction, but it was unwise to acknowledge such a comment where an unfriendly witness might notice. My outward detachment, I must admit, was also partly due to my attention's being so closely focused on the jewel; never before had I seen such

a stone. It continued to draw my eye even after Gurborian rejoined his coterie.

Our Line had no whelps to be presented that year. When Sherek, the new Master of Hounds, called for our pack's representative, I strode forward to kneel before the throne. "In the stead of Baron Volorian," I asserted, "I, Kasarian, appear for the Line Sired by Krevonel." Norandor acknowledged me with a wave of his hand, and I withdrew to one side.

The Great Hall's air seemed suddenly stifling, the torches far too bright. Within my head, the nagging pain that for some nights had frustrated my efforts to sleep redoubled its thumping. Desiring a temporary refuge away from the noisy throng, I slipped out into the corridor leading to the oldest part of Alizon Castle.

I knew of one particular room where I was unlikely to be disturbed. The ancient mosaic designs on its walls and floor were similar to those in one room in my own castle here in the City. I plucked a torch from a hall sconce to carry with me, but torches within the mosaic room had already been kindled by the servants.

Behind the pierced stone screen along one side of the chamber was a long bench probably used by serving slaves in times past when the room was more frequented. Due to winter drafts, a large tapestry had been hung across the room side of the screen, but it was threadbare in spots. If a person behind the screen chose his vantage point with care, he could see quite well into the main chamber. I had not intended to spy unseen, but I had only just sat down on the bench when I heard the scrape of boots entering the main room.

There were two intruders—one whose voice I did not recognize, but the other voice was Gurborian's. I moved very



quietly to obtain a glimpse of them through the tapestry fabric. The second man was Gratch of Gorm, Gurborian's prime henchman. He had been named in Volorian's letter as one of those prying and poking about in the mountains near our estates. From their first words, I could draw two immediate conclusions: they mistakenly assumed that the mosaic chamber was empty, and they plotted treason against Lord Baron Norandor.

Keeping his voice low, as befitted a devoted conspirator, Gratch said, "We are safe here from interference, my lord. No one followed us. I commented openly that we were going to the Kennels to survey the breeding bitches."

Gurborian scowled. "Lord Baron Fool has named Sherek to be Master of Hounds. I had hoped to influence the choice from among our faction, but my bribes were evidently insufficient. That naming is done, and of less import than your news. How stands Bolduk's faction—for us or against us?"

Reluctant to answer, Gratch toyed for a moment with his belt dagger. "I tried both the strategies we had discussed, my lord—hinting at dire costs for rejection, while promising fair rewards for alliance. Despite my best efforts, old Baron Bolduk continues obstinate, clinging to the senseless notion that only the Kolder are strong enough to vanquish Estcarp. I told him that the last Kolder within our borders have been dead for seven moons. The late Hound Master's misguided foray into Estcarp should have convinced the very doorposts that Alizon can no longer expect any aid from the Kolder."

"Bolduk *is* very like a doorpost," mused Gurborian. "Perhaps a brisk fire at his base might melt his stubbornness. His blood feud with Ferlikian could always be revived by a word or two in the proper ears. Still, I would prefer Bolduk's Line

to be with us or neutral. Was he not impressed by your mention of our planned Escorian alliance?"

Gratch shook his head. "It is a delicate matter, my lord," he said dourly, "to speak of any magical matter to Bolduk. Even though by our hoped-for alliance we should control the lash of spells, and for a welcome change, Estcarp's crones would suffer the effects, Bolduk persists in abhorring any recourse to the weapons of our sworn enemies."

Gurborian paced back and forth, his impatience evident in every stride. "Why can he not *see*—any weapon that might succeed must be employed? The Witches have thwarted us far too long with their foul containment spells woven from the Forbidden Hills across the Alizon Gap. It would be rare sport for them to be scourged by magic stronger than their own. If only we had an Escorian mage to exhibit . . . even an apt apprentice could persuade the undecided among the barons to join with us."

Eager to placate his master, Gratch leaned toward Gurborian. "My lord, I am certain that I shall be successful in my latest negotiations. Today I received a message from my most reliable source near the Escorian border. If his information is correct, he should soon be able to arrange a meeting for me with a lower level student who has traveled in Escore and—"

Gurborian seized Gratch's neck chain and jerked him so that his teeth rattled. "If—should—lower level student," he scoffed. "I have heard such weasel words too often with nothing tangible to show for them. Norandor is already suspicious of our comings and goings. So far, I have mollified him." He thrust Gratch away, and flourished the jewel on his own neck chain. "He awards me this to assure my loyal allegiance. Fool—it was mine thirteen years ago as Mallandor's reward



for my aid in deposing Facellian. Once our new plans are firmly forged my faction will feed Norandor to the hounds just as we earlier served his littermate. But I need more backing! I dare not move too soon without sufficient preparation.”

“There is one definite word of cheer, my lord.” Gratch had prudently stepped beyond Gurborian’s reach. “I was able to hire the poisoner we spoke of. The supply of smother root that you required will be delivered by tonight.”

“I shall make good use of it.” Gurborian smiled. “Bolduk’s younger whelp—is he not in the Castle with his sire? Should he suddenly fall ill or worse, Ferlikian would be blamed, and my quiet offer of sympathetic alliance could be well received.”

“I shall see to it, my lord,” said Gratch briskly. “Would it not be wise if we were seen at the Kennels, in case anyone should seek us there?”

Gurborian started for the door, then paused. “Indeed . . . although I do not care to encounter Volorian’s fosterling in the Kennels. I hear that he is as tediously keen a houndsman as that troublesome border lord himself.”

“While I was in the mountains during the Second Whelping Moon, I saw Baron Volorian from a fair distance,” Gratch remarked, as he followed his master out into the corridor. “He was wading through his pack, choosing new breeders. They say he’s too old and too involved in the breeding to leave his estates nowadays. As you saw, he did not come for this year’s Assembly.”

“Volorian may be old,” Gurborian replied with a laugh, “but he’s wily. He well remembers how I disposed of his younger littermate, so he keeps his distance from me.” Their

voices receded, trailing off into a murmur, then silence.

I sat half dazed, my thoughts racing. A murder plot against Baron Bolduk's younger whelp—Bolduk's Line currently harbored no active animosity toward the Line Sired by Krevonel, but neither were we obligated to dispatch a warning. I judged that an admonitory word to Ferlikian would be more potentially useful. Such commonplace baronial machinations, however, were thoroughly dwarfed by Gurborian's threat to forge a treasonous alliance with the magic-wielding fiends of Escore. Should Gurborian ever suspect that I had overheard his plotting, he would move swiftly to send me after my murdered sire.

I had been five years old when Gurborian ordered Oralian's death. My sire had led a faction of the older barons who steadfastly resisted any alliance with the foreign Kolder. When the then-reigning Lord Baron Facellian had rammed through the alliance despite all opposition, Gurborian curried his favor by removing Facellian's most prominent baronial opponents. Facellian eagerly acceded to the Kolder's demand for war with the Dales across the sea. The Kolder being few in number, it fell to Alizon to provide the warriors, but the Kolder did supply us with uncommon weapons to advance our invasion.

I remember hearing my elder littermates discuss those early, exciting, and successful years of the war. Our coastal invasion was initially invincible. The moving metal boxes the Kolder supplied to shelter our fighters could scarcely be withstood. Even so, as our sire had warned the Baron's Council before his murder, we were totally dependent upon the Kolder for the supplies required to maintain the boxes and their fire spewers. When those supplies were blocked by the



Dales' Sulcar allies, we lost our most powerful advantage. Two of my littermates died in the fighting, and when the third was too severely wounded to ride, his men cut his throat to prevent the Dales hags from loosening his tongue by magic.

I was twelve when it was clear the war was lost. Having nimbly positioned himself with Mallandor's faction, Gurborian wielded an equally strong hand in Facellian's overthrow. Even then, Gurborian's ambition was overly fierce to be safely accommodated too close to the throne. In order to allow time for Mallandor's justified suspicions to cool, Gurborian withdrew for six years to his coastal estates.

I had been quietly fostered with Volorian all those years, well away from the swirl of plotting in Alizon City. Following my unremarked presentation ceremony at age twelve, Volorian agreed that after a prudent time, I might take up residence in our pack's castle in the City. I arrived at the castle when I was fifteen, the same year, I later learned, that Gratch first appeared at Gurborian's side to become a shadowy partner in his scheming. They both returned to Alizon City when I was twenty, but they carefully stayed out of Mallandor's way until two years later, when Estcarp's Witches worked their foulest magic, tearing the very roots of their southern bordering mountains to foil Karsten's impending invasion.

Mallandor yearned to strike while the hags reeled, depleted by their exertions, but their cursed containment spells still held across our mutual border. The pro-Kolder faction of barons then agitated for a concerted effort to open a new magical Gate for the Kolder, so that they might bring us more of their metal boxes as well as more Kolder to reinforce their scant remaining numbers. I was repelled by such plans, but it would have been fatal to say so. Because of my scholarly



interests, it was acceptable for me to take part in the search for documents from the ancient days, even as far back as the Betrayal itself, in the hope of finding useful lore on the dreaded mage-work involved in the Gate magic.

During the spring of last year, Mallandor hearkened to more foolish advice—openly endorsed at the time by Gurborian's faction—and sent his Master of Hounds Esguir raiding into Estcarp to seize some Witch pups for the Kolder to use in their Gate magic. The plot failed miserably; all the captive Witchlings escaped back into Estcarp, and the few Kolder left in Alizon Castle were all killed. Gurborian then revealed his true intentions. He rallied Mallandor's enemies to overthrow the Lord Baron. Because his own faction was not strong enough to place him on the throne, however, Gurborian backed Mallandor's ambitious littermate Norandor. Mallandor and Esguir were fed to the hounds, and Norandor assumed the Lord Hound's mask.

From the conversation I overheard between Gurborian and Gratch, it seemed that yet another overthrow was being plotted, and this time I had no doubt that Gurborian sought the mask for himself. But what post could Gratch hope to attain? As a non-Alizonder, he could not be named Master of Hounds. Probably he expected to continue his role of counselor in Gurborian's shadow. He was a dangerous foe, familiar with the rarest of poisons.

I remember wondering as I carefully made my way to my castle, whether my physical discomfort could be due to one of Gratch's potions, but I dismissed the thought. Like all barons resident in the City, I regularly partook of small doses of various poisons to build advance resistance. I had also made a useful study of antidotes, thus I felt reasonably



sure I could deal with Gratch's threat. My household servants were all reliable, due to pack loyalty, blood-ties, or fear. To lessen the lure of bribes, I kept my pay levels sufficient.

On my way through secluded alleyways, I had to pause several times to recover from fits of dizziness. As I reflect upon the events of that night, I realize that my weakness was caused by my proximity to Gurborian's accursed jewel.

Arriving at Krevonel Castle, I reeled to my bedchamber and lay down, apprehensive of what dreams might beset me should I fall asleep. All I could think about was that jewel—when I closed my eyes, its image burned in my mind. Somehow, that sparkling crystal seemed to be reaching out to me, drawing me toward its cold blue fire.



CHAPTER 3

Mereth-her journal at Lormt
(4th and 5th Days,
Month of the Ice Dragon,
New Year of the Lamia)

My dear one—what would you say of this curious place, fabled Lormt of the Scholars, isolated amid mountains rendered even less accessible by the Turning, as they term the Witches’ spell-shifting of the earth?

I did not think it necessary to dispatch a messenger to herald my coming; that would have been a proper courtesy for a nobleman with a retinue, but scarcely justified for a lone Daleswoman. I recalled Dame Gwersa’s assertion that any serious kin-lore seeker who dared the journey to Lormt was certain to be welcomed, but might also risk being misplaced in the countless archive nooks by the resident scholars who were renowned for their complete devotion to their work.

Although our ride had been long and cold, and both of us were politely greeted upon our arrival, the guide I hired at Es City refused to stay at Lormt. Once he had delivered me and my scant baggage at the metal-bound gates, he would have turned to depart if the gatekeeper had not insisted that he allow his horses to be watered and rested for at least a few hours.



You would have exclaimed, I think, at the vast scale of this citadel of ancient learning. I had formerly believed that there could be no larger building stones than those massive gray-green blocks I had seen in Es City's walls and Castle. Upon entering Lormt's great courtyard, however, I concluded that Lormt's builders must have been capable of wrenching and shaping the very roots of the surrounding mountains.

Dame Gwersa's informant had reported significant destruction wrought by the earthquake, but I was appalled to observe the actual extent of the ruin. Of the four round towers anchoring the rectangular courtyard, two appeared untouched, a third had lost half its former height, and the fourth corner's tower had completely collapsed, along with most of its short adjoining wall. The ground beneath that area had dropped away more than a trade wagon's length, bringing down one entire long outer wall.

Obvious efforts had been made since to deal with the damage and repair what could be salvaged. As we rode in, I noticed newer metal fittings and bindings where the gates had been rehinged and patched. What at first glance appeared to be huge, shapeless heaps of rubble, upon closer viewing showed signs of organized excavation and timber shoring. Several sheds of rough-hewn wood were spaced along the lines of the fallen walls, and sturdy fences of brush and woven withes extended between them to hold back the mountain snowdrifts from overwhelming the courtyard expanse. I judged from the sharp-peaked tower roofs and the steep-pitched roofs along the remaining walls and buildings that the winter snows at these heights must be far heavier than those I remembered from my childhood near the Dales' western peaks.



Dark slates sheathed all the roofs here, including those on the two ancient stone buildings within the courtyard. One tall structure with a strip of high windows running its full length nestled against the intact long wall, while the squatter, smaller building was tucked to the left inside the gates and abutting an undamaged corner tower. Stone watering troughs for the animals were placed near a sheltered well at the right interior corner. Except for the gaps caused by the earth's subsidence, all the remaining stonework was doubly impressive for the sheer size of the blocks and the tightness of the unmortared joints. I know exactly what you would have done, had you been here with me—you would have peered at the walls and said, "I doubt whether a knife blade could be slipped between those blocks."

I was not given much initial opportunity to survey my surroundings, however, for I had no sooner dismounted than I was confronted by a party of four figures well-cloaked against the late afternoon chill. To my surprise, when an icy wind gust blew open the leading figure's cloak, I saw suspended from her belt a wooden runeboard like those used by our Wise Women of the Dales. She raised her hands in ritual greeting, and offered me a traveler's cup. Cold and stiff as I was from my long day's ride, I savored the taste of the steaming herbed broth—a welcome cup, indeed!

I extracted my hand slate to write the proper response: "For the welcome of the gate, gratitude. To the ruler of this house, fair fortune. I am Mereth of Ferndale, come here to seek knowledge concerning my kin."

The Wise Woman accepted my slate and read my message aloud for the others as calmly as if she was frequently accus-



tomed to receiving mute visitors. Her features and coloring were those of Estcarp's Old Race, but it was heartening to me that she seemed at least familiar with some of our Dales customs. "I am Jonja," she responded, with a brisk nod of her head. "I welcome you to Lornt."

"As do I." A tall, gaunt man beside her stepped forward, his gray eyes proclaiming him also of the Old Race, although age had turned his black hair to silver-white. "I am Ouen. Lornt's scholars allow me to represent them to guests. This is Duratan, our resident chronicler and invaluable advisor."

This second tall man had been a soldier at one time, I thought. He was bearing no sword at his belt, but his body seemed still to balance as if compensating for the familiar weight. When he moved toward me, he swung his left leg stiffly, as I had seen many Dales fighters after war injuries. He held out his hand to the fourth figure. "My lady Nolar," he said, "healer and scholar." Both of them were of the Old Race, but her face was marred by a dark stain like a splash of wine.

"Come within, out of the cold," Jonja suggested. "The hour grows late, and you should rest from your journey. We can confer in the morning concerning your request."

The other three withdrew, while Jonja led me to a guest chamber deep inside the remaining long wall. Stone stairs led up and down, linking what seemed to be countless storage rooms and quiet sleeping cells. Occasional torches supplemented the waning daylight that seeped through slits in the courtyard side of the wall. A few of those curious round light globes like the ones I had seen in Es Castle so many years before also provided additional illumination. My designated room had a low wooden bed whose mattress smelled of sun-

dried rushes. Several plain but well-sewn quilts were folded atop a carved chest. An earthenware pitcher and basin stood on the stone ledge near the door.

“I have asked the cooks to send your evening meal here,” Jonja said as she turned to depart. “Should you care to write any queries for our consideration tomorrow, I will ask a scribe to bring you quills, parchment, and ink. May you find here whatever you came to seek. I wish you fair repose this night.”

The meal sent for me was simple, but well prepared and sustaining. I found the white-fleshed steamed roots unfamiliar but tasty, and the rabbit stew was savory. There was sweet butter and fruit conserve to spread on the rounds of barley bread. A flask of hearty ale complemented the food.

Soon after I had set aside my tray, I heard a tap at the door. A man nearly my age bustled in, his arms full of scrolls and quills. He set his bundles on the bed and darted back out into the corridor to fetch in a writing bench and a study lamp. Before I could write my thanks, he had hurried away.

I have been sitting at that bench for some time now, attempting to set my queries in an orderly array. My earlier letter to you composed aboard the ship was most helpful in clarifying my thoughts. I find myself deeply affected by the weight of years pressing upon this place. The kin lists that you and I compiled in the Dales stretched back many generations, but Lornt’s stones belong to an age unbelievably remote beyond any we knew, even from the Dales’ oldest legends. The keen pursuit of learning here by so many scholars over so long a time makes my total candor not only a courtesy but a necessity. I have written the account of my past, including my odd talents and my one encounter with the Witch at Es



Castle. I suspect that along with the famed kin lists here, there must also be ancient documents concerning magical matters. Perhaps these folk *can* help me find some lore related to my betrothal jewel . . . if they choose to allow me access to their archives. I await the dawn with a mixture of impatience and trepidation.

My sense of apprehension last night was indeed justified. These Lornt folk were evidently as wary of me as I was of them! After I had eaten a hasty morning meal, Jonja herself conducted me to the larger courtyard building, which proved to be the main scholarly repository. Never before had I seen so many scrolls gathered together in one place. We passed through a warren of study nooks and cubicles, divided and flanked by shelves, with countless tables and desks all heaped with sheafs of writings. Scores of elderly men—and a few women—moved about slowly carrying documents or perching on chairs or benches.

Jonja did not speak to any of the scholars, but preceded me up a narrow staircase to the upper level, where she opened a massive door into a study room well illumined by a segment of the high window strip I had noticed from below. The same three Estcarpians who had met me at the gate looked up from their seats around a table littered with documents.

Ouen rose to offer me a high-backed chair. “Come join us, if you will,” he invited. “We have been discussing the significance of your arrival.”

I held out to him the pages I had written, then took my seat, placing my slate on the table before me and propping my staff at my knee. You used to claim to envy my practice of rapping on the floor with my staff to draw attention to my

hand slate. You said it invariably stopped every contentious meeting, and threatened more than once to try a loud shout of your own to award you equal notice . . . but you never did test that tactic, at least, not in my hearing.

Ouen read my statement aloud, not pausing for any comments. When he finished the last page, he looked at me with a keenly assessing gaze. "You are commendably frank," he remarked. "We shall return that courtesy. You should know that Mistress Jonja had alerted us of your approach some hours before your arrival."

Startled, I turned to face the Wise Woman. She had laid her rune-board before her, and touched it now with her right hand. "I bear a certain measure of the foreseeing gift," she explained. "I sensed yesterday that someone associated with Power was drawing near to Lormt, so I asked these friends to join me at the gate. You will understand that any stirring of Power must be carefully examined. Once you had come under Lormt's roof, I consulted both my herbs and my rune-board to determine your allegiance to either the Light or the Dark."

The soldierly Estcarpian, Duratan, nodded and extended his hand above the table. From a small leather bag, he spilled out a few gemstones of various colors, some clear, some cloudy. "I also consulted these crystals of mine," he said. "I see you are surprised that a male could share those talents thought to belong solely to Witches and Wise Women. Kemoc Tregarth, whose talents descend from his mighty father, gave me these crystals. They fall for me in patterns that can convey warnings in time of need. When I tossed them last night concerning you, I received such a warning. You are at the center of potent violence and conflict. . . ."



Before he could finish speaking, I thumped my staff, snatched up my slate and wrote, “No! Violence wrenched away all dear to me twenty years past, in Alizon’s war against our Dales. I have no traffic with any magic, nor do I bring you any danger of conflict!”

Duratan smiled, but there was little warmth in his expression. “I did not mean conflict now,” he corrected. “I was about to say that my crystals warn of trouble yet to come.”

I wiped away my first remark with my slate cloth and scribbled my rejoinder. “I crave your pardon for interrupting. I am an old woman—how can I be a threat to anyone? I fought in defense of our Dales, that is true, chiefly by using my trading experience to supply our men harrying the invaders. But those awful years are gone by. All I seek now is your help in finding whence came my betrothal jewel, and who was my true father.”

Ouen again read my words aloud. The lady Nolar seemed deep in thought, then she observed, “This pendant jewel you describe cannot be a Witch Jewel, for I have seen and handled one of those—it belonged to a Witch I assisted in a quest over a year ago, just after the Turning. I must tell you that I briefly possessed a shard found here at Lormt that proved to have been riven from a stone of great Power far to the south. It was not a clear crystal, however, like your betrothal gem, but a creamy, opaque stone veined with green, and wondrous for its healing gifts when rightly addressed. I shall gladly aid you in searching our archives here for any news regarding your lost jewel.”

“And we can inquire whether old Morfew might spare the time to sort through his interminable kin lists,” suggested Duratan. This time, his smile was warmed by genuine affec-



tion. “He is justly famed for his store of knowledge.”

“I thank you all,” I wrote on my slate. “My questions have not allowed me to rest. I undertook this far journey with the mere hope that Lormt might provide answers. I rejoice that you offer me assistance.”

Thus as the snows of the Month of the Ice Dragon swirled outside, I began my search of Lormt’s documents.



CHAPTER 4

Kasarian—events at Krevonel Castle,
Alizon City (6th Day and early 7th Day,
Moon of the Knife)

I did sleep that night, and I did dream. I awoke before dawn, my bedclothes in a disordered tangle. Although I tried, I could not recall the substance of my dreams, only that there had been vivid colors and strange sounds and whirling motions. Had there not been some prominent object . . . some patterned design? No matter how intense my effort, I could not retrieve any details.

Feeling unsettled, I climbed the tower staircase to our castle's mosaic chamber. Always before when I was troubled, I had found a certain soothing quietness in that room, as if the ancient designs ornamenting the walls and floor diverted both eye and mind. Some of the beasts and plants portrayed were clearly recognizable—the split-tusked boar, the shrieker, the hooded crow, the fever-leaf vine; others were bizarre, with too many legs or heads or fanciful flowers. As I walked slowly around the room, tracing the more faded patterns with my fingers, I felt suddenly convinced that some of these very designs had appeared in my dreams—their colors far brighter, the animal forms moving somehow, as if alive. On

the heels of this insight came a second revelation. Before my last littermate had sailed for the Dales, we had talked in this room. He discussed the formalities I should follow if he were killed in the fighting, including the surrender by his mate of what we termed the elder's key. As I recalled that conversation, the key's image filled my mind's eye.

When had I last seen that intricately engraved key? It was thought to be as old as our Line, descending to the mate of the eldest male upon the birth of her first male. Volorian's mate having died young, the key had been presented to my dam, and upon my sire's murder, passed to my eldest littermate's mate. With all three of my elder littermates now dead, I had assumed that my mate would eventually be given the key . . . except I had so far bred no whelps, not yet having an alliance negotiated for me. As the persisting image of Gurborian's jewel had nagged me the previous night, I found my thoughts were now fixated on the elder's key. I had seen it only twice: once when I chanced to discover my dam sorting through our pack's treasures, and once when the key was passed to my last littermate to be given to his mate. When she had delivered a female, the key had been returned to its special casket.

Casket—that should be the place to look. I hurried to the castle's strongroom and shifted chests and boxes until I uncovered that particular silver casket. The lock was stiff from disuse, but I inserted my sire's key from my belt ring and pried back the casket's top. Pushing aside layers of chains and baubles, I caught a glimpse of bronze-silver. When I drew the key out into the light, I was startled to realize that it, too, had been part of my dream. I could close my eyes and picture every detail of engraving along the shaft and the thick carved bits. I could retrieve no association for the key from my dream, but as I held it in my hand, it balanced sweetly, like a favorite dagger.

But what lock did it fit? The question struck me so force-



fully that I sank down on a bench to consider it. Had anyone in my hearing ever named the purpose of the elder's key? I knew that the breeding females of our Line prized it, but my dam had certainly never told me what chest or door it was meant to unlock. If a key no longer functioned as such, why should it be handed down through generations? There *had* to be a matching lock . . . but where?

I shook my aching head. Why should the elder's key suddenly be so important to me? Where was its lock? Because the key was likely as old as our castle, I reasoned that it must be associated with an equally old lock. I swiftly surveyed all of our treasure chests, but none of them bore locks of the proper size or metal. Doors—there must be dozens of doors in the oldest parts of the castle. Before I could pursue my thoughts any further, I was called to attend to baronial duties. I tucked the key inside my belt wallet until I could snatch the time to continue my investigations.

No opportunity occurred that day, and I was required to attend more Assembly functions that evening. By the time I retired to bed, I had temporarily forgotten the elder's key, but it was not finished with me.

I awoke as if a sword blade had been pressed against my cheek. I was seized by a conviction: the key did belong to a lock made of the same metal, a lock in a very particular door. My visual impression of the door was so strong that I put out my hand to touch its rough wooden surface, only to clutch empty air. My vision had been another dream. I sat up, frustrated and angry at first, then intrigued. I could not have imagined a door in such detail—I must have seen it at some time, in some place. Here, in this castle—the words echoed in my mind.

I pulled on my boots and lit a small hand lantern. What better time to search unnoticed than in these hours when few eyes were likely to be open? I extracted the key from my

wallet, and as I held it in my hand, I vow I sensed a tenuous directional pull leading downward.

With the key in one hand and the lantern in the other, I descended the remoter back staircases. One dusty passageway to the left beckoned, then I sought more stairs, always going down. The cellars deep beneath the castle had once provided dungeons, but nowadays were used for storage or abandoned to the silent darkness. Never before had I ventured so far below. The tugging sensation in my mind seemed to be growing more pronounced. I hurried through another passageway, descended a flight of stairs whose gritty steps had not been disturbed for years. My lantern light awoke an answering flash of bronze-silver across the antechamber. I had found the door of my dream vision.

I raised the elder's key and inserted it in the massive lock. When I turned the key, the door opened soundlessly, as if both lock and hinges had been freshly oiled. The space beyond was dark, but the air wafting out was sweet. I had heard of locked rooms full of poisonous vapors sealed to snare the unwary, so I thrust my lantern inside, pushing it along the paving stones. I watched the flame closely, but it burned bright and unaffected. Extracting the key from the lock, I crossed the threshold.

The stonewalled chamber within was bare—no furnishings, no wall hangings, no rugs. I hesitated, disappointed, then a movement among the shadows caught my eye, and I whirled around. The door was closing behind me. Before I could reach back to halt it, the door closed and I heard the lock engage.

Such untoward actions raised the dreaded possibility of magic. The very Betrayal that founded Alizon a thousand years before had been plotted by mages. Since that time, no Alizonder baron of any wit had trusted any magic-wielder. Alizon had always suffered at the hands of images and Witches.



Still, I was of the Line Sired by Krevonel. This was Alizon City, not Estcarp, and I was properly armed. How could magic possibly infiltrate into the roots of Krevonel Castle? Besides, I held the elder's key in my hand; it had opened the door to this room once. Why should it not function so again?

As I turned toward the door, I think it was the distinct change in the quality of the light that diverted my attention from the lock. The yellow light cast by my lantern from the floor was fast being overwhelmed by a white glare starkly outlining my shadow against the bare wall fitted with the door.

I spun around immediately, crouching as I drew my belt dagger in my left hand. To my amazement, the white light was emanating from a hand-sized spot glowing in mid air at the center of the room. Even as I watched, transfixed, the spot expanded, stretching into an oval tall and wide enough to encompass a man's body. The area within this peculiar space was opaque, but tremulous, like a bank of curdled clouds suffused by moonlight. Simultaneously repelled and attracted by it, I neared it cautiously, circling all the way around it. It continued to hang motionless, its lower rim a step above the floor level.

I thrust my dagger blade warily into its center. The point penetrated unimpeded, vanishing from sight as if it were plunging into a milky liquid. I snatched back my blade. It appeared unaffected, being neither hotter, colder, nor wetter than before.

I suddenly realized that I was still gripping the elder's key in my right hand. That strange drawing sensation I had felt earlier resumed with even stronger intensity. Whatever lay within or beyond that oval of light was attracting the key toward it. Driven to investigate this potential breach of security that could threaten not only Krevonel Castle but Alizon

City itself, I clasped my dagger firmly in my left hand, raised my boot, and stepped into the oval.

Instantly, I was blinded, deafened, and stricken as if by winter's iciest blasts. I was not physically touched, yet my body seemed somehow twisted. Before I could cry out, my foot completed its step back onto a level stone surface, and my other senses returned.

But I was no longer in Krevonel's lower chamber—this space was vast, the walls extending out of sight into dense shadows. To my dismay, there were other people in this chamber. Two of them held lanterns, and by that yellow light and the white glare from the oval portal now behind me, I recognized Alizon's direst enemies: gray robes, gray eyes, black hair—male and female Estcarpians! Numbed and shaken by my passage through the light portal, I was afflicted by a roaring in my ears and dimming sight. I tried to speak, to raise my dagger to defend myself, but smothering darkness enveloped me and I felt myself falling.



CHAPTER 5

Mereth—beginning her account requested for Lornt’s archives: events at Lornt (early 7th Day, Month of the Ice Dragon)

Morfew himself has asked me to record my experiences, commencing with the extraordinary occurrence in one of Lornt’s cellars disclosed by the earthquake. I have thus set aside my private journal to compose this report for the archives. In view of the cascading events that overwhelmed my personal quest, all of our collective energies have become engaged in a more urgent search, upon whose outcome the present fates of whole lands may depend.

But my mind outraces my quill, and fingers stiffened by age require frequent warming at Morfew’s brazier. As any good trader strives to preserve his accounts in order, so shall I begin properly at the beginning of this remarkable tale.

It was near the second week of the Month of the Ice Dragon, and I had resided at Lornt for only two days when I was abruptly jarred from sleep as if by a battle shout. I kindled a night lantern, wrapped myself in my warmest robe, and secured the padded felt slippers that Ouen had given me. The corridor outside my guest chamber appeared deserted. I

heard no stirrings or sounds of distress . . . yet I felt irresistibly drawn to descend the staircase and continue to seek more stairs leading farther downward. I had no clear notion of the object of this singular late-night excursion, but I pressed forward through the empty passageways until I simultaneously spied the flicker of other lamps down an adjoining corridor, and heard the muffled rasp of leather and fabric against stone.

Jonja emerged ahead of me, closely followed by Duratan, Nolar, and Ouen. They were evidently as surprised to see me as I was to encounter them.

Duratan raised his lamp as I approached them. "Why are you wandering here at this hour?" he demanded.

Fortunately, I always kept a hand slate and chalk in the pockets of all my robes. "I was awakened," I wrote, groping for the words to explain my presence. "I found no one near my guest chamber, but I felt obligated to descend and seek the cause of my disquiet."

Jonja nodded, her face grim-set. "Power is stirring, far beneath the settled levels of Lormt. Each of us was also roused from sleep. We must hurry to determine the source of the disturbance. The Turning exposed many storage areas below this level. I sense a growing pulse of Power thence. Come!"

That earlier distortion of the earth had indeed twisted and tilted the stone paving blocks, as well as cracking some of the walls. We picked our way gingerly around and between the displaced stones as we continued our descent. Suddenly, a great space opened around us. Our small lights were mere sparks within a chamber in which Captain Halbec could easily have moored his trading vessel, masts and all.



Nolar moved her head like a hound questing for an elusive scent. “Can you not feel it?” she asked. “The very air is tingling. Look! Over there, to the left!”

Before any of us could step forward, a spot of opalescent light shimmered at eye level not ten paces away. I stared at it, not knowing whether to advance or retreat. As I watched, the spot of light expanded into a man-sized oval. Duratan’s free hand dropped to his belt. I was heartened to see him draw a substantial, long-bladed forester’s knife. Setting my lantern on the floor, I grasped my staff in both hands. If the need arose, I had not forgotten how to wield it as a weapon.

The oval’s milky surface roiled as a booted foot emerged through it, followed by the remainder of a tall man’s body. Nolar gasped audibly. Had I possessed a voice, I should have joined her. The intruder was obviously an Alizonder soldier.

I had hoped never again to have to look upon those arch-enemies of our Dales. Their distinguishing features were seared into my memory—feral green eyes, short white-silver hair, hooked noses, teeth sharp as those of their own cursed hounds. From his high-sided boots to his blue-green tunic and tight-fitting breeches, this was a typical Alizonder soldier . . . and yet, on closer examination, perhaps not just a mere soldier. As the oval behind him contracted in size, its light flashed on a decorative gold chain across his chest, and an ornate dagger clutched in his left hand. At the sight of us, his eyes widened with alarm. He swayed unsteadily, gave a sudden strangled cry, and collapsed to the floor, just as the shrinking light spot vanished.

Duratan was the first of us to move, kneeling quickly to disarm the Alizonder. He snatched away the dagger, tossing it out of reach, then removed several other weapons from the

wide leather belt—a dart gun, several throwing knives, and some objects I could not recognize.

Without making a conscious decision, I found myself stooping next to Duratan to grasp the intruder's extended right hand. The Alizonder's fingers were tightly clenched around a cold metal object—a heavy key, I soon realized, when I pried it loose. The instant it touched my flesh, it seemed to cleave to my hand. I was assailed by a burst of images flowing into my mind. In all my years of sensing ownership ties to objects, I had never experienced such an intense flood of concentrated information. I dropped from my crouching position to sit directly on the floor, squeezing shut my eyes to try to control my disorientation. As soon as I could regain my breath, I opened my eyes, and thrust the key into my pocket to halt its mental intrusion. Seizing my slate, I hastened to write what I had learned.

Nolar had observed my preoccupation. Perhaps fearing that I had swooned, she kindly bent down to brace her arm around my shoulders. When she saw that I was urgently writing, however, she retrieved my lantern and voiced my startling revelations. "I sense from the key in his hand that this enemy is Kasarian of the Line of Krevonel," Nolar read from my slate. "By magical means he does not understand, he has come here from the vaults beneath his family's castle in Alizon City!"

The members of the Lornt party exclaimed, all talking at once, but I could not focus on what they were saying. My body was shaking as if with an ague. Violent, conflicting feelings raced through my mind—white-hot hatred for those evil Hounds who had ravaged our Dales, killing my beloved . . . but also equally burning curiosity. What magic could convey



a living man so many leagues, and how could I be able to sense identifying facts about my deadliest enemies when I knew only a handful of words in the Alizonian speech?

Ouen's clear voice suddenly claimed my attention. "We must send for Morfew at once. When this Alizonder recovers his senses, we shall likely require the aid of an Alizonian speaker."

Nolar gently touched my shoulder. "If I cannot provide healing assistance for you, I can go rouse Morfew."

"Pray do not be concerned for me," I scribbled on my slate. "I am amazed rather than ailing."

"Then I shall hasten to Morfew's chamber," Nolar said, taking one of the lanterns to light her way.

Jonja had been carefully examining the Alizonder's gear. Turning to me, she asked, "Can your gift of insightful touch extract more information for us about this Kasarian before he awakens? The greater our knowledge of the threat he poses, the better."

Duratan nodded in agreement. "Perhaps his House badge or his baron's chain may speak to you, lady, for if I am not mistaken, this man is a war baron or a land baron. His array of weapons argues the former, while the quality of his gear suggests the latter."

At my age, rising from a stone floor consumes inordinate time and effort, so I simply hitched my skirt and crawled back to the senseless figure. His unlined face, relaxed in unconsciousness, seemed superficially vulnerable. I was struck by his relative youth—he could scarcely be thirty years of age. At least, I thought grudgingly, this particular Alizonder was too young to have taken part in the invasion of the Dales.

I could not wholly disguise my reluctance as I reached out



to touch the Alizonder's tunic. I shunned the hateful Hound's head badge on the right breast, and forced myself to finger his House badge on the left, a finely embroidered patch of three blue darts worked in a triangular array against a white background. The instant resulting pressure of mental images made me recoil, breaking contact. I took a deep breath, braced one hand on a paving stone, and grasped his baronial chain in my other hand.

I shut my eyes, stricken by clamoring images. It was as if I were personally viewing a great torch-lit assembly of Alizonders. I *knew* it was the recent New Year's Presentation of Whelps, and the horrifying figure who seemed to have a hound's head was actually the Lord Baron Norandor, wearing a ceremonial mask. Another richly dressed baron arose from his knees before the Lord Baron's throne . . . his name came to me, Gurborian. When he drew back and turned, I was jolted to behold my betrothal jewel suspended from his neck chain! I must have swooned at that point, for I was next aware of a flask of wine being pressed to my lips, and Jonja's voice calling my name.

I gestured for my hand slate. Jonja read the words aloud as swiftly as I could write them. "I have just seen my betrothal jewel being worn by an Alizonder baron at their New Year's Assembly. He is the Baron Gurborian of the Line Sired by Reptur, murderer of this man's father, and his archenemy."

Duratan's exclamation was lost in the general astonished babble. I remained seated on the stone floor, trembling from its physical chill as well as my sensing experience. Previously, my visions of lost articles or places to search for them had come to me in fragmentary dreams. I could not recall so vivid and coherent an impression as this, and certainly never



before while I was awake.

Ouen began to speak, but Jonja interrupted. “Look!” she said sharply. “Our uninvited visitor is stirring.”

“And feeling for his weapons,” Duratan observed. “He will be disappointed to find them missing.”

I reached for my staff, and with Jonja’s assistance, rose to my feet. I did not want to be at a disadvantage to any Ali-zonder, whether he was armed or disarmed.



CHAPTER 6

Kasarian—his account requested for Lormt's archives, following his sudden transport to Lormt (7th Day, Moon of the Knife/Month of the Ice Dragon)

Muffled voices intruded into the darkness enfolding me . . . I could hear people talking, but their words were unintelligible. As I became increasingly aware, I struggled to move my limbs. Hard, cold . . . stone beneath me—why should I be lying on a stone floor? My left hand was empty—where was my dagger? I felt for my throwing knives, but my belt loops were stripped bare of all weapons. Worse still, the elder's key was no longer in my right hand. Had I been robbed as well as disarmed? I strove to deal with a daunting rush to memories. I had stepped through that eldritch oval of light deep beneath Krevonel Castle, and by some foul magic, I had evidently been spirited elsewhere. Estcarpian enemies—just before the darkness had claimed me, I had seen Estcarpians.

I opened my eyes, and sat up cautiously to survey my situation. I was indeed outnumbered by foes, but so far, they had only disarmed me, not actively attacked me—nor had they stolen my baron's chain or belt wallet. As soon as I moved, they had stopped speaking. The five of us sat—or stood—in



silence, peering tensely at one another. I wondered if more enemies could be lurking beyond the flickering, limited lantern light. The portal through which I had come had disappeared, depriving us of its additional illumination.

This chamber was vast—distant walls and ceilings receded into impenetrable darkness. Unsettling as my surroundings were, I was more immediately concerned with the presence of my adversaries. The four figures before me were formidable: two males of Estcarp's witchly Old Race, one Old Race female garbed like the spell-casting hags of the Dales, and one other startling female. For a heart-stopping instant, due to her properly white hair, pale eyes, and fair skin, I almost mistook her for an Alizonder, but her obvious comradeship with these Witch folk and her inappropriate stance quickly altered my opinion. She was grasping a sturdy staff as if she knew how to wield it; quite impossible for an Alizonder female. When I stood up to attain a better vantage, she was the closest to me. Her hands betrayed her advanced age. Why should an elderly female, clearly not an Estcarpian, join in company with Old Race fighters and a spell-casting hag?

Although he bore no sword, the old male appeared to be the sire of the group. He gestured toward some wooden benches nearby, and said in slowly, carefully-pronounced Estcarpian, "Let us sit down and talk together peacefully."

It had been some time since I had heard the enemy's speech. A few of my fellow barons with scholarly talents had learned the rudiments of Estcarpian in order to be able to question the rare live prisoners that we seized within our borders, but I had not participated in an interrogation for several years. I judged it prudent at this point to conceal my understanding until I had a better assessment of my position. I

therefore feigned ignorance of his words, and countered in Alizonian, "May I be told where I am and who you are?"

The younger male held a serviceable knife in his right hand, but he did not flourish it. His easy familiarity with the weapon and his erect bearing suggested soldierly experience. Furthermore, he limped when he moved, as if maimed from an injury to his left leg. As soon as I spoke, he faced the old male, and said impatiently, "Surely Morfew has been roused by now! As you predicted, we do require his skill with Alizonian speech."

Morfew—the name almost caused me to betray myself, but I disguised my reaction by taking a step to one side. There had once been a certain noble Line in Alizon, before my sire's Presentation. I had seen its breeding lists among the baronial records, and the males' names took that form. I was searching my memory for the name of the Line Sire when a spark of light pricked the distant darkness.

As the light grew closer, I could see two slowly moving figures. An Old Race female led the way, carrying the lantern, which disclosed a garish birth stain across her face. I suppressed a shudder. We of Alizon do not allow deformed whelps to live. Far better for each Line to breed only the strong and the fit. The female stretched back her free hand to steady a thin, elderly man with long white hair. Surely, I thought, he could not be an Alizonder . . . but when he sat down on a bench near to me, he peered at me with pale blue eyes and addressed me in halting Alizonian.

You have nothing to fear in this place, young man, he said. "We intend you no harm. I am Morfew. . . ."

"Not of the Line Sired by Ternak!" I interrupted him, for the name had come to my mind.



He blinked at me, rather like an owl disturbed from its daytime slumber. “My sire was bred of that Line, yes,” he replied, “but it has been sixty years since I have received any word of our pack. You will excuse my rough speech—I am the sole Alizonder resident here, so my tongue’s facility has declined from lack of practice.”

“I must relate hard news of your Line from a time before my whelping,” I said. “The Line Sired by Ternak has been considered dead these many years since the last known males perished in the blood feud.”

Morfew grasped the edge of the bench, his face drained of all color. “Blood feud. . . .” he whispered, then shook his head as if to clear it. “Wait. Matters concerning my pack can be discussed later. I must convey your words to my friends. This man knows my family,” he told the others in Estcarpian. “He bears ill tidings from long ago; they have been destroyed.”

“I sorrow that you must receive such dire word from the past,” the Old Race sire responded, “yet we need to know now who this man is and for what purpose he has come here.”

Morfew bowed his head for a moment, then stared straight at me. “You wear a baron’s chain,” he noted. “Who sired your Line? Why have you come to us?”

I thought quickly. All the extensive Ternak lands had been seized by the Lord Baron of that day. Half had been awarded to the survivors of the blood feud, but it could be possible that this old baron might mount a valid claim for his land rights. It was advisable to speak him fair. I saluted him properly, touching first my Hound badge, then my Line badge. “I hail you, Morfew, revealed restored Baron of the Line Sired by Ternak. I am Kasarian, of the Line Sired by Krevonel. I know

not how I come to stand before you in this strange place. I stepped through a curious portal in Alizon, and must assume that I have been delivered here by magic. Is this place near to our common border?"

Morfew held up a restraining hand. "You have indeed been transported a great distance, young man. These vaults lie beneath the citadel of Lormt, far to Alizon's south."

I could not believe him. I had of course heard of Lormt. In Alizon, it was dismissed as an isolated Estcarpian castle not worth assaulting, a distant gathering place for useless, doddering scholars who scrabbled among dusty writings. Even Estcarp's Witches scorned the old males who laired at Lormt. I had certainly never expected to travel thither.

The soldierly Estcarpian sheathed his knife and stooped to pick up a lantern. "Can we not find a more comfortable place than this for our conversation?" he asked the old sire.

Morfew rose slowly from his bench. "By all means," he agreed fervently. "My bones do not find these cellars hospitable." Turning to me, he added in Alizonian, "Come along, young man. Let us seek a warmer, *softer* place to sit and talk."

I noticed that they arranged for me to walk in their midst, for the spell-casting hag beckoned for me to follow her, and the soldierly male walked closely behind me.

As we picked our way around and over cracked and displaced stonework, I wondered what catastrophe had befallen this place. The massive blocks and style of the joinery implied an enormous edifice above us, perhaps as old as my own castle. We passed through winding corridors and up many stairs, then suddenly an icy wind gushed through an outer door as we emerged onto the snow-covered stones of a night-



shadowed courtyard.

Never had I beheld such a space enclosed by towered walls. Moonlight reflected on the snow revealed severe damage to parts of the rectangular enclosure. Teeth chattering in the chill, I clasped my arms tightly across my chest and glanced upward. I halted so abruptly that the soldier following behind collided with me. “The stars!” I exclaimed, jarred into speech. “Beyond the walls—mountains!”

Morfew touched my arm, evidently for reassurance. “This *is* Lornt,” he said. “The skies here are somewhat different from those above Alizon City, and we are truly tucked away among the high peaks. At least we have our cloaks to shield us from the wind. Hurry along—we have not much farther to go to reach a sheltered fire-side.”

A tall stone building reared before us, and the spell hag plunged into a recessed doorway at its base. We climbed yet more stairs, then the hag opened a heavy door into a snug study lined with scroll-stacked shelves. Kneeling by the hearth, she coaxed a fire from coals banked for the night.

Morfew settled himself on a cushioned chair at the head of a long table, and offered me the chair to his left. The soldier withdrew briefly, then returned with a tray of pewter goblets and a flask of ale, which he poured into a pannikin to warm over the fire. I let the others sip their brew before I tasted my portion. I had noticed that the goblet I chose was empty before the pouring; it seemed unlikely that they would try to poison me at this juncture. Morfew must have observed my brief hesitation, for he smiled and said, “We keep no poisons here, only old documents.”

The soldier drew a leather bag from his belt and spilled from it a scattering of crystals upon the table surface. At

the same time, the spell hag placed in front of her a carved wooden board ornamented with red, black, and gold markings.

I felt the hair rise on the back of my neck. Was I to be subjected to Estcarpian magic? “Morfew,” I demanded, “What means this display?”

“Do not be disturbed,” he replied in a soothing tone. “My friends are merely testing whether any Power of the Dark presently threatens us.” Morfew repeated his remark in Estcarpian.

The soldier frowned as he scooped up his crystals and tossed them a second time. “I see no taint of the Dark about him,” he said, glancing dubiously at me. “There are, however, strong indications of pending danger.”

“My rune-board confirms your crystals,” said the spell hag, as she returned the wooden strip to her belt fastening.

Stung by their remarks, I held my tongue until Morfew had repeated their words in Alizonian, then I asserted, “My Line has ever rejected any resort to magework. What taint of the Dark do you have reason to associate with me?”

I paused, struck by a tantalizing thought. Could it be possible that these folk might oppose Gurborian’s plotting? If they reviled Dark magic, would they not despise any Escorian alliance proposed by Alizon? I decided to take a calculated risk. “How stand you anent any traffic with the Dark Ones of Escore?” I inquired. “In my studies of ancient lore, I have read that Estcarp once warred mightily with those from the east, but we have heard naught further in Alizon for many years. Is there still enmity between Estcarp’s rulers and Escore’s mages?”

Morfew seemed intrigued. “What a curious question,” he



observed. After he had relayed my words to the others, he resumed in Alizonian. “As I try to recall how matters were viewed in Alizon, my counter question to you would be, ‘Why do you ask that? On which side does your interest lie?’ But pray contain your reply for a moment, for I perceive an opportunity to explain to you our somewhat different ways of thinking here at Lornt. More than fifty years ago, I was prevented from pursuing knowledge in Alizon, so I journeyed here, where all scholars are welcome to reside.

“You must understand, young man, that Lornt has no rulers like Alizon’s Lord Baron and his Baronial Council. As a community of scholars, our sole purpose is to seek and organize lost lore from the past. The Council of Estcarp’s Witches scorns us for our predominant maleness, but tends chiefly to ignore us. We thus rarely affect one another—still, two years ago we suffered from their great Turning of the land, which caused the damage you observed to our walls and foundations. For our part, we prefer to be left undisturbed, each of us working as he chooses.

“As for Escore,” Morfew continued, “we have had scant word of it until relatively recent years, when some of the Old Race have ventured there. Puissant powers still abide in that land, some pledging homage to the Light, but others serving the Dark. I am certain that I speak for Ouen, our chief scholar (he gestured at the old sire), when I say that Lornt stands firmly for the Light.”

The others around the table hearkened closely to his translation, their expressions grave.

“But would you fight against Escore’s Dark mages?” I persisted. “Would you defend this place against them?”

Appearing alarmed, Morfew repeated my questions. The



soldierly Estcarpian frowned at me, and snapped, “Do you warn us or threaten us?”

A sudden loud thump made us all start in our chairs. The white-haired old female had pounded her staff on the floor. She appeared to be unable to speak—yet another maimed foe!—since she scribbled on a slate and handed it to the old sire so that he could voice her message. “Enough questions,” he read aloud. “Answers must now be offered.”



CHAPTER 7

Mereth—events at Lormt
(early 7th Day, Month of
the Ice Dragon/
Moon of the Knife)

As we plodded back toward Lormt's upper levels, I labored under a double burden: the physical exertion of retracing our way through all those corridors and staircases, added to the internal exertion of controlling my seething feelings. I could scarcely suppress my sense of dread and revulsion at being within actual touching distance of an Alizonder.

It was true that Morfew was also of that cursed race, but from the moment I had met him, I discerned that his spirit was distinctly different from those of his rapacious countrymen. Like Dame Gwersa, Morfew was a true scholar. In recent years, he had been immersed in kinship studies. A quantity of documents had been sent to Lormt from the collection of Ostbor, an elderly Estcarpian famed for his kinship knowledge, who had died some months before the Turning. The lady Nolar had been Ostbor's student, Morfew told me, and upon her settling at Lormt, she had assisted him greatly in bringing some order to her former master's scrolls. Vast quantities of additional kinship records had been disclosed when Lormt's hidden cellars were revealed by the Turning. I

had just begun to work with Morfew and Nolar on that section of Lornt's archives dealing with the Dales when this genuinely threatening Alizonder shattered our peace.

I told myself that this young Alizonder baron could have been no more than a child at the time of the invasion. It was unreasonable of me to hold Kasarian personally responsible for the injuries that I and other Dalesfolk had suffered . . . and yet he was an Alizonder baron, and thus represented our direst foes. Countering my aversion was my burning curiosity. He *had* to know something about my betrothal jewel, for it was by his remembered vision that I had seen it worn by his family's enemy. I realized that I would have to curb my natural loathing and seek to learn more from Kasarian of Krevonel . . . if he, in turn, would deign to talk to me.

We settled ourselves at last in Ouen's study, where Duratan served us a most welcome measure of warmed ale. Kasarian markedly refrained from tasting his share until after we had sampled ours.

Duratan's and Jonja's employment of their magical foreseeing tools evoked a forceful rejection by Kasarian for any form of what he branded "magework." After a pause to deliberate, he pressed us to state whether Lornt would defend itself against the Dark mages, who were rumored to hold parts of Escore, the magic-haunted land beyond the mountains bordering Estcarp to the east.

When Duratan sharply demanded whether the baron was warning us or threatening us, I judged that it was time to interrupt before anger—however well-justified—flared into actual violence. I thumped my staff on the floor, and was gratified when all eyes immediately focused on me. Ouen read aloud my message: "Enough questions. Answers must



be offered.”

An impish smile brightened Morfew’s face. “Dear lady,” he began, “how helpful of you to direct us to an essential point. Each side in this discussion possesses information desired by the other. Young man . . .” Morfew peered keenly at the Alizonder and asked in Estcarpian, “Am I not correct in believing that you can understand most of what we say? The time required for our exchanges could be halved if I did not have to repeat every statement in both tongues.”

The Alizonder smiled—an unpleasant grimace, disclosing his hound-sharp teeth. “You said your Alizonian was slack from disuse,” he responded in halting but intelligible Estcarpian. “I also find my Estcarpian similarly rust-bound. If you would speak slowly and assist me as needed. . . .”

“I thought as much,” said Morfew. “Let us try, then, to be as simple and clear as we can, for all our sakes. Since you have given us your name, you should know the names of my colleagues. This is Ouen, our chief scholar, as I just mentioned. Next to him is Duratan, a former Borderer and now our able chronicler; his lady wife Nolar, healer and scholar; Jonja, our resident Wise Woman; and Mereth, who has recently voyaged here from the Dales to pursue kinship queries.”

The Alizonder gazed intently at each of us in turn, then made a graceful gesture, touching his House badge. “I am honored to speak in such a company,” he said.

“These are troubling questions about Escore,” mused Ouen. “Morfew, did you not some time ago examine our archives seeking information concerning Escore?”

“So I did, Master Ouen.” The old scholar rubbed his hands together, a habit he indulged, I had noticed, whenever he saw

an opportunity to share the fruits of his inquiries. “Kemoc Tregarth came here five years ago to search for lore about the east. In assisting him, I discovered that a thousand years before, the virulent Dark forces in Escore overpowered those of the Light. As they fled for their lives, the remnant of the Light’s forces worked a great magic spell to raise a wall of mountains to impede all further access to Escore. At the same time, they set a block in the minds of the Old Race to prevent any thought of the eastern direction. From those displaced Old Race folk arose the Witches of Estcarp. Only since the recent Turning of the earth—a Second Turning, one might say—has the Old Race again become able to think of or indeed travel to the east.”

Morfew paused to reflect, then resumed, “I can recall only one incident regarding encounters with Escorian mages in Estcarp. Immediately after the Turning, when traveling far to the southwest, Nolar was captured by a Dark mage released by those very earthquakes from a binding spell set upon him at the time of the First Turning. Fortunately, that single, dangerous echo from ancient Escore was banished by the assistance of a Witch and certain localized powers. Your questions, however, imply some present threat. Do you bring us warning of evil stirring even now in Escore?”

Kasarian had listened intently, sitting motionless except for the fingers of his right hand, which rhythmically turned his gold signet ring. When Morfew posed his question, Kasarian spread both hands flat on the table. His fingers were long and supple, and I had observed from walking behind him how quickly and surely he moved. I suspected he would be a deadly opponent with sword or knife.

“I can tell you no names of Escore’s mages,” he admitted



frankly, “but I have reason to believe that intense efforts are being made by a certain faction in Alizon to forge an alliance with such Dark forces. The roots of this treason stretch back to the time of the Kolder’s initial meddling. The alliance that Lord Baron Facellian formed with the Kolder over twenty years ago was a disaster for Alizon. The Kolder sought dominion over the Dales, but contrived to spend our fighters’ blood to obtain their desire. After inciting us to invade the Dales, they then abandoned us, failing to supply the vital aid they had promised. Well before the last of our invading Hounds were stranded across the sea and wiped out, it was apparent that the war was lost. Lords Baron of Alizon do not lose wars and survive. Mallandor took the throne. . . .”

Kasarian broke off to refresh himself with more ale. My thoughts were clamoring—it was as well that I had no voice, or I would have screamed at him. I clutched my staff until my knuckles ached. That he should dismiss so coolly the torment that Alizon had inflicted upon our Dales! And yet . . . I had never before considered how Alizon must have reacted when their Kolder alliance had failed them so miserably. With their fighting ships and trade ships, the blessed Sulcar had harried Alizon’s coast, and intercepted the Alizonders’ ships, thus contributing to the Kolder’s inability to supply the invaders. Suddenly, I could understand why Alizon’s version of those frantic years would require excuses as well as revenge for what they had to view as a sure victory snatched away from them. When Kasarian resumed his tale, I forced my fingers to relax their grip on my staff.

“There remained yet a few of the cursed Kolder in Alizon City,” Kasarian continued. “They bided their time, strengthening their ties with certain of our barons, and attempting to



gain access to Lord Baron Mallandor's ear. Three years ago, the faction favoring the Kolder persuaded Mallandor that an energetic effort must be made to bring new Kolder forces to Alizon by means of a Gate to be opened by magic. It was proposed that unguarded Witch pups could be brought from Estcarp to provide the Power needed for the Kolder's Gate spell."

Jonja seized her goblet so fiercely that I feared she would snap its stem. "We were told of that horrid raid," she said, her voice shaking. "It was an evil affront to all of Estcarp."

Kasarian nodded calmly. "I was opposed to the tactic from its first suggestion," he said. "The ill-advised ploy failed disastrously, as I had suspected it would, leaving all of the Kolder dead. The Witchlings escaped, fleeing back into Estcarp. Another faction, headed by Baron Gurborian, then argued that Alizon should forget the Kolder and employ a bold new strategy. Gurborian's chief henchman, Gratch from blighted Gorm, suggested that we could sweep away our enemies with assistance from other and closer sources. Through inquiries, he had identified certain lower-level mages in the mountains between Alizon and Escore. Gurborian endorsed Gratch's plan to seek a linkage with the Dark forces still to be found in Escore. With the might of Escore's Dark mages employed on Alizon's behalf, he asserted that Alizon could occupy all of the lands west of the mountains—Estcarp, Karsten, as far south as we cared to extend."

"And just what would these Dark mages of Escore gain from such an alliance with Alizon?" asked Morfew, his hands clenched into fists.

"They would, of course, be proclaimed fully sovereign in all lands east of the mountains," Kasarian replied.



Ouen emitted a muffled snort. “Presumably they already consider themselves sovereign in those areas they control,” he stated. “Other folk also share those lands to the east. I cannot believe that the Dark mages tremble for fear that their scattered fiefdoms are at any risk from western invasion across the mountains. As you describe Gurborian’s plan, the Dark mages would gain only a gilding of words upon the already existing order of rule.”

“Yet I perceive one factor to bear in mind,” Morfew observed thoughtfully. “Such an alliance for Escore, should it result in the destruction of Estcarp, could be seen as a gratifying, if overly long-delayed revenge of sorts upon the Old Race for the ancient affront of the First Turning.”

I had been watching Duratan, whose stern expression had grown more severe throughout the discussion. “Let us consider another question for a moment,” he said in a disarmingly mild tone. “Why should a baron of Alizon openly disclose this previously unsuspected threat to Estcarp? Surely Alizon would rejoice in Estcarp’s fall, not choose to warn us in advance of any dire peril.”

Each one of us around the table regarded Kasarian warily as we awaited his explanation.



CHAPTER 8

Kasarian—events at Lornt
(7th Day, Moon of the Knife
/Month of the Ice Dragon)

I found this confrontation with enemies who might possibly be manipulated into temporarily useful allies to be as exhilarating as a hunt at full gallop after the split-tusked boar . . . yet I was keenly aware that I was treading upon a sword's edge. Constant vigilance was imperative, even if the enemy of one's enemy did necessarily share some common aims. The interests of one's Line and of Alizon itself had always to be foremost in crafting any would-be alliance.

I reasoned that these scholars at Lornt might well possess information about Escore that I could use to counter Gurborian's efforts. It would not be advisable, however, to reveal to them that Gurborian was plotting to overthrow Lord Baron Norandor. That was purely an internal Alizonian matter, potentially hurtful should Alizon's enemies learn of it prematurely, and turn it to their advantage.

I therefore chose my words with extreme care, emphasizing the potential danger to Estcarp should Gurborian's faction forge an alignment with Escore's Dark mages. The Lornt



folk swiftly grasped the implications, I thought, but Duratan, their soldier, inquired why I, a presumed enemy, should warn them in advance? It was a clever question, doubtless intended to expose my motives. Fortunately, I had a ready answer, doubly impressive because it was both plausible and true.

“If Alizon must fight for territory,” I told him, “it should be with our own strength. Alizon’s barons who hold to the methods proved successful in the past have always shunned magic, whether it was wielded by Escorians or Kolder. I assure you that the Line Sired by Krevonel has consistently opposed any reliance upon magic. This notion of Gurborian’s that Estcarp’s Witch magic can be defeated by Escore’s Dark magic is yet another false idea, worse even than our previous recourse to the Kolder’s magic. What benefits did Alizon ever gain from the Kolder? My three elder littermates were all slain in the war with the Dales. Alizon gained nothing from that Kolder-inspired slaughter except some few baubles wrested from the Dales at a deplorable cost, and rivalries among the survivors for inherited baronies.”

Another volley of thumps from the old female’s staff interrupted me. She wrote furiously on her slate, and pushed it across the table to Morfew. “You say some baubles were taken from the Dales,” Morfew read aloud. “Have you ever seen or heard of one particular jewel—an egg-sized, blue-gray stone set as a pendant on a silver chain?”

Bemused, yet startled, I thought that they could refer to only the one such stone. “Baron Gurborian was awarded a jewel of that description,” I replied cautiously. “It had been sent back from the Dales early in the invasion, and was considered to be one of the few prime treasures of the campaign.”

Although the Lornt folk's expressions were guarded, I could see that they were keenly interested. Why should they care about old booty from the Dales . . . unless the mute female might assert some property claim?

She retrieved her slate and wrote a further message. "That pendant belonged to my family," Morfew read aloud. "I have reason to believe that the stone may be an object of Power. Is Baron Gurborian aware of the nature of his prize?"

I was taken aback. The only stones of Power known to us were those cursed jewels wielded by Estcarp's Witches. If Gurborian's stone was concerned with magic, that would explain the peculiar weakness that afflicted me during and after the Baronial Assembly, when I had been in the same chamber with it . . . possibly even the dreams that assailed me later that same night. But Gurborian appeared totally unaffected, and he had been wearing the frightful object.

"No," I told them honestly, "I do not think that Gurborian at all suspects that he possesses more than a mere jewel. We of Alizon are not . . . familiar with magical objects, and would not likely recognize that aspect unless it was revealed to us."

Morfew stirred uneasily in his chair. "If Baron Gurborian should meet with any Escorian mages while wearing the pendant," he fretted, "they would immediately sense the true nature of the stone."

I slapped my hand on the table to emphasize my words. "All the greater cause," I asserted, "to prevent Gurborian and his faction from arranging any such meeting. I do not know how this particular stone of Power might be wielded, but surely it would be vastly more perilous in the hands of Dark mages. I confide to you now my deepest fear, rendered more harrowing by this word anent Gurborian's jewel: once the



Dark mages of Escore have been enticed to cross the mountains, will they choose to retire voluntarily again behind that barrier as before? What shall Alizon do if Escore's magic crushes Estcarp and is then directed against us?" The Lornt folk made no immediate comment, but I detected evidence of dismay in their frozen demeanor.

"I have heard this place called 'Lornt of the Foolish Scholars,' " I persisted, "yet now that I behold you, I see no fools among you. It may be that lore preserved here could help me frustrate Gurborian's efforts. Your land and mine have long considered one another enemies, yet I say to you, both Estcarp and Alizon must now beware of what may fall upon us from the east. Can we not work together to resist this threat? Will you help me search your archives for lore I can use against Gurborian?"

Although I had disturbed them, the Lornt folk showed commendable restraint. I had wondered whether the two females might cower or weep, but both preserved outward calm.

The old sire, Ouen, rose to his feet, and I also stood, along with the others. "You have given us many grave matters to ponder," Ouen said to me. "Your questions are too vital to be answered in haste. Let us all retire now to think, and to sleep. We shall confer again on the morrow."

The Wise Woman motioned brusquely toward the door. "I shall conduct you to a guest chamber nearby," she said.

As I followed her, I noticed that the party remained standing. No doubt they intended to talk further after I had departed. I was not offended, for I should have done the same had we been in Alizon, our roles reversed. I turned at the door. "You honor me with your courteous attentions," I said.



“May these night hours bring us wisdom.”

To my surprise, Morfew smiled. “I have not heard that admonition since I was a pup!” he exclaimed, then he shook his head, his somber air restored. “I hope on the morrow, Kasarian, that we may have time to discuss those past events concerning my pack. It has been an equally long time,” he added, “since I have heard the words ‘blood feud.’ ”

I bowed, and touched my Line badge to him. The Wise Woman closed the door behind us.



CHAPTER 9

Mereth—events at Lornt
(7th Day, Month of
the Ice Dragon/Moon of the Knife)

When Ouen bade us to retire, I struggled to my feet, my mind reeling. The thought that my betrothal jewel might be within the grasp of Escore's Dark mages somehow chilled the very marrow of my bones. I felt almost as if Kasarian had slapped my face instead of the table when he exhorted us to prevent Gurborian from meeting with the Escorian mages. I *knew* within myself that we could spare no effort to thwart Gurborian and his henchman; the stone must *not* be lost to the Dark! I had remained standing, heedless of the quiet talk among the others at the table. Nolar took my arm and urged me to sit down.

Quite soon, Jonja returned, announcing that Kasarian was settled in his guest chamber.

Duratan shook his head ruefully. "I seldom feel that Lornt lacks proper accommodations for any guest," he said, "but this night, I would prefer a strong lock on our visiting baron's door, and its key in my hand."

"If Kasarian attempts to skulk about in the dark," Nolar commented with a smile, "he is more likely to fall down the

stairs or become irretrievably lost.”

“I did warn him about the stairs,” said Jonja briskly. “And I made sure his candle was a short one. I do not think he will go far this night.”

“Nor shall we.” Ouen’s tone was grim. “Let us confer briefly before we part. What are we to make of Kasarian’s unsettling warnings?”

Duratan stared into his goblet. “How can we dare to believe anything we are told by a baron of Alizon?” he asked. “Their words are notoriously untrustworthy, and they frequently poison their own family members to advance their positions.”

I tapped my staff on the floor, and offered my slate. Morfew read aloud my words. “You are wise to be wary. We of the Dales have endured bitter experience of the Alizonders. They are a cruel, devious, and treacherous folk . . . yet we must scrutinize every word of Kasarian’s to determine which if any of them might be true. The threat he describes is too serious to be ignored.”

Morfew drummed his fingers on the table. “I have been casting my thoughts far back to my days in Alizon,” he said. “Some of the noble Lines have preserved more of what you Estcarpians would term a sense of honor than have others. As I recall, Krevonel was one such Line, although much reduced in numbers over the years by battle deaths and murders. I can speak only of the previous generations—this Kasarian is unknown to me, nor do I know his sire’s name as yet, but I shall ask him on the morrow when we speak together.”

Ouen nodded his approval. “We are indeed fortunate, old friend, that you reside among us. Kasarian may well tell you more privately than he is willing to disclose in our presence.”

“He may already have said too much to us,” Duratan suggested. “His great fear that Escore’s Dark mages, triumphant



over Estcarp, might then turn to rend Alizon represents only one of the possible outcomes of a great clash of magics. We would do well to foresee and evaluate a different outcome: if Escore's Dark mages and our Witches should battle to mutual ruin, would not Alizon then be left to capture and hold all three lands?"

"From my knowledge of Alizon," said Morfew, "I perceive another related point. It is likely that Kasarian also belongs to a faction of barons. Just as Gurborian's faction is said to be pressing for an alliance with Escore's Dark mages, so too may Kasarian's faction be waiting to take advantage of any mistakes or reverses. Their goal may be the very seizure of any lands left vulnerable should the primary opponents dispose of one another."

I handed my slate to Morfew. "I do not believe," he read my words, "that Estcarp can dismiss Kasarian's warning, however suspect he may be as its bearer. I must convey to you my intense conviction that the stone of Power must *not* be acquired by any forces serving the Dark!"

Both Jonja and Nolar leaned forward. The Wise Woman spoke first, her voice strained. "I know what mighty deeds can be wrought with Witch Jewels," she said. "An unknown crystal of the size you describe, should it be imbued with Power, might be capable of loosing ruin on a scale that would make the damage of the Turning seem insignificant."

"It is true," Nolar declared, "that some stones of Power can be misused for ill. The Stone of Konnard was meant to aid in healing, yet the Escorian Dark mage Tull twisted its force to produce hideous results." She broke off for a moment, unable to continue. Duratan took her hand without a word. She smiled gratefully at him. "My memories of that awful time still revive past hurts. We learned then that a Dark mage could wrest vileness from an otherwise beneficial object. Had not our Witch stood forth with her jewel,

great lasting evil would have been done. As it was, Tull was destroyed, and his effect upon the Stone of Konnard was totally expunged." Nolar looked at me. "If your jewel had been wielded by forces of the Light," she said earnestly, "then it would likely resist being subverted. Certainly, you were not tainted by your association with it, or the crystals and runeboard would have discerned it."

"But a Dark mage with sufficient Power might also be able to corrupt such a stone," Ouen warned. "I believe that we must endorse Kasarian's proposal to thwart Gurborian's alliance with Escore's Dark mages."

"How can we in Lornt possibly affect the maneuverings of a primary baron in Alizon?" demanded Duratan.

I passed my slate back to Morfew, who read for me, "Should there be sufficient lore in your archives concerning Escore's Dark mages, perhaps we could use such in crafting a plan."

As Morfew returned my slate, he observed, "Kasarian has to be our source for current knowledge about affairs in Alizon. My task is to search the archives anent Escore, and I intend to begin at first light . . . or possibly a few hours later."

When Ouen again stood up to dismiss us, his tone was decisive. "We must be alert and probe for Kasarian's true motives. Morfew, we rely upon you to draw him out as best you can. We shall meet here on the morrow and devise a joint plan. For the sake of Lornt—for the sake of Estcarp, we must determine how to meet this challenge. May we be guided by the Light!"



CHAPTER 10

Kasarian-events at Lormt
(7th & 8th Days, Moon of the Knife)

As soon as the Wise Woman withdrew from my guest chamber, I stepped quietly to the door to listen. I could not believe the absence of any lock—the door had a simple latch to hold it shut, but no lock, no key, no means to bar it from without or within. My initial reaction was scorn that Lormt's security should be so woefully lacking . . . then I was struck by a colder, second thought. In a place inhabited by Witchfolk, locks would be unnecessary. The Estcarpians' cursed Witch powers would allow them to set binding spells on any enemies (such as I) within their walls. I snatched back my hand from the door and retreated to sit upon the narrow bed. The Witchfolk might also be able to spy upon me unnaturally, so I must be constantly circumspect. After blowing out the single candle left on a shelf beside the bed, I unbuckled my weaponless belt, removed my boots, and lay down.

I did not think that my thoughts could be discerned without my being aware of such ensorcellment. Silent meditation in the dark, I reasoned, should be safe from observation or intrusion. I reviewed my impressions of my potential allies in order to appraise my chances of influencing their decisions, as well as to assess the dangers each posed to me.



Their soldier Duratan had not troubled to conceal his animosity toward me. I respected his fighting experience, but could not immediately judge the significance of his crystal tossing. Morfew had declared its purpose was to detect any taint by the Dark. How much more information could the peculiar exercise provide? Estcarp's Witches were always female; males were not supposed to possess magical powers. The sole exception known to us in Alizon was the terrible Simon Tregarth, who was said to have come through a Gate from elsewhere. His three whelps bred by a Witch of Estcarp were also magic-wielders of sorts, although fragmentary accounts that reached Alizon held that the female of the three had fled from Witch training, by the aid of her littermates. Alizon preferred to have no dealings with the Tregarth pack, their sire and dam having severely interfered with our aims in the war with the Dales. I resolved to learn more from Morfew concerning the nature and extent of this Duratan's magical talents.

I next considered Duratan's mate, the disfigured Nolar. Was she a true Witch? She admitted accompanying a Witch on the southwesterly journey that had brought about the destruction of a Dark mage. That was daunting news . . . yet I had to smile, lying there in the darkness. What would Gurborian say if he knew that one or more Witches had already vanquished a Dark mage from ancient Escore? My ironic amusement was short-lived. If this Nolar was a Witch of such puissance, I must be doubly wary of her.

I was suspicious as well of the Wise Woman. Although such females lacked the raw Power of Witches, they nevertheless wielded certain noxious magics. Wise Women in the Dales had several times during the war induced our captured Hounds to babble, to Alizon's sore disadvantage. We



had therefore ordered our Hounds to slit the throats of any wounded who might fall into the Wise Women's clutches—thus perished my last littermate.

The third female, the mute Mereth, had come to Lornt from the Dales. I could feel her hatred as plainly as if it were a blazing firebrand—yet she had not openly reviled me in her written messages to the group. I could not understand her appearance. No Dalesfolk had such eyes, skin, or hair. She must possess Alizonder blood, unheard of for a Dales female outside our breeding control. She could not have been whelped in Alizon as a mute, or she would have been killed at once. Perhaps she had been silenced in later years. Might she also be magic-tainted? She unsettled me for too many reasons. I had to learn more about her.

As Lornt's chief scholar, Ouen seemed to be in charge, but Morfew had said there was no ruling council. The others deferred to Ouen as to a sire. Although I could, I thought, dismiss him as a potential fighter, he was of the Old Race and therefore dangerous. In this strange place, he, too, might command Witch powers.

And then there was Morfew. In the past, the Line Sired by Ternak had held influential positions in Alizon. Why would Morfew exile himself far away among enemies? As a noble Alizonder, he had to have deeper motives than the pursuit of powerless learning. Possibly I could gain his confidence to the point that he might disclose to me his true reasons for residing at Lornt.

From his long years at Lornt, Morfew could also enlighten me in the ways of these formidable Estcarpians. It was vital that I persuade them to allow me—indeed, actively assist me in searching Lornt's archives for any hint of Escorian weaknesses.



The lack of available time deeply distressed me. Even now, Gurborian and Gratch were striving to locate Dark mages. My work here at Lormt had to be swiftly productive if I were to have any active chance to hinder them.

A chilling thought occurred to me. Even if I should find useful information at Lormt, how could I return to Alizon in time to apply it? There was also a secondary consideration: would the Estcarpians permit me to leave? Might they not hold me as prisoner or hostage, demanding ransom from my Line? I decided that potential difficulty was less worrisome than my primary predicament. My sole means for presumably immediate travel back to Alizon lay through the terrifying passageway in Lormt's cellar . . . if indeed the magic spell that animated it remained in force. Would the portal beneath Krevonel Castle accept my return, or was its spell set to deliver only from Alizon to Lormt and not in the opposite direction? I could not know until I dared the attempt, provided the Lormt folk would allow me access to their cellar.

I twisted on the bed as I grappled with the many aspects of my plight. At the root of all the questions clamoring for answers lurked a truly gnawing fear. The very existence of an entryway between Estcarp and Krevonel Castle constituted a peril equal to that posed by the Escorian Dark mages. What if a whole troop of Estcarpian warriors—or far worse, a company of Witches—chose to invade Alizon through that portal, assuming that the spell permitted such a transit? In all of Alizon, I was the only one to know of this potentially fatal breach in our closely guarded borders. There was no way to warn the Lord Baron except by personally daring the portal again . . . and what could Alizon do to defend itself? If we sealed off the chamber beneath Krevonel Castle, might there not be other equally unsuspected horrors poised to open in



still other sites?

Apprehensive and frustrated by my crippling lack of sufficient knowledge, I fell into a fitful but dreamless sleep.

Early the next morning, Morfew sent a slightly less elderly scholar (still decrepit to my eyes) to fetch me to him. He directed me across the courtyard to the second, lower stone building near the gates.

Morfew greeted me fairly, and offered simple fare to break our fast—gruel, barley bread, butter, honey, cheese, and ale or cold water to drink.

“I must confess,” Morfew confided as he spread butter on a bread crust, “even after all these years at Lornt, I do sometimes miss Alizon’s succulent meats.” He shut his eyes, and smiled as he recited, “Roast boar, moorhen, haunch of deer, rabbit in pastry . . . ah, well, an old scholar scarcely requires such rich viands. The puddings, though, did linger sweetly on the tongue.”

I saw my opportunity to seek answers to some of my jostling questions. “I commend the quality of your honey,” I began. “Ours has been bitter of late. Tell me, if you will, why you first came to Lornt, and why you stayed? As one of Ternak’s Line, surely, when young, you had firm expectations of advancement?”

Morfew waved his butter knife dismissively. “Although I was an elder whelp,” he said with a wry smile, “I was not suited to assume the barony. Kin lists and ancient lore had always interested me far more than hunting or contending with the other whelps for advancement. By great fortune, I chanced to hear of Lornt from a merchant who dealt in scrolls. I set out from Alizon City when I was twenty, and I have never thought of returning. I sought my way to Lornt for nearly ten years, but as soon as I entered these gates, I



knew that I had found my true home.” His smile faded, and he sighed. “You said last night that my Line had been destroyed in a blood feud. How came that to be?”

“Most of the deaths occurred almost thirty years before I was whelped,” I replied. “Our sire related the tale to my elder littermates, who subsequently passed it to me. Shortly before our sire was to be Presented . . .”

“Forgive my interruption,” said Morfew. “I recall only some of the famed sires of Krevonel. Which is your sire?”

“I am honored to be sired by Oralian of that Line,” I said, touching my Line badge. “I was a fosterling far away from Alizon City when Gurborian ordered my sire’s murder. It was over fifty years ago when the blood feud between your Line and the Line Sired by Pagurian reached its climax. As blood feuds go, that one was unusually bitter—I gather that a number of pack alliances had been obstructed by kidnappings and poisonings. Pagurian’s forces finally surrounded Ternak’s main hunting lodge, and set it afire while its sire was within, Talfew by name. . . .”

“My sire,” murmured Morfew, his hands clenched on the scrubbed boards of the table.

“I condole with you,” I said formally, “as I must also condole for the two male whelps who were killed in the fire along with Baron Talfew.”

Morfew’s voice trailed off to a mere whisper. “My only littermates—I had wondered over the years how they had fared.”

“You will be gratified to hear that the surviving members of your pack attacked Pagurian’s camp. Unfortunately for your Line, they were all killed in the fighting. The Lord Baron of that day decreed that too many of both Lines had died—indeed, no males were thought to be left to Ternak’s



Line—so he declared the blood feud nullified. He appropriated half of the Ternak lands, and bestowed the other half upon Pagurian's survivors—whose case," I hastened to add, "was persuasive. Most of the ruling baron's hound pack *had* been poisoned, along with his mate, and the linkage to Ternak's official poisoner was clear."

"I remember those of my pack from my early days only," mused Morfew. "Sixty years is a long time to be away. My life is now totally rooted here. The folk of Lormt have become closer to me than those of my own pack ever were."

I was taken aback. "Then you will not present your valid claim for Ternak's lands?" I asked.

Morfew shook his head. "No, young man. I think too much blood has already been shed over that land. I have no interest in it, or in whoever may now hold it. Let it lie where it was bestowed those long years ago. But we have dallied discussing these private pack matters—give me your arm, if you will, and let us hasten to Ouen's study to confer with the others. I must tell you that I have already separated out some of the scrolls I once studied concerning the First Turning. Can you read the ancient scripts of Estcarp?"

"If they differ from what I have mastered," I replied, "I shall apply myself to learn them. Gurborian will not wait for us. He will be progressing with his schemes, and we must stop him."



CHAPTER 11

Mereth—events at Lormt
(7th, 8th, & 10th Days,
Month of the Ice Dragon)

During the few remaining hours of that night, I doubt that any of us found ease in sleep. I lay down, but my troubled thoughts denied me rest. Although I was far removed in time and distance from the torments of the Dales' war, I found it still painful to contemplate the necessity of assisting, even working in the same room with an Alizonder baron. Yet if the warning that Kasarian had voiced was true, Estcarp lay in deadly peril. Should Estcarp fall, we of the Dales could not expect the mere expanse of sea alone to shield us, as we had learned to our earlier sorrow.

Kasarian's and the Lormt folk's talk of Dark mages unsettled me. I could contribute no useful lore from the Dales, except to express my intense terror at the notion of such beings. I supposed that I might be of some use in sorting documents, provided that I could read them. My prior acquaintance with old Estcarpian scripts was limited to the small collection of kinship records preserved by Dame Gwersa, together with some few other scrolls I had encountered in my own researches.

My thoughts persisted in returning to my betrothal jewel.



That it should even now adorn the chest of a primary baron of Alizon made me clutch my quilts tightly about me to subdue a trembling not wholly provoked by the winter chill. As soon as an opportunity arose, I resolved to query Kasarian about this Baron Gurborian and why he had been awarded my jewel.

At first light, I hastened to the food hall, hoping to encounter Morfew, but he was not there. I ate what was placed before me—it might as well have been boiled wool for all I tasted it—and hurried to Ouen’s study.

Ouen opened the door when I tapped with my staff. Nolar, Duratan, and Jonja were already seated at the table. Ouen told me that Morfew had offered to eat with Kasarian before escorting him to join our conference. Morfew had thought it possible that Kasarian might confide in him as a fellow Alizonder, although the old scholar was too honest to hold out much hope on such a brief acquaintance with so wary an adversary.

When Morfew and Kasarian entered the study, we all stood while Ouen pronounced an invocation for guidance from the Light in all of our deliberations. Kasarian appeared bemused, but held his tongue until invited to speak. He immediately requested our decision. Would Lormt allow him to search its archives for, as he phrased it, “weapons of knowledge to be used to deflect Escore’s sorcerous dagger raised against us all?”

Ouen gazed at each of us in turn. “I ask you to declare,” he invited, “whether you believe that Lormt should open its store of documents to this petitioner. Duratan?”

“I do so believe,” Duratan said firmly, “with the stricture that one of us be always present to observe what is being read.”

Nolar nodded. "I agree," she said, "with the proposal and the stricture."

"As do I." Jonja glared at the Alizonder. "As to the stricture, I am prepared to serve at any time as one of Lormt's observers."

I proffered my slate for Jonja to read aloud. "If permitted, I, Mereth, will also serve."

To my surprise, Morfew suddenly chuckled. "What a grim lot of scholars we appear," he said. "It is true that the cause for our searching is of the utmost seriousness, and we must press forward without delay, but consider the opportunities for discovery! All those previously unknown documents revealed by the Turning—I have been longing to sort them properly. Now I shall have willing and able assistants to speed the task. I urge all of you to join me in the study area near my quarters. I shall instruct the more agile of our helpers to fetch there the materials that we should survey."

And so began our great search of Lormt's archives. To permit uninterrupted work, Ouen arranged that food and drink were also brought to us along with the seemingly unending stream of documents.

During one such brief respite while we were eating, I queried Kasarian on my slate concerning Baron Gurborian and the jewel, but he feigned to know little about the matter of the awarding of the pendant. He claimed that it had been bestowed during the Dales' war, when he was, as he termed it, "a pup." I did not entirely believe him, but saw no way to press him at that juncture.

As I had suspected, my skills in interpreting the Estcarpian scripts, especially the ancient ones, were not sufficient



to deal with the older documents. Morfew kindly showed me how to distinguish the writing styles of various periods, with their forms for certain key words, such as “mages” and “Escore,” so I could at least assist in the initial winnowing process. Nolar, Duratan, and Jonja were all able scholars, and together with Morfew and Ouen, they sorted through heaps of scrolls, bound leaves of parchment, and fragments. By intense effort, Kasarian appeared to decipher the ancient scripts he had not encountered before, and soon he was proceeding almost as quickly as the Estcarpians. I noticed that Morfew or Ouen were carefully retrieving and examining each document that Kasarian laid aside. At first, Kasarian affected not to see; then he showed his fangs in an Alizonder smile, and simply handed each leaf directly to one of the Lornt folk for their perusal. This continued for a while until Morfew threw up his hands and exclaimed, “We are foolishly wasting valuable time in reading after Kasarian. Either we accept his discernment, or we do not. How say you?”

Duratan frowned, then nodded ruefully. “Our mutual need must outweigh our traditional suspicion. Let him proceed without further oversight. This task before us is too daunting for us to diminish our supply of able readers.”

Kasarian wordlessly saluted him, and redoubled his efforts.

We were wearily persisting in our labors two days later when one of Morfew’s helpers lurched in bearing a heavy wooden chest blackened by age and dust-snarled cobwebs. He said it had only just been discovered in a remote cellar breached by the Turning. Kasarian peered at the rust-bound hasp, then pried it open handily with a table knife someone had misplaced from our last meal. I happened to be nearby,

so I looked inside the chest when he raised its lid.

The top layers of parchment leaves had been damaged by rain or flood. Kasarian lifted them out, disclosing more parchments and several books. As I reached to assist with the emptying, my fingers brushed across a rather small, nondescript leather-bound book. I jerked my hand back instantly—it was as if I had unwittingly stroked a swarm of Anda wasps. Startled, I recalled the similar shock I had felt when I first touched my betrothal jewel.

Kasarian regarded me quizzically, but Nolar rushed to my side. “Have you cut yourself on a splinter, or been bitten by a spider?” she asked, offering to examine my hand.

I shook my head, and wrote on my slate, “I felt a strange sensation when I touched a book in that chest.”

Nolar stood quite still while she read aloud my comment. “I, too, have encountered such a wonder here at Lornt,” she said, her eyes shining with excitement. “Can you distinguish which book affected you so?”

I deliberately grasped the volume I had dropped back into the chest, and as I did, a surge of mental images nearly overwhelmed me. I fell as much as sat on the nearest bench, striving to retain my senses. Jonja hurried to pour me a restoring cup of wine, while Nolar set a stack of clean parchment before me. Struggling to catch my breath, as if I had run a long distance, I wrote as quickly as I could. All the others crowded closer to hear Nolar read my words.

“We have discovered here,” she voiced for me, “the journal belonging to a puissant Escorian mage from that very time a thousand years ago, which Morfew spoke of. I sense the writer’s name—Elsenar—and that he possessed the very jewel of such concern to me . . . to us all. It was a stone of



great Power. I cannot convey my dread that forces of the Dark now active in our day might seize it for some frightful use.”

Jonja had immediately consulted her rune board. Her voice shook with relief when she reported, “There is no taint of the Dark associated with this book. Mage its writer may have been long years ago, but he was of the Light, not the Dark.”

“May I see the book?” asked Ouen. He glanced at first one page, then another, and frowned. “Morfew—what do you make of this peculiar script?”

Morfew gazed over Ouen’s shoulder. “I regret to say—could you turn that page? Yes, it is quite clear to me that I cannot decipher a word. The hand may be fairly written, but it is in no script known to me.”

Nolar and Duratan jointly examined the book, then Jonja, and lastly Kasarian, but none of them could read it. Not being within reach of my staff, I thumped the table with my hand. Ouen handed me the book, its lines of neat script arrayed across the pages, completely unreadable. . . .

I shut my eyes for a moment, and then looked a second time. My hand trembled as I retrieved my message parchment. “I, too, cannot read this script,” I wrote for Nolar to read aloud, “but perhaps because of my gift of touch, I can sense in my mind the meaning of these writings. I believe that I can transcribe all that is written here. Pray fetch me more ink and a brighter lamp. I shall begin at once.”

At some time, the initial pages of Elsenar’s journal had been infuriatingly water-blurred, but when I turned to the first undamaged leaf, the substance of the ancient mage’s account was instantly clear to me. As I completed copying each sheet of parchment, Morfew softly read it aloud to the others while



I continued to write.

When I glanced up occasionally, pausing to flex my fingers, I could see that the entire Lornt company shared my feelings of excitement mingled with alarm. After more than a thousand years, we were doubtless the first in Estcarp to learn when and whence Alizon had been settled. Kasarian sat rigidly in a high-backed chair, his jaw muscles tight-clenched, his only movement the turning of his signet ring. It seemed to me that when Nolar had read out the name "Elsenar," Kasarian had reacted to it instantly. The general illumination in Morfew's study chamber could scarcely be termed bright, but I vow that the Alizonder paled visibly. Being so fair of skin, he could blanch only slightly, but I do not think my eyes deceived me. He *knew* the name of that ancient mage, and whatever else he knew concerning Elsenar, the knowledge must have been daunting. I wondered whether Elsenar's written revelations surprised Kasarian, or had he already been aware of Alizon's turbulent origins?

I wrote until my fingers cramped. Nolar kindly warmed a basin of water to ease my aching hand. When Morfew grew hoarse, Jonja took up the reading. Elsenar's tale seized us like a fighter's grip on our very throats.



CHAPTER 12

Elsenar—his thousand-year-old journal transcribed by Mereth at Lornt (10th Day, Month of the Ice Dragon)

“ . . . **W**hich we had often done in our collaborative work as Adepts in Escore. I had begun to suspect that Shorrosh might be dabbling in magics perilously edging near the Dark, but when I confronted him, he vowed to me that he had never employed forbidden spells. At the time, his protests of innocence appeared genuine. I resolved privately to monitor all of his activities. We were about to embark upon a most challenging experiment, for we planned to travel to the empty northern lands to essay the conjuring of a Gate. Our arts had revealed to us a place far removed from our world, but threatened by disaster. Shorrosh’s magic glass had indicated that killing walls of ice were about to spread across that land. All living things—plants, animals, people—would perish unless they could be removed. The folk of this place called themselves the Aliz. They were a sturdy, aggressive stock, strikingly pale in hair and eyes when compared to the black-haired, gray-eyed Old Race of Escore.

At first, Shorrosh and I were able to conjure only a small portal to link the two worlds. Shorrosh insisted upon daring



the passage himself, pointing out that if he should be lost in the transit, I could safely close the portal. That defensive measure proved unnecessary, however, for his initial passage delivered Shorrosh to the primary fortress of the Aliz. When he proclaimed himself to their ruling council, the Aliz mistook his name, hailing him as the embodied Voice of Chordosh, their chief war god. Shorrosh did not correct them, but reveled in their adulation.

Through a smaller scrying glass he had carried with him, Shorrosh reported back to me. The Aliz, he discovered, had no notion of magical Power. That absence of experience contributed mightily to the impression Shorrosh made upon them; his slightest spell or even the most childish of magical entertainments utterly astonished the Aliz. Shorrosh suspected that they might possess hidden magical talents subject to activation and instruction. I warned him not to proceed in that regard, but to leave the Aliz untouched until we had learned more about them.

From his location there, Shorrosh was able to determine that the advancing ice cliffs had not yet approached the more settled areas. We thus were allowed a limited time to organize the rescuing transfers we hoped to provide, once we enspelled a larger portal—a true Gate. We invested substantial energy in our Gate spell. As soon as it was securely framed, Shorrosh led an advance party from Aliz through it into the bleak moorland north and west of Escore.

That first party of Aliz nobles were sorely disappointed by the harsh emptiness of the land, but Shorrosh promised them wondrous improvements to be wrought later by exercise of his magical arts. I feared that he was promising them too much, but I assisted in the spells to raise castles and smaller-scaled living quarters in an area suitable for habitation by active folk. The settlement flanked a navigable river, and Shorrosh soon grandly termed it ‘Alizon City.’



Increasing numbers of the Aliz then came through the Gate, bringing with them packs of savage white hunting beasts. Because those alien creatures were generally dog-sized and bred to hunt, I termed them 'hounds,' and the immigrants embraced the name. Indeed, they began to style themselves the Hounds of Alizon, choosing to adopt Shor-rosh's name for their new homeland. Along with the packs of hounds, they also brought other living things from Aliz. Several of the animals and plants they attempted to transfer failed to survive, but a few flourished, among them some favorite Aliz food plants, and the small, burrowing animals they called 'shriekers,' which they bred and slew abundantly for their religious ceremonies.

Upon closer association with the transplanted Aliz, I became disturbed by the vigor of some deplorable qualities among them. The nobles were a vain, quarrelsome lot, prone to scheming and treachery. Still, certain of their individuals and families were more responsible and admirable. In the hope of influencing these new Alizonders, I determined to ally myself to one of their major Houses, or as they styled their extended families, 'Lines.' I proposed a wedding alliance with the prominent Lady Kylaina, whose exquisite, ivory beauty was equalled by her keenness of mind. I conjured for her a special castle in Alizon City, in which we established our residence.

During those months of intensive activity, Shorrosh and I had tragically neglected our ties with Escore. A force of Adepts corrupted by service to the Dark had waxed stronger than those of us devoted to the Light had realized. Their meddling with living creatures in Escore had produced horrors that should never have been imagined, much less enflashed. Alerted too late to prevent the Dark tide of evil from threatening all of Escore, a number of us conferred by glass and agreed to meet far to the south, where a citadel called Lormt

was being erected as a rallying point for those of the Light.

I did not at that time consult with Shorrosh, who was back in Aliz supervising further selections of beasts and folk to be transferred to Alizon. Descending into the deepest vaults beneath my castle, I opened a magical postern to Lormt, so that I might assist my fellow Adepts of the Light with both their construction of the citadel and their plans to defend Escore.

While I was gone, Shorrosh shamefully revealed his true allegiance. The Alizonders had complained mightily to him about the desolate lands surrounding Alizon City, reminding Shorrosh of his earlier grandiose promises. He told them that with the aid of various Dark Adepts of his acquaintance in Escore, he could alter the climate and the very land itself to create a bountiful, garden-like expanse. Furthermore, he had been most favorably impressed by several monstrous beasts native to Aliz, which he desired to bring through the Gate to Alizon for hunting purposes, as well as for 'study,' after the depraved fashion of the Dark Adepts. Shorrosh also hinted that he might consent to instruct selected Alizonder nobles in the rudiments of magic.

Because of my nagging suspicions concerning Shorrosh, I had left hidden spells in effect in Alizon City which divulged to me all of these dreadful developments when I returned briefly from Lormt. I confronted Shorrosh in his castle, demanding that he reconsider his recent actions and renounce all of his ties with the Dark. I believe that our escalating clash of wills might have led to a Spell Duel, had we not been obstructed by a jolting exercise of defensive Power raging to the east. We soon learned that a mighty spine of mountains had been raised beginning between Escore and Alizon, and extending far to the south. The forces of the Light in Escore had fatally misjudged the strength of the Dark Adepts, and when those of the Light at last attempted to suppress those of



the Dark, many of the Light's best champions were destroyed. Fleeing for their lives, the survivors fought their way westward, relying upon the new mountain barrier to seal off their Dark pursuers, among whom were numbered several of Shorrosh's vile colleagues.

At the time of the disaster in Escore, Shorrosh had been arranging for a major transfer of monsters from Aliz. When he broke off our argument to hurry through the Gate to oversee that impending transit, I seized my opportunity. By secret means, I had only recently acquired a jewel of great power, which I had attuned to my mind so that it was uniquely answerable to my control. I then called upon my jewel to dissolve the Gate to Aliz, thus severing Shorrosh's only means of return to Alizon.

Immediately after destroying the Gate, I summoned to Alizon Castle all of the prominent Alizonder nobles to inform them that there would be no further linkage with Aliz. They were at first incredulous, then indignant. They demanded that the prodigious promises that Shorrosh had made to them must be fulfilled; otherwise, they would consider themselves ill-treated and betrayed. They insisted that I must instruct them in the uses of magic, so that they could subsequently conjure whatever they desired.

I told them that Shorrosh's promises had been false, and I had no obligation to honor them. Because the Gate had been dissolved, Shorrosh could never return to Alizon, so they could expect no further bounty from him. With regard to their being instructed in magical knowledge, I declared that they were not fit to be imbued with it. Because I had vital business to attend to elsewhere, I would soon be leaving, and I warned them, that they would henceforth be obliged to fend for themselves.

I had already spoken privately with my beloved wife Kylaina. We were to be favored with a child in due course,

and I urged her to come with me away from Alizon. She declined, refusing to be parted from her people, a sentiment I could understand, but under the circumstances deeply regretted.

Knowing that Kylaina and our child-to-be would have to be kept safe following my necessary departure, I therefore produced a vivid magical demonstration before the Alizonder nobles. I assured them that although I might not appear to be physically present, the spells I was invoking in Alizon would apprise me of any threats to Kylaina and those of my blood descent. Those of my Line would be magically protected from any form of attack. The Alizonder nobles were profoundly shaken by my display of raw Power. With my protective spells invoked, I could safely depart for Lormt.

Returning to my castle, I entrusted to Kylaina the key to the enspelled chamber far below, where I had set my postern to Lormt. I told her that the key would provide access to a magical outlet for escape to be used only by those of our blood, and only in the direst emergency. She vowed that she would safeguard the key and any related instructions as precious secrets to be restricted to those of our Line.

I did not disclose to her the destination of the escape route for two reasons. First, I dared to hope that she would not be forced to use the key. I judged that those of her present Aliz kin should provide her with reliable comradeship, while my protective spells would prevent any violence from touching her while I had to be away. It was possible that, in a fairly short time, the forces of the Light based in Lormt might prevail over the insurgent Dark forces in Escore. Once my work at Lormt was completed, I could return to Alizon and further consolidate the position of Kylaina and our Line-to-be. Second, I did not want my postern ever to be employed as an invasion route to Lormt, should the treacherous Alizonder element somehow learn of the passage and conceive



notions of magically-aided aggressive expansion. I precluded that potential danger to Lormt by constructing my postern spell so that only those of my blood could travel by that means; for any other would-be transients, the aperture would not exist.

I bade Kylaina farewell, assuring her that my absence would be as brief as possible, then hastened to my postern to return to Lormt.”

[At this point in her transcription, Mereth paused, then wrote with a shaking quill, “When I first touched the key that Kasarian was holding upon his arrival here, I sensed a certain familiarity about it. I now see that I was recognizing the aura of common ownership that now encompasses all three objects: the key, the jewel from my past, and this journal—all belonged to Elsenar. We must necessarily conclude that Kasarian is blood kin to Elsenar, or else he could not have passed through the magical postern from Alizon to Lormt.”]



CHAPTER 13

Elsenar—his journal transcription
continued by Mereth at Lormt
(10th Day, Month of the Ice Dragon)

“As soon as I arrived at Lormt, I discovered that an ominous proposal was being debated among the Adepts of the Light already assembled there. Lormt’s site had been chosen for its strategic nearness to Escore, permitting a constant magical watch to be sustained in that direction. Since my previous visit, the citadel’s walls and living quarters had been erected by spells, and four great spheres of quan-iron had been seated at the bases of the corner towers. The Power inherent in that extraordinary substance provided the ultimate protection against any assault by the Dark. Unfortunately—from my point of view, which was shared by a few other Adepts—the sheer size and spatial relationship of the spheres tempted the majority of Adepts to conceive a dangerous plan. They recommended that such an immense Power focus be used to create a Master Gate, capable of opening into multiple destination sites. All of the Gates known to us from previous experience had linked our world with only a single destination. The party in favor of this Master Gate project argued that the immense threat from Escore’s Dark Adepts



demanded that we seek additional sources of Power from other worlds to bolster our defenses and ultimately allow us to regain control of Escore for the Light.

I was not at all convinced that so unprecedented an effort could bring about the results they predicted. The complexity of the spells that would be required necessarily entailed enormous risks of unpredictable repercussions. I stated my reservations before our Council of Adepts, and suggested that we should instead seek closer sources of aid; we could call upon our brother Adepts of the Light in Arvon, across the sea to the west. I proposed that we open a postern to link Lornt to Arvon, but the others would not listen. Because of the success of their recent mountain-raising spells, many of the younger Adepts had become overly confident. They asserted that Arvon's Adepts had little interest in matters relating to Escore. Complaining that it would take time to persuade those of Arvon of our desperate situation, they said such time and energy would be far better employed on their Master Gate effort.

When I saw that I could not sway the disputants to accept my plan, I withdrew from Lornt to a forester's lodge in the nearby mountains. The simultaneous working of spells by so many Adepts at Lornt was creating continuous cross-currents of Power. I determined to act alone, using my jewel to open a postern to Arvon. I had framed my spell and actually begun my transit when the most awful catastrophe occurred.

The main body of Adepts, having descended to the very roots of the Lornt citadel, had invoked a Great Spell, mightier than any ever before attempted by Adepts of either the Light or the Dark. As they had expected, a multibranching Master Gate did briefly form at the quan-iron spheres' Power

focus, but the Adepts balancing the intricate layers of spells lost control of the structural flux. An unbelievable surge of Power blasted outward from Lornt, disrupting my comparatively feeble postern spell. I was literally snatched back to the forester's lodge, where I lay for some hours, stunned in both body and mind. As soon as I had revived, I rode immediately to Lornt, where I learned the appalling extent of the disaster that had afflicted us.

There was no one left to testify to the events that had scoured the spell chamber, but apparently, when the Master Gate coalesced in the center of the chamber, it must have exerted an irresistible suction that pulled all of the spellworkers into its maw. The apprentices and retainers who had been stationed in the outer corridor told me that they had been blinded by a blaze of light and deafened by a thunderclap of sound. At that same instant, the Power surge erupted from the chamber, physically dashing them to the floor.

The only Adepts spared to us were those few elderly mages whose bodies had been thought too frail to dare the exertions involved with a Great Spell, and a few others who had shared my distrust of the project and had declined to assist. Even in their tower quarters remote from the spell chamber, they, too, had been rendered senseless by the discharge of Power loosed when the Master Gate vanished.

From a formidable force representing the Light, our company had been reduced to a devastated remnant. I gave what succor I could to the dazed survivors, and dared one magical effort in the spell chamber to establish contact with any of the missing Adepts. The very air in Lornt's lower vault had been drained of all energy. I knew with cold certainty that the Master Gate was unreachable, and all those who had passed



through it were lost to us forever.

Once all of us had recovered sufficiently to gather in the great hall, I conferred with the remaining Adepts and apprentices—a pitiful number compared with our former strength. They agreed with me that our only hope now lay in an appeal to Arvon's Adepts of the Light, but feared that no one could be spared from our watch on Escore. With the residual Power of the quan-iron spheres to aid us, we could just barely preserve the same evident force level as before. That was vital, for we knew that Escore's Dark Adepts would have registered the Power disturbance rippling outward from the Master Gate's collapse. They would certainly soon emit questing probes to seek the cause of the disturbance, and to test our remaining strength. As the primary bastion of the Light, Lormt had to appear to be unchanged and impregnable.

Having already once constructed a postern to Arvon, I offered to re-establish that link and essay the mission to seek aid from our brothers to the west. After agonized discussion, the others bade me to make the attempt. Ordinarily, I would have allowed myself a day or more of rest and meditation before I again conjured such an extended postern. In view of our perilously decimated situation, however, I waited only long enough for a fresh mount to be brought before I set out for the forester's lodge."

[Mereth's hand abruptly faltered. She snatched up a fragment of parchment, wrote on it, and handed it to Morfew, who hastily rounded the table to peer down at Elsenar's journal.

Alarmed, Ouen asked, "What is amiss?"

"Mereth can no longer sense Elsenar's message," Morfew said, pulling the study lamp closer to illuminate the opened



page. “Master Ouen,” Morfew exclaimed, “the hand composing this journal has altered. I can read this script! It appears to be an addition by an apprentice—a distraught apprentice, as well he might be. . . .”

“Morfew,” said Ouen in a decisive tone, “pray share your discovery with us before we become distraught.”

Morfew was instantly contrite. “Forgive me, dear friends. Could you fetch one more lamp? This scrawl is so ragged that some words are difficult to make out. Thank you. ‘Master Elsenar has not returned,’ ” Morfew read haltingly. “ ‘It has been . . . three days! Old Master Verdery was taken to the lodge to employ his scrying glass. He detected vestiges of a spell so shattered by intense Power flow that the postern to Arvon which Elsenar had anchored there could not be re-established. We fear the worst—that a Dark Adept in Arvon must have intercepted Elsenar. We can ill bear the loss of one of our few remaining Master Adepts. May the Light defend us!’ ”]



CHAPTER 14

Mereth—events at Lormt
(10th Day, Month of the Ice Dragon/
Veneration Day, Moon of the Knife)

When Morfew stopped reading and closed Elsenar’s journal, we all sat in shocked silence.

Ouen was the first to speak. “It would seem that our present dangers may echo long past events. As in Elsenar’s time, Lormt may once again be imperiled by Dark forces from Escore.”

Morfew, excited by other aspects of what we had just heard, briskly rubbed his hands together. “I never thought to learn the origins of Lormt,” he exclaimed. “At last, Master Ouen, we possess evidence concerning when and why the citadel was constructed.”

“And why it was almost preserved untouched during the Turning,” Ouen commented. “We knew that our quan-iron spheres were somehow involved, but perhaps an explanation emerges from Elsenar’s account. The spheres provided Power for the working of the Great Spell, and for the watch upon Escore. I believe we may reasonably suppose that when Lormt is in any way subject to a magical assault, our spheres have been prepared to produce a protective enclosure spell to encompass the entire citadel.”

“Which we certainly observed, to our benefit,” Morfew agreed. “Had not the earth subsided following the Witches’ Turning, Lormt’s walls would have held—but once the Witch-magic departed, our sheltering spell bubble withdrew, and the damages Lormt suffered were entirely due to non-magical causes.”

I had by then retrieved my staff, and thumped it to draw their attention. “We may now also understand,” Nolar read my words, “how what I had considered to be my betrothal jewel first came to the western lands; Elsenar carried it to Arvon a thousand years ago when he crossed the sea through his postern from Lormt.”

“The critical menace we face is here and now, not a thousand years ago,” Kasarian declared impatiently. “You have admitted that if Gratch succeeds in arranging an encounter with the Escorians, the Dark mages would be aware of this ancient jewel of Power now possessed by Gurborian.”

Jonja nodded grudgingly. “Yes,” she said, “even if the jewel was not worn in their presence, the Dark mages would recognize its magical aura lingering from Gurborian’s physical association with the stone.”

“But Elsenar described his jewel as being singularly attuned to his mind,” Nolar pointed out. “Do you suppose that such a personal binding might prevent any other mage from tapping its Power?”

“We must recall that a thousand years have passed,” Ouen said. “It is possible that any limitations impressed by Elsenar upon his jewel may have weakened over so long a time. While I feel confident that mages of the Light would not seek to impose their wills upon an object of Power attuned by another, I suspect that mages of the Dark would not likely be bound by any such scruples.”

Duratan had been quietly pacing. He moved a chair next to Morfew and sat down, propping his stiff leg upon a document chest. “Two reasonable outcomes suggest themselves in that regard,” he mused, “and I do not welcome either one. If the Dark mages can draw upon the Power inherent in Elsenar’s jewel, should they acquire it, then the peril to Estcarp would be unbearably increased. On the other hand, if the Dark mages attempted to force their wills upon the stone, and it resisted their efforts, might there not be another immense discharge of Power, such as that caused by the destruction of the Master Gate?”

“It is obvious to me,” said Jonja tartly, “that Elsenar’s jewel can *not* be allowed to fall into the hands of servants of the Dark. It must be controlled by, or at the very least be held under the protection of those devoted to the Light.”

“But how can we achieve that end?” asked Morfew. “We are here in Lornt, and Elsenar’s jewel is in Alizon.”

“Your question has a simple answer,” Duratan replied ruefully. “It is an answer simple in the stating, but far from simple in the achieving: we shall have to wrest the jewel from Gurborian.”

“Has Lornt an army at hand of which we are unaware?” Kasarian inquired in a coldly polite tone. “Baron Gurborian is unlikely to surrender his jewel for the mere asking, however persuasively you may phrase your request.”

“Perhaps you can suggest a more promising course of action?” Duratan challenged.

Kasarian nodded, ignoring Duratan’s sarcasm. “We cannot waste precious time on raising a fighting force or travelling the distance overland to Alizon City,” he argued. “If the spell that delivered me to Lornt will also function in the opposite direction, I could return through Elsenar’s postern in your

vault and attempt to recover the jewel from Gurborian.”

The Lornt folk all tried to speak at once, until Ouen raised his hand to restore order. “You would dare such a mission?” he asked the Alizonder.

Kasarian’s voice was firm. “I would.”

“A drastic reduction in offensive force, would you not say,” observed Duratan, “from a prospective army to just the one man? Unless Baron Gurborian customarily marches about alone, and you can provide a well-armed household force to waylay him, I urge that several of us accompany you on this quest . . . to improve our chances for success.”

Kasarian stiffened, about to respond, but I thumped my staff to forestall him. All during their discussion, I had been forcing my hand to write. From the moment that Duratan proposed the forceable capture of Elsenar’s jewel, I knew that my course of action could not be denied. Although my spirit—indeed, my very body—shrank back from the conclusion that my mind had reached, I knew I had to interpose myself in these crucial deliberations.

I handed my parchment to Nolar, who read for me, “Remember the stricture on Elsenar’s postern spell: only those of his blood may traverse that passage. I believe that I, too, must somehow be related to Elsenar; otherwise, why would my mother term his jewel to be our family’s betrothal gift from olden times? Could it be that my talent for insightful touch might derive from some measure of previously unknown mage blood? I suggest to you that my appearance weighs in favor of my passage to Alizon—you may have noticed that my hair and eyes could be mistaken for an Alizonder’s. Furthermore, I possess one commendable attribute for a potential spy—I can commit no slip of the tongue in the enemy’s presence. Besides, should Gurborian have hidden

away Elsenar's jewel, I assure you that I can identify it by touch, even in the dark, if need be."

During Nolar's reading, Kasarian had leaned forward in his chair, his face drawn with dismayed surprise. "You cannot mean," he blurted, then paused, and stared affronted at each of the others in turn. "Surely on so vital a mission, you would never consider dispatching an old, speechless *female!*"

Morfew smiled. "Mereth is not at all accustomed to the sheltered ways of our Alizonder females," he said mildly. "I hasten to inform you that the women of the Dales are every bit as active as the men, in both trade and warfare."

I nearly broke the point of my quill in writing my reply for Nolar to read to Kasarian. "Young man, in my seventy-five years of life, I have likely traveled farther and endured more fighting than you have. I can do more with a staff than merely lean upon it, and during my days as an organizer of war supplies for the Dales, I became a keen shot with a dart gun."

Kasarian did not immediately reply, but his thinly veiled disdain for me seemed to be replaced by an air of wary reassessment.

Ouen again raised his hand to focus our attention. "We have before us," he said, "two proposals: Kasarian's offer to attempt a return to Alizon by postern to act on our behalf, and Mereth's offer to accompany him. We must weigh the virtues and the drawbacks of each offer. I suggest that Kasarian withdraw briefly to his guest chamber to ponder his appraisal and response to Mereth's offer, while we of Lornt abide here to discuss the merits of his offer."

Kasarian instantly stood up, and bowed to Ouen. "I perceive why you are regarded as Lornt's chief scholar," he remarked. "You speak wisely. I welcome the opportunity for a private examination of this . . . irregular proposal."

He turned, bowed to me—to me!—and touched his House badge, then left us, shutting the door firmly behind him.

Jonja waited a moment, then eased open the door and looked down the corridor. “He has gone toward his chamber,” she confirmed. “Shall we leave the door ajar?”

“I think not,” said Morfew, amused. “Kasarian will likely truly retire to reflect upon the notion—quite bizarre to an Alizonder, I assure you—that a female can be expected to do more than produce strong whelps and mind a household.”

I sat very still. I had never before had occasion to think about Alizonder women and how they might live. None had ever been seen during the Dales war; we had assumed that they either did not choose to travel with their men, or were not allowed to do so. Should they be customarily kept as virtual prisoners in their manors and castles, it might be difficult for me to move about freely in Alizon City . . . assuming that Kasarian would accept my company.

Duratan was again fretfully pacing. “How can we dare to trust one Alizonder baron to oppose another such?” he demanded. “Now that Kasarian knows the awesome strength of Gurborian’s jewel, might he not try to seize it for the benefit of his own House—or worse, inform the Lord Baron so that he might act?”

Morfew shook his head, all traces of humor banished. “No, I believe that we may rely upon one sure fact: Kasarian would not venture to keep such a jewel in his own possession. The Line Sired by Krevonel was ever one devoted to the old ways. They feared and despised any association with magic. I think we can also trust Kasarian’s unswerving hatred for the Line that murdered his sire—such actions are not forgotten in Alizon.” His voice shook as he added, “That is why we have been cursed over the years by blood feuds. Deep

wounds leave deep and lasting scars that persist over generations.”

“Should Alizon loose its fighters upon Estcarp at the same time that we were magically assailed by Escore’s Dark mages,” Duratan worried aloud, “then our plight would be truly desperate. Our Witches have not yet fully recovered their strength from their mighty exertions required by the spells that caused the Turning.”

“I fear that they will never completely regain their former strength,” said Nolar sadly. “So many of them were killed or woefully afflicted by the excessive Power they wielded. Even now, the Council in Es City continues to search the land for young girls—even children—to be trained as rapidly as may be in order to reconstitute their numbers.”

Jonja glanced warily outside the door, then rejoined us at the table. “Should such an awful double assault befall us,” she said, “I would not be surprised if the Witches’ Council chose the same tactic resorted to by the Sulcar when the Kolder sent Gorm’s mindless masses to capture Sulcarkeep.”

Ouen stared at the table, but his eyes were focused upon something other than the wooden surface. “The utter destruction of Sulcarkeep was an act of sorrowful necessity,” he said. “May the Light forbid that we of Estcarp ever be driven to such a violent ending.”

“Lornt presumably would endure,” asserted Morfew stoutly, then he paused, and added, “provided our quan-iron spheres continue to protect us.”

“Who would want to exist in a single, isolated fortress surrounded like an island by the flood tides of the Dark?” asked Duratan bitterly.

“In regard to the possible outcome of a mission to Alizon,” observed Morfew, “should Kasarian and Mereth succeed

in passing through Elsenar's postern, how could they go about securing Gurborian's jewel without being captured or killed?"

"Kasarian will have to formulate a plan feasible for use in Alizon," Ouen replied. "We must then judge whether his plan holds a reasonable prospect for success—as well as whether it provides sufficient protection for Mereth. It disturbs me greatly," he said directly to me, "that because of the postern's stricture, you alone may represent us, risking your life for Estcarp's sake."

My hand was steady as I wrote for him to read, "I am an old woman who had thought her remaining active days were likely few. If this mission should be my last journey, I have no regrets. We of the Dales can never forget what you of Estcarp risked to aid us in our time of need. I have been a trader all my life. Fair service in return for fair service—what honest trader could offer less?"

Ouen's smile softened his usually stern demeanor. "The Dalesfolk have ever been known for their steadfastness and courage," he said. "Jonja, will you fetch back our guest? We need to hear what plans he has devised."



CHAPTER 15

Kasarian—events at Lormt
(Veneration Day, Moon of the Knife/
10th Day, Month of the Ice Dragon)

It vexed me that I had not fully grasped the mute female’s potential for disturbance. Soon after we commenced our joint search of Lormt’s archives, Mereth poked her writing slate at me, querying me anent Gurborian and why he had been awarded “her” jewel. I thought it advisable to plead ignorance of the details due to my relative youth at the time, thus I did not inform her that the first bestowal ceremony had taken place shortly after my twelfth-year’s Presentation to Facellian, the Lord Baron at that time. I had already left Alizon City when Facellian was deposed, so I did not actually see the jewel until its second awarding to Gurborian by Lord Baron Norandor at this just-past New Year’s Assembly. Mereth did not press the matter, but I suspected that she did not entirely believe my disclaimer.

When by her unnatural touch, Mereth identified the writer of the ancient journal as ELSENAR, I had to grip the arms of my chair to avoid crying out. I was appalled that she should utter, of all names, *that* baleful name! It was because of the execrated Elsenar that we numbered Alizon’s very years

by the form "Since the Betrayal." The indelible stain upon the Line Sired by Krevonel had been the tradition that we descended ultimately from Alizon's Lady Kylaina and the treacherous mage Elsenar. It was for that reason that we designated Krevonel as our original Foresire. Reputedly, he had been the elder whelp of Elsenar's siring, but no Alizonder could possibly want to claim Elsenar as Foresire.

By our reckoning, one thousand fifty-two years ago, Elsenar and the equally foul mage Shorrosh had betrayed our Foresires, who had courageously ventured through an ensorcelled Gate into the then empty land of Alizon. That those two ancient and untrustworthy mages proved to have come from Escore (according to Elsenar's fiendish journal) only increased my aversion to Gurborian's present-day determination to seek out more such linkages, courting Escorian ruin for Alizon yet again.

We had always been taught that after the mages had destroyed the Gate, severing all access to our original homeland, they then vanished, abandoning our Foresires with no provisions except for the few hunting animals and food plants they had previously brought through the Gate. Those initial years had been starkly intolerable, but gradually, our Foresires succeeded in devising a new Alizonder society. Except for Chordosh, whose name lingered on as a Moon Name, they set aside their former gods, since their godly powers stemmed from our original blood soil, forever reft from us. To replace the lost gods, they developed over the years a system of veneration of the Foresires, which waxed and waned in prominence and degree of devotion according to the will of each successive Lord Baron. In order to preserve appropriate respect among the packs, the early Lords Baron instituted

bodies of official Venerators to carry out the ritual duties required, including the breeding and sacrificing of shriekers.

As I contemplated the ancient origins of our ways, I was jarred to realize that this very day was Veneration Day, Alizon's singular year-day set apart between the ninth and the tenth days of the Moon of the Knife. On Veneration Day, the series of observances culminated in the largest mass sacrifice of shriekers, signifying our recognition of the Foresires. I had never before been absent from those ceremonies.

Isolated at Lormt, I felt simultaneously burdened and challenged by my sudden opportunity to influence the course of Alizon's future existence. Elsenar's journal could not be gainsaid. To my personal distress, the mage's narrative cited not only his redoubtable jewel, but also his key to the postern beneath Krevonel Castle—that very elder's key preserved by the females of our Line. That it should have been originally presented to our Forelady Kylaina by Elsenar caused my fingers to tingle at its remembered touch . . . yet without that key, I should not have been able to travel to Lormt. Nor, for that matter, could I deny that without some measure of the mage's tainted blood, I should not have passed through the postern at all. That was an even more daunting realization—that I must necessarily possess mage blood. I had to brace my body to prevent it from shuddering in the open view of the Lormt folk.

I forced myself to concentrate. In all my study of our Line's lore, I had never encountered word of any such prize as Elsenar's jewel. By Alizonder Line-right, however, it clearly should have descended through the Line Sired by Krevonel. War booty claim or no, Lord Baron's bestowal claim or no, Gurborian could not retain the jewel: it belonged to Krevonel.

My blood ran cold at the thought. I had heard the whispers about the cursed jewel from the Dales. None could state the full cost in lives associated with it before Lord Baron Facelian seized it. As an Alizonder, I knew that I should experience a blazing desire to claim so great a treasure for our Line . . . but the idea of possessing an object so steeped in magic tore at my vitals like the claws of a dire wolf. Still, I could not deny that Alizon's very future depended upon preventing Gurborian's potential Escorian allies from ever nearing Elsenar's jewel.

The Lormt folk persisted in discussing former unleasings of vast spell powers within and nearby the citadel. Such talk was unsettling. Should these Lormt folk succeed in securing the jewel, might they not surrender it to Estcarp's Witches? I could identify no desirable choice between the two sword edges confronting me. I could not, for Alizon's sake, abide either alternative; neither Escore nor Estcarp could be allowed to control that awful jewel. I therefore offered to attempt the jewel's recovery myself, should it prove possible to proceed back through Elsenar's postern to Alizon City.

Duratan at once challenged my offer, demanding that he and others accompany me, but once again we were interrupted by the Dales female. Duratan's mate read out Mereth's reminder that only those of Elsenar's blood could travel through his postern. To my utter astonishment, she then asserted that *she* should be selected to accompany me! She did present some cogent arguments—that her Witch-like power of touch implied mage blood, and her pack's tradition of owning the jewel linked her to Elsenar.

I regret that I failed to contain my instant reaction of

scorn for such a ludicrous proposal. The idea that an elderly *female* would dare to claim a role in high male affairs of state deserved only the laughter of disbelief . . . but I saw at once that the Lornt folk's view was contrary to mine. They did not laugh. Indeed, Morfew informed me that the Dales females were distinctly unlike ours, being as active in affairs as males, which I found a most disagreeable perception, but did not say so.

Mereth herself wrote an acid defense of her war experience, which I realized had to be taken into account, even despite her advanced age. How was I to know the capacity for agility and endurance possessed by these unnatural females?

Ouen then suggested that I withdraw to my chamber to consider Mereth's offer, while they remained to deliberate upon my proposal. I welcomed the chance to reflect upon the disconcerting body of information laid before us in so short a time. I bowed to him, and to Mereth, and hastened through the corridors, striving to impose some order upon my agitated thoughts.

It was evident that I had to revise my appraisal of this Dales female, Mereth. Perhaps her appearance could be explained if her blood had come down through Elsenar's Alizonian alliance. I had wondered earlier if she was part Witch; in one respect, the actuality might prove even worse—she could be part mage! She had not, however, been previously aware of her blood-tie until she read Elsenar's journal, so she was not a trained mage, mistress of many hideous spells. She could, however, sense information by touch, a frightening talent . . . but one that might serve us well in locating the jewel if it should be hidden away. As I reviewed all that I had learned at Lornt, the beginnings of a plan stirred in my mind.

When the Wise Woman came to escort me back to the group, I was ready to amend my original offer.

Once I had taken my place at the table, Ouen immediately announced that the Lornt folk had tentatively accepted Mereth's offer, depending upon the details of my plan for retrieving Elsenar's jewel from Gurborian.

I decided to address my proposal directly to Mereth for two reasons. First, out of courtesy to a possible comrade in arms on a potentially fatal mission; and second, out of curiosity to see how she would react.

"I crave your pardon, lady," I began, "for my earlier outburst. I have been trained in the customs of Alizon, and I do not as yet fully comprehend your ways. I did not intend to offend you. I have carefully pondered what you wrote, and if you dare to be bold and resolute, I think I perceive one way by which you might be accepted in Alizon City." I paused, but she merely nodded, and gestured for me to proceed. "In my earliest youth," I resumed, "I was fostered with my sire's elder littermate—"

Morfew interrupted. "These folk are more familiar with the form 'uncle,' " he explained, "just as they tend to say 'brothers' or 'sisters' rather than male or female littermates, and 'family' instead of pack."

I bowed to him. "I thank you for such useful words to increase my understanding of your speech. My . . . uncle, Baron Volorian, still lairs at his manor far to the north and east of Alizon City. His letters first alerted me to Gratch's probes among the mountains adjoining Escore. Volorian is the oldest living male in our . . . family, and is eminent for his intense hatred of any traffic with magic. Since my sire was murdered by Gurborian's hirelings, Volorian has essen-

tially avoided Alizon City, being occupied with his hound breeding, for which he is also duly famed. None in the City now would likely recall him well enough to doubt you, lady, should you appear, posing as Baron Volorian.”

The Lornt party stirred in their chairs, obviously dismayed by my suggestion. Having launched my initial thrust in what I had to view as a duel with words instead of swords, I hastened to press my advantage. “You are much the same size and age as Volorian, lady,” I said to Mereth. “Your hair, of course, would have to be properly shortened and perhaps brightened. Your lack of voice, however, does pose a problem.”

Morfew unexpectedly smiled. “I discern a simple solution for that difficulty,” he observed. “Could we not say that a winter ague has temporarily quenched your uncle’s voice? It is a common enough ailment among us here at Lornt—our Master Pruett is kept busy in his herbarium through all the winter months, brewing soothing syrups to restore lost voices.”

I was favorably impressed by his quick wit. “That would do very well. I could explain my current absence from Alizon City,” I continued, “as a sudden journey in response to a summons from Volorian to confer with him at his manor.”

“But you just said that Volorian has avoided any possible contact with his brother’s murderer all these years,” the Wise Woman objected. “How could you now devise a way that the two of them could meet without blood being shed? I gather,” she added, nodding toward Morfew, “that you Alizonders cherish your feuds.”

“It is precisely because of the depth of animosity between our two Lines that my plan has such promise,” I retorted.

“Gurborian avidly desires to attract more prominent barons to his faction. We could intimate that if sufficient reasons . . . and payments . . . were offered, then the Line Sired by Krevonel *might* be persuaded to join Gurborian’s faction. I could assert that Volorian insisted upon returning secretly with me to Alizon City to conduct such delicate negotiations personally. Gurborian would not dare refuse such an opportunity. I believe that he would even risk coming to Krevonel Castle itself to attempt to win our support by his false enticements. We could then dispose of him and seize the jewel, provided we could somehow spur him to bring the jewel with him, thus sparing us both the hazard and the trouble of seeking it at his castle.”



CHAPTER 16

Mereth-events at Lornt
(10th Day, Month of the
Ice Dragon/Veneration Day)

When he was brought back to the study room, Kasarian addressed a brazen proposal to me, with an odd mingling of both arrogance and courtesy. He declared that I was of a suitable age and size to disguise myself as his uncle, Baron Volorian, who had fostered him as a child.

I was appalled by Kasarian's proposition. How could I possibly pose as an Alizonder baron? I had already felt utter revulsion at my own notion which required me to go among our Dales' worst enemies in even the most inconspicuous, surreptitious fashion, but this hideous plan entailed my assuming a visibly prominent role. I forced myself to attend to the continuing discussion.

"If our initial overture to Gurborian is composed skillfully enough," Kasarian resumed, "Gurborian would feel obliged to investigate the validity of our receptiveness. Once we tempt him into Krevonel Castle, we can maneuver adroitly for the best opportunity to kill him. Gurborian has always been as wary as a cornered split-tusked boar. He would be unlikely to succumb to any consumable poisons. If I could position myself near enough to him, a dagger thrust should be

more certain. . . ." His voice trailed off as he became aware that the others around the table had drawn back in obvious distaste. "I see that Alizon's common modes of action differ from yours," Kasarian remarked, evidently more intrigued than offended by our reactions. "Do you not resort to killing under pressing circumstances such as these?" he asked.

"We do not often have occasion to weigh various methods of killing in advance," said Ouen dryly, "except during councils of war."

Duratan's expression remained somber. "In this instance," he commented, "the Alizonian way may have to be considered. If Gurborian is customarily on guard against sudden attacks, it will be far more difficult for us to take him by surprise."

I thumped my staff and extended a written question for Nolar to read to Kasarian. "Would Gurborian recognize Volorian's script?"

Kasarian appeared startled by my query, but after a moment's thought, he shook his head. "No," he said, "I can think of no reason why they should have exchanged writings in the past. Volorian dispatches few letters—only to me, and to other noted breeders of hounds."

Nolar accepted and read my related proposal: "Could we not bait our trap with a message ostensibly written by Volorian? Suppose Volorian demanded to know the truth of Gurborian's intentions concerning Escore, and offered, under convincingly stringent conditions, to pledge his Line's backing for Gurborian's plot?"

"An admirably clever thought, lady," Kasarian acknowledged. "Knowing that Gratch had encroached upon our lands, Gurborian must assume that Volorian is aware of his suspicious activity near our estates. He should indeed be drawn to

respond to such an approach.”

“Regarding the setting of conditions for a meeting of mutually mistrustful barons,” mused Duratan, “Volorian could insist that Gurborian come secretly to Krevonel Castle at a discreet hour—midnight, say—with a minimal number of bodyguards. I trust that Gurborian does employ bodyguards?”

“A dozen or more,” Kasarian confirmed. “Gurborian has accumulated many enemies.”

Nolar’s eyes brightened. “It may be that I perceive a way whereby Gurborian might be persuaded to bring Elsenar’s jewel with him to Krevonel Castle. Since Morfew’s winter ague has silenced Volorian’s voice, the baron would reasonably order Kasarian, his brother’s son, to speak for him. And,” she added triumphantly, “Volorian could make it a condition for the meeting that Gurborian wear his jewel from the Dales. He could claim that Kasarian had taken a fancy to it, and its presence and implied potential availability as a bribe might sway his opinion in Gurborian’s favor.”

Morfew reached for quill and ink. “I can easily indite that message in the proper Alizonian style.” He scribbled busily, then read to us, “ ‘Gurborian: I have heard curious rumors and reports concerning certain of your recent plans. What is the truth of the matter regarding your furtive incursions along the Escorian border? Packs of our puissance should unite into one overwhelming force, not splinter our strength by opposing one another. Is it not time that we set aside our Lines’ past enmities? If you have contrived a scheme with promise, I might, for carefully negotiated considerations, rally Krevonel to your faction. Come to Krevonel Castle at midnight. Bring no large retinue, but I would hear from your agent Gratch, who I know has been sniffing about my territory. Discussions

of such moment should be held circumspectly by pack elders. Since a winter ague has quenched my voice, however, Oralian's whelp will accompany me to speak in my stead. A private word for your ear alone—the whelp has taken a fancy to that bauble of yours from the Dales. Bear that in mind when you arm yourself for the excursion. His opinion could be persuasive, especially among the younger whelps of our Line. I await your reply. Volorian.”

Kasarian showed his fangs in a wolfish grin. “Morfew, I commend the shrewdness of your composition. It strikes the perfect tone to prick Gurborian's ears.” His expression reverted to his more usual semblance of keenly focused regard. “I do foresee one other obstacle,” he said. “Yonder female's paws cannot be mistaken for those of a proper baron and Master of Hounds.”

Morfew emitted a snort that I took to be a suppressed laugh. “The seamstresses of Lornt,” he said, “ably directed by our Mistress Bethalie, can craft ornamental gloves suitable for even baronial use. Surely an elderly baron suffering from ague would choose to glove his hands warmly for a clandestine meeting in an old castle at midnight.”

“Your ingenuity is inspiring, Morfew,” Ouen observed appreciatively. “We must also address the matter of diverse speech. Do you think it will be possible to teach Mereth sufficient Alizonian so that she can react acceptably to what might be said during a conference with Gurborian?”

“If the lady will permit,” Kasarian offered, “I can endeavor to instruct her in our basic speech.”

“The two of us can assist her,” Morfew declared. “She must master our script as well, so she can write brief comments on her slate as Volorian would, in order to communicate with his nephew. ‘Nephew,’ ” he added for Kasarian's

enlightenment, “is the Estcarpian term for a brother’s or sister’s son.”

I nodded to each of them, and wrote, “I thank you both. Let us set about these tasks at once. I possess a few words of Alizonian, and I know the script for some trading terms, but I achieved that limited understanding many years ago. My memory will require much refreshing and additional instruction.”

“As for her hair. . . .” Jonja had been looking from me to Kasarian, and then back to me. “Kasarian is right. Mereth’s hair needs to be a paler, yet brighter hue if she is to survive close scrutiny by Alizonders.”

Nolar had been quietly pondering. “I am familiar with many preparations of bark or nut shells to darken hair,” she said, “but I cannot immediately recall any treatment that causes hair to lighten to the silver-white we require. I shall ask Master Pruett—he knows more about herbs than any person in all of Estcarp. If such a substance exists, he will know of it, and likely have three different forms of it tucked away in his herbarium.”

“Pray inquire of him for us,” Ouen requested, and Nolar rose from her chair.

Jonja also stood. “By your leave, I can alert Mistress Bethalie to assemble her most skilled glovemakers.” At Ouen’s gesture of approval, she followed Nolar from the room.

Ouen pushed back his own chair. “Your study of Alizonian should be as undisturbed as possible,” he said. “I shall arrange for food and drink to be brought here, as we did for our work in Morfew’s rooms. We will rejoin you presently, after you have had time to progress. Despite the gravity of the threat from the north, we cannot neglect Lormt’s necessary

activities.”

Duratan smiled ruefully. “Master Wessell has been chasing after me through every corridor, waving his provisioning lists. I had hoped to elude him in here, but this would be a good opportunity to confer with him.”

Once they had departed, Morfew gathered together several blank sheets of parchment, and invited me to take the chair beside his. Kasarian retained his place across the table from us.

As the hours passed, I was exceedingly relieved that I could not physically speak the wretched tongue. The more I listened to Morfew and Kasarian growl and snarl at one another, the more they sounded like a brace of quarrelsome hounds. Spoken Alizonian grated upon my ear . . . and my memory. I had thought that I had buried those memories, but jagged shards from the past stabbed my mind, unbidden, no doubt prompted by the hateful speech of our Dales’ bitterest enemies.

I thumped my staff, and gestured toward the flask of ale. Kasarian leaped up to pour me a measure. I shut my eyes for a moment, then forced myself to copy yet again the shapes of the script letters that I had to master. I was gradually achieving some facility, but my hand was again aching from the intensive exercise.

Nolar returned first, bearing a welcome tray of porridge, cheese, bread, and fruit. Jonja arrived soon afterward, noting that Mistress Bethalie herself insisted upon coming to measure my hands for the baronial gloves.

Nolar briskly swept aside our parchments to make room for the food. “I described to Master Pruett our need for some means to match the Alizonder hair color,” she reported. “He regretted that he could not attend to you personally, Mereth,

but he is engaged in a most delicate extraction of essences that he cannot abandon. He assured me, however, that this decoction of silver nettles should produce most satisfying results." She withdrew from her skirt pocket a flask of murky liquid that exuded a sharp scent even though its stopper was tightly wrapped with dried grass.

Jonja eyed it dubiously. "I should not care to apply that to *my* hair," she stated firmly. "Common nettles I know well enough, and how they will restore hair color, but these silver nettles from the high mountain meadows are far harsher in their juice and in their stings! Surely such an extract would be too strong to apply to the scalp."

Nolar nodded. "From my own herbal experience, I raised that very objection, but Master Pruett vows that his regimen for purifying and cooling the decoction quite diminishes the more noxious elements of the plant. Still. . . ." She glanced at me, and smiled. "If Mereth will allow us, I would feel easier if we cut off a lock of hair and tested that first."

Jonja plucked from her belt scrip a sturdy wooden comb and a small knife. I let down my hair, curious to see whether its already white hue could be bleached by Lormt's herbs to the singular silver-white shade characteristic for Alizonders.

We duly peered at the lock Jonja placed on a saucer, while Nolar dampened it with water, then added a few drops from Master Pruett's flask. Jonja stirred the strands with her knife, and rinsed them in a second saucer.

"Master Pruett advises that we apply the nettle extract in a solution with mild soap," Nolar said. "The lightening process will take somewhat longer, but will be gentler to the skin."

"I would not have believed it," Jonja admitted, "but this extract of Pruett's does produce the desired hue. If you agree," she added, turning to me, "I can trim your hair to the length

and style worn by this Volorian.”

Kasarian had been watching us with great interest. “The last time I saw Volorian,” he remarked, “his hair was trimmed much like mine. He wears his perhaps a trifle shorter at the back of the neck, since he seldom fights in a helmet. I practice frequently with blade and spear,” Kasarian explained, “in order to maintain my speed of thrust. Some fighters must pad their helmets, but since my hair is dense, I require no padding.”

“I welcome your attentions and advice,” I wrote for Nolar to read aloud. “At your convenience, I place my hair at your disposal.”

That afternoon sped past in a blur of activity. Just as we were completing our hasty luncheon, an energetic woman of middle age rapped at the door. Nolar introduced her as Bethalie, Lormt’s mistress for all forms of needlework. She spread a square of thin cloth on the table before me, and with a stick of charcoal, deftly marked around my outstretched fingers. From a capacious pocket in her smock, she produced a well-worn strip of linen barred with evenly spaced lines of stitching, which she stretched around and along every possible dimension of my hands. Having carefully noted each measurement on a corner of the cloth, she bobbed her head, gathered up her materials, and promised to bring me a pair of cloth test-gloves as soon as her seamstresses could cut and stitch them.

Jonja was lighting the candles and Nolar was about to serve our evening meal delivered by one of Morfew’s assistants when Mistress Bethalie bustled through the door. She explained that these relatively flimsy cloth gloves would be unstitched to provide patterns for cutting the leather versions. Humming a quiet tune to herself, Mistress Bethalie tight-

ened a tuck here and loosened a seam there. "It may take two days," she announced at last. "The final gloves must be appropriate for a baron of Alizon. I have three embroiderers marking out the ornamental designs for the gauntlets."

True to her word, two days later at midmorning, Mistress Bethalie appeared at Ouen's study door looking highly gratified. Walking directly to the table, she extended to me a pair of hideous red-purple leather gloves, their gauntlets encrusted with tortuous swirls of silver thread so closely stitched that I expected the surface to be as stiff as a turtle shell. When I thrust in my fingers, however, I discovered that the leather was as soft and supple as fine wool. I had never in all my years possessed finer made—or more garish—gloves. I removed one for Kasarian's inspection. He examined it with every appearance of genuine approbation.

Bowing gracefully to Mistress Bethalie, Kasarian said, "I have seldom touched a finer prepared piece of leather, or seen more elegant decoration. Baron Volorian himself would wear these gloves with pride."

He turned away to exclaim to Morfew about the stitching, and I heard Mistress Bethalie murmur to Nolar, "I promised our chief tanner last year that someday I would rid him of that vile mistake he made in dyeing. He wagered with me that no man in Lornt would endure such an appalling shade of leather. I believe that I can now honestly claim my wager, for these gloves have been worn, albeit briefly, at Lornt. It seems that their appearance appeals solely to Alizonders."

In the past, I had prided myself upon my ability to juggle several tasks, compressing into one stretch of time a number of trading activities that had to be accomplished simultaneously. The next several days at Lornt reminded me most

forcefully of the strenuous trials for both mind and body that had assailed us during the time of fighting in the Dales, and to an even greater degree in the awful years following the war. I had been aided then by others who shared my burdens; now I also had supportive assistance, but so much depended upon my personal exertions. I raced through the crowded hours, listening to and writing Alizonian, sitting for my hair to be cut and bleached silver-white, trying on piece after piece of clothing that Kasarian selected from Mistress Bethalie's stores to outfit me as Baron Volorian.

Kasarian himself brought up the subject of weaponry. One morning when I had finally been fitted with matching breeches, tunic, and boots that would serve until we could substitute the distinctive high-sided Alizonian style, he declared, "Volorian must be properly armed."

Without saying a word, Duratan crossed the study to unlock the small cabinet mounted above Ouen's desk near the window. He took from its shelves all of the weapons he had removed from Kasarian's body, and placed them on the table.

The Alizonder instantly arose to restore each item to its designated place on his belt or up his sleeve or tucked inside his boot tops. He preserved a deliberately impassive facial expression, but when he wriggled slightly to settle his gear in place, I suddenly recalled a similar motion. Doubt's old dog had given just such a gleeful squirm whenever his master buckled on his favorite cart harness. I realized that except when he slept (and indeed, I suspected that Kasarian slept with his knives within close reach), he probably had never before been deprived of his personal weapons for so many days as his current visitation to Lormt. I knew that I should have felt ill at ease had someone taken away my slate, chalk,

or tally sticks—how much more vital to an Alizonder’s sense of well-being must be his constant awareness of his personal weapons? Possibly the only time they would consider going unarmed would be in a place they knew to be utterly secure . . . if such a place could exist in Alizon, where treachery could be confidently expected from one’s own closest family members.

As I watched Kasarian, I could not avoid noticing the stark contrast between him and Duratan. Duratan’s body, too, had obviously grown accustomed to the weights of sword and dagger, and had been hardened in their use . . . yet during my observations of him at Lornt, Duratan had seemed most serenely content while wielding a quill or searching through old documents. By comparison, for all the pallor of his coloration, Kasarian called to mind the shadows of the night rather than the light of day. He was like a lean, sharp-toothed hound trained to lunge for an enemy’s throat, I thought, then decided that he embodied elements of wildness beyond those of even a war hound. With his uncanny agility and quickness of balance, Kasarian more closely resembled a prowling wolf, always poised to spring, always deadly.

Kasarian had noticed that I was watching him. He touched his belt and said, “As Volorian, lady, you will also have to wear such weapons. In recent years, however, he has exchanged most of his daggers for training gear with which he works his hounds. For our would-be meeting with Gurborian, he would definitely equip himself with full armament. If we do emerge in Krevonel Castle, I have there ample stores of weapons for you, as well as a proper pair of boots.” He walked around me, scrutinizing me from all sides. “I commend you, lady,” he said. “Did I not know better, I would vow that you were a true baron of the blood.”

“And one who regrettably still requires more practice in understanding the quickness of spoken Alizonian,” warned Morfew. “It is vital that you be prepared to respond to sudden queries, Mereth, with no suspicious hesitation. Let us rehearse again the kinds of phrases that you are likely to hear.”

For what seemed endless hours, I feared that I would never grasp what they were saying, but finally my ears discerned the important words which I could not dare mistake. We frequently labored far into the nights. We were constantly aware that at any moment, Gurborian might be succeeding in locating a Dark mage from Escore.

I was both deeply relieved and keenly daunted when on the twentieth day of the Month of the Ice Dragon, after nine days of furious effort, Morfew pronounced me sufficiently prepared for our purposes to deal with both spoken and written Alizonian. Ouen received Morfew’s report with evident gratification. “I believe that we can risk no further delay,” Ouen declared. “We have accomplished all that we can here at Lormt. Let us now discover whether Elsenar’s postern will accept these two would-be travelers. May the Light favor our enterprise!”



CHAPTER 17

Kasarian-events at Lormt
(19th Day, Moon of the Knife/
20th Day, Month of the Ice Dragon)

I had to concede privately that these Lormt folk were formidable plotters. Although they clearly disliked my proposal that Mereth should impersonate Volorian, once they had weighed our perilous situation, they began to offer inspired suggestions for implementing my plan. Initially, they appeared to be repelled by my various strategies to kill Gurborian if he could be lured to Krevonel Castle; then Duratan acknowledged that violence, however repugnant it was to them, might have to be employed. I wondered to myself how else they expected to acquire Elsenar's jewel except by violence, but I did not utter the comment. We Alizonders knew to our sore cost that Estcarp's male fighters were deadly in open warfare. I had to trust that they could be depended upon to wield a blade in defense of their own bodies, even if they shrank from planned assassination. Besides, if Mereth alone could accompany me, I could not rely too heavily upon her prowess with weapons. I should have to dispose of Gurborian myself.

I was considerably relieved to be allowed to resume my confiscated armaments. My uninvited residence at Lormt had

been distinctly uncomfortable without their familiar weights and shapes close to hand. I informed Mereth that once we reached Krevonel Castle, I would provide the proper boots and arms to make her fully presentable.

The three of us—Morfew, Mereth, and I—toiled diligently for days until we felt reasonably certain that Mereth could pose as Volorian and not be swiftly exposed as an enemy pretender.

On the Nineteenth Day of the Moon of the Knife, Ouen judged that we must delay no longer, and led our party to the same vault into which I had been so abruptly thrust only thirteen days before. Duratan strewed his uncanny crystals on the stone paving. The blue gems among them fell into a tight oval pattern, as if they had been deliberately set in a cluster. I beheld no significance in the array, but he and the others evidently viewed the display as some sort of positive omen.

Morfew voiced the question that had also occurred to me. “Can we expect Elsenar’s postern to function only at that same hour of the night? It may be that the activating spell is time-linked. I was not present when the magical opening was visible, but Ouen pointed out for me the stone over which the access area formed, and we marked that stone for any future reference. I understand that all of you observed a disturbance in the air—a glowing light suspended above the floor. My eyes are not as keen as they once were, but I currently see nothing out of the ordinary about this space above the marked stone.”

The Wise Woman frowned at her rune-board. “Nor can I sense the flare of raw Power that initially drew us here before the postern opened. Do you feel aught, Nolar?” Duratan’s mate shook her head, and the Wise Woman turned to Mereth. “Perhaps if you touched Morfew’s marked stone,” she requested, “you might detect some information beyond our sensing.”

Mereth stooped and ran her fingers lightly over the expanse of paving that Morfew had indicated, but her witchly insight failed her on that occasion. She wrote on her slate that the stone produced no images in her mind.

Ouen reached in his belt scrip and withdrew . . . the elder's key! "It may be that this key is needed as part of the spell," he observed, extending it to me. "Were you holding the key in your hand at Krevonel Castle when you first became aware of the postern's opening?"

I hesitated, reviewing my recollections. "Yes," I confirmed, "I was holding the key, but my back was turned away from the center of the room. My eye was attracted by the strange light suddenly waxing behind me."

"If only we knew more about how the ancient mages set their spells," Duratan's mate fretted. "No doubt they could conjure the opening whenever they required it, using special words or gestures."

"I certainly employed no words or gestures," I retorted, "nor did I know whither I was going."

Morfew had been staring at the marked stone. "Perhaps," he said thoughtfully, "if Kasarian stood upon this spot and envisioned the postern-linked chamber in Krevonel Castle, then the force of his mental focus might summon the access point."

The Wise Woman nodded. "Assuming that the postern will accept more than one transient at a time," she cautioned, "we dare not risk any physical separation of the two travelers. If Mereth and Kasarian clasp hands, surely that contact would keep them together during the journey."

Remembering the unsettling disorientation of my passage, I judged it wise to warn Mereth beforehand. "My initial transit was tumultuous," I said to her, "rather like being severely buffeted by a winter gale. The Wise Woman speaks reasonably, but a mere handclasp alone could be dangerously inad-

equate. I had best lock my arms around you, lady, while bearing the elder's key as I did before, should that be a necessary element for the working of the spell. Come, let us stand close together, and fix our minds upon our urgently required terminus."

Mereth tucked her staff through her belt, and after some slight hesitation, placed her arms around my waist. Taking the elder's key in my right hand, I reached around her cloaked shoulders, grasping her body firmly against my chest.

"The chamber which we would enter," I declared aloud, "is that magic-secured lower vault beneath Krevonel Castle." I closed my eyes to concentrate upon the bare stonewalled space as I had last seen it . . . the age-roughened wooden door with its bronze-silver lock. . . .

"It's coming!" The Wise Woman's abrupt cry startled me. When I opened my eyes, an eldritch oval of curdled light was soundlessly expanding only an arm's length away from our position.

"Hold fast, lady!" I ordered, then lifted her off her feet, and plunged both of us through the shimmering expanse.



CHAPTER 18

Mereth—events at Lormt, then at Krevonel Castle (20th Day, Month of the Ice Dragon/ 19th Day, Moon of the Knife)

“I forced myself to approach Kasarian and put my arms around his slender waist. He was apparently not equally repelled by me, for he seized me so tightly that I could scarcely breathe. A shattering thought struck me—no male had hugged me so fervently since my beloved Doubt, achingly long years ago. That I should have to submit to this indignity from an Alizonder was almost more than I could bear, but even worse lay ahead.

I clung frantically to Kasarian, the only solid, warm object in a pitch-black, freezing, roaring chaos. I could feel his heart hammering through his tunic, but he held me unflinchingly. I do not know whether I dared to breathe, or if one could breathe in that awful space. Just as instantly as we had been afflicted, we emerged into another stone-floored chamber. Our only light source was the postern opening itself, and as it rapidly diminished, then vanished, we were left in complete darkness.

“Can you stand, lady?” Kasarian’s voice came from near my ear. He had eased his enveloping clasp so that my feet

were again firmly on the floor, but he kept one arm around my shoulders. "She cannot speak," he muttered to himself in Alizonian, then added to me, "Squeeze my hand if you can stand unaided."

I felt for his hand, and pressed it. I was somewhat light-headed, as if feverish or only half awake, but I believed I could hold myself upright if I did not try to move.

Kasarian released me. Shortly afterward, I heard a scraping sound nearby. Abruptly, I could see that he had struck a spark with his tinderbox, and was squatting to kindle a burnt-out torch, possibly the one he had left behind when he came to Lornt. The flickering torchlight disclosed a bare, windowless room with only one massive door. I leaned upon my staff while my dizziness receded.

"Before we leave this chamber," Kasarian warned, "we must plan carefully. It would be best for you to be seen by the fewest possible people. I cannot show myself here without being at once attended by Gennard, who has been my body servant since I was whelped. Having previously served my sire's littermate, he is the sole person at Krevonel Castle who knows Volorian by sight. I shall tell him that you are a baron engaged upon a secret visit to the City; he will ask no prying questions. We can also rely totally upon Bodrik, my castellan, who came to Krevonel five years ago from our coastal estates. Yes, those two shall be the pair to serve us. Do not be disturbed by the scar on Bodrik's face—he was wounded two years ago in a skirmish with brigands from Karsten." Kasarian paused, then added, "Bodrik has often clashed with Lursk, Gurborian's Master of Arms. The two of them preserve a wary truce while both Gurborian and I are in the City. I shall entrust the dispatch of Volorian's message to Bodrik.

He will contrive to achieve our desired ends: secure delivery of Morfew's summons into Gurborian's hands, while avoiding unwelcome attention by outside observers."

I withdrew my slate and chalk from an inner pocket of my cloak. Limited both by the slate's small available surface and my store of Alizonian, I strove to compress my host of questions into the briefest form. I wrote, "Will not your servants seek our horses?"

Kasarian read my words, and showed his teeth in a wolfish smile. "I rejoice, lady, that our rough transit has not addled your wits," he said. "If we are to assert the secretive nature of your baronial mission to the City, then we should not arrive conspicuously, with a mounted troop. As the Master of Krevonel Castle, I alone know and use the many secret passages allowing entrance and exit without notice by friend or foe. My staff will assume that we used such a passage—which, after a most abnormal fashion, we did." He fell silent for a moment, than stated, "You will have to inspect my hounds; no visiting baron, most especially Volorian, would fail to do so. Have you ever had occasion to see or touch one of our hounds?"

I clutched my slate tightly to prevent him from seeing the tremor that pulsed through my hands. "From distance," I finally managed to write, "only twice, during war." I shuddered inwardly at the memory of those two awful events.

During the early years of the war in the Dales, the Alizonder invaders had brought with them a number of ravening packs of their namesake beasts, which they loosed upon our defenders. The Alizonders' hounds were like no dogs such as those we knew and employed ourselves for hunting or warfare. From Elsenar's journal, I now knew that the original

hounds had come through a mage's Gate with the first Alizonders. All we of the embattled Dales had known was revulsion and terror for the lean, white creatures that savagely ran down our fleeing men, women, and children. Once the blessed Sulcars succeeded in harrying and intercepting Alizon's supply ships, the barons gradually withdrew their precious hounds as too valuable to be slain at sea or by our darts or swords. Volorian, I recalled, was supposed to be a noted breeder of the vile creatures. I would have to compel myself to view Kasarian's hounds.

Staring at me speculatively, Kasarian must have sensed my reluctance. "I shall fetch to you a recent pup from my prize bitch," he declared. "Before you encounter the entire pack, we must determine how your scent affects them. Come, let us repair to an upper chamber. I have much to tell you while we dispatch and wait for Gurborian's reply to our message." He thrust his key into the great lock, and swung back the door.

We proceeded through corridors and up stairs whose dusty surfaces had recently been disturbed by the marks of only one pair of boots. Unlike the sober gray stones of Lornt, Krevonnel Castle's stones were a glistening buff-brown color, but the scale of the Alizonders' construction was equally impressive. I noted a strange similarity between these underground ways and those beneath Lornt . . . until we gained the more habitable upper levels. The farther we climbed, the more sumptuous the decorations and furnishings became. Possibly because of their own physical paleness, the Alizonders seemed to adorn their living quarters with brilliant—even jarringly bright—colors.

Twice, far ahead of us in the corridors, I glimpsed white-

haired figures clad in dark blue livery, but as soon as they noticed our approach, they scurried out of sight around the next corner or through the nearest door. One figure alone did not retreat, but marched purposefully across a vast reception hall to meet us. He was a tall, gaunt, older Alizonder, whose pale blue eyes reminded me of Morfew.

Kasarian nodded brusquely to the man, as if he had expected to encounter him. "You will serve our guest and me in the north tower room, Gennard. Send for Bodrik to meet us there at once."

As he bowed to Kasarian, Gennard touched his House badge. "Welcome back, Master." He turned toward me, repeating the bow and the gesture. "Krevonel Castle welcomes you, Worthy Baron," he said in a voice neither subservient nor fearful. If he had served Kasarian since the baron's childhood, I assumed that he must be a capable survivor . . . and that he felt secure in his position.

I imitated Kasarian's nod, and strode after him, for he had already moved toward a distant door. We climbed yet more stairs. I was deeply relieved when Kasarian finally entered a room and offered me an ornate chair. We had scarcely seated ourselves before a different Alizonder appeared at the open door.

"Enter, Bodrik," Kasarian invited, and the man he had described to me as his castellan approached us.

Somehow, I had expected that all Alizonders would look alike. So far, Kasarian's castle staff did share the same distinctively pale hair and skin, and they were all outfitted in the same neat blue livery ornamented with white piping and braid. When viewed face to face, however, the individual Alizonders appeared as different as any two Dalesmen would.

Bodrik's features were not as finely cut as Kasarian's, and he was stockier and broader of shoulder than his master. His eyes were a clear green, like the early leaves of spring, but what drew my gaze was the livid scar that branded a diagonal slash from above his left eyebrow across the bridge of his nose, extending down his right cheek.

Touching his House badge, Bodrik bowed to Kasarian. "Krevonel welcomes your return, Master," he said in rumbling tones, the growl of his Alizonian more pronounced than Gennard's or Kasarian's.

"Krevonel is honored by the arrival of this Worthy Baron," Kasarian proclaimed, nodding deferentially toward me. "His name and presence, however, must not be revealed to outsiders, since his purpose in the City must be achieved in utmost secrecy. He has traveled a far distance, despite a winter ague that has presently quenched his voice. He will make known his orders to you in writing."

As Bodrik bowed to me, he said, "I am yours to command, Worthy Baron."

"The Baron's first command is that you convey a private message to Baron Gurborian," Kasarian said, holding out the leather-wrapped packet containing Morfew's cunningly phrased summons. "Take this at once to Lursk, for his immediate delivery into Gurborian's hand. We require an equally discreet reply. Depending upon the nature of Gurborian's response, I shall have further instructions for you."

"It shall be accomplished, Master. Lursk is drinking today at the Hooded Crow. Your message will be in Baron Gurborian's hand within the hour." Bodrik bowed again to each of us, then hastened from the room.

Gennard must have been watching for Bodrik's depar-

ture, for he entered right away, bearing a carved wooden tray crowded with flagons, covered dishes, and open containers. With the ease of long practice, he swiftly set out an array of food and drink on a side table. He would have commenced to serve us, but Kasarian held up his hand.

“We shall not require you to serve,” Kasarian said. “I prefer that you attend to a different task. In our haste to reach the City, we did not encumber ourselves with baggage. During his guesting with us, the Baron therefore relies upon our wardrobe for his needs.”

Gennard surveyed me. “If the Worthy Baron will allow me, I can fetch to his guest chamber a selection of robes from your sire’s store, Master.”

“An excellent idea,” Kasarian approved. “He is much the same size as Baron Oralian. Bring the clothing and suitable boots to the chamber next to mine. We shall repair thither after we have eaten and conferred. Be sure also to fetch a supply of writing chalk. The Baron’s voice has been temporarily silenced by an ague, and he must write his orders upon a slate that he has brought with him.”

“As you command, Master . . . Worthy Baron.” Gennard bowed to us both and withdrew.

Kasarian moved a table between our chairs, and began to transfer the dishes. “I do not permit the affairs of Krevonnel Castle to be conducted in the lavish fashion favored by some other barons,” he remarked. “I became accustomed to the simpler fare and style of service provided at Volorian’s estates. Now that I am Master of Krevonnel, I maintain that style, rather than indulge in pointless rounds of banqueting.” He carefully poured a dark red liquid into a silver flagon, then paused before offering me the cup. “I must caution you,”

he advised, "about this bloodwine of ours. We have never allowed any of it to be taken beyond Alizon's borders; it is restricted solely for baronial use. I suggest that you sample it . . . sparingly, until you fully appreciate its character."

I accepted the flagon warily. In my years of trading experience, I had tasted many vintages, some thin and sour, others strong and heady. This Alizonian wine had a pronounced bouquet, somewhat acrid, but not offensive. I took a very small sip. It tasted like no other wine I knew—at the same time, both strangely sweet and salty. As soon as I swallowed, I felt it bite like a potent, long-fermented cider. I set the flagon on the table, taking a deep breath to clear my vision. Kasarian was watching me over the rim of his goblet. I fancied I could detect a certain glint of amusement in his eyes. I wrote firmly on my slate, "Best I not drink much of this. Makes eyes water."

Kasarian nodded, evidently entertained by my reaction. "I shall have to serve bloodwine to Gurborian and Gratch when they come," he said. "We can excuse your failure to join us as occasioned by your loss of taste due to that same deplorable ague that has taken your voice. To accompany this meal, try this cordial made from white hedgeberries—much blander, yet thirst quenching."

As he served each dish, Kasarian described it for me, and tasted a sample himself. I could not help recalling that both he and Duratan had cited the Alizonders' penchant for poisoning one another. Doubtless Kasarian was attempting to reassure me of the wholesomeness of his viands. I chose to eat items familiar to me—some poached fish, a leg of wild moorhen, rabbit in pastry, some cheeses. Kasarian urged me to taste a dish of what appeared to be steamed roots served

with a cream sauce. He said it was another Alizonian speciality, never offered to outsiders. I found it so highly spiced that I doubted that many outsiders would desire to eat it, but I was spared from having to write my opinion of the dish, since he devoted his attention to slicing a glazed fruit confection. He would have pressed further dishes upon me, but I hastily wrote that I could eat no more.

Kasarian passed me a silver bowl containing moistened cloths so that we might wipe our hands. "I shall leave you briefly now," he announced, pushing back his chair, "to fetch the hound pup. Gennard may return to clear away our finished meal. If his presence perturbs you, you can survey the City from our windows until he leaves."

As Kasarian had predicted, soon after he left the room, Gennard did come back. He bowed to me, then started stacking the dishes on his tray. I nodded to him in what I hoped was an acceptably dismissive baronial style, and walked to one of the slit windows to look out upon the city of my enemies.

Because of the winter cold, heavy wooden shutters padded with wool had been secured across the windows. I unlatched one panel and swung it back. The sunlight was impeded by a layer of high clouds, so that my first view of Alizon City was appropriately drained of color. I was dismayed to behold the extent of the sprawling settlement. Ranks of roofs crowded one against another as far as the eye could see. From its commanding perch on an elevated rocky ridge dominating all other buildings loomed a monstrous fortress that had to be Alizon Castle, seat of the infamous Lord Baron. High up as I was in the Krevonel Castle's tower, I could see the glitter of metal flashing from the helmets of the sentries patrolling the

fortress walls.

The frigid draft through the open window numbed my face, but I was already chilled from within. The realization that I, a lone Daleswoman, should be standing in clear sight of the very Kennels of the Hounds of Alizon pierced me like a knife thrust. I was aghast when tears I could not feel because of the cold suddenly splashed down on my sleeve. I contrived, while closing and fastening the shutter, to rub a fold of my cloak around my face. I did not turn around until I heard Gennard close the door as he left the room. I chided myself severely. Loneliness and weariness could not excuse so dangerous a lapse. I doubted that Alizonder barons often indulged in tears—unless they were writhing in poisoned agony.

The door opened abruptly, and Kasarian entered, carrying a squirming white bundle in his arms. I hastened to sit on a nearby bench so that he could place the horrid creature in my lap. It was an extremely young beast, but already long of leg and well-muscled for the chase. I tried not to disclose my repugnance, but settled the hound with my gloved hands.

I was surprised by the softness of its short white fur. Its head was very narrow, with keen yellow eyes deep-set above a pointed, questing nose. Its curiously flared ears folded back flat against its skull except when they pricked erect to listen. The needle-sharp claws, like those of a cat, could retract into the foot pads; I soon discovered that its teeth were even sharper when it nipped me even through Mistress Bethalie's gloves. Kasarian's hands, I saw, also exhibited fresh toothmarks and scratches.

He observed my gaze, and laughed—the first time that I had heard him laugh. I suppose I had expected Alizonders to

bark like their wretched hounds, but Kasarian's laugh was a natural sound of genuine pleasure.

"Exceptional spirit!" Kasarian exclaimed, wiping away a streak of blood from his wrist. "Both his sire and dam are fine beasts, as this one will be in time. Due to the silver in his coat, I call him 'Moonbeam.'" He rubbed his fingers gently behind its ears, and the beast twisted its muzzle around to lick his hand.

I was astonished. Could these murderous hounds actually inspire affection? Was an Alizonder capable of such feelings?

Kasarian compounded my surprise by assuming an uncharacteristically defensive manner. "Few other barons name their hounds," he conceded, "but I have found that some hounds respond to training more energetically when singled out. Volorian introduced me to the practice, for he always named his primary hounds, the better to maintain correct breeding records. While they are pups, of course, hounds are more amenable to handling. Moonbeam clearly welcomes your attentions."

I realized that I had unconsciously begun to stroke the creature, and to my amazement, although the sound it made was rougher and more grating, it purred, almost like a cat.

Rising from his crouching position by my feet, Kasarian reverted to his more usual arrogant manner. "I rejoice that your scent does not infuriate Moonbeam," he said. "Since you have handled him, his scent will cling to you, which should aid in your acceptance by the adult pack. Let us now restore Moonbeam to the Kennels."

As we started toward the door, Gennard appeared. "I have placed a selection of Baron Oralian's clothing in the chamber

adjoining yours, Master,” he reported.

“Having examined Moonbeam, the Worthy Baron presently desires to inspect the balance of my pack,” Kasarian declared. “We shall assess your choices upon our return from the Kennels.”

Long before we reached the Kennel area, I could hear the dreadful clamor of the hounds. Moonbeam whined excitedly from his perch in Kasarian’s arms. We descended several steep ramps, stopping only when our way was blocked by a heavy iron grill anchored firmly in the stones on either side of the passageway.

Kasarian called out, “Wolkor!”

A burly Alizonder hurried out of the shadows to unlock a hinged gate panel fitted at one side of the grill. “Moonbeam’s dam be sore vexed, Master,” he complained. “’Twas needful to double leash her.”

Kasarian shifted Moonbeam into the other man’s eagerly extended arms. “They shall be parted soon enough when he joins the training pack,” Kasarian said.

I followed close behind the pair of them through a narrow passage that opened out into a spacious courtyard. The Alizonder carrying Moonbeam darted aside beneath an archway leading back into the Kennels.

“Wolkor has served me as Hound Master for many years,” Kasarian observed to me. “I had to bribe his former master to secure his release, but I have found none better at tending whelping bitches. You can judge his prowess by the excellent condition of my pack.”

I do not know how I endured the next hour. Like most nursling animals, Moonbeam had possessed—to some limited extent—the attraction of vulnerable helplessness. To be

forced now to survey the grown hounds with every appearance of approval made my flesh crawl.

Having restored Moonbeam to his mother's custody, Wolkor paraded before me individuals, braces, triples, and surging packs of hounds. My worst memories from the Dales war rushed back into my mind as the thin-flanked, ghostly white bodies strained against their leashes, weaving their snake-like heads from side to side, snapping and snarling. Whenever Kasarian bellowed some encomium above the din, I nodded appreciatively. I had to believe that the hounds accepted me as an authentic Alizonder, for their vicious exuberance was not directed in any corporate attacks on me.

Finally, as I was beginning to feel giddy from the dust, noise, and peculiar odor of the hounds, Kasarian called to Wolkor, "We shall distract you from your duties no further. I look forward to the whelping!"

Taking my arm, Kasarian led me back through the twisting passageways into the castle. "You did very well, lady," he murmured, when we were safely alone in one of the castle's endless corridors. "Volorian himself could have looked no wiser—except he would have forcefully evaluated every hound. I had to explain your lack of voice. Wolkor is convinced that you are a famed hound breeder." That obviously ridiculous assumption made Kasarian smile. "You may yet deceive Gurborian, lady—I begin to think that you may!"

Gennard was waiting for us outside an intricately carved door in one of the upper halls. The bedchamber within was regally appointed. On a wide table beside the canopied bed, Gennard had laid out a profusion of elegant cloaks, tunics, breeches, and soft leather boots.

With a low cry of recognition, Kasarian picked up a tunic

of vivid green velvet, closely embroidered with gold thread. "I remember this," he said slowly.

"Baron Oralian preferred that color," Gennard remarked. "I thought that perhaps the Worthy Baron. . . ."

"Just so," Kasarian interrupted. "We shall consider your selections. You may retire."

Once Gennard had shut the door, Kasarian held out the tunic to me. "I was five when my sire last wore this, just before his murder," he mused. "It is unlikely that Gurborian would recall it. Try it on, together with these proper boots."

I was relieved that only outer garments had to be exchanged, since Kasarian showed no intention of leaving the room. The genuine Alizonian clothing and boots fit me passably well.

While I dressed, Kasarian had paced back and forth. When my outfitting was complete, he surveyed me critically and nodded. "I commend you," he said. "No man could deny that in such garb, you present the appearance of a true baron." Suddenly he tensed, motionless except for a deliberate inclination of his head. Had he been one of his appalling hounds, I thought, his ears would have pricked up, he was listening so intently. From immobility, he erupted into a blur of motion, snatching a knife from his belt with a horrid facility, and throwing it with the sureness of a striking snake toward a shadowy corner where the brocaded bedskirt brushed the carpet.

I flinched inadvertently at the thud of the knife's impact, which coincided with a shrill animal cry of pain.

Kasarian bent to retrieve his knife, jerking it free from a fold of fabric, and disclosing the body of a large brown rat he had impaled against the wooden bedstead.

As he walked toward the door, Kasarian drew a strip of cloth from his tunic pocket to wipe his knife blade before resheathing it. Opening the door, he called Gennard, who appeared so quickly that he must have been waiting nearby. Kasarian gestured at the carcass and said, "An extra morsel for Wolkor's evening feeding." Gennard tidily grasped the dead rat by its tail, bowed to us, and withdrew.

Kasarian must have sensed my disquiet, for he surveyed me speculatively. "Have you no rats?" he asked.

I countered on my slate, "Have you no cats?"

He read my words, and smiled. "I have heard of such beasts," he remarked. "They are kept, I believe, to hunt rats and mice within inhabited structures. Our hounds are superb ratters, but are far too high-spirited and valuable to be allowed to run loose indoors. They must be reserved for hunting truly significant game. For controlling vermin, we find that a ready knife is quite adequate . . . and the sport instructs the young, exercising the agility of both hand and eye." His smile faded. "We may have scant time left before Bodrik returns with Gurborian's reply. Pray sit down. You must be informed of certain matters before Gurborian and Gratch arrive—for I cannot believe that they will avoid falling into our trap."



CHAPTER 19

Kasarian—events at Krevonel Castle
(19th Day, Moon of the Knife/
20th Day, Month of the Ice Dragon)

I was not at all certain how well Mereth would accommodate herself to our Alizonian food and drink, particularly to those singular items which we never allowed beyond our borders. It was vital that her reactions not betray her before Gurborian. I knew that she would have to accustom herself—if that were possible—to our potent bloodwine, which was always served copiously at any baronial meeting. Mereth sipped the portion I poured for her with commendable caution, then wrote that it made her eyes water, and she preferred to avoid drinking much of it. I deemed it prudent to accept her superficial response; she could not be seen by Gurborian to choke upon or swoon from imbibing our primary baronial drink. I suggested that we would ascribe her otherwise inexcusable rejection of the bloodwine to her loss of taste due to the ague.

Mereth appeared to experience no other difficulty with our Alizonian food. In case she might be suspicious of the presence of poison, I tasted some of each dish to allay her fears, then left her briefly to fetch my hound pup Moonbeam, who had been whelped early, between the year's two regular Whelping Moons. He already showed considerable promise

of becoming a pack leader like his sire. When I placed him on Mereth's lap, she held him acceptably. Even when he nipped her hands through her gloves, she refrained from striking him. She was, of course, incapable of crying out, but I was favorably impressed by her forbearance. To my considerable relief, Moonbeam freely endured Mereth's presence and attentions—indeed, he actually rumbled in response to her stroking! I trusted that his scent would cling to her sufficiently to assuage the pack when we proceeded to the Kennels.

I was most gratified by the fine display of my pack arranged by Wolker, my Hound Master. When all of my beasts had been shown to their best advantage and we rose to depart, Wolker whispered to me that Krevonel's Kennels were honored to be inspected by such an experienced visiting authority. His reaction encouraged me to think that Mereth might just possibly deceive even Gurborian.

Upon arriving at the guest's bed chamber, Mereth dressed herself with admirable dispatch, requiring assistance with only the bestowing of weapons. Arrayed in one of my sire's complete outfits, she could easily have been mistaken for a genuine baron. I had been carefully weighing in my mind how much to reveal to Mereth. I could not know what Morfew might have told her about Alizon and our ways. Although he claimed to have been cut off from news of Alizon during all his years of exile in Lornt, I was not certain whether that was a deliberate attempt to deceive me. I decided that in order for Mereth to be properly wary of Gurborian and Gratch, she had to be more fully informed about their reputations. Because Volorian was well aware of Gurborian's plotting, Mereth dared not appear surprised by facts known to Volorian. It was now therefore vital that I disclose to her Gurbori-

an's and Gratch's intentions to depose of Lord Baron Norandor.

"I must warn you first about Gratch," I began. "He is a shadowy figure, much dreaded due to his mastery of rare poisons. Little is known about his past except that he escaped from his birthsite on Gorm shortly before the island fell to the Kolder thirty years ago. Doubtless his intense hatred for the Kolder stems from that time. Ten years ago, he appeared in Alizon, and after assessing the relative prospects for advancement among the primary barons, allied himself with Gurborian. I had just assumed the mastery of Krevonel Castle when word began to circulate that Gratch had become Gurborian's principal advisor, contributing to and participating in all of his schemes. A year or so after Lord Baron Mallandor's accession, both Gratch and Gurborian retreated to the Reptur Line's estates along the coast. They conducted their plotting in general seclusion there for some five years, allowing Mallandor's suspicions ample time to cool."

Mereth held up her hand, and scribbled on her slate. "After war, Mallandor replaced Facellian," she wrote. "Why would Mallandor suspect Gurborian? Was he not friend?"

"Gurborian had openly supported Mallandor's overthrow of Facellian," I confirmed. "That was the chief reason why Mallandor rewarded Gurborian with the jewel we now know to be Elsenar's."

"But you said at Lormt you did not know details about gift of jewel," Mereth objected on her slate. "You said you were only pup at time."

I could not entirely suppress my amusement at the gullibility of the Lormt folk. "When you first inquired," I said, "it was not advisable to divulge the full extent of my knowledge. We Alizonders learn early that information can be as precious

as gold, and should be as closely guarded. It is now necessary that you be thoroughly informed about the foes we must vanquish.

“At Lormt, I spoke the truth to you—a limited portion of it. As a twelve year old whelp-of-age, I had been presented to Lord Baron Facellian. Volorian accompanied me to that New Year’s Assembly to stand in my murdered sire’s stead, then we returned to his manor where I had been fostered. Shortly after we left Alizon City, Facellian was overthrown and executed for losing the Dales war. Mallandor bestowed the jewel upon Gurborian as partial payment for his support, but soon realized that Gurborian’s loyalty to him as Lord Baron might be no more trustworthy than it had previously been to Facellian. Gurborian prudently withdrew to his coastal estates to allow Mallandor’s doubts to subside. Even after Gurborian returned to Alizon City five years ago, he deliberately shunned the Lord Baron’s close scrutiny. To disguise the true intentions of his travels, he occasionally pleaded for leave from court to attend to various matters at his estates.

“When I established my residence here at Krevonel about ten years ago, I had heard about the initial awarding of the jewel to Gurborian, but I had not seen the gem until it was for the second time bestowed upon him by Norandor at this New Year’s Assembly just past. To my knowledge, Gurborian had never publicly displayed the jewel after he first received it from Mallandor. I had wondered why he had refrained from wearing such a rumored prize, since he is famed for his lavish show of baubles, but I concluded that during those intervening years, Gurborian likely dared not remind Mallandor of the reason for his possessing it. After all, one successful overthrow of a Lord Baron might lead to thoughts of another such removal . . . and indeed, we now know that Gurborian was

already scheming to depose Mallandor.

“Three years ago, when Estcarp’s Witches forestalled Karsten’s impending invasion by their horrendous magical assault upon their southern border’s mountains, Mallandor longed to attack Estcarp while it was distracted and vulnerable. The Witch-spells sealing their northern border with us held firm, however, preventing any incursions from Alizon. Mallandor then witlessly acceded to the pro-Kolder faction’s arguments, resulting in last spring’s bungled raid into Estcarp led by Esguir, his trusted Hound Master. When all the remaining Kolder were killed and the Witchlings had escaped back into Estcarp, Gurborian recognized his opportunity. He united Mallandor’s enemies in a plot to elevate Norandor, Mallandor’s littermate—brother, as you say—to the throne. To recompense Gurborian for his essential aid, Norandor then officially conferred the jewel upon him for the second time—although only for his lifetime’s use. Esguir and Mallandor were, of course, fed to the hounds.”

I was interrupted by the sudden grating of Mereth’s chalk. She held up her slate for me to read her scrawled query, “Fed to the hounds?”

“Surely Morfew has described to you our traditional method of disposing of failed Lords Baron and traitors to Alizon,” I replied. “Obviously,” I hastened to add, “the bodies are *never* given to the better hounds because of the poison residues.”

Mereth’s hand faltered slightly as she wrote, “Poison?”

“All prominent barons and their primary retainers must guard themselves against being poisoned by regularly consuming small amounts of the more usual poisons,” I explained. “The practice naturally renders the human bodies unfit for houndmeat. Traitors’ bodies are fed to only the less able

hounds, so that their illness or death would not diminish the effectiveness of the pack.”

I regarded Mereth closely for any other signs of deplorable weakness, but aside from her initial hand tremor, she seemed to have recovered her resoluteness. “One of Norandor’s men, Sherek, has been lately named the new Hound Master,” I resumed, “to Gurborian’s bitter disappointment. Gurborian had mistakenly assumed that he could influence Norandor by bribery and coercion. Soon after Norandor’s elevation to the throne, Gratch came forward with the cursed notion of seeking an alliance for Alizon with the Dark mages of Escore to replace our former, failed alliance with the Kolder. With Gurborian’s approval, Gratch probed about in the mountains near Volorian’s estate this past summer, occasioning those letters from Volorian that first alerted me to the Escorian threat.

“I must tell you that I have private reasons I may not discuss which convince me that Gurborian and Gratch intend to depose Norandor, if they can secure sufficient backing from other disaffected barons. Volorian suspects as much—ever since the murder of my sire, he has harbored boundless enmity for Gurborian. You must bear that enmity constantly in mind during your impersonation. Despite the fair words of Morfew’s message, Gurborian will not be easily persuaded of Krevonel’s willingness to ally with him. You and I must appear to be both outwardly cold—as he will expect—and yet plausibly prevailed upon by the strength of his arguments to accept his proposals.”

Looking bleakly determined, Mereth nodded, then wrote yet another query on her slate. “If Volorian known for rejection of all magic, how can I in his place . . .” She hesitated, groping for a usable Alizonion word, I presumed. After a

pause, she finished the query, “bend to endorse any alliance with Escore?”

“The potential for irresistible gain should overwhelm our objections, or so Gurborian will likely insist,” I predicted. “If I appear to press you forcefully on behalf of the younger whelps of the Line of Krevonel, then your skillfully timed change of attitude may satisfy them. Your initial revulsion toward Gurborian’s suggestions can moderate into reluctant acquiescence. Under the circumstances, we are compelled to risk all—we must say anything necessary to pry Elsenar’s jewel away from Gurborian. As soon as the stone is within our grasp, we must withdraw as rapidly as we can, to convey the jewel through the postern to Lornt, where it will be safely beyond the control of Gurborian or the Dark mages.”

Bodrik should have returned by this time, I thought, unless he had encountered difficulties in delivering our message. I chastised myself for my impatience. Gurborian would weigh each word Morfew had written, and surely take equal pains—and time—in composing his reply.

I glanced at Mereth. She did not appear to be unsettled or visibly nervous, but it might be well to keep her occupied so that she would not have time to brood or indulge in fretful female imaginings. “You are suitably garbed for our baronial meeting,” I said, “but I am not. Come through into my quarters and refresh yourself with another . . . feebler wine while I array myself.”



CHAPTER 20

Mereth-events at Krevonel Castle
(19th and 20th Days, Month of the Ice
Dragon/ 20th and 21st Days, Moon of the Knife)

As Kasarian described to me the two enemies we were likely to confront, I blessed my long years of trading experience that enabled me to listen without exhibiting any outward signs of my true feelings. My beloved Doubt had often accused me of cultivating a facial expression of bland indifference. He was forced to concede that at times, I could extract better prices than he because the other merchants could not discern which particular goods I especially desired.

Listening now to Kasarian, I was appalled by the history of repeated intrigue and murder that he recounted. It was all the more chilling in its impact because of his matter-of-course style of speaking. I found it horrid to contemplate that for him and all the other Alizonder barons, their chosen way of life had grown out of such a bloody tradition.

When Kasarian mentioned Gorm, I felt a surge of painful memories. We Dalesfolk had once conducted a lively commerce with that island stronghold offshore from Estcarp. In my early years of trading, I had established fruitful ties with many merchants based in the warehouses crowding Gorm's

ports. Moored like a great vessel of rock in Estcarp's coastal bay, Gorm was sheltered from all but the rare northwesterly storms by the peninsular arm crowned by Sulcarkeep, the Sulcar fleet's home port. During my first overseas voyage with Uncle Parand so many years before, our ship had anchored for a time at Sippar, Gorm's primary city, which also served then as Estcarp's main port.

Thirty years ago, all the golden days of prosperity had come to a shattering end. While Hilder, Gorm's Lord Defender, languished near death, his second wife, anxious to secure her regency on behalf of their young son, secretly summoned the hideous Kolder to back her rule. The very night that Hilder died, the Kolder swept in from the sea, not as allies, but as merciless invaders. Most of Gorm's inhabitants suffered an unspeakable fate, forced to fight as mindless slaves for the Kolder until they were killed by their own grieving former friends from Estcarp and Sulcarkeep. Following Sulcarkeep's tragic, deliberate destruction by its own defenders to prevent its seizure by the Kolder's forces, Estcarp's Witches, aided by the famed Simon Tregarth, used their magic to launch a successful invasion of Gorm, exterminating all the Kolder lairing there. Ever since, the haunted island had been abandoned, mourned by all who remembered its fair past.

I now learned from Kasarian that Gratch, Gurborian's prime henchman, was one of the few who escaped from Gorm shortly before the Kolder doomed the island. Unlike the Gormfolk I had known and respected, Gratch was evidently a wicked schemer, no doubt attracted to Alizon where his murderous talents would be most fully appreciated. Because of Gorm's betrayal into the Kolder's hands, Gratch loathed the Kolder, and thus aligned himself with Gurborian, who, for different reasons, shared that detestation for the foreign instigators of the war with the Dales.

I was startled when Kasarian confided that Lord Baron Mallandor had suspected Gurborian of conspiring against him. I had understood that Mallandor had relied upon Gurborian in their violent overthrow of the previous Lord Baron, Facellian. Kasarian boldly admitted to me, however, that he had not told me the entire truth at Lormt concerning the circumstances of Gurborian's receipt of Elsenar's jewel. The wretched baron had actually been awarded the stone on two separate occasions by two different Lords Baron!

I was numbed by Kasarian's factual recital of the murderous intrigues and betrayals that saturated the Alizonian court. I hoped that he did not notice how my hand shook before I steadied my chalk when I queried him regarding the hideous double execution of a disgraced ruler and his underling who were literally *fed* to the hounds. It was as well that I could not speak, for I do not know what damaging words I might have blurted out—yet what words could have conveyed the depths of my affronted disbelief? I shuddered inwardly to think that countless generations of Alizonders had preyed upon one another in so cruel a fashion. It was difficult to grasp how Alizon had survived for so long when outright murder was a commended tactic for baronial advancement.

Clearly, Gurborian exemplified the most deplorable Alizonian traits. He had benefited from each major act of treachery, but not all of his schemes had succeeded. The execution of Mallandor's Hound Master had left vacant that powerful Alizonian office of primary war baron. Gurborian attempted to sway the appointment by means of bribes and intimidation, but the new Lord Baron Norandor had ignored Gurborian's machinations and installed one of his own men as Hound Master.

Kasarian warned me that Volorian had long been aware of the extent of Gurborian's ambitious plotting. When I posed as Volorian, I should have to reflect his enduring animosity

toward the murderer of his brother; Gurborian would expect it. Both Kasarian and I, in fact, would have to strive to convey a plausible change in our established attitudes, from entrenched opposition to grudging acceptance of Gurborian's proposals. When . . . if we did obtain Elsenar's jewel as a necessary bribe to secure Krevonel's backing, Kasarian admonished me to disengage as quickly as possible, so that the jewel could be carried safely to Lormt, out of danger of discovery by the Dark forces of Escore.

As if struck by a sudden thought, Kasarian fell silent. He observed that he was not appropriately dressed to confer with Gurborian and Gratch, and invited me into the adjoining bedchamber. I had an initial fleeting impression of sober elegance. Dark blue wall hangings softened the expanses of bare stone, and I glimpsed a canopied bed draped with a matching blue brocade occupying a raised dais against the far wall. Before I could fully survey the room's furnishings, however, my attention was exclusively engaged by one of the most terrifying sights I had ever beheld. When I half-turned as I passed a shadowed alcove, I found myself at the mercy of an enormous golden-eyed monster rearing up to attack me. I nearly fell, lurching backward and to one side in what I expected to be a futile effort to evade the nightmare's fangs and claws. Had I possessed a voice, I should have cried out in despair . . . then I abruptly realized that the beast had not moved.

Doubtless alerted by his sensitive ears as well as his swordsman's eye for movement behind him, Kasarian spun on his heel, one of his belt daggers ready in his hand. When I gestured at the monster, he laughed aloud. "I should have warned you in advance about Krevonel's most noteworthy trophy," he said, sheathing his dagger as rapidly as he had drawn it.

Plucking a torch from a nearby stone embrasure, Kasar-

ian raised it to illuminate what I could now see was a gigantic wolf-like creature whose thick-furred hide had been preserved and mounted upon a hidden framework to mimic the effects of a living, lunging predator. Kasarian was a tall man, but the rampant creature's outstretched front paws loomed above his shoulders. He regarded the horror with an expression that I had seen only once before, when he had brought me his hound pup. It seemed impossible to believe, but he was genuinely proud, even . . . fond of this monster.

"So few sightings are reported nowadays," Kasarian mused. "My sire's sire killed this dire wolf many years ago during a hunt in our northern mountains. The craftsman who mounted the skin achieved a splendid effect with the eyes, don't you think?" He waved the torch from side to side. I tried not to shudder as the glittering eyes appeared to shift within the massive skull. "Pure gold orbs with black stones inset for the pupils," Kasarian explained. "They provide a most life-like impression." He sighed regretfully. "I have never had the fortune to sight a dire wolf myself," he said. "My sire once told me that he had encountered unmistakable tracks, but the winter weather was too severe for his hunting party to pursue them. Still, we cherish this excellent specimen which not even Gurborian can match, for all his wealth and power."

I welcomed the goblet of fortifying wine that Kasarian poured from a silver ewer on a side table, and was equally grateful when he offered me a cushioned chair. He then strode to the door to shout for Gennard to attend him in his robing chamber.

My pounding heart had slowed to a more reasonable pace by the time Kasarian returned. I had to admit that he made a striking figure in midnight blue velvet tunic and hose, white leather belt and boots, and with an even more elaborate gold baronial chain suspended across his chest.

He had scarcely seated himself when Gennard thrust open

the door. "Master," he called urgently. "Bodrik has been wounded."

Jumping to his feet, Kasarian demanded, "Where is he? Was he able to return to Krevonel?" Before Gennard could answer, we heard an approaching clamor in the outer corridor, and suddenly Bodrik himself reeled into the room, closely pursued by several liveried servants scrambling to assist him. Krevonel's castellan had been sorely battered. A blood-soaked rag had been wound around his neck, and his formerly spotless livery was torn and streaked with more blood. He fell to his knees at Kasarian's feet, and tried unsuccessfully to raise his right hand to his chest where his House badge had been nearly ripped away. "Arm slashed," he muttered.

Kasarian immediately knelt, steadying Bodrik with a firm hand to each shoulder. "Gennard," he ordered, "Send for Wolkor, then fetch a basin of water and bandages. The rest of you, away to your duties."

The other servants hastily withdrew, Gennard close on their heels.

Bodrik shook his head slowly, as if dazed. He fumbled with his left hand inside his disheveled tunic. "Lursk is dead, Master," he said hoarsely.

I snatched up the wine ewer and filled a goblet to hand to Kasarian, who held it to Bodrik's lips.

"Rest a moment," Kasarian advised. "Wolkor is coming to attend to your wounds."

The wine seemed to revive Bodrik. As he drank the full measure, some color returned to his blanched face. Kasarian set aside the emptied goblet and lifted his castellan into a chair. Bodrik's labored breathing eased. He managed at last to extract the message packet with his left hand, and held it out to me. "Baron Gurborian entrusted me with this reply to be given only into your hands, Worthy Baron," he said, his

voice clearer and stronger than before.

Accepting the bloodstained packet, I peered questioningly at Kasarian, who drew one of his belt knives and reached across to cut the packet's binding straps. "How came Lursk to die?" he asked.

There was no mistaking Bodrik's reaction—he showed his Alizonian fangs in a triumphant grin. "Whilst we waited for Baron Gurborian to compose his reply, Master, Lursk and I fell to arguing in the courtyard."

Kasarian nodded gravely. "I trust," he said, "that you promoted the duel to facilitate my orders?"

"Aye, Master. I thought an open clash with Lursk would guarantee a direct audience for me with Baron Gurborian." Bodrik looked at me. "Before I entered the Master's service," he said, "Lursk killed my younger littermate in Canisport. I thank the Worthy Baron for this opportunity to settle my Line's account with Lursk."

I acknowledged his statement with what I hoped he would view as a nod of approval. I had been in Alizon for only a matter of hours, and already one death had resulted. What a dreadful place this was—filled with violent hounds, legendary monsters, and murderous barons.

Kasarian held the message packet stationary for a moment. "How came you to survive once Lursk was dead?" he inquired in a dangerously calm voice. "Surely there were others present in Reptur's courtyard."

"Lursk's men would have killed me," Bodrik replied with earnest conviction, "had it not been for Lord Gratch. The noise of our struggle attracted his attention. He came out of the balcony, quill in hand, just as Lursk foolishly overbalanced and I ran him through. The others were set to attack me, but Lord Gratch ordered them to seize me and bring me before Baron Gurborian at once. The Baron was not pleased to hear of Lursk's death, but he said to Lord Gratch that the

opportunity provided by Krevonel's message could not be lost due to misdeeds by underlings. I spoke up then, Master. I told him that I had settled a private score with Lursk—our duel had naught to do with Krevonel or Reptur. He said I had best stay out of Reptur's reach henceforth, then ordered me to deliver his reply before he changed his mind and killed me himself."

Kasarian smiled unpleasantly. "Should the occasion arise that I must dispatch another message to Gurborian," he remarked, "I shall take care to send a different messenger."

Gennard returned with bandages and a basin of water just as Wolkor arrived carrying a well-worn satchel bulging with ointment jars and herbs that I presumed he kept to treat injured hounds—or Alizonders. Fortunately, in one sense, this was far from my first experience with severe battle injuries. I had helped our Wise Women during the harrowing years of the Dales war, so I was not outwardly shaken by the sight of blood and mangled flesh. I took the bandages from Gennard and spread them out on a nearby table ready to be folded to the required dimensions.

Wolkor and Gennard swiftly removed Bodrik's tunic and the remnants of his undergarment. Besides the still undisclosed wounds on his neck, he had suffered a jagged sword cut down his right forearm. To my surprise, Wolkor threaded a delicately curved needle with what appeared to be a length of waxed thread. While Gennard pressed together the edges of the slash, Wolkor sewed the torn skin as neatly as any seamstress, then sponged the area with wine before bandaging it.

Leaving them to examine Bodrik's neck, Kasarian pulled Gurborian's reply from the packet. He held the document out deferentially for me to read, but I could make scant sense of the elaborately swirled Alizonian script.

"I vow, Worthy Baron," Kasarian observed to me, "that

Gratch's hand has become more decorative since the last time I saw it. Let us seek a better light by which you can advise me of your response." Taking my arm, Kasarian firmly steered me to a table near the looming dire wolf, well out of listening range of the other Alizonders.

"Gurborian, through Gratch's quill, expresses himself with his usual pretense," Kasarian said, fetching an extra candle to illuminate the writing. "'Volorian,'" he read in a low, sarcastic voice, "'I rejoice that you honor Alizon City with your presence. We have sorely missed your counsel these many years—I have often thought what valuable contributions you could make to advance Alizon's interests. Now you grace me with your most noble invitation to attend you. I shall be delighted to arrive at the time and place you specified, accompanied solely by Gratch and a minimal party of guards. Your suggestion truly stirs my interest. I dare to hope that both our Lines may benefit greatly from our meeting. Pray extend my most cordial greetings to Kasarian, whose loyal service I have long admired. I eagerly await the set hour. Gurborian.'" Kasarian paused, then bared his teeth in a feral smile. "Morfew has earned a large medallion to attach to his baronial chain," he said. "Our quarry has taken his well-worded bait. Come, let us set our arrangements in order."

At our approach, Bodrik insisted upon rising to his feet. He appeared to be fully recovered from his ordeal.

"Wolkor," Kasarian said, "you may return to the Kennels. Tell the steward you may draw a flask of bloodwine."

Grinning, Wolkor bobbed his head and slapped his House badge with enthusiasm. As soon as he had closed the door, Kasarian turned to Bodrik and Gennard. "We shall be receiving Baron Gurborian this midnight," he informed them. "The Worthy Baron and I shall confer with him and Lord Gratch in the green audience chamber. Since this is to be a secret meeting, they will be accompanied by only a few bodyguards.

Bodrik, are you fit to serve as my Armsmaster?"

To demonstrate his restored capacity, Bodrik flexed his right hand and sketched a vigorous swordsman's flourish. "Aye, Master," he asserted. "Krevonel's prime troop can overmatch any of Reptur's lot."

"See that they do," Kasarian ordered. "It is possible that some . . . disagreement may arise between our two parties. Your picked troop will deal with Gurborian's guard. The Worthy Baron and I will attend to Gurborian and Gratch."

"Shall I bring your sire's sword from the Armory, Master?" Gennard inquired.

"Yes, take it to the audience chamber," Kasarian replied, "along with proper refreshments for the four of us. The Worthy Baron and I will take a light supper here. You will fetch our repast before you attend to the arrangements in the green room."

Bodrik had not been gone long when Gennard duly delivered yet more trays of rich Alizonian food, which he was prepared to serve, but again Kasarian dismissed him to "see to your more important duties below."

Kasarian shut the door behind him, observing briskly to me, "Your imposture would be revealed if Gennard saw you eating. Your flat Dale's teeth betray you. You must therefore guard against showing your teeth to Gurborian and Gratch. It is as well that Volorian's supposed ague prevents you from consuming the prepared refreshments."

I choked down a bit more of the Alizonian food, vowing to keep my mouth shut tight throughout the baronial meeting.

At last, Kasarian led me downstairs to a wide hall. He stopped before towering double doors that opened inward upon a spacious room whose walls were draped with vibrant green tapestries glistening with gold-threaded patterns. Three substantial iron cressets set in floor mounts provided illumination in addition to the candles flaring on the large table at

the room's center. Gennard had arranged a lavish cold supper on a long trestle table against a side wall. He had also placed a sheathed silver-hilted sword on the conference table.

Kasarian at once grasped the sword, drew it with his left hand, and executed a sudden flurry of lunges and mock parries. As I had suspected, he handled the weapon with expert ease. Evidently satisfied with the blade, he sheathed it, then peered keenly at the wall hangings. Behind one of the great carved chairs, vertical folds of fabric covered a niche in the stone wall. Kasarian concealed the sword in the narrow space. After rearranging the tapestry, he turned to address me. "I warn you to avoid being scratched by any baronial blades—it is customary for all such to be dipped in poison. You did say you could wield your staff; can you also use a sword or dagger?"

I shook my head, and wrote on my slate, "Dart gun and staff—not sword. I could stab, if close." I touched the hilt of one of the daggers at my belt, but Kasarian frowned.

"It is likely best if you attempt to stay out of dagger range," he said. "Besides, all of us will be obliged to disarm—ostensibly—before our meeting begins. I have no doubt that both Gurborian and Gratch will carry hidden weapons, just as they will suspect the same of us, but custom is custom. They will not consider your staff to be a weapon, of course. Alizonder barons do not fight with staffs."

"Dalesfolk do," I wrote firmly.

Kasarian grinned. "So I have heard." Instantly, he resumed his serious mien. "When Gurborian addresses you," he said, "you must write on your slate as rapidly as you can, but in such a way that neither Gurborian nor Gratch can clearly see the results. I alone will interpret for you. That way, I can answer concerning matters which you might not know. Do not be fearful of Gurborian's or Gratch's lordly manner—you are Baron Volorian of the Line of Krevonel, and as such, you

defer to no man save the Lord Baron himself.”

Bodrik appeared at the open door. He had donned a high-collared tunic to cover the bandage at his neck, and seemed fully alert and able to fight, should such action be necessary. “The Reptur party has arrived, Master,” he announced.

“We shall meet them in the hall,” Kasarian replied.

As I followed him toward the double doors, I noticed a heavy wooden beam lying along the interior wall beside the threshold. I had no opportunity to query Kasarian about it.

Just outside the doors, four of Kasarian’s armed retainers were rigidly drawn up in a line behind Bodrik. They faced four equally well-equipped Alizonders garbed in gaudy ocher livery piped with black. A sense of mutual hostility hung in the air as strongly as if a bottle of rank scent had been spilled on the stone paving between the two groups. Kasarian coldly ignored the underling intruders, striding out into the middle of the hall to intercept their approaching masters.

I immediately recognized Gurborian, having glimpsed him during my earlier vision at Lormt. He was a broad-shouldered, stocky man, with a wider face than Kasarian’s, flatter cheekbones and a more prominently hooked nose. His eyes were a murky green, reminding me of a pottery glaze that had gone wrong in the firing. I was repelled by the ostentation of his costume. His bloodwine-red velvet tunic was slashed with black satin inserts, whose seams were ribbed with pearls. The gold filigree chain draped across his shoulders glittered with red gems, as did the several rings he wore on both short-fingered hands. Even his black high-sided boots were decorated with gold inlays. He was not, however, wearing Elsenar’s jewel. If he had brought it with him, he had tucked it away out of sight.

The taller, thinner figure carefully keeping a pace behind him had to be the infamous Gratch. Like most folk from Gorm, he differed in coloring from the Old Race. With his

wheat-yellow hair and blue-green eyes, he appeared out of place among the paler Alizonders. His features were fine cut, but as he drew closer, I could see lines of dissatisfaction around his mouth, as if he often scowled. His tunic was made of a dark red-brown corded fustian whose color and texture reminded me unpleasantly of Bodrik's clotted bandages. The links of his neck chain, while discreetly smaller and less ornate than his master's, were still clearly fine gold.

I could not avoid comparing the two opposing parties. Next to Gurborian and his men, the men of Krevonel looked severely plain. Kasarian had mentioned that he preferred a simpler style of life than some other barons; I now understood better what he had meant.

I quickly decided to imitate as best I could the outward demeanor of the most arrogant man I had known, a merchant from Karsten who had infuriated Uncle Parand with his haughty airs. I therefore measured Gurborian with an offensively unimpressed glance.

Gurborian showed his fangs in a patently insincere smile, and proclaimed, "When I received your message, Volorian, I knew that only a matter of urgent significance to Krevonel could lure you away from your hounds at so crucial a time."

I scribbled busily on my slate for Kasarian to "read" my reply. He deftly held the slate out of Gurborian's view while relaying my presumed remarks. " 'What better time for a covert meeting? I have not missed the First Whelping since the war overseas. No baron would expect me to desert my pack just now.' "

"An adroit stratagem," Gurborian complimented me, "but might not word . . . sift out concerning your absence?"

"Certainly not," Kasarian retorted. "Volorian's Hound Master is completely reliable. No whisper concerning this meeting will ever be heard—at least, not from Krevonel."

"Nor from Reptur, I assure you," Gurborian heartily asserted.

Kasarian wiped my slate with his pocket cloth and returned it to me. "Let us now disarm," he suggested, "so that we may commence our discussion."

The four of us deposited a daunting array of knives upon the hall table outside the audience room.

Since I was both the eldest and the ostensible instigator of the meeting, I stalked into the chamber first, claiming the highest-backed master's chair for myself. Kasarian waited for our two guests to enter, then closed the doors and stooped to raise the wooden beam whose purpose I had not known. I now saw its intended use, for he dropped it into iron brackets bolted on the inside facings of the double doors, effectively barring us within, while also shutting our armed retainers out.



CHAPTER 21

Kasarian—events at Krevonel Castle
(20th Day, Moon of the Knife/
21st Day, Month of the Ice Dragon)

As I preceded Mereth downstairs on our way to the audience chamber where we were to meet with Gurborian and Gratch, I weighed in my mind her reactions to events earlier that night. She had clearly been shaken by her unexpected confrontation with the dire wolf in my bedchamber, but, surprisingly, she had not fainted from fright. Considering that she had never before beheld such a beast, and must have initially assumed it was alive, she had responded well, lunging to one side while gripping her staff to ward off its attack. I was favorably impressed by her steadfastness—most unusual for a female. Later, she had also proved undaunted by the sight of Bodrik's wounds when he returned injured. Indeed, she had offered useful assistance, pouring a timely cup of wine for him, and displaying an obviously experienced hand with the bandages. I judged that those actions provided evidence that her service during the Dales war was likely worthy of respect.

When Bodrik reported that he had killed Lursk, Gurborian's Master of Arms, it was as well I could confidently

trust my castellan. Otherwise, I might have been reasonably concerned that Gurborian had contrived, by bribe or threat, to shift Bodrik's allegiance to Reptur, and send him back to Krevonel as a spy. I knew, however, that Bodrik was sworn to me. by an unbreakable blood oath. He had taken a notable risk in tempting Lursk to duel on Reptur's ground, but his rashness had been rewarded. Immediately after Lursk fell, Gratch had intervened to prevent the Reptur troops from killing Bodrik. As Bodrik had calculated, he had been ushered directly to Gurborian, who rightly recognized that the loss of his Master of Arms was of far less import than the potential opportunity to woo Krevonel's alliance with his faction. Instead of killing Bodrik, Gurborian had allowed him to return to Krevonel, bearing Gratch's penned response to Volorian's invitation. As we had hoped, Reptur would come to Krevonel at midnight.

I dispatched Gennard to arrange a suitable repast in the green audience room, and to take there my sire's poisoned sword. By Alizonian custom, conferring barons always disarmed before entering a meeting room, from which all mere retainers would be excluded. These measures had been originally intended to reduce the incidence of outright armed clashes between mortal enemies, but over time, would-be combatants tended to provide themselves with concealed weapons in case active offense or defense became necessary within the locked chamber.

Bodrik announced Reptur's arrival. I was gratified by my castellan's choice of four armsmen to stand for Krevonel. I recognized three of Reptur's four armsmen—able fighters all, but not equal to our troop.

Gurborian and Gratch had arrayed themselves handsomely. I watched Mereth closely for any betraying signs

of intimidation, but was greatly heartened when she assumed a most convincingly magisterial demeanor, reminiscent of old Baron Moragian.

As soon as the four of us had disarmed in the hall, Mereth marched directly to my sire's chair at the head of the oval table within the audience chamber.

I deliberately turned my back on them in order to secure the interior beam in place to bar the doors. I had relied upon Gratch's choice of chairs—ordinarily, he would never have consented to sit with a door to his back, but he had to assume our barred double doors precluded any surprise entry. Moreover, he was right-handed, and had to be lured by the direct proximity afforded for a knife thrust toward Mereth. My sire's sword was conveniently within my reach behind the chair across from Gratch, to Gurborian's left and Mereth's right.

Gennard had prepared a tray for us on the conference table. Moving to my desired chair, I shifted the three gold goblets and poured a generous measure of Krevonel's best bloodwine for our guests. They naturally waited for me to sample my own portion before tasting theirs.

Gurborian frowned at Mereth's empty hands. "Can it be," he inquired, "that you shun this excellent vintage, Volorian?"

Mereth achieved a remarkably rueful, close-mouthed grimace as she scribbled on her slate, then presented it for me to read. She had written, "Frustrated due to ague. Cannot taste food or wine properly."

"'I can scarcely express my frustration,'" I read aloud. "'This ague has robbed me of my taste so that I cannot properly appreciate food or drink.'"

Gurborian relaxed somewhat in his chair. "What a pity," he said. "When your taste returns, you must prevail upon

Kasarian to send some casks of this wine to you. I find it quite laudable. Don't you agree, Gratch?"

"Most assuredly, my lord," Gratch dutifully responded.

Mereth rapped her staff upon the floor, and made a peremptory gesture at Gurborian, who laughed sharply.

"You always were impatient, Volorian," Gurborian said, "as direct with words as with swords." He turned back to Gratch. "Pray explain to the Worthy Baron what a singular opportunity awaits him and Krevonel when they ally with Reptur to promote our new venture."

Whatever else one might say about Gratch, one would scarcely characterize him as direct in any matter. I recalled Volorian had written that if Gratch's object in prying near our estates was to spy upon Escore, it was a wonder he had approached the actual border region—it would have been more like him to take ship to Karsten and worm his way around by the most devious possible route. I was intensely curious to hear how Gratch would try to lure us into denying our Line's traditional utter rejection of magic. It was not surprising when he chose to approach the subject obliquely.

"We cannot, of course, enhance the already formidable reputation secured by the Line of Krevonel," Gratch said earnestly to Mereth.

Mereth nodded, as if acknowledging an accepted fact.

"It appears," Gratch continued, "that you no longer care to participate in the active conduct of affairs at Alizon Castle, being fully occupied, no doubt, with your renowned breeding efforts at your country estate."

Mereth nodded again, and drummed her gloved fingers restlessly on the table top.

Undaunted, Gratch forged ahead, creeping nearer to the

nub of his argument. “My lord and I have carefully considered what enticements we might offer to encourage a certain . . . change of mind on your part,” he said. “We knew that the virtues of our proposal would appeal to your keen military judgment, but oftentimes extra . . . factors can speed one’s decision.”

Mereth thumped her staff suddenly, startling Gratch into a slight stammer. “W-worthy Baron?”

She scrawled one word on her slate. I held it so both Gurborian and Gratch could see the boldly written query, “Terms?”

While she wiped the slate, I added. “And in return for what action by Krevonel?”

Gurborian had propped his chin on one beringed hand, his expression passive, but expectant. He was—at least for the present—evidently content to let Gratch speak for him.

Gratch sipped thirstily from his goblet. “I understand,” he said, “that the Worthy Baron’s pack is lacking in only one champion strain—the bloodline held exclusively by Baron Bolduk.” His voice took on a wheedling note, as if he were trying to induce a newly weaned pup to put its head through a spiked collar for the first time. “Quite recently, Baron Bolduk actively embraced our proposals. Should you join our faction, it is most likely that he would favorably entertain your request for breeding rights.”

Mereth subjected Gratch to a withering stare, rightly implying that so flagrant a bribe—without previous explanation of the reciprocally required action—was too contemptible to deserve comment.

It seemed a suitable time to divert their attention to me, and possibly trick them into saying more than they intended. “Speaking of Bolduk’s Line,” I remarked, “I

heard lately that the younger whelp died quite suddenly during the New Year's Assembly . . . on the Sixth Day, was it not? Doubtless the old Baron was sorely grieved."

Gurborian affected a doleful outward expression, but his eyes glinted with satisfaction. "Just so," he said. "I hastened to his side as soon as the sad news reached Reptur. As I had suspected, their old feud with Ferlikian was behind the death. Baron Bolduk was most appreciative of my condolence." He addressed Mereth directly. "You will want to confer with him, I am sure, since both of you have long held similar attitudes regarding certain . . . matters. You will find that Bolduk has completely revised his former convictions now that he has assessed the rewards promised by our venture."

Mereth wrote briefly and to the point. I simply voiced her command: " 'Detail this venture.' "

Gurborian nodded to Gratch, who dipped a finger in his bloodwine and drew a scarlet streak across the table top. Once he had added a few more such lines, I saw that he was sketching a crude map of Alizon's borders.

"Since our ill-advised alliance with the Kolder has been destroyed," Gratch declared, "my lord and I have devoted ourselves to determining the most advantageous new course to expand Alizon's dominion. For too long, we have been thwarted by the Estcarp's hags' detestable spells that hinder our free movement southward. Here—where the Forbidden Hills trail off into the trackless Tormarsh—the Lord Baron has persisted in probing over the years, but the Witchspells have prevented passage of more than a pitifully few spies. Some moons ago . . ." Gratch paused, looked keenly at Mereth, and added, "as you were evidently aware, Worthy Baron, I journeyed near your estates to pursue inquiries in the mountains bordering on Escore."

He marked two spots with his finger. “Here . . . and here, my lord sought word of certain powerful forces which might assist us in scourging Estcarp. . . .”

“You dared to consider consulting the vile Mages of Escore?” I interrupted. It was not difficult to feign intense dismay, given the appalling nature of the Escorian threat.

“Calm yourself, Honorable Kasarian,” Gurborian purred. “It has been said that you are a swordsman of notable skill. Would you refuse to employ the sharpest blade available merely because you disapprove of the decoration on the hilt? I urge you to weigh the obvious advantages of our strategy. Who else can counter—indeed, overpower—Estcarp’s hags? The sole strength of the Witches lies in their magic. Why should we not enlist even more puissant magic on our behalf? As a scholar, you must know that in the far past, it was the Mages of Escore who first drove the Witches over the mountains into Estcarp.”

Gratch leaned forward, stabbing his wine-stained finger at the area of his map that represented Escore. “Like Alizon,” he asserted, “Escore does not forget past insults or past foes. For a thousand years, Escore, too, has been border-blocked by Estcarp. Their Mages likely still cherish hopes for further revenge.”

“How say you, Volorian?” Gurborian inquired. “Surely you do not mourn the destruction of the Kolder—unreliable foreigners who failed miserably in their campaigns against the hags. Escore is nearby, and centuries-steeped in Power. Should we not seize so promising a means to enlarge Alizon’s borders while also avenging the honor of our Foresires?”

Mereth surveyed Gratch’s map, then wrote on her slate for me to read, “Krevonel has always hated magic. How can this plot help Krevonel?”

I nodded, as if in firm agreement, and “read” aloud, “ ‘You know very well the position our Line has always taken regarding magic: it is an abominable practice, *never* to be accepted. How can you propose that Krevonel consider allying with such disgusting foulness?’ ”

“But no magic shall be wielded within Alizon itself,” Gratch quickly averred. “The full force of Escore’s fury will be directed entirely against Estcarp.”

Mereth regarded him balefully, scribbled briefly, and flourished her slate at me. I had to admire her spirit—the genuine Volorian could have reacted no better. I read her words as they were written, since they were perfectly chosen. “ ‘And if Escore should prevail against Estcarp, then where next do they turn for prey?’ ”

Gratch sputtered, and flushed a dusky red.

Gurborian laughed aloud. “I had wondered whether your years away from court might have dulled your wits,” he exclaimed. “I see they remain as sharp as your hounds’ teeth. You pose a fair question. Until we complete our negotiation, I cannot supply the particulars, but you may be assured that Alizon will emerge with full dominion over all lands to the west of the mountains. I will not settle for less.”

“Can you confide to us the names of those negotiating for Escore?” I inquired.

Gurborian shook his head. “Alas, no. Our contacts must for the present remain secret. It is their imperative condition, you understand.”

“But you are dealing with acknowledged Mages,” I persisted.

“Of course,” Gurborian snapped. “Those with minor skills would be of scant use to us.”

Mereth passed me her slate. Again, I read it directly

aloud. “ ‘How do you plan to control Escore’s Mages? Will they not attempt to enslave Alizon with their foul magic? ’ ”

“No, no,” Gurborian objected. “You misunderstand the thrust of our argument. We shall deal with only the most powerful enemies of Estcarp, those Mages whose desire for revenge is greatest. We shall assure them that once they have swept away the hags, Alizon will occupy and administer the whole of Estcarp. Their own sovereignty to the east of the mountains will be complete; we guarantee not to challenge it. Think of the advantages for them: a stable border, steadfast Alizon guarding their western approaches—perhaps we might even indulge in some limited trade to our mutual benefit.”

I pretended to be impressed. “That does sound eminently rewarding to both sides,” I admitted. “The Lord Baron must have commended you when you presented the proposal to him.”

Gratch hesitated, pouring himself more bloodwine. “As to that,” he began to say, but Gurborian interrupted.

“Norandor has not yet been advised regarding our venture,” Gurborian said. “We prefer to be able to present him with the complete results of our negotiations.”

“So you have not yet actually found the Mages you seek,” I stated, forcing him to commit himself . . . or lie.

“It is a delicate procedure.” Gurborian signaled for Gratch to refill his goblet. “Our efforts proceed concurrently, like a brace of hounds questing after two separate scents. Gratch has been pursuing our potential Escorian linkages, whilst I have been enlisting barons to our cause. Each effort strengthens the other. The Mages will be the more impressed by a large faction of like-minded barons, just as the barons will be similarly impressed by the expe-

rience and power of the Mages with whom we deal.”

“I should think,” I observed tentatively, “that locating Escorian Mages would be a difficult, indeed dangerous undertaking.”

As I spoke, I watched Gratch closely. Oftentimes, folk who boast of their mastery of a skill like poisoning fail to recognize that others may also stumble upon useful scraps of poison lore of which they may be unaware. Among Krevonel’s ancient manuscripts, I had found a description—annoyingly pierced by vermin’s teeth—of a certain rare root which, when dried and powdered, was promised to loosen a guarded tongue. Having acquired and powdered such a root, I had cautiously sampled a few grains to gauge whether the flavor could be noticed in wine, and also to test its effect on an Alizonder, since the document had originally been seized in a sea raid on the shipwreckers of Verlaine. Aside from a slight warming of the blood, I detected no other effect on me, but I thought it worthwhile to try the potion on Gratch, whose home isle of Gorm was near enough to Karsten to render him perhaps vulnerable. I had therefore tipped a pinch of the root powder from my signet ring’s hidden compartment into Gratch’s first goblet of bloodwine. It was gratifying to see that his breathing had noticeably quickened, and a film of sweat was glistening on his forehead. I awaited his reponse to my statement with special interest.

“There are more mages and would-be mages lurking about in those border mountains than you would believe,” Gratch blurted. “Of course, most are worthless, self-deluded fools. I mind one I came upon this past summer—an old recluse who had brewed a potion supposed to stimulate the body to great feats of strength and endurance. He was so enamored of the effect he felt when he

dipped his fingers in a basin of it, that he had his apprentice fill a bath with the potion so he could immerse his entire body.”

“Such a potion could be of great value to soldiers,” I acknowledged. “The mage was mightily affected, I trust?”

Gurborian scowled. “The old fool died outright from excessive excitement,” he said bitterly, “and his witless apprentice was so frightened that he turned out the tub, scrubbed the floor, and burned the only directions for mixing the potion.”

“What a loss,” I commiserated.

Gurborian waved his hand dismissively. “Only a minor disappointment when measured against the range of our accomplishments. An assurance for the future greatness of Alizon is within our very grasp.” He regarded me keenly. “You cannot deny that your word wields weighty influence upon the younger whelps of your Line. What more dazzling prospect could you set before them than an Alizon whose borders extend into . . . even beyond Karsten. I should certainly prize your counsel and leadership in the triumphant days to come.” For an instant, his fingers hovered near his tunic pocket as if he intended to reach inside, then he hesitated, and merely extended both his hands flat on the table. “In addition to the high position I would guarantee you,” Gurborian continued, “it might be possible that other rewards. . . .”

But Gratch had been staring fixedly first at Gurborian’s hands, then at Mereth’s gloved hands, and abruptly he exclaimed, “Hands! I knew I had heard something about Volorian’s hands. The left hand—during this summer, you lost parts of two fingers while separating your hounds. Why are your hands concealed in those gloves?”

“The ague produces frequent chills,” I intervened, but it was too late. Before I could prevent him, Gratch seized Mereth’s left hand and snatched off that glove, revealing her full complement of fingers—as well as her gender.

While Gratch glared as if he had uncovered a venomous toad, Mereth jerked her hand free from his grasp. Gratch bellowed, “A *bitch*’s hand—this is not Volorian!”



CHAPTER 22

Mereth—events at Krevonel Castle
(21st Day, Month of the Ice Dragon/
20th Day, Moon of the Knife)

As soon as Gurborian had seated himself, I became aware of a curious sensation emanating from his end of the table. And then I *knew* as if my fingertips had brushed the very stone: Elsenar's jewel was concealed upon Gurborian's person. Never before had I felt such a certainty, or detected an object's presence without physically touching it.

It was impossible for me to alert Kasarian that Morfew's devious message had succeeded. Gurborian now had to be pricked into openly presenting the jewel as his crowning enticement.

I had to be aware of judging the attraction of a bribe by the Dales' standards. As an experienced trader, I had already assessed the wealth of the House of Krevonel. Its castle fittings might be spare, but they were all of the highest quality. My association with Kasarian caused me to doubt that lavish riches or sensual pleasures would appeal to him. The other Alizonder barons craved brute power—or in Volorian's case, pre-eminent mastery of those accursed hounds.

When Gratch sought to take advantage of that weakness

by proposing access to hound breeding rights, I stared scornfully at him as if he were proffering me a tub of rancid butter. Undeterred by my negative reaction, Gratch drew a rough map on the table top with a finger dipped into his bloodwine. I had to suppress the urge to shudder at the raw memories that action evoked. The table's wood was pale, bleached like the Alizoners themselves. Against that ivory surface, the wine's crimson streaks ran like real blood, reminding me unbearably of other long-ago tables covered with wounded Dalesmen. I forced myself to concentrate on Gratch's hateful voice. His Alizonian was tinged with a Gorm accent which he constantly strove to disguise.

My heart lurched when Gurborian actually began to reach for his tunic pocket, but he hesitated, spreading his hands flat on the table. Jarred from his wine-soaked reverie, Gratch peered from Gurborian's hands to mine. Before I could evade him, he stripped off my left glove, roaring that I was not Volorian, but a *female*.

We all leaped to our feet, seeking positions of advantage. I discarded my right-hand glove so that I could take a firmer grip on my staff.

Just as Kasarian had predicted, both Gratch and Gurborian had smuggled in concealed weapons—Gratch pulled from his pocket as small a dart gun as I had ever seen, while Gurborian drew a thin-bladed dagger from his sleeve. Kasarian immediately snatched his hidden sword from behind the wall tapestry.

Even despite his copious bloodwine consumption, Gratch still moved with unsettling agility. He lunged toward me, snarling, "Out of my way, useless female!"

In backing away from him, I caught my boot heel against the chair leg, throwing myself off balance. Gratch struck at my shoulder as I swayed, shoving me to the floor. He desired a clear dart shot at Kasarian, who was completely immersed

in his life-or-death duel with Gurborian. I knew Gratch's darts had to be poisoned, probably rendering any bare-skin impact deadly.

Gratch did attempt one shot, but Kasarian's keen side vision must have registered our movement, for he dodged to one side even as Gratch lifted his gun to fire. Unwittingly, Gratch stepped within range of my staff. I reached up from my prone position on the floor and smashed the staff across his forearm, sending the dart gun careering over the stone paving. Colliding with the table support, the gun rebounded toward me. I snared it with my staff, seized it, and fired point-blank at Gratch's looming face, as he was diving to retrieve his weapon. The dart lodged beneath his left eye. He gave a horrid shriek as he fell atop my legs, but I kicked out and rolled away from him, under the table. In case he pursued me, I spun around as quickly as I could, but I need not have troubled on Gratch's account. His dart poison must have been instantly lethal. Gratch lay where he had fallen, his eyes still staring in disbelieving horror, his limbs twitching like those of a beheaded lizard. It occurred to me that he had never expected a "useless female" to fight back.



CHAPTER 23

Kasarian/Mereth—events at Krevonel Castle, and later at Lormt (20th Day, Moon of the Knife/21st Day, Month of the Ice Dragon)

Kasarian

As Gurborian engaged me in an aggressive pursuit around the room, I heard the impact of Mereth's body against the paving stones, but I could spare no more than the briefest of glances in their direction. Gurborian furiously pressed his attack at that point, and I was forced to transfer my full attention to our dispute. It could not have been more than a moment or two later that Gratch screamed. As I retreated toward the conference table to survey Mereth's situation, I tossed one of the chairs in Gurborian's path to obstruct him.

I could not immediately see Mereth, but Gratch was dead, lying half under the table, his face contorted. I had to assume that Mereth had somehow acquired his dart gun and shot him—a most unexpected but welcome action on her part. I had no time to search for Mereth, being again assailed by Gurborian. In case Mereth was alive and hiding under the table, I drew Gurborian toward the far end of the chamber. As we fought our way past the barred doors, a volley of blows

rang out against them from the corridor side. Bodrik's force was doubtless engaging Reptur's quartet. I felt confident that Krevonel would prevail in that encounter; I had to be equally certain that I was the victor on my side of the doors.

Mereth

As I caught my breath, I realized that along with the clash of blades inside the room, I could also hear definite sounds of conflict outside in the hall. The two Alizonders were warily circling one another in the far end of the room. I shivered at the thought that with both sword and dagger blades poisoned, even the slightest scratch might be fatal. I crept nearer, hoping to trip Gurborian with my staff, but like Kasarian's, his huntman's senses alerted him to my stealthy approach. Dropping his dagger to free both hands, Gurborian toppled one of the iron cressets to block Kasarian's way, and grasping a heavy chair, he rammed it toward me, forcing me back against the stone wall.

I tried desperately to squirm to one side, but the chair arm cruelly impacted my thigh. The pain was so severe that my sight clouded for an instant. When my vision cleared, I saw Kasarian wrench the supper-laden trestle table away from the wall and sling it side over end, sweeping Gurborian off his feet. Kasarian hastened to release me from the crushing weight of the chair. As I collapsed to the floor, the entire room seemed to slide sideways in the most sickening fashion. I had somehow held on to my staff, which was fortunate, for Gurborian, having regained his footing, was skulking behind Kasarian, raising a broken chair arm over his head. I managed to deliver a glancing poke to Gurborian's ribs, partly deflecting his stroke so that the length of wood smote Kasarian's upper right arm and shoulder instead of his skull. Gurborian snarled at me, and viciously kicked my outstretched leg. I felt the bone crack. He likely would have assailed me further, but

Kasarian, surely half-stunned by the blow he'd taken, whirled around, interposing his sword, which he had transferred to his left hand.

Gurborian hesitated, backing away from Kasarian's naked blade. "Your right hand appears quite limp," he observed with a savage grin. "Can it be that your arm is broken?"

Kasarian smiled equally unpleasantly. "So paltry a blow could produce only a transient numbness and possibly a minor bruise," he said, executing a complex flourish with his blade. "Arms Master Shivar insisted during my earliest training that I develop expert skill with either hand. Do not indulge in any false hopes that you have disabled me."

Gurborian growled several Alizonian words which I did not know, but their import was obviously insulting. Kasarian's expression hardened. He regarded Gurborian with icy scorn, and declared, "You bring disgrace upon the Line Sired by Reptur."

Suddenly, I smelled the sharp scent of scorched or burning fabric. Coals from the overturned cresset had ignited torn chair upholstery, Gurborian's cloak, and a tangled tablecloth ripped loose during the earlier phase of the duel. To my immediate distress, bright flames were feeding along the debris, drawing ever nearer to my injured legs, which I could not move no matter how hard I tried. Desperate, I waved my staff to attract Kasarian's attention.

Kasarian

As Gurborian warily retreated from my sword's reach, he cast unforgiveable aspersions upon my sire's breeding, thus providing more than ample grounds for slitting his throat had I not already determined to kill him.

From the corner of my eye, I sensed a frantic movement. Unable to attract my attention by crying out, Mereth was waving her staff. The cresset's spilled coals had ignited debris

scattered on the floor, and a line of fire was licking toward her. At once, I slashed a panel of tapestry from the wall and cast it, tentlike, over Gurborian. I knew that even such a heavy fabric would not contain him for long. Although somewhat hampered by my numbed right arm, I cast aside my sword, seized the overturned trestle table by its edge, ramming it over against the far wall to squeeze the swathed Gurborian behind it.

I could then turn to assist Mereth. There was no time to skirt around the mounting flames fed by Gurborian's discarded cloak and other wreckage. I reached directly through the fire to haul Mereth to safety. Using Gratch's unburnt cloak, I smothered the worst of the flames and dispersed the remaining coals and debris.

Mereth

Kasarian sped to assist me, thrusting his bare hands unflinchingly through the flames to grab my boots and pull me away from the mounting danger.

Having untangled himself from Kasarian's impediments, Gurborian emerged like a wounded boar from its den, his eyes wild, blood welling from a scrape on his forehead. He had retrieved his dagger, and lumbered toward us, intent upon striking Kasarian while he was distracted with my rescue. Alert to his approach, Kasarian executed a tumbler's roll, snatched up his own sword, and leaped back to guard me.

In his single-minded frenzy to penetrate Kasarian's defense, Gurborian dashed at us, but stumbled when his foot struck one of the fallen goblets. Instantly, Kasarian lunged, slicing Gurborian's outflung hand. Unable to check his forward progress, Gurborian fell heavily. He lay motionless on the floor for the space of a heartbeat, then gave a chilling cry. As he rolled over, we could see that in addition to the sword cut on his hand, he had impaled himself upon his own

dagger. In obvious agony, Gurborian pleaded in a choking voice, "Kill me, I beg you—this blade is steeped in flesh-rot poison!"

Kasarian warily neared his fallen foe, but not close enough to come within dagger reach. What he saw prompted him to take three rapid steps and pierce Gurborian through the heart. After withdrawing and wiping his sword, Kasarian dropped to one knee beside Gurborian's body. When he stood up, I saw for just an instant the glitter of something silver in his hand before he thrust it into his tunic pocket and hurried back to me.

Had my leg pain not been so overwhelming, I would have smiled at the disgusted expression on Kasarian's face. Our violent combat had produced deplorable disorder. I had seen enough of his living quarters to know that Kasarian preferred everything around him to be maintained neatly in place. He was now obviously far more annoyed by the disarray and damages to his audience chamber than by his own injuries.

He stooped to lift me up. Having previously experienced his raw strength first hand during the postern transit, and now having seen his fighting energy, I was surprised by his gentle touch. He eased me into the only unbroken chair, then turned toward the barred doors.

I brushed tears of pain from my cheeks as I watched with trepidation. We could hear no further sounds of battle from the hall outside, but we could not know which force of retainers had triumphed—Krevonel's or Reptur's.

Kasarian

No further sounds of combat emanated from the hall, but I felt it was still advisable to proceed prudently. I eased the bar out of its supports. Then, sword in hand, I quietly opened the right-hand door.

It was as well that I forbore from rushing out into the hall.

Bodrik was poised just outside with a poleax, ready to strike our enemies, had they prevailed. I complimented him on his preparedness. He reported that all of Reptur's men were dead, along with two of ours.

"Come within," I ordered. "We must hasten to dispose of our primary guests. Baron Gurborian unwisely chose flesh-rot poison for his dagger, so observe the necessary precautions."

Bodrik glanced at what was left of Gurborian, and smiled. "The safest way to transport yon carrion to the river will be to wrap it in some of the downed tapestry cloth," he said. After appraising the chaotic state of the chamber, Bodrik added, "Gennard will be sore vexed, Master. He dislikes spills and stains, so he does. I wager.

He'll complain of the damage as well." "Gennard can attend to the cleaning in the morning," I observed. "Be sure none of the poison soaks through when you lift the . . . residue. Gratch's body will not require special handling; his darts were evidently prepared with smother root. I shall be occupied attending to the Worthy Baron's injuries. We may be obliged to consult a bonesetter."

Bodrik saluted Mereth respectfully, then departed to assemble his work party. I lifted Mereth in my arms and carried her as quickly as I could to the nearest passage-way leading to Krevonel's vaults.

Fortunately, my right hand had recovered from the effects of Gurborian's blow. Had Mereth not so ably employed her staff to deflect his stroke at my head, I should likely have been killed. It was frustrating not being able to ask her the extent of her bodily injury. She had shut her eyes, but I did not know whether she was wearied or had swooned from pain or weakness. I dared not stop to request that she write upon her slate. Having broken bones myself in falls during hunts and melees, I presumed she must be enduring considerable pain. I attempted to proceed as fast as I could with the min-

imum of jarring. Even so, the journey to the postern chamber seemed interminable. I was particularly gratified that due to forethought, I had slipped down earlier in the evening to kindle the slowest burning torches. We were therefore assured of a minimal lighted path had we been forced to make a hasty—or fighting—retreat to the postern once we secured Elsenar’s jewel. Striding with Mereth in my arms, I had no free hand to carry a torch or taper.

When I at last reached the lowest corridor, I had to lay Mereth down in order to extract the elder’s key and unlock the door to the postern chamber. Recalling how that door had shut behind me before, I had to assume the same magic could again protect our backs once we had entered the room. It was still deeply unsettling to behold the heavy door swinging shut and locking by itself, but I was almost immediately distracted by the formation of the eerie floating patch of light signaling the postern’s opening. Carrying Mereth, I stepped through, hoping that the Lormt folk would be aware of our coming.

Evidently, Ouen had ordered that someone be present in Lormt’s cellar at all times. When I emerged, one of the elderly scholars was standing nearby, his face stricken with fright and amazement. I cudgeled my wits for the proper Est-carpian words. “Do not stand there, man,” I told him. “Fetch a healer!”

Speechless, he snatched up his lantern and scurried toward the distant door, but before he had proceeded very far, was met by two figures hurrying toward us.

Alerted by their unnatural talents to the postern’s activation, Duratan’s mate and the Wise Woman were approaching at a fast walk that quickened to a run when they saw that Mereth was injured. Dispatching the scholar to inform the others, they assisted me in laying Mereth on one of the wooden benches. “What happened to her?” the Wise Woman demanded.

“It was necessary to fight,” I replied. “Gurborian and Gratch are dead. I believe Mereth’s leg is broken.”

The Wise Woman had been delicately feeling Mereth’s body and limbs. “Also some ribs,” she snapped, “and who knows what else.” She glared at me as if she held me personally responsible.

“Were you wounded in the fighting?” Duratan’s mate asked, raising her lantern to shed more light on me.

“A mere bruise or two,” I said. “Attend to the lady—her injuries are more severe.”

Mereth suddenly opened her eyes and fluttered her fingers. “I think she wants her slate,” Duratan’s mate observed. She turned to Mereth. “Is that what you wish?”

Mereth nodded vigorously. By great fortune—or perhaps the force of long habit—Mereth had retained her slate and chalk in her tunic pocket. The Wise Woman extracted them, while Duratan’s mate supported Mereth to a sitting position so she could write. I lifted a lantern to provide illumination.



CHAPTER 24

Mereth—events at Krevonel Castle and Lormt (21st Day, Month of the Ice Dragon/
20th Day, Moon of the Knife)

The gnawing agony in my injured right hip combined with the searing ache in my left knee to distract me from noticing the unsettling effects accompanying our postern transit. I knew I had returned to Lormt when Nolar spoke to me and Jonja retrieved for me my slate—only slightly cracked—from my tunic pocket. I had become increasingly aware of another sensation overriding my pain. I recognized with a start that it was the same mental pressure I had earlier felt at Krevonel’s conference table, except it now waxed even stronger.

I remembered the flash of silver in Kasarian’s hand when he stepped back from Gurborian’s body. Seizing my remaining sliver of chalk, I wrote on my slate for Kasarian to read, “You found the jewel. I sense its presence. Let me see it.”

He hesitated for an instant, then slowly drew out the chain. The brilliant blue stone I had discovered at Vennesport so long ago at last dangled before my eyes at Lormt.

Jonja gasped audibly. “It is truly an object of great Power,” she whispered.

Nolar peered thoughtfully at the jewel. “I feel something

akin to the puissance of my own Stone of Konnard,” she said. “Perhaps this jewel, too, possesses similar healing properties that might relieve Mereth’s pain.”

Kasarian dropped the pendant into my outstretched hand. The instant it touched my flesh, all other sensations diminished as if cast into the depths of a bottomless well. My mind reeled as a strange, insistent voice addressed me. Before I became incapable of acting, I managed to thrust my hand into my pocket, unclenching my fingers and breaking my contact with the jewel.

I snatched my slate, and wrote for Nolar to read, “Elsenar has enspelled a message within his jewel—an urgent plea for aid. I long to write it for you, but my hand grows unsteady. Can you carry me to a bed? I fear that my pain is such that I may swoon at any time.”

Jonja emitted a derisive snort. “A plea for help that has waited a thousand years to be heard can wait a few more hours—or days. Your leg and the rest of you needs a healer’s attention. What can be delaying that scholar? He should have notified Ouen by now.”

My vision was beginning to darken again, but as often happens in times of great strain, minor irritations can assume undue significance. I abruptly realized that my hands were bare, and managed to scrawl, “Pray express my apologies to Mistress Bethalie. In the struggle with Gratch, I have lost both her fine gloves.”

“Good riddance,” Nolar said firmly. “They were atrocious to look upon.” She turned her head away toward the distant door, and smiled with relief. “Be of good cheer—Duratan is bringing the litter we used to transport Master Kester when he fell and broke his hip.”

Her voice unaccountably receded, as if she had moved far away, then swooping darkness obliterated all further sensations.

My next awareness was of a ravishing smell of herbed broth. I opened my eyes to find myself in a bed of glorious softness, propped against a bank of pillows. Nolar was sitting nearby, stirring a pot suspended over the fireplace coals.

I raised my hand and slapped the bedclothes to attract her attention. She hurried to my side at once, bringing a pannikin of broth and a horn spoon. No wealthy merchant could have savored the finest banquet fare more than I did that simple broth. I gestured for my slate, but Nolar would not give it to me until I had drunk the last drops of nourishment.

I saw at once that my poor old slate, companion for so many hazardous leagues, had been replaced by a fresh slate mounted in a sturdy wooden frame. Nolar handed me a piece of chalk, and I wrote, "How long have I been asleep?"

"Nearly half the day," Nolar replied. "It is more than an hour past midday, and all of us are most grateful for the respite after last night's exertions. Although," she added with a mischievous smile, "we are markedly curious to hear Elsenar's long-delayed message. When you are certain that you feel strong enough to convey it, Master Ouen wishes to be informed. Since this room will not comfortably accommodate our full assembly, he suggests that chairs might be placed in the hall."

I wiped my slate, and wrote, "Pray tell Master Ouen that I, too, am most anxious to learn whatever Elsenar sealed within his jewel. I cannot know in advance the extent of his message, but if you will fetch me parchment and ink as before, and a table we may position across the bed, I shall try to transcribe Elsenar's ancient plea."

Within the hour, my bedchamber had been converted into an audience chamber. Morfew claimed a cushioned chair near my bed, the better to hear the reading. Nolar insisted upon sitting next to me, where she said she could most easily read the pages I wrote and also provide any refreshments I might

require. Ouen sat beside the door, while Jonja and Duratan placed chairs just outside the door in the hall. Kasarian preferred to stand at the foot of the bed.

While I had slept, in order to attend to my bodily hurts, Jonja and Nolar had removed my baronial clothing, replacing it with a long-sleeved, high-necked linen nightgown which was far more comfortable. They had bandaged my aching ribs, and my knee, and had applied a wondrous poultice to my hip, which both warmed and numbed the area. I felt considerably more alert, with far less pain than I had upon my return through the postern.

Oralian's green velvet tunic had been carefully draped at the foot of the bed. I did not have to touch it to know that Elsenar's jewel remained within its pocket where I had left it. I motioned for Kasarian to hand me the tunic. When I had first grasped the jewel in Lormt's cellar, my impressions had been confused and fragmentary due to the strain of my injuries. I had to hope that Elsenar's spell would allow me a second opportunity to receive his message now that I could devote my entire attention to it.

I shook the chain and pendant out upon the table positioned above my lap, then deliberately seized the jewel in my right hand. Like a rush of icy mountain stream water, the enspelled voice of Elsenar poured into my mind.



CHAPTER 25

Elsenar—his enspelled message
transcribed by Mereth at Lornt
(21st Day, Month of the Ice Dragon/
20th Day, Moon of the Knife)

“**G**reetings, Child of Mind. However distant in time you may be, I know that you will heed my call and come to my aid. Hear now the tale of my plight. I am Elsenar, Mage of the Light. I conjured a postern from Lornt to the land of Arvon across the sea in order to seek assistance from like-minded mages there in meeting the perilous challenge from the Shadow emanating from Escore. My first attempt was disrupted by the unprecedented forces loosed at Lornt by our mages’s disastrous efforts to conjure a Master Gate. The momentary existance of my postern probe to Arvon, however, was detected by a Dark Adept there, one Narvok, who was himself seeking to open a Gate, but lacked sufficient Power. He lay in wait for me, and when I later launched my second spell, he twisted my postern’s opening to his lair so that I was drawn into a Duel of Power as soon as I emerged. My jewel afforded me insight into Narvok’s intentions. I immediately framed a spell to pitch him through his half-opened Gate and seal it behind him—but he, in turn, discerned the inestimable

value of my jewel, and by tapping Power from his Gate spell, for an instant, he succeeded in stripping the gem from my grasp.

Before Narvok could seize his prize, however, both of us were overcome by a third and far greater Force. Unknown to either of us, the place where we contended had been a Site of Power in the distant Elder Days. The energy of our spells had stirred the residual Force to awareness of us. It fastened upon my jewel, dashing the gem from Narvok's control to the stone floor beyond my reach, while simultaneously expelling Narvok through his Gate, and disintegrating the portal once the Dark Adept had passed through it.

Lacking my jewel in hand, I was at a great disadvantage, seemingly unable to communicate with the aroused Force. I felt myself beginning to be swept back toward my postern's opening to Lornt—but the excess of Power unleashed in that place was more than either my modest spell or its framer could bear. My very being was reft in twain; one part of me was ejected through some portal beyond my knowledge, while the rest of me was englobed, as in a drop of amber, within the walls of that place. Yet I was not truly physically present there, for I sensed that my fragmentary essence was so insubstantial as to be invisible. Still, my jewel was physically present, and because it was so intimately linked to me, I could bespeak it by mind-call. Through it, I entreated the Force of that place to examine both my jewel and what remained of me, to determine that I intended it no ill will, and was not of the Shadow as Narvok had been.

At once, I was subjected to a pitiless appraisal that probed my inmost being. To my extreme relief, the Force ruled me acceptable . . . but in its dealings with Narvok and me, all of its Power reserves stored through the ages had been expended. Its mind-touch fading, the Force expressed genuine regret for causing my sundered condition, then to my

horror, it ebbed away, diminishing beyond my mental reach.

Lacking physical substance, I could not touch my jewel, even had I been capable of movement. In one sense, my suspended state was fortunate, for I required neither food nor drink in my bodiless condition. I could only wait for someone to enter the place, someone whose mind I could address by means of my jewel. I had no way to know what span of time elapsed. I was entrapped in what appeared to be an underground vault, but it might lie beneath an inhabited castle or an abandoned ruin. Flares of light released during our *Duel of Power* had revealed a stone staircase in a far corner of the chamber, but that rose to a landing and twisted so that no outer light penetrated to delineate day from night . . . or, as I was to find to my dismay, season from season.

When at last a figure finally stumbled into the chamber, its heavy outer clothing was laden with snow! I caused my jewel to pulse with a bright light so that it would both provide illumination and attract the intruder's attention. At once, the figure threw back the fur-rimmed hood of its cloak, exposing an unmistakably female face.

As she drew nearer to gaze upon my jewel's waxing brilliance, I used that thread of visual contact—for she was no mage nor even mage-trained—to call to her mind. I employed the simplest of commands: "Come to me." She was receptive to my mind-call, and once she reached down and grasped the gem in her bare hand, I achieved a strong mental link with her.

It was instantly apparent that she could not act to free me, for she possessed neither the knowledge nor the Power to wield my jewel. During my immurement, I had considered such a likelihood; I could scarcely expect that the first person to enter my prison would be an Adept. I had also considered a possible strategy to employ should my first potential rescuer be a female untutored in magic.

It would have been unspeakably shameful to use my Power to force this woman against her will—only those of the Dark would dare such evil. I therefore described to her my desperate situation, and proposed my remedy—that only with her free consent, I would, by my magic sire a line through her body so that one day, the resulting empowered Child of my Mind could return to this place, able to wield my jewel and release my enspelled fragment.

I sensed an immediate turmoil in her mind. The very thought of magic repelled her—a most curious reaction which I had not foreseen, but I could not know what alterations in attitudes might have occurred while I had been entrapped. Simultaneously, however, she was also fiercely attracted by the possibility of childbearing. Throughout the three years of her marriage, it had been her ardent desire to bear sons by her husband, but no children had been granted to them.

After intense deliberation, she told me frankly that she was accustomed to weighing all the costs and benefits of any proposed course of action before committing herself.

I was most favorably impressed by her prudent demeanor. Should she consent to subject herself to my spell, this woman of forceful character would serve as an admirable mother for my rescuer-to-be. Since she could not perceive my invisibly ensorcelled remnant, in order to assuage her understandable fears, I provided her with a vision of my previous physical appearance.

I further assured her that the action I requested was not to be viewed as a betrayal of her wedding vows. I entreated that she and her husband foster the child of my mind as if it were their own. Indeed, in an additional attempt to ease her aversion to my Power, I suggested that I could, for a set time, veil her memory of this entire incident. From her first intimation of pregnancy, I wanted her and her husband to consider and then rear the child as their own. I did insist that when

the child reached a practical age to be able to commence my rescue, she would regain her clear memory of this encounter so that she could impart directions and advise in the planning. I explained to her that if she did choose to help me, she must agree to take my jewel with her, for it would maintain my magical protection over her and the child, insuring that both would survive.

“She pondered my offer, then affirmed her willingness to assist me. She did ask that I perform the temporary obscuration of her memory. To account for possession of my jewel, I proposed that she would remember it as a valuable gift received from a secret source, and that would safeguard it for the child’s coming of age (should it be a male), or betrothal gift (should it be a female). When that time came, her full memory of our bargain would return; she would present the jewel and its accompanying obligation to the child of her body and my mind.

“Upon her agreement, I expressed my profound gratitude, and at once commenced my initial incantations. To promote introspection and the development of a reflective nature, I set strictures to produce a child mute from birth, who should also be gifted with the insightful touch, allowing instant future recognition of my jewel, mind to mind.

“Know therefore, Child Who-is-to-come, that I, Elsenar, your father, implore you to hasten hither to free me. You must seek guidance to this place from your mother, the Lady Veronda of the Dales. . . .”



CHAPTER 26

Mereth—events at Lormt
(21st Day, Month of the Ice Dragon/
20th Day, Moon of the Knife)

At first, Elsenar's mental voice totally dominated my senses, but gradually I recovered an overlapping awareness of my Lormt surroundings. I found that I could briefly lay the jewel aside while I wrote Elsenar's words for Nolar to read aloud. I wished that the others in the room could "hear" the degree of urgency underlying Elsenar's magical communication. Somehow I knew beyond any doubt that there could be no possibility of deceit in such a message. The emotional overtones were stark—Elsenar had been convinced that his sole hope for rescue depended upon the response of his enspelled plea.

I glanced up for an instant. Lormt's party of listeners were thoroughly engrossed by Elsenar's account of his unnatural incarceration. As I resumed my transcribing, Elsenar's words "to produce a child mute from birth" echoed through my mind. I was gripped by an icy sense of foreboding. I forced my fingers to continue to wield my quill until two unbelievable phrases assailed me like the lash of a whip: "I, Elsenar your father," and "your mother, the Lady Veronda of the Dales."

Had I possessed a voice, I would have cried out in utter consternation. I did not feel the jewel drop from my nerveless fingers as a tide of darkness swelled within me, blotting out all sensations.

Afterwards, the others told me that quite abruptly, I seemed to stop breathing, and fell back against the pillows. While Jonja chafed my hands, Nolar fetched her nearby satchel and thrust a handful of crushed herbal leaves under my nose.

I was jolted from my swoon by a bracing, acrid scent that made me sneeze. As soon as I opened my eyes, I motioned for the press of figures to move away from my bedside so that I could orient myself and catch my breath.

I struggled desperately to make sense of what must be true, yet seemed unthinkable. Elsenar the mage *was* my true father . . . but until my mother had sought refuge amid the ancient ruins beyond Ferndale, Elsenar had been trapped there for a thousand years. I had found the answer to the vital question I had journeyed so far to ask; I now knew my true father's identity. As an exceedingly unsettling secondary discovery, I had also acquired yet another unexpected addition to my kinship list, albeit one more distantly removed in time. I had been sired by Elsenar almost seventy-six years ago, but a thousand years earlier, he had sired the foundation for the House of Krevonel. Kasarian was thus a peculiarly time-displaced kinsman of mine! With a trembling hand, I reached for a new sheet of parchment, and wrote the last astonishing words of Elsenar's message, to which I added my kinship deduction.

When Nolar read the words, Kasarian's face blanched to such a degree that I almost believed he might swoon. Instead, he resorted to his habit of furiously twisting his

gold signet ring. When he spoke, his voice was hoarse, as if his throat were dry. "How can we know," he began, then stopped and poured himself a measure of barley water from the jug Nolar had prepared for me. At any other time, I am sure that an Alizonder baron would have spat out such an insipid brew, with appropriate imprecations. It was a telling indication of Kasarian's distraction that he drank a full goblet without a murmur. I doubt that he knew what he had swallowed. The moisture, however, did restore his voice to its usual firmness. He resumed his unfinished question. "How can we know where to seek our common . . . Fore-sire [the very word seemed sour in his mouth] if his postern to that place of his imprisonment has been magically destroyed? Surely your lady mother is dead and cannot direct us as Elsenar had intended."

I hastened to write, "Even if that ancient postern still existed, we would have no way to locate the site near Lornt where Elsenar conjured it. No, as we embark upon any effort to succor Elsenar, we must pursue our journey to the Dales by ship, horse, and possibly on foot. I was not yet twenty when my mother died, but I recall many walks with her during my early years through the unnamed valleys near my birthplace. I believe that I can identify the very site of Elsenar's immurement. My mother once pointed out to me some ancient stone ruins within which she had sheltered, she said, from a winter storm before my birth the following summer."

I stopped writing, suddenly aware that my grasp was bending the quill near its breaking point. Like a sheaf of brittle leaf fragments tossed by an icy wind, previously unexplained segments of memory abruptly formed a coherent pattern.

As one reared in a large family, my mother had longed for sons to assume her Clan's trading responsibilities. She had trained me, her only child, to be useful despite my physical limitations. Could it be that her substantial trading successes had been achieved because of the magical influences of Elsenar's jewel? It now seemed reasonable that those strange dreams that had affected both my mother and me had been prompted by the jewel's close presence.

I wondered if my mother had begun to regain her memories of her encounter with Elsenar before she departed upon her last, fatal trip. With searing insight, I confronted the harsh truth from our past: the heaviest strokes of evil fortune had befallen us when we became separated from the jewel—when it was first stored away, then lost in the looting of our treasure room at Vennesport. My mother had been swept away to her death, while I had suffered the torments of the war against the Dales. Now that Elsenar's jewel was once again in my hand, I was obliged to act upon his appeal for kin-aid.

Another shard of memory intruded, piercing me like a dagger thrust. Painfully long ago, I had shared my private feeling with Doubt, writing for him in our secret script expressions of the emotions I could not voice. Compelled now to unburden myself, I scribbled furiously, "Intolerable frustration! To be confined in this feeble body that can no longer sit a horse or climb a mountain track! Elsenar's geas from the past was directed to *me*—I was deliberately bred to fulfill this charge! When my mother was ready to give me Elsenar's jewel as my betrothal gift, she would have been empowered to explain the circumstances of her agreement with him. With the assistance of my prospective husband, I should have been able to undertake the mission to

set Elsenar free . . . but my mother died before I became betrothed, before she could tell me about Elsenar's plight. Blood oath binds me to honor her commitment, but in my present condition, I cannot contemplate such a journey. My predicament is unbearable!"

I paused again, reluctant to continue, but unable to ignore the only other answer to the conundrum. Once more, I had to force my hand to shape the words for Nolar to read aloud. "Yet I can perceive one remaining alternative."

After hearing my words read, Kasarian nodded slowly. "I also bear the blood of Elsenar," he said in a grave voice. "Would you permit me to attempt this quest in your stead?"

Duratan intervened. "You cannot seriously propose to travel in the Dales," he objected. "Although more than twenty years have passed, the wounds Alizon inflicted upon the Dales have still not entirely healed. You would be far likelier to be met with a sword edge than a journey cup."

Kasarian regarded Duratan as if he were a particularly willful hound refusing to follow a clear trail. "I am accustomed to living with a sword edge ever near my throat," he retorted. "Why should that circumstance hinder the making of reasonable plans? When I alone can satisfy the stricture, the conclusion is obvious: I must go."

"But can you so easily abandon your baronial duties in Alizon for such an extended journey?" Nolar inquired. "Besides, troubling questions must arise concerning Gurborian's sudden disappearance. Might you not be suspected of some complicity?"

Kasarian shook his head impatiently. "I answer only to the Lord Baron, and then only if I witlessly fail to make sufficient preparations in advance. Gurborian provoked many powerful enemies. Before I left Krevonel Castle, I ordered

Bodrik to dispatch in two days' time a persuasive letter to the Lord Baron suggesting four plausible causes for Gurborian's abrupt absence. I further informed the Lord Baron that I should be engaged for a period of weeks in a needful evaluation of my most distant estates. I shall not be expected in Alizon City until I choose to return there."

From her position in the hall, Jonja half rose from her chair. "Why would you commit yourself to this quest?" she demanded. "You have made clear to us your utter aversion to objects of Power. Do you expect us to believe that you would personally bear Elsenar's mighty jewel over the vast distance to surrender it to its very master?"

"You speak plainly to me," Kasarian replied. "I shall be equally forthright. No, I do not welcome the burden of this accursed jewel, yet it belongs to my Foresire, who, if he presently exists, commands it be restored to him. I perceive this journey as an imperative duty to our Line of Krevonel. I also venture to suggest that it would be advantageous for our collective interests should our factions be strengthened by the backing of so puissant a mage. Surely he would incline toward granting that boon to his rescuer."

While Kasarian spoke, I had reluctantly reached my own decision. I handed Nolar my written comments. "The ruins you must seek," she read aloud, "lie near the border of the Waste, the whole breadth of the Dales inland from the sea coast. You may encounter severe peril in nearly every inhabited area."

Kasarian surveyed me ironically. "Lady, not long ago, I would have said that no foreign cur from outside our borders could live to penetrate Alizon City . . . yet you did." Addressing the others, he added, "I have observed that the wits of you Lornt folk can be sharp beyond my previous

imaginings. If you can craft a credible tale to explain my presence in the Dales, I shall willingly journey under its protection." Pausing, Kasarian smiled suddenly, which softened the harsh angles of his face. He turned back to me and said, "You dyed your hair to improve your disguise, Lady. Could not mine be similarly darkened to placate the hostile eyes of the Dales?"

"I must say," Morfew observed wryly, "I was not at all certain that Mereth could successfully impersonate an Alizonder baron. It is an even more difficult prospect to believe that you can deceive discerning Dalesfolk into accepting you as one of their own. You are far too pale all over, young man—you would have to soak your whole body in a bath of oak bark extract."

"Perhaps not." Nolar's quiet voice drew our attention to her. "Have not children been sired upon Daleswomen by Alizonders?" she asked. "Kasarian might claim to be such a halfling."

My hand trembled as I wrote, "I know of no such unfortunates who were . . . allowed to live. During the war, many Daleswomen took their own lives rather than bear children of shame."

Kasarian had been listening intently, his head inclined a little to one side like an inquisitive hawk watching the grass below for signs of an unsuspecting mouse. "I was four when the invasion began," he said. "To my knowledge, no mixed-breed pups were ever brought back from the Dales. It may be, however, that I can suggest a circumstance under which a mixed-breed of my age could reasonably claim existence. Formerly, Alizon dispatched raiding vessels which at times returned to port with captive breeding stock."

Jonja's eyes widened. "You cannot mean that you used

captured women” Her voice trailed off into appalled silence.

“Rumors of such events have reached us,” Ouen remarked coldly. “We had hoped they were mistaken.”

Kasarian did not appear at all perturbed by our obvious revulsion. “Do not you Estcarpians breed with the Sulcar at times to invigorate your lines?” he inquired. “We barons, of course, have always preserved our pure blood, but among the common folk, captured outside females have produced useful servants and workmen. Could I not represent myself as one such?”

With a heavy heart, I wrote, “In years past, some of our trading ships have been, we thought, lost at sea. We assumed that they had been sunk in storms, but” I could write no further. It was too painful to contemplate what horrid lives our tradefolk must have endured had they been taken to Alizon to serve as brood mares.

Nolar did not hide her repugnance when she declared, “We of Estcarp deplore and reject any form of slavery.”

Kasarian shrugged. “It has ever been so in Alizon,” he said. “The strong exploit and rule the weak.”

“As important as such matters are in the lives of our people,” Ouen asserted sternly, “we cannot at present address our divergencies. Whether we view this Alizonian practice as traditional or offensive, it exists, and perhaps we can make use of it in a constructive manner.”

“Suppose. . . .” Nolar looked at me with a rueful expression, as if she understood my barely restrained grief. “Suppose,” she resumed, “we say that Kasarian’s mother was aboard a trading vessel from the Dales—perhaps a coasting ship blown far enough out to sea to be intercepted by an Alizonian raider. Reared as an oppressed servant, he would

have schemed to escape whenever an opportunity arose.”

“I can contribute the opportunity,” Jonja offered. “Three years ago, when Karsten clashed with Estcarp, all our lands were in an uproar. If ever a flight from Alizonian captivity could have succeeded, it would have been then, while the border with Estcarp was beset with thrusts against the spell barriers.”

Morfew rubbed his hands together. “And I foresee the necessary linkage to Lormt,” he exclaimed. “Kasarian could have slipped into northern Estcarp and apprenticed himself to a wandering trader whose travels led the pair to Lormt. But what excuse can we offer for Kasarian’s dangerous foray into the Dales—surely not that he seeks Dales-kin of his presumed mother?”

I had finally controlled my internal turmoil of memories, and was able to write upon my slate, “Let us take account of the knowledge we possess. I know the Dales, and I know trade. As Morfew’s suggested apprentice, Kasarian could undertake a journey for his master. Among Lormt’s countless documents, surely there must be maps of the Dales. Let us say that upon one such old map, the merchant found a reference to a possible source for something valuable in trade . . . but not too valuable.” I stopped to think while Nolar read, then wrote my conclusion. “I know the perfect material: lamantine wood. It is prized, but not so much so that a venture to seek it would attract brigands. It is also to our advantage that the area where Kasarian must pursue his search is near the Waste, which will likely discourage any offers to accompany him. Futhermore, I can write letters to my Sulcar friends to secure Kasarian’s sea passage, and to tradefolk in the Dales to request their aid to him along his way inland.”

“A most plausible tale indeed,” Morfew pronounced when Nolar finished reading my parchment. “How say you, Kasarian? Can you pose as merchant’s apprentice?”

During the reading, Kasarian had at first looked highly skeptical, but then his expression had grown more thoughtful and less doubtful. “I can try,” he said. “I have scant experience with trade,” he admitted frankly, “other than my periodic reviews of the steward’s accounts for Krevonel Castle, and my dealing in hounds.” Kasarian turned to me. “You will have to instruct me, Lady, regarding such matters, as well as assist me with the speech of the Dales.”

“An accomplished scholar, Irvil of Norsdale, came here some years ago to engage in kinship studies,” Ouen said. “His joints stiffened so during the winters that he found further travel too painful and asked to reside with us. He will gladly teach the spoken tongue of the Dales.”

“Before we embark—again—upon such strenuous activities,” Morfew observed plaintively, “can we not consider at least a brief respite for food? My aged stomach reminds me that the hour for supping has come . . . and gone.”

Jonja stood up. “We have chattered too long as it is,” she proclaimed. “Mereth requires rest after her ordeal. Out, all of you, and do not trouble her again until morning.”

I lifted my quill to write a protest, but Jonja plucked it from my grasp. “Out!” she commanded, and like a flock of singularly meek sheep, the whole troop, except for Nolar, filed out of the bedchamber.

“Before I retire to the chamber next door,” Nolar promised me, “I shall warm another cup of broth for you, and replenish your barley water, since Kasarian unaccountably drank your supply. Should you need me during the night, you can ring this little bell suspended on a cord from the bedstead.”



Although my mind longed to weigh and assess the events just past, as well as the burgeoning prospects for the morrow, I found that I could scarcely keep my eyes open after I had drunk the second cup of broth. Nolar sensed my desire to keep Elsenar's jewel close by me . . . but not where I might accidentally touch it bare-handed in my sleep. She dropped the chained pendant into a small leather bag she took from her herb satchel. My last vision from that momentous day was a fading glimpse of Nolar's sleeve as she gently tucked the bag out of sight under my pillows.



CHAPTER 27

Kasarian—events at Lormt
(20th and 21st days, Moon of the Knife/
21st and 22nd Days,
Month of the Ice Dragon)

When I listened to the reading of the message enspelled in the jewel, I had to bite back a cry of denial at the revelation that Mereth had been sired by Elsenar upon a Dales female named Veronda. Krevonel, the Foresire of my own Line, had been sired a thousand years previously by Elsenar. We had suspected earlier that Mereth had to possess some of Elsenar's blood, however attenuated, because of her acceptance under the stricture of his postern spell. Her Line's claim to the jewel also argued in favor of some kinship linkage . . . but by his ghastly magic, Elsenar was not just Mereth's distant kin. He was her very sire! I had to accept the incredible; Mereth and I belonged to the same direct Line. That recognition took my breath away.

With an effort, I forced my attention back to the final words of Elsenar's message. I had to admire his devious reasoning and foresight in bespelling Mereth to be mute, but he had not been able to control what subsequently befell his jewel. Alizon's seizure of the stone during the Dales war

had ironically thwarted Elsenar's original plans for his timely release.

I did not express aloud my profound doubts that Elsenar could still be alive and capable of being rescued. I had to concede, however, that reason could not always be relied upon when magic reared its vile head.

When Morfew complained that we had talked well past the common hour for supping, the Wise Woman abruptly commanded us all to leave the bedchamber so that Mereth could rest.

I welcomed the interruption, for I needed time to plan and reflect. After stopping by Lormt's dining hall, I withdrew to my chamber, carrying with me a loaf of bread, some deplorable gruel, and a flask of ale.

The problem of Elsenar burned in my mind. The opportunity appeared irresistibly tempting: if I could somehow contrive to free the ancient mage by restoring to him his jewel, then Elsenar should grant abundant rewards to me as his rescuer. On the other hand, the prospect of facing a living mage, especially one of such notorious reputation, was unspeakably horrid. What could I do to defend myself against the very monster present at Alizon's dawning and personally responsible for the Original Betrayal? Instead of rewarding me for freeing him, Elsenar might blast me on the spot . . . or far worse, return to Alizon by his sorceries and seize total control of the land. How could a mortal man stand against such unnatural Power? And yet . . . taking risks had always been the Alizonian way, and potential gains had to be balanced against only possible threats that might never materialize.

Constrained by the cramped dimensions of my bedchamber, I managed sufficient exercise to verify that my swordsmanship had been unimpaired by my slight injuries. I then blew out the candles and lay down. Feeling somewhat weary from the day's exertions, I slept dreamlessly.

It was midmorning of the next day before the Wise Woman allowed us to gather again in Mereth's bedchamber. Somewhat restored by her rest, Mereth appeared less haggard. She had already drawn a crude map to show us where lay the ruins beneath which she believed Elsenar had been trapped. She had also drafted letters for me to carry to certain Sulcar ship masters at Etsport, Estcarp's chief port since the destruction of Gorm.

I was examining Mereth's map when yet another of Lormt's host of elderly males arrived at the door. Although his ruddy skin had lightened with age, as had his hair, he was evidently a Dalesman. Morfew hailed him as Irvil, the kinship scholar Ouen had named to us. It was a telling indication of the lack of proper organization at Lormt that Irvil had been totally unaware of Mereth's presence within the citadel. He at once erupted in a spate of Dales speech which was far too rapid for me to comprehend more than a few scattered words.

Mereth seemed outwardly unaffected, but I noticed a tear spilled down her cheek. She scrubbed it away with her sleeve, and wrote a private greeting to her countryman on her slate.

After reading it, Irvil turned to me and said in Estcarpian, "I am told that you have urgent need to learn the speech of the Dales. I never thought to speak to an Alizonder . . . but Master Ouen requests that I talk with you."

Irvil was easily old enough to be my sire's sire, which meant he likely harbored ill feelings from the time of the war. I bowed to him, and touched my Line badge. "I would not impose upon you if the need were not urgent," I said. "Both Alizon and Estcarp face a common threat which, if unchecked, would likely endanger your Dales. My proposed voyage to the Dales may assuage that threat. I thank you for your forbearance and assistance." Irvil's grim expression eased, as if my words had mollified him.

Mereth thrust her slate at him, and he read aloud, “‘We shall divide our time between instruction in both speech and trade, since Kasarian must master the rudiments of each.’”

Morfew smiled. “Pray do not entirely submerge your Alizonian accent, young man,” he advised me. “You must remember that the only Dales speech you would have learned as a pup would have come from your mother; until you escaped into Estcarp three years ago, you would have spoken chiefly Alizonian.”

Nolar rose and advanced toward me. “I claim an hour of your time to dye your hair. Shall we attempt the transformation this afternoon? I must consult with Master Pruett concerning the proportions for the herbal mixture. I will call for you when my preparations are complete.”

Duratan moved to accompany his mate. “It is just as well,” he remarked at the doorway, “that you can admit to an Alizonian father, since otherwise your pretense would be ruined every time you opened your mouth.”

“May you swiftly impart the knowledge that is required,” Ouen exhorted Mereth, Irvil, and me. “Pray inform me if I may provide any aid. All of Lormt’s facilities are at your disposal.”

Thus began a daunting week of constant application. Morning, noon, and evening, I listened, and wrote under Mereth’s and Irvil’s demanding tutelage. Bearing Morfew’s warning in mind, I did not attempt perfect mimicry of the sounds of the Dales speech. In truth, the tones were difficult to match, being softer and quite different to the ear from Alizonian.

As she had promised, Duratan’s mate marched me to her lair later that first afternoon. She had me sit upon a stool beside a stone basin in which she stirred an acrid fluid. After wetting my hair with water, she poured cup after cup of the odoriferous rinse over my head—nor did she neglect to darken

my eyebrows, using a soft brush dipped in the dye. Both of us were well-soaked by the time she pronounced me possibly presentable. She warned me that once-set, the dye would not fade for a long time. It would not do for the color to lapse during the sea voyage. I must confess that I started at the sight of my image reflected in a silver tray. For an unsettling instant, I thought I was beholding a stranger. No baron would have allowed such a dark-haired, disreputable ruffian into his living quarters as a guest . . . but Duratan's mate smiled at me, and said I made a barely passable halfling.

Between our strenuous study meetings, Mereth composed additional letters to be given to her kinsmen and other traders in the Dales once I landed at Vennesport. We pored over maps together for hours while she supplied me with descriptions of the land I must traverse and the likely arrangements that must be made for me to secure supplies and hire suitable horses.

The First Whelping Moon commenced while we labored. Mereth termed it the Month of the Snow Bird, and indeed I had seldom seen heavier snows than those burdening the mountain fastnesses surrounding Lornt.

I was soon beset by Lornt's chief provisioner, a bald, talkative Estcarpian named Wessell, who fell upon me like a yammering hound pup. He proved to be surprisingly efficient, however, in choosing and assembling the travel gear I required. He also presented me with a small box of laman-tine wood, which he praised highly for preserving delicate foodstuffs during long journeys. We had seized a few such examples as Dales booty, but I had not before possessed a sample of that dark gray-brown close-grained wood. Mereth wrote that it was prized for making bottles which could keep water sweet for many days, as well as containers which would indefinitely keep fresh the best journeycakes—those baked with fruit or meat bits. No Dalesman knew, she added, where to find the trees from which the wood could be cut, but

precious objects made of worked lamantine wood were rarely found in the Waste. My trader's quest, guided by the old map, would be considered dangerous, but not so extraordinary as to arouse undue notice.

By the Third Day of the First Whelping Moon, I was ready to depart upon my first stage of travel—the thirty or more leagues from Lornt to Es City. One of Lornt's younger scholars—still old enough to be my sire—agreed to accompany me as far as Es City. It was necessary to leave behind at Lornt all of my baronial trappings, including my signet ring. I felt perilously vulnerable with just the single belt dagger which the Lornt folk insisted was the customary defensive weapon for a traveling merchant. The notion of spending a moon or more—depending upon the weather—aboard a ship manned by Alizon's deadly Sulcar foes with only one inadequate blade at my belt was maddening. I reminded myself that I was ostensibly a trader's apprentice, and as such, I must comply with their practices.

Gathering up my heavy outer cloak, I entered Mereth's bedchamber to collect Elsenar's jewel. She was sitting up in the bed, and nodded approvingly as she surveyed me. She wrote on her slate for me to read, "Our joint efforts have succeeded. You truly present the semblance of an apprentice trader. Take with you now Elsenar's legacy, together with my well-wishings for a fair journey." She held out to me the glittering jewel, which I secured in the innermost pocket of my tunic. At that point, I did not care to wear the cursed object next to my skin. It was unsettling enough having to travel with it on my person. Would it again afflict my dreams as it had in Alizon? I thrust away the unwelcome thought.

"I thank you doubly, Lady," I said, "for both your trust and your farewell. With the aid of your map, I shall find the ensorcelled ruins and restore this mighty stone to our Fore-sire." I bowed to her, and my hand moved in habitual salute to

the bare cloth of my tunic, where my Line badge should have been sewn.

Mereth almost smiled. "May the Flame guard you, Outlander," she wrote, much to my puzzlement.

I bowed again, and hurried down the stairs toward the horses waiting in the windswept courtyard.



CHAPTER 28

Kasarian—account of his
journey from Lormt to Vennesport (3rd
Day, First Whelping Moon-23rd Day,
Moon of the Dire Wolf)

I had often hunted in the mountains bordering upon Escore, so I had no difficulty adjusting to the gait of Lormt's mountain-bred horses. They were smaller, less sturdy beasts than our prized Torgians, but well-suited for maintaining their footing on the snow-shrouded slopes.

My trail companion was Farris, a taciturn Estcarpian. In order to accustom myself to my assumed character, I asked Farris to address me exclusively by the Dales name we had chosen for me: Kasyar. I had to learn to respond to it as if it were my name; my life might well depend upon such details. There was scant opportunity to converse while we were riding, but once we camped for the night, I attempted to engage Farris in speech. It appeared that he had been drawn to study at Lormt because of his single-minded devotion to an encompassing knowledge of herbs. Once he raised the topic, he became tediously loquacious. My own acquaintance with plants tended more toward the noxious and poisonous varieties, but fortunately, I struck upon one aspect we could profitably discuss—the range of herbs

employed for enhancing and spicing bland foods. Gennard's sire had been a master cook who had instructed him in the preparation of many pleasing dishes. I recalled sufficient details from Gennard's remarks to prompt Farris' discourse.

The deep snow and rough terrain frequently thwarted our progress. We did not descend to more level ground for over a chill, tiresome week. Gradually, as our unmarked path approached the north bank of the Es River, we encountered a clearer, more travel-worn trail. After a few day's further advance, that trail broadened into a road of sorts, and late on the Thirteenth Day of the First Whelping Moon, we glimpsed our first sight of the massive gray-green wall encircling Es City.

Crouching upon the high ground at the city's center, Es Castle glowered down at us, dwarfing even the great round towers set at intervals along the city wall. In my worst nightmares, I had never thought that I would one day behold the very fortress wherein Estcarp's gray-clad crones gathered like spiders at the hub of their web of far-flung spells.

The next morning, as we rode through one of the narrow gates, I had to make a constant effort to preserve an outwardly untroubled aspect. It was daunting to penetrate into the heart of the territory of Alizon's prime enemy, alone, without the backing of a properly equipped army. I sternly suppressed my apprehensions that at any moment, we might be confronted by one of the gray-robed Witches who could instantly discern my true identity.

Fortunately, once we passed inside the gate, Farris immediately turned away from the street leading to Es Castle, guiding his horse into the crowded lanes of a commercial quarter near the outer wall. He led the way into the busy courtyard of an inn whose sign bore a bright, if somewhat

ill-drawn, painted image of a snow cat. After we dismounted, Farris explained that he planned to survey the city's markets for herbs otherwise unavailable at Lormt, rest here overnight, then begin his journey back to the scholar's citadel. He would first inquire of the innkeeper where I might seek the merchants Mereth had cited as possible sources of assistance to me.

I was deeply relieved to learn that one of the three Est-carpian merchants that Mereth had addressed in her letters was currently present in the city. Bidding Farris farewell, I followed the innkeeper's directions to a nearby warehouse where I presented Mereth's letter. My cordial reception provided clear evidence of the high regard in which Mereth was held by these trading folk. The merchant, who recalled her recent brief stay in Es City on her way to Lormt, expressed an active interest in handling any lamantine wood I might discover during my expedition to the Dales. He did ask why, as an apprentice, I was not accompanied on such a trip by my master, but I related the tale we had agreed upon at Lormt should anyone inquire: how my master had suffered a fall in the mountains as we had descended toward Es City, and had been forced to return to Lormt. Persuaded by the promising nature of the old map, he had entrusted me with the quest of the Dales. The merchant congratulated me upon my unusual opportunity, and dispatched one of his hirelings to engage a horse for the next stage of my journey, the four or so leagues to Etsport. He graciously invited me to stay the night in the guest quarters adjoining the warehouse.

I guarded my tongue carefully in all that I said, but I did not appear to arouse any suspicion. During the evening meal, the merchant told me that few trading ships dared the winter seas, but if fortune favored me, I might perhaps find in port a Sulcar captain named Brannun, who sailed no

matter what the season.

Early the following morning, I set out for Etsport. A well-traveled road ran alongside the Es River, allowing for much faster passage, even despite the drifting snow. With my larger, rested horse, I covered the distance by nightfall.

I took care to skirt the environs of the local stronghold, Etsford Manor, ruled over by the misshapen former ax-wielder Koris of Gorm, now Lord Seneschal of Estcarp. We had heard in Alizon that, after being severely wounded, Koris had retired to this quiet holding. It was rumored that he and his mate, Loyse, whelp to the shipwreck-scavenging Lord of Verlainé, still provided counsel at times to Estcarp's Witches. Not wanting to attract the attention of such dangerous enemies, I rode straight to the dockside at the river's mouth.

I quickly located the trading house recommended to me by the merchant in Es City. His colleagues there willingly took charge of my horse, agreeing to attend to it until they dispatched their next shipment of goods to Es City. They informed me that the Sulcar shipmaster I sought was indeed in port readying his vessel for a voyage to the Dales. One of the apprentices showed me the way to a tavern favored by this Captain Brannun, and pointed out to me a giant fair-haired man quaffing ale at a table near the door. Once I distracted his attention from his ale mug by bellowing his name, I introduced myself.

He wiped the foam from his distinctively bristling Sulcar mustache, and measured me with a most insolent glance. "For a stripling, you raise a fair cry," he said. "What matter is so pressing that you intrude upon my refreshment?"

In dealing with Sulcars, we Alizonders had long found it advisable to speak directly—it was pointless to employ subtlety with a Sulcar. I reached into my belt wallet and slapped

two bars of silver on the rough wooden table in front of him. Before I had left Lornt, Mereth offered to pay for my passage to the Dales, but I had insisted upon using my own gold. Duratan had objected that I could scarcely present metal branded with Alizonian markings, but Ouen, somewhat to my surprise, had sent for a casket containing unmarked silver bars, from which he carefully weighed out a fair substitution for my gold.

Captain Brannun grinned and poked the bars with a sinewy forefinger. "I do believe your business is urgent," he observed. "I take it you desire to arrange for passage on the *Storm Seeker*?"

"If you are sailing immediately for the Dales," I confirmed. "My master requires me to undertake a trading voyage on his behalf while his broken bones mend at Lornt."

Brannun clouted me vigorously on the shoulder. "Fortune smiles upon you, lad!" he exclaimed. "I have been loading goods these past six days and await only the proper winds to set sail for Vennesport. But do not sit there parched as a desert flower. Master Taverner—ale for my passenger! Ale for me! What stores are you shipping? I warn you, I have scant space left in my hold."

"I hope to return with goods," I replied, "but I travel with none. I carry only minimal baggage."

"All the better," Brannun roared cheerfully. "I feared for a moment that you might require hold space that I could not supply. Come, finish that ale and let me show you the *Storm Seeker*—the finest vessel a man could wish beneath his feet." As he rose, he scooped from the bench beside him a huge tawny mound that I had mistaken for a bale of furs. Noticing my glance, Brannun laughed aloud. "I doubt you've seen the live beast that yielded me this cloak," he

declared. "'Twas a true lion—aye, one of those rare beasts from the lands far south of the Dales. When I was a young man—likely your age or less—he came upon me during a coasting voyage. We had put in to shore to replenish our fresh water. I was bending over, filling one of our casks at a stream, when this lion leaped upon me out of the brush. I can tell you, it was a glorious struggle! Had I not had my throwing ax at my belt, I might have suffered a substantial injury. As it was, I gained this splendid skin together with the design for my fighting helm, all at one stroke." Flinging some Karstenian silver bits on the table to settle our account, he swept me toward the door.

I had never before boarded a sea-going vessel. All of my limited sailing experience had been on river craft. Brannun displayed surprising agility for a man of his size as he leaped from the dock to the deck of a typically ungainly, but sturdy, broad-beamed Sulcar ship. Like those of all such vessels, its prow was carved in the grotesque form of a scaled serpent.

Brannun sniffed the breeze, and squinted at the low clouds. "The wind's not yet brisk enough for us to set sail—possibly it will have freshened sufficiently by the morrow. Come aboard! You have a choice of quarters—the cabin beside the wine or the one by the spider silk—unless you'd care to camp on deck?"

I assured him that I preferred a space below decks. I had decided that it might be prudent for me to stay below as much of the time as possible, limiting my exposure to the Sulcars and thus reducing my chance of accidentally betraying my true identity. I confessed to Brannun that this was my first sea voyage, and expressed my concern that we might encounter storms. I thought for a moment he was about to choke.

“Storms—storms!” he sputtered. “Sail in winter, sail amid storms! Why do you think I named my ship *Storm Seeker*?” He waved his arms wildly. “Because it revels in storms—the higher the waves, the faster it runs before the wind.” He shook his head, incredulous at my ignorance. “You *may* stay less wet below decks,” he conceded reluctantly, then his eyes brightened. “Of course, during the truly major storms, all hands aboard must work the ship together. Your master will count you far more worthy for the experience, I’ve no doubt.”

On the Eighteenth Day of the First Whelping Moon, we sailed from Etsport. Three days later, the first storm descended upon us. I began to learn more about ships than I ever cared to know, both above and below decks. Brannun’s crewmen were a boisterous lot—typical Sulcars—but able seamen and, as we Alizonders had learned to our sore cost, formidable fighters. I was expected to lend a hand at any time I was on deck, so I stayed below whenever possible.

Even below decks, I could not entirely seclude myself. Once the initial storm had passed, Brannun marched into my cabin, his arms laden with tally sticks and documents which he dropped upon my plank-rimmed bed. “See what you make of these cargo accounts,” he ordered. “Your master would not want you to idle away the time when you have such an opportunity to enlarge your store of trading knowledge.”

I should have liked to have told him that I kept a steward to attend to such menial work, but in order to preserve my imposture, I strove to bring some order out of the poorly inscribed chaos. When Brannun blustered back in some hours later, I pointed out to him that his tally sticks proclaimed his cargo short four bales of woven goods when compared with his nearly unreadable loading lists.

“You Dales traders,” Brannun declared, “always fretting over exact tallies.” He rattled my teeth with another buffet to my shoulder, and bellowed, “Come dine with me in my cabin! We can discuss the proper forms for keeping accounts.”

It was during that meal that I nearly betrayed myself. While we were eating some moderately acceptable fish stew, I saw a large rat poke its head from behind a timber rib arching along the wall. Quite by habit, before I even thought, my hand drew and threw my belt knife, impaling the wretched beast.

Brannun drew a sharp breath, and eyed me narrowly. “Where did you learn to throw a knife like that, young apprentice?” he growled.

I cursed my muscles for acting on their own without my conscious direction. As abjectly as I could, I proffered my woeful supposed past experience. “For some years, I was kept as a slave in a castle in Alizon,” I explained. “It was miserably overrun by vermin. They kept no such fine beasts as your cats, so we slaves were forced to dispose of any rat we saw in that fashion. I crave your pardon for drawing my blade without your permission.”

Brannun guffawed, and struck me such a clout across the narrow table that he nearly jolted me from the seating bench, which like the table, was secured to the deck with wooden pins. “Permission?” he roared. “I would I could toss a knife that swift and sure. I required some years to master my throwing ax—until I saw your toss just now, I rather fancied my speed. You must show my lads how you do it! I can see that your earlier practice had refined your skill so that you react to sudden motion glimpsed from the corner of the eye. Pray take care that you do not skewer our ship’s cat, or one of the smaller hands. We shall be obliged

to address you as Kasyar-of-the-Fast-Knife!”

After that near calamity, I attempted to guard my movements as well as my tongue. Such constant wariness, together with the long hours of confinement in my cabin, wore upon my temper. Curiously, one source of restful ease was the ship's cat, whose acquaintance I made the morning following the rat incident.

I had gone on deck to stretch my legs when Brannun bustled past; the man was always on his way somewhere aloft or below, forward or astern. Spying me, he stopped, and exclaimed, “Yonder comes our cat—Sea Foam, we call her—a prime ratter. Give her a few weeks, and you'll have far fewer moving targets aboard to tempt your knife.”

I turned to see a large, cream-colored cat regarding me with bright amber eyes. Not knowing exactly how one customarily approached such beasts, I knelt and extended my hand for it to sniff, as I would have done to a strange hound. It cocked its head at me, then stepped nimbly across the slanting deck to rub against my boots.

“She likes the lad!” Brannun boomed approvingly. “Sea Foam's always been a keen judge of character—doubtless recognizes a fellow master ratter.”

For the remainder of the voyage, Sea Foam often visited me in my cabin, sometimes curling up on my bed, sometimes even sitting in my lap and purring like a real hound—a most singular animal.

In addition to four more severe storms, we encountered some adverse winds that slowed our progress, but as the Moon of the Dire Wolf neared its close, the bleak horizon bar of bare water was replaced by the welcome uneven bulk of solid land. We had spent thirty-four days at sea, by my best judgment, for during the worst of the storms, it had been difficult to determine when day ended and night began.

I had formed a hearty respect for Captain Brannun and his crew—and an equally hearty conviction that I preferred land travel to sea voyaging. The thought of motionless land or even a runaway horse beneath me had become increasingly attractive. I was ready to present my lamantine wood-questing tale to the traders of Vennesport.



CHAPTER 29

Kasarian—account of his journey across the Dales from Vennesport to the ruins beyond Ferndale (26th Day, Moon of the Dire Wolf—24th Day, Moon of Chordosh)

It took three days for me to deliver all of Mereth's remaining letters: two to kinsmen and two others to traders of her acquaintance. Initially, each of the recipients looked somewhat askance at me, but after reading her letters, they wholeheartedly extended themselves to organize the mounts and supplies I would need for my trip to the lands bordering the ill-reputed Waste. Each of the Dalesmen also inquired anxiously about Mereth. Only one of the traders was of her advanced age; the other three were a generation or more younger than she. They seemed to view her as an honored elder, and appeared genuinely concerned about how she had been received after her long journey across the sea. I assured them that she had been graciously welcomed at Lormt, where her extensive knowledge of kinship lists was highly praised. I did not mention her injuries. It was better that they thought her happily absorbed in scholarly pursuits . . . which she was, after a fashion.

As Mereth had cleverly foreseen, both the ostensible trade

goal of my quest, and more especially the area I proposed to search actively discouraged any serious offers by the Dalesfolk to accompany me. One of Mereth's kinsmen, a whelp of her dam's Line, made a halfhearted suggestion that he could try to engage a guide for me, but I asserted that Mereth's personally-drawn maps were more than adequate to direct me to the vicinity where my master's special map could be consulted. I hinted that my master preferred my mission to be solitary, and in a flash of inspiration, I confided that because of my unfortunate circumstances of birth in Alizon, I thought it advisable to avoid populated areas as much as possible. Once he had heard my explanation, her kinsman, looking both abashed and relieved, pressed upon me two hampers filled with all manner of gear to equip me for every calamity likely to befall an isolated rider. He urged me to exchange my riding and pack horses for mountain ponies once I reached Paltendale, and gave me a letter to request assistance from a wool trader of his acquaintance there. I attempted to pay him with some of my unmarked silver bars, but he obstinately refused to accept them, saying that Mereth's letter clearly commanded what he called "family courtesy" to be extended to me. Since I was supposed to understand such Dales arrangements, I had to nod knowingly, but I expressed my gratitude for the consideration.

On the Twenty-sixth Day of the Moon of the Dire Wolf, I set out on the road leading from Vennesport to Trevamper. Mereth had drawn for me a Dales map I could show openly, marked with bold lines linking the populated areas, but she had written a private advisory commentary for me to commit to memory so that I could choose less-traveled paths as I forged steadily northwestward.

The Moon of the Dire Wolf fast gave way to the Moon of Chordosh as I toiled, often cursing the variable weather. A day might dawn cold and fair, but in the space of an

hour, clouds could form and sweep down from the mountain ridges, pelting me with sleet, snow, or rain—sometimes it seemed that all three discomforts jostled for a turn at assailing the horses and me.

Past Trevamper, there was nothing that could be termed a road, and since I had to shun any trails that exhibited signs of frequent use, my progress at times was maddeningly slow. I rode south of Dorndale, then climbed into the hills to the west as I avoided Haverdale. I sought a northerly course away from the Haverdale area, and scaled the steep flanks of the peaks separating Ithordale to the west from Fyndale to the east.

By that time, I estimated that I must have ridden some sixty leagues at the least, and more than half the Moon of Chordosh had passed. To eke out my supplies, I supplemented my diminishing store of journeycakes by hunting for game. The snares I set before I made camp near nightfall yielded occasional rabbits. I supped several times on a clumsy, slow-flying bird that roosted carelessly within my knife's range.

When I reached Paltendale, I scouted carefully before I descended the winding track into the dale. The wool merchant recommended to me back in Vennesport proved to be another garrulous fellow who talked incessantly about sheep. He did accept a silver bar when I told him I did not know how long I might be searching near the borders of the Waste, and I preferred to purchase his mountain ponies outright. After replenishing my supplies, he insisted upon walking with me as far as the edge of Paltendale. He warned me to beware of late spring snow slides from the higher slopes, then turned back, still prating about the countless vicissitudes besetting the scattered local flocks whose wool he planned to buy.

I had never much cared for ponies in comparison with horses. I soon found that my new mount was a contrary beast which stubbornly pursued its own notions of the most

desirable path. I almost regretted my lack of proper Alizonian spurs, and frequently did regret this pony's total lack of proper Alizonian training. As we penetrated farther into the remote northwesterly high country, however, with its nameless valleys squeezed amid sheer peaks, I discovered that both animals were utterly reliable in their footing, especially on the treacherously narrow ledges and steep inclines. Considering the terrain, they were nearly as able as our Torgians. I resigned myself to the willful nature of my riding pony, and allowed it to set a prudent pace along any track it chose that led in my desired direction.

Now that I drew nearer to the peaks and valleys that Mereth had described as adjoining Ferndale, I adopted a new nightly practice. Once I had settled the ponies and wrapped myself in my travel blanket and cloak, I would withdraw Elsenar's jewel and hold it in my hand. I had not taken it out at all during the sea voyage, nor previously during the many weary leagues of transit across the Dales. At Lormt, when I had taken the jewel from Mereth, I had wondered whether its odious magic would again oppress me as it had done from just my mere initial sighting of it in Alizon. To my private relief, I had not noticed any worrisome intrusions into my dreams, nor signs of bodily weakness such as I had also briefly experienced in Alizon. I was, however, constantly aware of the stone's physical presence. I could feel its hard shape through my tunic when I lay against it, but I had sensed no suspicious magical effects from it until I left Paltendale.

As I rode into the trackless wilderness, I found my hand kept straying unbidden to my chest. When I camped that first night after parting from the wool merchant, I surprised myself by extracting the pendant from my innermost pocket and slipping the silver chain over my head. The stone seemed unusually chill, perceptible even through my glove, but I told myself it was likely due to the abnormal frost in the air. I

slid the jewel inside my tunic against my shirt, and soon fell asleep. I did not dream directly about the jewel, as I had before in Alizon, but I did preserve into my waking the next morning an almost tangible impulse of . . . direction, a faint pulling sensation, as if a barely appreciable breeze was steadily nudging me farther to the north and west.

After that night, I held the jewel each evening before sleeping. I realized with mingled dread and excitement that the tugging sensation was drawing me exactly in the direction indicated on Mereth's final map—the map supposedly locating the site to be searched for lamantine wood. For the last four or five leagues, I no longer bothered to consult Mereth's map to identify landmarks, for the jewel itself guided me straight to an eruption of gray, tumbled stones half buried by drifting snow. According to my tally of days, it was the Twenty-fourth Day of the Moon of Chordosh.

I warily examined the deserted area around the ruins. The snowy surface was trackless, undisturbed save by the wind. I fed and watered the ponies, then tethered them loosely to some nearby evergreen branches so that they could pull free if I did not return. Using a bough broken from the same tree, I swept away the drifted snow until I uncovered the first of a flight of broad stone steps leading underground.

The descending stairwell angled sharply to the left, widening out into a snow-choked landing, then plunging again down a more narrow passageway into darkness. I had brought several torches with me in my supply hamper, but as I turned back to fetch them, I suddenly hesitated. My hand reached to my chest, and before I consciously considered the motion, I found that I had lifted the chain off over my head, so that the jewel could swing freely from my fingers. It sparkled so brilliantly that I thought for an instant it was glowing with more than the natural light. When I advanced toward the shadowed stairway leading farther below, I could not deny the evidence

of my eyes: the jewel *was* shedding a cold blue light of its own. I would require no ordinary torch to illumine my way.

The deeper I descended, the brighter the pendant glowed, until it cast eerie shadows along the ancient stone walls of a large, bare chamber that opened outward at the foot of the stairs. As I raised the jewel to survey the space, it began to wax more and more radiant until I had to shield my eyes with my other hand.

Abruptly, I *knew*, as clearly as if an icy blade had pierced my back, that I was no longer alone in the chamber. With a thrill of dread, I dropped my free hand to grasp my dagger hilt, but I was so stricken by the sight before me that I could not draw my weapon.

The eldritch glare from the jewel fell upon the figure of a tall, dark-haired man garbed in pale robes of a curiously antiquated style. Before I could properly focus on him, the jewel flared with such unbearable brightness that I almost dropped it. To my intense dismay, I felt the chain press against my flesh as the pendant slowly but firmly loosed itself from my grasp. I could not completely stifle a cry of disbelief as the blazing stone floated through the empty air toward the robed figure, which had raised a hand in obvious summons.

I was further appalled to realize that I could discern the far wall's masonry lines *through* the very substance of the figure. My opponent was horridly transparent, as if his lineaments were drawn upon a vertical sheet of river ice. As the jewel halted just beyond the figure's outstretched fingers, its painful radiance subsided to a level more acceptable to the eyes. Eyes . . . I was shaken when I gazed upon the figure's ghastly face and saw that his eyes lacked whites, but were solidly dark orbs whose regard held me as a serpent's stare overawes its prey.

All this while, our confrontation had been soundless, save for my rapid breathing. Suddenly, I thought I heard him speak

to me in totally unintelligible words, although his tone was reassuring. I did cry not aloud when I realized that what I had mistaken for a normal voice was instead the result of some hideous magic causing sounds to form within my mind! My legs would no longer support me. I sank to my knees, fighting to avoid an unmanly swoon from stark fear.

The calm “voice” intruding in my mind was instantly intelligible. “Has it been so long that the very style of speech has altered?” it observed. Then, as I knelt, the tone sharpened. “No, no—do not kneel to me! I am but a scholar, not your lord demanding fealty. Arise, I say! You have restored to me my jewel; you are of my blood, yet your hair is stained as if in disguise. I would ask you to relate your tale, but as you see, I am not fully present in the body. Indeed, now that the presence of my jewel has broken the bonds that have enthralled me here, my time is limited. Unless I act soon, I shall vanish irretrievably. If you will allow me, I will touch your mind and learn from you without consuming the time required for speech. You are alarmed—do not be. I am your kinsman, Elsenar, Servant of the Light. We of the Light do not harm or compel any creature against its will. May I enter your mind?”

I could not trust myself to speak to this mighty mage, the scourge of our land more than a thousand years past. My flesh crawled at the thought of his touch . . . yet I knew in my bones that I could not prevent him from dealing with me as he would, no matter his fair words. Still, I had come this far unscathed. If Elsenar was himself in danger of vanishing altogether, perhaps his Power was greatly diminished. What damage could he wreak against me, other than to kill me? I sternly suppressed my recollection of rumors that Estcarp’s Witches had been known to transform men into animals. I had no time to indulge such foolish fears. I took a step toward Elsenar, and nodded my assent.

His strange, penetrating gaze swept over me. He raised his hands, and his jewel drifted closer to me, pulsing a deeper, darker blue that expanded into a great sapphire pool of light that engulfed me in its azure depths.



CHAPTER 30

Elsenar—events at Narvok's abandoned lair, recalled subsequently by Kasarian due to their mental linkage (24th–25th Day, Moon of Chordosh)

Time—an unbelievable span of time had elapsed since my duel with Narvok. It seemed to me only moments ago that my fateful struggle with the Dark Adept had aroused the Force which had lain dormant in this place since the Elder Days. Once it had lashed out, expelling Narvok through his Gate and rending me in twain, it had sunk back into unreachable somnolence, stranding this wisp of me in a bodiless condition, unable to move or speak. After an immeasurable interval, a woman had intruded into my place of confinement. By the Power of my jewel, I attracted her attention, and obtained her permission to employ a spell to breed a Child of my Mind capable of wielding my jewel to release me at some future time. When she, perforce, departed with the jewel, it was impossible for my ensorcelled remnant to gauge how long I hung suspended in the darkness.

It was not until my mind sensed the approach of my jewel that I roused from my torpor. I was still totally immured, but my awareness waxed as the stone drew ever closer. By the

surge of Power, I was alerted when the jewel's bearer entered the chamber. I hailed my jewel joyfully—as a vital part of my mind, it invigorated me by its closeness, enabling me to assume at least partial visibility. I could not, however, take physical possession of the stone, for I had no substance, no means to touch or be touched. Neither could I speak orally to the young man whose blood called to my blood. But why was his hair stained dark when he was obviously a son of Aliz stock?

I summoned my jewel to leave his hand and approach me. Its energy warmed my mental essence like life-giving rays of the sun. I drew upon its strength, and bespoke the young man mentally, in the speech of the Alizon I had known. At first, he seemed not to understand me, then he gave a great cry, and fell to his knees.

I realized that he must be frightened by my mindspeech. Disturbed that he should fear me, I urged him to rise, employing the intimate mindspeech that transcends all spoken language. I explained to him that my apparent revival was merely temporary; that I must take immediate action to reunite the shards of my magically cloven self or else I would soon disperse into nothingness.

In order to achieve the swiftest transfer of information, I requested that he allow me to touch his mind directly, thus permitting me access to his memories. As in my previous experience with the Lady Veronda of the Dales, I could not and would not act without the willful consent of my respondent.

The young man did not reply to me vocally—indeed, his body trembled as he stepped forward toward me, but he faced me despite his understandable trepidation, and firmly nodded his assent.

By the Power of my jewel, I reached into his memories. To my initial surprise, I learned that this Kasarian of Alizon

was not the Child of my Mind whom I had expected to rescue me; that child, borne by the Lady Veronda, had been a female named Mereth. Through Kasarian's eyes, I viewed her as he had last beheld her, abed, recovering from grave injuries she had suffered while risking her life to retrieve my jewel. Alarmed, I scanned Kasarian's store of background knowledge. Mereth had been born in the Dales nearly seventy-six years ago, but Kasarian recalled my activities in the land of Alizon as having occurred over a thousand years in the past!

I was deeply disheartened that my expulsion of the treacherous Shorrosh and my destruction of the Gate to the homeworld of the Aliz should still be regarded by Alizon's current inhabitants as a betrayal of such magnitude that they dated their very calendar from that event. Still, I had been aware of the cruel flaws in the nature of the very first transferees from Aliz. I could not be truly surprised—although I was filled with regret—that the descendants of the folk I had originally rescued should have preserved, and even apparently intensified the deplorable qualities that so marred the character of their foresires. On the other hand, I was distinctly gratified that I could detect no taint of the Dark in Kasarian. Indeed, ironically, because of their burning sense of betrayal by Shorrosh and me, the Alizonders had denounced and rejected magic with such single-minded ferocity that their culture ever since, for all its appalling faults, bore no trace of influence by the Dark . . . until . . . until now!

With increasing dismay, I concentrated upon the nascent threat posed by Baron Gurborian's schemes to seek alliance with surviving forces of the Dark yet active in Escore. I viewed the physical duel in which Gurborian had fittingly received his death wound from his own poisoned blade. I saw how Kasarian had recovered my jewel from Gurborian's body, and had then carried Mereth through my private postern to Lornt, where awaited a group of scholars, champions

of the Light, anxious to thwart any attack by Escore upon the lands to the south of Alizon.

I surveyed Kasarian's knowledge and opinions of each of his companions at Lormt; theirs was an uneasy relationship forged by the necessity to defend against a common enemy. To my great sorrow, I learned of the war waged by Alizon against the Dales. Kasarian, while not of an age to have taken part in the failed invasion, still considered Alizon to be at enmity with both the Dales-folk and the descendants of those devoted to the Light who had fled from Escore and now called themselves Estcarpians.

There can be no deception in direct mind touch. I was instantly aware of Kasarian's tumultuous feelings toward me—how he was both fearful of and repelled by my magical Power, yet at the same time, he cherished some hope that I might reward him for freeing me. He recoiled from the possibility that I might return to Alizon and seize total control there, but he also entertained the speculation that I might conceivably aid his Lormt faction in devising a plan to prevent any survivors adhering to Gurborian's faction from allying with Escore's Dark Adepts.

I ranged through the brief span of Kasarian's life experiences, tapping his memories of his father—murdered, I learned, by Gurborian. Kasarian's lineage extended back directly to Krevonel, the son I had never seen, borne by my beloved Kylaina so many centuries ago. Through all the intervening generations, echoes of her singular beauty had been preserved—I glimpsed her again in the color of Kasarian's eyes, and in the grace of his carriage.

I longed to stay in this new time, so far removed from the age I had known, and yet similarly menaced by the deadly blight of the Dark. Even as that desire swelled within me, I knew I dared delay no longer. From the core of my being surged a sense of overpowering necessity to hasten toward



that unknown Gate beyond which the remaining fragment of me languished in aching incompleteness.

As Kasarian's mind had lain open before me, so would my thoughts during this linkage become accessible to him upon later reflection. There could be no secrets between us. I knew that I must work quickly, before my strength ebbed. Using my jewel's energy, I dissolved our linkage gently, so that Kasarian would suffer no lasting ill effects.



CHAPTER 31

Kasarian—events at Narvok’s abandoned lair (25th Day, Moon of Chordosh) & subsequently at Lormt (1st Day, Moon of the Spotted Viper/2nd Day, Month of the Fringed Violet)

Never before had I experienced such complete mental submersion. The disorientation and sensory deprivation associated with travel through Elsenar’s postern had been violently debilitating. When my consciousness was captivated by Elsenar’s jewel, however, the impressions I received were curiously pleasant. What seemed to be my initial absorption into an all-enveloping blueness gradually altered as a shimmering cascade of colors rippled around me, mingled with echoing musical tones like none I had ever heard. I was also aware of fragrances sweeter than the scent of our bloodwine bushes in bloom, or even the stupefying perfume of the stranglevine’s flower. Yet I knew that I was not seeing with my eyes, hearing with my ears, or smelling with my nose; I could not truly claim awareness of any physical body at all. This bodilessness would have been terrifying except that the serene beauty of that peculiar space totally dispelled all apprehensions. For a timeless interval, I was immersed in soothing warmth.

Quite suddenly, the sounds and scents ceased, and the warmth drained away, to be replaced by a bracing coolness amid an encompassing blueness, as if I had plunged into the deep waters of a mountain pool. My hands tingled from the chill . . . hands! I was abruptly aware of my normal bodily sensations. My vision returned, disclosing the bare stone chamber still illuminated by Elsenar's glowing jewel.

Elsenar's ghostly figure loomed almost within arm's reach. His face was drawn, and his transparent features rippled in and out of focus, like pebbles perceived beneath the surface of a rushing stream.

His voice resounded in my mind. "So many great events have occurred since I was stranded in this place. Once again, the menace of the Dark threatens to erupt from its fastnesses in Escore. If I could, I would hasten to aid the Forces of the Light—but unless I unite with the banished fragment of myself, I shall surely perish. You also are needed to assist in the struggle to preserve Lormt and Alizon. I adjure you to be wise in the use of my postern between Alizon City and Lormt; I have no time or energy to alter its stricture against any not of our blood. My other postern spell which I set so long ago between this place and Lormt can be activated for one final passage. I shall alert Jonja the Wise Woman of your impending arrival. Doubtless by now, the lodge where I conjured that spell has been reduced to dust, but she will know by her arts when and where you have emerged. I shall dispatch you first, and dissolve that postern behind you. I must then seek to restore my separated self. Even if I should succeed, it may not be possible for me to return to Lormt from that unknowably far place, so your companions must not expect my further aid. Now must I take my leave of you, Kasarian, blood of my blood. I see through you the distant face of my beloved Kylaina. May you and your companions triumph in your vital endeavor! Stand always with the Light!"

Elsenar's jewel, which had been floating motionless between us, drifted toward him. He raised his insubstantial hands as if to clasp it. The jewel blazed brighter than the sun, blinding me. I threw up my hands to shield my eyes, but before I could complete the gesture, my entire body was snatched into the howling chaos of postern transit.

I was simultaneously dazzled and jostled by my emergence, half-stunned, onto the dew-soaked grass of a mountain meadow. I lay still for some time, slipping into and out of consciousness. The sun was sinking behind the tallest peaks when I heard horses approaching. I managed to raise myself to a sitting position. Duratan rode ahead, followed by the Wise Woman, who was leading a riderless third horse. Upon sighting me, they dismounted, hastening to my side.

The Wise Woman offered me a flask of spiced wine, but after taking a mouthful, I had to refuse more. My body was still deplorably weakened by the postern's disruption. I was not at all certain that I could remain upright in the saddle. Fortunately, Duratan recognized my infirmity, and put me up in front of him on his horse where he could steady me.

I did not later recall any of the return ride to Lormt. When we clattered into the vast courtyard, I roused to glimpse the face of Lormt's provisioner, still talking as if he had not yet finished his last speech to me. As I slid down from the saddle into his arms, darkness claimed me.

I awoke, they told me, the following day, which the Lormt folk termed the Second Day of the Month of the Fringed Violet, the last Moon of their Spring Season. I was taken aback. Morfew assured me that it was indeed the First Day of the Moon of the Spotted Viper, the second of our three Moons of the Spring Season. I had been absent from Lormt for almost three Moons.

Before I could ask how the Lormt folk had fared, the Wise Woman entered my bedchamber, bearing a heavily laden tray.

Morfew remarked that he had favorably influenced her choice of food for me. The Wise Woman grimaced at him, exhorted me to eat, and left us alone together. I welcomed the succulent slices of roast boar, which Morfew said that Duratan had provided. I complimented the fare, and inquired whether Duratan employed any local breed of hound in his hunting.

Morfew laughed outright. “Few of us here at Lornt are of an age or possess the agility to hunt,” he explained. “We acquire most of our game and the food we cannot grow for ourselves by trading with nearby crofters. This particular beast intruded into one of our walled gardens, where he was dining upon our root crops when Duratan cornered him and ended his depredations with a spear thrust. Not so exciting as a horseback chase with our hounds, perhaps, but the reward is equally tasty.”

I could now accept the spiced wine I had previously rejected. As I poured a second measure, I asked, “How fares the Lady Mereth?”

“I rejoice to tell you that her injuries seem to be mending,” Morfew answered. “Master Wessell has contrived the most ingenious wheeled chair in which she can be pushed about, making it easier for her to assist us with the document reading. When you feel fully restored, Mereth awaits your report in my chambers, together with Ouen and the others. I must confess that our curiosity has been difficult to contain.”

Shortly afterward, having eaten sufficiently, I was gratified to discover that my own clothing had been neatly folded atop the chest at the foot of my bed. As soon as I had dressed, I followed Morfew through Lornt’s confusing passages to his study room.

It took me some time to relate my experiences. The Lornt folk were keenly disappointed that Elsenar—and his jewel—could not be relied upon to assist them in averting the threat from Escore.

I did not express my private relief at Elsenar's departure. His presence could not fail to be a critical danger to Alizon, no matter how well-intended his actions might be. The traditions and convictions of a thousand years could not be dismissed or swept away overnight. No Alizonder—most certainly no baron!—could view Elsenar's return with anything less than stark horror. Unless Elsenar bound us all in magical thralldom, Alizon would be convulsed with violent reaction. For the sake of Alizon's continued existence, it was necessary that Elsenar remain a frightful figure safely rooted in our distant past.

I was also personally relieved that Elsenar's awful jewel had departed along with him. No man should be capable of meddling in another's mind. And yet . . . I could almost hope that Elsenar had succeeded in locating and reuniting with his missing half-self, so long as he did *not* come back to trouble us in Alizon.

Ouen raised his hand to forestall the continued pointless discussion about Elsenar's utter withdrawal. "We must develop our own offensive and defensive plans without any reliance upon Elsenar's aid," he asserted. "I had hoped that he might greatly augment our resources, but we must accept Elsenar's warning that he is unlikely to return to Lornt."

"In that regard," said Morfew stoutly, "our situation is no worse than it was before we dispatched Kasarian to the Dales. During all this elapsed time, Jonja's and Duratan's foreseings have not revealed any overt moves by the Dark mages. We have detected no further alarms from Alizon. Surely Gurborian's faction remains in disarray, attempting to recover from his unexplained disappearance."

"I must return to Krevonel Castle as soon as possible," I declared. "It is vital that I learn how matters stand in Alizon City. Gurborian and Gratch have been eliminated, but others in their faction may have assumed their places, and continued

to pursue the fatal linkage with Escore. I may be able to rally the elder barons—beginning with the authentic Volorian—to oppose both the pro-Kolder remnant and whatever persists of the pro-Escorian faction.”

Morfew peered at me. “I am concerned about your safety,” he said. “Will it be prudent for you to go back now? Even though your prolonged absence has been justified by your supposed survey of your far estates, will not your enemies have remarked upon the violent events at Krevonel Castle preceding your departure?”

I could not suppress a smile. “What violent events at Krevonel Castle?” I inquired. “I assure you that no word will have been uttered by my staff regarding the affairs of that night. There were, you recall, no other surviving witnesses.”

Duratan nodded grudgingly. “But won’t Gurborian’s faction still suspect that you were somehow involved in his and Gratch’s disappearance?” he asked.

“To suspect is one thing,” I countered. “To prove a suspicion can be considerably more difficult. Unless Gratch uncharacteristically betrayed his master’s confidence, none of Reptur’s pack can know what befell Gurborian’s missing party. Bodrik will inform me of any whispers that may have circulated. I readily confess my own unanswered question: what fortune have you experienced in your search for documents anent Escore while I have been away from Lormt?”

Duratan’s mate waved at a table piled with scrolls, books, and loose scraps of parchment. “We have found many references to the great clashes in Escore before our ancestors fled into Estcarp,” she replied, then shook her head in obvious frustration. “So much of it is fragmentary, and some is obscure and unreadable. There seems to be no end to the uncovering of new stores of material which we have yet to examine.”

“I never thought to behold such insights into the far past,”

Morfew exclaimed, rubbing his hands together. "It would be more helpful," he conceded, "if the bits and pieces fitted together more coherently, but we press ahead slowly."

I saluted them. "The information you assemble may provide the key that enables us to triumph," I said. "I pray you to persist in your work, and to share with me any facts that may further my endeavors in Alizon."

"The only way we could communicate with you in Alizon is by postern transit," the Wise Woman objected. "Since the postern is restricted to only those of Elsenar's blood, our sole potential messenger is Mereth, and she will be in no condition to undertake such travel for some time to come." She waved one hand fretfully, and exclaimed, "If we could simply cast a message packet through the portal—but one of Elsenar's kin bearing your Krevonel key is required to make the passage!"

"Just as I am, in your terms, Volorian's nephew," I observed, "so do I also possess similar useful pups in my pack. They would be told merely that they were to deliver a message; a solid mask over the face would blind their eyes from seeing to whom the message roll was handed. Pack loyalty would keep their tongues still—that, and a prudent awareness of their personal vulnerability."

Morfew sighed. "It is a sorrowful practice to rule the young by force and fear," he said.

I could but stare at him in disbelief. "The Law of the Pack is best for all," I contended. "The strong become stronger, and the weak are removed before they can breed more weakness."

"So long as none is harmed by your arrangements," Ouen said firmly. "As you rightly say, it is imperative that we keep our location at Lormt a secret. You have been given sufficient reasons to trust us, Kasarian, but your fellow barons would not likely approve or embrace your alliance with us, their per-



ceived mortal enemies.”

“It has ever been the Alizonian way to seek advantage wherever it is to be found,” I replied, “and to break agreements when better opportunities arise. Still, I have learned that your ways also have unexpected value. You rely upon an oath without fear of subsequent betrayal. That is a different way from ours, but it seems to have afforded you a certain . . . stability that we lack in Alizon. Considering the degree of danger that presses upon us from the east, I believe it may be necessary for each of us to alter some of our ways if we are to survive.”

I was interrupted by a loud thump from Mereth’s staff. She had been writing busily during our discussion, and now she held out a sheet of parchment to be read aloud by Duratan’s mate.



CHAPTER 32

Mereth—events at Lornt
(2nd Day, Month of the Fringed Violet/
1st Day, Moon of the Spotted Viper)

After Kasarian departed from Lornt, I worried every day. Even though Nolar's dye had wrought a startling effect, transforming Kasarian's silver-white hair to the dark brown of shredbark nut hulls, I could not totally convince myself that he would be accepted by Dalesfolk old enough to remember the horrors of the war. When he came to bid me farewell and claim Elsenar's jewel, I surveyed him with apprehension. His newly darkened hair emphasized the Alizonian pallor of his skin, making his blue-green eyes all the more brilliant by contrast. I thought to myself that the only way to disguise Kasarian successfully would be to hide him out of sight in a large hamper. The garments that Mistress Bethalie had provided for him were entirely suitable for a trader's apprentice. If only Kasarian did not have to move about! He could not mask his swordsman's balance or his uncanny hearing. I had to hope that the combination of my letters to the tradesfolk and our tale of his mixed parentage would plausibly excuse Kasarian's otherwise inexplicable attributes.

When I handed him Elsenar's jewel, he did not clasp its

chain around his neck, but instead tucked the pendant within an inner pocket of his tunic. I knew that for a magic-averse Alizonder, the jewel had to be an awful object, whose very touch must be loathsome . . . yet Kasarian was willing to risk his life to carry it across the sea and through the Dales. On an impulse, I wrote for him a travel blessing I had learned during my childhood years of residence with the Dames of Rishdale Abbey.

After Farris returned to Lornt we received only one other report concerning Kasarian's progress. Nearly nine weeks later, early in the Month of the Crooknecked Fern, a scholar from Karsten arrived, bearing a message for me which he had been given in Es City when it became known that he was traveling to Lornt. The Es City merchant desired me to inform "Kasyar's" master that his apprentice had reached Etsport on the Seventeenth Day of the Month of the Snow Bird, and had sailed for the Dales two days later on the *Storm Seeker*. I recalled that during my own voyage, Captain Halbec had mentioned that ship to me. He considered the *Storm Seeker's* Captain Brannun to be one of his few fellow Sulcars whose ship and crew could safely dare the winter seas.

After that heartening word, silence prevailed for many anxious days. We pursued our search of Lornt's documents from first light until dark, and past dark with the aid of lamps and candles. We discovered fragmentary confirmations for Elsenar's journal accounts, and some evidence to support Kasarian's version of Alizon's early history; but we did not find any clear details or specific strategies that we might use against the Dark Forces from Escore now threatening both Alizon and Estcarp.

At least once a week, we gathered in Morfew's study to observe Jonja and Duratan as they consulted their foretelling devices. Jonja explained to me that her runeboard could indicate, in a general sense, how Kasarian was faring. When

she concentrated on Kasarian while touching her rune-board, should her moving fingers be halted upon a gold rune, then we might be assured that he was well; a red rune would disclose the presence of some limited peril; while a black rune would indicate mortal danger or death. Duratan said that his crystals could also display signs of external impediments or positive aids. All of us felt relieved when the first few runeboard readings and crystal castings seemed to show that Kasarian was proceeding without adverse interventions. Our concern intensified several times, however, when Jonja's fingers stopped upon red runes, and Duratan's crystals confirmed the existence of danger. Ouen reminded us that we had to expect Kasarian's ship would encounter storms during any winter voyage to the Dales. Morfew suggested that the *Storm Seeker* would likely require four to six weeks for its passage, depending upon the winds and the number and severity of the storms. We therefore calculated that Kasarian should have arrived at Vennesport late in the Month of the Hawk, or possibly early in the Month of the Crooknecked Fern.

As those intervening weeks crept by, we were lulled by the repeated appearance of gold runes and positive crystal readings. Then suddenly, on the last day of the Month of the Crooknecked Fern, when Jonja ran her fingers across her rune-board, they halted on a black rune. Duratan, grim-faced, cast his crystals, and exclaimed with evident frustration, "Kasarian is in danger—but from what? I see two sources of Power confronting him, but both are of the Light. . ."

"Elsenar!" Nolar's voice shook with excitement. "Kasarian must have located the ruins, and by means of Elsenar's jewel, the mage has been revived. Would not both mage and jewel show as Forces of the Light?"

Jonja's expression remained bleak. "Until the dominance of the black rune loses its hold," she declared, "I shall stay

here with my board.”

To our puzzlement, neither indicator changed that night, or the next day, despite repeated consultations, but in the late afternoon of the Second Day of the Month of the Fringed Violet, Jonja gave a strangled cry, and slumped forward in her chair. Alarmed, Nolar took her hand, but after only a few moments, Jonja shuddered and opened her eyes.

“I have received a Sending from Elsenar,” Jonja announced. She pressed a hand to her forehead, as if still dazed. “Compared to this, the Witches’ Sendings were a mere whisper in my mind; Elsenar’s Sending bears the force of a shout! I shall have to brew a remedy for this resulting ache . . . but I have no time for such. We must ready a horse—no, two horses.”

Nolar gently pressed a cup of barley water into Jonja’s hand. “Refresh yourself first,” she suggested, but the Wise Woman spurned the drink, setting it to one side.

“We must make haste!” Jonja urged. “Elsenar intends to return Kasarian to Lornt through the same postern by which he traveled a thousand years ago.”

Morfew absentmindedly drank the barley water, then remarked, “But all we know about the site of the forester’s lodge where Elsenar worked his postern spell is that it was within a day’s ride of Lornt.”

“Elsenar assured me that I could determine the place,” Jonja replied. “He knew about my talents from Kasarian. I sensed the mage’s intention to take immediate action. It may well be that Kasarian has already accomplished the transit. Judging by the speed of the displacement from Alizon City to Lornt, we must assume that this far longer distance would still be bridged magically with great brevity.”

Duratan swept his crystals back into his hand and tossed them again onto the table. As they scattered, the shining blue stones crisply outlined a wedge pointing to the southeast. Scooping up the crystals, Duratan rose to his feet. “I shall see

to the horses,” he said. “Our initial direction is clear.”

Also standing, Jonja clutched her rune-board. “I will ride with you,” she asserted. “We must hurry. Kasarian may be stunned by his transit. What if he emerges impaired and stumbles into a ravine?”

Preceding her toward the door, Duratan said, “We shall discover his condition only when we find him.”

The late Spring twilight was fading when they brought Kasarian back to Lornt. I watched from a doorway opening onto the great courtyard as Duratan’s horse approached, bearing a double burden. Duratan was mounted on the loin behind the saddle, his arms extended to support the senseless Alizonder. Master Wessell hurried past me to help carry Kasarian inside. Although the injuries to my legs had healed, I still had some difficulty in walking, and was obliged to rely upon the clever wheeled chair that Master Wessell had constructed for me. I could thus be fairly easily pushed about on the ground floor, but I required someone to lift me bodily up and down stairs. It was for that reason that we had changed our meeting place to Morfew’s study from Ouen’s upstairs quarters.

Jonja did not allow us to confer with Kasarian until the next day, providing him time to recover his strength. With barely contained impatience, we gathered in Morfew’s study. When the old scholar escorted Kasarian between the towering stacks of scrolls and documents, I thought Kasarian appeared even more gaunt than when he had left Lornt, but he moved with the same singular grace. Taking his seat at Morfew’s worktable, Kasarian related to us the details of his astonishing journey.

After our spirited reaction and discussion of what responses we should make, Kasarian surprised me by openly recognizing actual positive advantages in our traditions of oath-keeping and mutual trust. He conceded that in view of

the Escorian threat to us all, each of us—Estcarpian, Alizonian, or Dalesman—might be forced to change our traditional thinking.

At that point, I thumped my staff on the floor to attract the company's attention. Nolar read aloud my urgent query: "Can we be certain that we are aware of all of the posterns bespelled in ancient times? We know of only two posterns set by Elsenar—the one from Narvok's lair to Lornt, which has been destroyed, and the one from Lornt to Krevonel Castle, which is restricted to those of Elsenar's blood—but might not he and perhaps other mages from Escore, of the Dark as well as of the Light, have set similar postern spells in the past?"

Morfew frowned. "Pray also do not forget the Gates," he admonished. "The Gate through which our Foresires came to found Alizon was sealed by Elsenar, and the Master Gate which was attempted here at Lornt was abolished, but there have been other Gates. I understand that Simon Tregarth himself came to Estcarp through a Gate that opened near the border with Alizon. The Kolder came through yet another Gate that was blessedly shut behind them, but Kasarian has told us that the remnant Kolder in Alizon desired to conjure a new Gate in order to replenish their numbers. We must consider the likelihood of the hidden presence of Gates as well as posterns."

Kasarian's face had blanched. During Nolar's reading and Morfew's alarming remarks, Kasarian had been sitting motionless, not even twisting his restored signet ring. "While Elsenar meddled in my mind," he said in a bitter tone, "I also became aware of some of his thoughts. At first, I did not recall the details of that . . . unnatural experience, but now that you discuss the matter of Gates and posterns, I remember certain of Elsenar's thoughts concerning such things." He gripped the edge of the table, his eyes flashing with anger. "There *were* other postern spells—but it is like hear-

ing echoes in a cave! I cannot fully grasp his thoughts, but I *know* that Elsenar possessed knowledge of other posterns and possibly other Gates.” Kasarian paused, then added slowly, “If other accursed magical openings exist into Alizon from Escore, then the danger is even worse than we earlier imagined. I beg you to seek any word in Lornt’s archives that could tell us how such horrors might be detected and sealed off!”

“The danger you rightly perceive,” Duratan said grimly, “is not limited to Alizon alone. Consider, my friends, what might befall Estcarp should the present-day Dark mages become aware of any former passageways bespelled in ancient times between Escore and Estcarp? Or, for that matter, if they determine to conjure such a postern now for the purposes of invasion?”

I handed Nolar another written query. She read aloud for me, “Should we not send an immediate warning to the Council of Witches in Es City? Surely this new realization of an added dimension to the threat from Escore must be conveyed to them.”

“I fear,” Ouen said, his voice sharp with regret, “that any warning from Lornt would be doubly discredited by the Witches. They have ever scorned us for our maleness, and they would be all the more offended, if not outraged, that the original source of our warning is an Alizonder baron.”

“We must also remember the Witches’ painfully diminished strength,” Nolar observed sorrowfully. “Even should they pay heed to us, I fear they could not mount any significant countermeasures. Despite frantic efforts to train new Witches, the Council has not yet restored the awful losses they incurred during the Turning.”

Grasping for the slightest of encouragements, Morfew ventured, “Perhaps Estcarp’s existing spell-watch along the border with Alizon could be strengthened to some degree.”

Jonja's face, too, had paled. "I could attempt to establish a Sending to Es City," she offered. "Just before the Turning, the Council of Witches warned us here at Lornt so that we might take some advance precautions. I received their Sending. They maintain a constant mental watch at Es Castle; I might be able to reach that Watch Witch. I must tell you frankly, however, that I doubt a call from Lornt would be accepted."

"We could send a written message," Nolar began, but Duratan interrupted her. "During the prolonged clashes with Karsten," he said, "I served with the Witches as a Borderer. I believe that I could present our case to better effect if I rode to Es City and faced the Council."

"I shall accompany you," Jonja declared. "In the Witches' sight, I may be considered less than those who devote themselves exclusively to mastering the uses of Power. Although my talents are limited to treating the ills of the body and spirit, as an undefiled female, I may stand before the Council without apology. When Estcarp's very life is vulnerable to so grave a threat, the Council cannot refuse to listen to us."

Kasarian smiled ruefully. "I would request to ride with you," he said, "but I perceive I would be no more welcome at Es Castle than would be a Witch who craved audience before our Lord Baron. It occurs to me that my original warning might impress the Witches more favorably were it not obtained voluntarily. Pray inform the Council of Witches that I betrayed my tale to you unwittingly while your captive and ill with fever."

Nolar shook her head. "A wise person takes care to speak the truth to Witches," she advised. "They can discern any efforts to deceive them."

I handed her another sheet of parchment so that she might read my plea. "Those of us who remain at Lornt must begin without delay to seek any other scraps of writing that may

have been left here by Elsenar. Earlier, we found part of his journal. Surely additional documents of his may yet be discovered—perhaps some which identify the sites of other posterns or Gates.”

Ouen pushed back his chair. “Morfew and I will compose a corroborative letter,” he said decisively. “Since this day is already far advanced, Duratan and Jonja will desire to depart for Es Castle early on the morrow. Meanwhile, we must indeed act upon Mereth’s apt injunction. I shall ask all able scholars to join in our search. Any documents bearing Elsenar’s unreadable hand will be fetched at once to Mereth for her transcription. May we be guided by the Light in these vital tasks!”



CHAPTER 33

Kasarian—events at Lormt
(2nd Day, Moon of the Spotted Viper/
3rd Day, Month of the Fringed Violet)

Mereth raised a devastating question: might there be other sorcerous posterns existing from ancient times? Morfew compounded the horror by reminding us of those far more substantial magical openings, the Gates, which led to and from strange, unthinkable distant sites such as the place whence Simon Tregarth sprang, or the hideous home nest of the Kolder. I exhorted the Lormt folk to plunder their archives for any word that might instruct us how to locate and seal such frightful breaches.

As I listened to their subsequent discussion on how to warn Estcarp's Witches, my feelings were violently at odds. The very notion of meeting with those redoubtable crones made my skin crawl . . . yet I had to acknowledge the perverse sense of Gurborian's own argument which I had overheard in Alizon Castle. When detestable magical forces were arrayed against you, was it not far better to have similarly empowered forces acting in your defense? Gurborian had schemed to pit Escore's Dark mages against Estcarp's Witches; surely I must admit the advantages of the reverse case. If Estcarp's Witches

could be marshaled—however weakened they might be—to respond on our behalf in countering the Escorian threat, then our faction would at least possess some magical Power to turn aside the horrid assaults we must expect to endure. I was privately much relieved that the Lornt folk renounced my participation in the mission to warn Estcarp's Council of Witches.

As the Lornt folk arose to address their individual tasks, I accosted Duratan's mate. Before I could return to Alizon, I had to make a vital request. "If you would assist me, Lady," I said, "I should be grateful. I cannot appear at Krevonel Castle with my hair in this garish state."

Somewhat to my surprise, Duratan's mate smiled. "It seems almost a pity to bleach it," she remarked. "You make a distinguished appearance with dark hair. . . ." Before I could protest, she hastily added, "I shall ask Master Pruett whether the silver nettle preparation we used to lighten Mereth's hair can reverse the effects wrought by my shred-bark dye. Come along with me and we shall attempt to recover your proper baronial guise."

Several times during the acrid herbal drenching that followed, I half-suspected I might drown. To my considerable relief, however, once I wiped the last of the rinsing water from my eyes, I saw from my reflection in the silver tray that my hair had been restored to its natural Alizonian hue.

After I had dried myself to a presentable state, I hurried back to Morfew's chambers, where I found Mereth and Morfew diligently sorting through heaps of documents.

Morfew glanced up at me when I entered, and nodded in approval. "I must say," he observed, "I prefer your authentic aspect. If you are determined to go back to Krevonel without being attacked on sight, you certainly could not bear that remarkable coloration suited to a Dalesman."

"It is imperative that I return to Alizon," I asserted. "I

must strive to counter at their source those forces which seek to destroy our land. Just as your work lies here among Lormt's archives, so mine awaits me at Krevonel." I hesitated, reluctant to raise the subject. "I regret that in my unnatural passage through Elsenar's postern from the Dales, I have lost my trader's wallet containing the silver bars given me by Lord Ouen."

Morfew chuckled. "You need not trouble yourself on that account," he chuckled. "Lormt's stores of silver are more than adequate for our rare disbursements. I expect Master Ouen to insist that you take your own Alizonian gold back with you—no, no, do not object. Your activities in Alizon will demand copious bribes, and we truly have no use for Alizonian gold here at Lormt."

Mereth rapped with her staff. Morfew took her slate and read, "When you dispatch your nephews to bring us messages through the postern from Krevonel Castle, how will you explain to them the sensations they will experience during the transit? Will they not be unduly frightened?"

"That is a matter I have carefully considered," I replied. "Fortunately, I know of a reliable posset which will render the pups so drowsy that they will not notice the eerie effects of their passage. I shall tell them they must traverse a way so secret that blindfolding and complete silence are obligatory. There will be no difficulty, and no harm to the pups."

Morfew gathered up an armful of scrolls. "Master Ouen will be gratified to hear of your intentions in that regard," he declared. "I must carry these documents to him, and observe his progress with the final version of the letter to be sent to the Council of Witches. Should I not see you again before your own departure, Kasarian, I wish you abundant hunting and the best of hounds for your pack."

It was pleasing to hear the familiar Alizonian farewell. "Whatever you pursue, may your blade strike true," I

responded, touching my Line badge.

When we were left alone together, I gazed at Mereth. I would never have believed that I could feel such justified respect for an elderly female bred in the Dales . . . yet her very sire was Elsenar, my own distant Foresire. It was therefore understandable—although completely contrary to Alizonian tradition—that her wit and fighting prowess should be so remarkable.

I loosed the buckle of my belt and slipped off one of my sheathed daggers, which I presented to Mereth. “Lady,” I said, “your actions at Krevonel likely saved my life, thus by our ways obligating me to a blood debt—but by the peculiar interference of Elsenar’s magic, we both spring from his Line. We are like littermates far separated in time, and among such, no blood debts may be incurred. I therefore beg you to accept this parting gift as a token of my profound regard.”

Mereth at first appeared surprised, then a faint smile twitched the corners of her mouth. She took the dagger somewhat gingerly, and wrote on her slate, “I never expected to receive a kin gift from an Alizonder. Must I beware of its poisoned blade?”

“This was a favorite throwing knife of my eldest littermate,” I explained. “Its blade is clean.”

She wiped her slate, wrote again, and proffered it to me. “I thank you doubly, Kinsman, for the value blade and for your personal actions on my behalf. Had you not ably defended me, I should have been cruelly burned, if not stabbed and poisoned. I believe that both of us have been given ample reasons to modify our initial views of one another. By surviving severe danger together, we have learned to cooperate. Now an even greater challenge lies before us. As you embark upon your efforts, take with you this silver ring crafted in the Dales. Its design is simple, and should not attract unwelcome attention if you choose to wear it in Alizon.”

I bowed to her, and fitted the ring on my right hand's least finger. "The decoration is handsome, Lady," I said, "like the pattern of ribs on a bloodwine leaf. I shall wear it proudly."

Mereth extended her slate to me for the last time. "As Morfew noted, we may not see one another again. You go forth into your perilous land, while I must bide at Lornt awaiting whatever befalls us here. Take with you therefore also my Farewell Blessing: To the day of your journey, a good dawn and sunset; to the endeavor, good fortune without a break. May the Light strengthen our resolve, and ward us against the Dark."

I touched her ring-gift to my Line badge, and bowed. "I thank you for your Blessing, Lady," I affirmed. "It is for me a second gift, for I have received none such before. I shall send you word of my progress with Volorian and the elder barons. It would likely be wise for you and Morfew to address any return messages to me in Alizonian, should the script chance to be seen by prying eyes."

Mereth nodded her agreement. With a final bow, I took my leave of her. The elder's key was ready to hand in my tunic pocket. I made my way directly to Lornt's cellar.



CHAPTER 34

Mereth—events at Lornt
(3rd & 4th Days,
Month of the Fringed Violet)

No sooner than Morfew had left the two of us alone, to my intense surprise, Kasarian unclasped his belt and presented me with one of his many daggers. He made a gracious speech, acknowledging that I had probably saved his life during the combat with Gurborian and Gratch. By Alizonian custom, he would therefore have owed me what he termed a blood debt, but because both of us bore Elsenar's blood, such an obligation could not be imposed. Instead, he intended the dagger to serve as a token of his regard.

I accepted the sheathed weapon with some considerable bemusement. I had to view it as a kin gift . . . from a most extraordinary source. I inquired on my slate if the blade were poisoned, also after the Alizonian custom. Kasarian assured me the dagger was clean; it had belonged to his eldest brother, who had used it as his favorite throwing knife. I tried not to envision at what or whom it may have been thrown.

It seemed evident to me that Kasarian's gesture was motivated by both courtesy and genuine gratitude. Despite the cruel nature of his Alizonian upbringing, Kasarian appeared

to possess—at least to some degree—a sense of honor that any Dalesman could respect. From my own experience, I certainly could not fault his courage and daring.

I knew that we might well never again meet. Kasarian was about to plunge into the hazardous currents that swirled constantly around his scheming fellow barons. From my perspective, at any time, Lormt itself might be assailed by Escore's aroused Dark mages. When Kasarian had earlier left Lormt to carry Elsenar's jewel to the Dales, I had impulsively written for him a travel blessing. I now surveyed Kasarian for what could be the last time I should ever behold him, and without any reservations, wrote for him the solemn Farewell Blessing of the Dales. I appended to it my fervent prayer that we might be strengthened by the Light in our resolve, and safely warded against the Forces of the Dark.

Kasarian raised my personal parting gift, the silver Dales ring, to touch his House badge, then with a final graceful bow, he left me.

I recommenced my reading and sorting of documents until Nolar brought the evening meal. After sharing it, we worked on together for some hours. Gradually, my eyes grew weary, and the candlelight dimmed as I drifted into a light sleep.

I awoke quite abruptly when Duratan and Morfew burst into the room. Both of them were as excited as Dales lads opening gifts on their name-day.

"It is only one page," Morfew exclaimed, waving an age-darkened leaf of parchment, "but it is definitely written in Elsenar's hand. The moment I saw it, I set the others to emptying out the entire chest wherein it was found . . . but I said to Duratan that we must bring this to you immediately!"

Nolar urged Morfew to sit down, and handed him a cup of barley water, which he welcomed.

"Thank you, child," Morfew said, subsiding breathlessly

into a chair. "I have not hastened this rapidly," he gasped, "since the time of the Turning when I abandoned my exposed position in the courtyard just before the long wall fell."

I reached for a second candle holder to cast more light on the faded ink marks. Although I could not read the writing, being able to see it helped focus my mind upon the message it conveyed. Elsenar had composed it during that time just after the horrendous collapse of the Master Gate. I wrote for Nolar to read aloud, "Before Elsenar launched his second attempt to conjure a postern to Arvon, he wrote this letter to the surviving Mages of the Light remaining at Lormt. He feared that other Gates might be similarly opened by the Dark mages, and pleaded for a concerted effort to frame a spell . . . I find this difficult to grasp, but Elsenar seems to have thought that some . . . device sustained by a spell could detect the presence of threatening Gates, or possibly guard against their opening at a given spot. His letter is incomplete. Were there no other related pages found near this one?"

Duratan shook his head, dislodging a shower of fine, soot-like particles from his hooded jerkin. "As you see, we have been burrowing. Only two days ago, a scholar chanced to notice a crack in the wall of one of the storage bins in our root cellar. Once we shifted the roots, and broke through the back wall, we gained entrance to a small chamber choked with ancient boxes and chests." He sneezed. "And dust," he added. "Ouen is there now, guiding the removal of each container. Many of the wooden boxes have been weakened by age or ruptured during the Turning."

Morfew rubbed his hands together. "Documents are scattered about in glorious profusion," he reported. "This leaf of Elsenar's was atop one small stack, but the pages beneath it belonged to other collections. If any additional fragments by Elsenar were stored in that chamber, I am certain that Ouen will locate them."

Duratan stood up. "I must return to assist him," he said. "Our presentation to the Council of Witches would be immensely strengthened if we could alert them to the magical strategy that Elsenar conceived for discerning the sites of rogue Gates and posterns."

Morfew yawned. "My bones remind me that I should be searching for my bed," he observed. "On the morrow, Ouen will surely amend our letter to include this vital news. You and Jonja must delay your departure until we have examined every scrap of writing hidden in that root cellar."

"I am certain," Nolar said firmly, "that were Jonja here, she would advise Mereth to rest now, so that she will be able to transcribe any further messages by Elsenar." Exhibiting a briskness reminiscent of Mistress Bethalie, Nolar resolutely expelled Duratan and Morfew from the room, then helped me settle for the night in a nearby quiet cubicle which we had converted into a bedchamber for my use. As she turned toward the door with her candle in hand, Nolar paused. "I shall go brew some cordials to sustain the searchers," she remarked with a smile. "Should they find any more of Elsenar's writings tonight, they may hasten back here to implore your interpretation, so you had best sleep while you can."

Once Nolar had closed the door, I lay against the pillows, layers of warming quilts drawn up to my chin. My thoughts were too active to allow me to sleep.

I was concerned about Kasarian's reception in Alizon. Even if he successfully explained his absence, he must henceforth contend with endangerment from all sides. The Lord Baron would be constantly—and justifiably—suspicious of plots against him; the equally vengeful Reptur forces would be pressing to impute responsibility for Gurborian's disappearance; and all the other surviving members of Gurborian's faction would still likely be dedicated to forging an alliance

of convenience with Escore's Dark mages. Even if Kasarian contrived to rally Volorian and some of the elder barons to his side, his position would remain extremely precarious . . . yet I had seen how competent Kasarian was, how quickly he acted and reacted. If anyone could thread his way through the deadly maze of Alizon's incessant struggle for power, it should be Kasarian.

I also could not dismiss from my mind the uncertainties besetting us here at Lormt. We *had* to persuade the Council of Witches to take heed of our warning—but would they grant audience to Duratan and Jonja, and if they allowed Lormt's case to be presented, would they agree to act decisively on our behalf? So much depended upon what further evidence we could provide concerning Elsenar's plans to detect and, we had to hope, also seal or render harmless any Gates or posterns through which the Dark Forces of Escore might attack Estcarp. I had to wonder whether even clear instructions by an ancient mage could be successfully implemented by the Witches. Would their collective Power be sufficient to activate his spells? Would Elsenar have written down instructions for setting such spells? There seemed to be no end to the questions buzzing in my mind like a swarm of ill-tempered bees.

I could almost hear what Doubt would have said in his deep, earnest voice. "When you have more questions than you have answers, and when most of the questions demand time to be resolved, there is no use in wasting energy by fretting. Apply your strength to some task that can be accomplished, and let time furnish the facts you require to deal with the excess questions."

My precious Doubt . . . I had dreamed about him only the previous night, recalling an incident that I had not thought about for years. The two of us had been examining the bolts of cloth stacked in one of our warehouses at Ulmsport. Other

traders and messengers kept darting in and out, interrupting our tallying, until Doubt was festooned with three loops of cloth drawn out from separate bolts. After the final intrusion, Doubt spun around in frustration, and a great swirl of cloth unrolled from his shoulder down to the floor.

I could not, of course, laugh aloud, but I was quivering with amusement. He stared at me, affronted. "And what, may I ask," he snapped, "is so uproarious?"

In a scrawl woefully mirth-shaken, I wrote on my slate, "You look like a piece of Elderdale twist-bread!"

Doubt glanced down at his unintended entanglement, and voiced a hearty laugh for both of us. "I had best extract myself then," he exclaimed, "before I complete the knotting process. Although," he added in cloth-muffled tones, "I've always heard that a properly knotted twist is a certain charm to ward off ill fortune."

That dream had bridged the years as if no time had passed, but when I awoke, only the warmth of the memory lingered in my mind. I knew that I could never again feel the touch of Doubt's hand on mine, except in memory, just as I could never again hold my betrothal jewel, the Magestone of Elsenar, gone with him to some magical place far beyond our understanding.

I realized how very much I wished that I had been able to present the Magestone to Doubt as the betrothal gift intended by my mother . . . yet I now clearly recognized that such a jewel of Power was not meant to adorn a mere bride. It was bound up in the very life of the mage who had activated and wielded it. By its awesome Power, it enabled Elsenar to travel vast distances and accomplish great works. Somehow, I felt in my heart that the Magestone had conveyed Elsenar to the place he had to go to be restored to wholeness. I could not say how I knew, but I *knew*. Now both Elsenar and his Magestone were irretrievably isolated from us. For centuries, they

had been lapped aside, like two floating leaves diverted out of the stream of time into separate backwaters. Elsenar had been magically frozen in Narvok's lair, as if sealed beneath a sheet of winter ice, while his exquisite jewel had passed from hand to hand, unrecognized for what it truly was until, by our efforts, it had been returned to its master. After that restoration, the pair of them had re-entered time's on-flowing stream, now swept away from us to fulfill their magical destiny.

Doubt, too, had been swept away from me, just as inaccessibly. Amid the gushing flow of events, I was now companioned by the Lormtfolk, who had accepted me as their friend and fellow striver. In a most unbelievable fashion, I even had to admit that I had come to consider Kasarian of Alizon as one of my new companions. That he was my kinsman, I could not deny. He had shown me unfailing courtesy and unexpected gentleness. By all that I had known in my life before I came to Lormt, I would have scorned and feared him as my enemy . . . but because of what we had endured together, I began to think that I might possibly, perhaps, someday if we lived to meet again . . . call him friend.

In these twilight years of my life, I had traveled farther than I had ever expected, and seen sights beyond my most fevered imagining. A sense of belonging seeped into my awareness, easing my weary body. At last, I had found my rightful place. Lormt was the refuge I had sought without realizing that I could not fully belong in the Dales. The prospect before me was daunting; we might at any time be driven to fight for our lives, but I had survived such challenges before. Not only could I draw upon my memories for strength and sustenance, but I could rely upon my steadfast friends to pursue the struggle to preserve all that we held dear.

Just before I fell asleep, I glimpsed in my mind a scene that could never be, yet was somehow achieved in the realm

of my fancy: Doubt was standing in a shaft of sunlight, holding out his hand to me. Suspended upon its silver chain around his neck flamed the blue glory of a jewel shaped like the Magestone, but freed from the unbearable burden of its intrinsic Power. I sensed that this was indeed the betrothal gift I would have bestowed upon my dear lord had we been allowed to wed.

Doubt's voice seemed to whisper, "For a time yet, you must apply all your skills to defend Lormt . . . but I shall always wait for you, my beloved."

In this golden dream, I smiled, and reached for my quill and a clean sheet of parchment. There remained much yet for me to write.



AFTERWARD

Mereth—events at Lormt
(5th Day, Month of the Willow Carp/
4th Day, Moon of the Fever Leaf)

Kasarian had gone through Lormt's cellar postern back to Alizon on the Third Day of the Month of the Fringed Violet. Because of the discovery of the ancient, incomplete letter written by Elsenar, Duratan and Jonja delayed their departure for Es City for three more days, leaving on the Eighth Day. Our exhaustive search had disclosed two more tantalizing fragments in Elsenar's hand, but neither contained the details we craved concerning how to detect or block posterns and Gates.

During the subsequent days, we waited anxiously at Lormt for word from either Es City or Kasarian. Nolar moved her pallet to Lormt's cellar to watch in case Kasarian sent his nephew through the postern. Because we could not know when such a transit might occur, Ouen and Morfew asked a group of the less elderly (and more reliably alert) scholars to share the watch duty. Morfew carefully taught all of the watchers a set speech in Alizonian. He would have stayed on the site himself had the chill not so pained his bones.

I was gradually recovering my mobility as the weeks passed, and shared some of the later watches as the Spring

gave way toward Summer. Morfew had warned Nolar not to speak to the Alizonder lad when he appeared; it was necessary that he should hear only male voices speaking Alizonian, so that he would not suspect he had left Alizon.

Late on the Second Day of the Month of the Willow Carp, Duratan and Jonja splashed through Lormt's gate during the first Summer rain. They were weary and disheartened. Duratan would have made his report at once, but Jonja demanded that both of them change into dry clothing.

When we gathered in Morfew's study, Duratan could not sit still. He paced back and forth, his frustration plain in every bitter word. He and Jonja had been allowed to address the remaining members of the Council of Witches at Es Castle several times over the five-day period of their stay . . . but to no avail. Duratan was convinced that if Koris had been there, he would have listened to and joined in Lormt's plea for action—but Estcarp's Seneschal was absent from Es City, traveling through the countryside to assess the progress of recovery from the Turning. Jonja reluctantly agreed that we should not depend upon any aid from the Witches. Almost all of the prominent Witches had been killed or injured during the Turning, and those who now attempted to rule Estcarp were racked by division. One faction argued for a cloistered withdrawal from all worldly affairs to bastions such as their Place of Wisdom, where over time, the Sisterhood could be replenished. Even those Witches who desired to continue ruling from Es Castle as before were unwilling to make any commitments for concerted action, especially when the request for assistance came from Lormt, and stemmed originally from a hated Alizonder. Duratan told us sourly that the only useful fruit from the trip was his chance hearing that Simon Tregarth was back in Escore. Simon's two sons, Kyllan and Kemoc, were

also presumed to be in Escore at present, but the Witches had no good opinion of them, still keenly resenting their rescue three years ago of their sister Kaththea from the isolated Place of Wisdom, where Estcarp's girls gifted with Power were trained to become Witches.

Duratan abruptly stopped pacing, and exclaimed that we *must* alert Simon Tregarth to the threat posed by Escore's resurgent Dark mages, who might employ magical means to erupt at any time into Estcarp or Alizon. Jonja offered—after a night's rest—to attempt a Sending to the Valley of the Green Silences, Escore's stronghold of forces devoted to the Light. Not being a fully empowered Witch, Jonja could not convey our entire, complex warning, but she believed she could express our urgent need to reach Simon Tregarth. Early the next day, Jonja concentrated upon our desire that the Lady of the Valley would dispatch to us one of her blue-green message-carrying birds to fetch our written forewarning.

Jonja had scarcely completed her effort when, to our surprise, Duratan suddenly cried out, not in pain or fear, but with fierce joy. He sat rapt for a few moments, then shook himself as if rousing from sleep. He explained to us that Kemoc, his former shield comrade, had become aware of Jonja's Sending. On a previous occasion, Kemoc had appeared to Duratan in a dream, but this time, Kemoc achieved a waking linkage with Duratan's mind. He now informed Duratan that Simon was presently scouting the northwesterly border area between Escore and Alizon in response to troubling rumors that evil was stirring in that quarter. Alarmed by our distress call from Lornt, Kemoc pledged to leave the Valley of the Green Silences immediately and ride to confer with us. His journey across the intervening mountains would likely require five days, but

once at Lormt, Kemoc could establish a mind-link with his elder brother Kyllan back in the Valley, thus eliminating the delays and hazards of trying to communicate by bird-borne messages.

While we waited for Kemoc to arrive, a further significant interruption occurred only two days later, during the evening of the Fifth Day of the Month of the Willow Carp. Ouen was most fortunately serving on watch in Lormt's cellar when the postern from Krevonel Castle abruptly flared into activity, delivering among us a groggy, docile Alizonder lad who was clutching Elsenar's key in one hand and a tightly-wrapped message roll in the other.

At once, Ouen guided the lad to a bench and intoned Morfew's admonition in Alizonian: "Wait here in silence. This message may require an instant reply."

Leaving the lad under the wary observation of a fellow scholar, Ouen hurried to confer with us in a distant corner of the cellar. Kasarian identified his messenger as Deve-rian, a pup of his eldest littermate's Line. His message was brief, but deeply disturbing. Upon his return to Krevonel Castle, Kasarian had launched discreet inquiries that had just recently confirmed his worst fears. The leadership of Gurborian's faction had been seized by two barons, Balaran from Gurborian's own Line Sired by Reptur, and Ruchard of the Line Sired by Gohdar. They feigned complete cooperation and agreement with one another, but each was secretly vying to be the sole leader of the faction. Kasarian had taken advantage of their concealed rivalry by bribing underlings in each camp in the name of the opposing side, so that his own interest would remain unsuspected. He had learned that very soon a meeting was to be held just across the border in Escore with a Dark mage known to the barons as Skurlok. Kasarian was apprehensive that neither baron

could successfully confront a Dark mage—that without the positive advantage afforded by Gratch’s cunning, Alizon’s interests would likely be betrayed. Kasarian promised to obtain more details, but meanwhile urgently desired word from us concerning our “southerly venture,” as he delicately termed Lormt’s plea for aid from Estcarp’s Witches.

Morfew quickly composed a reply, using purposefully obscure language of his own in the event our message might be seen by enemies in Alizon. “I regret,” he read aloud to us, “that our southerly venture appears to have come to naught. The parties we appealed to are unwilling to commit themselves on our behalf. Within a few days, however, our agent has arranged for a meeting here with his former shield comrade, the second puissant pup of that formidable sire we mentioned to you earlier. You will rejoice to hear that very sire is even now investigating rumors concerning the activity you have reported; he is tracking the matter from the far side of the border. In view of our impending receipt of important further information from the second pup, pray therefore dispatch your messenger to us again in four days’ time so that we can share the news with you. We shall expect him at that time, but will also keep watch should you need to send a message before then.”

We hastened back to the postern site, where Morfew sternly addressed the blindfolded lad garbed in Krevonel’s dark blue livery. “Hear me, Deverian of the Line Sired by Krevonel. Bear this message to your Master as carefully as you bore his to us. On your feet, now . . . I shall guide you to the opening of the passageway. Do *not* drop the key!”

Putting a hand on each shoulder, Morfew firmly aligned the lad with the marked paving slab, and gave him a gentle push as the familiar but still eerie postern oval formed soundlessly in mid-air.

When Deverian had disappeared, Ouen remarked, "If the fine weather holds, Kemoc should arrive at Lormt in three more days. We shall assemble all of our documents for his examination."

Duratan was grimly gratified that Simon Tregarth was already aware of a suspicious disturbance near Escore's border with Alizon. There was no question in Duratan's mind that Simon Tregarth and Kemoc would believe our warnings and would take prompt action to counter the threat.

I thumped my staff on the paving and wrote for Nolar to read aloud, "With the aid of this fine new staff that Master Wessell has shaped for me to replace the one I had to leave at Krevonel Castle, I am now well able to move about once again. Should it be necessary for us to send a sudden message to Kasarian, I believe that I can travel through the postern. It would not be prudent, however, for me to wander about in Krevonel Castle by myself. I shall take with me a well-stocked scrip and a pallet so that my period of waiting for Kasarian in the postern chamber may be moderately comfortable. It would be useful to know whether we of Elsenar's blood can activate the postern spell without the presence of Elsenar's key to the chamber in Krevonel Castle."

Duratan smiled. "Lady," he said, "Simon Tregarth himself could not ask for a more spirited ally than you have proved to be. Although our situation is grave, with you and the sons of Tregarth on our side, I begin to see grounds for hope."

"May we remove this discussion to a warmer location?" Morfew asked in a plaintive voice. "Mereth's bones may have mended, but mine are growing stiffer each hour I spend in this cellar. Besides," he added, as we began our

long upward progress, “I distinctly heard Master Wessell say something about a cask of well-aged wine he found recently amid all the upheaval. The least we can do is taste a sample to see if it is suitable to serve to young Kemoc when he arrives.”

As I followed behind the others, I looked forward to the wine, the fellowship, and the challenge that lay before us. The Dark mage Skurlok would find himself confronted by the iron-hard, unified resolve of forces from Lornt and Escore . . . and even from Alizon. We would be prepared to defend our lands.

ANDRE NORTON
THE WARDING OF
WITCH WORLD

With special thanks to the household, Ingrid and Mark, who listened and listened and listened very bravely.

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PROLOGUE ONE



Escore-Alizon Border

Simon Tregarth reined in his Torgian stallion beneath the heavy dull gray of the threatening sky. This was wild country with little in it to attract the eye—rather, one looked from side to side with a rising sense of caution. His own inborn talent of foreseeing, limited as that was compared to the Powers which could be wielded by those about him, had been awake and pricking him since they had broken camp this morning. There was undoubtedly trouble awaiting them ahead—but where did it not wait in this land of ancient sorcery and struggling Powers?

This was not only a gray-beclouded morning; even as far north as they had ridden it was also humid, tempting a man to rid himself of helm and mail, to reach more than was prudent for the saddle flask of water.

“You can always smell it—evil cannot rid itself of its taint!” A younger rider joined him on the hillock, from which they could see the rising land before them. Even time and erosion had not been enough to disguise the fact that the undulating strip of land edging the foothills had once known the control of man—or something else as determined to wring what was wanted from nature.

Simon grinned at his eldest son. Kyllan was a warrior first, but he was also talented to some degree. His helm side veils of mail lay



pushed back on his broad shoulders and his head was lifted, his nostrils expanded as if indeed he were following some quarry, hound fashion.

Some evil lingers—but not born of our time. The animal Kyllan bestrode also held its head high. A Renthan of the Green Valley, Wegan was no less intelligent than his human companions.

“A trap?” Simon crossed thought patterns with the Renthan.

No— Then that thought was broken. *Gray Ones!* Wegan’s warning shrilled through the minds of both the men.

Simon did not question in the least that warning, even though his own senses—sight, hearing, scent—caught nothing to betray evil ahead.

The warning had carried also to the rest of their scouting party. They were a mixed lot, but such could be always raised in Escore these days. For in the very ancient home of the Power-born there was a stirring, a sense that the age-long sleep had been broken, perhaps forever. Their party had struck out today because of vague warnings—vague so far. But those keeping the wards were ever alert to the least shift detected by talent.

So in their group rode three of the Green Valley who had held so long only to their own safe refuge: Hatturan, Varse, and Jonka. Beside their Renthans strode the war Torgians of the Old Race who had returned from exile: Yonan and Urik of the Axe, both of whom had known Escore as once it had been; Sentkar, a drifter from the Border wars; Denner out of Lornt; and one who had added himself brazenly to the squad on the second day after they had left their base camp—Keris, Kyllan’s son.

Now that youth stirred in his saddle, and his hand jerked a little in the direction of his sword hilt. He reddened and quickly dropped it on the saddle horn, darting a glance at Yonan to see if his overeagerness for a face-off had been detected.

After all, battle skill was all he could bring to bear against the enemy. He carried always the burden of his lack of talent. All *that* fortune had been bestowed upon his twin sister. However, fortune had at least favored him with a natural ability with sword and dart gun.



After it had been realized that he was one of them, Keris had been allowed to continue with them, mainly because this was a land where no sane man rode alone. But that he was steadily ignored by both his father and his grandfather made him very sure that there was going to be a harsh reckoning sooner or later.

Before them, swirls of mist arose from humps on the plain which spoke of former buildings. Keris remembered one of the many legends which were part of the Valley lore of his childhood—that a man oathed to a duty and slain before he had accomplished it continued to exist as a thin shadow of himself until his purpose was accomplished.

Perhaps they stood now on what was once a battlefield. Not for the first time Keris knew the pinch of loss which had been his when he came squalling into the world. Half-blood, yes, but his half of that blood did not carry with it the Power—not as it had with his sister. He had the appearance of his father, but not even the limited gifts Kyllan knew—nothing of his mother's strong talents.

Simon Tregarth straightened in the saddle, brought his mail wreathing about lower face and throat. Perhaps to ride on was rank folly, but his years of battle with the Dark forces had taught him that confrontation was the best of answers. Kyllan's Renthan had swung around and was now facing due north as his rider also made ready for action.

The Gray Ones arose out of the misty mounds silent as those swirls of fog, coming in their hideous fashion, some on two feet, some on feet and hands, their dirty gray coats matted with burrs and dried mud. It was plain that they had come from some distance and with haste. At what summoning?

Simon sent his stallion down from the hillock and directed the rest of the squad to close in a circle with that high ground to their backs. The count of the attacking force was somewhat reassuring. This was not a full pack and Simon was sure that they came to this brush already weary. He shot.

The dart from his weapon caught the leader of the pack in the shoulder and the creature howled



“Yasaaahhhh!” The three of the Valley broke line to use their own most potent arms—the flame whips—and each found its mark.

The Gray Ones wavered. Either these had a caution not usually known to their kind or else they had some order keeping them from moving in. But the fact that they occupied this territory was an added worry. Gray Ones normally fought by haunting the night, patrolling camps, pulling down stragglers, not this openly.

There was no need for one man to give an order to another in such a struggle as this. And those from the Valley were used to handling such threats. Even so, Simon took aim and fired a second dart—not at the leader of the pack this time but at one who skulked behind his fellows for some reason.

The creature leaped into the air, twisted oddly in upon itself, and crashed flat into the mosslike vegetation which carpeted the plain.

That might have been a signal. Yowling threats, the pack drew back, plainly unwilling. And, against their usual custom, two of them picked up the last downed, though they left two other bodies behind them.

The mist appeared to grow thicker. Kyllan unleashed what power he had and linked with the Valley scouts. Together they were able to weave a probe—not that it could do more than just let them know for sure what they already guessed: that there was some Dark Power ahead which was determined to keep its territory inviolate.

It was Urik, his great axe out of his shoulder sling, who swung his Torgian around, but Keris moved with the swifter agility of youth. One of the mounds before them had cracked open as if some planted seed was fiercely inspired to reach the upper world. From the riven soil emerged Sarn Riders, their reptilian steeds’ necks stretched to full length so that they could threaten with green-streaked fangs. As did the Valley dwellers, the Sarn Riders carried whips with dark lashes—but the force from those was not marked by flame, rather by shadows. Shadows which could bite and tear and eat away the skin.

Simon shot, though he knew that there was little chance of his bolt



dart going home. There was always speculation that the Sarn Riders were not altogether material as this world knew that state of nature.

He was aware that Kyllan, Sentkar, and Yonan were drawing swords. And the swords forged in the Valley had more than just a cutting edge to protect their wielders.

Denner had bent a bow. He was a famous shot, Simon knew, but an arrow against these devils was only a shaft of little power. As had Simon, he coolly picked a target and shot.

A Sarn lash flicked skyward so fast it was a mere trace in the air, to catch that arrow. There was a burst of bluish fire. Then a line of flame ran down the whiplash before its owner could throw it from him, and he doubled in upon his mount. There was no sound to be heard, but Simon swayed a little in his saddle and Keris nearly fell from his. For the cry which had tortured their minds was enough to shake them for that moment. And both rider and mount were now gone.

Stolidly Denner made ready a second arrow. There were, Keris noted, only five of the arrows left and he was sure that in their way they were more precious than many a name-famed sword.

Denner was out of Lormt, that fabled cache of forgotten knowledge. When the Great Turning had kept Estcarp from invasion from Karsten to the south, the force of the magic so deliberately unleashed scored the earth itself and brought down one of Lormt's towers and part of the girding walls. It was revealed that the masonry, thought to be so solid, really covered a veritable warren of sealed rooms and passages, all of which appeared to be crammed with scrolls, books, and chests of strange instruments for which there seemed no use.

The scholars who lived like gray-backed mice within those walls—some for almost the extent of their long lives—had been so overwhelmed by the extent of these finds that they thought of little else than burrowing a way into the next unsealed chamber.

Duratan, once of the Borders and at the time of the Turning marshal and protector of these knowledge-mad delvers, had built up a small force of his own. From second and third sons drafted from the surrounding farms, and from drifting Borderers whose



companies had been rent apart during the Turning, and some of *their* sons in turn, he had brought into being a force which had easily reckoned with outlaws and such. It was said openly that while the masters of Lornt sought so avidly for one form of knowledge, Duratan gathered the remnants of another. He sought fabled weapons of the far past—or at least such descriptions that they might be brought into being again. Thus had come Denner's arrows, Keris was sure. But they must be hard to make, since the man from Lornt rode with so few in his quiver.

Now the Gray Ones had slunk back among the mounds while the Sarn Riders were veiled in by thickening mists. Those by the hillock prepared for attack as the riders of the Valley began a low buzzing chant. When that creeping mist reached toward them it was stopped by the Valley magic, plowed up and down, side to side, forming a rolling wall of fog.

Though they expected the Sarn Riders to burst out, there now was no change—save that the clouds overhead were very dark; it might be well into evening rather than midday. It began to rain, huge drops striking at them as if they were blunt-nosed darts.

Simon stirred uneasily. Direct attack he could understand and welcomed—for the pull on him, drawing him forward, grew stronger with every breath he drew. But he had lived many seasons now with magic, enough to be doubly cautious of anything out of nature which his own senses could not explain.

“Jonka?”

The Valley rider's Renthán trotted closer. Under this dull sky, that peculiarity of the Valley race—their ability to change the color of both skin and hair—had now left him gray, and against the wanness of his hair his ivory horns were agleam.

“There is a need,” he said, Simon's uncertainty clear to him. “A greater trouble than we thought lies ahead.”

Simon waited, hoping the other would enlarge upon that, but it was the Renthán whose thoughts reached him first.

Those we have faced came at a hurry. Perhaps that which we seek has not Power enough to raise a full range of any Dark fighters against us. He tossed his head so that the brush of hair between



his big ears flopped near his eyes. *They may trail us if we go forward, but such is their nature they cannot hide.*

Simon made his decision. "Loose file, then, and let us ride."

Keris knew a flash of pride. That was indeed Simon Tregarth, legend alive, and in his own veins flowed the same blood. But he must prove it so—and this might well be his chance.

Even as he tightened hand upon the reins, that rolling wall of mist before them swirled higher and then was suddenly gone, as if the drive of the now-steady rain had washed it away. Simon led the way, heading out slowly with the expert ease of one used to many such scoutings, into the humped plain.

There was no sign of any Gray Ones—except the two bodies which had been left by their fellows—and that opening in the ground from which the Sarn had erupted was gone as if it had never been.

The Valley men took the points as they went. Simon appeared to be following as straight a course as he could. Keris, careful not to come under his eye, rode nearly knee to knee with Denner. The Borderer had drawn a flap over his quiver as if those remaining shafts must be protected from the rain.

Keris swallowed and then dared to ask the question he had held since he saw the bow in action.

"Is—is that—your arrows—of the old days?"

Denner was young enough to glance at his questioner with a trace of superiority. "Their making is one of the finds of Lord Duratan. They are very hard to fashion. We do not perhaps know the full process. But—you have seen what they can do."

"Yes—" Keris was answering when the message came, strong enough so even those untalented could understand.

Ahead—it was very necessary to get ahead at all possible speed. Simon no longer tried to take a trail which would lead them as far from potential ambushes as possible. Instead he gave the Torgian its will and let it move into an increasing canter. Kyllan dropped behind, surveying the rest of their party. His eyes lit on his son, but there was no recognition in them—Keris might have been any of the force under command.



They were almost across the plain. The mossy vegetation appeared to soak up the rain in a sponge fashion, slowing their pace, but Simon was pushing now.

The first of the foothills lay before them after what seemed an endless flight of time. And ahead, in spite of the storm, flared a orange-red glow. It seemed to be centered in space between two of the hills.

“Alizonderns!” came a warning from Jonka riding to the west. “But they are not on the move. Their hounds are in leash and they watch what lies ahead.”

Jonka was joined by Varse. The two Valley warlocks, with Renthans as powerful in their own way, would give adequate warning were those hated westerners to descend to take a hand in this. Alizonderns were enemies to be respected.

With the steady, slowly brightening glow of light ahead, even Keris could pick it up now—that foul emanation which steamed forth from any invoking of the high lore of the Dark. He saw Denner uncover his quiver.

It would seem that whoever or whatever lay ahead had some influence over the weather, for the pelt of rain suddenly ceased as if they had come under an unseen roof, though there was no lightning of the clouds overhead.

Simon slid out of the saddle and Kyllan nodded as he caught the reins of the Torgian his father handed him. This was the old, old game Simon had played now for many more years than he wanted to count. His booted feet sank ankle-deep in the wet moss as he moved forward, using every bit of cover.

The mush of the moss lasted only for a few feet and then Simon felt the rise of more solid footing. He planned to half circle the rise to his right, trusting he could find a point from which he could see. The Valley men and their mounts could pick up any communication he would need to make. But—for one moment only—he held in mind the picture of another, her dark hair, her proud head high: Jaelithe. During the past year, as they had helped to police Escore, he and Jaelithe had often been apart—but never could he feel that something of himself was missing. Now she—

Abruptly he shut off those disturbing thoughts to concentrate



on matters at hand. He had indeed reached a kind of lookout, one that Kurnous the Head Lord himself might have arranged.

But what he looked down upon was a puzzle which he strove sharply to bring into proper focus. There were men below, right enough. A number of them were plainly Alizondern slaves born into hopeless labor for all their lives. Only one of the white-haired, arrogant warrior class was visible, apparently sent to oversee the labors of the others.

Equipped with massive chains and wrist-thick ropes, they had apparently drawn into this place—for the ground was deep-rutted behind them—two massive pillars of stone. The red light which gave sight for their labors came not from any true fire but out of a huge kettlelike cauldron around which stood three men of another race.

Simon's lip curled. Both those of good and those of evil had survived not only the Great War of the adepts but all the chaos thereafter. One of those men down there he knew—not from any meeting between them but because he had seen his image summoned up in smoke when Dahaun of the Green Valley had sought danger near and distant.

It was Rarapon, once linked with the traitor Denzil, and as eager as that damned one to regain power. He wore the crimson robe of an adept but kept fussing with its belt and then its collar as if it did not fit.

The slaves were finishing their labor. Deep pits had been dug and now the stones were ready to be raised by pulleys. Simon saw Rarapon make a quick gesture. The Alizondern noble nodded and clicked his fingers. At that signal there were short struggles next to the pits ready to receive the ends of the rocks. At each, two of the slaves turned on a third, one of their fellows, and hurled him down into the dark hole, even as the pillar was allowed to crash into place.

Rarapon moved forward with a strut such as might be assumed by the leader of a great congregation. He raised both hands high and began to weave a pattern back and forth in the air, angry red trails following his fingers.

Now he chanted also, but the sound reached Simon only as singsong noise.



Simon needed no nudging from a talent he lacked—he *knew!* Rarapon was striving to open a gate! Gates were the ancient ways through which the adepts of the Great Age had explored other worlds at their whims—whose secrets, even whose existence in most cases had been forgotten.

The gates had not only taken wanderers and wayfarers out—they had drawn them in. From solitary venturers, such as he had been so many years ago, to whole nations like the Dalesmen of High Hallack, the Sulcars, and various smaller bands and clans.

And they had drawn evil as well. The plague of the Kolders, who had ravaged as much of this world as they could touch. Lately also that invasion overseas made by strange seagoing race of fanatics whom only the skill, blood, and courage of Falconers and Dalesmen together had stopped. The Falconers themselves, the—

None of those who survived that blast of raw magic, uncontrolled, chaotic, could afterward honestly describe the ponderous power which had played with them. Deafened, only half conscious from the terrible pressure against his outward senses and his inward person, Simon dimly saw the pillars bow toward each other and fall, to crush all who had been in that narrow valley. The cauldron glow was extinguished.

Simon rolled over on his back, his arm upheld in a gesture of pleading, to whom or what he could not guess. Then she came. Jaelithe was as visible in his mind as if she stood before him.

“Back, get you back, Simon. Bring with you all those you can add to the force of Light. For there has been such magic wrought as threatens an end to all our world!”

He reached for her now, but she flickered out. Nor did he understand then that the ancient Mage Key had vanished from this plane of existence. It left behind uncontrolled, unwardered other gates against which there would be no defense save the bodies and minds of those doomed to struggle through the days to come.

PROLOGUE TWO



Arvon, Kar Garudiyn (Castle of the Gryphon)

The day was fair, that Eydryth could not deny. She stroked her harp. Certainly a day to bring music into the world. Yet something kept her from plucking at the silver-blue strings of the instrument. She felt restless and at the same time was disinclined to move out of this warm band of sunlight in the courtyard.

This was not the silent keep her parents had ridden into years ago, felted deeply by dust over the passing years. Instead, for more than her lifetime it had been a dwelling alive with those whose love and camaraderie she cherished the most. Now she was late home from perilous wandering, and she should sink happily into its welcoming peace. But this morning—

Though she had not realized it, Alon had been a second half of her for longer than their actual marriage. Yet in the past few days it was as if a drift of time and space had come between them.

It was surely because of Hilarion—that adept survival of the Old Time who had taken Alon into training, knowing him for what he was, born with the greater talents. She had never seen Hilarion, who lived with the famed sorceress Kaththea Tregarth, half the world away. To her he was but a name, for Alon seldom mentioned those days before their own meeting.

She had seen him weave magic far beyond the control of any



that she knew—but that was only in times of great danger, and all that was now safely behind them.

Alon had not gone with the rest—Kerovan, Joison, and their son and daughter; Jervon and Elys her own parents—down to the Herd Marking of the Kioga when the proper colts were chosen for training and the Kioga camp was a swirl of noise and confusion.

No, for the past days Alon had quietly disappeared into the high tower of this ancient pile, and what he sought, or what he wrought, there she had no idea. None save that this was a thing which Alon must choose to tell when and if he would. Still her mind kept pricking her with the thought of Hilarion.

“Eydryth, where is Firdun? He promised—” Her young brother padded barefooted across the pavement of the court with a peevish echo in his question.

They had all gotten over the shock Trevor had provided last year, or at least were no longer overridden by it. On the point of giving birth, his mother Elys had been viciously ensorcelled, hidden away in a state of half-life.

It had been Eydryth herself who had started the breaking of that spell, years long as it had lasted. Her mother had been mercifully freed and within moments had given birth. But it was no baby toddling toward her now. For, having been broken, that power, which had tightly held mother and unborn child, released time as well as captives, and in the weeks following his birth Trevor had caught up bodily and mentally with the years he had been denied.

“Firdun?” He stood straight before her now, his thumbs looped into his belt, his lower lip outthrust, taking on the guise of Guret, the Torgian horsemaster, to a comic degree.

Inwardly Eydryth was close to sighing. Firdun, the son of Joison and Kerovan, and recognized by them all as having talent perhaps even past their own way of measuring—was as unlike his sister Hyana as day from night. So far the discipline of his parents had held, but he had refused within the past month to work longer with Alon (of whom Eydryth thought he was jealous).

Perhaps the greatest difficulty of all was the fact he had not been named to the Champions of the Gryphon. Eydryth’s own father



Jervon had not been among them, but he was a fighting man without talent and readily accepted that his worth lay in another direction. But Trevor—yes, the newborn—had been named to their chosen circle, though he was but a child. Firdun had not, in spite of his obvious power.

Trevor, however, had fastened upon the older youth as a life model. He dogged Firdun whenever he could and, while Firdun was never harsh with him, he now avoided the child as much as he was able.

“Firdun said,” Trevor was continuing, “that we would go to see the horses. The choosing.” His large eyes were shining. “Could be one might even choose me and then Father would not say I was too little to ride except with him.”

Suddenly Eydryth shivered. She had no farseeing talent, but it was as if a dark troubling had touched her for an instant.

To her surprise, Trevor swung away from her. At the same time she heard the pounding of hastening boots on stairs. A moment later Alon burst into the courtyard and skidded to a sudden stop just before he crashed into the two of them, as if he could not control the force of the necessity which had brought him. One of his hands fell on Trevor’s small shoulder and he pulled the small body closer. At the same time he reached also to Eydryth as if he must embrace them both, as he was looking in the same direction as Trevor.

There was nothing to be seen—not for her. But she swept fingers across the harp strings and their answer was much louder than she had sought for—almost nearing the blast of a battle horn.

Alon shook his head at her as he pushed her brother into her arms, taking a position before the two of them. Trevor was wriggling and Eydryth had a hard time holding him under control.

The troubling! It was not just a touch now. From the camp in the valley below, as far as that was from them, they heard a dulled shouting, the screams of fear-maddened horses.

“Garth Howell rides!” Alon spat.

Eydryth shivered. Those of Garth Howell had good reason to hate *her*. Fueled by rage, she had curse-sung one of their great war-



riors. Yet never before had those shadow ones ventured out of what they considered their own territory. They nested upon their stores of unknown knowledge with far fiercer protection than the scholars of Lormt guarded *their* finds.

Alon was moving toward the vast gate of the castle. Eydryth, one arm about Trevor, her other hand grasping her harp, was quick to follow. But already the others were coming up the castle rise, their horses hard pressed. Kerovan played rearguard and Jervon had drawn sword readily, save that against their foes steel was of little value.

Nevertheless they dismounted, sending the horses into the courtyard with sharp slaps on the rumps. Then, as archers at the forefront of a coming battle, they formed a line.

Kerovan and Alon were shoulder to shoulder, flanked by their wives, then Hyana and Trevor. Eydryth began to hum.

They ride to the Dragon Crest!

Eydryth was not surprised by that sudden flashing into her mind. The Lady Sylvyia, who was more than half of the Ancient Ones, might share their home, but also she still roamed the hills which had been her joy in youth.

The fairness of the day had dimmed; clouds gathered. From the Kioga camp the din still sounded. Alon gave the command:

“Wall!”

Eydryth’s voice swelled. Her fingers were swift on the harp strings. To her voice fit the chant that Alon now uttered, one which was picked up by the others. Only Trevor remained silent, but he moved to stand before the adept, head up and childhood’s seeming vanished from his small face. Both hands rose over his head, his fingers clutched as if he grabbed for something hanging here. Then he hurled the invisible.

They have with them a captive. Sylvyia’s mind-words thinned as if between them had arisen a barrier. *Firdun! He is mind-bound!*

Eydryth’s voice faltered, Trevor’s hands shook, their chanting died away. Alon’s features were as set as if graven on the image of one of the High Ancients. He made a slight gesture and they moved a little away from him.



Power—Eydryth could feel it gathering—
Then—

She was hurtled to the pavement, her harp under her bruising her arm, Trevor screaming and clawing at her. The raw chaos which struck at that moment was like no torment she had ever tried to face before. She saw Joison wilt and go down, dragging Kerovan with her.

Alon staggered back, both hands to his head, his features twisted as if he stood in full torture.

Would this continue forever? If so, Eydryth did not believe that any who cowered there could live through it.

However, as suddenly as it had struck, it was gone. They lay still for a long moment, as weak as plague victims who had crawled from their beds.

Sylvya's message shook them back to life.

There has been such magic wrought as this world has not seen since the final battle of the Great War—a rending and tearing past measuring. Those of Garth Howell lie now as dead and their captive rides to freedom.

Alon's face was wet with sweat as he rubbed his hands across his cheeks. "That was not aimed at us here, or we who had our minds open would be dead. Hilarion—I must know—"

He swung around as if he would go back at once to the tower where he had been so pent, but Eydryth caught his arm.

"What has Hilarion to do with this? He is an adept of Old, one of the race which brought doom upon us all in that day. Is this some new magic of his devising?"

Alon drew her close. "Not so. I was pupil to him and he is a master of the Light. We strive now to devise a form of communication which can cover great distances. It is my belief that perhaps such raw power unleashed may answer our last problem. But I must know—"

"We all must know." That was Kerovan. "For I think that a very wide door to the ways of the Dark may have been opened, and that all of good need to stand together to preserve the Light."

PROLOGUE THREE



Shrine of Gunnora, South of Var

Destree n'Regnant strode back from the bathing pool, her wet towel swinging in one hand, the fingers of the other busy with the latches of her jerkin. Destree had never been one to linger over the matter of arising in the morning, with its attendant need for dressing, preparation of food, and the like, but she accepted such as a matter of living.

She had slipped a silver ring over her shoulder-length fall of fair hair, tethering the locks out of the way at the nape of her neck, though some remaining drops of water sprinkled from side to side as she walked.

Already her thoughts were well ahead of her body, busy with the known demands of the day before her. There was the potion to be enflasked for Josephinia, whose joint pain had awakened fiercely during the recent weeks of one storm after another, and she must swing by the Pajan farm to look upon the new colt that was reported a weakling. But there never seemed enough time between sunrise and sunset to do everything.

Also, this morning she had awoken with a faint troubling of mind. It was not a lingering from one of her Lady's outright informative dreams—she would have remembered every detail of such—yet she could not altogether forget it.



The huge black cat, sitting on the steps of the ancient shrine Destree had worked with her own hands and strength to restore, opened his mouth in one of his silent meows. By the Lady, Chief seemed to grow larger every season! He certainly was far more impressive than any of the farm cats of the valley. Cleverer, too, or else the others hid what they thought from the minds of her kind. But Chief was not of this world and so not of the native feline blood at all. With Destree he had survived the ordeals of the Port of Dead Ships, as well as transportation through one of those strange gates. Though this particular gate no longer existed—thanks be to the Lady and her Powers. The cat bonded with her, who was outcast and shunned, in a tie so strong she did not believe even death would break it.

“Ready for breakfast, my lord?” she grinned down at him. “Though I do not doubt your night’s hunting has already given you a full belly!”

There was no expression in his large yellow eyes. Instead, he yawned widely, exposing fangs which she knew he could use to good or bad purpose, depending upon the nature of his prey.

Within were two chambers. Destree had restored fallen stones to their places, swept, washed, and then worked patiently to rub down the walls with a mash of scented herb leaves from the garden run wild. The outer room was her own domain for housekeeping tasks, though there was no hint of disorder allowed. A table of the very hard—and precious—vase wood, which held a metallic sheen of the purest gold when it was well rubbed, was accompanied by two benches of the same. There was a corner where a fireplace did not dare to strew any ashes onto the floor, and shelves and a cupboard or two.

Here were no tapestries, no rich carvings, but Gunnora’s fancy itself had taken command. For, up from the meeting of wall and flooring, around the room had risen a weaving of vines. No matter the season these retained their flowers and their fruits, mingled together, bringing the peace of the outer world in.

The second chamber was the shrine. Destree spread her towel



over the end of the table to dry and surveyed the flowers on the vines.

Not blue—no—that faint shadow which had followed her out of the night forbade that. Then—she made a deliberate choice carefully plucking, by their long curls of stem, a handful of the vine's bounty. The white blossoms which stood so often for a seeker who was not even sure of what he or she sought; the gold for the promise of harvest, which was Gunnora's own high season.

Destree passed into the shrine. Here stood a block of pure white stone such as was to be seen nowhere else in this countryside. Its sides were carved with Gunnora's seal—the shaft of ripe grain bound by fruited vine. She crossed quickly to that, avoiding the long couch placed directly before it, where seekers for wisdom might sleep and learn.

There was a single slender vase on the altar, shaped skillfully as the rare river lilies. Destree took from it the withered flowers of yesterday and replaced them with her handful of gold and white.

She cupped between her hands her amulet, the heritage which served her so well. Its amber felt warm, as if another hand rested within her hold.

"Lady," she said slowly. Of course the Great One could already read what lay within her mind; still, as all her species, she clung to speech. "Lady, if there is trouble, let me serve as you have called me to do."

She was well into her morning tasks when she heard the creaking of farm cart wheels. Stopping the flask she had been filling, she went to the terrace outside the shrine entrance.

The road up from the village was hardly more than a track and the huge plow beast that pulled the rude cart protested from time to time with a bellow.

Josephinia! But Destree had meant to deliver the potion herself to the farm. Trimble, the woman's husband, tramped beside the work beast, prod ready in hand. But there also swung from his belt an axe, the edge of which gleamed after a fresh sharpening. And coming behind, bows in hand, watching alertly from side to side, were Stanwryk and Foss, the two most expert hunters of the valley.



The small procession took on, as it emerged from the curtaining wood, the appearance of travelers abroad in perilous country.

Destree was already hurrying to meet them.

“What is to do?” Her early morning premonition was now well enforced.

“Woods monster, Voice.” Trimble’s voice raised to outrumble the cart. There came a whimper, half pain, and half fear, from his wife bundled between rolls of blankets.

“Aye.” Stanwryk pushed forward eagerly. “Last night, Labert o’ th’ Mill—he heard his sheep in a pothor an’ loosed Tightjaw. There is nothing living in the valley willin’ to stand up to that hound, as you well know, Voice. Only then there came such a screeching an’ to-do that Labert took to his house an’ barred his door. This morning . . .” He paused his spill of words and Foss took up the tale. He was always a man of few words, but today he was freer of speech than Destree had ever heard him.

“First light come and Labert was out—had his bow, he did, an’ his grandsire’s sword. In th’ graze land over th’ mill—a dead sheep, more than half eaten—an’—”

Stanwryk demanded his chance again. “Tightjaw—that hound was torn in two—torn in two, I’m sayin’ an’ I seed th’ body for me-self! Just like he was no more than a rabbit under th’ wolf’s teeth. An’ that was not all, Voice. There was tracks, mind you—an’ they warn’t made by no hill cat nor bear. They was like a man’s—but a man with twice the length of foot of Trimble here.”

Trimble clumped forward a step or so. “Voice, since we was children, our paps and mams, afore us, we have heard tales of creatures of th’ Dark who hunt an’ savage all true men. This here shrine of th’ Lady, why, ’tis said it was set right here that there be a strong place of Light against the Dark from the north. But this here night thing which has come upon us, truly it be of the Dark, an’ we asks you, Voice, call now upon th’ Lady that She may hold us under Her cloak.”

“Yes,” Destree said.

How well she knew that things of evil could wander far. Her body tensed. Had she not fought with one remnant of the Black



Power—that which was set to swallow the crews of ships it captured, even from other worlds than that of Estcarp? Had another gate gone wild—activated in some fashion so that it had provided a doorway for a thing from an entirely different world? Or had some skulking monstrous creature come prowling far south to establish for itself new hunting grounds? She must somehow discover which and what they faced. For these people of the valley had no defenses against any strong manifestation of the Dark.

Did she—? Her hand went to her amulet. She had the Lady, and promises between them would hold until the world's end.

As Destree worked with Josephinia's poor, pain-twisted body, the men waited without the shrine. But when she issued forth again having put her charge under a soothe-sleep, she found only Trimble there, striding distractedly up and down, while the draft animal sampled the sweet, high-growing grass of the shrine field. Foss and Stanwryk were gone.

"Voice!" The farmer hurried toward her, his big hands outstretched as if to wring what he wanted out of her. "What can a man do against th' Dark Ones? Long ago our kinfolk fled 'ere to be away from such danger. Now—"

Destree laid her hand gently on his shoulder. "The Lady takes care of Her own, Trimble. She will show us a way."

He stared at her as if he wanted to accept her words as a sworn oath.

"Foss—Stanwryk—they have gone to raise th' valley that we can form a hunt. Pacle's hounds—" he shook his head slowly. "Voice, there has never been a hound whelped in the valley as dangerous as Tightjaw, nor as sly and clever in th' hunt. Yet this thing took him with ease."

He smeared the palm of his hand across his face. "Voice, those who hunt the Dark are many times fools."

Trimble was no coward, that she well knew. He only spoke bare reason. But how many would listen to it?

"There is another way of hunting." She glanced over her shoulder to the shrine behind. "Be sure that that will be tried."

It was well into midday when the clamor of leashed and impa-



tient hounds and horses' pounding hooves, as well as one man striving to bring them to order, sounded from the cart track. Josephinia had wakened from her sleep and stretched cautiously.

"But there is only a memory of the pain now, Voice," she said excitedly. "I am as new!"

Destree showed her a flask. "Be sure to drink of what this holds night and morn. Also eat sparingly of meat but well of that which grows in the earth through the Lady's bounty."

The ragged body of the assembled hunt came bursting in to shatter the peace of the shrine meadow. Slavering hounds strained at the restraint of collar and the leash. Their handlers were a motley crowd—from lads still to name themselves men to a grandsire or two, they were milling about. Foss pulled off his peaked leather cap and came directly to her.

"Voice—Hubbar's youngest, he was down by th' river an' he saw a thing—a thing of hair an' huge of body, with fangs for tearing. It was by the water laving one arm—for Tightjaw must have left his mark after all. But when Yimmy came with th' news an' we went there it was gone. Now we ask the Lady for arm strength and weapon strength to take it before it kills again!"

"I shall ask," she said, "but this I must say. If this is but some wild beast of a kind new to us, then it can be well hunted. If it is more—then go with caution."

He nodded as he put on his cap again. They were on their way. Trimble and his cart, with his wife now sitting upright clasping the flask to her ample bosom, had a handful to play guard. But the majority struck off northward, into the first thick fringe of the forest. Destree watched them go with concern.

However, what she had to do lay elsewhere. She returned to the outer room of the shrine and quickly stripped off her homespun clothing. Into a large basin she ladled water from the hearth pot and measured into that, drop by careful drop, oils from several different vials.

Then she washed herself from head to foot, even dipping her hair into the basin, smearing the oily liquid over her whole body. Making no effort to dry herself, she then sought the inner room.



Drawing from the couch before the shrine the covering on which the farmer's wife had lain, she substituted another taken from a small chest by the altar. Green it was and brown, gold, and purple, all intermingled so no human eye could follow any pattern, and though it was very old yet it was still intact.

Destree spread it with care over the couch and then stretched herself upon it, folding her hands beneath her full breasts and closing her eyes.

The transition came quicker than it ever had in the few other times she had tried this ritual. Fear—pain—the need to run—run—run—Strange—all the world about was strange, there was nothing to be seen as a guide—yet—fear/pain—the need—the need to escape—

And the world she saw dimly was *strange*.

That strangeness fed fear. The very color of a leaf, the shape of a branch was all wrong. The ferns which beat about her legs as she ran—she shrank from their touch. This was not her world—where had the Lady led her?

She—she had been in the home wood and at peace with herself and the world about. Then there had been the tall stones. One of them had been shiny, and that had attracted her so that she went and laid hand upon it. Then—then she had been whirled away into nothingness and when she could see again she was in this fearsome place where all was alien and wrong.

Destree tried to cut behind the ever-present fear. The Dark? She sought the smell, the feel of evil. But there was none—only confusion and fear, pain—

Gruck! Out of nowhere came that name. She was . . . Gruck! In the same moment that became clear to her, she strove to break the bond. But she realized now where the Lady had sent her. She—she was the hunted monster.

But it was no beast. It thought, it strove wildly to learn what had happened to it. Nor was it anything of evil wandering southward. It now rested under the compassionate hand of the Lady. So somewhere another of those cursed gates had made a capture, and the innocent would be hunted down and slain unless she could prevent it!

Destree's eyes snapped open. She was already pushing herself up



from the couch. She paused long enough to return the covering to its time-set folds and then, from a chest in the foreroom, she brought her own woodsrunning clothes. Not the skirts such as she wore for the sake of making the valley people receive her more easily. Instead, she drew on over her still oily body breeches, a shirt, a sleeveless jerkin with oddly fashioned silver latches, boots made for hard service over indifferent trails. There was a belt with knife and small pouch, and at length she pulled from near the bottom of the coffer the backpack she kept ever ready for travel needs, checking to make sure that it held salves and herbs for the treatment of wounds.

There was no question in Destree's mind that she would find Gruck—that this poor refugee from another place was now her charge. Chief leaped out of the shadows and took the fore, entering the woods at a different angle than the hunters had followed. She listened but could hear nothing of their clamor and she wondered how far back into the thickly wooded hills they had gone.

“Gruck?” She sent out a mind-call. But there was nothing to anchor it and so draw her to her quarry. She did not know what Gruck looked like. She knew little more than the creature's emotions at its displacement and perhaps the hunt on its track.

Chief appeared to have no doubts about direction. For want of a better guide, Destree followed the leaping passage of the great cat.

Now—now—she could hear!

The clamor of the hunt suggested that Gruck was at bay. She hastened her pace from trot to run. They must not kill this stranger! It was not of its doing that it had come here. Yes, it had killed a sheep—but that was because it hungered. It had killed a dog which attacked it. Certainly no man there ahead could say that he would have done otherwise in its place.

Destree came into the open. There had been a forest fire, storm-set, here a year ago. The land was all blackened stumps and sprouting green between. And there was a tall rock firmly planted. Around that the battle now raged.

Three dogs lay dead and a fourth crept away, uttering a keening howl. With its back against the rock, the monster half crouched. It was taller than any man Destree had seen, and its entire body was



covered with thick curls of wiry black hair. Yet its head was well proportioned by human standards and its green eyes held intelligence. One of its arms had been crudely wrapped in a covering of leaves already torn and half gone.

About its waist, seemingly too small for the width of those heavy shoulders, there was a wide belt, along which ran glitters with every movement of its body.

Why Foss or one of the other bowmen had not already shot it down Destree did not know. Perhaps that was by the grace of the Lady. She raised her voice now. The land about them seemed to amplify her call.

“Hold!”

With Chief running at the same easy pace before her, she cut down into that place of desolation. The hunters had turned their heads at her call, though Foss’s attention swung almost instantly away and he had arrow to string now.

“This is not of the Dark.” Her voice came pantingly. She shoved between two of the men before they knew she was upon them and threw herself into place before the creature at bay.

Foss’s face was bleak. “Stand aside, Voice. We owe you much, but we have no place for monsters.”

“I tell you”—Destree had her voice under better control now—“the Lady’s hand stretches out to this one.” She tried to sign the truth of that by reaching behind her to where Gruck leaned weakly against the stone. Her fingertips were fretted by alien fur.

“This thing is a killer. Protect it at your own peril, Voice. If you would have anyone in this valley heed you an’ th’ words of your Lady ’ereafter, you will stand aside.”

She could read only a shadow of doubt in a few faces. They were as one on this. Yet her duty had been set upon her. Destree drew a deep breath as she tried to summon words which might break their resolve.

What came was something far different. A huge furred hand shot out and gripped her. She smelled the strange odor of alien flesh sharpened by fear. But there was only an instant for them to cling together so.

The blast which beat down upon them all was none of the La-



dy's calling. Destree knew that, before her senses reeled and she clung to her strange companion even as it held to her. This was strange magic, raw, without a check.

Her throat filled with bile as she saw men tossed about like straws in a tempest. The whole world split apart. Not the Lady's doing, no. Nor, she was certain, did Gruck have aught to do with this. Gate—had the gate which had captured this refugee gone as wild as that gate at the Port of Lost Ships when they put an end to it? No, something within her—perhaps the Lady reaching through the torment of assaulting magic—assured her. This was the beginning of something else—something such as no record she knew of listed.

Its mind-blinding attack ended. Dimly Destree saw the men of the hunt helping each other to their feet. One of them took up the injured hound. Then they turned and went away as if both Destree and their quarry had ceased to exist.

CHAPTER ONE



The Ingathering at Es City

The city was old, even beyond the imagining of the most fanciful. It was and it had simply always been. No one raised questions concerning the time of its youth; they were too awed by the feeling of leaden age which seemed to breathe from each worn stone. That Power had gone into its erection, from the pentagon citadel which was its core to the smallest of the houses clustering inward toward that promise of protection was known. It was and it would continue to be.

Yet for the first time there was a questioning which grew with each day. For parts of Es which had slumbered dourly through generations were being refurbished. More and more weary travelers arrived along each of the highways feeding into the four great gates.

This was no festival time. Those who had lived quietly, mostly in peace during the passing of one long year to the next, had no part in this ingathering. Tradesmen came to the fore of their booths, their apprentices and children edging out carefully into the streets, while the upper window curtains were looped far back so that the women and elders, usually within, did not miss the sight of such strangers, their mounts, their apparel, their followers.

There was no cheering, as might have arisen to greet the safe return of champions, but rather a muttering, a whispering which



sometimes uttered clearly a name or two. Riders were pointed out by senior to junior, who stared in equal awe. For these who came now to Es were part of distant legends—traders' tales, heretofore never completely believed.

They rode or strode in silence also, no small talk, only sometimes the jangle of a piece of equipment, the snort of a war Torgian, or the like.

A tailor grabbed excitedly at the sleeve of his wife, who had come down into the shop.

"'Tis one of the Green Valley, that one! See, he sprouts horns! And the lady with him—she is Dahaun!"

His wife drew a breath which was close to a sigh. "Master Parkin said she was noted fair—but this is a goddess!"

Still they came. From the north, Borderers of those squads which served to hold the passes into Alizon. Out of the river which linked Es with the sea moved others, sleek of body, finned as to feet, who stared about them silently for a moment or so before they began their inward march. There were Sulcar captains, too, their huge, furred cloaks thrown back, their horned or center-ridged helms bright with gold, proving that they were wide-faring, and lucky in that faring.

For three days they came. Only once did the city guard not retreat to give passage. They wavered into an untidy line before two riders from the southland. There was a woman clad in leather and with her plainly a high-born lord of the Old Race. However, it was the steeds which they bestrode that had brought forward the guards.

Men knew of Torgians, famous for their battle readiness. And they had seen, during the past days, those roan-red Renthans which allowed riders from Escore to mount them.

As with the Renthan these new mounts wore no reins, no sign of restraint to any wills save their own. They stood taller than any Torgian and their shining coats were uniformly black.

As they tossed their heads, snorting at the movement of the guards, those close enough could see that their large eyes were of a startling vivid blue—that of the freshest of summer sky. Yet—



“Keplians!” Someone in that crowd had raised the cry. The woman rider leaned a little forward, her hand on the arching neck of the mare she rode.

“We are of the Light!” Her voice had a note of challenge. “Think you we could have passed your defenses else?” She turned a little to wave her hand at the wall behind her.

There was a glow, and then for an instant a flashing blaze of a blue pattern. Those standing there cried out in confusion. Dimly they had known that Es had defenses other than those ready to man her walls with sword and axe, but never in memory had they seen it proved.

The captain of the gate raised his gauntleted hand in salute, his men crowded back, and the two who rode steeds out of ancient nightmares paced on as if they approached their own stable yard. Yet they left witnesses who had seen plenty to talk of, and rumor spread wide and fast. Who the two strangers were and how they had come to make peace with Keplians, monsters of the Dark lands, no one knew. But no one could deny that the woman had summoned the signs of Power to prove they were no peril.

For some six days more the ingathering continued. Supply-filled boats came from west and east along the river. There was such a demand for foodstuffs that farmers as far away as Gottem sent their surplus and made good bargains.

But there was no going forth into the town by the strangers. Squads of the Borders were seen from time to time. One such returned with a group of Falconers who looked very trail-weary. All who came were housed in the citadel and that seemed to be the end of them.

Almost as startling as the coming of the Keplian riders was the arrival of a body of witches escorted by troops wearing the badge of Marshal Koris. Witches had not been seen too much of late years. The strain of the Turning had depleted their ranks. Many of the oldest and most authoritative had either died or been left empty of brain after that effort. The small core left had withdrawn to their own place of training, the Place of Wisdom.

There were six of the gray-robed women and the eldest was cer-



tainly no age-worn hag. On the other hand, she had in her company two, robed and even wearing stones of Power, who were scarcely more than children. Those who knew a little guessed that these must be counted high in Power.

The arrival of the witches put an end to the flood of travelers—those gathered in the citadel might well have been waiting for them.

If the city was agog over these visitors, the citadel fairly shimmered with new life. It was as if the stones from which it had been formed drew energy to develop a silvery sheen which was clearly visible at night.

How could it be otherwise, Keris thought as he stood on one of the small balconies near the dome of the building, when within its walls was such a gathering of Power which had certainly not been known since its building—if even then.

That he was here himself rested on the fact that he had been one of that party accompanying his grandfather to the Alizon Border. They had all been questioned extensively, even under the glow of a truth jewel specially sent from Lormt, and surely there was nothing more than they could tell.

Lormt—that seemed to be the kernel of this gathering and yet only its marshal and two of his men were under this roof. There was much talk of a Lady Mereth and—he frowned—of a link with Alizon. All his life long Keris had known that Alizon was the enemy.

But at least that terrible attack of raw magic which had laid them all low had been explained. That, too, Lady Mereth had had a hand in. The Magestone—the Great Key which had controlled the master gate of the ancient adepts—had come to her, and equally to an Alizondern, by right.

There had been a battle of Powers. A black mage who would have seized that control was safely gone—but so was the Key. And the Key had been fashioned to control all the gates. No one knew how many of those there were—or where they all might be. If the Magestone lay now in limbo for all time, then would the gates themselves—those still able to work—go wild and let in upon



them such perils as the Kolders? Or would they reach out here in his own world to snatch the innocent and take them ever beyond the reach of home and kin?

He heard the summoning gong which vibrated through the walls of the citadel, and reentered the room he shared with two other Valley born, so cramped were the lodgings by the arrival of such a host. The sound of the gong had died away but not the sound of feet along corridors.

The heart of the citadel, of Es itself, was the great assembly hall four stories high, ringed with balconies for those who were unable to find places on the main floor.

Keris worked his way to a place by the rail and began to pick out from the gathering below those he knew by name as well as those whose deeds were already bard's tales. Ethatur of the Valley and Dahaun, Keris's own mother, with Kyllan overreaching her by but a finger's breath or two. Flanking them on one side his Uncle Kemoc, with his Krogan lady well wrapped in a heavily dampened cloak so that she could withstand a lengthy time beyond the touch of her native water.

On Dahaun's right was a great bear of a man, his heavily muscled form made the bulkier by a furred cloak worn as a badge of authority—Anner Osberic of the Sulcars, he who had led the raid on Karsten which would not be early forgotten.

There were so many: dark-haired, pale-skinned lords and ladies of the Old Race, as well as these outlanders. At the far end of the hall was a table set on a dais, chairs along one side of it only, ancient, tall of back, their once-deep carvings worn nearly smooth. In the center were two raised a little higher than their fellows. And even then one had to have a double set of cushions to bring it high enough for the occupier: Koris of Gorm, Marshal of Estcarp, in reality, since the withdrawal of the witches from most active government, the ruler of a land which had once deemed him an outcast. His handsome head was high held but his stunted body, in spite of the shoulders of a veteran axeman, could have been dwarfed by most of the company.

To his right the other throne chair gave seating to a woman



whose dull ash-gray gown was in sharp contrast to the brilliant show of color in the garb of those about her. She wore a single jewel—and that, too, as it swung on her breast on a silver chain, was as dull as her gown. Yet it was a far more potent weapon than any other armament within this great hall.

The witches were nameless, as all knew. For a personal name was a potent thing and to surrender it to the knowledge of another was to put one with that other's power. But this one passed by the name of Gull when among others and she was now the chosen link to those remaining within the walls of the Place of Wisdom.

There was Simon to Koris's left, and Jaelithe, his once-witch wife (who held an uneasy truce with her onetime sisters). Then Koris's Lady Loyse, of whom legends had already been woven.

At the end of the table stood a man who had not seated himself in the chair awaiting him. Rather he was leaning forward, handling with obvious care the wrappings of some object which had been placed on the board. Flanking him was Marshal Duratan, chronicler and protector of Lornt, who was watching every movement of that unwrapping as if he expected some outburst of energy to follow.

Keris was well placed to watch that action and he knew the man so engaged, just as he knew well the woman who hovered beside his shoulder as if to offer aid be it needed.

The man was Hilarion, the last (as far as they knew) of the adepts whose playground and experimental laboratory their whole world had been before the Great Change. Though Hilarion looked to be no older than Simon, he had survived years untold as a slave beyond a gate of his own making before being freed by the woman beside him—Kaththea, Simon's sorceress daughter.

There were a handful of others at the other end of the table, but, as Keris's, all eyes were intent on what the adept was doing.

The last of the enfolding covering had been pulled away. What stood there, some six hands high, was a double-pyramid-shaped object, each of the square bottoms being set solid on a length of blue quan iron.

Hilarion moved around the end of the table to the side facing



the whole company, where there were no chairs to conceal a full view. And he went slowly, edging his device hardly more than an inch at a time along with him, until they reached the certain point of the board.

For the first time then the adept spoke. “Of old we could look across mountains, under seas, beyond oceans. But like much else, that art was lost with those from whose minds it sprang. You all know of the discoveries at Lornt after the Turning, but before that time I was working with another—Alon, now of Arvon—to bring back a device which would allow such communication.

“Now we face such danger as may equal the Great Disaster. As you well know, the Mage Key, which once controlled all gates, has been discovered. When such power comes, even into worthy hands, it awakens and stirs the Dark. And though that key may be safely lost once more, the Dark is still awake, and old enemies are empowered.

“Those of Alizon have long labored, plotted, to bring us down. They had their compact with the Kolder first, and, when those vermin were driven from our world, they went seeking other aid. Though they profess to fear and hate all Power, there are those among them willing to use any weapon to gain what they would have.

“Therefore, the key when it was found brought out of the Dark an Old One of great power, as well as he who in the beginning first fashioned it. There were those of *his* house still living. And through them the Light arose.

“Through the years we all have known of the gates. There have come through them whole nations seeking refuge—such as those of the Dales—as well as others by chance. And most of these we had reason to welcome. But . . .” the pyramids seemingly having been placed to his satisfaction, he turned more to the company to address them, “the key is gone forever. While it remained in our world—though well hidden—its influences might well have kept a portion of the gates in check, allowing them to work only erratically. Now” —he made a small gesture with one hand—“who knows what has happened? We all felt the terrible unleashed power



of the key's passing—we have certain gates we are sure of. . . . However, perhaps I wander from what I hope we can learn.”

“This”—he had swung around once more to confront his apparatus—“perhaps will give us word out of Arvon. For Alon has labored there, backed by the Power of the Gryphon, to construct a similar device. If we can communicate, then we need not wait for any ship's voyaging to bring us news which perhaps will arrive too late for us to act effectively.”

Kemoc had slipped out of his chair, and Dahaun and Ethatur also, and with them Jaelithe. There was a stir as Gull arose from her seat. With impassive face she followed them, one hand clasping her jewel to her breast.

Kaththea stood now behind her lord, her hands out so that her fingertips reached up to rest upon his shoulders. Behind her Kemoc copied her gesture, linking with his sister, then came Dahaun and Ethatur. Last of all, Gull, after a moment's hesitation, keeping one hand still to cup her jewel, touched the co-ruler of the Green Valley. Keris's hands clasped the edge of the railing so tightly that the edge cut into his palms, but he was not aware of that small pain. He might not carry the talent within him, but no one in that hall could be unaware that such forces were gathering as might well blast the very walls about them were they to be carelessly unleashed.

The tension was like a cloud, one could almost see as well as feel it, and there was utter silence in the whole of that large company.

Hilarion's own hands went out, his arms stretched wide, and each outheld palm seemed to pull with it one of the pyramids, drawing them ever farther apart, enlarging the space between them. He recited no ritual as Keris had expected, but from his outstretched fingers there shot darts of blue flame.

The pyramids caught that force, held it until each of them in turn was afire. Once that was accomplished, from the quan iron slab on which they were rooted came a shaft of light, within its heart a darker core. That grew fast and cleared as it grew, putting on substance, until between the pyramids stood a miniature man—



no figurine, for as the last of the light which had drawn him disappeared, the small figure raised arm in salute.

Keris was too far away to see the mannequin easily, but no one in that company could miss Hilarion's welcome.

"Alon!"

The mannequin bowed his head. "As was hoped, master of learning, so it is wrought." One could have expected the thinnest of piping from such a small body, yet the voice was near equal to Hilarion's.

"There is good reason for summoning—" Hilarion began, when the other interrupted.

"We must be swift—we are seven but we are limited. There was a turmoil of raw magic."

"Yes. The key to the Great Gate was found—and then taken from this world. Now we do not know how the subject gates may be used."

"So." The image of Alon nodded. "Those of Garth Howell ride for the Crest of the Lion—or so they did before the wave struck. There is said to be a gate there—or once was. And Garth Howell is shadowed. They have those among them who can well choose to reach for the Dark."

"We meet in Es in full company, we who are sworn lieges to the Light," Hilarion continued. "We hope to search out which gates still have life in them. Those at Lornt labor to find the way to ward our land, to discover how such gates can be locked forever. We can send a search party to you in the west, but much of your land is unknown and it will take time to cross the seas."

Alon appeared to shimmer for a moment and then stood clear again. "The force is failing. We shall do what we can—the Dale lords and those of Arvon will be warned. Now—"

Again his figure shimmered but this time it did not recover its density, rather was gone. Hilarion himself swayed forward against the table. His hands fell to its surface, plainly holding him upright, and he was breathing as might a man who had won a race for his life.

Nor were those who had backed him in better shape, holding on



to each other or the edge of the table as they made their way back to their places. Even Gull's slow pace was close to a totter. And when they half fell into their seats they sat wan-faced.

"This then is our task." Marshal Koris's voice, meant to call a regiment to order, was loud enough to encompass the rising murmur from the throng before him. "Where there is a gate, there is perhaps still an opening through which may come ill. Do not forget the Kolder."

Keris saw Anner Osberic's wide lips shape a snarl.

"There was also but months ago that sweep of ships and men out of nowhere," Koris continued. "Had it not been for the Falconers and brave Dalesmen they might have found foothold here. You of the Sulcars"—now he addressed Anner directly—"have your tale of coming through an ice wall which opened for your ships into our seas."

Osberic nodded. "That is true. We came from the north and there was an ice barrier. What brought us through it we have no legend for, but"—he swung now to address Marshal Duratan—"they say you have found all manner of strange histories recently at Lormt. Perhaps there lies something of our own beginnings here."

Duratan spoke briefly. "If there is any such, Lord Captain, and it is found, be sure you shall know of it speedily."

Simon Tregarth moved forward a little. His hand had been clasping Jaelithe's as if he could in some manner return to her the strength she had loosed for Hilarion.

"There are those of us who came by chance and separately. That spot near the Tor Marsh where I found my way, that I know. And there are others—the Lady Kelsie—"

Among the throng there was a stir as a slight girl moved forward. She did not step up on the dais but she turned to face the company, and it was plain she was straining her voice to reach all their ears. "My gate I know—it lies in Escore."

"And the Lady Eleeri—"

Another stirring of the crowd. This time the woman who advanced was brown of skin, nearly as brown as the skillfully fashioned leather she wore. Her black hair was long and braided, with lengths of blue and gold beads shining within the loops.



“I followed the road of my Old Ones by choice and not by chance,” she said. “Yes, I know where I entered into this world now mine.”

For the first time Gull now spoke.

“Of the gates, we have always known. In the past . . .” she paused a moment as if she were carefully selecting the words she would speak next, “we held the Power to be a sacred trust given to us alone—that only one female born could know the talent and use it properly, so much was kept our secret knowledge. Now . . .” she paused again to look down on the crowded hall, “we see that, though we in the past wrought mightily to protect our world, yet we were not the only ones chosen by the Light to do so. Now I am empowered by our council to speak directly. This”—her hand caressed her jewel—“can be used as detection for any magic, old or new. If a gate once existed and is no longer in service, that it can tell. If a gate which has lain dormant again gathers Power, or perhaps is the goal of others—that, too, we can tell. But we have no wards for such and at Lormt lies our only hope of finding them.

“Now I believe it is in the minds of those gathered here that there must be those to go forth, parties to seek the gates unknown. For so long we have been at war with our neighbors—Alizon, Karsten—we know nothing of what lies farther south or north except, as Lord Anner has said, what is told in the legendary histories of others.

“In Arvon little is known of the south, or what lies beyond the desolation of the Waste. We do not even guess how much land must be searched or whether we can find all which we seek. The Adept Alon has reported that Garth Howell seems to be taking a hand. There is also news from Lormt and the north that those of Alizon can be once more our bane.

“This much we can offer you: When you send forth your search parties, one of our sisterhood will ride with each. We can communicate over distance—how far, we have never really tried—and our weapons have proven their Power.”

Koris and Simon were both staring at her while Jaelithe was nodding.



“This your council has decided . . .” Simon’s words were not quite a question but she seemed to take them as such.

“This is decided—we are at your service for this undertaking. For is this world not also ours and what you would do will protect it in time to come?”

“Lady.” Koris bowed to her. “We accept, and your bounty is greatly to be cherished. The Light will rise and the Dark be met as it should be. There remains only to choose our parties and ride!” His voice had risen almost to a trumpet’s call with that last word.

Keris swallowed, and he loosed his grip on the railing. Ride—ride in the greatest quest any bard could imagine? Had he the slightest chance to be one of those riders into glory?

CHAPTER TWO



Krevanel Hold, Alizon

Liara, Litter First Lady and Keeper of the Home Hearth of Krevanel, critically regarded her reflection in the long mirror, whose ornate and begemmed frame rather overshadowed its smooth surface. She tongued wet a forefinger and patted one of the forehead curls which stubbornly refused to lie flat.

The stiffness of formal dress was always confining, but from early childhood she had been taught the gliding walk which swung the wide, embroidery-heavy skirts in the proper fashion. One could learn to endure such harnessing of one’s body when protocol demanded so.

At least the combination of colors which met her eyes now was not near blinding. By choice and with relief she followed her litter brother Kasarian’s taste in selecting dark blues, hunter greens, and



shades of rose which melted into silver gray. Her white hair, strained up now with enough jeweled pins that she could actually feel their weight, was perhaps not well displayed by such choices, but the blaze of her tight throat collar and the heavy rings in her ears gave contrast enough. She had never pretended to be a beauty and she knew she was suspect among the high blood because of the freedom of her early upbringing—though she made very sure no one could fault her manners in company.

Today she had chosen to wear the darkling blue of evening sky, the thick vros silks of her clothing webbed and rewebbed by silver stitchery, with here and there a small carved crystal to flash before the eyes. Her collar—a proper hound collar, of course—was fashioned of silver inset with the same crystals, as were the cuffs wrapping wrists which were far less delicate than they looked. Yes, she was readied to oversee the great table in the hall where her littermate feasted.

Liara's slightly slanted eyes narrowed. Why Kasarian shared a guesting cup with such as Lord Sincarian was a question which had troubled her ever since the message of this event been sent to her two days earlier.

They were marked blood, those of the House of Krevanel, and had been, now well into generations. There were those who would joyfully set their hounds on Kasarian—on her—did chance and opportunity arrive.

Their sire had been poisoned at his own table. Her three elder littermates had died in battle overseas—or so it had been reported. Perhaps she and Kasarian only lived now because they had been taken from the keep on the death of their dam and delivered to the care of her mother's litter brother, Volorian.

Volorian's pale shadow of a littermate had ruled there. She had been strict, but she had favored Liara, and somehow the child had also taken the fancy of Volorian himself. He had allowed her more freedom than usual, even taking her with him to visit his breeding kennels and see the fine hounds which were his consuming pride. She knew hounds well, and from Volorian and those who served him, together with her own watchful observation, she had learned something of men.



Alizon was steeped in the debris of blood feuds carried on for generations. The great families had not wiped themselves out in these continued intrigues only because at intervals they turned to attack their neighbors—the infamous Witch Kingdom of Estcarp to the south, and, more recently and with aid from the Kolder strangers, High Hallack overseas.

There were two whelps of her second littermate, but they were mere children as yet. Leaving Kasarian—and her—all which remained of the true line of Kaylania, who had mated with a great mage and so brought a strange and sometimes troubling blood strain into their generations.

Kasarian was always under threat—or so it seemed to Liara. His own sense of self-preservation, the shadow of Volorian (who might or might not move to succor or avenge him), the blood oaths of some of his men had kept him alive. But now—

Liara frowned as she turned away from the mirror, her silver-fretted skirts brushing the carpet. It was almost lately as if Kasarian had taken on a new role in life—that he was making some move which would bring him into open conflict with his worst enemies.

He had begun to disappear at times. However, since questioning the will or actions of the head of any line was simply not to be thought of, Liara had no idea of what occupied him so closely. Kasarian might believe that she was unaware of all which was supposedly the lord's domain.

Liara's lips curved in a small secret smile. He had his tight-mouthed retainers—the tall grim-featured Gannard, his body servant, the castellan Bodrik. What he shared with them in the way of secrets she could only guess.

But—she held out her hands before her to turn the wide-banded ring set with a milky stone on one forefinger. Women had their secrets also. Though her dam had not lived long enough to initiate her into full knowledge, there was Singala, who had been almost a true dam to her. She had opened for Liara, on her return to this hold, the women secrets.

Even as the walls hid passages and spy holes aplenty in the baron's quarters and the main halls and chambers, so did such exist



within her own chambers, where, by custom, men could enter only on invitation from the First Lady of the Hearthside. She had soaked up much knowledge during forays along those ways. But what clung the tightest to her mind was the matter of the key.

For the Key of Kaylania was by right the possession of the First Lady. And since Kasarian had no mate, the Key should have been hers. What it meant she had no true knowledge, only that it was a very powerful charm and one for those of the female line alone. She had waited for her littermate to mention it, but his attentions to her were always on the coldly formal level; he was not one to bend to any blandishment from a female. Her lips drew back now to show the tips of her teeth. Better she was one of his prize bitches—he would have been far more open to her then.

But she was deeply concerned now. The House of Krevanel was, by all she could gather, threatened on all sides. Perhaps it was the curse of the ancient mage blood which aroused the easily fired ire of their fellow barons. And if Kasarian became involved in some plot—as she was well assured that he now was—she foresaw a very dark future.

Liara turned her ring again. Welladay, she carried her answer with her. A baron brought down was fed to the hounds; his household could not expect much better. Therefore she carried her way of escape ever with her—a swift-acting potion Singala herself had distilled and swore by.

Liara passed into the corridor, paying no attention to the servants clad in dark blue livery who bowed and touched house badges as she passed. For this night, she could walk freely through that part of the keep which was usually male territory, since she had been ordered to oversee the feasting table.

Why her littermate wanted her attendance had not been part of his orders. Usually a feasting was for fellow nobles only. Thus she felt a small fluttering which she sternly fought as she went, high-headed and with proper arrogance.

Bodrik himself with two guardsmen kept the great door. And flanking him were three other parties of scarred, gaudily uniformed fighters, the colors of their tunics glaring against the muted hues of



the tapestry behind. She knew that these strangers were the personal guards of Lord Sincarian and the other guests.

They all touched house badge to her and Liara allowed herself a very slight nod of acknowledgment. Then Bodrik stepped forward and rapped upon the door. She heard the familiar grating sound of the safe bar being withdrawn and a moment later her way was clear to enter.

The flare of the torches in their holders was doubly bright tonight, as no one liked the thought of shadows when nonpack or nonfriends gathered together.

Liara stood where she was just within the threshold. She touched first her hound collar and then her house badge and inclined her head in Kasarian's direction. He had arisen, as had the three others there, and came to offer his hand to lead her to the top of the board, where stood the tall golden ewer of special blood wine for the guesting cup.

Of the three guests, she knew two. One was Baron Olderic, who gave her an appraising stare. She knew that he held much to her brother's way of thinking, if not openly. But he was old and his influence these days was small. With him was the eldest whelp of the House of Caganian, about whom little could be said save that he was easily swayed to take any stand for the moment.

It was the third man who had the most importance for her: Baron Sincarian. If evil grew itself legs and walked the streets of Alix, then it wore his seeming. Yet no one, not even the Lord Baron Hound himself, could bring him to heel. For all his vile repute he was a well-favored man, perhaps some three or four years older than her littermate.

He had been mated three times and each of his Hearth Ladies had died very suddenly. Whispers of what had caused their demises were only that and repeated with care.

"Lady of the Hearth of the House of Krevanel, Liara."

Kasarian made introduction. Only then did Liara touch collar and house badge, first to Olderic then to Sincarian and lastly the Caganian First Whelp.

They seated themselves, while she remained standing by the



ewer. Shaking back her sleeve, she poured the first cup for Olderic. But before she poured the second, her littermate spoke again.

“The Baron Sincarian has made an offer to the House of Krevanel. He seeks as his Hearth Lady and mate the Lady Liara.”

She hoped they could not read the revulsion in the face she had so carefully schooled to be impassive. Kasarian had this right—and females were playing pieces in the intricate intrigues for power.

“The House of Krevanel,” her littermate was continuing, “holds the blood of the Lady Kaylania and therefore possesses a tradition which belongs to that house alone. Any female whelp may state her preference for a mate and none may question it.”

Baron Olderic looked shocked and then frowned. The First Whelp’s lips twisted as if he wished to laugh at the thought of such nonsense. Lord Sincarian made a small movement as if to arise from his chair but did not complete it.

What was Kasarian’s purpose? Liara thought. Did he wish her assent to a future of unbelievable evil, or did he want her heartfelt refusal and so give Sincarian such an insult as would start a feud? If she were to be his piece in some game he should have given her fair warning.

She thought of Kaylania—that legendary lady who had mated with a mage, drawn strange and dangerous blood into their line.

For the first time she spoke, keeping her voice to the monotone expected from a female in male company.

“Does the Lord Sincarian wish to welcome to his hearth one with . . . with mage blood?”

There was a flicker in her littermate’s eyes, but she could not tell whether that came from surprise or from satisfaction that she had made some point for him.

Sincarian was staring at her and it was plain that she had suddenly presented a problem.

“This one speaks openly of things most men would keep silent,” he said to Kasarian. “Is it that Krevanel now wants all the world to know of its taint? Has dealing with the mages from over the border so set you up in your own estimation? A poorish lot of dabblers they have proved themselves.”



Her littermate spread out his hands palm up, no weapon showing. "All here know what has happened lately when mage strove against mage to open once again the great gate. *I am open* in my speech, since it is to the honor of my house to be so."

Baron Olderic nodded as his host paused. "Rightfully so. You are a properly schooled whelp of a line which has long proven its worth to Alix. The Lady"—he deigned to nod at Liara—"also knows her place. You would be a fool, Sincarian, to cross bloodlines with Krevanel. Surely as a breeder of famed hounds you know that. Has not the Baron Kasarian in the years since he ruled in Krevanel made no attempt to take a mate? He is to be honored for his decision. I will so state, even in the high council." His fist pounded the table and Liara feared the cup of wine would be upset.

She risked a glance at her littermate even as she poured the guesting cup for Sincarian. Oddly enough, she had a strong feeling that her bold words had pleased him, in some way fit into a plan of his. But they certainly did not need another feud. As she handed the cup to Sincarian, he stared at her boldly. His look made her feel as if she stood there unclothed while a chamber rat nosed at her.

The First Whelp hesitated before he took the third cup she poured, as if by accepting it he would be in some way besmirched. Yet when Baron Olderic stared at him, he reached for it in a hurry.

Liara set the ewer in place and folded her hands at her waistline, where the length of the wide sleeves hid them. She found herself turning her precious ring about on her finger, knowing her gesture to be unseen. When would Kasarian dismiss her?

She had long ago learned that patience was one of the female's weapon-shields, but it did not come to her naturally. This night it threatened to break bonds. Custom or not, nature or not, she concluded that the time had come when she must speak frankly with this littermate of hers, could she get to him privately.

It was easy, so close a watch did she keep upon him now, to catch that slight shift of his eyes toward the guests. Once more touching collar and house badge, she framed the formal words:

"Be safe within, my lords, even as a whelp lies safe beside its dam



in the nursing box. The hearthside is at your service.” She inclined her head in their general direction.

They arose as she moved with the proper wide swirl of her skirts toward the door, but she did not look toward even Kasarian again.

Once more she passed swiftly through the halls, and came to the portal of her own domain, where the guards held strict attention and the door bar was drawn at their sergeant’s knock.

There were two slave maids in the outer room and Liara spoke to the nearest.

“Go and see if Whelp Nurse Singala sleeps. If she does not, come and let me know. You, Altara,” she ordered the second, “aid me off with this stifling weight.” She was already plucking at her bodice fastenings.

Liara had managed to rid herself of that cumbersome round of skirts by the time the first maid returned. Altara was carefully pulling out the long, jeweled pins to loose her coils of silver white hair.

“Lady—the whelp nurse wakes. She ate well tonight and is eager to have you come.”

Liara swiftly pulled on the short house robe, let Altara tie back her hair with a ribbon, and then waved both maids to the task of putting away the robes of state she had so swiftly shed.

No one could halt the passage of years. Singala, who had once been so much the reigning force in this part of the keep, now had to keep to her bed—her painful, swollen joints making her more often prisoner than not. But no ache or dust of years had slowed her wits, and to Liara she was as Gannard to Kasarian: an ever-present guard, a keeper of secrets, and perhaps the only one within these walls she might trust in full.

The woman, propped against a fluff of pillows, her badly swollen knee supported by a bolster, was gaunt. Her face appeared as if she were veiled by a webbing of tiny wrinkles. Her gray-white skin looked almost part of a mask, but her green eyes were sharp, clear, and took all attention from the rest of her.

“There is trouble?”

Liara laughed and shrugged. “When is there not in this world?”



But this trouble . . .” Swiftly she told her nurse of the happenings in the banquet hall.

“My littermate plays some game of his own—courses his hounds on secret trails. I—” She reached forward and took Singala’s gnarled fingers into her own, warmer hands and held them close. “You have taught me much, very much. My dam’s littermate, the Baron Volorian, by some grace of fate saw something in me which made him treat me almost like one of his own whelps. I have been at his heels in the kennels, and always I listened and learned. Singala, surely it must be true what was said tonight—those of our house have a strange blood strain. There is this also—I want the Key! It is mine to have for it passes by full honor to the First Female of the Krevanel pack, and that I am! I do not know where my other litter brother’s mate left it when she died. But I have a strange feeling”—she pressed her nurse’s hands even closer—“that in that key there lies something which is mine. And I shall ask Kasarian for it—nor can he by pack oath deny it!”

“Heart Whelp.” Singala might have been speaking as she did years ago when Liara came to her for the comfort or warmth of love. “Your litter brother’s mate never held the Key—for she was of another bloodline. It was laid away with your own dam’s betrothal jewels, which are yours alone.”

“Laid away—the treasure room! Did my dam not have a special casket with a double badge upon it? For she was truly of the house blood, being of the litter of Jaransican, who was of the west branch of Krevanel, now gone.” Liara’s eyes glistened. “So—we have double mage blood, Kasarian and I.”

She should feel fear, the proper revulsion of one who had been touched even so lightly by the evil of that magic which she had been brought up to abhor all her life. But she did not—rather she felt a queer excitement, as if she approached some door and would not find it barred, but swinging to her will.

“You have made me free of many secrets of this house, Singala Warm Heart, and so given me what may be greater than any heritage one can hold in two hands. A year ago I found another secret cabinet in the Lady chamber and in it what was left of certain records. Time



had eaten them, but there were bits left even I could puzzle out. Now you give me this—the knowledge that I may claim the Key.

“I fear for Kasarian. He says little, and never, of course, to me, save on matters to do with the hearth. But he is engaged in some secret dealings, of that I am sure. He disappears for times, some long, some short, when none can see him, and Gannard stays ever close to his chamber as if on guard. Three times has he summoned young Deverian to him, though heretofore he showed no interest in the whelps, save that they mind their tutor and cause no trouble. Tonight he brought Lord Sincarian here and quoted a bride offer—yet Sincarian is such a man as my brother in the past would put fang to the throat. Why does this happen? Why must a female never be told what threatens her hearthhold?”

Singala’s bluish lips shaped a tiny quirk of a smile. “Again questions, questions. But to these I have no answers. Nor”—she glanced away from the hold the girl’s eyes kept on her, along the length of her twisted, aching body—“am I now one who can search out news for you. And”—her smile was gone—“remember this, Heart’s Whelp. Trust is something which can never be sworn to.”

Liara nodded. Even if she had a littermate within the female quarters, she would not turn to her for aid—and never to one of the slave maids.

“I must think on this. Now, my dam by choice, get your rest. Gurtha will be stern with me when she brings your sleep drink.” She attempted to loosen her hold on Singala’s hands, but those crooked fingers now entrapped hers.

“Course with care. You are not of the pack—therefore if they learn this, the pack will pull you down. Oh, Heart Whelp, course with care!”

“As if I would do else. Now rest you, and be sure that I shall do nothing to arouse the pack.”

Back in her own chamber she summarily dismissed both maids, seated herself on a bench before her dressing table, and gazed into the mirror. By every sign she was truly of the pack—yet they hunted not by sight but by more subtle means, reacting speedily to such scent as might be given off by fear or even by some faint



change of thought. She had watched Volorian's prized breed too long not to know that. Through the centuries that their masters had concentrated on such breeding, perhaps some hound nature had become a part of these masters as well.

She had thought to approach Kasarian directly for an accounting. But one in her position did not do such—it was beyond all proper action and training. Her speech in the banquet hall tonight had been on the verge of lost propriety. He had given no sign of either approval or disapproval that she could now sort out of memory. But she half expected him to seek her out, either for a lashing by tongue or—or what?

Liara slipped a tress of her hair back and forth between her fingers. She had heard traders' tales such as were common in the female quarters. Alizon was not the whole world. There were other lands beyond its borders and the women there had strange ways past all propriety. Others even than the thrice-damned witches went freely about.

There had been slaves brought back from raids on the overseas Dales, though she was too young to remember more than glimpses of the two women who had been part of one of her littermates' loot. They died, and swiftly—one of them taking with her two of the guard before she was cut down, and the other under the lash. For they could not be broken to the ways of proper obedience.

Liara stirred and now her hands flew busily to her hair. She twisted it tightly, bringing out a net to confine it as close to her head as she might. She sped across the room and pressed her thumbs hard, one on the center of a flower carved on the tall head of the bed and one on the two embossed leaves below it.

There was no sound as the panel swung. She kept it well oiled and it had been more often in use these past days than before. There was a small chamber beyond and she felt for the top of the chest there, snapped a make-light to the wick of a lantern. Then she wrenched her house robe over her head and substituted the one-piece garment she had devised with Singala's help and sewn herself in secret. It had a hood which she pulled into place, leaving only a slit for her eyes.

The treasure chamber. She had made that part of her decision. She could have, of course, asked that her dam's jewel case be



brought to her, but somehow she wanted the Key in her own hands before anyone else knew it or even guessed that she would want it.

The hidden ways of the hold were a spider web. She kept carefully away from those she thought were known to Gannard or her littermate, as she made her way down and down, sometimes by stretches of ladders formed by finger- and toeholds only, to the lower depths. The lantern swung from a firm grasp on its cord, but its light was limited.

Two years ago during her night wanderings she had found the hidden entrance to the treasure room and now she searched once again for the proper turnings. At the time she had simply explored gingerly, afraid that there might be a hidden alarm which would betray her presence. But now she knew what she must look for. Threading a path between chests, storage boxes, even suits of armor glistening with gems as the lantern light touched them, she came to that table where she had noted a number of smaller coffers.

Swinging the lantern lower, she strove to read the arms engraved on the begemmed lid of each. Dust had settled—except on one! Liara halted. There was the double house badge of her dam. But even as her hand went out to seize upon its lid, her eyes and her sense of caution were keen enough for her to see that this one had been disturbed. She drew a deep breath.

The Key! She hesitated no longer but lifted the lid, the fastening of which showed marks of being forced. There was wealth in plenty to glitter up at the lantern as she swung it closer. With a finger she stirred coils of necklaces, the tumble of two state collars, a sprinkling of rings. No key.

Liara caught her lower lip between her teeth. Kasarian—she was as sure as if she had seen him. He had taken the Hearthkeeper's Key—that which was rightfully hers!

She flipped closed the chest. Females were supposed to hold tight to any strong emotion. You might smile and smile when within you seethed with a storm of anger. She had seen Hearthkeepers accept dire insults with a languid air as if their ears were purposefully deafened to such.

But that did not mean that they could not plan—and act—to



rebalance the scales of justice. Kasarian had her key. Now—now dared she confront him openly?

Liara shook her head at her own thought. No . . . subtle as some new weapon she must be. But first she must learn more, and since she was ready for such searching, she would start now.

It meant venturing into the ways she had always prudently avoided. But a good hound did not turn from the hunt because of a thorn in the foot pad. So Liara began a most cautious journey within the walls of her own home hearth.

The first unknown side turning she took led downward again and she decided to stick with it. Whatever Kasarian was doing, she believed he needed privacy, and he was not going to find that above—even with Gannard and Olderic to screen him.

She thought she must be past the level of even the dungeons now. Then the faint echo of a voice brought her quickly around and into another side opening, which led to so narrow a crack that she must turn sidewise to follow. But the voice was growing louder and now she could distinguish words.

“ . . . honor of the house, whelp. You are the son of Regroian, who died to serve Alizon. That your littermate is ill is a pity, but he has done this many times. You will take this into your hand—latching it also to your belt.”

Liara's own hand moved along the rough stone, then her nails caught in a crack and there was a jar of sound. She could not turn to go. Her body seemed wedged in and she was helpless, as if she were bound there to await Kasarian's pleasure—for there was no mistaking his voice.

However, whatever lock she had in her folly undone answered that pressure she had unsuspectingly applied. A narrow door, only a little wider than the passage, swung open, gathering speed as it went so that it crashed against the outer surface beyond her reach.

Kasarian, yes, and with him, Nakarian, the younger of the two house whelps.

Her brother whirled. His thrown knife seemed to strike oddly to her left, though she knew that Kasarian was an expert.

He flung out an arm and swept Nakarian back, advancing on



her now with sword out and ready. Liara dropped the lantern. There was torchlight enough in the outer room to reveal her face as she scabbled with hasty fingers to loose her hood.

Kasarian was already striking. That blade with its custom poison tip should have sliced into her at heart level. Instead the point rebounded with a force which also made him loosen his hold upon the hilt.

He stared at her, at the sword, and then back at her again. Deliberately now he stalked forward and she would not allow herself to try to squeeze away from his weapon. She was of the blood of Krevanel and as a female of that line she would die.

And strike he did, only to once more fail. Now he snarled, showing his teeth like one of the sire hounds.

Liara did not know what protection stood there with her, she only knew that one did. Dimly, very dimly in her mind a faint memory stirred. The Key—the Key was the answer!

“I am First Female of the Line of Krevanel, Guardian of the Hearth. In me doubly, as in you, littermate, runs the mage blood. And I have come for what is mine by pack right!”

His eyes widened, and he dropped his sword point.

“What is yours by pack right, female?” His voice grated dangerously, as it might have had she been an insolent slave.

“The Key of Kaylania, which was of my mother’s holding but was not given into my hands.”

Kasarian took a step backward. Slowly he shook his head from side to side, not as if he were denying her words, but rather as if he were trying to clear his thoughts.

“Come.” He beckoned and then added, “If you can—female who carries mage blood.”

Perhaps he meant to cut her down once she was free of this passage. Yet her pride was high and she would not yield to any fear. She stepped down from the level of the passage to the floor and stood facing him.

Those vividly green eyes of his which had widened earlier were now narrowing into slits. Suddenly he plucked something from his



belt and tossed it to her with a queer expression of one waiting for some strange action.

Her own trained reflexes answered. Out of the air she caught a key—large, old. And it was warm in her hand, fitting within her fingers as if it were meant to rest there.

But there was something else now—a circle of brilliant light snapped into life and grew. She saw Kasarian suddenly grab the whelp and take from him a packet, which he tossed to Liara.

“Mage blood you claim—mage blood you be!”

The circle of light was turning into an oval, growing taller and taller. She saw Kasarian turn again on Nakarian and strike a blow, knocking the boy to the floor.

“Go, mage! You will find your kennel waiting!”

He gestured to the oval of light, which was now pulsating. It was a door—a door! She took one step forward and then another conscious now only of that opening. Nor did she feel Kasarian’s clutch at her wrist twisting the Key from her. At the same time his other hand slammed her between the shoulders, sending her stumbling into the core of that light, into whirling, wringing nothingness.

CHAPTER THREE



Lornt

Keris pushed the Lady Mereth’s wheeled chair with all the care he could summon. She never complained, but he had learned during these past days to watch for that shade of shadow which was the only sign of pain her features ever showed. How he had become in part her feet, and sometimes her hands, he could not



rightly have explained, but now it seemed very natural that her wishes were as commands, as those of any Border captain.

The greatest chamber in Lormt, comprising most of the first floor of one of the undamaged wall sections connecting the three still-standing towers, had taken on a new look.

It had been ruthlessly cleared of age-worn desks. Piles of wood-backed books and rolls of manuscript had been stored in coffers along the walls, much to the fretting of that handful of elderly scholars who considered this their complete domain and were being roused out of it without even a by-your-leave.

Owen and the Marshal Duratan, as well as the Lady Mereth, had attempted to clear the room for action without producing outward mutiny among those accustomed for so long to study there. There had been gusty scenes and in the end desks and materials had simply been moved and their owners told where to find them.

Now the huge chamber was occupied by a long center table, one Keris believed could seat with ease half a Border regiment. It had hurriedly been put together from the scarred refectory tables found here and there, some having been used only for the repository of books. Now it was covered not by a rich banqueting cloth, but by a strip of hide, cut and united again to form a runner from one end to another. And this was the center of present activity.

Men and women gathered up and down its sides and the sound of their voices rose far above a hum. Sometimes there was the sharp rise of argument and then Duratan, or Nolar his Lady, Owen, or the Lady Mereth would straightaway appear to listen and then bring the disputants to some agreement.

Many of those working on that huge map carried trays slung from cords about their necks, trays on which rested small pots of inks, while they held a selection of brushes in one hand or even between their teeth, their jerkins and robes spotted with the signs of their industry.

What was growing before all their eyes now was a strange picture of their world as they knew it. Mountains had been sketched in, rivers ran, forests blotted out portions of the hide.

In addition there were representations of blocky cities and ports,



darksome towers. Sulcar charts were much in evidence, those who brought them surveying the new map keenly, often with sharp critical comments, locating ports which had been hardly more than legend to most of those there who were not seafarers.

Already there appeared several of those ominous pentagons which had been chosen for the symbol of the existence of gates.

The searching party for Estcarp and that of Escore were already on the move. Each included one of the witches, and that of Estcarp had located near the head of the River Es indications—very faint but still unmistakable—that a gate had once existed there.

The power needed for communication with Arvon via the Adept Hilarion's instrument was too exhausting to those who must use it, and since their first contact they had had news only that those of Gryphon were spreading the news to arouse the Dales. Whether any real searching had begun there no one knew.

Lady Mereth was writing on her slate and Keris read the request over her shoulder.

“Ask the Lady Nolar to find us the Lady Liara.”

Keris nodded, positioning the chair broadside so that his present liege lady could see a section of the map which was nearly blank. This was not the territory of Alizon. Why that—that woman of the damned, hound-loving race was needed, he could not understand. As had most of them who had come in contact with her, he tried to ignore Liara entirely. Only the Lady Mereth, Duratan, and Nolar seemed to know how she arrived here in the first place. Though her people were established by very ancient lore to have entered via a gate, they had always been bitter enemies to those native to this land. Had not the Lady Mereth herself, Dales-born in High Hallack, suffered deep sorrow during the vicious invasion of the Alizonderns when they attempted to possess her homeland?

Keris threaded his way through the ever-moving throng about the slowly growing map, trying to catch sight of the Lady Nolar. Instead he nearly stumbled over a small figure robed in such dimming gray that she seemed hardly more than one of the shadows which their many lamps had nearly driven from the hall.

Keris backed away and bowed. “Lady, your pardon.”



To his mind witches were mature women, and from his first meeting he had wondered why this diminutive girl, hardly more than a child, had been included in the company sent from the Place of Wisdom.

“She is hiding—the Alizondern.” Even her voice still held a childish ring.

Hiding—spying! His revulsion arose swiftly.

The witch shook her head vigorously. “She is not our enemy—though so she has been counted. She watches—not spies. For this is the only way she can learn what we are, what we do. Her people know nothing of trust. Theirs is a hard, dark life and from their birthing they believe fate hangs over them. But this Liara—the older blood is stronger in her than she knows. The Lady Jaelithe perhaps can aid her—for she has also a part to play. Come.”

The witch girl led him toward the side of the hall where the discarded desks had been piled as safely as possible. Someone moved there, shrinking back but unable to get beyond his sight.

Keris moistened his lips. He certainly could not speak the devilish language of Liara’s kind. But she had picked up a few words—at least names.

“Lady Mereth—she—wants—you—” he spoke a little loudly as he might to one deaf.

Slowly the girl advanced from her hiding place. She was wearing the breeches, skirt, jerkin, and boots which were the garb of many of the women in the room, and her hair, so intensely white that it seemed to shine like a lamp glow, was tightly braided. By such dress she could be any of the Escore women at work on the map. But her heritage was plain in her pale face: that shining hair, and her slanted green eyes, with features narrow and sharp. Alizonders were half hound according to legend, and Keris thought at that moment that they might indeed be were, able to shape-change and run with their packs.



Liara still felt that she was caught in some foul dream. This place . . . where had Kasarian thrust her in his hate for her—for she was sure only hate had made him send her so? Only that old totterer



Morfew spoke her tongue. But *his* explanation of what had happened was so beyond comprehension that she did not believe it. All this talk of posterns and gates—

She looked at these strangers facing her now. The girl—Liara swallowed and swallowed again—the girl was a *witch!* Centuries of hatred and mistrust lay between them.

The young man—Morfew had told her he was a halfling, part human only, though he looked to be the same as any of the guardsmen passing now and then on errands. He wore a sword and another long holster weapon, which was common, but she wondered for a scornful moment whether all the Green Valley men such as he could stand up against Kasarian, or even her littermate's guards.

“Lady—Mereth—” he repeated. There was a beginning scowl on his face. She braced herself. Let him try to lay hand on her. These witch people were careless. She had three knives on her, carefully bestowed in hiding but able to be quickly drawn.

However, the name he mentioned was one of the few she really knew, and the witch had already turned and was going away. Liara stepped forward, but kept a careful distance from her guide.

They made their way to the table. There waited Mereth, that strange woman who could not speak but who had written such unbelievable things in proper Alizondern tongue on her slate. She claimed acquaintance with Kasarian, saying even that she had visited Krevanel. She had mentioned things which seemed to prove such a visit, and firmly stated that Kasarian was an ally in what went on here.

Liara came to her side, closer to that upright figure in the chair than she liked, but occupying the only open space. The lady was watching her closely, seeming to try to read with her very eyes any thought Liara might hold.

“I—came.” Let this female of the Dales tell her what was wanted, and quickly.

Lady Mereth nodded. Then her fingers moved nimbly over her writing slate and she held that out for Liara to read.

“Do you understand what we do here, Lady Liara? What your brother learned before you?”



“I have heard what has been told me,” she answered shortly. “There are gates, such traps as the one my littermate forced me into. These you labor to find and mark so.” She pointed to the long map.

Lady Mereth was writing again. “But to you this is a story, yes?”

Liara hesitated for a moment and then shook her head. She had been considering every aspect of the stories told her by Morfew (traitor Alizondern that he was) and this Mereth. Now she had a thought of what really could be behind such meddling. There might be a gate in Alizon, through which an army could be transported into the very heart of her homeland, there to wreak vengeance for what the hound masters had done in the Dales. Long had the witches been their enemies, and there were witches in this very hall here and now.

“I believe that you hunt gates.” Again her answer was abrupt.

Once more Mereth’s chalk was busy. “We hunt for portals through which the Dark can come to us, not ones to suffer us to travel into the unknown. You believe we threaten Alizon. Not so, but your home may also be threatened by just such a danger as we seek. We labor on two things, Lady Liara. First to find such gates, second to discover that which will lock them against all future opening.

“To do this”—she had wiped away the earlier lines and was writing swiftly again—“we must go into parts of our world of which we know nothing—where even Sulcars and traders have forged no trails. Girl, you have that in your blood which is mine also.”

Liara had heard that, too, what Kasarian had been told: that Elsenor, the mage who was their own distant foresire, had come out of time to father this woman, Mereth. All which she had always believed was under threat, and so was she—perhaps.

“I am of the House Line of Krevanel.” Her chin went up and she faced this chairbound woman proudly. “I am of Alizon. Anyone within this hall”—she made a gesture with her left hand, keeping her right carefully close to the hiding place of her longest knife—“would gladly see my blood on his or her steel.”

Mereth was writing again. “No one denies that your people are



hated. But your brother learned that with a common goal even enemies swear battle oaths.” Her chalk paused and now her stare at Liara was even more penetrating.

“You are not altogether ignorant. I have enough of the talent to know—this—”

The hand holding the chalk flashed upward, as if, leaving the slate, Mereth would now draw upon the air itself. And draw she did—a complicated design. White it was at first, as white as Liara’s hair, then deepening into a blue which drew the girl past understanding to put out her own hand.

The design curled, wavered, flipped, to encircle her wrist. She would have cried out, but it was as if Mereth’s own dumbness that moment became hers and she could only stare from the woman to that strange coil which did not quite touch her own flesh but whirled thrice and then was gone.

It was Keris’s turn to start and his hand went to sword hilt in unconscious reaction to an act which bore the force of true power. As strange as the truce with the Keplians, now of the Light, who companioned with the Lady Eleeri and her lord, so was such an acceptance of this female from Alizon. Mage blood—yes, he knew that story. It was widespread in Lormt and he knew that it had been passed along deliberately so that Liara might find acceptance among age-old enemies of her kind.

Only . . . there was no misinterpreting what he had just seen. This Liara was not only accepted by the Light; she also was gifted as well. He knew that old twinge of jealousy. To be a halfling and ungifted, while this open enemy was granted such a Power . . .

“What do you want of me?” Sparks of anger in those green eyes made Keris think of a snowcat he had once seen at bay.

The Lady Mereth did not turn to her slate at once. She was regarding Liara now as one must study some pattern in weaving. At length once more her chalk squeaked across her slate.

“Much, perhaps. Look you here.” She slid the slate to her other knee and now used the chalk to point to that part of the hide map before her.

Most of this was blank. Keris recognized a fraction of the coast-



line, but that, also, was cut abruptly short. This was south of Karsten—and he knew well the tale of that single gate symbol on the edge of the sea itself. His own clan, the Tregarths, had helped destroy *that* horror of a portal little more than a year past.

The girl had moved closer, as if her curiosity had drawn her against her will. But Keris was studying the land which was sketched in just above that blankness. Karsten—another ancient enemy. Survivors of his race there had been driven forth as exiles years since.

Pagan, the warlord duke, had taken command after the fall of the Kolder-backed rule. And Pagan had flourished until he was past all caution and had started north to invade Estcarp.

No one would ever be allowed to forget the Turning, when the witches protected their own with the force of such Power as racked the world. Mountains had walked and crumpled into valleys, new peaks had arisen. All the old trails were long gone, though parties of Borderers had been scouting southward ever since they had recovered from the backlash of that swordless battle.

They dared not accept that Karsten lacked gates. In fact there was already a known one near the new border on the southern side, sketched in by the Lady Eleeri. That lay in what had once been Karsten territory—a portion held by the Old Race before they had been hunted down and slain. There she had entered, to travel north and west into the fringe of Escore. And some of the descendants of those who had been driven out were indeed drifting back to restore ruined keeps long held by their clans.

So—the party sent southward would be moving through a land given over to warring nobles and continued chaos. They must go as stealthily as scouts and yet be ready to defend their mission should the need arise.

“ . . . know nothing of that land,” Liara was protesting. He must have been so intent on his own thoughts that he had missed some question of Mereth’s.

“And it knows nothing of you.” The words stood out, boldly scrawled on the slate.



Liara's hand was at her lips and she looked beyond the slate to the nearly empty stretch of hide. "Why?" she said slowly.

"Do you wish a half life among those here, few of whom will give you trust, or a full one you can make for yourself?" Mereth's chalk questioned.

The girl's body was as tense as a boar spear held ready in the hunt. "You yourself say I am not trusted. How then could I be accepted by any of this company who choose to ride into danger?"

"Because," she was answered then by a soft voice rather than the chalk, "you are called Lady of Alizon. The power chooses what tools it will wield."

The small witch had drifted once more to them. That jewel which usually swung on its neck chain now rested on her palm, held out before her. And for a moment, even as Lady Mereth's sending, it blazed blue.

Liara drew a ragged breath and shrank back a step. "I will not be slave to your magics!" Steel glinted in her hand now and Keris moved as quickly, being just able to catch her wrist, though he had difficulty in keeping that hold.

The witch jewel flicked. Another ray of light, and Liara dropped the dagger Keris had not yet been able to wrest from her.

Then the small, gray-robed figure moved closer. "There is no harm in that which is born of the Light," she said. "And whether you see it now or not, that is where you stand, Lady of Alizon, on the side of the Light—even as does your brother. Yes, you will be one of the searchers." She extended the jewel a fraction farther. "I do not select, nor do my sisters; this does. And"—suddenly she half turned toward Keris—"there is also a need for a fighting man."

Keris had not loosened his hold on Liara. "Lady," he said with all respect to this maid who was perhaps ten years or more his junior, "I am no name-won warrior. There will be those in plenty who can better serve than I." The words were bitter. His whole body ached to believe what she had said: that he—the halfling—the ungifted—was a proper weapon for this foray.

She smiled at him almost mischievously. "Keris Tregarth, think



what name you bear. Already those of your clan are on such a ride.”

“They are,” he answered slowly, “what they have always been, sword and shield to wall our world.”

“Nor are you any less, Valley guard.” Now she was deeply serious. “I have the foresight—which is more of a burden than any blessing. This pathway is also mine and I see you on it. The reason will be made clear in time.”

He let Liara’s wrist fall quickly, lest he betray the shaking now of his own hand. What he wanted most, and this wisp of a witch child was granting it! The wonder of that made him feel a little dazed.

Then he pushed closer to the table to survey the unfinished trailing lines which disappeared southward into the nothingness of ignorance.

“Var City”—he pointed—“and then the Port of Dead Ships. But inland from there, who knows?”

There came a sound from the witch that was close to laughter.

“Since we are naming names—I am Mouse. And for your question, the answer is, who indeed? Learning that can only come in time.”



The days of their labor on the map seemed endless now to Keris. He noted, though, that Liara no longer kept to the shadows but often stood beside Lady Mereth’s chair, staring down at that same surface.

He delegated himself to search out the Borderers who had recently scouted south. And then he dared to approach that strange tamer of Keplians, the Lady Eleeri, whose territory lay in the disputed ground.

At his first awkward questions she seemed almost impatient. But as he persisted—though he did not tell her of the witch choosing—she called upon him to go with her, out of the hall, away from the bustle of activity there, pushing through the crowded courtyard where pack ponies and Torgians were being shod and made ready for swift riding.



He still matched strides with her as they came out into the open, away from that half-ruin which was now Lornt. Then they stood together in a wide field—good pasturage at this season.

She neither whistled nor called. But there came two trotting at a flowing gait, hardly seeming to touch hooves to sod. The Keplians: a mare who towered above any horse he had ever seen, and with her a young stallion.

The Lady Eleeri was speaking now—not to him but to the Keplians, as if they were of the same clan blood. And when they surveyed him with those great blue eyes, he knew that, bodily different though they might be, these two had intelligence and power such as was seldom found outside the Green Valley of his homeland. Instinctively he raised his hand palm out in greeting as the Lady spoke:

“This be one who will ride with us. He is of mighty get; those of his blood are those great and noted warriors, the Tregarths.”

This one is a colt only! The mare tossed her head.

Lady Eleeri looked amused. “We are all foals—until the wisdom-bringing years give us aging.”

Keris held himself stiff. He was used to mental communication with the Renthans of the Valley, though he had been overslow in learning to send as well as receive. However, stories of the past still rose from memory to haunt. His father had almost met his death from a Keplian years ago.

The mare’s eyes seemed to glare with blue fire now as she looked him up and down.

We do not company with such. There was disdain in that verdict. Keris flushed and knew a spark of anger, but he kept silent.

“He will have his own mount,” the Lady Eleeri returned. “Keris Tregarth”—now she spoke directly to him—“this is Theelas the great mare who helped bring down the plague of the Black Tower—and her second colt-son, Janner.”

Keris gave greeting to the two as he would to any clansman. The mare made a noise which sounded remarkably like a hearty sniff, nodded her head toward the Lady Eleeri, and cantered off, followed by her son.



“They have great pride, these,” the Lady said to him. “Prove yourself friend and you will have no better battlemate. But for untold scores of years they were hunted by men and by servants of the Dark and they learn new ways slowly.”

“Even perhaps as we,” Keris returned boldly. He could not help but admire the beauty of the two seeming horses as they cantered off.

She nodded. “Even as we.”



Keris spent more and more time now on his own preparations, for Liara was now fully attendant on the Lady Mereth. There was more strength in her slender body than one might believe, and she had no difficulty with the handling of the chair. Part of his days were spent in the improvised weapons court, where what skills he had already were fiercely polished closer to a master’s art. The rest of the time he schooled himself as best he could by studying the reports from those who ventured into Karsten, making the trip each morning to see if anything new had been added to the map—but very little appeared there still.

At last the day did come that it was their turn to ride out. The Sulcars had gone first, since they must travel by wind and wave and not all the year was free of the Great Storms. So had gone Keris’s son Simond, his Lady Trusla, and the witch Frost—all jewel-chosen. They headed north, with only the thinnest trace of an old sea log account as a guide.

Hilarion had contacted Arvon once again to learn that two parties were equipped and ready for search—one for the Dales and one to head across the barren Waste itself.

Keris could not will himself to sleep and moved eagerly when the day of their own journey dawned. They were not a large group, hardly more than a scouting party who could make the best use of the hiding places if detected.

The Lady Eleeri and Lord Romar were borne by the Keplians. Keris himself had Jasta, a young Renthan who was truly excited at being part of this adventure. Liara was mounted on a large hill pony—she had had to learn to ride during their time of waiting,



since the females of the Alizon keeps never journeyed so. But now she felt at ease in the saddle and had taken on the leading of their pack train of mountain ponies well burdened with supplies.

Mouse rode a Torgian mare well to the fore of their party but not beyond the guards. Those numbered two Falconers, Krispin and Vorick, whose fighting skills were doubled by the aid of the great birds who rode at intervals on the special saddle horns of their mounts but scaled up into the sky at will. Denever, armed with those deadly arrows, a double number now in his quiver, had a place of prominence.

For Denever was of Karsten, a wanderer who had survived the mountain upheaval which wiped out the army of which he was a part and who had cast in his fortunes with those of Lornt. He was flanked by two of the old Borderer guards who had once been his deadly enemies—Farkon and his shield-mate, Vutch the Left-Handed.

So they rode out of Lornt in the early morning, pointed south, where the unknown might wait darkly.

CHAPTER FOUR



Karsten

The ravaged mountains to the south no longer offered any easy traveling, though there were trails coming into being again. Some were made by those roving Border scouts ever suspicious of some hostile movement from the south, others emerging as game tracks as time passed since the Turning. But the party from Lornt used none of these.



Lord Romar, astride the Keplian Janner, had long been a wanderer, thus now and then he sighted some landmark. On the fifth day after they left the Border behind, Keris was riding point, meshing his mind with that of Jasta, the Renthane he bestrode. It was Jasta who stopped so abruptly that only years of riding experience kept Keris on his back.

The Renthane held his horned head high, drawing in deep breaths of the chill air of the heights, as if he had been on the run. Not for the first time, nor even the hundredth, Keris silently cursed his inability to produce any talent-born ward of warning for himself.

There came a flash in the air over their heads. Farwing, Krispin's falcon, swooped as if to land on a neighboring crag and then soared again. That the bird was on scout Keris knew. And a moment later he heard stones rattle under hooves as Denever's Torgian pushed up beside him.

The stretch before them looked more inviting than that way over which they had just forced a passage. However, that in itself could be a warning. The falcon swooped again, but from among a cluster of rocky spines arose other flyers on the wing. The wind blowing toward the party carried a trace of filthy stench.

"Rus," Denever commented, yet he made no move to use his bow.

The evil birds, their naked, blood-red heads agleam in the sun, were spreading out, speeding toward them. Old lore flashed into Keris's mind—a thrice-circling to immobilize prey for the coming of their masters? He had never heard of birds being used in such bespelling. Again the falcon soared, seemingly unwilling to let near him any of that ghastly flock. For flock it was fast becoming—Keris counted at least a dozen of the creatures now on wing.

"Sssaaaaa!"

When he heard that sound from behind, Keris drew steel and Jasta half wheeled so that they could now look in both directions. Trotting as if her hooves were on the smoothest of roadways came the Torgian mare which was Mouse's mount, seemingly so attached to her mistress that she even sheltered next to Mouse's camp mat at night.



The young witch held her head at a sharp angle, making no move to watch the trail or control the passage of her mount. Instead her lips were moving, though Keris caught no sound of words.

Above, the seemingly purposeful flight of the rus faltered all at once. Their wings flapped vigorously as if they fought against some storm wind which would carry them away. Yet they continued to struggle.

There was a curdling in the air space between the flyers fighting that battle and the party on the trail. It seemed to Keris that the stones about him appeared to yield up shadows which arose purposefully, thickening into a net—no, a sack—a giant sack as he had seen used as a fishing net.

“Sssaaa!” Again Mouse’s voice arose and this time with the snap of a command.

Still the rus fought, but it was clear that they now fought to escape, not to come at any prey. At them, with the power of a full storm gust, came the bag, gathering them in. They were screeching now, their voices echoing and reechoing from the heights about. Keris heard in answer the squeals of the pack ponies downtrail, and trumpet challenges from the Torgians.

Even as the bag closed about the birds, so did it continue to grow thicker, hiding what it held. Then it whirled about in a mad circle, and vanished as might a cloud. The air above was free.

He saw Denever, no longer watching the battle above, move toward Mouse, but already a Keplian strode arrogantly uptrail and the Lady Eleeri was beside the girl, reaching out a hand to steady her. Mouse’s eyes were half closed and she drooped.

The Keplian mare tossed her head, glanced from eye corner at the Renthan—for the two breeds seemed in a rivalry of sorts.

Trap, Jasta’s mind spoke.

“Set by whom?” Keris countered. “What has been loosed here?”

Well may you ask that, Jasta replied. *The rus are said to serve the Sarn, but Sarn have never been known to ride this far south.*

Lord Romar had joined them and now slid from the back of the Keplian who was his battle companion. He nodded to Denever.



“There is no other way past this height,” he pointed out. “If they have bottled us in . . .”

Keris and the archer joined him afoot. Behind them the Falconer Krispin settled his returned bird on his saddle horn before he, too, dismounted.

However, the four of them advanced with caution, hardly noting that the Keplian and Jasta, both showing ready teeth, followed. What they found as this too-tempting trail rounded an upstanding pinnacle of bare rock—

Keris had seen many horrors of the Dark. He was no green boy who had never yet blood-wet his blade. But this!

Trap it was, and they were not the first to meet with it. There stood a bulk nearly as tall as the roof of a landsman’s cottage. It had been fashioned—surely this thing had never really lived?—though of that they could not be sure. It was a monstrous head, something out of the deepest of nightmares. And the worst was that it was somehow a nauseating mingling of human and some reptilian species. Its jaws were well open to show a triple row of great fangs which had the appearance of rusted metal.

Lying on the ground about it were fragments of bodies, most clearly human. Keris swallowed—the stench was terrible, but not as bad as facing what caused it. And here the rus had been feasting.

A skull dislodged by the Keplian lay grinning up at them, plucked bare of all semblance of flesh.

Denever was circling to the left, attempting to avoid touching any of that terrible mass, and Romar was taking the right when they were both struck, as well as Keris, with the powerful mind-send of the two mounts who had followed them, uniting in one message.

There is no one here.

“This thing has no life of its own,” Romar said with authority. “I guess it is a device once given strong powers to entice prey within reach—as we see by its kills.” He stooped and picked up a sword, the blade snapped off close to the hilt but showing no signs of rust or weathering.

He turned the remains of the weapon around. The hilt was



rough with a setting from which jewels must have been pried. Meanwhile Denever was poking gingerly into a noisome mass on the other side of that head. He jerked out, with the point of his lance, a club which rolled until it was stopped by a rack of bones.

“Outlaws,” was his judgment.

It was Jasta who cut in then: *Comrades, this thing is now harmless. Though if it can be activated again, who knows? There is evil here, but it is faded.*

Keris faced the bloodstained snout. “The Port of Dead Ships,” he said slowly. “That was also something set by those long gone but kept alive at times. A gate?” But already he knew that that guess was wrong. This was no gate, though it might once have been a defense for some place of evil, even a gate.

The Witch. That was the Keplian. *Perhaps it is her doing which broke the pattern. But do we leave this here perhaps to hunger and eat once more?*

There could be only one answer to that. They threaded their way downtrail and reported what they had found. Mouse was seated on one of the cushion mats, her jewel held tight between her hands, while the Lady Eleeri supported her. But as they came, she looked up. There was such a shadow on her small face that Keris was shaken. He could almost believe that she had witnessed that horror with them.

“It is as Jasta has said.” Her words came slowly. “The evil is no longer strong, but it may return. We cannot leave such a thing to work its will again.”

Farther downslope Liara regarded her heavy boots, a crinkle of pain between her white brows. To anyone who had worn for most of her life soft slippers in a keep, these thick-soled monsters were instruments of torture. Still, the Lady Mereth herself had overseen their making, and the girl had no doubt that the workmanship which passed that pair of falcon-sharp eyes was the best which could be provided.

The reins of her riding pony were looped over a nearby knuckle of rock. Riding, too, left her body sore in places she could not have



believed. Whenever she could, she abandoned the saddle and walked beside the line of burden beasts.

To the surprise of all at Lormt, herself included, the wiry, mountain-bred, small beasts were their least troublesome under her control. She knew that most of the party could communicate with the various animals they accompanied. But they considered the pack ponies outside that range of influence.

She had certainly made no attempt at such a talent—it would be witchery. On the other hand, apparently in her presence the creatures could be loaded, herded, used without the vicious attempts at biting and kicking with which they greeted any others. She often caught them watching her as if she in herself were a menace they were afraid to challenge.

There was confusion up ahead. Save for an ever-present rear-guard, often Denever (certainly a guard to depend upon if she had need, which she did not), Liara seldom rode closer than shouting distance to the rest of the party, except when they stopped at intervals in their twisting upward climb. When they did come to such halts, she kept with the ponies, suspecting that her presence was of less value than her absence as far as the others were concerned. Certainly she wanted no close contact with that witch whelp, and, though she would never have admitted it aloud, she was distrustful of the Lady Eleeri, who used trail craft like a trained hunter and who was always trailed by her Keplians.

The men, of course, were unapproachable, even though the females of this outer world were as frankly at ease with them as they would be with their own sex. She had first marveled at that openness and then somehow it made her angry inside, as if they had forced her into a kind of invisible prison.

However, she could use her eyes and her ears, and her life in Alizon had trained her to seek out nuances, weigh even the tone of a voice, the flick of an eyelid. Thus she tried to learn all she could without any questioning, making herself a slave laborer for this mixed band.

There came the sound of a scrambling run downtrail and she was on her feet in an instant, grasping for the reins of her pony.



She recognized the newcomer as that halfling Tregarth, enemy born to those of her blood.

“Off pack!” His order came breathlessly and he pushed past her to the foremost of the ponies. The small beast promptly snapped with yellow teeth and Keris barely avoided that vicious nip.

Liara smiled slyly. Then she returned the reins of her mount to the rocky tie and slipped past young Tregarth to the animal, who was prevented only by the length of its lead rope from savaging him as he backed hastily away. There was more sound upslope until one of the Falconers skidded on a mossed stone and fetched up again the rock which had supported her earlier. The hawk mask of his helm was in place and his bird circled overhead.

“Do we camp?” Liara asked. Her hand was now on the pack pony’s neck. It did not strike at her, but it began to sweat as if the climb this far had taxed its full strength.

Keris scowled at her. “We need the beasts—to clear our path.”

Her hands were busy with the ropes as the men stood watching, for if they ventured any nearer, the ponies rolled eyes and prepared to kick and buck. She was used to this job now, but it was clear that the others were impatient that she did not allow the loads to simply tumble to the ground.

Once the lashings on the ponies were freed, she nodded to the others. “There is need for this. Would you let it lie?” Liara had no thought herself of trying to lift or drag the packs.

However, the men did not protest. Already they pulled the supplies behind a tumble of storm-uprooted trees.

The rearguard was up with them now, short spear out of his shoulder sling, on the alert.

“What’s to do?” he demanded.

“There is that beyond which must be destroyed. We need the pack ponies to shift rocks.” Keris’s answer was immediate.

“Then”—the guard jerked a thumb at Liara—“best get her for the managing of them. No man is going to want to lose a hand or have his feet kicked from under him!”

Keris nodded. Then he spoke to Liara as he always did, aloofly, not meeting her eye to eye. “With your assistance, then, Lady. We



need the strength of these beasts and you can best command them.”

There was no reason to refuse. In fact she was being sharply prodded by curiosity. Getting into her saddle and settling herself there gingerly, she picked up the lead rope and the three men stepped nimbly aside as she led her procession up toward the ridge top.

The wind was rising and it flowed downslope. Liara made a face. This was like the effluvia from a badly kept kennel—though she had never heard of a kennel neglected to such an appalling state.

The Lady Eleeri and the witch had moved aside from the trail and here was Denever, and the second Falconer. They were squatting, the archer busy with a stick, drawing on a patch of ground brushed clear.

Lord Romar stood there also looking down, and as Liara drew her train to a halt he said:

“Farwing and Swifttalon report that the length of the thing vanishes into the side of the cliff itself. It is like some monster entrapped.”

Denever nodded. “Entrapped even as it was set to trap. The evil is sped now, Lady Mouse has said. But it may still return even as fire flickers out of an ember when another stick is laid for its eating. We have here a trace way up—which only the ponies can take. The Torgians and Keplians and Jasta are all too large to attempt it. Even if it were widened, their greater weight and shod hooves would bring them down.”

The others were nodding and then the Falconer added: “Farwing reports broken land atop. Even the ponies will have to be sure-footed there.”

Denever grunted. “Show me a pony that is not that and I shall shout it aloud to all of Karsten. These beasts are bred and born in such country and they are surefooted. So, Lady Liara”—he did not even turn his head to look at her—“if you can get these stubborn animals to climb, perhaps a good third of our job is done.”

“Lady Liara.” Mouse was standing now, though Eleeri hovered by her as if to offer instant support. “It is true that the Dark has



withdrawn from this thing. The trap is very ancient and perhaps, if a will was set to move it once more to slaughter, it has withdrawn. For now your beasts have nothing to fear.”

Your beasts—not you and your beasts. Liara nodded but was surprised when Mouse continued:

“Though you see shadows where none walk, there is promise of more—by this.” Her hand cupped the jewel. “So do I swear it!”

Witchery! Liara tensed. Was this Mouse girl weaving some net about her, dooming her to everlasting service? But it would not matter, she had already doomed herself when she had taken the hidden ways of Krevanel keep.

“My thanks, Lady.” She tried to speak smoothly. “What we can do, these beasts and me, that we shall.”

However, when she saw the steep narrow trail up which they had to be urged, she began to doubt her own words. Dismounting, she tested the ropes which fastened the ponies in a chain.

“Here, take you this and test your way.” Lord Romar had moved to her side and pushed into her hand a stout shafted spear.

Nodding thanks but concentrating on the trail ahead, Liara looked for the best place to begin that climb. She thought she did not fear heights and certainly in the secret ways of Krevanel she had dared passages purposely made perilous. Slow but sure—that was what was to be kept in mind now.

Liara never afterward tried to guess how long that ascent took her. She kept small spurts of fear under tight control and the ponies did not balk when she tugged at the lead rope. As the climb continued, that stench grew the stronger and she knew what caused it—maggot-infested meat, crust of blood. The field of some battle might lie ahead.

Finally she and her charges reached a leveling off and she was sure they were on the crest. Around them was a tumble of shattered rock—such as might have existed after some stupendous hammer had given blow after blow here.

The ponies were puffing and moved of their own accord away from that near-impossible trail. This was like a shelf against the



cliff and she could see no way they might stray. In fact, one moved purposefully to lip at a tuft of coarse gray-green grass.

She had no desire to see what lay below the edge of the drop to her left. The fetid odor was enough to warn off anyone. Yet she made herself go and gasped as she clung to one great rock and looked down.

A serpent—such a serpent as was reported in legend, killed by heroes in their time for the good of all. What showed in the open was the terrifying head, its monstrous jaws open. However, a little more than a hand's-breadth behind the backward slope was the cliff wall. Lord Romar had been right: The thing appeared to have been trapped in solid rock.

But—*it* was also rock, showing no sign of life save the grisly remains about its rigid jaws. Witchery past any imagination except in a nightmare.

“Not pretty, my lady!” The men of the party had climbed up now, crowding to the cliff wall for safety.

Her grasp on the rock beside her tightened. “What would you do?” She tried to keep the quaver of her answer to Lord Romar under control.

“We have the assurance of the Lady Mouse that it is now without peril. But the Light does not leave some trap of the Dark undestroyed. We shall use these”—with a sweep of his arm he indicated the sowing of rocks about them—“to bury that thing.”

So indeed did they labor, Liara with them, for she must see to the loading of every pony, accompany it to the verge where the men hurled the stones of each burden out and down.

They paused to eat and drink from supplies lifted in a net. Even the Falconers laid aside their proud helms and mail shirts as they worked. There were bruises and small cuts in plenty and Liara once felt the world whirl about her and might have fallen had not Romar's strong hand from behind steadied her.

“Lady, you have done much. It is because of our need that we must ask.”

Somehow she shaped her dusty lips into a grin. “My lord, I



would give the full treasure of the Lord High Hound now, that some other of you could deal with these unruly beasts!”

He laughed. “Each of us has a talent.”

Her grin turned wry. “And this is mine? Well, we are making the most of it this day.”

Now the day was already fading into evening. Looking down, she could see that most of the horror below was hidden by stones. There were dark stains on the walls—where blood must have once splashed high. But the head, except for the tip of the high-held snout, was buried.

However, the sun which had seemed furnace-hot on them at times as they worked was fast disappearing westward. To take the downtrail even in dusk was something Liara knew that she could not attempt. The ponies were nickering, proving more and more difficult to handle. They needed water and forage and if they were forced to further work she doubted if even her “talent” could control them. She announced as much when the next burden of stones arrived.

“It is so,” Denever agreed.

The snout was hidden now. She was sure that they might go—but the loss of light trapped them there, unless the men were willing to risk descent. She was not, nor would she demand it of the now head-hanging beasts—one did not course a hound past its endurance.

She heard a call from the head of that trace trail. Two more coming up! First came the Lady Eleeri. She had left behind the bow which was her ever-ready weapon so that she could assist Mouse, though the girl scrambled ahead with a will.

Through the dusk they moved in a glow of light of their own, which emitted from the witch jewel. Lord Romar joined them as quickly as he could wend a way over that uneven surface. They spoke together, but in such low voices that Liara could not make out words.

Then the witchling moved apart from them, on toward the edge of the cliff and that hidden horror below. She held out her jewel and it flamed even higher. Lady Eleeri hurried after her to lay hand on her shoulder as the girl’s voice rang out, reaching them all now:



“Earth, air, fire, and water! By the dawn of the east, the moon-white of the south, the sun of the west, the black midnight of the north, by yew, and the hawthorne, illbane, rowan, all the laws of knowledge—the law of Names, the law of True Falsehood, the law of even balance—may this thing now ever cease to be!” Her voice arose higher and higher, stronger and stronger, until the last words she uttered were like a trumpet call.

From below came a pale gleam which was visible even through the glory of the jewel. Liara edged forward, tightening her rock hold to look down once more into that cut.

The stones they had shifted through most of this day were no longer a ragged heap. The outer ones were palely lit—and under Liara’s gaze they appeared to flow together, edge fitting firmly into edge. She was entirely sure that no human hand could shift one of them again.

“Now.” Mouse turned her back on that feat of witchery and faced the Alizondern girl. “Rightly you think of the good beasts. They shall have their reward.”

She moved slowly over the still-stone-littered ground, swinging her gem from its chain now. Suddenly those links straightened. The stone was held not by her hand any longer, rather floated by itself on the air. And it drew Mouse after it to the rise of the cliff wall.

Liara heard a musical note high and clear as gem struck rock. There was a crumbling one could detect even through the gloom—a darkness—moisture seeking a way out of some hidden bed. The ponies must have scented it, for they started as one toward Mouse. Liara moved swiftly, suddenly afraid for the younger girl, witch though she might be.

The trickle grew thicker, runneled down the rock to curdle between the stones of a rough pool. And the ponies crowded about. Mouse moved between them easily, the gem now swinging from her hand.

As it passed over the ledge of rock they had cleared by their earlier labor, a shadow arose from the surface.



Unbelieving, Liara stooped and felt. Her battered fingers tangled in grass.

“For tonight they will be sustained,” said Mouse. “And we may safely take this trail below. This is the night when I must report.”

Liara saw them gather at the trail. Still, her body was heavy with fatigue, and she could not face that descent, remembering too well all the perils lying along it. To her surprise, an arm closed about her waist. She did not at first recognize who had joined her. Then when she knew it for young Tregarth, she would have jerked away, but she did not have any strength left to elude him. She could only allow herself to be supported and drawn along.

CHAPTER FIVE



Unknown Land South of Var

Those who had come hunting were gone and yet Destree had not tried as yet to free herself from the clasp of this alien out of another world. She could smell the fear emanating from its haired body and did what she could to remain quiet, to use some manner of self-control to ease the other's panic. But her head still spun from that fearsome chaotic blast of magic, and her sight seemed blurred as if she saw not the familiar things about her but their images double-edged.

A black shape came in bounds across the charred ground where the creature had been cornered amid rocks. Chief reared on his hind legs and caught at the edge of her jerkin. His jaws parted as if he howled some war song, but the girl heard nothing.

However, his coming broke the spell. She brought her own hand



up to lay upon the wide, heavily muscled arm which had engulfed her when Foss had been about to loose arrow. Slowly she drew fingers through the wiry fur-hair, projecting with all her might that talent which Gunnora had fostered and trained, even as she spoke aloud—though this strayer from nowhere could not hope to understand.

“All is well—there is no fear.” *At least not for now*, her thoughts added. “They have gone.”

She continued that slow stroking. The grasp on her loosened. Destree looked over her shoulder, tilting her head back to get better sight of the creature’s features.

They bore some resemblance to human. There were deep-set eyes now fast upon her, yellow-green, with pupils so large as to occupy all visible space. The nose was broad, with cavities of nostrils which were flushed red within. The jaw jutted forward, wide and heavy. But when one studied the stranger carefully and slowly, the thought of *monster* faded away. Though she who had tasted of its thoughts knew that this was no beast but another sentient species.

Thick lips opened, to be caressed by a thick, purplish tongue. The arm which she touched turned in her grasp and now caught her wrist in a grip Destree tensed herself not to attempt to break.

Her captor for the present drew her hand up to those wide-arching nostrils and sniffed. Out shot the tongue again and touched her sweat-coated skin. But Destree, sure of her Lady’s hand in this, did not try to loose herself.

The great head bowed and then her hand was borne still farther upward until the lips nuzzled her flesh as lightly as a floating petal might have drifted on it. Dropping its hold, Gruck stepped back. There was no question now in the girl’s mind that this weird stranger believed her a friend.

However, she doubted greatly that anyone else in the valley would see it except as a menace to be destroyed. Gunnora had sent her to ensure its safekeeping; if it meant trouble for her, then she must accept that. Had she not in her time been such an outcast that she had been spat after when she walked port streets, and judged beyond all protests Dark-shadowed?



“Gruck?” she said. It drew back from her a step or so. Against the dark pelt a wide golden belt glistened in the sun now bearing down upon them.

That did service as more than a simple strap, the girl saw. Thrust through attached loops were a medley of artifacts, two at least which bore a very strong resemblance to knives. A plump pouch rode against the middle of the belly.

The workmanship, she believed, even though she could not examine the belt and equipment closely, was certainly not that of any barbaric civilization but fashioned by a people well used to tools.

“Gruck?” If she could awaken some vocal response from the stranger, perhaps she could learn from whence it had come. Destree had never heard of any gate traveler who had returned to its world. However, her knowledge of such was very limited and, without proof, how could she just accept that this poor lost creature might not be sent back to its proper place? But first she must find where it had made its entry.

It held its head cocked a little to one side now, its measuring gaze still centered on her. Chief advanced past her to stand directly before it.

His up-bannered tail moved slowly, but there was no ridging of fur, nor laid-back ears, no hissing or snarling. The stranger suddenly stooped and one of those huge large-fingered hands caught up the cat. Destree started forward—remembering the dead sheep, the slaughtered hounds. Then she saw that Chief was cradled in both hands, being raised to exchange stares on the level with Gruck.

For what seemed a time out of time itself, so caught up was she in that confrontation, Destree watched. Deep in her mind she felt the stirring, not clear as when the Lady would speak, but rather a tantalizing, teasing flutter. She bent what powers she had to touch that communication, to share in what Gruck and Chief had found as a mutual meeting—but it was not within the grasp of her talent.

At length Chief gave a soft mew and the stranger set him carefully down. Now Destree was growing uneasy. Foss and the rest had been scattered by the pummel of that power out of nowhere,



but perhaps not so frightened that their fear of this place would last long. They would be the more determined to turn on what they could see and understand, after a fashion: this alien monster. And she remembered Foss's warning. For all her place as healer and Voice, she would not be able to put an end to a second hunting.

"Chief." She summoned the cat and he came to her. Valiantly she began to build a mind-picture. Over the year and months she had been here, this had been a daily exercise, and one in which the cat seemed eager to indulge.

Now she built up, solidified, and sharpened in thought as well as she could the outline of a door, using the portal of the shrine as a pattern. Once she was satisfied with that, she put Gruck on the other side and brought the alien through. Three times she repeated that mental exercise. Chief had watched her unblinkingly, but now Gruck moved. Once more that mighty arm swung out and caught her wrist. Now the great head swung from side to side, the nostrils quivered as if searching for some scent.

It—he—she understood? Destree gave thanks to the Lady in quick thought. Gruck was already moving eastward, drawing her after him, and she did not struggle to free herself.

They kept to the higher reaches which walled the valley, wending a way among the trees which had escaped the fire of the past. At intervals all sense of purpose was taken out of her hands while Gruck and the cat had one of their periods of silent communication. It was as if the stranger depended on some sense of Chief's for general direction.

They rounded the edge of one of the sloping mountain meadows. No sheep grazed here today and she was sure that all flocks were safely pent in paddocks below. Gruck seemed tireless and Destree was glad of the long tramps she had taken in the past to hunt certain herbs and flowers to the Lady's need.

At last they rounded the bole of a huge tree, one of the forest giants which could awe men. Beyond, a thicket had been visibly torn apart, the wilting limbs of lower growth crushed and splintered. It might even have been the site of a scrimmage. Was it here that Gruck had killed the great hound?



But her furred guide now stopped to pull and hurl from their way the debris. And, within a few strides, the stranger stopped short. It turned once more to face her, flinging its arms in a gesture which engulfed the whole of this denuded clearing.

Cautiously Destree advanced. The thick underbrush must have been attacked by Gruck on his arrival here—her thoughts sorted that out. However, there were no standing pillars as she had learned from those of Estcarp and Escore usually marked such a site. Instead there was only a block of dull blue stone, its surface cut with a pattern which was so filled with earth and worn away that only her sight, trained to keenness by herb search, could distinguish it at all.

Gruck took a stride forward, hurling away a last tangle of up-rooted brush, to take a firm stand upon that stone. Then those great eyes were filled with entreaty as they turned to Destree.

She pulled loose some of the splintered growth and went to her knees, her hands spread palms-down on the edge of the stone only inches away from those huge pawlike feet.

“Lady!” she made her plea. She was sure that if there was any way this alien could return to whence it had come surely the Lady in Her pity would allow it.

But there was nothing of the feel of Power here—nothing but the grit of soil and stone under her seeking hands. This could be any rock of the mountainside, never put to any other use. Perhaps—perhaps the transportation of Gruck had exhausted all the Power which it had once held. She knew that all the gates known worked erratically. Sometimes they slumbered for years. Sometimes they awoke, to the peril of this world—as when the Kolders marched with death—or to the despair of others from alien worlds who were jerked through and made prisoners, of sorts. Destree felt a piercing memory of one such prisoner and her fate. That one had sealed the gate, that it could harvest no more from the sea—there would be no more dead ships in that port now.

Destree crouched, staring down at the rock, her hands still flat on the lifeless stone. How could she explain to Gruck that there was no return?



Her present problem was one of communication. There was no way she could make clear to this alien what had happened. Such complicated explanations could not be shifted through Chief. She lacked the Power. . . . The Power!

The only hope now was the shrine. If Gunnora chose to break the barrier between them, Destree had no doubt it would go down. But the shrine lay on the border of the valley—it was often visited. And, perhaps because of her interference, Foss and his fellow hunters might already be laying an ambush there. Or could they—where the Lady held Her beneficent rule? She could only hope that the shrine was safe for her purpose, for her need of what she might be able to learn there drew her like a hound's leash about her throat.

There was movement beside her. That massive hairy form had also gone to its knees, facing her across the stone. Now its hands reached out to copy the position of hers, while the large eyes demanded some answer from her.

She found herself speaking, though she was sure the creature could not begin to understand her words.

“The Power is gone.” Now she tried to build a mind-picture of a nearly dead fire as the last of its core ashed gray.

The large mouth before her opened and sounds which were so deep that they seemed to come from that barrel of a chest answered her. Though the creature could not comprehend any words she knew, Gruck understood.

Big hands left the stone to hook over the powerful knees; the body rocked slowly back and forth and that deep cry became a kind of desolate keening.

Impulsively Destree raised her own hands to place one on each of those haired fists. “Lady,” she prayed silently, “give me now of Thy Power. This is a living creature caught in a dark web of unknowing. May your Will come to its aid!”

And she strove with all her might to summon all of her slowly awakening talent, all she had learned at the shrine, to carry the comfort which had swelled high within her.

Chief pressed against her side, with a small throaty sound. Then



Gruck's massive head arose a little. One paw and then the other rose from those knees, each bearing her hand, and the tip of tongue touched lightly against her skin.

Chief turned, looking up at her, uttering that sound of impatience which meant to follow—even as he had at times led her to some suffering beast.

She and Gruck arose almost together. The cat was already half into the welter of broken branches. Daring, Destree again reached for this stranger, caught the thick wrist, and nodded in the direction the cat was taking.

To her delight that head nodded back. In so little she had managed to establish a very small tie of understanding between them.

Chief had his own ways of forest travel, but today he did not seek out those brush tunnels, rather wove back and forth in directions which offered few obstacles.

Destree was constantly alert for any sound of baying hound. Perhaps the villages had not yet recovered from that giant stroke of Power which was far from any knowledge she herself held. Luckily the shrine was apart from the rest of the settlement. (It was, she had early discovered, far older than the settlement, for the first of the northern refugees who had wandered into this fertile land had found it and left it strictly alone, having no reason to trust any work of an older day.)

However, she signaled Gruck to wait in hiding while she surveyed not only the shrine but its immediate surroundings. Foss was a man of skill and an ambush might well be his first thought now.

But all seemed as it had been when the Lady had first brought her here, wearied and bewildered by doing battle with that evil in the Port of Dead Ships. Now to its peace and safety she beckoned this stranger. For all the size and weight of that massive body, Gruck moved with a kind of fluid ability which in the past she had noted among the Sulcar traders, the Borderers ever alert for trouble. She did not doubt that this creature had many skills—perhaps some she could not dream of.

Gruck showed no fear or wariness after stopping just at the end of the small meadow to sniff the air. Then the paw-feet joined hers



on the steps to the portico and she brought her strange visitor into the outer chamber.

Chief went to stand on his hind legs and swing a paw at the pot that stood ready to swing over the smoldering fire. She realized that it was indeed well past noon, and if the cat was hungry so was she, and so, perhaps, their new guest.

Gruck had retreated to one end of the room and stood watching her as she busied herself adding to the portion of last night's stew and bringing out a round of the coarse bread Josephinia had left on her visit. Sawing off a hefty slice of this, she offered it to the guest, and a few moments later saw those powerful jaws chomping away on the offering.

The dark yellow cheese seemed to be relished also and the bowl of the reheated stew was eagerly reached for. Destree had put a spoon into that, wanting to know what utensils might be shared between them. It was promptly put to its proper usage.

Last of all she drew from the small cask under the far cupboard a tankard of herb-infused ale. This could be used, as she had learned long since, to relax the body, open the mind. It worked well with those of her species. Now she was daring to try it—as if it might prove a key to unlock that mind-barrier between them.

Resolutely she nodded to Chief. Well fed and now washing a paw, he withdrew to the outer door, ready to play guard as he had before when she herself had gone mind-roving. With a tankard in one hand, she held out the other to Gruck.

Wide eyes fastened on her. Perhaps it would be refused, but she knew no other way she might hope to accomplish what she knew must be done if this stranger—and maybe she herself—were to survive.

Furry fingers closed about the tankard at last. The alien stood so tall that the massive head nearly brushed the lintel of the inner door as she urged him forward. To Destree's relief and inner joy, the light from the walls glowed brighter—the blue of summer sky, the brown of earth awaiting seed, the green of that which would come of such seeding. She drew a deep breath. Once before she



had been welcomed so—on the first day she had found the shrine and dared to enter its sacred heart.

From beside her came a soft hum. Gruck held forth a paw and watched the color play across it. Destree drew her charge yet further in. They reached the lounge bed before the shrine. She motioned to that, seated herself in example.

The huge body settled beside hers. Raising the tankard, she drank three mouthfuls, enough to half-empty it. Then she nodded to the one her companion held. There was no hesitation, Gruck drank, but those strange eyes were now fastened on the altar before them.

More and more the colors spun about them, but there was no sense of vertigo, of being caught up in something which would threaten body or spirit.

Warmth, an out flowing of welcome, of peace.

Then the stirring in her mind—*Goddess* touch? Perhaps, but secondhand. This was not threatening, but it was very different. This time that strange thought-touch came without any fear or pain to distort it.

No hurt. Those were not her words, nor any message of Gunnora's. Destree knew too well the aura of those.

Then more slowly, *Go—go back?*

A question. One she could not answer as she wished.

"A gate"—she began to form her own words—"open—shut—not open—Power gone."

There was a feeling of withdrawal, of an empty space.

Then: *Gruck must stay—here!*—The latter part of that was a desolate cry, though it came by thought, not lips.

"Yes . . ." her feeling of peace was gone, torn asunder by what she had to say.

The feeling that she must speed on, break into that despair, struck her forcibly.

"This is the shrine of Gunnora: I am Her Voice." Destree was not really aware that she was speaking her thoughts aloud now. "She sent me to aid you, for all living creatures of the Light are dear to Her. And Her Hand is over you and will hold you so."



Now the mind-touch seemed to twist in his head as if someone fumbled to enter a key into an unknown lock.

I am Gruck. The pattern was rough at first and then grew more smooth. A laborer might be learning the way of a new tool. *I am—* there was hesitation and then the exchange continued, *one who walks the woods, and tends the beasts of the Alatar. Second guardsman of the west.*

A paw-hand stirred and went to his belt as if to assure him that that much remained of the past.

I found a strange stone—light shone from it—when I touched it. He was making a supreme effort now to control that time of panic that she now experienced with him, in part. *There was first black nothingness and then there was HERE! I hungered for I could find no proper food and—and I killed—but without pain.* The hand on his belt moved to touch a rod looped to it. *There came another beast—one like one red-minded—and that I had to kill with these.* He held out his hands. *For I could not mind-touch it and it was akin to those beasts who are mad with the coming of deep summer.*

“To defend oneself,” Destree returned carefully, “is no crime. If you had done evil you would not sit here now at the very heart of Gunnora’s place.”

To those who hunted, to you—I am so different of body that you see me as—

Destree’s mind shuddered away from a smudged picture of something indeed so monstrous that she could not believe such lived—save in the very fortress of the Dark itself.

“No!” she was quick to protest. “But, Guardsman Gruck, this I cannot hide from you: There is but one village of people in this valley. They are very simple folk, but long ago their kind were hunted by monsters and so they fled south. They remember the tales of the old days.”

His mind-touch was growing ever stronger and clearer. *So I am such a monster returned to harry them? Their hunting will not cease?*

Destree sighed. So had her thoughts already turned. Foss would be out and there would be killing, for she did not expect Gruck to surrender his life without battle. But if there was to be no battle?



She could not stand between the valley and the stranger. Already Foss had warned her that any influence she might have had, had waned. Nor could she expect Gunnora's active aid. What she had now, communication with the refugee, was a mighty gift. But Gunnora was not a warwoman—all her Powers were of peace.

Therefore—there was but one answer. Gruck must go, get as far away from this valley as he could travel. Only . . . where?

To the west lay wasteland and the sea. But to the northeast there was rumored a land in which the Old Ones still lived, and others with them perhaps as strange in their ways as Gruck. Thus he might find welcome there.

But—Destree closed her eyes and felt the drag of great sorrow and loss—he could not go alone. All she had sought to find here, the little she had done in the name of the Light, was that to be extinguished? Death trod many trails in this land; she had skirted such before she reached this haven. Yet it was Gunnora's will which had sent her to Gruck, and therefore she was left no choice.

I am one who knows the woodland, he cut into her dreary thoughts. *I can find a place, for where there are forests to guard, then it would be as always.* His head was up and he was staring again at the altar. Then he was silent.

But Destree felt it filling her, also, that outreaching which was all-encroaching. And she had known that urge from old. It had been that which brought her from the desolation of the Port of Dead Ships to this very shrine.

"There is a reason," she said slowly, wanting to deny acceptance and knowing that she could not.

*In my world—*Gruck again touched his belt—*there are certain orders laid upon one. Alatar says, "Go you there, let this be done," and so it is. Nor can one turn aside from duty. I think, you who call yourself Voice, that this Lady Gunnora has already extended a blessing to me, a stranger not of Her following, so that now I am to be sped as if by the Alatar to something which must be done.*

Slowly Destree nodded. She had held fiercely to her strength for many years, standing up to foul usage and facing down strong evil.



For the first time since she was a small girl she felt the smart of tears in her eyes, drops flooding upon her cheeks.

“We go.” Again she spoke, with voice as well as mind, and those two words might have been a blood oath offered before one took up shield and sword. “Now—there is much to be done. I do not know how long those of the village will wait before they seek the shrine. We must be gone before they come. I cannot defame the Lady by any struggle in Her own place.”

She was wondering whether their communication would fail once they were away from the inner shrine, but it seemed that this gift would last. Gruck first watched her and then helped her make up packs. Herbs for healing, and the ones for clearing the mind should she be allowed to call upon the Lady. There was a thick cloak and two hide packs she had put together to use when exploring.

But save for her belt knife there was no weapon, and for the first time in years she wanted the feel of a sword hilt, the weight of a blade.

Gruck insisted on the larger pack being put together with twice as much in it as his own burden. The girl found herself explaining, as she selected and bagged, the reason for this or that being added to their store. Between times he watched the baking of journey cakes, for which she recklessly used the last of her meal and all the dried berries and nuts of the former season.

It would soon be dusk. She dared not show a light, lest they were already spied upon by Foss and his hunters. But Chief kept trotting out at intervals, slipping as a black shadow through any cover available and always returning with reassurance.

The dark of night would serve them. Her efforts at preparing for their leaving had left her tired, but they must put as much space between them and the village as they could. And Gruck agreed with her. She had treated the wound in his arm, finding it already nearly closed, and he seemed not to feel any stiffness there.

Then came night and for the last time Destree went, this time alone, into the inner shrine:

“Give us fortune, for we shall serve You as best we can,” she said



slowly. "I know that I am not only Your Voice but now Your hand also and I have a task before me. But—Lady, when all is well again . . . let Your peace be with me."

She stood with bowed head and it was as if a hand touched for a blessed moment the tight braids of her hair.

CHAPTER SIX



Karsten Southward

Liara held her eyes stubbornly to the fore and refused to glance backward. After the exhausting struggle through the broken lands, they had gained the holding of the Lady Eleeri, a place which fairly breathed the threat of magic at one, or so Liara held to that thought.

The keep in which they had sheltered to rest and regather supplies was fully as impressive as Krevanel itself—but held none of the grayness of spirit she had so often known in her own suite of chambers there. Light seemed to cling and clothe its walls as the days remained fair and the weather favored them.

Three separate herds grazed in the wide, rich green of the valley. But none of any one herd strayed into territory which was claimed by another. The Keplians were utterly free.

Time and again the stallion Hylan would come into the courtyard and the Lady Eleeri, as if summoned, would be ready to meet him there. That they communicated by mind Liara was well aware, but such talent was not hers, nor did she seek it. It was difficult enough to hold to her belief in herself among those of her own



species, for none of her traveling companions awoke in her any desire to know them better.

Having had his conference with Eleeri, the stallion would leave, not only the keep but also the valley. And each time he returned it was not alone. Once he teamed with a mare who bore a crusted slash down her shoulder and nosed ahead of her a foal who stumbled and wavered. Eleeri was already waiting—as if her speech with Hylan could traverse miles. With her was Mouse who ran lightly forward to aid the colt. Hylan's second disappearance was longer and he came back alone. This time there was blood on his own forelegs and one could almost feel the heat of anger which steamed from him.

"Gray Ones," Denever reported that night as they shared out supplies around the great hall table. "They are usually trailers, ready to pull down stragglers. Why do they prowl about now?"

"An excellent question," Lord Romar returned. He had finished his food early and pushed aside his plate. Now he had spread out fanwise on the board before him half a dozen knives, plain as to hilt, but with the blue-green sheen of blade which meant quan iron—that legacy of the Old Ones which was rarer than any gem Liara had heard of.

For this keep was not only the holding of his Lady's claiming, but also held secret stores which delighted the fighters now made free of them. There was a quan mail shirt for most of them—though Liara had refused to take that offered. She was caught in a web of magic; she had no mind to become so entangled that the person who was Liara would cease to be.

"Yes, the Gray Ones nose closely," said Krispin, the Falconer. On his wrist perched Farwing, whom he had been feeding bits from his own place. "Also, their number grows."

"They were the servants of the Black Tower once." Eleeri had taken one of the knives from her mate's collection and was running a finger up and down as if trying so to test its edge. "The tower and he who held it are gone." There was a stillness about her face as if she were remembering only too well something which had struck close to the heart. "Who or what calls them now?"

Mouse sat still, her jewel between her hands. When she looked



up, her gaze traveled from face to face about the board. They were clear enough to see in the golden light of the lamps.

"They are drawn . . ." she said.

"By what we plan to do?" Keris demanded, shifting in his seat. He could never doubt the statement of any witch, young or old, but they were far too apt to speak obscurely.

"Perhaps," was the only answer Mouse offered him.

"It is well maybe that we move out soon," Denever said. "If they seek to set a cork to bottle us up here, of what value will a full fight be? Your—your liege—Hylan"—perhaps he, too, found it difficult to accept the Keplian as a full member of their party—"can he say whence these come?"

"Always," Lord Romar answered, "they roam. Not long since, this was their territory. Perhaps they seek to make it so again. But this time they have no Dark lord to give them aid. However, you are right. We have found two gates and mapped them—that through which my dear Lady came, and that water-washed one which Lady Mouse assures us is now and has been a long time inactive. How many lie before us—who can tell?"

Liara felt strangely fatigued, as if somehow the light of the lamps on the quan iron blades had drawn from her some of her energy. She had a full day behind her and, if they marched, a number of aching, burning strides out into the unknown tomorrow.

A hand touched her shoulder and she flinched. Why she had given such a reaction to so light a contact, she could not have told. But it had seemed for an instant that some dangerous shadow slipping by had wafted against her.

The witchling? She still gripped her jewel and Liara could see the power in it was awake or waking, for the light shone between her fingers.

"Sister in the Light." Mouse's voice was hardly more than a whisper, well covered by the sounds of those about them rising and discussing what must be done before they moved. "You have been sadly plundered of what was yours to have. But hold this ever in mind: That which is born to the Light cannot be taken—unless it turns willingly into the darker path. And you will *not*!" Mouse's last



word was as emphatic as an order. Then she was gone, leaving Liara, muddle-thoughted, behind her.

She was busied enough the next morning to keep under control questions and the general uneasiness which she was unable to throw off. Though they had now traveled with the party for a goodly length of time, the ponies were as uncontrollable as ever and she must stand by the head of each, keeping it steady, while its load was lashed in place securely enough to stand all tests of a rough trail ahead.

A third Keplian now joined them. Romar told the party, "Hylan is our guard marshal, and this land lies under his protection. Thus he cannot be one of us as he wishes. But the mare Sebra, who is this season barren, joins us at her desire."

They were over the border of Karsten and now they wound toward the southwest. To the east lay the end lands of Escore and there was another party searching there. The Falconers and the Borderers scouted ahead with greater care, for they had entered halfway through their second day afield a countryside which had been mauled and torn by warring. Liara had heard enough to know that after the Turning, when Duke Pagan and all his forces had been swallowed up, this countryside had been ravaged and fought over by outlaws and small lords quarreling for some advantage over their fellows.

For the first time, while she viewed the charred stone of burned-out holds, saw unsown fields, with here and there the yellowed bones of a draft animal—or perhaps even a man—Liara realized this is what Alizon might come to with its eternal intrigues and assassinations, its gobbling up of lesser enemies by the greater. She had never before questioned the way of life she had been born into. It was enough to try to see ahead what she could do for her own safety and that of her line. Suddenly she wished that Kasarian rode with her on this trail. She still did not know what ploy her littermate was engaged in, but that he held some touch with Lornt, with the Lady Mereth, there was no denial. Was Kasarian also hunting a gate? The two she had seen so far—a pillar wind-bitten and moss-covered, and then a quiet pond, its waters so clear one could see no sand at the bottom, but rather a stretch of blue-gray rock—were not impressive in themselves.

The travelers were well armed and they rode taking every precau-



tion they could against surprise. She had tried their dart guns but was far from a good shot. Swords were not part of the schooling of a Hearthmistress of Alizon—but knives, now . . . She hugged her right arm against her for a moment and felt the quan iron with its tepid warmth—the blade never appeared to grow as cold as true steel—against her forearm. There were two more in her belt; one rode within the collar of her jerkin between her shoulders, the other in her boot. With these there were few who could match her.

They camped that night in a shatter of ruins that had no cover nearby, so that nothing could steal upon them unawares. Mouse made her report to Gull, though no spoken word was to be heard. Then she informed the others that the sites of four gates had been located within Estcarp but none of them appeared to retain any power. It might well be that the destruction of the Magestone had indeed sealed them all. Yet who could be sure?

Liara shared the rotation of the guard, and by the stars she thought it might be near midnight when she caught that whiff of scent out of the night. Unlike the stench of that thing of the crevice, this had a familiar odor, one which something in her found exciting.

Memory clicked and she was back with Lord Volorian, trotting behind his burly body, trying to keep up as well as listen properly to the stream of knowledge he was half growling at her. Volorian's kennels were famed throughout Alizon. Pups whelped there brought fabulous sums—if they were sold at all. Almost she could feel now the fur on some small, plump, squirming body, hear the rough purr answering to the proper scratching behind the ears.

But—there were no hounds! Liara stiffened; her hand slipped, bringing sleeve knife into her grasp. Perhaps, she tried to assure herself, there were hounds from the destroyed manors and keeps they had seen, gone feral in a pack, interbreeding and managing to live off the land.

She listened with all her might, hearing the scrape of a thick iron-studded boot sole at the next post. Hounds did not hunt silently unless that was brutally enforced by some huntsman. But more and more she believed that somewhere, not too far away, a pack of four-footed danger drew in upon them.



Hound scent? She had as noiselessly as possible shifted her position to face in the direction in which she believed that advance lay. There was a full moon tonight and the open land about the ruin was open to see.

Hound scent? She drew that smell more deeply into her nose and then saw a quiver of shadow advance from a copse of trees well away. Those were no hounds!

Instantly she was alert. She had never seen a live Gray One—and the two bodies she had viewed had been more manlike than dog. But Liara knew what came. And even as she was about to shout an alarm, the enemy struck—with a weapon she had not been expecting—directly at her.

The warning choked off in her throat as she found herself frozen, unable to move hand or foot, and with a weight pressing against her breast as if to forbid her free breath. In the meadow before her, the moonlight seemed to thicken as if some power drew upon it to produce a form.

Liara gasped for breath and gasped again. What stood there? The form of the thing was clearly that of a female, for its silver height was unclothed, but the head—white, sharp-snouted, with red ears, not folded as usual back against the skull, but standing erect as when the hunt was launched.

It was out of a nightmare—but no nightmare she had ever heard of before—a foul mixture which had nothing to do with the will of nature.

Nausea arose within her. Yet somehow her will awoke. There had been no call, no sound which even she could hear. But that—that loathsome character strove to draw her toward it—beckoned her as if in her innermost part there was a likeness, a kinship— NO!

Liara was no longer aware of anything except that thing in the meadow, that which summoned. Around her, fouling her lungs as she breathed, was the thick smell of kennels. The thing's blazing eyes caught hers and held; the form standing there appeared to grow, taller, more solid, more powerful.

Come—blood to blood—come, the order continued. While that treacherous part of her own unknown inner self was drawn, it was



sharp pain which broke that fast-woven spell. She felt the bite of metal in her flesh.

And straightaway, before the thing could tighten its invisible cords on her again, Liara's own hand moved. She threw her sleeve knife.

She saw the hound-woman raise clawed paws to her throat and then stagger back, then crumple down. Liara whimpered and staggered in turn, until her shoulder thumped forcibly against what had once been the wall of a watch tower. Pain held her in its fist—even as if that knife had entered her own throat.

Through watering eyes she saw the limp white body in the grass. The brilliance of the silver which had made it so visible was fading, just as the smoothness of the flesh vanished. The thing was still female, but the hound head was gone—only a skull thatched with grizzled hair remained.

Liara was able to pull herself straighter—the pain had faded. She could hear shouting and saw a wave of more just such hairy bodies ripple forward.

Nor did the cries of alarm come from one direction only; she was dimly aware that they also sounded from behind. The camp in the ruins must be beset by more than one party.

They were attacked by such a wave of Gray Ones as none in that refuge had ever seen drawn together before. Only the moonlight was their friend; had the sky been clouded, the fierce determination of those without might well have won them a way within.

Of this Liara was barely aware. Since her knife had taken the hound-woman, her arm flopped by her side, so weighted that it might be encased in the stone of the walls. She coughed and coughed again, tasting blood which she spat away.

Keris set a second clip into his dart gun. At least this was one weapon with which he could truly claim expertise. He continually blinked his eyes, trying to ease a smarting which had struck them at the rise of that white pillar of light just before the attack broke. Liara had been fronting that pillar and he was not sure what she had done, but he guessed that she was responsible for its vanishing.

There was another figure up on the wall where Liara had earlier



stood and he heard the voice of the Lady Eleeri raised in what could only be a war cry. She was using her bow with the skill he had often seen demonstrated in the arms court, and he was sure that very few of those arrows missed their marks.

Still the waves of Gray Ones came as if maddened past all thought of self-preservation. There followed the high-screamed challenge of a stallion encountering traditional foes, and from the arched entrance below broke the Keplians. One watching them now could well believe in the tales of their devil blood.

Even as a warhorse might be trained to rear and so bring down any footman menacing his rider, so did the mare Theela and the colt stamp death, rip and toss bodies aside.

Then was a breathing space when no new forces came out of the distant woodland. The Keplians made a round of the bodies, once or twice raising a razor-sharp hoof to snap out a flicker of life. However, when they approached that crumpled figure Liara had confronted, they circled it at a distance, their heads down as if they sniffed deeply at what lay there. Then Theela swerved to head for the ruins, her companions behind her.

“Liara?” Though the voice was low, it cut easily through the fog surrounding the girl which had led her to believe she was no longer any part of those who fought here.

Light, brilliant—blue—searing her eyes. She could not lift her deadened arm to shade them. The shine of the hound-head had been almost as strong.

She could not even see who stood behind that mighty lamp, but the voice she knew. The witchling.

At that moment it was as if someone had unveiled a secret for her viewing and she shrank back again against the stone. There was that in her . . . she held a taint which those—those things of the dark could sense, could call—

“They called.” The brilliant light still held her fast. “But did you answer?”

Life was returning to her arm, she was able to bring her hand up to her trembling lips.

“I did not then . . . know—”



“Do not hold yourself at fault.” Mouse’s soft voice was serene. “If you drew them, then also their purpose was betrayed when you brought down their bait. And that very bait alerted our watchers.”

“Hound . . .” Liara murmured through stiff lips then. “*We* are the Hounds of Alizon, not merely the packs we raise. And those packs have been used for Dark purposes.” She shivered. Though no female had watched an Ordered Feeding, yet the details of such were as known to all as clear as crystal in a collar. “Your people say I am not of the Dark, but if there is in me that which can draw something searchers want . . .”

Her thoughts were flying very fast now, seeming like a stream of orders shouted in her ears. “If that be so . . . then I have no place with you.”

“If you were of the Dark, Lady Liara, then death would have been your portion as you stand here. We are all fashioned by those of our blood gone before, but it is the choices that we ourselves make which can change the weaving patterns.”

The light no longer tortured her eyes. Now the Lady Eleeri came to her, still holding her bow.

“This was an attack planned by hate but not by true knowledge. If they believed that they could win through our defenses by the tricks of a half-taught Shaman, then they are the less to be feared. Had they waited—”

But Liara had already caught the logic behind that.

“Waited until we were strung out on the trail, until I was behind with the ponies. Yes, then they would have had their victory.”

“Never.” The radiance from Mouse’s jewel had faded, revealing her as she stood behind the wall of its brilliance. “For I say they believed you to be the way to us and you are not. Nor can you ever be—unless”—she spoke more slowly now—“you allow yourself to doubt, to seek shadow and turn aside from Light.”

“How can you be sure,” Liara asked, “that I will not?”

They had given her trust, these enemies of old, and she feared trust, feared it because among her own it never held. However, outwardly she accepted for the present Mouse’s assurance, though her mind was busy untangling tormenting thoughts.



She did not sleep for the rest of the night, though she lay quiet among her blankets. This quest of theirs—gates upon gates—what had it really to do with her?

That she might ever return to her own place—no. She had been forcibly barred from Krevanel by Kasarian's action. There was no place for her at Lormt, even if she were to turn back, and if she remained among these she had come to accept she might well once more be used against them.

Hound . . . Whenever she closed her eyes now she could see that silver body and the hound-head. She had never heard any tales among her people of such an unnatural creature. But what if that was what Alizonderns were inside? Had they so absorbed the inner natures of their prized, four-footed companions that that was how they would appear to an eye which could truly see—a mixture of human and beast? All those days she had spent with Volorian, her pride that he shared knowledge with her . . . had that time strengthened that taint they did not realize they possessed?

She kept much to herself with the morning and she was busy, for the ponies were unusually unruly. Perhaps the scent of the dead bodies beyond the wall reached them. Secretly she plundered one of the packs, setting aside a packet of journey cakes. Bow and arrows were not her weapon, nor could she help herself to such without it being instantly noted. She still had three of her four throwing knives, and a short sword she had used mainly to hack paths through thorn brush when necessary.

When had she ever had anyone who really cared what became of her? In Alizon she had filled a need and done her duty well enough that those of Krevanel seemed to find her well qualified. Her help with the ponies—that would weigh a little against a second attack of the Gray Ones.

Morning mist became rain and they all turned the hoods of their cloaks up over their heads. But no one suggested that they try to wait out the storm, for Mouse had announced, before the downpour had become too heavy, that there were indications of gate Power somewhere ahead.

Trees gave way to tough grass and clumps of brush, and that in



turn to a stretch of gravel in which were upstanding stones set in the general confusion of a forest grove. The ponies had to be prodded into keeping up with the party and then seemed to decide on their own that they were better served by company.

Liara dropped back, as was the usual way if one answered a call of nature and slipped around one of the tree stones, waiting until the rear of the Borderers rode by.

Then, shouldering the very small pack which was all she allowed herself, she skulked from outcrop to outcrop away from the plodding party, not knowing or caring now in what direction she headed.

Keris was surprised when one of the pack ponies crowded up beside Jasta. The small beasts usually kept their distance from the mounts of the rest of the party. He glanced back to see that the lead animal closely followed by the rest, yet there was no sign of Liara on her tough mount and she usually kept carefully close to her charges.

She is gone.

He started at the Renthan's mind-message. Since the happenings of the night before, his once-vague suspicions of the Alizondern girl had reawakened. Then he had held the next post in line with hers and had seen a strange pillar of light arise facing where she stood. His forehead creased in a frown. It had been as if some fleeting breaths of time had been rift from him and he remembered nothing clearly until the light was overthrown to the ground and he was busied picking off those slaving Dark ones who attacked so oddly without any cover as if they had expected to find the defenders asleep.

He had been with Krispin and the Lord Romar when they had ridden forth, with the addition of the young Keplian stallion, to survey the bodies after the battle. And his ranging had brought him close to where that light pillar had been rooted. Something had shone in the grass and he dismounted.

There was a dead Gray One, of course, a female and larger than any he had ever sighted in all the years they had warred upon such in Escore.

Oddly enough, the bristled face turned up to the light was layered with what appeared to be white paint. And as he stooped to see the closer, he could distinguish flat pieces of stiff red stuff fastened



to either side of the skull as if to mimic ears. In the creature's throat was a knife buried near to its hilt, not quite far enough to hide its quan iron blade. And he had seen that knife hurled many times over in the arms court at Lormt, always thudding exactly in the center of the target. That was Liara's. He tugged it loose and rammed the blade several times into the ground to clean it. Odd she did not come to claim it herself; such knives were too valuable to be left lying, even in bodies.

They had been so busied breaking camp that he had forgotten his find and it was only now, when he could not sight the Alizondern girl and Jasta said she was gone, that he remembered.

"Gone—where?" For a moment he felt a sharp flash of fear. Even though the Falconer and one of the Borderers kept guard, this place of many stones offered excellent chance for an ambush.

To follow her own trail, the Renthian returned.

"To betray." Keris was not altogether sure he meant that.

To give us freedom from what she fears the most. Nor for all Keris's urging would Jasta elaborate on that.

CHAPTER SEVEN



Karsten, Southeast of Var

It had been raining, the heavy endless rain which soaked one's garments to the skin, but the land seemed to welcome such a burden of endless drops. Meadow grass gave way to tangles of vines, which appeared to carpet the ground instead of searching for any tree or rock which could bear them aloft. Here and there, sheltered by the larger leaves were huge scarlet flowers which gave forth a cloying



perfume and were shaped, Liara thought as she struggled along, not unlike the stripped skulls of shriekers tossed aside after the great day of annual slaughter. But there was nothing else here to remind her of her homeland. She knew that she was entirely lost.

Yet twice fortune had favored her. The first time she had been warned by keen hearing to take cover as a troop trotted by on the remains of a road which had not been kept up for many years. They were huddled in cloaks, those who had them; the rest wore blankets, odds and ends of hides, pulled around their shoulders.

They were not of the Old Race, but a mongrel lot, and from the saddle horn of the leader bobbed the severed head of a woman, anchored so by twisted hair. They were southerners such as she had always heard them described—yet she had certainly seen none of their like in Lormt.

Her next caution that this was not deserted land had come with a heavy rise of smoke. She had hidden out for nearly half a day, her now too slim body pressed to the ground, staring down at a keep which had clearly fallen to attack. She was thankful she was so far away that she could not hear or see clearly what happened there. The troop which seemed to have taken the small stronghold might be better armed and disciplined, but its soldiers, she was sure, were no different from those brutes she had earlier seen.

The keep had fallen, but perhaps there were some who escaped and those mailed riders below might sweep the fields around to make sure of their prey. Liara edged back as well as she could, pulling over and around her the well-leaved branches of a sturdy mat of brush.

At least she could sight no hounds to be set on the trail of fugitives. These southerners apparently never depended on such. She let her head fall wearily back against a tree trunk centering the cover she had chosen.

Her fingers were on her belt. Five days since she had left the party from Lormt. If they had come seeking her . . . But why should they? She had been set among them by necessity, not choice. And time drove them. They would have no time to hunt for her and still cover the ground assigned them—already far too



large a stretch for so small a party. Briefly she wondered what kind of a gate Mouse's jewel had found within that strange place of stone pillar-trees. Not that it mattered.

She rummaged in her small pack and brought out the forelegs of a ground-hopping creature she had knocked over with a stone at dusk the night before. Her knives Liara dared not risk, but she had discovered that her wrist skills, honed by practice with the knives, could also hurl stones to advantage. The meat had only been partially seared by the handful of fire she had dared to light and had kept going only for a short time. It smelled rank and tasted worse, but she chewed and swallowed doggedly.

That which she had feared the most, what had in truth driven her apart, was ever to mind. But she had never picked up the odor of the Gray Ones, seen any of their paw prints on overgrown roads or game trails.

Her retreat from overseeing the engagement at the keep had been close to noon. Now it was near twilight when she struck recklessly into the ground-matting vines and saw before her a rise of trees which gave a daunting impression of gloom rather than promise of any shelter. Liara paused once on her steady plodding, which followed a zigzag pattern to allow her the use of any place where the vines thinned somewhat, to send a stone from her carefully selected collection at a commotion among the leaves. To her it seemed that some hidden creature was taking flight and hunger ruled her enough to try to make sure of some catch.

There was a shrill keening and the vine leaves were torn hither and thither as she caught glimpses of a small body and dared to throw again. When the struggle subsided, she advanced to find a bird—large as the fowls at the farmsteads, its fluffed feathers shading into the green of the leaves themselves.

Picking it up by its broad feet, Liara pushed through the remainder of the vines to the first fringe of the wood. Only there, well shadowed by the trees, did the girl stop to examine her kill. Praise be to Uncle Volorian, she nearly said aloud. She had been armored long since to the bloody ways of feeding the hounds and certainly



her own needs were as important as theirs. More and more she was breaking through the shell of an Alizondern female.

Now as she grubbed in the leaf mold under the tree, which kept off most of the rain, she looked back at her existence in Krevanel as another life. As she uncovered a stone or two, embedded them in her mold hollow and then searched around for small pieces of brush or half-rotted tree branches, she wondered whether, given the chance (and the assurance of course that her littermate was *not* waiting on the other side to bring her down), she would willingly pass again through that postern gate in the depths of Lormt.

The bird was cleaned and plucked. She had her small fire after several snaps of the lighter, and pieces of meat impaled on some straight sticks over the flames, which sizzled as the fat began to burn into greasy drops and encourage high flames.

Would she keep on ahead through this forest? The fact that she had no real goal was troubling. Remembering the map at Lormt, she made a guess or two and thought she must be close to the southern border of Karsten. There was supposed to be a small nation south of that—mainly of seafarers—called Var. Not of the Old Race, either—would it be wise to strike farther west and try to find refuge there?

The rain had slacked off a little. She fed from the strong, unsalted meat of her catch and wrapped the larger part in leaves for the next day. There was no way she could post any sentry here. As it had been ever since she parted with the company, she must spend a restless night. But she was so tired that she was not sure she could keep alert enough to sense any peril.

Leaning back against the bole of the tree under which she sheltered, Liara blinked and blinked again. She had brought her knives out of hiding and had them under her hand for instant use. The fire she allowed to die, even though she shivered in spite of the thick traveler's cloak about her. Against her will her thoughts kept turning to her fine chambers at Krevanel—to the soft bed, to all the luxury she had taken for granted.

Her skulking away from the party . . . She turned now to consider the decision which had brought her to that act. Alizonderns



thought first of their own advantage. She had been tutored from as far back as she could remember to weigh actions in how they would affect herself first, and then others—if there was any advantage in her aiding such.

In spite of the witchling's words, she knew well by all she had been so taught that those who had accepted her only reluctantly at the first would be well rid of her now.

She ached—all toughening learned on the trail from Lornt did not seem to help now. When she swallowed, her throat was sore. Twice she choked and coughed until her eyes watered. Tired . . . so very tired . . .

The dusk of the forest closed in upon her. Her last remembered gesture was to close hand on knife hilt and then, in spite of all her efforts, she slid down into darkness, though there was a part of her which warned that that was dangerous.

So deep was she in exhausted slumber that no spark of warning reached her as they closed in. She aroused, dully aware at first and then with the thrill of pure fear, as she felt hands pawing at her. When she at last gained true consciousness, she found herself staring up into a half-seen bestial face while foul breath puffed down at her as the creature drew taut a rope about her chest and upper arms. She was flopped over roughly and her wrists were lashed together so tightly that the thongs which held her cut cruelly into the flesh.

Then she was rolled back again. She must have fallen prey to these hunters in the early morning, for there was the gray of a well-advanced dawn piercing between these trees to let her see her captors.

One of them pawed at her hair, tangling his wide but blunted nails in the strands enough to jerk her head upward at a painful angle so that when he leaned closely over her they were nearly eye to eye. And his lay within dark pits of his skull, like sparks of fire.

All the dullness of sleep had been swept away from her. She knew that the failure of her own body, her ability to keep on guard, had delivered her to those hunters she had fought to elude. Gray Ones.

They wore no clothing and their haired skins showed patches where scars and running sores were plain to see. The worst was that they were so human in their general stance and bodies. The one



who still kept his hold on her was clearly male, but one crowding in beside him, showing sharp-pointed fangs, was a female, though her bared breasts were hardly more than flaps of skin thinly furred.

Two of them were wrestling clumsily with the straps of her small pack, jerking it back and forth as each snarled at the other and tried to win the find for himself.

He who held her head captive spat words at her and Liara had learned enough of the general trade talk which was the common tongue of all who used speech in the north to understand.

“Where others?” He viciously shook her head from side to side and then thumped it against the ground to emphasize obedience to his will by a quick answer.

“Gone.” The word rasped in her throat. *Let them put an end to me speedily*, became the one plea she clung to.

He blinked at her and snarled, then mercifully loosed the hold on her hair and hunched away. Liara caught a glimpse of knife blade. There stood her weapon straight in the earth as she had left it when treacherous sleep had overcome her. Why the creature had not already taken it as spoil, she could not guess.

The female pulled at his hunched shoulder, pointing to the two who were now ravishing the backpack. He snorted and spun around.

His companion did not follow him but squatted down in his place by Liara.

She lowered her hairy face and then uttered a sound which was close to cackle. “Dog stink,” she observed. “Dog meat good.” She ran her tongue over her lips and then her jaws remained a little open, the tip of her dark tongue spattering drops down on the girl.

Liara braced herself against any sign of disgust or fear. So in this much she had been right—those of Alizon did take on some of the nature of their prized four-footed stock. But the female Gray One was busy. She found the latches of Liara’s jerkin easy enough to pull apart. And without disturbing the ropes holding her captive, but by the judicious cut of a dull-bladed knife here and there, she slit cloth. She soon had the girl stripped, her rent clothing piled to one side.

Thick fingers gathered up the skin of one of Liara’s breasts in a tor-



turous pinch and the girl could not in time smother an answering cry. But she already lay open to the inspection of the majority of the pack.

She fought to close her mind to what they intended to do with her. Would she furnish them with a feast? Or would she be an object for torturous play?

The female gave her another bruising pinch and was ready to deliver a third when there came a low-throated houndlike call, and immediately all those gathered around Liara edged away.

With her head now flat on the ground and little chance to see more than the hairy forms which walled her in, the girl could not view the newcomer. But that these here owed it some form of service was plain. A moment later they all drew back to open a pathway for a much taller form, so enwrapped in a black cloak, so hooded that its features could not be distinguished, coming at a deliberate pace, seeming to lean now and then on a staff which overreached that hooded head in height.

Liara had heard in Lormt and had experienced for herself at least once, when she had fronted that head of stone, that evil had its own odor and so revealed itself for what it was to any of the Light. The Light—how much she could claim to be of that, she did not know. But this thing sickened her until she wanted to spew forth last night's food. A Sarn Rider? Though it was rumored that the Gray Ones were not too often in the company of such.

The staff swung forward and she could not turn her head quickly enough. Its point struck her grimed forehead directly between her white brows.

She felt something like a prick and then . . . nothingness—nothing at all.



Destree had depended so far on Chief as a guide. She was sure they had left the shrine just in time to escape another visit from the villagers and she went strongly believing that what she did was the Lady's will. Gruck seemed to agree to her leadership, but as he went he continually turned his head from side to side, obviously sniffing, now and then putting out a hand to touch a leaf, to point to one of those flying things which were like flowers on the wing.



With constant effort the Voice tried to mind-meet such unspoken queries with a name. Sometimes she was even shaken enough from her desire for haste to attempt to acquaint the stranger with the use of some herb he seemed to locate by instinct. They were powdered by flower petals brought by the rising wind and she knew that a storm was coming. They should find shelter, for these spring storms could turn, without warning, into raging torrents.

They found a mighty windfall, a tree which must have been a giant before some whirlwind ripped its roots free. Then Destree slipped off her pack, pulling grass and brush away from the fungi-spotted wood. Gruck needed no instructions, following her example. But it was he also who dragged up saplings he had harvested with ease and wove them into a roofing. They could not stand erect in their improvised shelter, but they had cover—and just in time.

The storm hit about sunset and they crowded together, Chief tucked between them, chewing on journey cake and looking out into a solid wall of rain.

Where go? Gruck's questing thought brought Destree out of a worry about a new patch on the shrine wall which might not perhaps hold against such an assault.

"Escore," she answered aloud, and then realized that meant nothing to her companion. She strove to picture that land as she had heard of it—a strange and eerie countryside filled with the remnants of many alien peoples, of the Light but still with thick pockets of Dark lingering within it.

From there—go home?

Destree knew that she could promise nothing. This was no child, nor, for all his appearance, some animal less in intelligence than human. He must have the truth, for only on truth could she build trust.

"There are those there"—she shaped her thoughts slowly, keeping one hand on Chief's soft fur as if that simple link could amplify what she would say—"who know much more than I. If there is a return for you—that they can tell."

He had turned his head a little away; she could only see the rounded shape of it staring out into the rain. His next attempt at



communication surprised her, for it no longer dealt with his gate passage.

This be rich—good land to grow. Its Alatar must love it much. She more felt than saw his hand go out and run along one of the sapling poles which supported their shelter. *Yet . . .* He hesitated so long that she thought he had closed the path of communication between them. Then he turned to look at her and she could see his eyes like luminous disks in the dark. *There is no guardsman here—none to listen—none to aid—not to fight—*

“Fight!” She was startled. What was this mountainous man-thing beside her used to standing guard against in his own woods?

That which takes but does not give . . . He appeared to be struggling for some way to explain. It was as if he could not altogether believe that she did not know what he meant.

“There is never a world without enemies,” was the best Destree could answer. “And this I must say in truth—the land toward which we travel has evils in plenty. One must be ever on guard.”

That is my calling, he returned. *For guard I am, and no place where there are growing things can be totally strange to me.*



She was having difficulty keeping awake and dozed off. When Destree roused in the dim morning light, Gruck was still sitting on his heels at the opening of the shelter, looking out into a world with a stare of such intensity that she believed in some way he was establishing odd ties of familiarity.

The storm had done them one favor. It had certainly delayed the chase after them and cloaked their trail. Even Foss, she hoped, could not pick up any hint of their passing.

One day was like another, except they grew to know more and more about each other. Destree watched with awe when her giant companion confronted a spotted tree cat ready to defend two kits with all the fury of her kind.

He knelt before the cat, which was already poised to spring, and, making a soft sound deep in his throat—not unlike Chief’s own purr—he laid down a woodsnark, one of the tree-boring lizards



which he had spent some time cutting loose from its inroads on one of the forest giants.

The tree cat snarled, but did not sound any battle cry. Belly against the ground, she crept forward and a paw flashed out with lightning speed to be set on the plump belly of the lizard. Then it and she were gone.

Destree saw him also standing in a brook in the fair light of morning, his golden belt with its heavy dangles of equipment laid aside, until he made the same lightning-swift move she had seen by the long-billed cranes, coming up with a fish for them to break their fast.

Nor did she try to disturb him on the day he discovered a vine withering where it lay upon the ground still half-wreathed about a broken branch and watched him loose the coils of the plant and transfer them with infinite care to another support near at hand.

In turn he was eager to learn from her what she knew of herbs and their uses. However, she harvested few of those that they found, as there was no way to dry them and perhaps no use for them in the future.

The girl kept no count of days and all she was sure of was that they headed northeast. Nor could she be sure if they had passed into Escore.

That they were not away from the ravages of mankind was brought abruptly home to them one day when an anguished scream cut through the air, startling them both to face in another direction.

Destree had no doubt that that was a death cry. She had known the perils of constant struggle too much in the past to escape knowing. Her hand went instantly to her amulet. For that had been a woman's scream.

Gruck was already striding in that direction, and for the first time she saw him free from his belt a rod which was short-sword long but held no cutting edge.

Now her wilderness-trained senses caught the scent of horses and men. She tugged at Gruck's thick arm.

"There may be many."

He made an odd noise and shook free of her grip, his long



strides, which she could not match, leaving her behind. Then she saw him level that rod of his, take aim through a break in foliage.

There was a shrill humming. Cries—death cries also. She clenched the amulet tightly. All knew that the Lady had Her dark side also—that She could deal death when that was demanded. Destree had not moved to stop Gruck.

They pushed through the bushes, Gruck seeming to have no dread of any opposition, to look out into a glade. Three in rusted mail, greasy skins, possessing such features as she did not care to look upon, lay on the ground, and beyond them a twisted white body.

She hurried to the victim—hardly more than a child. Destree straightened out the crumpled form and laid between the bruised and bleeding breasts the amulet.

“Lady, this one has suffered foully. But already You wipe away her tears and she knows no pain. May she go on happy feet through the Last Gate and find beyond all she had most longed for in her life.”

They laid the unknown girl in a pit scraped deep by Gruck’s great hands. It was he who reached high enough into a newly flowering tree to break blossoms for a blanket with which to cover her before they returned the earth into place.

He went then to the three horses, thin and showing the cruel marks of a whip, and took off their gear, freeing them from all restraint. But to the bodies of the murderers he paid no attention and she did not question him.

Rain began again like tears at what lay behind them as they started on. At last they made one of their camps, but it was clear that Chief was not at ease. He prowled back and forth before their small fire, now and then growling.

And he was still doing so when the amulet became like a lick of fire against Destree’s breast. This was the Lady’s call and she must answer. Sure of that, she said nothing to Gruck, but started at a steady trot into the rain. Chief, for all his hatred of the water, with her. But Gruck padded not far behind.

Stench—of vile filth—or evil! How far they had come from their camp Destree did not know, but that what lay before them was



truly of the Dark she understood. She slowed pace but did not stop. She gestured caution to Gruck, who nodded.

If those gathered there had out sentries, such had neglected their stations in order to watch what was happening. Gray Ones—and a goodly-sized pack of them! They had formed an irregular circle. In the midst of that was a captive. So white was this bare body that it seemed to glow. And over it stood cloaked and hooded one who was not of the pack.

Gruck moved out to where he might be sighted before she could do anything to stop him. He held again that light rod, but this time balanced for throwing, and even as she moved to urge him back, the alien weapon had left his hold. There came a high whistling and the hooded one jerked his head up. He half raised his staff and from its knotted top glowed sullen red light.

But the alien weapon reached its mark first. And the figure collapsed as speedily as if there had never been a form within to hold the cloak upright.

From Gunnora's amulet came a spreading ring of light. Destree heard growls and then screams from the Gray Ones as they lurched back and away from the bundle of clothes and the white body beside it.

CHAPTER EIGHT



Unknown South Karsten

“*S*he’s gone!” Keris had backtracked and—with more effort than he thought dealing with any animals could require—herded the pack train. Only the fact that the ponies were linked nose to tail



had given him any aid. The slightly larger beast Liara had ridden followed its kind without protest.

“Taken!” The Lady Eleeri started forward, when Mouse’s hand came out to stay her.

“Not as you think. She went as her own will drew her, for she feared that which she believes she carries within.”

Their party had drawn in about the small, gray-robed figure of the witchling.

“But,” for some reason Keris found himself protesting, “was she not tested at Lornt? If there was the touch of the Dark on her—surely she was no adept to be able to conceal such—from you, from your sisters!”

“She is not of the Dark, though through her blood she could be so governed—by a master Power. They call themselves hounds, these of Alizon”—her small face was very sober—“and through countless years of their fostering of such packs, who can say what trait could be absorbed?”

“But”—now it was the Lady Eleeri who spoke—“did you not choose her to this company?”

A shadow of distress was on Mouse’s features now. “I did not choose, Lady. This”—she held out her jewel—“drew me to her, even as it did to all of you here, woman, man, Renthan, Keplian. We have a place, each of us, in this venture, and Liara has not yet played out her part. She must go her own way for a space. Now”—she gave a small shrug as if to dismiss the subject—“let us to what this would find.” She was already moving, the jewel held out before her.

They had dismounted among this place of stone tree trunks, for the footing was rough and they could move only slowly. Sometimes there were cracks in the surface of the ground in which it would be only too easy to catch a hoof.

The desolation about them, the ever-soaking rain, made Keris feel as if they had been captured by one of those fabled gates and shaken into a world which was no longer that he knew. Jasta was surefooted, yet he dropped a little behind, coming up behind the



pack ponies. And his presence seemed to subdue their stubbornness, for they followed Keris's tugging with no great protests.

The pillar trees gave way to a wide-open space. Open to the sky but not to the traveler—for in its center rose such a strange bulk that they halted at the very edge of the pillar land and stood staring at it.

Whereas the other gates the witch jewels had drawn them to were indeed worn away by centuries, this squatting erection made one uneasy to look upon. Keris remembered those strange shapes which abode in the otherworld of that Dark Tower where three of this party had ventured to save a life—and a spirit.

Massive, with no sign about it that it had been in any way pieced together, it was gray-green in color and, like the serpent head which they had buried, fashioned in a form which could only have served the Dark.

Its limbs were pressed tightly to the ground and its back was a warty hump. The face—if that which was at the fore of its ball head could be called face—was plainly close to that of the small, water-dwelling amphibians Keris knew from childhood. Jaws gaped for at least half the length of the head. There was no visible nose, nor any eyes; the warty skin stretched unbroken from jaw to crown of head.

Theela reared on her hind legs and trumpeted a challenge, the fierce blue of her eyes gleaming ever stronger. Those about her were making warding signs. That there was nothing to come from here but evil struck them all.

Although the Lady Eleeri tried to stop her, Mouse moved out of the group now clustered, gathering close as if human and beast sought protection in the presence of each other.

The light of her jewel flickered and Mouse stared ahead. She had taken only a step or so and now she stood still. Her voice, soft as it was, reached them clearly.

“This is—aware. . . .”

Keris's shoulder nudged again Jasta's sleek hide. No dead gate this, but perhaps one which at any moment might suck them in



through that great mouth, or spit out at them some new horror hitherto unknown.

“Theela.” To Keris’s surprise it was the Keplian mare Mouse summoned. “Eleeri, Romar.” She added, then, the names of the other Keplians. Keris was left as Jasta moved forward, though Mouse had not named him. It was a strange company now fronting the lowering thing. Keris knew that the Lady Eleeri possessed Powers, some not even of this world, since she was one who had come through a gate. And the Lord Romar who was her mate had been greatly tried in battle with evil and come forth one of the conquerors.

He could see that even as they stepped forward, the hands of the two humans were moving in gestures, though they drew no weapons. The Keplians—who, until the Lady Eleeri had broken an ancient spell, had served the Dark—went mainly unwillingly. But these Keplians were free, and somehow, even as he stood some distance away, Keris could feel a backwash of Power generated by the three black forms—while Jasta, he was well aware, held within him that talent which was born in all his kind.

“Can it be locked?” The voice of the Lady Eleeri was very steady as she asked that. She had flung one arm over Theela.

“That we have not learned.” Mouse cradled her jewel in her two hands to press it against her forehead. “They search at Lormt—but we have not discovered how to seal a gate. If it *were* ever known. We cannot seal, but we can wall.”

Lord Romar nodded as if he understood at once what she suggested. He moved to take Eleeri’s free hand, though she kept still her touch on Theela.

“Widdershins,” Mouse said, and turned. Lord Romar followed, bringing with him his lady and Theela. Behind them abreast came the two other Keplians and Jasta.

They went slowly and Keris saw the lips of the three who were human moving, though he could distinguish no words. However, he was sure that what they uttered were the spells in which they most trusted.

The animals almost appeared to shimmer. In spite of the rain,



there was a glistening gleam to all their coats and they kept carefully in line as they went. Three times that strange party made a wide circle about the drop-jawed thing.

The power they called touched those who waited. Both falcons suddenly took wing to soar above the bulk, weaving back and forth in graceful flight. And Keris found himself repeating words which held no meaning but had somehow reached into him to be uttered aloud.

There was movement within that gaping mouth, a thick black line, like one of the anchor ropes of the Sulcars thrust out. But in that moment Keris, for a second, caught sight of something else. There was a change in the fall of the rain. It seemed to thicken heavily, to form a wall along the path the dealers in Power traveled.

He was never truly sure, though the memory of it held through the years, if he had indeed witnessed it—that that rope had come within touching distance of the half-illusionary wall and been snapped back.

Those who had spun the web came back to the others.

“We must find a place—away from here,” Mouse said hurriedly. “For I must report to those at Lorimt. An evil active gate—that must be known. Our walling cannot hold for long—but it may be that my sisters can reinforce warding from afar.”

So they trailed once more through the pillar forest and came at last to normal-looking land. It was dusk before they reached soil which bore living green bordering on a river, and beside it they set up their camp. At least with the coming of night the rain ceased and they were able to build a fire and attempt to dry out clothing and eat a larger meal than the last two they had allowed themselves.

Mouse withdrew to a small private place they had made for her by piling the packs together. And Keris went on watch, sharing duties with Vutch and Vorick. Lord Romar was using a rather wan light given off by a ball he carried in his wallet, which he brought out but seldom, to light his additions to the map he carried of their day's passage. They must be close to the south border of Karsten, but this was country Denever did not know. He had led them as



best he could through those portions of the rough land which would give them cover. And he had volunteered to scout to the east, which project they were discussing this night.

Keris was glad to be free of his guardianship of the pack train. Even with Jasta's help he found the balky and sullen ponies hard to manage. Yet Liara had never appeared to have much trouble with them.

Liara—and the Gray Ones. For the first time Keris wondered at Mouse's easy acceptance of the girl's disappearance. To be untalented among those with power was to be as one blind or deaf, he thought suddenly. He knew that the Alizondern girl was not accepted cheerfully by the company—the Falconers and Borderers had fought her kind too often. And, considering the age-old hatred the witches had held for them, he wondered that she had been so openly made welcome at Lormt. However, it was also known that those who were struggling there to untangle old knowledge for the good of all did have some odd connection with the hounds.

Where was she tonight? He wondered. She had taken a pack from their stores, but it had only been a small one and he was sure she had no experience in living off the land. Gray Ones—his hand went now to his own belt.

He had forgotten that—the knife with a blade of quan iron which he had found in the curiously withered body after their battle. He knew of Liara's skill and he was certain that the knife was hers—he should have returned it to her. That lapse picked at his mind as he kept sentry.

Denever did head off the next morning, striking farther east and going alone except for his Torgian. Mouse seemed to be at ease; whether she had indeed enlisted some distant Power to hold the gate, she did not say. However, she had another report for them.

In all, nine gates had been located in Escore, where the abundance of talent made the project easier. Five showed signs of life and were under guard. Marshal Koris's searching parties in Estcarp had added three more to the total of those discovered in their own territory. One of these appeared dead but was being watched just the same, and the other two quiescent. Keris was certain that those



must have been dealt with temporarily as had that one they themselves had found the day before.

“Was there ever any record,” the Lady Eleeri asked when Mouse was done with her report, “how many adepts ventured into this wandering worlds scheme—any list of who they were and their own homes?”

“That is now with Hilarion and Kaththea,” Mouse replied. “Hilarion reported two gates of his own and he deactivated them as well as he could. But the adepts were not friendly among themselves. It was their pleasure to make some new find and astonish their fellows, but not explain how they achieved the results they paraded later. However”—her small face was drawn and tired—“most of the Old Ones were of Escore and Arvon—that was the world before the Great Battle broke all apart. Therefore what we may find here in the south are the works of either wanderers, more than usual distrustful of their kind, or of refugees who were scattered after the First Ending.”

They did not push on that day. It was plain that the expenditure of talent had been hard on both human and animals. The two Borderers fished to good results and Keris on Jasta, with Falconer Krispin, went hunting. They brought down a good-sized pronghorn and Farwing took four grass hens—such abundance of meat to build up their dwindling stores as they lingered for a second and then a third day to dry it, waiting for Denever’s return and some report as to what lay downriver and whether they might expect to run into some of the roving parties which seemed now to provide Karsten’s fate.

During a second such hunt on the following day they came across evidence that Karsten still had pockets of life strong enough to hold the chaos at bay. Farwing, on scout, picked out what lay ahead, reporting to Krispin.

“A road”—the Falconer smoothed the head of his feathered companion with a finger—“and apparently one in use. Farwing saw a party traveling it. Perhaps we should take a look for ourselves.”

Better know the worst as soon as one could, Keris silently



agreed. If their present camp by the river was not at the edge of an overgrown wilderness, but rather bordered on inhabited holdings, they must be ready to move on.

They dismounted, and Jasta drifted a little ahead as scout. Following him, Keris and the Falconer came through a narrow ravine which provided a path for a small stream with bush growth enough to afford them cover.

There ran the road, rightly enough, and Keris was quick to take the meaning of that space on either side: not quite as wide as an arrow flight, but obviously cleared, so that an ambush would be hard to set.

Whoever ruled this part of the sadly war-torn land had the will and power enough to keep open roads. And roads meant not only quicker movement for armed forces but also for traders. Where went traders there was peace, even if an uneasy one.

The road ran across the stream with no benefit of bridging and Keris guessed there was either a ford or just a shallow flow of water.

The party Farwing had sighted was already close to the fording. There rode a cluster of armed guards and within their circle of protection a litter swung between two sturdy horses, brightly curtained though somewhat tarnished by road dust. A section of this had been looped back that the rider within could view the scene. Keris caught sight of a rich-colored robe which could only be that of a noblewoman, and he saw a silver-banded arm fast-closed about a small, struggling child who was red in the face and screaming as it tried to free itself from restraint.

Behind the litter came three women in more sober garb, their heads nearly hidden by winged caps, mounted on slow-pacing horses. Then more guards. They all held to the plodding speed of the litter horses, though Keris noted that several of the men acted as outriders, seeking the very verge of the cut-back growth for their passage.

"Luscan!" That sharp exclamation from his own companion was startling. Just as the Falconer had spoken, so did the bird on its saddle-horn perch let shrill a carrying cry.

There was instant answer from the wayfarers. The guard split



smoothly in two, one half taking their places around the litter and the women riders, the three closest headed toward the ravine while their companions maneuvered to withstand a charge.

Before Keris could move, Krispin sent his mount forward as his bird uttered another screaming call. Then Keris noted that two of the guards wore the equipment of Falconers. Their own birds were mantling and quickly answered Farwing's cries.

One of the three Falconers below pushed up the bird-beaked visor of his falcon helm.

"You ride, Brother of the Eyrie, on oath?" The part of his face Keris could see was that of a much older man, and a seamed scar lifted the corner of his lip to one side.

"I ride on oath," Krispin answered steadily. "I ride in no quarrel against the brotherhood—though the Eyrie no longer exists."

The guardsmen below were taking their cues from the Falconers. There were hands on sword hilts and bows well forward, but they seemed willing that, in this, their own fellow traveler take the lead.

Krispin lifted his own beaked visor and then, as if to make his identity certain to the other, he took off that helm entirely.

"You are Luscan of the Barred Wing Flight," he said. "I was fledgling in the season you took flight command."

"And who was your trainer then?" came quick demand.

"Asshfar—but he took flight long since, even before the rending of the Border."

"Asshfar," the other repeated. "So, boy, what do you now—play blank shield as the rest of us to scrape a living?" His twisted mouth was a sneer.

"I have taken service as my flight commander bade me—"

"With Baron Jerme? You ride boldly enough on his land."

"Cross it only. Those I ride with have a geas set."

Luscan stared at him. "What does witchery and geas have to do with an honest fighting man?"

"Perhaps much. But this I will swear to—by sword and blood, talon and beak—we come not to trouble any dweller on this land." He hesitated and then added in a voice which was a tone sharper, "Be they of the Light."



Luscan grunted, but it was plain that the oath Krispin had offered was binding to him.

“Whose shield badge do you raise?” he asked in a slightly less arrogant tone.

“That of two lands, perhaps even of Karsten, since that which we seek lies also here, as we have already proven twice.”

“Riddles!” That rather querulous voice came from the woman in the litter. “Speak plain or be taken for what you are—masterless and eager to profit by such freedom.”

The two other Falconers urged their mounts a few steps forward until all three faced Krispin. Keris tensed, knowing that if this turned from speech to sword, he would have a part in it.

“There is threat of the Dark for all men of good spirit.” Krispin made no move to resume his helm. “We come out of Estcarp, out of Escore, out of Lormt, to seek the seeds of death.”

“Witches!” Again it was the woman who spoke. “Have they not brought enough death upon us? Where lies my dear first lord, servant of ill power? Under the rocks of the mountains, lost forever.”

Her voice was nearly lost in a rush of wings. All four of the falcons had, by no order Keris was aware of, taken flight. At the same time Jasta’s warning hit him:

Trouble. An ambush set and now they grow impatient. Their master is not an easy one.

Down the stretch of road still before the cortege there frothed and bubbled, rising out of the grass of the verge, their natural hiding place, rasti—the great rat things who lived only to kill and eat.

Perhaps the scouts had not sighted this because they had been seeking more normal dangers. The screams of the women rang as high and violent as the neighing of the frightened horses. Though they might grow no longer than a man’s forearm, yet rasti in a pack could well bring down a horse and rider.

Keris raised his voice in the Valley battle cry. “Light for sword—Light,” and Jasta bore him forward at a run. They met with the tail end of the pack. Jasta’s head went down. He caught one of the bloated brown bodies, snapped and flung it into the midst of the



others, while he reared on high feet to bring forehooves into smashing play.

Keris fell into the familiar rhythm he had known ever since he had first ridden forth with Kyllan. He had left sword in scabbard. In his hand the fire lash of the Valley guard cut down into the pack and the screaming of those he seared ended as their own fellows turned upon them. For that was the nature of the foul beasts: Often they could be turned from their attack in order to satisfy their ravenous hunger on the bodies of their own kind.

Keris cut a path through the pack before they seemed truly aware of what enemy harassed them. Then Jasta wheeled and back they went, the flame lash sending sparks of light to catch in the fur of those it did not actually touch.

He was no longer alone in the battle, but was aware of war-trained Torgians stamping and rearing—though the steel used by their riders was far less efficient than the weapon from the Valley.

Keris was aware of a falcon in dive, turned to one side, and quickly reversed the swing of his whip to kill the rasti attacking from his left. The smell of scorched flesh and blood was like a mist rising among them.

He saw suddenly a block of the creatures heading for the horses of the litter. Those huge animals went wild, screaming and rearing. The litter came free at one pole, throwing into the dust of the road the child while the woman hurled herself after to protect the little one with her own body.

Now he must use care. The plunging of the litter beasts continued, along with their screaming, as brown bodies leaped out of the dust to sink teeth into their flesh. Hampered as they were by the remains of the litter, they had little chance of defending themselves.

But it was the woman and child which mattered. Jasta needed no word from him. The Renthian took a great leap and landed directly on the first of those razor-toothed creatures. Keris was instantly out of the saddle, before the woman. He shortened the lash, burning his fingers in the process. But now he could stand and



beat down the rasti, while the woman had curled herself into a kind of ball, the child unseen in her clutching arms.

They came—three times—and their attacks were such that he could somehow believe the woman and the child were their primary prey. But it was also plain to him that this horde had never before faced the fire lash and they had no defense against its measured swing.

Then . . . he stood faced by a mound of dead beasts. None of those stirred.

They are dead, Jasta reported. There was a long streak of blood down one leg of the Renthian and he lowered his horned head to lick at the wound. Save for the pain in his hands where he had shortened the lash in midst of battle, Keris was untouched. But having relooped the lash, he went down on his knees beside the woman, laying a hand gently on her shoulder.

She quivered and cried out, a small, whimpering sound.

“They are all dead, Lady. But did any reach you? Such wounds must be quickly treated.”

Her elaborate headdress slid into the dust as she at last raised her head. Then Keris was elbowed aside by one of the other women as they gathered about her. From what he could see, neither she nor the child had been touched.

“You, youngling.” Keris swung around with a snarl and found himself looking up into the face of Luscan. The Falconer’s mount ran blood in several places and he himself showed a growing spot of crimson on one leg. “You are no fledgling of any flight I have heard of—nor do you fight as any I have seen. Who and what are you?” This harsh demand on the part of the older Falconer sparked Keris’s anger.

“I am no birdman.” He used the common word for Falconer and did it deliberately. “I am Keris Tregarth out of the Green Valley—but doubtless you have never heard of either my house or my home.”

“Tregarth—he was at the taking of Gorm,” Luscan said slowly.



“But you are a youth and he was a seasoned fighting man of perhaps three times your years.”

“He is my grandfather,” Keris replied shortly.

“Yes, your people keep records of their get.” The older Falconer nodded. “Also I am not as ignorant as you think, fledgling, for I have heard of the Green Valley and those that kept alive the Light through all the Darkness. What other power have you beside that fire which answers to your will?”

Keris shrugged. “What I have been taught, I know.” It was no business of this man that he did not carry the talent which should have been his birthright.

“And to some purpose.” Luscan nodded. “It was fortune’s favor that your shield man stopped us here. Had we ridden into that . . .” He looked at the mound of rasti bodies.

The train was beginning to sort itself out into some kind of order again, though they did so after sending scouts, who not only viewed the distance for any movement but also used spears to stir the verge grass—though Keris believed that another attack was not imminent.

That rasti and Gray Ones roamed these southern lands was not good hearing. It had always been thought that both species never ventured far out of Escore. And he had no desire to be trailed by another such pack as this one.

The woman sent for him before he prepared to ride—for this news must be taken quickly to those they had left behind.

She was very pale and when she tried to speak, the words came one by one.

“They—tell—me—you—are of a great house of the north.” Now she was growing more eloquent. “That I can believe. Also that you mean us no harm. If any stop you this side of the river, show them this.” She jerked impatiently at a coinlike pendant hanging on a bedraggled ribbon around her throat. “Blood debt is owed. I, of the House of Righon, do swear to that.”

The old formal words used in ceremony came back to him as if from another life, and he thanked her.

Meanwhile Krispin was gathering from the now-free speech of



the guards much information about the countryside and which lords might welcome and which might hunt them down merely because they rode out of the north.

With the smell of blood still in his nose, Keris started back to the river camp. They might not be bringing meat this time, but he knew that the information would be very welcome to the party.

CHAPTER NINE



Lornt, South Karsten

The two women in the small room faced each other. Both were well wrapped in shawls, as the chill given off by the walls could be piercing if one lingered for any length of time.

Lady Mereth strove to settle herself more comfortably on the cushioned seat of her wheeled chair. Her writing slate was in her lap, but she only fingered her chalk, did not put it to use.

The gray-robed woman opposite her displayed features sharp nearly as a hawk's. On her breast rested a dull jewel, but her hands were busy with something else, a ball of pearllike glimmer with glints of color showing for an instant now and then. Gull, leader of the witches in Lornt, stared down at this as if, though it lay within her grasp, she feared its touch. Finally she spoke, her voice a monotone. She might have been trying to stifle in part what she must say:

“Five reports of evil moving—and all from the south borders. Yet our gate hunters surely have not awakened all this. Something else draws our ancient foes.”

Lady Mereth's chalk squeaked. “Draws?”

She saw Gull tense, and the witch did not answer directly. “Sarn



Riders, Gray Ones . . . rasti, even, which are usually herded only by their appetites. And certain others, ones who have never actively risen against the patrols of Light, yet did not welcome ever our coming into their territories. Now they sweep south. Are they drawn, you ask? I needs must say yes. Last night Mouse reached us with a tale of a rasti attack near the border of Var—clear across Karsten, even as they met with Gray Ones just a little earlier.

“That gate they found—it was awakening. It takes four of the sisters now to keep steady watch, to hold the cover on it, and our number are limited. Yes.” She pressed her hands tightly about the ball. “However, I do not believe it is that gaping evil they seek, these southbound ones.”

“A greater one?” Lady Mereth wrote.

Gull nodded. “The fire of magic struck far when the Magestone went from us. Such could awaken the Dark as well as the Light. Now those of Escore sweep their southward borders and report this exodus which has never been known.”

“We have found many accounts of the Mage Wars here since we started a distinct hunt for such,” Lady Mereth wrote. “Yet there was something else mentioned several times—ask Morfew if you wish a full account. Power is of the land, it courses under the surface like unseen rivers of everlasting fire. Therefore those who deal with that power, or are born of dealings with it, instinctively do not venture too far beyond the sources they feel. Karsten never knew Gray Ones, except perhaps a small band or two on a quick raid, and then just along the Border.” As Gull read and nodded, Lady Mereth erased the filled slate and wrote again. “Rasti, the Lady Eleeri knew, but that again was in the Borderlands. These other presences you mention, have they ever stirred far from their native haunts before?”

“None such has been reported in our time.”

“The worst that any gate threw upon this world,” the chalk moved on, “was the Kolder. And from all accounts their gate was opened from the other side. But what, Learned Sister, if there now waits a gate in the south, perhaps controlled by a force beyond our knowing, which has found some barrier weakened and now summons to aid that to which it is akin?”



Gull's clutch on the ball was now so tight that it would seem her fingers were sinking into it.

"Yes." Her voice was a mere whisper of sound. "And Hilarion can no longer raise Alon in Arvon. Garth Howell"—she spat the name with a cat's hiss—"is not Lormt but it also harbors secrets.

"But do we suggest sending an army south—when we know so little?"

Mereth sighed and squirmed again against her cushions.

"Learned Sister, already time treads fast. Crops must be harvested to the last grain stalk, the smallest apple. There is no way Marshal Koris can call levies to arms without visible cause in Est-carp. While those who police Escore now have all they can do."

"So." Gull's word was almost a verdict. "We wait—let us hope for not too long."

Lady Mereth thought of the small party struggling into the unknown land so far away and sighed. Marshal Duratan could release no more than a squad. Even if they sent out a call for unpledged Falconers they could put no true army in the field. She wondered what happened now in her beloved Dales land. The triune of lords who established a loose rule after the invasion by Alizon might not even be still in existence. As for what might rise in Arvon—one guess was only worth another. That they had lost contact with Alon had sent Hilarion back to his own castle, to labor with the same equipment he had used before.

"Mouse . . . she is very young. . . ." Mereth touched on a subject which had bothered her from the first.

Gull did not turn her eyes away. "Mouse"—her monotone was even softer—"is one such as comes to us perhaps once in a hundred generations. She will be one of the greatest All Mothers we have ever had. But the finest sword must be well tempered before it is readied for battle. Already her sending is such as few can equal. Look you—"

She steadied the pearly ball on her knee, her fingers well to its bottom so as not to hide the sides. Lady Mereth made the effort to lean forward as far as she could.

Gazing balls she knew well, but this was not crystal as the others she had seen. Now the colors on its surface grew sharper,



flowed, thickened, until she had an eerie sensation that she was something mighty and beyond human looking down upon a world in space.

Figures moved there, grew sharper, became recognizable. Travel-worn they were, honed to the point that Mereth understood them to be at their most alert. She studied them face by face—but—

“Liara is not with them!” she wrote.

“Liara made a choice— No,” Gull was quick to answer as Mereth’s protest could be read in her face. “Not one of the Dark—rather more greatly of the Light than she knew. Her part is not yet—nor can we be sure what it shall be.” Gull leaned closer to the ball. “Mouse, sisterling,” she called.

Then the world Mereth surveyed was blotted out by a small, sun-browned face. But the eyes . . . those did not belong to any child.

Lips moved, but it was in her head not with her ears that Mereth heard the answer.

“The land seems barren of people, but before us once more stand mountains, and our scouts ride to search out some possible path. We have seen no more of the Dark Ones, but there have been traces—things move in the night and only the strength of the Light hides us. There is something astir—though still far away—yet it is not to be denied.”

“Heard and understood, sisterling. If you need heart power, call—all we can raise will be yours.”

It was only a pearl-colored ball again. Gull leaned back in her own chair, appearing more gaunt. “South—ever south.”

“May the Blessing of the Flame be theirs,” Mereth wrote the age-old prayer, one she had not used for years, and then added:

“But what we can all do we shall, and Lormt’s secrets are unending.”



The mountains rose before them, clothed for half their heights with heavy growth so dark green as to seem nearly black. The travelers had long ago left behind them any sign of man’s work, though they knew that to the west lay the wide valley of Var and its city.



Here there were not even game trails, and both birds and animals seemed very few.

When they camped at night they drew close together, human and animal. Even the ponies no longer showed any stubbornness about being picketed close to the campfire.

It was Keris who blurted out on their third night of attempting to find passage south something which he believed they must have all noticed.

“Rasti—Gray Ones—I found a paw print in the mud of a spring this afternoon. Do they accompany us but are not yet ready to attack?”

Krispin, as usual, had settled Farwing on the horn of the saddle he had loosed from his horse. “They come, yes. But that they hunt *us* . . . I wonder.”

They are called. No one could mistake the snappish mind-voice of the Keplian Theela.

“Called!” Keris’s hand instantly went to the butt of his flame lash.

The mare was far enough into the circle of the firelight that they could see her nod her head like a human.

Something seeks—that which answers it comes.

Now all their heads swung toward Mouse.

“That which the Dark bred, held as liege in Escore, is moving south. I think we shall find it also. Whether we can deal with it . . .” Her child’s face was set as that of a woman facing some dangerous task. “But it is there—it waits.”

Though all his life he had called the Green Valley home, known the peace which dwelt there past all troubling, still Keris had always been aware that that was only a small fortification against what might roam beyond. Clans of the Old Ones years earlier, hunted out of Karsten, had been led by his own father to the resettlement of land about the Valley. Scouts rode many ways and there were some portions of Escore in which fury only drowsed and might awake at any time.

That ancient enemies were also journeying south was a hard thought for them all. Though they controlled many talents and



Powers among them, they were but a handful, and who had yet been able to count the enemy?

There was one question which concerned them and it was Jasta's mind-speech which stated it. *A gate—already used by the Dark—a force drawing ready to strike northward?*

"There is this," Mouse answered slowly. "It has long been known that each land holds its own power which nourishes and supports those who are able to draw upon it, knowing or unknowing. The Gray Ones—the rasti—are of Escore. So it is true of the Sarn Riders, though such we have not seen trace of. They are not attuned to what lies here." She put her hand flat down on the ground before her. "This will nourish, even as earth nourishes seed and root, only what is native to it. The farther one strays from one's own place, the less power. . . ."

"Lady Mouse." It was Denever who had moved to face her straightly. "We of Karsten who were not of the Old Race had no earth-born power—that was why the Kolders forced the old duke to put your Old Ones to the horn. I served Duke Pagan because I was liege man to Lord Grisham and my oath was given him. I rode the north part of this country as my lord's man and though there were places, yes, which we avoided because of the Old Ones' honoring, yet never did any witchery arise. If the power of their land could not save the Old Ones at the time of the Horning—and they did have witchery—weak indeed must it be. It may well be true that the evil of Escore flits south now but will this land then turn against those who are of it?"

"No one, living or perhaps among those Gone Beyond," Mouse answered him, "can unriddle the way of power. This much I have learned. My own"—her hand was on her jewel now—"takes longer for its raising, demands a greater price when I use it. And we are far from Estcarp."

Be not so sure, Witch Maid. Theela's thought struck deep. *You speak of powers within the earth—well, some be of the Light. Have not your own kind said Light draws light?*

"As Dark draws dark," Keris said flatly. "However, this much I know from scouting in Escore. Gray Ones—and rasti—do not like



the cold of heights, nor overmuch the shadowing of any forest. Both face us now.”

“Right,” Krispin cut in. “And do we have any choice?”

The Lady Eleeri shifted. She had been inspecting a coil of bow strings, testing each as it lay across her knee. “No. It is south. And do you forget Sebra’s find today?”

The Keplians took turns running loose, yet one always seemed to be well to the fore of the party when they set out each morning. Sometimes the sleek, beautiful animals disappeared for half a day or more, which never seemed to bother either the Lady Eleeri or her Lord.

Yes. The new Keplian mind-voice was less strident than that of the mare, but still well assured. *There is a canyon. The stream in it is low—there is forage in plenty and as one goes—it climbs.*

“With the dawn we send our feathered brothers.” Krispin was smoothing the head of his own falcon. “Their sight is keenest of all.”

So it was decided. Keris took his share of sentry duty and, when relieved, wrapped himself in his bedroll. They had camped in a half clearing, backed on one side by the rise of a low cliff. The heat of the fire he had just fed before he went to rest was reflected back by the stone, though it was chill and damp even a foot or so away.



It seemed as though he had been asleep for only a moment when—he was elsewhere!

He crouched belly down to the earth, seeking somehow to become a very part of it, not to be identified. His heart was pounding and his mouth was dry. No man lives without feeling the touch of fear, but what Keris suffered now was an all-encompassing terror. Yet something kept him from yielding what remained of his rational self to this assault.

Before him was a clear space in which stood a rough monolith, perhaps worn by ages of wind, so that its true nature could no longer be distinguished. But it gave off light and that deepened, spread. Light that was blue.

The fear which held him planted was as heavy as if a great beast’s



paw pinned him down. He could only watch helplessly what was happening before him.

At the foot of the time-battered statue stood a woman. And there was about her now the same air of command as he had many times seen—in his mother, in the witches. She was dressed in rough trail clothing; there was a pack at her feet as if she had shifted it to free herself for battle. However, though she wore steel, she had not drawn any blade; instead, much like the witchling Mouse, she held something in her hand which glowed.

She was not the only one who had gone to earth there. Keris could see, only partly behind her as if a body rested behind the discarded pack, the limbs of another, slighter form.

Strangest of all was her second companion. The creature towered well above the natural height of any man the Escorian had ever seen and it was completely covered with frizzled fur. Yet it stood on hind legs and wore about its middle a wide belt, glistening in the light, from which hung a number of artifacts.

“By the Power of the Maid, by the Power of the Woman, by the dire Power of the Hag . . .” the words beat into his brain and it seemed to him that that pressure which held him captive shifted a little. “By the Power of earth from which we come, to which we return in our allotted time, by the Power of the sky where rides Our Lady’s Own Token, by the air we breathe, by the fire which serves us—by this very land—show yourself for what you be, shadow of shadows, Dark out of Dark!”

The hairy creature had freed a rod from its belt and held it as a man might hold a familiar weapon.

“Show yourself!” Her words rang again as a battle cry.

That which had held Keris eased. He saw a curl of movement just beyond the edge of the blue radiance. And he wanted nothing more than to drop his head upon his arm, not to see—*that!*

What human could shape words to describe such a thing? Bile rose in his throat to choke him and he swallowed convulsively.

“Face now Her wrath—for you are unclean, not of the Light. Face Her . . . Sardox!”

The shadowy coils wavered. He could feel the menace in them still.



There shall come a reckoning, earth slut. No voice—only a thought. And now this much Sardox lays upon you and those beings you think to shield—for certain laws hold both Dark and Light. You have challenged me, setting yourself up as a champion of that feeble Lady of yours. Therefore from this hour forth you shall travel as MY will takes you, that we shall meet again!

The woman laughed. “Brave words, Sardox. You have striven to break my ties with the Lady for three days—and even that you cannot do, for this earth answers not to you. Only my Lady can name me champion—and I am but one of the least of her servants. Still this night you have not taken me or those with me. Get you to *your* lord and answer to him for your defeat!”



“Keris! Keris!”

His body was whirling through a vast space—there was nothing to which he could cling; rather, he was a plaything of such winds as his world did not know.

“Keris!”

He could not even move his jaws, his tongue, his thought to answer.

“Keris!”

First it was like a stab of pain, and then it was an end to all fear, freeing him from the place of winds. He became aware he was panting, as worn as if he had raced heedlessly up some mountain slope. Then he opened his eyes and saw first that comforting beam of light and then Mouse’s small anxious face behind it. He was no longer wrapped in his bedroll but was lying with his head on the Lady Eleeri’s knee, and she was wiping his face with a dampened cloth which smelled wonderfully of herbs so that for a moment he could believe himself back in the Green Valley.

Dawn light gave those gathered about him substance and he could read the concern on all their faces.

“I—” his voice sounded like the croak of some swamp-born thing. “It—it must have been a dream!”

Mouse was shaking her head slowly. “It was a sending, a true



sending. Though why it came to you—” There was a shadow of surprise on her face now.

He could only remember for an instant his old pain. “True. I have no talent, halfling though I am.”

“We are what the Great Ones make of us,” she returned. “But speak now of this sending—for it was meant for us and we must know.”

Then Keris launched into a description of his vision, dream, sending, or whatever it might have been, and found that it was easy to remember the smallest details as he continued.

As he described the woman he had seen standing battle-ready against that which flowed in the Dark, Mouse nodded.

“So,” she said now, and her jewel glinted the brighter for a second, “now the Oldest Ones stir. Gunnora.” She bowed her head as if she were paying homage to some great one of her own craft. “From the world itself comes Her Power—when we evoked the changing of the mountains, so did we deal with Her. Our roads led to the same goal but have ever been apart. Say once more these words Her Voice spoke.”

Keris discovered that he could recall them now as easily as if he read them from a written page held before his eyes.

Sardox! It was the mind-voice of Jasta which cut through the end of that retelling. They all looked to the Renthana.

Jasta tossed his horned head high. *Each people,* he said, *have their memories. We remember Sardox, for it was he who wrought until he brought forth the Sarn Riders, and worse. It was thought that he was snuffed out in the Great Battle. And now it seems he looks south.*

Keris was aware of a shifting among those who ringed him in. Trusted and tried as they were—yet no man of his time could imagine facing the wrath of those who had moved before the ancient First Breaking of the World.

“So”—the Lady Eleeri drew her herb-scented swab across his forehead for the last time—“we ride. And in the way Sebra has scouted.”

Vutch took his place with the pack ponies, though Keris had



hoped that it was not apparent he found so difficult the everyday actions necessary for breaking camp. That he could hold to his seat on Jasta without faltering gave him something of encouragement and he was eager to leave what had become to him an ill-omened place. But Mouse's mare matched pace with Jasta, and for that he was not so happy.

That he had been struck down by the Power of a known source lay deep in his mind, and he feared that memory now. Never would he forget that force which had pressed him, into the ground, held him captive while it reached for its more potent foe.

He tried to fix his mind more on that huge, hairy creature which companied with the priestess. It was totally unlike any he had ever seen in Escore, which was alive with oddities, for it was there that the most unscrupulous of the adepts had wrought that greatest evil of all, dabbling in the very stuff of life to form new species for their profit or pleasure. He knew well the earth-dwelling Fos, the water-needing Krogan, the Flannen. Jasta, good friend and comrade, was also of such begetting.

And there were the Gray Ones, the rasti, the Sarn, and now this last invisible thing which had brought to such a high pitch all the fear his own body could generate.

Perhaps the witch could read his mind, for it was as if she had followed his thoughts.

"This hairy one"—she might have now been speaking aloud her own thoughts—"its like is listed nowhere. Yet it is of the Light or it could not have so stood within the circle of Gunnora's service. It may add much to our own knowledge when we meet with these other travelers." She spoke confidently, as if she expected to come across them at the next curve of the passage.

They had not gone far down it, both falcons aloft, Shama himself playing advance scout, when the Lady Eleeri's Theela stopped short, whether at her own wish or her rider's, Keris could not tell. However, the Lady was leaning forward on the Keplian's back staring at the rise of the canyon wall.

The sun did not strike directly into this cut and, as Sebra had



observed, it gradually sloped upward, leaving the running stream an arm's length below. Yet the daylight was clear enough to show that that greenish surface was not featureless stone.

Instead shadows flitted back and forth across it, though there was nothing to throw such patterns. Some were but abstract markings and others quite clearly were those of vegetation, with flying things winging from one curved branch to the next.

To Keris's amazement, Mouse laughed. "A plaything, long since forgotten. Look you to those ledges across the stream. Are they not seats for those who would watch?"

"But for what purpose?" burst out the young man. The more he watched, the more aware he was that there was nothing offensive or evil—no peering forth of demon faces, no outward clutch of taloned paw.

"A play of learning, perhaps. Others may have had their Lormt. These do not threaten and for us they have little meaning, but they have meant much for others once on a time."

What they meant now was an irritation, for one looking up at the play of shadows could pause, form a barrier for the next in line. Jasta and Theela both swore that to them the wall was clear, so that shifting maze was only visible to the human members of their party.

Still, in spite of all his efforts at ignoring the show to which there seemed no end, Keris found his eyes continually drawn back to the figures cavorting there. He was beginning to recognize some forms of birds, also what seemed to be flying lizards with wings which appeared nearly transparent within their ribbing. Then there was a large squatting plant which all the airborne flutterers seemed to widely avoid. And—

The screech of a falcon broke the fascination of his last stare as Swifftalon came to Vorick, settling on the saddle horn perch of the Falconer who was well in the lead.

The rider turned his head to relay the news his bird had brought. "There is an end to the canyon ahead but also a way out."

And what a way it was, they discovered as they squeezed by a



massive rock which had three-quarters closed the passage and came up to face what could only be a staircase. Gathering at its foot, they surveyed this new impediment. Humans might make that climb—even the Keplians and Jasta and the well-trained Torgians—but could they ever force the pack train upward? And what lay at its top?

CHAPTER TEN



*The Mountain Ways
South of Var*

Gruck seemed to have a natural sense of seeking out the best of trails. Though he had shouldered a pack which was growing steadily smaller, he also carried the girl. Destree, following in his footsteps, wondered at his continuing strength. Since they had turned abruptly south after that momentous meeting with Power such as she had no real words to describe, the Voice tried hard not to depend too heavily on her companion, to carry an extra share of this trek.

There was no map, no wavereader such as the Sulcar ships had to keep them on course—only this pressure to go forward. But of one thing Destree was sure—it was not fully by the order of that thing they had fronted; the Lady had also a hand in this.

Liara was their present problem. Since they had brought her out of the hands of that leader of the Gray Ones, she had been one empty of mind, one whose person lay deep chained within her body. Destree had clothed her as best she could from her own extra gear, but there were no boots to cover those very slender white feet.



Nor, when she was urged to stand, could they lead her more than a step or two over such harsh footing.

She would eat, if Destree would put food in her hand and then bring that hand up to her mouth; she would drink when the water of mountain springs was held to her lips. But her eyes were blank and she appeared to see no more than if she had been struck blind. In fact Destree had begun to wonder if that was really the case.

She had known her at once for what she was—an Alizondern. Though what a woman of that race was doing here—unless she had been dragged for countless leagues by captors—she could not begin to guess. Her thin features appeared sharp, akin to those of the monster hounds which had been the scourge of the Dales as Destree had heard during her days as a sailor on Sulcar ships. Unable to free her hair from the tangles wrought by the thick brush through which they often had to move Destree had shorn off the nearly waist-long locks and the girl had not seemed to notice, certainly made no complaint.

Destree no longer tried to keep any track of the days. Incidents which happened lingered in her mind. Certainly she would never forget the night of the Shadow Being, or the time Gruck had used another of his belt equipment to bring down a leaper, the largest Destree had ever noted.

She had given thanks to the Lady and paid respect to the bones of the creature, which she had carefully returned to the soil, glad for the sustaining meat. Mostly they had existed on a strange diet which Gruck seemed to favor—leaves of some plants, and even insects which she no longer had to struggle with herself to eat.

Once as they worked their way farther up into the higher reaches of the mountains, they had suddenly rounded a crag to confront a snow leopard, its muzzle dyed with the blood of a mountain pronghorn it had brought down.

The giant had halted and then gently laid the girl at his feet. He reached for no weapon, holding out his paw-hand as might a man giving the peace sign to a newly met fellow traveler.

The leopard had snarled. Destree had seen its body tense. Then from Gruck's deep throat there had come a sound not unlike the



purr of a well-fed cat. The leopard's head turned a fraction on its shoulders as if striving to catch every nuance of that sound. Destree saw its body relax.

Gruck stooped to pick up the girl again and then turned a little to the west, so that they passed well away from the leopard's feast.

Such are like the warrior cats of Alatar, his thought touched her. Mighty in battle. They hunt cleanly and do not mangle their kill. Nor do they slay save when they must fill their bellies or defend themselves.

Destree longed to ask him more about his own world. That he apparently followed the ways of the Lady, living close to the earth and its creatures, she already knew. Yet something kept her from questioning. Had she been snatched—say, from the herb garden of the shrine—and plunged into a totally different world, would she want it recalled to her memory?

However, their meeting with the snow leopard had an effect they had not foreseen. For the first time the girl he carried did not lie limp in his big arms. She was staring straight up into his face.

There was first such a flash of terror-fed horror that Destree sprang close to the giant's side, fearing the girl might try to fight her way free. And since they stood on a stone-studded slope that might end in disaster.

The Alizondern cried out in a language Destree did not know, but she picked up easily the fear which nearly maddened the girl. Gruck had moved quickly to put her down, where she went to her hands and knees while he strode back, away, leaving Destree to face her.

The girl flung up her head and that sound coming from her now was not words, rather the howl of an animal driven nearly out of its mind by terror. Destree moved.

Though the girl fought and clawed at her, she got one hand at the thin nape of the other's neck while, not trying to avoid the raking fingernails which tore a path down her cheek, she pressed against the other's forehead, pushing aside the sweat-plastered hair so that her amulet might rest directly against the girl's clammy flesh.

Destree had used this before, twice, when she had had to deal with hysterical patients, and she knew what it would do. At the same time Chief, who had kept himself apart from the girl ever



since they had rescued her, came trotting between the stones and sat with his wide yellow stare.

The wildness in the eyes of Liara's face began to fade. Just as the hands, which had torn at Destree and left bloody evidence of their force, straightened and fell to the girl's lap.

Now Destree dared to draw her into an embrace, striving to put into that act all the warmth with which the Lady had gifted her, all the reassurance—all the security. So they crouched together. Now the girl was crying, great tearing sobs which shook her whole nearly wasted body. One of her hands raised, did not quite touch the bloody seam a nail had left on Destree's cheek.

"It is nothing," Destree soothed. "You have been in the hold of the Darkness—now you have broken through. Gruck"—she turned her head a fraction and he moved a little forward—"is our guardsman, warrior, friend. He is of those the Lady holds in Her hand, and none She holds so will bring you harm. I am Destree"—she could not quite keep the small note of happy pride out of her voice—"whom the Lady called to be Her Voice."

The girl drew the shuddering breath of one who has sobbed herself close to exhaustion. Now her arms went out in a hold to equal Destree's earlier one and she looked straight at the giant, then to the cat.

"Me." She used the trade tongue of the northern lands. "I was once Hearthmistress and First Whelp guardian to the house of Krevanel. What I am now . . ." her hold on Destree tightened, "I do not know. But—" there was a flare of fear again in her green eyes. "Lady—I must give you warning—I fear there is in me, perhaps in all of us who nurture the hounds—that which draws the Gray Ones."

Destree smiled. "Child, be sure that the Lady would not welcome you if that were so. But how came you south so far from Alizon? Is there then war again in the north?"

"Not war . . ." Then, as if she must tell this healer—for healer she truly was—all she could, she poured out what lay behind her, ending with her capture by the Gray Ones.

Though Destree's hold on her was still comforting, yet Liara sensed that this was indeed such a story as the other must arm herself to accept.



“So—that storm was only the beginning,” Destree said, as if she thought aloud. “And we are promised dire trouble in the south—yet that is where the Lady points our steps.”

“Let me go.” Liara could say that and yet she could not loose her hold on the older woman. “The Gray Ones—”

Slowly Gruck had approached them again and now he squatted on his heels. Chief leaned against a heavy, hairy thigh while the giant smoothed the cat’s fur until he purred.

Destree’s thought sought the hand of the giant’s. “How much did you understand?”

Gates, he returned in thought, and also made a harshly guttural sound in his throat. *So was I caught—so may others be entrapped. If these Power workers would seek out gates for their complete closing, then service is like to that given to the Alatar—to be offered gladly by all who follow the Light. Also, we are being drawn south—perhaps through the will of this Sardox, perhaps in service of your Lady. I think that it might be well to seek out these others, perhaps bring them warning, if they do not already know of what may be sniffing along their trail.*

Liara loosed the hold of one hand on Destree and rubbed her grimy forehead. Then suddenly she spoke, her voice scaling upward as if once more she were entering to the clutch of panic.

“Lady—I hear in my head. Those who deal with magic are tainted so. See, now the Darkness shows in me!”

“Not Darkness, Liara—you are now daughter to the Lady. She gives many gifts—the opening of thought to thought is one. Did you not learn that at Lormt?” She smiled.

“Now, these rocks are too hot to perch on with any comfort. Let us move on. Gruck will carry you until we can decide some proper foot coverings, for your flesh would be torn to pieces here. See, even my trail boots have their own tale of gashes.”

For a moment Liara’s features tightened as if she were about to object to that. The giant held out his hand and her small, dirt-grimed one was swallowed in his grasp. She stared intently into his wide face, and their eyes locked for a moment, and then she said:

“There are dreams which one can be caught in, so deeply that all seems real. Perhaps this is a dream, but if it be so, I accept it.”



They moved out of the glare of the sun on the dark rock and came to a cup of welcome shade. Destree shared out food and for the first time Liara ate for herself, though Destree was glad at that moment that it was dried bits of the leaper and not some of Gruck's grubs she had to offer,

They—these who come from the north—the giant's thought-speech was not interrupted by the clump of his mighty jaws—were heading south and west?

He leaned back a little, his hands braced on his knees, his head turning slowly as if he made some detailed thought record of all he could see here.

Liara nodded. "There was a country called Var by the western seas, but there they did not plan to go."

"This is a wide land," Gruck continued. "Can those of the party who have such Power link minds to guide us?"

Slowly Liara shook her head. "Nor might they wish to. I know that the witch—she must have guessed what pulled the Gray Ones upon us. Why would they want me to draw the attention of the Dark to the path they take?"

You, Sister in Service—that head swung now in Destree's direction—does this seem true to you?

"Only from one way of thought—" Destree was beginning when suddenly Liara cried out, pointing skyward.

"Falcon—see, it comes to search us out!"

The bird had turned in a wide circle and was indeed heading back toward them. Destree watched it eagerly. She had served on ships where Falconers had been marines. And where there were falcons, surely those who called them brother could not be far away! It was swooping lower; waving or calling to the bird would mean nothing, for it answered only to the signals of its bonder. Yet, when it made two circles about them and then sped westward, she was sure that their presence would be speedily known to those who had launched the bird.



It would seem that they must retrace their way, Keris thought. How far must they rove now? The flight of steps facing them could



be climbed perhaps by humans, but the pack train could not attempt such a feat.

They established a temporary camp. As he went about his regular duties Keris wondered how many of his companions were as disheartened as he. There was very little talk among them and most of them were frowning.

He passed by Mouse, who was sitting a little apart, her now well-worn and hem-tattered robe huddled about her as if she needed some shelter against a chill wind. Her hands were folded in her lap, but her attention was all for that forbidding flight of stairs. Was there, Keris wondered fleetingly, some trick of the Power which could waft them to the top? After all, in their time the witches had moved mountains as if those were child's buckets packed with sand. But Mouse was one alone, not a whole council-in-order of her kind—not that he believed that the witches, who had nearly wiped their kind out of the world by such action in the past, would be ready and willing to try such again.

He saw a flash of movement across one of the steps—a flick of brilliant color. The thing fled for a space and then spread nearly transparent wings so that he could see its likeness to one of the lizard flying shadows on the wall now well behind them.

Wings—well, only the falcons possessed those. Even as that thought crossed Keris's mind both of the Falconers sent their birds aloft for scouting.

It was still only midafternoon and there was something about their crowning disappointment which seemed to make them all languid. He fastened the last of the ponies to the picket line and the creature, though it showed its teeth for an instant, did not snap at him as he had expected, preparing to dodge.

The Keplians and Jasta were, of course, never picketed, and for some reason they were walking in single file, like mages intent on some rite, along the foot of the stairs. The Lady Eleeri stopped sipping from her water bottle to watch them, her eyes narrowed as if to intensify her gaze.

Keris dropped down not too far away. Lord Romar and the others were busied with that map, which was Romar's particular



charge. But no one was making any suggestions. It was Mouse who spoke, and her voice, soft as it was, carried to rouse them all.

"Lady," she said to Eleeri, "what say these you have won to our aid?"

It was the mare Theela rather than Eleeri who answered.

We can go—and this one. She nodded toward Jasta. *The dumb-tongued ones*—she used a sharp sneer Keris had never heard before, as she indicated the Torgians—*if they go free of riders or all else in the way of burdens and are aided. But those—* she snorted in the direction of the ponies, *this is not for them!*

Keris's protest was being framed even as Eleeri answered. Much as he detested the small beasts, what they carried with every day's travel southward grew the more important. Boots must be repaired, shoes for the Torgians replaced; the scaled-down necessities by which they lived could not be just left here.

"There is need, Wind-Swift Sister"—Eleeri used both mind and tongue speech to answer the mare—"for what they carry. Nor can nearly half of it be taken on without them. We have willing backs, but we go into the unknown where there may wait such hunters as would welcome travelers heavy with gear."

Lord Romar rolled up his map. "It would be best to wait until the birds return. If there is a way beyond this trap we have gotten ourselves into, perhaps they can point it out."

All were willing to agree to that. But Keris roused himself and went to the dump of packs, noting by the brand mark on the hide cover of each just what was within. The more he looked, the less he believed that *anything* at all could be discarded and they not suffer from its loss later.

Taking advantage of a halt in a place which could be easily defended, the party began to get to tasks of their own setting. The packs were opened for supplies to repair boots, arrow shafts to be fitted with heads, kits for the stitching up of the worst of tears which the mountain growth had left in their clothing.

The Escorian found again the knife which had been Liará's. It was as clear in the sun as if it had never been blood-clouded, but when he held it in his hand he was nearly startled enough to cry



out. For the sense that what he held was by loan only and that the Alizondern would return to claim her own was as clear as if Mouse had proclaimed it.

Swiftalon was back first from the scouting, and after communicating with the bird, Vorick reported that there was nothing to the east but mountains rising ever higher, mostly bare now of any growth.

His fellow scout was delayed so long that Krispin was plainly ill-at-ease and paced back and forth, his helm discarded so that he could stare farther skyward in search.

When at last the falcon came into sight, they all felt a measure of relief. The bird came to rest, panting, its bill open, and Denever, who was nearest, held up a small metal cup he had just filled so that the bird drank.

Krispin smoothed its feathers, using those slurred sounds which were soothing and plainly gave comfort. He waited, the others crowding in about him, for Farwing to deliver his message in his own time, when he felt once more strong enough.

Maybe Mouse could pick up the very high-scaled bird speech, but the rest had not been trained to catch it. And it seemed to Keris that they were never going to learn what lay ahead or why Farwing had been so late returning.

“There are others—above.” Krispin indicated the staired cliff. “Among them is the Alizondern female.”

“Gray Ones?” Denever demanded.

“Not so. One serves She whom some call the Lady, and the third is like no living thing my brother has seen before.” Again Krispin caressed the nearly exhausted bird. “They are well to the west, but now they move toward us.”

“The Lady,” Mouse said. “Then that one stands in the Light and perhaps these are the ones you saw in the sending, Keris. If so, it is plain that their way is also ours in the end.”

Theela pushed forward. Her usual mind-speech carried the bite of irritation. *This way can be climbed—have I not already said so? Though those flat-footed ones you call Torgians will need aiding, mountain-bred though they claim to be.*

One of the Torgians snorted almost as if he had caught the



Keplian mare's insult, though as far as Keris knew his breed lacked the human range of mind-touch.

With the exception of Mouse, they moved back to view the packs, most now open to be rummaged through. Denever went down on his knees beside one which had not yet been loosened and came out after a moment's delving with a coil of rope.

This led to a search in which most of them took a part—though in the end what they had discovered was, Keris believed, not enough to answer any great need.

The Lady Eleeri had pulled one of the pack bags itself out into the open and was on her knees beside it. It was of well-thickened hide, coated on the outer side with a layer of hardened sap from the umpas—the best moisture protection known in Escore.

Straightening the now-flattened bag out on the ground, she began to measure it with the width of her palm and then nodded.

“Here we have fortune's gift. But it must be carefully prepared. One cuts so—not straight but in a circling toward the center.” Chopping past the buckles and ends of straps, she began to follow her own instructions, and her blade was keen enough to pierce both covering and hide so that shortly they could see what lay there was a coil a little more than a finger wide, the loops of which answered sluggishly as she caught the outer end and whirled it up and around. It still showed a tendency to recoil, but the Borderers were ready with stones to pull it as taut as they could and straighten it out.

The confusion of the camp grew the greater as more and more of the bags were emptied and slashed after the pattern the Lady Eleeri had set. Keris, moving boxes of stores to clear more working space, came upon Mouse.

She was standing beside the larger pony, which Liara had ridden, and her hands were cupped about its muzzle. Knowing the temper of the beast, he would have moved to pull away. Then he heard a low crooning and saw that not only this larger mare but all the stubborn-tempered train were standing without any of their usual signs of resentment at the nearness of humans.

Mouse looked over her shoulder at him. “These, in spite of their



uncertain tempers, have been faithful servants. Loose their picket ropes now.”

“But—” he glanced back at the very busy scene behind him.

“They cannot follow—but this is a land not unlike that of their foalhood. Loosen them to find their own place in the pattern of things as should be.” There was not only the crack of a command but a certain solemnity in her words. He found himself indeed loosening the halters from the beasts, which for the first time since he had taken charge of them stood quietly under his hands.

Liara’s mare turned and trotted down the canyon and the others fell in behind her as if they were a party of Border Rangers under her command.

“What do you do!” Denever came up as the last pony, with a contemptuous flip of its tail, passed out of reach.

“They can go no farther,” Mouse answered. “We must do now as best we can.”

Once more they sorted supplies, and this time it was a more momentous thing to say this will be needed, that we can leave. For who knew the country beyond, though the falcons had reported that it seemed thickly wooded with no sign of any keep or building?

So the shoes of the Torgians came under strict examination from Vutch, who had farrier skill, with a replacement here and there. The Keplians and Jasta went bare of hoof as always.

They were another day at such preparations and the falcons were sent out once again in the later afternoon, reporting that the three sighted from aloft were still headed along the crest of the stair cliff. Mouse made her report to Lormt and had a fraction of news in return—there had been a Sulcar ship in from Arvon, the crew of which reported rumors of trouble in the Waste and said that a Border guard enlisted from the Dales lords and those Falconers who had settled in Seakeep were on the move, to set up their own defenses. But of those in the Eyrie there had been no word—nor had any come from Hilarion that he could once more have speech with Alon.

Of the Sulcar ship which had headed north to follow the tradition of their own legended gate there had come no news at all.

Keris had not slept soundly through any night since that during



which he had suffered from the sending. Now he lay looking up at the stars, which seemed very bright in their hard glitter tonight, and wondered. Such journeys had seemed to be the best of all measures at the great meeting at Es City, when they had been so busied with preparation at Lormt. But they were no army, merely scouts. What if any group of them discovered more than could be faced with any hope of survival?

By the next morning they were ready to make their attempt on the stairs. The packs, cut down to what a man might shoulder, were lashed together with hide ropes and left at the foot of the climb to be drawn up after human and animals had made their successful journey. That which they could not hope to take with them—both in the way of additional weaponry or other supplies—was stacked and covered with piled rocks.

Theela tossed her head and moved out before any signal had been given. She planted each hoof firmly and mounted the stairs as if she had been accustomed to such travel all her life. Behind her came the Lady Eleeri and the Lord Romar, followed by the two other Keplians and Jasta, with a reassuring calmness (or at least Keris found it so) radiating from him.

The Torgians were not as confident and each had to be led up one at a time, a man at either side, with supporting ropes, though Keris could not believe that any such precaution would really protect against the consequences of a misstep.

Twice he himself made that journey, striving to keep his own nerves under control so that the sweating horse he was helping to guide would not sense his unease.

Somehow they were all at the top at last, standing on a wide plateau which seemed to narrow southward like a finger pointing them on. Then began the hauling up of the packs under the heat of the sun, and the constant sense of what might happen if balance was to waver, which seemed to go on forever.

They all lent a hand as necessary, save that Keris had not seen Mouse since she had made the climb with her hand resting on Jasta's dusty shoulder. Once the last pack was up, they simply collapsed where they were in a ragged line along the cliff top. The Keplians



appeared to be herding the Torgians to the east, where there were some signs of greenery. Keris thought longingly of water but could not summon the strength at present to move in search of it.

A falcon's scream brought them back to sudden alertness and they scrambled for the weapons they had dropped when they manhandled the store packs upward. Farwing cruised over them, screamed again, and then headed west.

Keris, swaying a little, had gotten to his feet. His rock-scraped hand went for the butt of the force whip. But there was no wave of rasti bursting out of nowhere to bring them down. Rather, two figures moving at a slow but steady pace, with a third clinging to the back of the black-furred thing of Keris's sending. Was this another attack of that experience?

No, for those about him were all astir, and between the party who had come up the stair and those three, Mouse was running as if in answer to a summons she could never disobey.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



Into the Unseen, the Unknown, Southward

The three from the east had halted, almost as if, Keris thought, they awaited some sign that they were welcome. Seen in the daylight, the furred giant did not possess, or at least Keris found it so, that suggestion of menace which had been like a cloak about his wide shoulders when the Escorian had been caught in the sending.

The giant creative supported Liara, and Keris could see that



there were wrappings about the girl's slender feet, but surely no coverings as would stand up to walking over the rough rock.

Mouse was well out in front, but now Keris, who stood the closest of the rest of the party, ran after her. That he could defend a witch was thought born of folly. Still she looked so small, kilting up her robe so she could run faster, that involuntarily he followed.

The other girl of the trio, whose scratched and torn trail clothing showed hard travel, held out from her breast a pendant of deep golden color. At the same moment she brought that into view, Mouse halted some paces away from the three and raised her jewel. Both blazed—and to Keris it seemed that circles of fire spread out from each . . . but not in opposition, rather uniting, until his skin tingled and his sweat-damp hair moved on his head from the vibration of that Power meeting Power—in equal greeting.

“Greetings to you, Witch.” The girl smiled as one would at a friend long sought. “All good to you from the Lady!”

Mouse's sweet trill of laughter sounded.

“And to you, Voice of the One in Three. Of old we have never clasped hands—but a new day is with us.” Now she took another two steps forward, her blazing stone resting on her flattened palm, and the other moved as swiftly to meet her, so that when their hands touched, their signs of Power rested one upon the other.

Then the radiance and its Power aura was gone and they were but girl-child and young woman looking peacefully happy, while around the legs of the girl the large black cat wove back and forth purring.

Mouse reached out to Liara, whom the giant had set partly on the ground, though he still supported her.

“Welcome back to us—for all of us are one. So it has been set.”

“I am of the blood of your enemies, and perhaps . . . more!” It was as if Liara were forcing those words out in warning.

Mouse laughed again and gave a small flip of her hand backward to indicate the company who had drawn in there.

“We are many things, and each of us has a strength which is needed. Look upon us—do we wear the battle masks of enemies?”

Keris saw Liara draw a deep breath. Somehow her hands went



out and the giant loosed his hold on her, so that she tottered forward close enough that Mouse embraced her and whispered something which brought the Alizondern girl's head up, banished the shadow of uncertainty from her gaunt face.

Suddenly she shook free of Mouse's hold, retreating to catch once more at the arm of the giant.

"This is—" she began, and there was a shading of defiance in her voice.

"Gruck, Guardsman of Alatar in another place and time." To Keris's surprise, Mouse promptly named the giant. She might have known him as well as the Lord Romar. "There are in all worlds those that serve Light, and with that in their heart they know each other. And this be Chief"—she indicated the cat—"mighty warrior, also from beyond."

She had been approaching the giant, looking very small and frail against the hairy tower of his great body. Now she was looking up into his face and there was no longer any lightness in her words.

"There may not be any return for you, Guardsman. Nowhere have we any record that those who have come to us through a gate have found their way home again." Her small hand stroked the kinky fur of his forearm. Had he been of Liaras's size, she might almost have taken him also into her embrace—or so Keris thought at that moment.

Gruck's other hand completely hid hers, and then he lowered his massive head and brought her small finger up to his lips. Those parted and a purple tongue tip protruded long enough to touch her flesh. That the giant was rendering some formal salute was apparent.

As they moved on to where the travelers had piled their packs above the stairs, only Mouse stayed close to the new arrivals. The trip up the stairs had been so exhausting and had taken so long that night was well on its way.

Shouldering the packs, they headed for that bit of green, still visible in the twilight, into which all their four-footed companions had vanished much earlier.

What they found when they came to the edge of a drop—for it



became plain that what they viewed were the tops of growth and that the level of the ground fell here—was a valley which was certainly larger than they had foreseen.

A stream ran through it and two of the Torgians, looking hardly the size of the ponies from this height, were standing hock-deep in the flood, dipping their noses in now and then for a quick gulp. The rest of the animals were spread out, grazing avidly, and the look of the grass from above suggested that here was better fare than they had had for some time.

The slope downward was easy enough after facing the stairs, and the sight of water brought them all down it at a good pace.

Keris doffed his helm and thrust his whole head into the clear waters of that stream. When he sat back on his heels and looked around him, he noted something strange about this oasis of growth and water among the rocks.

In the first place there were no trees, nor any sign of brush except when the slopes in some places gave way to the valley floor. Also it seemed in some manner . . . shaped. Shaking his wet head, he had a sudden impossible vision of a giant spoon being used to scrape out this hollow.

In addition—they had suffered so much from such attacks in the wooded lands below that they were now accepting such as a normal part of life—there were no biting insects. None of the grazing animals flicked a tail or threw up a head to deter the attention of those flies which had been the bane of their existence only three days earlier.

Nor were there any birds. The falcons rode the saddle perches, but there was no other winged life to be seen.

A shape moved out of the dusk to kneel not too far away. It was the giant. Though he had both huge hands in the stream, he was not apparently engaged in washing. Instead he grabbed handfuls of a shoreline plant, thick of leaf, which when disturbed gave forth a pungent though not unpleasant scent.

Heaping his harvest beside him, Gruck selected one clump, swirled it again in the water beyond where his occupation had muddied it, and champed it between his great teeth with apparent



satisfaction. He caught Keris in his sight and immediately tossed some of his crop in the Escorian's direction.

Keris knew something of herb lore. No one of the Green Valley could escape schooling in such. And he thought he recognized here a water plant, difficult to find in his own land, but which could be safely eaten by the traveler. Breaking off several of the tough leaves, he washed them as Gruck had done and chewed.

The taste seemed to be a medley of flavors, and was, after living on trail rations, doubly palatable. He nodded his thanks to the giant and hastened to pull free another mouthful.

From eating he turned to harvesting, and with their hands high-piled and dripping, they brought this find back to the camp. Nor were they the only ones who had benefited from exploration of the countryside. The two Borderers, who had gone off to make sure that the Torgians were safely accounted for, came back carrying their helmets filled like buckets to the brim with stone-centered fruit, each as big as one of Gruck's thumbs.

As they shared these around, Keris saw the girl Destree, whom Mouse welcomed as an equal, was quietly collecting the discarded stones. Keris had two in his hand and offered them to her instead of pitching them back into the grass, and she smiled and nodded.

"Bounty must be ever returned," she said. Keris recognized another version of his mother Dahaun's Power. If one accepted the fruits of the earth, then one must return something of equal value. No plant was harvested in his home valley that an offering was not placed where its roots held deep. And he could guess that with the coming of light in the morning she would plant again all the stones of the eaten fruit.

There was no way of making a fire here. Oddly enough, dusk seemed to last for a long time, so that they were not separated in the dark but could see each other. Nor did there seem any reason here to set a watch, with the animals grazing about to sound any alarm.

"This is," said Lord Romar, working on the mending of his mail, "a place set aside . . ."

"It is like a place of the Old Ones, those who walk now among



the stars yet would touch earth to keep green memory,” replied the Lady Eleeri.

Even as she spoke, there was a sudden light flash in the heavens toward the south. Instantly Keris felt a troubling. It was as if far off someone touched a thread, quickly, quietly, testing. . . .

Mouse, who had drawn a little apart, after her fashion, to await any message which might come, stood, a shadow among shadows, watching where that falling star had shone.

“We are,” she said slowly, “where my Power does not work. For there are two Powers ancient in this world. Mine which is inborn and yet must be sharpened by training and ever added to by learning, and yours, sister”—she turned her head a little and Keris thought she spoke to Destree now—“which is of the earth and all it holds. Is this not a land in which your Lady might happily have her being?”

“Yes,” Destree answered. “Therefore, sister, it becomes *my* duty to call.”

Was it a call, or a song? Keris could not have answered that. With it arose an ever-increasing purr which somehow he could not decide was Gruck paying tribute to something he, too, well understood, or the cat at ease with life.

They had not yet explored the full of the plateau. The valley had engulfed them, lulled them to the rest they needed. However, one end of that valley pointed to the south and just as they had sighted the falling star, so did now another light arise.

Someone might have lit there a signal fire—in this woodless country! First came a shaft of pearly smoke, very visible in spite of the dark, a column seeking to level with the greater heights around them. Then that smooth shaft appeared to answer to winds they themselves did not feel and it curved to point, not to the sky, but to what lay beyond, ahead of that point of rock.

For a moment out of time it held so, and then it was gone. But all of them knew that they had their answer. Two kinds of Power: one had started them on this journey, now another would send them farther on.

Destree had ceased her call when the plume of smoke first ap-



peared. Now she spoke with authority. "There we are sent, for you are as much caught up in this summoning as are the three of us. We can only obey."

There was no more speech among them. All hauled out their bedrolls, providing what they could for the three least well prepared. While overhead no star moved.

Keris slipped his weapon belt within a hand's distance. There had been no break in the feeling of peace here, neither was that peace any ploy of the Dark to take them unawares. Yet somehow he was better able to sleep with his hand upon it. There was movement in the dark farther out; the animals seemed to be drawing in toward the camp. Had Jasta, the Keplians, seen those signs? He did not believe that even the Lady Eleeri knew Theela and her kin well enough to answer, and one did not question the Renthans on the subject of Power—for they had their particular share of it also.

The peace of the valley seemed also to be soporific, as the sun was warm when the sleepers began to rouse. They did so slowly, as if some of the urgency which had ruled them in every morning camp before had been allayed.

There was no hurry about moving out, either—no one mentioned any such need. The party split into two, the smaller group consisting of the Lady Eleeri, Liara, Destree, and Mouse, heading westward to a quiet pool near which Gruck had done his harvesting the night before. The men, in the other group, stripped off gear and too-well-worn clothing at a point beyond a stand of the fruit bushes to the east.

Keris had expected the water to be chill this high in the mountains, but it was no more brisk than one of the Valley pools and as freshening to his body. Gruck did not follow them into the stream, but from that many-looped belt of his he brought out a tool which opened into a comb, which he began to use, having dipped it in the water, to curry his thick hair. Keris, emerging from the stream and drying himself as best he could on an undershirt he had discarded, watched this toilet for a moment or two. Then, feeling some wariness, he went to the giant and motioned from the busily



stroking comb to the back and shoulders which Gruck, short of a snake's limber contortions, could not reach.

The giant nodded and handed over his comb at once for Keris to set to work. This was rather like grooming one of the Torgians and yet under the strokes of the heavy metal teeth the hair was far closer to a kind of thick fur than unclipped horsehide.

Also, though there was a light musky scent, it was not as heavy as that left behind after thorough work on a mount. As Keris was busied with his voluntary task, the giant reached for a heaped pile of small plants which he had apparently assembled before he had begun the combing. Unhooking an intricate clasp, he laid aside that heavy belt with all its appliances and stretched it carefully out on the grass before he crushed the leaves and began to run them over his body as one might apply soap.

Emboldened, Keris nudged one of those large shoulders and reached for some of the pulp, trying to apply it carefully to the portions he had curried.

Good to be clean.

He was used to mind-send, though this was on a new level. But somehow the words startled the Escorian.

"Good," he agreed quickly enough.

"You're making a good job of it, fledgling!" Keris looked at Krispin, who was holding up a much-creased and yet fresh body shirt, trying to shake it free of the worst wrinkles before he put it on. Having dragged it over his head and tucked it into breeches still wet from a vigorous sloshing in the stream, he settled down beside them, his eyes on that belt.

"You bear strange weapons, brother-in-arms," the Falconer said to the giant. "For I must think that some of this you carry is indeed weapons."

Again came that slight off-center mind-send. *I wear guardsman's gear, birdman.* But he offered no further explanation. Krispin hesitated, still staring at the belt, and then shrugged. If this new member of the party wished to keep his own counsel, let him. It was the right of every man to speak or keep silent as he wished.

They gathered back by the open packs again and set around re-



assembling them. There were no ponies now and Keris was well aware that a war-trained Torgian could not be emburdened. As for the Keplians and Jasta, he could not imagine them submitting to such usage.

He noted that the Voice of Gunnora and Mouse had drawn aside and that they were joined after a moment by not only the Lady Eleeri but Theela, the Keplian, as well as the cat Chief. All were facing toward the point of the wedge-shaped plateau, due south as far as Keris could judge, and though he could not see that they spoke one to the other, they could be thought-joined in some business of the Power.

It calls. Destree need not have put that into thought. She knew that those with her realized that drawing which was growing stronger, even as she did.

*And—*Mouse's hands cupped her jewel as if to hide it from the light of day—*time grows short. Our way lies there.*

So they moved out, reluctantly—and rightly. For as they came up out of the depression of that place of peace, they were all seized again by the need for haste, with a foreboding which grew the stronger as they approached the point. The Borderers and the Falconers kept the reins of their mounts, while the Keplians and Jasta trotted free. At the Falconers' signals their birds soared up and out, heading south at far greater speed and with better vision than the party below.

They had managed from what was left of their supplies to cobble a pair of boots for Liara, and she kept close to the giant, insisting on shouldering a pack the doubtful Destree allowed her.

Krispin suddenly shook his head so that his helm's falcon crest took on a tiny vestige of life. "There is land below and a great forest," he reported Farwing's sending.

Only a short time later they came to the point of the wedge. Land below, yes, and by the dense green look of it completely overgrown. But—they stood on the verge of a cliff. There was no stairway waiting here, nothing but sheer rock, and between them and the green of the land below floated wisps which might even be low-lying clouds.



Vorick exploded with an oath. "We do not have wings," he spat out the obvious.

"But there is a road waiting!" The young Keplian stallion Janner suddenly pushed past the Borderer and his horse and trotted out—

On air! Yet he did not fall, but rather moved parallel with the point of the cliff as if he trod a road as well kept as an Estcarpian highway. Vorick's horse tossed his head and neighed, pulling at the reins the startled Falconer still kept tightly held.

"There's nothing there!" Krispin protested, and fought to keep his own horse back from the edge.

Keris shed his pack. Perhaps for someone used to the surprises which could turn up in Escore this was nothing too startling, but he found it very hard to make himself keep his eyes on Janner, the ambling cat, and then Theela and Sebra frisking along with nothing under their feet. Jasta now moved up beside him and Keris flung up an arm to stop his regular comrade in arms.

"What do you see?" he demanded. Around him the others were having trouble with their Torgians, who seemed intent on following the Keplians even though usually the two species kept well apart.

A road, Jasta returned without a moment's hesitation.

Keris threw himself belly down and forced himself to crawl to the seeming knife edge of that monstrous cliff. Clinging as best he could to the stone on which he lay, he stretched out his right arm and swept it through the air. His fist struck painfully against a solid object which his sight assured him was not there.

It seemed that he was not alone in his exploration. Though most of the others were trying to herd the horses back, he saw Mouse and Destree follow his own feat of wriggling forward and reaching out. Then both the witch and the Voice apparently were moved by a shared idea, for they swung their Power jewel and amulet out into space.

Keris heard the click of each strike a firm surface, but there was no manifestation of the Power in answer—no lighting up of either jewel.

Mouse slipped back. "There is something there, but it is not for our eyes."



The Lady Eleeri stood up and whistled, a clear, carrying sound. Below, Theela's ears flicked. Whatever footing gave her support manifestly led down. The mare was already past at least two-thirds of the cliff face. But now she wheeled and came trotting back. The rest of her clan and Jasta followed. Chief paid no heed to a summons he apparently believed was not for him.

Lord Romar stooped and picked up a pebble, flipping it out. It hit to bounce and then pitch out into space and fall. Watching it go was not a pleasant suggestion of what might happen to one taking such a path blindly.

In the end, even as they had climbed the stairs at the other end of the plateau, so now they were condemned to a similar way of proceeding—in reverse. For where men had urged the Torgians up those steps sweating out a fear of a misstep, so now they clung again to their horses and tried not to look down at a road that was not to be there.

The Keplians took their superiority in the matter as only a just tribute to their species and the four women became their charges, edging out, with the cliff nearly brushing their shoulders as they took one cautious step after another.

Keris saw the sweat beading Vorick's face below his falcon-masked helm as he stepped from firm rock onto nothingness and then began a slow descent. The others followed one by one. Keris had reshouldered his pack and Jasta was waiting. But—he turned his head in search of the giant. He was not of this world; could some such magic as this defeat him entirely? Jasta might aid, though there was little either of them could do, even together, if that huge body took a misstep.

“Can—can you see?” Keris asked, afraid of what the answer would be—justly. For Gruck shook his head. However, he was fingering a packet on his belt and from that drew forth a coil of what looked like silver spun nearly as fine as thread.

He stood with it in his hand for a full breath or two. Then Keris swallowed twice and found that he *could* say what he must.

“If Jasta wears a leash of that”—he indicated the wire—“and I also hold, then can we move? Jasta sees the road.”



Gruck looked to the Renthan. *You offer this, four-footed brother?* His mind-speech was hesitant.

A loop for the neck. The Renthan approached him, close enough for such to be set before his saddle. *Then against the cliff face for both of you. If I see any obstruction, you shall know in time.*

Thus the three of them formed the rearguard—most of the others a good space ahead now. Keris wished he could shut his eyes. Yet his sight held determinedly to that surface which was not there. Why such a road had ever been laid out he could not imagine, unless it was meant for a far more efficient barrier than any wall he had ever seen. That the animals were not affected by it was the travelers' only salvation as the humans crawled down that way that was not. This road was such a manifestation of Power as even Keris, who had grown up surrounded by varying degrees of the talent, had never seen. Plainly, as if they looked up to see some curse hung over them, they must deal with this pathway that even a witch could not see. He did not forget how the tools of both Mouse and Destree had proven useless.

When they reached the foot of the cliff, the animals were as fresh as if they had only been ridden for a canter down a pleasant road. But the humans, from Mouse to the giant Gruck, subsided suddenly to the ground as if their legs had been stricken useless, most of them determinedly turning their backs on the way they had come.

Keris was quickly aware of one thing. Even the exertion and stress of that descent did not settle on him as suddenly as a blanket of humid heat did now. It would seem that they had descended from the normal world into one which was totally unknown. He heard a cry and turned his head.

Coming in great bounds which made him shudder was the great black cat Destree called Chief, who had been recently not much in evidence, as he went hunting for more than the fare which satisfied the rest of the party. His last leap took him hurtling through the air into Destree's arms, and she clutched him as if he were a treasure lost and found again.



This second coming of Chief seemed to break their stupor. They began to get to their feet and turn to view the way south. What they faced was the thickest wall of tangled and interwoven growth that Keris had ever seen. From it wafted strange unwholesome odors of vegetation decaying over centuries undisturbed. There was movement among the vines and branches which suggested a concentration of life, though they caught no sight of any body.

Destree felt Gruck move up beside her. He stood, his hands curved near his belt, his head up, his large nostrils stretched to their greatest extent, as if he could foretell through scent alone which might lay in wait there.

CHAPTER TWELVE



Jungle Passage, Unknown South

“Well”—Vorick stood hands on hips surveying the densely massed green before him—“short of swinging a good forester’s axe, there’s no hacking a way through that!”

“To say nothing,” Denever said, “about what may be mindin’ some business thereabouts and will not take kindly to strangers crashin’ in.”

However, the movements they had noted when they had first come to this narrow open space at the foot of the cliff no longer appeared to trouble the foliage. The heavy humidity made it difficult to draw a deep breath and when one did, the faint smell of rot was something that Keris, at least, had never met with before.

Destree, Chief weaving about her legs once more, moved up to face the same green wall a little apart from the others. The open



space which gave them room for movement was cramped, and the Torgians showed openly a nervous distrust for this shrouded land which must shadow everyone entering it.

She fingered her amulet. It remained lifeless. If the Lady had an answer to their problem, She was not yet ready to share it. At present their hopes were pinned upon the falcons, which had taken once more to scouting, west and east, along the top level of the cliff down which they had just made their way.

If there could be any break, any chance of penetrating this thickly grown land, the birds alone might sight it. She stooped, and, for the comfort of feeling him close, she picked up Chief. He speedily draped himself about her shoulders, his prick-eared head brushing the braids of her hair. However, there was no purr to sound reassurance. Liara slipped between two of the mounts and joined her.

“This is a land not meant for us!” she said.

“Yet it is one we must face,” Destree returned flatly.

She glanced around. Their packs were in a pile by the cliff wall and there the Lady Eleeri was busy sorting out meager portions of supplies. All which they might need to nourish their bodies might indeed lie ahead in that green gloom but, knowledgeable as the Voice was, she could sight no plant—without venturing closer than she wished—which could be added safely to their rations.

It was Gruck who passed her and the Alizondern girl now, advancing with the slow steps of one scouting enemy territory toward the outer edge of that wall. Still afar from touching distance of the growth, he came to a halt, his feet slightly apart to balance his weight as if he faced some possible battle opponent.

Then his hand flicked up and out, and something Destree could only see as a flash through the air aimed for the thick stem of a thing which could be either an oversized unopened bud or a tightly curled knot of leaves.

The giant’s cast caught it fairly and he jerked it toward them. There was a moment when they saw that thin line, nearly invisible as it was, become taut and then the sharp sound of a crack and the giant’s catch came sailing back through the air. He avoided it with



an agile twist so that it landed on the stone, its arrival drawing the attention of the others to circle the thing.

None of them, even Gruck, made any attempt to touch it. In the first place its size was such that Destree could only compare it to one of the prize melons shown by landworker Wukin last season. In color it was as blandly green as the rest of the walling trees, vines, and bushes.

But as it lay on the stone where it had landed with such force, that green began to change. Like veins there appeared a network of thick, upstanding lines across it. Those were first pinkish and then grew ever darker—like watered blood.

Chief spat and suddenly voiced a howl right in Destree's ear, nearly deafening her for an instant. Vorick sighted upon it with the spear he chanced to be holding.

Destree heard the thump of hooves: the three Keplians and Jasta were now pushing their way into the circle of watchers.

Gruck made a complicated twist of the wrist and the thin line he held was free of the pod. Now there was a shifting in that. One end was splitting open into sections, and those cracked wider and wider apart.

A whiff of musky, sourish odor arose as the two top sections suddenly arose straight up. Again there was movement, as out of the remains of the pod crawled unsteadily what first appeared to be something close to the rock snakes Destree knew well, save this was much thicker in its midbody—a body with seeming scales the same color as the trees ahead.

The thing raised a snakelike head in which were set ovals which perhaps served it for eyes. Then it opened a mouth large enough to nearly split that head in two, displaying fangs, from the two large fore of which dripped reddish liquid.

Having left the remains of the pod, it lay on the rock for a short space. None of those watching made any move toward it. Then that thick hump on its back split in turn, became wings so nearly transparent that only a pattern of webbing might be truly seen. Keris recognized one of the shadows from that place beyond the cliff—this was a flying lizard.



Chief leaped without warning from Destree's shoulder, leaving deep scratches. He crouched now in his fighter's stance, and the thing was certainly not completely blind, as it swung around to face the cat.

"No!" Destree moved, but not as fast as Liara, who stood a fraction closer. The Alizondern girl's hands closed on the cat and he twisted and turned, trying now to vent his rage upon her.

"No!" Destree near shouted now. "Let it be!"

She swung her amulet between the fighting cat and the lizard thing. The latter's head seemed to rise a fraction higher. Then its mouth snapped closed and the wings fanned the air. Moving with a speed which moments before the watchers would not have believed possible, it scuttled in the direction of the jungle. Its wings spread and it took off and out, hidden in a moment by a tangle of vines.

Destree pointed to those reddish drops still glistening on the stone where it had lain. "Poison," she warned.

"So now we have trees which give birth to poisonous flying things," Krispin said. He stopped, picked up a stone, and tossed it to cover the stain before grinding his heel upon it. "How did you know?" he demanded directly of Gruck. "Or was it by chance only that you showed us this new possible disaster?"

It called. The giant's thought was simple. *It was time to be free—though that it did not say. Only that it called.*

Lord Romar gave a small, harsh laugh. "We must take it to mind not to answer such appeals again, large friend. Also"—he looked back to the jungle—"who can tell what else may possibly entrap the unwary?"

No one answered him, for out of the air sounded the cries of the falcons, and their bonded brothers were quick to receive them, standing quiet in that communication the rest could not understand. Vorick reported first.

"There is no possible opening for perhaps two days' journey or more to the east."

However, Farwing had better news, perhaps some hours' travel to the west a river issued out of the cliff face—perhaps thus did the lake in the safe valley drain. It straightaway entered the jungle and



its waters might well offer a road of sorts. At least the travelers would not have to cut a way in, for the waters had already done that for them. And it pointed due south, in the direction they all knew they must go.

The narrow strip of open rock was rough and they divided some supplies for the Torgians to transport. Not even the Falconers rode—though their birds were on the saddle perches.

In fact, as they sorted once more through supplies the Lady Eleeri and the Keplians gathered together and Jasta sought out Keris.

Battle brother, the Renthian hailed him, *it will be share and share alike. You wear a pack—can I do less? For you are a warrior even as I.*

Apparently the Keplians had come to a similar decision, for they allowed Eleeri and Romar, but them alone, to secure packs on their backs.

With Krispin in the lead, harking to Farwing, who picked up landmarks, they started out. They went slowly, for none of them had as yet completely thrown off the effects of that ordeal of walking on air. It might not have strained their bodies, but the demands of nerve control laid upon them had been heavy.

The strip of clear space at the foot of the cliff widened slowly as they went, giving them room to move in a tighter body. But they could see nothing more than the high stone to the right and the waiting menace of green to their left. Nor did they reach the promised river until dusk was well advanced. Keep going, Keris thought, because they *had* to have the promise of it made truth.

In spite of the growing dark, they could see that where the water flowed from the cliff face it was clear and none of them, human or animal, refused to drink. But as the water advanced toward that tunnel in the jungle, it grew murky. Across its surface danced specks of green, as of sparks thrown off from a fire.

They set up their rough camp and shared out supplies thinly. The four-footed members of the party fared better than the humans, as they cropped eagerly that grass spreading up the riverbank.



“Lady.” Lord Romar came up to where Mouse stood a little apart, her hands fast clasped about her jewel. “What advice do you have for us?”

She did not look at him as she answered. “Lord Romar, you have also the talent and it has been tried in desperate fires. You have what burden lies upon us all now.”

“To go on,” he replied in a low voice. “But even a fool would mistrust a march through these waters.”

“There will be a way.” Mouse sounded utterly confident. “That which would have us will not waste what it would feast upon.”

Keris, within a short distance of the two, knew that curl of fear which caught at any before a battle was enjoined. So—if the witchling believed their journey would be aided by the enemy, then they dared not allow themselves to be entrapped by any offering. A boat here—its very appearance would make it suspect.

This night they set sentries once again. The dank and debilitating humidity did not vanish with the day and they were immediately aware of a new and vicious attack. The flies and insects which they believed had made their lives a misery during other intervals of their journey were as nothing to the swarms of winged and crawling tormentors which sought them out now.

Destree opened her herb bag and shared out what she could of pungent dried leaves in an effort to keep them off. But when she reached the end of her supplies speedily and those she had shared seemed to do little good, she went to stand by the riverbank. This night a moon arose to ride high, making the water a sheen of flowing silver.

She took the amulet from her neck and held it high. To Keris it seemed that the moon’s radiance enveloped it until she held a small lamp. And she sang.

Once again Gruck, moving out of the deeper shadows, crouched behind her, and his deep purring caught on the notes of her wordless song, until all the camp save for those two lay in silence and even the animals, beating tails and tossing heads against the onslaught of the flying things, eased and stood rock-still.

Then—



“OOOOOOWaah—” The cry might have been that of a hound ready for the hunt, but it issued from the slender body of the girl who stood now with one hand on the giant’s shoulder. There was nothing soothing in that night-shattering cry—it was no petition, it was a dire warning.

There came a breeze, certainly not from the direction of the jungle, for it held none of that cloying rottenness. Keris realized that the cloud of thirsty bloodsuckers about him was gone.

The song had died, yet the echo of the fierce cry seemed to hold above and around them for a short passage of time. They only knew that that winged and crawling army had vanished and now the sound of the water flow arose again.

Liara swung around to face them. The moon seemed caught in her short crop of silver hair. Her face bore a defiant expression.

“Hound knowledge can count for something,” she snapped, “even here. Do you think our packs are allowed to suffer from fleas, or ticks, or the blackflies of the coursing season? By right I have not the knowledge of how to banish them, for I am female, but one learns if one keeps open ears and is silent in company. My uncle Volorian knew the pack cry, and here it is mine!”

“All of good use is of the Light. It is of benefit to living creatures, so it blends when the Power is summoned,” Mouse said. “This is not my Power, but that of the earth and the beasts which roam it—yet it protects as effectively as any gem.”

Thus they spent the night, and if armies from the jungle sought to bring them down, there was no sign of any such attack. Such a success was heartening—that they had descended the invisible way had been one victory, and now they had been nourished by a second. There was a feeling of new energy and the need to be busy about them all.

Again it was Gruck who dared the first attempt on the jungle. Without any explanation he splashed into the river, keeping close to the bank, the water rising to swirl just below the cincture of his belt. Though Destree sent a frantic mind-call after him, he did not so much as turn his head.

Once within the entrance of that cave of growth they watched



him scale the shore, planting one large foot partway up the bank while he bent to lash out at the thick growth. There were squawks and cries and a thrashing of leaves.

Destree, feeling she must follow and yet not knowing what aid she could offer him, saw the muscles beneath his shaggy pelt stiffen. With a mighty heave he brought out of its hiding place a log so thick that his own wide reach could not encompass it. It skidded from his hold luckily near enough to the riverbank to roll down into the water with a mighty splash.

The giant paid no attention to his first catch; now he was bent nearly double, striving to see through the torn vines to where the log must have come from. Again he put his full strength to the test, this time venturing farther up the bank to do so.

He was almost hidden now from their sight, but the wild weaving of leaves and branches let them know that he was once again busy.

Suddenly he appeared taking two strides back toward the rest of the party standing unable to understand what he wished or needed.

Rope—

Destree whirled to get the coils Sebra had carried since they had reached the foot of the invisible way. Krispin and Denever were already gathering those up. Oddly enough, the Keplians, who had after their usual way kept apart, now moved forward, Theela deliberately stepping first into the river water, though she delivered at the same time a disgusted snort.

A flick of her head and one of those coils of rope was caught between her teeth. She jerked it from Krispin and now she moved toward where Gruck waited, the water rising about her sleek hide.

For a space of perhaps a breath or two the giant and the Keplian faced each other. Destree believed that they exchanged some messages—but if so, it was on a mind-plane beyond her reach.

Gruck took the rope, swiftly fashioned a loop in one end. Then, even to the amazement of the Lady Eleeri, he tossed that loop over Theela's head while she stood still and allowed such bondage.

Jasta pushed past Keris, snagging on his way another coil of the hide rope. Behind him trotted the two other Keplians.



“So—that is the way it is.” Lord Romar did not linger to take off swordbelt or mail, but waded in, the waves of water set up by the others’ splashing well up to his shoulders. But even those battering waves of the water did not hinder him from making three neck loops in the stretch of hide and then heading toward where Gruck had disappeared, carrying the loose coils of the rest.

As he passed Theela, who was standing as firmly rooted as a rock, he looked back.

“We’ll need even more hands here.” He must have picked up some message from the mare.

Keris splashed in, and heard the Falconers and Borderers follow. Then Destree brushed past him and, before he could stop her, was scrambling up the crumbling rock down which the giant had rolled the log.

There was a completed netting of hide ropes, linking men, Keplians, Renthan, and the two best-trained of the Torgians, before Destree showed her sun-browned face on the bank above.

“At the signal,” she called, “pull with all your strength!”

Keris could not conceive of the size of any tree log which would so engage all their efforts. But he stood, feet a little apart and ready.

At first it seemed that they were straining to move one of the mountains behind them, something so earth-rooted it could never be freed by such puny efforts.

Then—

The line of humans and animals was nearly thrown full into the flood as the strain suddenly ceased. Yet the lines of hide were still taut, while a second or two later what they fought against seemed as firmly set as ever—but not quite.

Water splashed up against Keris’s cheek. Eleeri, her hawk features sharply set, was steering Mouse, supporting the girl who was so much shorter that the river water washed her chin. Behind came Liara, her face set with determination.

Up the bank they pulled themselves, smearing arms and legs with clay. Then they disappeared where Destree had stood only moments earlier.

Meanwhile those in the river held their hide ropes taut and



waited for a second signal. Keris was aware of not only the mutter of the stream but the heavy breathing of both men and animals. But otherwise the jungle before them was quiet.

There were movements he could not see, hidden by the growth on the banks above, twitches and short pulls to which he instinctively adjusted his own hold.

Once more Destree appeared, a scarecrow figure so bedabbed with leaf muck and clay that she was like an ill-made image of herself.

“Pull!”

They threw themselves into the task. There was no answer at first and then, unwillingly, something began again to move in answer to their efforts.

Keris could hear the snapping of vines and branches. Some whipped viciously through the air, while torn leaves rained down into the open, plastering stickily to the men and animals.

Slightly to the left of where Destree had stood there rose what looked like a barrier of sorts, coated with the loose leaves, dangling vines. Again they halted—all of them looking up at that low wall.

Now it was the Lady Eleeri who showed herself to one side, her muddy hand actually resting on the top of that barrier.

“Back! Out!” By mind-speech and word she almost screamed those orders, then leaned forward to slash at the nearest knotting of rope with her sword. They went, some of them backing through the water without taking time to turn.

There was a shudder along that barrier. Eleeri took a quick leap to the side, crashing into a vine-draped growth to which she clung.

Out and out, farther and farther projected what seemed to be no tree trunk but a platform of some kind. It was covered with masses of leaf muck and clay, yet that had scraped away from the bottom in places and Keris could see what seemed to be a smooth surface, certainly no barked wood.

It teetered for a moment on the edge of the bank and then, overbalancing, skidded out into the air and down, causing waves and a curling of water from which those below escaped with some difficulty.

All Keris could think of, as he wiped the muddy water from his



eyes and somehow made it back to the bank, was that the roof of some fair-sized garth had taken wings to land before them. But a closer look showed him that this jungle find had more of the appearance of a merchants' barge such as he had seen on the Es River.

It rode low in the water, wavelets lapping down and then over the edges, but he could see that it was not shallow. Rather, the interior was filled with ancient debris shed by the jungle. And it certainly could not be of wood, or it would long ago have rotted away.

They approached it tentatively and then once more put their ropes to use to tow it back toward the open space at the cliff foot.

Destree crouched back in the vast hollow where the thing had lain, Liara crowded beside her on one side, Mouse, her sodden robe plastering heavily against her, on the other.

On Destree's knees rested Gruck's head. His deep-pitted eyes were closed and his breath came in uneven gasps. There were bloody tears in the fur on his shoulders and his whole body shook as if he lay unprotected in the snow of high winter.

How he had finally, even with all their help, gotten that find out of the clutch of the earth she would never understand, but that he was near the end of his strength she knew. Now she leaned closer over him, not taking her amulet from about her neck but keeping it linked with her, as she let it lie on his forehead. There was a launch of a fur body nearly as dark as the one she nursed as Chief nestled down, half covering that wide chest.

Hesitantly Liara moved. She stretched her thin body, less than two-thirds the length of the giant's, beside his and clasped as much as she could against her. Her tongue showed between those over-sharp teeth and she licked Gruck's chest near where his mighty heart was visibly laboring.

Mouse fell to her knees. She held high her jewel and, though there was no sun here to bring it radiance, it glowed. Eleeri moved behind the witch, laying hands on the girl's slight shoulders, willing into the rising Power all she herself could give. This gentle giant was not of their species. It might be he could not answer in his extremity to what they would do—but what they had to give, they would.



The witch jewel blazed. Now its radiance came in waves, and each succeeding wave stroked farther down that long body until Gruck was enclosed by it. Eleeri felt her talent answer, drawn upon. She strove to summon it from the very depths of her. All the knowledge of her grandfather—shaman knowledge, some of it stretching back to the beginning of mankind—she fought to channel into Mouse.

What happened at the river now meant nothing, only that this stranger who had come to be a deep part of their company must be saved.

Liara raised her head. "His heart—it is beating stronger." Once more she returned to her licking, as a hound mother might fight to restore an injured whelp.

Mouse was sagging; twice she dragged herself more straight. And Eleeri's hands and arms ached as if she had carried some great burden for days.

They were unaware that others moved around them now, hesitant to come closer, knowing that Power worked to the upmost peak these could raise. Then Eleeri felt hands fall also on her shoulders in turn and into her flooded a new wave of strength. Under her own touch in turn, Mouse was straightening again, and the jewel blazed like a fallen star.

On Destree's knee Gruck's head turned a fraction. His eyes were still closed, but he was speaking in grunts she could not understand. On sudden impulse she leaned even closer.

"Guardsmen of Alatar, return! The trail still lies waiting ahead."

She tried to strike into the mind which moments before had been closed to her. Gruck opened his eyes.

I come— It was as if he answered her summons.

It was on Theela's back that they brought the giant back to the cliffside camp. And there, floating, though still uncleared of debris, was what he had won for them.

Gruck, propped against a backing of packs, looked at it after Destree had gotten down him a strengthening potion.

"It is a boat—of sorts—our transport." Lord Romar had settled down beside him. "But how did you know where it lay?"



Slowly Gruck shook his head and then grinned, sweeping his tongue across his thick lips.

It—it called to me. This—he waved a hand toward the waiting jungle—is like part of my homeland. There we know—when a tree dies—when even the egg of a varch is broken in the nest. He touched his forehead with his finger.

I knew that there was something there, not rooted, not part of the proper life where it lay. You have much Power. But Power is not all alike. We guardsmen are one with the forests—what is natural there does not call.

“You said that lizard thing called.” Romar rubbed his hand along his chin. “Yet do these not know naturally themselves how to break their pods?”

Gruck shrugged. “Concerning such life I know nothing. Only that that one needed help.”

Whoever had left that barge must have vanished long ago. The more the travelers cleared it, the more work seemed to stretch before them.

It was Destree who sought out Mouse before the witch made contact with Gull. “Does it seem to you that fortune serves us too well?” she asked.

“We know we are summoned,” Mouse replied soberly. “But the Light can provide as well as the Dark. Lord Romar says that the current in midstream is strong enough to speed us on our way, and they have cut poles to use. This much I know—we go to meet that which will not be refused, nor can be avoided.”

There was little talk among the travelers that night; they were too tired. But Liara looked up at the stars and lay awake for a time. Her actions as part of this company seemed to have opened one of these gates all were mad about. The Hearthkeeper of Krevanel was fast disappearing and perhaps in the end no one would care—even herself.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



The City Lost to Memory, South

Luckily fortune favored them in some ways. Keris wiped his arm across his sweating face and took a firmer hold on the long pole. Though the current of the river flowed in their favor, they needed the poles to fend off floating weed mats and waterlogged trees. This was the third day since they had left the cliffside. Luckily the river was wide enough so that the green gloom did not quite close over their heads.

None of them had been able to identify the material from which their present craft had been originally fashioned. Once freed of the debris of burying years, it seemed to be almost a giant half-shell or pod, sleekly gleaming as they had scrubbed it clean. But it was certainly not of any wood they knew, or time would have eaten it long ago. Nor did it give off any ring of metal. And to suggest it might be the shell of some monster was more than even the most active imagination would agree.

Who had left it there, and why, they would never know, but Gruck continued to insist that it was not native to the land in which it had been found.

Quarters aboard were crowded, the animals stationed at the centermost point, the humans, who were needed in relays at the poles, around the edge. Their supplies depended entirely on the river's bounty itself.



Some of the clusters of floating weeds Gruck fished out eagerly. There were small shelled things there which could be eaten if one was hungry enough—and they certainly were—and some of the not so waterlogged weed was given to the mounts, who sniffed at it disdainfully at first and then were driven to such graze. Once they had passed under a vine swinging barely a little above their heads across the water, dragged down by a number of round melonlike growths.

It was Keris's flame lash, aimed as best he could with the barge bobbing under him, which cut the vine, and Gruck grabbed at its falling line, hauling it swiftly into the boat.

With visions of more poison-spitting flying lizards, the rest of the party gave the giant as much room as they dared. But with his knife he split apart the nearest ball and the fresh scent of the juice which squirted out was enough to overcome their caution.

They ate half their catch, the humans scraping out the crisp inner sections, the mounts falling eagerly on the tougher skins. And the remaining four they wedged in among their packs.

Several times flying lizards swooped above them and always the hawks became nearly frantic, having to be quickly soothed by the Falconers. But none of the creatures came close enough to attack.

The travelers did not seek any tie with the banks, from their entrance in the water on, keeping to the river by common consent both night and day. There was no guessing what might lie in wait within that fastness of entangled growth, and at least over the water there was a faint suggestion of breeze to fight the draining humidity of the stifling heat.

In spite of the caution which had been drilled into them from their earliest years, the Falconers, the Borderers, Keris, and Lord Romar had been driven to discard their helms, their mail, even the leather quilted underskirts, and bent to their service at the poles nearly bare of body.

It was midmorning on the fourth day when they came suddenly on the first break in the jungle wall. Into this cut the sun beat steadily and there was a heavy droning as if some great creature breathed.



At Lord Romar's quick gesture they poled the barge closer to the opposite shore. Already the men were reaching for their discarded armor and weapons.

Liara moved forward first, and deep in her throat sounded that small growl. But Destree and the Lady Eleeri were not far behind. Yes, there was movement across river—and life—a feasting! Liara saw a limp gray arm pulled into the air as two of the flying lizards fought for a better grip on the already rotting flesh.

There were four such humps quivering under the attentions of the lizards or of smaller creatures who were so fast in their attempts to gather some of the torn flesh that they could hardly be seen.

Oddly enough, the remains were spaced in an exact pattern. And the carnage was grounded on what seemed to be pavement. Towering over the scene was a tall shape fashioned in a position which no human could have held for any length of time, its sharp knees half bent, clawed forepaws resting on them, shoulders hunched a little. The ovoid which was its head bent forward so it seemed to be watching the scene below with critical appreciation.

Clearly it had been constructed of the same red-brown material as the barge and probably by the same hands. But about it hung a cruel madness which seemed to lead those it watched to even greater frenzy in their feasting.

"Gray Ones," Liara identified the slain.

"Servant of the Outer Dark!" Mouse's voice arose over hers. Her hand moved as if she would reach for her jewel, and then she shook her head.

"Such shells are sometimes open for those who come," she said. "If it has not life within it still, let no touch of Power bring it awakening."

They were ready to agree with that and poled valiantly, bringing the barge into midstream, where the current ran the swiftest.

"So still the Gray Ones come," the Lady Eleeri said. "But they serve the Dark—why should they then suffer such an end?"

"Because," Destree made answer, "great Evil Ones do not return any loyalty to those who serve them. It may be that what awaits be-



yond must have pain and blood to build up its power—therefore it takes from those answering its call.”

Liara shivered. “The Dark One,” she muttered. “What could he get from us if he used us so?”

“That is why we go.” Mouse had turned her head so she could no longer see even the edge of that opening in the jungle.

They were very silent as the barge bobbed on and the men swung the poles. None of them was green to warfare. They had battle scars, and memories which sometimes became night dreams of torment, but there was something about that monstrous thing presiding over the feast of the dead which carried the seeds of a new fear.

There were no more such interruptions to their voyage, though at first most of them expected secretly to come across other massacres. However, they needed to come to an end of this depleting journey. Their mounts were suffering from the poor forage and they were ready themselves to sink under the dank heat which beat at them.

As long as the tree canopy seemed to be so close, neither Falconer would send his bird on scout. However, at dawn the second day after they had left the clearing they sighted a break in that roofing and Krispin released Farwing.

The bird flew swiftly, cutting upward into a patch of open sky as they floated on, impatient for its return. Then suddenly Gruck stuck his pole deeply enough in the river that with his great strength he could for a moment or so halt their advance.

Faster water— His message was interrupted by one from Theela, who had shouldered her way among the other animals to the fore of their section.

Open land—but the river—it falls!

Lord Romar and Eleeri, long trained by their years of roaming, looked from one bank to another. If they faced a falls or rapids of some sort, their barge would be no place of safety. On the right the green of the heavy growth apparently made a firm stand, but to the left some storm of the past had brought down several trees to crush their lesser fellows, opening up a way.



A flash of wings and Farwing was back. Krispin caressed the bird as they communicated, and then he said swiftly:

“It is true. The jungle ends not far ahead. There is another cliff, but not such as we have had to face. However, the river narrows into a falls, descending thus to a lake.”

So at last they had to dare the jungle, if only the fringe of it. Once more their mounts accepted the packs, leaving the humans to open the way. Swords were drawn and ran sticky with saps of different hues and they all tried not to touch what whipped back at them.

The heavy growth did not reach the edge of the drop before them, with a very good reason. Here was a shelf, or perhaps once it had been a road, of the same material as their barge.

No seam or crack marred its surface—it might have been laid yesterday. However, Destree knew as she dared to take her first step out upon it that it was incredibly old. But it was what lay below which held them still and silent for a long moment.

An easy slope of ramp led down to rolling stretches of plains thickly carpeted with matted greenery—though no trees. Here and there some of the jungle vines draped mounds which formed squat hillocks.

“A city!” Lady Eleeri cried, even as Swifftalon took to the air, soaring out over what they could see.

Buildings, yes, turned to mounds, where, in spite of the vine netting, could be seen stone.

However, those were only on the outer edge of this metropolis, for such, they saw in awe, it had been. Destree, who had served on Sulcar ships, had seen most of the largest cities of the eastern sea, but she had never viewed any such spread of buildings new or old. Beyond the stone ones where the jungle fought stood high towers, clean of any growth. She thought these must rival Es Citadel itself.

However, these were not castles, nor any type of habitation she had ever viewed before. For, though a tower extended six even seven stories tall, there was no visible break in the walls of any she could view from here—no dark slit of window. Instead it was as if someone had set up rows of children’s play blocks—for they could



see even from here the dividing of streets. These also had been built of the material which defied time and nature.

There was a glint far in the distance, and when Swiftalon returned, the bird reported that this must have been a port, for there was much open water beyond. Also he had not been able to see any life except birds. Still they hesitated to start down that road and enter into the city. Estcarp, Escore, Arvon, all had their share of strange ruins, and these native-born were used to take care about any strange erection which could possibly have connection with the Dark.

Though the barge which had served them so well had been of this strange new material, none of them were about to forget that image in the jungle and the impression of cold horror which it had left with them.

They decided at last to establish a camp near the small lake into which the river plunged. There they must hunt, for they were all gaunt and had tightened belts to the last notch.

Then they could explore by degrees and with caution. The birds would be invaluable, and Eleeri insisted that the Keplians could easily sense danger. They did not know what new talents Gruck might produce when it was necessary.

Destree was heartened as she stepped off the foot of the ramp to see a tall standing, the largest she had ever found, of illbane, its ivory flowers scenting the breeze.

That was rare in the world she knew, a very costly and hard-come-by herb. Surely if those who had once lived here had cultivated such, they had not served the Dark, for illbane was a mighty tool against evil.

There were other plants, too, which she knew of old, and they seemed to flourish extremely well in this earth. The terrible humid drag of the jungle was behind them and they walked at a swifter pace and were soon at the place Denever, scouting ahead, had picked out for them.

Open fields, grown waist-high with grass and what Destree was sure was a kind of grain now gone wild, welcomed the animals. Free of any burdens now, they rolled luxuriously and then began harvesting nearby. The Falconers delivered four grass hens dis-



turbed by the horses, which had fallen easy prey to their birds, and Chief brought in a half-grown heeper. Keris and Denever, though they kept away from any of the overgrown buildings, went hunting and then had to call upon Jasta to help transport a small beast which might have been ancestored by a farm cow.

The women sought out herbs and Gruck went into the pond, where some quick work on his part brought out ten fine fat fish. Thus after a long time of near-fasting, that night they feasted.



Once more there was a gathering in a side chamber of Lornt. Autumn threatened, especially after sunset, and braziers were giving forth a limited measure of heat as well as some of the incense believed to clear the mind. For clear minds were needed. But this time it was more than Gull and Mereth who held council there. Willow, Gull's second hand, was another half shadow beside her superior.

Here also were Jaelithe and her daughter Kaththea, Nolar and Dahaun of the Green Valley.

Gull's rasping voice broke the silence. "You have heard"—she made a gesture toward a small table a little apart on which were piled sheets of leaf paper showing dark ink writing—"what has been reported. There is interference from the south. Sometimes Mouse gets through clearly, but again there is silence."

"The Dark?" suggested Jaelithe.

"No, that we would sense at once. Three reports have come in turn from the Sulcar expedition: They have truce with the barbarians but are now before even the boundaries of that half-fabled land. Arvon—what chances there to give us any hope?"

Gull leaned forward a little and stared straight at Kaththea, a frown drawing her somewhat bushy brows together.

"Hilarion labors but—so far the connection cannot hold. And that," the younger woman nearly spat back at the witch, as if she were defending her mate, "*is* of the Dark. Therefore we dare not probe too deeply lest we draw to us something of what our kin must now be facing."

"Now we hear of a city," Mereth broke in, her slate chalk busy. "Did not Mouse tell you in detail of that?"



“Not only of a city, but . . .” Gull hesitated, “we know of the indrawing of the Dark Ones southward. It would seem that it is this city they seek. They are being watched but our scouts are too few to attempt an open meeting with them.”

“A city,” hazarded Nolar. “Perhaps also—a gate?”

For a long moment Gull made no answer, and then she nodded. “A gate,” she said sourly, as one biting down on unripe fruit. “We hold that earlier one found alive, but it takes toll on the sisters. To hold two such—” Then she turned on Mereth, her cheeks flushed a little as if with anger. “For all your delving, you have found nothing concerning a ward. We hold one gate here, perhaps two, if Mouse can give us early proof. How many may lie elsewhere? But I tell you this—even all the power which made mountains walk to our defense in the past cannot hold much more than we already deal with!”

“Sage Morfew uncovered yesterday a packet bearing the seal of the Mage Arscro.” Mereth shifted in her chair.

She heard the sound of quickly indrawn breath. For the first time Willow dared speak:

“Arscro is legend.” She stated that as if she hoped it was a fact.

“Legends,” Kaththea returned, “have a habit lately of coming to life. But who—or what—is Arscro?”

“One of the Old Great Ones—the first openers of the gates.” It was Nolar who made answer, to the very obvious surprise of Gull. “When I was student to Sage Ostbor he had one document which made some reference to Arscro but saying nothing more than that—that the first of the gates grew from his experiments.”

“Then let us hope,” Gull snapped, “that this sage’s find, Lady Mereth, will have some answers which we badly need. In the meantime . . .” She paused, as if she hated to say the words which she spoke now. “We shall guard and sustain our people—those with Mouse as well as who are farther afield—as best we can and hope for time.”



Mouse crouched in the half embrace of the sweet-smelling shrub which had drawn her because its perfume seemed soothing to her troubled mind, and looked out upon as much of that grotesque



city as she could see from this small hillock. They had guessed that in reality it was one city rooted upon the ruins of another, ruins which the newcomers had made few attempts to clear away. The worn, overgrown stone humps were in such sharp contrast to those towering windowless, doorless spears of buildings that it somehow triggered uneasiness.

The falcons and then the Keplians and Jasta had been the first-in scouts for them, the animals apparently roaming in their grazing closer and closer to the more crowded center of the town.

So far they had reported no signs of any life except birds and animals. It was as if this forgotten country had never been known to man. At dawn and late afternoon scouting parties of three had begun going out, ostensibly hunting but really penetrating deeper into the midst of the clustered buildings.

But—Mouse had her fist at her mouth and was gnawing at her knuckles, unconscious of the pain—but there was . . . She bit deeper. Gull should be here—one of the Elder Sisters. She could not tell for herself what dwelt like shadows just behind her shoulders. There was a . . . waiting!

Because she was so unsure of what might menace them, she could not call too often—try too much to explain. This brooding *something* might well be waiting for her to reveal Power in just some such way.

So far she had not shared her uneasiness with any of the others. But she wondered if Destree was not also troubled at what might be.

The brush which sheltered her now shook, and fragrant petals showered down upon her. Liara was on her knees, her green eyes bright, her lips tight against those sharp white teeth.

“There are Gray Ones,” she said with a certainty which could not be disputed. “Riders also—though their mounts are not honest beasts like ours. Gruck trails them.”

So, her uneasiness was banished by so much. Mouse knew now, as if Gull had announced it in cloister meeting, that these straying Dark Ones were moving, against their wills, drawn by something greater than they could understand, toward a final meeting.



“We move camp,” the Alizondern girl was continuing. “Vorick has found a ruin which is not altogether swallowed up and will give us temporary shelter, and the Lady Eleeri has sent out mind-call to Theela. The mare will bring the other animals in. Only the scouts are out, but today they vowed to strike clear to the sea—if it is a sea. Can you call them, Lady Mouse?”

She remembered seeing them ride out that late afternoon even though she had been more than half buried in her own thoughts: Denever, Krispin, and Keris. Surely the Renthan would pick up the Keplian warning as it came.

But the men . . . She clutched her jewel firmly and summoned up a mind-picture of each—Krispin in his hawk mask helm, Denever, and Keris, of the Valley and yet not of it.

She held them so and summoned strength with the jewel. Then Jasta answered, and she knew that they would be slipping back with more caution than they had gone, out of any trap newly come enemies might be setting.

Gather they did, at the temporary shelter Vorick had discovered. Either the masonry of this particular ruin had been better ordered or the plants attacking it of less hardy rooting. They were able to push aside a screen of vines and enter into a large hall, the roof of which seemed intact under the prodding of their spears.

The space was large enough that they could also bring in the mounts, and the animals made no objection to being urged under cover.

Their two travel lanterns flashed brightly enough to afford half-light for this hall. But anyone could see that wariness grew sharper by the moment in each and every one of them.

Apparently Liara’s report had already spread. They were busy at their packs loosing extra arrows, fresh spearheads, sharpeners for the blades of knives. Mouse saw Keris to one side, his flame lash in his hands, examining intently the butt—perhaps the lash’s efficiency was threatened, for he frowned as he did so.

“The Dark Ones gather,” Destree observed. “They are few, as far as we can tell. Perhaps the jungle took greater toll of them than we



can guess. But there are Sarn Riders—and such are not easily faced. Rasti?”

She looked inquiring to Vorick, whose Swifttalon had flown scout that day.

“They have not been seen. And Swifttalon can track a leaper in a hayfield by the wave of stems alone.”

Mouse felt that sharp blow, delivered by no hand, coming out of the very air around her. She held her jewel first to her trembling lips and then to her forehead above her eyes.

Distorted pictures, like tapestry crumpled together, shook her. She was dimly aware of hands clasping her tightly, giving her support. With all the talent she could summon, Mouse tried to make some sense of the weaving pictures. It was as if some constantly whirling mist first revealed and then quickly hid them again.

Then—perhaps she had drawn enough support from those hands to control her talent focus—she saw.

There was a city, or at least a large collection of those same tall windowless buildings. However, this city was alive. Along the street she saw most clearly moved humanoid figures: small, emaciated, barely clothed in tattered and filthy rags. They looked as bleached against those buildings as if they had been buried underground for most of their lives, and they were harnessed together in packs by chains. There were men, and women—and children—all blank and hopeless, to her sight.

These might be beasts driven to some slaughter, for others, larger, brutal of face, clad uniformly in dull black, marched on either side of that pitiful company, swinging whips which only too often raised a bleeding welt on bare skin, seemingly at the caprice of the wielder of that lash.

The captives were urged on, emerging now from the city to a wide-open space. There had been built a platform on which were a number of cushioned seats. These were occupied not only by men wearing black (though it was richly overhung with gemmed chains), but by a number of women who were eating bits from boxes being passed around, laughing and talking feverishly.

One man on the platform was on his feet, leaning forward a lit-



tle to overlook the captives. He made a gesture, and out of the general lines of his followers below came another who bowed to the one who summoned her. For Mouse saw she was a woman dressed in the same uniform, but one lightened by a green collar which extended well down her breast and which was centered with a pendant.

She made a bow to the leader, but it was one which held a hint of mockery, then stood waiting. He gestured again. A vehicle unpulled by any animal, yet running smoothly, came to a halt beside her and she seated herself to be borne forward around the waiting captives, to the open space farther on, where two pillars stood. Her carrier was followed by a number of others, all carrying uniformed women.

The one who led this procession got out and went to the pillars. From one of those vehicles which had followed her there came two women at a fast trot, carrying between them a squat artifact they set down directly facing the space between the pillars.

Behind this the woman took her place, while there moved in from either side other warriors, all armed with tubes.

The woman set hands to two levers on the top of the artifact and there blazed out a thrust of black-gray which became like a mist filling the whole space.

Then out of the mist wavered a pair of Sarn Riders, their ugly monster mounts acting as if blind, and after them scuttled Gray Ones, bumping into one another as they came, their jaws drooling long strings of yellow stuff.

The tubes carried by the waiting warriors spurted fire, and Sarn Riders and Gray Ones went down. But they were still living when the mist was gone and they were dragged forward by great hooks and torn to pieces between the pillars, their blood turning the ground into a noisome mud.

This the woman leader inspected and then came back in her vehicle to stop below the platform and make some report. Whatever she said was not taken kindly by the leader to whom she spoke. His mouth opened as if he were roaring. Firmly his subordinate shook her head.

Then—Mouse was whimpering and crying, her head against



Destree's shoulder. She was sure of what she had seen. Somewhere they were struggling to open a gate—those creatures of evil. And she could only now believe it was here.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



Blood Magic, Lost City

Mouse became aware of a soft crooning, of a warmth as if she lay against the breast of some loving spirit. The horrors which had spun through the “seeing in her mind” still abode, but they were softened; she could no longer taste bile in her mouth.

“Sisterling.” No abrupt call such as might come from Gull or one of the sisters she had come to know—this was part of the warmth and the caring. Slowly she opened her eyes and looked up at Destree and another who also helped to support her. That support she needed, for she felt no strength from either bones or flesh—only a great weakness.

It was Eleeri who was crooning, and her hand stroked Mouse's cheek, seeming to leave behind its passage more of the feeling of peace, of safety . . .

Safety!

For a wild instant she was snapped back into that other place and watched the foulness in action there.

“Mouse!” A voice from afar. And one she knew. *That* was Gull! She must answer, report, and she tried to pull herself up from out of Destree's hold.

“We have seen, Sister,” that remote voice spoke now. “Through your eyes we have seen. Rest safely until the Dark rises.”



Gull's voice died away—thinned perhaps by the great distance now lying between them. But Destree, the Lady Eleeri, Liara, Gruck—all the others she sensed now about her—they were not so removed. And if that gate of torment and death opened—and those were drawn into its maw . . . !

“Please.” She could feel that her hands still rested on her jewel, but it was cold to her touch, for now the Power was gone out of it. “Listen!”

The need for warning this handful of companions—perhaps the lack of time—gave her energy enough to find the words, though those came haltingly, to tell what she had seen. Though she did not have strength enough to lift herself far up against Destree and could see only part of Eleeri's face, a suggestion of lighter countenance behind her which must be Liara, she was entirely certain that she spoke to all of them and that they heard.

“A blood gate!” Of them all, Keris cried first from those shadows she could not pierce.

She sensed that he guessed more meaning in what she had reported than most of the others. However, he was of Escore, the heartland of the Old Race, where the deepest of memories lingered.

“A blood gate?” That was a question from Krispin.

But he was interrupted by Vorick. “That flash we viewed came from near the sea! Yet it did not open any gate.”

“No,” Lord Romar said slowly. “For only half the price is paid. Lady Mouse, surely you have knowledge of evil dealings.”

His words might have been keys, unlocking some of the old knowledge which had so filled her days with learning until the call had come from Es City.

“A blood gate—” Mouse's voice caught and she had to stop and clear her throat, “is wholly of the Dark and used only by the Dark. Of such was that which loosed the Kolder curse on us. But that was done from their side by some learning of their own which we did not share. This—this—draws from the deepest evil this world has ever known.

“We believed that some loathesome Power was summoning the Dark Ones from Escore to serve them. That it was, but in another



way than the riders and the Gray Ones could guess. Called through the gate, they were slain, with all the pain those others could contrive, opening the way to this world. But only has it been done by half. They can enter now, I believe. But the gate will not remain open to their passage unless some of the blood of that world be as cruelly spent on this side—that is why they brought those captives.” In spite of herself she began to shiver.

Mouse had faced evil before. She had helped to destroy one of the ancient vile traps, and that by instinct alone, for she had had no true training then. But this was such a danger as only an army armored with the highest talent could withstand. Gull! Then she remembered, Gull already knew. Her own effort had been so great she had interlocked with the Witch Mistress who had seen even as Mouse had seen.

How much time had they before that pitiful crowd of captives would be driven through to slaughter? And these strangers, as had the Kolders, had weapons perhaps beyond the comprehension of her world.

Eleeri spoke first. “We watch. And you, Witch Daughter, when the strength is again yours, ask how goes the research in Lornt. Since the blood gates were known of old, then also there must be records of them—and perhaps even answers. Now . . .” once more she gently stroked Mouse’s cheek, “let Destree call upon her Lady’s aid to your healing. For it is plain you have suffered a wounding, if not one of flesh.”

If Mouse could have protested she would have, but the Voice of Gunnora seemed to seep into her whole body. Her eyelids were so weighted she could not hold them open, and down into the greatest depth of renewing slumber that soft croon carried her now.

They were but a handful. Keris glanced from one to another in that ruined hall. Against them the might of an army—one undoubtedly such as the Kolder. They could muster a collection of talents—but Mouse had the greatest Power to control, and to see her so reduced promised little good for the future.

Flight was possible, but he knew that no one of them, human or



beast, would take to that. If the gate was opened, then what they could do must be done here.

“Kolder tricks,” Lord Romar was saying slowly. “They kept us at war for years. It was your grandfather”—he looked now to Keris—“and the Lady Jaelithe who put an end to that. Yet I do not believe that this gate opens on the Kolder world. What we face now is a different brand of Power.”

Destree had settled Mouse comfortably in her bedroll, but before she moved away she saw Gruck’s bulk nearly fill the entrance to the interior of the ruin. Behind him moved swiftly the three Keplians and Jasta.

When the two Borderers and the Falconers, who were nearest, hurried after him, the giant looked around and shook his head. Eleeri, pushing up beside the men, suddenly nodded.

“He would set an alarm,” she said, and Theela whinnied as if impatient to be gone. Keris slipped past the others until his shoulder rubbed against Jasta’s.

The giant’s big head swung around and those deepset eyes studied the young Escorian. Then he gave a brief nod and started down through the meadowland toward the city. Keris swung up on Jasta, as the pace the other set was difficult for an ordinary man to equal without breaking into a run.

Keris had made three previous scouting ventures into the remnants of the ancient city. There had been, as he thought, no possible way of getting into those tightly sealed towers save by blasting. Now they moved among many of these as Gruck led the way, the Keplians trotting behind him down toward the visible patch of the sea.

Mouse’s vision had certainly suggested that the evil forces she had witnessed in action must once have known this country. Else why would their towns, set in such perfect precision, be here?

The Escorian expected that Gruck would bring them down to the seaport side itself, where they had not yet explored. However, having paused twice to sniff deeply, Theela close beside him as if the mare shared another range of thought, the giant turned down one of the silent streets, where even the small thud and jangle of



their passing seemed to be instantly swallowed up. Their small cavalcade came to a halt on the edge of an open space, paved like the streets with the same imperishable material.

Here also stood a pair of pillars. Sighting those, Keris was sure they had reached their goal. This open field, the pillars, were too like those Mouse had described—save that here the field was deserted.

Keris noted that now their speed diminished, the giant cutting his strides, his head going from side to side as if on constant watch. Theela left, breaking into a trot, the two other Keplians following her. They circled about the pillars, though remaining at some distance from the sinister stones.

They will stand guard. Jasta's mind-speech touched Keris. *The big one can use our aid.* With Keris still mounted, he cantered on.

The giant's hands were now busy with his belt and he brought out of a pocket there that same silvery wire Keris had seen him use to snap the lizard pod many days earlier. He motioned to Keris, who quickly joined him.

Pressing one end of the wire into Keris's hand, he gestured for the Escorian to strike out for the farther of the two pillars. Though everything within him dreaded such an approach—what if he were to be sucked through?—Keris obeyed the other's unspoken order.

Meanwhile Gruck, with a flourish of arm to unwind the thread, was heading for the other pillar. Twice he paused for a long sniff but then went steadily forward. Now he reached his right hand, the silver thread clasped between thumb and forefinger, and deliberately pressed the slightly crooked end he held against the pillar.

To Keris's surprise the thread now appeared to be rooted. Clasp- ing the loose coil, Gruck came toward him, pulling the cord taut behind as he came, at what might be shoulder height for a human. Reaching Keris, he took the other end and pressed it seemingly into instead of against the stone.

So thin was that thread of metal that only glints of the afternoon sun made it visible. Gruck caught it and gave it a testing jerk. A twanging of sound answered.

Still it seemed he was not finished with what he would do. Once



more Theela and her companions trotted up to him, and this time Jasta translated at once.

Vines, grass are needed.

The Keplians and Jasta could tear the growth from the walls of the nearest heap of rubble. However, Keris's knife cut cleanly, and he paid no attention to the sticky sap which covered most of him by the time they were through, and brought their harvest back to the giant.

The giant had taken no part in their ruthless stripping of the ancient stones but rather was inching along on his knees from one pillar to the other. In his hand was a rod, which he held steady in a straight line. A red glow showed on the pavement as that passed over it, and it left a groove behind.

Keris could not help a series of uneasy glances at the pillars. His woeful lack of talent would give him no warning if those Mouse had seen broke through. How long would it be before they could expect invasion?

Gruck pulled the mass of fast-withering vegetation apart. Some he discarded with a toss to one side and other pieces he handled carefully. Having sorted what they had brought, he once more went to work. Into that groove in the pavement he fit certain sections of vine, and as each was so planted, he sprinkled small pinches of what looked like dust which he took from a stoppered vial drawn from his pouch. So he worked with the methodical care of a gardener who had all the rest of the day at his service to complete the task.

He rose to his feet at last, hands on hips, looking from right to left and back again. The notch burned into the pavement was filled.

Then he turned and tramped toward the same rubble where they had torn loose the vines. Down on his knees again he scooped at the soil, darker here and moist, gathering up vast handfuls of it. Seeing what was to be done, Keris, too, went digging. He watched Gruck's transference of the mucky stuff to the now-buried vine sections and followed the giant's lead. Then a jerk of Gruck's head



sent him back and away. The three Keplians drew together, Jasta a little apart.

Gruck took up position at midpoint of that nearly invisible strand uniting the pillars. He threw back his head and Keris heard a roll as if distant thunder drummed among the peaks behind them. It continued almost as if the giant need take no breath to sustain that call.

There was a darkening along the line of buried vine. Then small stems arose, whipping back and forth higher and higher until their blind search found the thread, and there they anchored. Anchored and grew thicker, and not only that but they developed—with a speed as if shot as arrows from a skilled bow—great thorns. Nor were those the only products of that fantastic growth. Buds appeared, thick and round, growing even larger.

Gruck was silent. But he took two great strides and caught Keris by the shoulder, drawing the young man back and away just as gleams of color showed among those buds and they opened into huge blossoms, from the centers of which arose puffs of yellowish powder.

Death! With the giant's warning in his mind, Keris was once more on the move. How practical against off-world weapons the giant's powers might be, none would know until the time came for testing them. They might not have discovered the complete lock for that gate, but he was sure that what had been done here would win them some much-needed time.

They all felt the need for some communication with those who had sent them, but it was plain that Mouse, wan-faced, somehow even shrunken a little so that she looked even more the child, could not be put to the strain of a call upon those in Lormt.

They ate and then snubbed out their small fire. Jasta and the Keplians had drifted out again into the open land—of them all now, perhaps these were the best as scouts and watchers. They could hope that the aliens beyond the gate might very well have no idea that man and animal might communicate.

But this night only Mouse slept, if sleep she did. Perhaps she had



been drawn into some trance state for renewing. The rest sat in a circle about the graying ashes of the fire.

It was Lord Romar who broke the silence which had held them as the night drew closer in.

“Gruck”—he nodded toward the giant, a hulk of denser darkness against the wall—“has given what he can of his talent to win time. Whether his barrier can hold against what those others can bring upon us, we do not know. But . . .” now he looked from one to the next of those about him as if he could see their faces plainly, “to ward for all time this gate . . . We are eleven. Perhaps eleven thousand would be a better accounting for such a task.

“Let us now list what we do have. My race has talents, strengths which can be drawn upon, but I do not possess the Power to focus such except in limited battle. My Lady”—he glanced at Eleeri, who had settled beside him—“has power born in another world and of a different learning. That she won freedom for the Keplians was such a feat as no other attempted.

“Denever has been entrusted with the weapon secret found at Lormt.”

“That much, my lord. But I am not of the Old Race and I have no talent except that learned in the fighting courts.”

“Thus do I say also,” Vutch growled. “I fought the dead of Gorm, and kept the Borders clear where I was sent. But all my Power lies in arms skills.”

Krispin cleared his throat, a sound not unlike that made by Farwing. “Falconers are born to sword and shield, and to the fellowship with their birds. We do not deal in Power, though we have fought battles where it was used. But not by us.”

Keris’s mouth seemed suddenly very dry. “As you know, I am halfling, born to the Lady Dahaun and her Lord Kyllan Tregarth. I am of Escore, which is looked upon as the source of Power both Light and Dark. But—I have no talent.” He said it clearly, trying to hold his voice firm.

Suddenly he felt odd, as if he were under critical study—a strange insect, perhaps, in the custody of one of the scholars at Lormt who had a liking for such kinds of knowledge. He turned



his head and found himself looking straight into the Alizondern girl's eyes, which seemed to shine green even in the absence of very real light.

"No one knows"—her sharply accented trade speech cut through the dark—"what one is until the last lesson is learned. I was Liara Hearthmistress, Whelp Cherisher, of Krevanel. Among us magic—what you call Power—is a thing of evil so great that you cannot conceive of how we feel near it. Yet, I discovered that my brother has accepted certain magic and will make use of it. Then I made a discovery that my species has other tricks and faults—did I not draw the Gray Ones? Now I strive to forget what has been pushed upon me from birth—and I am still finding that Liara is not what I always believed she was. Think not of yourself, pack comrade," now she said to Keris, "as one mutilated. Rather seek new paths not shadowed by the events of the old. You say you are without talent—does he speak the truth?"

Oddly enough now, her attention swung from him to Gruck.

What he has will come when there is need. The giant's mind-speech was quick. Also as a Guardsman I have talents, which may be strange in this other world of yours, but in which I have been long drilled. Since I can no longer serve the Alatar as I gave my oath, I now serve your purposes.

Destree shifted a little away from Mouse's bedroll. She had been holding the small hand of the sleeping girl and now she laid that gently back on the other's breast. Her fingers then went to her amulet.

"This is the Lady's battle also. There is a thought which might be of service. Tell me"—she spoke directly now to Eleeri—"I know that the witches hold open the lines of communication with Lormt. But is there one there also who is of the Lady's following?"

Eleeri did not answer at once—rather, it was Liara who spoke a name. "The Lady Nolar. She is a healer and I have seen her light the Lady's lamp."

"Picture her in your mind, Liara. Make her features plain, even see her about some daily task!" There was excitement in Destree's voice now.



They sat in silence. Keris found himself also striving to draw into memory she who was the life companion of Marshal Duratan. Anyone who had once seen her would never forget, for nature had cruelly marked her with a discolored cheek—a red shading which could never be banished.

“Yes . . .” Destree’s voice was hardly more than a breath. “So—I see her. Now—by the Lady’s favor”—she seemed to be addressing them all—“I will do here what should only be tried in a favored shrine. You”—now she spoke to Lord Romar, and then nodded in the direction of Gruck, and lastly to Lady Eleeri—“must be my guards this night, for if the ties are broken, the worst may fall upon us.

“I must lie entranced, and under the Power you can raise to cover me. However, it must be the Power of the earth, of that which the Lady knows—no magic from the learning of men.”

Denever had lit one of their very small camp glows in a far corner of the room and Destree was already unrolling her bedroll. Then she brought forth her pack of supplies and made careful choices, sniffing and discarding, adding a drop of one of her selections now and then to a bowl so small she could cup it in her hand.

When she was finished and had put away the package of herbs, she drew upon their supply of water and washed her face and hands. Then she beckoned to the three whom she had selected as guardians and they moved in, Gruck one side of the bedroll, Eleeri at the head, and Romar at the foot.

Holding high the bowl, Destree made her plea:

“Lady, we are in need. I am one of Thy lesser creations, You who have made our world bear life—but I ask not for myself but for that very life You cherish, since the Dark looms high and its shadow lies upon us.”

She drank the contents of the small bowl in a single draft, then stretched out even as Mouse so quietly lay, her hands folded on her breast over the amulet, and closed her eyes. In this very dim light she seemed to become one with the mat and stone on which she lay.



There was nothingness and then a blast of wind. But that was not sharp against her body; rather, it held summer’s warmth and



the scent of flowers. She might be lying on a bed at rest— No! deep in her, something sparked. This was no time for rest. She had not asked for that, but for something so much greater that she feared her talent might not be such as to grant it to her. Find—she must seek and find!

Now the soft wind vanished, and, as if in reproof of her inner demand, she seemed to be swept along so fast that she was rendered breathless. Find! To that she held firmly.

That which served Destree now for eyes saw light, more brilliant than she had known since she had left the Shrine—for on a table stood two lamps, both turned as high as possible, and on shelves others.

She knew at once where her petition had brought her: This was the workroom of an herbalist, a healer. And she who labored here sat by the lit table, a script so ancient it had been engraved on copper beneath one hand while with the fingers of the other she was tracing out the inscription word by word, whispering as she went.

Suddenly she looked up, staring at where Destree might be if she were indeed present in body. Her eyes were wide, and she stared as one who found belief difficult.

“You—you are a messenger,” she said, rising quickly from the stool on which she had been seated. “Yet you seek no witch.”

“I am of the Lady’s chosen,” Destree thought in return.

Nolar drew her hand down her stained cheek—perhaps the return of some very old gesture she had once used in an attempt to hide that marking.

“The Three in One, Guardian of all life, be ever with us.” She spoke the words of recognition. “How may I serve Her from whom you have come?”

“Our witch is overborne by what she has discovered. Thus I carry what must be known.” Swiftly—she had no idea how long her strength of trance could hold—she described to her listener their new discovery by Mouse, and the need laid upon them. “If you have discovered a ward,” she concluded, “it is needed at all cost now. We fear that worse than the Kolders may be upon us. I . . .”



She faltered; the trance was fading, she had never tried her talent so deeply before. “Help—aid—” she got out those last two words.

Then once more the darkness and the wind which had carried her closed in.

Nolar stood but for a moment—awe still touched her. Then she went swiftly to a shelf on which stood a small gong. Swiftly she struck the metal and the ringing tone of it not only filled the room but, as she knew it would, reached out into corridors and rooms beyond.

“Nolar!” came a voice she knew well. She knew *he* would be the first to answer. It was always so—when she needed him, he was there. The marshal was not in war gear, but still he went sword-belted, and all knew that with that well-used blade he could give good account of himself. But against an army with strange and overpowering weapons, turned so toward the Dark that they might open a blood gate? He already had his arm around her.

“We gather in council. However, we are stronger: Hilarion has returned. So already all are summoned.”

“To the south,” she said in a small whisper. “Oh, Duratan—so far away!”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



Lornt, South, the Forgotten City

It was not such a large assemblage as had gathered at Es City months earlier, but what would be decided here might change a world forever.

Simon Tregarth and Jaelithe, Simon just home from a second



sweep search in North Escore, Dahaun and Kyllan, the Sage Morfew, and, curiously flanked by Gull and Willow (as if they drew in now to make common cause), Lady Mereth. While Kaththea sat, she was not at rest, her body tense—she might have been one of the great cats about to bring down a skillfully tracked quarry. And Hilarion paced back and forth, turning swiftly as Nolar and Duratan came in.

“The alarm.” Simon Tregarth, rather than Gull, seemed for the moment in command.

Nolar moved forward until she stood behind the nearest empty stool, though she made no move to seat herself. With a cautious glance at the two witches, she launched speedily into her report. Dahaun’s long fingers locked before her, and after the manner of her ancient race her fair hair darkened to a somber black, her skin becoming nearly chalk white.

Hilarion’s pacing had come to an abrupt stop and he was watching Nolar as if he would shake the words out of her at a faster pace than she could utter them.

“Well?” Gull looked to the adept. “What mastership of Power can be pulled forth now? Kolder darkness lasted for years and nearly wrecked us. Do we await a second coming of such?”

She was fingering her jewel, and her eyes were narrow as she kept them on the adept. Of old there had been no meeting place for the Witches of Estcarp and any man who claimed Power. But Hilarion reached far back—even before the first beginning of their sisterhood.

“I came with certain information,” he returned abruptly. “We have sought afar, even before the first stone of this storage house of knowledge was laid. The gates which were our playthings—oh, yes, I played such games also until I was enwebbed by my own recklessness—were born of the curiosity of a single man: Arscro. And any reference to him and his dealings has been hunted, here, by the leave of your sisterhood”—he inclined his head in Gull’s direction—“among all the stores of legend and history you hold.

“What may lay elsewhere in this world—in Arvon, in the parts we now know nothing of, we cannot guess. But the gate plan was born from the mind of a single man, seized upon by his fellow



adepts with great enthusiasm, dealt with, refined, sharpened as one edges a sword.”

“And what has this to do now with what we face?” Gull’s voice was sour and sharp.

“What can be born in one mind can be recaptured. We might have searched for a hundred seasons but for that which Sage Morfew brought us. Together with my own knowledge of the opening of gates, we have an answer of sorts. Whether it will be successful . . .” He shrugged. “There is this about the highest magic: Its results cannot be foreseen, only speculated upon—or tried in desperation.”

“Now we here face what has been learned by our southern band,” Simon’s deep tone cut in. Jaelithe’s hand lay on her knees, and his wider fist closed over it as one who would hold what he has past all dispute. “Time is against them. She who speaks for Gunnora—Destree n’Regnant—has stood against great evil in the past and we were also a part of that battle. She says that their witch is exhausted. And how many leagues of mountain and hostile land now lie between us? Even if we had before us the solution—the gate lock—how could we give it to those who need it most? And even if they received the spell, would it answer to them, so far removed from the place it was woven?”

Hilarion shook his head slowly. “Do you think that every one of your questions has not already been made plain—though it was not until this hour I knew how desperate the cause might be?”

For some reason Nolar’s attention was drawn away from the men confronting one another to Dahaun once more. The Lady of the Green Valley, she who had been one of those who held firm against the Dark for more years than Nolar could count—she was once more changing. The black hair was silvery as if time laced it through, her face was thin and drawn.

Kyllan must have noticed the change also, for he was on his feet, shoving back his stool, standing over her as if with his very presence he could keep some peril away.

She spoke, addressing Hilarion directly. The two of them might have stood alone in that room.

“You know what can be done.”



“What I could try.”

“And only you?” she asked.

“Only me—now. It might be a long search to find someone with talent enough, and then even longer to teach such.”

The withered, aged look seemed stamped upon her now—her usual many changes were lost in the past.

“Then there is only one way!” She stood and seemed not to see Kyllan’s hand come out to her, rather advanced within touching distance of Hilarion.

Now the adept’s expression changed in turn. There was a wrinkle of pain between his eyes.

“Who? The Witch Child could not mesh in that fashion. Nor do I believe that Gunnora’s Voice can be so unloosed from her Mistress. There is Romar of the Old Race . . . he is talented.” Hilarion shook his head slowly. “One of the Falconers? Their mind patterns differ. The Borderers—”

She spoke only one word in answer. “Keris.”

“Your son!”

“Think closely, Hilarion. He is partly of the Old Race, partly of an off-world blood—and bred in Escore. Also, he is without any talent to rise and perhaps forbid exchange.”

“You know what may come of such meddling with life patterns?” Hilarion demanded.

Slowly the aging look was fading away again from Dahaun. “Those of our blood are birth-sworn against the Dark. He has fought evil since he could crack a flame lash, hold a sword.”

“The choice—” began Hilarion.

Jaelithe nodded, understanding the point he was beginning to make. “The choice must be his, and he must also know that the price may be heavy.”

Kyllan had moved forward and now Simon in turn had arisen, his face set grimly.

“What is this Power you would work?” Kyllan demanded first.

“The knowledge needed for the closing of this blood gate lies here.” Hilarion touched his own forehead. “Nor can it now be used by any except me. Later it may be otherwise, but this is a matter of



racing time in the south. There is no possible way of my reaching this lost city in my person. Thus . . .” he hesitated and then went on, “I must have a body, a mind, ready for me to enter there. If Keris consents, he will serve even as I would could I stand there.”

“And the price?” Kyllan had edged up beside Dahaun. Though he had learned long since to control his emotions in most situations, there was now a frown and a stillness about his face which equaled that of Simon.

“The price is this.” To Nolar’s surprise it was the witch Gull who cut into this confrontation. “When this adept withdraws his persona from the boy—what may be left is mindless husk, with no hope of restoration. He has no talent to anchor him.”

“No!” Nolar could not stifle that cry. Keris—she remembered the boy who had been so excited over the prospects of the scouting trips, so exultant when he knew he would be one of the seekers. Like her ruined face, he had carried an inner scar—of being a halfling with no talent. Yet it had not soured him.

Somehow Simon’s face looked as gray as Dahaun’s had been a little earlier. Kyllan slammed a clenched fist into the palm of his other hand; his eyes blazed.

They heard through that tense silence the squeak of Lady Mereth’s chalk. She turned over her slate and held it high so they could read the large bold letters she had written.

“To each a choice. Do not lessen him by not offering.”

But from the corner of her eye flowed a tear.

Simon put out his hand almost as if he sought some support and he received it speedily as Jaelithe moved to him.

“He is a Tregarth. There is that in him which would not thank you for denying him at least the choice,” she said.

“How do we do this?” Sage Morfew spoke up in his soft voice for the first time. “If you contact Keris and make clear to him what has to be done, it must be soon.”

Dahaun’s hair was now the brown of sere autumn leaves and only her eyes seemed alive in her face.

“He is blood of our blood.” Without looking, she caught at Kyllan’s hand. “We shall seek. Then—it must be done at once!”



It was of course a dream—yet so real. Keris lay in his own bed with, around him, the flowered vine walls of the Valley house which had always been his true home. Over his head the brilliant thatching of feathers rustled a little under a breeze. He felt utterly content, one with all around him, as had happened only a few times in his life. The feeling had once led him to believe that he was on the very edge of discovering that after all he carried buried talent.

There was movement and he turned his head a little to see his mother and father seated on mats, watching him broodingly. Perhaps he had been ill.

“Keris.” His mother’s hand did not quite touch his forehead. “Remember.”

How had he come here? This was the Valley of Green Silences, not the strange city. But she allowed him no time for questioning.

“You and your comrades need our aid. There is so little time. You must make a choice, my son.”

Now Kyllan smiled at him, but there was something awry in that smile, as if it were very forced.

“Hilarion,” Dahaun continued, “has found what may be the warding, but only he can use it. There is only one way he can bring it to the blood gate before evil breaks upon us. Since he cannot travel the leagues between, he must have a body for wearing.”

Keris knew the chill of fear. “For every use of power so great”—perhaps he was not really speaking, merely thinking that—“there is a price. What one is laid on this?”

“It can be done only by your free choice, my son. If you willingly consent to be the tool for Hilarion’s use . . . it may be that—” She bit at her lip.

His father’s hands were on his arms belt as if he had heard a signal to battle. “It may be that when Hilarion must withdraw again—”

“I shall die.” Keris brought that out quietly.



“That which is you may be gone. Your body—it may remain for a while.”

Keris closed his eyes for a long moment. The fear was waging in him now. What his father had said was worse than any sentence of death.

“The choice is yours!” Kyllan’s voice hurt like the thrust of steel into flesh.

Keris looked to his father and then to his mother. Halfing of mixed blood, but it would seem that there was some worth in him if . . .

“I am Tregarth.” He repeated the three words as he had so often thought them over the years. “I serve where I am best used. If I perish in the service of the Light, what greater end can be mine? Tell Hilarion . . . his body lies in wait. And the time is very short.”

There was a flicker, a dancing of color about him. He shivered. What—what had he promised? But perhaps from the first this had been the weaving of his life pattern, that he might have been born talentless for this very choice. He fought his fear fiercely. How long would he remain himself? When would Hilarion come to take that which was particularly his?

He could see light now, pale, coming from that open doorway in the ruined hall. And he heard a piteous moaning—no, not from him, thank the Great Old Ones. There was movement about him, yet he knew that he must remain in just this place—remain and wait.

Now he was a small pale thing fleeing along a stretch of shadow gray road until he crouched against a wall past which he could not drag himself. His pursuer came.



A flash of light was so great that it blinded the travelers for a moment, used as they were to the dusky interior of the ruins. Mouse sat straight up in her bedroll. She did not touch her jewel, but it was flaming as brightly as if she had called up its power. De-stree felt the heat of her own amulet. There was such Power here now that one could sense it to the very bones, taste it.



When she managed to see clearly again, Keris stood, looking beyond all of them to the entrance. Keris . . . ? No! When she stared too intently at him, his body seemed to waver, to be doubled in an odd way.

“Hilarion!” Mouse was on her feet.

He who had been Keris looked to her. “There is that to be done and the doing lies . . . now!”

Paying no more attention to any of them, he started straight for the door, but Liara had caught at Mouse, taking such a grip on her worn robe that she held the witch captive.

“What has happened?” the Alizondern girl demanded. And there were rising murmurs from the rest of them, though some had stepped aside to clear the door.

“Hilarion has come! The ward—he must have the ward!”

“Keris?” There was denial in Lord Romar’s cry.

Mouse answered him. “It was his choice. Thus he will serve.”

They were all on their feet now, following Keris out into the light of a new day, but Liara now appealed to Destree. “I don’t understand.”

“Keris has opened the gate which is himself, given full entrance to Hilarion.” Destree held to her amulet helplessly. This was of her doing. . . .

“That—” Liara pointed, “that is now your great mage? Then where is Keris?”

Destree shook her head slowly. “Perhaps we shall never know.”

She heard a stifled protest from Liara, but her attention was all for the one who led them—though he might no longer be aware that he had any company at all. His head was bare of helm and mail hood; his hands swung loosely by his sides but not near any weapons. The morning wind lifted a lock of his dark hair and then fell away as if even the breeze could no longer touch him.

So they went into the city. Those who bore arms had them, and out from among the towers came the Keplians and Jasta, but the Renthan did not as usual seek out Keris.

Destree heard the mutter of voices about her, but she did not try



to sort out any words. They went now to such a rising of Power as she could not imagine—though perhaps Mouse had an inkling of what could come.

The ancient streets flowed by them like water. And Keris looked to neither side, but turned this way and that as if he had come this way many times before.

Then they came into that field. Gruck had somehow made his way close behind Keris as a shield mate might stand.

His handiwork still lived; there was no sign that the vines there had withered. The thorns did not droop and the sinister flowers were red and yellow saucers. There had certainly been no breakthrough from that darker world.

Now Keris's body seemed even more misty, as if there was a struggle to keep it in form and steady. He—it—stood at the midpoint between those pillars, with the others, humans and beasts, in a semicircle behind him. Only Gruck kept his place closer to the adept.

There came sound, a thunder of it. Gruck's paw-hand was on Keris's shoulder and he jerked him farther back. Destree clapped one hand to her nose and she saw Mouse, white and sick, clinging to Liara, with the Lady Eleeri, arrow to bow cord, edging on to protect them. Blood—the stench of blood heightened by evil—

There came a crash from that barrier Gruck had set. Through the mass of vegetation thrust the broad nose of one of those carriers Mouse had seen in her vision. It tore through the vines but then slewed around and headed to the left, apparently out of control.

However, it was only the first of its kind to pierce the barrier. Those waiting had to scatter in a hurry, for it was plain that these metal crawlers no longer possessed any directing hand.

In one Destree saw a body lolling forward, skimming the pavement next to her. Another carrier nosed through the wide hole the first had opened for it. Eleeri's arrow sang a death note and a man half arose within and toppled over the side, to be impaled on one of those thorns not quite broken from its vine.



There was a jerk and the carrier swayed back and forth. It might be striving to return, but the Power of the gate refused retreat.

Keris moved. He reached for no weapon. Instead his voice arose until it seemed echoed back from the very sky over their heads.

“We are of this earth. What is wrought here was born of that earth.”

He held out both hands, palms flat, and on those appeared balls of violet flame which flared as high as if they fed greedily upon the flesh which supported them.

“Arscro!” His ringing call made of that ancient name a battle cry. “Because there is always the balance—let now that balance right itself.”

Then those behind him cowered away in spite of themselves, for he was summoning—summoning by names the most Ancient of Ones. And with each name the violet fire blasted higher.

The carrier had trundled through the wreckage at the gate and now stopped. But no one emerged from it. Nor did any other threatening blunt nose of metal show in its wake.

“Rammona, Lethe, Neave, Gunnora—Mothers of earth, Creators of all living things.” His voice was as high and as steady as when he had begun, but it seemed to Destree that that wavering of body was growing stronger.

“This is no door for us. By the mercy you hold in Power—make it naught!”

That last cry seemed to ring in the air. The fire he held in his hands flamed away from his body, struck full upon the pillars and all which was between them.

Now the pillars in turn became torches and the violet deepened to the purple Mouse at least recognized as the epitome of Power—perhaps its like never unleashed before.

High blazed that fire and there was no heat from it. However, that blood stench was gone. The pillars were dwindling, leaving not even ash behind.

With their passing went the remains of Gruck’s barrier and the carrier which had been frozen there in passage. The other machines



which had preceded it had smashed into the rubble of ruins, the windowless towers.

There was a great gust of wind. They had to hold to each other not to be taken off their feet. Then—the plain was bare and under them even that seamless pavement was beginning to crack and erode.

Keris's hands no longer held the fire; they hung limply at his side. Gruck moved with that agile speed he could show when he must, and caught the Escorian as he stumbled.

That curious wavering outline of his body ceased. He was solidly himself again. Or . . . was he? Healer's instinct brought Destree running. Gruck had caught up the young man's body as if it were not of any weight and carried it back to one of the stands of meadow grass, settling there as if in a nest waiting for Destree's aid.

He was not dead, that much her quick check of pulse assured her. But that pulse was slow and uncertain. It was evident that Hilarion was gone and they could only hope that the price of power would not be nothingness.

Gruck put his hands on either side of Keris's head and his own eyes closed. Destree sensed he was seeking life, striving to find where it now lay and bring it forth.

However, it was as if Keris slept—no, not exactly slept, but that what made him what he was had withdrawn . . . past return? She refused to accept that.

Mouse knelt at his other side. Tears ran down her thin cheeks as she said: "Sister, long ago those of my kind severed their Power from that which the adepts knew and used. I—I can do nothing." And she was openly sobbing now while her jewel hung dull and lifeless.

Destree remembered those names Hilarion had called upon: Neave, who held always the way of truth; Lethe, who guarded the gate of birth life; Gunnora—her own dear Lady. She need not call upon Them by voice, They knew what lay in her heart.

Fearing nothing any longer—for those who had manned the



carriers were dead and their blood gate was no more—the travelers trailed back out of the lower city, Keris in Gruck's hold.

What had happened here had wrung the strength from all of them. Even the Keplians walked, their heads hanging as if they had run a full day's journey. Destree, Mouse, and the rest left with Keris, moving camp, having little wish to hide among the dank-walled ruins any longer.

Liara crouched at Keris's feet. "I heard Lord Romar say that his body may live—but his spirit is gone."

She twisted her hands together. "All people have their heroes. My House of Krevanel have added to the roll in Alizon. But to risk the spirit . . . I do not understand—there is so much I do not understand. I only know I *must* learn!"

Mouse smiled sadly. "We learn all our lives long. If we do not, then we are not what we were born to be. Keris believed that he was less because he had no talent. Yet a talented one could not have embodied Hilarion. Sister," she said to Destree, "what hope is there?"

"I do not know, for never have I seen this before—though I have heard of it. We can only hope that he will awake."

Yet, though they took turns at his side, he did not. At dusk Mouse drew well apart, so that the effects of the adept's Power discharge would not weaken her call, and reached Gull with her message.

"This Tregarth?" Gull asked last of all.

"We do not know—he seems asleep."

Gull made no comment. The old distrust of male talent still might hold with some of the sisters. But surely the time for such aversion was gone. They had moved mountains to save their country, but here a man might have done even more.

Dawn was paling the sky. Destree set aside the small spouted cup from which she had dribbled her most potent restorant into Keris's mouth just moments earlier. The potion would keep the body living, but it could not recall the spirit which had left it. The dawn wind brought the scent of the not-so-distant sea.



She had heard the message from Lormt: they were to return; their quest was finished. Already the found gates were being closed and warded. Their own had been the worst because of the blood price.

She was aware of movement near her. Jasta came up to stand beside the unconscious man.

There is still a spark.

Destree turned upon the Renthan swiftly. "How can such be reached?"

Who gives life, Voice? Who would save a valiant one who gave to her earth?

"Then"—her hand was already on her healer's pack—"I shall seek."

This would be a different kind of seeking than when she had found Nolar, for it was not a seeking in place or time, but beyond them both. She spoke to Mouse, and to Eleeri, but she was surprised when the mare Theela joined them, and then Gruck without a word.

There was a potion to be drunk, then she stretched beside Keris's motionless body. Into her began to flow what they could give her—strength.

There was darkness and she knew that she followed someone who had earlier fled this way. Waves of fear beat at her, as might the dashing waves of the sea. She held tightly to the picture of Keris—not as she had seen him last stretched seemingly lifeless on the ground, but in his full vigor of body and mind.

Down that black road she sped, feeling that in her which was eating at her strength. Then she saw that wisp of a grayish thing which clung desperately to an imprisoning wall.

Only a wisp of a thing—no, that she did not believe. Destree set herself to infusing into it to that other—that one in her memory. There—and there—and there! She called for strength—it came—held—while she built that body, made it whole and no wisp of shadow.

"Keris!" she summoned.

Then she opened her eyes upon the sun and those about her, so



united in a friendship bond that it could never be broken. Now she turned her head.

His eyelids arose slowly. There was wonder in his face. Not the face of an idiot—by the grace of the Lady, this was again a man.

“Keris!” Her voice was loud in her joy.

He smiled. “You need not deafen a man, Lady—I am right here.”



Interlude: Lormt



The first of the early fall rains had swept through during the night, again making the crumbled section of the vast pile dangerous with falling bits of masonry. Since the Turning had brought down one tower and a portion of two of the connecting walls, the sages had done their best to ensure no more great collapse (there were enough holding spells cast there, stated Owen, to smother a tempest), yet there continued to be a certain amount of deterioration. Even so, the mainly elderly sages and those they managed to lure into helping them were still entirely intent on locating all they could find in the sealed archives which the first damage had revealed.

But now those more in touch with the world at large had other and momentarily more important matters to deal with. The great hall was still their meeting place and the hide map of their world was still fastened to the long refectory table. There were new markings in a goodly number on the eastern continent pictured there, but very few on the western.

This morning, however, it was not the map which engrossed the



company gathered there. They had pushed benches, chairs, and a couple of stools into an irregular circle.

The man, leaning back as if bone-weary, spoke first as the lamps began to gutter out.

“It is done.”

A sound which merged into a vast sigh answered him from the others. Tension drained from other bodies, leaving them feeling nearly as weary as the speaker.

But there remained a question which held them tightly bound still in that company.

“Keris?”

Dahaun’s hand was clasped so tightly in Kyllan’s that it would seem their flesh was melded together forever, even as it was in that distant body of their son.

Hilarion had raised both hands to cover his face, and his answer sounded muffled. “I do not know.”

There was the scratching of chalk against slate as the old woman in the wheeled chair wrote a terse message and pushed it to her neighbor, the witch Gull.

Gull fingered her jewel, gave a sidelong glance to her companion Willow. Then she spoke, her monotonous voice sounding harsh as the chalk she answered: “They will be fighting with all the talent they can summon; we dare not break into their struggle now. If he can be saved, those with whom he has companied will save him.”

“Small comfort you give us, Gull,” Jaelithe Tregarth returned. “But the gate is gone, Hilarion.”

He nodded, his head still in his hands. Kaththea had arisen and come to stand behind him, her hands massaging the flesh of his upper shoulders and the nape of his neck.

Gull spoke. “So. And you can chain the other also? Or must you travel yourself to each, since we have more time?”

It seemed to most of them there that she had abandoned the problem of Keris—almost as if some of the coldheartedness of the earlier generation of her kind had frosted her emotions.

Now the adept raised his head and faced her squarely. “Those we have found to be quiescent we can close from afar. That which



your sisters hold in the spell of Mouse's laying . . ." There was a crooked little smile on his lips now. "There it must be your Power to lead mine to the goal."

Nolar twisted her fingers, stained a little from the potion she had been laboring on when summoned here. The old and deeply embedded distrust of the witches for men of Power—surely it would not hold now! That a witch and an adept would share their very different but formidable learning would be as overturning in its way than the removal of the mountains.

"The All Mother has agreed to any service needed." Gull's thin lips screwed together as if she found that statement bitter. "Willow will wait for any signal from Mouse. Cricket, Moth, and Ash hold the capping now. You must deal through them."

"Best now, then." Hilarion pulled himself up from his chair, levering himself with his arms. Kaththea was at his side and Nolar's healer's instinct brought her to them both.

Lady Mereth made no attempt to use her writing slate, but her hand caught at Dahaun's and she looked straightly up into that ever-changing face of the Lady of Green Shadows.

There was a strange calmness to Dahaun's features and she spoke something which might be a message for them all:

"He is not beyond the Final Gate, for if that were true, we who gave him life would know. Thus there is hope."

She stooped and kissed Mereth's cheek and went out with Kylan.

So the party broke apart, some going back to the map. It was Duratan who rapped his fist on the border of the painted hide. "Arvon."

With that one word he expressed the second problem which had drawn them together. Hilarion, for all his effort, had been unable to once more contact Alon. He reported at last that it was not their focus which was at fault, but rather that some unknown Power formed a barrier, and for all of them that was hard to accept. Koris had sent a fleet of three of the swiftest Sulcar ships bound to the Dales, but this was the period of storms and what was ordinarily a



three-week voyage might become twice that with ships beaten off the regular courses by the winds and waves.

“If there is news—Simon waits, and we shall know.” Jaelithe had no doubt that the tie between she and her lord was such that the leagues between them now would be nothing.

“Terlach . . .” Duratan said absently as if voicing a thought aloud.

“Your Falconer comrade.” Jaelithe sounded eager. “He has established an Eyrie in the Dales, hasn’t he?”

“They use no Power . . .” Duratan began, and then turned suddenly to sit on a bench. From within his jerkin he brought a small pouch and shook out on the bench beside him a palmful of stones. The colors were alive even in this dim light.

Closing his eyes, he held his hand, palm flat, a little above them for a long moment. The stones shifted, colors separated and recombined. Jaelithe could make nothing of what he was doing, but she knew well that the Marshal of Lormt could easily have scraps of old knowledge unknown to others, ones which only answered to him.

Now she could see that the stones in their movements had fashioned the form of an arrowhead, a black stone backed by two gray, and then three blood-red forming the tip, the rest trailing behind.

Duratan’s features became a grim mask. “*Evil*—and note it points west. Whatever fares in Arvon is of the Dark!”

Once more he gathered up the stones, shook them well, and threw, then shadowed them with his hand. Jaelithe could see that the color formation was slightly altered. The tip of the arrow was now a gray stone and three more of a bronze cast separated it from the black and dark.

“So far all is well with Terlach and Seakeep, but they are not removed from the fringe of the Dark. Lady”—he turned to Jaelithe—“what of Garth Howell? Are they as powerful as the witches?”

She searched her memory, trying to recall scraps of her early knowledge when she, too, had worn the gray robe and the jewel.

“As the witches held the power in Estcarp, so we knew that there was our balance in Arvon. But between us there was no communi-



cation after the Great War. They had adepts among them and they gave more Power to men. Also they were said to experiment in knowledge which was dangerous to others. They maintain their own guards—something on the order of the Sarn Riders—but no one has said they are wholly given to the Dark. For generations now they have been content to stay within their own boundaries and have little to do with any outside those in liege to them. Like the sages here at Lormt they have given the impression that the search of learning is paramount to them.”

“But they are not truly of the Light?”

“Shadowed, we called them. It may be that the burst of wild Power has changed the balance. If so, how can we measure or even guess what they may do? Those of the Gryphon stand against them. And our foreseers promise much from them. But already they may be embattled. It would do us no good to try to raise an army against those armed with Power. We can only go on with our searching here and discover all we can of what was once used effectively.”

He gathered the stones and repouched them. “It seems that nothing these days is designed to bring us comfort.”

“When Power is loosed, Duratan, that is sure.”

They separated from the gathering for what seemed to many of them the longest day they could remember. All of them threw themselves into tasks which they hoped were of importance.

But when the great gong sounded, they instantly dropped what they were doing and reassembled. Dahaun greeted them. Her hair was a flaming glory about her; all the color which had been leached out of her was back. She stood by Gull and even the witch looked less forbidding than usual.

“Keris—Keris is ours again!” Dahaun trilled like one of the birds of her beloved valley. “The gate is truly destroyed and our son is himself!” Kyllan took a couple of strides to draw her into a tight embrace. For the others it was as if the very walls of Lormt had disappeared and they stood in the open sunlight of a peaceful land.

Nor was it much later before Jaelithe also had a report. Captain Hilbec had reached Es City with knowledge concerning Arvon:



that the Dales were suddenly seeming invaded by some evil which soured their lords' minds so that there was open warfare between several. There were rumors of dire trouble in the Waste, and all connection with Arvon no longer existed.

Hilarion broke into an oath at that. He had once more brought his communication device to a side table in the conference room and now he scowled at it. They knew that earlier in the day his Power, joined by the restraining hold of the witches, had destroyed the evil toadlike trap the southern searchers had found. But if they could not reach Arvon, how could he share his discovery, which might be of major importance to Alon?

"So this is it," Kyllan said. "We may have cleansed our own portion of the world, but if the other half is engulfed . . ."

He need not finish that sentence. They could do so for themselves very well indeed.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



Arvon, Gryphon Country, Northwest

He must hold to the barriers—thicken them as he could—let those about him feel only fear, pain, exhaustion. That he had been taken riding in Kioga gear and on one of their far-ranging scout horses gave him a small advantage. But those ringing him now must not know him for what he was—Firdun of the Gryphon House.

Had it not been for that wild blow of Power, they would never have taken him at all. But his talent had been wide open and the



Power sweep had rendered him near witless for a space. What chaos stirred now in Arvon he had no possible guess. But that it was mightier than any he had dreamed of, he was certain.

It had been well planned. He still clung to that estimate of the action which had brought him this far from home. Guret of the Kioga had reported an unusual amount of coming and going from Garth Howell. That nest of corpulent vipers had long been used to taking their ease, content with their delving into their store of old spelling and ensorcellment. Men and women both drifted into their holding, drawn by inherent desire for knowledge—but too often it was that of the shadow and it was firmly believed that the major mages there followed the Dark Road.

A sudden vicious jerk brought him up against the horn of his saddle, making breath explode from his lungs, and he did not try to stifle the cry of pain. They had him looped with a long rope, his hands tied behind him, but they had to keep their distance since his Kioga stallion went wild at any close contact with their monstrous scaly imitations of mounts. There were five of them—the well-armed leader and his men (if men those ill-shaped creatures who pounded along behind him truly were).

Firdun knew his own Powers; even now he was not sure of their limits. But he was too linked with those of the Eyrie to call upon them—not until he knew where these would take him and why.

Power worked two ways—a sending might well bring a retaliation unsuspected and unprepared for. Meanwhile, he let himself slump, held tight to his outer defenses of fear and pain, and tried to judge just where they were bound and why.

There was no spoken communication among his captors, and he dared not probe to find if they were using mind-send or merely following some orders given before they picked him up. But his weekly scouting out of the Eyrie had given him landmarks to remember and they were headed as far as he could tell for that high mound known as the Dragon Crest.

He was aware of newcomers swinging in before and behind him, other parties of the strange warriors. Among these were some who wore the rune-sprinkled robes of mages or the drab jerkins of



novices. It would seem that Garth Howell, for the first time in centuries, was emptying its wards to the outer world.

The last dizziness which had been part of his undoing at the strike of the great Power was gone. But he still held to his determination to seem no more than he was—in this company the wisest move of all right now.

There was a harsh calling from overhead and swooping over them came a flock of birds, black, huge, red of eyes, cruelly curved as to beak, which suggested that these, too, were not to be easily dealt with.

A sudden side movement of those around him let Firdun see that the other parties headed in the same direction were following their maneuver, leaving an open space for what came. He must continue to keep his head down as might an utterly controlled captive, so he could not turn to see what sped from the southwest.

But he could look from the corner of his eye, and in spite of all his training he was startled. The creature was plainly female and well above any of his captors as to height. It was not running but proceeding in great bounds, during which it spread heavily feathered arms which served to keep it aloft for long spaces.

There were patches of feathers also on the lean body and the head bore an erect crest, while the four digits which might be termed “hands” were long and evilly taloned claws.

The flock of black birds continued to circle it aloft and Firdun, daring to raise his head a little, could see that his present companions showed no desire for any close contact with this avian-descended alien.

This clearly was out of the Waste, for its like had never been seen by any of the Eyrie—and they were far traveled, as were the nomadic Kioga, ever in search for new forage for their herds and flocks.

Firdun knew well the old stories which said that the wars of the Great Lords long ago—those which had nearly wiped life from most of this world—had left strange remnants of beings, some holding to the Light, and other warriors for evil. The latter this newcomer certainly was. He did not need his talent to assure him



of that, as the whiff of vile odor which blew in his direction when the creature leaped was enough to turn the stomach of any true human.

Their company fell back into line and he could see now the rise of the Dragon Crest. Apparently that was also the goal for the bird woman. Once more their party was urged from its track and this time to humbly give way to a much larger group of riders.

The outer row of these were mainly knights, their faces shadowed past recognition by their weirdly fashioned helms. They surrounded three of the mages. The robes of these were rich with tracings which glistened jewel-fashion under the sun. Two were plainly old, older than any living man Firdun had seen before, as the Old Race did not show signs of age until just before their time to enter the Final Gate. However, he who rode between them and a little ahead, as if he were paramount in rank here, seemed to be hardly more than Firdun himself in age. His smooth face showed no wrinkle, his cheeks even holding a hint of childhood plumpness still.

Unlike his followers, his robe was the color of newly shed blood, and the runes upon it were black. Nor did they appear to have been stitched there but were in motion back and forth. Around his neck was a chain of black metal which supported a globe, dull and lifeless, of about the size to fit into his palm should he wish. His cropped hair was bound the tighter to his head with a band of the same black metal as the chain. However, there was nothing monstrous or misshapened about his features. He was comely enough except his eyes seemed very heavily lidded and he rode with them nearly closed.

Just as Firdun had felt the evil of the avian woman, so did he now sense talent. Power rode here, and he was a little shaken. For while Power was of his own heritage and training, and he was kin to those of the Eyrie, this emanation was strong enough to suggest that the young rider was not an adversary to be underjudged.

The party of this leader also drew ahead and Firdun could see movement up the rise of the Dragon Crest. But before his own group started the rise, they were matched by another squad, and these had a prisoner under the same bondage as he himself wore.

It was plain that this man had been very roughly handled, as he



was lashed tightly to the saddle of his uneasy horse. His head was turned a little in Firdun's direction and he caught a glimpse of a blood-splotched face.

Hagar! Of all the traders who ventured up from the Dales, or dared the Waste in search of relics of the ancient days, he was the most bold and resourceful. They had been awaiting his arrival at the Eyrie, for he was a good collector of news and usually even the rumors he gathered had a core of truth in them.

They mounted the slope now and it was steep. A lash curled out, striking not only Firdun's horse but leaving a fiery welt on his own skin, slicing through his breeches as if they were no more than a morning's spider web.

The young mage and his party must have already reached the crest. But the two squads with prisoners had fallen behind, since the horses were showing all the signs of going wild with fear. Finally some of their escorts had to dismount, use more ropes, and fight to bring the frantic animals along one stride at a time.

Firdun did not have to exert any will to hold to his outer semblance of fear. He had ridden mounts from the Kioga herds from earliest childhood and he well knew that the one under him was now near the bounds of sanity.

At length they were forced to stop. Two of the squad cut the cords binding him painfully to the saddle, jerked him to the ground, and threw another loop over his neck so that he needed to keep at a near-run behind the knight's horse or be strangled. He could not see Hagar now, but he hoped that the trader would be able to keep up.

The Dragon Crest was one of those monuments left from the days of the Lost Lords. Perhaps it had been a shrine to some personified power. Now it was a pavement of black blocks, seeming to the eye as if to step out upon them one would fall endlessly into some forgotten peril.

The knight was aided in his handling of the captive by two of his men. They whipped circling ropes off Firdun and sent him sprawling out onto that slick black with full-armed pushes so he fell and slid a space, his cheek against the stone.



Then he was rolled over with force as the second prisoner was flung after him. Hagar—would the trader betray him? He could not in this time and place project any illusion to change his features.

The edge of that blood-red robe swung into his limited line of sight. Then from the other side of his body a booted toe thudded home to send him rolling over, face up to a sky where clouds now seemed to be gathering at an unusual rate of speed.

He was also looking straight up into the face of the young mage. The face was handsome, yes, and the lips were curved in a small smile which might have charmed had one not seen the steel-silver eyes above, eyes which appeared to have no discernible pupils.

In Firdun there arose a vile sickness as if something utterly foul had been forced down his throat to be repelled in turn by all his body.

Then the young mage nodded and moved to the left. In spite of his efforts at control, Firdun followed him with his eyes. Now Hagar was the center of the other's scrutiny, but the trader's eyes were closed and he moaned.

There was a skittering sound, a fetid smell. The avian female had taken the mage's place and was eying Firdun, turning her head from one side to another as if she could only view him exactly with one eye at a time.

"Prepare them."

Hands caught in Firdun's armpits and he was pulled up to his feet. He made himself as limp as possible so they dragged him across the black pavement to where a metal grill had been assembled and he was lifted and thrown down on this, fetters snapped to hold him fast.

Sacrifice—

The realization shook him fully awake. He had played his helpless captive game perhaps too long, but he had needed to find out why Garth Howell was on the move. That these gathered here had been responsible for the storm magic he did not believe; some of them seemed to have been completely cowed by it.

Now, he could call upon the Eyrie—but that would also put



them in danger. He knew that his talent was great, but he had never been able to meld with the others in spite of all their struggles. They had finally accepted the verdict that he had some other part to play—but not as a sacrifice to the Dark!

They were pushing dried grass and straw under the grill on which he lay, methodically building a fire. He could not shout any spell aloud.

Clouds gathering, darkening, and those black birds of the Waste creature were flying back and forth. No, there were not clouds there—instead there were bags, gray bags beginning to bulge with moisture. In his mind ran the rain spell, but accented now—tending toward raising a cloudburst.

He could hear a stirring about him and firmly shut it out of his mind: clouds—water—water—clouds. There was a flare of flame darting up at his head, singeing his hair, nearly searing his eye. Clouds—and wings—wings were knives to cut those clouds and bring down the full deluge. The birds, screaming, flew hither and thither as if they no longer had any choice in the direction they would go.

Flame struck at his cheek; his clothes were smoldering.

CUT!

The birds made strange maneuvers among the clouds and it was indeed as if some great water bag had been slashed and its contents released. Water so thick one could not see through the slanting lines of rain struck full upon the platform. Firdun heard cries, but he concentrated on something else now. Fetters—the metal drew the rainwater; flecks of rust rose on them like seeds forced into growth. He exerted his talent strength and the metal snapped.

He was on his feet in one of the swift fighting movements he had learned from Jervon of the Eyrie. Around him armsmen, mages, were being beaten to the ground, actually pushed over the sides of the platform. For the fury of the rain drew with it now a fury of wind. He could not see the red-robed mage—all were only shapes in this storm from the heavens—but he did see that other bound figure, in fact he nearly fell across him. Pulling Hagar with him, he leaped from the edge of the pavement, allowed the now-



slick, clayish sides of the crest to capture and carry them to the bottom.

Though two of the monster mounts of those from Garth Howell blundered past them through the curtain of the storm, Firdun made no attempt to catch at the dangling reins of either. Hagar stirred and somehow his rescuer was able to get the merchant on his feet. He tried feebly to struggle against the younger man's hold but was unable to free himself.

Encased in the mud, which seemed to plaster tighter to their bodies rather than be washed away by the torrent, Firdun staggered in the only direction he could believe would put Dragon Crest behind him now. He could only hope that the fury of the storm was hitting his enemies as hard.

Because he needed some guide, he followed one of the runnels of water from the sides of the crest and hoped that would keep him from the defeat of moving in a circle.

His call upon the storm had drawn heavily on his Power and he wanted nothing more than to flop down in the mud underfoot and sleep. At least Hagar appeared to be recovering from his semiconscious state and kept his feet without so much support.

Though the continued fury of rain and the wind was high, Firdun started when his companion sounded a shrill whistle. He was about to clamp his hand over the trader's mouth when shadows moved through the curtains of falling water and a moment later Sansah, his Kiogan mount, and a dull-coated and smaller dun came whickering toward them.

"Up with you!" Hagar shook himself and to Firdun's amazement the remaining cords which embedded the man's arms fell as if slashed and the trader was already pulling up into his travel-scored saddle. Firdun followed his example, but he did not have time to gather up Sansah's reins before the Kioga stallion was matching, with a steady ground-covering lope, the trader, who now rode straight in the saddle as if his late captivity was only a dream.

They were certainly approaching the edge of the storm now. The punishing wind which had been at their backs since they left the crest, as if to urge them forward, died away and the rain was more



that of any seasonal storm. Hagar seemed to know exactly where he was going, and Firdun was content for the time being to allow him leadership.

He was debating within himself whether to try to mind-touch anyone at the Eyrie when the trader brought his mount to a stop and waited for Firdun to join him. The rain was now a mere drizzle.

But Firdun was staring at the man wearing the torn and sodden garments of a Waste trader. As if to induce closer examination, the other threw back his leather-enforced hood.

“You are not Hagar!”

There was no resemblance now to the trader’s usual sun-browned and somewhat meager features in the face turned squarely toward him. This was . . . Firdun knew Power as it walked in a human envelope. He shared a home with an adept, and others who were not fully of mankind, save that they all held to a common goal. In his own veins coursed blood which in part had come from no human stock.

Like knows like—except that he was far from being the true match of this former fellow captive. As with all the Old Ones, the stranger did not show human signs of aging any more than might a man in the prime of life, but his eyes . . .

Firdun’s clay-fringed fingers arose as he sketched in the air between them a sign he had known since early childhood. The faint traces his gesture left in the air were swallowed up in a blaze of blue for an instant.

The stranger was smiling, a gentle smile such as a teacher might wear in favor of a pupil.

“No, I am not Hagar—though I borrowed his seeming for a space, even as you are going Kioga-clad, that I might ride relatively unnoted through a troubled land. Had it not been for that release of wild magic—” and now he was frowning—“by All the Most Ancient of Powers, what brought that upon us?—I would never have been reduced to be the one whom I seemed and so taken.”

“Where did that Power come from?” Firdun pushed. Surely this



one who was greater than any he knew would have the answer to that. "Is it of the Dark?"

"Neither Light nor Dark—just Power unleashed for a space beyond all dealing with it. As from whence it came—that I do not know. Save it was not summoned within leagues of where we now are. Any of the talent who had their minds open must well have been blasted for a space."

"Garth Howell—"

"Ah, yes, Garth Howell. No, none such could be put to the boil there—though they have some new talent, it would seem, willing to play on the shadowed side, and pay blood price for learning. You are Firdun, son to the Gryphon line. I have been known by several names. Your father will call me Neevor at our meeting—a meeting we must haste to now, for it would seem that events beyond our reckoning stand in the future."

Sorry as the stranger's horse looked, the animal broke into an even canter and then a full gallop at such a speed that the Kioga stallion, for all his vaunted strength, appeared to find hard to equal.

Since such a one as this said they must return to the Eyrie, Firdun could accept that decision. And the first traces of dusk were gathering when they took the ramp which brought them into the first court of Kar Garudiyn—to find themselves awaited. It was Kerovan, the Gryphon lord, himself, who came forward to help Neevor dismount after the fashion of courtly courtesy. Behind him was the Lady Joisan with the guesting cup, while the Lady Eydryth carried a plate on which lay the bread, salt, and a handful of berries for close-kin welcome.

Firdun dismounted under the eyes of Guret, their horse marshal, whose glance at the condition of Sansah brought a frown of reproof.

They were so intent upon Neevor that they asked him no questions, and for that Firdun was content. He sought his own quarters, soaked for a time in a basin pool of herb-enhanced waters, and then dressed. But his thoughts were busier than his fingers.

He had been thankful at first glance to see that the Eyrie had suffered nothing from the wild magic. With such a concentration of talent within its walls, it could well have borne the brunt of a heavy



attack. But neither had he told anyone of his own plans to spy on Garth Howell which had been formed a few minutes after he had learned from a Kioga herdsman that several parties had ridden out of that dubious shelter in the general direction of his own home.

Thus, had he come to grief it would have been by his own reckless choice. He stopped combing his hair now and stared into the mirror before him, but what he saw there was not his own reflection, rather another scene years ago, one which had marked him apart from the others and for which he must pay all his life.

He saw very clearly the small boy who was angry with the young girl Eydryth had been, deciding in his impudence to teach her a lesson. There stood the doorway wreathed with rowan and illbane, spell-set to protect a coming birth. It had been his hands which had torn away that protection willfully, thinking only to give Eydryth trouble, but really opening the door for an evil which had lasted for long years and sent Jervon out of his wits, and Eydryth roving even overseas, with even a threat to his father before the end.

Reckless and thoughtless he had been, and perhaps that taint still was set within him—as witness his rash ride forth this day to spy upon an enemy none of them could weigh for Power. It was told that the Gryphon would hold Arvon itself against ill to come, but he was the outsider—he could not meld with them. Any Power he could summon would be his alone. Now there was this matter of wild magic. What if this was only the first of such storms to be set loose and bring chaos to all Light?



They gathered in the great hall, and Kerovan bowed Neevor into the lord's seat at the middle of the table. Firdun looked down the line of faces. There they were—Kerovan and his Lady Joisan, both strong in the talent and Kerovan of stranger heritage. Then Alon, a true-born adept, once apprenticed to the last of the Old Adepts, Hilarion of Escore. Next to him his wife Eydryth, the Song Witch, and beyond her her mother Elys, also of witch blood but later an armswoman who had awoken her own talent, and Jervon the warrior who claimed and won her. Next Hyana, moon-sworn and still in the process of learning how deep was her talent, and last of all



Trevor, only a child, yet those about him were already certain that he was the focus for what the rest could call upon—the point to the spear they held for the Light.

It was Firdun who told the day's story at the lifting of Neevor's hand. And when he spoke of the young mage, Neevor halted him to ask careful questions about what Firdun had noted concerning the man.

"The wheel turns ever," Neevor commented. "You, Alon, are adept-born, though you know not your kin. But, save for Hilarion of the ancient days, you are the only holder of such talent. But if the Light strives now to provide us with warriors, then to even the balance the Dark does also. And should such a one be born on the Dark side and in this land, he would seek out Garth Howell and sharpen his talents there. But that the wind of magic was born of his meddling—that I do not believe. We must check with our own fountain of knowledge—Lornt overseas—and perhaps learn thus what we face.

"This much I know: the vulture woman-thing Firdun saw is of the Waste. She and her winged flock are utterly of the Dark—but the Waste lies well to the south. Tell me, Kerovan, how goes it with the Four Lords? Are their holdings still at peace—Silvermantle, which touches the edges of the Waste, Redmantle, Bluemantle, Gold?"

Kerovan was frowning, turning his goblet around in his hand. "Of clear knowledge I can say nothing. There have been no hunting parties southward for some months, although this is the time of year the young bloods of the lordships take to the hunt. Nor have any traders come our way. The Kioga have remarked on that."

Neevor nodded. "Hints, yes. But sometimes hints have trouble to feed them. The Four Lords have not always been in complete accord. Any more than the Dale lords, who often have an eye for a piece of neighbor's property. You have made a casting?" he spoke now to Hyana.

She looked surprised at being so singled out. "No, Lord, I thought there was no reason—also I do not have strong knowledge of anyone at any of the four courts."

Neevor took a sip from the cup before him. "Tomorrow we shall



call upon the Star Tower. Those at Reeth have bindings with the very land and so can often pick up what we may not envision or hear. But I would that there was some way we could speak with those at Lormt, for more than one answer may lie there. The distance is too wide for scrying and also there is the sea between, which wars against any Power.”

“There may be a way,” Alon spoke up. “This problem of communicating at a distance was one which my Master Lord Hilarion often considered. Together—though we are far apart—we have for a time been working upon some method of mind-send. It lacks but a little adjustment here to use—though I cannot tell how Lord Hilarion fares with his portion.”

Neevor’s eyes seemed ablaze. “Yes, the adepts had such in the old days—and when a thing has been discovered once, then perhaps it can be discovered again. Also Hilarion has all of Lormt to draw upon. Let us hope you can try it soon.”

“There are the Dales,” said Jervon, whose earlier days had been given to warfare there, not Dale lord against Dale lord but against the invaders from Alizon. “We were waiting on Hagar for knowledge of what passes there, though we know that one flock of the Falconers have settled at the coast and are building an Eyrie. They fought a mighty battle against invaders from another Dark-damned gate and won.”

“I fear you must not expect Hagar this season,” Neevor answered. “He lies abed at Norseby Abbey, where the dames try to bring back his wandering wits, for he came staggering out of the Waste two months ago babbling strange words and acting as one caught in a nightmare. Dame Rutha, who has lately become healer mistress, now suspects possession of some sort. And the Great Ones know that land is ridden by enough hungry spirits to seize upon a man who does not take care. Whether he will ever be free again we cannot tell.

“But we can well establish contact with the Dales. While the Daughters of the Flame do not care for us and I think would do little to aid, there were others—those they call wise women, who give homage to Gunnora and are sympathetic to our ways. Yes, there is much to be done. We are like hunters now, facing a web of



many trails and not knowing which to be followed for the greatest gain. It is up to us to choose—and very soon.

“We do not know how much Garth Howell’s plans suffered when you called down those nature forces upon them, Firdun, but I will not believe that they have been greatly overborne by the loss of a couple of sacrifices. That they are willing to spill blood is a dire warning, and we must set up guards against them.”

Neevor looked along the line, though his gaze did not reach Firdun at the end—it could not. “Those of the Gryphon have been foretold. Now I say unto you, make secure all your defenses, and at the same time seek new ways to bend your talents. Those of Reeth will come and others, and in the end you will make a stout stand.”

But would it be enough to hold—to reduce Garth Howell to what it had been for years: a place of knowledge? Firdun remembered too well that handsome face turning evil eyes upon him and the thickness of Power which clothed the mage tighter even than his red robe.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



Arvon, Reeth, Gryphon’s Eyrie

Broken strings trailed from the hand harp and Aylinn rubbed the cramping fingers of one hand against the other. She was not even sure that she was in the same room, for this one was a mass of debris, smashed bottles, broken jars, and a cough-inducing smell where one of the braziers had fallen and was bringing to sparking flames twisted lines of drying herbs.

Her head ached and she felt as if she had been picked up and



tossed aside by some force who had no possible kinship with human life. As she looked around at the wild destruction of months of work, she felt first the heat of anger, then the deadening force of frustration. For there was certainly nothing *she* could blame for this sudden chaos. Unleashed Power of an extent she would not have been able to imagine had it not struck before her. Who? Where?

“Aylinn—Aylinn, are you all right?”

The girl looked now to the doorway. Kethan, her foster brother, seemed to sway a little as he stood there. There was a cut over one of his gold-brown eyes which had begun to dribble blood in a crooked path down his face.

She pressed her hands against the moonsign on her breast from which she was never separated. Somehow she managed to free her wits from that maddening whirl which had struck without warning.

“What? Who?” she asked.

Kethan took a step within the triangular room of the Star Tower to plant his shoulders against the wall as if he still needed some support.

“Wild magic,” he answered her hoarsely. “No control!”

“Aylinn! Kethan!” The woman who pushed in to face them both gave one look at what lay before her. Both of her hands flew to her lips as if to stifle some moan of loss.

Aylinn got unsteadily to her feet. “I—I was just trying to harp and then— Who has done this?”

“It had no imprint of our knowing.” The man whose hands fell on the woman’s shoulders to steady her spoke with a voice which was hardly far above a snarl. “And it was not centered upon us. Were that so, Reeth, I think, would have ceased to be.” For a moment the outline of his body wavered in their sight; it might be that a great snow leopard stood hind-legged half embracing their mother. But Herrel of the Weres brought his rage swiftly under control.

Kethan picked up a small bowl which had miraculously survived being pitched halfway across the room. “Wild magic,” he said



slowly. “Could this”—he made a small gesture to indicate the room—“have been . . . called?”

“Gillan?” Herrel looked to his lady.

The shock of loss was beginning to lighten a little from her face. “It is true that Power attracts Power. But all here is of Green Magic, born of the earth, and such should not draw such destruction.”

She stooped and began to gather together the lines of drying herbs, pulling them with a quick jerk away from where some of the brittle leaves had begun to smolder. Aylinn quickly laid aside the ruined harp and began to start the cleanup of that debris-covered floor from her side of the room. Kethan stepped past her to return a now-empty case of shelves to its place against the wall. But Herrel was prowling back and forth, in and out of the door, his soft-footed strides like those of a caged beast.

Each in that room controlled his or her own form of power and was fairly sure of its limits. But as far as Herrel knew they had no enemies. True, he had left the Werebrothers when he had gone with Gillan, whom they deemed “witch” in their foolish ignorance.

But when they had been led to Reeth—for both of them would always be sure that was what had brought them, a purpose which they did not yet understand—his power took another turn, one meant to foster life instead of fanged death. And Gillan seemed to become more and more before his eyes one of the fabled Green Ladies who had once walked the Great Wood of Arvon.

Aylinn, who was daughter and yet not daughter, being foisted unknowingly upon them at her birthing, turned easily to the Moon Magic and had twice gone to shrines apart to study. But the were line held in Kethan—though he had been stolen to be raised as a keep lord—and when the time came he had found his way to his parents through a peril so ancient it might have existed even before the Old Ones walked the land.

But what they held, they held in prudence and for good—to heal, to grow with the Light. Reeth itself had not only welcomed them but held them in a strange kinship of learning as the years had passed. Perhaps they had grown too trusting, believing that the outer world fared as well as they did. Herrel snarled. Once he had



been a fighter both with sword and claw. If the Dark arose again, he could bring back memories of those old skills.

It took them three days of labor to clear Gillan's cabinet of lost harvests and reset the shelves. It was too late in the year to replace some that were gone. And it would take several growth seasons to replace what had been lost.

Herrel and Kethan took turns to roam on were nights, always seeking some answer as to what threatened. They made contact with those of the Gray Tower, Hyron, Herrel's sire, himself seeking them out but with no addition to the guesses which they all voiced from time to time.

Doggedly they spent their days wood-seeking with Gillan and Aylinn for what rarities they might find growing. And Gillan combed her garden, only to sort leaves, stems, and flowers with sighs.

However, they were gathered together in the growing gloom of night when the first of their answers came. They had not lit the lamps, for there was a full moon tonight and Aylinn sat in the outer door, her head back, her slim young body nearly bare to its coming rays.

There was a curdling of light on the nearest path of the herb garden. Its appearance brought them all to their feet. Yet none of their many safeguards had reacted to it. Therefore, perhaps, they could safely think of it as a thing of the Light.

Now Kethan could distinguish the outline of a form within it, seeming to draw the light and so solidify. But only the face at last looked out at them.

"Ibycus!" Kethan could never forget the one who had given him his pard belt, made him free to be what he was: a were of weres, and perhaps more after he passed through the ordeal set by his enemies.

The face in the mist smiled, the outline of the head nodded.

"Greetings to the kin of Reeth." The voice was almost as musical as the tones Aylinn had been once able to draw from her ruined harp.

Herrel took a step forward. "I take it, Ancient One, that there is trouble."

Ibycus gave a soft chuckle. "Straight to the point as always, Her-



rel. Nor is our world ever free of trouble. As yet we know not what we face—save it has set astir much we hoped would continue to sleep. There was magic—in the far east—”

“The Dales?” questioned Gillan. She had spent what had then seemed long dull seasons there, but there were those who had been kind and she wished no ill for them.

“Farther—perhaps Estcarp wars again. Yet this had no touch of witch sending. We strive now to contact the Adept Hilarion, since Alon of Gryphon’s Eyrie was his ’prentice and they dealt with new learning. Those of the Castle of the Gryphon seek knowledge among the four clans—there is stirring of possible conflict there. And . . .” he hesitated a moment as if to make what he now had to say the more forceful, “Garth Howell has opened its doors to take a hand in some ill game.”

“And we of Reeth?” Herrel asked swiftly. “What would you have of us, Ancient One?”

“Them!” A curl of mist broke away and then into two threads indicating Aylinn and Kethan. “The Lady Sylva—she who suffered under the evil hunt and won free by our aid—has appealed to the Voices in the north hills. As usual they will not answer clearly, speaking in a maze of words through which we must find our way. But this much we have learned. There is to be a mustering at the Eyrie, first to deal with Garth Howell, and then for some even greater task. And the choosing of those for the task is not to be of our making. Aylinn, Moon Daughter and Healer, you have a part in this. Kethan, were and warrior, you also. This is my summons—come to the Castle of the Gryphon, for there is need.”

“And for us—what need?” There was a deep angry growl in Herrel’s question.

“To hold Reeth, you and my Lady Gillan, as it has never been held before—with all the power you can summon. When we go up against Garth Howell we shall have good need for such founts of strength, and Reeth is now you, as you are Reeth.”

Ibycus—or his authoritative shadow—gave them no more time for any questions. The mist swirled and then was gone, leaving the four of them in the moonlight with the scent of herbs about them.



Though there was still the marks of chaos within the tower, here was peace.

Or only the suggestion of it, for all Ibycus had said hung like a warning stormcloud over them. Aylinn held forth her arms, her head turned upward so that the moon encased her fully. Within her the uneasiness was growing ever stronger and it must be battled and put down.

There came a frightening roar from her left and now the moon glistened on sleek white fur as a wide-jawed, fearsomely fanged head raised to once more sound red anger. To her right Gillan had moved into view, her hands and robe stained with the nearly destroyed harvest of herbs, and by her side padded a pard, snarling. Of such was the garrison of Reeth, and so it stood as one.

But how can one defy an unknown enemy, Garth Howell? Aylinn knew the place only secondhand by rumor. Those born with her talents were not welcome there, nor would she ever wish it otherwise. And what part had she and Kethan to play in the action Ibycus had only hinted at?

Together as they had stood ready for battle, so they returned at length to the inner stronghold of the star-shaped tower of Reeth. Those rods along its walls held steady with the bluish haze which meant their usual protection held.

No snowcat now, no pard, the two men pulled forward their usual chairs and Herrel would have seated Gillan also, but she shook her head and tramped back and forth across the wide end of the wedge-shaped room while Aylinn settled by the smoldering hearth and fingered the rod topped with moonflower which was her talent focus.

“Kar Garudiyin is a three-day ride.” Herrel broke the short silence. “You will take the were mounts.” He did not look straightly at either his son or his foster daughter.

“Then,” Aylinn answered, “should we not be prepared?”

Gillan stopped in her pacing. Her mouth was straight set and she wore the face which was hers when some problem raised by the talent confronted her.

“Why Aylinn, Kethan?” she demanded of the room at large. “Ibycus speaks in half riddles as the Old Ones have a way of doing.



There is this . . .” She made a small gesture toward the door which gave upon the wreckage of what had once been her particular stronghold. “Power draws Power. This blowout of chaos has already made plain how feeble our defenses may be. Yet Ibycus prates of Reeth as a stronghold. I should have had him look upon what chanced here and then ask what good our defenses were. Now he asks for—” She shook her head. “A force to go up against Garth Howell. Is the Ancient One mad or age-forgetful? And then hints of another task beyond that.”

Her eyes were blazing as she came to stand before Herrel, as if he were the one she would rail against.

“We are what we are.” Herrel’s voice had again fallen close to the growl of his werehood. “And being what we are, what choice have we? If the Dark rises, then must the Light also stir.”

Gillan’s stained hands wrung together. Then she rounded on Aylinn. “Daughter—though our supplies have already been too well consumed, we shall save what we can for aiding a wayfarer.”

Aylinn hastily followed her foster mother back to the devastated storage room, but Kethan heeded his father’s gesture in another direction.

“We can war either as men or beasts,” Herrel said as he lifted the ponderous lid of a great chest. “You will know which choice is yours when the moment comes. Yet you will ride forth as a man and hold to man’s heritage as long as you can, for you will find few that are comfortable with were blood and talent.”

He pulled forth a large bag and loosed its cording, bringing out a mail shirt which gleamed blue-green in the sparsely lighted room.

Herrel shook it out and stepped forward, the shirt held out, to measure against his son’s shoulders. “Quan iron—a legacy from those who held Reeth before us. Yes, I think it will serve in fit.”

Beside the mail there was a helm, bare of any crest, yet with a fore-portion which descended over the face with only eye holes to break its sleek surface. And last of all there was a sword in worn scabbard.

“Your belt.”

Kethan freed the buckle, the familiar touch of the large jargon long since carved into the buckle disturbing him a little. He had



been warrior-trained and knew that to depend upon the were form for all battle was more dangerous to him than perhaps the enemy. For always there was an inner battle between beast and man when the talent awoke.

He was oddly relieved when Herrel, having made the weapon fast to the belt, handed it back to him and once more its binding was about him, though the weight of the sword made it strange now.

No normal horse would carry a were—in fact astute fighters among the kin had learned that that hatred of their kind could also serve them as a weapon. But they had their own breed and though Herrel no longer rode with his kin from the Gray Tower, he had two mounts of their shaping for service.

When they rode out of Reeth the next day, they carried well-filled saddle bags—and the blessings of those who cared for them the most.



In Kar Garudiyin there was another gathering at that same hour. The sturdy Kioga scout drank thirstily of the guesting cup, watching over the rim while Lord Kerovan laid out the thin-scraped parchment map and Firdun held down one end firmly. The Lady Joisan had both elbows on the table, supporting her chin as she studied the lines burned into the skin.

“To the east, Horsemaster, there was flattening of one of the tall domes,” the scout reported. “Massar rode with us and he had scouted that land well—he has ever a nose for evil and he did not like it that there had been so much astir there lately. We all have our magics, Horsemaster, but can we tell which is the more powerful until we pit one against another?”

“The flash signals this morning told us that one party has ridden out of the place. They must intend a journey of length, for they have pack ponies in train. There was a guard of their knights and foot fighters, and at least three robed mages set in the middle as if they were treasure being held against mountain outlaws.”

“What color robes, Hassa?”

The Kioga set his emptied cup down. “That was not said.”

Kerovan continued to smooth the map with a forefinger. “But they rode southwest?”



“That is so, Horsemaster.”

“The bird-thing,” asked Firdun, “did that also go with them?”

“No report was made concerning the creature.”

Could they hope, Firdun wondered, that that monstrous Waste-bred thing had somehow suffered on the crest? There was that about it which sickened him even to remember.

“Sylvya—” Joisan began, and then shook her head to deny what she was about to say.

“Silvermantle is her goal.” Jervon had come to stand beside the table on which lay the map. “They lay farthestmost to the west—”

They were interrupted by Elys. Behind her at an easier pace, as if he must protect what he carried from any possible harm, came Alon.

He set his burden carefully on the table and they found themselves looking down at an artifact which none of them could name. There were two pyramids standing with a space between, all connected by a metal base. Alon’s face was alight with excitement.

“It works—Hilarion’s power and learning. With this we can communicate overseas.” Now he stood in front of the strange object and held his hands out. Eydryth had already seized one and Joisan the other; they in turn linked with Hyana and Jervon and in that moment Firdun knew again that sharp thrust of the old inner pain. Even small Trevor came running to form the circle.

Haze curled up from the caps of the pyramids. This settled, and in the centermost part between them it thickened into a wavy figure. The strength of the talent loosed in the room made skin tingle.

There stood in miniature a man Firdun had never seen but whom Alon greeted with exultation as Hilarion.

So they learned—learned of the source of the wild magic which had struck so far—of the loss of the Magestone which might still have kept the gates in check and what was to be done now: the search for gates, and with it the search for that which would safely ward them. So fleeting was that time of communication that there was little chance for questions. Alon did report of the sudden change at Garth Howell and that Firdun had been prisoner for a space.

Hilarion ended with the need for scouting out any such opening as might be used by the Dark, and then he was gone and they were left



weak and trembling at the call upon their power. Elys caught Trevor up in her arms and regarded him anxiously, while Firdun steadied his sister and ached within that he could not have helped more.

There was that which he could do—not only enhance the wards of the Eyrie, but lay what protection he could over the wide Valley which the Kioga made their home range. This he proceeded to do as the day wore on and the night came. He ate that night in the tent of Jonka, the chief, with the principal warriors of the clan gathered to listen to what news he brought.

“We shall send out scouts. Tell this to the Lord Kerovan. And we shall continue to watch this place of darkness Garth Howell. There is some coming and going there, but our people have seen none of the high knights since that party rode out to the west.”

“Chief Jonka, warn your watchers. Each people has their own power, but that of Garth Howell has been gathered through a series of seasons too great to be counted. There will be snares.” He paused to drink the berry wine in his cup.

“Our wisewoman drums, young lord. She is already showing far greater skills than old Nidu ever had. Also she is one who can scent evil,” Jonka said with some pride. “We have not had one like her for several lifetimes—perhaps she is the great Sheeta born again. For it was Sheeta who brought us into this land.”

Kethan tensed. “Then the Kioga also came through a gate?”

Jonka nodded. “So our lore singers say. We were supposed to have fled a great danger, and the chieftains called upon the Lord Horsemaster of the far stars. He put into the mind of Sheeta what must be done and thus we came here. But that was long and long ago and Sheeta, knowing well the duty laid upon her, then closed that gate under the Horse Star seal. We can show its place to those of the Eyrie if they have the need.”

One gate, supposedly sealed, out of how many? Firdun wondered wearily. It was well known that the Dalesmen also had come through a gate. Had this been once an empty world—except for the adepts who had perhaps amused themselves with entrapping strangers to be studied and perhaps unwittingly used in their own dubious plans?



“So now there must be a search for other gates,” Jonka was continuing. “Who goes to search, and where?”

Firdun shook his head slowly. “Of that you know as much as I, Horsemaster. Perhaps only your Great Mare will show us a trail.”

Jonka nodded approvingly. “Be sure we shall be ready when the need arises. But what of the northern lords? They stand aloof from us and always have. Surely they are not all darkened by the shadows.”

“That we must also discover. There have been rumors of quarrels once more close to feuding. The Dark can weaken any tribe or house by subtle meddling—with minds.”

Jonka frowned and spat ritually twice into the fire beside him. “Such tricks—yes. We shall call upon our dawn drummer and learn what we can. Bide with us this night, young lord?”

Firdun got to his feet slowly, wanting nothing as much as to take advantage of that offer. “Not so—my thanks for your guesting offer, Horsemaster. But it is best that I return once more to the Eyrie. Remember I have set the three-times-three spells. If you send a messenger, let him give horn call from the road beginning.”

He had heard that man could sleep in the saddle if worn enough, and as the night drew on he began to believe that perhaps he could prove that. There were clouds and the darkness closed except for here and there where grew those night-blooming plants whose noxious flowers gleamed brightly to summon the insects which provided them with food. This strip of land had not yet been cleared, but then, the Kioga herds grazed well down valley and the horses themselves avoided such growth.

However, he and his mount were not alone. He had begun to sense that other just after he had ridden out of the camp. Not danger, but a feeling of ease which he had known from earliest childhood. Now he reined in and after a moment gave the familiar summons of a birdlike whistle.

If the female creature out of the Waste had been the personification of all evil, she who came running lightly, the faint haze enclosing her, was the Light embodied. Firdun was out of the saddle and watching her eagerly.

“Lady Sylva—but why do you run the night?”



Her feather-crowned head arose a little and she trilled her words, which were always half song: “I run at my own will, Firdun, since I am no longer captive to Darkness and the Hunter. Yet there is a stirring and in all of us the old blood warns. But this night I have come for you to urge haste. Neevor, the Elder One, has that which must engage us all.”

Firdun bit his lip. “I am not of the meld—”

She flitted closer to him, her moonflower perfume cleansing the air as she moved. “But this day you have wrought very well, Firdun. Not even Neevor—though I would not wish to point it out unless there was dire need—could have set the guards stronger nor with greater authority. All of us in a way stand apart. Am I not the last of my kind?” Her smile faded. “Yet here with you of the Eyrie I have found my place. Never look back and hunt guilt in the past, Firdun, it is not worthy of you. Because of a child’s act of destroying the wards and leaving Elys free to the Dark, must you think you must prove yourself always? I fell into the evil and I am free. You, a small boy, saw no harm in the mischief.

“We are all set in patterns. Had your thoughtless act not yielded Elys and her unborn son into the Dark’s hold, would Eydryth have gone seeking and thus won us Alon and freedom from that madwoman who would have brought us all down?”

“We cannot lay on destiny our faults,” he said quietly. “I do not ask for any judgment save that which I deserve.”

Her light touch was soft on his cheek and then he felt a feather-soft kiss.

“Firdun, do not think of the past. What lies in the future will show you yourself far better than we can now guess. Now let us not keep Neevor waiting. It seems he has another task for all of you—for me. I must still go roving, for there are those to be led in to swell our forces.”

And with that she was off into the night again, while Firdun wearily remounted and rode. Was she right? Did he cling to his guilt and let it conquer him in spirit? Had his childhood act indeed ended in gain instead of loss? No, a man must stand by his acts and not attribute them to the patterning of forces beyond his true knowing.



There was this left: He did not know even yet the boundaries of his own talent. All which galled him was that he was set apart from the others. However, he could learn how, when, and where he might serve best, and it would seem that Neevor had now some duty he was able to do.

Setting his mount to a faster canter, he looked up into the dark sky. Already he could see the very faint glow of the tallest tower of Kar Garudiyn and sent forth his testing probes. Yes, his wards were all well placed and ready.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



*Arvon, Gryphon's Eyrie,
Silvermantle Holdings*

Firdun lay stretched on the stone bench of the inner court where the spray from the ever-playing fountain reached him now and then. He was engrossed in the drawing of his will and senses inward, to hold such sentry duty against the Dark until his guardship was over. To help hold the wards with all the power Ibycus was summoning was a road he must travel not in body, but with his inner energy, reaching out to touch each point of ward in turn, making sure the drawing together of forces of the Light would not in turn attract the Dark.

Perhaps in the far-off past when Kar Garudiyn had been the Great Landsil's own dwelling such forces had been drawn, marshaled, and sent forth. No—he must not let his mind stray from the rounds he had set it to go sentry.



This hour all the strengths of the Eyrie, plus the age-old authority of Neevor himself were bent to a single task. The Mantle Lands gave heed to the Voices—but the Voices had never answered directly. Now, with the warning from overseas, they might just be swayed to the guardianship at least of those who had always paid them homage in the Mantle Lands. At least every seeker in any of the holdings would also get the message concerning the danger of the gates and would report his or her true dreaming to the lordships there.

He did not make his mind rounds in sequence; it was unwise to establish any pattern which might be sensed by a prowling talent who would take advantage of the smallest slip. Sharply he saw within the heights near the Dragon Crest where he had placed one of his more powerful sentinels. Then he switched swiftly to the valley of the Kioga camp. There he did touch Power—but that came according to Jonka's promise. Their spirit drummer was at work.

Southward: a faint fragrance—could the mind *scent*? But that was Sylva and with her two others, talented strangers who walked in the Light. Firdun had a wavering glance of a prowling pard on guard.

East to the Dales. There were three sites of old trouble, its power now so weakened that it was like a faint sniff of a bad spell. What or who had ruled there once was long gone; only the vile aura of what had been done still lingered—but that was nothing, even if such united strong enough to trouble the barrier he had set.

North lay a wide strip of wild land before the borders of the Mantle Lands, but it had long ago been cleansed of any perils save those directly to the body from strong beast or desperate outlaw.

Now—Firdun put all he had into this outward thrust—Garth Howell. All of the Eyrie had tried at intervals in the past to mind-see behind those walls but had never put their full talent to the testing—and it would be perilous action on the part of the full meld to—

Firdun's body suddenly stiffened as he lay. There was a hint of opening—a trap to entice him in? They surely had their own war-



dens and defenses. But the temptation was great. He scouted that passage, then advanced by the smallest fraction of which he could control his talent. He saw shadows which were certainly indwellers, but also he saw ruins, the fall of an inner wall, a dome roof which had buckled to flatten at least a floor or more. And the shadows busied themselves about these evidences of disaster.

The wild power had certainly wrought mightily here. That half-crushed dome might have roofed some workroom of mages—if those same had been at labor when it struck.

Then—

That vulture face flashed between him and what he tried so hard to see and Firdun instantly shut off the mind-path. He had recognized at once the creature from the Waste. Had she in turn sensed him, or even identified him? Once again his recklessness might well have endangered—

Swiftly his mind-pattern whirled from one barrier point to another. All were holding steady. No more such ventures on his own; he must keep to the duty set him here and now.



Within the great hall Neevor sat straighter in his chair. His two hands lay palm-flat on the table before him and between them rested a ring. The metal loop was of silver darkened by age, and the large stone set to the fore was a dull, clouded gray, as dusky as the metal which supported it.

Eydryth's fingers swept across the strings of the harp resting on her knees. This was not any song to buttress words—rather, it seemed to rouse full attention from those others sitting there.

Kerovan spoke as the last note faded and was gone. "Trouble."

"Yes, those of the Mantles will care for their own." Neevor was trying the ring on one finger after another of his right hand. It was firmly in place at last on the forefinger, covering his flesh and bone nearly from knuckle to joint. "They remember too well the Road of Sorrow, and they want no more such journeying. Though their aid will be limited, they will police their own lands, and should the news from Lornt come that complete warding is available, they



will use it. Do not judge them, Kerovan. Remember the night when you camped by that road and what you heard—and felt.”

Yes, he could remember very well that night in the wilderness when he had dared with Raill, who then seemed his only friend, and had awakened to feel a great burden of despair he could not understand.

Joisan pointed to the ring. “What is the meaning of that?”

Neevor held out his hand and surveyed the ring there with satisfaction in his voice as he answered.

“A guide. This will give warning of the presence of a gate, one active or not. It will lead where we must go. It is also a weapon. No”—he glanced quickly at all of them—“the Eyrie is a stronghold which must be held. Like it or not, the Mantle Lands are also your duty. Here is the true heart of your power and it must not be weakened by your going forth. There will be those to take up the task, never fear. But we march no army into the Waste and the west beyond; we send only those who have certain talents, each of which fits another piece into the pattern. Of the Eyrie, Firdun—”

He named had just come into the room, aroused by that trail of music, and now he stood staring at the mage. Was it that he might be the weak link in the chain here?

Neevor’s eyes flashed and the ringed finger pointed directly at the youth. As he did so, the stone came to life in a burst of violet light, gone almost as soon as it had first shone.

“Thus speaks that which the Voices have decreed shall be our guide. What talent you have will be at need—more than it will serve here. And now”—he pushed back his chair and stood—“hither come two others of our party to be. Sylvyva has seen them through the wards.”

They could hear the stamp of a horse hoof through the window giving onto the outer courtyard. Firdun was the first through the door he had just entered and the rest were close behind him.

Sylvyva had dropped on the edge of the fountain and was dabbling her fingers in the water, her sweet smile bringing peace with its very presence. But the other two were strangers.

There was a man hardly out of his late youth and with him a



girl, whose dark hair was crowned with a circlet bearing a silver moon. The man was tawny-haired and wearing such mail as only the greatest of lords might hope to possess: a shirt of quan iron rings and a helm. His only weapon appeared to be a sword swinging from a belt of tawny fur the same color as his hair, its fastening a graven gem in the form of a pard's snarling head.

She with the moon crest was dressed in stout riding clothes of a dull green, and that color seemed to shift in shade with every movement she made. A second silver moon lay pendant on her breast. Across her knees as she sat in the saddle was a short staff, hardly longer than a wand, and around its upper portion was wound a cluster of moonflowers, supposed only to bloom at night but here spilling out their fragrance in the day.

The mounts that they rode were different from any Firdun, for one, had ever seen—slightly larger than the cherished Kiogan breed, both dappled in shades of gray. The eyes of the one which turned its head to view him were a vivid green and seemed to lack pupils.

“Ibycus!” The man greeted Neevor gladly. “As you see, we are good and obedient children.”

The mage laughed. “Of Aylinn I will believe that, but of you, Kethan, perhaps there may sometimes be question. Let me make known to you”—he half turned to those of the Eyrie—“our two new comrades. This is Aylinn, Moonmaiden and Healer, and her foster brother, Kethan, were and warrior.”

Were! Firdun was startled. All knew of those of the Gray Tower, the fighters who had held against the Dark, but somehow in his mind he had always pictured them in their animal guise. This Kethan was like any other man save for his coloring—his coloring and that belt to which Firdun's eyes kept turning.

“Our mounts,” Kethan was saying as he swung out of the saddle, “do not herd with other horses. They will not cause trouble, but it is better that they be stabled apart.”

In spite of the powers Neevor (whom they addressed as Ibycus) had professed for them, those of the Eyrie discovered these new recruits to their company to be no different from other travelers the



hold had housed over the years. They were not like the Kioga, but Kethan, at least, might have passed for the son of some Mantle lord.

To Joisan, Eydryth, Elys, and Hyana, it seemed within minutes of their greeting that Aylinn had been known to them all their lives. There was about her something of the Lady Sylvya—a feeling of peace and comfort in her presence.

Trevor had gone at once to the two shadow-dappled horses which loomed so tall over him, and reached up his hands. Each bent head to nuzzle his fingers.

Kethan came up behind the child. “This is Trussant. And the other is Morna. They are the were breed.”

The child turned his head a little to view the tall warrior. “Do they then become . . . people?”

Kethan laughed. “No, they are not shifters—only they company with us who are and are willing to share our lives. The horses that men generally know would not do so.”

“Will—would Trussant let me ride him?” Trevor had always been horse-mad, Eydryth thought as she came quickly up to where they stood.

Kethan smiled at her. “No harm, Lady, for this little one. If he wishes, let him ride and show us where we may stable them. They have come long at a fair pace and need care as any tired travelers.”



Kethan had shrugged off his mail and helm, and even the tawny belt which supported his sword lay across a stall barrier as he worked rubbing down the two horses, answering Trevor’s questions.

There was fresh hay which the small boy insisted on putting in the mangers and he watched with intent interest as Kethan sprinkled over each portion of that double handfuls of what looked like brown beans.

“What are you doing here, Lordling?” Guret stood now, scowling, just inside the door of the stable.

“Guret—see the were horses—come.” Trevor beckoned. Kethan had turned to regard the young Kioga, who entered with the au-



thority of one who was in his proper place and about to question the presence of others.

“You are Mount Master?” Kethan smiled and made the palm-up friendship gesture of a warrior meeting a friend. “It is not that I do not trust your boys to stable our mounts, but these are of another breed and will learn quickly who is friend and foe. Until then it is better that I care for them.”

Guret’s scowl did not lighten and he paid little attention to Trevor, who now held his hand and urged him forward.

“Were mounts,” he said stiffly. “I have heard of such from the traders.”

“They are not to be found save at the Gray Tower and Reeth,” Kethan answered civilly. “They are battle chargers and trained fighters.”

He did not seek to break through the other’s very apparent antagonism. Weres knew only too well how they were accepted by those who looked upon shapeshifting as a thing well within the Dark’s shadow.

“This”—he touched with his booted toe one of the close-woven bags which he had unhooked from the saddles—“we add to their forage when they are stabled. It is made from herbs of the Lady Gillan’s own growing and serves as grain.” He set about reassuming his mail and belt while Guret continued to watch him with narrowed eyes, saying nothing.

Then he stooped and slung over his shoulder first one set of matched saddlebags and then another. They were a fair load, pressing his mail shirt near bruisingly against his flesh, but Guret made no attempt to offer aid.

However, he turned abruptly, brushing past Trevor and heading for the outer courtyard. Nor was he in sight by the time Kethan had reached the stable door. He sighed. It was plain that this stable master was important here. Would Kethan now meet members of a garrison who looked with the same suspicion upon his kind?

It was Firdun who came to meet him now and with an exclamation insisted on taking half of his burden. So he came into the great hall where the others were gathered close to Ibycus, and a



greeting cup was pushed into his hand by the maiden they called Hyana, the other set of saddlebags taken.

He soon discovered that there was no prejudice here, but then he could sense that talent was strong within these walls. And those with Powers, if they followed the Light, were always well met together.

Both of those from Reeth found that the hospitality of the Eyrie was indeed to be enjoyed. And they had two days for exchanging stories, those from Reeth learning of the news from overseas and of all that could be learned concerning Garth Howell. Ibycus-Neevor spent much time with the enchanting woman who had led them here. She was plainly not of human heritage, but that she was considered close kin by the others within these walls was easy to be seen.

What they conferred about was not made public, but the others were engrossed enough in preparing for what must come to have little time to wonder.

The decision had been made that a scouting party strike west and south through Silvermantle country to the Waste. That a party from Garth Howell had now been traced as taking nearly the same path seemed to Ibycus-Neevor (who now went by the first of his names) to urge that they follow.

Firdun twice related his sighting of the strange mage, and each time Kethan felt that this stranger he had never seen might well be an opponent to be rightfully feared.

Kethan himself worked with his mounts and the horses the Kioga brought up from the valley—some for extra mounts, others pack beasts. At first Guret and the other handlers were loath to let the were and his pair near their own cherished beasts. It was Aylinn who showed up the second morning they led the horses down into the valley where those selected by the Kioga were herded together. Chief Jonka was there with a number of his older warriors, and also a tall woman wearing a robe painted with strange designs, carrying on her hips a small drum.

Aylinn had taken Morna's reins, the mare nudging her with her head from time to time, while Kethan led the dappled stallion.



There were whinnies and calls and signs of uneasiness among the Kioga beasts, and men moved in to try to quiet them. Then Aylinn's moon staff was lifted into the air. As the uneasy beasts of the valley watched, she passed the garlanded rod carefully over both Morna and Trussant.

The scent of the moonflowers was strong, rising above the smell of dust and the sweat of the Kioga horses. The two standing quietly under the passage of the rod suddenly neighed—the sound louder than was usual to the Kioga.

Then the Kiogas' own beasts quieted. They still stood with all their heads facing toward the were mounts, but there were no rolling eyes and tossing heads now.

Aylinn nodded to Jonka and smiled. "Horsemaster of the Herds, there will be no trouble for your good mounts. Know that there is no evil in Trussant and Morna but that they will all be trail comrades together."

On the fifth morning after the arrival of those from Reeth, all were up at dawn and ready to set out on whatever track Ibycus chose for them. Firdun had made a last testing of wards, and they had news that Garth Howell seemed to have again walled itself in from any touch of the world.

Alon had tried again to contact Hilarion—to no avail. At length they decided that they had only their own knowledge and skills to depend on. Quert and two other of the young Kioga—Obred and Lero—had volunteered, and, when they faced the test of the mage's ring, it accepted them.

They were a very small party, Firdun thought as he straightened his helm and saw the pink of the dawn band the sky. His kin and Sylva remained to hold firm in the Eyrie, and Ibycus had promised that the ring had other aspects beside those of selection and guidance. He could communicate through its dull stone setting at intervals with Alon. Thus they would keep a slight tie with those who stood firm in the same struggle.

The mage had hinted that they might pick up other allies along the way, but so far no one else came into Eyrie territory. What was



happening in the Dales, or in the Mantle holdings, they had no knowledge. But at least the alarm had been given.

Their first day's journey went at a steady pace and through territory well known to Firdun and the Kioga. They saw no trace of any except Kioga herders, yet they set up regular watches at night. When the moon started to wax again, Aylinn planted her staff in the center of their camp and made the proper call for aid in their quest.

On the fifth day after setting out, Firdun felt restless from the moment he awoke, driven to make careful rounds of the camp. It was as if something was pricking him, like a thorn from a wayside bush. So he met face-to-face with Kethan.

"There is a shadow rise," the were said. "Not yet strong enough to trace. Unless you can do so, Lord Firdun."

"But would such a trace be prudent? If there was a searching . . ." He did not know why he thought of that, nor why he spoke of his indecision aloud.

Kethan nodded. "I think it lies stronger ahead in that direction." He nodded toward the west, where the dimness of predawn still held.

"The Mantle Lands stretch north. We must cross the holdings of Silvermantle to reach the Waste. If we are near enough to the Border now . . . But that is for Ibycus to decide." Firdun turned swiftly into the heart of the camp to find the mage.

Though he kept an open mind channel as they went on, he could detect nothing but a trace of power. Certainly nothing which carried the taint of evil. It must be the Border wards, which were set to warn but not to oppose unless what came was of the Dark.

They had been moving through wild country where there were no settlements and certainly no holds. The only life they sighted other than their own party were small family herds of pronghorns, grass hens, and once something which withdrew hurriedly within a pile of rocks but let forth a snarl as they passed some distance away. Firdun saw Kethan's head turn quickly and, his own mind being open for any message, he caught some of the slurred wording of that one.



“Peace, brother-in-fur, we take not your hunting land.”

Firdun had a vision of the spotted furred grass cat who had sought hiding but fully resented their invasion of its territory.

Ibycus called the noon halt that day by a spring, where they ate cold rations of journey cake and drank water. Aylinn sifted into the large common container some small red seeds which gave flavor and seemingly higher refreshment as they shared it.

“Beyond the hill”—the mage pointed to the rise from the foot of which their spring sprung—“lies Silvermantle. Firdun, as you ward so you can also pierce—when it is necessary. Vision it for me.” He came behind the young man sitting on the ground, and placed one hand on each of Firdun’s shoulders.

Obediently Firdun closed his eyes and envisioned a ward wall. But also he sent streaming at it, like a well-thrown spear, a thrust of violet fire. That touched the wall, entered. There was a moment of waiting and then—

Ibycus threw up his head so he was facing directly into the sky. “By the will of the Voices—we come in peace and about their business. Read our hearts and take you the truth.”

The wall was gone. Firdun opened his eyes. Ibycus came to where Guret was holding his mount. “Well enough, we are granted passage.”

There seemed to be little difference in the land about them as they mounted the hill and found a game trail leading down its other side. If there was some hold or ward tower nearby, there was no indication of any road, or even path which was in use.

They were still in empty land when they camped that night, but had altered their course farther south. Firdun went to lay the night wards—but he never completed that circle he had set himself.

Passing beyond a copse of trees he suddenly stood as if struck by one of the hold spells. And spell it was, he recognized a moment later. Though he strove to draw upon his talent to counter what held him, the familiar counters failed. Now he was striding, in spite of himself, directly away from the camp. Nor could he, he discovered, communicate by mind-send any warning or appeal.

This was broken ground and he slid down into a cut, scratched by the brush which resisted his passage, and then, came out into a



wider section. This was open country, bared of anything but the tall grass—

No, not bare! There was a shimmering in the night. Above him where silver-touched clouds gathered, thickened, towers grew plainer, and the castle from which they arose took substance. Now the whole building, huge as it looked, glowed green with ripples of silver, as if it were fashioned from some unknown stone.

Also—as it grew solid, so did it no longer hang above him. Glamorie, strong glamorie: He recognized it for what it was and yet even with that knowledge he could not banish what he was seeing. Now once more he was drawn forward, toward that tall foregate between two towers. He had a sharp thought of a web with a spider within, but in spite of his struggles he could not break the ensorcellment which held him.

The castle gate was open. What waited within? Oddly enough he felt no evil here—no touch of the Dark—yet why was he then entrapped?

“Up to your old games, Elysha?” It was like a shout in his very ear. Past him strode Ibycus, his face twisted in anger.

“Games you taught me. Remember those fine days, my lord mage?” A voice as silver as the lines across the castle walls answered with a tinkle of amusement in that thought-send.

“Elysha—” the wrath in Ibycus’s voice was growing hotter.

“Elysha,” she interrupted him like an echo. “Always Elysha do this, Elysha do that. But in spite of you I learned, though you would never grant me mageship. Now, I think I will just play a game after all—with this youth. He has possibilities.”

In the open doorward stood a woman. Her hair was night-black and fell about her like a cloud. In her oval face her eyes were huge and deeply violet, and violet also were the thigh-length jerkin, the breeches, and the boots she wore. There were gleaming purple gems to fasten that jerkin, and more braceleted her wrists as she slowly raised her hands in a beckoning gesture to Firdun.

But Ibycus’s left arm came across the younger man’s body like an unmovable bar. The mage’s other hand, with the ring on the forefinger, pointed straight toward the woman.



There was a flash of light so brilliant that Firdun could not see for a moment or two. When he looked again . . .

The castle was gone. And the woman stood wearing a sly smile, her attention on the ring, which was blazing as violet as her eyes.

“You see, my dear and never forgotten lord, you have need for me and must bid me proper welcome, for it has been long. Now your own Power ties me, and you cannot deny it.”

Ibycus stood staring from the still-brilliant stone of the ring to her and then back again. She laughed as gayly as one of the maids at a harvest feasting.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



Southwest into the Waste

“It can’t—I won’t—”

Firdun had never heard that note in Ibycus’s voice before, as if the ever-controlled mage were being shaken out of his eternal calm.

“But it does, my dearest of friends,” her silver voice continued. “Your own tool now assures you of the fact that you cannot leave me this time. The Dark stirs and toward the end of containing it again we shall once more march together. Now, since you have set me roofless and homeless, let us go to whatever shelter you propose for this night.”

That bond which had drawn Firdun snapped. The woman out of the now-vanished castle turned her smile in his direction. It was now not sly and taunting, but quite open.

“One of the Gryphon breed. A good omen—you are Firdun of Landsil’s line. Ah, now, there was one who was always most courte-



ous even when he denied you what you wished. So much lost, but then there is always more to be found, and some of it interesting. Since my dear master here”—she nodded toward Ibycus—“has not seen fit to introduce us properly . . . I am one of the secrets out of his past, Elysha, who fetched and carried and craved such crumbs of wisdom as he let fall for my taking. We parted somewhat stormily, I remember. However, I have made very good use of the days since, Ibycus, as you will come to see.”

She seemed to carry them along with her flow of words, marching forward as if she knew exactly where her goal lay, and somehow Firdun and the mage fell in behind her. Yet Firdun could actually feel the red rage which still cracked the elder’s ever-present armor.

It seemed to the young man that even the fire they had set at the heart of their camp blazed the higher as Elysha came into the circle of its light. Those about it halted in whatever they were doing to stare as they might at some night running thing from the outer dark. Still there was, he would swear, no taint in her in spite of Ibycus’s very apparent dislike for her company.

It was she who spoke first. “Since we are to be trail comrades in this matter, let us follow guesting custom. I cannot bless your roof, for you have none save the sky, but for those who stand here I wish all good fortune.”

Aylinn moved first. She had been holding a cup in her hands; now she came forward and offered it to the woman.

“Welcome you are . . .” she hesitated, as if trying to find words to fit this new form of formal greeting.

“I am Elysha, Moonmaid.” The purple gems about her wrists glistened as she accepted the cup and took the required first drink. “As to what I am—well, opinions on that differ. But you would not find that any barrier of Reeth’s truth would stand against me.”

Kethan had moved quickly up beside his foster sister. Elysha nodded to him.

“I have known your breed of old, and we were not unfriends. You are Kethan, and in you two bloods flow so that you are both more and less. But the skills you have are never to be thought the less.”



The three Kioga had drawn together and Firdun saw Guret's hand was near the hilt of his sword.

"Kioga." Elysha nodded. "Warriors and horsemasters. Not of this world in the beginning but bringing with them into it strong arms and shields for the Light. I remember Chief Ranfar. Now, there was a fighter! He went up against the Quagan and survived—though the Quagan did not."

Firdun saw Guret's amazement and the near openmouthed expression of the other two of his tribesmen.

But it would seem that Elysha now considered they were sufficiently well introduced, for the tone in her voice changed and there was a much sharper note in it.

"I have read the bowl, Ibycus. And I know what drives you and these stout hearts now. Yes, there were gates in plenty in this world. And if some be thrown open now, we shall be perhaps driven like a herd of sheep to slaughter. Also—some days ago another hunter came before you and he has a true guide. Ibycus, Ibycus, how could you of the first power allow Garth Howell to go its own foul way so long unchecked?"

Oddly enough, it was Kethan who caught her up with that statement. "One before us, Lady? Do you mean the mage from Garth Howell?"

"Who else? Well, he has perhaps two days' journey time on you, but we shall use him in turn. For he knows, I believe, just where he is going and his trail will in turn become our guide."

As encased as she had been in glamorie of her spells, that disappeared as she stood among them. Except for the richness of her clothing she seemed to be no different from Gillan or Eydryth—certainly less alien than Sylva, who had always been a part of Firdun's life. And it appeared that she expected to be accepted in that fashion even though Ibycus settled himself as far as he could from her as they shared out their evening rations.

At the moment their main concern, once their amazement at her coming subsided, was the next day's trail. For one of the Kioga, scouting ahead, now asserted that half a day at their usual pacing



would bring them over the Border and into the grasp of the rightly dreaded wildness of the Waste.

Though traders had reported that there were oases to be found, the sere, yellow land immediately facing them offered nothing that they knew of in the way of water or forage for their beasts. Two of the pack train carried as heavy burdens of food for their mounts as was possible.

However, they must find other sustenance as an aid. All of them had heard the rumors that the Waste had once been a rich and fair country until the wars of the mages had struck—in the latter days wantonly, for there were masters gone brain-sick who no longer tried to control their Powers.

Life did survive there. Not only the traders who brought back strange artifacts from time to time, but also weird forms, perhaps born of the very disaster as had riven the land.

Silence had fallen upon the circle about the fire. Kethan broke that.

“Lady,” he addressed Elysha, “you have told us that those of Garth Howell have already ridden this way. Are you sure of their path?”

She was inelegantly licking crumbs from her fingers as her great violet eyes turned in his direction.

“I can lead you where they seemed to be heading when they passed my own hold. Do you try your other senses on the trail, then, wereling?”

“Pards do have senses beyond those of men,” he answered evenly. “I can at least try. And this much is true: We can usually find water in lands men would consider bone-dry.”

Ibycus appeared to have thrown off his sulky frustration and rage, for he nodded. “A good thought. One to be tried.”



They rode in their usual pattern when they left in the morning. Elysha had been provided with one of the spare Kioga mounts and took the lead, Ibycus not pushing forward to accompany her. But Kethan urged his shadow-marked mount even with the woman after they passed the valley ahead.

They had carefully filled every water bag or container. Now as they rode, the Kioga brought down with their stone-weighted sling



cords two brace of grass hens. But even this much hospitality of the countryside was lost as they approached the end of the valley to face some low mounds which seemed far too regularly set to be of nature's keeping. Seeing some weathered rocks protruding here and there, Kethan guessed that this might have once been a keep, or even a village. But it had now long returned to the grip of the earth.

Elysha reined in when they won to the other side of this jumble out of the past, and pointed ahead. "In that direction."

It was more west than south, but she seemed very sure. Now Aylinn brought her mount forward as her foster brother left his saddle. He doffed his mail and his helm, unhooked his sword from the skin belt. Swiftly he bundled these in the cloak which had been rolled behind his saddle. Then, light-footed, he ran out onto the mounded land.

He was gone for only a few moments and then Firdun drew a deep breath as a light tawny-furred body slipped over the last of the rises, keeping well away from the horses, which were already registering uneasiness, heading in the direction which Elysha had indicated. That form was large for a pard, but certainly there was nothing else to suggest that it was other than the animal it looked to be.

Kethan drew in the multitude of scents which his human nose never seemed able to separate, one from the other. The ground cover here was closer to a brownish fringe and it held a dry, dusty smell. He caught a trace of a hen's passing and crossed a fresh leaper trail which his present body urged him to follow. But the man was in charge of the beast and he went on.

Crossing another low rise, he looked out over a flat land which was floored with baked yellow clay, riddled with cracks. There were stubs of rocks here and there to break the vast monotony of that emptiness. But it seemed to reach on and on toward the horizon. Under the sun the yellow of the earth gave back a haze which narrowed Kethan's eyes to slits.

He did not emerge directly into that emptiness but rather cast along the foot of the last ridge. While a feline hunts by sight and not in most cases by scent, it seemed to him that in this desolation



he could pick up the traces of the other party, even if they *were* a couple of days in advance.

Yet as the heat waves from the land before him beat down, he could find no trace of any promising lead. He had neared the end of the mound when he picked up a rush of foul odor, intermingled with several other scents, all highly irritating to both his nose and the spirit which inhabited his now-furred body.

The trail certainly led out into the Waste and he began to believe, after he had followed it for a number of paces, that he had indeed found what his party sought. Turning back, he leaped to the top of that mound.

Not too far away the others waited. He did not want to send their mounts into a frenzy with a full-throated roar, but he pitched a snarl as loudly as it could and caught the wave of Aylinn's arm in return.

For the time being there was no reason to resume human shape. His pard senses should be far more practical. Aylinn was turning in his direction, leading Trussant. If necessary the stallion would carry him even in this present guise as it was bred and trained to do, but he would keep to the trail on foot as long as necessary.

He could guess that the Kioga and their animals would find this new country pure desolation, and he could only hope that his pard talent could lead them to better.

They rode on under the bake of the sun. The hooves of the horses stirred up miniature dust devils of yellow haze. Kethan still caught that faint foul stench of the party he followed and they were striking in a straight line as if they knew exactly where they were going.

He avoided a rack of fragile bones, the mark of some traveler here who had not been fortunate. Twice he saw rock serpents, but the vibration of the approaching hooves sent them weaving away. Of any other life which might shelter here there was no sign at all. Even the sky overhead was bare of any sweep of bird wing.

Ibycus called a halt at noon, where they sheltered in the only possible alleviation from the sun, a rocky spire. Aylinn came to Kethan who was carefully keeping his distance, to bring him a portion of rations and some sips of water.

"The trail holds?"



So far, he told her by mind-send. Though I cannot truly be sure we travel behind those we would watch.

They had only gone a short distance forward, that spire of rock which had sheltered them still tall in view, when Ibycus's command rang in Kethan's mind.

To the east—with care.

Obediently the pard swung away from the way he had been following. As he did so he saw that the mage had held up his hand and that the ring there flamed.

Now it was that tool of Power which led them. And to something they did not expect, for it could not be seen from the level of the endless plain.

Though there were many cracks in the clay, this was no crack but a deep cut in the ground. Kethan stopped, his ears flattened against his skull, and he snarled as he half crouched, moving forward only a fraction at a time.

The walls of the cut were ragged, still of the yellow clay, as if that form of earth extended far beneath the surface here. Yet this was not a place unknown—though it might lie now in total desolation.

Kethan had seen some of the artifacts brought back by traders—those taking wild chances at collecting things when sometimes a single touch meant death. Here were likenesses to one Gillan kept in Reeth, a strange fashioning of a series of four small pyramids, pressing together, seemingly of metal in which were embedded colors as brilliant as gems.

But these showing in the cut were larger than that curiosity at Reeth. Some were more than the size of his furred skull, and the colors played back and forth among them as if they exchanged rainbows in some strange game of their own.

Though pockets of these studded the walls, those were nothing compared to what floored the crack itself. Here were masses of the same kinds of blocks with triangular caps far larger, forming so rugged a surface as to suggest that no one could find footing there.

Completely bemused by their find, they lined up along the edge of that great cut, staring down. Ibycus's hand had dropped from its



level point as if it had been pulled and that ringed finger pointed straight down into the mass of broken bits of brilliant color.

Now by closer examination they could see that the floor of the crack, beneath its burden of weird fragments, arose in the middle, sloping off at each end.

“Vastar . . .” Elysha stooped to pick up one of the bits which lay on the very lip of the crack. “Or do you say that is wrong, Lord Mage?” She glanced with that usual shadow of a sly smile at Ibycus.

To the others the word she uttered had no meaning until suddenly Aylinn gave a little cry and moved back.

“Were those who wrought with the star metal to build?”

Elysha nodded. “And it would also seem that they dabbled in the matter of gates, if your guide shines true, Ibycus.”

He did not look at any of them but stood staring down at the bristling flooring of the crack. It was plain by the continued glow of his ring that some source of Power was there.

“Ropes!” he burst forth suddenly. “Will your horses,” he demanded of the Kioga, “stand and take the weight of a man descending by saddle rope?”

Guret edged closer to the lip of the crack. “If we can find a place where the ropes do not rub against those.” He jabbed a finger at the outcroppings of metal.

“Then let us find such.” Since Elysha had joined them, Ibycus’s temper was no longer even. And he seemed to have set himself a little apart from the rest of them.

Firdun was moving slowly along the edge, measuring the sharp drop below each stride of earth he covered. “Here!”

There was indeed a limited stretch of the thick-backed clay which had only a small sprinkling of encrustation. Anyone descending there would land not at the highest point of the metal pile beneath but at the opposite end from where they now stood.

Kethan pulled himself away from the company and then walked two-legged once more to join them. As a pard he could not help; this was a man’s job.

Then they discovered that Ibycus was set that he and he alone



might make that descent. And his icy-voiced orders underlined that, for this, the others would be of little use.

Four of the Kioga mounts were in place and a coil from the packs had been made fast with the skill the nomad horsemen knew well.

Ibycus set a loop of the rope about his middle and edged over the cliff, facing inward toward the clay wall. It would seem that the ruggedness of the side, steep and straight as it was, was an aid rather than a hindrance. Firdun continued to eye narrowly the mass below. In his mind it bore too close a resemblance to a pit trap with sharpened poles at its bottom.

The mage moved quickly as if he had indulged in this form of exercise many times before. However, as his boots crushed down on the uneven flooring, he staggered and caught at the rope, holding fast in order to retain his balance. Slowly he turned toward the mound of metal pieces, several taller than himself. Their colors appeared to grow brighter as he turned. The beam from his ring had shifted and was playing over that rugged mass.

Firdun tensed under the spurt of invisible Power which shot upward. Aylinn swung her moonflower rod, Kethan snarled, while the Kioga uttered cries of astonishment in their own tongue.

For the uneven crown of that metal mound was shifting. Chunks broke off and rolled. While several seemed to aim straight for Ibycus, he did not move and at the last minute they tumbled either right or left to avoid him.

One of the watchers moved swiftly. Elysha held out her two arms, the color of her wide amethyst bracelets nearly as ablaze as the colors rising below.

“We take no treasure, you of Vastar, forgers of stars and dealers with the deep veins of the earth. Your day is past; the long sleep is upon you. Know that for the truth!” she cried aloud.

And she was answered. Not by the mage below nor any of the others, but seemingly from those ruins upon ruins heaped by ancient disaster. It came as a moaning, like the wind of a rising storm, though over their heads no clouds gathered.

The shuddering of the mound of scrap continued. Pieces appeared to raise from their long-held beds to whirl and fall outward.



So far none had struck directly at Ibycus, but such chance might not continue. Firdun half turned to Guret to give the order to draw the mage up out of range.

“You are gone—into the ashes of time,” Elysha’s voice continued to ring out. “Each age has its proper lives—and then those fade.”

From the top of the mass arose now a single piece. Like the bits which formed it, it was a stepped pyramid, but this unjoined to any other, standing alone, and the color of yellow tinting sharply into red played across it.

Nor did it stop in its expansion. Now they could see that it was supported on square pillars, growing ever taller until it was like a roof set on four supports.

“Ibycus,” Elysha shouted to the mage. “By the Power of the Great Lords, the Forgotten Kings, and That Which Once Walked the Far Mountains—do what you must do!”

He had not needed that arousal to action. The ringed hand swung high and was brought down from right to left, and then from left to right, leaving visible in the air a plain-cut cross of shimmering blue—a blue which approached the violet of high and purest power.

The cross tilted in the air, spinning around, its speed ever increasing, until those waiting could not distinguish its separate arms. Sidewise so it flew at the columns supporting the pyramid.

Over their heads the sky darkened, and that wailing moan grew loud enough to force them to hold their hands over their tormented ears. But the wheel of light held steady and it cut as easily as the sharpest-edged knife through a mass of clay.

The upheld pyramid—Firdun caught at his sword hilt. He heard the snarl of Kethan now at his side. Had there been, in that last instant before the thing crashed back into the mass of metal from which it had arose, a pair of *eyes*—blistering fiery eyes? Or perhaps that was only some quirk of his own imagining.

What was happening below was quick to erase that from memory. Ibycus no longer stood firm. His body was sprawled among the sharp-edged pieces of rock, and those were still shifting. Nor did they any longer avoid him. Rather they struck hard enough to make his still form quiver.



“Up—up—!” both Guret and Firdun cried at the same time. Kethan reached out to grab the taut rope where it lay across the edge and Firdun joined him as the Kioga urged their horses back from the crack.

“Wait!” Aylinn was beside her foster brother. “You will rip him to shreds against those rocks he cannot avoid.”

She reached out with her moonstaff and shook it vigorously. There was a white, sparkling dust from the hearts of the flowers, which sank close about Ibycus. The mage might now lie in the cocoon of some great insect. Yet the dust did not yield to any projection as they carefully raised him from the floor of the crack.

Though the mound had moved, it had not disappeared, only seemed to settle more deeply into the clay. Its colors were fading, dulling. Then they had the mage over and with them again.

He still lay limp, his eyes closed, and on his outflung hand the ring was dull and dead. But Aylinn brought out her healer’s bag, and Elysha moved to take the injured man’s head on her lap.

Aylinn, with Kethan’s aid, managed to get a potion from a flask down his throat. “His Power is drained,” said the moonmaid. “He needs to rest until strength comes to him.”

Firdun looked around at the sere wilderness. “Where can he recover here?” He knew from his own uses of the talent the draining of strength it demanded. And, from all he had seen, Ibycus had just faced something which was so encased in some ancient sorcery as to threaten life itself.

Aylinn was speaking now to Guret. “Can we sling some way for carrying him between two of the horses? They are well trained and perhaps, coming from a wandering people, you have seen used so before.”

“Yes, Lady, this can be done,” he confidently assured her.

“Then where do we go?” one of his companions spoke up.

What they needed was water, shelter, forage. Kethan could only guess that that trail he had been following might lead to such. It was a small chance, but it was a chance.

“Good enough,” Elysha answered his thought. “Not all the Waste is bare as you see it here. And those we follow will not go off



wandering with no true goal in sight. Lead on, were. Of us all you have the best chance to find what we need.”

They would have to travel slowly. Luckily it was now nearing night and soon the heat of the sun would cease to beat on them. Once more pard Kethan padded back to where Ibycus had summoned him from the trail. It was fainter now—perhaps the explosion of power back in the crack had some effect on his talented senses. But still he was certain enough that he was right to keep on.

Dusk was gathering when he noted a change in the land around him. The harsh yellow of the baked clay was taking on a slightly different shade. There was a hint of rose about it now. Not only that, but he saw small, red-leafed plants here and there which grew thicker until his paws found a softer carpet.

Then, his head up, he sniffed and sniffed again. To his pard knowledge there was no mistake. Somewhere—not too far ahead—lay water! The mind sent that back to Aylinn as he increased his pacing to a trot.

Among the small mosslike plants now arose bushes. They were hung heavily with rose red flowers, the petals strikingly marked in vivid black. There was a faint scent, not altogether pleasant, and there were swarms of small winged things hovering about each. Luckily those showed no interest in him.

He came to another descent from the level of the yellow plain and waited there once more to contact Aylinn. She was riding to the fore, leading Trussant with his gear. Somewhat to his surprise Elysha had joined her, though her mount gave signs of being none too comfortable with the company of the were steeds.

Down—but the slope is easy, Kethan reported.

We must find a place soon, his foster sister replied. *Ibycus has not yet recovered. Tonight I must moon sing.*

He glanced up into the dusty sky. What Aylinn would do would also exhaust her, but if she had decided it must be done, then it would be so.

Down the slope he went, the moss continuing as a carpet, the flowered bushes rising around him. Ahead, to draw him on, the scent of water. But he must exercise caution. Those whom they fol-



lowed might also have seen fit to camp hereabouts, and he flashed another warning back to Aylinn.

CHAPTER TWENTY



By Moon Power, in the Waste

The smell of the vegetation, the bushes against which he had to push, the mosslike growth underfoot, began to make him feel queasy. Certainly, though he could readily now pick up the scent of water not far ahead, this strange vegetation might not provide suitable forage for their horses, and the scant store of grain they had been able to carry was not more than enough to share out in a handful or two.

Then his pads felt more solid footing and he paused. Feline night sight was better than that of humans—he had no difficulty making out the fact that he had come upon a road, one which had been smoothly paved. Yet under the limited light its surface was dark in color.

At the same time the water scent was overpowered by a whiff of something else. He smelled a fire—and beasts—and men! He sent a sharp warning back to Aylinn but she already had a message for him also.

Firdun says there are wards. . . .

Kethan was swiftly off the road. There was a massed thicket of some kind to his right and he made a quick detour, concealing himself behind it. Once there, he dropped until his belly fur nearly scraped the moss and advanced with the same caution he would have used in stalking a very wary pronghorn watch bull.

His hunter's skills brought him to a second thicket. Now the



water scent was very sharp, drawing him until animal will and man will nearly locked.

However, there was a further warning ahead: the glow of fire. A moment later he crouched behind a screen of flower-laden plants which edged a pool—and a screen which was no work of nature.

It was stone-walled, with intervals where that wall was cut away as if to give better access to the water. The fire he could sight lay to his right and was undoubtedly the core of a camp.

Beast senses could give him one report, but Kethan was well aware that in some cases human knowledge and reaction was the better. Lying where he was, he made the change.

His vision was lessened and also his ability to scent, but to his sight now those by the fire were sharply individuals and not just members of a species.

Some of the party, early as it was, were already enwrapped in their sleep padding. He could sight none of the ungainly mounts those of Garth Howell favored. They might well be tethered some distance away. At least as he now was, no pard scent would arouse them—if they could be aroused by such.

By the fire itself sat two as tightly encased in armor as if they meant at any moment to attack, and he suspected that these were the knights he had heard reference to. Across from them were three others. Two wore brown traveling robes such as mages favored and the hoods of those were so drawn forward over their heads that he could not see their faces.

The third made no such attempt to disguise his identity. Kethan, remembering well Firdun's repeated tale of his captivity on the Dragon Crest, was sure that this was the leader of that foul crew. Yet his face was serenely handsome—also the firelight appeared to center upon him now and then as if to make clear that such a one sat there.

He looked young—but with the Old Race (if he were of that blood) there were very few signs of aging. Certainly he had the air of one whose smallest wish had never gone ungranted. Though he was not speaking now, rather sitting looking at the fire—or in some strange way below it—he slipped back and forth between his



fingers a wand, shorter than most sages carried, but suggesting it had been fashioned of much richer material.

Suddenly, with the speed of a hawk's swoop, he struck out with that rod against the fire. The flames seemed to huddle together for an instant and Kethan saw those others gathered there edge hastily back.

Kethan could only guess what the stranger intended, but caution made him reach in search of Aylinn. *Ward also!*

The flames had begun to circle, spiral, at the same time drawing more tightly into a column. Now Kethan could catch the rhythm of a chant, so low it was not more than a murmur (though it awakened uneasiness) and he could not distinguish any words.

Now the flames stiffened and held; Power must have melded them so. Then that column split open. But to Kethan's despair he could not see to the other side. He had no idea what the mage now faced. Nor dared he move to better his view for the few very long moments that held so.

But the serene arrogance was gone from the young mage's face as if it had been wiped with a rough hand. His eyes were redly murderous as the fire became once more only leaping flames.

Now he was on his feet in one light movement and apparently giving orders. Those asleep were roused. They were apparently about to break camp. Had they learned of their followers and were going for an attack?

Kethan fed to Aylinn in as few words as possible what he saw. They were bringing those noisome lizard-horse mounts out of the Dark, seeing to the packs which burdened a couple of them. The young mage busied himself drawing patterns in the air with the point of his wand.

Where that sudden warning came from Kethan never knew, unless it was part of his ancient heritage. But as speedily as he could, he shifted. Pard lay where man had crouched.

Those patterns in the air whirled the wilder and started shooting off sparks which flitted out into the gloom of the now-descended night as if they were winged. Three shot over the end of that large pool in his direction. But they did not pause as they passed over him and at last puffed into nothingness some distance behind. If



the mage had thought to uncover a spy so, his Power was not aimed at weres.

However, he was the last to get to saddle and he looked back with a careful survey of the pool and its surroundings from the north end where their camp had been.

Kethan continued to lie where he was, but his report went to Aylinn.

They went north. Circle and come in from the south. Let Firdun test—I cannot pick up any wards.

They had left the fire burning, but now it was flickering. Kethan longed to cast in that direction, but against a mage—a mage from Garth Howell—he might not have defenses.

He did edge toward one of those openings left in the rim of the pool to sniff at the flood below. To his pard sense it was no more nor less than water and fairly fresh, not stagnant as one might expect in these circumstances.

But he would await Aylinn's decision, for no healer could be mistaken about such things. Now he could hear movement from the dark behind. Best make his change before the Kioga horses would scent him. He arose from the matted moss and slipped into the bushes.

The moon was up now and there were silver flashes moving toward him. Aylinn must have tried to cover up her Power ornaments, but the motion of riding let them gleam through now and then. He was quickly at her side.

“Ibycus?”

“He has not roused. I must speedily call up the Power to awaken him.”

“But those from Garth Howell—the mage—Power calls to Power and they will know.”

“Firdun will ward and so will Elysha. She is more perhaps than we think her, Kethan. For a long time she was Ibycus's apprentice and I think perhaps his near equal.”

The south end of the clearing was a surprise. For here was not only the pool which had been fashioned to service, but columns of slender pillars, each deeply engraven. Aylinn held her moon wand



high as the rest of the party joined them, the inert body of the mage still slung between two horses most carefully led by the Kioga.

There was no reaction to Aylinn's gesture. Kethan himself could sense no power. Whatever this place had been in the past, it was no fane to any strength that was greater than its builders.

They had no intention of building a fire. Ibycus was settled on a deep mat between two of the columns. Aylinn having declared the water fit, the Kioga led the animals one by one down, seeing that they did not overdrink. But the rest of them gathered around Ibycus, save for Firdun and Elysha, who disappeared quickly into the night, intent on their warding.

It was not until they returned that Aylinn dropped her cloak and stood in her kilt of silver moons, strung so that with every movement of her slender body they gave off a faint chiming. The crescent moon in her hair, the full disk which lay between her breasts appeared to draw an aura of cold clean light about her. She beckoned to Elysha.

"Of us all, Lady, you have known him the longest and he may so answer to you sooner."

With only a nod, Elysha slipped down beside the mage and placed her hands carefully, one on his brow and one on his breast heart high.

Aylinn's chant was half song. The moon was well across the sky, yet its gleams were still centering on her. From the flowers on her staff came the perfume of their night blooming. Her petition must be very old, delivered in the nearly forgotten word lore she had learned in Linark, for Kethan could not understand; perhaps only Elysha among them did.

The Kioga and Firdun had withdrawn to the edge of that columned run and Kethan followed. This was women's Power and it was best that they be left to it. Meanwhile, Kethan described those he had seen by the fire and the mage's weird confrontation with the rise of its flame.

He knew that perhaps it was his duty to once more go hunting the trail to the north of the pool, but he was near to the end of both strengths, pard and human, and it would do him no good to waver when he should be at his most alert.

In the end they decided that Obred and Lero would circle



around on foot, not venturing too far away from the pool, to seek any traces of that swift withdrawal.

“I do not believe, somehow,” Firdun said, “that that warning from the fire, if warning it was, concerns us. This mage is certainly of high rank, and with this talk we have heard of gates set free, he must be going to search for such.”

The slow, soft chant ceased, for the moon was now too low to fire Aylinn’s power. But Elysha raised her head and there was a look of triumph in her face.

“Ibycus—Neevor.” She called by both the names he had carried through the years. “Awake—the battle is done.”

The light had grayed enough so that Firdun could see the eyes in that pale set face open, gaze straight up at the woman bending over him.

“Elysha?” Ibycus’s voice was frail, as if all the years which must lie behind him had drained the full timber from it.

“The same, Lord Mage. You are safely back with us again, since this moon daughter has sung you home.”

His eyes shifted from her to Aylinn, and now he smiled. “Strong is your Power, Daughter of Reeth Tower. For indeed I was far away before you recalled me.”

It was light enough for them to see that the pavement under them, the columns, were of a rose shade, against which the growth about looked darker still, yet in the same hue.

Elysha helped him sit up and now he pulled away from her, as one determined to care for himself. Gazing around at the pool, the columned stretch beside it, he held out his hand and stared intently at his ring. But the stone was lifeless again.

Yet his head went up and he drew a deep breath as he now faced the northern end of the pool.

“The Shadow servers!”

“Be quiet and rest.” Elysha’s hand closed tightly on Ibycus’s shoulder, striving to push him back upon his mat.

“Do not play the fool, Elysha, when you are not. Evil has drawn a slime trail here—even though it be gone. And of what kind was it?” With every word he spoke, his voice became deeper and more



assured, and it was very plain that the Ibycus they knew was truly returned to them. It was Kethan who came forward and gave him the full story, the mage's set gaze boring into him as if making sure no scrap of memory was overlooked.

"Fire . . ." he said slowly when Kethan was done. "Fire can cleanse, fire can kill, it can answer both to Light and Dark. Whatever that one summoned, he is more than we thought he might be. Garth Howell has troubled strange waters to bring forth such knowledge, nor will they be the better for it in the end."

"It might be well not to push so close on the heels of those," Firdun cut in.

Ibycus scratched his short-trimmed beard. "There speaks your father's son. The Gryphon breed were ever warriors and more conquering than conquered. Yes, we shall give them a day, perhaps two. I think that they are still afar from what they seek. This . . ." He looked about him.

"Ah, where are you, Gweythra, now, I wonder? Your court stands well against time, even though you no longer reign here. There is no shadow remaining—we may eat and drink of the bounty of one long since withdrawn."

Kethan slept, though he had not intended any long rest, and he knew that Aylinn was curled in the same surrender among the folds of travel cloak to which Elysha had drawn her after they had eaten.

To their near-tasteless ration cakes they added berries, deep red and luscious, bursting with juice, which both Aylinn and Ibycus had assured them held nothing noxious, while the horses cropped eagerly of the moss sod.

With the coming of the sun there also appeared birds, strange in color, fearless as they hopped about the travelers in their resting places among the columns.

Firdun awoke at a touch on his shoulder and looked up at Guret.

"The scouts have returned, Lord. Those who left did not try to hide their trail but have gone swiftly, as if to reach their goal was more important than to beware of followers."

"Which may mean they feel they have no reason to fear us." Fir-



dun yawned away the rest of his desire for sleep. Or else, he thought more glumly, they expected such a welcome where they went as would effectively dispose of any trackers.

He saw Ibycus now, standing by the pool curbing. Gathered around the mage were a flock of mixed birds. There were tall, stilt-legged waders, certainly meant to spend their days walking through pools, contrasting in size with small puffs of feather well able to fit in the palm of his own hand.

For the most part their coloring was in shades of rose, but there were a few pure white. And he saw one a startling and vivid blue green. That one perched boldly on the peak of Ibycus's cap as if in charge of the company. Oddly enough, under the sun the pavement, the curbing of the pool, and the columns beside where Firdun had bedded down seemed to emit a rosy haze, almost if a setting sun had altered the blue of the sky. He wondered at the use of this place even as he donned his mail. Though he was aware of a very faint whisper of Power here, he was sure nothing could summon it again. What had given it energy was long since gone.

Then he started and a moment later laughed at himself. That he had seen a pard loop away between columns was not strange. Kethan must have also awakened and assumed his were shape. But he was padding steadily away from the company, and *not* turning north as if about to verify the trail of those others; it was as if he had another goal in view.

Thus Firdun also looked southward. They had faced two of the strange places of the Waste. By report and rumor there were infinitely more. Was Kethan under orders from Ibycus or now drawn to some discovery on his own?

No one mentioned his going as they gathered for their meal and Firdun was oddly disinclined to ask. Aylinn awakened late and did not join them, still gathering her talent strength, though the coming of the night should restore her.

He knew generally of moon power, of course, though none of the four women of the Gryphon followed that path. It was one of the oldest of the talents, but it was growing thin—he had heard that fewer and fewer were born with that trait.



It was true though the Mantle holds were each settled by those of the Old Race and there were healers and wise women, and even female sages and mages to be found, such Powers were not avidly sought and those who held them became in time estranged from their clans and after a fashion kinless, living only for the Power.

Yet in this girl out of Reeth he had sensed none of that withdrawal and certainly her ties, from what he had heard during their journeying, were as tightly kin bound to those of the Green Tower as he was to the Gryphon.

Elysha was more his idea of one of the Greater Talent; still, in some ways she in turn was bonded with Ibycus, whether that mage wished it or not.

On impulse he picked up one of the big leaves they had put to basket use and which still held a good number of berries, carrying it over to Aylinn.

She looked up, seemed a little startled, and then smiled.

“Greetings to you, my lord, and thanks for your thoughtfulness. It is true that one wakes always with hunger when the Power is evoked.”

“My name is Firdun.” Suddenly it was important to him that titles or honors be forgotten. After all, in this company they stood equal, each with his or her own duties.

Now she laughed, a giggle such as Hyana would give before accusing him of being pompous. She had crammed a goodly handful of berries into her mouth as if indeed her hunger had overridden all daintiness of manners. A small trickle of juice showed at the corner of her mouth and she licked that in.

“Firdun it shall be—even as with Aylinn. Are we all not kin in the Light?”

She made a small gesture and he squatted on his heels, Kioga style, to bring them closer together.

“I do not know your way of Power,” he began hesitatingly, not quite sure even yet why he had approached her so.

Again she laughed. “Strange would it be if you did. It is woman Power—like unto the teaching of Gunnora. Is not your sister Hyana one of the healing faith?”



“A healer, yes, but she learned much from the Lady Sylva and she is—”

“Not of our blood or breed.” Aylinn nodded. “My mother heals and she is of witch blood from overseas. My father is were. Or so we believed for many years until Kethan came to us and we learned that evil had wrought at our united birthing—I being truly daughter to a hold lord and he son of those who had always fostered me. Now we are truly brother and sister. Still the talent arose in me when I was very young and my mother fostered it—sending me to Linard of the healers for learning. But their First Lady found that I was Moon-touched also and thus—” she had dropped the berry-stained leaf Elysha had shared with her and now made a small gesture, “I am what I am—and I am well content.”

Her eyes were full upon him, gray he had thought them in the daylight, yet with some of the moon glimmer in them. And they saw!

He wanted to twist away—not to face that weighing.

“You see yourself flawed.” She spoke plainly. “Flaws can be turned from ill to well if they are examined closely.”

He wanted to break that eye bondage, but he could not—and not because she held him in any ensorcellment as Elysha had done.

“I ward,” he said slowly, “because I threw away my chance to meld. There are those of the Gryphon and there is . . . me. Though I was but a child, I let in evil, and from that came great grief and my loss.”

“You are—” she was beginning, when suddenly her eyes went wide and no longer kept him captive. But her hand groped to catch his arm in a bruising hold. “Kethan!”

Though she spoke that name as hardly more than a whisper, it sounded like a shout. Firdun gained his feet, alert as he would have been to a Kioga battle horn, bringing her with him. For a moment or two she clung to him.

“Kethan!” she cried again.

If there had been some mind-send, Firdun had not caught it. But now Aylinn loosed her hold on him and, paying no attention to the gear scattered about, whistled. There came a clatter of hooves between the columns as the were mounts answered.

“What—” but he had no time to frame a question. Those about



them were astir, but none close enough to catch her before she mounted the bare back of the mare and the beast whirled, the stallion keeping equal pace out and away to the south.

Ibycus pounded his staff on the pavement. "The young fool," he snapped. "No, we cannot put that name to him, for what he follows is born of nature even if it be used by another."

"Do we ride?" Guret could have been speaking either to Firdun or the mage. Behind him the camp was completely astir, packing with speed.

"There is no choice, even though it draws us farther from our trail," was the mage's answer.

But Firdun had already run to saddle his own mount. He took the time to arm himself, resenting each lost moment. Also he beckoned to Obred and ordered that the Kioga move out.

He had scouted enough with the tribesmen to be able to follow the trail which Aylinn had certainly made no attempt to conceal. Now already the columns were behind and he was watching those prints ground into the moss which were his guide.

That some danger had struck at the were, he had no doubt. He had no idea what talent the other could call upon in defense past his shapechanging. As a pard he could be prey for any hunter—even though this land seemed bare of any but the smallest game.

There was a copse of trees and then beyond, the open. Once more the odd reddish tint of the ground was changing until it ended abruptly in a band of the same baked clay over which they had earlier traveled. Save this was not open ground but a maze of rocky outcrops, slimed by the droppings of a huge flock of black birds, their naked raw red heads outstretched to the full as they cried out in a rising din.

Riding back and forth before this broken barrier was Aylinn, Kethan's stallion faithfully at Morna's heels. It was as if the girl were trying to force her way past a wall. . . .

A warding!

Firdun's mind-probe met a will-barrier so tight that the recoil actually caused him a small measure of pain. He had never struck



against such before—though he had never really tried to pierce clear to the heart of Garth Howell's defenses.

Now he rode to catch up with the girl, turning his mount so that she was forced to pull in her mare.

"There is a warding—"

"As if that is not plain!" She almost snarled at him as if some of the were blood was also hers. "Yet look—"

She pointed down to the yellow soil and Firdun caught plain sight of the tracks. Cat—pard—Kethan must have come this way.

The birds which had continued to circle and scream above the rocks now began to venture out toward them and the party which had ridden on their trail.

"Rus!" Elysha spat out. "This is their nesting place. But why?" She was leaning forward in the saddle and had caught sight of the pard tracks. Then under her guidance her horse sidled back a fraction, the rest of them withdrawing to give her room.

She dropped her reins and her mount stood statue-still. Raising both hands, with the gemmed wrists purple fire in the sun, she began to move them back and forth, gesturing as one might to draw a curtain.

There was a haze over those rock pinnacles now. The birds withdrew in frenzied flight, probably alighting somewhere beyond, since they were no longer on the wing.

Elysha's groping gestures grew wider until with them her arms moved apart to their farthest extent. If she strove to sweep away that growing haze, her efforts worked in exactly the opposite fashion—it was thickening.

Before their eyes now there were no feces-stained rock spires, not even the yellow ground underneath. Elysha spoke a single word Firdun had never heard. They were looking at an entirely different stretch of country as if the sere desert land had never existed.

Here was the welcome green of newly growing grass, gem-studded with flowers of yellow and red wide open under the sun. And there was also a path of gravel as silver white as a moonbeam.

The path wove back and forth and around but eventually it reached not the forbidding walls of a keep, but rather the timber



and plaster side of what might have been a Dales inn of the best sort. Around and over the door of the inn was an arch, vine-covered and boasting blood-red flowers.

All the while there seemed to flow toward them from that green and gracious land a welcome which grew stronger with every breath they drew until Firdun came alive to the danger.

“Glamorie!” Not a word—but a trap, even as Elysha’s castle had drawn him. Firdun wheeled his mount between that lure and his companions, even crowding against Aylinn’s mare to force the animal back.

Elysha let her arms fall. The fair country they looked upon was once more the filthy roosting place of the rus and those birds were rising again to circle and scream.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



The Hold of Sassfang, the Waste, South

The pard lifted his head higher, brushing impatiently through the flowering bushes, petals clinging to his fur, since they seemed to be yet heavy with the dew of early morning. The scent was faint but not so faded that it did not hold true as he went. And this drew him as nothing had done before in his life. The man was buried deeper and deeper within him as he went, while the beast ruled on this trail.

It promised—he was not quite sure of *what* it did promise—but it was such a lure as he could not ignore. Then he came out of the moss-carpeted land and faced—



The pard blinked and blinked again, eyeing what lay before him. His astonishment was such that not even the scent which had pulled him here could hold. Man arose, beast disappeared, and Kethan stood at the beginning of a finely kept graveled path which led by a series of odd curves to such a building as certainly no one would expect to find in this stretch of country.

He had heard from traders that the Dales which attracted yearly fairs had such accommodation for those who traveled to them. Not holds in which any peaceful wayfarer could claim shelter for the night, but what they called inns, which were erected only for the comfort of travelers.

There were no walls here, no signs of any need for defense for those about. Even the wide door was open. Smoke curled up from chimneys at either end of the building and the breeze brought him a suggestion of freshly baked bread—the soft loaves of good living, not the hard journey cakes. Such as he had eaten at Reeth when Old Wife Zentha still ruled in the kitchen quarters there before she had left to take care of her motherless grandchildren.

But—there *was* Zentha! She stood in the doorway with her usual wide smile, even bearing the usual small smudge of flour on one apple-round cheek.

Deep in Kethan something strove to awaken, but when Zentha beckoned to him his man shape impatiently suppressed that prick.

“Zentha!” He might have returned to childhood—except that in his bleak childhood Zentha had played no role. Now he ran, following the odd curve of the path without any heed.

“Laws, now,” he heard her well-remembered voice. “Now, didn’t them as rides the breeze tell me as how I’d have a hungry man coming to put his legs under the table and hold out his hand for the nearest dish?”

Again that prick far inside, this time more insistent. But Kethan went on. Zentha was backing into the open door of the inn, still facing him.

He set his foot on the wide step, ready to follow. Her hand—no, no hand—rather a set of knife-sharp claws struck out. Before Kethan roused from the ensorcellment he had not known held



him, those claws caught at the carved pard buckle of his belt as if they knew the exact trick of its fastening. The force with which it was torn from him sent him nearly whirling like a top.

Gone was the inn, Zentha— He reeled back against a befouled rock, fighting to protect his face and eyes from the rus screaming down in attack. All about him was the yellow of the outer Waste. In his flight from the birds, blood already streaming from his hands from a deep score on one cheek, he brought up bruisingly against a rocky pillar and rebounded to another.

The rus clustered and swooped, claws and beaks tearing at his clothing where they could not reach his flesh, though already they had wounded him well. Somehow he floundered into a kind of crevice between two of the pillars and did all he could think of in his confusion and bewilderment, cramming his body back into that hole.

At least he had defeated the birds for a breath or two. But he had no weapons and he had seen twice what such flying monsters could do at their will, picked bones and tatters of cloth left only to mark their feasting.

He heard a harsh crackle of laughter and peered out of his small shelter. There was no Zentha, of course. In the place of her wholesome self stood a creature he had heard described by Firdun: the bird-female which had been at Garth Howell, or at least one of the same species.

It seemed that she could not view him straight on, that her large eyes were set too far apart. Her beaked face kept turning from one side to the other. Now and again she loosed that evil cackling while the rus circled about her. And between her hands she flapped his belt back and forth as one displays a battle trophy.

Aylinn—no—his thoughts instantly forbade any contact with their party. He had been caught, he knew now, by glamorie. None of the rest must fall victim to this. For those practiced in that art were able to summon up any sort of scene which could reach the innermost thoughts of their prey and draw them.

He could see a little of his surroundings, though from within this crack his sight was limited. There stood a veritable forest of



these huge rough monoliths of rock, streaked by generations of droppings, and the smell was enough to turn his stomach.

The birds, having driven him into this prison, were alighting on some of the outcrops. But the eyes in their raw red heads were turned in his direction. Their mistress swung the belt again. It hurtled out through the air and was gone, beyond his range of sight. Then she squatted down, put her clawed hands within another crevice, and jerked out a blood-clotted hunk of meat. Some of the nearer birds stirred and she pinched off bits which she flung up so that they caught them neatly, as if this were a trick they had done many times before.

Having pecked the few remaining shreds from a section of broken bone, she stuck forth a long, narrow purplish tongue and licked her claws. Then once more she cocked her head to view him out of her right eye.

“Noooo—runnnns—noooo follow—” The words were so garbled he could hardly make them out. But somehow his thoughts leaped to what he thought she meant.

He had been the prey because as a were he would pick up once more the trail of those out of Garth Howell. How much did this creature and those she had companied with understand about his party, anyway?

Kethan made no attempt to answer. His wounds, shallow as they were, smarted, and he wondered briefly what sort of filth the claws might have left in his broken skin.

His captor leaned back against the nearest outcrop. Her lidded eyes closed, but Kethan had no hope that she slept. Or, if she did, her rus guard were always awake.

To remain here without a struggle was not of his nature. Nor could he hope for any rescue. Therefore, he dropped his own bloodied head on the arms he had folded across his up-pulled knees and set up mind wards. But first he dared a probe and discovered, of course, that this place was well warded. Firdun knew the keys to such, but that talent was not one the weres owned. He suddenly had a vision—there out of what appeared to be a haze rode Aylinn astride Morna, barebacked as if she had mounted in a



hurry, Trussant trotting to match her. Behind moved other figures he did not doubt were the rest of the party. He cut contact instantly, before he even tried to reach his foster sister, for fear that whatever glamor lay here could pick some hint from his own mind which would bring her within reach of this monster.

He did not have farsight. It was too bad, he thought with a wry twist, that the talents could not be sorted out so one always had a supply of those most necessary. Not farsight—but something else!

Kethan's cramped body tensed. Then that call—that queer seeking which had brought him out of camp—was *not* connected with this trap after all! Dare he open to what he sensed now, or was it just another trick?

Instead, purposefully, and without the aid of his vanished belt, he strove to touch that level of him which was were. He could not make the change without the belt—no. But could he *think* were?

Like one edging along a very narrow path, on either side of which there was a threatening drop, Kethan proceeded to do what he had never done before. He had always fought to hold the pard under, keep his human part in control. Never when he was in man form had he tried to think were. But it seemed that now he must use any possible defense—and perhaps so find an actual weapon.

Thus he sought that other path. He fought to think of himself padding on four feet, his sight, hearing, and sense of smell far beyond anything his human form possessed. Almost . . . almost . . .

There! He had been alert enough to catch that fugitive other sense, the one which had drawn him. And it was certainly not of this place of horror. Even as he, it was imprisoned here. Feline . . . were? No, it did not respond to that suggestion he dared to send. Not were—but certainly not wholly animal, even though it went in four-footed form. He had a quick glimpse of shining black fur, a sniff of scent—female, in fear, and yet still a warrior.

At his tentative touch there was an instant withdrawal and he waited patiently, not seeking. Let her come to his summons, understand what he was and that he was no threat to her.

Suddenly he was seeing—with the same odd clarity as he did when the pard shape was upon him. But not through *his* eyes.



There was the forest of rocks, the birds soaring and settling now and again. And there was a crevice, even smaller than the one he had found. But this was not at ground level—rather, it was halfway up one of the rocks. Then he was somehow inside it and looking out, with red rage tearing at him because of the birds. There was blood on the rock and drifting feathers.

She had given a good accounting of herself. It was also plain that she saw no possible way of escape and had set herself grimly to die with as much trouble to the enemy as she could.

Now, even as he had looked through her eyes, his pard sense loosed her within his mind and made clear what lay about them.

Fight! That came as fiercely as if it were hissed in his ears.

Fight? *Weapon—belt—* He made the translation and hoped that she would catch it. Only with the belt did he have a chance against the birds and this Waste-born monster.

Belt? It came as a question, and he quickly strove to visualize it as it had been so long familiar to him.

There was a mind-silence—she had withdrawn. Perhaps she could see no value in his information. The bird woman opened both eyes, clicked her beak like jaws together, and arose. She was looking beyond him, plainly engrossed in whatever had aroused her.

Without a glance in his direction she left in her queer hopping gait, leaving the rus on sentinel duty behind.

Others— The mind-touch awakened again. *She calls the flock.*

Not here, he returned quickly, for none of the birds nearby had withdrawn.

Here. Water, food—must find—

The words instantly turned on his own thirst and hunger. Outside the sun was nearly gone. Though he lacked the night sight of the pard, he somehow felt encouraged by that withdrawal of full light. He kept his eyes on the birds. Several of them had taken wing and coasted off. Had the monster set some ward on him? Delicately he probed. None he could sense.

Water—food— Again those words reached him on pard-send.

The birds watch, he cautioned.



Death time not yet—she has not said so. They allow water—food—

He had been so cramped in the crevice that he had trouble working his way out of it. To his complete surprise he saw that the rus in sight were perched on the tops of the outcrops and none of them stirred.

Somehow Kethan made it to his feet. Water and food—yes—but more than that, he wanted to find the belt his captor had tossed away. He started to edge fully into the open and stood for a long moment, feeling queasy and ill from the stench of this place.

Water— It was a summons. But far more important was the hope of finding once more his belt.

The bird woman had stood so. The scene was sharply pictured in his mind and she had flung the belt in . . . that direction!

He fought the pain of his cramped legs and dared to lurch onto the next of the pillars, clutching tightly at the rough stone to keep from falling. To his continued amazement none of the birds now roosting above did more than stare down at him.

Come—water! That mind-urge was sharp. But Kethan's sight ranged slowly from the littered and dung-thick ground to the pillars about, paying no attention. The belt. . . .

It was fast growing darker. There seemed to be clouds rising to blot out the remains of the sunset, and the shadows linking pillar to pillar thickened until he nearly despaired that he could ever sight what he sought even though it might lay directly before him.

Surely it must have spun in this direction—he could not be wrong about that. Search the ground, then follow the line of each rough pillar to its crest where the rus sat watching. Nothing.

He had set his shoulders against one of those outcrops. The foul odors stirred up by his traveling over the dung-thick ground were enough to stifle a man. Then—

Was it his own binding with that artifact which set it slightly a-swing? He was certain, though he could not see it clearly, that the belt dangled well out of his reach halfway up one of the crags, looped over a jutting spur of rock.

Kethan, heartened, came with a swift lurch to stand beneath it. But it was far above his reach and, though he surveyed the ground



around him in frustrated anger, he could see no rock he could drag into place which would help him catch that tantalizing strip of hide. To attempt to climb the rock itself was perhaps the only answer, but when he laid bruised and beak-torn hands on its surface he could find no irregularity which would give him either finger- or toehold. The rus above were growing restless. Several of them came at him, they would have him badly torn with no chance to defend himself.

He coughed and coughed with a force which seemed to tear at his lungs. Some of the offal above must have been dislodged. If he could drink—

Water. That did not come as a true call but rather a memory. To remain frozen here perhaps until his tormentor returned was the act of a fool. He had found the belt, and he would now find a way to claim it.

Now he loosed his own mind-send. *Water?*

It was like the thread spun by a spider, so delicate a tracing that even one of his sobbing breaths could break it. Ahead—to the east. If those obscene birds aloft had caught it also, it meant nothing to them, or else their will joined with the other to send him on.

But as Kethan went, he marked the way which would bring him back to the belt. Long days of wood-ranging, both as man and pard, had heightened senses to remember points of land, and these rocky points were so dissimilar he could sight easily those to be used on a return trail.

The cramps in his legs at least eased, though his thirst and hunger were there to weaken him. And as he came into an open space—like a glade in a true forest—he was wavering. Here were tightly bunched plants sprouting, tall stalks on which hung bell blossoms pallidly alight. And around those swung the foul insects attracted by the offal.

But tightly closed in upon itself as each plant was, there were wide spaces between each. One of his boots crushed down upon the empty remains of insects that had earlier fallen prey to these rooted hunters.

Beyond was a dark pool. And at its edge crouched a fur body,



lean nearly to the point of starvation. A head lifted and wide, night-brightened eyes caught his.

He could see now that this other was indeed a cat—larger by a third than those he had seen in Arvon. One ear was raggedly torn and as it hunched around away from the water, he could also see that one leg moved stiffly. Yet its head came up with a small hiss of warning.

Oddly enough at that moment what flashed into Kethan's fore-mind was the traditional keep greeting of the Dalesfolk.

I give traveler's thanks for the greeting. May good fortune hold this household.

And then he was stopped by the thought which broke through his unconscious return to keep ways.

Drink—eat—

It would seem that this fellow captive had only two things on her mind. Drink, yes. He knelt by the pool and dipped in one hand. The liquid seemed turgid and faintly warm, and certainly as he held it closer to his lips the smell was such that one would not class it, he thought with irony, with the first squeezings of the harvest seasons.

But it was liquid and it soothed his dry mouth and went down his throat easily enough. He cupped both hands together and drank again. All right, here was water, unless it was poisoned by some chance of the Waste. He allowed himself two more gulps. But food . . .

The dim light provided by those ghostly flowers showed him that his companion had left the poolside and was limping toward a large rock oddly shaped with an overhang which formed a miniature cave. From that she emerged again, dragging a bundle which already showed signs of having been badly mauled.

He joined her to draw back a piece of hide covering which was scored again and again by what could only be the claws of the rus. What lay within was a very small portion of dried meat, beginning to smell, and with tooth marks set about its edges.

It was a very small portion and Kethan looked from it to the cat, who settled down again, seeming to find it difficult to arrange her



damaged leg to her satisfaction. He was hungry enough, yes, even to snatch up that offered portion and eat it all himself. But another thought began to expand in his mind.

The cat obviously had no chance against either a flock attack by the rus or a swift pounce from the bird woman. But he had been tricked out of his belt—therefore the pard had meant the greater danger. This was only hopeful guessing, but he could prove it one way or another—with help.

He indicated the meat and the cat and tried to simply mind-send. *Let sister one eat. Then this one has something to show.*

The cat continued to stare at him. *No eat?* came at last so faint he could hardly catch the words.

Kethan nodded vigorously enough to set some of his scratches smarting again. *This one.* He dug his thumb into his chest vigorously. *Weapon—get free—if sister help.* He hoped that he was speaking the truth in that.

The cat looked at the meat and then attacked it ravenously. His own tongue swept over his lips and he fought against the ache in his middle.

Having finished the last scrap of the pitiful ration, the cat sat up and regarded him again.

What do?

Come. He could not even be sure the rus would let them go, but it was the first step to freedom for them both. Kethan stopped and caught up the cat, trying not to mishandle the injured leg. Under that matted fur the body was nearly a rack of bones. How long had this poor thing been here? he wondered.

He retraced his path until he came again to where the belt was looped out of reach. Holding the cat against his chest, he pointed up to the barely discernible strip of fur.

“Weapon.” He looked deeply into the feline eyes now turned up to stare at him and allowed his mind to fill with the vision of the pard in all his hunting force, claws and fangs against the rus.

Somehow he knew she had captured that picture, understood. Now her head turned and she looked up at the belt. He could hold her as high as a rough series of small nicks or pocks in the rock.



She might have two body lengths more to climb, and then she would have to reach out a paw and push the belt (which he could only hope was not too well anchored) off and down, leaping so he might catch her.

Cats held certain mysteries of their own. He had heard enough of the old legends to know that in the past they had shown powers apart from mankind. Could she—would she?

She moved now in his arms, her head turned toward the pillar up which he would boost her. He shot a glance at the now practically invisible rus. None of the creatures had moved. Could he hope that they slept?

Standing on tiptoe, he held the cat to the farthest extent of his reach. In spite of her favoring that paw, she now used the seemingly disabled limb and planted it apparently against the rock, but he was sure she had found a hole. Then he drew a deep breath and was able to push her a fraction higher.

In a second of time she was totally out of his hold, a black blot against the yellow-red stone. She wriggled herself about and he caught his breath, sure she would fall, moving in as close as he could. Her paw went out and struck full on the heavily carved jargon of the buckle, sending the belt swinging. Then the balance failed and the artifact fell within his reach. But he was waiting for the cat, tense for her and the coming attack of the birds.

Fortune favored him in that he caught her, holding her tightly to him, sure he could feel her small heart racing against his larger one. He placed her carefully on the ground between his feet and grabbed up the belt, locking it well around his waist.

The transition was swift—he was four-footed again and the cat straightened up to dab her nose briefly against the larger one he turned down in her direction. So far, so good.

Now to get out of this prison. If he took the cat on his back and the birds attacked, he could not defend her—she would be swept away and torn to pieces. Therefore gently he licked her head, and then gripped at the nape of her neck as easily as he could in the way a mother would carry a kitten.



They returned to that place where he had hidden in the crevice. But it would seem that now ill fortune took a part in the game.

There was a shriek and several rus took to the air, planing down at them. Kethan nosed the cat back into the crevice and stationed himself before it.

For all his lack of food and rest, he was able to summon the lithe agility of his kind. With a roar he arose, using his great forepaws, the cruelly curved claws, well in a wide sweep which caught and smashed several attackers against the rocks. He had chosen his position well; they could not come on him from behind.

Twice more they whirled down, but he had the pard's night eyes now and could see them coming. He was ready. One he caught in his fangs, spitting out in disgust the thing's musty-feathered body with the life crushed out of it. And with one paw and then the other he fended off and destroyed enough of the others so that they now held away, screeching aloud to the night.

Then came she for whom they called, with great hopping strides between the pillars of her stronghold, her beak mouth open as she hissed aloud her rage.

The birds stayed back now, seemingly willing to leave the battle to their mistress. Her head swung widely back and forth as she viewed Kethan first through one coal-red eye and then the other.

But he knew this was his final chance. Summoning all the energy left in his body, he sprang. Her beak scored the top of his head as he evaded her attack at one of his eyes. Both of his forepaws pounded home on her chest, sending her back by the fury of that blow against a pillar. He heard her scream of pain and anger and felt brittle bones snap. Then she slid down and folded together. Plainly, for now, she was finished. He did not know whether he had delivered a death blow or not.

Whirling, he seized the cat once more by the neck hold, leaping out and beyond the beginning circle of the pillars into the open Waste once again. Behind him the air fairly shook with the clamor of the rus, though oddly enough, none of them attempted to follow him away from their own stronghold.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



The Fane of the Three, the Waste, West

The battle energy which had brought Kethan out of that foul nesting place began to fail. His head drooped and he realized that the cat's body, frail as it was, was dragging the ground.

However, he could see those waiting and he realized that they could not reach him because of some ward. This, he could only hope, was set to keep out invasion, not to keep prisoners in.

Aylinn's moonflower wand was the beacon to which Kethan held, though there were deeper glows on either side of her. One was a strange dark-piercing violet which he associated with Elysha and the other a pale gray as if Ibycus's ring was waking.

The clamor of the birds rose harsh and heavy behind him, but none of them had yet attacked. Were they so under the command of that Waste monster that they would not do so without orders?

At last he knew that he could not drag his companion any farther. He loosed his grip on the loose neck folds and crouched. For too long the heap of black fur lay where he had dropped it. He began to lick as he would the wounds of his own kind and he strove to reach with mind-touch.

Climb—back— He repeated the thought over and over until at last the cat did stir. Hoping he was understood, Kethan crouched as low as he could on the baked clay as the body uncurled very



slowly and then crawled, as if to rise to its feet was more than it could hope now to do. It nudged against the pard's side, as he strove to flatten himself even further. Then he felt the sharp pain of claws catching through his fur, points rasping his skin as the other climbed. A weight settled on his back, but the punishment of the claws still held and Kethan hoped the cat was well anchored even though the experience was painful for him.

With care he arose from his crouch, trying to make sure that weight did not shift at any movement of his. Then once more he faced that cluster of lights which meant safety. But his pace was not in leaps now. He placed one paw before the other with great care.

It seemed to him that the whole of the night must waste away before he could reach his goal. The ward—it was there for him also. Almost he could have howled his frustration to the night sky.

But a figure he could hardly see in that limited light moved out a little ahead of the three sources holding so steady. There was movement, but Kethan could no longer, in spite of pard night sight, follow what that other did. Dimly he realized that the ward was being challenged. Firdun—wards were his talent and if any could break through this barrier, it would be him!

Kethan's head drooped almost to the ground now. He wondered, even if Firdun was successful, if he could manage the few more paces to get he and his companion out.

Then there came a howling cry from his companion and a feeling that somewhere, not quite in the time he knew, a door had opened, or a barrier fallen. So heartened, he stumbled on to feel the healing of the moonflowers, as well as an inpouring of energy. Only he was too spent now. He crumbled to the ground and felt faintly the scratching of claws. But as he went into a soothing darkness, nothing mattered anymore.

Aylinn was on her knees in an instant, pulling at the length of the pard. Her hands sought his middle. A moment later she had shot the bolt of the jargon buckle and pulled away the belt so that now a very battered and bloodstained young man rested at their feet.

Elysha stood in the same instant and caught up the cat, cradling its starved body against her.



“Uta, what evil sucked you into that?” There was a crooning note in her voice as she held the animal against her breast.

“Out of here!” Firdun’s voice was an order which caught all their attention. “There may well be a backlash—that was a fourfold be-spelling.”

He had already bent over Kethan while Ibycus and Guret moved up on the other side. The were was limp in their combined hold; they could not arouse him enough to move even with their aid. So they carried him somewhat clumsily, well aware that he might well be wounded worse than the damage they could see. Then Obred and Lero arrived, that same hammocklike device stretched between two of the horses, which snorted and pawed the earth but were easily forced to obey, and Kethan was transported. So they moved through the night, Aylinn walking beside the swaying hammock in which her foster brother lay, impatient to be allowed to tend him, though Ibycus and Firdun, and even Elysha, appeared to be gripped by the same conviction that they must be on the move and as quickly as possible.

Kethan had not stirred since he had fallen except when the hands about him moved him by their will. But she could see that his face between the smeared filth and dried blood was that of one who slept at peace, had not fallen into deep unconsciousness.

They headed south for a space, Ibycus now and then bringing them to a pause while he studied the stars overhead. He also gazed often into the murky gem on his finger and once sharply changed their direction. Elysha carried the cat and sometimes Aylinn caught a fringe of mind-send between the two. The wisewoman had insisted that she be given a packet of meat and she also carried her saddle water bottle slung over her shoulder, offering its contents to her charge at intervals.

Dawn was once more visible enough that Firdun could see that the eternal pan of cracked yellow clay over which they had traveled through most of the night had again changed. This time there was no reddish moss to carpet the ground, nor were the small bushes beginning to show in any color except natural green. For a moment or two, remembering well that glamorie of the trap, he had eyed the landscape distrustfully.



Now they followed, he was sure, a directly western course. But they must also be well south of the trail those from Garth Howell had taken. They came to a stand of trees and Ibycus at last called a halt.

Kethan did not rouse even when Aylinn loosed her healer's bag and made measured choices. He did swallow water when his head was raised against her shoulder and a cup held to his lips. However, it was as if he moved in his sleep and his eyes remained closed. She had a frightening thought that the rough scratches might hold some poison.

Elysha joined her and together they stripped away his badly rent clothing so she might treat each and every one of those cuts. For the first time he moved on his own, his hands going to his waist, and he gave a slight moan until Aylinn put his wandering fingers on his belt, though she did not fasten it once more about him.

The trees marked a spring, and the grass a little beyond their circle drew whinnies from their mounts, who wanted freedom to graze. The two Kioga tribesmen rode out and came back very soon, carrying a creature not unlike a leaper but twice it in size, roughly butchered between them. Firdun, exploring around the spring, returned with a double handful of sweet root.

Among them the cat moved, apparently in better shape now than her rescuer. She had gone to sit beside him, her eyes on Aylinn, almost as if she needed to make sure he was under proper care. Now she hunkered down, her paws folded under her. Seeing the half-healed gashes on her bony body, Aylinn brought forth more salves and set about anointing them, paying extra attention to the torn ear, the animal permitting her touch as if it were expected.

One—three— Aylinn started at that sudden mind-touch. The cat had extended her injured leg as if to draw the girl's full attention to it.

The moonmaid knew little of tame cats. However, with snowcat and pard sharing her family, she certainly was aware of the proper mind-levels for communication at least within their species.

"Moon." She shaped the word with her lips as well as spoke it aloud.

One—three—female Power. The answer came promptly.

"True," she agreed. "Greetings, sister-in-fur."



Uta. The cat replied that same name with which Elysha had first greeted her. *One—three—waiting—*

Aylinn was putting a light binding of leaf cloth over the slashed leg. “Waiting where, Uta?” To her knowledge there were very few moonmaids and she had heard of none who dared the Waste.

See soon. Feel good. He will awake soon. The cat nodded toward Kethan. *Brave fighter—cat lord—*

“He is man also,” Aylinn found herself saying, “as you can see.”

Much not seen by eye. Man-pard—great warrior.

Uta deliberately closed her eyes and it was apparent she considered their conversation over—leaving Aylinn a bit resentful, with a lot of questions she would like to ask. That this animal was not of the same breed as those cats who had joined households she was very sure. But neither was she a were! The Waste was certainly full of mysteries. Perhaps one could never come to the end of them.

She curled up by Kethan and followed the cat’s example, finding sleep ready to seize upon her. But the same was not so for Ibycus, sitting not far away. The scowl line between his eyes had deepened greatly since they had left the Eyrie. Nor did he look up in greeting as Elysha came up to kneel beside him, though at no invitation of his.

“Our party grows.” The ever-present scent which clung to her garments encompassed them both. Ibycus forced a cough and she laughed.

“Age never set heavy on you before, Lord Mage; do not invite its burdens now. I would like to hear Uta’s tale, but you have more in mind.”

Her bracelets flashed as she indicated the hand lying on his knee, the dull stone of the ring now without any signs of life.

Ibycus gave an exaggerated sigh. It was plain she was not going to leave him alone. But then, when had she ever? His memory flashed back over seasons too many to count now, to when he had seen her first, a child not yet into girlhood casting the snapped-off heads of grass flowers into a pool and watching intently as they swirled and were borne away by the current.

Had he only possessed the power of foresight . . . But he had not. Perhaps it was youth then also which betrayed him, so that he



had thrown himself down beside her. Nor had she feared him for a stranger. When she turned to look at him she might have been welcoming one of her kin.

They had talked—and it had not been a child to whom he spoke that day. Wisdom already grew within her and her talent truly amazed him with its hints of Power to come. So he had lingered, not only by the pool, but in the hold of the Silvermantle lord who had taken her into fosterage after the death of his sister.

In spite of himself Ibycus had been drawn back season after season until she was maid-grown and demanded as her right that he take her as pupil. But as time passed she had wanted more, to be made free of the innermost of his thoughts as if she would sink herself wholly into him so they might become one. Then he had summoned up his full strength and held the last barrier, so she had left him in rage—rage rooted in hurt. He had sometimes wondered . . .

No, this was no time for memories, but for the here and now. However, if he did not offer her an explanation she would dig for it and so upset the delicate balances of the Powers with which he must play.

“I must speak with the Gryphon—with Alon if it is possible,” he told her. “What are we? Less than two handfuls and we know not still what hides at Garth Howell which might feed those who have gone forth.”

Now he stroked the dull gem with the forefinger of his other hand. Fingers touched lightly on his arm. “Draw from me, Lord Mage, if there be need,” she said quietly, all the half mockery gone out of her voice.

Ibycus stared into the stone. At first there was no change and then tiny threads of color flickered across its surface. These drew together, thickened. But the effort to hold, and to enhance, what he had summoned was great. It might be that the baneful Waste itself would defeat him.

Alon! He did not repeat that name aloud, but it sounded through his mind. Now he felt that other strain finding its way like blood through a vein into his body. She was indeed feeding his Power as she had promised.



Alon! The colored threads were certainly brighter, thicker. It was like looking into a mirror surface, for the very stone of the ring seemed to swell, to provide him with a wider vision.

That was Alon, right enough—behind him a smudged expanse which might or might not be a poor showing of the Eyrie courtyard. However, Alon's head had turned, he was looking up and outward to meet Ibycus's compelling stare.

"How fares it with you?"

Ibycus knew he had little time to spare. "One gate found—it is sealed. You have news out of Lormt?"

"Little enough. Hilarion labors. So must Garth Howell. There is an incoming of darkness."

"It threatens you?"

"Not yet. It gathers there, it waits. You track those gone from the Garth?"

"We were forced from their trail. We seek it again—they head west still. How—" What more Ibycus meant to say vanished, for the face in the stone was gone. Instead there was a dark roiling cloud.

Instantly the mage was on guard. Into that spreading darkness shot a jagged bolt of lightning, and less than a heartbeat later the lightning was tinged with violet. Twice that crossed the stone, then darkness and lightning disappeared and only the dull gray oval lay under their gaze.

"Garth Howell?" Elysha's hand had fallen away from his arm. She was breathing faster.

Ibycus shrugged. "With what may wander hereabouts unchallenged, who may guess? We need a sanctuary for a space."

One—three—waiting— Uta had uncoiled and now limped over to Elysha.

"A moon shrine!" The woman was startled. "You can show the way?"

Was going—bird demon caught me.

Even as Uta had awakened, so now Kethan moved. He stared unbelieving up at the trees over his head for a moment and then blinked. His stirring roused Aylinn and she sat up yawning, like a



young girl who had missed her proper sleep. But she turned to her foster brother fast enough, her hand going to his bandaged forehead.

“How do you feel?”

He grinned. “Hungry, sister mine. Have you a roasting sheep well ready on the fire?”

She moved as if to aid him, but he managed quickly to sit up without her help. His clothing was now largely a matter of tatters and much of it Aylinn had cut away when she tended his wounds. But his first act was to buckle on the belt which had lain tightly beneath his hands during his sleep.

They gathered by the fire where a leaper had roasted and shared out the meat after Kethan had drawn a fresh shirt and jerkin from his saddlebags. Guret and the other Kioga seemed more than a little surprised when Ibycus announced that they had a new guide, the cat Kethan had brought out of the rus roost. Kethan himself scooped up the limping Uta and, mounted on his shadow horse, settled her as comfortably as possible.

The green country held as they rode. They had started at nooning, but Uta seemed certain they would reach their promised shelter before nightfall.

Little sister. Kethan struggled to find the proper level of mind-send. *How do you?*

Well—moon power healing—belly full.

Then he asked the question which had lain at the bottom of his mind since his awakening. Though the others had seen no signs of being followed, still he kept a wary eye now and then on the sky overhead and his ears were alert for the screeching cries of the rus. That they had managed to win free of that prison seemed more and more fantastic to him.

It was he whom the bird-thing had been told to capture—because of them all he was best at reading a trail. And he was far from sure that, in those last moments of frenzied attack, he had done more than perhaps temporarily cripple her. What did Uta know—as she, too, had been captive there?

Sassfang little power, came the message. *Only in her own place can she hold. There is no follow feel.*



Somehow he was able to accept that. He still held to the fore of their party, even though he rode as a man since Uta was in his charge. But he surveyed the country through which they passed with a scout's eye.

There were more and more copses of trees such as the one in which they had camped. And, while the green of the grass appeared overlaid with a dulling gray as if a rain of dust had fallen not too long ago, it *was* grass and had not the inherent menace of that yellow baked clay.

Now they could see a rise of what looked to be a rocky cliff face before them. However, this crag stood alone, unaccompanied by any other outcrops, and the closer they came toward it the more visible was a glitter, as if pockets of pure crystals studded its sides in no regular patterns.

It also was surrounded by trees, but such trees! They stood only a little taller than a mounted man, but their branches spread wide, meeting those of their neighbors to form a roof.

Also they looked to bear two kinds of leaves—one wide and fleshy thick, the other in a tight roll—unless those latter marked some buds or fruit not yet ready for the harvest.

“Laran!” Aylinn pushed Morna up beside Kethan. “Laran—oh, indeed this is blessed land!”

Though those trees had formed a roof of branches, there was room to move under them if they dismounted and led their horses and pack train. Luckily those matted branches grew only at the crowns of the trees and the trunks below were bare.

Firdun was aware, as he urged the pack train along, of a growing fragrance, even more potent than that which clung to Aylinn's moonflowers or to Elysha's garments. Also once he was under that roof of branches a feeling of utter peace such as he had never known before encased him. It was as if all the world, with its sorrows, fears, and alarms was so warded that nothing could penetrate here except that which was of goodwill.

The grove of encircling trees was not a large one. They came out into the open again to face flashes of light. What they had seen from afar was no crag alone in a level land. If it had been assem-



bled by some purpose, those who had worked so had not followed the patterns known to mankind.

This was a mighty throne backed by the crystal-studded white rock. No human could ever have been accommodated by that seat, so high did it tower. But there was one seated there, and they came to an awed halt. Between them and the throne was a round pool or else a mirror of stain-free metal and the figure on the throne leaned forward a little as if staring down at its surface.

Uta squirmed in Kethan's arms until he set her down. Limping, certainly of them all showing no awe, she approached the throne.

The figure seated there was so muffled in a robe or veils, which were even drawn tightly over its head, that the travelers could not see its true nature. But the hands which lay uncovered on either arm of the throne were of human fashion yet twice the size, with long fingers, the nails of which were formed of crystals.

Aylinn sank to her knees, her moonflower wand outheld as a warrior might offer his sword to his lord.

"One of three, three in one." Her voice sounded as if she were on the verge of tears. "That thy servant is allowed this meeting is more . . ." She was truly weeping now, the tears wet on her sun-browned cheeks.

Kethan found himself on his knees also, and heard a stir about as the rest also paid homage. There were many great Old Ones of the legends. The earthly ties with such were said to exist throughout their world. That Uta had led them to one such sanctuary was plain.

That which the sitter represented might be long since withdrawn, but not to Aylinn and many others. Even if it were only a representation, there was that about it which made this, for those who walked in the Light, holy ground.

That peace Firdun had felt when he entered here was armor against all the Dark. But now there seemed to be a questioning, a desire to know why that peace was troubled by their coming.

He felt uneasy for a moment or so, as would any unbelieving intruder in a sacred place. But that unease was swept away. There was no harm in his coming. That which he had followed all his life, his



talent, opened wider—like a flower under the sun. He had been judged and found worthy.

Elysha moved forward, almost equal with Aylinn, her head thrown back, her eyes searching that veiled face for what could not be seen.

“Gunnora in all glory! Earth Mother, Sky Mother, Dweller in the Deep Waters—all in one. What you have given is ever at your service.”

Perhaps even more now, Firdun felt that searching and weighing. Perhaps they all learned more of themselves than their kind ever knew. But though they had been united in purpose from the start for this venture, now they were welded, melded, worked upon as a smith works sword steel to do what must be done.

Then—

They knew that presence which had been there, for the time of that weighing was gone. Nothing was left but the form which could hold Her as She willed, when She willed. However, She had made them free, given them guesting for this night within Her sanctuary, and they were honored more than any sitting in a High Seat of a hall.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



The Meeting in the Waste, West

Guret and his two tribesmen approached Ibycus, though they made a wide circle past the throne and its silent occupant.

“Lord”—though there was a note of deference in Guret’s voice, there was also a hint of defiance—“we would take the four-footed ones out to the open meadows where they may be staked to graze



at their will. This High One”—he shot a glance over his shoulder at the throne—“is like our Mother of Mares and yet we are not truly Her children. That She has given us Her blessing is a wondrous thing, but we would not intrude upon that which is not of our heritage.”

Ibycus nodded. “Do as you will, Horsemaster. But hold this to you—what abides here is friend to all of the Light, and Her power is both wide and everlasting.”

Thus the Kioga led the mounts and the packhorses out of the shadow of the trees, but none of the others followed.

As dusk settled down, those podlike buds on the trees began to show wider cracks as if the night was meant for their blooming. And a perfume scented the air. Though the travelers got out supplies for a meal, none of them seemed to be inclined to do more than nibble at a bit of journey cake, take more than a sip now and then from their water bottles.

Hunger was banished, along with all distress and uneasiness. Aylinn went to stand just under the limb fringe of one of those trees. The buds had opened wide and flattened, loosing white petals which gave off a glow far deeper than the gleam of her own moonflowers. She dared to reach up and give the lightest of touches to the nearest one.

Then her hand jerked back in dismay, for the blossom floated free into the air, the petals wide as white wings. It did not fall, even though there was no breeze to bear it—none Aylinn could feel. Its flight was to the left and then it settled down onto the surface of that mirror pool at the foot of the throne.

Kethan and Firdun had both watched her near the tree and now each moved in, as might guards. But Aylinn had dropped to her knees, leaning out over the surface, which the landing blossom had not troubled into life.

Slowly her hand moved forward. Firdun stepped closer as if to prevent her, but Kethan’s arm was out, a barrier to wall him away.

With infinite care the girl inserted her fingers under the edge of the nearest petal and, without touching it more than she must, she drew it toward her.



At last she stepped back, her moon wand lying unnoticed by her side, the splendid bloom resting on the palm of her hand. From her throat there arose a soft crooning, as if her wonder at what she held could not be kept silent.

Soft fur brushed against Kethan as he settled down beside his foster sister. It seemed at that moment there was nothing else in the world except that one perfect flower. Yet it was not for his taking—that he also knew.

Aylinn held the flower at the height of her breast. There her moon badge was a circle of glory. Not taking her eyes from what she held, she groped for her wand and held that to the same height. The flower which had topped it for so long was fading, its petals becoming gauze-thin. Then those fluttered loose and were gone. Slowly, as if at any moment she feared what she held might be taken from her, Aylinn advanced the wand toward the flower, slipped the tip of it under its petals.

So she held it. On Kethan's knee a paw moved, a black-furred head was raised high to watch. About them there was a stirring, a feeling that some potent Power wrought, not by their will, but another's.

Aylinn raised the wand. With it she saluted the throned one as a warrior would raise a sword in homage.

"Moonsworn I have always been by the beliefs of my people," she said. "Now—now, One in Three, I tread any path *you* open for my feet. That I have been chosen so—" Her voice broke and once more she was crying. "Mother, Sister, Ancient One, make of me now what you will!"

She bowed her head over the wand she had drawn back against her slender body. Kethan longed to put his arm about her, draw her close, for he had a feeling that in these moments she was going farther away, even though she had not moved.

Uta reared up on his lap, putting her paws against his chest and looking up into his face. He heard Firdun stir, get to his feet also, and swing away.

Slowly Kethan got up, keeping his hold on the cat, and left



Aylinn alone. Or was she so? Perhaps there were others now who would welcome her.

With a growing emptiness in him, Kethan turned his back upon the throned one and strode back into the trees. The blooms had mostly opened and he felt as heavy of body, as drained of energy as he had when he had escaped from the place of the rus. He tumbled on the bedroll he had spread out earlier and stretched out, dimly aware that those scratches and hurts he had felt were gone. There was only the peace.

Determined, he turned his head away so he could not see the crystal throne. Uta was still with him, a warm comforting armload of fur.

His eyes closed.

Something stirred, not only against his body, but in his mind, breaking the euphoria produced by the flowers. He was aware of, very far off, a kind of summoning which was not an alarm, merely a call—a call he must answer.



Perhaps that first light of the flowers had faded a fraction; he was sure when he opened his eyes that he could not see as clearly. There was a shadow of a shadow—yet it brought with it no feeling of alarm, rather awoke him further, determined to see what stood there, weaving a little as if it stood unsteadily.

Kethan's hand went to his belt. *Pard eyes—let him have pard eyes the better for seeing—let him have them—now!*

And certainly some fraction of that keenness came to him. For see he did. Not Aylinn, silver white as he had always known her; not Elysha, aflame with the emotions she held in control; not—not the Lady. No, he was a man and she would not come so to him.

But there *was* a woman there—and such a woman as he had never seen in either Arvon or the Dales. She was small, perhaps her head might come a little above his own shoulder if they stood together. (But he found that he could not get to his feet, rather was frozen where he was.) Her hair was short, showing none of the looping braids or locks which he was used to. Rather, it fit her head



like a silken cap, with only a lock or two slightly longer, reaching to touch her shoulders.

Her face had some of the triangular shape known among the Old Ones, with a pointed chin and large eyes which were green or yellow—he could not be sure which.

She was fuller of body than Aylinn, but not statuesque as Elysha. And covering her, yet molding close to show breasts and hips, was a dark single garment, seemingly made of one piece, with no skirt or overdress, covering her from throat to wrist to ankle.

Kethan's nostrils expanded. He had not only pard sight now but pard sense of scent. This was a female which awoke in him something which had been long asleep and now would move him to . . . But move he could not.

Who are you? He thought he had asked that aloud and then realized that he had used mind-send.

He saw her smile, showing sharp-pointed teeth. She raised both hands and smoothed herself down the length of her body as far as her hips, as if in some feminine reassurance that she was appealing as she wished to be.

Kethan made a supreme effort. He did not want to be wholly pard and so perhaps drive this wondrous apparition from him; he only wanted to touch, to make sure that he saw what he believed stood there.

Somehow he succeeded. His fingertips slipped down her thigh until he could hold no longer and his hand fell helplessly against his own body.

You like . . . what you see? Her mind-send was high-pitched and there was something of an effort in it.

I like. And his send was close to the pard's growl.

She laughed silently, making no sound. *Be patient, four-foot. If fate is kind we all gain what we strive the most to obtain. I have waited—long . . .* Her voice trailed away.

Kethan summoned the last of his strength and tried to catch her. But like the moonflower earlier, she faded and was gone. Now he sat alone and the peace of this place was broken for him.

That his visitor had been from the Dark Side he knew was im-



possible. Was she some servant of the throned one who had dared to make her presence so known to him? Or was she a sending?

He simply knew that he could no longer sleep. Uta, curled by his feet, uttered a sleepy protest. He half covered her with the edge of his sleeping mat and struck outward through the trees toward the outworld, certain that he must find something which was real enough for him to understand.

“Who goes?” That demand out of the dark argued that some other of their group had found this place an enigma which might not be wholly accepted as good.

“Firdun?” He recognized the voice.

There was movement in the darkness and a hand clasped his arm with a punishing grip. “The talents are many; we each have our own. That we know. But—has your sister this night found a path which will lead her totally away from the ways of our world?”

“I do not know,” Kethan answered truthfully. He was shaken a little out of his preoccupation with his late visitor, to wonder at why this son of the Gryphon would be so moved by the ceremony they had watched.

“She is your kin—” Firdun was beginning, when Kethan interrupted him.

“We are not blood kin, but fosterling. I am were, as you well know. Aylinn was raised daughter to my mother, who is a wise-woman and healer. Discovering she had great talent, she was sent to Linark—and there discovered she was Moon called.”

“There are those women of Estcarp”—Kethan could not see Firdun’s face, but Firdun’s voice was bitter—“who raised the power to wrack mountains. But they look upon men as lesser beings. Oh”—there was a vigorous swish of air in the dark as if the speaker had flung his arms wide—“I do not know what I seek to say—but if Aylinn goes from us—”

“That will not happen while we quest.” Kethan was guessing. Aylinn—the Gryphon son—men were drawn to women and women to men and had been since the days the world had begun. Sometimes it was ill done and ended in sorrow; sometimes it was as with Kethan’s parents, Gillan and Herrel, such a bond as nothing



could sever. But no one could speak for another in such matters. "She will be with us," he repeated, knowing at the same time it was chill comfort, "until we have finished what we would do. Time changes many matters, and talents can fit to talents in a fashion one might not believe."

His answer was first a sigh, and then Firdun said: "The Kioga camp nearby . . . we can share their watch." He spoke as if sleep was now beyond his hope.



Well away from the grove of the throne, Guret, armed and alert, was following such a trail as only an expert horsemaster could sight. For the most part the mounts they had carefully chosen from the Kioga herds for this venture were well trained—to the point of standing as if hitched when the reins were flipped over their heads to touch the ground until their riders remounted.

Heretofore only the packhorses, who were ever contrary beasts, had to be picketed when they camped. But for the past few days the young gelding Vasan had provided something of a problem. Guret blamed most of this restlessness on the presence of the were mounts, even though those were as perfectly behaved themselves as any war-trained horse and he could not find anything in their recent actions to fault them.

Tonight, perhaps because they were still bemused by what they had seen in that strange fane, the Kioga had moved out to camp in the familiar open without paying any special attention to the beasts they loosed to good forage. They had busied themselves as usual with the packhorses, but their own mounts they had left to their usual freedom.

However, it was customary for a sentry on duty—and they had posted their sentries here as they would in any unknown territory—to check the horses, moving among them with those soft words which had reassured them from colthood.

And Guret had discovered that Vasan was not beside his usual bond mate Vartin. Having widened his circle of search and discovering no sign of the horse at visual distance from the small herd, he had returned to camp, awakened Obred, and told him that he



would trail the stray. It was not long since they had been loosed and he wondered how and why Vasan had taken himself off. He was one of Guret's own private string (each of the Kioga had brought three mounts so that they could change and not overweary the horses if the need arose), and Guret felt responsible for such unlikely behavior.

Guret was gone before Firdun and Kethan joined the Kioga camp and Obred had already vanished into the darkness to take up his sentry duties.

The land was at least level and there were within easy distance no more strands of trees. Also there was a moon overhead even though it was waning. Guret whistled and stood listening for any answering thud of hooves.

When he was not so answered, he went to hands and knees, locating where the taller grass was trampled. Oddly enough, Vasan was not moving like a grazing horse, but rather as if he had already been summoned.

Guret had shed mail and helm and left them in camp. The night was so warm, and that insidious promise of peace had been so all-prevailing, that he had not thought of the gear he had left piled by his bedroll until now. He wavered between returning to arm, to perhaps give some kind of an alarm, and then he made his decision. No. Vasan could not have strayed too far. There was another copse of trees not far ahead now and perhaps that proved a screen for the horse.

Guret had been well tutored in all the tricks of tracking horses. Since the life of the clan depended upon their trained mounts, the loss of even one could not be accepted. He now found a stream by nearly sliding down a slick clay bank to where there was a narrow runnel of water well below the surface of the plain.

There another searching of the ground revealed footprints—leading north, as if Vasan had chosen not to cross that shallow stream but rather moved beside it. Here and there bunches of grass had been snatched for the eating; the gelding had not lingered to graze.

Again Guret tried the calling whistle. Only the cry of a night



bird sounded in answer. Now he began to question his choice. To go trailing on into the unknown dark was a risk that was folly to take.

He had just risen to his feet from tracing another hoof mark in the clay when a scream cut through the air. At least he had his sword, having taken that up as a matter of course when he had gone on sentry. That was out of his scabbard and ready in his hand as he pounded forward.

There were more of those screams. Some he was sure were of the pain and terror of a horse. Vasan, surely.

The stream took a curve to the left but still pointed north. Now there were other cries—human? He could not tell, but scout craft slowed his forward plunge. He must know the nature of the danger before he burst into some battle like an untrained boy.

He took to the side of the stream bank, though this was overgrown by a tough thicket of tall-standing reeds so he had to cut his way with the sword. Most of these towered above his head now so that he could see practically nothing of what lay ahead.

“Great Ones—Old Ones—the Dark rises!”

Certainly Vasan had never voiced that! But an instant later the battle scream of a horse in dire defense broke again.

Guret threw himself forward through the last curtain of the reeds. There reared a horse, striking out with forefeet against smallish things which scuttled here and there across the ground. The willow screen had cut off some of the light but not enough to mask the fact that there was indeed a shadowy figure standing on hind feet, human in seeming, and it was striking down at the scuttling enemy with what looked to be a sword, or at least a part of one.

The Kioga had already chosen sides. He hurled himself on and, to his utter amazement, the scuttling things did not turn to attack him but rather scattered the closer he approached them.

He thrust and raised his sword. On the point of it was impaled something so alien even in this dim light that with a sharp twist of his wrist he hurled it away.

Then he expected them at last to turn on him. Vasan was proving his battle worth, bringing hooves down in a regular beat, now



and then lowering his head to seize on one of the scrambling enemy and toss it away.

“By the One in Three—” Where those words had come from Guret could not tell, but they filled his mind, fell swiftly from his lips. “By the Maid, by the Lady, by the Old One who keeps the last gate of all, give us of your strength and Power.”

That shadow by the bank lurched forward a fraction. It had dropped its sword. Now it fumbled at its breast and he wondered if the crawlers had managed to inflict some wound.

“Lady—” The voice was very low. “She who elects the death hour—be with us all.”

Guret was gripped by a force he had felt only twice before, when he had faced some sneaker out of Garth Howell and made sure the evil-born did not return. He waded into the creepers that laid about him. Somehow the very blade of his sword gave forth light now so that he could see the things—spiders, frogs, things of no known species. They were dying without uttering a sound. Then, breathing heavily, Guret stood by a pile of the strange dead and there was no more stirring across the ground.

Vasan whinnied, then snorted, tramping over his late prey to push his head against Guret’s shoulder, once more the perfect-mannered mount.

“You are wounded?” Guret pulled the horse’s forelock gently as he asked of the stranger.

“No more than a bite or two.” There was no quiver in that answer. “The urings will not be returning to *His* call!”

Booted foot shot out and lifted one of the bodies. “I have to thank you, but that She could send one of Hers to bring me aid—after—after—” The shadow form gasped and crumpled down. Guret went into action. He found that the body he lifted was not in war gear but rather wore a soft covering, which was both a thigh-length jerkin and breeches.

The breath which touched against his cheek was soft and came in a pattern as if the stranger wept. Vasan was already by Guret.

The horse without orders accomplished the most demanding of all its training, kneeling. Guret boosted the stranger up and was



glad to see that hands came forth to tangle in Vasan's mane. Then he vaulted up behind and headed back toward the camp.

He found those awaiting him alert. Since it was faintly dawn, he supposed that his night search had taken longer than he thought. Lero was instantly by his side.

"Shield brother—what—"

Both Firdun and Kethan crowded in on the other side to free him of his burden. Only moments later they had the stranger stretched out on a bedroll. Over them still blew the perfume of the tree flowers which were again folding into their tight buds. And under that tent of trees Aylinn came on the run, her healer's bag bumping against her shoulder.

In better light Guret was able to see his prize for the first time. The stranger was very slender and slight of figure, and the pale face turned up to them, eyes closed, was that of a boy hardly into youth. Kethan had reached for one of the limp hands and now turned it over. Cut deep into the flesh were the bloody marks of bonds. There were bruises showing darkly on his face also, and as Firdun investigated further, pulling off boots, he uttered an exclamation of anger at the show of more bond marks between scratches, and even a bite which might have come from the things the boy had fought.

They aided Aylinn to strip him. Ribs stood out as if he had been nearly starved. She busied herself with her potions, tending each wound with swift speed and all her care.

"'Tis young Hardin of Hol, Silvermante." Elysha stood over them now. "But he is of Garth Howell!"

For a second or two Aylinn paused and then shook her head firmly. "Not so—look and be sure." She took up her moonflower wand, which had been slipped through the side thong of her healer's sack.

Out the wand swung under her firm grip. The flower now topping it had not closed, as had those over them. Rather, it was brighter than the moonflowers she had always carried to center her Power.

Slowly she passed the flower above that young body, head to



foot and back again. When she had finished, he stirred and his eyes opened. His first sight must have been of Aylinn, for he covered into the covering on which they had laid him.

“Unclean.” Once more there were tears visible in his eyes. “I am no longer—”

“Look.” Aylinn commanded sharply. “Look and believe!”

“The evil one broke the true bonds.” His bandaged hand arose to half-hide his face. “He called upon one of the Great Dark Ones and I was given—”

“No one can be given without his will,” Aylinn stated sternly. “Did you then surrender your will to this one of the Great Dark?”

His head turned from side to side. “No, no—not willingly. But then I was in another place and saw—and the will of that which looked upon me made me crawl at its feet.”

“You wear marks of bondage,” Aylinn said, “and those are freshly torn. Thus where you went was not willingly. Nor are you any hound of the dark to howl at his master’s bidding.” She turned to Kethan and Firdun, who stood behind her now. “Bring him—gently!”

Thus they carried him between them and he was very light of weight, until they came again before the throne and its silent occupant. He had closed his eyes as they arrived and there was a look upon him of one who had thrown away all the good life could offer.

“Lift him up!” again Aylinn ordered decisively. “Place him there.” She pointed to the lap of the veiled one. The boy let out a weak cry, tried to struggle from their hold, but together they settled him where Aylinn indicated.

Then they stepped back almost as one while the healer, her moonflower blazing on the rod, again touched the forehead of the boy.

“*Lady—mother—life-giver*—this one has suffered from the evil which stands ready to assault us all. Look into his heart; know that he did not fail through any fault of his choosing. Cherish him as a newborn, cherish him as one growing—give him back his knowing of self.”



The answer came as a victory cry to reach into all their minds:

“This is My son, born by My will. The Dark has wrought ill to bring him down. But that which was and is truly Hardin—is free.”

The boy gasped and uttered a short cry and then went limp. Aylinn nodded and Kethan and Firdun lifted him down to settle him on one of the bedrolls.

“He will rest,” the girl said, “and when he rouses again he will know that what he fears was only that—a fear to be swept away.”

“You know him?” Ibycus had turned to Elysha.

“I saw him once—on the day that tangle-witted father of his dispatched him to Garth Howell. His mother had the Moon talent, you see, and Lord Prytan was without power. He tried to get his lady to promise not to seek out the Lady—but one does not tell the sea to stop washing upon the shore. Thus when she was on a mission to the Voices he had the boy taken.

“Knowing a little of Prytan I can guess that it was more of a bargain than a gift. Who knows what those of Garth Howell might have promised in return? To have a fresh young soul dedicated to the Lady and nurtured carefully in Her ways to offer to some Power who wished to batten on riven knowledge—yes, that would suit Garth Howell. They might even offer Prytan a few small tricks in return, but no true talent.”

“His mother?” queried Aylinn.

“The last rumor was that she had not returned from the Voices. At least she was never seen in Silvermantle lands again.”

“How did you find him?” Ibycus, still staring down at the sleeping boy, asked Guret. Guret told them his tale of the missing horse and the battle by the stream.

“So—can we not think now,” Ibycus replied slowly, “that this Hardin accompanied the party into the east? Their present mage seems fond of sacrifices. And the urings—they can be commanded, though they are not too forceful in combat. So the boy escapes—or—” Now he paused and held up the ring. “Or seems to, so that he can join in some way with us and they can have eyes and ears in our camp.” He gave a short bark of laughter.

“If they planned such, it will not hold now. The lad is cleansed



of all touch of the Dark. They would have to recapture him and once more attempt ensorcellment. But that he can give *us* information is an unexpected boon.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



*Gryphon's Eyrie, Arvon,
Western Trail, the Waste*

Alon hunched over the table, hands planted on either side of the glass hemisphere, its curved surface up. His face was gaunt and marked with the lines of hours of strain. Now he shook his head so violently Eydryth shivered. All his talent was summoned, but lacking focus.

He nodded toward her again and patiently, as she had for nearly all the morning, she played her harp and crooned wordlessly, striving this time to alter in the slightest the sounds, so that she might have the good fortune to hit on that which would be his aid.

They had discovered during the past days of labor that the full melding of Power did not reach what Alon needed. As a last resort Eydryth had suggested trying her own talent—the harp and song which had been her protection and weapon.

“No.” Small feet thudded across the room and Trevor was pounding on her knee. “No so—so!” His child’s voice was several notes higher than the scale which she had always considered the most powerful, likely to provide what she needed.

Eydryth swallowed. Her throat felt dry, as if she had been



singing half the night in some inn for a grudging ration of dry bread and stale cheese.

Alon leaned back a little. His attention had turned to Trevor, who was continuing to demand his sister's attention with a cry of "No—so."

Eydryth reached for the goblet of herb-infused water Joisan had set there earlier before the rest of them had withdrawn to ensure such silence as was possible for this experiment. She allowed the liquid to rinse about her mouth and then swallowed.

Trevor had stilled his protest but had planted himself firmly before her, his fists on his hips, looking up as if he were supervising labor. When his sister put down the goblet, he came a little closer. Reaching out one finger, he touched a harp string.

They were made of quan iron, finally spun as threads, those strings. Nearly everlasting and embedded with a force no living mage could explain.

Eydryth heard the note. It was like a faint echo from the slight touch. She prided herself on the fact that she could remember any note she had heard—just as any ballad listened to once was recorded in her memory.

Now she touched the string in turn, with the familiarity of one to whom this instrument was a part of life itself.

It rang forth. She listened and again summoned it. This time she strove to fit her own voice to it. Three times she tried, Trevor crowding ever closer, looking anxiously up into her face. Then note and murmured croon melded.

Alon's head jerked around to the hemisphere. It was no longer stubbornly clear. At the same time Trevor fashioned something which was not unlike a word—if "Ahhhhlaa" could be given that title. And it almost became one with the notes Eydryth added one to another, fluting still but in a different range.

The hemisphere before Alon was no longer vacant. A weaving of violet-blue swirled within it. As the harp continued and Eydryth and Trevor added their parts, Alon began an incantation.

At first his voice sounded hurried, as if he must reach some goal in a very limited time, and then the girl could sense that he was



forcing himself to keep a measured beat. Beat—yes! The ancient words were also fitting themselves to that eerie music.

They were getting through—by the will of the Lady they were getting through! Not by the apparatus Alon had earlier used, which had so hopelessly failed them, but by this.

Her fingers felt sticky with sweat as they swept the strings. Her voice was once again drying her throat. Eydryth settled herself to endure. Trevor seemed to have no ill effects and his “Aaaaalaa” was clear and carrying.

Within the hemisphere the blue whirled vigorously and then was gone. They were looking at a face they had hardly dared hope to see again—Hilarion. There was excitement and exultation in his expression.

The warding— The words were mind-sent, not spoken. *The warding*— Symbols flashed in a wild pattern through Eydryth’s head. Some she recognized as representing certain powers still known; others were strange.

Alon sat staring down at the small representation of Hilarion, his hands on the sides of his head as if to hold within all that was being fed him.

At last there was an ending. “We have warded.” That was intelligible speech again. “Do you do likewise?”

However, the mist was upon Hilarion once again, sweeping across the hemisphere, and he was gone. Eydryth reached quickly for the herb drink and emptied two swift gulps down her aching throat. Then she offered it to Trevor, who drank more slowly as if he did not need refreshment so badly. She was watching Alon as he leaned back in his seat.

From the pile of parchments in a muddle not too far from his hand he drew one, and with his writing stick was setting down a mixture of lines, curves, triangles, and spheres. Did he remember it all? Certainly he must, for he had studied with Hilarion since boyhood and was adept-bred himself.

“So.” He let the writing stick fall and roll from him, his attention only for the symbols he had outlined. He looked up at



Eydryth and Trevor then, and for a moment or so he was the youth she had met in Estcarp, all somberness gone from his face.

"Ibycus has destroyed one gate," she said hesitatingly.

"Yes, but it should be visited once again—the new warding full-set!" He flung out an arm and pulled Trevor to him in a hug. "How knew you the way, little brother?"

"I just did." All that temporary authority appeared to have deserted the boy. "We go to hunt gates now?"

Alon shook his head. "Not yet—we have others hunting them for us. Also we must keep an eye on Garth Howell." Some of the tension had again stiffened his features. "But we must tell Ibycus."

"Through that?" Trevor wanted to know, pointing to the hemisphere.

"No—that has done its duty, little one. It has held more power than we can control. See—" He tapped the crystal with a fingertip and it shattered, the broken bits in turn becoming dust. Now he turned to the girl. "Rest, heart's lady. We shall need the full meld to search out Ibycus, and that at moonrise."

She had laid aside her harp and now he had an arm about her shoulders, was drawing her up against him. She needed that steadying, for she felt that without it she could not keep her feet.

But that Alon had managed to do this—and those at Lornt . . . Hilarion, the others had found the answer. It was enough to make one feel dizzy with relief.

They might still have Garth Howell to reckon with, but who knew— Perhaps with study Alon could turn this same formula on that haunt of Darkness and seal it also. After this hour Eydryth could believe anything was possible.



Ibycus had taken a place close beside the boy, who now appeared in the depths of slumber. Now and again he regarded his ring, staring into its dull stone as if he would summon up answers to questions his mind proposed but could not solve. Though the day advanced, they made no move to travel onward. All of them could guess that locked in the sleeper was the information they needed the most now.



The Kioga kept out of the grove, their attention mainly for the mounts, since they wanted no more such wanderings as had drawn Guret away. He described several times to the tribesmen the nature of those ground-clinging creatures which had held horse and man at bay.

“Those of the Mantle Lands have mounts indeed,” Obred remarked as he chewed his noon rations. “But they are not close kin to their herds as we, the People, have always been. How was it, then, that this young lordling has also the gift of calling? And why Vasan, who had not chosen him at the fall roundup?”

“I think”—Lero glanced around him as if to make sure there were no others than his own tribesmen about him—“that the Mother of Mares has some purpose in all this.”

As one, the three of them made the touch to forehead and then heart which honored that sacred name. There were many stories of the way the Mother dealt with those in which She had some interest, and it could be that the strange wandering gelding indeed had a purpose—to bring Guret to the scene before the stranger was pulled down. He remembered now the odd fact that the urings (as the stranger named them) had fled him even before his sword started harvesting their lives. Her Hand over him? Perhaps; only a shaman could have borne witness to that.

“Where does the old mage think to lead us now?” Obred changed the subject.

“That is his choice and we have yet to hear it,” returned Guret.



Ibycus held his ring-befingered hand out over the boy lying still within the sanctuary of the fane.

“Hardin of Hol?” he called softly as one might to awaken one from rest. “Hardin of Hol.”

The boy’s eyes did not open, but his head turned from one side to another and a faint frown line showed between his brows. Like all those of the Mantle Lands, he was plainly of the Old Race, pale of skin in spite of life in the open, dark of hair with the delicate, slanting brows of the same shade. Though he had not yet reached



his full man's growth, the firmness of his jaw and his well-formed features showed that he was indeed well to look upon.

"Hardin of Hol!" called Ibycus for the third time, and this time more loudly.

Aylinn sat cross-legged at the boy's head, her healer's eyes sharp to catch the difference in him. At her back was Kethan, the weight of Uta resting across his legs, a low purr to be heard now and then.

But Elysha was on the other side of Hardin's body and now she put out a hand warning off Ibycus. The mage looked up with a frown to which she paid no attention; rather, she leaned forward a fraction and spoke herself.

"Hardin, son of Ylassa. . . ."

There was a small choking cry from the boy in answer to that and his eyes opened, staring straight at her.

"Mother—" he began and then, so swiftly he caught them all by surprise, he drew in upon himself, one hand pawing at his side as if to palm a weapon. "You are—" It was clear that he was fully conscious now. But he paused, his eyes surveying her sharply.

"Last midsummer we shared a guesting cup," Elysha returned in an ordinary voice. "I was the Lady Ylassa's chamber guest."

He rubbed his hand across his eyes. "Yes. You brought her the message—you rode with her out of Hol." He was on his knees now and he grabbed at her shoulders, digging his fingers in as he gave her a vigorous shake. "Shadow creeper, her blood debt is mine." With the force of his attack he overbore her backward.

Kethan sprang to action with Firdun. Thin and wasted as the boy seemed to be, his rage was such that it took the two of them to hold him.

Elysha arose, smoothing some tatters from her shirt at the edge of her jerkin. But it was Aylinn who swung past her to where the three still struggled, and her wand blazed.

Hardin gave a choked cry and all the strength seemed instantly wiped out of him. He flung back his head and his eyes went wide. He stared now at the great seated figure as if nothing else existed now in his confused world.

"Hardin." Still smoothing her torn sleeve, Elysha deliberately



moved so she stood between him and the throne, that he could see her fully. “The Lady Ylassa is safe. She was called by the Voices and serves them now.”

“My lord—he said—” the boy choked on the words and was plainly struggling for control. “When he ordered me with him on a hunt . . .” Now there was another note in his voice, anger was returning. “We—he said we were to guest in Garth Howell. But—they gave me of the guesting cup and when I drank—” Again he sought for and found self-control. “I was a prisoner and they said that he—he had given me freely to them and I was of value because I was her son!”

“Did they also tell you that she had agreed?” Elysha asked.

“Lies! They serve the father of lies there! They have a new leader—one Jakata—he is mighty in power and has made covenant with that which waits beyond—”

It was Ibycus who interrupted. “Waits beyond what?”

Firdun and Kethan had released their hold on Hardin and now he swung around to confront the mage. “Beyond a gate—the greatest of the gates. It spoke to them—the Garth has spell dreamers, three of them—and by those they know what happens elsewhere. Jakata says that the time wheel has spun and these are the old days come again. He is an adept—and from behind him the Dark will rule.”

Ibycus was nodding. “And this gate, boy—does Jakata hunt it now, to the west?”

“Yes, he was summoned. It is said—I heard the guards speak—that there was a blood-drinking and a soul-darkening. . . . Oh”—his face lost years; it was now the desolate one which might be shown by a hopeless child—“I—I dreamed. They used pain and other ways I do not understand save that they were against all which was of the Light.” He looked nearly as pale as the image behind him now. “I was a warrior. I have ridden against the hill demons when they come to ravage and I have slain in the name of the Light—but they overthrew me and I am . . .

“Stranger”—he grasped at Firdun now—“use your sword. I



know that you march against the Dark. Let my defiled blood be the first you shed! Give me that much armsman's grace!"

Aylinn moved to face him.

"Look upon me, Hardin. Have you seen my like before?"

He lifted his head. "You—you are one of the moon-called."

"As is your mother. Whose temporary dwelling is seated there?"

She pointed to the throned one.

"The One in Three." He moved his hands and Firdun dropped his last hold on him, allowing him to make the gesture he wished. Trailing lines of blue followed his passing fingers. He gasped and staggered, save that Kethan was there to steady him.

Aylinn held out her wand until it nearly touched his breast. "Hardin of Hol. In Her eyes you are a worthy son of one who serves Her well. There is no spot in you, no rot through which the Dark can reach. Take and hold." She extended the wand until it brushed his hand.

Very slowly his fingers advanced to grasp it, and then hers withdrew, and hold it alone he did. The moonflower at its tip spent its scent on the air. Hardin fell to his knees. With both hands he gave the wand back to Aylinn.

"Reborn you are, Hardin. Chosen servant of One in Three. And as such—"

"As such"—his voice was now firm—"I shall live and ride, hold the sword of war, the open land of peace, for all my days. And"—there was an eagerness on his face as he arose once more and went unerringly to Ibycus—"mage, what I know is yours and perhaps it can make a difference."

Ibycus moved his ring finger and a line of light broke free. It did not quite touch Hardin, but it was evident that it was meant to indicate him.

"I think you have much which will be of aid to us," the mage said. "Now let us listen."

It was almost, Firdun thought to himself, like one of the storytelling sessions which were used in the Kioga camps for impressing upon children the history and hard-learned knowledge of those who had gone before.



Jakata plainly had many of the skills granted by history to the mage company of adepts—those mages who had once ruled and then brought close to complete death and ruin this world. He had sought out Garth Howell when it was merely a repository for half-forgotten and little-understood knowledge. Though he appeared a young man, it was said that he had not apparently aged a season since he had been there.

At first he had spent time listening courteously to those who had long studied there. But he had also gone seeking for himself in sections of the underground storage rooms which had not been entered for generations. He had always shown an aptitude for the solving of puzzles and began to bring out in the meetings of the scholars unusual matters hitherto unknown. At last it had become a custom for him once every so many tendays to conduct what was not quite a class or an exhibition, but a combination of both, and so drew to him most of the younger students.

From these he had chosen a devoted band to whom his word was the revelation of one of the Great Old Ones. Yet he had given no sign that he sought anything but knowledge for the sake of knowledge.

Slowly there had come a splitting of the company at Garth Howell. Those older mages, well-entrenched in their studies for the sake of learning alone, stood aside and Jakata made no attempt to influence them, in fact paid them great courtesy whenever the occasion demanded.

Of the others a handful had left—again no one gainsaying their withdrawal. So in the end the active members of the community were all his fervent followers.

The Mantle Lordships for the most part held to the ancient belief in the Voices—those revered as being the spirits of ancestors willing to remain in touch with the world that those of their blood might be aided by their advice. Here and there, however, a lord like Prytan was intrigued by the rumors of what might be going on and, if he was ambitious, started casting about for ways in which he might profit.

At length Jakata had said that he was commanded to provide a



Voice himself—one for the coming age of new rule. He ordered a pilgrimage to Dragon Crest to offer a blood sacrifice. But on the way they had been subjected to such a storm of magic as they had never believed existed, and Jakata had been aroused to a claim of Power beyond any mage since the Great Old Ones.

They made a capture, and a rich one: one of the fabled Gryphon line whom all knew were favored by the Light above most. And in spite of the rage of the magic, he had been readied for sacrifice, only to have his own talent somehow aided by the release of such potent Power, and he escaped.

However, Jakata had not been dismayed by this. Instead he was feverishly set on a new venture. A sacrifice at Dragon Crest was as nothing to the opening of the portal through which some great leader could come and, through his dream seekers, he learned where that portal was, with the promise that when they reached it all would be made plain to them.

Hardin had been chosen as sacrifice this time and was being transported with the company westward. When he came to that part of the story, he faltered, for he could not himself explain how he was freed.

Ibycus cut in. "It is more than you they want for the feasting of their Dark lord, Hardin. Therefore they loosed you, being sure that the bonds of spirit they had set upon you were well locked. So were you brought to us—though"—he smiled—"it was all a little clumsy. I think your Jakata perhaps left the details to someone of his company not so well schooled.

"However, they shall get what they want, for we shall seek out the gate even as they are doing. And though none can ever foresee the end, by the time we reach there we shall have our answer."

The next morning they moved out. Hardin joined Guret and showed himself nearly as good a horseman as the Kioga—they were soon talking horses together. Also he was able to play their guide northward for the space of two days, having scouted in the hills during the demon raids and learned some of the skills.

On the third day they found the remains of the camp from which he had escaped, or been allowed to escape, and then Kethan



as pard tracker took over. The young Silvermantle lord watched the were go into action with amazement. His people knew the weres, of course. At intervals their nobles had hosted weres. But none had ever come into Hol, and to see the tawny pard slip into the tall grass where a man had ridden was a surprise.

However, Kethan's shadow horse still had a rider. Uta had fit herself in the saddle there and the mount accepted her easily. So they went, Kethan on trail and the Kioga and Firdun taking turns riding point.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



The Wellspring of Evil, the Waste, West

It was a good morning, and the land around was not yellow clay, though the growth on it was sparse and rough, with here and there a curiously twisted tree to stand sentinel. Also the scent was running well, though there began to be more about it than the natural odors left behind by men and horses. There seemed to be a whiff now and then of a faint stench—a taint such as might be given off by old death lying long unburied.

Kethan followed a hint of water which must have drawn those others before him. That brought him in sight of tumbled blocks of masonry: Such stones he had never seen before, for they were the dark green of fir needles mottled here and there by bands and trails of a lighter shade.

Cautiously he scouted the place. Here the grass had grown tall.



If he went belly deep in it and stalked as if following a pronghorn, he did not believe he could be sighted save from the air—or by the trembling of the grass he crept through.

There came a sharp hiss and he swerved to the right. A grass serpent nearly as thick around as one of his own furred limbs raised head, viewed him with unblinking eyes. The reptile bulged thickly in the middle, which meant it had recently fed and only wanted now to find a place to rest and digest its meal. Kethan backed away and the weaving head began to lower again. Such snakes were edible but not to the taste of any who could find more palatable food. Anyway, he was far more suspicious and curious than he was hungry at that moment.

He made a half circle of the broken wall, for a circular wall it was proving to be. Once more he picked up the scent trail. Only—

Kethan crouched low and pawed at his nose, though he knew that he had no way of shutting that stench out of his nostrils. This was not the faint hint of evil which he had sorted out of the tracks, but a blast of noisome smell.

While it came up from the trail true enough, it was stronger when he turned his head back toward the wall. That, he was sure, was its real source, and he was not going to leave some station of the Dark behind without learning its nature.

He sent out a fine mind-probe, then started so that he nearly arose to full height in his cover. Those he followed had plainly left this place, but what had they left behind?

Once more he drew himself forward, belly brushing the grass bent down by his weight. Now he could see a break in the wall which was not caused by age but had been intended. The trail led from that, and along it he now padded.

Kethan did not want to try the mind-probe again—it was too easily a way of alerting something on guard. Yet he had sensed in it more pain than anger. Now he was at that gate and able to see what lay beyond.

In the exact center of a circular pavement of the same green stone was the curbing of what could only be a well. But set up be-



side it, to cast an ominous shadow, was what Kethan first thought to be one of those dread knights who served Garth Howell.

Then he could smell the freshly spilled blood, and saw the pool of it about the boots of he who stood there. No, rather he was propped up by spears wedged into cracks of the pavement, his body lashed to them, even his neck and forehead in loops to keep them aloft, for his helm was missing.

His hands had been shorn of gauntlets and were lashed before him, and the fingers—

Kethan's nose wrinkled. They had been hacked away. Blood spotting on the curb of the well suggested where they might have disappeared.

Kethan did not approach the corpse directly; rather, he slunk along the wall, making a full circle of the space and surveying it from all sides.

There came suddenly, over the buzz of insects which were gathering in swarms, a faint moan. The eyelids in that uplifted head twitched. Kethan halted, paw raised.

So—it was true—this one still lived. That he was evil, Kethan did not in the least question. Though why his own must have treated him so was perhaps something to be discovered, might be useful for his own party. Ibycus—the picture of the mage grew strong in his mind. Toward it he aimed another sending and knew he was answered.

There were birds—the scavengers of the Waste gathering. He watched them with care waiting for the rus to appear. But if they hunted, they had not found this prey.

He had no wish to be caught within those sinister walls and found a way for himself across a broken section, retracing his own trail to meet the sooner with those who followed. That they might communicate the better, he assumed man's form just as the first of the Kioga outriders came into view, bow strung and ready, his trained mount following a weaving way.

Obred did not join Kethan. The were knew—and had become more or less indifferent to the fact—that the tribesmen found it



hard to accept one of his kind, even once proven to be wholly of the Light. Now he waved and Obred flourished his bow.

It did not take long for the rest of the party to come into view—Lero urging the pack animals, in spite of their complaining, to a pace to keep him and them well in sight of the rest.

Ibycus was in the lead, but Elysha was close after—not entirely to the mage’s wishes, Kethan was sure. Then came Kethan’s sister, matching pace companionably with Trussant, on whom Uta still balanced, then Firdun and Guret, armed and flanking Hardin, though certainly they were not acting as guards.

Ibycus dismounted somewhat stiffly. The hand bearing the ring was against his breast and Kethan thought he saw a play of color there—but not the blue of true Power.

“So what have you found us this time, young Kethan?” he asked as he tramped forward.

“A puzzle,” Kethan returned, “and a dying man.”

“One hurt?” Aylinn was off Morna in an instant, swinging the strap of her bag across her shoulders. “Where is he?”

The Kioga took up watch, riding in circle around the green ruin as Kethan led the rest into the place of the well.

“Oh!” Aylinn would have run forward, but Elysha seized her by the arm.

“What you see may not be,” she spoke sharply. “This one is of Garth Howell.”

“But he is injured,” Aylinn insisted angrily. “By Healer’s Oath—”

“Even for Healer’s Oath,” Elysha admonished, “would you bring disaster and the Dark upon us all?”

The girl struggled, attempting to free herself, but Elysha held her back. It was Ibycus who approached the tethered man, the others giving him good room.

The mage upheld his hand and pointed the ring, not at the man’s breast but at his loop-held head.

“By the Star, by the wave, by the earth which holds the grave,” the mage said slowly. “Speak now, you who have been sent to give us what message your lord wishes.”

The bluish lips in the gray face moved, but the eyes above re-



mained closed: “You—follow—death—” That voice came very faintly as if from far away.

“As all men do from the time of their begetting,” the mage made answer. “Did Jakata think playing games fit to frighten children would hold us back?”

Now the finger he held up blazed like a black flame. “You have served your master—”

But the figure before him might not have heard anything he had to say. “The One who comes claims its day. Follow, fools, and die the sooner for it.”

Then the mouth dropped open and a dark tongue protruded between a yellow straggle of teeth.

Ibycus wrote in the air with the ring, and the symbols which began as slashes of blood turned to spears of darkness. He spoke aloud. Those symbols moved sluggishly. It might have been they resented his command, but at length they wavered toward the dead man, fastened on him. The rest of the company pressed back as flame burst from the wracked body, eating with a raging intensity until there was nothing left but a scorched mark on the pavement.

“He—he was Salsazar, of Jakata’s guard. He was on duty the night I got free.” There was a shakiness in Hardin’s voice.

“He was not of the living as we know them—perhaps for many years,” Elysha answered.

“Out—out with you!” That cry came from Firdun. He grabbed for Aylinn, bringing Elysha also, as the woman still had grip upon the girl. “Out with you—a ward has broken—what comes?”

Kethan leaped forward and had an arm around the mage, jerking him backward, pushing Hardin as he reached him. Then they were outside the space. But not before Kethan, at least, caught sight of what was rising from the well. He had seen death new-come, he had seen the evidence of death long past left to crumble back to the earth. But these figures rising as if winged from that dark circle were death unnaturally alive—and they were many. Shadows at first, they lapped like water over the well curb and floated about the wall.

However, broken as that was, it seemed to prevent their coming



farther. The things were becoming more solid of body. Not all were of humankind. There were monsters among them which only the most blackened mind of a Dark mage could conceive. And about them was such a stench that the travelers reeled farther back.

Ibycus shook himself free from the hold Kethan still kept on him. His ring was still blazing. Now he shouted over his shoulder to Firdun: "The curse of Unwin in the Day of Last Desolation. Remember it, boy!"

His hand was on Firdun's shoulder now as they faced the battered walls. Through the holes they could see what gathered, growing stronger with every moment in the air.

Firdun's voice came as loud as Ibycus's in a measured range of words. Old words, words which, when they were uttered, seemed to make the ground under their feet move. And the mage matched him word for word, his flaming finger still at point.

The sun over them paled. Guret and his tribesmen could no longer control the horses; they reared, struggled loose of rein hold, and scattered. Kethan staggered as a warm and heavy-furred body leaped to his shoulder. And then he was standing, one arm around Aylinn and the other supporting Uta on his chest.

Above the circle of the broken wall the sky darkened, yet more gray-white became the things now rising above its edge, struggling. They might be throwing themselves against some barrier. Ibycus's hand, now raised high, became a torch, the flame bending toward the broken-edged circle.

The mage's voice rolled thunderwise and Firdun's words were like lightning bolts in accordance to this storm of Power. Yet it was plain that some manner of control was being exerted to keep those unholy emanations rooted still to the vile source from which they had sprung.

At last those two voices spoke as one, called upon a single name. Kethan reeled where he stood, steadying Aylinn, who was now shaking and uttering small moans. Uta's claws bit deeply into his shoulder. The cat's ears were flattened to her skull, her mouth open in a vast hiss of rage.

Did the land under them move? Kethan could never afterward



be sure. He only knew that this was like the storm of raw magic which had buffeted all the world at the beginning of this venture.

Down upon the whirling bone-white shapes swooped the clouds. A lid might be so placed on a seething pot. Ibycus was on his knees, Elysha behind him now offering firm support, while Firdun reeled back to crash against Hardin, sending them both to the ground.

On the ground where stood the circle of the wall swelled a vast black bubble. But only for a moment. Then it burst and they were all struck with the Power surge.

“Kethan!”

He lay looking up at a sky which was once more blue and peaceful. The only cloud in sight was one small white puffy fluff. Aylinn was still clinging to him, her face buried against him.

He drew a deep breath and then another. A rough tongue swung against his chin and he looked up into Uta’s eyes. There was . . . an emptiness, as if something had been withdrawn from their world—hastily and with great force—and that which they knew was seeping only slowly back to fill the gap.

“Ibycus—dear master—”

Disturbing both Aylinn and Uta, Kethan levered himself up. Elysha sat on the ground, the mage’s head held against her breast, and her face was drawn. Years might have descended upon her. But the man she held moved. His eyes moved.

Strangely enough, he smiled with some of the gentleness Kethan remembered from when the mage had made his few visits to the Green Tower as a guest and friend.

“Not yet, Elysha. I may be bendable at time, but the breaking has not come. Now let us see what the Ancient Ones have given their aid to accomplish.” He twisted loose from her hold and sat up.

So directed, they all looked toward that stronghold of the Dark.

It was—not!

Where those tumbled stones had marked the wall, there was not a single pebble showing to mark a circle of ground. Clay pottery taken from the kiln after a long baking might have borne the same gleaming surface as that platter of green laid down flat-surfaced.

Ibycus laughed. There was something euphoric in that sound.



“An effective stopper, glory given to the Great Names! There lies that now which no Dark can break.”

However, it was plain he had paid for his efforts. When he tried to get to his feet, he stumbled, and Kethan was quick to aid him up. Firdun still lay in the matted grass, Hardin beside him.

Aylinn hurried, wand forward, but Elysha was there first. “Power sister,” she commanded.

So they knelt on either side of Firdun’s body. On his breast, as they turned his face upward to the sky, Aylinn laid the moonflower wand, and then she clasped hands with Elysha over him.

Their eyes were closed and there was a distinct sign of strain in both their faces. Kethan looked to the mage.

“He is drained?” he asked, and shivered himself from the chill that thought brought to him. He had heard warnings enough in the past that the overuse of Power might even burn out the talent—leaving one weaponless indeed.

Ibycus joined the women and stood looking down at Firdun. “He is blood of the Gryphon; he himself does not know the extent of what he can do. No other could have called the Great Name except one of near-adept Power.”

As if his judgment were one of Aylinn’s cordials, Firdun opened his eyes, staring upward, and it must have been Ibycus whom he first saw for he asked: “It was done?”

“Done and well done!” Ibycus answered promptly. “Though now we know that those we follow have gone very far along the Dark road. Or else they are fools—and I do not believe Jakata to be such. What he searches for may give him the power of Grelia.”

That name was nearly an oath. No man said it lightly, nor had for nearly a thousand years. For it was last borne by the one who nearly triumphed in the Great Battle which had left the world men then knew in ruins.

“It would seem, then,” Firdun replied grimly, “that we use what speed we can to stop him.”

But to reassemble their party was not an easy task. Those who had been near the well moved yet farther away.

The Kioga came trailing back to camp one at a time, each bring-



ing some of the mounts. Packs had been lost, bucked off in spite of the lashings, and they had to sort out all their gear again and find what their losses in supplies might be.

Kethan, again in pard shape, went seeking and found two of the packs, broken open and the contents trampled. He dared not go near the horses and could only indicate the finds he made.

They had set up a rough camp by nighttime. Luckily most of their animals had been retaken. In addition, Guret had shot a small pronghorn and his two fellow tribesmen had knocked over some long-legged, gaunt-bodied birds they flushed out of the grass in their going.

Kethan had also located water—a spring some distance from the site of the well. But none of them dared to drink until Aylinn pronounced it clear of any taint.

They ate, if meagerly, and were prepared to settle for the night, the mounts this time securely picketed. Suddenly Ibycus, seated by the small fire they had made, interrupted—not with any word, but by holding his ring out into the light of the flames. To Kethan’s relief it was burning blue.

“Message . . .” Ibycus bent his head forward. He was so placed that none of the others could see exactly what appeared in the oval stone when the blue light paled to white. A second later he spoke without looking up.

“Firdun!”

It took only an instant for the other to change places with Elysha and crowd forward to look into the seeing ring.

“You are ward-trained,” the mage said. “Watch—remember!”

Then he spoke to the ring itself as if it were a person.

“Alon, we are ready.”

Without any suggestion, Elysha moved in behind the mage and placed her hands on his shoulders, and Aylinn, pushing past Kethan, did the same for Firdun, somewhat to her foster brother’s surprise. Kethan himself was left to grasp with each hand one of the women’s and then felt Uta leap into his lap.

Whatever Alon was relaying to Ibycus they could not hear. Kethan caught a glimpse of changes of light within the ring stone as



if patterns formed and changed there. Then he felt the pull of Power being drawn upon, as if Elysha and his foster sister were already feeding Ibycus and Firdun nearly at the top of their strength. He nearly started with surprise when he felt warmth and energy rising in him. It could only be that Uta was linked in their endeavors.

Time no longer meant anything. They were caught up away from the world they knew for the purpose of the Power, and to that alone could they answer now.

At length the ring turned blue once again. And Ibycus's voice rang out hurriedly as if to reach someone already departing.

"Understood!"

The usual weakness and need to reorient themselves with their proper world followed, but they were still languid when the mage began to talk.

"They have labored well at Lormt. Hilarion and others, working with bits and hints from ancient words, found the formula for warding the gates—for all time. They are already putting that into use overseas, and the Gryphon's clan will do the same in Arvon and the Dales. But we face something more ominous—a wholly Dark gate to which Garth Howell is pledged. And for that we must produce the ward."

Now he looked at Firdun. "It is fully yours? Two at least of us must know it."

The other nodded. "What was shown I shall remember. There my talent holds."

"As you rightly proved this day, Gryphon's son," said the mage.

The Kioga this night divided the watches among themselves, leaving the others to rest. It would be his task, Kethan knew, to be up with the dawn, or even before, to seek out once more the trail of those from Garth Howell. Also he must go with double caution, as who knew what traps this Jakata might be able to set?

He rolled himself in his blankets but missed the warmth of Uta. She was usually tucked against his side with her slumber-inducing purr. Feeling oddly deserted, he allowed himself to sleep. The night was hunting time for the cat tribe and she was probably off on af-



fairs she believed of more importance than companionship with humans—or weres.



Usually Kethan's dreams were disordered fragments, many of them to do with the chase, and never were they very clear or vivid. Not like this—if it was a dream.

He was certainly not lying on trampled grass and scratchy blankets under the open sky. Instead he was in pard form right enough, but with the human portion of him standing aside watching what was happening, what was to happen.

There were two great pillars carved from rock before him and to his pard sight they glowed, golden as his own eyes. Sitting on the crown of each was the figure of a cat facing what lay behind him: sentries, yet taking their ease, for they sat upright with their tails curled over their paws.

So cleverly had they been carved that they seemed to hold a spark of life and be all-knowing and all-hearing. Between them ran the shattered pavement of a road long since worn by time. Beyond the pillars there appeared to be only a gathering of dusky shadow, though he felt no warning of evil about it.

However, what was most important was that delicate scent which reached him. Once before he had been drawn to answer that message—and then had fallen prey to the bird woman. But this time it was overwhelming, appealing to instincts which made the human part of him uneasy.

Still, so compelling that was, he could not turn from the path but padded between the cat pillars and into the duskiness which he found did not in the least blind his night sight.

Moved by an impulse he could not understand, he held high his head and uttered a yowling cry—no challenge but rather in a way a plea that he must know what was happening and why.

She slipped from between two rocks and stood looking at him. As his coat was gold, so hers was black and she was not as large. But to his pard sight this was beauty such as his human eyes had never sighted.



He slackened pace as she hissed slightly, a warning that she was independent and gave her favors only when she pleased.

He prowled back and forth a few paces from her to display his muscular form, the fact that he was a warrior among pards, one worthy to be looked upon with favor.

Again she yowled—

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



The Web Lands, The Waste, West

W*anton changling!* The pard snarled and slewed around in the dust, earth. Behind him he heard a hiss become a growl.

Female foolishness, that voice inside his head continued. Will this poor world never be free of female foolishness?

Completely bemused, the pard looked to his black counterpart. It would seem these snappish words were not being aimed in his direction. Her ears were flattened to her skull and her fangs shone against her black fur.

Try some foolishness yourself, oldster—time your blood ran a little faster. Just because you have turned your back on certain matters that does not mean that they have ceased to exist. Each of us have our rights—

Not, her send was interrupted sharply, when the desires of one challenge the purposes of all. Try this again and you will be the worse for it.



Kethan blinked and blinked again. He lay on his back looking



up at paling stars. And he was man, not pard. But some of that aroused in him made him restless and he sat up. A dream, of course, but such a one as seemed as real as a true sending. And that voice . . . Ibycus! Surely it had been Ibycus who had broken into that most interesting meeting.

He looked around. The mage was apparently asleep a distance away, his cloak pulled over him against the fall of dew. Then he himself was aware that Uta's warm body was no longer fit to his side. The cat was still missing. Night hunting—as he himself had gone many times for the sheer joy of running free under the moon.

Uta—the black cat—and she who had met him by the cat-crowned pillars? No, that other had been a match for his pard size—a dream weaving in all surety.

However, he was too fully awake now to try to sleep again. Kethan sat up, his knees against his chest, his arms about them. How much of any were was beast, how much man? He was only one-third were by blood, his father a halfling, his mother a wise-woman from overseas. He had been raised as a man and would never perhaps have learned his heritage had not Ibycus, in his guise of trader, brought the pard belt to his supposed father's castle.

Without the belt he could not make the change as perhaps a true-bred were could do. And he could remember his first fears when the changes had come without his control, before he had learned to master his talent. Now he was well practiced in slipping in and out of the beast's role, and he took pride in what his animal senses could uncover while hidden to the denser humankind.

He avoided the other sleepers and went to the spring, where he shed shirt and jerkin and doused head and shoulders into water which was cold enough to bring a gasp out of him. Squinting up at the graying sky, he decided that they were in for a fair day—and perhaps a hot one. Best make sure all their water bottles were well filled.

As he stood up and stretched, he faced west. There appeared to be no break in this scrub-filled land. And he thought that the trail of those from Garth Howell ought to be easy to pick up—at least for a pard.



The rest of the camp were astir by the time he returned. Sleeping mats and blankets were rolled and there was already food laid out. Lately Kethan had taken to leaving his share, being well able as a hunter pard to supply his own needs on the march.

Uta had returned and seemed to be of the same mind. Her night's hunting must have been good, for she turned aside from what Aylinn offered her and went to sit by Trussant, plainly ready to once more be carried at her ease.

Before Kethan was ready for his own change, Elysha suddenly appeared beside him. Those strange, compelling violet eyes of hers caught and held him. She had the faintest quirk of a smile about her lips.

"Good trailing. However"—now the smile had vanished—"there are dreams and dreams. Make very sure, young were one, that you discover which is which. And take nothing which is different to be what it seems until it is proven so."

Then she was gone again before he could answer. Dreams? Had that venture in the night been a dream of Elysha's spinning? He remembered Firdun's story of her cloud castle, which had seemed as real as the ground beneath it. For one who dealt deeply in glorie, a dream-sending should be an easy task.

However, this was day not night and the trail awaited him. He made the change and took the lead with a long graceful bound.



Firdun elected to ride point today, taking the northern swing while Guret matched him to the south. Watching Kethan's departure, he felt a twinge of envy. How did it feel to run free in a body so unlike the one one was born into? Yet in camp Kethan seemed a quiet young man, like the son of any Mantle lord. Firdun had heard tales of the ferocity of the weres in battle, but to hear and see were two different things. Kethan as a man, for all his fine armor—which rode mostly in a bundle on that strange mount of his—appeared a most amiable and peaceful sort.

The were's foster sister . . . Firdun always felt a little awkward in her presence, especially since he had watched her draw Hardin back from the Dark hold. His own sister was all vivid color, her



dark hair usually threaded with golden chains, her skirt and breeches of gold or rich rust brown—like unto the legendary scales of the Gryphon. Her eyes were golden also, and she was such as enlivened any company she joined. But Aylinn was like her beloved moon, and as far from any man's touch. Firdun tried not to watch her so much when they were in company, for fear that others would note his regard.

Her talents ranged to a very high level and, though he had been brought in to company with Ibycus in reducing the things from that foul well, he felt like a untutored boy beside a mage mistress when they were together.

How much Power *had* the Great Ones seen fit to grant him? Alon had tested him several times and often surprised them both with the results of such measurement. He could not shape-change, but he could produce a certain amount of glamorie, though certainly nothing to rival that Elysha was able to summon. He could ward, and he could break wards. He had no healing ability, but that was mainly a talent which was female, not male.

On the other hand, he could hold his own against any arms master he had met at a Mantle hold. Jervon and his father had seen to that. In open battle where powers were not evoked, he could give good account of himself, he was sure.

Yet at the Eyrie he was the one without because he could not meld. Perhaps, once this journey was behind them, he might go seeking a place of his own. The Sulcar captains were always ready to sign a good fighting man for their voyages. The Falconers served them so for years—and they traveled into places as unknown to the world at large as this Waste was unknown to men from the east.

He jerked his thoughts around to the business at hand, an intent study of the land through which he rode. There had been no sign of Kethan since he had taken off as they left; however, any alarm he would send could be picked up by most of them.

This was dreary countryside, though according to the old tales it had once been well settled, by a people who had knowledge long since forgotten. He knew that the furtive traders from the Dales who dared to venture here brought back many strange and even



beautiful artifacts. But they were jealous of their hunting grounds. So far this party's contact with the past had been that place of the pyramids, the long-pillared pool, and the well enclosure. Surely there was more to be found.

At nooning the group drew together and shared rations and a very scant amount of water, most of which they gave to their beasts. The countryside was becoming more and more desert. Where they had been greeted on their first venturing into this country by the plains of cracked yellow clay, and then passed into the place of red earth and veined foliage, now the ground showed wavelike stretches of a gray-blue coarse sand.

There were fewer and fewer plants to be seen, and the gnarled trees were missing. However, from portions of the sand there protruded tall poles which did not appear to be a natural growth. They were the same hue as the shade and about the size of four boar spears bound together.

There was no tumbled masonry about to suggest ruins as there had been at the well. Guret and Firdun studied several of the poles near their temporary resting place and found them a puzzle. Though they were slightly rough in texture to the touch, they did not seem to be rock, and inquiring touches left the fingers tingling for a moment or two.

Ibycus tested them with his ring. There was a responsive color but very pale, and it matched the hue of the sand in which the poles were planted. They were not set up in any pattern, but scattered here and there, with a good distance between each of the poles.

The travelers tried when they started out again to angle well away from those standards, being cautious enough to avoid anything for which there was no practical explanation. Mind-send from Kethan assured them that they were still on the trail of the Garth Howell party.

Ibycus's head suddenly jerked skyward. The sun had been cloaked in part by a haze and now his ring color was deepening toward a murky red-blue.

"Watch aloft!" he shouted. "Get the horses moving—ride!"



As if his words were a spell, the haze thickened in places. And from it balls broke loose, while the sand in which the poles were footed began to run like water. Not only were the travelers being threatened from above, but below also. The Kioga, Hardin, and Firdun were trying to press the loose horses to a faster pace and yet keep them away from that rippling. Aylinn had bow in hand and arrows ready.

A round object thrust upward out of the disturbed sand and instantly she let fly at it. Her arrow struck true and rebounded, the thing paying no attention to the attack.

Something which resembled the forepart of a giant worm was pulling into the light and it was not alone. The rippling sand parted to let through others like it, while down from the sky dropped what might have been fishers' nets, each weighted with a black ball-shaped body. The nets caught on the poles, swung wide, back and forth.

One of the extra horses screamed horribly and reared. A web traveler clung to its neck to thrust fangs deep into its throat, and the worms nearest to the attack writhed toward the doomed animal at a surprising speed. The Kioga were urging on the animals, but Firdun turned and rode for the horse already kicking on the ground and thrust with his sword. There was a spurting of greenish ichor mixed with blood and the thing shivered like a punctured bag.

"Away—they are poisonous!" Ibycus shouted.

Firdun's mount leaped over the nearest worm and he drew back to help form a rearguard with the mage, Hardin (now equipped with a Kioga bow), and Aylinn. Ibycus threw out his arm to wave them all on. One of the web creatures struck at him, but Elysha's forearm swept up and there was a violet flash from her bracelet.

The web thing burst, spattering the ground with matter which steamed like acid. There was another horse down, and a Kioga trying to ride close enough for a shot at the attacker was nearly thrown as his horse reared to avoid one of the worms.

With their riding webs fast to the poles, the spider things could swing hard enough to whirl themselves a great distance. Their



ground-bound allies whipped about, one sweeping a Kioga's mount from its feet. Luckily the rider sprawled out and away from his downed horse while the attacker fed upon the screaming animal. He charged toward the thing on foot in spite of Ibycus's shouts to keep his distance.

This time Firdun spurred between, knocking the Kioga back and slashing at the worm at mid-body. He barely avoided the whipping tail of the thing and then was nearly knocked from his saddle by one of the spiders. However, the frenzied fighting of his horse to be free and away prevented the creature from a true strike and a backswing of sword sent it spinning to smash against one of the poles from which dropped an empty web.

Luckily that line of poles did not extend forever. And it looked as if both the swinging spider things and the worms were unable to leave their close vicinity. The Kioga were again striving to bring the pack train and the spare mounts into line when there sounded a distant roaring.

Wind swept at them with a buffeting force, freeing some of the webs. Whether or not the creatures could actually control the flight of their carrying strands, those now in flight could not tell, but at least ten were riding the gusts of wind toward them.

It was several moments before Firdun grasped the fact that they were being herded. Their attempts to outride and outrun those wind riders sent them following a southern direction. Guret, Lero, and Hardin began to prove the Kioga expertise, and that of a Mantle hunter, with their bows.

But these were not easy targets. They appeared to ride currents of air which rose or dropped without any pattern. Those steady streams of air also gathered up puffs of grit from the gravel waves, sending it to sting flesh, threaten the eyes of the would-be fighters.

The travelers were away from the poles now and at least the worms appeared to have made no attempt to follow them. A lucky shot burst another of the web riders, and Obred uttered a war cry. Still the wind blew steadily and the web riders showed no signs of giving up pursuit.

Then lightning struck straight across the path of those web-



borne horrors. Struck once, and again. Several webs were rent and the creatures in them burst and gone. It was then that Firdun's horse stumbled and he was thrown, crashing down on his shoulder so that his sword fell from a numbed hand. A web had touched ground not too far away. Its occupant, apparently uninjured, leaped for the man. His horse had recovered to plunge on. Firdun had stooped to try to recover his sword when sanity returned. Ward . . . what would ward such a creature as this?

He had never been forced to face the summoning of formulas so fast, but somehow his half-dazed mind was able to sort out words and he shouted them.

The lightning whips still struck back and forth through the spinning webs but did not approach him and he had a feeling that they in themselves might be as deadly to his kind as the creatures they sought to destroy.

That thing which had started its leap at him crashed in midair against what he had so quickly summoned—a shield. Still clinging to that materialization, it thudded to the ground, the shield flattened over it. Firdun shook his head slowly. Why had he not drawn on this talent when the web riders first appeared? He had been as open to attack as a Dalesman of no talent.

Now he flung up his right hand, still numb from his fall, and forced his fingers into patterns which should be as familiar and easy to him as drawing breath into his lungs. Only he struggled as might an apprentice of the least talent. It was as if he himself were somehow in ward, kept from exercising his powers except when he drew upon the very limits of his energy.

The lightning flashes were coming farther apart and weakening. At the very moment he became aware of that, Firdun was forced to his knees. A mighty hand might have reached out of the sky to flatten him for the puny powerless thing he was. Something was draining, gnawing at his memory. He could not recall the proper gestures, the words, as much of him as his own name.

Then followed fear, not that which was the natural result of their battle, but rather a fear which was an emptiness—in him! Warrior and warder as he was, Firdun uttered a cry, his whole body shud-



dering. He could not move any more than if he really were encased in one of the wind-driven nets.

To be so shaken by raw fear was worse than taking a wound in the flesh, for this reached far deeper, left him a quivering nothing. Nothing—no! He was Firdun of the Gryphon. He clung to the thought-picture of that Gryphon.

Landsil, one of the Great Old Ones, who had stood twice against the utmost power of the Dark and won. Landsil! Instead of the jumble of Power words he had tried to keep in sequence, Firdun now centered on that one name, held to it as the only security in his present world.

The hand which pressed—there was no hand! He heard now the beat of mighty wings. And the gale those raised banished that which had entrapped him. From Landsil's gift had come his talent, and once more the Gryphon returned to his breed that gift.

Firdun pulled to his feet. The web riders had not been swept from the sky even by those lightning bolts which had now vanished. But they were wavering, and that push of wind which had sent them in pursuit was dying—it was dead.

Drifting webs settled on the scrub land. Firdun held up his head. Just as Ibycus had drawn from him more than he thought he had had at the well, so now he brought up his full strength. The air between him and those webs glimmered oddly. He could sense more than feel the freezing cold which was gathering. There was surely a sheen of frost already on the withering grass.

No movement, no wind, no bodies emerging from the webs. The webs themselves were turning into crystals, glistening in a sun which now cut through the haze overhead. Firdun picked up his sword, ramméd the blade twice in the soil to clean it of the noisome ichor of the slain, and sheathed it. Turning, he looked for the others.

Aylinn was kneeling on the ground beside a figure in purple clothing. Elysha—struck down by poisons? He was sure that the webs had not carried past where he had taken his involuntary stand. Ibycus knelt at her other side. The Kioga were urging the animals together in some semblance of order, but Hardin stood a



little apart, eyeing Firdun as he came, as one might look upon an adept. One hand was covering his mouth.

As Firdun advanced, the young lord was shaken out of his trance.

“Jakata,” he said. “He used his Power—and it did not hold.” His hand arose in a warrior’s salute. “Lord, they spoke of the Gryphon breed at Garth Howell and Jakata laughed. I think he does otherwise at this hour.”

“The Lady.” Firdun only nodded at the boy’s speech and went on to where those other three were gathered.

He had never seen such an expression on Ibycus’s face before. And beneath the one he could not read he sensed the other’s rage.

“Heart-held”—that was Elysha, her voice thin but her words precise and confident—“this was another testing—be not so disturbed that it came. That one we follow will use every fraction of the Dark which lies in this dreary land to try us.” She raised her hands a little and Firdun saw that the gems in her bracelets no longer held their rich gleam. He was sure then he knew from whence had come those lightning flashes.

Now Ibycus stood up. “Fool, I am a fool. He must know this land far more than any have believed possible—and he makes it serve him.”

“But”—Elysha laughed and raised herself with Aylinn’s help—“he does not know the mettle of those who move against him. Landsil’s get, I salute you,” she said to Firdun.

“Hardly an adept,” Firdun returned, “or perhaps even a ’prentice of promise. But there was no warning from Kethan.”

Aylinn looked up, her face very sober. “He is alive and free. Were that not so, I would know it. Perhaps his way, though still westward, did not follow this same route.”



The pard was crouched in the best spot of cover he could sight in this country, which had changed again from the dry plains they had known. He had caught and eaten a fat waddling bird in the last of the long grasses and had feasted well. Now he was tonguing his paws but still keeping a watchful eye on what lay below this perch of his.



His trailing sense had not been taxed this day. It had been easy to pick up the scent. Earlier he had found only a deserted campsite. But the traces he nosed out angled now a little more to the north, and the land was beginning to rise. Not only were there hills here to break the monotony of the plain, but they were fast growing taller and there was a smudge on the horizon which promised greater heights.

However, below was what was of more interest now. For they had camped early and there had been quite an amount of stirring about even after they had halted. They had put up wards and he had no thought of testing those. His pard range of sight was enough to let him spy out what mischief they might be preparing without getting close enough to trigger such unseen defenses.

The major portion of the party had withdrawn to the farther end of the valley before him and were there setting up some shelters and had started a fire. But the one he knew to be Jakata, together with the two underlings, wearing sage's drab robes, were busily at work in another direction. The two sages had chopped down several small shrubs and dug out the remainder of their roots, pulled the coarse grass up by the roots, working with the haste of those who dared not even think of disobeying any order. Their leader had seated himself on a rock to one side and sat staring into space as if he were inducing a trance.

That they intended calling upon some Power, Kethan was well aware even before the sages began to draw lines on the bare earth with branches they had stripped and sharpened. They were busied for some time before their leader took part in the action.

Rising from his seat, he picked up a mage staff of some dark wood, rune-carven and crowned with a monstrous head. The others were setting out what looked to Kethan at this distance to be short, thick clubs, planting them end up here and there among their carefully formed designs.

Having finished, they hurried out of the maze of lines, and Kethan was certain that they would just as soon be elsewhere during the rest of the proceedings.

Jakata raised his staff and pointed it at one of those clubs, which



immediately produced flame as might a candle. He methodically continued until he stood in a circle of fire.

Kethan growled deep in his throat. The stench of evil was growing stronger by the moment. He was well aware that Jakata knew exactly what he was doing, for the pressure of Power was rising. Kethan debated a withdrawal, but when the Power did not increase past a certain point he was sure his presence would not be revealed.

Jakata snapped his fingers and the two others moved reluctantly toward him. They did not come alone. From behind a rock they dragged a smaller figure, hands bound together, squealing and sobbing as they forced it forward.

To Kethan the captive was a new form of life. No bigger than a half-grown child, it was very slender of body, and, that being bare, he could see that the skin was very dark brown. What hair it had was clustered in tightly tied lumps on its head and it was plainly female and, in spite of its small size, mature.

The pard's lips drew back in a silent snarl. That Jakata intended to use this small female for some bloody summoning he was certain, and his whole nature, both man and beast, revolted against being a silent and not interfering witness of such an act.

The sages thrust their captive down on her knees before Jakata. One of them whipped out a thick cord which he looped around the prisoner, each of the guards thus holding an end taut to keep her firmly in place.

Kethan stirred; his muscles ached for him to leap down and deal with Jakata. But he well knew that this Dark lord must be close to an adept in Power and no prey for a were.

Now the man in Kethan began to take control. His talent was based on his own body, but he had a second heritage. Gillan of the Green Tower had borne him, and even the weres had come to know that she was beyond their Powers when they had tried to break the bond between her and her were mate.

Gillan's gifts were like her foster daughter's. She served the Lady as a healer, but she had other talents she could call upon. The Power building here was growing like the roaring of a furnace.



Jakata might feel that he held it well in leash, but if the Dark beckoned, so would the Light follow.

Kethan had no moonflowers beneath his paws; such magic was for women. But this was a woman captive and perhaps so some plea might well be made for her. He had never even thought of trying this before.

Yes! The mind-send was sharp and he knew it. He turned his head quickly, but there was no sign of that sleek, black-furred form. But she was with him now—in his mind.

Yes! Her encouragement came again and Kethan gave a leap of mind, not body, into paths he had never trod before.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



The Wing Ways, the Waste, West

The candles . . . Kethan's pard sight concentrated on the two nearest ones. He noted that the sages who rope-imprisoned the captive stood well outside the designs which were centered by Jakata. And he sensed there were wards in place. As in all the old knowledge, when a mage would dare a summoning, he or she took such precautions as possible to keep under control the thing they called upon.

The light of thick clublike brands was a dark red and the smoke given off by their burning arose in straight lines into the air. That they provided the bedrock of safety was his guess.

Fire was no friend to beasts; only humans had tamed it partly to their will. He snarled silently again. How—



Look! came again that command out of nowhere. And as if that unknown other now had control of his body functions, see he did.

That mass of grass and brush which had been so ruthlessly grubbed away to clear Jakata's designing was not empty. Though its inhabitants had made no attempt to defend their protection against that clearance, they were beginning to move in now.

By himself he could never have touched such alien creatures with mind-send. Yet there was an answer as that Power out of nowhere directed him to touch and link, touch and link. He did not even know what they were. Insects? Reptiles? Grubs torn from the earth?

However, link with them he did, until he had a heaving weapon of sorts. That he directed, his concentration on his task so great that he lost his outer sight of what was below. There were more answers—even farther removed from any touch he had known. And he knew that not only the dwellers in that brush and earth but the ravaged plants themselves were awakening to a kind of life unknown to them before.

He aimed his silent and unbelievable army and sent them toward their goal, his body so tense that his very bones began to ache.

A ragged root—it was too stiff to be a snake—moved toward the nearest candle. There was a humping of the ground also, and even without sight Kethan knew that dwellers in the earth were tunneling ahead.

The pressure of the gathering Power was intense. It seemed almost that it would crush him where he crouched. But it was not complete—it could not be as long as *she* kept guard.

Jakata's rolling chant echoed back from the low hills and Kethan fought to shut his ears to it.

Let me in!

This time the voice was a sharp order, so swift and powerful he could not help but obey. He went against all nature, both human and were, and opened to that call.

It pulsed through him, that new energy. He watched, even if dimly, that root wreath itself about the thick candle. At the same



time the ground around it heaved. It tottered, fell inward, and its flame was quenched against one of those drawings in the earth.

Kethan lay nearly spent under the crushing anger of that which had sought this path. But he was allowed no time to fight for himself. Again he must do what was to be done by inner power alone.

The were's mind seemed to give a sharp lurch. He dropped his hold upon the things of the grass and the earth. Instead he centered his being on "seeing." Out of that mass of grass and grubbed-up soil there leaped what were his own. Pards no larger than the hand of the mage who was now waving furiously, pards raised to battle fury, able to spring above their own height into the air.

Kethan, shorn of strength, lay dim-eyed. But he saw Jakata stumble back, fling out his arm. One of those small brown forms had teeth, vise-set, in the mage's flesh. Two others hung and clawed nearly belt-high on his body.

He heard screams. The two sages had dropped their ropes and were running, one with a pard form clinging to his thigh. Jakata was using his wizard's staff, seeking to beat to death those who had attacked him.

But by that battle he was torn away from his own summoning. Now there was black anger in the air—Kethan thought he could almost see it as a cloud gathering about the mage.

Aroused now to his immediate danger, Jakata threw back his head and screamed—and the words which issued from his lips could be seen like coals of blazing fire.

She who had shown him the way had not deserted Kethan. Those small vicious balls of fur below thinned, disappeared. He could feel that substance from which they were born return to him. But there was still action below. That which had come at the summoning was not to be lightly dismissed. Kethan could feel in his own body the struggle being made by Jakata to save himself.

But he also saw something else. That small captive who had been constrained within the circle of the candles was on her feet and running, though her hands were still tied.

She threw herself in a frantic leap over the pile of brush, crash-



ing down, to be buried within that mass by the very force of her landing. Kethan stood, shook himself.

He had no time now to try to realize what had happened to him; he could only go into battle as he was.

“Great Warrior!”

It echoed in his mind as he, too, leaped down to the edge of that brush. Judging from the continued screaming shouts of Jakata, the mage was still engaged in striving to send back to its own plane that which he had called. Of the two sages there was no sign.

But Kethan sighted the wild shaking of the brush mass and reached that point just as the bloody, well-scratched body won into the open. She stared at him for a wild-eyed moment and then with a whimper folded in upon herself, falling in a small huddle before him.

He had to make a quick choice, and perhaps it might be a fatal one. As pard he could not get her out of danger; as a man he and she might have a thin chance. He made the change, glad that the mass of cuttings walled him away from the patterned ground. Stooping, he caught up that bony little body, slinging her over his shoulder as he made the climb back up to where he had perched. At any moment he expected to feel some dart cut them both down, a demon fire from the mage staff to send him out of life forever.

But that extra spurt of strength which was were heritage carried him up and behind a sheltering spur of rock unharmed, to his utter surprise. Perhaps Jakata, in the midst of his own battle, had not seen them at all.

He still held the child-woman against him. Now she once more opened her eyes, staring up into his face. But this time she showed no terror.

“Fal-so-lee! Artez Manga?” Her voice was as thin as the chirp of a small bird.

He did not want to use mind-send. If her people did not use it, such a touch might once more overwhelm her. But she was not speaking trade talk, and he knew no way to answer her.

Setting her carefully on the ground, he half turned toward the rocks which were a barrier against what lay below. There were signs the traders used. He sorted them out now from memory. Then his



hands moved in the simplest ones suggesting escape and freedom. Quickly then he broke the cord binding her wrists, leaving them braceleted with deep gouges.

He used the sign for “away.” She nodded vehemently and scrambled up to her feet. A moment later her hand closed about his and she tugged him with her northward. The jangle of chant from Jakata still reached them; perhaps they *did* have time to make a good run for it.

Only he could not travel here in human form. A strange wanderer in the open with no horse or gear would catch instant attention from any scout. As a pard . . .

Gently Kethan released that small hand and took several strides away. She watched him first wonderingly and then with growing agitation. His sign language was so limited, and how could anyone explain thus his nature?

Three times he slowly signed “friend—safe,” and on the third signal her own small hands echoed his gestures. Drawing a deep breath, he made the change.

A small muffled cry echoed in his ears as he went four-footed once again. She was backing away, both hands over her mouth now and her whole body trembling. He stood where he was and because he must somehow make contact he sent a mind-probe.

Friend—no hurt—friend!

She had halted her retreat, though her body was still shaking. Slowly then she began to move, and Kethan stood still. She made a complete circle about him some distance away. Then, as if she could no longer find the strength to move, she suddenly sat down.

Had his mind-send really reached her? He could not tell as yet, and to intrude upon her again might be harmful.

Then her shoulders straightened; she was very apparently bracing herself for some action. Slowly she got to her feet again and came toward him.

To his surprise and dismay, she sank to her knees before him and crouched until she could touch her forehead to the ground.

“Great Old One.” The words she spoke she also thought, and he dared to catch the thought.



But he felt uncomfortable. If she saw in him one of the great ones of the past, that might lead to trouble.

We go—your home, he thought steadily. That much he could do; see her safely back to her own kind.

She raised her head and for a long moment stared at him. Then, very slowly, she nodded. Rising, she came close to him and put out a hand cautiously to touch his furred head.

Kethan was again aware of the danger below them. He could still hear a faint droning which might be Jakata's chant and he had no desire to linger near that scene of the mage's struggle with whatever he had called upon.

Go, he mind-sent.

She smoothed the fur on his head and then again nodded and set off in a northly direction. The land here grew increasingly rugged. After a while she was limping, her bared feet fretted by the rough stones and gravel. Yet she did not break pace.

Once or twice she paused and looked searchingly around as if in search of some landmark. It was during the second of these pauses that Kethan took time to mind-reach for his own companions. Aylinn was the easiest to touch, for they had long been able to exchange so.

But the Aylinn who answered him was not his usual tranquil sister. There had been trouble. What trap had he not found in time to warn them off?

She did not explain—only that they were free and on the move again. Quickly he sketched for her the activities of Jakata and urged that they keep their distance until Ibycus could decide what was to be done. It might be that the Dark Mage could lose his battle, and things only the Ancient Old Ones might have been able to cope with would be loosed.

Ibycus, Firdun—both had the ward talent, and he believed that Elysha also knew something of it, for glamorie was often part of warding. They would be on the watch now.

His small companion had started on a step or two while he had communicated with his foster sister. Now she looked back and beckoned and he loped along behind her.



The footing here was better, and he saw indications that the use of tools must have once, very long ago, smoothed a path which was steadily climbing into the heights.

At length they were on a ledge, with the rock wall to their left and a sharp drop on the right. But the way was nearly wide enough to give access to a wagon and they kept close to the wall.

The stone of the wall was of a startling bright ocher hue with veins of black. Nor was it a smooth surface. Cut deeply into the stone were patterns—some running like record runes, others in the form of people and animals. Though greatly weather-worn, they were still visible.

He recognized the image of a snowcat—the most formidable of felines—and birds, or at least winged creatures. However, the figures meant to represent people were sticklike drawings a child might make.

Again his guide came to a halt, facing a section of cliff which was incised with symbols he was sure made up an inscription.

Stretching out her arm, she used a fingertip to trace those cuttings line by line and her voice arose in a singsong he could not understand.

The inscription bordered a round of shining black stone, forming a frame for it, and some trick of polishing had left that inner section smooth like a mirror, though showing no reflection. As her voice died away, she leaned a little forward, standing on tiptoe to place both hands palm-flat on that empty surface, holding them so as she again spoke.

Finally she stepped back. *We go—guards meet—up!* Her send weaved in and out and she pointed toward the ledge road before them, which was slanting at far steeper angle now.

In spite of the fact that she limped and left small bloodstains on the stone from her bruised feet, she quickened pace until she was almost running and Kethan padded easily behind. The ledge emerged on what must be a plateau well above the country below.

Kethan swung around to gaze south. Did Darkness still hang



there or had Jakata's spell-casting been finished one way or another?

He thought he could see wisps of what could be smoke, but those were fast disappearing in the air. It was not too far from sunset now. But in this upper world of heights and rocks there might be any number of shelters.

A flapping sound from overhead brought him around, belly low, a snarl rising in him as a new scent reached his nostrils. He had never forgotten the rus and since they served the Dark they might also have come to Jakata's calling.

His small companion was standing some distance away, her arms folded about herself as if she felt the chill of the winds which were sweeping down from the peaks ahead. In the air, nearing her with great swoops, were three men surely of her own kind, yet equipped with wings apparently fashioned by stretching thin scraped hide over stout ribs.

That the wings were not a part of them, Kethan discovered as he watched them come to a gliding landing near the woman. Those pinions were fastened in place by a harness for shoulders and waist.

The first to touch ground struggled out of his wings and ran to the woman. A moment later she was tightly held against him. For him alone she existed at that second. But his two companions now moved swiftly between Kethan and the two embracing.

Along with the harness for the wings, each carried a rod with a vicious-looking hooked point and they separated to come at him from two different directions.

"Kaasha Vingue!"

The girl had caught a glimpse of what they would do and called out sharply. They halted, looking from the pard to her and back again. She wriggled free of that tight hold upon her and caught the hand of he who had greeted her so in a torrent of excited speech.

Kethan straightened from his crouch. *Friend*, he tried to mind-send.



The startled expressions of all three men proved they had not expected that.

The two with their strange spears were still very wary, moving one slow step and then another. But the girl brought the third directly to Kethan. Her mind-send was ragged and he had to strain to catch some of its meaning: *Great Old One—Man—four feet—show.*

To change would leave him defenseless. His sword and armor were still packed on Trussant—or at least he hoped they were. As a pard he could be a fighter strong enough to face even an armed man. Could he trust the woman to the point of making the change?

Four—two— Now she had dropped her companion's hand to sign the message.

Reluctantly Kethan decided to make the change. There was a concentrated murmur of awe from all of them as he stood there as a man. The girl was smiling and nodding and again addressed the newcomers with excited speech.

Once more she caught the hand of him who had greeted her first, drawing him forward. She transferred her grip to his wrist and pushed his hand, half curled in a fist, at Kethan, who held out his own right hand palm up, in the ancient peace sign.

The stranger's flesh touched his. Fingers ran over his skin as if seeking fur.

Then the man turned to the others.

"Kaasha Vingue!"

Their spears went point down to the ground and both of them knelt, raising their left hands high in salute.

Friend, Kethan signed. And all three vigorously nodded.

Up, the woman gestured. But now Kethan shook his head.

Go—own—people, he mind-sent.

The four gathered together at that and their high voices cheeped back and forth. At length the woman returned to him.

Evil—moves, she sent. *Black land*. She swung out her arm toward the west in a vigorous gesture and her expression was one of fear mixed with loathing. *Be—safe*.

No safe when evil moves! All of them must have picked up that



mind-send, for they were nodding vigorously. *Power—Power of Light comes—I find path.*

She seemed to consider that and then turned to the man who had shed his wings. After something which sounded like a question, he went back to his discarded harness and opened a pocket-like pouch fastened to the waist strap.

He came back with what looked like a square of dull crystal, so dark in hue as to seem almost rock. The woman took it and faced Kethan.

With the small plaque flat on one palm, she covered it with her other.

*I—Poquen. He—*she pointed to the man beside her—*Yil.*

Kethan indicated himself and said his name. Which she repeated twice, seeking the right inflection.

Bad country—easily lost—you come here. She pointed directly to the plateau on which they stood. *Take hands so.* She held out her own, holding the crystal to explain. *Call Pequin—Yil—will come—show—right path.*

He could accept that somewhere to the west was whatever Jakata hunted—and it could only be a gate. If the Dark Mage was now willing to call upon such Powers as he had tried to raise, then he needed more power or else was pressed for time.

The sooner their own party caught up with those from Garth Howell, the better.

I go. He changed again and she came closer, holding out that flat crystal. Luckily it was of a size he could carry in his mouth.

They raised hands in a last salute and he turned away. The crystal was cool in his mouth, but he was thirsty and hungry. Somewhere on the way back to join with the others, he must eat and drink.



Ibycus sat on a hammock. He had a small stick in his hand and was thrusting it into the ground, only to pull it forth again, his eyes not on his busy hands but half closed as he went over in such detail as she could supply all Aylinn had just told him. There was a tingling in the air, and Jakata was responsible. Whether Kethan's interference had really defeated what the mage had tried, they



could not be sure, but he was of the opinion that it had. How much of the evil he had tried to summon had rebounded on him?

Jakata: they knew so little of him. Though Ibycus had no dealings with Garth Howell—not since the day they stood for the Dark in the great battle—he could accept that they had records maybe as great as those of Lormt.

The mage sighed. Ever since the news of the discoveries at Lormt, the knowledge uncovered by the falling of tower and wall, he had been planning to go overseas. But he was oathed to this land, one of the last of the guardians.

And it was here and now the loathsome Darkness crawled. He had searched memory well both during the days and in dreams at night, trying to understand what drew Jakata. That it must be one of the major gates, he was sure—though he had thought that most of those were destroyed along with their makers.

“The gate of Ranchild.”

Ibycus started and dropped his stock. Elysha stood there watching him, that small half smile she used so much when she looked at him curving her lips.

“But—”

“Yes, the records state that that vanished with a goodly section of the land, that the fire mountains and the sea met in battle, to leave nothing behind. You have held the Power for long, Lord Master. You have shared it—a little.” Now her mouth quirked in what was not a smile.

“Ranchild—he muddled his own brewing.”

“To end a world,” she agreed. “But who knows what hidden roots can bring to a new sprouting?”

Ibycus thrust his twig with almost vicious power into the ground again. “We must have a sending—to the Eyrie. If they have touch again with Hilarion and Lormt, perhaps there is some news from overseas which can strengthen our stand.”

“Not you,” Elysha returned. “To launch a sending, and receive from it when Jakata is meddling with nastiness we cannot identify, is a risk—master that you are. You can remember much of the old



days—when it suits you to do so. Remember then how you dealt with it.”

He was on his feet now, staring at her. “Always you want more than you can possess—” he was beginning with a hint of rising rage.

“Do I, Lord Master?” Her violet eyes seemed very large and they held his so he could not turn away—though he resented fiercely within him that she could still move him so.

“You cannot,” she continued, “refuse to use any weapon which lies at your hand. This is no longer between us, but the fate of all we know lies upon our heads, hands, and talents. Therefore I call upon you to this venture, and by the Favor of the Three in One you cannot deny me! I have also such a shield as I had not before, even with all your preparation. The moonmaid is an anchorage you cannot fault. Therefore—this night let us see what we can see. Dare you refuse this?”

The twig snapped in his fingers. Old memories stirred, old emotions he had thought dead. She had the right of it. He could not refuse her offer—whatever weapon lay at hand must be used—and he felt that time raced on their heels and in this could be their last and greatest enemy.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



The Seeking, the Waste

They had pushed on, well away from the valley of the web riders, and it was dusk before they made camp. Ibycus had ridden at the fore of their company and had not spoken, nor did anyone attempt



to contact him, such was the expression on his face, the very stance of his body in the saddle.

Aylinn, as was necessary with the were mounts, kept to one side. That there was a bout with Power brewing, she was aware. Kethan reached her, but even of his report she repeated only the bare facts to the mage as they started this steady ride westward.

She glanced now at Trussant, keeping perfect pace with her mare, and for a moment was startled. Had there been a shadow of a form in the saddle there? What if the Powers they had drawn and released were thinning some curtain of time or space? Then she shook her head at such folly. No shadow, just Uta, holding with a deep-clawed grip to her perch.

The cat's head was turned toward the girl now, those large eyes surveying her with a kind of measurement, a questioning Aylinn could not understand.

It seemed that the farther they rode, the more sere and ominous the land became. There was still vegetation—grass—a stunted tree or so. While now across the far horizon arose a banding which could only mean heights, and stark ones.

Out of the tall grass trotted a well-known shape and Aylinn sighed with relief. Then Kethan arose man tall and waited for her.

The coming of the were broke through that isolation which had held Ibycus all through the past hours. He wheeled his unwilling mount and rode up to them.

“Report!” His voice held no hint of friendliness. He might have been a war leader irritated by the late arrival of some scout.

Kethan's face was oddly stretched and now he raised hand to mouth and brought out a piece of dull crystal which, to Aylinn, looked much like the setting of the mage's ring. It flared like make-light and on the mage's hand that ring answered with as brief and bright a surge of light.

“You bring us what?” That sharpness was not gone from the mage's tone.

“Perhaps allies, perhaps only goodwill, perhaps a key to what lies before us,” Kethan answered. “The winged people will welcome us if we follow their road—and they have no goodwill for Jakata.”



Ibycus nodded. "Well enough. Is there proper camp land near, a place which can be warded well?"

"Beyond the second rise is a stream—though it is hardly more than a trickle."

Aylinn's head had swung in the direction of her brother's pointing finger. Her moonflower wand was extended to follow the line he indicated.

The sun was nearly down, hidden now behind that line of hills beyond, and only the brilliantly painted sky gave them light.

"It is clear," the girl said. "No ward, no shadows in wait."

"Ward?" Firdun had come up to join them. He had changed, Kethan thought, glancing up at him. When they had left the Eyrie, a youth had ridden with them. Now it was as if some of the great burden of what must be Ibycus's years had shifted to Firdun. Now, like Aylinn, he faced in the same direction.

"Barren land," he said a moment later.

"Let us to it, then." The mage, still frowning, waved Kethan into the saddle. Uta quickly shifted to clear space for him and they rode with the rest strung out behind him.

Elysha, as Ibycus, had been silent through that march. Letting her horse's reins fall, though the mount appeared willing to follow the right trail, she had turned her bracelets around and around her wrists, her eyes half hooded as she went. Firdun had felt an indrawing of Power even as he had sensed when those of the Eyrie were about to meld. He had seen her with Ibycus earlier in the day, and the ill temper of the mage had first shown then. It could well be that this mistress of glamorie was evoking her own talent for some reason.

They crossed one of the rounded hills and there was indeed the scent of water to set their beasts to a faster pace. However, at the mage's orders, their party broke in two as they dismounted. Guret and his fellow tribesmen offed the camp gear from the horses and then herded all the beasts downstream, leaving a clear space between them. Hardin had hesitated, glancing from the mage to the Kioga, but when Ibycus showed no sign of dismissal, he remained.

A beckoning finger brought Firdun to the mage's side.



“Warding we need, and you alone can hold it here, for another task will be mine. We know that Jakata already plays with Powers which may have escaped him—even though we have not yet been attacked. Therefore give me such a warding as could stand against the very Wary One of Uin.”

Firdun swallowed before he answered. “Lord, what talent I have is at your command. Whether that is great or less can only be measured in action.”

“And action we shall certainly have!” Ibycus said sourly, swinging away to approach Elysha. She had slipped her bracelets from her wrists, and Kethan was sure that he saw a line of smoky purple haze wreath them as she clicked them together end to end so now she held a cirlet.

It was Hardin who seemed to know what was needed without being ordered. He pulled loose an arm’s grasp of the grass about, then another, unrolling the cloak he had been lent and spreading it over the improvised bed.

Without a word, Elysha fastened the cirlet of her bracelets over her head so that it banded across her forehead. She then held out her left hand to Aylinn.

“Our Lady’s mount runs the sky this night, sister, in full glory. You are my anchorage. Her chosen.”

Aylinn nodded. As Elysha settled herself on the grassy nest, Aylinn took that outstretched hand and wrapped it under hers about the wand. The mage moved slowly, reluctantly, Kethan thought. However, he at last seated himself at Elysha’s head.

“Ward!” he again commanded. Firdun summoned in a rush his talent. He mind-built a wall of fire and it shone moon-bright about them. Perhaps it was even beyond just his own seeing now, for he heard a gasp which might have come from Hardin.

Kethan had knelt behind his foster sister, his hands cupping her shoulders lightly. Then he was aware of a weight against his own back, heard the soft purr of Uta in his ears. What powers the strange cat might have were apparently to be freely offered.

Ibycus’s hands moved and the guide gem came to life, as did the moonflower of Aylinn’s wand. His lips were shaping words, yet



silently so no sound except their own heightened breathing broke the silence of the dusk. Slowly, a sentry on duty, Firdun paced around the wall his eyes saw, if theirs did not. Always, with each step, he strengthened the section he passed with all the vigor he could summon.

It seemed to Kethan that time had stopped, or that they had stepped beyond the pull of its stream. Around Elysha's head the brilliance of the jewels increased until they spread to mask her features with violet light.

The movement of the mage's hands was continuous. He was leaning slightly forward as if that fire about Elysha's head was drawing him.

The woman's body lay motionless. Kethan could no longer see even the steady rise and fall of her breast, as if breath itself had left her.

He was more and more aware of Uta's warmth against him, for, from Elysha and the mage, there now spread a chill. Aylinn's flesh, too, was cold. He willed, with the strength of both man and pard, warmth into her. And always Firdun walked his sentry.

There was a faint cry from Elysha. Quickly Ibycus's right hand flashed downward to lie heart high on her breast and Kethan felt Aylinn tense, and strove to give her aid.

Firdun's pace quickened. Now Kethan could see Firdun had caught upon Hardin and drew him up and along with him. The boy might not have any talent, but he was moon-blessed and so had some strength of will and body to add to theirs.

The warmth Uta gave him, Kethan passed on as he could. It seemed almost as if that purr had become a chant, one never meant for human ears to hear.

"I am here." Not Elysha's voice, though her lips had opened upon the words. It was a man who spoke.

"What can you tell us of the Gate of Ranchild?" Ibycus asked.

First it would seem that the other had no answer, for there was a long pause. And then:

"Ranchild ruled in Garth Howell in his day. The Gryphon found him a dire danger. He was said to be on his way to escape



through the gate when Landsil matched with him and won. If there is memory of the gate, it lies within Garth Howell.”

“What does Garth Howell now?”

“They appear to bide their time. Since Jakata went forth, they have kept strictly within their own wards.”

“And there is nothing more about the gate?” pressed Ibycus.

“Only that it is in the Land of the Dead to the west and none have sought it since Ranchild went. Some say that Landsil hurled him through and sealed it. But seals wear with time. What would you have us do?”

“There may be more to learn at Lormt.”

“We shall ask as best we can. But those of Lormt did not gather much from Arvon—nothing after the Great War. If you need what we have to give if and when you reach the gate—ask. There are Dark forces abroad—they are easily sensed. This Jakata may be far more than he seems.”

Elysha suddenly moaned. Her head swung from side to side. Kethan felt the strong pull through Aylinn. Yes, the Dark was moving and not only in Arvon, but also here!

Did or did not a shape pace now outside Firdun’s ward? Was it only visible to sense and not to sight? The old adage that Power drew Power might well be proven here this night. Kethan dared to loose a fraction of beast’s gifts of sight, sound, smell—

Smell! The scent was very faint, but it held all the vileness he had found at the place of the well. Neither sight nor sound served him and still he could see that Firdun and the boy from Silvermantle, hand-linked now, moved more slowly, Firdun half facing outward as if he matched pace with something which was slyly testing the strength of their defenses.

Ibycus arched over Elysha’s head, still behazed by the color from her cirlet. She quieted. Then suddenly she sat bolt upright, brushing against the mage. Her eyes were like brilliant holes to be seen through the haze.

Aylinn swung the moon wand between those eyes and the outer darkness as Elysha’s head turned in that direction. And the pull of her need drained from Kethan almost more than he could give.



The haze about her head was fading and they could see the twist of her features. Fear, yes, but, more than that, loathing, as if she looked upon something grossly unnatural.

Ibycus had slewed around in the same direction and now his hands were grasping his own staff. From his forefinger shot the beam of the ring, brilliantly white.

“Not—so!” Those words came from Elysha. The full-throated masculine voice began to fade as if the speaker drew farther from them. Elysha tried to twist free the hand Aylinn had anchored to the wand—the other went to pluck at the circlet.

Both bracelets were now loose in her left hand, but she remained linked to Aylinn. She swung the length of glowing gems in the air and it was like lightning striking over Firdun’s head—out into what now seemed the depth of dark beyond.

Ibycus’s staff moved, raised, pointing in the same direction as those lightning flashes. They snapped against the length of age-hardened wood, seeming to use it as a guide outward.

Firdun leaped to one side, dragging Hardin with him. That spear point of flame, fashioned by its contact with the mage’s staff, struck outward.

Rage—pain—denial—rage—

Like gusts of wind those emotions burst forth—but all beyond the barrier Firdun had set. Now the mage was shoulder to shoulder with him, still aiming the living fire outward. The backwash of raw hatred was like the blast of a tempest. They shivered under it, but none of them dropped hand, lost control.

“By the Stars of the Great Ones, by the will of That Beyond, by the oathed Power of the Light.” It was Firdun who cast that incantation. “By Landsil, by Theorn, by Gailarian, and Thrius, by the Claws of the Gryphon, the fangs of the weres, the will of the Lady—we are no meat for your eating.”

Was he actually growing taller with every word, Ibycus seeming in his shadow? Now he reached out and caught at the mage’s staff. Nor did Ibycus attempt to deny him that touch.

“Get you into the Dark from which you crawled.” There was the



same force in Firdun's command as there might have been in the mage's earlier. "By _____ it is willed!"

The name he called upon then was like a blast of storm upon them all and Kethan knew that he had heard one of the Great Names which only the Power-possessed might use.

The fire wreathing the mage's staff drew from straight, spear-thin lines into a ball. It leaped forward. Kethan sensed what the wand controlled even as its Power burst all bonds. He had sight more of mind than body, when that fire broke upon a dark mass which swayed, and thrust forth limbs which were almost tentacles. He swayed and held his own position only by a great effort against waves of torment and rage which strove to tear them down even as the thing withdrew.

Ibycus had loosed his hold on the staff and Firdun was plainly leaning upon it to keep himself erect. Aylinn released Elysha's hold on the moon wand. It fell to her knees as if she could not hold it, light as it was. Kethan felt Uta's warmth vanish. The cat must have loosed her hold on him.

Though the strength was wrung out of them all, they knew also that they were free. But Firdun swung around to face Ibycus squarely.

"What have you done to me?" His voice scaled up as if he were back in boyhood again.

"Nothing." The mage seemed in no hurry to take back his staff, which Firdun was thrusting in his direction. "We must all make our choices for ourselves, Gryphon-born."

Firdun lifted the staff as if he would hurl it from him. Then, his eyes seeming afire, he threw it so the mage caught it easily before it touched the ground.

"I will choose as I wish," the young man said. "I am what I am—and none shall make me other."

Ibycus smiled wearily. "So say we all upon occasion. Yes, your choice is your own. But at this moment we are bound together and only failure of our mission will tear us apart."

Firdun's head went down. His empty hands clasped, opened,



and clasped again. Then he finally raised one and muttered some words, and Kethan knew their ward was down.

Aylinn leaned back against her foster brother's shoulder. "It is not well," she said, so softly that he hardly heard her.

"In what way?"

"Kethan, you know that I have sometimes—when the Lady empowers me—foresight. For Elysha—for him." She nodded toward Ibycus. "It is perhaps only my inner fear, but out of this we shall all come changed. We have taken up the weapons of the Great Old Ones and some of those are not for us."



As always they all felt the overpowering fatigue which followed the Power drain. And they were eager to join the Kioga, eat of roasting grass hens on improvised spits at the fire, drink, and find their bedrolls. Firdun had not spoken with any since they had left the place he had warded. He ate little and put his bedroll a little apart. There was a strange, set cast to his features, as if he were no longer the comrade they had known. Now and again he looked toward Ibycus, scowling, as if the mage had set him to some task he hated.

Even as Firdun watched the mage covertly, so Kethan saw Aylinn watch Firdun. Her face was nearly as sober as his. With the moon directly above them, she, too, drew apart, and Kethan knew that she communed in her own way with the Lady, this time with a troubled heart.

He made very sure the stone he had brought from the winged ones was safe. He put it, wrapped in a bit of cloth, under where his head would rest—having a ghost of an idea that perhaps it would foster dreams. And this night he wanted to escape—escape into that dream of the valley guarded by stone cats and the black-furred, beautiful one who had enticed him there.

Only this time he did not go four-footed. He recognized the pillars with their seated cats, but he was all man this night in spite of his strong-willed desire to change.

Then *she* stepped into the open from behind one of the pillars—not a cat now. Her head with its short-cut, thick black hair came to



a little above his shoulder; her slender body revealed by the straight one-piece garment she wore was human, graceful, even as she had possessed feline grace before.

“Lady . . .” He hesitated, not knowing how to address her.

She smiled but did not answer. Instead she came to him, soft-footed, and raised both hands to draw down his head. He felt her soft lips nuzzle against his cheek.

“Great Warrior,” she breathed rather than spoke. “It has been so long for this one.”

Without being fully conscious of his action, Kethan’s arms went about her, drawing her even closer.

“Beautiful one—who are you who comes to me so?”

He heard a soft chuckle. “Learn the answer to that, Great Warrior, and when I come I shall stay—as you wish. It has been so long.” Now she sighed.

Even as she sighed, she faded to nothingness in his arms and was gone. And he cried out hopelessly even as he saw the cat pillars also spin into nothingness.

If he dreamed more that night he did not remember it. With the morning his frustration sent him out on scout even before the camp was dismantled.

He took the same trail he had followed before, save that he no longer tried to trace out the scent of Jakata’s people. The winged ones had promised an easier way to what they called the Land of the Dead, and Ibycus believed that that was the direction in which Jakata was headed—if he had survived the evil he had called up.

“Though doubtless he did,” the mage had commented as they decided on Kethan’s direction, “or we would not have been tracked last night. Unless he loosed what cannot be controlled. But if that were so, this”—he held out his finger ring, the same dull stone now power empty—“would have given us warning.”

The trail led them more to the north, and as the day advanced, the distant mountains raised a jagged barrier across the horizon. Once they skirted ruins of some size—a keep which might have been even greater than their Gryphon’s Eyrie, Firdun thought. But they did not approach closely, and there was a feeling of desolation



and despair which appeared to reach out to them from those tumbled walls.

Here, too, were the remains of walled fields where once crops had been sown. Even here and there a degenerate lone stalk of grain waved a tassel in the breeze. But the travelers did avail themselves of what was furnished by an ancient orchard. Most of the older trees had moldered away, but there had been fresh saplings arising from long-rotted fruit. And several of these bore a heavily ripe crop, so the travelers made that their nooning and relished the sweetness of fresh fruit again.

By afternoon they had reached the beginning of the heights. There was the remains of an old road, but they did not follow that. Rather, Kethan scouted a more difficult way up and down the reaches of some valleys, being careful to note if there were any signs of past habitation there. A large cellar hole suggested that there might once have been a hunting lodge. About it was a strong smell of bear and he mind-sent back a warning to avoid the possible den.

For two days they traveled so. At first their pace was slow, for they had all suffered from the draining of Power, but strength returned. Firdun had kept to himself. Nor did he sleep well at night, for the import of what had happened weighed upon him. He was no adept like Alon, no master of both the lesser and the great Powers. Yet he could not deny that in those moments when he had grasped Ibycus's staff it had seemed that a key turned deep within him.

He bit down upon sour fear. Many times he had wondered how Kethan could reconcile his two selves, pard and man. Now he wondered if he himself had, in some way, been splintered and now carried a second being within. Though he had always felt the loss of not being one of the melding Eyrie, yet that act of his had seemed to come as if he had planned it and knew that it would succeed.

"Firdun?" Startled, he looked up. They had dismounted to lead their horses up a rough grade. He realized that his horse had been snorting and sidling, and he saw that Aylinn with Morna had caught up with him.

"Moonlady?" he returned, soothing his horse. She wretched her



reins about Morna's saddle horn and the were horse dropped back, still following steadily.

"But I am Aylinn," she said now. "Trail companions follow no formal speech. Firdun, is all well with you?"

He wanted to turn her off with a quick denial. Somehow he could not.

"I wonder," he said slowly, finding it difficult to put his unease into words, "if I am still Firdun."

"The Power uses us hard sometimes. But one carries what one was born to hold. If you are more than warder, more than what your kin line has believed, is it not better to face that and accept? I . . . sometimes I can foresee . . . a little."

She was looking beyond him upslope now to where Elysha was walking beside her mare. Ibycus was in the lead well ahead; Aylinn had not seen them together since the night of bespelling.

"And you have foreseen?" Firdun demanded. Perhaps she *could* supply some answer to his disordered musings.

"Loss," she said quietly. "Just an emptiness where life should be."

"For all of us?" he asked again, entirely alert now.

"No. Nor can I tell you which in surety. But there will be gain also, Firdun. Do not shrink from what will come for you alone. It is as the Great Power designs. We are children and have our tasks to learn."

"Nor is that easy!" His voice was harsh. "Aylinn, you are a healer—how can one heal a fear of the unknown?"

"One accepts," she answered softly. "Firdun, you doubt yourself. Look upon what stands behind you. You are of the Gryphon line—Kerovan fathered you, Joison is your mother. They were far apart in talents and gifts yet they came together to form a stronger whole. I heard you call on Landsil in the night. Would one of little talent dare such an awakening of old forces?"

"Ibycus stands alone." He stared ahead to where the mage was just disappearing over the crest of the height up which they were making their way. "I—I do not want such a life."

"Nor need you choose so. Think of Alon, or Hilarion. Do they



hold themselves apart from others, adepts though they be? Ibycus is the ancient warden of this land, but he is also a man and makes men's choices, and others can do also. Ah, look!"

She suddenly pointed to the sky. There was a dark speck there, growing ever larger as they watched. Somehow it did not have the right shape to be a bird.

"One of the flying people!" the girl cried as it sank behind the heights. "What freedom—to use the very sky as a path."

They quickened pace and then she dropped back to Morna and Trussant, where Uta rode with the air of one for whom that very mount had been trained. The last scramble up the slope was a slippery one and they had to take it with caution, though they longed to run.

Then at last they looked out on a plateau of red, black-veined rock and saw Kethan, in pard form, accompanied by a small figure who had discarded the wings and came forward to greet the newcomers.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



The Road to the Land of the Dead, the Waste

There had once been a road through these brittle cliffs, but lava flow and violent earth-twisting had left only the faintest traces. The badly shattered surface was little trouble for those winged forms coasting above the party as they now crawled painfully along. But this was the only way to what they sought.



Now they rode at a walking pace and in armor, for the warning given them had been clear. This broken land had its own menaces, although Kethan could not guess what might lair in such a desolate place.

Then the brighter-colored lands over which they traveled were well behind them. Coarse black sand drifted and the winged ones warned of setting foot on the porous rock where domed bubbles could break under any weight and entrap man or beast in the hollow below.

They wound single file in the direction their winged scouts waved them, often having to dismount and lead their horses. Aylinn was kept busy at each pause tending cuts from the raw knife edges of the broken stones, and Kethan's pads would have been lamed within an hour, so he rode as a man.

It was on the second day's journey into this dire place that they came upon one of the reptilian mounts of a Garth Howell breed. It had been literally torn apart, most of its belly gone and the rest clawed and broken.

Rock crawler.

It was from Uta that send had come. Kethan could smell the fetor of the dead thing and now he sighted what seemed to be a narrow trail metallically bright under the sun. It looped down from the heights above and, even as he eyed it, Trussant gave one of the deep whinnies of his kind and sidled as far as he could from corpse and trail.

What is this thing? Kethan aimed at the cat, who spat as the horse whinnied, her ears flattening against her skull.

Crawler—eater of all.

She had no more sent that message than one of the high rocks moved, uncoiled, became something alive. The were's shout of warning carried along the trail as he urged his mount around to face the thing.

Its rough skin matched exactly the rocks over which it now traveled, so movement alone could reveal its presence. A huge mouth gaped, showing a double row of stained teeth.

He could see no legs as it slid down toward him, nor did it curve



its passage as might a snake. Instead it appeared to slip with ease over the most jagged fringes of the rocks, leaving behind a metallic, gleaming trail, perhaps of slime.

Nor did it utter any sound. But the horses of the party were going wild and Kethan saw Ibycus bucked from his seat to land on the sharp fragments of the trail.

The thing reared its forepart now. Greenish liquid dripped from the corners of its huge mouth. Kethan could distinguish neither eyes nor ears, but plainly this creature had some sense which alerted it and drew it in his direction. He caught Uta by the back of her neck, dropped her behind him, and then drew sword.

Weres did not fight with fang and claw alone. The battle heat was rising fast in him, but he did not will the change this time. Plainly the creature was heavily defended with scales and he thought even a pard would have no chance with this.

“Together.” Firdun forced his horse in beside Kethan. “The head.”

Yes, the head. But there was no eye one could transfix, only that open cavern of a mouth. Both horses were wild with fear and Kethan knew that they could not force the animals closer. He lunged out of the saddle and ducked to avoid the metal battle shoes as Trussant reared.

There came the sharp whistle of Kioga arrows. But those which reached the thing clicked harmlessly to the ground.

“On the move,” he half shouted over the din of the milling party behind. “I take right.”

“So be it!” Firdun made answer. He was also afoot. But he was swinging something in one hand, one of the saddlebags.

And the monstrous head seemed to center on that. Kethan had scrambled up the short incline. The vile stench which arose from it set him gasping for air. That bag Firdun had hurled was caught, the great teeth clamped on it.

“The head.”

Kethan had not needed that suggestion. In spite of the weight of his mail and sword, he leaped, not as surely as the pard might have done, but well enough to bring him tottering on the back of the



thing. His boots slipped and then found purchase on the huge back scales which arose in ridged lines.

He fully expected the monster to hump its body, endeavoring so to throw him off. But that did not come. Instead he saw Firdun below moving from side to side, throwing rocks which left his hands cut and bleeding, so holding the attention of the monster.

Twice it lowered its head under that barrage of rocks. Firdun had been joined by Guret in the assault now. Apparently this rock-bred thing was slow of brain. Kethan leaned forward a fraction. Yes, when the head swung to his right he thought he could see a kind of dark crevice between the scales. They could not be entirely fast set or the thing could not move.

“To the right,” he shouted.

He almost brought about his disaster, for his voice coming from above appeared to reach some hidden hearing organ of the crawler. It lifted its head with a jerk and Kethan fell to his knees, feeling the points of those ridge scales cut his flesh. But he did not lose his grip on his sword, nor did he slip to the ground. Now the rain of rocks was coming from his right and that head went down again.

His chance was a small one and he dared not wait any longer to take it. Holding the sword with both hands, he thrust down with all his strength and skill at that dark line which might be a seam between the scales.

The quan iron blade struck, was held for a moment, and then went deep, as Kethan pushed with all the might he could summon. But he could not hold that long. This time the thick body beneath him convulsed. The forepart arose with a twist which tore loose his hold on the sword hilt and he was tossed out and down, landing painfully with one hand impaled on a splinter of rock.

The massive body convulsed again and rolled toward Kethan, who was too dazed and wedged within the rocks to evade it. Down from the skies swooped the winged guides, their hooked spears ready. The spears caught and held in the rough ridges of that body, shifting it enough so that Kethan escaped the full impact of the dying creature. His legs were trapped beneath its weight, but that was all.



Firdun was already climbing to where the were lay, and behind him came Hardin and Guret. Their united strength shoved the still-quivering body from him and then he was pulled free and aided in descent to join the rest of the party.



They later learned from the winged folk that there were but a few of these rock crawlers and each jealously guarded its own hunting space, so there was little chance of a second attack.

Kethan, screwing his face from the potion Aylinn forced upon him, his hand bound with more of her healing salves, knew that for the present he could not change, and a part of him found the pain of that realization as sharp as a wound.

There were no streams or springs in this desolate barren country. But, as they climbed another peak to wedge through, the air which struck them carried a new scent.

“Sea winds!” Elysha said. “We come to the very end of the world, Master Mage.”

Ibycus had been riding as one deep in thought, all his attention turned inward, so that Firdun had urged his mount closer and once or twice caught at the loose reins the mage seemed almost ready to let fall.

“The end of the world . . .” Kethan had seen the great sea of the east on a visit to the Dales seasons ago. But that there was another sea, no man had ever said. Certainly the Sulcars, who prided themselves on their mastery of the waves, never mentioned other waters to be plowed.

Ibycus’s head jerked up as if he had been pulled awake from some dream or trance.

“Yes,” he repeated somberly, “there awaits the end of the world.”

However, they were not the first to find it, for one of their winged guides glided overhead and landed neatly on the outcrop of rock almost directly in the mage’s path, so he had to pull up his horse.

Those of evil—wait. Firdun was close enough to the other two to pick up the send. *Their fighters stand ready for battle. He who wears the cloak of the Dark goes ahead to call his master.*



There are the black knights below, came back Aylinn's send. They stand ready and there is an open plain.

They halted and Ibycus was again his alert self, as if he had made some decision and would stand by it.

"Guret," he called, and the Kioga, who had dismounted to inspect his horse's hooves, raised his head and came forward. "Remember the Take Song of Warren?"

The horsemaster blinked and then nodded. "It is a desperate trick, Lord." He glanced back at the huddled horse people. "And a deadly one." The tribesman's jaw was set and it seemed for a moment he might defy Ibycus's suggestions.

Kethan slipped his arm out of the sling. The weight of the sword was back; Hardin had worked it out of the body of that rocky nightmare. Firdun was drawing his own blade.

"Arrows," he said. "Kioga are good marksmen. But the beasts will have little protection."

Guret's face was bleak. "If it must be so, let it be."

He strode back to where his tribesmen were and at his orders they began to unload, dropping the packs without much caution. They were scowling and it was plain they were opposed to what was to be done. Kethan pushed ahead a little.

The remnants of the old road gave patches of good footing. But they were emerging on a plain of what looked to be coarse black sand, bad footing for any horseback maneuvers. Yes, there were those who waited. Six of them, so encased in black armor to match the footing under their snake-headed mounts as to seem fashioned completely of metal.

Each carried a tube, its butt against the rider's hip. And one could well believe that they held the secret of some old and powerful weapon. Of Jakata and his two attendants there was only a glimpse. They were urging their own horses through the slippery and hoof-engulfing surface of the plain, headed for a vast dome of black rock.

Aylinn had her bow, Kethan and Firdun had their swords, Hardin one of the Kioga boar spears. Who knew what forces the mage or Elysha could summon?



However, Ibycus was speaking again and even the three winged ones who had been the guides for this day had alighted within hearing.

“Those are deadly killers,” the mage said slowly. “But they are a wall we must pass. Firdun, it may well take both of us to ward what Jakata would open. Thus . . .” He paused so long Kethan believed that he did not want to continue at all. The mage suddenly seemed changed. This haggared man was not the holder of Power that Kethan had known for so long, but rather one who for the first time was gnawed by doubt.

“Thus—” again it was Elysha who spoke aloud what must be his thoughts, “comrades, let Guret do what his kinsman of long ago did in battle. Loose the mounts which are free, ride with them, and open a way, for we are of little account, being only servants of the Light, and we use what weapons we must in that service!”

There was a murmur from the Kioga. Firdun well knew the bonds between rider and horse with those people; he had been a sworn brother in the tents since childhood.

“Cut us a path, servants of Light!” Ibycus’s voice held his old decisiveness now.

The Kioga were passing among the animals. By each horse, one of the Kioga stopped, and, putting hands to either side of its head, touched his own forehead to that of the beast and held it so for a breath out of time.

They knew that they had been sighted. That grim black line below had come to a halt. The winged people took to the air and Kethan wondered if they were withdrawing. Claws caught at his shoulders for a firm hold. He was so used to Uta’s presence now that he had not even known when she had taken her place with him.

Then Guret cried out something with the ring of a battle slogan. The free animals went forward at a trot and then a gallop. Behind them rode the three Kioga, Kethan, and Aylinn. The reins of Morna laid loosely as his foster sister set arrow to bow, her moon wand thrust to safety at her belt.

Behind them came Ibycus, flanked by Firdun and Elysha—who



had taken her place even though Ibycus had opened his mouth as if to refuse her.

They were down from the heights now. The beasts of their train were slipping and plunging, their race hindered by the sand which trapped their feet.

One of those black knights moved, reversed a tube he held, and pointed to the Kioga stallion who led that race. There was a flash of flame and the horse screamed in agony, but the pace of the others carried them on.

The Kioga were shooting and Kethan saw one knight jerk and fall from his saddle, but mainly the tribesmen had been aiming at the mounts of that grim company and three sank, bristling with arrows.

Then Trussant, aflame with battle rage, brought Kethan close enough to exchange blows with one of the knights. They were sending their flames and Kethan felt the sear of one flash which came too near. He ducked and cut not at the body of the knight but at those hands which grasped the deadly rod. The quan iron blazed almost as brightly as the flames and passed, cutting off both gauntleted hands, deep into the neck of the serpent horse, whose shriek below was lost in other screams and cries. The winged people were taking their own vengeance, swooping over the now-broken line of knights to hook with their spears and drag from their saddles men even as they took aim.

Kethan could sense no magic. This was a fight free from Power and he rejoiced in it even though the change was not on him.

The melee swung this way and that. There were bodies of both beasts and men trampled into the sand. The fire weapons appeared to be easily exhausted. Perhaps, Kethan thought fleetingly, they were the gift of Dark Power and could not be recharged.

He was dimly aware that Uta's weight was no longer against his back. Perhaps she had been swept from her hold. Then there was no one ahead of him and he urged Trussant around.

One of the armor-encased knights staggered by him on foot, both hands clawing at his own head. Uta's black form was pressed



as tightly to his helm as when she rode with Kethan, but now her claws were locked in the visor as she spat and howled her anger.

The knight stumbled closer and Kethan swung his sword, taking the same care he would have under his father's eyes in the arms court of the Green Tower. A blow on the shoulder sent the staggering man to his knees and Trussant reared as trained, bringing down both quan-iron-shod hooves on the faltering man, driving him deep into the sand as Uta sprang free.

Kethan looked around for another enemy. But what he saw was only the wastage at the end of the battle. The knights and the monster mounts lay dead. But also there were the bodies of seared horses, and a limping Kioga was cutting the throats of some who still screamed.

Jakata's guard had failed, but somehow Kethan was sure that the Dark Mage had already forgotten these servants, that he was too intent upon reaching his goal.

Now the were raised his head and stared toward that black hump. He saw riders making the best speed they could in the sand and knew that Ibycus, Elysha, and Firdun had gotten through.

Still there was no end. Morna moved up beside him. Aylinn's bow was gone, her moonflower wand was in her hands, her eyes were wide.

"We must go on." She echoed his own thoughts.

They had lost Obred, and Guret rode chanting the death song of a warrior who had won his triumph. But they felt too much the pressure which was building around them now to remain.

For there was Power awakening. Would they be in time to stop Jakata from his spelling? They could not urge their horses now to more than a walk and the party ahead grew smaller and smaller, sometimes half covered by the sand which arose a little like dust to cloak them.

Of Jakata and those with him, Kethan could no longer catch sight. But he hoped that the other three were close enough behind Jakata to interfere with any sorcery he might intend.

The spells which summoned or controlled major Powers were never easily enacted and Jakata would need time.



There was a small black shape trotting by the side of his horse. Uta! He called to her, but she kept steadily on as if she were now on some quest of her own and must not be distracted from it.

She was even drawing ahead, for, though Trussant kept to the best pace Kethan could urge on him, the cat steadily left him behind. She was not running, yet the shifting sand did not appear to slow her.

However, the sensation of drawing Powers was increasing. And now it weighted them down, though they fought against it. Aylinn summoned Hardin, Guret, and Lero to join her. Each of them she touched in turn with the moonflower, holding it out to Kethan at the last.

The heaviness which had been weighing upon him was lessened. But something else was astir. At first he thought that the black sand might have been summoned up in dust devils such as plagued many who ventured into the Waste.

Only this was not black—the haze was more rust red in shade—and it did not whirl, it stood. He blinked twice. Uta was not walking in sand, she was pattering down a street—a wider, better-paved way than even one of the Dale seaports could boast. While on either hand arose, as plants might grow out of rich earth, walls, houses, mighty towers, and buildings. Glamorie he well knew, but even though he could tell what it was, he could no longer pierce through it.

Also he thought that he caught glimpses now and then of shadow figures moving among those buildings, even along the pavement on which he now appeared to ride. Before him, that hump of black rock which had become their goal was fast altering. It formed an arch with carven pillars on either side.

Yet there was also a menace in these shadows. Kethan felt the newcomers were far from welcome here, and he began to watch alertly on each side the doorways in those buildings, the alleys and street mouths which they passed.

The shadows took on no stronger outlines. All of his party were riding close together now. The winged people had not accompanied them and Kethan felt suddenly very wary and alone.



He longed to change, but dared not, knowing that in spite of Aylinn's treatment he could not go four-footed until better healed.

"Glamorie," he said aloud as if to reassure himself.

"True," his foster sister answered. "It is out of the past—we are seeing what once was. Time itself is being drawn to this place."

He had always heard that the Great Old Ones had cities and castles—which their descendants had not been able to match. This must have been one of them. The space before the arch cleared, seemed to tighten in an odd way as if more substance had been added to the ghostly frame. Elysha dealt in glamorie—was it she who was calling back what once was?

That flavor of sea wind in the air was strong. Once this must have been a lord among cities—until twisted Power brought it to bare rock.

The road widened as they neared the gate so that there was a large space. There stood those they sought, both friend and foe.

CHAPTER THIRTY



An End and a Beginning, the Waste

The blood-red robe of the one figure before the center portion of the gate identified Jakata. He was standing, but those two sages who had accompanied him were huddled to the ground, unmoving. Kethan wondered briefly if they had served as some sacrifices for their master.

He had to call upon his own reserves under the weaving, the



massing of Power centered here. Somehow he had slipped from the saddle and was afoot. A figure moved to his right—Aylinn, her moon wand held in both hands before her breast. The flower which topped it seemed wan—as if it, also, had been sucked dry of potency. On his left was Hardin, and behind him Guret and Lero. Then he was aware that he was indeed tramping on stone pavement, that the walls were solid.

They were also drawing in, those wisps of shadows which had the faint likeness to beings. Yet none of them had features he could distinguish, nor did any approach close enough to touch.

The three who had gone before stood as steady as Jakata. Ibycus was in the center, his staff held in both of his hands. Somehow he appeared to loom taller, as if what he called upon filled him past the confines of his body. To his left was Elysha, the blaze of her bracelets bands of fire. She was calm of face as one who waited, having marshaled all her strength and contained it ready.

Firdun's sword and helm lay slightly behind him. He might have tossed aside as useless those weapons of common humankind. The youth who had ridden out of the Eyrie was gone now. His gaunt face was strained, as if he also gathered and held that which must be used in this final meeting.

Forward trotted another, her black fur allowing her to be easily seen. She moved with purpose as if she had been summoned and must answer. So Uta came to Elysha and stood statue still.

Kethan moved on, Aylinn matching him step for step. He did not know what had become of the others. Perhaps this last battle was not for them. The pard in him wished for freedom, fought to take form, swelling with the waves of energy circling about them, but he held to his present form. Somehow he understood that, were he to release that other within, he might forever lose the man in the beast.

He could hear the faint crooning song Aylinn was voicing. Words so old that time had nearly erased them. The moon was not above to favor her now, but still she entered into the Maiden's ritual. And her moonflower appeared to revive.

Firdun stared straight ahead of him, not at the red-robed figure



who postured and chanted before the gate. The man was but the key; it was what lay beyond him that must be faced.

Jakata was well aware of them—how else could it be with the currents of magic circling about? Yet he had not glanced in their direction, his attention all for what he would do.

His black staff pointed first to one of the prone sages and then to the other. It was not the bodies which arose at his bidding, but shadow things, more material than those Kethan had seen in the city. But all which was human and of the world of light lay still, now just husks discarded.

Those shadows flanked Jakata, one on either side. And they changed, growing taller, more visible. It was they who turned to face Ibycus and the others now.

The ring of the mage's finger was blazing. He gripped his staff almost as if it were an anchorage he must hold to.

"Neevor . . ." That thing out of the shadows which had arisen on Jakata's left at his bidding showed a discernible face now. It was no monster—there was almost a serene beauty in it. However, Firdun, seeing it, felt an icy chill.

"Neevor!" Those lips were shaping a small tight smile. "Well met, brother."

Ibycus's features were set. He looked beyond the thing which addressed him at Jakata.

"Brother." That greeting was repeated softly, almost caressingly. "We meet again."

"Not so," the mage returned. "Long ago our paths parted, if you are indeed some remnant of him whose liking you strive to wear. At Car Re Targen there was a parting, and Car Re Targen has been tumbled stone for countless seasons. You are not Mawlin—you are not!"

"Deny me as you please, I stand here, brother."

He was fully solid now—that shadow-born thing. And such a one as might loom well over Ibycus, only the mage raised his ring hand and the beam of light from that stone struck full into the face of the thing slowly advancing. It writhed, cried out.



"Ill done, brother. Death you have given, death you will have in return."

"Ill lived," Ibycus answered, "and even more ill in dying. You do not walk again."

There was agony twisting that fair face now and Firdun swayed, for a pain which was not his and yet seemed of his giving struck through him. Then it was gone. He saw that Ibycus leaned now on his staff as if he needed its support.

Almost within the archway Jakata postured and moved as he might in some formal dance at a feasting.

"Ibycus . . ." the second of the shadow-born spoke. This was a woman. As her companion, she was fair of face, well endowed of body. Looking upon her, Firdun felt a drawing which almost brought him a half step forward.

"Beloved." Her voice was husky; it beckoned, promised. What man could stand against the lure she had become?

"Love does not last past betrayal, Athal who was."

"I am not *was*—beloved—I *am!*" She opened wide her arms.

Firdun almost could have rushed forward, but that call was not for him. He saw from the corner of his eyes the purple blaze which now seemed to half hide Elysha.

The woman-thing laughed and one wanted to join with her. A musky, languorous scent filled the air. Her eyes promised . . .

"Remember the morning in the great chamber—Ibycus? Then you swore many things, did you not? Among them an eternal bond for us. Remember the night upon the river when you said the very stars were mirrored in my eyes and you were in your might? Remember—"

"Remember," Ibycus interrupted her languorous voice, "how it was with you when we came to the last stand at Weyrnhold."

Tears came into those large eyes, spilled over on her ivory cheeks.

"I am your true love, Ibycus, come again. Weyrnhold was long ago—I was young—and afraid."

"Afraid?" That word uttered with scorn had not come from the



mage but from Elysha. "Afraid of losing what mattered most to you—your power over men."

The languorous beckoning look was gone. The vision's smile became as near a snarl as any human lips could shape.

"Stupid nothingling! Have all your sighs and longings brought *you* what you wish—this man?"

"What any man would give a woman must come with truth and trust," Elysha's voice rang out. "I do not lay your traps."

Athal laughed, spitefully this time. "And where do you stand, nothingling?"

"Beside him you would bend to your own purposes. I take only what is given freely."

"Enough!" Ibycus raised his ring hand. "We lose time with this chitter-chatter. Be gone, Athal, to seek again what you chose at Weyrnhold. Such choices are made only once and forever hold."

"No!" Her voice rose to a shriek. "You cannot be lost to—"

The thrust of the ring light caught her in midstep as she would have flung herself at him. Her screams rang in Firdun's head until he half turned on the mage who would inflict such pain on anyone, man or woman.

Then she was gone and with her disappeared that spell which had begun to entangle him also. Ibycus leaned even heavier on his staff. Elysha advanced a hand but did not quite touch him.

Then he straightened and his voice rang out with all the old force and power.

"Shall we cease with games, Jakata? You have thrown the challenge. Now make good your threat."

The Dark Mage had ceased his strange pacing back and forth. His wand swung between two fingers and he smiled as had the woman.

"You have lived long, Warden. I think your day is done. I have unlocked the gate and—"

His words centered all their eyes upon that archway. There was a hum in the air, a feeling of compression about them which was partly anticipation. The inside of the arch was black, as hidden as a



starless, moonless night—or the very depths in which the greatest of evil nested.

“Firdun!” Ibycus did not look at him, but he was instantly alert at that call. He must remember—it was now that that which had been given must be used.

He spoke the first of those words in unity with the mage. Even as Ibycus drew patterns in the air with his ring finger, so did Firdun echo them. He felt drawn out of himself, melded into something larger, stronger than he had ever known—he who could not meld.

And the chant continued. There was a roiling within the darkness of the gate. That which Jakata had summoned was at hand. Though Firdun could not see it, the stench filled his nostrils, the first wave of black power washed around him. But he held and the words came. As he spoke them, they issued from his lips not as speech but as points of light, and those points formed patterns.

Again came the surge of evil. Before them Jakata swelled, grew. His arms were flung out and then drawn to his breast as if he embraced the blackness, drew it toward him to be one with him or he the symbol of it.

A length of black lashed out as Jakata pointed now at Ibycus. The mage swayed, but his voice continued, and Firdun’s with it. More of the star-words gathered, and from one side came stabs of purple lightning such as Elysha had summoned before.

The giant which was now Jakata threw back his head and laughed. While behind him the dark beyond the gate thickened, split, thickened again, as if some force gathered there to be launched at the outer world.

Jakata was now framed in a half circling of tentacles which issued out of the dark. The words which were stars had clustered into a form like the head of a spear. Jakata moved. His leap did not carry him to Ibycus; instead his giant form faltered as he stumbled. The mage pointed with his ring.

The tottering figure of the Dark Mage was caught, light spear at his breast. And the force of that pushed him back. Those tentacles about him writhed, fastened on the other parts of the gateway as if



they would help to lever outward that which lurked hungrily within.

Some of the star-words had fallen on impact with the Dark Mage, but now Ibycus was beginning the formula for the second time and Firdun, feeling weaker by the moment, followed.

Then—the lashlike arms snapped closed, about Jakata. And within their hold he shrank once more to human size, his handsome face convulsed with pain and terror. Back into the archway he was drawn. Now the star-words were no longer a spear point. Rather they were shaping in the form of such an armed hatch as might defend a hold. Bars thickened, crossed, melted together.

A mighty blast of evil in its final struggle shook them all. Firdun was on his knees now, holding desperately as he could to the task he had been set. Warder he was—and this was the great warding.

He could see Ibycus weaving back and forth, keeping his feet only by his hold on the staff. Then from the mage's forefinger flashed a last and great starburst. It struck full center on that weaving of the light. There was a sound which sent them deaf. They all fell to the ground.

There was complete silence, Kethan, lying face down where that last great blast had thrown him, heard only his own breath coming raggedly. He made a great effort and forced his head around.

The gate . . . there was no gate, no arch, no city risen out of the past! Even the black lump which had stood there and which they had seen from afar was flattened—gone. Washing up about where it had been was a lacing of white wave. The clean smell of the sea came to clear the air and out of the sky wheeled birds, white of wing, swooping and soaring as if they played some game.

Between Kethan and that world's end lay the others. He had not been the first to stir. Aylinn was drawing herself inch by inch toward the two who lay so close together—Ibycus, his head half hidden by his crooked arm, and Elysha, whose hand rested on him as if she had made a final effort to aid.

There was Firdun also, his hands planted on the ground, visibly straining to raise his body. And beyond him another. Another . . .

Was Kethan caught once more in one of those dream visions?



No, the city was gone, the gate was gone, what remained now was only the truth. On his hands and knees Kethan pushed toward those who had defeated and survived—or had they?

Aylinn was on her knees now, pulling at Ibycus, striving to roll over his limp body. Elysha raised her head, struggled upward to aid the girl.

But for this moment there was another calling Kethan, calling him with something deeper than magic which could be learned, something which was bred into him and was now aroused.

He dared not try to rise higher than hands and knees, and, with each pull forward, his lungs labored and his head shook as he doggedly fought the terrible weakness of his body. He was dimly aware that Firdun was stirring now, but his attention was all for that other.

She lay curled as if she slept. Her face was toward him and she was all he remembered from that night vision—save that now on her forehead above and between her closed eyes was a point of light, star bright.

Kethan pulled himself along with a fierce need to know. Had life itself been drawn from her? He collapsed at last beside her body and put out a hand which shook to touch her cheek. His lady of fur, his lady of—

Her eyes opened slowly and at first it was as if she did not understand what she saw. Her hand moved slowly over the soft black suit as if hunting for something gone.

“Uta!” He had cupped his own hand under her head, drew it to rest against his shoulder. “Uta!” And he knew that that was the name she bore.

There was surprise on her face, and then a surge of light like happiness.

“It is served—my time of exile. . . .” Her voice was hardly above the softest of murmurs, but he heard it easily. Now she looked straight at Kethan. “No, great warrior, I am not of the kin—no were. But shapechanging was set upon me long ago. How . . .” Her hand went to her forehead, where that spark gleamed ever brighter. “The promise is fulfilled at last.”



Tears gathered in her eyes and spilled onto her cheeks. “Yes, it was promised, but so long . . . so long . . .”

“The past is gone.” Kethan drew her even closer. He wanted this treasure he had found to be a second part of him. Now his lips touched the salt of the tears on her cheeks. Then found her own lips waiting for him. What did the past matter for either of them now?

“Uta.” He wanted to sing her name, but he had no bard’s voice. Her arms were about him now, her lips as eager as his. They were lost in that magic which had nothing to do with sorcery until a cry startled them.

Aylinn held her flower staff across Ibycus’s body. The mage’s eyes were open. He looked at her, then to Firdun on his knees by him, and, lastly, up to her who cradled his head.

Somehow Kethan gained his feet and drew Uta up beside him. Together they stumbled toward the others. Ibycus’s eyes steadied now upon them.

“Well done, huntress and far wanderer. Serving the Light has broken the burden you have carried so long.” His voice was the faintest trace of sound. “Neatly did you trip that Dark one.”

“Lord . . .” Uta dropped from Kethan’s hold once more to her knees. “The time of exile—”

The mage smiled. “Is past. You bear your pardon and will hold it all your days. Also you have chosen and are chosen, and that is as it should be.” Now his gaze passed to Aylinn. “Do not fret yourself, Moon Daughter. To every living thing there comes an ending. For every Power there is a price. Payment is now demanded of me.”

“Be not so sure!” they heard Elysha say. “You have always been so quick, so sure, dear lord, of the needs of duty, of everything but that which lies deep-buried within you. It is time for the seed to open, and let the plant grow and flower.”

Swiftly, before he could protest, she shifted his head and shoulders to Aylinn’s hold. Then she walked some space away as they watched her wonderingly.

Up went her arms and around each wrist blazed fierce purple



fire. "I summon—let me be answered!" she cried—demanding, not pleading.

They saw it take form in the air even as had the vanished city, but far brighter, like a rainbow, glittering with scattered bursts of colors. Steadily it grew more visible as it descended, more solid, until, as it met the ground, Firdun felt a tremor, heard sound.

Then Elysha beckoned to them. "Bring my lord."

Kethan and Firdun between them took him up. His weight seemed no more than a fraction, like that of a child, his body shrunken, his face shadowed as if age were fast creeping upon him. They carried him as easily as they could and Elysha pointed to a place within the palace's wide-open gate. She stood there as if for anchorage until they left him, and then returned running.

"Glamorie, then, dear heart?" he asked.

She laughed. "To each his own. It has always served me well."

He had held to his staff during their transport. Now he lifted his other hand to keep them where they were and they saw that the ring stone was cracked, shifting away in ash like bits.

"Firdun"—there was more strength in the mage's voice now—"well have you served and even better will you serve. He who is a warder passes ward to the proper one when his time has come. Take you this."

He held out the staff. Firdun wanted nothing so much as to refuse. But there was that in him now which made him accept it.

"Gryphon's get," Ibycus continued. "You are not less than your kin, only called to walk another path. And I hold no doubt that you will tread it well. Now my time is past and I think my lady grows impatient." He smiled at Elysha, who now took his head up against her shoulder once more. "Return you to the Eyrie, that your story will be known there and at Lormt. There still lie pools of the Dark, but if the gates are closed as they will be, there will be nothing to feed them from afar. May the grace of the Power watch over you."

His eyes closed and he sank deeper into Elysha's hold as the castle arose from the black sand. It was bright enough to make them close their eyes and when they opened them again it was gone.



Aylinn rubbed her hand across tear-wet cheeks. Firdun stood with the staff in both hands now. There was a grim, shut look about him as if he was no longer one of them but faced a duty which was drawing all light and laughter out of his life forever. Aylinn studied him for a long moment, then she came to him, holding out her moon wand so that it matched in straight uprightness the staff. The flower was fully open, though they stood in the light of late afternoon.

“No path must be walked alone,” she said. And the light in the flower appeared to pulse as she spoke. “There are many different ways of warding and watching, Firdun. Shut no doors until you are sure.”

Frowning, he looked at her, his lower lip caught between his teeth. His shoulders had slumped as if the staff had become a burden to pull him down.

“Ibycus rode alone.”

“Ibycus was one man; you are another. Make your own choices, Firdun. Do not accept past ones as duties which must be followed. Look you.”

She held her moon wand closer until one of the outstretched petals of the flower touched the staff only a finger’s-breadth away from his own hold.

It was as if some of the stars which had been words sprung to life again, running along the length of the age-darkened shaft. Firdun gave a small broken cry.

“Aylinn!” Just as her wand had come to him freely, so did she now.

“With you—with you I can.”

“Of course you can,” she answered triumphantly. “Ibycus knew it or he would not have passed his Power to you. You will come to be even as he was—the hope of many, a sure shield against the Dark.”

“Lord . . .”

They turned their heads.

It was Hardin and Guret with Lero, standing together. And Hardin pointed to the lace of waves. Those caught together in new



understanding, felt the wash of water now about their feet, splashing upward.

“The sea comes.”

Kethan laughed. “A time for all felines to withdraw! And we have a long road before us.”

“Let it be so,” Firdun said. It seemed to the others that there was a new note in his voice. Almost, Aylinn thought fleetingly, that if she closed her eyes she might have believed that had been spoken by Ibycus himself. A long road, but not alone—no, never alone.

And, as they drew back, the sea washed up over where the gate had been.



Interlude: Es Port, Es City, Estcarp



It was a fair enough day, and the sea wind which poked intrusively into the tower lookout was fresh rather than chilling. But the Lady Loyse drew her double woolen scarf more tightly around her shoulders, even though she was well aware that the chill she felt lay within her and was not an assault from without.

She tried not to count the days she had stood here, looking out over the great harbor, past the evil black blot that was Gorm, the cursed. There were ships aplenty. It was a good summer for traders, and the Sulcars were making the best of brisk winds and stormless seas. She could count five ships at anchor now—but not the one which meant the most.

The sea she knew—the worst of it. Verlaine, where she had been born, had been one of the old menaces. They had not been pirates, those of that hold—but equally as evil, for they had thrived on



wrecks, and nature aided them in the worst storms by driving ships full on the fang teeth which lay beneath the water not far offshore. Verlaine could not have been the only one of its kind. What wrecker lords ruled in the north, in Alizon, overseas in the lands unknown?

There were there pirates also. However, a nest of them had been efficiently cleaned out near Seakeep in the northernmost Dales.

The Dark was abroad and where it might manifest itself next, or in what fashion, who could say? They had some communication with the Eyrie in Arvon, but that was far from the coast and those laboring there knew nothing of the perils of the sea.

“What spell would you set upon the waters, dear heart?”

Though he wore heavy boots with his half armor, he had not made enough sound to distract her from her concentration, so she was startled as he moved up beside her, his strong arm, well muscled from axe-swinging, closing about her waist. She turned her head and looked directly into his eyes.

Koris, now Defender and War Marshal, virtual ruler of Estcarp, was no taller than she, but she had seen him deal so well in battle that no foe dared come at last to face his wide-shouldered frame.

Loyse forced a laugh. “I am like a green maid waiting for . . .” She hesitated and was lost, but she would not let him see tears—never that.

“You are a very great lady”—he was speaking directly against her cheek now, his breath warm—“and you have a son gone from your hearth.”

“News?” she asked that, even though she knew that if there had been and, he would have told her at once.

“The *Tall Sails* is in from Seakeep. Their master took barge before they came to direct anchorage. He has only rumors and some knowledge—that the bergs are unusually numerous and faring farther south this season.

“Also”—and now he had drawn a little away from her—“Vixen has asked for a meeting.” Lightness was gone from both his voice and his face. Loyse pursed her mouth as if he had offered her something sour to taste.



“Let us go, then.” She turned toward the winding stair. “Koris, you dealt so many years with those of Vixen’s kind. How did you keep your tongue ever civil? I had thought that the new gathering of witches were of a more calm and peaceful nature—until she was wished upon us for our contact.”

“Dear heart, Vixen is as nothing to some of the High Ones in the old days. They armored me well. Nor is she like her sisters now—except there may be one or two lingering on. But the strongest died or were burned out with the Turning and the new ones are more tolerant of us.”

They came down to the barge which would take them upriver to the city, and the rowers set their oars to a sharpened drumbeat which not only kept their swing of arms to a rapid pull but warned any craft ahead of them to give right of way.

Loyse did not settle back into the cushions at the stern but sat bolt upright. Could there have been news from one of the gate-seeking parties which was important enough to force Vixen to call them? Had there come some discovery from Lormt? She had a small regretful thought at how little Lormt had yet aided them. The Sulcar records uncovered there were all of a later date when the sea people had made strong contact with Estcarp and the Dales. So little as a guide—a legend! But then, legends sometimes yielded up their cores of truth. At least Estcarp and Escore were cleansed of any of the unfortunate and threatening openings into other times and places. And they had been well able to follow the southern seekers.

With Arvon . . . who knew unless Hilarion had once more opened his spellway with the Gryphon’s stock?

“They have only a limited season.” She spoke one of her fears aloud. “These in the south, in Arvon, need not fear an early winter.”

“True.” Koris did not try to belittle her word-concealed fear. “But Captain Stymir has traded north and gone farther than any of his people for generations. He knows well what is to be feared.”

She knew that as well as he, and she was ashamed to be so on edge. Their son Simond was battle-tested. And he had Trusla by



his side. No one yet knew just what powers she had—she refused to be tested by the witches—but that she possessed such was very visible to anyone also talented.

At least Vixen had not been foisted on Simond and Trusla. Frost, their selected witch, was of the new blood: very well trained and yet amiable with those outside her own small calling.

Ancient Es loomed over them and then the citadel engulfed them. Loyse, though Verlaine had been old and had much of a dark history, had never felt at ease in these halls. All was too old—seeming to reach back before people were people and other presences dwelt here.

Koris kept his office in the lower room of one tower and it was there that the most private business was conducted. They had no sooner entered than Vixen was upon them. Loyse resented bitterly—for Koris's sake—that this witch, chosen to be their contact with her kind and Lornt, loomed well above both of them. Nor was she beanpole-thin as might have seemed in keeping with their austerity, but as broad-shouldered and hulking as a man at arms.

As usual all her face except for her eyes was impassive. Those two points of light half hidden by the puff of her cheeks were never pleasant to face. Loyse had her share of highborn pride and she had nothing to be ashamed of in her past, yet when Vixen cast one of her cutting glances in her direction she felt as if she were still back under her father's cruel rule.

Koris had seated his lady with all the formal courtesy of the court (that, too, was a small reminder of his rule here) and had waved Vixen to a seat across the small table piled high with maps and reports.

"You have news, Lady?" He came directly to the point.

"Of a kind." Her thick tongue swept across her lips as if she savored what she had to say. Which meant, Loyse knew, it was trouble. "Our watch sister near Korinth has sent a warning."

"Korinth." Koris was already reaching for a map. "Yes, the secondary new settlement of the Sulcar, north of the Alizon Border."

Loyse wanted to smile but kept any signs of levity under strict



control. Did Vixen think that she could for a moment know more of his duties than Koris?

If she was irritated by the fact that a meant barb had not gone home, the witch did not show it.

“They have given refuge to strangers,” she continued. “People not of their kind, nor Alizonderns, nor of the Old Race. These are fleeing from the north and their shaman”—she used the word with a tone of disgust—“babblers of trouble building. They dream, do these strangers, and take a nightmare born of lack of food—or too much of it—for some revelation from the Great Power.”

Koris’s attention seemed fully for the map. “If the winds continued fair, the *Wave Cleaver* should be at anchorage there. Stymir has kin in Korinth and so access to the latest rumors out of the Great Cold. Their wisewoman accepts these refugees as such in truth?”

Vixen gave a curt nod. Loyse thought it was plain she would like to express an opposite opinion.

“Well enough. With the storm of the Magestone’s passing, raw power doubtless passed around the world. Who knows what balance it may have upset in these lands we know nothing of?”

Loyse’s fingers tightened in a hard clasp where her hands lay on her lap.

“What is the news from Lormt?” Koris asked with the same tone in which he would have required a report from one of his menie.

“They dig and they delve, and that adept urges them on. But as yet he has no answers and he has no touch with Arvon.”

“And it is southward these refugees flee.” Koris was busy with the map again. “Of your favor, Lady, call upon this outland sister of yours and ask for all she can tell us—even to the smallest detail. It may even be necessary for her to leave her post and go to Korinth to learn all we should know.”

Now there was a shadow of expression on Vixen’s face—a none too pleasant one. “The sisters are assigned by the Council in the Place of Wisdom. Only those selected to protect these expeditions move about.”

“I do not think that the council will refuse any request which



has a bearing on the safety of this world,” Koris returned. “Now—what news has come from the Lady Frost?”

“None, save that which was beamed last night. The captain comments on the unusual number of icebergs. Frost is to speak with the shaman in Korinth today.”

“Then”—Koris leaned back a little in his chair—“we should have a good reporting, so your watcher will not have to fare north from her post to give us one.”

Loyse saw how hard Vixen’s hands were gripping her jewel. There was not always a smooth joining of the generations of witches. And those chosen to go with the searchers were of the younger. Luckily Frost had impressed all of those at the choosing with her quiet strength and goodwill.

Vixen arose with a swirl of her gray robe. “What is sent you will have in good time, Lord Marshal.” Without any further adieu she strode out of the room.

“Trouble in the north.” Loyse allowed herself enough relaxation to repeat that. “My heart, when have we not faced trouble in one quarter of the world or another?” A weariness had settled on Koris.

“True. But it is easier to fight in person than to wait on this shuttling back and forth of news!”

Now he reached out and put his hand on that map, and impulsively she laid hers on it.

“He is of your blood and mine, Loyse. And neither of us ever accepted defeat, nor were we disappointed by having it forced upon us. He is also man grown. He has taken a mate of his choice—one we can respect. And the jewel selected the two of them. It is always the harder for the watcher than the doer. I send to Simon tonight—he prowls the north Border, since we still are not sure what boils in Alizon. Though it seems by rumor that that young lordling Lady Mereth tamed is very busy. If his actions can keep his countrymen within their own Borders, baying for each other’s throats, he serves us well. Loyse”—his grip on her hand was tight now—“it seems our destiny to be ever on the alert. I think that peace is not to be our portion, so let us bear that as we can. This



much have I gained from war—my dear lady, without whom my life would be a barren thing.”

“As I have gained you, my dearest of lords. In the end good comes out of evil—or else of what value is life itself? I made my choice long ago,” Loyse said slowly. “Never have I regretted it. Now I shall teach myself not to regret that Simond has made his also—or else it has been made for him—as perhaps it was for me. We have been blessed, my heart.”

“As we shall be again.” Koris took her into his arms and they were one—as it had been for so long and would continue always to be.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



Korinth, North of Alizon

So new . . . Trusla moved closer to Simond. The canal which ran through the center of this town was not strange to one who had been born and raised in Tor Marsh, where all clan houses existed on islands divided by bogs and channels. But there she had always been aware of a feeling of kin-age—of timelessness where things remained always the same from season to season.

And when Simond had taken her to Es City, that was a place of awesome age—as was even the keep where they had later made their home together.

Here were no stone walls—only barked log houses, many of them still roofless, all the center of activity. The mud from the last rain was thick enough between these crude shelters to be ankle deep if one were forced off one of the planked walks. Always one



could hear the pound of hammers, the shouts of those raising beams, warnings to get out of the way of this or that train of burden bearers.

The ship from which they had embarked only a short time since had come heavily laden with supplies to keep those hammers busy. And after Sulcar custom the women were busy as the men, poling laden craft along the canal, even steadying materials for the builders and wielding axes themselves.

Trusla had never before heard of creating a whole new town, but there were many things in this strange world outside Tor Marsh of which she had been unaware.

“Ware!”

Simond’s arms about her waist swung her back, with himself, to avoid a team of sweating men linked together by a log slung in a series of rope loops.

All those so busy around her were so very big. They towered above her, even above Simond, who partly shared her Tor blood. She had found it difficult to adjust to life on board the ship, not that she allowed anyone to guess that.

“In here.” Simond was now urging her along one of the muddy plank walks toward a large house which looked finished, even though the scent of freshly cut wood met them at the wide-open door. As they entered, Trusla hoped they were not breaking any custom.

“Ha, welcome. Come in, come in! Bertel, the guesting horns for our friends!”

To Trusla’s ears that came as a roar. She had to bend her head well back to see the grinning face of her host. Even among his own kind Mangus Shieldarm was reckoned tall.

She found herself installed in a chair which was certainly older than the walls about her, its hide-cushioned seat well worn, and her feet did not quite touch the floor over which were scattered rugs of fur as well as the woven kind she was used to.

A tall girl with long blond braids was at her side before she was securely seated, a drinking horn in one hand and the guesting plate of bread and salt in the other. Trusla accepted the horn and a piece



of the bread dipped in salt and spoke in as easy a voice as she could summon.

“Fair fortune to this house and all who shelter here. May your hunters be skilled, your crops ripen well, and your ships return safely to port.”

She did not dare glance at Simond to see if she had learned that correctly from his coaching. The girl was handing another horn and the bread dish to him now.

“And may your voyage, my Lady, my Lord, be easy and your search trail open and free.” Mangus drank deeply from the horn he himself held.

“Now . . .” He waved and Bertel disappeared. “There is news! All-Knowing One”—he raised his voice to a near shout again—“they have arrived and wait.”

A curtain woven in strange and colorful patterns was swept to one side at his hail and a woman entered, a little ahead of her companions. Perhaps she had once stood nearly as tall as Mangus, but now she walked slowly, her back rounded so she had to peer up to see them. Most of her thin white hair was covered with a blue-green hood—the color of the sea at its calmest—and a large part of her body was concealed by a cloak matching it.

A step or so behind her was another woman, much younger, wearing the usual jerkin, shirt, and breeches of the Sulcars but with a scarf of the green-blue crossing from right shoulder to left hip. She carried (as if it were something most precious) a small drum, a hint of great age about its scuffed surface.

Just behind these two came Frost, the witch out of Estcarp assigned to their mission. She was young and though Trusla had been wary of her at first (the witches of Estcarp having had an awesome reputation in the past), Trusla had come to like listening to her explanations of things strange to the Tor girl.

The fourth and last of the party was strange enough to center all their attention once they sighted her. Beside the somber gray robe of the witch she was a blaze of color. Trusla could not guess her age or even her race—she was certainly not Sulcar, nor like any of Estcarp.



From her shoulders drooped a cape of feathers which she did not wear closely held as did the old woman. They were brilliantly black and white, set in patterns, and the cloak was loose enough to show that under it she wore a thigh-length garment of shining white fur, sleek and edged at the throat with fluffy down. Her feet and legs were covered with boots up to the thigh, seeming to offer the advantage of both shoes and trousers. As far up as her knees these were closely bound to the leg with narrow ribbonlike strings on which were strung large beads in a multitude of brilliant crystallike colors.

Her black hair was looped up and clubbed at the nape of her neck with more of the beaded strings. Against the white of the jerkin her skin looked dark and her eyes had a curious upward slant at the corners. She walked as one with authority, but what Trusla noted, with an odd feeling of kinship, was that she, too, was short, towered over by both Frost and the Sulcars.

“Here be those out of Estcarp, All-Knowing One.” Mangus himself placed a chair for the oldest woman, and her attendant took her place behind her, while Mangus seated Frost and the stranger.

“This is the Lady Trusla out of Tor,” Mangus was continuing, “and Lord Simond, son to Marshal Koris.”

The woman in green favored each of them with a measuring stare, which Trusla met firmly. Of old she had dealings with priestesses and gave formal honor to their calling, whether they would be friends or not.

“The Lady is known to you all.” The witch inclined her head in a short nod. “And this is the Winged One of the Latts.” Trusla thought he looked a little uncertainly toward the woman in fur and feathers.

She did not nod, but she eyed Trusla and Simond and then smiled, remaining silent.

“Your mission is well known,” Mangus began, reaching for his drinking horn as if to sustain himself, and then pushing it away. “All we know about the sea lanes to the north, and the legends thereof, has already been given you.

“As you know, we are establishing Korinth as a meeting port for



our ships in the north trade. A moon ago we became hosts for others. Winged One, these have been sent by the Great Powers of the south to deal with what may be the very root of your own trouble. Let them hear what has befallen your people.”

There was a long pause. She might either have been assembling her words or still be weighing the purposes of those about to hear them, but at last she spoke, using the trade language, but so accented Trusla and Simond had to listen very carefully and could not be sure they always understood. There had been no attempt at mind-send and it was not for them to initiate it.

“We live . . . north.” She made a small sweeping gesture with one hand. “Hunt—the wasbear fears our spears and arrows as do the shadow hounds and the furred mountains.”

There was pride in her voice and when she spoke of the bears she had stroked the fur of her jerkin.

“Always there is fear.” She was picking her words slowly. “But most fears we have always lived with and they are a part of us—they are like the great snows, the bitter winters—our life. Now comes something else.”

She stirred in her seat, edging forward on the cushion which was nearly too wide for her. “All peoples have their powers. You of Est-carp”—she nodded to Frost—“can summon that which is greater than any living being. You”—now she spoke to the woman in green—“can drum up or lay a storm, speak over great distances, doubtless do other things to make one marvel.

“We Latts . . . dream.” She seemed a little uncomfortable, as if she doubted their belief. “Dreams find us game to be hunted, those who have lost their trail, foretell the worst of the storms. They can tell us how to heal the sick, the wounded, how to deal with others—others save the Dark!” Now her voice rose sharply and Trusla saw Simond tense, even as she was doing.

“This Dark is not known to us before, nor have we any kin song about it save one—and that allies an ancient evil with the north. By this legend we know that we have been driven once before—southward.

“Now it whispers in our dreams, it taints the flow of truth—our



hunters are sent on the wrong trails. There have been deaths which should not have come. So we gather what we have and we come south, hoping to reach beyond the hand of the Dark. This land is fairer, but it is not ours. Also if the dream goes deep, as it should for the Power to rise, the shadow lurks and we must withdraw.”

“You feel such interference even now?” Frost was fingering her jewel.

“Twice. I do not enter the deep dream, for I have not the Power to hold walls when my need is only to seek.”

“Perhaps we may have an aid for that,” the witch said crisply. “But that this thing stirs in the north, of that you are sure?”

The woman of the Latts was frowning a little. “Are you sure when your crystal clouds against your will, Woman of Power? All which is of the Light is aware when the Dark prowls. This began when there was a great beating of the Wide Wings—such as none have known before. A storm it was, and yet it was not. For the thing which struck upon us we have no words. And it was as if that summoned the Dark—which was eager to come.

“These good traders who had known our people for many seasons tell us to settle near—that together we shall fight evil. We are strong, we are ready. Yet how does one fight when one knows not the nature of the enemy? Now you from the south come and say that the Dark is moving upon our whole world and that you hunt the source to deal with it. You know not even the touch of the Great Cold. Even the strongest of our hunters do not venture into the ice palaces. Though there are those among us who have seen them from afar.

“The Dark can use the land itself to bring you death.”

“Yet still shall we search,” Simond’s voice came clearly. “Not only do some of us deal with Power, but there are those behind us who can work through us. This world has faced an ending drawn by Power before—and the Dark went down to defeat. If we die, it shall be still fighting.”

She measured him eye to eye. “Boasting I know—it is the way of hunters. But you are not boasting, young chieftain. What you say



you truly believe. Well enough—if you would carry war to the enemy, go with the best of dreams.”

“Do more than dream for us.” Trusla sat straighter. “You say your hunters know of the lands beyond. Can ships go there?”

Mangus was already shaking his head when the woman answered. “Not so, for the ice ever covered the sea. A ship seeking a hunting trail there would be crushed by the great mountains of floating ice.”

“Then if we must take to land”—Simond again took a part as if he knew what was in Trusla’s mind—“we shall need guides. Can we find such among your people?”

There had been no formality in his request, it was a straight question and she answered it as straightly. “It shall be put before our Speaking Fire. It will be by choice if any such go.”

He nodded. “As it should be.”

Frost fingered her jewel. “Messages have come from the south. I have told our sister”—she bowed her head slightly toward the Latt woman—“of Lormt and what we hope to find there. There is much to be shifted and considered, tested. Hilarion is the last of the adepts and his chosen knowledge was along a special path, but now he has turned to that which did not interest him before. He has managed to contact those of the Gryphon in Arvon with a warning—and they, too, report trouble already on the march there. Their party ventures westward into lands unknown. However, our tie with them was broken and we know not how matters go now with them.”

There was a small sound from Mangus as if he cleared his throat. He had set down his horn on a small side table and now produced a roll of map parchment.

“We are seafarers, as all know, though the records of Lormt have little for us. This”—he was unrolling the square he held—“is a combination of reports from those captains who in the past have ventured north to the farthest extent—which can only be done at the height of the warm season. Added . . .” he hesitated and glanced at the woman in green, “is what is remembered from very ancient times. We have only this that we are sure of: that our peo-



ple are not of this world—a condition we share with other races here—and that we entered on board ships through a far northern gate.

“Since it may be that any gateway may be a danger, now it would seem we must return to our beginnings—if we can—and there see how it fares.”

“The moon hangs full tonight.” The woman in green reached out her hand and her attendant held up the small drum so that she could tap lightly on it with her fingers.

The sound might be slight, but Simond’s hand went to sword hilt, and Trusla caught breath in a small gasp. For it seemed that tapping somehow echoed oddly through their bodies.

“The drum will speak.” The woman withdrew her hand. Then Trusla blinked, seeing the witch jewel on Frost’s breast gleam with life for only an instant, while the shaman of the Latts held out both brown hands and drew patterns in the air.

“Old bones need rest.” The woman in green hauled herself up from her chair. “Do you,” she said, turning her full attention now on Trusla and Simond, “answer when the drum calls. What the sea accepts will be made plain.”

She shuffled off with her attendant, with no more of a farewell. But it seemed that neither Frost nor the woman of the Latts was prepared to break up their conference.

It was the witch who spoke first. “Those who have come from the south, sister, have been selected by the Power. The star light has touched Captain Stymir, and these two out of Estcarp. If any of your blood wish to try our trail, will they agree to such testing?”

Toward the woman of the Latts she held out her hand and on its palm lay her jewel, dull gray and seeming without life. But, perhaps even to her own amazement, as she turned slightly toward the stranger, it broke forth with light as rainbowed as the strings of beads which made up part of the other’s clothing.

The slanted eyes narrowed. “I serve my people,” she said slowly. “It is laid upon me and my kind. Why does this Power thing of yours call *me*?”

“I cannot tell,” Frost returned, “save it is not mine to command



in this matter any more than it was when we stood in the great hall of Es Citadel and it chose from all the company there. Power calls to Power, and there is always the greater purpose.”

The woman's hand twitched as if she would raise them to ward off some unwelcome thing. She raised her head higher and her lips pointed now, not toward the others, but to the fresh-set beams above them. From those lips poured sounds, as body-filling in their way as the tapping of the drum had been. Trusla saw not the room about her, but a stretch of sand, and the sand moved, arose, became—and then was not, though the single instant of sight had left a residue of new energy within her.

What Simond felt, she did not know; Mangus seemed only puzzled. But the witch jewel in Frost's hold flashed again.

There had been a question asked, that much Trusla was as certain of as if she had heard the words. Now there was silence.

But only for a breath or two. Then from nowhere she could discern, came an ear-torturing roar such as might burst from the jaws of some beast mightier than they had ever seen.

The shaman seemed to huddle down into her chair, draw in upon herself. Yet she showed no sign of fear, only of one facing a burden which must be carried with care.

There followed a clatter of someone entering the room, armed and ready, an axe in hand as if some attack had already begun. Like the shaman, he was dressed in furred garments, but he wore no feathered cloak, instead three long black feathers pointed at an angle backward from a beaded band about his forehead and hair.

A thong of hide supported on his chest a rounded ball half black as the feathers, half gold. And the face he turned toward the southerners was grim as he bowed his head quickly to the shaman and asked something in his own tongue. He could not be much older than Simond, but he walked with the assurance of a well-tested armsman.

“It is well,” the shaman spoke in the trade tongue. “This one is Odanki, of my own kin blood. He is a rover, one who has seen ice palaces.”



He was staring suspiciously at all of them now. "What would you do, south people?" His trade speech was curt.

"Sister," the shaman spoke now to Frost, "try this one with your testing. We have no Speaking Fire, but already your Power and mine have melded enough that I will be bound by the Voice of Arska. Even as we have all heard, that Great One seems to wish to take part in this."

Frost's hand shifted to confront the Latt. Instantly the jewel flared to life.

The Latt stepped back, frowning, his upper lip lifting a little as some beast might threaten a snarl. But now the shaman slid off her too-high seat and came to him swiftly, laying a hand on his axe arm. She spoke with a solemn intonation like an oath, and he listened to her, his snarl fading, a look of wonderment on his face.

Then suddenly he dropped to one knee and, catching hold of the nearest edge of the other's feather cloak, raised it to his lips.

"Arska," continued the shaman, "has brought you one of our best. But now since I am also chosen for this searching I must speak with my people, assure them that Arska will raise up those to help them in time of danger."

She passed their circle of chairs, the hunter falling in behind her, and was out of the door and gone before any one of them could summon words.

"Lady"—Mangus broke the silence left by that swift exit—"this all who know them can tell you of the Latts: they are a proud people, rovers with no settled home. If they give their word, so it is kept. If they cannot for some reason keep it, then the next of kin will pick up their duty. Their hunters are fine fighting men and know much of their frozen world. Of the powers of their shaman . . ." he shrugged. "I am not talented; I cannot vouch for what they can do."

"She is a true sister," Frost answered, "her power runs deep and full, though it comes from another source. There is nothing of the Dark."

"But," Simond cut in, "did she not say that any guide who



would volunteer to go with us must do so of free will? Was this one not summoned?"

Frost smiled. "As you, Simond? We are but the tools of Greater Forces and a workman chooses his tools to suit the work which must be done. Also, I do not think the shaman chose this Odanki; I believe he was summoned by something greater than she. And by this"—she patted her once more dead gray pendant—"that was certainly proven.

"Now"—she looked to Mangus—"this map you and your knowledgeable captains have put together—where will it lead us?"

"In truth, Lady, across the world as we know it. Look you."

They all crowded around the table from which he had lifted his drinking horn and looked down at the maze of lines, some drawn in sturdy black and some in less steady red.

"See—this far upcoast..." he was running a thick forefinger along one of the black lines, "you can go without too much danger—though the icebergs are much larger in number this season. Here"—he stabbed down—"you will swing westward, clear to Arvon's land, though I do not think any of them have ever ventured to explore it.

"This is Dargh. Of that you keep clear. It is surely of the Dark and they say that men there eat their own kind in times when the waller fish do not run well. Beyond Dargh, on the continent itself, there is a Sulcar trading post. We call it End of the World—I cannot twist my tongue to give you its native name."

"There are natives there?" Simond asked.

"Yes, their land is free in places from the ever-steady ice because of hot springs. There is even feed for their load beasts. Horses, mind you"—he held out a hand about four feet from the floor—"no larger. And yet there are grodeer nearly as tall as this house and they say other strange beasts. I have seen great tusks of ivory once in a while which have come from End of the World and men tell strange tales of furred walking mountains. But then why should we laugh at such tales? For the farther a man travels, the more marvels he chances to see.

"You will learn what you can there. These Latts speak of ice



palaces on this side of the ocean. Perhaps such lie farther north there also, for our legends speak of such.”

“These red lines . . .” Simond pointed to the closest on the map, “what do they signify?”

“Tracks of ships which have never returned,” Mangus answered shortly. “These northern seas hold as many traps as a land where the Dark abides. Yet the legends tie in with some of these voyages and so we record them.”

He rolled the map up as if he did not want to think of some of those records, and handed the roll to Simond.

“Stymir still has provisions to load. Give this to him as I promised. He has made two trips north and knows well some of the dangers. In fact he fought off a raid of the Dargh man-eaters three seasons ago. And he added two new islands to our records—one of which had some strangeness about it that he would never talk about.”

“A place of the Dark?” Trusla was only too aware of strange places and usually there was good reason for keeping away from them.

“Perhaps.”

A workman was waiting impatiently at the open door and they guessed that Mangus had taken time from pressing duties for this meeting. Frost said that she wished to consult with the Sulcar wise-woman again, so once more Trusla and Simond were left to return alone to that newly constructed warehouse-to-be where the passengers and the crew of the *Wave Cleaver* were temporarily housed.

“Ice palaces,” Trusla spoke. “Real palaces?”

“More likely just the edges of great glaciers,” Simond returned. “Such at a distance might well seem to be as great as Es and perhaps wind-carved into towers and walls.”

“These Latts . . .” she began again, Simond seeming very far away suddenly, as if he were caught up in some tight weaving of thoughts. “They have beautiful furs. And their shaman—she is not as strange and apart as some of the wisewomen even in the south.”

“We shall certainly learn more,” Simond agreed. “They will have us to Lormt when we return and shake out of us every bit of memory our minds hold—all to add to their store.” He laughed. “Per-



haps before we come to the end of this venture we shall be able to even astound Morfew himself.”

This venture, Trusla thought. Yet the Latts said that some master thing of the Dark had driven them from their homelands. What kind of monster must they face, perhaps among those ice palaces?

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

*Korinth, the Northern Sea*

The constant sounds of activity had died away with the coming of sundown. But the growing town was still alive when Trusla went to the impromptu market down on the wharf. Another ship had made port at nooning and samples of its cargo were already being placed to catch the eye—and gather a crowd.

This had been a risky project on the part of the captain, for he had not carried building materials or needful supplies, but rather what those in the bare-wall town might consider at this point to be luxuries. There were fabrics which could make curtains and wall hangings, dishes both for display and daily use, even such things as spices and those dried flower petals which would fight the heavy scent of woodsmoke in the rooms.

To Trusla's surprise there were buyers enough gathering to bargain with those the captain had designated to be merchants for the day. And she saw change hands lengths of ivory tusks, and bundles of furs at a brisk pace, the buyer going away with this ornamentation for houses perhaps still roofless.

It was when she was shouldered aside by one of the brawny



women who wore a heavy hammer in her belt that Trusla stopped short, refusing to move again in spite of another shove.

What had drawn her eyes was an earthenware bottle. It was wide-mouthed and its cover had been removed to show its contents. How such an object had turned up in this cargo, and moreover, how the present owner had obtained it, she could not guess. Somehow she could not believe that the seller knew what she was offering, for it was a woman tending this trestle table. The contents of that jar were a door into the past—though to the eye the jar was filled with sand—red-gold sand—seemingly as fine ground as dust. Such sand she knew—such sand had changed her life and opened a door upon the world for her.

“Xactol!” she whispered. Did or did not that sand stir a little? Or was it only her wish that made it seem so? “Sand sister.”

She jerked at a silver bangle on her thin wrist. It was all she could think of now for exchange. The woman looming over her had put down a full gold piece out of Estcarp for a length of dull blue and rust red weaving and a set of carven wooden bowls. Now the stall keeper was looking to her.

“Your jar.” Trusla pointed so there would be no mistake.

The stall keeper picked it up, turning it this way and that. “Out of Estcarp—well fired, can be used at the hearthside if you wish. The sand . . .” She must have caught Trusla’s glance; the girl feared spillage due to the other’s quick movements. “That is nothing. The dealers there pack them so against breakage. Two silver twists, Lady.”

She was studying Trusla closely now, seeming to have noted for the first time that Trusla was a stranger, not a townswoman.

“I give this.” The fen girl held out her bangle. It was surely worth more than two twists of that silver wire which the traders used for small transactions. Then she thought that the woman was eyeing her almost with suspicion and she added hastily, “Such are made in my village.” She was improvising. “I find it here to be a lucky matter.”

Now the woman grinned. “Ah, don’t we need all the luck we can draw to us, Lady? It is yours.” But she was quick enough to drop



the bracelet into her money pouch. "Here"—she reached down into a box beneath the table—"you need the rest of your luck, or what you hope to hold can run out with the first dip." She slapped down on the table a round of smoothed wood which was plainly meant to cork the jar and Trusla speedily put it into place.

Holding her prize tightly, she made her way through the crowd and back to the warehouse-inn. Simond was off with the captain and their map, but for the moment she was very glad she was alone.

Settling down on one of the two stools their small alcove held, she loosed the hide curtain and let it fall into place to give privacy. The jar she placed with care on the other stool, as she had no table. Her hand went to loosen that cover and then she let it fall instead to the top of the stool. For the moment she did not want to prove herself right or wrong, she just called on memory.

There had been a shelving floor of such sand under the moon and that sand had moved, given birth to one whom Trusla sometimes saw fleetingly in dreams and had always longed to see again. Xactol—sand sister—that one had named herself, and in Trusla she had awakened knowledge that there was indeed a need for one who was unlike her companions. Since then Trusla had made small experiments on her own—very carefully.

When she had returned with Simond, each saving the other from certain death, the witches had wished to test her, for being Tor and apart, they thirsted to know what powers or talents those of her race might have. But the witches were no longer all-powerful and already she had mated with Simond, thus destroying most of her value to them. But inside she was sure that her sand sister had awakened more than Trusla could understand.

She remembered one day when she and Simond had gone fishing (or he had fished and she had explored the small island they had chosen) and she had discovered a stretch of silver-gray sand. It had not held the same feeling for her, yet it drew her to it.

On its surface she had drawn—designs she had not remembered she knew, though she was a weaver. And the designs had sent her into a sort of dream in which she had done something which had



great meaning. But when she had roused again at Simond's call, the sand was bare of any marking and of the dream she remembered only that feeling of accomplishment.

Now—if it were true that she held in this jar sand out of Tor, what might she do?

“Trusla!” Simond's voice drew her back into the here and now. She saw the curtain sway at his touch, but she knew he would not enter without her bidding. Swiftly she transferred the jar into her own pack. Why she must keep this secret she could not say—only that for now it was hers alone.

She swept aside the curtain and Simond stood smiling widely. He kissed her cheek and then threw himself on the bunk, his legs stretched out, one arm reaching for Trusla to draw her to his side.

“No more hammers, no more mud, no more sawing.” He made a kind of chant out of it. “The *Wave Cleaver* is loaded and ship-shape, as the captain says. With the dawn we can be off again away from this mud pie and off to do what we are meant to do.”

Trusla could understand his excitement and she was careful to try to equal it. But she feared she would never make a good sea rover. The cramped cabin was so small that this alcove seemed a lord's hall when she stole a look around. Luckily only yesterday she had washed and freshened with dried herbs almost all of the clothing except what they now wore. And Simond had spent hours bur-nishing their mail coats and making sure their weapons were keen of edge.

His smile had faded a little and there was an anxious note in his voice as he continued, “There is this, heart holder. Because of the addition of the Latts to our party, our quarters will be changed. I shall have a hammock with this Odanki in the mate's quarters and the shaman will come with you.”

She should have expected something like this. Frost, by reason of her rank, had a hastily constructed cubby off the captain's main cabin and the rest of them would have to make what room they could.

“The Latt woman seems one of goodwill.” Simond had sat up



again now and was watching her. "Were it instead that wisewoman whom Mangus gives ear to now."

Trusla laughed. "Were it so, I think I should choose to walk—there is the shore and later maybe ice thick enough to bear one up. Yes, I think that the Latt will be a good cabin mate. Only . . ." Now she threw her arms around him tightly. "It will not be Simond to keep me warm at night!"

"My loss also, dear one. Now—let us see to the packing." But his return embrace and the hoarseness of his voice was a small comfort she could cherish.



Their sailing out of Korinth was certainly not a quiet and unnoted one. The green-robed drummer led a procession of women who whistled and moaned, and made sounds so close to enraged waves that Trusla could close her eyes and believe the sea already washed about them.

Not to be outdone by the invoking of Sulcar powers and good fortune, the Latt party was nearly as great. But here it was the men who chanted, waving spears and axes as if challenging to battle. Their chosen champion had added a sword to one of the packs he shouldered. From the second one fluttered feathers and Trusla guessed that that held the possessions of the shaman. Cuddled in the left arm of the woman was a small furry shape which moved, turning a round head constantly as if it would see everything as quickly as possible.

The Latts knelt and raised a keening cry—one which could touch even those not of their race. Then they deliberately arose and turned their backs, though still they stood in ordered ranks, as if they must not look upon the withdrawal of the shaman and her champion.

Nor did she turn her head to look at them, but marched steadily up the gangplank, Odanki a step or so behind, the creature still held in her arm. Trusla eyed that warily. Sharing a cabin with another woman was one thing, but that the shaman had brought a pet with her. . . .

However, they stood a little away from her as the ship cast off moorings and they began their journey to the open sea—luck



cheers from those thronging the walk rising even above the cries of their wisewoman and her followers.

Trusla hesitated for a moment and then made her way to the shaman. "Wise One, our cabin lies this way."

Those dark, oblique eyes fastened on her and the woman nodded. Now that she was close enough, the girl could better see the creature in the wisewoman's arms. At first she thought it a child bundled so heavily in furs that only a section of its reddish face and two large eyes were visible.

Then the shaman set it carefully down. Though it stood on its hind feet, this was no child. It was entirely covered, except for the palms of its quite humanlike hands and face, with thick dark hair over which lay an outer sheen of silver as if every tip bore frost. With one of those hands it held tightly to the shaman's bead-twisted legging-boots; the other was at its mouth as it stared over its fists at Trusla.

"The little one?" she ventured. No child, nor pet—she had heard at Lormt and Estcarp of some workers of Power who augmented their strength by energies drawn from nonhuman beings. Was this one such?

The Latt woman was smiling, her hand dropping to the round furred head which she smoothed soothingly.

"This be Kankil, who has chosen my tent as her home. Such seldom trust our kind, but when they do, then those so chosen are greatly blessed. Yes, she serves in the Power."

Trusla had not been aware of any mind-reading touch, but perhaps this reading of her question had been only a guess on the other's part.

"Now." The Latt came forward a step or so and held out her other hand, Kankil coming with her. "The naming of names is given only among friends—do you also have that custom?"

"Some of us." Trusla nodded, her attention divided between the shaman and her small companion. "I am Trusla, as the Lord Mangus named me—my true name. So also is it with Simond, who is my dear lord."

"And in our tents I am Inquit. For between us there lies no shadow of the Dark. But you are not of these sea people, these Sulcars, blessed as they are for the helping hands they reached to us."



“No, I come from a southern land—Tor Marsh. And my lord also bears a portion of such blood, for he is son to Koris of Gorm, also of Tor Marsh breed and now Lord Marshal of Estcarp.”

Kankil suddenly loosed her hold of Inquit’s legging and skipped to Trusla. No one could see in this mite any danger. The girl dared greatly and smoothed the small head turned up toward her, feeling fur softer than spider silk beneath her fingers.

“It is well. Now we share tent.” Inquit laughed. “Though I do not think it will be as large as those within my tribe’s holding.”

Trusla felt soft furred fingers steal into her hand and she grasped them gently, turning to lead the way to their cabin. She felt a queer touch of shame as if she regretted she had no better to offer. Some of Simond’s gear was still piled in a corner, for they had no other place to put it and the interior was in Trusla’s eye woefully crowded. Inquit’s tribesman had dropped her pack by the door and she pulled it in while Kankil leaped out of the way onto the bunk.

“One always learns from journeying,” Inquit observed. “The Sulcars live mainly on their ships—it is good that they are so large, for then their quarters can better serve such as we are.”

Trusla had pulled open one of the cupboards below the bunk, and then indicated the pegs on the wall, on one of which already swung her fishskin storm coat. She must get another for Inquit also.

The Latt shaman was already busy with her pack and Trusla edged past her beyond the door to give her full room to arrange her belongings as best she could.

Already she herself felt a little unsteady at the rise and fall of the ship; they must be nearing where the canal gave upon the sea. She hoped she would not disgrace herself as she had the first three days of this voyage when her stomach had rebelled against her.



The boat rocked perilously and chunks of ice sometimes nudged against the sides. A skin boat, not even honest wood, and how long would it be before the sea had her?

Audha huddled in upon herself. Rogar had stopped moaning long ago in this piece of the Netherworld which had caught them fast. She hoped dully his torment was over now, as the end had



come to Lothar Longsword and Tortain Staymir earlier. If she were a true battleman of Skilter's line, as she had always believed she was—false, false pride—she would rock this miserable excuse for a boat and bring an end to torment.

Sooner or later the sea would have them all, dead and alive, but some small core within her kept her from bringing it all to a quick finish. A Sulcar endured to the end, unless, like the great Osberic, he could die taking with him the enemy in force.

What she had seen in the past few days made her believe that the Light had indeed forsaken this world. Could icebergs sail with a direct purpose, herd a ship? She would have said that that was a story to frighten a boastful child. Yet—by the Ruler of Storms, this she had seen, had suffered with all others of the *Flying Crossbeak*.

They had been bound farther north than usual, Captain Hars-son having had good trade the previous season with End of the World, that post which clung to the very edge of the unknown. She was a wavereader and this had been only her second voyage as such without a mistress waver to oversee her reports.

Audha bit down savagely on the ice-rusted edge of her frozen sea cloak. She would take blood oath before the very inner altar that she had not erred. Their voyage had been easy—in the beginning.

It seemed then the bergs had been spewed forth out of the night itself like harpoons of the flipper hunters. By morning's light there had been a shifting wall of giant drifting ice before them. One no prudent captain would dare to think of threading.

And it centered on *them!* By the Ruler of Storms—the stuff had centered. Though they changed course, so did the bergs. Men who had spent nearly all their lives in the northern trade had watched unbelievably. And the waves—she had watched until her eyes had nearly frozen solid, but the patterns made no sense.

Instead, out of nowhere, had come a current, seeming to spread from the bergs to catch upon them. They fought to come about, to retreat before what they could not understand—using every trick of seamanship countless generations had passed along.

But always the ship had been driven westward, though they fought fiercely to gain the open sea they could sight in the east. There had



been no wind; the frosted sails gave them no aid. At length the captain had ordered the longboat to be put over with rowers to see whether, as a last resort, they could break free of the path of the bergs.

Audha shuddered—her mind kept going back always over the past. If they had done this, or tried that . . . But there had been no real choice. For then, out of nowhere, had come the fog, and the boat was swallowed up by it. It almost seemed that they had a chance in spite of veering blindly.

Until . . . until—oh, Blessed Mother in the Deeps—they had heard those shrieks and cries, and moments later, before they could stand to arms, the demons had been upon them, clambering over the sides of the *Flying Crossbeak* in a filthy wave.

The fog had served those well, covering their attack from their small skin boats which crowded around the ship like maggots on a poor dying thing.

A shadow had loomed out of the fog to where she sat in the bow seat of the wavereader and a blow had sent her into darkness before she really knew what had come upon them.

She did not remember their coming to Dargh the accursed; they must have dragged her still-unconscious body. The screaming had aroused her to life—pleas and cries which sent her near to madness. Among them she was sure she detected Varga's voice—and young Kertha. . . . There were other screams and an insane howling and she had somehow managed to shut herself back into the darkness.

But her body would not let her spirit escape and she awoke again. As she tried to move, she found she was trussed like a swimmer intended for the market. It was very dim, but she could see enough to understand that she lay in a stinking hole and that she was not alone in her captivity. Someone was moaning in a monotonous cry, and she nearly gagged on the stench of blood, human waste, and general filth around her.

"Audha?"

Her own name had roused her further. She was at least able to turn her head and see a second prisoner almost within touching distance.

"Rogar?" she ventured. Rogar Farkerson was kin, her mother's



cousin, and he had been one of her teachers in Sulcar lore over the years. She had been proud that he had spoken up for her when the captain was choosing a wavereader.

“You are wounded?” he asked quickly.

His question made her aware of her aching head. But she could not detect any other hurts.

“No.” She refused the aching. “We—we are on Dargh?”

For a moment he did not answer and then when he spoke his voice was harsh.

“We are. That slime out of the fog took us! But—we have a chance, maybe—those left of us. Lothar is speared, but they do not know our stock, these demons. They believed him sore hurt and did not take care in his binding, being very eager for their—their feasting.”

Audha swallowed convulsively. She forced from her mind the memory of those cries.

“Now they lie like drunk. Dargh needs fear no attack—the ice has closed in. We—we they are keeping for further sport and eating. Better we died cleanly in the sea. Lothar now works to free Tortain. For Hugin we can do nothing, he is near sped—may the Great Gate open for him soon. Now—can you move closer to me, girl? They use hide for their ties and hide can be chewed—and I, thank the Wind Ruler, still have a full set of teeth well used to tough chewing.”

So they had won free, the four of them. Once he could crawl again, Rogar had made to the other side of that place and bent over a shape lying there. A moment or two later the moaning stopped.

“I think his kin will claim no blood debt,” came Lothar’s voice out of the shadows. “You have served a comrade well and we shall send a lantern a-voyage for him and the others.”

Audha had been listening to any sound from outside. The walling about her seemed to be made of skins laced together, though under them, mostly hidden by refuse, was a pavement of stones. Also this cage appeared to be half sunken below the surface of the ground.

Rogar and Tortain went to work on the hides on their upper walls. One could not possibly use teeth there, Audha thought, and



nearly laughed hysterically, but it seemed they had found tools of a sort—cracked and sharp-edged bones. She moved up beside Lothar. Though she was no wisewoman healer, she knew something of wound tending, as did all the seafarers, among whom many skills had to be used.

She had not even light enough to see how badly he was hurt. At her questioning he admitted that a spear had cut him in the shoulder. She had no supplies, but she helped improvise a sling to give him what ease she could and he assured her that the wound had stopped bleeding and perhaps was hardly more than a graze.

The hide split at last. There was more light beyond, but they were facing away from it. Probably fires of some size still burned before the straggle of huts. Audha gagged again at the newest of foul odors—burned flesh.

Indeed their gruesome feast must have reacted on the demons like drink, for the prisoners could see nor hear no stirring at all. It might be that the raiders had so seldom such a large supply of food at hand that they had eaten themselves into a stupor.

The four worked their way out of that noisome prison and kept the firelight at their backs. Audha touched Lothar and whispered: “Wave wash.”

With her ears as their guide now, they made a wide detour around the rest of the huts they could sight and came to a beach. Not only a beach, but a good choice of the skin boats drawn up out of the water’s touch.

Even together they might not have been able to launch a ship’s boat, but the skin one slid along and they gingerly took their places in it. Rogar stumbled on two paddles laid in safekeeping at the bottom and, armed with one of these, Tortain with the other, they had forced a passageway.

Once out from land, they could see better the fires on the shore—and worse. There was the *Flying Crossbeak*, crushed between a rocky cliff and a giant berg, smashed past all hope. Ice floated here also, but it was in smaller pieces and, though Audha feared for a space that it might follow the strange and uncanny ac-



tion of the bergs and herd them back toward the hellish island, these seemed to follow no pattern.

So they had won free from Dargh, but to what purpose? Lothar's hurt showed in the morning to be much worse, and later he raved in delirium. Audha had held his head on her knee, but she had no water to give him when he called for it.

They had to stop paddling after a while, for their hands were blue with cold. So now they floated under the morning sun—but not back to Dargh.

There were no supplies on board. Oddly enough, Tortain, a bear of a man, was the first to fail. His heart, Audha thought, gnawed out of him. And then Lothar. Now it was another day, another night, another day since they had won free. Why did she live? She was sure Rogar was close to death. The sun that first morning had showed a fearsome bruise down his jaw and neck, though he had made no complaint.

Sulcar courage, Sulcar skill—all for nothing. She could watch the wave patterns now and they were drifting southward away from that monstrous trap of the bergs. But why, her mind worried dimly with the idea, had those bergs seemed to act with purpose against their ship? She knew of no power strong enough to command the flow of ice.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE



The North Sea

Drums were beating somewhere and it was icy cold. There was death in that cold. Trusla opened her eyes. Dream—no, someone



was pounding on the door of their cabin. Inquit was already astir in the dark and she felt Kankil against her, whimpering.

There was lantern light outside as the Latt shaman slid open the door. And people in the passageway. Berg—somehow that struck into Trusla's mind—one of the bergs about which they told such legends must threaten the *Wave Cleaver* now.

She struggled into her clothing, an act which should have been easy after all the weeks she had practiced it. Inquit was back pulling on her own furred gear. The Latt shaman was muttering to herself what sounded to Trusla like some kind of an invocation, and she hesitated to break into that with a question.

But she was behind the shaman, Kankil having made a leap from the bunk to hold to her mistress when they went out.

It was Captain Stymir and with him the old seamaster Joul, no longer a ship's ruler but given all respect and welcome aboard any ship he chose to honor with his presence because of his vast lore of knowledge.

"She—she is like one mindless!" The captain broke into speech as soon as he again sighted the shaman. "If you have the healing touch, wisewoman, do you aid her. Two voyages has she made under my flag and a better wavereader no ship could wish for. Now—in the night she runs screaming across the deck and would have thrown herself overboard had Hansa not caught her. He still holds her fast, she fighting and screaming."

Indeed Trusla could now hear the shrill cries of a woman who might be utterly demented.

"I have some healer's knowledge, yes, Captain. But it is for the hurts such as my people suffer. There are wounds of the mind and spirit which require greater knowledge than mine. Have up the witch; her kind is said to be able to face demons and deal them death."

"She has been called. Hansa has taken our Undia into the great cabin. But it took all his strength and he is a powerful man, whereas she is but a maid."

The screams came hoarsely now, if louder, as they found their way



to the great cabin. It seemed to Trusla that the chill she had felt upon awakening was also growing stronger.

They had lit a number of lanterns so that there was light enough to see the girl struggling madly in the hold of the Sulcar seaman who towered above her. His face was streaming blood from the raking of her nails, and spatters of foam flew from the corners of her mouth every time she voiced one of those screeches.

Undia had always seemed a shy and retiring person. And Trusla had learned enough since the voyage started to know that she had her own Power talent—one esteemed and carefully fostered when discovered. For some reason it was possessed mainly by females and those of certain kin lines so that each girl child was carefully watched from infancy for any signs of such gifts. Wavereaders they were called, and it appeared that some unknown sense allowed them to gauge currents, to find guide paths through the sea. As with the witches, they kept apart except for their own kind, and Trusla had often wondered if they were not lonely; a ship at the most carried two, one being an apprentice. But only Undia had sailed with them and Trusla would have sworn that she was as levelheaded and free from any demon possession as Inquit or Frost. Yet her mad struggles now were certainly born of the Dark.

Frost stood within touching distance, though those struggling bodies did not touch her. On her breast the jewel was alive—with a shade of green light which had something forbidding about it. Trusla herself suddenly saw a frightening change in the fighting girl. The signs of fear-born rage were gone—her face smoothed, and for an instant out of time it was not Undia who now slumped slackly against Hansa, but another girl.

The stranger's face was there clearly. Trusla could hear the gasps of those around her, a kind of whistling noise from Kankil. Then it was Undia, but limp and unconscious.

“Possessed!”

Trusla heard that fateful exclamation from some one of them, but Frost spoke suddenly and sparingly in answer.

“This is not fully a sending from the Dark but a cry for help. Lay her there. She will not struggle again.” She indicated the lone bench to one side. Then she turned to Inquit, a measuring look in her eyes.



The shaman faced her as silently, but some unheard question must have been asked and answered as both of them moved to stand over the unconscious girl. Inquit motioned to Trusla and pointed to a small brass bowl on the wide table which apparently served the captain as a desk.

Trusla luckily found it empty and stood holding it at the shaman's gesture. From some hidden pocket in her fur tunic Inquit produced a small packet which she opened with great care, dropping but a pinch of its contents into the bowl.

She had given no open order to Kankil, but the small furry creature climbed up beside the unconscious girl and deliberately spread its own body face down across hers so that their hearts must have been close together. Now the shaman took the bowl and snapped her fingers at it. A small thread of mist arose and she paced slowly about the bench, the bowl outheld and the mist, seemingly inexhaustible, weaving a pattern in the air back and forth across Undia.

Having done so, she stepped aside and Frost took her place at the girl's head. She slipped the chain of her jewel from around her neck and with it touched Undia's sweat-beaded forehead.

"What lies within be told without," she commanded.

Undia's eyes did not open, nor did she seem in any way aware of the listeners. But speak she did now—in a broken series of small phrases as if the effort of bringing forth the message she had to give was almost too much for her strength.

"The ice herds—fog—demons—" Undia's face twisted as if even to bring forth that name caused her pain now. "Dargh—feast—Rogar, Lothar, Tortain—left—me—left—only ones. Creep—get skin boat—take to sea. Cold, oh, cold that eats the bones. Death comes as friend. Lothar dies—Tortain—Rogar—better a quick death in the sea—rock the boat over—no, Sulcar dies not except at the Call. Cold—read the waves—I can read the waves again—too late—south—but only ice—always the ice floating about. Wind Ruler, hear me! Mother of the Deeps, hear me! I am Audha of the *Flying Crossbeak*, wavereader—let the cold take me quickly—oh, quickly."

Frost looked across the girl's body to the captain. "This maid is a wavereader of great talent—I have heard that from several of you. Can she be led by this other so that we can find her still alive?"



Captain Stymir looked amazed. “How know you that such can be done? It is one of the hidden talents. But then, Lady Frost, I take it that all talents are open to your reading. Ask her pattern. No—wait a moment.”

He near leaped to the table desk and brought out a white square of wood and one of the black sticks kept for short reckonings. “Now!” he commanded.

“Audha,” Frost addressed the unknown as if she stood there before them, “tell us of the patterns you see.” The jewel in her hand was now flashing white, straight at the closed eyes of Undia.

Again she spoke—this time the words made no sense as far as Trusla was concerned. But the captain’s writing fingers flew as he put down a series of symbols.

“Will we find her alive?” he asked as he handed the square of wood to his mate.

“If my sister here can keep her living,” Frost said in a low voice.

Inquit’s dark eyes gleamed through the mist cover she had woven. “There is still a living spark. The little one feeds that through this one. What can be done we shall do.”

Trusla felt her helplessness. This was no usual healing matter, though even there her skills were limited. Then she felt arms about her, strong support. Simond was always there when she needed him most. She sighed with a small feeling of relief.

“Best to go!” Inquit waved her hand, and, except for Frost, those gathered there left her to her own use of Power, hearing her strong voice raised in a chant as they left.

Trusla still stood within the circle of Simond’s arm as they stood together in the growing light of dawn. By all the signs it would be a fair day. But she was haunted by the thought of that skin boat with its sad cargo adrift somewhere ahead.

Joul took the wavereader’s position at the bow, the captain at his shoulder. Now and then he called out some direction, which was passed to those working the ship. They had taken an easterly course and could see afar the rise of cliffs like an open jar ready to engulf the sea.

Rations in the forms of bowls of mutton stew were passed and



they ate as they stood to their posts, dipping the hard ship biscuit into the liquid to make it chewable.

Now the sun sent both light and warmth down upon them. Here and there it appeared to be reflected from the waves in strange flashes—or, Trusla thought, she was too eager by far to find something amiss.

“She—that Audha—spoke of ships being herded by bergs,” she commented after she had drunk the last few drops from her bowl. “How can that be? I do not know this north. What out of the Dark could so threaten?”

“We shall doubtless discover that in our own time,” Simond returned bleakly. “This is a part of the world where our kind live only on sufferance; sea, ice, and rock hold the real rule.”

There was a cry from the lookout on the masthead. And it brought them all to the side of the deck. Then a sharp spate of orders sent the trained Sulcars to launch one of the smaller ship’s boats. Men swung down on ropes to man it and it pushed away from the *Wave Cleaver*.

Even Trusla could see their goal, a dark, strangely shaped thing which rode low in the waves, and toward that the ship’s boat flew with a flashing of oars.

It was too far away for those on the ship to see more than vague movements, but some of those suggested that bodies were being transferred from the derelict to their own craft. And the native boat was left behind as the ship’s boat came swiftly across the waves.

Those on board were ready and dropped slinglike nets, each of which was brought up with care to be swung over the rail. The stiff, contorted bodies—surely all were dead. But then a hand moved out to catch at the netting that held it and Trusla heard a small cheer from those ready to receive the lost.

They did not even unroll the net from about that one and Hansa gathered up the slender body and carried it as he might a child back to the great cabin. Trusla saw Inquit stand at the door, waving vigorously. But when the captain and some others of the crew would have followed, she slid the door shut in their faces with a determined shove.



The three others who had been lifted aboard were indeed dead. Under the captain's tight-lipped orders they were straightened to lie on wide strips of sailcloth. Their frozen hands were somehow loosened enough to be brought to lay on their breasts, and into the loose hold of those hands was fitted the shaft of a boarding axe—the warrior's key to the Last Gate.

Trusla turned away. These were not kin who lay here—but in final things all were kin. However, she felt as if she were intruding on something not meant for her eyes and sensed that Simond agreed. Together they went to the fore of the ship, where old Joul still sat in the wavereader's perch.

“May the Fire Fangs of the Bosken avenge them.” He nearly made a song of the words, weaving back and forth in his narrow seat. “May I live to see Dargh be wiped from the living world. Lothar Longsword, Tortain Staymir, who stood at the last ingathering with pride of victory over the greatest varse any man had ever harpooned before. Rogar—now, there was a man. Many a well-spun tale he had for shipmates when we drank together. He was at the fall of Sulcarkeep—one of the few who took to the message boats by the order of Osberic himself. The maid—she I do not know—but she has carved herself a part in the next bard-singing—and she shall have it, by the Breath of the Wave Driver Himself!”

He glanced around at the two who had ventured to come up behind him.

“We remember our kin gone before,” he said fiercely. “Though we cannot give these good shipmates land burial, the sea welcomes always the Sulcars. For we have made it our own. We build towns now—but once there was only the sea and it kept us for the time given us. It is only just that it receives us at the last.”

Receive the three it did. Sewn into their shrouds, and with Joul himself summoned to chant their deeds and kin names, and the captain to empty into the waves the farewell cup for their going. Wreathed with thick lengths of chain, they went down into waves, which seemed higher, stronger, as if eager to receive them.

But Audha was not among them. It seemed that whatever power



the Latt shaman and the Estcarp witch could summon kept her back from that last journey.



In spite of Audha's broken warning of what might lie ahead, the *Wave Cleaver* kept on course once they had picked up those in the skin boat. During the day Trusla made a visit to her cabin searching for that jar of sand she had found in the wharfside market. She did not try to free the wooden stopper but sat with it in her hands. As she turned it around and around in her fingers, the sorrow and some of the ever-present uneasiness was drawn out of her. Closing her eyes, she sought to summon every scrap of memory from a past that for a while she had struggled hard to forget.

Life in Tor Marsh was no easier for those who followed its boggy ways than it was for these Sulcars who depended upon what seemed to her an element which could become treacherous at any moment—the sea. But it was what one was bred to which seemed the lesser evil—if one could deem it so.

Among her kin she had been the lesser—the near outcast one. Only because Blind Mafra had spoken for her was she now here. She had never felt the rich warmth of kin approval. Among her kind there were no individual mothers, and she had no idea who had fathered her at the Moon Dancing. But this—once more she turned the jar and thought of what had freed her—this was as much a part of her as her lifeblood.

Now she did loosen the cap and very slowly put a finger within. Yes, it felt the same, she could not deny that. The soft powder enclosed her finger and clung. Trusla had no understanding of why she now did as she did, but she raised that coated finger to her lips and licked her flesh clean. There was a very faint taste—like that of Tor water—and a whiff of fragrance.

“Little sister . . .”

She heard that—or only hoped?

“You are more than you think. And you shall learn, ah, how you shall learn!”

“Xactol?” she said wonderingly, without opening her eyes. For she was seeing not the cramped cabin in which she sat, but rather the



small strip of beach flowing with sand like this, and that sand rising to dance in the moonlight, to become one she yearned to join—to be one part of.

“Go to the one who is near the Great Sleep.” Yes, she was hearing that clearly. “Give her of your strength. Two Powers hold her in this world; let the third bind her safe herein.”

Trusla put the jar into hiding once again and then went directly to the great cabin. The door was slid shut, but she put out her hand as if she had been summoned from within and opened it far enough to slide through.

Undia no longer lay on the bench but was now on a mat of blankets on the floor, Audha so close beside her that they touched at shoulder, arm, and hip. Both of them had been stripped of clothing and that mist which Inquit had summoned still hung in the air. Kankil sat by their heads, a soft furred paw on each forehead. Her eyes were closed and there was a faint sound like a hum or a purr sounding from her.

Frost had settled cross-legged by their feet and her jewel flared and dimmed, flared to dim again as she pointed it to them.

Neither woman seemed to notice Trusla, but she went confidently forward to kneel beside the stranger out of the sea—Audha. She reached forward and placed her hand on the girl’s breast, chill as death under her touch.

Then she closed her eyes. Sand—a long stretch of sand—sand which arose about her, for this time *she* danced there, whirled and dipped, felt the caress of the powdery stuff against her skin. Now she deliberately did what she had never dared to do before. She called—not to summon but to demand—to raise Power which none of her kind had ever had, or so she believed.

The sand about her as she danced was warm, grew warmer, nearly flame-hot, and now she took command of it with all her strength, channeled it, sent that heat of life where it must go.

This was like no struggle she had known since the time she had fought to keep life in her when Simond broke the barrier that let them both through into the outer world. Somehow she held, and



fed that heat of life—fed it with all the strength in her—to fight the chill, to banish the grasping fingers of death.

At last she sagged, crumpling backward to the floor. Dimly she heard a low moan and knew that she had won. Then there were arms about her settling her against a pillow. And mistily, as if she viewed it all still through a fall of sand, she saw Frost and Inquit busy wrapping the two girls with blankets. Making signs above them—the witch with her jewel and the shaman with her hands.

Something soft and warm nestled against her, reached up short arms to clasp hands about her neck. Kankil was with her now, purring steadily, and somehow she felt strengthened by the rhythm of that sound.

“Trusla! What have they done to you?” Through that relaxing hum she heard Simond’s cry. He was on his knees beside her, holding her, his arms enfolding her along with Kankil, who still clung to her as might a child to its parent.

There was a flashing light. She tried to close her eyes against it but could not. Ice—ice come out of the sea—no, she was still warm, she had not been swallowed up by the freezing water.

Then she could see that it was Frost’s jewel burning bright, not to harm or threaten but to awaken her fully to the here and now.

Undia first came into sight beyond the brilliance of that gem. She held a blanket close about her and under the sea tan her face was greenish pale. But there was no longer any madness in her eyes and she was drinking thirstily from a cup Inquit held to her lips.

Audha? Trusla shaped the name with her lips rather than said it aloud.

“She sleeps, sister,” Frost answered gently. For the first time she used the form of address which welcomed Trusla among those with the Power. Power—sand—she had danced with sand and commanded it to be obeyed. Abruptly she straightened in Simond’s hold.

“Xactol!” Never before had she said that name aloud within the hearing of another, even Simond.

Frost’s head was a little inclined to one side, as if she were weighing the word she had heard. Then she smiled and all the stiffness Trusla instinctively associated with the witches was gone.



“We serve many different aspects, perhaps, but they are all of the same Power, whether you name the Flame, Gunnora, or—”

“Arska,” Inquit broke in. She had settled Undia and now was pulling a furred covering over Audha. “This one lives—perhaps because there is a need for her yet to walk this world. We have proved that the Light has reached out to her. But she will sleep. Kankil. . . .”

Trusla’s arms tightened for an instant, reluctant to let the little one go. But she had Simond now. The shaman’s small creature ran to where her mistress bent over Audha and then she delightedly slid her small body under that cloaking fur and disappeared. Trusla had good reason to believe that once again she was lending the comfort which she radiated to one who needed her the most.

“Trusla.” Simond’s voice was soft, like a caress—when he said her name in that fashion it was as if they were an indivisible part of one another. “You must rest.”

Before she could move or protest, he had her fully in his arms and was carrying her back to her cabin—how she wished now it was theirs. But he settled beside her as if that thought also was in his mind and he smoothed her hair and then kissed her, not with passion, but with joy that they were together.

She did sleep and she had no dreams. She did not dance with the sand, she did not cower away from the ravings of Undia, she went only into velvet darkness which opened and closed about her, holding her safe and soft.

But others dreamed. Twice Frost had to use the witch jewel to drive Audha into deeper unconsciousness and Kankil whimpered and cried out as the raging memories cut across the sleeper’s mind.

All that Undia had reported when they had been in such strange contact across the sea leagues was indeed the truth. Twice over Frost had to fight away Audha reliving all which lay just behind her.

At length she seemed to sink into such a depth of exhaustion that the healing of the jewel was no longer needed. Then Inquit and Frost faced each other across her now-quiet body and the face of each woman was grim with foreboding.

“I know not the north,” Frost said hardly above a whisper. “What



evil walks there? Tell me legends, sister, even if you do not know the truth.”

“We had only the dreams to plague us,” the shaman answered. “But in the last days before we trailed south those were strong enough to kill—and they did!” Her fingers moved on her knee as if she sketched patterns there. “The Power runs in kin lines with us, sister. I am the daughter of a daughter of a daughter who was dreamer for a much greater tribe. For we are now a remnant of a people. And always, in each generation, there were evil dreams—but they were not so strong. The Power could destroy them and none died or went mad. Then . . .” she took a deep breath, “I know not of my own accord what happened. But from you I learned of the wild magic which struck when the gate stone was gone. And I can understand the fears your people have of the Dark arising outworld and perhaps coming to us. This poor child speaks of icebergs which herd ships to their doom. Only of the Dark could such things come.”

Frost nodded and once more slipped the chain of her jewel over her head so it lay again gray and lusterless on her breast.

“Always the Dark.” She gave a weary sigh.

But Inquit was smiling wryly. “Always the Dark, sister, but we can marshal good fighters on our side, and we shall.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR



West Coast Voyage, North

The *Wave Cleaver* had altered course soon after they had picked up the drifting boat. As yet there had been no signs of any floating bergs, but Captain Stymir was willing to take the longer route, that



he might not encounter whatever had brought the *Flying Crossbeak* and its crew to their end.

Dargh was well marked on the map used by any ship bearing north, but it lay closer east than west. Their new course would add extra days of sailing onto their voyage, as on the west there were treacherous shoals and reefs among which few ever wished to hunt a path.

Undia had recovered by the second day after the ordeal she had partly shared with Audha and insisted on returning to her post at the prow—though for the first day Joul remained at hand.

Audha still remained in deep slumber in Undia's bunk. Frost and Inquit took turns visiting her, though Kankil was always cuddled close to her unmoving body. Trusla felt she had little to offer now, but concern pulled her in the same direction several times each day.

She sensed that the Sulcars of the crew were tense and apprehensive. Axes and swords had been loosened of the oiled covering which kept them from rust at sea. And it seemed that all day long the screech of metal against an edging whetstone could be heard. They kept a lookout on the midmast, though those had to be changed hourly because of the nip of the wind.

From time to time Undia raised the horn which hung at her belt and blew patterns of notes which set the crew to various tasks, most of which Trusla could only guess at. Simond had been summoned twice by the captain and she guessed that his own knowledge of possible attacks from the Dark was examined. After all, though his service had been only on land, for the past months he had been heading one of Koris's Estcarp search parties and twice they made finds which had sent a witch riding in a hurry to lay some trouble to rest.

On the fourth day they sighted the first warning of the rough way ahead. Sometime in the past an unknown who had feared the traps the sea laid had erected, on a wave-washed cone of rough rock sometimes completely hidden by the water, a cairn which appeared to be fused together. At least the wrath of the sea about it had not beaten it away.

At the tip of that rugged pile was set a round of metal. And the



sea had not had its way with that, either, for it was not dimmed. Undia swung up a rod with a similar disk at its end. There was flash from the cairn-set plate.

“Hothrot’s light.” The tall Hansa came up beside Trusla as he spoke. “’Tis said that he gave one of his own eyes to win that beacon for us all. It is true that some Power holds it steady.”

The ship veered again slightly. Undia leaned forward in her seat, her attention fast-fixed on the waves into which their prow plowed. Another blast from her horn caused a flurry of activity.

Now Trusla could see the dark rise of the western coast. Unknown land. That which was known of Arvon, where the four Mantle overlords held reign, was to the south. She had seen some furs on the wharf market tables—some of a dull gray—which most of the buyers had avoided and she had overheard named stinkwolf. Indeed they had smelled strong, and Trusla had heard from one complaining customer that they came from some beast unknown in the east and a peril to be avoided in the west.

For the rest of the day and through the dusk, which came very late in these northern reaches at this time of year, the *Wave Cleaver* followed the pattern set by Undia’s horn.

At last the captain himself ordered her from her perch and Joul took her place so that she could eat and drink. However, she refused to go to her cabin but lay on a wad of sail and blanket they spread for her.

Trusla made a final trip to see Audha before she herself sought sleep. Frost sat cross-legged on the deck planking, her body swinging to the motion of the boat. Her head had fallen forward on her breast and she plainly dozed.

Inquit slid open the door behind Trusla and edged in. Their vigil was beginning to affect both women. By the limited light of the lantern swinging from its hook above, they looked gaunt and strained.

Just as Inquit closed the door, Audha moved. She had lain every time Trusla had seen her in that same stiff, unnatural position as when they had arranged her so on the bunk. But now her head



turned from side to side and she sighed and then gave a small cough and her blue eyes opened.

She stared at Trusla in bewilderment and then turned her head weakly to survey what she could of the cabin.

Kankil raised her soft head from the girl's shoulder and patted her cheek gently. Both Frost and Inquit half pushed Trusla aside to go to their charge.

"What watch?" Her voice was thin. "My watch—I must keep my watch." She sat up suddenly and collapsed as quickly. "My head spins . . . but the watch."

"The watch is kept, little one." Frost's voice held its most gentle note. "You are safe—this is the *Wave Cleaver*."

Audha's eyes seemed to open farther. She raised a hand and pushed aside Kankil as if she desired no comfort, no tending.

"Then—then I dreamed true." Her face twisted as if some pain wrenched at her lean middle. "We—we were taken—but how—how did I come here, Lady?" She reached up now and grasped the sleeve of Frost's robe, nearly jerking the witch down upon her with a sudden show of strength. "The captain—tell the captain—the Dargh—"

"We are well away from that plague spot," Inquit said, drawing Audha's attention to her.

"You—you are Latt." The girl spoke as one now dazed. "And you . . ." She looked to Frost, and then shrank down into the bunk, loosing her hold on the other quickly. "You are a witch—out of Estcarp. Witchery—it was dire witchery as caught us. What do you weave now?"

She was shaking, and, without thinking, Trusla pushed past Frost, though her smaller form could not hide the taller witch. As Kankil had done, she patted the other gently.

"We seek woven witchery to break its web, waverader. It was the Power of these"—she indicated Inquit and Frost—"who, with the aid of our own waverader, found you."

The girl bit her lip. "It must be by some favor of Power I live. Rogar—Lothar—Tortain?"



Trusla shook her head. "They walk the Road of Heroes' Grace. But you remain."

Now the girl clutched Trusla's hand, holding it tightly. "Perhaps I lived to warn. There is that which moves. Something drove the bergs so that our ship was herded like one of the wasan to the fall slaughtering. Dargh . . ." She shuddered, and Trusla settled herself precariously on the side of the bunk and somehow brought Audha up into her own arms.

"All is well," she crooned, as she would have to one of the little ones in the children's room in the great house where she had been born. "We are far from Dargh. Our captain has chosen a western way."

The girl in her hold stiffened. "That is the way of peril also—though only by rocks and the whims of the sea and not the beastliness of man eaters. To voyage so is a great danger, though it has been done."

"As we shall do again. Captain Stymir has made other northern voyages. Many of the perils are already known to him." But she saw the shadow of uneasiness still on Audha's face.

Inquit had moved up beside Trusla. "We are of the north, though we do not take to the sea except for the hunt. Yes, there grows danger, but it is that which we are sworn to seek and face—Power to Power. Now you must eat and grow strong and perhaps in a few days you can aid Undia with the watching, for she has no 'prentice on this voyage."

The feeling of calmness and good sense which Inquit projected now was such that Trusla could also feel. After a last lingering look at Audha, Frost slipped out of the cabin and the other two proceeded to tend their charge. At length she slept again and this time it seemed that she rested naturally.

However, there was a meeting in the great cabin at dusk. The *Wave Cleaver* had again altered course several degrees east, since the strain of trying to read the wave run in this dull northern light was too much for either Undia or Joul, though both stayed stubbornly at the bow post.

Captain Stymir had out his map and was regarding it closely.



“We are beginning to sight ice—not real bergs but still visible. And the western reefs devour ships as a hungry man clears his dinner plate. From what can be guessed, the *Flying Crossbeak* was taking the way of most caution—eastward—before swinging toward the western shore. A peninsula that is well armored with reefs and tricky currents. Yet we must round it to reach End of the World.” He looked to Frost.

“Lady, you have your own way of foreseeing, is that not true?”

“No one can truly foresee, Captain,” she replied. “For life is made up of choices. We can sometimes tell what lies ahead for this choice or that. I do have the Power”—and her hand instinctively cupped her jewel—“to know whether any menace of the Dark lurks ahead—but that range is limited.”

“You have tried it.” He made that more statement than question.

“I have. There is a shadowing in the north. Also a blot of evil which I believe to be this Dargh. The Dark draws energy from pain, fear, violent death. See for yourself.” She slipped off the chain and now her jewel dangled over the map. It began to swing and yet somehow they were sure that she did not urge it so. Then it settled in the air as if an invisible pocket held it, aslant on the chain and to the east on the map.

“Is this your Dargh?” she asked.

“It is Dargh right enough, but certainly not mine, nor that of any true man. Those who den there have no right to the name of humankind.”

The color of the jewel was changing now. There was a dull red glow—it might be an ember scraped from some hearth, so dark a red that it was nearly black. Simond’s sword hand curled, to grip a weapon he did not draw. He had seen such a message given once before, when he had ridden the outer reaches of Estcarp seeking any entrance for the Dark. Then the witch in their company had been close enough to be sisterhood to alert them and draw Power. And a thing which might have once been a circle of slimed green rock had died in flame focused through her jewel—erased before it could once more be used.



“Can it be destroyed? I saw what happened in the Glade of Bone Trees,” he blurted out.

“Only a great summoning can cleanse such a Dargh,” the witch replied. “You witnessed the erasure of something very old—that which set it was long gone. This lives and gathers. But it is only a servant, or so it would seem.”

The captain made a dry sound which was far from a laugh, if that was what he had intended.

“You give us faint encouragement, Lady Frost.”

“If what we are now seeking is indeed the gate through which your people came, Captain, why did they chance such a journey into the unknown? The Sulcars are spoken of as lovers of trade and gain and they have served not only themselves but also our world well by those very matters. But above all else, as a goad, there hangs fear.

“The best recorded entrance of a whole people uncovered so far at Lornt is that of the Dalefolk. Their wisefolk deliberately opened that door to escape some disaster so great that, lest some longing for a part of the past would move them to eventual return, they closed and sealed it behind them with the strongest Powers they could against any reopening. The Kioga—they fled a war and found a land they could make their own. And those others who through the years have come singly—such as Simon Tregarth—have been hunted by their kind and took a final chance for escape.

“Your legend of a northern gate through which you passed on ships—tell me, Captain, you have known it from childhood. Is it not deliberately obtuse? If those who come thus into our seas fled, then what did they flee? The wild Power loosed when the Magestone went from us was enough to arouse many sleeping things—and it has. The shadows that have driven the Latts from their home ranges with evil and deadly dreams—this affair of the *Flying Crossbeak*—does that not suggest that perhaps some lock *your* people put upon a gate is weakening, that something beyond is drawing to it, or perhaps experimenting with that of the Dark it can summon and control?”

Stymir had shifted a little in his chair. “And if we follow the



hints of legend to this gate, Lady, and it opens—how do we battle?”

“They search now at Lormt, as you know, for the ultimate sealing of all gates. Hilarion remains and he is an adept such as could gather power into his hands and hurl it like lightning. Even we of the jewel”—she held hers close again—“who have been favored above most by the talent, cannot command such forces as an adept summons. But if his Powers, plus all we can feed him—and there are many talents, each with their own strength and virtue—fail, then there will be a sequel battle such as this world has not often seen.

“I cannot chart a sea path for you, Captain. That is the talent which is of your blood. What I can do is foretell any blight of the Dark which lies across our path. And at this time I see nothing which threatens save the weapons of nature herself.”

The captain reached within a coffer on the table which served him as a desk. He brought out a plaque of what looked to Simond like clear ice, yet in the warmth of the cabin it showed no signs of melting.

“Three years ago”—Stymir seemed reluctant to say anything, turning the plaque about in his callused hands—“I made the voyage to End of the World. It is never one popular with my people, but if a man succeeds, the return is great. Not only are there precious furs such as can be found in no other land, but when the ice streams run from beneath the glaciers still farther north, men seeking in their gravel beds find gold nuggets, as well as gems, held prisoner by the ice for seasons and released only by the chance of a melt.

“This is such a thing.” He lay the plaque on the table. “It is something not even our Storm Talkers can understand. Though it seems ice, it is not, nor is it glass, which would not have existed for a fraction of an hour candle in such a rough cradle. But from the north it came, and now . . . look into it, Lady, and tell us what can be seen.”

Simond had already noted a dark spot in the middle of the plaque, though all the rest of it was crystal clear. It appeared to him that as the witch leaned closer to view the find, that spot not only



grew darker but larger. Also suddenly small sparks of light glittered at one end, coming alive as might stars in the southern nights.

"It is . . ." She had held her jewel pointed toward it and there was a flicker from those star points. "It is a ship—ice-trapped, yet not destroyed. And those stars . . ."

"If they are stars," said the captain, "then they are ones we do not know, we who use such light as part of our guiding. Nor is the ship like the one on which we now travel."

Frost had taken a step away and now those others there drew closer to study the find in turn. Among them Odanki was the first to speak. As a rule he was silent in most company; Simond thought that he deliberately listened to gain knowledge of these strangers around him, jealously in turn guarding his own inner self as best he could.

"That is the Foot of Arska." He did not quite touch finger to the plaque, but he indicated plainly the stars. "Not always is it so—for Arska walks the skies of the world and sometimes His tracks are different—but there is a long time between such differences."

"Yet you call the constellation by name, and we who travel the northern waters do not see them so." The captain was frowning.

"To Arska there is no time as we know it," the young Latt hunter responded calmly. "We, too, have our guide maps, and they are of the sky. Twice has Arska's trail changed since our Rememberers kept records."

Simond caught his breath. He had listened and read enough of the records at Lormt to know that mankind's time was swallowed up when the stars appeared to move and that seasons beyond counting lay between such shiftings. How long must these Latt records run? It would seem that his unspoken question was already one to be voiced from Frost herself.

"Your shaman, hunter, has told us that you have no tradition of any gate—any offworld beginnings."

He smiled with a flash of white teeth clear against his dark skin. "That is certainly the truth. Do *you* have a gate memory, Powerful One?"

She was frowning a little. "No," she returned. "Nor do any of



the true Old Race. It is our belief that we have been here always—and that there were no gates until the adepts created them as doors for learning or amusement.”

“So . . .” he faced her straightly. “Perhaps we are ‘Old Ones’ also, but of a different breed. Our Rememberers tell of the coming of these shipmen, and also of a war to the southward, when a people who were one with animals they called hounds strove to drive us north and out of the land which was once ours.”

Alizon, thought Simond. But by all they had learned from Kasarian in Lormt, it had been a good thousand years or more since the hounds had entered this world. So if the Latts had ever had such a gate, it lay so far back in time that it was truly lost.

“We were never a people great in numbers,” Odanki was continuing, “but we found a place we could make our own and Arska signed His judgment of us then in the skies. So”—he came back to the matter immediately at hand—“there are Arska prints and they shine upon a ship which you say, Captain, is not one of your kind.”

Simond could catch only a shortened sidewise view of that shadow at the heart of the plaque. Even he who was no seaman could make an outline of another type of vessel. This one had no masts; instead, in the center section of its deck, there was an erection like a tower standing to a goodly height.

Captain Stymir’s eyes had been fastened intently upon it as if the thing had more meaning than any of the questions and answers about him. Simond saw the captain’s features stiffen, his thin-lipped mouth straighten into a line. Did he indeed begin to recognize it?

“It is a thing of evil,” he said. “It . . .” He reached for the plaque as if he would dash it to the decking, destroy it utterly.

Simond swung out his hand to intercept the other’s. “It is a key.” He did not know why those words had come to him, but he knew they must be said.

“You are right, southerner.” Surprising them all, Odanki spoke again. “This was found, you tell us, Captain, in one of the summer glacier streams. Thus it is out of the upper ice—from the great



halls we have seen from afar. It is a track such as a hunter will follow to find his prey.”

Captain Stymir looked up at the young Latt. “Your track,” he said almost jeeringly, “has lain long. The quarry must have far since vanished.”

“Not so.” Odanki seemed unshaken by the captain’s tone. “The ice holds what it takes far past generations of any kinline. Last warm season Savfak took a hunting party northeast. There are sometimes the great horned ones to be found there—thin though the forage is. Into that land the moving ice has flung a wide arm. It was a warmer season than any but the oldest could remember and the weather was good.

“Savfak found trail and we took it. It was lost at last at the foot of the ice wall. But in that wall . . .” he paused, “by the honor of the past kin I swear that we saw what was encased there—such a beast as never any hunter had faced before. Three men standing on each other’s shoulders could perhaps have reached its back, and its mouth was open, showing such fangs as were out of natural growth.

“It was of the ice and we left it to that hold. But things can be indeed kept very long in such storage. Who knows, Captain, how long the ice held this picture thing of yours?”

“Your legend speaks of a gate through which your ships came,” Frost said. “We know that this quest of ours is overseen and appointed by Powers we do not question. Perhaps you do have now a guide of sorts. In End of the World can you not seek out the one who traded this to you and discover all he knows?”

“That much can be done. But—look—it fades!” said the captain. The flicks of stars were gone, and the ship was again a black blot growing ever less.

Frost had once more put on her jewel. “Power summons Power,” she commented. “When it is needed, we can raise it again.”



“Things washed from the ice barriers—great beasts caught within.” Trusla marveled at Simond’s report of the meeting in the



captain's cabin. "Could such beasts come alive again?" she wondered.

"This land," Simond returned with a grin, "has seen even stranger things in its time. Lady Frost has gone to report to Es and to gather any news which may have been passed from Lormt."

Trusla knew the deep trances which were part of any such communication. It might be some time before the witch would rejoin them to share what she had learned. The sun was warm here. She had been able to discard her cloak. She knew that this strange country did have its summer, though it was very short. But it was long enough to start runnels of water in streams from under the tall glacier walls.

People would have spread out from End of the World preparing for the threat of next season's cold. She had listened to the talk of the seamen enough to know of the fishing which went on long into the night dusk, the cargoes brought back to be spread on racks and dried.

Then there were the herds of horses—somehow Trusla found it difficult to think of horses not much larger than wolfhounds—shaggy, except where the marks of packs had worn away some of the strands of hair. These were no Torgians, not even equal to the mountain ponies—certainly very far removed from the proud Keplians she had seen in Es, who considered themselves the equal if not superior to her own species.

There would be pack trains of these miniature beasts gone out of the trading post—each with some prospector or hunter. At the same time there might be another ship in harbor, since this was the open season. . . .

Another ship! She thought of Audha. The Sulcar girl seemed to be nearly recovered. At least she no longer was plagued by the nightmares which Frost and Inquit apparently had driven out of her memory.

In fact she seemed uneasy in her idleness and had offered her services to relieve Undia, though the latter appeared not to wish that.

A small brown furred figure bounded across the deck now, utter-



ing a small squeaky cry Trusla now recognized as her own name as Kankil believed it to be. She held out her arms and the little one threw herself in a tight hug. Kankil was firmly bonded with Inquit, but somehow with all that had been going on, Trusla had never been able to satisfy her curiosity concerning the shaman's companion. Were those of Kankil's kind common among the Latts? Where did they come from otherwise? Certainly they were far from being pet animals. Holding this loving warmth close to her, she wished—when all this trial was safely over—she might find a Kankil also to companion her.

Inquit had followed her small companion and now sat down cross-legged on the deck beside Trusla. She no longer wore her feather cloak and the lacings of her white fur tunic were undone so that the sun reached the thin skin undergarments she wore and part of her own skin.

She sniffed deeply and then nodded. "Not far now, Trusla. The land breezes already seek us. See . . ." She pointed to a dark line across the sea, which they were veering east again to avoid. "That is the snout of the traders' land. It shall not be long before we come to anchorage there."

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE



End of the World, North

It was not a good day as they maneuvered into the pocket harbor of the farthest known northern Sulcar port. But in spite of the drizzle of rain soaking her cloak, Trusla had kept to the deck. On either side there were cliffs, tall and black, save for here and there



where streamers of some kind of sea growth oozed down the forbidding stone. Before them was the single entrance to the open land beyond.

But there were no buildings that Trusla could distinguish. There were no age-old towers and walls, nor the bustling newness of Korinth. There was one long wharf, wet with overlapping waves, and beyond that, what seemed to be a wild-handed scattering of rounded humps.

The trade flag snapped from the *Wave Cleaver's* main mast and a similar streamer of faded cloth had half wrapped itself around a pole ashore. Also there were those waiting on the wharf, beginning to shout greetings and questions even before any on the ship were within hearing distance.

The welcomers were an oddly mixed lot. Sulcars towered over others who were not too far from the Latts in size and coloring, though their clothing was less of fur, seeming to be hides far more closely fitted to their bodies. Their hair was long and drawn up in stiff, thick knots held so by carven circlets. As far as Trusla could see, there was no distinction between man and woman in the style of clothing. However, the colors, in contrast to the somberness of the lands about them, were vivid—for those hide shirts and breeches were dyed in brilliant shades and wide whirls of patterns.

“First ship!” One of the Sulcars had made a funnel of his hands and shouted up to them as they eased into anchorage at the wharf. “First ship luck!”

Behind him two more Sulcars were carrying out a barrel, balancing it between them and now knocking into one end of it a spigot while two laughing women dropped by it a basket of drinking horns.

That the first ship of the season was a great occasion the passengers on the *Wave Cleaver* were quick to understand. A drummer and two flutists appeared farther down the wharf and started to underlay the shouting with music of a sort, and it was like a feast day in the south.

Some time later, Trusla was coughing from a sip of a cup one of the women had offered her, clinging to Simond lest they be sepa-



rated and whirled away into an impromptu dance which had begun down wharf. They were joined by Frost and Inquit, Odanki like a bodyguard behind her, Kankil clinging, slightly wild-eyed, to the shaman.

So Trusla was introduced to a third kind of city and one which was so different that at first she was secretly a little dubious about entering the door a grinning Sulcar had pulled open for her. It was before this mound that the trade flag had been raised and manifestly it must be the main building of End of the World.

It was necessary to go down a short flight of steps, each consisting of a worn rock set in the earth in order to reach the doorway which their host kept waving them toward. This was more a burrow than a house. Set well down in the earth, more than a Sulcar's-height deep, the floor was a patchwork of stones fit together with skill. More stones paneled the wall of the first room into which they had come. But covering those for the most part were hides, painted as brightly as the clothing the owners wore.

Across one end of the room, farthest from the main door, was a raised ledge. This was heaped with cushions which looked as plump as if no weight had ever rested on them.

Above their heads were great curved pieces of bone, which must have been carefully matched for length, as they met in the center. Between these stretched tightly more hide, probably several thicknesses of it. Trusla, remembering what she had seen outside, believed the builders covered this foundation with layers of earth and sod, perhaps with some packing from the sticky seaweed.

There were, she was to discover, four rooms in all. The one in which they were now received was in the nature of the official hall. Behind it were two other chambers divided by high curtains, and, beyond them, a cooking place which extended out with a lower roof from the main dwelling.

The exuberant heartiness of the man who had welcomed them vanished when he waved them to seats among the cushions, which Trusla discovered were remarkably soft. He made them known to two women already waiting there. One was his wife and the other, whose strictest attention had been for Frost and Inquit, was a con-



trast to the other women they had seen. Her garment reached nearly to her ankles and was patterned only in white. A wide buckle of strips of bone was bound around her waist and she also had a kind of frontlet running from the neckline of her garment down to that girdle. This was patterned with a mixture of bone heads and stones of green and blue. A band of the same type of work drew her long hair into a fastening behind her neck.

Different from the aged wisewoman they had seen at Korinth, this woman was young, or at least wore an appearance of youth to match Frost's. She had no drum, nor any attendant drummer, but she did hold a staff also of bone yellowed by time and carved with both runes and suggestions of weird creatures which might have been seaborne.

"This be our Watcher—the Lady Svan." Lady Svan inclined her head but still held her gaze on the other two women of Power in the room, Frost and Inquit. "And my House Lady, Gagna." Again a bowed head but there was lively curiosity to be read on the features of his wife.

It was Frost who made first answer. "To this house good fortune such as the Light sends. I am called Frost and am of the Sisterhood of Estcarp of the south." She looked to Inquit, and the Latt shaman, brave in her feathered robe, holding and stroking Kankil, said in turn:

"For the blood kin of the Latts I have been Power-chosen to deliver the great Call when that is needed. My public name is Inquit, and this little one be my dream anchor."

"These be the Lady Trusla and Lord Simond out of Es," Captain Stymir said with proper courtesy.

"Out of Es," repeated the Lady Svan. "Far have you come, yet not for trading. Captain"—she spoke sharply now, as if she found this company not greatly to her liking—"twice have the runes been read and the answer always lies on the Dark side. What danger follows on your heels? If you run hither for shelter, then know that that we cannot grant."

"Cannot"—Frost's voice was very soft and yet it held a core of



ice—"or will not, Watcher? We do not flee, we seek, and that seeking may mean life or death for all which lies upon this earth."

"As already evil has struck," the captain interjected when Svan did not reply at once. "The *Flying Crossbeak* has fallen to the Dark." Swiftly he told the main points of Audha's story.

"Bergs that herd ships!" the trade master burst out. "That is against all nature."

"Nature can be commanded by Power," returned Frost.

"Truth," agreed Svan. It was plain that her distrust of them was growing. "Did not your sisters cause the mountains to dance at your bidding not so long ago? What danger do you hunt here? This is a near barren land; we cling to the edge of it because we have learned how to make our compromises with nature. Let that balance be upset and indeed our lives shall cease to be."

"How do you know that already the Dark does not lumber toward you like a wounded great boar who will have its vengeance?" Inquit was eyeing the Watcher almost as coldly as the other was viewing the whole of their party. "You have cast runes, you say, and what led you to that, Watcher?" She leaned forward a little. "Did you also dream?"

Svan flushed. "You speak boldly of hidden things," she snapped.

"I speak so because it is a time for boldness, Woman of Power. We do not deal now with the fate of a single town, or even that of a single kin tribe. It is forbidden by Arska for His Voice to leave His people, yet I stand here under His orders. And this witch out of Es travels not for any pleasure. Listen to what may come upon us. Something perhaps worse than icebergs which herd ships into the waiting caldrons of maneaters."

Oddly enough, it was not to Captain Szymir she gestured, but to Simond.

And he told of their quest starkly with no such embellishments as a bard would use. First of the loss of the Magestone and the wide rip of wild Power which answered that, and then of their concern about other gates which might be so unlocked—ready to open to the demand perhaps of new horrors from without.

He spoke of those who searched in Estcarp and Escore, and the



party which was heading even farther south to lands unknown. Of the message alert sent to Arvon and what those who received it also decided upon. He told of the falling of Lormt's fourth tower, of the strange storerooms that collapse had uncovered and of how all the sages of learning struggled there to find answers to what those of action might meet.

A serving lad came with ship's lanterns to set around as the light began to fail, and twice the Trade Master pushed a drink horn into Simond's hand as his voice grew hoarse.

Trusla could see that he had truly won to their side the Lady Gagna and the Trade Master. She tried to read behind the impassive mask that the Watcher continued to wear. At least the woman had at last turned her gaze from Frost and Inquit and was, she was sure, listening intently.

When at last Simond was done, his voice was harsh from use, for Trusla knew that he had put into his account all the force he could summon. Simond was not a man of many words, preferring mainly to listen and not to address any company in form. Now the Trade Master turned to the Watcher.

"Lady, by the right of office given me in this town, I ask you now, once more the runes!"

She did not move or answer him at once, her attention still on Simond. Trusla longed to voice aloud her own irritation that this Sulcar witch could not see at once it was the truth he was speaking.

Then at last Svan raised her chin almost defiantly as she replied, "There is no moon this night, Trade Master."

Frost moved so the cushions about her rustled. She held her gem a little away from her breast so that it dangled from its chain. "There is Power and Power," she said crisply. "We must come to a decision, for I am under pledge to report to my sisterhood and learn from them in return." In the heart of the jewel there was a spark of white fire.

"Well enough," the Trade Master's heavier voice responded. "But first we eat and restore ourselves."

There was no answer from the Watcher. Trusla noted that Inquit's gaze followed the Sulcar wisewoman steadily and she had a



suspicion that the Latt shaman was not pleased by the Lady Svan's attitude.

It seemed that by unspoken consent among the whole party no more reference was made to the quest. But as several others, both men and women who apparently had some say in the affairs of the town, came in and small blocks of tables were strung together to support dishes of steaming stew and hard ships' crackers in place of bread, there was excited talk of the fate of the *Flying Crossbeak*. Audha's story had apparently sped through this company.

"Such should be wiped from the earth!" declared one young man, not wholly Sulcar by birth, for his hair was dark and he had slightly obliquely set eyes.

The Sulcar seated beside him brought his fist down on his portion of the shared table with almost enough strength to send the dishes spinning, filled though they were.

"Dargh was talked of at the last All Gather," he burst out. "And what was said then? That we could not spare fighters or ships enough to take the island. It is pitted with caves to which those demons flee whenever they are threatened. We can destroy their foul dens and kill maybe a hand's worth"—he held up his hand now and wriggled the fingers—"that are too old or stupid to take to hiding in time. If we stay for a period, they creep out at night and pick off any sentry and are gone where even our best trackers cannot follow. They are of the Dark and the Dark favors them. But this matter of icebergs which drive a ship to them—Dunamon himself, who knows the northern seas as a wasbear knows the hunting flows, swears that this maid is sure of what she saw.

"I tell you, shipmates and kin blood, if some Power has turned the very force of nature against us—then what comes of our outpost here? The demons of Dargh twice raided our holdings here when we were building. We drove them off at cost and then have sat well pleased with our battle honors because they came not again. But what if they have now a force which turns aside axe and sword?"

"There is this, Trade Master"—Inquit had popped a round of vegetables from her stew into Kankil's mouth—"when there is a



gather of Dark forces, drawing in to its core all such as can be influenced by it, then when it falls, so do its followers. For Power unleashed does not halt until all which threatens it is gone—and the Light is very sure.”

The Sulcar man grimaced. “Wisewoman, we who have no talents and are drawn into the affairs of Great Ones also may be wiped away. Tell us the truth—what do you seek here? Save for Dargh, we suffer no threat.”

“You have a path,” Captain Stymir put in. He pushed aside his dish and from a belt pouch produced the plaque he had shown those on board the *Wave Cleaver*. “What story have you about the coming of the Sulcars?” He asked that with force enough to rivet their full attention.

The man who had been speaking was quick enough to answer. “That our far kin came on ships through an ice gate into this land.”

“And why did they come?” For the first time Simond spoke again after his long spell of reporting news.

“The saying is that they fled some danger,” the Sulcar growled. “Many people on this world have such tales of their own. But the seasons between that time and this have been past the counting even for the Rememberers.”

“How far north has any ship gone in—say in the past fifty seasons, Trade Master?” Simond persisted.

The Trade Master answered with authority. “Evan Longnose took the *Raven* past the ice wall that season when there was more heat.”

“Only his longboat returned, crewed by four dead men,” answered the other Sulcar flatly. “We do not go beyond the high wall unless some hunter is a witless fool.”

“But,” Captain Stymir now cut in, “this is the season for the running of the under-ice streams. More than half your people here are already on the trek to mine them as well as set their traps. This, as the Trade Master knows, was found two seasons ago by Jan Hesar in one such stream.”



He laid the plaque on the board before him and those who had not already viewed it on shipboard crowded closer to see it.

"This is a thing of Power—the Lady Frost has tested it." He bowed his head a fraction in the witch's direction. "But Dark Power. Like the gold and gems you pick from the gravel of the ice streams, this was borne slowly into light—probably by the ice itself and then freed through the seasonal melting. Therefore it has a source beyond our explorations."

"To go by ship is folly!" burst out the Sulcar. "And over the ice mountains? What fool would try to set a trail? And . . ." he paused to scowl at the plaque, "who knows what awaits at the other end?"

"We shall see," Stymir said quietly. "This is perhaps a key. We know of gates; which one will this one open?"

"Enough!" The Trade Master ended the discussion. "All this talk of evil is enough to unsettle any stomach. Tell us of how things go in Korinth, what trade has come in from the Dales." And he gazed at them from under bristling brows.

Captain Stymir was the first to grin in answer. "Well enough. You have heard the worst; now let us turn to the best. The Dale lords squabble as usual among themselves. Though since the Falconers have established an Eyrie in the north there are no more sea raiders thinking to fill their chests with the products of honest traders' labor.

"Lord Imry works to bring all the forces under him, but the southern holders who suffered the most in the Alizon invasion are not so ready to relinquish any authority. The three major ports have been largely rebuilt and there is a steady stream of traders—especially in wool and artifacts from the Waste."

Lady Gagna shivered. "Such are unchancy," she commented.

The captain agreed. "True, but none are taken aboard until they have been examined by a sage or one of the Dames of the Flame abbeys. And they have their own way of dealing with that which is cursed. Estcarp is quiet now—Koris is a good lord and justly esteemed, and Simon Tregarth sits at his right hand.

"Escore boils now and then and perhaps always will, but the Tregarth sons and those of the Green Valley are good guardians. In the



far south several seasons ago the Port of Dead Ships was destroyed, and there is much talk now of an exploring expedition to head farther than Var in that direction, after the search for the gates is behind us.

“So far, outwardly, all follows the usual pattern.”

But, Trusla thought, *why*? At least the Trade Master knew what occupied the minds of most thoughtful people now, talented or untalented.

She and Simond had been offered quarters in one of the empty houses, the owner of which had gone off for the summer harvesting of whatever this land had to offer. The misty rain had stopped and they did not need a lantern to guide them, for the strange light which held in this north during the summer season was still giving the impression of day.

Trusla gave a sigh which was partially of happiness when she shed again her cloak and left it to dry, draped over two wall hooks.

“You are tired.” Simond, having shed his own cape, came to her.

“I am very proud,” she said, and linked her arms about his neck, drawing him as close as she could. “For my lord presented our cause as no one else might have. You do not deal in power and thus you see matters as most of these people do. Their Watcher . . .” She ended that with a long kiss and savored the good feeling of his touch along her small body.

“Their Watcher . . .” he said, having marked her chin line and down to her throat with his lips, “you do not like her.”

“I do not know her. But, my lord, this night let us forget all guests and Powers, witches, shamans, and Watchers, and keep some hours for us alone.”

He laughed softly. “Always you are the wise one, my lady. So be it. The Lady’s moon lamp may not shine upon us, but Her grace will fill us.”



In this odd light Trusla did not know how long she slept—for it had certainly been late when, with her head on Simond’s shoulder, she had sunk into the deepest and sweetest sleep she had known for what seemed a very long time.

At first she was puzzled when she opened her eyes. She lay alone



on the wide bed and this was certainly not the cabin of the ship with its cramped space. No—she rubbed her eyes—this was a house, or so the people here deemed it—and they had reached port. But this would be only the beginning, and perhaps the easiest portion of their traveling was behind her.

There was a soft rap at the door and, when she answered, one of the women who appeared to fuse Sulcar and alien features came in carrying a pitcher of water from which steam arose.

“Your lord said you were greatly wearied, but now it is the noon time for eating.” She was pouring a portion of the water into a basin, laying out a coarse strip of weaving as a towel.

“I am indeed a lazy slugabed.” Trusla laughed and hurried to wash. Then she hunted out clean underclothing, even if it was sadly wrinkled, and she felt at ease as she came to join the others at the Trade Master’s hall.

For the first time she saw Audha among that company. Youth seemed to have been drawn out of the wavereader’s face. Her jaw was set and she gazed ahead as if she saw nothing of what was about her. Kankil sat close to her, paw hand on her knee, and Inquit was just beyond, keeping a close eye on the girl.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX



The Reading of the Runes

There was no talk of their mission or the immediate past among those gathered there. Most of the conversation concerned a promising run of flat fish which could be harvested with ease as the predators which followed such schools drove them into the shallows.



Once pulled out of the sea, they were quickly prepared and put on smoking frames—a harvest which would help the trading station survive during the winter to come. In addition there was some excitement over a report brought in by a young hunter that some of the great horns had been sighted not too far away.

There were also comments on the possible luck of the back-country trackers, those who mined the ice streams, and those driving the horses to summer pasturage. Trusla had already seen those small beasts which seemed to be the only domesticated animals those of this Border settlement had.

In general appearance they were horses right enough, but far removed from even the hill ponies of the south, being hardly larger than the great hounds some of the Dales lords and noblemen of Karstan kept for boar hunting or to beat off attacks from the vicious Gray Ones. Their coats were shaggy in rough patches, as they were shedding the thick hair which covered them in winter, and they were gaunt. No one larger than Kankil could hope to mount one, and they were used for packing alone.

A woman near Trusla, as she sat to accept a ship biscuit coated with a tart-sweet jam, was discussing with a friend the fact that several of the small beasts had been returned lately with injured hooves, needing special attention, and that she hoped there would not be an epidemic of such to curtail the summer work.

However, Trusla's attention kept returning to Audha. Though Trusla had tended the girl on shipboard, the wavereader's eyes had passed over her with no sign of recognition and the Estcarpian sensed that Inquit, too, was disturbed by her aloofness.

Those gathered here—mainly, Trusla believed, to give reports of one or another of the town's activities—began to drift out again. There was no sign of Captain Stymir, but Frost was settled among the cushions a little away from the others. She had smiled and nodded to Trusla, yet about her was an aura of waiting—though if she were truly impatient she kept the signs of that hidden.

Simond appeared in the doorway, gave lordship hand greeting to the Trade Master, and bowed to the others. He was quickly fol-



lowed by Odanki, the Latt taking a place against the wall, leaning a little on his harpoonlike spear.

The Trade Master clapped his hands. At that signal three more of the people gathered there got to their feet and left. The master of the Sulcar town now held between his knees a small drum, not unlike, Trusla thought, that which she had seen carried for the wisewoman in Korinth.

With the very tips of his big fingers he tapped out a series of small raps and there followed silence. Only Audha turned her head, as if aroused for the first time out of some deep well of thought, to look at him searchingly.

Three times the Trade Master used that signal and as the sound of the last beat died away, the Watcher came. At first Trusla thought she was wearing a mask and then realized that those splashes of color were paint, so arranged as to make the woman's features no longer human in appearance but rather like some dream thing.

The Trade Master placed the drum on the floor now, and Svan went to her knees before it.

"The moon is not lit." There was ice in that.

"Neither is your Power hidden by day," he answered her levelly. "Do you say that you control less in the way of forces than this lady witch or this shaman and dreamer of the Latts?"

There was conflict here; Trusla could feel the tension. No one questioned the abilities of a talented one unless it was in the form of a challenge. Yet this Sulcar was goading his own Watcher.

"So be it." Svan shrugged slightly. Her head swung slowly so that she eyed each gathered there. "The reading will be of your demanding. Now . . ." she had slipped out of her sleeve a short, slender knife and held it to the Trade Master.

He applied the needle tip of that to his forefinger and a drop of blood answered. Then he shook his hand so that it splattered down upon the surface of the drum.

"Let those who search now pay," she said stiffly.

Inquit reached for the knife and followed the Trade Master's ex-



ample, squatting forward so her blood drop also landed on the drum top. She passed the blade to Simond.

He shucked off the gauntlets he had been wearing and prepared to draw blood. Trusla half raised her hand. She knew nothing of the nature of the Watcher's power. Would this act lock them to the will of the Sulcar wisewoman? Simond had no talent shield to stand between him and such usage.

Svan looked beyond Simond to her, and the heavily painted face seemed to express something which was beyond the girl to understand.

"You are already bound to this mission; for the runes all blood must be read," she said.

Trusla caught a glimpse of Frost and the witch was nodding encouragingly, so she did not protest Simond's contribution to the drum and made her own. However, the Watcher did not look to Frost. Perhaps this was a matter of Power so alien that one could cancel out the other—of such she had heard.

But another moved, and before Trusla could return the knife, it was snatched from her hold and Audha stood beside the drum.

"I claim blood debt!" Her voice was high and thick with challenge. "By all the Laws of the Wave, Wind, and Sea, I am now a part of any hunt which will bring down that which has slain kin and shipmates. By the Deep Mother do I swear this."

And her drop of blood fell to the taut top of the drum. Trusla could almost believe that there had been the faint whisper of sound as it struck and spattered.

The Watcher nodded. "Such is your right, since you alone have come from a life-shedding. May the Lord of Storms use you as you wish."

Audha subsided once more among the cushions. There was now life in her face, and her eyes were on the Watcher as if she must not miss anything Svan might do.

The Watcher pulled the drum to her. She was sitting cross-legged, the drum midway between her knees. From the front of her robe she brought out a pouch stained a dull black but with a fringe of scarlet feather tips around it.



Loosening its string, she shook out into her hand what Trusla thought were a palmful of rounded pebbles. Four she inspected and dropped back into the pouch, the rest she closed her fist upon, but before she moved again she looked first at Inquit as if she considered her the lesser danger, and then to Frost.

“Still what you hold, Shaman and Witch, this is not a stew in which you have the stirring.”

Having sent each of them a final fierce glance from her paint-rimmed eyes, she tossed the pebbles onto the bloodstained cover of the drum.

There was a loud roll as if the fall of those stones had been instead a heavy beat. And the sound echoed. Trusla felt a tingle of the skin—Power was awake, and here.

Though the drum remained stationary, the pebbles continued to roll. They appeared drawn (in an unpleasant way, Trusla thought) to the blood drops and each moved like a sentient thing until it had touched each of those splotches.

They gathered—like hunters in conference. Then that tight cycle broke and they began each to spin, the whirl taking it away from its fellows. At last they were quiet and Trusla thought she could distinguish something which might be a pattern not unlike the wildly laid-on paint which masked the Watcher.

They waited in silence. Svan displayed no wish to continue to the next part of the ceremony. Almost, Trusla thought, like a sulky child forced to show off some art before strangers.

She herself could see now the pebbles were deeply slashed with markings in most of which blood now drew thin lines. Svan's hand came up and she waved it with an odd motion as if she mimicked the passing of sea waves over the stones.

One or two pebbles seemed to tremble but did not leave their chosen place. However, something else—something beyond sight and hearing—had awakened.

Svan's mouth was now near a snarl. She mouthed words. But that feeling of being looked upon continued. It was Frost and Inquit who answered. The shaman swung about on her pillows, Kankil giving a muted cry, plastering herself against the broad



breast of the Latt woman. The shaman's hands raised and moved. One did not need too much imagination to guess that her gestures were those of a tried and trained hunter throwing darts.

Frost cupped her jewel so that no gleam of light moved in the Watcher's direction, but Trusla could see it was alive and bright as the full midsummer moon.

That which had come unbidden flinched. Trusla could feel it even as if her own body had responded so. Then it was gone.

"North," Frost said. Inquit nodded. The Watcher's shoulders seemed to draw together as if she would avoid some blow. She leaned further over the rune stones.

"The Dark awaits," she said. "It will take such knowledge as all the talent here cannot raise to lay it. But we are left no choice, for that which has been awakened seeks prey—it hungers and would feed. You will go to it, because you are oathed and chosen, but you are but blades of summer grass before the first frost. Death—death and ending—"

"Not so!" Frost's voice rang with authority. "We are but the point of the spear and behind us stands an army. Do not forget that there is greater knowledge now being hunted, hunted by those who know how to use what they can find. By this"—Frost's fingers caressed her jewel—"can I speak with my sisters, and they in turn have very ancient and powerful knowledge to draw upon. There are many talents, each having its own force. As a smith forges a sword, sometimes choosing pieces of very old and famous weapons of the past to unite with all his skill to the new, so shall we in the end face this blight. It lies to the north. . . ."

That was more statement than question but the Watcher answered, "It lies north in the land where no tracker can go."

"Yet," pressed the witch, "you can give us more information than that, Rune Reader."

"Already the knowledge of the trail is yours. Hunt out Hessar and ask of his ice river. Your captain flourishes that which he names a key for the unlocking of mysteries. Very well, follow that lead and come upon the rightful gate—if you can."

She was on her feet and stooped to sweep up the pebbles, re-



turning them, still bloodstained, to their pouch. Then she caught up the drum itself before the Trade Master could move—if it were his to reclaim.

“I have read the runes—you will go and there is no turning back. Nor do I believe any return!” Settling the drum on her hip, she swept out of the room.

Simond’s hand closed on Trusla’s arm. “Let us be out of here,” he said in a voice so low as to be hidden under the broken sentences of the other. “It does no good to see the Dark before it comes upon one. I have been at arms practice with the shipmen this morning. Come and let me show you what this land can be with summer upon it.”

She was pleased enough to go. There was no drizzle of rain, but a fair day under the sun. There was the ever-present scent of the sea in short breezes which ruffled her hair and plucked at the collar of her jerkin. But there were other scents also, and she drew a deep breath of wonder and delight.

For the world around them, including the rounded tops of the burrowlike houses, was a vivid green, and that green was broken by patches of flowers like jewels on the feast dress of some Dales lady. The green and flowers reached as far as she could see, broken only here and there by workers.

She saw ground which had certainly been put to the plow, and looked to Simond questioningly, for surely the growing season was too short for any grain.

“It is a kind of root thing they grow,” he explained. “And it serves them well, for it is best eaten when it has been frozen and needs to be dug out. There are berries, too.” He pointed to a number of children, more than she had seen before in the town, who were out in one section of the green land, basket in hand, hunting under the low-growing leaves for the fruit. Most of them, she noted with a smile, already had a chin streaked with juice.

Down a beaten trail of a road came a train of the small horses. They had pack racks on their backs, but the bags were not full, rather looped up. Three drovers accompanied them: a Sulcar, a



young woman of the native people, and a half-grown girl who combined features from them both.

One of the pickers arose and came running. "Helgy?" She greeted the girl. "But it is not time for return—is there something wrong?"

Unconsciously Simond and Trusla had drawn closer. The woman glanced at them and then gave a longer look, but the Sulcar snapped his fingers at the fruit picker. "Off with you, Ragan, or you will get the rough side of your aunt's tongue for a half-full basket."

He spoke in a pleasant, bantering tone, but there was a shadowed expression on his face which suggested darker thoughts.

Somehow the day no longer seemed so bright. And the child who had come running to greet her friend did not return to her picking at once but stood looking after the small train as it entered the town.

"Trouble." Trusla did not need that warning from Simond. She half expected to see clouds gathering in the sky overhead. They were there right enough, but they were small and as fleece-white as the Dales sheep.

However, it was enough to send them both back themselves, though they kept a slower pace, letting the distance between them and the travelers widen. There were other surprised calls as those three came into the town. By the time they had reached the Trade Master's headquarters, a number of people, some who had so abruptly left their jobs that they still carried tools in their hands, began to mass there.

Odanki appeared silently out of nowhere and with his bulk and the natural air of a guardsman opened a passage for Trusla and Simond. They found the room already crowded with townspeople—though only the Sulcar drover had come to face the Trade Master.

Neither Inquit nor Frost were there, but the Watcher had a prominent place on the long lounge.

"Alward, his mate, their sons, dead." The Sulcar newcomer held out his hands in a wide sweep as if to suggest the complete disaster he was mentioning. "Their beasts torn apart as well—and no was-



bear alone could kill so. Also this is the season when those seek the heights, not the tundra. And this I swear, by the Ruler of Storms, there was no weapon mark on them that we could find—but their bodies were so ill used . . .” his face was gray now and he swallowed convulsively twice before he continued, “that we could not be sure. Godard came for me after he found them and we dealt with them as best we could. Their supplies were not looted, but rather bestially defiled. Then, since I had my hearthwoman and my daughter with me, we came back here, for all must know. Perhaps other prospectors such as Alward have also been so slain.

“Trade Master, I was mate on the *Thunderer* and served at three raidings along the Alizon coast. Yet never have I seen such bloody work as this. Nor were there any true trails.”

“Alward . . .” the Trade Master repeated as if he could not believe what he heard. His gaze swept for a moment beyond the speaker and lit on Simond.

“Lord Simond, what news had you out of Arvon? Could evil fester up from there?”

“Not at last reporting,” Simond replied. “There are the Mantle Lands as far north as we have recorded and no great trouble reported newly there.”

“From the north.” The Watcher’s dry voice nearly covered his last words. “This comes from the north. Alward spoke of traveling toward the Fangs of Gar this season, did he not? And you, Othor, did you not head in that general direction also?”

“It is so, Watcher,” he agreed. “We left together with our trains, Alward and his sons and my close kin, and did not separate until the third day out. He had some thought of trying the stream before the Fangs, for Hessar has done well there and this year turned to the west where no one else had gone.”

“You say there were no trails,” the Trade Master said. “Yet I know your hunting eye, Othor, and surely you sighted something.”

The man loosened a small bundle fastened to his belt. “Only this, Trade Master.”

The bundle seemed to consist of a great many folds. When finally he lay it open, those about him shrank back as far as they



could, for there arose from a small twist of grayish hair he showed a violent stench. Trusla recognized it at once. Once smelled, it could never be forgotten—stinkwolf!

“Not in the tundra,” one of the men near them said in quick denial. “They are of the southern broken lands and do not venture far from their foul dens. ’Tis said that they cannot live apart from close to where they are whelped and that the land itself rises to kill them if they try to do so.”

“Enough!” The Trade Master was waving a hand and Othor quickly rewrapped his bundle, though the smell seemed to linger on.

“It calls.” The Watcher’s face was twisted in an expression of deep distaste. “Dark summons Dark. If trouble moves from the north, then it may well be drawing to it now anything which will aid it—even as a cruising captain may summon other ships to join him in a raid upon wreckers.”

“Trade Master,” Othor demanded, “news must be sent to all the trappers, the prospectors. Our camps are never large and they can be easily picked off, one by one, by whatever creeps upon us now.”

“True.” The Trade Master looked to the Watcher. “Can the Recall be given?”

“If it is not already too late.” There seemed to be no wish in her to be reassuring, and those listening now had dour expressions. There was a murmuring and a stirring.

Trusla slipped out with Simond, determined to find Frost, while Simond himself headed to contact the captain. As she went, she speculated unhappily about what this new threat would mean to them. They had decided to hire a guide and a pack train within a day or two and head out in the direction Hessar had chosen for his season’s labors, for the captain was certain, and both Frost and Inquit appeared willing to back him, that the location of the stream in which the plaque had been found would be the point from which they would start their search.

More than ever she wished that she had talent—to be like the woman in some bard’s song who could summon up from the earth itself dead heroes buried centuries since in order to form an army



of the Light. As it was, she was sure that, even with all the inhabitants of End of the World armed and ready, they could not hope to put a full troop in the field. Nor could they mount any of those fighters. She was a passable archer only; her art was but newly learned under Simond's direction. Sword work was beyond her, she had not the strength to swing a battle blade. But her knife was skilled and she had what Simond called a natural talent for throwing the perfectly balanced blade that was always with her.

She had nothing more—no spells. The sand—the jar of sand? She had used it in Audha's aid, yes, but as a restorative, not a weapon. Anyway, when and if she ventured forth from this earth-bound town, she intended to take it with her.

There was Frost's gem and Trusla was duly aware that the witch jewel had such powers as one could hardly speculate upon. What Inquit could summon up she could not guess.

But somehow of this she was sure: their real search had not yet begun and it would not be stopped here by a skirmish with the unknown.

She called her name before the door of the house which had been turned over to Frost and Inquit. A small chirp answered her and the door was edged back, with some effort, by Kankil, who reached up to grab Trusla's hand and draw her in.

Like any hearthwife, Inquit was busy turning the contents of a skillet at the fire so that the fresh-caught fish on it would be evenly browned. And Frost, her long sleeves well rolled up, was tasting critically the contents of a pot she had just swung away from the greater heat of the inner fire.

To see the two of them busied at homely tasks was oddly reassuring, perhaps more so than if she had come in upon some summoning of Power. They seemed in good accord with each other and secretly she was glad that the sourish Watcher was not here to put them all upon their dignity.

But Frost let the spoon drip most of its contents into the fire, which blazed up in answer.

"There is trouble," she said. Trusla almost believed she heard the



faintest of sighs as if the witch gathered up again, for bearing an ever-present burden.

She waved Trusla to a seat on one of the cushions. Though Inquit did not lay aside her long-handled fork and her fish did not suffer from lack of tending, she, too, was watching the girl.

“There is trouble,” Trusla confirmed. Swiftly she outlined the events of the morning, the return of Othor and his family and the ill news he brought.

Inquit shrugged. “How else could it be?” she asked apparently of the room itself. “The Watcher is right. If evil stirs, it becomes needful that it draws strength from somewhere—and how better than from summoning those it can command to do its will? These poor folk died hard deaths and that also is the way of evil, for blood is its feasting drink and never can it get enough of it. No, we have been too easy with ourselves. Now we call together those who must venture and lay what plans we can.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN



The Drawing In of the Dark, North

For a number of the nearly endless days, with summer dusk banishing the dark, people returned to End of the World: families—kin clans—single trappers, and prospectors. But there were others who would never come again. There were grisly finds of at least three devastated camps with dead.

One of the last to arrive, a brawny giant of a man oddly



matched by a teammate who was a native, dragged at a distance behind the last pack animal in his party the tattered remnants of a grizzled gray thing broken and torn and exuding such a stench that he cut it free before he came to the circle of earth houses.

It was viewed at a distance by those with hardy stomachs, who agreed that what Hessar had snared in a rope trap was truly a stinkwolf. But that these had been the only attackers, many of the returning hunters denied—even though none of them had seen any human opponents.

There were conferences held in the Trade Master's hall, and on the fourth day of the indrawing a second ship made harbor. The *Spindrift* had come up along the coast from the Dales and their news was eagerly listened to.

"There is trouble aplenty," Captain Varmir declared. "Not in the Dales themselves, though they are restless—there have been two blood feuds between kin clans since the Year Turning, and Imry has his hands full with these hot-tempered swordsters.

"But ill news has spread from Arvon of danger in the Waste. That pest hole could hide any danger until it grows strong enough to engulf half a ship's crew. There is a place named Garth Howell."

Frost started and her hand went up as if to hide her jewel from menace.

"The traders are getting out," Captain Varmir continued, "and they have stories in plenty. Those of Garth Howell never troubled the land much—stay out of their claimed territory and you need only watch your back now and then. But those who carry rumors now say that it has been claimed by a Dark master and that those within it do his will.

"All the Mantle lords have warded and will not stir from within those wards. But it is also said that some with the true Power are now daring the Waste itself, to bring Light into the Dark. May the Storm Ruler give them His axe and spear!"

"What say the shoreliners of the broken lands?" the Trade Master demanded.

"Little enough. That has always been outlaw territory and if the Dark eats up what hides there, the better for all concerned."



“Not eats,” Frost said, and though she spoke quietly there was a sudden silence and all murmurs of talk in the hall stopped. “Not eats, but calls—or drives. Garth Howell . . .” There was such a look of revulsion now on her face that Trusla was amazed. She had never thought one of the nearly impassive witches could show such emotion. “Garth Howell is no fortress, no boundary holding. It is a place of storage of ancient knowledge. What if they have uncovered there, even as the mountains fall uncovered such at Lormt, things hidden and forgotten? Do any of these rumors, Captain, speak of travel northward?”

“No, lady, only that those of the Light travel west, and one who spoke with me in Quayth said that they were possessors of Power and on the trail of the Dark.”

“As we should be also,” Frost said slowly.

The Trade Master answered her quickly: “Lady, you have heard all our people have to say of the tundra. Where is any army you can summon to back you?”

Her lips curved into the faintest of smiles. “Trade Master, each of us has our purpose in life. What I and those with me have been sent to do must be accomplished.” Suddenly she opened her hand and for an instant the jewel blazed.

“I will speak with my sisters now, and then there is much to be done.”

She rose and left them. Something small and soft tumbled from the seat cushions and pattered after her, and then Inquit moved. Trusla felt the pull on her. Though she was not of their sisterhood, yet she was now compelled to follow.

With the return of the many summer-scattered parties, the newcomers no longer had the use of their homes. No one, though, had appeared to claim that which the shaman and the witch shared, and it was toward that that Frost now led the way.

Once within the larger forerom, Inquit went straight to the fire and threw into the small core still living there something she had drawn from within her fur tunic—which must, Trusla had long since decided, have a number of pockets.

The red coals on the hearth flared green and she smelled a



strong puff such as came from the burning of the needlelike leaves of some northern trees.

Frost bent her head a little forward and drew that fragrance deep into her lungs, then settled herself on the cushioned ledge at the side of the room. Kankil curled up above her head, round eyes on the witch's face.

Trusla found a quiet shadow as far away from the witch as she could manage lest she disturb the other, and Inquit sat cross-legged by the fire, swaying slowly back and forth, her eyes closed. At length that swaying stopped and Trusla had the thought that the Latt had entered her own form of trance.

The girl closed her eyes, not for need of sleep, but because she felt she must shut out the world about her. And opened the doors of memory once more to the night of her awakening, her oneness for a space with another.

She was once more dancing on the carpet of red sand, yet there was a purpose in this. Like any maiden being trained for the ways of Volt, there were steps which were right and those which destroyed the weaving. One went so—and so—then one turned a fraction in another direction and this time took three steps, the next time nine.

Trusla set herself to embed in memory for all time the pattern of that dancing—for there would be a need in days to come. Twice through she danced that measure. The Sand Sister did not appear. This venture was her own to carry out. Yet she could feel the warmth of the other's care about her like a cloak.

“So be it.”

Trusla opened her eyes. Her feet had trod the last of that measure—it was finished. She had learned what that which was in her desired her to learn. Frost sat up, though she leaned against one of the pillows, and the girl guessed that the witch had suffered from the usual energy drain laid upon those who used Power.

Inquit turned her head slowly, and her eyelids looked heavy as if she strove now to awaken from a dream. “So be it,” she echoed the witch. “And it must be soon. That we hold Power it must sense, but so far it has had the besting of our kind. A ship and its people



destroyed, camps turned into sinkholes of corruption at its will. The longer we sit, the stronger it grows. Captain Stymir was right—that which Hessar found in the ice river is the key.”

“They labor at Lornt,” Frost said. “Hilarion is the last of the early adepts. His searching must bring the answers we need. Those on the south trail have overcome some traps, but they head to even greater.”

Neither of them looked to Trusla, nor seemed to be interested in what she had to report. For now she was satisfied that was so, for she could not have explained what she had done—or what she was meant to do.

They went together to Captain Stymir and discovered that he had somewhat anticipated them by meeting with Hessar. The plaque the latter had found lay between them on the small table in the captain’s cabin of the ship. Simond was there and again he must have been at arms practice, for, though he had put aside his face-masking helm and thrown back the underhood of chain mail, he was still in full field gear. Matching him was Odanki, and they were both intent on the piece of skin scrawled with markings which the captain anchored in place with one thumb.

“No, Captain, I have not returned,” Hessar was saying as the three women entered. “Nor would I take up the like of that again. It is an unchancy thing. Also”—a glare as if he were issuing some challenge struck them all from under his bushy brows—“believe me or not, but that water—it seemed ice-born even as are all such streams. But by Blood Oath, I tell you, it was warm!”

He appeared to be waiting for scoffing dismissal of his story. But Captain Stymir looked thoughtful.

It was the shaman who broke that short silence. “There is a strange place in our own lands,” she said. “Ice lies around it—but within those walls there are springs which are hot enough to scald the hair from a leaper. And from them run—until they disappear underground—streams which are warm. Healing, too, though the smell is not pleasant. Those with an aching of the bones could lie in such streams where the heat was less and come out feeling limber once again. I have seen this place. When I was in my appren-



ticeship to Narvana I went with her. She harvested some of the water, and some of the ill-smelling encrustations about the hottest of the pools—which she kept and used for the good of the skin. If such a place is in one part of the world, why can its like not exist elsewhere? Hessar's stream may be the guide to it.”

The Sulcar prospector nodded. But his scowl did not lighten. “Unnatural things are best left alone,” he commented gruffly.

However, he did agree to mark his trail to the ice stream, though he utterly refused to be the guide there, even when Captain Stymir offered him what Simond knew would be a well-filled purse even in Es.

It would appear that no one in End of the World wanted to be a part of what they would do. When Simond and Odanki went to buy packhorses they were refused, except for four with hanging heads which looked as if they were of small use to their present owners. Nor would any of the townspeople volunteer as guides.

They gained but one more for their party and she came to them in battle dress, a hard scowl on her face.

“I am blood-sworn to gather toll for my shipmates,” Audha declared defiantly as she faced them. The girl had changed. She was still lean of body, but Trusla, during her own bow practice each day, had seen the wavereader in training combat with any who would give her an opponent. And during the final days before they planned to leave, that trainer was most always Odanki—nor did he ever spare her, as far as Trusla could judge.

They had their supplies, but it was the Trade Master who at the end ordered them a selection of better beasts chosen from those owned by his own kin. However, these small creatures could not carry packs even as full as a hill pony of the south. So the party pared and pared again all they had brought with them.

They were assured there was game to be found clear up to the very verge of the ice wall. In fact, along the foot of that even greathorns were to be found. And such plants as could nourish a traveler were carefully displayed and the virtues of each explained.

However, Trusla was well aware that those who helped never expected to see the party again. In fact, a few were hinting that their



very presence in the port perhaps could bring down the Dark on bystanders.

Stymir formally turned the captaincy of his ship over to his mate. Oddly enough, at the last moment he gained them another recruit—old Joul, who actually appeared where they were assembling the pack train with an animal of his own, a seaman's well-corded chest on its pack frame.

Since there was no real dawn in this land that was nearly always light, Trusla was not sure what time their small party moved out. But early as it was, there were those gathered to watch them. The attitude of those watchers, however, was somber, and there was none of the bright joking and friendly calls which had marked their embarkation from Korinth.

The Trade Master marched with them to the end of the scattered burrows of the village, but the Watcher, though appearing bedabbled in her ceremonial paint, made no such concession to ceremony. In fact, it was plain that she was glad to see the last of them.

Odanki, Simond, Stymir, old Joul, and even Audha strode along with full complements of weapons and armor, helmets covering their heads. As usual Frost was well to the fore with her swift smooth stride. She carried no visible weapons, but she had accepted from the Trade Master a seasoned staff with the admonition that it was sometimes wiser to test patches of footing ahead. Matching her, the bulk of her feather cloak and furred cloth making her look almost square from behind, was Inquit, who led one of the horses, on the back of which, above the rolled belongings of the shaman, perched Kankil, who alone of their present company appeared to treat this faring forth as a good and exciting adventure.

There were no roads to follow here, only the traces of trails made by those who had gone out earlier this season and returned during the past few days. But they did have a guide, as they need only lift their heads to view it.

The glaciers in their slow march had covered the land, but even with their weight they had not completely defeated some show of the rock crowns of a cluster of northern mountains. It was toward



one of these that Hessar had pointed them and somewhere along its cloaking glacier—if it *did* exist at present—they would find the seasonal drainage stream.

The land about them was so fair under the clear sky that Trusla found it hard to believe that evil had already marked it. However, long before nooning they were to have proof of what had occurred before and could be done to the unsuspecting travelers.

They saw the smoke first—tendrils befouling the air—before the odor of the burning reached them. Szymir and Simond split off from the party, but not until Inquit had joined them, moving as swiftly, in spite of her heavy clothing, as the men.

Frost took up position between the rest of the party and those going to investigate. She was holding her jewel and it was beginning to glow. But she made no attempt to stop them.

They did not go far. Those waiting could still see them as they stood together on a slight rise staring ahead—and then they returned at a swifter pace than they had gone.

“A death camp,” the captain explained curtly. “We must not be caught in the open so.”

“Nor shall we,” replied Frost. “We have warning.” She had slipped off the chain of the jewel and now held it lying flat on her palm before her. It glowed, not with the clear light of day, but rather with a dull and blackish color. Yet when Frost swung her hand toward the points of the half-buried mountains, it cleared.

“There be caves along the ice wall,” Joul rasped. “Better a wall to the back, even if it be ice, than have to face four ways at once and perhaps find ourselves a fifth one and them in it we don’t want to meet.”

They no longer kept to the even pace of their morning’s start. And when they halted to rest the animals and take some food for themselves, they ate with weapons close at hand. As they continued to travel steadily far into the dusky night with only a few such rests, the third day brought them to the ice wall.

Joul had been right. The edge of the glacier was pitted and jagged with falls of ice, some of it carrying great embedded boul-



ders. It was among such that they set up a camp as a midpoint for their searching.

That night Frost again communicated with her sisterhood while entranced. But this time Inquit kept guard, sitting image-still at the witch's feet while Kankil guarded her head. Trusla, on impulse, brought out her sand jar and sat with it between her hands, but she did not allow herself any entrance into dreaming.

"There is a find," Frost reported at the loosening of her trance state. "Hilarion works against time to unravel some ancient puzzles. And"—now she was very sober—"this much fortune allows us. For some reason, that which awaits has for a space withdrawn. Whether this is a ruse on its part so that we shall enter its nets without sensing them, or whether it has exhausted more Power than it can now summon, who knows? For this space we are free, though how long that freedom will last I do not know."

"The more reason we find our stream, and speedily!" the captain said.

Simond stirred. "We have already marked streams," he said slowly. "One at least seems to agree with Hesar's description. Lady," he addressed Frost directly, "is there any way that something found can be again attracted to the place of its finding?"

Inquit clapped her hand over her mouth. Kankil, who had been in her usual resting position against the shaman, sent out a series of loud chirps and made almost wild gestures with her small paw-hands.

"Give me the find," the shaman commanded the captain.

He hesitated, watching the now extremely excited Kankil dubiously. Then he did produce the plaque. In the glow of the day that black center dot was this time fully visible. Kankil made a quick dart forward and wrested it out of his hands before he could stop her.

"Here—" He made a grab for the small creature, only to have Odanki suddenly between them.

Kankil brushed the mosslike tundra growth smooth and set the plaque at a precise angle on it, making several small adjustments, until she seemed sure that she was correct in what she would do.



Having so placed the plaque, she dropped cross-legged beside it. Holding out her hand with the stubby index finger pointing, she moved her hand as if it were fastened by a cord to the plaque. The plaque had, Trusla was sure, taken on a glow of its own, and certainly the blot which was its core was growing larger and darker.

It was clear to all of them that Kankil in no way touched the plaque where it lay. Yet suddenly the block lifted far enough so that space could be seen between it and the tundra on which it had rested.

Now Kankil, still holding her finger in position, scrambled to her feet. She moved as if she led one of the pack animals forward, while the plaque slid through the air definitely to some purpose.

The rest hastened to join her. Frost's jewel was again a gleam, but once more with the white light of acceptance. They pushed on, silently, for they were all intent on what they were watching. There came the soft sound of running water and Kankil now stood on the back of one of the lesser streams they had charted, not one they had considered a major find.

Slowly Kankil lowered her finger and the plaque sank to earth at the very edge of the stream. She looked over her shoulder to Inquit and shrilled those thrilling notes which Trusla had come to know signified pride and accomplishment.

Leaving the plaque lying now inert, she flung herself into the shaman's outstretched arms and hugged the woman.

"There are many talents, Captain. No one, even the ancient adepts, could count nor command them all. This little one is a talented searcher. She has found your stream."

The captain stopped to pick up the plaque. It slipped out of his fingers into the water and he grabbed frantically to get it back. Now he stared up at them all in utter amazement.

"It *must* be Hessar's stream in truth—the water is warm."

Which set them all to testing it. Compared to the icy, biting cold of the other streams, this was indeed warm and yet it flowed, as they could well see, out of a fractured crack in the ice wall, the chilling breath of which reached them.

They moved camp after Stymir was at last able to reclaim his



trophy from the water, though the horses were unruly and could not be brought to drink of the stream or graze near it.

There was an odor to the water true enough. Yet the shaman's testing could produce no sign of anything poisonous. Now it remained for them to strike into the country of the ice itself.

Regarding those treacherous walls of the glacier which they had been warned to keep at a distance from, they could see no way of climbing to move inland. Odanki, the only one among them who knew the ice lands, declared at once that such a feat was impossible.

Nor could they take the pack beasts on any such climb, and to cut their supplies to less than half at near the very beginning of their journey would be utter folly. There remained then only one road for them—the bed of the stream itself. Stymir and Odanki tested it with staff and the poles of spears. Here it was not deep, though the bottom was dangerous, being strewn with stones released and washed down into the open. There were no fish or other life to be seen.

However, the fissure through which it came was nearly as tall as a ship's foremast and venturing in by degrees the men reported that that ceiling did not lower. However, the unpleasant smell of the water seemed caught under the ice roof to strike anyone daring to travel so.

That night they held a full conference, each giving an opinion. As Simond pointed out, Frost smiling and nodding as he spoke, they had never really believed that what they were sent to do would be an easy task. They had Frost's jewel for a warning and, though the shaman did not advance any details, she let it be known that she, also, had her ways of Power for protection and practical foreseeing. It was Audha who had the last word. As she was usually silent and aloof, her voice brought silence when she spoke:

“If there is but a single path, then that is the way I take with the morning. I cannot rest until my kin's blood is cleansed from me. I know little of your Light and Dark battles—to me this is a life debt and only I can pay it. Therefore I shall go.”

And they accepted that she spoke the truth. Her ordeal in Dargh



had left her with only one purpose—to repay death with death, and as all Sulcars she would hold to it.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT



Into the Land of Ice, North

It was impossible to force the packhorses to follow the road provided by the stream—not only because of their complete refusal to be dragged into the lapping water, but also because the rough bottom of the cut threatened broken legs for the small beasts.

Yet the party was reluctant not only to leave a larger part of their supplies behind, but to let the animals themselves drift free on the tundra, where it was very plain that something was eager to slay all invaders.

Inquit and Kankil of them all were able to round up the small beasts and hold them quiet while Frost went from one to the next, touching each with her jewel and so setting upon them some warding—though how strong that would be against what had already struck here, the travelers had no way of telling.

Their gear was then broken down into individual packs, and they assumed layers of spare clothing over that which they already wore, in protection against the freezing cold which they were certain awaited them ahead. Into a larger pouch she could swing from her belt, Trusla managed to stuff the jar of sand.

They had a last very hearty meal, consuming supplies which could not be taken. The horses had already wandered off, grazing as they went. They did not scatter apart far but kept close enough that they might be in a recognized herd.



The horses were finally gone, small black dots to be seen only in the distance but certainly heading on the back trail, when, after a rest period Stymir urged on them all, the travelers gathered together for their own departure. Each was equipped with a staff of sorts—mainly a stout spear—from the spare supplies. Because of the rough footing, they had to proceed at a slow pace and make sure that every step was as stable as possible. Still there were falls, plunging the unfortunate forward into the water—which luckily never reached more than thigh high.

The crevice—though it offered only the narrowest strip of footing on either side of the stream—did not narrow as they went. But it did close overhead so that they moved through a strange dusky world, transparent in places and elsewhere containing dark blots that were perhaps rocks carried forward by the eternal invisible movement of the ice.

“It is warmer!” They had halted for a breathing space and Captain Stymir drew off his heavy glove to plunge his hand into the water. He was right, as the others’ experiments quickly confirmed. The stream, which had been only faintly warm when they had first found it, was distinctly heated to a higher degree.

One good result of this appeared to be its effect on the size of the fissure, as that continued to widen until they could splash along at its sides in lower water.

“Aaaagha.” Odanki, who had been in the lead, suddenly halted, with so little warning that Frost had to catch at his pack to keep herself on her feet. There seemed to be a jog here in the way they were following. The ice wall which projected, forcing the stream to one side, was opaque and dark. Trusla, expecting to see a rock of some monstrous size, pushed a little on until Simond caught her in a nearly bruising grip.

This was no rock! What it might be she could not, for a moment, understand. In some places the encasing ice had thinned enough so she could see what seemed to be a cluster of snakes, each of them larger than a man’s leg in girth, frozen together in a contorted knot.

Above those rose a dome which ended in a great beaklike projec-



tion, and there were two saucer-sized pits which might once have sheltered eyes.

The ice had melted back a little in one place so that the tip end of one of those snakelike appendages was freed to trail down to the water. But from the position in which the creature had been frozen it seemed that it was about to launch itself straight at them if they tried to pass, if it could at its will break its prison.

“Sethgar!” The Sulcar captain stood looking up at the thing which towered well over him. “But—but demons do not lie in ice!” He looked to Frost. “Lady, we have a very ancient tale of such as this—that they acted as do the Hounds of Alizon but the masters they obeyed were beyond the power of men to battle.” He suddenly caught at his fur overgarment and brought forth the plaque.

There was a glow about it and he spat out an oath, nearly dropping it into the water, as if it had burned or cut his fingers. At the same time Frost’s jewel flared red.

“It is dead, long dead.” Inquit used the tip of her spear to poke at that dangled bit the ice had released. It quivered under her prodding, but that was all.

“This Sethgar,” Simond demanded. “It was a thing of the sea, was it not?”

Certainly they could not see any form of legs—only those lengthy snakelike appendages.

“Yes. But . . .” the captain was staring down at the plaque he held. Once more it resembled a small window through which they could see into . . . where? Another world? Trusla wondered.

The strange black ship was far clearer in every detail now. And, plainly clinging to the deck near the bow, was a dark mass which could be just such a creature as they faced now.

“It seems”—Frost cradled her jewel against her—“that if your legend of coming through some ice gate in the north is correct, then we are finding proof of what hunted your people here, and we follow the proper trail.”

Stymir visibly shuddered. “Lady, some tales are told for the pleasure of listeners who, sitting by a comfortable fire, enjoy to shudder



at what does not exist. To see a demon come to life is no light thing.”

“It is no demon.” Odanki had advanced, spear in hand. Now he struck the ice wall which covered the monster. A chip or two broke off, but there was no other change. “This is old, old, and long since dead—the ice will release it in time and it will rot into nothingness like any dead thing.”

Joul uttered a cackle of laughter. “The Latt has the right of it, Captain. It is true that even men have been lost in ice crevices only to be spouted forth years later looking as they did when they went in.”

In Stymir’s hold the plaque appeared to dull and he looked down at it and then shrugged. “So be it. But the Lady is right—what we search for must lie ahead.”

There was no way here to establish any resting place. Though their pace from the start had been a slow one, bodies began to ache from the constant care one must take to avoid the perils of the footing. They ate sparingly as they went and Trusla began to wonder if she could keep up—the ice crevice appeared to have no end.

Odanki had scooped up Kankil and the little one rode on his shoulders, chirping now and then, perhaps to herself, for no one answered her.

The mist came first, Trusla suddenly realized that the water had been growing ever warmer as they went and now there was a thin cloud rising from it ahead.

Luckily the passage widened ever larger and there was a stretch of mixed earth and gravel on either side of the stream which was fast becoming truly hot. But, in spite of their efforts, they were lagging, though advancing doggedly.

Now there was a smell also, one which irritated throat and nose and set them coughing. It was perhaps borne by that stream.

Trusla dug her spear butt into the ground and pulled herself on. Simond had tried to take her pack beside his own some time back, but she refused. Each must give all one could to this venture.

Then they came out of the hold of the ice, into a world they



could not believe at first look existed. They must have been struck down by some glamorie during that march.

There was a sharp slope to the ground ahead. The stream developed rapidly high banks and from it the strong odor arose, thick enough to drive them back from the water.

At a space beyond, the ground was free of any hint of ice, and green with a growth not unlike that of the summer-freed tundra. There were clumps of color which could only be flowers, and the air above them was so humid and sultry that their bodies, under all their layers of clothing, were as wet as if they had just climbed from baths.

Then, as if to announce their coming, straight out of a patch of mud of many colors there arose with a roar a plume of spray. Audha cried out and jumped back, catching a heel in the thick vegetation and sprawling on her back, nursing one hand with the other as if some droplets of the spray had reached her.

They were cautious in their venturing farther into this strange place of heat amid the cold. They saw the rise of the mountains beyond, and more glaciers there, but here the heat was almost that of midsummer in the south and they were panting, striving to move farther away from that muddy space which made up about half of the open earth. This was spotted with holes which fountained up at startling intervals to add to the heat and the smell.

At length they retreated to a grouping of rocks behind which the glaciers showed not too far away. Waterlogged clothing had to be shed, though whether any of this would dry they could not guess.

The grassland had inhabitants. Odanki dug out from a shallow den a fat little creature which both the Latts seemed to recognize, and one of Simond's arrows gave them a beast not unlike one of the leapers of their homeland, save that it was thicker of body.

So they ate and then their bodies demanded rest from the trials of the day. It was, Trusla thought, early morning when she settled on a still-damp bank cushioned by the moss beneath.

For the shaman there appeared to be no rest. The Estcarpian girl was too spent to do more than watch, but when Frost and the Latt woman drew a little away, she realized that Inquit intended a use of



Power, though Frost did not seem ready to rouse her talent. Perhaps she was anchorage for the shaman.

Trusla expected to dance once more in her dreams—to follow the pattern laid in her mind upon the sand. Instead . . .

Like one of the house pests of the ancient holds it came nibbling—seeking. Though it exerted no great Power, Trusla was well aware that it held such in abeyance. Curious—*she* presented some puzzle to what came spying.

Then there was a very clear picture. She was not a part of this but only a watcher—though there was a part of her which fought to aid.

They were fleeing, those white-sailed ships. Sulcar ships, she knew, even if their main sails were painted with strange patterns. Behind them all the sea and sky was dark—not with the honest dusk of night, but rather as if something like a great sword blade swept across the sky and sea.

There were lights on each ship, the strongest coming from their bows. Not from lanterns, she was certain, but rather as if each vessel had a life force of its own.

Out of the sea, near a lagging rearguard ship, arose huge snake arms—even greater than she had seen as part of the ice-bound creature. Those strove to seize upon the ship. But the light at the prow suddenly blazed high, and the sea thing fell away as if blinded.

So they came—with the Dark ever behind them. Now she could see that the waters boiled with a multitude of the monsters. But she sensed that on one of those ships rode a great will, one who had honed talent and Power into a weapon, wasting nothing of what he could control until this hour when it was needed most.

Out of the curtain of the Dark burst another ship and this one she also knew—for she had seen its likeness in the plaque which had drawn them here. It flashed forward though it carried no sails, like a thing with sentient life.

The Sulcar ships drew into line, sailing as close to each other as they dared. They were like a thread forced through the eye of a needle, and the black ship was fast upon their wakes.



There was a burst of light, so eye searing that Trusla cried out and all was darkness. She was in Simond's arms and he was calling her name with concern. There were others around, but all she could do for the present was to cling to him and wait for her dimmed eyes to clear.

One of them came to kneel beside where Simond held her, eyeing her searchingly.

"You have dreamed!"

Through even Simond's calling her name those three words sounded clearly. And Trusla answered:

"I have—seen—" For certainly that had been no dream, such as one small talent wove.

Then there was another beside the Latt shaman, and with her coming was a glint of light which made the world about Trusla fully real again. She told them—of that flight of ships before the curtain of the everlasting Dark, of the black ship which had come to cut the waves of their wakes, and then of the light which had left her blinded so she had not seen any more of that flight.

"The gate," Frost said. In her hold her jewel lost that spark of light which had fully aroused the girl. "And those who fled—surely they had Power of their own. What kind, Captain? What did your ancient kin use to defeat the Dark which would have followed?"

He shook his head. "Lady, some Power we have over storms and freaks of the sea. But none else which any of our blood could tell you. Could it not be that this destroying light came from that which pursued?"

"Yet you stand, Sulcar man, in a world you swear was never yours to begin with. No, I think that your far kin won free. Free and able to leave the warning which you carry now—the likeness of their enemy."

"In the ice . . ." the Latt shaman was no longer looking at Trusla; rather, it was as if she stared inward. "I dreamed also—not of the past as did this one, but of what happens now and—"

She got no further, for out in that mud and steam there whipped up into the air a great lash and the heat of it reached them even as far as they were from the fount.



There was a second such and a third, driving them back against the wall of stone and ice. And each was closer. So they moved toward the north for the boiling spray which now seared the green growth in the direction from which they had come. At last they appeared trapped in a shallow break of the wall while back and forth across what had been a richly green land beat whips of steaming mud and water, the fumes of which set them coughing and fighting for good air to breathe.

Trusla saw a swing of light. Frost's jewel, flaming like an earth-tied star, swung back and forth. Beside her the shaman was—in spite of coughing—chanting. The girl saw Inquit's hand raise, in it one of the long feathers she must have pulled from the edging of her cloak. Three times she waved it and then let fly, and fly it did—out into that streaming mush of what had once been land.

It was not a bird—no, as it went it became more like a long-shafted dart, flung straight as a small hunting spear. Into a rain of blistering mud it winged.

The column, fed from some inferno below, broke as if the shaman had sliced it with a great sword. The light from Frost's jewel caught another threading pillar, setting it aw whirl inside a narrow space.

They knew this upheaval for what it was: no act of nature. Rather, the attack of something which was alien—alien enough perhaps not to realize that they had such protection or strengths. If it had not realized that, it accepted such knowledge quickly. No more geysers arose from the mud, though long streaks of stinking, steaming earth had withered the green which had first welcomed them.

Trusla choked rackingly and still held to Simond. But that oppressive feeling that they were being confronted by something entirely alien to all they knew had withdrawn now.

“Qwayster.” Joul had drawn his sword as if to use that in defense. “The breath of Qwayster!” Beside him Captain Stymir stood, a gray cast under the sea tan on his face. He was coughing, tears streaming from his blue eyes, a small red patch on one arm showing under a smoking hole burned in his tunic.



“Have you given us a true name, seaman?” Frost asked, her jewel still at ready, though no more fountains were rising. “Do we now face some adept known and named?”

It was the captain who was shaking his head. “Demon, Lady. Another out of ancient tales: a force which could be commanded by one of great Power—to use the earth itself as a weapon. Was it not so with you of Estcarp when you made the southern mountains turn to your will?”

“That took the Power of all the sisterhood,” she said slowly. “Do you tell us now, Captain, that our enemies may be legion?”

Inquit stopped smoothing the edge of her cloak as if she had been soothing it for the loss of the feather. “Not many but one. But very old. It has slept long and now it wakes. Did I not dream also? Yes, we are on the proper road, but that one has been astir for only a short time. It was the wild magic doubtless that called her forth.”

“*Her?*” Simond’s surprise was plain.

The shaman smiled. “One woman does not mistake the magic of another, young lordling. To touch talent to talent is to learn. Yes, what we are to face is no adept, but one as wily and perhaps as Dark-filled as any who fought in the Great War to blast our world long since. Only this one is not of our universe. She thinks, she seeks, she feels her way—she is wily as an old wasbear with cubs to defend, and as greedy as a direwolf pinched by winter hunger. She will watch—and I think perhaps continue to test us. But she is not going to waste any great Power until we face her in her own place, where she feels that she is strongest.”

“And where is that place?” demanded the captain.

“It shall call us as she wishes. Nor must we fight such a call, for only face-to-face can we make the final testing. Your talk of gates, southern-born, is true. This one was caught on our side of one, entrapped in the Power which closed it upon her kin. She took the way of long sleep, waiting for that which would aid her. Then the wild magic broke the web she herself had woven.”

A woman—if such could be counted a woman, Trusla thought. But then the witches had wrought great things and there were tales that there had been women also among the ancient adepts. Only—



the girl shivered—the thought that it was female made it somehow more monstrous.

They spent what was left of the night in the small patch of green which had survived the attack of the mud. The choking steam subsided. Odanki and Simond went on scout when the camp roused and they had eaten, edging along the wall of the valley. Trusla was not aware until she was repacking her shoulder bag that Audha had disappeared. The Sulcar girl was always so quiet and retiring that half the time one forgot that she was one of them.

If Audha had not followed Simond and the Latt hunter, then she could have only gone in one direction—backtrailing. And Trusla was still dubious about those attacks of mud.

She spoke to Inquit, and by the shaman's sober face she apparently shared Trusla's concern. It was then that Kankil caught at the edge of Trusla's tunic and urged her along, chirping as usual but not as if she went in any fear.

"We go—the little one knows," Inquit said. At her agreement, which Kankil seemed to understand, the small one loosed her hold on Trusla and bounded ahead.

They still kept to the edge of the cliff's foot. None of the masses of mud had reached this far and there was a green fringe. Kankil gave a sudden squeal and threw herself on her knees, clawing aside the thick mass of leaves to reveal bright berries. She gathered a pawful of these and brought them back to the shaman and then went to harvest some for Trusla. The fresh taste of the fruit seemed to banish some of the stale remains of yesterday's memories.

Though they were tempted to stop and harvest more, they went on, coming to a place where a great wedge of rock extended out into the valley. It had been well scoured by the ice which had carried it here, but now, Trusla noted, as she had not when they had passed it before, there was an opening of sorts between it and the cliff and it was into that Kankil pattered.

Once more they strode over uneven gravel, but there was no stream to wade this time. Instead Inquit pointed to a scraped place on the wall as if someone had left a sign on purpose.

It was beyond that, under the overhang of the rock, that they



found a new road. Trusla eyed it in wonder before turning to Inquit for confirmation.

"It—it is a stair!" But who had it served? There was none in this country to have built such a range of wide steps. Yet it was plain that that had been done.

But they had not yet tried that trail when they sighted something else—a sight which halted even the agile Kankil.

Set to one side of this way was a ledge, chiseled into the rock with the same precision and craft which had built the stairway. And on it . . .

Trusla gasped. A row of skulls had been set with care, but what made them so hideous was the fact that each bony dome of the bodiless head had been covered with a luxuriant growth of the same moss as that which grew over the ground below, so that it would seem the weathered bones were fully haired.

Inquit's first astonishment seemed quickly past. She had approached the line and was studying them carefully, though she did not touch any.

"Not man as we know," she said. "Look at the size of the eye holes, and this ridge of bone above those. Also they are wider in the jaw. No, not men."

Trusla was willing to accept that verdict without any examination of her own. There were races in Escore which certainly bore little resemblance to humankind and yet held intelligence as great or greater than her species. It could well have been that some such had once lived here.

Now the shaman seemed to have lost interest in the line of skulls. Instead she brought out the long-bladed knife which served her for so many purposes. With the point of this she was digging along a space between the skulls and the edge of the ledge. Soil, roots of plants, and small stones scattered under her assault. But what she had uncovered was not the natural roughness of the rock but deeply incised lines which had the appearance of runes.

Beginning on the left Inquit touched each of those symbols with knifepoint again, and repeated some click-click of her native



speech. However, she was shaking her head decidedly. “Not a spell of my knowledge. Best leave it alone. And best of all move to find Audha. She may be bound where it is dangerous to go.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE



*The Lair of the Ice Worms,
North*

With a cautious eye at frequent intervals for the mud lake, Simond and the Latt hunter kept as close to the ice and rock wall of the valley as possible. Simond half expected some advice from Frost—even that the witch might accompany them—but she had not come. In fact, Frost had seated herself by the rocks where they had camped, and Simond had a strong belief that she had withdrawn into herself in some form of trance.

They could not follow a straight line, but luckily the margin between the wall and the mud continued and they kept to this. There was still the spouting of geysers to be seen, but they were small and few. Perhaps whatever force had sent them in action against the invaders slept again.

Odanki grunted and pointed with his spear. Arching up from the meager green of the ground growth here were bones, curved like ribs but certainly larger than those serving any animal Simond had ever seen.

The Latt squatted on his heels and tugged at the remnants of the skeleton. At his touch the bones flaked and two broke, and he uttered an exclamation of disgust. His disturbance of the remains had



moved them enough so that Simond could now see great branching horns, far more weighty he would have believed possible for any beast to wear comfortably.

Odanki turned his attention to these, prodding forcibly with the butt of his spear. They seemed to have outlasted the bones, for they did not crack. He grunted and then got to his feet and dragged at the best handholds he could find, freeing both the horns and the skull wearing them from the hold of the ground.

“Greathorn,” he commented. “Good!”

Strong as the young Latt was, he apparently could not drag his trophy far and Simond helped him pull it closer to the cliff. It was plain that Odanki had found what was treasure as far as he was concerned.

Yet he was willing enough to leave it when Simond suggested that they move ahead. Those cliffs of glacier they could see in the distance arose so quickly they almost appeared to race before them as they tramped on. Simond wondered if the fumes they had inhaled had in some way affected their sight.

On they went, though they made no more discoveries. Then suddenly there was a change and the ground beneath them began to slope slowly downward. Simond readied himself to face perhaps another set of mud pools and spouts.

However, not only were those now behind them, but they felt a chill which struck with doubled force, since they had been in the unexpected warmth of the valley for so long. The ground growth became a ragged fringe and there were not only rocks but the tips of ice formations showing, some to catch the light and reflect it.

This broken land led to what Simond could only think of as a lake. Yet one which no waves moved but rather which held the glitter of glass—a smooth stretch on which there were no cracks or crevices.

Odanki pushed with spear point. There was a *ping* and a splinter flashed upward.

“Solid ice,” he commented. To Simond’s surprise the Latt sat down on the edge of this threat of dangerous footing and burrowed into the pack he carried slung over one shoulder.



What he brought out might have been chipped from the same great horns as the ones they had discovered. And he fit curved frames, one over each trail boot, testing several times each fastening. When he stood again he rocked awkwardly from foot to foot and then deliberately stepped down upon that glassy surface, using his spear to steady himself.

He moved out a space and then curved back, nodding to Simond as he came.

"I go across." He indicated the far side of that ice lake. "Have no runners for you."

Before Simond could protest, Odanki did head out from the shore, slipping along on the ice, apparently well satisfied with his method of progress, leaving the Estcarpian fuming behind.

But there was nothing Simond could do. The Latt was plainly used in his own land to such odds and was ready for them. However, Simond had no intention of returning alone to camp, his part of their scout having ended so abruptly. Why had the Latt not shared from the beginning these aids? Or else they were so common to his people that he had thought Simond already knew of them.

The Estcarpian watched carefully the Latt's progress until suddenly he became aware of something else. Though the ice seemed clear when looked down upon, it was opaque beneath the surface and seemed solid. Only Odanki's shadow, pale in this thin sunlight, stretched in the opposite direction. However, now there *was* a vague trace of movement beneath him under that ice.

Since here certainly the unknown was to be feared, Simond shouted. When Odanki turned his head to look back toward him, the Estcarpian waved vigorously, first to that half-hidden movement in the ice and then for the other to return.

Only his warning was a fraction too late. Suddenly the Latt floundered. Around him spread a patch of fast-melting ice. He was fighting for footing as might one who had been caught in quicksand. He cried out in a shout which held both pain and fear.

Simond measured the distance between the shore and where the hunter struggled. Though Odanki floundered and fought, that



space of melting ice had slowed in enlarging. Simond threw a twist of rope about a rock and pushed off away from the shore.

By great effort the Latt had reached the edge of that melting ice, wedging his spear across that point from side to side. But he shrieked—not fear now, but pain.

Simond teetered forward on the ice, hoping that the sand and gravel frozen into the soles of his thick boots would give him some steadiness. Small and slight though he might seem, his Tor blood gave him a strength of arm and shoulder which might equal, if not better, Odanki's.

Somehow the Estcarpian was able to fight his way toward the Latt, though what had attacked the latter remained well hidden under the ice shield. Simond knotted the other end of the rope into a loop. The Latt cried out and raised an arm to wave him back, but Simond was able to throw that circle over the upheld arm.

Then he dropped to his hands and knees and turned his back on the hunter, beginning to crawl for the shore, taking the strain of the other's weight on his shoulders. Always he looked beneath him for any shadow moving under the ice.

There was a sudden loosening of the strain, and, holding fiercely to the rope, he dared to look back. The Latt had somehow clambered out of the ice mush and was using both arms to propel himself in a frantic slide toward Simond.

After breathless moments they crawled out on the shore, Simond jerking Odanki with him. For the larger man had suddenly gone limp. Simond looked down the length of the Latt's body.

There was torn hide clothing, there was blood—and a trio of things which brought bile up into Simond's throat. He beat at them as they still held to their prey, for Odanki could only feebly raise his hands now, smashing them against the firm ground.

One had dug itself so deeply into its intended feast that Simond had to grab it with one hand and slash with a knife he held in the other—only to cry out himself as the body he stubbornly held until it was free of the Latt's leg was like a branding iron laid across his own flesh. The things were soft and pink, with wedge-shaped



heads which flamed into fire-red and were nearly the length of an arrow. Luckily their removal into the outer air apparently seemed to weaken them, and Simond was able to kill the last and let the burning body fall.

That things of such heat could lair in the ice was like another form of Power and certainly one he could not understand. He worked over Odanki quickly, stanching the bleeding bites, while the other lay his arm flung across his eyes as if he could not bring himself to look upon Simond's work.

There were bites, and torn flesh, but the Estcarpian applied the powders and pads each of them carried for emergencies. Then he urged Odanki to chew a twist of root which he knew was a painkiller.

That there might be venom in those bites worried Simond. And he was not sure he could get Odanki back to camp on his own. At length he dragged the Latt as far from the edge of the ice lake as he could and covered him with handfuls of earth to keep him warm.

Before Simond left to summon help, he went back to view the inhabitants of the lake. Their brilliant color was fading fast now as their broken bodies cooled. But they were still repulsive—like great worms. They carried the fringes of many small legs on either side, and the open mouths of those horny wedge-shaped heads were well equipped with double rows of teeth.

When Simond returned with Stymir and Joul to aid the Latt, Odanki insisted that he would walk with help, and he did. Simond supposed it was the Latt's horror of the very nature of his enemies which had added earlier to the loss of blood to weaken him.

Both the Sulcars had inspected the bodies with open astonishment, being forced to believe that Simond and Odanki were right: the creatures could generate such heat in their bodies that they could melt the ice and so trap prey they could probably see as shadows on the surface above them. Even after lying dead in the cool air, those flame-hot wedge heads still held a good degree of heat.

"Do they live in the mud?" Simond wondered. "But then why hunt prey in the ice?"

Stymir laughed grimly. "You can ask many *whys* for things one



comes across traveling, Lord Simond. This is another freak of nature.”

“Not something sent?” Simond wondered.

“I think not. Come, let us get our comrade back to those who have healing Power.”

As they passed the horned skull, Odanki made them promise that that also would be retrieved. Stymir tested the strength of the horns and then agreed. “Such are good tools upon occasion,” he told Simond. “It will do no harm for us to see what can be done with this pair, especially since he may be in camp for some time.” He gave a meaningful glance toward the hunter.

When Simond returned to camp for the second time, he looked around for Trusla, surprised that she was not in sight. Joul mentioned that with the shaman and her familiar his wife had gone to hunt Audha, who had disappeared. He would immediately have set out on their trail—perhaps ice worms were not the only strange perils to be met with—but Frost stopped him.

She looked very gaunt and drawn, and he was sure that she had been using some Powers, so that a thrust of fear went through him.

“Listen.” She kept him both silent and pinned with her eyes, so that he could not leave her. “They have broken the secret lockings—Hilarion and those of Lormt. I have it here.” She touched not her jewel but her forehead. “But lest something happen to me, the secret must now be shared. The shaman is gone, as is Trusla—both having talents. The Sulcars—they had never been able to use any Power unless it deals directly with the sea. Therefore . . .”

He took a step backward. “Lady, I am no lore master—nor even of the Old Blood.”

“No, not of *our* Old Ones, but of others. You come from those who once sheltered under the wings of Volt, who was mighty as any adept. You say you have no talents, and perhaps by the measuring of others you do not. But you can remember—though the passages of long memory have never been opened for you. Therefore—you *must* remember. And if I cannot reach the end of this quest, you will share this memory and those with Power shall put it to use. Come.”

He had been slowly retreating, she following him step by step,



and now they were behind a shelter of rocks, out of sight of the rest of the company. He tried to dodge, be free of what she would lay upon him, but he could not move.

Up came her hand holding her jewel. It did not blaze, but rather issued forth a soft, golden light. In him the fears which had stirred settled and were gone. Simond felt the touch of the jewel to his forehead between his eyes.

There was a strange sensation—as if he walked down a hall lined on either hand with doors, all closed. On them glimmered symbols which he felt, as he noted each, he should know, that they were a part of a past he could not quite understand.

Then he came to the final door, the one which ended the hallway. It did not open, but simply disappeared. Now he faced a great wall of the same soft gleaming color as had accompanied him on this journey. There was a sighing—like the soft slow beat of great wings.

On the wall a great clawed hand began to write. Each symbol it formed was in the precious blue which meant refuge from all which was of the Dark. Though Simond did not understand, he also knew that he would not forget those symbols. They would be a part of him until this life's end.

Softness, like the tips of great feathers brushed against his cheek. He knew it for a blessing and a farewell. Simond blinked and Frost stood before him holding a gem once more turning gray.

“You remember?” Frost asked.

Immediately there flashed into his mind those symbols. He also knew, without being told, that though he did not know their meaning, he could, when there was need, voice each of them in turn.

Frost smiled. “Yes,” she said, “always when there is a need the Light will answer. Now—you would find your lady, and . . .” she hesitated, a slight frown now drawing her brows together, “there is need there, also. I cannot understand.” Now she was speaking more to herself than to him, and he was eager to be gone. “There is something calling—but if it is born of the Dark, it is of no evil we know.”



Simond was already on his way, Stymir behind him, and they followed the same trail which had been laid out for the women that morning. There was no sign of any troubling of the mud pool except for a stray geyser now and then well away from them. However, the stinking mud and seared ground growth remained as a warning.

The Estcarpian had served on scouting expeditions enough to pick up the signs of passing left by those they hunted—the more so since the women had taken no trouble to conceal their going. So he and the captain came to the stairway and started up.

They halted by the row of skulls, and Simond saw quickly the runes Inquit had uncovered.

“What is the meaning?” he demanded. There were too many mysteries in this place, and, even if this was a very old one, that did not render any message it held harmless.

The captain had gone down on one knee, the better to inspect the near-invisible lines, and then set to picking with his own knife-point at those still hidden.

“This”—he used the knifepoint to indicate one of the runes—“is the old form used in the master scrolls for the Ruler of Storms. This”—he had selected another—“is a plea. It is Sulcar—but so old . . . I can give you no meaning for the rest.”

“Those are not Sulcar skulls.” Simond had been studying the row with their green gloss of what might be hair.

“No,” Stymir agreed at once. “And my people were never ones to take heads as battle trophies as some of the Dark-ruled barbarians do. But that my kin came this way I will swear.”

Simond had already placed his foot on the next step. “They went on—see, there is a scrape of boot edge. What brought Audha in this way?”

“What has brought all of us? We seek for the lost. What? An enemy, a gate, something which threatens us? Can it not be that that which we seek can use one of *us* to its own purposes?”

“She swore blood oath against that threat.” Simond tried to keep his voice level. “Do you mean that in doing so this wavereader opened herself to the very purpose of that which she hates?”



Once in the past he himself had been insidiously taken over, to be used for another's bloodlust in sacrifice. It had been Trusla who had broken the bond he did not even realize held him, and brought him to freedom. So he well knew that such things could be.

"Who knows?" the captain replied.

They had reached the top of that very ancient stairway and were looking out now over the rough surface of the glacier toward those distant mountains. Simond's frustration became anger. Trusla knew nothing of such lands, but Inquit was of the north and surely must be well aware of the perils of the way ahead.

However, a moment later he sighted dark dots moving steadily toward the mountains, though they went slowly and with caution. But the thought of a break in a snow arch, a fall into a tomb crevice, caught at Simond until he found it hard to breathe.

Three dots: two larger, one small. So they had not yet caught up with Audha. There were signs of a trail right enough, but that could have been left by those they themselves followed.

"It is the little one who leads," Stymir pointed out. "Perhaps some talent of hers is what they depend upon as guide."

Simond wanted nothing more at that moment than to seize upon Kankil and jerk her back, bring them all to camp once again. But the captain was right. There was a space between the shaman and her familiar and Trusla brought up the rear.

They had heard plenty of stories in Korinth and again in End of the World about the perils of the glaciers. Not only was the footing highly treacherous, but oftentimes glaciers provided lairs for the great wasbears, and to approach any such while its owner was in residence was to call upon death foolishly.



"How much farther?" Trusla brushed a string of hair back under the fur which framed her face within her hood. The bite of the cold after the warmth of the valley seemed doubly severe. She had tucked her hands into her armpits to warm them a fraction every time she and her companions halted. For their progress was not steady, since Kankil cast back and forth for the trail continually.



Where could Audha be bound? There was nothing but this everlasting ice, cold, and those stark mountains in the distance. Was she being called?

Knowing how her own Tor people could apply that compulsion on occasion, the thought had come to her much earlier in the day that that was what might have happened. She suggested it, and, to vanquish her one small hope, Inquit had agreed. Wisdom suggested that they turn back, yet Kankil chirped and clicked and the shaman followed. Glancing behind several times, Trusla was not sure she *could* find once more that stairway into this dreary country.

They came to the end as Kankil huddled on the edge of a great crevice which appeared to descend to the very depths of the earth. And there the trail ended.

Trusla looked down with a shudder and turned swiftly away. She could well envision what had happened. Audha, reaching this cut-off, yet still compelled to go forward, could have blindly marched over the lip of that break and lie so far below that no one would ever see her again.

Inquit prowled back and forth along the crevice. Oddly enough, she never looked down, but rather stared across the width of the break. There was certainly no sign that a bridge of any kind had ever existed here.

"She fell. She is dead," Trusla said at last. As the wind whipped around her, she felt as if she, too, would soon be gone, lapped forever in ice as had been the monster they had seen.

"No." Inquit's denial was flat. "There is still life essence to be sensed—the little one knows. But it is true that from where we stand we cannot now follow."

"Where we stand we shall be frozen stiff," Trusla returned. "What do you mean that Kankil knows? Knows what? Did Audha grow wings and is she off to the mountains?"

Inquit gave her a hard stare. "There is more than one kind of wings, Tor woman. I seek mine in sleep, and dreams can carry one afar."

Trusla stamped her foot and a small ridge of ice cracked. "You



cannot sleep and dream here! I do not believe that any Power would hold you so.”

“Exactly right. But dream I shall. Now we return; there are those already searching for us and we must not scatter our forces too widely. I do not know. . . .” For another long moment she stood, gazing ahead across the crevice. “I would speak with the witch. We do not hold the same talents, but together . . . Well enough. Come child, before, as you threaten, you turn into a pillar of ice.”

So they turned their backs upon the crevice and started their retreat, again Kankil bouncing ahead as if she knew that they still needed a guide.

Suddenly, as they went, Trusla sighted two figures headed toward them. That was Simond! The cold which ate at her no longer bound her to shuffling, halting steps. She passed Kankil, taking only caution that she not make a misstep. Then Simond’s arms were around her. He was shaking her until her head bobbed on her shoulders and then he enveloped her in a hug which drove all that ice from her veins.

CHAPTER FORTY



The Ice Palace, North

Audha floated in and out of the world through which she slipped and slid. Around her, she was dimly aware, were walls of dark ice within which shadowy things loomed now and then. Yet she was not conscious of cold. That drawing was fast upon her, and nothing mattered but that she finish this journey.

All which had been her earlier life faded and no longer had any



meaning. She could not even remember now the faces of her shipmates, nor of those with whom she had recently traveled, even though now and then she had a moment or two when she glanced from one ice wall to the other expecting faintly to see forms she knew.

One thing she had not lost in this journey, and that was the avid need to see what waited at the end of it. She fell over bad footing, rose again to keep on.

Now she began to sense that she was not alone after all—yet who or what accompanied her was beyond her range of sight. She felt fear once or twice, and then that was wiped from her as a cloth might soothe her sweating face.

She hungered and thirsted, and now and then she absently picked at the ice of the wall and sucked at it. Still whatever drew her kept her going. She had brought no pack or supplies with her, only the spear which served her as a support and a staff, and the knife at her belt.

How long she walked in that daze within the crevice she did not know. The dusky light always appeared the same, as if it clung about her to give her sight, after a fashion.

Then the crevice began to narrow, until at last her shoulders were brushing walls and the footing was slanting more and more sharply upward. At length she drew her knife and dug in as best she could to draw herself forward, and at last floundered weakly into the open once again.

Vaguely she knew that to remain where her exertions had brought her was to fall prey to the cold, but she wanted nothing more than to remain where she was, to let the dullness close down upon her mind and forget all which lay behind, or might wait on her ahead.

Yet that compulsion would not release her. With the spear as a steadying staff, somehow Audha got to her knees and then hauled herself to her feet. Then she looked around.

The plain of the glacier stretched about, but, not too far ahead, a rocky rise split the ice flow. And to Audha's blinking eyes there ap-



peared a strange glow at one side—almost the reflection of a fire. Though how could such be here?

It must be more of this eerie weaving of thought patterns which suggested such a thing. However, because she had no other real goal, she started for that, taking one shaky step at a time, unable to keep going without digging in the spear.

The glow did not disappear. In fact, it was growing brighter. The girl almost believed she could feel a gentle warmth in the air.

Audha pulled herself around the edge of a rock pile and was met by warmth but not by any flames. She slumped rather than seated herself so she could hold out her mittened hands toward what stood there.

Her thoughts began to move again, as if they also had been frozen, and she was curious. Sitting on a flat base was a cone perhaps as high as her waist were she standing. The light from it did not flicker as would flame, but it appeared to Audha to be of some kind of metal, and iridescent lines crawled around its bulk.

She felt that this was no thing of Power on the level that the talented knew Power. Rather, like a ship, it was something built for a purpose. Yet she had never heard of any such form of light and heat before.

Who had set it here to succor her? Those she traveled with spoke always of the Dark in hiding ahead. And—memory was beginning to return with more force—the icebergs had herded her ship to the foul destruction of Dargh.

“You are a she. . . .”

Audha started; her knife was out. Those words seemed to issue from the cone.

“I am Audha, wavereader.” She held on to what she could of her control. “Yes”—she was guessing at the meaning of what she had heard—“I am a woman.”

“She—woman,” the voice repeated as if learning new words. “You come to kill.” There was almost a disdainful note in that. “Kill—kill.”

The anger which filled Audha and had brought her on this mission might have been released by the heat. Once more her mind



was swarming with broken memories of Dargh and their escape—and the death of those others, shipmates all.

“I am oathed by blood.” What was she doing, sitting here in the ice talking to a cone of metal? Perhaps it was only a death vision, as were sometimes said to be seen by those dying, and she really lay back in the crevice near the last Great Gate with no friend-hand to hold at her going.

“Kill—always—kill. Long—so long—to wait, and now kill—kill again!”

There was a strangeness to the voice. Audha’s awakened rage seemed too much to expend upon a voice and a bit of metal.

“Who are you?” she demanded now. She was sure that the cone was only a device for some Power and she must face the thing behind it for the sake of her own sanity.

A word was spoken in reply, but so tangled did it sound that Audha could neither have spoken it nor understood. It could be a name—or a rank—or an office. She hesitated and then tried again.

“I am a woman—what are you?”

There was no swift reply. Perhaps the other was either measuring Audha in some way or else did not quite understand.

“I am female,” the answer came at last. “Once I was ____ !”

Again a gabble the girl could not translate. Though somehow she received a strong impression of the sea—almost as if for a moment she had stood on board with a fair wind filling sails over her head. Sea . . . her memory made a small jump. That—that thing frozen in the ice—it was, the Power had told them, of the sea. “Female? Frozen there?”

“Not xagoth-slog!” The voice now echoed anger of an insult. “I am . . .”

This time the answer came one word at a time. The cone voice might be attempting to pick out of Audha’s own mind the proper words.

“Ship—wind power—all obey.”

“Officer—or perhaps even a shaman,” the Sulcar girl guessed. But what they hunted was evil. Was she now confronted by some creature of the full Dark who could strike with blasting energy?



“Lost—ship caught—in ice. I will Power to hold me safe until they come—my mates and young—to set me free. Ice holds—I sleep—long and long and long. Then comes a great wave of power—not Stiffli power”—Audha thought she got that word right this time—“but it broke apart all bonds laid to protect. I rise—still there is ice. And when I use the sight there is a ship—a ship of the killers. I have nothing—only the ice—and here the ice obeys my power. I send it to kill—”

“To kill my ship, my shipmates!” Audha’s knife was free in her hand. But her arm would no longer obey her; it would not rise from her side. And how she could have slain the cone, she had no idea.

“Now others come. They hold Power known to this world.” The voice was continuing in spite of Audha’s rage, and she found herself forced to listen. “They will be drawn even as you were drawn, slog female, and I shall use their power to win free and back to the world which is mine.”

The girl was breaking through that which held her quiescent, usable to this thing.

“Be not so sure.” She found she was able to control her knife hand now, but still saw no way she could turn its point against this alien thing. “There are those in this world who can make mountains walk and can close such gates to other places with ease.” She built upon her bluff as speedily as she could.

“Yes.” To her astonishment the thing readily agreed to that. “But then I have . . . you!”

Against every fraction of will Audha could summon, the compulsion snapped down upon her again. She stood up, not by a willing of her own. The cone whirled so that its color flow gave her vertigo, and she closed her eyes.

“Come!”

Her body, her eyes, were no longer under her own command. She looked and saw that the whirling cone had somehow collapsed into a ball. It did not quite rest upon the rock, but rather floated purposefully forward. Then Audha discovered that she could do nothing but follow it.



Her body ached with fatigue and she was so hungry her stomach seemed shrunken into a tight knot, but still she followed, chained by that other's will.

It wove a way among more and more of the rocky outcrops. At least it continued to project some of its saving warmth to keep her stumbling feet moving. Dark rocks.

Then—

Once more the ball was whirling. From its substance there spun a strip of near-invisible stuff—glass or clear ice—or some substance Audha had no knowledge of. It grew wider, and slanted upward, clearly visible among the rocks because of its continued play of color.

“Come!”

The order brought her forward in spite of all the force of her own will she raised to fight it. The girl felt her foot set on that half-seen way, her body tense with strain and the bite of fear.

It was lifting her up as easily as a leaf caught in a wind gust. She ached to hold still, afraid of losing her balance and falling to those rocks steadily growing smaller below her. Then she began to realize that she was encased in something as stiff as the ice from which she had come, as much a prisoner as any chains could bind her.

Dizzy, she closed her eyes—then opened them quickly again, fearing that she might miss some important change in this unbelievable transport.

Though she was well above the ground now, the rocks still loomed about her. And it seemed to her that they turned ugly, wind-worn faces to leer at her as she swung by them. She summoned what strength she had for a question.

“Where—?” but she got no further. Now that commanding force had even seized upon her tongue. She could see snow shifting from the breath of wind in the heights, yet that lash of cold did not reach her, even when they passed through what seemed a small blizzard.

This was indeed Power, and such as she had never heard described before. The length of light on which she was anchored swept around another tall spire of rock. They were heading straight



for the mountainside, she thought sickly, foreseeing her helpless body dashed against that unyielding wall.

But no, there was an opening and the ball which provided her passage headed straight for that. They came under an arch of a snow bridge to voyage across a plateau, and on that stood . . .

Audha was so weakened by her ordeal that now she saw what she could not possibly believe. Yet, though she blinked and blinked again, and firmly told herself not to be captured by any glamorie, that continued to stand foresquare and the ball was starting an easy curve of descent to bring her to it.

The Sulcar girl had seen Es City, the oldest and greatest of the works of humankind (plus perhaps the talents of the adepts) on the eastern continent. She had walked the streets of all the major Dales ports. This . . . was far beyond the labors which had brought such into being.

It seemed to be fashioned of the same strange material as produced the cone ball, and the colors which played across it were even richer in hue. Yet there were towers which were not opaque but like glass or the clearest of ice. And, strangest of all, in spite of where it stood—in the midst of this most desolate and barren land—there was a space beyond its outer walls which was carpeted with green. She caught a glimpse of flowers among the low-growing plants.

The ball which had brought her was at ground level now, approaching the castle which towered over her. And the closer Audha was carried, the more differences she noted in its building compared with what she knew. The edges of roofs curled outward and slightly upward and here and there along them were what she first took to be the heads of sentries, small though they seemed to be.

Then she knew them for carvings of creatures which certainly looked humanoid, not monstrous, but who wore expressions of sadness and despair.

Only a very large carving placed over the main entrance lacked that doleful touch. It was the head of what could only be a woman, her hair free and loosed about as if the wind itself were caught in it. Human—and yet was it so?



The forehead was high and wide, with unusually thick brows over eyes. Then the head narrowed to a very pointed chin beneath a small mouth. The nose was low-bridged, nearly flat, and wide of nostril. As Audha stared up at that face there appeared sparks of orange, almost like the tips of flames, in those eyes only for an instant, and then her captor swept her on under the archway.

She was instantly aware of the warmth which closed about her, stronger than that given off even by the cone. They did not cross any courtyard but were instantly in a great hall.

But an empty one. Here was none of the coming and going of servants one saw even in a Dales hold. No guards stood by the four curtained doorways—two on either side—past which she was swept.

Nor was there any dais to lift above the general servants and guests the ruler of this place. Instead, as the hall came to a halt, she was left firm-footed on the floor by the disappearance of that trail which had carried her, to discover she was facing something with the appearance of a broad but clouded mirror. She could see something of her own body reflected there, but also there appeared, farther in, dark in which she could not even distinguish any true shape.

“You have a choice, female of this world,” the voice which had been in the cone again rang out. “I can set you—so—”

Instantly Audha was encased in a pillar of ice. And with that about her, her mind seemed to dull; that which she truly was shrank smaller and smaller.

“Or”—so she could still hear the voice—“you can serve me.”

Audha shivered. She had heard all her life of bargains with the Dark and that no one ever won such. The end was always worse than even the stupid fool who fell to the wiles of evil could imagine.

“Serve you how?” She tried to play for time, to learn just how deeply she was now enmeshed with the black power.

“You will give me the use of your body. I do not know what you mean by the ‘Dark’ your kind seem to fear so much. Who judges what is wrong and what is right? I have been caught in a trap and



held away from all my kind. To return to them I use what I can of the Powers I know.

“I would learn more of those with you who have Powers of your own. If they are greater than I—then so be it. But if I can summon more and achieve what I would—then who can judge that I am ‘evil?’”

Logical enough, but Audha remembered Dargh.

After a moment of silence the voice continued. “So you have ties with others of your kind and you would avenge them. Do you not understand even yet it was because of your hate and anger you opened the door to me? Yes, I loosed the ice upon your ship. That was an enemy—the kind I followed across the Vors Sea before I was trapped. My blood died also in that battle. Your anger I have known, and have learned the folly of it. But it was those of your own kind who brought death to your shipmates. No order from me set it so. My Power moved as I tested it after many years. I saw a ship like unto those which had driven me here to linger alone—and so I shall send them off and away from me.”

“There were other killings,” Audha said hotly. “The camps of the trappers overrun.”

“Power calls and there was something here which was ready to answer my call, though I did not know the nature of it. But enough of this balancing of good and evil. What will you? Remain sealed in the ice for all time, or give me the use of your body that I may safely contact those of Power with whom you travel?”

“So that you can slay them, having learned enough?” demanded the girl.

“Quick thinking, female—but inclined to be stupid. Trust is hard to come by. I have none for those of your kind who manned the ships that drew me here. But . . .” There was a long silence, and then she spoke again, “Who is the greatest of Power among you?”

Audha wanted nothing more than to deny any answer to that, but suddenly she found that the truth could be pulled out of her whether she wished or not.

“Frost is a witch of Estcarp. No one truly knows the extent of their Power.”



“Then it is she with whom you and I will deal. I wait no longer. If you refuse me entrance, I can force it. Then you shall become as the slogs, a thing to be used only as tool.”

She was right: in her innermost thought the girl knew it. And she also realized that the choice between the pillar and being a slave had been only a choice. One she no longer had time to make even if she chose.

Out of that mirror expanse before her came a thrust of light which struck her full in the face. Before she could even cry out she was whirled into a darkness so deep it was like being smoothed in the very depths of the earth.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE



A Meeting of Powers, North

“**A**fter such a fall . . .” Odanki shook his head. “No, you must give up hope, Lady Trusla. Such crevices descend very far into the ice and the cold is such that any so caught are frozen soon. Also—to attempt to climb down in rescue, no and no.”

He was seated with his bandaged leg out before him on the ground while his hands were busy at work all the time he flattened her faint hope of reaching Audha. The great horns Simond and he had discovered had been dragged back to their improvised camp and he was busy chopping and cutting, but what he was working on she had no idea.

“Not so.” Inquit had come up behind them. “She lives.” There was such flat certainty in the shaman’s voice that Trusla was on her feet, eager to move to prove that statement the truth.



Frost was behind the Latt woman. Her usually impassive face wore the suggestion of a frown.

"There is a ward," she said slowly, "but not such as are known to those of my talent."

"She has been taken by the Dark!" Trusla was quick to interpret that. Though she had no strong ties with the Sulcar girl, who had always held aloof even in their small company, she felt a need for haste to free her from whatever dire force held rule in the high rocks and snow above the warm mud pocket.

However, Frost was holding her jewel out, pointing in the general direction which they guessed lay between them and the vanished girl.

That gem which was her guide to the difference between the Dark and the Light had not flared crimson or, the worst of all, smoky black. Nor was it blue, as it would have been had Audha sought a place of the Light. Instead the grayish stone held within its depths a flickering which was greenish in hue, and that pulsed as if to warn them that the talent it revealed was putting some force to work.

They had gathered around, drawn by the sight of the strange color. And now Frost spoke again. "Neither of the Light nor the Dark—something in between."

"Such a something," Simond was emboldened to say, "could turn either way." He did not know why he was so sure of that, but he was. "But that which drove the ship to Dargh certainly was evil. That which brought death to the camps, that which we seek—it is of the Dark."

Frost still cupped the jewel in her hand. "If we judge by the acts you mention—yes, the Dark waits. But never has the talisman been wrong—and this shows something new." She extended her hand a short distance toward Inquit. "What say you, sister?"

They were startled by the small creature leaping for the Latt's shoulder. Kankil's round head was very close to Inquit's and she was chirping loudly, certainly in excitement—or warning?

"How strong is that ward, sister?" the shaman asked Frost. "Is it held by some method which you know?"



The witch closed her eyes and raised her gem until it touched her forehead above and between her eyes. She stood, holding all their attention now. Even Kankil had ceased her chittering.

"It is strong," she said at last. "But it is not of any setting which I know."

Simond was surprised. Having known the Powers of the witches from his birth, he could not imagine they lacked any such knowledge of what was a relatively simple use of the talent.

"What of yours?" Frost asked, almost sharply, of the shaman.

Kankil slid down the Latt woman's bulky form but kept tight hold of her at thigh level. Inquit reached out for the edge of her feather cloak and selected, after careful inspection, one of the large quills which fringed it. Twisting that free, she lifted it and sent it gliding, as she might loose a bird. It did not swoop again to earth as they had expected, but rather rose higher and higher, until it was equal in height to the top of the cliff beside them.

There, as they watched, it started off in the direction of the glacier surface, steady in flight, though it used no wings.

It disappeared from sight and yet they were somehow all still watching the sky. Now Inquit was chanting and, with her, the cheeping of Kankil kept an echoing pattern. They continued to watch.

Then Inquit jerked as if, out of somewhere, she had been struck a sharp blow. For the first time Trusla heard Kankil's soft voice rise to a shriek. But the shaman kept her feet. She only looked to Frost, shaking her head.

"Sister, the ward holds also against that Power which is mine. Yet behind it—there is no challenge of the Dark building."

Now the witch spoke to the others. "If a gate awaits above, it holds no threat for now. But we must move with caution."

The captain laughed. "Lady, we have no wish to sail within arrow length of the enemy. Yet it would seem that Audha's disappearance is the first true trail mark that what we seek lies in that direction."

Inquit turned to her hunter. "We go as one or we do not go. When can you trail again?"



Odanki pushed out his leg and ran his hands cautiously down over the stockinglike bandages Inquit had provided. "Another day—that will also give me time to finish these." He still had his lap full of scraps of the stone-hard horn. "And if we go into the heart of the great ice, we shall need them."

Simond dubiously eyed the curved bits the other was fitting together. He had seen those foot pieces which had taken Odanki out on the frozen lake, but he had no idea what the Latt now labored on. Certainly no one would try the lake passage again. The glacier way above was trouble enough.

Joul came back to camp later in the day with a brace of white birds, thick of feathers but unfortunately lean of flesh. At least the party had a few mouthfuls of meat to flavor their stew. Frost had gone off by herself again, and Trusla was sure that the witch was trying either to pick up Audha's trail in spite of the warding or to communicate with her own sisterhood. She came back at last very pale, and dropped rather than sat beside the shaman.

The Latt woman reached out and, as if Frost were Kankil, patted her shoulder. "Eh, sister, do not waste strength; you may need for later. There is a rough way before us and we do not know how long a one."

That night Trusla did not sleep steadily, though she was tired from her exertions of the day. Instead she crept out of the doubled sleeping roll, taking care not to rouse Simond, and went to her gear. The party had decided early that they must again cut the size of their packs since much of the way would mean more climbing. And there was that she was sure she must not forget.

She felt rather than saw the jar of red sand. It was a slightly awkward shape, but she was sure she could fit it into the front of her long fur tunic.



What Odanki worked upon steadily the previous day, he showed to them early the next morning. Like those odd things which had allowed him to cross the slickness of the ice lake, these were also meant for aids—not only for feet, but hands as well. And he measured carefully, using his supply of thongs with care, until each of



the party had, to swing from belt for future use, two sets of what really resembled, Trusla thought, claws. She could understand the value of such in crossing the rough ice above.

Frost did not attempt any more visions, nor did the shaman. Rather, with Trusla's help, they put together packets of herb salves, what was left of the bandages, and anything they might need for a possible injury.

Odanki went through a series of exercises, putting some strain on his legs. However, they had healed somewhat, and the last evening they remained in the area of mud, Frost had him uncover his hurts, inspected them carefully, and then held her jewel a finger's breadth above the wounds, passing it slowly back and forth. It did not flash fire, but Trusla was sure she had seen a spark in its depth.

Once more they took the pathway of the stair, Trusla with Simond close on her heels, then the shaman and the others. The Escarpian girl turned her head when they passed the grim warning of that line of skulls. Were these the remains of sentient beings, or the being as they now faced? Yet they gave off nothing—there were no remnants of any slaying Power here.

When they reached the head of that stair and looked out upon the plateau of the glacier, Trusla shivered. That huge crevice which had swallowed Audha was not the only one, she suspected. Though they had divided the coils of ship ropes among them, to be looped over shoulders, and they had Odanki's strange claws for an aid, still this was a threatening world.

They moved slowly, taking care with their footing, in some places traveling roped together. But it did not take them long to reach that crevice down which Audha had disappeared. As they approached it, a figure moved out to meet them.

"Audha!" Trusla cried out, and the voices of the others joined hers.

The Sulcar girl was calm-faced. She might have left them only seconds earlier and suffered no ills during that short absence. Kankil chirped and made one of her leaps toward Audha, seeming



almost as willing to warmly welcome the wavereader as she would have her mistress.

However, she did not complete that leap. With a complicated twist of her body, she landed on the ice, still some distance from Audha, to simply stand, her paw-hand to her lips, her eyes wide.

A strangeness touched them all now. Their greetings cut off and they kept their distance. There was no change in Audha's expression. She was eyeing them calmly in an aloof way, as if she met with strangers. So she surveyed each in turn—her gaze sliding quickly over the men, though Simond believed there had been an awareness close to anger in those searching eyes when she sighted the captain.

However, it was the women who received her main attention. Trusla she appeared to dismiss quickly, the Latt shaman held her a little longer, but then her full gaze centered on Frost.

"Audha!" Frost's thankful cry was repeated, only now it had a questioning note. It seemed for the space of a breath or two the other did not hear her. That steady and measuring gaze had fallen from Frost's face to the jewel at the witch's breast.

No longer dull and gray, the stone appeared as if set in a gemmed frame of colored brilliance. Those colors rippled so one could not swear that this stone was red or yellow, green or blue, but took on each hue in turn.

Frost showed no surprise at the change in her jewel. When she spoke, it was a level question: "For whom do you speak?"

A slight flush arose on Audha's pale face. "I am again your comrade in search."

But even her words were delivered in the monotone of one repeating a learned ritual.

The shaman's hands were moving. Perhaps one of those gestures was an order, for Kankil went slowly, step by step, to stand before the Sulcar girl. She held up her paw at a stiff angle so they were all able to see it. One of her stubby fingers arose to point to Audha and then a second was beside it.

Possession! Trusla tensed and shivered. That was a forbidden use



of the talent unless the one so possessed agreed. With what had Audha made a pact? Surely such was intended for all their undoing.

“You see.” Frost was not speaking to the girl, Simond knew. He had hand to sword hilt, yet this struggle was not meant for steel, but rather to be waged on another plane. “You see—now what comes of that seeing?”

“You are?” Audha’s voice had taken on a different timber—an arrogance which was certainly no part of the companion they had known.

To the surprise of the others, Frost laughed, and Inquit smiled broadly.

Trusla thought she understood. Did this other they now dealt with believe they would surrender their *names* so foolishly?

But Frost was answering: “It would seem we face a trade, Audha—who-is-not. You have gauged us for what we are. Therefore let us not act as children at a fair, gawking at what we do not understand. Name for name—but we shall accept the one by which you face the world, even as we also wear such.”

The jewel’s glittering edge did not dim and although it seemed unnaturally still, and none of them could feel a hint of draft, the wide feathers fringing Inquit’s cloak stirred slightly even as a bird might move wings before taking flight.

It would seem to be now a battle of wills. Then the other spoke through her new servant.

“You company with Sulcars—with the slayers—and yet you expect anything save *this* from me!”

Audha’s voice arose to a shriek. Trusla gasped. The group had not been spread out, but rather gathered close to the girl they had discovered; thus the bubble which arose around them, though it crowded them even closer together, was not too large.

Both the captain and Simond cried out, and steel met that barely visible barrier. To no purpose. It might seem that they were contained in a vast cage of Var glass but one which did not yield to any assault from metal.

It was cold, suddenly far colder. That bubble could be of clear ice and now they would freeze.



Frost simply pointed her jewel at the half-visible expanse before her. The glittering encirclement of the gem gathered together and formed a rainbow-hued ray. It touched their temporary prison and that shattered, great pieces of the ice falling away. Odanki swung out his spear at one still-standing fragment and sent it after the rest.

“So you command the ice,” commented Frost. “Yes, that must be so, or we would not come upon you here. What else can you call upon, stranger?”

They came as if they had arisen out of the many crevices in the glaciers—such beasts as Trusla had never seen save for furs on a trader’s counter. There was a pack of short-legged but fast-moving, grizzle-coated things from which arose a stench to sicken one, at last one of the huge white wasbears, and some dark slinking forms which, though furred, seemed to writhe across the ice like serpents.

The shaman loosened one of her fringe feathers. Szymir had already shot an arrow, which went neatly home in the shoulder of the nearest wasbear but did not in any manner slow that creature in its steady advance.

Now Inquit shouldered past the captain and deliberately leaned over so that her feather was touching the ice under their feet. With the briskness of a hearthwife busy about her daily tasks, she swept that feather forward, eluding the hand with which the captain tried to stop her. So she swept, pacing forward. And on her fifth stride . . .

The pack of ravening animals was gone!

“It does little good,” she said complacently, straightening up and carefully inserting her feather back into whatever knot had held it previously, “to dream against dreamers.”

No emotion showed on Audha’s face. She was like one of those near-human-sized figures the landsmen put in their fields to keep birds from the early crops.

“Do we play games, stranger, or do we act as sisters in Power? What do you summon next—a glacier to sweep us away?” Once more Frost laughed.

“I summon . . . you!”



From around them now whirled small chunks of ice, streamers of snow. Trusla caught at Simond, only to find him as unsteady as she. Yet they held together. The others they could see only as forms which appeared and disappeared as the very stuff on which they stood rose to gather them in.

There was no clear sight of what was happening. Trusla only knew that there was no longer any solid surface under her boots. Yet she was not falling, nor was Simond. At least, caught up in this maelstrom, they were still together. There was a terrifying sense of being in a place where there was nothing stable except the man she clung to. Then, with force enough to bring a cry out of her, she did strike a level surface which held steady and she heard Simond swear and kick out, fighting to get to his feet and take her with him.

The storm of snow and ice particles was settling and they could see again the rest of the party. Odanki was spitting strange words with as much force as Simond. He had to lean heavily on his spear to get to his feet. The venture had done little good for his healing wounds.

The rest looked wonderingly around. Perhaps the shaman and the witch and Kankil had been prepared in some way for this wild journey. However, to the rest it had been a use of Power and therefore as awful as it was effective.

Audha was certainly still with them—whether she remained possessed by their opponent or not. In fact, she was close to Frost, who was shaking herself as if to banish the gathered snow and ice from her furred garments.

This was certainly not the brink of the crevice where they had found the Sulcar girl. What faced them now was enough to keep them statue still, just looking for a moment or so.

For here was a mountain fortress, such as the Sulcars and Simond knew represented a bastion nearly untakeable by any mortal means. Flashes of colored light which matched the encirclement of Frost's jewel played along the walls and appeared to leap from tower to tower. It was, Simond was certain, the hold of a ruler with unlimited means and perhaps unlimited manpower.



Still, because it did not resemble the stone he knew, he had a feeling, that it, too, was an exertion of Power alone.

There was an open doorway facing them in obvious invitation—too obvious. They did not stir from where the ice storm had deposited them. *They* did not—but Audha did.

She had been shoulder to shoulder with Frost when the storm had cleared. Now her hand shot forward, so swiftly they did not mark her action until too late.

Her fist grabbed about the jewel and she gave it such a vicious jerk as brought the witch forward and nearly to her knees. Then the chain must have snapped, for the jewel was free in Audha's hold—blazing.

The Sulcar girl cried out, shook her hand, tried to rid herself of what she held. Apparently the jewel was also at battle now. However, she herself was snatched up bodily and taken from them, to be dropped, now wailing, at that open doorway. Yet—she still held the gem.

Frost started forward. She slipped and slid in a tangle to the feet of the shaman, who was quick to come to her aid. Now they were aware that between them and the castle was a stretch of glass-smooth ice.

Odanki pushed to the edge of that. Sitting down, he fastened the thongs with claws over his boots, while Trusla and Simond fought to bring Frost and Inquit back to stable footing. It would seem a nearly impossible task. The ice might have been coated in turn with wax or grease; it possessed just the right consistency to send them sprawling. They were panting when they finally pulled back to the small stretch where the storm had deposited them.

Audha had not moved from her place in the doorway. Why she had not gone on within, Trusla could not guess. But then Frost might have picked that thought out of the girl's mind, for she said, "She will not take it within her sanctuary."

"Just so, sister." Inquit was soothing Kankil, who had found her slide on the ice somehow unusually unnerving. "It might well serve you as a key were it taken within. She will—"



“Hold it for ransom, perhaps.” Captain Stymir stood, hands on hips, his eyes narrowed as he studied the castle.

Odanki had tightened the last strap over his boot. With a look of confidence, he raised his unwounded leg and brought it down with a distinct stamp on the edge of that spread of ice—only to lose his balance and spin out, the claw strapped to his mittens and his boots making no impression on the slick surface, a cry of complete amazement bursting out of him. All his wriggling only took him farther from the shore until he was marooned near halfway between the party and the castle.

Trusla had never seen a witch without her jewel and it was very well known that that was the focus of her Power. If the dweller in the castle did summon Audha to her and take the gem, could it wrest control of Frost’s energies for her own use? The jewels were a secret and no one outside of the sisterhood knew just how great a weapon they were or what a witch deprived of one could do.

Trusla caught her lower lip between her teeth as she thought. Perhaps this was the time that her dream was brought into being. Simond was busy with the captain and Joul trying to throw a rope to the Latt hunter and draw him back. There was no one to stop her.

From her inner pocket she brought the jar. Somehow the very feel of it gave her confidence. In her mind was set exactly what was to be done, just as she had dreamed it nights ago.

She loosened the cork and shook into her hand a small palm full of the sand. With care she set the jar on the ice between her feet to keep it upright and hurled the sand she held out over the ice.

There was no wind she could feel to make it drift, but move it did, though in no straight path but rather wavering and in patches, with the ice showing in between.

She had shed her pack, even her belt. Now she picked up the jar and closed her eyes. There was no ice, nothing but the sand for her feet, and that other presence was not too far away, watching with approval.

Trusla began to dance.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO



Into the Halls of Ice, North

Trusla was caught in that dream which she would never forget. She swayed and turned, only the bulk of her heavy trail clothing disguising her graceful surrender to what lay in her mind. Twice she halted and once more shook sand into her hand and sent it flying. But she did not open her eyes—for she was not there. No, she danced in the moonlight beside a pool, weaving her steps to match those of the being who had summoned her and now sustained her past any fear or misgiving.

The others watched her in awe, though Simond had dropped his hold on the rope by which they were towing Odanki back to security and would have tried to follow her had not the shaman stepped in between.

“Young lord, to each her own magic. She dances now with a Power which is hers alone, and no harm to her comes of obeying such a command.”

“Possessed?” he flared, and glanced beyond Trusla to Audha. The girl still crouched in the door of that unbelievable castle, her hands held, very apparently against her will, about Frost’s jewel.

“Not so! She has opened a door to that which was given her as a birth gift—to be held against just such a time as this.” Inquit’s cape fluttered a little, though no wind had touched it. The edge of it



arose before him and he had a sudden idea that, fragile as that feathered weaving looked, it might be a formidable barrier.

Right—now left—and two steps right again. She touched no slippery ice spread as she went. For the last time Trusla paused to toss out once again what the jar contained. That carrier seemed much lighter.

She opened her eyes. There were the three steps leading up to that gaping door. But there was light above the entrance. She felt a touch of warmth—no more than a spring breeze might carry—as she looked up at that carven head which spanned the top of the portal.

Though the face remained a mask, the eyes were fully open. They held the blue-green of far seas—and intelligence—as well as anger and perhaps some dismay. Audha moaned and Trusla took the last three steps which brought her under the head and to the side of the Sulcar girl.

As Trusla looked down at Audha, she saw no longer that mask-like serenity but rather a twisted grimace of pain, and with that the awakening. Perhaps that which waited had released her hold on her prisoner.

Placing the sand jar back in the inner sling of her fur overgarment, Trusla went to her knees, for only so could she face Audha squarely. She held out her hands and said simply: “Give it to me!”

The painful grimace on the Sulcar girl’s face contracted even more. She was swinging her cupped hands back and forth, striving to push them apart and release the jewel.

Trusla straightened a little. Her fingers still felt slightly gritty from the sand. That and the Power it held for her had defeated one Power; could it another?

Reaching forward, she cupped her sandy fingers around Audha’s, jerking, shaking hands. “Loose!” she commanded. But she knew that truly it was not to the girl she spoke now but to the Power behind her. “By the will of Xactol of the sand—be this lock broken!”

Audha’s hands went rigid in her grasp and the girl screamed, a thin plaint, like that of a child in deep despair.



But loosen her grasp did, though the fingers remained crooked as if they still would hold fast what she had taken.

The jewel felt cold with the sting of ice-borne mountain water. It seemed to twist of itself as if to be free of Trusla's grasp, but she did not give way. So—

So—it would seem that perhaps Trusla had won, only to lose. There arose a harsh, grinding sound. The surface on which they now both crouched shifted under them. Trusla ducked as a large fragment fell from above.

There were cracks opening in those solid walls. The colors which ran across them flamed even more fiercely. She saw two of the carved heads crash and splinter into bits. The castle was shattering around them.

A pointed shaft, looking as viciously perilous as a spear, skimmed by Audha so close that it slit the edge of her outer fur tunic.

Trusla looked for the pattern of sand on the ice. Save for a red stain here and there, it was gone. Yet they would be safer out on that slippery surface than here. She folded the jewel into what she hoped would be safety. Then, catching the much larger Sulcar girl by the shoulders, she gave her the most vigorous pull she could, stumbling herself as she went backward, but getting them both into a sprawl in the open.

The continued destruction of the castle made her push and pull Audha—who seemed utterly helpless—as far as she could from the rain of splinters coming from those walls. The slickness of the ice lake was an aid now instead of a hindrance and they whirled together out of reach just as one of the towers which was part of the entrance came crashing where they had been only moments earlier.

Then they were not alone. Simond had her—though he did not urge her to her feet, but rather wrapped her hands around the rope which girdled him, and they both skidded away from the rain of sharp-edged ice fragments.

However, even as the castle ceased to be, so now the slick ice vanished and they were crawling over the rough surface of the mountain ways again.



There was a final ponderous sound from behind and then Trusla found herself, her grip on Simond iron-hard, and beside her Frost. The thought uppermost in her now was what had sent her into the maelstrom of falling ice. She loosed one hand from her anchorage with Simond and fumbled in her tunic—to bring out the jewel.

It was dull and gray again. The lights which had played about it were gone. She wanted to be rid of it as soon as possible and when Frost took it, she sighed and relaxed against Simond's broad shoulder at her back.

"To each her own talent," said the witch. There seemed to be moisture in her eyes and certainly at that moment she looked more like one who lived apart from Powers than at any time Trusla had seen her. "Yours has served us well, little sister."

"Audha." Trusla could see the shaman a little distance away kneeling beside the limp figure of the Sulcar. "She—"

That comforting shadow of humanness was gone from Frost's face and Trusla shivered. What would be the wrath of a witch whose very source of power had been stolen?

"Audha is . . . gone," Frost answered. "What moved her like a leashed hound withdrew when you took the gem. That one wanted it and yet feared to bring the unknown within her own stronghold. She has no use for a tool which has failed her. And it is the Sulcars who drew her worst hatred."

"Dead . . ." Trusla turned her head, unable for that moment to look upon the other girl. Ill fortune had been with her, and always at the bidding of this thing they still faced.

"Perhaps it would be better so. Not dead, but spirit-drained. Our sister of the Latts is a dreamer. Perhaps a dream—when there is time—can reach into the depths and call forth again that which is Audha. Now she is a child—or less than a child."

"The castle?" Trusla did not want to think more of Audha. To be a body without an innermost dwelling was to attract the worst of the Dark, though she knew that both Frost and Inquit would do what they could to protect Audha from that last outrage.

"Is gone. Look," Simond said in her ear. He shifted around, drawing her with him so they stared across that expanse which had



been glass smooth. It was broken and creviced now, fragments of ice forming barriers. Where those towers had stood, the colors racing over them, there stood now rock, black crags. Yet just at the point where that open gate had beckoned them in, there was a deep and dark hole, some passage or cave cut out of that rocky core.

“Glamorie?” She would not have been surprised if Frost had answered her yes. Trusla knew well that a master or mistress of the Power could create a whole city by choice, though such creations never lasted for any length of time.

“In its way. Except . . .” Frost was twisting the links of her broken chain apart, striving to rejoin them to hold the jewel once more. There was a raw red line on the small portion of her neck Trusla could see within the thick fur framing her face and edging her hood. “Except,” she repeated, having completed her task to her satisfaction, “that which held the castle still sits in waiting there.”

Captain Stymir came up behind them. “No place to strive to twist someone out as one pries a mussel from its shell, unless we know more.”

“No,” Frost agreed. “We do not enter that web. But I think that she who shelters there now has something to consider.”

“To fight on enemy territory when one knows nothing of the odds,” Simond commented, “has never availed any attacker much in the end.”

“To fight . . .” Now it was the shaman who joined them. Audha lay on a padding of cloaks. Curled very close beside her, Kankil stroked the girl’s blank face gently with one hand. “To fight is not always the answer.”

“You have shown that one how foolish it is to stand against your Power.” Odanki limped up. He was gazing proudly at the shaman. “Set the dream demons on her—they will twist her!” His hands moved as if he held a length of hide between them and were indeed twisting it.

“None of us knows the extent of the other’s Powers,” Frost returned. “Also, there is this. By the virtue of the talent I cannot truly read this one is of the Dark as we know it. Perhaps it is entrapped.”



“Entrapped?” the captain nearly exploded.

“Captain,” Frost asked, “what is that dim legend that your people entered into this world through a gate? What do we now hunt but that same gate? Perhaps something else has also been caught so—an alien to this world, a world which she has found barren and forbidding. Your people were free when your ships plowed into our sea—as dangerous as that is in this north. For someone who had no ship—no—”

“The ship in the plaque!” Stymir interrupted, and jerked that out of hiding. When he held it out into the wan light of day, they could see the change.

The black blot in the center was indeed in outline something akin to a ship, but far different than those the Sulcars sailed. It was long and narrow, and, where a midmast should be, there was a single tall and wide wedge, too solid-looking to be classed a sail. There was only one figure on the deck and that, as far as they could see, was a lump which had some of the attributes of the thing they had seen frozen in the ice.

“That thing—that *thing* could do this?” The captain’s arm swung out in the direction of the shattered castle.

“No—it was a servant of some kind,” Frost said slowly, “and that ship was close on the Sulcars as they fled. They gained freedom—perhaps this ship did not.”

“If we only knew more . . .” Trusla did not mean that as a complaint.

“But we do not!” the captain returned savagely, swinging the plaque wide in his hand as if he would hurl it from him.

“It is as one weaves a feather robe,” Inquit commented. “One studies the pattern and one places a quill there and quill here to make the proper pattern. But she who abides within there”—the shaman nodded toward the cave entrance—“is the only one who perhaps knows that pattern. And if our efforts continue to counter her, what may she send against us? She has tried us three times—three failures—and such as she does not take kindly to that.”

“Therefore”—Frost’s hand was again upon her jewel—“we seek her out. And we may still have a guide.” Abruptly she left their



company and went to where Audha lay, Kankil still curled beside her, crooning in her ear softly and patting her cheek.

Trusla would have thought the girl asleep or unconscious, but her eyes were open, staring up into the sky where already the night was clouding in.

Frost knelt and touched the Sulcar girl with the same gentleness that Kankil used. She sat so, linked by her fingers on the other's forehead, pushing back the heavily furred edge of Audha's hood. Her own face smoothed, her eyes closed. She was seeking, the Est-carpian girl was sure, for some spark of life or thought upon which she could seize as a bond to draw the other back to them.

"We wait, we eat," Inquit announced. "We ready ourselves. For it is not to stand upon ice and await the will of another that we have come here."

Eat they did, very sparingly of their provisions. Trusla sucked a long splinter of ice Simond handed her, gaining from its melting the water her body must have. Yet as they made what preparations they could, all their eyes kept returning to that waiting cavern which grew ever darker.

It was Kankil who managed to get some food into Audha, pressing tiny bits of journey cake into the girl's mouth and then smoothing her throat as if to urge her to swallow.

"She is not mindless." Frost held her share of cake in one hand while the other hovered over her jewel. "It is as if she has fled into a very deep part within her, and there locked in that which she has always been. When we move—she will come. The little one"—she indicated Kankil—"will be her guide."

Frost and Inquit stepped out with a confidence Trusla was certainly far from feeling. However, she matched strides with Simond and that was easeful in itself. Behind them Audha moved, her right hand tightly held by Kankil, whose chirping rose and fell as if she were singing some ritual to keep her charge on her feet.

Then came the Sulcars and Odanki, all ready with weapons, even though it was in their minds that battle steel had no power here.

The dark of the cave mouth closed about them. But if their



enemy meant to keep them so blinded, that ploy failed from the first, for Frost's jewel gave forth a thin gray light.

That did not reach far, but it was enough to show sure footage ahead. However, they were not far into the opening before they were fronted by something new. Even as the towers and walls of the ice palace had failed to hold, now they could see the broken remains of another barrier, the sharp points left in what might be a frame, warning them away.

It gave steel its chance, for the men came to the fore to break and beat to shards all which threatened them. Now Audha first showed signs of true life.

"She—the shadow one—this was her abiding place." The words came loudly and the Sulcar girl balked when Kankil attempted to urge her on. At last it was the shaman who took strong hold of Audha's upper arm, drawing her along with due care to keep away from the splinters.

That they were indeed in a place which was of a different nature they realized as they gathered in a group on the other side of that broken barrier. For the cold which had struck at them so long was gone.

It was not only warmer, but there was a strong scent.

"The sea!" Captain Stymir exclaimed.

Perhaps, but something more also, Trusla was sure. The ocean scent was cut by a whiff now and then of a spicy odor—certainly not unpleasant. Frost's limited jewel light showed them something else as well—squarely across their path, yet leaving them room on either side for their passage, was a length of dull-colored metal. When the light of the jewel touched it, there developed flickers of colored light, wan and hardly visible, just enough to show that the object was oval, pointed at each end, yet wide in the middle section and deep.

As Frost held their improvised lamp closer, they could see that the interior was oddly shaped, as if a body had been half sunk in some protective lining. The outline remaining was the source of that spicy fragrance. A bed of some sort, Trusla believed, and a far more comfortable one than she herself had known for many days.



“She is gone!” That cry came from Audha. Pulling hard against the grip the shaman kept on her, she reached the side of that resting place and flailed out with both hands into the empty space as if her touch would supply what her sight did not.

The passage plainly led beyond that bed, if bed it was, and when they had drawn Audha away from it, they ventured on. The smell of the sea lingered with them and the warmth continued. They threw back their furred hoods, loosened the throat ties of their coats.

“There is a slope. We are going down!” Odanki suddenly exclaimed.

It was true. But the descent was a gradual one. Around them the way remained dark and smooth. Their footing appeared to be rock; they could be traversing now the heart of some mountain.

The interruption to their journey struck without any warning. There was a growling as if rock scraped rock heavily, then that gradual slope became a slide as slick as if it had been greased. They lost their footing; body thudded against body as they tried vainly to somehow control that furious descent.

Trusla heard the exclamations of the men, and rising above them, she heard chanting: two bespelling runes though not quite fusing, showing that both the shaman and the witch were calling upon Power.

This time, however, that which they needed did not answer. Instead, in what was a tangle of bodies and wildly flailing limbs, they left the hold of the tube and came out into light which held not only the colors but the heat of flames.

Here was another cavern or space—so wide that one could not see the far end of it. Only a short distance from them was a pit. It gave off the same stench as the mud pool. And across its molten surface (for it seemed to be not true mud but rather a flowing of fire) were fountains of flame and sparks arose. The heat hit at them with almost the same intensity as torches held close to their bodies, and Trusla was sure that the fur of her clothing was singed by it.

Mostly on hands and knees, they crawled back as far as they could get from that flame pool. There was no possible chance of



their retracing their wild journey through the tube. If they were to find a way out, they must venture either right or left as close to the wall as they could.

But before they came to any decision, one of the flame fountains very close to the edge of that pool leaped higher, grew thicker, firmer, as they watched wide-eyed.

This was no flame pillar, for rather a woman stood there, her white body untouched by any sign of burn. Even her hair, which did not lie upon her shoulders but waved about her as if wind-driven, was not singed.

She was humanoid—but she was not human. Simond, who knew the strange breeds which flourished in Escore, was sure of that. And Trusla, seeing the flash of those sea-green eyes, knew that it had been a representation of this face which had been over the door of that vanished castle.

Reaching out, the woman caught a tendril of flame. It hardened in her hold into a shaft not unlike a spear. Deliberately she drew back her arm and threw the fiery point striking straight for Captain Szymir.

“Sulcar.” Her voice was a hiss and her mouth seemed to twist into a grimace of pure hatred.

On the breast of the captain’s fur tunic a patch of hair seared and smoked.

But at the same time there was another weapon in the air. Inquit might have been expecting just such an attack. One of her feathers penetrated the outer flame fence of that pool. It struck down and there was a puff of heavy smoke, and the fire died around the woman.

“Yaaahhh!” Sheer fury was the base of that cry as the other flung her arms high. Fire burst into being in the air itself, to swirl toward them like rain wind-driven.

“By the Will which is ever—the Power which dies not, the Light which never yields to Dark . . .” Almost as loud as the fire woman’s screams of rage arose that chant, sounding somehow cool, calm, and confident. Frost faced the other squarely, and now she took one deliberate step and then another toward her.



What Power the witch was able to call upon, Trusla could never afterward guess, but that rain of fire winked out and the flames from which it had bubbled sank back.

“Hate—why do you carry this burden of hate?” Still as calm and clear as the words of the ritual came Frost’s voice now.

The woman stood very still amid the lowered flames, her eyes fixed solely on the witch. “To all is allowed blood price—is that not also a belief of this barren land of yours?” she sneered.

“Greater yet is one who asks no price. Long ago was the act for which you seek vengeance—exile from your world—”

“My world,” the other cut in. “Not so—maybe now the death mounds for my kind. We hunted only for a refuge. And those”—she flung out a pointing hand toward the Sulcars—“would see us dead—because we differed from them. Our poor beasts they killed as monsters—our talents made us demons. Some of us died in their fires. But we were strong, and when we learned the secrets of their world, we turned the very earth they would hold against them. Yes, we drove them from land to land, island to island, for we had secrets their pitiful excuses for Power holders could not understand.

“We drove them! I, Urseta Vat Yan, led the fleet which hunted them down. But they had among them someone different, someone who had come through space, or time, or followed some path we did not know. And that one opened the way for them, so they escaped. But for me and mine—the gate locked itself upon us and there was no key for its opening.”

“Hate can be a powerful lock on any gate,” Frost said, still calm against the heat of the other’s tongue. “Hate, cherished and fed, brings madness. I call upon you now, Urseta Vat Yan—you are a sister in Power. Use that Power as it should be used—unlock the gate within you.”

The woman’s face was still a scowl of anger. It seemed to those watching that rage itself now fueled the flames among which she stood. Then, without any answer, she vanished and straightaway the fire in the pit failed. So darkness drew in from all sides.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE



Through the Mists of Time, North

Again it was Audha who provided them with a guide. Uttering a desolate cry, she rushed about the edge of the almost extinct fire pit, heading now for the darkness beyond, her arms outstretched, her hands grasping the air as if she would seize upon some greatly desired thing held just beyond her reach.

“She seeks that of herself the other still holds.” Though she was running, the shaman’s voice was steady. “Thus she will lead us to whatever place that one seeks now for refuge—or else lies in wait.” And her last words were grim.

The light of the jewel was now so frail, all Trusla could see were the shadows of the two before her half cloaking it. The smell of the sea was stronger now and she wondered if some trick of the path they now followed would dump them down another swift descent into the cruelly cold waters of the north. Yet about them the passage still seemed warm.

Trusla was panting now—the steady speed of the running Sulcar girl was such that she could not equal it, bundled as she was in sweat-sticky furs and hides which imprisoned her body. Still Audha showed no sign of slacking.

Somehow they had found their way back—or Audha had led them—out of that mountain-hidden hall into another passage.



The sea scent was there also, but it was tempered by other odors.

Trusla called on failing strength to draw a deep breath. Not spice, no—it had been long seasons since the perfume had wrapped her under the moonlight in Tor Marsh. She kept glancing down at the darkness about her boots, half expecting to see the wide-open blooms of the march-moon, then long, wide petals curling upward about her feet. But this was not Tor, she thought confusedly. There could not be any such sweetness spread for them to tread on.

Light again—pale at first. Trusla raised her hand to run across the slick skin of her forehead. She felt a queer reaching—as if something sorted their thoughts and memories for a purpose of its own.

There was in this black hole a blaze of light to her right. Oddly enough, those running with her did not even turn their heads in that direction. But Trusla had somehow drawn apart from Simond and there was distance between her and the rest now. She turned her head, looked, and stopped.

Tor Marsh had never been a happy place for her. But now here was a wide door open into all its familiar islands, bogs, and ways. She could hear the drums and her childhood training responded to their beat. There—there just a step or so away was the house which had been her own home. A shadowy figure moved in the doorway—Mafra leaning on her staff, waiting for Trusla to lead her out into a mist-veiled road.

But the girl was jerked back by a grasp, fingers dug so deeply that she could feel the bruising that they set upon her skin.

“No—”

“Come!” The voice was harsh and carried the weight of a command in it. She was dragged along at a queer, almost shuffling pace as if the one who had taken her captive could not walk with a straight stride.

“Shadow—dream—” the voice continued in her ears.

But Mafra was coming out of the hall door, her head up, her head turning, as if her blind eyes were following Trusla as she



was so dragged away from her. The girl tried to shift against that compelling hold—to beat and kick for her freedom. But the one who held her was not to be so easily escaped, though she heard a gasp or two of pain as if she had managed to do her captor a hurt.

Her beating hands, when they could find a surface, brushed fur and hide. Certainly it was not chance alone which brought a smear of something else across her fist. She did not know why she raised her knuckles to her lips and licked them, why she had halted in her fight for freedom.

She licked, and the few small grains of powdery sand were on her tongue. As if a curtain were snatched away, Trusla no longer saw Tor Marsh. Mafra did not wait there for her tending. It was only dark, very dark, for the only light, that shallow beam of Frost's jewel, was well ahead.

"Glamorie." She knew now who had kept her out of that trap, for trap it must have been. Perhaps since Audha had proved not useful for their enemy, she had been second choice. But she remembered now how the Latt hunter had sprawled across that spread of ice where the sand had given her footing. In his floundering he must have struck one of those patches, leaving spread grains clinging to his clothing as her safeguard now.

He was limping, and though he kept doggedly onward, her vigorous struggle with him might well have opened his hurts.

"All is well!" she said in a breathless voice. "The glamorie vision is gone."

His answer was a grunt, and she heard the thud of his spear butt against the rock as he pulled himself along.

"Trusla!" One of those shadows ahead turned back and was running in their direction. "Trusla?"

"We are here. There was a glamorie, but Odanki held me from it!" Should she blurt out her half-suspicion that the enemy now sought another tool and had made a try for her?

The light ahead had stopped. She could see some kind of a struggle going on and then one of those shadows flopped to the ground, the witch light held above the prone figure.



Simond, without a word, gave a shoulder as crutch to the Latt hunter. Making the best time they possibly could, they joined the others.

It was Audha who lay, again tended by Kankil. The shaman, her feather cape spreading wide across the rock, bent over her. Now Frost knelt to once more touch the girl's forehead.

"No one can slay shadows!" Odanki's denial sprang, Simond was sure, from the fact that thus far all the battles had been between the women, and he given no chance to aid in any skirmish.

Frost looked across Audha's body to Trusla.

"You were sought." That was no question but a statement. Her features, even seen by the slim light of the jewel, held a new austerity.

"There was a glamorie—a picture of Tor Marsh—like a door—and one to whom I owe a debt waiting there. It was Odanki who knew it for what it was. He held me back."

"So, having nearly broken one weapon, she seeks for another," commented Inquit.

"The dead do not war!" Stymir snarled.

"Always steel for the men—but certain things cannot truly die, Captain. Nor can you, I think, use that sword of yours on this menace, even if she were to stand with empty hands before you. When the snowcat is pursued hotly, she heads for her den, as every wall of that she knows well and she will use all she knows. This one's hate is still hot and perhaps it will never cool." There was a tinge of feeling in those last words.

"How does she?" The captain moved closer to look at Audha.

"Life force is drowned—perhaps to set the glamorie. But she lives and it is certain that she will obey."

Kankil chittered and reached out a hand to touch the shaman's cloak. Inquit nodded. "You have done your best, sister. Let us now see what else can be done. But we need time." She raised her head and looked about her. "Stark though this be, we must camp, rest, eat, for we cannot go on if our bodies fail us, no matter how our spirits urge us."



It was a strange camp indeed. They had left most of their supplies behind except for all the food they could carry. So there were no sleeping mats, only their cloaks, and the men lay harshly in their prisoning armor.

Having shared out meager portions, Inquit produced another bag from beneath her cloak and took out a packet. When she loosed the string of that, Frost frowned, but the shaman spoke directly to the witch.

“Sister, we eat scraps now and we do not know if we can find more food. To deal in this”—she held the bag open—“is, as I well know, a chancy thing and one which must be well considered. But if we are to drop for faintness in these paths, how will that benefit us? I say to you all that what I hold is a precious thing for a Latt hunter, for a traveler caught in a long storm. It grows sparsely and its harvesting is left only to those of the great knowledge.

“Place a pinch of this upon your tongue and then take what rest you can. I will swear by Arska that whatever virtue has been grown into it will serve you well.”

The Sulcars seemed a fraction reluctant, but Odanki took his pinch at once and Simond followed, with Trusla eager to join him. She had heard many tales of strange herbs, and legends said that some could keep one awake and hearty for even days with no other nourishment.

After Frost and Inquit had dipped into the contents of the bag, and they watched the shaman put a pinch of it into Audha’s mouth as Kankil held that open, the Sulcar captain and Joul took their share.

The four men insisted on dividing up watches while the women stretched out to sleep. Inquit took again one of her long quills and drew a warding circle about their whole group, and they placed Audha between Frost and the shaman, Kankil as usual curled up beside the girl.



Trusla was crouched on the deck of a ship, the wind slapping at the sail over her head. There were screams and cries filling the air and she realized that she was on the very edge of a battle.



Sulcars, their faces convulsed with rage, were fighting Sulcars. Then there rang a shout—words she did not understand, though which had meaning for the men before her. Their individual engagements broke off and they formed an irregular circle around two of their number.

She knew those faces. Her memory moved sluggishly at her bidding. The smaller man? His name—Joul. Who was Joul?

There was shouting again from the watching men. Some apparently were cheering on Joul. The others' cries held jeering notes, and the tall man they drew in to back—that was . . . Captain Stymir!

One could feel hate in the air, as heavy and blistering as the wind. The men circled slowly, eyes fast on each other, deadly purpose in every line of their tense bodies.

“Kill—kill—this is your deadly enemy who has been delivered into your hands. Kill, if you wish to bear the name of ‘man.’”

Trusla whimpered, her hands to her head. That order had not come out of the air as any honest sound, but seemed to vibrate within her. She knew little of swordplay—only what she had learned watching Simond and his squad at exercises. The Tor men knew no niceties of dueling. And to Trusla these two were most ill-matched, Stymir towering over Joul. Yet, such was the precision with which the smaller man moved, she could not believe that any combat would be one-sided.

Joul hunkered low and gave a hop forward not unlike that of a fen frog, his double-bladed axe swinging up and back, barely missing Stymir's legs—While only a scrambling scuttle kept the captain's sword from striking home.

The cries from the watching men grew louder. Still louder yet was that screamed order which must strike within their heads also, for Trusla saw both duelists retreat a pace, as if momentarily bereft of self-control.

“Kill—this be your enemy—kill!”

It was no one of the watchers who was shouting that. The girl arose from her crouch. She might still be somewhat in a mind-



maze from what she saw, but the truth was beginning to break within her now. What she witnessed was not the full truth.

At that moment of recognition suggesting they were again within the Power hold of another, she saw a shadowy figure rise behind Joul, stepping through the line of watching, shouting sailors as if they were but sea mist. Arms wrapped around the small man's shoulders and he was jerked backward, falling with his captor to the decking.

However, there had been one also who had moved upon Stymir at the same time, as tall, as broad-shouldered and threatening as the captain was at that moment. There was a flash of hand and Stymir's sword clattered down. He cried out and caught his wrist. Now there were arms around about him also and he was captive, fighting fiercely for freedom. That struggle grew less—even as had the movements where Joul had gone down.

Yet none of the watching sailors seemed to see what was going on. They still watched the center of their irregular circle and their voices rang as if they cheered on a deadly engagement.

Just as the doorway into Tor Marsh had vanished, so did the ship, the sailors. There was only left in the very dim light Simond kneeling on Joul, the older man's arms outspread and pinned now to the rock of the passageway—while Odanki, in spite of favoring his leg, held the captain in a hug like that of a wasbear which had closed for the final crushing of some prey.

For a moment all Trusla could hear was the heavy breathing of the men, though their struggles had come to an end. Now there was more light as Frost came to stand between them. The Est-carpian girl saw the wicked masks of rage fade from the faces of the two Sulcars. In their place appeared bewilderment with an overshadowing of shame.

“What—what did we do?” There was such uncertainty in the captain's voice. It sounded close to the high note uttered by a boy on the edge of some great fear. “Joul—kin-friend—blood brother. I—I was fighting again Rajar, the ship slayer.”

“And I”—Joul had been released by Simond and was sitting



up—"was on the *Pearl Queen* off Kaynur when we were raided by the demon craft—their captain being my meat."

"You are Sulcar, and in your past," Frost said quietly, "there lies much violence and death. The one who matches talents with us sent you back in time—"

"Thinking we would kill each other," broke in the Captain, "and so save her the trouble."

"Undoubtedly one of her thoughts," agreed Frost. "She does not understand that in this we all stand together. Simond, Odanki, she could not bring into *your* past." She looked now to the two who had loosed their captives and were stepping back. "No. But each of you are also men of war. Simond has ridden with the forces of Estcarp and Escore against worse dangers than shadows, and you, Odanki, have known the terrors of the wilderness. Each man holds in his past some time when death brushed him by as one of the shaman's feathers can brush. We were warded well, but not against our own memories and emotions."

"Therefore," Simond said stolidly as one accepting a task he could not relish or dare refuse, "we must be watched also until we can win to the end and see her face-to-face."

He looked now straight at Trusla. "My lady, it is against all which lies within my heart, but this I desire you now to promise. That if I come close to you, you will be on your guard, that you will stay with Inquit or Lady Frost—no matter how much I may urge you not to do so."

"No!" She would have gone to him then, but he stepped back, raising his hand to ward her off.

"Yes!" There was the same ring of iron in his voice which she had heard Koris and Simon Tregarth use upon occasion, and inwardly, much as she wished to refuse, she knew he was right.

"He speaks straight-tongued." Odanki centered his attention on the shaman. "Greatly was I honored that you chose me above all others to be your champion, Dreamer and Voice of Arska. Yet if this evil one could bring you down by my hand, then only the Outer Dark will be mine."

Frost turned her jewel around in her hands. "There is this—"



all of us have fought the Dark in one manner or another. Yet this one is truly not of the Dark as we envision it in our world. Think on what she said: that a gate was opened for the Sulcar escape—not by one of their blood with great talent, but by a stranger. Can we not then believe that one of the adepts who played their gate games in the past was responsible for both the flight of the Sulcar ships and accidentally for the capture of her own vessel?

“She spoke of wars and evils—the Dark adepts took delight in such meddling. It might well be that one such was careless enough to begin what could not be finished on that other world. If so, that the Sulcars were saved was perhaps the only victory.”

“You would speak for her?” the captain asked.

“I would that we speak *with* her. And until that time we must be on guard. She has not entirely released Audha—perhaps she cannot. Thus we still have a tie which will sooner or later bring us face-to-face. Only when talent stands against talent can we convince her that this world is not hers to play with.”

“You would return her to her own?” Trusla asked softly.

“If such can be done before the gate is sealed, and that is her own wish—why not? The darkness she awoke here is that which is centered in her alone, and perhaps in her own world it is not born of evil but of fear and despair. Therefore let us hunt this to the end.”

As they had been awakened so abruptly from their rest, they took a longer space before they began the march again. Then shaman and Frost worked over Audha. Though Trusla had no knowledge of the Powers they used, each in her own way, she believed that they entered the near-comatose girl’s mind, seeking now to stimulate that factor which sent her ever seeking the one who had taken from her the part which made her more than body.

Mindful of what Simond had said, Trusla did not sit beside him as she wished. The fear his suggestion had planted in her was ever to the fore of her mind. What great danger had he faced in the past that could come upon him again? She knew of the



horrors of Escore, of the Border war with Alizon, with many chances for such to be summoned again.

But he seemed to be sleeping calmly. Now she took note that both Captain Stymir and Joul had arranged themselves on either side of the Latt hunter and on his breast lay one of the feathers from the shaman's cloak. At least that was Power of his own people, and she believed its influence was as strong as Inquit could make it.

She herself, now that the storm of that awaking to battle was past, felt strong and eager, ready to march. Let them find what they sought and face this Urseta Vat Yan. That they were bound for the gate, Trusla was somehow sure. And she wanted, with all the force within her, to find it.

Simond slept on. Nor was there any change for the hunter. Might it be that the Power could reach only the Sulcars because they were the enemies of old? That she had been nearly trapped—she could well accept that the menace could not work through a male, but needed her who had the least talent of all to take Audha's place.

At that conclusion, Trusla deliberately closed her eyes to visualize the sand of the dancing. She had used the last of that precious powder, the only alien weapon she had. Now she still held to her vision.

There was no dancer to stir the sand slightly. Instead, in the midst of its carpet a man slept, his face turned up to be fully revealed in the moonlight. Greatly daring, Trusla reached. A tendrill of sand no thicker than her thumb arose at his head. It whirled and yet it seemed full-rooted there.

Again the sand moved, this time inches away from his worn boots—arose and stayed. The girl gave a deep sigh of gratitude. Odanki had his feather guard; now Trusla was sure she had made Simond as safe as her small Power would let her. Her confidence in that was followed by something else—a mixture of curiosity and belief. So her talent was not exhausted, as she had thought. When this journey was over, maybe she could learn more,



enough to encompass Simond and herself and bring them safety and fortune for a lifetime.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR



The Ship out of Time, North

Simond was locked into his thoughts as he swung along beside Odanki. Before them went Trusla and he was sure that she was purposely lagging behind, hoping for him to join her. But that fear which had been born of the attack on the two Sulcar warriors strode beside him, step by step.

What monster out of his own past could this alien woman of Power summon to blank out all of him except the need to slay? Resolutely he tried not to think of the past—of his long scouts through his homeland, of the sharp attacks along the Alizon Borders, of the things he had helped to hunt down in Escore. He found memory along those paths almost too strong. So he deliberately called up those words of power which Frost had locked into his mind, those which would ward any gate for all time.

He could almost see them etched in the blue fire on the air before him as he went—assuring him that none had been lost.

Trusla and Inquit were supporting Audha between them, Frost a step or so in advance with her jewel giving them still light enough to see the rock under and about them. The girl was blank of face, and yet, whenever they paused for a short rest, she tugged at those who partnered her and had to be pulled down to be seated.

Kankil still showed attachment to the Sulcar girl, climbing at once into her lap when she was down, patting her set face gently,



and crooning. It was as if the shaman's familiar was laboring like a healer to return Audha to them fully herself again.

Night and day no longer had any meaning here, though they kept to a pattern of rest periods and eating the last few crumbs of their supplies. Whatever Inquit had given them appeared to stretch those very meager mouthfuls so they arose again refreshed and with the energy of one who had feasted well.

It was not Frost's jewel which was preceding them now, but rather a thin, grayish light from ahead, far ahead. As they walked forward that grew stronger, while the odd warmth which had wrapped around them diminished. So they paused to pull on and latch hoods, seek out the mittens ready to be worn.

They came out into day. Small blasts of stinging snow struck at them and they could feel the ice of the air they reluctantly were forced to draw into their lungs.

Deep as the passage through the mountain and glacier had been, they faced again a world lying below them. Ice-circled hummocks and the broken footing of glaciers again awaited them.

However, across that plain stood such a wall as bore little resemblance to the glaciers—though such must have added to it through the centuries. It was more like a mighty barrier set up by man's purpose, not nature's, and there were the faint markings of something which had once been ice-free and was not choked. From the foot of that—

Water! Surely they could see the flash of dull sunlight on open water! It was filled with small floating islands of ice. It led to the right.

"East." The captain and Odanki spoke almost together.

East? Did the ancient sea so long hidden lie in that direction? And was this the gate they had come so far to find?

The claws Odanki had fashioned out of the horns gave them the ability to descend—with ropes to provide additional safety—the wall on whose crest they had emerged.

Then it was that Odanki cried out, held spear with his right hand and long belt knife with the other. For one of those humps which they had taken for outcrops of the ice moved.



To Trusla it was like a white-frosted tree rising well above her head. A red mouth opened and there was a roar, echoed menacingly back from the cliff behind them. She had seen only the hides of wasbears, and the creature of vision their foe had set upon them, but she had heard enough hunters' tales here in the north to know that they were the monarchs of the frozen world, intent on holding their hunting rights and instinctive enemies of any men. Only was this real—or was Odanki being tested in his own way of life?

Then she saw Audha jerk free the hold Inquit had resumed on her arm once they had made the descent. In her mittened hand the girl grabbed up a chunk of ice two fists thick and, before they could move, hurtled it through the air, to strike full on the furred shoulder of the animal.

The strangely elongated head of the creature swept in her direction and it went to four feet from its first threatening upright stance. Inquit tried to catch the girl again, but now she had pulled loose from Frost as well, her strength such that she brought the witch off balance and to her knees.

Again the wasbear roared. Its small eyes gleamed as red as its open, well-fanged mouth. Then it charged. Trusla would not have believed that such a bulk could have sprung so swiftly from its position.

Audha made no attempt to even pick up another ice ball in a vain attempt to stop it. Rather, she also sped. Not toward any of her companions but out over the rough ice, and the wasbear followed her.

There was a flash through the air. The spear Odanki had thrown thumped home in that thick body, to be dragged along, its butt catching in the ice furrows. The wasbear turned its head and snapped at the weapon. Its fangs cut through the shaft as if it were no more than a twig, though blood continued to run from a hole in its upper shoulder.

Audha was screaming now—not, Trusla realized, in fear or for aid, but rather as if she fronted some invader of a ship on which she sailed. Luck had been with her so far and she had not stumbled.



Now there came the *whang* of a bowstring and the wasbear shrieked as an arrow bit deep into its outstretched neck.

“No!” Audha’s voice cut through the cries of the animal. “She has me in part—let her take me in whole!”

The strong, clear light of Frost’s gem cut through the air. In spite of its swift movements, the beam struck the animal between those red eyes. It reared once more to its hind feet, teetering back and forth as might a man who had taken a death stroke. Then it crumpled in upon itself and collapsed, the ice splintering under the weight of its body.

“No—” There was a sound in the voice of the Sulcar girl which hurt as much as if they had watched her being cut down without any defense.

She rounded on Frost as the men approached the wasbear warily. Such were notoriously hard to kill and had often risen seemingly from death to account direfully with their would-be hunters.

“Why? You have had your will of me.” Audha nearly spat the words at Frost. “You have used her tie with me to seek her out. Now let me go free. By steel or the fangs of such as that—it does not matter. I cannot be myself again.”

“What is held can be returned,” the witch answered her. “We have not yet come to the end of the road set us.”

But Audha once more was lost to them, sunk back into the prison deep inside herself.

Trusla ventured to question Frost. “Can she be saved from this?”

Frost nodded. “Power may have many sources, but it answers also to certain defined rules. One who is ensorcelled can be released—if the will is there. However, she said she had brought us to our goal. Now we must wait to discover all we can. For in knowledge itself is Power.”

Odanki and Simond were butchering the wasbear. It certainly was not any trap out of glamorie. Trusla felt queasy as she watched their busy knives and the red fountaining over the snow.

She moved away from that gory spot, closer to the icy river. She was surprised that the bear chase had carried them so far—now the



mysterious cliff rose close at hand. But her companions were just now more interested in food.

She knew well that the northerners, the Latts, and the people of End of the World could and did eat raw meat, for there was often no chance of making a fire. She had seen Latt children chewing happily on such strips while watching their elders preparing food to be frozen or dried against the fasting of winter. But surely . . .

Inquit left her in no suspense as to what use they were going to make of the kill. Odanki, with some ceremony, had brought the shaman a gory offering and she gave him gracious thanks for his courtesy.

Thus they ate again—after a fashion—though Trusla, in spite of all the willpower she could summon, went aside and lost vigorously the few mouthfuls she had been able to choke down.

When they finished what they could, they went to that scrap of open water. It was like a nearly choked river and it flowed out of sight of those standing at this level. But Frost's attention was mainly for the ghost of a gate they all believed they could see, from which that river issued.

She waved to the Latt hunter and, when he joined her, asked, "Can that wall be climbed? We need to know how wide this may be."

He nodded and rounded the outspring of the river from the cleft under the choked remains of an opening. Once more resorting to his climbing claws, with the other men behind him, he began to climb. The ice was rough enough to give them good holds and the Sulcars, used to climbing into shrouds in ill weather, seemed to find this as easy as did Odanki. Simond came last. He was still holding away from the others, unable to forget that some trick might be played to entrap him.

Audha stood still, as if pillar-frozen in the cold, her eyes straining unseeingly before her as if her attempt to die at the claws of the wasbear had exhausted what was left of her energy. Trusla's attention was all for Simond. Within her mittens her hands clenched, wanting to believe that he had only a climb before him and no rise of old danger.



The Latt reached the top and disappeared from sight, apparently to do just what Frost had asked of him—measure the width of that barrier. His shout carried down and Trusla cringed. Then she realized that as no warning, but rather surprise.

Simond had safely scrambled over the edge and disappeared after the others and then Odanki returned, waving an arm vigorously, the Sulcars and Simond busy dropping the ropes. It was plain they wanted the women to join them.

Bringing Audha up was a problem. At last they looped part of a hide rope under her arms while Inquit, her feather cloak billowing wide, climbed beside the seemingly helpless girl, giving a hand now and then to aid that limp body to avoid some outcrop of the ice.

The top when they reached it seemed reasonably flat, nor was it any thick glacier field but limited in size. However, the Sulcars hurried the women forward and pointed down.

There was a thick mist hanging close to ground level below, hiding whatever might be there—solid ice or berg-filled water. However, it was what projected into that mist which centered their attention. This was no ledge of rock—nor any freak of nature. Even land-bred Trusla could guess she was looking down at the stern of some kind of ship, nearly as large as the *Wave Cleaver*. But it glistened as if covered against the wearing of time with a transparent coating of ice.

“The ship . . .” Captain Stymir had brought out his plaque and was staring first at it and then what lay beneath them. Though their find was halfway covered by the heavy ice, they could see the stern plainly, as well as part of that rise of the strange hump which appeared to take the place of sails.

Now the captain turned to Frost. “We have found the gate, Lady. Let your Powers now destroy it—and the thing which survived.”

“The gate, yes, but I have not yet the Power.” She took a step from them and held out her arms. On her breast her jewel was flashing fire which was answered from a pinnacle of ice nearby—was it ice? Those rainbows of rippling color. . . .

“Kin in Power,” Frost called into the chill air. “We have found



what we have sought—yet I do not believe you guard it against us.”

Rainbow tendrils moved like living roots along the ground, encircling them. Yet neither Frost nor the shaman appeared ready to counter what might be an attack of Power.

Frost had shed her mittens, so they hung by strings, to bare her inner, gloved hands. She did not touch her jewel; rather, her fingers moved in the air. And slightly behind her Inquit spread wide that feather cloak so that Trusla almost could hear the whisper of great wings about them.

“By my Power”—Frost’s twisting fingers left trails of blue light in the air—“I swear truce. For you are not of the Dark we know.”

Those lines forming the circle about them began to whirl, until the colors became such a streak of mingled light as to hurt the eyes if one tried to watch them. And that ground-held halo of light drew in toward them before it halted. Around and around it spun, ever faster, rising a little from surface level to form a low wall. There was a low moaning wail and Audha sank to her knees, her hands before her face.

“By my Power”—Frost’s voice now held a note of command—“I swear truce.” Her busy hands were stilled and fell to her sides.

The wall still whirled and Trusla was sure somehow that none of them would be able to cross it—perhaps even Frost’s Powers might be tried to the uppermost.

How long did they wait there? First there came the warmth they had known in the underways. Winds might sweep snow, as they saw around them, but they did not feel the bite of those drafts.

Then, as if she walked out of some unseen door in the air before them, she appeared. Across her body played the many ribbons of color, granting her clothing of a kind. In her hands she balanced a globe so large even her two palms and fingers could not encompass it. That held raging fire, such fire as had fed the mountain pit.

Her long hair, which seemed to change in shade constantly if one tried to look at it, crackled about her, and sparks were thrown off from its coils. In her triangular face her large green eyes showed



no pupils—they could have been pieces of lantern glass behind which flames held steady.

“Why?” The single word rang in all their heads but they knew it was meant for Frost.

“Because, even as this gate was used, it was not done so by the will of your breed. We move now to close forever all such openings into other worlds, thus pledging that there shall never more be any entrapment of the innocent, nor invasion of evil, nor meddling in what is not for us.”

The woman continued to stare at Frost.

“You are one of great Power in this world.” In her hands that globe swung a little. “Can Power stand against Power?”

“Why should it?” Frost asked. “The Dark is always with us—even as it must be in the world you know. If you were of the Dark we would have long since discovered it. What you have done you can undo. . . .” She turned her head a little to look to Audha.

“Sulcar slut,” spat the other.

“The stars move.” For the first time Inquit spoke. “They have moved—the time wheel turns. Here the Sulcars live in peace. Perhaps in your world they no longer exist.”

The woman laughed, and that laugh was sword-edged. “How well you have read us, feather flapper. Yes, knowing my kin, I think that world is now wholly ours.”

Trusla was aware of a growling throat sound from the captain, yet not loud enough perhaps to be heard by the others.

“So we make a truce—then you do as you came to do: destroy this trap which was sprung by some Power from your own brewing. What then of me?”

Frost deliberately looked to Captain Stymir now. “Captain, ships and things of the sea are known to you. This gate is half open, for it holds something which exists now in two worlds. Can this ship be freed into its own place once more?”

Trusla saw the woman clutch the ball of fire even closer to her. She was watching the captain as a huntress watches prey.

“Lady, of Power such as yours I know nothing. The ship looks to



be fully sheathed in ice. To free it might be a task beyond your strength.”

Again the woman laughed. “A Sulcar who speaks the truth as he knows it—this is indeed a change in the way things be. Worry not about my sweet *Storm Flitter*. What you see is the time-dispelling casing I set upon her, even as I went myself into the deep sleep. Those who were my guard . . .” Her head bent as she looked at the ball she held. “When I awoke through the roar of that great wild Power of yours, the spells had faded and they were . . . gone. Happily so, for perhaps they returned, in spirit, home. I wove too well—though perhaps there was a reason for that also. Witch Woman”—she twirled the ball in her hands—“you have opened your mind to me. It is true as you think, we need no more gates, and perhaps it is also true that this one exists still because my ship is half-bottled in it. Can you swear to release it and me with your spelling?”

“Who can swear certainly to anything of the Power?” Frost returned. “The gate I can close, once your ship is freed. But consider this, Sister in Power. You will be in your own world; however, as the shaman says, it has been long—the stars have changed.”

The woman was smiling. “Let my future be my own. It is no concern of yours, Witch Woman. What I return to, if I can, will be mine to face. Perhaps I have even become a legend for the telling.”

With one hand she slapped the side of the ball she held and that encirclement of color disappeared.

“What of the Sulcar girl? What you have taken from her—is it gone forever, then?” Frost demanded.

The woman shrugged. “They are a Powerless lot, save when they have weapons to hand. Who cares?”

As one the captain and Joul moved forward and they were followed closely by the Latt and Simond.

“But we do have weapons.” The captain’s voice was low, almost caressing, as if he held in his hand not a drawn sword but some well-loved thing.

The woman seemed to consider him, her head a little to one side. “Fire and steel, yes. But I have this.” She had posed the fire



ball on the palm of her hand as if she steadied it for tossing. Then she smiled. "And I would be quickly answered, would I not, you who deign to call me Sister in Power, with such fates as you could hope to bring upon me. This much I will promise. I do not know the full strength I have taken from this slut. But I know what can be returned, if and when matters go to my satisfaction."

As swiftly as she had appeared she was gone, and her going brought them to the edge of the gate to look down again at the ship in its clear ice envelope.

"Can it be done?" the captain demanded of Frost.

"We can only tell when we try. But note you cannot see the place in which that ship now rests. That is not any mist given off by the substances of this world."

It was true, the ship was plain enough to be seen half-caught in the ancient trap of the gate. But behind and around it was not really a mist but a fog, which, even as they watched, appeared to thicken and hide. What it covered, they could not see. If anything moved in it, they could not tell. It was . . . just as it had been for countless generations now. And no one suggested a climb down into that rolling grayness.

Instead, left rather at a loss since their proposed partner in labor had chosen to disappear, they climbed down once more and Frost went to study the gate, Simond with her.

"Hilarion did not foresee such as this," she said. "I can strive to reach Es or Arvon. Still, the otherworld Power alive here may interfere with that." She sighed. "It is difficult to depend upon another, and one who cannot be trusted."

"She may yet spring some trap?" Simond demanded, well aware that he might be the target. "Lady, let me be put under watch, for she may still think that I will serve her purpose. I ask of you, should I fail in such a testing, will you look to Trusla? Her people will have none of her because she saved my life, as you well know. She will need someone to stand beside her."

Frost had been bending her head a little forward, studying the jewel now resting on her palm. "I think this stranger will not trouble us so again, Simond. There was truth in what she said: if she



believes we can offer her a return to her own world, then she will link Powers.”

“But it has been so long.” Without them realizing it, Trusla had joined them. She could not bear now to have Simond too far away. “To return to a world one does not know, that has moved apart . . .”

“There is this,” Frost said. “Simon Tregarth, when he sought the Port of Dead Ships and found the floating derelict which was from his own world, discovered that time was different between us. There was evidence on the ship that he had spent more years apart than he had reckoned. This Urseta Vat Yan could even possibly discover that such transition works in an opposite fashion. For no two Powers are alike—just as no world copies another to the last blade of grass.”

“I hope”—Trusla had captured Simond’s hand and held it close—“that that is so for her.”

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE



Gate Fall and New Day’s Dawning, North

They had seen no more of the woman who called herself Urseta Vat Yan. Frost spent much time pacing out a line which spanned those very ancient outlines of the now-ice-choked passage. She could not approach it too closely; the sluggish stream issued from its foot. Finally she appeared to have made up her mind on some point and summoned them to a meeting.

Once they were so assembled, she singled out Audha, touched



the girl's forehead, and repeated, as she might a ritual, the name they had heard days earlier:

"Urseta Vat Yan!"

Names had Power. Perhaps the alien from the otherworld had held Frost's talent so low that she had not believed the witch could so compel her.

But now that shimmer of rainbow across the ice spread upward. Once more they saw the stranger as she wished them to behold her, whether it was in her natural body or not.

She did not hold her ball of fire this time. It hung above her head, and the warmth from it even they could feel. But her green eyes were hard, and as the warmth of the ball, so could her anger be sensed by all of them.

"What would you, Witch Woman?" she demanded.

"What we have spoken of, Urseta Vat Yan—the end of what we have come to do."

Trusla saw a forked point of tongue show and sweep over the other's lower lip.

"You would bring down your gate—and crush my ship. So much for all your brave words of mutual understanding."

"No." Frost showed a patience Trusla had not expected. "We shall force the gate to close, yes. But can you loose your ship on the same signal? This is an act which, to my knowledge, has never been tried before. And this also will I tell you—those who lock the gate may not survive."

She was facing the woman very straightly, gray eyes locked to the pupilless green. The ball of flame spun suddenly, and short tongues of flame fringed it around. Once more Trusla saw that double point of tongue show for an instant.

Then Frost's words struck home to Trusla herself. The witch had chosen Simond to share her task—that might mean she was about to kill him! No—and no!

She discovered that she could not utter that scream of denial aloud, nor could she move to wind arms about him, hold him safe. Power held them fast to the will of those other two. Even Inquit



stood silent, her cloak tightly about her as if it were a shield against forces they could feel rising now.

The green eyes appeared to flicker rather than blink. Now the woman reached upward and caught the ball, holding it to her even as Frost held her jewel.

“Such payment . . .” she said slowly.

Frost’s face was still serene. “Such payment—if it is asked of us—we shall give willingly. However, this, too, I must make clear to you if you choose your own path. Time has sped—you may be returning to a far different world than you left.”

“A different world, a kin-gone world,” the woman repeated slowly. “Yet if that means years will drop upon me even as the snow whirls in this barren place, still I will be . . . home.”

She tossed the ball from one hand to the other and the colors in it flamed so high she might have been holding a portion of sun far warmer than this country had ever seen. Then she turned partially away.

“My Power is not of your world. If you loose what you can command at the same moment, perhaps neither of us shall profit.”

“Agreed.” Frost’s voice was still calm and untroubled. “You uncase your ship first and then we shall tackle the gate.”

Still the woman hesitated—and then gave a toss of her head which sent her spark-laden hair streaming into the air.

“So be it—and how better a time than now, Witch Woman?”

Frost looked to Simond. Quietly, as they had been speaking, he had been unbuckling, unlacing, dropping to the ground the mail, the weapons of which he had always been so proud. Those who dealt with the greater Power did not bring steel to such a meeting. He stood at that moment in his fur underjerkin, even his belt knife out of its sheath.

Trusla swayed. In spite of all her efforts, she could not go to him. But he turned to face her.

“Heart’s core for me”—he spoke as if the two of them stood alone and there were none else to hear—“much have you given me. Now give me the last gift of all—your courage.”

She saw him only through a glaze of tears. Without Simond,



what would she be? But what she saw in his face brought a whisper of answer which it seemed the restraining Power would allow her now:

“You have all of me—forever.”

She had to crouch there, for her legs refused to support her any longer, and she watched him go, shoulder to shoulder with Frost, who had also shed the bulk of her outergarments. They had fit Odanki’s claws and were once more climbing. There was a brilliant flash of flame and the alien was already above them, perched on the middle of the faintly defined archway.

Trusla, pain binding her as with chains, had to watch Simond, now but a small dark figure, cross that arch—move out on the other side away from her and beyond the gate boundaries. If she could only stand with him there!

Urseta Vat Yan, tossing her ball from hand to hand as one about to play some childish game, disappeared toward the far end of the archway. They could no longer see her—only the sparks of her constantly turbulent hair.

Then a hand fell on Trusla’s shoulder, and she smelled that spicy scent which clung ever to the feather cloak of the shaman.

A quill the other held swept the ice and snow before where she huddled and the girl saw, as through a window—or into a mirror. There was the thick curtain of cloud, with only visible the protruding stern of the alien ship. But that was brightly lit now, for standing on the deck was Urseta, and she hurled the ball into the air. Faint and far away Trusla caught her call. Along one side of the ship rolled the ball, and then along the other, and the ice was gone as if it were mist puffed away.

Then once more the instrument of Power returned to Urseta and she stood looking upward, even though Trusla doubted she could see the other two at the gate—certainly not any of them waiting below.

However, her voice came clearly enough, ringing in their heads.

“I cannot leave any anchorage here now. Take what is of your world and time!” The ball broke into halves, each of which became a small ball in turn. One she threw into the air with all her might,



and the other she hurled with even greater force straight before her to where the other half of her ship was still imprisoned.

There was a bursting apart—sight, sound, feeling were all a part of it. Trusla heard the roll of those other two voices speaking words which had not been voiced for centuries. Through suddenly dimmed eyes she tried to see Simond, but there was descending on them something else. Faded as if its journey through the air had nearly dimmed its Power came the fireball. It struck full upon the head of Audha, who had stood forgotten among them, gripped in the dazed state which mainly held her.

Trusla had just time to see the rainbow fire compass the Sulcar girl before she heard that other sound: the roar of rock and ice, shattering under the hammer of true Power, the cliffs shuddering and scaling off great chunks.

“Simond!” She covered her face with her hands. Maybe if fortune favored her one of those great slabs would find her.

It would seem that the roaring of the broken gate would never stop. Snow half buried them, and Trusla dimly felt pain as a razor-edged splinter cut along her arm, slitting the fur and hide as if it were a knife.

The silence in the end was as overpowering in its way as had been the noise of the destruction. Somehow Trusla forced herself to look up—

Up at what? Where there had stood a wall barrier was a jumble of broken slabs, some seeming as great in size as a Sulcar ship.

Ship? Half-dazedly she tried to center her eyes on where that ship had once been caught. Did it lay crushed under this pounding, or had the woman indeed made her return?

“Lady Trusla!” Someone was tugging at her, striving to pull her free of the ice which half covered her. Bleared of eye, she looked up into the face of Audha.

There was spirit behind those eyes again, concern in the Sulcar girl’s expression. Truly what Urseta had taken she had, at that last moment, returned. Faintly Trusla was happy—faintly—for nothing mattered now that Simond was not here.

There came the sound of rushing water and she could hear call-



ing in the distance, though that meant nothing to her now. That stream which had edged from under the gate was now a river, shearing off pieces of ice which bumped along in what seemed a strong current whirling eastward.

“Aaaaheee, ahheee!” That cry broke through the confusion in her head. She was dimly aware of Audha digging swiftly about her, dragging her out of the mass of snow which half covered her. Not too far away Kankil was also digging, throwing a storm of snow and bits of ice into the air as she screamed over and over again that ear-piercing cry.

Odanki suddenly towered over the shaman’s small familiar and his big hands added to the welter of snow they were throwing into the air. Then the hunter stopped and, using both hands, pulled the shaman out.

However, even before she was raised to more than her knees, she was pointing to one side, crying in her own tongue nearly as loud as Kankil. The captain, staggering a little, came up. One arm hung limp and Joul was close to give him a hand.

But at the shaman’s insistence not only did the Sulcar man leave the captain, but Audha also moved to aid. Trusla remained dully where she was, watching them, as might a detached dreamer, work to bring out Frost.

At first she thought that the witch was dead, struck down by the very Power she had summoned. Then the girl was aware that the jewel on the other’s breast was showing a spark of fire.

Only . . . Trusla tried to get to her feet, and when she discovered she could not make it, she started on hands and knees to the river. If Simond’s side of the gate had collapsed even as Frost’s—and it looked as if it had—then he lay buried across that barrier of rushing water. The longer he remained below any heap of snow and splintered ice, the sooner the last flickers of life would be frozen out of him. That he was not yet dead Trusla could believe. Surely that shutting off of warmth and good, of her very heart hold, would be sensed by her.

She paid no attention to those behind her, pausing for a breath or so now and then to watch that other shore, see some small



splotch of hide clothing perhaps among the everlasting blue-white of the snow. Then she was at the water's edge and that was a perilous perch, but the danger meant nothing to her now.

The ice was still breaking off in pieces, to be rolled over in the water, carried away. And she knew this much of this land: to throw herself into that frantic stream and hope to reach the other shore was merely to reach out for death. Though in the end that is what she might well do.

She was dimly aware of someone who was standing now beside where she crouched in despair. The softness of a feather brushed against her and then a small warm body, almost like a brazier of coals, hurled itself upon her.

Inquit—Kankil. Of what matter their coming? There was nothing which would bridge that waterway—and no sign beyond of where to hunt.

“Little sister.” The Latt woman's hand rested softly on her head. “He is not dead.”

Trusla shrugged. What matter? He would soon be so. She looked into nothingness and knew its bite.

Kankil was patting her face with soft paw-hands, crooning with a rumbling purr which reached into Trusla's own body but did not soften the growing bleakness there.

“What can be done?” It took a moment or so for Trusla to realize that the shaman was not speaking to her but to Odanki, who had come up on her other side.

“To cross in this flood—Voice of Arska, that is impossible for anyone, for we cannot grow wings and fly.”

Trusla started up, dislodging Kankil from her lap with a sharp shove. She was on her feet, teetering on the very edge of the water, only half aware that a firm hold had fastened on the back of her belt.

But she had not been mistaken! Surely, by the Greatest of Powers, her eyes had not played her false now. That dark arm seemingly grown out of the very earth was showing clear against the snow. A moment or so later there was a cascade of chunks, then head, another arm, shoulders appeared!



“Simond!” Trusla screamed with all the power her lungs could summon.

He tried to rise and sprawled forward on his face. She would have thrown herself into that flood now if the hold on her had not remained so very strong.

No, he was not stirring now. They must reach him! Cover him with the garments he had discarded, somehow get him warm—bring life back to him!

Trusla tried to turn and fight that hold, but she was as entrapped as if the ice had risen to wall her in. She screamed at Inquit.

“He must have help!”

“There is no way to cross the river in such a flood.” Captain Stymir, his left arm now lashed across his breast, came up to them. “Unless . . .” He looked to the shaman. “Many times Power has done what force of arm and heart cannot. The witch seems to sleep; we cannot rouse her. Thus what she might be able to control we cannot call upon. And you, Shaman?”

“Animals I may command in the name of Arska, winds I can summon and sometimes lighten storms, and there are other things. But here I stand as you, Captain.”

Trusla’s breath was coming in dry sobs. “Simond, Simond”—she made of his name a plea, like some ritual which could not escape answer.

He moved. Somehow he had levered himself up on his hands, though his head still hung as if any effort was too great for him.

“Simond, Simond.” Perhaps it was her calling which reached him, kept him from lying waiting for death.

“Hunter!”

That one word was so imperative that it broke all their attention centered on the struggling man.

It was Audha who had come to them. Yet—it was not the Audha Trusla had known, beaten by adversity, robbed of her birthright. Now the Sulcar girl put out a hand to lay fingertips on Odanki’s bulky arm. He jerked and his mouth opened, but what he might have wished to say was swallowed up in the question she asked:

“You are one who knows the ice. If there be an air bridge, would



you risk a crossing? You alone, for I do not know . . .” She hesitated. “I have yet much to learn.”

“A bridge?” he repeated almost stupidly, as if he could not believe that she had asked that. “To bridge that . . .” he pointed to the ever-flowing flood.

Trusla saw Inquit’s eyes narrow and then the shaman herself spoke.

“You have followed the flippered ones out on the floating bergs. You stand as my man and shield. If there be a bridge, dare you cross it?”

He shook his head as if he could not believe what she was saying. “I am the Lord Simond’s bondsman for my very life! Did he not bring me out of the very jaws of the worms? Show me your bridge!”

Audha moved a little apart from them, even as Frost did when she would deal with Power. She flung wide her arms and in the wide space between her hands danced color, ribbons of color such as had run across the walls of the ice palace.

The fingers of her left hand slacked apart and those ribbons of color shot out over the river even as Trusla had seen a fisherman of the marshes throw a baited line. The tip of the rainbow touched a floating cake of extra width and drew it toward them. It nudged a second and then a third. In spite of the battering of the water—perhaps that now flowed *beneath* what Audha wrought and did not try full strength against it—there was a bridge.

“Go with speed,” she ordered. “I do not know how long . . .”

Odanki had already thrown aside his long outer tunic and his bow and quiver. But he still had spear in hand and was using that in a way odd to Trusla, to give himself a running start to jump for the nearest bobbing cake of ice. Trusla wanted to close her eyes; she was sure that what the hunter attempted now was beyond the ability of any man.

Yet, though the strangely hooked-together cakes bobbed, they did not spill him into that current. With his spear hooked well into the ice of the opposite bank, he pulled himself up and over. Though he was limping more, he was still moving at nearly running speed.



He reached that dark blot which was Simond and with a struggle somehow got the limp body over his shoulders, almost as he might carry a kill to camp. Beside her Trusla heard Inquit making sharp rasping cries even as might some great bird working itself up to its highest point of energy.

Audha's expression was not unlike the one Frost wore when she called upon her Power. Also—somehow her Sulcar features appeared to alter a little—she was not quite Audha anymore. But the ribbons of light continued to flow from her.

Inquit took two steps coming up behind her. The shaman's glove and mitten had been loosed and her hand was free in the cold. But those fingers went forth and closed on Audha's neck where the hood had slipped from her head. Inquit's eyes were closed and her expression was one of deep concentration.

Odanki's pace, for all his efforts, was slowing. He had Simond and was approaching the edge of the river once more with uneven strides. Reaching the bank, he paused and shifted his burden a little and then leaped. Under the combined weight of both men, the ice dipped and water washed, but Odanki was already taking off for the next portion of that bridge.

What moved her Trusla could not have told, for pure fear had kept her held in place, but now she felt Kankil's hand close on her and when the small creature drew her, she was able to take the steps to Inquit's side. Kankil reached up with her other stubby fingers to catch at the shaman's dangling hand.

A drawing such as she had never known gripped Trusla. Still she chanted, as her own private ritual, Simond's name. But she realized that even as the shaman was feeding Power to Audha, so she was now a part of that chain. Her will arose fiercely, trying to feed all she could into that linkage.

The hunter was past the middle of the river. Only it seemed to Trusla that those colored bands which built his path were not holding steady; rather, they faded and then pulsed anew at intervals as if they were near the end of their Power to hold.

Joul and the captain had been working frenziedly at a section of rope, the captain's one-handed efforts sometimes more of a hin-



drance than a help. Joul took over their labor, fashioned a loop, and then cast with a seaman's eye.

Odanki was caught and held by Joul's coil and the captain held the shore end. The ribbons flickered—but the Sulcars were ready and gave a great forward pull. Odanki slammed against the bank. Audha's hand fell to her side. The lights were gone, but the shaman had moved with speed and Trusla was with her.

Scrambling, pulling, seizing on whatever part of the two came to hand, they worked together and brought both the hunter and his burden ashore.

Trusla caught at Simond, his head falling back against her shoulder. Was she still chanting his name? Perhaps—for his eyes opened and he was looking up at her, a slow smile curving his lips as if the flesh were too frozen to answer his will.

"Not—this—time, Heart . . ." Those eyes fluttered, shut again.

The party had no means of building a fire—and they needed the heat to live. Inquit went to Audha. The girl stood nearly as blank of face as when she had moved to Urseta's will, but when the shaman laid a hand upon her shoulder, she shuddered and came alive again.

"Who are you?" the shaman asked.

Audha laughed. "I am *Audha*, wavereader. But that one, when she would take me for her servant, entered into me. And when she left . . . she took what she claimed as hers, but she could not take all. For something of it had rooted. Just"—she laughed again—"as some of the hated Sulcar had rooted in her. Perhaps that will mean a new beginning for her also."

The shaman nodded. "That is possible—as none can deny. She had control over warmth, that one. What can you do with that?"

Audha's smile was gone. "Wisewoman, I am not Urseta, only one to whom some small shreds of Power have come. It may be that I have lost all that I had, for now I know I am empty and it is useless for me to try."

"Rightly so." They were startled by Frost. There was the weary look upon her which she always wore when she had been entranced. But her jewel was ablaze.

"I have spoken to Korinth and the Watcher there was already



warned from Lornt that aid was needed. Now . . .” Her hands cupped the jewel and she knelt beside Simond, passing the blaze of its light down from the crown of his head to his feet. He sighed as he turned his head a fraction closer to Trusla’s breasts.

“Be not afraid, child,” Frost said. “He will lie unknowing and unharmed now until they come for us. Now let us see to this champion of yours, Inquit. He was well chosen and deserves high honor.”

Odanki also lay on the ice, but his eyes were wide open, first in apprehension and then softening with awe as Frost’s gleaming symbol of Power passed over him. As with Simond, he seemed to fall asleep, and Inquit, unfastening her feather robe, drew it over him.

“Lady, you spoke of help,” Stymir said. “In this land such must come soon.”

“As it will. Be sure, Captain, every drum calls for wind launching.”

She stood for a moment looking back at the ruins of the gate. That strange fog which had blanked out what lay on the other side was no longer to be seen—only rough foothills which arose in the distance to mountain height.

“I hope,” she said, “that she will be served as well in her own world and time as we shall be in ours. For there was nothing of true evil in her, only strangeness, and despair and the burden of terrible loneliness. Let us wish her all good fortune, as perhaps such thoughts will carry past all barriers, seen and unseen.”

And looking around that half circle of faces, Trusla knew that Frost’s appeal was truly answered. Might Urset Vat Yan find at least a portion of what she had lost. For them . . . it was done, all the struggle and peril. They had only to wait, for none of them could doubt that what the witch had promised was the truth; their own needed help was on the way.

EPILOGUE



Es City, Estcarp

The seasons had turned and once more it was spring, even though few signs of a renewing world showed within the age-old capital of Estcarp.

But the outer harbor was crowded with ships, and the streets were decked in festival array as they had never been in memory.

Not only was every inn packed to the point that sleeping room at night was allotted to guests on the floors of already crowded rooms, but every household had opened doors to distant kin, or strangers recommended by such.

There was constant traffic on the streets, even to the meanest of alleys. So much so that the guard had been ordered out early to patrol ways for provision wagons to bring in needed stores.

Crowds gathered day and night to watch the passing of notables they had heard of sometimes all their lives but had never thought to actually look upon.

The center of this busy and confused web was again the great hall of the citadel itself, though sometimes there was an overflow into the courtyard when newcomers must be received with full ceremony.

Flags of noble houses signified the presence of every family of note—even some from troubled Karsten, where there was still a bitter struggle in process for the ducal throne. And strangest of all



were two banners those of Estcarp had in their lives faced only in battle—bearing variations of the hounds of Alizon.

All those gathered knew that once more their world had changed—not this time by the awesome Power which pulled down mountains and moved rivers, but because it was the beginning of a new age.

Just as it had taken those shaken by disaster in the mountains to welcome life again in strange places, so was it now that all faced change to which many came warily, but from which there was no escape.

In the great hall once more there was the gathering of those of Power: those who ruled, those in whose grasp now the future of their world rested. They might peer warily at one another, but they listened and understood—even if some did only dimly.

One representative of each of the ruling houses occupied a chair on the dais, for there was limited room, and the chairs themselves were crowded so tightly together that no one occupant could move without disturbing a fellow.

Here showed a gray robe of the witches—she who was presently Knowledge Holder. They recognized her in their company as Diamond, since all witches' true names were forgotten when they came to the Place of Wisdom. Her chair needed no banner above it—there was no mistaking a witch. Her serene face showed no sign of aging and it was true she was one of the younger sisters lately come to her office.

There was Simon Tregarth, outlander, founder with his witch wife Jaelithe of a house which had served Estcarp and Escore mightily over the years. Then came Jaelithe herself, and beyond her Hilarion, the last of the great adepts, and Dahaun of the Green Valley, high in the holding of Power. Next to her, those from overseas: Alon and Eydryth of the Gryphon line; Firdun, who was now protector of the Waste; and from the Dales, Lord Imry, whose constant struggle to bring peace to the holdings there was at last near completion.

Beside him was Kerovan, Lord of the Eyrie, preserving distance between the Dales lord and he who represented the enemy



the Dales had brought to bitter defeat: Lord Kasarian out of Alizon. Strangest of all were the two who were plainly close comrades but of different species altogether. One was the Lady Eleeri, another outlander who had come to right, through her own efforts, an ancient wrong. Close across her shoulder was the head of a Keplian mare, her blue eyes shrewdly aware of all about them.

Last of all two women, their furred and much-beaded dress strange in this company. The one wore, like a ruler's mantle, a cloak of feathers, and the other, her gold hair in Sulcar braids, sat with her eyes downcast as if she felt she had no place there.

It was given to Koris as commander in this place to speak first, and as he did so the murmur of voices in the throng below quieted.

“What honor can we give those who have faced the Dark and come forth victors? The deeds of such are meat for bards, and their names will last into the far future when all the rest here shall be forgot. But once more shall they be told in this company, gathered from all our known world, so that their honor can be made manifest in all countries, in every hall, by the hearth of every holding.”

He paused. There was a hum of voices as those massed to listen agreed.

“We rode in Estcarp and Escore to good purpose—though it will be long before the last roots of the Dark can be dragged from growth in our earth.

“To the south, crossing lands unknown before, we hail these.” He spoke slowly, pausing for a fraction after each name:

“The Lady Eleeri, her Lord Romar, the Keplian kind who are our true comrades. With them as watch, guard, and guide, the Lady Mouse of the sisterhood, two Falconers and armsmen of courage, as well as the Lady Liara out of Alizon and chosen armsmen.”

At that name Kasarian stirred and sought the face of one near the fore of the listeners.

“Also they were joined by another outlander, a mighty warrior for the Light—Gruck—and she who is the chosen Voice of Gun-



nora, and her friend the cat, Chief. There went also one of the house which had ever been a strong support for us—Keris Tregarth. All have heard the tale of how he went into the Dark to serve and that the Light called him forth as a true son.

“The Voice and Gruck do not stand here today. It is by their choice that they remain in the south, where more of our people of knowledge will join them later.

“In Arvon there were also those who came at the call of need. The House of the Gryphon held fast, and those they sent forth are of the same strength of mind and body. Firdun, of their own blood, and the were Kethan and his foster sister, the healer Aylinn. With them the Kioga, Guret and their warriors—one of whom went to the last reward of Heroes—may Obred be ever honored so. Also one saved from the Dark—as well as the Lady Uta, who joined to be their guide. And lastly Ibycus, he who was protector of the land from the ancient days, and the Lady Elysha.

“They fought the Dark in many ways and in the end lost both Ibycus and the Lady Elysha, whose work for the Light was deemed finished. Now Firdun will ride the Waste and the trails and perhaps in time there will be others to join him.

“But those who went north also gained. The Lady Frost and the Shaman Inquit united in strength—though their Powers differed greatly. And the Lord Simond and his Lady Trusla were not far behind them. Nor was Captain Stymir and his mate Joul. The Latt champion Odanki, whose great strength was their safety many times, served better than any other might have. And last of all there is the Lady Audha, who brought back to us, through sore troubling of spirit, new knowledge.” He glanced at the Sulcar girl, who still looked down and did not meet the eyes of any there.

“Now since these, no matter what their heritage, won for us the safety of our world, have again been named in full honor, we do not forget those of Lormt: the adept Hilarion, the Lady Mereth, the sage scholars who sought the final knowledge. To say thanks for such services is a too small thing. We can only give them our heart gratitude.

“So we have once more changed our world. And now we call



upon those who have asked that they be allowed to speak about certain things at this meeting that there be no thought of any secret and misunderstanding in the future. Lady Diamond . . .”

There was a stir as the witch arose. Her hand covered her jewel as if that touch provided her with some strength as she spoke.

“In the past there has been bitterness and denial—we have believed that the Power was only truly ours. But such useless pride was first swept away at the Turning. And now we have also had much to learn, we who thought ourselves above schooling. Our domain is still this land—or any other which needs what we have to offer. But we do not rule in Es any longer. Those who have talent and wish to come to us we shall welcome gladly. However, it will be by their choice, not ours. The Place of Wisdom is now our citadel and therein shall our order abide.”

Koris bowed his head. “Lady, none will deny your gifts and those of your daughters. That we labor toward a common end is truly a way of life we shall welcome.”

She had seated herself when Koris swung to Kasarian.

“Lord, we have been blood enemies for all our lives and the lives of our fathers before us. Still, since you found your door to Lornt, surely there is hope that we, also, can have peace along our Borders.”

When the young Alizondern arose to answer, it was almost as if his white hair shown silver. His hands moved in the traditional formal gestures of his kind even as he answered.

“To the ignorant belongs fear, Lord Marshal. I have learned what one of my blood might never have known had not chance and my curiosity transported me into your Lornt. We are a country of treachery, hatred, and spying. There are those among us who will never accept even a truce with you. But those are the elder lords for the most part, and they are ever at each other’s throats. There is an easier way to gain rulership than by steel and poison, and it is one I am trying to learn.

“There is one here to whom I owe an honor debt.” He looked down into the company below. “My sister Liara has taught me that



the fabled line of the great mage does run true in us. If she wishes—chooses—I offer her great danger but also a part in change.”

Slowly the girl arose from where she had been seated.

“You are Hound Master of the House,” she said clearly. “If I be in truth Hearthmistress at present under that roof. . . .” she hesitated. “I am Alizondern, knowing the tricks and terrors which assault all our houses. Somehow I believe that I am indeed the one to stand behind you.”

“No.” He shook his head. “Beside me, as the first Lady of our line stood beside her Lord when all others would pull him down. Though I trust it will not come to that end for us.”

“What of the Dales, Lord Imry?” Koris asked.

The dark-haired man who appeared to wear a permanent line of frown—or anxiety—between his eyes replied slowly.

“The Dales have suffered in the past by ever bickering. We fell to Alizon at first because each lord would fight only for his own holding. This is a lesson now held ever before us. By the end of this season we shall hold a conference to decide some matters. Commander Terlach”—he inclined his head toward a Falconer in the crowd—“has already cleared outlaws from the north hills as far as Quayth. We shall listen to him, a master of the trade of leading men.”

“Thus be it,” Koris said slowly, each word carrying with it nearly the force of an oath. “Always the Dark will rise—for it cannot be entirely driven from any world of man—and then the Light must arm for battle. But no longer need we fear that any outlander evil can burst or creep upon us unaware, perhaps summoned by some perverted talent. For we have Powers of our own, more and stronger than we may now know, just as we have discovered parts of our world before unknown. Perhaps it is now our duty to further that knowledge of both land and sea beyond the maps and charts. We must ever strive to learn more and put what is so learned to proper use.

“This I say, and all here will agree: once more there has been a Turning. Mountains may not have walked, but rather Powers. And from this time forward we shall search and stand sentinel. The old



gives way to new, and it is in my reckoning good will come of this and we shall prosper.”

He was silent for a long moment and then said—as one who makes a solemn promise:

“The gates are closed.”