

Sand Sister

by Andre Norton

The moment of birth came in the early dawning when the mists of Tormarsh night still curled thick and rank about the walls of Kelva's hall. This in itself was an ill thing, for, as all well knew, a child who is to have the foresight and the forereach must come into the world at that time: the last moment of one day and the first of the next; while under a full moon of the Shining One is indeed the best time to welcome a new Voice among the People.

Also this was no lusty child who entered the world crying a demand for life and the fullness thereof. Rather the wrinkled skin on its undersized body was dusky, and it lay across the two hands of the healer limply. Nor did it seek to draw a breath. But because all children were necessary for the Torfolk and each new life was a barrier against the twilight of their kind, they labored to save this one.

The healer set lips upon the cold flaccid ones of the baby and strove to breathe air into its lungs. They warmed it and nursed it, until at last it cried feebly—not to welcome life but to protest that it must receive it. At the sound of that cry Mafia's head inclined to one side as she listened to that plaint which was more like the cry of a luckless bird trapped in a net than that of any true child of Tor.

Though her eyes were long since blind to what the Folk could see, being covered with a film which no light could hope now to pierce, Mafra had the other sight. When they brought the child to her for the blessing of the Clan and House Mother, she did not hold out her hands to receive the small body. Rather she shook her head and spoke:

"Not of the kindred is this one. The spirit who was chosen to fill this body came not. What you have drawn to life in it is—"

She fell silent then. While the women who had brought the child drew away from the Healer, now staring at the baby she held as if the wrap cloth of the clan birthing enfolded some slimy thing out of the encroaching bogland.

Mafra turned her head slowly so that her blind eyes faced each for the space of a breath.

"Let no one think of the Dark Death for this one." She spoke sharply. "The body is blood of our blood, bone of our bone. This much I also say to you: what now dwells within that body we must bind to us, for there is a strength indwelling in it which the child must

learn to use for herself. Then when she uses it for those she favors it will be both a mighty tool and a weapon."

"But you have not named her, Clan Mother. How can she dwell in the clan house if she bears not our name freely given?" ventured then the boldest of those who had faced Mafra.

"It is not in my gift to name her," Mafra said slowly. "Ask that of the Shining One."

It was now morning and the mist was curtain heavy, blanking out the sky. However, as if her very words had summoned the creature out of the air, there swooped across the women there gathered one of the large, silver-gray moths that were dancers in the night air. This settled for an instant on the wrapping of the child, fanning gently its palm-wide wings. Thus the healer spoke;

"Tursla—" Which was a name of the Moth-maid in the very ancient song-tale of Tursla and the Toad Devil. Thus it was that the child who-was-not-of-the-clan spirit was given a name which was in itself uncanny and even a little tinged with ill-fortune.

Tursla lived among the Torpeople. After the fashion of their ways she who had borne the child was never known to her as "mother," for that was not the custom. Rather all the children of one clan were held in love by the elders of their House and all were equal. Since Mafra had spoken for her, and the Tormarsh itself had sent her a name, there was no difference made between Tursla and the other children—who were very few now.

For the Torfolk were very old indeed. They spoke in their Remember Chants of a day when they had been near unthinking beasts (even less than some of the beasts of this old land) and how Volt, The Old One (he who was not human at all but the last of a much older and greater race than man dared to aspire to equal) had come to be their guide and leader. For he was lonely and found in them some spark of near thought which intrigued him so he would see what he might make of them.

Volt's half-avian face still was one they carved on the guard totems set about the fields of loquths and in their dwelling places. To his memory they offered the first fruits of their fields, the claws and teeth of the dire wak-lizard, if they were lucky enough to slay such. By Volt's name they swore such oaths as they must say for weighty reasons.

Thus Tursla grew in body, and in knowledge of Tormarsh. What lay across its borders was of no consequence to the Torfolk, though there was land and sea and many strange peoples beyond. Not as old naturally as Torfolk, nor with the same powers, for they had not been blessed by Volt and his learning in the days their clans were first shaped.

But Tursla was different in that she dreamed. Even before she knew the words with which she might tell those dreams they caught her up and gave her another life. So that

many times the worlds which encased her periods of sleep were far more vivid and real than Tormarsh itself.

She discovered as she grew older that the telling of her dreams to those of her own age made them uncomfortable and they left her much to herself. She was hurt, and then, angered. Later, perhaps out of the dreams, there came to her a newer thought that these were for her alone and could not be shared. This brought a measure of loneliness until she discovered that Tormarsh itself (though it might not be the worlds through which her dreams led her) was a place of mystery and delight.

Such opinion, however, could only be that of one who wore a Tor body and was reared in a Tor Clan; for Tormarsh was a murky land in which there were great stretches of noisome bog from which reared the twisted skeletons of long-dead trees—and those were oftentimes leprous seeming with growths of slimy substances.

There were the remnants of very ancient roads, which tied together in a network the islands raised from these marshy lands, and age-old stone walls enclosed the fields of the Torfbk, rearing also to form the clan halls. Always the mists gathered at night and early morning and wreathed around the crumbling stones.

But to Tursla the mists were silver veiling, and in the many sounds of the hidden boglands she could single out and name the cries of birds, the toads, frogs, and lizards, though even those were not like their distant kin to be found other places.

Best of all she loved the moths which had given her her own name. She discovered they were drawn to the scent of certain pale flowers which bloomed only at night. This scent she came to love also and would place the blossoms in the silvery fluff of her shoulder-length hair, weave garlands of them to wear about her neck. Also she learned to dance, swaying as did the marsh reeds under the winds, and as she danced the moths gathered about her, brushing against her body, flying back and forth in their own measures about her upheld, outstretched arms.

But this was not the way of the other Tormaidens, and when Tursla danced she did so apart and for her own pleasure.

The years are all the same in Tormarsh and they pass with a slow and measured beat. Nor do the Torfbk reckon them in any listing. For when Volt left his people they no longer cared to reckon time. They knew that there was war and much trouble in the outer world. Tursla had heard that before she had been born a war leader of that other land had been brought into Tormarsh by treachery and had been taken away again by his enemies with whom the Torfbk had made an uneasy and quickly broken pact.

Also there was still an older story—but that was whispered and could only be learned if one plucked a hint there, added a word here. Even further back in time there had been a man from outside whose ship had foundered on the strip of shore where Tormarsh

actually came down in a point to the sea. And there he had been found by one who was a clan mother.

She had taken pity on the man who had been sore hurt and had, against all custom, brought him to the healers. But the end to that had been sadness, for he had laid a spell of caring on the First Maiden of that clan and she had chosen, against all custom, to go forth with him when he was healed.

There had come a time when she returned—alone. Though to her clan she had said the name of a child. Later she had died. Yet the name of the child remained in the chant of the Rememberer. Now it was said that he, too, was a great warrior and a ruler in a land no Torfbk would ever see.

Tursla often wondered about that story. To her it had more meaning (though why she could not have said) than any of the other legends of her people. She wondered about the ruler who was half Tor. Did he ever feel the pull of his part blood? Did the moon at night and perhaps one of the lesser mists which might lay in his land awake in him some dream as real as the strange ones which haunted her? Sometimes she said his name as she danced.

"Koris! Koris!" She wondered if his mate among the stranger people held his heart in truth and if so, what was she like? Did he feel divided in his heart as Tursla did? She was by all the rights of blood fully of Tor and yet had this ache in her spirit which would never be stilled and which waxed stronger with every year of her life.

She grew out of childhood and she set herself obediently to the learning which she should have. Her fingers were clever at the loom and her weaving was smooth, with delicate pale patterns quite new among the Torfolk. Yet no one remarked upon any strangeness in those designs and she had long since ceased to mention her dreams. Lately she had indeed come to feel that there was a certain danger in allowing herself to become too deeply immersed in such. For sometimes they filled her with an odd feeling that if she was not careful she would lose herself in that other world, unable to return.

There was an urgency in those dreams, which plucked at her, wishing her to do this or that. The Torfolk themselves had strange powers. Among them such talent was not accounted in any way alien. Not all of them could use these—but that, too, was natural. Was it not true that all had each his or her own gift? That one could work in wood, another weave, a third prove a hunter or huntress skilled in tracking the quarry. Just so could Mafra, or Elkin, or Unnanna, transport a thing here or there by will alone. The range of such talents was limited, and the use of them drew upon the inner strength of the user to a high degree so that they were not for common employment.

In her dreams lately Tursla had not roamed afar in those strange landscapes. Rather she had come always, to stand beside a pool of water, not murky or half overgrown with reed and plant as were the pools of Tormarsh, but rather a clear green blue.

More important, what she had felt in each of those recurring dreams was that the reddish sand which rimmed it around, as the old soft gold the Torfolk used would rim a gem, had great meaning. It was the sand which drew her—always the sand.

Twice with the coming of the Shining One in full sighting, she had awakened suddenly, not in Kelva's House but in the open, awakened and was afraid, for she knew not how she had come there. So mused that she might have wandered into one of the sucking bogs and been trapped forever. She came to be afraid of the night and sleep, although she did not share with any the burden she bore. It was as if one of the geas set by Volt himself bound her thoughts, laid a silencing finger across her lips. She grew unhappy and restless. The isle of the clan houses began to feel like a prison.

It was on the night of the highest and brightest coming of the Shining One that the women of the Torfolk must gather and bathe in the radiance of the One's lamp (for so was the body quickened and made ready that children might come forth) and there were too few children. But Tursla had never come to the Shining One's place of blessing, nor had this been urged upon her. This night when the others arose to go she stirred, meaning to follow. But out of the darkness there came a quiet voice:

"Tursla—"

She turned and saw now that some of the light insects had crawled from their crevices to form a circle on the wall, giving the light of their bodies to illuminate the woman sitting on the bed place there. Tursla bowed her head even though that woman could not see her.

"Clan Mother—I am here."

"It is not for you—"

Tursla did not need Mafra to tell her what was not for her. But in her was the heat of shame, and also a little anger. For she had not chosen to be what she was; that fate had instead been thrust upon her from the hour of her birthing.

"What then is for me, Clan Mother? Am I to go unfulfilled and give no new life to this House?"

"You must seek your own fulfillment, moth-child. It lies not among us. Yet there is a purpose in what you are and a greater purpose in what awaits you—out there." Mafra's hand pointed to the open door of the House.

"Where do I find it, Clan Mother?"

"Seek and it will find you, moth-child. Part of it already lies within you. When that awakes you will learn and learning—know."

"This is all you will tell me then, Clan Mother?"

"It is all I can tell you. I can foresee for the rest. But between your spirit and mine rolls a mist thicker and darker than any Tormarsh gives birth to in the night. There is this—" She hesitated a long time before she spoke again.

"Darkness lies before us all, moth-child. We who foresee can see, in truth, only one of many paths. From every action there issues at least two ways, one in which one decision is followed, one in which it is made in opposition to that. I can see that such a decision now lies before the folk. Ill, great ill may come from it. There is one among us who chooses even now to ask for the Greater Power."

Tursla gasped. "Clan Mother, how can this thing be? The Greater Power comes not by a single asking. It is called only when there is danger to all whom Volt taught."

"True enough in the past, moth-child. But time changes all things and even a geas may fade to a dried reed easily snapped between the fingers. Such a calling needs blood to feed it. This I say to you now, moth-child. Go you out this night—not to seek the place of the Shining One—there are those there who tend strange thoughts within. Rather go where your dreams point you and do what you have learned within those dreams."

"My dreams!" Tursla wondered. "Are they of use, Clan Mother?"

"Dreams are born of thought—ours—or another's. All thought is of some use. That which entered into you at your birthing cannot be denied, moth-daughter. You are now ripe to seek it out and deal with it. Go. Now!"

Her last word had the force of an order. Tursla still hesitated however. "Clan Mother, have I your blessing, the good will of this House?"

When Mafra did not reply at once Tursla shivered. This was like being before the House and seeing the door barred, shutting one out of all touch with kin and heart-ties.

But Mafra was raising her hand.

"Moth-daughter, for what it may be worth to you as you go to fulfill the future laid before you, you have the good willing of this House. In return you must open your mind to patience and to understanding. No, I will not tell this foreseeing, for you must be guided not by any words of mine but by what comes from your own heart and mind when you are put to the test. Now, go. Trust to what the dreams have laid in your mind and go!"

Tursla went into the moonlight, into a world which was the black of bog-buried wood, the silver of mist and the pallid moonlight. But where was she to go? She flung out her arms. This night no moths came to dance with her.

Trust to what the dreams had laid in her mind. Would such point her in the direction she must take? Following the discipline of those who used the talent, she strove to clear her mind of all conscious thought.

Tursla began to walk, steadily, as one who has a purpose and a definite goal. She did not turn to the east, but faced westward, her feet on the blocks of one of the lesser roads. Though her eyes were open, she was not aware of what she saw, or even of her moving body. Somewhere before her lay the pool of her dreams and about it the all-important sand.

The mist clung about her like a veiling, now concealing what lay ahead, what she had left behind. She crossed one of the islands and another. The road failed at last but unerringly her feet found tussocks and hillocks of solid land to support her. At last the mist itself was tattered by a wind, strong, carrying in it a scent which was not that of the Tormarsh.

That wind awoke Tursla from her trance. She slowed to a halt at the highest point of a hillock covered with grass, shaped like the finger of a giant, pointing due west. The girl used both hands to keep the silk-soft strands of her hair out of her eyes. Now the moon was bright enough to show her that this ridge of land ran on to further rises beyond.

Then, she began to run—lightly. In her some barrier had broken and she was swallowed up by this great need to find what lay ahead; that which had waited for her so long—so very long!

Nor was she surprised to come at last into that very place of her dreams. Here was the clear pool, and the sand. Though in the moonlight the colors of her dream had been leached away, the sand was dark and so was the pool.

She tore off her robe, letting the length of cloth, spattered with the mud and slime of her marsh journey, fall from her. But she did not allow it to drop onto the sand. It was as if nothing must sully or mark that sand.

Nor did Tursla step upon its smooth surface. Rather she climbed a small rock just beyond its edge and from that sprang out, to dive into the waiting water. That closed about her body, neither cold nor hot, but rather silken smooth, caressing. It held her as might a giant hand cupped about her, soothing, gently. She surrendered to the water, floating on the surface of the pool.

Did she sleep then, or was she entranced by some magic beyond the knowledge of those who had bred her? Tursla was never quite sure. But she was aware that there came a change within her. Doors opened and would never close again. What lay behind those doors she was not yet sure, but she was free to explore, to use. Only the first thing—

As she lay floating on the soft cushion of the water Tursla began to hum, and then to sing. There were no words in her song, rather she trilled as might a bird, first gently, quietly, then with a rising—call? Yes, a call!

Though she lay with her face turned up to the sky, the moon, the stars, those far-off night jewels, she was aware that about her was a stirring; not in the water which cradled her, but in the sand. It was arising, partly to her will, or rather her call, partly to the need of—of— someone.

Still Tursla sang. Now she dared to turn her head a little. There was a pillar of sand from which came a tinkling, a faint chiming, caused as one grain of its substance rubbed against the other in a whirl so fast it would seem that there was no sand but only a solid column of the dark grit. Louder grew Tursla's song, more and more the pillar thickened. It no longer reached skyward, rather kept to a height no greater than her own.

The contours of the pillar began to alter, to thin here, thicken there. It took on the appearance of a statue—crude at first, a head which was a ball, a body with no grace or shape to it. But still the sand changed, the figure it formed became more and more humanlike.

At last the sense of movement was gone. A figure stood there on rock from which her birth had drawn all the sleeping sand. Tursla trod water, drew into the shore, and climbed out to front this being for whom her song had opened the door and wrought a shaping.

Into her mind there came the name she must now speak—the name which would anchor this other, make sure and safe the bridge between her world and another one that she could not even imagine, so alien was its existence.

"Xactol!"

The sand woman's eyelids quivered, raised. Eyes which were like small red-gold coals of fire regarded Tursla. The girl saw the rise and fall of the stranger's breasts, the moonlight was reflected from a dark skin as smooth seeming as her own.

"Sister—"

The word from the other was hardly more than a whisper. It held in it still some of the sound of sand slipping over sand. But neither woman nor voice wrought any fear in Tursla. Her open hands went out, offering kinship to the sand woman. And hands as firm to the touch as her own caught and held, in a clasp which welcomed her in return.

"I have hungered—" Tursla said, realizing in this moment that she spoke the truth. Until those hands closed about hers there had been this deep lack, this hunger in her which she had not even truly known she carried until it was so assuaged.

"You have hungered," Xactol repeated. "Hunger no more, sister. You have come—you will have what you seek. You shall do thereafter what must be done."

"So be it."

Tursla took another step forward. Their hands fell apart, but their arms were wide. They embraced as indeed close kin welcomed one another after some long time apart. Tursla found tears on her cheeks.

Chapter 2

What is asked of me?" The girl drew back from that embrace, studied the face so close to her own. It was calm and still as the sand had been before her power had troubled it.

"Only what you yourself choose," came the murmured reply. "Open your mind, and your heart, sister-one, and it shall be shown to you in the appointed time. Now—" The right hand of the sand woman arose, and the slightly rough fingertips touched Tursla's forehead, held so for the space of several heart beats. Then they slid down, over the eyelids the girl instinctively closed and again held so, before going on to her lips. The touch withdrew, came again to her breast over the faster beating of her heart.

From each of those touches there issued an inflowing of strength so that Tursla's breathing quickened; she felt a kind of impatience, of a need to be busy, though with what task she could not have said. This inflow of energy made her flesh tingle, alive in a way she had never experienced.

"Yes—" her voice was swift, her words a little slurred. "Yes, yes! But how—and when? Oh, how and when, sand sister?"

"The how you shall know. The when is shortly."

"Then—then I shall find the door? I shall be free in the place of my dreaming?"

"Not so. For each her own place, sister-one. Seek not any gate until the time. There is that for you to do here and now. The future is the threaded loom upon which there is not yet any weaving. Sit before it, sister-kin, and fix the pattern you desire in your mind, then take up the shuttle and begin your task. In one sense we, in turn, are shuttles in the service of a greater purpose and we are moved to form a pattern we cannot see, for to its weaving we are too close. We can know the knotting and the breakage and perhaps even mend and reweave a little—but we are not that Great One who views it all. The time has come for you to set your portion of the pattern into the unseen design."

"But with you—"

"Younger sister, my bridging of the space between us Cannot be held for long. We must hasten to the task set upon us both. Your mind is open, your eyes can now see, your lips are ready for the words, and your heart is prepared for what must come. Listen!"

So there by the dream pool Tursla listened. It was as if her mind was as porous and empty as one of those leaves of the draw-well, a sponge ready to be filled when one dipped it into water. She drew in strange words, and heard stranger sounds which she must shape her lips to form. Though that was a difficult thing, for it would seem that some of those sounds were never meant for her to utter. Her hands moved to pattern designs in the air. While following the movements of her fingers there remained for an instant thereafter a faint tracing of color—that which was red-brown like the sand which had formed the body of her teacher, or else green-blue as the pool beside which they sat.

Again she got to her feet and moved her body in the measures of a dance—to no music save that which seemed to be locked into her own mind. All this had a meaning, though she was not sure what that might be, save that what she learned now was her true birthright and also both a weapon and a tool.

At last her companion was silent and Tursla, now slumped upon the sand, felt as if that energy which had filled her had seeped away little by little, driven out of her again by the learning which she had so eagerly grasped.

"Sand sister, you have given me much. To what purpose? I cannot set aside Volt's ways and be ruler here."

"So was never intended. In what manner you can serve these people—that you will see from time to time. Give them what is best for their needs, but not openly, not claiming for yourself any powers. Give it only when such giving shall not be marked. There will be a time when your giving will set another part of the design to work—then, oh, younger sister, give with all your heart!"

She who answered to the name Xactol and whose true form and kind Tursla only dimly could perceive (and then only in her mind) arose. She began to turn, and that turning

became faster and faster, a blur of movement. Just as she had put on the substance of the sand so now she lost it. Tursla covered her face with her hands, protecting her eyes against the trails of grit which spun out and away from what was becoming once more only a pillar.

The giri sank forward, feeling the drift of the sand over her. She was so tired, so very tired. Let her sleep now dreamlessly, she asked something beyond, the nature of " which she recognized no more than she did the real form of Xactol. As the sand arose about her body, covered her lightly as might a soft cloth of spider silk, she indeed slept without dreams, even as she had petitioned to do.

It was the warmth of the midday sun beaming down upon her which roused her at last. She sat up, sand cascading from her. The colors of her dream were here, bright—green of pool, red of sand. But last night had not been a dream. It could not be! Tursla gathered up a palmful of the sand and allowed it to sift between her fingers. It was very fine, more like powder-ash than the grit she expected.

She brushed it from her body and then she knelt by the pool, troubling its mirror-smooth surface to wash the sand from her hand, her arms, her face, splashing the water over her body. The wind blew steadily and, after she had retrieved the robe she had discarded, she went on, past the rocks which rimmed the pool site.

So she came to the sea and for the first time looked out onto that part of the outside world which she had heard spoken of but had never seen. The play of the waves as they crashed in shore and broke, leaving that which had formed them to drain away, enchanted her. She ventured out upon the water-smoothed sand. The wind, so much stronger here, whipped her robe and tugged at her hair. She flung her arms wide to welcome the wind which had none of the marsh scent.

It was good to be so in the open. Tursla settled down on the sand to watch the breaking waves, singing softly to herself in wordless sounds which were not meant to evoke any answer but which were an attempt to match the music of wind and wave.

She saw shells in the sand and picked them up in wonder and delight. Like and yet unlike they were, for, seeing them closely, she could perceive that each had some small difference to set it apart from its kind. Not unlike those of her own species—each with some part of him or her which was only his or hers.

At last she reluctantly turned her face from the sea to the Tormarsh. The sun was already westering. For the first time Tursla wondered if any had sought her and what she must say when she returned which might cloak this thing which had happened to her.

Slowly she dropped her harvest of shells. There was no need to advertise her visit to a place which custom forbade any desire to see. But that was no reason why she might not come this way again. No rule of Volt said definitely that the sea was forbidden to those who followed his ancient rules of living.

Tursla found the marsh oddly confining as she passed swiftly along the trail toward the House island. So as she went she plucked certain leaves which were for dyeing, glad that fortune favored her in that several plants were of the Corfil—a rarity much prized as it produced a scarlet dye which was mainly used for the curtains of Volt's own shrine, thus was always eagerly sought.

As Tursla came along the westward road she had her skirt upheld into a bag, a goodly harvest in that. But one moved out to intercept her before she gained Kelva's House.

"So, moth-sister—you have thought to return to us? Did the winged ones tire of you so soon, night walker?"

Tursla tensed. Of all those she wished the least to meet Affric was the one. He leaned now on his spear, his eyes regarding her mockingly. There was a belt with a fringe of wak-lizard teeth about his middle, attesting to both his courage and skill. For only a man with both nearly supernormal reflex and cunning dared hunt those great lizards.

"Fair day to you, Affric." She did not warm her words. He flouted custom in his familiar greeting. The very fact he did so was disturbing.

"Fair day—" he repeated. "And what of the night, modi-sister? Others danced with the moon."

She was more than startled. For any Torman to speak of the Calling, and to such as her who had not named any man before Volt for a choosing!

He laughed. "Send me no spears from your eyes, moth-sister. Only daughters of Volt—true daughters— need make a man watch his tongue by custom." He took a step nearer. "No, you did not seek the moon last night, so then whom did you seek, moth-sister?" There was an ugly set to his mouth.

She did not make any answer. To do so would be indeed lessening herself in the eyes of all. For there were those who listened, if from a distance. What Affric said and did was a raw affront.

Tursla looked away and walked forward. He would not 4aie*, she was sure, attempt to stop her. And he did not. But the fact that he could publicly address her in that manner was frightening. Also not one of those listening had spoken up in rebuke. It was almost as if this had been deliberately arranged to insult her. Her hands tightened on her improvised bag of leaves. Why—?

None stood before the door of Kelva's House and she walked head high, back straight, from the day into the dusk.

"Back at last, are you, then?" Parua, who tended the store cupboards and served as eyes for Mafra, regarded her sourly. "What have you there which needed to be cropped by night? A night when your duty lay elsewhere?"

Tursla shook out the leaves to fall upon a mat.

"Parua—do you really think that such as I should dance for the Shining One's favor?" she asked in a voice from which she was able to keep all emotion.

"What do you mean? You are woman grown. It is your duty to bring forth children—if you can!"

"If I can—you yourself say that, Mother-one. Have I not heard otherwise all my life? That I am one who is not true Tor-born, and therefore I must not give life to a child because of the strangeness which is a part of me?"

"We grow too few—" Parua began.

"So thus the clan will welcome even the flawed? But that is not custom, Parua. And when custom is broke it must be done openly before Volt's shrine, with all his People assenting."

"If we grow few enough," Parua countered, "Volt will have none here to raise his name. There are to be changes, even in custom. There will be a Calling, a Great Calling. So it has been decided."

Tursla was astounded. Great Callings she had heard talked of; the last had been years ago when the Torfolk had allowed their stronghold to be invaded for a short time by strangers. It was then that the war leader of the outside lands had been prisoner here—together with her who, it was whispered, had been Koris* chosen lady. There had come no great ill from that, save that it had reached them later that, even as they had closed the marsh, so was now the outer world closed to them in turn. But even then there had been two minds about the right and the wrong of what they did.

It was true that births grew fewer each year. She had heard that Mafra and one or two of the other Clan Mothers speculated as to the reason for that. Perhaps even that their race was too old, had taken mates only among themselves too long so that their blood thinned, their creative powers were dimming. Thus it might be a fact that they would try to force her to their purposes. For it would only be by force that she would come to a Choosing—there was no Torman she had ever looked upon with favor. And now, she was not conscious she was pressing her hands against her breast; even less was she a daughter of Volt!

"So, moth-one," Parua continued, looking at her, Tursla thought, slyly and near maliciously, "your body being Tor-born, that might well serve Volt's purposes. "Consider that."

Tursla turned quickly toward that wall alcove which was Mafra's. The Clan Mother seldom left her private niche nowadays. She had hands whose skill had outrun her vanished sight, and, by touch, alone, she made those useful to her people, shaping small pots to be fired, or spinning fibers more smoothly than any of her house descendants could.

Now Tursla saw that those hands lay strangely still, ^ »loosely clasped in the old woman's lap. Her head was held up, just slightly a-tip as if she listened. As the girl stood hesitantly before her, uncertain if she dared break into that j. trancelike state, Mafra spoke:

"Fair day, moth-child. Fair be your going, fair be your coming, firm your steps upon the crossing places, full your hands with good labor, your heart with warmth, your mind with thoughts which will serve you."

Tursla sank to her knees. That was no common greeting! It was—it was that given to any clan daughter, "wh6 knew she was at last with child! But—why—

Mafra raised one hand, stretched it forth. Tursla quickly bent her head to kiss those long, age-thinned fingers.

"Clan Mother—I am not—not as you have welcomed me," she said hurriedly.

"You are filled," Mafra said. "Not all filling is with a life which will separate itself in time from yours and become all in all to itself. There is life within you now and, in due time, it will come forth. If it does so in a different fashion, then that is the will of Volt, or of what power stood behind him when he came to lead our people up out of ivagery. It shall be with you as with the Filled. So shall it be said in this House and Clan. And if it is said so among those who are your own, then it will be the same elsewhere among the Folk."

"But, Clan Mother, if my body does not contain a life they will understand, and the time passes when I should bear the fruit which House and Clan need, then will there not be a reckoning? What can be said then for one who had misled House and Clan?"

"There will be no misleading. There is set before you a task, that you shall do by virtue of the life you hold. What will follow from that will lead the two roads of which I told you—one this way—" Her hand swept to the right. "One that way." She indicated the left. "I cannot foresee past that choice which shall be yours. But I think what you will choose shall be of wisdom. Parua—" she raised her voice and the other woman came near, going to her knees as did Tursla.

"Parua, this Tursla, moth-daughter, is Filled and so let House and Clan be guarded according to custom."

"But she—there was no Choosing, no moon dance," Parua protested.

"She was sent out by my wisdom, Parua, do you question that?" Mafra's tone was chill. "Into the night she went with my blessing. What she sought—and found— was by the will of Volt as revealed to me in foresight. She has returned, filled. I recognize it so, and, by my Volt-given gift, I proclaim that now."

Parua's mouth opened again as if she would protest and then it closed. Clan Mother had spoken, she had said that Tursla was Filled. And, if she who had the farsight for her own said this, then no one dared question the truth of it. Parua bowed her head Submissively and kissed the hand held out to her. She backed away, her gaze still on

Tursla, and the girl sensed that she might have to admit openly Mafra's judgment was right, but her own reservations were still stubbornly alive.

"Clan Mother," the girl said quickly, as soon as she was sure Parua must be beyond hearing the murmur of a voice she held to the edge of a whisper, "I do not know what is expected of me."

"This much I can tell you, moth-child. There will soon come one whom Unnanna will summon—not with voice or message—but by the Calling itself. He has such blood ties that this calling can catch and hold him as one snared in a net. But the purpose for which they would bring him—" There was a new note in Mafra's voice. "That is, in the end, death. If his blood is spilt upon the ground before Volt's shrine, that blood shall call aloud. And its calling will bring the forces of the outer world upon us with fire and steel. Volt's people will die and Tormarsh shall be a barren and cursed place.

"We count our children as the fruit of all of us together. No one claims any child as his or hers alone. But this is not the way of the Outside. There they hold not to House Clans, but are split into smaller gatherings. There a child has but two on which to call in trouble—she who gave him birth and he who filled her at some time of choosing. This seems strange and wrong to us, a breaking up of the bonds which are our strength. But it is their way of life.

"However, this different way also gives other bonds which we do not understand. Strange indeed are these bonds. Let anyone there raise hand against a child—and the mother-one and he who filled her will take up the hunt with the fury of a wak-lizard who sights man. The one whom Unnanna would summon for her purposes is son to a man who is perhaps the greatest threat the Outside can raise against us. I fear for our people, moth-child.

"It is true that we grow fewer, that only a hand-finger count of children may be born after any choosing. But that is our sorrow and perhaps the will of life itself. To bring in blood-giving—no."

"And my part in this, Clan Mother?" Tursla asked. "Do you wish me to stand against Unnanna then? But even though you have named me Filled, who would listen to my words? She is a Clan Mother, and, since you go no more to the moon dance, it is she who leads."

"That is so. No, I lay no task on you, moth-daughter. When the time comes for you to do as you must, you yourself will know it, for that knowledge will be inside you. Give me now your hands."

Marfa held out both of her own palm up, and Tursla placed hers thereupon, palm down. Again, just as it had been when she and Xactol had communed with one another, there was a feeling of quickening within her, a stirring of energy she longed to use but did not yet know how to put to any testing.

"So—" Mafra's voice was but a whisper, as if this were a very secret thing. "I knew that you were from elsewhere at your birthing, but this is indeed a strange thing."

"Why did this happen to me, Clan Mother?" Tursla voiced her old protest.

"Why do many things happen—those for which we can see no meaning or root? Somewhere there is a master pattern of which we must all be a part."

"So did she say also—"

"She? Ah, think of her, picture her in your mind, moth-child!" There was an eagerness in Mafra now. "See her for me!" she ordered.

Obediently Tursla pictured the spinning pillar of sand, and she who had been formed by that.

"Indeed you have been Filled, moth-child," sighed Mafra after a long moment. "Filled with such knowledge that perhaps you alone in this world can begin to comprehend. I wish we might talk of this and of your learning, but that cannot be. For it was not meant for me to gain any other than I have. Do not share it, moth-daughter, even if you are so moved. A basket woven to hold loquith seeds, no matter how skillfully made, cannot carry water which is intended to fill a fired clay jar. Go you now and rest. And live after the manner of the Filled until the time comes and you know it."

So dismissed, Tursla went to her own portion of the dan house—that small section given to her when she was judged more girl than child. She pulled close the woven reed mats which made it into a private place and sat upon her double cushion to think.

Mafra's pronouncement would not only excuse her from any moon dancing, but would speedily put to punishment any speeches such as Affric had made to her, any gesture even from any man of any House. She would be excused also from certain kinds of work. The only difficulty she might face at first would be that she could not leave the settlement island alone from now on. The Filled were ever " under guard for their own protection.

She ran her hands down her own slender body. How long before the fact that her belly did not swell would be noted? The women were sharp-eyed about such matters, since birth was their great mystery and they were jealous of the keeping of it. Perhaps she could devise some sort of padding within her robe. Also the Filled often had unusual desires for different food, altered their habits of living. Maybe she could turn such fancies to her account.

But eventually the time would come when she would be found out. Then what? To her knowledge no one among the Folk had ever made a false statement concerning such a

thing. It would strike at the very root of all of their long-held beliefs. What punishment could be harsh enough for that? Why had Mafra done this?

No one of the Torfolk, Tursla was sure, would accept ^ the idea of a Filling with knowledge. And Mafra—she, A. Tursla, had not made the claim—it had been the Clan ,^P Mother. Such a deliberate flouting of custom, just so that /"She would be left to hold herself ready for this other action of which Mafra had only given her hints.

A Calling for the purpose of blood. Tursla drew a deep math. If Mafra meant by that what Tursla could guess, then that was a great breaking of custom also. Sacrifice—of a—man? But there were no such sacrifices ever made to Volt; a man whose killing might bring down a doom of ending on Tormarsh and Torfolk. What part would she have?

She could—no, something within Tursla forbade that for now. This was no time to open that door in her mind which guarded what she had learned from Xactol.

Patience must be hers and this role must be played well. The girl drew aside her private curtain and arose. What she wanted most was food and drink. Suddenly she was very hungry and thirst made her mouth dry. She started for the supply jars, intent only on tending her body, sternly closing down the whirl of thoughts in her mind.

Chapter 3

Three days went by; Tursla spent the time quietly at work with her spindle in her hands, but, more to her own desires, also with her thoughts. Mafra's word had been accepted by the House clan—how could it not be? She was given the deference accorded the Filled, served first with the choicest of foods, left to her own thoughts since she seemed to wish it so.

But on the third day the girl aroused from the half trance in which she had allowed herself to drift as she attempted to sort out and store what she had learned. Much of what she discovered lay only in hints. Yet she was sure that such hints were only way markers to deeper knowledge that she must have and that she still could not now remember. The struggle to do so only made her tense and restless, her head ache, and sleep hard to come by.

Nor could she summon up any of her dreams. When she slept now it was fitfully, more like a light doze from which she could be awakened by such a small thing as a sleeper in the next mat place turning over.

Knowledge was of no help if one could not tap it, Tursla believed with an ever-growing distress. What lay before her?

Wishing to be alone with that spark of fear which was fast growing into a flame, she arose from her stool before the loom and went from the Kelva's House. She neared the group of women before she noted them, so entangled was she in her thoughts.

Unnanna stood there, the others facing her as if she were laying upon them some duty. Now her gaze rested on Tursla, and a small smile—a smile which held no kindness in it—lifted the comers of her thin-lipped mouth.

"Fair be the day—" She raised her voice a little, plainly to address the girl. "Fair be your going. Fair be the end of the waiting for you."

"I give thanks for your good wishing, Clan Mother," Tursla replied.

"You have not spoken before Volt the name of your Choosing—" Unnanna's smile grew wider. "Are you not proud enough for that, Filled One?"

"If I choose to spread Volt's cloak about me and am challenged for so doing," Tursla returned, hoping to hold her pretense of serenity, "then there must be a changing of custom."

Unnanna nodded. Her outer pose was one of good will. It was not unheard of that some maid at her first Filling chose not to announce the name of her partner in the moon ritual. Though generally it was a matter of common knowledge as soon as her Clan Mother proclaimed the fact to the satisfaction of the clan.

"Wear Volt's cloak then, moth-daughter. In days to come you will have sisters in aplenty." There was an assenting murmur from the women about her, an eager assenting.

But Unnanna was not yet through with Tursla.

"Do not go a-roaming, moth-daughter. You are precious to us all now."

"I go only to the fields, Clan Mother. To Volt's shrine that I may give thanks."

That was a worthy enough reason for leaving the place of Houses and no one could deny her such a small journey. She passed Unnanna and started down the moss-greened pavement of the ancient road. Nor did any follow her there, for again custom decreed that one who so sought Volt's shrine should be granted privacy for any petition or thanks the worshipper desired to raise.

Volt's shrine—time had not dealt well with it. Walls had sunk into the ever-hungry softer ground of the marsh, or else tumbled the stone of their making across pavement, because no man could put hand to any rebuilding here.

For these were the very stones which Volt himself had laid hands upon in the very long ago, set up to make his shelter. It had been a large hall, Tursla guessed, as she traced the lines of those crumbling walls. But by all legend Volt himself was larger in body than any of the Torfolk.

Now she wove a way between those crumbling walls. Under her feet the earth and stone was beaten hard into a path during the countless years Torfolk had sought comfort here. Thus she came into the inner room. Though the roof was gone, and the light of sun shone down upon what was the very heart of Volt's domain—a massive chair seemingly carved of wood (but such a wood—strange to Tormarsh—which no damp could rot). On either side of the chair stood tall vases wrought of stone and set in them, ready for any call to Volt, the quick firing pith of those trees waterlogged in the marsh whose spongy outer bark could be flaked away, leaving an inner hardness which burned so brightly. Here were no light insects, but fire which destroyed and yet was so brilliant in its death.

For a long moment Tursla hesitated. What she would do now was allowed by custom, yes, but only if one was greatly moved by some happening which could not be understood and from which there seemed to be no answer in any human mind. Was that her case now? She believed she could claim it was.

Tursla put out her hand, setting her palm flat on the petrified wood of the chair's wide arm. Then she drew herself up the one shallow step which raised the seat above the flooring of that near destroyed hall, and seated herself upon the chair of Volt.

It was as if she was a small child settling herself into the chair of some large-boned adult. Tall as she was among the Torfolk, here her feet did not meet the pavement as she wriggled back until her shoulders touched the wood behind her. To lay her hands out upon the arms was a strain but this she did before she closed her eyes.

Did Volt indeed listen from wherever he had gone when he withdrew from Tormarsh? Did that essence of Volt which might just still exist somewhere in the world care now what happened to those he had once protected and cherished? She had no answer to those questions, nor could any within the bounds of Tor give her more than such guesses as she herself might make.

"Volt—" her thought shaped words she did not speak aloud—"we give you honor and call upon your good will in times of need. If you still look upon us— No, I do not cry now for help as a helpless child calls upon those of the clan house. I wish only to know who or what I am, and how I must or may use what has Filled me as Mafra swears it have been Filled. It is no child that I carry in truth; perhaps it is more—or less. But I would know!"

She had closed her eyes, and her head rested now upon the back of the chair. There was the faint scent of the tree candles from either hand, less than they would give off at

their igniting. She had seen the Clan Mothers hold such before them and the smoke had wreathed them around while they chanted.

She—

Where was she? Green grass grew out before her, a fan which stretched to the feet of rises of gray rock. Scattered in the grass, as if someone had carelessly flung wide a handful of bright and shining stones, were flowers, their petals wide, their shapes and colors differing as the shells on the shore had differed. Above the flowers fluttered moths—or winged things which resembled moths. Those were also brightly colored, sometimes bearing more than one shade or hue on their wings.

There was nothing of Tormarsh in this place. Nor was it, she was sure, another sighting of her dream land. She willed to move forward and her will gave birth to action, for she passed, not on her feet step by step, but rather drifted in the air, as might those flying things.

So Tursla was wafted by her will to those rocks which rose above the grass. Again her desire lifted her higher, to the topmost pinnacle of the rocks. Now she gazed down into a greater valley wherein there ran a river. Across that wide ribbon of water spanned a bridge of stone, and the bridge served a road which ran across the green of the land.

While on the road, approaching the bridge, there was—

Horse—that was a horse. Though Tursla had never seen such an animal she- knew it. And on the horse—a man.

Her will to see drew him to her sight in a strange way, though in truth she had not moved from her place on the hill, nor had he yet come upon the bridge. Still she saw him as clearly as if he and his mount were within such distance that she could put forth a hand and lay it on the horse's shoulder.

He wore metal like a silken shirt, for it had been fashioned of small rings linked one upon the other. Above that a cloak dropped down his shoulders, fastened at his throat with a large brooch set with dull green and gray stones. There was a belt with like stones about his waist and from that hung a sheathed sword.

His head was covered with a cap also of metal, but this was a solid piece, not chained rings. It had a ridge beginning above the wearer's forehead and running back to a little below the crown of his head. This ridge possessed sockets into which were fastened upstanding feathers of a green color.

But Tursla's attention only marked that in passing, for it was the man himself she would see. So she studied the face beneath the shadow of the cap.

He was young, his skin was fair, hardly darker than a Torman's. There was strength in his face, as well as comeliness. He would make a good friend or clan brother, she decided, and a worse enemy.

As he rode he had been looking ahead, not truly as if he saw the road, but rather as if he were busied with his thoughts, and those not pleasant ones. Now, suddenly, his head jerked up a fraction and his eyes were aware—and they looked upon her! While a quick frown marked a sharp line between his brows.

Tursla saw his lips move, but she heard nothing, if he had spoken. Then one hand lifted, was held out toward her. At that same moment all was gone. She whirled away in a dizzy, giddy retreat. When she opened her eyes she sat once more in Volt's chair, and she saw nothing save the time breached walls of his shrine. But now—now she knew! Volt had indeed answered her wish! She was linked with the horseman and in no easy way. Their meeting lay before her and from it would come danger and such a trial of strength as she could not now measure.

Slowly the girl arose, drawing a deep breath, as one preparing for a struggle, though she knew that the time for that was not yet. He had been aware of her, that horseman, nor did he in the mind's eye grow blurred with the passing of moments. No, somewhere he rode and was real!

In the later afternoon she sought out Mafra again. Perhaps the Clan Mother could or would give her no answers, yet she must share Volt's vision with someone. And in all this place only Mafra did she trust without reservation.

"Moth-child—" Though Mafra turned sightless eyes in her direction never was she mistaken concerning the identity of those who came to her. "You are a seeker—"

"True, Clan Mother. I have sought in other places and other ways, and I do not understand. But this I have seen; from Volt's own chair did I venture out in a strange way beyond explaining." Swiftly she told Mafra of the rider.

For a long moment the Clan Mother sat silent. Then she gave a quick nod as if she affirmed some thought of her own.

"So it begins. How will it then end? The foreseeing reaches not to that. He whom you saw, moth-child, is one tied to us by part blood—"

"Koris!"

Mafra's hand, where it rested upon her knee, tightened, her head jerked a fraction as if she strove to avoid a blow.

"So that old tale still holds meaning," she said. "But Koris was not your rider. This is he whom I told you about—the child of those who would move mountains with spells, slay

men with steel, that naught conies to harm him. He is Koris' son, and his name is Simond, which in part was given by that outlander who fought so valiantly beside his father to free Estcap of the Kolder."

Mafra paused and then continued. "If you wonder how these things are known: when I was younger, strong in my powers, I sometimes visited in thought beyond the edge of Tormarsh, even as this day you have done. It was Koris' friend Simon Tregarth who was brought hither through strangers' magic and delivered to his enemies. Also with him was she who was Koris' choice of mate after the manner of the outlanders. Then we chose ill, so that in turn the outlands set their own barriers against us. We cannot go, even if we wish, outside the Marsh, nor can anyone come to us."

"Is the seashore also barred, Clan Mother?"

"Most of the shore, yes. One may look at it, but the mist which rises between is a wall as firm as the stone ones about us now."

"But, Clan Mother, I have trod the sand beside the sea, found shells within it—"

"Be silent!" Mafra's voice was a whisper. "If this much was given you let no other know it. The time may come when it will be of worth to you."

Tursla allowed her voice to drop also. "Is that a foreseeing, Clan Mother?"

"Not a clear one, I only know that you will have need for all your strength and wit. This I can tell you, Unnanna calls tonight and, if she is answered, then—" Mafra lifted her hands and let them fall again to her lap. "Then I leave it to your wit, moth-daughter. To your wit and that which is in you from that other place."

She gave the sign of dismissal and Tursla went to her own place and took up her spindle, but if any watched her for long they would know that she had little profit from her labors.

Night came and around her the women of the clan stirred and spoke to one another in whispers. None addressed her, being Filled she was carefully set apart that nothing might threaten that which she was supposed now to carry. Nor did they approach Mafra either, rather ranged themselves with Parua and slipped quietly away.

There were no guards set about the House isle, save on the two approaches by which a wak-lizard might come. No one would watch those bound for the Shrine in any case, so that Tursla, pulling a drab cloak about her, even over the soft silver of her hair, thought she could follow behind without note.

Once more she crept along the same path she had taken earlier that day. Those ahead carried no lighted torches; there was no gleam save the moonlight, but she saw that every house must be represented. But this could not be a complete Calling after all, for

there were no men. Or so she had thought until she caught sight of moon gleam on a spear head and noted those cloaked men, ten of them, standing in a line facing the Chair. While in that seat huddled a figure who raised her face to the light even as Tursla found a hiding place back behind a pile of fallen rock.

Unnanna sat in the place of Seeking. Her eyes were closed, her head turned slowly from side to side. Those standing below began to croon, first so softly that it was hardly to be heard over the lap of water, the wing rustle of some flying thing. Then that hum grew stronger—no words, but rather a sound which made Tursla's skin tingle, her hair move against her neck. She found that her head was swinging also in the same way as Unnanna's and, at that moment, realized the danger which lay in being trapped into becoming a part of what they would do here.

She raised her hands and covered her eyes so that she might not see that swaying, while she thought, as one catches a line of safety thrown wide, of the sand sister, or the racing sea waves. Though a pulse now beat within her, Tursla also fought her own body; and, without being fully conscious of what she did, she rose to her full height and began to move her feet, not in the pattern Unnanna's head had set, but in another fashion, to break for herself the spell the Clan Mother was raising.

There was power building here; her body answered to it. Force pressed in upon her like a burden, trying to crush her. Still Tursla countered that, her lips moving in words which sprang from behind those doors in her mind which she had earlier tried to open and could not. Only such danger as this would free them for her.

She opened her eyes. All was as before—save that Unnanna had moved forward on the chair of Volt. One after another those waiting men came to her. She touched them on the forehead, on the eyes. Then each made way for his fellow. From the tips of those fingers which she used to touch them came small cones of light, and those who stepped back from her anointing carried now a mark on the forehead of the same eerie radiance.

When all had been so marked they turned and made their way from the hall, the women giving back to open their path. As they passed by Tursla she saw that their eyes were set and they stared as men entranced. Their leader was Affric; and those who followed him were all young, the most skilled of the hunters.

When they had gone from her sight, Tursla looked track to the hall. Once more Unnanna sat with closed eyes. Power surged; it came from each of them there. Unnanna in some manner drew that unseen energy from them, consolidated it, shaped from it a weapon, aimed that weapon, and sent out on course.

Tursla was not one of them. Now she stood tense, seeking within herself something she sensed must be ready to answer her call. She used her thought to mould it, thinking of what she would hurl—not as the spear Unnanna's wish had fostered—no, what then? A shield? She did not hold strength enough in herself to interpose any lasting barrier. But perhaps there was something else she could mind-fashion. She thought of the

likenesses of all the weapons known to the Torfolk, and fastened in the space of a breath upon—a net!

Clenching her hands until her nails cut into her own Besh, the girl centered all of her unknown energies, untested to their full extent since that night by the pool, and thought of a net—a net to entangle feet, to impede those who marched by night, those who would set a trap. Let them themselves be now entrapped.

As blood draining from a grievous, mortal wound, the energy Tursla summoned seeped from her. If she could only call upon that greater well of strength which Unnanna could tap for herself! But a net—surely a net! Let it catch about the feet of Affric; let it ensnare him where he would go. Let it be!

The girl stumbled back against the wall, weakness in her legs, her arms hanging heavily by her sides, as she had neither the will nor strength now to raise them. With her back against the rough stone she slipped downward, the ruins rising around her like a protective shield. Her head fell forward on her breast as she made her last attempt to send what remained in her to reinforce the net her vivid mind picture had set about Affric's stumbling feet.

It was cold and she was shivering. Dark lay about her, and she no longer heard that sound which had built up the energy for Unnanna's mind dart. Rather what came was the whisper of wings. Lifting her head, Tursla looked upward to the night sky above the pocket in the ruins where she rested.

There were two moths a-dance, their beautiful shadowy wings outlined with the faint night shine which was theirs when they flew in the deep dark. Back and forth they wove their meetings and partings. Then the larger spiralled down, and for just a moment it clung to the dew-wet robe on her breast, fanning its wings, tiny eyes which were alight looking into hers ... or so it seemed to the bemused girl,

"Sister,*" Tursla whispered. "I give you greeting. Fair flying for your night. May the blessing of Volt himself be with you!"

The moth clung for another instant and then flew away. Stiffly Tursla pulled herself up. Her body ached as if she had done a full day's stooping at the loom, or at harvest in the fields. She felt stupid, also, when she tried to think clearly.

She tottered along, one hand against the wall to support her. There was no one here—Volt's chair was empty. For a moment she wavered as she gazed upon that seat. Should she try again? There was a longing in her, a strange longing. She wanted to see how the rider fared.

What had Mafra named him? Simond, an odd name. Tursla repeated it in a whisper as if a name could be tasted, said to be either sweet or sour.

"Simond!"

But there was no answer. And she knew that, even if she mounted Volt's chair again, this time there would be no answer. What she had done or tried to do here this night had exhausted for a time her power. She had nothing to aid her to reach out.

Walking slowly, catching now and then on some half-broken wall or pile of stones, she won out of Volt's hall. But she needed to sit and rest several times before she got back to the clan house.

Then it took all the skill she had to be able to make her way through Mafra's house to her own corner. Should she tell the Clan Mother what had been done this night? Perhaps—but not in this hour. To rouse any of the nearby sleepers would be the last thing she wished.

She lowered herself onto the sleeping mat. In her mind then there was only one picture, already becoming fuzzed with sleep—the image of Affric fighting a web about his feet, his sneering mouth open as if he shouted aloud in fear. Though she was not conscious of it, Tursla smiled as she fell asleep.

Chapter 4

Mist was heavy about the island where the ancient clan houses stood, hanging curtains between house and house, turning those who went outside into • barely seen shadows moving in and around through the fog. The moisture in it pearled on every surface in large drops which gathered substance and then trickled downward. That same damp clung to skin, matted hair, made clammy all garments.

Such fen mists had been known to Tursla all her life.

Still this one was far thicker than any she could remember; and it would seem her uneasiness was matched within the clan house, for no hunters went forth, while those within stirred higher the fires, drawing in closer for the light and heat. Perhaps they did this not for any warmth to send their garments steaming but because the very brightness of the flames themselves had a kind of cheer,

Tursla had sought out Mafra again. But the Clan Mother appeared unwilling to talk. Rather she sat very still, her blind eyes staring unwinking at the fire and those about it, though she made no move to add herself to the circle of company there. At length Tursla's foreboding of a shadow to come made her greatly daring and she touched timidly one of Mafra's hands where it lay palm up on the woman's lap.

"Clan Mother—?"

Mafra's head did not turn, yet Tursla was sure she knew that the girl was beside her. Then she spoke, in so low a voice Tursla was sure it could not carry beyond her own ears.

"Moth-child, it comes close now—"

What—the fog? Or that other thing which Tursla felt, though she had no part of Mafra's powers.

"What may be done, Clan Mother?" The girl shifted her body restlessly.

"Nothing to stop these witless ones. Not now." There was a bitter note in that. "You cannot trust in anything or anyone save yourself, moth-child. The ill act has been begun."

At that moment there sounded, through the doorway of the clan house (like the bellow of some great beast), a call which brought Tursla and all the rest sheltering within to their feet. Never before had the girl heard such a sound.

Then the cries of those by the fire, who were now all taming to the mist-hidden doorway, running toward that, made her understand. That had been the Great Alarm, which had never been sounded in her lifetime, perhaps even in the lifetimes of all now here. Only some action of overpowering peril could have brought the sentries on the outer road to give that alert.

"Girl!" Mafra was also standing. Her hand tightened about Tursla's arm. "Give me your strength, daughter. Ill, thrice ill, has been this thing! Dark the ending thereof!"

Then she, who so seldom left her own alcove nowadays, tottered beside Tursla. At first her slight body bore heavily upon the girl's support. Then she straightened, and it appeared that strength returned to her limbs as she took one step and then another.

They came into the open but there the mist was very thick. Figures could only be half seen and that just when close by. Mafra's pressure on her arm drew Tursla in a way which it would seem the blind woman knew well.

"Where—?"

"To Volt's Hall," Mafra answered her. "They would carry this through to the end—profane the very place which is the heart of all we are, have ever been. They will slay, in the name of Volt. And, if such a slaying comes, why, then their own deaths must follow! They have decided upon their road—and evil is the end of it!"

"To stop—" Tursla got out no more than those two words when her companion interrupted her.

"Stop—yes. Girl, open now your inner thoughts, give yourself freely to what may lie within you. That is the only way! But it must be quick."

She had never believed that Mafra's strength might still be such as to send the Clan Mother at so fast a pace. There were others around them, all were heading in the same direction. The stones of the ancient road under their feet were slimed with water, yet Mafra, for all her lack of sight, made no missteps.

About them loomed the broken walls of Volt's Hall. Still on they pressed, until they were in the place of the chair. Here through some trick perhaps of emanations from the ancient stones themselves, the mist thinned, raised, to lay above their heads like a ceiling, yet allow them full sight of all which was below.

Those torches set upright in the vases to either side of the chair were ablaze. Other brands were in the hands of those standing along the walls. In Volt's chair sat Unnanna once again. Braced with a hand on either arm of the giant seat she leaned forward, an eager, avid expression on her face.

Those she so eyed were gathered immediately below. Affric stood there; but he had not the arrogant pride which he had worn so confidently when he had strode forth from this place at the Clan Mother's bidding. He was pale of countenance, and his clothing was smeared with swamp slime, while one arm was bound to his side with vine fiber, as if bones had been broken that must be straightened and protected for healing.

Seeing him so brought a picture into Tursla's mind: that of Affric unsure of foot as if he had been caught in some snare, stumbling and falling, falling against one of the upright pillars which bore Volt's own face deep carven. Her wish—dream! Had that indeed left Affric like this?

If so, she had not done all that she had wished. For between two of Affric's followers was the stranger she had seen mounted on the road, the one Mafra had named Simond.

His helm was gone, so his fair hair, near as bleached as her own, shown in the torch light. But his head rolled limply forward on his breast. It was plain his legs would not support him and he had to be kept on his feet by the help of his guards. There was a matting of blood in his hair.

"Done!" Unnanna's voice rang out silencing the murmurs of those gathered there, producing a quiet through which the sounds of the marsh life without could be heard. "Done, well done! Here is that which shall give us new life! Did I not say it? Into our hands has Volt brought this one that we may drink of his strength and—"

Tursla did not know if she had made some signal but the guards suddenly released their hold upon Simond and he fell forward. There must have remained some spark of awareness in him, for he put out his hands, though he was on his knees, to catch at the

edge of the step on which the chair stood. Now he raised his head by visible effort and lurched forward and up, for he grasped at the chair itself, and dragged himself to his feet.

The girl could not see his face. Without knowing she had done so, she broke from Mafra's side and edged along, pushing by others, seeing none of them, coming closer to where the captive stood.

"What do you want of me?" he asked as he edged around, so that he half faced the Torfolk.

Affric took a step forward and spat. His mouth was a vicious slit.

"Half-blood! We want from you what you have no right to—that part which is of Tormarsh!"

There was a sound like the far-off squall of a wak-lizard. Unnanna laughed.

"They are right, half-blood. You are part of Tor. Let that part now give us what we need." Her tongue curled over her lower lip, swept from side to side as if she licked moss-honey and savored the sweetness of that delicacy.

"We need life," she leaned closer to the arm of the chair where Simond still had his hand, using that hold to support him. "Blood is life, half-breed. By Volt's word we dare not take it from our own kind, and we cannot take from one who is full outlander, for between the twain of us there is no common heritage. You are neither one nor the other; therefore you are ripe for our purpose."

"You know of what House I am." Simond held his head high and now his eyes caught the Clan Mother's in a compelling stare. "I am the son of he who took Volt's axe—by Volt's own wishing. Do you think then that Volt will look with approval on the fate you would give me?"

"Where is the axe now?" Unnanna demanded. "Yes, Koris of Gorm took it; but is it not now gone from him?"

Volt's favor follows the axe. With it destroyed, he has lost interest in you."

The murmur which had begun at Simond's words died away. Tursla pushed closer. She had done as Mafra had urged, laid her mind open to whatever power lay in her. But she felt no swelling of force, no new warmth within. How then could she stop this thing which was of dark evil and which would indeed bring an end to the Torfolk?

"Take him—" Unnanna was on her feet, her arms spread wide. In her pale face there was exultation.

Tursla moved. Those about her were so intent upon the scene before them that they were not aware of her until she was through their line and had shoved past one of Affric's followers to reach Simond. Once there she stationed herself before him, facing the man moving in to obey Unnanna's order.

"Touch me if you dare," she said. "I am one Filled. And this one I take under my protection."

The nearest man had raised his hands to sweep her aside. Now he stood as rooted as one of the dead trees, while those behind him retreated a step or two. Unnanna leaned closer from her perch upon the chair.

"Take him!" She lifted her hand as if to strike Tursla in the face, so drive her away. The girl did not flinch.

"I am one Filled," she repeated.

The Clan Mother's face twisted with stark rage. "Stand aside," she hissed as might one of the pallid vipers of the deep muck. "In Volt's name, I order, stand aside! And if you are truly Filled—"

"Ask it of Mafra!" challenged the girl. "She has said it—"

"Shall it be needful then—" Mafra's voice rang out from the gathering of the Torfolk, "for a Clan Mother to state this again? Do you aver that on such a thing there can be a false swearing, Unnanna?"

The crowd stirred, fell away to form a lane. Along that Mafra advanced. She did not totter now, but walked as

firmly as if she could indeed see what lay before her, bumping into no one, but keeping straight course down that open way until she, too, came to stand before the chair of Volt.

"You take much upon you, Unnanna, very much."

"You take more!" Unnanna shrilled. "Yes, once you sat here and spoke for Volt, but that day is past. Rule your own clan house as you may until the messenger of Volt comes to call you. But do not try to speak for all in this time."

"I say no more than is my right, Unnanna. If I say this house daughter is Filled, then do you deny it?"

Unnanna's mouth worked. "It is your word before Volt, then? You take on you much in that, Mafra. This one came not to the moon dancing—who then filled her?"

"Unnanna—" Mafra raised her right hand. Her fingers moved in the air as if gathering threads of mist and rolling them into a ball. In the silence which now fell between them, she made a tossing motion, as if what she had pulled out of invisibility had indeed substance. Unnanna shrank back until her shoulders touched the high back of the chair.

Suddenly she flung both hands up before her face. From behind that slight defense she sputtered words which had no meaning as far as Tursla was concerned. But that Unnanna was, for the moment, at bay, the girl understood. Turning a little she caught at Simond's arm which was closest to her.

"Come!" she ordered.

Whether they could win from Volt's Hall, and if so what she might do then, Tursla had no idea. For the moment all she could think of was to get away from this place where only the slender thread spun by custom had so far protected her.

She did not even look to Simond. But he apparently yielded to her urging, for when she stepped away from Volt's chair he did in truth come with her. Hoping that he would continue to be able to stay on his feet, Tursla led him forward.

Affric moved into their path. His good arm raised, he balanced a short stabbing spear. Tursla met his gaze squarely and moved closer to Simond. She said no word but her intention was plain. Any attack upon the stranger would be met by her. To raise a weapon against a Filled One—Affric snarled, but he gave way when she did not, just as those others made a path for her, even as they had for Mafra.

Somehow they reached the outer wards of the Hall. Tursla was breathing as fast as if she had run all the way. Where now—? They could not return to the clan houses. Not even Mafra could hold back the weight of outraged custom long enough for Simond to escape. And the trails out from here would be speedily covered.

The trail to the pool, the sea! That flashed into her mind even as if some voice out of the mist had reminded her. For the first time she spoke to her companion:

"We dare not stay here. I do not think even Mafra can long hold Unnanna. We must go on. Can you do it?"

She had noted that he staggered though he kept his feet. Now she could only hope.

"Lady—by the Death of the Kolder—I shall try!"

So they went into the boiling of that strange, heavy mist. She could not even see beyond the length of an outstretched hand before her. This was the strongest folly. If they missed the road, the step-tussocks farther on, the marsh itself might claim them and no one would ever know how they passed.

Still she walked, and brought him with her. After a space they went side by side, as she drew his arm about her shoulders, took a measure of his weight. He muttered now and then—broken words without any meaning.

They were well away from the clan-house isle when once again the deep-throated alarm trumpet of the Torfolk aroused echoes across the marsh. Now they could expect pursuit. Would this mist which enclosed them work as well to delay the hunters? She feared because such as Affric knew the outer ways of the Tormarsh far better than she.

On and on, Tursla fought a desire to hurry. For he whom she now half supported could never step up the pace. The surface of the road was still under them. She was, she realized, trusting in an inner guide which was an instinct and something she had never called upon before. Unless it was that same feeling of lightness which had led her this way when she had met Xactol under the moon. Always she listened, after the echoes of the alarm died away, for any sounds which might mean they were closely followed.

There were ploppings from swamp sloughs where small creatures, disturbed by their passing, leapt into hiding; and the hoarse cries and calls of other life. They did not move out of the mist, nor did that grow any thinner.

Time lost any measurement. From one moment to the next Tursla could only hope that they were still well ahead of any pursuers. That she had been proclaimed Filled would save her, for a space, until her false claims would be proven. But she could not hope to protect Simond.

Why did she risk all for this stranger? Tursla could not have answered that. But when she had seen him in that vision which had visited her in Volt's Hall she had known that, in some way, they were linked. It was as if some geas of power had been laid upon her, there was no avoiding what must be done.

They were nearly to the end of the pavement now. Though she could see nothing, the girl could sense that in an odd way as if the knowledge came to her by a talent which had nothing to do with sight, hearing, or touch. She halted and spoke sharply to her companion, striving to bring him, by the very force of her will, out of the daze of mind in which he walked.

"Simond!" Names had power, the use of his might well awaken him to reality. "Simond!"

His head raised, turned a little so he could eye her. Like the Tormarsh men he was of a height such that they could see each other on a level. His mouth hung a little open; there was a runnel of blood from one temple clotting on his cheek. But in his eyes there was also the look of intelligence.

"We must take to the swamp itself here." She spoke slowly, pausing between words as one might do with a small child or a person gravely ill. "I cannot hold you—"

He closed his mouth and his jaw line firmed. Then he tried to nod, winced, and his eyes blinked in pain.

"What I can do—that I shall," he promised.

She looked on into the mist. Folly to venture so blindly. But this mist might lie for hours. With the Torfolk aroused they had no hours; they might not even have more than the space of a dozen breaths. She had as yet heard no sounds of pursuit, for Torfolk were wily and had learned long since to move with practiced silence through their territory.

"You must come directly behind me," Tursla bit her lip. That they could do this at all she was dubious. But there was no other choice.

He drew himself straight. "Go—I'll follow," he told her quietly.

With a last glance at him the girl stepped out into the mist. That inner guide had led her aright; her foot came down on the firmness of the hassocks he could not see. She went slowly, lingering before she took each step to make that he saw her, though for him this blind journey must be much worse, for he did not have the same certainty which was hers.

Step by step she wove a way, trying hard to remember how long this most perilous part of their flight must last. Still he did not call to her, and each time she turned her head she could see him well upright, safely balanced on a foothold.

Then she stumbled out on firm ground, the tenseness of her body leading to pain in her back and shoulders, a warning tremble in her legs. This was, at last, that island like a finger which marked the last part of the way to the pool. With her feet firmly planted she waited once more for him to draw close to her. When he gained that solid stretch of land he fell to his knees and his body swayed from side to side. Swiftly she knelt beside him, steadied him.

There was the sheen of sweat across his face and the clotting blood melted under that. He breathed heavily through his mouth, and his eyes, when he looked at her, were dull. He frowned as if she were difficult to see and he must expend much effort to hold her within his range of vision.

"I—am—near—done—Lady—" he gasped, word by painful word.

"There is no more. From here the footing is good. It is only a little way."

His mouth stretched in a stark shadow of a smile. "I can—crawl—if—it—not—be—too far—"

"You can walk!" she said firmly. Rising, she stooped and locked both her hands under his nearer armpit. Exerting the full of her remaining strength, Tursla indeed brought him

to his feet. Then, pulling his arm once more about her shoulders, she led him on, until they were on the rocks above the silent pool encircled in sand.

Her hands fumbled first with the fastenings of her robe. She moved now in answer to her knowledge of what must be done. The answer slipped into her mind as the maker of dye might measure and add a handful of this, a counter of that, while intent on boiling some fire-cradled mixture. There was custom to be faced here also. Only by a certain ritual might that which she must summon be approached.

Tursla's robe fell about her feet. Now she stooped once more above the recumbent man, her fingers seeking buckles, the fastening of mail. His eyes opened and he looked up to her, puzzled.

"What—do—?"

"These—" She tugged at the mail where it lay across his shoulders, her other hand picking at the stuff of his breeches. "Off—we must go where these cannot be worn."

He blinked. "One of the Old Powers?" he asked.

Tursla shrugged. "I know not of your Old Powers. But I know a little of what we can summon here. If—" She put her forefinger to her mouth and bit upon that as she considered a point which had only that moment occurred to her. This place would welcome her, had welcomed her, because she was what she was (and what in truth was she? one small part of her now asked. But the time for any such questioning was not now). Would he also be accepted? There was no way of proving that except to try.

"We must—" She made the decision firm—"do this thing. For I have no other way of escape for you."

She helped his fumbling hands with the fastenings, the clasps, and belting, until his body with the wide powerful shoulders, the long arms which marked him as of Tor blood, was bare. Then she pointed to the rock from which she had leaped that other time.

"Do not tread upon the sand," she cautioned. "Not while it lays thus. We must leap from there—into the pool."

"If I can—" but he pulled himself along as she mounted the rock.

Out she leapt and down. Once more that water closed about her. But she moved swiftly away toward the farther side of the pool, clearing the spot where he should land. Then she looked up as she trod water.

"Come!"

His body looked as white as the mist curling behind him. He had climbed onto the stone she had just quitted, and she saw his muscles tense. Then he stretched out his arms and dove, cleaving the water with a loud splash.

Tursla turned on her back and floated as she had before. He was no longer her charge, for she had brought him to what safety her instinct told her was all they could hope for, and the pool had not repelled him.

Tursla, her eyes up to the sky which she could see through ragged patches of mist which was being tattered by the sea wind, began to sing—without words—the notes rising and falling like the call of some bird.

Chapter 5

As before at her call that sand stirred. The girl could feel no wind, yet the grains of powdery stuff arose, began to twirl as she had seen them on that night. A pillar was born, now moving faster and faster, each turn making it more solid to the eye. Now came the rounding of a head, the modeling of the body below that.

Still Tursla sang her hymn without words as the vessel was formed to hold that which she summoned. She had half forgotten Simond. If he watched in astonishment he made no sound to disturb the voice spell she wove with the same certainty as her hands could follow a design upon her loom.

At last Xactol stood there. Seeing her waiting, Tursla came from the pool, standing erect on stone from which the forming of that other had swept the last minute grain of sand.

"Sand sister—" The girl raised her arms, but did not quite embrace the other.

"Sister—" echoed the other, in her hissing, sand-sliding voice. "What is your need?" Now her hands came forth also and Tursla's lay palm down upon them, flesh meeting sand.

"There is this one." Tursla did not turn her head to look upon Simond in the water still. "He is hunted. They must not find him."

"This is your choice, sister?" inquired that other. "Think well, for from such a choice may come many things you could have reason to look upon as ills in the future."

"Ills alone, Xactol?" asked the girl slowly.

"Nothing is altogether ill, sister. But you must think of this—you are now of Tor. If you go forth there will be no return. And those of Tor are not well looked upon by the Outlanders."

"Of Tor," Tursla repeated. "Only part of me, sand sister. Only part of me. Even as it is with him. I have the body of Tor but the—"

"Do not say it!" commanded Xactol, interrupting her sharply. "But even if it be so, Tor body may betray you. There is a spell set upon the Marsh boundaries. Torfbk cannot go forth—and live."

"And this one?"

"He is divided. He was drawn in by the spelling of Tor, for there was that in him which answered to such a call. But his outland blood will help him to win forth again. Do you try to go with him—" Now it was the woman of sand who left unfinished a warning.

"What will happen to me?"

"I do not know. This spelling is none of ours. The Outlanders have their own witcheries and their learning in such is very old and very deep. You would go at your own peril."

"I stay at even more, sand sister. You know what cloak of safety Mafra dared to throw over me; and, in the way they understand that claim, it is false."

"The decision is yours. What now would you have of me?"

"Can you buy us time, sand sister? There are those who will trail us to the death."

"That is so. Their rage and fear reaches out even to this place. It is like the mists which they love." The woman withdrew her right hand from where it rested under Tursla's. Now she raised that so that her finger touched the girl's forehead between and just above her eyes.

"This I give you. Use it as you will," she said in a soft voice. "I must go—"

"Will I see you again?" Tursla asked. "Not if this choice is yours, sister, this choice I read in your thoughts. My door between the worlds is here alone." "Then I can't—" Tursla cried out. "But you have already chosen, sister. In your spirit's innermost place that choice lies. Go with peace. Accept what may lie before you with the courage of your spirit. There is a meaning behind what has happened to you. If we don't see it now, all will be made clear in time. Do as you know how to do."

Her arms dropped to her sides and Tursla fell once more to her knees, and veiled her eyes with one hand. But the other she rested on one knee, palm up and slightly cupped.

Xactol began to turn, her spin grew ever faster. The fine sand which had formed her whirled out and away as the body became a pillar, and the pillar, in turn, sand falling to the rock. But in Tursla's hand there remained a small pile of the sand.

When the rest of that substance was once more spread out upon the rim of the pool she arose, cupping her fingers tightly about what she held. Now she hailed Simond. "You may come forth. We must go on." Her head jerked around. There was a sound behind. The hunters may have been questing, at last they had the trail. Like Xactol, she could now sense the rage and fear which drove them. Not even her claim of being Filled would be a protection against what moved them now. She shivered. Never before had emotions other than her own been fed to her in this way. The alienness of this was frightening. But there was no time to hesitate, to learn fear fostered by that hate.

Simond came ashore. He walked more steadily, his head was up, but his attention was not for her, rather on their back trail as if he, too, had picked up some emanation from their pursuers.

Tursla climbed the rock to where she had left her robe. She held it up in one hand and spoke:

"Can you tear from this a portion of cloth? What I carry—" she showed him the fist which grasped the sand-dust—"must be safe until we have need for it."

He caught the cloth from her and tore a portion from the mud-stained hem. Into this she emptied the sand, making a packet of it. Then she drew on her robe. But though he had breeches and boots on now, he fastened on only the leather undershirt, left his mail lying.

When he caught her attention he stirred the mail with his boot. "It will slow me. Where do we go?" "To the sea." Already she was on her way. The stay in the pool might have refreshed Simond's body, brought beginning healing to his wound, for he kept pace with her as she climbed and slipped among the rocks—She could hear the come and go of the waves, the wind sweeping mist and marsh air away from her.

They came to the shore. Simond looked north and then south, finally standing to face south. "That is the way for Estcarp. Let us go—"

If I can, she thought. How strong is that spell laid upon the Torfolk? Does it rule body only, or body and spirit both? Can my spirit break a bond laid upon the body? But she asked none of this aloud.

So they sped along the sand just beyond the reach of the waves. From behind came a shout, and a spear flashed over the wash of the water. A warning, Tursla guessed. The hunters wanted them not dead but captive. Perhaps Unnanna still would have her sacrifice.

Suddenly the girl gasped and cried out, stumbling back. It was as if she had run into a wall and rebounded, her body bruised from the force of that encounter. Simond was already several strides farther on. He whirled about at her cry and started back.

Tursla put out her hands. There was a surface there— invisible—but as tight as the stone side of her place in the clan house. She could feel its substance.

The wall the outlanders had set about the Tormarsh! It would seem that it was indeed a barrier she could not pierce.

"Come!" Simond was back at her side, apparently what was the wall for her did not exist for him. He caught at her, tried to drag her on.

The force of his attempt again brought her hard against that barrier.

"No—I cannot! The spells of your people—" she gasped. "Go—they cannot follow you through this!"

"Not without you!" His face was grim as he stood beside her. "Try by sea. Can you swim?"

"Not well enough." She had splashed now and then in some of the marsh pools, but to entrust herself to the sea was another matter. Yet what choice had she? That heat of hate behind was warning enough of what might happen!

"Come—"

"Stand!" That shout was from behind. Affric— She did not even have to look around to know who led the hunters.

"Go—" Tursla tried to push her companion on, through that wall which was no wall for him.

"The sea!" he repeated.

But it would seem they were too late. Another spear expertly thrown, flashed between them, struck the unseen wall and rebounded. Tursla faced around, her hand going to the breast of her robe, closing upon what she had brought from the pool side.

Affric, yes, and Brunwol, and Gawan. Behind them a score of others, closing in, their eyes avid with a lust of hatred such as she had never met before. Consciously or unconsciously they were using that hatred as a weapon, beating at her; and the hurtful blows of it made her sway, sick and spirit wounded.

But Tursla stilt had strength enough to bring out the packet she had made. With one hand she tore that open as she balanced the fold of cloth upon the palm of the other. Now that the sand was uncovered, she raised it level with her lips and gathered a great breath to blow it outward. As it swirled she cried aloud. Not a word, for such spelling as this was not summoned by the words of this world. Rather she shaped a sound which seemed to roar, even as the alarm trumpet of the Torfolk had done.

There was no sighting the disappearance of the sand that her breath had dispersed. From the shore itself there uprose small curlings of white grit. Those began to whirl, even as Xactol had formed her body. Higher they grew by the instant, drawing more and more of the shore's substance into them. But they remained pillars, not taking on any other form. Far taller they were now than any of those who stood there.

Affric and his men backed away a little, eyeing the pillars with the uncertainty of men who face a hitherto-unknown menace. Yet they did not retreat far, and Tursla knew well that they still held to their deadly purpose.

The top of the tallest pillar began to nod—toward the Tormen. Tursla caught at Simond's shoulder. The strength that moved the pillars was draining from her. That she could order them much longer she doubted.

"The sea!"

Had she cried that aloud, or had he read it in her mind? She was not sure. But Simond's arm was about her and he was striding toward the wash of the waves, bearing her with him.

As the waves struck against her, the water rising from knee to waist, Tursla strove still to keep her mind upon the columns of sand. But she did not turn her head to watch how effectively her energy wrought.

There was shouting there, not now aimed at the fugitives. Some of the voices were muffled or ceased abruptly. The water was high about her now. Simond, sparing no glance for what might be happening on the shore, gave an order:

"Turn on your back. Float! Leave it to me!"

She tried to do as he wanted. So far there had been no barrier. Now as she splashed she could see the shoreline again. There was a mist. No, not a mist—that must be a whirl of sand thick enough to half hide the figures struggling in it as if they could not win forth from its embrace, rather were caught fast held in the storm of grit.

Then she was on her back and Simond was swimming, towing her with him. No longer did he head out to sea, but rather altered course to parallel the shore. Tursla had held the sand, sent it raging as long as she could. She was drained now, not able to move to aid herself even if she had known how to swim.

That shouting grew louder. Then—

Force—force pushing her back, sending her under the water. She gasped, and the salt flood was in her mouth, drawn chokingly into her lungs. She fought for breath. The

barrier! this was the barrier. She wanted to shout to Simond, tell him that all her efforts were useless. There was no escape for her.

No escape! Her body, her body was sealed into Tormarsh by the spells of the outlanders! No—hope—

Aroused to a frenzy by the danger of drowning, Tursla tried to get free of the hold upon her, to strike at Simond and make him let go before she was pushed completely under the water.

"—go! Let me go!" Her mind shrieked and water once more flooded into her mouth and nose.

Out of nowhere came a blow. She felt a flash of pain as it landed. Then, nothing at all.

Slowly she came back from that place of darkness. Water—she was drowning! Simond must let her go.

But there was no water. She lay on a surface which was steady, which did not swing as did the waves. And she could breathe. No water filled her nose, covered her head. For a long moment it was enough to know that she was indeed safe from being drawn under. But—

They must be back on the shore then. With her releasing of mind control the sand would have gone. Perhaps Affric was—

Tursla opened her eyes. Above her the sky arched— clear except for a drifting cloud or two. There was no hint of the Tormarsh mist about. She raised her head—though that small action seemed very hard—she was weak, drained.

Sand, white, marked with the ripples of waves which curled in, drained away again. And rocks, and the sea. But no Affric, no Torman standing over her. She was— Tursla sat up, bracing herself by her hands.

Her wet robe was plastered thick with sand. She could even taste the grit between her teeth. There was no one—no one at all. Yet a few moments of study showed her that this was not that tongue of beach to which the Tormarsh reached.

She inched around to face inland. To her left now, a goodly distance away, rising into the air as if a hundred—• no, a thousand fires burned (for it stretched along there inland as far as she could see), the mists of the marsh arose like smoke, cloaking well what might lie on the other side.

They had passed the barrier! This was the Outland.

Tursla wavered to her knees, striving to see more of this unknown world. The sand of the beach stretched for a space. Then there was a sparse growth of tough grass; beyond that, bushes. But there was no smell of the swamp.

Where was Simond?

Her loneliness, which had been good when she feared Affric and the others, now was a source of uneasiness. Where had he gone—and why?

His desertion, for her, was frightening. Was it that she was of the Torfolk? Could it be that the Outlanders' hatred for the marsh dwellers was so great, that, having saved her life, he felt he had paid any debts between them and had wished no more of her company?

Bleakly Tursla settled on that fact. Perhaps in the Outlands Koris himself hated his Torblood and his son had been raised to find it a matter of shame. Just as a Torman might, in turn, look upon half-Outland blood as something to lessen him among his fellows.

She was Tor—as much as Simond knew. And as Tor—

Tursla supported her head upon her hands and tried to think. It might well be that, having made one of those decisions she had been told to consider seriously, she had cut herself totally adrift from all people now. Xactol had warned her fairly. When she left the country of the pool she would no longer have communication with that one mind? —spirit?—entity?—who could understand what she was.

Mafra—for the first time Tursla wondered, with a little catch of breath, how had it gone with the Clan Mother who had faced Unnanna and worked some magic of her own to cover their escape; though what manner of Torfolk would dare to raise either hand or voice against Mafra? The girl wished passionately at that moment that she could reverse all that had happened to her, be once more in the clan house—as it had been on the night before she had gone to keep her meeting with the sand sister.

To look back, Tursla shook her head, that was only a waste of effort. No man or woman might ever turn again and decide upon some other path once their feet were firm set on one of their choice. She had made her decision, now by that she must live—or perhaps die.

Bleakly she looked landward. The sea was empty and she expected no help to arise out of that. Now she was hungry. Already the sun was well down in the western sky. She had not even a knife at her belt; and who knew what manner of danger might prowl the Outland at the coming of true darkness?

But if she tried to go hence it must be on hands and knees. When she attempted to rise to her feet she found herself so weak and giddy that she tottered and fell. Hunger and thirst—both were an emptiness crying to be filled.

Filled! At least now the clan would never discover her deception. If she had been filled with something else as Mafra had averred, what was it?

She brought her knees up against her breast, put her arms about them, huddling in upon herself, for the wind was growing colder and had a bite to it which the winds of Tormarsh never held. Now she tried to think. What was good fortune for her now? What was ill? The latter seemed a longer list. But the good—she had escaped Affric and the rest—the anger of the Torfolk which would have been dire when they discovered she would bring forth no child to swell their dwindling numbers. She had certain knowledge which she as yet did not know how to use, that which Xactol had granted her.

But if the sand sister was forever barred from her, when and how could she ever learn?

And where might she go for shelter? Where was there food? Water? Would the hands of all dwellers in this land be raised against her when they knew her for Tor?

She—

"Holla!"

Tursla's head came up instantly.

There was a mounted man—riding through the inland brush! His head—bare head—Simond! Somehow she wobbled to her feet, called out in return though her voice sounded very thin and weak in answer to that shout of his:

"Simond!"

Now, it was as if something tight and hurting inside her had suddenly broken apart. She wavered to her feet, staggered, one foot before the other. She was not alone! He had not left her here!

The horse was coming at a trot. She could sight a 'second animal following; Simond had it on lead. He came in a shower of sand sent up by the pounding feet of his mount. Then he was out of the saddle and to her, his arms around her.

Tursla could only repeat his name in a witless fashion, letting him take the weight of her worn out and aching body.

"Simond! Simond!"

"It is well. All is well." He held her steady, letting the very fact that he was there, that she was not alone, seep into her mind and bring her peace.

"I had to go," he told her. "We needed horses. There is a watch tower only a little away. I came back as soon as I could."

Now she gained a measure of control.

"Simond." She made herself look directly into his eyes, sure that he would in no way try to soothe her with any false promise. "Simond, I am of Tormarsh. I do not know how you brought me past that spell your people used as a barrier to keep us from the Outland. But I remain Tor. Will your people give me any welcome?"

His hands now cupped her face, and his eyes did not shift.

"Tor chose to stand our enemy, but in return we have never sought that enmity. Also, I am partly Tor. And Koris has made Torblood a blessing not a curse in Estcarp, as all men know. He held the Axe of Volt which would come only to him. And he intended that Estcarp not be meat for those who were worse than any winter wolf! Tor holds no stigma here."

Then he laughed, and the lightness of his smile made his whole face different.

"This is an odd thing. You know my name, but I do not know yours. Will you trust me with that much to show your belief in my good will?"

She found that her face, sticky with sea water and rough with sand, stretched an answering smile.

"I am Tursla of —No, I am no longer of any clan house. Just what I am now—or whom—that I must learn."

"It will not be hard that learning. There will be those to help," he promised her.

Tursla's smile grew wider. "That I do not doubt," she replied with conviction.