

# WOLFHEAD

by

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## I

Throughout the Year of the Moss Wife did we Dalesmen hear of the Hounds of Alizon and their strange allies from across the sea. That they brought war was plain to all, like storm clouds upon the horizon, yet, though each Dale's lord saw to the storing of food and the training of men, they did not ally themselves to one another until nearly too late. We are a proud, stubborn, and independent breed, and such alliances are alien to our way of thinking.

Yet it chanced that Lord Torak of Ellskeep, my father, traveled south to the war front before the grudging Dales alliance. Ellsdale had known peace for many years, excepting minor skirmishes with outlaws of the Waste, and though most men long for such relative tranquility, it grated against the fiery temper of my father. There were Sulcarmen amongst his ancestors, as one could tell with a glance at his mighty physique and bronze skin, and this, mingling with his Dale heritage, produced a man who itched for action that no hunt or sword prac-

tice could provide. Thus it was, when the first reports of an invasion of High Hallack trickled north to the Dales, that Lord Torak gathered a small entourage of fighting men and readied himself to march.

He called me to his chamber a week before his departure, and I dared believe I was to ride with him. I entered his bedroom to find him standing before the window, the cold air of the Month of the Snow-Bird drifting in like fog.

"You summoned me, Father?"

He turned and looked upon me as if for the first time, like a stranger unaware that Wylona of Ellskeep had all her life preferred the jerkins and trousers of boys to the dresses of girls.

"Wylona," he began quietly, "in a sevennight we start our trek south."

My spirits rose as I heard these words, only to be crushed by his next utterance.

"Whilst I am gone, you will be the highest authority in Ellskeep."

"Oh," I said, then, quickly, "I am honored by your trust, my lord."

My father cocked his shaggy head, a lion questioning like a pup.

"You expected something else? To battle the Hounds of Alizon at my side, perhaps?"

I cast my eyes down in shame, but I looked up again as my father continued.

"Heed me; it is no light matter I tell you this day. I could easily claim to have foresight other Dale lords lack, but that would be a lie. I ride, perhaps, on a fool's errand, but I fear nothing else will quell the thirst that gnaws within me. A thirst to clash, steel to steel; a thirst to strike foemen down before me; a thirst to fight with shield brothers at my side. As some men seek gold or women, so must I seek war."

He turned to gaze at the portrait of Lady Amiell, my mother and his wife, dead these dozen years.

"Before I met your mother, I would disappear from Ellskeep for months on end, carrying the blank shield of a mercenary. But, then, both my elder brothers died of the Creeping Plague, and I met Amiell, and so I stayed in Ellsdale as I should. For

seventeen years I have fought the desire for battle, and I fear I can stave it off no more.

"You have been both son and daughter to me, Wylona. I have had you instructed in swordsmanship and strategy as well as in the ways of the court ladies, and in my absence, the gentles and soldiers of the court shall obey you as their liege. And should it happen that I do not return . . ."

"Don't say such a thing, Father."

Torak lay his mighty hands upon my shoulders.

"I must. Should I not return, you shall be their liege in truth. We have no male relatives to challenge you, and few Dale lords truly desire Ellsdale, bordering as she does the Waste on the north and west. And even should a challenge arise, I know the Lady Wylona of Ellskeep shall face it and triumph."

I knelt before my father and thanked him for his trust and faith, and then he dismissed me. A few days more and he left, though the Month of the Frost Sprite had scarcely begun, and breaths still misted like dragon-smoke. He bade me take seriously the counsel of my elders, such as Kegan, the crusty old captain of the guard, and then he said farewell. Nevermore did I see him.

## II

The Alizon invasion was no border skirmish. Ragged bands of refugees came up from the south, first a trickle, then a torrent. The rumors they passed on were scarcely believable, but we knew them to be true.

The Hounds bore with them weapons the like of which we had never dreamed. Their footmen carried strange devices that slew from afar, using only a beam of reddish light. From their ships came great, squat, clanking things of metal, which crawled inexorably across the land like monster tortoises, spewing streams of fire before them. Even if the men to the south withdrew into their keeps and behind their city walls, the metal

monsters penetrated the barriers of stone with the ease of a mole digging through soil. How could any mortal men defeat unliving metal juggernauts?

As ever more tattered bands wandered north, however, we finally received good tidings amongst the stories of the Hounds' atrocities. It seemed the metal monsters were not indestructible, after all. They needed supplies from the Alizonian ships to keep moving, and the supply lines from monster to shore were harried as often as possible. Furthermore, there seemed to be a limited number of the juggernauts, for no more were delivered from the Hounds' vessels.

Such hope was stirred in our breasts that more and more Ellsmen marched away to the south, leaving our Dale severely undermanned. But so far were we from the war front that we blindly thought ourselves safe.

I lay abed one night, some months after the sealing of the alliance by the lords Imgry, Savron, and Wintof, wondering whether my father still lived, and whether our land would ever know again the peace it once took for granted. I heard shouts and running footsteps far below, and I was up by the time Captain Kegan pounded 'pon my door.

"Milady—milady! They come from the Waste!"

"They?" I repeated. I grabbed my mail shirt and worked it on over my head, then I opened the door to see the guard captain's worried face.

"One of the border posts began to fire-signal," he explained, "but there came a flash, as of lightning, and nothing more was seen. But now a rider has reached the keep, half dead, his skin charred as if he'd fallen into a smithy's furnace. He says the metal monsters of Alizon come—from the north!"

My blood grew as cold as the rings of my mail.

"How could this be?"

"The coast to the east of the Waste is not often visited anymore, save by scavengers. Perhaps the Hounds landed there unseen. The how does not matter. The question is, what shall we do?"

"There may be nothing we can do," I said, pulling on a boot.

"If the combined armies of High Hallack cannot stop the invaders, what chance have we? I fear it is our turn to be refugees."

Kegan stiffened. "You suggest we flee Ellskeep, like rabbits dug from a warren?"

"If it were merely men, even a great army, I would fight to the death at your side. But neither sword arm nor coping wall will halt the metal monsters."

I scooped up my helm, which sat upon my dresser where most ladies arrange face powders.

"We must sever their supply lines as our countrymen have done in the south. But to do that, we must first survive!"

Captain Kegan reluctantly agreed, and we descended the stairs to a court ruled by chaos. Men and women ran helter-skelter with half-filled packs and wallets while the warning bells above spelled out the code of invasion.

"Milady," said Kegan suddenly. "You should have packed your belongings!"

I glanced back at the stairwell. "There is no time."

I visited the man who had brought the news. Though Belita, our wise woman, attended him, I knew he lay on his deathbed. The left side of his face was blackened and cracked; his left eye was gone completely. But still could he speak.

There were at least three of the metal juggernauts, by now, a league or so from the keep. They were ponderous and slow, evidently relying on their far-reaching fire to strike down enemies. Foot- and horsemen accompanied the monsters, but these troops seemed reluctant to stray far from their vicinity. Such did I learn before the burnt sentry passed from our world.

After a moment of silence, I came to business.

"We should have time to send riders to the villages roundabout. Also, we must send word to the Dales south and east."

"I shall attend to it directly, milady," said Kegan.

"And no doubt the Hounds will want to demonstrate their power by attacking the keep. It must be evacuated."

"I believe that decision has been anticipated, Lady Wylona," the captain observed, glancing about. Then he smiled, for the first time in living memory, and left.

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From a distant hilltop did we see the first of the Alizon monsters. It was a vast vehicle of dull gray, shaped like a horseshoe crab. It moved at a walking man's pace, but whether it crawled on legs or wheels, or even upon its belly like a snail, I could not tell. From its apex shot a thick, reddish column on occasion, and wheresoever the column passed, flames sprang up as from a grass fire.

As I watched, grinding my teeth in helplessness, the metallic vehicle crept up to the very walls of Ellskeep and then paused, like a fat beetle that has run into an obstacle and is too stupid to turn aside. Slowly—and I gasped at the thing's mute power—the monster began passing through the solid north wall, which gave no more resistance than bread dough to a cook's prodding finger.

The northwest tower, where all my possessions and memories lay, shuddered like a post hit by an axe. Then it crumbled thunderously into a mound of rubble.

"Ellskeep is no more," I said, turning away. "Now we must leave."

Of our party, there was, besides myself, Kegan and a score of soldiers; Belita; the ladies Nabora and Varda, my father's cousins; a handful of servants; and a few villagers from nearby Lormill. There were horses for myself and each soldier, and burro-drawn wagons for the ladies and the wise woman. The others kept apace on foot.

We traveled southwest for a day, desiring a safe distance between ourselves and the Hounds before holding council. One of Kegan's men brought down a fat hill-buck with his arrows, so we ate well that night, at least. Afterward we discussed our options.

"I fear all the abbeys in High Hallack are filled to bursting already," said Kegan. "Besides, from what I've heard, the Hounds take no heed of the sanctity of the Dames, but crush abbeys beneath their juggernauts with the same ease they smash keeps."

"We dare not go any nearer the Waste," I began. "If the outlaw bands know of this northern Alizonian strike, they may

grow bold and cross our borders, like jackals following lions. I think we should warn our neighboring Dales and join our meager forces to theirs."

"We are cut off from those of the east," Kegan pointed out, "but I sent several riders to warn them, so in that direction should the warning spread. The south seems our best hope—perhaps Ronansdale."

"Yes," I said. "For Lord Ghislain of Ronanskeep was long friendly to my father."

I put the question to the folk around us.

"What think you of Ronansdale?"

Everyone muttered in agreement.

"Ronansdale it is, then," I concluded.

### III

I took my turn at watch a couple of hours before dawn, and afterward I walked past Belita's cart on the way back to my bedroll. To my surprise, she stepped out from behind it and asked how went the watch.

"Nothing to be seen or heard," I answered her, glancing to the north, "which I count as a blessing."

Belita stared off in the same direction, and after a moment of silence, she spoke.

"Well, Alvred and Leofric are on watch now, not we two."

"Aye." I looked at her again. "Tell me, what might you be doing up already? As you say, it is not your watch."

Belita smiled coquettishly. "I intended to wash a few items at the stream—myself included. I waited for you because I thought you might be wanting to divest yourself of your byrnie and helm for a while."

I frowned. "Leave the camp before daybreak?"

"Not to worry—Alvred's post overlooks the stream, and he promised to watch—"

I raised an eyebrow.

“—not *too* closely, of course.”

Belita smirked, and I could scarcely keep from laughing aloud. There were older wise women who looked down upon Belita, for she could not completely control her emotions, a discipline necessary for the craft. She tried turning a harsh mask to the world, but time and again her feelings bubbled out like steam from under a kettle lid. And that this was a bad thing, I would never believe. I could not turn down her offer.

I did not bathe in the stream, but I stripped partially and scrubbed myself with Belita's soap. Without my armor and weapon I felt naked, but also light as a dandelion tuft. I glanced up on occasion at the silhouette of Alvred, black against the purple dawn.

Nearby, Belita washed her hair. I did likewise.

“Does your hair not get snagged in your mail?” my friend asked, through her own dripping tresses.

“I usually braid it beforehand, but there was hardly the opportunity the other night . . . It would be most practical to cut it, like a lad joining the guard, but—”

“But you are not a lad?” ventured Belita, pulling comb and brush from her pack.

“No. Sometimes I have to remind even myself that I am Lady, not Lord, Wylona.”

“You've tried to be both, since Torak left. If you carry all the woes of Ellsdale and her people upon your shoulders, you'll be old and stooped before your years.”

I straightened suddenly, my pride stung.

“I am the Lady Wylona of Ellsdale. It is my duty to accept her people's woes, problems, and ill luck, and take action to lessen them.”

Belita approached me, comb and brush in hand.

“Right now you look like a pond-dunked farm maid with snags in her hair the Rats of Nore could nest in. Drying, grooming, and rest are the only actions you should take now.”

“You are irreverent and incorrigible, Belita,” I said, then I smiled and hugged her to my breast. “You are also my best friend. Don't ever change.”



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Belita had just begun brushing my hair when an eerie, quavering howl echoed out of the wilderness beyond the stream. We both froze, staring in the direction of the sound. There was nothing to be seen.

"What was that?" I asked. "A wolf?"

A second howl filled the air, closer this time.

"I know the calls of all the four-footed inhabitants of the Dale land," my friend answered slowly. "This is like that of a wolf, but—different."

We began dressing quickly, and suddenly we heard, not a howl, but the blare of our camp's warning trumpet. Belita sprinted up the gravelly shore, ignoring my call to wait. I fought my way into my byrnie and snatched up my scabbard and helm.

I heard now the pounding of hooves and the shouting of men. There was a slight rise between the stream and the camp; it was here Alvred had been patrolling. He was no longer to be seen. Belita disappeared over the rise, and moments later I crested it.

Kegan and his soldiers were scattered about, fighting a band of horsemen with steel and arrow. I saw the villagers and even the ladies fighting with what weapons were to hand; I grew proud of my people and rushed into the fray.

As I yanked my sword from its scabbard, one of the horsemen bore down upon me. I had no recourse save to hurl my helm at him. He raised his buckler to deflect the missile; I noted that only furs protected his midriff, and as he galloped by I swung my sword into the area between his shield and his hips. The blade shuddered deep into him and slid out wetly.

After he fell, I observed that buried amongst his furs were the round seals of several Dales—trophies collected over many years. These were outlaws, then, not foreign invaders.

Suddenly I heard a strange sizzling noise. I looked up to see a man on a horse, carrying something that resembled a crossbow made of gold and silver. A red streak shot like unknicked lightning from this object into our camp, setting one of our carts afire in the wink of an eye. I guessed this weapon to be one of the fire-throwers of the Alizonian invaders, but these men were not Hounds, of that I was sure. They were outlaws who had

one of the Hounds' weapons. Had they successfully raided an Alizonian party? Were the Hounds and these wolfheads in league?

I could not wonder about this now, for another horseman rode upon me. He pulled forth a strange rod, half again as long as my sword, made completely of glass or crystal save for a black handgrip. Bubbles of greenish light skittered up and down the crystalline shaft like fireflies trapped within.

He carried the rod in one hand like a sword, and as a sword I met it. I parried it with my blade, but some terrible force ran along the steel, into my arms and thence through my whole body, like the poison of the Basilisk. I collapsed onto my face and did not rise.

## IV

A steady jostling shook me slowly awake. I opened my eyes warily to find that I sat upright, ahorse, but not by my own doing. My hands were bound before me, and a loop of rope stretched from my wrists around the neck of my mount. I tested my legs carefully; a rope passing under the horse's chest joined my ankles.

I was not alone on the horse. A weather-gnarled arm stretched by on either side of me to grip the reins. One of the murderous outlaws rode with me, supporting me like a lad his love.

My only impulse was to struggle like a wildcat; my only desire, to spit him upon my sword. But the first would accomplish nothing, and the second was beyond my capabilities for now. I had remained limp instinctively upon awakening, and I decided to continue my unconscious appearance. My eyes were open to observant slits, however.

I glimpsed other horses to the left and right. Each bore two riders, one outlaw and one Ellswoman. That meant these wolfheads raided us, not for food, riches, or the simple thrill of

killing, but for wives. I recognized the Lady Varda, her sister, and—Belita! Her precipitous flight back to camp had been a disastrous mistake.

With such weapons as the basilisk rod and the fire-thrower at the bandits' disposal, I feared that Kegan and his soldiers had been overwhelmed and slain to a man. After all, I saw no male captives. I vowed silently to avenge them.

I tilted my head carefully, to get a better look at our captors. They were an ugly lot, clad mostly in badly cured furs, and they had more than their share of scars, eye patches, and missing fingers.

One man—the leader, I guessed—particularly caught my eye. He had ridden somewhere ahead, but now he reined his horse in, allowing his fellows to pass by. He scrutinized the women as if they were horses up for sale. All of his accoutrements—cloak, trousers, shirt, boots—were made from gray-white wolf skins, and the fire-gun was slung over his shoulder.

When he came abreast of me, his gaze caught mine. I winced my eyes shut too late.

“Ho! The swordmaid awakes!”

I feigned senselessness a moment more, until he continued.

“Don’t play the puff adder with me, girl! I know you hear and understand.”

Very well, I thought. I opened my eyes and glared at him with all the hate I could muster.

“That’s better,” the outlaw said with a sneering tone. “More spunk than the rest combined, and not reeking of Power. Bitard was right—you are a valuable prize.”

He matched his pace to mine, and he reached a hand toward me as if to stroke my cheek. I spat at him. He only sneered again.

“You we’ll have to watch,” said he of the many wolf pelts. “More than all these others put together. You are a schemer—a warrior—a leader—just like me.”

“Not like you, murderer,” I denied hotly.

The bandit leader guffawed. “You’ll be trouble—but you’ll be worth it.”

“That depends on what price you set to your miserable life, Wolfhead.”

The outlaw stared at me for a second, then laughed. So did the man behind me. Perhaps my threats were hollow, but I did not deem them *that* funny.

"You happened upon a private jest, I fear," said the outlaw leader at last.

"Jest, then, while you may," I advised coldly.

"If glares were daggers and words, darts, lady, would none of us be here. And nothing more shall you—"

He stiffened suddenly; the smirk on his face replaced by a mask of anger. The raiders now clopped along a natural pathway between two copses of trees. From far to the west there reverberated the same eerie howl Belita and I had heard twice at the stream. I straightened to see the horsemen glancing to and fro, their mounts blowing nervously.

"So!" cried the bandit leader. "Still he follows us! Well—let him bay all the night long. I shall send no more men out till we reach Dragonsback."

The bandit's reaction puzzled me. He seemed to hate this strange howling creature as he would a human foe. However, he had good reason to do so, as the next few moments proved.

The bandits' eyes were turned to the west, where the mournful call was repeated, and my eyes were jumping from one man to another. None of us turned our gaze to the east until a score of gray, white, and black forms burst from the nearby trees. They were wolves, sleek, swift, and uncannily silent.

The world around me blurred as my mount rose and pawed at the air. The man behind me squawked in surprise and slid off its rump. Bound as I was, I couldn't have fallen if I tried.

I heard yells of command and shrieks of pain. The wolves shot in and out amongst the men, tearing with their fangs and dodging sword blows, still unnervingly quiet.

My horse bolted from the outlaw caravan and crashed into the stunted forest. I tugged on the rope around its neck as I would the reins, but the slaving beast would not obey. I gritted my teeth and ducked the slashing branches of the trees, and I prayed it would avoid stepping in any holes.

After nearly a quarter hour of flight, the horse slowed its pace. It came upon a stream and lowered its head to drink. Afterward, it climbed a slight rise and began cropping the

stunted grass as though I didn't exist. I bent forward and started the arduous process of untying my bonds with my teeth.

## V

My teeth slipped off the thick rope and clacked painfully together for the twentieth time. I spat out the bits of fiber I'd torn loose and swore. I'd been at this for an hour, and this knot of rope still seemed like a knot of wood. I grew thirsty and tired. I wished to relieve myself, and my legs were chafed from rubbing against the horse's shoulders.

Suddenly the horse's head rose, ears perked. A vaguely human outline moved amongst the gnarled trees and menhirlike rocks. Was it a traveler? A bandit? Worse?

The skittish manner in which the horse backed away from the approaching silhouette made me fear the last possibility. Just as it seemed ready to bolt again, however, a strange trilling noise filled the air, apparently coming from the dark figure.

My mount whinnied softly. It hesitated, then it actually started forward, as if attracted to the trilling.

When I could make out the details of what approached, a cold thrill spread through me. Although it walked upright, it was not human. Its legs and arms were long and spindly, and all its body was covered with gray-white fur. A plumelike tail swished into view from behind it, and its head was that of a great wolf.

*Wolfhead . . . A private jest . . .*

Suddenly I knew I faced the howling thing that the bandit leader hated. That it was his enemy, though, did not comfort me.

"Gee-up!"

I yanked hard on the rope about the horse's neck. The horse, which had been blind with terror only an hour earlier, clopped fearlessly right up to the wolf-creature.

The creature, still trilling, patted the horse's muzzle with its

pawlike hand and took hold of the reins, like any human equestrian. I caught myself making half-choked gasps of terror, undignified noises that stung my pride.

The creature's eyes were sapphire-blue, and they shifted from the horse to me. I bit my lower lip and stared back. For a full minute our gazes locked, as though we fought with willpower instead of weapons. Finally, the wolf-thing snorted as if bored and turned away.

The man-beast slipped its clawed fingers around the rope that held my hands to the horse. It lifted the rope as far as it would come from the animal's skin and bit it with its sharp, white teeth. Once, twice, thrice the wolf-thing sawed at the cord, its lupine fangs accomplishing in seconds what my human teeth couldn't in an hour.

I straightened and worked my wrists apart. My hands had become numb and purple, and the tingle of returning blood made me gasp. The creature squatted by the horse's foreleg and bit through the rope that held me to the animal.

My mind was awirl with questions. Why was this being helping me? *What* was it? That it had intelligence like unto a human's, I could not deny. But could I speak with it?

"Wh-who are you?" I asked tremulously. "Can you understand me? Can you speak?"

If the man-beast comprehended, it made no sign. Its ears perked like a dog's, and it stared off into the gnarled forest from which I'd come. I heard the distant howling of wolves, and suddenly the wolf-creature shot away. Sometimes it loped on two legs, sometimes on all fours. I almost called out to it, but I checked myself. I knew not what motivated the creature, but I found it hard to believe that it could be sheer altruism.

I dismounted and caught the horse's reins. For the first time I noticed a dart-gun stored in a holster that was built right onto the saddle. I snatched it out and found there to be a nearly full complement of darts, for which I thanked Sul.

Now; what to do? The bandit leader had mentioned Dragonsback, a jagged line of peaks to the north. That seemed as good a goal as any, but first I had to rest up from my ordeal. I was one against many, and I had no shield-brother to spell me

on watch. I tied the horse's reins to a stunted bush and stumbled down to the stream.

I rode uneasily along the streambed, which stretched northward toward Dragonsback. As I studied a small knoll to my left, the horse neighed and sidestepped as if it had nearly trod upon a serpent. I scanned the rocky path but saw nothing. When I looked up again, the wolf-creature's blue eyes stared back like two fireflies. It squatted on the knoll like a great chipmunk. It flinched as I yanked out the dart-gun, but I did not fire, and it remained where it crouched.

"Wolfheads," it said in a guttural voice. It felt strange to hear a recognizable word from its bestial muzzle.

"What?"

It looked away to the east.

"That is the term you use for such as *those*, is it not? Robbers, murderers, rapists—wolfheads."

"It is," I admitted warily. "What of it?"

The man-beast bent forward, fur bristling.

"I would merely inform you that amongst true wolves such crimes are unknown. They do not abandon their children or their mates; they do not wage war; they hunt, but not for sport; and they are loyal to their packs, more so, I'm sure, than many men are to their liege lords."

"That is so?" I asked. I felt suddenly defensive, as if I represented all humanity. "You quite suspiciously resemble a Gray One, my furry friend. They are most definitely of the Dark. Do you claim such nobility for them, as well?"

"I would have, once," the wolf-thing snarled. "They are not responsible for what they are today. They were created and used as vessels for the Dark—if not by men, then by those with a similar disregard for fellow living creatures!"

I snorted. "You cannot compare my kind to those ancients who held High Hallack before, man-wolf. I know not why you chose me to hear your exaltations of your lupine friends, but—"

I stopped and lifted my gun again, for the wolf-thing hunched its back, and I sensed it would pounce. Pounce it did, but aside, not forward, and my dart whizzed through empty air. For the

rest of that night I neither heard nor glimpsed Wolfhead—as I christened the lupine being—though I kept alert for its return.

## VI

I would fall out of the saddle if I did not sleep soon, I knew. I was wending my way through a maze of channels that crisscrossed the Waste, the peaks of Dragonsback my only compass. As I passed the mouth of one such channel, I noticed an azure glow—mist lit by some source hidden behind a twist in the rock walls.

I reined the horse around and started down the narrow gulch. Ruins of the Old Ones could be found even in the Dales, though most avoided them. Some held an atmosphere inimical to men, some were indifferent, and some were actually friendly. Belita had taught me that ruins of the last sort were built of glowing bluish stones. If this was such a place—

I rounded a sharp outcropping and found an anomalous expanse of lush greenery stretching from one rocky wall to the other. At the center sat a great circular dais, several rods wide and as high as my chest, and in the middle of the dais stood a small temple of turquoise stone.

There was a throb—no, a *feeling*—that permeated the air, a sense of well-being and safety, like my earliest shadow-memories of my mother. The horse's pace picked up noticeably; I believe it, too, felt the benevolent atmosphere.

I'd saved some of the rope that had bound me, and with it I hobbled the animal, though I thought it unlikely to wander from this oasis in the Waste. A stone stairway reached from the ground to the lip of the dais. I ascended warily, though with each step I was more certain than ever that nothing ill could befall me here.

I approached the small building. It had a simple arched entryway, without a door. From it came a glow slightly brighter



than that of the dais or the temple's exterior. I stepped boldly through the opening.

There was only one room in the building, scarcely any larger than my bedchamber in fallen Ellskeep. There were two windows, one in the south wall and one in the north. Taking up the west wall was a shrine of sorts, built of more blue stone.

At the south end of the temple I noticed a small wooden table with a single chair beside it. In the north stood a cot matted with soft rushes, as green as though they'd been picked this morning.

A strange feeling washed over me, as if a door had been opened and a gust of wind had blown in. I turned to find utensils, a plate of steaming victuals, and a mug of dark red liquid on the table. No physical person could have brought them without my spotting him.

"For the welcome of this house, my thanks," I said aloud, looking slowly about at the corners of the ceiling. "For the feasting on the board, my pleasure and good wishes. To the—inhabitants of this house, fair fortune."

Afterward, I ate the meal provided from thin air, for I was famished. I could not identify the meat or the vegetables, but each bite melted on my tongue like butter. The strange drink, which was neither wine nor mead, sent warmth down my throat and outward through every limb.

Finished, I removed my boots and my mail shirt and stretched out on the cot with a sigh. I faded into a dreamless sleep before a single thought of Wolfheads human or otherwise crossed my brain.

I awoke fully in but a moment, completely refreshed. I sat up with a smile and slid my legs over the side of the cot.

"Good morning, dear lady. Your rest appears to have done you well."

Wolfhead sat on the chair at the other end of the room, one elbow propped upon the table, as if he were someone I commonly breakfasted with. I swept my hands over my mail shirt, where I'd set my dart-gun. It took me a moment to realize the man-beast held it.

"Weapons are unwelcome here, my lady. Tolerated, perhaps, but not to be used in this place."

Wolfhead stood up on his spindly lupine legs and approached me, holding out the gun butt first. I stood up as well and accepted the weapon hesitatingly.

"Wh-why are you here?" I demanded.

"I wished to apologize for any offense I may have given last evening," said the man-beast. "There are certain subjects on which I feel strongly . . . Also, we have common goals and common hatreds we should discuss." He glanced about the temple with drooping ears. "But not here. Anger and war do not belong to this place. I shall await you outside."

He turned to the doorway on his double-jointed legs. He walked with a strange grace, like a dancer on tiptoe. Also was his voice less guttural today, as if his growling speech was something he effected to impress people.

"Wait! Who—what are you?"

Wolfhead stared back for a moment. His eyes were of the same turquoise shade as the stones of the temple.

"That is a tale long in the telling, lady, perhaps better saved for later."

With that, he padded out the door. I pulled on my boots and byrnie and followed.

With each step I took down the stone stairway, the feeling of well-being diminished and the doubts of reality awakened again. How could I trust this creature? What did he want?

Wolfhead awaited me by my horse. He was trilling again, and the animal nudged his furry hand as if seeking a sweet therein. He stared down his long snout at my dart-gun, which I held prominently before me.

"You are still suspicious," he observed.

"Humans always treat the unknown with caution," I explained. "Especially in a land such as ours, where death can come in the form of man or beast, weapon or willpower."

"Fair enough."

Wolfhead quietly patted the horse's muzzle until I spoke again.

"Yesterday . . . There were wolves . . ."

"Gnarrel's pack."

"Gnarrel?"

"Their leader, when I am not around. They lost three of their

number in yestermorn's attack, while Shekkar has two known dead and several badly mauled."

"Shekkar?"

"The outlaws' leader. The one who wears only wolf skins—and only of wolves shaded like me."

The wolf-creature slid one clawed hand over his fur. That of his chest and stomach formed a white-band, like a narrow tabard.

"He does that to annoy me."

I lowered my gun and slipped it into my belt.

"He is the common hatred you mentioned?"

"Indeed. He will be making for his headquarters near Dragonsback. He goes there to meet with the outlanders."

"Why would this Shekkar seek the invaders?"

"He would be wanting more weapons like the guns that sear from afar. The outlanders want men to guide caravans to the distant sea and back."

"So there is an alliance between the outlaws and the Hounds!" I exclaimed. "If only I could warn Ronansdale and the lands beyond . . ."

"Your men who still survive shall sound a warning for those of the south. On foot, and with scores of injuries amongst them, they cannot hope to follow Shekkar."

"My men? Some live?" I asked excitedly.

"Four or five. Akria and her pack are watching over them."

"Akria?"

"Gnarrel's dam."

I frowned. "My men may misinterpret the attention of wolves."

"My four-footed cousins will patrol for enemies and predators, and perhaps supply them with a rabbit or two. They will flee any confrontations with your soldiers."

"The soldiers—was one old, silver-haired?"

"I do not know . . . My lady, you are full of questions this morn. We really should move on. Tonight, perhaps, I can answer you more fully."

"You are right, of course."

"I must gather my four-footed brethren. We shall await you at the entrance of the canyon."

Wolfhead dropped to all fours and loped away at a startling pace. I had already started thinking of him as "he" rather than "it," but it was hard to distinguish him from the forest beasts when he ran as they.

I wondered at the wisdom of entering into an alliance with this mysterious man-beast. But . . . I glanced back at the Blue Temple. Were Wolfhead malevolent, he could not have set foot upon the dais. I was certain of that.

## VII

Wolfhead ranged ahead of my horse throughout the day, as Dragonsback towered higher before us. The wolves loped along just out of sight, but I heard them call to their strange leader. Toward evening, they led me down a narrow valley to the east, in the foothills of Dragonsback. Now I could see the wolves, a score or so, all about. They sauntered along as if weightless, slapping their paws to earth only to propel themselves forward. By now, my horse seemed unconcerned even if one crossed closely in front of it.

Far ahead, the man-beast rose onto two legs before a bleak cliff face. I saw at the base of the cliff a small building near-completely tumbled, abutting its stony surface. There was a single entrance, cleared of debris, large enough for two horsemen to enter side by side.

"What is this place?" I queried.

"A good shelter for the night," the wolf-man answered. "There are stores within, and well water."

The wolves disappeared into the arid terrain around us as I dismounted. I hobbled the horse and followed the man-beast in. There was a main corridor that ran straight back from the entrance into the depths of the cliff. Along the walls were numerous other entryways, radiating out from the main hall, and also statuettes and busts covered with the dust of ages. These

figurines were of men and legendary semihumans, like Satyrs and Mer-Maids.

"Here," said my lupine guide, pointing at an opening on the left.

I entered after him and saw a wide, calm pool of sparkling, blue, fluorescent water. The pool illuminated the room well enough to make things out.

On the far side of the room were stacks of smoked meat, bags of grain, and clay jars of obvious Dale make. I wondered how the man-beast had obtained them and transported them out here. On the left was a hearth or oven and, next to that, a pile of kindling. On the right the room receded into darkness.

"You have been quite industrious here," I commented. "Is this your home?"

"Near enough. It is my birthplace."

I lay on a pallet of dry rushes the man-beast had found in the darkness. He stretched out on a woven rug several feet away. The fire crackled brightly in its corner alcove, its light flickering on the floor between us. I had just finished a piece of dry meat as my lupine companion spoke.

"This was a beautiful land, once. The earth was rich and fertile, the beasts roamed peacefully through the woods, and the birds sang at one's request. Yet there existed people then, as now, who did not find nature's variety enough. They manipulated living creatures as a sculptor molds clay, and they produced beings previously unknown. Some served as ambassadors between the people and the creatures of the wild. Some spread the ways of the elder folk across the land and sea, and to places they themselves could not colonize—in the waters there are Krogan, in the air Flannen, and beneath the earth Thas. And some were no more than living portraits, expressions of others' imaginations."

"You speak as if you were there," I said softly.

"I was."

I started. "But that would make you so—old!"

The man-wolf's toothy grin glinted in the firelight.

"In one manner, I am very old. In another, I am not. Please have a little patience, and you will hear. Patience is a virtue

most humans lack—as did not a few of those almost-human Old Ones long ago. All the universe holds—and more—would have been revealed unto them eventually, but many could not wait.

“Dark Powers and entities were summoned, only to escape and spread across the land like a forest fire. The Shadow touched upon people, animals, and in-between creatures like me, and war broke out, utilizing weapons to put the outlanders’ fire-guns to shame. Mountains tumbled like a child’s blocks. Seas dried or ran to other beds. The beautiful land became the Waste.

“There remained a wise man, Gwart, who thought a chosen few should leap out of the stream of life until matters were settled in the land. He picked a number of his followers—including such as I, for he judged us not by our outward form—and we went with him to a hidden vault. Then, we slept.”

“Slept?”

“A near enough word.”

Wolfhead rolled onto his back. He seemed to study the ceiling.

“Finally, I awoke—alone. Everyone but me was dead and dust or gone altogether. My mind and memory were like a newborn cub’s; if the others had been as I, they may have simply perished in the Waste.

“I crawled from chamber to chamber, scenting nothing save dust and centuries-old bones. I finally found Gwart in his compartment, looking whole, if dormant. But when I touched him, he crumbled away. This reached through my clouded mind, and I howled for him.”

The Gray One paused for a moment. I sensed his sorrow, and I wondered again at the dichotomy between his bestial exterior and his engaging personality. If ever he left the Waste for the lands of men, he’d be slain on sight, I knew, and my choler quickened at the unfairness of it.

Wolfhead continued:

“I heard the questioning calls of men, stirred by my mourning. I staggered onto two legs and followed the sound. Thus did I come upon Shekka’s band.

“The outlaws had entered the sanctuary, for what purpose I

never did learn. I suspect their intrusion had something to do with my awakening . . . At any rate, the bandits' first impulse was to slay me, and I was virtually helpless. But Shekkar was quite irreverent where it concerned the Old Ones. He ordered me captured instead, an easy enough command.

"He did not know why my mind was stunted, but he saw an interesting possibility in me. I was at first treated like a favored dog, and as my mind grew clearer I came to accept Shekkar as my master."

Wolfhead crossed his spindly arms over his chest, and his lips curled up to reveal his fangs.

"Some men have fighting dogs or war-horses for which they are envied. But who could boast of an obedient Gray One?"

"Let me say only that I grew displeased with my lot over the next few months, as my memory returned, and that I fled into the Waste during a raiding foray. The true wolves of the wilderness accepted me quickly—that was why my kind had been created, after all. Since then we have harassed Shekkar and his band . . ."

The fire crackled for a moment or two.

"That has become difficult since the coming of the outlanders. Shekkar must not get more of their terrible weapons."

"You have my full cooperation, of course," I said. "But even together, what chance have we to defeat the Hounds and their fire-spitters?"

Wolfhead rolled onto his side, facing me. His eyes glinted in the darkness like two bright opals. He put a single clawed finger to his lips, as though shushing me.

"Ah, my lady, their defeat we must leave to your countrymen. Our task is smaller. If we each take half the pack and strive to our utmost, I think we might cause enough confusion to allow you to free your people."

"I take half the pack? How could I tell them what to do?"

"They will know, dear lady, trust me."

"But shouldn't we spy out their camp? Know the placement of their guards?"

"Indeed, indeed," Wolfhead interrupted. "But let us save that work for tomorrow. For now, we must sleep—though I've had enough for many lifetimes."

The man-beast smiled, and it occurred to me that two days ago I would have considered his toothy grin a frightful spectacle. How fast things could change! A week ago I doubt I would have believed such as Wolfhead could even exist, much less that he'd be my ally.

The man-wolf noticed my lingering eyes and sat up.

"If my presence disturbs you, my lady, I could find another room in which to sleep . . ."

"No, no," I spoke up hastily. "I wouldn't hear of it! I was merely thinking about the recent turn of events . . . It is not for me to turn you out . . . even if I so desired."

The Gray One lay gingerly down again. "As you wish, dear lady."

In the morning the man-wolf greeted me with two dusty satchels in his paws. He set them carefully onto the floor and opened one, then he reached in and lifted out an oval stone set into a bracelet. The stone was of the same turquoise-blue as the Old Ones' temple.

"What is this?" I asked.

"A form of protection," the Gray One explained. "Put it on."

I obeyed, and the man-wolf continued: "There are a dozen more such stones within. It is very important that you get your fellow women to wear these as soon as possible. And you must keep them on until you are well away from the outlaws' camp."

I sat silently for a moment, examining the blue stone. A feeling of security seemed to emanate from it, as from the temple.

"From what will they protect us?"

Wolfhead grinned, picking up the second satchel.

"This contains some things of Gwart's," he answered, slipping its strap over his lupine head. "I learned much from him in my youth—enough to prepare a surprise for our adversaries."

"You shall use Old Ones' magic against them?" I ventured.

The man-beast nodded, then he exclaimed, "Oh! There is also this!"

He reached into the first satchel again and pulled out a dagger in a sheath. The pommel of the weapon was wrought, appropriately enough, in the shape of a wolf's head.



"Not always did we fight with tooth and claw," the Gray One explained. "For now, I think you need it more than I."

I thanked him for the blade.

"Now, dear lady," he continued, "I believe we should prepare to depart."

## VIII

The sky was so overcast, I could scarcely tell night from day, but this morning the dark clouds were a blessing. We traveled as we had yesterday, I on horseback, the wolves roundabout, and Wolfhead ranging between us. An hour or so before nooning, the Gray One bade me dismount and wait at the base of a rocky hill as he scouted ahead. When he returned, he announced that beyond the hill, in a shallow valley, our enemies lurked. We then climbed the prominence together.

Like the ancient building in which we spent the night, the bandits' hideout seemed to grow out of a cliff face, but there were so many balconies, windows, and turrets that one could imagine an entire cliff-city. Stretched out before it were tents, horses, dogs, crates, and one of the Hounds' metal juggernauts. I knew the bandits by their crude furs, but mixed amongst them were men wearing uniforms and crested helms. The Hounds of Alizon!

"The captives are held in the great tent on the north edge of camp," explained Wolfhead. "So much has Gnarrel sniffed out for me."

"Why would they leave them outside? That cliff-castle seems impregnable to attack."

"Yon structure is not truly held by Shekkar," Wolfhead continued. "Oh, he and his men occupy a few chambers. But that is a stronghold of the Shadow, where Dark Old Ones dwelt in the days of my cubhood, and their malevolent influence still permeates the air. It is too malignant in the deeper recesses even for the likes of Shekkar, but it is so impressive a hold that

he will suffer the majority of the space to be held by Darkness. There is simply no room for a dungeon."

"Hmm . . . What about flight?"

The man-beast pointed out the tent-prison in question.

"There are horses brought by the outlanders tied off to the left. The outlanders fear the dark hold and keep their possessions far from it. While they and the outlaws are distracted, you can escape on the Alizon mounts."

We slid back from the hill's crest.

"Not even a hundred wolves would occupy the attention of all those men. And you say half the wolves will be with me?"

The Gray One studied me as one might look upon a backward child.

"The evil men below will be otherwise disposed when you come, my lady. With Gwart's help, that is," he added, patting the satchel around his neck. "Now, I think the time has come to get to our positions."

I fidgeted anxiously amongst the rocks near the Alizon bandit camp, a dozen wolves waiting with me. I was to move in as the animals did, I was not to lead them. The outlaw Shekkar had named me a schemer and a leader, yet I had been deferring to the Gray One's judgment ever since we joined forces. But, I reasoned, these beasts were his soldiers, this was his land, and even the bandits we opposed had been his enemies longer than they'd been mine.

Even if I successfully freed my people, the bandits would certainly give chase, unless Wolfhead's "surprise" took care of the lot of them. But if such Power was at his disposal, why had he not struck such a blow before?

Belita had taught me that each use of Power has its price, on mind, body, and spirit. For lesser manifestations, you merely gave up some stamina—you felt drained, as if you'd been working or marching all day. But legend told of the Power the Old Ones wielded, Power to move mountains or slay armies. Such great magic carried a far greater price . . .

A benevolent Gray One was a freak in the contemporary world. He could not join his own kind, nor could he live in the

Dales, where men feared the slightest departure from the norm. Perhaps he did not fear to pay a great price . . .

Far away I heard angry shouts. Wolfhead's assault had begun. A wavering howl came to me over the pounding of hooves and the sizzle of fire-guns. The wolves shot forth without a sound, and I followed as soon as I could put spur to horse.

Most of the bandits and Hounds were watching the commotion to the south, and some were running or riding to join the fray. Others, however, had enough sense to remain scattered along the camp's northern perimeter—and these were now being harried by my wolves.

I rode hard toward the prison-tent. Since my saddle and reins were of the outlaws' design, I was not immediately marked. I circled behind the tent and dismounted, my dart-gun and wolf-dagger ready as I crept toward the entrance.

I spotted two guards at the flap. One turned as if to speak to the other and spied me. I fired and watched a crimson flower blossom in his throat. His companion dove to the ground within the tent, then his hand reached out, a dart-gun of his own clenched in it. He pulled the trigger blindly, and a wasp-sting of pain burned into my left arm.

I cried out, and the two nearest wolves pricked their ears and disengaged themselves from their opponents. They charged into the tent, and I heard the second guard scream. I followed, pausing only to pick up the first guard's sword, though the pain in my arm pulsed with each step.

"L-Lady Wylona!"

Belita, Varda, and the others stared wide-eyed at me, the wolves, and the dead guards. The animals seemed shy of the attention and loped out the way they'd come.

"No time for talk," I said. I opened the bag at my hip and began hauling out the blue stones Wolfhead had given me.

"Put these on," I commanded. I watched to make sure the prisoners obeyed.

"What are they for?" asked Belita.

"Protection," I answered.

"Indeed," she agreed, "but normally against forces neither Hound nor outlaw wield. Where did you get them?"

"From a friend. Now we must go."

\* \* \*

I peeked through the tent flap and saw no one, though I still heard hoofbeats and cries. I crept to the corner of the tent and spotted the tethered horses, but before we could reach them the shouts of Hound and outlaw rose into screams of unmistakable terror, accompanied by horses' whinnies and dogs' howls. I peered across the encampment and received my first glimpse of Wolfhead's "surprise."

Out of a dozen windows and turrets of the cliff-keep there billowed—smoke? The thickest smoke from a forest fire was never so black as this. 'Twas like a river of oil flowing out onto the surface of a lake, swirling, spreading, and polluting everywhere.

"Dear Gunnora," I gasped, "what has he done?"

Belita came up beside me. "Your friend?"

"I fear—yes."

The wise woman frowned. "His cure may well be worse than the disease!"

A putrid gust of wind from the direction of the cloud hit us. I held my wristlet up to Belita's face.

"He gave me these. Will they protect us?" I had to shout to be heard.

"Perhaps," my friend answered. "I do not think it prudent to test them, however."

Varda and the others had gathered at our backs, watching the loathsome cloud as we did. I shooed them like chickens toward the Alizonian horses. The horses snorted and stamped, but as we untied them, they settled considerably. I can only think the proximity of the magic stones calmed them.

Men, horses, and the narrow-headed canines of the outlanders fled past us unheeding. I looked out over the shallow valley, searching for the man-wolf. The inky Darkness blotted out the light more effectively than the thick clouds above; however, I could see tiny figures running in its shadow—and, near the entrance of the cliff-keep, one figure upright but unmoving.

I noticed many tools and weapons strewn upon the ground roundabouts, including a farseeing lens. I picked it up and trained it on the unmoving object. It was, indeed, the Gray One, standing stock still, his head thrown back as if howling. In

his paws he carried a small black pot, from which curled a streamer of red smoke, a streak of blood against the Darkness.

Around Wolfhead lay several men, dead or alive I could not tell. Also there were pale, indistinct moving things that gathered about the fallen like vultures. In a ditch near the cliff-keep such a grouping incurred a swath of red beams—someone with a fire-gun was still alive out there.

The Gray One collapsed, the black pot rolling from his paws. The ghostly shapes around him crept closer. Even at this distance, I should have been able to see the blue glow of a bracelet-talisman. I saw none, however.

"The foolish creature!" I exclaimed. "Hasn't he one of the wristlets?"

"The Dark Powers of that place would have ignored his petition with such a charm nearby," said Belita, again popping up at my side. "Who is 'he,' anyway?"

I glanced back. My horse had not bolted, but it danced about nervously. I had three blue stones left in my pouch, besides the one on my wrist.

"I'll introduce you after I fetch him," I promised, heading for my mount.

"Are you mad? You cannot go out there!"

"We owe our freedom to him," I said, grabbing the horse's reins. "I shall not desert him! Besides, he may know how to stop what he has unleashed. You must ride after the others to make sure they don't get lost in the Waste!"

I climbed into the saddle, wincing at the pain in my left arm, and put spur to horse.

## IX

There was a purple nimbus coating the tortured earth, providing a vague illumination in the Darkness. Also did the strange misty entities flittering about glow of themselves, and once or twice, from the ditch near the cliff-keep, the red beams of the fire-gun shot into the sky.

At first the mist-creatures ignored me, to gather still around the camp's fallen. They did not tear into the bodies like scavengers; I did not think they were solid enough—yet. There were loathsome

spiderlike things, bounding along with a speed unlikely for their bloated forms. There were humanoid entities, a ghastly combination of man, lizard, and praying mantis, with skinny, slick limbs, reptile heads, and fly eyes. And there were wattled bat-creatures as well, with bulging eyes like those of a newly hatched chick.

The spider-things were becoming aggressive. I fired a few darts into them, and they burst like ticks trodden underfoot. My horse was getting harder to manage, blue stones or no. I'd have to dismount soon, and I feared the animal would bolt the moment I did.

Suddenly the beat of galloping hooves drew near. Behind me I heard Belita's voice.

"Above you!"

I looked up and realized with horror that the Darkness had thrown out lengths of itself like squid arms casting about for prey. Belita reined in at my side and sketched something in the air with her forefinger. For a second a strange symbol burned above her, the same bluish shade as the magic stones, then the tentacles of Darkness pulled away like so many fingers singed by a stove.

"Thank you, Belita," I gasped. Then, "I thought I told you to go after the others."

"Did you? The wind must have carried your words away," she lied. "But as long as I am here, perhaps I can be of service."

She drew another symbol, aimed, it appeared, at my horse's head. The lathering animal calmed, as did the wise woman's own. We rode the last few yards to Wolfhead's prone form and dismounted.

"Great Gunnora!" exclaimed Belita. "This is a Gray One!"

"In form only, Belita!" I cried, kneeling at the man-beast's side. "He is a creature of Light, not Dark!"

"Yet, he caused this!" she accused, spreading her arms wide.

The Darkness had replaced the sky, and its tentacles lapped at the rim of the valley. The earth glowed with the sickly light of fungi, and the disgusting Shadow creatures capered but a few yards away. The wind howled over us, filled with a stomach-turning stench of decay.

"Perhaps he can also put an end to it!" I yelled. I slipped one

of the bracelets over Wolfhead's wrist and pulled him to a sitting position. He refused to stir.

I turned to Belita. "He won't wake up!"

Belita reached into a pouch at her waist and pulled out a bone vial. She shook a pile of crystals into her hand and cupped it to Wolfhead's snout. The Gray One snorted, winced, and opened his turquoise eyes.

"My lady!" he gasped. "You shouldn't have come!"

"I do not forsake my comrades," I answered him. "Now, come, before the Darkness claims us all!"

"I cannot," the man-beast cried.

"Are you mad, wolfling?" I asked, glancing up. The palpable Shadow seemed to press massively closer. I could swear a great whirlpool was forming directly above, a maelstrom in the sky.

"Not mad," sighed Wolfhead. "The evil in yon place demands its due for the routing of the outlanders and the bandits. It shan't retreat until paid."

"And that payment is—?" demanded Belita.

"Me," said the man-wolf.

I was stunned for a moment, though I'd half suspected he might try such a thing. The Gray One rolled weakly onto all fours.

"The bowl . . . Where is the bowl?"

From a depression nearby a trickle of red smoke emerged, to be whipped away by the wind. Wolfhead crawled slowly toward it. Meanwhile, a new volley of crimson beams shot out of the ditch near the cliff-keep. The Shadow creatures fled from the assault, now making audible squeals.

Suddenly Belita leaped past the man-beast and squatted by the trickle of smoke.

"Hold you place, Gray One! Wyłona—come here!"

Her voice carried such authority that we both obeyed. I squatted beside her and stared at the black pot I'd seen earlier in Wolfhead's paws.

"Don't touch it with your bare flesh," she warned. She tore loose part of her tattered skirt and used it as a pot holder.

"Ah! Look at the effigy within! It gives me an idea to save this strange friend of yours."

I peered into the pot. The red smoke had finally dissipated; I

could not identify its source, for within there was only a crude, unscorched doll, wrapped with wolf fur.

"What is this?" I asked.

"The Gray One's representation of himself," Belita replied. "A focus for the Dark Powers. He is not much of an artist, and this very fact may save him."

"How so?" I asked, looking up. It was not my imagination. There was a maelstrom in the Darkness, and the ceiling of its hateful substance was itself descending toward us.

Belita tilted the pot toward me. "Who does this remind you of?"

"Wolfhead—the Gray One, of course."

"Who else?"

Who else? There was no one else one could mistake for a Gray One. But—this was not Wolfhead, it was a very crude doll clothed in wolf skin . . .

I gasped, finally catching the wise woman's meaning.

"You understand," she said. "Good. The Darkness does not see and hear as you or I. It has only such tools as these to focus on our world. And the tools of magic tend to be somewhat symbolic. There is one other that this effigy might represent . . ."

We both glanced at the ditch, where another red streak split the Shadow.

"The Hounds fear all Powers, Dark, Light, or Gray," Belita continued. "They kept themselves, and their fire-guns, as far from the dark keep as possible. There was only one other, to my knowledge, who possessed such a weapon . . ."

"All he must do is touch it?" I queried.

"Yes. For one so resembling the effigy, it would not even have to meet his bare skin. Touching it to his clothing would suffice."

I grinned wickedly. "I shall fetch my horse. You'll have to hand the pot up to me."

"Wylona—your arm—"

"Belita," I hissed. Our eyes locked for a moment.

"Very well, my liege," she finally said.

Belita drew her horse-calming symbol once more over my mount, but the beast's muscles still quivered beneath me. The wise woman handed up the black pot, wrapped in her torn skirt, and I cradled it before me. Wolfhead watched us with horror.



"My lady—what do you intend?"

"I'm saving your shaggy hide," I called. Then I was off.

I galloped past overturned carts, sagging tents, and flapping banners. The Darkness was like a ceiling only a few rods away. Once more did a fire-beam shoot upward; I only hoped that the bandit leader would be too preoccupied to notice me.

I drew up to the lip of the ditch; there crouched Shekkar beneath an overhang, the bodies of several Shadow creatures nearby, looking semisubstantial again in death.

I prepared to hurl the pot at him, but he spotted me and fired the red beam. My horse was stricken, collapsing with a death-scream; I fell into the ditch, losing my grip on the pot. I barely avoided being crushed by the pitiful beast, but that didn't worry me. The pot!

It bowled along the rocky earth like a ball in a yard sport. The bandit leader saw it and kicked it aside.

My head throbbed as if struck with a bludgeon. I sensed—an opening, as of a door or window, like I had in the temple when my dinner appeared from nowhere. I looked up, and now I could peer down the very throat of the Shadow-maelstrom.

Shekkar had advanced with his fire-gun, perhaps to finish me, but now he stared upward, too. Of a sudden the wind changed direction, with such violence that he was knocked down.

The wind! By the dust it carried I could mark its movement. It came from every direction into this ditch—then up!

Shekkar cried out. I watched him rise from the ground like a leaf caught by a dust-devil. He flew ever upward, struggling and screaming, into the throat of the maelstrom. Then the world-turned-nightmare faded from my sight.

## X

I spluttered and waved my arms, the sting of smelling salts sharp in my nose.

"Milady?"

The lupine form crouching over me was a welcome sight. I reached up and tousled the fur of his neck as I might a child's hair. The blue sky beyond Wolfhead was a vision even more welcome.

"The Darkness is gone," I observed.

"As are the outlanders and the bandits," said Belita.

"And I am still here," said Wolfhead. "That you did this still amazes me. I am indebted to you both."

"No more than we are to you, Wolfhead," I denied.

The Gray One's ears perked. "Wolfhead?"

I flushed. "I'm sorry. I had to give some sort of name to you. And Wolfhead had—popped up in the conversation."

The man-wolf grinned. "It is not undescriptive. But I do have a name, my lady, unused a thousand years. I am Amarrok."

"Then let me say at last that my name is Wylona," I returned. "And this is Belita, my dear friend and adviser."

"Yes," said the Gray One. "Your woman of Power. We introduced ourselves while you were out."

I rode upon Belita's horse, while she and the Gray One led it and discussed the days of the Old Ones. I was content to watch the landscape.

Bodies were still scattered about, of men, horses, dogs, and also of the Shadow creatures. The latter melted like cheese in the sunlight. I saw the prison-tent and the abandoned juggernaut, yet this land seemed like a different world compared to its own self of just a few hours before.

From far off came a timid wolf howl. We stopped, and Amarrok answered. Three furry shapes limped toward us from the rocky hills—the only survivors of the Gray One's pack.

"My brothers," Amarrok sighed. "I have used them for my own purposes as much as any Dark Old One."

The wolves greeted him in a friendly fashion nonetheless, and he dropped to all fours for a minute, speaking in a language of growls and yips.

"They have received Akria's call from the south," he explained, rising again onto two feet. "Evidently her mission was a success. Your male survivors did reach a place of safety."

Amarrok stared down at the ground for a moment before

speaking again. "I fear, dear Wylona, that I must take my leave as soon as Akria comes."

"Why?"

"To tell you the truth, lady, I had not expected to live out the day. And however much I'd like, I can hardly return with you to the Dales."

He did have a point. I couldn't imagine the Gray One and the court ladies sitting down to sup at the same table.

"But your wise woman has given me a spark of hope."

I raised an eyebrow as I turned to Belita. She explained.

"It is rumored that there lies a land to the north of the Waste, called Arvon, where Old Ones live in peace, protected by illusions from modern men. It is only a legend, even amongst wise women, but Amarrok has heard of it."

"The territory to the north was known as Arvon in my day," the Gray One said. "That the name has survived, even in legend, gives me hope that this rumor is true. The search will, at least, give me something to do."

We traveled on at a walking pace. When we crested the hills surrounding the shallow valley, a score of furry forms appeared out of the rocky terrain. The three wolves with us hobbled out to greet them, and then Amarrok spoke to them in his lupine language. When he rose again to face us, I knew this tokened a farewell. I dismounted slowly and took Amarrok's paws in my hands.

"L-Lady—Wylona—" the Gray One stuttered. "I must away."

"Will we ever see you again?"

"Perhaps. There is only the Waste between Arvon and Ellsdale, and it is not quite so terrible a barrier as it once was."

I hugged the furry man-wolf and kissed him on the muzzle. Belita embraced him as well, then he and his renewed pack bounded away into the Waste.

The women's campfire drew us like a beacon. We quashed their many questions until we organized them for traveling, and even then we were uncommunicative.

It was a long and tasking trek from Dragonsback to Ronansdale, but we survived. At the very border of the Dale

we were met by a party of men, amongst whom rode Captain Kegan. It seemed that Kegan and the others had brought Lord Ghislain of Ronanskeep word of the metal Alizon monsters, and the old warrior had implored that men be sent in rescue for the women of Ellsdale. I was glad to see the guard captain safe, but I could barely suppress my laughter as he told me of the terrible wolf pack that hounded his men for days.

I met with Lord Ghislain and offered whatever help my tattered band of followers might give. A lesser ruler would have thought us no better than another group of refugees come to leech off his generosity, but not the master of Ronanskeep. We were welcomed into his halls like favored members of his court, and we settled in gratefully, swearing to toil like the lowest menials while we imposed.

Of what took place thereafter, better tale-tellers than I have already written. The supply lines of the juggernauts had been severed by the coming of the Darkness; the northern Dale forces had only to keep them from reopening. As they did in the south, the metal monsters ground to a halt, and they sit there still, rusted trophies of war, on the border of Ronansdale and Ellsdale.

The reclamation of our fair land has been a long and tedious process, but a new keep rises from the ruins of the old, and above it banners flutter, with the seal of Ellskeep proudly displayed.

In the days to come, though, perhaps Ellsdale and Ronansdale will join as a single land. Ghislain of Ronanskeep has visited me several times now; he is a brave and handsome man, but more importantly, he is unafraid of the new or strange, and he does not find it odd that I've decreed the hunting of wolves for sport to be a punishable offense. Sometimes he even rides with me to the edge of the Waste, and we two listen to wolf howls in the night, as though expecting a lupine voice to call out a human greeting.