

SEA-SERPENTS OF DOMNUDALE

by

Ginger Simpson Curry

In the month of the Ice Dragon in the year of the Yellow Dwarf, Zvetta was driven to consult the wise woman, Elsgeth. The hut was dark, unlit save for a roaring fire to ease winter chill. Flame shadows lunged along the walls like wild beasts.

Zvetta chafed her bracelet against her arm, nervously awaiting the farseeing. Pushing reddish hair back from a delicate oval face, she peered intently at the wise woman. Elsgeth stared, as one mesmerized, into a cup she held, shaped like two hands pushed together. For this five-night space, Zvetta had slept only a snatch or two. And the stench and heaviness of an evil presence filled those intervals. What danger lay ahead for her and her lord, Maurs?

Though Zvetta possessed traces of Power from long ago kinblood, she had no formal training, and her efforts to farsee had failed.

Thus, this scry by the ageless, dark-haired witch sitting opposite the young woman, gazing into red-brown cup water, was her one chance to discover what Dark thing consumed her sleep.

Wise woman Elsgeth mumbled words Zvetta did not understand and formed runes in the air that glowed bright green before fading away. Ancient lips chanted: "As it was once long ago, so shall it be again. Twins will be birthed,

one from the Dark, one from Witch and Noble. The Twin of Dark shall trick the Dales: Ithdale, Ulmsdale, Upsdale—all of them—into uniting under his warrior leadership. Then will he show his true Evil and reach out mighty fists to conquer lands far and wide. Those who will not bend knees to the Dark One, those will he slaughter until the Seas of High Hallack froth with blood.”

Cringing, Zvetta lowered her head until her eyes fell upon the talisman wristlet. Crafted into a wheel with sea-serpent enclosed, green stone wound thrice about her left wrist. It was handed down by her lord’s family. He had given it to Zvetta nearly a year ago for their one-year wedding day.

Slipping it on her arm, he had murmured, ducking his head, “The sea-green of Domnu is that of your eyes. Craftsmen could not a better match make. You belong together.”

The bracelet fascinated Zvetta, linking her to the ocean for which she felt such a kinship that she wondered if she could once have been a sea creature.

Now dazed with terror, Zvetta bowed her head lower, the droning words of Elsgeth battering her like poison rocks.

“Twin of Witch and Noble shall try to slay the first great overlord of High Hallack.” Elsgeth’s pitying gaze rested upon Zvetta’s face. “But, my lady, the Dark Twin will win out.”

“I be not witch! Why say you?”

Elsgeth’s gaze shifted to the flames. “I know no more than what I see, my lady.”

“Elsgeth—if it be me—what must I do? What does it mean?” Nearly in tears, she shoved the bracelet up and down her arm.

Raising her eyes, Elsgeth sighed. “I know not, my lady. I be but a vessel through which a byway appears.”

As the wise woman held the flap to let Zvetta from the hut, she put a scrawny hand on the slim shoulder, halting Zvetta for a moment. “Know you that the future be much

pathed. You might change the scry—if you choose a steeper trail.”

Then there was hope! Zvetta’s boots crunched through the icy snow as she made her way back to Domnukeep. Eerie ice shapes hung in snow-shrouded trees like lurking birds of prey. Insisting to herself that she would not let this evil happen, Zvetta hurried into the keep, for once anxious to shut away the forces of nature.

Much later that evening, speaking with Maurs in their bedding room, Zvetta scraped sea-serpent bracelet against itching skin.

Tall, impatient, with jutting chin and blazing blue eyes, Lord Maurs was much the elder of the pair. On one of many forays into the Waste, he had overnighted at Zvetta’s father’s keep. Taken straightaway with the patient, loyal girl of slight form forever smoothing whorled reddish-brown hair, he had lost no time in asking for her hand.

Zvetta knew that her cheerful steadfastness drew this impulsive warrior to her. She knew also his fanatical hatred of magic—good or evil. Many paths had he forged into the Waste trying to disprove magic. Her heart was heavy this night, for she feared for his safety. Telling him about the prophecy would impel him to the Waste again. Items discarded by Old Ones upon leaving this land—ages before Domnu kindred passed through the Gate—held Powers that could destroy.

A frown creasing brown skin between thick wings of eyebrows, Lord Maurs squeezed Zvetta’s shoulder. His attention suddenly attracted to red welts spiraling her left arm, his eyes widened in concern.

“My lady, what makes you fret so? And look at Domnu!”

The enclosed sea-serpent’s red eyes gleamed like hot coals. Its green body pulsed with a glow that reminded Zvetta of shining sea life swimming like fallen stars in a night sea.

She let Maurs slide the bracelet off and examine it, his rough fingers exploring slowly each circlet. Though habitu-

ated to it, she still puzzled over the sheep's head topping the graceful body. What did it mean to the Old Ones? For surely one of those magical beings had once worn it. Where in the Waste had the long-ago father-kin found it? There were strange tales that these things attracted only those kindred whom they wished to wear them!

"Hah!" said Maurs, turning to Zvetta and waving something dark. "See you, my lady, this tiny black nugget became wedged between the bands." He tossed the stone aside and set the now-dull wristlet upon the bed table. "Methinks you should not wear it until your arm heals."

Zvetta had worn the wristlet continuously for a year and felt uneasy without it. She regretted she and Maurs could not discuss the wise woman's words.

Maurs led her to the bed where he stroked healing salve onto the injury. Under his soothing touch she felt her troubles slide away. That evening their lovemaking was more gentle, more prolonged, more satisfying than ever before. Zvetta thought, *From this night of shared ecstasy surely will a babe be started!*

Afterward, though, she became apprehensive again and yearned for her circlet. A fitful sleep finally claimed her.

Upon feeling Maurs's hands heavy against her, caressing sensitive places with a deft knowledge she had not known he possessed, she bethought herself still asleep. He aroused her to a delirious state. "Must . . . Must have you!" she uttered through clenched teeth, throwing herself from side to side, unfocused eyes covering the room.

When she abruptly twisted left, the sea-serpent pulsed, beaming a green radiance, as if trying to warn her.

Averting her head, she gazed into eyes as bright and red as flame. She screamed, flailing desperately to remove the heavy body; the body that was Maurs, and yet as he pinned her arms down and laughed wildly, she saw it could not be. A stench so awful she needs must retch enveloped her, making her dizzy.

From somewhere deep within her mind ancient knowledge flowed. She shrieked, "Domnu, come to me!"

At once the sea-serpent bracelet sailed through the air and dropped onto her hand where it wriggled back up her arm. Jabbing Domnu against the evil face with its fanged teeth and red eyes, Zvetta watched Power fade from the form atop her, sagging, folding in upon itself until all was gone—save a black nugget.

Following that same mysterious inner sense, she thrust sheep's head against nugget, commanding, "Domnu, kill the loathsome one."

Before her amazed eyes, the rock crumbled into dust and the dust disappeared. Her thoughts then were only of her lord. Where was he? She roused all of Domnudale. But though they searched throughout the long night and for days afterward, never again was the man Maurs seen.

Her lord's man-at-arms, Donas, remained at her side during the following months, lessoning her in duties she took on during this transitional period between Maurs's disappearance and the rule of the child she now bore. The sea-serpent bracelet she locked away, for each time her glance fell on it she thought of Maurs and cried anew.

She trudged again to the wise woman, asking from whence had come the dark nugget that changed Maurs into an evil one. Elsgeth said, "My lady, Lord Maurs brought it unknowingly from the Waste. The reason, I know not. Even as I know not why, years ago, geas commanded me to serve Domnukeep."

Many times during the following seasons, Zvetta wondered if Domnudale was cursed. She knew it was the closest Dale-holding to the sea. It was said that the founder fancied this stretch of deep, salty water, but disliked the fishing life. Accordingly, he had settled several stones' throw away. Perhaps the green sea-serpent wristlet he brought out of the Waste added wood to his fire. At any rate, so taken with the talisman was he that he named all his holdings after this marine creature called Domnu.

So fertile were his lands and so wool-laden were his sheep that some Dale lords muttered that he must use magic. Dale children taunted young Maurs with this con-

clusion. As he grew into manhood, the lad's uncertain denials hardened into obsession. He would prove Old Ones' artifacts held no mystical life force.

To flout evil, it is said, be a much dangered path. Zvetta had often wondered why the wise woman remained when most people shunned her. She caught her breath. Had the witch stayed all these many years to bring Zvetta the prophecy? Was it possible for both unions to take hold: that of Maurs and the Evil One? The Evil One *had* destroyed her husband, that she now believed.

Sometime before the seventh month, vigorous, spaced kicking of miniature feet within her womb convinced her that she carried not one tiny body, but two. She recalled the farseeing. "Twin of Witch and Noble shall try to kill the first great overlord of High Hallack. But the Dark Twin will win out."

She stroked her swollen, shifting stomach praying neither baby was evil. Incomprehensible dread sent tremors through her.

Before the births she again sought out Elsgeth. This time a film obscured the wise woman's vision. Naught could she see.

On the seventh night of her seventh month a geas was put upon Zvetta. The dream was so clear that she screamed into wakefulness. She had been by the sea, in a stone cave hollowed out long ago when tides pushed farther inland against the beach. Her babes were born, each in a separate sac. As she scraped her belt-knife across the umbilical cords, she heard as plainly as if Gunnora, Goddess of Harvest and Protector of Children, stood beside her, "Ye must place steel in the heart of the evil babe. Only this can prevent the prophecy."

Shivering, Zvetta burrowed into the bank of covers. It was contrary to her nature to harm the slightest living thing. Even the winged ones of the flowers seemed to know this. When she tended the small garden behind the stone-walled keep, fuzzy butterflies perched on her shoulder, peering at her as if believing she must converse with them!

She moaned, then chided herself. She needs must be strong for her beloved Domnukeep and for the surviving infant.

Whether by geas or will, in the intervening days she hardened her heart against the pain that waited to rend it like a sword rends flesh.

She bid Donas teach her to wield Maurs's sword. With metal mail secured over leather jerkin, she practiced several hours daily. If the keep was invaded, she could help defend it, and the exercise enabled her to sleep the night through again.

Many times in the succeeding months she relived tender moments with Maurs in her dreams. Once they cantered ponies to the ocean mouth where they lay together under a canopy of golden leaves, watching waves break upon the sand. Another time Maurs took her hand and led her to the underground keep exit. With loving concern, he said, "Should war break out and the keep be assaulted, you must not look for me. You must flee to safety through this secret opening."

Smiling, she thought, *Never would I leave you, my love*, even as wakefulness and its returning emptiness split her heart with the physical impact of an arrow.

Before she was mentally prepared, her labor began. That night in bed her back had pained her so that she could not sleep. Her thoughts circled to Maurs. Was he dead? Had that awful Dark One swallowed him up, and had she ordered the sea-serpent to kill what had once been her lord Maurs? Without conscious thought she took Domnu from its hiding place and inserted her hand into the bracelet. The sea-serpent felt warm and soft and vibrant against her skin. Did she imagine it or did it possess a slight glow?

The first pain struck her. Shuddering at what she must do after the births, she prepared a journey pouch.

She stole out through the secret underground tunnel. In a trancelike state, she made her way down to the sea, pausing only when the pains were too strong for her to remain upright. It was as if, like a migrating winter bird, she followed some clear track laid deep into her mind. Finally she

heard ocean waves crashing onto shore and knew she was almost there. Advancing around a bend, she saw the dream cave.

When the babes streamed from her, she cut and tied the cords. After cleaning herself and the twin boys, she swaddled them in warm clothes. Then, her mind still clouded, she prepared to carry out the geas.

She lay the knife betwixt the infants, studying each in turn. From some well of inner knowledge issued names. "I name you Quirinus," she crooned to the first-born while stroking his red hair. "And you shall go by the name of Remus," she told the second who had more pinkish skin and blond, almost white, hair.

Grasping the knife, she raised it aloft. She needs must cut cleanly into the heart, causing as little pain as possible. Groaning, she hesitated, regarding first one tiny form, then the other. Light from an unknown source illuminated the two figures so she could see clearly. But which was the evil babe?

Indecision burned away the insidious mind-fog. She dropped the knife. Placing an infant in the crook of each arm, she frantically tried to sense its intent—as she did with winged ones. She perceived no evil. Instead, a deepening love flowed from her to each sleeping son. Whimpering, she wondered wildly if the geas meant her to kill both boys?

No. . . !" she screamed, her heart leaping in her chest like a wild animal fighting to be freed. "That I will not do! My lord's babe will live. That much of him I must save."

Suddenly, an increasing warmth upon her wrist drew her eyes to the talisman. The light shone from Domnu! The green sea-serpent shimmered ever brighter as if an energy deep within its body was strengthening. From a volition not her own, her arm raised and pointed toward the sea. Was the bracelet telling her the water would decide which babe was to live?

Awakening, the newborns squalled as she shuffled into the ocean to knee depth. The Domnu circlet blazed now.

She stood there a long while, salt spray dampening her weary, sweat-drenched body, searching first the faces of her sons and next the sea, awaiting a sign.

A dark form separated from distant waves. As it neared, Zvetta saw a serpentine neck arch from the breakers. She cried out. The thing halted a tall tree's length away, giving her time to study it.

The green serpent was almost two man-sizes tall. Never had she viewed such a gigantic living creature. She would have fled save that her body was frozen with fear. She must move! She must run and protect her infants from this monster.

Great waves of compassion surged from the giant to her. The emotion tingled into and out of Zvetta from head to toe, calming her. The babies stared with weak eyes at the green beast slithering toward them once more.

As if greeting a friend, Zvetta sent forth a return message of warmth. When the mammoth sheep's head sank slowly to barely rest upon her shoulder, she became even more soothed, thinking she recognized it. From ocean depths had risen Domnu, living sea creature in whose likeness an Old One had fashioned her circlet. Or was this sea-serpent an Old One himself? One who had claimed the sea as his kingdom?

She knew not which was true. She knew only that no harm would befall them from this one. Woman and serpent joined gazes. Raising first one elbow with baby snuggled within, then the other, she pleaded, "Old One, tell me which is of the Dark and which is of my lord Maurs."

Zvetta noted then that Domnu's eyes were not red as in the bracelet, but the clear blue of rain-washed sky. The Old One ducked its head, but not before she saw tears roll from the orbs.

Its gaze shifted swiftly over the newborns. Then the great head snapped back up level to Zvetta's and words entered her mind as clearly as if the serpent had spoken them.

"The time is not yet, my lady. Come you hence with the

lads, in the year of Moss Wife, in the time of Chrysalis, on the seventh day."

Gliding backward slowly, as if reluctantly, the soft green body plunged into the sea and disappeared.

How Zvetta made her way with the twins back to Domnueep she could not afterward remember. For a ten-day spell thereafter, she drifted into and out of fever. Pressing in upon her during lucid hours was the growing power of the geas. One evening she awoke to find herself before the cradle of her first-born, Quirinus, holding a knife to his pumping chest. For a moment she hesitated, the strength of the geas making murder appear the right path.

Domnu's words blazed into her mind with the force of a comet streaking through the black sky. "The time is not yet, my lady." Moss Wife was ten years hence! Never could she fight the geas' urging for all that time!

Biting her lip, she chose her future. At nooning tomorrow she would send Donas with the twins to her father's keep at Tyrnsdale, a five-day journey by pony. There would Donas train both boys as lord-heirs to Domnudale.

Creeping back to bed, she told herself that exile was the only way to keep her babies safe. Surely time would distance her feelings so when next they met she could perceive which was evil.

After Zvetta banished her sons, the geas weakened, but her disobedience brought punishment. No longer was her mind "yoked" to the garden creatures. Finally, the winged ones abandoned the flowers which died. And at long last, she could no longer bear to stroll among their skeletal remains.

She turned more and more to stroking the sea-serpent perpetually encircling her left wrist, finding solace in stories she imagined about it.

Domnu had brought fertility to her lord's house in years past. Always were there lord-heirs to rule Domnudale. And surely the sheep's head meant that the serpent was

kind. She had not imagined the compassion radiating from it, had she?

Geas weakened, Zvetta still knew no peace. Constantly did she worry that the Dark Power grew as each year passed. Had she killed both Quirinus and Remus at birth, she would now have no such fear. Still, even today she could not do the terrible blood letting.

While Zvetta ruled Domnudale wisely, if not happily, another creature worried with her. After Zvetta had left with the twins, the transformed Maurs rose from the sea, gazing longingly at the birthing cave. In a short time his neck gills struggled for the life force of water. Lonely beyond measure, he ached to join his wife. Fleeting, he thought about racing up the sandy beach until he collapsed to wait for death.

Had he slain the twin boys, he would be at her side, free, as was his right. What had stopped him? Had his new sharper senses felt his lady's love for the infants? Without her love and faith in him he did not want his man's body back. He shuddered. A few months ago he would not have acknowledged such intense feelings.

He was no longer the man she loved, in body or mind. Sometimes he seemed so in tune with all living beings that his head ached from the weight. *Would* Zvetta still want him—if and when he returned?

Yet, if he were so lonely why had he not let her know who he truly was? His head drooped. No! Better she thought him dead than see him cursed to this body, perhaps for life. But if it be for life, why had he told her to return in the year of Moss Wife? He shook his head, not understanding from what well-spring of knowledge had spilled those words. An inner sense had convinced him that in ten-year-old boys the developing evil would show but perchance be less strong than at manhood.

Descending, the sea-serpent swam dejectedly back to the cooler, deeper water of his ocean home, remembering all the while the trauma of gaining consciousness in the strange body.

By his reckoning, it had only been four and one half months ago, but by the births he realized time was halved in this dimension. At any rate, he had been hurled into an abyss of reality beyond his ken that morning the Dark coupled with his wife. He recalled nothing after his struggle with the Abomination until awaking on the ocean floor—breathing!

By the Flame, he should be dead, for the water surface was many man-heights above him. He felt smothered, as though entombed. An overwhelming desire to shake free this skin and go to land consumed him. Thrashing about wildly for several moments fighting thought-demons, he stirred up sand until he could no longer see the world that was now his.

Maurs willed his body to calmness, trying to think logically—as he had always done in the past. He swam into water more shallow and clear where he curled his body and studied it. The sight of his slippery green form made him groan with despair. The bleating sound issuing forth and bubbling away in all directions brought such a coldness to his body as he had once felt when buried in a snowbank.

What manner of head was attached to this eel-like body? He extended his neck and looked down upon his reflection. Blue eyes glared from a sheep's head!

By the time he returned to the ocean bed, he thought he had pierced the heart of the mystery. Could the Waste nugget have contained the evil fiend that had tried to kill him?

Why did it fail? He recalled a scene. A green brilliance rose from the Domnu bracelet and lashed at the black. Yes! It had surrounded them! The talisman had somehow warded off the death blow, reducing its effect so the worst the Evil One could do was to transform him into the image of Domnu! Thus, into his field of horror was sown a seed of hope. Undefeated was he yet. He would make do with what he had: take command as a lord should.

Abruptly he comprehended that in attempting to disprove magic, he had validated it! He wanted to dispute this, but logic . . . He would have laughed aloud had he

the larynx to do so. He roared mentally at the joke he had played on himself. Logic—what was logical about a man being turned into a fabled sea-serpent?

Beginning to adjust to his strange shape, he surveyed the sea life about him, curious. Contrasting the dazzling whiteness of the sandy bottom was a multitude of marine animals, garbed in rainbow colors. Huge sea fans—pink, yellow, and purple—swayed lazily to the current. Giant staghorn and elkhorn coral stretched their antlers upward, as if trying to prick the sun.

Never had he seen a more brilliant, more spectacular region. Truly was this a realm fit for the mightiest ruler. Perhaps the ocean reef had once known such a leader—in Domnu, the true possessor of this body. By the Flame, it was as if an entire world had been isolated from man to await in a timeless continuum a divine overlord.

Blue eyes continued to roam the reef. Peeping from coral crevices were tiny blue fish, pen-shaped bodies glowing. Pausing before their homes, he was astonished when they launched themselves at him. A moment later, his skin prickled where they extracted and then ate minute blood-suckers. Their activity relieved a vague itch. He remained there a long time, stretching and shivering, enjoying this new and pleasurable state.

Luxuriating in the sensuous “harvesting” of his derma, he was completely relaxed when the attack came. His skin suddenly felt afire, as if leeches had dropped onto him, sucking his blood.

Flailing about, he tried first one tactic then another trying to shake off the increasing pressure of the suckers. Even though his tail whipped back and forth, they clung fast. In fact, the suction intensified.

He flung his woolly head about to bite off the pests and was appalled to find himself staring into the bulbous eyes of a Decca. Rumors there were of such beasts, but he had doubted these, just as he had doubted magic.

Momentarily stunned, he felt the inexorable pull of those ten spongy arms, tugging him closer to its yawning cavity.

If the myths were true, a Decca could use its arm tips in many ways, one being to inject paralyzing poison into an enemy, another being to introduce a substance to liquify his insides so the toothless monster could ingest him.

At that instant, the creature sprayed red poison onto Maurs's neck. Stinging, he screamed mentally, "By Gunnora, I won't give up yet! Maurs will not be defeated—even by such an animal as this." Dumbfounded, he felt the beast's grip slacken.

Then the Decca did an amazing thing. Its deep red color changed with lightning speed to milk-white. Still holding Maurs, but looser, it brought the sheep's head up to confront two bulging eyes. A puzzled voice entered Maurs's head. "*Maurs? A thinking creature be you? What manner of life? Quick with your answer, for I be hungry.*"

Maurs was so relieved it took him a moment to form a response. This was the first intelligent being he had encountered. Were there more? "*I be a man, a lord ensorcelled into the body of a . . . a sea-serpent.*"

Releasing all save one tentacle, the Decca drew Maurs closer. "*By the Lady Who Swims the Shallows! Speak you the truth!*" After spreading a soothing substance onto Maurs's neck, the Decca jetted a short distance away.

Maurs swam after it. "*Please don't go! We be two intelligent creatures—let us be friends.*"

"*No!*" came the retort. "*I care not for the Dark. Go you from my lair.*"

When Maurs tried to explain, the creature shot a green stream at him and vanished into the spreading murkiness. The sea-serpent headed in the opposite direction, sick at heart he could not form an alliance with the magnificent animal. On land he had had much success as a leader, but here it seemed he needed more persistence.

Time passed faster for Maurs than for Zvetta, the ten years Zvetta endured being akin to five ocean-dweller years. It was as if when the Dark Force transformed Maurs, it did so by sending him through one of the many Gates into a region where things differed from the norm.

Maurs used these years as wisely as he could, becoming almost as adept at dealing with undersea inhabitants, including Deccas, as he had been with the Dalesmen. His main regret was not accompanying more with Zvetta, not being more open with her.

As the years mounted toward the coming battle with the Evil One, his anger at the force riving him from his family increased. He who had so long scorned magic took to practicing the nuances of the mind, determined that when the moment arrived, he would prove which son was not of his loins.

Zvetta, on the other hand, turned away from mind-sensing, fully aware that sending away her sons and flouting the geas had caused that talent to be stripped from her.

Instead, she devoted herself to the physical body and to the conscious mind, attempting to gain the Dalesmen's respect so when the twins came of age she could turn control over to one of them. Deeply lonely, she went often to the seashore hoping to see Domnu with whom she felt, strangely, a wholeness. Though she saw him not, the habitual act became a small pleasure in her life.

On the seventh day in the month of the Chrysalis in the year of the Moss Wife, a small boat occupied by a tall woman and her twins put into the ocean near Domnudale. Thin, face creased in worry lines, the woman scanned the rolling waters anxiously. Even in this calamitous time she breathed deeply of sea spray, savoring its tanginess.

Rowing swiftly, the redhead broke silence. "Mother, can you now tell us why you have brought us hence?"

His high-pitched voice reminded Zvetta that these two were mere lads, just ten years of age. Yet, before the moon had stolen the day, one would die.

She caressed the green wristlet glowing on her left arm. "O, Gunnora, Guardian of Children, please help me to make the right choice. Don't let me spill the blood . . ."

The blond-haired Remus cut into her entreaty. "Mother! Will you answer us?"

She shaded her eyes with her hand, saying only, "Look yonder, Quirinus and Remus, see you a sign of the green sea-serpent?" She yearned to take them into her arms, as she had done before exiling them ten years before, to give such comfort as she could for the coming trial-by-water. But she dared not, for the geas had begun increasing its pressure the day the twins arrived home. She smoothed her red-brown hair back from her face, sighing.

Without warning the green form announced itself, rearing up under the boat, capsizing them. Zvetta felt herself being pulled deeper and deeper and she struck out blindly at the force holding her. Instinctively she held her breath while, with the keen appraisal of a ruling lady suddenly in battle, she swiftly judged the situation. A gigantic, many-armed creature was carrying her under the sea toward a circular rock wall. Quirinus and Remus were pounding after her, knives gripped between teeth, arms and legs slicing the water.

The twins were gaining on them, a thing that surprised Zvetta, for the colossus holding her seemed much more powerful and swifter than the lads. Her lungs aching, she exhaled slightly, desperately aware that before the boys reached her she needs must attempt to breathe—and in so doing must surely drown.

Behind the wall, the Decca yanked her close to its bulging eyes, staring into hers intently. Whatever message it intended to impart was done at an unconscious level, for Zvetta found herself clutching the rock wall with one hand while raising the Domnu bracelet to her face. Pulsing green light haloed out until it covered the entire circle of the Decca lair, nine to ten man-heights across. The light seemed to seep into Zvetta's body, and she abruptly realized she no longer needed to breathe.

Quirinus reached her first, his face contorted with his lungs' demand for air. Jerking him within the safe circle, she waited to see what Remus would do.

Her blond-haired second-born treaded water outside the enclosure, eyes narrowed as he studied them.

He was not straining for breath!

Remus was the son of the Dark! No sooner had she thought this than she saw that he had gleaned the realization from her mind. He grinned, a malevolent twisting of the lips, and thought-spoke: "*Farewell, dear mother! Too late have you discovered me.*"

Dismayed, *Zvetta* watched him kick off from the wall and stroke away. His progress was halted when, from nowhere it seemed, the sea-serpent descended and wound its tail around the slight form, dragging *Remus* back within the compound. There they continued struggling until *Remus*, finding his immature magic no match against all of them, cried out, "O Dark One who created me, descend and slay these paltry beings." He added a few unintelligible words, forming signs with his hands.

A black entity spiraled to the sea bottom, swirling like a tornado as it surrounded the circular wall and drew close to its antagonists.

Facing the sea-serpent, *Zvetta* held the *Domnu* bracelet to its face. "Domnu, if you be an Old One, use your Powers now to end this evil that would kill its brother and bring Darkness to all the Dales."

Maurs felt a stirring within him, not his natural anger toward the Abomination, but an age-old hatred. This strengthened so quickly he at once recognized two things: There had always been another *mind* residing in this body with him, and if the two united, never could they separate—he must remain a sea-serpent forever. He despaired of ever again strolling the Dales with *Zvetta*.

Still, what else to do? Above all he must not let the prophecy be fulfilled.

Whilst *Maurs* turned his wits to the Dark substance tightening into a collar about his neck, strangling him, *Remus* took advantage of the slight wavering in *Decca's* attention. The lad plunged his knife between those protruding eyes. As blood frothed the water around them, the blond boy shook his fist in triumph. Declaring *Maurs* the next to die

from his blade, he pumped his legs furiously, propelling himself toward the loathed sea-serpent.

Without conscious thought, Zvetta flung one arm about her son. Before Remus could shake free, she sliced her blade across his throat. Sobbing, she pulled her gaze back to the battle raging just inside the wall. She saw Quirinus swim toward the struggling forms.

Catching up, she embraced him and shook her head. There was little that mere human could do against this powerful smoky one. Though he resisted, Zvetta dragged Quirinus away from the closing collar.

The black substance oozed about the sea-serpent, wrapping his body as tightly as a cocoon. Gills closed off, Maurs could not breathe. He felt the anger that had been building all these years blast forth in a rage so explosive it seemed he must burst from it.

The Domnu intellect probed his mind. Maurs welcomed it wholeheartedly. Inhaling ancient knowledge, he fused the two halves of mind into one whole. He saw then, as if from a series of drawings, that this cursed being had long been an enemy of the true Domnu. And that Domnu had long sought a vessel such as the disbelieving Maurs to draw the malevolence into the sea-serpent's domain. Bafel was its name.

Shoving mightily, Maurs/Domnu whipped his tail about and infused a greenish material into the black ooze. Feeling the crush on his body slackening, he shot more and more of the green poison into the black pool.

Bafel flowed back, attempting to funnel his mass toward the surface. Maurs/Domnu yelled mentally, "*Bafel! I scour my seas of you!*" More and more of the substance poured from him. The green liquid continued to infiltrate the black slime, diffusing and weakening each black molecule until it was totally dissolved.

His strength depleted, Maurs/Domnu lay his sheep's head once again on Zvetta's shoulder, drawing what comfort he could from her closeness. Soon she would be lost to

him forever. *"My lady, you can safely return to Domnukeep and raise Quirinus to rule well."*

The geas having been finally followed, Zvetta could again sense the emotion in this strange beast. For some reason, she was caught up in its torment. *"My lord Domnu, why be you so sad?"* She tried to mind-speak what tugged at her. *"Why care you so for . . . for me?"*

She stared into the blue eyes without fear, indeed with all the love she had once felt for Maurs. Greatly confused by this, she pivoted to get Quirinus and ascend to the surface. Domnu stopped her with his next message.

"Know you not me, my lady?"

Zvetta trembled, swirling about. *"My lord Maurs? You are alive, truly alive?"*

"Alive, yes. But never can I return to what I was before."

Clutching the bracelet to her breast, Zvetta commanded, *"O Domnu, do with me what the Evil One did to my lord—so that I may again reign at his side!"*

And the Dalesmen still speak of the day two sea-serpents escorted Lord Quirinus from the sea.

Afterword

When Andre Norton asked me at a fantasy con called NECRONOMICON to write a story set in Witch World, I tasked my "incubator" to cook up a fitting idea. Even so, exactly how Sea-Serpents of Domnudale arose is a mystery. All I know is my thoughts tugged me to that moody domain of the Old Ones, the Waste.

Another alluring place, symbolically representing intuitive wisdom and struggles between life and death, the ocean, called to me. Soon, paddling uninvited into images of brine