

Earthborn: A Witchworld Story

by Andre Norton

Mereth drew a deep breath. Breezes here were still ice kissed, though this cup of land was well beneath those mountain walls, which formed its confines. She pulled her heavy cloak closer and secured its throatlatch before freeing Mage Ruther's experimental distance see-all. Mereth never ceased to wonder at its ability to draw into her vision things that lay far away.

If this tool had only been available in the days of the invasion, It seemed, she thought, that nowadays minds were proving sharper. Knowledge, either long forgotten or newly discovered, advanced steadily from one sunrise to another. It was almost as if the constant alerts, necessary before the Warding, having now vanished, way had been opened for the flourishing of learning. Mereth did not, of course, accept the suggestion that a Golden Age had come to Estcarp and her own High Hallack. No, when the Gates, known or secret, had drawn captives from many far sources to people this long-mixed world, Estcarp, Arvon, High Hallack, Karstan, Escore, evil had come, nonetheless, twinned with good.

Gone were the Gates, yes, but though the Dark might not feed its forces here now, it had not yet shrunk to nothingness. Behind her now, within the near-repaired walls of Lormt, more than a score of scholars engaged in research, eager to recover any hint of what might rise to threaten again. Towers, brought low by the Dance of the Mountains, were now near restored. However, beneath the ancient floors of those venerable storehouses of knowledge, long-hidden rooms had burst open to be explored by the then few, reclusive inhabitants. Newcomers, sages of high learning, had flocked in. The efforts of at least three quarters of the Lormt dwellers were now bent toward this exploration and were being repaid.

She lifted again the far-seer, held it to her right eye and turned it down slope. There appeared movement now, which in this near-deserted country might herald a visitor, one of those seeking to trace war-tossed kin, raider scout, or homeless wanderer?

Peering so through her new tool, Mereth saw straightly enough. What leapt into instant view was a gaunt villager garbed in rags. It was the shepherdess she had observed warding a tiny flock of bedraggled sheep a day gone. To the woman's eye, skilled through years in merchanting, the pitifully thin mottled creatures, rated of the poorest quality. Such faded, ragged wool would bring scarcely half a glance in the past from the factors at Ferndale Warehouse.

The distant village girl rounded a rock and then half stumbled against the stone as if unable to stand erect. Mereth gained her feet with the aid of her long staff, thrust the far-seer into a belt loop and headed down the hill. She had made no mistake in reading the expression of abject horror that had grimaced that narrow face.

Being a mute, Mereth could not call out, nor did she appear to possess any of the Old Talent of mind-touch. Suddenly her feet struck something slick in the sprouting grass and she dug in her staff just in time to prevent herself from falling.

The shepherdess's head jerked up and she looked directly at Mereth, terror still etched on her features. She screamed and lurched away from the rock, running, not toward Mereth, but away.

Mereth was not close enough to bar the girl's way with her staff and had to steady herself, once more unsure of her own footing. Just as she reached the upstanding spur of rock, the girl had reached the far side, no chance to stop her now.

Leaning heavily on her staff for support, the woman of Lornt doggedly followed the frightened girl; however, now a strange awareness broke upon her so sharply that she almost staggered. Clutching the rod of polished wood with all her might, she met such an odor that she held her breath for a moment. Death's foul stench, Death with the sickening effluvia of an ancient evil.

A battle ground might well poison the rising wind so, but even during the years of the war, Mereth had only once met with such a stomach-twisting smell, it filled the nostrils, but, it also reached deep within her and awakened a nameless fear. Perhaps the loss of one ability, that of speech, stirred and sharpened all her senses. It posed a question for the likes of Maid Mouse, whose visits she cherished. Mouse was renowned for her magic talent and the gift of discerning the balance of things.

As the woman continued to plod persistently along the track the girl had taken, her thoughts were rudely interrupted.

Looking down, she was met with a strange sight indeed. At her feet in the spring-green meadow grass lay a fleece, rent and be-splotched with great gouts of blood. Among the young blades of recently nibbled grass there showed rough patches of blood-soaked mud.

Mereth carefully inserted the ground tip of her staff under the edge of the hide and flipped back a part of it to examine the flesh side. With so much blood about, this must be a fresh kill, but how could this be with no sign of paw-, claw- or footprint? Furthermore, there was not one scrap of flesh adhering to the underside of the sheepskin. No animal could kill and clean its prey and leave the hide thus. And where were the bones? There was no sign of any remains, nothing but blood and hide!

There were feral hunters in plenty in these mountains, borse-bear, val-lops, snow cats. But sites of their feasting bore no resemblance to this. The very look and feel here shouted danger in the Lornt woman's mind.

Wessel, he might know. Lornt and its grounds had been his charge for years. He was truly both Lord Duratan's right and left hand and the first to be queried about land or towers. She had seen him an hour earlier supervising the finishing of the crenellations of a new tower in the outer wall.

But, the herder, Mereth turned slowly to scan the reaches of the meadow. Of course there was no sight of the girl. She might have traced the child by the sound of her running, but the sight of the strange kill had lost her that advantage and she probably could not have kept pace long enough to catch her. Many heavy boulders thrust up along the fringes of the pasturage like ill-socketed teeth. Any one of them offered an ample hiding place.

Perhaps later she might borrow one of the tough little ponies and ride down to the village to inquire about the girl, though the prospect of success was dim. There was no great friendship between the village and Lornt, for many of those living there now were Karsten survivors of the Mountain Dance and deeply bitter against those with Talents.

No, to learn what she could from Wessel was her best move at present. Again planting her sturdy staff with care, Mereth turned to retrace her steps.

She found Wessel leaning on an overturned cart, happily engulfing, with obvious hunger, a huge round of herb bread wrapped about a fat chunk of cheese. The filling looked about to escape his hold, but he adroitly stuffed the last of it into his generous mouth. Mereth hesitated; to call a man from his midday meats simply to observe a puzzle lying down-mountain was hardly fair. But, time was crucial. The evidence must be seen immediately or be of no value.

The bailiff swallowed again as she came up.

"Trouble, M'Lady?"

Mereth steadied her slate and carefully printed, the easier for him to read.

"Down slope, look, something curious to see,"

He rolled what remained of his meal into a square of coarse linen and tucked it into the front of his jerkin. Then he hesitated for a moment and looked closely at her.

Instinctively catching his unspoken question, she shook her head and he forbore to pick up the only possible weapon at hand, a mattock that leaned against the wall behind him.

This time she took more careful account of her footing. At the nooning it was warmer now and her hearing, always acute, caught the drone of buzzing insects. As they approached the site of the kill, it seemed that the stench had intensified; however, the near-palpable evil she had sensed clouding the spot was now dissipated. Wessel practically vaulted the last few paces down to stand beside the blood-clotted fleece and after a moment squatted, his hand over his nose.

" 'Pears something took one o' Fuser's ewes," he had half advanced a hand near but not quite touching the befouled wool.

Again Mereth's writing tool was busy. "Mot-wolf, bear, Snow cat?"

He shook his head in response to her list. "Not as any mountain hunter was this done, M'Lady. Where be the paw prints, bones and the like? Best we put Lord Duratan on this, he was ranger trained. Now," Wessel rose to his feet, "I'll just go and tell him."

Mereth withdrew. The cloud of blue flies and the pervasive stench were more than she could bear any longer. Even when she reached Lormt again, she avoided visiting the buttery for a while. Instead she went to the tiny chamber that opened off her well-appointed living space and sat down at her desk, which was thickly spread with documents and a couple of wood-covered books so heavily fashioned to protect the ancient parchment pages.

There was the Larweeth case, this was her duty at Lormt; she must keep to it. The great war behind them, the massacres of the old race in Karsten, the Moving of the Mountains had stirred up her entire world as one stirs the stiff batter for a feast cake. Families and clans had been brutally rent apart.

Now Lormt was devoted to gathering and cataloging of news of such losses, ready to offer aid to any who came seeking news of kin. Sometimes one had to sift through very old records for needed clues. Accustomed to keeping accounts of business on land and sea for her trading family, Mereth had found this a suitable occupation in her old age, one she could ply with skill.

Only, she closed her eyes for a moment and saw only bloody wool. Clapping her hand to her lips, she swallowed firmly and reached for a book of armorial bearings. This she opened with determination and forced herself to locate a particular mark.

At last able for a time to push the disturbing scene out of her mind and settle down to pursue her research, Mereth became shortly so engrossed that it almost startled her when a messenger from Lord Duratan arrived to ask, if it were no trouble, could she attend upon him?

It was near twilight when Mereth trudged through the halls, aided by her staff in making cautious descent into the bowels of Lormt. There she knocked on the door of Lord Duratan's quarters from whence he ordered the affairs governing the safety of the ancient seat of knowledge. Once of the Borderers, he kept his chamber well lighted and when the woman knocked and entered at his invitation, she immediately caught a sound that betrayed his mood, a random clicking.

He had swept a space clear of paper, pens and folios on the ancient wood surface of the table before him. Above this his hands rose and fell as his fingers gathered a partial palmful of colored crystals, only to toss them in a scattered pattern, which he studied after each throw. So, he gauged this matter serious indeed! Mereth stared down in turn at the results of his last pitch, one shaped by chance and his particular Talent. The crystals lay about the cleared place in a discernable array.

Most of the darker colors had fallen well away from the central core, where appeared different shades of green from that of new spring grass to the darkest bramble leaf hue. However, these were lightened by a sprinkling of pale yellow, lying randomly. After one

long stare, the Marshal of Lornt raised his head to look directly at Mereth and begin to recite as if reading from some report drawn from Wessel's account book, ending:

"Lady Mereth, in the days before the Warding the ships of your house sailed far. Have you ever heard report of such a foulness as you discovered today?"

The woman's slate and stylus were at the ready. "No." A terse enough answer, but none further was needed.

"There are beasts enough in these heights to be feared." He was sweeping up the crystals to pour them back into a double bag of lizard skin. "At this season of the year such are well hungered from the sparseness of winter game. Yet none known to be at large hereabouts gorges to the point of leaving naught but an empty hide. Wessel is now asking questions."

Duratan's next word was drowned by a sound, which instantly brought them both to their feet and swinging toward one of the narrow windows in the guardian's chamber. The man reached it in two strides, but Mereth was not about to be left behind and crowded against him to see.

The last vestiges of twilight dimmed the slope that walled the valley. Some distance below small blazes bobbed up and down, torches, by the look of it, Mereth opined. These seemed not to be approaching Lornt, rather milling around at a remove.

Duratan pushed the woman aside as he strode across the room, pausing only to snatch a cloak draped over a chair back. Uncaring that she was many passages away from her own covering, Mereth followed him through the door, though he was running now. Even with the aid of her staff, she could not keep pace and by the time she reached the center court, a small company of armed guards was assembling, while two at the gate were grunting as they opened the massive portal with straining muscles. They carefully limited the space to just enough to let a single armsman pass.

Though the torches were not visible from this level, a shout came from a wall sentry two levels above.

"Still there!"

"M'Lady, this be a cold night! Here, get you into this." Mistress Bethelie, housekeeper for Lornt, had whipped off her own cloak to wrap it around Mereth's shoulders. Mage Lights swayed above them, brighter than any torch. Clearly Lady Nalor's powers were at work.

Mereth gave hasty thanks, for Duratan had, by then, slipped through the narrow opening of the gate and the porter was preparing to shut it when she squeezed by. He made as if to stop her but she paid no heed. Only, as the darkness closed around her outside, did she pause. The mage globes did not extend to this place. A misstep would surely mean a painful fall. Ahead came the sounds of the armsmen and she bit her lip in irritation. She had no choice but to stumble along at a crawling pace, exerting her waning strength to dig in her staff for support at each step.

Cries rose from the huddle of torch bearers and a shrill scream, suddenly cut off, as if by a blow. When Mereth finally reached the point of action, the flickering torchlight, though poor, was enough to reveal much of the struggle that surrounded her.

No armsman had drawn steel, but all were fighting with short, thick wooden staffs, not unlike her own longer one. Their opponents were men from the village who shouted raucously as they fought.

Mereth could make out raw oaths mingled with cries of "Ye Dark Ones! Beggone! Leave us be!" Historically the researchers of ancient lore in Lornt had little contact with the villagers, save for the troublous times when they had opened the great depository of knowledge to shelter those fleeing for their lives. The landsmen and their families had been grateful enough then, but after the vast disaster of the Turning, distrust had arisen and communication was limited to dealing for supplies. However, she had never heard of such trouble as she now witnessed.

Mereth had scarce time to ponder the matter, for as she pivoted about her staff, she barely escaped a killing blow aimed at her head. As it was, it landed crookedly and painfully against her shoulder.

Rober! Why, only that morning the carter's son had greeted her civilly with proper respect, but now his reddened face was drawn into a twisted mask like a blood-mad raider. Mereth shuddered. It was as if the old days had come again. Instinctively she retaliated, swinging her stout staff with practiced force and caught the youth at knee level. He screeched and went down.

Holding his knee, he rolled over. He had not landed on bare ground but on another body. Naked flesh revealed by torchlight writhed frantically. The shepherdess, so small and withered-seeming without her rags, had been roped into a bundle. Raw weals across her arms gave evidence of earlier abuse.

Mereth moved to stand over her, ready to defend the pitiful girl and herself, but Rober had dragged himself away, still clutching his knee and howling continuously. The core of conflict had moved away from them and shadows enclosed the two females as torches were either snuffed or carried distant.

However there was just enough light for a few moments for Mereth to spy a refuge of sorts, another of the upstanding rocks. She could not carry the girl but she might perhaps roll her. She leaned over and grasped the girl's hair, greasy and dust clotted. She could tell by a brief gleam that the shepherdess's eyes were upon her. The older woman made a hand motion to indicate rolling and pointed toward the stone, hoping the girl would understand.

There was no answer, but push Mereth did with what strength she had left and the small body did seem to undulate into a roll until together they came up against the harsh surface of the boulder. The woman dropped to the ground, near exhausted, with the helpless girl lying against her. Mereth was shivering, no, rather what she felt was wrenching shudders that shook the girl's so-thin body.

Mereth had no blade with her to cut the small captive's bindings, but loosing the throatlatch of Bethelie's cloak, the woman drew the trembling girl into her arms and did what she could to pull the sturdy length of tightly woven wool about them both.

As she attempted to draw the girl higher in her grasp, the edge of her cloak tangled about one of the thin arms so strictly bound. The villager lurched forward as best she could but was unable to free herself. Twisting in Mereth's tightened hold, she screamed again and managed to near face her captor squarely.

"Evil, Make kill, quick!"

Mereth was in no position to write either question or answer. But at that moment one of the torch bearers, a supporter on either side, retreated near enough that the woman saw, Across the shepherdess's tightly bound arm, stretching as a ghastly fringe along the shoulder was rough, raw flesh, lacking any skin. Immediately Mereth swung the girl from close contact, the better to see the bony back riddled with more vicious patches of exposed flesh, in which was seen embedded bits of torn leaf or dark broken stem.

There was evidence of, not a heavy flogging, but something far more frightening. Mereth shuddered. She must get the victim to Lornt, where Nalor could employ her healer's skill to ease the child's torment.

The girl writhed, trying to pull herself away from Mereth, though even the slightest movement brought harsh cries of pain from her. While the woman's attempts to hold her closer to prevent further self-inflicted torture only made her screech louder. Without the ability to communicate, Mereth was near as helpless as the bound one. No! No! NO! Her mind battled against the gag nature had laid upon her as she had once before in her life when her younger sister had been cut down before her eyes by an Alisonian during the Kolder War.

"M'Lady!"

The light was stronger. Wessel stood nursing his left arm against his chest as Master Forbie, with whom she had exchanged greetings that morning, lowered closer a torch.

"What have we here?" Duratan joined them. "Lady Mereth, how came you here?"

She looked down at the trembling girl who seemed to have suddenly shrunk to little more than a tiny armful of abraded flesh. As Mereth leaned back against the rock, the torchlight pitilessly revealed more of the blood-oozing body. Wessel uttered a blistering oath while the commander of Lornt's garrison turned to shout, "AID!" over the field where the battling guards and villagers could no longer be seen.

Back at last at Lornt, a gesture from Nalor, two of the elderly scholars had pushed a table closer to the high blazing fire of the chamber where dried herbs swung on cords anchored well above. Mereth crouched on a stool within close reach of the flames' warmth, nursing a mug of cordial hot enough to be a blessing to her frosted hands.

She watched Nalor whisk a length of bed sheet across the table and Duratan, aided by a guard, stretch the village girl thereupon, face down, the herb mistress at the last moment turning the youngling's head gently to one side. A low swung lamp chained to a beam above the table revealed the child's abused flesh.

To Mereth's astonishment, the ghastly skinless wounds now in full view did not continue clear across the back as would signs of a severe lashing. Instead they could be seen on left shoulder, left arm and left hip; the rest of the skin was bruised but untoned.

Mistress Bethelie, bringing with her a small steaming kettle, folded cloths in a pack under one arm, appeared beside Lady Nalor as the men left.

Her face was contorted, flushed with anger. "What manner of brutes are these village louts?" she demanded.

Lady Nalor made no answer, but she had opened one of her medicine pouches to take out slender tweezers. Mereth guessed her intention, pulled herself up, setting aside her drink, and twitched one of the cloths from the housekeeper's grasp.

Stretching this flat on her palms, Mereth pushed Bethelie aside to stand at the Herb Mistress's side as, with obvious care, yet swiftly, Nalor began to free the wounds of the bits of stem, matted leaves and portions of blossoms, which clung so tightly to the raw flesh that they seemed to be embedded.

Once she had cleared these all away, she nodded to Mereth, who had immediately clapped one side of the waiting cloth over the other, that nothing escape.

"Feel it?" Nalor asked.

Mereth nodded, the cloth pressed tightly between her hands. Feel it, she did. Perhaps not as strongly as did Nalor, who was of the Old Race and had some of the Talent: rage, blistering, concentrated rage, such an emotion as might drive a man into battle with no thought of himself, simply to slay and slay until he, in turn, would be slain.

And, though there was no possible physical cause, the emotion was rooted in the folded cloth she held.

She must continue to hold; she could not reach for her slate to write any of the questions churning in her mind. Thus Mereth stood and watched Nalor go about her healing work, while keeping half her attention on the wadded cloth into which her nails burrowed.

At length Mistress Bethelie supervised two of her own staff as they carried away the girl, heavily swathed in bandages. But there was no time, even then, for questions and answers, not when one of them could not speak them freely. Either Mereth had become accustomed to the burning of the strange rage, or else much of that had subsided. She still clasped the cloth tightly, however as cudgel-battered men began to be either carried in or aided by comrades. There came both defenders of Lornt and villagers, bloody, bruised and somehow scarcely aware of their surroundings.

Lady Nalor paused to snatch up a glass bowl and curl a summoning finger at Mereth. "In." She had opened a hinged lid. Mereth pushed in the crumpled fabric and the Herb Mistress snapped the lid back down instantly and made it secure.

The housekeeper appeared, holding Mereth's staff and drew the cramped and wrinkled hand of the older woman into the crook of her sturdy elbow. "Come, M'Lady, 'tis near sunup. We do not wish any fever, now do we? Bed for you now,"

Nalor had not only relieved her of that burden that had hammered against her strength, but it seemed that she had drawn on Mereth's energy, draining her as well. She allowed herself to be half guided, half carried to her own chamber and the soft comfort of her waiting bed.

It was light again, the clear gloss of very early sunlight touched the undrawn curtain of the bed as she roused. Mereth sat up among the pillows and drew her hand across her forehead, a gesture which brought no relief to her aching head. She looked around twice to reassure herself that no evil shadow had followed her out of the dreams that had imprisoned and tormented her.

Slowly she washed in the tepid water she found in her bowl. Its warmth suggested that someone had looked in at her not long before. Shivering, she drew a heavy gown of quiet violet from her chest and a gray shawl formed into lace by knitting. Mereth continued to battle the pain, which had established itself behind her eyes and, leaning on her staff much more heavily than usual, she sought out company.

This she found in one of the common rooms. The chamber was more crowded than she had ever seen it, and voices rose more loudly than usual. As Mereth entered, partly unnoticed, she was near deafened by fragments of news that were being passed around the room.

Lord Duratan had sent for the nearest Wise Woman, no, he had ridden off to seek her, he was going to appeal to Lord Koris who ruled in Es these days, the villagers had been dabbling in ancient and forbidden things, they had actually brought a girl child as a sacrifice to some devilish thing, and on it went!

Mereth lingered near the door, wanting to escape the din. If she could only cover her ears, but she dared not lose the support of her staff and perhaps end up on the floor for her trouble.

"Lady Mereth!"

Mage Faggold, one of the oldest scholars, suddenly appeared beside her. Though he had counted a vast tally of years, he had not retired as far from the world of the present time, as most of his age group, and he was credited with being perhaps the finest historian of those now at Lormt.

He raised his voice more strongly to overcome the din. "This is indeed fortunate, finding you so. We are about to sit in council." He offered her his arm with the grace of a courtier.

Thus those, who might this day be considered the new defenders of their world, gathered. Lord Duratan was not present. In his place sat Nalor, his lady, and lying before her on the table, around which their chairs had been gathered, was the cloth Mereth knew well. There sat Wessel and another former Borderer, three of the sages, and Faggold.

When Mereth was comfortably seated, her slate to hand, Lady Nalor, using the point of a pen as an indicator, raised the edge of the cloth and flipped it out flat. Next she pointed to indicate brown splotches, sticking to its length, which was now far from white.

"You have seen what lies here as it appears beneath the enlarging glass. You have felt," she paused, looking from one face to another.

From the moment her eyes had touched that cloth, Mereth's head moved from side to side. She strove to repel what had followed her out of her feverish dreams. Without her conscious mind's order, she was writing on her slate.

"It lives, it eats, eats the living,"

The horror of that thought shook her write-stick from her hand. Faggold caught it before it fell to the floor. Lady Nalor nodded.

"Yes." Tapping her pen on the table, as if to center their attention to her, with its tip the healer separated one of the dark twigs. "This is not a thing of the sun or of the Light. It lives beneath. Though it seems a plant, yet it is not as we know plants, for its food is flesh and blood." She gazed from one to another of the council members.

Mereth picked up her writing stick from beside her slate where Faggold had placed it. She had regained her control and shaped her words firmly.

"Is this one of the ancient evils awakened again? Or, is there a gate undiscovered, unsealed? Do we dig to tear it up by the roots?" She lingered a moment, supplied a final sentence, her memory awake. Of course there in the past the crew had been fighting a lesser peril on the strange island to the far south, however their improvised weapon had worked very well. "There is fire to cleanse, weed killing potions to poison," she listed on her slate.

Faggold and Lady Nalor had both been following her writing closely.

"Acid of Safall," Nalor nodded vigorously.

"Hot coals held tongs of bale iron," the Mage added his suggestion as quickly. "We must make the villagers aid,"

Mereth leaned back a little. Those in the council were all talking at once again. She felt as if a cloud hung above her head. This was all too simple somehow.

She picked up the slate and stick to stow them into the bag fastened to her girdle. Those about her were planning now; sometimes they seemed of two minds as to what

method to use, but all were united on the fact that the task must be done with all possible haste, before the monstrous ground-creeping scourge could spread farther.

Mereth chewed her lower lip. There was more, of that she was sure. Was a villager, one with some Dark learning, backing this?

With the aid of her staff she got to her feet. Lady Nalor looked up and Mereth made a small gesture with her right hand. Over the years she had been at Lormt she had developed hand signals, easily understood by her daily companions. Now she also gave a slight nod.

However, Mereth did not return to her chamber when she left the council, rather she went but a short distance down the hall, into a small side room. A kitchen maid sat nodding in a chair beside an occupied bed. She quickly slipped out of the chair, rubbing her eyes and yawning. Mereth smiled and gestured to the door. The maid disappeared gratefully, leaving the chair for the old woman.

Mereth settled there gingerly, her attention all for the occupant of the bed. She was entirely alert now, as more and more her suspicions grew firm. The village girl lay with her well-padded back up-turned, the bandages giving forth an herbal scent. However, her head was turned toward the elderly woman and now her eyes opened abruptly.

Speech being denied her, and perhaps even all communication, if the girl could not read, how could she?

Mereth's head jerked. It was as if she had heard, sly laughter.

"What would you have of me, old woman?"

This creature could surely not be one with the Power Women,

"Right," the word struck into Mereth's aching head like the point of a spear. "Power sweeps in both ways. All things balance. What would you have of me, I ask it again. And I am not patient, Think what you would ask, scraping around on a slate wastes time. If we deal together, something must be done about that."

Mereth clasped her hands tightly together. She had walked daily with fear in the war days, but this was something else, she might be chained in some cell while a flood of filth rose about her. Only she must force herself to discover what monster had been brought into Lormt.

"Who are you?" She shaped the thought with difficulty, painfully.

"I am Vorsla, Starqua, Deden, Karn," Smooth flow of thought paused. Mereth's eyes were on her own tightly clasped hands. She refused to meet those other gray ones.

The voice spoke again in her mind. "Ufora."

Involuntarily a short guttural sound escaped Mereth's throat.

"Yes, oh, yes! When you were little did your dam never strive to threaten you with that name? Ufora of the darkest woods, she could make you one with a tree chosen by a logger, or with a jumper already entangled with the Skinner, the Eater?"

Mereth forced herself upright in the chair. Could this creature read more thought than that intended for communication? Quickly she readied another question.

"What do I do here?" The woods demon continued, "Well, I emerged from the Long Sleep as you see me, a small one easily abused by others, a throw-away of the war. It has taken me too long to become truly myself." The girl touched the crushed linen covering her breast. "Only now after the letting of blood do I fully remember. These dolts of upper dwellers believe they won the ancient war at last by closing the Gates to the worlds of another level. We remain, we, who were sleeping away the flooding of endless years. So, again we were free to fold time. There have been openings left for those unguessed, in which to build their nests anew. So will Ufora do!"

The slight body on the bed moved, pulled up to its knees and slewed around. It plucked at the thick, odorous bandages until it was free. Smooth skin, shown much more darkly against the bedclothes, covered a body in which bones were no longer visible.

Mereth fought desperately against the pain in her head, throbbing as if words were beating a drum within her skull.

The seeming girl snatched up the uppermost sheet and was winding it about herself. She tied two ends together and knotted them, patting the knot when finished.

"Now," She had spoken only the one word aloud. Standing with her head tilted a little to one side, as if listening, she remained quiet for a moment or two. Then her face twisted into a mask of rage. "So," she spoke at last. "They would," She started toward the door but her bulky covering slowed her. Mereth made a determined effort. Her staff, wielded as a spear, thudded home on the other's ribs. The girl screamed, caught at the bed for support, then collapsed to the floor. At once the door flew open with such force it crashed against the wall. Mistress Bethelie gave one glance at Mereth and then centered her attention on the girl, who was snarling at the old woman and visibly working her fingers in a pattern between them.

Bethelie caught at the heavy bunch of keys swinging from her own girdle, snapped it loose and crashed the jangling ball against the girl's hands with good aim. Mereth sat back weakly in her chair. She was finding it very difficult to breathe and her head pain seemed to draw a veil, clouding her vision; however, she could still hear Mistress Bethelie's precise voice:

"Iron, cold iron, to you, evil slut, iron!"

The ringing words followed Mereth into darkness.

Never, since her venture with the Magestone, had Mereth felt herself so removed from real and daily life. There was no sense of transition from the small room, of rising from the chair and making her way through the halls and the great courtyard into the open. A

will, which she did not claim as her own, possessed her. Nor did she see anyone on that misty journey. In the huge edifice of Lormt, she might have been totally alone.

Then, with no warning, the walls and restored towers vanished. Mereth was no longer alone, though those about her had a tenuous look. Before her now stretched the sharply sloping, rock-studded land where the skirmish with the villagers had been fought. The sod had been torn away and, not too far away, more of it was yielding to rakes not meant for a farm laborer's cultivation. They were larger than customary and the prongs wider, scratching up clods of earth with vicious points more like weapons than farming implements.

It was near to this activity that the major part of a large assembly was to be found. Mereth blinked once and again, trying to rid her eyes of the cloying mist. Lord Duratan stood there with Wessel and two other one-time Borderers whom she knew to be expert archers. A step or so beyond stood Lady Nalor holding a drawn sword whose weight was obviously burdening her.

And,

That force, which had brought Mereth here, thrust her forward at a quicker pace. Fear like one of the sudden mountain ice showers, struck her full faced. A bundle, resting on the ground between Nalor and the yet undisturbed turf, stirred. She who claimed to be Ufora got to her feet. Her face was like a mask carved from greenish ice of the higher mountain slopes. She tried hard to raise her arms, but her wrists were drawn tightly together. Though there was no strong light, the day being gray, yet flashes glittered. The captive was in irons,

Iron, cold iron,

Nalor was chanting. Now and again Duratan tossed at Ufora a fistful of crushed herbs. Once, twice Ufora tried again to raise her hands. The lips of her masklike face twisted. She might have been seeking to utter words of some dark ritual of her own.

Then, the seeming girl lifted her head a fraction and the dark eyes in her oddly green face fastened on Mereth, meeting those of the elder woman,

Ufora was instantly before her, fettered arms inching out to her. She could see them, impossibly reflected in the creature's eyes. If one pressed there, and there, the bonds would loosen. Mereth knew what the other strained to force her to do.

Three times her own hands came up and out toward the iron-encircled wrists. Three times her own will prevailed and they fell again, but she grew weaker, her head filled with such pain as she was sure would overcome her.

There was no hesitation in Nalor's chant. Her words held no meaning for Mereth. Only there were others!

"Anchor's up, ye sons of Gry,

To the sails, let us fly!"

A man's voice, deep from the throat, armed with courage, about to sail on a final voyage.

Deep in her resonated the words she could not voice,

"Wind and sail

Cannot fail

Men with the Light.

Not even,"

The song she could not voice aloud was fading within her. Rolf, he, . She shut away that memory fiercely. But, but, he had freed her! The staff, her ever-ready companion, lifted. She could no longer sense those dark eyes holding her in thrall. They were light, oddly flat.

Nalor's words were lifting upward in a single, final trumpet-voiced phrase.

The strange girl retreated, still facing Mereth and Nalor. Her foot caught as a noose of roots suddenly snaked out. She screamed, stooping to batter thin green stems ending in yellow flowers with petals that had the shape of sword blades.

Before the watchers could move the land did so. A great crevice gaped and from it arose a thin netting of fine roots to close ominously about the girl. Again the ground shook, preparing to close its doom-crack. Nalor moved; into that heaving growth she tossed a ball, only to snatch a second one, then a third, which Duratan held out to her. Close, the earth did at last! Mereth shuddered as shrill screams slowly faded away, death cries of that which should never have lived.

Thus passed the Latter Battle of Lornt, fought and won, and though the sages housed there sought often to find record of its like in the chronicles they prized, they did so in vain. However, Mereth related the tale to Maid Mouse of the Learned Ones and what she heard in reply, she never told, save that talk by thought became a gift to which she fiercely clung, so dearly was it won.