

# Dragon Scale Silver

By Andre Norton

## 1 The Coming of the Far Strangers

THE STORM had been high, battering the cliffs, breaking over the half reef which gave protection for anchoring the fishing boats. But the men of Wark had had warning (for none are so weather-wise as those who live by wind and wave and the changeful sea-luck). So no boats were lost, nor men either -- save only that the smaller yawl of Omund was driven up on the beach so he must inspect it carefully.

Omund was not the only one upon the wave-pounded sands that morning, for sea storms, if they do not take wantonly from what little stores of goods a man may garner, sometimes give. Thus all of Wark who could keep to their feet and had keen eyes were down on the strand seeing what bounty might have been deposited at their very doorsteps.

Sometimes amber was found so, and that was a precious find. Once Deryk had come across two gold coins, very old, with signs on them Aufrica, the Wise Woman, said were of the Old Ones. So Deryk took them to the smithy straightaway and had them melted into a lump, thus removing any magic curse from good metal.

Always there was wood, and the kelp from which women could make dyes for winter wear, and shells, which the children treasured. Sometimes the wreck of ships, such as never anchored in the reef-guarded small-bay of Wark, nor which most of the people had ever seen the like of -- nor would unless they traveled to Jurby port.

This time came the strangers. At first those on the beach thought the boat drifting in deep water was wreckage, and then there was a flutter of movement aboard. Yet there were no oars. When those on shore called and waved (though their voices might well be lost in the crying of the sea birds) there came no answer.

At last Kaleb of the Forge stripped and swam out, a rope about his middle. Then he waved vigorously to let them know there was life aboard and made fast the rope, so the men, pulling together, could bring in the boat.

In it lay two, though one leaned against the side, her salt-tangled hair about her wan face, her hands moving weakly as she tried to brush it from her eyes. The man lay quiet, a great wound upon one temple as if he had been felled in battle, so that they first thought him dead. But Aufrica, bustling forward, as became her calling of healer, pulled aside his sodden tunic and listened for the heartbeat, declaring that the sea, or ill fortune, had not taken him yet. Thus with the woman, who seemed in a daze, unhearing their questions, only brushing feebly at her hair and staring wide-eyed, he was taken to Aufrica's house.

So the strangers came on the storm edge to Wark.

And thereafter they stayed, though they remained strangers. For the wound which had felled the man had in a manner changed him. At first he was like a little child and the woman fed and cared for him as if in deed he was one she had before carried at her breast.

Their clothing, sea-stained and stiff with salt, was not that of villagers, nor was the woman like any they knew. At first, Aufrica reported, she had not their tongue, but she learned it speedily. Then Aufrica, who had always been open, spoke less and less of those she sheltered. And when Gudytha, the headman's wife, and others asked questions, she was evasive, as if she harbored some secret which both awed and excited her.

The women of Wark spoke long and often to their goodmen, and at length Omund came to the house of Aufrica as Headman to ask the name and purpose of the strangers that he might send word to the Lord Gaillard in whose territory Wark lay. For this was in the Year of the Salamander, before the great war of the invaders, and High Hallack was at peace, with law within its borders, especially along the coast where the settlements dated from the early days.

The stranger man sat in the sun, his healed wound leaving a scar across his forehead. Except for that he was comely, dark of hair, with thin, well-cut features which were not those of the Dalesmen. He was slender of body, though tall, and Omund noted that his hands, which lay slackly on his knees, were not calloused as his own from oar and net, but rather those of a man who had not labored thus for a living. He smiled at Omund with the open frankness of a child and there was that about him which made Omund smile back as he would at his own young son. And in that moment he thought that for all the tittle-tattle of the village wives and the talk over the wine-horns of the men, there was no harm in this poor stranger and he had come on a useless errand.

At that moment there was the opening of the door and he looked away from the smiling man to face the woman who had come out of the sea in his company. Straightaway something stirred deep in Omund's mind, though he was a simple man who found the events of each day enough to think on.

She was nigh as tall as he and, like the man, slender and dark of hair. Her face was thin to gauntness and there was certainly no trace of beauty, as Omund reckoned it, in her. But there was something else --

He had been to the great hall in Vestdale to be confirmed in his headship for Wark. There he had seen the Lord of the Dale and his Lady sitting in state, all power and authority. Yet when he faced the stranger woman, wearing a kirtle made from one of Aufrica's and badly fitting, too, with no gems on her fingers or at her throat, her hair braided but with no golden bells to dance lightly at the ends of those braids, he felt more awe than he had in the full splendor of Vestdale.

It was her eyes, he afterward decided -- nor could he have told the color of them, save that they were dark and seeming too large for the thinness of her face. Still in them --

Without thinking Omund took the seaman's knitted cap from his head and raised his hand palm out as he would to the Lady of Vestdale herself.

"Welcome in peace." Her voice was low, yet had in it a kind of controlled power, as if she could shout down the mountains behind them if she wished. She stood aside for him to enter.

Aufrica sat on a low stool by the fire. But she did not rise nor bid him welcome, leaving all to the stranger as if this was not now her own house, but rather she was visitor within its Walls.

On the table was the hosting-horn filled with the good wine of hospitality. Beside it a platter of welcome cakes. And the strange woman held out her hand as was the custom, her fingers light and cool on his sunburned wrist. So she brought him to the table, taking the stool opposite from him across the board.

"My lord and I have much to thank you for, you and your people of Wark, Headman Omund," she said as he sipped the wine, suddenly grateful for such a familiar thing when all else seemed to take on strangeness. "You have given us both second life,

which is a great gift indeed. And for which we are in your debt. Now -- you wish some accounting of us -- as is proper."

He had no chance to ask the questions he had formed in his mind; she was in command here even as a Dale lord would be. Nor did he resent that; it seemed right and proper.

"We come from overseas," she continued. "But there is ill doing there, the hounds of war cry. There came a time when we must choose between death and flight. And since no man, nor woman either, chooses death unless hope is fled, we took ship for a new land. There are the Sulcarmen who dwell in ports of their own along our coast, and through them we learned of this land. It was on a ship of theirs we took passage.

"But -- " For the first time she hesitated, looked to her own long-fingered hands where they rested on the tabletop. "There was a storm," she continued as one who must put aside certain thoughts, "and the ship was sore beset. My lord was struck down by a falling mast as he was to come into the boat. By a great mercy -- " here her fingers moved as if she made some sign, and Omund saw Aufrica stir, heard her draw a deep breath, "he fell to me. But there were no others reached us and we drifted until you found us.

"I speak frankly now with you, Headman. What gear we had was lost with the ship. We have naught now, nor any kin here. My lord mends, he learns from day to day as a child learns from birth, yet faster. Perhaps he will never regain all the storm took from him, but he shall be able to play a man's part in the world. As for me -- ask of your Wise Woman -- I have certain gifts which match hers, and those are at your service."

"But -- would it not be better that you go to Vestdale -- ?"

She shook her head at Omund's suggestion.

"The sea brought us here, there was doubtless a purpose." Once more she signed upon the table and Omund's awe grew, for he knew now this was one like Aufrica, but greater, so it was well Aufrica did her handmaid's service. "We remain here."

Omund made no report to the Lord at Vestdale, and, since they had delivered the year's tax at Jurby, the Lord's men had no reason to visit Wark. At first the women were inclined to keep apart. But when the stranger tended Yelena in such a birth that all

swore the babe would not come live from her body, yet it did and lived, and Yelena also (after the stranger had drawn certain runes on her belly and given her to drink of herbs) there was no more talk. Yet neither did the goodwives treat her with such friendly wise as they did Aufrica, for she was not of their blood nor kind, and they called her always Lady Almondia, just as they spoke with deference to her man Truan.

As she said, he mended, and when he was fully well went out with the fishers. Also he devised a new way of rigging nets which added to their catch. He, too, went to the smithy and there he worked with a lump of metal he brought out of the hills until he had a sword. This he practiced with as if against future need.

Often together the Lady and Truan went to the hills in directions those of Wark never took. Oh, men had half-wild sheep there which they kept for the shearing. And there were deer, and other game to provide a tasty change from fish. But there were also things of the Old Ones.

For when the Dalesmen came up from the south into this land it was not a barren world. Though the Old Ones were few, for many of them had withdrawn, no man knew where. Those who remained had little traffic with the newcomers, keeping ever to the high places, the wastelands, so that one saw them only by chance.

Strange indeed were the Old Ones and not all of one kind as the men of High Hallack. Some seemed monstrous. Yet in the main they did not threaten man, only continued to withdraw further.

However, they left behind them many places wherein they had once built their own strongholds, places of power. And these, though well built, men shunned. For there was about them a feeling that it was well advised not to disturb their ancient silences, that if one called too loudly or too arrogantly, one might be answered by that better not to face.

There were places also where remnants of powers or influences still clung. Into these one could venture and deal with such -- if one was foolhardy and reckless. If you gained, the saying went, your heart's desire from such dealing, yet in the end the sum was dark and grim and you were the worse instead of the better for it.

One such place stood in the hills above Wark and the hunters, the herders kept afar from it. Nor did the animals they trailed or tended ever stray in that direction. Yet it was not noted for evil as some places were, but rather for a feeling of peace, so that those

encroaching upon it by chance were oddly shamed, as if they disturbed the rest of something which should not be so troubled.

There were low walls, no higher than a man's shoulder, and they enclosed a space, not square, nor rectangular, but a five-pointed star. In its centermost core was a star-shaped stone set as an altar.

Within the points of the star sand was spread, and those stretches of sand were different in hue. One was red, one blue, one silver, one green, and the last as gold as the dust of that metal. No wind ever seemed to blow within the walls, and the dust was always smoothly spread, as if it had not been disturbed since first it was shifted there.

Outside the star-point walls there was the remains of a garden which was a tangle of herbs. It was there that Aufrica went three or four times a summer to harvest those simples she used in her cures. After the coming of the strangers both went with her first, and then alone. But none spied to see what they did there.

It was from such a trip that Truan brought back the lump of metal he wrought into a sword. Later he brought back a second mass and fashioned a shirt of mail, so cunning his work that Kaleb and fishermen alike would watch, marvel at how deftly he drew out metal into threads or wire, formed them into interlocking rings. As he worked he always sang, though the words were not in their language, and he appeared to be in a dream from which he could not be easily roused.

While he labored the Lady Almondia sometimes came to watch, her long hands clasped one over the other tightly as if she willed herself to some hard action. Her eyes were sad, and she would leave with drooping head, as if she watched some fateful thing which had in it the seeds of abiding ill. Yet never did she speak, nor strive to halt his labors.

There came a night in the first of autumn when she arose before the moon was to be seen. She touched the shoulder of Aufrica who lay in her own bed place. While Truan slept they went forth from the house and took the trail up and up. The moon gave light as they reached the top, to show them the way as clear as if they carried lanterns.

So they went, the Lady Almondia first, and Aufrica after, and each carried a bundle in the crook of her arm, and in her free hand a wand of ash peeled white and silvered by moonlight.

They passed through the old garden and the Lady climbed the wall, her feet setting prints in the smooth sand which was silver. Aufrica, following, took care to step in the tracks the Lady left.

Together they came to the star altar. Opening her bundle Aufrica took out candles, finely fashioned of beeswax and scented with dried herbs. She set one of these on each point of the star. While the Lady unrolled the packet she carried and brought out a cup. It was roughly made of wood, as if it had been shaped by hands not accustomed to such a task. Which was the truth, for she herself had labored in secret to hollow it.

This she placed in the center of the star. Into it she shifted a little of the sand taken from each point, putting in a double handful of the silver. So the rude cup was half full. She nodded then to Aufrica, for they had done all in silence, not breaking the brooding quiet. The Wise Woman threw around the cup full handfuls of a white powder, and when that was done the Lady Almondia spoke, thus calling upon a Name and a Power. And she was answered. Out of the night struck a bolt of white fire to ignite the powder. And that blaze flared so brilliantly Aufrica cried out, covering her eyes. However, the Lady Almondia stood steady, and now she chanted. As she chanted that blaze continued, though there was naught for it to feed upon. Over and over again she repeated certain words. At last she flung high both arms, and when she lowered them slowly to her sides again, the blaze died.

But where there had been a cup of rough wood, there was now a goblet shining, as if fine silver. The Lady took this and covered it quickly, holding it to her as if it were some treasure she valued with her life.

The candles had burned away, but they left no dripping of wax where they had stood; the stone was bare.

The women turned and went. Aufrica glanced back as they climbed the wall. She was in time to see a small ruffling of the sand as if it moved under some invisible, unfelt wind, to wipe out the footprints they had left.

"It is done, and well done," the Lady spoke with a wearied voice. "There remains now only the end -- "

"A lusty end -- " Aufrica ventured.

"There will be two."

"But -- "

"Yes, a double wish carries its own price. My lord shall have his son, who, as the stars have written, will company him. Yet, there shall be another to guard."

"The price, Lady?"

"You know well the price, my good friend, my moon sister."

Aufrica shook her head. "No -- "

"Yes, and yes! We have both cast the seeing runes. The time comes when one must go, the other be left. If the day of going comes a little sooner -- for a good purpose -- what matters that? My lord will have those to watch after him. Look not so, moon sister. You and I know that such partings are but doors opening, not closing -- though the dull eyes of this world see very little. Rejoicing, not sorrow shall be our portion!"

Though she had always been so sober of mien and quiet, it did seem that the Lady Almondia thereupon put on lightsome airs she had not shown before. And there was a kind of beauty about her as she bore the cup back to the house.

There she filled it with a special wine of Aufrica's best. With it rim-full in her hand she went to the couch of her lord and laid her hand upon his forehead. He awoke easily and she laughed and spoke to him in her own tongue. Then he laughed also and drank of the cup halfway. She finished the rest and went to his eager arms and they lay together after the way of man and wife and were fulfilled while the moon sank and the first light of dawn grayed the sky. Not long after it was seen that the Lady was bearing, and now the women of the village felt less in awe of her and they would speak freely, telling of this or that which was of aid to women in her condition. Always she thanked them softly, with good will, and they brought her small gifts, a length of fine wool for a wrapping band, things to eat which were proper for a breeding woman. She went no more to the hills but worked about the house, or sometimes sat silent, her eyes fixed upon the wall as if she saw there what others could not.



But Truan became more than ever a part of the village. He went with Omund to Jurby for the year's tax and trading venture, and when they returned Omund was high pleased, saying that the Lord had made an excellent bargain with the Sulcarmen so they reckoned more from this venture than for many years previous.

Winter came and people stirred not far from their homes, except at Yule eve when they had the Year's End Feast, the women tossing ivy, the men holly onto the fires to bring luck for the Year of the Sea Serpent now beginning.

Summer came after an early spring and there were babies in the village, Aufrica overseeing the birthing. The Lady Almondia no longer went out. And several of the goodwives began to watch her and shake their heads in private, for, though her body thickened, yet her face was very thin, her arms like wands for size, and she moved as one with a burden greater than she could bear. Yet she smiled at all and seemed content. Nor did her lord appear to notice any change in her.

Her time came with moonrise on just such a brilliant night as that when she and Aufrica had evoked whatever was within the star walls. Aufrica brought forth oils over which she said old spells, and upon the Lady's belly she wrote runes, and upon the palms of her hands, and upon her feet, and last of all on her forehead.

It was a long labor but it ended at last with the crying wails of not one babe but two. Side by side they lay on the bed place -- a boy and a girl. The Lady, too weak to raise her head from the pillow, looked to Aufrica with a message in her eyes, so that the Wise Woman came quickly to her, in her hand the cup of silver.

In this she poured a small measure of pure water and held it so that the Lady could, with infinite labor, raise her right hand and set fingertip in it. With it she touched the girl babe who cried no longer, but lay looking about her with strange, almost knowing eyes, as if she could understand all that was happening.

"Elys," said the Lady Almondia.

By her stood the Lord Truan, a kind of horrified awareness in his face as if his season's long gentle acceptance of life was ended with bitter knowledge. But he reached also finger to water and touched the boy babe who was crying lustily and kicking as if he fought.

And he said: "Elyn."

Thus were they named, and they grew well. But within four days after their coming the Lady Almondia closed her eyes and did not wake again. So she went from Wark after her own fashion and when she was gone they discovered that indeed they were much the poorer. The Lord Truan let Aufrica and the women make her seemly, then he wrapped her in a woolen cloak and carried her in his arms into the hills. Men, looking upon his face, did not ask him where he went, or if they could aid him.

On the second day he returned alone. Nor did he ever mention the Lady again, but became a silent man, willing to give aid in any matter, but seldom speaking. He continued to live with Aufrica and he cared for the children with more attention than the village men were wont. But no man remarked on that, for he was no longer one they felt easy with -- as if some of that which had always cloaked the Lady was now wrapped about him in turn.

## 2 Cup Spell

THAT WAS THE BEGINNING of the tale, before it was mine. I learned it mostly from Aufrica, a little from my father, who was Truan, the Far Stranger. For I am Elys.

There was more that Aufrica told me concerning the Lady Almondia. Neither she nor my father were of High Hallack nor of the Dales blood. They came from Estcarp, though my father said nothing of their life there. And what my mother had told Aufrica was little.

Aufrica, being a Wise Woman, had the lore of herbs, knew charms, could make amulets, ease pain, bring children, had the powers of the woods and the hills. Though she never attempted the mastery of high sorcery, nor called upon the Great Names.

But my mother had been more, though she used what she knew sparingly. Aufrica believed she had set aside much of her power when she fled her native land with my father, the reason for that I was never to learn. But my mother was witch-born, sorceress trained, so Aufrica was like a newly schooled child in her presence. Yet there was some barrier so that she might not turn much of her past authority to use in High Hallack.

Only when she wished children had she invoked what she had once been able to call upon freely. And then she paid a high price -- her own life.

"She cast the rune sticks," Aufrica told me. "On that table there, she cast them one day when your father was afar. In those she read her own future was short. Then she said that she must not leave her lord without what he longed for -- a son to bear sword and shield after him.

"It was the nature of her kind that the bearing of children is not often known. For they put off much of the woman when they take on the cloak, put out their hand for the wand of power. They must break vows and that is a fell thing. But she was willing to do this for her lord."

"He has Elyn," I nodded. At that moment my brother was indeed with our father, down with the boats drawn out of winter seas to be worked upon against summer out-faring. "But there is also me -- "

"Yes." Aufrica's hands were busy as she crushed dried herbs into a scented paste in the mortar she held between her knees. "She went to a place of the power to ask for a son, but also she spoke for a daughter. I think that she, also, wished one to take her place in the world. You are witch-born, Elys, though what I can teach you is very little beside what your mother knew. Yet all I have learned shall be yours."

A strange upraising indeed. For if Aufrica saw in me my mother's daughter, to be nurtured with the learning of old powers, my father saw a second son. I did not wear the kirtle and skirt of a village maid, but breeches and tunic like my brother's. This was to suit my father, as he was uneasy if I appeared before him otherwise.

Aufrica thought that was because as I grew older and taller and more of a woman I resembled my mother and that made him unhappy. So I kept to the likeness of Elyn and he was satisfied.

It was not only in apparel that my father wished me son rather than daughter. From the earliest years he taught me arms-play, matching Elyn and me. First we thrust and parried with small, mock swords made from driftwood. But as we grew older he beat out twin blades in the smithy. And I knew as much of the art of battle as any Dales squire.

However, he yielded to Aufrica, that I had my time with her. We quested into the hills for herbs, and for her to show me certain places of the Old Ones and relay to me the

rituals and ceremonies which must be observed at phases of the moon should it be desired.

I saw the star-walled place where my mother had wrought her High Moon Magic, but that we never ventured in. Though we brought harvests from about the walls.

I had seen many times the cup my mother had brought from that final sorcery. Aufrica kept it among her most precious things, never touching it with her bare hands, but always with a square of green-blue stuff she valued highly. It was silver in color, that cup, but also other colors ran across its surface when it was turned this way or that.

"Dragon scales," Aufrica told me. "This is dragon scale silver. I had heard of it in old legends, but never did I see it before the dragon fire itself wrought this at the Lady's bidding. It is thing of very great power; guard it well."

"You speak as if it is mine -- " I marveled at the cup, for it was a thing of such beauty as one might see only once in a lifetime.

"Yours it is when there is time and need. It is bound to you and to Elyn. But only you, being what you are, can make use of it." Nor did she say more then. I have spoken of Aufrica who was very close to me, and of my father, who walked, talked, and lived as if a thin sheet of some invisible armor cut him away from the rest of mankind. But I have not spoken of Elyn.

We were born at one birth, yet we were not close copies of one another. Only in our faces and persons was that so. Our interests were never the same. He loved action, swordplay, and he chafed at the narrow life of Wark. He was reckless and often disciplined by my father for leading other boys into trouble or danger. And he used to stand outside at times, staring at the hills with such longing in his eyes that he seemed a hawk in chains.

I found my freedom inwardly, he wanted his outwardly. He had impatience for Aufrica's teachings. And as he grew he spoke more often of Jurby, of going there to take service with a Dales lord.

That my father would have had to let him go at last we knew. But in the end war answered that for us. For in the Year of the Fire Troll the invaders came to High Hallack.

They were seaborne, and, when my father heard of their raids upon the coast keeps and towns, his mouth set hard. For it seemed that they were enemies long known to his own people. He put aside those moods of other-being when he walked apart and one night he spoke to us and Aufrica with the determination of a man who had decided upon a course and would not be turned from it.

He would go to the Lord of Vestdale and offer his sword -- and more than his sword, for knowing this enemy of old, he had that to offer which could prepare resistance the better. Looking upon his face we knew that nothing we might say or do could turn him from this course.

Elyn then arose and said if my father would go, then he also as squire. And his determination was as set and stern -- their faces alike, one to the other, in that moment as if one was the mirrored reflection of the other.

But my father won that battle of wills, saying that Elyn's duty was to me and to Aufrica for the present But he swore a binding oath that he would send for Elyn later, so his authority held.

However, my father did not depart at once; rather, he wrought in the smithy day and night. But first he went into the hills with a pack pony. When he returned his animal was heavily laden with lumps of metal which might have once been worked and then congealed into these masses.

From these he wrought, Kaleb aiding him, two swords and two shirts of fine and supple chain mail. One of these he gave to Elyn, the other he brought to me. When he laid it down he spoke as one who would have his words heeded, to be remembered in days to come.

"I do not have the gift of foreseeing that she had" -- seldom did he mention my mother, and then never by name -- she might have been some great lady he held in reverence and awe. "But I have dreamed, and of my dreams has come this -- that there lies before you some venture in which you must go girt with more than your strong spirit and courage, my daughter. Though I have not treated you as a maid -- yet --"

It seemed that words failed him. He stroked the mail shirt as if it were silk, nor did he look directly at me, but turned sharply and went before I could speak. And in the next dawn he took the hill path to Vestdale. Nor did we ever see him again.

The Year of the Fire Troll passed, and as yet we dwelt safe in our small clift pocket, we of Wark. But Omund made no year-end voyage to Jurby, for a small band of hard-used folk came over the hills to tell us Jurby had fallen to the enemy in a single night of red wrack and ravage. And that Vestdale Keep was now besieged.

The villagers met and tried to plan. They had always lived by the sea, yet it seemed now that the sea might be their bane and to flee inland meant safety. The younger men, and those without strong family ties, spoke to make a stand where we were. But others thought it better to abandon the village and return later if no invasion came nigh.

Tales of the refugees swung the day, for those hearing their accounts of the red ruin the raiders left urged retreat, and that decision won.

During all debate my brother listened but did not speak. I read in his face that he had made his own decision. So when we went back to the house I faced him and said: "There comes a time when one can no longer keep sword in sheath. If you would go -- go with our blessing of good fortune. You have served your time here; be sure we shall have safety on our side when we take to the hills, for who knows their secrets better than Aufrica and I?"

For a long moment he was silent and then he looked at me straightly.

"There is bred in me that which I must answer, for a year I have been trapped here. Yet I was promise-bound."

I went to Aufrica's cupboard, and she, sitting on a stool by the fire and watching, said not a word. What I brought forth was the dragon cup of our heritage. When I set it on the table between us I let fall the wrapping and set my two hands boldly about the cool curve of its sides. So I held it for the space of a few breaths.

Then Aufrica arose in turn and brought from her stores a bottle of herb brew I had never seen her open before. She drew its stopper with her teeth, keeping both hands about it as if she feared she might drop or spill what she carried. Into the cup she poured a thick golden liquid, and a spicy odor filled the room, carrying with it the plentiful ripeness of a good harvest, the slumberous fullness of early autumn.

Halfway she filled the cup as I held it; then she drew back, leaving Elyn and me facing each other across it. I loosed my hold, reached out, catching his hands, drawing them to the smooth silver.

"Drink," I told him, "half of this, drink. For it is the cup we must share before we part."

Without question he raised it two-handed, and did not set it down again until he had swallowed half the potion. Then I took it in turn and finished what was left.

"While we are parted," I told him, "I shall read your fate in this. For while the silver remains clear as you now see it, then all is well. But if it clouds -- "

He did not let me finish. "These are times of war, sister. No man walks safely forever."

"True. Yet sometimes ill can be turned to well."

Elyn made an impatient gesture. Never had he taken any interest in wise knowledge. It was as if he deemed such of little value. Still we had never brought this difference into words. Nor did we now.

Rather I put away the cup and worked with Aufrica preparing what he must take with him, covers to sleep warm in on the trail, food and drink, as well as a wallet of healing herbs. And, like my father, he went.

But those of Wark left also. Some of the younger men followed my brother like an ill-drilled menie. For he was, in spite of his youth, a leader amongst them in his knowledge of arms. The rest of us barred the doors of our houses, loaded our pack ponies, and took to the hills.

That was an ill winter. We found refuge, first in an inland village, until an alarm of raiders came – then farther inland in barren country. Until we lived in caves and other rude shelters. Always came tales of farther and farther invasion, more and more taking of High Hallack.

Aufrica and I were much called upon for our knowledge of healing, not only of wounds when wanderers from lost battles chanced upon us, but of the many illnesses which

come from hard living, hunger, and even of hearts giving up hope. Since we faced dangers which were more sharp and sudden, I wore the mail my father had fashioned for me, knew sword-weight at my belt. Just as I learned to use the bow for hunting, both for the pot and for those who would prey on us for what sorry possessions we had left.

As it always is when there is no law in the land and only war and more war, season after season, there were those who had been born of our own kind and now skulked as filthy scavengers, preying on all too weak to defend themselves. I killed in those days and knew no sorrow for it, for those I so slew were not truly men.

One thing I kept ever by me was the cup, and each morn I took it forth to look upon it. Never was its brilliance dimmed, so I knew all was right with Elyn.

Sometimes I tried to reach him by a dream bridge, using a sleep potion. Yet all I bore back into wakefulness was a confusion of half memories. At those times I hungered for more than Aufrica could teach me, for what my mother must once have had.

In our wanderings we came nigh now and then those places of the Old Ones. From several we urged our now small and stumbling band away. For what crept like a foul fog from those was evil malevolence, wholly alien to our kind. Others were empty -- as if what they had once cupped was long fled or had seeped away through the years. A few were welcoming, and to those Aufrica and I went, hoping to evoke something of what centered there. Yet we had not the proper training to take more with us when we left than a sense of peace and inner refreshment.

There were no longer named years for us, just the passing of seasons. In the third summer we found refuge at last. Some of our band had split away, choosing other roads. But our small remaining group, with Omund at its head (he was now much crippled with an aching ailment of the bones), his younger brothers, their wives, two daughters with children whose husbands had followed Elyn (for which they sometimes looked ill at me yet never spoke their feelings aloud), and three more households in which the men were elderly, remained together.

We found a way into a small upland dale which had never been settled or visited save by shepherds in season, or cattle drovers, who left huts where they had sheltered during the grazing months. There we stayed, our handful of sheep, our half-score of footsore ponies, glad to be at rest. And the people who had spent their lives combing a living from the sea turned with patient labor to win some sustenance from the hills.



In high places overlooking the two passes we kept guards. So different had life become that those guards were mainly women, armed with bows and with spears which had once been the harpoons of deep-sea fishermen. Well did we keep watch and ward, for we had seen several times what chanced in small settlements when those raving wolves of scavengers came down.

It was midsummer of our second year in that pocket of earth, and most of the others were at labor tending what grain and roots we had saved for this season's planting, that I was on hill watch and saw for the first time riders on that faint track which would bring them to the south pass. I raised my bared sword and with the sun flickering on its bright blade signaled the alert down valley. I myself went by previously learned ways to spy closer upon those who came. For by this time we judged all strangers enemies.

As I lay upon a sunwarmed rock and watched, I could see that they were little threat to us. For we made up in will and preparedness enough to handle these two.

They were plainly fighting men, but their mail was rusted and gashed. One had been tied to his saddle and drooped so he might have fallen to the ground had it not been for those ties and the fact that his comrade rode close beside him, leading his mount.

There were bloodied rags bound around the head and the shoulder of the half-unconscious rider, and about the forearm of his companion.

That companion looked time and again to their back trail, as if he expected pursuers. He still wore a helm topped with a crest of a swooping hawk, though one wing of that was shorn away. And both had the ragged tatters of heraldic coats over their mail, though whatever device those had once displayed was so raveled as to be unreadable. Not that I was learned in the symbols of the noble Dale houses.

Both men had swords, now sheathed. And the helmed one a crossbow. But they had no field packs, and their mounts ambled at a footsore pace, as if nigh to floundering.

I inched a little back and got to my feet in the shadows, setting arrow to bow cord.

"Stand!"

My order must have seemed to come from empty air. The helmed man jerked his head. I could not see his face clearly because of the overhang of his headgear, but his hand was on sword hilt in swift, sure movement. Then he must have thought better of what might be useless defiance, for he did not draw.

"Stand forth yourself, lurker, steel to steel!" His voice was hoarse and low, but he bore himself as one ready to meet trouble as it came.

"Not so," I answered. "I have that which will pin death to you, bold man! Come out of your saddle and put your weapons from you."

He laughed then.

"Cut me down as you will, voice from the rocks. I put aside my blade for no man. If you want it – come and take it!"

Now he deliberately drew his weapon, held it at readiness. Even as he faced me so his comrade stirred and groaned, and the other urged his horse a little on, pushing between the wounded man and where he must believe I stood.

"Why do you come here?"

His constant glancing at his back trail remained in my mind and I wondered if he led more trouble to us. Two such men we could handle -- but more --

"We come no place." There was vast weariness in his voice. "We are hunted men as you can guess if you are not blind. Three days ago Haverdale stood rearguard at the Ford of Ingra. We are what is left of that force. We bought time as we promised, but how much -- " He shrugged. "By your speech you are of the Dales, not the Hounds. I am Jervon, once Marshal of Horse -- this is Pell, my lord's younger brother."

That bristling defiance seeped from him; the weariness lay like a heavy burden on him. And I knew – as if I had cast runes on it -- that these men were no menace to my people, unless they drew after them what we could not handle. So I came out of hiding. As I wore mail, he believed me a man, and I let him think it. But I brought them into the Dale and to the tending of Aufrica.

Those with Omund were first ready to find me at fault, saying trouble rode with such strangers. But I asked what else I might have done -- slain them out of hand perhaps? And that shamed them, for though their hard life had brought a certain callousness to them, yet they still remembered the old days when a man's door stood open to the world, with bread and drink set always at the table as welcome to all travelers.

Pell was gravely injured and Aufrica, for all her skill, could not hold back the shadow of death, though she fought valiantly for his life. Jervon, though he had appeared strong and ready to fight, took a fever from his ill-tended wound, and lay with wandering wits and burning flesh for some days. Pell had slipped beyond help and was laid in our small Field of Memory (where four others of our people slept) before he spoke again rationally.

I had been standing by his bed, watching and wondering if he, too, in the fierce burning of the fever would go from us, and thinking that would be a sad waste of a man, when he opened his eyes and looked straight at me. Then he frowned a little as he spoke:

"I remember you -- "

His greeting was odd, but many times a person out of grave illness carries half dreams which are confused.

I brought a cup of herb drink and put my arm about his shoulders to raise him to drink of it.

"You should," I told him as he sipped. "I brought you here."

He said nothing more, though he still watched me with that faint frown. Then he asked:

"My lord Pell?"

I used the saying of the country people. "He has gone ahead."

His eyes closed, but I saw his mouth tighten. What Pell had been to him, I did not know. But they were

at least battle comrades, and I guessed that he had done much to try to save him.

But I did not know what to say then. For to some sorrow is a silent thing which they must battle alone, and I thought perhaps Jervon was such a one.

However, I surveyed him as he lay there. Though he was wasted and gaunt from fever, and perhaps from earlier hardship, he was a man of good presence, tall, if spare of body, but, like my father a swordsman born. He was a Dalesman in that his hair was golden-brown (lighter than the skin of his face and hands which were darkly browned by the weather) and his features well cut. I thought I could like what I saw, save there was no reason to believe that I would ever have any closer contact to continue or deepen such liking. He would heal and then ride away, as had my father and Elyn.

### 3 Tarnished Silver

YET JERVON did not heal as speedily as we had thought, for the fever weakened him, mainly in his wounded arm. Although he worked grimly at exercises to restore full use, still he could not order fingers to tighten to grip as they should. Patiently, or outwardly so, he would toss a small stone from hand to hand, striving to grip it with full strength.

However he took part in our work in the dale, both in the ragged fields and as sentry in the hills. And in this much we were favored, none trailed him.

We gathered at night to listen to his accounts of the war, though he spoke of dales, and towns, fords, and roads of which we had never heard, since those of Wark had never traveled far overland until they had been uprooted. By his account the struggle was going ill for the Dales. All the southern coast holdings had long since been overrun, and only a ragged, desperate force had withdrawn to the north and the west. It had been during that last withdrawal that his own people had been overwhelmed.

"But the Lords have made a pact," he told us, "with those who have powers greater -- or so they say -- than those of sword and bow. In the spring of this Year of the Gryphon they met with the Were-Riders of the wastes and those will fight hereafter with us."

I heard a low whistle or two, for what he spoke of was indeed an unheard-of thing -- that Dalesmen should treat with the Old Ones. For of those the Were-Riders were. Though the Dales had lain mainly empty at the coming of the settlers, yet there were

still a few of those who had held this land eons before. And not all of them were such unseen presences as my mother had dealt with, but rather resembled men.

Such were the Were-Riders, men, in part, in other ways different. There were many tales about them and none which could be sworn to, since they were always reported third- or fourth-hand. But that they were a formidable force to enlist on our side no one could deny. And such was our hatred for the invaders -- those Hounds of Alizon -- that we would have welcomed monsters if they would march with our host.

The long summer became fall and still Jervon worked to restore skill to his hand. Now he took to combing the hills with his crossbow, bringing back game, yet not going as a hunter. He was a lone man, courteous and pleasant. Still as my father had been, one who erected a barrier between himself and the world.

He stayed with Aufrica until his hurt was healed as well as she could manage, then went to make a hut for himself a little apart. Never was he one with us. Nor did I see much of him, save at a distance. But since my skill with the bow was in much demand to lay up meat to be dried and salted (we had found a salt lick, a very precious thing), I was not often in our straggle of huts.

Then one day I slid down a steep bank to break my thirst at a bubbling spring. There he lay. He must have been staring up at the sky, but at my coming he started up, his hand to sword hilt. But what he said to me was no greeting:

"I remember where I saw you first -- but that cannot be so!" He shook his head as if completely puzzled. "How can you ride with Franklyn of Edale and also be here? Yet I would have sworn -- " I turned to him eagerly. For if he had seen Elyn, then indeed he would be bewildered by our likeness.

"That was my brother, born at one birth with me! Tell me, when did you see him -- and where?"

The puzzlement faded from Jervon's face. He sat working his hand upon a stone as he always did. "It was at the last muster at Inisheer. Franklyn's men have devised a new way of war. They hide out in the land and allow the enemy to push past them, then harry them from the rear. It is a very dangerous way." Jervon paused, looked at me quickly, as if he wished he had not been so frank.

I answered his thought. "Being his father's son Elyn would glory in such danger. I never believed he could be found far from action."

"They have won great renown. And your brother is far from the least among them. For all his youth they name him Horn Leader. He did not speak at our council, but he stood at Franklyn's shoulder -- and they say by Franklyn's will he is handfasted to the Lady Brunissende, who is Franklyn's heiress."

I could think of Elyn as a fighter and one of renown, but the news that he was handfasted made me blink. Seasons had passed, yet I saw him still in my mind the boy who had ridden out of Wark, untaught in the ways of war, yet eager to see sword bared against sword.

Moved by the thought of time, I wondered about myself. If Elyn was a man, then I was a woman. Yet of the ways of a woman I had little knowledge. In my father's day I had learned to be a son, from Aufrica to be a Wise Woman. But I had never been myself -- me. Now I was a hunter, a fighter if the need demanded.

But I was not a woman.

"Yes, you are very like," Jervon's voice broke through my straying thoughts. "This is a strange, hard life for a maid, Lady Elys."

"In these days all is awry," I made swift answer. For I was not minded to let him think I felt that there was aught strange in what I did, or was. It questioned my pride and that I would not allow.

"And it seems this must be so forever!" Now he looked at his hand, flexing his fingers.

My eyes followed his. "You do better!" It was true, he had more control.

"Slow, but it mends," he agreed. "When I can use arms again I must ride."

"Whither?"

At that he smiled with a touch of grimness. But, limited though it was, that change of expression made him for an instant like another person. And I suddenly wondered what Jervon would be if the darkness of war were lifted from him and he free to seek what he wanted of life.

"Whither is right, Lady Elys. For I know not where this dale of yours lies in relation to those I rode with. And when I set forth it will be a case of hunting to find -- rather than be found -- by the enemy."

"The snows are early in this high country." I drank from a palmful of water. It was very cold, already there might have been ice touched at its source. "We are shut in when the passes close." He looked to the peaks, from one to another.

"That I can believe. You have wintered here though."

"Yes. It means tight-pulled belts toward spring, but each year we make better of what we have, lay in more supplies. There were two extra fields planted this year. The mills have ground twice as much barley this past month. Also we have salted down six wild cows, the which we were not lucky enough to have last year."

"But what do you do when snow closes in?"

"We keep within. At first we suffered from lack of wood." I could shudder even now at the memory of that and the three deaths which came of it. "Then Edgir found the black stone which burns. He did it by chance, having set his night-hunter fire against such a stone -- it caught afire and kept him well warmed. So now we haul in baskets of it -- you must have seen the bins against each hut. We spin, we weave, we carve deer's horn and wood, and make the small things which keep life from being too harsh and gray.

"There is a songsmith -- Uttar. He tells not only the old tales, but fashions new ones from our own wanderings. He also has made a lap-harp to play upon. No, we are not lacking life and interest during the cold."

"And this is what you have known all your life, Lady Elys?" There was a note in his voice I did not understand.

"In Wark there was more. We had the sea and trade with Jurby. Also -- Aufrica and I -- we have much to keep us busy."

"Yet you are what you are -- no fisher maid, nor farm wench."

"No -- I am Wise Woman, hunter, warrior -- And now I must be about my hunting."

I arose, disturbed at that note in his voice. Did he dare to pity me? I was Elys and I had much more within the hollow of my hand than perhaps any Dale lady. Though I might not have my mother's learning, yet there were places I could go, things I might do, which would turn such fragile flowers into, quivering, white-faced nothings!

So I left him with a small wave of the hand, and went seeking hill deer. Though I had little luck that day and brought back only two forest fowl for all my tramping.

Through all these days I never ceased to draw out the cup binding Elyn and me and look upon it each day. Though I did this secretly. It was on the fourth day after my chance meeting with Jervon that I drew aside the covering and was startled. For the gleaming beauty was dimmed, as if some faint tarnishing had spread a film across it.

Aufrica, seeing that, cried out. But I was silent, only inside me was a sharp thrust, not of pain, but of fear which was in itself a kind of pain. I rubbed hastily at the metal, to no purpose. This was not caused by any dust, or moisture condensing on the surface, but an inner clouding. It was not lifeless and dead, which would mean Elyn was beyond any help of mine, but that he was in danger this was the first warning. I spoke to Aufrica. "I would far-see -- "

She went to the rude cupboard now the safekeeping place of all her painfully gathered stores. From there she took a large shell with a well-polished interior.

Also she gathered small vials and a leathern bottle and a copper pot no bigger than my hand. Into the last she dropped powder pinch by pinch. Then began to combine in a beaker a drop of this, a spoon measure of that, until she had a dark red liquid washing there as she turned it around and around to mix it

"It is ready."



I pulled a splinter from the firebox, dipped it to the flame, and with it ignited the contents of the pot. Greenish smoke, strong scented, curled up. Aufrica poured the crimson stream into the dragon cup, taking care it reached almost to the inner rim yet did not overflow. Then quickly she repoured it into the shell basin.

Before that I sat. The scented smoke made me feel a little lightheaded, as if, did I not use my will to remain on the stool, I might float away. Now I leaned forward and looked into the ruby pool in the shell.

This was not the first time I had used the power of scrying, yet never before had it been of such importance to me. So I was tense and willed the sight to come quickly and clearly. The red of the liquid faded and I saw, as one looking into a room from a far distance. For it was a room which was pictured there. The details, though small, were clear and sharp.

By the shadows it was night, yet a candle-holder as tall as a man's shoulder stood at one end of a curtained bed. In that a fist-thick candle burned bright. The bed was rich, its curtains patterned by a skilful needle, and those curtains had not been closed. Resting therein against pillows was a young girl of the Dales people. Her face was fine of feature and very fair, her unbound hair ribbons of gold about her shoulders. She slept -- or at least her eyes were closed.

In all it was a scene of rich splendor such as might be from some tale a songsmith created.

But the girl was not alone for, even as I watched, one moved out of the shadows. As the candlelight fell full upon his face, I saw it was my brother, though older than I remembered him. He glanced at the sleeping girl as if he feared her waking.

Then he went to the wall where was a window. That was closed by a great shutter with three bars locked across it, as if he, or those who had closed it, wanted to make very sure it could not be opened in haste.

Elyn brought forth a dagger and began to pry here and there. On his face was intent concentration, as if what he did now was of such importance that nothing else mattered.

He wore a loose bedchamber robe girdled about him, and, as he raised his arms to lever with the dagger, the wide sleeves fell back to show his bare, well-muscled arms. On the bed the covers were tumbled, the pillow dented where he must recently have lain. Yet he worked with such dire determination that I could feel it as I watched.

Beyond that barrier was something calling him. And -- I also felt the faint, far touch of that call. It was like the fiery end of a burning splinter touched to my bare flesh! From it my mind flinched as if I felt the actual pain of a burn. Flinched, and so broke the power of the scry bowl, so the picture vanished. I was breathing hard and fast as if I had fled some danger. As indeed I had. For what pulled Elyn into such action was peril indeed. And it was not of his world at all -- unless he had greatly altered since we drank farewell from the dragon cup.

"Danger -- " Aufrica did not ask a question, she stated a fact.

"Elyn -- he is drawn by something of a -- a dark Great One!"

"As yet it is only a warning." She pointed to the cup. "A faint shadow -- "

"But the warning is for me. If he is fair caught in some ensorcelment he will not be easily kept from the trap. He is not my mother's son, but my father's. There is none of the gift in him."

"True said. And now you will go to him."

"I will go, hoping that I may be in time."

"You have all that I could give you." Her voice was touched with pain. "You have what came to you by right of birth. But you have not what armed my lady. Daughter of the heart have you been to me, me who had no child of my flesh, since I was not one to tread the path your mother walked in her time. I cannot stay you from going, but with you you take my sun -- " She bowed her head and hid her face in her hands. For the first time I noted, with surprise, that those were thin and wrinkled, showing more clearly the approach of age than did her face. For she was one of those with good bones, whose skin was clear and tight. Yet in that moment she huddled on her stool as one beaten, all the passing years pressing upon her at once as a burden under which she was like to sink.

"Mother-kin have you been to me." I rested my hands on her hunched shoulders. "No more have I ever asked than to be daughter-kin to you, Wise Woman. But in this thing I have no choice."

"That I know also. For it is in my mind that your Lady Mother thought that this would be your path in life, to serve others, even as she did in her time. I shall fear for you -- "

"Not so!" I interrupted her. "For to think fear is to give it life. You must rather work with power, saying that I go not to defeat, but victory."

Aufrica raised her head, and seemed to banish by will her trouble. I knew that she now determined her strength would be as a force of swordsmen to guard me. And the strength of Aufrica as I well knew (I who had seen her battle death in her time and win) was a thing to be reckoned high.

"Where will you seek?" She spoke briskly as one who would plan.

"For that -- the casting."

Again she went to her store place and this time brought out a much-folded cloth to be smoothed flat. It was divided with lines of gold into four quarters, and those quarters in turn to small triangles by lines of red all running through the center inscribed with runes no man could longer read but which were Words of Power.

Then she produced a chain of gold from which hung pendant a small ball of crystal. On the other end of the chain was a band ring she slipped on her finger. She then stood by the table, stretching forth her hand until the ball was directly over that centerpoint on the cloth. Though her hand held steady, the ball began to swing back and forth. Then it altered that swing, traveling only along one of the red lines, back and forth. I studied and remembered.

So -- south and west I must go. And soon, or, as I had warned Jervon, the snow would come to close the passes and there would be no traveling at all.

Now the ball hung motionless. Aufrica drew it up by its chain into her hand and put it away in a small bag as I refolded the cloth.

"Tomorrow," I said.

"It is best," she agreed. Straightaway she went once more to her storage place and began taking stock there. I knew she would send me forth as well armed with those things of the Wise Learning as she could.

But I went to seek Omund in his hut. Since all were aware that Aufrica and I had ways of seeing the unseeable and dealing with matters not open to most, my news would not sound unbelievable to him. Though we did not explain to any the methods we used to gain our foreknowledge. I merely told him that through the learning of a Wise Woman I had discovered my brother was in trouble. And that trouble came not from war but was of the Old Ones. Therefore, since this was a birth geas long laid on me, I must go to his aid. Omund nodded his head when I was done, though his womenfolk, as always, gave me side looks of ill-confidence.

"It is as you say, Lady, there is no choice for you. You leave us soon then?"

"With tomorrow's dawn. The snow may come early this year."

"True. Well, Lady, you have dealt fair and fine with us, as did your Lady Mother and the Lord, your father, when they dwelt among us. But we are neither blood nor kin of yours. And both those are ties we must answer when the call comes. For all your aid in the past we are thankful and -- " He arose stiffly to his feet and went to a box-chest he had made. "This is small enough return for all you have done, but it will keep you warm of nights in this harsh land."

He brought out a journey cloak which must have been the work of many days. It was fashioned of the shaggy hair of the high mountain goats left on the hides, yet dyed a soft, dark purple like the haze of twilight -- a color which might be an accident of some chance combination of dyes and not to be found again. It had a beauty which was rare in our present lives. Nor would I believe that any lady would have a winter covering to better it.

My thanks I could only make in words, yet I was sure he understood what this meant to me. For in my life I had many useful things and things well made, but seldom did those combine with beauty also. But he only smiled and clasped my hand in both of his,

bending his grayed head to touch his lips to my calloused fingers as if, indeed, I was his lady.

In that moment I realized that, strange though I had felt myself in Wark always, yet, in a way these were my people and I was losing something now. Still not all felt as Omund, and those even of his household were glad to see me go.

With the cloak over my arm I went back to Aufrica -- there being none other here to take private leave of. There, somewhat to my surprise, I found Jervon. He was seated by the table which was now bare of all Aufrica's things of power, though she was still fitting packets into a shoulder bag. And he seemed more at ease than I had seen him before, in his hand a cup of Aufrica's blended herb brewing sweetened with wild honey.

He arose as I entered and there was an eagerness about him I had not seen before.

"The Wise Woman says you ride forth, my lady."

"I have that which must be done."

"Which I have also, having lingered long enough. Therefore, these being days when no man rides alone if he can help it, there being a need for eyes to watch both sides of the road, we shall fare together."

Nor did he ask that, rather he spoke as if it were already decided. That irked me. Yet I knew that he spoke the truth -- that to travel in company, and with one who knew far better than I the dangers wherein I would travel, would be an aid I dared not, simply out of pride, refuse. So I schooled my voice, but I asked:

"And if I ride not in your direction, swordsman?"

He shrugged. "Have I not said I know not where my lord may now be? If you seek your brother to the south and west, there shall I also find news of my banner. Though I warn you, Lady, we may be heading directly into the open mouth of the dragon, or perhaps I should say -- the open jaws of the Hounds!"

"Of which your knowledge shall warn us," I retorted. I was determined that this would be no farfaring in which I was to be treated as a fine lady from a Dale house, guarded and swaddled with care. If we rode together, it was as battle comrades, free and equal. But how I was to say this I did not yet know.

Aufrica, seeing the cloak, came forward with an exclamation of delight that I would have such a fine protection against the cold. And she straightaway brought out a box brooch to fasten it. Nor did I need telling that within the lid of that was set as powerful a travel spell as she could evoke.

Jervon put down his cup.

"With the dawn then, Lady? We do not go afoot -- I have the horse which bore me hither, and the one which was Pell's."

"Dawn," I agreed. And I was pleased at the thought of horses, for they would mean swifter passage. South and west -- but to where -- and how far?

4 Coomb Frome

PERFORCE we took the road which had brought Jervon as there was no other trace across the wilderness. And, since his coming, none had traveled it.

It was a very old road, and here and there were signs it had been worked upon -- by man? I thought not, for those before us here had been only herdsmen and hunters, wandering folk. Which meant this was a way of the Old Ones. "This comes within a league of the Ford," Jervon said. "But there it loops away from the sea. We turned into it only because it gave better footing for the race we were forced to. But where it comes from and to where it leads -- " He shrugged.

"It is of the Old Ones, and who knows their reasons?" That was a Dales' answer, yet I knew there was always logic in the remains of the Old Ones -- though it might not be ours.

"You are not of the Dales." He sent that statement at me as he might a well-aimed crossbow bolt, a deadly one.

Deadly? Why had that thought come to me? But I made truthful answer.

"I was born in Wark, therefore I am of the Dales. But my parents came from overseas. Yet they were not of Alizon, but of some nation already at war with the Hounds. So that when my father heard of the invasion he straightaway rode to war. Since we have heard naught since, and it has been many seasons now, he is likely dead. My mother died at the birthing of Elyn and me. That is my breeding, swordsman."

"No, you have nothing of the Dales in you," he continued, almost as if he had not heard my words. "They say things of you, these people once of Wark -- "

"As they say of any Wise Woman," I countered. And I did not doubt that many things had been said of me, surely not all to my favor, for with Aufrica alone had I been close. And such as Omund's women had long looked askance as I passed. I was not wedded wife, not like to be -- for that state goes not with my gifts. That, too, made a gulf. Had we had more able-bodied men I might have been pushed to a troublemaking decision. For I was not like to tend the hearth of any man of Wark.

"More than Wise Woman, they say. They speak behind their hands of dealings with the Old Ones." There was no tone of awe nor trace of aversion in his voice, only curiosity. He was like a warrior confronted by a new weapon who would ask questions concerning it.

"Would I might say that was so! One able to bargain with the Old Ones need not live as you saw us living. Do not men say that the power can bring all things -- build a Keep in a night, dash an enemy army into nothingness, make a rich garden grow on barren rock? Have you seen that behind us?"

To my surprise he laughed. "Far from it, shieldmaid. But I do not decry the learning of a Wise Woman -- whether she be of a village or one of the Houses of Dames. Also, I think that the Old Ones might not be interested in our petty squabbles -- or so must our strivings seem to them -- and they could be inclined to treat summarily any who disturb their rest."

"You must seek them, they come not uncalled." And in that I might have been foreseeing without knowing it.

The country continued barren and we kept to an even pace which did not tax our mounts, for to be afoot here would be dire. At noon we turned from that old road way and ate journey bread, drank from a stream, and let our mounts graze for a space. Jervon lay on his back, looking up into the laced branches of a gnarled tree which hung, with just a thin tatter of leaves, over the bank above the spring.

"I am truly of the Dales," he said. "My father was a third son and so landless. After the custom he took oath to the Lord of Dorn, who was kinsman to his mother, and became his Marshal of Horse. My mother was a damozel of the Lady Guida's household. I was well trained. My father had it in his mind to strike out, when I was old enough, to the northern wild country, and seek his own land. He had four or five heads of households pledged to back him.

"Then came the invaders and there was no thought of riding north, only of trying to preserve what we already had. Dorn was in the path of the first inward thrust. They took the Keep in five days, for they had new weapons which spat fire and even ate rock. I had ridden to Haverdale to beg help. We caught up with two survivors on the road three days later. Dorn was gone, erased as if it had never been. We did not believe them at first. I took to the country that night and reached a place from which I could look down. What I saw might have been a place of the Old Ones, so time tumbled you could not tell wall from courtyard."

He spoke without emotion, perhaps time had dulled it so this seemed now to have happened to another man. This is a merciful healing when it happens. Now he paused and, though his eyes seemed to search the branches over him, yet I knew he saw something far different.

"I stayed with Haverdale and took oath. We could not hold the western road, not with the devil weapons of the Hounds on it. Though those did not last long. They could be destroyed by desperate men and fire, and they were. It would seem that the Hounds had no others, at least we did not see them crunching over the countryside again. But they had made good use of them. Every major Dale hold in the south was gone -- every one!" The hand lying on his chest balled into a fist, though there was still no emotion in his voice.

"There was no one leader to whom all the Dale lords would rally. The Hounds had made sure of that -- Bernard of Dorn, Myric of Gastendale, Dauch, Yonan -- all the men of promise were either wiped out with their holds and their followers, or assassinated. The Hounds were well prepared, they knew all our weak points. And it would seem we



had more of those than defenses. The lords did not unite and they had no trouble plucking them off one by one as they would pluck ripe fruit from a heavily laden branch.

"We could only run, and perhaps hit, and then run again. And we would have all been bleaching bones had not the Four Lords come out of the north and beat some order and sense into us. They made all see we must unite or die. So there was the confederation and they made the pact with the Were-Riders.

"It has been long, but the tide is turning now. We have driven them back dale by dale -- though they rally at times -- we who were at Ingra Ford can say that. But in time I think the Hounds will howl instead of bay and we shall have a final accounting. Though what will be left then -- For there are many lords dead and dales war swept. High Hallack will be another land altogether. Perhaps there will be an overrule of the Four -- no, Three -- for Skirkar is dead and he leaves no son to raise hold banner. Yes, it will be a different land."

"What will you do? Remain Marshal at Haverdale?"

"If I live that long, you mean?" He smiled. "We do not plan futures for ourselves any more. There will be some to survive, but as a fighting man I cannot say I shall be among them. I do not know what will chance if I live to see full victory. For all the days since I have been counted a man I have been at war. I can hardly remember what peace means. So -- no, I do not think I shall give peace-oath to Haverdale. Perhaps I may even follow my father's dream, go north and seek land of my own. But I plan not. To live through another day takes all the wits a man has."

"There are tales of the north and east, that there are more remainders of the Old Ones there." I was trying to remember what little I had heard of that country. "True enough. So perhaps it is just as well not to go troubling in those quarters. It is time we ride, shield-maid."

Nightfall found us in a place of rocks and there we huddled without any betraying fire. I offered the over-protection of Omund's cloak as I would to any comrade. And he accepted cloth-company as he might had I been Elyn and not Elys. So that the warmth of our bodies under the cloak let us sleep snug in spite of frost without.

Another day's ride and we were at the Ford. The wrack of the fight was still strewn there. Though there was a funeral pyre at one side. Jervon raised bared sword in salute.

"Haverdale did that. They paid death honors. Therefore they gained forces and returned." He dismounted and went searching among discarded weapons, returning with a dozen crossbow bolts to replenish his small stock. He also had a fine dagger with a gemmed hilt and a blade which, for all its outlaying in the weather, had not been dimmed by any rust.

"Hound work, of their best," he said, putting it into his own belt.

"Now," he swung into the saddle once again, "there is a traders' road here, it swings south to Trevamper. Though that town may not now stand."

Though it was close to dusk we did not camp at the Ford. That was too close to the pyre, too full of memories for my companion. We rode on until he turned off into a thicket. That was a screen for a place where rings of stones were set about the ash of old fires, and some hacked poles made rude shelters.

"Our camp." He stirred the ashes with boot toe. "Long dead. I think it will be safe to stay."

Once more we dared not light a fire. But this night the moon was bright and clear. I knew that I must look upon my talisman for this search. Though I could not be private, and to let my secret into the keeping of another was hard. Yet it was necessary to know how it fared with Elyn.

Thus when we had eaten, I got out the cup and took away its shielding cloth. Almost I dropped it. For that tarnishing cloud, which had been only a mist, had now deepened about the stem and lower part of the bowl into a black stain. So I knew that ill had come upon Elyn. But, though he was in grave danger he still lived, and would until the cup was entirely black.

"What is it?"

I wished I did not need to answer, but there was no way of escaping Jervon's interest.

"This warns of my brother's danger. Before it was only a clouding, now -- see this black? As it rises up the cup, so his danger grows. If the cup be all black, he is dead."

"A third of the way," he returned. "Have you any way of learning what this danger may be?"

"None -- save it is not the chance of war -- but bound up in the ways of power. He is caught in some ensorcelment."

"The Dalesmen do not take to sorcery save as the Wise Women practice it. And the Hounds have their own kind, not rooted in our beliefs at all. So -- the Old Ones -- " But I could not think of any way Elyn could so have aroused some ancient evil. He had never had any interest in such matters. I tried to recall my far-seeing -- of that bedchamber where the girl had slept while my brother wrenched and levered at bars across a shuttered window.

"Can you far-see?" Jervon asked.

"Not here. I have not the proper things -- " Then I wondered.

I had been so schooled by Aufrica that instinctively I thought of all such seeking in patterns she set. But she had always insisted that I had inheritances of stronger powers.

The tie between Elyn and me was close; we were born at one birth; when we looked upon each other we might be looking into a mirror. Therefore --

"Give me the water bottle!"

Jervon passed it over. I took out one of the strips of soft-beaten inner bark which I carried in my pouch for wounds. Into this I rubbed pinches of three of the herbs Aufrica had supplied and then wet it with water from the bottle, washing my hands carefully with the mixture.

Having so purified myself, I took up the cup. Though it held no liquid, I looked into it as I had into the shell basin, striving to shut out of my mind all save Elyn, thus search out where he was and what he did.

Suddenly it was as if I were in the cup, for about me was a silver-white light. Only for a moment did that bedazzle me. Then I was able to see more clearly. Around me stood tall pillars like the trunks of forest trees, save that these were smooth and polished, their slimness unbroken by any branch. Nor did they support any roof; overhead was nothing but moon and star-hung sky.

These pillars stood not in rows, but rather in a spiral so that one entering among them would walk around and around, in and in, to whatever lay at their heart. At that moment I knew a vast fear, like none I had known before, so I could not even think. For what waited at the heart of that spiral was something so far from the way of life I knew that it was utter terror.

Then -- that changed. It was as if it suddenly put on a mask or shield. The terror was cut off, and in its place -- a drawing -- a sensation of wonder, of the need to see the source of that wonder. Yet because I had earlier felt that overwhelming aura of what really lurked there I was repelled and not ensorcelled.

Out into the open came a figure, mailed, helmed, with sword at hip, riding a war steed. He dismounted, dropping the reins as if he cared not now whether it should wander or not. And he moved toward the opening of the spiral as if he were called.

I tried to cry out, to force myself between Elyn and that gateway to a darkness far worse than death. But I could not move. My brother approached the beginning of the spiral --

"Elys!" Hands on my shoulders, shaking me. I sat hunched over the cup -- the empty cup -- The moon was light but there were no pillars, no spiral.

I raised the cup hurriedly to eye level, more than half fearing that that black shadow would have crept higher. For if Elyn was in that pillared way -- how could he be saved? But the stain was no greater than it had been before. "What did you see?" Jervon demanded. "You -- it was as if you looked upon some great horror and you cried upon your brother's name as if you would pull him out of death's hold by voice alone."

Jervon knew more of this land than I; surely he would know of the spiraled way -- the quickest path! For such a thing of menace would be noted to Dalesmen.

"Listen." As I covered the cup to stow it away, I told him of that earlier vision -- my brother laboring to open the window, then of this later one. "Where lies such a place?"

"Not in Trevamper, or near it," he returned promptly. "But the barred window -- somewhere -- sometime I have heard of that." He rubbed his forehead as if so to summon back a wisp of memory.

"Window -- barred window! Yes -- the Keep of Coomb Frome! There is an old legend, that from one window in the center tower men can see the far hills. And if they do this at some one hour -- they take horse and ride -- and from that riding they do not return. Nor can those who seek them thereafter ever find them again. So Coomb Frome was no longer a lord's house but kept only as a garrison and the window in the tower was close shut. But that all happened in my grandfather's time."

"It could be that Coomb Frome is once more a lord's hold. Did you not say my brother was hand-fasted? By what I have seen he is now wed. Yet he left his lady and went forth to search for that -- ! I ride to Coomb Frome!"

So we came to that Keep, but our reception there was a surprise. Though when I was first hailed by outpost men as Lord Elyn I did not deny it. It was in my mind to learn what I could of my brother before I asked questions. So I said I had been on scout and they would hear my report in due time. Perhaps a lame explanation, yet they did not protest it, only seemed glad to have me back.

Nor did Jervon deny my story. He looked to me with a question in his eyes, and then away, as if he were willing to accept the role I assumed. I pretended a great desire to see my lady wife, for I had been right, Elyn was wedded to the Lady Brunissende.

Men smiled at that, and some laughed a little and whispered one to the other. I could guess they passed such jests as men do when the newlywed are in their company. Only the eldest, a man of some rank, said my lady had taken hard my going forth and had since kept her chamber. At this I played the role of great concern and set heel to horse rib in urging for speed.

Thus I came into that same chamber I had seen in my vision. And the girl of my dream lay still on the bed, though there was with her now an older woman who had something of the look of Aufrica. So I judged she might be of the Wise company. The girl cried out:

"Elyn!" And started up, running to me, her night-robe all awry, her eyes puffed with past tears, her cheeks tracked by new ones. But the woman stared straight at me; then she raised her hand and made a sign I knew well, so that before I thought, I answered it .

Her eyes went very wide. But Brunissende was upon me, her hands reaching for my shoulders, calling upon my brother's name, demanding to know where I had been and why I had left her. I put up my hands to hold her a little off for this welcome I found difficult to answer. Then she pulled away, looking into my face wildly, terror growing in her eyes.

"You are -- you are changed! My dear lord -- what have they done to you?" She began to laugh shrilly and struck out at me, her nails marking my face before I could catch her hand, screaming I was not as I had been.

The woman reached her quickly and, bringing her a little around, slapped her face. So the screaming broke abruptly and Brunissende looked from one to the other of us, rubbing her cheek, yet when she faced me she shivered.

"You are not Elyn." This time the woman spoke. Then she recited words which I also knew. But before she completed that spell, I interrupted.

"I am Elys. Did he never speak of me?"

"Elys -- Elys -- " Brunissende repeated the name. "But Elys is his sister! And you are a man with the seeming of my lord -- who has come to deceive me evilly."

"I am Elys. If my brother said aught of me, you also know that I shared his upbringing in part. Sword and shield-work I learned even as he did in his childhood. Though when we were grown we went separate ways. However, there was a bond between us, and when I was warned that he was in peril, I came, even as he would have come had he heard I walked into danger."

"But -- but how did you know he was gone -- lost in the hills? No messenger has ridden from here. We have kept it secret lest worse happen if it were known."

Brunissende watched me now with the same side-look I had seen in other women. And I thought that, marriage-sister though she be, the time might well come when she would like my room rather than my company. But if she were Elyn's choice then she had my favor, save that now my first duty lay not with her but with my missing brother.

But her woman drew a step closer to me, all the time studying my face as if I bore there in bright paint some sign of who or what I truly was.

"It is the truth, my lady," she said slowly. "The Lord Elyn has said little save that his father and mother were dead, and he had a sister who dwelt among the people who sheltered them from childhood. However -- I believe now that he might have said far more and yet not told all." Again she made a certain sign and I answered it with deliberation, but added somewhat that she might know I was of no low level in her learning. Then she nodded as one come to the solving of a problem.

"The far-seeing it must have been then, my lady. So you must also know where he now ventures -- "

"It is sorcery of the Old Ones." I addressed her rather than Brunissende. "And of the Black not the White. It began with this -- "

I pushed past the Lady Brunissende who still looked at me with a lack of full understanding to that window at which I had seen my brother labor with bars and bolts long rusted into place. It was close shut now as if he had never worked upon it. But when I laid hand to the lower bar I heard a choked cry and turned my head.

The Lady Brunissende cowered against the bed, both hands to her mouth, with nothing but witless terror in her eyes. She gave another muffled cry and swooned

## 5 The Curse of Ingaret

THE WISE WOMAN Went to her quickly, then looked to me again.

"It is but a swoon, and she is better not hearing what you would say, for she is frightened of such things -- the learning."

"Yet you serve her."

"Ah, but I am her foster mother and she does not reckon what I do. But from her childhood she has feared the Curse, for it has lain heavy on her House."

"The Curse?"

"What lies beyond that -- waiting -- " She pointed to the window.

"Tell me, for I am not one who swoons. But, first; Wise Woman, what is your name?"

She smiled and I smiled in return at what we both knew, that she had one name for the world and one for the inner life.

"No, you are not one unable to bear the worst which may be told or shown you. As for my name -- here I am Dame Wirtha -- I am also Ulrica -- "

"Dame?" For the first time I noted she did not wear the rich-colored robes of a Lord's household, but rather gray, and that the wimple of one of the abbeys covered all but her face. Yet I had heard that the Dames and the Old Knowledge did not meet. Also that those of the abbeys did not go beyond their enclosures after their final vows were taken.

"Dame," she repeated. "War upsets all. The House of Kantha Twice Born was overrun by the Hounds this year past. And since I escaped I came to Brunissende -- as I took vows only after she was handfasted. Also Kantha Twice Born had the Old Learning herself in her time and her daughters are of a different thought than those of other abbeys. But we have shared names -- or do you have another?"

I shook my head. There was something of Aufrica in this Dame, but more which was herself alone. And I knew I could trust her.

"I was Blessed at my first naming, given after the custom of my mother's people -- "

"The Witches of Estcarp! Would you had now what they can control, for your need will be great if you



think to do what brought you here."

"Tell me of this Curse, for it must be that which has taken Elyn."

"There is a record that the First of the House of Ingaret, from whom my lady is descended, had a taste

for strange knowledge, yet not the patience nor the discipline to follow the known roads. Therefore he took risks such as no prudent men would think on.

"By his lone he went into the places of the Old Ones and from such a journey he brought back a wife. It was in this very chamber that they lay together, but they had no children and the lord began to fret, for he would have a son to follow him. He took steps to prove that the fault was not his -- siring a son and then a daughter on women he kept in secret. Could any man be greater fool than to think he could hide such matters?

"He came hither one night to take his pleasure with his lady wife and found her sitting in a great chair, like that in which he sat when he gave justice in the hall. Before her on stools sat the women he had used to beget the babes, and they were as if dazed, staring straight before them, while on their knees rested their children.

"When he faced his lady, blustering, demanding to know what she did and why, she smiled at him very sweetly, and said that she but saw to his comfort that he might not have to journey forth in night and ill weather to seek those to satisfy his body -- she had brought them under his roof.

"Then she arose and he found he could not move. She put off the fine robes he had given her, and the jewels he had set upon her, all these she tossed to the floor. Straightaway they became torn and tattered rags, broken base metal and glass. Then, with her body bare and beautiful in the moonlight, she walked to this very window and drew herself up on the sill.

"Thereupon she turned to look once more on Ingaret and she said words which down the years have never been forgot:

" 'You shall desire, you shall seek, and in the seeking you shall be lost. What you had you threw away, and it shall call through the years to others, and they shall also seek, but that seeking shall avail no one.'

"Then she turned and leaped through the window. But when the Lord Ingaret, released from the spell which had held him, raced to look down -- below there was nothing. It was as if her leap had carried her into another world.

"He gathered together then his chief men and he acknowledged on a raised war-shield the boy as his son, gave a daughter's necklet to the girl. Of their mothers -- after that night they were ever maze-minded and did not live long. But the lord did not wed again. In the tenth year following he rose at night and rode out of Coomb Frome, nor was he seen again.

"Through the years other men, some lords, some heirs, some husbands of heiresses, all close to the rule of Coomb Frome, looked from this window at full moon, and then rode out -- to be seen no more. Until the window was tight-barred and the family would come no more to this Keep. So that in the latter days none vanished so -- until your brother."

"If it had been many years -- then perhaps this which waits is the greater hungered. You have the needful for far-seeing?"

"You would try that here? The Dark Powers must have potent rooting within this very room."

Her warning was apt. I knew what I attempted would be highly dangerous. Yet it was needful.

"Within the moon-star -- " I suggested. She nodded, then hurried into an inner chamber. I turned to the saddlebags I had carried with me and brought out the cup. Almost I feared to drop its wrappings lest I see it black. But, although the dark tide had grown higher on the bright silver, yet there was the space of two fingers' breadth untouched at the top. Seeing that I had hope.

The Dame came forth with a wide basket in which were small jars and bottles. First she took up a finger of white chalk and, stooping, she drew, in sharp, sure lines, the five-

point star on the floor in line with that barred window. At each point she set a white candle.

That done she looked upon the cup I held. And she drew a startled breath.

"Dragon scale -- where got you such a thing of power, Lady?"

"It was fashioned by and for my mother before my birth. From it I was named, as was Elyn, from it we drank farewell, so that it now bears the stain of his danger."

"Power indeed had your mother, Lady, to bring such as that into being. I have heard that it could be done, but the price is high -- "

"One she paid without question." And I knew pride as I answered.

"Yes, for only one of courage could do so. You are ready? I have given you such protection as I know."

"I am ready."

I waited until she poured within the cup a blend of liquids from two of her bottles. Then I stepped within the star while she lit the candles. As they burned brightly, I heard her croon the Summons. But her voice was very faint and far away, as if she were not almost within arm's-length but across a dale ridge.

But my eyes were on the interior of the cup where the liquid began to bubble. A mist from it filled my nostrils, though I did not turn my head aside. The mist drifted away and the liquid was a still mirror.

It was as if I were suspended in air, perhaps on wings. Below me was the spiral of the pillars. The curve of it wound around and around to a center heart.

And in that heart were people. They stood so still -- unbreathing. Not people then, but images, so finely

wrought they seemed alive. They, too, were in a spiral, one very near the heart, the others curling outward. And the last in that line --

Elyn!

As I recognized him, something knew me, or at least that I spied upon it. Not anger, no, rather contempt, amusement, scorn that so small and weak a thing as I would trouble it. Yet it was also --

I exerted my will, was back again among the steadily burning candles.

"You saw him?"

"Yes. Also I know where to find him. And that must be done swiftly." "Steel -- weapons -  
- will not save him.&quot;

"Be sure I know that. Yet before she has never taken one tied to such as me. She has grown sure of herself, very sure, and that may work against her."

Two things only, and small, but in my favor. Certainly no missing lord of Coomb Frome had before been sought by a Wise Woman blood-tied to him. Yet the time was so short. If Elyn stayed too long in that web he would be as those others, an image, not a man.

"There is a way privately from this Keep?" I asked.

"Yes. You would go at once?"

"I have no choice."

She gave me things from her own store, two amulets, herbs. Then she took me by a hidden way between the walls, made for escape should the tower be besieged.

And she had her own serving maid bring a horse. Thus I rode out at dawning, armed and mounted, pulled by the thin thread my far-seeing had spun. How far I must go I had

no idea, so that I kept the horse to the best pace I could since time was now my enemy. I slipped past patrols, mainly by using the craft of a Wise Woman to distort their sight of me. At last I was in the wild country beyond which was a maze of sharp-cut ravines and thick brush, so that I had to dismount many times and find a way by breaking or sword-slashing a path.

After one such bout of labor I stood, my hand on the saddle horn, resting before I pulled up again on the blowing horse. Then I knew I was being followed.

That such brush might conceal outlaws I was aware. Or even those from the Keep, mystified by their lord's seeming return and new disappearance, come to track me. Any interference might be fatal to Elyn.

At least in such broken country I could find cover from which to watch my back trail and decide what to do. Sword in hand, I urged my horse within a screen of brush so thick that even autumn loss of leaves did not make it transparent. There I waited.

Whoever came was a master at woodcraft. And I thought of how my brother had ridden with those who struck hard behind enemy lines. But he who advanced so silent-footed, whom I might not have seen had he not inadvertently startled a bird, was Jervon.

Jervon, whom I had in the main forgotten since I had arrived at the Keep. But why? He should be making his own plans to join his lord.

I stepped from behind my screen.

"What do you on this road, swordsman?"

"Road?" His face was shadowed by his helm but I saw his eyebrows tilt upward. So did he look when he was amused. Though amusement had not come often during the days we had been together. "I would not call this wilderness a road, but perchance my eyes have been deceived. As for what I do here, well, did I not earlier say that one does not ride alone when company is offered -- not in these days?" "You cannot go with me!" My voice was a little high as I answered. For I sensed the stubbornness in him. And the road I followed was to such a battle as perhaps he could not imagine, and in which he would be enemy instead of friend.

"Very well. Ride on, my lady -- " He agreed so readily that my anger sparked.

"And have you trail behind? I tell you, Jervon, this is no place for you. What I do is the art of the Wise Women. And I must also face a curse of the Old Ones -- one strong enough still to man-slay." I owed him the truth, for in no other way might I convince him that I was right.

But his expression did not change. "Have I not known this, or much of it, from the beginning? Go to war with your spells, but this is still debatable ground and there are human wolves as well as those strange menaces you have better knowledge of. What if you are attacked with steel and bolt before you reach your goal, or while you must keep your mind and strength for your sorcery?"

"You owe me no oath service. In fact you already have a lord. Seek him out as if your duty."

"No oath did I give you, Lady Elys. But I took oath to myself. I stand at your back while you ride this way. And do not look to cast some spell on me to bring my will to naught. The Dame at the Keep gave me this."

He reached within the throat of his mail shirt and drew forth a pendant of moon-silver wrought into a looped cross, and I knew he was right. Unless I expended on him strength I would need later, I could not overcome the protection that carried. But it was a shield for him where we went. Though I wondered at the Dame sending after me anyone unlearned in any Wise Craft.

"So be it," I surrendered. "But this I lay upon you -- if you feel aught -- any compulsion - - say so at once. There are spells to turn friends into enemies and open gates to great peril."

"That I agree to."

Thus I did not ride alone for the rest of the day. And at nightfall, which came early at that season, we halted on a ridge top where there were two great spires of rock standing. Between them we dismounted.

"You know where you go?" Jervon had traveled in silence most of the afternoon. Were it not for the sound of his passage behind me from time to time, I might well have forgotten I had a trail companion.

"I am drawn." Though I did not explain farther. Now I was too much aware of something in this country before us, a troubling, an uneasiness, as if something which usually slumbered deep now stirred. And I was well aware, that learned as I was, I certainly could not provide an equal match for such as the Old Ones.

"Are we yet near or far?" he asked.

"Near -- we must be near." For so I read that troubling. "Which means -- you must remain here."

"Remember what I said." His hand was on the loop cross. "I follow where you lead."

"But in this country you need not fear any human," I began, then read in his eyes that no word of mine would move him. Short of attacking him with sword, or spell, I had no chance at staying him. Though I wondered at his stubbornness, for which I could see no reason. "You face a peril you cannot understand." I put into that warning all the force I could muster. "We deal now not with those who fight with steel and strength of arm, but with other weapons you cannot dream of-- "

"Lady, since I saw what the weapons of the Hounds did to Dorn, I keep an open mind concerning all and any arms." Again there seemed to be a quirk of humor in his speech. "Also, since that day I have been, in a sense, living on time not mine, since by rights I should have died with those I loved and who made up my world. Thus I do not wager my life -- for that I feel I no longer own. And there is in me a great desire to see how you wage war with these unheard-of strengths and unknown arms you speak of so knowingly. If we are close -- let us to the battlefield then!"

There was so much decision in his words that I could not find any to answer him. But went to look down-slope before us, seeking the safest path, for we were about to descend into a country which stretched wide and unusually dark, even though twilight still lay along the ridges.

What I saw was surely one of the Old Roads, or rather a trail, and that ran in the right direction so we could follow it. It was a narrow way, suffering us only at intervals to ride

abreast. And it led into a woodland, wandering back and forth between trees with trunks so huge in girth that they must have been centuries growing.

Very still was this wood, only now and then the sigh of falling leaves. But never the cry of a night bird, nor rustle of ground animal such as was normal. And always the feeling of something awakening slowly.

"We are waited -- " Jervon's voice was low, yet it was almost like a shout in my ears. "We are watched-- "

So he was sensitive enough to feel it too. Still, as yet, there was no arising of menace, no threat in that stir. Just the sense that our coming registered in some way.

"As I warned you." For the last time I tried to move Jervon to withdraw before it was too late. "We deal with other ways than those of men. Yes, we are watched. And what will come of that watching I cannot say -- "

But he did not answer me and I knew that no argument I could use would move him.

Within the maze of trees the path turned and twisted so much I lost all sense of direction. But I did not lose that thread which tied me to what I sought. And I knew this way would bring me there.

We came at last from under the shadow of the trees into moonlight. And there I saw what had been in the far-seeing -- the spiral of pillars. They stood gleaming, ice-cold and frost-white, in the center of an open space.

I heard a sharp exclamation from Jervon and turned my head, startled. On his breast the loop cross had sprung to vivid fire, as if it had been fashioned not of moon-silver but of some huge gem. And I knew that what powered it had been awakened into the strongest life it could possess by the emanations from the spiral.

There was warmth also against my knee, and from the saddlebags came a dim radiance. I fumbled with the clasp, brought out the cup. There was left only a thin rim of silver undarkened -- so little time had I left! But even that thread responded, too. "Stay you here -- " I gave that order. He might not obey it, but I must keep my mind on my



own actions, think only of Elyn and what must be done to save him. Jervon had made his choice -- on him be the result.

With the cup in one hand and in the other one of the things the Dame had pressed upon me, a wand of rowan peeled clean and then steeped in the potent juice of its own fruit, being after laid for the nights of the full moon exposed in a place of Old Power, I went forward. That was light enough weight, nothing compared to the sword which dragged at my hip. Yet I did not free myself of that, for it was wrought of metal which my mother and father had sought in strange places, so that in its way it was a talisman.

Thus with wand and cup, the knowledge that I alone could face what lay there, I stepped past the first pillar and began the winding path it marked.

## 6 Field of Stone

THERE WAS a drawing at first, as if a current pulled at me, urging me on. Then came a sharp reversal. That which lurked here must have sensed that I came not bemused and ready as had its other victims. A pause, while I advanced steadily, cup and wand held as sword and shield ready for battle. Then --

What I had braced myself to meet from the beginning struck hard. It was like a blow, with force enough to stagger me. Yet it neither drove me to my knees nor into retreat. I had to fight as one might fight facing a buffeting storm wind.

Where I had gone easily and steadily before, now I wavered in spite of all my efforts, from side to side, winning only inches where I had taken strides. However, I schooled myself to think only of what I must do, put aside all uneasiness. For the least break which fear might make in my guard would leave me defenseless.

I held to one warming spark of hope. What I faced here was strong, yes, stronger than anything Aufrica and I had ever thrown skill and energy against, but it was not spun from the power of an adept. Part of its strength must be rooted in the fact that for a toll of years it had not been successfully withstood. Thus the very fact that I did battle was enough to slightly shake its belief in what it could and would do.

And I discovered that, though those pillars seemed to stand well apart from each other with space in between, there was a force field uniting them. So that once within the spiral one could not look out any more than one could through a wall. Also --

Almost I had been captured in the simplest of traps. I rated myself for my momentary inattention. I had been moving in a pattern, my attention so on the fact that I must keep moving that I was unaware my steps fitted the purposes of another, not my own. Straight-away I sought to break the lulling spell, stepping long, short, from side to side, even giving a small hop now and then, anything to keep from what might hypnotize mind and body.

I prepared for a new attack. Since that which awaited me had tried two ways, and both had failed, the third would be a greater threat.

The clear moonlight was gone. There was light, but it streamed from the pillars, as if each were the flame of some giant candle. That light was faintly green, giving an unpleasant look to the flesh of my hands, as if I were tainted with some foul disease.

But the wand and that section of the cup still unclouded were like twin torches in return, burning now with the blue of those safe candles which one uses in defensive spells.

Once more the assault began, and this time it was through sight. Things coiled, and glided, peered from between the flames of the pillars, showing faces and forms so foul as to be only of the Dark. My defense was not to be tempted to lift or turn my eyes from cup or wand.

To sight was added sound. There were voices I knew, which cried aloud to me, sometimes with pleas, sometimes sharp warnings. Having so beset sight and hearing, the power in command here tried once more to engulf me in the pattern of its weaving. Thus my fight grew so that I was as a beleaguered swordsman facing many foes at once, striving to keep them all in play.

But my way was on and I kept to it.

Suddenly all sound, sight, pressure ceased. This was withdrawal, not victory. The ruler of this place was concentrating forces, waiting for me to reach the heart of the spiral before loosing on me full power. I took advantage of that release to push ahead faster.

I came into the heart of that net which had been woven, or least put to the use of, she who had cursed the Lords of Coomb Frome. And I moved into company. Men stood

there, their faces all turned to the center of the circle. Twelve of them I counted and the last was Elyn!

In none of them was the spark of life. They were like statues so perfectly fashioned that they needed only breath and warmth to make them men, but both they lacked. And all were bound by what they looked upon.

There was a circular block raised in the center and on it -- Mist thickened, became a form -- that of a woman, unclothed, beautiful. She raised her arms and tossed high the wealth of her hair which was like a cloak, but did not lie about her, rather rose in weaving tendrils, as if it had life of its own. Silver-white as moon-shine was her body, silver hair her hair, only her eyes were dark and seemed to have no whites, but were like small pits far back in which something watched the world with no good will.

She was perfect, she was beautiful, and there was that in her, I recognized, to draw anything male to her. It was as if the full essence of the female was distilled and here given form and life.

So -- me she did not draw -- but repelled! For all which makes one woman suspicious, or jealous, or brings her to hate another, was also so distilled and brought to the highest. And I do not think it was until that moment that she realized I was not what I outwardly appeared.

Her realization was followed by a blast of hate. But for that I was prepared, raising cup and wand before me swiftly. Her hair writhed wildly, reaching for me as if each strand fought to wreath itself noose-wise about my throat.

Then -- she laughed.

There was scorn in that laughter. It was such as a queen might utter were the lowliest of her work-maids to challenge her power. So confident was she.

Her hands went to that flowing hair, and she broke away threads of it. As she held them they glittered even brighter, taking on the semblance of burnished metal. These she rolled and spun in her fingers to make a cord.

But I did not wait idly for her attack. What magic she was about to use I had heard of. It had a beginning as a love charm -- and as such it might be considered relatively harmless. But the other face of love is hate, and in hate this could kill.

So I sang, not aloud, but in my head. And, as I watched her, my chant followed each and every turn and twist of her silver-bright fingers, bringing so a counter to what she did, as if I too wove a twin, though invisible, to her effort.

I could guess that what she did was far more potent than the charm I had knowledge of, she being who she was. But that she used a spell I could identify was a small tip of scales in my favor. I had come expecting the skill of a close-to-adept; I was faced with something known to every Wise Woman. Of course this might be only the first of many spells, which would grow in complexity and power as our struggle continued.

Now she had her loop, but she did not yet cast it, rather she passed it from hand to hand, those dark caverns of eyes ever upon me. I noted something else, that aura of the female, the sexual impact she had used as a weapon, was fading.

Her body was no longer of great and compelling beauty, her limbs lengthened, grew thin and spare, her breasts flattened to her ribs, her face was a mask of bone covered thinly with skin. Only her hair remained the same.

But her lips stretched in a scornful smile. And for the first time she struck at me with words. Though whether she spoke them aloud or from mind to mind I did not know.

"Witch one -- look at me and see yourself. This is how you look to others!"

If she thought to catch me through vanity -- Had she so poor an idea of human women that she believed such a small assault would win her any even temporary victory?

Her words meant nothing. It was the noose to which I must pay attention.

"What man follows such as you -- " Her taunting stopped. Her head went up, her eyes no longer strove to hold mine, even her hands were still, the noose of hair hanging limply from one. Her attitude was one of listening. Yet I could hear nothing.

Once more a change came over her, beauty flowed back to round her body, make her the idealized image of what any man would joyfully claim as a bed-fellow. Again she laughed.

"Witch, I have underrated you. It seems you do have one willing to follow where you led. But what a pity -- from a beggar even his bowl shall be taken. Watch, Witch, and see how works the power of -- " Then she shook her head and my heart warmed. For I realized how nearly she had been off guard, almost she had said her name. And, if she had uttered that, she would have truly lost. It had been so long since she had faced any kind of opposition that she was careless. Therefore I must be ever alert, ready to take advantage of any such slip.

"Turn and look, Witch," she urged. "See who comes now at my calling, as did all of these fools!" I did not need to do so, nor would I lower my guard. If Jervon had come, then he must take the consequences. I could not let myself be shaken in any way from the battle between the silver woman and me.

I heard rather than saw him move into place beside me. Then his hand came into my line of vision and I saw he had drawn his sword, was holding it point out to the woman.

She began to sing, a sweet beguiling. And she held out her hands to him, though she had not dropped the noose. And in her, woman that I was, I could see all the enticement my sex might ever hold for a man, promising him every delight of body.

Jervon moved forward.

Nor could I lay any blame on him, for this was sorcery which even the blazing loop cross at his throat could not avert. It was too distilled, too potent --

And that potency awakened in me the same anger which I had felt before, as if the silver woman threatened all I could ever hold dear. Still I was a Wise Woman and to such the body and emotions must ever be controlled by the mind.

She was speaking, a flow of crooning, compelling words -- aimed at Jervon. I saw the sword waver, the point sink to the ground. His other hand went to paw at the loop cross, pull at it as if he would break the chain and throw that talisman from him. But also I sensed something else.

Strong was her spell, yes. But he was fighting it. Not in fear, as the others might have fought when they came to realize the deadly enticement they faced, but because he knew in some part of him that this was not truly his desire.

How this came to me I do not know, perhaps because it struck at her also. Her arms reached, she was desire incarnate -- waiting for him alone. His hand was on the loop cross, no longer pulling at it, no, rather clutching as if that gave him safe anchorage in the midst of a storm.

What I had been waiting for happened; the noose spun out through the air. But not aimed for me -- at Jervon, as if his stubborn refusal to surrender had again shaken her from careful planning.

I was waiting, the tip of the wand catching into that loop. Straightaway it curled itself around the peeled branch as it would have around flesh had it touched. But as swiftly it released that hold, made to slip down to my hand.

I shook the wand, saw those coils loosen, and the noose was sent flying back toward her who had sent it. It landed at the foot of the block on which she stood and humped into life like a serpent, began to crawl back again toward us. But the silver woman was already weaving another such from her hair, plaiting it with flying fingers this time, not leisurely as she had before.

Jervon only stood, his hand still on the hilt of his sword which now rested point against the pavement, the other clasped over the loop cross. I knew that he could not defend himself more than he did at present, resisting her spell. I would have to meet her attacks alone. But at greater disadvantage than before for she could take Jervon unless I divided my defense.

Dared I do that? I wavered, and then was angered by my own wavering. In this I had no choice. If Jervon was to fall to her sorcery, that I must allow, keeping single-minded on the last struggle between the two of us.

Once more she had a noose, but this time she did not fling it at either of us, rather dropped it lightly to the pavement where, as its fellow, it began to wriggle toward us. She was smiling again, already weaving a third while the two others humped and crawled.

Yes, this was such an attack as might win for her -- might -- But I clung to the doubt. I thrust the cup into the fore of my belt, and with my left hand drew the sword my father had forged from the lumps of ancient metal.

It caught no reflection from the light around us. The whole of the blade was dark, thickly dark as a night without moon or stars. Never had I seen it so before; always it had been as any other weapon. But it might now have been forged from shadows.

I laid it on the pavement before me, edge toward the creeping nooses. What protection it might give I did not know. There are powers which can be defeated by metals, even other powers which feed upon them. But this was strangely wrought and I had belief in the judgment of my parents who had valued it so highly.

Once more I took the cup into my hand, waited with it and the wand. But I had to divide my attention now between the actions of the woman and the crawling nooses -- three of them -- for she had finished that and was busy with a fourth.

One of the nooses reached close to the blade I had laid down. It coiled back upon itself, as might a serpent preparing to strike, one end raised from the ground, darting back and forth as if it were before a wall it could not pierce or climb. For the moment I had the relief of knowing I had another defense.

To my surprise Jervon moved, heavily and jerkily as one who fights the dead weight of his own body, but he brought up his sword, slashed at the coiled noose. It struck back at his blade, strove to wind about it, yet fell away. So steel was also a defense.

Those who stood statue-still about us were mainly armed, but their blades were all sheathed. Perhaps they had been so ensorcelled that they had not been aware that they must fight for freedom.

The silver woman hissed like a great enraged cat. She hurled her fourth noose at me and once more the wand caught it, threw it back. But at that moment I knew that I must not leave her the initiative.

I poised the wand as I might a hunting spear, hurled it straight for her breast. She gave a loud keening cry and swept her hair out as a shield.

I saw the wand thrust deep into that and the strands melted back and away. But she had deflected the wand and it clattered down against the block on which she stood and broke. Yet half her hair was shriveled away. Quickly I caught up the sword at my feet. And Jervon, still moving as if leaden weights were fastened to his arms, was striking awkwardly at the remaining nooses. But he moved so slowly they could well take him first.

There was no time to consider Jervon. I must think only of what was to be done here and now. I leaped over the crawling nooses, straight for that block on which she stood tearing at her hair, not waiting to weave cords but throwing handfuls of it at us both, it flowing in cloudy masses through the air.

I waved the sword back and forth before me to clear that menace. Then I stood before her. Her face was no longer beautiful. Once more she showed a skull countenance. Her lips were drawn back against her teeth; her hands, ceasing to comb at her hair, were outstretched. Before my eyes they became huge talons reaching to rend and tear.

I readied the sword, thrusting up and in. And met nothing. Yet still she stood there ready to launch herself at my throat. Again I thrust. Then I knew -- what I saw was illusion; the core of it lay elsewhere. And I must find that or lose the battle entirely.

There was a thin cry. Jervon had slashed two nooses, the third had fastened on his foot, was weaving up his body. But I had no time -- I must find the witch core.

That it lay somewhere in this spiral heart I could not doubt. She could not have manifested so strongly otherwise.

The woman did not move from where she stood, though her claw hands were still outstretched, her head turned at what seemed an impossible angle on her shoulders so she could follow me with those eyes which were not eyes. With her mouth pulled into a furious snarl, she lost more and more of her human aspect, her rage mirrored in her body.

I realized now that she was tied to the block and could do no more than her hair tricks and the like. As long as I was alert for such moves, I was free to seek that which must be found if she were to be wholly destroyed or driven away.



Passing among those silent figures of her victims I reached the pillars about that core. I moved along them slowly, checking ever upon the movements of the enemy.

She raised her hand to her face, those claws melted again into fingers, and she cupped them together as if she sheltered some precious thing. Then she brought her hands to her mouth, blew gently into them as if she had need for warmth.

But I knew that what she so blew was a new way of attack, though I could not guess its manner. Suddenly she spread her hands wide, and crouched between them was a small thing the like of which I had never seen before, save I knew it to be evil.

Wings which were flaps of mottled skin it had, and a horned head, and a sharply pointed snout. It was as red as a leaping fire spark. And like the menace of wind-driven flame, it was as she tossed it aloft. I expected it to strike at me, but rather it winged up and up, vanishing quickly.

I did not know from which direction it might return, or when. Yet I dared not linger to wait on it, I must continue my search. So I kept on from pillar to pillar. And ever she watched me, her teeth like fangs, her grin that of death itself.

Since the wand was shattered, I pinned my hopes on the cup. A thing of power, it must react to power when it neared the source which fed the apparition of the woman. Yet the small silver portion grew no brighter.

By then I had made the circuit of the pillars. So -- the obvious must be true. The source lay under that block on which she stood. But how to force it up or off --

I came up behind Jervon. His legs were now netted by not only the third noose but some of the flying hair she had sent against us. None rose high up his body and his sword arm was still free. It would take the two of us -- I knew that now. But could he -- would he -- aid?

I passed my black sword up and about him. The nets shriveled into nothingness. He turned his head. His face was set, white, with some of the rigid look of those others. But his eyes were alive.

"You must help -- with that stone -- "

I laid the sword tip to his shoulder. He shuddered, moved stiffly.

Yet all the time I remembered that winged scarlet thing she had sent flying. Was it poised for attack somewhere over our heads, or was it a messenger to summon aid for her?

Jervon took one ponderous step and then another at my urging. He moved so slowly it was as if stone itself obeyed my wishes. I put the cup again into my belt, caught his wrist, and set the point of his sword at the jointure of stone and pavement.

An arm with misshapen talons raked inches short of his face, yet something, perhaps the loop cross, kept him safe. I went to set my sword point even with his and I cried out -  
- hoping with all my might he could do as I ordered:

"Heave!"

Both hands I had set about the hilt of the sword. And at that moment came the scarlet flying thing, aiming for my eyes. I jerked my head, but by the favor of those powers I had long served, I did not lose my grip

--

Like a brand of fire along my cheek was that stinging blow. I could hear a hissing whine. But all that mattered, all that must matter was the stone. And it was moving!

I put forth all my strength, at the same time crying again:

"Jervon, heave!"

And that stone, under the urging of our blades, arose up, though the flying thing darted about our heads and I heard Jervon cry out, saw him stagger back. But we had done it -  
- the stone was up, poised on one edge for an instant, then crashed over and away.

7 Silver Bright

SHE WHO HAD menaced us from the block was gone. But the red flyer darted again at my eyes in such a fury of attack that I stumbled away half-blinded. In my hand was still the sword, and I thrust with it down into whatever we might have uncovered. There was a low wail. The red thing vanished.

I stood at the edge of a small pit. There had been a casket there in the hollow but the point of the sword had pierced it, cleaving the metal as if it were no more than soft earth. From that now spread a melting so that the riven casket lost shape, became a mass, which in turn sank into the ground on which it lay. In moments nothing was left.

Now the very pavement under my feet began to crack and crumble in turn, becoming rubble. First around the edges of the pit, and then, that erosion spreading, in lapping waves, as if all the untold years that this place had had its existence settled all at once, a burden of age too heavy to support.

The waves of erosion touched the feet of the first man. He shivered, moved. Then his armor was rust red, holding bare bones, until all toppled, to crash in shards, bone and time-eaten iron together, to the riven pavement.

So it was with the rest. Dead men, losing the false semblance of life as time caught up and engulfed them, to reach to the next and the next.

"Dead!" Jervon said.

I looked around. He had lost that rigid cast of countenance, was staring about him as if he wakened from some half-stupor into full consciousness.

"Yes, dead, long dead. As is this trap now."

I pulled my sword from the pit where it had been standing upright, its point no longer anchored in the box, but in the dark ground. But that point -- it was eroded, as if it had been thrust into acid. I held but three-quarters of a weapon. I sheathed it, amazed at what power must have erupted from the box.

Elyn! Almost I had forgotten him who had brought me hither.

Swinging from that hole I looked to where my brother stood, one among the other prisoners. He moved, raised a hand uncertainly to his head, tried to take a step and tripped over the bones and armor of one of his less fortunate fellows. I sped to him, my hands ready to steady him. He was blinking, looking about as one who wakes out of a dream, to perhaps find not all of it a dream after all.

"Elyn!" I shook him gently as one shakes awake a child who had cried out of a nightmare.

He looked at me slowly.

"Elys?" But of my name he made a question, as if he did not believe I was real.

"Elys," I assured him. And, though I still kept one hand upon his arm, I held out now the cup.

That dark tarnish was gone. And in the moonlight the silver was as bright as it had been from the night it was first wrought. He put out his hand, traced the rim with one finger.

"Dragon scale silver -- "

"Yes. It told me that you were in danger -- brought me here -- "

With that he looked up and around. The erosion had spread. Those pillars had lost their eerie light; most of them had crumbled and fallen away. The power which had knitted it all together had fled.

"Where -- where is this place?" Elyn was frowning, puzzled. And I wondered if he knew at all what had happened to him.

"This is the heart of Ingaret's Curse. And you were caught in it -- "

"Ingaret!" That single name seemed to be enough. "Brunissende -- where is my lady?"

"Safe in the Keep at Coomb Frome." But there was an odd feeling in me. It was as if Elyn had taken a step away from me -- a step? No, a stride -- still my hand was on him.

"I do not remember -- " Some of his uncertainty returned.

"That does not matter. You are free."

"We are all free, Lady. But are we like to remain so?"

Jervon was by me. He still held his unsheathed sword and he had the watchfulness of one who treads through enemy territory where each wayside bush may mask armed surprise.

"The power here is gone." I was sure of that.

"But is it the only power hereabouts? I shall feel safer when we are to horse and on the back trail."

"Who is this?" Elyn spoke to me.

I thought perhaps some of the mind daze still held by his curt question, and I made ready answer.

"This is Jervon, Marshal of Haverdale, who has ridden with me for your deliverance. It was by his sword aid that we won this battle with the Curse."

"I give thanks," Elyn said remotely.

I thought -- he is still under the edge of the spell, his wits are slowed, so I can forgive his bareness of thanks. Yet his manner chilled me a little.

"Coomb Frome -- where lies it?" At least on that question Elyn's voice was alive and eager.

"A day's ride away," Jervon answered.

In that moment I could not have said anything, for it was as if the struggle with the silver woman had sustained me against any weariness, but now that that was past, and Elyn once more free, all fatigue settled upon me at once, as time had done to crack open this foul web. I staggered. Instantly there was an arm at my back, strong as any keep wall, supporting me.

"Let us ride then!" Elyn was already starting away.

"Presently." Jervon's word had the crack of an order. "Your lady sister has ridden through one day without rest, battled through the night, to win you free. She cannot ride now."

Elyn glanced impatiently around, a stubborn look I knew of old on his face.

"I -- " he began, and then after a moment's pause, he nodded. "Well enough." If he said that grudgingly, I was far too sunk in this vast weariness to care. Nor was I really aware of how we came free of the ruins of the spiral. Or of aught, save a drowsy memory of resting on the ground, with the soft roll of a cloak beneath my head, my furred one spread over me, while a firm hand held mine and a far-off voice urged me to sleep.

I awoke to the tantalizing fragrance of roasting meat, saw through half-open eyes the dancing flames of a fire, and near that, on spits of branches, the bodies of forest fowl, small but of such fine eating that not even a Dale lord would disdain to find one on his feast table.

Jervon, his helm laid aside, the ringed under-hood of that lying back on his shoulders, sat cross-legged, Watching the roasting birds with a critical eye. Elyn -- ? I turned my head slowly, but my brother was not to be seen in the firelight, and I levered myself up, his name a cry on my lips.

Jervon swung around and came to me quickly.

"Elyn?" I cried again.

"Is safe. He rode out at noontide, being anxious concerning his wife, and doubtless his command."

I had shaken sleep from me now, and there was that in the tone of his voice which made me uneasy.

"But dangerous country -- you said yourself to ride alone across it was deep peril -- with three of us -- " I was babbling, I realized, but there was something here I could not understand.

"He is a man, full armed. He chose to go. Would you have had me overpower and bind him into staying?" Still that note in his voice.

"I do not understand -- " My confusion grew.

Jervon arose abruptly, half turned from me to face the fire, yet still I could see the flat plane of his cheek, the firmness of his chin, that straight line which his mouth assumed upon occasion.

"Nor do I!" There was heat in his voice now. "Had any wrought for me as you did for him -- then I would not have left her side. Yet all he pratted of was his lady! If he thought so much of her, how came he into the toils of that -- ?"

"He perhaps cannot remember." I pushed aside the furred cloak. "Oftentimes ensorcelment has that effect upon the victim. And once that power set up its lure he could not have resisted. You remember surely what spell she cast. Had you not the loop cross it might so have drawn you."

"Well enough!" But his voice did not lose that heat. "Perhaps he acted as any man. Save, that from your brother one does not expect the act of any man. And -- " he hesitated as if he chewed upon some words he did not want to say yet there was that forcing him to the saying, "Lady, do not expect -- Oh, what matter it. I may be seeing drawn swords where all are sheathed. What say you to food?"

I wanted to know what chafed in his mind, but I would not force it from him. And hunger was greater than all now. Eagerly I reached for a spitted bird, blew upon it and my fingers as I strove to strip the browned flesh from its small bones.

So long had I slept that it was dawn about us when we finished that meal. Jervon brought up the single horse. So Elyn had taken the other! That had not occurred to me. My brother's behavior seemed more strange as I thought on it.

I did not gainsay Jervon when he insisted that I ride. But I made up my mind that I would not spend the whole of this journey in the saddle; like true comrades, we would share alike.

However, as we went, my thoughts were well occupied with Elyn. Not just that he had left us so – any man newly out of a spell might well be so over-cast in his mind to hold only to one desire and the need for obtaining it. If Brunissende meant so much to him, he might see in her the safety he craved. No, I could not count his leaving as unfeeling, for I had never been in the grip of a spell.

It was Elyn the boy I began to remember, recalling all I had once accepted without question. Though why I had this overshadowing feeling that I was about to face another testing I could not tell. Save that no one who had Wise Learning ever puts aside such uneasiness as without cause.

Elyn had never shown any interest in the Wise Way. In fact, now that I faced memories squarely and sounded them for full meaning, he had shunned that. Though I had had laid on me the vows of silence in many things, there had been lesser bits of learning he might well have profited by. Also he had not liked it when I had shown my arts in his presence.

Oddly enough he had not resented the fact that I shared his swordplay. He had treated me then more as a brother, and I had been content. But let me speak of what I might do with Aufrica and he had shied away. Yet at that last meeting he had allowed the cup pledge. The first time, to my knowledge, that he had ever agreed to any spell binding.

We both knew our mother's story, that she had sought out powers which might prove fatal in order to give our father a son. She had forged the dragon cup -- but at the last moment she had asked for a daughter also, gladly paying with her life.



So we had not been conceived as ordinary children; magic had played a part in our lives from the beginning. Did Elyn fear because of this?

Though I had been much with him and my father, yet I had had those other hours of which my father never spoke. He, too, as I recalled those years now, had seemed to ignore that side of my life. As if it were something -- like -- like a deformity!

I drew a deep breath, a whole new conception of my past opening before me. Had my father and Elyn felt aversion -- even shame -- But how could they? There Was my mother -- What had happened in that land of Estcarp across the sea which had rift my parents from their former life, tossed them into barren Wark?

Shame of the power? Did my father, my brother, look upon me as one marked -- or tainted -- ?

"No!" I denied that aloud.

"No what, my lady?"

Startled, I looked at Jervon walking beside me. I hesitated then. There was a question I longed to ask, yet shrank from the asking. Then I nerved myself to it, for by the reply I might perhaps find some solution to the problem of Elyn. "Jervon, do you know what I am?" I asked it baldly, my voice perhaps a little hoarse as I braced myself for his answer.

"A very gallant lady -- and a mistress of powers," he replied.

"Yes, a Wise Woman." I would not have flattery from him. "One who deals with the unseen."

"To some good purpose, as you have here. What troubles you, Lady?"

"I do not believe that all men think as you do, comrade. That there is good in being a mistress of powers.

Or if they admit so much at times, they are not always so charitable. I was bred up to such knowledge, to me it is life. I cannot imagine being without -- though it walls me from others. There are those who always look askance at me."

"Including Elyn?"

He was quick, too quick. Or perhaps I was stupid enough to give away my thoughts. But since I had gone this far, why try to conceal my misgivings farther?

"Perhaps -- I do not know."

Had I hoped he would deny that? If so, I was disappointed, for after a moment his reply came:

"If that is the way with him, it could explain much. And having been caught in what he distrusted -- yes, he could wish to see the last of all which would remind him -- "

I reined in the horse. "But it is not so with you?"

Jervon put his hand to sword hilt. "This is my defense, my weapon. It is steel and I can touch it, all men can see it in my hand. But there are other weapons, as you have so ably proved. Should I fear, or look sidewise (as you say) upon them because they are not metal, or perhaps not visible? Learning in the arts of war I have, and also, once, some in the ways of peace. That came to me by study. You have yours by study also. I may not understand it, but perhaps there is that in my learning also which would be strange to you. Why should one learning be less or more than any other when they are from different sources? You have healcraft which is your peace art, and what you have done to lay this Curse is your art of war.

"No, I do not look with fear -- or aversion -- on what you do."

So did he answer the darkest of my thoughts.

But if I must accept that Elyn felt differently, what lay in days ahead? I could return to that nameless dale -- unless early winter sealed it off -- where the Wark folk stayed. There was nothing to tie me to them save Aufrica. Yet I had known when I rode forth

that her farewell to me had been lasting. There was no need for two Wise Women there, and she had done her best for me. I was now a woman grown and proven in power. The hatched fledgling cannot be refitted into the eggshell from which it has broken free.

Coomb Frome? No, I had nothing there either. I was sure I had read Brunissende right in the short time I had seen her. She might accept her Dame, but a Wise Woman close kin to her lord -- there would be more sidewise looks.

But if I went not to the Dale nor to the Keep, where would I venture? Now I looked about me wonderingly, for it seemed, in that moment of realization, I was indeed cast adrift and even the land around me took on a more forbidding cast.

"Do we go on?" Once more Jervon spoke as if he could read my unhappy thoughts.

"Where else is there to go?" For the first time in our companying I looked to him for an answer, having none myself.

"I would say not the Keep!" The decision in that was sharp and clear. "Or, if you wish, only to make sure of Elyn's return, to visit only and let that visit be brief."

I seized upon that -- it would give me breathing space, a time to think -- to plan.

"To Coomb Frome then -- in brief."

Though we perforce went slowly, by mid-afternoon we were sighted by those Elyn had sent to meet us. So I came a second time to the Keep. I noted also that, though we were treated with deference by that party, yet Elyn had not ridden with them.

We reached the Keep long after moonrise and I was shown into a guest chamber where serving maids waited with a steaming copper of water to ease the aches of travel, a bed such as I had never known for softness. But I had slept far better the night before on the bare ground in the wilderness, for my thoughts pricked and pulled at me.

In the morn I arose and the maids brought me a soft robe such as the Dale ladies wore. But I asked for my mailed shirt and travel clothes. They were then in a fluster so I

learned that by my Lady Brunissende's own orders those clothes had been destroyed as too travel-worn.

Under my urging one of the maids bethought herself of other clothing and brought it to me. Man's it was but new. Whether it had been for my brother, I knew not. But I wore it together with boots, my mail, and the sword belt and sheath in which rested the mutilated weapon which had routed the Curse.

I left my cloak, my saddlebags, and journey wallet in my room. My brother, they told me, was still with his lady -- and I sent to ask for a meeting.

So I went for the second time into that fated tower room. Brunissende saw me first and she gasped, put out her hand to grasp tight Elyn's silken sleeve. For he wore no armor.

He gazed at me with a growing frown. Then he took her hand gently from his arm to stride towards me, his frown heavy as he looked me up and down.

"Why come you here in such guise, Elys? Can you not understand that to see you so is difficult for Brunissende?"

"To see me so? I have been so all my life, brother. Or have you forgotten -- ?"

"I have forgotten nothing!" he burst out, and it was as if he were deliberately feeding his anger, if anger it was, that he might brace himself to harsh words. "What was done in Wark is long past. You have to forget those rough ways. My dear lady will aid you to do so."

"Will she now? And I have much to forget, do I, brother? It would seem you have already forgotten!" His hand came up; I think he was almost moved to strike me. And I realized that he feared most of all -- not me as a Wise Woman, but that I might make plain to Brunissende the manner of his ensorcelment.

"It is forgotten -- " He said those words as a warning.

"So be it." I had had no decision to make after all. It had been made for me, days, seasons -- long ago. We might be of one birth, of one face, but we were otherwise

hardly kin. "I ask nothing of you, Elyn, save a horse. Since I do not propose to travel afoot -- and that I think you owe me."

His frown cleared a little. "Where do you go? Back to those of Wark?"

I shrugged but did not answer. If he wished to believe that, let him. I was still amazed at the chasm between us.

"You are wise." Brunissende had crept to his side. "Men hereabouts still fear the Curse. That you have had dealings with that power seems fearsome to them."

Elyn stirred. "She broke it for me. Never forget that, my lady."

She answered nothing to that, only eyed me in such a way as I knew there could be no friendship between us.

"The day grows, I will ride." I had no desire to prolong this viewing of something already buried in the past.

He gave me the best mount in his stable, ordered out also a pack horse and had it loaded with gear. I did not deny him this attempt to salve his conscience. All the time I saw the looks of his men who, seeing us so like together, must have longed for the mystery to be explained.

After I had mounted I looked down at him. I did not want to wish him ill. He lived by his nature, I mine. Instead I made a sign to summon fortune and blessing to him. And saw his mouth tighten as if he wanted it not.

So I rode from Coomb Frome, but at the gate another joined me. And I said:

"Have you learned where your lord now lies? Which way do you ride to return to his standard?"

"He is dead. The men of his following -- those still living -- enlisted under other banners. I am without a lord."

"Then where do you go, swordsman?"

"I am without a lord, but I have found a lady. Your road is mine, mistress of powers."

"Well enough. But which road and where?"

There is still a war, Lady. I have my sword and you yours. Let us seek where we can best harry the Hounds!"

I laughed. I had turned my back on Coomb Frome. I was free -- for the first time I was free -- of Aufrica's governing, of the wretched survivors of Wark, of the spell of the dragon cup, which henceforth would be only a cup and not any lodestone to draw me into danger. Unless -- I glanced at Jervon, but he was not looking at me, but eagerly at the road ahead -- unless, I chose to make it otherwise. Which at some future day I might just do.