

NEITHER REST NOR REFUGE

by

Ardath Mayhar

I lay beside one of the small streams that feed into the wide, lazy rivers of Kars. The damp of the black soil was seeping into my clothing, and more than one crawling creature was finding refuge in my boots or my loose shirt, but I didn't move. Concealed by a thick screen of greenery, I watched a line of Duke Yvian's mercenaries as they rode along the road toward Gartholm.

I had no personal quarrel with the duke, to be sure, but when one is a refugee from one's own people one tends to be wary of everyone. Lying there, hearing the thud of the horses' hooves and the distant mutter of voices, the clink of weapons, I thought of the last day of my life in Estcarp. I had hidden, even there in my homeland.

It had been easy to conceal my unusual talents from the witches. Our stead was a remote one on the edge of the southern mountains. My mother was of the Old Race and knew how to deal with those who came to examine her daughters for the Talent they nurtured so jealously. Not one of them ever thought of testing my mother's son. Such things did not occur . . . males did not harbor that gift, though even we had heard rumors of an outlander who had some sort of power that made the witches squirm with discomfort.

My sisters had not desired to go to the training required

of those with such gifts. Both had managed to find lovers at incredibly early ages and so disqualify themselves. Their husbands now helped my father with the work of the stead, and my mother was pleased with the turn of events. Perhaps she had even advised and abetted my sisters in their method of escape.

My own betrayal came by no one's fault. I had been sent to a neighboring stead, across a wooded steep, after the seeds for which we traded each year. I had taken a shortcut, far above the road that had been cut into the hill, because two of the witches were traveling along it.

As I approached a steep bluff that had been undercut by the winter's rains, I saw the soil begin to shift. A landslide in those hills was always a thing to fear, and I knew that the women riding along the road would be buried alive if I did not act.

My years of secret practice, my covert lessoning at my mother's knee were the only possible sources of help. I braced myself against a tree-trunk, well clear of the loosened spot, and strained to stabilize the creeping earth before it could become an avalanche. The boulders that were loosed in their places were diverted to strike big trees farther down the slope, so coming to a stop before they could do any damage.

I should have known that no use of such power could escape the notice of those on the road. The use of gifts, even without the utilization of the jewels they wore, could only bring them seeking the source of the disturbance they sensed.

I knew that whatever their reaction, it could only be terrible for me and for my mother. When I heard them climbing the slope, I fled. Without goodbye to my family, without any supplies other than those I carried for the short journey to our neighbor's stead, I left Estcarp and went up into the mountains.

The Falconers watched me, I knew, as I crossed along

their trails. Perhaps I might even have joined them, but I disliked the mountains. Driven to flight, I found myself strangely delighted with the notion of seeing strange places and meeting people different from those I knew.

The line of men was out of sight. I heaved a sigh of relief and crawled along the side of the stream until I came to a path. It was well-worn . . . probably being the one used by some neighboring village for reaching the water. A scrubbing-stone assured me that that must be the case, and I followed the track cautiously.

Before I had gone very far I stopped in my tracks. There was a village ahead . . . I could smell the distinctive odor that gathers where human beings group themselves. But there was another stench. Fire. Burnt meat. Death, which I had now learned to recognize a long way off.

Those men of Yvian's had come from this direction, though along the road instead of by the path. What had they done there?

I crept into the shrubbery edging the path, through a belt of trees, across a field whose crop of grain was tall enough to conceal me. As I drew nearer, the foreboding in my heart became stronger. As did the smell. Burnt bodies would smell so, I thought.

There were six houses grouped about a green knoll where a few sheep still huddled, looking about in a bewildered manner. Two of the houses were burning fiercely, and from the other four there came no sign of life.

I lay again behind a screen of greenery, trying to think why Yvian should be attacking his own people. It was not a thing that anyone with a brain would do, so far as I could see.

There were sprawled shapes lying about the area between the houses and the knoll. Not one moved as one of the houses collapsed with a roar, its thatch roof sinking into its fiery interior.

I crawled from my concealment and stood, looking

about. Then I went to bend over one of the bodies, that of an elderly woman. She had been brutally mistreated before having her throat cut. And she was of my own kind, though her black hair was strongly laced with gray, and her ivory skin was stained with age and blood.

My heart thudding painfully, I went from body to body. All were of the Old Race. All had been not only murdered but foully used before death. They had been left, too, for the birds and scavenger beasts to maul. That I could prevent.

I dragged them, one by one, to the door of the other burning house and laid them decently straight along its line. Then I brought armloads of the stacked wood left from the winter store and piled it over them. When that roof collapsed, it would fire the pyre and take their pitiful bodies with it.

As I worked, I found that I was crying. Until now, even though my danger had been real, it had seemed remote. Here I had found that to be of my kind was sufficient grounds for being condemned to death. That is a bitter lesson, and I, Jorem, at the age of nineteen, learned it with pain and passion.

Gulping back a sob, I set the last load of wood over the last pitiful body. A child. When I straightened my back I stood for a moment in the blazing heat so near the burning building, and I cursed long and bitterly, using terms that I had heard but never used before.

I thought for a moment that I had gone mad. Another voice was echoing my curses. It came from a pile of cattle fodder stacked along a stone wall. Even as I stood away from the burning house and started toward it, the hay began to stir. From beneath the pile came a slight figure that began sneezing and shaking itself free of straw and dust.

I hesitated to help, though many times I had assisted my sisters in such difficulties. She had probably been terrified.

Now she could not know that I was to be trusted, so I stood back and let her tidy herself as well as she could.

Even as I waited, others of the houses began to show signs of smoke . . . the fire must have been cast into less hospitable spots there, I thought. The girl stopped her efforts and turned to watch the next roof burst into flames.

"My father's house!" she moaned. "Mother?" She turned frantic eyes toward me.

I had to shake my head. "I saw no one living as I put them to rest. There were six women, four men, five children. If your mother is there, I will try to find her, but it will be a perilous business."

She shook her head, in turn. "There were only six women here. Four men. Six children . . . I am the only one left, and I am no longer to be considered a child. But what will become of me? Everyone . . . everything . . . all is gone!"

Something in the air seemed to be trying to warn me . . . I could not know of what. I reached for her hand.

"This is no place to stay and ask questions. Someone is coming. We must hide ourselves, unless we want to join your people. And there will be nobody left to burn our bodies. Come!"

I led her quickly into the field from which I had crawled, and we dropped to hands and knees and made our way to the wood-plot beyond. There we crouched behind a fallen log, risking peeps from our shadowy retreat.

Six horsemen rode into the blazing village. Their mounts shied and snorted at the smoke and the smell of death, but their riders pulled them up and sat staring about. One, seemingly the leader by his fine mail shirt and ornate helm, gestured about.

"He has seen that someone survived . . . the bodies in the fire . . . he wants to know who. The duke evidently wants all of us dead." The girl's voice was quiet, but its edge was steely.

I didn't wait to ask her why or how. I slid backward toward the stream, and we went into the water and slipped downstream beneath the cover of the ferny banks until we were far below the path that had led to that dead village.

When we came out, we were sodden, chilled, and the sun was down. "We must have a fire," I said. "We will catch our deaths, if we stay wet all night."

She put out a warning hand, barely visible in the tenuous twilight. "We of the Old Race were thrice horned! Everyone will hunt us. We cannot risk it."

"Horned? Why?" I was stunned, though I should have suspected that something of the kind had happened.

"They read a proclamation. There was something about a raid out of Estcarp. Nonsense, and all of us knew it, but it changed nothing. The mercenaries attacked at once. I had just time to dive into the hay and burrow deep. I . . . didn't watch."

I reached to take her hand. "What is your name?" I asked, simply to change the direction of her thoughts.

"Thelia. Daughter of . . ." She choked quiet.

"I, too, have lost my people. Not through death, but it seems to be just as final as that might be." I looked down at her in the dim light. "And what will be final is our deaths, if we don't have fire. Come with me."

I went into a thick wood, filled with deadfall and tangles of vine. It was evident that no one had come here, even to gather fuel, in generations. The thick crown of treetops above would surely hide our smoke.

There was no problem in finding enough dried stuff to make fire. Quick work with flint and steel set a spark, which grew into a tiny blaze. I left Thelia to nurse it along as I cleared a wide space around the area to keep the flame from spreading. Then I went blundering into the darkness and brought back armloads of branches broken from fallen trees.

"Dry wood makes little smoke. The light cannot be

seen . . . this wood is too thick to let any light through. We can dry ourselves. Then, if we feel the need, we can move away from this spot before daylight.”

She stared up at me, her triangular face ivory-pale, smudged with smoke and tears and dust. Even our journey in the stream hadn't succeeded in cleaning away the traces of her experience. But her gaze was now steady and fearless. Something in her look made me wonder how any rider of Duke Yvian's would fare if he encountered her armed and ready.

I shrugged out of my loose shirt, spread the things out of my small pack to dry beside the blaze. The warmth was grateful against my skin, and I turned about, hearing the cloth of my nether garments begin to steam.

Thelia watched for a moment; then she slipped off her over-tunic and spread it beside my own things. She stood beside me, back to the fire. I could hear her sigh of relief when the clammy cloth began to warm.

I tried not to stare, but the wet material of her undergarment outlined her slender body with great fidelity. She was, as she had said, no child, no matter how lacking she might be in inches. Her pale face was beginning to flush with the warmth. She was no beauty, but there was something about her that tugged at me. She was not unlike one of my sisters . . . yet what I was beginning to feel I had never felt toward a sister. It embarrassed me, and I turned about to warm my other side.

There came a light chuckle from behind me. I began to blush and felt that go down my neck and over my bare chest. Blast! She could see me blushing. The chuckle grew stronger.

I turned around again and sighed. The lines of stress that had made her small face so stark and grim were now eased. She looked at once younger and more mature.

“Jorem, you're a very nice person,” she said. “I am glad it was you who came. But where are we going now? We

cannot stay in the woods. We cannot go by the roads. Anyone seeing us is justified in killing us on sight. What are we to do?"

I had been thinking along those lines myself. The Old Race was stamped on my own face, as well as hers, for I resembled my mother, not my Sulcar father. I, too, was subject to that horning, caught in the same web of vicious intent that had destroyed Thelia's home.

I sat and patted the ground beside me. She dropped to sit there.

"It is time I told you of myself," I said. "You should be warned, for you may see things that shock you . . . that you believe are impossible. I . . ." I glanced sidewise at her . . . "I have something of the gift the women of our kind possess."

She turned to look squarely into my eyes. "You? A male? How can that be? It is considered impossible!"

I turned my gaze to the fire. "I am not trained . . . only insofar as my mother knew a few matters she could pass on to me. She had no great gift herself, though my sisters did until they . . . disqualified themselves. I seldom can accomplish anything if I set about it intentionally."

I risked another glance at her, and she was still staring. "An emergency seems to—to pull it out of me. Once one of our cattle was swept downstream in the spring flooding. I reached out, in some way I didn't understand at all, and pulled her back to a spot shallow enough for her to find her footing. That was how my people learned that they had spawned a freak."

"Is that why you are here?" she asked. "Because of what you are? I can imagine that the Witches do not approve of such exceptions to their rules."

"I kept a hillside from sliding down on a pair of them. That would not have made any difference in their treatment of me—or of my mother—if they had seen that it was a man who saved them. So I hid, and then I ran. They

may suspect, but suspicion is not enough to empower them to make trouble for my folk. I have done a few things since . . . small matters to save my own skin . . . that make me understand something of the gift. Are you shocked?"

A small hand took mine. "No. After today, nothing will ever shock me again. No gift saved my people. No Witch came to do so much as ease their dying. You were there, and you did what you could to help. I cannot go back to my people, and you cannot go to yours. We will be our own people, a family perhaps, for a time. Will you do that?"

I closed my fingers about hers. It was a comfort, after all those weeks of homeless tramping, to feel a human touch and concern for another. We were young. We were probably helpless, if faced with armed men or fully trained power, but until such time we would do what we could. I felt the same thought in her.

In the end, we went down the stream. It would end, I knew at the start, at a river. And rivers led to the sea. My father's blood, while it didn't show in my face or body, ran strong in my spirit. I had never seen a sea, yet I knew what it must be. Pounding waves sometimes accompanied my dreams, and vessels rigged with tall sails somehow lived inside my mind. A Sulcarman, no matter if he be a generation removed from it, could survive in or near the broad waters.

It was not an easy or a safe journey. Only the fact that only those aboard boats or barges were expected to be traveling along a river saved us from discovery. We contrived a raft that looked like floating brush. Buried in the nestlike mess atop it, we drifted slowly past villages, past Gartholm itself, and approached the environs of Kars.

I would have liked to pass by night, but there was no way to steer our makeshift craft to shore. We came by day, at midafternoon, and we burrowed deep into the brush on our raft to avoid detection by anyone on the river or ashore.

Strangely, I could see no guard set at the docks. The city was covered with a thin layer of smoke, as if houses had burned recently. The horning must have begun there, to spread outward like ripples on a pond. Straining to see between branches, we peered at the city as long as it was within sight. It was frustrating not to know what was happening there.

A deep bend below Kars brought us to near-disaster. There was an eddy there that sucked down our raft and, almost, our struggling bodies. We made it to shore breathless and exhausted. This was no well-wooded riverbank but a low, sandy curve backed by open fields and a road that seemed well used. Even as we pulled ourselves onto the sand, hoofbeats came along that road, and a voice roared an order.

I looked up in time to see an armored figure scoop Thelia beneath one arm and head toward a horse, ignoring her struggles. Another was coming toward me, dart-gun at the ready. I saw my own death in the eyes of the man who now stood over me.

He moved slowly, a grin splitting his thin-lipped mouth. Fury ran through me in a hot flood. Hatred for anyone who could kill so casually and causelessly.

Something took me into its hands and began to wring me in its grip. Darkness behind my eyes . . . darkness and anger and red rage . . . I felt my head bursting with pressure. Something went from me in a sear of force, and I lay limp on the sandy edge of the road, facedown, shaking.

After a time there was a touch at my shoulder. Light. Tentative. Almost fearful?

I groaned and turned myself to face upward.

Thelia sat on the ground beside me. Her eyes were wide, and her face was even paler than it had been after her ordeal.

I sat convulsively. Pain shot through me, and I gasped as I looked around us. Four men lay on the road, with their

horses collapsed either under or beside them.

"What happened?" I asked.

She shook her head. "I don't know, precisely. But you did it, whatever it was. They just . . . fell. Unconscious. They're not dead. We'd better do something before they come back to consciousness."

The horses were beginning to twitch. Even as I watched, one quivered and tried to rise and stand, failed, then succeeded. That drove me to hurry to the side of the nearest man. I rolled him over, stripped off his mail and helm, then tied him with strips torn from his own leather undercoat. When I looked up, Thelia was serving another the same way. Before any of them recovered their senses, we had them well trussed and rolled into a small ditch in the field.

We tumbled the extra two saddles into the ditch with them and loaded the extra horses, now recovered, to look like pack animals. The trappings taken from one of the men fitted me fairly well, but the smallest of them had worn mail large enough to swallow Thelia. She hadn't the stature to masquerade as a soldier, anyway. So we cut away her long black hair, put a metal cap on her head, and contrived breeches from her short leather skirt. She made a passable boy, perched on the smallest of the horses.

Then, bold as suns, we set out along the road that led, Thelia assured me, to the coast and the sea, ending at the sea-keep called Verlaine. The few patrols we passed did not challenge us. Before two days were gone, we had passed beyond the well-traveled portion of that road and were in rocky country where there were no farms or villages.

All the way, I was half watching for danger and half concerned inside myself with the last manifestation of the gift that had come, so unsought and unexpected, to me. It was a frightening thing. Before this, I had consciously done something to cause the effects I'd achieved. This had come from some layer of me that I had not known was there.

Fired by anger, it had brought up from my own depths a destructive power I had not known I possessed.

Thelia, riding silently behind me, had said nothing. She knew, I think, what turmoil was troubling me. When we camped, at last, beside the cliff on whose other side the waves thundered, she spoke.

We were sitting beside a skimpy fire built of sea-wrack brought up from a small cove. The horses had grazed a bit on the salt grass and returned to the fire, standing about with eyes sparking reflections of the firelight.

Thelia put a chunk of anonymous wood onto the flames, and the fire burned blue and green for a time. When it had turned red again, she turned to face me.

"You are troubled. About that power you possess . . . or that possesses you. Why? It saved us both, you from death, me from death after . . . much worse. What gives you cause for concern?"

I had been asking myself the same question. While I had been reared in a remote place, we had known visitors, tale-tellers, people who knew the ways of Estcarp and other parts of our world. I was not ignorant, for all my inexperience. I knew that power, however come by, no matter how unexpected or unorthodox, is better than no power at all. Yet my qualms were real, for all that.

"I think it may be that I cannot control this thing. I have no training that gives me a rein on it. It takes over, as you have seen, and does things that I only know about afterward. It is frightening. I want to know what I do and to do it purposely. I feel helpless and in the grip of something stronger and more dangerous than I want to become."

It sounded strange, even to me. Weak. Even cowardly. But Thelia seemed to understand.

She nodded, her face bright in the firelight. "I see. I understand. You need training. I may be able to help you."

Something came alert inside me. "You . . . have been so trained?"

She laughed. "No. Not I. But I went with my youngest sister, when she was sent by my mother for such training. She had less than enough talent and came home again, but I know the woman who can teach such skills. I can find her, I believe. Few can . . . she does not advertise herself to the world."

"I did not know that any in Karsten practiced such witcheries as are done in Estcarp," I said.

"Few do. None have ever done it openly. Those able to teach what is needful can be numbered on one hand—or could be. Possibly only Sabyl is left, now. She lives in such a remote spot that even those carrying the word of the horning could not find her and would not know to seek for her."

"You call her name? I thought that was never done."

Thelia sighed. "She is no longer a practicing witch. She married, but for some reason a part of her gift remained with her. Enough for teaching those with the power how to use it. Now, widowed, she lives alone in a cove . . ." she glanced up shyly from beneath her straight black brows . . . "on the coast."

I sat straight, hope blossoming inside me. "You can find her? She can teach me?"

"If she is not too appalled at your sex to make the attempt. If she has not been found by accident and done to death. If I can find her again." Thelia smiled across the blaze.

For the first time since that burst of black anger, I felt a lightening of the spirit. If I could only be trained, be made to feel that I was not some sort of dangerous creature that might explode into destructive violence to the detriment of those about me, I could live with what I was.

I might return home again, an equal to those women who had frightened me into flight . . . For a moment I dreamed. Then I relinquished the dream. Whatever befell, those would not relent toward any man who challenged

their sole possession of power. My mother had known that. I knew it.

But with Thelia I did not need others. In the time since our first meeting, she had worked herself into my heart.

If she brought me to Sabyl, and if Sabyl taught me what was needful, the two of us might well find a way to redress some of the wrongs done to her people. Thelia, small as she was, held determination worthy of one twice her size. I had a talent that was useless in my own place but, just perhaps, highly valuable in hers.

I smiled back at her. "If I can learn what she has to teach . . . would you be interested in going back with me? Back into Karsten? To learn what has been done to our people? Even . . ." I set a stick carefully across the flames . . . "to require some payment for the suffering of your family and all those others destroyed by the horning?"

The blaze leaped up in a crackle of green and orange and blue. Her eyes were gleaming in the paleness of her face.

"You would go to war? At my side? Then I will surely find Sabyl. We will go back together into Karsten, and we will work our will upon this foul duke, or, lacking him, upon his mercenaries."

The coals were growing red, and their color shaded her face. She nodded, once, decisively. "Jorem of Estcarp, we will go to war together."

And afterward? I found it didn't matter, so long as we went side by side.

* * *

Afterword

Having been led gently into the world of fantasy by Andre Norton at a tender age, it is natural that I should feel that I

live, at least partially, in her Witch World. The musical language, the mind-expanding concepts she used in the series of books dealing with that world seem to have helped my own creative imagination to flower.

The horning, as described in the first book, has always intrigued me . . . what shocking and unexpected devastation was visited upon those unsuspecting members of the Old Race! I also liked the concept that a male could possess the powers that the witches claimed solely for female use. The combination of ideas grew into this story, which was a lot of fun to write.

—ARDATH MAYHAR

