

Changeling

by Andre Norton

Lithendale, though no fortress for defense, rather an abiding place for the Dames who gave refuge to all, still held something of grim darkness in this early spring. Snow lay in ragged, mid-edged patches upon the ground, and the courtyards showed a gloss of damp upon worn stones. A chill wind moaned and cried at every window to the west, plucked at steamy panes with fingers just too weak to wrench a way within.

Hertha's forehead pressed against one of those thick panes. She leaned over the wide sill as if she could gain relief from the pains which rent her fiercely. The life she bore within her body might be a warrior, one who ruthlessly would tear her in twain, so eager was it ready to battle all the world.

She was not alone. There was the woman who now and then came to walk beside her and steady her. To Hertha that other was a faceless puppet, someone from a dream, or rather a dark night's sending which had no end. In one hand the girl clasped, so tightly that even its time-smoothed ridges drove deep into her flesh, her one talisman, Gunnora's amulet. Hertha did not pray—not now.

Would any petition to one of the Old Ones be heard arising from this abbey dedicated to another power?

Setting her teeth, Hertha lurched away from the window, took one step, then two, before, once more, grinding pain sent her staggering. She was on the bed, her body arching. Dank sweat plastered her hair to her forehead.

"Gunnora!" Had she screamed aloud or had the name only rung in her mind? A last thrust of pain was a spear within her, twisting agony. Then—

The peace, end of all pain. She drifted.

In the dark which enfolded her she heard a throaty, gurgling laughter, a laughter which was evil, a threat. In that same dark she saw—

There was a circle of stones and to these clung—no, they did not cling—only the deformity of their bloated bodies made it seem so. Rather they sat, their monstrous heads all turned, their bulbous eyes watching her with malicious joy and triumph. Hertha remembered. Now she cried out, not any petition to a Power of the Old Ones, rather with a fear she thought safely gone, buried in time.

She wanted to run, even to raise her hands as a barrier between those eyes and hers. Though the girl knew that even if she so veiled her own sight, she could not escape. The Toads of Grimmerdale! She had recklessly, wrongly sought them once, cheated them, fought them, and now they were here!

"My lady."

The words were faint, far off, had nothing to do with present horror and fear. Still it would seem that somehow they acted as a charm against the Toad things, for those faded. Hertha, shivering, spent, opened her eyes.

Inghela, the stout Dame, wise in herb lore and nursing, stood in the light of two lamps. That wan day Hertha had watched so endlessly through the distorted thick glass of the window must have ended. Dame Inghela's grasp held the girl's limp wrist. There was an intent searching in her eyes, so dark and clear under the line of her folded linen headdress.

Hertha summoned strength. Her mouth was parched, dry, as if she had fed on ashes.

"The child?" In her own hearing her voice was very thin and hoarse.

"You have a daughter, my lady."

A daughter! For one moment of pure joy Hertha's heart moved with a quicker beat. She willed her arms to rise, even though it felt that each was braceleted with lead. Gunnora's promise—a child who would have nothing in it of the ravisher who had forced its birth. Hertha's own, her own!

"Give me," her voice was still weak, yet life, and now will, were fast returning to her, "give me my daughter!"

The Dame did not move. There was no bundle of warm wrappings in her arms. It seemed to the girl that the woman's measuring glance was stronger, an emotion in it which Hertha could not read.

She tried to raise herself higher on the bed.

"Is the child dead?" She believed that she had managed to ask that without betraying the surge of emotion which tore her as sharply as had the pains earlier.

"No." Now Dame Inghela did move. Hertha watched as the Dame stooped to lift from a box-like bed a bundle that gave a sudden, ear-piercing squall, struggled against the confinement of the blanket about it.

Not dead—then what? There was ill fortune in the way the Dame had met her question, Hertha was sure. She held out her arms, willing them not to tremble, setting herself to bear any evil.

The baby must be far from death. Its battling against the swaddling was vigorous. Hertha grasped the bundle, resolutely turned back the coverings to look upon what Gunnora had promised, a child to be wholly and only hers.

She looked down upon a small wrinkled, reddened body of the newborn, and she knew! Revulsion, for only a moment, burned in her as if she might still vomit forth the evil which must have lain dormant in her since this new life had been conceived.

Evidence of her sin, her dealing with the powers of evil, ancient and strong evil, only that lay now on this one, not on her. She stared down into the ill formed face. The child stared back, its croaking cries still. Those bulbous eyes seeming to thrust into hers as if already the small creature knew that fate had marked it. There was the faint hint of brownish patches already staining its skin. The Toads—yes—their mark!

Hertha cradled the child with fierce protectiveness, looked defiantly over its head at the Dame.

Inghela's hands moved in the signs of ritual against the Powers of Darkness, even as her lips shaped words which were whispered too low for Hertha to catch. One of her hands caught at the loop of prayer rings at her belt and fingers began to separate one from the other.

"Changeling!" The maidservant, whom Hertha had hardly been aware of during her hours of labor, crept from behind her mistress into the circle of lamplight.

That word aroused Hertha to greater awareness.

"This is," she said slowly, distinctly, in that moment taking unto herself all which might have misformed the child, all the burden of sin she had drawn to her in her madness and her hate, "this is my daughter, Elfanor, whom I proclaim is truly of my body, my fair child, and who rests within the name of my clan."

Elfanor? Hertha wondered at that name, how had it come to her? It was one which she had never heard before. Yet it seemed to her the proper one. As for the other formal words of her acknowledgment of the child, they were empty. She had no clan, no family name, no lord to raise the child in the central hall of a keep before all those of his holding.

She was utterly alone, the more so now because of what had been laid upon this child. Hearing the click of the prayer rings Inghela fingered, Hertha knew that already her daughter had been judged, and she had been, too.

That same stubborn pride which had made her withstand the demands of a family line she could no longer lay claim to, to court a certain revenge which had now recoiled upon her in this vile fashion, that was her shield, and, perhaps, still her weapon.

"My daughter," she repeated firmly, daring the Dame, the maidservant staring avidly at what she held, to raise any protest.

"Changeling—" Once more that dread word held a cursed sound.

Dame Inghela turned swiftly, her authority plain to read on her round face as she looked at the maid and issued a swift stream of orders. The girl fled, busied herself hastily in gathering stained linen, pouring slops into a waiting bucket. Then she scuttled from the chamber. Inghela had once more taken her place by the bedside. Her steady gaze met Hertha's defiant stare.

"The child—" she began slowly.

Hertha's chin raised a fraction. She would never reveal now to this, or any other living soul, the sorrow and the torment within her.

"Is cursed. Is that what you would say, Dame? If so, the curse is mine and mine must be the answer."

Dame Inghela showed no sign of affront at what might almost be considered blasphemy when uttered in this place. Those who followed the Flame were taught, and taught, that sin left its mark upon the sinner. In so much could Hertha's words be considered confession.

"Evil seeds itself when it is watered and cherished by the will," she said slowly. Yet the gaze which held Hertha's so levelly did not condemn.

"You know my story," Hertha replied harshly. Since she had taken Elfanor into her arms the child lay quiet, the large, bulging eyes were half closed, as if, young as the babe was, she heard and understood. "Yes, I sought evil to draw upon my enemy, him who had defiled me. I sought an evil of the Old Ones openly, willingly, because all which filled me then was hate. Still the full evil did not come to fruit. He whom I sent to the Toads I fought for. He lives."

"Yet he was not the right man, as you have also said," Dame Inghela reminded her.

"That I did not know until after. I had already fought for him, Thus, this—" Her arms tightened about the small body. "I do not know any of the ancient wisdom, the sorcery of how any power could have reached within my body and changed new life I carried into this. Elfanor is mine, upon me let the burden fall. And—" it might be ill for her to speak so within this place, still that headlong need for defense, for the right to nurse some

small hope within her now, led her to do so—"perhaps what one power had done to set awry, another can aid."

Once more Dame Inghela swung her hoop of rings. "Your speech is not good. Here we follow the true teachings. You have already had proof of what conies when one appeals to that which is no belief of ours!"

"True." Hertha repressed a shiver arising from cold within her, not in answer to that rebuke. At the same time she reckoned—they can put no walls about my thoughts. There are powers and powers.

She loosed one hand, her fingers found what lay upon her breast, the amulet of Gunnora. Again she recalled how she had sought out that shrine, heavy with her child, seeking what succor she could. Of how in dream—or perhaps more than dream—she had been made welcome and one of her boons granted. For she was certain at this moment that Elfanor had indeed no part of her father within her, that she was wholly Hertha's own.

As days passed Hertha never spoke again of what she might do. She was well aware that her child was the subject

of many whispers, that such congratulations upon her safe delivery as were offered gave lip service only to custom.

Sudden warm winds came out of the south. The earth dried after the last of the snow's burden soaked into it. Spring was coming early. Hertha kept to her chamber much of the time, her thoughts busier than her hands, though she nursed her daughter and cared for her entirely, refusing any help from those who she knew looked upon the baby as cursed.

At the fourth week she asked for formal audience with the Abbess, her plans made.

Carrying the child, she made her courtesy of ceremony in the inner parlor, thinking fleetingly how different matters were since she had been previously received here. Then she had come wrapped in what she knew now was a false contentment, having laid upon another for a short space, the ordering of her life. At this moment she caught at that straying memory fiercely, pushed it away. She had been a fool, and must now pay for her folly, perhaps all her days.

"They say, Lady Hertha, that you desire to go forth from Lithendale." The Abbess was not a tall woman. Still the high-backed chair of age-darkened wood, all carven with Flame symbols, enthroned her. Hertha's first suspicion dulled. Perhaps she was a poor judge of the motives and thoughts of others, but here she read no malice, no accusation, only true concern.

"I must," she replied, sitting on the very edge of the stool to which the Abbess had waved her, Elfanor close against her. The baby never cried when Hertha held her so in fact she would lie still, open eyes upon her mother's face. Hertha had to keep herself from ever searching those too-large eyes for some hint of the marsh fires she had seen once in eyes so like them. "Your reverence, I—and mine— have no place within these walls."

"Has that been said to you?" The Abbess's demand came, quick and sharp.

"Such does not have to be said. No, none has given me any unwelcome word. But it is the truth. Through me a shadow of evil has come into a place which should be at peace and holy."

"Peace we may strive for. Holiness is not of our fashioning," the Abbess returned. "If you leave here where do you go? My Lord of Nordendale—"

Hertha made a swift gesture. "Your Reverence, he was good to me when he had every right to draw steel across my throat. I brought him into such peril as perhaps none of our kind has seldom faced. You know my story, how I prayed for vengeance to creatures whose very nature is of black foulness, and later drew him into their net."

"Then fought for him again," the Abbess said slowly. "Did you not believe when you so fought that he was still the one who shamed you?"

"Yes. But what did that matter? If I had turned my own dagger point upon him for a clean death, that was my right, was it not?" Her old shame and hate clung for a moment to memory. "But no man, no matter what his sin, should be given to old evil."

"He did not hold your act against you. No, rather he did in a measure honor you for trying to uphold your battle against shame. This Trystan spoke with me before he rode forth, and, since then, have you not had twice messengers from him confirming that he has accomplished his desires in part, that he has taken command of the leaderless people of Nordendale, that he has brought peace and more than a small measure of hope to others, that he wishes you to come in all honor as his lady. He is a strong man, hard in some ways, but also, in his core, as good as the steel he carries. What of him? Do you go to him?"

"To him least of all, Your Reverence. He is but new come into his lordship. Strong and valiant a man though he may be, let him bring a bride with a 'changeling' already at her breast, and trouble shall rise about him, as water rises about a rock fallen into a swift flowing river which in time shall roll it over and over, doing with it as the water wills. No, I do not go to Nordendale. Also I beg this humbly of Your Reverence, that you not send any message to Lord Trystan. If he or his messenger rides hither again you will say that I have gone to my own people."

"You have no people, so you have said," the Abbess returned sharply. "Falsehood shall not be uttered here either in a good or bad cause."

"My Lady Abbess, I have by my own action set myself apart from those once my kind. In truth I go to what perhaps is my own place."

"The Waste? That means your death. To seek death willingly is also a sin."

Hertha shook her head. "No, had I wished to travel / that path I would have taken it easily months ago. I do not _ go out to die, but to seek an answer. If that seeking leads me into strange places, then that I shall face."

"Their ways have never been ours. You imperil more than your body in such a search."

"Lady, I imperiled myself so months ago. Now I have J"< a battle before me. Do you believe—" the girl's face f ^ flushed, her eyes were bright, afire as those of a hunting * falcon ready for the death swoop, "that I shall not fight for fr this little one, who is wholly mine? There are places of evil \$ from the days when our people did not know this land, but there are also places of peace and good. Is it not true of a healer that often a small part of a dangerous herb may be given to counteract the illness that same herb or its like seeded in the body? If it takes me a lifetime of searching, I will seek healing."

For a long moment the Abbess made no answer. She studied Hertha's face, as if by the very force of her will she could see through flesh and bone to the thoughts of the mind within that skull.

"This is your choice," she said slowly. "We do not use strange powers, but sometimes the Flame grants us also a ~- measure of foreseeing, even as a wise woman will look into &. her scrying cup. I cannot tell why, but I believe that if anything can be done to lift this curse, guidance will be given you."

"And if the Lord Trystan comes?" Hertha had drawn a deep breath. She had never expected such a response from a woman so deeply wedded to rituals which denied any dependence upon other and older arts.

"He will be told the truth. That you bore one for whose future you must strive, and that you have gone so to battle, we know not where. Whether such a man will accept these statements, I do not know. That is a matter for him to decide. I cannot give your search a blessing, but insofar as one vowed to our beliefs can well-wish another, so do I you, Lady Hertha. You have courage, and your will is like a sword blade, worn somewhat by this world's battles, still sunbright and keen of edge.

"You have the mount which the Lord Trystan left for you; that I advise you to accept, even though your pride may prickle. We shall also give you one of the baggage ponies, for of those we have many, brought here by refugees, some of whom did not survive

and whose goods were left for kinsmen who never came. Supplies you shall have, with what traveler's gear you wish to select from our storehouse.

"And—" once more she hesitated. "I have given you well-wishing. I cannot add to that any blessed charm, for where you go such could be a hindrance rather than an aid. Nor will I ask in which direction you travel, though I will say do not ride the open road, as this is a land in chaos and there are many masterless men to prey on travelers."

"Lady Abbess, you have given me far more than I dared dream." Hertha arose to her feet. "Perhaps your greatest gift is that you have not said to me, 'Go not, this is a useless thing!'"

There was the faintest shadow of a smile about the Abbess's lips.

"And if I said so, and wrung my hands, and called upon authority—which I do not have since you are no daughter of this roof—would you have listened? No, I believe that you have thought much and that you believe this is your life burden. So be it. We all choose our own roads, some with less cause than you."

Hertha stood very straight. This woman had that in her which might have made them friends had the circumstances been otherwise. For a single moment Hertha wondered what it would have been like to be welcomed as a "daughter" into such a house of peace. But that was a very fleeting thought. She repeated the old guesting farewell of the traveler:

"For the feasting, for the roof, I give thanks and blessing. For the future all good to this place, as I take the road again."

The Abbess bowed her head slightly. "Go in peace, Lady Hertha. As you seek so may you find." Though she said she refused the flame blessing, still her hand raised and moved in some air-drawn sign between them.

Then Hertha and Elfanor went out of the place of peace. The Abbess had indeed been generous. The horse Hertha rode, astride, garments culled from the supply left by the refugees providing her with the wide, skirt-like breeches of a noblewoman's hunting garb, was that on which Trystan had brought her here. It was not a showy beast, and it was rather small, having much of the blood, she was sure, of the tough, wild mountain breed. But such were sought by travelers for hardiness.

Trailed behind by a leading rope was an even smaller pony, well-filled packs slung one on either side of his back. Belted at Hertha's waist was a long bladed sword-dagger which she had found among the stored gear. She also had strapped to her saddle a short boar spear, its wicked head needle sharp. Elfanor rode in a cradle-like basket against Hertha's back, leaving the girl's arms free for the managing for her two beasts.

She went out in the early morning, for it was her wish to get along the known road when it would be the least traveled, on into the hills, even as the Abbess had advised. The land was indeed filled with masterless men and outlaws. Many of the lords had died in the war, leaving their holdings to the weak and the easily preyed upon. It was such men as Trystan who might in the end bring order out of this present darkness. She thought of that, and then pushed it out of mind. That she could have stood beside him and perhaps given him aid, that was like a smoke fancy, quickly blown away by the grim truth of her burden.

Before the sun was well up she was off the road to pick a crisscross path among some stones which looked as if they were the chance product of a landslip, but which, she knew from her diligent questioning at the abbey, were instead a barrier or half-closed gate to disguise the beginning of another and much older way.

It was true those Old Ones who had once held the Dates, had a liking for roads which climbed along the crests of the hills rather than curled at more ease through the valleys. Such a way had, months before, taken her to Gunnora's shrine and later to the place of the Toads. What she sought now was a return to the shrine. Gunnora alone might grant her some direction. For the Great Lady was a lover of children, one who smiled upon those who bore them, and was well known to listen to any petition for a baby in need. Whether she would aid one who was cursed—No, Hertha told herself firmly, this sin was hers and not that of the child. Any payment which must be made was to be laid where it belonged. She would take the scaly spotted skin, the eyes, all visited on Elfanor. It was her hope that Gunnora might lead her by some dream of enlightenment to learn to do just that thing.

She rode at a slow amble, stopping at times to slide from her padded saddle and nurse Elfanor. The child had not cried. Her silence was one of the strange things about her. Also Hertha noted that, at times, those rounded eyes looked out upon the world with a measurement which certainly was not of the human kind. Nor should so young a baby focus so keenly on what lay about it.

Though the ancient road kept to the heights, those who had fashioned it had arranged that travelers could not easily be revealed. Brush and trees, both thick-growing, walled it on the valley side, here and there giving way to a screen of upstanding broken rocks, all blending with the countryside so that this safeguard was not, in itself, a sign that a highway lay so concealed.

Hertha and the child sheltered that night in what might even have been a contrived campsite, for here were rocks upsprouting, several leaning at an angle so that their tips touched to form a rude imitation of roof.

There was even a basin or pit there, blackened surely by ancient fires, into which she packed sticks and the dried moss she had had the forethought to cull from branches of the brush, setting a pocket of flames, over which she crouched, nursing the baby against her. To that fire she added a scant handful of dried leaves from a packet Dame

Inghela had given her. The smoke puffing up as those were consumed brought a fresh, clean scent. But it was not for that that Hertha had added her material so sparingly. Such a combination of herbs had the ability to keep at bay dark dreams. The scent cleared the head, as those learned in plant lore knew. Hertha needed this.

To travel this old road deliberately put her again under the influence which ancient powers could still exert. Whatever small safeguards she could raise against evil, those she must use.

The beasts drew closer to the fire also, feeding on the grain she took from her journey bags. She dared not turn them loose to graze at will. But there was water nearby, a spring feeding a rill from which the horse and pony had drunk noisily, where she herself rinsed out her two bottles of water, refilling them both, slaking her own thirst after the dryness of a journeycake.

Sleep came fitfully, for she had set herself a kind of inner warning which did arouse her now and then through the night to feed the fire, while ever close to her hand was the hilt of the long knife, the shaft of the boar spear.

Her body ached in spite of the way she had tried to ease her travel. Near dawn, though she lay back once more in the cup of rock, she did not sleep, rather went over in her mind the direction in which she must head at the coming of true day.

The hill road ran on, now dipping a little into some valley, now climbing above. Hertha passed rock walls on which had been graven so deeply strange symbols that even long passing of time had not altogether erased them.

On the fourth day her road branched, one part turning south. She had seen no one, though once or twice, when the trail drew closer to the valley way, she had heard sounds of others. Each sound had frozen her into waiting with a fast-beating heart.

At the splitting of the trails Hertha took the northernmost, and began to look about her for some landmark. If she was right, this was the same way she had followed months ago to Gunnora's shrine. So she should catch sight of some rock spur, some stretch of country she could remember.

There was no good camping place on this fork. The wind swept down, holding no spring softness. She swung the cradle about from her back, steadying it across her saddle, bending a little over it so that the folds of her cloak could give protection to the baby.

Shadows formed by early evening drifted down the slope. Still she rode on, for there was no promising place to alight. Then, when Hertha had nearly given up hope, she saw the building she sought. There was a glow from the door on which was hung a strip of metal fashioned into Gunnora's own sign, a ripe grain sheath with a binding of fruit-laden vine.

Her mount, which had been plodding with down-drooping head, now whinnied. Its call was answered by the pony from behind. Hertha herself raised her voice, which in her own hearing sounded hoarse from cold and lack of use:

"Good fortune to this house and the dwellers therein!"

The door split open, each half sliding back into the wall; golden light streamed out. Nor did her mount give her time to slip clumsily from her saddle, rather the horse paced on and stood, blowing, in what was an outer chamber, not a real courtyard. Still both beasts seemed quiet and content as if they had indeed come to their proper place.

Hertha, stiff and sore, feeling as if she had been riding forever, dismounted.

"Enter into peace."

The voice came from the air. She remembered how it had also done so upon her visit to the shrine. She looked doubtfully at the horse and the pony. Their loads must be shed. They had served her well and should be eased.

"Enter." A second door opened for her. "The good beasts will be tended, as will all who come in peace."

Already the warmth, the feeling of being burdenless, filled her. She did not linger, but walked forward. At that second doorway she slipped the long knife from her belt sheath and left it lying, for steel was not worn in Gunnora's hall.

The second room was as she had remembered it—a table set with food, all ready to refresh the traveler. In her basket nest Elfanor stirred, gave a small mewling cry. Her large eyes stared up into her mother's face, and never had Hertha been so sure that within the small misshapen body there was a mind which saw, which knew, which was older than the flesh and bone that contained it.

She half expected a protest from the child, or perhaps from whatever presence abode in this chamber. Could one bring a cursed being into the light which was its opposite? Save for that one cry Elfanor did not make another sound, nor was there any answer. Hertha dropped into the chair, held the baby close to her with her left arm, stretched out her right hand to pick up a goblet from which arose faint steam, the scent of wine mulled with herbs which was a traveler's welcome on a night of cold and long wayfaring.

She drank. She spooned into her mouth the richness of a stew, food which satisfied, filled the body and eased the mind as no mouthful had done since her first visit to the shrine.

Satisfied, she sat back in her chair at last and spoke as much to the leaping flame of the two lamps on the table as to the room.

"To the giver of the feast, fair thanks from the heart. For the welcome of the gate, gratitude. To She who rules here—" Hertha hesitated. She could no longer find the proper words. For the first time the idea arose, hard and harsh, of what she had done. Into a place of peace and light she had brought sin and evil—her own sin and evil!

On the far side of the table a second door swung open. There was dimmer light beyond. Now, filling the room, came the sweet scent of flowers at the height of their summer blooming, a kind of voiceless murmur as one might hear in the flowing of a merry stream, the hum of contented bees about their harvest, the faintest breath of wind stirring blossom-laden branches.

It would seem that the Presence here did not judge as she knew she should be judged. In her heart there was a small spring of real hope. Her travel-stained divided skirt dragging at her boots, she went forward, not slowly, reluctantly, but as one who has a purpose and knows that it must be carried out.

Smoke tendrils ringed about her, the scent grew stronger. It seemed to Hertha as if that smoke took on tangible substance, forming many arms to draw her on. Half-amused by the herb scent, she stumbled a little as she came up against a couch. There she lay down wearily. Her eyes closed.

There was a light, golden as the ker-apples of autumn, rich in its seeming as the metal men prized. It arose as a pillar stretching from the floor or ground so far into the upper regions of this other place that Hertha, no matter how far back she turned her head, could not see its crown. She saw now that it was not solid, even though her sight could not pierce it. Rather it pulsed in rhythm, as if it were tuned to the beating of a heart.

Beautiful as that column was, there was something awesome, near threatening about it. Hertha had knelt unconsciously. She wanted to reach out her hands to that light, to pray for pardon; only her hands, her arms, were locked about what she carried. She turned her eyes from the light to that burden.

The child had human form, true human form, yet it was dark, sullenly dark. Still, in its small breast, the light of the pillar awoke an answer, a spark as clear and glowing golden.

"Lady—" Hertha did not believe she spoke aloud. In this place the words came straight from the heart, from innermost thought, and that part of any who came here which was the whole truth. "I have sinned against the life which is of the good. Let not punishment fall upon the child, but rather on me. For the innocent should not suffer for the guilty."

The light flashed brightly to scald her eyes. Tears ran. Or were those tears she had not shed since first the evil that all her kind could do had caught her in a foul net?

Hertha waited for an answer. When nothing came, fear awoke. She had to hold to all her strength and courage to keep her eyes upon that searing light. She shivered, for it

seemed to her that a cold wrapped around her, cutting her off not only from the mercy of the light, but from the life of her own kind as well.

She cried out. If this was death, then—

"Not the child!" Her words were not as a plea, rather a demand. Then she was more frightened, for one did not demand from the Powers, one wooed and prayed.

The light vanished as if a blink of her tormented eyes had sent it into extinction. She saw something else—

There spread now before her a place of rocks standing in a pattern, a wheel pattern. That stretched as if she were suspended in the air above. Though it had looked different from the ground, as she had seen it twice before, she knew what she envisioned now—the place of the Toads.

Devilish greenish lights glowed upon the sitting rocks at its heart. Hertha half expected those to reach for her, fearing that any protection she might once have had against those Dark Ones had been withdrawn.

However, they did not appear to be aware of her, if indeed the Toads were present. Now she moved, as one might who wore wings and used them in slow even beats. She traveled above that maze of rock ways outward to its circumference. Something else appeared. At the ends of several of the ways which led into the web of the Toads there stood straight and fast in the middle (as if they were closed doors to bar entrance) stones which shown faintly blue. Three such roads were so closed, three were open. Into Hertha's mind swept knowledge, as if this were something she had always known and which had been asleep in her mind, to be now awakened.

So had the Toads of Grimmerdale once been confined and kept from troubling the dreams of men, kept from drawing to them such foolhardy or evil people as she had been when she had first sought them out. So must they be confined again. Hertha drew a deep breath. If this was the task set her, then she was ready for it.

There came to her then a warning. Because she had once attempted to use the Toads to achieve her end, she was now vulnerable to them. To come so close to their own place was a risk of death worse than any failure or hurt of body. The choice was hers alone. Would it save Elfanor? Of

even that she could not be sure, only hope, but hope was Strong, it could carry one far, be meat and drink, rest and surcease. Now Hertha held to it with the full force of her will.

Once more the girl faced the winds of the heights. _There had been food again waiting her when she had awakened. In the outer court she had discovered the animals, fed, saddled and burdened, ready. The sun already touched the upstanding peaks of the

hills as she set out, turning once more eastward, picking a way to avoid the closer settled dales.

As she went Hertha searched for landmarks she had seen but once. Above all she must avoid any meeting with a jar-roving hunter or herder out of Nordendale. The fact that the dalesmen avoided the places of the Old Ones, shunned their roads, was her only advantage.

The track which had been a clear guide to Gunnora's shrine became dimmer on its twisting way east. Beyond the reaches of Nordendale she should cut south once again for the circle of the Toads, perhaps over land where there was no trace at all of any road.

She dared not quicken pace. This track was treacherous with a winter slippage of stones and rock. With Elfanor in her carrying cradle upon her back, Hertha had to dismount now and again to lead her horse, testing the stability of the trail with the haft of the spear. Her mount had not so far refused to advance and that she took as a good sign, accepting that the animal's sense, so much keener than her own in many ways, would give any warning of trouble.

After a full day's travel she slept but fitfully, Elfanor in her arms beneath the huddle of her cloak, their rest a nest of last year's leaves and grass which Hertha scooped into place among a tangle of storm-downed trees. The second day had no sun, instead a thick mist which was half drizzle dampened her dank clothing against her.

Nordendale she passed—with a feeling of relief. She had allowed herself a short period of viewing what lay below, marking the changes which had come to that half-deserted, once masterless holding since last she had come this way. There were people in the garden patches, a movement of sheep along one hillside. But her eyes had sought at once the tower of the keep. No banner cracked in the crisp wind. Which meant the lord was not in residence. Where? Hertha bit down on her mittened hand. There could well be one place to which Trystan was now bound—Lithendale! If he had gone seeking her— She shook her head as if her jumble of thoughts could be so reduced to order. No, there was only one thing which mattered, that stone wheel above Grimmerdale!

There was little forage for the horse and pony here. They pulled toward the green now coating hillside meadows. She had to use all her skill and determination to keep them moving. At noon she bribed them with broken bits of journey cake which they mouthed eagerly, licking up the last of the crumbs from the rocks where she had dropped the pieces.

The drizzle never became true rain, only a gray misery which wrapped her around. One of those lesser irritations which could eat away at one's determination. Her garments clung to her, and she shivered continually as she rode. Tonight—if she did not halt too long at an eating or rest break—tonight she should be within such distance of Grimmerdale that the next morn she could face her task.

She had this much in her favor, Hertha decided. The Powers of the Dark Ones were fed by the night, by any absence of light. If she could get to her task by the day she would have that small advantage. Providing she could finish before dusk deepened again.

Twilight came early. Again she camped at a place from which she could see the lantern above the door of that inn where once she had served and waited with what patience she could muster, for the one man whom her singleminded purpose had sent her to deliver to vengeance. She longed for a hot drink, for shelter even as squalid as that inn had been, the sound of voices of her own kind. Instead she crouched alone, her two beasts uneasy beside her, sucking at a stick of dried meat, and nursing her child. In the last of the light she saw that once more that knowing, measuring look was back in Elfanor's eyes. Something which was not of proper mankind gazed out at her, slyly, maliciously, with anticipation.

Hertha refused to believe that this was more than her imagination. She cradled the baby in her arms, after giving her the breast, rocking back and forth, crooning in a whisper one of the old, old songs she remembered her own old nurse had used to hold at bay the dark and all which might glide within thick shadows.

That night she did not sleep. It was as if the driving purpose which had brought her here fostered within her a frenetic energy, so that she had to use all her power and determination not to leave the half shelter she had found, to go straightway to the place where they waited.

So strong did that pull become that she knelt upon the ground, fighting with all the strength of her being the desire to move, to go—

That night might have lasted for a year, a century, more than her own lifetime, or so it seemed when the first grayish finger-claws of dawn came clutching over the hills. Hertha got stiffly to her feet. She was numb with cold, cramped in every muscle by the battle she had fought. Still lay the task ahead.

Now placing the baby's cradle on the ground, the girl opened the bag which Dame Inghela had given her. There were packets of leaves so dried and crushed that their condition was dry powder, others, withered to be sure, but still clinging to the branches from which they had sprung.

Hertha made her choices, lifting each pinch she used close to her nose to make sure that she dealt with the right one. Five such pinches she worked into a thick grease contained in a small pot, then three more, and lastly one, which was the strongest and most pungent of them all, making her sneeze, even gag when she smelled it closely.

The salve which had absorbed all these she rubbed in wide circles about her eyes. It beaded in her brows, making her squint a little from its strength of emanation. Again she used more as an ointment. Taking off her damp cap, she thrust her braids of hair back

impatiently that she might anoint her ears. Last of all what was left she spread across the palms of her hands. Having so prepared herself, and fasting as required, she picked up the basket cradle and took Elfanor to the nearest shelter, a bush very thick with budding branches which overhung the ground. Slipping the cradle back under that rough canopy, Hertha set on end about the open side of the hiding place those branches of twigged herbs, forcing them into the earth, bolstering them erect with small stones.

The horse and pony had followed her. Now she recklessly crumbled all she had left of her journey cakes, leaving the bits in two piles at which they eagerly nuzzled. Getting to her feet, Hertha started forward, refusing to let herself look back. All she could do to protect Elfanor she had. She dared not let any apprehension steal into her mind, she must remember only what she had come to do.

The circle of the outer stones which was the rim of the Toad's wheel were clear enough. She held her hands together so that the greased palms were as one. Using them both then she pointed her fingertips forward, the smell of the herbs very strong.

Hertha edged along, making the circuit of the wheel's outer wall. Nor would she allow herself to glance down any of the avenues formed between the spokes of upstanding stones, but kept her gaze on the ground. She found the first of the "stopper stones" at the third such aisle.

Hertha faltered. The thing was a rough hunk of rock, not even worked as were the pillar stones, and it was as tall as her knees, so well embedded in the ground that perhaps it might be even larger. She wet her chapped lips with the tip of her tongue and considered its size, her own strength. Could she move such?

She might only find one of the missing ones and try. The girl dropped her cloak to the ground, its sodden folds hindered her shoulders and arms. Already she had sighted what she wanted. This was one! All points and angles, its blue surface standing out vividly in this place. Hertha reached it quickly, set her palms to it and pushed, to find the boulder set in the ground as securely as any forest tree.

So—but it could be moved! Having been in place once, it must be put so again. Now she exerted more strength, strove to rock it back and forth, her hands chafed by the roughness of its surface. The stone moved!

So small a triumph, but enough to encourage her. Panting, fighting, rubbing her hands near raw in spite of their protective covering (for in this place she knew that she dare not use the mittens which dangled from her wrists), she edged the rock on, brought it into place at last midpoint of one unguarded aisle, and leaned against it, panting for a space.

There was something building about her, a kind of soundless laughter, of jeering at one who dared so much surely to fail. Hertha straightened. Her lips were one firm line, her chin set. One! Now for the next—

She found a second stone, but this was half buried in rubble. She had to pull and dig to free it before she could once more try to move the rock on. It was stubborn, leaving its bed with such reluctance that once or twice she despaired of ever getting it out. Her hands left bloody prints upon its surface when she dragged it at last to the doorway it must lock. Two—

Hunger gnawed at her. She swayed dizzily now and again as she went to search for the last. Surely she could find and set that. Her wide divided skirt dragged at her legs. She felt as one wading through a vast quagmire of sucking mud, having to fight for each forward step.

There was no stone! There must be! She could not have been misled in her vision in the shrine. Those of the Power who turned to the light played no such cruel tricks. They could refuse help, but they did not deliberately deceive. Somewhere near the stone must lie. Hertha turned slowly, examining the ground. There were tumbled stones, yes, plenty of them, both large and small, but none of a blue sheen.

Could it be wholly buried in some pile as the second was half concealed? She could sight no heap in that clutter of rocks which was large enough to hide totally what she sought. Once more she made the dragging round of the outer circumference of the wheel. As she went, so did that sly laughter seem to grow within her mind, buffet her like the wind of a rising storm. She was certain that the Toads knew what she attempted, that they watched her in amusement, somehow certain that her efforts would fail. But those would not!

The circling of her search grew wider, farther away from the edge of the wheel. Now she sought out Elfanor and nursed the whimpering baby, not realizing her own fatigue until her legs seemed to fold under her and the bleeding hands with which she clasped the child to her shook with tremors she could not control.

Her hunger was gone, leaving only a dull pain in her body as she hunched forward, impatient but waiting that the child might be satisfied. The horse and the pony stood on either side of the tangled bush. They had again licked up all the food she had left but they had not strayed.

Suddenly the mount which had carried her threw up its head and nickered before Hertha could stop it. A neigh answered. She stiffened where she crouched, taking the baby from her breast and placing it quickly in the basket behind her. Elfanor opened her mouth and gave forth a furious yell.

Somehow Hertha got to her feet, stood there wavering, one hand making fast her clothing, the other resting ready on the hilt of her dagger. Though the drizzle of rain no longer fell, the clouds still hung overhead. Not dark nor close enough however to hide the fact that there was a rider coming.

There were outlaws enough in this war-torn land who had the desperate courage, or perhaps even the inclination, to follow the Old Roads. She remembered, too, nightmare tales of things which prowled, or were said to run the ridges. Surely no one would come here unless he was bent on some form of mischief, so evil was the reputation of this place.

The newcomer fronted the rise, and she saw he wore war mail, a snouted helm which hid much of his face. A shield swung by his saddle horn, and its device had been new painted. That was the only bit of color about him, for the horse he rode was of the same dull gray as his half armor, as dusky of mane as his surcoat.

Once she might have known him by the shield device, but the lords of the dales lay in many unknown graves up and down the lands, and new men had risen, choosing their own markings. Hertha could not put name to who would bear what he carried. The painting was crude as if someone hardly versed in such work had made an effort to picture something only imperfectly described. There was a strange cloudy representation of what might be some kind of monstrous head, cutting across it, straight and far better pictured, the blade of a drawn sword, as if that weapon barred the monster behind from some prey. Cold iron—

The thought ran in her head as if he who rode so shouted it aloud. Cold iron, which was indeed the bane of some of the Old Ones, a counter to their magic in itself.

Some outlaw, more foolhardy and reckless than most of their breed? Or a wanderer who did not know the danger he unwittingly courted in such a place? With that snouted helm so overshadowing his face she could not see him any clearer than if he wore a mask. But the voice which hailed her! Hertha drew a deep breath of protest—yes, that she knew!

His mount, a war charger of good breed, paced slowly onward, the reins lying easy on its neck as if the rider had no reason to control it to his will. She wanted to run, but there was no refuge, no place to go where he could not follow—even into the den of the Toads where once they did venture together.

"My lady—" His hail seemed to hang in the air between them as if she refused to let her ears hear it. His horse stood quiet as he swung down with the practiced ease of a fighting man, leaving that shield still hung in place. Now he came toward her, his booted feet making a small crunching sound on the gravel. Somehow Hertha found her voice, was able to raise hand and ward him off with the only gesture she could make.

"No!"

If he heard her he did not listen. Now she could see his sunbrowned jaw, his firm-lipped mouth below the half mask of the helm. He paused and dragged his mail-enclosed gauntlets from his hands, thrust them into his belt and then dealt expertly with the fastening snaps of the helm, pulled it off to free his head with its frosted hair blowing

free in the breeze. His eyes were slightly narrowed as he regarded her with such a speculative look that Hertha longed to be away from here, safe hid from all the thoughts which his coming had awakened in her, nothing must defeat her purpose here. So, hardening her resolve, it was her turn to take a step forward, both hands up, grimed, broken of nail, raw of finger, between them, in that warding off gesture.

"My Lord Trystan—why?"

Somehow she could not find more words, though thoughts plagued her.

"I went to Lithendale; you were gone." He spoke simply, as one might to a troubled child. "They told me that you sought help in a strange and perilous place. So I came."

Hertha ran her tongue across her lips, tasted a little of the bitter coating she had laid upon her face.

"This—it is my task—" She tried to lash herself into saving anger. Always, save once, she had defended her independence, carried her own burden without any help.

"I do not know witcheries," he said gravely. "Perhaps it is true that yours may be the only hands," he glanced at her misused fingers then, "which can accomplish this. Then again, my lady, it may also be that two can do better and quicker than one what must be done."

Before Hertha could retreat he was at her side in one swift stride, trying to catch her hands. But she jerked away.

"Do not!" she cried. "They have protection."

"Protection!" One eyebrow arched upward in an odd slant which she remembered of old. "It would seem by the looks of those that you have had little of that this day. Tell me," now his voice had the ring of that which had been raised many times to command men, "what do you do here and why?"

"Why?" She must disgust him and quickly, get rid of one who had no part of this and who must not be drawn into her troubles. With a flap of her earth-stained clothing she turned and stooped to catch up the basket. Settling that against her hip, she pulled free the covers about Elfanor's face. Even under these clouds the light was without pity, showing the clear marks of the curse. While the baby's eyes were open, staring outward with that evil, knowing look. "See you?" she demanded fiercely, studying him intently, watching for the first sign of revulsion.

However he had himself well schooled, that she must admit. He did not display the disgust she was certain she would see.

"They told me—a changeling—" His voice was slow, even, again as if he were afraid to alarm. "But you think, lady, that you have found an answer here?"

"Perhaps, only perhaps." She felt odd, having prepared herself to counter the shrinking she had expected from him. What kind of a man was he who faced the results of dark evil without a change of eye or expression?

"Perhaps is sometimes all one can ask for." Again he made one of those swift, sure moves and she found the basket whirled out of her torn hands, held firm and secure in his, as he looked down at the child. "What is it that you think must be done?" he asked briskly.

She wanted to take the basket from him, to draw tight the coverings which made Elfanor safe from prying eyes as well as this cold. But her tired body made her clumsy as she stumbled, half fell forward, so that now he held the cradle upon one hip and his other arm was about her, both drawing her close and supporting her.

"Come." He countered her small attempt to pull away, led her to a pile of stones and there seated himself, the cradle resting across his knees, she herself beside him, unable to summon any strength to pull free from his hold.

She shivered, her hands lying uselessly on her knees. Then, to her great disgust, she felt tears on her cheeks. So much of her wanted to yield, to let someone else take command. Only—she need only look down at Elfanor, who as usual lay quiet, only stared up into the face of the man who held her with those unblinking eyes, the sly fires well alive deep in their depths.

Hertha summoned up all the strength she could muster, and broke free from his grip, somehow got to her feet.

"The rocks—the last one—" She must keep to her task!

"Which rock?" He did not try to hold her back, only stood himself and then placed the cradle carefully on the ground.

Hertha had already lurched away, afraid now that he would attempt to hold her again. If he did, she might yield to that traitor part of her which his coming here had awakened in a way which bewildered and weakened her resolve.

"The blue one, the last—I have searched, and searched. Two I found. The third—I cannot." She stumbled on, her torn hands outstretched as if to implore the ground itself to produce the stone she must have. "The rocks," she spoke more to herself than to him, trying to return to her singleminded hunt, shut out all which was not atuned to that, "one must be placed at each of the entrances, as a sealing. That is the task laid upon me now."

She was only half aware then he had passed her, to go to the nearest of the spoked lanes and look down at the earth-encrusted boulder she had worked so hard to set in place.

"This kind?" Trystan did not wait for her to answer. Instead, having studied the stone, he too swung out in search among the tumble of rocks which lay spread but along the crest of the ridge.

Hertha dragged her way on, stopping now and then to pull at a pile of smaller stones, hoping each time to see hidden beneath them the blue she sought. She had been near three-quarters of the way around the wheel now and there was no sign of the last one. Did it exist at all?

"Ha!"

She turned. So quickly that she lost her balance and fell painfully to her knees. For a moment she did not see him at all and then his head appeared nearly at ground level and she remembered a notch of gully which ran there.

"I think that it is down here!"

Somehow Hertha got across the ground between them. Trystan was stooped, hurling small rocks away from him with vigor. As Hertha came to the lip of that cut she could see it too, buried, only a small bit showing above the soil now that he cleared it from the rock fall. Blue like the others. But how could she raise it?

Having thrown aside the rocks, Trystan drew his sword and stabbed the earth, throwing chunks of winter-hardened clay aside, yet working more slowly and with care for the safety of his tool which was not to be foolishly blunted.

Hertha wiped the back of her hand across her forehead, smearing the herb grease on her face. She stared down at where Trystan worked with a dull despair. He might free the stone, yes, but how could she get it out of that tight lodging, then drag or roll it to the final resting place? Strength seemed to have melted out of her body.

"There it is, my lady!" He stepped away, thrusting his sword once more into its scabbard, looking down at the boulder he had uncovered with an expression of satisfaction.

From somewhere Hertha summoned croaking words. "Up—how does one get it up?"

That she could lift that piece of rock she had to acknowledge was beyond her powers. Yet the task was hers alone, she was sure of that, as she had been since the first of this ordeal.

"There is the rope which kept your pony's sacks in place." He stood, pinching his lips as he looked down at the rock. "With the aid of the horses it can be pulled out."

Hertha blinked. What he said made sense. She had been so bemused by her own fatigue that such a move had not occurred to her. It gave her a spurt of energy and she was on her feet once more, heading to where she had piled the pony's gear. There was the rope, sure enough, a strong one. Whether its strength was enough to carry through Trystan's suggestion she could not be sure until it was tried. Looping the coil over her arm and shoulder, she brought it back and tossed the end to him.

He caught it neatly out of midair as it fell, then knelt to work a length around the rock, taking advantage of any projecting angle to make the stone more secure. Finally he looked up to her.

"Bring your horse, mine, and we shall see if this will serve."

-Her own placid mount caused no trouble, plodding

easily enough to the gully. But his beast pulled back on the reins he had left dangling to the ground, the traditional "earth tie" of a fighting man, rolling its eyes and snorting. Hertha pulled steadily on the reins and was glad that there was no battle—the horse followed her at last, one reluctant step after another.

Trystan clambered out of the cut, was already making one end of the rope into a loop about the horn of her saddle. The other he still gripped in his hand as he mounted up, giving the now foreshortened piece of cordage a second twist about his own horn.

At his signal not only the horse he bestrode, but her own moved and she saw the rope become as taut as a bowstring, snapping hard against the edge of the gully. She feared to hear the crack of a breaking rope. Still that did not come. Trystan's horse went slowly on, step by step, her own following while the rope remained taut. The rock, indeed, freed from its earth setting, was drawn up the side of the gully as it gouged and scraped against the wall along which it swung.

The boulder arose at last over the edge, plopped near Hertha's feet. She hurried to it, worrying at the knotted rope, she would have nothing left to draw upon. Trystan was beside her, his hands pushing her aside as they competently freed the stone.

"Now where? Where is this road which must be so guarded?"

She shook her head. "I must do it! Mine the sin, mine the payment!" She tried to edge past him, to set her hands to the stone's earth-grimed side. It must be done—she must do it!

"No." His voice seemed to come from very far away, as if her head were so full of the need for keeping her mind on action that she could not catch the words quickly. "If it needs your touch, well enough. But remember, I, too, faced the Toads once in a time."

"Because then I tricked you." Hertha was not aware again that she was crying until she tasted the salt of her own tears. "All was of my doing. Let me go. It must be placed before sundown—it must be!"

He did not answer her. Instead he bent and braced both hands to the boulder, releasing his strength, sending it rolling in a wobbling fashion across the ground. Hertha hurried after it with a cry of dismay. She reached it first, set her own energy, what remained of it, to the pushing, and felt that it gave only inches.

He was once more beside her. "Together we once fought here, my lady. So shall we fight again. I have not sought you out to lose you again in any battle which means all this one does. Heave if you will and must, but with my help also. Surely whatever power sent you here cannot deny you my aid, not now!"

Hertha could not raise breath to answer him. She labored at the stone, and it was moving more easily, rocking from side to side. If she was not fulfilling the task laid upon her, she would suffer. But she could not accomplish it all alone, of that she was sure.

The stone moved so slowly. Above was the darkening of clouds which were of no storm's signal but that of coming night. Night was when the Dark Ones arose to power, if they could not get the stone in place before the last of daylight reached them! Hertha's breath came in shallow gusts of panting. Before them to the left was the last of the open ways. Trystan changed position, coming about behind her so as to exert pressure from the other side.

It seemed to Hertha that the very ground denied them aid, that certain shadows crept out from the pillar bases to cover the rough portions and hide obstacles from them as they labored.

"On now, my lady, just a short way—" He, too, was panting. Then he bent even closer to the ground, going down on one knee as he set his shoulder firmly against the side of the rock.

"Stand away!" he ordered her.

She saw the strain of his body, his flushed face. For a long moment it would seem that the rock had caught past their moving. Then—

Slowly, and with a wavering from side to side (which Hertha watched with anguished anxiety, her bleeding hands pressed to her mouth) it went forward, came to a stop in the center of the way.

There was a sudden sweep of wind, sword-sharp with cold, whirling out her clothing, raising dust to blind her eyes. Somewhere from within that gritty haze came hands, arms, a body which steadied her. Was it the wailing of the wind which carried that strange chorus of grunting cries? Or did she imagine it only?

She could barely keep her feet. A moment later he caught her up, carried her out of the whirlwind of noise and grit, back toward the bush which still sheltered Elfanor.

The wind died, she heard another sound, the vigorous crying of a baby. Trystan set her down and Hertha staggered to the cradle. It was not dark yet, the twilight was still holding off a little. She caught the basket up into her arms as she fell to her knees. Holding it tight against her with one arm, she clawed at the covering blanket. Elfanor was screaming steadily.

Hertha stared down. Her eyes were tearing, perhaps the grit of the wind storm had irritated them. She blinked and blinked furiously, fighting against that distortion of her sight. Then she could see clearly.

Her daughter's face was red with effort, her eyes screwed shut as she howled, flailing at the air with the fists she had managed to loose from her swaddling.

A red face, but—

Hertha's fear melted away. This was no changeling! She had won! The curse was gone. The eyes in the baby's face opened. They were dark, but there was no alien knowledge in them, just as that anger-reddened skin held no scaled patch of brown.

"Free! She is free!" Hertha crooned, rocking the baby, cradle and all, against her as she swayed back and forth. Firm hands clasped her shoulders. Dimly she realized that a new strength had come, that she was no longer alone.

"You freed her." His voice was clear to her.

She turned her head to look at him, all her gratitude swelling up within her like an inner fire.

"With you only could I have done it."

"Did you think I would not help?" He looked stern, harsh and hard, in the failing light. But that was not Trystan in truth, that she was sure of. For the first time in days, months, even years which she could remember, Hertha let her stiff independence seep away, allowed herself the precious safety of his hold.

"With you only," she repeated softly. She knew from the light suddenly aglow in his eyes, the softening of his lips that he heard. "Many are Gunnora's gifts—many and good."

"May her name be praised," he said then, though Gunnora was the holder of women's Power and no man worshiped at her shrine. "She has given us both much in this hour. My lady, it grows dark, shall we go?"

Hertha looked at Elfanor. Whatever rage had possessed her at the sundering of the dark power was gone. The baby blinked sleepily.

"Yes," Hertha cried. "Let us go—home!"

The delight in his face was such at her words that she believed she had nothing else to wish for.