

THE STILLBORN HERITAGE

by

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I

Mal wormed as much of his four-year old body as he could into the drafty niche between clammy wall and faded tapestry. He had never ventured into the wing of the keep that harbored his three maiden aunts—until this peculiar secret excitement had commenced. With his finger he enlarged a mouse-gnawn hole in the fabric and watched. The screams had been going on for hours. The men were all banished below to the great hall while the women of Malmgarth dealt grimly with the crisis common to womankind. Serving women and maidservants trod tirelessly between scullery and upstairs, carrying whatsoever the midwife demanded.

Mal scowled as Ysa appeared with a steaming pot of fragrant tea and some fresh cakes old Cook had made just that day. She took them in to the midwife without once looking around to offer any to Mal. Ysa was the nicest and the plump-est of the maidservants, and she belonged to Mal and none other. In the drama of Lady Eirena's premature delivery, no

one had thought of Mal's supper and bedtime. Vengefully he pulled more threads out of the priceless old tapestry and glared after Ysa. She went in and came right out, and from the look of her Mal knew she had forgotten about him entirely.

Even his uncle, Lord Rufus, would have no use for him once this new stranger arrived in Malmgarth. Mal had heard Lady Fairhona say as much to Lady Elga, who were sisters to Lady Eirena. Mal knew little of the reasons that had taken him from his own home to the south at Birkholm, save that his own mother had died of the same disease that Lady Eirena now suffered, and he had been sent to his uncle, Lord Rufus, as a fosterling.

Lord Rufus and Lady Virid had no children of their own; hence, no heir for Malmgarth would come from the line of Rufus. Any child of Eirena, elder sister to Rufus, provided a truer bloodline than did young Mal, the nephew of Rufus. Lady Eirena had not chosen to consummate her alliance with marriage, as was her right, though possible bastard offspring of Lord Rufus were not entitled to inheritance. Male or female, Eirena's child, if it survived its birthing and was not deformed, would be the heir of Malmgarth.

Mal was too young to care about inheriting Malmgarth, with its green pastures and tall stands of timber, sheltered from the north storms and cooled in the summer by breezes from the not-too-distant sea. Fertile Malmgarth meadows provided pasturage for herds of fine cattle and sheep, and clean-limbed horses.

Over generations of selective breeding, the Malmgarth horse combined the intelligence and strength of the fabled Torgian and the speed and beauty of the silver-dappled Were steeds. The result was a horse invariably born completely black, later to acquire silvery stippling in the quarters and belly, although the most prized did not change color until old age. Their necks were slender, proudly arched, their superb

heads and flowing tails carried arrogantly high. A hint of wildness always lingered in the Were-Torgians' large flashing eye and flaring nostril, yet no rider, once accepted by a Malmgarth horse, could wish for a more faithful and obedient mount to carry him over the long distances between neighboring keeps. In battle, a less common occurrence nowadays but still to be guarded against, a Malmgarth horse defended his master with teeth and hooves.

Memories still lingered of the days of wind and wolf after the Hounds of Alizon had ravaged the Dales, leaving farm and keep barren of all life, until the great ones such as Lord Trystan had taken hold to bring the land out of lawlessness into order. The father of Lord Rufus had been one such, and with him he had brought a pair of Were horses to the desolate keep of Malmgarth. Men had looked askance then at Lord Tirell, wondering at what bargains he must have driven during the war years, but glad enough at the peace he returned to the land to forget he was no lord born and forgive the expediences of wartime.

What Mal cared about was the fat gray pony of his own named Baldhere, the tidbits Cook always gave him instead of making him wait, and the dozen or more serving women in the household who never refused him anything. Best of all were the evenings beside the fire in the great hall, sitting alongside his uncle Rufus and pestering him with questions when Rufus was in a patient mood, or watching with admiration when Lord Rufus was in a fiery temper and strode up and down shouting at some miscreant herdsman or plowboy.

Rufus was everything any boy would love—noisy, handsome, as generous with gifts as he was with cuffs on the ear, and he smelled of horses and mead and leather. Rufus often set Mal before him on a fast Malmgarth horse, and they would race like the wind together across the meadows and rolling hills, with Mal shouting for joy as the wind tore the words out of his mouth and made his eyes stream with tears.

None of this would Mal share with that troublesome stranger being born in the room across the corridor. He was cold and stiff from standing and watching, but he relished the feeling of doing the forbidden. All the women came and went without once suspecting that he was there, spying upon that which they wished no male eyes to see.

Then the screaming came to an abrupt end, but the room was not yet still. A maidservant hurried from the room, meeting Ysa in the corridor.

"The child is stillborn," the maid said hurriedly. "Send a man to the abbey for the Dame Averil. What can't be restored to life must be blessed. We don't know what evil thing might take the spirit's place."

"The poor little scrap," Ysa murmured as she turned to hurry away beside the first woman. "Too eager to come into this cruel world."

"And a girl it would have been, more's the pity," said the other.

They were scarcely out of sight when a dark, hooded figure crept out of the shadows from the other end of the corridor, where stairs descended to a thick door to the courtyard below. Mal stood very still, scarcely breathing, as he recognized in this other some of his own furtiveness.

It was a woman, he saw, but not one of those who worked in the house. This was one of the rough ones who worked outdoors, and her kind had no business here. Mal swelled with lordly indignation, and would have stepped out of his hiding place to challenge the forward creature, but his eye chanced upon the bundle the woman carried. It was a bit of old tapestry formed into a bag, and he would have recognized it by its smell alone. It had the acrid smell of pungent herbs, and it belonged to Merdice, the herb woman. Mal scarcely dared blink, lest her cat ears hear the sound, and he knew if he moved her serpent's eye would certainly see.

Merdice glanced about suspiciously, as if she sensed his

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presence. He had feared her greatly since her first appearance at Malmgarth on the first day of winter. Rufus and the menfolk had burned the straw wheels to frighten off the evil spirits, but Merdice had somehow failed to be frightened away. She was homeless, a ragged wanderer begging at the scullery door, but it was a fearless sort of begging, and she had cast her dark gaze over the keep, noting with sharpness this and that detail, and finally inquiring if Lord Rufus wanted a woman to work the herbs in his stillroom. As if she had somehow known that the ancient woman who used to do the work had died and left Lord Rufus's livestock and household without the infusions and powders they needed to recover from sickness and injury. It was whispered among the servants that Merdice had the evil eye, that Merdice talked with the dead in the ruins across the beck, that Merdice could put thoughts into your head, or pick thoughts from your head; but all agreed that Merdice was one who walked apart from regular people.

Mal thought that Merdice probably roasted small children, especially disobedient little boys. From his wary spying upon her in the stillroom, he knew she talked to herself as she made her preparations, or perhaps it was invisible spirits she addressed. Once he had come upon her in the stillroom sitting bolt upright, staring as if entranced. Usually she whirled upon him angrily when she caught him snooping, and drove him away with a shake of her fist. To Mal she seemed incredibly old and wrinkled, although her hair was barely streaked with gray, and she walked with a haughty straightness in her gaunt and angular frame. Eagle fierceness burned in her acute dark eye.

Now she turned and looked measuringly at the tapestry, and Mal knew that his life was over. She punched at it, feeling the small space between it and the wall, a space far too small to hide a full-size figure of a man or woman. Shrugging, she glared at the tapestry and fumbled in her bag for a small crys-

tal bottle. She drew it out and held it up to the light of the sconce a moment. Inside, a substance like smoke swirled around and around with the graceful, fluid manner of a living thing. A tiny face pressed against the clear surface for a moment, framed by two flowerlike hands, then it too swirled restlessly away, trailing a glimpse of pale hair. The little creature seemed to be searching for escape, rising to push determinedly against the wood stopper with delicate arms, then gliding onward around the bottle.

Mal had never seen such an engaging toy. Fiercely he yearned to possess the tiny lady in the glass—clear glass, which in itself was a wondrous marvel. Yet Mal did not move a muscle in his hiding place, only allowing his eyes to widen with yearning.

Merdice tucked the bottle suddenly into her flowing gown and turned to face a figure hastening toward her.

“What do you here, Merdice?” Ysa inquired in a tone not calculated to offend. “No one sent for you.”

“The infant,” Merdice said. “I have restoratives for still-birth. I wish to see the child before the rest of you give up on her.” Merdice gazed straight at Ysa, who was on the point of refusing. Her head was just beginning to shake in denial, then she stiffened slightly and her eyes did not blink.

“Very well,” Ysa replied, her hand going to the door latch. As she pushed open the door, Mal glimpsed the room beyond, where several women were attending to Lady Eirena, who lay pallid and moaning insensibly. The midwife held a tiny blue-gray thing wrapped in a scrap of white cloth. They all looked up at Merdice in outrage as Ysa spoke.

“The wise woman is here with a restorative for the child,” she said, speaking as if by rote.

The midwife started to heave her massive bulk to its feet, and the other women turned indignantly, but Merdice lifted one hand and all their actions were stayed.

“Good,” Merdice said. “That’s much better.”

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She glided into the room and took the baby from the midwife. With one hand, she slipped the bottle from her gown and loosened the cork with her teeth. Holding the bottle under the baby's tiny nose she removed the cork, and the smoky fluid substance inside vanished. Almost at once the infant drew a breath and began to cough and sputter, its voice rising in a querulous wail.

Merdice returned the infant to the midwife and swiftly stepped out into the corridor. It had all taken just moments. Ysa remembered to shut the door behind Merdice, and Mal heard her voice cry out "The child lives!"

Lady Eirena spoke wearily. "Her name is Aislinn."

Then Mal again faced Merdice, who halted beside the tapestry, her head turning warily as she surveyed its length. This time she spied the hole Mal had picked in the fabric, and she pounced like a cat. Mal scuttled along behind the tapestry, with Merdice pouncing a split second after him. He couldn't very well cry out for help, even had his throat not been paralyzed with terror, since he was an intruder in Lady Eirena's domain. There was no one to save him, and he was speedily running out of tapestry.

A projecting abutment suddenly shunted him to the left into darkness, and he tumbled a short way down a flight of narrow steps. Below, he could see a light and hear voices, so he stifled his frightened sobs and crept downward. Pressing against the wall, he slithered down the stairs as fast as he could go with his short legs reaching down doubtfully for each step. He expected a clawlike hand to grab him at any moment, or perhaps Merdice had changed shapes and would come after him as a wolf, a great rat, or even a spider.

The stairs ended at a narrow door, which Mal pushed against frantically. It opened, and he tumbled into a closetlike room that he recognized immediately as belonging to the realm of the kitchen and the wonderful, kind female deities who reigned there. He scrambled out of the pantry into that

fragrant haven of firelight and roasting meat. The kitchen deities flocked around him, and Cook took him on her billowing, comforting lap and soothed him with a sweet cake and held a cold knife to the rising knot on his forehead.

"He's been up that musty bolt-hole to the ladies' wing," observed Cook, wiping cobwebs out of his hair. "Spying on the birthing, I have no doubt. Is that where you were, my little lordling?"

"They'd have his hide if they knew," said one of the others with a nervous titter.

"It's no matter now," Cook said. "We won't tell them and they'll never know. A pity the poor baby never drew breath. And Lady Eirena cheated after all. Went to such a deal of trouble, she did, to get that child. We'll have little Mal for a lord after all, it seems. Well and good enough for me, instead of Eirena's spawn."

Mal looked around at their faces and sat up straighter on Cook's lap, knowing he had something to say that was portentous.

"The baby isn't dead," he said solemnly. "Merdice came and the little lady in the glass went into the baby's nose."

"Merdice?" Cook repeated, and the kitchen women all looked at one another uneasily at the mention of her name. "What a fanciful tale. He must still be frightened. Little Mal, old Merdice wouldn't come into the house. The outside doors are all locked and nobody would let her come in. You don't need to be frightened of her."

Mal cuddled once more into Cook's ample lap and bit into another cake, letting the crumbs fall on her greasy apron. He was getting sleepy now. He drummed his heels against Cook's knees to keep himself awake, and squirmed, but within minutes he was asleep, with the half-gnawed cake still clutched in his grubby hand.

II

Mal saw Aislinn infrequently, when the nurse carried her, squalling, up and down the courtyard, or, once she was bigger, as she staggered around on the rough flagstones of the great hall, closely attended by a nurse so she would not fall and hurt herself. No nurse could be always so vigilant, and Mal was secretly pleased when Aislinn fell down, or when she hugged a big muddy hound and spoiled her fine little gown. Always the secret fear nagged in the back of Mal's mind that, because of Aislinn, one day Rufus would send him away, as the serving women had said he would.

By all accounts Aislinn was a pretty child, and all the women cooed over her when they got the chance, a treasonable disloyalty that rankled Mal exceedingly. She was a troublesome little brat, and as she became larger she attached herself to him and followed him about, and he wasn't sure how to get rid of her. Mud and water was no deterrent; she came paddling after him with no regard for the hem of her embroidered dress and thin beaded-satin shoes. He could get on his pony and leave her, but she always waited for him, and looking back at her gave him an uncomfortable guilty feeling.

When she was six and he was ten, Lady Eirena's half-hearted and usually futile attempts to govern Aislinn were abandoned. If Aislinn was decked out in the morning in a rich gown of fine fabric encrusted with beading and twining embroidery, the child abandoned the heavy dress somewhere in the meadow or byre in favor of her undersmock, which did not interfere with running and climbing walls and riding horses. Stiff shoes met a similar fate, never to be found again, unless she gave them away to some other child, and dainty slippers were ruined after a day of play-hunting. By the end of the day she looked like a woods nymph in her short smock,

girded about with vines and leaves, her loose long hair crowned with flowers and hanging in a pale, tangled cloak around her shoulders.

Mal was not aware of the particular day when he became thrall to her. Perhaps it began the day when he let her ride behind him on his horse—old Baldhere long ago forsaken in favor of a gentle, tall mare. They raced with the wind, laughing as the mare leaped across streams, letting the wind snatch away their shouts. It could have been the day when Mal crept up on her in the woods to frighten her away from following him, and he had found her lying on the ground surrounded by mice and voles, and other little furry creatures were coming from their burrows as she called to them. Her voice was strange and low, and the words she spoke made no sense to Mal. When she saw him watching, she laughed and banished the small animals with another word. Then she called again and a butterfly settled on her outstretched finger, and yet another, until her hand was covered with butterflies and a cloud of them circled over her head.

Mal edged out of his hiding place to look more closely at the bright-winged little creatures.

“How did you do that?” he asked suspiciously.

Aislinn smiled and waved her hand so they scattered once more. “I say their names and they come to me. Oh, Mal, show me the place where Tavis saw the big cat—or are you afraid the cat is still there?”

Mal certainly was not, and they spent the day in the old ruins, where they caught a glimpse of the great silvery cat retreating from them into a dark place between the fallen slabs of stone. Aislinn started crooning to it in her peculiar voice, and the cat replied with its own throaty crooning, coming into the sunlight again, blinking with lazy curiosity as its head swung from side to side, searching for the source of Aislinn’s voice.

“Stop!” Mal whispered urgently, his every hair standing

upon end in utmost horror as the cat padded slowly toward them on its huge, silent paws.

"What's wrong? Are you afraid?" Aislinn asked in great surprise, a gleam of merry devilment in her eyes.

"Yes!" Mal blurted. The snow cat could see them now, and the tip of its long tail flirted interestedly as its slitted golden eyes dwelt upon Mal.

"I'll send him away if you promise to let me go with you wherever you go," Aislinn said reasonably. "If you don't, I'll tell everyone how frightened you were when we saw the snow cat."

"You'll tell anyway, and everyone will laugh."

"I won't. You can tell them you touched a snow cat." She reached out and clasped Mal's hand in her own; then she stepped into the clearing, pulling him after her. The great cat padded toward them, its huge head slung low. As Mal gazed at it, all the menace he had been trained to see left the beast. He saw a creature of wondrous strength, a lord of nature among animals, who crouched at Aislinn's feet and gazed up at her with lazy amiability. Mal felt its curiosity as she touched its broad, furrowed head, its willingness to do her bidding. At Aislinn's insistence, Mal touched the snow cat's head also, taking care to keep a tight grip on Aislinn's hand. For a brief moment he had the disturbing feeling that the Dalesmen and their kind were excluded from a force as mighty and ancient as the land itself, where all beasts were united in a common knowledge. That knowledge was denied to Mal and his kind.

Aislinn spoke another word to the snow cat, which got to its feet and moved away with no haste, pausing to look alertly toward the garths and byres of man below before vanishing once more into its grotto.

"Now you can tell the herdboys you touched a snow cat," Aislinn said.

Mal shook his head. "They wouldn't believe it. And you'd

better not tell anyone either or they'll think you're just boasting. Where did you learn his name?"

Aislinn was kneeling in the midst of some flowers, talking to them as she chose a handful of blossoms. "Everything has a name," she said with a shade of annoyance. "You just look at it and know. Even people have names, but they keep them secret."

"My name is Mal, and I don't keep it secret."

"That's not your only name. You mustn't ever tell that one. You must know that! The creatures don't hide their names from me." She looked up at Mal, her pointed face suddenly sober. "Do they tell you their names, Mal?"

"No, of course not," he said disdainfully. "It's a girl-thing to know names."

Nor did it seem unusual that Aislinn could speak to plants, coaxing berries out of hiding so that the branches swung into her reach, or calling the fruit and nuts to drop from the trees when she was hungry. By speaking a name, Aislinn could even banish the pain of cuts and scratches and close a wound so it bled no more.

In the way of all children, these things became commonplace, as much accepted as part of the world of Malmgarth as the huge disc of the red rising sun, the dew that came from nowhere each morning to water the grass and flowers, the glossy-coated new calves and foals that magically appeared at their mothers' sides, young creatures like themselves.

Aislinn liked to be outside before dawn, barefoot in the dew. Long ago her mother and her servants had abandoned their attempts to keep her within the ladies' wing of the keep, teaching her useful things like sewing and embroidery and gossiping. If Mal did not come out, Aislinn sent a bird to twitter in his window, or a hound to jump on his cot and lick his face, treading on him with huge feet all the while.

Then they crept into the kitchen, where the cooks were

starting their work, and Mal carried away what cake and bread they would let the children have. Next they stopped at the dairy for dippers of fresh, warm milk. Then they visited the horses in the mews and ate their breakfast in the hay mow, watching the men harnessing the draught horses. Hitching a ride on a wain would take them far afield for the day, from which point they could range in any direction, pretending to be outlaws of the Waste plotting to pillage Malmgarth, or Rangers exploring the Dales for the first time.

Rufus was content with the situation, if Lady Eirena was not.

"That boy is getting no education," she pointed out frequently over supper in the great hall at night. Mal and Aislinn should have been in bed long before, but they often availed themselves of the opportunity to spy upon their unsuspecting elders.

"That boy," Lady Eirena continued, "is running wild like a hare and he's teaching Aislinn all manner of wicked tricks. She never wears her shoes and she rides a horse with her shift pulled up over her knees and she's forever among the servants and animals, acting as if she were no better than they are. That boy is a young savage, not suitable company for a young lady of the keep!"

Rufus grinned. "You should get her some riding clothes, then. That boy is learning more about this land than if the gamekeeper walked him around it every day. Let him have his freedom a bit longer, and by himself he'll come around to becoming the landlord. The Lady Aislinn will not regret it one day, when she is ruler here. She'll need a landlord who knows Malmgarth's every stone and pathway."

"Her future husband will be lord here, not your fosterling," Lady Eirena replied acidly. "Although I suppose," she added with ill grace, "as our brother's son he may stay as long as he wishes."

"A stranger cannot rule Malmgarth," Rufus said. "A land-

lord must have his heart in the land, or it will not produce for him. It's a born gift."

"Nonsense," Lady Eirena said. "You speak of the land as if it were alive."

"And it is, my lady sister," Rufus replied.

The idea of Aislinn's future husband coming to Malmgarth only amused Mal and Aislinn. They knew what they would do with any unwelcome intruder—Aislinn would call upon the vines to bind him up, the clouds to rain upon him, and the wolves to chase him away. Always in their minds this unwelcome stranger named Hroc of distant Brettford was inextricably linked with the marriage proxy, a wispy little man of beyond-middle years named Chlodwig. Next to the burly and noisy Rufus, Chlodwig appeared as a withered leaf shaking in the blasts of Rufus's humor. At the wedding feast he scarcely had picked at the food placed upon the plate that he was to share with the bride, Aislinn. With a shudder Aislinn pushed the meat to his side of the plate, with other things she did not like to eat, and drank deeply from the glass that he only sipped at, like the anxious elderly rooster that the other roosters liked to pick at. Aislinn had laughed secretly during the celebration meal, exchanging glances across the table with Mal, who was squirming and uncomfortable in new clothes.

The proxy marriage was promptly forgotten by Aislinn and Mal. In eight years the groom would appear to claim his bride and her land by marriage-right, but eight years was eons to children. The birdlike Chlodwig and his proxy groom, Hroc, were soon ridiculed into nonexistence.

Nothing could frighten Aislinn and Mal into what Lady Eirena considered proper behavior for children—much as she knew about the subject of children or their behavior or how to control it. Her best attempt had been to employ fear, but its effects were not long-lasting. When Aislinn was old enough to start following Mal around on her short legs, Lady Eirena had told the sepulchral tale of the black wain. Mal heard it

often himself, with Lady Eirena's sharp nails digging into his arm as she gripped it, her eyes boring into him to emphasize the awfulness of the fate she foresaw for both him and Aislinn if they didn't mend their ways.

"There's a great black wain covered with strange writings of the Old Ones, and it has two great wheels that turn with a sound like thunder. An enormous flayed ox draws the wain, dead these long years but still the evilness of little children keeps him walking and walking, going from house to house where there are evil little children living, who fret their mothers to distraction. Then the ghoul in a long gray cloak who drives the ox and the wain gets down from the wagon with his great hay hook and catches the children with it and carries them away to the black wain, where they can't get out no matter how much they scream and cry. He carries them away to be eaten later by wolves and ravens and evil things who like the taste of wicked children. Would you like for the black wain to come to Malmgarth after you, you heedless little imps?"

The story gave Mal waves of gooseflesh whenever he heard it, even when he thought he was far too old to be frightened by such fancies. But Aislinn always listened open-mouthed, her eyes upturned to her mother with rapt attention no matter how many times Eirena thought to reprimand her daughter with the horror of the black wain.

Inspired, Aislinn almost always sought out some fresh source of trouble, something particularly forbidden to her, and the more horrific it was to Mal the better she liked it.

"Let's go to the ruins of the Old Ones," she suggested after a severe scolding for losing yet another fine dress, this one washed away in the river. "The ruins where I once showed you the snow cat."

"That's a forbidden place," Mal objected. "The Old Ones left a spirit there to keep people out."

"It's a good place," Aislinn said firmly. "Now come, or I shall go alone."

Mal was helpless to protest any further. His only worse crime than accompanying Aislinn was allowing her to get into trouble by herself. Leaving the walls of the keep, they crossed over the bridge that could be withdrawn against possible attackers. On the far side, against the foot of the woods, were the huts of the servants and laborers, who lived beyond the walls of the keep in these times of peace. Within the wood itself, where the trees were most dark and mossy, old Merdice had a hut of stone held together more by moss than by any visible mortar. A winding path led from her house to the keep, where she went each day to the stillroom to dispense the needful cures.

Mal groaned. This was another strongly forbidden pastime: the spying-out of Merdice. Today, luckily, the door was shut tight and no smoke came out of the hole in the roof. A large cat of mingled colors sat washing its face on the stone that served as doorstep. Hearing their approach, it looked up warily, one paw still poised in midair as it studied the intruders. As Aislinn stepped forward, speaking coaxing cat-words Mal was familiar with, the cat turned and vanished into the underbrush.

"He's gone to tell Merdice what we're doing," Mal said. "She always knows everything we do, with that evil eye of hers."

"Nay, she doesn't," Aislinn replied. "She's just a dusty old thing. I'm not afraid of her."

"Yes you are. You always run past the stillroom as fast as you can."

"Not anymore. I think I should like to talk to her sometime, Mal. You're not afraid of her, are you?"

"Afraid of her? I'd sooner be afraid of old Chlodwig." But beneath all his bluster lurked a deep memory tainted with fear and misunderstanding, and Merdice and Aislinn were some-

how strongly linked. Mal did not remember much except the tapestry and Merdice flailing at it as she hunted him. If Aislinn had run past the stillroom as fast as she could go, it was to keep up with him.

They did not visit the ruins often, unless they were on horseback in the midst of a longer journey. The site was on a hilltop, and the dressed stones of shattered walls had tumbled down as far as the bottom, leaving a maze of obstacles to thread between to reach the top. Little remained to help them judge the character of the buildings that had once stood there—except a jumble of ornate doorposts and lintels, and fallen pillars adorned with fine carving, all made of a bluish stone that had withstood weathering so well that the cryptic symbols were still easy to discern.

The symbols and the signs of the previous dwellers of the land now called Malmgarth were disturbing to Mal. They made him feel that men were newcomers to the Dales, and temporary newcomers at that. If the builders of such a grand edifice had come to an end, then Malmgarth might too lie waste one day.

Aislinn felt no such qualms. She climbed among the ruins with a fierce intensity, as if she were looking for something she alone could recognize, rather than merely exploring. Mal clambered after her, lest she get out of his sight and disappear into one of the many dark holes that offered themselves to the imprudently curious for inspection. He had not forgotten the snow cat who had laired here two years ago.

Aislinn was not content to explore in the usual areas. She beckoned to Mal and climbed to the top of the hill of broken stone, where they looked down into the area that had once been the courtyard of what seemed to have been a small keep.

“An awkward place for a keep,” Mal said. “Too far from the meadowlands and grainfields.”

“This was no keep,” Aislinn said, her eyes busy with the

scene below. "This was a place people came to and went away from strengthened. Come, there's something down there."

As they went around a shoulder of shattered stone, they looked down into another courtyard area. A circle of pillars still stood, although some of them were broken off short and others stood crookedly. Within that circle was a pavement of patterned colors forming the design of a large, five-pointed star. Someone had cleaned away the rock and rubbish, which now formed a low, crude wall beyond the circle of pillars, that must have covered it. As they watched, a dark figure appeared among the rubble and approached the star pavement, pausing at a point of the star to heap up a small pile of firewood before moving purposefully toward the next.

"It's old Merdice!" Aislinn whispered, and they both crouched down to watch with bated breath.

At first sight of the place Mal had known this was something he did not understand, and the awful grip of fear clamped down upon him. Aislinn, however, had gasped with rapturous delight, as if she greeted the appearance of something lovely and welcome.

Merdice moved from point to point of the star and then took a position in the center, where she placed a silver urn. From her untidy bundle she took a peeled wand. To Mal's horror Aislinn stood up and started climbing down the slope.

"Nay, Aislinn!" he gasped. "That's old Merdice! She must be working evil in such a strange place! The Old Ones made that star . . ."

But Aislinn never hesitated, her bare feet finding the way down the faint path as if by instinct, and Mal had no choice but to follow her. She did not seem to care whether he followed or not; all her attention was for Merdice and the star. Mal reached the bottom of the slope and slipped behind a large rock to watch what Aislinn was going to do. Merdice was certain to report it to Lady Eirena, and there would be more trouble blamed upon Mal, who was supposed to keep Aislinn from harm.

Merdice looked up from her secret works, scowling as was her habit. Aislinn approached her fearlessly and stood gazing at her as if awestruck, or paralyzed by her own temerity.

"What do you here, child, without a guardian?" Merdice demanded sternly.

"You are my guardian," Aislinn said.

Merdice nodded her head once sharply and edged a step nearer Aislinn. "And you are one of the Stillborn, who need no teaching. All things will come to you at the right time. Or you will be brought. My duty is merely to ensure that no evil thing comes near you."

"I have Mal to protect me," Aislinn said.

Merdice shook her head. "Mal will do you no good at the time when you most need someone to defend you. He will abandon you, out of his foolish mortal pride and fear."

Mal's pride was sorely stung. He came around the edge of the rock, mustering as much anger and dignity as a thirteen-year-old boy could muster.

"Aislinn!" he called commandingly. "Come away from there! We should go back now!"

Merdice cast her eye over him and chuckled dryly. "I remember you, poking and prying where you had no business, and I have a warning for you. Don't interfere with things you cannot understand, little mortal. And this girl and her fate are two things you shall not interfere with."

"She's only trying to frighten us," Mal said to Aislinn. "Let's leave her to the Old Ones. Perhaps the snow cat will find her and make a feast of her old, dry bones. Now come, let us go."

Merdice spared him a withering glance before turning back to Aislinn. "You needn't listen to him, my fair one. He can command you in no way."

There was an unpleasant glint of triumph in her dark eyes, but Aislinn drew back toward Mal.

"Mal is my friend," she said, "and I like him better than I

like you, guardian though you may be. Mal will keep me from harm, as he always has done."

Turning quickly she came toward Mal. For a long moment Mal and Merdice stood eye-locked, glaring at each other in mutual dislike and distrust. Then Merdice turned and snatched up the silver cup and thrust it into her bag, muttering angrily.

Thereafter, Mal began to watch more closely the comings and goings of Merdice, and with uneasy surprise he noted how often she seemed to be attending to some ill creature or harvesting some plant within sight of Aislinn. The windows of the stillroom gave her a view of Aislinn's window in the ladies' wing of the keep, as well as of the lower door into the courtyard.

Lady Eirena became more grim as Aislinn bloomed into a tall young girl of lithe stature and long clean limbs and disturbing steady gray eyes that often gazed unblinking at nothing for long periods of time, as if Aislinn were considering matters of grave importance. Supposedly, young girls of the keep had nothing more important to consider than looking as pretty as possible, or perhaps what color of wool to use next in a tapestry or embroidery.

Aislinn questioned where she should have remained silent and ignorant.

"Mother, where did we come from? Before, I mean—the world before the Dales."

"Before the Dales? There was no world before the Dales, child. Our ancestors came here long before the war with Alizon and they made the garths and keeps, and there was no before. Who put such a notion into your head? Was it Mal, or was it Merdice?"

"Mal does not know, and neither does Merdice. If she does, she doesn't tell me. But I don't believe she knows. She's merely a servant."

"A servant indeed, and you shouldn't talk with her so

much. It isn't seemly for the lady of the keep to be too familiar. If I had my say, Merdice would be gone long ago."

"Merdice is a guardian. She must stay. No one knows the fields and groves as she does, and where the good herbs grow. You need not fear Merdice, Mother. There's no harm in her."

"What peculiar, fanciful notions you have, child. In three years you'll have no time to brood about such foolishness as secret powers and spells. You'll have a husband to take care of, and children soon enough after. If only I had taken you in hand better as a child, and forbidden you to run about like a wild thing with Mal—"

"You could not have stopped me then, Mother, any more than you can stop me now from doing what I think fit."

"Such talk! Do you want to break my heart, after all I've done for you?"

"There are things I must do, Mother."

"Nonsense. You are a young lady of gentle birth, and there is nothing you must do except marry and produce an heir to Malmgarth."

"Nay, Mother. I have other things."

"Indeed! And who decided you must be so high and mighty and important? You're just a girl, my dear, and one day you'll discover of what little importance you truly are."

Aislinn smiled her strange, rare smile, a smile of secrets and hidden sadness. "Mother, none of us is of little importance."

Now that Mal had turned seventeen, Rufus began taking an earnest interest in teaching him the duties of a landlord, and many times Aislinn could not go with him. Rufus took him to the fairs in the fall to sell or buy grain and livestock, flax and nettle for weaving, fine cloth for the ladies, and innumerable other wares all displayed in tented booths for sale or barter.

As many of the household of Malmgarth as could be spared rode to one particular fair in a procession of wains to carry the ladies and the bartering goods. Aislinn and her mother

and her two aunts had a wain to themselves, but as soon as she could escape, Aislinn bestrode her horse and rode alongside Mal. When they reached the fair, she went with Mal and Rufus to look at animals and tools of the farming trade. She was now thirteen and growing into a young lady, but she still had no use for a long, smothering gown stiff with embroidery, nor any use for the company of other keep ladies and their daughters. Nor did she any longer shed her confining clothing in the meadow to dance airily free in her thin shift; Lady Eirena had conceded so far as to allow her shorter, divided skirts for riding and tall boots to protect her feet and legs. Aislinn, however, never lost her relish for running barefoot in the dew with her pale hair streaming free of the nets and combs and pins thought appropriate for ladies. And Mal did not like to see her bedecked in fine gowns, with her hair tightly braided and coiled, any more than Aislinn enjoyed such confinement herself.

In the company of Mal at the fair she walked along looking as much at the other people as she did at all the wares offered for her perusal. Still wearing her plain riding skirt and boots, she eyed the other young girls in their elegant gowns, put on especially for the fairing and the chance glances of possible young suitors.

More than a few curious glances came her way, and Mal saw industrious whispering going on behind hands and fans, and sly eyes turned in her direction. He began to seethe, although Aislinn was interested only in the wares in the traders' booths—silver spurs, bridle ornaments, bells for harnesses, and fine saddlecloths of bright colors.

"That's the lady Aislinn, who is to marry Hroc of Brettford," said one of the whisperers from a clump of ladies gathered beside a weaver's stall. "A plain, pale thing she is, is she not? The young lord will be happier with the land than he will be with such a wife!"

"Will Brettford come to the fair this year?" queried an-

other woman. "If they do, this will be the old lord's chance to see what sort of wife his son is getting. No one knows what the sire is of that child. The lady Eirena never chose to show him to anyone."

"Hist! Here she comes! Be still!"

If Aislinn heard, she gave no sign, but Mal bestowed a fierce glower upon the gossiping ladies as he passed.

"There's a deal too much cackling from these geese here," he growled loudly to Aislinn as he hurried her along.

Aislinn, however, was not to be hurried when she wanted to see something. Standing apart from the merchants' booths, a ragged booth where a juggler was entertaining a sparse group seemed to draw her eager feet toward it. A dark-eyed youth played a stringed instrument as accompaniment to the juggler's amusing chatter, and it was to this youth Aislinn was attracted. She pushed her way through the small crowd to face him directly, her manner quick and her body trembling with eagerness. A swift beam of recognition passed between Aislinn and this ragged young minstrel, who lived upon the road and from the bounty of strangers. He was nearer to her age than Mal's, and his smile was bright and quick in his sun-browned face, as if he had any right whatsoever to be so forward to a lady so much his better.

Mal smoldered, tugging Aislinn away. "There's a better show on the other side," he said. "These fellows are nothing but wandering beggars—and impudent to ladies besides."

"Oh look, Mal!" She halted beside a booth, her countenance suddenly clouding. "He's got birds in cages! I'd like to buy them all and set them free! Do it, Mal!"

Mal gripped her arm and tried to hurry her away from the twittering captives. "Come along, Aislinn! Let him sell his birds. They'll live much longer as ladies' pets than they would on their own in the wild."

"How would you like to exchange your freedom for a long life in captivity?" Aislinn demanded angrily, her eyes flashing.

She planted her feet and glowered at the bird seller, not minding the curious and amused onlookers.

She was going to be headstrong; Mal knew all the signs. He stifled a huge sigh and felt for his purse. It wasn't fat, but he could probably induce the bird seller to liberate all his captives for as much as he had.

"Little birds are good companions for ladies," the bird seller began indignantly. "There's no reason to take on about keeping them in cages. They don't mind a bit, being fed every day and kept safe from hawks and weasels. It's a life lots of us wouldn't mind ourselves." Nevertheless, he took the purse and began opening the cages.

The men waiting for their wives chuckled. Mal flushed scarlet, darting a murderous glance at Aislinn. Or rather at the spot where she had stood a moment before. She was gone, probably drawn away by some other gaudy attraction of the fair.

Or perhaps that ragged fellow from the juggler's tent had followed her and kidnapped her, thinking to ransom a pretty pile of gold from Rufus for her return. Any lascivious fellow in the crowd would covet her if his lusting eye fell upon her. The evils that could befall Aislinn without his protection were legion. Mal plunged through the thickening crowds, cursing the darkening sky. Straight to the juggler's booth he went, but the juggler and his son were yet entertaining the ragged crowd. Mal searched around their tent and wagon and saw no sign of Aislinn. The juggler's wife sat clutching her baby, terrified into silence by the fury of his manner.

Mal rounded upon her at last, demanding, "Where is the young girl? She wore a red jacket and riding clothes!"

The woman stared at him in growing fear. "I saw her," she whispered. "She's another one of them, as is the boy. His mother died when he was born, and I wish he'd gone with her, and him that juggles, too. Your lady is like the lad. I'd know another one of them, after what I've seen—"

"Is he your husband—the juggler?" Mal demanded.

"Aye, and that is the worst of my luck. Stay away from that juggler, lad. He's not—" She ended with a gasp as a shadow loomed against the tent suddenly. In the light that remained, Mal recognized Merdice. The sight of her chilled him, and he had the feeling that meeting her at such a time was not a good omen.

"Idle tongues do a lot of rattling," Merdice said, and the woman took her baby and slunk away. To Mal she said, "Come you, and I'll show you what you seek. A fine protector you are."

"You know where she is?"

Merdice nodded a single sharp nod in the direction of a nearby booth. "I always know where she is."

"What are you doing here?" Mal demanded. "What would your sort care about a fairing?"

"Nothing at all," Merdice replied.

Inside the booth, Mal found Aislinn in the midst of a company of four other young ladies, with their mothers and attendants looking on. They chattered like a flock of birds, delighted with the company of one another as they talked about their homes in distant Dales. Mal looked in but did not enter. Merdice stopped outside, as if she intended to wait there.

"Now are you satisfied?" Merdice inquired.

"No," Mal answered. "How does she know those girls? She likes talking to them, yet there are other girls she refuses to speak to. She thinks girls are boring and stupid."

"And so she should, because they are," Merdice replied maliciously. "Have you met her future husband yet? He's here at the fair, and Eirena is arranging for them to meet."

"I don't care," Mal snapped.

"Why should you be jealous? You've always known she wasn't for you."

Mal heatedly strode away a few paces, then he came back for Aislinn, stepping into the tent.

"It's getting late, my lady," he greeted her politely. "Your mother will be getting anxious."

On the way back to the Malmgarth tents she looped her arm through his and sighed happily. "I've never had such fun," she said, her eyes still feasting on the treats they passed. "We must come here every year and see the ones we met before."

"Who were those girls you were talking to?" Mal asked. "You'd never met them before."

"Oh! Mearr and Liliass and Ana!" She skipped as she walked. "I feel as if I'd met them before. They're friends. Does it seem to you that you know friends at once when you meet them, and no one else seems that way? No one else is the same, or ever will be. I have four friends—Mearr, Liliass, Ana, and you. And Merdice. I've decided I want to make her my fifth friend. She walked all this way just to be where she could guard me. I want you to go back to the juggler's tent and tell her she is to come and share my mother's tent."

"She won't do it," Mal said. "And your mother won't like it. Merdice smells."

Aislinn considered. "Perhaps you're right. Merdice wouldn't like my mother. But I shall win Merdice over to my side somehow, see if I don't."

Mal secretly breathed a sigh of relief, but his sorest trial was yet to come. On the morrow, Lady Eirena brought about the long-awaited meeting of Aislinn and her legal bridegroom, Hroc of Brettford.

Hroc was no withered sapling, as was the much maligned Chlodwig. Mal was certain he would hate him on sight, and he was not disappointed when Hroc and his father's retinue approached the place where Rufus was tented. Hroc rode a mincing white stallion, magnificently caparisoned—and Mal thought hotly of the fine silvery Malmgarth horse Rufus had

sent the young rogue as a wedding gift. Beside Hroc rode his father, Lord Brettford, on a chestnut horse, and behind came the ladies on horseback. Brettford was too far away for people to travel comfortably in wheeled vehicles, so everyone rode and carried their trade wares on strings of packhorses.

More fine gifts were exchanged between Lord Brettford and Lady Eirena and Lord Rufus, while Aislinn and Hroc stood by stiffly, waiting for the formalities to reach the point of formal introduction of the bride to the groom. If the meeting had taken place at home in Malmgarth, Mal would have slipped away to hide his raging jealousy, but here in the open meadows of the fairing place, he was forced to stand still and glare his hatred at Hroc from the ranks of Lord Rufus's eleven men of arms.

Aislinn made her curtsey and immediately subsided into wan silence, doing her best to look pale and listless and drooping. Mal knew she was sulking in the rigid dress she had been forced to wear, which could have stood up by itself without a reluctant young girl inside it. Lady Eirena had supervised the elaborate dressing of Aislinn's hair, which looked unnatural on such a slender girl, robbing her of her own fresh beauty and attempting to invest her with something far more guileful.

Hroc was a simpering youth near Mal's age, glossy with a superficial politeness that did not extend much further into the Malmgarth hierarchy than Lord Rufus and Lady Eirena. He scarcely acknowledged his introduction to Mal, who had not ceased to look as menacing as he possibly could. Mal did not care if Hroc saw his hatred; he would have slain him on the spot if looks were daggers.

Before the fairing was over, Mal heard through the gossips that young Lord Hroc was not displeased with his bride, however had he not approved the bargain it would have made no difference. As the youngest son he was forced to be content with what fate had dealt him. An invitation to Malmgarth was

strongly hinted for, but Rufus extended no such and they rode back to Malmgarth with the lady Eirena livid with rage at her brother's rudeness the entire way.

III

Aislinn sought out Mal's company when she could, more shyly now than in the past. To her silent hurt and dismay, Mal seemed remote and even unfriendly, where once he had possessed almost her entire affection and wholehearted trust. His manner was so cold and stiff that she feared she must have unforgivably betrayed his friendship in some unconscious manner. In company he was severely polite to her, but when she found him alone he virtually rebuffed her, falling into sullen silences punctuated by the shortest of answers to her speech.

So it had seemed to Aislinn since the fair when Hroc had been presented to Malmgarth as its prospective lord. Or perhaps the cause of Mal's hostile behavior was her discovery of the voices on the wind, which had come to her the day after they returned from the fair as she was riding with Mal near the ruins. So plainly had she heard the short snatch of speech that she turned to Mal, thinking he had spoken to her.

"Nay, it was not I," he said rather crossly. "I heard nothing. Is it a crime if a man wants to be silent?"

"Only when the so-called man is only seventeen," she said in jest. "Truly, Mal, I heard a voice."

"The voice of your husband, Hroc, perhaps," Mal snapped.

Aislinn's heart turned cold at the mention of Hroc, who would appear in Malmgarth altogether too soon at the end of three short years to claim her as his wife and Malmgarth as his home. All the joy went out of her in an instant, and to make matters worse Mal was angry at her for some unknown cause.

"Why are you angry? If I said something wrong, I didn't mean it as an unfriend. You know there's no one in the world I like better than you, Mal."

"Don't be such a child, Aislinn. You're the betrothed wife of Hroc and I don't think we should go about alone together anymore." He rode his horse away from her a few paces, leaving her gazing at him, stricken and white.

"Are we no longer friends?" Aislinn's voice trembled, and a great stab of pain gripped her throat and crushed her heart until she could scarcely breathe.

Mal's shoulders rose and sagged in a long sigh. "Yes, but not as we once were. You belong to him—and not anyone else."

"I belong to myself and to Malmgarth," Aislinn said fiercely, blinking back tears that were now angry. "Hroc is neither friend nor enemy to us. Who are you to tell me who I belong to? I belong where I please!"

But she had not reckoned with Mal's pride, or Mal himself. She could attach herself to him and ride out with him and follow him around as usual, but Mal held himself remote from her. He spent more time with Rufus in the fields and meadows, and Aislinn realized how lonely the keep could be without the warmth of Mal's friendship. Always before he had found time for riding with her, or for simply talking by the kitchen fire. Now, instead of warm hopes, there was a cold knot of loneliness in Aislinn's heart.

Merdice went about her business as usual, seeking out the good herbs to replenish her stores, preparing them for the easing of man or beast. She noted with satisfaction that the interfering Mal was taken away more by Rufus to be instructed in the duties of his status as landlord, and that Aislinn was left to her own devices. From the beginning Merdice had worried about Mal, finding him spying upon her as she had. But no one had listened to the little brat's tale, and Merdice had breathed a sigh of relief. By now, a dozen of

years later and longer, he would have forgotten completely what he had seen.

The artful little minx began coming around, even as Merdice had suspected she would, when the time arrived. From that day on the ruins, Merdice had known the curiosity was there and she secretly rejoiced. Aislinn would be everything Merdice had hoped—everything the Old Ones had planned.

Aislinn began leaving things she had come across in her solitary wanderings—a handful of fresh-picked burnbalm with the dew still on it, a snakeskin, the teeth and bristles of a wild boar killed by one of the huntsmen. Merdice waited, knowing what was stirring in the girl. She also watched, following when Aislinn never suspected. She saw that the girl still called the creatures and plants by their true names, instead of forgetting them as she grew older.

Some of the other Stillborn, Merdice knew from their guardians, had forgotten their ways when they became old enough to know they were not typical children. The wise ones had foreseen that the use of mortal bodies would have strange and sometimes unwelcome results. As Merdice read the sendings, she learned that some of the children betrayed themselves innocently and were set aside as lunatic. A few were indeed badly torn between their two heritages, and not to be relied upon. Some had died of illnesses or accidents. Only ten of the original twenty were thriving, unsuspected among their mortal families, grasping eagerly for the keys of knowledge as they gradually came into their hands. In them would repose the knowledge, and the responsibility of maintaining the ancient knowledge.

Aislinn's curiosity about Merdice increased as she was left more to her own devices. In short, she was often lonely, not caring for the company of her mother and her aunts, nor did she care about the distant cousins who were sent occasionally to Malmgarth. The advent of company in the house was excuse for Aislinn to slip away, and increasingly she went to the

stillroom. At first she watched Merdice working and was silent. Merdice tested her knowledge of the secret names, not suspecting that before the end of a year it would be she who would listen more often while Aislinn talked.

"The little redwort is more powerful for stimulating the heart than the witch's thimble," Aislinn would observe gravely, "and harder to find. I shall show you where it grows, and we can bring back a root for your garden."

Not always would she tell Merdice the secret names.

"There is too much Power in that name," she would say.

"Do you think I can't use it wisely?" Merdice demanded angrily when some such was refused her. "Have I not been a guardian of the Power for all my life? Is this jewel I wear merely a bauble to enhance my beauty?"

Aislinn, though young, gazed into the face of Merdice without fear. "It is forbidden for a reason. I know no other answer. What am I, Merdice, that I am placed somehow above you, who are so wise and old?"

Merdice sighed, her temper forgotten. "My dear, I know not the answer. It is within yourself and will be revealed when the Old Ones deem you ready for the knowledge. Until then, I am your guardian and you are the vessel of a power greater than anything created by mortal man. Your purpose will come to you, a thing which you do not now dream. Now is the time for preparation. You know the names of all things, greater and lesser. You can cure wounds, this I have seen. You must learn to hear the voices and understand them, and one day you will learn to speak to those far distant from you."

Aislinn accompanied Merdice to the Place of the Voices, as the young girl named the ruins of the Old Ones with such a sense of certainty and rightness that they both knew it was the true name of the fallen fortress.

"Who are these voices?" Aislinn asked impatiently. She sat within a small circle of broken pillars, turning her head from side to side in the wind, hearing faint scraps of speech blowing

past her. She had grasped only the most tantalizing of scraps at first, after Merdice had shown her where to sit. At once she had been gripped with a sense of belongingness, and she had stayed in the sending seat until she was on the point of exhaustion.

"Ones like you are speaking," Merdice replied. "You must learn to hear only one voice at a time."

"Can you understand them, Merdice?" Aislinn asked.

"Only when someone is sending directly to me. I have not the power that you will have one day."

At last the day arrived when Aislinn, straining her senses to hear the voices, suddenly cried out, "It's Mearr! I can hear her! She's speaking to the juggler's boy, and his name is Hwitan!"

She stayed in the seat until sundown, with Merdice watching nearby and holding the restless horses. Merdice made intermittent feeble attempts to tear Aislinn away that were ignored.

"There are others like me!" Aislinn said, when she finally noticed how dark it was getting and realized they must go back to the keep. "We are ten in number, Merdice, and that is all that is left."

Detecting a note of sorrow in the girl's tone, Merdice replied, "Perhaps the other Stillborn will get another chance someday—perhaps there will be more beings such as you. We don't know what the Old Ones intended by placing their spirits within human mortal frames."

Aislinn rode in silence, her silvery hair glowing like rays of the moon itself. "I am learning more about my Purpose," she said slowly. "The Stillborn speak of the Waste and what lies within it. We don't know yet what is there, but it is something important to the Old Ones—and to us, since we are of the Old Ones. Merdice"—she hesitated long before speaking—"I never knew before how alone I truly am."

"Tush, child. I shall always be with you, whatever comes to pass. And there are nine others like you."

"But what about Mal? And my mother. And Rufus? I'm not as they are. I'm apart from everyone—except the other Stillborn."

"You owe them nothing. If not for the intervention of the Old Ones, they would have had nothing but a stillborn child. You would be nothing but an essence in a bottle. The Power created you, child, and it alone will sustain you. These others will soon pass away from you when they learn what you are. There is no future for you except the Power."

"Mal will not desert me," Aislinn said.

Merdice sniffed. "Mal is no different from the others. He'll turn his back when he discovers how different you are. No man would want a wife with a soul from the Old Ones. Our fancy young Lord Hroc wants healthy children with no blot upon them—or tie to other powers. He wants a wife who stays in the keep and attends to the home fires. That's not the life for you. Nor do we know what powers you might lose in the coupling with a mortal man. All could be lost."

"Or perhaps nothing," Aislinn added. "I don't much like to think about living your sort of life, alone with your Power, feared and despised by almost everyone. Are you never lonely, Merdice? Do you not wish for just one other person in the entire world who will be with you as a staunch, true friend as long as you live?"

"Pshaw," Merdice snorted. "That's a lot of girlish nonsense. I think you're acting very human."

"And feeling very human," Aislinn said. "It's very well to live your entire life in service of the Power, but I don't want to be alone."

"Then be with your own kind, who understand you."

"But even the Stillborn cannot replace my lady mother, and Rufus—and Mal. Did you never love anyone, Merdice?"

"I was taken away from my mother and family when I was six years of age and I never saw them again. Loving mortal beings will lead you only to distress. They are by nature intransigent, and inconsistent, as well as inconstant. Save your-

self the grief and devote yourself instead to the Power. It will never fail you."

"And I must make my human feelings die? How will I be happy if I do that?"

"It's a human mistake to think overmuch about happiness. There's not much of it to be found among your human family that I've noticed."

"But there's the hope of it, the memory of it, and the idea of it," Aislinn said. "I don't think the Power has much to do with happiness."

"Certainly not with the trivial kind you're thinking of. You will be complete only in the Power, and completeness must be happiness. The choices are made for you, Aislinn. There is nothing you can do to alter your fate."

"We shall see about that," Aislinn answered stubbornly. "Is it human to believe you control your own destiny?"

"Very human," Merdice replied in exasperation. "If I did not know better, I would say you were completely one of them. I fear I shall have to discuss this with the other guardians. I hope the other chosen ones aren't similarly infested with human emotions."

Aislinn found increasing comfort in sendings from the other Stillborn, until the tenor of the messages abruptly changed. From the south, Mearr reported strangers who said they had come in ships from the land across the sea. Despite their engaging tales of adventure and ingratiating manners, Mearr did not trust them. They asked too many questions and seemed far too interested in the numbers of men-at-arms stationed at the keep.

Lilias reported other strangers, and Ana, and the rest of the Stillborn in scattered holds across the southlands and up the seacoast toward Malmgarth. Hwitán and the juggler saw more strangers and travelers than was usual for the roads of the Dales, and all the strangers had the seeming of outlanders, and all asked a great many questions concerning the land between coast and Waste.

"Is this the Purpose?" Aislinn asked of Merdice. "Do the strangers know the secret of the Waste?"

"Even you with your knowledge cannot answer that," Merdice replied. "How do you expect me to know?"

Aislinn laughed nervously and paced up and down the length of the stillroom, pausing to examine this or that infusion or dripping bag extracting juices. Her eyes were brilliant when she looked at Merdice, and her entire body radiated tension.

"It is the Purpose for which we were sent," she whispered. "It is almost time. Do you know," she added with a strained laugh, "last night I dreamed of the black wain my mother used to try to frighten me with. I saw it just as plainly as if it were real, and I got into it, and went away. I always thought that wagon was death, coming for me."

"It was only a dream," Merdice said. "You are too fanciful—another of your unfortunate human characteristics. The other guardians have the same problems. If you do have a Purpose, I fear for its success, as long as you cannot set aside your human fears and fancies."

"It's no fear or fancy that a strange force is coming into the Dales from across the sea," Aislinn replied, gazing with unseeing eyes into the sunny courtyard beyond the coolness of the stillroom. "And I cannot rest with any comfort until I know why they are here. They must not go into the Waste, Merdice."

"What is in the Waste?" Merdice asked.

Aislinn shook her head and moved toward the courtyard. "I cannot say, Merdice, but it must be protected."

When they finally arrived in Malmgarth, the strangers were as Aislinn had foreseen in Merdice's scrying cup. There were four of them, dressed well enough in traveling cloaks and chain mail, but to Aislinn they had the air of hired men outfitted and paid for a purpose. To Lord Rufus and the others, the strangers were fair-seeming and courteous, and plausible in

their story of seeking unoccupied land for settlement. It was only sensible that men on such a mission would want to know how much protection Malmgarth thought necessary, and what threats might arise from the direction of the Waste.

They stayed at Malmgarth three days, and by the beginning of the third Aislinn sought out Mal. It was a foggy morning, and she waited on her horse on a rise of ground, knowing Mal would soon be riding by her position.

She nudged her horse forward to meet him halfway.

"Mal, there's evil abroad in the Dales," she greeted him. "The strangers beneath our roof are no friends to us. They are the harbingers of war and death. Once the Dales were overrun with men from over the seas, with strange weapons and wains that moved with no horse pulling. More bloodshed is coming to the Dales, and the threat is already upon our soil."

"How do you know all this? Did Merdice give you these ideas? It sound like something an old crow would cark about. She's not a clean one, when it comes to strange taints. I wonder that Lord Rufus has tolerated her so many years."

"Would it astonish you to know that I am as unclean as Merdice? If not more so? You should know it well, Mal, seeing me call creatures and plants by their names, and a host of other gifts given to me by the Old Ones. I am not as you are, Mal. That which I was to be perished in that stillborn babe. It was the Old Ones who put this life into that body made by Lady Eirena. You should know it well. You were there and you saw what Merdice did."

"I thought it was a nightmare."

"It was no dream. Nor is it any dream that the Dales are being invaded again, and the strangers from Alizon are again searching for that which is hidden in the Waste. Even now the spies are under our roof."

"What would the Old Ones have us do? Kill them?"

"It is what they deserve. We are not murderers of guests,

so they should be captured and taken back to their ships. If this were done throughout the Dales from north to south, the invaders would know we are ready to defend that which is hidden. They will not walk through us burning and pillaging so easily this time."

Mal was silent, ominously silent. Perhaps she should not have told him all that she was.

"How do you know for sure they are coming from the south, through all the settlements?"

"There are ten Stillborn such as I am. Mearr in the south speaks to everyone through sendings, and Hwitan the juggler's boy has traveled from south to north many times. What they have seen makes their warnings very dire indeed. Please believe me, Mal. Everyone in the Dales is in the greatest danger."

"What would the Old Ones have us do? Call together an army?"

"Yes, but it must be done before it is too late. Last time the invaders came searching, the Dalesmen quarreled among themselves too long. We must not be afraid to raise up leaders over ourselves this time."

"We? Are you certain you wish to include yourself in our number, my lady? If what you say is true, then you are not of the Dales, but rather of those Old Ones."

"I am a Daleswoman first, and this is where I belong!" Aislinn snapped.

"Then you plan to live here at Malmgarth with Hroc and raise up his children as a Daleswoman for the rest of your life? Is that what you intend to do?"

Aislinn hesitated. "I cannot say. To tell the fate of a man is forbidden."

"I thought as much. You will leave Malmgarth to be with those others like you. You wouldn't care for this narrow life, after knowing what the Old Ones can give you."

"Mal—you and I must be together. Either I will follow

you, or you will come with me when the call comes. I can't exist apart from you—even knowing you're angry at me. You are my one true friend, and I'll never have another."

"You'll have your husband, Hroc."

"Don't be foolish. I know nothing of him except his name and his face, and neither is important to me. Without you near, I'll be lonely for the rest of my life. You are like the other half of my soul, Mal."

"Your soul came from a bottle out of Merdice's old bag," Mal said. "What need can it have for me, a common Dalesman? What do you Old Ones care about the people of the Dales, except as fodder to protect whatever it is that is hidden in the Waste?"

"I am not an Old One," Aislinn said.

"But you are. You know the real names of all things. You can heal wounds. You command the storm clouds. You speak with your people many miles away. The gulf that separates me from you is so wide and deep that we will never see its sides and bottom. You are one of them. You will never be one of us. But your warnings will be heeded. The Old Ones have the gift for stirring men to battle."

He swung his horse's head around and sent the animal plunging back toward Malmgarth, leaving Aislinn behind. She started her horse forward, letting it carry her where it would. The pain in her heart was like the gulf Mal had described, so huge it threatened to swallow her, and aching empty and hopeless. In his own hurt he was a stranger to her.

The horse carried her as if by habit to the Place of the Voices. Aislinn dismounted and approached the sending seat. At once the voice of Mearr was in her ear, questioning. "What is the source of all this grief?"

"I love a mortal man," Aislinn replied heavily, "and a love such as that is doomed."

"Are we not mortals?" Mearr asked. "These bodies are just as theirs, with the same dreads and desires. Why should we not love mortal men?"

"The Power sets us apart," Aislinn answered bitterly. "We can never be ordinary Daleswomen, with our knowledge and the Voices whispering in our ears. We were created for a Purpose—the protection of that which is hidden in the Waste. How can we be ordinary with such burdens?"

"The burdens will be greater or lesser at times when there is greater or lesser need," Mearr answered. "In times of lesser need we will be almost ordinary."

"But will Mal come to see me as almost ordinary, or will he always see me as one apart? If we were so great and wise, would it hurt so much?"

"We are also human, sister, and with human nature, nothing can be truly foretold. It is a fearsome mixture. Even the Old Ones cannot foresee our fates."

"Why not? Perhaps the Old Ones are not so great and wise either! Why must we suffer?"

Mearr was silent a moment, and Aislinn could hear the voices of some of the Stillborn. Ana had hurt her leg falling from a horse when she was a small child, and the pain had never left her since, and others had hurts similar to Aislinn's. A storm of complaints rose in Aislinn's head until she had to break away. Rising from the seat, she took a single step, then a single clear voice pierced the din of voices, piercing Aislinn's hurt with a single word.

"Asmerillion!"

Always the sudden gift of knowledge had made Aislinn tremulous and weak for a short space, but this was the sort of knowledge that staggered her. She dropped to her knees on the green turf, gasping, her heart laboring until she thought it might burst. She had been given a Name in which there reposed as much power as the knowledge of her own Name. She trembled in fear and humility, knowing afresh the burden of Power and its imperative for proper use. The Name she had been given was Mal's, and she now had the power to command him as if he were a puppet in her hands, if she so desired.

There was that within her which would exult in his domination, and it warred with her knowledge that misusing her powers in this way was an evil that would lead her to misery.

"Merdice!" she called, and the guardian answered with a mind-touch from the rubbly hill above, where she had been waiting and watching. She came down to the sending seat as if she had been expecting to be sent for, crushing a pungent herb between her hands.

"Smell this. It will clear your mind."

"Merdice, I know Mal's name."

"You must never use it or you will destroy any love he has for you."

"This I know, but I'm afraid to lose him."

"Do you want to keep him in a cage? Do you not remember the cage birds at the fairing, and how it hurt you to see them imprisoned?"

Aislinn stopped her restless pacing to and fro, standing still to gaze into her own memories a moment with a faint smile softening her lips. Either the soothing herb or her own wisdom calmed her turmoil. In a more gentle, if sadder tone she said, "So it must be. I will never use his Name to bind him to me, if he wishes to go. Mal is no cage bird; he's a hawk no fetters can bind."

It was evening, and a heavy dew had settled by the time Aislinn and Merdice reached the keep. Aislinn's feet and hem were soaked, as she had insisted upon Merdice's riding her horse while she walked. On the morrow, Aislinn had a fever and kept to her bed, attended by Lady Eirena and Merdice, an unlikely pair, but resigned to the fate that had thrown them together in the joint custodianship of Aislinn.

Aislinn fretted at the wasted time, sending Merdice for this or that concoction to reduce her fever, but after a short space the fever always returned. By night Aislinn tossed in her bed, plagued by dreams of the black wain and the flayed ox.

"Where is Mal?" she asked on the third day. Her face was

pale and her eyes shadowed by the fever's wasting. "I must see Mal—before I go away."

Lady Eirena attempted to soothe her, but Aislinn did not cease to call for Mal.

"Mal is gone," Lady Eirena confessed fearfully. "Gone with Rufus to join forces with Lord Brettford."

"Brettford!" whispered Aislinn, closing her eyes and sinking back as if the strength had left her. "Ill-fated Brettford! He must be stopped—before the black wain . . ."

Lady Eirena and Merdice stared at one another. They had never liked each other, but their disliking was now forgotten.

"Is there nothing you can do?" Lady Eirena whispered. "My daughter is dying!"

"This is no fever of ordinary cause," Merdice replied slowly. "My lady, this child is not wholly your daughter, and there are forces that hold sway over her which you can scarcely understand. She was brought to you for a Purpose, after the life of your child had flown. The Old Ones do not wish for their knowledge to vanish. There is that which is hidden in the Waste, and it must be protected from wrong use. This child is one of ten whose Purpose is to defend that secret. If she chooses to fulfill her Purpose, she must leave you and Mal and all she loves. She struggles between the pull of her two natures—mortal and ancient. It is this struggle that gives her fever. She is yet only a child, with such a choice as this to be made."

Lady Eirena sank to her knees beside Aislinn's cot, gazing into her daughter's face. "Was I too proud, too greedy? I wanted Malmgarth for her, and a rich husband to bring her fame. I should have let her choose Mal. Mal could have kept her here. There is no one she loves but Mal, and I was envious. Now I will lose her completely, won't I, Merdice?"

"I know not, my lady. Such a one as I is unable to read her future."

"My daughter, can you hear me?" Lady Eirena bent closer.

"I will release you from the marriage contract with Hroc. You must become strong again. There is something you must do—the Purpose for which you were sent. If Mal is your destiny, then you must go after him. No one will interfere. You are still my daughter, whatever else you may be. Let the fools and cowards say what they will; I am proud to call you daughter."

Aislinn's sleep became easier. The two women watched over her until just before dawn, when even the vigilant Merdice dozed away lightly. Aislinn awoke and crept softly out of her bed. Her mother slept uncomfortably in a chair, cheek pillowed upon one hand. Aislinn gently kissed her, then touched Merdice on the shoulder.

"It's time," she whispered, taking up only her shoes and her cloak. "The black wain—it's coming."

Merdice awoke and followed her from the room and down the stairway to the door to the courtyard. The door was securely barred and bolted with heavy locks, but they all slid aside soundlessly and the door fell open to let them pass. It closed silently after them.

Aislinn stopped in the center of the courtyard, her loose hair catching the moonlight in a pale nimbus around her head. Her head kept turning, as if she was listening to sounds Merdice could not hear.

"Child, you are ill," Merdice began.

"It comes!" Aislinn whispered suddenly.

A distant rumbling of wooden wheels sounded almost like thunder. The sound grew louder, punctuated by the cracking of a whip. Aislinn turned toward the great outer gates of the keep, which were safely locked and would remain so until Lord Rufus returned. Nothing could come through that portal—yet a cloud swirled there, filled with bits of whirling light that gradually resolved into the form of a great black wagon with two high wheels carved with symbols familiar to Merdice. The wagon was drawn by a giant ox. Its naked form was gray and glistening, streaked with blood, and it moved toward

them inexorably as in a nightmare. The hooded driver raised his whip and cracked it with a sound like lightning striking, and the power of it rushed by Merdice and Aislinn, tearing at their cloaks and hair.

Merdice clutched Aislinn's arm, trying to pull her away, but Aislinn could not be moved. The wain rumbled to a halt and the driver beckoned with his whip. The hay hook stood in the whip socket, its sharp edges gleaming with blue fire. Aislinn pulled Merdice forward, ignoring her babble of protest, which was snatched away in the torrents of wind.

IV

The rest of the Stillborn were in the wagon. A ripple of excitement passed through the other nine and their guardians as Aislinn took her seat. They communicated without a sound, yet Merdice found herself in the center of a sea of excited chatter. She was not conscious of leaving Malmgarth behind in a mighty crashing of wind and thunder and an eerie flaring of lightning, as was witnessed by those who were left behind. The wain traveled not by conventional means; instead of lurching along over a rutted Dales road, it somehow soared, with nothing to be seen distinctly through clouds of swirling mist.

Aislinn strained her senses to find their direction with growing unease. "We're going north into the Waste, Merdice—away from the battle at Brettford. Mal and Rufus won't have enough time to come to terms with the other lords before the invaders land on our shores. Why are we going north, when the conflict is in the south?" She spoke loudly enough for all to hear, ignoring Merdice's attempts to hush her.

The gray-clad driver turned. His face was a hollow shadow beneath his hood. He replied, "If the Dalesmen will not be

able to agree on their leadership, once again all will be destroyed. Singly, their weapons and troops cannot stand against the weapons of the invaders from Alizon."

"We could help them, instead of going into the Waste," Aislinn persisted.

"This is their fate, since they have chosen to be stubborn and foolish. They make as much war among themselves out of pride and distrust of one another. Mortals are born to fight and die in wasted causes. They will keep the invaders occupied while we take up our position to defend that which is hidden."

Aislinn thought of Mal, and the surge of her emotion playing upon the sending powers of the others rippled through them like a stiff wind among leaves, lifting them from their blind acceptance of the driver's will.

"My parents and my brothers will perish unless I do something to help them," Mearr said. "They would never turn their backs upon me!"

The others seconded her in a rising tide of resistance.

Aislinn spoke to the driver. "Turn your wagon around and drive it south."

"Would you oppose the will of the Old Ones? I cannot turn it around. I was commanded to bring you to the Place and I must do it."

"I command you to turn southward, or I shall name your Name," Aislinn said. "I know you and I am not afraid!"

The guardians cringed at her audacity, and Merdice tried to pull her down into her seat.

"Aislinn! This is rebellion! No one fights against the Old Ones in this way! You cannot change what they have decreed."

"Do the Old Ones determine the fate of mortal men?" Aislinn demanded. "Are men not free to determine for themselves their own choices and take the paths their choices lead them to? Not even the Old Ones have the right to say that the

Dalesmen must die to save that which is hidden, I say they will not die, if we turn around and go to their aid, as we should. We are just as mortal as they, despite that which sets us apart. By turning our backs on them, we betray ourselves!"

"Aislinn!" cried Merdice. "You can't do this! You don't know what you do! You might destroy yourself and all the Stillborn! All the careful work and planning of the Old Ones will come to naught!"

Another of the guardians answered, "Perhaps it should! It was a mistake putting such spirits into the bodies of mortal man! What an unholy conjoining of Power and emotion!"

"Be silent!" Aislinn said. "We shall turn the wagon around. We all know the Name of the driver, and I shall be the first to speak it."

"You are a travesty of the Old Ones' Power!" the driver hissed. "You must not command this wagon to turn!"

"But I shall," Aislinn replied calmly. "Your Name is Weard, and I command you to turn about."

"It is as you command," Weard replied grimly.

"Turn about, Weard!" called the Stillborn, while their guardians cowered in the bottom of the wagon.

Weard lashed the air with his whip, scattering deafening bolts of lightning. The wain pitched and trembled like a ship at sea, finally grinding almost to a halt as it swung around. Then the great ox lunged forward again, snorting a spray of foam.

"We're turned southward, Merdice!" Aislinn exulted, giving her guardian a shake.

"Such a thing has never been done before!" Merdice gasped. "You have opposed the Old Ones!"

"No," spoke Mearr. "We are the new Old Ones. We have decided for ourselves."

The wain carried them onward until it was light, but they could see nothing through the clouds that swirled around them. At last, Weard turned and spoke over his shoulder to

Aislinn. "We are near your destination. I will leave you soon, and you can try your skills against the fate that rules these mortals."

"You will stop in a sheltered place and wait for our return," Aislinn said.

The place Weard chose was a ruin on a hilltop overlooking Brettford and the seacoast not far beyond. The keep lay surrounded by green fields and meadows, defended by ditches and earthworks, where sheep and cattle grazed. The only sign of great events afoot were the bright banners flying over the fortress to announce the presence of the visiting lords there. Lord Brettford's retainers on horseback in full battle attire were escorting a delegation from the invaders toward the keep.

"Brettford treats with the enemy," murmured the Voices of the Stillborn uneasily.

Aislinn made a sweeping scrutiny of the surrounding hills. The Dalesmen of various holdings held aloof in their encampments in the hills, waiting for the word of their lords inside the keep while the enemy unloaded men and weapons from their ships.

In the harbor were four ships, not of the like any of the Stillborn had ever seen. They were all of the same gray color, riding low in the water and mounted with inexplicable devices instead of sails and masts. Gaping maws spewed forth into the shallow water of the harbor men, who waded ashore to a large encampment where marching companies were forming up. As Aislinn watched, four small ships plowed into the water and came growling up onto the beach, trundling away with no visible means of locomotion. As Aislinn gazed at them, a part of her recognized the ships and the menace they carried. Among those strangers lurked an ancient evil that she sought for with her mind-powers, stealthily, lest that evil one become aware of her presence.

"They have summoned a Power," she whispered. "A cold-

ness is there, a thing I cannot name. Something not of mortal man, nor of the people in the ships."

She touched Merdice with one hand, and Merdice uttered a stifled cry as she shared the vision. It had the feel of ancient evil, and it was a living thing that suddenly became aware of them, as a bear awakens suspiciously in its den. It cast around warily, then Aislinn suddenly closed it out of her mind contact.

"We must go back," Merdice whispered. "We can't face that alone! It's old and it's evil!"

"We are old also, and we are not evil," Aislinn replied. "Hwitan," she called to the juggler's boy. "Do you know the names of the storms and the giants of the air and of the sea?"

Hwitan surveyed the harbor and the ships, his dark eye kindling with a speculative light. "To be sure I know the Names of the sky and water rulers," he said. "It is time they were awakened against these ships that trespass."

"Not yet, Hwitan. Take with you Hagan and Ehren," Aislinn said. "Mearr, Ana, Adalia; you will go along the shore to find the war camps of the men from the ships. Liliias, Eanraic, Kining; follow the roads leading from the harbor and overtake those who are already advancing into the Dales. We know the Names of all creatures and how to assume their shapes, and we can turn the elements of air, earth, and sea against our enemies. Every stone, every leaf and stem, must turn against these invaders. On the land we must meet them with disasters, and succor those they meet with in battle. We will turn them back to their ships, and drive the ships far from our shores. Merdice and I will go into Brettford and enlist the united aid of the Dales."

"My lady," Merdice addressed Aislinn, with deference for the first time, "I would not want to see one of the Stillborn fall into the hands of Alizon and that evil that they serve. They would be glad to capture and make use of the power that resides within you."

"Are you afraid, Merdice? If you wish to go with the others, you may, but I must go into Brettford. Mal and Rufus are in there. They must be warned that there can be no truce with these strangers."

"My place is to watch over you, wherever you go," Merdice answered staunchly. "If you go there, then I shall also—though it be to our deaths we go." She slipped a sharp dagger from its sheath inside her sleeve. "They will not capture us alive."

Aislinn did not wait for dark, as Merdice repeatedly and doggedly advised. They approached the keep openly, meeting a contingent from the enemy encampment that eyed Aislinn and Merdice wolfishly, their weapons held as if they expected trouble. Merdice made a soft, contemptuous sound, and Aislinn had no difficulty reading her guardian's thoughts. These were common ruffraff, blank shields from Alizon who would do anybody's killing for the right price.

"Here's a pair of geese for the plucking," one of the Hounds of Alizon sneered, his evil laugh echoed by the others. They surrounded Aislinn and Merdice, blocking the way with their horses.

"Get you gone!" Merdice snapped. "This is the lady Aislinn of Malmgarth, and it will go ill with you if you attempt to distress her."

The Hounds laughed rudely, and one reached out to touch Aislinn's hair with a grimy hand.

Aislinn eluded his offensive touch and named the collective name of horses, "Hesturfljott!"

Their mounts at once began to prance and curvette restlessly, while their riders tried to bring them under control with shouts and whips.

"There's witchery in this!" snarled the leader of the Hounds. "We came in peace to negotiate, and we've been attacked with witchcraft!"

"Hesturfljott! Strjuka!" called Aislinn, adding the com-

mand to run, and the horses bolted away wildly, snorting, every eye white-rimmed.

Knowing the Hounds would not return while she could speak to the horses, Aislinn advanced to the earthworks surrounding the fortress.

At the main gate, standing confidently open, they found a mixed guard of Alizon and Dalesmen keeping a suspicious distance from one another. A pair of Hounds with lances barred the path, their hairy, weasel faces suspicious.

"Stand aside," Merdice ordered. "This is the lady Aislinn, betrothed of the young lord Hroc, and you dare not deny her entrance."

"You can't pass here," the foremost of them said roughly. "No one else is permitted to enter while our chieftain Beorg and the priests are within. We don't know what sort of treachery you might be planning."

The Hounds laughed unpleasantly, casting their eyes over Aislinn with villainous leers.

Brettford's men listened, watching with disapproval written on their features. Exchanging a glance, they approached, their weapons held ready.

"Allow the lady to pass," spoke their leader. "We'll take the responsibility if she menaces your chieftain and his wizards. I see nothing to be so frightened of in her aspect."

"No one will pass," the Hound snarled, barring the way with his lance. "I find it suspicious you'd let her pass. I don't like the look of it."

"We'll hold to our truce if you will," retorted the Dalesman. "Are you accusing us of breaking it?"

The Hounds gripped their weapons and moved slowly into defensive positions. Aislinn knew the metal of their weapons and spoke to it, and the weapons were hurled from their owners' hands with a fiery crackle of sparks.

"Witches!" spat one of the Hounds, clutching his seared hands in pain.

Four of the Hounds seized their longbows, but Aislinn named the name of the trees the wood had come from, and all the arrows flew wide. Some even arced backward upon the ones who had released them, when Aislinn was able to concentrate adequately upon the command, with Merdice tugging urgently at her cloak.

The Hounds backed away to a safe distance, their hairy faces incredulous. Silently Brettford's men opened the gate for Aislinn, staring at her with startled eyes as she passed within.

Outside the main hall doors six Hounds of Alizon skulked, glowering as Aislinn approached and barring her way. One of the main hall doors opened a suspicious crack and another Alizon guard peered outside around the edge of his shield. Aislinn named the wood of the doors, causing them to fling outward wildly with a crash and stand open, as if a monstrous hand had seized them. Four Hounds within scuttled backward, gazing incredulously at the form of the advancing foe—a girl, slight of build, with pale hair streaming past her shoulders in tendrils that stirred as if they possessed life of their own. Her image shimmered, mixed with a myriad of other faces and forms and countenances until her opponents knew not the nature of their foe. They backed away before her advance, and she crossed the threshold into the great hall.

Among others seated around the great table were Lord Brettford, Hroc, Rufus, and Mal. They rose to their feet, aghast at her intrusion and her method of gaining entry into the hall.

Aislinn spoke, her voice echoing against the stone walls. "Lord Brettford, Lord Rufus, and the other lords of the Dales, you must not form any agreement with these invaders. How can you have forgotten so easily what passed in the time of your fathers when last these Hounds harrowed the Dales and laid it waste?"

Hroc and his father muttered the first accusations.

"What manner of woman is this? Is it a Witch among us?"

"She has powers!"

The Alizon chieftain and his three gray-cloaked wizards scowled at Aislinn. Again she probed with her thoughts, and she encountered the lurking darkness redolent of evil.

"These wizards traffic in unclean powers," Aislinn said, "besides coming under the protection of those strangers in the ships. Everything about them augurs ill for the Dales."

"We won't be ensnared by strange powers from any quarter." Angrily Lord Brettford rose to his feet and beckoned to his men. "Take Malmgarth and their sorceresses out of our gates and see to it they don't gain entrance again. I hereby sever all bonds with Malmgarth and release all obligations and deny all future alliances. At Brettford keep, Malmgarth has ceased to exist."

Mal turned to face Aislinn's accusers like a wolf at bay. "You fools," he spat. "The lady Aislinn speaks the truth and you know it in your hearts. We can make no truce with Alizon and those shipmen when all they wish for us is doom. Know all you present that I stand with the lady Aislinn, and any who attacks her, attacks me."

"Put her outside the walls," Brettford commanded. "She doesn't belong here, where she can bring more harm upon innocent mortals with her vile powers. To think my son nearly allied with such a one!"

"She's tainted by the magic of the Old Ones," Hroc said. "Those of stillborn birth are said to be inhabited by the unknown forces."

"Aislinn is a gift of the Old Ones," Mal retorted. "To save us from our enemies and our own folly."

"We want no gifts from the Old Ones," Lord Brettford said. "Take your witch and go back to Malmgarth. There can be no alliance with those who consort with evil powers."

"Evil powers!" snorted Rufus. "There's nothing evil about the lady Aislinn, who is heiress by birthright to Malmgarth."

I've known her since her birthing hour and she's never done anything of this nature until now. If this be your idea of evil, then Malmgarth is better not to rally under your flag!"

"I say the same!" echoed Merelow, lord of Wealdmar. "I join with Malmgarth and the lady Aislinn."

"And I," added the lord of Traedwyth, stepping forward to ground his axe on the floor with a resounding clang. Six others and their principal retainers stepped forward to announce their loyalty to Aislinn.

This took nearly half the assembled lords, and the two factions eyed each other warily. More tension mounted in the hall as Beorg and his contingent took their leave with scowling faces and menace in their manner. The chief wizard, Duru, paused a moment to stare at Aislinn, his thoughts probing, testing her strength. She shuddered at his unclean prying, and barred his attack.

"We'll meet again," he murmured, passing by.

Aislinn stepped forward, sweeping each side of the table with an angry glare.

"You are quarreling yet," she said. "The invaders are baying at your doors and you should be unified! There are only nine other Stillborn, and they are in the hills turning back the enemy in the way they know best, and others are striving to keep shipmen from landing more warriors."

"There's not many of them," Brettford said contemptuously. "And they have few horses. What can they do, when each of us has fifty men waiting behind him?"

"They are not many, but they have weapons such as we have never seen," Aislinn replied. "All of you must call your men down from the hills at once before these strangers and their rolling ships move across our land. How can you have already forgotten what happened in the time of your fathers, when Alizon rent the Dales with murder and bloodshed and destruction?"

"While you argue," Merdice said, "Beorg is rallying his

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men to attack us. How much longer do you intend to sit and bandy useless talk, Brettford?"

Grimly, Rufus said, "Half of us are ready to defend our lands. You who are not afraid to fight for your lives and freedom, rally under your flags and Malmgarth will lead you to victory!"

Wealdmar, Traedwyth, Ulfmaer, Faerwold, and their principal retainers shouldered their weapons and strode into the courtyard at the heels of Rufus and Mal, sending part of their number to saddle and bring forth the horses.

A shout from the battlements halted their cavalcade.

"They come! Beorg and his Hounds and a war engine!"

Merdice gasped, "Too late! We're trapped!"

"Not trapped," Mal answered. "They are fewer than we are. We'll drive them back into the sea. Not so much as a foot of Dales land will be given them."

Aislinn commandeered a horse for herself, swinging onto its back before Merdice or anyone could say nay. With a soft word in its ear she sent it cantering after Mal. None of the warriors moved to oppose her—except Mal, who scowled in disapproval, but he knew it was senseless to attempt to alter her mind once she had resolved to do something. He moved his horse near hers protectively, watching alertly as the enemy approached.

A dark knot of men and one of their unfamiliar engines of war moved toward the main gate of Brettford. Ten Alizon warriors rode in the fore, their shields and helms bearing their symbol, a lizardlike creature. Behind them came ten others on foot, followed by one of the strange engines, unfamiliar in aspect but clearly deadly in purpose. It moved like a small ship with no sail, with sinister growling and grinding sounds.

Malmgarth and its allies rode forth from the gate and halted, watching the advance of the enemy to the first earth-work barrier. Had the fortress been properly manned, a body

of armed skirmishers would have ambushed them there and made short work of such a small number.

Aislinn watched their advance, the restless wind plucking at her hair. The Voices of sendings whispered insistently in her ears.

"The enemy has landed at Arnwold," she said, nodding to the south, "and a band of twenty is moving inland. More are eastward, already as far as Walesis."

"What of these who are coming?" Mal asked her.

"Ordinary enough men and horses. But their war engine that comes on wheels of its own power is different. I know not the names of its metals. It is all nameless to me. There are two men inside." Briefly her questing mind touched two minds, which reacted at first with curiosity, than sudden anger and withdrawal. A wave of cold passed through Aislinn that was not cold of the real world around her. It was as menacing as the darkness she sensed in Beorg's wizards.

The war engine halted, its snout forward end pointing toward the mounted riders. The Alizon warriors fell to each side of it, and Beorg rode forward to approach Rufus and Mal with a swaggering air of smug self-confidence.

"This fortress will be ours before nightfall," Beorg said with a leer. "Take yourselves and your Witch into the hills to hide, unless you are ready to die today. Wherever you go, we will ferret you out like rats on the threshing floor."

Rufus replied, "It is you who will be winnowed this day, and the chaff of Alizon will blow away on the wind!"

"You will rue your decision," Beorg said, reining his horse around to move out of the path of the war engine.

For a long moment nothing moved. Inside the engine, the men were making subtle clicking sounds.

Suddenly Aislinn spoke a single word, and the war horses beside her and beneath her sprang as one out of the path of the war engine, just as a puff of smoke issued from it, followed by a thunderous explosion. The stone gatepost behind

them exploded with flying shards of rock. The horses no longer needed Aislinn's warning; they fled in snorting, eye-rolling terror, with their riders struggling for control.

Aislinn's horse plunged wildly to the side, crashing down the road's embankment in a spray of gravel, and plowing to a halt on its knees. Jarred from her seat by the precipitous descent, Aislinn flew over the horse's head and landed hard in a pile of rocks. Stunned, she lay gasping with pain, hearing only a senseless roaring in her ears. She struggled to rise to her hands and knees, but the earth swayed dizzily beneath her.

"Mal!" she called desperately, striving to recognize him among the blurred figures swinging around her.

Mal and the others were gradually regrouping their frightened horses in the shelter of the earthwork when Mal heard her cry. Seeing her, he sent his horse charging toward her, while the war engine rumbled forward once more. Then it halted, pointing its snout toward the gates, now standing securely closed. With another great explosion, the gates shattered into flying pieces, sending the horses plunging in terror once again. Mal leaped from his bolting horse and raced toward Aislinn. The Alizon warriors perceived his intentions and charged to meet him with swords and axes bared. Behind him, Mal's allies urged their reluctant horses forward, but were not in time to avert the end of the short, fierce battle. A sword struck alongside Mal's helmet, sending him reeling as if poleaxed. The Alizon attackers then turned on the Dalesmen and drove them back, and would have pursued them but for the command of one of the three gray-cloaked sorcerers behind the war engine.

"Beorg! Let them go," commanded Duru. "Let's see what we have captured here." With a jangling of his belt apparatus, where an assortment of symbols and pouches dangled, the sorcerer halted near Aislinn, who could sit up steadily enough

to stare back at him in defiance. A bruised and lacerated lump was rising on her forehead.

The sorcerer passed his hands through the air, making signs that glowed momentarily, casting unsavory light upon his raddled countenance. To Aislinn, he had the look of one who had tampered unwisely with the forbidden secrets of the earth.

"I am called Duru. What do you here, Old One?" the sorcerer simpered maliciously. "And in such a vulnerable form as that? Do you not know how easily mortal bodies suffer and perish? Or were you merely curious to experience pain?"

Aislinn commanded a mighty effort of will and rose to her feet, subjugating the agony of her bruised body to face this opponent. Opponent he was to Malmgarth and to all that she held dear, as well as to the Old Ones' powers inhabiting her fragile mortal frame. She recognized Duru for what he was, and for the powers that governed him. He was one who served the evil forces, as Merdicè served the Old Ones, yet he did not possess pure Power as Aislinn did.

"You are an unclean thing, Duru," she said with contempt. "You have no dominion over me."

"Do I not? Are you not flesh, and mortal?" Duru beckoned to the warriors. "Bring this one along with us, and don't be deceived by her tricks into letting her go. She'll soon see that the form she is in is prison enough."

Two men grabbed Aislinn's arms and dragged her along, not realizing that her resistance was due in part to the bruises and swellings incurred in her fall. Biting her lips, she refused to utter the least admission of weakness.

"What of this one?" asked one of the warriors, prodding at Mal's inert form with his foot.

"Bring him," the sorcerer replied after a knowing scrutiny of Aislinn's pale face. "He came to rescue the lady. Perhaps he is important to her. Weak mortals often attach misplaced importance to other mortals."

Aislinn made no sign to gratify his suspicions. Mal's unconscious form was thrown over a horse, and Aislinn was hoisted onto another. Duru rode beside her and held the reins, precluding her escape in the short distance to the fortress.

The war engine rumbled ahead. The Alizon warriors followed in its wake with shouts of savage triumph as it crashed into the remains of the door, finishing the job of ripping the gate from its hinges. The few defenders inside rained arrows and lances down at it, which bounced away without doing harm. Once the war engine was inside, more explosions followed in quick succession, and more shouting.

Rufus and the remaining warriors milled about, torn between the desire to rescue their companions and the need to obtain reinforcements.

"Some one of you must carry the battle sword to the others." Rufus held up the sword, already tied with colored strands. "Tell them it is the time of seige and battle. Beorg and his shipmen may hold the fortress, but much good it will do any of them if no one can get in or out. We hold Beorg and his sorcerers virtual captives. Their advance inland will fall into confusion if we can hold them."

In three days' time the warriors of Wealdmar, Traedwyth, Ulfmaer, Faerwold, and Malmgarth were united to lay seige to the keep of Brettford. They came down from the hilltops suspiciously at first, alarmed by the tales of earthquakes, floods, avalanches, and flash fires carried back by their spies. Barriers of fire on the ridgetops blazed by night, and lightning walked there by day. All nature seemed to be in revolt, hemming in the invaders wherever they turned, except seaward, the way they had come.

V

Inside Brettford keep, Aislinn paced the narrow confines of her prison—a circumscribed area within a five-pointed star, with a vile-smelling candle burning at each point. When she tried to pass the invisible line, a force halted her as if she had walked into a wall. Duru watched his prisoner gloatingly, disturbed from his self-congratulatory glee only by the unfavorable reports from the battle outside the walls.

“Your Dalesmen have us surrounded,” he sneered. “Their efforts are paltry and useless when compared to our superior force. We have two hundred trained fighting men, besides four of the war engines you saw. Each is as powerful as a hundred men with longbows and swords.”

Aislinn replied, “Their might is nothing if all nature opposes their passage. Rocks, trees, water, the air, and the earth itself will gape to engulf them and the earth will tremble in warning. The sea and the giants within it are waiting for our command. We Stillborn were formed for the defense of that which is hidden. Now we defend that which we love. This time these invaders will not pass.”

Duru snorted angrily, galled by the truth in her words. He had heard the earth’s grumbling, and seen with his own eyes the fires and lightnings in the hills. The harbor, usually placid, had turned rough and windy, and the ships were unable to disgorge more men into the dangerous water. Great finned and spiked backs often broke the surface of the water as something large and unknown circled the ships.

Duru continued arrogantly, “You must send to these others and command them to let us pass, or you shall die, and that one with you. A great many of your Dalesmen will die if our troops turn to deliver Brettford keep from the seige. All their blood will be upon you unless you command them to surrender.”

"They will not be so commanded," Aislinn replied. "I would deserve to die if I gave such a command."

"I wonder how arrogant you will be when I decide to have that one with you put to torture—or death."

"Do what you will, but the result may not be what you expect." Her eyes flashed with a dangerous light, and Duru winced as if some invisible force had struck him. Aislinn gave no betraying sign of surprise, and he hastened to conceal his reaction as an impatient turning away.

"We wish only to pass through your lands on our way to the north," Duru continued when his composure was regained. "Perhaps we could come to an agreement. Safe passage for us all to the Waste, and no blood will be shed. I believe you could guarantee us this—even without your cooperation. You would be much more sensible to agree to take us to that which we wish to find, so no harm will come to those you value."

"And afterward, when you have found that which is hidden?" Aislinn questioned.

"You would be freed, of course, and your companion. All those we captured in Brettford would be freed," he added expansively. "It's your foolish hesitation that keeps them in the dungeon below."

Aislinn spoke slowly, her concentration turned within on the voice of warning she heard there. "Those men inside the war engines and the ships are not as we are. They have come from a far place through a strange gate. They seek another strange gate to bring more of their own kind into this world. Do you not know that you will be destroyed along with everyone else when the shipmen move into our lands? They are different, and powerful with their strange weapons. They won't let us live among them in peace, even if we wanted to."

Duru uttered a sharp bark of laughter. "You won't frighten any of us with that sort of talk."

"It would be most wise," said one of the other sorcerers,

pulling on his gray beard, "to show the shipmen our goodwill by taking them willingly to the gate in the Waste. And if not entirely willingly, then seemingly willingly."

"I won't show you that place," Aislinn replied. "It is forbidden to such unclean ones as you."

"Nothing is forbidden if you have enough power," replied Duru, signaling to the other sorcerers. "We'll go into the great hall. It is almost time to appease the powers that dwell within with another life force. Get that old woman we captured; she's a small loss to anyone. Bring the Lady Aislinn, so she may see how vain her protests are."

The wall of unseen force around her was broken by a word, a name Aislinn did not recognize. The sorcerers gestured with their staffs, also unfamiliar wood, and Aislinn felt herself pushed forward. It was a helpless feeling she did not like, not knowing the nature of the force that bound her.

Duru opened the doors to the hall and stepped inside, beckoning the others to follow. At once Aislinn knew she had entered the domain of a power as great as her own. The great hall was nearly dark, except for narrow slits of light coming in from windows above. Sullen, smoking candles of unsavory hue burned at the five points of a star marked on the pavement. Her eyes swept the hall, searching for the source of the evil emanations that beat against her, prying, searching for a weakness in her defense. Her birthright protected her as if by instinct; she was invulnerable to the strange voices that swirled around her, coming from the dark, formless center of the pentacle, where something darker than the dark hung wavering.

The three sorcerers gained in strength with proximity to their source of power. Grizzled of beard and raddled of countenance, they burned with the fever of their search for the greatest of powers. Aislinn felt their thoughts prying at her, trying to read the secret they knew she possessed—the secret of what was hidden in the Waste.

One departed and returned with Merdice, pushing her along roughly.

"This is a paltry offering," the wizard remarked. "There's scarcely any meat on her bones to speak of."

"The Voice does not care for meat," Duru answered, his eyes burning with fervid heat as he lit a brazier. "It wants the essence of life that all living things possess. It feasts upon the power released when a life is taken."

He drew a long sharp knife and stood gazing toward the center of the illuminated pentacle, repeating words of invocation. Aislinn sought to touch Merdice's mind and was sharply rebuffed with the words "Don't feed it your fear!"

The darkness gathered itself almost into a recognizable form. Duru beckoned, and the others brought Merdice forward.

Aislinn flung back her head and commanded them, using the powers of her voice. "Halt! Release this woman! You trespass gravely in this wanton slaughter, and forces are rising against you as I speak."

Her voice flattened the flames of the candles, driving them backward, but not extinguishing them.

The centermost of the three sorcerers jerked forward a step. His withered lips parted to speak in a voice not his own, which strained his throat with harsh rasping.

"Who are you that dare defy my servants?"

"I shall remain nameless. You don't belong in this place. I command you to depart, by the power of the Nine Great Names!"

"I was summoned," came the resonating answer from the center of the blackness, thrumming through its human medium, shaking him in its grasp.

Aislinn darted a look at Merdice. Seeking forbidden knowledge had somehow led Duru to the discovery of the name of this ancient malignancy, and thereby he gained a small degree of control over it.

"What folly!" Merdice hissed. "Duru, you're a fool to have raised this thing from its sleep!"

Duru smiled coldly. "Bow to my will and live. Resist and you perish forever, swallowed by the Voice."

Aislinn was drawn a step or two nearer, then she halted the pull that drew her forward. Contemptuously, she said, "I am not yours to command. The vermin who called you are your slaves, not I. Command them to your will."

She swept the gray-cloaked ones with her gaze, feeling more of the cold evil radiating from their glittering, soulless eyes. The Voice they had summoned had taken them over completely.

The Voice spoke. "Seize her and bring her to me."

They moved forward with clawlike hands reaching for her, waves of overpowering strength beating at her. For an instant Aislinn dared hurl her mind probe into them, searching for something in them whose name she knew. They resisted fiercely, but not before Aislinn was able to pick from the mind of the weakest of them a single frightened thought: "Power and emotion! Does she know?"

"I am not afraid to approach this creature of my own volition," Aislinn said, shying away from the touch of their yellowed, evil hands.

Turning her back upon them, she moved forward toward the dark nothingness hovering like a cloud within the pentacle. She signed with one hand, creating a glowing blue image that hung in the air before her.

"That will not protect you here," spat the sorcerer medium, trembling again with the force speaking through him. "It is commanded that you reveal the hidden gate in the Waste, or your fate will be that of those who thought to oppose my might."

The dark force permitted her a brief glimpse of the other captives held in a dark place, ringed about by fire and cold. Among them she recognized Mal, and her probe leaped out

to him like a spark from a pitchy log bursting asunder, brilliant with all the power of her need for him. She glimpsed his startled face for a split second, time enough to whisper his secret name, "Asmerillion!"

Then the Voice broke around her in a wave of thunder, a roar of pain and fury that shook all three sorcerers. They gripped their skulls, convulsed in pain. The Voice lashed out at Aislinn in a withering blast of life-destroying abnegation. Merdice gripped her arm, whispering, "Use your anger as a weapon! Emotions are nameless to this creature! It has never been human!"

Relentlessly, Aislinn summoned her fury and will to live, and the blackness retreated. She probed with her mind power, finding Mal again in some dark corner of the fortress. He was on his feet now, raging at the door that barred him and the others from escape.

"Asmerillion, come forth!" Aislinn called with a fiery surge of wrath.

The mediums jerked like puppets, stumbling forward, then reeling back in the gust of Aislinn's anger.

"Release your prisoners and depart!" she hissed, her rage honed to razor sharpness by the glimpse of Mal. "I am Stillborn of the Old Ones, double-protected against all Nameless!"

The Voice growled, selecting Duru for its punishing grasp, shaking him as a dog shakes a rat. Aislinn felt his fear as a rush of emanations, which the Voice seized upon with greedy hunger. The creature expanded, threatening to burst through the protective wall of candle and flame. Now it had form, many forms, mostly bestial and distorted.

"Asmerillion! Come forth! Speak!" Aislinn commanded again, silently speeding the true name of the wood to Mal.

In the dungeon below, in the most ancient part of the several keeps that had stood on that site, Mal stood transfixed, his essence pouring around him like steam from the body of a

sweating horse. Then he spoke to the door, and the wood burst from its iron bands. Brettford and Hroc and the others still stood flattened against the wall, not moving, staring at him and the door in stupifaction.

"Asmerillion!" came the quavering cry again, and all of Mal's being answered that call. He plunged through the wreckage of the door, meeting the Alizon warrior set to guard the prisoners. Still stunned from the explosion, the warrior reached belatedly for his sword as Mal hurtled into him with a catlike leap. It was as if the fanciful dreams of his childhood had come true—his strength was limitless; no enemy could touch him, so great was his speed and power. He tore the warrior's weapons away from him, hesitating only long enough to command Lord Brettford and the others: "Follow me if you want to live!"

The power of his voice brought them out of their shock; they hastened to follow him, inflamed by his own strength to deeds past their reckoning. They overtook more Hounds of Alizon in the subterranean corridors of the keep, taking their weapons and leaving them broken and wounded in their wake. As they gained the stairway to the surface, they battled relentlessly with twice as many Hounds, ever pressing their way forward with Mal in the fore, swinging his sword with tireless ferocity.

Ever in his mind he heard Aislinn's voice calling, "Asmerillion! I summon thee!"

By the time the short, sharp battle of the stairway was done, eight Hounds lay dead and dying, and three were fleeing to spread the alarm.

"After them!" panted Hroc, fired with bloodlust, but it was Mal's command he waited for.

"Let them go," Mal said. "It's the hall we must take now. Aislinn is there!"

They had yet the courtyard to cross, which seethed with Hounds taking up battle positions. Mal counted fifteen of them remaining, not including the two men inside the war engine. It

sputtered into sudden life, rolling forward with its snout swiveling. Below the snout was a slot from which protruded the smooth black weapon that issued a puff of fire, a sharp explosion, and instant death to one of Brettford's men. The force threw the man backward, clutching his breast where a deadly gushing of blood poured relentlessly over his hands. More sharp cracking sounds came from the war engine, causing the stones to explode where an unseen projectile struck, and splintered holes appeared in doors and pillars. Mal and his followers flattened themselves behind abutments and walls, scuttling desperately to escape the death-dealing machine as it revolved around the courtyard. The Hounds of Alizon cheered nastily, nevertheless maintaining their hiding places as if they also feared the thing.

Mal's small force retreated from the courtyard, their hot fury subsiding quickly into bafflement and fear.

Within the hall, Aislinn and the others heard the battle raging outside.

"Your barbarians have escaped," Duru said. "Bring them into submission at once, or they will all be destroyed!"

"I have come to free my people!"

"Your people!" the Voice repeated, speaking through one of its mediums. "If they are not your slaves, they are not your people. You are of the ancient breed, as I am, even though you appear in human form."

"I am human also," Aislinn flared proudly.

"These people are nothing," the Voice persisted.

"I will destroy you to save them," answered Aislinn, darting another searing mind probe toward the darkness in the pentacle. In her wrath, she summoned the Names of the loose objects in the hall, creating a storm of flying cups, stools, benches, firewood, and loose weapons. Even the fabric of the tapestries on the walls flapped frantically. Strains of wild music tore through the air, dischordant harps and lutes and flutes clamoring in protest. Aislinn's image shimmered, giving her a

hundred faces and forms of attire in the space of moments. A flickering nimbus of light hovered around her.

The Voice thundered sharply, "We are old enemies, you and I! Do not attempt to deceive me with these idle tricks! Your human nature pollutes your powers with these strange manifestations! This is abomination!"

"Go back to your well of darkness," Aislinn commanded. "Only the wisest ones will hold the secret of the gate place, and the wisest ones are not the most evil ones." The nimbus flared like black smoke, roiling with anger.

"You will die, and your Dalesmen, and your brothers and sisters in mortal flesh," hissed the Voice enticingly. "All you own will be mine then, and you will feel no more pain."

Like a whiplash, Aislinn's bruises and aches flared into agony. With enormous stubborn pride she bit her lip and vowed inwardly to give no sign of her pain. The nimbus surrounding her turned red, shot with swirls of black.

Then the Voice showed her a brief vision of the courtyard, with Mal and the Dalesmen cornered by the triumphant Hounds, with the war engine growling like a ravening beast over its prey.

"They will die, unless you save them," the Voice whispered. "Speak the word, and they will be delivered. Hesitate and they are all lost."

As Aislinn gazed, another of the Dalesmen was caught by the projectiles hurled by the war engine, and she watched his life expire before the Voice barred her sight.

"Don't weaken!" Merdice snapped. "Rage! Weep for those who die! These are your weapons! Use them!"

"Asmerillion!" Aislinn's thoughts directed the Name guardedly, and she was rewarded with a sudden bright flash as her mind touched Mal's. She felt his wrath directed toward the Hounds and their engine, his fury at the death of his companions, and his fierce will to survive sweeping all fear and doubt before it. At the sound of his true name he leaped to his feet,

again radiating the mesmerizing power that heartened his companions and strengthened every fiber of his being.

Mal heard her voice whisper as if in his ear. "Take the lance to the war engine. Speak the Name Jurtsprengur!"

Mal gripped the lance at the mention of its name and felt a tremendous surge of power in response. It moved like a living thing in his hand, finding its mark twice in the flesh of the Hounds during his rush across the courtyard. No hand or weapon was able to touch him. He charged at the engine and drove the sharp metal point into the slot, crying out the name of the wood: "Jurtsprengur!"

The lance exploded into splinters and greenish mist. Mal leaped away, eyes watering with the acrid sting of the mist, gasping a little at its choking smell. The war engine continued rolling forward, scattering the Hounds and crashing blindly over obstructions as if it had gone mad. Then it shouldered up against a wall, partially knocking it down, climbing sidewise up the rubble in a drunken manner, and then it rolled ponderously over onto its back. Its multitude of wheels kept turning with the same grinding noise, but no more explosions issued from it.

The remaining Hounds, perceiving that their guardian was helpless, mounted a determined defense of the main hall. Mal scarcely saw the men he battled; they bobbed into his view for a few moments, then were hewn down by his sword, mortally wounded. When he reached the door, he remembered the word that had broken the door of their prison. Speaking it again, he was rewarded with a shuddering explosion of splinters and shards of wood flying away in all directions. With his men at his back, he thrust his way into the dark hall, somewhat lighter now by the loss of its two great doors.

"Aislinn!" he roared.

"Asmerillion! Mal!"

"Good!" hissed Merdice. "Think of Mal, child! You love him, don't you?"

Triumphantly, Aislinn's power surged forward, pouring out

all her defensive fury and loyalty and passion and indomitable human will, from the depths to the heights of her scale of emotion. Shapeless images gathered around her, each trembling with a different color: angry black, courageous red, blazing yellow, white, pure quivering blue, and the malignant fury of green. Aislinn summoned them, gathering them, honing them into darts, which she hurled at the blackness in the pentacle.

The Voice winced away from her bombardment of nameless forces. The mediums raised a unified shriek of agony and terror as the bolts struck the center of the star. They collapsed like empty sacks, convulsed and clawing.

"This is anathema!" the Voice wailed, already distant. "These powers are nameless!"

Duru gasped. "The Voice is retreating!"

Trailing colored auras, Aislinn strode past them without a glance and smote off the flame of the nearest candle with a spattering of grease and sparks. With a howl, the Voice fled back to its hiding place, a distant dark region Aislinn glimpsed in one last hurled thought probe.

The warriors surrounding the fortress waited for the expected attack. One of the ships in the harbor disgorged another of the war engines into the churning waves, only to watch it being engulfed and overturned by a huge dark green wave that some watchers insisted was a mighty beast of the sea with glistening scales and a spiky spine.

"Hwitan is doing his job well," was all Aislinn said.

All the forces of nature seemed conjoined to bring to pass the battle at Brettford. The retreating forces of Alizon struck toward the fortress and found it ringed with the besiegers. At the end of the third day, when night should have fallen, which might have aided their attack upon and retreat into the keep, the light stayed in the sky, a red, lowering nimbus that bathed the keep in lurid light. Baffled and not a little dismayed, the enemy forces staged a series of rather ragged attacks upon the

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siege-holders, harrying and retreating. Always the unexpected fire sprang up for no cause, obscuring clouds of fog divided the enemy into smaller bands, lightning strikes heralded the stealthy approach of the foe, and the sea in the harbor threatened to devour the ships anchored there.

Near dawn, one of the ships attempted to negotiate the rocky mouth of the harbor and was ground to pieces against the rocks, ending in a series of fiery explosions and billowing clouds of roiling black smoke. The warriors of Alizon, perceiving themselves in the desperate situation of being deserted on hostile shores by the ones who had brought them there, abandoned their ambition of capturing the keep and pushed toward the sea. Another war engine guarding the harbor encampment grumbled into life, advancing toward the water at a speed fast enough to be construed as cowardly flight by the besiegers, leaving behind the Alizon warriors who once so confidently had followed it. Some of them plunged into the water, risking their lives to reach the open maws of the ships, but the rough waves and that below them greatly reduced the number that managed to crawl safely out of the water and into a ship.

Once in the water, the war engine was easy prey for another dark green wave sporting scales and fins, which rolled it over several times almost playfully before taking it under and keeping it. The water exploded many times, but the war engine did not resurface.

The three remaining ships weighed anchor and drifted seaward past the wreckage of the fourth ship, leaving behind the tattered remnant of an Alizon host, suddenly with no place to turn on shores unmistakably hostile. Battle horns were sounding in the surrounding hills. Beneath snapping banners, Rufus and Mal led the united forces of Dalesmen to the attack, finishing the war that Alizon and its strange allies had thought to bring to the Dales. The prisoners taken were held securely until ships could return them to Alizon, and the dead were heaped up and burned; the burning lasted seven days and seven nights.

At Aislinn's orders, the Black Wain rolled away empty, except for gray-cloaked Weard morosely cracking his whip. Only a select few watched it depart and vanish into the mists that accompanied it. The Stillborn and their guardians, including Merdice, and Mal and Rufus, watched it disappear like a banished nightmare.

"I did not dream it was real," Mal said uneasily when it was safely gone. "Not even when Lady Eirena tried to frighten us with it. How did she know?"

Merdice replied, "It was an easy matter to put such a dream into her head, to help prepare Aislinn for the day it would arrive."

"Nor will it return," Aislinn continued Mal's thought, "until war again threatens that which is hidden."

"Then you will go with it again?" Mal questioned.

"Yes, we all must," Aislinn replied. "But it will be long years before any of us return forever to the place where the Wain is kept. Long enough for me to be lady of Malmgarth, if you will be its lord."

"But your mother, Lady Eirena, and Hroc—"

"All barriers have been removed, Mal, except, perhaps, your fear and distrust of my Stillborn heritage."

"Let the others fear," Mal replied. He lifted her up on his horse to ride before him. "We'll send word ahead for Malmgarth to prepare to receive its Stillborn bride. There'll be such a feasting and a celebrating, and every holding will be invited."

Turning away, Merdice almost smiled, quickly hiding this irregular impulse with her hand as she thought of a night fourteen years before when a small boy had eluded her behind a tapestry. All her regrets about that escape left her. Aislinn had a new guardian and would not require her protection, but soon there would be more young ones of the Stillborn heritage for Merdice to teach the lore. So far, the unholy conjoining of Power and emotion had proven strong, and bright with promise.