

Sword of Unbelief

by Andre Norton

1: Fury Driven

My eyes ached as I forced them to study the hard ground. From them a dull pain spread into the bony sockets that were their frames. The tough, mountain-bred mount I had saved from our desperate encounter with the wolf-ravagers stumbled. I caught at the saddle horn as vertigo struck with the sharp thrust of an unparried sword.

I could taste death, death and old blood, as I ran my tongue over lips where the salt of my own sweat plastered the dull gray dust of this land to my unwashed skin. Again I wavered. But this time my pony's stumble was greater. Strong as he was, and war-trained, he had come near to the end of endurance.

Before me the Waste was a long tongue of gray rock, giving rootage only to sparse and twisted brush, so misshapen in its growing that it might well have been attacked by some creeping evil. For there was evil in this country, every sense of mine warned that, as I urged Fallen on at a slow walk.

That wind which whipped at my cloak was bitter, carrying the breath of the Ice Dragon, It raised fine grains of gray sand to scour my face beneath the half shading of my helm. I must find some shelter, and soon, or the fury of a Dune-Moving Storm would catch me and provide a grave place which might exist for a day, a week, or centuries—depending upon the caprice of that same wind and sand.

An outcrop of angular rock stood to my left. Towards that I sent Fallen, his head hanging low as he went. In the lee of that tall fang I slipped from the saddle, keeping my feet only by a quick grasp of the rock itself. The ache in my head struck downwards through my shoulders and back.

I loosed my cloak a little and, crouching by the pony, flung it over both his head and mine. Little enough shelter against the drive of the punishing grains, but it was the best I had. However another fear gnawed at me. This flurry would wipe out the trail I had followed these two days past. With that gone, I must depend upon myself, and in myself I had lesser confidence.

Had I been fully trained as those of my Talent and blood had always been—then I could have accomplished what must be done with far less effort. But, though my mother was a Witch of Estcarp, and I was learned in the powers of a Wise Woman (and had indeed

done battle using those powers in the past), yet at this moment I knew fear as an ever-present pain within me, stronger than any ache of body or fatigue of mind.

As I crouched beside Fallen, this dread arose like a flood of bile into my throat, the which I would have vomited forth had I could. Yet, it was too great a part of me to allow itself to be so sundered. Feverishly I drew upon those lesser arts I had learned, striving so to still the fast beating of my heart, the clouding of my thoughts by panic. I must think rather of him whom I sought, and of those who had taken him, for what purpose I could not imagine. For it is the way of the wolfheads to kill; torment, yes, if they were undisturbed, but kill at the end of their play. Yet they had drawn back into this forbidden and forbidding land taking with them a prisoner, one worth no ransom. And the reason for that taking I could not guess.

I set a bridle of calmness upon my thoughts. Only so might I use that other Talent which was mine from birth. So now I set my mind picture upon him whom I sought— Jervon, fighting man, and more, far more to me.

I could see him, yes, even as I had sighted him last by the fire of our small camp, his hands stretched out to warm themselves at the flames. If only I had not—! No, regret was only weakening. I must not think of what I had not done, but what I must now be prepared to do.

There had been blood on the snow-shifted ground when I had returned, the fire stamped into cold charred brands. Two outlaws' bodies hideously ripped—but Jervon ... no. So they had taken him for some purpose I could not understand.

The dead wellheads I left to the woods beasts. Fallen I had discovered, shivering and wet with sweat, within the brush and brought him to me by the summoning power. I had waited no longer, knowing that my desire to look upon the shrine of the Old Ones, which I had turned aside to do, might well mean Jervon's death, and no pleasant death either.

Now, crouching here, I cupped one hand across my closed eyes.-

"Jervon!" My mind call went out even as I had brought Fallen to me. But I failed. There arose a cloud between me and the man I would find. Yet I was as certain that behind that shadow he still lived. For when one's life is entwined with another's and death comes, the knowledge of that passing through the Last Gate is also clear—to one trained in even the simplest of the Great Mysteries.

This Waste was a grim and much-hated place. Many were the remains of the Old Ones here, and men of true human blood did not enter it willingly. I am not of High Hallack, though I was born in the Dales. My parents came from storied Estcarp overseas, a land where much of the Old Knowledge has been preserved. And my mother was one of those who used that knowledge—even though she had wed, and so, by their laws, put herself apart.

What I knew I had of Aufrica out of Wark, a mistress of minor magic and a Wise Woman. Herbs I knew, both harmful and healing, and I could call upon certain lesser powers—even upon a great one, as once I had done to save him who was born at the same birth with me. But there were powers beyond powers here that I knew not. Only I must take this way and do what I could for Jervon who was more to me than Elyn, my brother, had ever been, and who had once, without any of the Talent to aid him, come with me into battle with a very ancient and strong evil, which battle we had mercifully won.

"Jervon!" I called his name aloud, but my voice was only a faint whisper. For the wind shrieked like a legion of disembodied demons around me. Fallen near jerked his head from my hold on his bridle, and I speedily set myself to calming him, setting over his beast mind a safeguard against panic.

It seemed to last for hours, that perilous sheltering by the fang rock. Then the wind died and we pulled out of sand drifted near to my knees. I took one of my precious flasks of water and wet the corner of my cloak, using that to wash out Fallen's nostrils, the sand away from his eyes. He nudged at my shoulder, stretching his head towards the water bottle in a voiceless plea for a drink. But that I did not dare give him until I knew what manner of country we would cross and whether there would be any streams or tarns along the way.

Night was very near. But that strangeness of the Waste banished some of the dark. For here and there were scattered rock spires which gave off a flickering radiance, enough to travel by.

I did not mount as yet, knowing that Fallen must have a rest from carrying a rider. Though I am slender of body, I am no light weight with mail about me, a sword and helm. So I plowed through the sand, leading Fallen. And heard him snort and blow his dislike of what I would have him do—venture farther into this desolation.

Again, I sent forth a searching thought. I could not reach Jervon. No—that muddling cloud still hung between us. But I could tell in what direction they had gone. Though the constant concentration to hold that thread made my head throb with renewed pain.

Also there were strange shadows in this place. It would seem that nothing threw across the land a clear dark definition of itself, as was normal. Rather those shadows took on shapes which made the imagination quicken with vague hints of things invisible which still could be seen in this way, monstrous forms and unnatural blendings. And, if one allowed fear the upper hand, those appeared ripely ready to detach themselves and move unfettered by any trick of light or dark.

I wondered at those I followed. War had been the harsh life of this land now for so many years it was hard to remember what peace had been like. High Hallack had been overrun by invaders whose superior arms and organization had devastated more than half the Dales before men were able to erect their defense. There had been no central

over-lord among us; it was not the custom of the men of High Hallack to give deference beyond the lord in whose holding they had been born and bred. So, until the Four of the North had sunk their differences and made a pact, there had been no rallying point. Men had fought separately for their own lands, and died, to lie in the earth there.

Then had come the final effort. Not only did the Dale lords unite for the first time in history to make a common cause, but they had also treated with others—out of this same Waste—the Wereriders of legend. And together what was left of High Hallack arose with all the might it could summon to smash the Hounds of Alizon, driving them back to the sea, mainly to their own deaths therein. But a land so rent produces in turn those with a natural bent towards evil, scavengers and outlaws, ready to plunder both sides if the chance offered. Now such were the bane of our exhausted and warworn country.

These were such that I followed. And it could well be that, since they were hardy enough to lair within the Waste, they might not be wholly human either. Rather be possessed by some emanation of the Dark which had long lurked here.

For the Old Ones, when they withdrew from the Daleland, had left behind them pools of energy. Some of these granted peace and well being, so that one could enter therein timorously, to come forth again renewed in spirit and body. But others were wholly of the Dark. And if he was destroyed at once the intruder was lucky. It was worse, far worse, to live as a creature of a shadow's bidding.

The ghostly light streamed on before me. I lifted my head, turned this way and that, as might a hound seeking scent. All traces of trail had been wiped away by the wind. However I was sure that I followed the right path. So we came to two stelae which fronted each other as if they might once have formed part of an ancient gate. Yet there was no wall, just these pillars, from the tip of which streamed cloudwards thin ribbons of a greenish light. And they had been formed by men, or some agency with intelligence, for they had the likenesses of heavy bladed sabers. Yet on their sides I could see, half eroded by time, pits and hollows which, when the eye fastened straightly upon them, took on the semblance of faces—strange faces—long and narrow, with large noses overhanging pointed chins. Also it seemed that the eyes (which were pits) turned upon me, not in interest or in warning, but as if in deep, age-old despair.

Though I felt no emanation of evil, neither did I like to pass between those sword pillars. Still it was that way my road ran. Quickly I sketched with my hand certain symbols before I stepped forward, drawing Fallon on rein-hold behind me.

These pillars stood at the entrance of a narrow gash of valley which led downwards, the steep sides rising ever higher. Here the dark had full sway, for there were no more of the luminous stones. So that I went with that slow caution I had learned in the years I had ridden to war.

I listened. Outside this valley I had heard the murmur of the wind, but here was a deep quiet. Until my straining ears caught a sound which could only be that of running water. And there was a dampness now in the air, for which I was momentarily grateful. Fallon pushed against me, eager to slake his thirst.

But where there was water in this desert land there could also well be a camp of those I pursued. So I did not hasten, and I held back the pony. He snorted and the sound echoed hollowly. I froze, listening for any answer which might mean my coming was marked. But if the wolves I followed were human, certainly their sight here would be no better than mine, even more limited for they did not have—or so I hoped—the Talent to aid it.

On we went step by hesitant step. Then my boot, slipping across the ground, struck against some obstruction. I stooped, to feel about with my hands. Here was a cluster of small rocks, and beyond that, not too far, the water. I felt a path as clear as I could. As far as I could tell, a spring broke ground on my left, some way up the wall of the valley, and the water poured from that into a basin which in turn must have some outlet on the other side.

I scooped up a handful of the liquid, smelled it. There was no stench of minerals or of other deadliness. I splashed it over my face below the edge of my helm, washing away storm grit. Then I drank from my cupped hands, and squeezed aside to let Fallon have his way. The noise of his gulping was loud enough, but I no longer feared detection. Those I sought had come this way, yes. My refreshed mind assured me of that. But there was no camp hereabout.

"Jervon!" I pressed both hands over my eyes, pushing back my helm, reaching out in mind search again. For a moment it was as if my touch found a weakness in that mist I had encountered before. I touched— He was alive, mauled yet not badly injured! But when I tried to deepen contact, that I might read through him the numbers and nature of the force which held him, there was once more a cutting off of communication, as suddenly as a sword might descend between us.

The nature of that interference I could judge. There was that ahead which was aware of me, but only when I tried to reach Jervon. For as I hunkered there, my mind barrier up, I did not sense any testing of that. In me now fear was lessened; instead another emotion woke to life. Once before I had fought against very ancient evil—with love—for the body and soul of a man. Then I had sought my brother Elyn trapped in a cursed place. Though what I felt for Elyn, though we were of one blood and birth, was but a pale shadow to that which filled me when Jervon looked upon me. I am not one who speaks easily of what she thinks the deepest upon, but in that moment I knew how completely Jervon's fate and mine were rooted together. And I experienced fury against that which had cut the cord between us.

Recognizing that fury, I drew deep upon it, used the hot emotion to fill me with new strength. For, even as fear weakened that which was my own, so could anger give it

sword and shield, providing I might control that anger. And there in the dark, by that unseen pool, I fashioned my invisible armor, sharpened those weapons which no one but myself could ever wield. For they were forged out of my wit and my emotion even as a smith beats a true-edged sword out of clean metal.

2: The Shadow Hunter

IT was folly to advance farther into the dark. I dared not risk a fall and perhaps a broken bone for me or for Fallon. Though every surge of emotion urged me on, I held to logic and reason. Here dark was so thick it was as if the ground about generated some blackness. Above hung clouds to veil even the stars.

I fumbled in my saddle bag and brought out a handspan of journey bread, hard enough perhaps to crack teeth gnawing it unwarily. This I soaked in water and fed the greatest portion to Fallon, whose lips nuzzled my hand to search out the smallest crumb. Then I used my will and forced upon his mind the order that he was not to stray, before I settled in between two rocks and drew my cloak about me as poor protection against this damp chill.

Though I had not thought to sleep, the fatigue of my body overcame the discipline of my mind and I dropped into a dark even deeper than that which enfolded me here. In that dark, presences moved and I was aware of them, only not clearly enough to draw any meaning from such fleet ings.

I woke suddenly, into the gray of early dawn. And I awoke because I had been summoned as if someone had clearly called my name, or a battle trumpet had blown nearby. Now I could see the dim pool with the runnel of water leaping down the rocks to feed it. On the other side of that Fallon grazed on clumps of tough grass, which were not green but sickly ashen, withered by the chill of the season.

There was indeed an outlet for the pool basin, a kind of trough which ran on into the morning fog beyond. I moved stiffly, but, now that my mind was once more alert, I cast ahead for that blankness which hid Jervon and his captors.

It was there and this time I did not make the mistake of trying to pierce it, and so alert whatever I had touched the night before. At any rate, for the present, there was only one road, that walled by rises of stone on which I could not even see finger holds. Yet there were markings there—eroded and time-worn as those upon the stelae guardians—too regular to be nature's work, too strange to be read by me. Save that I disliked the general outlines of some of those symbols, for with their very shape they aroused misgivings.

As I broke my fast with another small portion of water-soaked bread, I kept my eyes resolutely turned away from those shadowy scrawls. Rather did I strive to see into the

mist which filled this cut in the earth. And again I listened—but there was nothing to hear save the water.

Having filled my two saddle bottles I mounted, but I let Fallon for the moment take his own pace. For the way was much cluttered with rocks, with here and there a landslip over or around which we crept with care.

The sense of new danger crept slowly upon me, so intent was I on keeping contact with that peculiar blank-ness which I believed imprisoned Jervon. This was first like a foul smell which is but a suggestion of rottenness, but which gradually grows the stronger as one approaches the source of corruption. Fallon snorted, tossing his head, only kept to the path by my will.

Oddly enough I could not sense any of the ancient evil in this thing, though I bent my mind and my Talent to test it by all which I had learned from Aufrica and the use of my own power. It was not of any source I knew—for the taint was that of human not of the Old Ones. Yet also during our hunting of the Waste outlaws this I had not met either.

Now my flesh roughed as if more than the chill of the fog struck at me. Fear battled for release from the iron guard I had set upon my emotions. With that fear came a disgust and anger—

I found myself riding with hand upon sword hilt. Listening—ever listening—but my ears caught nothing but the thud of Fallon's hooves, now and again the ring of an iron shoe against an edge of rock.

The fog closed about, beads of moisture dripped from my helm, shone oily wet upon my mail, dampened Fallon's heavier winter coat into points.

Then—

Movement!

Fallon threw up his head to voice a shrill squeal of fear. At the same instant that which I had sensed struck and lapped me round.

For, through the rim of the fog, came horror unleashed. The thing was mounted even as I, and some trick of the fog made it loom larger than it was. But that which it rode was no horse of flesh and blood—rather a rack of bones held together by a lacing of rotted and dried flesh. And it was as its mount, a thing long dead and yet given a terrible life.

Its weapon was terror, not any sword. As I stiffened and drew deeply upon my power I realized it for what it was—a thoughtform born out of ancient fear and hatred. So did it continue to feed upon such emotions, drawing in to it at each feeding a greater substance.

My fear, my anger, must have both summoned and fed it. But it was real. That I could swear to, as much as if I laid hand upon that outstretched arm of bone. And Fallon's wide-eyed terror was meat to it also. While it trailed behind it, like a cloak, a deep depression of the spirit.

Fallon reared, screamed. That mount of bone opened wide its jaws in answer. I struggled with the panic-mad horse under me, glad for a moment that I had this to fight, for it awoke my mind from the blast of fear the spectre brought with it.

I raised my voice and shouted, as I would a battle cry, certain Words. Yet the rider did not waver, nor did the mount. And I summoned my will to master my own senses. This thing needed terror and despair to live, let me clamp tight upon my own and it would have no power—

Fallon sweated so that the smell was rank in the narrow defile of that way. My will had clamped upon him also, held him steady. He no longer screamed, but from his throat issued a sound not unlike the moaning of a man stricken close to death.

It was a thing fashioned of fear, and, without fear ... I made myself into a bulwark, once more spoke my defiance. But I did not shout this time, rather I schooled my voice into obedience, even as I held Fallen.

The thing was within arm's length, the stench of it thick in my nostrils, the glare of its eyeless skull turned upon me. Then ... it faded into the mist. Fallen still gave forth that unanimal-like moaning and great shudders ran through his body. I urged him forward, and he went one unsteady step at a time, while the fog coiled and spun around as if to entrap us.

It was enough for a moment that the horror had been vanquished. I hoped dimly that what I knew of such was the truth, that they were tied to certain places on earth where raw emotions had first given them birth.

As we paced along beside the small stream I heard sounds, not from ahead, but from behind. Faint they were at first, but growing stronger—there was the beat of hooves in such a loud tattoo that I thought some rider came at a speed far too reckless for the stony way. I heard also voices calling with the mist, though never could I make out the words, for the sounds came muffled and distorted. Still there reached me the impression of a hunt behind. And a strange picture flashed into my mind of one crouched low on a wild-eyed horse, behind him, unseen, the terror which drove him.

So keen and clear was this picture that I swung around when I reached a pile of rocks against which I could set my back. And I drew my sword. There was a rushing past where I crouched, my left hand tangled within Fallon's reins, for he was like to bolt. But nothing material cleared the mist. Again ancient shadows had deceived me.

Though I waited tensely for whatever pursued that lone rider of the distant past, there was nothing. Nothing save the uneasy sense that here were remnants of ancient terror caught forever in the mist. Then, ashamed at my own lack of self-control, I started on again, this time leading Fallen, stroking his head and talking softly to him, urging into his mind a confidence I did not wholly feel.

The walls about us began to widen out. Also that mist was tattered and driven by a wind which whistled down the valley, buffeting us with the frost it carried. But also it brought me something else, the scent of wood smoke, of a fire which has been recently dampened out.

We came to a curve in the near wall which served as a guide through the now disappearing mist. I dropped Fallon's reins and ordered him to stand so, cautiously crept forward; though the probe of my Talent picked up no whisper of a human mind. Still so strange was the Waste that I could believe those who harbored here might well have some defense against my power.

There had been a camp there right enough. A drowned fire still gave off a strong odor. And there were horse droppings along one side. I could see tracks crossing and recrossing each other, though the sand and gravel did not hold them clearly. But plainest of all was what had been painted on one massive rock which jutted forth from the wall. And that was no work of years before; the symbols must have been freshly drawn, for they were hardly weathered or scoured by sand.

One was a crudely drawn head of some animal—a wolf or hound—it could have been either. It interlaced the edge of the other, a far more complex and better executed symbol. I found myself standing before that, my forefinger almost of itself following its curves by tracing the air.

When I realized what I was doing I snatched my hand back to my side, my fingers baited into a fist. This was not of my learning, though it was a potent thing. And dangerous... There was an unpleasant otherness about the symbol which aroused wariness. However, I believed, though I did not understand its complete meaning, I did pick up the reason for those mated drawings. For among the Dales there was an old custom that, when a lasting truce or alliance was made, the lords of both parties chose a place on the boundaries of their domains and there carved the Signs of their two Houses so twined in just the same fashion.

So here I had come upon a notice that the outlaws I hunted had indeed made common cause with some dweller of the Waste who was not of their blood or kind. And, though I had suspected no less, having trailed them through the haunted valley, yet I could wish it otherwise.

To have some knowledge but not enough is a thing which eats upon one. If I might have read that other symbol I could be warned as to what—or who—I had to face. As I began a careful search about the deserted camp I alerted the Talent to sniff out any clue to the

nonhuman. But the impressions my mind gathered were only of the same wolfish breed as we had hunted—desperate and dangerous enough.

Jervon had been there and he still lived. I had half steeled my mind to find him dead, for the Waste wolves did not take captives. What did they want with him? Or were they but the servants and hands of another force? The impression grew on me that the latter was so. That they had some purpose in bringing him hither could not be denied.

My years with Aufrica had taught me well that there are two kinds of what the untalented term "magic" or "witchery." It was contagious magic which I used to track Jervon, for about my throat I wore the amulet of a strange stone shaped not unlike an eye, which he had found and carried for a luck piece since he was a boy, and then had put into my keeping upon our handfasting, having in those years of war no other bride-jewel to offer.

But there was also sympathetic magic which works according to the laws of correspondence and now I prepared to call upon that. From my healer's bag I brought forth a length of ash stick, peeled, blessed by the moon, bound with a small ring of silver wire, which is moon metal. Now I faced that symbol on the rock, pointed to it with ash rod which was no longer than my palm and fingers together.

Immediately the wand came to life in my hold, not to trace the characters, rather turning and twisting in a manner to suggest it would leap from my grasp rather than face what was so carven there. So I knew what I suspected was true and that this was a thing of the Dark from which the Light recoiled.

Now I touched the wand with the eye-stone which I drew forth from beneath my mail, rubbing the stone down one side and up the other. Then I held out my hand with the lightest hold upon the ash. Again it twisted, pointing ahead.

My battle with fear in the mist had drawn too heavily upon my inner resources; I could no longer depend upon mind search to follow those whom I sought. However, with the wand I had a sure pointer, in which I could trust. So I continued to hold it as I mounted Fallen and rode out of that camp, turning my back upon the entwined symbols of an unholy alliance.

The valley widened even farther, as if it had been but a narrow throat to open country beyond. I saw trees now, as misshapen as the brush, and monoliths, as well as tumbles of stone, which suggested ruins so old they could not be dated by my own species.

There were tracks again. But within a very short time we came to a place where those turned to the right at an abrupt swing. Only, in my hand, the wand did not alter course, but still pointed straight ahead. There was only one solution to accept: Jervon was no longer with the wolf pack which had pulled him down.

Had there been some monstrous meeting beneath those symbols and he whom I sought been given to that Other whose sign was set boldly on the rock? I dismounted to

search the ground with a scout's patience. And was rewarded with faint traces at last. The main body I hunted had indeed turned here. But two mounts had kept to the straight track. One of those must carry Jervon.

If he rode with only one outlaw as guard—I drew a sharp swift breath ... This might well herald a chance for rescue with the odds much in my favor. I mounted again and urged Fallen to a faster pace than he had kept during that day's travel, watching keenly the country ahead.

3: The Frozen Flame

Here in the open the mist was tattered by the wind and one could see farther. So my eyes caught a flash of light. Yet it was plain that this did not rise from any fire but rather sparked into the sky, perhaps as a beacon.

Now the stones of the forgotten ruins drew together, formed tumbled walls, with here or there some uprise of worked rock which might have once been a stele, or even a statue. But these were now so worn away by erosion that such shapes remained only vaguely unpleasant ones, hinting of ancient monstrous beings. Gods or guardians? What man now living could say?

The sun broke through, yet here it had not even the pallid light of mid-winter, rather a drained, bespoiled radiance, with nothing to warm either body or heart. And still shadows clung to the rocks, though I resolutely refused more than to glance at them. I knew the power of illusion, for much of that lies within the Talent.

Before me rose a wall, massive in its blocks, some larger than myself, even when mounted on Fallen. This time had not used so harshly. The pale sun struck points of icy fire from gray-white crystals embedded in its surface. The way I followed led to the single break in that wall, a narrow gateway so narrow that it would seem no more than one had ever been meant to pass therein at a time.

Now the wand in my hand flipped so that I barely prevented it from slipping through my fingers. Its silver-bound tip pointed to a dark stain smeared on that wall near the height of my thigh, riding as I was. Blood—and that of him whom I now sought!

I could only draw hope because the smear was so small a one. That Jervon had not been overborne without a fight, that I was already sure of. He was too seasoned in war to be easily taken, and the bodies I had found at our last camp had testified to his skill in defense. Yet this was the first sign I had seen that he had been wounded. Now I glanced at the pavement under foot, expecting to sight more splashes thereon.

The wall was the first of three such. And they varied in color, for the outer one, in spite of its clusters of crystals, was a gray as the rest of this Waste. The second, some twenty places beyond, was dull green. Yet it was not any growing thing which had clothed it, but part of the blocks themselves.

While the third was the rusty-brown-red of dried blood and in it the stones were smaller. The entrance through to it was still narrower, so that, despite my misgivings, I was forced to dismount, and essay that on foot.

If there were any blood smears here to mark Jervon's passing, those were cloaked by the natural coloring of the stone. Before me stood a squat building, only a fraction higher than the wall, windowless and dour, the stone of its making a lustreless, thick black, as if it had been fashioned from shadows themselves. From the roof of this issued, ' straight up to defy the sullen sun, the beam of light that had shone across the land.

Now that I drew nearer I could see that beam pulsated in waves, almost like the ever-changing and moving flames of a fire. Yet I was sure it was not born from any honest burning of wood.

Windowless the place might be, but there existed a deeply recessed doorway; so deep and dark a portal I could not be sure if any barrier stood within. I paused, using my senses to test what lay about me, for to go blindly into danger would not serve either Jervon's cause or my own.

Hearing? There was no sound, not even the sigh of wind across twisted shrub and sliding sand. Smell? I could not pick up any of the faint rottenness which had alerted me to the coming of the phantom in the valley. Sight? The deep door, the pulsing flame, unmarked ground between me and that doorway. Touch ...?

I held up my hand, the wand lying across the palm. That moved again, wavering from side to side with a growing speed until it had switched around and the wire-wound tip pointed to me, or back of me to the wall entrance through what I had just squeezed. There was warning enough in that. What lay ahead was highly inimical to such forces as I dared call upon. And I was somehow certain if I took these last few strides, passed within that portal, I would be facing danger worse than any wolf blade or phantom hunter.

If only I knew more! Once before I had gone to battle with one of the evil Old Ones, in ignorance and using only my few poor weapons. And Jervon, at that hour (having far more to fear than I, for he possessed none of the safeguards of the Talent), had come with me, trusting only in the power of cold iron and his own courage.

Could I do less now? As I stood there, the fluttering wand in my hand, I thought of what Jervon was to me. First an unwanted road companion through a hostile land, one who made me impatient for I feared that he might in some way turn me from my purpose. Then—

My life was bound to Jervon's. I could not deny that. Whatever force had brought him here, it was for no purpose except his destruction—and perhaps also mine. Yet I accepted that and walked toward the doorway.

There was no door to face me. Only, once I had stepped under the shadow of that overhang, there was a cloud of darkness so thick it might seem one might gather together folds of it in one's fingers as one could a curtain woven on a Dale loom. I raised the hand I could no longer see until I thought the wand was level with my lips. Then I breathed upon that and spoke three words.

So tiny a light, as if a candle no thicker than my own little finger, shone feebly. But as that sparked into being I drew a deep breath. There was not yet any pressure on me. In so little had I won a token victory.

That other time I had had an advantage because what dwelt anciently in such a place had been all-powerful for so long that it had not seen in me a worthy opponent. Therefore it had not unleashed its full strength against me until too late. I did not know that lay ahead, nor could I hold any hope that it would be the same here.

Time is often distorted and altered in those places of the Old Ones. All human memory is filled with legends of men who consorted with Those of Power for what seemed a day or year, and returned to find that their own world had swept on far faster. Now it appeared otherwise to me.

The very darkness, which was hardly troubled by the light on which ray spirit fed, was like a flood of sticky clay or quicksand catching at my feet, so that it was a physical effort to fight against that in order to advance. As yet there had been no other assault upon me. Slowly, I gained the impression that what intelligence had raised this place for its shell of protection was otherwise occupied, so intent upon that concentration that it was not yet aware of me.

Even as the pinpoint of flame I held before me, that thought strengthened my courage. Yet I dared not depend upon such concentration holding. At any moment it might be broken, by some unknown, unseen system of alarm, to turn the force of its interest in my direction.

I fought against the sticky dark, one step, two. It seemed to me that this journey had consumed hours of time. My body ached once more with the effort I must exert in order to advance. One more stride—

Thus I passed from complete dark into light so suddenly that, for two breaths, three, I was blinded. Then, blinking, I was able to see. The space in which I stood was round, with two great chairs, by their dimensions made for bodies larger than humankind, facing each other across a dazzling pillar which formed the innermost core.

Then I saw that it was not really a pillar, but rather a rounded shaft of ceaseless rolling radiance. No heat radiated from it, only an inner flickering suggested the flames it mimicked.

My inner warning sounded an alarm. Instantly I averted my eyes. There stood the force and purpose of this place. I had come out behind the nearer chair, its back a barrier, but I could see the other. Something had fallen from its wide seat to lie like a pile of wrung out rags on the floor.

Jervon—?

But even as I took a step towards that body, for dead that man must be by the very limpness of his form, I saw more clearly the face turned towards the light, the eyes wide in horror. And a stubby beard pointed outward from the chin. One of the outlaws!

Then Jervon—?

Carefully averting my gaze from that challenging, beckoning fire, I edged around the chair before me. Yes, he whom I sought sat there. There were bonds about his arms, loops bringing together his booted ankles. His helm was gone and there was a gash on his forehead which had been only roughly bandaged so that congealed red drops lay on the cheek beneath.

He was—alive?

I reached forth my hand. The wand trembled. Yes, there still was a spark of life in him, held so by the stubbornness of his own will and courage. But his eyes were locked on the pillar of fire and I knew that what was the man I knew was being rift out of him into that flame.

I could do two things. Recklessly, I first tried mind seek. No, his consciousness was too depleted to respond. If I attempted to break the binding of the flame I could overturn the result of his own courage, loose him and lose him. There was a great strength in Jervon. I had seen it in action many times over during the seasons we had ridden together as comrades and lovers (seldom can those two be made one, but so it was with us).

So—I must follow him—into the flame. Front that Power on its own ground.

If only I knew more! I beat my hands together in my impotent frustration. This was a great force, and one I had no knowledge of. I did not know if I could face it with any Talent of my own. It might be invincible in its own stronghold.

I moved slowly on to look at the dead outlaw. He had been emptied of life force, easier prey by far than Jervon. The way he had fallen made it seem he had been contemptuously thrown aside.

But I knew Jervon. And upon that knowledge I could build now. It would do me no good to take his body from this place, even if the flame power would allow that. For then he could never regain what he had already lost—what must be returned to him . . .

Returned—how?

Desperate I was, for I might lose all, his life, mine, and perhaps more than just the lives of our bodies. But I could see no other way.

Deliberately I went to that other throne, careful not to touch the wasted body as I stepped over it. I am glad I did not hesitate now, that my inner strength carried me up unflinchingly to where that dead man had sat. I settled myself within the curve of the arms, under the shadow of the high back. My wand I took in both hands, forcing it up against the power which tried to forestall me, until the point was aimed at Jervon's breast.

I did not believe that the power I would confront was of my plane of existence at all. Rather I thought that the frozen flames were but a small manifestation visible to our world. I must seek it on its own ground if I were to have a chance.

The outlaw had been its creature already. Doubtless he had lain under its spell even before he had entered here, perhaps sent by it to find such strong meat as Jervon. And Jervon it had not completely taken. Also it might never have tried to absorb one learned in the Talent.

Such a hope was very thin; I could count on nothing save my own small learning and my determination. But it was not in me to leave this place without Jervon. We would win or lose together.

So—the battlefield lay within the flame—

My grip on the wand was iron tight. Now I deliberately raised my eyes, stared straight into that play of curbed fire. I need only release my will for a very little.

4: Elsewhere and Elsewhen

I was—elsewhere. How can one summon words to describe what is so wholly alien to all one's experience? Colors rippled here that had no name I knew, sensations wrenched at the inner core of my determination and Talent as if they would pull me apart while I yet lived. Or did I live now? I was aware of no body in this place, five senses no longer served me, for I realized I did not "see" but rather depended upon a different form of perception.

Only seconds, breaths long, was I given; then a compelling force swept up the consciousness which was all that remained of my identity and drew me forward across a fantastic and awesome country.

For country it was—! Though it was subtly wrong, my human instinct told me. There were growing things, which did not in the least resemble any I had ever seen, of eye-searing yellow, threatening red. These writhed and beat upon the air as if they fought against their rooting, would be free to do their will, and yet were anchored by another's ordering. Branches tip-clawed the earth or swept high into the air in ceaseless movement.

Then I was beyond them, carried so by the force which I had momentarily surrendered to. And I put aside my preoccupation with the strangeness of this place, to fasten inwardly, nurse my Talent with all my strength.

Yet must I also conceal from that which summoned me that I had that hard core of defiance within me. For I was sure that I must not dissipate that before I fronted the Power which ruled here.

I had heard legends through Aufrica (though from whom she had gained them she never said) that when the Old Ones held the Dales they had meddled with the very stuff of life itself, and that the adepts among them had opened "gates" which led to other dominions in which the human was as unnatural as that which passed swiftly below me now. That this might be such a "gate" I have begun to believe. But its guardianship was alien.

Here was a stretch of yellow ground unbroken by any of the monstrous growths. Patterned deeply on its surface were many tracks and trails, some deer>worn as well-used roads. Yet my own feet, if I still possessed those appendages, did not seek to tread there. Rather I had the sensation of being wafted well above that broken surface.

Those tracks and ways converged, angling toward some point ahead. And, as I passed on, I began to see moving figures, ones which pressed forward step by reluctant step. Yet none was clear, but rather cloaked in ever-shifting color so that one could not define their true outlines. Some were dully gray, one or two a deep black that reminded me of the dark through which I had passed to reach the chamber of the flame. Others showed as sickly green, or a sullen, blood/rust red. As I swept over them I longed to shriek aloud my pain, for it seemed that from each there came some thrust of despair and horror which was like the cut of a sword one could not guard against. Thus I realized that these were victims of this place even as I might be.

Why I winged my way rather than trode theirs I could not guess. Unless that which ruled here knew me for what I was and would have me quickly within its grasp! And it was not good to think of that. But I had made my choice, and must hold firmly to my resolution.

Thicker became the figures plodding so slowly. Now I began to believe that their doom was deliberately prolonged by purpose, that their helpless suffering was meat and drink to something—

Was Jervon one of those?

I tried to delay my own passage, hover above those misty lights which were still substantial enough to leave tracks on the plain. But then a second thought came to me, that in allowing myself to show interest in any of those tormented wayfarers I could in turn betray the more plainly what I was and why I had come.

So I turned my new sense of perception from those travelers, and allowed the compulsion full rein to draw me in. I came at last to where that yellow plain gave way abruptly to a chasm.

The walls of that were the dull red of the final wall which had guarded the flame building, and in shape it was round. Down its sides the lights which tracked the plain made a painful descent, now so thronged together that their colors seemed to blend and mingle. Though I thought in truth no entity was aware of its fellows, but only of its own sore fate.

Down I was drawn, past those toiling victims. Once more into a pool of dead blackness and loss of all perception. Here I began to exercise those safeguards I had learned, seeds of which had been mine from birth. I was myself, me, Elys—a woman, a seer, a fighter. And I must remain me and not allow That Other to take away my oneness with myself and my past.

Still I raised no opposition save that belief in myself which I kept within me. At this Dment I must put even Jervon from my conscious mind and concentrate on my own personality. Instinct told me this, and for a Wise Woman such instinct is a command.

The dark began to thin and I could see light again. But in that sickly yellowish glow there was nothing to be marked, save directly under me, or that part of me which had come seeking this grim venture, a throne.

It was fashioned of the black, the dark itself, and on it there wavered a ruddy mist in which whirled gemlike particles.

"Welcome—"

It was not sound which reached me, rather a vibration which shuddered through whatever form I now wore.

Slowly I settled down, until I fronted that towering throne and the unstable form it contained. Very small was I, so that this was like looking up at the face of some high Dale hill.

"Good—"

Again the word vibrated through me, bringing with it both pain and—may the Power I serve forgive me—also a kind of pleasure which defiled that which I held to be the innermost core of my being.

"It has been long and long since this happened—"

The glittering mist of the throne was melting, developing more of a form.

"Are there then again those to summon for the Gate?"

That form leaned forward on its throne. The glitter points flowed together, formed two discs which might serve the alien for eyes. Now those centered upon me.

"Where is the gift then, servant of ——" The name the thing mouthed was like a flame lapping about me, so strong was the Power that carried, even though I was no follower of it.

Before I could frame an answer, its shadowy head bobbed in what might be a nod.

"So the gift comes—yet I think it not of your devising. Think you I can be so easily deceived?" And the form shook with what might be silent and horrible laughter. The contempt in which it held me and all my species was like a loathsome stench in the air of that place.

"Your kind has served me," the vibration which was speech continued. "Long and well have they served me. Nor have I ever withheld their rewards. For when I feed, those feed— Behold!"

It stretched forth an extension of the upper body which might well serve it for arm, and then I could perceive indeed that all it had fed upon was a part of it. But not in peace. For the torment of those it consumed and yet nourished within its own substance was that they were conscious of what had happened to them, and that consciousness lasted throughout ages without respite. While as a part of this Thing they were also forced to feed in turn, damning themselves to further torture which was endless.

Even as I watched one of those long appendages flickered even farther out and returned, grasped in it a writhing core of grayness which was one with those shapes I had watched on the plain above. This it clasped to its body so that the gray sank into its mass and another life force was sentenced to an existence of terror and despair.

Seeing that, my mind stirred. Even as that rider I had seen in the valley was a thoughtform fed into life by the terror of those whose emotions strengthened it, so was this Thing a product of similar forces.

I had heard it said that men are apt to make their gods in their own images, attributing to those gods their own emotions, save that those emotions are deemed far greater than any human mind and heart can generate. Thus this Thing might once have been born—to serve a people whose god it was, who fed it for generations. So that at last it was no longer dependent upon their willingly brought sacrifices, but could indeed control mankind and so ex? I its own dominion. ^ *

But if that were indeed the truth, then the weapon against it was . . . unbelief. And, in spite of the evidence of my senses, here I must bring that weapon into being.

The glittering eyes that were set so on me did not change and the despair and horror which it exuded in waves wrapped me around with all the force long generations of worship could generate within it.

"Small creature—" again it shook with that unvoiced demonic laughter. "I am, I exist—no matter from what small seed of thought I was born. Look upon me!"

Now its substance grew even thicker and it indeed formed a body. This unclothed body was godlike in its beauty—its tainted beauty—brazenly male. And the eyes shrank, to become normal-sized in a face whose features were those truly of some super being without a flaw.

Except the flaw of knowledge of what it was and from what it had come. And that knowledge I clung to. It did not show bones and rotting flesh, but that was its true state.

"Look upon me!" Once more the command rang out. "Females of your kind found me good to look upon in the old days before I grew tired of your world, and that which closed Gates swept across the land. Look—and come!"

And that vile pleasure, which had troubled me before, again assailed me. Against that I set the training of my Talent—the austerity in which we learn to master all that which is of the body. Though I felt myself waver a little forward, yet my determination held me fast.

Then those perfect lips smiled—evilly.

"You are more than I have tasted for a long time. This shall indeed be a dainty feasting—" Now it raised a fine muscled arm, beckoned to me with its long fingers. "Come—you cannot withstand me. Come willingly and the reward will be very great indeed—"

My thought arose in answer and I shaped the name it had given me and with that name certain words. It was a forlorn hope. And, as that head tossed back and it laughed openly, I knew how vain that hope was.

"Names! You think that you can lay upon me your will by names? Ah, but that which I gave you is but the name men—some men—called me. It is not the name by which I know myself. And without that—you have no weapon. However, this is exciting—that you dare to stand against me! I have fed, and I have gathered strength, and I have waited for those who closed the Gates perhaps to hunt me. But they have not come, and you, worm thing who dares to face me—you are of such as they would not trouble themselves to look upon, far less do you stand equal to them.

"Only you shall give me sport, and that will be pleasant. You have come seeking one, have you not? Others have been led by pride and kinship to do so. They were fitly rewarded as you shall see when you join them. But name me no names which have not power!"

This time I did not try to answer. But feverishly I went seeking in my memory for the smallest trace of knowledge I had. Aufrica's learning had been shared with me to the best of her ability. We had visited certain forgotten shrines in the old days and sometimes dared to summon influences, long weakened by the years, which had once been dwelling in them. Spells I knew, but before this creature such were but as the rhyming games small children play.

No—I would not allow room to that despair which insidiously nibbled at my mind! What I could do I would—!

The creature on the throne laughed for the third time.

"Very well. Struggle if you wish, worm one. It amuses me. Now—look what comes—"

It pointed to the left and I dared to look. There had come, very slowly, plainly fighting the compulsion which drew it, one of those columns of light. This one was not black, not gray, nor yet red, but a yellow which was clear and bright. And in that moment I knew that this was what this world would see of Jervon.

Nor did it crawl abjectly as had the one the false god had claimed in my sight, but stood erect, as it fought against the power of the thing on the throne.

"Jervon!" I dared at that moment to send forth a thought call. And instantly and valiantly was it answered:

"Elys!"

But the thing who commanded here looked from one of us to the other and smiled its evil smile.

5: Together We Stand

So sweet a feasting — " A tongue tip appeared between the lips of the handsome face, swept back and forth as if indeed savoring some pleasant taste. "You give me much, small ones — much!"

"But not all!" I made answer. And that yellow flame which was Jervon no longer advanced, but stood with me, as we had stood together through the years when there was a blooding of swords and a need for defense. For I knew that this was not all of Jervon, that still in his ensorceled body he held stubbornly to his identity even as I went armed behind the wall of mine.

That which sat enthroned leaned forward a little, its beautiful and vile face turned to us.

"I hunger — and I feed — so simple is it."

It stretched out one of those seeming arms to an unnatural length, gathering to its bosom another crawling blob. In my mind there was a shriek of despair.

"You see how easy it is?"

Rather did I in turn reach with the Power for Jervon. And it was indeed as if we now stood hand-linked before this thing that should never have been. All the clean strength of Jervon's manhood was at war with what abode here. And to that I joined my Power, limited as it might be. I formed symbols and perceived them glow in the air, as if written in fire.

But the Thing laughed and stretched out a hand of mist to sweep those easily away.

"Small are your gifts, female. Do you think I cannot wipe them from sight? So and so and so—" That hand of mist moved back and forth.

"Jervon," I sent my own message, "it feeds upon fear—"

"Yes, Elys, and upon the souls of men also." And it seemed to me that his reply was so steady it was as if I had indeed found an anchorage which I needed.

Twice more the creature fed upon those blobs which crawled about the base of its throne. But always its eyes were on us. For what it waited, save that it must have our greater fear to season its feasting, I could not guess.

But that pause gave me time to draw in all which I knew, suspected, or hoped might aid us. How does one kill a god? With unbelief, my logic told me. But here and now unbelief was nigh impossible to summon.

We who have been burdened with the Talent must believe, yes. For we know well that there are presences beyond our comprehension, both good and evil, who may be summoned by man. Though we cannot begin to understand their true nature, limited as

we are by the instincts and emotions of our corporal bodies. I seek certain of these intangible presences every time I exercise the Power which is mine, small that it is. And in Jervon also there is belief—though his presences might not be mine. For we do not all walk the same roads, though in the end those roads must meet at a certain Gate which is the greatest of all, and beyond which lies what we cannot begin to imagine with our earthbound minds and hearts.

Only to this Thing I owed no belief. I was not one who had bowed in the courts of its temple nor sought its evil aid in any undertaking. Therefore—for me—it was no god!

"So do you think, female," flashed its thought back in answer. "Yet you are of a like kind to those who gave me creation. Therefore in you lie certain matters which I can touch—"

It was as if a slimy, rotting finger sleeked across my shrinking flesh. And in its wake—yes—there was that in me ready to respond to that nauseating touch. I have weaknesses as inborn as my Talent, those it could summon into battle against me. Once more it laughed.

"Elys—*" The thought that was Jervon's overrang that laughter. "Elys!"

It was no more than my name, but it broke through that feeling of abasement that anything in me could respond to this horror. I drew once more upon logic. No man or woman is perfect. There is much lying within us which we must look upon with cold, measuring eyes and hate. But if we do not yield to that hatred, nor to what gave it birth, but stand aside to let one balance the other, then we do what those trained in the Way can do to fight that which is base. Yes, I had in me that which could quicken from this thing of the utter dark. But it was how I met that weakness, not the weakness itself which counted.

I was Elys, a Wise woman, even as Jervon had reminded me by the speaking of my name. Therefore I was no tool of that which had led me to this throne. I had come of my own free will in order to face it, not been dragged by dark forces overcoming my spirit.

"Elys—" It was the enthroned creature that uttered my name now, and there was enticement in that naming.

But I stood fast, summoning up all which was bora of my long training to armor me. And the beautiful head so far above me shifted a little. Now, though keeping me still in its gaze, it also could see Jervon. It raised its hand to beckon.

The yellow flame which was my fulfillment in this life wavered towards the throne. Yet it was not muddled as were those others which crawled about us. Nor did Jervon ask aught of me in that moment, but made the struggle his own, for I knew, without his telling, that he feared I would be depleted should I undertake his defense as well as mine.

Then I moved whatever form this world had left me, standing between Jervon and the thing which reached now with its shadow hand to grasp him.

Once more I pronounced the name men had given him in their fear and horror of this baneful worship. But I sent no symbols into the air for him to sweep aside. Rather I did send a thought picture and this was of an empty throne crumbling in long decay.

Fear I fought, and anger I reined in, making both feed and serve me in what I would do. This was—not!

I could not close off that sense of perception which assured me that it was. But I held valiantly to the small weapon I had. I did not worship, I did not believe, nor did Jervon. Therefore: this thing was NOT!

Yet it was growing more and more solid even as I so denied it. Beckoning—BEING!

The imagination of countless generations of men had fashioned it, how could I hope to dismantle it with only a denial?

An empty throne—a nonbeing—!

I threw all that was me, all which I sensed I drew now from Jervon with his willing consent, into that picture. This was no god of mine, I did not feed it—it could not exist!

Torment indeed was that denial, for ever it called to a part of me, to force homage and worship. Yet that I held out against. No god of mine! There must be faith to bring a god alive, to perform deeds in his name—without faith there was no existence.

I knew better than to summon the Powers I did kneel before. In this place all worship the enthroned thing would take to itself, whether given in its filthy name or not. No, this was the bareness of my spirit and my belief in myself, and Jervon's belief in himself—(the which he was loosing to me)—that mattered. I did not accept, and I refused homage because it was—NOT!

The thing lost its lazy assurance, its evil smile and laughter, even the quasi-human form it had assumed to tempt me. There was nothing in the throne place now but a ravening flame touched with the deep black of its evil. That swept back and forth as might the head of a great serpent elevated above a coiled body, waiting to strike.

Its rage was that of madness. The long years it had existed had not prepared it for this. It was here, it could seize my kind, absorb into it their spirits—

But could it?

Humans are composed of many layers of consciousness, many emotions. Any who deal with the Talent—and many who do not—knew this. The throned thing fed upon fear and

those viler parts of us. The miserable blobs it drew to it, which were now packed tightly around me, swaying in time to the swaying of that flame on the throne, were dominated by the worst that had lain in the humanity they had once been, not the best. They had been held prisoner by their fears and their belief, until they had been summoned here to be delivered helplessly to their master.

A master who could in turn not hold them unless they surrendered, whom they had created and could now destroy—if they so willed it!

I threw that thought afield as I might whirl about me an unsheathed sword. If they were all lost in the depths of their foul belief then it would avail me nothing. But if only a few could join us—only a few!

The thing on the throne was quick. It lapped out and down, and took with that lapping the first row of the blob things, swelling in power as it absorbed their energy.

"Elys—Elys—"

Only my name, but into it Jervon put all he could to hearten and sustain me. I was aware of a brighter burst of the clear golden flame to my left.

Again the false god pounced to feast. There was something too hasty in its movements, as if time was no longer its servant, but might speedily be its enemy. It wanted to cram itself with life force, swell its power.

But it could not feed on unbelief. That logic I held to as one holds to a rope which is one's only hope of aid.

An empty throne—

Now that rusted and diseased flame uttered a kind of shriek, or perhaps that was not any cry but a vibration meant to shake me, loose me from my rope of hope. It flickered out and out towards me, towards the light which was Jervon.

We did not believe, therefore we could not be its prey.

I was in the dark; my perception was totally gone. I was—in ... No, I could not be within something which did not exist. I was me, Elys, and Jervon. We were no meat for a false god whose creators were long since dust, its temple forgotten.

It was as if my bare body were seared by a cold so intense that it had the same effect as fire. I was one with—no, I was not! I was Elys. And Jervon was Jervon! I would feel him through the torture of the cold, holding" as I did to his own identity. We were ourselves and no servants—victims—of this thing which had no place in the world. We had no fear for it to batten on now, and those parts of us which it could awaken, those we could control.

There was an empty throne—there was nothingness—nothingness but Elys and Jervon who did not believe—

Pain, cold, pain, and still I held and now Jervon called to me and somehow I found the strength to give to him even as earlier he had loosed his for me. Together we stood, and because of that both of us were the stronger, for in our union was the best part of us both—mind and spirit.

Darkness, cold, pain, and then a sense of change, of being lost. But I would not allow fear to stir. A god who was naught could not slay—

I opened my eyes—for I saw with them now and not with that special sense I had had in that other place. Before me was a column of light, but it was wan, sinking, growing paler even in the space of a blink or two. I moved; my body was stiff, cold, my hands and feet had no feeling in them as I slid forward on the wide seat where I had awakened, looking about me for something familiar and known.

This—this was the round chamber where I had found Jervon—

Jervon!

Stumbling, weaving, I staggered to that other chair, fumbling with my dagger so that I might cut the ropes which bound his stiff body. His eyes were closed, but he had not tumbled flaccidly down as had the outlaw who had been drained. I sawed at his hide bonds with my numb and fumbling hands, twice dropping the blade so I had to grope for it in the half light. For the flaming pillar in the center gave forth but little radiance now—more like the dread glow which sometimes gathers on dead bodies.

"Jervon!" I called to him, shook him as best I could with those blockish hands. His body fell forward so his head rested on my shoulder and his weight nearly bore me tumbling backward. "Jervon!"

It seemed in that moment that I had lost. For if I alone had won out of that evil place then there was no further hope for me.

"Jervon!"

There was a breath against my cheek, expelled by a moan. I gathered him to me in a hold, which even the false god could not have broken, until his voice came, low and with a stammering catch in it:

"My dear lady, would you break my ribs for me—" and there was a thread of weak laughter in that which set me laughing too, until I near shook with the force of that reaction.

I almost could not believe our battle won. But before us, where we crouched together on the wide seat of that throne, the last glimmer of light died. There was no gateway now into elsewhere. Outside the outlaws of the Waste might be waiting, but we two had battled something greater than any malice of theirs, and for the moment we were content.