

Books by Andre Norton

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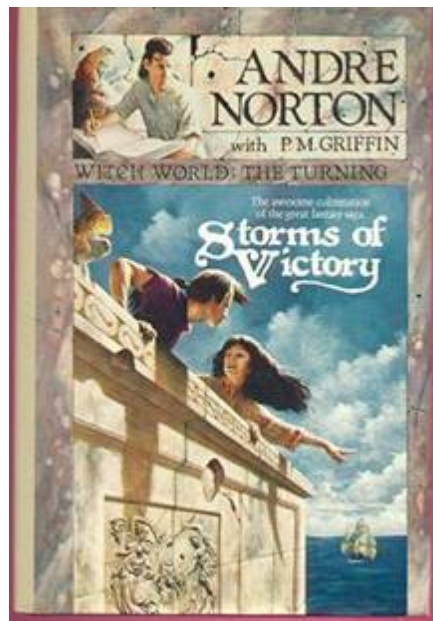
About the Authors

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 Lornt 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 Lornt 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 Lornt."

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 Lornt'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 Lornt 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.

--19 Seakeep (1991)--

by P. M. Griffin

Chapter 1

"There was no need of a fire this far into the spring, at least not by day. At night, it was another matter. Damp and sea cold still made themselves felt once the sun's warmth was gone, and so logs had been laid

at ready in the hearth of the Holdlady's sleeping chamber to combat them.

Una's eyes shifted from the waiting wood to the smoke-blackened stone wall behind it. The absence of the familiar light and heat depressed rather than soothed her, and she quickly turned away again.

She sighed in her heart. She had reason in plenty for her low spirits, and she could not close out her bleak thoughts as she had the sight of the idle fireplace. The situation before her must be faced, and the decisions she made would mold not only her own fate and future but those of the people dependent upon her.

She did not think to rebel against the responsibility laid on her. She had grown accustomed to that weight, having carried it, with more than passing success, for year after year until she could scarcely recall save as a sort of distant dream the long-past days before war and the miseries that were its outriders had descended upon the Dales of High Hallack.

It had come upon them suddenly and unexpectedly, at least to outlying, virtually isolated Dales like those of this region, although the lords of the major holds to the south had indeed anticipated and tried to prepare against it. Even Harvard, that wily soldier who was her father, had not been concerned in that final year of peace about more than the happy fact that the lady who was his wife was at last with child. He had concealed his disappointment well when the infant proved to be female, rejoicing instead that his lady, whom he loved greatly, had survived the difficult birth. A scant two months after the child's formal owning and naming, Alizon had unleashed its hounds and strange weapons against the Dales.

Then had begun years of horror and loss. For the first time in their long history, the fiercely independent lords of High Hallack had united in common cause, for they had very quickly learned that if they did not, the individual Dales would be swept away one at a time until all had been devoured.

Even after their alliance, for a long time after it, the issue had remained at question, and hope was more a low, stubborn light that somehow refused to die than any sending of reason. Then the tide finally turned. The Dalesmen, in company with their mysterious, terrible allies, the Were Riders from out of the Waste, stopped and finally threw back the invaders, utterly defeating them and ruthlessly hunting down the last remnants of their once-invincible forces.

That work done, the army of High Hallack had disbanded, and its various units returned home. All too many had found little or nothing to greet them, for Alizon's forces had ravaged far and for a long time before they had been broken, and they had spared nothing, human or human structure, falling under their ruthless power. For many, the work of rebuilding, lives and Dales alike, proved as hard a war as that from which they had just been released, a war demanding an equal measure of courage and strength.

Seakeepdale and its neighbors had been spared all that. Remote and isolated, no armies had ranged and ravened in this region, and want had not battered upon the populace. The loss of luxury goods did not greatly affect holdings too poor to afford much in that line in the best of times. As for necessities, all the Dales in this locality were basically self-sufficient and traded for what they required or wanted chiefly among themselves, rarely venturing even as far as Linna either to acquire or dispose of goods. They had lost, aye, as had all High Hallack, but they had managed.

Una's chin lifted. Seakeep had managed better than any. With only a handful of old or incapacitated men to lend their limited strength and valuable experience to aid her women and young boys, her mother, frail and gentle as she was, had been able to keep her hold running and productive. Under her leadership, her people had maintained the various structures, had set and harvested their crops, seen to the more demanding working of the sea and the never-ending care of equipment and animals. They had succeeded

so well that Seakeepdale had not only met its own needs but had been able to send some small relief to the Dales' hard-pressed army and set stores aside for emergency use besides.

Her head lowered, pride in her mother's accomplishment fading as other memories rose to replace those which had fired it. When the tragically few survivors had returned home, Lord Harvard had been with them, but he had ridden a litter rather than a horse. After all the fighting, all the plotting and maneuvering—the Dales' leaders had come to appreciate both his courage and his counsel, although he had not been a member of their inner circle—he had been felled, a spear through his back, in very nearly the final engagement of the long war.

For months, his lady and his people had tended him, despairing of his life. His will and heart were both strong, and he had lived, but never again would he use either his legs or his right arm.

Harvard had not broken in mind or spirit as many another would have done but had bent himself to the task of running and restoring his much reduced Dale. His own broken body would no longer serve his needs, and with the humility of a great heart, of one who could place responsibility above pride, he continued to rely upon his lady's proven abilities and ever increasingly upon the young, eager daughter who became the active agent of both.

The Holdlord trained Una well in duties not normally falling to a woman. No son would now be born to him, and it was both his wish and his lady's that the rule of the Dale not pass completely from the family which had held it since the first settling of High Hallack.

Una of Seakeep had proven an apt pupil, showing all the Holdlady's abilities but coupled with her sire's energy and a love of the land and its ways that was all her own.

Harvard, however, grew ever more heavy of heart as the years progressed. He could not blind himself to the potential for conflict and wasteful quarrelling should his only child and heir be left unwed when he at last went forth from this life and world. His lady's death after a brief illness at last painfully emphasized his own mortality, and he moved to secure Una's future and Seakeep's by giving her to the Lord Ferrick, an old and trusted comrade of his, a strong fighter whose mind was as sharp as his sword, a man well fitted to rule the holding that would one day come to him by reason of his union with its heir.

Arranged matches were the norm among the ruling families in the Dales, and Una of Seakeep had accepted her father's decision willingly, acknowledging its necessity and the wisdom of his choice. The marriage had been performed, and she, along with the rest of her people, had breathed a sigh of relief that one more threat had been brought to an end.

Only a few short weeks later, fate had struck High Hallack yet another vicious blow. Man's greed was not its instrument this time, but a foe even crueler, a sickness which had swept over all the continent with breathless speed and varying effect. To some Dales and some people, it brought but a few days of more or less mild illness. To others, it was devastating.

Nearly all this region's Dales had been badly hit, Seakeepdale among the hardest. The old, the very little ones, and those already weakened were all stricken hard, as was usually the case with any such epidemic, but this time the young and basically hale were cut down as well. They burned with fever, coughed, and in all too many cases developed a deadly lung fever from which very few recovered. With almost malignant precision, the disease had chosen the young men who had only then begun replacing the rents left in the population mix by the war and made them the targets for its most virulent attacks. Only a relative handful remained after the visitation had passed.

Una herself had gone to the brink of death. She had fought her way back, but when she awakened and some strength returned to her, she discovered she was bereft of both sire and lord.

Her grief for Harvard was naturally deep and sharp, but so, too, was the sense of loss which she felt for Ferrick. Una mourned him in heart, for herself and for Seakeep. He had been more of an age to have sired than to bed her and had been no more sensitive to a young girl's needs than any other man of his type, but he had used her gently according to his lights and even tenderly. As her father's close, though younger, friend, he had known her since her birth and had borne real feeling for her. That was more than many a Holddaughter could hope to find in the husband to whose chamber she was brought.

The woman's eyes flashed green fire. A good man had died. That was a heavy enough evil. It was doubly wrong that his loss should result in further danger falling upon those he had striven to defend.

Una of Seakeep did not rail against the fact that she had been forced to officially assume the reins of control over the Dale in which she had been bred. She was capable of that and, in truth, enjoyed exercising the abilities she had more than proven she possessed. For several years, all went well. She ruled her Dale and worked with her people, and her efforts, their efforts, were rewarded so that Seakeep prospered and hope and the joy of life were once more fully alive in them all. Now, however, her widowhood was placing all she loved, all who looked to her and owned her authority, in jeopardy. To avert it, she would have to act decisively, knowing that she might well fail in her aim and that, should she succeed or only partly succeed, the potion she brought in for a cure might too readily prove a worse curse than the ailment it was meant to counter.

There was no help for it. She squared her shoulders and left her sleeping quarters for the slightly larger chamber adjoining it where she was wont to conduct the Dale's business and to meet with those who assisted her in running it.

A small boy was sitting at the broad writing table, frowning over the heavy book she had set him to studying to occupy his time and mind while waiting on her will. A fleeting smile touched her lips. Like her parents before her, Una believed that a holding was the stronger for having the bulk of its populace lettered, and this lad, despite his preference for more active pursuits, had proven quick and eager to learn.

"Bring Rufon to me now, Tomer."

"Aye, my Lady.—He will be right glad to hear it, too. He is full to the neck of those Ravenfield... people."

The woman nodded. It was easy to share her page's sympathy with the warrior and also his dislike for their arrogant neighbors. And his underlying fear. That lay as a pall over all Seakeep.

She gave no other indication of her feelings. "Run for him, then," she said mildly and composed herself for the meeting as soon as Tomer quit her, on the run as she had suggested.

It was not long in the coming. Rufon had been waiting impatiently for his liege's summons and was quick to respond to her call. He was a rather short, stocky man with rugged, not unpleasant features marred by a small, old scar on the chin. Only emptiness remained where the right arm should be.

The Dalesman drew himself up before her but waited for her to speak, as was seemly.

She gave him greeting, then turned at once to the business troubling them all.

"Our guests are still abed?" she asked him.

"Aye, but they will be up plaguing us for an answer soon enough. —You will have to give them one, my Lady," he added with a rough gentleness. He feared greatly that there was little real choice before the woman, that she would have to capitulate, to the ruin of them all.

She read that belief, and anger rippled behind the veil of her composure.

"I shall not deliver Seakeepdale to Ogin of Ravenfield. By the Amber Lady, do not even imagine that I could so betray my trust as to give that tyrant power over us."

"You will have to choose another lord, then, my lady, and quickly, or he will take that power unto himself despite your will."

"Choose whom?" she asked wearily. "Ravenfielddale is the strongest here. Ogin's father kept his forces well-nigh intact by the simple expedient of staying home when his neighbors marched to war. He could spare more men to the fever than the rest of us, and Ravenfield was granted a light visitation on top of that. He has a full garrison, while the other Dales have scarcely enough fighting men to maintain ourselves and prevent brigands from gaining a foothold in the region. Given that situation, which of our neighbors would risk, could risk, setting himself against Ravenfield by joining with me either himself or through marriage with a son? It is pretty well guessed that Ogin might be only too willing to find an excuse for adding a better Dale than ours to his territory."

Her eyes flickered to the walls as if to peer through them to the world beyond.

"Seakeep is large in terms of space, but no man will grow rich on its produce. It would take a rank fool to put a Dale already in hand at hazard for it, at least until conditions become more nearly normal once more."

There was always the holdlady herself, the man thought. Una of Seakeep was fairer than any other woman he had yet seen, maid or matron, surpassing even her own mother in beauty, and that last was no small accomplishment.

She was tall for a woman of her race, slender of build and so delicately formed as to give the appearance of fragility. Her hands were small as a child's; one of them laid at its full length would not have spanned the breadth of his palm.

Her features, in keeping with her slight bone structure, were very finely chiseled, exquisite rather than mirroring the slightly heavier ideal worshiped by the most of their kind.

Her hair was a rich dark chestnut. Even bound as it was in that single thick braid, it reached to the small of her back.

The eyes were the crown of her many beauties. They were very large and widely set and were fringed all around by long, dark lashes. Their color was a most astonishing jade green, doubly striking against a pale, subtly life-warm complexion.

His eyes wavered. Lady Una was right, of course. Lords wed for land and the power the ownership of land endowed, or else for a weighty dowry when no holding was to be had. Beauty in a wife sweetened the pot, but it counted for nothing when the marriage bargain was made, no more than did the worth of

the woman herself. A pity, too, in this case, for there were few finer than

Una of Seakeep, or more able either, though it went somewhat against his sense of propriety to admit that last.

"There are still many lords in the Dales left without lands or place," he observed, "And many more men, proven fighters and leaders, who would not scorn a holding such as ours."

She shook her head emphatically.

"A stranger? I might only bring a second Ogin down on us. Besides, I need an army, not a single man, to secure my choice."

"What can you do, then, my Lady? You will have to give them some answer soon..."

Una smiled.

"No, old friend. That is your part. Ogin sent emissaries to do his wooing for him. Seakeep's emissary, not its lady, shall make them reply."

Her eyes met and held his. She was grave now, but there was no hesitation on her, and it was apparent to him that she had some possible solution in mind, one she was prepared to act upon.

A quietness of bearing and manner had ever marked her, and now that her decision was made, that aura of stillness seemed to radiate from her, to rest on her like a mantle. Even her voice was soft when she spoke, gentle despite its firmness.

"You will inform Ogin's envoys that I am most displeased by their mission since I only last Yuletide specifically told him that my duties to my Dale and to my dead lord will require my full attention for a long time to come. Furthermore, one who seeks Seakeep's lady would do well to come to her himself."

That last statement gave Rufon a start, but a grin of appreciation spread across his broad face almost in the same moment. That peevishness was precisely what a man like Ogin of Ravenfield would expect of a woman. It would leave him satisfied despite Una's curt dismissal of his velvet-sheathed demand and would stand as partial explanation for a fairly lengthy delay in her willingness

Witch World. The Turning to entertain a renewed suit from him, a suit for whose final outcome he would feel absolutely no concern.

"You have bought us more time at any rate, my Lady."

"Time enough to secure ourselves if fortune smiles on my plans.—I must make haste now. I have already given orders to have the *Cormorant* put under sail, and I would be gone before our unwelcome guests awake."

The man frowned.

"Gone? Where..."

"Ostensibly to Linna to pay my respects to my lord's sister, although I would have our people keep the fact of my departure quiet for as long as possible. If I am over-long in returning, let it be made known

that I chose to remain a little while with my kinswoman in the peace of the Abbey. That will be accepted if you also mention that I am trying to see if there might not be a market for some of our horses again."

He nodded. No one who knew her could imagine this one slinking away to cloistered halls in a foredoomed attempt to hide from a threat which must inevitably confront her, but Seakeepdale's superb horses had been prized throughout the region prior to Alizon's invasion. The herd, that nucleus of it which had not been sent off with the Dale's warriors, had been kept small during the years since out of necessity, but it was only reasonable that the Lady Una would now try to increase her stock and reopen trade for them.

Reasonable or nay, that was patently not her reason for going forth now.

"Where will you be in reality?" he asked.

"I shall see the Abbess Adicia in truth. There is love between us, and I do owe her the courtesy of a visit. After that"—she gave a shrug, as if submitting herself to fate—"Linna town itself and then home overland, with the help of the Horned Lord, or else south until I find what I seek." Una did not think it strange or amiss to call upon a being most commonly besought by soldiers and hunters since that was the work before her.

"What do you seek?" he asked, curiously and with a little concern.

"Mercenaries, a goodly company of them. Men enough to stand our cause until we can build up our own strength once more by one means or another."

"Lady! By all...—Do you recognize the risk you take? And how do you propose to pay such a host, even assuming you could find men willing to hire themselves to your banner?"

The woman sighed.

"There is peril, aye, but I know what I want. A company whose deportment shows that their pride and discipline are yet intact are likely to remain true to their oath. As for payment, that may not be as difficult to arrange as would have been the case a few years past. Life is still harsh and very uncertain, but open, large-scale warring is no longer the rule throughout High Hallack. With both lodgings and sea passage dear, escort or guard duty should not be too unwelcome an alternative for a party at loose ends while its leaders consider where next to locate.

"We must prepare to receive blank shields whether I do, in fact, succeed in binding any to me or nay. Let the lower chambers of the tower be made ready for their use, all save the great hall and the servants' places and their work rooms. That way, our people will not have to endure strangers being quartered upon them. We have too many manless families for that now, and there is room in plenty here."

She sighed to herself. The Amber Lady knew, they had room to spare. Seakeep's household had ever been small for the size of the tower, and it was smaller still since war and sickness had laid their lash on the Dales.

"As you will, my Lady," he responded, masking his surprise with some difficulty.

Una of Seakeep smiled. She was accommodating more than their own folk with those arrangements. She could have been far more specific with respect to the type of warriors she hoped to engage, but she did not choose to speak of that lest he believe her reason had been reft from her. She herself half

believed that part of her plan to be sheer madness when she dwelled on it, but she was determined to make the effort. Her chances of securing Seakeep's safety would be fully trebled if she did manage to succeed.

Unlikely as that hope might be, there was still the possibility that it might come to pass—slight, perhaps, but real for all that. The Una who was as close to her heart as a sister of her blood might have been and who was her sole confidante in this matter agreed with her that the attempt must be made, as she agreed that the importation of mercenaries was Seakeep's only real chance of surviving as an independent entity during the period ahead, little though either of them liked the idea of bringing strangers onto the Dale's ancient soil.

Her head raised. The time for her to begin was come.

"Take you charge now, old friend. I shall return as soon as I can, hopefully with swords sharp enough to turn Ogin's greed."

Chapter 2

All Falconers were trained from boyhood to handle themselves in and around water, and many of them loved the wild, alien element so well that they would not voluntarily seek a nonmarine commission. The mountains, the mystery and beauty of the highlands, held Tarlach too powerfully for even the awesome lure of the ocean to claim him that completely, but he had served aboard both war and merchant craft in the past and did not mis-like the thought of doing so again should that work present itself.

He was undecided at this moment as to what course he and his comrades should follow, but he would have to choose, or allow fate to choose for him, fairly soon if they were not to see the merchants and innkeepers of this place devour the gains their swords had hard won for them.

Fortune had served them ill by freeing their swords this far from the centers of real trade and activity in High Hallack. Linna was not a bad town in itself, just too small and isolated to provide much opportunity for a company of this size.

Before the invasion by Alizon, Linna had been an insignificant village serving the few needs of the poorly endowed, rugged Dales of the surrounding region, but it had escaped the hostilities ravaging the greater part of High Hallack. It had possessed one of the few harbors remaining in the hands of the hard-pressed Dalesmen as well, a reasonably good one at that, and to it had come Sulcar ships, some blockading the coast to turn back Alizon's efforts to supply and reinforce its troops, some bearing much-needed supplies or equally welcome contingents of blank shields, often men of his race, eager to hire out their swords and battle skills.

Some of that bounty had survived the war's end. The harbor was deep and it was sheltered even when the Ice Dragon bit sharpest and roared the loudest, and sea captains found they could access a current not far off the coast which nearly doubled the power of the average wind to hurry them to the richer ports to the south. They continued to use the place, and so, too, had the merchants and traders drawn by the presence of their vessels. Indeed, many of them had established permanent dwellings and workplaces here, settling chiefly in the previously open area abutting the walls of the small Abbey where a handful of devout Dames had gathered to serve the Flame. Along with these additions to the community, a couple of new inns had joined the much enlarged original one close to the waterfront, all of which were still reasonably busy during the more temperate seasons of the year.

Apart from these changes, however, Linna had more or less resumed its old village identity and had all but reverted to the peaceful market town it had been probably since the Dales were first settled.

He sighed, and his fingers caressed Storm Challenger. The falcon did not move from his place on Tarlach's arm but raised his head to fix piercing, steady eyes on the human he had chosen as his comrade and mind-brother. He sensed the trouble on the man but opened no communication, knowing that was not wanted now.

Tarlach sighed again. It was right that peace should return to High Hallack, even as it was slowly returning to Estcarp across the sea. People everywhere had a surfeit of violence and wanted only to build and live their lives, each in his own way. Most would succeed in the end, and slowly the scars of pain, ruin, and death would be eased.

Not for the Falconers. When those thrice-accursed Witches had moved the mountains, destroying the Eyrie along with the invading army sweeping into Estcarp, they had sealed the fate of his race, or so he feared and believed.

His kind followed a lifeway most other peoples found harsh and cold in the extreme. In the far past, they had sailed north in Sulcar ships, fleeing the curse that still loomed over them. With them had come their women and young, but they had traveled together in the sense that others moved with their herds and in no manner as kin with kin. Estcarp, the realm of the Witches, was closed to them because of this treatment of their females, but they had found refuge and a home in the mountains on its border. There they had raised the Eyrie as the seat of their warriors, who earned their way as mercenaries, and had established the ever-perilous women in several villages where they remained apart, unvisited save at certain set periods by men who came on command to copulate with them to ensure the continuation of their race. In time, segregation born of need had been reinforced by hatred and contempt for all human and near-human females, and Falconers sought no alliances, permanent or temporary, with any woman apart from those brief en-counters required for breeding the next generation of fighters.

That had worked well enough with villages and Eyrie set well apart from neighboring peoples, and even then some women had departed, slipping away from the mountains to seek richer lives elsewhere. How long could they be expected to remain in their present settlements within Estcarp? Another generation? Two? Hardly longer than that, he imagined. Falconer men would not stay bound to such a life with other examples and opportunities all around them, and, however little he might think of them, he did not believe their temporary mates would do so forever, either.

Once more, he touched the great war bird. Would the day finally come when no member of his species, not a single human being, would be able to share thought with these winged ones? If so, then their ancient foe had her vengeance on them for a fact even if she was never to regain the freedom to work it herself.

He gripped himself, trying to shake his spirit loose from the pall which had settled on him. The Horned Lord knew, he was tired! Perhaps all this only stemmed from that...

Storm Challenger's soft greeting returned him to his surroundings. He looked up to see another man approaching, this one also wearing the high-winged helm and stark armor of his race. A black, white-breasted falcon rode his wrist with the ease of long custom. Brennan, his chiefmost lieutenant.

"What news, Comrade?" he asked, making himself speak lightly so as not to burden the other with his gloom.

"None. I came abroad early to enjoy the morning and saw you." He hesitated. "Something rides you, Tarlach?"

The mercenary captain shook his head.

"I was merely preoccupied."

"Deeply preoccupied for you not to have been aware of our coming.—This has been so more than once of late."

Tarlach made him no immediate answer but rather fixed his attention on the activity already bringing the harbor alive. Three vessels were in port. Two Sulcar craft were unloading what looked to be kegs of wine or ale. The third, a vaguely disreputable-looking merchantman of no readily apparent origin, seemed to be making early preparations for departure.

"None of them is nearly large enough to serve our needs," he observed wearily.

"For the journey back to Estcarp or just southward?"

"I have not decided, but either way, we should do better than in our present situation. We have been here four weeks now without receiving an offer, nor are we likely to receive one the way I read it. Perhaps there are no suitable commissions left to be had anywhere in High Hallack."

Brennan eyed his commander.

"You sound less than desperate about that possibility. You want us to return to Estcarp?"

Tarlach shrugged.

"We could all use some time in one of the camps. We have been fighting now almost without break since we came to High Hallack." He straightened. "Whether we go or stay, it will be as a unit. We went forth as a company, and it behooves us to return so to the commandant."

The lieutenant started to agree, but before he could speak, both war birds hissed angrily and took to the air. Even as they did so, sudden shouts and clamor announced battle near to hand.

Instinctively, the two Falconers raced toward the source of the disturbance, a narrow alley separating two warehouses.

A band of seven men, a press gang to judge by their apparent unwillingness to damage their victim despite his resistance, had forced a lone traveler into the close space and were attempting to overpower him before anyone could become aware of their attack and thwart it.

Their target seemed to be a youth or a very young man. His hooded journey cloak was of a style which proclaimed that he had come from this general region. Much more they could not see, for he was standing at an angle to them, and the garment concealed his features and the greater part of his body. Only the sword glinting in his hand was clear to view.

One of the ruffians sprang in behind the lad in the hope of felling him with a blow from the stout rod he carried, but, to the surprise of all, the boy whirled even as he moved. The bright blade stuck home before the larger man could bring his weapon to bear.

The traveler's face was now partly visible to the newcomers. It was starkly white and stricken in a manner which suggested that he had not slain before, but horror of the killing had not fully crystallized in the enormous jade eyes before Tarlach drew sword and forced his way through the press gang, casting two of them roughly to the ground as he went.

He put himself between the attackers and their prey.

"Let him be."

"Try nothing foolish, carrion dogs," Brennan advised coldly. The second Falconer had kept his place at the alley's mouth but had unsheathed his own weapon in support of his commander's stand.

The gang hesitated only a moment before fleeing, taking advantage of the narrow path the lieutenant had purposely left free for their going. Their supposedly easily taken victim had proven something different in the testing, and the sudden appearance of the mercenaries altered matters still further. They were no match for those deadly, battled-tempered blades or for the falcons wheeling just over their heads. It was well known that those birds were trained to tear a man's face, his eyes, in battle.

Tarlach scarcely waited for them to disappear from sight before seizing the arm of the one he still took to be a boy.

"You are not injured?"

Una of Seakeep shook her head, too numbed by the shock of what had happened, what she had just done, to give him a verbal reply.

"Come quickly, then. If they return in force, we could be trapped here."

She could not repress a shudder as she was hurried past the body of the man she had slain but willed herself to give no other sign of discomfort or to speak at all even to voice her gratitude. Her companions were right. They had good reason to fear entrapment in here. Besides, they were likely to abandon her very quickly once they discovered that she was a woman. That, she must try to prevent, and she needed to be certain that her wits were fully about her again when she fronted them.

The Falconer captain slowed his pace once they had left the docks behind.

"We should be safe enough here."

Una drew away from him. He would not welcome physical contact with her once she revealed herself, as she must now do.

"Aye. Vagabonds of that ilk will not be anxious to face your like in any open place."

The men stiffened. This was not the voice of a boy, or of any male.

The woman dropped her cowl.

"Thanks given, Bird Warriors, and to your winged comrades."

"The service was slight," Tarlach responded harshly as he turned to go.

"It was of great importance to me."

He was hard-pressed to repress a smile.

"I suppose it was," he conceded.

"Hold, Captain!" she said quickly as the pair started to leave her again.

She did not know his rank, of course. She could not tell one man from the other behind those masking helmets, and there were few if any not of their race who could decipher the subtle markings on their clothing and armor by which they noted place and identity amongst themselves, but she had long ago learned that, when dealing with a strange warrior of unknown authority, it did not hurt to accord him a good rank. A certain amount of vanity was native to all her species.

There was no doubting, at least, that the man who had saved her was the senior of the two. Among Falconers, only the ranking officer of a party or the soldier of longest service actually dealt with those of other peoples among whom they moved, even in the tight quarters aboard a ship or with respect to those hiring their swords.

Although she trembled in her heart lest she lose this opportunity fate had given her, Una made herself speak quietly and steadily.

"You are blank shields?"

The man nodded. His grey eyes bore into her. Both her bearing and her manner of speech declared that the Daleswoman was wellborn, and her clothing was of good, though not extravagant, quality with little sign of wear. It was probable that she could afford to hire an escort for herself if she required one.

That she was such a fool as to imagine Falconers would swear allegiance to her was another matter.

"We are part of a larger force bound not to divide our number."

"I have need of such. That is what brought me to Linna." She drew a deep breath. "I had heard much of your kind's battle skill and courage and your quickness of thought from Lord Harvard, and I had hoped beyond hope to bind Falconers to Seakeepdale. What I have seen of you just now intensifies that wish."

Both mercenaries stirred.

"Lord Harvard?"

Relief swept Una. That had been her high die. They did know her late sire's name. Given that recognition, she felt they would at least grant her a hearing. After that, well, she could do no more than tell her story well and hope.

"I am Una of Seakeepdale, his daughter and widow of the Lord Ferrick, his comrade and chief captain during the war.—My need is real, Bird Warriors. I know you dislike having any dealing with a woman, but I ask you not to dismiss me before you listen to my tale. It will not take a great share of your time."

The Falconer commander's lips tightened. He turned abruptly on his heel.

"Come with us."

The captain did not break stride until he had reached the largest of Linna's three inns. Scarcely pausing even then, he threw open the heavy door and swept inside. Una followed after him and then Brennan, who quietly-secured the way behind them.

The helmet-masked figures filling the big room within looked up at their coming. A deadly silence fell as they caught sight of the Daleswoman, and on every side she was conscious of their hostile, cold eyes burning into her, as if she were something vile which had just crept out of a Shadow-marred pit. Only the falcons seemed friendly, or comparatively friendly. At least, there was curiosity in the contacts she received from them and not the senseless resentment their masters evinced. She shivered in her soul and was glad that she had no Power to read that or to delve any part of these grim, hating minds.

Tarlach did not offer her a chair or bench on which to seat herself, but he did remain standing beside her.

"This is Lord Harvard's daughter, Una of Seakeep. She claims she has come to Linna seeking blank shields."

His disapproval was so strong that it was almost palpable. That was a bad beginning, she thought. What she faced was an interrogation, and she wondered if anything she could say would convince these men, or win their aid even if they did come to believe the truth of her words and the reality of her need.

The Falconer leader's eyes were hard as the steel of a prize sword.

"You are alone? That is why you are in boy's garb?"

"I am alone, aye. As for my dress, it offers me a freedom of movement which I should not otherwise enjoy. I was born in Seakeepdale, and I am well known in Linna town. If I had come in my own guise, I would have heralded my intention to all the country."

"Why do you feel it necessary to augment Seakeep's garrison now that Alizon's troops are no more? There is no warring in this region."

"Seakeep does not have a garrison," she told him flatly. "The fever hit us hard and took not only my sire and lord but most of our men besides. Of those who remain, the better part are youths scarcely of an age to be considered warriors, none of them with battle experience save against unorganized brigands. Only a relative handful of sound men are left to us, and it would be rank stupidity, madness, to imagine that the courage of women and children will stand against trained war skill and physical strength in any real test."

The Falconer was quiet for a moment.

"What is the nature of the danger threatening you?" he asked somewhat less harshly.

"It is only the possibility of danger as yet," she responded, "but it would take a fool to ignore it."

"There are more fools than you would imagine in this world," Rorick, next in command after Brennan, muttered. Too often, blank shields were hired weeks or even months after they would have been most effective. Sometimes, their services were not sought until hope was entirely dead.

Tarlach's glare silenced him. The captain's attention returned to Una.

"Who is putting the fear on you?"

"Ogin, Lord of Ravenfield, the Dale adjoining ours. He desires control of Seakeep. Thus far, he has contented himself with trying to win it through marriage with me, but when he finally realizes his suit is hopeless, we fear he may well try sterner means. His garrison, or his father's then, remained out of the fighting and was, thus, almost completely undiminished, and his Dale was touched but lightly by the fever, the only one in our region so preserved."

"Why should he not move at once, then, without wasting time with wooing?"

The woman colored slightly, but her chin raised.

"I am not considered ill favored, Falconer. Ogin will wait, a bit longer at the least, if for no other reason than it would suit his vanity to have me capitulate willingly. He is an attractive man, certainly, and a strong one. By his light, he has good cause for hope, and it would pay him to gain his will thus. Even weakened as they are, he can do without alarming the neighboring Dales to the point that they might unite against him. Alizon taught us the worth of that tactic, and he is not one to forget such a lesson."

"Yet you say his efforts to gain you are in vain?" Tarlach questioned.

She nodded.

"That one is a tyrant and would be insuperable if he held any power in Seakeep. I could not deliver my people over to the like of him if there were nothing else against him."

"There is more, however?"

"Suspicion only, but it is sufficient to firm us in our resolve to fight long and hard before accepting defeat at his hands."

She pursed her lips.

"All this northern coast is rugged with few harbors and many deadly rocks, and storms rise with little or no warning. Vessels, great and small alike, have always run the risk of disaster when approaching it, and wrecks have never been uncommon for the volume of shipping involved, which, in truth, is not large even now. That holds stronger still with respect to our waters."

Her eyes suddenly hardened in a manner that gave him a start. There was both anger and the determination for battle without quarter in them such as he had only seen before in war leaders faced with a righteous cause and a difficult if not well nigh impossible fight in order to sustain it.

Una was not aware of the reaction she had provoked in the mercenary or of the change in her own bearing which had sparked it.

"Of late, there seem to be a great number of craft being lost in our region, literally lost, without a trace and without survivors to carry their tale. In nearly every case, the doomed vessels were merchantmen with full holds."

"Sea wolves?" he asked, his voice turning deadly cold.

"Worse."

"A black wrecker!"

The grey-eyed man all but spat out the words. One having served at sea, however briefly, could have no other feeling than the most unremitting hatred for renegades who lured ships to their destruction, usually slaying any the water would have spared, in order to strip them of their cargoes and other valuables. Such were less even than pirates, vermin fitted only for extermination...

"We are in no way certain of it," Una cautioned. "There is little basis for our belief at all beyond the fact that the disappearances appear to have begun shortly after Ogin came into his inheritance, and there have been too few of them to give us a firm pattern.

"We add to that timing his strong interest in Seakeep. Mine is not a Dale which will ever bring great wealth, nor would it be of any greater help than Ravenfield itself in the fulfilling of an ambitious man's plans, but it is possessed of a long, rough coast, lonely and very well suited to dark work."

"It is best that this Lord Ogin be kept from your holding," the mercenary agreed. "Ravenfield does not border on the sea itself?"

"It does, but on a much narrower front. It is a wild coast even for the region, though, and it affords one good place where a small wrecker craft could be concealed. That cove would serve very well for his present low level of activity, but if Ogin hopes to make wrecking his road to power, he will need a better base."

"Which Seakeep can provide?"

She nodded.

"We have a harbor, small but very deep and with good shelter under all but the most extreme conditions."

"Such a one is an enemy to all. You could claim aid from your neighbors by right."

"They do not suspect him of this, though they are well-enough aware of the loss of ships in the area. As I said, it has always had a bad reputation. We of Seakeep are closest to Ravenfield and are the most involved with the sea, and so we have deduced more."

"You might have done well to share those deductions," he told her sarcastically.

"Suspicious, and coming from a woman?" she replied bitterly, but then quelled her annoyance. "Besides, could we in honor lay that shadow on a man without a shred of real or solid circumstantial evidence to support it, knowing he would be likely to carry the blight of it for years or for life?"

"As for help, the other lords know him to be a tyrant with power to back his will and prefer to let him be, at least until they have recovered something of their former strength."

The man was silent for several minutes, a seeming eternity to the Daleswoman.

"What exactly do you want of your blank shields?" he asked slowly at the end of that time.

"Chiefly to act as a deterrent against aggression." She frowned, marshalling her thoughts to present them

as logically and briefly as possible. "With each passing month, our own ability to resist increases as our youths work to gain skill and our older boys approach or attain manhood. You may well believe that they have been undergoing warrior training since childhood."

She eyed him.

"The same is true of our girls. I know you will not approve of that, but we had to use what was available to us during the war or leave ourselves completely naked for the future. This was but another uncommon duty they were forced to assume with our men gone, and they have done passing well, at least those young enough at the outset not to have been crippled by the belief that they are inherently not capable of such work." Her lips tightened momentarily. "Fortunately, our women as a whole took better from the start to the heading and farming and to the fishing, or we should all have had a harder and hungrier time than we did."

"Despite all, you do not want war?" Tarlach questioned sharply. It was bad enough dealing with a woman like this. The idea of having to rub shoulders with a female garrison was less appealing still.

"We do not. Only to guard ourselves if needs be."

Her face hardened.

"The Dales of our region have ever fought sea wolves from outside and brigands seeking to establish themselves on our coasts and in our mountains to the peril of all. If such evidence should come to light, then we would fight. Thus has it always been and must be, or we should soon be swallowed up by renegades unfit to bear the name of human."

"Why Falconers?" he asked bluntly. "It is clear that you do not actually expect to discover such evidence, and even if you did, aye, we are fighters as you claim, but so, too, is every blank shield who came through the war and the times that have followed it. Few survived who were not."

The Holdlady sighed. She had hoped this question would not be pressed. Her reply was not likely to please him, but she knew she had still more to fear from falsehood or half-truth.

She met his gaze steadily.

"I am not war trained, Bird Warrior, or accustomed to traveling with warlike men. Every blank shield is basically an unknown. If I chose wrongly and loosed a treacherous troop on my virtually helpless Dale..."

The green eyes fell, then raised again.

"There may be renegades among your kind, but as a whole, the word of a Falconer is known to be sound. Once given, it will not be violated in spirit or letter. So, too, is it with your discipline. I will do all in my power to see that you are not forced to have more to do than absolutely necessary with my people. You are professional fighters. We are not, and we will all be more happy to let go military duties, particularly during the summer months when our farms and animals and fleet will be demanding much of us. However, we do not want to have more trouble from the garrison brought in to defend us than they were hired to prevent. I need not fear that you, your men, will settle in as minor tyrants, treating my Dalesfolk as servants and slaves, wresting the fruits of their labor from them and viewing my wenches as stallionless mares handy to service their pleasure. They have proved themselves worthy of better than that."

A dark flush crimsoned Una's face, and her eyes did fall. It was not her custom to speak so bluntly on such matters, and it was beyond her power to conceal her shame.

Tarlach recognized her embarrassment, but saw something else as well, the quietness which remained with her despite her present discomfort and her desperate need to secure her will and secure it quickly. It was no absence of motion or feeling but rather a quality arising from within her to envelop her whole being. Were the others as aware of it? he wondered absently, and he wondered how anyone could be blind to this inner dignity and the strength it proclaimed.

He recalled himself sharply to the business at hand.

"There is the matter of payment," he said curtly.

She spread hands that seemed too small to have wielded a sword as he had seen her do.

"I cannot give what your company is worth in time of open hostility. Seakeep can offer the war price of a lesser unit along, of course, with your keep and that of your winged comrades and your mounts. They are not unjust terms since you are not being called to battle, merely to guard, with the probability of little or no actual fighting, but you could command more from a lord facing actual combat and needing a force as large as yours, and that I freely acknowledge."

Several of his men stirred behind him, and the captain's own eyes slitted. There had been no change in her tone to indicate awareness of the shrewdness of her observation, but he believed that she knew full well what she had said. This Una of Seakeep had been managing her holding for a long time now, interacting with other Dales as well as ruling her own. Woman or nay, she knew what she was about.

"The duration of our oath?"

"Twelve months at the least. Longer if it proves mutually agreeable, but it would serve us ill rather than benefit us to take you on for less."

She waited now, making herself present an image of calm and assurance she was far from feeling. There should be no more questions, just the Falconers' response to her quest.

Their captain realized that the time of decision was at hand as well. His eyes swept his troops before returning to her.

"Your answer you shall have soon," he told her, "but not immediately. It is not my practice to bind our swords to any long-term service without first consulting with my officers."

"Of course, Captain. I shall return whenever you wish." She knew that they would wish to confer in private and would have been willing to accommodate that reasonable desire even had her own need not been so great.

"It will not take that long."

"Very well. I can wait outside."

Tarlach hesitated. If she did that, she might well draw the attention she was striving to avoid with her disguise. He owed her at least protection from betrayal whether they rode with her or nay, and there was

also the possibility that the press gang might chance upon her again and attempt to exact vengeance for her earlier escape.

He pointed to a door to his left. It led to a smaller room intended for the use of highborn or otherwise privileged guests or those requiring a more private meeting place than the big common room. It was empty at the moment and was not likely to be wanted before time for the midday meal approached.

"You can wait in there, Lady, if you wish." Una nodded and then took her leave of the mercenaries.

No one spoke for several seconds until the keen ears of their falcons reported that the Daleswoman had moved away from the door. Once they had that assurance, however, all eyes turned to Tarlach.

"Where did you meet up with that one?" Rorick demanded.

His commander tersely described the attack Brennan and he had thwarted.

The other snorted.

"A mare swinging a sword!"

"Her skill saved her a cracked head," Brennan pointed out indifferently, then dismissed the aberration from his mind and turned to Tarlach. "You are not seriously considering giving oath to her?"

"I am that, by the Horned Lord. Her tale is true as she sees it. All our winged comrades are in agreement on that, and they find nothing else amiss with her."

The war birds did not share their human companions' distrust of womankind, but they were sensitive as no man could be to falsehood or dark intent of any sort insofar as it affected their own company. They were, of course, instantly aware of any working of the Shadow or the true Dark, but that was not at question here.

"So?" snapped a voice to his right. "Let her take on blank shields of her own kind and her qualms be damned. Why should we concern ourselves with her difficulties, and for less than we could command, as she herself observed?"

"More than half our number served as young warriors in the war against Alizon. How many of us would be here to argue this had Harvard not proposed the change in plan which rendered the charge to which our company had been ordered needless? The end result would have been the same that day, but he alone had care enough of us, mere mercenaries though we were, to pull us from certain massacre. More, he then placed us where we could point the assault that broke the hounds' final strength.—To my thought, we Falconers are under no small debt to him, in honor if not by oath, and since we can do no better now than repay it to his Dale, so must be our service."

His eyes swept the company.

"It is also to our benefit to accept this. As the Lady Una so subtly pointed out, there are not many lords in need of our swords at the moment, and perhaps that is to our good. We are tired. Our sick recover more slowly than they should, our wounded more slowly still. Our animals lack staying power, and our gear needs replacement and major repair. A spell at guarding would allow us to rectify all that, without paying out to innkeepers, and we would come away with a few extra coins to add weight to our belts as well, enough to pay our passage back to Estcarp without forcing us to draw on our major gains."

The answering murmur which ran through those gathered around him was reluctant but not actually condemning, and he felt that he would have his will as he continued speaking.

"I will refuse if service to Seakeep is truly repugnant to you, but for my part, I think we would be fools to cast this offer aside."

"We will go," Brennan replied gruffly. "You know that full well. You will be getting the worst of it. It is you who will have to deal with the wench, not the rest of us."

"What must be endured shall be, Comrade," he answered with a resignation which did not conceal his distaste for that aspect of their commission.

Chapter 3

Scarcely two hours later, the Falconer company left Linna. They had settled their account with the innkeeper without having to ask their new employer to stand their debts but had used her silver, as was their right, to supply themselves for the journey ahead.

Una joined them outside the town, well away from prying eyes which might take note of their meeting and pass word of it to unfriendly ears. Ever in her mind was the knowledge that news traveled comparatively fast by sea, and they must perforce journey overland since there was no vessel available of a size capable of carrying her new army.

She herself was well horsed, better than any of the Falconers, on a gelding of Seakeep's own breeding. He had belonged to the Abbey, but her lord's sister had given him freely when Una had asked to purchase him or to have the loan of him for an extended period.

Warmth filled the woman's heart. There had been no questions, about this need or her strange garb or her hurried, sudden departure, merely a quick kiss, a fervent uttering of the Flame's blessing and Adicia's own, and an opening of the rarely used rear gate while the other Dames were at their private meditations.

Una raised her head. She was proud that she had been able to get away so readily and smoothly without forcing her escort to wait for her, and she was proud of her ability to handle her fine mount. It was a good beginning, that proof of competence, but one she knew she would have to maintain over the days ahead. The journey before them would be a long one, and she could not afford to weaken or lag during it. These cold men would be anticipating that, and if she fulfilled their expectations, they might well dismiss Seakeep along with its ruler.

The march was not a pleasant one for Una. It could not be completed in less than a good three weeks and could too readily stretch out far longer if they encountered any significant trouble. The Falconers pushed hard during the first stage of it. Ostensibly, they did so to make time while they could, before they reached the more demanding country that the Daleswoman warned lay ahead, but in reality, she knew they were trying her, or trying to break her down, to force her to plead for a halt or a slowing of pace. This she grimly set herself against doing, determined not to give them any part of their will. Pride and the necessity of remaining strong before them aside, needless delay was unthinkable. She would be away so long as it was. Maybe too long...

Tarlach watched the Holdlady closely as the days went by, trying to gage what they actually had in her.

She was showing some ability, right enough, he admitted grudgingly, but it was apparent that she was feeling the effects of the journey. Sometimes near the end of the day, it seemed more pride than strength that kept her in the saddle.

The fool! Would she really let herself be ridden into the ground?

A sense of shame touched him. That was unworthy. He would praise rather than condemn a warrior for similar stubbornness, and she had more than an unwillingness to give way before them to push her. It was not difficult to imagine that Una of Seakeep must be laboring under a sharp concern, fear, for her holding and what might be happening there. She was more eager than any of them to shave every possible moment off their journey.

Recognizing that, he reduced the pressure of their march. The Holdlady was carrying trouble enough without their adding to her difficulties out of mere spleen.

The Falconer company had not remained long in even nominally settled territory, and for the better part of their trek they found themselves forcing their way through a wilderness such as might never have known the tread of human feet before their coming.

Even for men of their experience and training, the way was rugged at its lightest, often so much so that they were compelled to dismount and lead their animals, and the progress they made, though constant enough, was slow and hard-won.

Scouts they sent out, as would any military column, but chiefly they relied on the sharp eyes of their falcons to bring them news. Always the report was the same— no sign of other parties, friendly or otherwise, and no change in the country ahead save that its difficulty inexorably increased with every passing mile.

Through it all, Una of Seakeep held her own with the mercenaries, neither delaying them nor asking their aid while on the trail, nor did she ever seek additional comfort or finer fare at night. At times, her face was drawn and pinched with weariness, her body ached with strain and the effects of the constant damp and mountain cold, but her eyes ever remained bright and her smile ready to greet any of her usually taciturn companions who chanced to approach her.

For the most part, that did not happen often. The Falconers did not fail in the courtesy required of blank shields toward the one hiring their swords, but in accordance with their established custom, it was their captain who handled all intercourse between his company and their employer. She soon came to know him well although he neither entrusted her with his name nor appeared unmasked before her. There were other ways to recognize and partially judge a man than the study of his face. His walk and stance, his speech, the set of his mouth, the sharp, ever-shadowed eyes all told a great deal. Above all, there was his falcon. Storm Challenger was a true lord among creatures, high even amid his own noble kind, and was a powerful testimonial to the worth of the man he had chosen for his particular comrade.

The mercenary commander often rode beside Una, for he wished to learn as much as he could about the territory his people would occupy for the next twelve months and over which they might be forced to fight.

He had expected little from such an informant when he began questioning her, but he quickly came to realize that he could not have wished or willed for better. Una's knowledge of her Dale and those around it was astonishingly detailed, almost minute in its precision, more in keeping with what he might look to find in the reports of a trained scout or ranger than anything he would anticipate hearing from the ruler of

any holding.

Her love for Seakeep glimmered in her every description, a love so deep and of such strength as to be well-nigh palpable, but it was realistic for all its power. The Holdlady recognized and accepted her Dale's lackings and weaknesses even as she did its strengths and beauty. She knew and admitted its limitations and was content to live within the bounds set by its lack of major resources.

If more of her kind were of like mind, he thought rather grimly, there would be less of a call for his profession, less of the darkness and destruction which had torn this basically peaceful land for so long. The Dales and their lords had not been responsible even in small part for instigating any of that.

The Falconer supposed that such contentment had to come as an outrider to life in a backwater holding like Seakeepdale, but he had known something of Una's late lord and imagined it might be hard to achieve for a man with Ferrick's abilities, although his acceptance of both the relative solitude and the genuine hard work of running an economically marginal hold was readily understandable.

Even the most insignificant Dale was infinitely preferable to ruling none. A marriage such as Ferrick had made was the dream, the well-nigh unattainable dream, of every blank shield, of every wellborn but landless younger son venturing forth to win his way in a world where power lay with land and the ownership of land was concentrated in the hands of hereditary lords who carefully guarded their patrimonies, neither diminishing nor dividing them and delivering them over only into the hands of a single heir at the time of their own death. Only by bedding wisely and very well could any man not directly in line to inherit normally break into their carefully closed circle, and even in these days, with many Dales still in chaos and rightful lords dead, it was no simple matter to lay claim—and maintain it—on any holding.

Perhaps Ferrick had originated in the area. The quiet of the place would seem natural then and would not be as likely to chafe on him. Then, too, he had been no youth when he had come to power, not old, certainly, but well into his middle years.

Familiarity with him or at least his kin would have probably gone far in moving the old Holdlord to listen to and accept his suit for the hand of his only child and heir.

The heiress herself? Tarlach glanced at the woman riding beside him. Una of Seakeep would have been a maid scarcely out of girlhood when she had been wed...

She had made no mention of her lord's people, but if the possibility of an alliance with them existed or if less formal help might be expected, he wanted to know about it. That could work greatly to their advantage in any confrontation with an overgreedy neighbor.

"Lord Ferrick, he was a native of your region or distant kin?" he asked abruptly.

Una looked at him in surprise. The Falconer had never questioned her about any personal matter before. She realized what he was about then and shook her head.

"He was a friend to my father, nigh unto a brother although Ferrick might have been the son of his youth as I was the daughter of his age. They had ridden together as blank shields for many years before my father came to Seakeep."

He looked at her sharply.

"Lord Harvard also bound his sword?"

The Daleswoman frowned, nettled by the completeness of his surprise.

"You Falconers may justly be counted the best of the mercenaries, but you are not alone in that calling," she responded testily, "nor do you alone excel in its arts. Father fought so well and had gained such wealth by his endeavors, and managed it so wisely, that he was able to woo and win my mother's hand, Holdheir though she was."

He stared at her, taking aback by her vehemence.

"I meant no insult to your sire, Lady."

Her temper cooled even as it had risen.

"I know. My weariness must stand as my admittedly poor excuse."

She reached out across the space separating them, then flushed and hurriedly withdrew her hand again as he stiffened under her touch.

"Your pardon, Captain!" She bit down on her lip. "I did not mean to break courtesy with you."

Her distress was so apparent that Tarlach cursed himself for having schooled himself so poorly.

"The breach of courtesy is mine, Lady. You have shown us by now that you wish to use us honorably."

"So do I intend, and so will it be with all my folk," she told him miserably, "but few of us are accustomed to associating with peoples other than our own kind or to accommodating ourselves to ways strange to us. There may be other violations of your custom, slight, perhaps, but offensive to your warriors."

He smiled, one of the few times she had seen him do so.

"Give us some credit for sense, Lady. Mercenaries cannot afford to be too thin-skinned.—We shall manage well enough unless I badly misjudge the worth of your word."

Time passed and more time. The company struggled along a difficult but obviously planned and maintained trail winding its way up one of the steepest slopes they had yet encountered. Had its grade been only a very little sharper, it would have been a cliff, a barrier impossible for their mounts to negotiate at all.

The crest topping it, in contrast, was surprisingly gentle, and there the Falconers drew rein.

Tarlach gazed out over the world which lay beneath, and his breath stopped a moment at the almost incomprehensible beauty of it.

He was looking down upon a long, rather broad valley which sloped gently into a miniature bay. Behind and to either side, mountains rose, tall, green-clad giants ever gazing seaward.

The ocean was a vast, brilliantly blue realm, her foam-speckled surface tossing and glinting in the golden sunlight. She seemed to quieten as she entered the bay. Here, her waves came dancing playfully over the pale sand, but beyond this single favored site, they rushed the land with awesome fury, roaring and

breaking against the cliffs with eternal, implacable rage.

Their anger seemed most pronounced and, through that magic ever exerted by the great ocean, fairest at those points to north and south where mountain and water met in the long, low, narrow spurs which cradled and protected the tiny harbor. In these places, the sea was marbled with white even on this mild day, for a myriad of rocks and islets scarcely more than rocks themselves rose up to break its flow.

Above all stretched a sky high and blue, the perfection of its expanse enhanced rather than disturbed by a scattering of white clouds and by the flight of waterbirds.

To his weary eyes, this might almost be a vision out of the Halls of the Valiant were it not for the marks of human life and industry which were so much a part of the placid scene. The little bay was dotted with vessels, and cottages nestled on the green slopes above it where the fury of the waves did not reach. Cultivated fields and pastures stretched out around these to fill the whole of the valley, and overlooking all, slender and stately and formidable upon a high and yet sheltered pinnacle, soared a tall round tower.

Una had described this stronghold closely, but still the man stared at the actual sight of it. Never had he beheld anything of its like before, and he had seen much since the day he had first girded on a warrior's blade.

"What witchery is this?" he whispered.

The Holdlady heard that.

"None! It is old, aye, as I told you. It was old when my people first came to this place, but no working of Power keeps it sound, just the strength of the stone comprising it and the skill of the vanished folk who raised it."

Una's eyes caressed the tower lovingly.

"Save for that good rock, all the rest is of our working. Everything which had been there of wood or metal or materials more perishable still had crumbled to dust long before our arrival in High Hallack. We had to replace all that and have kept it in repair since."

"You mentioned another ancient place."

She nodded.

"The Square Keep. My forebears lived there before the decision was made to remove and settle closer to the greater bounty of the sea and land here. It had been put into repair then but is now a complete ruin again, all but the original shell. That is well inland and cannot be glimpsed from the valley, but you will doubtless visit it as you travel the Dale."

The woman fell quiet. She raised eyes that were somber and hopeful both.

"Well, Bird Warrior, now that you see it, how do you judge Seakeep?"

Tarlach said nothing for a moment. How could he tell her that his heart ached at the sight of it, that its beauty and the Tightness and balance of the life revealed in even this first glimpse, the open peace and harmony of the place, drove through his inner being with the force of a spear after the violence and ruin he had witnessed all these last years?

"It appears to be a holding worthy of its ruler's care," he replied.

The Falconer's eyes narrowed as he scanned the mountains fringing the valley, gaging the peril they presented and their value as a defense. He knew that Seakeepdale consisted of all this now visible to him and twice again as much land, but only this one vale was arable to any large extent or permanently inhabited. His first task must be to secure this place, Seakeep's heart. After that, he would have to see what could be done to safeguard the rest.

That might not be an impossible goal despite the Dale's size and the relatively small force at his disposal. This was rough country, among the roughest he had encountered. The mountains presented an impressive barrier to anyone seeking to force entrance here, particularly to anyone attempting to lead a large company into it. Their own passage had of a certainty been anything but easy, and they had at least traversed a way which did some service as an informal road.

"Are there many other entrances like this to the valley?" he asked without taking his eyes off the distant peaks.

"No other except the sea. That is part of the reason my ancestors chose to settle here, as a guard against an invader's most probable route of attack. We had no idea what this land might hold then, you see, and there were signs in plenty to prove that it was inhabited, or had been at one time."

"What about this Square Keep? It has been my experience that men do not raise strongholds, most particularly strongholds fashioned out of great blocks of stone, unless there is either something to guard or guard against. You claim only this valley is fit for farming or pasture on a significant scale and that there are no major ore deposits in the region at all, so I doubt it was any quality of the land which drew the Old Ones to the place."

Una nodded slowly.

"Well said, Bird Warrior. I had temporarily forgotten it. There is a passage, but it gives entry only to the Dale, not to this valley, which truly can be approached only from here or by water, and it would be very easily defended."

"That would serve us little with no guard on hand to do it.—Any door to your domain must be viewed and treated with respect, Lady. Determined men can accomplish near sorcery with a supposedly insignificant breach."

Her fingers whitened on the reins.

"You are right. My carelessness might have cost Sea-keep dearly."

She felt the grey eyes on her. For once, they were not cold but were filled with such sympathy that the control her responsibilities forced on her trembled, and she had to fight herself for a moment to maintain it.

"You must despise me utterly," she whispered.

"No!—Fate has laid a burden on you that you were never trained to carry. You had the wisdom to realize you needed the help of such as we and to seek it out." He smiled. "I presume you are as interested in our experience as in our physical abilities."

"More interested, Bird Warrior."

The gratitude she felt to him was enormous. This hard man had neither condemned nor patronized her with that response. He had acknowledged her position as it was and had acknowledged his own role with respect to it.

Tarlach's expression tightened as his attention returned to the valley and its strangely formed keep.

This was another matter. As he had already stated, Una herself was not to be blamed for the shortcomings of her Dale's defenses, but had she no advisors? There had to be some men down there who knew the ways of war.

"Whatever about the Square Keep, a guard must be set on this route at once. Had we been invaders, our swords would now be red with your people's blood."

The Holdlady smiled.

"Perhaps, but were I not with you and patently at my ease—and expected to be returning in such company—you would not be viewing any so charming a scene. If you failed to meet our challenges satisfactorily, it would be far fewer of you who would still be able to see anything at all, fair or ill."

The Falconer stiffened.

"Watchers?"

"Of course. Did you believe us to be complete fools? I thought you realized we were under observation for the last several miles." She saw him glance at Storm Challenger, who was perched on the mount fastened to Tarlach's saddle for his use. "The winged ones are not to blame. With strength in so short supply, we have had to fall back on care and stealth. Our youth know how to conceal themselves, and one does not sit on the top of a tree in mountain country where an enemy standing in a still-higher place might possibly spot his post. Even your comrades' sharp eyes are not likely to detect single, widely spaced sentries under such circumstances, particularly when they are not even radiating hatred or other strong feeling to alert their inner senses, which I believe to be more acute than ours."

The captain's jaw tightened. That failure had been a bad one. It could have been deadly, and he was mortified to have been caught in it almost at the instant of his arrival in the Dale he had been hired to defend.

He resisted the instinctive impulse to snarl at the woman. That would change nothing and would only serve to magnify his unit's blindness during their approach.

"Your people are to be complimented," he admitted rather sourly.

Una nodded to acknowledge the praise but did not press the subject. The incident could have opened a serious breach between them at the very outset of the mercenaries' service with her. That it had not was due solely to their leader's control, and she was not about to put that to any further test.

"Let us go down now. My folk should have readied barracks for you, but even so, it will take time to get you all settled, and the day is already old."

Una took the lead on the narrow, steep road which was the only approach to the round tower's single gate.

At first, only a squad of youthful sentries stood at attention to greet her, but then Rufon appeared at the entrance. She saw his jaw drop and then close with a snap, and she fought hard to repress a laugh. Apparently, those informing him of her approach had neglected to tell him the company in which she rode.

That gave her a moment of concern. She knew he had delayed to order food prepared, fire laid, and otherwise ready her chambers and the mercenaries' quarters for imminent occupancy. She had no doubt that he had prepared the barracks, whatever his private feelings about her chances for success, but would his arrangements be acceptable? Would anything provided by a Dale run primarily by women be satisfactory to house these men long-term?

There was no sign of that worry in the smile which she bent on her liegeman as she gave him greeting and accepted the hand he raised to steady her as she dismounted.

"Thanks given," she said as her feet touched the ground, speaking softly so that he alone might hear her. "I have brought us some help and doubtless some problems as well."

"Doubtless," the veteran agreed with feeling, then he shook his head in wonder. "By what sorcery did you manage this?"

"By fortune's stroke and very nearly my own disaster—but, I pray you, friend, do not use that word around them! They jump like kittens at the sound of it."

He chuckled.

"Never fear, Lady Una! We will take care to guard them well, feelings and person." His face softened. "It is good to have you home, my Lady."

"And good to be here."

She glanced at the keep.

"I want to settle our blank shields as soon as I bid them formal welcome. You have readied places for them within the tower?" Of a certainty, they could not be housed in any of the cottages with Seakeep's families.

"I have, my Lady, as you instructed."

"Well done. Hasten now and prepare Lord Harvard's chamber as well. I would have their captain use that."

Rufon frowned but quickly recovered himself. He had loved the Lord Harvard, and he had no liking for allowing a hired stranger free use of what had been his personal place, but reason said this was a sensible move on the part of his liege. Their employer or nay, Lady Una would be little welcomed by those Falconers, and she herself would find no pleasure in venturing amongst them, but as ruler of Seakeepdale, she would have to meet, and possibly frequently, with their commander. This compromise would permit both parties to retain a greater degree of privacy than would otherwise have been possible, and, because of the man's race, there was small chance of any shadow's being cast upon her honor.

Una had anticipated some resistance, or at least disapproval, from Rufon and was both surprised and relieved to encounter none.

Perhaps because of the ease with which she had convinced him, she was completely taken aback when the mercenary spurned her plan.

Tarlach's eyes blazed before she had finished speaking.

"Officers and warriors of a Falconer unit remain together," he informed her with an icy finality that stung like the cut of a whip.

"Very well," she snapped, angry in her turn, "but I am going to have to have access to you, so warn your comrades that, woman though I am, they can expect to find me in their quarters fairly frequently. Rest assured, Bird Warrior, I shall not so far accommodate you as to bring you into my sleeping chamber when we needs must confer. My people have our customs as well!"

The Daleswoman gripped herself. Customs, aye, but her kind were not quite so ruled by irrationalities, practices and the hidden or open terrors which sparked them.

"A Hold lord's quarters are large. Two or even three of you could use the room in comfort, more if you accept crowding."

Tarlach was silenced a moment, first by amazement at the sudden outburst from the usually controlled Hold-lady, then by mortification as he recognized its cause and what prompted her to make her second offer. Blank shields were not normally given a place among the blood household of those they served. Una had made exception for him out of consideration for his people's ways and had swallowed her annoyance at his rejection and opened her personal domain to still more strangers... because she believed he feared to be so separated from his own kind.

He held his temper. To allow it any rein would seem but overreaction, confirming her error in her mind.

Hoping that his masking helm would conceal the shame sweeping him, he raised his hand in a rough salute.

"There is no need for that. You have shown greater foresight than I, Lady Una. For that, I must offer thanks."

She nodded, but he could still sense the tension on her. He made himself smile.

"Blank shields are rarely used so well. You took me by surprise."

Now her expression brightened, resuming almost magically its customary ready openness.

"We of Seakeep have sound reason for welcoming them, do we not?"

Tarlach set his baggage down and looked around him. There was a feeling of solid comfort about the big chamber. It was amply furnished, the pieces substantial and massive in scale, well made but constructed of local materials and apparently by local craftsmen. He saw none of the exotic woods or costly inlay work favored by the richer lords to the south in the days when High Hallack was still free of war and they had resources to spare for such luxuries.

It was ready to receive him despite the lack of fore-warning that it would be required, good testimony to the quality of the service Una of Seakeep commanded. The high bed had been made up and its hangings drawn back. A fire had been laid and now burned cheerfully in the hearth, its heat already reaching out to warm the air around it. Candles were in their sconces, waiting to give their flickering light when the sun finally set.

He walked over to the centermost of the three windows breaking the expanse of the outfacing wall and stood by it, gazing out over the valley and the bay beyond. The evening was now well on, and the sun was going down magnificently red.

A fine view, he thought, and this opening was large enough to permit him to enjoy it. Because the room was so high, greater access could be allowed to light and air than was permissible at lower levels, or anywhere in more conventionally formed strongholds. It had been so in the Eyrie as well...

Heavy metal shutters had been fitted to each window to shield the interior in time of danger, but he had the feeling that they had never been tested by more than the violence of the savage storms which must occasionally roll in from the sea.

Sadness welled up in him. That could all change too soon.

It would not! It was his business to see that this peaceful holding did not suffer the same fate that had stricken so many other of High Hallack's Dales.

A knock sounded behind him, and at his word, the great oak door swung silently back.

He raised his hand in greeting to Brennan.

"Welcome. Come in and see how a lord of Seakeepdale lives."

"Passing well," Brennan commented, his eyes sweeping the heavy, dark furnishings and excellent tapestries; he, too, liked the amount of light entering here. "You will be living well, my comrade."

"Quite well.—Are the others settled?"

"Most comfortably. These Dalesfolk are not tightfisted at any rate. We are not likely to starve while amongst them."

Brennan went over to the window.

"You would travel far to see finer than that," he remarked in admiration. "I wonder what else can be seen from this height."

"From the other side? A good bit of the bay, I imagine, and, of course, the mountain behind. The contrast between the two should be even more dramatic than this."

"Who else is quartered up here?"

"Only the Lady Una." His voice hardened instinctively, but then he shrugged. "She should not trouble me overmuch. She will be wanting her own share of peace."

His comrade laughed.

"You would find little of that below, right enough." His expression sobered. "What will be our course, Tarlach?"

"An easy one for the time being, for the rest of you anyway. I shall have to devote much of my attention to the Lady Una, and I will have to ride with her or her scouts to learn the Dale and something of those bordering it.—That learning is not my task alone. I want all of you to familiarize yourselves with Seakeep as thoroughly and as quickly as possible. Call on the younglings here to augment my reports. They should be more than willing to help."

The lieutenant nodded. This was a logical and common plan for a mercenary unit to follow upon entering into a territory where they might have to fight. Knowledge of their own and their enemies' lands always worked to reduce losses, sometimes significantly so, and frequently it was the edge that gave them the victory.

The commander returned to the window after Brennan had gone. He felt relaxed now that his duties to his command had been temporarily discharged, contented and enough at ease that he had no qualm about loosing Storm Challenger to the air in compliance with his winged brother's strongly declared wish.

All the falcons had responded with pleasure and their own excitement to this high, rugged country, so like their own lost home in many respects. It was good to be here and enough at peace that he could grant them the freedom of it.

It was good to have some share of that freedom himself.

Chapter 4

Spring flowed into a gloriously perfect summer without a break in the quiet course of life in Seakeepdale.

Tarlach found himself thrown more heavily than he had originally anticipated into the Holdlady's company, heavily enough to give him pause whenever he thought to consider their enforced relationship.

That was not often. He had fallen under the spell of this beautiful, wild realm, and he had very quickly come to realize that there was no better guide to show him its ways.

The woman's familiarity with her domain was little short of phenomenal. She almost literally knew every foot, every aspect, of the huge Dale, and his wonder at the depth and intimacy of her awareness grew with every excursion he made with her.

So, too, did his own fascination with this world of mountain and sea, but despite his frank encirclement with it, he recognized as readily as did its ruler that Sea-keep would not be a paradise in every man's eyes. It was not wealthy. Its territory was vast, aye, but it was poor in arable land, as Una had admitted from the outset, the most of that and all of the best being centered in the valley guarded by her round tower. Here, its people grew the staples and smaller luxury crops which sustained them and their animals, again, those common to most high, rough regions—small, dark cattle, the little black-faced sheep whose meat was so superior to that of the heavier lowland animals and whose wool was sparser but much the stronger, a few half-wild goats, hogs, mules and asses, and an assortment of fowl.

Only the horses were extraordinary, and these were of such quality and beauty that they seemed more creatures out of a bard's fancy than living beasts native to this ancient, many-sorrowed world. That notwithstanding, they were fine work animals and fine in the hunt or for exploring the roughest wilderness, and the least of them, properly trained, would be a war horse any Falconer would bind his sword for a full year to possess.

The mercenary sighed. He was not likely ever to own one of them, nor was any other of his race. The Dale's breeding program was small, producing enough animals to supply its own needs but no more. Markets where an acceptable price might even reasonably be anticipated were simply too far and the journey to them too difficult to make the effort of building the herd worthwhile. Even in the days before the invasion, horses had never been taken farther than the semiannual fairs at Linna.

That was just as well. Seakeep had never really been able to spare the men to send on long-term trading missions. There was no warring between the Dale and its neighbors, but this isolated, wild land was a lodestone to brigands, and its jagged coast called to pirate crews. These were the enemies of all and had to be fought by all, and they came frequently enough that each Dale maintained a well-trained, battle-tempered garrison to combat them.

The brunt of the ocean warfare had always fallen to Seakeep, since its harbor, though too small to support commercial fishing on more than its present scale or to entice merchantmen from the larger ports to the south, was the sole refuge for a fleet in this region.

None of that mattered, he thought, not economic hardship or danger from sea or land or human predators. A man could be happy here. This was a place in which to set down roots, to build and to grow, to meld with a world welcoming to those willing to work with rather than against her, a world where his kind could make themselves a home and grow strong and whole once more...

His thoughts stopped, or, rather, they began to blur. The humming of the breeze and the muffled surging of the surf were working upon him in consort with the pleasant heat, and he was content for the moment to let his mind drift where their influence wafted it.

A high, distant call penetrated his mental doze, and he looked skyward, automatically homing in on the cry. Storm Challenger. An exultant joy filled him as he watched the falcon soar high in company with Brennan's Sunbeam. Unconsciously, his muscles tensed and strained as if he would join his comrade in body in the ultimate freedom of flight even as he joined with him in spirit.

This was just a playful flight, the birds' way of expressing their pleasure in a beautiful day, but they had soared for more serious and timeless purpose earlier in their stay, as had every pair in the company. These falcons were creatures of the heights, and Seakeep met their instinctive needs to the full. Their annual nesting had proven fruitful as no other had been since the last in the Eyrie, before destruction had come to set them wandering. Another such hatching, another year in the Dale, and the future of the black-and-white birds should be assured. That would be an accomplishment and a comfort even if the men who served with them must all too soon fade.

His breath caught suddenly. Una was on the beach as well. She had begun walking toward him but had heard the falcons' calling and had stopped to watch them. To his horror, she raised her arm in the distance greeting used by his people, and they—they responded, with a true welcome and not merely an acknowledgment of her presence.

She understood! That accursed female understood what they said and did!

He reached her in a matter of moments. Seizing her roughly by the arm, he spun her about, forcing her to face him.

"Witch! Dare you try your spells against them?"

Una struggled an instant to free herself, but when she could not, she stood still, quiet save for eyes blazing like cauldrons of green fire in her fury.

"You have strange standards of judgment, Falconer! For you to do this is but natural communication with members of another species. For me, it is an aberration, something vile to be feared and condemned."

Her contempt was a lash into his face, but he did not give way.

"For your kind, it is unnatural."

"Then it is most difficult to understand why no animal has ever refused me greeting and good wishing after the manner of its kind."

His hold loosened enough for her to jerk her arm out of his grasp.

"It is true that this is not a usual gift of my people, and I have had to take care during all my life lest I be branded an oddity or worse among them, to the detriment of my house. I had not intended revealing myself to you, either, but I thought it no harm since the falcons themselves answered me as they did." She turned away from him. "I suppose I was wrong to expect better than this from you."

Her voice both thickened and trembled at that last, and she hurriedly strode back along the way she had come.

Tarlach cringed in his heart, realizing there was pain as well as anger on her.

Justified anger. He did not need the reproach he was receiving from the two falcons to tell him that.

"Lady! Lady Una, wait!"

The Daleswoman halted and faced him again but gave him no verbal reply.

He came to a stop before her and stood in the manner of a shieldman before his liege.

"I overstepped my right..."

"Aye. That you did." Una eyed him coldly. Her shoulders squared. "Prepare your mount, Captain, and order mine prepared. The question of sorcery appears to be ever in your mind and accusation of it ever on your tongue. All this area is well-nigh free of that, but I do have a friend whom you would find distinctly suspect. She is no follower of the Shadow, but you shall judge that for yourself. If you read it otherwise, or if your fear of her proves too great, then go, and do not waste more of my time and resources."

The mercenary's hand went to his sword, and he had to will himself to leave it sheathed.

"Take care, woman. We are oath-bound to serve—"

"Your oath be damned! Of what use would you be to me if you come to hate me more than my enemy? Ogin is a man, after all," she added bitterly. "What matter if he may be luring ships to their deaths in order to increase his store?"

"That is vile judging!"

"You do not think it amiss to use me so. Ready yourself to ride, Falconer. I must have your decision now as to whether you and yours remain in my service or not."

Chapter 5

The pair rode from the round tower in black silence. Tarlach wondered briefly if he was acting the fool in telling no one what he was about, in coming with this woman at all, but he dismissed that thought in the next instant. Pride and anger were driving him, aye, but it was his duty to investigate any local conditions which might affect his company, and that, unfortunately, included sites and sources of Power activity. As for Una, Storm Challenger rode with them, and the Falconer commander knew that, whatever else she might be capable of doing, this one would not purposely lead him into harm. Or himself. Treason of that kind was not part of her. That he was forced to admit despite all his hard feeling of the moment against her.

The heavy quiet continued between them, and as time went on, the mercenary grew more and more uncomfortable under it. He had never been conscious of the Holdlady's pressing her conversation on him, but he realized now how much he had come to enjoy her response to her holding, her observations of the land and the amazingly rich variety of life it supported, her often surprising reaction to his own comments, and with that exchange abruptly terminated, he felt as if he had suffered an irreparable loss, all the more painful and poignant because the break between them had been of his making.

At last, he sent his horse forward until the stallion drew abreast of her mount.

"Is my crime so very black?" he demanded sullenly.

"No. You cannot be blamed for being what you are. I chiefly resent that your attitude has forced me to do this."

Her eyes rested somberly on him.

"Women have their friendships, too. We cherish them as much as any of your kind do yours, cherish their closeness and confidence.

"I value that more than most, perhaps, since I have been privileged to have but one such companion, one single sister of my soul. I had no siblings, and even were there girls of my age in the neighboring Dales, distance would have prevented much interaction between us while we were very young. As for our own people's offspring, my father did not believe it well for me to mix too freely with them, the more so once he had reconciled himself to the fact that there would be no son to rule after him.

"I filled my days well, but still I longed for some true comrade as I grew older, someone to share the experiences of life and growth with me. It was as if the Amber Lady had wielded her Power for me when I came across the place to which we are going and discovered there a girl of my own age who loved

Seakeep even as I did and who held interest in many of the things which gripped my heart and mind. She even shared my name."

She smiled at the memory of their meeting but almost immediately grew grave again.

"She is not human, or entirely human, as we define ourselves, and even then, as a child, she knew enough to want to keep apart from our kind, a shyness she still retains."

Una heard the quick indraw of his breath and nodded.

"There might have been very great peril for me in that meeting, but I was fortunate. I was also not an utter fool. As dearly as I yearned for this friendship, I went to both my mother and my nurse, who was a wisewoman of very great ability. They met my other Una and gave their approval to my continuing to visit with her, but they are the only ones I have ever brought to see her."

Tarlach's eyes were dark with trouble.

"If this... Una is innocent of evil, why have you thought it necessary to conceal your association with her?"

"Partly because it was her wish, as I have mentioned, partly because of my own position. A Holdlord's daughter must always act and think with respect to her Dale, and I was heir as well. I could not afford to let myself be thought too strange or have it rumored that I had truck with things better left alone. That I have a strong gift for healing which extends well beyond the training every wellborn girl receives in that art as part of her education was welcomed since that is both a distinct benefit to all and is an accepted duty of my sex and rank, but no other ability or connection that so much as hinted of Power would be so regarded."

"No speech with animalkind and no friendships among the Old Ones?"

"Either might be sufficient to have caused objection to my coming into my own."

"Power in one form or another shows in many Dale families," he reminded her. "It rarely appears to arouse much resentment."

"Aye, but that comes as a gift—or curse—from of old. There are no such traditions in our house, no ancient melding with those not of our race or kind."

"What is hallowed by time elsewhere would meet a very different reception here as a present-day innovation?"

"Given the nature of most people, aye, particularly now. The fact of a woman's holding rule to herself so long is in itself an oddity resented to some extent by many."

His eyes measured her.

"Yet you are willing to bring me to your friend?"

"I must. I cannot have you unsure of me if it comes to pass that you are forced to fight for me. You have to be certain, in your heart at least, that I stand with the Light and not the Dark."

His head bowed.

"I would I could tell you I entertained no such suspicions against you."

"You must have them, being what you are."

"We do have reason, Lady," he said softly.

"I do not even imagine otherwise, not after having come to know you a little," she said with sadness.

"You do not ask those reasons?"

"I have no right to ask," Una answered. "That is Falconer history and Falconer business alone."

Tarlach was silent for several minutes.

"Before we came to the land where we established our Eyrie, we, the men of my race, were enslaved." His eyes closed at the recalling of that ancient horror. "You cannot conceive the depth of that bondage forced on us by an adept of the Dark path. It was an Old One, not human though human enough in appearance, who held us in such thrall, but for all her store of Power, she was unable to work her will on us directly. To accomplish that, she needed to use our females. Every woman was a vessel to serve as her tool, and those she utilized became even as she, dark and cruel, living only to exalt themselves and to grind and degrade..."

"Eventually, at great cost, we broke free, and the surviving remnant fled north, borne in Sulcar ships, taking with them those of their women that were still alive but treating with them even as we do today.

"We had escaped, you see, but our victory was only partial. The Dark One was foiled. She was captive, but she was not dead. Her will lived and ever sought the woman who would shed for her the blood that would release her. Then she would be after us again.— Apparently, no other race could serve her particular needs.—We durst not let ourselves grow attached to or involved with any woman again, for it would be through such close association that her Power would close on us again should she indeed gain her release. Over the years, the centuries," he shrugged, "need became virtue, I suppose. Contempt and hate took the place of any longing our forebears must have felt for a warmer, gentler life among our own. That ill feeling soon expanded to in-' elude all of your sex, as was probably inevitable considering the number of women who are wielders of Power in Estcarp, the great number of women who are potentially most perilous to us."

He stopped speaking suddenly as a thought came to him with all the force of a diving falcon.

"Our females must be afraid of her return, too, more intensely than we. Maybe that is why they never made an effort to seek other lives in number, although Estcarp lay near enough for them to have gained refuge there." He stared fixedly into the distance. "They have worse to dread than us. We were enslaved, but we remained still men, still ourselves. Those who served her purpose were not what they had been. Identifiable traits remained, aye, but in person, in soul, they were altered even as those who accepted the Kolder's jewels were changed and bound."

"All your women were so chained?" she asked softly.

"No. Our history is clear on that. She attempted to seize only the ones she specifically required, and most of those she did call refused her, dying of that refusal, but always a few responded or were

compelled to respond. That was her Power and our undoing, that no Falconer woman could deny her, or survive making good that denial, and each one so claimed could then chain the men associated with her."

"So, once out of the trap, you determined to allow yourselves no associations at all?"

"Could you risk drawing that doom down on yourself a second time?" he countered.

"No. I could not, even at so great a price." Una was still for a moment. "Perhaps your answer, for male and female alike, lies in taking partners from among other peoples. You indicate that your foe seemed to want or require those of your blood to work her will." She eyed him pensively. "A species unable to change to some extent is doomed, for the time when some change is required will inevitably come. That holds true for people as well as beasts, I think."

"Perhaps, and perhaps some of my kind might eventually be convinced to risk that course rather than face complete extinction, but, Lady, do you see the women of any other race coming to us? Our ways are viewed with a hearty dislike by your sex, and who would be foolish enough to imagine a yielding to need also guarantees an altering of heart? It would be too much to think that attitudes generations in the building could be banished in an instant because some of us accepted the necessity of such a move and broke with the rest of our fellows to make it." Were banished by the rest... "It will not come to that."

"No? Then I do fear for you. Your villages are in Estcarp now. Old history will not hold forever against the examples of another, richer life open for the viewing but a short ride away. Add to that the losses your men must have suffered since the Kolder came, and your kind is in major, maybe mortal, trouble, whether you admit and face it or nay."

She studied Storm Challenger for a moment as he sat regally upon the perch before the man.

"I should not be sorry to see some of your ways gone, but, Falconer, what you have achieved with these valiant birds must not be lost. That would be to the impoverishment of this whole world."

Tarlach did not know whether to stare at the woman in awe or curse her for naming this fear of his as accurately as if she had drawn it directly from his mind. A chill ran through him at the sudden thought that she might have done precisely that.

He chose silence and a quick move from the sensitive subject before she should also divine his pain and his hopelessness of ever rising from the blow dealt to his race by the destruction of their base.

"What must be endured shall be," he told her with a finality that allowed for no further discussion. "But what of yourself, Lady? I am... curious about your gift. You can apparently treat with the falcons much as we do. Can you do as much with all other animals?"

"Aye and no both. Each kind is different, and the thoughts of some touch more readily than others with mine. Your falcons are wonderful. I had never imagined to find mindways so complex and deep in any other being save a cat, and I usually do not draw very closely with birds."

She hesitated.

"I meant no harm or insult to you in addressing them. Since they returned my initial courtesy greeting without reserve, I assumed I did no wrong."

"You concealed from us your ability to talk to them," he pointed out.

"From habit, as I do from everyone. It was no evil intent or deed that I was trying to hide."

"I yield to that," he said after a moment. "You can speak with all or most warm-bloods to some extent. What about things whose blood runs cold?"

"With some of the scaled ones and those creatures dwelling in both water and on land, but I have no contact or almost none with insects or fish or other beings like to them." She guessed the question he did not voice. "I have no such ability whatsoever with our own kind."

The man had the control and the grace to mask his relief.

"You have formed no individual friendship such as we share with our winged brothers and sisters?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"I have not been so blessed. Though all will speak with me, none have permitted me to come that close.—Your falcons actually do choose the warrior with whom they will ride, do they not?"

"Aye, but they are also taught from the egg to seek such a comrade among us. Other creatures do not expect that sort of relationship from humans. Try making the initial move yourself. Choose a being you respect and can love and reach out to it." He paused. "A cat would be a sound choice. You indicate a preference for them, and they are regarded not only as acceptable companions for humans but ones for whom a great deal of fondness can be shown. With one of them, you need not reveal the true nature of your association." Tarlach smiled. "They are small as well. That is a distinct advantage if you want to keep your comrade beside you in hall and bower."

She laughed.

"A point well taken, Bird Warrior! I shall bear it in mind." She sobered. "And the rest of what you have said. If such a friendship can truly be mine, rest assured that I shall do all in my power to win and be worthy of it."

The silence between them was different now, companionable and ever ready to lift, as it frequently did under the wonder of the country through which they were riding.

This was the high-mountained interior of her rugged hold, and Una, knowing the Falconer's delight in such terrain, set a course up a steep slope to a crest from which they could see for miles before them. Higher peaks behind hid the ocean from them, but the rocks and forests, the barer, sweeping expanses of heather, furze, and fern, the small, wild streams racing into impossibly clear lakes, the low places green with sweet grass or dark with bog growth were as grand in themselves and tore at heart and mind with all the sea's more familiar force.

Tarlach felt a twinge of guilt at the strength of the emotion rising within him, as if he were betraying the Eyrie and all his dead stronghold had meant.

"There are other mountains far higher," he said sharply to counter it.

"Probably, and grander, too," she agreed, "yet I think I should not love them as well if I were set in their midst now. These have been my friends since my infancy, and their beauty has become my standard for

all that is fair."

He forced himself to relax. Una had done him no wrong. She was not responsible for his weaknesses and should not have to bear with his temper if some difficulty of his own momentarily discomfited him.

"It is so with me as well," he told her. "I was born amidst highlands, and I am drawn by them to this day." The Falconer smiled softly and naturally. "Since coming here, though, the ocean has managed to put her spell on me as well, which she had never been able to do before."

He glanced at her.

"Your Seakeep has magic. Lady Una. I grant you that."

The woman looked out over her world.

"Aye," she murmured, "magic that can set one's heart at peace."

Una's attention was fixed upon her Dale, but it was at the Holdlady herself that the mercenary captain was looking, and she glanced at him with some surprise when she sensed the direction of his gaze.

"Is anything amiss?"

He flushed a little, for he had not realized he had been studying her so intently.

"No, Lady. I was thinking about your relationship with your land," he added hastily. "It is most uncommon."

"Surely my feeling for that is not so strange? I should imagine most Holdlords share it."

Tarlach shook his head.

"No," he replied slowly, "that is not true, at least not among those with whom I have had contact. They see their domains with the eyes of rulers or farmers or herdsmen and, naturally, as soldiers, and all, of course, see in them their homes and their roots and cherish them for that reason, but your look just now was that of a lover."

A sudden chill gust of wind caused him to glance skyward. Dark clouds seemed to be materializing out of the erstwhile vividly blue dome.

Tarlach sighed inwardly. Storms came on very quickly in these mountains, and by the look of it, there was no hope of returning to the tower before this one opened up. They would have to go to earth somewhere and wait it out, that or ride on and take a soaking.

He turned to his companion.

"Do we run or dive for cover?"

"Both. Our goal is near and will provide us with good shelter."

Hardly had she finished speaking than she sent her mare over the crest and began racing downslope at a pace which would have frightened many a fairly daring man.

The warrior watched her a moment before following after her. Whatever her other talents or lack of them, Una of Seakeep was as skilled with a horse as anyone he had ever met.

They had not been traveling long at this furious pace before the woman's mare leaped, almost flew, over a high hedge and disappeared from his sight. In another moment, Tarlach had joined her.

His eyes widened a little. They were within a very small field enclosed on all sides by a tall fence of mixed growth, its lowest point being that at which they had made their entry.

The grass was high and had obviously never been seriously grazed, but it was the wall of vegetation surrounding them which held his attention. Holly, fuchsia, mountain ash, and rhododendron rose up together in one seemingly continuous mass, while heather, broom, and an almost bewildering variety of smaller hedge plants, many brilliantly flowered, filled every space the larger growth left free.

Roses were here, too, wild roses, and, along the wall facing them, tiny, deep pink climbers that had clambered to the very top of the trees supporting them and were cascading in vivid sprays through their branches. In other places fragrant patches of honeysuckle provided a similarly dramatic display.

"This is incredible," he said softly after a moment's silence. "But how came it to be? You could never have done all this. Not even the roses could have been brought to this state in the full of your lifetime, and these trees..."

Una laughed.

"Of course I did not set them! I have done some pruning, right enough, but that is the extent of my interference with nature's handwork here."

"She had some other help, then. Many of these plants may be feral now, but they are not so in themselves. Human hands, some hands, put them or their ancestors in this place."

Several great drops of rain struck them, and Una caught his hand.

"Come, or we shall be drowned despite all our horses' efforts!"

"What about them?" he asked as he allowed himself to be drawn after her.

"They shall be fine. See, they are standing under cover already."

She led her companion into the shelter of a great holly. The leaves and branches were thick around and above them and seemed to form a natural tunnel leading into the very heart of the hedge.

They followed this to its end at the base of the ancient tree. Here, the branches lifted so that there was room in plenty for the mercenary to stand erect. A low, rather long grey rock stretched before the trunk, its top slightly rounded and comfortably smooth.

The Daleswoman seated herself on this and smiled up at him.

"Welcome to the Bower."

He sat beside her. It was an effort to conceal his nervousness, although objectively, he found nothing

amiss with the place. What Una had already told him about her namesake was enough to set him on edge.

"When did you discover it?"

"As a child, shortly after I found the field. I was a dreadful little thing for burrowing in those long-gone days. Listen! You can hear the rain falling all around us, but scarcely a drop is coming through. It takes a proper deluge to penetrate this far."

Tarlach shivered and drew his cloak more tightly around himself.

"Enough of the wind seems to make it in."

She smiled.

"Not in proportion to the whole. Look at how the branches are dancing in the top layers above us. Besides, you would gladly take a lot more cold than this and a soaking outside with it to what we would be enduring in here from the biting clouds if the air were still."

"Biting clouds?"

"You must know them. Tiny, flying insects. They swarm by the thousands and ten thousands in dim places when there is little or no wind to keep them off."

"I do indeed! We call them the bitter motes."

The man shook his head ruefully.

"I remember one night—it was during my first service as a blank shield, too—my company was stationed in ambush awaiting an anticipated invasion of the holding to which we were bound. It was a hot, muggy evening in late summer without the barest breath of a breeze to stir the air..."

"And the clouds were out?"

"Red raving, and we were under a command of total silence. We did not dare move so much as a hand to try to keep them off us, not that it would have done us much good."

Una laughed sympathetically.

"You poor things! Did the invaders come?"

"Not at all. They arrived a month later by an entirely different route."

She tried unsuccessfully to mask her smile.

"That must have been enough to make you consider seeking another lifeway."

"Just about," he admitted.

Another gust of wind reached them. Tarlach saw his companion shiver and burrow farther into her cloak. She straightened abruptly, with purpose, and his stomach muscles tightened. They had come here

seeking more than shelter.

"Where is your friend?"

"In her own place, of course. You did not think that she lives here? This is merely the spot where we normally meet since we both love it so."

"How do you summon her?"

"It is not a summons really. Una is my friend, after all, not a servant. I just call to her with my mind, as she calls to me if she is the one to initiate the visit. Usually, I am the one to do it, for there is almost no delay in her response, whereas I must ride far to reach the Bower."

She stood up.

"I had best begin."

"Aye."

Una looked at him closely.

"Are you sure you will be all right?"

"Aye!"

She cringed mentally. That question had been a mistake, but she knew enough about him to realize that he was definitely not happy about any of this.

That could not be helped. They would have settled nothing if they rode home again without having fulfilled their mission.

Closing her eyes, she set herself to issuing the call that would bring her friend to her.

Tarlach watched uneasily for several minutes. He was beginning to feel relieved as time continued to flow by with no perceptible change occurring in their surroundings, but then Storm Challenger's warning hiss told him that it was only the weakness of his human senses which made it appear that all was still normal in the Bower.

For nearly a full minute longer, he could detect no difference, then the air before him began to shimmer, to stretch as it were, until he seemed to be looking into an inconceivably eerie passage.

A figure materialized at its farther end, indistinct at first but growing ever clearer as she approached, appearing rather to float than to physically walk. At last, all too soon for him, she stood before them, as real or seemingly real in the flesh as they were themselves.

The Falconer came to his feet in shock. His mind groped for and found Storm Challenger's, but the bird evinced only a surprise similar to his and the natural uncertainty engendered by this eldritch situation in which they found themselves. There was no fear on him and nothing at all of the anger all his kind instinctively displayed when confronted by any taint or work of the Shadow.

The newcomer was very alien, all the more distant despite and because of her beauty and the fact that

she might almost have been human. Most frightening in his mind was her resemblance to Una of Seakeep. In face and form, they might almost seem one woman divided by some accursed enchantment, but closer observation revealed that the depth and breadth of a great ocean lay between them.

This being showed an uncommon stillness as well, but the calm in her expression was not that of one who accepted and had come to terms with a life that held its share of weight as well as joy and the ever-present potential to crush utterly. Hers was the empty peace of someone who had not been tested at all and who neither feared nor faced any threat of trial in a future maybe infinitely long.

The fair features were lovelier if anything than the human's but were somehow oddly chiseled, as if another race had a part in their fashioning.

The green eyes were at least alive, and if he could not fathom all that they held, he thought he could read something of the emotion flickering within them, a sadness and a hunger whose cause he wondered if any human might delve or comprehend.

That vanished in the moment of his identifying it, for her eyes, her whole face, lighted with pleasure when they rested on his Una. Whatever about his other doubts, that response told him that the bond between the two was quite real.

That, too, changed rapidly. The strange Una spotted him, and a veil dropped over her inner being.

She glanced inquisitively at the human woman.

"Sister?" Her voice was soft, like the Holdlady's but somewhat oddly though not unpleasantly pitched.

"This is the captain of the force who have come to help us. I thought it best that he meet with you to assure himself that we of Seakeepdale have no traffic with the Shadow."

The magnificent eyes fixed on him.

"I hope your mind is now easy on that score, Captain, or that it soon will be. This Dale and its people have ever been free of taint, from its earliest history right through the present moment." She smiled. "For my part, I love Seakeep as well and am grateful for this chance to give you my own thanks for your service." She made no mention of the fact that he was patently a blank shield, well paid for that service, no more than Una had drawn his profession down during her introduction of him.

Tarlach gave her salute, but he was glad to take refuge in his people's custom and make her no verbal reply. He was unsure of her, not of her allegiance to the Light, which both Storm Challenger and his own instinct affirmed, but of her purpose, and he did not know how much she might be able to read into the feelings behind any response he might make or what her reaction to his uncertainty would be.

He stepped back several paces into the living tunnel, leaving the pair to speak together in privacy as would be expected of him. He was, after all, no more than Una's escort...

He watched them from that vantage, fighting the urge to force his way back in there and thrust himself as a sword and shield between the Holdlady and her almost-image.

More than an image! His heart gave a vicious leap. By the Horned Lord! That one was something far more!

It was a battle after that to restrain himself during the eternal minutes which followed, but he knew if he intervened now, whatever hope he had of reasoning with the Daleswoman would probably be ended. He must hold his peace for the moment, unless the stranger made some open threat against which he might rightly act, though to what effect, he could not even begin to hazard.

At last, after what in actuality was only a very few minutes, it was over. The alien woman withdrew down her passage as she had come.

No sooner did Una stand alone once more and his comrade had confirmed that the gate was truly closed than the Falconer was at her side. He seized her hands.

"What does that one want of you?" he demanded harshly.

The Holdlady started to answer sharply, but then she saw the tightness of his lips and read that which burned in his eyes.

"Nothing. She is my friend."

"She is you!—Una, she is your own self, different, aye, but you in spite of that!"

She stared at him as if he had gone mad.

"We are not the same, not in thought or totally in likings, and though we do look alike, I do not have quite her store of beauty. I know that is of no importance to your kind, but surely you must see it. The rest, you cannot know unless you accept my word, but that is before your own eyes."

"I have admitted that you are not the same and praise the Horned Lord for that, but yet, you two are one. I cannot explain how or why, but it is so. As for your appearance, Una of Seakeep, you judge yourself ill. You are fairer in any man's eyes than that strange... thing could ever be. You have shared human life. You are strong and weak, warm, because of that sharing..."

He stopped speaking. It was impossible to express concepts, to describe comprehensibly a situation so completely outside anything he had ever encountered or heard described before. He fully believed that even the Witches of Estcarp, with all their vaunted Power and learning, would have been utterly baffled by this, though for the first time in his life he heartily wished they had one of them here with them to help them front this mystery.

"Una, she is not of the Dark. I give you that, but still, I—I fear that she is trouble, and dire trouble, for you. Do nothing, grant her nothing, without careful and long thought lest you thereby take a step you might be powerless to retrace."

Chapter 6

"Tarlach was in his usual place on the beach the following morning, standing in the shelter of a great rock. The sign of the previous day's storm was still on the sea, and he did not envy those manning the small boat far out in the bay whose antics he had been observing for some time with that part of his awareness not locked into his memory of that other Una.

He had been thoroughly surprised and much relieved by the Holdruler's response to his declaration. He

had anticipated fury and well nigh a battle of wills with her—reason almost demanded it after so incredible a statement—but that had not occurred. Una had staunchly defended her friend, right enough, as he supposed was only to be expected, but once her initial astonishment had subsided, she had not set her back against him. She had neither condemned him nor dismissed his fears outright. Rather, with real humility, she had admitted that she herself had none of the answers necessary to refute him and no knowledge in the ways of the Old Ones. Given those limitations, she had acknowledged the wisdom of conducting herself with the circumspection he advised.

She had thanked him for his quickness of mind in detecting a potential for peril which neither she nor the two people she had most trusted in her life had even envisioned.

His head lowered. He had been so sensitive to that danger only because the strange Una was female and because she either possessed herself or could otherwise control enough Power to permit her to open a gate at will. How much credit did he deserve for that? He wondered what sort of response he would have made had their positions been reversed and the Daleswoman had found it needful to caution him in some relationship of his. To his shame, he knew full well that he would not have heard her with the same fairness and respect, that he probably would not have used her with courtesy at all, not even that which was her due as the one to whom his sword was bound.

His preoccupation was not so deep that he failed to hear the welcoming call Storm Challenger reserved for his mate. He looked up as the falcon left his shoulder to join Sunbeam in the air above, and he raised his hand in greeting to Brennan.

The lieutenant acknowledged it.

"I knew I would find you in this place."

His commander smiled.

"I am here often enough. I love to watch the way the bay changes with each new shading of light and hour."

The other looked at him.

"You are very drawn to this Dale."

Tarlach nodded.

"Seakeep has much to offer a man." He sighed, his mood sobering. "I hope war does not come here. It deserves better than that."

"I doubt it shall. There has been naught but peace since our arrival."

"Aye, but it is during the autumn and winter storms that a black wrecker will be active, not now."

"Assuming one is operating in this area at all. We have seen nothing to suggest that there is, no more than there has been any trouble with this Lord Ogin. We have not had so much as a sight of him."

"You knew it would probably be thus through the summer months," the captain replied in surprise. "As for the Lord of Ravenfield, he would logically remain quiet for a while and then begin pressing his suit with the Holdlady anew using other tactics."

"Aye, there is the Holdruler.—You were long in the returning yesterday."

Tarlach stiffened.

"What do you say?"

"Nothing."

"The storm caught us, and we took refuge against it, then had a long wait before it blew over." There was a sharpness in his tone which was rarely loosed on any of his own. "Do you imagine I would violate one to whom I am oath-bound, by violence or through seduction?"

"Seduction can be a mare's weapon."

The captain's hand struck the hilt of his blade.

"I would kill any other for that," he snarled.

Brennan stepped back a pace. He did not need the suddenly alerted falcons now swooping very close to the two men to tell him the depth of his friend's anger. Most righteous anger. He had done him ill in speaking as he had for no better reason than his annoyance over his commander's disappearance the previous day.

"Pardon craved, Comrade. It is just that more than one of us had begun to grow uneasy by the time you returned. You had given no one word of your plans, and we did not even know where to begin seeking you."

Tarlach's outrage cooled.

"That was foolishly done," he admitted. "In truth, I had allowed our employer to provoke my temper and acted under its lash." He shrugged. "That is done. Our purpose was sound. She gave me report of a place of Power, and I went to examine it, using her as my guide."

"What! I thought Seakeepdale held no such canker."

"The activity is intermittent."

"Tainted?"

"Neither Storm Challenger nor I detected any sign of that."

The Falconer leader found himself reluctant to reveal what had happened in the Bower. It was too strange for him to offer either explanation or assurance, and yet he felt to the depth of his being that the woman from beyond the gate represented no threat to anyone but the Holdlady of Seakeepdale. On the other hand, Una's position would of a certainty be compromised in his comrades' eyes if the story became known.

That must be avoided. She was already somewhat suspect, apparently, or Brennan's impatience would not have been expressed in the terms he had used just now, and the company was growing restless under the lack of real work and the seeming absence of the threat Una had described as her reason for hiring

blank shields. Technically, that should not matter. They were sworn to give a twelve-months' service here, but the fact that they were bound to a woman might put stress on the strength of that oath in the minds of some, and he did not want to face the task of imposing obedience and discipline on any of his warriors. This was too good a unit to be so weakened.

Fortunately, his lieutenant seemed to accept his appraisal as he had spoken it, and to help forestall any further questioning, Tarlach turned his head to the sea, once more fixing his attention on the small vessel tossing on the still-angry water.

She was much nearer now, and he frowned as he continued to study her.

"Brennan, you had more time at sea than I. What do you make of that boat? I have been watching her on and off for about half an hour. Sometimes she travels fast, sometimes slow, as if with the wind, and occasionally she turns broadside to the waves as she is doing now, although she always eventually heads into them again."

The second man watched her closely for some minutes.

"She is probably sound enough, but I do not like the look of her. She is not moving right, as if she were only partially under control at times."

Brennan's head snapped up.

"She is in trouble! See, she is flashing something white, a sark perhaps."

"Rouse the Dalesfolk! They have probably seen her as well, but we cannot chance that they have not. I shall keep watch on her here."

Brennan nodded and raced for the nearest of the cottages, but he had not gone ten yards before he saw several girls and a couple of youths running like young coursing hounds down the beach toward the moored boats. Knowing matters to be in good hands, he returned to his commander after raising his hand to the Dalespeople to acknowledge their control of the emergency.

The strange vessel was soon taken in tow and brought ashore.

The three men aboard her, all well known to the Sea-keep people, were tired but sound. They reported that they had been fishing off their own shore when their rudder had struck a submerged rock they admitted they should have avoided easily had overconfidence in the face of a too familiar danger not made them careless. They had rigged another rudder with their spare oar but had drifted out of their Dale's waters by then and had made for here with the intention of putting into Seakeep's harbor to properly complete their repairs.

When the sea had proven a little too rough for their makeshift rudder, however, they had grown afraid and had begun signaling for help. There were few other landing places beyond this point besides Ravenfield's single small beach, and all three readily confessed their unwillingness to venture into that territory, which had always been known as a dangerous coast and had gained an even worse name for wrecks and lost ships in recent years.

Tarlach's eyes met his lieutenant's as the eldest of the fishermen, he who was telling the tale of his vessel's adventures, made that last statement.

Brennan nodded. That was the sign the Falconers needed. There was no doubting the sincerity of the seamen's fear, their acceptance and avoidance of a locally acknowledged peril, and there would be no further thought of leaving Seakeep before the term of their service ended.

Chapter 7

With the willing help of Seakeep's fisherfolk to speed their work, the strange fishermen had soon completed the repair of their boat and were gone again before the afternoon had moved very far toward evening.

The new feeling of purpose they left behind them in the mercenary warriors would hold firm, and already the Falconers looked upon their routine guarding as a matter of need and of some importance. Perhaps the still-quiescent Lord of Ravenfield might not prove to be the source of the peril the three had so casually confirmed, but someone was, and there was no question about the need to keep this harbor secure against that renegade.

Despite fortune's solving that trouble for him, Tarlach's mood remained dark all that day and continued dark into the next so that he was glad enough to keep to his quarters, out of sight of his comrades and the Dales-folk alike, while he attended to the record keeping that was the bane of every commander responsible for more than a mere handful of warriors.

He was not pleased to hear a soft, almost secretive knock around midmorning but gave the call for admittance.

He scowled when the Holdlady entered, but a high-pitched meow drew his attention to the minute kitten she was holding against her, and he glanced into eyes glowing so brilliantly that they were well-nigh aflame.

The Falconer came to his feet and hastened to meet her.

"You have bonded with your comrade already!"

"I have indeed!" She hesitated. "I am sorry to intrude on your work, but there was no one else to whom I could introduce her." Once more, excitement overcame her. "I never imagined it could be like this!"

He laughed.

"It was the same with me when I was first so chosen, my Lady."

Tarlach stroked the tiny animal with his forefinger. She was a tortoiseshell, seemingly all fur and with huge, very round, and quite fearless eyes.

"She is a delight and should be a beauty when she grows." He glanced at the woman. "She is very young, though. What made you seek out an animal so immature?"

"I did not, not intentionally. I chanced on her this morning. She was defending herself claws and teeth against one of the dogs, who had cornered her. He meant business and would have ended the matter in another few seconds had I not intervened, but there was no cringing or thought of surrender to him or to death on her."

"You did not haul the brute off her?" he asked quickly.

"Hardly! My skin is still whole.—I should have done that had I been forced to it, but I merely told him in mind to be about his proper work and not to trouble again those who should be his charges. He went off suitably chastened."

"And your little friend was grateful?" he inquired, masking his relief.

"Much more! I asked where I might find her mother to reunite them, but she refused to tell me or to leave me." The woman smiled indulgently. "She is very strong-willed."

"You are well met there," he said dryly. "What have you named her, or was she kin-named already?"

"I called her Bravery. After that stand of hers, she merits it."

"In truth."

Tarlach took the little creature and examined her carefully.

"A fine animal. She should prosper well. Remember, though," he added, recalling his own excitement with his first chick, "it will be a while yet before you can take her adventuring with you."

"I think my maternal instincts are quite intact, Captain," she told him tartly as she retrieved Bravery from his hold.

Their hands brushed together during the transfer of the kitten, and the Falconer stiffened.

He glared at the Daleswoman.

"You have brought me the queerest commission I have ever had the misfortune to hold," he told her savagely.

Tarlach stopped himself.

"I am a fool," he said, "and an arrant boor besides. All this must be twice as difficult for you."

"I do not find your company unwelcome," she answered, turning her face from him. "I have come to see you as a true friend rather than merely as an ally."

The color rose a little in the cheek visible to him.

"If I wrong you by saying this, I pray you pardon me. You know that I—I would not insult or lessen you."

"Insult? Your regard is not that."

He took a step nearer her.

"Una of Seakeep, you would be the delight and strength of any lord fortunate enough to win you for all that remained to him of eternity. Too often I have heard you indicate otherwise in your speech. That is an

injustice to yourself and to Seakeep; such thought can move you to choose for your lord a man less worthy than you and your Dale merit and should gain."

He turned away.

"It is not my right to speak thus to you."

The woman smiled.

"You have every right. Have I not called you my friend?"

The jade eyes studied him speculatively.

"Your comrades have been giving you trouble?"

His quickly masked start gave her the Falconer's answer although he himself was unwilling to admit the accuracy of her guess.

"Why do you ask that?" he inquired evasively.

"Because it almost needs must be so. Your people do not appear to enjoy idleness. You have had more to do than the rest of your command since coming here. Now that the others are rested and have gotten some feel for the Dale, they cannot find the guarding of the one overland entrance very challenging. They do not even have responsibility for watching the gorge at the Square Keep since you have set your falcons that task. They would have to be wanting something to properly occupy them, even without the irritant that I must represent." Her eyes fell momentarily. "Idleness must be aggravating that, too."

"You are sharp, Lady. Your reading of us is not far off, but have no fear that we shall break faith with Seakeep." His eyes glinted coldly. "Your fisherman neighbors have thoroughly convinced my warriors of the need for our presence. We are all one in our hatred for sea wolves and black wreckers, and we regard both as our rightful prey."

"Thanks given, Bird Warrior," she said in a voice husky enough to tell him that she had been more than passing concerned on that subject.

"Our oath would have kept us here," he told her stiffly.

"I know, but it is better, infinitely better, that you hold to it willingly."

For several moments, neither spoke. The man found the silence oppressive, but a constraint had fallen on them both, and he did not know how to break it.

Bravery cried then in a voice astonishingly loud for her size, as if to express her disapproval of this change in the atmosphere around her.

He smiled again and once more stroked her.

"If you can bear to part for a while from this little one, I should like for you to ride with me. Although I have studied the gorge several times, I have not actually entered the Square Keep. In that, I have been remiss. It doubtless still has potential as a defensive position usable either for or against our cause."

"I shall have put on riding garments by the time you have ordered our horses to be made ready."

The Falconer scowled as he headed for the stables. It was indeed his business to check out the old keep both for its military potential as he had stated and to see if it might show any sign of use by forces of either the Light or the Shadow, but he knew the way right well without having to call for a guide.

He shook his head angrily. Did he jest with himself? Like it or not, after that meeting in the Bower, he was going to have to keep very close to the Holdruler of Sea-keep. He did not know precisely how far his oath to defend her actually extended, but to his mind, it included shielding her to the best of his ability from the effects of possible encirclement as well as from plain cold steel. To do that, he would have to make sure that she could not be summoned to another such rendezvous while he was at some distant place and unable to reach her.

It was important to him that he succeed. The strength of that importance surprised and troubled him a little, but there was no point in denying that he cared about Seakeep. He did not want to see disaster strike here, and he did not want to see it strike the Holdlady herself, so much so that he had been moved to speak as he had earlier though it went against both his own training and his position here. If Una set up the wrong man as lord in Seakeepdale, the result could be as bad as an invasion. It could be worse.

In a sense, it was a pity he was what he was. Seakeep's last two male rulers had ridden as blank shields...

Tarlach stopped in mid step, then he began to laugh softly. The men of his race had often been accused of taking themselves too seriously by a mile's march, and if he was not the proving of that now, no one ever would be. Was he another Ogin, then, with an opinion of himself so inflated that he imagined his suit would be welcome beyond any question of its success? The idea of his seeking a Holdlord's place was so ludicrous that it was funny only. He could not bring himself to so far dignify it as to chide himself for having entertained it in the first place.

The course they followed was a rugged one, and they had to cross a good part of it on foot leading their animals, but the Daleswoman moved along it with nigh unto the same ease as she would have shown negotiating an overgrown walk.

The pair made reasonably good time, and since there was no need for haste on them, they stopped to rest after traversing a particularly difficult stretch although they had not scheduled a break at that point.

Una sat on the thick heath and breathed deeply of the sweet air, drinking of it as if it were wine.

The man settled himself beside her, as glad for the chance to stop as she was.

"No wonder you were able to endure so well on our march here after training over such ground."

"Am I going too quickly?" she asked contritely. "I know this area so well that I am not very troubled by it, but you are new..."

Tarlach only laughed.

"You forget that every land is new to me. This pace will not try me overmuch."

He looked at her curiously.

"How is it that you have learned to move through a wilderness like this? I have never before seen such ability in a Daleswoman and rarely anything approaching it in one of your men, apart from trained scouts or hunters."

She smiled, pleased but a little embarrassed.

"I was always one for exploring, and my father instilled in me the belief that one who would rule a Dale must be knowledgeable about it and all its workings."

"It was Lord Harvard who had you taught the use of a sword?" he asked curiously.

"Aye. It amused him at first, but I think he was less than pleased later when I proved good with the weapon." She sighed. "To his credit, he let me continue to train with it. He was a firm believer in maintaining a sound body, and he did not consider wielding a needle or strumming a lute an effective substitute for physical exercise."

"That is why you also ride so well?"

"In part, though all Seakeep people have that ability to some extent. Our horses are such that they demand perfection from us. Anything less than skill with them would be a desecration." Her eyes sparkled. "He even insisted that I learn how to swim and sail because those were skills useful to a seabound folk."

Una's brows furrowed.

"He never thought I might have need of battle skills, though, that I might have to rule and lead an imperiled Seakeep."

"Those can be learned," the Falconer told her. "You have the basics already to judge by the way you handled yourself that day we met."

She looked quickly away, biting hard on her lip to keep it from trembling. That was a memory she did not cherish.

The captain's hand just brushed hers.

"Forgive me, Lady," he said gently. "The first slaying is ever harsh even for those of us trained to such work."

She smiled, grateful for what he offered.

"Does it ever truly become easier?"

"Aye, but for most of us never a pleasure. We all know to beware the man who takes joy in bringing death."

Tarlach saw that she was ready to go and, coming to his feet, gave his hand to help raise her. They set out at once and soon fell silent again, devoting their attention to the mountainside rising before them.

They had traveled thus for some two hours longer when the woman came to a halt and silently pointed with her small hand.

The thick forest through which they had been riding ended abruptly at the place in which they were standing. A tall cliff rose up above them, and on its summit stood a most strange ruin, its sturdy walls still strong despite the weight of the years, of the centuries, resting upon them.

It was a keep, square in shape, its stern face broken by a very few narrow slits scarcely large enough to allow a bowman space to aim and discharge his weapon.

Her eyes ran proudly up the forbidding, powerful walls.

"The Square Keep was discovered much as you now see it by the first of my people to reach Seakeep after coming to this land and beginning what we now call our history.

"According to the tale he told later, the spirit of this land came to our lord in a dream in the form of a noble maiden, or came in her own self as some would have, and told him that this place was his and his line's for the taking if he willed to have it, but that if he did so, it would be with the understanding that his blood would be carried through his daughters.

"He did so will, and his heirs—all daughters as foretold since no male child has ever been born to our house—and the heirs of the people who followed him have dwelled here even unto the present day."

"Ravenfield and the other Dales?"

"They were settled at the same time, quietly as ours was, but they were spared even so much contact with those who had ruled High Hallack in the far past. We were all fortunate in that respect. In many other places, men have been seared and their lines cursed by brushes with the Old Ones and their works."

"You read that truly," Tarlach agreed readily after a short silence while he studied the ancient building.

"The keep, can we enter it freely, or is that dangerous? You have said it has been a ruin for a long time."

"Very long, but, aye, we may explore if we use reasonable caution."

The old fortress proved most interesting although they were not actually very long in the exploring of it.

The ground level consisted of one great chamber. The floors above, three of them, were linked to one another and with the first by a narrow, ever-twisting staircase running upwards through the incredibly thick walls. The chambers inside, those they could see, since the woman's fear of venturing too far out onto what little remained of the ancient floors kept them to the outer parts of the keep, were all dank with the barren cold born of centuries of disuse, and dim, for the few narrow windows admitted little light to the interior.

The stairs ended in a slender doorway that brought them out onto the ramparted roof.

The view from this high place was spectacular, but more than that, it showed clearly along its entire length the only passage piercing the high wall of mountains forming Seakeepdale's inland boundary in this area. At the opposite end of this gorge lay Ravenfield.

"I want to scout it out again since we are so near," the warrior told her. "Our falcons' reports are good and complete, but it does a commander no harm to observe a position firsthand now and then."

"Very well, Captain. Let us go. The way down to it is easier than the one we followed coming to the keep."

Chapter 8

Ravenfield's lands differed very little in appearance from Seakeep's, mountains stretching out on every side wild, forbidding, and beautiful. There was more and richer arable soil in Ogin's domain and much less sea-coast, but neither fact could have been ascertained from this place where the two Dales met.

"An invasion could be mounted through here," the mercenary told his companion, "but I would not like to be serving under the commander desperate enough to lead it. A dozen men set where we are standing could annihilate an army trying to reach Seakeep from this gate, and it would require precious little warning for us to place the ambush."

"And if they did pass through here, they would still have to cross all the country between, much of which can be readily defended, and would then be faced with the prospect of taking the road into the valley itself."

He nodded.

"Not an easy task, but any man capable of black wrecking is not one to be underestimated."

The Holdlady gasped suddenly.

"Speak of dark dreams, and one's sleep is shattered!— Do you see that vale to the right on our side of the gorge? A stream runs through its center."

"I see it. There is a rider on the farther bank. One of Ogin's people?"

"Ogin himself unless I am badly mistaken. He has an odd seat although he is a fine horseman."

She watched the Lord of Ravenfield for several seconds.

"He cannot see us. Shall we slip away or confront him?"

"Is there wrong in his being here? He is on your land."

The enforcement of boundary integrity varied greatly from section to section and even from Dale to Dale within a given area.

"None at all," she replied. "Border jealousy is rare here. There is too little to spy out or damage save around the keeps themselves. He could legitimately be seeking animals strayed over here, hunting, or merely enjoying a ride."

"Or he could be reconnoitering the territory even as we," Tarlach said grimly. "He has heard of my company's presence in Seakeep by this time and cannot but have divined the cause of your hiring us. He could be preparing to strike the first blow in the hope of crippling us through surprise."

"Aye, or that."

The Falconer's eyes narrowed for a moment.

"I would meet this neighbor of yours. Let him come upon us, though. We shall see if he chooses to hail us or withdraw unseen."

They slipped away from their vantage point and, mounting their horses, carefully worked their way down so that they would not be observed before they were ready to show themselves.

Both tensed as they at last moved into the open, wondering how the interloper would respond to their presence.

Ogin was not long in spotting them. Either his mission and heart were indeed light, or his nerve and speed of decision were those of a master general, for he called out to them almost at the moment of sighting, or, rather, he called to Una, whom he obviously recognized as readily as she had him.

He was a striking man, Tarlach saw as they drew near him. Of average height, Ravenfield's lord was of a stocky build, all muscle with nothing of fat upon him. His face was square in keeping with his body. Its complexion was ruddy beneath a deep tan. Ogin's eyes were dark under heavy, black brows. His hair was very dark as well with a pronounced wave. It showed the barest hint of thinning at the crown. His features were well formed except for the lips, which were uncommonly narrow, making his mouth seem no more than a hard slit across his face.

He inclined his head toward the woman in a courtly fashion.

"You are far from home, Lady Una," he remarked pleasantly after exchanging greetings with her.

"As are you, my Lord."

"Indeed, and I am a trespasser besides. I was rough-training this colt when I caught sight of a fine hart and gave chase."

"I am sorry to have broken your hunt, then."

He laughed.

"You but spared my pride, Lady. My horse was too inexperienced for such work in this country, and I lost the beast."

The shrewd eyes flickered to the mercenary, who had remained silent and a little behind his companion during the exchange.

"What fear has come upon you, Lady Una, that you ride your own lands with warrior escort? That had never been your wont."

"Only the times, my Lord. Too many have been sent wandering and running whom it would not be well for a woman, or a man either, for that matter, to meet while traveling alone."

He eyed the Falconer's winged helm coldly. It was a chance and perhaps a reckless one, but this meeting just might be made to work for his good.

"A single warrior, my Lady?—That one will be of no use to you. All this solitude is wasted on his sort—

Ogin said no more. He wanted to swallow but dared not lest the needle point of the sword pressing against his throat penetrate the flesh and the windpipe beneath.

"My charge includes defense of my liege's name as well as her person, Lord Cur," Tarlach said with an icy fury in which the other man read the will to his death. "You have made assault on that, and hers is the right of judging your fate."

"Let him go free," Una commanded.

Her own voice, her face, were fixed with disdain.

"This now closes the question that was between us, Ogin of Ravenfield. Your insult to me I shall not forgive, and more unpardonable still is the slur you cast at this warrior who has bound his sword in honorable service to me. You may leave unharmed now, but if he or any of his comrades should take you again on my lands, he may exact whatever penalty his honor demands from you.—Now go, before I alter my command and allow him to loose his blade on you!"

The Holdlord eyed the lowered but still-ready weapon in the mercenary's hand and the falcon already circling his head and made no issue of the matter. His gamble had miscarried and more violently than he might have imagined. He could only count his losses and lay other plans to gain the end he was determined to secure.

Without a word to either of them, he jerked his mount's head around and turned back toward his own domain.

The Falconer glared after him.

"The bastard," he muttered savagely. "I should have cut him down where he sat!"

"He was angry at my having outmaneuvered him by blunting the threat he represented, and perhaps he hoped to drive a wedge between your people and your oath."

"He is a fool as well, then. Because he is void of honor, does he imagine we are all of his ilk? My race must be harshly judged indeed if that is the way we are viewed."

"It would have been an ill deed all the same to fell him for a word."

Tarlach looked closely upon her and saw the tightness of her manner; she had not enjoyed the insult. Like himself, she had reined her anger, aye, and her slashed pride as well. This one was worthy to have command over others, as worthy as was any lord under whom and with whom he had served throughout the years of the war and since.

"The break between you is open now," he observed.

She sighed.

"That was inevitable once he spoke as he did. I suppose he knew my answer anyway, and my determination to resist force, once he learned I had brought blank shields to Seakeep. Our folk made

sure that news spread where it should go as soon as you arrived."

She sighed again.

"It is probably for the best that it happened. Now he will either have to take direct action against us, which he is not likely to do with your company to stand our defense, or else content himself with his present base and level of activity."

The captain straightened.

"Activity which I hope we can soon put to an end," he said quietly; if he had ever doubted it before, he firmly believed now that the dark-eyed Dalesman was fully capable of doing all the people of Seakeep suspected of him. "Let us go, Lady. It is growing late, and I would not make our camp too near this place."

Una nodded. With his hope of obtaining Seakeepdale through marriage shattered, Ogin of Ravenfield might well consider some work of treachery against them.

They rode as fast as the terrain would permit for the rest of that day and well into the evening, concealing their trail with all the cunning bred and trained into the Falconer over the long years when his life had at times depended as much or more upon his ability to move silently and quickly as upon his skill with a sword.

There was only so much that even he could do, however, with their destination and general direction known, and the captain frowned darkly when they finally ceased their run for the night. No camp could be so carefully hidden that it could not be discovered.

"Come," he said suddenly after they had finished eating the portion of their supplies allotted to that evening's meal, "we shall make our bed in the branches above."

Una started but followed him without protest.

He led her some distance from the area they had disturbed before stopping beneath one of the forest giants towering high above them. Using their belts to help them grip and hold the smooth-grained bark, they climbed to the lowest branch and from there to the one above, a limb so broad that they could have walked erect upon it for a full third of its length had they been so daring as to make the attempt.

The woman was glad that her companion was not so inclined, and she was relieved when he indicated that they would not have to go any higher. She gingerly maneuvered herself until her back rested against the solid roundness of the trunk and from this position of relative security rather unhappily surveyed the place where she was to pass the night. She had no fear of heights, but neither did she like to dwell upon the fall she could take with the slightest loss of balance.

If Tarlach was aware of her unease, he gave no sign of it. Moving as cautiously as she had before him, he settled himself beside her.

Una steeled herself and slid a little to her right to give him more room.

His arm closed around her.

"Stay still. There is space for both of us up here. If we take it in turn to watch so that one of us is always

alert, we should have a secure if an uncomfortable night."

She smiled despite herself.

"Ogin willing."

"Ogin willing," he agreed, "and I believe he will leave us in peace to enjoy it."

"That is why we are perched up here like a pair of nestless birds?"

He laughed.

"I live today because I learned early to guard against even unlikely peril, but if I felt we were actually in danger, I would not have permitted us to stop at all."

Una sighed to herself, knowing he was right.

"In any event," she said after a moment's silence, "the first watch is mine."

"Do you think I would allow you to sleep through?" he asked a little sharply.

"Maybe you would, maybe not, but I do know that your senses are better trained than mine and will be needed in the darkness of the late hours and in the strange light of predawn. We should have little to fear during the first part of the night. Ogin had no warriors with him, and he would not attempt to ride after us alone. Even if he had a company waiting fairly close by, he would still have to return for them, then come back again, discover our trail, and follow it. Despite our stopping, he can hardly overtake us very quickly. In fact, I am more concerned about the possibility of some sort of ambush near the tower than I am of any direct pursuit."

The mercenary looked at her with new respect.

"You read it as I do.—Have no fear. We shall be watching for any such trap, although I truly do not think we shall meet with one. The Lord of Ravenfield could not have known we would be riding here, and I do believe that he was traveling alone. You have told me that is the practice here save when it is known that brigands are active in the area, and lack of an escort precludes an impromptu ambush." As if to emphasize his words, he yawned. "For now, my Lady, it is best that we try for whatever rest we can find."

The Falconer did not sleep immediately although the weariness of an active day was full upon him.

He was resting partly against the tree, partly against his companion. He had no fear of falling. The slender arm around him was strong in its support and would hold him should he begin to slip, at least long enough for him to become aware of and avert his danger.

He looked up. Even his night-trained eyes could discern no more than a shadow profile of the Daleswoman, so thick had the darkness become.

That was enough, more than enough.

Tarlach closed his eyes again and allowed his consciousness of her to sweep through him.

The nearness of her was as a flame, lighting every nerve, every instinct, within him. He longed to close that lovely body in his arms, to lie beside and with her...

A fury of self-loathing filled him, and he crushed the unwelcome passion. Was this the best that could be expected of one of his race, then, this rapid capitulation to the forces working on all men, and in a manner utterly degrading to his honor? It was vile beyond any violation of discipline to even think of so using one dependent upon his protection. Una of Seakeep needed him now. She trusted him, and she must never come to suspect the extent to which his supposed strength had failed him.

Chapter 9

Their precautions were either totally successful or quite unnecessary, and the pair reached the round tower unmolested late the following morning. There, they separated, Una to apprise Rufon of all that had befallen them, and Tarlach to make report of this first meeting with their potential enemy to his own comrades.

His tale ended, the captain flung himself into the heavily carved chair Brennan drew up for him, his expression threatening and dark.

"That one merits the hating," he muttered.

His fury against Ogin of Ravenfield had returned in all its force during his recounting of their exchange, and he felt little need to mask it among these men.

"Is the man feeble-brained?" Rorick asked. "What could he have hoped to accomplish by provoking you two like that?"

"Probably precisely what the Holdlady suggested, to force a wedge between us with that slur on her name. It would have been to his benefit to strip her of defense again by driving us off."

Brennan laughed without humor.

"He erred, then. I have rarely seen you with your back up like this."

"I dislike someone trying to manipulate me as if I were a witless child," his commander replied hastily. "How do you accept it?"

"None of us care for insult. I think Ogin of Ravenfield may discover us rather more interested in the fight than he might otherwise have found us if it comes to that now."

"Aye, and he recognizes his mistake. Be assured of that. He does not strike me as one who habitually so fouls his tactics, either." He shook his head. "I pity anyone giving him cause to vent his spleen at the moment."

"What is your judgment of him?" Brennan questioned. "Apart from your dislike of him, how would you class him as an opponent?"

Tarlach paused, choosing his words carefully.

"Intelligent, capable, willful and quick of temper but, I think, usually in better command of himself than he showed us—a dangerous man and, I believe, one with the ability to induce others of his ilk to fight well for his sake. He is not an enemy we dare ignore."

"You believe that Seakeep does have cause to fear him, then?"

He nodded.

"I do, and after our meeting yesterday, that fear may not be very far from being confirmed in action."

His lieutenant was frowning.

"One thing I do not understand. We have heard the explanation of how he comes to have a strong and able garrison when those of his neighbors are all much reduced, but a crew capable of black wrecking is another matter. The Dalesfolk here and the admittedly few outsiders making use of the bay whom we have observed all seem to be honest, human people, right poor material for such work even if they were compelled by force to undertake it."

"Such can be hired. Ogin has left his Dale on occasion since he gained possession of it with no explanation of his destination given to his neighbors. He could well have been gathering the renegades he required to him and settling them in his chosen lair. The Ravenfield folk would by and large have been kept ignorant of their presence and purpose, and any happening to learn about them would have been slain outright or silenced by terror."

Tarlach went to the long table which served the mercenaries as a desk and spread a map on its ample surface. Ogin's wrecker activities were the most hateful of his presumed offenses, but they must be relegated to a secondary position in their regard for the moment; it was his possible role as an invader to which they must now address their attention.

The Falconer company was still together, clustered around their officers and deep in discussion, when Rufon entered the barracks.

Tarlach gave him a nod of greeting and looked inquisitively at him. The veteran had assumed the role of liaison between the clannish mercenaries and those people of Seakeep needing to deal with them, and he thought that the Dalesman might be acting as Una's messenger now. Although her position gave her the right to do so, she had never yet intruded upon them in their quarters.

That assumption proved accurate, and he soon found himself in the great hall. Una was standing near its center, alone for the moment, a pillar of quiet set amidst a scene of uncommon activity.

The man's eyes narrowed. There was no panic, but this bustle went well beyond the normal press of activity usually to be found here. That seemed to bespeak some sort of trouble.

He was even more convinced that something was seriously amiss when he reached her side a few moments later and saw the grave cast of her features.

"What is wrong, my Lady?"

The green of her eyes seemed to deepen as they fixed on him.

"Are Falconers permitted to do work not related to battle?"

"What work?" Tarlach asked in surprise.

"A storm comes, one of the sea's mighty gales, though it is very early in the season for those, and the most of our harvest is still in stacks upon the fields. If we cannot bring it in before that tempest strikes, our animals will feel hunger's lash this winter."

"You wish us to help you draw it in?"

"Aye, if you would not find the task demeaning. Without your help, a good part of the crop is certain to be lost."

"We are not like those lords who think the labors supporting their domains are somehow beneath them, Lady, and we, too, love our animals, though they be less fine than yours; we have no wish to see them hungry. The help you want is yours, but it shall come from only half our number, the others I shall have to hold in reserve for our defense."

"Ogin can read the signs as well as we. He will not mount an attack now."

"Not if he is still within his keep, perhaps, or very near to it, but if I were he and already well en route, I would press my assault, hoping to come upon my enemies while they were laboring in their fields and unprepared for treachery and then shelter my army in the captured tower or in the cottages and outbuildings if that still held out when the gale struck."

"You are right as always in these matters," the woman conceded with admiration, but then she shuddered. "How terrible your life must be for your mind to ever have to flow to war and the work of death."

"My life is a blank shield's, and my thoughtways are a major reason for your having hired my sword."

"Aye, and yet I am sorry you have not known more of peace."

The man smiled.

"We, too, have our times of quietness. If that were not so, I should hardly be able to appreciate, much less enjoy as I do, all I have found here. It is just that other peoples rarely see us in such moments. They are not likely to come often during our periods of service with you."

The grey eyes shadowed.

"This commission has been an exception to that, and soon even Seakeep may become prey to violence and hate..."

"Perhaps the Amber Lady will spare us that," Una said quickly, "or the Horned Lord, war being his province."

He threw the mood from him.

"Maybe they shall, but they mean to test us all the same in another way if your reading of the weather is sound.— Let us be away, my Lady, and see to this work of harvesting."

The mercenaries labored all that afternoon and evening beside the Dalespeople, racing the ominously darkening sky and rising wind to bring what was an unusually rich harvest under cover before it could all be swept away.

Every cart was pressed into service and every available beast, horse, mule, ox, and ass. Many drew the wagons with their loads of saved hay and oats. Others slung the great stacks in, hauling them out of the fields by rope without the aid of any vehicle.

Workers stationed in the barns and sheds piked each load inside, straining to have one in its place before the next was delivered.

Although ever threatening in its aspect, the weather continued to hold throughout the afternoon and evening, and when Tarlach at last stood at the window of his chamber which gave him the best view of the cultivated area, it was to look upon gratifyingly empty meadows, half of which would still be full had it not been for the aid furnished by his command.

Night was nearly upon the world, for the black clouds choking all the sky gave little room for an extended twilight, but the waning sun still provided enough illumination to reveal the tight patchwork of Seakeep's fields.

The greater number and also the smallest were the gardens bearing the Dale's fruits and vegetables. These had not been emptied of their crops, which had not been ready for harvesting even had there been time to take them in.

Such tiny fields, he thought, and now more than ever, he appreciated the wisdom of those who had made them thus, minute plots surrounded by high, firm stone ditches which would protect the crops growing within from the gale's anger and hold the carefully tended soil in its place despite heavy rains and steep slope. So it had proved since the settling of Seakeepdale, and so, he believed and hoped, it would prove tonight.

He shivered. The big room was cold despite the roaring fire. After setting the siege shutters firmly in place over each of the windows and securing them, he returned to the inner portion of his quarters and prepared himself for bed. There would be no point and less pleasure in remaining up very much longer this night.

Chapter 10

The rain began soon after he had retired but remained no more than a particularly heavy downpour for a long time. Then, two hours after midnight, such a blast of wind struck the tower that the warrior snapped awake, grasping the sword which was never beyond the reach of his hand.

Even as he took hold of it, he released it once more, recognizing the source of the disturbance.

The man rose quickly and went to the screened window nearest him. He opened the observer's port set into the shutter but could see nothing beyond save a seemingly infinite blackness.

His eyes shut as a searingly brilliant flash of white light filled all the world around him, and he hastily closed the tiny port once more lest he be soaked by the cascade of rain forcing its way through the small opening.

Tarlach went back to his bed. He did not return to sleep, for the hammering of the gale-driven torrent, the almost continuous lashing of the lightning, and the exploding thunder were overwhelming in their violence and would not be dismissed from his awareness. Lying there, listening to the tempest's fury, the mercenary commander did not believe he was alone tonight in welcoming the thick stone walls around him.

He must have dozed at some point, for when awareness again returned to him, it was to find Storm Challenger tugging at his hand impatiently and none too gently with his cruelly sharp bill.

Tarlach heard it then, a knock scarcely audible against the chaos raging outside.

He sprang from his bed. The light from the still-flickering fire was sufficient for his needs, and he did not bother to reach for a candle. Since the war bird told of no danger but rather pushed him to action, though without explanation, he hastened to the door and drew it open.

Una. She was fully clad in the garments she had worn before retiring and was holding a candle, whose flame danced wildly despite the shelter she tried to give it with her cupped hand. Her eyes were huge and her face too white for its pallor to be explained by the hour and dim light. He saw that Bravery was clinging to her sleeve.

The Falconer ushered her inside, carefully closing the door behind her.

"My Lady, what has happened?" He did not even think to insult her by asking if it was the storm that was troubling her.

"She came to me. My sister. The other Una."

He knew that he whitened himself. Although the room was cold and he was bare before her to the waist, he forgot his intention of drawing his cloak around himself.

"Here?" he whispered.

She nodded.

"Aye. She said she actually has the freedom of any of the Old Places."

He led her to one of the two chairs in the chamber.

"What did she want?"

Una drew a deep breath to steady herself.

"I had remained up to make record of our harvest and to attend to some other business I had let lapse a while and was about to prepare for bed—

"You were alone?"

She nodded.

"Except for Bravery. I often work late and always dismiss my waitingwoman when I do."

"She came then?"

"Aye, and in haste. She had all but stepped from her passage before I was aware of its opening. Once here, she quickly told me the purpose of her visit, first describing her nature and then confirming what many have come to believe about this world, that the forces of Light and true Dark battled fiercely here at one time and that at long last, after awesome destruction, the forces of Light partially conquered, not totally but securing supremacy enough to impose the balance of life once more and to put checks upon those many servants and works of Shadow and Dark which could not be utterly overcome."

"This other Una, what was her role in that war?"

"None save that of a distant victim." She shivered, and not from the chill. "You were right about her in a sense. She is me, or, rather, she is what I would have been had the Shadow never found entrance into this world, but she is not whole. She has no actual substance and no real place in this time or any other time."

Una bit down on her lip, fighting to retain hold on her composure before this man whom she feared would have small patience with any display of weakness or hysteria, although it was pity, grief, and not fear that was chiefly driving her.

"She was content to remain as she was and to make herself accept that role and—and just hope that better might eventually come, but conditions around us have changed to the point that she felt she could no longer do so. The old balance has been troubled. Not only in High Hallack but throughout all this world, Power has been wielded and forces awakened which have long slept, to such an extent that she says the time left to all of us might well be short, so short that she feared if she was ever to have life, real human life, she was going to have to claim it at once."

She saw Tarlach stiffen, as if he knew what she was about to say and rejected it utterly.

"Una wished to meld her spirit with mine so that she would become part of me and I of her—"

"No!"

The woman shook her head impatiently, silencing him.

"It would mean the life she so craved, and I should have knowledge and the key to the Power she says lies within me."

"No!—Una, you did not..."

His ringers bore into her shoulders so that she winced although she would not permit herself to cry out. He seemed scarcely to notice but did ease the pressure of his grasp.

"Una, what answer did you make her?"

The Holdruler's head lowered.

"I wanted to grant her wish. She pleaded and reasoned so passionately, but I was afraid. Something deep within myself rebelled against the very thought of what she required of me. I battled myself and my selfishness, but I could not bring myself to agree."

"Bravery struck then. With her mind and all the strength of her body, she tried to force me out of that room and here to you. That was when I recalled my promise to you, and I told Una that I could make no such decision in a moment, based only on emotion and excitement, that I must weigh it in all its aspects when my mind was cooler and more open to reason.

"She grew angry, naming me a coward and the falsest of friends, then told me to stay as I am and face life and what it might throw at me with the weapons I might have had forever tight sheathed. After that, she—she flung herself into her passage and vanished."

"The Horned Lord be praised," he whispered.

Tarlach realized his hands were shaking and hastily withdrew them. He had been blind, he thought dully, intentionally blind, but this infinite peril had stripped away that comfortable denial. He knew now what Una of Seakeep was to him. He did not merely long to satisfy himself with that beautiful body. He wanted the woman for his companion, to cherish and guard and grow ever closer to her for the whole that remained to him of life and to center that life around her.

"Una, that offer was of the Dark. Had you yielded, you would have been lost, and so, too, would your... sister."

"No! She is not—

"Herself, no, but the Shadow's ways can be seductive. Think what she suggested. Was this not the fate that befell our women in those ancient days? They, too, became, not individuals any longer, but extensions of another." He paused lest his voice begin to tremble and betray him. "Her purpose for asking this does not matter. Each creature comes into being unique. Anything which destroys that individuality, anything which eliminates or adulterates mind or will or spirit, strikes at the very basis of life, at its greatest glory, its greatest strength, its very core. Your loyalty and generosity nigh unto delivered both of you into a trap which neither of you deserved or devised."

"Neither of us? Do you really believe that after what you have just said?"

"If you are somehow one, then I cannot accept that she would intentionally have wrought that black evil."

"Thanks given for that," Una said softly. She looked up at him. "I owe more by far than my life to your good sense and to Bravery's."

"Do not forget your own. That core within you which protested your granting her plea was no cowardice, Lady."

"Perhaps not, though it was not reason, either.—Do you think she was right? About the old balances being disrupted and our having maybe only a little time left? You have had more experience with Power than I, having lost so much because of its use and even fighting beside the Were Riders if what Rufon tells me is true."

"It is true," he replied stiffly. "As for the rest, I do not know, Lady. That vast amounts of Power have been unleashed and old forces awakened, aye, to that I can testify, but to say more..." He shrugged. "No man has the reading of the future."

"Perhaps that is to our good."

The Daleswoman came to her feet.

"I have troubled you long enough, Bird Warrior, but I felt it was your right to know all this."

"My name is Tarlach," he said wearily, as if in defeat.

He scowled at the door.

"If you were Holdlord, I would not permit you to go from this chamber tonight after what you have already endured in your own."

"I cannot remain," Una told him softly.

Nor could she. Even here, tongues wagged fast and some minds ever ran in a kennel. A lord might do much not permitted a woman without loss of his people's respect, and if he did alienate himself from their ways to the point that he was bereft of that, he could usually still retain his power to command them. With Una, it was different. She needs must keep her name unsullied, or her authority would be seriously compromised, a risk she durst not take at a time when Seakeepdale most needed to stand solidly behind its leader.

His own position would not admit of scandal either. His Falconers would not smile at such a rumor as a company of another sort would do, and explanation at this point would do him more ill than good. The fact that he had concealed their first encounter with that other Una would have to be revealed, and that deception would of a certainty be most harshly judged.

"Leave your door ajar. Between them, Storm Challenger and Bravery should be able to alert me if she makes another attempt to reach you."

"You believe Una might try to use force to compel me?"

"Hopefully not, but the despair of deep disappointment has driven many a one to deeds not normally within their nature, for good and for ill.—Have you an amulet of Gunnora?"

"I do, a gifting from my mother."

"Wear it, then, if you do not have it about you now. I do not know what the Lady could or would be willing to do for you since your spirit sister is not herself of the Dark, but we cannot afford to forgo any defense."

"I have it on."

"Good."

He looked at her. She seemed so slight and vulnerable in the flickering light that he wanted only to take her into his arms to shield and comfort her.

His fingers reached out and gently brushed her cheek before dropping away again.

"For your trust, thanks given, Una of Seakeep. I shall prove worthy of it, if I must spend the life of my very soul to see you safe."

Chapter 11

All through the following day—if the dull twilight permitted by the massive clouds could be so termed—the great storm raged and then through the night after it.

The Falconer captain spent much of his time watching it while the dim light held. The uncontrolled and uncontrollable violence of it fascinated, awed, him and also frightened him a little, whatever the security of his refuge. There was something in this tempest which reached the very core of him, touched in him some primal spark, the ember of a time when there had been no shelter save a covering of hides or brush or, at best, a cave discovered more by chance than by foreknowledge.

It was the enraged ocean which kept drawing him and holding him to his window. *He* had seen storm-flung waves, great waves, before, but never had he imagined to find in Seakeep's harbor the like of those boiling there now.

The usually peaceful little bay was utterly transformed. It looked larger, for the two arms of land partially enfolding it were submerged at their tips, although both places were of an elevation which normally kept them visible during the year's highest tides even when reinforced by a gale of considerable strength.

The ravening waters had rushed far inland as well, covering most of the lower pastures. So high did they come at one point that he began to fear for the cottages set nearest the beach. The people were still within them if the lights told true, and there could be no thought of flight to higher ground now. The wind would almost certainly sweep anyone attempting that.

The dwellings and the planted fields around them remained inviolate, however, further testimony to the knowledge and foresight of those who had originally chosen the sites for them. The ocean threatened, she took the rough lands below, but Seakeepdale's homes and gardens were spared.

Tarlach slept soundly that night and would probably have slept well into the next day had something not caused him to come full awake shortly after the eight hour.

He lay still, trying to discover in his waking state what had roused him. There was no sensation of danger, and no warning of anything amiss from Storm Challenger...

There was a change, a lessening, in the sound of the tempest, he realized suddenly. The wind no longer pummeled the round tower so wildly. He had grown accustomed to its scream over the past hours, and this alteration in its force was more than sufficient to have thus activated his warrior's senses.

The Falconer dressed rather slowly and then cautiously opened the observer's port at which he was wont to stand.

The storm was indeed much reduced, although it was still a power against which no sane man would care to pit himself. Wind and rain were both at the level of a more average gale, and the waters had receded almost to the beach once more. The spurs on either side of the bay were nearly completely exposed now, with only their very edges and outlying rocks still submerged.

The ocean retained her anger, however, and if the breakers crashing onto the shore were no longer so awesomely high, they remained fully as deadly to any mortal forced into joining battle with them.

The man stiffened then and, throwing back the shields, leaned forward as far as possible into the narrow window, oblivious of the rain clawing at him through the uncovered slit.

There was a vessel out there, a merchantman by the look of her, and it required no sailor's eye to see that she was in serious trouble. One mast was broken, shattered approximately at its center. The ship listed sharply, and she rode ominously low in the water so that her deck was almost constantly awash. Even at this distance, he could see that her movements were sluggish, as if she were heavy with water and unable to respond well to the commands of those trying to control her.

All this flashed upon his mind in an instant, as did the knowledge that, conditions being what they were, it was very unlikely that any other had seen her.

Tarlach raced from his chamber and, calling to the ever-present sentries, raised the alarm within the tower.

The demands and terrors of the ocean were bred into the people of this seagirt Dale, as much a part of them as the limbs which bore them up or with which they performed their lives' work, and word of the imperiled craft had been carried throughout the valley within minutes of the captain's having sighted her, the storm notwithstanding.

There was little anyone could do. The boats were ready and their crews beside them, but they could not be launched. They might have braved the seas farther out in the troubled bay, but nothing could pass the churning, crushing madness of the breakers. It was not even possible to light a signal fire or beacon; the drenching rain smothered every effort before the fuel could begin to take light.

The Falconer officers joined Una and Rufon in her office chamber, watching the agony of the broken vessel, each in agony himself because of his helplessness.

"She is trying to make the harbor," the Dalesman said at last with a kind of deadly calm, "but her master does not know this coast. She is dangerously near the cliffs as it is, and if she continues on her present course, she will surely ground on the north spur or on one of its outriders. Once that happens, she is lost and her crew with her; there is no way of getting a boat out to her to take off any survivors."

That grim prediction proved to be all too accurate. The merchantman limped toward the bay, toward the un-guessed peril of the submerged spit.

Her captain was wise in the ways of coastlines, or else he sensed something amiss, for he strove to bring his vessel farther out and did, indeed, clear the spit itself. The threatened ship passed into the very heart of the miniature islets and rocks surrounding the landmass, however, and within minutes of doing so, the inevitable occurred. She grounded with a crash rendered inaudible by the roar of wind and waves and a jolt which rent the very souls of the watchers.

She was ripped completely open. Scarcely had the shock of striking left her than her bow rose into the air, and she settled stern first into the furious ocean.

The very rock which had doomed their ship gave added moments of life to those of the crew fortunate enough to have been on deck and somewhat forward at the moment of impact. It remained within the tear it had made and so wedged itself that it held the prow a little above the level of the water. To this clung some fifteen hapless sailors.

Theirs was not a comfortable refuge or a secure one. The prow was no great distance above the ocean at its highest point, and every few minutes a huge sea would wash over it, completely covering it for the instant of its passing. Only the fact that, compelling though they were, these were still rollers and not yet full breakers, preserved the castaways at least temporarily, but at best their respite would be short. Hands bruised and numbed by cold and strain would gradually weaken, and their hold on the slippery, steeply inclined wreck must eventually break.

It took time, longer than might have been expected but that the mariners realized they were very near to tower and cottages and hoped against the stark witness of the tempest that help would somehow reach them. An hour passed without visible change, then a massive wave covered the prow, and when it was once more clear to view, three of them had vanished. An hour's quarter later, another five were taken.

Tarlach turned away from the window.

"They are not physically so very far from land. If a rope were carried to them, they should be able to climb along it to safety."

"Aye," responded Rorick, "but how is it to reach them? The distance is too great for us to throw it out even if the wind were not against us."

"A properly directed dive from the cliff would take a man beyond the white water. He would have to be a strong swimmer, but granting that, he should be able to make the wreck."

Una paled at the suggestion.

"That part of the sea is filled with obstacles. No one would dive into it from there even in the calmest weather when the ocean herself presented little danger. A would-be rescuer stands nearly as much chance of being broken against some submerged rock..."

"It is the risk of one life against the certain loss of many, Lady," Tarlach replied quietly.

Una nodded, although she knew who the swimmer would have to be.

"Tell us your plan, Captain."

"It is simple enough. You are right in stating that only by purest chance could anyone survive a leap from the crest of the cliff, and even more difficult, more impossible, would be a successful climb back up to it along a rope by already exhausted men, yet only thus can escape from the wreck be accomplished.

"See that ledge there, the broad one about a third of the distance from the water? There is a fairly easy ascent to it from the fields above the beach, and men could be stationed there to assist the survivors."

His companions nodded.

"I shall make my jump from the smaller one immediately above it. The rope can be fastened to some point there so that the castaways need but drop into your peoples' arms once they are over land and not be forced to attempt any scaling of a final rocky lip."

"It is as good a scheme as can be devised," Brennan agreed reluctantly, "yet I would not have you be the one to make the attempt."

"The plan is mine, and I am the strongest of our company in the water." He glanced at the Holdruler. "It is nearly certain that none of your folk could be considered, Lady. The most are yet too young, their adult powers undeveloped."

To that, she was forced to yield, though it tore her to the depth of her soul to do so. She lacked the strength of muscle to take this on herself, and she knew that Tarlach's reading of her people was accurate. Indeed, there were few of them who might have made the attempt even had that not been the case. In accordance with the superstition shared almost universally by fisherfolk, most of Seakeep's inhabitants were unable to swim. As for his taking the task upon himself, since his own comrades accepted this as Tarlach's role, she could not gainsay him.

Chapter 12

Each moment might bring disaster to some or all of the desperate mariners still clinging to the prow, and the captain made no delay. Leaving his mount at the base of the cliff, he ascended the rough but easily negotiable natural path to the ledge below that from which he would soon leap and from there clambered the ten remaining feet to the one above.

This last was not an easy climb, and he was breathing heavily by the time he reached his goal.

He did not pause, that notwithstanding, but cast off his cloak as soon as he had gained the level place. He retained the single, tightly fitting garment he wore beneath it. Fashioned in one piece of supple leather and covering all his body, it would keep the cold from him and should provide some protection as well from the tearing of the obstacles with which he would inevitably meet.

The Falconer made fast the light, strong rope he had carried with him to a tall pinnacle of stone so perfect in shape and width that he might have imagined it had been formed specifically for this purpose had its surface been less rough. As it was, he was forced to tie his line carefully so that it would not rub and fray against a sharp ridge running nearly its full length.

The free end he bound about his waist, fastening it with a knot that would resist pressure but would rip easily when he willed that it do so.

There was a movement below, and he bent to help Una over the edge and onto the ledge.

She rose to her feet with his assistance and drew the hood of her short cape over her hair although she was well soaked. He recalled absently how she disliked the feel of rain running down the back of her neck.

He saw with some concern that she had Storm Challenger with her, huddled beneath the cape and grasping her left arm tightly lest the wind sweep him despite the protection she was affording him. Although most of the mercenary company had gathered to watch their commander's attempt, their falcons had remained within the tower, away from the frigid rain and the violence of the gale, which still had more than enough power in its higher gusts to fling one of the birds against the cliff or outward and down into the ocean.

He realized in the same moment that the Daleswoman fully appreciated the danger and had his comrade well secured, and his worry eased. Una of Seakeep could be trusted to see that no harm befell the winged warrior.

"You should not have come here," he chided. "You would both have better shelter below."

"We wanted to wish you fortune's blessing," she said simply.

She also wanted to be with him as he went into what might well be his death, but that one could not say to a man such as this.

Perhaps she might not be able to speak what lay in her heart, but Tarlach was glad of her presence. The Lady of Seakeep realized this and knew she had done rightly in coming to him.

He closed her marvelously tiny hand in his and held it a moment while he studied the foaming madness below.

It was so far, he thought, so desperately far to the quieter water beyond. His daring plan did not seem very feasible now, when he looked over his proposed route from this high vantage that was to be its beginning.

Feasible or nay, he must start, or none of those poor devils out there would see the sun rise on the morrow. Rise? They would not be alive to watch it go down.

He was frightened, aye, but his fear was neither unnatural nor excessive, and he made no attempt to disown it within himself. No reasoning man could put his life in peril unmoved, and it was not any sword that he faced but all the might of an enraged ocean.

Tarlach straightened. She was a worthy foe, and it was a worthy death he would meet if that was to be his fate.

He looked swiftly upon the woman beside him, and a pang of loss tore him as even his fear could not.

He released her hand, and, turning from her, he made his leap into the maelstrom below.

For all its suddenness, the dive was excellently executed, and the man cut the water cleanly in the place where he had intended to put himself.

He went deep before braking his descent and leveling off. The seas were rough and very strong even out here beyond the white line of the breakers, and he thought it best to remain as much as possible beneath them. He had another reason, too, for keeping well below the surface. Tarlach had guessed that the water beating against the cliffs with such awesome fury must retain some of its power in its return to the outer body of the ocean. By catching that undertow, availing himself of its strength, he should be able to counter in a great part the forces seeking to drive him back against the shore.

So it proved, and he rode the submerged current as long as possible, leaving it to face the madness on the surface only when his lungs' demand for air became too incessant.

The Falconer took care not to penetrate the backwash too deeply, however. There were places where such hidden streams were so strong that a man becoming trapped within one could neither rise nor descend out of its grasp; he was unwilling to chance that it might be thus here.

He was a good swimmer both on the surface and under water, but this was no light task he had taken upon himself, and his progress was slow and painfully won.

Although the rain had lessened considerably, the storm clouds from which it fell allowed precious little light through to pierce the troubled waters, and visibility was poor, almost nonexistent. Only the sightings he was able to take when surfacing to breathe gave him any real warning of close obstacles, and it was the brief glimpses he managed to catch of his goal during those moments coupled with a highly developed sense of direction which kept him on course.

The rope he carried weighed upon him and increased the drag of the water, and it was in constant danger of snarling. He had foreseen this peril and bore the slowly unwinding coil strapped to his chest rather than on his back to keep better control over its release, but there was little he could do to protect the ever-lengthening line trailing behind him. He tried to regulate the speed at which he loosed it, but beyond that he could only pray that it did not become entangled before it lifted out of the sea.

His exertions were such that the chill of the water did not affect him very greatly, but he was tiring rapidly, and the injuries he had already taken made him wary in his swimming, slowing him still further.

Whatever his care, Tarlach could not avoid all of the jagged rocks littering this section of water. His slow pace helped, for he was able to alter his course fairly readily in the few seconds given him after sighting each fist of stone, enabling him to avoid sustaining serious damage, but, despite that mobility and the considerable protection afforded him by his leather clothing, his near blindness while submerged and the strong and sometimes strange action of the sea caused him to hit hard several times, and soon his body, particularly his shoulders and arms, was heavily bruised and bloodied.

The mercenary ignored his injuries. They were not significant individually or in total. It was exhaustion that he had to fear.

The wreck was still a goodly distance away, and he was well-nigh spent. There was a very real danger that he would grow so weary with battling storm and water that his battered limbs would cease to obey his will.

Time passed. The wreck was near now, perceptibly nearer than it had been when he had last surfaced. That fact gave him new courage, but the increased confidence it provided, or, perhaps, a weariness past full control—he himself would never know which—rendered him careless. His course altered unknown to him during his next dive, and he rose to find himself in the white water fringing the outmost face of a minute island.

A gauntlet of wind lashed him, and with it came a wave as angry and crushing as was possible in a sea not yet a true breaker.

Before Tarlach could move to avert his peril, he was lifted high and slammed against the stone wall with a force that drove the breath from him.

He must have lost consciousness momentarily, for when he was next aware of himself, he was under water and choking on the bitter liquid he had begun to swallow and draw into his lungs.

Struggling against the blackness still threatening to engulf his mind, the mercenary fought his way to the surface, in the end literally pulling himself up the face of the rock.

Dazed as he was and despite the burning agony in his chest, he forced himself to move diagonally instead of directly upward so that, when he broke through at last, it was on the lee of the islet that he found himself. The shelter there was poor enough, but it was something, and the jagged stone gave him a place

to which he could cling for a short while until he was again able to swim, or else until he could ready himself to die.

He pressed tightly against the wet surface, not caring that the viciously sharp barnacles further ripped his already rent garment and cut into his tormented flesh with each rise and fall of the sea around him.

It was his left arm that held him in place. The right dangled uselessly by his side. He did not know whether it was shattered or merely numbed by the shock of the impact. As of yet, he felt no pain, although he could see that he was bleeding heavily from a deep tear in the shoulder.

If that or the arm beneath it was broken, he thought, he was slain. He would not be able to reach the wreck as he now was, much less make the crossing back to the cliff. Even with the lesser injuries he could now perceive, he doubted he would be able to do so.

That made no difference for the immediate moment. He was too dazed to do more than cling to his place and hope that his senses would soon right themselves.

He shook his head violently in an effort to clear away some of the blood pouring from a scalp wound just above the temple, then closed his eyes. He had succeeded only in increasing its flow and had made himself desperately ill besides.

Gradually, the sharpness returned to his mind, and the crippling sickness passed from him. He gingerly tried the damaged arm and found that he could use it again.

Tarlach impatiently wiped some of the blood from his face and away from his eyes. It was still coming, but only in a trickle now, and he did not think the injury would give him further trouble. Such cuts always bled freely, even the most superficial of them.

The Falconer looked for and located the wreck. It was very near. He knew that he should not have to dive more than a couple or three more times before reaching it.

The rope was his most immediate concern. It had saved him by catching on this rock in such a manner as to prevent his sinking while stunned or being carried back in the direction from which he had come, but if it were too badly entangled or if it were frayed, he might yet be lost and those he sought to save with him.

Thought of them drove the last clouds from Tarlach's mind. He released his hold and, diving, began working his way back along the line.

Fortune had been kind. The rope had embraced the rock in one clean loop, which he easily freed.

That done, the man made for his goal. The brief pause—only a few minutes had actually passed since the accident—had served him well. It was not sufficient to restore him completely, of course, but the distance he still had to cross was short, and the rest he had taken was enough to carry him over it. He dove twice and on rising the second time found himself within an arm's length of the dead vessel.

He reached the prow, tried to clamber upon it, but the wet, slippery wood and steep incline defeated him, and he could not have scaled it without the aid of those already clinging there.

Tarlach had barely reached their side when a shout warned him to take hold. Almost in that moment, a huge swell rolled over the wreck. He felt the wrenching force of it and shuddered, realizing what the

battered sailors around him had endured this day.

Incredibly, no more of them had been taken since the eight had been swept, but, then, he had not actually been long in coming to them, and hope had renewed the strength and holding power of the survivors, two of whom, he saw with a numbed sense of shock, were females. They had seen him and knew no man would make such an effort unless he bore with him the means of their salvation.

They had no time to cast away, however, and he described his plan even as he made fast the rope, shouting to make himself heard by all.

The mariners were grim-faced when he finished speaking, for the road he proposed would have daunted men rested and full in strength, but these were Sulcar, bred to the demands of the sea. This was their only hope of safety, and so they steeled themselves to take it. When the mercenary refused their offer to let him go before them, the first woman grasped the suddenly fragile-looking line and began moving hand-over-hand along it.

Chapter 13

Una watched Tarlach's progress in an agony of suspense, never taking her eyes from him when he was visible above the waves, following his progress when he was not by watching the strand of rope ever rising out of the water behind him.

Because he was submerged when they occurred, she was spared the sight and the knowledge of most of the accidents which befell him, but the last she witnessed in all its terror.

The Falconer himself was stunned by the impact and was unaware of much that was happening to him in that instant, but she who saw the manner in which he was cast against the stone fang thought that his body must be utterly shattered. When he slipped beneath the water, she believed to the depths of her heart that it was never to rise again.

The woman could scarcely credit the evidence of her eyes when he clawed his way to the surface, but even her joy could not blind her to the fact that he was hurt, perhaps seriously hurt. He was holding to that rock in a way which told that he was incapable of doing more to help himself.

The man's strength or, she amended, his courage, was astonishingly resilient, however, and he dove again an incredibly few minutes later.

There were no further mishaps, and he quickly reached and clambered up the side of the dead ship—only to find another danger confronting him.

Fear mounted in her as each succeeding wave swept over the prow. Distance prevented her from observing the extent of the captain's injuries, but Una had witnessed his failure to scale the wreck unaided, and she could see that one of the survivors was helping to hold him in his place, as if the fastening of the rope had taken the last of his strength.

She shuddered. Would he be able to cross when the time came, or would he have to remain where he was, himself a sacrifice to the storm from which he had saved the others?

The first of the mariners was crossing now, moving slowly, painfully, up the rope.

It was a hard, agonizing task, but the work of a seafarer is of a kind that builds solid muscle, and at last she came to the ledge below Una and dropped off into the arms of those waiting there to receive her.

A cheer went up from the Dalesfolk which Una imagined was echoed by the survivors waiting their turn on the wreck out in the bay, although, of course, no such sound could reach her.

The second sailor had begun his crossing, but she felt sure of his safety, and her attention stayed more with Tarlach than with him. Was it but her hope, or did the mercenary appear to be taking more of his own weight?

By the time the third man had reached the ledge, she saw that this was indeed so and relaxed a little for the first time since he had parted from her.

Seakeep's lady stiffened suddenly. The fourth man was about a quarter of the way across. He appeared to be having no more difficulty than any of the others, and yet something seemed amiss to her. More than amiss. Something was dreadfully wrong.

She frowned and forced herself to concentrate on the scene before her, trying to discover what was giving rise to this sense of alarm.

The rope! There was a strangeness in its motion, an added violence in each jerk that it gave.

Desperately, her eyes ran its length from the wrecked merchantman to the place where it was bound to the ledge.

Una grew pale as death. The line had slipped, not far, but enough that it was now in contact with the axe-sharp ridge of stone. With every motion made by that unsuspecting seaman out there, another few strands parted. Only moments remained before his support was entirely severed.

She called out to those below her but knew she had not made herself heard.

What could she do? She doubted she could so much as reach the lower ledge before the rope went.

It was snapping!

With the speed of desperation, she leaped and caught hold of it. The break was in the coil, and enough length remained that a man might have refastened it or at least have drawn it about the pillar so that the stone would have taken the most of the mariner's weight.

Una's strength was not sufficient for that. She twisted the line about each of her hands, then cast her arms around the rock, thus completing the loop with her own body, in the very moment that the rope finally parted.

She screamed as it jerked tight on her hands. The pain was incredible, unbearable, yet she must endure it or see the rest of those people die, see Tarlach die and make his death a nearly useless gesture.

The Daleswoman gave fervent thanks that she had been given both the foresight to seek the support of the rock and the time in which to claim it. She could not have held this weight unaided and would only have been drawn off the cliff herself had she attempted to do so.

She pressed her forehead against the pillar, sobbing in her agony, but she only wound the punishing rope the more tightly around her crushed hands.

She was to have no respite. Una had hoped to secure the line properly when the man crossing it reached safety, but the next had begun to move before he dropped from it. She must remain as she was until the last was over.

She had to stay conscious as well, and so she battled furiously against the blackness which would have brought her the ease of oblivion.

It went on and on, a seeming eternity of crushing, wrenching torment, then, abruptly, the pressure left her. She looking up, half dazed, to see the tall figure of a Falconer keeping tight hold upon the rope. Another worked feverishly to secure it to the stone once more.

The very release from pain was a torture in itself, as was the sudden rush of returning circulation, and the woman wept bitterly although it shamed her to do so. Because she keenly felt that shame, she fought herself until she once more had herself in full command.

The mercenaries finished their work and came to her. The nearest she recognized as their lieutenant and the other as the one second to him.

Brennan knelt beside her and cradled her bruised hands in his own with a gentleness which seemed foreign to a man of this stern race.

"Rest, Lady," he told her. "Rest easy. You have given them their lives, the Horned Lord and their own strength willing."

"How did you know?" she managed to gasp through the haze of her pain.

"The captain's falcon. He had to wait until there was enough of a lull in the wind to permit him to come to us, but fortunately, he was not delayed too long.—He waits our commander's return below," he added, forestalling her next question. "He took no hurt in his flight, although he had scarcely reached us before the wind rose again."

As if to emphasize his words, a gust harsher than most lashed at them, momentarily taking their breaths and setting all three shivering.

The second warrior placed a cloak around her. She recognized it as Tarlach's and protested, but the man only laughed.

"We will not leave him wanting, Lady. Never fear for that."

He lifted her then and, because her injured hands prevented her from making the descent herself, bore her to the ledge below.

There, she suffered the rope cuts to be bound but refused to leave. Her mind was clear again, free of the cloud left by pain and effort and alive to all that was happening around her. She would not seek shelter and comfort herself until the Falconer captain was once more safe upon this shore.

Chapter 14

With the securing of the rope, the mercenary fulfilled his purpose in coming to the wreck, and in that moment, the strength which had been sustaining him vanished. He slumped wearily against the prow, knowing the next wave or the one following it would sweep him.

An arm closed over him with the grip of braided steel. He looked up to find that the mariner nearest him, a tall, powerfully built man, had seen his trouble and had moved to aid him.

Tarlach flushed because this one who had already borne so much must thus spend what remained of his strength. He offered no protest, however, and only nodded his thanks. The alternative was death, and he was not prepared to go down to that while hope of life remained.

The other had little difficulty in reading his thoughts and grinned broadly.

"Think of it as some small return for the use of your rope, Landsman," he said, then braced himself to receive the onslaught of the next wave.

The first of the castaways was inching her way along the swaying rope. The Falconer watched her progress as breathlessly as any of the others, and if he was still too spent to cheer with them when she reached the ledge, the joy and the triumph in his heart more than equaled theirs.

The crossings went smoothly, with the survivors moving rather more quickly than the mercenary had anticipated.

He studied each one carefully, noting his movements and trying to discover the major difficulties of the ascent and how best to counter them. His own turn would come all too soon, and he would have to know then exactly what to do and how to accomplish it as rapidly as possible. His strength was too uncertain to brook much delay—if it would be sufficient to take him across at all.

At least it was returning to him. The big mariner had given him the respite his body had needed to restore itself after the multiple shocks and strain he had suffered in reaching the wreck, and he had taken the most of his weight upon himself again before the fourth survivor had gained the shore.

He was all too well aware, though, that his recovery might be a false one, or, if genuine, short-lived, as the last had been. He had taken injuries, some of them of unknown severity, and any one of them could affect his ability to cross that slender rope. The torn shoulder concerned him particularly; it could very easily prove bad enough to cripple him.

Tarlach closed his eyes. All the open lacerations were troubling him now. He did not have pain in the sense that he had known it in the past, but the salt water was acting on them, and they burned wretchedly. He was cold, too, and shivered violently, as did the others still on the wreck. Exposure weakened a man, he thought as he cringed beneath the lash of a fresh squall, and, if prolonged enough or severe enough, it could kill him.

He felt the seaman beside him stiffen and look up.

The last of the castaways save for this one was now almost across.

The Sulcar glanced speculatively from the rope to the Falconer.

"Let us go together," he suggested.

Tarlach shook his head.

"No. That cord is thin. I would not trust it to take our combined weight.—Go. I shall use these last minutes to rest and then follow you."

The other nodded once and took hold of the rope.

The warrior watched him closely. He made good progress and seemed to have less difficulty than any of his comrades although he had remained longest on the wreck and had borne the newcomer's weight as well as his own for part of that time. The man's strength and powers of endurance must be prodigious.

Tarlach sighed. He would wish heartily for a share of both before very many more minutes had passed.

There was no help for it. His turn was come.

He worked his way along the slippery wood until he was in position to take up the rope. He paused while a sea, the largest in some time, passed over him, then he grasped the line.

For a short while, the lower portion of his body was submerged, but gradually, he rose beyond even the most eager of the waves.

His imagination had not played him false in anticipating the difficulty of this ascent, and Tarlach could only wonder that all of the others had been successful in reaching the shore.

They could not have done it had they not been relatively sound, but, then, neither could anyone significantly injured have held his place on that wave-washed prow for so long. Those who had suffered physical damage of any importance in the sinking of their vessel had either gone down with her or had been among those taken earlier.

Even unhurt, he wondered how every one of those mariners had borne this. He had thought himself hard, his body trained to endure and to conquer pain and difficulty, yet he did not know if his arms could hold. The shore was far, so infinitely far, and there was no relief, no moment's ease, along the whole of the way to it, just endless, wrenching agony which intensified each time the rope rebounded under the pressure of his movements.

Had he been able to establish a smoother rhythm, he would have spared himself much of the jolting now ripping his muscles every few seconds, but his injured shoulder made that impossible. It would not accept his full weight for more than the barest fraction of a second, and so he had to depend on the left to support him save in that instant when he must release his hold to grasp another place a little farther along the line.

Soon all thought left his mind, everything except his concentration upon this awful, creeping climb and the will which lashed nerve and muscle to accomplish what sane consideration would have declared to be impossible.

Thus it was that he started somewhat when he found himself suddenly very near to the cliff, as if he had just wakened to reality out of the mists of encirclement.

The sight of the corrugated, all-but-perpendicular wall cheered him, fired his courage. With hope to spur

his waning strength, he crossed the remaining distance more rapidly and even more smoothly than he had the great length now behind him, although this final stretch was far steeper and more difficult to negotiate.

The moment at last came when he was over the ledge where the Seakeep people and his Falconers waited. So powerful had been his will's control that it was another instant before he was able to force his fingers to relax their hold; then he was down, standing once more on the firm heartstone of the mountain.

For several seconds, he was aware only of the reality of his escape, that and Brennan's supporting arm.

Tarlach leaned heavily on the lieutenant. With the press of danger at last gone, the forces which he had marshaled to meet it were also ebbing, and both mind and body were demanding payment for all he had inflicted upon them.

The mist cleared suddenly from his mind. One he expected, wanted, was missing.

"Una?"

She was with him then, forcing her way through the blur of faces around him.

"I am here, Captain."

Her voice was brisk, that of a healer with her patient before her, and he did not think it an accident that she had addressed him by his rank rather than the name he had confided to her. That one's mind retained its grasp...

He dimly heard her telling those with her to bring him down to one of the cottages rather than wasting time making for the more distant tower, but he was content now and glad to give over the command of his affairs to these others. A veil of darkness had enveloped him in its soft, impenetrable embrace even before she had finished speaking.

Chapter 15

The mercenary commander woke slowly. He was in a strange room with whitewashed stone walls and heavy, simple furniture. The angle of the light streaming in through the small window opposite him showed it to be very late morning.

That surprised him, and, without thinking, he sat up. The sudden movement brought with it such a surge of pain through the whole of his body that he fell back again with a gasp he was not quick enough to smother.

Storm Challenger swooped down from his perch in the rafters and alighted on the bed, alternately crooning softly in concern and scolding his comrade for his carelessness.

Una was beside him in the same instant.

"Easy," she told him. "Even a Falconer must expect to pay for the abuse you meted out to yourself."

Tarlach made no answer. His eyes were fixed upon the heavy bandages binding both her hands from the wrists to the knuckles.

"What happened to you?" he demanded.

She shrugged, wincing a little as she did so, as if her own muscles were sore.

"A few cuts. I shall have a more appropriate covering put on them as soon as I leave you. There was no time yesterday."

"You lie! Your eyes show red. Has pain set you weeping?"

"No. I am merely weary." Her head lowered. "I have wronged you. For that, I crave pardon."

He sat up again, oblivious this time of his protesting muscles.

"What ill have you ever done to me?"

"I have tempted you with Seakeep."

The Holdlady made herself face him.

"I knew your people loved highlands and played upon that liking to cement your agreement to aid us."

"The Dale is fair, my Lady, and my commission demanded that I observe it closely, as your duty demanded that you display it to me."

"Display it, aye, but I opened to you the Seakeep of my heart, endeavored to share that love with you. I succeeded overmuch."

"There is no disgrace to me if you did. Seakeepdale is a holding fit to win the respect and heart of any man worthy of the name."

His breath caught in a sudden rush of horror. What else had he told her? Or the others?"

"Was I so ill last night?" he asked carefully, almost afraid to trust his voice to speak.

"Ill? No, but you were restless, and I thought it best that I be the one to remain with you." As a healer, she had that right, and not even Tarlach's comrades could gainsay her.

"Lest I reveal the existence of your spirit sister?"

"In part."

There was also her own need. She had come to feel for this man what no other, certainly not the lord to whom her father had given her, had ever before roused in her, mind and heart and body. His proposing that deadly plan and taking the execution of it upon himself had wakened to her awareness what must have long been living within her, the knowledge that Tarlach of the Falconers, this strange, stern warrior whose face she had never fully seen before they had stood together on that ledge, was her chosen lord, so named by her heart and her will alike.

Of that she dared not speak and would probably never dare to speak.

The woman made herself smile.

"I need not have worried on that account. You said very little, save of your feeling for Seakeep, and you claim that is not damaging to you among your own."

"It is not," he averred again.

He shifted uneasily. Her concern warmed him, but he felt uncomfortable because of it as well. Una had troubles enough of her own without his adding to them.

Tarlach frowned slightly as another question rose in his mind.

"My injuries are light, or I would not feel as well as I do," he said slowly. "Why was it necessary for someone to stay with me?" Even now, he realized suddenly, she was watching him very closely, as if seeking for something amiss.

Una touched the bandage crossing his temple.

"We had reason to fear a hair-thin break and dared not leave you."

Her manner changed.

"Do you have any dizziness now, any blurring of vision?"

"None."

"Pain?"

"No more than is to be expected."

The cool fingers brushed his forehead.

"There is no fever, either."

She smiled.

"I think it is quite safe for you to return to the tower now and let its owners reclaim this cottage."

The man saw that a fresh uniform had already been brought for his use.

"As soon as I am dressed."

"I shall have your mount prepared."

He glanced at his shoulder, recalling the trouble it had given him. It, too, was bandaged.

"This?" he asked.

"A nasty but harmless cut. No more than that. There is no sign of poisoning, which would have been your greatest danger from it."

The jade eyes darkened.

"Slight though it is, it might have slain you..."

"That is over now," he said softly.

He flexed his shoulders, being careful of the injured one, and was relieved to find some of the stiffness beginning to go from them.

"How are the survivors?" he questioned her.

"Well, all of them. They are waiting to thank you."

She shook her head ruefully.

"Beyond exposure and the shock of their experience, none of them suffered nearly as much damage as you did."

Tarlach merely nodded. Her answer but confirmed what he had already figured.

Una moved toward the door.

"Your lieutenant has been most anxious for you. Shall I send him in?"

"Aye, of course, or he will believe me hurt for a fact.—Hurry back with my horse," he told her. "I would not have the people of this house grow too tired of Falconers and those who hire them."

The captain was already nearly dressed when Brennan entered the room.

He pulled on his tunic, wincing as his bandaged shoulder protested this new range of movement.

"I shall have to put up with this for a day or so, I suppose."

The other laughed unsympathetically.

"Be glad that you are here to endure it, friend.—How do you feel?"

"Sore," he admitted, "but I am quite sound."

"The Horned Lord was with you," Brennan said gravely.

Tarlach faced him.

"How did the Lady Una come *to be* hurt?"

"She did not tell you? But, no, she would not."

The lieutenant described all that had happened on the high ledge.

"That rope had cut her hands to the bone before we reached her," he concluded. "It is only by a miracle that it did not sever some nerve or tendon and leave her a cripple. As it is, all she faces is some

insignificant scarring."

He shook his head, grudging his admiration but compelled to give it.

"Few of our number would have had the will to hold on as she did."

The commander sat on the bed. His face had gone starkly white.

"What manner of man am I," he whispered, "to keep her here all the night, and she wounded herself?"

Brennan shrugged.

"Your need was the greater, and she willed it thus."

"I never even noticed she was hurt."

"You were in poor condition to notice anything."

There was a knock, and, upon receiving the captain's permission, Rorick joined the pair.

"The Lady Una ordered your stallion readied and brought to you."

He studied his commander critically.

"You are looking better than you did yesterday evening, I am pleased to say."

"I imagine that still leaves ample room for improvement," Tarlach replied dryly.

He drew his cloak around his shoulders.

"Come. I have inconvenienced the people of this place long enough."

He stood a moment in the door, observing the scene before him.

The sea was still high and angry-looking, but all other sign of the storm had vanished from the world. The sun was bright and yellow, the air almost amazingly clear and pleasantly warm despite a fresh breeze.

All color seemed to be intensified, whether in the varied hues of the surviving flowers, the vivid blue of the sky, or the startling emerald of the fields.

The latter appeared to be in good condition, gardens and pastures alike, with the exception of those which had actually been flooded. The high walls had successfully defended the tiny areas in their keeping; Seakeep's people would not be wanting for their produce this winter.

Tarlach was readily identifiable for once because of his bandaged arm, and as soon as the Falconer officers stepped outside, every eye fixed on him.

His own warriors grinned as they stiffened into formal salute, but, ever remembering that they were among those not of their race, they did not call out or approach him.

The Dalesfolk stayed back as well, but it seemed that they could not lift their eyes from him, and the

look they bent upon him was little short of adoration.

If he were truly an outside lord, he thought, and coming into Seakeep through marriage with the Holdheir, he need not fear for his acceptance now.

Angrily, he drove that thought from his mind and silently cursed himself for his weakness in supporting a desire which could never be fulfilled.

More to distract himself than out of any feeling of impatience, he mounted and put his horse into a trot which quickly brought him to the gate of the round tower.

Chapter 16

Tarlach was soon introduced to the mariners whose lives he had saved, all but their captain, and he guessed that this one was probably with the Holdlady herself in one of the chambers which she favored for her own use, probably that in which she ate, given the hour. Una rarely took her meals in the great hall unless some ceremony or gathering called for her presence there.

That assumption was soon borne out by Rufon, who came to him with the invitation to join the Holdruler and her guest at her board.

The Falconer went at once. He owed much to the man whose strength had held him on the prow of the dead ship, and he wanted to offer him his thanks, that and his sympathy for the losses he and his people had sustained.

Even as he entered the room, the Sulcar rose from the place he had been occupying at Una's left and hastened toward him.

He was an imposing man, handsome in feature and possessed of a well-proportioned body which had all the grace of a soaring falcon despite its extraordinary size. His fair hair was bleached almost platinum by the constant working of sun and water and looked nearly white against his bronzed skin. The eyes were a pale blue.

The grasp of his fingers was firm when they closed on Tarlach's hand.

"I am glad to find you well, Captain. I am Elfthorn, master of the *Mermaid Fair*."

The mercenary returned the pressure of his hand.

"And I am pleased to see you thus and your crew as well."

"Because of you, we are sound. I give you thanks now in my own name and for my comrades."

The warrior grimaced.

"I am sorry I could not arrange a more pleasant journey for you."

"Anything that took us off that cursed prow was paradise itself."

The blue eyes darkened with a pain that would not soon leave them.

"I should not speak of the *Mermaid* thus," he said softly. "Even in death, she strove to serve us."

"She was a gallant ship. I grieve with you for the loss of her."

The other forced a smile.

"My life was spared to me and part of my crew as well. That is far more than we had reason to expect."

That speech took courage, Tarlach thought. The *Sulcar* rode the waves as a clan, the women working their vessels beside the men, the children learning their ways almost from the time they could walk. So would it have been aboard the *Mermaid Fair* .

None of those children had survived the wreck. This people lived by the sea and did not bewail what she took from them in her cruelty, but mourn they must, in solitude, in their own hearts and souls, even as Falconers bore and suffered their own losses. This was a strength and a pain he readily understood, and he grieved with Elfthorn as truly as if those the storm had riven from him had been of his own company. He held his place, however. He would not worry those deep wounds by forcing further response, from the man.

While the meal, which had been delayed until Tarlach's arrival, was being eaten, the *Sulcar* told how his vessel had been caught in the mighty tempest and how she had ridden it successfully until a freak, twisting wind had snapped her mainmast even as a gigantic sea had swept over her in such a manner as to rip her hatches open, all but swamping her and carrying off so many of her crew that the hopelessly overmatched pumps could no longer be properly manned.

The outcome had been inevitable from that moment, and he had been seeking for a place to beach the doomed vessel so that those still remaining might preserve their lives and perhaps part of their cargo as well.

He gave a great sigh.

"Gunwold's fortune is made now."

"Gunwold?" Una asked blankly.

"A man of the Old Race but one of the best sea captains I know. He is master of the *Dion Star* and my chiefmost rival. We were each racing to deliver a cargo of silks to the markets in the south, for conditions here are still such that there are not likely to be buyers for two such shipments, and we both knew that only the first vessel in port would dispose of her goods with profit. The pilot must have brought him through this region and sent him on his way long since, unless fate struck him some blow like that which brought us down."

He misunderstood the silence which greeted his statement.

"The *Star* reached Linna a few hours before the *Mermaid* . There was only one guide ship in port of any interest to us, and Gunwold was quick to engage her.

"To give him right credit, he offered to divide the cost with me, knowing the reputation of these waters and that I would follow him blindly, for there is no hatred in our competition, but the pilot refused to take

two ships, claiming he would be unable to serve either properly if the weather should turn at all."

He looked from one to the other of them, frowning deeply now.

"What is amiss?" the man asked sharply.

"There is no pilot servicing this coast," the Dales-woman told him quietly.

Elfthorn's mouth hardened at the implication of her statement.

"A pirate?"

"We suspect a black wrecker," she replied, "though in this case, the two are well nigh the same.—Did you see her captain at all, speak with him?"

He nodded and described the man as closely as his memory permitted.

She shook her head.

"It is not Ogin."

"He would not show himself there," Tarlach interjected. "He is too well known for that. Another, some stranger, would have to contact potential victims for him."

"We must forget him for a moment," Seakeep's lady told them, determination firming in her voice. "The *Dion Star* needs our attention now, though I very much fear there is little we shall be able to do for her. All too many ships, large and small, have vanished in this area since Ogin became master of Ravenfield, and even without the possibility of treachery, a storm such as we have just weathered could have shattered a fleet. We have no way of guessing where or how far it might have swept her or where he might have led her."

"We can only wait for some word of her fate, then?"

"Not so," Tarlach answered. "The sea is still wild today, but by tomorrow she should be calm enough for the boats to go out, as they naturally would in the aftermath of a major tempest. Una and I shall be aboard one of them and shall explore the Ravenfield coast. That would have to be part of any search we would undertake considering the deadly name and general isolation of the region. It is my understanding that Ravenfielddale has few boats for such work."

The Holdruler nodded.

"Very few, and none of them are large enough to effect an even moderately difficult rescue in deeper waters. Sea-keep has traditionally taken this duty for them."

"Our course is plain before us, then. We will leave as soon as the sea permits."

The mercenary leader joined Una after they had quit the feasting hall.

"If the ocean continues to quiet herself as she has until now, she should be calm enough for us to sail by dawn."

She nodded.

"I shall order the boats to be ready to leave with the first light."

"In the meantime, I suppose we must inspect the valley."

The woman looked at him sharply. There was a dead note in his voice she did not like.

"I must inspect it. You are to rest after your ordeal yesterday."

Tarlach started to protest but then shrugged, seeing she had read the weariness which had suddenly come over him.

"How can I be so tired?" he asked. "I have done no more than ride from that cottage to the tower and eat a good meal, and I was late abed..."

"Your body has been repairing itself. That is wearing work. To judge by some of those scars you bear, you have been wounded severely enough in the past. It must have been the same with you on several of those occasions."

"It was." He sighed. "Hopefully, this will not be quite so long a process as it was with a few of them."

She smiled.

"Give yourself a couple of hours' ease, and all should be right with you again."

The Holdlady took her leave of him, promising to see him again later in the day.

The captain raised his hand in farewell, then went to the level where his quarters were located.

He entered his own chamber, closing the door carefully behind him so that he should not be disturbed.

It was with no little relief that he stretched out upon the bed and closed his eyes, but his thoughts remained active and were full of concern. He was as utterly drained as if he had taken no rest at all since he had returned from the *Mermaid's* prow. If he could not regain some measure of vitality before morning, he would be of little use either to himself or to his comrades.

Despite his worry, he dozed and then slept deeply, not waking again until three full hours were gone.

The Falconer felt refreshed and himself once more and hastened from the room in search of the Lady Una.

He found her, as he had anticipated, in one of the recently flooded pastures.

"How bad?" he asked after exchanging greetings with her.

"They will do for sheep," she replied. "That is fortunate since we shall have to close some of the higher fields. We seem to have been lucky otherwise. No one was hurt and none of the animals, and the buildings took only minor damage. The boats and their equipment are all sound as well."

"The crops?"

"I have not examined the gardens yet, but according to my people, most seem to have come through well. We lost some fruit, but not as much as we expected. The other things, staples and luxuries, appear to have survived more or less intact."

Thus it proved when they toured the gardens a little later, and both were justifiably pleased by the time they again prepared to part.

Their separation would be short. Tarlach wished to meet with his warriors regarding his upcoming mission and then rejoin the Daleswoman as quickly as possible so that she could brief him in greater detail than she had heretofore done on the coastline they would follow.

Tarlach did not spend much time with his Falconers. They were to have no role tomorrow, and he merely wished to tell them what he had learned from Elfthorn and the course of action they had determined upon as a result. It was the stark confirmation of the reality of the danger threatening not only Seakeep but all this region, all the coastline, and it gave them a purpose beyond the earning of pay for being here.

He was a little surprised when Rorick followed him outside but fell into step with him.

"Why are you permitting the Holdruler to accompany you tomorrow?" the warrior asked without preamble.

The captain looked sharply at him, but his anger died as it was born.

His stupidity astonished him. He had not even thought to begin this search without having Una of Seakeep beside him, yet with the question thus brought before him, he could not wonder at the lieutenant's surprise. It would have been a strange move even for a warrior of some other race. More, he could be sailing into a measure of danger, although it was information and not trouble that the Seakeep vessel would be hunting. Dare he, had he the right to, expose Una to that?

He shook his head, ending his argument with himself.

"She has to come. Lord Harvard or Lord Ferrick would if they were still living, and she cannot afford to do less."

"I suppose you are right," the other conceded. "I had not considered that. Rule must be harder to maintain for the like of her.—You will not ship any of us with you?"

"No. Boats from Seakeepdale will be expected to appear in Ravenfield waters on their search for storm victims. The presence of Falconers would tell Ogin that we had some very different purpose in mind."

"He will never allow you to come upon his victim if she is still on the surface," the other pointed out.

"Why not, with such a storm to serve as a reason for her presence? Besides, he will not expect us to arrive so quickly. We are altering the search pattern enough to bring us to Ravenfielddale's only harbor a full day before we could normally anticipate reaching it. He will believe he has time in plenty to erase all evidence of violence before the wreck is found. The cargo he can strip at his leisure, as would be his right, claiming his own people had come to check the beach and had also discovered what was left of the *Star*."

"The wrecker ship will be kept well out to sea, I suppose."

He nodded.

"Of course. Ogin would want no part of our sighting her."

"You might come upon his renegades as they raped their prey."

"That would mean a fight," he agreed grimly. "It is not likely given the care Ogin will be exercising, but, aye, the chance does exist, and it is one against which we must guard until we are full sure we can take them. Our vanishing along with all his other victims would be of no benefit to our cause."

Chapter 17

A bright morning dawned to reveal a world utterly at peace. The temperature was mild, the breeze brisk without anger, the bay more like a sheltered lake than an inlet of the ocean. Even the open sea beyond was quiet and gentle, as if she had never been ruffled by more than the present soft undulating of her surface.

The Seakeep fleet weighed anchor with the first true light, each boat setting out upon her assigned course. Every vessel's route was so planned as to cross that of at least one other in several places, thus forming a reasonably tight mesh over the whole of the area to be searched.

The round tower's own craft joined with the others. There were two, slender, fast little ships very different from the heavy fishing boats used by the Dalesfolk. For all their seeming daintiness, however, they were strongly built and larger than most of the latter, and it was to these that the longest and most difficult and dangerous runs were given, those through the Ravenfield waters.

Tarlach would have preferred to use the *Tern*, for he judged her to be possessed of the greater speed and maneuverability, but she was much the bigger craft, and her place was farther out, beyond the sight of land.

Her superiority was but a matter of taste on their present mission, and he felt no qualm or real disappointment when he stepped aboard the *Cormorant*, giving his hand to steady Una, who crossed the narrow plank immediately after him.

He surreptitiously studied the Holdlady, seeking any sign that her own ordeal might have left upon her, but she seemed quite as well recovered as he. Only the bandages circling her hands remained as tangible evidence of what she had endured, and even these had been reduced to narrow strips hardly worth the noting.

They waited in the stern until the mountain spurs which had been so deadly to the *Mermaid Fair* had closed the harbor in behind them and then made their way to the prow, from there to keep their watch for the missing merchantman.

They would do so in comfort. The *Cormorant* was the round tower's pleasure craft, and seats had been fastened to the deck with an awning raised above them so that the Holdruler could enjoy the freshness and beauties of the ocean and coastline without enduring discomfort from the strong sun.

The pair would not have to concern themselves at all with the handling of their vessel; her full complement of captain and four crewmen were aboard and would see to her needs and management. All were mature and well experienced, and all were male, a fact which Tarlach regarded with relief although he had the grace not to say as much to his companion.

At first thought, five hands seemed a large company for a ship this size, but she often made voyages of such duration as to require two watches, and occasionally part of her crew was needed to defend her, although it was the more aggressive *Tern* which actively sought out and battled pirates when packs attempted to establish themselves in the isolated region.

The mercenary's grey eyes fixed on the lands they were passing, great, towering cliffs crowned with green, and, above them, the greys and purples of the mountains.

Pain sharper than a sword thrust twisted his soul. Eventually, he must lose all this, go from it...

He did not realize how open was his grief until he felt the light touch of Una's fingers on the back of the hand he had unconsciously clenched on the rail and turned to find her looking upon him, not with pity, but with a sympathy as deep as all eternity.

"Surely, it need not be forever," she said softly. "Sea-keep will always be open to you."

The man only shook his head.

"I shall not return once I leave here, Lady. To do so would but add to my torment." He glanced back at the shore. "I want this land," he whispered fiercely, "and never can that be for one such as I."

The Daleswoman pressed him no further, and for a time, speech ended between them.

Both kept watching the waters around them for sign of the *Dion Star* although neither expected to find anything, not until they had crossed into the sea touching Ogin's domain.

Perhaps Rorick was right and they might find too much there, he mused. If the merchantman had come to grief either through the storm or through treachery, her cargo was still likely to be inviolate, assuming she had not gone under altogether. The wrecker, which would have to be a small ship, certainly no larger than Seakeep's *Tern*, would not have been able to unload her in the heavy seas of the last hours. They might well meet with her as she came for what her victim had carried.

His eyes slitted. What should be their response in that event? Under normal circumstances, they should be able to overpower her, for the *Cormorant's* crew were capable fighters as well as able seamen, but might it not be wiser to avoid conflict a while longer, to pretend ignorance as to the killer craft's nature? Ogin and his people certainly had every right to sail the ocean bordering their hold and every right to inspect a derelict discovered there, claiming what she contained should all those aboard her have perished.

They could not pretend to imagine the vessel was come out of Rosehilldale, Ravenfield's farther neighbor. That big domain was possessed of no harbors at all and had no fertile, sea-touched valleys. Thus, it had no ships.

"What is the Lord of Rosehill like?" he asked suddenly, feeling a little uncomfortable because he should have questioned her about the man long before, when he had interrogated her regarding the domain itself, but had failed to do so.

"A good man, both able and kindly in his ways. Markheim is quite young, but his youth has not damaged his

Dale; it has prospered as well as any in the area under his rule, which began with his father's death two years ago."

"Wed?"

"This last year and a half. His lady is now awaiting her woman's time, being greatly enwombed by him." She smiled. "That seems strange in a way, for she looks scarcely more than a pretty child herself."

"Markheim has some solid reasons for not wanting any of this region's Dales to become a black wrecker's lair. It is a pity his seat is so far. We could use such an ally if Seakeep were badly pressed."

"Aye," she agreed grimly. "He would require three days' forced march just to reach the Ravenfield stronghold—if it could be done in that time at all—and longer still to come to our tower, and that only after a messenger had been received at Rosehill with word of our need."

"He would come, though?"

"Of a certainty. His house and ours have always been more than passing close."

The Falconer was silent only a moment.

"I think it is time that we speak with him," he said slowly, "and with the other lords as well. Even if we discover nothing now, even if Ogin is completely innocent of all we suspect, Elfthorn's tale is proof enough when coupled with the recent increase in the disappearance of vessels that something is very wrong in this region. Seakeep does not have to work alone in eradicating that evil."

Una nodded, her lovely face grave.

"Your suggestion is a sound one. We are so isolated here and so accustomed to depending upon none save our own selves that we sometimes fail to see the obvious solution to a problem when it requires active cooperation with our neighbors. A coalition such as you describe would bring the added benefit of powerfully discouraging aggression against any of us. Ogin would hardly invade one Dale when he knew he would merely be calling the united power of the others down upon himself."

"Unless he struck quickly only to slaughter and then withdrew again, taking with him all clues to his identity."

The woman looked at him sharply.

"You think he would act so?" she asked.

"A man capable of black wrecking?—If he is guilty of that, which I believe likely, and from what I saw of him in our admittedly brief meeting, aye, I think he could take that vengeance for your work against him, particularly if he managed or believed he managed to keep his name clear of taint and hoped to gain at least part of Seakeep's lands in the event you were all slain."

They continued their discussion a long time, for the creating of a workable, efficient alliance among the

far-lying, individualistic Dales was a complex task even in the preliminary discussion. Only when the sun reached its zenith and they observed that preparations for the midday meal were almost completed did they allow the matter to drop from their attention since they did not yet wish to reveal the full direction of their thoughts to their companions, who would be eating with them in accordance with long-established custom aboard both of the round tower's vessels.

When the meal was finished, all returned to their duties.

Those were not heavy despite the seriousness of the *Cormorant's* mission, not yet at any rate. The gentle breeze and quiet sea made the mariners' work light, and none of them anticipated either sighting the *Dion Star* or meeting with peril themselves while they remained so far within Seakeep's waters, which they must do for the remainder of this day. If for no other reason, they could not afford to forget the possible need of neighboring vessels because they sought for one particular ship, and the *Cormorant* would have to follow at least an approximation of the search pattern normally assigned to her in the aftermath of any major tempest. They maintained careful watch for their prime target, certainly, for storms show no respect for man's boundaries and might have broken the merchantman anywhere, but the pressure they would feel on the morrow did not grip them now.

Because a hunt such as that on which they were engaged could not be pursued with the world cloaked in darkness, the small ship dropped anchor once night fell, and those who were not on the late watch retired to their resting places, cabins or crew's quarters.

The former were almost incredibly small, containing only a bunk and a sea chest, which also served as a bench.

Tarlach went below along with the others, although he would have been better pleased to remain longer outside; there might well be little opportunity for rest the following night, too little to waste this. He left the door widely ajar, though, despite the damp chill of the night air. The tiny chamber otherwise far too closely resembled a tomb for either his liking or his peace of mind.

Chapter 18

The day was not very old before the Seakeep vessel set out once more.

All the crew and the two passengers were on deck when her anchor was weighed and remained there although this was not nearly so warm or calm a morning as the last had been. There was a feeling of tension, of expectation, on them. They would cross the Ravenfield border about midmorning, and then...

All that morning, they watched the water and the coast for sign of the missing ship. The nature of the shoreline was changing rapidly, with the cliffs becoming ever steeper and more forbidding and places where an illegally acquired cargo might be landed ever scarcer. Such spots would soon vanish into almost nonexistent rarity, and Ogin could reasonably and easily have chosen to avail himself of the resources of this little-visited segment of his neighbor's Dale.

They found no indication of any such use, no hint whatsoever that their mission need be anything more than a gesture sparked by the humanity of Seakeep's people. That notwithstanding, the mercenary's heart leaped up in his breast when they rounded a narrow, breathlessly steep finger of mountain very distinctive in its configuration. They had passed the Point of the Lords, the boundary between the domains of Una and Ogin. The shore now parallel to their course was Ravenfield's.

The Holdlady, who had been standing beside him at the rail, released the breath she had unconsciously held and deliberately turned her back on the land.

"Let us eat now," she advised, "although it is still early. There is but one place of which I know on all the Ravenfield coast which would be a suitable lair for a wrecker vessel, and we are not very far from it."

She had already described for him the cove to which she referred, a very narrow inlet leading to a cup of white sand, well sheltered and with easy access to the cliff tops far above. It would have been an admirable base for legitimate shipping, although its size precluded any large operation, but the entry channel was blocked in its center by a huge submerged rock called the Cradle from its form, which was revealed during the year's lowest tides. At all other times it lay concealed, an invisible, deadly menace to any vessel attempting to pass into the harbor.

No craft could sail over it. The two high points, the Headboard and the Foot, were only a few feet from the surface, the former being almost visible during ebb tide, and, since the rock lay lengthwise across the channel, only a very slender vessel—even the *Tern* would have been dangerously large for the attempt—could hope to bypass it.

Granting proper size and maneuverability and a daring crew familiar with the passage, however, a ship would be hard-pressed to find a more sheltered or secure port.

She would be almost entirely invisible save to one looking directly into the inlet's constricted mouth, and the high, closely encircling cliffs would break the killing force of nearly any wind, nearly any wave, even those generated by the terrible storm just ended.

Both Una's description and the map he had studied told him the cove was well concealed, but even so forewarned, the man had to quell an exclamation of surprise when the *Cormorant* rounded yet another of the seemingly endless mountain spurs to find himself staring into the natural refuge, or, rather, at something blocking the entrance to it, a badly listing derelict grounded upon the deadly Headboard of the Cradle.

She was big, considerably larger than the *Mermaid Fair* had been, and no sign of life was apparent either on her deck, the small part of it visible to them, or on the beach beyond.

It was the Daleswoman who broke the silence which gripped them all for several long seconds.

"Were they all swept?" she whispered.

"Perhaps," he replied. "The impact would have been bad, and she would not be getting full shelter out here. Any survivors would likely have gone ashore by this time anyway. The bay is dead calm, and the cliff is obviously easily scaled."

The *Cormorant's* captain joined them.

"Not so, Bird Warrior. Aye, the beach is easily reached and the mountain climbed, but how would men strange to this region know where to go from there? Even if they could locate it, a vast wilderness separates this place from the nearest human habitation. They would not be supplied or equipped for such a journey, particularly if any of their company were injured. Were I in their place, I would hold my ground a while and hope for a search such as we do, in fact, conduct in the aftermath of so major a storm."

"Well reasoned," Tarlach agreed. "They either perished to a man, then, or the survivors are still on the *Dion Star* .—The Lady Una and I shall board her at once.

You shall remain on the *Cormorant* , Captain, with two of your men. The others are to come with us."

The Seakeep vessel went in close to the wreck and stayed beside her until the four had gained her deck, then moved back, a safe distance away from the killer rock.

The deck of the *Dion Star* sloped so sharply that the members of the boarding party at first found it difficult merely to hold themselves in place, much less cross it. They soon gained their balance, but even then, all four preferred to keep handholds well within reach.

Tarlach more than any of them. It was only by the lash of his will that he was able to release his grasp on his support and force himself to stand erect. His mouth had gone as dry as if his tissues were shriveling for want of water, and his legs trembled so badly that he wondered if they would continue to bear him up.

He laughed at himself then, and all righted with him once more. This derelict might not be an entirely secure refuge, but she was hardly that bit of a prow to which he had clung a few days previously.

A glance at Una told him she had not become aware of his momentary terror, and he turned to the work before him with good spirits.

The dead ship sloped directly toward the beach, away from the cove's mouth and the open sea, and the four had not left the rail very far behind before they were cut off completely from the sight of the *Cormorant* .

This did not entirely please the warrior, although it meant that his party would be screened from observation during most of their search. They would also be blind to approaching danger, and he was all too conscious of the fact that the wrecker could return at any time, at any moment.

Despite that danger, he hesitated to send Storm Challenger aloft. The bird's sharp eyes would give them good warning of any approaching vessel long before she came near enough to threaten them, but sailors, too, were keen of sight, and the most of them were well familiar with the flight patterns of sea and shore birds. There would be no doubting the falcon's nature if he should be spotted in his turn. Even if he were too high and distant for the wreckers to distinguish his distinctive black-and-white plumage, it was likely they would be suspicious enough to investigate any raptor's presence near their lair with all possible speed. The hiring of the Falconer company by Seakeep's lady was well known, and men of the wreckers' ilk would not like at all the thought that the mercenaries might be taking part in what was supposed to be a simple voyage of search and rescue. They would feel compelled to find out what, if anything, had been discovered about their own secret work.

His party would be forewarned of their coming and would easily avoid a confrontation, but harm would still have been done. Ogin would then be alerted that Sea-keep's ruler was suspicious of him and that her suspicion was both accurate as to detail and ran very deep, and he would be a stark fool if he did not simply cease his activities until Una's blank shields had taken their leave of her. At that point, he would probably attack and reduce her Dale as Tarlach had suggested he might. Even if he did not go so far, he could still resume his attacks on shipping, secure in the knowledge that there was little his neighbor could do against him provided he acted with enough caution to give her no real or no good circumstantial evidence against him, at least until he grew so powerful that he no longer need fear her or any of the

others.

That must not be allowed to happen. They had to keep the Lord of Ravenfield's sense of security intact, work and watch until his guilt could be confirmed and he and his killers be taken. If they could accomplish that now, or part of it, all the better.

Despite his acceptance of that necessity, the Falconer remained uneasy about keeping the war bird with him. They could be trapped all too easily...

He feared for the *Cormorant* as much as for themselves. In open water, the Seakeep vessel had good hope of outfighting or outrunning any adversary they might expect to find here, but the narrow mouth of the channel gave her precious little room in which to maneuver. They would just have to work quickly and get away as fast as possible to report the *Star's* death and to make their plans in accordance with the nature of the evidence they uncovered here.

He shook his head as a feeling of frustration swept him.

There might be no black wrecker, no danger at all. The *Dion Star* could have been separated from her escort during the tempest and, seeing the cove, have made for its shelter, oblivious to the peril lurking just beneath the waves.

If that had been the case, fortune had been hard on her, for the huge seas would probably have carried her over the obstruction at its center or at the Foot. Only the Headboard remained too high, and it was across this that she had attempted to come.

His expression hardened. She could have been sent across it. A wrecker would not have dared to attack during the storm, but Ogin or his agent could easily have lured his victim to this place and let the Cradle do his murder-work for him.

He grimly pulled his mind back from speculation. That availed nothing. The merchantman herself would have to tell them what had happened.

There was little to be learned from the deck. The great waves raised by the tempest had swept it clean of all small or loose items. Of everything, only one lifeboat, in reality no more than a tiny dory, had somehow managed to stay in her moorings, probably because the angle at which the *Dion Star* had settled had given her good shelter, but nothing else remained. If men had died here, the ocean which had slain them had carried their bodies away with her.

"Try the cabins," the mercenary suggested without much feeling of hope; he had pitched his voice low, although there was ostensibly no reason to maintain silence or secrecy.

After signaling Una and the two sailors to hold back, he made for the nearest of the two deck cabins, that which would most logically have been utilized by any survivors because of its location and size.

As he approached it, Storm Challenger suddenly stiffened on his shoulder, spreading his wings and extending his head with an angry hiss.

Tarlach stopped. So. There was no fear on his comrade, but something was decidedly amiss within.

He stepped out of line with the opening. Cautiously reaching over, he tried the door. It gave no resistance and swung wide with the first gentle pressure of his hand.

He stood still a moment as he gazed inside, his eyes hardening in a way no enemy would have been comforted to see.

The storm had spared some of the crew, then, for there were men in the cabin, dead men who had met their end through the violence of their own kind and not through nature's mindless fury.

One lay near the door, his skull so crushed by the blow of some heavy object that his brains were mixed with the blood fouling the floor beneath him. Swords had felled four others who had been seated around a table and had been cut down as they tried to rise and defend themselves. A final man was lying on a makeshift bunk to the right of the entrance, his left leg immobilized by rough splints. His throat had been cut, as if in an afterthought by one rushing past him to down his more active comrades.

It was the sight of the last which caused Una to sway and turn her face away when she and her companions joined him a few seconds later, but she was strong and quickly steadied herself once more.

"They never expected what they received from those who entered here," she whispered savagely through set lips.

"It was help, friendship, that they were anticipating. That much is evident from their attitudes," the warrior agreed.

His arm came around her, as if he were unconsciously seeking to shield her from any similar danger.

Tarlach himself was quick to recognize the unnecessarily protective nature of the gesture and hastened to release her again.

He glanced toward the door.

"Let us be gone," he said briskly. "I little like this place."

"Should we not examine it, Captain?" the man nearest them, Santor, questioned. "We might learn much from it. The log..."

The Falconer shook his head.

"That will have been taken, whatever else they left for future attention.

"I want to have a look at the hold and then cast off before the wrecker returns. We cannot face her with our force split and with no room in which to conduct a sea battle."

"Perhaps they have stripped the cargo already," the second mariner suggested. "They had all of yesterday in which to do it."

"I doubt it, not completely. Ogin's ship needs must be small, and I do not imagine she would make more than a couple of runs in any one day unless really pressed. Her crew would not be able to bring much more than that up the cliff, however easy the climb might be for unencumbered men, and the risk of damage is too great to leave silks out on an open beach for very long."

He looked to the woman.

"There are no dry caves at sea level?"

"None, or I should have mentioned them."

He did not question her certainty. Seakeep's people knew all this coast intimately, Ravenfield's and Rosehill's as well as their own, a knowledge which had been the salvation of many a storm-caught or otherwise imperiled fisherman over the years. That knowledge included land features as well as those of ocean bed and currents.

The four left the bloodstained cabin, Tarlach carefully shutting the door behind them.

The Holdlady hastened toward the seaward rail to acquaint those aboard the *Cormorant* with the news of their discovery and to inform them of their plans. The others followed after her, for all of them still preferred availing themselves of the side's support to crossing the length of the steeply slanting deck without aid.

Without warning, the falcon let out a purposely low-pitched scream. Tarlach flung himself forward, catching Una as he went down, throwing her to the deck as well.

"Drop!" he hissed to the two men coming up behind them.

They obeyed, too surprised for either protest or question.

After a moment, the mercenary began to snake his way up the sloping deck until he had reached the rail. The rest followed him.

The side of the derelict was high and solidly built, but the storm and impact had broken it in several places, and stress had warped the boards comprising it so that cracks had opened between them. Through one of these last, they saw what had alarmed the war bird, a slender, black vessel even now bearing down on them.

Not on them. On the *Cormorant* .

The newcomer's prow looked strangely heavy for a craft of her size. Reinforced. She rammed her victims, then.

Those aboard the Seakeep ship recognized their danger as well and strove to avoid it, but the attacker was between them and the open water, and the wreck prevented them from slipping into the harbor itself quickly enough. They had only this one small area in which to move.

It was not enough. Undermanned as she was and taken by surprise by a speedy vessel obviously well used to this method of attack, the *Cormorant* was all but foredoomed. The killer struck her squarely, driving and pinning her against the solid structure of the big derelict.

She held a moment, then splintered under the double impact.

One man, the captain, died instantly, crushed in the crumbling of his vessel.

The others reached the water but had scarcely surfaced again before arrows raced down to meet them, arrows flying with an accuracy and assurance that proclaimed familiar custom on the part of those sending them forth.

Tarlach's glare silenced the bitter curse begun by the sailor nearest him. If they gave themselves away now, they, too, were slain.

His face was grim. The wreck was certain to be searched. They would not be able to conceal themselves effectively, not all four of them, and to attempt to do battle with so many was but suicide.

"Slide back down," he commanded suddenly. "Into the water."

Una started to move at once, but the men held in place, staring at him.

"What keeps you?" he demanded impatiently.

"I can swim a very little," Santor replied, "but Nordis, here, cannot."

"Can you tread water?" he questioned this second seaman.

"No."

"I will bear you up if needs be, but the Headboard should give us support.—Make haste now, or we shall be sighted going over the side!"

The pair still looked decidedly unhappy, but they were without choice and slithered down the deck until they had joined the Daleswoman at the opposite rail. The Falconer was with them in another moment.

Tarlach and Una moved first, flipping themselves across the railing quickly and quietly and then lowering themselves the full length of their arms.

This part of the wreck was much nearer the water than was the other side, and they had but a short drop after releasing their hold.

The woman immediately swam into the darkness created by the overhanging vessel, not stopping until she had reached her very side. There, her feet found purchase on the stone fang impaling the *Dion Star*, and she raised an arm to signal the warrior that he had reasoned accurately concerning it.

A few moments later, the mariners were in the water as well, and all three men were huddled beside her in the shadow of the dead ship.

Theirs was not a comfortable position, standing upon that submerged rock and supporting themselves by leaning against the great hulk which would become their death if she shifted only a little farther in their direction.

Death walked the deck above them as well. Even as the captain had reasoned they would, the wrecker crew boarded the derelict seeking survivors from the *Cormorant*.

There was no mistaking the man who led and ruled that band. His voice reached them clearly above the gentle lapping of the waves. They knew it, all of them, and their hearts burned with hate and an impotent longing for vengeance.

Tarlach's lips moved in silent thanksgiving to the Horned Lord that he had been given the foresight to close the cabin door when his party had returned to the outer deck and that they had disturbed nothing

during their brief exploration. The killers were searching thoroughly, and they apparently knew what signs to seek, but nothing had been left behind for them to discover.

So it proved, and the wrecker crew at last reassembled on the deck.

Once more, Ogin's voice reached the fugitives.

"No boarding parties, then. That is well for us. Una's people would not have been such easy targets had we found them armed and prepared, as these would have been."

"What were they doing so far into your territory?" another with the accent of a southlander asked. "Do they suspect you?"

The Holdlord gave a contemptuous laugh.

"Hardly. The storm drew them. Seakeepdale's residents are a humane race," he explained in a mocking tone. "They always send their boats out as soon as possible after a tempest on the chance that some vessel or other might have come into trouble. That is why I have insisted that we keep at sea and away from here. We might have had considerable difficulty in taking them had they become suspicious, especially that ship. She was fast and easily handled."

Ravenfield's lord turned his attention to the cargo.

"We shall have to finish here before anyone comes seeking the *Cormorant*—

"Another ship can be sunk as easily," a rough voice cut in.

"Do not be a fool! How many can disappear here in a week's time without our coming under suspicion? Why did you imagine I have let rich ships go by me in the past if not for fear of alerting our neighbors to our operation? Ravenfield cannot fight every Holdlord and ship's master in High Hallack, and remember well that if I go down, you cannot survive for long without my protection and support."

The southlander, who appeared to be next in command to Ogin, broke in at this point, as eager to avoid one of the lord's tempers as he was to press on with their work.

"We shall have to make haste in any event. I know nothing of clouds if those are not storm dogs above us."

Several others agreed and cursed angrily at the delay more foul weather would force upon them, that and the danger of the *Dion Star's* breaking apart with the better part of her valuable and delicate cargo still aboard. That had happened to them once already with another merchantman they had lured onto this rock.

Before they began, however, the Lord of Ravenfield had his killers take the corpses from the cabin and, after weighting them to assure their remaining on the bottom, cast them over the side, thus destroying the most obvious evidence of what had taken place. Soon the *Cormorant* would be sunk as well. After that, even if another Sea-keep vessel did come upon the derelict before she was scuttled, her crew would have no reason to suspect any evil save the violence of nature and would not search for the bloodstains marring the cabin's floor.

Chapter 19

Una shuddered as each of the dead men struck the water. One dark whim of fortune, and four more would join them. One small sound could be enough to betray them. The clarity of the voices, the distinctness with which they heard the movements of the wrecker crew, was evidence enough of that.

Tarlach had taken her into his arms almost from the time they had reached the wreck's side, for the place on which they had to stand gave but poor purchase for their feet, and she labored under the additional disadvantage of being several inches shorter than her companions, but now he pressed her closer to him. He knew what she endured, the sick fear that helplessness brings, the shame of being forced to witness grave wrong without being able to take action against it, the sheer misery of constant, piercing cold.

That last was bad now and would grow ever worse as the water in which they were immersed leached more and more heat from their bodies. Even Storm Challenger, who was spared an actual wetting as he clung to the *Star's* side, trembled constantly under the ever-more-vicious clawing of the penetrating damp and wind-powered chill.

This they could endure and must endure. Neither the temperature of the ocean nor of the air was low enough to slay them in the length of time they could expect to be here, although the violent muscle contractions which cold could induce might well bring death by rendering them incapable of swimming when the time came to leave their refuge.

They feared that possibility as they feared discovery by those above, but these mishaps must be counted the curse of chance. A more immediate danger threatened them. Their enemies would work long this day, and even after they had quit the *Dion Star*, the Seakeep fugitives durst not leave their hiding place, not while any daylight remained. All that while, the tide would be rising. Already, it had begun to turn. The change was not yet noticeable, but soon, desperately soon, the level of the water would climb until it left them without a place on which to stand and perhaps to the point where it would fill their shelter entirely.

It was a fear that proved its accuracy all too quickly. The rising sea reached his neck, his chin. The Falconer bowed his head to give his helmet clearance in the space that remained and finally removed it altogether, letting it sink into the depths of the ocean.

Una looked up at him and then clung the more tightly to him. He seemed vulnerable without the masking helm, as if he stood naked before the world, and unconsciously, she offered herself as a shield against whatever darts it might fling.

They stayed thus only a short while before Tarlach was forced to release her in order to take charge of Nordis, he who could not swim. The woman found herself similarly occupied, for Santor, though he could support himself for a brief time, was possessed of small skill in the water and little endurance, and it was upon her that he must depend for his life during the long hours of waiting before them.

Fortune blessed them in that the day had not been young when they had boarded the derelict. The wrecker crew made one hurried trip from the *Dion Star* to the beach, but then the westering sun forced them to devote themselves to the cargo they had salvaged lest the tide, swelled as it was by the unsettled weather, take it from them.

Their going all but freed the fugitives from the danger of detection provided they did not leave their hiding place. This they could not do, not yet, with the dead vessel still in clear view of those black-souled men working on the beach and on the cliff above it.

Only after night had spread her friendly mantle over the world did Tarlach cautiously move out from under the shadow of the derelict, towing the Seakeep mariner after him.

Darkness had fallen none too soon, for the water would shortly have filled their sheltering place entirely, but the mercenary was quick to realize that the tide was serving their cause despite all the discomfort and concern it had given them. The rail of the *Dion Star* was now near to them, within relatively close reach. Had the sea still been low, they would have been hard-pressed to board her from the water, particularly weakened by cold and tension as they were.

Even with the help fortune had thus given them, the task was a hard one. He tried and failed to climb the outward sloping side, and he failed to leap up to it from the water.

Nordis, now resting in the Daleswoman's charge, watched him fall helplessly back. He had almost succeeded, but the distance was a little too far. Some support, some solid place against which to brace one's efforts, was needed if one was to gain the deck by that means.

"You are strong in the sea, Bird Warrior," he said. "If you were to hold me, aid my spring, perhaps I could reach it and then draw the rest of us up."

"Aye, it could work," the mercenary replied quickly.

Scarcely had he spoken before Una and the second man came on either side of him. Trusting himself to their support, he took hold of Nordis and gathered himself.

The mariner nodded.

"Now!"

As he leaped, the captain cast him upward with all the strength left to him.

For one bitter instant, Tarlach thought this attempt had failed like his own, but then the man's hands closed over the edge of the rail. He hung there a moment but soon began to struggle upward. The deck was not yet won.

His arms were powerful, though, and he knew the ways of ships, and it was not long before he disappeared over the side. Several interminable seconds passed, then a rope snaked down to the remaining fugitives.

The second sailor went up next. Una and Tarlach had literally to be drawn aboard. Their strength had been spent in fighting the cold and the water below both for themselves and for their less able comrades, and, once they were no longer buoyed by the sea, they found themselves nearly helpless.

The wind was now high and very sharp. It cut through their soaked garments like a thousand daggers.

Aye, it gave the pain of knives, the Falconer thought, and it would soon prove as deadly, but there was nothing he could do to defend against it save to sink down beside the *Star's* high side and hope the sturdy wood might break some of its force.

The mariners would not permit that. They had known all the horror of helplessness below, but their own strength had not been squandered, and they now kept their companions on their feet.

"It will be better once we are out of this wind, Captain," Nordis said in a low voice, ever mindful of the ease with which sound could carry. "You can rest in the cabin."

Within minutes, they were inside, and the door was closed against the night.

The Falconer was walking more steadily by then but still dropped gratefully onto the chair the sailor drew over to him.

The temperature of the air was not so very low in itself, and he began to feel more comfortable almost immediately and almost to feel somewhat ashamed that he should be sitting at his ease while their party remained in peril.

He started to rise, but Santor grinned and placed a restraining hand on his shoulder.

"Let you and the Lady Una stay where you are a while, Bird Warrior. The turn to work is ours. Besides, I think we know more of a ship's cabin than either of you, even on a vessel of this size. Another chamber lies beyond this one. A man lived in it, and there will be things of his that we can use. Those bastards do not appear to have done much in the way of general looting."

"They have had no time for that yet.—Go to it, but guard your lights well."

"There is no port inside, and the moon is candle enough out here."

The two men were gone some time, but their arms were gratifyingly full when they did return.

"Fortune smiles," Santor declared triumphantly. "We found plenty for all of us, good-quality stuff, too, but that should be true, this being the master's quarters."

"I do not imagine he would have grudged us the use of them," Tarlach replied, stripping off his own soaked garments even as he spoke.

He dressed rapidly, then sat back, closing his eyes. It was an ecstasy merely to be dry and truly warm once more.

Una had changed as quickly, turning her back to her companions while she slipped out of her own and into the dead seaman's clothes.

Facing the others once more, she smiled broadly.

"That is a vast improvement, my comrades. Now, if we can just discover some food and drink, we shall be well fortified for our escape."

That proved to be a vain hope. They did find some wine, a little, but nothing at all of food in the cabin, and a hurried search showed that the galley and the hold containing the vessel's stores had been completely flooded.

The mercenary shrugged. That was a disappointment but not a danger to them. They would have won home or be dead from other cause long before hunger became a threat to either their lives or their health.

Thirst could be a very different matter, but he thrust his fear of it from him. They must act now whether

drink was available to them or not.

The dory was their only possible means of escape. None of them looked forward to a voyage in her, Tarlach least of all, but there was no choice before them if they were to give any battle at all for their lives. Had his companions been Falconers, combat trained and superbly capable in the water, they just possibly might have boarded and successfully made away with the wreckers' vessel even outnumbered as they were, but those with him certainly could not accomplish such a feat.

No, it was to this small craft that they needs must look to bear them on their coming journey.

She seemed incredibly fragile even to the sailors' more experienced eyes, yet they knew her to be a lucky vessel, having survived both the tempest and the rigors of shipwreck. Perhaps some of that fortune would flow to them when they took to her.

It was well that they could think of her thus, for the threatening storm was fast approaching now. The seas were becoming short and high, and heavy clouds filled in most of the sky, closing off what had been a brilliant moon. To set out in so tiny a craft into such weather seemed little short of suicide.

To remain was an even surer death, and all four preferred perishing in an attempt to gain their lives to being butchered as had the crew of the *Dion Star* .

The memory of those slaughtered men served to strengthen their resolve. If they made the try, they might win through, one of them at least, and carry testimony of all they had seen and heard. Dead, they could not confirm Seakeep's suspicions of Ogin's guilt.

Silently, the seamen examined the dory and found her sound. Even her oars remained. Any other equipment she might have held had been swept off, but she was such a tiny thing that it was doubtful very much had ever been stored in her. Santor and Nordis sought out several buckets to be used as bailers, for these they deemed to be essential, then declared her to be ready.

Tarlach ordered that they use the wine at once. It was not worth the saving—there was scarcely half a cup for each of them—and they had need of its strength.

Once more, the Seakeep mariners took charge, launching the dory smoothly and silently despite the choppy waves in whose midst they set her. They gave one glance at the menacing shore and crouched down as far as possible as they began rowing toward the open sea.

Chapter 20

Although all of the fugitives kept low in their boat until they had left the wreck considerably behind them, none of the four had much fear of detection now. The night was dark with a trace of fog to further cloak them from unfriendly eyes which might turn on the *Dion Star* , and the wind was high enough to mask any modest noise they might make in rowing.

All the same, it was with relief that they drew out of the narrow channel and rounded the spur of the mountain, out of sight at last of the dead merchantman and of those who had murdered her.

To his comrades' surprise, Tarlach ordered that they continue moving seaward rather than immediately assuming a course parallel to the land.

"This is no deep-water vessel, Captain," Nordis ventured, "and with heavy weather coming on..."

"We shall be driven against the cliffs or onto the rocks if we remain here."

Una straightened suddenly, guessing the hope he had not dared voice.

"We might even be picked up by the *Tern* farther out."

"The *Tern!* . Aye, she will stay at sea since there is no port to which she can fly quickly enough!" exclaimed Nordis.

"This blow will not be anything to drive her in search of one," Santor said eagerly. "It should prove no more than any of those the fleet has weathered many a time. Even at its worst, it will in no way rival the last."

There was a grimness in his tone despite the hope of early rescue Una had given him. Neither he nor any of the others needed to be told that the gale, comparatively mild though it might be, would be impressive enough for people attempting to ride it out in this pitifully tiny vessel.

"Forget the *Tern*" the Falconer warned sharply. "If we meet her, we can indeed rejoice, but it would require more a miracle than kindness of fate to accomplish that. It is on this dory and on our own strength that we are going to have to depend, and on nothing else."

His words cut down his companions' newborn elation. There could be no gainsaying the Tightness of them, and if the Daleswoman still nurtured some little hope in her heart of connecting with the second round tower vessel, she did not attempt to argue its cause. They did better to forgo the brightness belief in such discovery could give their spirits now rather than risk its almost inevitable shattering later, at a time when physical exhaustion and the lash of the elements might make its breaking the breaking of their will to fight on.

The Falconer commander and the Lady Una claimed the oars. The sailors made no protest, knowing that these two could handle them, at least well enough to bring the dory beyond sight of the land and start her toward home. After that, their greater experience would be needed, and they must be fresh and ready then to assume responsibility for their party's lives.

The storm did not break suddenly but rather crept upon them as if it were half afraid to show itself. The rain began soon after the dory had left the wreckers' cove but remained no more than an unpleasant drizzle for a long time. The wind, though bitterly cold, only gradually assumed the properties of a true gale. The ocean was more responsive to what was to come, but even she delayed some time before displaying her full anger.

What she did unleash was bad enough. Tarlach's muscles ached with the strain of battling swells so short and sharp that the boat seemed to make no progress at all, but he stubbornly refused to surrender his place at the oars.

Pride would have kept him there even if duty did not. The Holdlady, slender and fragile as she was, did not cry out against this same labor. While she held firm, so, too, would he until his skill was no longer the equal of the work before him.

It was only after the rain had become an almost continuous downpour and the wind had roiled the water

around them into a fury that the pair gave way to their more able comrades.

The mercenary huddled in the rear of the boat, cradling the falcon on his lap to give him what little he could of heat and shelter. His comrade was dying. He knew that, although the crisis was still some time away, and he despaired because of his powerlessness to do more to preserve him. He could not even keep the rain off him. There was nothing he could do to help any of them, Tarlach thought listlessly. He was scarcely able at this point to rouse himself enough to intelligently watch the progress of the oarsmen.

Una was beside him. He could not see her face, for she was sitting with her head lowered, but from the limp way she held herself, the droop of her usually straight shoulders, he knew that she was even more exhausted than he.

Little wonder, that. The Daleswoman was fighting what must be fairly severe pain as well as weariness and the effects of hunger, thirst, and the never-ending cold. The salt and constant wet had gotten to the numerous cuts striping his body, and, although none of them save that on the shoulder, which was now giving him considerable trouble, were of any significance, each one of them felt sore and angry. He could imagine the torment to her seriously damaged hands, could well-nigh feel himself what each stroke of the oars had done to her—

The shock of frigid water brought a gasp from him.

The swell which had broken on them was passed, but a second followed fast upon it, sweeping over the foundering dory.

"Bail!" Nordis roared. "Bail, or we are downed!"

He leaped to obey, the Holdruler beside him. They worked with the desperate speed of their need, and soon they had the boat enough lightened that she could respond once more to the commands of the rowers.

There was no returning to rest, however, not then, not in the hours which followed. The rain increased until it fell in an almost solid sheet, a deluge sufficient in itself to fill the open vessel, and it seemed that every third wave poured over the dory's sides.

Nordis and Santor proved their skill and their courage that terrible night. It was they who fought the bucking vessel, guided her, tried to keep her facing into the waves so she should not ship water with every swell. Many were the times the two in the stern saw them raised almost vertically above them as their craft climbed some mighty wave, their bodies clearly visible in the eerie, frightening brilliance of a lightning-illuminated sky, or below them as they raced into some Stygian trough.

Tarlach rested the bailer on his knee after clearing the boat for what seemed the thousandth time. The respite would be all too short, he knew, before he could be compelled to take it up again.

It was then that he became aware of the emptiness. No other mind touched his.

"No!" It was a moan. There was no body. He had failed even to preserve that.

"Not so!" Una's icy, bloodied fingers closed on his hands. "Do not believe that, not yet.—One of us would surely have felt his dying, Tarlach. Neither of us did. He— he was not really that low when you last tended to him?"

"No."

He looked at her, wanting to hope and fearing to chance this pain again if he did so and it was proved useless.

"Where, then..."

"Gone for help, perhaps."

"In this gale?" he demanded contemptuously.

"Grant him that much, that he would strive with his last strength, even as we. He could not aid us here, but if he could still fly despite those wet wings, can you believe he would not make the trial?"

"Flight should still have been possible," he conceded after a moment, "and this storm is not like the other, perilous force though it is." His eyes closed. "The Horned Lord guide and help him."

"And Gunnora..."

A bitter jolt of water silenced her, and they threw themselves back into their endless fight to keep the sea from closing over them all.

Dawn broke and grew old before the storm showed signs of abating, and the morning was well on before the rain entirely ceased.

All four slumped in their seats, too spent for the moment even to feel cheered by the lessening of their sufferings.

Tarlach's mouth tightened. No, that was scarcely accurate. The nature of their discomfort might have altered, but it was in no way reduced. They still had to combat high seas and sharp wind, and if there was no rain to torment them, thirst would soon make them long for its return.

Una saw him lick the salt from his lips and touched his arm.

"I managed to catch a little of the rain."

She held out one of the bailers to him.

"I am sorry there is only enough for a few swallows, but it was impossible to collect any until we stopped taking so much water, and the rain had almost ended by then."

"Sorry? Lady, you have revived our souls! That could be the saving of us in the distance we must go."

He took the pail from her. There was indeed only a small amount of liquid in it, and he took but a single sip. This he rolled around his mouth before allowing it to trickle down his parched throat. The taste was decidedly brackish, but he would not have relished the finest wine as much in a time of plenty.

The Falconer did not delay in returning the bailer to her. She, too, drank, taking no more than he had, then she held it out to her companions.

Both realized how little it contained and shook their heads.

"We shall be home soon enough, my Lady," Nordis told her. "Do you drink for us."

"Take it, both of you," the mercenary commanded sharply.

The Seakeep men stiffened.

"It is not our custom to deprive one weaker than ourselves..."

He raised his hands in a gesture of peace.

"It is our strength that your Holdlady needs now. We should be serving her ill to further reduce that even for her temporary comfort."

The mariners' eyes fell, and they accepted the water, the last any of them was likely to have until they won through to safety, the last they might ever have if they failed to do that very quickly.

The hours passed slowly. The fugitives had been nervous at first, fearing pursuit from the cove, for the storm, though violent, had not been such as to intimidate a vessel of the wrecker's size if her master's purpose were strong, but they soon relaxed. They had been careful to leave no sign of their presence aboard the *Dion Star*, and the loss of the dory, if noted at all, would be laid to the rough weather. The missing garments would not be marked since there had very obviously been no close examination of the cabin from which they had been taken, and their own discarded things they had brought away with them. No, they had nothing to fear from Ravenfield now unless some freak twist of chance brought about their discovery.

The warrior and the Daleswoman claimed the oars to give the others a chance to take some rest but were so weakened themselves that they could keep their places no longer than a couple of hours before having to surrender them again.

The work of rowing was brutally hard, and yet they dared not leave the oars idle for more than the few seconds lost in changing the team manning them. The storm of the previous night still kept its grasp on the sea—indeed, it was probably not truly ended at all but merely in a short-lived lull—and the waves continued to hurl themselves at the dory, as if enraged that she had outfought them for so long. It took the full of the fugitives' waning strength, the full of their skill, just to keep their tiny craft afloat; to make any real headway toward their goal was impossible.

Their spirits fell as time went on, precious time, time they could ill afford to squander. The overcast sky spared them much of what they might have endured from the blistering rays of the sun, but they were granted little else in the way of ease. Salt-fired thirst was a torture now, a draining torture that took power from muscles and mind alike, and ever in their thoughts was the knowledge that the return of the tempest, which by all the signs would not be long delayed, would mean at the least another day like to this if they could survive its pummeling a second time.

Because of the constant strain of their labor and their rapidly deteriorating physical condition, it became necessary to change rowers every half hour lest they grow too exhausted to function at all.

Tarlach took Una's hands in his after their third such turn. The bandages covering the palms were soaked with blood.

He made no comment as he pressed the cold, white fingers between his, trying to give them warmth

from his own meager store of heat.

How much more of this could the Daleswoman take? Her will was strong, and so, too, was her body, remarkably strong for one of such delicate appearance, but all they were enduring would soon bring down the most powerful man, much less this slight lady. The fact that she was possessed of no great reserves of fat or muscle was in itself enough to doom her...

"A sail!"

He looked up at Nordis' cry. The very tip of a mast had just risen up over the horizon.

His tongue ran over cracked lips. Should they attempt to hail her? They needed help, desperately needed it, yet even a strange vessel, one having no connection with Ogin of Ravenfield, might not be safe transport for the fair woman beside him.

The two sailors and the Holdlady herself were no less aware of their possible danger.

Santor gave voice to the fears of all.

"Pirates do occasionally sail these waters, as do those who might not treat kindly with folk in dire trouble, but such are rare, and we cannot afford to forgo the probability of assistance because we dread meeting with them."

"Let the Lady Una and you, Bird Warrior, since she will have need of your aid, conceal yourselves in the water as we approach the ship. If she proves false, you two, at least, shall still be alive and free."

They agreed because there seemed no other choice before them, although all realized they would not survive their companions by very long in the event of such misfortune.

The fugitives waited tensely as more of the sail and then the vessel herself hove into view. At the same moment, Tarlach sat erect, relief and joy sweeping through him as Storm Challenger soared high and proud against the westering sun.

"We can spare ourselves a dunking. She is the *Tern!*"

Chapter 21

The mercenary tried to crush the excitement swelling in his heart. The Seakeep ship was still very far away, and their dory was but a minute speck on a rough ocean. They might not be seen at all except by his winged comrade, and with no Falconers aboard to whom he could rightly deliver his intelligence, the war bird might not be able to communicate his discovery to those manning her even though he had somehow managed to draw them in this direction. Santor did say that she was well off her assigned track...

The others were aware of that black possibility as well. The tunic Nordis had taken from the *Dion Star's* cabin was white, and this he stripped off and began waving violently in the direction of the *Tern* while the other men rowed as rapidly as they might toward her.

Whatever their efforts and the falcon's and the prayers burning in their hearts, it seemed for a long while

that they would not be noticed, that they would be left to face storm and water alone as they had all these interminable hours.

Just as their hope was plunging to its lowest ebb, however, the larger vessel neared. Not very many minutes passed after that before they were standing on her deck with a crowd of curious, concerned mariners around them.

The Falconer almost savagely silenced the questions being fired at him. Una was beside him, in part leaning on him despite herself, and he could feel the tension in her, the strain of her effort to hold herself erect.

"See to the Holdlady first," he snapped, "and to these others. There will be time then to talk."

Dry clothing, food, and warm drink wrought a near miracle in the four, and soon Tarlach, as military leader of the *Cormorant's* survivors, was recounting the tale of their adventures in close detail.

His audience was quiet when he finished speaking. His description of their discovery of the murdered crew aboard the derelict had sparked angry growls from the Seakeep sailors and even more so the tale of the *Cormorant's* death and the slaughter of the men left with her, but the story of the fugitives' escape and ordeal silenced them, and it was several seconds before any of those who heard it found voice.

"We of Seakeep have blood-work before us and a heavy blood-price to claim," the *Tern's* master said at last, "but that must wait for now. We have not yet seen the end or the worst of last night's storm. I suggest that we run before it and lay our war plans in Seakeep when the Lady Una and the captain have rested.—Is this agreeable to you, my Lady, Bird Warrior?"

The Holdruler nodded.

"Aye, unless the captain feels it wiser to attack Ravenfield or the wrecker crew at once."

"No, nor have we the strength to do so now even if I so willed."

He sighed.

"It is better thus. When we do move, I want to be sure of taking that black company quickly."

His voice became cold, frozen by a hatred so bitter that all those present shuddered in their hearts to hear it.

"Ogin of Ravenfield is going to die. It may be by my sword or under my eye or by another's hand while I am held in some other part of the battle, but from this moment forth, he is no more than a corpse. I vow that upon my very soul."

Tired as he was, sleep would not come to the Falconer captain. Dark thoughts filled his mind, grim accusations from which even the violence of his hatred for the Hold-lord of Ravenfield could not screen him. He had accomplished so little since his coming to Seakeep... No, that softened his guilt. He had failed in so much, had failed so many, he who had sworn to guard...

Storm Challenger flew from the place he had chosen at the footboard of the bunk to come within reach of his companion's hand.

Tarlach stroked the bird. The mariners had treated him well and correctly when he had come to them battered and soaked from his flight through the gale. They had wrapped him in a towel, drying and warming him, and had fed him well. More, they had shown him the respect of recognizing that he had news of import to deliver and of trying to comprehend him until he had been able to lead them to the survivors.

His fingers stopped in mid-caress. This one could well and rightly quit him for the blunder he had made, yet in his friendship, he made no accusation. A man could search far and long before finding the like in a fellow human.

The falcon's head turned back toward the door, and he gave a soft call.

The man sat up. Una was lying awake as well and had used her ability to communicate with Storm Challenger to ascertain that Tarlach did not sleep and to request that he come to her.

The mercenary threw a cloak over the tunic the *Tern's* captain had given him and hastened down the narrow passage to the cabin which he knew to be the Holdlady's, staying close to the wall lest he be thrown down as the vessel rolled and shuddered under the battering of the storm once more raging outside.

A sick dread filled his heart. He knew the reception he merited from Una of Seakeep, the justice of her outrage, even to her dismissal of him, though her need for blank shields would probably preclude that last. Intellectually, he accepted the consequences of his misjudgment, but he knew, too, that if she met him with contempt—or, worse, with disappointment—it would break what little remained to him at the moment of spirit. He did not even have the will left to resent that her regard had come to be of such immense importance to him.

He was before her door. He hesitated only a moment before knocking. There was no point to cowardice. This meeting must take place, now or within a few hours. It was better to have it over, to have his fears confirmed or laid to rest, as quickly as possible. Even despair was preferable to this accursed uncertainty...

Una was resting upon her bunk but was still fully clad. She was relaxed now and comfortable, and even in her male attire she looked remarkably winsome. He realized quite irrelevantly that he had never before been inside an intimate chamber of hers.

She motioned to the chest which was apparently part of every such cabin's furnishings and then moved to the foot of the bunk so that she might sit near to him.

His eyes went to her freshly bandaged hands.

"How are they?"

"Perfectly at ease. They suffered no real damage, though I suppose the scarring may be a little worse now.—What of your own hurts?"

He shrugged.

"They are insignificant."

His voice was muffled despite all his effort to conceal the weight riding him, and her fingers moved

quickly to grasp his as they had on the dory when he had believed Storm Challenger lost.

"Tarlach, what agony is on you? I saw it before we parted earlier, and it has doubled in that little time."

His eyes fell, but he did not attempt to conceal his misery. It seemed that he could not, not before her.

"Even now, I lay trouble upon your troubles," he whispered bitterly. "It was mine to shield you, Lady, to see that no peril or discomfort ever came nigh to you, yet I have brought you only danger, hardship, and suffering."

He touched the bandages covering her palms.

"You gave me my life there on the ledge, and it was very nearly bought with your disability and disfigurement. Since that night..."

"I am the rightful ruler of Seakeepdale. I will not abdicate the responsibilities laid on me, not any of them, and I most assuredly cannot refuse the duties binding all human beings."

"I had my duties as well and have failed to perform them adequately."

"In what sense?" she demanded sharply.

"Had I sent Storm Challenger aloft when we boarded the *Dion Star*, we should not have been trapped there. I had feared he might be sighted and identified, thereby revealing the extent of our suspicions, and I judged that a greater danger than the possibility of actual surprise and attack. My misreading of the true situation caused three men to die and inflicted upon us all that we have endured since then."

The woman stared at him, then anger flashed in the green eyes.

"You are either playing the fool, or you are proud to the point that it interferes with your reason," she told him, giving full vent to her irritation. "You erred, perhaps, but we, at least, live, and with the definite knowledge of Ogin's guilt."

"By chance, we live."

"By chance and your good management. Life is a chance.—Can you allow yourself no mistake, Tarlach of the Falconers?"

He averted his face.

"Not with such a charge laid on me."

Una's lips parted. She should have known—he had all but declared it on more than one occasion—but that it should be so deep...

She bowed her head lest he read the recognition in her. Any response to this on her part, whether that of her heart or of cold wisdom, could only serve to increase his pain, to render his position the more difficult. She must and would continue with this interview as if he had not betrayed himself to her, as if they were no more to one another than comrades linked by strong friendship and common cause. Even that was much and too much for one such as he to admit.

The Falconer had come to a very similar decision, and when he faced her again a few seconds later, she found him apparently completely composed and easy of spirit.

"For your understanding, thanks given, my Lady," he said and then seemed to close the matter between them. Of a certainty, she saw with relief, he did not realize how much else he had told her.

The Daleswoman thought he would leave her immediately, but he remained beside her, watching her closely.

"You said but little when I mentioned the action we must take against Ogin," Tarlach said at last. "I would know your thoughts concerning it."

"Even if they are contrary to yours?"

"Even so, Lady. It is active war which we are discussing, not merely defensive guarding, and you speak for your Dale."

She sighed, knowing and hating the confirmation she must give.

"I do not wish to see this ancient land bleeding anew, and I most particularly do not want Seakeep to be the Dale responsible for once more bringing the curse of war upon it."

Her slender body straightened.

"My desire is irrelevant. A terrible evil has taken root here. It must be eradicated, whatever the cost."

The man nodded and then smiled faintly. He felt easier in his mind now. Seeing Una looking so well after her ordeal and hearing her acceptance of his part in it had raised much of the depression which had been crushing his heart, and her support of the course he needs must recommend reassured him, for he, too, had little love for the thought of loosing more bloodshed and violence over High Hallack and had even begun to doubt against the dictates of reason his right to do so.

He rose to his feet. With the double weight lifted from his spirit, his weariness was taking hold of him at last, to the point that he was becoming perceptibly light-headed. He must leave her now, or he would be unable to do so at all.

"I had best go," he told her. "We shall both need our minds fresh when we reach your tower."

"Rest well, my comrade," she replied softly. "You have battled long and hard already for Seakeep's sake."

Chapter 22

All that night, Tarlach lay locked in a sleep so deep that it might almost have been a shade of death itself, utterly oblivious of the lashing of the tempest outside, oblivious of the valiant and at times bitter struggle of the crew against it.

When he woke at last, it was to sunny skies and an ocean once more gentle and loving.

He lay still for several long seconds, allowing himself the nigh unto hedonistic pleasure of orienting himself slowly, as a lord might have done in his own bed in a time of peace, since he, in truth, did know where he was and his every instinct proclaimed the world to be quiet and secure around him.

He rose in the end and dressed himself in the garments laid out on the sea chest, again moving with deliberate slowness.

His muscles gave surprisingly little protest when he tested himself, and he wondered absently if it were possible to condition oneself against abuse even as one did against the rigors of a blank shield's life.

It was the *Tern's* master who greeted the captain when he came out on deck and described for him the storm of the previous night. He then gave him their position relative to their destination.

"You were out so long that we were beginning to fear we would have to carry you into the tower," he finished, grinning broadly.

Tarlach smiled.

"You would have managed to wake me somehow, I think. I would be rather heavy cargo."

He glanced about him.

"Are any of the others up yet?"

"No. You are the first. They should all be stirring shortly."

The captain realized he was famished and requested food, which was brought to him with a speed that declared this need had been anticipated. He and Storm Challenger had scarcely begun eating before his companions from the *Cormorant* joined them.

The afternoon was old when the thrice-welcome sight of the round tower and then the cottages and fields nestled in its protection at last lay open in their eyes. A short while after that sighting, they were ashore.

Tarlach went immediately to the tower, delaying only long enough to place the passengers and crew of the *Tern* under bonds of silence with the exception of Una, who needs must face the nearest kin of those she had seen slain. Seakeep's code would not permit these ones to be unnecessarily kept in concern and suspense or that they learn the truth through rumor, and so the Holdruler went privately to each household to inform its members of their loss and to bid them to hold their grief in silence for a brief time yet.

The Falconer captain summoned Brennan and Rorick to accompany him to what both guessed from his manner was to be a council of no small import. Rufon he called as well, but once he had them assembled, he remained quiet, saying only that Una must be present before they could begin. None pressed him, although the grim cast of his expression, his very silence, bespoke news that was both harsh and significant.

His grey eyes darkened when the Holdlady finally appeared. Her set, too-white face told the difficulty of the task just behind her.

He hastened to her. His fingers closed briefly over her hand. This was a pain he knew too well himself,

and his own heart sickened to think how often she might be compelled to repeat it before the horror that was to come could be brought to an end once more.

Every eye was on him, and the mercenary made no further delay in giving his report of all his party had seen and endured.

He spoke tersely, without any display of emotion, for he did not want to drive his listeners into ill-considered action. The crimes which he described were grave, and grave were the measures necessary to prevent their repetition. It must be reason's decision whether to accept or reject his proposals, reason only, and not an outraged heart.

As had been the case aboard the *Tern*, all were silent a long time after he had finished speaking.

The first to address him was Rufon.

"You believe attack is our only answer?"

"I do, as I have said. To spare this Ogin now would be the equal of nurturing the seeds of plague in your house. A man such as he could never be trusted even if fear of reprisal kept him human for years, for decades. One day, he would strike out again."

The Dalesman looked to his liege.

"This is my thought as well, my Lady, but war is no light matter, as we all know to our sorrow. Do you agree with this?"

"I know the grief which can, which almost certainly must, come of our choosing this day, but the Lord of Ravenfield has made our decision for us. Such work as he has wrought cannot be permitted to continue. I stand by the captain, as I have already declared to him."

The Holdlady turned formally to Tarlach.

"So let it be, Captain. Seakeepdale is at war, and yours is the waging of it. I only would I were able to do more for my people and for yours than send them into peril with my blessing."

"Your part, you will do. As for the rest, the waging of war is my company's work. Our swords would not otherwise have been bound to Seakeep's cause when you perceived the shadow looming over you."

"Seakeep's warriors shall be with you all the same," she told him firmly, "in whatever capacity you choose to use them. We are not a race to permit others to carry horror in our stead."

"This, I know," he replied, smiling for the first time.

"How do you plan to conduct this war, Captain?" the veteran asked him. With their course determined, only the laying of their plans—and bringing them to fruition—remained.

"As quickly as possible," the mercenary answered with a speed which proclaimed the thought he had been giving to the effort ahead of them. "A long campaign would be all but disastrous for Seakeep, but if we can move rapidly enough, we should be able to spare our people and Ravenfield's much slaughter and destruction."

The grey eyes were bright now, piercing like to his falcon's.

"You have said, Lady, that Ogin has no close kin to take Ravenfield after him?"

"None," replied Una.

"Tell me, Rufon, would his Dalesfolk fight stoutly or yield if he were proven slain and a strong force was before their gates?"

The older man thought a while.

"Yield, if they could feel at all sure they would be spared. They have had to accustom themselves to submitting under Ogin and his father before him to a degree that has ever been unacceptable to any other Dale in this area."

"Is he allied with any of the neighboring lords?"

The Holdlady shook her head.

"No. He is not liked and his house is not, it being a fairly new line here whose rulers have not fit in well with our ways. His grandsire married into Ravenfield, you see, and brought in a lowland lady a few years after when the Holdlady died in unsuccessful childbirth." She smiled rather ruefully. "We highlanders are slow to accept change."

"There must have been ties with the original house. Who would have taken Ravenfield had the outside woman not come?"

"Seakeep. We have no claim against that of true marriage, though."

"No, Lady, nor do I suggest pressing such an argument, but it may well help us in winning the Dale and establishing a quick and stable peace there once we take out Ogin if memory is held long here, as you state."

Rufon nodded.

"You intend to go after the wrecker crew before marching on the stronghold?" he asked.

"Aye," Tarlach replied. "Theirs is the crime, and theirs must be the payment. I want them brought down before they can either hide themselves or flee the region entirely. Ogin in particular must be felled quickly. If once he can hole himself in his keep, we shall have a long and bitter struggle in front of us which might well be the death of both Dales."

"Are you not assuming much in building our plans around the possibility of the Holdlord's being with his killers when we strike?" Brennan asked, interrupting for the first time. "To my mind, it would be more likely that he should pass the greater part of his time in comfort in his keep."

"That would normally be true, but he knows that Sea-keep boats will be out seeking the *Cormorant*, and I very much doubt he will trust his murderers not to attack if any of them come uncomfortably close, particularly if the *Dion Star* is still intact."

"If he is not with them?" the lieutenant persisted.

"Then we brace ourselves for a siege and hope it will be short-lived."

"His people are too cowed for us to hope they will rise against him even after learning the cause of our attack," the Holdruler warned.

"Aye, but they should also be incapable of courageous resistance against us, nor do I imagine they would wish to offer such battle."

The Falconer captain strode to the window slit and peered out at the bay for a moment before facing them once more.

"I want the *Tern* repainted grey, mottled over with black and touches of white. Cover both sails and hull in this manner."

"It shall be done," the Dalesman assured him. "The other vessels?"

"Send them out at once as they are. Let Ogin grow accustomed to seeing Seakeep craft. I plan to hold the *Tern* offshore until twilight. The growing dusk coupled with her camouflage should keep her invisible until we are all but upon the wreckers, but if we are seen, I would prefer that their suspicions be lulled concerning our purpose."

"If the *Dion Star* remains?"

"The boat or boats first finding her must explore her, of course. There will be nothing left to arouse suspicion by then, and our people will be able to carry on with their play. I would say she will be gone by now, though, either through the storm or deliberately scuttled after having been stripped."

"The wrecker might come upon our search parties."

He shook his head.

"Ogin will not make that mistake a second time. She will be staying well out during the daylight hours. That is another reason why I wish to penetrate her harbor late, to give her time to get inside herself." He frowned. "There is a slight chance that she will remain at sea altogether, but I believe her crew will prefer the comforts of a snug harbor enough to have their will in that matter. She is designed for quick raiding, not long-term dwelling, and the ocean is still unsettled enough to make staying aboard her unpleasant unless she be secured in a place of good shelter."

"Perhaps she will wait until full dark before seeking her base," Rorick suggested.

"I think not. She is rather too big to risk running the Cradle at night."

"So is the *Tern* ."

Tarlach nodded.

"We must be inside before then ourselves."

He fell quiet a short while as he envisioned the attack in his own mind.

"We shall have to strike quickly and conquer quickly. Ogin's men know that harbor intimately. If we give them time to maneuver, they could draw us into disaster. The *Tern* is large for work in that bay.

"If it be possible at all, we must prevent anyone from escaping up the cliff to warn the stronghold, or our task there will be the harder. Sending in a landing party simultaneously with our attack should accomplish that."

"Once the wreckers are overcome?" questioned Una.

"We march on the stronghold, bringing any of the killers still living with us and also Ogin's body." His mouth hardened. "That one will never permit himself to be taken living."

"The capture of a keep with the number of warriors the *Tern* can carry is a large assignment even for Falconers," Brennan commented dryly, but his eyes were smiling, for he knew his commander well enough to realize he would have a ready answer to that objection.

Tarlach grinned.

"So it would, Comrade, but the remainder of the fleet shall return home once the mock search is over and sail again for Ravenfield. They should reach the cove some six hours after our arrival, bringing with them supplies and the rest of our company. Seakeep's warriors shall march overland, bringing our horses with them, and meet with us en route.—Perhaps you might suggest the best place for our rendezvous, Lady, Rufon?" he added.

"There are a number of good possibilities," the Dales-man replied. "If I might have a map, my Lady, lest my memory fail me on some point, and the captain can choose from amongst them?"

She herself brought the chart to him, and it did not take long to select the most suitable site.

Tarlach remained looking at the map for several seconds, as if troubled by some thought. At last, he sighed and, raising his eyes, fixed them on the Holdruler.

"The overland column will be comprised of your own soldiers, my Lady. I know it is much to ask, but I would have you march with them."

That brought violent protest from the other three men, but he silenced them impatiently.

"Think, will you? What people would give themselves over to a band of blank shields, even when accompanied by neighboring Dalesfolk? Lady Una rules Seakeepdale, and her house has had the respect of the region for generations. Her presence could go far in convincing the Ravenfield garrison and those they defend to yield quickly to us."

"I will go," Una interjected before further discussion could take place, "but not overland. I sail on the *Tern*."

"Lady..." the commander began.

"Now you think, Captain! Where will a healer serve your wounded best, with them or with another band miles distant?"

For a moment, she feared that he would still deny her, but then his head bowed, albeit all could see that

he gave way most unwillingly. Her skill was simply too great for him to deny his warriors access to it.

All were silent some time after that, then Una glanced at the mercenary leader.

"What if one of our supposed search craft should happen to chance upon the wrecker?" she asked. "She could not pretend not to see her."

He smiled.

"Well asked. It is unlikely but could happen.—She shall hail her and ask if she has seen any sign of the *Cormorant*, as well as making the other inquiries to be expected at such a meeting. Our enemies will most assuredly have a convincing set of answers prepared for such an eventuality."

The Seakeep leaders remained together a long time until the plans for the conducting of their attacks were settled, then they separated, Tarlach going to his Falconers and Una to address her people and prepare the fleet as the captain had instructed.

Chapter 23

It was the middle of the following day before all was at last in readiness and the assault force was preparing itself for departure.

Una came to Tarlach's chamber to go over any final details which might have occurred to him since their last meeting.

He had assumed once more the dark cloak and high helm of his race, and her heart twisted in her breast at the sight of him, although she had known it would be thus. The uniform rendered him stern of appearance and distant.

When she looked into what she could see of his face, however, the feeling of loss left her. The man had not changed with his costume.

They spoke together only a short while—the council of the previous evening had covered just about everything that needed to be discussed—but the mercenary did not seem eager to quit the apartment to join their comrades below, and so she stood beside him, watching the activity boiling around the loading area of the harbor.

Tarlach's eyes went to the vessel they would soon board, and he shook his head in something of wonder.

"Your people have done well," he said to his companion. "I know where the *Tern* is moored, and yet I must half convince myself that I am seeing her. She will be nigh unto invisible to those not expecting her coming."

"I pray it may be so."

He turned away from the window abruptly, as if he could no longer bear the view.

"I would you were not coming with us."

"I must."

"I know, but you are not fit for war despite your ability with a sword."

The woman nodded.

"That, I realize. I shall stay out of the fighting, unless, of course, the issue goes so far against us that I have no option but to defend myself."

The Falconer's hand whitened where it rested against the stone wall.

"It wonders me that you can entrust yourself to my care again."

"I would trust you with my immortal soul," she whispered fiercely.

At that moment, the kitten Bravery squalled and hissed. She had been curled up on the foot of Tarlach's bed where she had climbed after Una had put her down upon entering the room, but now she was on her feet, her little back arched, her ears laid back. Even as she moved, Storm Challenger gave his more formidable battle cry.

The humans whirled about. The air before them was shimmering.

Tarlach put himself between Una of Seakeep and the disturbance. He knew it for what it was, a gate such as he had seen open in the Bower.

There was no escape. He dared not try to force their way through it to the door, and so he drew his sword and, heart pounding, waited to front whatever was to come.

As before, the figure of a woman materialized, approaching them as if from a great distance.

The spirit Una stepped into the room and stood surveying them. The Falconer could not fully read what lay in her expression, but he did not believe anger to be there or even very great surprise. Comprehension, perhaps, and maybe something of impatience.

"Have no fear, Bird Warrior," she said in her oddly pitched voice. "I have come with a warning, not to make further requests of my sister."

He inclined his head in acknowledgment but blocked with his left hand the Holdlady's instinctive move toward the other.

"We bid you welcome in that event, but all the same, it is best that you remain some distance from us. Sit if you will, Lady. There is a chair behind you."

She frowned.

"Is the round tower now yours to command that you give greeting and issue orders to those who come with business to conduct here?"

"The tower, no, but these are my quarters."

The newcomer smiled at that and in smiling seemed well-nigh one with Una of Seakeep.

"I stand corrected, Captain."

Tarlach waited until she was seated. Her expression had grown grave again almost immediately, and he did not doubt that her purpose for coming to them was indeed a serious one.

"You mentioned a warning, Lady," he prompted at last.

She nodded slowly.

"I did.—You have both noted that, unlike the most of High Hallack, there are no active relics of the Old Ones, in this area, that the ruins here are but that and no centers of half-sleeping Power?"

"Aye, this we know."

"It is by no accident but through the individual and collective courage and the determination of those who once lived here that this is true.

"The populace of all this world was larger and richer, far more varied, in those distant days, with many non-human races sharing place with those like to our own kind. Humans held this area, people strong in Power, men and women alike, though the last possessed and wielded it in by far the greater measure.

"An adept dwelled near to them, in a tower he had raised by his arts atop a rock straddling the mouth of a small inlet—"

"The Cradle!" gasped Una.

"Even so.—Like all too many others, he, in his arrogance and his hunger for ever more Power, ever more knowledge, drew upon forces better left untapped, tried gates never meant to open into any living realm such as ours. Because he himself was so dark of spirit, the results of his meddling proved direr than those which cursed so many other places, for himself and for all around him. He called and was answered, not by a thing of the Shadow but by a lord of the true Dark. His stronghold and all within it vanished in a blast of fire and bitter wind in that answering.

"The inhabitants of the region had been forewarned of his experiments and had deduced that trouble only would arise from them, though none had guessed the magnitude of the disaster he would summon. They had united to stop him but had moved a little too late. Before they could act, he had met his doom, and the Dark had been loosed upon the land."

She paused, as if to collect her thoughts, then went on.

"The full horror of what had occurred was soon brought terribly home to them, and they realized this massive evil must be stopped at once or all the world and perhaps other worlds with it were lost. They separated then, the women and the men, each party knowing they would not see the other again.

"The sorceresses fronted that lord of the Dark in their united Power and fought it in such a battle as had not been waged before or ever since in all this realm. In the end, their aim was achieved. They opened a gate into its own place and succeeded in driving it back into it, but in order to seal the passage permanently, they were forced to follow after their foe into that nightmare land. They completed their work and saved our realm, but for them there was no return. They remain, preserved in that dread prison

by their encirclements and maintaining their sanity, which was otherwise lost, by lying in a sleep like to a living death."

"Their men?" Tarlach asked.

"There was the original gate remaining, that which had engulfed the accursed adept and his keep. It had to be closed as well, but it was guarded. The Dark thing had left its Dog to hold the passage. This they had to defeat before they could begin their labor, in the full knowledge that if it could delay them long enough, its master would come, and all they had striven to preserve at such awesome cost would be lost.

"They were already few in number, having been badly decimated by earlier encounters with the adept's hirelings and the lesser things he had drawn to him, and their enemy was forewarned by the vibrations of its master's battle, even then raging in all its fury. It was prepared for trouble and prepared to return it in full measure.

"Most of the attackers perished in the assault, but the handful remaining drove it back into its gate and, with their last strength, sealed the entrance, dying to a man of that effort and the wounds they had sustained in the battle preceding it."

"Their children?" the human woman asked. "There must have been many too young to fight."

"None were left. All of them had been slaughtered, along with those tending them, in the first wild rampage of that dark force. It was this massacre, the manner of the killing, which had alerted the adults to the nature of that which they and their realm faced."

Both her listeners said nothing for some while after she finished speaking.

"A dread tale and a proud one," the Falconer responded at last, "but how does it affect us save as an example of courage?"

"Because those men, for all their bravery and sacrifice, had not been strong enough to succeed fully in their aim. The Dog was not sent back through that passage but was, rather, trapped within it. It was weakened by the wounds it had taken and further reduced by the lack of sustenance over the interminable ages since its imprisoning, but now blood has been shed at and around the Cradle, and pain and fear and anger have been released and the blood-lust and greed of the murderers. The Dog has fed well and tries its bonds. Only a little more of such offerings, a very little, and it will break free once more. When it does, be assured that its master will not be long in following."

Her eyes met and held each of theirs in turn.

"There is no company now extant possessing and practiced enough in the wielding of such united Power as to be able to chain those things again. Even Estcarp's Witches at the height of their strength would have been hard-pressed to do it, and they have not yet nearly recovered after their moving of the mountains. No individual human being can hope to withstand either of them. If that gate opens and they gain entrance here, this realm will see a riving such as it did not endure during the worst days of that ancient war."

"Do you warn and in the same breath tell us that we are foredoomed?" the Falconer asked. "Was this the meaning of your statement to Una that our time was short when you tried to draw her to your will?"

"It was not, to answer your second question first, the peril I foresaw then came of reason only and was

of a more general nature, stemming from the disturbance of old guards and old balances taking place all around us. This other situation has just come to my attention, for only the most recent slaughter at the Cradle made of it a threat sufficient to activate my danger senses. Before that, I was as ignorant of it as you."

Her eyes measured him, as if wondering if he was in any sense fit to carry the charge fate had laid on him.

"No, I do not say you are foredoomed, but take care to end this man's evil quickly, then seek aid from both the Amber Lady and the Horned Lord—who is her con-sort, Falconer—to help cleanse the place and set secure seals upon it.

"Above all, Una, my sister, see to it that this rock is not again used as an altar to receive the blood and the lives of butchered men."

Once more, she became still. Her look was sorrowful when she gave her attention back to the mercenary.

"I have no certain information for you or yours, Bird Warrior, but I am possessed of knowledge not open to you of shorter memory, and I can tell you this much. The curse which you have so long feared may someday relatively soon be brought to an end, either that or come to life once more. For my part, I believe it shall be the former since many races populate this realm and no other is as susceptible to that doom as your own."

She saw him start and nodded.

"Your history is known to me. It was the Shadow and the destruction its coming caused which was responsible for the loss of so much of our world's lore, and I am what would be had we been spared that plague. Your people are old in this realm, one of the earliest to reach it, and you should be one of the best fitted to live with it. You have been blighted, and now the shade of extinction looms over you all. I say this to you, though, as a gate once brought you to this place, yet another may be your saving, or the saving of those and that which is best amongst you."

She turned to Una.

"From you, sister, I crave pardon for my earlier, harsh words. You were right to fear what was of the Dark. Only believe that I had not seen the supposed solution to my hunger which I proposed as such until I pondered our break. I wronged you, and yours is the right to shun me, yet our association is old, the friendship of two lonely little girls and, later, of two lonely women. I would not see that shattered even for so strong a cause."

"It is not," the Holdlady replied firmly. "The place you have ever held in my heart is yours still."

"Thanks given, dear sister, for that and for all your regard. We may not meet again, and I would wish you now fortune in the struggle ahead and fortune in your life, be it long or very short."

With that, almost without warning, the alien Una rose to her feet and stepped into her passage gate. In another moment, she was gone from their sight.

Tarlach held the Holdruler against him, as if fearing she might even now be swept into the closing gate. Only when all sign of it had vanished from the chamber did he release her.

"Una, I would have you march with your people..."

Her eyes locked with his, and there would have been more yielding in the heartstone of Seakeep's mountains.

"Under no circumstances will I allow you to take that weight of responsibility upon yourself. We share it between us, you as my war leader, I because it is my Dale and my will that presses this war, and we shall witness and share the consequences of our warring since continue with it we must." Her voice softened. "Would I survive long if the Dark were loosed, Tarlach?"

"No. If the gate opens, we are all slain," he conceded. "Soon or late, it would swallow us."

"Then say no more. I, for one, prefer to know and meet my fate at once."

His shoulders squared.

"It is time to go.—Would you have me tell the others this news?"

Una thought for a while.

"No," she said in the end. "Not my folk, at least. They must fight in any event. Why throw this added terror on them when naught they can do will alter what we risk?" She paused. "It may be otherwise with your comrades. They will press the attack at the Cradle itself."

He shook his head.

"Like you, I would not blight their spirit with the dread of a possibility over which they have no control. Let them remain free to concentrate on fighting men without having to bear the fear of waking ultimate evil."

The pair found all in readiness when they entered the great hall. They quickly made their farewells to those who were not to accompany them and then started for the door and the vessel which would carry them to battle and, perhaps, to the deciding of their world's fate.

Elfthorn was standing with his crew at the entrance of the tower, but instead of merely wishing them fair fortune as did the rest, he matched his pace with theirs.

"A boon if you will, Captain."

"What would you have of us, friend?" Tarlach asked, already guessing what he would say.

"A crewman's place aboard the *Tern*. I told you Gunwold and I were rivals and that there was no hatred between us, but I did not say that we had lived as fosterlings on one bark. I would avenge his death and avenge also the suffering this Lord of Ravenfield has caused you both, who gave me and mine our lives and then received us so kindly."

"The place is yours and a place with the boarding party as well. Your strength and courage will be welcome to us in the fight ahead."

Chapter 24

"Tarlach stood on the deck of the *Tern* watching Ravenfield's harsh, beautiful coast. He had lain aside his helmet once more, and the cloak in which he was wrapped was one such as any of Seakeep's mariners might have worn. With their mission so near its crisis, he would do nothing which might announce his true intentions to his enemies. Most particularly, he did not want to reveal the presence of Falconers aboard this vessel before the time of attack was upon them.

He had felt somewhat nervous at first, remembering his short-lived but paralyzing panic aboard the *Dion Star*, but the unpleasant reaction had not recurred, and he felt sure now that he was free of it.

All the same, his spirits were low. If his plan failed, there could be months of slaughter before the Dale he had come to love. That was a dark prospect and one on which none of his company liked to dwell. Of that, he was certain.

He could be sure of little else regarding his comrades' feelings about Seakeep. That they liked the holding he knew, but he would not be greatly surprised to find that all or the most of them fully shared his own attachment to it. The power of these highlands was very great...

He shook his head. Perhaps he was but covering, excusing, his other, greater weakness by trying to lay something of this outrider of it upon the rest as well.

His eyes closed. The terror he had been battling surged through his defenses, gripping him so powerfully that he had to grasp the rail to keep himself from doubling over under its lash.

What did any of this matter if the slaughter soon to take place near the Cradle should prove the final feeding that demon Dog needed? He believed the spirit Una. He believed the sincerity of her warning and the accuracy of her reading of the threat looming over them all, and he trembled that this assault he commanded might open the gate to doom for High Hallack and perhaps for the whole of this world. It was too much. Too much responsibility for any man to have to bear...

"Tarlach?"

His head turned at the soft call. So engrossed had he been in his thoughts that he had not heard the Holdlady's light step.

"It was bad enough before," he told her, paying her the compliment of not concealing the fear that he felt. She endured it as well, after all. How should they not quail? No sane being could face this challenge without dread.

"We did rightly to keep this from our peoples," she said. "I have no experience in the waging of war, but I

think the knowing would only reduce their ability to fight even against men." She drew a deep breath. "Should we go on with it, Tarlach? Una told us to stop Ogin, but the cost could be the ending of us all."

"We must," he replied firmly. "His continued existence and that of his butchers must in itself feed the Dog since they have gone so far in rousing it. If I did not feel certain of that in my very bones, I should not risk a contest in the cove, even if it meant letting both him and the wreckers escape our vengeance."

His head lowered, and he stared unseeing into the ocean.

"That is one of the great torments of our situation. So much rides upon us, and yet we have little or no choice as to the action we must take."

The captain shivered and huddled deeper into his cloak as a sharp blast of wind bit through the heavy material as if it were no more than a layer of summer lawn.

He glanced skyward in some alarm but found no threat there. This cold breeze was but part of the rapidly advancing fall and not any signal of a coming storm.

Una shared his thought.

"It looks as if winter will be early this year and harsh when it does come."

"Aye."

"If the fighting drags on any length of time..."

"It is not my intention that it should drag on," Tarlach responded rather too sharply.

He gripped himself.

"Your pardon, Lady.—Try to rest easy on that point at least. Assuming fortune favors us at all, we should be able to bring Ravenfield to terms before the Ice Dragon bites at us in earnest."

He raised his eyes to the shore and studied the great cliffs somberly.

"Prepare yourself now, my Lady. There is only a little time left before our assault must begin."

Both Seakeep leaders were on deck once more as the small vessel glided noiselessly toward the deadly cove.

Tarlach's heart hammered in the wild, sharp manner he always associated with imminent battle, and he silently sent forth the short, intense prayers of a man who might soon be seeking admission into the Halls of the Valiant.

A few minutes more. Only a few...

The all-too-familiar curve of the headland screening the wreckers' harbor came suddenly into view, only the tip of it, but he knew it at once. Its form was not likely to fade from his memory for a long time to come.

Others came up from below, Falconers and crew. Working in a silence as deep as death, they loosed from her bindings the launch which had been riding the *Tern's* deck like some great barnacle and, when she was fully manned, lowered her into the sea. She would follow after the larger vessel, landing her cargo of warriors to secure beach and cliff while the mother ship engaged the black wrecker.

The evening was well on, and the darkening sky stained the ocean beneath a deep grey. Tarlach comforted himself with the thought that it would take eyes as keen as his falcon's to spot the two tiny craft against such a background. Their worst danger lay in skylining themselves, and even that risk was

minimized by the artful mottling which broke the outline of the sails.

The daylight, although fading, was still more than sufficient to give them a clear view of the tiny bay.

Nothing blocked its entrance now; the *Dion Star* had vanished as if she had never been.

No visible barrier lay between them and the harbor, the captain amended in his mind. The Cradle remained, a dire menace waiting under its concealing cover of water for its next victim.

He shuddered despite himself. With the tide high as it was now, scarcely an abnormal ripple troubled the surface to reveal its lair to even the most practiced eye.

His thoughts did not stay long with the obstacle nature herself had set there. That was the concern of the mariners. His work was before him.

The wrecker vessel was in and apparently moored for the night. She was resting in the center of the harbor, held in place by her anchor, and her sails were furled. A few men moved about her deck with the casual air of those who anticipate no trouble from weather or their own kind. The others were most likely below. None were on the beach, which was almost covered by the tide, and he did not believe there would be any in whatever shelter they had constructed for themselves on the windswept cliff above. Of sentries, he saw no sign, nor had he expected to find them. Life here had been too secure and unruffled for anyone to feel much inclined to court discomfort in apparently needless guarding.

The Falconer's hand was on his sword. They were very near now. How much closer would they be able to come to their quarry without being sighted?

No farther! One of the seamen aboard the wrecker looked suddenly in their direction and stared as if he believed madness had seized his mind, then he shouted the alarm to his comrades.

The *Tern* was in the channel, almost parallel to the Headboard, by that time.

Tarlach's mouth was dry. Would she pass? This was the route the wrecker followed, but the Seakeep ship was somewhat larger and deeper of draught.

The *Tern* was through, sailing freely in the bay. Without pause or delay, she bore down upon her prey.

The defenders strove desperately to ready their craft for combat, but the attack came too swiftly. The invaders were upon them before they could do much more than weigh anchor.

The captain recalled all too well the efficiency of their archers. These were felled at once by his own bowmen, then eager hands made fast the two ships, and his warriors leaped to the killers' deck.

The fighting was furious, vicious, for the wreckers knew the fate awaiting them if they were taken, and Tarlach had not misread Ogin's power to induce men of his own ilk to do battle for him. With his presence to rally them, they fought as they might not otherwise have been capable of doing.

The Falconers warred as was their wont, hard, cleanly, and with consummate ability, though they did conduct their assault with more fire than was usual with them. The crimes of which their opponents were guilty were particularly repugnant to them, as they were to all who frequently rode the waves, and each of them felt a personal need to avenge the *Cormorant's* death and the sufferings their commander had endured in its aftermath.

For Elfthorn, hatred and the will to vengeance were paramount, although never did he permit himself to grow careless or wild in his desire to exterminate the renegades who had betrayed and slaughtered the crew of the *Dion Star* .

He used skill and raw strength in equal measure. Tarlach saw him drive his blade through the breadth of a man's body, lift him on the sword, and then cast him over the side as if he had been no more than a small ham gone putrid.

That was one of the few coherent glimpses the captain managed to get of any of his companions during the course of the engagement. He had been the first to leap aboard the killer vessel, springing into the very midst of those clustered on her deck to resist the assault. He succeeded in drawing their attention for that moment from his comrades, allowing the first of them to gain their target relatively unscathed, but he himself was surrounded, and so he remained.

His position was a bad one. The men before him, around him, were capable fighters, and his own comrades could not break through their massed ranks with any speed. The wreckers appreciated that whatever little hope they had lay in their ability to support one another, and they battled mightily against the newcomers' efforts to separate them into smaller, more readily dispatched groups. Their determination gave Tarlach neither hope of release nor respite in his struggle to remain alive in their midst.

As seconds wore into minutes without help reaching him, his situation grew ever more desperate. No man could shield himself simultaneously on every side, and he knew his death would soon claim him.

He parried a thrust coming at him from the right. It turned from his trunk but sliced through his upper arm. A moment later, he was struck in the back. It was a glancing blow, readily deflected by his mail, but it unbalanced him, leaving him helpless for a moment before the one facing him.

The wrecker lunged, but his wolfish grin of triumph turned to a scream of terror and agony as Storm Challenger dove, a fury incarnate so rending face and eyes that his ravaged victim died gladly in the next moment on the Falconer's blade.

The press against him eased abruptly. Brennan and Elf-thorn each forced their way through to him, the latter using both the power of his arm and his sharp sword to throw his foes down.

Now Tarlach was able to look about him, seeking the one man his hate demanded that he kill.

He soon located him and began cutting his way through the struggling throng in order to confront him.

The Lord of Ravenfield was a doughty swordsman in his own right, and several warriors had gone down by his hand before the mercenary leader was able to reach and challenge him.

Ogin did not know who it was that he faced. He did not even suspect that anyone had escaped from the *Cormorant* , and, like most of those not of their race, he could not tell one Falconer from the next and so did not recognize Tarlach as the warrior who had ridden escort to Una the day they had met near the Square Keep.

He did read all too clearly the cold, implacable purpose in the mercenary. His death was determined in those half-shadowed eyes, and his own heart chilled. He knew he was not likely to walk away from this encounter.

Even without the purpose that seemed to be driving his opponent, Ogin recognized that the disadvantage was his. He was no longer fresh. He had been wounded in the earlier righting, and now pain and lost blood combined to give a still-sharper edge to the Falconer's basically greater skill.

For all the bitterness of his hate, Tarlach did not play with his foe once he realized the victory would be his, for that was not the way of his kind, and they strove together only a few minutes in all before the wrecker lord fell to his sword, dying before his body struck the deck.

The few remaining killers were quickly brought down after that, none seeking quarter and no quarter being offered them.

On shore, too, the battle had raged, although on a much smaller scale. The captain had erred in believing no guards would be stationed on the cliffs, but fortune had been rarely lenient, and the watchmen were there only to defend against possible damage to the perishable cargo by vermin or other wild intruders should the storehouse be left unattended. All had been asleep at the time of the assault, and the invaders were up the cliff and upon them before they realized anything was seriously amiss. They died rapidly, without inflicting much of the damage which had potentially been theirs to wreak.

All experienced something of a surprise, almost a disappointment, that the long-anticipated engagement should be ended so soon, but that feeling passed off even as it was born, and the mercenaries raised their swords high in the victory salute of their race.

It was a salute twice given, each man first lifting his own weapon, then lowering it again while the blades of those unable to wield them were held aloft. There were several of these last, for the victory had not come without its price, some belonging to the slain, the rest to the gravely wounded.

Chapter 25

"That gesture released Una. She had watched the battle from the *Tern* as Tarlach had bidden, in an agony of fear for the Falconer captain that overrode even her disgust at the slaughter she was witnessing. Now that it was ended, she wanted only to fly to him, to feel his arms around her and to assure herself that he was truly all right.

No such display was possible. She held herself to the degree of haste and purpose appropriate to her rank and her healer's art.

She crossed over to the bloodstained wrecker, accepting Santor's steadying hand, and started for the group of men comprised of Elfthorn and the Falconer officers.

The woman's pace quickened when she saw the blood on the commander's shoulder. When she reached him, she pulled aside the rent leather.

"Clean and bind this," she told Brennan crisply, although she breathed an inner sigh of relief; the wound was no more than a gash, long but not deep.

She turned back to the captain.

"Where have you laid your sore wounded?"

"On the deck over there until we can see to them, all but one man on the cliff. They can be moved to the *Tern* and brought home once their injuries have been dressed."

Una's eyes flickered to Storm Challenger, but her question regarding him was spoken merely to conceal her gift. She knew already that the war bird was unhurt despite his bloodied appearance.

Two of his kind did need her aid, as did a number of the human blank shields, and she delayed no longer in going to them. She had no fear as to her reception. Falconers knew how to take care of battle damage, but a healer of her competence was not often to be found, and she knew they would welcome her help for their more serious cases rather than merely submit to her right to give it.

As for the dead, the mercenaries' own would be brought back to Seakeep. Their enemies would be buried here in a single grave, all but Ogin, whose body they would take with them to Ravenfield to stand as proof of his death.

Because the sole casualty resulting from the assault on the cliff was too gravely wounded to be moved to the *Tern* as he was, the Holdlady accompanied the Falconers and Elfthorn when they went ashore to inspect the beach and warehouse and examine the materials stored therein.

She was with her patient a long while, and when she at last rose to her feet, it was with drooping shoulders and a lowered head. She had succeeded in making him comfortable, in inducing the sleep which had, astonishingly, eluded him, but healing was beyond her ability or, she believed, beyond the ability of any other. A spear had pierced him, slicing the bottom of the stomach and then traveling obliquely through his body so that it cut his intestines not once but through several folds.

His falcon sat on the shelf above the bunk where he had been laid. She, too, knew the nature of the wound, had known even before the woman examined him, and she was whimpering so piteously that her grief wrung Una's heart. Would she do this to Bravery if she should somehow be slain? she wondered. Would she suffer so if she should lose the kitten?

She took the bird up on her arm, stroking her feathers, giving what comfort she could, which was only that of sympathy and understanding, but she did not attempt to persuade her to leave the place with her. These two would remain together until the man died. After that, she understood from Tarlach, the falcon would be united with another warrior following a period of mourning if she would choose to accept one.

Since there was nothing more she could do for him, the Daleswoman committed the dying mercenary to the care of his comrades and prepared to return to the beach and then to the *Tern*. If there was no further help she could give to this man, there were several aboard her vessel who would profit well from her skills.

Elfthorn helped settle the wounded and arrange for their care during the voyage back to Seakeep harbor, then reported to the Falconer commander that all was in readiness, although he knew it would be some time yet before they would be able to depart. Tarlach had forbidden the *Tern* to try running the Cradle before she had at least the light of a perceptible dawn to guide her.

The merchant captain did not envy him that decision. Several of the wounded were heavily hurt, two to the extent that the delay in reaching permanent quarters and full care could possibly ensure their deaths. He, himself the commander of a closely bound unit, readily understood how such an order could—must—tear a man, as he knew that no other could ease or lift the burden of it from the Falconer.

Tarlach's eyes strayed to the place where the *Tern* was moored. He wondered how those aboard her

were doing and if the gravely hurt men would survive the night and the voyage home. The next several hours were critical for them, he knew.

It had been a costly engagement for one of its magnitude, he thought. Seven warriors were dead, and twice that number were significantly wounded, two of them grievously. The company would not remain an effective unit for long if it continued to sustain losses like that.

He sighed. At least they had the good fortune to be pledged to Seakeepdale. Many other holds did not treat so well blank shields felled in their cause, but they had no fear of neglect from Una's people.

His pulse leaped suddenly, but then he frowned. It was hours yet before even the first precursor of dawn should be visible. Why should the two ships out there be so readily visible?

Why should the sky be brightening in the west?

He knew the answer in his sick heart, and the next moment confirmed it. A lurid red glow materialized out of the blackness above the Cradle. It quickly strengthened, first into light and then into fire, an evil, lifeless fire that seemed to defy nature, aye, and possibility itself.

The others were aware of it as well. None of them suspected as yet that they were watching the coming of doom, but no one could doubt that this was a happening of great Power and that its origin was not likely to be any wellspring of the Light. They were afraid, but for now, they drew sword and waited. Even the falcons did not yet know the true scope of this disaster as they screamed their challenge to the Dark.

He saw her then, the Lady of Seakeep, walking purposefully down the beach. She did not pause until she had reached the edge of that place where the land stretched farthest out into the sea. There, she stopped and stood facing the burning gate opening above the Cradle.

"Una, no!"

The Falconer scarcely realized he had begun to run until he came to a halt beside her.

"What do you think to do?" he demanded harshly.

"Whatever I can. My sister told me I had a store of Power—"

"Sleeping and untrained!"

"The attempt must be made, Tarlach. At the least, it will be better to die trying to stop that thing than merely cowering in terror before it.—By the Maid and Matron!"

Within that unnatural fire they could see something, or the suggestion of something, a great, misshapen head that appeared to be all jaws, jaws filled with row upon row of fangs. Even from here, they were clearly visible.

Tarlach's eyes closed but opened again in the next instant. His terror would not permit him to shut out sight of the monstrosity.

The Dog was not yet free. He could see it struggling, fighting to rip apart the last thin shields holding it away from the realm of life it had longed for so great an expanse of time to ravage. Soon now, probably

within minutes, it would have achieved its freedom.

Una of Seakeep looked up at him.

"You should be with your comrades," she told him gently. "Go back to them now."

"My oath is to you."

"I release you, Tarlach. This goes beyond anything you plighted yourself to face." There was no hope of life in that, but she might perhaps win him a few more seconds.

"There is more binding us than an oath."

"There is more," she agreed quietly.

"Then grant me this, that if I am to meet my death on this beach, it shall at least be at your side."

He turned once more to the sea and the doom growing ever stronger there. He would die, but it would be in Una's cause, striving to defend her in the short time remaining to him. Above all, he vowed to himself that he would give her an easier death than she would meet from that horror beyond the gate, that he would give her fine spirit a true and clean release.

Storm Challenger and the other falcons he tried to dismiss, for their wings might win life or extend life for them, but all held fast to the bonds uniting them with their comrades. They, too, would attempt to stand their world's cause against this thing of the Dark.

The gate was giving way!

He was startled to see Una spring forward and only barely restrained himself from throwing himself after her when he realized the Holdlady was still in her place beside him.

The spirit Una!

The one his lady had named sister moved through the waves, on the waves. She advanced steadily until she had crossed half the distance between the shore and the opening gate. There, she stopped.

For one instant, she stood, still as a pillar of stone, then she sprang even as the gate tore open. It was not a seeming woman that leaped forth but light itself, fire, a blistering arrow of green flame which ripped into that dread passage and struck squarely that which sought to emerge from it.

The night exploded in light and sound as green flame and red fought together on the sea and above it, each struggling to devour the other. Thunder rent the sky, and the air around them turned, not hot, but bitterly cold.

At last it was over, and whether the battle had lasted minutes or many hours, none of the watchers would ever be able to say of his own self. The superphysical lights vanished, the red abruptly, the green first weaving itself again and again through the air above the Cradle before fading gently into oblivion, leaving behind it only the rich velvet blackness of their world's night.

Una sagged against Tarlach. She was weeping softly.

"We would not grant her the life she craved, and yet she spent her life thus for us."

The man gave her no reply save to hold her closer to him, but it was not the excess of brilliance they had endured which set his eyes streaming.

Chapter 26

It was some minutes before he trusted himself enough to turn quietly away from the ocean. With his arm still about the woman in support and comfort, he started walking back toward his comrades.

Elfthorn hastened forward to take charge of the Hold-lady, but the glare Tarlach fixed on him made him quickly step away again, nor did the Falconer leader remove his arm from her until Una herself straightened and took her own weight back upon herself.

Explanation had to be made, and the Daleswoman described the warning they had received from their spirit informer and detailed their reasoning for keeping this intelligence from their warriors even while she apologized for having done so. Of her relationship with the other Una prior to that last, fateful visit, she did not speak.

Only a few questions were directed at her despite the similarity between the spirit and herself, and she was soon able to take her leave of the fighters and seek the rest her body and mind and soul so greatly needed.

There was no such mercy shown to Tarlach. His comrades were angry over his silence, and he knew that if he did not satisfy them, the company would cease to exist as a unit with the conclusion of this commission.

Patiently, he reiterated what Una had already told them of their reasons for keeping the news of the true danger they faced to themselves.

"What would your knowing have accomplished?" he asked in the end. "We could not have fought that thing, and the fear of waking it would only have rendered you less able against those who did lie within the scope of our ability to defeat.—By the Eyrie, what do you imagine drove me to throw myself into the middle of those wreckers as I did if not my dread that any delay in concluding the battle might rouse the Dog? Fortune was rarely kind to let me come out of that one alive."

"All right, Tarlach," Rorick said hastily. "I suppose you are right, but that thing put the Ice Dragon's chill on all of us."

"You should have been feeling the way I did," he muttered.

That brought a sympathetic laugh from more than one of his companions. The lieutenant smiled as well, but his eyes remained somber.

"What connection did that spirit thing have with the Lady Una? Their resemblance proclaims that there needs must be some association."

A silence was on the assembled warriors. Their captain's possible answer to that, the depth of his knowledge concerning it, was a matter troubling to most of them.

"Am I supposed to be the Holdlady's confidant as well as her hired sword that she should discuss such a subject with me?" he responded irritably.

"Perhaps you are."

That came from one of the outermost of those gathered around him. Tarlach's head snapped toward the man.

His already ragged temper broke.

"The Lady Una shared the knowledge of our peril. I know too well what she endured since we learned that, and it is logical to assume that there was some sort of feeling between her and the being who saved us. If we are not capable of acting with compassion, then I do not know what titles we may lay on ourselves, but humanity cannot be numbered among them!"

His eyes swept his companions. There had been enough truth in that to set their minds at rest, and he took hold of himself. It would do no good and perhaps might cause much harm to press the question further.

Pleading his very real and apparent weariness, he separated from them. Tarlach found a sheltered spot near the cliff wall and drew his cloak around himself. Within minutes, he had sunk into the deep, dreamless sleep of exhaustion.

Brennan woke him shortly after dawn.

"Sorry, Tarlach, but you had best be moving."

"The fleet is in?" he asked as he sat up, rubbing his eyes.

"Aye."

"How does the landing progress?"

"Well. All should be ashore by the time you have eaten."

"The *Tern* is gone?"

The lieutenant nodded.

"With the first light as you commanded."

"Excellent.—The wounded?"

"They are all living. We can credit Una of Seakeep for that."

His commander came to his feet.

"Good news. I had not really expected it."

He studied the busy scene around him with satisfaction.

"It goes well indeed. We will move out as soon as everything is fully ordered."

Falconers fought and traveled mounted whenever possible, but, as they functioned effectively at sea, so, too, could they perform well as infantry. Their march over Ravenfield's wild highlands was swift and smooth, untroubled by either natural difficulty or human opposition.

They kept careful watch against the last but had little actual fear of it. The remoteness and rugged nature of their route would have made discovery unlikely in any Dale, and Ogin's people had been trained to keep within their village and the circle of cultivated land around it. They had no reason to wander out so far, and few of them would have had the desire to do so even if they possessed the courage or the folly to thus defy their lord. The company could be nigh unto certain that they would be able to pass through unsighted and unhindered.

Such excellent progress did they make that they reached the rendezvous site somewhat before schedule and were forced to conceal themselves nearby until the Dale unit arrived to join with them.

Their wait was not long. The column out of Seakeep, Rufon at its head, had been able to hold a fast pace as well, and the two forces were united hours in advance of their proposed meeting time.

With their army at full strength at last, the invaders no longer buried themselves in the wild lands on Raven-field's outskirts but moved on a straight course toward their goal, bearing themselves in battle readiness.

So swiftly did they march that the villagers and garrison had no warning of their coming until they broke suddenly upon the Dale's pasture lands in the early morning as the herdsmen were leading out their animals to feed.

The Ravenfield warriors and the people nearest their keep were able to take refuge within, but then had to flee, leaving their livestock and goods behind. Whatever stronghold contained in the way of foodstuffs would have to suffice for the duration of the siege.

Then began day upon weary day of talk as Una and Tarlach strove to negotiate Ravenfield's surrender.

Ogin's body was displayed to prove that there was no longer any need for either fear or loyalty to him, and the story of the *Cormorant's* death and her survivors' escape was told in explanation of this assault.

Oaths were sworn that the lives of the Dalesfolk and garrison would be spared and that there would be no pillage of lands or goods, a fact borne out by their treatment of those who had been unable to gain the shelter of the keep.

It was a difficult task, and for a time it seemed they would fail in it, but the captain had judged rightly the effect of Una's presence, the weight and power of her word and the respect in which her house was held, and in the end, the banner of Ogin's line was lowered in admission of defeat.

Moments later, the great gate opened, and the steward came forward. He stood before the stronghold, waiting.

Seakeep's lady looked to the mercenary commander.

"Let us go to him, Captain."

"That is not my place," he replied curtly, mindful of his comrades' earlier suspicions.

Una's eyes fell.

"You are right. It would not be well to thus risk both Seakeep's leaders."

Tarlach and those of his Falconers near enough to them to hear the woman's low-voiced reply stiffened as if struck, but the captain saw from her expression that Una had not reproached him. She considered his statement a rebuke, and she accepted it as just.

"Forgive me that," he said. "As your military commander, I needs must accompany you even if it were not my duty to guard you."

"Will you have an escort?" Brennan asked him.

"No. That might frighten them back behind their walls. We would never budge them then without a long fight.

Have the archers stay within range and at ready, though," he added grimly, "just in case thought and word are not the same with them."

He raised his hand in a gesture of farewell, and he and the Holdruler mounted their waiting horses.

The Falconer kept pace with her and rode at her right in violation of custom for so solemn an occasion, but he wanted to be able to use his shield to best effect to cover her should those in the keep send a shower of darts at them.

That ride seemed to take an eternity, short though it was in actual distance. Both were acutely conscious of their vulnerability to any attack despite the falcons soaring high above and the bowmen set to fire at the first signal of danger to their leaders.

There was no treachery and no mishap. They met with the steward, and after yet again assuring him that his charges would come to no harm from either her people or her blank shields, Una of Seakeep received Raven-field's surrender and formally took power over the defeated Dale into her hands.

Chapter 27

Some time was spent in ordering the captured Dale under the stewardship of the man Una named to assume that role, but these were people accustomed to accepting the commands of others, and the transition of rule was accomplished more rapidly and completely than might otherwise have been the case.

Once the Seakeep leaders felt certain all would remain quiet in Ravenfield, they departed for home, leaving a small, temporary garrison behind.

The enthusiasm of their reception was little short of astonishing, and the Falconers were amazed in no small degree to find that the welcome given them fully equaled that accorded the warriors native to the Dale, for such was not usually the case. Those who hired their swords out for gold could expect little

more than gold as their reward, however hard or well they fought.

For the Lady Una, there would be small respite from strain in the weeks and months ahead. She sent couriers mounted upon swift steeds to inform each of the neighboring Dales of what had taken place in Ravenfield and of the events which had brought it all to pass. These same riders also carried her assurances that she had no designs for waging any war beyond that which Ogin's crimes had forced upon her.

The Holdruler sighed wearily as she watched the last of her emissaries depart. Assurances were easily given but far less readily accepted, and she realized full well that it would be long months before any of the domains around her relaxed again. She had already extended her agreement with the Falconers to cover the dangerous period ahead when fear of attack might grow into panic and move some of the other Dales into active hostility against Seakeep if there was no strong force on hand to deter them.

Her jade eyes darkened. They needed the mercenaries more than ever, and she hoped to the depths of her soul that she would not mishandle her proposal to Tarlach, for that could only result in his immediate departure and his warriors with him, whatever his promise of service, yet neither she nor her house could lay claim to honor or to humanity if she did not make him this offer.

A great sadness filled her at the thought of him. It could have been so good between them if he were a man of any other race, but she accepted that all the richness which might have been must be allowed to wither and die stillborn.

Had she been a girl, buoyed by the confidence and intolerance of youth, she might have expected him to follow his own wish and join his life with hers, damning an old and narrow custom, and she would of a certainty have reacted with anger when the failure of his courage prevented him from acting in accordance with the dictates of his heart.

As a woman, she could do neither. For a Falconer, the brotherhood he shared with his comrades was everything. Apart from the strange friendship they shared with their war birds, they quite literally had nothing else. Even the Eyrie, which had been their pride, was now gone. He loved Seakeepdale, aye, but he would really value actual possession of it only insofar as it might offer a secure and fitting seat for his kind.

Could she expect that a relationship with her would be sufficient in itself, that it could take the place of all he would lose to gain it? Until she was able to answer that and answer it affirmatively, she must hold her peace. She loved Tarlach far too much and respected him too much to do that to him. Her eyes closed. She could not risk that he might in the end come to hate her or she to pity him. No wanting or need of hers was worth that.

One vow she did make. Tarlach of the Falconers was her true lord, and however hopeless was her longing to join her life with his, he would remain her only lord. She would set no other man over Seakeep in his stead, and if she thereby doomed her direct line, so let it be. She would never voluntarily carry another's seed or accept another's caress.

The Falconer captain received with no little surprise the Holdlady's request that he attend her in her own chamber at his earliest convenience, but he went to her at once.

It was not without some nervousness. Neither of them had mentioned again the declaration they had made on that Ravenfield beach with a terrible and seemingly inevitable death only moments from claiming them. He had not wanted to set out upon his final road without having told her that, and he still felt the

thrill of joy which had sprung to life in him despite the doom shadowing them when she had acknowledged a like feeling for him, but what was possible to admit in dying could not find fulfillment in life. He had believed, in truth still believed, they both accepted that.

His eyes fell and raised again. Of course, they accepted it.

They were not without some solace. They had been working more closely together than ever since their return to the tower and would do so for many months to come. They could take pleasure in that association, and if the ending of it would be painful, well, that they would have to face when the moment of separation was drawing upon them. They need not dwell on it now.

Una answered his knock with a quickness which told that she had been waiting for it.

Tarlach looked curiously around her apartment, not knowing what he had expected and feeling slightly disappointed because it fitted so well his concept of the private quarters of any highly born woman.

The furniture was more delicately fashioned than he had seen elsewhere in the tower, and some of the pieces differed to a greater or lesser extent from their counterparts in his own chamber to meet her different needs.

The various hangings and bed dressings were feminine in character, gracefully blending intricate floral displays with scenes depicting breathtakingly real-looking animals and birds. A frame containing a partly worked piece of needlecraft stood in the strong light by the window.

Only in one corner was there evidence of her responsibilities and heavier interests. Here stood a desk similar to his and behind it a closed cabinet of a type designed to hold maps and books and the records a Holdruler must maintain.

A number of closely inscribed papers lay on its surface. Una must have been working on them before he had come in, but he smiled to see the speed with which Bravery had claimed right of place once her companion had moved. She was now seated regally upon them and was calmly but intently watching the two humans, as if she were vitally interested in the outcome of their meeting.

Given her relationship with the woman, that was very possibly the case.

His mouth hardened, and his attention riveted upon Una herself.

The lady was standing at the centermost window.— The view beyond was all he had imagined it would be and more.—She was gowned in wool, as the season now demanded, a dress the very shade of her eyes. Its sleeves were slashed, revealing a lining of the palest green. As with most of her costumes, this gown clung tightly to the narrow waist and flowed freely from there into a soft, wide skirt. Her hair was bound by a broad ribbon of the same jade color, which was drawn through its dark mass in a complex lacing. When she turned at last to face him, he saw that there was what looked to be a fine emerald on her center finger.

His heart twisted painfully at the sight of her. She was so beautiful, all that could be desired in person or in body.—Had she attired herself like this on purpose, to wring his resolve and force him to repeat the declaration he had made and carry that declaration to fulfillment?

Shame filled him. Una of Seakeep would not use him, any man, thus.

Recognizing and admitting that only sharpened his grief, his awareness of all he must surrender. Whatever her intent, the Holdlady had driven a barbed sword through him by bringing him to this place, where he longed to come by another, richer light.

The man let no sign of his misery escape him. He gave her salute.

"You summoned me, Lady?" he asked, since Una herself seemed uncertain how to begin.

"I asked to see you," she corrected. "Elfthorn has been given what remains of the *Dion Star's* cargo?"

He nodded.

"As you commanded and is fitting. He and Gunwold were fosterlings, and his grief is real and sharp."

Both fell silent again, uncomfortably so.

Una struggled to find the best approach but still could think of no way that was completely without danger. Perhaps she did not, in truth, want to find a way to make the offer that would seal her loss.

It was so much harder to deal with him here, she thought. Throughout the rest of the tower and the Dale, they were Holdruler and comrade, but this place was private and her own, and the Falconer captain was her own true lord...

That did not matter now. It could not be allowed to matter. She loved this man, and it lay with her to prove that love.

Her head raised, and her eyes gripped his.

"I have a proposal for you, Falconer, one which can benefit both our peoples, but yours far more than mine."

"Name it," he said, cloaking his surprise and also his relief, for he had not been entirely certain of his ability to resist her pleading if she turned that against him; he knew in his heart that he would sooner face a slow death by fire than see her under the lash of pain, of body or of heart. Such testing would not have been likely anyway, given what he knew of her character, and her words just now confirmed that. It was not an impossible union between them which she wanted to discuss. No good to his comrades could come of that.

"I am now possessed of two Dales."

The mercenary smiled despite himself at the grim note which entered her voice as she spoke.

"Many a lord would find pleasure in that fact."

"Many a lord has no objection to the shedding of blood!" She steeled herself, then plunged ahead. "Between them, Seakeep and Ravenfield contain a vast amount of land, easily the equal and probably the better of what you Falconers controlled before the mountains moved. It is terrain similar to that which you once had save that it also has the advantage of providing ready access to the ocean.

"If I were to cede Ravenfield to you and enter into binding treaty regarding our joint use of Seakeep's wild lands, it would give your people a place in which to establish themselves, to build and grow strong

once more."

"Do you know what you say?" he gasped, scarcely crediting that his ears had brought him her words aright.

"Falconers face eventual extinction as matters now stand," she answered evenly. "I have seen enough of you to know that this must not be permitted to happen. The means to prevent it has been given me. I may not control a gate such as my sister mentioned, but land I have, land that can mean both life for you and a real home again in this world."

Her eyes slitted when he gave her no response, either in word or gesture.

"Can you think I am laying some sort of snare for you? I speak the truth. Ravenfield I do not want. The very thought of retaining possession of it after having gained it in such a manner is repugnant to me, however righteous my reasons for doing so. As for the rest, to stand back unacting and watch a people, any people, flicker into oblivion whose star I have the power to keep in this world's sky would be a stark evil, a work of the Dark itself. By my lights, I am without choice in making this offer!"

"I believe that, Una of Seakeep," the captain said very quietly. "But what of your own people and those of Ravenfield? Are you not risking doing them a mighty hurt?"

"Once before I said to you that life itself is a risk, but, no, in this case I do not believe that you or the generations to follow you will foul the oaths you take. I would not make this offer to any other blank shields, Tarlach, or to the lord or leader of any other people. Only Falconers have the proven honor to make the suggestion feasible.

"One stipulation I do make at the outset is that my Dalespeople must be used with complete respect, male and female, warrior and craftsman alike, both my own folk and Ravenfield's. I will not have any of them subjected to abuse or insult because of some of your less desirable ways."

She hesitated again, then once more pressed on.

"For this reason, because it is proven that we two can work well and reasonably together, I shall give over Ravenfield to you yourself rather than to your people as a whole or to any other of your leaders, and you shall represent and decide for them in the treaty we shall develop and in all matters concerning it thereafter."

"Una!"

She stopped speaking to give him a chance to recover himself. If the first part of her proposal had taken him unawares, this last had stunned him outright, perhaps for cause greater than mere amazement.

"It is permitted for individuals of your kind to hold land in their own name?"

"It is not forbidden," he responded slowly. "The question has never arisen amongst us.—We cannot trace descent," he added as an afterthought.

"I doubt the arrangement will continue in perpetuity." Her eyes fell. "It is just that I trust you above any other, Tarlach, and—and I do not want to have to treat so closely for all of my life with a man I know despises me."

She hesitated again.

"Would you have trouble dealing with Falconer officers of higher rank?"

"Some. All men are subject to pride, but we are not unreasonable, whatever you others believe of us. If once I can convince them to accept my role as Holdlord, they should be willing to permit me to act in that capacity with respect to Ravenfield. Seakeep, too, since few of them would want to associate on such a basis with you."

He eyed her.

"The benefit to us is obvious. What gain will Seakeep have?"

"Not as much," she answered frankly. "We will have the permanent protection of the finest mercenaries to range our world at least since the departure of the Old Ones and perhaps before that, as shall be detailed in our treaty.

"Apart from that, your gold and your trade will be most welcome."

She smiled at his look of surprise.

"You have called our horses the finest you have ever encountered. With your companies, your columns, as a ready and constant market, we could at last build our herd to fit the capacity of the land, as both animals and Seakeepdale merit, and you would be mounted as no Falconers have been since your race first crossed into this realm."

"It is not the final answer," he said slowly, as if to himself, "not even if I win enough support to bring at least one of the villages here."

"No," she replied, "if you mean that your women will not remain forever quiescent in the old way. You could hardly expect me to aid in maintaining them in such a state, could you?"

He smiled faintly.

"No, Lady, of a certainty, I could not."

She sighed.

"This will buy you time. You cannot continue long as a viable, separate people living at the sufferance of others. With land of your own, you can again maintain yourselves as you did in the past, and you would have the chance to face and try to resolve the difficulties besetting you.—That you must do yourselves, Tarlach. No one else can find the answers for you."

"Much less implement them," he agreed bleakly. "I very much fear we shall not find some of those solutions easy swallowing."

The captain was silent for a long time after that.

"There is merit in what you say," he told her at last, "merit in every word."

His voice sounded strange, as if the words were being wrenched from him under the compulsion of the

rack, and what she could see of his face was drawn and white.

"There is heavy risk for you in this, is there not?" she questioned gently.

His eyes closed.

"If I place such a proposal before my commanders and they reject it as being a woman's accursed wile, I shall be no more than a rabid dog in their sight."

"Do you believe this will prove the case?"

He shook his head.

"Not entirely. My company will support me, I think, if I present my case well, as should many of the columns, but there are some who will not, those who have ever been strictest in their isolation from other peoples. They form a good part of our number, and they will never condone this." His voice seemed on the verge of breaking, and he looked hurriedly at the window. "I have friends amongst them, comrades of my youth..."

Una placed her hand on his arm.

"It is not necessary for you to become involved. I can make the offer directly and deal with whomever your leaders appoint."

The man turned to her once more.

"No, Lady. What must be endured shall be. Falconers are trained to accept our responsibilities. That they at times carry with them danger greater than that of death or physical injury is of no significance."

"We of Seakeepdale are as powerfully trained not to inflict such peril on others when the power to alleviate it is ours."

He smiled sadly.

"It would be useless, Lady. No other Falconer would consider such a proposition from a woman, and I should still face the same wrath, the same penalty, for supporting it."

He straightened as she had often seen him do before embarking upon some difficult course.

"The task is mine to carry, my Lady of Seakeep. Its importance to my people both now and in future times is such that I cannot even consider refusing it."

The Daleswoman's eyes dropped, then lifted again.

"It is settled, then," Una said, speaking slowly, wearily, as if she had spent herself in a bitter struggle,

"though I suppose it will be long before we beat out the final treaty."

"Perhaps not so very long. You are mindful of our needs, and I shall endeavor to be as considerate of your people's."

They both fell quiet. There was nothing more to be said on this subject, which now required deep, private thought on the part of both.

Tarlach did not move to take his leave of her but rather turned to the window. Una had given so much, not merely the awesome gift of a Dale but that of life itself to his harsh race, and he had returned nothing. That he so valued her action and so appreciated its import that he was willing to place himself at risk of banishment and ultimate disgrace was no offering to her. It was but a warrior's duty in the face of his people's need.

Slowly, his hand went to a small leather pouch on his belt. Perhaps he had unconsciously intended to do this, he thought, for why else would he have chosen to carry the Talisman today instead of wearing it as he had always before done in all the years since its making?

"Una, I have no lands or gold to bestow in my turn, but I ask that you accept this from me."

The woman took the pouch and carefully opened it. She drew forth a slender, silver chain. Depending from it was an object which drew a gasp of delight and wondering appreciation from her, a small but exquisitely wrought silver falcon portrayed diving with a blood-red jewel grasped firmly in his talons.

"Oh, Tarlach, this is indeed beautiful!"

"It is more than that," he said in a way which caused her to look swiftly upon him.

"Power?" she asked incredulously.

He nodded.

"Of a sort. Every Falconer fashions one of these when he attains manhood, and he may possess only one at any given moment in his life. They can be gifted, as I am doing now, or suffer natural mischance, but they cannot be beguiled from their owner or otherwise taken without the full consent of his will, a virtue which passes to a true recipient, though not to a chance discoverer in the event of loss."

His eyes rested somberly on the Talisman.

"The possessor may also claim the aid of any Falconer or Falconer unit, provided only that his cause be just and in no violation of our honor."

"Thanks given, Tarlach," Una said softly. "I shall never of my will abuse this gift."

So saying, she clasped the chain around her neck, then quietly slipped the falcon beneath the material of her gown. His giving of this had been open, as had been his earlier gifting of his name, with no stipulation or request that she hold her possession of it close. Her doing so was an offering of her own, her acknowledgment of his confidence and her assurance that it would not be betrayed.

It broke the control he had forced on himself. Tarlach turned from her to conceal the anguish twisting his face.

"Una," he whispered in a muffled voice, "I swear to you, by the Horned Lord, were it not for my people's real and desperate need, I would offer you more than this, or seek to offer more. I would ask more of you..."

The Daleswoman came into his arms. His mouth covered hers and found there a mirror of all his own passion and longing.

His hold tightened. They might make the dare this once, take and give what was their desire and need. Una was no maid, but a widow who had known a man's embrace...

That thought died even as it was born. It took the lash of his will, for his body was aflame, but his arms loosened, and he stepped away from her. Gratification was not what he, what either of them, wanted, and he did not believe in his heart that the woman would willingly have yielded herself, for all her love, had he demanded that of her.

Una's eyes raised to his. She, too, had battled the desire burning within her, and she had to fight now to keep the tears brightening her eyes from welling forth.

"I would give you hand and hold, my own lord," she told him almost fiercely, "and while will remains mine, no other man will ever gain either from me."

Her shoulders squared.

"Nor will I entirely abandon hope, Tarlach of the Falconers. We of High Hallack learned the value of holding to that despite reason's grimmest sentence during our war with Alizon, and I would not see you surrender it, either. No one knows what web fate has woven for him—or what may be done with the threads as yet laid out for that weaving. We may still win through to what seems an impossible goal now."

The Holdlady drew one long breath, then she smiled at him.

"Let us be gone. Captain. I know little of him if we do not receive a visit from Lord Markheim very shortly. We had best prepare ourselves to greet and reassure him, and the others who will be following fast upon his heels."

They left the chamber together, each realizing the days ahead would be full of challenge and each prepared to meet that challenge and the whole of the life to which their decisions and their deeds would bring them.

This tale of Seakeep was more than one night in the telling. Having once begun it I could sense that he who lived it must press on to voice the rest. Perhaps so he made clear to himself certain feelings and questions he had not faced before.

When he finished it at last I was moved to throw the crystals. The pattern did not form falcon eyes as it had for Pyra, rather there was a jagged red line and above it grey so that I knew ill was close upon him. I would have spoken so to this bird warrior save that a message came to him that the Lady Una had come at last across the sea to join in his quest. And straightway he went forth from Lornt to meet her.

Only I was oddly shaken and once more I paced outside the walls of Lornt, with Galerider and Rawit as my only companions. Twice it seemed to me that shadow clouds gathered strangely—not in the east where Escore knew those Dark skirmishes and danger which might burst swiftly out of nowhere, but westward—over that land where we thought war was safely over.

My sword hand itched and I reached for that weapon I no longer wore. I found myself listening for a Border horn to sound downwind. Then I knew within me that, for all my thought of being

one who no longer had any active part to play in action, strange destiny still lay ahead.

No—the end of the fight was not yet, nor would that pass me by.