

OLD TOAD  
by  
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The spear or the shield: that which  
takes life and that which preserves it.  
Who is to judge which is of greater  
value in times of war?

—Excerpt from the *Tale of the  
Mountain Boy*

*An age ago they had caused the land itself to rise up in protest, to strain and heave like a beast tormented beneath their fury, as mountains were birthed and sundered and lifted up again to pierce the pale sky of a new day.*

*Among the scars too deep for centuries of rain and wind to heal: a great rift that split the spine of the steepest range from end to end, leaving for those who would come later a sheltered valley whose stepped plateaus fell gently with the sun into the west.*

*Look down now upon the hidden cleft. Mark how the lowest of the nine plateaus broadens to become a shallow basin clasped on three sides by walls of inward slanting rock. Peer closer and note a strange commingling of the very ancient and the merely old: A score of gray-green towers—low, circular structures weighted with age—stand like outgrowths of the gray soil, while among them, sprouting at their bases like clumps of toadstools in a forest, lies a humble village of thatch-roofed cottages and outbuildings.*

*See where long ago a great fissure cracked the valley's narrow western wall, evidence of the tortured land's final settling. Here sits the massive stone gate that provides the village with both its ancient name and its infrequent commerce with the wide world beyond its walls.*

*Leave the patchwork village and turn away from the great western-facing gate. Mount toward the sunrise, rough peaks serrating the dawn sky on either side of you. A steep hill rises abruptly in your path, its balding crown the highest level ground within the rift. For those bound by legs to the whims of the earth, this obstacle is most easily circumvented by means of the smooth-worn steps carved in days unremembered from the bared rock bones of the mountain itself. Here nimble feet will find a sketchy trail up the gentler slope at the hill's back and from this point on the climb is without obstruction: up and ever upward through a series of shrinking meadow terraces till gradually the path leads out of the rift valley altogether and into the maze of peaks and chasms that twist the land into a frozen sea-storm, with each jutting scarp a wind-lashed wave about to fall.*

*And finally, all but unnoticed at the far end of the topmost meadow pocket sits another Gate, this one almost a mockery of the sturdy man-made barrier half a day's walk down-slope, though it is far, far older. For here stands a gap-toothed ring of canted pillars, rough hewn from the same dull stone as that of the low towers now host to homely cottages in the rift basin. And within this broken circle is nothing more or less than two upright beams of reddish rock, man-high doorposts upon which a third stone has been set to form a crosspiece, a weathered lintel on which nothing rests, above a doorway leading nowhere . . .*

## I

A falcon was circling effortlessly high above the hilltop, the dark fans of its wings almost motionless as it rode the wind currents.

Ander watched through slitted eyes, one part of his mind dipping and gliding with the high hunter while the other marked the approach of his sister. She was still too far downslope to be tracked by eyes or ears, so the boy concentrated on the circling bird, savoring the few moments of solitary peace left to him.

Black wings, sleek black predator's body, small vee of white on the breast where he expected to find it . . . The falcon dipped lower and he spotted for the first time the cluster of bright ribbons fixed to its leg.

Not a hunting bird, then, but a scout—which meant its masters would not be far away. With a small thrill of excitement he closed his eyes and began to trace carefully the web of life that stretched around him: Tiny winged insects wove invisible designs above the meadow flowers of late summer while a dozen restless birds flickered in his mind like points of bright light from a tree halfway down the broad slope behind him. A hare crouched with its mate near the stream, panic-frozen by the dark speck that spiraled lazily above them.

He reached farther. There was the unmistakable bustle of his sister as she toiled up the hill path. He found no other evidence of human life outside the village far below.

Ander opened his eyes in time to see the falcon complete a final swoop before wheeling off toward the west with a beat of powerful wings, its flight becoming purposeful as if it sped now in response to a call no others could hear.

“They’re coming!”

Bereth's voice rang shrill with excitement over the crest of the hill, to be followed a moment later by a commotion of twigs snapping and muffled thuds as his sister flung her wiry body onto the rank grass bordering the shield stone. She lay noisily panting for a minute, her gaze lost in the cloudless sky and her sun-browned fingers clutching at clumps of grass as if to keep herself from falling upward into the empty vastness.

“Did you hear me, Ander-boy?” She raised a fistful of star-petaled yellow flowers to her face and sniffed at them

gingerly, then inhaled deeply, her dark eyes closed in anticipated pleasure. The next moment she had begun to sneeze violently. She threw the offending blossoms to one side of the shield stone and turned to her brother with a grimace of vexation.

"Why can I smell them in the spring but not in the fall?" she complained, pausing to rub vigorously at her nose with the back of a slender hand. "Anyway—the lookouts have seen them coming up the Lower Pass. Borderers mostly, with a few guardsmen—and *she* was riding with them for certain. Uncle said they could see the gray of her robe from the Watch Rock."

Her brother remained silent. With his eyes half closed and his blue-clad legs drawn up under his narrow chin, he seemed as lifeless as the broad flat stone on which he sat.

Bereth flopped her head back and squinted at the clear sky of almost-autumn, her long hair spreading out in a halo of black tangles on the grass. "I wonder what she will look like, Ander? Younger or older? Plain or beautiful? Is Raven beautiful, do you think? I wonder if she's all packed to go—Raven, I mean. Will they stay the night, do you suppose, or head back to Es with her right away?"

"Romsgarth, more likely." Her brother stirred finally, drawing a drooping stem of grass from between his teeth and examining it critically. "For the Borderers, anyway. Or they might just stay here. No sense in their making the long trip to Es City when they're needed out here to protect the Border. Not for one woman." He shrugged the subject away. "Why should you care when they go—or what she looks like? I don't. One goes, one comes. What difference does it make—they all wear the gray." He flicked the stem out over the patches of yellow summer's-last that wreathed the ragged edge of the hill crown overlooking the village.

"What difference?" Bereth was incredulous. "You make it sound as if they traded places once a week, but Raven's been at Mountain Gate forever—"

"Two years short of thirty," Ander corrected mildly,

leaning forward to select another shoot of sweet grass to be worried by his teeth.

“Long before you or I were born, anyway,” his sister finished unperturbed. “And all the ones before her have stayed their whole lives—I asked Uncle. So why should Raven be called back so suddenly now and another one sent in her place? Has she done something wrong, do you think? Is it the war with the South? Did she ask to go? Aren’t you even curious?”

“No, but I’m getting hungry.” He stretched out on the warm flat stone, his fingers playing idly in the lines of ancient carvings still faintly visible on its surface. “You might run down to the village like a good sister and fetch me up a bowl of stew or maybe a sweet. I’m too tired to go apple picking and I left my dart gun on the shelf this morning, so fresh bear meat is out of the question.”

With a cry of exasperation Bereth scrambled to her feet and marched onto the shield stone. Grabbing Ander’s wrists, she tugged at him till he rose to his feet with a sigh. She chattered in cheerful speculation as she led the way down the backside of the hill, pausing once to pluck them each an apple from one of the small trees just above the place where the icy little stream forked in two. Ander followed listlessly, his boots scuffing up small clouds of dust in the trail till they rounded the base of the hill and started down the sunken, moss-covered steps to the village.

The town square at Mountain Gate was in fact a small, stone-flagged courtyard bounded at five equidistant points by low round towers of grayish-green stone. A sixth tower, taller than the others, stood alone at the center of the five-sided square, its three levels connected by a steep spiral of stairs that clung like a vine to the smooth outer walls.

A noisy jumble of people, animals, and things obscured the base of the Tower of Wisdom as Ander and Bereth made their way into the square. Travel-stained men in battle dress passed among the small, tough horses used by the Borderers, loading and unloading parcels of various sizes.

Other soldiers tended to the weary mounts and fended off the forays of the village children who, accustomed to placid, waist-high goats as play-fellows, had no fear of crawling behind strong legs or among sharp hooves to better inspect these larger four-foots.

A ring of onlookers that seemed to comprise the entire population of Mountain Gate surrounded the confusion at the base of the tower. Bereth spotted their uncle's tall frame at the edge of the crowd and ran at once to join him, her small hand sliding into the crook of his elbow. Ander moved more slowly to position himself on Bereth's other side, Uncle acknowledging his arrival with a curt nod of the head, his dark eyes focused disapprovingly on the chaos of men and horses.

Following his uncle's gaze, Ander understood the lack of warmth in the older man's greeting.

"Look, Berry," he whispered with a nudge of his elbow. "Over there—Falconers!"

The two exchanged lifted eyebrows, inspecting the three men who stood slightly apart from the other Borderers, chins held high beneath the concealing masks of their bird-shaped helms. A trio of falcons akin to the one Ander had spied from the hilltop occupied the forked saddle perches of three nearby horses, but whether any of them was that same bird he could not be certain.

Turning, he watched his uncle watching the three and felt himself shiver in the warm sun of afternoon. Ander had tried to accept long ago that Uncle's occasional coldness toward him was not the result of wrongdoing on his own part, but rather a reaction to his resemblance to his mother, the Falconer woman that his father had taken to wife against all customs of both races. Bereth suffered less in this reflected disapproval, in appearance a true child of the Old Race with her pale skin, black hair, and dark, storm-colored eyes. Ander's ruddy face was framed by light brown curls and his own eyes held flecks of gold and amber in their brown depths.

He watched the hawk-helmed men as they cleaned the

trail dust from their small diamond-shaped shields, checked the saddle fastenings on the horses, and muttered quietly to the impassive birds. Not quite two years ago a company of Falconers, the only others he had ever seen, had passed through the village on their way to join a contingent of Borderers already fighting in the South. It was shortly after he and Bereth had gone to live with their uncle and Ander had stood close by the gate as the grim-faced warriors filed into the rift, half hoping one of them would recognize him for a half-blood of their own kind. Still stunned by the loss of his parents, his mind had spun off easily into fantasy, and he imagined the tall leader turning in his saddle to gaze knowingly at him through shadowed eyeholes. *Come, young kinsman. Your place is with us . . .*

But the men had looked straight ahead and nowhere else as they rode slowly through the village and up the trail to the meadowlands, hooded birds restive on the forked saddles, and Ander was left to his dreams in the dust of their passing.

"I haven't seen her anywhere." Bereth's tug on his sleeve recalled Ander to the present. "D'you suppose they could have been mistaken?"

"No mistaking the gray robes," answered Uncle's low voice before Ander could speak. "That one is here." He lifted an arm toward the tower's highest level. "Right up to Raven's roost they led her, straight from horseback and still robed and cowed against the dust of the passes." He shook his head, his eyes on the narrow window high above the square. "I imagine those two have things to say to one another not meant for our ears . . ."

## II

A slant of dusty light had accompanied the small figure partway into the chamber. When the tall woman shut the oval door behind her visitor, the room fell back into a dim-

ness relieved only by the pale illumination from a single arched window set low in the far wall.

Great tables bulked in the shadows, filling most of the room. Covering them was a clutter of storage vessels: ornate chests and cavernous urns; racks of small stoppered jars; narrow metal tubes designed to protect fragile parchment records and a myriad of less familiar containers. Broad hangings, their intricate designs all but obliterated by age and dust, covered the bare stone walls and a fraying rug of braided spirals softened the dimly seen floor.

The two women embraced, the newcomer stepping back after a few moments to study her host, her cowed head tilted backward.

“So tall,” she said. “I would never have recognized you. Of course, I half expected the solemn-faced girlchild from the Place of Wisdom to greet me at this door, despite the rush of years between that time and this.”

The younger woman smiled down at her guest.

“And you look much the same, old teacher—though in truth I used to think you a towering figure when you stole up on me from behind to catch me napping at my studies. Welcome to you, sister.” Her husky voice lost its lightness. “Though truly I never hoped to see the day that brought you to Mountain Gate.”

“Ah, well.” The old woman brushed at the sleeve of gray protruding from her brightly colored travel cloak. “Till a few weeks past I never thought to make the journey—nor to leave Lornt for any reason in the few years left to me. I was well settled there.” She shook her head. “And truth be known, I had my doubts of arriving here right up till the moment that great gate swung shut behind us. I must have cleared the way for others, at least, having swallowed half the dust ’twixt here and Es. And that surely, bony-backed beast they had me strapped to—*Ai!*” She stretched her back with a wry grimace, plump hands splayed on ample hips.

“Here, forgive me. Come sit with me.” The tall woman led the way to a low bench of skillfully carved black stone,



its legs inlaid with faceted jewels that winked like beast-eyes in the shadows. The newcomer sat gratefully, then pushed to her feet again with a groan and crossed the room to rummage among the bulging packs the soldiers had unloaded just inside the door.

"I've brought some tea from the Guardian. She gave it to me herself before I left, a good large supply." Humor sparkled in the dark eyes. "A nice gesture of confidence, I thought . . . Is there a kettle to hang in that fireplace? Ah, I see it. No, sit still, I'll get it started."

She glanced appraisingly around the dim chamber as she rejoined the other woman on the bench.

"Quite a treasure house you inhabit here."

"All of it left by those who came before me. The accumulation of centuries. I had started to put some order to it in the past few years. Now . . ." She finished the thought with a shrug of futility.

"We all wish there were another way," the old woman said into the silence. "Myself more than any, perhaps."

"I know, I know." The younger woman took a breath and sat up straight. "So the plan has been approved at long last."

"So it has—if nothing has changed in the week we traveled. I imagine you have had more recent word than I."

"Yes, two nights past. A sending from the Council."

"Ah." The small woman settled back against a large wooden chest bearing a coiled firedrake in chipped and faded pigment. "Then you may tell me the news."

"Not much to tell." Her hostess rose abruptly from the bench and threaded her way through the clutter to the low window. There she stood with thin arms crossed against her breast, pale hands clutching the opposite shoulders. "They told me only that you were on your way and that the general withdrawal would soon begin."

"Pagar's forces have not been quelled, then." The older woman gave a small sigh of resignation. "When I left some still had hope . . ."

"Very much the opposite." The husky voice was grim.

"His forays have grown bolder these past days. The mountains to the west and south of here swarm with his men. Each day we lose more ground, more fighters."

"Losses on the other side, as well, I suppose?"

"Oh, aye, when our Borderers sell their lives it is only at great cost to the Southern forces. But these new men breed like marsh flies and we—" She fell silent for a long moment, cleared her throat with another shrug. "As ever, our own numbers increase but slowly. Oh, it is a bitter little war when compared with the great campaigns of time past—but one that drains us of our life's blood, drop by drop. And so Estcarp finds her back to the wall and the plan has been approved at last." She shook her head, then said in a fervent whisper: "Tell me, old teacher, have we chosen rightly in this? Is there truly no other path?"

"I believe the tea is almost ready. And that, as you know, comes near the limits of *my* foretelling abilities." The old woman came to stand by the younger. "Here it is. Careful—hot."

"Thank you." She took the cup in long fingers, lowered it to the windowsill. They stood together and looked out through scented steam at the village below and the encircling peaks beyond.

"Such a remarkable place," the small woman said after a time. Her eyes strayed toward the east, darted back. "The world's far end and they live here as though it were any small town in Estcarp . . . What have you told them?"

"All that I was given leave to say: a handful of words. That I have been summoned to Es by the Council and know not when I may return. That another would be sent here to bide in my stead."

"Their response?"

"Puzzlement—Mountain Gate is not a place where change comes every day, or even every year. I think some are sorry to see me go, but that may be self-flattery." Her lips quirked in a humorless smile. "But as long as the pact is upheld and they have their witch . . ." She pointed to the crowd below, indicating a stoop-shouldered man with

drooping mustaches in a long face. "That one is Rof, the village headman. You will meet him soon enough. Near him is Hully, who keeps the maps, and over there is Tosker—the one with the belly. He minds the food stores and will want to know your dinner preferences, though the choices are not many . . . And the tall man in the front there: His name is Duroth. The gate and the lookouts are in his charge, as are his brother's children—the girl and boy at his side."

She leaned back slightly from the stone sill and regarded Bereth and Ander with pursed lips. "An odd tale there, beginning when a wild woman was found at the gate one day a dozen years past. Half-starved she was, dressed in ragged leathers, her speech a mumble of confusion. Donnar, younger brother to Duroth, brought her to me and together we managed to nurse her back to her senses. Her tale was never very clear—she had been wandering for some months and her mind had taken a turn away from reality—but we were able to piece together that she'd come from a Falconers' village far to the west, one of those horrid little pens where they keep their women and children." Her eyes darted with contempt to the hawk-helmed trio just visible to one side of the crowded square. "She was a strange creature—no surprise, given her origin and the fact that she had the courage to walk away from it—and fair to look upon in her odd way. Donnar worshipped her from the start. When he went to Rof for leave to marry it stunned the village. His brother never forgave him, seeing the union as nothing but shameful. For my own part I always found her a harmless thing, unused to the village—and especially to the daily presence of men—but hard-working and willing to learn our ways. She bore Donnar first the boy and then the girl and after a time they seemed to settle into the fabric of life here without a seam. Then she left their cottage one night two winters ago and vanished without a word. Donnar went searching for her and a snow cat found him in the topmost meadow. Of the woman there was never a trace."

"Hm. Odd indeed," agreed the old woman. She craned her short neck to peer at the children. "They seem normal enough."

"The boy shows the mixed blood a bit. But, aye, they're bright children, overbright at times if anything. I've let them help from time to time in my cataloguing here as they seem to have a taste for it. Ander reads as well as I after a year of teaching—though he prefers to spend his time in dreams. As for the girl, she's curious as the flannan and I think she'll come into the talent in a year or two. I feel the stirrings when they are around. I had been planning to test her . . . now I suppose it's just as well I never got around to it—for her sake, I mean." She dropped her pale hands to frame the earthenware cup on the wide stone sill. "It was two months after I received my jewel that I was sent here to the far end of the world, as you called it, little more than a girl myself. I thought I would die of loneliness. But now the years have passed and I find that I have dwelt here among these good folk for the greater part of my life. Oh, they are a good folk here, teacher—my only kin. I wish with all my heart that I could cast off the weight of this summons and walk down into that courtyard a free woman, to live out my days tending the goats or weaving cloth for them . . ." The husky voice trailed off into silence.

After a time the other woman asked softly: "Do you truly wish this, child? With all your heart?"

"Ah, well," the younger witch replied, pale fingers rising unbidden to clasp the dull crystal at her throat as she lifted her head with a sad, weary smile. "Not truly, sister. Of course not."

Despite his outward indifference, Ander felt a strong tug of curiosity as he waited with the rest of the village outside the Tower of Wisdom. Visitors to Mountain Gate were few and far between, though more common now that the fighting had spread to them from the west. One month might see a band of Borderers in need of supplies or a night's

respite from battle; the next frightened refugees from the South on their way overmountain.

But none stayed more than a few days—with very few exceptions—and Raven was at any rate the only witch of Estcarp to enter Mountain Gate in many long years. Ander had grown up thinking of her as unique: Their Witch. Now he began to wonder if all witches were necessarily the same as theirs.

“She’ll be needing a name, won’t she?” Bereth squinted at the tower’s narrow windows. “We have to have something to call her.”

Ander nodded slowly. The villagers had called Their Witch “Raven” and over the years the appellation had come to seem as much a part of the woman as the cloudy gem she sometimes drew from its biding place on the silver chain about her slim neck to aid in the performance of her craft. But it was not her name. A witch’s true name was her most prized possession—valued even more highly than that jewel that was both focus for the Power and badge of office—and never given lightly lest it be used as a potent weapon against the one named.

“Look—here they come!” Bereth pointed past him to the tower’s third level. There below an inset stone of dull blue an oval door was opening inward. “I see her—Raven and—”

Bereth’s voice stopped cold and Ander felt his own jaw drop as the two figures began to slowly descend the spiral steps.

First came the tall, gray-clad woman they had come to regard as synonymous with the presence of the Power in their village, her impassive features framed in black hair severely netted back from the triangular face. And at her side . . .

Leaning heavily on Raven’s slender arm, she was squat where the other witch was tall, fleshy and slow of step, with a round face in which small bright eyes blinked at the afternoon sun. Over rumbled gray robes she wore a garish travel cloak embroidered in bright colors with fanciful

beasts. Her own hair was streaked with age, more white than black showing in the lopsided mound beneath the pearl-gray netting. Stray wisps sprouted haphazardly around the plump face, while drooping incongruously from the front of the net was her witch jewel, an oval of dull crystal hung noticeably off center upon her seamed brow.

"She must be so *old!*" Bereth whispered loudly in the hush that had filled the square. "She doesn't look much like Raven, does she? More like a—a little owl."

Someone laughed in the crowd behind them and Ander shook his head.

"No, not an owl." He was trying to remember a picture he had seen somewhere, in the border of one of the story scrolls Raven had used to teach him to read. It was an ancient tale . . . "Old toad!" he said suddenly, the image coming clearly into his head. "With that jewel stuck up there on her forehead she looks just like the old toad in the 'Tale of the Mountain Boy!'" He regretted the words even as they left his lips, for there was more muffled laughter from behind and he began to hear his exclamation repeated in whispers around the wide circle of onlookers.

At last the two witches reached the bottom stair and moved forward into the square. Raven stood at her successor's side as Rof introduced the various elders of the village. Duroth eyed the old woman with open skepticism when his own turn came to be presented.

Then Raven faced the crowd.

"I am called to Es," she said, her voice seeming huskier than usual. "I cannot name the day of my return. But even in these times of uncertainty Estcarp does not forget the ancient pact uniting her with the good folk of this village for as long as the mountains stand: Mountain Gate to guard what lies in the topmost meadow and a witch to guard Mountain Gate."

She stood there a long moment after her words had died, measuring them all with her dark eyes; then she turned abruptly on her heel and walked to where the soldiers had assembled with their mounts. A guardsman handed her up

into the saddle and they joined the line of horses and men beginning to move slowly in the direction of the western gate. Thus with a single backward glance Raven departed the village, leaving behind her the ring of onlookers and the old woman who stood blinking at the sun, alone in the center of the square.

### III

Three globes were set high above the table in metal baskets attached to rafters blackened by age and woodsmoke. But two of the globes had been dark for years, and an assortment of candles was necessary to augment the wan glow emitted by the one that still functioned.

In the shadows just beyond the wavering tongues of light crouched Ander. When Rof's men had come to fetch Duroth, Ander tagged along quietly; now he sat against the wall between stacks of kindling, his head down on folded arms in a counterfeit of sleep.

Five men besides his uncle sat around the knife-scarred table. Two Border captains looked on as old Hully spread out a faded representation of the mountains to the south, using tankards to weight down the edges of the stiffly curling scroll.

"Something is afoot in Es," one of the Borderers was saying. "The Council members look grimmer than usual—if that's possible. But as to what it is, that no man knows—or is liable to find out since our lord Simon's been gone these many years . . ."

"Aye, and why they've taken your witch and sent you that one in her stead—" His fellow shrugged.

"Raven told me the old one used to be her teacher, years ago," volunteered Rof. "Said she was a member of the Council herself. I guess we can take that to mean she knows how to wield the Power when 'tis necessary."

Ander's uncle snorted from his side of the table. "Knows how to wield a table knife, you mean. She'll eat us out of

our winter stores in a month from the looks of the middle on her. Tosker, you'd best put a guard on the larder from now on."

"Now, Duroth, you mustn't—" The rest of Rof's protest was swallowed up in the men's laughter.

Ander felt another presence in the room as the jests continued. Peeping through his crossed arms he saw the witch standing quietly at the other end of the long chamber. She seemed to be staring in his direction, though he knew the shadows made him almost invisible, and as she moved forward a trick of the candlelight made it look as though a sly wink crossed her broad face.

"Good even to you, gentlemen. I seem to have arrived at the right moment, for I hear you speaking of food and I've just finished my own delightful dinner. I thank you for your hospitality to an uninvited guest such as myself."

With her jewel of office nowhere in evidence and her unruly hair free of the formal gray netting, the old witch looked more like a harried grandmother than an adept of the Power, but the men fell into guilty silence at her approach, rising as one when she reached the table.

Ander craned his neck to see past the bundles of kindling, inspecting her face at close range for the first time since her arrival a week before. Here in truth was no smooth-browed Raven, dark eyes flashing command above a narrow face. He stared at the round wrinkled visage set close on the shoulders, at the flattened nose and the cheeks like withered apples.

"Apologies for disturbing you so late in the day, lady." Rof sketched a vague salute as he surrendered his place of honor at the table's head. "The captains here have just arrived." He nodded to the dour-faced Borderers. "They've orders to make a foray overmountain tomorrow and Raven—the former lady, that is—she often helped with the planning. We thought you might do the same."

The witch nodded pleasant greeting to the men and pushed a stray lock of gray back from her furrowed brow.

"I have very little experience in battle strategy, Captain,



though I have passed some hours studying the records of past campaigns to be found at Lornt. I can offer no assistance, therefore—but if you do not mind my presence at your table, I would welcome the opportunity to increase my knowledge by remaining to share in your plans.”

“Did you say you have no skill at battle strategy?” Duroth’s face was incredulous. “Here at the twilight of the Old Race, when every man and woman—”

“Gatekeeper.” The old witch’s voice was soft, but seemed to hide an inner core of iron. “I am not the witch you had last week. You would do well to remember that.”

Ander sat among the sticks, blinking in surprise at the exchange. A witch admitting there were subjects about which she had no knowledge was unheard of. This little grandmother was proving to be as unlike her predecessor in action as she was in appearance. The only topics Raven would not discourse on were those she had pronounced either so secret or so insignificant as to be unworthy of pursuit. Looking around the dim table Ander saw his own bewilderment mirrored in the faces of the men.

“What happened? Did you see Old Toad?” Berry sat up in her bed at the other end of the sleeping loft as Ander climbed the ladder and made for his own pallet.

“Yes, nothing happened. I fell asleep and started to snore. Uncle woke me up and made me leave. She’s very different from Raven. She knows nothing of war. And stop calling her that!”

“But everybody does. They don’t mean any harm. It suits her so well.” Berry yawned. “I suppose we’ll never be allowed in the tower again. Too bad. There are so many interesting things up there.”

But the next morning brought an unexpected announcement from Uncle.

“You’re to go to the Tower of Wisdom today, both of you, as soon as you’ve finished with the house tasks. The new witch has asked to see you.”

The children exchanged glances as Uncle returned to his porridge, his expression as unconcerned as if he had just voiced a speculation on the possibility of rain that afternoon.

They found her on the third level, seated on a bench in the main storeroom, a dustrag in one hand and a half dozen slim parchment rolls in the other.

"I need help sorting through some of these things," she said without preamble when the two approached the bench. A bright blue scarf confined her hair and a yellow apron covered most of the gray robe. "I want to move some of it down to the ground, where I have my quarters. These legs were never meant for this up and down stairs every day, so I've decided to use yours instead. In return you'll get nothing but the chance to poke around in this heap of history." She raised her face to them, narrowed her eyes at Ander.

"I need strong hands as well as legs, and eyes that know what they see. My former pupil told me that you could read—is this truth, boy?"

"Yes. Bereth, also, a little."

The old witch nodded. "Strong hands, knowing eyes—and mouths that are shut more than they are open. Does this employment hold any appeal for you?"

"Yes, oh, yes!" Bereth leaned her head around the lid of an iron-bound chest she had pried open and begun to explore. "We would love to help you!"

Ander shrugged under the witch's shrewd gaze.

"I guess so," he said. "If Berry wants to."

It was different from helping Raven.

Where the other witch had been taciturn and self-absorbed, Old Toad talked to them while they sorted through the remnants of the past with her, welcoming their opinions on this or that unidentifiable artifact. She had an unexpected wealth of patience and surprised both children by attempting to make answer to almost all of Berry's questions—till even that seemingly inexhaustible hoard ran low

and the three worked in amiable silence till a new topic presented itself for discussion.

She spoke to them of the world beyond the western gate, of Estcarp and the evening that had come to the Old Race, still recovering from the ruinous war with creatures from across the sea and beset now by enemies to the north and south.

"It isn't fair," Ander said as he carefully unfolded pieces of musty cloth found in the hidden drawer of a box shaped like a turtle. "Why couldn't we all have been born in the old days, when people could be heroes and there were still great deeds left to be done?"

"There is always a need for heroes," said Old Toad, reaching for one of the rectangles of dyed cloth. Tiny pearls caught the light. "This I believe was the wedding dress of a princess of long ago . . . see the symbols there?" She began to lay the pieces of fabric out on the table in the outline of a long gown.

"You know what I think?" Berry spoke from the other side of the room, where she had been sitting for the past half hour, hunched over the small cleared space she had dubbed her work table. One of the boxes from the second level had yielded a strange device of sliding plates and crystal lenses and she was peering through it now at a portion of her collection of pressed flowers, gathered over the past few seasons and carefully preserved in her keep chest in Uncle's cottage. "I think we have to be like the summer's-last: beautiful and strong, even though winter is almost on—on—" She interrupted herself with a succession of rapid sneezes, drew hastily back from the magnifying device. "You know what else? I've finally discovered the difference—come look!"

Ander and Old Toad looked over her thin shoulders as the eager girl showed them the two separate mounds of yellow-orange powder she was viewing beneath the lenses: one culled from the flowers of the plant called summer's-last and the other from the seemingly identical first-of-spring.

“See—these little dots are larger and funny-shaped. I bet that’s why they make me sneeze!”

Ander lifted his brows at the witch. Old Toad shrugged and nodded. “It could very well be. The ancients had knowledge of such matters far surpassing our own. Perhaps Berry’s hungry mind is the one to unlock their many secrets.”

Despite the bond of friendship that had grown among Old Toad and the children in the few weeks since her arrival at Mountain Gate, Ander was uncomfortably aware that she still seemed an enigmatic figure to the village at large, and a poor substitute for Raven. Immersed in her work in the tower, she nonetheless responded to requests for such aid as Raven had been wont to give the village folk—but rarely with the same results as her predecessor.

There was the matter of the goats: small, surefooted animals that Raven had bespelled each spring, ensuring health and vigor in the little herd that supplied the village with milk and fine silvery wool.

When sharp-tongued Karith brought the best of her flock to Old Toad a month after the witch’s arrival at Mountain Gate, she said nothing of any earlier spell, thinking to gain a double blessing for her charges in a single year. But within a few days of the visit half the shes under Karith’s care dried up and the rest went sour, while the coats of both sexes turned dull and lifeless.

In a fury the goatwoman went to Rof. “Council member, indeed!” she stormed. “They’ve sent us an old drudge from their kitchens, more likely—with less magic than the meanest novice!” But when the headman brought the tale to the Tower of Wisdom the next day the old witch only sighed and shook her head ruefully.

“Bring nothing to me that your Raven has touched recently with her craft—for mine will not blend with it and you risk the undoing of the first work. Have Karith bring the flock again come spring and I will see what may be done.”

Rof departed the tower and went to find the goatwoman, his long face melancholy.

"Foolish woman." Old Toad turned from the doorway with another shake of her gray head. "Willfully hidden truth can only breed mischance when mated with the Power. And the more fool I—not to wonder that she came seeking benediction for her flock at this time of the year." She settled her bulk onto the chamber's sturdiest stool and regarded Ander gloomily. "I've got to get my head on straight-wise. Too much time spent at Lormt, I suppose, among the dusty words of another age. And now here—still I pass my time rooting among the old tales. It's time I learned to read people again, eh?"

"It's as though she were looking for something," Ander told his sister that evening. "Don't you get the feeling she hopes to find something in the tower—and that she needs to find it soon?"

"I don't know." Berry was working busily with something from her keepchest. "I just wish I could find the right—"

There was a flash of radiance and the two children stared in wonderment over the glowing globe Berry held cradled in her palms.

"I did it!" she squealed. "I fixed one of them! Wait till I show Old Toad— Nobody's ever done it before, but I thought if I mixed some of the powders from the third level with a little—"

"Hush! Put that thing away." Ander waved frantically at his sister. "I think Uncle's home."

"Oh, all right." With a grimace of disappointment Bereth closed the lid of the keepchest. After a moment she reached out and pried it open a tiny crack. A thin shaft of radiance spilled into the sleeping loft. "Isn't that pretty, though?" she said in a rapt whisper.

## IV

A light breeze blew beneath a sky filled with high clouds. Autumn had arrived in the past few days. Ander rubbed

his bare arms as he sat in his usual place at the center of the shield stone, legs drawn up under his chin and eyes closed.

"Am I getting closer?" Part urgent whisper, part shout, the call came from halfway down the back slope, from a small rise just above the stream fork where the grass grew thick and long.

"Stop yelling," he called back. "You'll scare them away. One of them just started to climb out of the nest. Wait . . . All right, keep moving . . . About five paces to your right. Go slowly. That's it. You're right above them."

"*Ai*, I found them! Oh, Ander, they're beautiful. Thank you for guiding me. Oh, come see . . ."

"I'll stay here. I've seen rabbit young before," he replied.

"Ah," came a voice by his side. "But have you ever seen any spotted white with black?"

The boy's eyes flew open and he scrambled to his feet, his heart pounding. Old Toad stood before him, her expression nonchalant as she traced the ancient lines and circles in the worn stone with the rounded top of a tall wooden staff.

"How did you—"

"Get past Berry? She was quite intent on following your directions. Or do you mean how did I know what the rabbits looked like? I could have seen their parents on the other side of the stream and made a guess. Or perhaps—" She tilted her head to one side and looked at him. "Perhaps you want to know how I managed to get past *you*, eh, Master Tracker?"

"I don't know what you mean," he stammered. "I was daydreaming. I had my eyes closed."

The old witch smiled to herself, nodding.

"I am sure you did. Ah, Ander-boy, I am not surprised you come here to be yourself. I have been feeling the tug of this place ever since I came to Mountain Gate. Today my staff and I decided to make the climb and see what was what. Do you know how old these runes are, boy?"

“No. Very old. They just look like lines to me,” he said, wondering how much the old witch had surmised of what he and Berry had been doing.

“Yes, indeed, very old. I wonder . . .” She knelt with difficulty on the smooth stone to examine the markings by his boots, leaned on his arm to regain her feet. “Do you at least recognize this symbol in the center—the one you have been covering with your pants seat for the past hour or so?”

He shook his head, seeing only a confusion of scratch marks.

“Shall we see if I do?” She carefully reversed the staff, lowering its metal-shod tip till it hovered just above the small hollow at the center of the flat stone.

Ander watched uneasily as the witch closed her eyes, her lips moving inaudibly. “I don’t—”

“*Euthayan!*” Old Toad cried, touching the tip of the staff to the stone. Instantly blue radiance flashed at the tip of metal, spreading to become almost blindingly bright as it ran through the maze of radiating lines and figures like a web of liquid fire on the surface of the stone. She lifted the staff into the air and the pattern faded at once from the shield stone, the tip of her staff continuing to glow for several moments before finally winking out like a quenched ember.

“I thought so,” the witch said matter-of-factly as Ander stood blinking away the bright after-images. She looked around the hilltop with a short nod of satisfaction. “A very powerful place, indeed. Ideal, ideal . . .”

“Ideal for what?” Ander followed her gaze, seeing nothing but rounded hill and cloud-filled sky, with the tops of jagged mountains in the distance all around.

But the witch made no answer, her expression having turned inward once again, as if she searched now deep within herself.

Abruptly she raised her eyes and pointed past him.

“Look where I point my finger, Ander. Tell me what lies there.”

Puzzled, he followed the direction of her gaze, considered.

“That would be the North, where Estcarp lies and beyond it one of the enemy lands: Alizon.”

“And there?” The plump arm swung in a short arc.

“The West. Mountains only, I think, till you come to the sea.” His voice grew softer: “The Falconers’ great Eyrie lies in those mountains.”

“There?”

“That is the South, where Pagar rules in Karsten. The place of the enemy.”

“Very good, you have studied your maps well.” She paused for a heartbeat, searching his tanned face with her eyes. “Now tell me what lies behind you, the direction of the rising sun.”

“The East? I’m not sure. They never put it on the maps. It’s just more mountains, isn’t it? I don’t think anyone has ever been farther east than here.” His face became thoughtful. “Unless you mean the Gate in the topmost meadow. That lies to the East. The Gate we guard. Is that what you mean?”

“I mean only to confirm what I had suspected. That you are able to think of the East. Ander, do you know what response I would get were I to bring any man or woman of Estcarp up here on this hilltop and ask them what lies in the direction of the sunrise? Nothing. Most of them would not even understand my question. They would peer to the south of my pointing finger or to the north of it—or most likely just blink their eyes and talk of other things. The Old Race outside of Mountain Gate cannot say what lies to the East because for them it does not exist.”

“But why? People talk of the East here, don’t they? It can’t be true.”

“Recently a young man came seeking knowledge at Lormt, a battle-wounded man searching the old records for something. About him I sensed what Raven felt when you and Berry were near: the presence of the Power! I kept watch over this young man when he did not know I was



near, took out the records he chose after he departed and studied them myself. They spoke of the past, the past in the East! I showed the records to others and they could not understand what I was talking about. For only among the Guardians, the witches, is there knowledge of what occurred in the East ages ago, or why the Old Race fled from there.”

“The Old Race came from . . . the East?”

“Aye. They came to Estcarp fleeing something, a thing so terrible that when they arrived they turned behind them and raised up a barrier of mountains, churned and splintered the very land behind them to create a wall against that which they had fled. Mountain Gate lies in the southernmost portion of that barrier, where the witch-made mountains join the natural ranges that separate us from Karsten. Then, having wrought their barrier, the wise of that time enspelled their own people, setting wards in the mind to prevent any of the Old blood from ever seeking the East again—or even thinking of it, so great did they fear what had driven them forth. All of the Old Race were so mind-locked save one small group. In these mountains there was discovered an ancient Gate which had survived the chaos within this rift. Where the Gate led to has been forgotten—perhaps to the dread secrets of the East, perhaps to another world entirely. But whatever its purpose it was deemed worthy of safeguarding and a village was set here and peopled with those of the Old Race who were willing to stand such duty. For it was necessary that they should know the East in order to live here at its doorstep . . .”

“Is that why you have come here? Is the Gate going to open again?”

She set a plump finger to his lips. “Ander, I have already entrusted you with more knowledge than my sisters would condone—far, far more.” She hefted her staff, shivering in the growing twilight. “Come, let us coax Berry away from her rabbits and go down to the village.”

“One more thing.” Ander looked hesitantly toward

where his sister played out of sight on the hillside. "Do you know what Berry thinks about the Gate in the topmost meadow? She has never told this to another person. She believes our mother went through that Gate the night she disappeared. She thinks someday she will come back."

## V

There had been a strange feeling in the air all morning. It was as though the air itself were growing thinner: a stifling feeling, though the autumn coolness remained unchanged. Duroth muttered at the breakfast table, glaring toward the witch's tower.

When Ander and Bereth reported to the Tower of Wisdom at their usual hour, they found the oval door barred from the inside for the first time in their experience.

Ander knocked tentatively on the door and Old Toad's voice issued from within, sounding curiously muffled.

"Go away. I can see no one today."

"But we were supposed to open up that chest from the second level," Berry protested, standing on tiptoe to try to peer through the single window. Heavy curtains obscured their view of the dark interior. "And I want to try to repair another glow globe. Can we just come in for a—"

"I can see no one today. Go away."

When they returned to the cottage, Duroth was busy nailing boards across the windows.

"Storm coming, a bad one," he said shortly, eyes on the western horizon where masses of purple-black clouds were gathering ominously. "Best go up to the sleeping loft and stay there till I call you. Nothing to do with a storm such as this but wait it out."

"We're worried about Old Toad," said Berry. "She wouldn't let us in the tower and her voice sounded so funny."

"No need to worry about that one." Duroth shook his head in disgust. "No doubt she's burrowed in among her

old scrolls. We're to have a meeting today to decide what to do about her—that may settle a few questions.”

“What to do about her?” Ander tried to read his uncle’s stern face. “But—”

“Inside now! Up to the loft! I’m not your Old Toad, to listen to children’s questions when there’s work to be done.”

Berry professed herself tired, her face wan and spiritless, and crawled onto her pallet. Ander lay down on his at the other end of the loft and waited till she began to breathe in the rhythm of sleep. Then he crept down quietly from the loft and eased open the cottage door. Uncle was nowhere to be seen, probably already gone to the meeting house.

“The lookouts have just spied another band of Borderers withdrawing to the west. That’s the last of them, by our count. It means they are leaving us defenseless, open to attack from Pagar’s men, as we had begun to suspect,” said Duroth bitterly. “Though in truth I had never thought them capable of such shameful dealings with their own kin.”

“The captain offered us safe passage a month ago, and again yestereve,” said old Hully quietly, his fingers rubbing a crease in the parchment of one of his scrolls.

“Knowing we would not take it! An empty gesture,” snarled Duroth. “Our life is in this place. We cannot leave. But they swore protection for as long as the mountains stand—”

“A witch only have they ever sworn, Duroth,” Rof interposed mildly. “Never warriors. They have their own lands to guard.”

“Warriors would not be necessary if we had a proper witch. Many’s the time in the past dozen years I watched Raven throw a cloak of fog about the rift, or summon up a ghost-lure to lead the Southerners past our walls. For our walls may be high, but they can be breached—and once we’ve come to Pagar’s attention you may be sure he’ll not rest till he’s cracked our shell and sucked us dry of life.”

He looked at the faces of the elders with a scornful laugh. "And where is Old Toad all the while? Hiding in her store-room with her eyes in the past and her fingers in our treasures."

"We sent a man to ask her about the storm," Tosker murmured from the other side of the table. "She wouldn't open the door. She told him to go away. He said she sounded ill."

"Ill!" Duroth spat the word out. "Sick with fear's more likely. It's just as well—I've seen what she does with her magic and I've no desire to have her tinkering with an honest storm above our heads."

"Why have they sent us such a wronghand, Rof?" Hully's voice was shadowed with bewilderment. "In truth, when she does work her witchcraft it comes out backward, like as not. Do they hold the ancient pact in such contempt?"

"Do you know what I believe?" asked Duroth. "I believe they sent her here to get her out of their way while they work their great plan against Pagar. She has said herself that her own use of the Power—if that is even what she uses—will not mix with that of other witches. I think the Council was afraid her mere presence would spoil whatever it is they were planning, and they sent her as far away from them as possible—woe to Mountain Gate."

Rof shrugged, scratching at his cheek with a rough forefinger. "Possible. Perhaps they feel the pact has grown one-sided with the centuries and that they have little to lose nowadays if it is not upheld." His gaze shifted to the east and the rising meadowlands visible through the meeting-house windows.

"The Gate . . ." Hully made a warding sign with his fingers. "Just because it's lain quiet all these years—surely they cannot risk the danger—"

"What danger?" Duroth snorted. "How do we know there's any danger left in it—or indeed ever was in the first place!"

"It glows sometimes of an evening," Tosker said nervously. "I'm not the only one who's seen it!"

"Perhaps there's danger, perhaps not." The gatekeeper shook his head stubbornly. "It matters not. For what shall we do to protest this breach in the pact, this wronghand—this Old Toad they've sent us—close our eyes? Should the Gate fall right open one evening and sluice forth Ever-Night, won't it be our village and our people first swallowed up in the Darkness if we refuse to sound the alarm and drive it back into its hole? No." Another shake of his head, this time in rueful admiration. "They have the upper hand in this game, if game it is . . ."

## VI

Three weeks ago Old Toad had shown Ander the strange treasure pulled from a casket beneath a swath of ancient fabric: a tiny urn or jug made of the same greenish stone as the tower itself and figured on one side with a small grinning countenance. The witch had spoken his name carefully, her lips close to the flared lip of the jug, then stoppered it hastily. Minutes later when she removed the cork her voice issued forth to his amazement, repeating the single word whenever she snapped her fingers or rapped on the table: "Ander . . . Ander . . ."

Today, when he and Berry had stood outside the tower, it was the muffled urn-voice that he had heard turning them away. Standing there, he had reached out with his mind and searched the tower for the witch's presence. She was not there.

Now as he climbed the mossy steps leading to the hill slope, he lifted his collar against the oddness in the air. A tight feeling prickled along the exposed skin of his face and hands. Even the stream lay flat and heavy-looking as he rounded the base of the hill, as if something were pressing smoothly against the very surface of the water, while in the little stand of trees above it strange ghost lights had begun

to shine palely. He blinked and looked again, but they remained: wisps of wan radiance flaring now toward the sky like intangible candles set haphazardly among the gnarled branches.

The wind had been rising without his notice. Lightning cracked above his head, to be answered with a growl of thunder that seemed to originate in the mountains beneath him rather than the angry sky. As he hurried up the path the rain began to fall in lashing sheets. In a moment he was chilled to the bone, his teeth chattering uncontrollably.

He covered his eyes at a second bolt of skyfire, plodded on against the lash of cold rain. He was nearing the hilltop. The sky had darkened considerably since he had left the village, forcing him to rely on memory and touch rather than his eyesight; now he scanned the summit of the hill through a blur of rain, trying to verify what his inner senses had told him back in the village square.

Another blast of lightning and there she stood: a small round silhouette at the center of the shield stone, one arm upraised above her head while her left hand gripped the tall wooden staff.

Her head was thrown back beneath the driving rain toward the focal point of the storm above her, the plump face pinched tight and her unbound hair whipped into a gray madness about her hunched shoulders.

Ander lurched forward with a cry, but the fury of wind and growling thunder swallowed all other sound.

In the hollow at the center of the stone rested the staff's metal tip and from it blue light pulsed outward through the ageworn symbols. The runes themselves seemed to writhe and change in the unsteady light, as though the blue glow were carving new lines into that ancient rock.

Another bolt of skyfire burst from the clouds above Old Toad's head and arrowed directly toward the village itself before it split just above the hill and forked away to either side of the rift. Explosions rang in Ander's ears as he staggered toward the rapt figure of the witch.

The ground shook convulsively when he was almost at

her side and he lost his footing, sprawling forward onto the smooth stone with a yelp of pain.

“Ander?” Small bright eyes stared down at him in wonder. “Should not . . . be here.” The words came thickly from her mouth. “Go home . . . now!”

“I thought you were lost!” He pushed up on his elbows. “I thought you might be hurt!” Tears streamed down his face, warm beneath the chill rain. “You have to stop it—you’re going to kill them! Why, Old Toad, why are you doing this?”

The witch shook her head slightly.

“Not . . . I.” She spoke slowly, absently, as if she dared not break her concentration on more vital matters. “Not my doing . . . the plan . . .”

“Who, then?” He looked wildly about the storm-lashed hilltop. “Pagar—”

“The Council . . . of Wise Ones in Es . . .”

“The witches?” Ander tried to make sense of the thought behind the words, failed. “Why? Why would they strike at us?”

Again the witch shook her head wearily. Thunder boomed with a grinding sound that seemed to come from directly outside the walls of the rift. “Not at . . . us. They strike at the Southern forces . . . swarming thick in these mountains . . . They strike here as they did once before in the East . . . to end a war they cannot win . . .”

Ander looked around at the storm’s rising fury, watched as a distant western peak lurched suddenly upward, only to fall back upon itself in a collapsing mass of crushed rock and dust. Lightning stabbed repeatedly outside the rift, so that at times the dark sky glowed with runes of white flame above their heads, while on the stone beneath their feet lines of glowing blue writhed in answer. Far below them the village huddled in the rain, untouched by lightning’s lash or heaving earth.

“We knew the villagers would not leave—could not—as part of the wards set on their minds . . . long ago . . .” Her voice was strained with exertion, distracted. “I came here

to search out a way to lift the compulsion among the old records . . . and failing that, to do upon this night what I have done best my whole life—wroghanded witchcraft in the midst of their great magic . . .”

“Wroghanded . . .” Words and deeds of the past month tumbled into Ander’s mind, pieces of a puzzle dropping into place in the space of a heartbeat. He stared up at the diminutive figure who, through some trick of the storm-light, seemed to tower like a giantess against the flashing night. Her right hand trembled with fatigue above her head, its palm turned toward the west, outward from her body: not in the gesture of the summoner, but as one who forbids, one who turns aside . . .”

“Old Toad! What about Raven?” His eyes sought the storm-ravaged peaks beyond the rift walls.

“With the others, one more adept to add her faith and will to the might of the storm . . .” The weary face held distinct sadness, far-off pain. “She may die tonight, as will so many . . . She may live—”

A rumble of thunder greater than any before it swallowed the last of her words. When the noise subsided her face was white, her dark eyes feverish.

“The storm mounts, in the sky and beneath the earth . . .” Her voice was barely a whisper. She shuddered now with each lash of lightning, each answering bellow from the mountains. Her eyes blinked, sought the small form at her feet. “Best not to loiter here with an old woman . . . If the Power should break through . . . here will it strike the first and deepest. Go home now and give my love to—” Her voice stilled with a cough of surprise. “Ander—where is Berry?”

“Berry?” He thought of home, the small sleeping loft. “I left her asleep—”

“*Not* home! Where is she, child? Find her—now!”

“I can’t!” He looked around in confusion, heart pounding. “It’s too dark . . .”

“Not with your eyes!” The old voice gained strength,



lashed at him with the force of a command. "Search with your mind—use your Gift, quickly!"

"But—"

"I have no strength to spare. Use it!"

He closed his eyes, feeling naked under the flash and beat of the storm, willing himself to a calmness that would not come, pooling his strength and sending it out into the maelstrom of terrified life that cowered under the night's rage . . .

"There!" His head had begun to pound with strain when it finally touched the familiar spark of life that was his sister.

"You have found her? Where is she?"

"Third meadow . . . walking . . . no, running . . . heading up." His eyes blinked open, squinted in the brilliance of a burst of skyfire. "I think—I think she must be trying to get to the Ninth Meadow—to the Gate."

"You must go after her—at once! I can only hold the storm back a little ways beyond the village. Soon she will be past my protection completely—go now, and pray it is not too late!"

The winds grew in fury as he retreated from the small figure hunched over the shield stone and each lash of lightning seemed to fall at his side. He struggled down the gentle slope, then up along the faint path to the meadowlands, eyes half shut in the driving rain, tripping and stumbling with every other step, his mind fixed on the tiny spot of life ahead.

After what seemed like the endless hours of a nightmare he glimpsed the small figure in the white sleepdress. Berry moved purposefully through the howling darkness, black hair streaming out behind her in the wind.

When he touched her the dark eyes opened unseeing, dull with confusion. She slumped against a bush, thorns snagging her thin dress, and tugged feebly at his hand upon her arm.

"Mother's calling . . . have to go . . ."

"Berry, we've got to go back—please! You've got to come with me . . ." His voice broke and he pulled her to her feet.

"Mother?" She looked at his face in the rain and smiled tremulously, twining her fingers behind his neck as he struggled to raise the small body. He lurched off down the path.

## VII

The room was dim, heavy curtains drawn across a single low window.

"They knew all along." Ander leaned forward on the black stone bench, his eyes on the low bed piled high with blankets. "They knew all along that you were different—that your spells had the power to oppose theirs—so they sent you here on purpose, to—"

"To fulfill the ancient pact and protect the village," the witch finished in a drowsy whisper. "To repay our debt and keep this one place Unturned amidst the Turning . . ."

"And you knew about my Gift," he continued more softly. "I tried to tell Raven once but she said I was dreaming. Yet you knew . . ."

"I am quite a different fish from my sisters, as the looking glass too eagerly confirms." Old Toad watched him from beneath drooping eyelids. "So perhaps my mind runs a different course and looks first for the Power's presence—stopping to examine the direction of its flow or the vessel it inhabits only afterward. The sisterhood has always believed the Power reserved for females alone—though events of the past few years have done much to prove otherwise. Do not blame Raven that she could not see what years of belief had taught her could not be there . . ."

"I wonder how many of the witches are still alive?" Bereth's voice came from the cushioned pallet laid on the floor next to Old Toad's bed.

“It was a fierce drain of the Power.” The witch’s voice was grave.

“Is it night come at last for the Old Race then, Old Toad?”

“Too early to say.” The shrug seemed to cause her pain, and both Ander and Bereth huddled closer, the latter stretching thin arms to comfort the old witch. “But look how deceptive appearances can be—look at you two, my Master Searcher and my Mistress of the Unending Question.” A smile creased the tired face. “I would have thought you summer’s-last, but perhaps you’re first-of-spring, after all.”

Bereth laughed, a joyful sound in the dim room. “I hope we don’t make you sneeze.” She looked at the drained features, the limp arms lying atop the thick blankets. “Oh, Old Toad, get better—get better fast! We need you to help us become what we’re supposed to be . . .”

Ander knelt by the side of the bed, a gathering tightness in his throat. “Yes, please,” he said to the seamed face. “Please—” He stopped, unable to say the shameful name, though he knew it could cause no hurt coming from himself or Bereth.

“Well, I shall try, anyways—and that’s half the battle and more right there, eh?” The old witch struggled to raise her head from the bed, pierced Ander with a shadow of her old look of command. “Old Toad is a good enough name for most of the good folk of Mountain Gate to know me by. Nothing shameful in it—I read the ‘Tale of the Mountain Boy,’ too. The Old Toad did wonderful things . . . But here, no tears on a bright new morning such as this. Listen to me now, Ander, Bereth, my dear friends. I have something for you: I want you to keep it safe for me.”

And then, holding both their hands, she gave them her true name.