

CANDLETRAP

by

Mary H. Schaub

Parven stared, terrified, at the unyielding stone floor spread out more than a tall man's height below him. His mind screamed that he was falling, that any second he must be dashed against the figured slabs. He would have cried out or shut his eyes to block the horrid sight, but he had lost all bodily sensations, as if he had plunged into frigid water. Suspended in midair perilously high above the magician's floor, Parven was reduced to only one conscious function: thought. He tried to shrink back from the yammering hysteria that threatened to overwhelm him. Perhaps if he concentrated on one thing or one person. He had heard that there were rare people who could direct their thoughts to others. In all his reading and gathering of scraps of forgotten lore, Parven had never discovered any spell or chant to enable an ordinary person to converse mind to mind. If only he had! Parven ran through a mental inventory of the amulets and protective charms tucked in his pockets or secured around his neck or wrists. Even though he could not touch or feel any of them, he knew they were there, and whatever powers they possessed should still be working in his favor. Not enough, he reflected ruefully, to ward him from this unexpected suspension

spell, but he was conscious and he might yet think of something constructive.

Time also seemed suspended in this chamber deep beneath the ruined castle. Parven's immobility prevented him from seeing anything not within his limited field of view. At first, he thought he might get some idea of time's passage from the two candles he could barely glimpse on the side table, but he soon saw that they were no longer burning as ordinary candles. Their flames continued to emit a dusky light, but they were static, and the substance of the candles did not diminish. Parven belatedly deduced that the candles must be part of the entrapment spell he had carelessly set in motion. He had not expected to be trapped; he knew that there might be dangers associated with pursuing ancient lore, but somehow he never thought that he could be so easily overwhelmed. He felt a surge of resentment that his amulets had proved so futile, followed by an equally fervent conviction that his being alive at all might well be due to those very amulets. They might not have preserved his freedom to move, but they were probably responsible for his still being himself. Parven shuddered mentally, recalling tales of hapless souls transferred into animals' bodies, or, worse, dispersed like morning mist rising above a lake.

The image of a mountain lake brought with it a poignant memory of his mother. She had been a scholarly, gentle lady totally out of place in his father's rough foothills holding. Although she had died when Parven was a small child, he cherished a glowing vision of her gathering flowers on the lake bank beside their upland meadow. Parven had been a shy, sickly only son. His father, not knowing what to do with him and encouraged by his forceful second wife, had dispatched the boy to be apprenticed to Halvard the trader. A shrewd man, Halvard had immediately discerned Parven's retiring nature and had set him to work learning to read and write. As soon as he was proficient, Parven had been directed to handle records received from scouts and travelers and to search the archives for hints of possible new trade goods and curiosities.

It was while he was sifting through a clutter of musty travelers' notes that Parven first encountered the description of a curious, remote mountain valley always cloud-bound, as if the

mists were drawn there to conceal the place. Intrigued, Parven sought out other reports on the same area, but the little he found was discouragingly brief. Those mountains were ominously near the edge of the Waste, so few sensible folk ever ventured there on purpose. One intrepid scout called the valley "forbidding and chill," and another traveler, lost after a storm, said his horses had refused to stay hobbled there, fretting and pulling at their tethers until he had moved his camp outside the valley. Parven diligently sorted through all of Halvard's precious maps. On one very old fragment, he was just able to decipher a faded warning scrawl: "Valley of Kulp—fog—ruins—AVOID." The more he thought about it, the more interested he became, until he traced every connection he could find relating to the valley. In those heights, natural accidents were a common danger to man and beast, so no general alarms seemed to have been circulated. Parven decided that there must be a treasure there—why else the persistent, unnatural fog and the repellent reputation of the place? Something valuable was likely to be at the center of it all, and the shrouding fog suggested that it was spell-guarded. Parven began at once to seek out charms and amulets warranted to guard against all sorts of nefarious spells. When Halvard announced that he was leaving on an extensive buying trip, threading through the populated parts of the Dales and culminating at the Fyndale Fair, Parven asked to pursue on his own some rumors of a trove of old manuscripts. Halvard frowned and said he supposed they could spare Parven during this trip, but only if he discovered some worthwhile information. His harassed assistant, Fulch, responsible for converting Halvard's orders into action, reluctantly organized an extra horse and supplies for Parven before he was swept off amid the usual chaos accompanying Halvard.

Parven set out on his own, too quiet and nondescript a traveler to attract unwanted attention. Days of hard riding brought him to the isolated, ramshackle inn where the single rough road and two merging trails degraded into barely passable footpaths threading on into the wild. Parven asked for any available guide, but the only man claiming to know the territory demanded so steep a price that Parven had to decline his help. Not knowing whether he could find any useful information or

goods for Halvard, Parven felt that he couldn't waste Halvard's silver on what was truly his own fancy and might well lead to nothing. He had his copied maps, and left the inn the next morning as quietly and unremarked as he had come.

Three days later, in the afternoon, Parven glimpsed an opaque fog bank spilling across the crude shepherd's track that seemed the only route in these mountains. He was certain it must be the valley of Kulp when his horse shied at the rise and refused to advance. Sensibly deciding that he should wait for daylight before entering the misty area, Parven camped in a nearby clearing where his horse consented to be tethered. Parven was too excited for some time to be able to sleep, but when he dozed at last, his dreams were ominous and troubling. He roused abruptly to find himself on his feet edging slowly toward the valley. Frightened—for he was never one to walk in his sleep—Parven hastily unpacked his most potent amulets. Further inspired by a thought of what the practical Fulch might do under such conditions, Parven also prudently tied his left wrist to his saddle. He awakened just before dawn, uncomfortably cramped, but still safely confined within his camp. Choking down a dry journeycake, he impatiently waited for the rising sun to lift the fog, but the cloudy mass stubbornly puddled in the hollows and lost only ribbons of its substance to the light breeze.

Parven finally concluded that he could wait no longer. The foresighted Fulch had packed a number of torches in case Parven might have to venture into dark cellars or caves. Not expecting to need one, Parven chose to be prepared, and marched into the fog bank, unlit torch in hand. He initially despaired of finding any ruins when he tripped over a broken paving stone. His excitement was short-lived, for the ruins seemed to be disappointingly bare, with not even any interesting animal tracks to mar the wind-drifted silt. As he peered closer, Parven discerned a pattern in the courtyard paving, an extended set of curves that nagged at his mind. He traced the pattern into the roofless remnant of the great hall, and found it became progressively more decorated, like an embellished spiral. The back wall where doors would have opened into the mountainside had been totally buried by a massive rockfall.

He spent the humid afternoon shifting stones and sweeping away loose soil with an improvised conifer-branch broom. His efforts eventually disclosed a metal-bound door once secured by an ornate but now-shattered lock. Behind the door, steep stairs descended, their narrow treads decorated with the dark red spiral pattern set into the stone. Parven took a stern grip on his natural inclination to rush down the steps. He sniffed the air cautiously, but it smelled only of damp stone and stillness. He then hurried back to his camp to make sure that his tethered horse had ample grazing and water in easy-reaching distance. From his array of charms and amulets, he chose the best ones to secure firmly around neck and wrists, and as an afterthought, Parven slipped the excess in his pockets before returning to the ruins.

Feeling uncharacteristically adventurous, Parven kindled one of Fulch's torches and kicked aside the last rubble cluttering the top step. After descending Parven's height, the narrow stairway abruptly turned at a sharper angle into the mountain. With his attention focused on the downward passage, Parven failed to notice the slow, silent closure of the outside door. The flickering torch obscured any awareness of the loss of outdoor light reflecting down the stairs. Parven progressed steadily down, quite soon losing any sense of direction amid the turns and counterturns. The walls remained unbroken by doors or side passages. He suddenly emerged into a much larger space with shadowed furniture bulking against the walls, whose stone expanse was muffled by great fabric wall hangings. A deeply carved high-backed chair provided a makeshift socket for his torch, and while wedging it securely, Parven saw some candles scattered on a narrow table nearby. Thinking to save his torch for the long return climb, Parven mounted five candles in a heavy metal holder, then quenched his torch with Fulch's leather snuffer thriftily tied to the butt. The candles, the same dusky red color as the spiral inlay on the floor, burned with a spicy, slightly musty scent. The room was too large for the odor to be immediately oppressive, but Parven left the holder on the table, and carried with him just one tall free candle to light his way. Its fumes made him dizzy, so he held it well away from his body while he examined the floor.

A great intricate spiral spangled across the stones, with twists and embellishments lacing every block. Parven felt compelled to trace the main pattern. The farther he followed the sinuous red lines, the more abstracted he became. He did not observe that his candle was not burning down; instead, the flames on his candle and the five on the table were all getting smokier. In the still air, the smoke threads rose and broadened into ripple-edged fans that spread until they touched. The corners of the room were gradually obscured, leaving only two illuminated areas—the sultry glow at the table, muffled in barely drifting veils of smoke, and the ruddy sphere around Parven's candle. He was nearing the center of the pattern when his foot rolled across something uneven on the paving. Parven shook himself; he had almost forgotten that he was supposed to be searching for treasure. He bent down to pick up the obstacle and erupted in a fit of coughing. A heavy layer of smoke pooled near the floor. Parven was surprised that he could scarcely distinguish the table's outline. He had never seen ordinary candles produce so much smoke, nor had he seen it pour over the edge of the table like a silent flood of dark cream. Faintly alarmed, Parven was again distracted by his boot's jarring against the obstacle. Snatching it up, he fumbled with a handful of golden squares linked into a chain. Something cylindrical was tangled in the chain. As he extracted it, Parven's heart pounded and he threw the object down in sudden dismay. It was a bone, the right size and scale to be human. His agitated movements swirled the smoke layers up all around him. Stifled, Parven belatedly scabbled in his pockets for his amulets. Touching them seemed to clear his head a bit. What was it he had been doing—treasure hunting? No, surely the vital task was to trace that fascinating red spiral, which was almost ready to enter the broad medallion design at the center of the floor. Parven absently scuffed aside more bones and jewelry as he proceeded along the bloodred track. The design absorbed his total concentration so much that he was not immediately aware of a startling development: he was walking a finger's width above the floor. Tendrils of smoke were eddying *under* his feet, between his boots and the stone paving. Parven was abruptly jolted to see the pattern on the floor *through* his feet. That shock finally shattered his unnatural

placidity. It forcefully occurred to Parven that he was ensnared in high magic, far beyond the level of his amulets. He intended to stop moving along the last tight spiral into the central medallion, but found that his semitransparent body was no longer obeying his mind. He suspected, in rueful retrospect, that his will was not truly free from the instant that he descended the castle stairway.

His brain was now finally clear. His last voluntary action was to drop his candle and grasp an amulet in each hand. They were clearly visible through his glasslike fingers, although Parven felt neither the cold silver of one nor the polished wood of the other. All of his normal bodily sensations were cut off, as if his mind were swathed in thick wool, remote from the rest of him. Then he was suddenly *there*, at the center of the pattern, but suspended farther above the surface than before. Parven took a brief glance at the torturous symbols writhing in the medallion, and wrenched his attention away, terrified that he would be riveted forever, gazing at what no mortal soul should ever see.

As he hung in space, Parven sensed a throbbing, not in the air, but in the power web sustaining the spell that had trapped him. It was oddly tentative, almost hesitant. In a burst of insight, Parven perceived that the original purpose of this awful chamber must have been to translate the adept elsewhere. Over long years of disuse, the spell was corrupted by distortions. It was almost like an intricate piece of machinery. Parven visualized a great windlass designed to raise massive weights. When first made, its parts all meshed smoothly and performed their separate tasks, but time brought friction and creeping slippage. Wood could swell or dry out, metal would rust despite the finest oils. Something similar, he supposed, must have affected this activating spell—perhaps even the presence of his multiple amulets—for Parven failed to be translated. He was instead frozen in space, a span above the ensorcelled floor, like a shadow suspended in a mirror's smoky glass. Parven flickered, then hung motionless. The candles, he could see from the corner of his eye, were also frozen, their flames static. The room was completely still. Unable to breathe, unaware of his body, Parven hung, his only link with reality was his mind, churning with fears and frantic plans for escape. Even had he known the

proper words to release himself, he could not speak them. At first his thoughts raced in an incoherent babble; then as he grasped the full extent of his predicament, Parven settled on the only action he could take: calling soundlessly for help. He had no specific person to be the focus for his pleas, but he hoped that some sensitive mind somewhere might notice and respond. He was right. He did reach another mind—Merreth's.

She was harried out of a sound sleep by a gnawing sense of distress and unease. There was an almost unbearable urgency pressing upon her, but no matter how she tried, Merreth was unable to discern any articulate warning or message. Clutching the inadequate bedclothes around her, she sat up, staring into the darkness as if she might somehow find a visual sign responsible for her disturbance. The shabby room was unchanged, as mean and cold as always. Sighing, Merreth stood up and dared to splash a little of the basin's freezing water on her face in an effort to rouse herself fully. She wrapped her one heavy cloak around her shivering shoulders and went to the narrow window overlooking the back courtyard. There was no bustle of unexpected travelers seeking Meadowvale Abbey's hospitality. Merreth realized that whatever awakened her came from within, not from the outside world. It was a troubling thought, but at least she had one friend to whom she could confide her strange story—Willow.

Merreth had herself been something of an unexpected traveler, for nearly eighteen years earlier, at the turn of the Year of the Crowned Swan, she had been a foundling abandoned at the Abbey's door. The Dames found a silver locket around her neck with the name "Merreth" written inside on a scrap of fine white leather. A modest amount of silver coins wrapped in with her blankets insured a fair level of care for the child. The Abbess at that time might have known or suspected something about Merreth's origins, but she died of a fever when the child was about a year old, and left no instructions other than that Merreth was to be cared for. Without a substantial dowry, Merreth was unlikely to marry well. Being a quietly practical child, Merreth soon determined that she would have to make her own way in the world, possibly being an Abbey resident for the rest of her life. Meadowdale Abbey was not one of the more fervent

establishments, and she was not pressed to take vows, but she felt obligated to repay the Dames for their care of her, perfunctory though it was. As she grew, Merreth considered mastering herb and plant lore, but none of the Dames were truly skilled in that field until Willow arrived.

Merreth was about fifteen on the winter day that the old blind wise woman appeared at the Abbey's side gate, alone except for an equally elderly horse and a few hampers of dried herbs and parchments. The current Abbess was not overly impressed by the prospective guest's decidedly modest trappings, but she was also too shrewd to turn away what might be an able, possibly skillful wise woman. Two small ground-floor rooms were set aside, and Merreth, as an unattached general helper, was sent to attend the new resident. From initial shyness, Merreth soon relaxed into a growing respect and affection for the older woman. Willow was living alone in a secluded valley with one apprentice who was recently called home to Norstead and her family. With the winter looming, the wise woman decided that she must seek a safer home for herself. She welcomed Merreth's request to learn about plants. Her blindness caused some difficulties in conveying her knowledge, but Merreth learned to bring samples that Willow could identify by touch or scent while Merreth made notes on their appearance, location, and uses.

As soon as she worked through her morning tasks, Merreth hurried to Willow's sitting room to explain her disturbing dream experience. Willow listened attentively, then prompted Merreth to recall every detail she could.

"It sounds to me, child, as if you have received the impression of a thought link. Not the substance, mind—you are not trained for such linkages—but for some reason, you are aware of a sending, and an urgent one, it would seem."

"But what am I to do?" Merreth asked. "I don't know where to go or even who is . . . calling me, but I feel that I must do something about it."

Willow took her hand in reassurance. "Indeed you must. I shall send word for an audience with the Abbess. I have little experience in such high matters, but I do know that callings cannot be ignored. You must listen with all your attention, with

your mind as well as your ears. You will know which direction you must travel." She shook her head, frowning. "This is no time to be setting out on a journey, and I fear that the Abbess will spare you only the barest assistance, but you are a strong, able woman now, and you may be aided on your way. As you know, I am not one who can foresee the future, but I feel that your path will not be totally solitary. Here." Willow probed deep into the recesses of a hamper she kept by her bed. "Take this silver bracelet—no, do not refuse. I earned it for curing a rich man's son of a particularly nasty wound. The silly goose should have known better than to put a dirty poultice on a wound, but few pay note to such things. Let me arrange to speak with the Abbess, and do you come back before you depart. It is fitting that we should ask Gunnora's blessing upon your venture." Willow instantly sensed Merreth's discomfiture. "No, I do not mean a formal invocation service by the whole company of Dames; I suggest a quiet prayer by the two of us. It is my believe that Gunnora will hear an individual plea as well as a chorus, especially if the supplicant be sincere."

The Abbess gave her most reluctant permission for Merreth's trip, along with scanty supplies and a horse so old that Merreth felt she should be carrying it. Merreth's sense of urgency drove her to depart as soon as she could, so the next few days whirled by. The weather fortunately stayed clear, although bitterly cold. Merreth reached the nearest inn on the very last of her poor mount's strength. She traded Willow's bracelet for a sturdy mountain horse and a better stock of food. Trying to follow Willow's suggestion, Merreth paused several times each day, holding her mind open for any directional guidance from her internal imperative. At first, her efforts were fruitless. It was only when she turned the horse in frustration and started back toward the abbey that she had a clear impulse to race back the opposite way, deeper into the mountain country. As the cold, weary days passed, Merreth felt increasingly certain that she was right. Her sense of being desperately needed grew with every ridge and valley that she crossed.

When she finally reached the decrepit inn where Parven stayed, she was dismayed to find that there were no more established trails farther into the wilderness. The little money she

had left was not sufficient to hire a guide. A stable lad who looked less villainous, although a bit dirtier than the others in the yard, saw her hesitate as she took stock of her remaining supplies.

"Be you going farther on, lady?" he asked.

"I have still a way to go, yes," Merreth replied. The lad had a pleasant face and shrewd brown eyes beneath a sun-bleached thatch of hair. She decided to be frank. "I need a guide, but I have only a certain amount of silver. Would you know a reliable man I might hire?"

The boy grinned. "No reliable man here, lady. This be a bad place to seek help without a sword to hand and a friend to guard your back." Seeing her obvious disappointment, he hastened to add, "But if you would allow, I know most tracks hereabouts. And I have my own pony, so you'd not supply one for me."

Merreth took a moment to think. The boy couldn't have been much over twelve years, although he was stocky and seemed healthy, as best she could judge beneath the grime.

He thought her pause doubt. "It is my pony, lady," he asserted. "I saved the foal when its dam died."

"I'm sure it is your pony. I couldn't ask you to leave your work here. I don't know how long my trip may take. It could be many days."

"I make my own way, lady. The innkeeper lets me bide for helping in his stables, but I can leave when I will."

"Surely your parents," Merreth began, but the lad interrupted.

"I have naught, lady. Just my pony."

"We are alike, then, you and I," Merreth said, struck by their similar isolation, "for I know of no family of my own."

"You be a lady," the lad said firmly. "I be Rymples."

"My name is Merreth. I have come from the abbey of Dames in Meadowdale, where I have lived all my life. If you can guide me into the mountains, to the place I must go, I will pay you five silver pieces." She hoped that was a fair fee.

Rymples seemed cheerfully willing to go anywhere, possibly for no pay at all. "That be generous, lady. Bark—my pony—be ready to leave this midday, if you want. They say a journey that starts in sun will go the warmer."

Merreth shivered as an icy breeze penetrated her worn cloak. "Then by all means, let us begin in sun, for I would welcome any warming."

They were scrambling along a narrow track scarcely visible to Merreth's eye as the sun dipped behind the higher peaks. Rymple had approved of her riding style soon after they set out. "I can see you know horses, lady."

Merreth thought wryly of the weary hours she'd spent riding the paths around the abbey grounds with sour-faced Dame Katherilda correcting every lapse. By necessity, Merreth had mastered a light but firm touch on the reins and an effortlessly erect seat. "You could say that we are well acquainted, Rymple, although this is the longest journey I have ever undertaken."

Rymple coaxed his shaggy pony down a steep incline. Merreth could see why he'd named the animal "Bark"—its rough hair closely resembled the dun trunks of the tenacious mountain evergreens clinging to the rocky ground. "They say, lady, that a journey is only as long as you make it. Some go fast, some slow."

"Rymple," Merreth accused, "I begin to suspect that you are the source of all of these 'they say's.'"

The lad looked back at her with a happy smile. "Sometimes, lady, there ought to be a saying, and if you don't know one from hearing it, you can guess what it should be."

They camped twice more, each time in wilder and more desolate country. The wordless calling that Merreth had come to think of as her summons grew stronger and more desperate. It was Bark who first alerted them just before Merreth saw the bank of mist seeping across the track ahead.

"Bark's likely smelled another horse," Rymple suggested. "That's the sound he makes for such. Let me search ahead a way, lady, in case you might not care to meet the rider."

Merreth prudently reined in to wait behind a concealing boulder. Rymple returned shortly looking concerned. "Was a horse hereabouts. I found where it was tethered. It ate all the nearby food and pulled free some days ago by the signs."

"Is there no trace of its owner?" Merreth asked.

"No, lady, but he left his camp ready to come back to."

"Can you tell where he might have gone?"

Rymple hesitated, then made up his mind. "You may as well come along, lady. It be not safe to leave you here."

They rode slowly into the clearing where Parven's modest belongings were tidily secured. Dismounting, Rymple and Merreth pursued Parven's tracks, leaving their own animals tethered at the deserted camp.

Rymple paced uneasily when they found the ruins. "They say, lady, a wise man never sleeps where old stones are broken."

Merreth gingerly touched one of the broken blocks and drew back. "These stones certainly give no sense of welcome," she agreed. In fact, the longer she examined the site, the more clearly she sensed a cold, implacable menace. Spurred by her summons, Merreth urged Rymple to keep searching for the missing horseman. She had explained to Rymple on the trail how she didn't know exactly where she was being drawn, but that she was responding to an urgent plea for help. Now Merreth had to weigh the forbidding impulses from the ruins against her worry at the recent weakening in her internal call, as if the caller were losing strength.

Rymple soon noticed the area that Parven had cleared in front of the closed door. He glanced about nervously. "Lady, there be the smell of magic here. We had best guard our backs and go wary."

Merreth fervently agreed with him. It took a conscious effort for her to reach out to the door, which swung open easily enough. "If it opens that freely," Merreth reasoned aloud, "it may also close freely. Do you watch to see it stays open while I go within."

Rymple stretched out a restraining hand. "Wait, lady. Best we brace it open. There be plenty of rocks here. Strong winds do spring up in these mountains, and should we need to hurry out, we'll want the way free."

Once the door was securely wedged open to Rymple's satisfaction, he ran back to Parven's camp to fetch two torches. It was obvious that he intended to accompany Merreth wherever she went. Peering into the dimness beyond the door, Merreth was glad of his presence. They descended the stairs slowly, watching for any signs that another had recently passed that

way. The marks that Parven's boots had made in the gritty dust on the stairs stood out clearly in the torchlight. Merreth's sense of urgency pricked at her, so that she edged past Rymple on a tiny landing and took the lead despite his objections.

She was the first to enter the ensorceled room, where the static candle flames instantly resumed burning. Coughing from the fumes, Merreth hurried to the table and snuffed out all the candles with fingers tucked in a fold of her cloak. A current of clear, cold air poured down the staircase, quickly thinning out the suffocating smoke. Merreth held up her torch to survey the room. Somehow, she felt reluctant to step out on the patterned floor. She could see the odd tangles of glinting metal scattered on the shadowed surface, and above the floor, just barely visible, as if half seen from the corner of an eye, something was suspended.

Merreth gripped Rymple's arm with her free hand. "Rymple, do you see it? Near the center of the floor, a span above that great dark knot in the pattern."

Rymple dutifully peered where she directed. "See what, lady?"

Merreth fumbled for words. "It's like—like a fish deep underwater, or something reflected in an old dusty mirror. Don't you see it?"

Rymple shook his head. "No, lady. There is naught there that I can see."

Merreth shut her eyes briefly and concentrated. This had to be the source of her calling. The plea was frantic now, but faint, and it was definitely emanating from the center of this room. She could feel where it was located. When she opened her eyes, the dim disturbance in the air did seem a trifle more substantial. "I believe that I have found the source of my summons, Rymple," she said. "The difficulty is that magic must be preventing you from seeing it. And," she added, "to be honest, I cannot see it all that well myself, but I *know* it is there . . . that *he* is there." She was suddenly convinced that her identification was correct. "Rymple, we have found the man from the deserted camp. He has been trapped here for all these days of our travel, and before."

"Then we must free him, lady." The boy shared her excite-

ment, but his basic practicality steadied him. "But how can we free a man we can't even see?"

Frustrated, Merreth stamped her foot. "If only we had one of those charms so common in the old songs and tales. Heroes are forever waving them about to open locked gates and such."

To her surprise, Rymple said, "But we do have one, lady." He reached inside his tunic and extracted a small metal pendant suspended around his neck on a rawhide thong. Pulling it off over his head, he handed it to her.

Merreth turned the object in her fingers. "It looks as if it is made of . . ."

"Horseshoe nails," Rymple completed her thought. "Aye, so it is, but not made by me. That takes fine work and lore to be said over it during the making. A smith at Groff gave it to me, and I have always worn it since."

Merreth could see that what she had initially taken to be a crude lattice of nails hammered together was actually a carefully crafted piece, with the metal strands laced over and under one another and smoothed on all edges. "Thank you, Rymple," she said, slipping the cord over her head. "I have heard that forged iron has great virtue against evil magic."

Rymple looked pleased, but turned his attention back to the challenge at hand. "It may be my eyes, lady, but I think I see bones out on that floor. Could be wiser not to step on those red lines, in case they be part of the magic."

"I agree," Merreth replied, "but how else can I reach the center of the floor? That table is not long enough to push out and walk upon, and even if we moved the two chairs, we would still lack the full distance."

Rymple scanned the wall above the table. Jumping up, he seized a section of the nearest hanging tapestry and jerked until it fell away into his arms. "Here, lady, touch my amulet to this. If it be good honest cloth, it should not be harmed."

Merreth bent toward the dark red material and pressed Rymple's amulet against the cloth. There was no reaction. Rymple at once turned to pull down more lengths. "We can walk on this, lady," he observed triumphantly. "It should spread out fair across the floor." He busied himself finding the best ways to fold the cloth so that Merreth could push it ahead of her while

carrying her torch with one hand. As Rymple experimented, Merreth stood thinking, scarcely aware of his bustling figure. She didn't want to be left alone in this dangerous place, but she also didn't want to risk Rymple's life any more than she already had. "Rymple, can you see the man hanging in the air now?"

Puzzled, Rymple looked again. "No, lady. It be empty air to me."

"Then I believe it is better for me to try to reach him alone while you return to guard the door. No," Merreth forestalled Rymple's protests. "I know you want to help, but I have thought on this matter, and as you say, there is very strong magic here. If that door should close, we would also be trapped. Better that you make certain our exit is safe. Now that you have provided this clever way for me to walk out to the poor man, I should have little trouble. Do go on, for we want to be outside and away before nightfall."

Rymple was reluctant to leave, but had to admit the sense of what she said. He showed her how to push the folded tapestry bundles across the floor to provide a path, then wedged his torch above the table and took the old torch that Parven had left there.

When Rymple had climbed out of sight up the stairs, Merreth gathered her courage and stepped out on the first tapestry section. Instantly, she felt two contrasting sensations—a coolness at her throat and a more muffled warmth on her chest. The source of the warmth was obvious at once. Parven's amulet hanging outside her gown was as warm as if it had been heating near a forge. The sharper coolness was higher. Merreth plucked out her silver locket on its thin chain and was astonished to see the metal glowing softly in the dimness. Neither object was painful to touch, but both evidently represented unsuspected Power. Encouraged to think that she might have some form of magic at work on her behalf to pit against that force ensnaring this chamber, Merreth proceeded cautiously, unfolding and pushing ahead of her more lengths of tapestry as she neared the central medallion. She had quickly learned not to look at the design on the floor after one curious glance sent her mind reeling. Reaching the medallion's edge, Merreth could at last straighten up, torch in one hand, to concentrate on her goal.

She could distinguish the suspended figure of a dark-haired young man, but he was hazy and partially transparent. To her dismay, when she stretched up tentatively to touch his boot, her hand passed right through the space. "Oh!" she exclaimed. "You seem to be here, yet you are not." For a moment she stood immobilized by frustration, then she tried to think more clearly. "If I shut my eyes," she said, "perhaps I can sense you better."

With her eyes shut, Merreth could definitely place the mass above her. The link in her mind was so faint that she almost ignored it, but abruptly she realized that she was at last communicating with the source of her summons.

The message was like the ghost of a whisper. "*Help me! Help me!*"

"*Who are you?*" Merreth thought back, straining to achieve a stronger link.

The reply was stronger. "*Parven. I am Parven. Help me, please!*"

"*I am Merreth. I have come in answer to your call, and want to help you get away from this dreadful place, but how are we to proceed? I cannot touch you to pull you down.*" Merreth opened her eyes. Parven seemed a bit more solid. She slid a piece of tapestry around so that she could look up at his face, and so that he in turn could presumably see her better, for it was evident that he could not move by himself.

"*I cannot move,*" Parven confirmed. "*Have you any amulets?*"

"*Yes, I seem to have two.*" Merreth glanced down and saw that Rymple's lattice had turned a glowing gold. "*One is iron, although it now looks gold. The other is my silver locket. I never knew before that it had any power, but in this room, at least, it has a light of its own.*"

"*I brought many charms with me,*" thought Parven ruefully, "*but they were not sufficient to free me. Perhaps yours may turn the balance if only you could reach them up to me.*"

Merreth estimated the distance between them. "I shall need to climb upon a chair," she decided, and retreated warily to fetch one. Using a tapestry strip, she lashed her torch securely to a cross-brace in the chair's back so the torch extended safely

parallel to the floor, allowing her to climb on the seat. She also brought back more cloth to spread beneath Parven and added her cloak to the layers in case he should fall directly to the floor. Her preparations made, she tucked up her riding skirt and climbed onto the carved wooden seat. *"I believe I can reach you from here,"* Merreth said. *"I can still feel your presence better than I can see you, so I shall shut my eyes when I reach. Wait—let me bind an amulet to each hand. That might help me touch you."* A few twists of her silver chain secured her locket in her right palm, and Rymple's thong was ample to bind his lattice to her left hand. Both amulets continued to glow. *"You must think of yourself as solid,"* Merreth suggested to Parven, *"and I shall do the same."*

"I am ready," Parven whispered in her mind.

Shutting her eyes tightly, Merreth focused her directional sense, mentally groping for Parven. Of course he was there—she was keenly aware of him hanging above her. She suddenly realized that the spangle of bright sparks that she sensed against his mass had to be his amulets. It was strange to sense light sources with her eyes closed, but there were two even brighter glows in her mind, one silver and one gold. As she raised her hands, those glows also elevated as she lunged for Parven. For a sickening instant, her grasp closed on empty air, then she felt a peculiar shifting of space, and her hands brushed against rough fabric. With an elated cry, Merreth clung to Parven's legs and leaned too far, losing her footing on the chair. Together, she and Parven sprawled onto the cold floor with an impact that quite took Merreth's breath away. It was Parven's real voice that recalled her to the present.

"Merreth! Your skirt—it's afire!"

Horrified, Merreth saw that part of her riding skirt had fallen beyond the tapestry protection onto the patterned floor. Sullen little flames were flickering along the smoldering cloth. Her mind racing, Merreth snatched her skirt off the floor. As Parven helped her beat out the fire, she reasoned that the tapestry would probably also have burned had it not been so long immersed in the magic permeating this evil room. Breathing hard, Merreth leaned against Parven while both of them recovered from their exertions.

Parven was feeling severely shaken by his experiences, his limbs trembling as his nerves slowly regained their control over his muscles. He was startled to realize that his shaking was not wholly accounted for by his immense relief at being free. "Merreth," he exclaimed, "the floor is moving!"

Clutching each other, they fled back across the tapestry path to the safer edge of the room. It soon appeared that nowhere in the room was secure, for the tremors were grinding the stone blocks against one another, and cracks were webbing across the paving.

"The stairs," Parven called above the rising din. "Run!"

A gust of cold air pressed Merreth's skirt against her legs, slowing her frantic effort to move. As the draft rapidly grew to a blast of wind, Parven pulled Merreth along. "This is not normal wind," he shouted. "It must be part of the trapping spell, to keep us here." He threw aside the now-useless torch, its flame blown out.

In the shrieking darkness, clinging to the side walls, Merreth and Parven fought their way upward step by step against the gale that threatened to dash them back down into the chaotic room below. Merreth squeezed her eyes shut to keep out the stinging dust and rock chips. When her outstretched hand seized something rough but snakelike, she cried out and nearly fell. Closer touch identified it as a rope extending from above. Blessing Rymple, Merreth called out, "Rope!" and passed its free end back to Parven. Steadied by the rope, they made faster progress until, as she rounded a corner, Merreth felt a strong, upward pull and saw Rymple's figure silhouetted against a dim light. He was guiding the rope, trying to keep it from fraying against the turn in the stairwell.

Seeing the struggling pair below, Rymple shouted over his shoulder, "Bark—pull!" The pony hauled to such good effect that Merreth and Parven were virtually jerked up the final stairs. As they stumbled into the open at a breathless trot, a last vindictive burst of wind raged from the door, bringing down an avalanche of rocks and debris and burying the passageway.

All three people dropped to the ground a safe distance away, whooping for breath amid the swirling dust. When the air cleared, Merreth introduced Parven to Rymple, then she hastened to pat the stolid Bark.

"Had you not lowered that rope," gasped Parven, "we should never have emerged in time."

Rymple flushed with pleasure. "Always carry a bit of rope," he admitted shyly. "Never know when it be handy."

"Let us move away from this wicked place," said Merreth, shuddering. "That wind has blown me cold, and in our hurry, I forgot to bring my cloak."

"We had scant time to pack," Parven said. "Never mind. I have a spare cloak at my camp—if it is still there," he added. "I have no idea how long I have been trapped."

"I have traveled nine days," said Merreth, "and I received your call two days before that."

Parven stared at her, amazed. "No wonder I am starving."

"There be bread and cheese with the packs," Rymple pointed out. When they reached the camp, he kindled a fire against the twilight chill. Merreth gratefully wrapped herself in Parven's spare cloak while Rymple set out a simple meal.

As he reached for another piece of hard cheese, Parven declared, "I never thought bread and cheese could taste so good." He sighed wistfully. "I had journeyed here hoping to find treasure, or at least some old documents. I fear that I shall have nothing to show my master as excuse for my folly."

Rymple emitted an apologetic cough. "I fancied you were too busy, lady, to have time for the gathering, so I did it."

Merreth looked at him blankly. "Gathering?"

"Aye. There was a fair lot of plunder on that marked-up floor. I picked up a bit while seeing how best to fold those cloth strips for you." Rymple turned out his belt srip, shaking loose a heap of gold and silver chains, ornate bracelets, brooches, and rings. Parven and Merreth stared, quite bereft of speech, then Merreth hugged the surprised Rymple before he could evade her. "Rymple," she said, "*you* are the treasure."

"Nay, lady—anyone would have done the same."

Parven, whose wariness had been sharply heightened by his ordeal, poked at the glittering heap with a stick. "Do you suppose these are spellbound?" he asked in a low, nervous voice.

Arrested by the thought, they all pulled back, then Merreth suggested, "Rymple's amulet should guide us." She had quickly unbound both charms from her hands as soon as she had emerged from the staircase, and had given Rymple his lattice

back on their walk back to camp. Rymple now slipped it off and touched each piece of jewelry to the lattice, which had resumed its usual appearance of ordinary iron nails. To their mutual relief, there were no adverse signs. The friends passed around the items, exclaiming at the jewels and the workmanship.

"They seem to be just as they are," observed Parven, "the spoils of that evil trap."

"Except this," said Rymple hesitantly, holding out a blackened ring of intricately woven metal. It had a strangely unclean patina, and Rymple prudently gripped it in a fold of his tunic rather than touch it bare-skinned. "It was caught on one of the chains," he explained, "or I would not have brought it. It be dire."

Merreth peered at it only long enough to discern part of the familiar, harrowing spiral design from the castle floor. "This ring must have belonged to the sorcerer who bewitched that room," she ventured.

Rymple dropped the ring on a flat rock. "They say, lady, that like calls to like."

"In this case, Rymple," Merreth replied, "I believe that what they say is most definitely true. Something dark clings to that ring, and if we carry it away with us, I fear that taint would mark our trail."

Parven shivered despite the warmth of the fire. "Then let us bury it here, where no one is likely ever to find it. I should have been forewarned by my study of old lore, but I let my desire for treasure blind me to the dangers of this place. You will have heard, I expect, that long ago the Old Ones warred among themselves, and some were banished or driven away, while others clung to scattered bases of power, often in the Waste or near to it. I now see that this Valley of Kulp, as the old map names it, must have been such a base for an Old One of the evil path. He used that vile room of spells as a door or gate through which he escaped, but he must have intended to return since traces of his Power still endure, as we found to our cost. I know that I should not care to draw the attention of such a one should he ever become aware of our intrusion. I must confess that this ring frightens me. The old lore assures us that such

objects can retain links to their owners, even after great lapses of time."

"There be an old dry well off to one side of the ruins," said Rymple. "I found it while looking for water for the horses. Not likely that any traveler would search such a place."

Taking torches, the party at once investigated and agreed that Rymple's idea was sound. He dropped the suspect ring down the shaft and they heard it rebound against the stones as it fell. Feeling as if a lingering threat had been safely disposed of, they returned to Parven's camp to make their own travel plans.

"I suppose we must go back," said Parven with obvious regret.

Merreth sat erect. "Not I. I have more than repaid the Dames for their care of me, and I will not return to waste my days in that barren place." Her fierce expression softened as she added, "I would like to send a message to my one friend at the abbey, Willow the wise woman, for she is the only one there who truly cares for me."

"But where will you live?" asked Rymple, practical as always.

"Wherever in the Dales I can find a holding that will accept me," said Merreth decisively, "or I shall live beside my horse."

"You need better shelter than that against the winter," Parven objected. "Halvard, my master, has ample space. If I asked him, he might allow us all three to settle in one of his empty storage houses."

Merreth's face was set in stubborn determination. "These last days I have known freedom and companionship, and I will not return to confinement and bondage." She touched Parven's sleeve lightly and smiled. "Dear Parven. I do thank you for your kind offer. Besides Willow, no one has ever cared before what might happen to me."

"Or me," Rymple inserted. "I stay with you, lady. Where you go, I go, and Bark, too."

Somewhat dismayed by this sudden acquisition of a mounted retainer, Merreth exclaimed, "But, Rymple, I cannot pay you."

"Don't you think," Parven suggested diffidently, "we should all share equally in the jewelry from the castle? From the little I

have seen of such goods in Master Halvard's trade, there should be value enough to sustain us all for some time."

Rymple had been marking idly in the dirt with a twig. "There be holdings in these mountains left long ago. Might be we could find one and settle there for the winter."

Parven leaned forward eagerly. "I passed just such a place on my way here! The house had fallen in somewhat, but if we could patch the roof—and there was still some fruit in the side orchard, and some grain gone wild in the field."

"Now who is being fanciful?" accused Merreth, but she also felt a rising excitement. "We could at least examine the place," she conceded.

Parven could scarcely plan fast enough. "I could send a message to Master Halvard. The first winter storms may well come before I could return to speak to him myself."

"Where be this holding you saw, master?" asked Rymple.

"Two valleys beyond that churlish inn—I trust you stopped there?"

"I met Rymple there," said Merreth, "for which good fortune I forgive them their churlishness, if not the outrageous amounts they charged."

"There is a fine stream close by the holding," Parven rushed on with enthusiasm, "and the nearby slopes are not steep enough to threaten avalanche."

Rymple seemed unusually interested. "Be there a twisted tree by that stream? And a big dark rock an arrow's flight from the house?"

Distracted, Parven considered. "Yes, now that you mention it, I did notice such a tree, and I remember several large rocks in the vicinity."

Rymple nodded, satisfied. "'Tis Juspel's Holding, then."

Merreth's concern had been increasing during the exchange. "Rymple," she demanded, "what is amiss at Juspel's Holding?"

"They say it is accursed, lady," Rymple replied cheerfully. "That is why no one goes there since Juspel fled."

"But why is it cursed?" Merreth pursued.

Rymple shrugged. "Never heard to be certain, but some say Juspel offended the Old Ones and could stay on the land no longer." As when Parven had first mentioned the Old Ones, Rymple's hand moved again to touch his amulet.

"You don't seem frightened," Parven pointed out.

"Nay, master. So long as I have my amulet, I fear no magic."

Parven took a deep, steadying breath. "I, too, have my amulets, and Merreth has hers, for which I shall always be most thankful. Surely we need not be turned aside by mere reputation. I shall write to Master Halvard at once. We can send the message from the inn on our way to Juspel's Holding. I must also send Master Halvard most of my share of the treasure as well. He is a fair man and should willingly let me go my way, for he has many other scribes far better versed in trade than I."

"And I can send my message to Willow," said Merreth, and paused. "Is there anyone you need to write to, Rymple?"

The boy stared into the fire. "Nay, lady. I have no one, and besides, I have not the skill of writing or reading."

"That's easily remedied," said Parven. "I can teach you. It is one of the few things I do really well."

Rymple was temporarily speechless, then he babbled, "Me? You could show me how to read? And write?"

"Of course. It might take a while, but there will be plenty of time for us indoors during the winter storms."

Merreth shook a finger at Parven in mock severity. "Have a care, Parven. You have already heard a few of Rymple's They say's. Should he learn to read, we should also be treated to an endless store of It be written's, mark my words."

At first abashed, Parven joined in the laughter. He had never before felt that he had truly belonged anywhere, in any company. Now suddenly he did belong, with these friends. "I accept the challenge," he announced. "We might as well start at once with a few letters. Here, Rymple, sit by me nearer the fire where the ground is flat. Take this stick and see how the marks are made."

Merreth watched them for a while, then settled herself to sleep. They would be rising early to begin their journey to a new home, the first real home that any of them had ever had. They would want a new name for the place, she thought drowsily. If it hadn't been for Parven's being trapped, and Rymple's cleverly bringing the rope, and her own unexpected discovery of her locket's power, they would not have escaped from the dreadful room with its fuming candles. Candles. Candletrap—they would call it Candletrap Holding. She would suggest it in the morning as a reminder of their adventure. As she drifted into sleep, Merreth was smiling.