

OATH-BOUND

by

Pauline Griffin

The Water Swallow still heaved so in the aftermath of the great storm that Tronel had to put out his hand to steady himself as he bent to pass through the door of the captain's cabin.

The Sulcar were a tall people, fortunately, requiring high ceilings, and once inside, he was able to straighten again despite the wings on his helm and hold himself erect in the correct manner for a shield man before the one to whom he had bound his sword.

Helmgard half sat, half lay upon his bunk, scowling at his freshly splinted leg.

He glanced up in the next instant.

"Sit, Bird Warrior. I would ask of you, not command, and I dislike straining my neck to see those with whom I speak." The Falconer complied.

"What would you have of me, Captain?" Helmgard said nothing for a moment, as if he must gather his thoughts or brace himself for a hard duty.

"The Water Swallow sailed these southern waters before, making landfall on the large, hitherto unknown island which is our current destination.

"My eldest son did not return with the others we set to exploring it. They reported he had become separated from them and they had found him again only as he vanished

into a strange circle of stone trees which they were unable to penetrate themselves.

"I did."

He stared straight forward, not seeing for a moment the man whom he addressed.

"It was a gate, of course, or the precinct of a gate. Those inside informed me that Bretor had passed through and that the nature of the passage precluded his return. As weregild, I was granted command over one of them for a period of seven years, the Lady Qu'el who has served me since as my bondswoman. That period is now at an end, and I must return her to the gate."

He slapped his injured leg with a big hand.

"This prevents me from accompanying her myself, and I swore that no other of my own people would ever set foot beyond the beaches of that accursed island again, yet I cannot send her alone. The journey will take the better part of two days, and although it was safe enough in the past, I understand from her that this may no longer be the case."

"So you would have me escort her?" His face was unreadable beneath the masking helm, his voice cold. Helmgard nodded.

"I ask you to serve so in my stead. Your people's feeling against womankind is well known, and I do not demand what I know would be distasteful to you at the very least. If you do refuse, then I must be forsworn to my folk since I cannot fail in my duty to her."

Slow yellow fires burned in his screened eyes, but Tronel answered as the other knew full well he must. The spar which had put the Sulcarman on that bunk would have struck him instead had Helmgard not cast him out of its way.

"It falls within the bounds of my oath. Falconers serve thus when we ride escort to some lord's retinue . . . When?"

"The storm worked with us in this," he replied. "We

should sight land with the dawn and be ready to set ye ashore by noon.”

The morning was still very young when Tronel came on deck. The ill-famed island lay on the horizon, filling most of it. Distance and the still-heavy shadows aided the heavy covering of vegetation characteristic of most southern lands in softening it, so that from here it looked almost as if it were covered with feathers or fur.

No matter. Helmgard's directions would bring them to the gate, and Storm Lord was aloft and should already be soaring over the island, scanning it with his sharp eyes. Once the falcon returned, he should have more than enough knowledge for his purpose. Mercenaries were not accustomed to the luxury of fighting on ground of which they had intimate knowledge.

His lips tightened a fraction. This was to be escort duty only, insurance against trouble but not an anticipation of it. In truth, he had no will at all to face down any witchery issuing out of a gate . . .

He stiffened and instinctively stepped back into the deep shadow cast by the bridge superstructure. Another was approaching this normally secluded part of the deck, and he was not minded for company, not even that of his own comrades.

To his surprise, the intruder was his unwelcome charge.

Tronel's first thought was to withdraw at once, but he forced himself to remain where he was and study her. Falconers hated women and feared them for the terrible danger they represented to his kind, but over the long years since their migration north, contempt had risen up as well, and that was in itself a threat. It had so blinded them that neither he nor any of his companions had even suspected the eldritch history of this female despite her patent strangeness. That weakness must be altered, now and in the future.

Qu'el was human, or seemingly human, right enough, but her delicately wrought features had a cast to them that told they were not likely to have originated here, save, possibly, in Escore . . .

Her complexion was pale, fairer even than that of the Old Race, and her hair was of a rich honey color. The eyes were large, nearly too large in the small face, heavily lashed and piercingly black, the most obviously alien feature about her.

He frowned slightly. What purpose had this creature of the gate served apart from satisfying the need for vengeance for the captain's loss? She did not work the ship alongside the Sulcarmen and women. Helmgard might have used her for his pleasure, of course, but he imagined that she had more likely performed some other, more significant, function.

Qu'el stopped some five feet from him and stood by the rail, asking no support from it, while she fixed her eyes on the distant island.

Her coming here now was no cause for amazement at least. If that were indeed her homeland, or an entrance to it, she would naturally be eager for a sight of it after an absence of seven years.

Whatever her feelings might be, her expression at first remained absolutely impassive, then suddenly, her head snapped skyward, and such joy and exultation and splendor filled her that his lips parted a little in wonder.

She gave a low, infinitely glad cry of welcome and lifted her arms as if to embrace one much loved.

A black speck showed there, still high against the sun, but descending so rapidly that it soon took discernible form.

His heart seemed to stop. The white vee on the breast was visible now. Storm Lord, and he was coming, not to his battle-brother, but to this-female.

Tronel watched, frozen with dread and the feeling of

betrayal, as the falcon came to rest on Qu'el's arm, his sharp talons closing so gently that they scarcely ruffled the material of her sleeve. She drew him to her until he caressed her pale cheek with his head.

The man waited to see no more.

"Release him, Witch!"

She stepped back with a startled cry, but before he could reach her, the bird was between them, calling in the language they shared that she had done him no ill.

The woman fled. He did not try to follow. The Water Swallow was not so large that he would not be able to locate her quickly if he needed to do so. For the moment, all his concern rested with Storm Lord.

Man and bird knew one another well. They had been paired since the then-newly-fledged falcon had chosen to ride his arm and no other's, and it was not long before Tronel was able to assure himself that no bond or block or change seemed to be set on him. His feathered brother had but responded to the heart-cry and gladness of the woman.

The Falconer's interest in viewing the island was temporarily spent, however, and he hastened below to the cramped bow section allotted to the mercenaries.

Noon came soon, too soon for Tronel. The Water Swallow was anchored in the center of a small bay, as close as she dared come to the shore, and he was in his place in the prow of the boat that would shortly ferry him and his charge to land.

He glanced somberly at the pink-white sand glistening under the bright sun and the vivid green wall of vegetation behind it. It would not be long before they disappeared into those trees, perhaps permanently.

He quelled that thought. He did not fear the island, not any more seriously than was prudent for a warrior approaching unfamiliar territory. What he dreaded was the one even now settling herself opposite him in the stern.

This was not a man's plaything, not merely a body formed for the production of fighters, but an entity come out of a place of Power and proven possessed of the ability to draw to her a being he had believed responsive to himself alone. What other gifts were hers to wield, he wondered, and how would she choose to use them now that her period of bondage was ended? If she would exact vengeance for that servitude, there might be very little a sword or knife or muscle could do against her.

Qu'el, for her part, sat absolutely still, giving no backward glance at the ship and and seeming to look right through him.

Tronel saw one slender hand dip over the side and thought she frowned slightly.

He ran his own fingers through the water. At first, he was puzzled, then he drew a quick breath. The sea was cold! This was more like the water on Estcarp's coast than a shallow, sun-warmed bay so far south.

The breeze was cool, too, enough so, he realized suddenly, that he was comfortable in his mail. Before this, he had found the noon and afternoon temperatures nearly as debilitating as a wound.

He fixed his attention on Qu'el. Her features were frozen into their mask again, her body quiet, but the eyes were alive, darting from sea to sky to the fast-nearing land.

So. No immediate danger, but she sensed enough of its shadow or enough strangeness to be very much on the alert. It behooved him to hold his own guard as well.

They made land without mishap. Tronel sprang lightly to the sand and stood back while the nearer of the Sulcar men handed the woman out.

Her head lowered once to acknowledge the service, then she walked swiftly toward the trees, moving so quickly that he found he had to press himself to overtake her.

Qu'el came to a halt just beyond the first of the screening

trunks. She stood with eyes closed, her head tilted slightly back.

She drew in a great lungful of air and slowly released it again.

"Free . . ." Her eyes opened and fixed on him, the question in them so clear that he responded as if she had spoken it.

"I am but your escort, lady. What lay between you and the Sulcar is none of my concern or interest."

She nodded even as she had to the oarsman but then looked somberly upon him once more.

"I am sorry for having spoken to your falcon," she told him softly. "I knew that to be a breach, but he in his flight was the fairest and finest sight I had seen in an eternal seven years, and the call went out from me before I even realized I had sent it forth."

"He seems to have suffered no hurt," the man responded gruffly.

"None. Storm Lord came to me through his own generosity." Tronel made her no answer. He would gladly have terminated all conversation with her, but her earlier unease troubled him. If she had any knowledge or suspicion which might bear upon his mission, he would feel the better for sharing it.

"Something disturbed you out there, the cold of the water, I think."

She smiled. "You are a miner of thoughts, Falconer! I had believed I concealed my reaction well." In the next moment, she was grave again.

"It troubles me because it is unnatural to this place." The great eyes raised, and he felt them lock with his despite the screening of his helm.

"I fear that no part of all this world is as safe as it was when I came into it. Wars have been fought and are being fought. Balances have been altered. Gates, old and new,

have been wrenched open." A shudder passed through her of which she seemed unaware.

"I say to you, Bird Warrior, that if the peoples of your realm knew what powers, knew the lords of the Inner Dark, lurking just beyond, groping for any entrance by which they might come against Light and life, ye would no more battle human against human, equal against equal, but would rather embrace one another as brothers-and-sisters-in-arms against the horror that might at any moment come upon ye."

"You believe this chilling is of the Dark? That Dark?" he asked sharply. She shook her head.

"I do not know, but it is wrong for here, and anything in violation of nature must be watched carefully until it has firmly been proven beneficial or harmless."

"You know so well what is right for this world, this island? You are not native to either."

She nodded. "I do. The gate we seek has been set here a long time."

"We must move as warriors in a hostile land, then, with silence and care and with our senses open to receive sign of any foe before he can leap out upon us."

Although the afternoon passed swiftly and peacefully, Tronel's face was tense and strained by the time the first shadows began to fall, and when he chose a campsite, it was with both concealment and ease of defense in mind.

After some deliberation, he allowed a small, well-hidden fire, one that might be kicked out in a moment should the need arise.

He chewed some of the dried meat from his pack without really tasting it. Everything was so silent around them that his very breath seemed to trumpet like the blast of a war horn. That was the working of his imagination, but he knew full well that they had good cause for concern.

"Where are the animals?" he whispered to his companion.

"Hiding," Qu'el answered. "A great terror is on them."

"Of what?"

"I know not, but, Falconer, I would end your service now and have you return to the ship did I not fear that it would do you no good."

"You believe some Dark power is here?"

"This has the feel of the Dark." He saw one hand lift to press against her eyes.

"My realm has bred many of the like, and no gate is so mightily guarded that its defenses are not occasionally breached." She straightened as if girding herself for a struggle.

"Here, such a break would be temporary, but much havoc could be wrought before it was won again and the invaders destroyed or driven out once more. It is mine to prevent that, but to do so, to act effectively against any but the most menial of the Shadow's slaves, I must reach the gate and actually enter into it. Only then will my strength be returned to me."

"We shall reach it," he assured her, feeling in his heart that they had no other choice if the half of what she seemed to fear was true.

Unless she herself was of the Dark.

Tronel put that thought from him. The Sulcar did not deal with the like, and even should Helmgard and his clan be deceived as to a Dark One's nature, Storm Lord would have known, as would the other falcons, before his company ever set foot aboard the Water Swallow. Their vision was clearer than any human's in such matters.

"Did you not serve Helmgard with Power?" he ventured.

He could see her rueful smile in the flickering light.

"I served him as I cannot serve us. I brought him luck."

"What?"

"There are many times when choice or chance affect a man's or a people's life. My function was to always bring

him and his to the most favorable course, and I succeeded so well that his wealth and clan have increased despite the turmoil which has reduced so many others, to the point that he has been able to help reoutfit and man other Sulcar vessels, lessening the need to hire hands outside their own blood."

He stared at her for several long seconds.

"You cannot help us so now?" he managed to ask at last.

"That is absolutely forbidden. The Power simply would not rise for me." Her head lowered as the burden settled on her again.

"Perhaps it is not as I fear."

"Perhaps not."

"You do not believe that," she responded dully.

"Nay. . . . How came you to be stripped of your strength, lady?" Qu'el stared into the fire.

"I mishandled the gate. It was through me that Helmgard's son came to be lost." Her head lowered.

"He chanced upon us as we were attempting to contain a breakthrough. The nature of our foes was obvious enough, as was the fact that we were hard-pressed, and he brought his sword to bare in our cause, helping to turn the issue in our favor.

"People from your world can cross into ours if it be their will to do so and their purpose is sufficiently strong, and when he was told that the threat to his realm was a continuing one, he demanded his right to take part in the defense.

"Both my own sword-comrade and my sister had gone down in the fighting, and my thoughts were more with my losses than with him. I failed to see that, though he could function very well in most respects, he was as a child in his ability to grasp deep or complex concepts, that he could neither truly appreciate the gravity or permanence of his decision nor comprehend at all the stark horror of the foes he was dooming himself to battle. In my accursed preoccu-

pation with my own pain, I condemned that-child to a war he was no more fit to fight than a babe laughing in its mother's arms." She took hold of herself.

"When his sire came, we admitted our guilt. We could not restore his son to him, but so that some good might come to him and his from the disaster, I was commanded to accompany him after the most of my Power was taken from me and ordered to serve him as I have described. It is much to Helmgard's credit that he never used me other than courteously, although he was given free play as to how he might deal with me."

"When you return to your own?" the man asked after a moment.

"I shall be given charge of no more gates, but all I had will again be mine along with whatever increase to it my efforts here will have gained for me. Power is strengthened by the exercising of it, even in such a manner as I did among the Sulcar."

He frowned.

"You were harshly judged."

She shrugged. "It was just. An officer must bear the burden of his mistakes." There was no answer Tronel could make to that, and his inability to do so both made him aware of his discomfort and spurred a need to withdraw out of this discussion.

"We had best rest now. I shall take the first guard." His companion accepted that without any show of surprise and immediately curled herself into a ball, drawing as close as she could to the fire.

The Falconer watched her for a moment. Normal night cooling had joined with the unnatural chill so that it was now quite cold. Her clothing was light, designed for the warmth normal to the island, not for the temperature presently punishing them. Almost without thinking, he loosened his cloak and dropped it over her. Qu'el looked up, and Tronel turned hurriedly away.

"It would be a hindrance to me," he lied as he hastened from the circle of light.

He relaxed a little once he had drawn apart from the camp and set himself for his watch.

His fingers absently stroked Storm Lord. The feathered one was the more effective sentry, and, as on many a similar occasion before, he gave fervent thanks for his presence and for his fierce courage.

He shivered as the claws of a particularly sharp wind gust penetrated the thick canopy to tear at him.

This was probably needless, he thought sourly, just complication and difficulty forced on them by a female's ridiculous hysteria.

Reason gave the lie to that. The Lady Qu'el did not strike him as one who gave herself over to panic, and if she did so weaken now, her fear was born of such solid base that he still durst not discount it.

Dawn found the small party already on the move. The chill was stronger than ever, the silence even more oppressive than it had been the previous day. It ate at them all, so much so that Storm Lord limited his scouting to short forward spurts followed by quick retreat to the illusory safety of his companions' company. Although the man would have preferred to have more advance knowledge of their route, he did not have the heart to demand greater effort from the falcon. His own fear was too strong.

They continued on thus for three hours, and Tronel was beginning to hope that they would reach the gate without suffering worse than this trial to their nerve when Storm Lord returned from one of his scouting flights with real purpose on him. He had discovered something he neither understood nor liked.

The two humans followed after him until they came to a halt before a newly made path, a swath of destruction ten feet across that followed a course roughly parallel to their own. All within it was blackened and slain.

The Falconer's eyes narrowed as he bent to examine some of the blasted vegetation. He had initially imagined it had been charred but now saw that it was cold-killed.

He looked to his companion.

"Do you know what might have done this, lady?"

"Aye," she replied grimly, "hunters in the service of a particularly vile and powerful lord. We had best make haste. They track by sensing body heat, and they were heading in the general direction of our camp. They are sure to strike our trail at some point, and when they do, they will be back after us. They move very swiftly when seeking to give death." She straightened.

"Let me have your knife, Bird Warrior. My Power may be chained as yet, but there are no bonds on my body."

He gave the weapon to her and stepped onto the black road. The invaders appeared to have come from the gate or at least from that direction. They would save time if they kept to the path their foes had made.

Half an hour passed and ten minutes longer, then he became aware of sounds behind them.

Tronel's arm caught Qu'el, forced her off the blighted trail. He followed fast after her, keeping his body between her and whatever was approaching.

He saw them, two creatures, biped in form and slightly taller than a big man but without any great breadth of shoulder or muscular development. Their uncovered skin, or what passed for skin, was a stark white. The heads were long and lacking in what humans called features. A slit existed about where eyes might be, and another, shorter one was positioned an inch beneath it, but that was all. Their arms ended in gaping circular holes where hands or other appendages might be expected to begin.

Those last were weapons. Even as he watched, the nearest hunter pointed toward a clump of tall ferns. A cloud issued from the arm, and the plants shriveled.

They were aware of the humans—that much was certain

from the way they moved—and the Falconer braced himself to meet their assault.

He raised his eyes to peer into the dead blackness lying beyond the slits in the helmetlike heads.

Helmet? He wondered if what he saw before him was actually the creature or merely some artificial covering akin to his own mail. Qu'el confirmed that wild surmise in the next instant.

“Break their cases. The light will soon finish them.” After that, there was no more time for speech.

Both sprang aside and apart as the Dark hunters sprayed with their icy mist the place where they had lain. Tronel saw the women cast her dagger, saw it penetrate the foremost being's cheek, but his own opponent gave him no opportunity to observe the result.

A greater distance lay between him and his target. Qu'el's blow had shown that the thing's armor could be pierced, but the surprise of their counterattack was over, and the hunter's reactions were quick. It loosed its deadly weapon even as he dove for it.

The man leaped to avoid it, did escape it himself, but he could not lower his sword in time. It met the stream, only its point, but such a surge of cold ran up its length that his arm dropped, useless, by his side.

His left hand caught the weapon as it fell. He swung with it and struck home only to see the now-brittle metal shatter into gleaming splinters.

The creature's arm raised again. Tronel tried to bring up what remained of his sword but knew his blow must come too late.

“The face! Tear the mask!” His eyes raised to it, but he had no hope of reaching it . . .

A black missile tore through the air above him. Incredibly fast, fierce, almost an embodiment of battle fury in this moment of his master's peril, the falcon threw himself at the Dark hunter. His powerful talons, his beak, seized the

narrow strip separating the two slits, wrenched at it until it tore out and stood at a right angle to the face.

For one moment, there was an outpouring of murky shadow and piercing cold, then that vanished, and the emptied shell toppled. It struck the man, knocking him, but there was little real weight to it, and his own armor prevented him from taking injury from the blow.

Tronel came to his feet in the next instant, still gripping the remnant of his sword, but he saw the other invader was down as well and Qu'el was standing beside it. Storm Lord's concerned call told him the falcon, too, had come through the encounter unscathed.

Working his fingers to ease the throbbing of returning circulation, he sheathed his weapon and joined the woman.

"We still go for the gate?" he asked.

"Aye, though what we shall find there . . ." Her shoulders squared.

"We shall never know until we make the test. A few more minutes will give us the answer."

They crept forward, every sense alert, so that it seemed an eternity before they found themselves facing the place Helmgard had described.

It was indeed strange and to Tronel fearsome because of that strangeness. Twenty great stones had been set in a circle, or had grown thus, for their form was that of trees, and bright, living leaves sprouted from the branches. In their center stood a plain arch fashioned of the same gray rock.

At first he relaxed, for all seemed well, but then he detected a faint shadow, a sooty mist flecked with red, hovering around the arch.

"Too late," Qu'el whispered, despair plain on her. "Our guards must be slain."

"The Dark lord?"

"Nay, a servant awaiting his coming, but it is not one which can be fought without Power."

He watched the shadow-thing. It seemed to grow ever more substantial as his eyes became accustomed to fixing on it.

"Is it like to those hunters?"

"Nay. It is quite mindless but a perfect choice of guardian here. It will sweep down on us if we try to approach the gate."

"We cannot fight through it?"

She shook her head. "There is no hope of that, not with the weapons we possess."

"What will happen?"

"Its master and probably others will come, to the great grief of this world."

The Falconer was silent awhile.

"You say it will sweep down upon an intruder, lady. If I were to move against it first and draw it to me, would it be possible for you to slip in and gain the gate?" She studied him closely, then the guardian at the arch.

"Perhaps, if you could hold it for even a few seconds. The chance is slight, and there would be very little hope of your survival." He merely shrugged.

"Warriors have made that choice before now." He drew his broken weapon.

"The edge is still sound. We shall soon see if it will bite upon mist." Tronel hesitated.

"If you win through, send Storm Lord back to my people aboard the Water Swallow. There is no point in sacrificing him as well, and he will answer to you."

Her head bowed. "So let it be."

The Falconer made his charge. He crossed the ground separating him from the stone trees quickly, passed between the nearest of them.

A great red-shot darkness loomed up before him. What had seemed mist at a distance proved something more cohesive at closer range, a thin ooze that was, in a terrible,

mindless sense, somehow alive, obscenely alive.

It flowed toward him. He braced himself to meet it, not daring to hesitate or even to think lest his fear break him and he flee. If once that happened, hope was indeed dead.

It was on him then, pouring over him like the tide over a boulder in its path—or quicksand swallowing the last trace of its victim—a blind hunger and cold and a death that was deeper than any dying.

The horror seemed to seep into his very being, body, mind, and soul, draining the light and life out of him. He could not struggle, could do nothing at all as the warmth was leached out of him but fix his mind on the memory of a bright sun and a falcon soaring high against it. He remembered the joy lighting a woman's face at the sight of that falcon . . .

It was nearly over. He imagined he saw a new light, a vibrant green that tore into the black and red, but he was too spent for even delirium to hold him, and he retreated into full night.

Tronel became aware of heat, of a gentle touch that sent warmth pouring into his body. His eyes opened to find Qu'el bent over him.

He started to draw back, but memory returned, and he compelled himself to lay still.

Her eyes closed a moment, as if in relief, and her hand lifted in a gesture of greeting.

"It is good to have you back in this realm, Bird Warrior. For a time there, I feared not even the Green Fire would be sufficient to warm you again. He frowned at that. Green Fire? In that first moment of awareness, he had thought her surrounded by emerald flame, as if it emanated from her . . . His vision was clear now, and she was but a woman.

"It is victory, then?"

"Victory. That Dark One will not come again, nor will

many of the retinue he planned to bring with him." Her expression shadowed for a moment.

"They were a bad lot, worse even than I had feared." The man's strength was returning rapidly. He sat up after one failed effort and tried to take stock of himself. Qu'el read his desire easily enough.

"Both you and Storm Lord are sound. You still have your dagger, though your sword can but serve as a reminder of this day." She held it up, or, rather, the hilt of it. Only a small sliver of the blade now remained.

"You managed to get in a few strokes, no mean feat, and they did tell. As for the rest, your mail is nigh unto useless, I fear, but your helm somehow escaped damage save for a bent wing, which can readily be set to rights."

She handed it to him. He took it from her, but rose to his feet and stood looking at it without attempting to set it on his head.

"You will rejoin your people now?" he asked.

"Aye." He took a deep breath. "I would make this war mine."

"Do you know what you say? There is no withdrawing or release from such service." His eyes met hers.

"I am no mind-damaged boy, lady. Having seen this enemy and fought it, I cannot again go back to slaughtering my own kind, those who should be brothers-in-arms with me as you yourself named them." The lady was silent for many long seconds.

"You have shown yourself to be all we could wish in an ally, yet there are difficulties, maybe insurmountable ones, for you.

"You overcame your distrust of me and your lesser feelings to work with me in this need, and you overcame your indifference for compassion's sake, which is, perhaps, an even greater measure of you, but just now, you had to will yourself not to recoil when you wakened to find me beside you.

"The war we wage is harsh. Our enemies are awesomely powerful, and we have learned it is necessary, essential, to pair our warriors, male with female, so that each is balanced by the gifts of the other and both are strengthened thereby. The penalties of failing to effect that partnership are inescapable, and, Bird Warrior, they are heavy. Could you bind yourself to serve with a woman even as you now do with Storm Lord?" It was his turn to fall silent.

"If I must," he said in the end.

"The decision of a moment is not enough. Are you willing to battle with yourself, with your own past? It will come to that, month after weary month."

"If I must," Tronel replied again.

He hesitated then, knowing himself well enough to realize that in such a war, rout might come more frequently than advance.

"If my-partner realizes that I am battling." Qu'el regarded him more closely, seemingly with greater respect.

"Very well, Falconer," she said, speaking slowly, thoughtfully. "Wait one year. Think well and use the time well. Spend some of it at Lormt, that repository of ancient knowledge, if you can, following whatever trails catch your fancy. If at the end of that period, you are still firm in your resolve, then we shall welcome you gladly, you and your feathered brother both."

She smiled, silencing the question he had been about to raise.

"Do not fear for the gate. There are others besides this one. The way will be opened for you . . . You are content?"

He nodded, concealing the keenness of his disappointment.

"I must make myself content."

"Well answered . . . Good journey, Comrade, until we join forces again." The Lady Qu'el stepped back, toward the arch. He watched her, knowing she went to face

enemies like to those they had challenged this day.

His hand raised in the salute of his race.

“May you soar high on fortune’s wings, Lady.”

With that, because he found he did not wish to see her go, he turned and, calling Storm Lord to him, left the area of the gate to begin his journey back to the coast.

* * *

Afterword

I have been captivated by Andre Norton’s Witch World ever since discovering it. The Falconers, however, fascinate me above all its other inhabitants, a race hating and fearing both women and sorcery with excellent reason.

Given this interest, I leaped at the chance to work with such a man—one honorable in himself and possessing the integrity and courage to put his prejudice and fear aside for duty’s sake and then to acknowledge the need to battle them under the double challenge of universal peril and the evidence that presented itself against them. It was a story I thoroughly enjoyed doing, and I would very much like to develop the character further.

—PAULINE GRIFFIN