

The Way Wind

Andre Norton

Andre Norton's imaginary Kingdom of Estcarp, surrounded by enemies, one foot in twilight, the other in the long night of defeat, has always struck me as the metaphor for a kind of patient courage: those who hold the gates, those who wait, those who hope, and those who guard not only against outward enemies, but against their own despair.

"The Way Wind" is a story of how the winds of change come to gatekeepers if their courage holds firm.

The crumbling walled fortress and the dreary, ragged town, which had woven a ragged skirt about it during long years, stood at the end of the Way Pass. It was named l'Estal, which in a language older than legend, had a double meaning—First and Last.

For it was the first dwelling of men at the end of Way Pass along which any traffic from the west must come. And it was also the end of a long, coiling snake of a road stretching eastward and downward to Klem, which long ago it had been designed to guard.

There could have been another name for that straggle of drear buildings also—End of Hope.

For generations now it had been a place of exile. Those sent from Klem had been men and women outlawed for one reason or another. The scribe whose pen had been a key used too freely, the officer who was too ambitious—or at times, too conscientious, the rebel, the misfit, those sometimes fleeing the law or ruler's whim, they came hither.

There was no returning, for a geas had been set on the coil road, and those of lowland blood coming up might only travel one way—never to return. There had been countless attempts, of course. But whatever mage had set that barrier had indeed been one of power, for the spell did not dwindle with the years as magic often did.

Through the Way Pass there came only a trickle of travelers, sometimes not more than three or four in a season. None of them lingered in l'Estal; there was that about the place which was like a dank cloud, and its people were grim of face, meager of livelihood.

During the years they had managed to scrape a living, tilling small scraps of fields they terraced along the slopes, raising lean goats and small runtish sheep, hunting, burrowing into the rock of the heights to bring out stores of ore.

The latter was transported once a year to a certain bend in the descending road, and there traded for supplies they could not otherwise raise—salt, pigs of iron, a few items of what was luxury to them. Then it was also that the Castellan of the fort would receive the pouch bearing the royal arms containing, ever the same, orders. And now and again there would be another exile to be sent aloft.

The trickle of travelers from the west were mostly merchants, dealers in a small way, too poor to make the long journey by sea to the port of Klem itself.

They were hunters with pelts, drovers of straggles of lean mountain cattle or sheep, small, dark people who grunted rasping words in trade language, kept to themselves, and finished their business as soon as possible.

Of the Klemish exiles, none took the westward road. If there was a geas set upon that also, no one spoke of such. It was simply accepted that for them there was only one place to be longed for, dreamed of, hopelessly remembered—that that lay always eastward.

There had been many generations of exiles, and their children had known no other place; yet to them l'Estal was not a home but a prison of sorts, and the tales told of the eastern land made of that a paradise forbidden, changed out of all knowledge of what it had been or was.

Still there was always one point of interest that stirred the western gate sentries each year—and that was the Way Wind. At the very beginning of spring, which came slowly and harshly in these gaunt uplands, a wind blew strongly from west to east, souring the pass, carrying with it strange scents. It might last a single day; it might blow so for three or four.

And by chance, it always brought with it some one of the western travelers, as if it pulled them on into the line of the pass and drew them forward. Thus, in a place where there was so little of the new and strange, the Way Wind farers were a matter of wager, and often time not only the armsmen at the gate but their officers and their women gathered, along with townspeople, when they heard the outer horn blast, which signaled that the wind herded a traveler to them.

This day there were four who stood on the parapet of the inner wall, not closely together as if they were united in their company, but rather each a little apart.

The oldest of that company, a man who had allowed the hood of his cloak to fall back so the wind lifted tufts of steel gray hair, had the paler face of one who kept much indoors. Yet there was a strength in his features, a gleam of eye which that about him had not defeated, nor ever would. At the throat of his cloak was the harp badge of a bard. Osono he had named himself ten years before when he had accompanied the east traders back from their rendezvous. And by that name he was accepted, eagerly by the Castellan and those of his household.

Next to him, holding her own thick cloak tightly about her as if she feared the wind might divest her of it, was the Lady Almadis, she who had been born to the Castellan's lady after their arrival here. Her clothing was as coarse as that of any townswoman on the streets below, and the hands that held to that cloak were sun-browned. There was a steady look to her, as if she had fitted herself to the grim husk housing her.

At pace or so behind her was a second man. Unlike the other two he had no cloak, but rather dressed in mail and leather, sword-armed. But his head was bare also as he cradled a pitted helm on one hip. His features were gaunt, thinned, bitter, his mouth a mere line above a stubborn jaw—Urgell, who had once been a mercenary and now served as swordmaster in the fortress.

The fourth was strange even in that company, for she was a broad-girthed woman, red of face, thick of shoulder. Her cloak was a matter of patched strips, as if she had been forced to sew together the remains of several such in order to cover her. A fringe of yellow-white hair showed under the edge of a cap covering her head. For all the poverty of her appearance, Forina had a good position in the town, for she was the keeper of the only inn, and any of the Way Wind brought would come to her for shelter.

"What is your wager, my lady?" Osono's trained bard's voice easily overreached the whistle of the wind.

Almadis laughed, a hard-edged sound which lacked any softening of humor.

"I, sir bard? Since my last two wind wagers were so speedily proved wrong, I have learned caution. This year I make no speculation; thus I shall not be disappointed again. Think me over-timid of my purse if you will."

Osono glanced at her. She was not looking toward him but rather down the wind road. "Lady," he returned, "I think you are over-timid in nothing."

After a moment she laughed again. "Bard, life in l'Estal makes for dull acceptance—perhaps that gives root to timidity."

"There is the priest." The observation from the mercenary cut through their exchange. He had moved forward, as if drawn by some force beyond his own understanding, to look down at the cluster of townspeople and guards by the gate.

"Thunur," Osono nodded. "Yes, that crow is well on the hop. Though if he tries to deliver his message to either herdsman or trader, he will not get the better of them. Shut-mouthed they are, and to all of them I think we are Dark-shadowed—they would listen no more to one of us than to the bark of a chained hound."

Urgell had put his hand to the edge of the parapet wall, and now his mail and leather gauntlet grated on the stone there. Chained hound, Almadis thought, proper term not only for such as this man, but perhaps for all of them. But then a Bard was trained in apt word choice.

"That is one as makes trouble—" Forina had come forward also on the other side of the soldier. "He has

a tongue as bitter as var, and he uses it to dip into many pots. T'would be well to keep an eye on him."

Urgell turned his head quickly. "What stir has he tried to set, Goodwife?"

"More than one. Ask Vill Blacksmith what a pother made his sister sharp-tongue him. Ask of Tatwin why three of those snot-nosed brats he strives to beat learning into no longer come to his bidding, ask Solasten why she was pelted with market dung. Ask me why the doors of the Hafted Stone are now barred to him. A troublemaker he is, and this is a place where we need no one to heat old quarrels and pot new ones!"

"If he is a brawler, speak to the guard," Osono suggested. "But I think he is perhaps something even more to be watched—"

"What may that be?" The bard had all their attention now, but it was Almadis who asked that question.

"A fanatic, my lady. One so obsessed with his own beliefs that he is like a smoldering torch ready to be put to a straw heap. We have not an easy life here; there were many old hatreds, despairs, and these can be gathered up to fuel a new fire. Ten years ago, one of his nature arose in Salanika—there was such a bloodletting thereafter as the plains had not seen since the days of Black Gorn. It took full two seasons to quench that fire, and some brands still smoldering may have been scattered to blaze again—"

"Such a one as Thunur, you think?" Almadis demanded. "L'Estal has answers to such—have we not?" The bitterness in her voice was plain. "What are we all but outlaws, and we can exist only as we hold together." She did not turn her head, but she loosed one hand from her cloak hold and motioned to that dark, ill-fortuned spread of age-hardened timbers which surmounted the wall of the shorter tower. "That has borne fruit many times over."

"He has a following," Urgell said, "but he and they are under eye. If he tries aught with the western travelers, he will be in a cell within an hour. We want no trouble with them."

Certainly they could afford no trouble with the few who came the western road. Such wayfarers were their only real link with a world which was not overshadowed by the walls about them and the past which had brought them here.

The gray-robed priest had indeed been roughly jostled away from the gate. He was making small hops, for he was a short man, trying to see over the crowd before him the nature of the wayfarer who was now well within sight.

"It—it is a child!" Almadis was shaken out of her composure and came with a single step to stand beside the mercenary. "A child—! But what fate has brought her here?"

The wayfarer was slight, her bundle of travel cloak huddled about her as if it were intended for a much larger and stouter wearer. Hood folds had fallen back on her shoulders, and they saw hair that the wind had pulled from braids to fly in wisps about her face. She was remarkably fair of skin for a wilderness traveler, and her hair was very fair, though streaked here and there by a darker strand closer to the gleam of red-gold.

There was no mistaking, however, the youth of that slight body and those composed features. She walked confidently, and at her shoulder bobbed the head of a hill pony, still so thick with winter hair that it was like an ambling mound of fur.

Bulging panniers rode on either side of a pack-saddle. And that was surrounded in the middle by what looked to be a basket half covered by a lid.

Contrary to all who made this perilous way through the high mountains, the girl carried no visible weapons

except a stout staff which had been crudely hacked from some sapling, stubs of branches yet to be marked along its length. This was topped, however, with a bunch of flowers and leaves, massed together. Nor did any of them look wilted; rather it would seem they had just been plucked, though there were yet no flowers to be found in the upper reaches where reluctant patches of snow could be sighted.

"Who—what—" Almadis was snapped out of her boredom, of that weariness which overshadowed her days and nights.

As the girl came to the gate, there was a sudden change. The Way Wind died, there was an odd kind of silence as if they all waited for something; they did not know what.

So complete was that silence that the sound Osono uttered startled them all.

"Who—what—?" Almadis turned upon the bard almost fiercely.

He shook his head slowly. "Lady, I have seen many things in my time, and have heard of countless more. There is said to be—somewhere in the western lands—those who are one with the land in a way that none of our blood can ever hope to be—"

The sentries at the gate seemed disinclined to ask any questions. In fact they had fallen back, and with them the townspeople withdrew to allow her a way path. In their doing so, Thunur won to the front rank and stood, his head stretched a little forward on his lank neck, staring at her, his teeth showing a little.

Almadis turned swiftly but Osono matched her, even extending his wrist in a courtly fashion to give her dignity. Forina, closest to the stairway, was already lumbering down, and behind them Urgell seemed as eager to catch a closer sight of this most unusual wayfarer.

They gained the portion of street just in time to

witness Thunur's up-flung arm, hear his speech delivered with such force as to send spittle flying.

"Witchery! Here comes witchery! See the demon who is riding in such state!"

The crowd shrunk back even more as there was a stir to that half-covered basket on the top of the pony pack.

"Fool!" Forina's voice arose in the kind of roar she used to subdue a taproom scuffle. For so large a woman she moved very fast, and now she was halfway between the slaving priest and the girl, who watched them both serenely as if she had no cause to suspect that she was unwelcome.

"Fool! That is but a cat—"

The rust-yellow head with pricked ears had arisen yet farther from within its traveling basket, and green eyes surveyed them all with the same unconcern as that of the girl.

But such a cat. One of those pricked ears was black, and as the cat arose higher in its riding basket, they could see that there was a black patch on its chest. There was such a certain cockiness about it, an air of vast self-confidence, that Almadis laughed; and that was a laugh that had no edge of harshness.

Her laugh was quickly swallowed up by a chuckle from Osono, and a moment later there sounded no less than a full-lunged bellow from Vill Blacksmith.

The girl was smiling openly at them all as if they were greeting her with the best of goodwill.

"I am Meg, dealing in herbs and seeds, good folk. These traveling companions of mine are Kaska and Mors—"

The hair-concealed head of the pony nodded as if it perfectly understood the formalities of introduction, but Kaska merely opened a well-fanged mouth in a bored yawn.

Now the sergeant of the guard appeared to have

recovered from the surprise that had gripped them all. He dropped his pike in a form of barrier and looked at the girl.

"You are from—, mistress?" he demanded gruffly.

"From Westlea, guardsman. And I am one who trades—herbs—seeds."

Almadis blinked. The girl had moved her staff a fraction. That bouquet of tightly packed flowers which had looked so fresh from above now presented another aspect. The color was still there but faded—these were dried flowers surely, yet they preserved more of their once life than any she had ever seen.

"There be toll," the pike had lowered in the sergeant's hold. "'Tis a matter of four coppers, and there be a second taking for a market stall."

Meg nodded briskly. Her hand groped beneath her cloak and came forth again to spill out four dulled rounds of metal into his hand.

Those who had gathered there had begun to shift away. Since this stranger the wind had brought was going to set up in the marketplace, there would be plenty of time to inspect her—though she was indeed something new. None of her kind of merchant had entered l'Estal before in the memories of all.

Only Thunur held his place until the sergeant, seemingly unaware that he was close behind him, swung back the pike and the priest had to skip quickly aside to escape a thud from that weapon. He was scowling at the girl, and his mouth opened as if to deliver some other accusation when Urgell took a hand in the matter.

"Off with you, crow— You stand in the lady's way!"

Now the priest swung around with a snarl, and his narrowed eyes surveyed Almadis and the bard. There was a glint of red rage in that stare. But he turned indeed and pushed through the last of the thinning crowd, to vanish down one of the more narrow alleys.

"Mistress," the mercenary spoke directly to the young traveler. "If that fluttering carrion eater makes you trouble, speak up—his voice is not one we have a liking for."

Meg surveyed him as one who wished to set a face in memory. "Armsman," she inclined her head, "I think that here I have little to fear, but for your courtesy I give you thanks."

To Almadis's surprise, she saw Urgell flush and then he moved swiftly, leaving as abruptly as the priest had done.

"You'll be wantin' shelter," Forina said. "I keep the Halfed Stone—it be the trade inn."

Again Meg favored the speaker with one of those long looks, and then she smiled. "Goodwife, what you have to offer we shall gladly accept. It has been a long road and Mors is wearied. Our greatest burden has been his—sure foot and clever trail head that he has."

She reached out to lace fingers in the puff of long hair on the pony's neck. He gave another vigorous nod and snorted.

"If you have spices—or meadowsweet for linens—" Almadis had an odd feeling that she did not want this girl to disappear. A new face in l'Estal was always to be hoped for, and this wayfarer was so different. She had kept stealing glances at the bouquet on the staff. It seemed so real, as if, at times, it had the power of taking on the freshness it had had when each of those blossoms had been plunked.

"Your flowers, Herbgatherer, what art gives the dried the seeming of life?"

"It is an art, my lady, an ancient one of my own people. In here"—Meg drew her hand down the side of one of those bulging panniers, "I have others. They be part of my trade stock. Also scents such as your meadowsweet—"

"Then surely I shall be seeing you again, Herbgath-

erer," Almadis said. "A good rest to you and your companions."

"My lady, such wishes are seeds for greater things—"

"As are ill wishes!" Osono said. "Do some of your wares come perhaps from Farlea?"

Meg turned now that measuring look to the bard.

"Farlea is sung of, sir bard. If it ever existed, that was many times ago. No, I do not aspire to the arts of the Fair Ones, only to such knowledge as any herb-wife can know, if she seeks always to learn more."

Now it was her turn to move away, following Forina. Kaska had settled down again in her basket until only those mismatched tips of ears showed. But there were those who had been in the crowd at the gate who trailed the girl at a distance as if they did not want to lose sight of her for some reason.

"Farlea, Osono? I think with that question you may have displeased our herbwife," Almadis said slowly. "You are a storer of legends; which do you touch on now?"

He was frowning. "On the veriest wisp of an old one, my lady. There was a tale of a youth who followed my own calling, though he was of a roving bent. He vanished for a time, and then he returned hollow-eyed and wasted, saying that he sought something he had lost, or rather had thrown away through some foolishness, and that his fate was harsh because of that. He had been offered a way into a land of peace and rare beauty, and thereafter he sang always of Farlea. But he withered and died before the year was done, eaten up by his sorrow."

"But what makes you think of Farlea when you look upon this herbwife?" Almadis persisted.

"Those flowers on her staff—fresh plucked." His frown grew deeper.

"So I, too, thought when first I saw them. But no,

they are rather very cleverly dried so that they are preserved with all their color, and I think their scent. Surely I smelled roses when she held them out a little. That is an art worth the knowing. We have no gardens here—the rose walk gives but a handful of blooms, and those are quickly gone. To have a bouquet of such ever to hand"—her voice trailed off wistfully and then she added—"yes, such could even fight the grim aging of these walls. I must go to the market when she sets up her stall."

Meg did set up her stall on the following day. From the market mistress she rented the three stools and a board to balance on two of them, to form the humblest of the displays. Mathe, who oversaw the trading place, watched the girl's sure moves in adjusting the plank to show her wares. He lingered even a fraction longer, though it was a busy day, to see her unpack bundles of dried herbs, their fragrance even able to be scented over the mixed odors, few of them pleasant, which were a part of market day.

There were packets also of yellowish, fine-woven cloth which gave forth even more intensified perfumes, and small, corner wrapped, bits of thin parchment such as were for the keeping of seeds. While in the very middle of that board was given honored place to that same bunch of flowers as had crowned Meg's trail staff.

Kaska's basket was set on the pavement behind the rude table. And Mors stood behind. The cat made no attempt to get out of her basket, but she was sitting well up in it surveying all about her with manifest interest.

Two small figures moved cautiously toward the stall. Beneath the grimed skin and the much-patched clothing, one face was the exact match of the other. Between them strutted a goat, each of his proud curl of horns clasped by a little, rough-skinned hand.

They proceeded slowly, darting glances to either side as if they were scouts in enemy territory. Only the goat was at ease, apparently confident in his ability to handle any situation which might arise.

"You—Tay—Tod—take that four-legged abomination out of here!" A man arose from the stoop behind one of the neighboring stalls and waved his arms.

The goat gave voice in a way which suggested that he was making a profane answer to that, and refused to answer to the force dragging at him from either side. The boys cowered, but it was apparent they had no idea of deserting their four-legged companion to run for cover.

Meg was on her feet also, smiling as if the two small herds and their beast were the most promising of customers. When her neighbor came from behind his own stall table, a thick stick in his hand, she waved him back.

"No harm, goodman," she said. "This beast but seeks what is a delicacy for his kind. Which he shall be freely given." She selected a stalk wrapped loosely around with its own withered leaves and held it out to the goat. For a moment he regarded her and then, with the neat dexterity of one who had done this many times before, he tongued the proffered bit of dried stuff and drew it into his mouth, nodding his head up and down, as if to signify his approval, with a vigor to near shake free the grip of his two companions.

The other tradesman stared, his upraised club falling slowly to his side. But there was a wariness in his look when he shifted his glance toward Meg, then he withdrew behind his own table, as if he wished some barrier against a threat he did not truly understand.

However, Meg paid no attention to him. Rather now, she reached behind her and brought out a coarse napkin from which she unrolled thick slices of bread

with green-veined cheese between—the food she had brought for her nooning.

Two pair of small eyes fastened upon that, as she broke the larger of the portion in half, holding it out to the boys. Though they did not entirely loose their hold on the goat's horns, their other hands shot out to snatch what she held, cramming it into their mouths as if they feared that it might be demanded back.

"Tay—Tod." She spoke the names the man had spoken.

The one to her right gave a gulp that left him choking, but his twin was the quicker to answer. "I be Tod, lady—this be Tay."

"And your friend—" Meg nodded gravely to the goat, as if indeed the beast were a person of two-legged consequence.

"He be Nid!" There was pride in that answer such as a liege man might show in naming his lord.

"Well met, Tod, Tay, and Nid," Meg nodded gravely. "I am Meg, and here are my friends, Kaska and Mors." The cat only stared, but the pony uttered a soft neigh.

A valiant swallow had carried the food down, and Tay was able to speak:

"Lacy-lorn"—he gestured toward the bouquet of dried flowers—"But too cold now—" He shook his head.

"Lacy-lorn," Meg repeated with a note of approval in her voice, "and hearts-ease, serenity, and love-light, Kings-silver, Red-rose, Gold-for-luck, Sorrows end, Hope-in-the-sun—maiden's love and knight's honor, yes." The old country names came singingly from her as if she voiced some bard's verse.

"Bright—" Tod said before he stuffed his mouth with another huge bit.

"You see them bright?" Meg's head was cocked a little to one side. "That is well, very well. Now, young-

lings, would you give me some service? My good Mors needs some hay for his nooning, and we had too much to carry from the inn to bear that also. Can you bring me such? Here is the copper for Mistress Forina."

"Nid—" began Tod hesitantly.

"Nid will bide here, and there will be no trouble." There was complete assurance in her answer.

Tod took the proffered coin and with his twin shot off across the marketplace. Meg turned to the man who had warned off the boys and the goat.

"Of whose household are those two, if you please, Goodman?"

He snorted. "Household? None would own such as those two. Oh, they make themselves useful as herds. They be the only ones as can handle beast Nid," he shot a baneful glance at the goat. "Three of a kind they be, stealing from stalls and making trouble."

"But they are but children."

The man flushed, there was that he could read in her voice and eyes which he did not like.

"There are a number such. We had the green-sick here three seasons ago, Herbwife. Many died, and there were fireless hearths left. Mistress Forina, she gives them leftovers and lets them sleep in the hay at the stable. More fool she; they are a plaguey lot." He turned away abruptly as a woman approached his stall, glad to have done with Meg's questions.

The goat had shifted to one side and touched noses with Mors. Kasha gave a fastidious warn-off hiss just as a thin man in a shabby cloak paused before Meg's narrow table.

He was eyeing the flowers.

"I thought them real." He spoke as if to himself.

"Real, they are, good sir. But this is what you wish—for your daughter." Meg's hand was already on a small packet. "Steep it in apple ale, and let her have it each morning before she breaks her fast."

"But—herbwife—you did not ask me—I did not tell—"

"You saw," Meg answered slowly and firmly, as one might speak to a child learning its letters, "and I am a healer. We all have gifts, good sir. Even as you have yours. Out of love of learning, you have striven hard and given much—"

Never taking his eyes from hers, he fumbled in the pouch at his belt and brought out a coin.

"Herbwife, I know not what you are—but there is good in what you do, of that I am sure. Just as"—his eyes had dropped as if against his will to the flowers and he gave a start—"just as those are real! Yet it is out of season, and some I have not seen for long. For such grew once in a garden eastward where I can no longer go. I thank you."

Meg was busy with the bouquet, freeing from its tight swathing a spike of flower violet-red. As she held it up, it did in truth seem to be fresh plucked.

"This for your hearth-home, scholar. May it bring you some ease of heart for not all memories are ill ones."

He seemed unable for a moment or two to realize that she meant it. And when he took it between two fingers, he was smiling.

"Lady, how can one thank—"

Meg shook her head. "Thanks are worth the more when passed along. You had one who has given much, scholar—therefore to you shall be given in turn. Remember this well"—and there was force in those three words.

It was almost as if he were so bemused by the flowers that he did not hear her. For he did not say one word in farewell as he turned away from her stall.

Those shadows awakened in the afternoon from the walls about the market square were growing longer when Almadis came. As usual Osono was at her side,

and behind her Urgell. Though she had been free of l'Estal since childhood, taking no maids with her, it was insisted that she ever have some guard. And usually the armsmaster took that duty upon himself.

There were feuds brought into l'Estal, for men of power arose and fell in the lowlands, and sometimes a triumphant enemy suffered the same fate as his former victim. Lord Jules had been a mighty ruler of a quarter of Klem before his enemies had brought him down. His lordship became this single mountain hold, instead of leading armies he rode with patrols to keep the boundaries against the outlaws of the western heights; his palace was this maze of ancient cold and crooked walls, and warrens of rooms. But he was still remembered and feared, and there were those who would reach him even if they must do so through his only child.

So Urgell went armed, and Almadis carried in her sleeve a knife with which she was well trained. There was a sword also sheathed by Osono's side, though as a bard he supposedly had safe conduct wherever he might go. Might go—that was no longer true—there was only l'Estal. No man or woman asked of another what had brought one to exile here, so Almadis did not know the past tale of either of the men pacing with her now, but that they were of honor and trust she was sure, and she welcomed their company accordingly.

Meg's stall had been a popular one this day. Most of those coming to buy had been dealt with briskly, but there were some with whom she spoke with authority, and twice more she had drawn flowers from that amazing bouquet and given them to the amazement of those with whom she dealt. So it had been with Vill Blacksmith, who had come seeking a herb known to be helpful against a burn such as his young apprentice had suffered. He went off with not only his

purchase, but a sprig of knight's honor gold bright in the hand of his bonnet. And there was Brydan the embroideress, who wished a wash for aching eyes, and received also a full-blown heart's-ease, purple and gold as a fine lady's gem when she fastened it to the breast of her worn grey gown.

Oddly enough it seemed that, though Meg plundered her bouquet so from time to time, it did not appear to shrink in size. Her neighbor began to watch her more closely, and his frown became a sharp crease between his eyes. Now and again his own hand arose to caress a certain dark-holed stone which hung from a dingy string about his throat, and once he muttered under his breath while he fingered that.

He was the first to sight Almadis and her companions, and his frown became a sickly kind of smile, though there was no reason to believe the Castellan's daughter would be interested in his withered roots of vegetables, the last remaining from the winter stores.

Indeed she crossed the market as one with a definite mission in mind, heading straight to Meg's stand.

"Goodwill to you, Herbwife," she said. "I trust that trade has been brisk for you. We have but very few here who follow such a calling."

Meg did not curtsy, but smiled as one who greets an old friend.

"Indeed, lady, this is a fair market, and I have been well suited in bargaining. We spoke of meadowsweet for the freshening before times—"

"Lad's Love—dove's wings"—Osono paid no attention to the women, his was all for the bouquet—"Star fast—"

"Falcon feather!" Urgell's much harsher voice cut across the smooth tones of the bard.

"You are well learned, good sirs," Meg returned, and her hand hovered over the bouquet. "Those are names not common in these parts."

Osono's gaze might be aimed at the flowers, but yet it was as if he saw beyond them something else—as might grow in a meadow under that full, warm sun, which never even in summer seemed to reach into these stark heights.

Meg's fingers plucked and brought forth a stem on which swung two white blooms, star-pointed. She held that out to the bard, and he accepted it as one in a dream. Then she snapped thumb and forefinger together with more vigor and freed a narrow leaf, oddly colored so that it indeed resembled a feather.

"For you also, warrior." And her words held something of an order, as if to make sure he would not refuse. Then she spoke to Almadis:

"Meadowsweet, yes." She swept up a bundle of leaves and wrapped them expertly in a small cloth. "But something else also, is it not so?"

"Red-rose," Almadis said slowly. "My mother strove to grow a bush, but this land is too sere to nurture it. Red-rose—"

The flower Meg handed her was not full opened yet, and when Almadis held it close to her, she could smell a perfume so delicate that she could hardly believe such could come into the grayness that was l'Estal.

"Herbwife," she leaned a little forward, "who are you?"

"Meg, my lady, a dealer—a friend—"

Almadis nodded. "Yes, of a certainty that."

She brought out her purse. "For the meadowsweet"—she laid down one of the coins.

"Just so," Meg agreed. "For the meadowsweet."

Osono was fumbling at his own purse with one hand, the other carefully cupping the starflower. Then he caught Meg's eye, and flushed. Instead he bowed as he might to the lady of some great hall where he had been night's singer.

"My thanks to you—Herbwife."

Urgell's bow was not so low or polished, but there was a lightening of his harsh features. "And mine also, mistress—your gifts have a value beyond price."

There were others who sought the herb dealer after the castle's lady had departed. But few of them were favored with a gift of bloom. Perhaps six in all bore away a leaf or flower, but still the bouquet appeared to grow no smaller. When Meg, in the beginning twilight, gathered up her wares and repacked them, two small figures appeared.

Behind them still ambled their horned and bewiskered companion. For the second time Nid touched noses with Mors, who was hardly taller than he. And Kaska voiced a small hiss.

"Help you, mistress?" Tay shuffled a bare foot back and forth in the straw which strewed the market square in marketing days.

"But of course. Many hands make light of work." Meg swung one of her cord-tied bundles to the boy, and he hurried to fit it into the panniers, which his brother had already placed on Mors.

"You are not out with the herds, youngling?" she added as she picked up as the last of her supplies, that bouquet.

Tod hung his head. "They will not have Nid now—he fought with Whrit, and they say he has too bad a temper—that any of his get are not wanted. They—set the dogs on us and Nid savaged two, so—so they talk now of—" He gulped and his brother continued:

"They talk of killing him, mistress."

"But he is yours?"

Both small faces turned toward hers, and there was a fierce determination in the chorus of their answer.

"Before times, he was herd leader, mistress. When Lan, our brother, was herder. But"—now their voices faltered—"Lan died of the green-sick. And the herd

went to Finus—they said as how Lan had told him so—that we were too young— And Finus—he said as how there was much owed him by Lan, and that he had the rights. Only Nid would come with us, and he stayed. But—” Tod stopped as if to catch breath, however Tad’s words gushed on:

“They won’t let us to the pasture anymore. Finus, he lives in our house and says it is his.”

“What have you then as shelter?” asked Meg quietly. She was holding the flowers close to her, beneath her chin, as if she breathed in for some purpose the faint scents.

“Inn mistress Forina—she lets us in the stable—but they say that Nid is bad for the horses.”

“Not for this one,” Meg nodded to Mors. “Let he and Nid bed down together, and we shall see what can be done.”

They made a small procession of their own out of the marketplace. Meg carried the flowers and humped Kaska’s basket up on one hip with the familiar gesture of a countrywoman bearing burdens. Mors trotted after her, no leading rein to draw him on, and he was matched by the goat, the two forming a guard, one to each side.

There were those who watched them go, narrow-eyed and sour of face. It would seem that just as there were those who had been drawn to the stall during that day, so also there were those who shunned it. Now a darker shadow moved forward to stand beside the stall which had neighbored Meg’s.

“You have kept eye on her, goodman?” it hissed a question.

“I have, priest. There is that about her which is not natural right enough. She is weaving spells, even as a noxious spider weaves a web. Already she has touched some here—”

“Those being?” The voice was hot, near exulting.

Now the stall keeper spoke names, and those names were oddly companioned—lady, bard, soldier, smith, scholar, needlewoman, a laborer in from one of the scanty hill farms, a gate sentry off duty, a washerwoman, the wife of a merchant and her daughter—

And with the speaking of each name, Thunur nodded his head. “You have done well, Danler, very well. Continue to watch here, and I shall search elsewhere. We shall bring down this slut who deals with the Dark yet! You are a worthy son of GORT, the Ever-Mighty.”

Within the keep the ways were dark and damp as always. Though in some of the halls there were dank and moldy tapestries on the walls, no one had made any attempt to renew them, to bring any hint of color into those somber quarters. Even candles seemed here to have their halos of dim light circumscribed so that they could not reveal too much of any way.

Almadis tugged at her heavy trained skirt with an impatient hand. She had but little time, and this was a way which had not been trodden for long. She could remember well her last visit here, when rage at all the world had seemed to so heat her, she had felt none of the chill thrown off by the walls. The loss of her mother had weighed both heart and spirit.

Now the pallid light of her candle picked out the outline of the door she sought. But she had to set that on the floor and use both hands in order to force open the barrier, which damp had near sealed beyond her efforts.

Then she was in, candle aloft, looking about. No one had cared—there had probably been no one here since last she left. Yet the mustiness was still tinged with a hint of incense. The room was small, its floor covered with the rotting remnants of what had once been whortle reeds, which trodden upon, gave back sweet scent.

There was a single window, shuttered tight, a bar dropped firmly in place to hold it so. Beneath that stood a boxlike fixture which might be an altar.

That was shrouded with thick dust, a dust which clouded the round of once-polished mirror set there, gathered about the bases of three candlesticks.

For a long moment Almadis merely stood and looked at that altar and its furnishings. She had turned her back on what this stood for, told herself that there was nothing here beyond what she could see, touch, that to believe in more was folly—a child's folly. Yet her mother—

Slowly Almadis moved forward. There were still half-consumed candles in those sticks, grimed, a little lopsided. She used the one she carried to touch the wicks of those into life. Then, suddenly, she jerked her long scarf from about her shoulders, and, in spite of its fine embroidery, she used it to dust the mirror free, dropping its grime-clogged stuff to the floor when she had done.

Lastly she turned to that window. Straining, she worked free the bar, threw back the shutter, opened the room to the night, in spite of the wind which wove about this small side tower.

For so long it had not mattered what rode the sky; this night it did. And what was rising now was the full moon in all its brilliance and glory. Almadis returned to the altar. She could not remember the forms. Those other times she had merely repeated words her mother had uttered without regard for their meaning. There were only scraps which she could assemble now.

But she stationed herself before that mirror, leaning forward a little, her hands placed flat on either side. On its tarnished surface she could see reflected the light of the three candles—but nothing else. There was no representation of her own face—the once-burnished plate was too dim.

Nor had she that learning which could bring it alive. Yet she had been drawn here and knew that this had meaning, a meaning she dared not deny.

Tucked in the lacing of her bodice was that rose Meg had given her. Dried it might be—with great skill—yet it seemed to have just been plucked from a bush such as her mother had striven to keep alive.

The girl moistened her lips.

“One In Three,” she began falteringly. “She who rules the skies, She who is maiden, wife, and elder in turn, She who answers the cries of her daughters in distress, who reaches to touch a land and bring it into fruitfulness, She who knows what truly lies within the heart—”

Almadis's voice trailed into silence. What right had she to ask for anything in this forsaken place, return to a faith she had said held no meaning?

There was certainly another shadow of something on the mirror—growing stronger. It was—the rose!

Almadis gasped, for a moment she felt light-headed, that only her hold on the altar kept her upright.

“Lady”—her voice was the thinnest of whispers—“Lady who was, and always will be—give me forgiveness. Your messenger—she must be one of your heart held—Lady, I am not fit—”

She raised her hands to that flower caught in her lacing. Yet something would not let her loosen it as she wished, to leave it as an offering here.

Instead there was the sweetness of the rose about her, as if each candle breathed forth its fragrance. She looked down—that flower which had been yet half a bud was now open.

Quickly, almost feverishly in her haste, Almadis reached again for the altar. There had been something else left there long ago. The dust had concealed it, but she found it—Her fingers caught the coil of a chain, and she held it up, from it swung that pen-

dant—the flat oval of silver (but the silver was not tarnished black as it should have been) on it, in small, raised, milky white gems, the three symbols of the Lady in Her waxing, Her full life, Her waning.

It seemed to Almadis that the candlelight no longer was the illumination of that chamber, rather the moon itself shown within, brighter than she could remember it. She raised the chain, bowed her head a fraction, slipped those links over it, allowing the moon gem-set pendant to fall upon her breast. Then she did as she remembered her mother had always done, tucked it into hiding beneath her bodice, so that now the pendant rested between her breasts just under the rose. Though it did not carry the chill of metal to her flesh, it was rather warm, as if it had but been passed from one who had the right to wear it to another.

Now she gathered courage to speak again.

“Lady, you know what will be asked of me, and what is in me. I cannot walk my father’s way—and he will be angry. Give me the strength and courage to remain myself in the face of such anger—though I know that by his beliefs he means me only well.”

She leaned forward then, a kind of resolution manifest in her movements, to blow out the three candles. But she made no move to bar away the moonlight before she picked up her journey candle to leave the room.

Though it was day without, the guardroom was grimly dusk within.

“Three of them we took,” a brawny man in a rust-marked mail coat said to one of his fellows. He jerked a thumb at a rolled ball of hide. “Over the gate to the west he says.”

The older man he addressed grunted. “We do things here by my Lord Jules’s ordering.”

“Don’t be so free with words like that hereabouts,

Ruddy,” cautioned the other. “Our Knight-Captain has long ears—”

“Or more than one pair of them,” retorted Ruddy. “We’ve got us more trouble than just a bunch of lousy sheep raiders, Jonas. While you’ve been out a-ridin’, there’s a stew boilin’ here.”

The bigger man leaned on the edge of the table, “Thunur, I’m thinkin’. That one came at dawn light a-brayin’ somethin’ about a witch. He’s a big mouth, always yappin’.”

“To some purpose, Jonas, there’s more n’more listen to him. An’ you know well what happened below when those yellin’ ‘GORT, come down’ broke loose.”

“Gods,” snorted the city sergeant. “We be those all gods have forgot. Perhaps just as well, there was always a pother o’ trouble below when priests stuck their claws into affairs. There are those here who are like to stir if the right spoon is thrust into the pot, too. Thunur is gettin’ him a followin’— Let him get enough to listen an’ we’ll be out with pikes, an’ you’ll remember outlaw hunting as somethin’ as a day’s good ramble.”

“Well, I could do with a ramble—over to the Hafted Stone to wet m’ ’gullet an’ then to barracks an’ m’bunk. His Honor is late—”

“Right good reason.” A younger man turned from the group of his fellows by the door and leered. “Hear as how it was all to be fixed up for our Knight-Captain—wed and bed the lord’s daughter—make sure that he is firm in the saddle for the time when m’lord don’t take to ridin’ anymore. They have a big feastin’ tonight just to settle the matter, don’t they?”

There was no time for an answer. Those by the door parted swiftly to allow another to enter. He was unhelmed, but wore mail, and over that a surcoat patterned with a snarling wolf head. His dark hair was cropped after the fashion of one who wore a helm

much, and it was sleeked above a high forehead. The seam of a scar twisted one corner of his mouth, so that he seemed to sneer at the world around.

He was young for all of that, and once must have been handsome. His narrow beak of a nose gave him now the look of some bird of prey, an impression his sharp yellowish eyes did nothing to lighten. Otger, Knight-Captain under the Castellán, was no man to be taken lightly either in war or council. Now he stalked past the men who crowded back to give him room, as if they were invisible, even Jonas pulled away quickly as his commander fronted Ruddy face-to-face.

"There is trouble, Town Sergeant?"

Ruddy had straightened. His face was as impassive as that of a puppet soldier.

"Sir, no more than ever. Th' priest of GORT is brayin' again. Some are beginnin' to listen. This mornin' he came here—"

"So!" Otger turned his head but a fraction. "Dismissed to the courtyard."

They were quick to go. Only Jonas and Ruddy remained. The Knight regarded them with the hooded eyes of a predator biding time.

"He is still here?"

"Sir, he spilled forth such blather that I thought it best you hear. He speaks of those above him in a manner which is not fit."

Otger moved past him, seated himself on the single chair behind that table, as a giver of justice might install himself in court. His hand went to his cheek, the fingers tracing that scar. Jonas edged backward another step. That was always a trouble sign. Young as Otger was, he had gained such influence here as to be served swiftly.

It was the Castellán who had advanced him swiftly—and in a way, who could blame Lord Jules? The years spun by only too swiftly, and a man aged

with them. The lord had no son—but there was a daughter. One wedding her would surely rule here. Those of the east plains would take no notice, if all was done properly, and there had been no exile of high blood now since Otger himself had ridden in as a gold-eyed youth five seasons back.

"Bring the priest," he ordered now. And Jonas went to fetch Thunur.

The man did not cringe as he came. Instead, he was bold at this fronting, his head up, and eyes blazing with the fire of the rage that always burned in him.

"I hear you wish to see me," Otger's gaze swept the fellow from head to foot and back again. Just so had he looked two days before at that wounded outlaw they had taken.

"Witchery, Sir Knight. Foul witchery has come by the Way Wind into l'Estal. It must be routed out. Already it has ensorcelled many—many, Sir Knight. Among them"—Thunur paused for a moment to make his next statement more portentous, "The Lady Almadis—"

"And who is this dealer in witchery?" Otger's voice was very calm. Ruddy hitched one shoulder. This priest would soon learn his lesson by all the signs.

Thus encouraged, Thunur spoke his tale, so swiftly that spittle accompanied the words he spewed forth. He ended with the listing of those who had borne away tokens of Meg's giving. And at the saying of some of those names, Otger's eyes narrowed a fraction.

"It is laid upon all true men and women to deal with witches as GORT has deemed right—with fire. This—this sluttish whore, and those brutes she brought with her—they must be slain; and those whom she has entailed must be reasoned with—less they too are tainted past cleansing."

"You name some who are above you, priest.

Tongues that wag too freely can be cut from jaws. I would advise you to take heed of the need of silence for now—”

“For now?” Thunur repeated slowly.

“For now.” Otger arose. “You seem to have an eye for such matters. Out with you to use that eye, but not the tongue, mind you!”

Thunur blinked. And then he turned and went. But Otger spoke to Ruddy. “Have the patrol keep an eye to that one. I have seen his like before—they can be well used if they are handled rightly, but if they are not under rein, they are useless and must be removed.”

The market was alive. Though some of the sellers noted that there were more men at arms making their ways leisurely among the booths. However, since the border patrol had just returned, that might be expected.

Again Meg had taken her place, Mors behind her and Kaska’s basket carefully out of the way. Her bouquet centered her table board. But those who came to look over her stock this day did not seem to note it particularly, nor did she all the morning lose any bloom from it for gifting.

Tod and Tay came by just before the nooning bell and brought her a basket Forina had promised. This time Nid walked behind them, his heavy-horned head swinging from side to side, as if he wished to keep a close eye on all about.

Just as he stepped up to exchange polite nose taps with Mors, one of the guards halted before Meg’s display. He had the weather-roughened and darkened skin of a man who had spent many years around and about, and there was a small emblem caught fast in the mail shirt he wore that marked his rank.

“Fair day to you, Herbwife.” He studied her, and

then his eyes dropped to her wares. “You have Illbane, I see.”

“You see and you wonder, Guard Sergeant? Why?”

She took up the bundle of leaves. “It stands against evil, does it not—ill of body, ill of mind. What do they say of it? That if those of dark purpose strive to touch it, they are like to find a brand laid across their rash fingers.”

“You know what they say of you, then?”

Meg smiled. “They say many things of me, Guard Sergeant Ruddy. It depends upon who says it. I have already been called witch—”

“And that does not alarm you?”

“Guard Sergeant Ruddy, when you are summoned to some duty, would any words from those not your officers turn you aside?”

“Duty—” he repeated. “Herbwife, I tell you that you may well have a right to fear.”

“Fear and duty often ride comrades. But fear is the shadow and duty the substance. Look you”—she had laid down the bundle of leaves, turned her hand palm-up to show the unmarked flesh, and carried that gesture on so that as his eyes followed they touched the bouquet.

“Rowan leaf and berry,” he said.

“Such as grow in hedgerows elsewhere.” Meg pulled out the stem to show a pair of prick defended leaves, a trefoil of berries.

Slowly he reached out and took it from her.

“Watch with care, Herbwife.” He did not tuck her gift into full sight as had the others who had taken such, but rather closed his fist tightly upon it and thrust that into his belt pouch.

Almadis stood by the window. One could catch a small sight of the market square from this vista. But she could not sight Meg’s stall. She was stiff with

anger, and yet she must watch her speech. It might be that she was caught at last, yet she could not bring herself to believe that.

"He rode in," she tried to keep her words even in tone, not make them such as could be used against her. "And with him he brought *heads*—heads of men! He would plant those as warnings! Warnings!"

"Against raiders, outlaws. They only understand such." That answering voice held weariness. "Their raids grow bolder—oftener. The land we hold, which supplies us with food, with that very robe you are wearing, cannot yield what we need when it is constantly under raid. Now, with the upper snows fast-going, we shall have them down upon us more and more. I know not what presses them these past few seasons, but they have grown bolder and bolder. We lost a farm to fire and sword—Otger collected payment. They deal in blood, thus we must also."

Almadis turned. "He is a man of blood," she said flatly.

"He holds the peace. You call him man of blood—well, and that he is in another way also. We are of ancient family, daughter—thrown aside though we may be. Rank weds with rank. Otger is the son of a House near equal to our own. Whom you wed will rule here afterward; he must be one born to such heritage. There is no one else."

She came to stand before her father where he sat in his high-back chair. And she was suddenly startled, then afraid. Somehow—somehow he had aged—and she had not seen it happening! He had always remained to her, until this hour, the strong leader l'Estal needed. He was old and to the old came death.

So for the moment she temporized. "Father, grant me a little more time. I cannot find it in me to like Otger—give me a little time." Her fingers were at her

breast pressing against the hidden pendant, caressing the rose which still held both color and fragrance.

"Where got you that flower, Almadis?" There was a sharpness in his tone now.

Swiftly she told him of Meg, brought by the Way Wind, and of her stall in the market.

"I have heard a tale of witchery," he returned.

"Witchery? Do some then listen to that mad priest?" Almadis was disturbed. "She came with the Way Wind—from the west—she brings herbs such as we cannot grow—for the soothing of minds and bodies. She is but a girl, hardly more than a child. There is no evil in her!"

"Daughter, we are a people shunned, broken from our roots. There is shame, pain, anger eating at many of us. Such feelings are not easily put aside. And in some they take another form, seeking one upon whom blame may be thrown, one who may be made, after a fashion, to pay for all that which has caused us ill. Eyes have seen, ears have heard, lips reported—there are those who cry, witchery, yes. And very quickly such rumors can turn to action. This Meg may be a harmless trader—she may be the cause of an uprising. There is the ancient law for the westerners, one which we seldom invoke but which I turn to now—not only for the sake of town peace but for her safety also. This is the third day in the market—by sundown—"

Almadis swallowed back the protest she would have cried out. That her father spoke so seriously meant that indeed there might be forces brewing who take fire in l'Estal. But on sudden impulse, she did say:

"Let me be the one to tell her so. I would not have her think that I have been unmindful of her gift." Once more she touched the rose.

"So be it. Also let it be that you think carefully on what else I have said to you. Time does not wait. I

would have matters settled for your own good and for my duty.”

So once more Almadis went down to the market and with her, without her asking, but rather as if they understood her unhappiness about this matter, there came Osono and Urgell. She noted in surprise that the bard had his harp case riding on his shoulder, as if he were on the way to some feast, and that Urgell went full armed.

It was midday, and Almadis looked about her somewhat puzzled for the usual crowd of those in the market, whether they came to buy and sell, or merely to spend time, was a small one. The man whose stall had neighbored Meg's was gone, and there were other empty spaces. Also there was a strange feeling which she could not quite put name to.

Ruddy, the guard sergeant, backed by two of his men, were pacing slowly along the rows of stalls. Now Urgell came a step forward so that he was at Almadis's right hand. His head was up, and he glanced right and left. Osono shifted the harp case a little, pulling loose his cloak so that the girl caught sight of his weapon, a span of tempered blade between a dagger and a sword in length.

If there had been a falling away of the crowd, that was not so apparent about the stall where Meg was busied as she had been since she first came into l'Estal. But those who had drifted toward her were a very mixed lot. Almadis recognized the tall bulk of the smith, and near shoulder to him was Tatwin, the scholar, his arm about the shoulders of a slight girl whose pale face suggested illness not yet past, while by her skirts trotted a small shaggy dog with purpose which seemed even more sustained than that of the two it accompanied.

There was also, somewhat to Almadis's surprise,

Forina of the inn, and behind her wide bulk of body came Tod and Tay, once more grasping the horns of Nid with the suggestion about them that they were not going to lose touch with that four-footed warrior.

Others, too, a shambling-footed laborer from the farmlands, with one hand to the rope halter of a drooping-headed horse that might have drawn far too many carts or plows through weary seasons.

Just as they gathered, so did others in the marketplace draw apart. That feeling of menace which had been but a faint touch when Almadis trod out on this cobbled square grew.

There was movement in the alleyways, the streets, which led into that square. Others were appearing there who did not venture out into the sunlight.

Urgell's hand was at sword hilt. Almadis quickened pace to reach Meg's stall.

“Go! Oh, go quickly!” she burst out. “I do not know what comes, but there is evil rising here. Go while you can!”

Meg had not spread out her bundles of herbs. Now she looked to the Castellan's daughter and nodded. She picked up her staff and set to the crown of it the bouquet of flowers. The twins suddenly loosed their hold on Nid and pushed behind the board of the stall, shifting the panniers to Mors's back. Meg stooped and caught up the basket in which Kaska rode, settled it firmly within her arm crook.

“Witch—get the witch!” The scream arose from one of the alley mouths.

In a moment, Vill was beside Urgell, and Almadis saw that he carried with him his great hammer. Osono had shifted his harp well back on his shoulder to give him room for weapon play. There were others, too, who moved to join that line between Meg and the sulkers in the streets and alleys.

“To the gate,” Almadis said. “If you bide with me,

they will not dare to touch you!" She hoped that was true. But to make sure that these who threatened knew who and what she was and the protection she could offer, she pushed back her cloak hood that her face might be readily seen.

"To the gate," Ruddy appeared with his armsmen, added the authority of his own to the would-be defenders.

They retreated, all of them, bard, mercenary, smith, sergeant forming a rear guard. Only before the gate there were others—

A line of men drawn up, men who had been hardened by the riding of the borders, Otger's chosen. Before them stood the knight-captain himself.

"My lady," he said as they halted in confusion. "This is no place for you."

Almadis's hand went to Meg's arm. "Sir, if you come to give protection, that is well. But this much I shall do for myself, see an innocent woman free of any wrong—"

"You give me no choice then—" He snapped his fingers, and his men moved in, he a stride ahead plainly aiming to reach Almadis himself.

"Sir Knight," Almadis's hand was on her breast, and under it the moon token was warm. "I come not at your demand or that of any man, thank the *Lady*, save at a wish which is my own."

Otger's twisted mouth was a grimace of hate, and he lunged.

Only—

From the staff Meg held, there blazed a burst of rainbow-hued light. Otger and those with him cried out, raising their hands to their eyes and stumbled back. From behind Almadis and Meg moved Mors and Nid, the ancient horse, whose head was now raised, and those three pushed in among the guard,

shouldering aside men who wavered and flailed out blindly.

Then Almadis was at the gate, and her hands were raised to the bar there. Beside her was the scholar, and with more force than either of them came Forina. So did the barrier to the freedom without fall. And they came out into the crisp wind without the walls, the very momentum of their efforts carrying them into the mouth of the Way Wind road.

There were cries behind them, and the screeching of voices, harsh and hurting. Almadis looked behind. All their strangely constituted party had won through the gates, the rear guard walking backward. Urgell and Osono had both drawn steel, and the smith held his hammer at ready. There were improvised clubs, a dagger or two, Ruddy's pike, but none were bloodied. Urgell and Ruddy, the smith beside them, slammed the gates fast.

Almadis could still hear the shouting of Otger, knew that they had perhaps only moments before they would be overwhelmed by those who were ready for a hunt.

Meg swung up her staff. There was no wide burst of light this time—rather a ray as straight as a sword blade. It crisscrossed the air before them, leaving behind a shimmer of light the width of the road, near as high as the wall behind them.

As she lowered her staff, she raised her other hand in salute to that shimmer, as if there waited behind it someone or thing she held in honor.

Then she spoke, and, though she did not shout, her words cried easily over the clamor behind them.

"Here is the Gate of Touching. The choice now lies with you all. There will be no hindrance for those going forward. And if you would go back, you shall find those behind will accept you again as you are.

"Those who come four-footed are comrades—the

choice being theirs also. For what lies beyond accepts all life of equal worth. The comradeship of heart is enough.

“The choice is yours, so mote it be!”

She stood a little aside to give room, and Tod and Tay, laying hands once more to Nid's horns, went into the light. Behind them, his hand on the old horse's neck, the laborer trod, head up and firmly. Almadis stood beside Meg and watched them pass. None of them looked to her or Meg, it was as if they were drawn to something so great they had no longer only any knowledge of themselves, only of it.

At last there were those of the rear guard. Osono and Vill did not glance toward her. But Urgell, whose sword was once more within its sheath, dropped behind. Somehow her gaze was willed to meet his. The leaf Meg had given him was set in his battered helm as a plume, the plume that a leader might wear to some victory.

Almadis stirred. She stepped forward, to lay her hand on the one he held out to her as if they would tread some formal pattern which was long woven into being.

Meg steadied Kaska's basket on her hip, and looked up to the glimmer as Castellan's daughter and mercenary disappeared.

“Is it well-done, *Lady*?”

“It is well-done, dear daughter. So mote it be!”

With staff and basket held steady, Meg went forward, and when she passed the gate of light it vanished. The Way lay open once again to the scouring of the wind.