

LA VERDAD: THE MAGIC SWORD

by

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Abbey Halsted was the last stronghold of the Ladies of the Flame on the trail northward to the Gray Towers of the Weres. With such a location, it had witnessed many strange events. Few were stranger than the one going on at that very moment in the inner council chamber.

The seven chairs were arranged in a semicircle with the head Abbess in the central chair. All wore the full-length black robes of the order. Even the wimples surrounding their faces and heads were black. The only thing breaking the monotone of color was the red flame embroidered on the left breast of their robes. This was the ruling circle of Abbey Halsted, the Head Abbess and her six advisers.

Before them stood a young woman in the travel costume of the Daleswomen. She had the jet-black hair and the pointed chin that hinted of some connection with the Old blood. But the eyes were what held the council. Like deep pools they hinted at a knowledge long forgotten by her peers. The owner of those eyes was known simply as Eudora, and she was there in response to a recent night vision.

"You come to us with a tale that Gunnora has contacted you. Why, why, and why?" asked the abbess with her eyes flashing.

Eudora was used to people doubting her visions. She re-

tained her composure without difficulty as the six other Ladies of the Flame leaned closer, the tense poses of their bodies betraying their inner excitement. "Why what?" she asked respectfully.

"Why does Gunnora wish to establish contact with us? Her shrine is used mainly by the Daleswomen of the south. Why does she need our help now? For centuries the Toads have been her nearby harmless neighbors. Why does she think she has anything so valuable that *we* should risk contacting powers beyond a Gate for *her*?" asked the Abbess.

"First," Eudora replied, "please remember that Gunnora is a feminine power the same as you are and does very good work with our sisters, the Daleswomen. Second, our knowledge of the Toads is very limited. We do not know *why* the ancients imprisoned them in their circle of stones. I, for one, would not care to find out what evil they are capable of if . . ." her voice trailed off.

"If what?" interjected a lady of the council. "Does 'if' mean the Toads are trying to escape their enchanted prison?"

"Possibly," replied Eudora. "Gunnora has reason to believe that Toads are already preparing a champion willing to risk her wrath to gain her treasure for them."

"Champion? Treasure?" questioned the council in chorus. "Why does not Gunnora strike their champion and end this nonsense if her treasure is so valuable to her?"

"Gunnora is dedicated to the hearth, love, and life," Eudora replied patiently. "It is contrary to her nature to strike out in anger. Besides, whenever the Toads' champion appears outside their enchanted circle, he looks like any other ordinary man. So Gunnora asks your help in getting her a champion!"

"Are there no warriors of the Dales who are in debt to her for past favors to their wives? Could not *they* be her champions?"

Eudora smiled. "Ladies, *this battle* must be fought inside the Toads' ring of stones to contain them there. No local warrior would stand a chance against Toad magic! She also

knows that besides serving the flame, you nurse the sick as she does, and you keep ancient records. If anyone can call a champion from beyond a Gate, you will be the ones to do it."

The Abbess was silent for a moment, then said quietly, "We well know from past history that it is very dangerous to meddle with those forces. It costs a price, and sometimes the price is very costly. Is her treasure worth the risk?"

"Her treasure comes from her vineyard," Eudora replied. "Only a few drops of the pure Essence of Life wine are produced each year. One drop of this essence, when diluted with large amounts of water, makes a drink that refreshes an exhausted new mother. More concentrated, it heals damaged bodies, and in pure form it can bring back life to a dead body or remove a powerful curse! So, ladies, unless you want an invasion of freed Toads, with all their demonic powers intact to curse the land, you must find Gunnora a champion. You really have no choice."

The council members all looked to the abbess. "When do we start?" asked one of them quietly.

"Now," replied the Abbess.

If he could just reach the garden, he would be safe for a while. But the sounds of pursuit kept coming closer, and his own footsteps were faltering from the lack of blood. Blood! It was a sticky mixture on the hilt of his father's rapier. His father had made the dangerous journey, from Lisbon in Portugal to Toledo in Spain, to seek from the hands of the world's most famous swordsmiths a special blade.

But not all the blood on the rapier was his! Some of it was the blood of his now-dead beloved. Strange, that in the same night the blood of a warrior and the blood of a maiden should mingle on the hilt of La Verdad, while the blood of a traitor was on its point!

La Verdad, or "The Truth," was what his father had named his sword. And it was for truth his father had died. It looked now like the son would soon follow the father,

for the killer forces were pressing closer, while his . . . but wait! His hand was touching an ancient wooden gate. The gate was set in an old slate wall. João de Branco staggered past the gate, not wasting the effort needed to close it. *They* would not dare enter here. Too many old wives' tales had come out of that small, unkempt garden; grim tales of people entering in who never came out. The Bishop's minions would keep guard well outside *that* door!

Now it became an effort to place one foot before the other. Only an iron will kept him moving toward the blue stone set in the wall in the back of the garden. By the time the Bishop's men got up the courage to enter, he would be gone on a no-return trip, or be dead, or both! What *was* the unseen force that drew him to this spot? Now his tortured body would respond no further, he fell face downward and the tip of La Verdad touched the blue stone.

His last thoughts were of the scene in Elizabet's drawing room. She had obtained papers that proved the Bishop was trying to usurp the legal powers of the local Duque de Caixias. The Duque was a good, good man, who thought more of the lives of his people than the demands of his church! Elizabet had the proof, and he would take it to the Duque. Her scream had drawn him into the next room. He charged into her bedroom with La Verdad drawn. The bloody body of his beloved on the floor did not stop his trained warrior's eyes from seeing a pair of black boots sticking from under the window drapes.

Without a sound he lunged, thrusting the rapier into the curtain at heart height. There was a gasp, and another body joined Elizabet on the floor. The sinister face on the body belonged to *O Tigre* (The Tiger), captain of the Bishop's bodyguard.

Now his heart overcame his mind, he knelt beside his beloved and picked up her bloody body. As he had feared, she was dead. Her crimson blood stained his sword arm as he gently laid her on the floor. It was this action that saved his life, for the crossbow quarrel buried itself in his shoulder instead of between his shoulder blades where it had

been aimed. He snatched up the papers Elizabeth had dropped and sprang through the window. Her sacrifice would not be in vain, he resolved! Then the sending hit him, he *must* get to the strange garden at the end of the *Rua dos Mortos* (the street of the dead). He must! He must!

As the first rays of the crescent moon invaded the garden, they revealed a distressing scene; the body of a very dead young man reaching out with his sword to a blue stone in a wall. The moonlight touched the stone, and La Verdad disappeared, only to reappear in a meadow in Arvon. Its master was dead, but the sword still pulsed with life. From it a powerful thought wave went searching, searching, searching. Out there somewhere, a kindred soul would need them. La Verdad had come to Arvon and the Dales with the *blood of a warrior and a maiden mingled on the hilt, and the blood of their enemy on the blade!*

The keen eyes of the woman called Eudora opened to a new day and rested on a very large cat. The cat was on the foot of the bed that the Ladies of the Flame had provided her with after the "sending" of the night before. With all the presumption of its tribe, it stared at the young woman unblinkingly, as behooved one in the presence of an equal. They had established a mind-link immediately and both respected the talents of the other.

"What news, little brother," she asked.

"Sorceress," he replied respectfully, "*I have found a strange object lying in Torbuck's meadow near the wall. I was hunting there last night and suddenly it appeared. It was similar to the iron sticks the two-leg warriors carry, yet it was different. Then the 'thing' mind-spoke me saying, 'Get a person of power for me!'*"

A "thing of Power" that could mind-speak? Never had Eudora heard of such! Maybe the Abbess could shed light on this. She quickly made her way to the Abbess's chamber with the message.

After pondering for a moment the Abbess ordered, "Go and search, this may be the answer to our 'sending'!"

Arvon had never seen its like, as La Verdad lay on the green grass of Torbuck's meadow. It was a typical Spanish rapier by the master swordsmith Thomas de Ayala of Toledo. The long slender blade was a good handbreadth longer than a regular broadsword. The name La Verdad was etched into the forte of the blade near the hilt. The pommel was pure gold, and a small ruby was set into each end of the quillion. The grip was leather bound and cross-laced with gold wire for a firmer grasp by the user. A knuckle bow was molded into the guard made in the form of interlacing steel rings that formed a cup to protect the hand of the user. Clearly, this could be a machine of destruction in the hands of a master swordsman! The beauty of the weapon's appearance was only slightly marred by some dark stains on the hilt and the tip of the blade.

Eudora rode her horse into the meadow flanked by two Border guards, who trotted both respectfully and slightly to the rear of her. "It's still here, just like you said it would be," said the older of the guards. She said nothing, but even before entering the meadow she had felt an urging, a strange force drawing her to this place.

The younger of the Borderers spoke disdainfully, "What kind of a child's toy is this?" Before she could answer, he had vaulted from the saddle, and stooped to pick up the sword. Then he gasped in pain and cast it from him. "By the beard of my grandmother," he roared, "'tis as hot as a poker!"

Eudora wondered fleetingly what oath he would have used had she not been present. Then she extended her white birch sorceress's wand and spoke softly, "I come in peace. You sent for me, mighty one?"

The younger guard glanced at the older one and raised up one eyebrow in question, had she lost her senses to speak thus to a weapon? The other guard shrugged and

rolled his eyes heavenward, clearly he thought the ways of a sorceress were beyond understanding!

Eudora dismounted, stooped, and picked up the weapon. She folded her riding cape around it carefully, and prepared to remount her horse. Even with her cape around it, she could feel a pulsing of Power through the length of the blade. Into her mind entered a soft feminine voice: "*Sister we feel your problem. We will assist your quest, for you seek to defend the truth. If success comes, you must help us complete our search for truth.*"

"We?" mind-spoke Eudora as a question.

This time a deep masculine voice responded in her mind, "*We are one, but we are two. We are sword-sworn to fight for truth! We-are-La-Verdad!*"

A knot of curious Abbey laborers, gate guards, and novices gathered around the drawbridge as they returned. There was electric tension in the air, and everyone seemed to sense that this was no ordinary event.

Eudora called to the Abbey sword-master, "Harkin, what do you make of this? But be careful how you handle it!"

Cautiously the elderly soldier hefted the rapier, assumed an on-guard position, and made a few thrusts at the air. "Clearly, my lady, it is a weapon for thrusting. The balance is perfect, it is very light, and . . ." here his voice trailed off.

"Yes?"

"Forgive me, mistress, but the weapon *almost* seems to have a mind of its own!"

The Borderer who had tried to pick up the sword in the meadow interrupted with a snarl, "I still think it is a child's toy and would like to prove it with my own steel!" There was a malevolent glare on his face.

Almost like one possessed, thought Eudora, almost as if he is honor bound to disprove the value of this weapon.

She gave a nod of approval to Harkin, and the two men squared off.

The Borderer was good, but the experienced sword-master had no difficulty turning aside his slashing thrust. There was the grating sound of steel sliding against steel, as Harkin followed his parry with a riposte that was really a feint. Suddenly La Verdad glowed with a bluish light, and its point circled the point of the extended broadsword twice, then spiraled down the blade with the fluid motion of a blue snake.

There was a gasp from the onlookers as the guardsman was not able to parry the thrust, for the point of the rapier caught the man's leather jerkin at the wrist and split it to the elbow!

"Cease!" commanded Eudora. "Sword-master, you have proven the weapon well. Return it to me."

Harkin started to extend the weapon to her, paused, and his face became as white as new-fallen snow. "Mistress, I cannot! By the axe of Volt, it is pulling me toward this youth!" It was plain that the aged swordsman was struggling hard to turn back to the young woman, instead he was stepping slowly across the circle of onlookers to a fair-haired youth on the opposite side.

"Do not resist, O worthy Harkin," instructed Eudora, for her sorceress instinct sensed an outpouring of power in the area. "Permit 'them' to choose their own master." No one seemed to notice her use of the plural "them," or if they did, thought it a slip of the tongue.

Caldon, the youth seemingly selected for the honor of owning the sword, accepted the rapier reluctantly. He was a tall youth, slender of waist and broad of shoulder, who moved on his feet with the grace of a hunting cat. From under a crop of blond hair peered the most innocent blue eyes that Eudora had ever seen. She spoke firmly to the novice warrior, "Caldon, bring the weapon to me."

The youth obediently walked to Eudora, extended the sword respectfully, then stepped back in alarm. "I can't, my lady! My fingers won't open."

“Then come with me to the Abbess,” replied Eudora with a grim smile, “it would seem we have found our champion for Gunnora!”

Eudora and Caldon stood on the deck of the Sulcar ship, gazing out at the starlit sea. Under pressure of time, they had decided to travel by sea from the cove below Abbey Halsted, down the coast and to a landing place near Gunnora’s shrine. Eudora had this terrible urgency, they *must* reach the shrine before the full moon!

She glanced over the square-rigged Sulcar ship, with its narrow bow knifing rapidly through the sea. It was from such a ship as this that her father, a wounded Sulcar sailor, had been brought to Abbey Halsted for healing. In the months that followed, he had rewarded the Abbey’s kindness by stealing the heart of her mother, one of the novices. He was killed a year later in pirate action, and her mother had returned to the Abbey to have their child. But her mother had grieved so over the death of her husband, that Eudora was soon an orphan. The Ladies of the Flame had raised her hoping she too would be a novice, but Eudora did not take well to Abbey life. She would venture out to talk to the local wise women to learn their secrets. Her last venture had been in the direction of Gunnora’s shrine, but the vision she had on the trail had sent her hurrying back to the Abbey council. Now she was again venturing forth into new worlds, this time with the company of an unproven warrior youth.

They made an attractive couple as they stood on the foredeck of the Sulcar ship. She, with her slender form, robed in the gray traveling costume of a Daleswoman; her high leather boots and flowing cape only helped to accent her long, unbound black hair tossed by the wind. Caldon’s muscular frame was encased in the high boots, leather jerkin, and the lightweight chain mail of a Border guard. One rebellious blond curl projected from under the open-faced helm on his head. It was a plain helm as it sported none of the snarling animals that many of the Borderers

were fond of displaying. He had no shield, and at his side was his only weapon in a new sheath, a weapon such as the Sulcar captain with all his fighting experience had never seen before! It had taken Harkin a long time to convince the youth a shield would merely be in the way with this type of weapon.

Eudora glanced up at the youth's grim expression. She smiled inwardly at the contrast between his face and the one golden curl that constantly kept peeking out from under his helm. So childlike to be going on such an important mission! Yet, he *knew* what his task would be! Eudora still was in doubt as to just *why* she had come along. From time to time her fingers would lightly touch the swordhilt. She seemed, in an odd way, to be in communion with it.

The sullen Sulcar sea captain glanced at the couple, turned away, and spat over the rail. He was under a geas to take the couple Daleward, but that did not mean he must *like* dealing with wise women. And that weird weapon the youth carried . . . why did the hair on his neck stand up every time he was around it?

Eudora thought back to the session she and Caldon had shared with the Abbess at the start of this adventure. Caldon had repeatedly placed La Verdad on the oval table before the older woman. She was experienced enough to recognize an instrument of power immediately. When she made some strange sign and said, "Choose!" the weapon would slide down the table until the hilt was in Caldon's hand. Then the rapier would slide back down the table to where Eudora could touch the blade. It seemed like La Verdad had chosen *two* masters. How could this be?

In the end it was settled that they would both go on this mission together. Caldon would fight the Toads' champion and she would . . . what? Then, there was the little gnawing question at the fringe of her mind, why had the Toads' champion not already raided Gunnora's defenseless vineyard?

As the ship plowed eastward, dark clouds began to gather in the night sky. At first they seemed like the wings

of a gigantic black bird. The sea became more restless, as the waves began to whitecap under a brisk wind. A tenseness began to be felt in the crew, who began to mumble Sulcar storm chants.

Caldon glanced down at the young sorceress standing tensely beside him and said, "Yes, I feel it too. *Someone or something evil* is trying to make contact with us."

She nodded and added, "You are right, this action of the sea is not normal. The crew sensed it also."

Then the clouds descended to sea level, and in the direct path of the ship they assumed the appearance of a huge, ancient warrior. *Now* it was clear to her why she had been chosen for this quest.

"Caldon, give me La Verdad quickly!" she ordered.

To the youth's credit he handed it over instantly without comment. Grasping the hilt, she made passes through the air that left temporarily a glowing trail behind them like ancient runes.

The cloud warrior came closer with upraised sword, but suddenly the clouds over the ship parted and for an instant the waxing crescent moon was in view. Eudora raised her left hand to the moon and a shaft of moonlight flowed down her arm, across her body, and out the blade of the sword like a bolt of blue lightning. On impact with the cloud giant there was a flash of blue light, a sound like a clap of thunder, and a silent scream of rage that only the mind could hear, then all was silent. Once again the stars shown down on a ship sailing across a glassy sea.

Taking the sword from her shaking hand, Caldor returned it to its sheath. She was drained, exhausted, ready to collapse as he supported her gently against himself. "So, it was all an illusion just to frighten us?" he asked.

"Illusion, perhaps," she responded wearily, "but an illusion with teeth! If that cloud warrior had struck this ship with *that* sword, we would all be swimming right now! But where is the captain? I must have something to eat, never have I been so starved."

The smiling captain came up, his attitude completely

changed. If this was a sample of what to expect on this journey, maybe it was better to have your own personal wise woman along! He insisted on serving his passengers himself. Never had he seen such powerful magic avert such a near disaster at sea.

Eudora added a pinch of restorative herbs to the wine and water mixture the captain was serving. She stopped in midbite on a piece of journey cake she was eating and said softly to Caldon, "For just an instant in that encounter, I was in contact with the mind of the Toads' champion. Somehow they have located Malfeitor's sword, that illusion calls himself Malfeitor the second."

"Malfeitor?" Caldon made the name a question.

"The original Malfeitor was a powerful warlock warrior that lived over a century ago. The Ladies of the Flame were forced to unite and destroy him to protect Arvon. No one ever learned what became of his sword. This new 'champion' has been defeated by us on the field of sorcery, but . . ."

"But now I must defeat him on the field of flesh and steel?" finished the youth.

"You are very perceptive," added Eudora, "but I fear there will still be some magic in that conflict also. Never forget you have a very powerful weapon."

"I have two, my lady," he replied. "I have *La Verdad and* you. You were magnificent in that encounter. I trust you to back me when the moment comes like a true shield-brother, or 'sister,'" he added hastily.

Eudora flushed at this unexpected praise, then looked at him intently. "Caldon, do you fear this coming conflict?" she asked.

He looked down as if studying his boot toes and replied, "I would not seek it out on my own. Yes, I dread the possible outcome."

"Good," she replied, "for if you didn't, you would be a fool, and this is no task for fools! Now we'd best retire, for we both need the rest."

Eudora entered the cramped quarters that had been as-

signed to her, but Caldon chose to stretch out on the deck with the off-duty crew members. Eudora slept the sleep of the totally exhausted. Caldon dreamed all night long . . . of a young woman in a gray robe casting bolts of lightning at a giant warrior.

They made camp at the halfway point to Gunnora's shrine. All during the last hour on the road Caldon had been nervous; unseen eyes were watching them, eyes that had no love for them. La Verdad sensed it also. Every time he touched the hilt of the sword, there was a responding tingle, as if a power of some sort were building up in it.

He selected the campsite with much care: a tall cave, really a split in the rock wall beside the path, just wide enough for one person to enter at a time. Evidently some animal had used it as a den, for there was a large pile of brush at the back wall. "*Animals or men?*" said a soft masculine voice in Caldon's mind. "*Be ready, they come!*"

Eudora had coaxed some of the brush into a small fire. With that light behind him, Caldon drew the sword and stood to one side of the cave opening.

They came as shadows, a ragtag pack of bandits. The firelight glinted on the few scraps of armor, two swords with knicked edges, one battle axe and two crudely made clubs. The cave sides forced them to come in single file, ideal for one swordsman facing a group. Caldon stood sideways in a slight crouch as Harkin had taught him. He stopped the first bandit by the simple act of extending his arm with his body weight behind the thrust. The lunge caused the rapier to pierce the biceps on the bandit's forearm. Without a sound, the attacker dropped his sword and fell across the feet of the axeman following him. This action briefly exposed the axeman's weapon hand and like the tongue of a snake, the rapier laid open the man's forearm with a bloody gash. As the bleeding axeman turned and fled, the rest of the pack turned and rapidly retreated. The wounded leader dazedly staggered after them. Not a sound had been uttered in the short conflict!

"Let them go," commanded Eudora. "Once again Malfeitor has visited us, these men were just his innocent tools."

He looked at her with one eyebrow raised in silent question.

"Did you not see how dazed they looked, and how silent they were? Malfeitor had placed them under a geas to attack us."

He nodded assent thoughtfully. "Now our enemy knows something of what he must face on the field of blood and steel."

The sorceress eyed the youth thoughtfully. "You did well with an unfamiliar weapon."

"They fought sluggishly," he replied, "like men moving in a dream. Even so, I'd rather have had my old broadsword."

"Why?"

"This is mainly a thrusting weapon; I have been trained mainly in the art of cut-and-slash using the edge," he spoke bluntly.

After a moment of silence she spoke softly, "Yet this weapon was sent from another place or time when the council summoned help from a higher power. When this use is over, it must be sent back, and I doubt not that some 'payment' will be demanded for its use. Just what that payment will be I do not know, but *there will be a price!*"

"There is something else that bothers me," the young swordsman replied. "When Harkin tested it, it glowed with a blue light and he said it had a mind of its own. I noted neither in this conflict."

"Caldon, do you trust me completely?" she asked quietly.

"Of course, my lady," he replied in shocked tones.

"Then remove your glove, face the entrance with the sword in your bare hand, and, *whatever happens*, try to keep your mind blank."

As he obeyed, she bound together some wisps of grass into a crude doll. She made a few passes over it with her

wand, chanting with strange words. She then cast the doll in front of Caldon.

Immediately a mean-looking, fully armed warrior walked through the cave entrance. Caldon dropped into an on-guard position and what followed was amazing. La Verdad became a flashing lance of blue light in the hands of a master swordsman. Attack after attack of the veteran warrior were met with the youth parrying each one easily. Then the rapier caught the descending blow of the enemy's broadsword, and with a flick of the wrist moved it harmlessly aside. With the smoothness of a slithering snake, the rapier lashed into the attack and pierced the other's throat.

Instead of a scream, there was a puff of smoke and Caldon stood with his sword piercing a grass doll.

"Your opponent was more than an illusion, he was the returned spirit of a veteran warrior. But with your bare hand in contact with the magic sword, you were able to win the conflict. The coming battle with the Toads' champion will be more than just one of blood and steel. The end will be in the world of reality, but the conflict will also have much of high sorcery. *That* is why you will need a sword not-of-this-world. And that is why you need me. While you fight Malfeitor, I will try to keep the Toads occupied. Now we need rest, I will set guards against Malfeitor's magic. We must both be in good shape for what tomorrow brings."

Eudora set some blue cubes at the four corners of the campsite and they rolled up in their sleeping rolls. But Caldon slept the light sleep of a soldier in a combat zone, with his bare hand on the hilt of La Verdad.

They made an imposing couple as the young sorceress and the recently proven young warrior stood before the shrine of Gunnora. The ancient building with its round windows and the door with the heavy bellpull seemed both to attract and repel them.

"What means this symbol, sorceress?" asked Caldon

with a hushed voice, as he pointed to the emblem of ripened grain entwined with a fruit-laden branch.

"It is the symbol of Gunnora, that of new life," she replied. As she pulled the bellrope, she wondered why it rankled her when he called her by her title instead of her name. *Why* could he not see her as a person instead of just a profession?

A voice as soft as the spring breeze said surprisingly, "The House of Gunnora welcomes all three of you, men and maidens. Welcome, champion; welcome, sorceress; welcome, La Verdad, living sword."

They entered a narrow hallway, lit by two lamps, one on each side and set on columns. They passed from the hallway into a large room that had a table set for two people. Food and some green drink in goblets graced the table.

"Refresh yourselves," the soft voice said, "and I will inform you while you are eating."

The two young people had healthy appetites, and the food was appreciated after days of journey rations. As they ate, the voice continued. "I observed your encounter with Malfeitor's astral image and his minions on the road here. He grows bolder and as his power increases, he will soon attack this very place. Until now he has been contained inside the Toads' ring, for when he leaves there he must assume his true form as an inferior wizard. *But he is learning from the Toads* and when the full moon begins to wane, my power will be unable to keep him in the magic ring. The new Malfeitor must be stopped this very night at the entrance of the Toads' prison. If my champion can hold out until moonrise, I will do all I can to aid him. Remember, this is an all-out effort by the Toads for freedom. *I will destroy this shrine before I permit that to happen!*"

"If Caldon fails," said Eudora with a catch in her voice, "you would destroy this place to stop the Toads?"

The soft voice continued, "The Toads must never get the vineyard of life, lest the entire of Arvon be taken over by dark forces. That is why I called on you and your sisters for help. The Ladies and I walk different paths, but in this we

have a common cause." Then to Eudora, "Come to my inner chamber, I would talk to thee alone."

Another curtain fluttered and Eudora passed through to an inner chamber. Caldon was left to his thoughts. *How did she know the name of the sword?* he mused. He would have been much more surprised had he known the conversation going on in the inner chamber.

The soft voice of the unseen Gunnora hung on the air like spider silk. "My champion is young, but very strong. He is also a rarity in any time, he has true character, high ideals, and is pure in thought. You will be wise not to let him escape you once this quest is over."

Eudora blushed furiously. "I am pledged to seek the way of Power. For me to take any man as husband would cost me my Power. It is my very soul, I cannot deny that."

"If you survive this coming combat, you may have a new sense of values. A new type of power may appeal to you," Gunnora replied.

"Then," surmised Eudora, "there is some doubt as to the outcome?"

The voice was quiet for a moment, then continued, "Two men shall fight, but mighty forces for good and evil await the outcome. In such a strife, the future is always uncertain. This is life."

Eudora sensed the interview was over. She arose and at Gunnora's request took a small flask of the green beverage with her to the larger room where Caldon waited. At first glance when he smiled at her, she felt the urge to smile back. "Remember, *sorceress*," she told herself, "Gunnora is the patron of home and hearth. *You* are pledged to another way!" He *was* handsome though.

When Caldon stooped to pick up his helm, he noticed a change in it. No longer unmarked, it had a golden sheaf of wheat, intertwined with a fruit-laden branch on the front of it. Gunnora had accepted her champion!

"Thank you, my lady," the youth whispered. It was a much more confident swordsman that placed his newly

marked helm upon his head. Once again they hoisted their packs and left the shrine.

They made the inn at Grimmerdale by dusk. The small group of hangers-on had taken one look at the somber maid, her grim companion with his off-world weapon, and silently left the hall.

The innkeeper was a slight, stooped man with a patch over one eye. Caldron spoke to him sternly, "Your evening meal, sir. But let me warn you, we know you have powerful neighbors who bear us ill will. My companion is a powerful adept who knows when food has been tampered with."

Meekly the innkeeper replied, "Yes, my lord. As for my Toad neighbors, I bear them no love. They took my eye as a price to stay here in business."

Eudora spoke to the man after he served them the simple but nourishing meal. "Place our baggage in two separate rooms until we come back tonight." So saying, she handed him a small gold coin.

He bowed in gratitude and said, "My pardon, my lady, but if you go out there tonight, you may not come back."

"Then," Caldron rumbled, looking up from his plate, "you had better start running and don't look back."

Without another word the innkeeper took their baggage and disappeared up the stairway.

Eudora opened a small flask and poured two drinking horns with equal amounts of a light green liquid. "We had both better sip some of Gunnora's gift while we may," she murmured. "We will need all the strength we can get."

Without further words the two of them left, Caldron holding the unsheathed sword and she her pealed birch wand. As they moved up the mountain trail in the gathering dark, they could feel a surge of strength from Gunnora's offering. They could also feel a tingling of gathering Power in the darkening atmosphere.

Large standing stones lined the pathway on either side, and they knew they were entering the Toads' prison. Reddish-yellow light appeared on the edges of the stones as

they spiraled inward to a hexagon-shaped center. Here before five bloated, toadlike creatures sitting on blocks of stone stood a tall figure, clad in the armor of past centuries. In one hand he held an oval shield and in the other an ancient broadsword. Here stood Malfeitor in the flesh, champion of the Toads!

"Study your enemy closely," said the still, quiet voice of La Verdad in Caldon's mind. *"Look for weaknesses and openings."*

Malfeitor's body was encased in a heavy leather jacket that had large bronze plates fastened on it. A kilt of overlapping metal strips reached from his waist to his knees. Bronze greaves protected the front of his legs from ankles to knees. Wide steel cuffs defended his wrists. An open-faced helm was on his head. *"Such armor will make a man slow, and he will tire quickly,"* mind-spoke Caldon.

"His target areas are his biceps, face, the backs of his legs, and between the bronze body plates," replied the voice. *"Make him move around, try to get behind him, play for time, and wait for the inevitable opening."*

The voice that bellowed from the armor-clad giant had a hollow echo in it. "Who walks the path to Malfeitor's castle?"

"What castle exists in a stone pile ruled over by five ancient prisoners, so weak they must depend upon a slave to intercede for them?" taunted Caldon. "You well know, traitor-slave, that the champion of Gunnora is here to end this travesty on honesty!"

The taunt had the desired effect. With a roar the giant charged waving his sword in great figure-of-eight slashes. But the light-footed youth easily sidestepped the sluggish giant and gave the back of his leg a quick thrust. The wound was slight, but enough of them would drain a man's strength. With a roar of pain, Malfeitor spun to face the youth, and in so doing for an instant exposed his shield arm. There was a flash of blue light as the rapier pierced the shield arm. The light faded as Caldon danced rapidly away.

Then the wave of force hit him, his legs became sluggish,

and Malfeitor moved in cutting and slashing! Quickly Caldon went on the defense. The rings that made up La Verdad's guard rang repeatedly as the youth's parries turned aside the giant's vicious slashes. High, right, left, low . . . how long could he hold out? Then, suddenly, he was free! Once again he could retreat and break off the attack. From across the hexagon, he caught a glimpse of Eudora aiming her witches' wand at the pillars the Toads sat upon. So blood and steel *and* high sorcery were involved, just as Gunnora had predicted.

How long the attacks and counterattacks lasted, Caldon had no way of knowing. In spite of the fact he was bleeding from a number of minor cuts, Malfeitor showed no signs of slowing. But his shield arm was sagging, so the giant tossed it aside and tried to adopt a thrusting attack. This was a mistake as his weapon was shorter than La Verdad and improperly balanced. He soon found himself wishing for the slight advantage his shield had given him.

But once again the seemingly immobile Toads entered into the conflict. Around Caldon's shuffling feet rose snakelike tendrils of fog that tried to trip him. And, once again, Eudora and her wand came to his rescue, chanting unknown words and making the air glow with runelike signs. These quickly dissolved the grasping snakes.

Now another force was to be dealt with, in the heat of combat no one paid attention to the rapidly rising full moon. In desperation Malfeitor lunged at the taunting youth, only to see a quick parry turn the thrust away, and once again the rapier glowed blue and began to spiral down the blade in attack. Then it happened! Caldon's foot turned on a pebble, and, overbalanced, he fell to the ground on his back!

With a roar of victory, the giant grasped his sword in both hands and slashed at the youth with a double-handed blow that would have cut him in two!

At that moment the giant was completely exposed and the sword named La Verdad had its moment of truth. As Caldon whipped the long rapier up, the glowing blue point went between two bronze chest plates, through the giant's heart, and out his back!

There was a long gasp and Malfeitor seemed to shrink within himself. As he hit the ground, the former giant was nothing but a little round-shouldered man with a patch over one eye. He was very small, very ordinary-looking, and very dead. Caldon reached to take his former enemy's sword, only to have it turn to a pile of rust. As they looked at the pillars the Toads were on, they proceeded to fade from sight.

Eudora looked at the husk of the little man in the over-size armor. "So he traded his eye for more than the right to stay in the innkeeping business. That poor creature would dabble with Power that could shake two continents. We wise women use our Power for good, and yet the temptation to use it selfishly has come up in the past and could come again." Glancing up at the full moon she added, "Maybe Gunnora is right, maybe another way is better.

"Beloved, we have one more task before we can rest tonight. We must close this prison tight." So saying, she led him down the spiral path to the beginning of the Toads' prison. "Place both of your hands on my shoulders while standing behind me, and let your strength flow into me." While facing the Toad ring, she held her wand up to the full moon with her left hand and, with her right, aimed the sword at the stones that had fallen over. "I call on the power of the Maiden," she chanted, "to remove this evil once and for all!"

Slowly the fallen stones raised themselves to their proper positions. The menace of the Toads was over.

Proven warrior and proven sorceress, they stood side by side in the moonlight in Torbuck's meadow. As gently as if she were handling a newborn baby, Eudora placed La Verdad in the exact position she had found "them." Both she and Caldon felt they were saying farewell to beloved friends. Then she opened a small flask and placed one drop of the dark green contents carefully upon the hilt of the sword. This flask contained the pure Essence of Life from Gunnora's vineyard and was the price exacted for the use of the sword by the higher powers. Eudora carefully closed the

small flask, then tied it with a bit of cord to the hilt of the rapier. As they stood back, a ray of light from the crescent moon struck the blue stone in the wall. Both the sword and the flask it contained vanished from Torbuck's meadow.

Arm in arm they slowly turned and walked back to their horses, not as warrior and wise woman, but simply a boy and a girl in the moonlight, very much in love.

A very wise man once said, "One day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day." Time between the Witch World and our world of João de Branco is very different. While weeks had passed in Arvon, it was the same night in João's small garden off the Rua dos Mortos. The Bishop's men had long since given up their watch over the gate of the garden, content to let someone else take care of the dead body it contained . . . in the daylight!

Suddenly a shaft of light from the setting moon flashed onto the blue stone in the garden wall. There reappeared in João de Branco's dead hand once again his beloved sword, with Gunnora's gift of life on its hilt. As the pure Essence of Life was absorbed in his body, he groaned and shook his head. What a dream he had been having!

Then, he realized it was no dream. Carefully he removed the tiny flask from the hilt of the sword. Then clutching the flask that contained Elizabet's very life within it to his bosom, he carefully walked to the home of his beloved Elizabet.

Afterword

My association with Andre Norton began about fifteen years ago when my then teen-age son tossed me a book with a cryptic, "y'oughta read this." "This" turned out to be a copy