

THE SENTINEL AT THE EDGE OF THE WORLD

by

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This story takes place in those uncertain centuries after the Old Race had fled the unleashed Powers of Escore, but before the coming of the Kolder, and naturally, in a time before Simon Tregarth arrived upon the Witch World, and begot the three children who were one.

Because of an acquired fondness for life, and the knowledge that one's enemies can strike from any direction, I sat in a dimly lit corner of the Bold Falcon with my back to the wall. The tavern, set near the foothills beneath the Eyrie of the Falconers, had a low-beamed ceiling supported by gray rock walls, which were sparsely decorated with old battle gear and supplied with only enough lamps to see halfway across its length. The Bold Falcon was a meeting place, as devoid of the Power as possible, and favored by blank shields looking for service.

Having just ended my employment with my former master, the usurper Duke of Karsten (I alone, of all my old lord's mercenaries, had refused to follow him into the hold of the Guardians, to face the futility of yet another loss), I was looking for a new cause and master to pledge my sword service to.

I am not a coward, nor am I afraid of death, but even one such as I must have a code to follow. Though I know not where I come from, for my memory of any time before my twelfth naming day is nonexistent, I know enough to prevent myself from raising battle sword against witch jewel.

But my former master, the Lord Burtak, is mind-driven to self-destruction. Thrice foiled by the present Duke Asfrid, Burtak has taken to private rages, and is determined to force (in some manner) the witches' Power to his.

With formal ceremony, Burtak had freed me of my sword oath and, after relinquishing my role, I clasped my former lord in a warrior's embrace to show that my past devotion was more than just bought by his coin. Shortly thereafter, I bid my regiment farewell, and left Burtak at the very gates of the Guardian's keep, and journeyed here, to seek new employment.

Lifting my tankard, I peered through the gloom-lit tavern. I thrust aside my memories until a later time when I could look back upon them with the reflected knowledge of right or wrong, and glanced about at my unnamed companions. It was a slow night in the Bold Falcon, with but a handful of blank shields looking for a new lord. Three tables from me sat a broad-bodied man, his intense features those of Gorm. A battler, thought I, one who could well defend a swordmate's back with utter confidence.

Two other blank shields sat halfway across the tavern room. Both had the dark, sleek features that bespoke the intermixing of the blood of the Old Race. Neither man looked right or left, but concentrated solely on their low-voiced conversation.

A few other nondescript people sat at isolated tables, drinking and eating as was their want. But in all, the Bold Falcon was quiet this night and prospect of employment low.

Shaking my head at my ill fortune, I drained my tankard and rapped its thick bottom on the table to signal my desire

for more. The tavernkeeper's daughter, a lass with long jet hair and wide of body but with an ever-ready smile to any who glanced in her direction, picked up the pitcher and started toward me.

No more than two steps had she taken when the door opened. The night chill whipped through the main room, causing eddies of dust to lift from the floor. A solitary person near the door glanced quickly up before losing interest.

The two mercenaries, so involved with their battle reminiscences, paused only long enough to dismiss the newcomer's dark cloak as not that of a nobleman's, but rather another blank shield. The Gorman to my left did not so dismiss the newcomer; rather, he peered with open interest.

And I, I froze. My inner senses, my special talent that has kept me alive in battle where no man should be able to survive, whispered to me that this person was no blank shield. My senses warned of a strange air about the newcomer—a mysterious aura not necessarily brought about by the featureless traveling mask or the dull black of his mail. No, it was something in his carriage, his stance, and in the proud cock of his head.

There was power too—I felt it deep within my bowels. A twisting, sickening sensation that always came forth in the presence of the Powres. Witch, I wondered. Yet, I felt no certainty of witchery about the man, and man I knew the person to be.

Old One? I asked myself. But no Old One, if such still survived, would walk into the company of mere humans. Who then? I let my senses range toward him until suddenly I felt them blocked. Instinctively, I drew back my small talent lest others be warned of this ability no man of Escarp should have.

The fleeting touch my senses permitted gave evidence that the one standing alone was no wielder of the Power as we know it; rather was he in control of other powers,

powers that came willingly from the earth instead of being taken from it by force.

As my thoughts raced, I watched the intruder close the tavern door and walk to the center of the tavern. He paused there, his gaze going to each person in turn. Though I could not see his eyes as they flicked by me, I felt the sharpness of an inner response, and knew well the man had marked me.

"I am in need of a blank shield," he said, his voice was low but carried well to all corners of the tavern.

I watched the two blank shields halt their intense conversation to look up at the dark speaker. "Only one?" asked the darker of the two.

"The right one will be sufficient," the stranger said, his voice as solid as a stately tree, his tone not as light as it sounded to untrained ears. "A hundred of the wrong ilk will fair no better." The black-cloaked recruiter looked about again. "Is there not one blank shield among you who is looking for adventure?"

When no one responded, he looked back at the pair of blank shields. "I seek more than a blank shield, I seek a hero."

"Then look you to another place, for here are but blank shields. We fight for coin, not to be remembered in song or legend, for neither fill our bellies or keep bodies warm at night," said the darker man.

"Does not one of you thirst for knowledge?" he challenged, his head turning toward me at last. "Is there no one who will risk all to gain all?"

His words tugged intriguingly in my mind. My senses came fully alert. Within me, at that place I call my inner self, an answer to his plea stirred. Yet never have I been the fool who jumps into the breach without knowledge.

"Risking all is a blank shield's lot. Receiving coin is expected. Gaining all is something not frequently sought. What is this *all*, to be gained by such a hero as you seek?" I

asked, my eyes locking with the two lively orbs revealed by the traveling mask.

“Perhaps coin enough to settle wherever you chose, perhaps more than you have ever dreamed, or perhaps nothing but the gaining of knowledge, which can be the most important part of adventure. Or perhaps,” he added, his voice lowering, “something more than you would want or choose.”

Rather than soothing my inner stirrings, his words served but to increase them. “You speak in riddles,” said the Gorman to my left, shaking his head in a gesture of refusal. “I hire out to he who talks clearly and seeks but my axe and my ability for its use.”

While the Gorman spoke, several others watching the scene nodded approvingly. Yet I could do naught but stare at the man as once again, his eyes met mine, and I felt the Power in the room grow. I looked quickly about, and saw that no other sensed the Power that might bespeak magic, or more.

When everyone turned from him, the black-cloaked man continued to hold my gaze. “Is it a bodyguard you seek?” I asked.

The speaker laughed. “Would that be all I sought, think you I would come here?”

I shrugged, for he spoke truth, the Bold Falcon was where one sought the best blank shields, not merely a bodyguard.

Black cloak drew himself up proudly, and as he began to speak, his eyes remained locked upon mine.

“I seek a brave man, a man who would serve a master well, and possibly through that service become master himself. Yet there is danger, a danger no man here has ever faced. If any of you would seek adventure or,” he said, his voice dropping so sharply that every man present leaned forward in an unconscious effort to hear him, “perhaps to learn a birth name never before spoken, I shall await you outside.”

My hand tightened on the handle of the tankard; my knuckles turned the pale color of death. His last words

chilled me deeply, for I of all men whom I know have never been granted the knowledge of my birth name.

Having said his piece, the strange recruiter started from the tavern. He paused at the door, his gloved hand resting on the carved pull, to glance over his shoulder to peer directly into my eyes. A sharp inner burning erupted within my head. It was not painful; rather, there was a releasing of some unknown bond, and a rush of images came forth.

I saw magnificent lands, jeweled brightly with soft vegetation. People tilled the field happily. It was a land at peace, a land that the people used with care and gentleness—it was a land I knew could not exist.

Suddenly I was witness to dazzling explosions of light and dark. Before my inner eye, the magnificent land was rent apart.

Staggered by the vision, for I have never before been granted such, I lurched to my feet and followed him from the tavern, knowing that I must find out what this vision was. I was certain that the stranger had somehow given the images to me. No, I realized clearly, he had not given them to me, but merely freed them from my own memory.

Once outside, in the cool night air, I found the man leaning against the hitch post, the ever-present low night mist swirling about his calves. The moon was full, its silver light lending glow enough to see clearly.

“What adventure is this that you seek a blank shield to act the part of a hero?” I asked in guarded voice.

“The one you have accepted, the one you were born to—perhaps,” he added, his eyes dancing merrily.

I laughed to cover my inner conflict. “I was born but to live and die. And I have yet to accept,” I reminded him.

“By your action, came your answer.”

“I have taken no action,” I stated.

“Then what do you here, rather than having your tankard refilled?”

Truth! Too late, I realized that he had set within me a

compulsion. Ensorcelment? Yet I voiced nothing of my doubts, for I needed to learn from whence came my vision.

“Like you, living from day to day? Like you, looking for a master to serve, and once well served, to seek again for another? Like you,” he went on, his eyes still aglow, “to watch others gain from your abilities, and receive but pittance for your loyalty?”

“I have chosen my life, and seek no further gain but to live honestly and serve the same.”

Suddenly the black-cloaked one removed the travel mask. His eyes, amber hues flecked with silver, were so unusual that I stared openly. His dark, finely honed features told me of the purity of his blood, only his eyes hinted of some possible intermixing that was not wholly of the Old Race. His oval face was handsome enough, if a shade too sleek and his chin a drop too pointed. A fine spun web of wrinkles etched the corners of his eyes and mouth. But other than for those lines, he might have been my own twenty and seven years.

“What would you have with me?”

“Your sword, your mind, and your ability to wield both.”

Again my inner senses flared. He asked for sword oath, while promising nothing that I could define, yet I could not dam up my curiosity. “You seek my oath without promise of pay?” I asked, smiling despite my innermost sensations.

When he spoke next, his voice took on a serious tone, and his eyes the same. “I promise nothing, but I offer much.”

“You offer only adventure.”

“The rewards for this adventure might be many, or few, but that would be your choice to make when the time is right.”

“You mentioned, in the tavern, the learning of a birth name,” I said, making it a casual statement more than question.

“So I did. But why should that interest you?”

"Would you have mentioned it if it would not?" I charged, tiring of his game.

"Is that the reward you would seek?" he returned in a low voice.

"Is such the reward you offer?" I countered.

"Perhaps that, perhaps more."

Shaking my head, I stared belligerently at him. "I have no lust to rule or dreams of riches, nor do I need to take lives to slake such desires."

The man quirked a solitary eyebrow. "Know you what you need? How can you presume to know what you need, or even want, when you know not yourself, but merely a shadow life."

"I know myself well enough," I defended.

He sighed softly, a sibilant issuance of breath that bespoke his knowledge of men. "Then you know too, that you have a need to learn more."

Trapped so easily by his smooth words, I tried to deny his truths. "I am a blank shield. A mercenary who goes to battle for a lord, nothing more, certainly I am no seeker of knowledge."

With my words, I saw a strange flickering about his face. "Do not play word games with me, when your professed abilities lay with sword. Be truthful to yourself, lest you begin to believe your lies. I am finished. Stay if you wish, come if you need."

"For how long will my service be required?" I asked.

"Until *you* withdraw your oath. Be that an hour, a day, a year, or," he said, his strange eyes shimmering as if I were seeing them through a veil of silvery mist, "forever."

Then he freed his mount and, as he guided his horse back a few steps, the low clinging night mist rose knee-high. Little spiraling jets of moisture ebbed and flowed around him.

For just a moment I stared at his horse, for it was unlike any I had ever seen before. It was larger than a mountain-bred horse, and broader of body, but smaller than a plains-

bred battle mount. Its powerfully muscled forelegs and tightly corded neck gave ample evidence of strength. Black it was, yet dappled with a silver-gray pattern that seemed to be the very color of the night mist itself. The horse's mane, pure silver-gray, was short and stood upright from saddle horn to a spot between two ears that were more pointed than on any breed I had known before.

A compulsion, not magic-born but self-created, bade me to action. Telling myself I was but committing the same folly for which I had left my lord Burtak, I drew my sword, reversed it in my palms, and held it hilt upward.

"I, Vadim, give my Oath of Sword and Shield, Blood and Bread, until such a time as my service is deemed completed," I said, speaking slowly and clearly the ritual of binding.

The man gazed deeply into my eyes. "I accept your oath, Vadim, on the terms I have already called for. The length of time to be decided by you. Mount," he added, "for we have a long journey ahead."

"Our destination?" I asked after settling myself in my saddle.

"The end of the world."

We traveled three days and nights, stopping only long enough to eat and relieve ourselves. With each pause for meal, Horvan, as I learned my new employer's name to be, gave me a potion to drink that banished tiredness and gave boundless energy.

Yet my inner senses told me that for all our haste, Horvan wanted more speed. I sensed that time was more important to him than he had led me to believe.

At the hour of midnight, of our third day of travel, we reached the mountains of Estcarp, which bordered I knew not where, for suddenly I realized that not I, nor any other to my knowledge, had ventured here before.

After we made camp in the foothills, and settled before a low fire, I turned to Horvan. "Do we battle in these mountains?" I inquired, looking over his shoulder to stare un-

easily at the ominous haze, lit by the moon, that clung to the mountains.

"Beyond," he said simply.

I knew my face reflected my innermost feelings of disbelief and confusion, for there was nothing beyond the mountains. Horvan merely smiled at my confusion. "Mind-blocked are all who live in the West. There are no memories of other things, but, Vadim, there is more!" Lifting his graceful hands, he moved his fingers in a strange pattern.

My inner self responded to his fingers, and a vision blossomed in my head. Again I saw the jeweled land, its cultivated fields stretching endlessly on. People happily worked the fields, and life appeared good and full.

When the vision faded, a thousand questions rose upward, but I did not ask a single one, for my Oath of Sword and Shield bound me effectively.

The next morning we entered terrain such as I had never before experienced. The sheer faces of the mountains, like exclamations of futility, jutted sharply skyward to warn all who came upon them that they had reached world's end. I saw too, as we scuttled over the stone pathways, that these mountains held no natural pattern; rather, it was as if the mountains had been placed with the purpose of confusion and blockade.

As we traveled deeper into the high stone mountains, the vegetation faded into a gray darkness. Yet ever was I aware that Horvan knew exactly which direction to take, while I was blind to all inner directions.

By noon, I could see nothing before me, but a wall of gray.

I closed my eyes against the sight, for if such was the end of the world, then surely I must soon plunge into the waiting void. But oath-sworn was I, and to the death would I follow my new master.

With every forward step of my mount, a deep chill entered my body. Yet I saw that the gray wall of nothingness was not solid, nor empty. The farther east we pushed, the farther east the gray wall moved.

While I tried to convince myself that it was but mind-block producing this impossible sight, suspicions of peril and doom waxed strongly within me. There was danger aplenty surrounding us. Fear erupted in putrefying waves that sought to paralyze me. My breathing was forced, my body riddled with pain. I had never felt its like, and, finally, I had no choice but to bite down upon my lip to produce something real to battle the torment of my mind.

With the sharp pain, and the taste of my own blood, came a momentary cessation of the fear. Mind-induced, I told myself. Not real. Yet what was and was not real, I no longer knew.

"These mountains are real!" I declared aloud.

"Good," Horvan stated as he signaled me to a stop. "Remember, Vadim, you are mind-blocked. That is the pain, that is the fear!"

In the gray air, gray ground, and gray light, I watched Horvan produce wood from somewhere and build a fire. Where the flames licked upward, the gray around the fire dissolved. I saw that the fire itself was built on grass.

Yet wherever the firelight did not reach, there was the overwhelming gray which brought out sensations of fear and pain.

"Sit, rest, for we are almost at the mountains' end."

I did as my new master bade, letting the fire's warmth help ease the chill set forth by the mind-block. A moment later, Horvan produced rations, and we ate and drank silently.

"What know you of the Old Ones?" he asked suddenly.

"All that I need," I responded too quickly. And, as his lively eyes fastened on mine, I took notice that his face seemed to have aged years during the short journey from the Bold Falcon. Of this I said nothing, for on our trip I had grown to respect this man.

"Tell me this *all*, about the Old Ones," he ordered, a faint glimmer of amusement sparkling in his eyes again.

I reached over the fire to warm my hands, for even this slight mention of the Old Ones brought a new chill to my

limbs. "They were the race before humans," I said slowly, repeating the tale that everyone knew. "They were mighty creatures, possessed of abilities that would make the witches' Powers seem but a babe's toy. They were evil, and warred among themselves until the very world was threatened with destruction."

"And then they fled—most of them—through their Gates into other dimensions or worlds, and left behind the ruined lands they had done battle upon," I said by rote.

"And even though they are long gone, you fear the Old Ones still?" Horvan asked, his voice low and reflective.

I glanced at him, his eyes fixed upon the fire, his lined, wrinkled face sad. "They have left things of Power, things of destruction behind."

"And think you that they were all bad?" Horvan asked.

Though this turn of conversation did not sit well with me, I was powerless to stop it. "All bad or not, what difference does it make to me?"

"Perhaps none, perhaps much."

"In what way?" I asked, puzzled by his comment.

Horvan dismissed my question with a shrug. "What do you feel, sitting here in this place? Speak truth!" he commanded.

I looked into his amber eyes that were no longer dancing merrily. "I speak only truth, or speak not. What I feel is fear. I fear this place, the mind-stink of it sours my every breath. I fear the next step I take, for I know that with such a step I shall fall into the void. My fear makes my bowels loose, and only my willpower keeps my hands from shaking."

"Yet you have not turned back," Horvan stated casually.

"I would plunge my dagger into my chest before willingly breaking my sword oath."

"What else do you know of the Old Ones?"

Again I thought back to the stories I had heard. "Most left the world through their Gates, but others stayed. They interbred with humans, and produced offspring that were neither as powerful as the Old Ones, nor as human as the

humans. Somehow they also produced other races, races that are to be feared."

"Not all," Horvan said. "Now it is time to listen to me, Vadim of the void. And, without any knowledge of your birth, it is truly a void you come from and live in. Listen well, Vadim, for by your sword oath sworn to me, I charge you with this act."

Staring into his eyes, I opened my mind. His words alone compelled me, but there was more, there was the Power, and I could not refuse that Power.

"Not all the Old Ones who chose to remain behind were bad. But of that you must learn yourself. And to learn, you must cross through the veil of gray mist, and enter the land of Escore."

"Escore?" I asked, tasting the name as if it were a sweet meat to be savored though I had never heard of this place before.

Horvan went on as if I had not spoken. "In Escore, you will follow the River Tele to the Place of Stones. I have left a raft for you, anchored in the water. Stay to the moving water, no matter what sights you see, no matter what life calls you to it. At the Place of Stones, you will set my body upon the center stone. You will leave my husk there, and follow the blue path to the Place of Healing.

"Sleep there you will, in a pit of red bubbling mud, and when you awaken, you will be given the wisdom to make the decision you must."

Horvan fell silent, and when I saw he had no more to speak, I drew in a deep, preparatory breath. "What decision have I to make, with my master dead and my oath ended?"

Horvan smiled. There was no guile, no deceit, to the quirking of his lips. "A simple decision. Whether you shall prepare Escore for its future, or return to your half life."

"Half life? My life has been full," I protested.

"As full as you know, without the ability to see it for what it is."

"Which is?"

Again came that bittersweet smile; again a sigh of resignation and finality. "Your oath to me is almost done, all you need do to fulfill your obligation is what I have ordered. But, your oath to yourself will never be severed, and it is that, for which I charge you."

"Again riddles," I said irritably.

"No, much less than riddles, and much more. Enough, Vadim, sleep, for this night you will need your rest."

With another curious movement of his hands, I felt darkness edging into my mind. But before I succumbed to the mysterious sleep Horvan put upon me, I saw him come close, and felt his long, gentle fingers stroke my brow. "You are strong, Vadim, in mind as well as body. Remember this when you awaken on the morrow: Follow the road I have opened for you, never leave it, and its end will bring you to the River Tele and your destiny." And then, with the combination of the gray mist and the closing darkness of sleep, he lifted something from his neck and placed it around my own. "Your key to Escore," he whispered.

The gray morning came, no different from the night before, yet I accepted that it was indeed morning, for I was rested and refreshed. Strangely, my fear of the gray had diminished a little. When I looked at Horvan, he was sitting by the ashes of the fire.

"We leave soon?" I asked, but Horvan made no reply.

Shrugging, I drank the cup of liquid Horvan had left by my side. With the thirst-slaking brew warming my insides, I rose and went over to him.

"How much longer?" I asked.

To this, Horvan made no reply either. And, slowly, I became aware of an emptiness in the place within me that had been filled by his presence since I had first met him. Not a little fearfully, I touched Horvan's shoulder. When my flesh met the cloth of his garment, I knew he was no more.

Turning him, I saw his eyes were closed, his skin hung in dead and torpid patches, and he appeared five-score years older than he had last night.

With his death, my sword oath and service to Horvan was ended. I was free to leave the gray emptiness, return to Estcarp, and to my life. But could I?

Closing my eyes, I drew up that which resided in my memory. With my eyes sealed, the time before last night's sleep returned. I heard Horvan's voice and knew that I could not turn back from the death service he had charged me with. I would be less of a man, were I to leave his body in these gray mountains, rather than bring him to his final resting place.

Looking up, I stared into the dull mist. Fear rose so sharply that I tasted its bitterness. Yet face it I must. Strangely I felt a warmth against my chest. It eased my chill fears, and enabled me to wall up my courage. Slowly I dipped my hand into my mail, and drew out the object Horvan had placed there last night.

It was a silver teardrop. No, not silver, but another metal—the metal of the Old Ones, came my instinctive recognition. But it brought out no fear, no hurt, only a fortifying warmth.

“What business had you with Old One things?” I asked the lifeless form of my lord. The teardrop in my hand grew warmer. No answer in words, yet there was a sensation of right.

I returned the amulet to its resting place above my heart and picked Horvan up. After securing his body to his mount, I saddled my horse, and started in the wrong direction—east.

The gray mist enveloped me as never before, sucking the warmth from my skin. I felt fearsome eyes marking my progress. I wanted to turn and ride back to Estcarp, and to the freedom from fear.

But I stayed on the path chosen by Horvan. “Why?” I asked aloud, challenging both the veiling mists and Horvan's lifeless husk.

Follow the road, never leave it, and its end will bring you to the River Tele and your destiny, Horvan had said. “What destiny?” I asked futilely.

Then I knew that Horvan had cast a compulsion upon me that would not end until I had completed his commands. Fool, I called myself for ever having followed him on this journey into death.

I forged ahead. When hunger struck, I ignored it—an easy thing in the face of the mind-leeching fears besieging me.

I know not how long I traveled, without sun to guide me, or animals to see. The road rose sharply at points, and there the chill mists would give way to the bone-sapping cold of high peaks. The call of a snow cat on hunt came with such clarity that I knew the beast to be within spotting distance, if I could but see.

Still I followed the road, a road that could not exist, and most likely did not. The hours of travel might have been minutes, or perhaps the minutes were hours. Yet, I did not grow tired, and realized that the potion Horvan had left me had strengthened me.

But then came a point where the gray mists solidified, and before me rose a wall of gray slate veined with silver webbing. It appeared impenetrable. The road I trod upon ran to it, and stopped.

“This is wrong,” I said, needing to hear a voice, even if it was my own. “This road leads to the River Tele,” I reminded myself, not knowing if such a river existed, except in Horvan’s mind.

But the road before me did end at the face of a wall, and not a river. Dismounting, I went to the wall. The chill of fear spread quickly through me, paralyzing my upraised hand. I fought off this fear, touched the gray surface, and felt its solidity.

Follow the road, came the compelling memory of Horvan’s words.

Remounting my horse, I started forward. I told myself the wall did not exist—it was but mind-block. So I neared the wall and stared at it, willing it to be gone.

Suddenly a lance of pain burst in my head. I cried out against the burrowing pain which grew stronger as I fought

it, burning with such force that I knew if it did not soon stop, I would die.

"No!" I screamed, battling the anguish even as my horse's head disappeared into the wall. The pain grew worse. Light exploded before my eyes. My body trembled violently; my insides turned to ashes.

I fell from my mount, striking my shoulder sharply on the surface of the road. I lay there while pain wrapped its terrifying fingers around me and held me prisoner.

But the pain of the fall gave me sight enough to see my horse disappear through the wall. No fear had it shown, no fright of the wall. It had not existed for the animal.

Last night Horvan had said we were near the end of the mountains. I discerned, somehow, that this wall must be the final barrier, set by whatever powers had sealed Escarp from what lay beyond.

Suddenly I perceived what was set down for me to do. "The key!" I gasped, forcing breath into my lungs and strength into my arms. The forces fought me: Deep and burrowing arrows of pain curled my fingers into claws; flashes of light blinded me. My stomach cramped, sending me into uncontrollable spasms.

Yet fasten I did upon only one thought. Horvan's key. That this is what it was meant for, I knew, as surely as I knew that the wall was not solid.

Willing my muscles to obey me, I dug my pain-clawed hand inside my mail shirt. Barely had I found the teardrop when another lashing pain doubled me over. Dark and violent waves of terror brought on a fear so desolate that it made my heart stop beating.

A thing of evil roused in my head, its vile smell so putrid that my stomach convulsed, and I spewed out its acid contents.

"No!" I screamed, hurling the word defiantly as my lips curled back to bare my clenched teeth. Pain-wracked though they were, my fingers worked slowly to draw the amulet upward on its chain.

When I finally freed the amulet from my mail, the sound

of my tortured breathing was the only sound in the world—it was as if the Guardians who watched this nowhere land had paused to see if I could do anything to stay their wrath.

Ripping the chain from about my neck, I grasped it tightly in the palm of my fisted hand and held it before me.

“There is no wall,” I shouted. “Free me! Open my mind!” From the center of my palm, heat poured forth. It raced upward along my arm, spreading through my body and entering my mind to form a brightness born out of the need for truth, and the banishment of fear.

The pain assaulting my body lessened, and I was able to gain my feet. No sooner did I stand upright, then there came a ripping within my head. A barrier I had never known I possessed fell, and I saw a soft white glow radiating around my body. I raised my arm, holding my fist toward the wall, which now wavered and flowed like a waterfall. Carefully I opened my hand and let the amulet dangle from its broken chain.

“There is no wall, there is only road!” I declared.

The light surrounding me collected into a ball and moved slowly toward the silver amulet. When it reached the swinging teardrop, it seemed to hesitate, waver, and then enter it.

I watched the amulet and, behind it, the wall, knowing that whatever would happen next would determine my future. “There is no wall! Be gone!”

No sooner had the words left my lips than the white ball of illumination and power gathered again. The ball shot from the amulet as does a dart leave its gun. Arrow straight it flew, striking the wall dead center.

An explosion of light flared. White brightness flowed upon the wall: The gray shattered, and the mists surrounding me dissolved.

It was day again. On the far horizon, the strong sun was in its late-afternoon descent. Blinking my eyes against the long absent light of day, I looked around. Before me, my horse and Horvan’s grazed on the tall grass at the road’s end.

Behind me were the loathsome mountains. To my left was a wide river with gently flowing water that glistened

invitingly. Ahead of me, the land stretched for miles. In the sky above, a flight of iridescent feathered birds flew in smart formation, strangely reminding me of the Border guards of Estcarp.

"Escore," I whispered, sinking to my knees in exhaustion.

When the morning sun came, the first such sight I had been granted in too many days to recall, I awoke from my sleep of exhaustion. The horses had not wandered farther than the riverbank, and I set out to finish my mission. The bank of the River Tele was to my left, and as I looked out at the gentle yet hilly land of Escore, I felt an unfathomable sense of familiarity.

The land was long unattended, and was rife with the feel of vast powers, both good and evil. While I pondered this new countryside, I used another of Horvan's special ration breads, for I had no wish to hunt without first learning the lay of the land.

As I ate the dry but energy-generating food, I replayed my battle with the mind-block. Why it should have taken on a physical form, when a mind-block is set within one's head, I could not know for sure, but I ventured that perhaps it was my mind which had produced the reality in the form of a wall.

With those thoughts paramount, I set about repairing the silver amulet's chain. When that was done, and Horvan's teardrop settled about my neck again, I set off for the Place of Stones.

Looking toward the river, I spied the small raft Horvan had said would be anchored there. *Stay to the moving water, no matter what sights you see, no matter what life calls you to it.*

Having spent my life as a warrior upon horseback, the use of vine-tied sticks for transport did not well suit me, but I knew not this magical land, and must trust in Horvan's judgment.

As I walked my mount and Horvan's to the edge of the

river, I sensed a darkness approaching. Not wanting to face whatever it was without some preparation, I quickly untied my food pack and tossed it out to the raft. Next I untied Horvan's lifeless husk, and waded through the ankle-deep water to gently place him on the raft.

With that task done, I turned back to the horses. Not a foot from the riverbank was I when the Dark Power struck out. My horse reared, its forelegs kicking out at me as if I were a snow cat. Horvan's mount charged forward at the same time, a double attack.

I dodged swiftly back, and fled to the raft. The horses, although battle mad, did not let hoof touch water. *Stay to the moving water*, Horvan warned. I had no need to be reminded again.

Sad at the loss of my mount, dart gun, and saddle, but knowing somehow that I was safe upon the raft, I cut the anchor rope and let the current take the raft.

As I rode the River Tele, I gazed about this land, and felt peaceful—at least where I was. Estcarp's mountains did not signal the end of the world. And, for the next two days, I traveled steadily, following the gentle course of the river. Not once did I see another, but feel eyes upon me I did.

The dark-shadowing threat I had sensed at the start of the river was always with me, a warning and a foretelling of things that abided and watched from dark and hidden corners.

At midday of the second day, the curving of the river straightened. Ahead of me rose huge pillars of stone set in a large circle. At the top of each stone rested an oval and accusatory face, carved, I knew, in the likeness of the Old Ones.

Reaching for the guide pole, I pushed the raft closer to the bank. I looked everywhere, seeking for that which might lie in wait. As I moved closer, I felt the Power of the place grow. Still, fear did not halt me as I moved toward my destiny.

A perception of agelessness settled within my mind, accented by my own wariness of this place. And, when the raft softly grounded on the low riverbank, I was prepared.

Lifting Horvan's husk in my arms, I jumped to the moss-

covered ground and started my pilgrimage to the pillars. Halfway there, the hackles on my neck rose as I smelled the overwhelming scent of evil.

I began to run, out of fear and out of the need for the safety which I knew the pillars offered. Then, in a spewing up of the earth before me, a nightmare form rose to block my path. Humanoid I marked it, but animal too. Fur covered its torso. It had the legs of a man, the ears of a wolf, and the red-glowing eyes of a werebeast.

Claws clicked outward, catching the glint of the cloud-shrouded sun. As it stared at me, the stench of its foulness reached my nostrils. Yet what little I knew of the Dark side of the Powers told me that this beast's strength was hampered by the lack of night's dark cover.

Would that my arms were free to draw sword, but Horvan's body forbade that. Suddenly the werebeast's eyes glowed redder, and it advanced upon me.

Knowing that I had but one chance, I took it. I flung Horvan's body at the beast, and drew my sword the next instant. As the werebeast growled with delight, I bent low and plunged my weapon truly. The beast screamed; its outcry sliced coldly through me.

Without sheathing my blade, I pulled Horvan's body free and raced toward the stone. The werebeast, lying in a pool of its blood, gave voice to another cry. To my left, the ground exploded, to my right the same. On all four legs, three more beasts charged at me.

I was but a dozen steps from the pillars as the padfalls came closer. Concentrating only on the first pillar, I put forth my last strengths. Seconds later my left foot passed the leading edge of pillar. Just as my right foot rose, a searing red lash tore across my back, renting my mail as if it were cloth, and opening my flesh. A cry spewed from my lips as I stumbled and crashed to the ground upon Horvan's corpse. Face down, my back on fire, I waited for death.

But when three heartbeats passed and nothing more happened, I turned to find the werebeasts standing angrily not

a foot distant from me. I was in the circle of stone. I was safe.

The pain in my back was intense, and I felt the warm flood of blood oozing from the wound even as one of the beasts rose upon hind legs. He growled, but I understood clearly. "I would have the body. You would have your life."

His words rang with some trace of truth, but I knew that it was a twisted truth. "Life as you know it?"

"Better than no life at all," he growled.

"I would take my chances with death," I stated, reaching for Horvan, while ignoring the open wound on my back.

"You will never leave this circle . . . as you are, intruder," the beast stated, his eyes glowing hell-red.

I spoke naught; rather, I carried Horvan's body to the center of the pillars, aware that my oath was not yet complete.

The closer I came, the weaker I grew. The stones grew fuzzy, and the pain in my back spread in fiery tendrils, sapping my muscles of their strength. But finally I reached the center, where a small, altarlike square stone came alive with a shimmering blue haze.

I was too weak to wonder at this, or to even care. With my head spinning, and my strength all but gone, I barely managed to drape Horvan's body upon it before falling to the ground.

As I lay on the earth, I stared up at the towering columns that reached high into the sky. The Power inside the stones was strong. The most powerful sensations I have ever felt, and somehow, they did not drain from me, but helped me to grow stronger.

I willed my pain-wracked body up, knowing that there was more I had to do. Reaching my knees, I held on to the face of the blued stone and used it to lever myself to my feet.

"What?" I asked, looking at Horvan's face. After three

days of death, it had not changed, nor was there any scent of decay about his corpse.

“What?” I repeated. In answer, I felt heat building over my heart. The amulet was calling.

I reached in, ignoring the tearing pain while realizing that the claw that had struck me had severed muscle as well as flesh.

When I finally held the amulet before me, I gazed again upon Horvan’s features, knowing the myriad of questions brimming on my tongue would never be answered. He had kept his word, in part, and paid me for my service with knowledge—the knowledge that there was more than what I perceived there to be. Yet there was another form of payment he had failed to deliver, my birth name. But death had stopped that, not a bargain ill broken.

Clenching my teeth against the force of another radiating pain, I exhaled sharply and waited for it to pass. And, with the easing of the pain, came the recalling of our talk of the Old Ones.

I had been adamant that the Old Ones were bad. But now I knew differently, for despite Horvan’s amber eyes, I knew him to be an Old One. For no other being would age the way he had, and in just a matter of days, go from life-filled vitality to death.

How old he had been, I could not guess, but my life must seem a momentary passing to his. Thinking these thoughts, I removed the amulet and placed it upon his breast, folding his hands over it before intoning the ritual of burial.

“Earth that takes which is of
Earth.

Water accept that of water.

And that which is now freed, let it
be free to follow the high path.”

The instant I finished, a low response came from beneath my feet. The earth pulsed; a blue light rose from the stone to surround Horvan’s body. Another arrow of light shot

skyward. A second beam of crystal blue reached out on the horizontal.

Watching the shimmering play about Horvan, I sensed the vast and ancient mysteries at play. For a moment, I thought I saw Horvan move. Then the blue light surrounded me. "*The place of healing,*" came a voice within my head. "*Follow the pathway now open,*" it commanded. Suddenly I knew it was Horvan speaking to me from within the blue mist.

Then the blue light gathered upon the stone, exploding heavenward with the speed of a dart. An instant later, Horvan's body was gone, and of the blue light, all that remained was the horizontal bar which awaited me.

Turning, I stepped into the path of light. With each step of my booted feet, the festering agony in my back throbbed anew. Yet I refused to acknowledge the pain, even as I refused to look at the dark forms who surrounded the Place of Stones.

I walked in the blue light, secure that if my death were to come, it would be from wounds already suffered, and not from any new attack.

How long I walked within my haze of pain I could not reckon, but eventually I came to a valleylike depression that contained several red bubbling saucers, formed of the earth itself.

As I approached one, light-headed and dizzy, the blue light disappeared. Stumbling, I fell to my knees and had to crawl. When I finally reached the nearest of the heated pools of mud, I gratefully sank into it.

The warmth of the mud spread quickly along my body, but I paid it scant heed, for I could barely focus any conscious thought. My loss of blood was great, and I wondered if I was but lying in my final resting place, awaiting the time I would join Horvan's spirit.

I managed once to open my eyes, but closed them quickly for a hallucination had appeared. I saw a woman, as iridescent as the birds I had seen when I first entered Escore. Her face, oval and fine-featured, was turned toward the sky. Her

long hair, falling in thick waves down the length of her back, radiated with a shimmering green glow.

And then there was nothing except the spinning blackness of escape from the pain.

My eyes snapped open. I stared at the turquoise sky, wondering if I was still in Escore, or had passed on to another plane. The only thing I remembered was of the beautiful and green vision of a woman.

Hallucination, I reminded myself. Breathing deeply, I sent my thoughts to tracing my body. The pain was gone. I shrugged. My muscles responded readily.

Sitting up, I looked about me. I was lying on a grassy sward, no longer in the healing pool. "Where?" I began.

"Home," came a woman's voice, sweet and husky and familiar.

Turning, I found the woman of my hallucination. "You are real," I whispered.

She smiled. "*As are you,*" she replied, but not with spoken words; rather she thought those into my head.

"Who—"

"In time you will remember, brother mine," she said aloud.

Her words struck me funny. I had no sister of the flesh. "You mistake me for another," I said.

"I mistake you not. I am Margua, half-sister to you who was sent to the other side, to learn."

"To learn what?" I asked, puzzled by her words, yet unable to push away the heady familiarity of her voice and name.

"How best to protect them, and us."

"You mistake me for another. I am a blank shield without lord."

"Nay, you are lord, risen to take your father's place, just as your son will take your place and his son his, until the three who are one arrive."

"You speak nonsense," I protested.

"Do I?" she asked with a smile as she dug her fingers into the moist earth.

When she raised her hand, filled with soil and grass, she held it up, an offering to the sun. "I call upon you, Powers of Earth, Wind, Water, and Fire," she intoned solemnly, "to witness this act."

She turned back to me and—her eyes, silver flecked in amber just as Horvan's had once been—fixed me with an unyielding stare. "Know you for who you are. Know you, Kalmar, son of Horvan, that you are the chosen of the Old Ones. Within you rests the fate of Escore. Rise, Guardian of the Land Between, Sentinel of the Gray Mist, and take your rightful place in this riven land."

I stared at her while the Power unleashed by her words opened my blocked mind in a much stronger way than it had in the mountains when I fought the mist. I saw, with the giving of my birth name, the truth of who I was and who I would always be.

Horvan was my father, the Sentinel of the Gray Mists, the Lord Protector of Estcarp and Escore. And I had inherited that title. It now fell upon my shoulders to be guardian to both lands. No evil of the old wars was to be allowed freedom to Estcarp. No person of Estcarp was to be allowed entry to Escore until the three who were one were ready.

And of my missing years, what I had thought to be my childhood? They were more than a dozen, much more, for in those years I had been trained by my father Horvan, among the last of the Old Ones who chose to stay behind to combat the unleashed forces of those gone to evil. And I was trained also, in the clean Powers of nature itself, by my mother Lonía of the Green People of Silence.

With this wondrous opening of my mind and memories and abilities, I remembered, too, of the time before I left Escore and of my adventures against the Dark and evil Powers haunting this once magnificent land. But those adventures are for another telling, and such telling must wait until I have set up my new outposts, destroyed the road

through the gray mists that my father had opened to retrieve me, and prepared my guardianship as befits the responsibilities set upon me.

Afterword

Shortly after discovering what science fiction and fantasy were—at the late age of thirteen—I also discovered Andre Norton and her novel, Catseye. I was hooked from there.

Years later, Andre was kind enough to read and give one of my novels a cover blurb. Shortly after that, she asked me to do a story for her. “Sentinel at the Edge of the World” is that story.

But what to write? My first reaction was to think about the characters Andre had brought to life in her Witch World novels and stories. Whose story would I embellish? Which small subplot would I expand? Which time period?

When I realized that to encroach on Andre’s territory was not for me, I looked along a different route. I found myself wondering what would be necessary for a legend, or a far-seeing, to come to pass. The obvious, for me, was that something or someone would have to keep watch. A sentinel who would make certain that the legend survived to its pre-ordained time. To do this, I delved into the shrouded past of the Witch World. I created the family of guardians, whose sole responsibility was to insure the survival of their world so that the legend would come to pass.

—DAVID M. WIND