

THE SCENT OF MAGIC

by

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Joa gulped as she peered over the rocky ledge. The Vupsall encampment lay far below. Tentholds, hounds, sleds, the people and their ownings were but tiny marks in the Escore valley. The sight dizzied the girl. Her clan was well sheltered from the early spring wind's teeth. Here, on the mountain's knees, there was no haven. The air was a knife of ice, slashing at Joa's dark skin, whipping her red-gold braids.

Not for the first time, she regretted undertaking this search. It surely was not the houndmaster's wish that she venture her very life to find the lost whelp. Were Desst beside her, Joa knew he would bid her turn back, before she was lost, too.

Strength grew strength, and in a season of much ill luck the death of even one small girl-child would diminish the tribe. It would especially grieve her sister Omithi. Their kindred and Omithi's husband had been among those who had perished this past winter. Many grave pits were dug. With misfortune upon misfortune, now ran rumors of mysterious slave raiders, roaming the game trails and preying on weakened Vupsall bands. The tale much affrighted the clan. They had used their ancient rituals to fend off such evil, but were afflicted in that. Omithi

was the most skillful at the women's charm-making dance. However, she was great with child and no longer able to move in the necessary patterns. Some of the people fretted and whispered that the tribe must be cursed. They wondered which of them had so angered the gods.

Naschellu, first wife of Joa's tenthhold, would have cast the lots toward her fellow widow, Omithi, if she had dared, for the elder was strong unfriend to the younger, and to Omithi's sister. Omithi's pregnancy and position protected them, and Naschellu was forced to swallow her spiteful resentment of the second wife sharing her cup and tent. She often vented her frustrations on Joa. Indeed, that shrew would rejoice, if the girl died on the mountain.

Joa leaned into the buffeting wind and resolved not to give the first wife that satisfaction. As she turned to retrace her path, a keening cry made her look toward the peaks, where a vrang hovered. "Hai! Cloud ruler! Tell me, where is the lost one?"

Vupsalls had never tamed these feathered allies of the People of the Green Silence. Yet Joa felt confident in seeking the great bird's aid. Did not the smith-priests assure the clans that the vrangs were creatures of the Light and therefore to be trusted? Joa tilted her head back, like an animal on the track of its quarry, sniffing. She stretched out her thoughts to the sky lord.

She would not have revealed this skill in the encampment. It was a secret she hid from all save Omithi. Unfriends such as Naschellu might name it evil and call for the girl's casting out, should they learn of it.

This mind-scenting talent had come upon Joa scant moons ago. It bound her to those of earth, water, and air. Of late, as she approached her entry to women's rituals, the ability grew. This power was very disturbing, but it was too useful to be put aside willingly.

The vrang's senses were hers. For a heartbeat, Joa was suspended over nothingness as the bird soared out above the valley. A seemingly fathomless gorge opened beneath them. As the vrang circled back, Joa carefully separated her will from his, reminding herself that she stood on solid ground. The feathered

one was a voice she felt rather than heard: "*You are not of the crags, Vupsall youngling. What do you here?*"

"*Farseeing One, I have come upon a duty to serve my people,*" Joa replied in the same speech without words. It was truth and not truth. The lost whelp was the most promising of his litter. Expertly trained, he would make a fine hunter. But she would not have undertaken this search had not Desst requested it. When Kynor, the clan's hound trainer, had died this winter, his young kinsman had assumed his tasks. Vupsall custom bound him to be shield and spear to his brother's widows as well, particularly since Omithi was pregnant. To the first wife Naschellu, Desst offered nothing beyond the law. To Omithi, he was heart-touched, and his kindness extended to his beloved's younger sister. To repay him, Joa had eagerly given herself to find the stray pup.

Despite the cold and peril, this searching had been far better suited to her spirit than what she must do in camp. Joa had little desire for women's work. Her fingers were clumsy at weaving and hide scraping and the other expected occupations. And Vupsall girls were never permitted to accompany the boys when they tracked and killed small game for the cook pots. A final insult had come this daybreak, as Naschellu ordered Joa to gather wood. That was a chore for an infant, not one approaching moonblood beginnings!

Before Desst left camp with the hunters, he had spoken of the strayed houndling to the girl, and Joa had seized her opportunity. Did Desst suspect she possessed some skill beyond the normal in such things? Perhaps not. However, he had seen her sure touch with the pack and trusted her. If she could, she would find the houndling, for Desst, and for her whom Desst loved, Omithi.

Majestically, wheeling, the vrang advised, "*Look to the copse yonder, Vupsall child.*"

An excited "yip" confirmed his sighting. Joa trotted across a patch of snow-raddled stones, heading toward the thicket. "To me, Clever Little One," she called, "you have played this chase overlong."

As she neared the tangle of trees and brush, the pup's mind-scent grew as strong as a well-braided cord. She determinedly

traced it through the brambles. Joa's leather breeches turned aside the thorns. But her loosely belted coat billowed in the wind, baring her unbudded breasts to sharp limbs and the wind. She forced herself to go on to the very end of the copse, hard against the mountain's side. Her hands closed there on the pup's creamy mane. Laughing, she knelt beside him, and he greeted her as he would a little mate, his rough tongue laving her scratches.

The vrang and Joa touched the pup's curiosity as he turned to investigating once more what he had sought ere he was discovered. He thrust his pointed muzzle deeper into the brush, uttering happy noises. Her wonder aroused, Joa asked, "What is it, Clever Little One?" and followed him.

Suddenly she and the animal were falling.

Joa did not have time to cry out in fear, for they did not tumble far—no more than twice her length. The pair landed on soft earth. For several moments, they lay stunned, the breath jolted from them. Then the pup stirred and Joa pushed herself upright, staring about.

The copse had hidden a cave's entrance. She and the pup had plunged over its lip. Pale, dappled sunlight penetrated the leafless branches, casting rays into this rocky womb. The interior, the size of a Vupsall tent, was empty but for a dusting of snow and scattering of pebbles. Joa wrinkled her nose. A musty odor was proof of long disuse. Her footprints and the whelp's were the first the earthen floor had known for uncounted seasons. Seeing that, her apprehension eased, and she stopped clutching her knife.

Then the girl discovered a series of carven steps rising to the sunlit opening. Above that entrance, a blue stone had been set into the lintel. Runes adorned both narrow stairs and door cap.

Joa's wariness rekindled. Runes! These, she had been told, were things of sorcery. Had she blundered into the lair of a seeress? And if so, did ill magic, the Power of the Shadow, lie here?

The houndling had no fear. Tail up, his slitted amber eyes bright, his small ears aprick, he snuffled along the steps and around the chamber's edges. Plainly he was not on guard against an enemy—and Joa herself had witnessed how the

clan's pack reacted with terror whenever the people's travels took them too near the ancient sources of dark wizardry.

There was no obvious touch of the Shadow. Yet Joa sensed a presence. Puzzled, she walked slowly away from the steps, into the cave's recesses. As her eyes adjusted to the dimness, she detected an eerie blue-green glow emanating from the rear wall. Was this light akin to the circles of stone sought out by Vupsalls? Such menhirs were desired camps, protected from evil and especially prized by tribes like Joa's that were not lucky enough to have a wise woman's guidance. It was said that those clans counseled by seeresses of the Old Race were ever safe from danger, not at risk with each day's trek they took.

Luck! How little of that had Joa's people known of late!

Her father and uncles dead. Kynor dead. Hunters, women, children, babes . . . so *many* dead. Game scarce. Journey food turned foul. Clashes with rival clans, costing them in wounded and stolen hounds from their already half-starved packs. Little wonder ill-seekers such as Naschellu muttered of curses.

Ah! But that might change, for all of them, if Joa had discovered a place of Power.

Tentatively she stroked the wall. A peculiar warmth snaked up her arm, healing her scratches instantly. She did not know whether to react with delight or alarm. Surely this craft was a good one. However, what created the magic and the blue glow? Was it something a Vupsall child should not touch?

Kynor, the dead houndmaster, seemed to thunder in her memory: "Do not ask so many questions, girl! The world *is!* The way of it!"

Yet she *did* question. It was a wanting, as unbidden as the mind-scenting, and as much a part of her. Now Joa questioned if this heal craft could be taken to the camp. What a gift it would be for Omithi, to ease her time of birthing.

Without warning, that presence she had felt earlier invaded her. The houndling and the vrang felt the questing touch also, without concern. Joa would have fled, but she was held moveless by unseen cords.

Vivid images flowed from the wall into her thoughts, bearing Joa into the past. She saw two sorceresses, guarding an ancient palace and creating magic to forestall magic. One woman was

of the Old Race, her hair raven black, her skin snowy, her robes long and full. The other was a Vupsall. Her dark flesh and her elaborately coiled gem-pinned red hair were much like that seen among the tribeswomen of Joa's clan. And like them, she painted her breasts, though not with flower designs common among the nomads; her adornments were arcane symbols. As Raven Hair watched, the Vupsall witch wove a charm dance, as Joa's sister had often done. About the pair swarmed their allies in sorcery—birds and beasts of breeds Joa had heard of only in legends.

The girl was reassured to see that the palace was constructed of blue stones. Then surely these wise women were of the Light. For did not the clans' elders proclaim that Darkness dared not enter such sanctuaries?

As scenes unfolded, Joa realized the blue stones were *not* always proof against the Shadow. She witnessed segments of a terrible war waged eons before her race had arrived in Escore. In that remote time, the wizards' struggle had maimed and blasted Escore. Indeed, the land was still much scarred as a result.

Abruptly, Joa was thrust forward into another time that was generations later, yet still long ere her own. Practitioners destruction wielded an awesome power, as Escore was maimed and blasted by forces whose marks still lay ugly upon the land. The sorceresses fought with runes, crystals, and bone wands, abetted by their peculiar creatures. An ominous reverberation rang through the palace. Joa started, knowing the sound for a spirit gong. *How* had she known? And how could she be part of these things that had happened generations before she had been conceived? This was not possible! Yet . . . she was one with the wise women, sharing their cup, and their fate.

Sacrifice had been necessary in that war. To gain space for other witches and warlocks elsewhere, Raven Hair and the Vupsall deliberately challenged the Dark, calling it down. And it smote with a terrible vengeance, rending the very stones of their palace to ashes.

As it struck, its victims vanished. They could not escape such dreadful power whole. On magic's wings, they had transferred their presences, and that of their beastly companions, to this

haven that they had prepared ere the holocaust. Here they were entombed while the eons passed. Neither living nor dead, they awaited the touch of one who would wake them to the world anew.

The tale had been told. Joa indeed had partaken of the wise women's cup, and feared greatly. She licked her lips and found no taste of bone breaker or blood seeker. Then the witches did not desire her death, or she would have sensed it. What *did* they want?

Raven Hair spoke in the flowing images and also within Joa's skull. Her words were foreign gibberish, that tongue of the Old Race. Seeing that she was not understood, she gave way to the Vupsall. The flame-haired witch's words were clear, though certain phrases seemed those of Vupsall ancestors long since dead. *"I am Aisli, girl, and this is Kotyan. We know from your thoughts that you are Joa, as we read your life and your people's. Ah! So you call your Gifting 'a mind-scent.' We will teach you far straighter terms for the sorcerous arts."*

Raven Hair, her accent heavy, adopted the other woman's tongue, saying, *"Do not fear us, Joa. We are in your debt, as you shall be in ours. You are already of our kind, you and the beasts whose spirits you can touch—or you would never have opened this sanctuary."*

"I but dream," Joa murmured, trying to make herself believe. *"I but dream."*

The Vupsall ignored her. *"All her clan's tales are in her thoughts,"* Aisli exclaimed. *"Thus we see what occurred after we two were rift from the battle, Kotyan. How Escore was hurt! But the Shadow was not victorious! Ah! What is this? My people have fallen back into barbarism. That is ill fortune to my house!"*

"They were victims," Raven Hair said. *"As were many, including you and I. Gaze upon the farseeing, sister, at what must be done. Vupsall will climb. Necessary. Lest the Dark overcome . . ."*

"The clans ever distrusted sorcery," Aisli muttered. *"But they took the weapon I offered them. They shall again, through this girl. The senseless feuding among the tribes must cease . . ."*

"Hsst!" Kotyan radiated intensity. *"The enemy!"*

The seeresses seemed to listen. Fascinated, Joa listened too,

and caught some of their apprehension. About her there was a soft growling and clacking of beaks, an approving chorus from those alien creatures entombed in the stone. They also tracked prey. Evil, entering the valley. Joa smelled a stench she knew at once for Dark Powers and through that saw a man of the Old Race, followed by an ugly group of Vupsall hunters. No, *not* hunters. Slave takers! Their master, the berobed, sharp-faced warlock, wove spells, working some grim mischief aimed at Joa's encampment. At her feet, the houndling whined, then made a puppyish attempt to sound a warning bark and alert the people.

"They do not hear you, Little Clever One," she murmured. "No matter. It is magic, only dream-weaving . . ."

"*Think you so, daughter?*" Aisli demanded curtly. "*Your mind-scenting Gift is impressive. Yet you are a babe, unskilled in its use. You deny your destiny—which is to join us.*"

"*No!*" To Joa's relief, she could move a trifle now, and she pressed cold fingers against her head, trying to drive out the visions and voices. "Leave me! I am no witch!"

"*You shall be,*" Kotyan said. "*You will have no choice. You were born to it, as were we.*"

"*In time, you will yield,*" Aisli agreed. "*The enemy, fed with slaves, will have leisure to grow, and the Shadow will reign anew. Wish you that for the Vupsalls, for all races?*" Blue light danced on the wall, mesmerizing the girl. Aisli nodded, satisfied. "*She will come to it, with courage,*" she said fondly, as though she saw something of herself, long ago, in the youngling standing before her.

"Dreaming, only dreaming," Joa breathed. "None of it is so."

"*She will follow the way we trod,*" Raven Hair said solemnly. "*We cannot outrun that which is written for us. Go now, girl, until your will concedes that you are sealed to the Power.*"

The invisible cords dropped away, releasing Joa. She was free! Seizing the pup's collar, she dragged him toward the rune-carved steps. Ghostly, tingling laughter rushed through her veins as Joa fled. The houndling longed to stay with the beasts locked within the wall, but she picked him up, carrying him to the top of the stairs and forcing him out into the copse beyond.

This time, as she tore her way through the thicket, the thorns did not harm her. They seemed to turn aside, allowing her to win bloodlessly to the icy mountain trail. Joa, still carrying the whelp, skidded on rocks and ran downward, nearly falling in her panic.

For a while the vrang accompanied her. He flew a tree length above the girl, his puzzlement a thing she could reach out and touch. When she did not respond to his unspoken questions, his wonder became disinterest. As he returned to his crags, Joa hastily wished him her thanks for his help in finding the pup. But she did not pause in her reckless descent.

Slowly, the images and voices and talk of inescapable destiny faded from her mind. Joa knew she dared not tell anyone of this, not even Omithi, lest the clan deem her headsick and shun her. No. It had, after all, been as dreaming. She and the pup had wakened spirits, and spirits did not like to be disturbed. Joa made the ritual two-fingered gesture to ward off ill luck hurled by the dead. *That* would keep the sorceresses' ghosts at bay!

She did not slacken her pace overmuch until she had reached the tree line, not far from camp. By then, the sun was falling behind the mountains. Twilight was fast settling on the game path Joa had used to make her way into the mountain and back again. She felt safe, now, in setting the houndling on his feet, though she held tightly to his collar. For a bit he strained to get loose and run up the trail. Joa chided him and untied her belt, fastening the leash to the pup's little jeweled necklet. As they continued down the path, he gradually lost interest in what he had smelled in the cave.

New leaves clung to the branches overhead, shutting out what little of day remained, shadowing the animal run Joa was tracing. She had to depend on the pup's nose and his hunger for his dam's teat to lead them the rest of the road. On every side, they heard twitterings and peepings that marked the hiding places of spring-awakened birds and forest beasts. There was no sound of predator or enemy, however, and more and more Joa felt secure. Soon she would be home.

What would be her welcome there? Hard, curious eyes? Some in the clan thought Omithi's sister a strangeling, lazy girl.

As she reached the edge of the encampment, Joa was grateful that Desst kept his hounds aside; she would not need to walk the length of the tentholds, enduring scowls, in order to return the pup to the pack. She stole past the back of the horn worker's tent and the gem fashioner's and the smith's, now and then peeping beyond the woven hide structures to the camp's center. Hunting spears were stacked. Fresh game was dressed, hanging from low limbs. The younger women were dancing the charm-making ritual, slowly, gracefully, though none did so well as Joa's sister Omithi—or as the Vupsall witch in those visions. The men were gathering at the smith's tent to reminisce about the day's hunt. No doubt they would also discuss the morrow and when it was best to strike camp and move.

Desst was still tending to his animals when Joa crept into the glow of his fire. The hounds, recognizing her, set up no din, but greeted the girl and the errant pup with soft growls. Desst glanced sternly at Joa while she fumbled with the makeshift leash, untying her captive. The whelp lunged forward eagerly. He and his litter mates tumbled together in a fierce welcome of bared fangs and lolling tongues. These were the rituals of the pack, as firm as the women's charm-making dance and the men's gatherings under the smith's guidance.

Joa refastened the belt, cinching her much-patched tunic. A big hand tugged at her braids. Beneath Desst's scolding expression there was a glimmer of amusement. He shrugged off his hunter's cloak and pushed back his green-fringed hood, eyeing the girl narrowly. She knew that she must endure a scolding, but hoped it would not be too severe. "See? I found him," she said, pointing to the houndling.

"Girl, did I command you to become yourself a stray?" Desst tried to sound angry, with small success. Responsibilities had weighed hard upon him and sometimes made him look older than his twenty winters. Now, however, there was an easiness in his manner belying the sharp words. Joa realized with guilt that Desst had been sincerely worried for her. He hid that, saying, "Omithi was concerned. Ill favored of you to cause her pain. Why did you search so long?"

"I—I am sorry. I wanted to fetch back Little Clever One. I *did*. Are you not pleased?"

He tugged at her braids again, more gently, then thrust his thumbs into his wide, gem-set belt. "Happy I am to have the pup to my hand again, it is true. Yet he was not worth a full sun's search." Desst shook his head. "Naschellu will be rough with you, girl, and rightly. The first wife had to do everything this day. Omithi could give her no help. The midwife says the birth waters will come soon . . ."

"Has it begun?" Joa cried.

The houndmaster grinned. "No, Kynor's babe does not join the clan, girl, so far. But he binds Omithi to her bed. You are not to trouble her. Heed me! She should not be given hurt for your sake. You are all she has."

Painful memory held them both silent for a pace. They saw their kin—Joa's father and uncles and Desst's brother Kynor—crashing through the river ice to their deaths. "I am not all, no," Joa said softly. "Omithi is heart-touched by Kynor's near blood, him that will have her to wife . . ."

Desst laid a callused, scarred hand over her mouth. "Talk not of that. When custom decrees I may bring Omithi bride gift and wipe the paint from her breasts and claim her, I shall. Not sooner." Chastened, Joa nodded. The houndmaster sighed and asked, "Where did you find the pup?"

"On the mountain. There was a . . ." She stopped herself and finished lamely, "He—he had chased a vrang up to the crags."

"This is the season for *all* the clan's younglings to neglect duty," Desst grumbled. He shook a finger at the unrepentant whelp, then at Joa, telling her, "Go now. Comfort Omithi."

She moved away reluctantly. She was eager to see her sister, but their tenthold was dominated by the first wife, and Naschellu, unlike Desst, would not be happy with the girl's return. Staying to the shadows as much as possible, Joa walked through the cluster of woven-hide dwellings. Tethered hounds outside each tent sniffed at her, identified as part of the clan, and lain back down once more. Small children played in the circles around each owning's fires, set, as was the pattern, before the tent flaps. Women joined in the charm-making dance or gossiped, as did the Vupsall men, in their way. Some of the girls, Joa's age mates, glanced at her, knowing her dread.

Those she called fellow smiled and spoke sympathy. Unfriends, wishing her ill, taunted her with promises of the punishment she should receive from her holding's first wife.

That wife, Naschellu, had shunned the usual gatherings tonight. The dour-faced widow poked viciously at her fire and glared at Joa. "So! Honored I am that you chose to come home! What would you, girl? Are you the daughter of some great leader, that I dance attendance on you?"

"I—I am sorry I did not gather the wood, but Desst . . ."

"You serve this tent, not Desst," Naschellu snapped.

Others were watching and listening. A few smirked, amused to see a disobedient child lessoned. Firelight shone on the women's naked, painted breasts, their jeweled collars, the gems in their elaborately coiled and pinned hair. Men looked toward Kynor's tent and shrugged, dismissing the scene there as mere female squabbling.

Naschellu got to her feet and rested her hands on her skinny hips. The chief wife's ever-bitter nature was a stink, one so strong Joa had no need of a secret art to detect it. A snake striking, Naschellu pinched the girl's neck fast in a painful grip. "Hear me! You obey *my* commands, not Desst's!"

Squirming vainly, Joa protested, "He is the hunter for this . . . ow! . . . kinfast. Desst put on Kynor's cloak, and he trains Kynor's hounds. And he barter them for the things we need. And he shares his hunt-kills with us, as Kynor did . . . ow!"

Naschellu shook her, like a hound a bone. "I *told* you to oil the traveling boxes, lest the leather crack. You did not! Nor did you sew garments or dig roots. You mended no light nets, collected no glow insects to inhabit the gauzes and bring day to the tent when darkness comes . . ."

The chief wife punctuated her words with cuffs. Onlookers did not interfere. Such rough discipline was common among the Vupsall clans. All in the tribes had suffered it, as younglings. Now Joa must pay her debt for ill-serving her tent.

But she did her best to dodge Naschellu's blows. That, too, was a common trick, and she hoped to waken on the morrow with no more than bruises from this chastisement.

"Tracking a lost whelp! Unfit task for women-children!" the first wife bellowed. And around her, oddly, the tribe's hounds

were setting up a din. They had been near many a similar punishing, and rarely reacted so. Now their angry barking added to Joa's confusion. Naschellu pummeled her mercilessly, the slaps hardening, beginning to break the skin. And a new and terrifying glint came to her eyes.

Some neighbors called objections. This went far past the laws!

Naschellu did not hear them. Spittle flecked her thick lips, and her expression was wild. "Bewitcher! You and your sister and your mother before you! All of you cursed me, sealed my womb, made me barren! It was *your* doing!"

She struck again and again, until Joa reeled, her vision blurring. Even when Naschellu released her hold on the girl's neck—the better to use both hands in assaulting her victim—Joa could not flee; she was too dazed to take advantage of the opportunity. Brutal fists knocked her to and fro.

An unseen force was ruling Naschellu, maddening her. And two other invisible presences witnessed the clash through Joa. Dimly, amid pain, she felt Raven Hair, Aisli, and their companion creatures enter her mind. She knew they were angry for her sake.

They were not alone. Omithi, big-bellied, struggled from her fur-covered bed and lurched to the tent entrance. There she knelt on the threshold, flinging her arms protectively about her sister. "Leave by, Naschellu!" Omithi shouted. "You may not punish her to death. She is free born! Stop!"

By now, the uproar from the hounds was deafening. It seemed to worsen Naschellu's rage. Her heavy hands fell upon Omithi as well as Joa, making neighbors gasp in horror.

"*Stay her, daughter,*" Aisli commanded. The silent voice rattled in Joa's skull. "*You have the power, schooled by us. It is the enemy who abuses you. Naschellu is but his tool.*"

"*Ai!*" Kotyan agreed. "*She, the hounds, and even your death will be diversions for his purpose. Observe!*"

For a twinkling moment, Joa was outside her body, a spirit flying into the surrounding forest to a nearby glade. The veil of night parted for her, though not for those lurking in that hiding place. A net of glow insects might have hung over their heads, showing Joa the enemy warlock. Like Kotyan, he was of the

Old Race; but where she was of the Light, he was Shadow-sworn, suffused with evil. His stench assaulted the girl, turning her stomach. At the warlock's back stood two hands' count of Vupsall warriors, dull-eyed, cruel men, shorn of all honor to the patterns. They marched to the wizard's bidding, and enslaved or killed as he ordered.

In an instant, Joa returned to herself. No time had seemed to pass while she viewed those dread lurkers. As before, the first wife pummeled her and Omithi. Naschellu was shrieking incoherently. Tortured by the will of the hidden warlock, she was his captive, catching up a brand from the fire and raising it to smash over the cowering sisters.

At last the clan's women ran to restrain her. They had not moved to save an impertinent child. Now, however, Naschellu threatened a pregnant widow. A crime most foul! It must be prevented!

The rescuers could not reach her in time to stop the blow.

"Act, daughter! Strike!" A dual mind-scent overwhelmed Joa, and she sensed this was her only course. Power washed away the pain Naschellu had dealt. Joa was strength, extending from her thoughts, though she was crouched and whimpering beside Omithi.

Bonds froze Naschellu. She was helpless, her fiery club held high, descending no farther.

Joa was one with Aisli and Kotyan. As she lifted her head and stared at Naschellu, the girl knelt amid an encampment of woven-hide tents—and she stood in a blue-stoned palace that was destroyed numberless seasons ago. Through her, that palace's mistresses and their beastly allies conquered time and death. Joa realized, with both despair and exultation, that she had accepted the cup fate had poured for her. She, too, was a witch!

Tribeswomen swarmed about Naschellu, prying the brand from her fingers, enfolding her in their arms. She thrashed wildly, and they were forced to pull her off her feet, pinning her as they prayed to the gods to restore her sanity.

They did not know their gods had no part in Naschellu's affliction. That Shadow-sworn warlock was her tormentor, and the hounds'.

The hounds! Would their clamor never cease?

Not so long as it served the enemy.

Hunters, shaken out of their unconcern by these events, began to resort to boots and whips, attempting to quiet the crazed pack. To no avail.

"In a breath or two, the slave takers will attack," Kotyan murmured deep within Joa's being. *"Their master has not yet detected your Gifts, daughter. He would scorn you, for he believes himself unmatched in sorcery."*

Without sound, in the same mental touching the witches employed, the girl asked, *"What does he here? Why does he enslave the Vupsalls?"*

Aisli answered her. *"Our people are to be his army, and the Shadow's. The terrible conflict will resume. Escore again will be rift, uncounted tribes slain, to establish the Dark forces supreme. He crushes the wills of the Vupsalls his minions take in slavery, for our people have no wizardry to oppose him. With our blood, he will construct his foundations, then thrust murderously throughout the land, from the eastern sea to the Green Valley to all the rivers and hills and woodlands. When he is done, Escore is lost forever to the Shadow . . ."*

The hounds! Howling, snapping at those who fed them, in a witless fury despite the worst the hunters could do to punish them.

It was a tactic, Joa saw, sent by the enemy. Distracted thus, off guard, the hunters would have no spears to hand as the slave takers swept upon them.

Escore—and her people—forever lost!

Joa gently pushed away from Omithi and rose to her feet. Heal craft, a gift of Kotyan and Aisli, flowed along the girl's veins, soothing hurts, clearing her brain.

She stood at a spot where many trails divided. Which must she travel? They were roads of destiny. Some led to enslavement. Others to a kind of living death, where her mind-scenting skill would be smothered and serve no use, nor would she. And one led to sorcery. On that path there was power, the victory of saving her clan from destruction and Escore from the Shadow. But there was also loneliness and a painful separation from those she loved.

"*Necessary, child,*" Kotyan told her, with tenderness. "*We knew what you shall know. A worker of magic is apart. Those who do not possess the arts do not understand, and they will always fear us. It is the way of it.*"

Aisli added, "*Courage is required, girl. It is not easy. Choose. And quickly. Or Vupsall dies. Which path will you take?*"

"I am but a child," Joa murmured, half aloud. "I cannot . . ."

"*He is one. You are three and many,*" and with the sorceresses spoke those alien hordes of creatures. Like the witches, the beasts owned Power, and offered it to this battle, and to future ones, upon the path Joa was invited to walk.

Naschellu was howling, a human hound, and driven, as they, to madness.

At that moment, the enemy again shifted his focus, creating yet another diversion to occupy the attention of his victims. Omithi clutched her swollen belly. Her eyes widened with fear. "The—the babe! Aaa! It—it is not yet time. . . !"

A midwife ran to help the young widow. The tribe muttered in surprise at this latest event. Were they indeed cursed, as had seemed all this winter?

Joa wondered. Had the warlock spread his evil spells far ahead, to pave his conquest? Was he responsible for the ill luck bedeviling her clan, and for the deaths of her kin and Omithi's husband? Anger was a heady odor, stimulating her and prodding her into decision.

Desst, his expression twisted with worry, hurried toward his brother's tent as the women carried Omithi inside. Joa shared his anxiety, but knew a far greater matter now demanded their power. She took hold of the houndmaster's arm. Startled by the strength in her touch, he halted and peered down at her.

"*Open your mind-scent to him, and to us,*" the unseen sorceresses pleaded. "*He will be our weapon.*"

Was Desst, then, to be the first necessary sacrifice on the path Joa was about to trod? No! She would strive to insure his life, and the lives of Omithi and the rest in the encampment.

Trusting her allies, Joa did as they bade. A peculiar look came into Desst's dark eyes. He was his own man, yet he bent to the will of a child and those who strengthened her.

"You must release the hounds," Joa instructed calmly.

She gave this much—that Desst was shown the enemy and something of what the warlock's presence meant. Rage twisted the houndmaster's face. "So that is what he thinks? Vupsall will not submit so tamely!"

Man and girl-child confronted each other for a heartbeat. And Desst stepped onto the path *he* must follow. But had he chosen in time to save the people?

He ran from tent to tent, slipping the tethers from straining hounds' collars. Fellow hunters gaped at him, fearing that he like Naschellu was mad. Was this to be the last curse to befall the clan? That they all lost their wits?

"Slave takers!" Desst roared, pointing to the forest. "The beasts smell them. Come. Take spear!"

And within the wood surrounding the lurkers' glade, the furred and feathered denizens of the valley set up a horrendous racket. The noisy assault was as a blow to the spellcasting enemy leader. It was something he had never expected. Frantically, he cast sorcerous nets, seeking his foe, and would crush that witch, should he find her.

Joa was taught and guided, moving in her first effort in such arts. Alone, she would have been as nothing, her untrained abilities a melting snowflake before the burning blast of an adept. But she was not alone. And in the distant time Kotyan and Aisli had lived, they had been among the Light's most skillful servants. They poured their Power into Joa, becoming part of her, showing her the way to manipulate Desst, the hounds, and the forest creatures. In that last, the witches' entombed animal allies had no peer; like called to like, across the ages, in this rough-made young army of the Light.

The clan's hunters were pelting into the trees, and Joa of Many Forces was able to press aside barricades of branches and shrubs to hasten their counterattack. She was a night wind, hammering the warlock and his slave takers mercilessly, as he had forced Naschellu to hammer Joa.

Little Clever One and his dam led the hunters and the pack. The cacophony was deafening. Those women who were not with Omithi in the birthing tent stared in terror in the direction of such noise. Children wept and babes clung desperately to their mothers' painted breasts.

Joa was not with them, save in body. She was with Desst, following the hounds, seeing beyond, to the creature-harassed enemies.

The wind was at her back, aiding her. Forest vrang and bat and ground hopper and tree serpent fell upon the warlock's men, clinging, biting, raking with talons.

It was thus when the men of the clan burst into the glade and Desst hurled his spear at the slave takers' master.

The sorcerer was incredulous. Joa read his thought: Did the barbarian seriously hope to harm one who commanded great magic? Negligently, the warlock wove a spell to shunt aside that spear lancing toward his heart.

And his spell was met with countering magic, wielded by women sacrificed in an earlier war between good and evil, and focused through a gifted Vupsall girl.

Again, it was a thing he had never expected. So arrogant was he that he had not called upon any farseeing to warn him of this. He deemed himself invincible.

Wrongly.

There was no space for him to retighten his glamour and build another spell.

Desst's spear penetrated the sorcerous veil and the enemy leader's breast. Coruscating energies filled the glade for a moment. It was a starburst of colors none of the clan had seen, save Joa; she had learned their hues in a cave, the living burial place of her invisible allies.

Bereft of the wizard's shield and guidance, the slave takers were trapped. Once, no doubt, they had been strong men, knowledgeable in use of point and blade. Now, they had been too-long puppets. Their courage, like their spirit, was vanished. Joa's people cut them down, aware that had they failed, these Vupsall foes would have done the same to any of the tribe who resisted them.

Joa felt Kotyan's shudder of revulsion. "*Patience, sister,*" Aisli comforted the woman of the Old Race. "*It is not your way, but at present it is the Vupsalls'. There will come an age, with Joa's labor, when Vupsall will no more need to survive through their spears. That path, however, is not yet beneath their feet. For tonight, it is good that they are barbarians, and friend to blade and blood.*"

Kotyan sighed. "*Ai! You see it, too, do you not, daughter? Much is required to raise your clans to the civilization they used to own.*"

Doubt assailed the girl. This small battle had been won. The battles ahead? Had she the strength to endure them?

She was tired as she had never been. Her wounds were almost mended, and the weakness did not come from that source. Sorcery had taxed her severely. Joa had not understood the demands her mind-scenting Gift would place upon her. As she leaned against the tent pole, listening to Omithi's birthing grunts inside the dwelling, Joa sniffed the air—and the unseen trails of magic.

The stench of the enemy warlock was gone. She smelled blood and the ugly and strong reek of murderous satisfaction, as was so for successful warriors. The hunters, flaunting booty, were returning to the camp. Desst, in the lead, waved the dead wizard's mantle above his head and shouted the triumph song. Women, realizing they were safe, cheered and greeted their men. Children laughed. Naschellu was abandoned, for her thrashing and screaming had ceased and her madness had vanished when the warlock died. Left alone, she sat up, groaning, and gazed about her at the happy scene, perplexed. Joa scented the woman's deep shame and anguish.

Hounds ran untethered through the tentholds. They exulted, as did their masters. One galloped past Joa, and she saw that the beast held a severed forearm in its teeth. The arm's flesh was pale. The wizard's! Desst and the hunters had not been content to pierce his evil heart. They had hacked him to pieces and given him as carrion to the pack. Ill fate, well deserved!

Joa trembled, sickened. Confused, she examined her reaction. What feeling was this, for a Vupsall child? She should be used to blood and violent death, for the nomadic clans had encountered these things all her young life. Yet she trembled. Had she absorbed some of Kotyan's squeamishness? Was this to be part of that civilized behavior she must learn, along with witch's arts?

Much would change. For her. For the tribe. All of them were setting forth on a different path from that which they trod before.

Behind the tent flap, the midwife encouraged the young widow in her birthing struggle. Then Joa heard Omithi cry out in victory, and there was a smaller, petulant squeal.

"The boy will live," Kotyan assured Joa. *"That we foresee."*

"He will become a clan leader of influence. Desst will stand at his side," Aisli said. *"Both will consult you, girl, to the clan's good luck."*

Without words, Joa asked, *"And does your farseeing tell you how much they will fear me? And how much I must be separated from them, from Omithi, from those I would embrace?"*

There was a silence of sympathy.

Naschellu was weeping, hiding her face. Joa reached to touch and her mind-scent told her of the first wife's pain. A twinge of pity argued with Joa's resentment of that woman. She knew Naschellu's emptiness that had soured her soul and spirit. The cry of Omithi's newborn son had been as a knife in Naschellu's heart. Kynor's second widow bore his seed, and Naschellu was barren. A sad trail stretched ahead, upon which no man of the tribe would put hand to hand with her nor take the paint from her breasts. Empty, she would go alone. It was that emptiness that had made her a ready vessel for an enemy's usage. In part the fault was hers, for her spiteful nature. But great was Naschellu's punishment, and her sorrow.

"There are sacrifices," Aisli spoke soundlessly, echoing the thought Joa held. *"We are sacrificed, too, girl, that the Light prevail."*

Little Clever One padded up to Joa. He put his paws on her knee, begging to be petted. Smiling, she did so, seeing that he, at least, would prove a faithful companion. Beast and bird would be her friends henceforth and ever, not fearing her powers as would humans. In *that*, she would not walk the path unpartnered.

A bit of the triumph had eased for Desst. He approached his dead brother's tent, staring at the closed flap. Joa turned her wistful smile from Little Clever One to the houndmaster and said, "It is well. Omithi is all right, and her son is healthy."

The words were scarce out of her mouth when the midwife unpinned the flap and stepped into the camp light. She held aloft the swaddled, bawling newborn and loudly proclaimed,

"A man-child! Ai! He will be a mighty hunter. Kynor's seed is yet with us! Rejoice!"

People set up fresh cheers and called for the brew pots to be opened and the music festers to make merry. This was a night of celebration indeed!

As women paraded to Omithi's tent, to honor her and praise her babe, Desst stared wonderingly at Joa. How much of her mind-scent touch did he remember? And what did he feel of it? Plainly, he longed to enter the hold and be with his beloved. But that was not permitted him till Omithi was purified and once more sealed to the clan's gods. Uncertain, unaccustomedly shy, he moved from one foot to another, eyeing Joa warily.

Then, of a sudden, he pulled off the warlock's cloak, which he was wearing, and offered it to the girl. "This is by rights yours, youngl . . ." He broke off, looking afraid. His manner was that of a man who had shown dangerous disrespect to a powerful chieftain.

So! She had taken but the first steps onto her chosen path. And already the separations began! Joa took a deep, weary breath. "No, Desst. Keep the cloak. It is your prize, honestly won."

Gratitude brightened his face. He wrapped the blade-rent garment about his broad shoulders proudly. "Ai! I did!" Then he glanced scornfully at Naschellu, who still sobbed in the dirt. "That one will not trouble you again. I'll see to it. I am your guard, and Omithi's."

Joa's smile widened. "Indeed! We will be as one, kinfast."

Whistling, swirling his cape, Desst went to rejoin his comrades. "*Well worked, daughter,*" the sorceresses said in Joa's mind. "*He is henceforth your ally. You will acquire many others. For we see you have skills beyond your mind-scenting. The wise witch moves gently with the souls of those who do not share her Gifts, and makes them hers by their own wish.*"

Little Clever One again pawed at the girl's knee. Laughing, she sat beside him, ruffling his fur. "Friend! *You do not fear me, do you, houndling? Together we will walk the way and serve the Light and our people.*"

No, she would not be alone. No doubt in the time to come

there would be pain. And no doubt some days she must deal hurt to those who would follow her, in order to accomplish good. But for now, she was Joa, and the scent she touched eased her. Allies, human and not, living and not, looked and approved as a girl played, and readied for her long future amid the weavings of Power.