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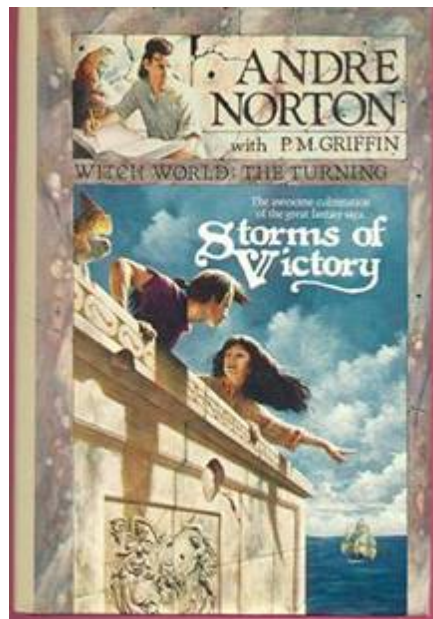
About the Authors

FOR OVER FIFTY years, **Andre Norton** , "one of the most distinguished living SF and fantasy writers" (*Booklist*) , has been penning best-selling novels that have earned her a unique place in the hearts and minds of readers. She has been honored with a Life Achievement Award by the World Fantasy Convention, and her numerous science-fiction and fantasy novels have garnered her millions of devoted readers across the globe. Works set in her fabled Witch World, as well as others, such as *The Elvenbane* (with Mercedes Lackey) and *Black Trillium* (with Marion Zimmer Bradley and Julian May), have made her "one of the most popular authors of our time" (*Publishers Weekly*) . She lives in Winter Park, Florida.

Mercedes Lackey has enjoyed best-selling success with her many fantasy works, including her much-acclaimed adventures set in the fabled world of Valdemar. While much of her work lies in epic fantasy, she has enjoyed successful forays into dark fantasy, with her Diana Tregarde books, and contemporary fantasy, which includes her recently published *Sacred Ground* . She is one of the most popular fantasy authors on the scene today. She lives with her husband, artist and author Larry Dixon, in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Witch World

-- Storms of Victory (1991)--



The Chronicler

THERE was a time when the hilt of a sword or the butt of a dart gun rested more easily in my grip than this pen. Now I record the deeds of others, and strange tales have I gathered. That I find myself a chronicler of others' deeds is one of those tricks which fate can play upon a man.

In the backwater of quiet which is Lormt a man must make his own work. I have been fortunate in that I am drawn more and more to the seeking of knowledge, even though it chances that I am but a beginner and must do so vicariously through the recounting of the deeds of others. Though sometimes, more and more, it comes to me that I have not yet done with an active role in that eternal war of the Light against the Dark.

My name is Duratan and I am of the House of Harrid (which means nothing now). Though I take commissions these days to search family rolls for many divided clans, I have never found any bloodkin to my house. It is sometimes a lone thing not to call any kin.

I came into Estcarp as a babe, having been born just at that black time when Duke Yvian horned all the Old Race and there was a mighty bloodletting. My nurse brought me hither before she died of a fever and I was fostered.

From then my destiny followed the pattern known to all my exiled people. I was trained to arms from the time

I could hold a weapon made to my measure—for there was no other life then when the Kolder devils loosed all our enemies upon us.

In due time I became one of the Borderers, adding to my knowledge of weapons that of the countryside and survival in the wilderness. Only in one respect did I differ from my fellows—I seemed able to bond with animals. Once I even faced a snow cat, and we looked eye to eye, before the impressive hunter of the heights went his way. In my mind it was as if I had dwelt for a short moment within his furred skin, kin to him as I was to no other.

For a time thereafter I was wary and disturbed, fearing that I might even be were, one of those who divide spirits—man and animal, able to be each in turn. Yet I showed no tendency to grow fur or feather, fangs or talons. So at length I accepted this as a minor talent—to be cherished.

In border service I met also the younger Tregarths, and from that grew in me a desire to something more than a triumph at arms and always more bloodletting. Of those two storied warriors it was Kemoc, the younger, to whom I was most drawn. His father being Simon Tregarth, the outworlder, his mother the Witch Jaelithe, who had not lost her power even when she wedded, bedded, and bore. There was also another unheard-of thing—that their children, all three, were delivered at a single birthing. There was Kemoc, and Kyllan, and their sister, Kaththea, who was taken for Witch training against her will.

Her brothers rode to prevent that but were too late. Kemoc returned from that aborted mission very quiet, but henceforth there was a deadliness in his eyes when he spoke of his sister. He asked questions of those who rode with us, and any we met. However, I think he gained little of what he wanted, for we who had fled Karsten had retained even less of the old lore than was known in Estcarp.

Then, in one of those swift forays which were our life, Kemoc suffered a wound too serious for our healer to deal with and was taken from the heights we guarded.

Shortly thereafter there came a period of quiet, almost a truce, during which our captain wished to send orders for supplies and I volunteered for that. With Kemoc gone I was restless and even more alone.

I carried the captain's orders but it meant a gathering of material which would take some time and I had nothing to do save find Kemoc. In me there has never been the gift of easy friend making and with him only I had felt akin. I knew that since his sister's taking he had been searching for something, and in that I

also felt I might have a part. When I asked concerning him I was told that his wound (which had left him partly maimed) had healed well enough for him to go to Lormt.

Lormt was then to us mainly legend. It was said to be a repository of knowledge—useless knowledge the Witches avered—but it was older even than Es City, whose history covers such a toll of years that it would take the larger part of a lifetime to count. The Witches avoided it, in fact seemed to hold it in aversion. There were scholars said to have taken refuge within its walls, but if they learned aught from their delving they did not share it abroad.

I followed Kemoc to Lormt. It is true that one may be laid under a geas, set to a task from which there is no turning back. I had angered no one (that I knew of) with the power to set that upon me. But I was firmly drawn to Lormt.

Thus I came to a vaster and more unusual group of buildings than I had ever seen. There were four towers and those were connected by walls. Yet no sentries walked those walls and there was no guard at the single gate. Rather that was ajar, and must have been so for some time, as there was a ridge of soil holding it thus. Inside were buildings but not like those of a keep, and around, against the walls, smaller erections most little more than huts—some of which were a-ruin.

A woman was drawing water at a well as I dismounted and, when I asked her where I might find the lord, she blinked and then grinned at me, saying here were no lords, only old men who ruined their eyes looking at books which sometimes fell to pieces while they did so. So I went searching for Kemoc.

Later I discovered that the affairs of housing were managed by Ouen (leader by default of the scholars, he being a younger and more active man) and by Mistress Bethalie, whose opinion of the domestic arts of most men was very low indeed. There was also Wessel, a jewel of a steward. It was because of these three that Lormt flourished as well as it did.

Nor were there only males among the scholars. For I heard of a Lady Nareth, who kept much to her own company, and one Pyra, a noted healer, whose country and clan were unknown but who Kemoc revered for her knowledge and help with his own injury.

Five days I stayed with him, listening with growing excitement to his discoveries. Those about him were for the most part so elderly that they might have been our grandsires. Each had a quest of his own and no time for us.

The night before I left Kemoc faced me across one of the timeworn tables, having pushed aside a pile of books bound in worm-eaten wood. He had a small pouch in his hand and from this he scattered between us some beads of crystal which lay winking fire in the lamplight.

Without any thought my hand went out and I pushed one here, and one there until a pattern I did not understand lay before my eyes. Kemoc nodded.

"So it is right, Duratan, knowledge lies here for you, also. And believe it or not, you have talent."

I looked at him openmouthed. "I am no maid—" I protested.

He smiled at me. "Just so, you are no maid, Duratan. So let me say this to you. There may be secrets within secrets and the Witches are mortals for all their powers. There is infinitely more in this world than they know. I have discovered much here and soon I shall be able to follow my own road. Take these." He swept up the crystals, returning them to the pouch. "You shall find use for them."

When I left at dawn the next morning he was at the gate to see me forth.

"If peace ever comes to this land of ours, shield mate, ride you here again, for I think that there is to be found a greater treasure than any wrecker lord of the eastern coast can dream of. Luck be with you and fortune your shield."

But his wish did not hold. Within a month of my return to the mountains a rock moved under my mount's feet when I was on scout, to plunge both me and the poor beast into a narrow valley. The chance I would be found was slim and pain sent me drifting into a darkness I welcomed.

Yet I had not come to the Last Gate. I was discovered by a deaf-and-dumb beast of a man who carried me forth, though his rough handling was a torment. I awoke in the house of a wisewoman he served. With all her skill she fought to save my crushed leg. Heal it did, but I knew that I would never stride easily again and the Borderers would ride without me.

With a knotted stump of cane in hand I made myself walk daily. I had fallen onto a stool after such a push when she came to me, in her hand Kemoc's bag. She held that out and for some caprice I fumbled within and drew out a few of the crystals, throwing them on the floor. By some chance they were all of the same color—blue—and, as they fell, they shaped, as cleanly as if I had pushed them, into the shape of a dart head pointing to the door. I felt as if someone had given me a sharp order. It was time to be about business as yet unknown to me.

"You have," the woman said to me, "the talent. This is uncanny—ward yourself well, Borderer, for you will find few to welcome you." She tossed the pouch to me as if she wished it quickly away from her.

I decided it was time I searched for Kemoc in Lornt once more but first I helped that awkward servant enwall his mistress's herb garden. When I finally rode forth there was in me even a small hope that I might find knowledge to buy me freedom from my lurching steps.

Only Kemoc was gone when once more I entered that uncloseable gate. Ouen told me that Kemoc had been greatly excited when he had ridden forth a tenth day earlier, nor had he mentioned where he was going.

Because I did not know his goal and because I believed that my handicap would make me a hindrance to him, I settled in the room which had been his, paying into the common fund of the scholars the last of my small store of coins. For a short time a shameful weakness of spirit took me and I railed at fate.

But I roused myself to fight such despair and now and then I tossed the crystals. Thus I began to learn that I could influence the patterns which came, even move separate ones by staring at them.

That drove me to the reading halls, though I had no idea what I sought. I drew upon scraps I had found in Kemoc's room on which he had scrawled some results of his own delving. But I felt I faced a maze in which I could be easily caught, for I had no one purpose.

I strove to speak to one of the scholars who seemed more approachable than the others, Morfew, who welcomed me as a pupil.

When it seemed that I must have action, for it was not easy to settle into a niche of books and scrolls, I went into the fields of the farms which fed the establishment and worked, exercising my leg and forcing myself to walk without a staff. Though I had not sought her out, Pyra came to me and offered surcease

from pain, greatly in agreement with what I strove to do for myself. She was a woman of great inner strength and it was only by chance that I discovered what else she was. For one day, when a stumble in a field brought back a measure of my pain, she found me sitting in the hall, crystals in hand.

I threw them in idleness and those of blazing yellow separated from the others and formed a pattern to seem a pair of eyes. Such eyes I had seen in a bird's head and these appeared to live for a moment and gaze at Pyra. I

heard a quickly drawn breath and at that moment, as if I had heard it shouted aloud I was sure. I glanced from those eyes on the table to the eyes in the woman's head, and I said to myself, "Falconer!" Though few, if any, men not of their own breed had ever seen one of their women.

She put out her hand and caught mine, turning it palm up, and she studied that calloused flesh as one might study the roll on the table. There was a frown on her face; as she abruptly dropped her hold on me she said only:

"Tied, Duratan—how and why I do not know." Swiftly then she left me.

But tied to the bird warriors I was though I did not guess it then or for years to come. Time passed and I did not count the days.

However, my power grew. That which had stirred in me when I had fronted the snow cat strengthened by use even as did my limb. I began to put more thought to such things, casting my crystals, seeking out birds and small field creatures. Then I gained a liege one of my own.

There had been a storm and after its fury had passed I rode out to the edge of the wild lands. These were hedged by forest which made a living wall around Lornt save for where the road (somewhat overgrown) passed and where the river Es curled. There came to me a whimpering, and it was the space of several breaths before I realized that I had caught that, not by ear, but by thought. I took it as a guide and it led me to where, trapped much as I had been in the mountains, lay a thin, shaggy-coated hound. It was a beast of fine breeding though it was all bones and its long hair showed neglect. Nor did it wear a collar. As I knelt it drew lip to show teeth and I noted a mark across its muzzle as if a whip lash had left a scar, I looked into eyes which were fearful and I loosed thought to calm and comfort. It sniffed my fingers and then licked them.

Luckily it had shared my fate no further, for it was only a prisoner and wounded by the matter of a scratch or two. I worked apart the branch of bramble which was its last binding and it arose to four feet and shook itself, took one step and then two away from me. Then it looked over its shoulder and came back, while from it to me flowed gratitude.

Thus I found Rawit and she was no common hound, but one that had been hardly used and had come to know my sort only as an enemy who punished. Though from the moment she came to me there was no barrier between us. Her thoughts flowed, even if sometimes they were hard to understand, but there was exchange between us and I found this a wonder which seemingly was as great a one to her.

We had visitors—mainly a trader or two who brought that which could not be raised in our well-tended fields, salt, scrap iron which Janton, the smith, used with great expertise. Also there were Borderers passing and from them we learned of the war. I asked of Kemoc and only once did I have news. That came from a horse dealer who had sold him a Torgian. But more than that I did not know.

There was a time when restlessness gnawed at me. I took to riding the woods' boundaries, Rawit

running by my side. Though we were well away from the mountains and no raiders came, still I felt a need for such patrols.

Morfew told me once that the ancients who had built here had set over the whole site a guard of Power and those sheltering within the walls need have no fear. Still I borrowed a spade and smoothed out that ridge of earth which kept the great gate from being closed.

As my unease increased I fell into the habit of each morning throwing the crystals as I arose. Oddly, Rawit always came from her bed at the foot of mine to watch. And each day I threw only those which were the red of blood and the smoke grey of dying fires. Yet when I tried to share my foreboding with Morfew, he shook his head and told me the ancients guarded well their own.

My wariness was given credit when a troop of Borderers came. These were no scouts nor being sent to turn some raid. Rather they carried with them all that they owned packed on ponies. From both men and animals—even more from the animals—I sensed some strange peril.

Their captain gathered those scholars who would heed him, and the farm people, to share the warning which had sent them on the move. Pagar of Karsten had set on march the largest army that men in this part of the world had ever seen. Already their van had penetrated well into the mountains across so wide a front that there was no way Estcarp could hold against them.

"But it is no longer our war," the captain said. "For the Council has sent forth the Great Call and we are for Es City. If you would have safety prepare to ride with us. But do not think we can linger long for you."

Ouen glanced from one to another of his fellow scholars and then spoke up.

"Lornt is guarded well, Captain." He gestured to walls and towers. "I do not think we can do better than to trust the guardianship which was set here when the last wall stone was fitted into place. We have no life beyond these walls. Also there is among us a wisewoman, Mistress Bethalie. She is strong in power though no Witch."

The captain grimaced and turned to Janton. "Your people then—" he began.

Janton looked around but one head shook and then another. He shrugged.

"Our thanks to you, Captain. But we've lived here father-son, son-father, for so long we would be like wheat pulled up untimely from the fields—to wither into nothingness."

"The folly is yours then!" The captain was sharp. His gaze lighted on me and he frowned again. For, that morning having thrown the fire and ash twice and felt a great weight of oppression, I had put on my scale shirt, and fastened my arms belt over it.

"You—" I caught his thought and felt anger, then also knew that he had the right to resent a fighting man to be at this time apart from any troop.

I answered that thought easily as I limped forward.

"Captain, how came that Great Call?"

"The seeresses," he answered, "and the falcons of the Falconers. The Council move but they have not

told us how or what. We have heard that Sulcar ships are in the bay and perhaps they wait for those who must flee."

Then he added, "Do you ride with us?"

I shook my head. "Captain, I found refuge here when there was no other to bid me welcome. I take my chance with Lormt."

They rode on towards the river and I heard them speak of rafts. I laid hand on the gate I had freed and wondered how well it would serve us as a barrier if Karsten fury spilled into this pocket nigh forgotten by the world.

The next day was awesome. I awakened before light and heard the whines in Rawit's throat, her shadow fear heightening mine. There was that about us which fairly shouted of Power, Power aroused, Power brooding, Power about to leap.

Even the most dreaming and wooly witted of the scholars felt it and so did those on the farms, for they came, family by family, to gather within Lormt's walls.

Ouen and I welcomed all within. Even old Pruett, the herbmater, did what he could to bring forth those gifts of nature which would do the most good in times of trouble. While Mistress Bethalie and Pyra stood together, a strange look lay upon them both, as if they strove to see what lay before us.

So did it come, first like a vast drawing, and I saw men and women sway as they stood, just as I felt within me the same pull. The ponies screamed as I have never heard their like do before and Rawit howled, to be answered by all the farm dogs. Then—

I lived through it as we all did. But never have I found words to describe what came. It was as if the very earth strove to rid itself of us and all we had planted on her back. No sun broke through the fallen darkness. Those clouds were blacker than any night, except that through them cut great jagged blades of lightning.

Someone caught my arm and by a lightning flash I saw it was Morfew.

"They do it again—they move the mountains!" He clung to me so closely that I caught his words.

Much has been told of the Witches and their power, but in those hours what they did was greater than any feat of their planning before. Literally did they move the southern mountains, and Pagar and his invaders were gone, even as much else went also. Forests fell and were swallowed up, birds and animals died, rivers were shaken from their beds to find other courses. It was the ending of the world through which we lived.

There came a bolt of lightning which cracked the sky above our heads and struck full upon one of the towers. From the foot of that followed so great an explosion of light as was blinding. We huddled on the ground and strove to see, fearing our sight had been rift from us. Yet when dim shadows appeared again it was to reveal a continued glow of blue light which centered now on two towers. Then those stones, which had been so firmly set, began to fall and we who could gain our feet pulled others away from the crumbling towers and walls.

It seemed that that time of destruction went on forever. But there came a moment as if some great beast which had used its claws to ravage our world was at length tired of the destruction it had wrought, and

the day cleared to a grey through which we looked once more on Lormt.

Perhaps, though the two towers were partly rubble and the wall which linked them only an unsteady mound, fortune had favored us. For no one had been killed and injuries were slight. Even the animals we had brought into the courtyard were safe.

There was something else—just as we had felt drawn by what we could not understand, so now were we all worn of strength. Those who dazedly found themselves alive moved only slowly. It was close to nightfall before we made our first discovery.

In their fall the towers, the walls, opened hidden places and rooms, crannies which had been sealed perhaps even at the first building were now visible. Our scholars went a little wild at what was displayed there. Forgetful of bruises, cuts, even hurts, which might have kept such old ones abed, they strove to climb tottering piles of rubble, to bring forth coffers, chests, sealed jars which stood as high as one's waist.

The rest of the ten days which followed was a strange time. From one of the remaining towers we could see that the Es had vanished from the course we knew. Trees in the forest leaned haphazardly one against the other. However, the houses which had been in the open were not greatly harmed.

That tower which had taken the first blow of all was split to its roots and I strove to keep the scholars away from it, for stones still rattled down into the depths. There was a dim glow there which flickered and grew less by the hour. Morfew joined me, wriggling out on his belly even as I to look down into the hollow.

"So the legend was right," he commented. "Smell that?"

There was dust in the air and a much stronger mustiness such as forever clung to the libraries. Still there was also another odor, sharp and acrid, which made us cough.

"Quan iron," Morfew said. "It is one of the old secrets. Yet I found one account last season which said that great balls of it were set at the foot of each tower and that is what was to keep Lormt from harm."

In a way it had, for we had been saved. However, we were careful of the unsteady piles of stone. After they had inspected their own homes many of the farm men came back and aided us, for the scholars had little strength and had to be discouraged from much they would do. In spite of my weakened leg I discovered that I could carry and push such as I would have thought I could not manage, as if some superior energy had come to me. So we were busied over many days, freeing the wealth of the hidden rooms and piling so much in the general hall that one could only follow narrow paths between.

On the third day I was heading for labor when Rawit whined and then her unhuman thought touched mine.

"Hurt—help—" She pointed her nose toward the ragged top of the second tower. There something moved. It flapped wildly back and forth and I saw it was a bird, caught by one foot so it could not right itself. Also one wing drooped while the other beat frantically.

To climb to that was dangerous, still I made the ascent testing each hand and foothold. The bird ceased its struggles and hung limp. Yet it was not dead, for I could just touch the edge of its thought and that was one of terror and helplessness. Thus I brought down at last a falcon, and no ordinary bird. This was a female of that same species whose males were the other selves of the Falconers, those dour fighters who

had held the mountains for so long. Managing to loose the foot was easy once I had reached the trapped bird, but caring for the damaged wing was a task beyond me and only Pyra's skill brought it back to partial use again.

Galerider (I learned her name early) was never to soar freely again but she became as much of a companion as Rawit. Though she mantled warningly at any other, she allowed me to handle her. She had been torn from her nesting place by a sucking wind and had no idea how far or from what direction she had been borne.

At length we settled into a new life. There were refugees who found their way to Lornt, but none stayed past the time when they had regained their energy. Many of the scholars had disappeared into their cubbies with the newfound knowledge, so intent that they had to be brought forth for meals or rest, so enchanted by their finds that they might have been ensorcelled as we are told men can be.

There came news. In that mighty task of turning, many of the Witches—nearly all of the Council—had been killed or so emptied of power that they were only husks in which a life flame burned feebly. One such as brought to us by a young woman who begged our aid. But there was nothing yet uncovered which could answer her need.

The Witches remaining no longer in command, we were told by the leader of a scout troop sent south to assess damages, Koris of Gorm was now declared leader. It was the scout captain also who brought news of Kemoc—saying that he with his brother had managed to free his sister and they had all disappeared.

If they fled toward the mountains—had they been caught up in the torture of the land? I often wondered that when I had time to think of anything except what was happening in Lornt. By chance I had become a keeper of bits of information about the present not the past, and wayfarers who came down the old road would ask concerning this kin, that holding, and the like. So I began to assemble records and my knowledge of clans and houses became known so that some came from a distance to see me and ask of their kin.

Then one came in a dream.

Parting a haze with a sweep of his arm as one might pass through a curtain Kemoc stood before me. There was surprise on his face but that faded and a smile took its place.

"Duratan!" His voice—did it touch my thought only, or did it ring in my ears? I could have sworn to neither. However, there was much he told me to add to my store of knowledge and be of greater aid to those who sought me out.

For he and his brother and sister had dared the east and found what they sought—the land from which our blood had first come. There was struggle there, for their own coming had unsteadied a balance of power. They now fought great evil and those who serve the Dark. Thus they wanted aid from any willing to give it—let such only travel east and they would find guidance.

When he had done he drew one hand down the haze against which he stood and said, "Look you here, shield mate, and you will know my words are true and you are not dreaming." He was gone and there was darkness, but that was the edge of waking and I opened my eyes.

Rawit was on her feet—her hind feet, her front paws against the wall—and she gave a sharp bark. But I had already seen it—a streak of blue running down the stone as if a finger had drawn it there.

Nor was that the last time that Kemoc sought me so, and what he had to tell me I kept record of. Twice I was able to tell seekers those they sought had gone over mountain to the east. It appeared that some ancient bond which had kept those of our race from thinking of that direction had been swept away. We heard tell of whole households—all kin together—gathering their possessions and setting out in that direction. Of each I made record.

So there was still war, though now largely of another kind. For the Dark which had slept or been sealed in Escore, as Kemoc said, stirred and awoke, not only within that land but elsewhere. Thus one of the tales I have to set down here was given me by Kemoc himself when he returned from a-voyaging into the unknown, though it was not his tale alone, and he but added somewhat to it before he gave it into my hands. Through it I learned of the sea—of which I knew little—and of dangers which might abide there.

--18 Port of Dead Ships (1991)--

by Andre Norton

It was in the month of Peryton and there was already the sharp bite of coming winter in the air. We had finished the last of the harvesting and I could turn once more to what had become my main interest in life, the work on my Chronicles of Lornt, when there came a party to us, even though Lornt lies even more afar from the road east than it did before the Turning.

The leader was Kemoc Tregarth, my former comrade-in-arms among the Borderers. He brought to me a valiant story, of a hunting of the Dark to the far south, which is as unknown to us as once was Escore of the east. Thus I speedily thereafter added this to my ever growing collection of tales concerning the lives of many after the great wars of the Turning. A little more we push back ignorance and bring forth the light of knowledge.

Chapter 1

The lead-dark sky was as gloomy as the age-encrusted thickness of walls in the west watchtower. There had been a heavy drizzle of rain all night and dawn had brought very little light. Nor did the two lamps in the room within do much to penetrate the general murk. The young man who had been sitting on the wide seat the wall provided under the window did not turn his head when he spoke but continued to stare at the bleak sky.

"Four within the four-month—" He could have been musing aloud. Then he added a question: "And before, what are your records?"

The tall man seated at the foot of the table shifted in his carven chair. "None such since the Kolder times. Oh, yes, we lost ships but never were they all in one part of the sea, nor did we have the floating proofs of evil then. There were six so lost and five of them discovered in the Year of the Winged Bull—my father's time. Osberic was intending to send out a search force—but then the Kolder took Gorm and we had other things to think on. Though I have sent to Lornt—to have the records searched. Your Chronicler, Lord Kemoc, has promised us a hearing and as soon as he can assemble what information is

there—"

"Lormt may have little knowledge concerning events of the sea. Though I agree if there is aught to be learned Duratan will dig it out. Do you have other legends of such happenings before the Kolder?"

The tall fair-haired man shrugged, spreading his hands apart in a gesture of not knowing. "Our records were in the Keep. When Osberic destroyed that, and an army of the Kolder slave-dead, what we should know now went also."

"It is always the same general part of the sea which seems to be thus cursed, your people say?" The woman wearing a long plain robe of a grey-blue leaned a little forward so the lamplight awoke sparks from a brooch at the neck of the robe and the girdle which held it close to her slender waist.

"Always to the south," the fair man assented. "We have established trade with the Vars and it is a good one. Look at this." He put out a hand to the stemmed goblet before him on the table, turning it a little. As had the gems the woman wore answered the light so did this produce a flicker of rainbow as it moved. The bowl top was a perfect oval but the support was formed of a branch of flowers, frosted stem and petal touched with a small beading of gold.

"Var work," he continued. "A toll of twelve of these brought back unchipped, sold at auction, and a ship need make but two runs a year. You have seen the fountain in the garden of the Unicorn. Bretwald brought that back— and on his next voyage he was ravaged by a Kolder raider. All his charts and knowledge—" The man shrugged again. "Gone. It was not until after the Kolder nest was broken once and for all that any of us ventured southward again. Yarn may not be the only port which it will pay a trader to visit. Now we have this: ships afloat, uninjured in any way we can see, yet deserted and with no sign left of what has happened to the crew. I say, and there are those who agree with me, that this is of Power—and evil Power at that. Or Kolder—"

The group gathered around the table all moved a fraction at that last word. Kemoc had turned his head at last to watch them. He who spoke was Sigmun of the Sulcars, a captain noted among his fellows for "lucky" voyages and who had served valiantly two springs back against the nest of pirates and wreckers who had set up a foul headquarters on islands off the southern border of Karsten. The woman at his right hand was the Lady Jaelithe, and that was a name to awaken many memories. A Witch who laid aside her dominion over Power to wed an out-worlder, the same man who now leaned back in his own chair, his half-hooded eyes on Sigmun: Lord Simon Tregarth. Though he wore no mail this day, yet there was that about him as always seeming that he might be summoned at trumpet call to reach for arms.

He who sat at the head of the table had had an extra cushion added to the seat to bring him to a level not too far below his guests. Koris of Gorm was now in all but name ruler of Estcarp. Beside him was the Lady Loyse, who had in her time wrought well in battle also.

The last at that board, beside the empty chair where Kemoc had been seated earlier— He watched her carefully now, perhaps trying to judge whether it was near the time when she must leave, reach the pool in the center walled garden five stories below and renew herself with the water there as her Krogan blood demanded. She caught her lord's anxious glance and the slightest shadow of a smile reassured him.

"The Council will do nothing." Koris was blunt. "They seek only to regain what they have lost—more of their kind, more of the Power which was torn from them at their turning of the mountains."

Sigmun laughed harshly. "Oh, aye, I was told that speedily when I asked for audience. But I say to you— there is evil loose to the south. And evil unchecked grows always stronger. If the

Kolder—perhaps a pocket of them who were afield when the nest was destroyed—are on the rise again..." The hand which had touched the goblet so delicately now curled into a fist.

Koris reached forward to smooth out again the thin sheet of parchment which covered a third of the table top. He ran a fingertip along the border of Karsten (an age-old enemy now fallen into chaos) tracing bays and indentations, the mouths of the river which drained, through tributaries, clear back to the base of the eastern mountains.

"So far we know." Sigmun watched that moving finger. "And for a space beyond." He drew his belt knife and leaned well forward to push its point even farther south. "This be wild coast and treacherous—also it seems uninhabited. There are no fishing boats to be seen, nothing shoreward to hint at any holding. Above Yarn, here"—he stabbed the line marking the shore where it became a scatter of dots and no firm line—"there are tricky shallows and reefs which might have been set up purposefully to catch the unwary. Reaching there we head out to the open sea. No one has mapped the coast. By all indications, Yarn is very old. Its people are not of Karsten, nor of any race we Sulcar have seen elsewhere. They do not like the sea—rather fear it—though why we do not know."

Kemoc stood up. "They fear the sea. And it is on the road to Yarn or near there that ships disappear. It would seem they have good reason to fear it. Have they no tales then—the kind which are told in taverns when a drinker forgets caution in speech?"

Sigmun grinned crookedly. "Oh, we thought of that also, Lord Kemoc. We think we Sulcars have hard heads and steady stomachs, but we have yet to see one of Vars blood in the least tipsy. Also they are a clannish people and they do not mix much with strangers. They are civil enough in their greetings and their trading, but they do not add aught to the bare words demanded by that."

"Kolder..." Lord Simon said that word as if it had seeped out of his thoughts. "There were rumors not long since that such as they linger still in Alizon, their old overseas ally. Yet this which you report does not fit their pattern of attack."

Lady Jaelithe shook her head. "Did you not say, Captain Sigmun, that ships were so lost before the Kolders moved upon us? No, I think here indeed lies a different puzzle."

"The question remains." It was Koris who spoke now. "What aid can we give you, Captain? Our forces are mainly for use ashore. Also, we still needs must watch Alizon with patrols. We have none except the Falconers who are trained to fight on both land and sea. And of them we cannot raise more than a company, for they have their own problems. They wish to establish a new Eyrie—in fact there is talk of one overseas. That is their affair and I do not think that they will be quick to answer any summons to fight an enemy unknown and unseen, save to those who have disappeared. I cannot strip my borders on such a slender evidence. The ships you command are wholly yours; Estcarp has but fishing boats and a small merchantman or two. So what do we have to offer?"

"True, all true," the caption answered promptly. "What I seek is knowledge." Now he looked directly at Lady Jaelithe. "I believe, and so do all those who have discussed this matter in our Sea Council, that some of this, perhaps all, is a matter of Power. If those of Estcarp will not aid us in this, then we must seek elsewhere. I have heard of what you have battled in Escore—can it not be true that in the far south, where we have not been, that land curls about to face the sea, giving easy coast-room to some of the Dark? What say you, my lady?" He tapped the parchment map again with knife point. The section which lay so there was blank except for a wriggle of line which might be part of an island, and more of the dots signifying the unknown.

She whom he had addressed leaned her head back against the high back of her chair, her eyes closed. All knew that though the Witches would not restore her jewel to her, the Lady Jaelithe had not lost what she could command before her wedding.

When her eyes opened again she looked beyond the table, and they sought the dark corner where I sat on a stool, watching this council as one might watch a harvest playlet. That I had any right there at all was a question which might well be asked.

"Destree m'Regnant—" She hailed me by a name, and maybe the old story was the truth—that when one's name was used in a matter of Power, one is captive to another's will. For I found myself walking to the table, all eyes upon me.

Sigmun's were hot, his lips tight, as if he kept words locked within him by great effort. In this company he was the one most likely to be my unfriend. The Sulcar have their own ways of Power but those deal only with the sea and perhaps a little with the weather. Also their few wisewomen are very proud of their calling and do not welcome outsiders any more than do the Witches. Of the others there I had no way of judging. Save I knew that in their own manner each of them had broken some pattern of their people and so were not mind-bound against the strange and new.

"M'lady." I gave her the traditional salute which went with her onetime rank, my head bowed above hands held palm to palm breast high.

To my surprise she returned that salute as if I were her equal. I found that a little daunting for I wanted none ever to believe that I was more than I truthfully claimed to be.

Orsya, of the water-dwelling Krogan, pushed her chair back a little, allowing me to approach the table closer. Once more Koris's hands went out smoothing flat the chart which lay there.

"What do you 'see'?" Lady Jaelithe asked sharply.

My hands were cold as the tremor which ran along my back. What if I failed now? True enough she had tested me alone and then it had been easy, not that I could or would ever claim that I had full command over this small power of mine. Now I drew a deep breath and leaned forward to place both hands palm down on the unfinished portion of the chart. I strove then to think of the sea, to paint in my mind the ever tumultuous waters, the birds which dipped and soared above, that other life which came and went below its surface.

Suddenly I could feel the touch of wave spume on my cheek, taste from the air the smart of salt, hear the never ending murmur of the waves. It was as if I trod well above the water, not soaring as a bird but rather as one who could walk some invisible layer of air.

I was searching out what lay to break that surface below. There were islands—as many of them as if some giant had seized up a handful of pebbles of all sizes and flung them out without care as to where they might fall.

Some were merely rocks hardly showing above the wash of the water. Others were larger. Yet there was nothing growing on them—nothing but rocks on which lay sea things now dead and stinking, as if these islands had been spewed forth by the sea itself.

Not too far away there was a sullen fire in the sky. I willed myself again and toward that I went. There was molten rock spilling down the sides of a cone, lapping out into the water which boiled with its heat.

Besides all this I "saw" something else—an unnatural threat which was being torn and rent by some process of its own formation. That which I touched ever so slightly was formless but it was apart from what I watched. There was the feeling of birth here, of a purpose. And that purpose held no natural cause in what it wrought. It was something so alien to me that I could not even set name to it. Yet I also knew that it was a threat to all which I looked upon—even the restless and heated sea itself.

I was back again in the tower chamber and I looked only to Lady Jaelithe.

"You saw?"

She inclined her head.

"You felt?"

"I felt," she answered.

I lifted my hands from the parchment. Suddenly I was weak, tired, I may have even wavered as I stood, for Orsya's hold tightened on my arm as she guided me into Lord Kemoc's empty chair.

It was the Lady Jaelithe who had pulled the Var goblet to her and poured into it a measure of wine from the flagon near to hand. She pushed that towards me. I was fearful of lifting that treasure, it might so easily shatter in my unsteady hands. Then someone else took it up and held it to my lips so that I could drink. The wine allayed my sudden thirst, warmed me, for I was chilled as I always was when I used my gift.

"There are newborn islands." It was Lady Jaelithe who answered their unvoiced questions. "Also there is a volcano sprung from the sea depths—

"That we have seen at times," Sigmun put in as she paused.

"Also—there is something else—there is unknown purpose!"

For a moment there was silence and then it was Sigmun who spoke and I was not too exhausted to see that his hot and angry eyes measured me. I had been brought here despite his protests and to him this use of my talent must cut like the lash of a length of broken rigging.

"Lady, does one trust a faulty star course?"

"Destree"—she stretched her hand across the table and I reached out mine to hers, to have her warm fingers close and hold firmly—"has seen and I followed that seeing. Do you then agree with those late companions of mine that my gift is now worthless?"

He flushed, but I knew there was no softening towards me, nor would there ever be. I was weary of the dread and suspicion which might always follow me.

Sigmun's lips parted as if he would voice further condemnation but it would seem that he thought better of that. It was Lord Simon who brushed this aside as one who would keep directly to the point of the matter.

"What purpose? Who can control enough Power to bring to life a volcano?"

"Who controls enough for the churning of mountains?" Koris asked grimly. "And that we have seen in our own time and place."

"Witches—farther south?" Captain Sigmun seemed to bite upon that as one would bite upon the tartness of an unripe fruit.

Kemoc had come to stand behind his lady's chair, his hands resting on her shoulders. "We have met in Escore," he said, "one adept to whom our Witches would be as untaught apprentices. And he was not the only one of his kind in the days when those fought together for dominion. We do not know who or what lies to the south. But I say this, we shall have to discover and that speedily. If men disappear and ships act strangely, there is purpose enough to learn. However, the Lord Koris was right when he said that we have no forces to send unknowing of how they must be used. As it is on the land, so it must be by sea—there must be scouts sent out."

Captain Sigmun nodded vigorously. "That is so, and with them someone who has the gift. Volcanoes and new islands, those we can understand, but if they are born by the will of someone or something—then I say we must have aid of Power to make sure."

I think we all looked to the Lady Jaelithe now, for certainly she was first among us when it came to considering the uses of Power.

"That is a matter to be thought on," she returned.

"And by the fifth hour—" Lord Koris had begun when Lord Kemoc moved, sweeping his lady up in his arms. She had gone even paler and her breath was light and fluttering. Without a word he hurried towards the entrance to the tower room and we knew that her Krogan heritage demanded the water that was theirs since their race had first come into being at the interference by some adept with nature's laws. Perhaps the very appearance of a Krogan among us was an argument that Power could call fire and molten rock out of the sea.

Captain Sigmun stood and said that he had to meet with three of the Sulcar commanders. It seemed that the company took that as a signal to break up. But Lady Jaelithe remained where she was, though Lord Simon and Koris had gone out, my hand still clasped in hers.

"What story is yours?" she asked in a low voice which was perhaps for my ears alone.

I looked away from her eyes and studied the goblet from Yarn for a long moment before I answered.

"You named me fully, my lady. Have you not also heard where my shame lies? I am only half of the House of Regnant—who my father was not even my mother could say before she died at my birthing. The ship on which her clan sailed was tolled ashore by wreckers—"

I had half forgotten the Lady Loyse, but now she moved and asked sharply:

"Off Verlane?"

"Not so." I shook my head. "It was across seas. There was a nest of pirates who boarded or wrecked many vessels. Those of the men who got ashore had the sword put to them, the women—' I was silent for a moment and they understood me well, I could feel it. "The Sulcars sent three ships against that hold and they had with them a true seer and a force of Falconers. They found my mother in a place

of—of—the Dark—the real Dark. She had been given to— My lady, she could not even tell what had befallen her in that place except that she had been the plaything of something that wrecker lord would placate and be friends with, so she, and others before her, had been the price.

"She was—mindless. It would have been well for her if they had had pity and cut her down instead of bringing her back. But Wodan's Fayre was her betrothed and he had led the breaking of that nest. He would bring her back and see if she could be healed.

"There was a healer in Quayth then, one of the Old Blood of Arvon. And my mother was taken to her. But she would not aid—she said that my mother had been overshadowed by evil and that she who had been Wodan's betrothed was gone, what was left was only a living husk. But he did not believe and arranged that she be taken to an island that he had knowledge of and there be tended by his sister and her maid-sister. They did so until I was born. Then she, who had at least worn my mother's body like a cloak, died and I lived. Only since then, Lady, there is no trust among the Sulcars for me. My gift came early, when I was just able to talk. I farsaw and I foresaw—until I realized that it was not a gift but a doom— for my foreseeing placed ill on people who asked it of me and never good.

"Last year Sigmun's blood brother became foolish from much drink at a tavern in Es City and he saw that I was also there, for I had come to ask of the Witches whether it be true that I was of some Dark blood. This is truth: if I forsee for myself, and sometimes that seems forced upon me and I cannot deny it, I profit but others pay hard for my gain. This Ewend caught me in my chamber, having seen where I went, and he said that there was one way to lay a Witch and this he would do and I might thank him for it. But when he laid hands on me—I foresaw and that I cried aloud. And he was afear'd for I spoke of a thing he believed very secret. So he loosed me, for I added to that seeing my only weapon, the threat that I would forsee a death of dread for him and that would come to pass.

"After he had let me go, while he was still muzzy-headed from what he had drunk so deeply, he was found by Sigmun, who had been hunting him. And he told Sigmun what death I had threatened. And, Lady, believe me in truth, I had not cursed him, nor built any spell against him, but within a month that very death came to him.

"Sigmun believes that I can kill with my tongue and my thought. Those of his clan fear and hate me. Yet he brought me here for I think he believes that if there is work of the Dark within this trouble then I, who am of the Dark, can perhaps be used as a weapon or an unwilling hostage. His people fear spells, except those of their healing women, and some to do with wind and wave. They believe that a man can be ill wished and that is why I still live, I think, for they believe I could leave some curse behind me which would pay in horror what they had done in blood."

"And you," asked the Lady Jaelithe, "what do you believe? That you were fathered by something of the Dark and so a danger to all those of the Light?"

I rubbed my hand across my forehead as if I would erase so the pain which gnawed at me, always did so after I had used my talent.

"Lady Jaelithe, I know not what to believe. This much I know—in the Dales of High Hallack there be many places of the Old Ones—some for good and some for evil. It is said that the evil cannot be welcomed by the good. When I was a maid just taking on womanhood I went to one of the places of Gunnora, she who all say is a friend to womanhood and truly for all good. I entered in, nor did any force of assault on my body or my mind drive me forth. I asked there that I be let to know what I am—that if I be evil let me be brave enough to turn steel against myself—that if I be good I be sent some sign that that was true.

"This came to me, falling from above, whence I could not see, coming straightly into the hands I held out." I groped beneath the shirt latching at my throat and brought out that which never since had left me, a stone smooth and cool to the touch, with worn lines upon it which I had never been able to see clearly. For, when I stared at them or strove to copy them onto parchment, they seemed to slide and move. The pebble was the color of ripened grain and bore a drilled hole near the top so that it was easy to string it upon a wearing cord.

The Lady Jaelithe looked upon it and then, as if she was drawn into that gesture from a force she could not resist, she held out a finger, not quite touching its surface.

There was a sharp exclamation from the Lady Loyse, for there was a spark of light which shot between flesh and stone. The Lady Jaelithe was still, very still for a long time—or what seemed so to me. Then she said:

"Be at rest in your heart, for none who are tainted within can wear that. And I think that this is a promise that there will come a time, Destree, when you shall surely know... much."

Chapter 2

What more assurance she might have given me I was not to know for there was a shout below and a messenger came running up to our council room so fast that he near stumbled flatfaced before us. What he had to give was a summons and we three followed him down into the courtyard. There stood a horse lathered from hard riding. He who had pushed the beast so was speaking to Lord Simon while Captain Sigmun came at a swift stride back to join us.

"... strange ship—unlike any we have ever seen! Harwic of the *Wave Skimmer* has brought it in. There were none aboard..."

"By the barge we go quicker—there are enough to man the oars!" Sigmun caught at the messenger's shoulder. "When did they come to port?"

"At dawn, Captain," the messenger, who was plainly Sulcar, answered promptly. "I have changed mounts twice—"

"To the barge is right." Lord Koris gave the order. "The crew is already gathered there. I planned to have gone upstream to the second watchtower."

Thus we speedily found ourselves afloat, for no one gainsaid any who had been in that upper chamber against going. Even Lord Simon, Kemoc and the captain took oars as we pulled out from the wharf. Lord Koris was at the tiller and set our course. For the moment it was a tricky one, for Es River is a highway in itself and many use it, both for traveling, and for the carriage of goods. Between the city and the coast it is always crowded and we swept past many a deep-loaded barge, they pulling aside in haste to give us clear voyaging as the messenger sounded a warn horn from the bow. Our own small vessel was crowded, since we had shipped a double quota of oarsmen, they trading places at intervals.

Even so it was past twilight, well into the deeper shadow of night, when the coast wind came to promise that we were near our journey's end. There was the gleam of torchlight gilding the water ahead as we closed in upon the landing for the official barge.

During that time there had been little said among us. We might all have possessed the farsee talent and been hard at labor marking out what lay ahead. Yet if that were so, none spoke of what they viewed.

From the water's edge we went straight to the small keep which was the place of the port governor. Him we found in the lower hall seated before a table which was piled high with rolls of parchment, cups used, some still half full, and plates which bore crumbs and smears of hasty meals. When he saw Lord Simon and Koris, who were to the fore of our party, he hastily got to his feet, his sword clanging against a metal flagon which he inadvertently swept from the board.

His hand lifted in a quick salute and he called over his shoulder for servants to clear the table, though he kept his hand in guardianship over the rolls. They brought up chairs from the darker corners of the room for the Tregarths and Koris. But the rest of us, save Sigmund, who remained standing, were satisfied with two benches. One I shared with the Lady Loyse and the other seated Kemoc and his lady, who, though he still kept a supporting arm about her, looked well and alert again.

"The ship?" demanded Lord Simon without delay.

"It is anchored off Gorm, my lord."

"Soooo." It was a long-drawn word, almost a hiss.

Gorm was a place of the dead, the small party of guard who drew that duty (it was always left to chance drawing by the leaders of squads) never stayed there more than a tenth day. And they kept away from the heart of the doomed and long-dead Sippar (a city which once had outrivalled Es City itself in wealth and inhabitants), taking position only in the tower by the seawall.

A place accursed was Gorm, where the dead-yet-walking hordes of the Kolder were finally released from the hideous spell laid upon them and the power of their captors broken in the east. No ship willing went to anchor in what had been the prime harbor in the old days. That Harwic had so left his find there suggested that there was good reason not to bring it closer to a cleaner portion of the land.

"A large ship, my lords. But it has no sails, nor any sign of there ever having been a mast raised above deck—"

"Kolder?" Lord Simon interrupted.

"If Kolder, then unlike their other ships such as we have representatives of," replied the port officer. He thumped the rolls he had been consulting and Koris drew the nearest from under his fingers, pulling it out to its full extent.

Though to my view it was upside down I could see the drawing very boldly painted there and recognized it from cruder pictures I had seen copied among the charts of Sulcar seamen. This ovoid form which seemed to be entirely without any superstructure, more like a queerly shaped bladder blown and sealed, had traveled under water, as ready as any native killer of the sea to lurk below the surface in its hunt for victims.

The same servants who had cleared the table so deftly at command returned with trays bearing plates and goblets and these were shared out among us. I had not realized that hunger had made a hollow within me until I looked at the bread and cheese, the pannikin of well-baked fish pudding on the plate I balanced on my knees. We ate and drank in haste as ones who are at siege and must speedily return to

their posts. Yet it was tasty and I licked the spoon from which I had eaten the pudding. The crumbs left on my plate were very few indeed.

I nursed my goblet after taking only a sip. This was the wine of sea port, potent stuff, and perhaps befuddling to one not used to it. Nor did the Lady Loyse drink deeply, though like me she cleaned her plate.

"This Captain Harwic, what story does he have for us?" asked Koris.

"He has been sent for, my lords. You may listen and judge for yourselves what unknown thing has been brought to mystify us." The port officer had never ceased to frown since we had entered and I believed that he indeed considered that Es Bay might well be threatened by what was now at anchor in it.

"This he brought to me—" The officer now pushed something across the table into the fuller light of the lanterns which now shown clearly, for it would seem that this defense tower was not equipped with those everburning moonlike lights which studded walls of most of the old part of Es City. "This," he repeated, and pulled back his hand more quickly as if he found even the touch of the thing in some way dangerous.

It looked to be a box, but inset in the lid was a round disc of glass—fully transparent—and below that was a dial which bore strange markings. There was a needle suspended so it trembled over that dial, and it swung easily as Lord Simon took up the find. I saw his face become set and he beat a tattoo on the side of the box as if striving to move that arrow. Though it quivered, it did not shift.

His lips formed words which he did not share with us and he arose so suddenly from his seat that his goblet overturned and the dark river of wine would have smeared over the edge of the parchments had not the officer snatched them away.

"This was found on board the ship?" There was an incredulous note in Lord Simon's voice.

"So Captain Harwic said."

We were all staring for it was plain that the box had delivered some shock and it must have been a mighty one to so affect this man noted for his many forays against the Kolder and the ancient evils of Escore. For shaken he plainly was.

He put the box down with care, almost as if he had held something which might spout fire, as had the mountain from the sea in my farseeing. If he were going to explain what he found so overpowering he did not have time before another Sulcar wearing both a mail shirt and the winged helm of a ship's captain came in, pausing by the door until the port officer waved him forward.

"This is Captain Harwic," the port officer named him.

He was older than Sigmun. I had heard of him, that he was one of those born with a very restless spirit, to whom the finding of new sea paths was more needful than the trading with any people he might encounter on unknown shores. Yet that he could do also, as stories of his unusual cargoes were well known, encouraging others to try for such. He was what was known to his fellows as a "lucky captain" and those who berthed on his ship were envied.

Now he sketched a salute as his eyes swept from one to another of our company. I believe that they mirrored that chill which I expected from his people when they touched me.

"You have brought in a ship." Lord Simon stood with his fingertips just touching the box which had amazed him so, as if to make sure that it really lay there before him. "One," he continued, "which is a craft strange to you."

"Very strange, my lord. And I have been north to the Islands of Ever Ice and south past any chart we know."

Lord Koris looked up to him. "Kolder?"

For an instant or two Captain Harwic hesitated. Then he spoke with careful slowness as if he were not certain himself. "It is unlike the Kolder ships which were seen at the taking of Gorm. This one was not meant to ride beneath the waves, but with them. Yet how it could sail at all I do not see—there are no masts... and never were, by the look of the deck. And there are no oars, also it was not designed for rowers. The Kolder ships moved by their magic, perhaps this does likewise. Yet it was a derelict, floating unmanned and answering to no tiller when we found her."

"And there was no one on board?" Lord Simon asked.

"No one, my lord. Still two lifeboats swung on the deck. Yet it would seem when we searched her that those who had been there had been called away by a sudden order. There was dried and rotted food set out on a table, and the bunks had been slept in. Also in the place where the captain must have been there were charts out which we had never seen the like of, two cups had stood there but had rolled and spilled across the charts. And that"—he pointed to the box before Lord Simon—"was on the floor skidding back and forth with the roll of the vessel."

"What was the cargo?" The Lady Jaelithe spoke for the first time.

"Bales of something which had once been a plant of sorts, my lady. That was swelled by the water which must have come through the hatch in some storm. It was rotted and without value. Nor did it look as if it had been grain."

"And where did you find her?" Lord Simon cut in.

"South, my lord. We were well south of the Point of the Hound. There hit a storm out of the northwest and that carried us well past waters which we knew. When we were left afloat after the fury of that subsided, we took a star sighting and tried for a shore. But there were reefs and islands and those we dared not venture among with the *Wave Skimmer*. We put out the longboat and Simot, my first officer, took four men, two of them Falconers, and they oared towards the islands which were large enough for a landing. The falcons were loosed, but the birds reported nothing but the bare rock. Not even lichen seemed to grow there.

"That night there came a distant roaring and there was fire in the sky. The like of that my father had once seen and the story he told very often. It must have been fiery rock from beneath the sea, shooting up. So we took sail away from there, for who knew where that troubled rock might rise next?"

"It was midday as we sailed westward that we saw the ship. We lifted signals but there was no answer. Then he who commands the Falconers sent his bird to spy closer for it looked very strange. When the bird reported none on board we closed and took her in tow. Though that was difficult. We have found derelicts before but they have been Sulcar, and once or twice a round-bellied merchant coaster from Karsten too far out from their usual coastwise sailing. Never have I heard that any have brought into port what we have."

"It seems, Lord Simon, that you have seen that before." The port officer pointed to the box.

"Not an exact match to this, but like it, yes. It is a compass."

"And that, my lord?"

"A direction finder of sorts. This needle"—he tapped the bubble glass under which that lay—"is supposed to point always to the north—thus one can keep a path. At sea such were always..." He hesitated for a moment, looking to the Lady Jaelithe before he continued. "This all of Estcarp and Escore knows—I am not of this world by birth but have won through one of the gates. This is something which my own time and place knows. And if so—" Again he fell silent; it was Kemoc who finished for him.

"Thus this derelict can be from another time-place? Can there be gates on the sea also? If so—what can win through them? The Kolder was an evil which near finished Estcarp in their time. Must we fear that some new disaster may come from the sea?"

"We can only learn though what has been found," Lady Jaelithe said. "And what the Power can tell us. Perhaps there are answers for us aboard that ship."

"We shall see." Lord Simon's expression was grim and now he gave a push to that which he called a compass, sending it out from under his hand. "The sooner, the better!"

Though the night was dark enough, our way was lit down to the quay by lanterns so that most of the shadows retreated to the farthest reaches. Captain Harwic had a ship's boat waiting and we all crowded into that. He gave the order quickly and we were shoved away from the quay, heading out into the dark of the bay. I had thought that we must return in his own vessel and that would be worked out towards brooding and damned Gorm. But instead his men plied oars and we pulled apart from the last of the anchored ships, heading on toward the full darkness since it was a moonless night.

I thought of Gorm and what it meant to those who were chosen by lots to garrison the watchtower there. The streets where the dead had walked under the control of the Kolder lie forever deserted, still the horror of what happened in Sippar, the great port, must remain always in memory. It had been more than a generation ago that Lord Simon and his following had fought the great battle there—and I knew that the Council had sent Witches with Power for cleansing. Yet it was still a place deserted and accursed.

Lord Koris should rule there by right of birth. He had been a self-exiled one when Sippar fell. Did he have any inner ties now to a place so blackened by the terror and despair of utter evil?

I saw by the dim light of the boat lantern at our prow a white hand move and touch upon a shoulder. Lord Koris—the Lady Loyse—both had been deprived of their birthright, yet it would seem to all whoever saw them together they had made their own kingdom of inner faith and strength.

On the still-distant island I saw the spinning beam of the great light, its sweep from side to side across the sea entrance to the bay. We had that for a guide and our men were quick and strong. It was not long before I picked up the wink of much smaller lights, those which must mark one of the great quays to provide landing beacons for anyone coming to Gorm.

It was towards those that we were making our way now. Beside me Captain Sigmun stirred. That we shared seating had come by chance and I knew that he was finding that an unhappy fortune. Only now I was better aware of something else.

That stone which I believed was a gift to me in Gunnora's shrine was warming against my skin. Such had chanced once or twice before. Power—remnants of Power—must still lie ahead. I raised my hand to press over the stone where it lay beneath my shirt. I wore Sulcar dress which afforded freedom from the long skirts and robes-of-state one sees in Estcarp. And because, except for my eyes, I looked Sulcar, my otherness was seldom apparent to those who had not heard the whisperings which followed in my wake when I went among the people who would not own me.

The short, loose breeches were an aid when we came at last to the quay in the dead city. I swung ashore with ease which matched that of Orsya, whose tight-fitting, glittering, short tunic was like scales, and truly I believed was fashioned from the skin of some large aquatic creature. She stood beside me looking towards the dark lump-mass of the city. Then she wheeled and faced the sea.

"This is a place of the Dark," she said. "I—" Her hands went to cover her ears, pressing tightly on either side of her head. Kemoc swung up beside her.

"It is well—!" I caught his thought and swiftly raised barrier, for never did I read unless that was asked of me.

Lord Simon might have some of the Power, bred in him in that other world from which he came. And Lady Jaelithe was surely Witch. Two of their three children were gifted in spite of sex and nontraining. All knew that Kaththea was a Witch in all but formal acceptance, and, as for Kemoc—he had dared to summon that which had not been called upon since the beginning of time of Estcarp itself and had not only survived but been answered for the aid of others. Warlock he was named, though he did not use regularly the gifts. While his brother, Kyllan, who had been named "warrior" at their triple birth, had mind send and some forewarning to draw upon, but his skills lay mainly in the meeting of battle.

The quay on which we stood was cracked and in one place part fallen from its support to be awash by waves. Not too far ahead there were two lanterns set and between them a ladder hung against the side of a ship. Lord Simon's stride lengthened and his pace was close to a run. While the Lady Jaelithe, wearing the riding dress which gave her more freedom, was quick to catch up with him.

He stood, his hands on his hips, his head turning slowly from right to left as he studied what was visible of the derelict in this light. The craft was large—near the length of a smaller Sulcar vessel—and I wondered at the skill and labor which had been expended to bring it to anchor here. There were two decks—the smaller upper one having a forward section placed higher still. Toward the stern behind this there were two lifeboats still snug set as Harwic had reported.

Lord Simon paced down the quay beside the ship. There were portholes but they were dark, dead eyes and no one could see through to what lay behind. As if the rest of us were invisible he caught at the ladder to climb to the deck. There was a lantern aloft there which gave some light.

Still without speaking he caught that up and a moment later disappeared into the cabin. The rest of us followed more slowly. Indeed this ship had never been meant to sail after the fashion of those of Sulcars. No mast had been ripped out by a storm; there was no place to set such.

Beside the door where Lord Simon had vanished more ladderlike steps led up to the smaller top deck. Sigmun and Harwic went in that direction. The rest of us followed Lord Simon. Here was a long cabin first which had portholes like windows on the sides. Ahead was a table set for four, wooden partitions marking out each place so that the plates and cups there would not slide to the floor during any attack of storm.

These showed remnants of a meal which certainly had not been finished, judging by the amount of food dried and rotted on the plates. We went on to visit other cabins. The walls were of well-rubbed wood, a rich red-brown. In two of the smaller spaces undoubtedly meant for private sleeping quarters, there were brightly colored garments on the bunks, which more resembled beds, and such things about which suggested women had been quartered here. Yet there was not any untoward chaos which would mark looting by pirates. In fact, Lady Loyse picked up a necklet of shining stones as rich as any worn for court in Alizon, where they flaunt their wealth. It was simply that the owner had gone as if for a moment of time only.

Back in the largest cabin at last, Lord Simon caught up with an exclamation something lying on the padded seat along the wall. It was certainly not a reading roll nor one of the rare books made by fastening separate strips of writing material into a common back made of carven wood or engraved metal. This was back-fastened right enough, but the strips were larger and seeming of a lighter material than any parchment.

Yet looking over Lord Simon's shoulder as he flipped this apart, glancing at each square as he turned, I thought that the markings there—though totally foreign to any script I had seen, must be runes of a kind. There was a picture of a woman dressed in strange garment which hardly covered even a quarter of her body. The clothing—if it could be called so—was a vivid red. Her hair was long, tossing free about her shoulders with no constraining ribbon or net. And she was lying belly down, her legs stretched out, her body resting on sand except for her head and shoulders, as her arms held her so. While behind her was a stretch of blue which might be meant to suggest water and out on that was just such a ship as the one we had boarded, water curling back on either side from the bow as if a knife blade were cutting through the waves!

Lord Simon snapped the reading record shut and studied the cover. Here was another picture, also of a woman, smiling—her hair, cut very short, was as black as that of the Old Race, but she certainly was not of Estcarp, and the robe she wore left her shoulders bare though she had jewels at her ears and her throat.

With his finger Lord Simon was tracing a line of what surely must be runes above the picture and suddenly he dropped the book to stare at his own hands.

"Simon—!" Lady Jaelithe set her hand upon his nearer wrist and was looking into his face with concern.

He started, as might a man awakened out of an absorbing dream, or one who was farseeing. Perhaps the latter was the truth for he said, as if speaking some unbelievable thought aloud:

"Fifty years! But it cannot be fifty years!" Still he looked down at the hand where his lady's fingers had slipped to grip his. The skin was brownly weathered but taut. Into my mind came then—perhaps his thought reached us all—that he expected to see grooved in his own flesh the signs of great age.

It is well known that the Old Race do not show marks of age (and they live longer than many other peoples of our world) which are common to those other races until just before they die. Yet the Lord Simon was off-time as all knew and it seemed he expected to be otherwise.

"This ship, Simon, is it true that it—

"Of my own time and place?" he asked harshly. "Yes— of my own place—not my time. It seems that the latter moves faster elsewhere. A gate—in the sea?"

"Perhaps," she answered him. "But one which would take a ship without the crew? That I think is another matter."

Chapter 3

I had slept during the latter part of the night after we returned to the port tower. Our quarters were not equal to those of the citadel at Es, but they were better than many I had known in my wandering life. If I dreamed, no warning from that carried over into the daylight. A patch of sun stamped on the stone floor a little away from the small bed told me that the hour was indeed late.

There was a washing place off the sparsely furnished room and I made use of what that offered, standing when I was through to look into a mirror of polished metal on the wall. In my mind there had flashed memory of that picture on the cover of the book Lord Simon had brought back with him into our quarters.

My fair hair, bleached even lighter by the summer sun, had been chopped off at shoulder level—for I found the long braids a woman must care for a hindrance. My skin was also colored by summer heat a brown which met the white of my body usually covered to form a definite line. I had the high cheekbones of the Sulcar also, but my chin was not so square and my mouth was certainly too large to give me any claim to even good looks, let alone equal comparison to most of the women I had seen.

It was my eyes which proclaimed the most sharply my alien status among the people whose blood I half shared. Where theirs were blue or in some cases green, mine were overlarge and of the color of well-forged steel. Being browed and lashed with black instead of that color which crowned my skull, those eyes appeared doubly prominent in my face, and, I thought, showed as chill as those floating hillocks of ice which could be often sighted in the far northern sea.

I held up my hair with my hands, straining it back so I could see what I might look like if I were shown as that pictured woman. The effect was in no way flattering and I went in to clothe myself thinking again that indeed I was not particularly favored by fate, physically as well as with those gifts which had done me more harm than good.

My hands sought Gunnora's talisman, which I settled carefully into place between my small breasts, I not being endowed in that direction either. It had been warm last night, but now it was cool and I latched my shirt high. There was a tap at the door of my chamber and I hurriedly went to answer the summons. The Lady Loyse stood there. She was small, making me feel suddenly too large and clumsy.

"Destree, we meet again. Jaelithe has something she wishes to ask of you. Also they have brought in the morning food." She smiled.

It was something I had thought about much since I had been so drawn into this circle of old friends and kin. It had been the Lady Jaelithe who had had me summoned to the first meeting back in Es City. These famed ones who had wrought in their own ways—Jaelithe, Loyse, and Orsya—to bring peace into places of the utter Dark had accepted me without question, spoke to me as if I were almost bloodkin, or at least a battle comrade from another time. It had been that feeling of trust which had led me to tell the Lady Jaelithe of my beginnings, and the

Lady Loyse had heard those same words. Yet she had not turned from me, jerking away her robe

where it touched my sea boots as if evil could be scraped by such an encounter.

This acceptance was so new, and because of the past, I could not wholly accept it. What did I possess that these could use that they spoke me so fair and came to call me in person to a meal when a servant could well have been sent? I kept my thoughts veiled, yet they added to that cloak of depression which I had worn so long it had become a very familiar garment.

"It is a good day," Loyse said. She paused by one larger inner window which gave upon the center court of the keep. There was a plot of flowers that seemed out of place guarded by such massive stone walls. But we could look down to three benches set near together, well away from those walls as if any who so gathered had some uneasiness about being overheard—as if the walls might sprout ears. Save for Sigmun I saw that those who had come from Es on that call the night before were helping themselves to food from a table set on wheels.

We joined them speedily and they all gave me matter-of-fact greeting as if indeed I were a longtime comrade in some action of importance. Lord Simon sat drinking from a cup but his eyes were elsewhere, upon what rested on his knees: the book from the strange ship. But he looked up as Orsya put out her hand to summon me to a seat beside her. Kemoc sat cross-legged at her feet, watching his father with compelling intensity, as if he would force some information out of him by eye power alone.

It was the Lady Jaelithe who put down her own cup to look directly at me. I was instantly alerted. Now it was to come—what they wanted from me.

"You have farsight—and foresight—"

"Foresight," I returned quickly and perhaps more sharply than I should have done, "I will not use—"

I saw both Lord Simon and Kemoc shaken out of their own preoccupation to look at me. But the Lady Jaelithe was continuing. "Have you also the talent of finding the origin of something from afar? That talent is often tied with the seeing."

I was silent with surprise. In my years of roving— though those had not been too many—I had never tried to set my gift working in that direction. Now that she spoke of it I had memory of small flashes of knowledge about people and things which had seemed to just coast into my mind when I took belongings into my hands. Yet I had always believed that that was merely my sensitivity to being more or less outcast and caused by my imagination, not any talent.

"Take this." Lady Jaelithe drew the alien book from her lord and actually thrust it at me with such a sharpness in her voice that it might have been an order she did not intend to have refused.

The book was very smooth to the touch and I found myself running my fingertips, as it rested on my own knees, back and forth across those lines of runes. They were neither incised nor standing above the surface as a touch on parchment might have found writing as I knew to be. In some way they were a part of the surface on which they appeared.

There was a stirring, not quite like the call to the seings I knew so well, but of another kind. I closed my eyes and strove to open a mind door I had not been entirely aware I possessed.

There was a storm, such as even the most canny Sulcar sailing master would find difficult to fight for the life of his vessel. Also there was fear—so overpowering and wild a fear as ran close to the borderline of sanity. I crouched in the large cabin of that strange ship. Foul sickness arose in my throat. I could see

another shadow—for the lights in the cabin had failed—and knew it.

"Miggy." I mouthed a name but I could not hear my own voice, so savage was the storm. It had seemed to spring out of nowhere.

"Jim!" Again a name, and, with that, came an even greater gust of fear if such was possible. Jim was gone—he had been licked into the sea as if a wave was a giant tongue lifting him up to gulp down.

Before the storm—I strove to reach that—what had 'happened before the storm? Somehow I managed to force memory to reply. There was sun, hot on a reach of sand. 'And a short quay to which there were several of the alien ships tied up. Miggy and Jim—they had been whispering together. There was some act which had a danger of its own. Yet danger made it interesting. It had to do with a 'boat—a boat and, out at sea, a bigger ship from which 'something would be transferred. That was the secret, one 'which was the source of danger. Still that danger was a lure. Now I saw the interior of the cabin—there were (four people there. They were not uniform in appearance :as were the Old Race and the Sulcars, carrying their kinship on their faces for all to see. She whom I knew for 'Miggy (and what manner of name was that?) had red hair. "While Jim's was brown, with silver patches about his ears, :and cut short, as was Miggy's also. But the other woman sat combing hers, which was streaked weirdly with several strands of silver through black. And the second man, seated by her, wais burnt very brown, while his close-cropped hair was in the beginnings of curls against the scalp.

They were arguing but I could not hear what they said, only feel tension in the air—it was about the danger. "Then—

Once more I was back in the storm, the ship in wild swing. There burst outside the ports, from the rims of "which water trickled now and then to wash the decking, a lash of light which blinded. There was nothingness, then—

I opened my eyes to find that all the party was looking to me. Slowly and trying as hard as I could about details, I recited what I had learned. If *I had* learned it and it was not born of some imaginative feat of my own. At that moment I could not be sure of anything, for I was spent. If I moved my head it seemed the whole courtyard took on the dizzying sway of the ship storm-tossed.

"The gate." Loyse spoke first when I had finished. "How did they get through the gate? How can there be a gate in the open sea?"

I shook my head very gingerly, afraid to bring on an attack of vertigo. "The storm—and before that the beach— There was no more."

Lady Jaelithe reached over and took the book from my now-slack hold.

"They sensed danger, these whom you saw. What danger was it? Perhaps the gate—"

"No." That much I could answer. "It was something to do with another ship at sea. A much larger one, I think."

"Sand and sea and many ships tied at a wharf," Lord Simon said slowly, then he caught at the book and went flipping through its queer pages in a hurry. He had found another picture and held it for me to see. "There were trees like this to be seen?"

The one he pointed out had a long bare trunk, its branches all at the top, wide leaves made of many

tapering strips set together.

"I saw no tree."

For a moment he looked as one who had thought he had found a thing of value only to discover it was worthless.

"You knew of such a place in your own world?" Lady Jaelithe asked.

"Yes. Also there was a place in the sea which had strange legends of disappearing ships—legends which had been known for centuries. A sea..." he said musingly.

Kemoc added a question. "But if a ship comes through, where is the crew? We know well the gates—have we not had personal knowledge of them? But always it was that people came—alone."

"It remains," for the first time Lord Koris spoke, "that of this we must know more. Do we want another invasion from such as Kolder? Let us make sure as soon as we can of what chances in the south that such ships as that can appear there. The Sulcar will support such a venture, since they believe that they will be the first threatened as they have already been. What of their ships found derelict without crews? Can it be that perhaps the gate opens also the other way, dropping Sulcars into your world, Simon?"

"Who knows what has happened. But as you have said—we must learn what we can. And to learn that we need ships willing to sail south, though what perils await there who can say?"

I think that all there would have volunteered for such a voyage but there were still duty to hold a man. Lord Koris had taken the rule of Estcarp, and for him that remained the fact he could not deny. In the end there were five of us—Lord Simon, the Lady Jaelithe, Kemoc and Orsya, and I—because in me something said, This you must do. Though I believe that the Sulcars, had it not been for those I was to company with, would have refused me on board. Legend grows greater than action in the telling and I was considered to be one of the enemy, or at least tied to the Dark, by most of the captains.

There were two ships chosen, Sigmun's and Harwic's. Beside the regular kin crew they each carried a detachment of Falconers, those dour fighters. But some precautions they did take. Though the Sulcar always sail in family groups, living more on board their ships than on land, this time they set ashore their children and such of their women as were pregnant, Lord Koris seeing all were well settled in comfort at the port.

There was one time of difficulty when one who was a seeress aboard Lord Harwic's vessel showed temper and teeth to me, saying that I was so ill-omened as to bring the fate feared the most on any person—so what would I do with a ship?

Then the Lady Jaelithe took command, and so much in awe was she held by all, even more by those who possessed some bit of talent, that the woman gave way quickly when it was made clear to her that that vessel was to bear Lady Jaelithe and Lord Simon. While I was to sail with Sigmun and Kemoc and Orsya on the *Far Rover*.

With a cargo of wood and very well provisioned, we set sail at last after two ten days of hard labor, heading out into an ocean under the first colors of dawn. Over us the seabirds wheeled and! called mournfully and under a fair wind our sails bellied, so that we were fast past the dismal shadow of Gorm with only the wide sea before us.

We had made other expeditions to Gorm to explore the derelict and Lord Simon had consulted the charts and other records found on board. He had names for a crew of six, but there had been others on board—the women I had "seen" and whose clothing and belongings were still in one of the cabins, a double one. Of those he could learn nothing save that they had been aboard. While there were no notations in what he called the ship's "log" which explained either the purpose of the voyage or the reason for carrying the rotted vegetation which had been stored in the small hold. As for the reclaiming of the ship for any service he explained to Captain Harwic that the running of it did indeed depend on neither sails nor oars but on a complicated machine, such as the Kolders knew, which needed to be fueled with a liquid unknown in our world. Thus the vessel remained at Gorm's dock for the present under the guard of the small garrison there.

Though I am of half-Sulcar blood I had never been taken in to any ship's clan yet I had worked passage on many vessels, doing the lowliest of labor, never trusted to any position of skill or direct need in maintaining the voyage itself. This time I was left with nothing to do for my passage. Or I would have been had Orsya and Kemoc not sought me out in the first day. The Krogan girl was deeply amazed by the very fact that so much water lay always about her now. Her people in Escore depended upon streams and ponds, lakes and rivers, limited in their exploration on land because of their need for that same water to renew their bodies from time to time. Before our sailing Kemoc had made plain to Captain Sigmun that the ship must tow a boat from which at intervals Orsya could descend into the sea and swim for the space needed to restore her energy.

Since I was anything but welcome on board myself I yielded at once to their invitation to join them in the boat. Kemoc was a strong swimmer, though his one hand and arm bore still the signs of the harsh wound which had made of him a left-handed and perhaps less efficient fighter. But he could be a child paddling in a puddle when his best efforts were compared to Orsya. Since her gills went into service in water she could dive and stay unseen for lengths of time which no one save a member of her own race could equal. Though Kemoc made her swear that she would not venture far from the boat. There were grim tales enough of what might lurk in the depths—strange water beasts and reptiles of which we knew very little were rumored to have their hunting grounds there.

To my surprise Kemoc had questions for me. I did not think that the Lady Jaelithe or the Lady Loyse had repeated the story I had told them, the first time I had ever revealed the whole of it to others, but that the Sulcars considered me an outcast was plain, and also my reason for being in Es City, a wish to consult with some Witch, was generally known. He had seen me use a fraction of my talent and now it appeared that he wished to know the extent of my birth gift. There was no reason to hide aught from him; we were by fate members of a company sent for a task and it was only just that each of us knew what might be expected from the others with whom he or she marched—or rather sailed.

I said that I had farsight, and foresight (which I also made plain I considered a flawed talent upon which I had no intention of depending) and, as he had seen, I had the reading sight after a limited fashion. But that I had any other of the talents I doubted very much.

"Sometimes one cannot be sure," he said musingly as if he had thoughts he did not share. "The Council thinks little of Lormt but there is much that can be learned by delving into the past. When the mountains turned, Lormt suffered the fall of two towers. But that same shifting of very ancient stones uncovered hidden rooms and spaces which held records no one had looked upon for uncounted years. A comrade from the Borderers of my early fighting days now deals with some of these finds. When we return, seek out what Lormt may hold for you, Seeress."

"You give me a title which no Sulcar will grant, my lord. What I can see they distrust, even as they keep me apart—

"Would you be one with them?" It was Orsya who asked that as she combed her silver hair, freeing it in part from the water which had sleeked it over her shoulders.

"I— ' But I got no further for as I tried to weigh my desires, order my thoughts, I made a discovery which should not have surprised me. Did I want to be one with the women of the ship's cabins, labor at sails and all which kept the cabin home afloat, be at the orders of those who were masters and mistresses of waves and servants of winds?

I looked up to the ship behind which our boat swung into the waves the *Far Rover* sent back to trouble us. Never would I be accepted aboard with anything but grudging consent. If I was of the true blood I would long since have been wed and one with kin whose single purpose was to advance the ship in seeking and discovering new markets, or plying stolidly back and forth between cities well known. There would have been nothing more for me than that advancement which was shared by all. I could not be a seeress; they, too, were bound by even tighter ties into the pattern of voyages. I was too long a wanderer on my own to accept any such commitment to the will of others. It had been a long time since I had felt any envy. Perhaps it was true my nature was twisted from birth and I was a ship without a home port or a rightful captain, always a-search.

Now I looked directly to the Krogan girl. "I think I would not be one with them unless I had been course set by them from birth. Though that I have never thought or said before."

"Each one of us has many roads ahead; we make choices sometimes without asking our hearts if this is rightful for us," Kemoc said slowly. "Nor can many of us live to walk a path another has chosen for us, no matter how schooled we may be to accept another's will." He turned his head a fraction and smiled at Orsya, taking one of her slender hands to hold it to his cheek. "Twisted indeed was our own path once but we came at least to where it ran straight and true. Though even now there lie shadows across our way—or so we must believe, being who and what we are. Still we would not have it otherwise. So," now he spoke a little sharply, his eyes for me again, "you have three gifts that you are aware of. And how do you polish them? By careful use as is well?"

I shook my head determinedly. "I do not seek to know the future—"

"But," it was Orsya who interrupted me, "you can see only one future—there be many for the same viewer. If one awakes one morning and does so, then the day will end with that future carried out. But if one arises making another choice the day will run otherwise. Then which, foreseeing, can you choose?"

"That is an argument I have used with myself," I told her. "Only the few times I have foreseen for others—and that almost always against my will—the evil waiting was what they met. They say my foretellings are curses compelling someone to meet the fate I outlook. And—for myself..." I shook my head. "Such foreseeing as that is always murky, seeming like a picture which has been slashed into tatters, this part or that part visible as in a dream, but no orderly progress I can view for my own enlightenment. No, I can foresee—blackly—for others, and that I will no longer do. For myself there is nothing to make choices for."

"That is the way of all who foresee—to lack the Power to set their own life forward," Kemoc answered. "But that you always foresee evil for others and that comes to them thereafter, that I cannot understand."

"Say then that I curse them, my lord. Not that I do so deliberately, with malice. That is my Dark heritage perhaps."

My hand was at my breasts feeling for Gunnora's amulet and again I clung to the one small hope that had brought me. A seeress who cursed—that *wasnot* my destiny. That path I could choose not to follow.

"My father," Kemoc continued, "has the foreseeing, but it comes to him as a warning and only shortly before the peril it heralds. He also can bond with us when there is need, feeding what talent we may use with his strength. With my mother he can be one-minded even at a distance. But that he learned later; it was not a birth gift."

"And you"—Orsya dropped her comb into her lap and drew her hand caressingly down across his scarred flesh—"you meddled in what you did not even know, choosing a path of great peril—yet it was also one of safety."

He was frowning, looking to the sea rather than at her. "I did not know how much a fool I was to use what I did not understand. And what I have learned thereafter has made me only more aware of that."

"My lord—" I began, and then he smiled at me and returned:

"Lord? No, I was a simple fighting man of the Borderers and I am still a fighting man when there is need. I have no lordship nor do I want one. I am Kemoc first and so I remain."

"Kemoc," I corrected myself. "What chances in Escore?"

"Now that"—again he smiled a little—"is a very large question and I can only answer a small part of it. It is thus with us—"

Chapter 4

He talked then of battles, of evil driven back, only to have its forces surge onward again, of how it was to live eternally on guard when one rode forth from those islands of safety which had always been under the protection of the Light.

"Still," Orsya said (she had tossed her hair until the sun, which was growing warmer, had dried it), "there are now times of peace and those are growing more and more, longer and longer."

"Is it, could it be true," I wondered aloud, "that Escore curves westward in the south, to touch upon the sea?"

Kemoc shrugged. "Who knows? We have ridden and fought our way far westward. My sister lives now upon another sea of which we of Estcarp had no knowledge in the old days. Judging by the extent of what we know nothing, it could well be that southward the land comes to an end and that sea is part of this one bordering the east as well as the west."

"Be still!" Orsya was leaning over the side of our small boat. There was a look of such concentration on her face now that a seeress might wear when in a self-summoned trance.

I stared into those waves but nothing could I see. The ocean was not like the clear water I had trudged beside inland, through which one could sight sand and bubbles, the coming and going of the creatures which made that course their natural home.

Kemoc did not glance at the water, rather his face was fixed in the set look of he who mind searches. All those who have any of the talents can develop mind touch to some degree. They cannot always communicate or receive direct messages from another but they can know where life runs, hides, or lies in wait.

Tentatively, with all the caution my own use of gifts taught me, I sent out a quest-touch tendril. Because Orsya still looked into the sea I strove to send in that direction.

For a second I flinched. What I had caught the fringe of was hunger, a mighty hunger, rawer and greater than any rage, and perhaps the more dangerous for that reason. There was no real thought, or if there was, the hunger overbore that.

Kemoc turned and caught at the rope which tethered us to the *Far Rover* and my own grasp was with his only a second later. We pulled with all our strength and our small craft answered, heading for the side of the Sulcar vessel. Orsya still kept her post as if she listened (could one name it so) to the thing which lurked out of sight.

I could keep in touch with it only slightly for the vibrations were too close to the edge of my ability to read to afford me more than that. However, I knew that the thing had certainly now turned its attention to us, that it had altered its swimming pattern and was following our skiff. I thought of a fish intent upon the swallowing of some bait and that lent more strength to my pull on our lead rope.

Now Orsya settled lower in her place, her chin propped upon her folded arms, which rested on the gunwale of the boat, her head forward, staring as if to force the swimmer below into view for all of us. That consuming hunger was now as sharp in my own mind as a shout might be in my ears.

We slid into the shadow beside the *Far Rover* facing the ladder dangling from her deck. Kemoc gestured to me to climb, but I indicated Orsya. He shook his head and I gathered that the Krogan girl might in some manner of talent be better armored than either of us. I sprang to catch the dangling cordage and was up and over unto the deck. Kemoc followed and then turned to reach a hand to Orsya.

"It comes!" she cried out as she dropped to the deck.

Three of the Sulcar crew crowded in as there was a flurry in the water below. I caught sight of a black shadow just beneath the surface and then there gaped out of the water a mighty head larger than the boat in which we had been. Great jaws ringed with pointed fangs, two rows of them, closed upon the wood of the boat and that sank out of sight in a rush as the thing which had so surfaced returned to its own place. Lengths of splintered wood whirled upward. It must have crushed the stout timbers of the boat, which had survived storms, as one could take an egg between one's teeth and splinter the shell into bits.

"What was that!" Captain Sigmun leapt down from the quarterdeck to join us. A moment later the *Far Rover* lurched in the water. The menace below had signaled its disappointment by a headlong ramming of the vessel.

Sigmun shouted orders and our ship veered a fraction from its course. However, there was no way in what we might defend ourselves from the unseen monster. I wondered if the seams of our hull could take such a pounding were it to continue. Then I saw that the rope which had moored our boat to the *Far Rover* was stretched tight and that the ship was actually answering to that determined pull. Turning, I snatched one of the boarding axes which were never far from hand in the racks, kept ready in strange seas. With all my strength I brought the blade down on the rope. It parted; the one end lashed back to rip my sleeve and cut into the flesh beneath.

Once more, even as I folded my torn sleeve over the wound, the ship shuddered at a ramming attack from below. Then that did not come again. Orsya stood close to that rail, grooved where the rope had cut, her head slightly aslant as if she listened. Then she spoke.-

"It has dropped below."

The captain stared at her. "What is it?" he demanded. "Never have I heard of any sea thing which was large enough to trouble the *Far Rover*. Will it attack again?"

"It hungers," Orsya answered. "I know nothing of its kind. Only I think that such hunger will drive it far. It senses us."

Sigmund glanced about the deck as if he sought some-thing which might be used in attack. The *Far Rover* mounted two of the dart machines which had been fashioned in imitation of those the Borderers carried. But they could only be used against a visible foe and had not been intended to shoot into the sea but rather across it. There were other aids to battle which might be used—the balls of glass which contained a blueish power to bring fiery death to man and sometimes ship when loosed from nets slung around to give them speed. The *Far Rover* was as well equipped as any Sulcar fighter-merchant could be and all that in the way of defense and offense had been checked, resupplied and made ready before we sailed.

There were harpoons set like spears in another rack on deck but one of those would be no worse than a splinter of the boat for that lurking below. We had a fair wind and the ship loosed of the small drag the boat had kept upon her cut the waves cleanly beneath billowed sails.

How we might have fared with a final attack we were not to know. Orsya sped across the deck, seeking the cabin she shared with Kemoc, and when she returned she held a bundle between her hands. Kneeling on deck she unfastened the strings of a stuffed bag which flopped open on the planking to show within a number of packets. One of these she caught up just as the water beast once again struck at the ship, this time dangerously close to the rudder. Kemoc, as if he well understood what she would do, tore off his shirt as he knelt beside her, holding the cloth as taut as he could against the planks. Onto that surface she poured a small stream of sandlike granules. They were dark and might have been the remains of well-crushed pebbles. Reknitting her first packet she took out another. From this she shifted a powder of blueish green. Kemoc took his side knife from its belt scabbard and with the point of that she stirred the mixture thoroughly. Then there was a last addition, this time of pebbles about as large as my thumbnail, of which she selected three of red and then six of blue.

Kemoc rolled and knotted the shirt into a bundle. I saw her lips moving as if she recited some spell or called upon a Power to serve her, then she ran, mounting to the upper deck where the steersman stood with a shipwoman beside him on either side to lend strength if need be.

Orsya drew back her arm and with all the strength she could muster she sent the package hurtling out over the water. It whirled downward at a speed I would not have granted it since it had no great weight. Touching the waves it sank like a stone. Orsya stood by the rail staring into the depths as if she could see the success—or failure—of her defense. There was a stream of bubbles boiling up through the water where that unwieldy package had sunk.

I longed to search with mind touch yet I feared that that very act had been what had aroused the creature in the first place. Then, without my searching, it struck at me, just as it must have Captain Sigmund, who was standing at arm's distance away, for I saw him sway. Not hunger this time but anger, a rage so great and dark that it near cut at one as might a sword. After that—nothing.

Now I did dare to search—the hunger had vanished. If the monster still waited below, it was not because of a desire to shake us out into its waiting maw. Yet Orsya still stood intent upon the water, Kemoc beside her, his own gaze fixed upon the ripple of the waves.

Captain Sigmund shook off what had held him prisoner for those few moments out of time. He shouted orders and the ship came to life—all of those on deck seemingly having been held in the same spell. It was then that the Krogan girl came away from the rail, Kemoc's arm still about her, supporting her. I guessed from her drawn face that she experienced, at least in part, the same overwhelming fatigue which came at the end of any use of the gift.

"Is it dead?" Sigmund paused beside the two of them.

Orsya shook her head slowly. "I do not think so. It has taken the Xalta inside it. But that will only confuse it for a while. It lies very deep now on the bottom of the sea and it is as if it sleeps. But for how long—what can I tell you? This is a defense made for use against creatures of the Dark who infest lakes and rivers—what it will do for one from the sea none of my people can guess."

I saw a bird arise from the foredeck, a falcon wide winging, and I knew that one of the Falconer marines on board was doubtless sending so a message to our sister ship, which was so far abeam that we caught only a glimpse of topsails. A warning—we might only hope that the thing with which Orsya had dealt would still lie in the depths long enough for both of our small squadron to be well away before it roused.

I saw Orsya glance in my direction and then speak to Kemoc. He beckoned to me, and, with Orsya between us, we sought her cabin, I pausing only to take up the bundle she had brought from there earlier. Once within she insisted on treating that burn the snapping rope had delivered to me, smearing it with a reddish stuff which had the consistency of mud and smelt acridly enough to make one sneeze. This hardened as soon as it was applied and that small pain I had only been dimly aware of during our encounter with the monster was instantly eased.

Kemoc went to the porthole and stood looking out. He was plainly troubled, and, when Orsya had finished with her heal-craft, he spoke that trouble aloud. "You dare not swim again—Then I knew what fear was rising in him and it was echoed in me. The Krogans must have water for their bodies. To remain dry for a length of time was as fatal as to remain without water to drink while one traveled in a desert region. If there were dangers hiding in the sea how could Orsya survive?"

"Perhaps I cannot continue to swim," Orsya assented, "but I can stay beside the ship with a rope about me to haul me forth speedily should any danger come. Also—" She brought out of that bundle which had held the materials for driving off the monster a jar which she un-topped. Almost instantly the cramped cabin was filled with a scent which set me to coughing and brought that same response from Kemoc. "This can be used." She made a face and sneezed violently herself. "It would seem," she commented, "that this sea air has made it all the stronger. Nothing in any water of Escore will approach the source of this. Perhaps it is true also of sea creatures." She speedily resealed the container but for moments afterwards we continued to cough.

"We have time enough"—she put the jar away—"to consider many plans, for the water need will not be on me yet a good while. Before I try to answer that there can be a searching." Hanging her bag on a hook driven into one of the beams overhead she settled herself cross-legged on the bunk. Kemoc leaned back against the wall of the cabin and I edged forward a stool and seated myself.

Orsya reached up and took Kemoc's maimed hand in hers. She closed her eyes and I felt the surge of

Power that went out in search—of what? The monster, to make sure that that was not coming to once more attack the *Far Rover* ?

Awkwardly I set myself to match her pattern. One had first to close off the touches of life energy which marked members of the crew and the ship clan. However, one who has used the gift speedily learns how to do that. An entirely open mind would be a torment to the one who owned it if one did not quickly learn to center such a search on something else. Still here we—or I at least—had no quarry. I closed my eyes also, to picture the endless surging of the sea, the waves which spun white lace as the bow of the ship cut through them. Even this far from land there were birds overhead—those kerlins who were said never to seek solid shore except for their nesting and who slept upon the rocking waves far out from any land.

There was life. I caught sparks of energy but none I tried to follow. For I was seeking something else—a hunter out of the depths. That fierce hunger which had struck as a blow the first time I encountered it was not there. Perhaps Orsya's counterattack had worked better than even she had hoped. However, it was easier to center on something which one could mind-picture and I had seen no more than a portion of the monster's jaws as those crunched upon our boat.

Without willing it my far gaze opened. Even as I had hung on thought above those grim rocks of islands when I had used it at the Lady Jaelithe's bidding so did I now once more forge ahead—or so I believed—and found—

The islands of rock again. They were scattered—rising from the sea in a half circle, one end of which reached to what was either a true shore of our own continent or else an island much larger, older, and—

Energy poured around me. That was not aimed at me but over the outflung islands. There was Power here—to entrap! Hastily I drew back, closed down my searching tendril of seeking thought. The islands and the land behind them were gone. I did not yet open my eyes and admit defeat. Rather I fastened upon one corner of the land I had seen so momentarily—not among the islands, rather that portion of the shore. Into that effort I poured more striving than I had ever done before as in me there was growing a need for haste.

Now I no longer saw the sea, rather I looked down upon a range of sharply pointed teeth which in the guise of land mimicked the jaws of the sea creature. These formed an outer wall but farther in there was a blot of shadow. It was growing more and more difficult to hold that picture in mind; I was tiring. I was—

I was seized by a Power source far beyond my own against which I could raise no defense. Back spun my farsight over the sprinkle of islands. There was no distant fire this time—had the volcano I had seen before been quenched by the sea?

The force which had entrapped me swung back and forth as if it also combed the islands for some object. I halted my struggle, for now I knew it for what it was—the joined wills of Orsya and Kemoc. There was a leap of heightened energy. Island and rock reef passed under my "sight"; we were returning to the shore of that other mass of land. I realized that these other two were riding on the edge of that force I had earlier encountered, only to fear and flee from.

There was a bay spreading below us—for now we three were one. Far more sharp and clearly came the sight. In that bay were gathered a vast fleet of ships! But there was no touch of life arising from those. We had only an instant of that view and then we snapped away. Even so we did not go so swiftly that I had not caught that warning. It was like a whiff of stench from some battlefield where all had perished and none remained alive to bury the dead. This was death itself, and not a clean one.

We were—caught!

I have seen nets spread for fish and the silver bodies leaping therein frantically and without hope. Somehow I knew that withdrawal could not come without a struggle. I resisted, and just as I had been drawn to them so now did they swing with me. Now I was a spear point and they the shaft behind. Though I had never been so entangled before I instinctively fought to change what lay beneath me. Bit by bit, aided by surges of energy from the others, I slowed our flight inland. This compulsion was something such as I had not met before. The stench of evil was in it, but I could not locate its source. That this was a device of the Dark I did not question, and to seek out its nature might well draw us farther into its hold. Instead I fought to mind-see the ship, the cabin—

With the farsight one is never aware of one's body— only of what one sees within. That in-seeing might be the only aid for us now. Ship—there was still the ship. Again the rocks and bay, now that swing of barren land; I strove to build instead the picture of the ship, of the cabin which reason told me still held that which was the flesh envelope from which I had ventured. For return I fought and with me those two others.

A ship, yes— However, it swung in and out, alternating with sight of that country unknown. Perhaps I could not bring the whole ship into being, but the cabin was smaller and we had roots there. For wherever one has slept and lived, even for a short time, that site takes on a measure of one's person. On such a link the farsight can fasten for a guide.

I built those walls, the narrow space between them. I saw Orsya, Kemoc, their linked hands— It was as if they had not quite realized what I could do but now understood. Once more they poured into me the force which they were capable of raising. I had a body—I opened my eyes.

Orsya leaned against Kemoc's shoulder, her eyes closed. There was limpness in her poise, which brought fear. Then Kemoc stirred; I heard his mind voice call:

"Orsya!"

He opened his eyes just as I stood away from the stool, before the Krogan girl. My hands were up on either side of her drooping head. With all the strength I had left I mind-sent the picture of where we truly were. Yet she did not stir. Was she still caught in that web of the Dark which had entangled us? Still in my back swing I had not felt any diminution of energy, and surely I would have known if we had left her alone!

Kemoc pushed my hands away. His own went into place the same way. I knew that the tie between them was such that he could reach farther to draw her back. Also, was he not reputed to be indeed a warlock, one who dipped into ancient wisdom generally forgotten?

His face was grim-set. Orsya fell back on the bunk as he withdrew support. Now he bent over her still using that hold between them. All of a sudden she sighed. That sound gave me such relief I, too, felt weak and sagged back against the cabin wall. Her eyes opened and she looked up into his face.

"It—it—waits—" Her voice was hardly more than the shadow of a whisper.

Kemoc spoke nearly as softly in reply: "It is not here." And, as softly as he spoke, there was still authority in his tone.

However, it was toward me she looked and not to his face so close now to hers.

"It hungers."

At that moment I knew the Tightness of her choice of words. That strong pull was as much a part of hunger as the force radiated from the sea thing. But it was not a hunger of body—

For the first time something which was not a conscious willing on my part twitched my thought aside, that was a path I must not follow. In that moment I also realized that, for once, fortune which was good not ill had worked through me for others.

Orsya, her gaze still holding mine, nodded. "You do not know your strength, seer-sister."

"But do not try it too far!" Kemoc broke in upon the two of us. "No more of-

"Such journeying?" I interrupted him. "Be sure that I will swear oath to if you wish it. Though I believe that we three this hour have seen that which we seek—"

"So be it," Orsya returned. "That is a place of death." She shivered, turning her face from both of us as she spoke.

There was a rap on the door at my back. I looked to Kemoc and he nodded assent so I turned and slid aside the door of the cabin.

Yakin, the mate, stood there.

"Captain Sigmun wishes speech with you." He did not look beyond me, but rather *to* me as if he brought an order. Because of the tone of voice he used when he said that I believed that it was. Though I was none of Sigmun's clan this was delivered as if I did owe allegiance to him.

I stepped without, moving slowly, for again the toll that farseeing had taken had drained me. Also there was apprehension of a kind, for I was very sure that Sigmun would not look kindly on any use of talent by me. Had he in any way been aware of the far journey from which I had just returned?

Chapter 5

Sigmun faced me in the narrow slip of cabin, the only private space afforded in a ship which was both a way of travel and also the permanent dwelling place of a clan. His eyes were the dark blue of the shadows one sees lie stretching out from snow dunes, and certainly there was no lighting of grimness which held his features in a harsh set. However, he waved me to a small stool which was the only other seat in that blade-wide space.

"There has been spelling!" he spoke abruptly. "We will have no more awaking of those from the depths."

"If spelling called such—and there was no calling—then it was also spelling which sent it away," I pointed out.

There was no lessening of his set jaw, of the bitter lines which bracketed his mouth. Now he brought his hand, fist tight, with force against his knee.

"I will not have the *Far Rover* endangered!"

"She was kept from danger, was she not? The water magic of the Krogans may be more powerful than we know."

He did not answer that, only continued to stare, as if by his will alone he could bring out of me some oath which would reassure him. Inwardly I was wary. Sigmund had been in favor of our present expedition. There had been certainly warning enough that this was no easy sail upon an unnaturally quiet ocean. This being so why had he now apparently changed?

"Does that thing follow?" he demanded.

That he would willingly ask the help of my farsight was so strange as to set me on guard. I answered him then with the truth:

"Captain, my talent you hold in abhorrence, why do you now wish to use it?"

"There is reason to consult any chart when one is sailing blind."

He meant it then. His fear for his ship had broken down, at least for now, that strong-held barrier which the Sulcars had always kept against me. Farsight could not bring any fate upon us as my foresight might; I could dare such a reading and not—

Sigmund had turned to pick up an object from the floor. This he held into the light which came through the single port breaking the cabin wall. What he so displayed was a piece of wood about the length of my arm, splintered at either end. That it was part of that skiff which had taken the assault of the dweller in the deeps was plain.

"You read from such as this." There was no warmth in his voice, only urgency. Nor could I deny him after my one such seeking. Only I was already weary from the farsight. To use what little strength I had gathered since that to a new test was perhaps futile.

Reluctantly I took the broken length of wood in both my hands, resting it across my knees. Closing my eyes, I willed to see, to read—

A murk closed about me. Through that was movement. I might have been entrapped in a thick fog in which there was other life astir. Yet so concealing was that fog that I could not be sure of the nature of the things which flitted, only momentarily, close enough to catch my attention.

Not fog—but water! I was thought-deep in the sea and those which flickered in and out of my land-trained sight must be fish—sea creatures. There was a sudden flurry as a near cloud of swimmers flashed past me. Fear lived in the fog, now.

I had not seen enough of the monster who had hunted us to be sure of its shape, to be able thus to center my sight upon the object I hunted.

This thing slid forward ponderously. I had seen many kinds of sea dwellers, some so very grotesque that they might have been fashioned by deliberate intention to frighten, but this held no echo of anything I had ever sighted before.

Though it was hard in this murk to judge sizes I had the impression that the thing was near as long as the *Far Rover*. The body was scaled but those overlapping armor shields were large enough to give the appearance of being shell hard and solid. I had once seen a creature, brought from the north, which possessed a similar body but that had been quite minute compared to this. Though there was something of a fish about it, yet there was also that which was totally strange—no finned tail, no fins for side and back. Rather thick, taloned extremities protruded to make swimming movements. The head was near the same size as the body and most of that head was mouth which was widely agape now as it plowed forward after the fleeing fish. Though it seemed to labor at its swimming it closed upon that flight and snapped up mouthful after mouthful of prey so small in comparison with its bulk that it must near spend most of its lifetime eating merely to keep life within that hideous body.

I dared to probe.

I could not have uttered a cry, for the throat which should shape that, the lips which would utter it, were not there. Instead I cut the cord of the "sight." When I opened my eyes I was no longer in the murk of the deeps but still seated on a stool in the captain's cabin while he held me with that fierce, compelling stare.

"You have seen it!" No question that, a statement of fact which I could not deny. "Does it follow?"

"There are no charts in the depths," I returned, struggling to retain at least my surface confidence. "It is feeding—following schools of fish."

He was silent for a moment and then he nodded as in answer to some thought of his own. "But there is more, that is the truth, is it not? You found something other than a sea thing feeding on its natural food."

So I must have betrayed myself. How much dare I say to this man who had accepted me with nothing but distrust? He could well believe that I was attempting some trickery. Only those who have the talent themselves realize that that which one learns through it cannot be assumed, it is always stark truth.

"The thing is—was—a guardian. It has—by some means—perhaps the coming of boiling water from a volcano—been driven from its place and it is lost. But it is not native here. And it was set to a duty—He did not smile at what he might deem foolishness, instead he was frowning. Then he turned again and I saw behind him a small chest. This he drew across the planking which was between us and snapped up the lock, throwing back the lid. From the interior he pulled out a roll of very ancient parchment, the edges of which were so tattered that they might be fringed. Closing the chest again he unrolled a small fraction of the scroll he held.

The marks upon it were very faded. I had to lean well forward to see what had been so revealed. Though some of the lines were missing, and the whole needed several guesses to give it full body, I might have been looking at a very crude representation of the thing I had seen feeding.

"This," Captain Sigmund said, with something close to solemnity in his tone, "is Scalgah."

I stiffened. That he meant what he said—that the much-faded picture was intended to represent a legendary monster so ancient that only a very few legends so much as mentioned it—I had to accept. I had heard enough from those who had visited Escort—that in that shadowed land many of the old legends did have actual life—so perhaps this was possible. Only Scalgah was not of Escore, nor even of the legends of the Old Ones.

From whence the Sulcars had originally come no one knew now, even our bards and seers could not tell. Only there was with us the belief that we, too, had won through a gate, in so far a past that the stones

of Es had not been yet cut or laid when we came. Why we came, that we did not know either. Those of High Hallack say they were hunted by enemies through the gate which brought them to the Dales. The Kolders warred, one part against the other, and forced their own gate that they might plunder what was waiting on our side to furnish them with the means of setting up a world empire of their own.

However, the majority of those who are recorded to be dwellers from Outside arrive one or two, or perhaps a small clan, together. Even as had Lord Simon in his time.

Sulcar legend did not say that we were hunted. Maybe we came by chance or for the adventure of seeking the new. However, there was no return and that was made certain by the appearance of guardians. Those who listened to the oldest songs knew naming those:

"Theffan, Laqit, Scalgah— ' I found myself reciting those names—all reverences had long since fled that rhyming now. It was a game song for children—used to "count out" this one and that from a dancing ring.

I saw Sigmun nod and then he rolled up that ancient record to replace it in the chest.

"So now we go to the gate?" I ventured, although I knew that he could only equal my own guessing.

"Perhaps. I would like to know if Theffan and Laqit also exist."

"Water and fire, earth and air," I repeated. "In the heart of death is the core of life. He who holds the—"

I had gotten just so far in that other ancient saying when his hand shot forward and closed upon my wrist in a crushing grip. "How know you that?" He spoke between set teeth as does a man before he bears steel.

"I—I do not know!" Yes, those words had risen easily in me. However, when they had first become a part of my memories I could not tell now. I had long been a wanderer. The Dales I knew, and the Waste, and even part of Arvon. I had gusted in halls, and slept under stars when other wanderers came together around a camp fire to seek out for a space the companionship of kind, for that we would hunger no matter how lone our lives. I had listened to the tales of merchants and, yes, had even served for a single voyage now and then aboard a Sulcar vessel when the ship clan did not know my story. I had talked and I had listened, and, though my years were not yet many, I remembered more than perhaps even the hard-faced man I now faced, whose laced fingers brought twisting pain to my wrist.

I could not understand why a scrap of ritual had struck him so profoundly. His other hand arose a little and his forefinger moved in the air as if he wrote there some message which only the initiated could read. I then knew what I had done. In some way I had used words which were the pass sign for one of the Kin-by-Sword companies among our people. Though such a one as I was barred from any these.

"I do not know where I first heard that, Captain. I claim no fellowship which is false." My other hand sought that amulet hidden beneath my worn shirt. Who was I indeed who could claim common blood, kin bond with any? Yet Gunnora had not refused me this sign of hers.

Did he believe me? I was not sure. But he released his hold on me and snapped the lock on the chest before he pushed it back into the shadows from which he had drawn it.

"You would be wise," his voice was very sharp and cold, "not to repeat that again. If it was mouthed in your hearing at one time that was, in itself, a call for discipline. So you say Scalgah—but does he follow?"

"That I cannot say, Captain. The farsight does not measure—" Then I remembered the board I still held—it had not been altogether by the farsight that I had viewed those murky depths. I laid my hand palm down upon it but I did not seek.

"I can only watch through this," I told him.

"Let it be so," he said curtly and I read in that tone that I was dismissed, so arose from my stool, the broken board in my hold.

Nor did he call again upon any gift of mine. Also, after speaking with Orsya and Kemoc, I did not seek again on my own. They were deeply interested in my report that the creature of the depths resembled one of legend, however, and told me of those other survivals of what had once been termed myth yet lived on in Escore.

Orsya's need for water was answered ingeniously by two of the Sulcar women, who brought forth a length of stout canvas carried to repair storm-torn sails. This they sewed at either end with their stoutest of waxed thread. Then we caulked it on the inside with tar, working until we had a crude trough as long as Orsya's body. Water drawn from the sea filled it at intervals and the Krogan lay within that, renewing herself as she must for life itself.

The days were fair and the wind was steady from the north. It seemed to me, who had long ago come to question any singular run of good fortune, that we were a little too favored. It might well be that the Dark forces were playing with us, as, according to legends, they had in the past, waiting to deliver some blow when it would be the hardest for us to stand defense against it.

We did not seek with farsight again. But Kemoc spoke often of the lore he had learned at Lornt. Though then he had gone for one purpose only, to search those incredibly ancient records in order to discover a place where he, his sister, and his brother might take refuge from the anger of the Council, there were other records stored there. He shook his head now over the fact that none of our party had sent for information there concerning the far south. It might be a case such as Escore where a part of our world had been walled away for protection. We could well have been better prepared had we known what lay perhaps forgotten in this time.

Now he asked of me every scrap of knowledge I had before he went to Captain Sigmun. Upon demand he was shown the full of that roll of learning. However, the runes, worn away by the years, were in another tongue and Kemoc could learn little from it. He asked once if I might hold it and so go far-seeking in the past but received such a decided "No" that I think he was astonished. As for me, I kept out of the captain's path as best I might so we had no more talk together.

The fair weather and the increasing warmth of the days as we sped south brought many of the clan to the deck, where they busied themselves with the care and restoring of wardrobes, the repair of weapons, and those small tasks which lie always to hand. Orsya mingled with them and showed one who made belts trimmed with shells a new pattern to work by.

Alone of our trio I had the least to do. Until, driven by sheer boredom, I took knife and began to work on that piece of half-splintered board which Sigmun had left with me. I was no master carver but once I had wintered in a dale where there was a woman so gifted with her hands and she had wrought from large gnarled roots all manner of strange creatures. From her I had learned enough to shape, far more clumsily, some object hidden in the wood which my eyes told me could be raised for the sight of others. My belt knife was keen and, though I began at first clumsily, my fingers once loosened to such a task grew the more skillful. What I brought forth from the wood was a likeness to Scalguh as my farsight had

marked him.

It was Orsya who first noted what I was doing, kneeling beside where I sat cross-legged peeling off slivers of the wood. As I paused to measure my work she put forth a hand and touched lightly the whittled wood. Her fingers were snatched quickly back and I heard a small sound so that I looked to her inquiringly.

"It is... death." She had hesitated before she said that last word.

"Yes."

"Yet you give it life. For what purpose?"

I did not understand at first and then I guessed that she meant the "life" I was bestowing by the carving which was coming at my insistence from the formless wood. Purpose? I had thought to employ my hands, not wishing to be idle when all those about me were busied. Still there were always warnings to be heeded in such matters.

Whatever is wrought by our hands carries in it something of our own energy and talent. A man could be tracked, even identified, by a sapling he had slashed to find his way through a wilderness. Someone, with the gift the Lady Jaelithe had led me to believe I had, could read the maker's body and spirit (a little) by taking into hands something wrought by the other.

"I do not know why," I answered slowly. "I thought to busy my hands, but there are indeed many things I might have chosen to see within the wood to lead me to free them so. Only it was only this which I was minded from the first to carve."

"A guardian." She had settled herself by me. "A guardian of a gate?"

"Who knows? The Sulcars have been long here. They have forgotten their coming and the reason for it. It has been only since the Tregarths found Escore once again, and the displeasure of the Council no longer matters, that people have questioned things as they be and speculate as to what might once have been. Also the mystery of lost crews and kin, as well as such surprises as the derelict Lord Simon recognized as being from his own world, if not his own time, makes one wonder what else there remains which might be a threat."

Orsya was combing her hair again, shaking it free of the water, for she had only recently climbed out of that liquid bed. Drops of moisture flew and a few pattered on the wood I held.

"There is never any peace now," she said. "Even in Escore, where for a time when we have beaten off the Dark and it seems had the best of a mighty victory—and such we have had many times over—we are not allowed long to go our own way and rest from battle. Always the Dark gathers new force, that which is of the Evil, and readies itself, so that once more rises a cry for swords and spells and keen eyes, ears, and mind to listen and arouse. Once my people were content with our streams and lakes where none troubled us—though we ourselves make the substance of such tales to be far different. Only I have not before heard that any gate has a guardian—"

A long shaving curved away from the blade of my knife. "Scalgah was a tale—as Escore he has taken on life again. But he is far away from the place where he should lie in wait. There was a troubling of the sea which even he could not withstand, some disturbance which has driven him from his proper place—"

"You have read this from him?"

"In part, yes."

She tossed the curtain of her hair back on her shoulders. "Did he know—were we more to him than food?"

"I do not know. He requires much to fill his belly." I tapped on that part of the carving with the point of my knife. "Only I begin to think that he knew that we reached for him."

"Does he then follow?"

"Again I do not know. But this I am sure of, I shall not seek him out without great cause. Nor would Sigmun and his kin take kindly to such action. I am no seeress of their choice but someone they have reason, or so they believe, to look upon with suspicion." With my other hand I again sought that amulet of Gunnora's. Only by that could I keep my own dread fear at bay. We were sailing as fast as a good wind could carry us toward that place we had seen, of desolate sea-born islands, fire mountains, and the bay of dead ships. What also might await us an active imagination could well supply—but never on the side of the Light.

I looked down at that on which I had been working. Had I a talent for such or not, that which was emerging under my knife indeed possessed a kind of life. Almost at that moment I was moved to hurl it into the sea. Yet something within me kept it within my grasp as if the time for such was not yet come.

Not yet come! My thought caught that. Perhaps the same sudden idea was caught by Orsya for again her hand came out towards the carving yet she did not quite touch it.

"There are weapons which are not steel," she said slowly. "Yet I would not carry this one openly if I were you."

I stroked away another bit of shaving and glanced up—to the afterdeck, where Sigmun stood beside the steersman. He did not wear mail or helm here and the wind pulled at his loose-braided hair. His attention was aloft at the sails which filled with the ever present wind in a manner which could arouse uneasiness in any shipmaster—it was too constant, too well faring. It was as if there had been a summons which only the *Far Rover* herself could answer and she did. We had veered course slightly that morning—another twenty hours or so of such a tail wind and we would be nigh past Karsten—though we could see nothing of that ill-omened shore from where we coursed. There would come then the Point of the Hound and beyond that only Varn was truly known.

Our sailing plan had been to harbor there, at least long enough to hear any news which those of the edge of our world might have gathered about what chanced beyond. Though the people of the city were mainly silent with strangers, the presence of the Lady Jaelithe might loose minds if not tongues. The Vars had ships, small fishing boats of shallow draft. They did not go to sea beyond the sight of the coast.

Chapter 6

Neither of the Sulcar ships had sailed from Escarp cargoless. Having Vars' needs in mind what they carried was fine woods, selected either for color or scent. There were large slabs of spicy pine and longer lengths of redheart with its vivid coloring, the more slender logs of wence, which were gold-yellow

and near as hard as steel, taking on a metallic lustre when polished. As well as small quantities of others with which I was not familiar save when they grew in the far hills.

The land around Yarn was treeless, the largest growths on the plain which fanned out from the sea being large brush, thorned and forbidding, generally carefully avoided by man and animal alike.

Unlike other peoples, those of Yarn did not explore inland nor spread far from the single city which was the heart of their own civilization. It seemed that their population never increased very much. There were indeed some families or small clans who left the safety of that stone-walled hold to cultivate fields well out on the plain, also tending flocks of sheeplike beasts that were much smaller and longer of limb than the species known in High Hallack, but produced a long-hair wool which could be converted on looms to a cloth which actually withstood moisture—and which the Sulcars coveted for boat cloaks, though very little of it was ever sold.

Though I knew the procedure well I had never seen used so carefully before the sensing of a harbor entrance. Sigmun had no seeress aboard, but one of his crew, a straight-backed girl, looking to be still in later adolescence, took her place at the bow of the *Far Rover* as we nosed in towards the shore. It was according to her hand signals that the man and woman at the wheel did their duty during a lengthy advance with most of the sails lowered, leaving just enough canvas above to give us slow movement.

Although there were no reefs breaking the surface of the sea here, this caution suggested that we were creeping through a maze of obstructions to enter the throat of the bay.

Cliffs loomed high on either side. Sigmun pointed out to Kemoc certain breaks near the tops of those natural walls which he believed held some manner of defense if the city should be threatened from the sea. Twice the path the water-see girl set for us brought us enough to one side to move directly under one of those.

At mast top we were plain marked with a Sulcar trade flag. However, on board near the wheel and its guardians our small force of Falconers had taken a stand, ready to defend the helmspeople should trouble arise. One had released his bird to spiral upward, well above the crests of the cliffs, keeping position in the air to sight any activity which might suggest danger. It was an excellent commentary on how wary the Sulcars were of the taciturn people of Yarn that they continued such action even though there had never been any hostility shown.

Behind us the *Wave Skimmer* had closed in. For the first time we were close enough to see those on the deck of our sister ship. Their water-seer was a man and they were just entering the crooked path down which we had steered when the *Far Rover* emerged into the open bay.

That was bowl shaped, surrounded by cliffs except for a space directly before us. There the walls of nature gave way to an open space in which was fitted, as a worker in gems might fit a jewel into a setting, the city itself—running from the base of the cliff on the north to that on the south.

The bay was not empty of shipping. Two wharves ran out and to those were anchored several small boats, one masted for the most part. Their sails made a brilliant splotch of color for those were dyed (though they were lashed down now and not showing their full brilliance) red, yellow, green, and even mixtures of those colors.

As the sails so were the buildings of Yarn itself. Though the coloring there was more subtle. The whole city might have been a canvas by some giant artist because the dwellings on one level were of one shade, those of the next a second, blending so that from the bay the town actually appeared to be striped,

beginning with shades of blue a little lighter than the sea surging about the wharves and then going through green, violet, wine red, rose, and so to gold and then a pale yellow.

I had heard that Yarn was unlike any other city the Sulcars visited, but this wide display of color was breathtaking to one who was used to ancient stone, always greyed. I heard Orsya beside me at the fore rail give a little gasp as she looked upon the prodigality of color.

Not only were the walls of each and every building done so but there were flags of different sizes cracking in a breeze which swept seaward over the town to touch on us.

The *Far Rover* was brought to anchor some distance away from the wharves. Sigmun had disappeared into his cabin, only to come out again wearing a mail shirt, a winged helm in the crook of his arm. He had given us all the instructions he had learned from ship records. We did not go ashore without invitation and we might have a long wait for the delivering of that. Those of Yarn moved only to their own customs and made no exception for any visitors.

The *Wave Skimmer* moved in to anchor a couple of ship lengths away. We watched them also lower the trade flag to raise it again with a streamer of white now above it. We could see people on the wharves but none of these appeared to halt what they were doing to even glance in our direction. Clearly one cultivated patience here. I had near decided that we were going to be ignored forever when a group came along the wharf nearest the *Far Rover* to embark in a boat which skilled oarsmen sent through the water at a good pace towards us.

Despite the color of their city those in the boat were dressed uniformly in a silver-grey and they all wore strange headgear in which a pointed cone was the center of a securely wrapped length of scarf thick enough in the overfolding to shield most of their faces.

At first I thought they had well-weathered skin much as a far-voyaging Sulcar would show. Then I saw that their color was so uniform they must naturally be dark of countenance. All but one of them sprouted a nubbin of beard on the projection of the chin and their eyes were unusually large and also dark—being artificially elongated by black marks on the skin curving upward toward temples. Though I thought the Sulcars were tall, these Vars appeared to unlatch a spring within their thin bodies as they got to their feet, one by one, to catch at the rope ladder Sigmun had ordered over the side. When they reached the deck the shortest of the party of four who had come to receive us was almost half a head taller than the captain.

They looked to neither the right nor the left, concentrating on Sigmun and his first mate. Before him they spaced themselves in a line so straight they might have been measuring it by their toes planted along one of the cracks between the boards.

There were doubtless differences among them. However, at first meeting, they looked so much of a match, one to the next, that they might well have been deliberately patterned to do so—like the manikins which are sold at fairs in High Hallack at harvest time.

Captain Sigmun and his mate saluted them with hand held up, palm out in the universal sign for peace. However, they made no reply in kind. One of their company spoke then, using that broken trade speech which the Sulcars had devised early on their meeting with other peoples.

"Ship come—why?"

Sigmun pointed upward to where our flags played, snapping in a breeze growing ever more brisk.

"Trade." He was as terse as those from the city.

They had been inspecting our company unblinkingly. It seemed to me that their gaze was not so much for the Sulcars but rather centered on those of us who were not members of the crew. Kemoc had followed Sigmun's example and wore mail, cradling his helm against one hip. Orsya's scaled, tight-fitting garment was covered by an unbelted robe of so light a blue that it was near the same silver as her scaled garb, which showed as the wind flapped the robe's skirts, as if striving to drag the whole thing from her shoulders. I had made no alteration in my own garb and looked quite drab, which had long been my portion in any company. A very lean purse does not warrant anything more than durability. My hair was sheared short at shoulder level and, though I had no mail, there was a serviceable long knife in sheath at my belt.

"Who?" The leader of the Vars pointed directly to us. There might have been curiosity in his ocular examination of us, but there was certainly no warmth or any alteration of expression on his features.

"Lord Kemoc, Lady Orsya, and... Destree," Sigmun answered with the fewest possible words.

They were silent and motionless, except for the spokesman, who stretched forth one hand. There was what appeared to be a round stone resting in the hollow of his palm. At first sight it was as silver-grey as the garments they wore. Then it began to change color, at the same time giving off a glow which tinted the flesh on which it rested. Blue, and the intensity of that hue grew more dramatic in less than a breath of time.

The owner swung his arm in a short arc. Now the stone pointed directly at Kemoc. The blue appeared to fade a fraction, but it did not altogether withdraw. The second swing was toward Orsya and the color rippled across the surface of the indicator as a stream might ripple across some pebble in its bed. At last it was before me. At first the color faded even further than it had with Kemoc, but an instant later it came flooding back until there was such light that it might have given off a lamp's radiance.

At the same time the amulet beneath my shirt warmed, the warmth rising to the heat of stone new-raked from the fire, so I was forced to fumble and bring it away from my skin into the open. Its honey shade might have been a fire of golden flame to answer that of the blue.

The man from Yarn was plainly astounded, as were those with him. I saw the serenity of their faces crack and astonishment break through their indifference. He uttered a stream of words as if he voiced an incantation or a formal greeting. Then he clapped his other hand over the stone, hiding it from view. Toward me he inclined his head, a gesture copied by the three others with him. Then to my surprise he pointed directly at me and made a question of one word.

"Trade?"

Did he wish my amulet? Or did he wish me? I wanted to try mind touch, but was too cautious to attempt that with a race who might not be so gifted and so would believe it an invasion which would then endanger any rapport.

I left it to Captain Sigmun to answer since it was he in this instance who headed our small command. The brilliance of the amulet was withdrawing being no longer confronted by the stone. I had no intention of parting with it since it was to me an abiding weapon against the Dark in my own thoughts, a promise that however I might have been fathered I was not a daughter of evil.

"Ask it of her." The captain deftly passed decision to me. The leader of the Yarn deputation appeared disconcerted, as if they had fully expected Sigmun to be in full control of all. However, obediently, the spokesman looked again directly to me expectantly.

In answer I deliberately slipped the amulet back beneath my shirt to rest warm between my breasts. Then I strove to carefully select words from the trade lingo as I had picked it up during my journeying.

"To me only—Power." That that word might mean as much here as it would in the north, I had no way of telling. One never does claim any hold on Power which cannot be proved should the need arise. Perhaps even here they might have heard of the Witches, even though the Council had no records of Yarn. Would they deem me a Witch and so expect from me what one of those dedicated and withdrawn personages might do? That would be fatal for all of us. Yet I must make sure that the amulet remained mine and not a thing to be bartered for. Power comes by the choice of some one or thing greater than any born of flesh, bones and blood, and to the one any such is given has to bear the weight of it without question—or in some cases relief. I would not, could not, part with that. Luckily I felt no touch of any mental probe. However, at the same time, I sensed that they had accepted my refusal and would not quarrel with it. In-stead, to my discomfort, they turned nearly as one and bowed, touching the bands across their foreheads, their lips, and finally their breasts in what was undoubtedly a form of very formal recognition or greeting.

Then the spokesman looked again to Sigmun.

"Trade," he said once more and this was uttered as half order, half promise. Turning again a little from the captain he once more gazed full-eyes at me and added:

"To Asbrakas, High One—" It was not quite an order but it was certainly a summons which he did not expect to have refused.

We had talked of Yarn before we had sailed. Since the Sulcars had found it to be most southern of all the lands they knew in which there was a native civilized people, it had been decided that if we could we must learn what was known there which could pertain to the mystery we sought. Did the Vars know of the derelicts? Had they any tales of volcanoes or any other strange things about the sea? That I should not refuse this invitation was plain.

"I come—" I agreed.

Orsya caught at my sleeve. "Not alone!"

I looked at her and at Kemoc, who was frowning as he watched the speaker. Had I any right to involve others if this was a trap of a kind, if that speaker had meant not my amulet but *me* when he had said "Trade"?

"She is right." That was Kemoc. "After all, they have tested us and I believe that we have passed some ordeal. They cannot object to three of us when they have a whole city to face us down."

So I pointed to Orsya and then to Kemoc and I said. "With these—we come."

For the first time I saw the Vars leader blink but he did not refuse. Kemoc spoke to Sigmun:

"Let my father know what we do."

The captain eyed each of us, and the gaze he turned on me was as chill as an ice-dotted northern sea. It was plain that he was yielding against his own will when he nodded and stood aside. The Vars also made way for us so that we descended first into their boat, they following after.

Oars flashed, sending the light craft shooting for the quay from which it had earlier come with nearly the speed of a dart. That rainbow of a city loomed higher and higher above us as we approached the shore so that now we were able to see that it had not really been erected on any level ground but arose by tier as if each line of colorful buildings was a step in a great stairway. We landed and walked along the wharf to the width of pavement which separated the first line of buildings from the curling waves.

There was not only the color to set those apart from other cities I knew. This close we could see that doorways and every window opening were surrounded with a wide band of intricate carving. The base was a pattern of vines but what sprang on stems from that innermost representation were circular designs—not like flowers but rather discs very closely engraved with lines which could be runes.

There were no streets as we knew them in Es City, rather steepish ramps which had a landing at each level of the buildings and then ran as a level way from each side of that central rise. Here were indeed people but we moved as if we were invisible, none turning their heads, or pausing to watch us pass. All we saw were men. It was as if this was some Falconer Eyrie in which no female dared ever set foot.

Windows facing the way of our climb were curtained. Yet I saw one of those curtains twitch as if there were the watchers who were indeed interested in strangers.

At weary length, for the necessity of climbing those steep ramps wore at our muscles so long had we been at sea, we came to the topmost level. Here were buildings three times or more the size of those below and their walls might have been of burnished gold, for the paint here gave back a glitter.

Two, which were the largest, fronted the space at the top of the ramp. We were pointed to that on the left-hand side, once more to face steps, a wide flight of them rising to a columned space. Those columns also were entwined with the same intricate carving we had seen below, these, if it were possible, even more tightly designed. Between such was an open doorway for which there appeared to be no gate nor guard.

The spokesman of the party which had brought us hither stood aside indicating that from here on we were to go unescorted. So we climbed, not hurrying our pace, in fact taking time to look about from side to side.

I had none of that warning which comes to those in the battered northern lands where, through centuries, the Light and the Dark have battled. There was none of the sickish effluvia which assaulted nose and nerves when the Dark was near.

Longing very much to release a probe of mind send I came to stand before that opening. Though the sun gave us a full light here there was no light ahead—perhaps some curtain denying that hung there. Yet I could see no hint of such. To be sure I drew the amulet once more into the open. As it had when confronted by the stone of the spokesman it began to glow.

Then—the suddenness of it nearly sent me stumbling back—there sounded a single great brazen note. I have heard the small gongs which the Sulcar seeresses use when they call upon a favoring wind after a ship has been too long becalmed. However this sound was the gathering of a multitude of such notes, combining them all into one mighty burst.

Kemoc was shoulder to shoulder with Orsya. His hand was on the hilt of his sword in reaction to that sound which must have shattered all calm in the city. I saw the Krogan girl's hands move in a suggestion of waves upon the surface of a stream. We did not even exchange glances but I was aware that they were one with me here and now. Three abreast we approached the cavern of the entrance.

There was indeed dark—not a tangible curtain such as one could grasp with the hands and hold aside—rather one like water into which one had dived—swallowing us up to keep on going blindly ahead.

We had taken perhaps four strides when we stepped out of the dark as easily as we had entered it.

There was light enough, though not as clear and bright as the sun outside. It hinted of the moon rather than the sun but still it awakened brilliant beams of rainbow light from all about us. For we stood in a single huge hall or room, and, surrounding us, was the work in glass which had made Yarn famous ever since the first Sulcar trader had brought evidence of it back to the north.

The walls had niches and in each of these was some wonder, while the shaded colors of the city without were reflected like gem lustre from each piece. In addition to these embowered along the walls there were pillars scored with color, around which wound vines with leaves here and flowers seeming so delicate that they might be shattered by a very breath on them. I thought that all the best which could be produced by the workers of Yarn was here visibly enshrined.

At the far end of the huge chamber was something unlike all else which kept it company. We found ourselves hurrying, for there was something about the glimpse we had of that which drew us. Then we came to a halt and I think that all of us gave an exclamation of wonder.

Here a throne of green-blue glass, transparent in spite of its rich color, stood high-backed. It was occupied by a figure which was enwrapped in bands such as formed the headgear of the Vars we had seen. These were of silver-grey and soft enough to show the contours of the figure they were intended to conceal. It was plainly that of a woman, but even the head and face were wound about and its blindness was somewhat daunting as we looked upon it.

Only the hands were free, and those were held level with the breast of the enwrapped one. On the side-by-side palms there rested a stone four, six times larger than that used to test us on shipboard. It was crystal clear at first, then small swirls of color moved in it as if it were a vessel holding water and that water answered to some disturbance.

Chapter 7

During my wanderings I had seen other statues which might once have represented the Power for forgotten peoples. Still this one, so enveiled from sight, gave an impression, not of being fashioned by the hands of others, but rather of a living thing entrapped and hidden. Certainly that which sat there could not be alive so bound with only long, slender hands bare, slightly greenish perhaps because of the reflection of its throne, remaining as still as if they, too, were indeed carven.

Why we had been sent to observe this goddess or ancient ruler, or whatever the seated one represented, we had been given no hint. I glanced at my companions and saw Kemoc's lips moving, though I heard nothing, and I did not try to make mind contact. He might have been calling upon some Power which he had known in Escore. Orsya continued to move her hands in the pattern of the gliding

current of a stream.

As for me—here my limited talents gave me no chance at learning what we might face. Farseeing and foreseeing—neither were of use. However, once again I brought forth Gunnora's amulet and fire blossomed in the heart of it. While that swirl of color within the great stone the enthroned figure held grew brighter, and wove a faster pattern within the boundaries which contained it.

I might well be holding one of the ancient light balls of Es City so did Gunnora's gift glow. Always that was matched by the glory of the huge gem the hidden one held.

Once more, out of the very air about us, sounded that great boom of some gigantic gong—a sound strong enough to make our ears ring. The surface of the strange gem was certainly expanding, or else we had been subtly ensorcelled to see it so. Out of its heart burst a fountain of rainbow light which trembled, rose and fell as might the water which fed the fountains we knew. Up and up, now a portion of it was directly opposite the band-hidden face of the sitter. It climbed again, and spread as it climbed, a constant flowing light which was nearly akin in girth to the columns of the hall behind us.

Then it leaped!

The beam faced Kemoc for a dazzling instant, swept on to confront the Krogan girl, and last of all fronted me. But there was no danger in it—rather a welcoming as if something long banished from all it knew stood now before the entrance to its own place and joyfully came home.

A tendril of that blue-green flame was outflung, the very tip of it touching for only a breath space of time my amulet. Within that I felt movement, not that Gunnora's gift wished to *be* free to leave me, but rather that a part of it hailed something akin. My pendant stone might be lips sucking at liquid which was not only new to it but which promised nourishment beyond any it ever hoped to have.

While I—sight entered my brain, not because I summoned it but because I was the vessel made to hold certain Power. Much of what I saw I could not understand for it came in the form of waves of color, whirling, self-knitting, self-loosening again. What I did know was that this was truly of the Light though of another kind, which on this earth had been in exile and which now had found heart-kin.

The fountain leaped again, up and up. Our heads went back on our shoulders drawn by the rise. Up and up— About us the glass enhancement of the hall beamed out in answer.

Then-It was gone! As a flame might be blown out by a gust of wind, the fountain vanished. Only where before Gunnora's gift had gleamed gold when awakened, it now rippled with added hues—green, blue. While from it there poured into me sensations I could not set name to. For the first time wariness, the shadow of fear, pricked at me. I was too ignorant; this was too alien to find easy berth in me. Both physically and mentally I flinched. For a moment or two I wanted to turn and flee from this place, to shed my amulet and leave it with the silent one, refusing what it might have now to offer me.

For the third time the gong note sounded. This time it was followed by a reverberating echo which I dimly felt must ring through all Yarn. That gem which the seated one held was colorless, not even the reflection of the throne could now tinge it slightly.

Around us there was a dimming, deadening of the glitter from the glass. But there was more, too. That figure on the throne—the bands which cloaked it were looser, or else that which those covered was losing substance. The body outlined only moments earlier had had the seeming of concealing firm flesh, youthful contours. Now there was a shriveling as if age had suddenly struck where it had been long

refused touch.

The two hands suddenly fell to the lap though they did not loose hold upon the gem. Now the ball of the head nodded forward until that which must mark the chin rested on the breast.

Who was I watching that change? I was disoriented, confused. Taking two steps forward I was now within touching distance of that figure. Was it about to crumble into nothingness? If so what penalty would be wracked upon the three of us for the dissolution of what or who must be an awe-producing figure to Yarn?

I grasped the amulet tightly and ducked my head to loose its cord. Then, guided by something outside any conscious act, I held out Gunnora's gift and allowed it to dangle down, to lie upon the surface of the deadened gem.

Instantly within me I knew that what I had done so unconsciously had been necessary, a gesture desired, a last test perhaps, set by that I might never be able to understand.

From where the amulet and gem touched there flashed a spark of vivid blue fire. Down into the gem it swirled, bringing with it life. Only the original color was now crossed and entwined with Gunnora's harvest gold. When I drew back, the gem lived once more, but was changed. However, the amulet showed no reduction of its own life. I half expected that we might again see a change in the hidden one, but that was not to be. It still sat, head forward, its bands loosened, its head turned downward as if blinded eyes could see, could search out what might be in the heart of that which it still held.

There came a light wind out of nowhere, wrapping us about, tugging at my short hair, raising Orsya's loosed locks. Softly it brushed against us. The breeze brought scents of growing things, all the richness of high summer. Such had I smelt within Gunnora's shrine; here it was even richer, caressed the closer. Then it was gone and its going seemed to have released us from that spell which had lain upon us since we had first been brought into Yarn's shrine.

We turned to retrace our way between those columns. I looked over my shoulder. She who was seated on the throne still nursed her gem and that held the mingled color which had entered it on the touch of the amulet.

When we came out of that palace, or temple, or place of Power, whichever it was to Yarn, we saw that our escort from the ship had been augmented. There was Lord Simon, helm on head, his fingers laced in his sword belt. Beside him the Lady Jaelithe, in mail and riding dress, her hair bundled into silver net after the fashion of the Witches. With them were more of the men of Yarn—and I thought I could see a far greater number of people on the ways which separated the tiers of the city.

I had not returned the amulet into hiding but held it up against my breast as had the hidden one once held her gem. The colors which had come into it did not this time fade, but swirled to the outmost edge of the stone hungrily, as if that light wanted forth into full freedom. I heard from below a murmur of speech and the crowd of

Vars divided, leaving standing there in plain sight a robed and cowled one, face as hidden as had been that of her in the temple.

Arms raised and wide sleeves fell back, showing the same long and narrow hands which held the gem, and above them rounded arms, so I could not help but believe that this hidden one was also female.

"Thrice blessing." Into my mind came that greeting. "Power calls to power, Light to light, even as the Dark can call shadows. Peace is not yet won, but there is now a beginning—"

"Well to Yarn." I made do with the best I could think of then. "Nothing have I done, only through me, through this." I held the amulet a little away from me, turned down my fingers so that all might see the light still within it.

"We are all but servants of the Greater Ones." The hands against the rich blue of the other's cloak were moving back and forth as if waving to me some tangible blessing. "That which is planted cannot grow, not even continue to live unless it receives nourishment and tending. We have been long without that which you have brought to us."

Now she put her hands together, bowing her cowled head, giving me such reverence as one of the Council would expect. Only that made me uncomfortable. Would she address me so if she knew what our coming had done to the hidden one within?

"To everything its season," she answered me as if my mind were fully open to her reading. "The guardian has kept watch for lifetimes, weariness is not alone for us."

We descended that last flight of stairs. Those of Yarn, save for the cloaked one, drew back.

Lady Jaelithe's gaze was for the amulet. She traced a sign in the air. There were lines as blue as those of the throne within, and they held for all of us to see. She looked now to me.

"There is a burden." Her voice sounded troubled, as if she saw wrong instead of right in what had happened.

"From any act comes consequences," I said aloud. Yet I was aware that, in a fashion I could not find words for, the amulet was becoming, with every breath that I drew, a weight of which I was most aware.

The cloaked one put forth her hands as if she held them toward a fire for warmth. Though she did not presume to actually touch what I held. Once again she spoke to us.

"For every trade there must be something offered in return. What will you ask for out of Yarn?" Now her hands gestured as if she would include the whole of the rainbow city in her offering.

While I was moved, without any prompting I was aware of, to answer her. "What we would have is news— from the south."

Her hands were stilled and I thought I could sense wariness, a hesitation. But I also knew approval from those of my own company.

Then the cowled one nodded. She made another gesture which was plainly an invitation to follow her and she went to the right and the building there which flanked the temple in which we had visited.

There was a ponderous door which might have been built up with layer upon layer of thick glass, the whole infused with a silvery light. That was drawn back at our coming, though there was no sign within of any who welcomed us. Once more we faced a columned hall but all the decoration was of the same clouded glass vined with a silver brilliance like the shine of the moon at full— giving good light to a circle of high-backed chairs established in what looked to be the exact center of that space.

The cowed one fitted herself and the width of her robe into one and signaled again for us to choose our own, to be seated. While from the back of the hall there came three of the city men much like the others, only with gemlike stones on the peaks of their headgear. This trio took their place in the circle facing the robed one. As usual they turned set, expressionless faces to us.

Once we were settled the cowed head turned a fraction to face the Lady Jaelithe and, even as her hands had moved earlier, so now did those long fingers rise to write upon the air. There were three signs so made and that in the middle I knew though I had no Witch training. It was the signal which appeared on the door of Gunnora's shrine. The Witches in their proud ranking of Power had never called upon the Ever Nourishing One. She was of another time, one which, even with the opening of Escore, the knowledge of Arvon, they refused to acknowledge. Too far had they journeyed apart during the unnumbered years.

Only the Lady Jaelithe, no longer bound by their prejudices, replied to that with a like pattern. Though I was the more amazed for I had always believed that Gunnora's rule was largely for the Dales and Arvon, with only traces remembered perhaps in Escore and among the humbler folk in Estcarp.

"We have hungered," the cowed one spoke to our mind. "There has been dire troubling and we have beseeched a sign. This is the second year time when the rains have not come and in the fields seeds dry or their sprouting withers. To the will of the Great Ones we have appealed. But always there has come only a greater burden. Were it not for the bounty of the sea Yarn might be shattered and we all be as dust."

"From where has spread this troubling—from the east?"

Could it be true in the south Escore curved around the coastal lands a part of the proper coastline? Certainly there had been "troubling" in a plenty in that riven land.

"To the east there is nothing but the mountains. No, what threatens lies south. There have been many signs and portents of shadow. We have dreamed ill dreams. Those grow longer and touch more of us each nightfall until some who have been greatly afflicted are brought into the Place of Light that they may have renewing sleep outside the Shadow. The food from the sea, which holds us to life since our fields do not yield, is sometimes gone, and our boats return with empty nets, or within those strange monsters which can deal death with claw or tooth.

"Those who had sought farther for food have seen afar the light of fire rising from the sea. While all men know that neither water nor fire can hold together, that one must always conquer the other. There have been no traders in our bay. Six moons ago the fishing boat of Zizzar Can was passed by a great ship, wind in its spread sails to carry it on but no man tending those sails, nor standing vigilant at the steering—a lost ship with none aboard. He and his men would have boarded it to seek out the meaning of such a mystery, but they had no way of climbing aloft. Soon the winds had driven it on. But it came from the south."

"Was this the first ship you have seen so?" asked Lady Jaelithe.

There was a moment of silence and then the cowed one answered:

"In the Founding Years of Yarn 6783 there was a similar time and then there came a wind from the south, searing with a heat which lay waste all the fields just before the harvest. Then four of the fishing craft were lost and the crew of the single one of that fleet which returned swore before the Waiter that all steersmen save their own, for they had followed some distance behind the other vessels, had set a

southward course. Though they shouted and signaled no one on board those gave them heed. Nor did they return. Far off, against a dark sky as if some storm broke there but did not reach to Yarn, there was a fiery light."

"And how long was that since?"

"This is the settlements year 6810. But this time there is that added to the ill which was not reported then—the dreams, and five or six days ago the Mirror of Keffin Du, set to guard the south wall, cracked and fell in shards when the guards, who answered the alarm, strove to dismount it for mending." Now the Cowl indicated with a nod one of the Varsmen and he went swiftly toward the back of the hall to disappear through another doorway.

"What do you seek south? Are fields over which you look also blasted? Are your ships taken?"

"Our fields are fertile still," Lady Jaelithe made answer, "but to the west there has been a mighty war of the Light against the Dark, and recently we have been told that here southward are strange acts which may mean more trouble—"

The man who had left the room returned. He was bearing before him a thick slab which he bent over to place on the floor so that all of us seated there could see that. The oblong was of glass, the underside of it murky, the upper part clear. While embedded between those two—

I have seen some of the horrors of the Shadow as run in Escore and Arvon—or representations of such. But this was enough to bring a gasp out of me. It was surely not a bird—though it lay in its transparent prison with wings outstretched. But those pinions were not feathered, rather they had the look of leather. The body was neither feathered nor furred, but thickly overgrown with stubby upstanding points like greatly thickened hairs. However, it was the head which was the worst. That had the likeness of a demonic-faced, miniature human. The mouth gaped a little—there seemed to be no visible lips—showing four large fangs, two up and two down, in the jaws. The nose was almost as prominent as a beak and slightly hooked.

Though it must certainly be dead the open eyes appeared to still hold life, as if it was staring at us all, marking each as future prey. On the head was an upstanding comb growth of the same bristles as clothed the body, but longer, like a ragged fringe.

There appeared to be no arms, unless those were marked by the bones which stretched the wings, but the legs and feet were again obscenely human in contour, though there was a tail wrapped loosely about the knees.

"This"—the cowed one nodded to the exhibit—"was one of a flock of such. They came, as if hurled by the savagery of a storm, from the south and they attacked the harbor birds, tearing them to pieces, so that blood and flesh fell from the skies. "Having so wrought that there was nothing flying aloft save those of its own kind, they dropped landward—and they can walk. Into Yarn they came and our kin died, for it seems that, savage as their bites are, they also carry poison at the roots of those fangs. People of the city died before we could net and kill. And these we have never seen before—have you?"

It was I who answered her and it was with a name I had always thought part of legend: "The Theffan."

I looked up from that small monster to find the others all staring at me.

"Where?" Lord Simon's single word was a command for enlightenment.

"Nowhere," I was forced to return, "save in legend—in stories which children use for a-frightening one another. There were guardians— One we have already met in the sea. The second was described as this thing before us, save that it was alone and only one. It is out of Sulcar tales, but very ancient—near forgotten. And there was also a third—"

My eyes had dropped once more to the small horror imprisoned for all time. To me it seemed more than ever that those red eyes held life. Now they centered directly on me, as if the thing wished so to set me in its mind that I would never be forgot when a time came for a reckoning.

Chapter 8

We stayed a full ten days in the harbor of Yarn. Three times we spoke with the cowed one whose face we never saw and with the trio who seemed to be the lawgivers of this city. Meanwhile Captain Sigmun and Captain Harwic had the cargoes of wood brought out and there was brisk bidding among the shore merchants for what was to them rare and precious wares. Only what we took in return were stores rather than the precious glasswork. There were dried, gnarled roots which certainly did not resemble food but which the Sulcars ground and made into a lumpy meal which in turn was again dried into journey cakes. But there was little else in the way of food, for the people of Yarn were on short rations for another year.

There were coils of rope, supple and yet very strong, and the smiths of the city went quickly to work to cast bolts for dart guns, beat out long knives with cutting edges so keen that these might split a hair dropped from above. Also each ship had a second and a third row of containers added to the water storage and filled from the streams in the valley. For as fierce as the crop-parching winds from the south might be there was no lack of water which poured from springs in the mountain walls about.

All this preparation had little to do with us. Rather we gathered with both the officers of the city and with the fishermen who still went forth to draw nets and do their part for the very life of Yarn. What we labored on were charts taken from our ships—those charts which were so empty to the south.

Captain Sigmun sat in on one such conference and he asked a question that seemed born of all the puzzlement of the Sulcars who were such super seamen:

"Lord, what of the ship at Gorm, how can such travel without either sails or oars?"

"Because it comes from a world like unto the Kolders' home in this much, them who are native there had machines of metal to serve their people—"

"And you, Lord Simon, coming from this world, would those machines obey you?"

"No, for it is necessary to feed the machine with a certain liquid which is like oil to a lamp. Without full tanks of that it cannot run. And such tanks within that vessel brought to Gorm were totally empty. It might well have been that, once brought through the gate, the ship ran on until it had used all that which made it mobile and then it drifted until Captain Harwic chanced upon it. We have not the means of bringing it to life again."

"Then it was like those great ground crushers, the ones brought to break the walls of keeps which Alizon took to High Hallack. It was proven then that, while the Dalesmen could find nothing which would stop them, after a time they halted of themselves and did not move again. So that those of Alizon needs must

fight hand-to-hand in regular battle." Captain Sigmun nodded. " Things which are of the Kolder are evil. I trust that that ship at Gorm be taken to sea and sunk. Whether it lives or not it may have other hidden dangers."

As if he had called some peril by his words there was a sudden movement in the room about us. Two windows crashed back against the wall, showering dangerous shards of glass around about. There came another blow which set the floor rocking under us. Kemoc threw out an arm and swept his lady away from the table, even as the rest of us withdrew in a hurry from our stools. The ceiling was shaking from side to side, even as did the floor under us. Above our heads solid surface cracked and debris rained down. I saw a pillar actually bend as if some unendurable weight had been pressed down upon it before it broke.

Two of the Vars had blood streaming from face cuts. The glass, which was so much a part of their life, now shattered to bring injury and death. Then the shuddering under us grew still and for a moment only there was utter silence. Breaking that came cries of pain, horror, rage. I edged to the now open window and looked out.

It might have been that Sigmun's words had roused up those long-dead devices of the Kolder. Houses had toppled; Yarn could now be a city taken after a long siege. I looked to the bay and I knew I cried aloud.

A hand fell upon my shoulder, jerking me back and away so that Sigmun could stand in my place. He in turn cried out. A wave was coming across the bay, such a wave that I believe the most fierce of storms could not have raised. The Sulcar ships were in its path; they would indeed be lost.

Higher than the tip of the tallest mast was the sea. A hammer of water, it fell. We could see nothing but spray and ravening smaller waves. At the mouth of the bay a second wave was lifting—

Thus the terror of the sea fell also on the city, the water rising above the first two tiers of buildings to smash down. How many driven from shaking homes had been caught and swept away? When the wash of water retreated it must have pulled with it many of those who had been alive only seconds earlier.

I think we were all frozen by the very horror of what we witnessed. One of the Vars wailed, throwing his arms wide, rushing for the window next to the one where Sigmun stood. It was Kemoc who caught him and held fast against the blows rained upon him by a man who could well now be mad.

Sigmun held to the window frame, leaning forward, peering out towards that welter of water, now slipping back into the sea and taking with it much from the city.

Against what had once been the quay at which we landed there was dark wreckage, larger than any of the fishing boats that had been tied up there. And nosing against that, as if the two ships had sought each other when they had been overwhelmed by the water, was the second.

Neither had been drawn back by the rush of the returning water, nor were they sinking. The masts which had brought them, with wide canvas spread flying south were snapped, huge splinters arising from their decks to mark where those had stood. That any aboard them could still live was unbelievable.

Now from the city itself swelled wailing cries which carried all the sorrow of a stricken people. We went forth to see what could be done, Captain Sigmun to hurry down to his *Far Rover* if she were not now sinking where she clung against the wreckage of the quay.

That the worst of nature was not yet through with us was made clear when there came two afterdisturbances of the land, bringing more buildings, already weakened, cascading down, until to walk any street was peril. Yet all those who were not caught by death in Yarn were already striving to discover the full extent of the damage, to rescue and get into the safety of the plain to the east of the city all who could be carried, or could walk on their trembling feet.

We went to help as we could and became separated in the throng as we strove to bring entrapped living out of tangled masonry, call and hunt for any who might answer.

The sky, which had been open and blue before this evil struck, was darkening and there began to fall from it a shifting of grey-brown dust becoming so thick it threatened to smother us. We tied cloths wet in pools of the seawater over our mouths and noses. Those masks had to be constantly shaken free of the mud which resulted and wet again. And we carried more strips at our belts to be used by any of the survivors we found. Many such clawed at the ruins, trying to dig free some kin or friend.

Many of the dead and the badly injured were women trapped in the houses, for the Vars isolated their women folk in inner rooms and they had not been able to get out of their quarters in time.

I worked with a group of men, two of whom wore the tight silver suits, now encased in the falling ash, of authorities. They had ripped apart their head coverings, using the bandings to make the masks we wore.

The fall of ash grew deeper. Where the waves had licked it formed a firm cover in which we had to dig using shards for shovels. Only too often those we uncovered were already dead.

There was no end to what we did. As the darkness gathered someone brought a lantern burning oil and this was our only light. I grew weary so that my hands shook as I helped shove stones to one side, or used my own fingers to dig away the ashes so we might find someone entrapped. My nails were torn and the seawater in which

I wet my breathing mask from time to time settled into cuts in fiery torment.

We were on the first level just above the sea when I leaned against a half-tumbled wall to catch my breath, so faint that I could hardly keep my feet. For the first time I looked up and around, not keeping all attention only for what was immediately before me.

There were other lights visible, pools of fire here and there. We had by chance come near to where the quay had once stood. I looked out over water which I could not see, only hear in the slurp of waves against the wreckage. More lights showed not too far away—the ships!

That they could be still above water I could not really believe. Surely the wave had crushed them like eggs in a careless hand. Still those lanterns were clustered and swayed in the dark as if they were mounted on some standard which was unquiet.

"Destree!"

I blinked. The mind call had somehow broken through that shell of concentration on what we did, as if someone had grasped my arm and supported my aching body.

I was dazed enough to wonder if my talent had wakened only to deceive me when the call came once more:

"Destree!"

As one could recognize an audible voice so did I recognize the Lady Jaelithe. I pulled around a little to face squarely those lights bobbing above the water which was full of now waterlogged debris and I blinked as my eyes teared to wash away the still-falling dust.

I made my way in a swaying shuffle toward those bobbing lights. This was one of those nightmare dreams in which one is under some compulsion and yet one's body refuses to answer one's mind. Coming to the end of what was left of the quay, tumbled rocks and the wreckage of two fishing boats, I clung to a pile of stone and tried to see through the falling dust what lay beyond. A form rose out of the murk, climbing out of the filthy water at my very feet. A hand caught at mine where it dangled limply at my side and gave a gentle tug.

"Destree!" Not Lady Jaelithe this time but Orsya. And she was willing me to come with her.

I did not have energy enough to refuse so found myself floundering in water. Though I feared to be struck by some floating debris, a hand locked in the collar of my shirt brought me forward. With the ash so thick upon the surface it was like swimming through stew. Then a hand took one of mine and lifted it so that my fingers could find and curl around a rung of a rope ladder, as choking and coughing from my dip into the mud, I managed somehow to climb. Then other hands closed on me and I was drawn inward to sprawl upon an ash-dusted surface.

There was enough light here to see faces, that of the Lady Jaelithe and with her Kemoc, while a taller shape beyond must be the Lord Simon. I levered myself up and saw that beyond our small group Sulcar crew members were working to sweep up the all-present ash and send it overboard where a smashed bulwark made an opening to the water. I shook my head trying to loosen the mud plastered about my mouth mask while clawing to get that off that I might breathe again.

Before me appeared suddenly a bottle held in a steady hand and I managed to get that into my own shaking grasp and gulp down the sourish wine which the Sulcars used to renew strength, steeped as it was with healing herbs.

That was the last act I truly remember.

Lights tossed and were gone; I was laying flat.

There was an imperative call, a command I had to obey. Though every part of my body screamed for rest it was not yet to be found. Save, I realized through the fog that encircled me, I was not in body. Through no conscious order I was speeding nearer and nearer to a light brighter than any I had seen since we had entered the glass-lined temple. This was true fire rising pillarwise into the air.

It gave aid to the sighting of what lay about its base.

There was molten stuff, thick, pure flame-crested, as it flowed away from that stem, growing duller as it made a way slowly but inevitably into water. The steam from that meeting formed clouds as thick as those which might hold a storm.

There were other dark humps rising from the water. One long saw-toothed stretch still had water trickling from it, though this bore no fiery crown. I thought I saw some creature lying on it writhing in death. But of that I could not be sure.

It was not what I saw but what I felt which counted now. The use of Power, not that of nature's own cataclysm but summoned by some intelligence, sent waves out into the world even as the tidal wave had been loosed on Yarn. Power was here to twist and tear. I have seen a lorka, one of the men-devouring creatures of the north, caught half in a web trap yet fighting so hard with tooth and claw that it could, and many times did, free itself, to rave on against those who were trying to defend themselves against its rage.

Here it was Power itself which seemed partially trapped. The energy which burst from it fanned outward, to transform what lay about—even as once the combined might of the Witches of Escarp had turned the southern mountains to save their country from invasion.

Yes, there was Power here, hampered enough so that it almost became an entity which had a purpose and identity of its own. I feared trying to tap it, or to follow it to its source. That it could snuff me out as one pinches the flame of a candle, of that I was sure.

Yet that which had sent me—or had pulled me hither— was not content to let me linger. My farsight swept on, past the volcano lifted out of the sea, away from that glowing pillar.

Beyond was darkness. It might be an empty night, save that which still struggled to free itself wholly was still there. Upon that my talent fastened. I, or rather my sight, moved steadily forward. There was enough reflection from the sea fire even here for me to see cliffs rising from the streaming water. They looked stark as if they had been new made.

I wafted above them only to see that this was all high land, well above any wash of the sea. Far ahead there was a point of light, red glowing as might a coal in a dying hearth fire. It was from that came the surging, fighting Power.

Still I dared not test it, even use a fraction of the farsight to scan its source. The thing was too raging, too eager to seize. Yet there was something about it which grew into more and more of a puzzle. I had sensed Power many times before, even traces of it in individuals who did not know they possessed any such talent. Then there had been limits, curbs. No one I had ever known, nor heard of, would so expend what was a gift in such an awesome striving for mastership— For it had not been from a desire to rework the earth and water of its world that that energy had struck. No, the destruction was only the by-product of another need. It had been a flaw which produced the breaking of nature's bounds here, not the sustained effort of will.

Yes, there was a reason and that was only partly fulfilled. What happened to the sea along the path that force had taken was only a side product to its desire. Not dipping in it, but daring to keep in touch with that I could sense I spent farsight more recklessly. I knew now my purpose and need, that I find the source.

The rot of it came so suddenly I shot beyond and needs must return. There was very little light here; what lay below had a dead blackness which might form a hole reaching into completely nothingness. The farsight was not the same as body sight. I could sense-see that there was below me a structure of some sort, totally lacking in any opening, much apart of the rock on which it squatted like a dour devouring demon out of the spirit Dark.

Just that—nothing more. I hovered above it striving to pick up some emanation of identity, some hint of who or what was spilling forth that great blast of energy. There was nothing—save the energy itself. Yet I well knew that that was impossible; each hint of talent, and certainly this was far more than a hint, must have its root.

Still I was justly cautious and I would not venture into what might make me a part of the fierce battle. As my opposition arose I tried to build up the strength of that and return.

A goal—the *Far Rover*' . But that might well have succumbed to the wave. A person? Lady Jaelithe! As I had trusted to Orsya in the water, so now I trusted to she who had been a Witch and had infinitely more talent than I. Instead of looking to that dark blot mounted on ragged cliffs I pulled into mind, with all my effort, a picture of her.

Into me folded, strong in its way as the wave which had struck into Yarn, Power, as if I now stood under a fountain of it. Only I was not pulled back as I longed to be. Rather was I held steady. Then there came a second surge of the well-honed strength, a third, a fourth. I knew that all the company were united and that I was only the point of a dart aimed straight for that thrust outward which was striving to overturn our world.

As one we attacked. I felt as if I was a bird torn lose by a tempest from some firm perch, to whirl out helpless in a storm it could not ride. I attempted to stiffen, to hold. Somehow I did.

The cliff arose as I whirled, or was dashed earthward, and the sober bulk was there. Power—energy—but—life?

No matter how trained a Witch or a seer may be she cannot so lose herself in what she would do that the fact she exists somewhere else is denied. Here was nothing— or so I first thought. Then I caught it—flashes so quickly-found and lost that they sped like the sparks from a fire. There was—or there had been—true life, yes. But the force possessed the life, not the life the force. And to any of that talent that is as great a horror as was the dead-alive army of the Kolders. It was a negation of all which the Light taught.

I had not felt the Dark as part of this before—it had seemed neutral, neither Light nor Dark—more like a storm bursting by the will of that which we cannot understand and which is outside our learning. But that it caught within it those it bent to its will so that they no longer were in command of their spirits—this could only be of the Dark. How cunning and unnatural must be the mind which conceived this that it could not be detected—only showed traces of what must have once been beings of freedom.

It was my horror at that which brought me back, spinning through the nowhere dark. I opened my eyes and saw Jaelithe's face. Her features measured my own horror as she gazed down at me. Then from behind, for I was lying my head pillowed on another's knees, came a hand holding within it something which I could not see clearly but which was wiped first across my eyes as I shut them again, then my forehead. There was the scent of the sea in that and also of the land, herbs well dried after they had ripened under the sun. I breathed deeply and felt only thankfulness that I had returned, that I had not been lost, bearing the others with me, as had been those piteous others set rigidly to the service of the Dark.

Chapter 9

"The *Far Rover* had survived the fury of the sea better than her sister ship, though that was still afloat, but barely so. Of our number we were now less than half of those who had sailed from Estcarp. All the crew members who had been on deck when the wave struck were missing, as were some who had been wharfside at the coming of the water. Captain Harwic was gone but Sigmun had survived. Going over the injuries of both ships when the deep black of night was turned into the grey of day (we never saw the sun

and the ash still fell, though to a lesser amount) it was discovered that the *Wave Skimmer* would never be seaworthy again but timbers and parts of her could be used for the patching of *Far Rover* and her kin-crew voted by voice that should be done.

The fact that the masts were torn out of both ships was what concerned the united crew the most. Without those they could not hope for any real escape by sea. Certainly there was no timber in Yarn land which could be used to restep those. Nor was there anything in the city warehouses, those which remained intact after the quake, which could be substituted.

Three of the fishing craft rested now high and fast drying on the second tier of the city. I saw Sigmun and the chief surviving officer of the *Wave Skimmer* walking around those as our own small party started back up the ramps to the upper town. What had been learned during my venture in farsight must, Lady Jaelithe decreed, be shared with the Speaker for the Seated One. A force which could not be understood, located in the south, able to stir the very earth, air and water of the world itself into such action, was now an enemy to be considered. Perhaps what we had been through this past day and night was only a forerunner of future attacks.

Some of the city dwellers had come back from the open land. They reported a drastic change in the main river which supplied their valley with water. Where before it had vanished into a cavern within the cliff wall some distance from Yarn it now ran straightly, for the cliff had split, rocks peeling away near to the original drain hole. A Falconer on duty with aiding townspeople away from the city had dispatched his bird to scan what might lie ahead there and reported that the water now entered directly into the sea some leagues away from Yarn Bay. But exploration in the direction had not yet been undertaken. As long as the water remained within their own sphere the people of Yarn were satisfied. Also a party of them, driving their short-legged, long-haired animals up into the upper pasturage, had had a brush with the flying monstrosities which they had barely been able to win. The creatures dived to savage both animals (who were better protected by the weight of hair from which they were soon due to be shorn) and their herdsmen.

Two of the herdsmen returned with severe bites, already carried by their companions in poison shock from the attack. What care was known to the city was given them but they raved and tried to rise and win back the way they had come, their fellows saying that they had had great trouble in the early period after they were wounded to keep them from trying to climb the southern cliffs.

Meanwhile we sat in conference with that robed one and two of the city elders. I was enjoined to tell in detail my assay by farsight. A question was speedily thrown at me:

"This thing which you sensed, is it strong enough to strike again?"

"I do not know. Nor was I able to learn the reason for its outbreak."

One of the city councilors turned his face fully, so that his cold eyes were hard upon mine.

"You from the sea"—a small gesture of one hand indicated the whole of our shrunken party—"seek this thing, is that not so?" Unlike his fellows met earlier he spoke trade language easily. "We have heard talk of guardians which are to be found in the lore of your ship people. It could well be that you have drawn the attention of this thing, which is so unknown to you, upon Yarn and we now lie under its eyes ready for a second blow! The sooner you are forth from Yarn the more we shall be pleased!" There was enmity in his voice which was as chill as the glance with which he held me.

Into the silence following that statement came another voice. For the first time she who wore the cowed

robe spoke aloud. Why she chose the form of oral speech I did not know, unless it was because she wanted to cut any closer contact with us, in that she might agree with the councilor.

"You have sworn to the truth of this upon the very talent you possess," she began and I nodded. I had slept after my ferrying forth to use the farsight but still my strength had not fully returned. My mind I opened deliberately. If she wished she could so tap the mind send, know that there was no guile in that I had reported.

"One guardian met with you to the north, before you came into Yarn waters," she continued deliberately. "Therefore if that were a scout, or messenger, your coming was already known. There might be excellent reason for preparing this which has been sent against us as well as you."

Lady Jaelithe gave answer as the other paused: "Yet these flying creatures were not sent upon you after our coming but well before, even perhaps before we raised anchor in Es Bay."

"I have heard," the cowled one made now direct answer to that, as if she was now summoning all she could use as evidence against us, "that one among you found floating derelict a ship which was not of any race we know and that he took that to Es. Perhaps he so robbed a power of its prey. Have you thought upon that?"

"There have been other ships, and those were Sulcar, which have in the near past been found floating so. It is the reason for that which brought us south. You think that they could also be prey reft from some enemy? Have you not also lost fishing boats?"

There was a long moment of silence. One of the councilors moved in his chair as if he found it difficult to sit there, perhaps because he was near Lord Simon, towards whom he darted glances now and then as if wondering why he had come armed to this meeting.

"We have lost boats—and fishermen," the cowled one conceded. That muffed head turned a little in my direction. I wondered how she could see when those folds fell so low as to mask her face. "You speak of others caught in the full power of this force. What did you mean? Could you have called out the names and been answered?"

I shook my head. "There were sparks of life within that, yes. But none dared I seize upon. It was like a great net," I used an example of her people, hoping both she and the councilors could understand the better, "full of struggling fish being drawn swiftly at the will of the netter."

Once more the cowl altered a fraction and now its dark opening faced the Lady Jaelithe. "This farseer has testified that the all of you with the gift joined her in seeking. What thought you of this matter of 'sparks of life' supposedly netted by an enemy you cannot describe?"

"They were there." The Lady Jaelithe's hands moved, and there was meaning in their movements, though I could not read it.

Out of the long sleeves which hid her hands when she wished came those of the cowled one. She fitted fingertip to fingertip at breast level and then, in a sudden gesture which I was sure was one meant to repel, she swung the palms out as if they now formed a shield.

"You call upon that which I do not know, Witch. I am no spell-sister of yours! We be of different blood, far different. I think you indeed meant no harm when you anchored in our bay. But also it is very easy to believe that it was because you did so this mighty disaster came upon us. Yes, we have lost fishermen

and seen the coming of other evils—such as the flying things—and so, it has been recorded, has happened before. But never have we paid such a price to any power as was rift from us this time. It would be well for you to go forth from Yarn as speedily as you can, one way or another—"

Lord Simon broke in upon her now, with no sign of usual courtesy, speaking rather as to another warrior who had reported some peril to come:

"Our ships are not seaworthy. The *Wave Skimmer* will never sail again. Nor does this land here offer that which will repair the *Far Rover* enough to make it seaworthy. How then do we go? Men cannot walk on the waves and there is no path along the cliffs to be followed—"

Again the cowl swung and this time it was turned to the one of the councilors who had not yet spoken. He cleared his throat gratingly as if it were full of the dust which had fallen outside. His hands were resting on his knees and I saw both of them clench into fists as if he prepared to face some attack.

"There is another ship. . ." He hesitated and then swallowed raspingly again.

I think astonishment held us all for a moment before Kemoc leaned a little forward in his chair to demand:

"What ship—a fisher's craft? And where?"

"The spy bird that serves your fighting men has reported such. Near where the new river gate to the sea has opened."

"A wreck—" began Lord Simon.

"Not so, this one has not been battered. It floats well—"

"We were not told of this!" Lord Simon snapped. "Is it one of yours?"

"Not so!" And the councilor used something of the same heat in his reply. "There is still life on board, or so your bird spy has reported."

"Thus comes your means of travel." The cowed one spoke up quickly.

"Sulcar?" Lady Jaelithe did not ask that of the Yarn people but of me and I knew I must seek again.

I closed my eyes and strove to put all from my mind but a picture of the *Far Rover* as an example of what I must seek. Then I sped forth the weary power of send as a trader might work a sea jewel out of its shell. I felt the familiar sick queasiness which came when I was foolish enough to use the power again far too soon. The hazy picture in my mind grew sharper, more fixed. I was indeed looking down upon a ship. The masts were two and to their yards still clung fluttering tatters of sail. But there were differences between this and any Sulcar ship I had ever seen. It was smaller, yet not a fishing boat. Now it rocked a little in the wash of the sea but there was a reef extending which kept most of the force of the waves from pummeling it. Except for the loss of sails it looked to be still seaworthy.

The falcon had reported life on board. I could see no one on the deck—in fact that was in a state of disorder.

Lines trailed from where lifeboats must have once been hung. Delicately I probed, seeking that life—was

there someone below injured by the sea, left behind when the crew had taken to those missing boats?

Life—yes! But at the same second I caught that small glow of energy I also knew that it was not human. Nor was it of the sea, or air. Rather an animal and one that had long associated with the human. It hungered and now it hunted, tracing out a trail of another creature smaller, wilder, a traditional prey—or foe. I strove to sense that other spark also and then jerked away my probe from a meeting with sheer savagery. There were more than one of these—there was a hunger in them also, avid, and they waited for that which hunted, thinking (though their way of thought was so alien that I could barely touch it) to make the hunter food for their own empty stomachs.

I made myself pull aside from a coming battle, striving to rise from the ship itself, mark points of reference around it so that we could come at it more easily.

"An island schooner—" Lord Simon's voice brought me out of the seeking and I knew that once again we had linked and they had shared my picturing of that ship.

"You know this then?" The councilor who wished us forth from Yarn was quick to catch on that.

"I have seen its like—elsewhere."

"This then is a part of that which you have been seeking?" the cowled one asked swiftly. "You will be about your business with it." That latter was no question, rather a statement which was almost an order.

When we reported to Captain Sigmun the finding of the derelict he was instantly alert to what might be a promise for all of us. By main force of will he was able to get a fishing boat which had not been utterly smashed hauled away from the city tier where the waves had deposited in and into the water. It was still a damaged craft and there must be constant bailing to keep it afloat. Nor would it hold a large party. Thus we needs must split our forces.

Most of the Falconers who were left would march with Lord Simon, the Lady Jaelithe, and some dozen of the remaining Sulcar crew, from the inner valley down the newly opened river which now had a gate into the sea. From what we learned of the falcon's report the ship was in an almost landlocked, smaller bay now very near where river met the ocean.

Kemoc, Orsya, and I would go in the very crowded fishing boat fighting a way along the coast towards that same spot. We did not leave at once—the fishing craft must have all the repairs our Sulcar seamen could give her. While there was also a need for supplies.

Twenty of the Sulcars under the mate Simot of the *Wave Skimmer* must stay behind to nurse hurts, broken bones, head injuries, slashes left by flying glass. To my surprise those same city rulers who wanted us forth did not object to us leaving our injured behind. I believe that they thought getting rid of the five of us who had given evidence of Power was the imperative purpose now.

There had been during the night two more aftershocks, but neither did more harm than shake more broken masonry from precarious perches here and there. We had done our best to help the townspeople while Sigmun saw to the preparation of the boat, and I think that our services did not go unnoticed. Yet there was plainly a growing feeling among all those of Yarn they would be glad to see the last of us.

That fall of ash which had been so choking had been laid by a steady rain which heightened at intervals into a drenching downpour. But that washed away the ash, except for muddy residue in corners, and, having known the stifling attack of the dry particles, we were pleased enough even though we went

soaked.

That night we slept in the hall of the council chamber and not alone for many of the Vars shared our quarters. Tradition and custom had been banished by the catastrophe and their women came with them out of concealment in the inner chambers, many of which no longer existed.

-It was on the morning of the third day after the disaster that we left. Those to go overland included the majority of the Falconers, only two remaining with us, their falcons ready to act as scout. It seemed to me that far too many were crowded into the boat Sigmund had salvaged. He himself had taken over the command of our party as if it were his right, and none of us disputed that with him. We all, except Orsya, were ready to take our turn at the oars which propelled us out of the bay; two of the crew were stationed on either side of the bow to fend off masses of floating debris.

Within the bay it was relatively calm but once we were out in the open sea we found that the waves had to be constantly fought if we would keep on course. Luckily the owner of our boat had managed to save his single sail by furling it well before the quake wave struck and, with that raised to a brisk wind, the rowers were released for a space.

There was a stench of rotteness which the wind brought and we saw large sections of the ocean surface covered with floating isles of dead fish turned belly up. That some of the inhabitants of the depths had survived we had proof. For there were sudden whirls in those masses of the dead and gaps left where the already rotting fish had been dragged under.

I watched these closely. Very much in my mind was the memory of Scalgah. If that monster had indeed followed us south would this vast meal be to its taste, or would it turn its attention to the boat? When even the *Far Rover* had been shaken by the battering of that huge body we in this cockshell would stand very little chance. Still I hesitated to probe, lest by doing so I would attract the very danger I hope we might avoid.

The cliff line, as raw and sharp as ever, lay to the east as we sailed south. I believed that I could detect scars along the sides where more of that natural wall had been battered and lost to the sea. The clouds of sullen rain hid much except the general outline.

We bailed with a will, throwing overboard as swiftly as we could both the fresh water from the sky and the salt from the sea coming through cracks even the Sulcars could not caulk. There was a chill wind, and that, blowing against our bodies through well-soaked clothing, brought us shivering, choking and trying to wipe rain and spray from our eyes.

With the arch of a dull grey sky over us we could not tell the time. We had speculated that the sea party might well reach the point of rendezvous before the company using the river as their guide could arrive. Twice we were delayed by having to make farther into the open sea to avoid fangs of reefs spilling out from the land. On one of these was evidence that some must be newborn for there lay sodden and dead under the spill of wave and rain the body of one of the valley herd animals.

The Falconers who had come with us watched the cliff crowns narrowly. It had been the bird of one that had found that the river had made itself a new bed. Now he brought his feathered comrade from beneath the edge of his cloak where he had carefully sheltered it and, having adjusted the device strapped to one of its slender legs, he tossed it aloft with a hunter's gesture. The bird circled the boat once and then soared up and on, toward the cliffs. Once more we had to edge into the sea to escape a water-washed ridge, and then took to oars to send our craft east again.

Here the water was murky. I saw a tangled mass, which could have been a large bush dug from a bank, wallow by. The water actually stained across the sea. While that outward-flowing current made it difficult to keep on course. Then I heard Sigmund shout and saw him pound the shoulder of the man beside him.

Out of the gloom rose the bare masts of a ship. The vessel swung a little back and forth as if it was anchored none too skillfully. There was no mistaking it—this was the ship of my farsighting.

Sigmund headed our craft straight for it. About us the rest of the Sulcar crew, except those busied with the progress of our own boat, were eagerly talking and pointing. Though now I could see a stretch of broken rail, and the main mast was certainly shorter than it should be, this vessel had not been too hardily used by the storm which had brought it here.

With the practice of their craft, at which, admittedly, none others in this world could do more than faintly equal, the crew brought us alongside the stranger and I saw one of the crew women leap up and make a line fast to the deck, holding us beside the greater vessel. That done she turned around to look over the prize.

A moment later she cried out, and kicked furiously as something near the size of her own foot dashed toward her.

Chapter 10

Both the two who had joined her, a man and a woman whose width of shoulders well matched his, had their long belt knives out even as their feet thudded solidly on decking. I saw more of the small creatures darting out from what were places of concealment, as if they were sentient enough to set ambushes for the first comer. They were certainly alive, and, like that monster of the sea, what they projected now was ravenous hunger.

The nearest Falconer dropped his cloak in the boat to free his arms and then leapt on the swing of our craft to climb into what was plainly a battle. It did not take the rest of us long to join him.

Those things which leaped to draw red, bleeding scores across the bare skin were furred, nothing from out of the sea. The long tails trailing on the deck were naked of any hair and the open mouths showed teeth ready for attack. There was a shrill squealing of a battle cry from them.

Knives and the Falconers' swords bit down into that frenzied pack, hacking—hurling mangled bodies back into the mass of attackers. Those injured or dead straightway became the center of balls of their loathsome kind feeding both on the dead and the dying.

We cleared the deck, sweeping the last of the wicked things into the sea, only at the cost of ragged bites and wounds which Orsya insisted must be treated at once with the supplies she had with her, for such creatures might well have carried poison in their fangs. Where the fallen had been the victims of their own fellows there were only now scattered bones.

I probed for life as I think that Kemoc was also doing. There was nothing more which had that avid hunger to mark it for us. However, there was still life on board. I swung around to set hand on the mast near me as I sent out a mind call, putting into it all the reassurance I could project.

There was a sound from overhead, almost a wail. From the rolled canvas of a sail a small body

emerged. It was twice the size of the creatures we had slain, but I knew that that would not have saved it had that ravaging force caught it. This was the hunter I had earlier detected.

It swung around and began to descend the mast, sinking what I thought were good and sharp claws in the wood as it edged its way down. We had made a circle about its refuge, eager to see the nature of this other seafarer.

Once I had seen a snow cat of the upper mountains, a thing of sinuous grace and wild beauty. This newcomer was perhaps a third of that as to size and I recognized it as one of those animals known in High Hallack and Ar-von, an animal that, in the old days, had held a position of esteem with those of the talent.

In color this one was black as the eye paint worn by the town women of the Karsten ports. Though, when it jumped from its climb hold at last to land on the deck, one could see a triangular patch of pure white on its upper chest. For a long moment it eyed our company until it came to trade gazes with me. Then it uttered a small cry into which it was easy to read a demand for help. As the famished horde we had cleared from the deck it hungered.

I went down on one knee upon the bloodied decking and held out my hand. Slowly the cat edged forward far enough to sniff at my fingers. How it had come aboard this strange ship and what purpose it had here I could not guess.

Opening the larger pouch at my belt I pulled out a length of dried fish which served those of Yarn as traveling rations. This I broke into small pieces, strewing them between me and the cat. It set to eating at once. Apparently it found no harm in us and was willing to let down its guard.

Captain Sigmund paid little attention to the cat; he was already at the way which led to the cabins and space below. While the Falconers, bared swords in hand, and two of the crew were quick to follow him. I broke up a second fish stick and was content to remain where I was.

The rain curtain had lifted. There was still a misty feel to the air but we could see the cliffs which here extended into the sea offering some protection to the derelict—and also mark that brown ribbon of current which betrayed the issuing of the inland river into the sea.

Orsya knelt beside me to watch the cat. "This is one such," she said slowly, "as the Old Ones knew—truly a cat. Only it is smaller. Lord Simon said that such were also known in his world."

It mouthed the last scrap of fish, even drawing tongue across the board where that had lain, and now it sat licking one paw and using that to wipe chin and lips, plainly washing after eating. This was the first time I had seen one of its kind before, and it fascinated me. Having completed its washing it yawned, to show an impressive set of teeth and four fangs two above and two below well set to tear. Its eyes were yellow, almost the shade of gold. With these unblinking it continued to stare at the two of us as if it now awaited any question we could care to ask.

I tried mind send. There was no pull of hunger to be read now; mainly the cat was curious. But the band level of its thoughts was far higher than that I was used to and it was hard for me to make contact. Tentatively I tried a question:

"Who are you?"

At first I was favored only with another long stare. Then there grew in my mind a hazy picture of the

beast engaged in combat, tooth-and-claw battle, with another creature I did not know—not even distinguished clearly.

"Warrior?" I guessed

The battle scene did not fade.

"Fighter? Killer?"

"Black battler?" Orsya offered in turn. "Mighty killer?"

The cat's jaws opened to give forth a hissing sound. It was plain it did not consider us intelligent enough to reply properly—there was certainly about its whole body now an aura of contempt. The picture vanished and instead there built up a second scene in which our black find stood tall and several of its own kind crouched low about it, plainly in awe and respect.

"Lord?" I asked.

However, it was Orsya who found the proper word, mainly because, I later discovered, there were nonhuman allies in Escore and each of these species had a leader who attended councils from time to time. "Chief?"

The cat uttered another sound to answer that, a rumbling, throaty noise. It took a step or two forward until it could bump its head against the hand she also held out. Orsya dared to touch the fingers on her other to its head, rubbing the sleek fur behind and between its alert ears.

"Chief!" I echoed, this time aloud. Now it came to me for the same attention Orsya had given it.

We were still in the process of getting our communication clear and straight when those who had gone to explore the ship returned. The cabins showed signs of recent occupancy even as had those in the strange vessel brought into Gorm.

Kemoc had a roll of charts under one arm and Sigmun and his crew were already inspecting the stowage of the sails. Unlike that other ship, however, ropes over the side told of the embarking of the lifeboats, the ropes which lowered them trailing into the water.

Orsya slipped over the side and brought back the information that there was indeed an anchor holding it. Seemingly the ship must have dragged that until it caught between two rocks under the surface, the chain to which that was made fast now went taut or loose depending on the swing of the ship in answer to the waves.

Our searching brought to light other things. There was food aboard. Some of the containers had been gnawed open and their contents were long gone to feed that ravening horde which had welcomed us. However, in metal containers were hard biscuits and in glass jars we could see colored contents which might be fruit. There were also cans but the thin slips on their sides had been torn and the metal itself bore the sign of tooth marks. Prying knives opened a few of these and we discovered vegetables and more fruit, once a drink.

Though we were travel-wise enough not to exhaust this bounty in a single meal, we shared out enough to take the taste of Vars fish out of our mouths and mostly enjoyed the novelties.

There was still no sign of the party who had gone along the river path and we decided to wait them out on the ship rather than seek any possible camping place at the foot of the cliffs. Sigmun made sure that lanterns, a pair of them, were set so that any emerging in the river current might see them.

We made a more detailed examination of the derelict. There was clothing in some of the cabins—oddly fashioned shirts which seemed to be knit as the women of the farms knit winter coverlets. They had blankets but those had been stowed away in a sleek textured material which we learned resisted water and so meant a way of protection against damp. All which was found was carefully examined and put aside for future decisions.

The charts which had drawn Kemoc were again meaningless to the Sulcars who eagerly studied them. But Kemoc pointed out certain features which he declared, and Sigmun agreed, were like those found on board the ship at Gorm. The cat sat quietly watching our prowling about and annexation of the contents of the cabins. Orsya had settled cross-legged on the deck in the limited light of another lantern, smoothing between her hands a long strip of very soft material which carried a pattern of shells. These had not been stitched onto the cloth, nor painted on, but were a very part of it.

Kemoc was watching her, a smile about his lips, when Chief appeared out of the dark into which he had vanished earlier. He settled down beside me, that rumbling mumble to be both heard and felt as I stroked his back. On impulse I tried to contact him. Did he know where the crew had gone? What had sent them off in the small boat, leaving an undamaged and much safer mode of travel behind?

I thought that perhaps I could not reach him, and, then, though his rumble did not cease, I received again a hazy picture.

This was certainly part of the very deck on which we now sat. Tall figures moved at the edge of sight and then vanished. There was one who dropped down to sit even as Orsya now did well within Chief's range of sight so that she became clear to me. *She* certainly, for there was a wealth of loose hair, played with by the wind, and of a color which was indeed different from any I had seen, being far more red than Sulcar yellow. She had extraordinary eyes, huge and black, and one could not see into them. Then she raised a hand and brushed against those hidden eyes and the dark circles arose, she pushing up to her forehead what was like a mask under which her eyes were normal.

She picked up from the boards beside her the same strip of cloth with which Orsya had been playing and with that bundled up her hair.

I opened my eyes then and I reached out, catching the end of that scarf. Orsya must have guessed the importance of what I would do from my expression, for she let it free into my hold. Once again I could see that other woman. But there was something else—perhaps rising from the strip of cloth I held. I was suddenly aware of a compulsion. The woman I watched was on her feet. The laughing happiness which had been hers when first I had reached into the past was gone. I could see her mouth open as if she screamed, the lips shaping an ugly gap.

There were feet running past her. Now a darkness fell, though I also knew that that was no natural dimming due to the time of day but something else. She stumbled a step forward, her hands outstretched as if she had had both of them caught up in some unseen grip. She tossed her head, the scarf slipped from her hair, those strange other mask eyes fell away also. She twisted and fought. Her fear was like a lash reaching through the unknown between us to strike at me also.

Then there was a man beside her, his arm tightly holding her. I could see fear and concern in his eyes. Whatever possessed her had as yet made no assault on him. She got one hand free and struck at his face

and head, her red pointed nails grooving deep scratches down his cheek. There came a second man and together they made her a prisoner. Only that which was her inner core— that—

I broke the mind tie instantly. That could have been a bridge between the possessed one and me. She had a fraction of gift, untrained, unguessed, and that had opened the way for that which had fallen upon her. They who held her were dragging her with them toward the passage which served the cabins.

As suddenly as the attack had been made on her, so did it also snap free. But I knew it had discovered what it had sought, an instrument through which it might act.

If this had indeed happened on board this alien ship, how much the quicker could it come and perhaps conquer those of us who were the greater gifted. It must be guarded against.

I looked with the outer sight to Orsya and Kemoc and I could see that at least some of what I had seen and felt had been projected to them. My fingers were busy with the seashell-patterned stuff, rolling it tightly. Many things can serve as keys to that which we would have remain imprisoned. If this was such, it must be put where it could do no harm.

"Give that here—" Kemoc reached for the scarf. He held the roll as gingerly as if it might be about to burst into flame, and then he wrapped it in the nearest possible covering, one of the charts he had brought to study. Could any of those, in turn, provide us with other entrances into the past and make understandable what had happened here?

However, I was not about to suggest that. Let such decisions await the coming of the Lady Jaelithe. I could produce the sight but I was well aware that all the guards I knew against what might be aroused by tampering with the unknown were as a straw compared to the training of a true Witch.

It was late afternoon when the falcon which served as our distance eyes brought news that the river-traveling party was within a short distance of the sea. At that time there was a brief conference as to the wisdom of remaining on board and bringing them hither or leaving a vessel on which certainly something uncanny had recently happened and prepare to establish a camp on shore.

The only difficulty with such a decision as that being that the incoming tide had already swept far enough along to lap against the cliff foot and there was no vestige of beach where we might shelter.

Then we could see figures on the move, not at the level of the sea but some way up the cliff itself, as if they followed a trail laid on a ledge we could not mark from the sea. Thus, using the boat which had brought us here, the Sulcars made two trips in and out and thus, returning both times crowded, the whole of our party was again assembled, this time on the unknown ship.

We filled it past the point of comfort, but at least our refuge was better than trying to see the night out either in the fishing boat or on the cliff side. There was some stability under us, provisions, and the light of several lanterns, until Sigmun ordered those to be doused in order to save the oil which fueled them.

Once more Lord Simon identified the charts. Though this ship was very different from that at Gorm, it was from his own world. Also, he explained, this craft, as well as sails, had the same kind of machine which would send it forward even if all wind failed. It was he who led a most systematic search of the cabins and that space where the wheel and the charts were.

Lady Jaelithe came to me where I sat in a small corner of the deck though not alone. The cat, Chief, had curled himself beside me, his head resting upon my knee.

"You searched—"

"Until I knew what I might stir with such a reckless questing," I returned.

She seated herself opposite me as if we two were about to engage in bespelling, with perhaps a scrying bowl between us. The rain clouds of earlier hours had split and withdrawn to the north. There was a rising moon and it looked very bright and almost harsh as to light. To everything there is a twin—one light, the other dark. The moon is for the weaving of women spells, which we are born knowing if we have the gift. But there are also two moons and one can be pitiless. I felt that that which rose this night was one which might be named such. Even the light can be cruel upon occasion.

The silver beam reached across the waves toward our new ship and that brightness resembled a claw waiting to hook about us. I was cold as if I sat full in the blast of a winter wind. And, at that moment, though my hand on one side touched soft, warm fur, and I looked to one far more versed in Power than I could hope to be, I was caught up in utter loneliness of spirit. It could be that one from the other time and place, whom I had watched struck by a fate I could not understand, trying in turn to meet familiar things here.

Even voices which reached easily about us because of the crowding sounded far-off and the words which they carried had no meaning. That sensation of being isolated increased. I began to breathe faster. This was being enclosed in thick glass into which even the needful air did not reach.

"Destree!"

My name sounded very faint—far away. Yet the knee of the Lady Jaelithe was close enough to brush against mine. I saw some movement in the half-light. I swayed a fraction as hands fastened to the fore of my shirt.

Light, not that pallid moonglow, was warm and yellow as the rising sun. Warmth spread from the now free amulet to break that shell which had been about me, ever thickening. I gasped, drew full lungfuls of air, and was alert to my own time and place once more.

The Lady Jaelithe's face was lighted by the flow piercing upward from her two hands held a little below my chin. I knew that what she so brought out of hiding was indeed Gunnora's amulet. Moonlight could call that power, even though it was of the sun also. But this time it spoke for another moon, a lightsome one, not a ghost light meant to only arouse the dead.

My own thoughts surprised me. This strange otherness was new; at least it had never visited me before. Had I indeed retained from my seeking something of that horror which had apparently sent into madness the woman of the ship?

I found myself spilling forth what had happened and I knew that Lady Jaelithe listened with all the strength of her art.

"Not again!"

I nodded, knowing well what she meant. Not again was I to spread wide my gift without knowing what guards must be held. But I had a question:

"What brought the madness?"

"My lord has said that those of his own world do not cherish the gifts. Those who are born with them are treated with disbelief. They have no discipline nor training to aid them in the proper use. We can believe that this woman whom you saw was one in which some of the Power slumbered. Perhaps she was entirely unaware that any fraction of gift was hers. Then there came a reaching—"

"From where? And how?"

"And why?" She added a question of her own to the two I had already asked. "We of this day do not understand the gates. We believe they were first wrought by those adepts who were seekers. Those of Escore who are closest to the old ways tell of wars and struggles and that there were summonings which brought into this world strange things. A number of the adepts opened such portals because they themselves would go a-exploring. Only their gates, once erected, remained sometimes traps.

"My lord says that in his world there are disappearances which cannot be explained. That there is a section of the sea about which are legends of whole ships which vanish. His people also fly through the air—using ships made to cruise so—and those also are gone, nor can any trace of them be found later.

"Thus there may well be a gate. For there is no other explanation which so fits the new facts we know. And if there is a gate in action which is great enough to draw in a ship, then the power which has fashioned it and which operated it is a mighty one. The Kolders found such a gate and they came through it, not singly as has happened with Simon and some others, but as an army riding moving fortresses able to bring down walls of a keep or even of a town.

"We have seen the sea raised to a force to assault Yarn even as those Kolder machines attacked in the past."

"Do we then face Kolder once more?" Almost I could be at ease if she said yes to that, for the evil one knows is far better than a brooding shadow one cannot pierce.

"Simon thinks not. For in his time and world there was no Kolder. What we seek now is very different. But its strength is not to be questioned. I think that the woman you saw felt that strength and was greatly afraid, as well she might be. It was perhaps the first breath of that which lies beyond the gate through which this ship came."

"And she, those sailing with her?"

The Lady Jaelithe made a sign of protection with one hand.

"That we do not know—yet."

Chief roused and moved his head between us. His eyes seemed to glow in the night. I was tempted to try a second time to reach the past through him but I knew the full folly of that.

Chapter 11

In the end which was a beginning we did not sail south again with only one ship, or two—we were part of a motley fleet. The *Far Rover*, which had weathered the storm still afloat though lacking masts, could not take to the quest again, that was apparent. But those of Yarn had been persuaded to trade for the

more damaged *Wave Skimmer* five fishing boats. One of these Captain Sigmund, who now commanded by default the whole of the Sulcar contingent, sent north to ask for help in repairing the *Far Rover* and to convey also a plea for assistance for Yarn.

I think that the townspeople might have even hunted us out of their ruined city had it not been for their seeress, she of the hidden face. She urged upon them in one meeting, which the five of us were ordered to attend, the consideration of the fact there could well be some agency, rather than the haphazard overspill of nature, behind all their city had suffered, and that if there was such a reason for the assault on Yarn it should be learned and that speedily. It is always best to know as much of the enemy, before the onset of any engagement, which can be discovered.

The Lady Jaelithe herself went a-seeking by mind and contacted the Lady Loyse by dream control. Though Koris's lady had no talent of her own she had been comrade to Jaelithe so long that there was a mind tie between them and one which could be exploited if the need was dire enough.

Thus we could be sure that news of what had happened would reach Estcarp. Though, unless forces there could be talked into a perilous voyage, we could expect little in the way of immediate help. That we might abandon what we had planned never appeared to be in any mind.

Sulcars are born with a need to explore. The speculation that the danger which had taken so many of their number and one of their ships might be a planned visitation of the Dark had only strengthened their stubbornness. In the past they had wrought, even to their own sorrow (as when Osberic sacrificed Sulcarkeep to break the power of the not-dead sent by the Kolder), to fight against what were often apparently overwhelming odds. I knew that many of them believed that, in spite of Tregarth assurances, we once more faced some manifestation of the Kolder evil.

Sigmund put the situation into words when he bargained for the two largest of the fishing craft which could be repaired and made seaworthy once again:

"If this be of the Dark, and it has that stench about it, then will you think to rest here safe if you make no move to attract attention to you? Have you already been safe? You have spoken of your fishers who have disappeared—you have seen the fury of the sea and other portents. The Dark has such powers as can rack a world apart. For Power is neither good nor evil itself, it is only to be used, and it is how it is used that is what in the end matters. The Witches of Estcarp brought such a wrenching to the mountains of Karsten—though it broke them. Think you burning a mountain is any less a deed than what we have experienced here?"

One of the council muttered about Witches and Sigmund caught him up quickly.

"It is not Estcarp which brought fire out of the sea and all the rest to fall upon you here. But I say this—if a gate does exist, and it seems that is true, it can well bring further disaster upon Yarn. Think you that it might not happen again and again? We know that there is trouble in the south—you yourself have said that. It is that trouble which we seek. I have heard you say that trouble followed us hither as if it was a scout of the Dark—is that not so?" He paused to look from one of those gathered there to the next and the next, as if he were prepared to challenge an adversary.

"Very well," he continued when there was muttering among them but no hearable answer. "Would you not rather we go forth into the very face of that which threatens so that it does not need to cast its lines hereabout to net us?"

So we gained four fishing craft (counting the one we had used to reach the derelict) to form a fleet. The

derelict itself had been very carefully examined and some repairs made. It had, in addition to the sail, that manner of propulsion akin to that of the ship we had left at Gorm. But Lord Simon, having inspected that, explained again that apparently the ship had continued under that—and not the battened-down sails—until all the food for the mechanism had been exhausted and the fittings were now useless. However, there were other things on board which were an aid, such as those boxes which could set clear courses, the provisions we had already discovered, and the like.

There were records also and those Kemoc studied, the Lord Simon from time to time explaining this or that. The charts were a matter of envy to Sigmun, being much superior in every way to those known to him, but because they were of unknown territory those were no aid now.

I did not try to "read" again. The Lady Jaelithe herself kept very close watch on the seeress from the *Wave Skimmer*, a woman of middle years who studied me with hot, angry eyes whenever I crossed her path. I know she might arouse such anger against me as would have put me in danger, but she feared the Lady Jaelithe and would not try to cross one who had been a Witch and was still rumored to hold Power in both hands.

It was the Lady Jaelithe on our voyage back to Yarn from the river bay who impressed upon me the dangers of interference with the unknown. Only that I knew and had already accepted. Captain Sigmun agreed that it was best not to bring the salvaged ship into port at the city, thinking that its presence there could well arouse more feeling against us. It was the Sulcars who worked on the vessels, preparing them as best they could for the open sea. Their badly injured stayed in Yarn and Sigmun gave up the whole of the *Wave Skimmer*, with the consent of what was left of her kin-crew, to the people of the town so that their guild of boat builders went to work replacing the fishing ships.

Because she did have authority by the reason of her onetime office, the Lady Jaelithe seemed to have come into favor with the cowed spokeswoman of the council and, invited to share her quarters, took up residence in a suite of rooms within that impressive temple where we had faced the blind guardian of Yarn. But the rest of us returned to the derelict and there did such labor as we could turn hand to. I was no stranger to Sulcar ship tasks and was more than willing to help. However, what Sigmun asked of the three of us—Kemoc, Orsya and me—was the clearing of the cabins below, to strip them of everything which might have been personal possessions of her vanished passengers and crew.

Chief accompanied me on my work in one cabin, curling up on a bunk which more closely resembled a comfortable bed. I had found two bags or cases which I thought were for the carrying of clothes and it was into these that I folded and pushed all wearing apparel, also anything else which might have been personal belongings.

The clothing, which resembled what I knew only superficially, was of unusual fabrics which I examined closely by eye but did not touch except with gloved fingers. I was not sure that I could indeed be pulled into "seeing" by touch alone, without clearing my mind, preparing myself to be receptive. However, I was taking no chances. When I had done the two bags were filled to overflowing. In fact it was necessary to obtain a length of rope to fasten one. For I had taken not only clothing and the like, but also bedcoverings which might have touched another's body.

I thought I was finished as I stood looking about the stripped cabin. The bunk was bare to its mattress, even the small curtains meant to hide the ports had been taken down. I was about to pick up one of the bags by the twisted rope handle I had devised, when Chief uttered a sound which was not quite a mew but clearly intended to attract my attention. He was standing up on the bunk, his hind legs on its surface and his forepaws against the wall behind. Twice when he saw me watching he butted his head against that wall.

I knelt on the bunk to examine the surface. It was paneled as was most of the cabin, but when I ran my fingers across the wood I felt what I was sure was difference in the depth of one of the joinings. If there was some compartment there it was clearly meant to be secret and the trick of opening certainly was not mine. However, with the point of my belt knife, I was able to force a small door which splintered under my gouging to show me a very shallow recess in which there were two boxes covered by material very soft to the fingers.

Still kneeling on the bunk I used the knife point most delicately, this time to raise the lids, taking care, as warned, not to handle the boxes more than I could help. What had been so carefully hidden by its owner must certainly be of value and thus even more closely tied personally to the one who had vanished.

There was a necklace in the form of fragile flowers of gold, each given leaves of small green gems which glittered, even though the light was not very bright. The heart of each flower was also a gemstone but of a deep golden shade. While between two of those flowers there had been set a pendant as a curling stem of gold, more of the green leaves, and a single much larger flower, the petals of which were not gold as the others in that chain but rather a stone which was both blue and green.

I have seen cherished jewels worn by Keep Ladies in High Hallack, some very ancient heirlooms treasured by Old Ones of high birth, even pieces found by those who dare to loot ruins of the Waste in Arvon. But the like of this never. The second of the hidden boxes revealed a bracelet, or so I thought it, as the chain was too short for a necklet, a ring, and a pair of matching pieces which, by the hooks on their backs, were meant, I believed, to swing from pierced earlobes.

This was indeed a treasure hord and I hunkered down to study it. I knew what would become of the things we gathered from the dismantled cabins. They were to be poked deep as they would go into a cliff crevice and left where no taint from former ownership could reach us. But to let this vanish so—there was protest ready on my tongue.

For as long as I could remember I had worn coarse clothing, mainly the castoffs of more prosperous and less unlucky Sulcars. The few new things I had ever managed to purchase had been the very cheapest I had been able to find, for most of my scant earnings had always to be saved for food to carry me through periods of lack of one kind of work until I could find more. There had been Sulcar kin who had allowed me passage for one reason or another, or because my story was not common to the port where I tried to sign on. I had also labored in the fields with the peasant farmers of High Hallack, and helped with harvests in Estcarp, where, since the wars, there was a dearth of steady hands and stout backs. I had also ridden guard for a convoy of merchants or two—men who had not been wealthy enough to hire blank shields or Falconers, but who had heard of the fighting ability of Sulcars and were willing to take a chance on one, even a woman—all knew that the Sulcar women stood ever ready to lend their strength on any ship or to the fore of a raiding party when their people had harried Karsten and Alizon in the old days.

Also I had seen rich loot rift from the coffers of pirates and wreckers, yet never had I seen anything to equal this. While to pitch it into a rock-walled pocket of the sea—

Though I had listened to all the warnings, and knew for a fact that there was good sense behind such, still, at this moment, I could not even close the boxes to conceal what I had found. Unconscious of having willed it my hand went out to pick up the ring. It lay in the hollow of my palm and when I raised it so that more of the light of the port touched it, there followed flashing rainbows of light. Truly if this was meant for bait it was such as would pull any eyes, hold the finder with desire.

I turned the ring about with fingertip. It slipped up and on my finger. The circlet might have been made to my measure so easily did it go into place. Against my tanned skin where small scars left by field labor still were to be seen, where the nail of the finger which it encircled was broken down and roughened, it was not where its beauty entitled it to be.

Nor did I seek mind touch. However, that came upon me. I saw another hand in place of my own, smooth of skin—the nail long and oval, unbroken, and even painted a deep rose. Happiness flooded in upon me as just beyond my sight stood the one who had given these treasures to me. And between that one and me there was a binding— They wed in Estcarp with words, and in High Hallack by cup and flame, among the Sulcar by naming of kin-clan. She who had worn this was wedded. Not to garner treasure or higher-born kin but because there was that of herself which reached and touched another. Together they had been so bound that in many ways they were one.

The jewels were treasure, yes, but what their owner had to hold to her was even a greater gift. I knew envy, not for metal and polished stones, but for the fact that there were some who were able to find this happiness which lay beyond the tangible.

There had been no cloud to shadow that happiness. I saw my own hand wearing that ring reach out into the air of the cabin and I waited to feel my flesh grasped by the firm fingers of another. Then—

Even as happiness had crowned me without my seeking, so did there follow the shadow. There are many beliefs within the world. Some swear by the Flame which dances on the altars in High Hallack, some by the teaching of even earlier gods and goddesses. We come into life and we leave it—some early and some later, some in illness, some by the cruelties of war—some even by assault of the Dark, and those be the truly unfortunate. Because we are what we are we have to make for ourselves hope— we must believe that there are things—or personages— greater, wiser, more honest and just, than we can be, and that, when we make an ending, it is in truth a beginning of an existence we cannot, because of the flaws which lie within us, really understand.

She who had worn this ring as a symbol of happiness, who in her joy and contentment had dared to believe for a while that there could not be any end to what she held—the fate which is with us all came to her and ties were broken, the light was overcome by dark. So did her pain and sorrow swell within me that I found I was weeping, and that I have not done since I was a small child forced to face what I was and what I must expect— loneliness, hatred, and perhaps even lying down with evil as its handmaid, though that I would fight.

I drew the ring from my finger and put it within its box. Yet I also knew that I could not give to the sea this I had found. The sealed niche which I had pried at to open was plain for the seeing. I knelt on the bunk and rammed it home again as best I might. It still showed the marks left by my knife and there might well be need for explanations. I looked down to the mattress on the bunk. Chief had moved forward and was crouched, with his forepaws on the larger of the two boxes. He might have brought some prey to prove his prowess and now dared me to take it from him.

It was easy to pull up the mattress and with my knife point rip stitches there until there was a space. The cat moved a little, allowed me to take the boxes and those I pushed as far into the opening as I could.

This was folly—already my obsession with the jewels was fading, with them out of sight. Still the stubbornness in me was not argued down by any foreseeing. These I would trust to fate. If any found them in their new hiding place and took them to destroy—I hoped only that I would not be near when that happened. For I knew my protest would be quick.

Looking around the stripped cabin I could see nothing else of its late occupant which I had left. So I took the bags I had filled and carried them up on deck where I found a small mound of similar well-filled containers. None of the Sulcar would touch them. It was left to Orsya, Kemoc, and me to drop them down into one of the ship's boats. The Lady Jaelithe, she who alone I feared might pluck out of my mind that which I wanted now to conceal, was not there. I gave a sigh of relief as we were rowed shoreward and pointed to the crevice which had been selected to hide it all, perhaps forever. Hide it we did, making several trips back and forth across the small strip of shingle the outgoing tide had uncovered, to see the possessions of the lost into that which must lose them even further.

I slept that night on deck. Chief was not with me, which was strange, as, after my return from Yarn, it seemed he had taken liege oath, or perhaps kin-oath, with me and never strayed far from my side. Still, even with his warmth gone from beside my shoulder, where it had lain before, I went easily into slumber, nor did I dream as I half expected to do.

It was Sigmun himself who made the last inspection of the ship, Lord Simon and the Lady Jaelithe sharing his search, that no vestige of personal belongings of those who had once voyaged in her remained. I waited to be asked concerning the knife-gouged panel but there were no questions. Thus I was left a little uneasy. Not having the jewels before me to bedazzle, I began to think they might have been used in some fashion by that which wished us ill and perhaps I had opened more than a wooden panel. I strove to quiet my misgivings with the thought that if aught did occur in the way of sighting of the Dark it would be easy enough to pitch those boxes into the sea.

That I wanted the treasure for myself, as a fighter might conceal a better piece of loot from his comrades, that I was sure was not what ruled me. There was something else, a feeling that I could not cast aside such beauty on a mere guess that it could bring trouble. I looked once that day at myself in the burnished surface of a shield one of the Falconers had been polishing.

There was certainly nothing reflected there to awaken vanity in me. I was sure that if I decked myself with that which I had found I would speedily resemble a wild pony striving to wear the saddle of a prized Torgian stallion.

There did come to me now and then so strong a desire to look again on my find that I had to battle with it. I muttered, or thought out, scraps of the learning which I had picked up during my wanderings, and even took surreptitiously to sniffing some old and brittle leaves from Orsya's store of healing materials, those meant to clear the head and mind.

It was certain, I decided after the fourth attack of that need to seek what I had hidden, that it came the strongest at those intervals when Chief was by me. Though I dared not attempt to grasp any thought from him. However, I became very sure that the cat had some link with what I had found through his pointing the way.

The weather cleared and the days were fair. We had no more warnings out of the sea of trouble to come. It was on the twentieth day after we had set to work to prepare our oddly assorted fleet that we at last set sail for the south.

Once again, even as it had when we left the bay of Gorm, the wind was in our favor, filling the sails of both the salvaged vessel and the newly prepared fishing smacks. Falcons were sent above at intervals, only to relay the reports that there were no other vessels a-sea.

If Scalgah had followed us south perhaps the rage of the sea had been too much for him. I knew that Orsya kept watch on what lay under-wave but she reported nothing but the passage of regular

inhabitants there—only saying that there were fewer of these than she would expect. Considering the masses of dead fish through which we had fought a way in the first days after the disaster, that was not to be considered strange.

We did not go too far off coast in our voyaging. The wall of cliffs continued to stretch a dark rope along the horizon to the east. To the west there was nothing but open sea. The one strange thing which the crew began to comment upon was the absence of seabirds. Perhaps they, too, had been drawn away by the abundance of dead fish. I was Sulcar enough to understand the uneasiness caused by their absence. The hardy fishers in the ocean have, from remote times, been a part of all voyaging, and certain types of them—a snow-white, wide-winged one, for instance—were considered to be lucky. We had legends of such birds guiding storm-warped vessels towards land. I knew many ships that carried paintings of that breed on the main sail.

It was on the fourth day out that the falcon sent on scout duty came with a report of land ahead. Whether that could be an island or if the shore took a wide outward pointing here we did not know.

Well before sundown we could see a dark line ahead of us, as well as still to the east. Sigmun ordered sail taken in to slow our advance. Two more falcons went aloft. This time they returned with the report that we were bearing down upon islands. As darkness closed in, a lookout on the main mast announced there was light ahead but veering more to the west.

It only required the stench which the shifting wind brought us to tell that we were not too far from a volcano. Though there was no spouting of wild fire into the night air, as most of us expected to see.

Sigmun had all sails in, those captaining each of the fishing boats following his example. The moon did not break through gathering clouds that night and our content of the past three days was gone.

Chief hissed when I would stroke him, and padded towards the bow of the boat as if he would stand lookout there. I followed him, coughing at times when the breath of the distant eruption reached us. There was uneasiness in the very air and I think that all of us were on guard, though exactly against what I believe no one could say.

Chapter 12

Perhaps all of us spent that night uneasily. From where I made myself a place at the bow of the ship with Chief I saw people pass beneath the lantern glow on deck, and I had only drowsed a little when I was joined by another, and then a second—Kemoc and Orsya. The latter made plain her presence by the herb scent about her which even the acrid odor of the air could not banish. It was she who spoke first:

"What have you seen?"

I replied with the truth. "Nothing, for here I do not reach ahead." Nor had I even been aware of my talent since I had put the jewels into hiding, striving to make sure that I could not be trapped into using that which might bring upon us such notice as we wished most to avoid. That there lay more before us that night—hidden by dark—I had only to look to Chief to see, for he was crouched, staring outward as if, with the infinite patience of his kind, he did sentry duty by some den opening in which crouched prey he intended to seize upon.

Orsya dropped her cloak on deck. I had to guess more at what she did than what I saw, for the lantern

light did not reach so far. She was upon the rail and then she slipped over, seeking that water she must have or she would die. Kemoc leaned well across the rail but he did not attempt to follow her down. She was entering an element she well knew, one where he could follow with the difficulty of those who breathed only air. Still I knew that if they were not joined in body they were in mind, and he stood sentry for her protection.

I had laid a hand on Chief's hindquarters and now I felt him quiver as if he prepared to spring. Though it was perilous I opened mind. I was on my feet, the rising wind whipping back my hair, hand on knife hilt. No stroke had come to me from a mind send, an attempted invasion upon that level of contact. Rather there was that which I sensed otherwise. Even as Chief might creep upon his chosen prey, so did there steal out of the dark south a feeling which was like unto a tendril, perhaps testing for some point of weakness. Yet it was not of a living thing!

That dark shadow which was Kemoc stood straight, his shoulder near touching mine. His hand had sought steel. We waited; after the scout might come the attack. However, there was none. That thing which had made my flesh tingle along the backbone had vanished.

I had heard tales of the undead—those which the Kolders had slain in spirit and yet still used in body. There were other stories, as grim, of certain sites to be found in places where the Old Race was once young and powerful. Yet what had stolen upon us that night was not even so allied with our own species or could share our thought or feelings. If it possessed life, and I was sure that it did—or at least purpose which moved it—then that life was such I did not know.

Kemoc had ridden against the Dark in Escore. His deeds there had already become the stuff of bard ballads. My own journeying had not been so far into the country half alive still with nigh-forgotten perils. So it was to him turned my question:

"What is that, warrior?"

"Something I cannot give name to," he answered as promptly. "Yet it is such that I would not have watching along any trail I take."

"Yet so does it watch, I think."

It was too shadowed where we stood for me to see his war-broken hand move. On the air gleamed for a moment a sign, which first burned blue and then appeared to fold together into a blot, that showed first yellow and then red about its edge, before it snapped out of existence.

"So we know," he said quietly, but with the tone of one who had expected no less. It could be that in Escore he had made such tests before and been so answered. For his gesture was of that Light, and that which closed in upon it was clearly Dark.

At that moment I wondered for the first time at the folly which had brought us here. We had, all of us, from the first prepared for this journey as if we marched to an engagement from which none of us would stand back. Even the Sulcars, who fought clear of the use of talent, seemed to have agreed that there was naught else to be done but to hunt out what might be a long-held lair of evil. I had heard no voice raised in argument against what we did then, or a few days ago when we had put together this small and perilously weak squadron to go a-hunting the unknown. Had something reached all the way into the Council chamber in Estcarp marking us down and enslaving us without our knowledge?

I had faith in the Lady Jaelithe, perhaps the strongest of Power among us. They said of Kemoc that he

had been long enough at Lormt to learn even older lore, though he was reputed to depend more upon his sword than such learning. While of the talents of Orsya I could not assess what she might know and be able to do for she was of another kin. Now I broke forth with a second question:

"Have we been as mountain sheep led to market?" For certainly to some powers rumored alert in the past we might well be as the stupid grazers of mountain meadows.

"If so," and he was not denying that thought of mine, "we have yet to see the shepherd. Though we may not be far now from where such may abide—"

There was a sound which brought my hand up, blade drawn and ready, only to know that Orsya was climbing back out of the sea, again able to abide in the air for a space. She clambered aboard and Kemoc picked up her cloak to toss it about her shoulders. While I saw the motions in the dark which I knew was her shaking her hair to rid it of the water.

"There is emptiness below," she said. "Life is not here, neither wearing fins nor shells, neither creeping on the floor nor swimming. It is a place in which fear has hunted and gone, leaving nothing behind."

So she set a seal on our unease. Nor did she and Kemoc go back below, but we three dropped to the deck together to remain—not on guard perhaps, but waiting—and for what we could not tell.

Morning broke again with a dull sky, no sun to break away that greyness. We came slowly up to the islands the falcon had reported. There was no green growth on them; they were barren rock with traces of the sea still set as if they had been raised from the depths, and not too long ago.

Again we missed birds; such isles as these in the north provided nesting places, oft time so thick with birds defending their own territory that there was fighting among them and the screams and squalls keeping up an ever rancorous clamor. Here the land might be long dead and with no life touching it. As Captain Harwic had done before us we chose two of the fishing smacks to do the exploring, selecting picked crews for them with Falconers for in-fighting if the need arose. In one I was at the bow. Sigmund might not trust me, but since I was favored by the Lady Jaelithe, he could not protest and all of us were well aware that this was not just a matter of sight and sound but also of the talent. The lady herself and Lord Simon were to the fore in the other boat, but Kemoc and Orsya remained with the ship as our common linkage.

Before we pushed off I was startled by a leap from the upper deck and Chief joined me, once more crowding past to take his place at the very point of the bow. There was a linesman who heaved over a weight and called out the clearage existing below, and the captain of the craft stood by the wheel as intent on those calls as we were in surveying the islands.

We had chosen the eastern way, while the other craft headed for the western sprawl of islands. Both craft moved by oars rather than trusting to breeze here. Adjusting our course by the soundings, we swung around the tapering end of the first island. I felt nothing of that which had striven to touch us in the night. The world was as empty to my mind seeking as it was to sight and ear.

But we were barely past the reef which pushed out from that island when we sighted the first proof that we were not the first to venture here. Piled up, its bow lifted high on reef rocks, was the remains of a ship. Its broken sides were patterned with barnacles and there was other encrustation which argued that it had been brought up from the sea after a long immersion. To my eye the design of it was strange. The small square ports, showing along its near side which was upturned to the sky, suggested that, large as it appeared, it had depended mainly on oars.

We did not approach it closer, but it held attention for most of us until we were well by. Certainly it was a warning that one went this course with caution. The leadsman's voice rang ever louder as we left that reef and its burden behind.

There were other islands ahead. Also that distant line indicating the coast of the mainland appeared to be moving east, as if throwing out an arm to encircle these blasted isles. The next two islands were smaller but—save they lacked a warning wreck—were no different in general appearance from the first.

It was as we drew closer to the next, and that was clearly the largest we had sighted—that Chief growled deep in his throat. While I stared at that mound of rock hunting sight of anything which might explain his unease.

My skin had begun to tingle oddly. There was a shimmer which came and went as I watched those rocks.

Twice I passed my hand across my eyes as if I would sweep aside some veil. Now I heard exclamations from the crew behind me. The three falcons which had accompanied their battle-comrades uttered ear-tormenting shrieks.

I waved eastward with my hand, hoping that the captain would obey that gesture and take us farther from what seemed now to be wild scatter of rocks. As I had marked at daybreak this was a morning without sun yet from between two of those ridge rocks on the island came a glint like that of light upon well-burnished metal.

One of the Falconers sent his bird aloft. It spiraled about, well above the dark blot of the island. The communicating device which the birds wore should pass a message of what might be there—for clearly it was not the black-grey rock which caused that patch of light.

As we veered out of line with that, I became aware that the prickling of my skin lessened. It was as if that spot had been hurling out in our direction some unseen assault which had manifested itself so.

"There is a thing of metal there." The Falconer whose bird was scouting moved up beside me. "It is not like anything Warwing has sighted before. He will not go closer for he fears it."

"Perhaps some defense," I returned. Knowing that anything which one of the war birds of the Falconers would avoid must indeed be a danger.

"Defense for what?" Since I was a woman it was odd that one of the Falconers would even notice me enough to ask that.

Defense for what was right. There was no sign, save for that long-ago wreck, to tell us that any had ever been before us on such a journey. I could no longer sight that glint among the rocks, but still I felt the prickle of skin, the sensation that there was a-lying in wait a threat to us. The reef into which the island turned stretched well out and we edged along, depending upon the leadsman.

More islands ahead—and something else! I heard an exclamation from the Falconer who still kept his position beside me, although his bird had come in to his wrist. At first sight that which broke the wash of the waves was only another of the rock mounds.

Only nature had not formed this one. It was foursquare, fitting exactly the rock, on which it was so firmly

foundationed, to the very water's edge. I knew well the age-old towers of Estcarp, and had seen many scattered remains which outdated even those across the sea in the land from which the Old Ones had long gone. None of those gave such a feeling of the far past, and of the alien as this.

To our sight, from the sea, there were no cracks in the four square walls, nothing to indicate that it had suffered from either blows of nature or of time. The huge stones which formed it were still cunningly set, and the lines of the two walls visible to us were broken only by what must have been left by the builders to serve as windows, dark oval hollows.

Those were all on the upper part of the building. At ground level there were no breaks in the surface at all. Entrance must have come from above. The stone from which it was wrought differed from that of the island foundation. It was smooth, unpitted, and in color a rusty red—almost, my thought supplied, the shade of dried blood. The roof which arose three stories above the sea was crenelated, the narrow embrasures perhaps intended for usage by archers.

Our craft did not change course to approach it closer. Nor did any of us suggest exploration. One of the falcons arose again to bear to our companion in exploration the news of what we had found. I studied it closely. There was that which suggested at any moment there might be a face showing in one of those blind eyes of windows, or that we would hear the whistle of an arrow, such as those of Karsten use for hunting, the snick of a dart, released to warn us off. I longed to probe but knew better. Such an invasion might well awaken something which time had lulled into a stupor.

We carried on, past the tower island. Ahead was a scattering of smaller lumps of barren rock. Farther yet lay an unbroken dark line across the horizon which could only mark, I was sure, the swing of the shore farther eastward into some cape or arm of another bay as that on which Yarn had taken root.

We counted four of these lumps dotting the water, and two of them were surrounded by treacherous underwater reefs, so that we had to edge farther and farther west in order to avoid them. I think that none of us liked thought of that silent fortress behind us, nor the mysterious guardian which Chief had first sighted on the other island.

The silence of this part of the sea was oppressive. Yes, there was the wash of the waves, and the small sounds we ourselves made on board, but the wind had dropped and the single sail of our craft hung limp, also the absence of birds continued.

Just as my mind fastened upon that there was indeed a sound from overhead. Not the scream of a falcon but a hoarse, hacking call. There had come, seemingly out of nowhere, to hang above us one of those flying horrors which had harried Yarn. One of the Falconers launched his bird and that spiraled up to hang above the dark noisome thing which made a landing on our mast, clinging to the very tip of that seemingly by some hook claws in its wings. It screeched and made grimaces at us, paying no attention to the falcon which indeed sheared off, not dropping upon it for a kill as one might expect it to do.

The Theffan instead gave all its attention to us. Chief growled deep in his furred throat and left my side, slinking along, belly fur brushing the deck, until he was immediately below the thing's mast perch. Then he gave the scream of rage his kind would utter when faced by a deadly enemy. One of the Sulcar took aim and fired a dart. The thing, with an incredibly swift twist of body, almost escaped injury. However, the dart cut through a bit of the leathery wing, pinning it fast to the mast while the thing shrieked and thrashed, striving to win free.

There was a froth dripping from its jaws. I thought of venom and was about to urge the crew back, for several had joined Chief at the foot of the mast, when he who captained our expedition warned them off.

Dark blood splattered at each wing jerk, then the creature tore loose. It strove to mount, the falcon flying in wary rings just out of reach, but the tear in the wing seemed to prevent that. Fighting hard for altitude it coasted instead down toward the sea, but with a last effort it won to a hard landing on one of the rocky islets. It was screaming with rage and pain and its clamor filled the air. The falcon circled, and then swiftly it checked the second round of its flight and came arrow true back to its comrade.

Though the first of the winged things had appeared so suddenly, we had warning of the coming of its fellows. They skimmed in from the south as a flock, giving voice to cries as they swept down at the ship. Then we were fighting, striving to defend ourselves from these flying menaces. Swords scored as they swung upward, but I heard one man scream and saw him put hand to eyes, blood spurting between his fingers. Two dropped for Chief and, I think, would have taken him aloft. I cut the head of one from its hunched shoulders and the same blow continued on to slice at one of the other's wings. For some reason they did not come at me straightly as they flew at the others. I did not have time to think of anything but the fight at hand. The Falconers in their mail, and those helms with the metallic throat veils, were better prepared for them. Two stood one on either side of the wheelman, using sword and shield not only to protect themselves but in addition see that no harm reached him.

There was a scream piercing enough even to sound through the cries of our attackers. I saw the leadsman fall into the water. Twice I struck out at the enemy to reach the rail and then went over after him.

The water was murky and warmer than I expected to find it. But I got my one hand on the collar of the fellow's stiff shirt and brought his head up far enough for him to get a full breath.

We must keep afloat on our own, for there was perhaps no one on board who had seen our swift exit from the fight, or had time to drop us a rope. The smooth side of the ship offered no handhold—our nearest chance was one of those dots of rock which were part of the sprawl of small islands. Towing the crewman I headed for the nearest. Sulcars swim as well as any fish—or that is their boast. With most of their lives spent at sea, that was part of their heritage. But the one I now companied made only feeble efforts to aid himself. At least he had not clutched me in full panic.

I encountered rock sharp enough to tear through one leg of my breeches and felt the teeth of that outcrop even more as I dragged myself up to a position from which I could turn and pull the other behind me. He no longer made any effort to help himself and I found it an almost impossible task to get him out of the water, lying on his back. His eyes were open but fixed on the sky above as if he were aware of nothing. There was a long wound reaching from forehead to jaw along one cheek. That bled the more with every movement his supine body made as I tried to drag him higher. On his throat was a second gap in the flesh and that oozed freely. I put fingers to that and strove to halt the loss of blood while I looked up and around to sight the ship.

I had not thought that our struggle in the water had brought us so far but the craft where the battle still raged was a good way from our perch. Now I eyed the air for any of the horrors who might have left the greater engagement to make sure of the two of us. Luckily there were no stragglers, the pack of them appeared fully engaged at the ship.

My attention snapped back to my fellow in misfortune. Though his eyes still stared unblinkingly aloft, his face was convulsed by a grimace and I saw that the blood now rising in his head wound was darker, almost black, also it had thickened. That which I was trying to staunch on his throat was also dark. His hand arose from his side, fist clenched, to beat at the air, so I had to release my hold on the throat wound and struggle with him to keep his body from sliding off into the water again. His legs jerked and kicked.

Yet he uttered no sound, nor did he look to me.

His mouth fell open and breath whistled out. Then his head arose a few inches from the rock only to thud back again, as, with that, his arm loosened and his feet did not move. He was dead—though neither wound should have been deep enough to let out his life. That the creatures we fought had the power of using venom as a weapon was so proven.

I stood up, steadying myself as best I could on the very uneven surface of that islet. The craft was even farther away and I could hear shouts and cries from it, making plain that the battle was still in progress.

My own position was totally exposed. Even if the flying horrors were beaten off, and I did not doubt that they would be, those retreating could well head for me and make sure that another of their enemies would be taken care of.

On the other hand to take to the sea again and swim for the ship would not be an answer, unless those on board were aware of my difficulties and could drop me a line. The perch which I now shared with the dead was a small one; it might even be more awash with the coming of the tide.

I looked towards the larger island to the north, one we had just passed when this attack had been sprung. It was guarded by reefs and no ship landing could be made there.

To the south then?

Reefs again, for now many of these showed above water. Those led almost like stepping stones to another and much larger island. I stooped and drew the body up as well as I could, leaving as much of it out of the water as possible. A Sulcar fighting crewman deserved a Sulcar funeral and perhaps we would later be able to give him such.

Then I stooped and washed my hands vigorously in the water. I must rid myself of the thick, poisoned blood. Having done this I looked ahead south. There was an expanse of water before the rise of the reef which I hoped would lead me to a firm place of refuge. I slipped into the sea and started to swim for that bit of water-washed rock.

Chapter 13

Almost, except for the effort I must expend, this was like crossing a stream by stepping stones. Each time I pulled out of the water on a point of reef or an islet I looked for the ship. Always its course was farther away from the source of my own troubles. I saw no falcon rising from the air-ship battle. Had those valiant comrades been wiped out by the monsters as had happened with the birds at Yarn?

This was a grey day wherein we had dueled with those aerial horrors and now rain came, fine as a mist but enough to slick down even those rocks above wave level, making it necessary to carefully watch one's footing. Mine was a painful progress now. As all on shipboard in such heat I had discarded sea boots for loose sandals. Those had been lost in my dive overboard. I could thank past poverty now for the fact that I had often, through lack of supplies, gone barefoot on land, so that the soles of my feet were calloused into nearly the same toughness as a boot. Though walking across the broken ridges of these islets had been and was growing more so a painful experience.

The water of the sea stung all small grazes into life. On my third emergence I shed my jerkin, worried a

ripped seam to a great hole and so made clumsy coverings for my feet.

When I crawled out at last on the large island which had been my goal I stumbled and limped to the highest point within the immediate vicinity to look for the ship. Some current of which we had not been aware must have seized upon it while the battle was in progress, as it had been borne even farther to the east and even appeared adrift. Had the monster attack so thinned defenders that the ship could no longer make any headway, was as lost as the derelicts? Could all on board be... dead?

The swift death from poison which I had seen the leadsman suffer—was that the fate of all? Surely if any Falconer still lived his bird would be aloft, seeking—

Then, for the first time, my assurance was badly shaken. Had anyone seen my plunge overboard? Or if they had, would I now be deemed dead? That possibility had not crossed my mind—now it fastened tight in my thoughts. I wondered if I dared try send contact. Any of those on board whom I could picture in mind would serve as a target but, on the other hand none that I knew of were trained to receive. The Falconers had such a hatred for the Witches that they built, during the generations they had lived on the fringe of Estcarp, shields against any such touch. I might be able to contact one of the Sulcar—

Even as I considered that the worry which had been with me since I left the ship so unceremoniously developed at last. There were flyers in the air, only dots as yet, but they came from the direction of the far drifting craft and they were headed in a seaward sweep, as if they already knew that I waited for them, easy prey.

It was the nature of the island which saved me. The rocks which formed it were ridged. Gullies ran between some of the taller ones and there were other slabs which were tilted enough to form shelter against anything overhead. I speedily worked my way into one such niche and waited.

My exertions had begun to tell. In addition to my sore feet, my back and legs ached. Also I realized it had been some time since I had eaten. In fact, so long ago had been my awaking from a doze on this morning and the taking of some very dry biscuit and a scrap of salted fish, I had gone without food for some time. Even more than the pinch of hunger, the need for water closed upon me. It was a sorry jest that I should be surrounded by liquid I could not drink. The realization of that made me twice as thirsty.

In a little the rain helped. I could reach out of the hollow in which I had taken cover, rub my hand across one of the standing rocks and bring it back wet to lick. Though that was indeed far from slaking the need in me.

However, hunger, certainly at the moment, was the least of my worries. My knife sheath was empty. I had no weapon, and from overhead came one of those ear-shattering screams of the flying horrors. One of them swooped down close enough for me to see, and counter-wise it sighted me. Still to reach me it would have to drop so close to the ground—where there were upstanding threats of broken rock—that I think this problem did impress any mind the creature possessed, no matter how heated the thing was by rage.

I reached around and found several pieces of stone. Then my fingers caught under the edge of something larger, and I struggled to free a length of what could only be metal.

Its corroded skin flaked off in my grasp, but there was still a hard core. When I had it fully out of the ground I discovered I was holding a length which would compare favorably with a sword, although it lacked hilt or cutting edge.

To have even that made me bolder. I tried to count from the entrance of my fort the number of the attackers. To withstand such a pack as had descended upon us earlier was more, I knew, than was possible. They need only leave a token number of sentries on guard and wait for thirst and hunger to either weaken me or drive me out.

Yet I could only count five who skimmed back and forth, and two of them had wounds. This was a beaten enemy, still that very fact might make them only the more set to take me.

One of them alighted on the crest of the rock perhaps a good stone's throw away from me. The fiery eyes were fixed and it threw back its grotesque head, giving voice to a throat-searing scream. I picked up one of the stones I had earlier loosened against just such a chance and threw.

The fragment of rock struck a little to the right of the thing, and shattered, one piece apparently ricocheting to hit the body of the flyer, who now leaped up and down as if rage filled it so fully it could not remain still. Another bound took it into the air and it arose quickly out of my field of vision. However, they were certainly very far from giving up the fight.

Two more swooped down to also alight, farther back than had stood the earlier one. These no longer screamed, but mouthed harsh chattering noises as if they were engaged in planning some coming difficulty for me.

I drew the rod I had found back and forth with one hand, scraping at it with the edge of another stone, wanting to clear it of all marks of corrosion so that I could see if there was any weak place along its length. It was not solid but rather bent under pressure, as limber as a whip.

The stones I had garnered earlier I made the best use of that I could—and was able to hit another of my attackers foursquare, sending it flapping and squalling to the ground, from which, though it made attempts, it did not rise again. However, I did not put an end to it. That was left for its own fellows. Two of them dived and, to my sickened disgust, caught the wounded creature by the wings and literally tore it apart. Why they turned on their own I could not guess, unless in frustration at not being able to take the fishing craft.

From the earlier mist the rain became a thudding downpour. Water spouted off the rocks, running seaward through the gullies. Under dark clouds we passed into a kind of twilight through which I was unable to see far beyond the crevice in which I sheltered.

There came no more screams from my attackers and I began to think that they had also been forced to seek some kind of shelter. At least the running stream of rain which fell to invade my hideout gave me drinking water. I sucked up palmsful, hoping that such a fill would also ease some part of my hunger.

The darkness was thicker. I had no idea of the hour. It could well be that night was really upon me. There was a rising wind which, at intervals, sent the rain slicing inward to my poor shelter. I was soaked to the last thread on my body and, though certainly my life had never been lightstone and I had known a number of miserable times, it now seemed to me that this was the worst I had yet met.

The falcons, if those intrepid birds still lived, would not be winging aloft in the midst of this. While had the ship kept to the last course I had seen before it, it must be going farther and farther from me. Once more I was greatly tempted to try the mind touch. If I could not raise anyone aboard the scouting craft, might I be able to contact either Kemoc or Orsya? Those with whom I had so lately sailed might well believe that I was dead—fallen into the sea and so totally lost.

I reached within the shirt the rain plastered so tightly to my body and brought forth Gunnora's gift. Though my flesh was cold, and I was beginning to be wracked by shivers, the carven stone within my palm was warm. I stared down at it. I did not know if it was meant to be used for scrying, and I still did not altogether trust my talent at piercing distance under a vague but perhaps deadly threat.

Still I tried to concentrate my full thought upon it, seeing first the stone, and then transposing Orsya's face upon that base. The amulet seemed to swell larger as I concentrated, but I was still aware that my hand held it. However, that connection with the real world faded. There was only the stone. Orsya—my thought went out—I tried to use it as a Falconer might use his bird, sending the mind search questing for our mother ship and she who was on it.

Only that search I could not complete. As fingers inserted in an ear can shut out sound or deaden it to the faintest of murmurs, so did my talent meet a barrier which turned it back upon me. The result of that return flow of energy was like a dagger thrust. Though I had heard that this might happen in times of stress, never had it been so with me before.

Swiftly I cut my thought search.

Still, on the surface of the amulet there was a swirl of movement. The outlines of what could be a head were forming. And I knew that it was not of my calling!

Two dark pits of eyes, a nose, a mouth which was set in a grin like that of a dead man struck down in battle. Only this was no warrior—at least any nation known to me. That rictus grin was softening, the lips no longer bared teeth to the full. While the blind pits which marked the eyes were filling, growing more and more like part of normal features. I was looking at a face which was no longer of the dead, but the living. There were eyelids closed across the onetime skull pits and slowly those were lifting. Then I was staring into eyes which seemed as large and knowing as my own.

This was a woman. That I guessed and knew it for the truth. I could see no hair above a high brow, nothing but the fact itself. Now the lips were moving again not to utter speech but in a smile which seemed to hold in it true welcome.

Gunnora? For a fleeting moment I held that thought. Then it was gone. No, not the All-merciful One—but a personage of Power, of command over my own kind even as the Harvest Lady ruled from her women-sought shrines.

There was satisfaction in the look I met. A fisherman might survey so a full net. I felt greater unease and I strove to cover the amulet with my other hand. Only to discover that I had no longer any command over my own flesh and bone.

Though it had grown very dark within the space where I crouched there was light about me—the warm gold of the sun. The warmth spread from the amulet to my whole body. I was aware of this but it did not matter. I was alert, waiting, as a messenger for some warlord might wait, impatiently, to be dispatched with orders to initiate some important maneuver.

Then—

The light in the eyes went out—candle flames puffed by a breath which was not mine. Once more the face changed to become skull-like—death out of life. Now I held only the stone. Yet from it radiated the warmth. In me there was something else becoming more sharp and distinct even as the face had grown.

In spite of the storm, the fact that the remaining flyers might come at me, I pulled out of my defensive pocket and stood under the thick curtain of cloud, rain plastering my hair and my torn clothing fast to my skin. I stooped and picked up the supple metal wand I had uncovered. At least in that much my own mind still obeyed me. For the rest—I was a game piece moved on a playing board.

I slipped and slid. The earth between the rocks appeared to have a greasy film but the covers I had tied about my feet answered for my progress. Though I expected to attract the flyers, to be a target for them, I heard no cries, saw nothing save the remnants of the body of that wounded one which its own companions had slain.

Now I reached the highest point of the island. So dark was the storm that I could make out very little. I had been brought here by a will I could not break.

The amulet still glowed. I glanced at it from time to time, watching for any change, but that did not come. Moved by that other will I turned around, cautious about my footing, to face south. The island on which I stood extended in that direction and it was that way I must go.

Thus I set out, climbing over ridges, striding through runnels between them where the streams of rain washed nearly calf high as I splashed along. Loneliness pressed on me more than it ever had in my life of roving. I think that I felt that because I was well aware that I went in submission to a command I did not understand. Though I went slowly with due care for every step lest I stumble and fall. A broken bone suffered here might well mean death.

On I went. Twice the way I followed narrowed to a rough ridge where the sea washed on both sides. It would seem that here the islands I could not see anymore in their entirety were like beads loosely set on a chain.

I do not know how long that journey lasted. In the darkness there was no way of measuring time. My body ached, and now I swayed dizzily from one handhold of upstanding rock to the next, striving to keep moving. For on me the pressure was growing heavier.

At last I fell and a wave broke over me, setting me coughing—as the water filled my nose—spitting the salty liquid out of my mouth. Under me as I lay there was no rock—luckily. Rather my hand swept across what felt like sand. I caught my breath and then crawled on my belly, so spent at last I could do no more, away from the lapping of the waves, well up into what appeared to be a rising mound of the sand, and there I lay. With great effort I pulled the hand which held the amulet to my now aching head, and darkness closed in so there was no longer any thought or feeling.

Did I sleep or swoon? At least I did not dream, or I did not carry into waking any such memory. I awoke to warmth on my nearly bare shoulders and I pulled my arms under me to help lever my body up.

The clouds and the rain were gone. A sun was in the sky and the heat on my body was such that I felt I lay half in a fire. I twisted around to survey my surroundings.

There was sea before me with reefs reaching out. Seeing those I marveled at the fact that I must have so blindly taken that road. It was not one I would have followed had I been given full sight. The island from which I had started was well out toward the horizon.

Remembering, I looked skyward. There was no winged thing to be sighted. However, here in the open I felt very exposed, so crawled as might an infant back to a wall of stone which arose up and up, a formidable barrier to any further retreat. To the west that wall continued. Farther along there were no

reefs and the sea washed directly at the foot of the cliffs. I looked eastward and from what I could see I had reached that part of the mainland which curved out.

My stomach cramped and my hands shook, the right letting fall the amulet so it swung once more against my breast. By some chance, for I could not remember that I had intended it so, I still held the length of rod I had found on my first place of refuge.

To me at present the first need was food. Not far away were rock pools doubtless left by a receding tide. I crept to the nearest. There was a fish of some size who must have been dumped into that basin by the earlier inroad of the sea.

My past had taught me many things, one never to disdain anything which might be food because I shrank from eating it raw. It took me some time to catch the intrapped fish and kill it with a sharp pointed stone. I scraped the scaled skin free with the same weapon and ate, making the most of my prey to the last scrap of meat.

Where I was now the cliff was sheer and I had no intention of going west where it arose from the sea itself. But there was a fringe of dark grey, sanded beach to the east and the cliff showed broken in places. Still unsteady on my enwrapped feet, from which the improvised coverings were near worn away, I started on in that direction. This was a very empty world to which I had come. Save for some sea creatures to be found in a tide pool or two along the way, there was no life here.

Fortune favored me, or else that which pushed and kept me on my bruised feet watched over me for purposes of its own, for I came to a real break in the cliff. Down that poured a stream of water which fell in a miniature cascade into the sea at that point. I scooped the liquid up in both hands and drank my fill. It seemed to me that where the stream had cut a path would be the best place to attempt to go inland.

For a while it was a difficult climb and I would rest now and then, the water spreading about me, my body trembling from the demands I made upon it. The cliffs arose on either side to shut off any view of what I might be climbing into and my fear of being surprised by the winged things kept me going, hoping to find some kind of shelter once I reached the upper reaches of those walls.

At length they began to fall away, widen out, so there was room on either side of the water. Then I saw the first growing things which I had sighted since we had sailed from Yarn. There was a greenish network across some of the rocks, wet with spray from the stream. It was not moss but rather resembled a netting, such as a spider would have fashioned. When I tried to pick up one end of a piece I discovered it was most securely rooted. These nets became larger and denser as I advanced. Then, ashore, in the grey soil showed stalks of a pale yellow-green—long narrow leaves outspread upon the ground with a center stem standing high. Those ended in a round knob and from them came a sickly odor. Stuck to those knobs here and there were insects, some still struggling for freedom.

At length the last of the cliff walls opened well out and I found myself at the edge of a wide stretch of rolling open land. As it was in the valley of Yarn there were no trees. Clumps of brush gathered here and there, tangling branches from one to the next, forming a growth which nothing could penetrate. Some of these strange copses were of quite wide extent. The leaves were dark in color and, though there was no hint of breeze in the air, these were in constant, trembling movement.

I continued to follow the stream as about that the land was open and looked to offer the easiest going. Also there were signs of life within the water itself. I overturned rocks and found armored things which were near enough to what I had seen on sale in northern fish markets as to reassure me of their food value. Though I had nothing in which I could stew them as was customary for their proper serving. Once

more I ate raw flesh, forcing it down. I had seen no signs of those herbs which grew along stream banks in the lands I knew.

Once as I wavered on I saw a serpent whose red-yellow scales made a bright patch to serve as a warning. I stood very still using the one end of the rod I carried to thump against the ground. The reptile, feeling the vibration, fled, as all his kind will unless one by chance corners them. But this was another sign that the land I had come to was not a healthy one for travelers.

The sun was well down the sky and I could not pick out any stretch of the land ahead I thought fit for a camp. Thus I squatted down beside the stream to rebind the coverings on my feet and try to make some plan for what was to come. With me still, perhaps even more pulling at me, was that feeling I must go on, that there was something waiting for me which must be faced.

By now I had surrendered to it so long I did not think I could ever break out of the spell it had put on me. We all know of geases and what those encirclements can do to the unfavored who have been so cursed. Was this in truth a geas? If so, who had placed it on me and for what reason? I could only believe that it was one which would not do me well and I longed at that moment for the company of the Lady Jaelithe, for perhaps she alone in all this world could read that which held me, and so aid me in what must be some coming battle.

Chapter 14

I disliked being completely in the open, yet the nearest copse was so entangled, vinelike branches embracing one another, that I knew I could not find refuge there. Nor could I see anywhere within the range of sight a place as satisfactory as the rocks among which I sheltered before. At length I decided to go on. The sky above was clear and as far as I could calculate this would be a moon-crested night. Underfoot the ground was promisingly level and I had the stream for a guide.

My pace was slow. I wanted nothing so much as to squat down for rest on one of the patches of sandy soil which spotted the valley floor. Yet move I did, until I could no longer place one foot before another, so came to sit by the running water from which I scooped enough to satisfy thirst. I had heard many tales of the Waste of Arvon—had seen a portion of it when I had gone a-hunting Gunnora's shrine.

The foundation of that was iron-hard clay with drifting sand about weird, heat-tortured growths of strange vegetation or the skeletons of such which a touch would reduce to powder. This was a different kind of blasted country but I could not help comparing it to that other which now lay a sea away.

In spite of all my efforts, my head nodded and my eyes closed. At some point in that struggle sleep won and I must have fallen forward on a pocket of sand.

Through the dark in which sleep held me there came sound—a thin wailing which had all the great sorrows of a country spun into that single thread. I thought I had dreamed it, but when I blinked awake, bemused and disorientated, not sure of where I was, that wailing continued.

There was a night wind blowing from the south and its strength must have carried that plaint. The moon was up but its light was not reassuring. As I looked, bleary-eyed, around it seemed to me that the copses I could clearly see cast very odd and disturbing shadows on the ground. Something a-wing blundered near me. I was instantly alert, picturing in that air one of the monsters. But if that were so the creature made no attack. Rather it dropped in a hunter's strike and a thin squeal cut the pattern of the wailing for

an instant, before the flyer arose again, prey which was no more than blot as far as I could see clipped between its taloned feet.

I heard then a clicking which came from upstream. There were stones heaped there, so thickly drawn together (and absent elsewhere along the water's run) that one could believe that tumble was the last of some ruin so far gone that only traces remained. Out of what seemed to be the heart of that tumble was something emerging. I got groggily to my feet, but for the moment I moved no farther.

There was a patch of full moonlight uncut by any shadow between me and that place of stones. To my eyes the creature pulling itself out of the rubble was large, and growing larger as it continued to scramble free. Once it slid down the fringe of the stone it stood erect!

The thing was humanoid from the outline of its dark body and it walked on two hind feet, its upper limbs swinging free by its sides. Then it passed from out of the fringe of the stone into that patch of moonlight. There it stood, hunched over, its head thrust forward, seeming to rest on very little neck but rather on the shoulders. There was no bulk to it, rather it was painfully thin, both upper and lower limbs hardly more than skin-covered bones, though the body was bloated and as round as if it had swallowed whole a rock such as those it had sheltered among.

The thing was female. Once it might have worn clothing, for there were a few remaining tatters of foul stuff hanging from a belt which confined the top of that paunch. Long hair was matted on the head and fell in clotted strands about face and shoulders. In fact the face was so veiled by that that I could not make out the features.

Not until the thing threw back its head and opened jaws to give forth a howl such as might rise from some starving animal. As with the arms and legs the facial skin was drawn tight over bones, the lips so stretched as to show teeth even when the mouth was closed, as it was after that ululating cry had gone forth.

I tightened grip on my rod as the head moved forward a fraction. At that moment I found myself unable to either attack or retreat. Yet I knew that it had seen me. Arms moved, hands with long nails, some raggedly broken, came up, those fingers spread as if to tear at my throat.

It leaped forward and I slashed with the rod, which struck one of those hands so that the arm fell limply to the creature's side. It did not howl this time, rather it slavered words which I did not understand. Then it halted to begin a short sidewise movement.

I turned also, to keep facing it. It was plain that even if my blow had given it a wound, it had no intention of abandoning the hunt. For that was what it was doing—it played hunter and I was the prey. Since I had left Estcarp I had seen the creature of the sea, and the airborne hunters, both unnatural by the standards of the northern lands. But this was not wholly strange; it was the worse because it aped my own species, and yet it was such a foul thing as I could not imagine any woman of my kind becoming.

It snarled. I saw the shoulders hunch a little more and I was sure that it was preparing once more to attack. This time I went to meet it, swinging my rod with a whistling note in the air. I landed a second blow which fell on shoulder.

It cried out and strove to raise the injured arm, with the fingers of the other hand making clawing motions in the air as if it thought to reach me but was miscalculating the distance between us. Once more I raised the rod—

This time it cowered back, halfway into a blot of shadow. It was mewling like a voiceless beast, yet here and there came a sound which was not unlike a word. When I took a determined step forward it retreated, backing towards the rock pile from which it had come, stumbling over one of the stones and falling to its knees.

Shaking its head from side to side, it clawed at the stones seeking aid to get once more to its feet, yet that effort seemed too much for it. Then it squatted there un-moving. Its head went back so that the face was wholly exposed to the sky. I could see tear trails on its sunken cheeks. Bracing a shoulder against the rubble it held forth its unhurt hand, not in menace as before but rather as if begging mercy or help. For a long moment we faced each other so and then it slipped sidewise, going limp upon the outer fringe of stone.

Its breath was coming in flutters and it clutched at one of the flat breasts on its bony chest. Twice it raised its head a fraction, the sunken eyes fast on me, and both times its mouth moved to shape what I thought must be words.

The hair-matted head fell back as the breast heaved once, twice, and then the creature was very still. I waited but it did not move again. Then I ventured on towards it. I had been aware earlier of the stench, but now it seemed a hundredfold and I could not bring myself to touch the quiet body, even being near it I gagged and fought nausea.

I circled to approach the pile of rocks from which this foul caricature of a woman had come. There was a dark hole there like a well opening. When I reached it from the back, on the opposite side from that point where lay the dead, the smell was even worse. However, I sighted something which continued to draw me.

Between two or three of the stones on this side of the pile there was a faint glow of light which had not been cast by the moon. Its source must lie within that pile. That the dead had some form of light, a fire, was hard to believe. I only knew that that was a treasure worth the peril of invading any den it might have used.

So I climbed the pile of stones with all care and stood by that well entrance. The odor was near overpowering yet, looking down now, I could indeed see that glimmer. I lowered myself into the hole. The moaning on the night wind, which had awakened me, continued but it was interrupted now and then by stretches of silence. During one of those I entered the den, listening for any sound which might suggest that there was a second inhabitant.

The stones were so roughly set together (yet they did not shift under my weight) that it was like descending a ladder. I was out of the well passage and into a room. That it was a room I was sure by the regularity of the walls and the fact one could trace the joins between massive blocks. This was indeed a remnant of some ruin made for defense or living quarters. The light continued to hold my attention. On the floor stood a cylinder, part glass— at least it was frosted and yet the light came through— and part metal.

It had been set close to a heap of what looked like broken-off branches of the copse boughs and mashed wads of the net stuff I had seen on the stream rocks. In that noisome nest there lay a shrunken thing which I looked at only once and then turned from in a hurry. Whatever the huntress had once been she had not stayed alone in this den—those were the remains of a child!

I caught up the lamp in a hurry and went to reascend into the night. In me there was turmoil. I could not believe that the mother had lived such a beast life—what had brought her to this hole with her child? Of

what people was she?

Outside I put aside the lamp on the ground, finding by experimentation it could be turned on and off by pressing a button on one side of the base. Leaving it off and setting aside my rod, I pushed myself into a task I could not leave undone.

Though my whole body shrank from what I did, I made myself pull the corpse of the woman back to the edge of the well. Having no rope nor any to hold me I could only push it over, to fall to the floor of that age-old chamber. Then I hurried to move stones, to cover over that opening. I was weeping when I had done, for sorrow had grown within me as I worked. After I had set the last stone to close that tomb chamber I took forth Gunnora's amulet. There was no glow from it, but, as always, it was warm in my hand. I held it out and passed it back and forth across the heap of stones.

"Let that which is of earth return to earth." I drew from memory words I had heard in the past. There had never been a time when I had said such for any I had ties upon, for even when I had been a fosterling, I had not been heart welcome to those with whom I abode. Why-should the dreary death of that creature which was no longer human put such a spell on me that I must do this thing?

"Let the inner spark which is life return to THAT WHICH SENT IT. May she who lies here be troubled no more and may SHE WHO GUARDS all womenkind welcome this one into the House of Peace through the last of all gates!"

In my hand the amulet blazed, the blue light of it seeming to seep through the cracks which my rough covering had left, as might spring rain falling to nourish waiting seed. Then that which had come from Gunnora vanished and by the pile of stone, with the morning star shining slowly, I was alone.

That pile of stone was not the only sign that once there had been more here than barren land. As the sky grew lighter, and I was able to see farther ahead, I noted other heaps of rubble fanning out from the river into the plain. Yet only the stones eroded by the ages remained and none of them held anymore any shape from which their original purpose might be read.

I had no desire to search farther for any remnant of life for I was sure that she whom I had found here had been alone, starving, and hopeless. Had she like me been brought here through some disaster at sea, marooned on this coast without any hope of rescue? Could she even have been from such a ship as the derelicts which had been found? There was no telling now.

Once more I hunted in the stream and made a meager morning meal of the armored things which lurked among water-worn rocks. With such to hand why had the dead one starved? Unless she had had no training at all in living off the land.

In me once more awoke the urging to be on my way. Still I did not yield to it at once. My meeting with the victim of this place might have loosened in a little the geas laid on me. I cupped the amulet and for the first time dared that which the Lady Jaelithe had warned against—I sent out a mind call, striving so to find the craft which had brought me here. Had that kept on the course which I had last seen it follow it must already have touched the shore—perhaps finding some temporary anchorage there—before I myself had made my perilous journey.

So recklessly I sought a mind, any hint of there being survivors of our expedition within range of my sending. And I picked up—

No! That was none of what I had always known as human kind. This was Power of a sort but none that

I could put name to. And it came not from the seashore behind me but rather from some source to the south of where I stood in the rising of the sun.

I jerked back instantly and strove to raise my shield, expecting a probe in return. None came. It was almost as if the source was asleep or so engrossed in some purpose of its own that my touch had not betrayed me. I still could not think of it being emitted by something that had life as I knew it. However, for all my wandering, what did I know of this world? Not even the Sulcars had plied their trade this far south—or if some ship had recklessly penetrated hereabouts it had not returned to tell of it. Only Captain Harwic had seen the barren islands and he and the *Wave Skimmer* had not lingered long.

I thought of Laqit, that fabled last guardian in our lore.

All the tags and tatters of very old tales which I had heard during my wanderings had never hinted at the nature of Laqit. I was tempted to use the amulet, to try to raise again that face which I had seen. That, indeed, had human features. But there were entities of whom I had heard that had the power of full glamorie, who might take any form they wished and so present themselves to those they wanted to beguile, even as there were beasts do battle in either human or animal form. Though those did not become their animal parts except when danger threatened. And what danger could I be to anyone with my half gifts, one of which always carried calamity with it?

One thing did follow my reckless meddling, there descended swiftly upon me now the full force of that compulsion which had set me traveling. Whether I would or no I strode among and between those piles of rock heading not due south but angling to the west more than I had the day before.

This trail was taking me away from the stream upon which I had come to depend both for the food and water it could offer and for a guide which could not be lost. I fought to keep beside it, only to have increasing pressure applied on me to leave it behind.

There was no way I could carry water with me. As for food—the dead-alive land about me gave no promise of any successful hunting. I did have the unusual light I had found in the dead woman's den slung to my back by a cord I had made from the networks on the stones twisted together. That I did not need with the sun climbing higher in the sky at my back. It did not take long for the heat of that to become an evil instead of a welcome good. The rays striking my skin through the tatters of my skirt were burning worse than even those of the harvest fields. Yet except for those dire-appearing copses of interlaced, towering shrubs there was no place which promised any relief from the sun.

I had perforce left the stream well behind me and could pick out a dark line to the west which marked a continuation of the cliff wall when I caught a small touch of life force. One more step and it was as if a portion of the ground itself, directly before me, took wing and flew ahead but no higher than I could reach with my rod, uttering sharp cries. For a moment I nearly tripped over my own feet. The flying thing was clearly some species of bird, having nothing of the winged monsters about it. Nor did it keep to the air long; perhaps it was not accustomed to extended or soaring flights for it settled back to the ground and immediately thereafter it vanished. The plumage which was its cover was also its defense for that was the same greyish shade as the earth, even carrying spots and lines which mimicked that of the ground thereabouts. However, having once seen it, and had its life spark register on my mind, I was able to take this gift of fortune with a swift blow by the rod. Preparing it for the eating was a much harder task, and there was no way of cooking it. Again I ate raw the fruits of a hunt.

Having once picked up this touch of life force I was sure I could pinpoint it again. I went on pulled by that tie, yet relieved that I did not face such a fate of sheer starvation as had that pitiful thing back by the river.

Water I came across at the same time as I made my kill, in fact the bird fell to my blow because it must have been absorbed in appeasing its own thirst. It had pulled up the soil from around one of those repulsive insect-capturing plants to bare a large bulb that was studded with holes and oozing liquid. With infinite care I put ringer to that moisture, smelled it. To my nose it had no scent, and then I licked on that dribble of sap. It had a sharp, sour taste but it allayed my heat-born thirst. I had the whole bulb out of the ground swiftly and punched a larger hole in it. The liquid actually spurted and I caught and swallowed as fast as I could the bounty it yielded.

So having my bodily wants answered, I went on— though my unwillingness to going so at another's will grew. I did not struggle. There might be a very good reason for me to conserve such Power as I had against some future confrontation. I knew only too well how helpless

I always was after I had drawn upon my talent to the utmost. Nowhere here were to be found the herbs and tending which a farseer must have after such an ordeal.

Though whatever moved me apparently had care enough to allow me to rest and take my own pace. It was late afternoon and the sun was a blow against my face and eyes when I stumbled forward a last few steps and came to my knees in the shade of a tall outthrust of what was mingled hardbacked clay and stones. I sat there, panting, for some time, looking but not seeing, content just to have this much alleviation from the burning heat I had been facing this day.

I do not know just when my unseeing stare tightened into a seeing one. There was a curved length of what could only be bone protruding from the side of that hillock. Beyond that marker there were other such, some half buried in the ground, some lying in the surface. While within reach there was a skull, its empty eye sockets turned toward the wasteland over which I had been traveling. These were not the remains of just one body. On my hands and knees I crawled partly around the hillock that I might see the other side.

There stood another such outcrop and beyond more reaching back to the cliff which did rise again before me. While bones were piled thickly about, some lying one over the other. There were whole skeletons which had been laid out correct to the last small bone and in other places bones were scattered as if flung about heedlessly.

Only what caught my eyes now were not these remains but what lay among them, about them, under them. There was the glint of metal, even the brilliant flash of gem-stones, and shreds of cloth, rotted and rendered colorless by time.

I did not feel as I had when I had buried as well as I could that wasted body by the stream. So old and flesh-less were these that I felt no kinship with them. Thus I dared now to do what many of my species would have done, I foraged among the long-dead.

It is a firmly held belief among the Sulcars—and per-haps among the fighters of other races also—that to take up dead-held weapons was to invite into one's own inner life he or she who had last borne the sword, or knife, or spear. I would be deemed unclean, doubly suspect to Dark blood, had any of my late shipmates watched me now.

When I staggered again into the shade of one of those clay-and-stone mounds I had three knives, lacking any touch of corroding rust, a sword with a gem-set hilt, and an armband with a sheath for a throwing knife, that light and murderous weapon still within its hold.

As I had searched for what I needed I had decided that this was no battlefield. Swords had not been drawn, knives still lingered in rotted belts. Oddly enough the metal was in no way corroded nor rusted, but clothing and belts and boots remained only as fragile remnants.

I had not seen on the skeletons themselves any sign of wounds. Each skull was entire without a break. There were no dart bolts or arrows between ribs thus placed to show that they had been shot into living bodies. Also I believed that those dead here had not been killed all at one time. It was as if various companies had been brought to this slaughter place, sometimes years apart, and finished off, left to lay where they had fallen. Nor had any visitor despoiled the bodies. Not only were unused weapons lying among the bones but I had seen jeweled bracelets, necklaces and the like, still upon the framework of those who had once been their owners.

There was one way I might solve this mystery, perhaps so learning how I myself might avoid a similar fate. Yet I shrank from employing it. I sat there as the sun dropped below the western cliffs and the broad banners it had left flying began to fade, drawn one way and then another. Would such an act as I contemplated draw me deeper into the hold of that compulsion which had brought me here? Was it worth such danger I could only guess at and should be able to understand?

Gunnora's amulet was warm again in my hand. I put my palm back down on my knee cupping the stone firmly and then I reached for the first of the knives I had gleaned. It had a longer blade than most; the hilt was, I thought, fashioned of some kind of horn, and that had marks deeply incised within its substance.

Picking that up, I laid it across Gunnora's stone, then I shut my eyes and threw open my mind swiftly, that I might not turn from the task.

Chapter 15

I did not slide into darkness—rather it was as if I were standing on a height looking down into a pool of grey mist. Here and there that was broken by an upstand of rock—so that all this might be again rock islets rising out of a dull, turgid sea.

There was stirring in and through the mist—I felt a blanket of fear, muffled fear, which kept one moving. Some part of it stood between those who so moved and a complete understanding of who they were and how they had come here.

There was a company entrapped, striving weakly to break forth. And I had been a part of them, only, by some freak of my own nature, I had been able to break bonds in this much, that I had climbed out of the cloying and imprisoning mist.

Who was I? Memory was dim, broken, had faded. A ship, the sea, and then a breaking open, a tearing apart of the normal world. Afterward the command laid upon all of us on board—that we steer for—

A harbor!

Yes, but though we made that landfall we were even more deeply caught in the net of some unknown fisher. We had come ashore, marching together, moved by the need for answering that call. Only in me had something twisted and strove for freedom. I had repeated words I had learned—held on to my sense of oneness—was not yet absorbed into the collected prey of whom I was meant to be a part. I had thrown myself aside just before those who were my fellows set climbing a long flight of stairs and I had

fought my way—fought it indeed, for it was as if I moved through some thick morass into which I might be engulfed at any moment. Still I had turned from those steps up which the others climbed, their faces without expression, their eyes set in unblinking stares, all which had made them the comrades I had known either wrung from them or sent into an unwaking inner slumber.

So I fought and forced a way among dried carcasses of ships which had run ashore. Only still that compulsion gnawed at me. I put my hands over my ears, as I might shut out some order, which hearing, I would be forced to obey, as I zigzagged back and forth about the time-eaten relics of seagoing races seeking ever to get beyond the reach of that which commanded this port of the lost.

Then for a space I was free, still I felt a thrust through me which I knew signaled not my vanquishment but that of those I had known. On their march they had lost more and more of themselves, their identity, yet at this end that flared high and in the same moment they were taken—there was nothing of them left, just emptiness.

I fled that emptiness, running in sand which caught at my feet, until there was a band of pain about my body. Though I did not pause even then but continued to stagger forward away from those steps which reached upwards into nothingness.

The place of the ships was passed and now I faced cliffs which were like walls. There I leaned, one hand against the rock for support, gasping for breath, all of me darkened by fear which had grown even greater since I had felt that ending of our company.

Fear made of me a near-unthinking beast as I clawed my way along the cliff. Then I stumbled and fell into a rift in the stone. Not waiting until I could regain my feet, I went on hands and knees into that crack until I came to the end and lifted bleeding hands to search the stone for holds which would take me out of this. Always I waited also for some blow, some assault which would bring on me the mindless obedience to walk to my own death.

I went up and up and then sprawled out on a ledge which ran both right and left, the wall above that looking strangely smoothed when I ran my hands above to discover it held not a single fingertip hold. Thus I turned left, trusting that I was still fleeing away from the stair.

At length the cliff began to descend and the ledge sank also. Again I crept when I wanted to run for there was a mist below and I could see nothing but the roiling of those billows.

It was when I reached the mist and it closed about me that I knew I was no longer alone. Trapped in it was sound—sometimes a wailing or the gasping of breath one hears when a weeper is near exhaustion. Also there were louder voices which called upon names, of their fellows, or perhaps of gods. It was a clamor and yet it was strangely muted.

There came into my mind then another thought perhaps seeded by my fear. My comrades had been taken in a pack, but what if that which had taken them had thought for another day, or hour—or year—and would keep a certain part of its prey in captivity to serve it later? Had I not escaped but only prolonged the evil I had broken from? I raised my own voice in a hail, wishing to see someone of those I could hear, perhaps discover more of what we had blundered into.

I was not answered. Still the other voices cried, and moaned, and called for help. This clamor struck so into me that I wanted out of it and I turned to search again for the beginning of that ledge which had brought me here. Save that the curtain of the mist was so strong that I was utterly bewildered and could not say I had come this way or that.

I came up hard against some barrier and the surface of this was rough enough to afford me hand- and footholds so that I could climb. That I did and my head broke out of the mist. Then instantly all the voices I had heard were stilled and I was alone. The mist lay about me but beyond there were other places which might mark similar hillocks.

For the first time I saw others beside myself who had won free from the net of the mist. On a hillock not too far away there sat a woman and across her knees rested the head and shoulders of a man. There were bloodstained bandages about his head and his shoulder, and she held him tightly, rocking back and forth as might one who nursed a beloved child.

I called to her, for the relief of seeing those two was warm in me and I felt that I was shaking off for the first time something of that compulsion which had moved me. She raised her head to look and I saw features which were unlike those I had knowledge of. Only around her large eyes and about her lips was her very dark skin free from a featherlike down. That, too, covered her arms and hands and every portion of her body which was unclothed. While her clothing was very thin, like the finest of veils, and had been rich, although it was now rent and bedraggled, with tears to split it.

She stared at me across the puffing mist which separated our mounds. Then she called in a voice which was a trill with no sound of words in it. Loosing one of her hands from the one she guarded, she raised that to wave to me.

Yes, I would go to her gladly, but if I descended now from my perch above the mist I would be lost again and could never be sure that I could find her. She must have sensed this as soon as my own thoughts formed. Carefully she moved the unconscious man she tended from her knees and got to her feet. There was a wrapping of cloth which sparkled here and there about her waist and this she loosened, proving it to be of greater length than I would have thought it measured. She shook this out and then stooped and made one end fast to her ankle. The rest she caught up in her hand and threw down into the mist. When she pointed to me and that and I was sure I had caught her meaning. If I could descend and reach that outcrop I would be guided by her girdle. It might be the most forlorn of chances but I was willing to take it, for to continue where I was until hunger or thirst, or that which commanded here, was moved to collect me, was indeed the most cowardly and useless of choices.

Yet it was not easy to descend until that noise-filled mist closed about me again. I had taken what precautions I could in the way I went so that I might be facing in the right direction when I was again below. I strove to keep going in that line in spite of the bewilderment with which the mist enfolded me. Twice I saw other shapes in the mist, blundering around, but I knew better than to allow myself to seek out a meeting with either. There was a shadow ahead and I kept on until I did indeed bump against the bulk of one of the hillocks. Eagerly I reached above my head seeking the touch of that rope of cloth. I indeed thanked the Wind Riser when I found it. After that it was a small matter to climb and rise up beside the woman and he whom she nursed. Her eyes, which to me were overlarge for her face, were on mine as I emerged and then she leaned across to jerk up the loop of cloth which had been my guide.

She motioned to the wounded man and gave more of her trills. I believed that she asked of me to see to him, but there was little I could do. Blood was drying on the bandages she had devised. He was clearly of her people as the same down on his skin was matted with blood along one arm where the shoulder wound must have dripped.

Now she made another gesture in the direction of the cliff which had brought me here and which arose as a dark blotch well away from where we were now. To think that we could get back there perhaps carrying the unconscious man with us was folly and she must have already seen that for the gesture which

she had made toward that focal point was one of repudiation.

There was hardly room for three of us where we crouched. I looked in the other direction and saw that there were indeed other such perches as this but they could be as far away as the familiar sea on which I had voyaged for most of my life. She and I together might be able—with a great deal of luck—to reach one or two more of those perches. However, with the wounded and helpless man we dare not try any such moves. I think she had already guessed that for her head was bowed, the longer down which served her as hair flattened to her skull as she rocked once more the man she tended and crooned a series of notes such as might serve as a lullaby for a sick child.

Nor could I now go and leave her. She was not kin, nor had any claim on me. Still I could not leave her here in a place where death was certain to come. There must be some way out. I was a stubborn one; perhaps it was that very stubbornness which had given me the strength to resist the order which had set my comrades to climbing. I had won that much, perhaps there was a way I could win more. So I continued to eye the way ahead.

There was movement on another of the hillocks, one a good distance from us so that in this uncertain light I could not even be sure I had seen it. Then a figure did stand there and I realized that another of the mist entrapped had won temporary freedom. An arm was raised and that distant one waved certainly to us. He or she had a better position, for not far away was another, taller height rising and that appeared to mark the end of the mist-ridden lower land. It might well be that that stranger could win altogether to freedom. However, we could expect no aid—he or she was too far away.

After that first hail the other did not wave again. I could not see from our perch what he or she would do. Then the other held upward in both hands something which resembled an axe. With a show of strength the stranger brought that down to where wisps of fog licked up from the mist. And, as if those were tangible, they split apart, the head of the axe beginning to glow.

What I was watching might well be some form of hallucination but still my eyes assured me that this was happening and that the mist was swirling back from where the axe wielder stood. More and more of the hillock was revealed as the fog receded.

The other twirled the axe twice about his or her head. I heard sound, faint but unlike the voices entrapped in the mist. Nor was this the trilling notes uttered by my present companion but it carried rhythm in it—not unlike one of the chanties we of the sea sing to make some hard task a united one.

Out from the stranger's hold flew the axe, skimming above the mist so that the down-pointed blade of it cut a path across the billows. Back pressed that concealing fog on either side clearing a path which reached over hard-beaten clay covering the ground. Then the weapon thudded against the height on which we were perched and I snatched at it, my fingers closing about warmth, then folding into a hold which made it seem that I was well familiar with this weapon, that all its secrets had been always known to me. That it was more than any axe, of that I was sure. In this place it was easier to suspend disbelief, to accept that which hours earlier might well have seemed a story for the beguilement of children.

With the axe now firmly in my hand, I leaned down, kneeling on the top of the hillock to give me a firm base, and swung the weapon back and forth, watching the mist retreat as might a living thing sore threatened. The whole of the mound on which we had taken refuge was now free to its very roots.

So, we had a way of winning through the maze set by the mist, but even so could we try carrying the injured and unconscious man? How often need the axe be used? What if it failed once we were away from the doubtful safety of the hillock?

I was distracted from these dire thoughts by a sound beside me, and I turned my head to see the woman pressing her long, thin fingers to the injured man's temples, one hand on either side. There was a sense of fierce concentration about her. The man groaned a second time and one of his limp arms stiffened; he raised a hand uncertainly and his eyes opened. In the moment perhaps all he saw was her face and the complete resolution in it. He muttered a deep sound almost equaling a distant roll of thunder. Then, with her hands behind his shoulder, taking some of his weight, she got him to sit up. For the first time he sighted me and I met a measuring stare, that of a fighting man facing that of which he was not sure, but she trilled and his wariness slowly faded.

In the end, laboring together, we got him down from the hill, he aiding us when and where that he could. Then, with his arms about our shoulders, we went slowly, the three of us together, along the path the axe had cut. That I continued to swing in my right hand not knowing when I might have to use it.

Though the voices in the mist reached us, very faint and far-off, none who were imprisoned there blundered into sight in that corridor. We wavered on, though the wounded man was no light weight. I felt empty. It was a long time since food had passed my lips, perhaps it was even longer for my new companions. Still we crept ahead.

Then the power of the axe's first cutting began to fail and I saw the mist closing in ahead. I remembered how the owner of the weapon had used it. Dare I take a chance and throw it ahead to clear our way as had been done before? I could not leave the two of them; the man was now nearly a dead weight which I was sure she could not support. Otherwise I might have played advance guard and marched on to strike, axe in hand.

We had paused and I limbered my arm by swinging it back and forth. An axe was indeed a shipboard weapon but it had never been my choice and I was certainly not adept in its use. I swung at last and let the haft slip through my fingers. It did not fall to the ground as I more than half expected it might, instead it advanced through the air and once more cleared the mist it met with its cutting edge, we following at the best pace we could make.

The axe vanished entirely, which raised a sudden fear in me. If the blinding cover closed upon us again we would this time have no defense against it, we could only hope to reach that point ahead where it had gone to ground.

But the pace at which we stumbled along was so slow! It seemed to me that we must yet be far from the hillock where the axe wielder had stood. Were we never going to make that? If the stranger who had been so distant had been able to produce this marvel what else might he be able to do to free us all from this trap?

There was the rise of another hillock in sight now but the pathway to it appeared much narrower. The woman trilled and pointed to that, I guessed her concern equaled mine. In the end she and I were forced to advance partly in the mist and partly in the clear, only our charge hanging between us wholly free of its touch. It seemed to me that the stuff pulled at me, strove to break my linkage and draw me entirely into it, so that part of my now small share of energy must be wasted fighting that.

We came to the hillock's foot and a figure moved away from that towards us. Even as the woman and her charge were alien to any race I knew, so was this man, for I knew him at last for what he was.

He was naked to the waist save for some strings of colored beads inter mixed with curved things which might be claws, and the longer lengths of what must be fangs. His skin was a very dark brown but

painted with brilliant color in elaborate patterns. The coarse black hair which covered his head had been coiled and knotted at the nape of his neck, kept in place there with a band of red cloth. Below a waist belt formed of discs of metal inset with blue gems he had on breeches which were also leggings, these fringed along the outer seams, plainly made of animal hide scraped bare of fur. While his feet were covered with boots very tightly fitting and also ornamented with beads and a few of the same talons appearing in his necklaces. He might well have been a barbarian such as traders tell about, but his dark eyes were shrewd and he was watching us with something of a propitiatory air. Swinging in his hand was an axe, surely the one I had tossed ahead not long before.

He eyed us up and down one after another, but he did not speak. Instead he gestured toward the right of the height from which he had descended, turned and threw the axe with a smoothness of long practice. Again that cut the fog and he started down the cleared path, not glancing back to see if we followed or offering us any aid with the wounded man. Perforce we did follow.

Luckily we were very near the end of that mist prison. We came out into the open and found our savior leaning against a rock, his axe again in his hand. Behind us lay the mist, night was gathering fast, and we had no knowledge of what waited before us. Food we needed badly and also water. Did he of the axe know more about this land than we?

He was striding on once more, finding passage between two outposts of stone, just as he had so confidently walked through the divided mist. Something crunched under my feet. I had trodden flat an arch of ivory—bones! They were lying thickly on the ground. We were making our way among and over relics of the dead! I caught one foot under another curve of ribs and took a fall, pulling the other two down with me. My body slammed hard against the bone-littered ground and—

Darkness, bewilderment such as is felt by someone being awakened too quickly from deep sleep. I was fleeing—

One me then another me, which was I? Memory untangled itself from the talent as I made myself breathe deeply and look about me. It was as dark as it had been when I—no, the owner of the knife—had come this way. I turned my wrist quickly and let that blade thud to the ground. That took with it the last tatters of otherwhere, other time. I was a Sulcar half-breed, not that youth who had by chance, and certainly magic on the part of another, won his way out of part of a trap.

Had he and those with him died here? I had found his knife, which I had used to unlock the door of knowledge.

Looking back now I could not remember where I had found it. Was it one of those still resting in a crumbling sheath or had it lain free? If so he might have dropped it in that fall and the four of them had defeated—at least for a while—that which kept the mist prison.

I looked around me. There were hillocks here, and an opening to the west ahead. Did that mist still hang there? Were there those who moaned and cried and called for help caught in it?

With the coming of the light tomorrow I must climb that cliff high enough to be able to see what lay beyond that rift. The scrying I had just incited was a warning. But for the moment I was too tired to even shift my body, though it ached. This use of the talent had been prolonged and I was already lacking in the strength which was born of regular food and rest.

I wriggled back, planting my shoulder firmly against earth and stone in such a way as to leave me facing the west. By my side, within easy distance for quick seizing, I laid my knives (save the one I had used as

a scry guide and which I had no wish to touch again), the sword, and my rod. Though the night was still and I could see no curl of mist in the heart of the rift, yet I trusted nothing here.

As I leaned back I thought of that warlock—for at least he was master enough of Power to fit life of a sort into his axe. Many of the adepts of old were said to be men. It was only when those who fled the wars in Escore reached Estcarp did the gift become the possession only of women. He had resembled no one of any clan or kin that I had heard of—however, that was the south and we knew not what peoples might dwell here. I remembered that men who had been at the retaking of Gorm had commented on the fact that many of the alive-dead slaves had been strange-looking people of no known race.

How long ago had this happened, this escape from the mist? They had found skeletons here even as I had done. Was it so close to my own time that somewhere the four were still alive? That poor starving creature I had found— she might well have escaped this same trap only to die in the barren land because she had no training to search out that which might serve as food.

Tomorrow—tomorrow I would know—I would climb and look and know!

Chapter 16

I could deny sleep no longer. Thus I fell, thirsty and hungry, into a waiting pocket of darkness. What awoke me was as sharp as the call to deck and sail duty during a storm. But my famished body did not respond with the same vigor as might have been mine on one of the ships. I looked about—

Sleep had taken me by the hillock and with my weapons beside me, in that place of ancient death. Now I stood on my feet and around me was a dull, greyish fog which bewildered my eyes even as the tail end of rest left me swaying where I stood, unwary and unprepared.

That I dreamed was my first sluggish thought. So vividly had I relived that other life which had been shadowed by a like mist that I was once more caught by what I had past-seen or read from the knife. The knife! That was not with me, nor were any other of the weapons I had scavenged. I held only the rod I had earlier found.

Catching a bit of flesh on my forearm between thumb and finger I gave it a vicious pinch. That I had certainly felt! No dream then—but how could I have come into this place unless something had commanded my body during sleep to move me here?

I strained to hear—as had that earlier captive—the sounds of others caught within this blinding fog. But there was such a quiet as made me wonder for a moment if I were deaf.

Those three who had won out of here had had the help of Power. What was my own power—but the twittering of a bird compared to that the painted man knew—he with his axe. Also I was sure that whatever—or whoever—had pulled me here would soon exert more of strength to compel me to its will.

My power—no axe—I gave the rod a disparaging flick back and forth. Then I put hand to my shirt and drew forth the amulet. Instantly it blazed into almost eye-searing light. I pulled the cord on which it was strung over my head to flip the stone about. As it had done under the cutting edge of the axe, the fog retreated. It no longer enclosed me so tightly. I turned slowly, spinning the amulet by the cord in each direction, and the mist shrank.

Well enough, for now I had my own clearer of ways. There stood one of the hillocks not too far away, and I headed straight for that, keeping off the mist as I went. However, I needed a better guide—I wanted to gain the top of the cliff, even as I had planned the night before.

I was still listening for any sound to suggest that I was not alone here. Perhaps it was the thickness of the mist which made it so very quiet. I did not like the feeling which that silence aroused—was it a waiting, an anticipation of my coming within reach of that which saw me as prey? There were no bones on the hard-beaten clay of the ground here. I reached the hillock and once more settled Gunnora's gift in place, the cord safely about my neck. The light continued to blaze. The ground at the foot of the hillock was free. I climbed, a short pull and I was above the mist. It was midmorning by the height of the sun and the heat of its rays struck almost like a blow.

I was able now to see what I sought, the wall of the cliff lying to my right, and I made very sure, as I descended from my vantage point, that I was facing the cliff. Then, with the amulet in hand, I worked my way out of the blinding fog and saw once more tall rock. The surface was rough enough for me to be sure of handholds. I had gotten less than a third of the way up when I came to a part I remembered from my seeking. This was certainly the end of the ledge which the fleeing seaman had followed out of that bay of dead ships. I swung myself onto that, willing to return to the place I remembered so clearly from my glimpse into that other's life. Also, yes, it was certain—that was the same fatal bay I had farseen for our party much earlier.

Lack of water and food made me unsteady. At times I had to lean against the cliff wall which formed one edge of that road. But I forced myself on. Though it seemed that sometimes I could barely set one foot before the other, I came out at last to view the bay.

This I had seen from scrying and also through those other eyes. Now I could look at it in person and the sight was so overwhelming that I simply slipped down the cliff side against which I had leaned to huddle where I was, staring unbelievably at what lay below.

I had thought Yarn's harbor large. I knew that that which held Gorm itself and served Estcarp was probably the largest known in the north. But this—

Perhaps the fact that it was filled with ships—not ordinary ships swinging at anchor or waiting against a wharf for a promised cargo—made it seem endless. Though I could not see the far western end of it even from my place above.

Many of the ships had been beached, as if their crews had deliberately aimed them for the shore. Among those were some which were only bits of weathered wrecks for on top of them, grinding them down into the grey sand, were other vessels—later comers. Masts had fallen; their liens of rotting rope formed traps on decks.

Nor were these all sailing vessels—no, there were some—one very large—which resembled in part that ship Captain Harwic had brought into Gorm—ships which must have plied through the gate. Again this was a place of silence. As usual in this fateful south there were no birds. And certainly no one stirred on those decks below no matter how solid they still looked.

I turned my head to shut out the sight of that vast graveyard of ships and gazed inland. There was again my memory of this place from the first farseeing to tell me that this cemetery on the edge of the sea was not all-important.

Not too far from the cliff way there reached a wide stairway cut into rock set there as if armies of people

came marching to whatever lay above. As the survivor of the knife had seen it, stone steps were worn in dips and hollows, by hundreds of feet during unnumbered years.

I looked upon that and there moved deep inside me a need for going up those stairs, for following all those who had marched that way before. Yet I also could sniff the evil from its crown. A mighty heap of refuse and filth might lay at the top, or back a little, for I could not sight such from here. However, the stench was sickening. The two-way struggle continued within me. I dropped from the ledge to the beach onto which ships had smashed. These must have been drawn by Power—a great Power which even nonliving products of men's hands could not resist.

The sand was below my bound feet when all the bemusement this place roused in me was pierced. I whirled with such vigor that I lost my balance and stumbled against boards spongy with rot, easily crushed by my weight.

"Destree!"

There was no mistaking that call from the Lady Jaelithe. I downed the mind barriers I had held while so near to this unknown danger.

"Hold!" came her order. "We are coming."

I tried to see between the wreckage of the ships if ours had entered that bay of disaster but I could perceive nothing of any movement on the outer fringe.

That my companions were using me for a guide I did not doubt and I quickly built up in my mind the picture of where I now was.

It was not from the ship-crowded bay they came, but as the Lady Jaelithe's touch grew the sharper and clearer, I pinpointed the source to the very beach on which I stood at a point farther westward. By the change in volume of linkage they were coming at a steady pace. I say

"they" because I was aware that she was not alone. Others backed her, feeding Power that she might range the farther and discover more quickly what they sought. A shadow crossed my mind that what we now did might throw us open to whatever evil abode here. Instantly she reacted to that.

"Yes. No more!" The tenuous link between us vanished instantly. I remained where I was looking ever westward and waiting.

There was another who came first. Leaping down from the deck of one of the beached boats Chief padded through the sand to join me, pausing only to face the foot of those stairs and hiss, his tail fur straight out from the roots as he lashed that appendage from side to side. Then he was on me where I still sat in the sand, too weak to rise again. Purring loudly he rubbed his head back and forth on my breast where the amulet lay. I rubbed his ears, the very touch of his fur freeing me yet further from the pull of that stairway.

They were not far behind. The Lady Jaelithe, Lord Simon, Kemoc and Orsya, and, rather to my astonishment, also two Falconers and Captain Sigmun. The latter walked nearly sidewise so bemused was he by the sight of all those ships. Twice I saw him shake his head, and then rub his eyes with his fingers, as might a man who thought that he viewed something which was born only of clouds and sorcery.

So entranced was he that he kept backing even farther up the beach the better to see all which had been entrapped there, until he was nearly at the foot of that stairway, so that I cried out:

"No, Captain! Away from that stair!"

He swung about to meet my eyes, then glanced behind him. His forehead puckered by a frown, he straightway put a good distance between himself and the foot of that way to death—or so I believed very firmly that it was.

They had provisions with them and granted me a share of both dried fish and sweet water. Certainly no banquet, but to me now the finest viands I had ever tasted. When

I had finished I knew they awaited my story and I straightway launched into an account of all which had befallen me since I had gone into the sea.

I knew that at least the Lady Jaelithe could follow my words with mind touch and that she would so be able to attest that I spoke the truth. It was that portion of my story which dealt with the seeing brought by the knife which interested her the most. Though I had been aware that when I mentioned that first use of the amulet which had shown me the face of a woman of Power, she had seized upon that to store in memory.

My tale of the adventures of the single sailor who had escaped the fate of his fellows held them all absorbed. At the coming of the man of Power and his axe they were all caught and held by every word I spoke, even the usually unshakable Falconers. It was one of them who asked the first question when I had done.

"What chanced to them—those out of the mist?"

"Death?" suggested his fellow. "You found the knife among the bones."

"The fall which put an end to the sight—he may well have dropped it then," I returned. But would he not have rearmed himself, some part of me asked in chorus at that. Look at the weapons I myself had garnered from that place. There may not have been so many at his time of discovery but there should have been some. Had he just left the knife and went on, better armed with what he had found there? The old superstition that taking on another's arms also took on a part of the owner—I began to see that that might have been partly founded in truth. I had told my story in detail, but only when I had spoken of the scrying had it become different—I had been a part of him then, hardly aware of myself. What *had* happened after that tie had broken?

If they had survived, those strangely assorted four, what had been their final fate? Starvation in the barren country I had transversed before I headed southwest? I found myself hoping that the warlock with the axe had dealt better by them than that.

The Lady Jaelithe had seated herself, as she listened to my report, so that she faced the steps up which the captives had trod. Her mind touch withdrew. I saw tenseness in her figure, the fact that her eyes might not look but that she now called upon the inner sight. Lord Simon's hand went out to rest on her shoulder, and I knew that he was backing her with his own power. I could even sense the flow of force between the two of them.

My hand went to my worn and grimed shirt and I brought out the amulet. That rested easily, fitting itself perfectly into the hollow of my palm. It was alight— though that glow was blue and not the brilliant beam

which had cut a way for me through the mist.

Kemoc sat cross-legged and Orsya half leaned against his shoulder. His maimed right hand was out, the first finger pointing to the stairs, his face also all concentration. Captain Sigmun and the Falconers had drawn a little apart.

I knew well the Sulcars were wary of this kind of Power and the Falconers owned to having no talents except such as bonded them for life with their birds. But with Chief it was different. He put one paw on my wrist and exerted strength to bring my hands down an inch or two. Then he leaned his head against my arm at the same place where his paw had rested. His eyes were wide open and glowing, fixed upon the stone.

Strength began to build. Slowly at first, like a single plank from one of the ships behind us floating on calm water. Then it picked up speed—the floating board could be motivated now by a rope attached and vigorously pulled.

Something had lain quiescent—it had... fed. Now it stirred a little, some faint warning might have reached into its half sleep to urge waking. I could not catch any clear picture. I did not think that any of us did or we would have shared it all at the moment it came into even one of the minds among us.

No, I "saw" no man, nor Witch, not even one of the monsters which had attacked before. There was a queer

Witch World. The Turning blankness about this thing of Power—it might be dead—lacking the spark of life which a user gives to the talent. Only it was not so—it was still able to function in a manner of its own.

I strove to reach above it with the farsight. Once again I hung above a solid block of sheer blackness. It might have been that all which provided life and color had been cut away here—leaving nothingness in its place.

Save that there was within that solid darkness something which sensed—sensed? How could that which was without life sense? Power, yes. It was a holder of Power, near filled with it. Until lately it had been emptied and it had to labor mightily to bring that to it which would once more make it ready to serve—to serve? What?

Then, as Chief might strike out with claws to defend himself before the enemy was fully aware that he knew of its presence, that which we were attempting to spy upon knew of us!

The amulet in my hand not only blazed light but heat sprung up from it. If that burning was some counter of that which we hunted to get me to drop what I had come to look upon as my personal defense it failed. I had had enough practice with the changes which might occur that I closed fingers about it and held on even when it became a live coal in the intensity of the heat it generated.

The Lady Jaelithe grimaced and then raised both hands. Her fingers moved as if she wove the empty air into living fabric. I saw Orsya's hands go out also and between them stretched two lengths of what could only be seaweed cords on which shells were strung. This burdened string she switched from side to side, lowering and elevating each hand one at a time. Kemoc had made no move of offense or defense but his face was closed, wiped clear of all expression.

There was movement though. The two Falconers, Captain Sigmun, were on their feet, starting towards the stairway. Their faces also were closed, their eyes staring straight ahead. I scrambled to my feet and

lunged forward. The hand closed about the amulet thudded into

Captain Sigmun's back, bruising flesh against his mail shirt. From that touch a small wave of blue light ran, swept both up and down. He gave a cry, throwing out his arms, and then pitched forward, to lie unmoving in the sand.

With the Falconers it was otherwise. Their birds turned upon them, flying into their faces and screaming. I saw blood run from a scored cheek. As Sigmun had done, the men sank to the sand and their birds flew circles about them still screaming.

My amulet moved, striving to turn as if it would work itself between my fingers. I looked down upon it. Once more the well-remembered symbols incised there changed. I saw the face which was a skull, and this time the flesh it put on was scant cover. It remained closer to death's visage than that of the woman it had been before. There was baleful light in those skull hole eyes, no smile curved those lips.

Lady Jaelithe jerked halfway around to face me. Her hands remained in the air but now they were still. I could guess what she wanted, but this was my battle. I knew only one way to fight it. I looked at the skull head and fought to summon Gunnora's grain sheaf and vine—that promise of fruitfulness which she was able to grant. This one was death—but Gunnora was life!

A small fear moved inside me. They said that I was of the Dark, the evil, Death's handmaid. However, if that were so I could not have stood even within the outer court of Gunnora's House. If this thing now in my hand was evil and thought to find me easy molding to its will—that was not so!

The grain, the vine! So stood the grain, tall, head heavy as it was in the field at harvest time. I had helped to cut such grain, to bind it into stocks, to feel its promising weight. There was the vine to fasten together—and the fruit that supposed was dark red, round plumpness from which, when one set tooth to break the skin, there burst that which refreshed after the heaviest labor, lightened the heart, gave hospitality to friends and weary travelers. This was life at its fullness—not death.

See it, I would, stock and vine, grain and fruit. That ugliness which hid it from me was not greater than Gunnora, to that I would in no way admit. Life—not death. I had no body, I was nowhere in the world—that inner essence which was me confronted the evil which was the skull.

It opened its fleshless jaws and it howled. I could hear that, the menace in it, just as I could feel it plucking at my will, striving to tear my determination from me. There was something beyond mere pain of body which slashed at me. Threat became deadly promise. Still I held. Grain and fruit, grain and fruit.

The skull became transparent in places so that I could see what I determined could be there. Once more it solidified and covered the emblem of life, lashed out at me so that I was near spent. But still I held.

Then both the skull and that which I had sought were gone!

My eyes were blinded; I was in the midst of a fire which roared and reared to enwrap the whole of me. There was no defense I had against this—nor was one needed. Instead all the pain which had gnawed at me was burned away. What was left was strong, able—held Power!

I blinked again. As when I had awakened that morning I found that I had moved unknowing from where I had been. For I stood at the foot of the stairway. That which I still held in my hands was no longer the stone which had come to me in Gunnora's shrine. Rather it was now a disc of gold through which moved motes of rich, dark red—the gold of the grain, the red of the fruit. And she who wore it was also

changed, that I knew. But how and why—that I could not yet say. I was only sure that my feet had been set on another path, of which none knew much in those late days but which it was my duty—and my joy—to walk.

I did not move away from the foot of the stairway, but I half turned so that I could see the others. The Falconers and Sigmund had recovered to the point they were sitting up. However, the other four of our company had drawn up in a line in front of me.

I looked to the Lady Jaelithe and to Orsya and I held out my hands.

"Sisters, there is that which must be done."

Each came forward and accepted the hand I offered. I saw Lord Simon make a slight movement as if to stop his lady and Kemoc lay hand on his father's arm. Mighty were they both in different ways and well did the people of Estcarp and Escore give them all honor. Only this was an affair of women, at last I knew that.

She of the skull face might have been routed on her first attack but she had never been defeated and was not now in retreat.

The three of us began to climb those stairs. I could feel that which tried to wrap us around, to encompass us, first mind and then body. Those it had entrapped before, during all the eons of time it had been in existence, had not been as we. The man with the axe might have taught it caution if it had been able to learn. But the mind of this thing was limited, it did not live, was not able to change patterns of thought, except in the ways which were meant long ago to defend it against those who had no gifts.

Its attack upon us grew the greater the higher we climbed. If such as it could feel apprehension, I believed it must do so now. We were outside the pattern—the pattern of the Dark. Up we went, pitted step by pitted step.

We stood at the top of that stairway, high above the graveyard of ships from more than one time and world. Before us, dwarfing us, was that windowless, doorless block of a black so deep that it appeared to draw light to it and swallow it.

At that moment perhaps its uneasiness had grown to the point where it willed defense. Out of the sky came the winged monsters, shrieking aloud. They came and they sheered off, keeping a good distance as they cried out their hatred. The glow of the great jewel I wore grew ever brighter, surely a warning.

That which we had come to find was before us, but how we could enter into that dark cube was a puzzle. Shadows moved outward from it to begin a kind of in-and-out, weaving dance. Red eyes gleamed and they were gone. Talon paws appeared, to take substance, and then fade into nothingness once again.

"Aaaüieeee!" Out of the very air itself seemed to come that echo-arousing call.

Chapter 17

He came from the east, to the land side of that cube, and he walked slowly, his shoulders a little slumped as a man draws in upon himself when facing the rigors of a winter storm. In his hands was the axe I had

seen him use to such purpose, and he swung it slowly back and forth. Though there was no mist here, he could be cutting a path through a barrier which perhaps only he could see.

There was little change in him since I had seen him last through the eyes of the man he had rescued. He certainly was no older and his movements were the vigorous ones of a man of middle years. He was chanting as he came, the unknown words making a pattern which might be strange to my ears but which I recognized for what they were, sounds meant to set up a rhythm which energized his own defenses against this place of the Black.

It was Orsya who matched him—though her voice was not weighty, rather it began as the sound a river might make when it found its clear path half walled by rocks, and then it was the pelt of storm rain. However, it did not drown out his chant, rather became a part of it, filling out places, so that it was a smooth power, completely whole.

In my mind there grew a picture. This land was not barren after all, far within it there was that which would bear were it given promise of future harvest. I found myself humming the work song of planting in the fields. The Lady Jaelithe's hands were moving, translating into her form of Power all the force which lay in what our voices summoned.

It arose to a great crescendo of sound and then one of the Lady Jaelithe's hands pointed at the cube as if to guide what we had wrought.

Only that which confronted us here was awake now, and it was not angered, for I could not sense any emotion, rather it turned to its ever-abiding hunger for a weapon and it sent out a discordant wailing.

Instantly we were silent for what we had built here might well be taken over and used by that. I could feel the compulsion it would set upon us. This might be one of those from the Dark edging about a camp fire, seeking for one who sheltered by the flames to come forth to where it might take its prey.

We stood silent and quiet. Though I had never entered such a struggle as this before, I was ready to believe that the surest way to open a door to it would be to launch another attack.

What it wanted, I was sure of that, was not our bodies—rather our life energy. It was that upon which it feasted, which it had been set to draw to it. There had come fresh energy into it lately, but not enough, there was never enough. If it had so absorbed all the crews from all those ships, it had feasted well in the past, and it was slaving so to feast again. Yet it was not alive by any measurement that I knew.

A screeching broke the silence. The flying monsters coasted down about that great cube, though none alit on its crest. Nor did they fly against us. Had they come to view some deeds of their master? And who was that master?

My question might have been spoken aloud. On the side of the cube facing us there glowed a circle of light, grey as a bone which had laid in some murky place for untold years. And bone it was, for the light twisted and turned to form a sheath of bones standing upright. Those twirled and fell or whirled aloft and there was a full skeleton surmounted by a skull which I knew, no matter how much one skull might resemble another. This was she who had dared to use Gunnora's gift to print herself on my mind and memory.

Very slowly, as if it required infinite effort, she was building a form over those bones, but it was painfully thin—so that the visage and the body was like unto the woman I saw die of hunger in the rock land. I think that she struggled to reach a more tangible, better form.

She must, I thought, be drawing on that which the cube had stored. It was only by fits and starts that she achieved more return for her purpose. Her head was fully woman now, and from it streamed hair which did not fall down across her wasted body but rather clung outward from her now hidden skull across the surface of the cube.

There was a suggestion of beauty in her face but that head above the skin-and-bone body was enough to arouse disgust and fear, not any awe or admiration.

Then, of a sudden, she left off her efforts. The bones and their thin grey envelope disappeared as though cut off at some source; only the head remained. That took on the likeness of youth and beauty such as perhaps few mortal women ever wear. Still this was of the Dark.

She smiled, and the tip of her tongue crossed the full redness of her lower lip. She had turned her gaze not toward us, but rather to the axe man. I think that was because he was a man and such she had found in the past to be ripe for harvesting. Only he showed a stone-silent face as one might see graven on some of the old statues in Arvon.

As we had earlier sang so now she trilled and the notes were sweet as the juice of a sun-ripened berry, save more like that of a berry which had hung on the brier too long so there was a hint of decay beneath the surface.

Not only was her visage faintly foul, but that odor we had sniffed from the beach arose about us here. The stench of a battlefield ten days old at the height of summer. I did not know whether I saw true or not but the cube seemed to shudder like a living thing so that foul stench could have been thrown off.

The axe man stood rocklike under her probing. Then the cube actually heaved. Out of it spun a long tentacle, whipping for his legs. I moved, the jewel of Gunnora's aglow in my fingers. But his axe fell clean and straight. The writhing appendage fell to the ground, to be gone an instant later.

The face on the cube lost something of its languorous smile. Now it mouthed words, and each of those appeared from those twisted lips like a fiery pellet of spit. From where they landed on the rock before the cube trails of smoke arose.

There was a rage there, so hot one could well feel it in the air. Those flying horrors screamed and arose in a body, flying back away from the cube, though I did not believe they had left the field entirely.

That rage was building and with it came something else—action I could not yet understand but which was fatal—if not against us, then others. The sun was darkening—or rather being veiled from us by clouds. I could *see* lines of energy rising from the four corners of the cube, slanting up, reaching for those clouds and the natural forces behind them. Darkness came as quickly as if night had shut down like the lid of a chest being closed upon its contents.

Yet the darkness was not complete, for around each of us as we stood there was a halo of sharp, eye-hurting light. That did not reach our bodies although that was what it was striving to do—to destroy those same bodies—and eat! The head on the cube stretched forward, the mouth open to show small, sharply pointed teeth. I thought of the were beasts and how some part of them showed their brand even while they walked in human guise and I thought that what I saw was not unlike a were. Was the woman a prisoner of the cube even as she believed herself to be in command of the power and mystery it represented?

We were not caught by that visible push of energy, but the sky opened above us. There came such a deluge of rain that we might have been standing under a fountain in full play. That in no way deadened or defeated the light; it passed directly through it to beat us. I put out my hands, allowing the amulet to hang in full sight, and I was grasped on one side by the Lady Jaelithe, on the other by Orsya. So linked we stood strong against that sky flood.

He of the axe had fallen back a few steps and set his shoulders against a rock. Unlike that brilliant, searing light which outlined the three of us, he had red flame encircling him, one in which tongues of the fire bent this way and that but were not drowned by the storm. I saw his lips move. Perhaps he was chanting again but the roar of the storm was such we could not hear him.

What I had heard of gates was that they were marked by age-eroded stones. This one, if it controlled a gate, was very different. But then perhaps a sea one would have to be.

I had not more thought of that when that glow was recalled from about us. It was no longer steady, rather it pulsed as if the energy which drove it was weakening. The rage was still there, perhaps the greater, since added to it was frustration. Long had what ruled this place been invincible, with no question or power raised against it. Even now it could not believe we were able to withstand its will.

My jewel's light spread out and out to encircle the three of us. Then it spun like a wheel, growing greater with every revolution, until it also enclosed the axe man and his fire. Having circled us at ground height it began, at a point directly before me, to rise, shaping itself into something not unlike a pointing finger. Only, before it reached the level of the face, that was gone.

The rain ceased, there were no clouds. The sun, now well to the west, lit the sky. Only pools remaining in rock hollows told us that what we had seen was the truth. On my breast the jewel called silently and the light it had loosed returned to it.

First of us to move was the axe man. He strode to a position before me just below where that face had formed. Raising his weapon he aimed a mighty blow, one which would have shattered even steel, I think. Yet his axe showed no harm, only it rebounded with such force as to near make him lose his balance. With his other hand he rubbed vigorously at the arm which hung limply at his side, though its fingers still grasped the weapon. I heard him give a grunt but we had no time to exchange any other sounds for the flying things were back, and this time they dashed themselves straight at us. Perhaps all our Power was weakened by our ordeal for nothing fended them off this time, and I flailed, vigorously with my rod, while the man before me used his axe, shearing off wings and feet so ably that I was sure he had fought just such creatures before and had learned well the trick of it. Lady Jaelithe also had a sword in her hand and Orsya whirled about her that bit of kelp rope which had strung on it the sharp-edged shells.

We killed and heard from the head of the stairway two battle cries. Then Lord Simon and Kemoc were with us and we drove off the flyers, nor had any of us taken hurt. It seemed to me that we had been very lucky, unless Power we had not consciously summoned was working for us now.

What we would do at the coming of night I did not know. I was loathe to leave this position by the cube, for I understood very well that one victory does not win a war. She whose face had appeared to us was not of the breed who surrendered. No, their commitment to what they would do is both full and final.

Lady Jaelithe was of one mind with me on that as she said:

"The dark can well be what leads powers of evil to wax, as the light for us. Therefore must we play sentry this night." Then she spoke directly to the axe man:

"Brother in Power, how is it with you?" For he was rubbing his left hand up and down his right arm, though he had used his axe valiantly moments earlier and the odorous dark blood of the flying things dripped from the blade of his weapon.

"Sister of Lightning." His voice was low and guttural and he spoke the trade tongue with a thick accent, though we could still understand him. "What black magic holds in this place?"

She shook her head. "That I cannot tell you, knowledgeable one, for it is not of the path which I walk, coming instead from a different and darker way."

He nodded. "So does it seem, sister. This is not of man's magic, nor yet that of womankind's—though we have seen the face of her who calls up storms as a woman summons her sheep. She eats does this one and then grows strong enough to toss the land about and bring fires up out of the sea. Sometimes her catch is good and there are ships to come at her summons, and those aboard she takes for her own that she may fill herself once again—"

"She is Laqit." For that had come into my thoughts and I knew it for a true one. This was indeed the last of the guardians which Sulcar legend named, this strange horror at the end of the world.

They looked at me but it was the Lady Jaelithe who made first answer:

"So this be Laqit. Yet there was a greater who set her here." Now she looked back to the now bare wall. The sun was down, leaving only colored banners across the sky. Already shadows lengthened and it was Lord Simon who said my own thought aloud:

"Does darkness also feed this—this one?"

The axe man was ready with an answer: "Not so, except that it can watch and wait and plan. But it has not fed as it hoped and that will lead to the need of our being ever alert and on watch."

"It is not alive—you speak as if it is—" I said.

"Not with life as we know it!" the Lady Jaelithe said quickly. "What do you do?" She ended with a swift demand as Kemoc moved forward, past us all. He had sheathed his sword, and his hands were raised shoulder high, palm out. Before any of us could move he had set those flat upon the surface of the cube, below where that head had appeared. His head fell forward a little, and I, who had moved to stop him, saw his eyes were closed and there was the strain of intense concentration mirrored on his face.

Not knowing what he would do I hesitated to draw him away. The others shared my uncertainty. We came close enough that we might catch him by the shoulders and draw him to freedom but we still hesitated.

I saw frowns, and the shadow of fear, determination such as a hunter might show though he kept to the chase in the face of great odds. Then Kemoc gasped and his hands dropped to his sides. He swayed and perhaps might have fallen had not Lord Simon and the axe man together steadied him and guided him back away from the cube.

He was drawing fast breaths, almost as if he gasped for air. Then his eyes opened.

"They are still there—those who have been recently taken. I have tried to call but they are so shaken

with terror that they cannot hear. If we could break that, and get to them, that which uses them might well suffer. It is weaker—the feeding has been scant for a long time."

Perhaps it was that new strength within me which roused to that challenge. Knowledge I had always gained in snippets, under no tutelage, for there were none who would take me for teaching. Yet now I had such a store as I could not calculate. I had not been given time to count it all over, to sort this from that. Such an inner study might well take years when we had only a short and fleeting time here.

"Where is the ship—the derelict?"

They looked at me startled. It was Lord Simon who answered.

"We left it just without the south end sweep of the bay."

A long way, I thought, and then I thought of birds' wings against the sky and the fact that the things which hindered a fast journey on land might not mean so much delay to one winged and aloft.

"There is that of the people gone which is still on board," I said. "Also, is it not true that that which has been worn much, treasured, kept by one person, is tuned to his or her spirit? Let us get what I left from the ship and see whether it can call to someone who is captive there." I nodded toward the cube.

"A falcon!" Orsya had caught my thought first. "Let the Falconers send one of their birds with a message to one of their own. That will not take the full night's time to reach there and back!"

Lady Jaelithe nodded vigorously. "Yes, that perhaps is the answer! It is one you and I have seen in part used." She spoke now to Lord Simon. "Remember when we called Power down upon the Kolders through that which was their symbol—how their allies fell away? Let us send for this!" She had taken two steps toward the stairway when she paused and spoke over her shoulder to the axe man:

"Does your talent do so, also, brother?"

He had put the axe down between his feet and was busy now at his belt where there were a number of small bags, all fastened by drawstrings pulled through loops there.

"This calling I have heard of but I have not seen. The gift the Above Ones have given me is different. Leave to me the guardianship of this place—it will not hold for long but there will be ones who shall stand sentinel for us."

Thus we left the stranger and went down the stairway. I thought as I went that many must have gone aloft by that way but perhaps we were the only ones ever to descend again. It was dark now. Gunnora's stone shone as well as any lamp but the spread of its diffuse light did not reach far. However, from some of the oldest ships, those which had been ground into the sand by the later comers, there was a glimmer. Almost it was the old tale of how the dread deathlights spring from the unknown graves where those dead by murder lay, to shine until they were granted justice.

By the light of that I saw the Falconers and Captain Sigmun. Each was seated and around him where he sat, well apart so that no line intersected another, there was a circle drawn in the sand. I would have thought that too soft to hold its shape for long, but these were still sharp and clear. The three men looked to Lord Simon and I thought that the stares of the Falconers were not far from cold fury. Their birds were on their wrists, heads under wings and they slept.

Captain Sigmun was the only one to speak. "How have you wrought above, warlocks? Your spells worked well here."

"Be thankful, Captain, that that was so," Kemoc snapped. "For there is that above which hungers and you would have been its meat!"

"So? Well, there comes a time for fighting and a time for standing aside. Have you gutted this eater so that we may now have our freedom?"

"Not yet. For that we must have your help—"

"Is it not true that we cannot stand against it?" One of the Falconers fairly spat that in Kemoc's direction. "Are we not bait?" He was sour of face even for one of his clan and I knew how jealous the Falconers were of what they deemed their honor. To be held a prisoner by his own side when a foray was made aloft must have diminished him and his fellow in their own sight.

"It is only your skill which can save perhaps all of us," Lord Simon cut in. I knew that he had ridden with the Falconers in the day of the Kolders and that since then he acted as a voice for them in the affairs of Estcarp, where they would not speak, since women judged there. To a Falconer a woman is a far lesser being than either bird or mount, to be kept from the consorting with man on an equal basis in all things. Perhaps it was because Lord Simon had long ago won their respect, in spite of the fact he was wedded and to a Witch, which worked on the pair of them now.

They had arisen and their falcons had awakened, one mantling as if ready for instant flight.

"What is your will, lord?" The younger of the two pointedly did not look in our direction, only to Simon. He beckoned to me. And as I skirted a broken timber half buried in the sand to come to him, the Falconers became stone faced again.

"There is this." I refused to be daunted by their attitude. "On the strange ship on which we have sailed into their waters there were many things which belonged to those vanished ones of her first crew. Most of those things we gave back to the sea lest they prove a draw of the Dark. Now we need what is left. With it we may be able to break the encirclement which holds this place and has squatted here to be the death of many.

"If you fly one of your falcons to the ship carrying a message, and that bird will return with what we need— it is small and easy to carry—then we shall be armed with an extra weapon which will serve us well."

Neither looked at me, but that they understood I knew. They were only following the long-held pattern of their kind. Then the elder nodded.

"Bold Wing is swift and the night is still young. He can be back by dawn if it is indeed true that what he carries is light enough."

"Good," Lord Simon said heartily. He took from a belt pouch one of those tablets made of a certain sleek stone, wafer-thin, on which orders can be written, erased, and written again. This he handed to me with one of the very narrow paint sticks.

I thought, trying to set my desire in as few words as possible. Then I wrote in the short word style of the Sulcar. It should be easy to find the boxes, take forth the jewels I had not been able to throw away.

Perhaps that had been a foreseeing of a kind, and something within me had known that there would be a future use for such. I was very sure of one thing—that she who had worn those gems had treasured them, and they might well be the key to the lock of the cube.

Lord Simon handed the write-stone to the Falconer, who took great care to knot it into a cord he slipped over his bird's head. Kemoc went forward and with his sword, a very slender one which seemed to draw light into its blade, he broke through the circles set about the men so that the Falconer could step forward and loose his bird, which spiraled up into the dark and was gone.

Chapter 18

It was a long night and twice during it I climbed those stairs to look upon the cube. The second time all fatigue had left me and I felt as strong in my own way as the rocks about. Though I kept a careful eye upon the place where that face had hung.

What the axe man had done amazed me the most. He was still busied about it when I had gone aloft. From those many small bags he had hanging at his belt he brought forth, a different color from each, what seemed to be colored sand near as powdery as dust. About the cube the rock of the cliff top was more level than it was elsewhere. Onto that space he dribbled sand from his clenched fist, first this color and then that. The colors I could be sure of, since the sand, even as the ship timbers below, gave forth a faint gleam. So he painted, one at each of the four sides of the cube, a weird figure which I guess was representative of some power he had learned to control. Then at the four corners, separating the territory of one of his designs from the next, he made other signs, not so detailed. Until, around the fortress of our enemy, he had set up this silent band of watchers born of colored dust.

I sat cross-legged and watched him. That this was no power of our world, I knew. Also I was as certain as if he had told me so this had in it something which was akin to Gunnora's kingdom—that it was born firstly of the earth and a deep respect for all which grew thereupon.

When he had finished the last of his sand-born symbols he came to where I sat and for the first time eyed me closely as if there was a need that he understand something which was unknown hitherto. Then he pointed to Gunnora's jewel with what he had held as an instrument for sweeping up any sand which dribbled awry because of some unevenness of the pavement.

"Corn Woman."

Whether he meant that name for me or for She for whom I now spoke I did not know. I answered with the name she was known to us:

"Gunnora."

He appeared to chew upon that as a man chews upon some viand he has never tasted before, trying so to judge whether it was to his liking or no. Then he nodded and seated himself some little distance away. Throwing back his head he began to chant again, but not raising his voice far above a whisper.

In me that thing I had felt since my stone had become a goddess's jewel stirred. I need not mind-probe to know that what he called upon was partly of Gunnora's own rule, the earth under us which could be fruitful or sere as Power employed it.

This was a place where I felt that no barrier might be eased. I had no time to go seeking inside myself for what I had been freshly gifted. I needed time, and solitude, and a way to work out my own road. None of those could I claim now. Still it seemed as I listened to a humming which was not of my own world, more barriers within me crumbled. I was not she who had started on this quest still fearful that the Dark might claim me—no, what I was—

I had listened to an old Sulcar sailor once who spoke of a queer land to the north, bordering on Alizon, of how there was a tribe of people whose leader could never be

-spoken to directly after he had taken on the circlet of rule, but had always with him a maiden to whom all words must be addressed, even though the ruler stood there beside her, and then he spoke to her and she to the petitioner. It had seemed to me a way of folly, but long-held custom often seems folly to those who look or hear of it unknowing of what actions it was born.

Would it—could it be that Power, also, had maidens or spokesmen who stood between the petitioner and what was wished? The Witches used Power as they would a tool—it was not personified for them. It had long been thought that it only was Dark power which drew servitors to it—remaining the shadow behind the High Chair in dealings.

What was I now? Surely a speaker for a Power whose strength I had no measure. I cupped my jewel and it was warm. Into me swept again that feeling of energy and purpose with which I had climbed the stair. The axe man chanted no longer, rather sat silent, his weapon resting against one knee. There was about him the air of a besieged who had made ready all possible defenses and now determinedly waited on attack.

"You are alone here, Brother-in-Power?" I asked. For it tugged at my mind that I wanted to know the fate of him whose knife had opened the seeing door.

His hands had been busy once again with another pouch at his belt. Now he brought forth a very small bowl to which was attached on one side a hollow, reed-like projection. He took from another pouch two pinches of what I thought might be dried herbs and those he packed tightly into the bowl. Then he had a very small splinter of wood which he rubbed across the rock so that there sprang from it a small flame and this he speedily applied to the contents of the bowl, sucking at the reed and then expelling from his mouth a puff of smoke. Even over the charnel smell of this place I caught that scent of that.

"There are others—" I do not know why he awaited so long to answer my question. Was he still somewhat suspicious of us?

"Not all," he continued, "can be taken by that." He looked at the cube. "There must be something in them which it cannot touch. Inland"—he gestured eastward—"the living is hard but men can exist, and do."

I would have asked more, wanting to know of the three he had helped escape from the mist, but at the moment the Lady Jaelithe came up the stairs and walked slowly towards us, looking at the sand-and-dust drawings with wonder. With her forefinger she outlined in the air what was not unlike part of one of the figures and it flashed blue. I knew that she would not have duplicated the whole drawing for she might so drain away its power. The axe man was on his feet, the bowl of his smoking object in his hand, watching keenly. But after her action he made one of his own, raising his hand shoulder high, palm out, thumb moving back and forth across the fingers set together. I knew that for a salute between equals.

"You do not sleep?" she asked.

"Before Woman, that does not sleep." He nodded to the cube. "It is otherwise—planning darkness for us all— and perhaps more than us. It seeks food, for it wishes its freedom and that will come only when it is strong enough to break the bonds laid upon it."

"It is part of a gate," she said slowly. "But of a gate which was turned wholly to evil by the one who opened it."

"Laqit?" I asked.

She shook her head. "There were guardians set by some gates when the adepts who opened them went through. Then were orders given that such gates were to be held ready for retreat. Laqit was a guardian of this one, yes. But also time has passed, too many years. The adept is gone, that which was to follow a pattern which he set for his return is now acting erratically—perhaps because of the guardian who reaches for power and freedom of her own. She—it—can only be defeated when the pattern is completely broken."

"She reaches too far—and for too much." I stood up, It was far too early to hope that the falcon had returned. I was restless as one is before any great trial of strength.

"There are sentries," the axe man said, and inhaled again from that which filled his pipe, puffing forth aromatic smoke.

"And potent ones, Brother-in-Power," agreed the Lady Jaelithe. "Yet this is a long night and we shall all be glad to see the end of it."

She stood for a moment at the head of the stairway as if she expected me to join her. But I shook my head. The axe man would commune with his messengers and guardians I knew. For me—I must somehow make peace within myself, for a strangeness was astir until I thought sometimes that I must shout aloud or smite the bare rock with my hands in order to contain energy building within. I might not be a speaker for Gunnora, never had I heard of any who were deemed such, but that I was now wholly hers, blood and bone, mind and heart, that I would swear to by any oath my people knew.

So I seated myself before that cube once more and I deliberately thought of Laqit, of who or what she must once have been—for that she was not of this world any longer I was sure. As I thought I nursed my jewel between my hands and the colors within it swirled and spiraled. Though I had thought to put my full mind on Laqit what I saw as a mind picture was something else. I was aloft as one of the falcons above this rock-walled place and the bay of dead ships, but there was one change— that cube was but a square of broken walls and those were crumbling into rubble, and the rubble to dust as if time was here a weapon.

There were bodies which lay about those walls and I knew if I wished I could see the face of each and every one of them. I did not wish for I knew that I was foreseeing and always foreseeing meant ill to those about me. However, I did not linger at the place where were the controls of that fateful gate, rather I was swept, as if by a needful fresh breeze, inland. I passed over that barren ground where only the twisted deadly growth had been. There was springing from the earth healthy grass and shoots which would be trees. The dead was coming alive.

I saw a village of stone-walled houses and forms moved among those, but again I did not want to look upon faces. So my journey continued farther eastward from the sea. There was a river and across it the remains of a bridge and from that led still a road, one of the straight tracks which the Old Ones knew. While the land that led into was like unto an Estcarp where no war had come.

High on a rise above that road was a place which my heart leaped with joy to look upon. To it I would have gone, to give all that I had and take again that which I most needed. Only this I could not do and I knew that the time was not yet but, as always, farseeing had favored me.

Then I opened my eyes and what I saw was that skull face and it was laughing, its direful eyes upon me. I was sure Laqit had seen through my talent for that future voyaging, but she was dismissing all of it as a dream which would never bear fruit.

Whether I actually saw her or not I was never afterwards sure. But that she did know I had been questing and what I had seen I never doubted. Now her head was gone like a snap of the fingers. The axe man had vanished also. A moment later he came about from the other side of the cube. He was no longer smoking. Instead he had in his hand a length of carved wood, a little shorter than his forearm, and as he strode, along the far side of the figures he had drawn, he shook that. The wood bore two thongs on which were sprung bones or teeth and those rattled together in time to his pacing.

Back up the stairs were coming the four others of our command against the enemy. Lord Simon, hand on sword hilt, though it was not steel which would win this engagement now before us, Kemoc, Orsya, and the Lady Jaelithe. It was she who carried in one hand a small pouch which she offered me.

There was grey sky to the east; our messenger had made better time than we had dared hope. It remained to be seen if the weapon he had brought was indeed that—arms to serve us—or whether I had guessed wrongly. But that I had not foreseen. Also I shut out of my mind what *I had* foreseen, the destruction of the cube, so that it might not bring any of us to grief as such seeings had done for me in the past.

I opened the bag and shook its contents free into my other hand. In the gathering light gems caught light from my jewel and brilliant sparks flew from them. The necklace I wrapped about my hand so that it would hold the other pieces against my flesh. I stood before the cube but first I looked to those five others who shared danger with me, for I was certain that, even if mine was the first move against the enemy, they would be a part of what would happen.

As Kemoc had done I advanced to the side of the cube, setting there my feet a little apart, bracing my full body as sturdily as I could. Then I leaned forward a little and put the hand which held the jewels against a surface which had not the feel of honest stone but rather a sleekness which made one think of slime and abominations. I loosed mind search.

I might have stepped on into the embrace of that dark evil. There seemed to be no solid barrier anymore. What lay within was a constant tumult, like the rushing of identities to and fro. I thought of Chief leaping into some narrow space containing a multitude of mice all of which strove to escape but found no way open.

To fasten on any one of those faint, stricken, dying identities (for dying they truly were) would avail me nothing. No, I might even be drawn also to the same fate. There was only one chance—

My thought had been a signal. Where my right hand might be, though I could not see it, there came a glow, first the merest trace of light, and then a small but steady flame. In my mind I fixed the picture thought of the gems—and bent all my Power (how much I might call upon now I could not guess) upon the summoning of she who had hidden that treasure.

Those entrapped still spun and fled here and there, mindless in the last emotion left to them, abiding fear,

on the very edge of madness, but not across terror, for this thing fed upon their thoughts and mad thoughts lost much of their nourishment.

The gems—I mind-pictured them again—not now in my hand held but rather on one whose face I had never seen and could not know. Around the throat the necklace, at the ears, on the finger the flash of jewels growing ever brighter.

She was there! I need not construct a thought shape to wear them; she who owned them claimed them. Straightway I plunged on into that one mind which the gem-brought memory had cleared.

There still abode fear, but another part of her thought caught mine.

Just as the blazing stone of Gunnora proved an anchor for me, so was what I offered fighting the wildness of her despair. Gifts—gifts of honor, or love—some of her thoughts were plain and open, others sealed to me. However, for now that which had her captive no longer played with her.

She was strong, was that stranger. The jewels were indeed a key for her, turning in a lock so that she could see a measure of freedom beyond this hell in which she ran captive and near mad.

Knowledge flashed between us. First she asked had freedom come? And I was forced to tell her in the openness of mind to mind that all freedoms save one were closed to her. I feared that I might lose her when I said that. She indeed retreated as one looking from side to side to find a way out.

Then she proved that she was indeed strong. For her thought caught mine and held tightly to it. If not freedom, save what lies beyond the last gate of all—then what was to be hers?

Again there could be no dissembling between us. I

thought of what must be done and I felt her mind grow hard and as keen as the blade of a sword as I stretched out before her the dangerous game which we must play—nor could I promise anything for its ending except hope.

There was anger in her and that was now fully awake. Women who have seen all they cherish fall in a raided village can rise to those heights of rage—it is cold, not hot, and it is deadly. I knew what the Witches had felt when they prepared to turn the mountains upon invaders. This was anger which could well be a potent weapon.

"Do what must be done!" That was an order and it was followed by a promise: "I shall do the same."

I sensed her reaching out to those silent, yet screaming, identities, searching, finding one, trapping it with fierce promise. Then I was without the cube, blinking in the rising sun.

They stood waiting even as they had been positioned when I left them. Though another had been added. Chief stalked forward, his ears flattened against his skull, his tail enlarged as was a ridge of fur along his back, and he yowled a fierce war cry. Before I could move he was past me, his nose pressed tightly to the cube. I heard him yowl again but the cry sounded muffled as if it came from far away.

When I stooped to pick him up he struck at me with unsheathed claws, leaving red rails on my forearm, and I loosed him quickly. He was back again in a moment. This time I used the mind send. Only, so different were our thought patterns, I could not match his level. There was a steady core at which he was aiming and I had hope that so he had found her and that she was doing what she could.

Thus we prepared for battle and under the sun's light we marched, mind with mind, to front that which had never been meant to be and must now vanish forever, if such as we were strong enough to stand against it—and if she within could indeed arouse one other, perhaps more to our cause.

Lord Simon drew his sword, putting it point down into a crack in the rock, his hands clasped over its plain cross hilt. Kemoc had also bared steel, his head was well back and up, he was looking towards the sky as if there hung the weapon he favored. By his side Orsya twirled her ribbon, shuffling the shells along it, her lips also moving as if she told some tale of numbers. The Lady Jaelithe's hands were up; I saw what she held in one was that rod I had found in the wilderness but along it circles, tight rings of blue, speeding ever faster, to spring from its end into the air.

The axe man held that mighty weapon in one hand, in the other the rattle, and the sound of that broke through air which was suddenly heavy and stagnant, full of foulness.

I? I had Gunnora's jewel and what more within me I could not tell, only that it was growing. Chief drew himself away from the cube, retreating, still hissing, now and then growling. A strange band of warriors were we indeed; all we had in common was purpose.

On the side of the cube formed that circle of light, the skull, and then the fleshed head of Laqit. She was smiling and she favored each of us, even Chief, with a long, measuring stare.

"Little ones, flesh and blood, captive to the final gate—tied and held within one life—She mocked. We listened.

There was a fearsome crack of sound from above us and lightning struck—but not straight—deflected so it hit the cliff to the west. I saw Kemoc's face white under the mask of weatherbrowning and I knew that it was his Power which had broken that aim.

"The dead lie down with the dead and are at peace." Words came to me and I said them. My belief that I was now a Voice grew stronger. "Peace be with *you*, Laqit. He for whom you keep this gate is long since gone, nor will he return. Be at peace."

In that moment I knew that it was will in the greater part which held this danger together. The will of one long gone, the will of her who should be dead.

She spat much as Chief had done. The cube seemed to swell. Over us swept the edge of a thrust of energy which, had it hit us full on, might well have blasted us into nothingness—but Laqit could fight only in the design set for her.

There was a rumbling to the east. The ground under us quivered. A portion of the cliff was loosened and fell away.

"Now!" Lady Jaelithe's word reached me. My mind struck farther. I sought for her within the cube, touched—and then there was a barrier which crashed down between us.

We struck. Into the face I hurled all which was Gunnora's, growth, harvest, love and being, life and death, which is only another gate, peace and all the fair things of the world. Thrusts of light burst from Lady Jaelithe's fingers to strike the wall. Kemoc shouted and his voice filled the heavens as if all thunder known to our world answered him, while from the sky came lashing of lightning, not striking toward us but against the cube. The axe man twirled his weapon above his head; it might have been only fancy but I

thought I saw giant figures resembling those he had drawn upon the rock come, each from a different direction, and their square-fingered hands reached for the cube.

Orsya whirled high her shell-tied strip of reed and again I felt a trembling under my feet. But what moved there were new courses of water hunting ways which led them under the cube.

So did we fight. But there were others. I knew when she who was prisoner within launched her own battle. Three of those others she had won to her, and united they stood. When the demand fell upon them for energy, they denied it. More and more and more anger beat—still they stood— though with each onslaught they weakened.

I saw Laqit's face twist, first with rage, and then in fear, and lastly in death, as such as she would know death, having surrendered her being to another way. Lightning struck full on the cube just as each of those giants from the sand paintings delivered also a blow.

There was a crack. I reached within, holding what Gunnora had to offer. She who fought did not claim it yet, but there were others and swiftly did that peace go to each whom the gate had not fully drained, last of all to her who watched me and smiled. She made a gesture and a bit of glitter came toward me. I threw back what I found now in my hands—flowers such as the Dales maidens wear at their bridals and are given them again at their last going forth. I saw her hands close about those and she was gone—there were no more half lives left.

But there was still Laqit. From something she had built a body, though it was skeleton thin, and her head was pulled to one side. She came striding from the cube towards me.

"I always hated you." Her voice in my mind was a scream. "I swore that I would bring you down. There was no other reason for—" She gestured to the cube behind her where cracks ran now along the walls. "He promised me that I would in the end have you. And Yah-non was known to always keep promises. Therefore—"

She leaped for me, her bone arms out, her pointed fingers reaching for my throat. Out of nowhere there sprang a black-furred body. It struck full upon her shoulders and she did not reach me, rather fell at my feet.

"Go in peace." I knelt beside her and my jewel shed its light on her body so I saw how under its flash she appeared firm and smooth and how she became all woman and no longer a thing of horror.

She writhed over on her back and looked up at me.

"I—always—hated—you— " she said. "Leave me that— just leave me that!"

Then she was gone and there was only dust mingling with the colored sands.

There was no more thunder. Those giants who had come at the axe man's call were gone. The cube was falling in upon itself. From the center of it there upsprang a fountain and I smelled the flowers of springtime and not the stench of ancient death.

Thus was the gate closed and those it had slain were freed. Much came of our questing. The Sulcar ships sailed south and they found wonderful strange cargoes in the dead ships of the bay. Yarn also ventured to that harvest and enough was recovered to rebuild much of their destroyed city.

The Lady Jaelithe and Kemoc set guards where the cube had been. They believed that it had indeed once opened the gate according to pattern but during the years had grown erratic—it needed always life force to feed it. That Yahnnon Laqit had spoken of must have indeed followed a darksome path to have created such a thing.

There was one thing from the ruins which Chief brought to me. He had gone sniffing and hunting there, the first of us to dare such entrance—seeking I am sure one to whom he had been more than friend. When he returned he stopped before me and dropped what he held in his mouth—the ring from the set of jewels. That I slipped on my finger, which it fitted, and kept in memory of a very gallant one.

The axe man chose to stay in the place a handful of survivors had found after they escaped from the mist. We made a visit there but I did not see any among them like those with whom I had shared my own adventure though there was a man with down upon him who said that his mother, her brother, and his father had escaped together—so time defeated that wish of mine.

When plans were made for going north I made plain that I would stay. I had never had a place of my own— though now both the Lady Jaelithe and Orsya wished me with them. Instead I told them a little of that last foreseeing and of the search I must make for that place which is truly mine.

"Be it so," the Lady Jaelithe said then, "Voice, for we each have her own place and happy and lucky are we who find it." I saw her then look at her lord and there was that in her eyes which told me where her place lay.

This I have written at the bequest of Kemoc that it might be carried to Lormt and there set with the Chronicles which will tell the history of all happenings for those coming after. Tomorrow Chief and I take the eastern trail which lies so plain in my mind, and so shall we both come to our true inheritance.

That a place of such menace as that eater of life force from captured seafarers could exist was a strong warning that much might haunt our world of which we knew nothing. That it had been destroyed was indeed a blow against the ancient Dark and I set the account of she who now calls herself the Voice of Gunnora to the fore for the noting of those who will themselves begin new ventures. For with Kemoc and Ouen it was my thought that other such traps might well be hidden. Since after all we appear now to know very little beyond the world wherein we ourselves travel.

Still, after Kemoc and his lady had ridden on to Escore, I was not given much time to meditate upon such speculations for within a ten days after Kemoc's going there came another needing my aid. He was a Falconer and such had not ridden our way before (save for Pyra and she was no dour fighting man). Still I had met his comrades among the Borderers and had always felt well disposed towards them—though as all men they varied. Some being more approachable and others not welcoming any gesture of goodwill from those beyond their closed units.

This one wished of us histories concerning his own people. This also had been a mission of Pyra's but I knew better than to call his attention to her. In fact she made some excuse to ride out the day after his arrival to go herb hunting. The strange situation between the Falconers and their women had long been a topic of gossip in our land and a matter of much speculation, some of it often lurid but never voiced near any of the breed.

The bird of this one bespoke Galerider and that awakened the man's closer interest in me, I think. One night when he was wearied of much searching and little reward for that, he came to my quarters, which astounded me a little. The Falconers, even those best disposed to outsiders, seek no close speech

beyond their own ranks. But sometimes the need to talk comes on a man and thus I recognized it was for him. I listened—still all his story I did not then hear from him because he saw it through his eyes only. The rest I gained in another way later on and it was indeed a tale which made even plainer how the travail of the mountain changes had altered our world.