

HEROES

by

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In the time after the witches of Estcarp spent their Power to make a final ending of the war with Karsten, all things seemed to lie in chaos, both the land and the lives of men. From my birth the knowledge of these things was with me, for my mother was a woman of Karsten who had won over the mountains after the horning of the Old Race there, and my father was one of the Border riders of Estcarp who helped her to safety. They had two children who died before me; my mother gave me the name of the first of them—Aelvan—and if she guarded me more than was proper for a future warrior, I suppose she had reason, having lost so much before. But in truth, she did me no service thereby, for I came to manhood without ever being tested, and that was nearly my undoing.

For me the wars of Estcarp were only a nurse's tale, for I was still a babe at the breast when the Calling that Kyllan had laid upon the House of Dhulmat spread among the uprooted folk in the outlands of Estcarp, and my parents, like so many others, fought their way over the Forbidden Mountains into Escore. And though our lives thereafter hung by a thread as all those kindreds who held to the Light strove against the hosting of awakened evil, I understood only the glory of their battles, not the dread, for I

grew into my strength in the safety of the valley stronghold that the People of the Green Silences had made.

And when at last I came to an age to bear sword and shield, the land lay quiet around us. It was a time for farmers, not fighters. My father had taken land and cared only for building up House Medwy once more. I had grown tall and strong, as children did in the valley. But the power in my body gave me no satisfaction, for my hands grew callused from the handle of the plow while my new blade hung unblooded on the wall, and the only battles I fought were in my dreams.

I was seventeen, just mastering my new strength and length of limb, when my father made a marriage feast for his sister's daughter in his new hall, and I first saw Medroc of Gallorn, sleek as a Krogan slipping out of a stream, and riding as proudly as if he and not his older brother had been the groom.

"Aelvan, this *is* good cider! Are you sure your father won't notice it's gone?" Auster wiped his mouth on the back of his hand and clapped me on the shoulder. We had been like brothers in our cub days in the valley, and though his family's holding was a day's ride from ours, we were still friends, though since I had grown so much bigger we didn't do much wrestling anymore. I carefully detached his arm from my sleeve, grinned back at him, and patted the cask.

"Not he!" I nodded toward the high table, where my father and some of the other lords were putting a higher polish on their stories of the Kolder wars. They had enough cider of their own to keep them busy anyway. "My mother might have," I went on, "but she was with the other women, fussing over the bride. I hid this cask away when we were bringing in stores."

Auster's brother grappled with him for the other drinking horn until I found a mug for him, and the two lads from

Lynxholme grinned broadly and passed their cups over so that I could fill them.

“At Gallorn we drank ale . . .” said Medroc.

I smiled tightly in return, remembering that I was host here, though I wondered if my restraint would survive hearing what they did at Gallorn one more time. Medroc had already given us to understand that it was only because there was no room for him at the warriors’ table that he honored us with his presence at all.

“Do you now?” asked Auster. “And do you get drunk on it every evening too?”

“Are you implying that I can’t hold my liquor?” Medroc’s pale skin flushed suddenly.

His mother had married her cousin, men said. In their son the delicate bone structure and pallor of the Old Race were intensified. I looked down at my own work-browned hands and wondered how much use the other boy would be in the fields. But the lord of Gallorn had brought a sizable following over the mountains; perhaps Medroc had never had to labor beneath a hot sun until the sweat dripped from him like rain; perhaps Medroc—

“Oh, does that shoe fit you?” Auster’s question sounded innocent, but Medroc’s face darkened further and I came abruptly back to full awareness. He was a guest, my guest, however unwelcome, and it was my duty to prevent a quarrel.

“Never mind that, Auster,” I said quickly. “Here’s the whole cask with which to prove our capacity, and if we finish it off, I’ve another one tucked away in the barn!”

I set the bronze-banded drinking horn to my lips and let the cool, tart-sweet liquid slide down my throat, swallowing steadily until the blood hammered in my ears. There was a moment when I feared my breath would run out before the contents of the horn, then I tasted emptiness, and set it down with a gasp.

Medroc’s eyes had rounded slightly, watching, but as I met his gaze they became opaque once more, and he held out his silver goblet to be refilled.

Singing, the women escorted the bride to the bedchamber,

and after a time the groom, flushed and eager, was led off after her, surrounded by his friends. I stayed at the table, grateful that the fires of the flesh awoke late in those of our blood. Although some of the men of Estcarp had made alliance with females of the other kindreds, there were still few enough human women in Escore that many men never married, and I had grown up knowing that this time might never come for me at all. Better, then, not to think about what was going on in the upper chamber, to refill my horn and let the cider haze my senses so that I would not feel.

The hall echoed with the ballad of a battle with the Thas in which Lord Kyllan had led the men of Estcarp to victory. I filled my horn again and drank, more slowly. By the time I had finished, they were singing about the defeat of the lord of the Dark Tower. At the high table, legend followed legend, but where I was sitting with the other young men, it was horn that followed horn, with only a few inconclusive trials at arm-wrestling to distract us from our drinking, until the torchlight blurred in a haze as golden as the cider I had consumed.

"They've done it all . . ." said Medroc suddenly.

"What?" I blinked, trying to focus on his narrow features.

"Our fathers—they've won all the battles and taken all the glory. There's no place left for heroes anymore!"

I stared, responding to the glory-hunger that was in him even as I resented him for awakening it in me.

"You don't want those times to come back again!" Auster shook his shaggy head back and forth. "The old times were terrible. Wolf-men, Sarn Riders, Thas, and ancient sorceries—my mother has told me—there was never a moment she was not afraid!"

Medroc snorted his contempt for women's fears, but Auster's brother nodded wisely.

"The Darkness is not all gone—there are still places where men do not go . . . Don't they have any such in your lands?"

Medroc frowned, and I guessed that if there were, he

had been kept from knowledge of them, and suspected that guardianship, and resented it. I smirked, realizing that there were mothers even more careful of their offspring than mine had been.

“What’re you grinning about?” snapped Medroc. “Are you trying to make game of me? The Alliance of the Light cleaned out the old evils when we were still nurslings.”

I shrugged, any sympathy I had felt for him dying still-born.

“He’s right, though,” I said quietly. “There’s a place of red stones up behind the south meadow where sheep and cattle used to disappear. We keep it fenced off now, and my father has forbidden anyone to go near.”

Medroc gave me an odd look, and then dropped his gaze to his goblet again.

“My cup is empty. Is there anything left in that cask of yours?”

I rapped the rough wood and listened, though it was a strain to distinguish the sound through the buzzing in my own head and the roar of celebration in the hall.

“Sounds hollow—” said Auster. His voice sounded hollow. I lifted the cask and shook it, hearing only the faintest of sloshing.

“S’all gone . . .” Auster’s brother observed mournfully, lifting his head from his folded arms. Then he subsided again, and after a moment began to snore.

“You said there was more in the barn?” Medroc looked back at me.

I blinked at him, unsure if the slurring I heard came from his speech or my hearing. I nodded slowly.

“Well, let’s go get it then! There’s no entertainment here—” He gestured scornfully toward the high table, where our fathers were talking softly over the guttering candles. His pale skin was flushed and his eyes glittered with mockery, as if he somehow *knew* just how rubbery my legs felt now.

I took a deep breath. The challenge had been clear, and if I admitted incapacity now, Medroc would win. And that was unthinkable! He was younger than me, and smaller,

and a conceited puppy too. Exasperation strengthened my legs so that I was able to stride out of the hall with scarcely a stagger. That was probably just as well—my father gave us a hard look as we pushed through the door, but I suppose he was tired too, by then, and he did not question us.

The moist kiss of the night air, heavy with the scents of new grass and night-blooming flowers, restored us to some semblance of sobriety. The wooded hills behind us were lost in shadow, and only the new moon shone clearly low in the west. Mist lay heavy on the valley, softening the harsh outlines of my father's log hall and the half-built stone walls of the hold he was building now. Someday, those walls would encircle the farm buildings as well, but for now the barn was far enough from the living quarters so that once we reached it we heard only the soft night sounds.

The cask was hidden in the tack room, in a corner piled with leather scraps and other unused gear. Auster held the lantern high as I pulled it free, but Medroc began to paw through the junk that had been piled around it. I was struggling to balance the cask on the grain bin when a sound from him turned me.

"Look! Battle gear!" he said reverently. He pulled a conical helmet free of the tangle and held it under the light. It was not much of a helm, being badly dented and filmed with rust, and the throat scarves of flexible mail dangled where the lacing that held them to the helm had rotted away, but my flesh tingled at the sight of it, and I knew unmistakably that what I felt, Medroc felt too.

"Not good for much now," I said roughly, to hide my emotion. "You were right, the glory is all gone!"

I finished wedging the cask in place and drove the spout in. Medroc gave me a long measuring look that I could not read, and held out his goblet to be filled.

I woke abruptly, head pounding, for a moment unsure where I was. Then I recognized the sour taste in my mouth, remembered the drinking competition, and looked swiftly around me, fearing to meet Medroc's mocking smile.

But I could not find him. The candle had guttered out, but the half light of dawn was filtering through the high windows. I recognized the huddled form next to me as Auster and saw his brother beside him, and the other two boys stretched out snoring near the door.

Medroc has gone out to relieve himself, I thought then, but already the pounding of my heart was telling me otherwise.

I took a deep breath and stood up. The world spun around me and I sucked in more cool air, willing it to still. The strengthening light showed me the arms chest half-emptied. But the rejected gear had not been thrown about. It was stacked carefully beside the chest, as if by someone who wished to make no sound.

Wincing, I took a swift step to the barn door, and saw a straight line of footprints going southward across the dewy grass. I must have made some sound then, for Auster sat up behind me, muttering.

"What's wrong?" he managed the words at last.

"Medroc's gone—" I answered softly, still staring across the pasture.

"Did he outlast you? Did he go back to the hall?"

"I wish that was all— I wish he had . . ."

Already I was turning. The shortsword I had worn for show at the wedding was still at my side. There was a hauberk of hardened leather in the arms chest, and another rusted cap that had lost its camail. I disliked taking Medroc's rejects, but they would have to do, for I suspected that I did not have much time. Ignoring the ache at the base of my skull, I slung my cloak over my shoulders and jammed on the helm, gathered up the hauberk, and grabbed a long haypole of stout, springy rowan-wood, and the coil of rope that was hanging by the door. Then I started across the meadow, following Medroc's trail.

Auster came after me, protesting.

"No, I'm not crazy," I answered without turning around.

"Can't you see where these tracks are leading? You may be

too hung over to remember what we talked about last night, but I do . . .”

For a few moments there was silence. To our left, the newborn sun was gilding the edges of the trees. A bird began to warm up for its morning song. Today, that sweetness seemed a mockery. I moved faster, afraid that as the sun grew stronger Medroc's tracks would mist away.

“The south pasture?” Auster asked finally, panting to keep up with me. “The place of red stones?”

I nodded, and paused as I reached the rim of a large circular depression, as if the land had sunk beneath the weight of what it bore. The bottom should have been moist and richly green, but the space on the other side of the fence my father had built there was barren—first a strip of gritty bare soil, and then, on higher ground, a tumble of giant stones. Medroc's trail led straight down the slope to the barrier. The rocks beyond it seemed innocent and empty in the pale sunlight. Medroc was gone.

My belly twisted with the knowledge of a dread confirmed, and I damned Medroc for a conceited fool. My anger was not lessened by the knowledge that I too had dreamed of penetrating this mystery, and had not dared. For a moment I hesitated, looking back at the familiar gray bulk of my father's half-built hold. Then, cursing, I started down.

“Where are you going?” cried Auster, behind me. “Aelvan, what are you going to do?”

“Go after him . . .” I growled without turning. At the fence I struggled to lace the tattered hauberk on. The rope I wound around my waist. Then I fastened the cloak once more and picked up the haypole.

“Aelvan, you can't—” Auster grasped my arm. “What use will it be for both of you to die?”

“What does it matter? When my father finds out about this, he will kill me anyway! Medroc was my guest; I have to go after him . . .”

I shrugged off Auster's hand. He grabbed for me again, and I turned, shoving him suddenly so that he fell back-

ward on the grass. In my clumsy gear, the fence was an awkward climb. But if Medroc had gotten over it, so could I.

The last thing I heard as I started across the bare ground was an anguished calling—

“Aelvan, Aelvan, don’t go!”

My first awareness was of cold. As I reached the rocks, an icy blast held me stunned and gasping. I caught my breath, but now my sight was distorting. The red rocks shimmered and flowed dizzily around me; stomach churning, I swayed.

You idiot, get the rest of the way through the barrier! I could not tell if the thought came from without or within, but in that moment I knew that I could choose to go onward or turn back to the safety of my own familiar world again. Behind me was Auster, who would welcome me with stammerings of relief, and my father, whose greeting would be otherwise; before me lay unknown dangers . . . and Medroc—for an instant I saw his mocking smile.

Noise pulsed in deafening vibration through my skull. I shut my eyes against the confusion of sound and vision and thrust myself forward, lost balance and crashed full-length on the hard ground.

No—not ground, a floor . . . As my senses steadied, I realized that the surface beneath me was a pavement of dressed stone. I sat up, ears still ringing, and blinked until the last blurring in my vision disappeared. Red rock still rose around me, but now I saw pillars branching into a high ceiling. Other archways opened onto empty passageways. Round windows set high let in a dim illumination. Only in the wall behind me was there a blur through which, dimly as if glimpsed through fog, the silhouette of my father’s hold could still be seen.

A little shaky still, I stood up, and nearly fell again as my foot struck against something that clattered across the floor. A bone . . . I looked around and saw a confused jumble of bones, with the empty horned skull to one side,

and knew where at least one of our missing cattle had gone. But the way the skeleton had been scattered showed that the beast had not died naturally. Some of the long leg bones were missing, and the piece that I had stumbled over was cracked and scored by powerful jaws.

I shivered, wondering what sort of beast could crunch beef bones as I took apart a fowl. There was nothing here now. I had heard of Gates that opened on a multitude of worlds. Had Medroc even come this way at all?

Then, near the entrance to one of the passageways, I saw an arrow scratched whitely into the stone. Fresh scratches . . . I swore in mingled relief and anger. Medroc had made those marks; the bastard had known that I would follow him!

Still muttering, I picked up my staff and strode toward the passageway.

The air in the passage was chill, but dry, and a thin layer of dust gritted beneath my feet. The carving of the stonework had an archaic quality, but the woodwork that remained here was only partially decayed. Except for the bones in the chamber where I had entered, there was no sign that anything living had come here for some time. But perhaps I would find Medroc before I met whatever had scattered them, and bring him back to the portal, and home.

Certainly nothing moved in the corridors through which I hurried. If it had not been for the fragment of rusted mail I found, I would have doubted that anyone had come here since its builders abandoned it. But I recognized that bit of armor and grinned, realizing that perhaps I had got a better bargain out of that arms chest than Medroc after all. The leather hauberk I was wearing was stiff and already rubbing me uncomfortably, but at least it was still whole.

“Well, well—look who’s here!”

The haypole slipped from my fingers and clattered loudly on stone, covering my involuntary exclamation. I grabbed for it and whirled, then straightened as my eyes focused on the figure beyond the little fire and I recognized Medroc’s

mocking grin. He had made a temporary camp where the passageway ended in a small room that had once been furnished with chests and benches. Their remains were now providing Medroc with the heat to cook a gruel of grain from our stables in a pot made from an old helm. In the opposite wall I saw the shadowed entrance to another corridor. A draft of cold air from that direction made the fire flicker wildly, and I heard the trickle of falling water from somewhere nearby.

"Such devotion—" he went on. "I thought you would at least wait until morning to follow me!"

"I did—" I said harshly, "the sun was just rising when I came through the Gateway."

"You must have come quickly, then . . ." He gestured toward the oblong of brightening light framed by the upper window. "Because the sun is just rising here."

There was no emotion in his voice. I licked dry lips and looked at him. It did not seem so long since I had left the world we knew, but how could I judge the passage of time in those featureless passageways?

"Three hours or one, what does it matter?" I answered as evenly as I could. "You've proved your courage, if that's what you wanted to do. Now it's time to go home."

"Courage?" Medroc asked with the same tight smile. "Speak for yourself, my friend. I've found nothing to frighten me here."

I could feel my face burn at his words, perhaps just because it *had* taken courage to follow him, or maybe a misplaced sense of responsibility—we were not drunk anymore! I took a step forward.

"Then you can start being frightened of me. We're going back, now!"

Medroc got to his feet. "Are you going to make me?" The glow in his eyes owed nothing to the fire.

Abruptly all my frustration, my envy, and, yes, my unacknowledged fears focused on that blandly mocking face. I dropped my gear and leaped at him. Fingers scraped painfully across mail to find the smooth flesh of his throat; I felt

Medroc's leg hook my knee, but I was still trying to throttle him as we fell. There was a confusion of painful impacts and a shower of sparks as we rolled into the fire, then away again, still grappling. A blow to the side of my head made my ears ring; I felt him jerk as my knee went into his stomach. His struggles had a serpentine agility that tested my own muscles, hardened by steady labor in the fields. Exulting, I pitted my whole strength against his, finding in the explosion of energy a release sweeter than victory.

We were both breathing in hoarse gasps; it was only when he went suddenly rigid beneath my hands that I understood that the other voice I was hearing had come neither from Medroc's throat nor my own. In the second it took for me to realize that, the laughter came again. Medroc and I rolled apart, blinking in the light of the scattered coals.

A woman was standing in the other doorway. For a moment I was aware of no more than a slender, swaying form, the flash of bright eyes and the glimmer of white flesh through the shadowy draperies that swirled around her. She laughed again, and we both came upright, staring.

"Men!" Her voice was soft, with a curious husky quality that set the blood pounding once more. "Or boys, anyway. It is long since I have seen such here!"

"We're men . . ." Medroc growled. For a moment his glance touched me, then he was watching the woman once more.

I shrugged, not caring what she called me, as long as she kept looking at me. I got to my feet, uncomfortably aware that merely brushing off the dust and ashes would do little for my appearance, but hoping that my height, at least, would impress her. When I had seen my cousin adorned for her wedding, I had thought her fair; dimly I remembered the loveliness of the Lady of the Green Silences and other great ones I had seen; but the beauty of the female before me was like the night studded with stars, beside whom all those other beauties seemed common as the day.

What compelled me, I think, was her mystery. Her limbs were perfect, but whenever I tried to understand their per-

fection, shadow would veil them again. The shining of her eyes prevented me from meeting them for long, and just when I thought I understood the imperial curve of her lips, some new emotion would alter them. That sense of motion animated even the nighted masses of her hair. She drifted forward, and for a moment I trembled beneath the touch of her hand.

“For men this seems a poor lodging,” the music of her voice transmuted once more into laughter. “But I have food in plenty, and soft couches where such heroes may take their ease. I am the Lady Deraa . . . Come with me . . .”

I suppose I could no more have withstood those words, from those lips, than Medroc had been capable of refusing the challenge of the red stones. I heard a muffled oath from Medroc, and was vaguely aware that he was scrambling to gather up our gear behind me. It seemed silly to worry about such things now, when the Lady Deraa’s bounty could no doubt outfit us in splendor, but I no longer cared enough even to argue. Eyes fixed on the lady, I started down the stairs of the dark passageway into which she was disappearing, and heard him scuffling after me.

“See, here is a hall worthy of heroes. . . Sit—take your ease. Refreshment will be brought to you.”

I blinked and gazed around me. The hall in which we were standing made my father’s look like a sty. Lost in contemplation of the lady’s motion, I had not noticed how we came there. It must have taken some time, for light was fading behind the jeweled windows now.

“Look, Medroc—” I gestured down the polished length of the high table. “I’ll warrant they drink something better than either ale or cider here!”

“Aelvan, listen to me!” Medroc’s voice had lost its mockery. “I don’t know what you’re looking at, but all I see is roofless walls and tumbled blocks of stone.”

I stared at him. “You don’t see the carved beams and the tapestries?”

He shook his head.

“Or the tables and the colored glass in the windows?” There was a short silence. I studied his face, and found only stubbornness and badly masked fear. “But you did see the lady, didn’t you? You answered her—”

“I saw—something—” he said reluctantly. “Eyes glittering from veils of shadow; I heard words. But I don’t know what the veils covered, Aelvan.”

“Medroc . . .” I spoke slowly, unable to keep a throb of derision from my words. “I do believe you are afraid!”

“Yes, I’m afraid,” he exploded suddenly, “and if you weren’t ensorceled you would be too! I don’t know what power has lured us here, but I don’t trust it—we should get out of here now, while we still can!”

I jerked free of his sudden clutch at my arm and we stood facing each other, glaring. It was he who was somehow being prevented from seeing the beauty around us. Unless he simply didn’t want to see—or was jealous because the lady had chosen me . . .

“Go then, if you’re so frightened—” I shrugged and sat down on one of the benches.

“No . . .” he said grimly. “You followed *me*. I won’t abandon you now.” He seated himself awkwardly, still glowering.

I stiffened, suspecting that I was being patronized, but at that moment torches sparked into life around us and a procession of maidens entered the hall, each bearing a dish that my mother would have been proud to offer her guests. The Lady Deraa came behind them, smiling, and I forgot my hunger for food.

“Don’t eat it—” Medroc’s whisper was harsh in my ear.

I heard the words but made no sense of them. Glancing down, I saw that they had set a platter of some kind of roast meat before me, with fruit that blushed like a maiden’s cheek and white bread beside it. But with the lady before me, I had no eyes for it.

“Eat—” she said gently, slicing from the fruit a wedge that dripped sweetness through her slender fingers as she

bit into it, then offered it to me. My eyes were on those crimson lips, wet now with rich juices. Blindly, I reached out for the fruit.

“No!”

Medroc’s shout was loud enough to distract me. Furious, I turned on him, and in that moment he whipped the hay-pole forward and struck the food from my hand.

“Look, Aelvan—look at it! *Now* do you see?” He grabbed at my arm with one hand while with the other he jabbed the pole at something that shriveled and smoked on the stones.

Stone? But rich carpets had covered the floor! Still trying to understand, I looked up to see Medroc swing the pole around and graze the lady’s sleeve.

There was nothing melodious in her scream. Lady Deraa flinched away from the pole as if he had struck her with the hooked end, but where the wood had touched, the material seemed scorched, and as I stared, it continued to peel back as if it were being consumed by an invisible flame. Still shrieking, she began to tear her draperies away.

Medroc settled into a spearman’s stance, holding the pole poised to strike again.

“Let him go!” he said hoarsely. “Show him your true face or I’ll sear your flesh with this.”

I blinked and clutched at the table for support, but the table was moving, shrinking—there was nothing there! I staggered, dizzied, as the hall disintegrated around me. A flailing arm found Medroc’s shoulder. I clung to it, holding myself upright, and saw what Lady Deraa had become.

Veils still half covered its limbs, but I now had no desire to penetrate the mystery. What I could see was corded with muscle and covered with scaled hide; the lips that had seduced me were a snout that writhed back from fangs set now in a fixed and vicious grin. And as I stared, the grin widened, and the thing roared and started toward me.

“Run!” Medroc began to haul me toward the door. The hall was alive with moving shadows—the serving girls had become creatures scarcely less terrible than their mistress.

But the floor was a chaos of tumbled stone, and I stumbled dangerously as I tried to follow him.

“Your kind gave me this shape! Men war with magic in this land! Those sorcerers of your race were cruel, cruel, to condemn me so! Now you will pay!” The roaring tormented my ears, and as I fled, the words that followed scored my soul—“You could have saved me! You could have made me beautiful!”

For a moment I hesitated. “Medroc—did you hear?”

“Yes—” he gasped, “but how, by letting her drink your blood?”

The other creatures leaped toward us, talons slicing the air. Medroc swung the haypole in a great arc around him while I tugged my shortsword free. Claws clutched at the space where I had been and I stabbed. The creature squealed and jerked away, black blood spraying, then came in again. I struck again, cursing the convention that had denied me a longer blade, and bit back a cry as talons sliced down my arm.

Medroc was clearing the way before us. Grimly, I tried to guard his back as we inched across the ruined floor. Where the rowan-wood touched, unclean flesh shriveled, but there was no such magic in the common steel I bore. The wounds I gave simply seemed to anger my attackers, and only the age-stiffened leather of my hauberk saved me as I battled backward toward the door.

Then, for a moment, the way was clear. Medroc shouted and shoved me ahead of him through the doorway, sweeping the rowan pole around behind us to cover our retreat. I staggered forward down broken stairs, blinking at the first pallor of dawn. I could just make out the dim shape of more ruins rising above the stunted trees.

Then Medroc was beside me, his breath coming in great gasps. I heard the roaring of our enemies.

“We’ve got to find cover! There’s something over there—can you run?”

Still wordless, he nodded. Eyes glowed in the darkness behind us as we dashed toward the trees, then the ground

shook as the creatures burst through the door and bounded after us. We could barely see where we were going, but the light was growing—with a shock I realized that the illumination that ever more clearly showed us our goal was not the pallid gold of dawn but a bluish radiance that glowed above a doorway.

But a monstrous shape loomed over us. Medroc jabbed and it screamed as the pole slid past it. Desperately I brought up my sword and felt the shock as it struck, stuck in armored hide, and pierced through to the unclean flesh behind it. The creature bellowed again, deafening me; I struggled to hold against the stench and the searing blood that spurted over me as it leaned into the blade. Then the thing's full weight came down and pressed me into darkness as it fell.

I was only dimly aware that something was tugging at me, as it manipulated my body, keeping consciousness from fleeing completely as well. Then the blue glow surrounded me, dissipating the shadows that had sought to claim me at the same time as it soothed my pain.

When I came to full awareness again I was laying on a bed of grasses whose fragrance mingled with the scent of the tea that steamed in the pot Medroc had just removed from the little fire. Through a ruined archway I could see the remains of an herb garden. Ill-bane was growing there, and blossoms had been laid in a circle around us. My scarred hauberk was propped against a stone nearby, and while I was unconscious he had cleansed me and tended my wounds. I must have made some sound then, for he jerked around, staring.

"Had a nice sleep, did you?" The mockery in Medroc's tone was belied by the relief I saw in his eyes. But even as I watched, some undefined tension went out of his face, and he began to look marginally more like the beautiful boy who had come riding through our gates—how long ago? I could not tell, and I did not even want to think about what I looked like now.

"The blue light—" I made a tentative try at moving, discovered that even though my arm ached abominably where the creature's talons had gashed it, my muscles still responded to my will. Medroc handed the pot of tea to me and I stopped speaking to drink from it.

"There was a blue jewel set above the doorway. I think it weakened the monsters, and when the sun rose, they all fled away. For the moment we seem to be safe here."

"Here . . ." I looked around me in bewilderment. "But where—" I began.

"Yes, where are we? That does seem to be the problem—" Medroc interrupted me. "Even if it was safe to go back to the hall, I don't know how to find the passageways through which we got there."

I glared at Medroc. "I would be safe at home if I hadn't come after you!"

"If you hadn't let that female monster lead you like a stallion after a stinking mare, we might both be safe now!" he retorted.

I felt myself flushing, resenting the truth in Medroc's words even as I resented the fact that he had saved me. I swallowed, tasting the knowledge that we were imprisoned here. Too stubborn to thank him, and too honest to deny what he had done, I could not speak at all. Grimacing, I lay down again and pulled the cloak that covered me—his cloak—over my eyes.

As darkness fell I slid into sleep once more. But despite the protection of the blue gem and the holy flowers, the poison of my wounds still worked in me, dark shapes troubled my dreams. Once more I was tempted by the unearthly beauty of the lady; but now I resisted it, and again saw her Change into an obscenity. My body must have reflected my spirit's struggles then, for I was distantly aware of cool hands on my forehead and the aromatic scent of rosemary, breaking the spell. I still dreamed, but now I saw a lady as fair as the other, but without the tyrannous beauty that had seduced me before. It seemed to me then that she held out her hands, begging me to help her, but

while I still hesitated, I felt someone shaking me, and opened my eyes to see that it was dawn once more.

My troubled dreams had not prevented sleep from performing its healing on my body. Movement was still uncomfortable, but my condition had improved enough so that it was intolerable to lie still. And we had nearly exhausted the edible plants left in the garden. Even if we had wished to stay, hunger would have forced us to leave our haven soon.

Medroc and I broke camp with a minimum of conversation, the echoes of the harsh words we had exchanged still hanging in the air, but by the time we had been an hour on the march exercise had restored some ease to my muscles, and it began to seem foolish to brood over what could not be helped in any case.

We could not go back the way we had come here, but Medroc had been able to see parts of the countryside from the campsite where I had found him, and he thought that perhaps we could skirt the ruins until he recognized something, and so come at the passages that led to the place of red stones by another way. The land through which we wandered bore the scars of ancient battles, and the marks of more recent fighting too. At times it had a tantalizing familiarity, as if at any moment I would round a turn in the path and come out upon a place I knew. Certainly the vegetation was that of Escore, but I had spent all my life since leaving the Place of the Green Silences at my father's hold. I realized grimly that I could be an hour's ride from my own valley and never know.

We lived off the land, snaring small game near our campsites and gleaning abandoned gardens. But there were other places, equally innocent in appearance, where the emanation of evil was like a stench to the soul. As the Lady Deraa had told us, men warred with magic in this land. We saw smoke trails against the sky, but previous experience with the inhabitants of this country did not encourage us to seek contact. The harsh words between myself and Medroc

were not forgotten, but they became irrelevant as our energies were focused on getting through each day.

And then came a morning when familiarity tormented me like an inaccessible itch, and Medroc was certain that he recognized the shape of the hills. Before us we saw the broken walls and charred roofbeams of what had once been a hold the size of a small city. Cautiously we crept toward them.

“The bridge will hold me! Do you think I’m a great lug like you?” Medroc gave the boards a last shove and stood up.

They seemed a tenuous support to cross the chasm where some convulsion of sorcery had ripped the floor away. We had entered the hold at ground level, but there was more to it than the surface showed, and now we must cross this blackness that hid unknown dungeons or lose a half day’s traveling as we sought another way. But despite Medroc’s brave words, the charred timbers he had laid across it seemed frighteningly frail.

“Even if you’re right and the boards bear *you*, what am I to do—” I answered harshly.

“There’s more wood on the other side—I’ll slide some over for you. Or else you can throw me the end of that rope you’re still wearing around your middle. If we tie it to the pillars, it will take some of your weight as you cross.”

His arguments were too reasonable; if I protested further he would know I was afraid. But the crack in the floor still gaped hungrily. Pulse pounding, I watched Medroc inch out across the darkness.

One foot—another foot, using the rowan pole for balance—despite his rash speech he was taking care. And then some flaw in the ancient timbers betrayed him, and time seemed to slow as his makeshift bridge collapsed. Exactly as imagination had envisioned it, I saw him fall.

Unsupported, the rest of the broken timbers crashed after him. The paralysis left me then and I dropped to my

knees at the edge, straining to see. A thin haze of dust glimmered in the cold light that slanted across the chamber, but I could make out nothing below it. I dropped a chunk of wood and in a moment heard it strike stone, but though I called again and again, there was no reply.

My mind still gibbered with debate over whether it was worse to cross that gulf or to enter it. But without need for decision my body was in motion. Swiftly I unwound the rope and knotted it around the nearest pillar, and gripping it desperately, slipped over the edge.

There was a lurch as if the knot had shifted and for a moment I swung dizzily. Then I forced first one hand to release, then the other, and let myself down.

Going so slowly, it seemed to take a long time. My feet brushed stone suddenly; I probed with my toes and found something solid, came down on it, and cramped fingers were allowed to release their grip on the rope at last.

The light from the hall was only a dimness above me. From my belt I pulled one of the torches Medroc and I had made, fumbled with the fire striker, and after a momentary struggle set it aflame. Now I could see that I was in a square stone chamber with the remains of storage bins stacked around the walls. Medroc lay motionless almost in the center of the room.

I licked dry lips and knelt beside him, probing gently. He was bleeding profusely where his head had struck the stone, but the skull seemed firm beneath. As well as I could, I cleansed and bandaged the wound. Straightening his limp limbs, I began to wonder how I was going to get Medroc out of here. As a dead weight, he seemed astonishingly heavy. It had been hard enough to support my own weight by my arms, coming down. If he could tie the rope around his chest I might be able to haul him up again, but until he regained consciousness there was nothing I could do but watch over him.

If he regained consciousness . . .

In that place where the only measurement of time was the burning of my torches, every moment seemed endless,

every moment flew. When they were exhausted I would be in darkness, but I could not bring myself to prepare for future need by giving up the light which I needed so badly now.

With those mocking eyes shuttered, Medroc's face seemed curiously defenseless. I cradled his head in my lap and looked down at him, wondering if, when he tended the wounds Deraa had given me, this was how Medroc had seen me. Why had we angered each other so? He was only a man, as I was—or perhaps the boy he looked now, no older than the child inside me who was whimpering with fear of the dark. We had wanted to be heroes, but there was nothing very heroic about either of us now.

And perhaps that was the answer. It was not our differences that had grated on me, but the fact that in essence, Medroc and I were the same.

"Brother—" I whispered, "brother in more than blood, please don't leave me alone!"

There was no answer. The first torch began to sputter and fade, and I lighted another one. A time would come when there were no more, when my food and water were gone. I would have to leave him then, if only to seek more supplies. And could I bear entering this dark hole again?

What if Medroc died here?

The faint illumination above had faded. Night had conquered the world outside, as it already ruled within. The rasp of Medroc's breathing was the only sound. As I listened to it, my troubled thoughts drifted imperceptibly into troubled dreams.

Once more Medroc and I stood back to back, battling monsters. We were struggling toward the tenuous safety of the ruins where the blue jewel glowed. Once more I felt pain, and the fear that we would never reach them in time.

"Help me!" my dream-self cried. *"If any power for good still lives in this land, please aid us now!"*

But then, as had not happened in reality, an answer came.

"Who are you? Where are you? What do you need?"

The voice was sweet and low. Babbling, I tried to tell how we had come here, and what had happened then, but everything was confused. I wasn't hurt, it was Medroc—Medroc, and we were trapped in the ruins! My mind spun, and sobbing, I came fully awake once more.

The torch had gone out, but there was nonetheless light in the chamber, a blue radiance emanating from the figure of the woman who stood at Medroc's feet, facing me.

I recoiled, recognizing the splendor of glowing eyes and pearly limbs that had captivated me before.

"Lady Deraa! You will not ensorcel me a second time." I reached for the rowan pole.

Blue veils fluttered as she shook her head. "Not Deraa, but Deranne."

"You are her image," I said stubbornly, brandishing the pole across Medroc's inert body. "Touch this, and take your true form again!"

Smiling, the lady who had called herself Deranne reached out and set her hands upon the smooth shaft. I stared and blinked, for her radiance had become, if anything, brighter. I jerked the pole away, and after a moment the splendor faded sufficiently that I could look at her again.

"How can I trust you? Nothing else has been kind to us in this land!"

"Do heroes look for kindness?" She smiled. "And you are forgetting the house of the blue gem and its herb garden. That was once my home."

I drew a long, shuddering sigh. "Forgive me. There was healing in that garden. Do you have that power?" Gently I smoothed Medroc's hair back from his brow. "My friend's head is hurt—can you wake him to life again?"

"Perhaps—let me see—" With a whisper of sky-colored draperies the Lady Deranne came forward and knelt beside him.

Without quite touching him, she began to pass her hands, palms-down, over Medroc's body, and where they had been, blue light clung for a moment, then cleared.

Very carefully she traced the heart and other organs, and the nerve channels that led to each limb. Then she turned, one palm hovering above Medroc's forehead while the other cupped his crown. Her eyes closed, she took a deep breath, and the light that came from her hands intensified. Holding him, I felt a tingling from the overflow of that power.

Suddenly Medroc moaned and jerked between my hands. Then he quieted, but his breathing had changed. As the lady took her hands away, he shuddered and eyes still tight-closed, he frowned.

"I will never drink Medwy cider again!" he said thickly. Then his eyelids fluttered open; he looked at the lady with appalled recognition, and heaved upright, fumbling for his blade.

"No! She's not Deraa!" I pinioned him and hung on with all my strength until his struggles eased. "Medroc, it's all right—she healed you!"

Medroc shook his head and flinched. "You look just like her—I don't understand . . ."

"She is my sister . . ." The lady looked down at her clasped hands, and for a moment her radiance dimmed. "The sorceries that wrack this land have sundered more than stone walls. Deraa was my twin, and both of us were born to Power. But Deraa sought power *over* other living things, while my quest was always for power *to* do things—power to heal souls and bodies, power to create anew. And so we two, who shared one womb in amity, can no longer even share a world without enmity. I seek to defend whatever good remains."

She lifted her head and looked at us again. "And now I suppose you will value the peace of your own homes the more, having seen what the breaking of peace can do."

Medroc and I looked at each other, then away. We had both been changed by what had passed, but whether that would make it easier or harder to take up the lives we had left behind us I could not say. But I thought of my father

and Medroc's father, building up holdings for their sons to rule after them, and knew that we must go home.

"It is a pity," the lady added then. "There is a need for heroes in this land."

"We're not heroes—" Medroc gestured around us. I understood his meaning—would heroes have fallen into such a trap as this? "We belong in the world from which we came," he added harshly.

"Do you?" she asked wistfully. "Well at least you are loyal, whatever else you may be. And the least I can do is to guide you back to the path from which my sister led you astray. Come—)" In a single fluid motion she was on her feet again. "Even from these depths, there is a way—"

She glided across the stone floor, and her light revealed an opening my torch had not reached far enough to show. Beyond it I could see the beginnings of a stairs.

In the end, Deranne accompanied us all of the way. Afternoon light was shining through the high round windows of the chamber of red stones, and beyond one of the archways I could see blurred green fields. Medroc and I stopped and looked back at the lady. She smiled at us, but there was sadness in her eyes.

"Go on," she said softly. "There lies the land from which you came."

I moved forward, wondering how long we had been gone, and what my father would do to me. A beating would be the least of it, I supposed. I wondered what kind of tale Auster had told. I moved forward, fighting the progressive sense of disorientation, my eyes fixed on the familiar outlines of my father's hold.

But it was *not* the hold! Balancing the great tower I remembered was another, equally strong. The courtwall had been completed—all of the walls were high! I was looking at no frontier outpost but at a finished rock-built stronghold, not only finished, but venerable, for vines were well rooted and some of those stones were beginning to weather away.

“Medroc . . .” My voice cracked, and I felt him come to stand at my shoulder, staring at what I had seen.

Then both of us staggered back into the chamber and turned on the lady.

“Sorceress! What have you done?” Medroc found his voice first. My own throat was tight with tears.

“It is sorcery, but none of mine,” Deranne said softly.

“But you knew—” he accused. “Why didn’t you warn us?”

The lady shrugged. “I hoped that perhaps, after all these years, the spell might have failed.”

“But what has happened?” My voice cracked painfully.

“You know of the witchery that sundered the land westward from Escore after most of our race fled this land . . .”

We nodded. We had been brought up on the tale of how the Tregarths had broken that spell to bring men back again.

“But not all of us departed in that migration, and not all were content with the balance of power that followed it. There were some, like my sister, who could not forgo the abuse of power, and as you know, the spells with which we fought her were only partially successful. And so the Powers that remained in Escore combined to wrest this region out of the stream of time, and though you tell me that in your world these wars have been won a second time, here, they still go on . . .”

“But time does pass here—” I protested weakly.

“Yes, but at a different pace. For every minute you have spent here, in your home a year has gone by.”

Eyes stinging, I moved back toward the barrier. My father would never beat me—even if he had the lifespan of the Old Race, he must be dead by now. I supposed that my cousin’s children must have inherited and completed the hold. Would anyone remember me?

“You can still go back—” said Deranne. “The land is at peace. You can live happy years.”

I turned around. “And what about you? Will you come with us if we do?”

The lady shook her head. "You two will be a little older when you return, but for me it has been too long. What would come through the Gate would only be dust."

There was a long silence, then Medroc lifted his head to look at me. The old mockery was back in his dark eyes.

"I told you before—there is no work for heroes in that land, and I refuse to drink Medwy cider again. I don't see any reason to go back there!"

An answering grin was already tugging at the corners of my own mouth, but I strove to keep it still. As if he had spoken in my head, I knew what Medroc meant now.

"You called us heroes—" I said to the lady. "Did you mean that? You know the mistakes we made."

"You make mistakes, but you learn," Deranne said softly. She had never looked so beautiful. "Yes, I need you here."

I felt a hard grip on my arm and with a quick twist caught Medroc's wrist in my hand. For a moment we tested each other, and I knew I was grinning like a fool. Then, our strength balanced, we knelt to Deranne in homage, and the touch of her bright fingers blessed our clasped hands.

Afterword

The advantage of writing in an already established setting like Witch World is that there is plenty of raw material (and re-reading it allows you to put off actually writing the story for days). The disadvantage is that you know that the Real author is looking over your shoulder, and become uncomfortably aware that she has done it all (better) before. In my search for a plot, I tried to analyze Norton's major story elements. My list included: