

SWORD OF SHADOW

by Andre Norton

Chapter One

Around me the night was very still, yet it seemed that just beyond the range of my sight, the seeking of my ears, there was movement. I pressed the palms of my hands tightly together, breathed deeply and slowly, summoned not only courage, but that strange part of my mind which I had never understood, but which, even in earliest childhood, I realized dimly was there—something which could change all the world for me if I could harness it properly. Only there was no one to teach me that then; I had only faulty instinct to depend upon.

I looked down at those hands so tightly enfolded. I had seen them sticky with clay and—no, I was not going to think of that. For remembering too deeply might open a door—like the one of the ever-to-be-feared Gates of the Old Ones—to that which I sensed prowling out there.

Yet there were those moving close about me now, each and every one willing to raise protection such as the Shadow fears, to wall me around with their own defenses. It was in me that the flaw lay. And how deep or dangerous that flaw might be haunted me waking, was a part of my dreams sleeping, sometimes strong enough to bring me gasping to full consciousness, to lie shivering—wondering what I might have done during that time my waking mind was not in command.

In my race many women are so cursed. Most may consider it rather blessed, but I do not. In Estcarp those with Talent are early detected and taken for training, taught all the safeguards one must have when one deals with the Power—even lightly.

But I was born into a time of chaos, my people fleeing over the mountains from Karsten, the few remaining members of a very ancient race which the ruler of that land had outlawed. And even had we been left alone I might never have developed my unexplainable gift—since there were no Witches in Karsten to seek out and train their kind. While the Wise Women who did dwell among us did not meddle with the greater Powers, but the lesser, which have in them only a portion of the Talent.

I was born to the sister of the Lady Chriswitha, who fostered me when my mother died of an illness I think now she willed upon herself, since she could not face a world in which her lord lay dead. They said that at my birthing she turned her face to the wall and would not even look upon me. For it was the fact that in protecting her escape from a band of Karsten over-the-Border raiders my father had died.

But the Lady Chriswitha had a heart which was big enough to open wide its door for me. And I was not her only fosterling in those turbulent days. She had also Yonan, who was

half of the Old Race, half Sulcar, the son of her heart-friend. There were also her own children —Imhar, heir to the House, the Lady Dalhis and the Lady Meegan, both of whom were older and wed young to liegemen of Lord Hervon. But I was different—

At first they thought that I had been given only the healing gift. For I could look upon man or beast and somehow see the ill which encompassed them. And with the animals I had kinship, so that in time I could not easily eat meat or wish any hunter well. Though this I kept secret within me.

When the Witches of Estcarp performed their last and greatest feat of battle, making the hills and mountains themselves move by the power of their united wills, and so walling off Karsten, then it seemed that a new and more peaceful life stretched before us. I could remember nothing but days of war—it seemed very strange to face peace.

And I wondered how those like Imhar would live. For he was born to war and knew nothing else, nor cared for it, I was certain. I knew so little of him, though he was to be my lord, thus uniting the kin more solidly together. But I think that meant little to him, and mostly it made uneasiness for me.

Yonan was more friend than Imhar. He came from two races which were born to hold sword and measure steel with enemies—yet he was seemingly a son to neither in that fashion. Doggedly he practiced swordplay, shot at targets with the dart guns, strove to do all which was expected of a man in those years. Yet with me he talked of other things, old legends and strange stories he had heard. He might have been a songsmith perhaps—save that to his clumsy fingers the lap harp was more unlearnable than was the sword. It was as if within him the cleavage of race had somehow marred or lessened the man he had really meant to be.

What would have become of us had we stayed in Estcarp? Sometimes I have wondered a little concerning that. Would I have come to wed with Imhar and perhaps never have known what lay buried within me? Would I have been happier for that ignorance? Sometimes my heart answers yes. But there is another part of me which denies that I could have done this.

However, even as we worked to build the Manor for the House, a youth came to us from the east. And his story of a need for us struck so deep into our minds that nearly without thought we found ourselves riding not only into the unknown, but into a war which was more grim and black of purpose than all the struggles we had known before.

Thus we came over-mountain into the Valley. And there I was like some plant which is given the soil it needs for full nourishment, sun, and water. For I met the Lady of Green Silences—she who bears many names in our ancient tales, but who in this cycle answers to that of Dahaun. She and her people are not of our race, perhaps even of our species, but they are human-formed. And with those of the Old Race who had not defiled themselves with dealings with the Shadow they held kin-friendships.

When Dahaun and I saw each other for the first time there was between us instant

knowledge that we sought the same road. She took me into her household, where I first learned how much there was for me to learn, and how little I had been able to give because I lacked such knowledge. I was like one long athirst in a desert waste who is offered a flagon of cool water. But I knew that also as one who thirsted, this I must take slowly, a sip at a time. For the talent too strongly seized may turn upon one.

The Valley was a beleaguered fortress—of the Power against the Shadow. For in this land of Escore there had been much ancient evil wrought by adepts who had set themselves above the rules of the Talent, feasting their crooked spirits on what they could warp nature into doing. And that ancient evil, though perhaps much weakened by time, was now waking, gathering its strength to rage again.

Within the Valley, we were told, safety lay, for it was guarded by such strong runes of Light that naught which carried the foul mark of the Dark might come. Yet our men (together with those who were not men in form and yet gave liegeship to the Light) patrolled the upper reaches of the heights, beating off attacks that strove to win up sheer rock to come at us.

Then—one morning I awoke and my hands were sticky with clay such as I had seen along the riverbank. And in me there was such an uneasiness that I felt as guilty as one who unbars the door of a keep to let through the enemy. Still also this I could not speak of, not to the Lady Dahaun, nor to my foster mother. But I had that to keep me busy. Yonan had been injured in a fall upon the heights—and might have died save that Tsali of the Lizard folk found him wedged into one of the crevices there.

I was glad that I must tend his ankle, occupy myself in other ways. For, though I had at once washed that clay from my fingers, it seemed to me that I still somehow carried the stain of it on my flesh, and the uneasiness which was part of it lay at the back of my mind where I firmly imprisoned it. Three times I tried to speak, and found that I could not shape the words; and so my unquiet grew, and I used what skills Dahaun had taught me—still there was no suggestion that anything of the Shadow had won through our barriers.

But I was reluctant to sleep that night, wishing even I might be watched by someone—yet this I also found myself unable to ask for.

The dream came as suddenly as if I had passed through a door. And it was as vividly real as awakening, so real that all which lay behind me at this moment seemed more of a dream or vision than where I stood now.

This was a hall—not like those I knew in Estcarp—unless very ancient Es might hold such. The walls appeared so far away on either side that they were hidden by dusk. But the pillars on either side were tall, and their carvings of strange monsters very clear. A light which was not the warmth of sun, nor that of any lamp, but which seeped greenly-yellow from divers of the pillars themselves, gave me full vision.

There was someone waiting here—someone I must meet—

I did not seem to walk normally as I flitted forward down the well-marked aisle; rather it was as if I were drawn through the air, weightless and without the power to resist. Then the aisle ended in a circular space. And on a pillar which was the center core of that, was a skull—life-sized and carved of what seemed the clearest crystal. Still the brain pan was filled with whirling, dancing light of rainbow colors, one shade eternally fading or deepening into another.

And resting one hand lightly on the base where the skull was placed stood a woman. She had some of the same look of Dahaun's people, for she changed color—her hair flaming near to scarlet, then deepening to brown, and at last to black; her skin one moment ivory, the next sun-browned. Yet I knew that she was not of the Valley.

Power radiated from her as if she aimed that directly at me. And, though her coloring changed so from one moment to the next, her features did not lose their own set expression. Her full lips were curved in a small, secret smile, as if she dwelt exultingly upon some knowledge she would share with no one.

Her body was clothed only by whirls of mist which also writhed and moved, revealing now a crimson-nippled breast, again a smooth thigh, the beginning of a slight curve of belly. There was something utterly wanton in that play of clothing which was faintly disturbing, reached perhaps that part of me which was not here in answer to her sorcery.

"Crytha!" She flung out one hand in a parody of friendly welcome. And her voice echoed in my mind, not in my ears. "Well met, little sister—"

There was that in me which cringed at her careless claim of kinship. I was not of her blood—I was not! And perhaps my instant revulsion troubled the spell she had set upon me, for I saw her smile disappear, her eyes on me burn with anger.

"You are what and who I will you!" So quick was she with the leash of ownership. "You will do as I say. Come to me—"

I could not fight that compulsion any more than I could have broken chains which might have been forged about my wrists or limbs. To her I went.

"Look you!" She waved a hand toward the skull with its blaze of inner fire. That was now brighter, harsher, alive!

Without my willing it my hands went forth and touched the temples of the skull, one on either side. Into me swept another will, imperious—overriding the last remnants of what I was. I was given my orders; I knew what must be done.

"So!" the woman laughed. "We have chosen well, eh, Targi—" She spoke to the skull as if it were a living being. "Now you"—contemptuously she looked at me—"go you about your task."

Out from the pillars came scuttling shapes. Thas—the underground people, such as had already tried once to betray us. The leader of that band caught at my hand and I could not draw away. Under his urging I turned to the right.

We went through burrows; how many and where they ran, that I could not tell. All which burned within me, with near the same blaze which the skull had shown, was what I was to do. For it came to me that there were limitations on the woman and the skull. What meant so much to them they could not accomplish because these ways were forbidden them. Perhaps the passage ran somewhere under the cliffs of the Valley and, even deep in the earth, the safety runes had a measure of power. If so, such did not now work in my favor. I could pass this way easily enough, but I could not free myself from the tasks laid upon me.

The rest—it became disjointed, more like the broken episodes of a dream wherein one slides from one bit of action to the next without any logical connection. I remember mouthing words which someone else—either the woman or the skull had locked into my brain. And then—

There was something wrong. I could feel the ensorcellment lock even tighter on me. But beneath that prisoning arose baffled rage. I had not completed my task—there had been unseen interference. The Thas surrounded me, pushed and pulled me along their black burrows. What happened after—I could never piece together.

But there came a time when I knew I moved above earth, I saw faces which I should remember, only the hold on my brain would not yet let me. Then—

Then I came fully awake—or alive—once more. I stood in the open air and around me blew sweet wind, the chill of which I did not mind, because it carried the freshness of the world I knew. And there was Yonan, and with him another who wore strange armor and carried a great double-headed ax. There was also Tsali and then—up from the depth before us which must make the Valley—Dahaun came and with her Lord Kyllan, who was hand-fastened to her—others behind.

I cried out—this must be real—not another dream. But only when Dahaun took me into her arms was I sure of that.

Chapter Two

The barrier against speech no longer held, and I told Dahaun freely what had been my dream. Though dream, it seemed, it was not. I had been drawn out of the safety of the Valley—and that by the betrayal of a part of my own wayward mind. For they showed me a figure wrought of clay. And set to its rounded head were hairs from my own; about its form was wrapped a rag which I had once worn. And this I knew without telling was of the Old Evil. So had I been reached and worked upon by a greater force than we had suspected had yet striven to break our boundaries.

When I described the woman who abode with the skull, Dahaun frowned; still, there was

puzzlement in her frown. She made me stay within her own quarters, taking care before she left me to use a wand, white and fresh-peeled, to draw around the cushions on which I rested certain tokens confined by a circle. And, before she had done, the need to sleep had so weighted my eyelids that I drifted away. Though I struggled, for I feared above all to lose my will and thought and be drawn into dreams.

Dream again I did, and not happily. I was not now physically a part of that second visit to the hall of pillars and the skull as I had been the first time. Yet I could see—I could hear.

There was a change in her who had woven that earlier spell, for I was as certain as if oath had been taken that it was the woman who had reached out to draw me to her through the runways of the Thas; I so much under her spell I did not know where I went.

She no longer showed the pride and arrogance which had clothed her better than the mist at our last meeting. And her beauty was marred, as if time had served her ill. But still she was one to be feared and I did not forget that. Though at this time she did not look in my direction nor show any sign that she knew of my presence there.

Rather she stood by the base on which the skull rested and her hands caressed the crystal of its fashioning. Those blazing lights had died, or been muted so that only a near-colorless fogging of the inner part remained.

I saw her mouth and lips move, believed that she chanted or spoke to the thing she fingered. There was a kind of passion in her face which was greater than wrath—although that emotion underlaid the other. I could sense the forces she strove to bend, to break, to control by her will—and her frustration and despair that this she could not do.

Then she stooped to set her lips to the fleshless mouth of the crystal. She did that as I believed a woman would greet a lover, the one who was the center of her life. And her arms went around the pillar so that the "face" of that grinning thing pressed tightly against her ruby-tipped breasts. There was something so shameless in that gesture that I felt revulsion. But I could not flee, for that which had drawn me here still held—dream though it was.

She turned her head suddenly, as her eyes sought me. Perhaps she now knew that some portion of me had been drawn once more into her net. I saw exultation blaze high in those eyes.

"So—the spell holds yet, does it, younger sister? I have wrought better than I hoped."

Her hands arose in the air to trace lines I did not understand. Straightaway that which was me was locked fast. Now she came away from the skull, and so vibrant was the Dark Power in her that her hair stirred of itself, arose in a great flaming nebula about her head, more startling than any crown a queen might wear. Her lips were slightly parted, their burning redness like a gathering of blood on her ghostly fair skin.

She came one step and then two; her hands reached out for me, that triumph swelling in

her and about her like some robe of ceremony.

"There is yet time—with an able tool—" I think her thought was more her own than sent to me. "Aye, Targi," she glanced back for a breath at the skull, "we are not yet lost"

But if she had some plan it had failed her. For in that instant the spell broke, the woman and the skull she tended so passionately vanished. I opened my eyes again upon the hall of Dahaun to see the Lady of Green Silences standing at my feet. While over me she shook a handful of near-withered herbs, leaves of which broke off at the vigor of her gestures, shifting down to lie on my body. I sniffed Illbane, that very old cure for the ills of the spirit; with it langlon, the tri-leafed, which clears the senses, recalls a wandering mind.

Only I knew what had happened, and I cowered on my bed of hides and springy dried grasses. Tears which were born both of fear and the sense of my own helplessness filled my eyes, to spill down my cheeks.

Dahaun, though she looked grave enough, reached out and caught my hand even when I would shrink from her, knowing now that some part of me had been attuned to the Shadow and that I was held by all which had and was most evil in this land.

"You dreamed— " she said, and she did not use mind touch but rather spoke as she would to a small child who awakes terrified from a nightmare.

"She—I was drawn again—" I mumbled. "She can draw me to her will—"

"The same woman—?"

"The same woman, the skull, the place of pillars. It was as it was before."

Dahaun leaned forward, her eyes holding mine locked in a gaze I could not break, for all my feeling of guilt and trouble.

"Think, Crytha, was it exactly the same?"

There was some reason for her questioning. I dropped my guard and drew upon memory, so that in my mind hers could see also what I had witnessed. Though I began to fear for her, lest some of the taint sleep with the knowledge, to infect her also.

She sat down cross-legged by my bed place. Crushing the last of the Illbane between her hands, she leaned forward, to touch those now deeply scented fingers to my temples.

"Think—see!" she commanded with assurance.

So I relived in memory, as best I could, what I had seen in the dream.

When I had done she clasped her hands before her.

"Laidan—" She spoke a single name. "And—Targi—"

"Who is Laidan?" I ventured at last.

"One who mixed—or mixes, since it seems that she must still live in some burrow of hiding—the worst of two races within her. Laidan was of the People by her mother's right—her father—" Dahaun shrugged. "There were many tales in the time of her bid to rule as to whom he might be—though he was not one of us. It is most commonly accepted that she was sired by one of the Hill Lords who accepted the rule of the Shadow—willingly. Laidan—and Targi—" she repeated thoughtfully.

"Well, for that combination there may be an answer. Those who went forth last night (if they can do as Uruk believes) perhaps can make sure Targi shall no longer be a factor in any campaign. But Laidan they would not have met in that past—for at the battle time she was elsewhere, very much engaged."

"The battle?" To me she spoke in riddles. After a long measuring look at me she did not answer that half-question. Rather she spoke about what seemed the most urgent to me now.

"It would seem that Laidan, and that which she has so long guarded, have set part seal on you, Crytha. How this may be I cannot understand. But the roots of it all may lie in the far past. However—if she can compel you to come to her—even through dreaming—"

I already knew the answer to that, though my body was so cold with an inner fear that it began to shake in vast shudders I could not control.

"Then—then I am a danger to you—an opener of gates—" I said in a low voice which I could not hold steady. I knew what I must add to that, but my lips and tongue would not shape the words. The fear which had seized on me was now in near control. However, if I would threaten a break in the defenses of the Valley—it was very plain that I had no longer a place here. I stared at her dumbly, unable to do what duty pressed on me to do.

Dahaun shook her head slowly. "We are not totally defenseless in Power. But it may be that you shall have to face that you will be a prisoner, little sister—"

I flinched. "That—that is how she named me!" To hear the same words from Dahaun added to my burden of terror and guilt.

"So?" There was a firm line about Dahaun's lips. "So—she moves in that way? There is this you must understand, Crytha, because you have not had the training in control which should have been yours when the talent first manifested itself; it is true that you are left vulnerable to such as Laidan. I do not know what she may have learned during the dusty seasons between the time of the Lost Battle and this hour. But that there are limits on her is also the truth, and you must believe it. She never commanded the Green Silences—" Now there was a proud self-confidence in Dahaun. "It took too long to learn

and she was ever impatient and greedy. Last time she took your body to do her bidding. This time—that being well guarded—” she gestured toward the runes on the floor “she could only summon up your dream self—which is useless to her, for it is of another plain of existence and cannot operate physically. If Yonan and Uruk succeed—” Then she stopped shortly.

“Yonan—what of Yonan?” I was for the moment startled out of my own self-absorption. “Does—does he go to hunt this Laidan?”

Dahaun shook her head. “No, for she wilt not be where he would venture.” She said no more, and with a sick feeling, I understood why. In sleep I could be milked of such information should Laidan again summon me.

“That she shall not do either,” Dahaun picked the thought from my mind. “For there are other precautions we shall take. Believe you this, Crytha. There is no reason to feel guilt because you have been caught in this snare. Adepts even, in the past, have been ensorceled by their enemies. Warned as to the nature of the foe, then we can take precautions.”

It was thus I became for a time a prisoner of my own people, of those I would not have harmed and yet who could not trust now what I might be forced to do. I lived apart in a smaller house where one of the Lizard women waited upon me, for those of that species could detect, through some faculty of their own, inborn and not to be influenced, any change in me. Also, I was forbidden to use the talent in any way—even for healing—since such a use might open a path of thought between me and she whom Dahaun called Laidan.

Yonan and Uruk—through the days I wondered where they went and to what purpose they had gone. None dared tell me, nor could I ask. But the Lady Chriswitha came to me with a suggestion which might be an answer to my fears for the future.

It was well known that among the Old Race she who married, or she who was bedded by any man (as had sometimes been deliberately done in the old days to Witches who were captured by the enemy), lost their power and talent. Only one exception in all the passing years had been known—and that was the Lady Jealithe. But her lord had been an Outlander, of another race. While he himself (against all nature as we conceived of it) possessed a portion of the Talent. However, even after she proved that the Power had not departed from her when she became a wife, still the Witches of Estcarp would not receive her again among their number and she was looked upon askance.

Thus there was a solution to my future. Let me wed and bed with Imhar and I would no longer be any threat to those in the Valley, since I would lose my Talent. And in my despair I almost seized upon this solution.

For Imhar I had no love. But among my people marriages were always arranged for the good of the kin-clan. Though during the years of exile and war some had come about differently—for I knew that the Lady Chriswitha herself had wed by inclination, since

there was no clan elder left in her House to arrange such a match for her. Lord Hervon had already lost his family during the massacres in Karsten and had met with her first to bring some news of kin—escorting my mother to her.

Thus her wedding had been of her own choosing. But those of her daughters had come about in the old way, their husbands being now landless lords who had joined with Lord Hervon among the Borderers and so had agreed to add to the solidity of his House rather than start new ones of their own. I had been hand-fasted to Imhar nearly from my birthing; only the constant war had delayed marriage by cup and flame.

Now, though we were still ringed by danger even more perilous, I need only signify my willingness for marriage and take my place as Imhar's lady, putting aside all hope of ever being once more a wielder of Power.

Imhar was well enough. He was comely, a warrior born, and the heir to Hervon. Only—only in spite of my present fear and hurt I could not give consent. I was worn within me by the need for keeping, or striving to keep, that which was my birthright. I could not say the words my foster mother and aunt wanted—they choked in my throat. I thought that my dear lady would be angry with me and I was prepared to add her anger to the rest of the burden I must bear. But she only voiced the suggestion of what I might do and then, after a moment's silence which I could not break, she added:

"No one is born with the same gifts or talents, dear child. Imhar is his father's son, and in him there is a vast energy which since his boyhood has been centered on the making of war. Dalhis and Meegan were content with what life brought them. They wished for nothing else but home hall and children to be borne from their bodies. But if something else is given us—" She fell silent and sat for a long moment looking at her hands where they lay upon her knees. "We are in a place and time of wonders, child. And we of another generation have not the right to choose for you as has always been done.

"Imhar—" Again she paused and then shook her head as if at her own thoughts. "He has his own talent, and he is happy to use it as he does. If you wish to bide as you are—there shall be no pressure put upon you for any wedding—"

"But I am hand-fasted—" I was bewildered, hardly able to believe that she meant what she said.

"Wait, Crytha." Her words came fast and with emphasis as if to impress their meaning the more upon me. "Wait until you are sure!"

"But I—as I am I may be a danger to you—all of you—even to the Valley."

"Trust the Lady Dahaun—and wait—" She got to her feet a little heavily and I saw with eyes which were a little clearer that, though she showed no signs of age (for the Old Race do not until very near the end of their lives), her face was very tired, as if sleep might come to her pillow at night but true rest fled.

I caught her hand in mine and held it tight.

"Thank you—"

Gently she withdrew her fingers. "I would not see waste," she said. "Dear as you would be as a daughter in my house, I would not see waste."

And, so saying, she went away, leaving me only the weight of time and the conserving of my patience.

Chapter Three

Though I feared each night to dream again—and eagerly drank the potion Dahaun sent me that perhaps this might not be—it was that very night that once more our defenses were breeched. Perhaps it had taken Laidan so long to build powers of her sorceries that she had not until this hour been able to reach me again.

Sight came to me and hearing, and it was as if somehow I had been blind and deaf all my life to that moment. For there were subtleties open to my senses now which I had never known before. Whether I stood in body or mind in that open I was not sure.

But I shivered in the chill of the wind, smelled the heavy scent of the trees which it scooped up from the Valley to fling outward with a prodigal force. Overhead hung the moon—an old moon, nearly dead and ready to vanish from the sky in order to be reborn in a new cycle.

I raised my hands, looking down along my body. I wore riding dress and my hands were scratched, nails broken, as if I had pulled myself by main force to this place. Now I wanted to turn, look down upon the Valley behind me, wondering (if I were indeed here in body) how I had won to this height.

Then I realized that I was caught in the trap of a geas which did not permit me even to look back—but only forward. So I wavered across the uneven footing of this place, where there were many treacherous cliffs and slides to trap the unwary. Also, I moved with purpose and certainty, though it might not be my purpose or will which drove me on.

And I could well guess whose will had drawn me out of safety and set me on this journey. Twice I tried to break the hold upon my mind and body, but so great and concentrated was that it was as if I beat with bare and bloodstained fists against a door cast of sword steel.

Then, realizing that in this there was not yet any chance for escape, I surrendered to the will of Laidan. I crossed the fissured rock, my feet bringing me unerringly to a cavity in the side of the height. There I stooped to push within a very narrow entrance which was half choked with fallen rubble.

There was no stench of Thas here. If Laidan held rulership over those burrowers, she

did not use them now, perhaps believing that my will was so locked by hers that I would do exactly as I was bid and not strive to escape.

Though I was not Witch-trained, I had the example of those of Estcarp always at the back of my mind. To control and force obedience on another demanded a vast concentration, continued, unrelenting. I did not know how close to an adept Laidan might be—and had not the Lady Dahaun said even the adepts themselves might be ensorceled? Every step I took drained more energy from her who bent me to some task which lay in her desire. I walked haltingly, as slowly as I could, ever seeking, with sharp unexpected darts of mental force, to find some weakness in what held me.

That none had yet been found was no reason for me to embrace despair. Laidan, I believed, had fastened the full of what must be a not inconsiderable talent on me. Sooner or later she would—she must—feel the strain of what she did. So I must keep probing, at irregular intervals, ready for any second which might win my freedom.

These underground ways were dark. I was swallowed up by blackness as if the maw of some great beast had engulfed me. But I resolutely held fear at bay. Laidan needed me; she would not waste what she needed. Therefore, even in the dark I did not have yet anything to fear—except the will which held me captive.

Now there was a kind of nibbling at my mind. It did not come, I believed, from what Laidan had laid upon me. She had to hold her manipulation of me too taut to take any such liberties. No, this was like a very vague memory struggling to throw open some door and issue forth.

All of my species have such occurrences of memory we cannot account for—times when we see a stretch of country, a building, when an inner voice swells in instant answer—saying, "This you have seen before." Even when we know that that cannot be possible.

What tugged so persistently at me now must be such a false memory. Or can it be true that we live more than one life, seeking in each to repair the wrongs we have willfully committed earlier? I have heard some of the Old Race discuss this theory upon occasion. But for me heretofore, this life had been enough—the wonder and promise of it filling me always.

But—sometime—somewhere—I had walked these ways. I was so certain of that I thought, black as it was here, I could be sure of the walls rising on either side. And those walls were not bare stone. No—deep cut in them were symbols. So, to prove myself wrong or right, I put out my right hand, confident that I would find my fingers sliding over such stone. And so I did. And the wall was pitted and slashed with deep cutting. Though I did not strive to trace any of the patterns I knew were there.

For those patterns were not of my Talent. Around them hung a taint of evil, lessened perhaps a little by the many years they had been wrought here. My flesh recoiled as if I had touched fire, or burning acid, when I found them.

The pavement under my boots was smooth, with no falls of rock nor crevices to provide any barrier. Then—I was brought to a halt.

I sensed a sighing—a disturbance in the air. That which had taken command of my body turned me to the left until both my outstretched hands once more scraped across engraven stone. And I tapped out with one foot, knowing, as surely as if I could see, that here a pit opened in the floor and the only way around it was a narrow ledge which my tapping toe located.

So I set my shoulders against that wall, my hands braced tightly against it, facing outward to the pit. Step by step I squeezed by the trap I could not see. While from the depths came ever that sighing, and with it a stale smell. My journey seemed to take an hour, though it could only have been minutes before I was once more on a wide and solid surface of a corridor.

Now I saved my strength of purpose, no longer making those attempts to break the power holding me. For that passage shook me greatly, the reason for it lying, I was sure, in the depths of that memory which was not a real memory.

I felt also that the passage now sloped upward—at so gentle a curve that at first I was not aware of it. This became steeper as I went. Finally I knew that my feet unerringly had found a flight of steps and I was climbing. Here the wall to my left was smooth and I ran my hand along it for the sense of support it gave me in the dark.

Up and up—was I inside the heart of some mountain? Though I could not remember any peak of unusual height among those walling in the Valley. No, the true chain mountains lay to the north and the west—those we had come over in our venture into Escore.

My hands arose, at the command of Laidan rather than by my own desire. Flat-palmed, they struck a surface just above my head. And I guessed that I had reached some kind of trap door sealing off this place. I exerted my strength, and not altogether at the bidding of my captor—for I wanted out of this trap.

At first I thought that exit must have been sealed or barred. Then, very slowly and reluctantly, it loosened in its frame. Gray light, thin like the last of any winter twilight, outlined a square on three sides. I arose two more steps that I might set my back to the door and, with a last compelling effort, sent that crashing up and back. Ancient dust puffed into my face, making me cough.

For a moment I hesitated, for what might lie above in waiting I could not guess. Then, because I must, I climbed into the open. There were piles of tumbled stone, even a trace of a wall, as if this hidden way had once issued into the room of a building of size and presence. But if that were so, the way was—

I blinked and blinked again. For a second or two I saw clearly the desolation which had been plain enough still in existence—the fallen blocks like shadows. Then those winked out. Walls arose out of the very earth itself, took on sturdy substance. There was a roof

high over my head veiling the sky. The place of the skull—?

No—there were no pillars here and the wall was round. I could have entered the ground floor of some tower. Window slits there were, but those gave little light. Rather that came from torch rods set at intervals on the wall, pulsating with a steady, contained flame.

The opening of the trap door through which I had emerged had pushed aside a tanned, furred rug, into the making of which must have gone more than one snow-cat pelt. And there were stools and benches, much carven, a table nearer to the wall on which sat a bowl of ruddy crystal overflowing with those small red grapes which are the sweetest and the rarest my people knew. Beside that was a flagon of worked metal with the sheen of silver and gold interwoven, which had been fashioned in the form of a traditional dragon—its neck curved upward, its mouth open to emit whatever fluid might fill such a container.

All illusion; my mind gave a quick and, I thought, true answer. Yet when I stooped to touch the wrinkles of the rug, my fingers held the softness of fur. So this illusion could control more than one sense at a time.

I swung around toward the table, determined to test that guess further, but there came a curdling of the air. So strange was that I stared as the atmosphere itself appeared to thicken, form a body. Then I faced Laidan.

She laughed, lifting one hand to brush a strand of flame-bright hair out of her eyes.

"So you are duly surprised, little sister? Well, time can be obedient to the will, even as is space—or the other boundaries men so complacently accept as always unchangeable and fixed. This is Zephar—"

For a moment after she spoke that name her eyes were intent upon me, almost as if she expected I might recognize the word. Then she shrugged.

"It does not greatly matter whether you remember or not. But all this"—she flung her arms wide, the mistlike covering that she had worn before seeming in this setting to be more opaque and more like some normal weaving—"answers readily to my call since I once had the ordering of it. Where memory is the sharpest, there we can beat time itself.

"However, that is of no consequence. You are—"

She seated herself with deliberation on the only true chair in that chamber, one placed at mid-board by the table, its dark high back framing her hair to make those strands appear even brighter.

"Yes, we are in Zephar, younger sister. And in Zephar there is that which even in this crook-coiled time you can do." Now she set her chin upon one fist and planted the elbow of that arm firmly on the table. Though her mouth might still smile easily, her eyes were like bits of ice drawn from the teeth of the Ice Dragon, as from them appeared to spread

a chill which grew strong within that tower room.

"You are life-linked with this one you call Yonan—though once he had another name and played the part of a tool—only not well enough. He had his death of his own pretensions, but not in time—"

And the word "time" seemed to echo through the chamber like a gong from a distance, a sound not to be denied.

"Now he would play the fool again," she continued. "But the past must not be reversed, rather it shall be improved upon. You, and through you Yonan (who is nothing but who unfortunately can move to destroy what a lifetime—twenty lifetimes—cannot bring once more into being), must be used. Therefore—younger sister—you shall take a hand and all will be as we wish—"

I found my tongue at last. Perhaps it was the thought that she would make of me a tool to pull Yonan down which brought that croak out of me, rusty-sounding as if I had not given tongue in a score of years.

"As you wish—" Had the two of us ever stood and bargained so before? A teasing ghost of memory assaulted me once more. Perhaps not just in this same way, I believed, but we had been opponents long ago. Then I must have known more—much more—

For a second time she laughed. "If you hunt down that very forgotten trail you will not find much at the end of it—save that you failed then even as you will fail now. Believe me"—her eyes were afire or else had put on the diamond brightness ice can sometimes show under the sun—"you will fail. You are even less this time than you were when once before we fronted one another. Yes, you shall give me Yonan and all shall be well. I will make very certain of that. Come!"

She arose, beckoning me. And, as it had been since I had come into consciousness this time among the hills, I was wholly subservient to her will.

She did not even glance back to see if I followed. Rather she went directly to where a stair spiraled around the circular inner wall of this place and climbed quickly, I constrained to follow.

We came so into a second and upper chamber where the ceiling was not so high. Here were shelves and tables holding all manner of basins, beakers, and small boxes. From the ceiling and along the walls dangled bunches of withered vegetation which I thought I recognized as dried herbs. But the center of the chamber had been kept bare of any furniture. And there, set into the floor in various colored stones so that it would ever be permanent and ready to hand, was the pentagram of witchery. On the points of the stars were thick black candles, which had been lighted before, as drippings of evil-looking wax ridged their sides.

Beyond the pentagram was a smaller circle, this bordered by runes which had been

drawn on the pavement in black and red. But lying in the middle of that, tightly bound, a gag forced between his wide jaws, was—Tsali! Though how the Lizard man could have been brought here I could not guess.

Chapter Four

Instinctively my mind reached to touch his. Only my thought send recoiled from an unseen barrier so intricately woven that nothing could pierce it—more of Laidan's sorcery. She had turned her back upon me, and there was contempt in that. She must now have believed me so poor a thing that she no longer even had to exert her power to hold me in control. Rather she was concentrating upon a search along those crowded shelves, taking down here a closed pot of rude workmanship, there a flask in which liquid swirled as if it had life.

I looked into Tsali's eyes and strove, though I could not reach him mind to mind, to make contact. And I saw that he knew me, yet there was that about his gaze which held shock—and—did I read repudiation?

In the beginning I had learned what I knew of my Talent because I could communicate with other life forms—those which are not the lesser (though ignorant men may deem them so because they do not walk, speak, or think after our fashion). The Lizard people, the Renthans, the Vorlungs of the Valley—they had arisen from stock totally unlike our own forefathers, but they were no less than we, only different.

Just as a fish lying in a sun-dappled pool, a pronghorn grazing in a meadow, a snow cat stalking in the upper reaches, have in them all the love of life, a way of thought equal to our own in power even if we cannot understand it. I have also called to me the scaled ones. And I remembered now, in a small flash, how greatly I had troubled Yonan when he had once found me and a serpent as close-linked as was allowed by our divergent natures.

But all those were clean beasts who had nothing of the rot of the Shadow in them. While here in Escore prowled creatures which to mind-touch would be to open wide a gate through which I, myself, could be invaded. How much did Laidan use those born as a result of ancient meddling on the part of a people grown so decadent that they would tamper with nature to amuse themselves—or to provide servants for further evil?

The Lizard man was clearly an enemy. And that she planned worse for him I did not have to be told. But since she had lifted from me most of the force of her will, leaving only enough to keep me here, I began tentatively to look about me, seeking any weapon, any ally I might find.

This cradle of sorcery had no windows, and the thick stone walls were all shelved. Also, the ceiling over my head was much lower than that of the chamber below. Now I could see that in the corners of that there hung the soft thickness of years of webs, some so heavy with settled dust that they seemed small ragged bits of curtains. And in those webs—I sent out a very small quest of thought.

The mind that I touched was totally alien, the spark of intelligence frightening in its cold avid hunger. I had never tried to summon any of the insect world before. But that I had managed to touch at all was a small triumph. And, apparently, Laidan, in her preoccupation, had not been warned that in so much—or so little—I had begun to evade the geas she had laid upon me.

I located another creeper consciousness, a third. It was very hard to hold to them, for their level of consciousness was so different from my own it was like grasping a cord which was constantly jerked from my fingers, caught again just before it had totally escaped me.

There were huntresses in those dusty webs, cold and deadly. Of our concerns they knew nor cared nothing at all. But they were there. And now I made an effort, concentrating on the largest and what might be the oldest of the webs. Something moved in the hole that was its center. So—I had drawn its inhabitant thus far into the open! I had no plan at all, nothing but a hope which was very dim at that moment. But I put my own talent to the test, summoning those who dwelt above. They seemed to have fared very well, for when they appeared their bodies were bloated with good living—and that in the largest web was larger than my palm.

These were no ordinary spiders. There was poison in their jaws. They could immobilize their prey, enclose it in the web for future eating while it still lived. And their tiny eyes were sparks of evil light.

Laidan had finished her selection of supplies for whatever infamous sorcery she would do here. Now she moved purposefully around the star, setting a second candle beside the first, sprinkling the lines uniting them with powdered herbs—the smell of which was noxious.

I could guess what she intended—that we would be within the barriers she was making very secure, but that Tsali would lie in that wherein should appear whatever being of personified evil she strove now to summon from Beyond. Tsali was meant to furnish the blood-gift to that—

However, she had to release more of her hold on me to concentrate on what she did. Now she muttered words I did not know, keening spells no true Witch would soil tongue with. These must be very exact—for her life would also be forfeit were she to neglect any of the safeguards she now wove here.

The largest of the web dwellers came scuttling to the edge of her noisome dwelling, teetered there, her sparks of eyes seeking the prey which I had set in her mind was not too far away. She launched forth into space, spinning as she came the cord linking her to her dwelling. Now she swung back and forth, her fat body an orange and black dot in the air.

I sensed the creature's dislike of the scents rising from the bruised herbs below. She

longed to retreat, but the mental picture of rich feasting I forced upon her held her suspended. A second lurking spider dropped from her dust-coated den—then a third.

"Ah." Laidan arose and rubbed her hands together, freeing them of the last fragment of leaf and stem. "We are ready, little sister. There need only go forth the summons—the sacrifice will be accepted—and you shall be welcomed as one of us—"

"And if I choose not?" I no longer watched the spiders lest Laidan look aloft and see them too.

"You have no choice," she told me. "You have no defense against what I shall call, and it will possess you—for a space. When it withdraws, you shall be its, and then"—she gestured with one hand to indicate all which lay within the room—"you shall learn willingly. There is that in you which shall open doors for us. Think you that we could have summoned you else wise? And"—now she eyed me oddly—"I think that you even long for this deep within you. You are of our kind, little sister, one who would mold instead of be molded. And that is a truth you cannot deny."

"I am not of the Shadow," I returned stubbornly.

She shrugged. "What is Shadow, what is Light? You have heard only one story, and that told by our enemies. There is much to be learned. Shall we shut doors and lock them upon that learning merely because of some fear of what lies beyond? There is only one true thing to desire—and that is Power! All else is swallowed up by time, broken and forgotten. Nothing within one lasts as long as the will to Power. You shall see, yes, and you shall rejoice in that—that you are one of those into which such Power may be poured, even as winter wine is poured into a waiting flask."

There was something in her words which did find a part of me receptive. Just as I had doubted myself when the Lady Chriswitha had talked with me, so did that doubt grow now in me. I wanted—I wanted to learn what I might do were I to use my talent to the full! I wanted—Power!

Still—another part of me arose to do battle now. Power—it could twist and mar, it could defeat its user, too. It—

The foremost of the spiders hung now above Tsali. I saw the bright eyes in his Lizard skull had moved from me to that dangling creature, marking too her sisters unreeling their threads to descend.

Laidan had come to stand with me within the star. Now she raised a small black wand she had brought from beneath her mist draperies. She pointed it from one candle to the next, and each started aflame with an oily, scarlet light. While she chanted as she moved.

Within me a sickness arose, so I crouched a little, my hands pressed against my middle. Whatever there was of my species which could be aroused by her sorcery was in such revolt that it tore at my body. And my own resolve strengthened.

Even as Laidan summoned that which she would force to obey her, so did I fix my will upon the spiders from above. I still did not know what I might do with them as weapons, but they were all I had. And I had learned enough from the Lady Dahaun to know that in such sorceries the balance was very delicate and easily disturbed. Laidan had enclosed both the circle and the star in which we stood with her precautions, but she had not thought of what might lie overhead.

The candles gave forth what was to me a disgusting smell. However, I saw Laidan breathing deeply between the words she still mouthed as if, from their scent, she garnered some needful food or energy. Then—

In the circle the air moved. But into that maelstrom there dropped the first spider from aloft. There was a swirling—I saw Laidan start, her chant faltered. A second spider, a third, disappeared into that misty column. Laidan started back—her hand raised to her mouth, for the first time shaken by what she witnessed—or felt—

I might not be as receptive as the sorceress, but I was aware of a vast troubling. Something which had been summoned—it had recoiled; it was angry. And—it was gone!

Laidan gave a cry, her hands arose to her ears as if to shut out some intolerable sound. Though I was aware of nothing, except that withdrawal. Then she, too, vanished—winked out instantly.

The flames of the candles were extinguished, leaving the room in near darkness. I was—free—

In a moment I crossed the star, grabbed from the table a stout-bladed knife and went to Tsali, slashing at his bonds. There was no longer any mental barrier between us. But something else weighed on the spirit in this chamber of the place Laidan had named Zephar.

Tsali stood, his clawed hand closed tightly about my wrist.

"Come—!" He scuttled for the stair, drawing me after him.

There followed a blurring of the walls, of all the things in that room, as if stout stone were melting, flowing away into nothingness. I thought I felt the steps of that stairway crumble and tremble under my weight. And I guess whatever illusion Laidan had set there was now disappearing, and that we might even be either trapped between times or perhaps buried under blocks of stone which the ages between would tumble from their settings.

At last, panting, we stood in the open, with around us only moss-grown and broken stones, a corner of what might once have been an outer wall. Tsali did not relax the hold he had kept on my wrist. His head darted from side to side with a speed my own species could never have equaled as he stood tensely, in such a position of instant alert that I

knew that we were far from safe.

"Laidan?" I aimed a single thought at his mind.

"Is not gone—yet—" he confirmed my own fear. "She fled into her own corner of nothingness lest that which she had summoned turn upon her. But there she nurses her hate—which will grow the greater when she learns what has happened elsewhere. And because she has linked with you—then you can furnish her a door through time once more."

"What has happened elsewhere?" I seized upon that part of his warning.

"He whom she would have awakened is at last truly dead. The youth you call Yonan and Uruk of the Ax have wrought their own kind of magic. But in so much will Laidan's hate now be the greater. Though I think she dare not try anything as yet. That recoil of spell drove her too far from us. Only not yet are we finished with her."

He led the way, still keeping hold on me, out of that shell of ancient ruin. Now autumn-withered grass brushed thigh-high about me, near waist-high for him.

"What—why did the spiders—" I began. For though those spinners had done my will and had apparently broken Laidan's sorcery, I did not understand how such a thing could be.

"The balance of all spells," Tsali returned, still more than half of his attention given to what lay about us, even though the last of the tumbled blocks now lay behind, "rests very delicately. What Laidan summoned demanded a blood price—and what she had ready for it." He thought-sent matter-of-factly, as if he had not been that same price. "But when other life came into it, then it was confused, angry—believing that Laidan had sought to engage its aid with so poor an offering. Those which are truly of the Shadow trust no one. Some spells they are forced to obey, but if any bargain is not kept scrupulously, then they are freed from their obedience. Three spiders did not equal one Tsali—" There was wry humor in that which brought a smile to my own lips in spite of that lowering feeling of being naked of defense in a threatening world which had and did burden me as we went.

"Where are we?" I asked. Was this my own time? And could we win back to the Valley?

"To each question," my companion picked up those thoughts very quickly, "I cannot give full answer. But we must go with all caution. Laidan will have a chance to replenish her powers. When she finds that Targi is no more"—his scaled head shook from side to side—"then she will not be appeased except by a full letting of blood. Since she perhaps cannot get at those who killed that which was Targi, she shall be the more bitter against us—"

"Yonan—Uruk?" I made a new question of their names.

Tsali's answer came as if now more important matters were in his mind.

"Their road is their road—they have done well. It is up to us to keep faith with the Valley. We cannot return while Laidan—" his thought seemed to flicker there as if he wanted to veil it from me. But, bitterly, I knew what he would have added and so did so myself:

"While Laidan can lay her spell on me." I made no question of that, for I knew that it was the truth and one which I must face with all my strength of body and spirit.

Chapter Five

We wandered on. Tsali amended his pace somewhat after we had won farther from the ruins. The land was drably brown. Autumn in its last stages had set its imprint here and had emptied the country of all growth, even as frost had drawn subsistence from the grass and weeds, now so dried and sere they rattled faintly in the wind.

There showed the remnants of a road, mainly a block here and there, overcast with drifted soil, or canted upward by the roots of a leafless tree. I stared around, trying to locate some landmark that I could fix on. Though I knew now I could not venture back once more into the Valley—not until I was entirely free of Laidan's influence.

Now I knew hunger and thirst, and I wondered where Tsali would lead us. But I did not ask. Rather I walked as one in a dream, following his urging. Yet inside I sought for what might lie there as a part of my Talent. Against Laidan I had no defense—or so I believed. How long before she dared venture out of hiding, strive to make me again her tool?

Tool?

Somehow my apprehensive thought fastened on that word. Man wrought in two ways, by the vision of his mind (which is not sorcery in itself) and with his hands—or those extensions of his hands which in the dim beginning some thinkers had devised to answer problems they strove to solve.

There were the tools of a landsman—the plow to turn the earth for the receiving of seed, the rake and hoe, the hammer, the saw; others I could not even name. There were, in addition, the tools which I had known—pots one could sling over a fire to withstand heat and cook the food within, the spindle for the making of thread, the needle, the loom—the spoon, if you will, and a short knife, and—

Also, there were other tools—those of war. There was the dart gun—my fingers moved without conscious orders as if to close about one of those weapons, seek its firing button. There were the swords, and lances; men turned more to them in these days when we could no longer fashion the darts. There were shields for defense. And in the Valley, each of the Green People carried at belt one of the force whips which were the children of lightning, tamed and domesticated to their service.

All these were tools—even the mind. But my defeat lay in that I had not been properly taught what might be done with the tool I was born with.

Tsali angled off from the ancient remains of that road, pulling me eastward. I stumbled along at his bidding because I had no other plan to follow.

The day was as ash-gray as the life-sapped grass through which we trod a path. But there were no clouds I could see. Now I caught the sound of running water, and my tongue moved in a mouth which seemed filled with dust. Down an incline which grew even steeper, Tsali pulled me. Only now I was eager in my going for I saw the water, running around rocks and over a stony bed.

I knelt at the stream bank to wash my hands in the flow, which was chill, then made a hollow cup of closely held palms and fingers to raise to my lips. Tsali had gone a little away and crouched to lap with a long tongue. When I had drunk my fill I looked about me with a more conscious gaze. Drink I had had, but there was also the need for food.

Tsali made a sudden lunge with both forelimbs, and arose, water dripping from his scaled skin, a fish wriggling between his claws. He waited until it stilled and flipped it to the ground behind him, then squatted on the bank, his eyes once more intent upon the stream.

Though I had long set my own path of life, that I would not kill a living thing for eating, still now I knew that logic must determine my survival and if Tsali's catch meant life and strength, that I must accept.

But I could not bring myself to touch the dead fish. I could only watch as the Lizard man snaked a second out of its world. He hunted among the drift which bordered the stream, to return with a sharply pointed stick which he used to gut his catch and a stone with which he skinned the bodies.

There was no fire—Tsali would prefer his raw anyway, I knew. I eyed the portion he had set before me with repugnance. But I must live and this was the only food available. I made myself worry loose bits of firm flesh, choke them down. This was no worse than many ordeals a warrior must face. While against Laidan and her world, I had no choice but to go to war.

From overhead came a scream, startling me so I near spit out the last mouthful I had forced between my lips. I looked up to see a bird, its bill opened to voice another such squawk, impudently planing earthward as if to snatch the food from our hands.

In plumage it was almost as dull-gray as the sky. But around its eyes there were circlings of light, blazing red—which gave a momentary impression that it looked upon us through dots of fire. Its like I had not seen before. And, though I immediately alerted my bruised and battered other sense, I found nothing in mind touch save what it appeared to be—a bird of prey, yes, but one which followed its own fierce nature and no order of the Shadow.

Its cries brought another of its kind. However, as they fed upon the offal Tsali had

thrown to one side, I experienced once more that far-off stir of what could not be memory (for I would swear I had never seen these birds before), yet—

The flash of their drab feathered wings, the burning scarlet of the mask about their eyes, grew more and more important to me. I found myself on my feet, my hands forming fists pressed tight against my breasts.

"Ninutra—!" I cried that aloud, my voice at that moment rising even above the incessant crying of the birds.

Ninutra? A person—a place—? Under that need to know, I reluctantly opened my mind and sought, deeper, deeper—recklessly. For such delving I had done before only under the control of the Lady Dahaun. And in such a place and time as now I stood, the peril must be very great. But that I brushed aside. I must know!

Ninutra—there was a hazy image forming. I shut my eyes to the sky, the birds, to the world I knew, turned my sight inward. Ninutra—come! I gave order to that fragment of thought—or memory—what was Ninutra?

There was a feeling of giddiness. The mental image sharpened, I felt breathless, filled with an expectancy in which excitement outweighed, at this moment, both fear and prudence.

A figure—about which held a nebula of flame color to match the patches about the eyes of the birds. If I could only brush away that curtain of brilliant radiance—see the clearer!

Ninutra—a Power—not a place. Of the Shadow? What had I then evoked?

No, that built-in warning which Dahaun's teachings had strengthened, did not come to life. Only neither did I feel the confidence I believed would flow about me if I summoned that which was turned to the Light. Could there then be a third force in this rent and warring land, one which stood apart from both the Dark and the Light—followed some path incomprehensible to both?

I fought to clear my mental sight of that image—or Power. But the light clothed it too well. However, slowly there came from it, as water circles outward when one throws a stone into a pool, a feeling of energy which was warm, growing hotter—hotter—

Maybe I cried out. I know that I shrank within me, strove now to will away that image, but I could not. Heat licked at me, but with it no feeling of anger. I sensed that what Ninutra might be was curious, that it stirred out of some deep contemplation of its own because my feeble summons had disturbed it. Was this one of the adepts?

If so, all which had been its human heritage was long since gone. It was pure force of a kind I did not understand, so alien—

Then that image receded from the fore of my mind. With it went some of the heat. Now

it was rather as if I looked down a long aisle to see at the far end a form standing. The red glow drew back into its body (I say "it" for there was no sense of sex in this Power, there was little left but a pure force).

As I looked upon it so I was certain that once "I" (or the inner part of me), now flawed and long buried perhaps by other lives and ages of time, had once had contact with this Force and it had sometimes answered me. But that was long and long ago and the cord between us had frayed into dust—

I opened my eyes upon the dreary world by the stream. The birds were gone. Tsali squatted on the stones, his jewel eyes on me. I found myself whispering still that name:

"Ninutra—" And then I mind-spoke to my companion. "Tsali—what or who is—was that Power?"

His head bobbed, not to me, but as if to the image I had evoked so mistily.

"One of the Great Ones—not born of your blood, nor of mine, nor of any race now living. One of the ones who lingered among us for a space—until those who sought the worst of the Dark arose and tried to summon—"

"But why do I now see this thing?"

"I do not know, Witch maid. Save those birds"—he made a gesture at the sky where I saw the distant wheel of wings—" were once, long and long ago, found in the Place Apart where Ninutra chose to dwell or else maintain some small contact with this world. There were also those there who opened their minds and hearts and at times they spoke of what lay in the future so that even the adepts listened when they were the Mouths of Ninutra."

Tsali—was I ever such a Mouth?"

He shook his head. "Ask me not riddles, Witch maid. Each race and species has its own legends. Do we live again once we have gone to the cleansing fire? And if we so live, can we remember? I do not know."

"I saw—Ninutra—" I answered slowly. "And—" I wrapped my arms about myself. "I was warmed by the Force. I—"

My head came up. Now it was not memory which moved within me, rather a portion of knowledge laid out clear and fresh in my mind, as if there was held in the air before me a scroll fresh from the writing of a keeper of the Deeper Knowledge. I had sought for a long time. And as such a seeker, I had left myself open so that Laidan had been able to enter into that part of me which lay vacant and ready for her sly suggestions. I do not know how my vision had worked upon me in those moments when I had fronted Ninutra, but now some of those empty chambers in my mind were filled.

Tsali stood tall, his crested head erect and swelling in color. I saw those flaps of skin quiver slightly as if his whole body would express emotion.

"Witch maid—what would you now—?"

"I do what must be done," I cut across his half-question, half-protest.

Eyeing the bank of the river under our feet, I found what I sought, a length of stick, drift, brittle and bleached, but as straight as the eye could measure it. This I took up, gripping it steadily. And as if it were a brush to lay on paint in the making of a picture, I drew with it in the air that which lay now in my mind. So it must go, and go, and go—

What I had drawn could be seen there. First only as faint lines. Then the color spreading inward from those lines, to give an opaque solidity. It glowed as a coal on a half-dead night fire might glow. I dropped the stick and stood looking at that hung in the empty air, while from my lips came sounds unlike any words, more resembling the harsh calls of those birds which had once nested in Ninutra's dwelling of force and now had come to scavenge in this much later day the results of Tsali's fishing.

Slowly, I put out my hand. In me was the certainty that once my fingers closed firmly on what hung suspended between the Lizard man and myself, I would have pledged my strength to a struggle I could not understand.

The red of that thing was fading, but its appearance of substance grew sharper and more distinct. Why hesitate? I had really known ever since Ninutra had answered me that this was to be done. I closed my hand upon a hard surface, though that was nearly as dull-gray now as the sky above us. Thus, I resolutely drew from the air what a knowledge I did not yet understand had wrought—a sword, which to the eye still seemed vaguely and mistily edged.

"Thus works the will of Ninutra," I said slowly aloud. "For here is the Sword of Shadow—not of the Dark, nor yet of the Light, but which can be born by either belief. Only now do I claim it—and for the Light!"

I swung the miracle blade through the air, as a warrior would test the balance of a new weapon. For that is truly what I did in that moment. It was not as heavy as the steel I had known, nor did it possess a slashing edge or even a sharp point for thrusting. Its threat lay in other directions.

Tsali's thought came to me. "It is done—" I read into those words a heaviness of forelooking.

"It is done," I agreed. "It was for this that I was born—I think. I am now what I must have been fashioned to be. And let Laidan think of what hand she had in such fashioning."

Chapter Six

The strange sword lost substance slowly even as wisps of mist are banished by the strong sun, though there was no sun over us at that moment. Soon I held—nothing. Still there was now in me the right and learning to call it forth again. I drew a long breath of wonder. My mind—if I could only have a space of peace in which to sort out what had poured without any sequence in my mind. Now I had no guide but my own instinct, that and the sure knowledge that battle lay before me; such a battle as I could not imagine, even though brushed by a Power I had been.

I stared down at my empty hand and I knew that, when I summoned it, that weapon forged in the name of Ninutra would return. But Tsali suddenly looked to our back trail. He hissed as the crest on his head blazed near blood-red. "Hunters—" his thought reached me in warning.

I was sure that those hunters were not from the Valley, nor perhaps of humankind at all. I sent my own mind questing out, to touch for a bare instant of time, traces of the Dark Ones. Though of what species they were, I dared not probe the deeper to discover.

"They hunt us—" Of that much was I sure.

"They quest for scent; as yet they have not found it," Tsali returned. He flexed his claws and hissed once more.

So—we were hunted. Had Laidan returned to betray us to her evil co-forces, or had our trail been picked up only by chance? The reason for their coming did not matter. It would appear I was not to be given the time I needed to marshal this new awaking of a talent I had never known lay within me.

"Can we seek a hiding place?"

Tsali's head had swung around to a degree no human neck would allow. There were hillocks about us—but the mountain heights lay well behind. And also to those I did not dare to go now. I saw no beacon of blue stone set up anywhere, promising a kind of phantom shelter to those who hated the Dark. We had early been advised that such could be islands of safety in a dubious land.

"Water—" My companion made purposefully for the stream, sliding down the bank to wade out into its slow current.

Of course, the old, old truth—evil of many kinds dared not cross clean running water. I scrambled swiftly after him, felt my boots fill as wavelets set up by my strides lapped in over the tops of that footgear. I held my divided skirt as high as I could, but the hem became sodden quickly. While I discovered the uncertain footing of loose stones slowed me whereas Tsali skittered easily ahead.

My questing sense picked up an emanation as foul to my mind as corruption would be to my nostrils. Yet I had not enough yet to name our pursuers. Now I resolutely did not try to touch again—lest that reveal us in our flight.

The bed of the river was wide but, as we went, the stream grew narrower, a curling ribbon of water as its center, stretches of gravel edging it. Which hinted that there were periodic floods to leave the drift along the way, higher water unknown at this season. Also, it was shallow here and quite clear. I could see the flight of fish and armored things which crawled across the bottom we disturbed by our coming. One thing troubled me greatly—

Tsali had turned his back upon those heights which might or might not wall the Valley. And now I made a decision, reaching out to meet his mind. "Tsali, warrior of warriors, I have taken a fate upon me which is not your burden. You can return—"

I got no farther. He looked back over his narrow scaled shoulder to hiss at me. And I felt the anger boiling in his mind.

"We go together, Witch girl. Should one of the Brother-Kin of Reto, whose wisdom held even the Great Snake for the space of two heart beats so that it could be truly slain, turn his back on an ancient enemy and say, 'This is no task of mine'?"

"Your pardon, warrior." I could make no other answer. "But there is this—I have accepted the weight of something I do not understand, which may even play me false at the moment we must face our enemies. I would draw no others into what may be a net of ill fate."

"What creature can claim free choice when the Great Ones stir again? Our legends speak little of your Ninutra—whether he was for the Dark or the Light. But I think he was one of those who turned his back upon both and went to a place which he alone mastered. And—"

What he might have added I shall never know but I heard again the squawking cries and saw that over us winged once more those same birds of gray and flame. They whirled and dipped, screeching. And in those moments I began to believe that they were now allied with the evil which trailed behind, scouts sent to make sure we had no chance of escape.

I tried to shut my ears to their clamor, yet they held my attention so well I stumbled on a slime-coated stone and went to my knees, the water shockingly cold as high as my waist. Tsali stood still, as intent upon those winged pests as I had been. Now I saw him rub a clawed finger along the base of his head comb.

He had the attitude of one who listened intently, as if their incessant squawking made excellent sense. I could understand nothing of it; even though in the past I had always before been able to establish contact with any living thing. For, when I cautiously sought mind touch, there was nothing, not even that residue of instinctive cunning which I had worked upon with the spiders in Laidan's sorcery room.

There were—just blanks! I could not even sense a mind barrier at work. And the very

fact that these birds were so protected made me uneasy.

Their flying darts came closer; I ducked my head when one screaming bird seemed about to attack my face, my eyes. And I raised my hands over my face in protection.

"Our guides—" Tsali appeared unmoved as they flew so closely about his head that it would seem their wings would brush his crest or his face.

"Guides to where?" I challenged, cowering a little once more as one aimed straight for me.

"Who knows?" The Lizard man shrugged his narrow shoulders. "But if we follow, they will cease this calling, which must ring well down stream by now."

It was a choice between two evils, I knew. No one had ever said that those of the Dark had no cunning. The racket of the birds must indeed alert anyone within perhaps more distance than I wanted to believe.

Tsali already waded toward the righthand bank. Now the birds circled once above his head, flitting on to pay full attention to me. More slowly, because of my waterlogged skirts, I followed him. Then, when my feet were on the bank, their screaming stopped as if cut off. Instead the birds, though they still dipped and fluttered around, mainly before us, were silent.

We were away from the area of the ruins where I had felt stifled and so ill at ease. Before us sloped a meadow. Though the tall grass was dull and near dry, yet here and there a late lingering flower made a scarlet or rust-yellow patch. However, aside from the birds of Ninutra, the field was empty; an emptiness which spread out before us until there stood afar an edging of woodland.

Across that lengthy field we went. Of course in so doing, we left such a trail behind us as the Dark Ones could sniff out with little trouble. But the grayness of the day now lifted a little. I held up my soaked skirt, sitting down once to draw off and empty my boots, which were beginning to show hard usage.

That way through the open was farther than it first looked; rather as if the distant line of trees, through some power, stealthily retreated at each step we advanced. The birds of Ninutra remained silent, but they wheeled and dipped, their movements certainly following a pattern, urging us forward toward the distant wood.

It was very quiet. And then, so faint it was hardly more than a vibration on the air, I heard a howling. That I knew from my days in the Valley for the call of a Gray One—those creatures of the Dark which are neither man nor wolf, but a blasphemous uniting of both. The sound came from downriver, giving me at last a clue to the nature of the enemy.

I had no long knife in my belt, no sword or dart gun. And Tsali's scabbards for knife and

sword hung empty, for his captors had despoiled him when they had taken him. I heard him hiss and lift his hands, extend his claws to the greatest extent.

We pushed forward with the best speed we could muster. The Dark Ones who caught any of us in the open had a potent charm against which no magics known could operate. They need only ring us thrice and we would be helpless to escape, fit meat to be pulled down at their desire. If we could reach those ever-beckoning trees, then such ringing would be far harder to accomplish.

It was here that the birds deserted us. Beating well up into the air, they formed a vee of flight and sped straight on toward the wood. Perhaps whatever strange task had been set them was completed.

My dragging skirt tripped me twice, though I held it as high as I could in my hands. Nor did I waste time looking back. For the hunting howl broke again and manifestly nearer. Tsali, unencumbered by clothing, could have flashed away and been out of sight long before I gained the shelter of those trees. But he did not. Instead he stooped swiftly twice, each time arising with a stone caught fast in his claws. No true defense, for all his courage, against what followed us.

I labored on. Hardly was I aware I had reached the trees, so hard set I was, my breath came in great tearing gasps, until I struck one shoulder against a trunk with bruising force. Then I caught at that bark-clad pillar, holding on with a despairing grip lest I fall and be unable to win once more to my feet.

Tsali's hand caught one of mine; he pried to loosen my convulsive hold.

"On!"

He was right, but I was not sure that I was able. There came a third howl from behind, this full-voiced and close, feeding my panic enough to make me let go, stagger ahead with Tsali tugging at me.

I brushed painfully against other trees; my clothing caught on low-growing thorns, tore when I jerked loose from their grasp. On and yet on. Here was only a small gray glimmer of light. These trees, I began to realize, had not lost their leaves—or rather needles, for the refuse under my slipping and sliding feet was composed of brownish needles near as long as my forearm. There was very little undergrowth—even of the thorns—once we had broken through the outer barrier of the wood.

Now I saw the birds once again, settling on branches, only to flutter farther ahead as we made our laborious way in their wake. And there was no sound—no breeze troubled the needles of the trees. Not one squawk issued from a bird throat. My own panting was loud, and that I was not able to control.

I staggered once and nearly fell—reaching out frantically to my right for a huge stone set on end. Only when my fingers dug into the moss which had covered it did I realize that

this was no natural pillar but one once embellished by some intelligence. As I clung to that to catch my breath, I could see that this was the first in a line of such pillars which marched on into the depths of the woods. And the carving my fingers had laid bare was that of a bird, its eyes deep pits into which even the moss had not rooted.

Another fragment of that not-memory gave me a moment or so of vision—of the stones of this way unencumbered by any growth, rather gray and splashed with color where the carving on them had been inlaid with paint. I sought the warn-off of Dark-fashioned things, since these were not blue stone. But—no—neither Dark nor Light held here. And I think I then guessed what lay before us—another realm altogether, one in which what concerned those of my blood was immaterial. Was this the place of Ninutra?

Another howl from very close now—the Gray Ones must be coursing the meadow. I looked about me for some hint of shelter. We could set our backs to this stone, but the outcome would never be in doubt—we would be speedily pulled down—

Or—

Of itself my hand stretched forth into the air, prepared to accept something from the unseen. I opened in my mind the door to that chaotic place into which had been poured all I could not yet understand.

Substance fitted into my palm. I speedily curled my fingers about to hold it firmly. There was the glow—scarlet as if outlined in fresh flowing blood. Once more I had the Shadow Sword.

Now there welled in me something which was not born of my species, which I must fight to hold steady. I looked from the sword to Tsali and spoke what I now knew was the truth.

"This is not yet the place. Let us go!"

From that point, it was I who took the lead along that line of pillars, Ninutra's birds fluttering over my head and a very grisly death, as I well knew, sniffing behind.

Chapter Seven

We fronted a great arch which was a marvel, for I think it had indeed been hewn of a single block of stone so large I did not see how any thereafter could move it to this place or set it upright. This was bare of carving, save at the very top where there was set a face, its eyes well above us to stare down the path we had come. Human in contour it was, but there was a lack of expression, a withdrawal in its gaze, which was not of my kind. Nor could I say whether it was man or woman. Rather the features held elements of both. But what made that image the most notable was, unlike the pillars which had guided us here, it seemed untouched by the years; no marks of erosion lay upon it.

The sword in my hand moved, almost of itself, rising up in formal salute to that carving.

I guessed that here was locked part of the essence which had drawn us on.

Behind the arch was only bare earth—or rather sand—silver in color. However, laid out upon that background, in bold patterns, were tracings of other sands to form symbols I did not know. The area was divided into four quarters, each bearing its own range of complicated designs, the division being two narrow paths bisecting it at precise angles.

I went forward down the path which had its opening at the gate. The instant I was passed beneath that portal my flesh tingled, my hair moved as if drawn by energies I had never encountered before. I did not look back to see if Tsali followed; at that moment it was only needful that I reach the exact center of this place.

There was power here surely, such as I had never felt before—even in that chamber where Laidan had woven her abortive spell or in the circles Dahaun used in her own green sorcery.

There are many kinds of magic; the green which is of the earth and growing things and includes in it the healer's craft; the brown which has to do with animals, our younger or unlike brothers we may strive to understand but seldom can; the yellow, the blue, the red, the black. Of most of them I knew a little. But this here was neither of the Dark nor the Light. Its source lay (or had been moved) elsewhere. But what had been left made me feel, as I so moved boldly toward its heart, as if I had flung off all clothing, to bathe myself in a substance neither liquid nor light, possessing elements of each.

I came to the centermost point of that strange sand-covered area, where the four patterns met to form a space only large enough for me to stand and not infringe on any of those squares where lay the symbols. This—this too—I had known!

All my life I had never had a real home—though with the acceptance of my kin I had lived pleasantly and well guarded. Still within me had there always been that longing for somewhere else, something beyond the life I had always known. First I thought I had found it in the Valley when the Lady Dahaun opened my mind to what I might become, should I have the skill and patience to follow the way she pointed.

But this—

I held the sword with both hands, the fingers of one curled about the other. While at that moment I heard—strained to hear—whispers which lay just beyond my distinguishing, so that in my frustration I could have cried aloud in rage and disappointment.

Now I raised my head so that I could look to the sky, that same gray sky which had overhung us from the first. No birds wheeled there, not even a cloud broke its stretch of lowering menace.

And I dared to call aloud—not by the mind touch— "Great One, I am here!"

It seemed to me that the presence I so eagerly sought could not be far away, that any moment I might see before me that form I had mind-visioned so wrapped in mist I could not distinguish its true being. This was the place of Ninutra, of that I was certain. Yet—

There was only silence. Even that murmur of voices, which had so vexed me because I could make nothing of the gabble, ceased. There was some fault in me. If I had ever come this way before (and I was sure now that in the far-distant past the I who was the inner part of me had done so), then all true memory of that was lost, leaving me now bereft and lessened.

My eyes filled, tears overflowed, to trickle down my cheeks. Because I had somehow been so sure of part of this I had clung to the belief that I knew all—

I dropped my eyes. There would come no answer, no. I was no longer one able to enter into those secrets which drew me so strongly. I glanced at the patterns of the colored sands. Once I had known, now I could push at the buried part in my mind and sense—very faintly—a small part of the meanings of those convolutions and spirals.

In my hand the sword—it was warm, heating. The blade glowed dully red, as if it were indeed steel which had been thrust for a space into flames. More intense grew that heat, yet still I held fast, though I needed to set my teeth fast upon my lower lip to endure. I was only humankind and not for me was the knowledge I knew was locked within this place.

"Ninutra—" Within my mind I shaped that name, shutting from me the pain in my hands. It felt as if the very flesh was frying from my bones—still I held. For this I had commanded the small Talent I possessed and I would not be robbed of even so poor an answer.

Now in my mind a command rang sharp and clear—

"Slay!"

I turned on my small square of path. Tsali had not followed me into this place—no, he lingered just beyond the great arch.

"Slay!"

One step I took and then a second; the pain in my burning hands could only be cooled by blood—blood running down the blade I held. I had only to strike and that blood would burst forth, to quench the fire which so bitterly punished me for my presumption in invading a shrine not now open to me. "Slay!"

And at that moment Tsali was gone, rather one of the lean flanked Gray Ones crouched in his place, his wolf's muzzle raised as he gave the call for the pack.

"Slay!"

I was being tricked again. This much I realized as I tottered forward. Then I took a last step, but I fought more valiantly for my mind.

"I pay no blood, Ninutra," I said and tasted the salt of my own blood from my bitten lip. "I deal not in death, but in life!"

As if those words had been a key turned gratingly in some lock long since near rusted into immobility, they brought me freedom. I held the sword and saw the blisters of burns arising on my flesh until the torment was more almost than I could bear—but only almost.

"No blood of mind-friend do I shed, Ninutra!"

There was another long moment of utter silence. Was I even able to communicate with that Power which had once been strong here? Or had its essence long since withdrawn, leaving only a residue of what might have formed the baser part of it?

Then—I was free of any pressure. In my hands the hilt of the sword cooled. I did not turn my head to look, but I was certain that that shadow-misted thing I had seen in my own vision was watching me, that I was being weighed one way and then another. I sensed even a very faint surprise, the first trace of emotion which had ruffled the spreading pool of oblique communication in which I was caught.

There was no Gray One at the gate—Tsali stood there, looking back the way we had come, his whole body as tense as one who expected to meet the shock of a battle charge the next moment.

Now I could join him. And I believed that I knew what alarmed him—those who had traced us dared to follow even here. Though in spite of that recent order which I had defied, I still did not believe this was any stronghold of a Dark One.

I glanced at my hands. Those welts of blisters had vanished, and with them the pain. But I still held the sword. In this much had the Presence in this shrine left me armed.

We stood together, Lizard man and girl; Tsali with the rocks he had earlier hunted brought forth from his belt pouch and ready to fling, I with Ninutra's sword. And so they came upon us, but not up the path marked by the stele—rather from the wood itself. As they bounded into the open, the birds of Ninutra screeched and dived at their heads. I saw blood run from a wound which just missed the left eye of the foremost of that stinking band.

Tsali let fly with his rocks. One of the Gray Ones flopped earthward, a great hole in his forehead. Another howled and pawed at his shoulder. But I raised the sword. From its tip there shot a lash of fire as brilliant as any laid by an energy whip. And the Gray Ones pushed back.

Their force parted to let through another, two others. One was hooded and masked, carrying in hands with unnaturally long nails a whip which he aimed (the lash skillfully snaking out) to entrap my wrist. But I slashed down with the sword and that thing was sliced cleanly through.

His companion laughed, a sound which seemed to infuriate the Gray Ones, for they snarled at her as might dogs who knew her to be their mistress but also hated her.

"So, Handmaiden of one who has long since withdrawn," Laidan spoke aloud. And I knew that, in using her voice, she sought subtly to insult me, perhaps so trick me into some foolish act. "Did you at last remember and come running—to find the Power you sought gone? Did you not recall more—that the Lady of Fire was the first to open her own gate and go elsewhere—?"

I was a little startled. Somehow I had thought of Ninutra (for no reason I could understand) to be one of the Great Ones, yes, but a sorcerer. Adepts had been both women and men. If the inner had served Ninutra in the far past, I did not remember as much as Laidan thought.

"Ninutra is gone," Laidan repeated. "Too many years has her gate been closed. Do you think your thin voice can reach between scattered worlds, and even if it did, she would answer? They said of her then that she walked her own way and had none she cherished greatly."

I did not try to answer her jeers. Something had answered, or I would not hold the Shadow Sword. Something had reached me when I had stood within that place of multicolored sands. But whether that was only faint lingering of Ninutra's power still able to, in a little, answer those who knew how to call it—who could say?

And was it that same indefinable something which now put words in my mouth to answer Laidan? I do not know, but I answered without conscious thought.

"You have come seeking me, Laidan. Now you have found me. Let us pledge that this lies between the two of us alone—"

For a moment I thought she would not agree. Still that twisted smile which was a grimace held about her lips.

"Very little sister," her voice rang with bitter mockery, "do you presume to challenge me?"

"If you wish."

Her smile grew the wider. "Very well." She snapped her fingers and the Gray Ones drew back. But their hot eyes were on us, and I knew well that her hold over them was a thing perhaps I could not count upon continuing for long.

From within her misty clothing she brought forth that black rod she had used in her sorcery, while I took firm grip on the sword. She had never once looked at it, nor seemed to mark that I held any weapon. A small suspicion fluttered in my mind—was it that Laidan actually did not see what I had?

She pointed the tip of her weapon at me breast-high. I saw her lips shape words I did not hear but rather felt, vibrating through my whole body as a wrenching pain. I tightened my hold on the sword. Once more that began to warm within my grasp. Slowly I swung it back and forth in the air before me, as if by such a pitiful act I could ward off the maledictions she hurled at me.

It seemed that I could even see those words she did not speak aloud, that they turned into vicious darts seeping through the air to center on my body. Yet the blade of the sword began to glow an even brighter red as once more I must subdue the pain of my flesh where my fingers tightened upon it.

Then I saw Laidan start; her eyes go wide; her gaze follow the swinging of the sword blade, as if for the first time she had seen it.

"No!" She threw her wand as a trained warrior might loose a small spear.

I saw that fly through the air. And, in some odd way, time ceased to exist for a few heartbeats. So that instead of flying at normal speed, it appeared rather to hang transfixed in the air well within my reach. I brought down the blade of the Shadow Sword, fighting the torment that movement caused me, so that it struck full upon the black wand.

Laidan screamed, higher and more terribly than any of the birds of Ninutra. The wand splintered into pieces, shattering into only small needles which hit the ground between us. And from each of these there burst a small black flame and a puff of noxious odor. But Laidan writhed, her body twisting as if she were gripped by great hands which strove to wring her about.

I heard the Gray Ones howl, saw them run madly away. Two blundered into the path marked by the stele and stumbled, falling forward, crawling feebly on, and then lying still.

But Laidan jerked and twisted and screamed—

"Slay!"

Once more came that order, and this time I did not resist it. I threw the sword, even as she had thrown the wand. The misty-edged point entered truly into the hollow of her throat. She crumpled, her body drawing curiously in until—there was nothing.

As the wand had vanished, so was the Shadow Sword now also gone. I stood with empty hands, staring at what I had wrought at that last order. Then Tsali's hand touched my arm gently:

"She is gone—but they," he pointed with his muzzle toward the silent Gray Ones, "may get their courage back—or rather their fellows will. It is best we go also—"

I shook off his hand with the same gentleness he had used. Rather, now I held both my arms wide and straight out from my body. Down from the leaden sky wheeled and darted the birds of Ninutra. They settled on my arms, my shoulders, silently but as if this was right and seemly.

I thought of Imhar. He was just someone very far away whom I had once known and wished well, but with whom I no longer had even kin-tie. And then, Yonan. In me I realized a little sadly that Yonan had wished me better than well, that I could have put out my hand and he would have taken it eagerly. But no longer could I do that.

Perhaps the gate Ninutra had found was closed past all opening. But in me that other I which had been stirring was near fully awake. I could not choose now the road which tradition laid before me, as Imhar's lady. Nor could I accept the richness Yonan wished to offer me. I was myself—alone. As yet I did not know just who or what that self was—or could be. But, even as the Sword of Shadow had burned with its power my hands, so now my spirit burned within me, lighting a hardly endurable fire to learn, to know, to be—

I looked at Tsali, my mind working to fit the proper words together. Before I was sure of them, he nodded.

"So it must be then. You have tasted Power; be very sure it is not tainted."

"It is not!" Of that one thing I was confident; I had been since the defeat of Laidan. So much would not have been allowed me had I been beguiled by the Dark. "Tell them that I must learn—and that I am still—no matter what may happen to change me—kin-bound. I swear this on blood I would not shed!"

I watched him go. Then I turned my back upon the huddled forms of the Gray Ones. And, with the birds still about me, I faced inward to Ninutra's Shrine. Or rather, was it a school for the learning of things not of this time and place? Now it seemed to me that already some of the lines of colored sand were beginning to send forth understandable meanings, even though the Great One who had wrought them was long gone.