

SWORD OF ICE

by Andre Norton

Chapter One

My mother was of the Old Race, those hunted out of Karsten when Duke Yivan put to the Outlaws' Horn all of a blood far more ancient than his, upstart mercenary that he was, dabbler in forbidden things, one who companied with the unspeakable Kolders.

Of a heritage older than Karsten's naming, all my mother brought into Estcarp when she fled death was herself and a tail of three fighting men from her father's lordship. Those she sent to join the Borderers who served under the Outworlder Lord Simon Tregarth, to hold back the evil which had come upon our world. She herself took refuge with a distant kinswoman, the Lady Chriswitha. And later she wed, not with a man of her own people, but with a Sulcarman, thus divorcing herself abruptly from her kind.

But he was slain in one of the forays against the southern ports. And, since she felt no home-love among his people, she returned to her own kin, bearing in her body a child conceived during her short wed-time. Also within her the need for life dimmed, so that when I was born ahead of the proper day, she went out from this life as goes a candle blown by an impatient breath.

The Lady Chriswitha took me, even keeping me though she had married another lord fled from the south, Hervon. His family had vanished during the horning, but he was a man of war learning and wrought well along the Border, rising to his own command. And he had two daughters and a son, Imhar. This Imhar was my senior in age by two years; a strong, healthy boy who took readily to the uncertain world of alarms and war in which we were bred.

With me it was not so. From my birthing I was a weakling and needed much care, given to many small illnesses so that I was ever a concern and a source of impatience to all but my lady, this impatience being made plain to me as soon as I was old enough to be aware of those about me. Though I strove to match Imhar, there was never any chance during our boyhood that I might. A sword fitted into his hand as if he were born carrying that blade, and he used it as if it were an extension of himself, with a skill precise and beautiful to watch.

He rode fearlessly, and was out on patrol before he could count barely the years of his

youthful training. And Lord Hervon took pride rightfully in his heir, a youth who had all the attributes necessary to make his way in perilous times.

I trained with sword and with dart gun—the weight of the war ax was ever too much for my arm. Among the dark Old Race, I was a stranger in more than my lack of physical strength, for I had the fair skin, the light hair of the Sulcars—but unfortunately, neither the height nor the fine strong body of that people.

Though I tried so hard to match Imhar, in my heart I longed for something else. Not the sea of my father's people, which might have been natural enough, but rather learning—the forgotten learning which had once been a part of our past.

It is true that no male could possess the Power, or so the Wise Women, those Witches who ruled in Estcarp, proclaimed. But there were old legends, fragments of which I heard from time to time and treasured in my memory, that this was not always so. That once men had also walked that road, and to some purpose.

I could read well enough, and I hunted out all I could that pertained to this age-dimmed past. Though I never spoke of such to those about me—for they would have deemed me stricken in wits, perhaps even a danger to the household should the Witches learn of my heresy.

In the year I belted on my own sword and took to riding with the Border Guard, Karsten loosed against us the greatest threat of all. The Kolders were gone, Lord Simon and his lady having ventured overseas and closed the World Gate through which that horror had come. Yivan, lord in the south, had been a part of the Kolder menace and had died of it. Then, for some time, there had been chaos across all of Karsten, as lord fought against lord for the leadership.

At last Ragan of Cleen triumphed. And, to unite his people, proclaimed a crusade against the Witches. For it is always in such straits a shrewd move to find an enemy outside the borders against which all may march, taking their minds away from wounds and losses nearer home.

So there came a great hosting, but not of our swords, rather of the Power. For the Witches united for a single night and day, summoning such strength as they could call. And then they aimed this southward and the land itself obeyed their commands. Mountains moved, the very earth twisted and rent this way and that. Accordingly they themselves paid a great price, for many of their number perished, being used to channel that Power until it burned out their lives.

Lest chaos fall upon us as it had on Karsten when Yivan was slain, Koris of Gorm took command in the land and the rule passed then from the Council to him.

Lord Simon and the Lady Jealithe had been lost long since in a quest to the northern seas, and there was no other war leader great enough to command the respect and loyalty of Estcarp.

But there came a strange tale, passing from manor to holding, holding to manor, that the children of the House of Tregarth had fled the land under the great anger of the Witches and that they were now outlawed, to be given no aid by any, lest those be condemned also into the state where all men's hands were lawfully raised to pull them down.

It was whispered that the known "Power" which Lord Simon had had and used was in his sons also. And that they had conspired, against all rightful custom, to aid their sister out of the House of the Witches where she trained. There was a very strange thing about them, unknown elsewhere in the world; the three had been born at one birthing! Thus, they were very close.

I speak of these three because they caused the changing of my life, and the lives of all who dwelt in Lord Hervon's household. And I, myself, was eager to hear all I could of the young lords who, as their father before them, differed from our kind.

Karsten being no longer to be feared, Lord Hervon had set about realizing his own dream for the future. During his riding up and down the land in his hosting, he had found a place which seemed to him a fair setting for a manor. And none would gainsay his claim as it lay well to the east, in a section of the country which had long been forsaken and half forgotten.

Thus, we set out for this place to build anew in a peace which still seemed strange and which we still doubted, so men went armed and we kept sentries about. There were fifty of us, mainly men—though the Lady Chriswitha had five women in her household and she had also her daughters, her sisters, and their husbands, as well as a child born two years after me to her younger sister, who died thereafter.

Now I must speak of Crytha—yet that is difficult. For from the time I looked down into her cradle on the hearth-side, there was something which tied me to her, in spite of all reason. No kin-tie lay between us, nor could any. For by the ancient custom of our people, she must wed Imhar when the time was right, thus unifying the lordship Hervon was determined to found.

She was truly of the Old Race, dark and slender. And to my eyes, there was always something a little remote about her, as if she sometimes said, or heard, that which was not shared by those about her.

Because of my weakly boyhood, I was closer in companionship with Crytha than Imhar, and she began to turn to me in little things, asking that I aid her in nursing a wing-broken bird and the like. For it was apparent from her earliest years that she had a gift of healcraft.

That her talents went farther than that I learned when I was near the age to ride with the Borderers (having gained strength to the point that I could call myself a fighter, if not an outstanding one). I had come upon her unawares by the brook which ran near the farm-

garth which, at that time, the Lady Chriswitha called home.

Crytha sat very still in the grass, which there grew nearly as high as the top of her head. Her eyes were closed as if she slept, but she moved her hands gently back and forth. I watched her, puzzled, and then saw, with sick horror rising in me, there coiled in the grass a snake perhaps as long as my sword arm. Its head was raised and swayed, following the command of Crytha's hand. I would have drawn steel and slain the thing, but I found I could not move.

At length she clapped her hands and opened her eyes. The snake dropped its head to the ground, disappearing into the grass as if it had been a hallucination.

"No fear, Yonan." She did not turn her head to look at me, yet she knew that I was there. And as she spoke, that compulsion on me vanished, as had the snake. I took two strides to her side, my anger rising to match the fear that had held me.

"What do you do?" I demanded.

She looked up at me. "Come sit." She beckoned. "Should I explain myself to a mountain whose eyes I cannot meet without a crick in my poor neck?"

I gingerly surveyed the grass, longing to rake through it with my sword that I might not drop upon her late companion—with dire results for both of us. And then I settled down.

"It is a part of healcraft—I think." But her voice sounded a little puzzled. "They do not fear me, the winged ones, the furred ones, and today I have proved that even the scaled ones can be reached. I think we close our minds too often, or fasten them on such as this"—she leaned forward a little to touch a single finger tip to my sheathed sword—"so that we cannot hear much of what lies about us—the good of the wide world."

I drew a deep breath, the anger seeping from me. For some inner sense told me that Crytha knew what she was doing, even as I knew the swing of steel.

"Yonan, remember the old tales you used to tell me?"

For it was with Crytha alone that I had shared my scraps of legend and ancient song.

"In that world, man had Powers—"

"There are Powers in Estcarp," I pointed out. And then a new fear rose in me. The Witches were avid recruits to their number. So far they had not drawn upon the refugees from Karsten, unless some girl child showed unusual skills. Crytha—Crytha must not vanish behind their gray walls, lay aside all that life made good in return for power.

"I am no Witch," she said softly. "And, Yonan, with you alone I share what I know. Because you understand that freedom is more than Power. Of that one can become too

fond."

I caught her wrist in a firm grip and held it, also drawing her gaze squarely to meet my own eyes.

"Swear not to try that again—not with any scaled one!"

She smiled. "I do not swear any oaths, Yonan; that is not my way. This much I shall promise you, that I will take no risks."

With that I had to be content, though I was seldom content in my mind when I thought of what she might be tempted to do. And we did not speak of this again. For shortly after, I joined the Borderers and we saw each other very seldom indeed.

But when we went to the east and set up the new Manor hall, it was different. Crytha was of hand-fasting age. It would not be long until Imhar could claim her. And the thought of that was a dark draft of sorrow for me. So I tried not to be in her company, for already I knew my own emotions, which must be rigidly schooled and locked away.

It was before we had the hall complete that the stranger came.

He walked in from the hills, one of our sentries at his back, and he gave to Lord Hvron the proper guesting greeting. Yet there was about him a strangeness we all felt.

Young he was, and plainly of the Old Race. Yet his eyes were dark blue, not gray. And he held himself proudly as one who had the right to greet named warriors on an equal ground.

He said he was a man under a geas. But later he revealed that he was an outlaw—one of the Tregarth sons—and that he came recruiting into the lowlands from the long-lost land to the east—Escore—from which, he said, our race had sprung in the very early beginnings.

Lord Hvron saw danger in him, and to this point of view he was urged by Godgar, his marshal. So it was judged he be delivered up to the Council's guard, lest we be deemed outlaws in turn.

But after he rode away with Godgar, there grew unrest and uneasiness among us. I dreamed and so did others, for they spoke aloud of those dreams. And we went no more to cut wood for the building, but paced restlessly about, looking toward the mountains which rose eastward. In us there was a pulling, a need...

Then Godgar returned with his men and he told a story hardly to be believed, yet we knew in this haunted land many strange things came to pass. There had been a vast company of birds and beasts which had gathered, stopping their journey to the west. And, guarded by those furred and feathered ones, Kyllan Tregarth had started back to the mountains. But that company had let Godgar and his men also return to us unharmed.

It was then that the Lady Chriswitha arose and spoke to all our company.

"It is laid upon us to believe this message. Can anyone beneath this hall roof deny that in him or her now there does lie the desire to ride? I spoke apart with Kyllan Tregarth—in him there was truth. I think we are summoned to his journey and it is one we cannot gainsay."

As she so put it into words, my uneasiness was gone; rather there arose in me an eagerness to be on the way, as if before me lay some great and splendid adventure. And glancing about I saw signs on the faces of the others that in this we were agreed.

Thus, gathering what gear we should need for such a journey, not knowing into what we rode, we went forth from the Manor we had thought to make our home, heading into a wilderness in which might lurk worse danger than ever came out of Karsten or Kolder.

Chapter Two

Thus, we came into Escore, a land long ago wracked by the magic of those adepts who had believed themselves above the laws of man and nature. In an uneasy peace, it had lain for generations keeping a trembling balance between the forces of Light and those of the Dark. The adepts were gone—some had perished in wild quarrels with their fellows which had left the land blasted and shadowed. Others had wrought gates into other times and worlds and, possessed by curiosity—or greed for power—had departed through those.

Behind, the vanished Great Ones had left a residue of all their trafficking in forbidden things. They had created, by mutation, life forms different from humankind. Some of these were close enough to man to allow kinship of a sort. Others were of the Dark and harried the country at their will.

Before the Old Race had claimed such power, there had been another people in the land; not human, but appearing so. These had a deeper tie with the earth itself than any man could have, for they did not strive to rend or alter it as is the custom of my kind; rather did they live with it, yielding to the rhythms of the seasons, the life which the soil nourished and sustained.

These were the People of Green Silences. When the doom wrought by the adepts came upon the land, they withdrew to a waste yet farther east, taking with them or drawing to them certain of the creatures which the adepts had bred. And there they dwelt, holding well aloof from all others.

But there were remnants of the Old Race who were not seekers after forbidden knowledge. And those had journeyed westward, preyed upon by things of the Shadow, until they reached Estcarp and Karsten. There, even as the Witches had done to defeat Ragan, those among them possessing the Power had wrought a mighty earthshaking, walling out their ancient homeland. So strong was the geas they then laid upon men that

we could not even think of the east—it dropped from our memories. Until the lords of the House of Tregarth and their sister, being of half blood and so immune to this veiling, dared return.

Our journey was not an easy one. The land itself put many barriers in our way. And also, though we were met by those Kyllan had aroused to wish us well, we were dogged by creatures of the Dark, so that we won to the Green Valley as pursued as we had been in the flight from Karsten a generation earlier.

But the Valley was a haven of safety—having at its entrance special deep-set runes and signs carved. And none that were not free of any dealing with the Shadow could pass those and live.

The houses of the Green People were strange and yet very pleasing to the eye, for they were not wrought by man from wood and stone, but rather grown, tree and bushes twined together to form walls as deep as those of any Border keep. And their roofing was of the brilliant green feathers shed in season by those birds which obeyed the Lady Dahaun.

She was of our most ancient legend—the forest woman who could call upon a plant to flower or fruit, and it would straightaway do as she desired. Yet, as all her people, she was alien. For she was never the same in men's eyes, changing ever from one moment to the next. So that she might at one breath have the ruddy, sun-tipped hair of a Sulcarwoman, and the next the black locks and ivory skin of the Old Race.

Her co-ruler here was Ethutur, and all which remained steady about him also were the small ivory horns which arose from the curls of hair above his forehead. Yet his shifts of feature and color were not as startling as those of Dahuan.

Under Lord Hervon's orders, we pitched tents in the Valley for our own abode. For, though it might be chill and coming into winter without the rock walls of this stronghold, within lay the mellowness of late summer.

It would seem that here legends came to life, for we saw flying, pacing, sporting, strange creatures which had long been thought by us to be out of imagination—wrought by ancient songsmiths. There were the Flannan—very small, yet formed enough like men to seem some far-off kinsman. They were winged and sometimes danced in the air for seeming sheer delight that they lived. And there were also the Renthan—large as horses, but far different, for they had tails like brushes of fluff clapped tight to their haunches; on their foreheads, single horns curved in gleaming red arcs.

These had borne us from the mountains, but they were not in any way ruled by their riders, being proudly intelligent and allies, not servants, for the Valley.

There were also the Lizard people—and of those I learned much. For I made my first friend among their number. That came about because of my own private heartache.

Crytha had come into paradise, or so she thought. She blossomed from a thin, quiet half-child, half-maid into a person strange to me. And she ever followed Dahaun, eager to learn what the lady would teach.

Imhar was constantly at the councils of the warriors, not always on the fringe as was fitting for one of his youth. He lapped up all the knowledge of war as a house mog-cat will lap at fresh milk.

For we had come into a Valley which was peace, but which was only a small cupping of that. Around us Escore boiled and seethed. Ethutur himself rode out as war herald with the Lord Kemoc Tregarth to visit the Krogan, who were water dwellers. And other heralds went forth to arouse what help would come at the rising of the banner.

There was a shaping of arms at the forge, a testing of mail, and all that stir which had been so long our portion in Estcarp. Save that now we were pitted not against men but against an unholy life totally alien to ours.

Fight I would when the time came, but in me there was a feeling of loneliness. For in all company, I had not one I could call rightly shield brother or cup mate. And Crytha was seldom in sight.

It was the day of the storm which began the true tale of Yonan, as if up to that time I had been a thing only half finished, rough-hewn, and only partly useful.

I had gone with a detachment of Lord Hervon's swordsmen, with one of the Green People as a guide, climbing up into the rocky walls which were our defense, that we might look out beyond and see what lay there, also select for the future those places from which we could best meet any attack. It had been a bright day when we began that climb, but now there were gathering clouds, and Yagath, who was our leader, eyed those with concern, saying we must return before the worst of the wind broke upon us.

The clouds (or were they of the Shadow and no true work of nature?) rolled in so fast that we hurried indeed. But it chanced I was the last in line, and, as the wind came down upon us with a roar to drown any other sound, my foot slipped. Before I could regain my balance, I slid forward, my nails breaking, my finger tips scraped raw by rock I fought to hold.

Now the dark and the wind dropped a curtain to cut me away from everything but the rock pocket into which the force of my descent had jammed my body. My mail had not served to save me from painful bruising; perhaps it had but added to that. And water poured down upon me, as if someone on the surface of the cliff above emptied one pail after another into my cramped resting place.

I pushed with all my strength and so got farther back into this temporary prison, where a rock poised above took some of the wind and rain off me. Later, I thought, I could climb, but dared not try it yet in that rush which was becoming a stream cascading down the wall to my right.

There were fierce slashes of lightning across the small portion of the sky which I could see, reminding me of the most effective weapons of the Green People—their force whips. Then came a fearful and deafening crash close by, a queer smell which made me think that lightning had indeed struck, and not too far away.

The rush of water carried with it small stones, and it did not drain fast from the crevice I occupied, though that had an open end facing outward from the Valley. So the flood lapped about my knees, and then touched my thighs. I squirmed, trying to reach a higher portion in which to crouch, but there was none.

While the drumming of the rain, the heavy boom of thunder never ended.

I was aware now, as I turned and strove to find a better shelter, that my right ankle gave out sharp thrusts of pain, enough once or twice to make me giddy. So I subsided at last, imprisoned until the storm might pass.

It was during one of those vivid flashes of lightning that I first saw an answering glint of light from the wall to my right. For a moment or two, that meant nothing, save there must be something there which reflected the flashes. Then I wriggled a little, to free my shoulder better, so I might feel along the wall.

My abraded finger tips flinched from the rough stone, then they slid onto something smooth; not only smooth, but in a way oddly cool and pleasant. In the dark, I explored my find. It seemed to be a rod of some sort, extending outward perhaps the length of my thumb and only a little larger than that digit in size. I tried to pull at it, and it seemed that it was a little loose but did not yield to the small amount of strength I could exert in my cramped position.

Yet there was something about my unseen find which kept my fingers seeking it out, touching it. That it was part of the natural rock, I doubted. It was too smooth, more like a piece of metal or crystal which had been purposefully worked. Yet the way it protruded from the native rock, with no break in that to hold it (as I was able to discover by touch), argued it could not be man-made.

The fury of the storm continued. From my constrained perch I looked out at the world beyond the valley, but the darkness kept me from seeing anything. Save here and there some glow close to ground, marking, I was sure from all I had heard, a place where a remnant of the Power force still burned. For these we had seen in our journey from the mountains, such being called to our attention. If the glow was blue that signified a point of safety where a man might shelter. But a sickly dull white, or a green, or worst of all a red shot with black—those signaled traps for our kind.

The storm cleared after what seemed to me a very long time. Now the water drained from the crevice. And the lightning no longer was laid whipwise over the hills. I edged forward from under the rock ledge which had been my shelter and tried to straighten up. My wet limbs, my wracked ankle, made such movement painful. I could feel rough

outcrops to climb, but could I put enough weight on my ankle to try that?

Then I froze. There was a sound, not of rain nor thunder—more like a skittering across the rock above me. Could one of the Dark creatures have found its way up during the cover of the flood, was it now waiting to attack me?

There came a light, a glow. By it I saw the pointed, tooth-rimmed snout of one of the Lizard folk. And then his forefeet, so much like slender, fingered hands, came into view. The light descended slowly toward me so I saw that it issued from a stone held in a mesh of delicate wire fastened on a slender cord.

The Lizard folk, like the other nonhumans, communicated by thought. But I had none of the mind touch which Crytha had so nurtured. I reached my hand and caught the caged stone. By that I could see my ankle. The boot was very tight and the leg above it swollen. I had given it a bad twist and it was plain I dare not put any weight on that.

With gestures, I tried to make my dilemma plain to my rescuer. He stared at me with jewel-bright eyes, then in a breath he was gone. For help, I hoped. Though I now began to dread that, too. My ineptness had long been a matter of rough badinage among Hervon's men. Here, on my first wall patrol, I had managed to make the worst possible showing.

With the Lizard gone, curiosity led me to duck back under the ledge and survey what I had found in the wall. When I advanced my dull light, there awoke a brilliant fire which was dazzling.

The thing was a rod right enough, fashioned of some kind of crystal which drew light. And it glowed with a bluish sheen. Yes, it projected directly out of the rock itself, but there was no mistaking that it was the product of some intelligence. Even though to find it so encased in solid rock was surprising.

I closed my other hand around it and tugged with all my might. The rod gave only a fraction. It was plain that to free it entirely, one must break the rock in which it hung. But that I would do! I must do! As the geas which had been laid on us all to bring us into Escore, I knew now that some force outside my own imagining was driving me to do this. That my find was important—that I would have sworn oath to.

Now I turned quickly—there was a further noise overhead and the Lizard man came clambering down the wall with ease. To him, this stone was an open stairway. He carried a rope coiled about one shoulder, and when he reached the bottom he made signs that I was to tie one end about me.

Thus, I found in the storm both my destiny in this long-shadowed land, and a friend—for Tsali was indeed a friend such as one could trust his life and more than his life upon.

Chapter Three

So I was pent in the Valley for a time. But the Lady Dahaun had shared her knowledge with Crytha, who brought to me a basin of bubbling red mud. This she used to make a casing for my ankle once my boot was cut away. And as its heat enclosed my flesh, the pain faded and I slept.

My dreams had never been real, nor of the kind one might name true sendings of the Power—such as favored ones of our Race have from time to time had as warnings. But this time I strode through a land which was as real as if I were waking. And in my hand I carried a sword—one fitted into my palm as firmly as if it were an extension of my own body, so that in my dream I could not imagine my life without that to hand.

Yet there was on me a great sorrow and fear, not for myself but for others. And as I went, I wept silently for a loss I could not remember and yet which was very great, weighing upon me heavier than any scout's pack. I saw that the mail I wore was broken in places and rusted by stains. While my left hand was pressed against my side, the fingers bloodied. Pain gnawed under that pressure, a pain I fought against. For there was that my body must aid me to do before I yielded to death.

Immutably death drove me; I knew that for the truth. All behind me was lost to the Shadow, save what I carried. In my dreaming mind, I knew that this sword must not fall to those who now sniffed my trail.

But I wavered, the burden of pain nigh bearing me to the ground. While that which lay before me shimmered in my sight. Time raced for me, with it my life, oozing in sluggish drops from my side. Yet my will did not yield to either time or my failing body.

The ground under my stumbling feet rose steadily, so that for all my determination, my pace slowed. Still I kept onward. Now there arose a mist before me. My lips shaped words I could not understand. Yet I knew that once I had known such and they had been to me weapons near as potent as the sword.

Perhaps it was the Power of the words which carried me past the limit of human endurance. My breath came in gasps; I could no longer master the pain eating at me, but my will still held.

I faltered at last to a halt, teetering on the lip of a drop. The mists rose from below, and I knew, in a part of my fast-dulling mind, that these were born out of what lay below—raw rock churned and set to a boil as if it were water, molten. Into this I hurled the sword. With it went out of me that strength which had kept me on my feet, brought me from the stricken field where the Shadow had triumphed.

As I crumpled to earth, knowing that now I could meet death, and did it willingly enough, I awoke. I was sweating and my hand was fast pressed to my side. I looked down, expecting still to see the blood dripping down the shattered mail. But instead my skin was smooth, unbroken. And I knew it had been a dream.

I had not been Yonan then—no. Nor could I have put name to the man I had been in

that time. But I carried with me from that dream of death one thought—that which I had found embedded in the rock on the heights was of the sword. To my hand had it once well fitted; so would it again.

However there was also in me a need to keep this secret; the reason for that I did not know. I endured Imhar's jeering at my ineptness. But, when Crytha came to inspect the casing on my ankle, I asked her concerning the Lizard man who had found me.

It was she who told me his name—Tsali—and that he was one of the scouts of the heights. I envied her her gift of communication with those other life forms and asked her to give him my thanks. But I was surprised when later that day he padded into the small shelter where I lay and squatted down beside me, watching me with his jewel-like eyes.

He stood perhaps near my shoulder in height, being large for his species. And as he squatted now on hind limbs, limber tail outthrust as a balance behind, he slipped from one wrist a cord on which white and red earth-colored beads were interstrung, counting these through his slender fingers as if he gathered something from the touch alone. I had seen his people do this before and heard some remark about it among our men—that so the Lizard folk apparently kept records among themselves.

I stared at his crested head and longed to speak—though I knew that the words I would mouth, even in the old tongue, would have no meaning. Only those of the Green People could speak mind to mind with all who shared the Light with them, against the Shadow.

Suddenly, Tsali wrapped his beads once more about his wrist and, from a pouch at the belt (which was the only thing he wore over his rainbow scaled body), he brought a piece of thin, smoothed stone about the size of my flattened palm. On this were carved lines of runes, the first intertilled with flakes of gold so that they were clearly visible, the second row with red, the last with ominous black.

I had seen such before. These were for foretelling and were used by Wise Women who had not enough of the Power to become full Witches. Yet, as Tsali held this up before my eyes, I believed that these runes were different in part.

With the plaque still in one hand, the Lizard man reached out his other to catch at my right wrist before I knew what he would do. Holding my hand with his, he raised it until my fingers slipped over the smoothness of the stone, felt the twists and turns of the deeply graven markings. Oddly enough, the stone was not cold as I thought it would be; rather warm, as if it had rested near a fire for a space.

Under my flesh the symbols brightened and grew more distinct. First, the gold, then the red, and at length, the black. Yet my flesh shrank from the last of those rows, for I well knew, even little learned in the Power that I was, that these last were signs of ill omen and despair.

Tsali had watched as the runes came to life and faded in turn, and there was about his scaled body growing tension. For it seemed that if I could not read what I brought to

brighter sparking there, he could. When at length I had pointed out the last of those symbols he took the plaque and once more stowed it away. Yet he did not leave me. Rather he leaned forward, his eyes focused on me in such a steady stare as compelled a like answer from me. Slowly, very slowly there came a faint stirring in my mind. At first that started me into flinching away from him, my astonishment so great that I could not believe that this was more than my imagination.

It was not clear mind speech between us, I was too lacking in skill to handle such as that. Rather, I could sense only a query of sorts. And that had to do with something from the far past—

But there was nothing in my past which was of note, which would send Tsali so delving into my mind. I was, perhaps, the least of the House of Hervon, and not even of the full blood of the Old Race. Or—what was I?

For one giddy moment, I seemed to whirl back into that dream when I walked to my death in order to preserve something (or destroy it); something greater than myself, yet which had been mine. And I found that even waking I remembered now in detail that climb to the lip of the cup, the loss of the sword which had been so wholly a part of me.

But that was only a dream—not of the here and now. I was not that stranger, death-stricken from an unknown battle. I was Yonan, the half-blood, the weakling—

I was—both!

How I knew this now—that I could not explain. I had heard of beliefs held by some Outlanders that, though an adept can live many lifetimes in length during his space allowed in this world, other and lesser men return, to be born again, if some task they have been set is ill done, so that they may once more choose and act. It is hoped this time for the better.

Was the inner me such a one? Had the dream been not fantasy but a far-off truth? Who could prove it yes or no? Only my dying walk was as real to me now as if I had indeed been a part of it—yesterday—or last night when I had thought I wandered in a dream.

Now I knew that I must prove that to myself. For that proof there was only one action—I must return to the cliff top, seek out that which was prisoned in the stone, and bring it forth. If I saw it, if I held it once more in my hand, then—then perhaps that knowledge that it had been mine, was meant to be mine, would come again.

There sounded a hissing from Tsali. Slight as it was, it broke my concentration. He was still watching me, but not with that compelling intensity. Now he nodded, his crest head moving gravely up and down. And I knew that, if I could not read his thought, save in the faintest degree, mine had been far more clear to him. I spoke, though I did not know if his alien ears could pick up and sort out the sounds I made into an intelligible pattern.

"I must go back—"

It would seem that he understood. For once more he nodded solemnly. And that nod had something of a promise in it, as if he intended that I must do just what I desired.

Now I was impatient for the healing of my ankle and pestered Crytha to be loose from the heavy cast of mud. Until she at last broke that and freed me. I could feel no pain, there was no swelling, no mark. And when I got to my feet, I felt nothing save what was normal.

But time to do what I wished, that was a different thing. I could not walk away from the drilling, the constant honing of our small force into a weapon for defense. Oddly enough, I had in me the strong belief that I must not share with any—save Tsali—the story of my find. So that it was after three full days of frustration and impatience that I slipped away at dawn, to once more climb the cliffs. But before I reached the first handholds, the Lizard warrior appeared out of nowhere, flashing past me up the rough stone with an agility no man possessed.

It was good that Tsali had joined me. For once aloft, I could pick out no landmark; I did not know in which direction to begin my search for the crevice into which I had so unexpectedly fallen. But it was plain Tsali did, for looking up to me and then bearing right, he made clear that he could guide me.

In the day, with no storm clouds about, the rugged heights of the Valley were very visible. There were many crevices in these peaks and they looked much alike. However, Tsali had come to a halt by one, and with a full swing of his arm, beckoned me on.

I got to my knees, peered down into the gash in the rock. From here I could see nothing. My find must lie farther back, under the half-shadow of the roof rock. To my belt I had fastened a small hammer which I had selected secretly from among the smith's tools, with it a sharp-bladed chisel. Though both were metal, I did not know how they would cut this rock.

With care I crawled down into the cut, Tsali lying belly down now on the lip of the crevice watching me with steadfast eyes. I might have missed what I sought, for it was near the color of the rock which held it. But the fact that it protruded was my aid.

Though the rod had the feel of crystal, it was opaque, gray—like any jutting knob about. How then had the lightning revealed it with a glimmer? I fitted my finger to it. Yes, it moved, but a very little. I could see, peering close, that there was a line separating it a little from the rock which enclosed it.

Delicately as I could, for I feared to break it, I began to work with chisel and hammer, tapping slowly, with care. Parts of the rock dropped away in very small and hard-won chips.

But I schooled my patience and worked with a care I have never used in any act before. It was needful that I do this—that filled my mind, possessed me fully. I was not aware of

the sun which blazed down, to make the crevice a caldron of glowing heat so that I doffed first mail shirt, then underjerkin of padded leather, and worked with my skin reddening in the force of that beam.

My hands began to shake and I leaned back against the wall of the crevice, suddenly afraid that, with some off-center blow, I might shatter what I sought. There was a hissing from above. I looked up and Tsali held down to me a bottle fashioned of the tough valley gourds.

Working out the stopper, I drank thankfully. My shoulders ached—but when I looked at the stone where I worked, my spirit was as renewed as my throat from that drink. It was indeed a sword hilt I had so painfully uncovered. I had it free now down to the cross hilt. But it would take hours more to manage the blade—if I ever could. How had any metal lasted through the heat generated by the molten rock into which my dream self had hurled this?

I put out my hand, curved my fingers, and grasped the hilt. That which I had felt in the dream once more flooded into me. This was mine! Never before had I felt so strong an impression of ownership, as if some object had been fashioned only for my own handling, to be held jealously from all others.

My grasp tightened. Without being truly aware of what I did, I pulled the hilt toward me. There was a moment of resistance, and then it came loose with such a snap that I overbalanced and fell back against the other wall of the crevice.

But—what I held was only the hilt. No blade projected, strong and keen-edged, beyond it!

My disappointment was so vast that for a second or two I could have wailed as might any child. It was mine—but what it had been was gone, lost in time and boiling rock, even as I had feared.

Still, I could not toss it from me. My fingers curled and held as if now their will was apart from mine, or else they were commanded by a part of me I did not know nor understand.

I held my find farther into the sun. Perhaps one of the valley smiths could reset it to a blade. It was not a treasure in itself that I could see. In color, the crystal of the pommel was gray, yet in the sun I caught a faint rippling of inner light. It had been worked with a carving like a scrawl of runes, perhaps to keep it from turning in the hand. However, those were so worn they were now but a pitted pattern of unreadable lines. The crossbar was of the same crystal-like material. Yet I was sure this was no crystal nor quartz of which I had knowledge.

I sighed. When I shrugged on my jerkin again, I stowed my find against my skin. A useless thing—still—there was something—

Was it a scrap of before memory which stirred deep, deep in my mind? I could not catch it. I only knew that what I held had once been as needful as life to me and that it had come once more into my hand for a purpose.

Chapter Four

In the days which followed I was tempted often to take the hilt to the smith and see if it could be fitted to any blade he had worked. Yet each time that thought came to me, I found that I could not do this. No, there had been only one blade which would fit. And time had taken that. So my find must remain useless.

But I discovered that when I slept, for some reason, I brought the hilt out (always in the dark and in secret) to hold in my hand. Did I wish to use it as a key to unlock the past? Perhaps. Though another part of me did not desire that either. Still I kept it ever with me.

Perhaps it carried with it some good fortune for a warrior. Or else growing older, and living under the sky of the Green Valley and its healing, brought about a slow change in me. I became more apt as a swordsman—once even disarming Imhar in practice. And that not by chance, for it was ever his way to make me seem awkward and without skill.

Sometimes I believed that had my secret been whole I could have confronted any man in our company and not come out the worse, battle-trained veterans as most of them were.

We of Hervon's House were not the only people to be drawn over-mountain into Escore. Others followed in time. Then we, with the Green People, went forth (for the Lady Dahaun had always knowledge, carried by her messenger birds, of those winning across the mountains.)

This land was awake, and evil paced it, save those few places guarded by remnants of the Power. Thus were we ever on guard when we ventured on an assay. It was during one such, at night, though our people encamped by a place of Light, that the Thas attacked us.

These live underground, seldom seeking the upper world, then only at night or on days well clouded. Though they had not first been reckoned among the followers of the Shadow, in these hours they listened to the call of the Dark Ones, thus becoming our enemies. During the night attack they were defeated only by an outgush of water which was brought about by Lord Kemoc and Godgar of our own troop. However, Lord Kemoc was grievously wounded and, on our riding, he was swept from us in a flood of the same water which had earlier saved us.

His loss was counted a sore one. For, though a man, he has studied the ancient records at Lormt. And it was a fact that he had called forth a summons and had been answered by one of the Great Old Ones, even though those had all been deemed gone from Escore.

His sister, the Witch Kaththea, withdrew to a place of mysteries, striving there to find some answer as to whether he lived or died. For she believed that he had not departed on the Last Road as yet.

Thus, Crytha became a closer companion to the Lady Dahaun, though she was not trained in witchcraft as had been the Lady Kaththea. So I saw even less of her. This was not a season for wedding, at least that thought heartened me. For Imhar could not claim her at a time when war raged around us.

Twice we had driven off attacks of the Dark Ones. Monstrous forms had circled the valley walls, striven to climb and bring death to all. Those Gray Ones, who are neither man nor wolf, but the worst part of both, came to harry us; other, even more alien things with them. In the sky above wheeled and battled the great Vorgs who answered the summoning of our hosts. But what sometimes fought with them were such creatures even nightmares could not spawn.

I found that Tsali took to accompanying whatever patrol on the heights I was assigned to. It followed that my companionship without words with the Lizard man became more a part of my life. When we were alone (though such times were few) he often let me know by gestures, in very dim impressions I could pick up from his thoughts, that he wanted to look upon the sword hilt. I would bring it forth (it always felt then a part of me), and he would stare at it intently.

Perhaps, I guessed, he knew more of its history, buried in the rock though it had been, than I did. How I longed to speak mind to mind and ask this. Men have their legends—perhaps the Lizard folk also had their tales from an ancient past. Maybe even one about that dying man who had not been Yonan—

I tried very hard to reach out with my thoughts, but it would seem that the talent was denied me. Yet in otherwise I was changing, as I was sure. And what might have happened had not another fate taken hand in my life I cannot fathom.

It was Crytha who brought the end to one part of my life, the beginning of another. For there came a morning when she was missing from her couch in the Lady Dahaun's hall. And the Lady of Green Silences came to Hervon's cluster of tents with a sober face. She held out her hand, on the palm of which lay an image roughly fashioned from clay. Strands of hair had been embedded in its head, a scrap of scarf Crytha favored wrapped about it in a crude robing.

The Lady Chriswitha, looking upon that thing, grew white. Her hands trembled as she reached forth a finger to touch, and yet did not dare. Then there arose such a wrath as I had never seen in her. She spat out:

"We were told that this was a safe land!"

"So was it," the Lady Dahaun returned. "This abomination was not fashioned here. I do not know how it was put within the bed place of your kin-child. I have learned that she

went forth at first dawning, telling my people she would seek a bed of Illbane to be harvested as the dew still lay upon it, making it twice as potent for healings. She appeared as always, under no compulsion; though it seems that in this she was certainly moved by another's will."

The Lady Chriswitha looked about us, as if with the eye she could see Crytha's trail. Her lips came firm together as I have seen them upon occasion, as now her fear was under deep control.

"You can follow?"

"We have followed," the Lady Dahaun replied. "But there is an end to her trail up there." She gestured toward the heights which walled in the valley.

"Why—why Crytha? And from whence came that—?" my foster mother then demanded, "She—she must be found!"

"Why Crytha? Because she is who she is—one of budding Power, as yet untrained—at an age when that Power can be used by—others. From whence it came, it has about it the stench of Thas. They possess certain talents which it now seems they are developing to a degree we have not known. As to the finding, I have tried the scrying—there is a wall against the far sight—"

I thought of the Thas I had seen during our battle with them, when they had attacked and been driven off by the gush of water. They were of the earth, smaller than men, dusky bodies covered with a growth which was tough and rootlike. As if they had indeed grown and not been born. To our eyes they were repulsive—like the legendary demons. And to think of Crytha taken by such!

In that moment I forgot I was liegeman to my lord, that I was a warrior under orders. I moved without thinking to snatch that crude image from the Lady Dahaun.

"Yonan!" The Lady Chriswitha stared at me as if I had suddenly myself taken on the guise of one of those deep earth dwellers. "What would you—?"

But I was no longer the Yonan she had fostered, the weakling who owed life to her care. In that moment, as my fist clenched around the image, I felt deep within me a stir which I had known only in my dream. I was someone else struggling for freedom, someone with more certainty of purpose than Yonan had ever possessed. I think that I was no longer a youth of little promise. Instead, two halves of me came together to make me the stronger in that uniting. I did not even answer the Lady Chriswitha, for there was a need tearing at me which I could not control.

"Where on the heights did they lose the trail?" I turned to the Lady of Green Silences, speaking to her as I would to an equal.

I saw her eyes widen as she gazed back at me. For a moment, she hesitated. As she did,

the Lady Chriswitha broke in:

"Yonan—you cannot—"

I whirled about, forgetting all courtesy. "This I will do. Either I bring Crytha back or else I die!"

It was her turn to show an astonishment which overrode even her anger and fear. "But you—"

I made a gesture of silence as I looked again to the Lady Dahaun.

"Where?" I repeated sharply.

Her eyes searched my face for what seemed to me far too long a time. Then she answered:

"No man can hunt safely through the burrows of the Thas. The earth is theirs; for them, it fights."

"So? I do not believe this. Lady." My left hand lay on my mail-clad breast and I could feel (and I knew I was not dreaming this time) a kind of throb against my body sent forth by the ancient sword hilt.

She bit upon her lower lip. Her right hand arose and in the air she traced some symbol. There was a faint light following that tracing, gone again in an instant. But now Dahaun nodded.

"The risk is yours, warrior. We dare not raid into the Thas burrows without greater protection than we have now. This act of theirs may be intended not only to gain control of a beginning talent which they hope to warp, but also to drain us of warriors needed for defense."

"One man may go without weakening your defense by much, Lady. With or without your leave will I do this thing."

"It is your choice," she returned gravely. "But this much will I warn you: if the Thas are now governed by one with the Dark Power, there is little a man can do against such. You know nothing of what you may face."

"True. But who knows when he lies down at night what the rising sun will bring tomorrow?" I countered with words which seemed to flow into my mouth by the will of that shadowy other which the touch of the hilt had awakened in me.

There was a hissing, startling us both. Tsali reared up to my left. His bright eyes met mine for a single instant before he looked on to the Lady Dahaun. I knew that between them now passed that communication I could not understand. In my hand, I squeezed

tight that ugly thing of clay, hair, and ragged cloth. I knew enough of the way of Power that this dare not be destroyed. For such a destruction might harm the one I would protect. However, it was a tie with her. Just as the sword hilt, now warm against my breast, was a tie with that other, greater self I could only dimly sense as yet.

"Tsali will go with you."

It was my turn to be surprised. Though the Lizard men were of the earth, even as those of the Green Valley, still they are not like the Thas, who hate the sun and are not at ease save in their deep burrows.

"He can be eyes for you, such as no man possesses," Dahaun continued. "And it is his free choice to do this."

Perhaps I should have refused to draw another with me into an unknown governed by the Shadow. But at that moment the part of Yonan which was still uncertain, lacking in confidence, felt a surge of relief at that promise. Alone among the Valley People, Tsali shared my secret. It did not matter that his skin was scaled, mine was smooth; that we could not speak to each other. For he could project, and I could receive, a feeling of Rightness about what I must now do.

I shouldered a bag of rations and two water gourds filled to their stopper levels, those stoppers being well pounded in. For arms, I had my sword. I would not take the dart gun, for these had very little ammunition left, and what remained must be for the defense of the Valley. The Lady Dahaun brought me a pouch which I could clip to my belt, holding some of her salves for wounds. But it was with the Lady Chriswitha, Lord Hervon still being absent on a patrol, that I had my final word before I left to face the unknown.

"She is already hand-fasted, Yonan." My foster mother spoke quickly, as if what she had to say made her uneasy and she would have this over.

"That I know."

"If Imhar were here now—"

"He would do as I am doing. But he is not, and I am."

Then she acted as she had not since I was a sickly little lad. She put her hands, one on either side of my face. The throat veil of fine mail which depended from my helm hung loose so that I could feel her touch warm on my cheeks.

"Yonan, Yonan—" She repeated my name as if she must. "What you try—may the Great Flame abide about you, hedge you in. Forgive me my blindness. She is of my own blood, even though there is in her that which is not of my spirit. For she is like the maidens of the other years, having that part in her which we thought had flickered and died, save in Estcarp. There will be always that in her which no other can possess, nor perhaps even

understand. She is my kin, however—"

"And hand-fasted to Imhar," I replied grimly. "My honor is not totally lost, even though I am not of pure blood, my Lady. She will come back, or else I will be dead. But after, I shall make no claims on her. This I swear."

There were tears in her eyes now, though she was not one who wept easily. And all she answered then was my name—

"Yonan!" But into that one word she put all she could summon to hearten me.

Chapter Five

I kept the image, tucking it into my belt and making it fast there with a thrice-knotted loop. For such things, even if they are used in the working of evil, are connected with the victims they are used against. It might be that in this rough thing of clay, rag, and hair I could find a guide.

Near midday we climbed the cliffs, following the path of those who had traced Crytha earlier. Tsali took the lead, as ever, his clawed hands and feet far more apt at this business than mine. But I had caught up to him as he paused by a deep cleft in the rock, one into which the sun, burning brightly as it did, could not far penetrate.

I lay belly down on the rock which lipped this, striving to see what lay down below. But there lay a thickness of shadow there through which only part of the rough walls was visible.

While the closer I put my face to the opening, the more I was aware of an odor, fetid and heavy, after the cool clean air of the valley. This carried the half-rotted scent of wood, fast being reduced to slimy sponge by age and water, and with that, hints of other nastiness.

I checked my pack, my weapon, before I swung over that lip, searching for hand and toe holds. The descent was rough enough to offer those in plenty. As I went that smell grew stronger. Tsali had followed me, but more slowly than usual. He wore a cord about his neck, a pouch of netting in which was a jumble of stones. As we went farther into the shadows of that ominous cutting those took fire, to give off a glow of subdued light.

The descent was a long one, far longer than I had judged, and had speculated. And, for all my care, I made what I thought was far too much noise, my boots scraping on the stone as I forced the toes into holds. Time and again I froze, flattened against the wall, listening. Yet never was there anything, save my own breathing, for Tsali made no sound at all.

However there hung about us a subtle warning of danger, the knowledge that we were indeed intruding into enemy territory. Sol strove to alert all my senses, bringing to service all that I had learned of scouting.

At last I reached a level surface. With care, I edged around on that, thinking I had merely found a ledge. But Tsali landed lightly on the same perch to my left, and held out his bag of luminous stones. By that dim light we could see that we were indeed at the bottom of a giant slash. A narrow way led both right and left, but Tsali gestured left.

Judging that he must know more of such burrows than I, that then was our choice. Though this was no smooth road, for we scrambled over loose rocks, squeezed by outjutting of the walls. What had been a crevice became a cave. When I stretched back my head to look aloft there was no longer a ribbon of sky to be seen.

Tsali pounced, using his claws to free something from a sharp rock, then held out to me a pinch of fiberlike stuff. From it arose strongly the noxious odor. I touched his find gingerly. The stuff was coarser than any hair I had ever fingered, more like fine roots. I could understand that this marked the passage of one of the Thas who had so scraped free a small portion of his body covering.

Tsali hissed and hurled the discovery from him, his gesture plainly one of scorn. I had not known before his personal feelings concerning the Thas. But with that gesture he made them plain enough. Again I longed for the power to communicate with him.

The roofing of this way dropped abruptly. Water beaded the walls around us, trickled down the stone, to puddle between the loose stones, making hazards. Luckily soon this changed and we crept along, only moisture-sleeked level rock underfoot.

Tsali's light was very limited. We could scarcely see more than a foot or so beyond us, though he held the pouch well out. Then we had to get down to our hands and knees to crawl. I put off my pack, pushing it before me. Still my shoulders brushed the roof of this passage from time to time.

Save for the smell and that tuft of hair, we came across no further signs that this was a way used by the enemy. Perhaps it had recently been opened or explored, in testing for some underground entrance to the Valley. But any such would fail, since the Green People had long ago set about their stronghold such signs of Power as none of those serving the Shadow might cross.

How long we crawled I do not know, but at length that hole gave way to a cavern, one far beyond our reckoning as to size depending upon the feeble light we had. Rows of stalagmites arose like savage fangs, to be matched by stalactites as sharp above. Tsali squatted, his head turning from side to side.

Even my senses, which were far less than his, caught the thick scent which was lying here. The Lizard man closed both hands over his pouch of light stones, shutting off even that small source of illumination. I knew that he so signaled the need for extreme caution.

I listened—so intently that it would seem all the strength of every sense I had was now channeled into one. And there was sound. Part of it I identified as a steady dripping—

perhaps from some steady, but small, fall of water.

However from farther away, much muted, came a rhythmic rise and fall of what was neither distinguishable words nor song, but which, I was sure, was not of the cave, rather of those who used it.

There was a very faint gleam to my left, Tsali had dropped one hand from the net bag. Now I felt his clawed fingers close around my wrist. With that hold he gave me a small, meaningful jerk. He wanted us to advance on out into the great blackness of the unknown.

I heard it said that the Lizard people could see above and below the range of men, able to pierce what might be to us full darkness. It would seem that I must now allow my companion to prove the right of that.

Slinging my pack back into place, I arose, Tsali beside me. Step by cautious step, we ventured on. Our path was not straight, for Tsali zigzagged, apparently to avoid the rock formations which would make this a giant maze-trap for anyone as nightblind as I. As we went that other sound grew stronger, taking on the rise and fall of a chant. But if those we hunted were within the bounds of vision they had no light to betray them.

Tsali took another sharp turn to the left. Now I could see a glow, faint, greenish, but still a break in the thick dark of the cavern. Against this the formations made misshapen rods like a grill, sometimes thick enough to veil the gleam altogether.

The chanting continued, growing ever louder—but in no tongue I knew. Somehow that sound made the skin on my body prickle with that warning which my species feel when they go up against the Shadow. Tsali crept now, dropping his hold on me, since we had the guide of that distant light. And I strove in turn to move as noiselessly as possible.

The unwholesome radiance flourished as we crouched close together to look into a second and smaller cavern. There hunched Thas, unmistakable in their ugliness. I counted at least a dozen. But rising above their misshapen forms was Crytha.

They had half-encircled her, but their low-slung heads were not turned in her direction as if they watched her. Rather they all faced toward a tall standing pillar which glistened in the light cast by stalks of lumpy growths half of the Thas held before them, as might worshippers hold candles at some shrines.

The pillar had a sleek, smooth surface facing Crytha. Now I could see that her eyes were tightly closed. Yet her face was serene, not as someone forced into action by her enemies, rather as one who moved in a dream.

Dimly I could sight something beneath that surface, as if the pillar held a captive or a treasure. The Thas wore no visible weapons. Slowly and carefully I eased my sword from its scabbard, loosed my pack to set that aside. The odds were very high, but it was Crytha who stood there, whom they had somehow claimed to do their bidding. For that she was

now engaged in some sorcery demanded by the Shadow I had no doubt at all. I surveyed the stretch of cave between me and that foul company, wondering if a surprise attack might be the answer. The Thas appeared to feel so safe in this hole of theirs that we had found no sentry. And feeling thus secure would not an attack bewilder them for just long enough?

Such odds were very slim indeed, but I could at that moment see no other action to take.

Crytha raised her hands. Though she did not touch the surface of the pillar before which she stood, she made sweeping motions, first up and down, and then back and forth. While those squatting about her continued to chant in their unknown tongue. I readied myself for a leap which I hoped would take me to the girl's side. If I could then break whatever spell they had laid upon her—

Tsali hissed. Something brushed my shoulder. I whirled. Out of the darkness behind us streamed long cords like misshapen roots. Before I understood our peril, one coiled about my ankles, to give a vicious jerk and throw me to the ground. I raised my sword in a slash meant to free myself from that bond.

The metal struck true enough, only to rebound from a surface on which no cut was visible. Even as I tried to swing again, another of those root cords snapped tight about my wrist in spite of my struggles.

Within a space of a few breaths I was both disarmed and helpless. But Tsali was still on his feet. It appeared that the cords disliked those gleaming stones which provided us with light. They feinted and tried to strike, but the Lizard man's lightning-fast weaving of the pouch kept them at bay. At length he made a leap far to the left and was gone, leaving me a prisoner.

There had been no halt in the chanting behind me. Nor, to my complete surprise, did any Thas now advance out of the dark to make sure of me. Only the cords still tightened on my body until I was totally immobile. Now I could see both ends of those, as if they had not been used as weapons, but were in some way living entities acting on their own. Yet all I saw or felt were like long unbreakable roots.

They also had an evil smell, which arose about me stiflingly. I choked and coughed, my eyes filled with tears as do those caught in acrid smoke. So the Thas had their sentries after all, such as I had never heard of. I hoped that Tsali had escaped. On him alone could I depend for help. Or would I die, smothered by this horrible stench? My head whirled dizzily as I slipped into blackness.

There were no real dreams. Rather somewhere—a long way off—a name was called. It was not a name that I knew, yet it belonged to me. And the call became more insistent.

I stirred; that calling would not be stilled. Now I opened my eyes. There was a smell of rotteness, but not strong enough to choke me senseless as before. To my right showed

a faint light. I tried to turn toward that. Something about me resisted and then broke; another puff of foul odor struck into my face like a blow, so I gasped and nearly lapsed once more into unconsciousness.

The light was above me. I swung my head farther. I lay at the foot of a pillar of—ice! The cold issuing from it was biting. But the front of the column was smooth as glass. And within—within that stood a body!

It was man-shaped, man-sized as far as I could judge. Only the face was hidden in a strange way by three diamond-shaped pieces of a gleaming metal fastened together by chains of the same substance. Two covered the eyes, the third masked the mouth, leaving only the nose and a bit of cheek on either side visible.

The head was crowned by an elaborate war helm from which a crest in the form of a jewel-eyed dragon looked down at me. And the body wore mail. While the hands were clasped on the haft of a great double-sided ax.

I levered myself up, more puffs of stench answering every moment. When I gazed down along my own body I saw that black and rotted cords were falling away. Apparently the rootlike sentries of the Thas had not too long lives. Also they had dragged me within their shrine, for I was sure this was the pillar before which they had chanted. Therefore—how soon would they return? Or had they believed me dead and so laid me here as an offering for the pillared one?

Action, not guessing, was what I needed. I pushed back from the freezing chill of the pillar and got stiffly to my feet. Perhaps I could break off part of one of the stony growths in the outer cavern, use that for a weapon. I looked longingly at the ax embedded in the ice. That was of no use to him who now held it, and perhaps far too heavy for me even if I had it to hand, but it was the only arm in sight.

I saw now that the column was not the only ice formed in this chamber. Beyond the pillar, to my right, long icicles, thicker than my wrist, depended from the roof. Some of them had sharp enough points—for weapons? I almost laughed at that idea, certainly that of a crazed man. Those would shatter at a touch—

"Tolar!"

I turned my head. Who had called that name? It was the same as had sounded through the darkness to draw me back to life again. I—I was Yonan! Yet something in me responded.

Hardly knowing what I did, I loosened the lacing of my mail shirt until I could grope beneath it, close my hand about the sword hilt, bring it forth. Here in the darkness —it glowed! The gray-white of the dull crystal came to life as strong inner fires blazed within it.

If I only had a blade!

A blade—!

My eyes went, I did not know why, save as if something so compelled them, to those long icicles which hung from the roof. And to them I went, though I knew this did not make sense. Still I selected one of those sharp points of ice, the length of a sword blade. Then I exerted force enough to break it free.

The ice snapped off cleanly as if cut. Still moving under a command I did not understand, I fitted the hilt to it. There was a burst of light which blinded me for a moment.

I might still be dreaming, or I might be indeed mad, but that which I held now was no thing of metal or ice, but a sword, perfect and balanced. It had now been called out of time itself to exist again for the sake of the Light.

Chapter Six

Now I returned to that prisoner in the block of ice. Surely he was a dead man. Still an uneasiness lingered in me as I studied him, as if, should I walk away and leave him so pent there, I would indeed be deserting a battle comrade.

I approached closer to the pillar, kicking aside the shriveled remains of the root bonds which were rotting away. There was a deep silence around me. Except in my own mind, where, very faint and faraway, sounded once more that name:

"Tolar!"

In my hand the new-knit sword did not cease to radiate light, though not with the full brilliance it had given off when I joined ice to metal. But enough to provide a torch far more effective than those stones of Tsali's, and I wondered if its gleam could betray me. Yet I could not put it aside in this place of dark mystery.

Crytha—Tsali—where were they? How could I track them through this maze? With no mind touch I would be lost as any talentless beast, unless I could gain some clue.

The smell of the Thas remained, but I could see no tracks. For underfoot was bare rock holding no print.

And my eyes were continually drawn back to that inert figure in the pillar, as if some deep compulsion tied me here—to it—rather than releasing me to the quest for the freeing of Crytha. Against my will I advanced toward the chill of that frozen column. Cold radiated from it, even as the light did from my strangely forged weapon. Yet the grip of that in my hand was warm, reassuring.

Who was this prisoner? How had he come to stand so in Thas territory? Plainly, from what I could see, he had no physical kinship with the squat, ill-formed earth people. Was

he their god? Or some ancient prisoner they had so set to mock and gloat over at intervals? Why had they brought Crytha here to perform so oddly?

Questions for which I had no answers. But, almost without conscious thought, I reached with sword point, to touch the surface of the frozen prison. As I did that, I was seized as tightly as the root things had bound me. No longer was it my will which moved me. No, another force overrode all which was Yonan.

I raised the sword, to bring it down against that pillar. One unyielding surface met another, jarring muscles along my side and shoulder. Yet I could not stop myself aiming such another blow, and a third; without any effect on either blade or pillar which I could perceive. I could not move away, held as a man in a geas, pledged to beat away at this column of ice, fruitlessly, while my body ached in answer each time the sword thudded home against the unbreakable.

Or was it breakable?

I could not be sure. Had a small network of cracks begun to spread outward from that point I had been crashing my blade against? This was the height of folly, to so fight to uncover the body of the long dead. My brain might know that well, but what moved my arm did not accept such logic.

Nine times I struck at the ice pillar. Then my arm fell to my side, so wearied by that useless labor that I could not summon strength for another blow. But—

The cracks I thought I had imagined—were there! Even as I stared, they widened, reached farther across the surface, deeper, farther—a piece of ice as large as my sweating hand flaked away, to hit the rock below with a sharp tinkle. Then another and another joined that!

I could no longer see the man within, for the cracks were so many that they starred and concealed all beyond the surface. More and more bits of ice fell out. With them came a rush of air so cold I might have faced the worst breath of the Ice Dragon. I stumbled back, enough wit and control left in me to flee the range of that blast.

Now the shattered ice flaked quickly, fell in jagged lumps. There was nothing between me and the body. While always the sword blade pulsed with light showing the stranger.

"Tolar—so long—so long—"

I would have cried out, but my tongue, my lips, my throat, could shape no real sound. Those words had not been spoken aloud, rather they broke into my mind as a great cry holding a note of triumph.

"Tolar—aid—"

There was no longer a greeting, rather a plea. And I knew whence it had come, from that

body which had been locked in ice. I moved jerkily, again as if another mind and will, roused from some unknown depth within me, was ordering my limbs—pushing that identity which was Yonan into some side pocket where its desires could not interfere.

I stooped stiffly, laid my ice sword upon the rock, and then I went forward. No longer to meet a freezing blast (perhaps that had been dissipated upon the opening of the crypt) but to reach for the shoulders of the body within.

His mail was ice-cold, the flesh beneath it seemed rocklike. But I tugged and pulled, until the masked man fell forward, near bearing me down also by the weight of his body. He was utterly stiff, as if completely frozen as the ice which had encased him.

I tugged and pulled until I had him stretched on his back, his hands still tight gripping his battle ax, his hidden face turned upward. Then I knelt beside him, wondering what I must do now. It seemed to me that no natural man could have survived that cold. But there had been adepts and men of Power in plenty in Escore in the old days. And it could have been that such as they were able to stave off death in ways we ourselves had lost record of during the years of our exile.

To warm his flesh—I had no fire here and I did not see how I could get him to the surface. Or if I wanted to! For we had been warned often by the Green People that many of those who remained outside their own Valley were more apt to be of the Shadow than of the Light. Perhaps this was some Dark lord who had fallen afoul of one of his own kind and ended so because his knowledge of the Power was less than that of his enemy. If so—we wanted none like him loosed, and what I had already done, under that strange compulsion, was to aid evil.

I peered down at him, holding out the sword, that its light, close to his body, might give me a clearer view. He was human in form as far as I could see. Which meant little enough, as the adepts had once been human, and there were also evil things which could weave hallucinations to cloud their true forms.

The helm and the mail he wore were different from any I had seen. And the ax, with its keen-edged double head, was no weapon I knew,. While those odd diamond pieces veiled his face too closely for me to judge what might lie beneath.

Now that command of my will which had brought me to free him ceased. No voice cried "Tolar" in my mind. I was again Yonan, myself. And any decision would be mine alone.

Above all I wanted to leave him here—to go out hunting Crytha. Still—

Among fighting men there are certain laws of honor by which we are bound, whether we desire it or not. If this captive was alive, if he was of the Light—then I could not leave him to the Thas again. But what was he—friend or bitter foe?

I laid down the sword, not again on the rock, but across his breast, so that the metal of its new blade rested partly on his ax. My fingers went to those chains which held in place

his mask. For it seemed to me that I must look upon his real face before I made my choice.

The chains looked frail enough, until I took them into my fingers, lifting them a little from the icy flesh against which they lay. I tugged at those which lay across the temples beneath the shadow of that dragon-crowned helm. Suddenly they gave so I was able to pull them up and away from the cold face. A second pull loosened that of the chin fastening, and I threw the whole from me.

I had so bared a human face with no distortion of evil I could detect. But then such evil can lie inwardly, too. He seemed ageless, as are all the Old Race after they reach maturity until just before their long lives come to an end, unless they fall by accident or battle.

Then—

The eyes opened!

Their stare caught and held me, my hand half out for the hilt of my sword. A very faint frown of puzzlement drew between the dark brows of that face.

"Tolar?"

Once more that name. Only now it was shaped by those lips slowly losing the blue of cold.

"I am Yonan!" I returned fiercely. No more tricks would this one play with me. I was who I was. Not a dying man in a dream—a body answering to a spirit it did not know.

His frown deepened. I felt then, and cried out, at a swift stab into my mind. He read me ruthlessly as I writhed, unable to look away. He was—

"Uruk—" He supplied a name. Then waited, his eyes searching mine, as if he expected some answer out of my memory.

I snatched the sword, drew away from him. It seemed to me at that moment that I had indeed brought to life one of the enemy. Yet I could not kill him, helpless as he was now.

"I am not—of the Shadow." His voice was husky, hoarse, like metal rusted from long disuse. "I am Uruk of the Ax. Has it been so long then that even my name is now forgot?"

"It is," I returned flatly. "I found you there." I gestured with my left hand to the pillar, keeping the sword ready in my right. "With the Thas yammering before you—"

"The Thas!" He strove to lift his head, the upper part of his body, but he struggled like a beetle thrown upon its back, unable to right itself again. "And what of the Banners of Erk, the Force of Klingheld, the battle—yes, the battle!"

I continued to shake my head at each name. "You have been long here, you who call yourself Uruk. I know of no Erk, nor Klingheld. Though we fight the Dark Ones who move freely in this Escore. We are allied with the People of Green Silences and others—with more than half the country at our throats—if they can be reached!"

There was a skittering sound, bringing me instantly around, my sword ready. And it appeared that my wariness gave that weapon power, for its blade blazed the higher. But he who spun into the open in a great leap was Tsali, hugging his net of stones still to his scaled breast.

He looked to me and then to Uruk. And it was upon Uruk he advanced. Though his mouth was open and I saw the play of his ribbon tongue, he did not hiss.

While Uruk rose now so that he supported himself on his elbows, though that action followed visible effort. Now he watched the Lizard man with the same searching stare which he had first used on me. I believed that they were in that silent communication and I was again angry that I lacked the talent. My boots crunched on the splinters of ice which had fallen from the pillar as I shifted closer to them.

Uruk broke that communion of gaze. "I understand—in part. It has been very long, and the world I know has gone. "But—" The frown of puzzlement still ridged his forehead. "Tolar—Tolar I reached. Only he could wield the ice sword. Yet I see it in your hand and you say you are not Tolar?" He made a question rather than a statement.

"I am not Tolar," I returned firmly. "The hilt of the sword I found set in a rock; by chance alone I found it. Here the Thas had taken my weapon. After, by some sorcery, I was moved to break off one of those icicles. And when I set it against the hilt—it became a full sword. I have none of the Talent, nor do I understand why this thing happened."

"That blade would not have come to your hand, nor would you have had the power to mend it," he answered slowly, "if some of that which was Tolar's Power had not passed to you. That is Ice Tongue—it serves but one man and it comes to him of its own choice. Also, it is said to carry with it some small memory of him who held it last. Or perhaps the speculations of the White Brethren may hold a germ of truth in them—that a man who has not completed his task in this world is reborn that he may do so. If it came to you—then you are the one meant to bear it in this life, no matter who you are."

Tsali had laid aside his bag of light stones, was snapping open a second pouch he had at his belt. From this he took another round object. Holding that between two claws, he began passing it down Uruk's body from the dragon helm on the man's head to the boots on his feet. From the new stone there diffused a pinkish mist to settle down upon the body he treated, sinking into the other's white, chilled flesh.

Now Uruk sat up.

"You spoke of the Thas," he said to me, and the grating hoarseness was gone from his

voice. "Thas I would meet again. And I believe that you also have a purpose in hunting them—"

Crytha!

I took even tighter hold on the blade this man from the past had called Ice Tongue.

"I do," I said quietly, but with a purpose enough to make those two words both promise and threat.

Chapter Seven

Our new companion moved jerkily at first, as if the long period since he last strode by his own will had near locked his joints. But, as we went, he stepped out more nimbly. And I saw that he turned his head from side to side, his eyes under that dragon-crowned helm alert to the dark which so pressed in upon us. Only the bared blade of Ice Tongue and the stones Tsali carried fought against that.

Once more I must trust the Lizard man as a guide, for he beckoned to us and then wove a pattern back and forth among those fangs of stalagmites, seeming entirely sure of where he went. I hoped that, having escaped the menace of the root bindings, he had followed Crytha and the party which held her when they had left me in the ice cave.

Uruk did not speak, nor did I, for I thought perhaps any sound might carry here, alerting those we sought. But I saw as I went that he began to swing the ax, first with his right hand and then the left, as if with that weapon he was equally dexterous in each hand.

The great ax of Volt which had come to Koris of Gorm—or rather he had taken it without harm from the body of Volt himself; a body which had vanished into dust once the ax was in Koris' hold—that was the only war ax I had knowledge of. It was not a weapon favored by either the Sulcarmen or the Old Race—at least within memorable time, but there was such utter confidence in this Uruk as he exercised that I was sure it had been for him the prime arm, more so than any sword or dart gun.

Questions seethed inside me. Who was Uruk, how came he to be encased in his ice prison? What part had he played during the final days of the chaos which had engulfed Escore after the adepts had enacted their irresponsible and savage games with the Power? He might be an adept himself, yet somehow I thought not. Though that he had something of the Power within him I did not doubt.

We came out of the great cavern into another one of the runs which formed the runs of the Thas. Here the smell of them was heavy. I saw the ax in my companion's hand rise, his survey of what lay about us grow even more intense.

Tsali beckoned again, bringing us into the passage. Luckily this was not one in which we had to crawl. But it was confined enough so that only one at a time could walk it. The Lizard man went first and then Uruk gave me a nod as might a commander in the field

do to a subordinate officer. With a gesture at my still-shining blade, he indicated that its light made my position in the van necessary.

The passage took several sharp turns. Where we might at present be in relation to the upper world, I could no longer even begin to guess. Once we had to edge across a finger of stone laid to bridge a dark crevice. Then I believe I could hear, far below, the gurgle of water.

Suddenly Tsali stopped. While Uruk's hand fell upon my shoulder in noiseless warning. But, dull as my hearing might be in comparison to that of the Lizard man, I could catch the sound, just as I could see a grayness. As if the passage we now followed opened into a larger and lighted space—though that light must be a very dim one indeed.

Tsali gestured once more. From here we must advance with the greatest of caution. He himself dropped to all fours, as the Lizard men seldom traveled while in the presence of humans, to scuttle on. I gripped the blade of Ice Tongue between my teeth and crept on hands and knees toward that light.

Moments later we reached the entrance to the tunnel. What lay beyond us must have once been a cave large beyond any measure I knew. But long ago there had come a break in the roof which arched over our heads, a wide crack far above any hope of reaching. And it was that break, very small in comparison with the roof itself, which emitted a light born of an exceedingly cloudy day, or of beginning twilight. So that it did very little to illumine what lay below.

This was a city—or at least a town—laid out by precise patterning. Narrow lanes running between crude buildings made by fitting rocks together into misshapen walls. These were perhaps as high as a tall man might reach, were he to stand on tiptoe. And the structures had no roofs nor windows, only a single door opening at floor level.

The Thas were here—in their boxes of houses, scattered through the narrow streets. There appeared to be a great deal of activity, centering on a round-walled building near the center of that collection of roofless huts. I heard a sharp, indrawn breath beside me and turned my head a fraction. Uruk, stretched nearly flat, but with both hands clasped about the haft of his ax, stared down into the teeming life of the Thas village, and his expression was certainly not one of curiosity nor of peace, but of a cold and determined resolve.

"They will have the girl," he said in the faintest of whispers, "in the chiefs tower. Whether we can reach her or not—"

The chiefs tower must be that edifice centrally placed. Though in the outside world I would not have named it "tower," since it stood perhaps only a little above my own height. I was more interested at the moment in those dwellings closer to where we lay.

Stones had been piled to erect those walls, yes. But I could see, by straining my sight to the uppermost, that even though those rocks had not been mortised into place by any

form of binder, they seemed to stand secure. And I remembered far back in my childhood watching a master mason lay such a dry stone wall, choosing with an almost uncanny skill just the right stone to lie next and next.

Those "streets" which wound so untidily through the settlement offered numerous possibilities for ambush. To fight on the level of the Thas, when perhaps they had more surprises such as the root ropes, would be complete folly.

Instead, I began to mark a way from one wall to another in as straight a line as I could to where Crytha must be. To climb the first wall (which was rough enough to allow hand and foot holds in plenty) and then, using all one's care, to leap to the next and the next was possible. There was only one place where that leap would force a man to extend himself, and that lay at the open space surrounding the "tower" itself.

The Thas were smaller than men. Perhaps their tallest warrior might barely top my own shoulder. But they were numerous enough to drag a man down—unless he could travel from one house wall top to another across their hidden city. And when a man is desperate, there sometimes comes a confidence which he never before believed he had.

Swiftly, I explained what I believed might be done. I spoke directly to Uruk, since I was sure that he could mind-contact Tsali far better than my clumsy gestures. The Lizard man hissed. But he made fast about his neck his bag of light stones.

I hated to leave Ice Tongue out of my hand, but I would need both of those to make such a try. So I sheathed the sword. Much of the radiance was shut off. But the hilt still showed inner, rolling stripes of alive color.

Uruk fastened his ax in such a way (he tried it twice to make sure it was positioned just right for emergencies) so that he could seize it from over one shoulder from where it rested upon his back. Having made such preparation we wriggled down the slope, going to earth time and time again, until we were behind the first of the box houses I had marked.

I could hear the guttural speech of the Thas, but not near to hand. And, although I had come to grief on the heights of the Valley during the storm, I believed that this I had to do. I pushed all thought of failure out of my mind.

The climb was as easy as I guessed and, only moments later, I reached the top of the wall. Luckily that was wide enough to give me good foot room. Tsali flashed up and past me, rounding a corner, leaping with the grace and ease of his heritage to the next wall. There was no one in the single room below, but that did not mean that we would be so lucky a second or a third time. It needed only one Thas to look aloft and spy us and then—

Resolutely, I shut such mischance out of my mind, followed Tsali. My leap was not easy or graceful as his but I landed true, to hurry in the wake of the Lizard man. Nor did I look behind to see if Uruk had followed, though once or twice I heard him expel his

breath in a short grunt.

We were three-fourths of our way toward the goal of the "tower" when we were spotted at last by one of the dwellers in a house we used so unceremoniously as a steppingstone. A shrill cry made me flinch, but I had not really believed we could win across the town without a sighting. And I thought we continued to have a chance —unless the enemy was equipped with more of those noxious roots.

Tsali had already made the next leap; I again followed. But the discovery must have shaken me more than I knew, for I teetered on the stone and had to drop and hold on lest I fall into the room below.

Now I heard cries echoed along the streets, and those I must close my ears to, concentrating only on winning to where Crytha might be. I had reached the last house. Before me was the space which I was not sure I could cross aloft. I saw Tsali sail out, alight on the tower wall, but such a leap was beyond my powers.

As I hesitated, Uruk drew up beside me. "Too far," he echoed my own thoughts aloud.

Below the Thas poured from every crooked way, massing about the doorway to the tower. There was nothing left but to fight our way through. I drew Ice Tongue. And, as if the strange blade recognized our peril and would hearten us to face it, the sword length blazed brilliantly.

From the Thas, there arose a wailing. I did not wait to see what weapon awaited me now. Instead, I leaped directly into the crowded space. At least one body was borne down by my weight, but I kept my footing. Now I waved overhead the blazing sword. It made a humming sound, nor did the light of its blade dim.

Thas cowered away from me, crying out, raising hands to shade their eyes. Then Uruk drew level with me, ax ready in hand. His appearance was a greater blow for the earth men. They fought, yes. Some died, by sword, by ax, but it would seem that the sight of our two weapons, or perhaps us also, had weakened their morale. I heard Uruk chanting as he swung the ax, though the words I could not understand. In that moment, another flash came out of that dream-life. Surely we had fought so before. And Ice Tongue, that was born of water, could tear away the earth.

We pushed our way to the door of the tower. As we reached it, Tsali edged forth from its interior, walking backward. His eyes were fixed on Crytha behind. He drew her as he might lead a horse forced to obey by pressure on the reins.

Her face was without expression, her eyes were still closed as if she slept. Uruk edged beside her. Before I could move or protest, his arm encircled her slight form; he raised her across his shoulder, leaving his right arm free to wield the ax, while the girl lay as limp as the dead in his grasp.

Now Tsali joined the battle. From his belt pouch, he scooped handfuls of powder which

he hurled into the faces of those Thas who ringed us around. They cried out, then hands dropped clubs and spears, to cover their eyes as if blinded.

We could not take to the wall tops again, and the largest body of the Thas stood between us and that passage by which we had come. Uruk assumed command now.

"This way." His order was confident, as if he knew exactly what he did. Because I could offer nothing better, I had to go with him.

We retreated, doggedly, not down a lane—but into the tower itself, which to me was arrogant folly. But Uruk, still holding Crytha and the ax, while Tsali and I stood ready to defend the door, looked about him as might a man who knew very well what he should do.

"At least this has not changed," he said. "Hold the door, Tolar—I do not think they have found the below way after all."

He laid Crytha on the rock floor, to give a mighty shove with his shoulder against a low table which occupied the middle of the room. When that did not move, he raised his ax, to bring it down with a force I could almost feel. Under the blade, the table split, cracked into pieces, which he kicked aside impatiently.

Then I heard hissing from Tsali and swung around to bare the sword at gathering Thas. They had brought pieces of rock which they held like shields to hide their eyes while behind those they advanced grimly.

"Come!" Tsali remained to throw a last handful of his potent dust into the air. That formed a small cloud, moved out over the Thas, and sifted down. By so we gained a short breathing space. Where the table had stood there was revealed a rectangle of dark. Uruk, with Crytha once more over his shoulder, dropped waist-deep into it.

"Hurry!"

I sped with Tsali to that opening and we crowded through, though my feet must have been very close to Uruk's fingers. The descent was not long. Our stones and the sword gave us light enough to see that we stood in another way leading into the dark.

"Take her—" I had barely time enough to catch Crytha, steady her against me. Uruk re-imb that stair to jerk down the trap door. I heard the pounding of his ax and saw that he was jamming into place bars I thought nothing might break.

"So—" I heard him laugh through the gloom. "It would seem that a man never really forgets what he needs to know. Now, Tolar who is Yonan." He descended the ladder again. "We walk ways which were old before the Thas came to play vermin in these hills. And I believe we can walk them safely. Shall we go?"

Though Crytha remained in her trancelike state, Tsali could control her in part. So, as we

threaded through very ancient corridors which time itself must have forgotten, she walked on her own two feet. Also, the longer we journeyed so, the more she came back to life. When, at last, we came to the end of a final, long passage and Uruk pressed his hands here and there on the wall, she was near awake, knowing me and Tsali, though she seemed uneasy with Uruk.

The stone which barred our way slipped aside with a harsh grating, letting us out into the world above. I looked around, searching for a familiar landmark. And sighted one such directly above. We were again on the mountain wall of the Green Valley. Once back there, the Lady Dahaun could surely bring about the complete healing of Crytha.

Uruk tossed his ax into the air, caught it by the haft.

"It is good to be alive—again," he said.

My fingers caressed the hilt of Ice Tongue. "It is good to be alive," I agreed. I still did not know what kind of ally I had unwittingly brought into our ranks, but that he was a friend I no longer doubted. No more than I doubted that I could face battle as readily as any of my kin. And with such a sword—what might a man live to do? A confidence I had never before known swelled within me.