

SWORD OF LOST BATTLES

by Andre Norton

Chapter One

In the morning light there seemed no shadow able to threaten this land. Below, the cup of the Green Valley lay alive under the touch of the sun with something akin to the glint of a great jewel. While for the four of us on the heights—or at least to three of our company—this held all the promise of welcome and safety we believe possible in this badly riven and disturbed country.

I reached out to Crytha, forgetting at that moment I had no right to claim more of her than common comradeship, or at the most, such affection as she might hold in her heart for a brother. For she was already promised to Imhar, son to my foster lord, Hervon. I was only Yonan, near the least of his household liegemen; though at my birth his lady had opened her heart and arms to me.

But Crytha's arms hung at her side. She did not look toward me. Rather she stood with her teeth set upon her lower lip, blinking her eyes slowly, as might one awakening after a puzzling dream. That she had been completely ensorcelled by the Thas, who had stolen her for purposes of their own because she possessed in part some of the Talent of the Power, that I had known from the moment I had seen her with those deep-earth dwellers in my quest for her freedom. In my belt pouch I could, if I would, still find that lumpy figure of clay, hair, and rag which had lain secretly in her bed to draw her to their purposes.

It was Tsali, the Lizard man, who had used the mind touch to control her as we fought our way clear of the Thas. But during the last part of our journey it had appeared she was regaining her full senses. Though to us so far she had not spoken.

Now I dared to break the silence between us:

"Crytha?"

Very slowly her head turned, allowing her eyes to meet mine. But her stare awakened fear in me, there being no depths in that gaze. She still looked inward, I guessed, not outward, and that by her free choice.

"Crytha!" I repeated with an urgency which I hoped would reach her ear as I could not myself reach her by thought.

Now something did stir deep in her eyes. The frown of a puzzled child ridged her forehead. She shook her head as if to banish so the sound of her name as I had uttered it. Then she spoke, hardly above a whisper:

"Tolar—"

"No!" I flung up my sword hand between us. That name haunted me, come out of a dead dream, out of the past. Just as I had felt a stranger move within my mind, take command of my body, when I had brought to being again the uncanny sword which now rode on my hip, seemingly whether I willed it so or no. Such a strange sword, newly forged by some Power from a hilt once bound in a rock centuries old, and a length of ice I had broken free from a cave wall. Yet it fitted my hand as if it had been fashioned only for me.

"I am Yonan!" I near shouted that.

She gave a whimper, and shrank back from me. Tsali, in one of his flickers of speed, pushed between us, hissing at me. The fourth of our company spoke first.

He had lagged behind as we came to the inner rim of the Valley wall, as if reluctant to take our path, and yet, because he knew no other, he was drawn to us.

Uruk—and who was Uruk? He had been a prisoner of the Thas, set for what must have been generations of time (as we mortals knew it) within the heart of an ice pillar in one of their innermost caverns. It was my strange sword, which he himself had named "Ice Tongue," that had freed him when that stranger battling for recognition within me had forced my attack against the pillar with the blade. And he had also called me "Tolar."

He stood now, studying me from beneath the shadow of his helm on which hunched the jewel-eyed dragon of his crest, his great ax resting head down upon the rock, but still gripped by both his hands. My uneasiness again awoke as I stared defiantly back. He must have been an ancient enemy of the Thas, yes. But that did not necessarily mean, in these days of war, that the enemy of an enemy was a friend or an ally. And of Uruk, in truth, I knew very little.

"She has been far under the Shadow," he said. "Perhaps she so gained a clearer sight than most—"

"I am Yonan," I said grimly. Now I jerked Ice Tongue from my scabbard, and I would have hurled the blade from me. But I could not.

"You hold Ice Tongue," Uruk said. "Having been born again, it carries its own geas. And that has been transferred to you—whatever you may be or how you name yourself. It is one of the Four Great Weapons, and so it chooses its own master."

With my other hand I fought to unflex my fingers, break the hold they kept upon the crystal hilt, which was no longer clouded, as it had been when first I found it, but rather shone with that sparkling of light which had fired up in it when the blade had been once more fitted to the grip. But I knew within me that there was no use in what I tried; I was not the master, but rather the servant of what I carried. And, unless I could learn the mastery I lacked, then I would—

I saw Uruk nodding and knew that he could read my thoughts, as could any wielder of the Power.

"Time is a serpent, coiled and recoiled upon itself many times over. It can be that a man may, by some chance or geas, slip from that one coil which is his own, into another. If this happens he can only accept—for there is no return."

"Tolar out of HaHarc—" Crytha was nodding too, as if she had the answer to some puzzle at last.

HaHarc? That was a tumbled ruin which lay beyond the Valley, a place so eroded by time (and perhaps beaten by the Shadow) that no living man could make sure which was house, which was road, if he passed among its shattered blocks.

Men said that the hills themselves had danced when it fell; but that they danced to a piping out of the dark. Even the legend concerning it now was a very tattered one.

"I am Yonan!" I slammed Ice Tongue back into my sheath. "HaHarc is long dead, and those who lived there are forgotten by man and monster alike."

"So HaHarc is gone," Uruk spoke musingly. He no longer watched me so closely; rather he looked into the Valley lying below us. "And this is your stronghold, Tolar-turned-Yonan?"

"It is the stronghold of the People of Green Silences, their allies, and we who come over-mountain."

"Those are they who now come then?" He freed one hand from the hilt of his ax, to make a slight gesture downward. And I saw that a party was indeed climbing the rock wall toward us.

Crytha gave a sudden little sigh and sat down, as if her legs could bear her no farther. And Tsali flashed away, down to meet those climbers. When I would have moved to follow him that I might speed help for Crytha, I discovered I could not go any nearer to the drop than where I still stood.

In me there was a rise of fear. The valley was guarded, not only by the valor of those within its walls, but by most ancient and strongest signs of the Power. If any carried on him the brand of the Shadow, he dared not cross its lip, unless he was an adept of the Dark.

Which I was not—not of the Shadow! Unless—I looked at Uruk and my lips flattened against my teeth. I had freed this man against my will, but I had done so. Was he of the Dark, such an act would have besmirched me also.

"You—!"

He did not give me time to add to that threat, or accusation. In answer he strode past me, lowering himself a little over the rock rim, only to return and bend over Crytha, lifting her gently to lean against him, where I was helpless to move.

Fear and rage warred in me. It was plain then that the danger to those of the Valley lay not in Uruk—but somehow in me—or in the sword! Yet the hilt of that I had dug out of the very rock of its walls, and that had accompanied me down into the heart of our defense, meeting then with no barrier. Save that I had dreamed thereafter, horribly, of how it had come to an end and me—or someone who had once been me—with it.

Now I set, with trembling fingers, to the unlatching of the buckle of my sword belt. I could try once more to rid me of this encumbrance, this threat to the Yonan who was. Perhaps if I did not touch the sword itself I could succeed.

And it would seem that in that speculation I was right, for when sword and belt fell from me, I could step over them to the same cliff edge as Uruk had done. But I heard his voice from behind me:

"No man can so easily set aside the fate laid upon him!"

"So." I snarled like a snow cat, my anger blazing high as I had seldom felt it before. "We shall see!"

I would kick this sword, send it flying back, away from this place. The rock broke in many crevices; let it fall into one such and be buried, even as the hilt had been hidden before.

But, before I could move, those from below reached us. The Lady Dahaun moved quickly, nearly as swiftly as Tsali, and she was the first to reach us. Behind her came Lord Kyllan and with him, Imhar, and three others—two of the Green People, one of our own men.

Crytha pulled away from Uruk with a weak cry of joy, such as I would have given the pain of a wound to hear had it been uttered for me. She fled into the open arms of the Lady Dahaun; there she wept with sobs which tore at her young body.

The Lady Dahaun whispered gently and that sobbing ceased. But Lord Kyllan, with Imhar at his shoulder, moved forward to face Uruk and me. And it was to my companion that they looked the first, their glances flitting quickly by me.

Uruk was smiling, a small smile which lifted lips alone and did not reach his watchful eyes. I saw that Lord Kyllan was as much on guard in his own way. But Imhar scowled. However, neither was the first to break silence—it was as if they were not quite sure which words to choose at this moment.

It was Uruk who spoke, and not to them, but directly to the Lady Dahaun. He swung up his ax, holding its double blade at the level of his breast in what was plainly a salute.

"Hail, Lady of the Green Silences—Merhart that was!"

Still holding Crytha close to her, she raised her head to stare at him as if she would reach his every thought.

"It has been long since that name passed the lips of any being—"

"So I have guessed, Lady. But it has been long since I was able to walk this earth. Whether you be in truth she who bore that name, or one come later of her bloodline, still you must know me."

She nodded gravely. "Uruk of the Ax. But the years fled past have been very many."

He shrugged. "To me they were a dream. I was captive to Targi—one of his choicer jests, or so he thought it. I have even been a god—to the Thas—if one can conceive of the Thas wishing a god to bow to. But I would guess that even this long toll of years you speak of has not yet resolved our warring."

"That is so. For a while we dwelt in the waste, to allow the Shadow to grow dim, rent by its own many furies. Most of the Great Ones are gone. But what some of them left spots the land now as diseased fungi will spot once solid wood. And the war sword has gone forth to raise us again."

Uruk laughed. "Then it would seem that I have been roused in time. Uruk of the Ax never refused battle."

Lord Kyllan broke in then, and I believed he still looked at Uruk with small favor and more suspicion.

"This man is truly of our belief, Dahaun?"

"He is a legend," she replied. "And legends grow—"

"Out of proportion in truth," Uruk broke in to end her answer. "Yes, Lord, I am not of the Shadow. Once I was master of a city; I led a province of this land into battle. What I am now is a single pair of arms, a head with some old skills of war hidden among my thoughts, and this." He lifted the ax a fraction higher. "It is one of the Four Weapons. And," now he swung a fraction, pointing with his chin at me, "there stands he who can hold another—Ice Tongue has been reborn in his hands!"

I heard the Lady Dahaun draw a swift breath. She looked from me to the sword and belt I had shed, and then back to me again. There was a little wonder in her eyes, which speedily became measurement.

"The Sword of Lost Battles— " she said.

"Yes. And this young lord has just discovered the first of its secrets—that it cannot pass your protection runes."

"I will not have it!" I cried out and would have kicked it far from me as I had planned to do. But the Lady Dahaun shook her head slowly.

"You can leave it here," she said, "yet it will not leave you. Each of the Four Weapons chooses but one owner, in time to become one with that man. But this one has an ill geas on it. It was meant to serve the Light, but there was a flaw in its forging. It brings ill to him who carries it—to the cause in which it is carried. Yet it is not of the Shadow as we know and hates all of the Dark."

"Yes," Uruk added, "until it be returned to its source it is ill-fated. But who says that the time of return may not come now?"

I shook my head and moved away from the sword determinedly. "Let it lie then. We need no ill luck. And I am no time master to meddle with the Power or the past. Let it lie and rust into nothingness where it is."

And I thrust my right hand into my armpit and held it there, for at that moment my very flesh rebelled against me and my fingers would go forth against my will to pick up once more that ill-omened blade.

Chapter Two

The fire danced high, its light touching now on this face among our company, now that. For there had been a gathering of all those of authority, both small and large, within the Valley. The Lady Dahaun and Lord Ethutur of the Green People, Lord Kyllan and Lord Hervon from over-mountain, he who led the Renthans, and Verlong, the winged, also the chief of the Lizard men. And together with them had come their chief warriors, spreading fan-wise back into a dark where the flame light did not reach. Among the first rank sat Uruk, his ax across his knees, with never one hand nor the other far from it.

Between her fingers, the Lady Dahaun held that figure of clay and hair and rag which had drawn Crytha from our protection to the Thas. And the eyes in that company fastened on what she held.

"It would seem," Ethutur broke the small silence which had lain for a space on us, "that our protection is not as secure as we believed it. For such a thing could not have come into this place otherwise."

I clasped my hands tightly before me. My right palm itched; the fingers kept cramping as if they would hold something. In me a hunger gnawed, a hunger I must fight with all my strength. For I had done as I had sworn. Ice Tongue lay where I had dropped it on the heights above and I would have no regrets—no regrets!

"This," the Lady Dahaun balanced the ugly talisman on one palm, "was not fashioned

beyond our walls, but within them."

At that saying, our uneasy glances swept from face to face around our circle. Would she tell us now that among us was a traitor? Yet how could that be? Who had enough strength of the Dark Power to pass the barriers so often renewed and set to our defense?

"The clay," she continued, "is of the brookside; this hair is from the head of Crytha, as is this also hers." She flicked with one finger tip the rag twisted around the image.

"Who—" Lord Kyllan's hand was on his sword hilt. His face, young-seeming as it was, was grim and set as if he looked ahead to some battle wherein he might go down to defeat.

"Crytha." Her answer came so quietly that it took me two or three breaths of time to understand. And then I would have protested, but before me was Lord Hervon.

"Why, Lady, would she fashion a trap in which to entangle herself? This is not sense, but folly!"

"She did not fashion it, my lord, not knowingly. But this maiden of your house has more talent within her than we realized. Untrained, the Power can harm as well as aid. She had drawn upon what lies within her eagerly, as a man drinks at a pool of clear water when thirst torments him, foreseeing no evil in her acts since all she desired was for good. She is a born healer of great promise. But no talent is single in one, and where Power opens the door and there are no safeguards, then there can creep in that which we fear most.

"Those safeguards we have set to make invulnerable this Valley work against physical invasion. But some subtle brain has devised a way of reaching out along a level of mind which is not guarded, which cannot be detected, except by the training which those of the Talent use as their shields."

"Such a questing thought will not trouble us who are so shielded. But it can influence—and without their knowledge or understanding—those who have not such shields. Fear not, now that this evil has so revealed itself it cannot use her again as a tool in its hand. Uruk"—she spoke directly to him—"who holds the Thas within his hand?"

He did not answer at once. And when he did, he spoke musingly as if he himself faced some riddle.

"Lady, you say I am but legend in this new world of yours. I lived in another time and a different Escore. My enemy there was Targi. The Thas paid him some liegeship—enough to let him use their burrows for my prison. But Targi—" He shook his head slowly now. "I have not sniffed out any of his mischief since I was freed. If he lives—" He slapped his hand flat down upon the head of the ax. "I would know it! We are too bound in enmity for me not to do so."

"Targi was slain in Emnin." The words came from my lips, but they were not mine. I saw all those in the company turn their eyes, startled, toward me. "It was the Lost Battle." That which was not Yonan continued. "Lost for the Banners of Eft, for the Fellowship of HaHarc. Yet the Shadow was also driven back; no side could claim victory on that day."

My sword hand flew to my lips, covering them. I was shaken by this sudden arousal of that other. And was well aware that those on either side of me withdrew a little as if I were revealed as an unclean enemy. Yet I had thrown away Ice Tongue—I was Yonan!

I saw that Ethutur regarded me with a frown. His lips moved as if he would speak, but the Lady Dahaun checked him with a gesture. Then she raised her hand and traced in the air certain symbols. As green fire they blazed, and then the green became blue. While it seemed to me that I whirled giddily across the fire between us, that all which was me hung in midair, naked and defenseless before those signs of her witchery.

"Who are you?" I saw her lips move to shape the words, but they sounded very faint and far away. Some mighty chasm now stretched between us.

I struggled. Yonan—I was Yonan! But I heard my own voice answer in the same thin and faded tone of far distance.

"Tolar—Tolar of Ice Tongue."

"And what would you here, Tolar?" came her second question.

"The past must be erased, the evil geas broken."

"And this is your will, Tolar?"

"I have no will in this. It is a geas which has been laid upon me, that my failure be redressed and time rewoven."

I—or that substance which was part of me—no longer hung before the Lady of Green Silences. Rather I was back once more in my own body. But I no longer sat among the people of Hervon. Rather, I had moved into the open, so that the breath of the flame nearly scorched my boots. I knew, bitterly, that he whom I had fought so hard to destroy was now fully awake within me. I had no longer a place here, but must be about some strange and terrifying quest which held little contact with the world I had always known.

"I must return." My lips felt stiff. In spite of the heat of the fire I was chilled, as I had been when I had hacked open the ice pillar of the Thas to free Uruk. And in me at that moment there arose the conviction that I went to death itself, yet I could not prevail otherwise against the compulsion which moved me.

Uruk arose. "This hosting is mine, also. For though the craft of Targi prevented my fighting aforetime, it shall not now. Lady"—once more he saluted Dahaun with the ax—"we go into the dark; think of us with fair wishing, for our path will be very strange and

the dangers along it such as few men have ever experienced."

"Boy—" I was aware Lord Hervon was beside me, his hand grasping my sword arm. There was a growing pain in my right hand, a pain which would never leave me until once more I clasped Ice Tongue and carried through what that uncanny sword, and this stranger within me, wished. "Yonan—what will you do?"

I sensed concern in his tone. And that part of me which was still the youth he knew gathered a measure of courage from his thought of me. But so small a part of my person was now Yonan it might have been that a stranger spoke those words.

"My Lord." I gave him full courtesy; to me he now seemed as far away as our voices had earlier sounded. "I go where I must go, do what must be done. For I am what Ice Tongue has made me, and it I shall serve until once more comes the end. Perhaps this time"—small hope struggled within me—"the end will be a better one." Yet memory overclouded that hope, as I knew again the sharp pains of my wounded body as I had dragged myself to that place into which I might fling the sword, lest evil find it and turn it to a still greater danger.

His hand fell from my arm. While that company moved out and back, leaving a path into the dark, away from the cheer of the fire. Down that steadily darkening way I walked, and shoulder to shoulder with me, Uruk. While within me something was stricken and began to die. When it was truly dead I would be a man without hope, with only the geas left to move me on.

Though it was dark my hands and feet seemed to find for themselves the way to climb the cliffs. And I went upward with greater speed and ease than I had ever gone before. Dimly I heard the movements of Uruk to my right. I felt no comfort in his company, he was too much a part of this thing which held me prisoner—which was killing Yonan as surely as if it tore open his breast to slit his heart.

When we reached the top of that way I saw the light and it drew me. The sword I had discarded had a torchlike hilt. I stooped and picked up the belt, buckling it once more about me. Then I fingered the grip, to find it warm, not chill as normal crystal.

For the first time since we had left the fire, Uruk spoke. He did not make a question of that word, it was rather as if he affirmed a resolve.

"HaHarc."

"HaHarc," I echoed in agreement. As yet that stranger (he whom they called Tolar) was not in full control of my mind, only of my will and body. I did not have his memories—except in fleeting, time-broken pictures. But when Uruk had uttered that name, then I knew it for our goal.

But we were not to reach those near-forgotten ruins unchallenged. For, as we made our way down the opposite wall of the mountain encirclement, my skin seemed to prickle

between my shoulders; I found myself sniffing the air. listening. Evil was abroad in the night—and the menace it exuded was strong enough to awake every instinct of caution. I could not throw away my life, rather must I live for the veiled purpose to be demanded of me.

It seemed that my hearing was keener, that I had other and new senses which brought me strong intimations of danger waiting below. And in the moment there flashed into my mind words—a thought not my own—

"Those of the Shadow move—"

But I had none of the Talent; how could I have caught this warning? No, Yonan had no Talent, but what did I know of the gifts and strengths of Tolar?

A rising puff of wind carried to us a thick stench. Not Thas, no—Gray Ones. Those runners on evil roads who were neither man nor beast, but the worst of each wedded into one. I paused in my descent to listen.

A faint scratching at the rock—not directly below but farther to my right. I peered down into a well of blackness. Then I saw the pallid blink of eyes which had a vile radiance of their own as they were raised to mine.

"Move to the left." Once more that mental message came clearly. "There is a ledge. I already stand upon it."

The Gray Ones made no sound. I set myself to exploring handholds to my left. There were enough to give me easy passage. Only moments later my feet found a firm surface and I could let go of those holds, turn to face outward.

"They are not silent hunters usually," my companion continued his soundless communication. "There are but five." He mentioned that as if five of the Gray Ones meant nothing at all to armed men. At that I wondered, fleetingly.

I saw the betraying eyes below. They moved steadily along what must be the base of the cliff, perhaps the height of a man—a little more—until they were again beneath us. I drew Ice Tongue.

It was as if I had suddenly produced a torch, limited though that illumination was. And in my hand, the sword itself gave forth a sound so strange that had not my fingers clung to it willessly I might have dropped it.

The songsmiths who tell and retell our legends, keeping alive so much which is long since gone otherwise from the world of men, speak at times of "singing swords," marvelous blades which give forth a shrill song when they are battle-ready. But Ice Tongue—snarled! There was no other word to describe the sound it made.

And its snarl was echoed from below. A dark bulk sprang up toward us. Not a Gray One,

for it showed no lighted eye discs.

Uruk moved and, in the light of my blade, I saw his ax descend into that black mass, heard a horrible howling as the creature, whatever it might be, fell back and away. Now the Gray Ones leaped up, as if maddened into stupidity by the wounding of their battle comrade. For our position above them gave us a superiority which no sane creature would have ignored.

Again Ice Tongue snarled as I cut down at a misshapen head, felt flesh give, bone shatter. They leaped to reach us as if they were frenzied, compelled to attack in spite of the fact that we could so well deal with them from where we stood.

Thus in the dark we slew and slew again. Screams and whimpers arose from below us. But we twain voiced no war cries. Nor did Ice Tongue "speak" by my will or training, but as if it, itself, had such a hatred for those below that it must vent that in force.

At length, Uruk's thought came to me, "Enough. They are dead."

I leaned on the bared sword, searching for any telltale flash of luminous eye, listening for any sound. But the night was now both black and still. I felt myself weary, drained, as if Ice Tongue had drawn upon my very spirit.

"We must move," Uruk added. And in me, too, a feeling of urgency warred with that weariness. "Those here have their masters, who will soon know that they are dead."

We followed the ledge on for a little and found at length that it narrowed so that we must descend once more. And, when, at last, the ground was under our feet, Uruk turned sharply away from the scene of our struggle.

"HaHarc—" he said. "We are not yet masters of time."

What he meant I did not yet guess, but I wiped Ice Tongue on a rough clump of grass and followed him, though I kept that blade bare and ready as I tramped along.

Chapter Three

Though there was no moon and the stars were very far away, affording no light at all, yet we two strode through the night even as we had left the fire in the Valley, shoulder to shoulder. We might well be following some torch-illuminated path. In me there was a certainty as if my mind saw instead of my eyes. Yet another part of me was ever on sentry duty against what might slink behind on our trail.

I had been tired when we had returned from the venture in the burrows of the Thas. My rest had been but a short one before we had been summoned to that council. Yet now I had no feeling of fatigue, only a burning desire to get ahead with what must be done. Though the nature of that act, whatever it might be, was still hidden from me.

Uruk did not break the silence between us, with either thought or speech. The Lady Dahaun had called him legend, but she had accepted him at once, which meant he was not of the Shadow. And he had known Tolar—yet I was afraid to try to recall any early tie between us. Yonan still flickered faintly within me, his fear enough to impose this last desperate restraint.

If evil did sniff behind us that night, it kept its distance well. Perhaps the slaughter we had wrought at the base of the cliff made the enemy wary. Or maybe they would entice us on in our folly well away from the Valley so that we would be easy meat for them. Dully, I wondered which of these guesses was nearest to the truth as I went, ever on guard.

That wan light of gray which is the first awakening of the morning rendered visible a wild, churned land. Some chaotic movement of the earth had had its way here. Uruk slowed. I saw his helmed head move right to left and back again, as if he sought a sign which was missing.

Now we must weave a path through a choking of brush and shrub which grew up about tumblers of dark blocks of stone. Still, when I surveyed this with half-closed, measuring eyes, I could see patterns—as if buildings of mist and fog spiraled upward from those battered remains, and roads opened for us.

Uruk paused. When I looked at him I saw his face set, his mouth grim-lipped. He searched the ruins ahead with a fierce, compelling stare as if he would tear out of them by the force of his will alone some mighty secret.

"HaHarc—" He did not use the mind touch, rather spoke aloud as if he could not quite believe in what he saw. Then he swung the ax, and there was rage in that swing as he brought the weapon down, to decapitate a thin bush. He might have been striking out against all the past with that useless blow.

For a long moment he stood, the withered leaves and branches he had cut still lying on the ground, the blade which had severed them pressing their wreckage into a drift of soil. Then he shook his head. Once more he stared about him intently and I sensed that he sought some landmark which was very needful for whatever he was to do here. But my battle with that other within me had begun once again, and I felt suddenly drained of strength, of any care concerning what might lie ahead.

Uruk moved forward, but hesitantly, not with the swift purpose he had shown before. It could be that, fronted by these ruins, he had lost some landmark which he needed. Still we wove a way among blocks, pushing through the growth, though now I followed behind him.

The valley which had held HaHarc was narrow at its entrance. I could mark in the growing light that it had been closed here by a wall or fortification running from one side of the heights to the other. Though the stones of that building were so cast about that it would appear the land itself had shaken off that bondage, as indeed it must have done.

Past that point, the way before us widened and those structures which had been divorced from the walls showed taller, less tumbled. The stone was darkly weathered. Still here and there, even in the gray of early dawn, I could sight remnants of carving. Sometimes I had to close my eyes for a breath or two because I could also see the mist curdle, raise, bring back ghostly shadows of what must have been.

We stumbled upon a street, still paved, though drifted with soil which had given rootage to grass, some small bushes. This ran straight into the heart of the destroyed fortress city. For I knew without being told that before its destruction HaHarc had indeed been both. Like the Green Valley, in its day it had stood as a stout oasis of safety against the Shadow.

On Uruk tramped, now facing straight ahead, as if he had at last found the landmark he sought. Thus we came at length upon an open space where the ruins walled in a circling of stone blocks, tilted and fissured now. At regular intervals about this had been set up, on the inner side of that circle, monoliths, carved with runes, headed by time-eroded heads; some of men and some of beasts, strange, and yet menacing—but in their way no more menacing than those creatures of intelligence who comaraded the People of Green Silences.

Some had fallen outward, to shatter on the pavement. But others leaned this way or that, still on their bases. And two or three stood firmly upright. Within the guardianship of these there was another building, which, in spite of its now much broken and fallen walls, I think had been tower-tall. And the stone of its making was different from that I had seen elsewhere in the ruins—for it was that dull blue which marked those islands of safety throughout Escore, the blue we had been taught to watch for during any foraying as a possible place of defense.

Once more Uruk stopped, this time facing a gateway in the tower. Had there ever been any barrier of a door there, that was long since gone. I could see through the opening into a dim chamber, wherein blocks fallen from the higher stories were piled untidily.

"Tower of Iuchar— " Again he spoke aloud and his voice, though he had not raised it, echoed oddly back, "Iuchar, Iuchar."

My other memory struggled for freedom. Iuchar—I had known—

A man—tall as Uruk—yet not one I had seen in the body, no. Rather he was—what? A ghost which could be summoned at will to hearten people, who in the later days of HaHarc needed strongly some such symbol to reassure them in a war they sensed was already near lost? Iuchar of HaHarc. Once he had lived—for very long had he been dead—dead!

I denied Iuchar, for all his tower. Uruk, leaning a little on his ax, turned his head toward me. I saw his eyes beneath the rim of his dragon-crested helm. They held a somber anger.

"Iuchar—" he repeated the name once more, to be echoed. He might so have been uttering a warning to me.

Then he raised the ax in formal salute to that travesty of a tower. And I found myself willed by that other to draw Ice Tongue also, and give with it a gesture toward the open doorway.

Uruk went forward, and I followed. We passed beneath that wide portal. And I saw on the walls without the traces of flame, as if Iuchar's tower had once been the heart of some great conflagration. But within—

I halted just beyond the portal. In my hands Ice Tongue blazed, and there was an answering fire running along the double blades of Uruk's ax. There was an energy in this place, a flow of some kind of Power which made the skin tingle, the mind wince and try to escape its probing. However badly time and disaster had treated HaHarc, in this, its very heart, the Light held, fiercely demanding. Bringing with it a fear which was not born of the Shadow, but rather a foretaste of some great demand upon courage and spirit, from which he who was merely human must flinch.

But there was no evading that demand. My hands shook and Ice Tongue quivered from that shaking. But I did not drop the sword, that I could not have done. Uruk had moved on until he stood in the very center of that circular chamber, and now he turned and beckoned to me.

Unhappily, but realizing that I could not resist what had lain here so long waiting, I took three or four long strides to join him. No earth had drifted here, the stone under our boots was clean; for those rocks which had fallen from above lay close to the walls. It might have been that the force which flung here determined to keep the core of its hold clear. Now I saw that the pavement was crossed and recrossed by lines, into which some dust had shifted, so that the pattern they fashioned was not to be too clearly defined.

Uruk took his ax, and, going down on one knee, he used one of the blades with infinite care, scraping away that shifting of ancient dust, to make plain that we stood within a star. While again moved by the stirring of that other will which had become an inner part of me, I used the tip of Ice Tongue in a like manner, bringing into clarity certain runes and symbols, all different, which had been wrought near each of the points of that star. Two I recognized; those the Valley used for its safeguarding; the others—I could have opened Tolar's memory perhaps, but stubbornly I resisted.

While always about us, pressing in upon mind and will, was that sense of waiting Power. Had any of it drained during the ages of HaHarc's loss? It did not seem so to me. Rather I thought that it had stored energy, waiting impatiently for the release we were bringing, if unwillingly on my part.

His task done, Uruk arose and gestured again to me.

"The fires—"

I knew what he meant, though the logic of Yonan denied that this could be done—even while the sword of Tolar moved to do it.

I passed slowly around within the star, reaching out with Ice Tongue. And with that ice-turned-uncanny-metal I touched the tip of each point of the star set in the rock. From that touch sprouted fire—a fire unfed by any lamp, or even any fuel, burning upward unnaturally out of the blue rock itself.

Then Uruk raised the ax high and his voice boomed as might the gong in one of the shrines tended by the Witches. I did not understand the words he intoned, I do not think perhaps that even that long-ago Tolar would have known them. To each adept his own mystery, and I was certain that Tolar had never been one of the Great Ones of Escore.

If Uruk was (but somehow that I doubted also), at least he had given no other sign of such. But that he could summon something here I had no doubt. From those points of flame my own sword had awakened into being there now spread a haze— sideways— though the flames of blue still arose pillarwise toward the broken roof above us. And that haze thickened.

As Uruk's voice rose, fell, rose again, the wall of mist grew thicker. I sensed that out of our sight, hidden behind that, presences were assembling—coming and going —uniting in some action which Uruk demanded of them. I kept Ice Tongue bared and ready in my hand, though the Tolar part of me felt secure. Excitement was hot along my veins, quickened my breathing.

The mist had risen to fill the chamber save within the star where we stood. My head felt giddy. I had to tense my body to remain standing; for I had an odd idea that outside the mist the whole world wheeled about and about in a mad dance no human would dare to see, or seeing, believe in.

Uruk's chanting grew softer once again. He dropped the ax, head down, against the floor, leaned on its haft as if he needed some support. His whole body suggested such strain, a draining of energy, that, without thinking, I took a step which brought me to his side, so that I could set my left arm around his shoulders. And he suffered my aid as if he needed it at that moment.

His words came in a hoarse, strained voice, and finally they died away to silence. I saw that his eyes were closed. Sweat ran in runnels down his cheeks to drip from his jaw line. He wavered, so I exerted more strength to keep him on his feet, sensing that this must be done.

The fires on the star points flickered lower, drawing in that mist, in some way consuming it. There were tatters in the fog now, holes through which a man could see. But I did not sight the fallen blocks, the same chamber in which we had entered. Now the floor was

clear, and there was other light beyond our flames, flowing from lamps set in niches. Between those lamps strips of tapestry hung, the colors muted perhaps, but still visible enough, blue, green, a metallic golden yellow, with a glitter, as if the real precious metal had been drawn out into thread to be so woven.

Then the star fires flashed out as if a giant's breath had blown them altogether. We were left in the glow of the lamps, while beyond the open doorway shone the brightness of the sun. I saw near that door a table and on it a flagon and goblets.

Steadying Uruk, who walked as if he were nearly spent, I brought him to that table. Laying Ice Tongue on its surface, I used my free hand to pour pale liquid from the flagon into one of the cups, then held that to my companion's lips. His face was drawn, his eyes were closed. But he gulped at what I offered as if he needed that to retain life within him.

And as he drank I heard sounds—voices, the hum of a town. I looked over Uruk's shoulder. As the room had changed, so had HaHarc. My hands shook as I realized what must have happened. We were—back!

No!

Tolar memory no longer warred with Yonan, but with its own self. I could not—I could not live this again! The pain from my first dream shot through my body as I remembered, only too vividly, what the past had held then, and now it had returned to face me—no!

Chapter Four

There was no brightness in this day. Dusky clouds covered in part the sky, while from the ground mist curled like smoke from uncountable campfires. Thick and evil was that mist, eye could not pierce its billows, nor could any mind send exploring thought through it. Thus we knew it was born of wizardry and what it held was truly the enemy.

I stood with Uruk, with others who wore battle mail and helms fantastically crowned by this and that legendary creature. To most of them the self I once was could give names, yet we did not speak one with the other. Our silence was as thick as the mist below on the plain.

Uruk shifted his weight. I could guess what was in his mind, for memory had returned to me full force—Tolar memory. But that was also a memory which stretched into the future. This was the Lost Battle. Though I could not see them, I could count over in that memory the names—and species—who gathered within the mist below.

What task lay upon Uruk and me now was something which I believed no man, nor adept, had tried before. Could we, knowing what we did, alter the past? Or would we be slaves to it—marched on to face once more the same fates which had overtaken the men of HaHarc in the long ago?

Though I had searched my small gleaning of legendary lore, I had never chanced upon any tale of time travel, of the ability to so alter what had been. And if we were so fortunate—what would be the result? Would HaHarc later fall to some other Power from the Dark?

Time—what was time? A measurement we ourselves forced upon the world, counting first by light and dark, then perhaps by the building of cities, the reigns of notable lords. Time now stood still as we drew our battle line and watched the forward creep of the fog.

"Be ready." Uruk's half-whisper reached my ears only because we stood shoulder to shoulder. It was coming —my skin crawled, my body tensed—the first of our chances to fight memory reached out to us. My mouth seemed overfull with saliva. I swallowed and swallowed again.

If we were not the puppets of time—then—

There was a sudden swirl in the mist. A dark figure strode through its curtain. Manlike, it stood erect. But it was not human.

"Targi's familiar—" Uruk's ax lifted slowly, very slowly.

Memory supplied what was going to happen now. In the before Uruk had met that creature, slain it—and then the fog had taken him. I watched, waiting for the pattern to grip him now. I saw him sway, as if some force pulled at him strongly.

"No!" His voice was as loud as a battle cry. "I play not this game the second time!"

I heard the men about us stir, mutter, and knew that stares of astonishment were aimed at him. For them there was no coil in time; this happened in the here and now, not in the distant past.

The thing which was Targi's servant was fully in the open. It was thick-bodied, wearing no mail, covered only by a wiry pelt of coarse, tangled hair. Its head was both feline and apeish in contour, and it snarled, its lips curling back to show tusks. Its great paws were clawed, and in one it carried a short spear with long, serrated metal for a head.

Those with us still looked to Uruk. We could all catch the challenge now. The thing below did not issue that. It was only a vessel which carried Targi's hate. Its legs were bowed as if by the great weight of the barrel of its body, and it rocked a little from side to side as it came.

No, the challenge shot into our minds, as a burning fury of battle lust and red hate. I saw men surge forward, ready to break our line on the heights, drawn by that defiance in a way they could not control. So had it happened before—

But Uruk did not stir. He must be using all his own Power—for still he wavered forward a step or two jerkily. On him was that challenge centering. Once he had answered it, not

realizing then what it meant.

"No!" The word broke again from between his teeth. His eyes were aflame by the rage aroused in him, rage which perhaps (even knowing to what fate it would deliver him) he could not long continue to control.

If Uruk went to meet that thing it would die—but we would also lose our small advantage bought of memory. This was the first test set the twain of us.

And if Uruk did not go? Two men were already running downslope, heading to answer that overwhelming challenge. While those about and behind us were muttering, watching Uruk with unbelieving eyes. They might all break, dash forward into that mist. Only Uruk could hold them from such folly. But—

I was running. Without taking any straight thought, I headed for the beast, whose ears went flat like those of an angry cat—spittle flecked about its fangs. Ice Tongue swung free in my hand, and again I heard the snarl which was its own battle cry. As I neared Targi's servant, fear was a weight on me. The hairy thing towered well above me in height; that weapon it was swinging up might shatter the sword I held if blade met blade—of that I was sure.

There were more dark forms breaking through the curtain of the mist. I heard a human voice scream, but I dared not look save at the monster before me. Tolar had not done this before. In so little might I indeed disjoint the flow of the past.

I did not think, it was rather that something outside myself commanded my body. The thing lumbered on, its awkward-seeming pace much swifter than I had guessed. I dropped to one knee. Ice Tongue slipped through my hand even as the full force of that hate which moved the enemy switched from Uruk at last, to beat at me, an unseen weapon worse than any forged steel.

Did I cry out my horror and fear when that mind thrust struck me? This is one memory I cannot search and find. But I used my sword, not as I would have in decent and honorable open battle. Instead I hurled it as one might a throwing knife.

It was not balanced for such work, yet the impetus of my throw carried it true to target. I saw the point of the flaming blade strike into the creature's swaying paunch, not biting deep enough perhaps to count, but cutting skin and flesh.

The shaggy thing paused, staring down at the sword piercing into its body. Its left hand caught at the blade. Then it threw back its head and howled, its red eyes coals of sullen fire. I felt its pain—but my own spirit leaped. It could not bear to touch that blade. The Power which had wrought Ice Tongue was utterly enemy to any of the Shadow.

Now the monster swung its weapon, not to reach me as yet, but to batter at the sword. One of those serrated edges caught at the hilt and jerked it free from the thing's body. Ice Tongue whirled away to my left.

I threw myself, with such force that my body skidded along the ground, the tough grass sleeked by tendrils of escaping mist aiding me. But just as I reached the blade, put out my hand to close about the hilt, a great clawed foot stamped down upon my wrist. The weight of the beast towering over me, the stench of its body, near laid me open to panic. So—if I did not die in one way from the Lost Battle, I would in another. We might not alter that final reckoning, even if we turned back time.

Straining to turn my head, I endeavored to make myself face death as it came by the hands of Targi's servant. There was shouting around us, yet I was not aware of any other caught in that struggle. My world had narrowed to the hulking shape hunched over me. Blood dribbled from the gaping wound in its belly. It tossed away its weapon. One hand strove to close that wound; the other, claws ready to pierce me, mail and flesh alike, descended to tear me apart. I fought madly against that pressing weight on my wrist. Then some saving sense took command. Instead of struggling I went down limp, as if easy meat for this nightmare.

Only my left hand caught at Ice Tongue. I had time for a single act. In my fingers the blade cut at my palm; still I had no choice. I pushed up a little to stab at that descending paw.

Perhaps the force of the blow the creature aimed at me added to the success of my desperate defense. For the point impaled the paw even as it had cut the paunch.

The thing squawked, jerked up its paw, drawing by so the cutting edge of the sword grievously cut my palm. I could not hold on. So I had to watch helplessly as, with a shake of the fist, it again freed itself from Ice Tongue, sending the sword flying out of my sight.

Now it raised its other great foot, the one it balanced upon grinding my wrist into the ground so that the pain made me dizzy. I knew what the thing planned to do. One mighty stamp with that other foot and I would be as smashed as an insect under a boot sole.

I had no defense. I could not even see well, since the pain from my pinned wrist and lower arm drew a red haze between me and that very certain death. Yet the smashing blow I expected did not fall. Instead the beast reeled away, back from me. I heard it give a grunting howl and its body crashed not too far away, blood pumping from a huge wound in its throat. For its deformed head had been almost, but not quite, severed from its neck.

"No!" In spite of the wave of pain from my wrist and the other hand which streamed blood, I held on to consciousness. There was no mistaking the swing of that ax. To save my life (or perhaps because the ancient compulsion had indeed been greater than he could withstand) Uruk had followed the pattern of the past—he had killed Targi's servant.

I saw him go into a half crouch, his ax once more at ready. Somehow I levered myself up on the elbow of my injured forearm, though each movement was like a stab into my shrinking flesh. Ice Tongue—?

Then I saw something else—something which whirled out of the mist. I found voice enough to warn:

"Behind you!"

Uruk whirled with a skill born from long hours of training. His ax was up as he turned. Something dark, ropelike, hit the blade of that, dropped limply away again, severed. But it was only the first of such attacks. He ducked and struck, ducked and struck again and again. Then, in backward stumble to elude a larger one of those flying cords, he tripped against the body of Targi's servant. Before he could right himself one of the cords snapped home about his arms, drawing them together though he fought in vain to get ax blade against them. I knew those living ropes—Thas' work! Now I got to my knees, holding my broken wrist tight against my body. My other hand was sticky with my own blood—to move it or my fingers was torment. But—

Just beyond where Uruk struggled and fought for liberty, I saw something else. Ice Tongue was standing, point into the ground. Its hilt was a light to guide me. Somehow I tottered to my feet, skirted the severed root which still wriggled, reached the sword. I could not close either hand about its hilt. Giddy, I went once more to my knees, leaned closer to the shining blade. My mouth gaped wide. I bent my head sideways and caught the hilt between my jaws.

It took effort to work it free of the soil. Then I had it. Uruk—I turned around. He was now completely prisoner; even the severed ends of roots crept to weave their lengths about him though he struggled and heaved.

I did not have strength to get to my feet again. Rather, on my knees, I crossed the space between-us.

"Your hands— " I aimed the thought at him.

I saw his eyes go wide as they found me. He lay still as I moved toward him. The mist had not parted, but we could hear shouts, screams, and the sound of weapon against weapon. In spite of all our plans and hopes, the men of HaHarc had been drawn into Targi's chosen battlefield. Uruk free might make the difference; his orders they would follow.

I reached his side. The hilt of Ice Tongue wavered in my mouth. Any blow I could deliver with it would have little force. I now possessed only one small hope. Targi's creature had not been able to touch it; might it then have the same effect on the living ropes?

Bending my head, I pressed the point of the blade into the root which had so ensnared Uruk's arms. I had no strength, the point would not penetrate—my gamble had no

hope—

But—

The root under the point of the sword wiggled, strove to elude that touch, light as it was. I fought grimly to bring all the pressure I could bear on it at that point. Suddenly, as if the metal had sawn through tough hide to reach a core no tougher than mud, the point sank in.

Like the living thing I more than half believed it was, the root snapped loose from its hold on Uruk's wrist to strike upward at my shoulder and caught. I could no longer hold Ice Tongue. The sword fell from my mouth. In its falling it clanged against the head of Uruk's ax. Now the ax blazed under that touch as the sword had upon occasion.

As I slumped forward, the roots writhed away from that blaze, reaching instead for me, clinging and squeezing, where they clung, with a kind of vindictive anger. But I saw Uruk swing the ax once more, slicing through what was left of his bonds.

Just as he won to his feet, had half turned toward me, the fog gave up another form and with it smaller things I knew of old. Thas! While he about whom those clustered—

I heard Uruk's cry:

"Targi!"

Chapter Five

As his dead servant, this Lord of the Dark towered above the smaller Thas. He was a figure brought out of some tomb—his dark mail dull, bedewed by the condensing mist. But his head was bare, and he carried no weapon save a slender black rod, topped by the bleached-bone skull of some small animal. His skin was a pallid white, showing the more so because of the darkness of his mail. And his hair, which grew in a brush like the mane of a Renthan, was brilliantly red. Tongues of fire might so appear to rise from his long skull, for that hair bristled erect.

Nor was his face entirely human. It bore no expression now—only the eyes were alive And in them boiled such a fury as no man could show. Uruk was on his feet, his ax ablaze as I had seen Ice Tongue. That blade lay on the ground. I saw a Thas dart to seize it, leap backward again with a guttural cry. I held on to consciousness with all my strength.

"Well met." Uruk's voice did not soar to a shout, yet it carried even through the din of the mist-shrouded valley. "This match of ours is long overdue, Targi."

There was no answer from the sorcerer, nor did the deadness of his bleached face show life. But he paused and I saw his eyes go from Uruk to the ax.

"You are a dead man." The words burst in my mind, coldly, shaped without emotion behind them, formed with such a vast self-confidence as struck at the beginning hope which had sprung in me. For by this much had we altered the past—Uruk was not prisoner to the commander of the Thas.

I then saw Uruk laugh, though I could not hear the sound of his laughter. The two of them had forgotten me. Hugging still my broken wrist against me, I strove to pull myself up. There was a flick across my body. One of the root cords looped there. I plucked at it feebly with my wounded hand. Then the Thas closed in, though they did not drag me from the field. Rather stood about me, watching their master and Uruk.

One of them gave a coughing grunt and fell. I saw the end of a dart between his shoulders. Then the others scattered, or threw themselves to the ground, striving thus to present the smallest of targets. I saw a Gray One lope from the mist. He stood watching for a moment, his tongue lolling from his fanged jaws. Then he sheered away. It would seem that Targi was to be left to his own actions.

The black wand wove a pattern in the air between the Dark One and Uruk. But the latter raised his ax and slashed down, his target not yet the man, nor even the wand. Rather that weapon was used to cut through the air whereon reddish symbols shown. As the ax passed, they did break into wisps of mist, blood-dyed in color.

I could have cried out at what filled my mind—syllables roared there. It was as if my thoughts were shattered before I could shape them, dashed and broken. Targi—what man could stand so to the spells Targi could command?

There was one—Tolar was of this time, he had been shaped by the knowledge of such as Targi. But—Yonan had not. And—

I was Yonan!

Deep I reached, fighting against the pain of both body and mind, seeking that other who knew not Targi, nor HaHarc, nor this world. Yonan who had none of the talent—could I hide behind his very lack, that lack which I had half resented all my life, at this moment?

My head was a battlefield. The will of the sorcerer might be aimed principally at Uruk, but some of his compulsion spilled into my mind, churned and obscured my thoughts. I concentrated, first on pain, summoning the pain of my hand, my wrist, to dwell upon it, surrender to it. While behind my embrace of that pain of body, I sought for Yonan.

He was buried—as near death as any personality might approach before the final flickering out of identity. I was Yonan! And over Yonan men long dead had no dominion, no matter how potent their talent might be. I was Yonan!

My pain I cherished, used it as a barrier while I sought to nourish into life that small spark from the far future.

"Yonan!" So did I call upon my other self.

Targi raised his wand, pointed it at Uruk. In spite of my own efforts I could sense, through every nerve in my battered body, even through the mind I sought to fortify against his sorcery, how he was drawing Power to him. It was almost visible to the eye, that Power.

Still Uruk swung the ax back and forth before him, touching nothing tangible. It might be that in that ceaseless swing he erected some barrier against the other's attack. And, slowly, he moved forward.

I felt Thas' crooked hands on me, drawing my bound body to one side, as they kept well away from the space between those two. The forces there might well be lethal to lesser beings. I was Yonan—momentarily I had been diverted from my own quest within. No, I dared not relax my poor protection again. Waves of that force had lapped against me, bringing a black despair so great that, had I been free and Ice Tongue within my reach, I would have turned its blade upon myself. Who can stand against such as Targi's assured thought? Master of Power that he was, who else could put himself forward as an enemy?

The very body in the dull black mail seemed to swell, to grow. The eyes of Targi were twin flaming suns under the still-clouded sky. And this man who would front him — who was he to challenge the strength of Targi! That demand burst redly in my mind.

"Who am I, Targi? I am what you yourself made me." Uruk spoke aloud, as if he would not touch minds with the sorcerer. In that way instinct told me danger did indeed lie. "To each evil, Targi, there is an answer. It would seem that we are so paired." Once more his ax swung.

Now the Dark One no longer painted his blood runes on the open air. He drew the wand between the fingers of his left hand. And I saw, yes, in truth I saw it—unless it was some ensorcellment which touched and held my mind —that the skull which crowned it opened its fleshless jaws and from that issued a shrill keening.

The pain I had called upon for my defense became at that moment my bane. It arose in a red agony, pulsing in answer to the keening of the skull. And I saw the Thas cower on the ground, their gnarled hands, which looked so much like twisted twigs, tight held over their ears.

Did Uruk's swing of ax slow? I could not be sure. Now Targi balanced the wand as a man balances a light throwing spear. Even the Tolar part of me did not know what would happen should that weapon of the Shadow strike Uruk. But that it would be more potent than any steel—that I could guess.

Ice Tongue—I glanced at the sword, which lay with its glittering blade belying the grayness of the day and the fog. It was far from me now as if it did indeed abide in another age.

Ice Tongue obeyed but one master—had not Uruk said that once? How well did it obey? Dared I—dared I let Yonan retreat from part mastery within me? I believed that now Targi's awareness was centered on Uruk; I had only to fear the side lash of the power he might use against the axman. Tolar—and Ice Tongue. Oddly enough I had not tried to explore before what that stranger within me knew of his forceful weapon. I did not know—

No, that was false! Tolar leapt into command within my memory. Ice Tongue—one of the Four—it became part of him who took it—but only if he were the one to whom it would answer. There were things about the sword which even Tolar had only heard rumored.

Taking a great chance, I fought against the wall of pain I had so carefully erected as my defense. I opened wide once more the door for Tolar.

Though the Thas squatted about me and I was surely their prisoner, my mind was not bound. I willed my attention only at the sword.

Ice Tongue! Of my desire and need I feverishly wove a cord as strong and supple as the root ropes. I was not even aware at that moment that what I would do was utterly beyond any knowledge of Yonan's, even of Tolar's. In the world where I lay now existed only two things—Ice Tongue and my will.

I had heard much spoken of the disciplines those who wield the Power must set upon themselves, of the years they must work to bring into their hands the reins of illusion and ensorcellment. Yet they were then able, by pouring energy into the right channel, to make the earth itself obey them—even though they might die, burned out, in the doing of it.

Ice Tongue—

Was indeed that blade blazing brighter, glowing like a narrow stream of fire in the grass trampled down by our struggle? I closed off all surmises, everything but my driving will. It was like shutting all the doors along a corridor, so that one's mind dwelt only upon what lay at the far end.

Ice Tongue—

In my sight the sword appeared to grow, no longer fitting the hand of any true man—rather such a weapon as only a giant might swing. And it began to move—

For a moment a small tinge of triumph broke my concentration; I was quick to wall that off. All which lay within me, which I called "will," "desire," "determination," must be focused on what I would do.

Ice Tongue! I put into that silent call the full strength I could summon, sending forth that order silently but still as strong with any Talent Tolar might possess.

The blade slid forward, as if indeed my thought was a cord or one of the root ropes looped about its hilt.

It came between Uruk and Targi. The Dark One still balanced his wand as a spear, but he had not yet thrown it. Or did he need to throw it; was he rather aiming its full energy? Uruk was forced back one step and then a second.

Ice Tongue!

I put into my unvoiced command the last distillation of all I had called upon, that faculty I had not even known I possessed until I put it to this final test.

The sword gave a kind of jerk, its point rising though the glowing crystal of the hilt still rested on the ground. It arose so—and fell again as the energy drained out of me far too swiftly. But it fell toward Targi, striking across his foot.

There was a bolt of force no one could see, but which struck straight into the mind my efforts had left wide open. I had a single instant to think that this was death—then there was nothing at all.

But if death were nothingness it did not claim me. For pain sought me out first, and I could not set that aside. It filled me with a deep torment. Then I became aware of a touch on my forehead between my eyes. At first that touch, light as it was (though it was firm enough), added to my pain, which throbbed and beat, making of me a cringing animal who had no hiding place.

Then, from that touch, there spread a coolness, a dampening of the fires of my agony. Little by little pain subsided, though it left me apprehensive even as it went for fear that raging torment would be unleashed again. But the coolness which came now was like rain on long-dried soil, soaking in, strengthening me. I opened my eyes.

Above me was a sky still drably gray. But hanging over me was a face which my dulled, exhausted mind could remember.

"Uruk?"

I must have shaped his name with my stiff lips, but he read it, and some of the frown which the rim of his helm nearly hid smoothed out.

Memory came limping back. I shaped a second name:

"Targi?" Only to see the frown once more return.

'We were cheated in so much—he lives,' he said aloud, as if mind touch was somehow not to be used. I thought I could guess why—my brain felt bruised, shaken. Perhaps it was as wounded as my body had been and to have entered it would have driven me mad.

"Where—?"

"He wrought an illusion in the end and escaped in it. But there is no safety with Targi free."

"The Lost Battle—?" Memory again stirred and somehow hurt, so I winced. "We changed that. When Targi fled, those who followed him did also."

"But before he did die." My memories were mixed. When I tried to think clearly, to sort one from the other, the process made me giddy and ill.

"Not this time. In so much we altered time, comrade. But whether for the better after all"—Uruk shrugged—"how can we tell? This much I know, Targi must be our meat."

"Why—?" I found it too hard to voice my question. But he must have read it even in the chaos which now mixed memory with memory.

"Why did he go? That was your doing, Tolar. Your sword upon his foot disturbed his spell casting. The Power reflected back on him, as it will when any ensorcelling is incomplete. He fled the death he would have drawn on us. But he is master enough to win sometime and build therein his own spell. We can only now be hounds on his trail."

I closed my eyes. At that moment I could command neither my body nor my shrinking mind. I wanted only darkness once again, and some mercy gave it to me.

Chapter Six

My wrist was stiff-set, with a splint to keep it so; my other hand had been treated with the healing mud to which both man and animal turned when there was need. Ice Tongue was sheathed at my side. But we were still in the past, the Valley of HaHarc behind us—the open countryside before. And if the clouds were gone, and the sun shone there, yet it still seemed that there was a shadow between us and its warmth and encouragement.

Tolar had no more memory to lend me now. For we had changed the course of action—I had not lurched, death-smitten, from that fog of Targi's brewing to destroy my blade and die hopeless and helpless among the rocks. Nor could I now have much in Yonan to call upon either. Though I had tried with all my determination to learn the ways of war, yet here and now I was like a green youth who had never ridden on his first hosting.

A little apart stood Uruk, leaning on his ax. And though he stared straight into the day, I thought that he saw nothing of what lay before us; rather his mind moved in another fashion—questing—

There had been those of HaHarc who had volunteered to back us; still that Uruk utterly refused. It would seem that the hunting of Targi lay upon the twain of us alone.

"He will go to the Thas." Uruk spoke for the first time, that unseeing stare not breaking.
"He will seek his heart—"

"His heart?" I echoed. For in these moments of supreme effort when I had commanded Ice Tongue I believed I had burned out of me most of Tolar memory—even as the Witches of Estcarp burned away their controls when they set the southern mountains to shivering down on Karsten invaders.

Uruk blinked, the masklike brooding left his features. "His heart—that part of him which is his talisman and the core of his strength, He would not risk that in battle, not even with us, whom he deemed so much the lesser. But if he would replenish his Power, then he must seek it to re-energize what he has exhausted."

"To the Thas? We seek them underground?"

Uruk blinked for the third time. "Where else? And we march into a trap if we do so. He will expect our coming, lay his own ambushes, and dispose of his forces to defeat us. Already he has spun a maze through which no thought can penetrate for our sure guide. And he will strive to take us—by body, or by that part of us he wishes the most to control—our minds. This is a wager of high Forces, comrade. The result may fall as easily against us as in our favor—perhaps even the former is more likely."

"Before when his body died," Uruk mused, "his inner essence was helplessly pent where he had concealed it. I remember." The ax shifted a little in his hands. "Why think you he had me kept living in that pillar? He needed a body—but somehow the Thas failed him in that ploy. Perhaps that was why they took your Valley maid, sensing in her some hint of talent which might accomplish what they themselves could not do."

I recalled vividly that scene Tsali and I had witnessed in the cave where Crytha, completely under some spell, had confronted the pillar which had imprisoned Uruk. That—had that been a part of the attempt at transference Uruk now spoke of frankly?

Now, too, I thought of those roots which were obedient to the men of deep earth, of the darkness of their burrows, of the fact that we possessed no guide. On the other side of the scale lay even heavier my conviction that Uruk was entirely right—we must destroy this Targi in one time or the other. And it would seem that fate itself had decided it would be in the past.

My bandaged wrist—I could still hold Ice Tongue in my newly healed hand, but I was not ambidextrous in battle. And in any sudden attack I would doubtless prove a hindrance. Still the sword itself, as I had had good proof, was a potent against the Thas.

"When do we go? And where?" My voice sounded weary in my own ears. Yonan, who knew so little and in his life had lacked so much confidence in himself, asked that.

"We go now," Uruk returned. "And Ice Tongue can sniff out the door to any Thas burrow for us. It is in my mind they core these hills now, perhaps striving to weaken the very

walls of the earth beneath in order to bring an end to HaHarc."

There was more than a ring of truth in that. I thought fleetingly of the old legend that someone—or something—had piped and HaHarc's walls had tumbled in answer. If there existed a honeycomb of tunnels running beneath those upper walls, such might indeed have come to pass.

So we went forth from the place where the mist had hidden the valley of the battle. The bodies of our own slain had already been gathered, laid on a pyre of honor, and reduced to clean ashes.

The Dark Ones had been also so dealt with—but with no honor paid them. For all men knew that some of the Dark Lords could reanimate the dead, though no spirit returned to bide behind their empty eyes. Rather the raised dead were clumsy tools, difficult to use, for they must be eternally held to any task set them.

Gray Ones, monsters—and some were men, so like those I had known all my life that meeting them I might not have realized they had sold themselves to the Great Dark.

Though the bodies were gone there was a litter of weapons still to be garnered, and a squad of men of HaHarc was about the harvesting of those. Those, as they moved, looked straightly at us, but none questioned where we went nor what we would do.

There were tracks cutting the soil, some left by hooves, others by the clawed, half-human feet of the Gray Ones. Also there were trenches, slimed within, smelling vilely, as if what had impressed those upon the once clean earth had crawled upon their bellies after the fashion of giant slugs.

It was only for a short space that Uruk followed this plain trail of those who had fled the battleground. He was heading, I was sure, for a line of hillocks, very small beside the ranges which protected the valley behind us, yet heaped high enough to form landmarks.

And one, I noted under this weak and wayward sun, had three tall stones planted on it, seeming like the bolls of trees whose branches had long ago been riven away by some storm wind. These were not of that sleek blue stone which marked the "safe" islands. Rather the stone was strange to the eye, being much pitted and of a rusty red.

I found I had a dislike for those stones, and the closer we advanced to them, the more my uneasiness and distaste grew. Now I swallowed, as does one who strives to conquer nausea. Ice Tongue, which I had drawn and carried awkwardly in my left hand, still gave forth a light discernible even in the sunlight. Now, through my grip on its hilt, there spread in me a kind of warning.

"Where—?" I dared to break the silence between us. But Uruk neither glanced at me nor spoke. His strides were deliberately measured. Yet there was no hesitation as he climbed the hillock toward those ominous pillars.

Ice Tongue moved in my hold. The point dipped as I climbed, trying to keep up with the axman. I have seen the Wise Women locate water, or things of metal long underground, how their rods then turn in their hands without their willing, pointing to the proper spot in the earth.

So it seemed that this sword out of time now acted in a like manner. I would not have had the strength to force it up and away from the earth which lay at the foot of the red pillars. Uruk was right again; in such a way the Sword of Lost Battles was our guide.

I noticed that Uruk passed the first of the pillars with care as if he wished no part of him or his clothing or armor to touch its forbidding surface. By the second stone he stopped. Ice Tongue pointed in my own grip at the ground beneath my boots. I had to struggle with the blade to keep that hold, for it fought as if the metal had a will of its own and would bury its point into that spot of earth.

Uruk's lips curved in were more a snarl than a smile. "Did I not say so?" he asked. "We have found what we have sought, the door to a burrow. But I think such doors are not for the wary. It would be best we choose our own entrance to Targi's runways. Do you try to trace if it runs beyond this point."

I fought with the sword, finally forcing it away from that point where it seemed to wish to bury itself. Uruk edged by the first of the three pillars, seeking the opposite downward side of the slope. Now he stepped back to let me take the lead.

The sword continued to point earthward, and Uruk uttered a sound close to a harsh laughter.

"So goes it then." He glanced back, measuring the distance from that last pillar. And then he gave a swift nod, as if answering some question of his own which he had not voiced aloud. Raising the ax, he aimed a blow, one with all the weight of his trained strength behind it, at the slope of the hillock.

The metal edge of one head bit deep, gashing the turf, throwing clods of it broadcast. A second and a third time Uruk sent the ax against the hillside. The fourth time it broke through in a small place, loose earth shifting into the hole he had so uncovered.

It took very little more ax work to clear a space so that I could lie belly down and lower Ice Tongue slowly into that opening. The sun did little to pierce the hole, but the gleam of the blade showed that this was perhaps not a cavern, but rather a tunnel in the earth, large enough for us to force a way through.

With a deep breath, walling swiftly from my mind all the warnings lest I not be able to go at all, I set Ice Tongue between my teeth and wriggled through, landing in a confined space which carried the heavy reek of Thas in its stale air. Though there was no sign of any lurking earth dweller. Swiftly I moved farther down the passage to give Uruk room enough to follow me.

The passage had been shored up here and there by heavy roots deeply embedded in the earth, and rough-sided bits of stone rammed in to aid that precaution, as if this was a runway which it was important for the earth people to keep open.

"Paugh!" Uruk spat. "This stink is foul."

We found that the passage had not been constructed with such visitors as us in mind. For it was necessary to move ahead stooping, our bowed shoulders now and then rubbing against the roof, bringing down ominous trickles of earth I tried not to think about. Here Uruk took the lead once more as if he knew exactly where we were headed.

As we moved away from the hole our only light came from Ice Tongue. I raised it high so that its wan glitter might shine over my companion's shoulder. The earth under our feet was as tightly packed as any long-used game trail, and always the smell of Thas clung.

Within a very short space we came to where the passage ended in a well-like opening. Uruk knelt and felt beneath its crumbling ruin.

"There are climb holes," he told me in a soft whisper. "Shallow, but I think we can wedge toes and fingers into them." Then he slung the ax over his shoulder and warily lowered himself into the dark opening. I kept Ice Tongue between my teeth as I felt I dared not lose the small light it gave us. But I waited until I heard Uruk's soft whisper before I dared swing over and seek those limited holds.

Down, down, down—my jaws ached first, as I kept that grip on the sword; then the ache spread down my tense body, shoulders, arms, fingers, toes, feet. And still there seemed no end to this descent. I feared I might choke and lose hold on the sword by spewing forth my last meal because of the stench here. But I hung on grimly, limiting my world to two things—keeping Ice Tongue ready and hunting the next and then the next hold.

That descent seemed endless—but perhaps to someone not so tense as we were, it would not have been any great feat. But I was very glad when Uruk's warning reached me and I felt once more a wide and solid surface underfoot.

There was more rock in the walls here, only that rock was crisscrossed with root supports. And the stone on the walls showed signs of having been roughly worked, to the extent of having the worst of the natural protrusions broken away. We no longer had to climb down—but the passage itself sloped more and more, making certain that we were fast going well below the surface of the ground outside.

"Wait!" I had not really needed that command from Uruk. Tolar was not yet totally dead within me, and the sense of an evil presence was so strong that it brought my hand up to hold Ice Tongue at ready for an attack. I saw what glowed ahead—swirling tendrils which reminded me of that other fog which Targi had used to cloak his force. Save that here light was a part of it and the billows shone with a greenish radiance which made me think of long-buried corruption. While an odor even viler than that of the Thas puffed

forth at us.

Chapter Seven

Uruk's laugh startled me, for to my mind those arms of mist were indeed ominous. However, there was contempt in the sound he made as he watched them thin, reach out for us like tentacles of some sea monster such as the Sulcarmen knew in the far south. And quick on that laughter he began a soft chant.

I saw his words. By what feat of sorcery this happened I could not explain. But the words formed blue sparks in this gloom, issuing from his lips as a stream, yet spreading out beyond to gather in a glittering puff cloud of their own. He moved confidently forward and perforce I followed.

Then that glitter of blue sparks touched upon one of the threatening tendrils of mist. There was a flash. The mist whipped back to join a center core which grew opaque, ever darkening, as more and more of the unnamable material was drawn to it.

Now there was no mist, rather a wavering figure which did not appear certain of what concrete form to take. From it issued a feeling of menace, building so quickly that it was like a blow. But if whatever that thing was thought to find us open to such counterattack, it learned quickly that we were not. For though it flung itself to the rocky way under our feet and strove to crawl at us, the blue mist dropped in turn.

"Ha, Targi!" Uruk no longer chanted; now he called as a man will shout a personal challenge to the enemy. "Do you then think me already your plaything? Helm-biter"—for the first time he gave his weapon a name—"is no steel of any man's forging. You should know that."

The mist winked out.

Uruk nodded. "He must be greatly shaken," he said musingly. "Targi is not of the Great Ones, no more than am I. But I would have thought he fancied his hold on the Dark Power stronger." Now his voice sharpened and he demanded of me: "How did he die—in that time we know?"

I dredged up Tolar memory. Targi—had Tolar seen him die? Or only heard it reported before his own grievous wound had driven him from the field? Then the words came to me haltingly, for the pictures in my mind were very dim and far away.

"He died by an ax. They raised an outcry when they found his body—that I remember."

"By an ax," Uruk repeated. "Then—"

I knew what troubled him. If it had been his Helm-biter that had so dealt with Targi, to slay him again might avail us nothing. Unless we could also reach the inner core wherein Targi or what was of the real Targi might find secure refuge.

"He will strive to repeat the pattern," Uruk said, this time as if to himself. "So—"

The way before us was dark. That evil coiling thing of little real substance had vanished. However, we had not lost our wariness, which was well. For now out of the dark again came snaking, some actually crawling upon the rock to better entangle our feet, those root ropes. The ax swung—I need not use the proper hand on Ice Tongue to prick at those reptilian, wriggling lines of dark.

It was butchery there in the half-dark. Neither Thas nor rope could truly face our weapons when we set our backs to the wall of the passage and swung the bright metal to bring death. The sword snarl was that of a wolf eager to be at the throat of its prey. And, while Helm-biter did not give tongue in a like manner, yet the very passage of the double-bladed head through the air made a kind of singing. While the Thas squealed and grunted.

Uruk raised his voice above their clamor. "Make an end now!" he ordered. "Targi used these to buy him time—the time he must not have. He thinks he will be safe in that place he has devised, so we must reach him before he sets a lock to guard his safety."

We came away from the wall in a charge. Uruk roared aloud the old battle cry of HaHarc. The sound of his voice was nearly deafening in that small section, and the blaze of our weapons made them living fire in our hands.

The Thas broke. I knew of old that they were fighters who needed the dark to make them confident. And there were bodies' enough, mostly from Uruk's hewing, to discourage them. Whether Targi withdrew the compulsion he had laid upon them to attack we never knew. But at our advance they broke and ran. Some fled ahead down the lefthand section of the passage, some withdrew to the right behind us.

Uruk moved swiftly. He might not trot nor run through this murk, but he made the best pace the cramped quarters and our uncertain footing allowed him. And I kept at his back, though I looked often to make sure that those who had run had not doubled back to follow us.

In my own time, the Thas had envenomed their spears. But those we tramped over, lying still sometimes in hands no longer able to raise them, showed no discoloration of point. In so much were we now favored.

We came to a forking of the passage, then a second, and a third. Each time Uruk turned right or left with no hesitation. I did not ask, but somehow I believed he knew where he went.

Thus we broke from a side way into one of those caves through which Tsali and I had earlier gone—or if not that, one so much like it no man could tell the difference. The stalagmites shown with crystalline sparkling as Ice Tongue's brilliance caught them. I would have been muddled by the number and variety of these age-long mineral growths,

but my companion did not pause, nor search. I saw that Helm-biter swung a fraction in his grasp; perhaps that was acting now as one of those needles the Sulcarmen kept locked within bowls to point a path across the sea.

So we reached at last to another opening in the wall, a crevice I might have overlooked, for it required careful squeezing to get by a large lump of rock into it. Another narrow passage awaited beyond, only the walls of this had certainly been hewn smooth, and I saw here and there a pattern of runes I did not know—save from them seemed to reach a coldness to touch the innermost part of a man, awakening in him uneasiness and despair. Only the warm sword hilt in my scarred hand fought that subtle assault upon my courage.

Uruk slowed his pace. His head was well up, for that passage had not been the cramped size beloved by the Thas. Men, or something much like men, had made it.

"Now—" The word was half a breath he expelled. "Now we win or fail, Tolar-that-was, for we have tracked him as he never believed any man born in the Light could do. And at the bay he will throw against us all his strength—"

He had hardly gotten forth the last word when a blow out of nothingness struck against us both. It sent me reeling unsteadily back, toward that half-concealed entrance. This was as if a giant and all-powerful hand had thumped against my chest, leaving me no defense, hurling me away. I lashed out wildly with Ice Tongue, seeing nothing tangible to so attack but feeling that I must do something or be utterly overborne and rendered helpless.

Uruk was forced back also, but only a step or two. His shoulders were hunched a little, his feet planted apart as if he were determined there would be no more retreat. I tried to copy his stance. More than that, I fought to edge forward again to join him.

The pressure continued. I had not been able to win a palm's-length forward; no, instead I had lost two backward. Anger, dour and sullen, filled me, unlike any I had felt before; Tolar's anger, which had in my touch with him been so tattered by despair. Tolar—once more I turned to that hidden other part of me which the sword had brought to birth.

Uruk was moving forward, his action resembling that of a man wading through thick mud. Each step he took was short, but he made it. I rubbed shoulder against the wall where my last retreat had borne me. Now I took the sword into my right hand, put out the left. As I had felt for those holds in the deep well, so did I now lock fingertips into the lines of the runes. Very small was the purchase such holds gave me. But I came forward again, slowly, one hindered step against another, just as Uruk moved.

Perhaps his ancient enemy could not divide that force easily, so that he was not able to fend us both off at the same time. Thus we were winning by small lengths. The throat veil of mail of my helm swung loose, I was breathing heavily, concentrating on my battle along the wall.

Uruk fared better—his steps grew longer. Under the threatening dragon of his helm crest his eyes were set, glowing.

Thus, through a time which seemed endless, we worked our way along that passage. And the pressure against us seemed never to relax. I was panting, and the beating of my own heart pounded in my ears. On—On—!

Then, even as quickly as the mist had gone, so did this vanish, I went to one knee, overbalanced by that withdrawal which came between one breath and the next. I saw Uruk stagger, but not more than a step.

Holding the ax still before him, he broke into a jogging run, one I was quick to try and match.

We emerged into a place filled with that green-gray radiance I had long known marked a strong center of the Dark Forces. There were no stalagmites here, rather pillars worked into shapes of horror, each a monster or a man, the latter seemingly locked in some unbelievable torment from which not even the end of time might deliver him.

Down the wide center aisle between those pillars, which, after a first glance, I would not look upon—for even seeing them stirred in me a fear I feared I could not suppress—Uruk went directly to the center core of this place.

It was perhaps a temple. But what god or force had been worshiped here, that had been none born from the adoration of my species. Here the pillars formed a circle, and in the center of that was set, on a half-pillar of rusty red, a crystal skull.

At the foot of the pillar lay, in a lank tangle, the man I had seen on the battlefield—Targi. His eyes were wide, staring unseeingly overhead, and his body was flaccid, that of the newly dead.

But in the brain pan of the skull—!

I could not force my gaze away from that swirl of raw colors, colors which hurt one to look upon. They surged, interwove in patterns, and—they had meaning. I need only look so for a little longer and that meaning would be made clear to me. It was the greatest thing I had ever done—I would be privileged beyond any of my kind—I would rule—rule!

I saw Uruk step over the body, raise his ax. Uruk—he would destroy—he—it was he who was the enemy in this place! Kill—Kill—!

Only the fact that my injured wrist would not obey my will made my blow a feeble one. Ice Tongue grated against the mail covering his shoulder. But that was enough to deflect the fall of the ax. It clanged instead against the pillar.

The skull rocked on its perch, as the colors caught within it moved in an even madder interweaving. I had kept grip on my sword, but only barely. That ill-aimed blow had

nearly taken it from my hold.

Uruk—he was danger! As long as he lived—as long as he lived—

He had turned those blazing eyes on me.

"Let me in, comrade—" In my mind a powerful voice cried like a burst of pain. "We can finish him— together—"

Uruk's ax swung aloft again. I was no match for him even with Ice Tongue—

"Thrust low!" that other in my mind urged. "There is a weak spot beneath his arm— thrust for his heart! And then—"

"Yonan!"

I tottered, raising my hand to my head, crying out with the pain which was a torment there. The sword hung heavy in my hold, its point toward the blocks of rock under our feet.

"Yonan!" came that call again.

"Thrust—now!" bade that other commanding presence pouring into my mind. Weakly I knew or guessed what was happening—

I raised the sword and I brought that blade down, largely by the weight of it alone, since there was very little strength left in me. Ice Tongue fell square upon the dome of the skull.

There followed such a torment within my head that I hurled the sword from me, fell to my knees, clasping my head on either side and moaning.

I did not see Uruk raise the ax again. But I heard the clack when one of its edges met the skull, cleaving it, shattering it, as if it were indeed ancient bone. There was a wild clamor in my mind—I would go mad—that thing which had tried to possess me would see to that. Babbling I sank forward, face down on the pavement, while eye-aching light swirled about me, closing me in.

But there had been a small part of Yonan unconquered, a fraction which had retreated into hiding. And now (how long I was under pressure of Targi's will I shall never know), that scrap of the one I had once been came out of hiding, in desperation, I think. I was stiff, cold, yet I was still alive and Targi no longer held me in his bonds. I centered what remained of my own will on moving my hand—to prove mainly that this I could do. Then, aching in every muscle, I struggled up.

Around me was a very gray light, forbidding, though only a faint shadow of the threat I had conceived had earlier hung there. Within reaching distance lay Uruk, while beyond

him, where we had seen the discarded body of Targi—

Had those fragments of brittle bone, those ashes, once really been a man or the semblance of one? Of the crystal skull which had dominated this hall, strove to master us, there was not even a broken shard remaining. But there was something else—there lay the hilt of a sword, a bladeless weapon now as dingy gray as the light around.

I crawled to Uruk. His ax had not suffered the same change; no, it lay intact under his hand. I felt for a pulse at the side of his throat. He still lived. Now I fumbled my water bottle loose from my belt, raised his head to rest against my shoulder, and dribbled the liquid between his teeth. At last he swallowed, coughed, and his eyes opened.

For a moment he stared at me as if I were a stranger to him. Then—

"Tolar—?" but he hesitated over that name.

I shook my head. Putting aside the water bottle, I reached for the sword hilt, to hold it into his line of vision.

"I am Yonan—even as you summoned me."

His lips curved very slightly. "And return you did, to our salvation. Targi, great in sorcery as he was, could not control the yet unborn. So Ice Tongue has left you—for good or ill this time, I wonder?"

Somewhere in me laughter bubbled. "For good, so shall I believe. I am done with ill-omened weapons and ancient battles, either lost or won. The future is what I shall make it!"

Then I remembered—were we still in the past? I had only the evidence of what remained of Targi to bolster my hope that we were free of time change.

Uruk must have followed the glance I gave to those nearly vanished remains; his mind caught my thought. "I think it is your time now, Yonan-who-was-more. Targi, at least, is very dead. And the shattering of his power could well have swept us onward once again. If that is true, Escore still has some use for us. Shall we endeavor to prove that?"

The hilt of Ice Tongue was dead. I sensed that never again would it play any part in the schemes and ploys of men. I laid it down on the wide step which supported the pillar on which the skull had been. Targi had striven to use me; he had failed. It was that intangible trophy which I would bear from this struggle; no man save myself would ever see it. I was not Tolar, yet something of him would always remain within me, honing what I was now into a better self, even as a careful warrior hones his blades. I could not deny that—I did not want to. But I was Yonan—and somehow I did not want either to deny that or forget it.

Perhaps time had indeed swept us forward as the sea tide will sweep that which it

carries. If so, there would be other swords, other battles, and for me a new life into which I must fit myself carefully and with more self-knowledge than many men are given to understand.

"Time was, time is, time will be— " Uruk said—no he did not say it, the words seeped into my mind. And in me there was a sudden heady spark of joy. Tolar I could thank for this—that I had at last that other sense I had always longed to possess. I got to my feet, reached down a hand to aid Uruk.

Time will be—the words sang in my mind, awakening impatience in me. Ice Tongue no longer held me, and all Escore waited!