

OF THE SHAPING OF ULM'S HEIR

by

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When my Lord Ulric put aside his wife, the Lady Elva, because within two years she had borne naught but dead babes and those far ahead of the time of normal birthing, there was much whispering in the Dale—both of keep folk and of those who dwelt on the land. Yet the majority of those who spoke behind one hand and kept an eye out for any talebearers were inclined to agree with their lord's action. Ulmsdale must have an heir, all knew that. For a Dale where there was no one of the right blood to sit on the High Seat of the hall had wretched times of quarrels, and sometimes its folk were forced to live under a strange banner of some invading lord. Evil and danger one knew was better than what might lie ahead.

Not that Ulric was either an evil or a danger to his own people. He was a man soured by what he considered a major misfortune and which others muttered was the curse of his house. That, since the days of his father Ulm, and that one's impetuous despoiling of a treasure house in the waste, there had been born no living children to the blood of his line—Lord Ulric himself being fathered before that venture. One did not steal from the Old Ones, even though they be gone, without some harsh payment in return.

My lord's first wife had died in childbed—though that was not too uncommon a thing. However, even then the

whispers began, for no follower of Gunnora tended her, and all knew that when things go amiss in the ways of womankind the Lady of Fruitfulness can well move to set them aright.

My lord did not even wait the full year of mourning before he was a-wooing again and this time his selection was my dear lady. It was my pride that her choice of first chamberwoman fell upon me who am also accursed in my own small way and live in the keep only by sufferance. For my father was marshal on that fateful trip into the Waste under Lord Ulm, and, in his sin and folly, also wrought ill for his blood. For I was born with a beast one's face—my upper lip split like that of the free running hare. So that people ever turned from me in disgust, from the time I was able to understand my deformity.

Only the Lady Elva never showed such aversion to me. Instead spoke me fair and praised my skill with my needle and my soft touch when putting to order her long hair. Long and beautiful was that hair—lighter than any I have ever seen—closer to the sheen of gold—waving of itself when it was loosed from the formal loops of a matron's styling. Hidden now beneath a dark veil yet she is content to have it so.

For after my lord, speaking in a strange high voice unlike himself and looking everywhere but at her whom he addressed, had said the words of dismissal, she made no plaint but withdrew to the Abbey at Norsdale and there took the secondary vows of one who comes from the world, having been a wife. Though before her all such were widows ready to find a safe refuge from the world.

I begged her to let me go with her, and that was when I first learned that, though she was of pure Dale's blood, she had the Seeing, or some portion of such power. For, even as Lord Urlic's eyes had turned from her as he had ordered her forth from his household, so now did she look beyond

my shoulder as if she saw no wall of stone but that which was alive.

"Ylas, there is that ahead in time which will concern you, and more than you. Here you must abide until that hour when what you shall do will be greater than you know and will change much for others." Then she took from around her neck the chain which held an ancient carving which she had worn ever under her robe so that none save me had ever marked it. Worn by years and handling it was, still there was no mistaking its shape—for it was an amulet of the Great Lady Gunnora who smiles on womankind. And this the Lady Elva put around my own neck and then laid her hand upon it, pressing it against me so that I felt its weight even through robe and under smock, and she said, "This will be shield to you, dear heart, when the time is here. Think often upon her whose sign this is and when the evil creeps upon this dale call to her."

Thus she went from us, to be swallowed by the abbey walls and no more have any touch with our world. Sore was that parting for me, very sore—once more I was the outcast one. But I think that my lord might have had second thoughts concerning his act—though the need for an heir ruled him so straightly—for he gave me freely the foretower top chamber and said that I was no longer to be the butt of other's foul humors and laughter. Clever with my needle I remained, and thus I felt that I earned my bread, for I made clothing and worked upon hangings for the walls.

My lord did not remain long without a lady. Save this time he needs must go far afield, since the whispers had run beyond the valley walls and he was looked upon by the neighbors as a cursed man. His new wedding brought us the Lady Tephana out of the north.

She had no right to stand against any curse, for men said—or their wives whispered—that she, too, was from an uncanny House and that her kin had had dealings with

some of the remaining Old Ones of the Waste so that strange blood flowed even within her own body.

As my own dear lady had been fair, so this one was dark with a pale skin which seemed more of the moon's giving than any healthy sun-touched flesh. She was small, and quick but graceful in her movements, and she laughed much, though it seemed to me that good humor never touched her dark gray eyes.

Though I was no longer chamberwoman she sought me out and gave into my hands various lengths of fine stuff which my lord had gifted her for her bridal, showing me with well-drawn pictures what she wanted made for her adorning. Though she would have her own maid do the measurements, as if she would not have upon her my touch. Though I did not care, for it seemed to me that there was that about her which was like a thin grayish mist. And always, I noted from the first, when she was nearby, the amulet my dear lady had given me seemed to chill, as if in some queer warning.

Her own chamberwoman she had brought with her from the North. She was a dour, sour-faced creature, much older than her mistress. They said that she had been the lady's nurse and that the lady had grown up always with her tending.

Her name was Maug and she made no friends in the keep, though she had presence even as if she were of the high blood, for people moved quickly to do her bidding. She need only to look sharply at any of the folk and straightway they were eager to do as she wished to get rid of her.

But to me she did not use whatever small power she brought to bear upon the others. Though I was aware that she watched me whenever I was in her lady's presence, almost as if I were some bold raider and she was a loyal guard.

The Lady Tephana was not a bride more than a month

before she went forth from Ulmsdale saying that she would consult with a wise woman who had settled near Gunnora's hill shrine that she might do her duty according to my lord's great desires.

She had already borne one child yet he was not with her but dwelt in her people's keep for a while. So it would seem that the lady had already favored her, and my lord had done well for himself in finding a fruitful lady. Still, when she rode forth with Maug and two of the guards, I noted from my tower window that she did not make the turn to the path which led to Gunnora's shrine but passed that by. Then curiosity moved in me and I changed house robe for a shorter tunic and put stout climbing boots on. Taking a shoulder bag with food for a double day's journey, I slipped out of the keep at twilight and made my own way over the women's road.

Why I thought thus to spy upon my new mistress I could not even understand myself, save that the need for my going gnawed in me like a hunger and would not be appeased.

It was close to midsummer and the moon was new, thus I felt that I had naught to fear for myself, still I took with me a stout staff of ash over which I had rubbed my amulet along with the crushed leaves of illbane. Although I knew no spells, I called with my heart and mind upon the favor of Gunnora, trusting that one so much the greater would know that I meant no harm but that there was that which I must know.

The track was a winding one, for it had never been laid or cut by men but patterned so by the feet of women who sought the care and favor of The Lady. I had taken it many times before since I had sworn service to the Lady Elva seeking with my own petitions to bring her the wish of her heart. Thus, even in the half dark, I trusted to my feet, which seemed of themselves to know each dip and straightway.

None in Ulm had a part in the building of the shrine toward which I traveled. Like much within the Dales **THOSE WHO HAD BEEN BEFORE** had laid the stone of its walls and planted about its doorway the sweet-smelling herbs which carried in their scent something which would lighten even the most dour heart for a space. But at the coming of our people to this land women were drawn to the place, and, within a generation of our people's lives in the dale below, the power which dwelt here was recognized.

I came out upon the hillside at the top of which stood the place I sought. But there were no horses in pickets, no sign of the two guards, and I needed not even that to tell me that the Lady Tephana had not come this way.

Yet I went to the door and set my hand upon a place where the ancient wood was rubbed smooth and bare by the countless fingers which had touched there before me. There was the clear sound of a chime and the door opened, though none stood within. However, there was light, soft and golden as always, and into my face puffed the air which was deep scented with all the odors of the harvest time.

I came into the first room, laying my staff and my pouch of food upon the floor. Then, daring as I did only in time wherein my heart was sore, I brought forth the amulet and held it out so that which waited could know me for a daughter come for council, and went on into the inner shrine where shafts of light stood as towers on either side of a block of golden stone. In the center of that was a hollow which perhaps would hold as much liquid as I could scoop up in my two hands. By that hollow was a pitcher wrought of gold and bearing Gunnora's pattern of harvest sheath bound with a cording of vine, the fruit ripe upon it—all winking in the light with the glory of gems.

Going to that table I twice advanced my hand to that pitcher, twice withdrew it, as the force of what I would do brought with it fear. Yet I could not now turn aside. Thus

on the third try I picked up that flagon and dribbled from it a clear bluish liquid which gathered into the pool. Just to the brim and no more was I careful to pour. Then I took from off my neck the chain of my amulet and that I laid by the pool. To me came words not of my choosing but as if something had stirred within me and spoke now through my lips.

"Lady—this one asks with all humbleness—to know—"

There was a swirl across the water which came of itself and not from any troubling of my doing. It grew dark—dark as a shadow of the midnight. Something moved through that darkness and then it cleared because a smoking torch shown within.

There were two cloaked and hooded figures, very small as if I gazed at them from a far distance. One raised herself even as I watched and laid her body upon a stone. That stone had to it a reddish look almost as if it had once been dipped in blood.

The other one therein the pool stepped forward and pulled at the cloak of she who lay and I saw the Lady Tephana and I did not doubt that that other was Maug. From beneath her cloak Maug brought forth a short rod or wand and holding this above her lady she drew it back and forth in patterns. Also I was sure that I saw come out of the dark where that torch did not light, faces and forms which appeared and disappeared so quickly I could not be sure of them, yet I knew that they were wholly evil, so much so that I quaked with the dread of what I watched.

Then the torch was gone, the water in the pool no longer murky, and somehow the bridle on my tongue was loosened once more and I cried aloud to the lights, the stone, the very walls about me: "What would you have me do, Great One? What evil is being wrought this night and where?"

"When the moment comes you shall know—" Did that

answer come out of the air itself, or was it in my head, a thought from another? I did not know but I was also aware that there would be no other answer.

That the Lady Tephana dealt with evil was plain. That I was to have a hand in some great matter, that was also clear to me. As I took up my amulet and put it about my throat once again it seemed to me that the ancient bit of carving had grown heavier and that I was ever aware of a kind of warmth which comes before a full fury of flame.

I rested that night in the outer room of the shrine and I dreamed, that I knew. But on my waking I could not remember the stuff of my dream save there had been some great peril and there was a need to prevent some act—and that prevention was mine.

I left upon the table in the outer room my offering: a ribbon of fine weaving ornamented with the best my needle could picture. And with the sun's rising I went from that shrine bearing not the comfort I had hoped but rather a sense of purpose I did not yet understand.

The lady was already returned when I came back to the keep. And I heard that she had indeed visited the shrine and prayed the night through that she might give her new lord the gift he wished—a son of his body.

Yet what shrine—not Gunnora's. Though the two guards swore that they had stood their watch apart from that—no man going within that gate. Whoever she had sought it had not been The Lady and had she set dreams upon the guards to hide that?

I had chance to meet Maug that eve as I sought my own tower room and it seemed to me that she hesitated as if she wished to speak with me and then thought the better of it. But I did not like the look which she gave me—as if she knew well that I had spied and how I had done so.

Again I dreamed and this time I remembered after I awoke, while the moonlight still shone full upon my bed. I had been somewhere else, and the feeling of that carried so

fully with me that for more than a quick breath or two I looked about my tower room expecting fully to see that other place—a long hall with tall pillars and in the distance a white light—a moon silver one toward which I was drawn. There at the heart of that lay what I sought, a chest of crystal in which lay— But the light burst forth as I tried to see who or what was within. Yet I knew that it was needful that I should do this.

I put forth my hand into the blazing light. It did not sear my skin as I thought it might. Rather my flesh prickled and I felt that into it entered some power which it was needful that I retain—even though I was no wise woman nor one of the Old Ones.

Now as my dream released me I looked down at my hand and it appeared even in the full of the moonlight to have a broad band like unto a burnished ring encircling each of my fingers. Though even as I watched in wonder, those faded from sight but not from touch, for I felt a constraint and weight on each as I moved them, curled and uncurled bone and flesh.

As I lay back again upon my narrow bed I rested that hand on my breast when it chanced to cup to my body the amulet of The Lady. And that warmed from the power, sending through me now a strength such as I had never before known, while in my mind I shaped words and spun them into phrases, though they were strange to me and it was as if I were repeating a ritual which I did not understand but which had been so drilled into my memory that I would never lose it again.

Nor did I sleep the rest of the night, though I lay quietly, wrapped rather in the warmth of what was now within me more than the covers I had pulled up against the chill of that stone-walled chamber. And I strove to remember each small portion of the dream while I wondered at what had lain within the crystal chest and why some great one made use of such a one as I.

It was a strange day which followed. I was uneasy and could not sit still at my stitchery for long at a time, but paced now and then my chamber. When I went down into the kitchen I heard the snickering of the maids and saw them watching from the corners of their eyes now and then a tall figure tending a brew pot on the hearth.

Maug who seldom left her mistress's chamber was there, and to that which bubbled before her she added now and then a pinch of this, a dried leaf of that. While the scent of it was rich but sickly, liken to the smell of meat which is near spoiled and yet covered with spices to hide its nastiness. While she measured and tended so she was humming—not any tune such as might be sung as one went about one's work, but rather a mumble of sound which seemed to pierce into one's head and yet carry no meaning. And I saw that those gathered there made a wide circle about her, even the cook, all powerful here, keeping a good distance.

But not such a distance as I myself chose. For upon seeing her back I thrust under the edge of my upper jerkin my strangely weighted hand and ate bread and cheese awkwardly with my left. For that feeling of cold evil gathered about me and dulled all the pleasure one could take in this homey place before.

Also I hurried away from the kitchen as soon as I had choked down a few mouthfuls and came again into my chamber. For now there settled upon me a feverish need to be about a certain piece of work over which I had dawdled earlier. This was a scarf of that same brave color sun's setting left upon the sky. This was to be patterned with birds the like of which I had never seen. However, Maug had brought to me two days earlier a picture of such, lined out on a thick shaving of wood. They shone bravely in shades of red, but where one might have set gold to give them majesty the pattern had black lines, providing them with feet, bills and crests of that murky hue. Nor did I like

to work upon them for I had a queer feeling now and then that when I finished a crested head it would turn a fraction and the eye I had set therein fastened upon me. I had never had such fancies before and I pushed these sternly out of mind. It also seemed, now that my hand was weighted by those rings I could not see, that the stitches I was setting precisely came very slowly into line. Yet also there was driving me this need to be done with the thing and have it off and away, back to she who would wear it.

So doggedly did I labor that the sun was still above the hill crest when I set the last stitch, shaking out the folds to inspect them carefully, making sure that I had not skimmed the pattern in any place. Then I folded it over my arm and took up also the pattern chip from which I had worked and went forth to deliver my handiwork.

Lady Tephana had been given the west tower for her own biding place and I hurried along the outer defense wall rather than take the longer way of descent to the courtyard and up again. There were no sentries about since Ulmsdale, to our knowledge, had no enemies to try our strength and I saw a wink of light from a window ahead where that portion of the keep was in the beginning of twilight.

I raised a hand to knock, but instantly, as if she had foreseen my coming, Maug opened the door and beckoned me within. So I entered the scented warmth of the inner chamber where the lord's new lady sat before a mirror gazing steadily into it, not seeming in pleasure at her own features, but as if she saw there something of vast importance. Such strange fancies did fill my mind that day.

"Ylas." She said my name without turning. "Lay it about me—carefully now!" Her voice was sharp as if the placing of the scarf were some weighty matter which occupied all her thought for the moment.

I had expected Maug to take the wispy stuff from me but now I obediently laid the picture from which I had worked down on a table nearby and shook out the scarf, letting it

fall gently even as she said, about her shoulders. There was a movement to one side and I caught a glimpse of Maug taking up the wooden plaque I had put down and tossing it into a brazier.

But what was much more important to me was that as soon as I arranged the scarf to the Lady Tephana's liking those weights on my fingers vanished, and it was only when I backed away a step or so that the sensation returned again.

The lady gathered up the scarf, wrapping it tighter about her with small quick tugs which again made those ill-omened birds seem to move. But the color became her darkness very well and she appeared in that moment more beautiful than I had ever thought. Now she smiled into the mirror and laughed.

"You have done well, Ylas. My lord will be pleased. We shall deal together again, you and I."

That sounded with too much emphasis, as if it was more than work with the needle she had in mind. However, I curtsied and somehow found the words to say that I was glad to have pleased her. She dismissed me with a wave of her hand and Maug moved in with a comb to deal with her long locks which were as black as the bills and legs of those uncanny birds.

So it was that they were both occupied as I turned to go. Only my eyes lit upon what sat on the edge of the table—a small tray of copper well burnished bearing a goblet of gold. And from that stemmed cup, which was fancifully wrought with strange faces of beasts such as no man has seen, there came a whiff of the scent given off by the mixture Maug had been a-brewing earlier that day.

My hand jerked out as if fingers had closed about my wrist to twist it so that my fingers fluttered over the brim. And—I was aware of that as much as if I had seen it happen—from those fingers had slid those rings of power.

There was a moment's troubling of the substance in the cup.

Then I knew fear such as I had never felt before in my life, maimed and kinless though I was. And I sped from that chamber out into the rising night wind on the wall, to hasten back into my own small room.

What sorcery had made me a part of it I could not know, but that I had been used for another's purpose as one might use a goose wing to sweep an ashy hearthstone, that was a truth I did not deny. Thus I ran then until I was within my own room, the door closed tight behind me, both of my hands to my mouth where my breath came fast. My heart pounded and I gasped, at last sinking upon my bed, rubbing that ringless hand with my other one, for it seemed that with the going of those invisible rings my flesh was icy cold and must be brought back to warmth again.

I did not dream that night, nor the next, though I dreaded what sleep might bring me. Nor were there any more strange happenings to make me wish I had some safe person in whom I might confide. However, as the days passed dully one upon another I did not forget, and often, when I was sewing, I would stop and look upon my hand, spreading wide fingers, striving to understand what had happened to me on that one day.

It was not long until we heard that our lord's hopes had again risen—that the Lady Tephana was quick with child. As a favor to her he had brought her son Hylmer to the Keep and made much of him. He was a child in which there was little to admire or please, being large for his age and swift to tattle or hinder one. But in my own place I saw little of him and I heard that my lord took pleasure in noting his sturdy health, foreseeing that as a promise for his own coming heir.

He also urged upon the Lady Tephana the calling of one of the wise women from a neighboring Dale, one who was

reputed to be a Handmaid to Gunnora. However, his lady refused, saying that Maug had been at her own birthing and knew more than any strange woman, no matter how high the art she claimed. Had she not successfully seen Tephana through the first birth of her son and as all living might now see—was he not a sturdy manchild?

It was in the eighth month after the lady had given her joyful news that once more I dreamed. Again I was in that hall where lay the chest of clouded light. I stood by it and, at an order I did not hear nor fully comprehend, I stretched both hands into its gleam.

This time I brought back no rings from that meeting, rather did I have always with me the sensation that over each finger, across each palm, was drawn taut the thinnest and finest of gauzy cloth. At first I hesitated to take up my needle again lest in some manner that coating I bore would be loosened upon the cloth to betray me to those to whom I was naught but a maimed one dwelling apart. But when I tried that did not happen, and it was the very day I discovered that with growing confidence that Maug summoned me to the Lady Tephana.

She was lying back upon cushions, her swollen belly now giving her no ease. But by her was a pile of cloth—pieces of two colors—one shining white which was usual for the receiving cloth which was any babe's first garment in the world, and the other of a filmy red.

"Ylas, once more the best of your needle skill is needed," she told me, stroking with both her hands the burden beneath her flesh. "It is to you that I give this that you may make a birthing cloth which will be the finest ever seen in this or any other dale. And with this," she put forward one hand to touch the red length, "you shall skillfully line with certain patterns Maug shall give you. For it is the custom of my House to so ask the protection of High Powers, that the sons we bear shall be straight and

strong of body and fair of countenance."

Nor could I say no for in me arose that compulsion which had moved me before. I accepted the cloth and the piece of painted parchment which Maug had ready. Thus burdened, I returned to my chamber. I say burdened, for that I was. The parchment which I had not yet unfolded to look upon I could not carry easily. Light and thin it seemed still it weighed as if it were a block of sword steel.

I threw it on the table in my chamber with the feeling that I had handled filth. Even yet I did not open it but rather sat for a space nursing one hand within the other, feeling still upon the both of them that coating as if I went gloved. At length I brought out my threads and the packet which held my finest needles. And I laid the cloth out, finding it twice as long as was the custom, guessing then that it was to be folded about the red stuff so that would pass unseen.

It was when I at last made myself unfold the parchment that the full blow of unknown power struck at me. That feeling of handling filth was strong. It seemed to me that I breathed in rank odor as I leaned the closer holding a lamp to see. For though it was day without, here the shadows crept from the corners and there was a murk like drifting smoke to hide those lines of red and direst black.

That this was a thing of the Dark I now had no doubt and I wondered that they had so revealed their purposes even to me who had no place among the keep folk. It was as if they thought of me as someone beneath their need to consider.

But that I would stitch such with any needle unto a birthing cloth! What did they think of me—or (and cold spread through me) did they also have a plan in which I would be silenced once my work was done?

I have since many times thought that I was controlled by one greater than myself and that Maug or perhaps even the

Lady Tephana had taken care to bespell me into this labor and were not aware that I had not fallen helpless into their trap.

Now I pushed the parchment back into its folds and sat on my stool considering for a long moment what I would do. That I must stitch the red cloth between the layers of white was plain, for when I experimented, putting one over the other, there was a rosy sheen to the upper layer. But that I would use the symbols of the dark—NO!

Then I marked out for myself with a charred end of ash (which in itself was a powerful talisman against all evil) two other patterns. There was that borne by the amulet of Gunnora and the other—why, the gryphon which was my lord's own sign and under the banner of which we lived.

Looking upon these I set about with my stitchery and my needle flew with such speed and ease that it might have wrought of itself without my urging. The length had room only for four symbols, the two repeated, but they grew out of my best work and I wrought them in silver thread—moonglow such as is blessed by The Lady in her own shrine. Then quickly I laid the cloth within the other and sealed the sides with stitches so small that my eyes should have ached when I made them—yet I suffered neither that nor any fatigue as I worked, upheld by an inner strength which was new to me.

When I was done I folded it with care, making sure that the rose shine was visible, but I wondered if those symbols I had not used might have been visible too. That was a risk I must take.

I had worked the night through, still my head was clear, I had no aching of back, no redness and pain of eye. Not yet would I return it, I thought, let them think that the task was such a labor that I was kept to my needle for hours yet.

Opening my casement to the brightness of the morning I drew a deep breath of the freshness of the air before I turned again to where my work lay and performed one last

task—that of passing above the folded cloth the amulet I wore. In my hand as I did so there was a pleasant warmth. Then all at once all the weariness I had earned came upon me and I stumbled to my bed, not taking off my jerkin or skirt, and fell upon it, sleep already sealing my eyes.

It was late afternoon that I awoke to another's shaking and saw above me Maug's lean, ill visage and smelled that sourish, bitter odor which she carried always with her.

"Fool—where is the work!" She raised her hand as if to slap me and then dropped it as one who would bide her time a little to deliver punishment.

"There—" I said, and pointed to the table.

She turned swiftly and snatched up first the parchment, tucking it into some pocket hidden within her fusty robe. Then her greyish-skinned fingers came to the folds of cloth. But she did not quite touch it. Instead she now shook forth another fold of material and gestured for me to place my handiwork upon that and cover it well.

With this she left me, but at the door she turned her head a little and I saw on her face a smile which was more the grimace of one steeped in malice. Again I suspicioned that those two meant me no good. Yet that suspicion did not really trouble me. It was as if I were sure that I wore armor against the worst they could attempt, and I gave thanks to Gunnora. For I truly believed that it was her amulet which had so hearted me. That and what still clung gloved tightly to my hands and which tingled a little now.

It was three days later that the news spread through the Keep that the Lady Tephana, wishing to make sure that her lord not be disappointed again, would go for the birthing to the very shrine of Gunnora where she could be sure that The Lady's favor would be hers. My lord was quick to give in to this plea of hers. But it was unexpected that she also asked for me to accompany them, her plea being that I was a devout follower of The Lady and was known to have her favor.

Thus, though there were clouds hanging over the crown of the not too distant hills we set out, the Lady Tephana in a horse litter, the mares it was slung between being hand-led by my lord's men, Maug striding on foot by her side, while I rode behind with two of the castle maids who were experienced somewhat in the mysteries of birthing.

We went at a slow pace in spite of the gathering of storm warnings, and I was not surprised that we did not turn aside at the hillside path leading to the shrine, for no horses, even the most surefooted, could make that climb. Instead we were to go around, to approach from the other side taking the slight risk of traveling on one of the Old One's roads which for the most part the Dalesmen avoided.

Our snail's pace brought us but barely on that road when the threatening storm broke and Lady Tephana cried out that she could not travel through its fury. The only shelter nearby was one of those half ruins which the Old Ones had erected at places along their roads. Into this we reluctantly crowded.

Luckily there were two half chambers left, and, having loosened the litter, the men bore Lady Tephana into the inner one whereupon we who had been chosen to serve her crowded.

It was then that she began to writhe on her resting place and cried out that the babe was coming too soon and in an evil place and she misdoubted that anything would be well. Maug held her hands and spoke to her softly but still she uttered cries and it was plain that her time was indeed upon her.

Thus we made ready to do what we might for the babe and I prayed to Gunnora that it would come alive and well. For—though I believed its mother to be tainted by some shadow I could not understand—the small new one would come sinless into the world.

Come it did and it was a son, squalling lustily. It was I

who received him upon the birthing cloth while Maug tended her mistress. And when I looked down at what I held I near dropped the child. For the well-formed small legs ended not in feet but in hooves such as one sees upon a kid, and the eyes which opened wide when I rolled the cloth about him were as gold as the glint of that metal in the sun!

Maug swung about as I uttered a cry of my own and reached for the babe. Only at that moment there was a sound which rose above the fury of the storm and the faint moans of the lady. It was like the passage of wings through the air, and so did I indeed see what seemed to be a great wing, larger than anything living could weld, and this swept down between Maug and me. At the same time there was a voice—though whether it spoke aloud or in my head I could never afterward decide.

"Son sealed to me!" There was triumph in it and I saw Maug cower backward with both hands over her eyes and I heard a sharp cry of fear from the lady. But to me came peace and I knew that this was well and good and what I held was no demon's brat but only one marked by nature with a brand even as the one I wore. And there was in me a vast pity as I cuddled him tight against a breast which would never know the weight of a child of my own.

The wing was gone and I heard sounds from the two maids who were crowded back against the wall shaking, their eyes squeezed shut as if they had been near struck blind. As I turned to give the child unto his mother as custom demanded that I should so that she could have the naming of him, Maug threw herself between us.

"Demon's get!" she mouthed and would perhaps have struck the babe out of my hold, and the Lady Tephana screamed full voice and thrust also outward, warning me off.

That was the way of it. They brought us back to Ulmsdale but the lady would not look upon the child and

those who had been with us were quick to blame it on both the curse of the house and the fact that he had been birthed in a place of the Old Ones.

Since she would not feed it or even look upon him, the babe was mine for a measure of days and I was forced to allow him to suck warm milk from my finger. Yet he thrived, and despite his eyes and those hooves he was a child good to look upon, and I came to cherish him.

But the Lord Ulric was determined that, having gotten his heir, he was fane to raise him. So he called in a forester with whom he had himself been fostered for a space when he was a child—the two of them being as brothers. To him the babe Kerovan was given and thus disappeared into the far reaches of the Dale. It was quickly made known by the will of my lord that no one was to speak of his son's deformity. While the maids who had been present at the birthing were sent with him. As for me I asked for speech with Lord Ulric and spoke of what had long been close to my heart, that I go unto Norseby and be with my lady there. He made me swear upon the mighty amulet which guarded the keep that I would not speak concerning Kerovan and this I agreed to very willingly.

There was only a small glimmering thereafter of all which had been my lot. For the tingling invisible gloves were gone from me when I gave the babe to his foster mother. I could not forget but neither could I speak. And, when I reached Norseby, I had much else to occupy my mind, for I found my lady ill of a deep cough and saw well that death was not far away. Out of their kindness they allowed me to nurse her. And there was one summer night when the moon was full that she spoke to me alone, for the Lady Sister who helped her with potions had gone to get more of a cordial which stifled the cough.

"Ylas—"

I had to bend very close to hear her faintest of whispers.

"The foreseeing—you have done what the Powers would

have of you. He—he—" she sucked in air as if she could not get enough to hold her with us—"he who—was—so—born—has his heritage. No demon as those two tried—no demon—" and so saying she crumpled back a little into the pillows about her and I knew that she had gone.

For me thereafter there was no more ensorcelment. I was given charge of the linens and the robes. Only in my dreams did I seek other places—which were always just a little beyond my reach. Yet never did I forget that great voice which greeted Kerovan at his birthing and thereafter my own dear lady's words concerning his destiny.