

KNOWLEDGE

by

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Aden moved swiftly along the familiar corridor, one of the nearly countless strands in the web uniting the chambers and rooms forming the heart of Lornt, the repository of the knowledge her very ancient people had accumulated through their long history.

The greater part of what was stored here was forgotten now, the records of it set down in languages or variations of languages no longer comprehensible to the most learned of her race, yet still that knowledge waited, ready to quicken the eager mind of one who could somehow learn once more the meaning of the words in which it was inscribed.

Such a sage was unlikely to come now, with the Old Race and, seemingly, every other of honor or worth beleaguered by foes and able to think of little beyond the waging of war to preserve themselves and the stark needs of survival. Under such conditions, small attention could or would be given to parchments and scrolls moldering away amidst the dust of time on the shelves of a repository that seemed to many more a shadow of a lifeway and a world long since faded and dead than a real part or any part of their own turbulent age.

The very residents of the place gave credit to such belief. It was not a living community in the usual sense. The greatest number of those dwelling and working here were men, very old men, who sat through long, quiet days at square tables or round tables in dimly lit chambers, reading or copying from disintegrating scrolls or merely dozing with the ancient manuscripts spread out unnoticed before them. Rare visitors to the silent rooms usually came forth again with the feeling that those they had seen, like the materials they purported to study, were but memories of what once had been.

The woman knew better. She, too, was part of Lormt, and she saw what outsiders did not. Truly, there were some here who drowsed gently through their days, but many only used sleep as a mask, a shield against the pain strangers roused in them. Their bodies might be frail, but the minds of most were fine. They disliked and resented pity and even more strongly detested the ignorance and indifference of the outer world. They mourned that so much of what was their trust and their love would almost certainly be lost because so few came to take up their work when their course in this life was at last run.

In one sense, Aden did not entirely regret that. She was not so long or so completely withdrawn from the violence and hardship of existence beyond these thick, gray walls that time had softened her memory of its ways. Perhaps it was better that the knowledge stored here should fade and die. Too much of it dealt with Power in one aspect or another, and she had little liking for the idea that something learned within this place should be used to bring still further misery on people already far too familiar with it. Certainly, she had not found much to comfort her in the handful who had come to Lormt on one quest or another during the period of her service here. A few of the seekers had patently been fine, high-souled beings right enough, but she put small trust in the rest of them.

All the same, despite her fears, a pang of grief shot through her, as it always did when she thought of the decay around her. Lormt held the history and heritage of her people, her world. The loss of what lay here would be the loss of their very birthright, an irreparable tragedy more wrenching than any wasting of goods or gold, although few outside these walls appreciated

that danger, and fewer still were willing to trouble themselves at all to avert it. Even she and Jerro did not really do as much as they might . . .

The woman's eyes closed momentarily as fear knotted her stomach.

She tried to grip herself. There was no need for such concern, she told herself sharply. It was a common failing she had observed in her companions here, one she did not want to see develop in herself, this overresponse to any deviation from the norm in their peaceful existence, as if such were a major disaster.

The argument was logical, but Aden could not convince herself that it applied here. Jerro could be thoughtless enough at times, and he often came late when he promised to meet with her during his visits to Lornt. Occasionally, if he found some trail that really captured his interest, he missed an appointment entirely simply because he forgot it, but her brother was not completely insensitive. He would not vanish for two full days without sending some word as to his whereabouts and the nature of whatever held him. Indeed, he usually issued a call for her help in his digging if the project were in any way involved. Nay, she had to put enough trust in him in that respect to seek for him now.

She knew where to begin, at least. Like herself, Jerro had his favorite chambers, those that were rich in material on the topics he most loved to delve. There was no reason to panic until she had sought for him thoroughly in all of them.

The woman sighed, thinking of the task ahead of her. It seemed inconceivable on the surface that anyone could come into danger in Lornt, but with her brother, she simply could not be sure. When the mood struck him, he was as avid a seeker after knowledge as she, and when some hunt gripped him powerfully, there was little that could turn him from it. Unfortunately, whereas she was content to read and to know a thing in her mind, he had a tendency to try what he learned for himself, sometimes before he had gathered all the facts to him.

She stepped under an archway and passed through a door left carelessly ajar. It opened into one of the larger chambers, where a single, aged man sat, bent over a large tome bound in

leather that had once been brightly dyed but was now faded to a muddy gray shade. There was no sleep on him. Ouen's expression was as quick and sharp as the wind of spring's first month. It was welcoming, and she made him a good approximation of a courtly bow although she did not otherwise pause. He made no effort to stay her but only smiled and waved her on.

Her own expression softened. This man was her teacher as well as the one who had ordered her to her work, and he had never held her back from any search she wanted to make, believing that to be more important than any shifting of dust. But then, she had given him reason to trust her, always fulfilling her duties even if she had to work far into the night to do it.

Aden left the chamber through a smaller door breaking the wall opposite the entrance. She hesitated outside it. Ouen would help her if he knew the weight on her . . .

Nay. It would be wrong to disturb him yet. If she failed to find Jerro herself, aye, then she would call on him, on them all, but for the moment, she must do her looking herself.

She would not be delayed long in the areas immediately ahead of her. Her brother rarely tarried long here.

This was her territory, and even in her worry, her fingers reached out almost of their own accord to caress a shelf on her right as she passed close to it.

The ways of animals and plants fascinated Aden, as did the sea and the workings of the land itself, all that made the world what it was. The healing arts, she studied avidly, and she gave freely of the knowledge she gained, to the good of a number of people both in Lornt and in the village just beyond its walls where she had been born.

Power did not interest her, possibly because she had no store of it and was denied the wonders those possessing it and trained in its use could wrought. Her motives for her lack of enthusiasm in this area did not worry her. No one could like or absorb everything, and she had more than enough to do in the broad fields that did captivate her.

If she did not care for witchery itself, the people who worked with it were another matter. The woman sought out everything she could discover about them, both records and tales of more

recent history, the better part of which she had learned before making her life in Lornt, and legends of mighty adepts who had lived and wielded Power and will in the dim past. Above all the rest, she strove to learn all she might about those Great Ones whom most considered to be gods, though some held them to have been men and women who had risen so far in their Power that they had advanced beyond humanity into another state entirely, a category that also held a larger number of other beings who had never been accorded the attributes of divinity.

They all drew the interest and efforts of her mind, but only Gunnora aroused any real feeling in her. That one was The Lady of life in all its fruitfulness and in its darker aspects as well, the patroness of women and their children. Although no man raised a sanctuary in her name or addressed petitions to her, Aden believed that to be the work of humankind and not the Goddess, if such she be, herself. Gunnora seemed too great a part and mistress of the balance apparent throughout all the rest of the world's realms to be the author of so unnatural a distinction.

For her own part, Aden did not worship Gunnora, for she was not certain in her heart that she was indeed a being to whom that honor should rightly be rendered, but her studies had, in truth, made her love that Great One and all she represented.

A wave of nervousness swept through her, stopping the ranging of her thoughts. Soon she would be leaving these familiar, well-browsed chambers for those less frequently visited, the ones in which Jerro was wont to roam during his increasingly frequent visits. Her search had been a cursory one to this point, but it must be carried in earnest from here on in, she hoped to a successful and pleasant conclusion. She had determined before starting out that he was not in any of Lornt's more public places or in the chamber assigned for his personal use. If she failed to discover him in the halls ahead, then she would know for a fact that there was probably very sound reason for the worry tearing her ever more sharply since yesterday evening.

* * *

Three long, weary hours went by without a break or brightening in the woman's search. She had by then passed through all her brother's normal haunts and came to rooms and corridors rarely if ever visited, perhaps not once in the year or in five years, places never coming under her care or any other's within the memory of Lornt's oldest citizen.

That very neglect helped to keep her moving, kept the hope alive in her heart although it seemed to her that she must have traveled the entire length of the huge building, as a measuring of the convoluted ways she walked would have proved to be the case several times over. The dust lay thickly here, on floor as well as on shelf, and it had been so disturbed as to indicate that some other had come this way not too very long in the past. The tracks seemed to be going in but one direction, and she thought, though she had not the skill to read them with any certainty, that they had been made by a man, or at least by someone with feet much larger than her own.

Aden continued on for another half hour. She was too tired by then and too concerned to wonder even fleetingly about the contents of these seemingly eternal rows of shelves although she probed every recess and space between them.

When would she come to the end of this infernal trail? What would she find there?

She battled down the panic threatening to overwhelm her. Very well, she thought. That mental outburst was a warning to her. She must stop, rest for a while and eat, or her body would betray her. The last thing she needed at this point was to lose control of herself.

The woman looked around the next chamber she entered and spotted a stone bench set beneath one of the tall, narrow windows. It looked inviting despite the inevitable layer of dust, and she went over to it. Her clothes were already so begrimed after her day's efforts that a few more stains would scarcely be noticeable.

She slid her light pack from her shoulders and took out the supplies she had brought with her, bread of her own baking and a small traveler's bottle of water.

As Aden ate, her thoughts drifted back through the years.

She could not recall a time when she and Jerro were not comrades. They had been born within a year of each other, and because fate had decreed that there were no others of quite that age in their village, they had grown up closer than was normally the case with siblings of different genders.

Life had been good to them. The offspring of the tanner in a little community that had been spared the horrors and most of the hardships vested on so many others, they had been raised in a good measure of what their kind termed comfort and in a reasonable degree of freedom.

Her brother had nearly always been the leader in exercising that last. Although the younger of the pair, all the courage and daring seemed to be his, and many had been the time she had followed him only because she, then considerably larger and stronger, felt bound to protect and care for him when they were away from their mother's watchful eye.

It was through him that they had first come to Lornt. When Aden was in her eighth year, Jerro had idolized his older cousins and followed them everywhere. To rid themselves of their small shadow, they had told him that he must scout Lornt's halls and report back to them if he wished to be part of their company, feeling certain that would cow him. The strange old building was a source of awe and dread to all the younger children and perhaps still had been a little daunting even to them.

They had underestimated her brother's determination, and that very afternoon he had set out with her as his very unwilling accomplice.

They had been caught almost at once, of course, as soon as they passed into the first courtyard. Terror had held them in place, or they should readily have been able to outrun their captor, but they were soon put at ease. The man who had taken them introduced himself as Ouen and told them of the work being done in the ancient place, then he had brought them around some of the rooms so that they could see the old books and scrolls for themselves.

The two children had returned again and again. Her eyes brightened, glowing almost like coals in a dark room as that memory rose up in her. They learned to read those scrolls and discovered how words changed and grew in meaning as years

rolled by until their old significance could be and frequently was completely forgotten. They both became expert, even as were their teachers, at ferreting out those meanings and pushing back with them to discover those more ancient still. As they grew older, their duties at home inexorably increased, but they still had found the time or made the time or, on occasion, stole the time to keep coming back.

Eventually, Jerro was apprenticed to his father, and she had taken service in Lornt, a move her kin much favored, for her skill in heal craft had already aided them, both themselves and their beasts, and they saw it to their benefit that she acquire still more of that learning.

Since that time, she had maintained herself by preparing her teachers' food and caring for their few garments and their chambers, both those where they slept and the larger places they frequented most in their labors. It was light work compared with what she had done in her father's house or would have faced had she been wed with one of the village lads, and through it all, she was given good time and good training in her explorations until in the end she had won an equal's place among the others. Indeed, the need to perform the labor to which she had originally bound herself had been lifted from her nearly two years previously, when Jerro had become his own master, and she continued with it chiefly to honor and comfort these ones who had become as dear to her as any blood kin.

Her existence in Lornt was good. She did miss the company of others like herself now and then, and she regretted that there was so little of laughter and nothing of song here, but Jerro came often—even through the long years of his apprenticeship, he had come—and his visits always cheered and brightened her, even as did those she herself made to her own people.

She bit down hard on her lip. He had arrived three days before, and on that first evening, he had all but flown into the small hall in an excitement he had refused to share, saying this was a trail he wanted to follow to its conclusion first. She had not seen him since then.

Aden buried her face in her hands. If only she had pressed him while she had had the chance!

Her fingers sought the tight little pocket she had sewn in her

tunic and closed over the object it held. She drew it forth and clasped it tightly, drawing comfort from it, as she always did when some trouble was on her.

She opened her hand after a moment and looked at it. Gun-nora's amulet, but like no other of its kind that she had ever seen. It was fashioned of bronze but was exquisite in the perfection and detail of its workmanship, so that stalk and vine seemed minute versions of reality in all save color and material. Tiny, brilliant white stones formed the grains crowning the stalk, and dull, round ones, equally small, represented the fruit of the vine encircling it. She had found it at the very back of a shelf, buried under an unsalvageably decayed manuscript, during her first week of service in Lornt. Although she had loved it, she had dutifully offered it to Ouen, but the old man had refused it, telling her it was like to a gift from the Goddess herself and that it was not a thing to which any man had a right. He had charged her to care for it well, an unnecessary caution in her case, and to treasure it.

Aden did not return it to her pocket now although she felt immeasurably calmer. She continued to hold it as she sat back, her eyes closed, trying to think.

The woman had not come this way before, but all of Lornt was mapped, and she made herself recall the sketches she had seen of its buildings and the winding ways within them, seemingly winding, for this was in actuality no maze but only a complex of rooms laid out to fill a purpose no longer really familiar to the descendants of those who had planned it. Her people had fallen back, in that respect, at least.

She thought she knew where she was. If she were right, this should be nearly the end, with only one long hall and a final room to be examined. If she found nothing in either, her hope would be exhausted.

Aden passed out of the chamber where she had taken her rest and started down the hall beyond it. This was indeed long, and she found it oppressive although she could not at first say why she thought it so. No less light reached it than any of the others through which she had come. No greater volume of dust lay upon it, yet it seemed almost unbearably dismal to her.

Her step faltered. Nay. It was more than that. She felt threatened here, and the sensation of danger grew ever stronger the nearer she drew to the door at its farther end.

Nerves! Night shadows! she screamed at herself, but she clutched the amulet more tightly as she pressed determinedly onward. The tracks still led on before her, and where that walker had gone, she could right well follow.

The door, one like all the many others in the ancient repository, was closed, but it gave easily under the pressure of her hand, revealing a small, close room. No other exit that she could see led from it.

No one seemed to be inside. Her heart sank, but she stepped forward. The tracks were there, but they were now much confused, as if some seeker had ranged from one packed shelf to another in the joy and drive of his searching.

She, too, wandered up and down those aisles, looking for any sign of her missing kinsman, or of the author of the tracks she had followed should he be another.

The woman had examined more than half of them when she came suddenly to a halt, held by surprise. There on the wall before her, so set that it caught and reflected the full light of the window opposite it, was a glass, taller and broader than herself, such as a great lady might yearn to own. It was truly a wonderful thing, not only large but remarkably clear and free of distortion.

She peered into it. Her image looked back at her with scarcely a waver to mar it . . .

Aden screamed. The body was hers, but the face—the face was Jerro's!

She looked again. Nay. It was only herself.

She took a deep breath to steady herself. She knew what she had seen. Aden fought down her fear and the numbing lash of shock. This was a thing, a work, of Power, and it was essential that she be calm and in full control of herself when she dealt with it, or tried to deal with it.

How she wished now that she had availed herself of the wealth of information that had been laid out for her taking all these years! Even that which could still be read would have vastly fortified her for this challenge. At the very least, she

might have learned with what she was contending and how best to move against it.

Regret, too, she put from her. It was too late for that. She must go forward with what she had.

The woman gazed into the mirror once more. Aye, her brother's face was there in place of her own. His eyes were starting in terror, and his lips were moving. Her heart twisted in anguish. He did not appear to be aware of her, but he was calling her. Over and over again, he was calling her name.

Emotion must not take her now! Think! Utilize what she had learned. It might have come to her indirectly while she had studied other matters, but she still had gathered in a great deal of information upon which she could and must now draw in her need.

Of all the things this accursed glass might be, the woman realized it was probably one of three. It could be a Gate into some other realm that Jerro had tried to enter and failed, or else failed to effect the return. It could be a device set long ages past to trap men or maybe any living creature blundering into it. Lastly, it could be a creature that fed upon the life substance of those it ensnared or a device to aid in such feeding.

The first, she discounted. People were sealed on one side or the other of a Gate, not, to her knowledge, actually within one. The third was almost too terrible to contemplate, a thing of the true and deep Dark. Such did exist, but always, they emitted that which struck horror and sickness into the very souls of even those like herself possessing no shadow of Power, warning, if sometimes too late, what they were. She was uneasy, but she did not feel that. Logic said the second possibility was the soundest, that this was a trap, but nothing very much more.

Very well, she would accept that, at least as a working premise. It was quite enough. How was she to move against it, free Jerro from its infernal hold?

She pressed herself against it, but all she could feel was the cool smoothness of the glass. Her fingers ran over it, carefully sliding across the whole of its surface and then along its unframed sides and bottom. A large tome dragged from the shelf beside it gave her the height necessary to perform the same search of its top.

To no avail. There was no break or seam, nothing to give entrance or release.

Tears sprang to her eyes. What was she to do? She knew enough not to try smashing the foul thing. That would only serve to slay her brother outright or, worse, to lose him, bind him forever in whatever state of existence or nonexistence he was presently held.

She had to move soon. That, too, was clear. His face, his lips, had an ugly blue cast to them. He had already been trapped for some two days, and the air that had been sucked in with him must be well-nigh exhausted. If she could not free him almost at once, then she had come to this place merely to watch him die.

Her hands balled convulsively. This was wrong, so very wrong, a violation of all justice! Some men, a very few, might merit such an end, but not Jerro. He was kind, open, loving, with nothing at all of villainy or guile in him . . .

A sharp pain in her right hand restored her to her senses. She willed her fingers to open and saw that she had clasped the amulet so tightly that the sharp little stalk had pierced her flesh, drawing blood.

"Oh, Gunnora," she whispered in desperation, "I know males are not supposed to be in your province, but he would be well worthy of your care, and I love him."

Aden stopped. Her hysteria vanished in the thought that had come suddenly to her.

Stones were used for polishing and cutting things, glass among them, and those tipping this symbol were very sharp. Perhaps they would be sharp enough and hard enough to serve her purpose.

It might avail her nothing even if she did cut the glass, or maybe she would only precipitate the same disaster that would come of breaking the mirror outright, but this was Gunnora's symbol, Gunnora who could not but be revolted by such foulness. If Jerro was a man, well, she was a woman, and it was she who strove, she who feared and grieved, she who loved.

Fighting to still the trembling of her hand, Aden moved nearer the glass. Slowly, carefully, she began to trace as closely as she could the outline of her body as it was reflected there,

pressing as hard and steadily as she could with the sparkling head of the stalk.

Her eyes flickered up to follow its progress, and her breath caught. Aye! It was working! A thin, seemingly very deep line now scored the once-smooth surface.

At first nothing happened besides that physical marring, but no sooner had she completed outlining the head of her image and Jerro's than a noise began, a hissing rush followed fast by a rumbling that seemed to her overwrought senses to be the dying of a world.

She hastened as much as she dared and tried not to look at her brother's face. It was slack now, the eyes closed. Were her efforts for nothing after all?

There was a cracking sound, the splintering of glass, and a great weight fell forward upon her.

She went down under it but quickly rolled the body off her so that it lay on its back.

Jerro, and his lungs no longer drew in air.

Aden's fingers pressed into the side of his neck and were met by the thrice-welcome throb that told her his heart still beat.

Steady, she commanded herself fiercely. Not one but many scrolls had told her what she must do.

The woman placed her mouth over her brother's, forcing air into him until his chest expanded with it. She let it remain thus a moment, then pressed down so that his lungs emptied once more.

Again and again, she repeated the process until her body screamed with such weariness that it threatened to collapse under the effort she was demanding of it.

Somewhere within herself, she found the will to continue. Jerro's heart still beat, and while it did, life remained his. If she stopped, she would be his slayer.

The light streaming in through the window paled and became gray. Aden drew in yet another lungful of air to give him when suddenly she heard a low moan. She looked down, hope and disbelief warring in her heart. His chest rose, fell, and rose again.

Minutes later, his eyes opened. They were slow to focus, but when they did, she saw with relief that they knew her.

"Aden . . . The Gate . . . A fair garden, then nothing . . ."
She pressed her fingers to his lips.

"Say nothing for a while. Gather your strength."

The woman looked up at the mirror for the first time since she had freed her brother from it. The whole upper portion was shattered, but some of the lower third remained. She glanced about her, spotted the book she had used to aid her examination of the trap, and sent it hurtling through the glass, shattering it utterly. Never again would it snare the innocent and unwary.

She picked up Gunnora's symbol from amongst the shards and carefully returned it to its pocket, then turned back to Jerro. He was sitting up, still weak but rapidly recovering his strength. After a few days' rest, he should be fully himself once more, although she fervently hoped that he would have acquired some measure of caution from his experience.

Wearily, she got to her feet and retrieved the torch she had prudently put into her pack before starting out on her hunt. They would need it before they had made their way half the distance back to the living quarters.

Tomorrow, she would return here to sweep up the fragments of the deadly mirror, after first consulting with Ouen as how to best dispose of them, but she felt at ease in her heart about leaving them for this night. No danger remained. The quiet calm that was Lornt's mark filled the chamber in place of the glowering threat that had struck at her earlier. Nothing was left for her or anyone else to fear.

She smiled. Lornt was cleansed, Jerro was safe, and if she would not forget the events of this day, the memory would be one upon which she would be able to build to the enrichment of her life and her mind. Perhaps by recording it, she might one day help work a similar victory for others who stood the Light's cause in the ancient and yet ever-new war with the Shadow and the Dark.

Her head raised suddenly. That was the purpose of Lornt itself, the reason, the paramount reason, why it had been founded in the distant past, and in recognizing that, in subscribing herself, instinctively, to that purpose, she had vindicated Lornt's continued existence and the worth of the life's work she had chosen to make her own.