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The Toads of Grimmerdale

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I

The drifts of ice crusted snow were growing both taller and wider. Hertha stopped to catch her breath, ramming the butt of the hunting spear she had been using as a staff into the one before her, the smooth shaft breaking through the crust with difficulty. She frowned at the broken hole without seeing it.

There was a long dagger at her belt, the short hafted spear in her mittened hand. And, under her cloak, she hugged to her the all too small bundle which she had brought with her out of Horla's Hold. The other burden which she carried lay within her, and she forced herself to face squarely the fate that had been brought upon her.

Now her lips firmed into a line, her chin went up. Suddenly she spat with a hiss of breath. Shame—why should she feel shame? Had Kuno expected her to whine and wail, perhaps crawl before him so he could “forgive” her, prove thus to his followers his greatness of spirit?

She showed her teeth as might a cornered vixen, and aimed a harder blow at the drift. There was no reason for her to feel shame, the burden in her was not of wanton seeking. Such things happened in times of war. She guessed that when matters worked so Kuno had not been backward himself in taking a woman of the enemy.

It remained that her noble brother had sent her forth from Horla's Hold because she had not allowed his kitchen hags to brew some foul potion to perhaps poison her, as well as what she bore. Had she so died he could have piously crossed hands at the Thunderer's Altar and spoken of Fate's will. And all would have ended neatly. In fact she might believe that perhaps that had been his true intention.

For a moment Hertha was startled at the grim march of her thoughts. Kuno—Kuno was *her brother!* Two years ago she could not have thought so of him or any man! When yet the war had not nearer the Hold. But that was long before she set out the Landendale. Before she knew the world as it was and not as she had believed it.

Hertha was glad she had been able to learn her lesson quickly. The thin-skinned maid she had once been could not have fronted Kuno, could not have taken this road—

She felt the warmth of anger, a sullen, glowing anger, as heating as if she carried a small brazier of coals under her cloak's edge. So she went on, setting her rough boots firmly to crunch across the drift edge. Nor did she turn to look back down at that stone walled keep which had sheltered those of her blood for five generations. The sun was well westward, she must not linger on the trail. Few paths were broken now, times in number she must halt and use the spear to sound out the footing. But it was easy to keep in eye her landmarks of Mulma's Needle and the Wyvern's Wing.

Hertha was sure Kuno expected her to come creeping woefully back to accept his conditions. She smiled wryly. Kuno was so very certain of everything. And since he had beaten off the attack of a straggling band of the enemy trying to fight their way to the dubious safety of the coast, he had been insufferable.

The Dales were free in truth. But for Kuno to act as if the victories hard won there were his alone—! It had required all the might of High Hallack, together with strange allies from the Waste, to break the invaders, to hunt and harry them back to the sea from which they had come. And that had taken a score of years to do it.

Trewsdale had escaped, not because of any virtue, but by chance. But because fire and sword had not riven, there was no reason to cry upon unbroken walls as gamecocks. Kuno had harried men already three-quarters beaten.

She reached the divide, to plod steadily on. The wind had been at work here, and her path was free of snow. It was very old, that road, one of the reminders to be found all across the dale land that her own people were late comers. Who had cut these ways for their own treading?

The well weathered carvings at the foot of the Wyvern's Wing could be seen easily now. So eroded they were by time that none could trace their meaning. But men—or intelligent beings—had shaped them to a purpose. And that task must have been long in the doing. Hertha reached out her mittened fingers to stroke one of the now vague curves. She did not believe they had any virtue in themselves, though the field workers did. But they marked well her road.

Down slope again from this point, and now the wind's lash did not cut at her. Though again, snow drifted. Two tens of days yet to the feast of Year Turn. This was the last of the Year of the Hornet, next lay the Year of the Unicorn, which was a more fortunate sign.

With the increase of snow, Hertha once more found the footing dangerous. Bits of broken crust worked in over the tops of her boots, even though she had drawn tight their top straps, and melted clamily against her foot sacks. She plodded on as the track entered a fringe of scrub trees.

Evergreens, the foliage was dark in the dwindling light. But they arose to roof over a road, keep off the drifts. And she came to a stream where ice had bridged from one stony bank to the other. There she turned east to gain Gunnora's Shrine.

About its walls was a tangle of winter killed garden. It was a low building, and an archway faced her. No gate or door barred that and she walked boldly in.

Once so inside the outer wall she could see windows, round as the eyes of some great feline regarding her sleepily. Those flanking a door by which hung a heavy bell-pull of wrought metal in the form of Gunnora's symbol of a ripened grain stalk entwined with a fruit-laden branch.

Hertha leaned her spear against the wall that her hand might be free for a summons pull. What answered was not any peal of bell, rather an odd, muted sound as if some one called in words she did not understand. That, too, she accepted, though she had not been this way before, and had only a few whispered words to send her here.

The leaves of the door parted. Though no one stood there to give her house greeting, Hertha took that for an invitation to enter. She moved into gentle warmth, a fragrance of herbs and flowers. As if she had, in that single step, passed from the sure death of mid-winter into the life of spring.

With the warmth and fragrance came a lighting of heart, so that the taut lines in her face smoothed a little, and her aching shoulders and back lost some of the stiffening tension.

What light there was issued from two lamps, set on columns, one right, one left. She was in a narrow entry, its walls painted with such colors as to make her believe that she had truly entered a garden. Before her those ranks of flowers rippled and she realized that there hung a curtain, fashioned to repeat the wall design. Since there still came no greeting, she put out her hand to the folds of the curtain.

But before she could finger it, the length looped a side of itself, and she came into a large room. There was a table there with a chair drawn up to it. Before that place was set out dishes, some covered as if they held viands which were to be kept warm, a goblet of crystal filled with a green liquid.

“Eat—drink—” a voice sighed through the chamber.

Startled, Hertha looked about the room, over her shoulder. No one—. And now that hunger of which she had hardly been aware awoke full force. She dropped the spear to the floor, laid her bundle beside it, let her cloak fall over both, and sat down in the chair.

Though she could see no one, she spoke:

“To the giver of the feast, fair thanks. For the welcome of the gate, gratitude. To the ruler of this house, fair fortune and bright sun on the morrow—” The formal words rang a little hollow here. Hertha smiled at a sudden thought.

This was Gunnora’s shrine. Would the Great Lady need the well wishing of any mortal? Yet it seemed fitting that she make the guest speech.

There was no answer, though she hoped for one. At last, a little hesitatingly, she sampled the food spread before her and found it such fare as might be on the feast table of a Dales Lord. The green drink was refreshing, yet warming, with a subtle taste of herbs. She held it in her mouth, trying to guess which gave it that flavor.

When she had finished, she found that the last and largest covered basin held warm water on the surface of which floated petals of flowers. Flowers in the dead of winter! And beside it was a towel, so she washed her hands, and leaned back in the chair, wondering what came next in Gunnora’s hall.

The silence in the room seemed to grow the greater. Hertha stirred. Surely there were priestesses at the Shrine? Some one had prepared that meal, offered it to her with those two words. She had come here for a purpose, and the need for action roused in her again.

“Great Lady,” Hertha arose. Since she could see no one, she would speak to the empty room. There was a door at the other end of the chamber but it was closed.

“Great Lady,” she began again. She had never been deeply religious, though she kept Light Day, made the harvest sacrifices, listened respectfully to the Mount of Astron at Morn Service. When she had been a little maid, her foster mother had given her Gunnora’s amulet and later, according to custom, that had been laid on the house altar when she came to marriageable age. Of Gunnora’s mysteries she knew only what she had heard repeated woman to woman when they sat apart from the men. For Gunnora was only for womankind and when one was carrying ripening seed within one, then she listened—

For the second time her words echoed. Now her feeling of impatience changed to something else—awe, perhaps, or fear? Yet Gunnora did not hold by the petty rules of men. It did not matter when you sought her if you be lawful wife or not.

As Hertha's distrust grew, the second door swung silently open—another invitation. Leaving her cloak, bundle, spear where they lay, the girl went on. Here the smell of flowers and herbs was stronger. Lazy curls of scented smoke arose from two braziers standing at the head and foot of a couch. And that was set as an altar at the foot of a pillar carved with the ripened grain, the fruited branch.

"Rest—" the sighing voice bade. And Hertha, the need for sleep suddenly as great as her hunger had been, moved to that waiting bed, stretched out her wearied and aching body. The curls of smoke thickened, spread over her as a coverlet. She closed her eyes.

She was in a place of half light in which she sensed others coming and going, busied about tasks. But she felt alone, lost. Then one moved to her and she saw a face she knew, though a barrier of years had half dimmed it in her mind.

"Elfreda!" Hertha believed she had not called that name aloud, only thought it. But her foster-mother smiled, holding out her arms in the old, old welcome.

"Little dove, little love—" The old words were as soothing as healing salve laid on an angry wound.

Tears came as Hertha had not allowed them to flow before. She wept out sore hurt and was comforted. Then that shade who was Elfreda drew her on, past all those about their work, into a place of light in which there was Another. And that one Hertha could not look upon directly. But she heard a question asked, and to that she made truthful answer.

"No," she pressed her hands to her body, "what I carry I do not want to lose."

Then that brightness which was the Other grew. But there was another question and again Hertha answered:

"I hold two desires—that this child be mine alone, taking of no other heritage from the manner of its begetting, and of him who forced me so. And, second, I wish to bring to account the one who will not stand as its father—"

There was a long moment before the reply came. Then a spear of light shot from the center core of the radiance, traced a symbol before Hertha. Though she had no training in the Mysteries yet this was plain for her reading.

Her first prayer would be answered. The coming child would be only of her, taking naught from her ravisher. And the destiny for it was auspicious. But, though she waited, there was no second answer. The great One—was gone! But Elfreda was still with her, and Hertha turned to her quickly:

"What of my need for justice?"

"Vengeance is not of the Lady." Elfreda shook her veiled head. "She is life, not death. Since you have chosen to give life, she will aid you in that. For the rest—you must walk another road. But—do not take it, my love—for out of darkness comes even greater dark."

Then Hertha lost Elfreda also and there was nothing, only the memory of what happened in that place. So she fell into deeper slumber where no dreams walked.

She awoke, how much later she never knew. But she was renewed in mind and body, feeling as if some leachcraft had been at work during her rest, banishing all ills. There was no more smoke rising from the

braziers, the scent of flowers was faint.

When she arose from the couch, she knelt before the pillar, bowing her head, giving thanks. Yet still in her worked her second desire, in nowise lessened, by Elfreda's warning.

In the outer room there was again food and drink waiting. And she ate and drank before she went forth from Gunnora's house. There was no kin far or near she might take refuge with. Kuno had made loud her shame when he sent her forth. She had a few bits of jewelry, none of worth, sewn into her girdle, some pieces of trade money. Beyond that she had only a housewife's skills, and those not of the common sort, rather the distilling of herbs, the making of ointments, the fine sewing of a lady's teaching. She could read, write, sing a stave—none of these arts conducive to the earning of one's bread.

Yet her spirit refused to be darkened by hard facts. From her waking that sense of things about to come right held. And she thought it best that she limit the future to one day ahead at a time.

In the direction she now faced lay two holdings. Nordendale was the first. It was small and perhaps in a state of disorder. The lord of the dale and his heir had both fallen at the battle of Ruther's Pass two years gone. Who kept order there now, if there was any who ruled, she did not know. Beyond that lay Grimmerdale.

Grimmerdale! Hertha set down the goblet from which she had drained the last drop. Grimmerdale—

Just as the shrine of Gunnora was among the heights near the ancient road, so did Grimmerdale have a place of mystery. But no kind and welcoming one if rumor spoke true. Not of her race at all, but one as old as the ridge road. In fact perhaps that road had first been cut to run there.

Hertha tried to recall all she had heard of Grimmerdale. Somewhere in the heights lay the Circle of the Toads. Men had gone there, asked for certain things. But ill report they had received all they asked for. What had Elfreda warned? That Gunnora did not grant death—that one must follow another path to find that. Grimmerdale might be the answer.

She looked about her, almost in challenge, half expecting to feel condemnation in the air of the room. But there was nothing.

"For the feast, my thanks," she spoke the guesting words, "for the roof, my blessing, for the future all good, as I take my road again."

She fastened the throat latch of her cloak, drew the hood over her head. Then with bundle in one hand and spear in the other, went out into the light of day, her face to the ridges behind which lay Grimmerdale.

On the final slope above Nordendale, she paused in the afternoon to study the small settlement below. It was inhabited, there was a curl of smoke from more than one chimney, the marks of sleds, of foot prints in the snow. But the tower keep showed no such signs of life.

How far ahead still lay Grimmerdale she had no knowledge, and night came early in the winter. One of those cottages below was larger than the rest. Nordendale had once been a regular halt for herdsmen with wool from mountain sheep on their way to the market at Komm High. That market was of the past, but the inn might still abide, at least be willing to give her shelter.

She was breathing hard by the time she trudged into the slush of the road below. But she had been right,

over the door of the largest cottage hung a wind battered board, its painted device long weathered away, but still proclaiming this an inn. She made for that, passing a couple of men on the way. They stared at her as if she were a fire-drake or wyvern. Strangers must be few in Nordendale.

The smell of food, sour village ale, and too many people too long in an unaired space, was like a smothering fog as she came into the common room. There was a wide hearth at one end, large enough to take a good sized log, and fire burned there, giving off a goodly heat.

A trestle table with flanking benches, and a smaller one stacked with tankards, settles by the hearth, were the only furnishings. As Hertha entered a wench in a stained smock and kirtle, two men on a hearth settle, turned and stared with the same astonishment she had seen without.

She pushed back her hood and looked back at them with that belief in herself which was her heritage.

“Good fortune to this house.”

For a moment they made no answer at all, seemingly too taken back at seeing a stranger to speak. Then the maid servant came forward, wiping her hands on her already well be-spattered apron.

“Good fortune—” Her eyes were busy taking in the fine material of Hertha’s cloak, her air of ease. She added quickly—”Lady. How may we serve you?”

“With food—a bed—if such you have.”

“Food—food we have, but it be plain, coarse feeding, lady,” the girl stammered. “Let me but call mistress—”

She ran to an inner door, bolting through it as if Hertha was minded to pursue her.

But she rather laid aside her spear and bundle, threw back the edges of her cloak and went to stand before the hearth, pulling with her teeth at mitten fastenings, to bare her chilled hands. The men hunched away along the settle, mum-mouthed and still staring.

Hertha had thought her clothing plain. She wore one of the divided riding skirts, cut shorter for the scrambling up and down of hill—and it was now shabby and much worn, yet very serviceable. There was an embroidered edge on her jerkin, but no wider than some farm daughter might have. And her hair was tight braided, with no band of ribbon or silver to hold it so. Yet she might be clad in some festival finery the way they looked upon her. And she stood as impassive as she could under their stares.

A woman wearing the close coff of a matron, a loose shawl about her bent shoulders, a kirtle, but little cleaner than the maid’s, looped up about her wide hips and thick thighs, bustled in.

“Welcome, my lady. Thrice welcome! Up you, Henkin, Fim, let the lady to the fire!” The men pushed away in a hurry at her ordering.

“Malka says you would bid the night. This roof is honored.”

“I give thanks.”

“Your man—outside? We have stabling—”

Hertha shook her head, "I journey alone and on foot." At the look on the woman's face she added, "In these days we take what fortune offers, we do not always please ourselves."

"Alas, lady, that is true speaking if such ever came to ear! Sit you down!" She jerked off her shawl and used it to dust along the settle.

Later, in a bed spread with coverings fire warmed, in a room which manifestly had been shut up for some time, Hertha lay in what comfort such a place could offer and mused over what she had learned from her hostess.

As she had heard, Nordendale had fallen on dreary times. Along with their lord and his heir, most of their able bodied men had been slain. Those who survived and drifted back lacked leadership and had done little to restore what had been a prosperous village. There were very few travelers along the road, she had been the first since winter closed in. Things were supposed to be somewhat better in the east and south and her tale of going to kinsmen there had seemed plausible to those below.

Better still she had news of Grimmerdale. There was another inn there, a larger place, with more patronage, which the mistress here spoke of wistfully. An east-west road, now seeing much travel with levies going home, ran there. But the inn-keeper had a wife who could not keep serving maids, being of jealous nature.

Of the Toads she dared not ask, and no one had volunteered such information, save that the mistress here had warned against the taking farther of the Old Road, saying it was better to keep to the highway. Though she admitted that was also dangerous and it was well to be ready to take to the brush at the sighting of some travelers.

As yet Hertha had no more than the faint stirrings of a plan. But she was content to wait before she shaped it more firmly.

II

The inn room was long but low, the cross beams of its ceiling not far above the crown of a tall man's head. There were smoking oil lamps hanging on chains from those beams. But the light those gave were both murky and limited. Only at the far corner where a carved screen afforded some privacy were there tallow candles set out on a table. And the odor of their burning added to the general smell of the room.

That was crowded enough to loosen the thin-lipped mouth of Uletka Rory as her small eyes darted hither and yon, missing no detail of service or lack of service, as her two laboring slaves limped and scuttled between benches and stools. She herself waited upon the candle lit table, a mark of favor. She knew high blood when she saw it.

Not that in this case she was altogether right, in spite of her years of dealing with travelers. One of the men there, yes, was the younger son of a dale lord. But his family holding had long since vanished in the red tide of war, and no one was left in Corriedale to name him master. One had been Master of Archers for another lord, promoted hurriedly after three better men had been killed. And the third, well, he was not one who talked, and neither of his present companions knew his past.

Of the three he was the middle in age. Though that, too, could not be easily guessed, since he was one of those lean, spare-framed men who once they begin to sprout beard hair can be any age from youth to middle years. Not that he went bearded now—his chin and jaws were as smooth as if he had scraped them within the hour, displaying along the jaw line the seam of a scar which drew a little at one lip corner.

He wore his hair cropped closer than most, also, perhaps because of the heavy helm now planted on the table at his right hand. That was battered enough to have served through the war. And the crest it had once mounted was splintered down to a meaningless knob, though the protective bowl was unbreached.

His mail shirt, under a scuffed and worn tabbard, was whole. And the plain hilted sword in his belt sheath, the war bow now resting against the wall at his back, were the well kept tools of a professional. But if he was mercenary he had not been successful lately. He wore none of those fine buckles or studs which could be easily snapped off to pay for food or lodging. Only when he put out his hand to take up his tankard did the candle light glint on something which was not dull steel or leather. For the bowguard on his wrist was true treasure, a wide band of cunningly wrought gold set with small colored stones, though the pattern of that design was so complicated that to make anything of it required close study.

He sat now sober faced, as if he were deep in thought, his eyes half veiled by heavy lids. But he was in truth listening, not so much to the half drunken mumblings of his companions, but to words arising here and there in the common room.

Most of those gathered there were either workers on the land come in to nurse an earthen mug of home brewed barley beer and exchange grumbles with their fellows, or else drifting men-at-arms seeking employment, with their lords dead, or ruined so that they had to release the men of their levies. The war was over, these were the victors. But the land they turned to was barren, largely devastated, and it would take much time and energy to win back prosperity for High Hallack.

What the invaders from overseas had not early raped, looted for ship loads sent back to their own lands, they had destroyed in a frenzy when the tide of war began to wash them away. He had been with the war bands in the smoking port, sent to mop up desperate enemies who had fallen back too late to find their companions had taken off in the last ships, leaving them to be ground between the men of the dales and the sullen sea itself.

The smoke of the port had risen from piles of supplies set burning, oil poured over them and torches applied to the spoilage. The stench of it had been near enough to kill a man. Having stripped the country bare, and this being the midwinter, the enemy had made a last defiant gesture with that great fire. It would be a long cold line of days before the coming of summer, and even then men would go pinched of belly until harvest time—if they could find enough grain to plant, if sheep still roamed the upper dales, or cattle, wild now, found forage in the edges of the Waste—to make a beginning of new flocks and herds.

There were many dales swept clean of people. The men were dead in battle, the women either fled inland if they were lucky, or else slaving for the invaders overseas—or dead also. Perhaps those were the luckiest of all. Yes, there had been a great shaking and leveling, sorting and spilling.

He had put down the tankard. Now his other hand went to that bowguard, turning it about, though he did not look down at it, but rather stared at the screen and listened.

In such a time a man with boldness, and a plan, could begin a new life. That was what had brought him inland, kept him from taking service with Fritigen of Summersdale. Who would be Master of Archers when he could be more, much more?

The invaders had not reached this Grimmerdale, but there were other lands beyond with darker luck. He was going to find one of those—one where there was no lord left to sound the war horn. If there was a lady trying to hold a heritage, well, that might even fit well with his ambitions. Now his tongue showed for an instant on his lower lip, flicking across as if he savored in anticipation some dish which pleased him.

He did not altogether believe in an over-ride of good or ill fortune. In his calculations a man mostly made his own luck by knowing what he wanted and bending all his actions toward that end. But he had a feeling that this was the time when he must move if he were ever to bring to truth the dream which had lain in him since early boyhood.

He, Trystan out of nowhere, was going to end Lord Trystan of some not inconsiderable stretch of land—with a keep from his home and a dale under his rule. And the time to move was here and now.

“Fill!” His near companion, young Urre, pounded his tankard on the table top so that one of the candles shook, spattering hot grease. He bellowed an oath and threw his empty pot beyond the screen to clatter across the flagstones.

The lame pot boy stooped to pick it up, casting a frightened look at Urre and a second at his scowling mistress who was already on her way with a tray of freshly filled tankards. Trystan pushed back from the table. They were following a path he had seen too many nights. Urre would drink himself sodden, sick not only with the rank stuff they called drink back here in the hills, but also with his life, wherein he could only bewail what he had lost, taking no thought of what might be gained.

Onsway would listen attentively to his mumbling, willing to play leigeman as long as Urre’s money lasted, or he could use his kin ties to win them food and lodging at some keep. When Urre made a final sot of himself, Onsway would no longer wallow in the sty beside him. While he, himself, thought it time now to cut the thread which had brought them this far in uneasy company. Neither had anything to give, and he knew now that traveling longer with them he would not do.

But he was not minded to quit this inn soon. Its position on the highway was such that a man could pick up a wealth of information by just sitting and listening. Also—here he had already picked out two likely prospects for his own purposes. The money pouch at his belt was flat enough, he could not afford to spin a coin before the dazzled eyes of an archer or pike man and offer employment.

However, there were men like himself to be found, rootless men who wanted roots in better circumstances than they had known, men who could see the advantage of service under a rising man with opportunities for rising themselves in his wake. One did not need a large war band to overawe masterless peasants. Half a dozen well armed and experienced fighting men at his back, a dale without a lord, and he would be in!

Excitement awoke in him as it did everytime his plan reached that place in his thoughts. But he had learned long since to keep a tight rein on his emotions. He was a controlled man, abstemious to a degree astounding among his fellows, though he did what he could to conceal that difference. He could loot, he could whore, he could kill—and he had—but always calculatingly.

“I’m for bed,” he arose and reached for his bow, “the road this day was long—”

Urre might not have heard him at all, his attention was fixed on the tray of tankards. Onsway nodded absently, he was watching Urre as he always did. But the mistress was alert to the hint of more profit.

“Bed, good master? Three bits—and a fire on the hearth, too.”

“Good enough.” He nodded, and she screeched for the pot boy who came at a limping waddle, wiping his grimed hands on the black rags of an apron knotted about him.

It seemed that while the inn gave the impression of space below, on the second floor it was much more

cramped. At least the room into which Trystan tramped was a narrow slit of space with a single window covered by a shutter heavily barred. There was a litter of dried rushes on the floor and a rough bed frame on which lay a pile of bedding as if tossed. The hearth fire promised did not exist. But there was a legged brazier with some glowing coals which gave off a little heat, and a stool beside a warp-sided chest which did service as a table. The pot boy set the candle down on that and was ready to scuttle away when Trystan, who had gone to the window, hailed him.

“What manner of siege have you had here, boy? This shutter has been so long barred it is rusted tight.”

The boy cringed back against the edge of the door, his slack mouth hanging open. He was an ugly lout, and looked half-witted into the bargain, Trystan thought, but surely there was something more than just stupidity in his face, when he looked to the window there was surely fear also.

“Thhheee tooods—” His speech was thick. He had lifted his hands breast high, was clasping them so tightly together that his knuckles stood out as bony knobs.

Trystan had heard the enemy called many things, but never toads, nor had he believed they had raided into Grimmerdale.

“Toads?” He made a question of the word.

The boy turned his head away so that he looked neither to the window nor Trystan. It was very evident he planned escape. The man crossed the narrow room with an effortless and noiseless stride, caught him by the shoulder.

“What manner of toads?” He shook the boy slightly.

“Toodss—Thhheee toads—” the boy seemed to think Trystan should know of what he spoke.

“They—that sit ’mong the Standing Stones—that what do men evil.” His voice, while thick no longer sputtered so. “All men know the Toods o’ Grimmerdale!” Then, with a twist which showed he had had long experience in escaping, he broke from Trystan’s hold and was gone. The man did not pursue him.

Rather he stood frowning in the light of the single candle. Toads—and Grimmerdale—together they had a faintly familiar sound. Now he set memory to work. Toads and Grimmerdale—what did he know of either?

The dale was of importance, more so now than in the days before the war when men favored a more southern route to the port. That highway had fallen almost at once into invader hands, and they had kept it fortified and patrolled. The answer then had been this secondary road, which heretofore had been used mainly by shepherds and herdsmen. Three different trails from up country united at the western mouth of Grimmerdale.

However had he not once heard of yet a fourth way, one which ran the ridges, yet was mainly shunned, a very old way, antedating the coming of his own people? Now—he nodded as memory supplied answers. The toads of Grimmerdale! One of the many stories about the remnants of those other people, or things, which had already mostly faded from this land so that the coming of man did not dislodge them, for the land had been largely deserted before the first settlement ship arrived.

Still there were places in plenty where certain powers and presences were felt this day, where things could be invoked—by men who were crazed enough to summon them. Had the lords of High Hallack not been driven at the last to make such a bargain with the unknown when they signed solemn treaty with

the Were Riders? All men knew that it had been the aid of those strange outlanders which had broken the invaders at the last.

Some of the presences were beneficial, others neutral, the third dangerous. Perhaps not actively so in these days. Men were not hunted, harried, or attacked by them. But they had their own places, and the man who was rash enough to trespass there did so at risk.

Among such were the Standing Stones of the Toads of Grimmerdale. The story went that they would answer appeals, but that the manner of answer sometimes did not please the petitioner. For years now men had avoided their place.

But why a shuttered window? If, as according to legend the toads (people were not sure now if they really were toads) did not roam from their portion of the dale, had they once? Making it necessary to bolt and bar against them? And why a second story window in this fusty room?

Moved by a curiosity he did not wholly understand, Trystan drew his belt knife, pried at the fastenings. They were deeply bitten with rust, and he was sure that this had not been opened night or day for years. At last they yielded to his efforts, he was now stubborn about it, somehow even a little angry.

Even though he was at last able to withdraw the bar, he had a second struggle with the warped wood, finally using sword point to lever it. The shutters grated open, the chill of the night entered, making him aware at once of how very odorous and sour was the fug within.

Trystan looked out upon snow and a straggle of dark trees, with the upslope of the dale wall beyond. There were no other buildings set between the inn and that rise. And the thick vegetation showing dark above the sweep of white on the ground suggested that the land was uncultivated. The trees there were not tall, it was mainly brush alone, and he did not like it.

His war trained instincts saw there a menace. Any enemy could creep in its cover to within a spear cast of the inn. Yet perhaps those of Grimmerdale did not have such fears and so saw no reason to grub out and burn bare.

The slope began gradually and shortly the tangled growth thinned out, as if someone had there taken the precautions Trystan thought right. Above was smooth snow, very white and unbroken in the moonlight. Then came outcrops of rock. But after he had studied those with an eye taught to take quick inventory of a countryside, he was sure they were not natural formations but had been set with a purpose.

They did not form a connected wall. There were wide spaces between as if they had served as posts for some stringing of fence. Yet for that purpose they were extra thick.

And that first row led to a series of five such lines, though more distantly they were close together. Trystan was aware of two things. One, bright as the moon was, it did not, he was sure, account for all the light among the stones. There was a radiance which seemed to rise either from them, or the ground about them. Second, no snow lay on the land from the point where the lines of rock pillar began. Above the stones also there was a misting, as if something there bewildered or hindered clear sight.

Trystan blinked, rubbed his hand across his eyes, looked again. The clouding was more pronounced when he did so. As if whatever lay there increased the longer he watched it.

That this was not of human Grimmerdale, he was certain. It had all signs of being one of those strange places where old powers lingered. And that this was the refuge or stronghold of the "toads" he was now

sure. That the shutter had been bolted against the weird sight he could also understand, and he rammed and pounded the warped wood back into place, though he could not reset the bar he had levered out.

Slowly he put aside mail and outer clothing, laying it across the chest. He spread out the bedding over the hide webbing. Surprisingly the rough sheets, the two woven covers were clean. They even (now that he had drawn lungfuls of fresh air to awaken his sense of smell) were fragrant with some kind of herb.

Trystan stretched out, pulled the covers about his ears, drowsy and content, willing himself to sleep.

He awoke to a clatter at the door. At first he frowned up at the cobwebbed rafters above. What had he dreamed? Deep in his mind there was a troubled feeling, a sense that a message of some importance had been lost. He shook his head against such fancies and padded to the door, opened it for the entrance of the elder serving man, a dour-faced, skeleton thin fellow who was more cleanly of person than the pot boy. He carried a covered kettle which he put down on the chest before he spoke.

“Water for washing, Master. There be grain-mush, pig cheek, and ale below.”

“Well enough.” Trystan slid the lid off the pot. Steam curled up. He had not expected this small luxury and he took its arrival as an omen of fortune for the day.

Below the long room was empty. The lame boy was washing off table tops, splashing water on the floor in great scummy drollops. His mistress stood, hands on her hips, her elbows out-spread like crooked wings, her sharp chin with its two haired warts outthrust as a spear to threaten the other woman before her, well cloaked against the outside winter, but with her hood thrown back to expose her face.

That face was thin with sharp features which were lacking in any claim to comeliness since the stretched skin was mottled with unsightly brown patches. But her cloak, Trystan saw, was good wool, certainly not that of a peasant wench. She carried a bundle in one hand, and in the other was a short hafted hunting spear, its butt scarred as if it had served her more as a journey staff than a weapon.

“Well enough, wench. But here you work for the food in your mouth, the clothing on your back.” The mistress shot a single glance at Trystan before she centered her attention once more on the girl.

Girl, Trystan thought she was. Though by the Favor of Likerwolf certainly her face was not that of a dewy maid, being rather enough to turn a man’s thoughts more quickly to other things when he looked upon her.

“Put your gear on the shelf yonder,” the mistress gestured. “Then to work, if you speak the truth on wanting that.”

She did not watch to see her orders obeyed, but came to the table where Trystan had seated himself.

“Grain-mush, Master. And a slicing of pig jowl-ale fresh drawn—”

He nodded, sitting much as he had the night before, fingering the finely wrought guard about his wrist, his eyes half closed as if he were still wearied, or else turned his thoughts on things not about him.

The mistress stumped away. But he was not aware she had returned, until someone slid a tray onto the table top. It was the girl. Her shrouding of cloak was gone, so that the tight bodices, the pleaded skirt could be seen. And he was right, she did not wear peasant clothes. That was a skirt divided for riding, though it had now been shortened enough to show boots, scuffed and worn, straw protruding from their

tops. Her figure, was thin, yet shapely enough to make a man wonder at the fate which wedded such to that horror of a face. She did not need her spear for protection, all she need do was show her face to any would-be ravisher and she would be as safe as the statue of Gunnora the farmers carried through their fields at first sowing.

“Your food, Master.” She was deft, far more so than the mistress, as she slid the platter of crisp browned mush, the pink sliced thin meat, onto the board.

“Thanks given,” Trystan found himself making civil answer as he might in some keep were one of the damsels there noticing him in courtesy.

He reached for the tankard and at that moment saw her head sway, her eyes wide open rested on his hand. And he thought, with a start of surprise, that her interest was no slight one. But when he looked again, she was moving away, her eyes downcast as any proper serving wench.

“There will be more, Master?” she asked in a colorless voice. But her voice also betrayed her. No girl save one hold bred would have such an accent.

There had been many upsets in the dales. What was it to him if some keep woman had been flung out of her soft nest to tramp the roads, serve in an inn for bread and a roof? With her face she could not hope to catch a man to fend for her—unless he be struck blind before their meeting.

“No,” he told her. She walked away with the light and soundless step which might have equalled a forest hunter’s, the grace of one who sat at high tables by right of blood.

Well, he, too, would sit at a high table come next year’s end. Of that he was certain as if it had been laid upon him by some Power Master as an unbreakable greed. But it would be because of his own two hands, the cunning of his mind. And as such his rise would be worth more than blood right. She had come down, he would go up. Seeing her made him just more confident of the need for moving on with his plan.

III

The road along the ridges was even harder footing after Nordendale Hertha discovered. There were gaps where landslides had cut away sections, making the going very slow. However she kept on, certain this was the only way to approach what she sought.

As she climbed and slid, edged with caution, even in places had to leap recklessly with her spear as a vaulting pole, she considered what might lie ahead. In seeking Gunnora she had kept to the beliefs of her people. But if she continued to the shrine of the Toads she turned her back on what safety she knew.

Around her neck was hung a small bag of grain and dried herbs, Gunnora’s talisman for home and hearth. Another such was sewn into the breast of her undersmock. And in the straw which lined each boot were other leaves with their protection for the wayfarer. Before she had set out on this journey she had marshalled all she knew of protective charms.

But whether such held against alien powers, she could not tell. To each race its own magic. The Old Ones were not men and their beliefs and customs must have been far different. That being so did she now tempt great evil?

Always when she reached that point she remembered. And memory was as sharp as any spur on a

rider's heel. She had been going to the abbey in Lethendale, Kuno having suggested it. Perhaps that was why he had turned from her, feeling guilt in the matter.

Going to Lethendale, she must ever remember how that journey was, every dark part of it. For if she did not hold that in mind, then she would lose the booster of anger for her courage. A small party because Kuno was sure there was naught to fear from the fleeing invaders. But after all it was not the invaders she had had to fear.

There had come a rain of arrows out of nowhere. She could hear yet the bubbling cry of young Jannesk as he fell from the saddle with one through his throat. They had not even seen the attackers, and all the men had been shot down in only moments. She had urged her mount on, only to have him entangle feet in a trip rope. She could remember only flying over his head thereafter—

Until she awoke in the dark, her hands tied, looking out into a clearing where a fire burned between rocks. Men sat about it tearing at chunks of half roasted meat. Those had been the invaders. And she had lain cold, knowing well what they meant for her when they had satisfied one appetite and were ready—

They had come to her at last. Even with tied hands she had fought. So they had laughed and cuffed her among them, tearing at her garments and handling her shamefully, though they did not have time for the last insult and degradation of all. No, that was left for some—some man of her own people!

Thinking on it now made rage rise to warm her even though the sun had withdrawn from this slope and there was a chill rising wind.

For the ambushers had been attacked in turn, fell under spear and arrow out of the dark. Half conscious she had been left lying until a harsh weight on her, hard, bruising hands brought her back to terror and pain.

She had never seen his face, but she had seen (and it was branded on her memory for all time) the bowguard encircling the wrist tightened as a bar across her throat to choke her unconscious. And when she had once more stirred she was alone.

Someone had thrown a cloak over her nakedness. There was a horse nearby. There was for the rest only dead men under a falling snow. She never understood why they had not killed her and been done with it. Perhaps in that little skirmish her attacker had been over-ridden by his companions. But at the time she had been sorely tempted to lie where she was and let the cold put an end to her. Only the return of that temper which was her heritage roused her. Somewhere living was the man who should have been her savior and instead had rift from her what was to be given only as a free gift. To bring him down, for that she would live.

Later, when she found she carried new life, yes, she had been tempted again—to do as they urged, rid herself of that. But in the end she could not. For though part of the child was of evil, yet a part was hers. Then she recalled Gunnora and the magic which could aid. So she had withstood Kuno's urging, even his brutal anger.

She held to two things with all the stubborn strength she could muster—that she would bear this child which must be hers only, and that she would have justice on the man who would never in truth be its father. The first part of her desire Gunnora had given, now she went for answer to the second.

At last night came and she found a place among the rocks where she could creep in, the stone walls

giving refuge from the wind, a carpet of dried leaves to blanket her. She must have slept, for when she roused she was not sure where she was. Then she was aware of the influence which must have brought her awake. There was an uneasiness in the very air about her, a tension as if she stood on the verge of some great event.

With the spear as her staff, Hertha came farther into the open. The moon showed her unmarked snow ahead, made dark pits of her own tracks leading here. With it for a light she started on.

A wan radiance, having no light of fire, shown in the distance. It came from no torch either, she was sure. But it might well mark what she sought.

Here the Old Road was unbroken, though narrow. She prodded the snow ahead, lest there be some hidden crevice. But she hurried as if to some important meeting.

Tall shapes arose, stones set on end in rows. For the outer lines there were wide spaces between, but the inner ones were placed closer and closer together. She followed a road cut straight between these pillars.

On the crest of each rested a small cone of light, as if these were not rocks but giant candles to light her way. And the light was cold instead of warm, blue instead of orange-red as true flame. Also here the moonlight was gone, so that even though there was no roof she could see, yet it was shut away.

Three stone rows she passed, then four more, each with the stones closer together, so that the seventh brought them touching to form a wall. The road dwindled to a path which led through a gate therein.

Hertha knew that even had she wanted to retreat, now she could not. It was as if her feet were held to the path and that moved, bearing her with it.

So she came into a hexagon shaped space within the wall. There was a low curbing of stone to fence off the centermost portion and in each angle blazed a flame at ground level. But she could go no farther, just as she could not draw away.

Within the walled area were five blocks of green stone. Those glistened in the weird light as if they were carved of polished gems. Their tops had been squared off to give seating for those who awaited her.

What she had expected Hertha was not sure. But what she saw was so alien to all she knew that she did not even feel fear, but rather wonder that such could exist in a world where men also walked. Now she could understand why these bore the name of toads, for that was the closest mankind could come in descriptive comparison.

Whether they went on two limbs or four, she could not be sure the way they hunched upon their blocks. But they were no toads in spite of their resemblance. Their bodies were bloated of paunch, the four limbs seemingly too slender beside that heaviness. Their heads sat upon narrow shoulders with no division of neck. And those heads were massive, with large golden eyes high on their hairless skulls, noses which were slits only, and wide mouths stretching above only a vestige of chin.

“Welcome, Seeker—”

The words rang in her head, not her ears. Nor could she tell which of the creatures spoke then.

Now that Hertha had reached her goal she found no words, she was too bemused by the sight of those

she had sought. Yet it seemed that she did not have to explain, for the mind speech continued:

“You have come seeking our aid. What would you, daughter of men, lose that which weighs your body?”

At that Hertha found her tongue to speak.

“Not so. Though the seed in me was planted not by lawful custom, but in pain and torment of mind and body, yet will I retain it. I shall bear a child who shall be mine alone, as Gunnora has answered my prayers.”

“Then what seek you here?”

“Justice! Justice upon him who took me by force and in shame!”

“Why think you, daughter of men, that you and your matters mean aught to us who were great in this land before your feeble kind came, and who will continue to abide even after man is again gone? What have we to do with you?”

“I do not know. Only I have listened to old tales, and I have come.”

She had an odd sensation then. If one could sense laughter in one’s mind, she was feeling it. They were amused, and, knowing that, she lost some of her assurance.

Again a surge of amusement, and then a feeling as if they had withdrawn, conferred among themselves. Hertha would have fled but she could not. And she was afraid as she had not been since she faced horror on the road to Lethendale.

“Upon whom ask you justice, daughter of men? What is his name, where lies he this night?”

She answered with the truth. “I know neither. I have not even seen his face. Yet—” she forgot her fear, knew only that hate which goaded her on, “I have that which shall make him known to me. And I may find him here in Grimmerdale since men in many now pass along this road, the war being ended.”

Again that withdrawal. Then another question.

“Do you not know that services such as ours do not come without payment? What have you to offer us in return, daughter of men?”

Hertha was startled. She had never really thought past making her plea here. That she had been so stupid amazed her. Of course there would be payment! Instinctively she dropped her bundle, clasped her hands in guard over where the child lay.

Amusement once more.

“Nay, daughter of men. From Gunnora you have claimed that life, nor do we want it. But justice can serve us, too. We shall give you the key to that which you wish, and the end shall be ours. To this do you agree?”

“I do.” Though she did not quite understand.

“Look you—there!” One of the beings raised a forefoot and pointed over her shoulder. Hertha turned her head. There was a small glowing spot on the surface of the stone pillar. She put out her hand and at her touch a bit of stone loosened so she held a small pebble.

“Take that, daughter of men. When you find him you seek, see it lies in his bed at the coming of night. Then your justice will fall upon him—here! And so you will not forget, nor think again and change your mind, we shall set a reminder where you shall see it each time you look into your mirror.”

Again the being pointed, this time at Hertha. From the forelimb curled a thin line of vapor. That curdled to form a ball which flew at her. Though she flinched and tried to duck, it broke against her face with a tingling feeling which lasted only for a second.

“You shall wear that until he comes hither, daughter of men. So will you remember your bargain.”

What happened then she was not sure, it was all confused. When she was clear-headed again dawn was breaking and she clawed her way out of the leaf carpeted crevice. Was it all a dream? No, her fingers were tight about something, cramped and in pain from that hold. She looked down at a pebble of green-grey stone. So in truth she had met the Toads of Grimmerdale.

Grimmerdale itself lay spread before her, easy to see in the gathering light. The lord’s castle was on the farther slope, the village and inn by the highway. And it was the inn she must reach.

Early as it was there were signs of life about the place. A man went to the stable without noticing her as she entered the courtyard. She advanced to the half open door, determined to strike some bargain for work with the mistress, no matter how difficult the woman was reputed to be.

The great room was empty when she entered. But moments later a woman with a forbidding face stumped in. Hertha went directly to her. The woman stared at her and then grinned, maliciously.

“You’ve no face to make trouble, wench, one can be certain of that,” she said when Hertha asked for work. “And it is true that an extra pair of hands is wanted. Not that we have a purse so fat we can toss away silver—”

As she spoke a man came down the steep inner stair, crossed to sit at a table half screened from the rest. It was almost as if his arrival turned the scales in Hertha’s favor. For she was told to put aside her bundle and get to work. So it was she who took the food tray to where he sat.

He was tall, taller than Kuno, with well set, wide shoulders. And there was a sword by his side, plain hilted, in a worn scabbard. His features were sharp, his face thin, as if he might have gone on short rations too often in the past.

Black hair peaked on his forehead and she could not guess his age, though she thought he might be young.

But it was when she put down her tray and he reached out for an eating knife that it seemed the world stopped for an instant. She saw the bowguard on his wrist. And her whole existence narrowed to that metal band. Some primitive instinct of safety closed about her, she was sure she had not betrayed herself.

As she turned from the table she wondered if this was by the power of the Toads, that they had brought her prey to her hand so. What had they bade her—to see that the pebble was in his bed. But this was early morn, and he had just risen, what if he meant not to stay another night, but would push on? How

could she then carry out their orders? Unless she followed after, somehow crept upon him at nightfall.

At any rate he seemed in no hurry to be up and off if that was his purpose. Finally, with relief, she heard him bargain with the mistress for a second night's stay. She found an excuse to go above, carrying fresh bedding for a second room to be made ready. And as she went down the narrow hall she wondered how best she could discover which room was his.

So intent was she upon this problem that she was not aware of someone behind her, until an ungentle hand fell on her shoulder and she was jerked about.

"Now here's a new one—" The voice was brash and young. Hertha looked at a man with something of the unformed boy still in his face. His thick yellow hair was uncombed, and his jaw beard stubbled, his eyes red-rimmed.

As he saw her clearly he made a grimace of distaste, shoved her from him with force, so she lost her balance and fell to the floor.

"As leave kiss a toad!" He spat. But the trail of spittle never struck her. Instead hands fell on him, slammed him against the other wall. While the man of the bowguard surveyed him steadily.

"What's to do?" The younger man struggled. "Take your hands off me, fellow!"

"Fellow, is it?" observed the other. "I am no leige man of yours, Urre. Nor are you in Roxdale now. As for the wench, she's not to blame for her face. Perhaps she should thank what ever Powers she lights a candle to that she has it. With such as you ready to lift every skirt they meet."

"Toad! he is a toad-face—" Urre worked his mouth as if he wished to spit again, then something in the other's eyes must have warned him. "Hands off me!" He twisted and the other stepped back. With an oath Urre lurched away, heading unsteadily for the stair.

Hertha got to her feet, stooped to gather up the draggle of covers she had dropped.

"Has he hurt you?"

She shook her head dumbly. It had all been so sudden, and that he—this one—had lifted hand in her defense dazed her. She moved away as fast as she could, but before she reached the end of the passage she looked back. He was going through a door a pace away from where the one called Urre had stopped her. So—she had learned his room. But toad face? That wet ball which had struck her last night—what had it done to her?

Hertha used her fingers to trace any alteration in her features. But to her touch she was as she had always been. A mirror—she must find a mirror! Not that the inn was likely to house such a luxury.

In the end she found one in the kitchen, in a tray which she had been set to polishing. Though her reflection was cloudy, there was no mistaking the ugly brown patches on her skin. Would they be so forever, a brand set by her trafficking with dark powers, or would they vanish with the task done? Something she had remembered from that strange voiceless conversation made her hope the latter was true.

If so, the quicker she moved to the end, the better. But she did not soon get another chance to slip aloft. The man's name was Trystan. The lame pot boy had taken an interest in him and was full of information.

Trystan had been a Marshal, and Master of Archers—he was now out of employment, moving inland probably to seek a new lord. But perhaps he was thinking of raising a war band on his own, he had talked already with other veterans staying here. He did not drink much, though those others with him, Urre, who was son to a dale lord, and his leigeman ordered enough to sail a ship.

Crumbs, yes, but she listened eagerly for them, determined to learn all she could of this Trystan she must enmesh in her web. She watched him, too, given occasion when she might do so without note. It gave her a queer feeling to so look upon the man who had used her so and did not guess now she was so near.

Oddly enough, had it not been for the evidence of the bowguard and she would have picked him last of those she saw beneath this roof. Urre, yes, and two or three others, willing to make free with her until they saw her face clearly. But when she had reason to pass by this Trystan he showed her small courtesies, as if her lack of comeliness meant nothing. He presented a puzzle which was disturbing.

But that did not change her plan. So, at last, when she managed close to dusk to slip up the stairway quickly, she sped down the hall to his room. There was a huddle of coverings on the bed. She could not straighten those, but she thrust the pebble deep into the bag-pillow and hurried back to the common room where men were gathering. There she obeyed a stream of orders, fetching and carrying tankards of drink, platters of food.

The fatigue of her long day of unaccustomed labor was beginning to tell. And there were those among the patrons who used cruel humor to enlighten the evening. She had to be keen witted and clear eyed to avoid a foot slyly thrust forth to trip her, a sudden grab at her arm to dump a filled patter or tray of tankards. Twice she suffered defeat and was paid by a ringing buffet from the mistress's hand for the wasting of food.

But at length she was freed from their persecution by the mistress (not out of any feeling for her, but as a matter of saving spillage and spoilage) and set to the cleaning of plates in a noisome hole where the stench of old food and greasy slops turned her stomach and made her so ill she was afraid she could not last. Somehow she held out until finally the mistress sourly shoved her to one of the fireside settles and told her that was the best bed she could hope for. Hertha curled up, so tired she ached, while the rest of the inn people drifted off to their holes and comers—chambers were for guests alone.

The fire had been banked for the night, but the hearth was warm. Now that she had the great room to herself, though her body was tried, her mind was alert, and she rested as best she could while she waited. If all went well, surely the stone would act this night, and she determined to witness the action. Beyond that she had not planned.

Hertha waited for what seemed a long time, shifting now and then on her hard bed. Near to hand were both her cloak and the spear staff, her boots new filled with fresh straw, were on her feet.

She was aware of a shadow at the head of the stairs, of steps. She watched and listened. Yes, she had been right—this was the man Trystan, and he was walking toward the door. Whirling her cloak about her, Hertha rose to follow.

IV

She clung to the shadow of the inn wall for fear he might look behind. But he strode on with the sure step of a man on some mission of such importance his present surroundings had little meaning, rounding the back of the inn, tramping up slope.

Though a moon hung overhead, there was also a veiling of cloud. Hertha dropped farther and farther behind, for the brambles of the scrub caught at her cloak, the snow weighted her skirt, and the fatigue of her long day's labor was heavy on her. Yet she felt that she must be near to Trystan when he reached his goal. Was it that she must witness the justice of the Toads? She was not sure any more, concentrating all her effort on the going.

Now she could see the stones stark above. They bore no candles on their crests this night, were only grim blots of darkness. Toward them Trystan headed as straight a line as the growth would allow.

He reached the first line of stones, not once had he looked around. Long since Hertha abandoned caution. He was almost out of sight! She gathered up her skirts, panting heavily as she plunged and skidded to where he had disappeared.

Yes, now she could see him, though he was well ahead. But when he reached that final row, the one forming a real wall, he would have to move along it to the entrance of the Old Road. While she, already knowing the way, might gain a few precious moments by seeking the road now. And she did that, coming to better footing with her breath whistling through her lips in gasps.

She had no spear to lean on and she nursed a sharp pain in her side. But she set her teeth and wavered on, between those rows of stones, seeing the gate ahead and framed in it a dark figure. Trystan was still a little before.

There came a glow of light, the cold flames were back on pillar top. In its blue radiance her hands looked diseased and foul when she put them out to steady herself as she went.

Trystan was just within the gate of the hexagon. He had not moved, but rather stared straight ahead at whatever awaited him. His sword was belted at his side, the curve of his bow was a pointing finger behind his shoulder. He had come fully armed, yet he made no move to draw weapon now.

Hertha stumbled on. That struggle up slope had taken much of her strength. Yet in her was the knowledge that she must be there. Before her now, just beyond her touching even if she reached forth her arm, was Trystan. His head was uncovered, the loose hood of his surcoat lay back on his shoulders. His arms dangled loosely at his sides. Hertha's gaze followed to the source of his staring concentration.

There were the green blocks. But no toad forms humped upon them. Rather lights played there, weaving in and out in a flickering dance of shades of blue, from a wan blight which might have emanated from some decaying bit on a forest floor, to a brilliant sapphire.

Hertha felt the pull of those weaving patterns, until she forced herself (literally so forced her heavy hands to cover her eyes) not to look upon the play of color. When she did so there was a sensation of release. But it was plain her companion was fast caught.

Cupping her hands to shut out all she could of the lights, she watched Trystan. He made no move to step across the low curbing and approach the blocks. He might have been turned into stone himself, rapt in a spell which had made of him ageless rock. He did not blink an eye, nor could she even detect the rise and fall of his chest in breathing.

Was this their judgment then, the making of a man into a motionless statue? Somehow Hertha was sure that whatever use the Toads intended to make of the man they had entrapped through her aid it was more than this. Down inside her something stirred. Angrily she fought against that awakening of an unbidden thought, or was it merely emotion? She drew memory to her, lashed herself with all shameful,

degrading detail. This had he done to her, and this, and this! By his act she was homeless, landless, a nothing, wearing even a toad face. Whatever came now to him, he richly deserved it. She would wait and watch, and then she would go hence, and in time, as Gunnora had promised, she would bear a son or daughter who had none of this father—none!

Still watching him, her hands veiling against the play of the ensorcelling light, Hertha saw his lax fingers move, clench into a fist. And then she witnessed the great effort of that gesture, and she knew that he was in battle, silent though he stood. That he fought with all his strength against what held him fast.

That part of her which had stirred and awakened, grew stronger. She battled it. He deserved nothing but what would come to him here, he deserved nothing from her but the justice she had asked from the Toads.

His hand-fist arose, so slowly that it might have been chained to some great weight. When Hertha looked from it to his face, she saw the agony that was causing him. She set her shoulders to the rock wall, had she but a rope she would have bound herself there, that no weakness might betray her plan.

Strange light before him and something else, formless as yet, but with a cold menace greater than any fear born of battle heat. For this terror was rooted not in any ordinary danger, but grew from a horror belonging by rights far back in the beginnings of his race. How he had come here, whether this be a dream or not, Trystan was not sure. And he had no time to waste on confused memory.

What energy he possessed must be used to front that which was keeping him captive. It strove to fill him with its own life, and that he would not allow, not while he could summon will to withstand it.

Somehow he thought that if he broke the hold upon his body, he could also shatter its would-be mastery of his mind and will. Could he act against its desires, he might regain control. So he set full concentration on his hand-his fingers. It was as if his flesh was nerveless, numb— But he formed a fist. Then he brought up his arm, so slowly that, had he allowed himself to waver, he might have despaired. But he knew that he must not relax his intense drive of will centered in that simple move. Weapons—what good would his bow, his sword, be against what dwelt here? He sensed dimly that this menace could well laugh at weapons forged and carried by those of his kind.

Weapons—sword—steel—there was something hovering just at the fringe of memory. Then for an instant he saw a small, sharp mind picture. Steel! That man from the Waste side dale who had set his sword as a barrier at the head of his sleeping roll, his dagger, plunged point deep in the soil at his feet the night they had left him on the edge of very ancient ruins with their mounts. Between cold iron a man lay safe, he said. Some scoffed at his superstition, others had nodded agreement. Iron—cold iron—which certain old Powers feared.

He had a sword at his belt now, a long dagger at his hip—iron—talismen? But the struggle for possession of his fist, his arm, was so hard he feared he would never have a chance to put the old belief to the proof.

What did they want of him, those who abode here? For he was aware that there was more than one will bent on him. Why had they brought him? Trystan shied away from questions. He must concentrate on his hand—his arm!

With agonizing slowness he brought his hand to his belt, forced his fingers to touch the hilt of his sword.

That was no lord's proud weapon with a silvered, jeweled hilt, but a serviceable blade nicked and

scratched by long use. So that the hilt itself was metal, wound with thick wire to make a good grip which would not turn in a sweating hand. His finger tips touched that and—his hand was free!

He tightened hold instantly, drew the blade with a practiced sweep, and held it up between him and that riot of blinding and weaving blue lights. Relief came, but it was only minor he knew after a moment or two of swelling hope. What coiled here could not be so easily defeated. Always that other will weighted and plucked at his hand. The sword blade swung back and forth, he was unable to hold it steady. Soon he might not be able to continue to hold it at all!

Trystan tried to retreat even a single step. But his feet were as if set in a bog, entrapped against any move. He had only his failing hand and the sword, growing heavier every second. Now he was not holding it erect as if on guard, but doubled back as if aimed at his own body!

Out of the blue lights arose a tendril of wane, phosphorescent stuff which looped into the air and remained there, its tip pointed in his direction. Another weaved up to join it, swell its substance. A third came, a fourth was growing—

The tip which had been narrow as a finger, was now thickening. From that smaller tips rounded and swelled into being. Suddenly Trystan was looking at a thing of active evil, a grotesque copy of a human hand, four fingers, a thumb too long and thin.

When it was fully formed it began to lower towards him. Trystan, with all his strength, brought up the sword, held its point as steady as he could against that reaching hand.

Again he knew a fleeting triumph. For at the threat of the Sword, the hand's advance was stayed. Then it moved right, left, as if to strike as a foeman's point past his guard. But he was able by some miracle of last reserves to counter each attack.

Hertha watched the strange duel wide-eyed. The face of her enemy was wet, great trickles of sweat ran from his forehead to drip from his chin. His mouth was a tight snarl, lips flattened against his teeth. Yet he held that sword and the emanation of the Toads could not pass it.

“You!”

The word rang in her head with a cold arrogance which hurt.

“Take from him the sword!”

An order she must obey if she was to witness her triumph. Her triumph? Hertha crouched against the rock watching that weird battle—sword point swinging with such painful slowness, but ever just reaching the right point swinging with such painful slowness, but ever just reaching the right point in time so that the blue hand did not close. The man was moving so slowly, why could the Toads not beat him by a swift dart past his guard? Unless their formation of the hand, their use of it, was as great an effort for them as his defense seemed to be for him.

“The sword!” That demand in her mind hurt.

Hertha did not stir. “I can not!” Did she cry that aloud, whisper it. Or only think it? She was not sure. Nor why she could not carry through to the end that which had brought her here—that she did not understand either.

Dark—and her hands were bound. There were men struggling. One went down with an arrow through him. Then cries of triumph. Someone came to her through shadows. She could see only mail—a sword—

Then she was pinned down by a heavy hand. She heard laughter, evil laughter which scorched her, though her body shivered as the last of her clothing was ripped away. Once more—

NO! She would not remember it all! She would not! They could not make her—but they did. Then she was back in the here and now. And she saw Trystan fighting his stumbling, hopeless battle, knew him again for what he was.

“Me sword—take from him the sword!”

Hertha lurched to her feet. The sword—she must get the sword. Then he, too, would learn what it meant to be helpless and shamed and—and what? Dead? Did the Toads intend to kill him?

“Will you kill him?” She asked them. She had never foreseen the reckoning to be like this.

“The sword!”

They did not answer, merely spurred her to their will. Death? No, she was certain they did not mean his death. At least not death such as her kind knew it. And—but—

“The sword!”

In her mind that order was a painful lash, meant to send her unthinking to their service. But it acted otherwise, alerting her to a new sense of peril. She had evoked that which had no common meeting with her kind. Now she realized she had loosed that which not even the most powerful man or woman she knew might meddle with. Trystan could deserve the worse she was able to pull upon him. But that must be the worst by men’s standards—not this!

Her left hand went to the bag of Gunnora’s herbs where it rested between her swelling breasts. Her right groped on the ground, closed about a stone. Since she touched the herb bag that voice was no longer a pain in her head. It faded like a far-off calling. She readied the stone—

Trystan watched that swinging hand. His sword arm ached up into his shoulder. He was sure every moment he would lose control. Hertha bent, tore at the lacing of her bodice so that herb bag swung free. Fiercely she rubbed it back and forth on the stone. What so pitiful an effort might do—

She threw the rock through the murky air, struck against that blue hand. It changed direction, made a dart past him. Knowing that this might be his one chance, Trystan brought down the sword with all the force he could muster on the tentacle which supported the hand.

The blade passed through as if what he saw had no substance, had been woven of his own fears. There was a burst of palid light. Then the lumpish hand, that which supported it, was gone.

In the same moment he discovered he could move and staggered back. Then a hand fell upon his arm, jerking him in the same direction. He flailed out wildly at what could only be an enemy’s hold, broke it. There was a cry and he turned his head.

A dark huddle lay at the foot of the door frame stone. Trystan advanced the sword point, ready, as

strength flowed once more into him, to meet this new attack. The bundle moved, a white hand clutched at the pillar, pulled.

His bemused mind cleared. This was a woman! Not only that, but what had passed him through the air had not been flung at him, but at the hand. She had been a friend and not an enemy in that moment.

Now from behind he heard a new sound, like the hiss of a disturbed serpent. Or there might be more than one snake voicing hate. He gained the side of the woman, with the standing rocks at his back, looked once more at the center space.

That tentacle which had vanished at the sword stroke might be gone, but there were others rising. And this time those did not unite to form hands, but rather each produced something like unto a serpent head. And they arose in such numbers that no one man could hope to front them all. Though he must try.

Once more he felt a light weight upon his shoulder, he glanced to the side. The woman was standing, one hand tight to her breast, the other resting on his upper arm now. Her hood over-shadowed her face so he could not see that. But he could hear the murmur of her voice even through the hissing of the pseudo-serpents. Though he could not understand the words, there was a rhythmic flow as if she chanted a battle song for his encouragement.

One of the serpent lengths swung at them, he used the sword. At its touch the thing vanished. But one out of dozens, what was that? Again his arm grew heavy, he found movement difficult.

Trystan tried to shake off the woman's hold, not daring to take hand from his sword to repell her.

"Loose me!" he demanded, twisting his body.

She did not obey, nor answer. He heard only that murmur of sound. There was a pleading note in it, a frantic pleading, he could feel her urgency, as if she begged of some one aid for them both.

Then from here her fingers dug into his shoulder muscles, there spread downward along his arm, across his back and chest, a warmth, a loosening—not of her hold, but of the bonds laid on him here. And within the center space the snake heads darted with greater vigor. Now and then two met in midair, and when they did they instantly united, becoming larger.

These darted forth, striking at the two by the gate, while Trystan cut and parried. And they moved with greater speed so he was hard put to keep them off. They showed no poison fangs, nor did they even seem to have teeth within their open jaws. Yet he sensed that if those mouths closed upon him or the woman they would be utterly done.

He half turned to beat off one which had come at him from an angle. His foot slipped and he went to one knee, the sword half out of his grasp. As he grabbed it tighter he heard a cry. Still crouched, he slewed around.

The serpent head at which he had struck had only been a ruse. For his lunge at it carried him away from the woman. Two other heads had captured her. To his horror he saw that one had fastened across her head, engulfing most of it on contact. The other had snapped its length of body about her waist. Gagged by the one on her head she was quiet, nor did she struggle as the palid lengths pulled her back to the snakes' lair. Two more reached out to fasten upon her, no longer heeding Trystan, intent on their capture.

He cried out hoarsely, was on his feet again, striking savagely at those dragging her. Then he was

startled by a voice which seemed to speak within his head.

“Draw back, son of men, lest we remember our broken bargain. This is no longer your affair.”

“Loose her!” Trystan cut at the tentacle about her waist. It burst into light, but another was already taking its place.

“She delivered you to us, would you save her?”

“Loose her!” He did not stop to weigh the right or wrong of what had been said, he only knew that he could not see the woman drawn to that which waited, that he might not do and remain a man. He thrust again.

The serpents’ coils were moving faster, drawing back into the hexagon. Trystan could not even be sure she still lived, not with that dreadful thing upon her head. She hung limp, not fighting.

“She is ours! Go you—lest we take more for feasting.”

Trystan wasted no breath in argument, he leaped to the left, mounting the curb of the hexagon. There he slashed into the coils which pulled at the woman. His arms were weak, he could hardly raise the sword, even two-handed, and bring it down. Yet still he fought stubbornly to cut her free. And little by little he thought that he was winning.

Now he noted that where the coils tightened about her they did not touch her hand where it still rested clasping something between her breasts. So he strove the more to cut the coils below, severing the last as her head and shoulders were pulled over the edge of the curb.

Then it seemed that, tug though they would, the tentacles could not drag her wholly in. As they fought to do so Trystan had his last small grant of time. He now hewed those which imprisoned her head and shoulders. He saw those rising for new holds. But, as she so lay, to do their will they must cross across her breast to attack, and that they apparently could not do.

Wearily he raised the blade and brought it down again, each time sure he could not do so again. But at last there was a moment when she was free of them all. He flung out his left hand, clasped here where it lay between her breasts, heaved her back and away.

There was a sharp hissing from the serpent things. They writhed and twisted. But more and more they sank to the ground, rolled there feebly. He got the woman on his shoulder, tottered back, still facing the enemy, readied as best he could be for another attack.

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It would seem that the enemy was spent, at least the snakes did not strike outward again. Watching them warily, Trystan retreated, dared to stop and rest with the woman. He leaned above her to touch her cheek. To his fingers the flesh was cold, faintly clammy. Dead? Had the air been choked from her?

He burrowed beneath the edges of her hood, sought the pulse in her throat. He could find none, so he tried to lay his hand directly above her heart. In doing so he had to break her grip on what lay between her breasts. When he touched a small bag there, a throbbing, a warmth spread up his hand, so he jerked hastily away, before he realized this was not a danger but a source of energy and life.

Her heart still beat. Best get her well away while those things in the hexagon were quiescent. For he feared their defeat was only momentary.

Trystan dared to sheath his sword, leaving both arms free to carry the woman. For all the bulk of her cloak and clothing, she was slender, less than the weight he had expected.

Now his retreat was that of a coastal sea crab, keeping part attention on the stew pot of blue light at his back, as well as on the footing ahead. And he drew a full breath again only when he had put two rings of the standing stones between him and the evil those guarded.

Nor was he unaware that there was still something dragging on him, trying to force him to face about. That he battled with a firm will and his sense of self preservation, his teeth set, a grimace of effort stiffening mouth and jaw.

One by one he pushed past the standing stones. As he went the way grew darker, the weird light fading. He was beginning to fear that he could no longer trust his own sight. Twice he found himself off the road, making a detour around a pillar which seemed to sprout before him, heading so back the way he had come.

Thus he fought both the compulsion to return and the tricks of vision, learning to fasten his attention on some point only a few steps ahead, and wait until he had passed that before he set another goal.

He came at last, the woman resting over his shoulder, into the clean night, the last of the stones behind him. Now he was weak, so weary that he might have made a twenty-four hour march and fought a brisk skirmish at the end of it. He slipped to his knees, lowered his burden to the surface of the old road, where, in the open, the wind had scoured the snow away.

There was no moon, the cloud cover was heavy. The woman was now only a dark bulk. Trystan squatted on his heels, his hands dangling loose between his knees, and tried to think coherently.

Of how he had come up here he had no memory at all. He had gone to bed in the normal manner at the inn, first waking to danger when he faced the crawling light in the hexagon. That he had also there fought a danger of the old time he had no doubt at all. But what had drawn him there?

He remembered the forcing open of the inn window to look up slope. Had that simple curiosity of his been the trigger for this adventure? But that those of the inn could live unconcerned so close to such a peril—he could hardly believe that. Or because they had lived here so long, were the descendants of men rooted in Grimmerdale, had they developed an immunity to dark forces?

But what had the thing or things in the hexagon said? That she who lay here had delivered him to them. If so—why? Trystan hunched forward on his knees, twitched aside the hood edge, stooping very close to look at her. Though it was hard to distinguish more than just the general outline of her features in this limited light.

Suddenly her body arched away from him. She screamed with such terror as startled him as she pushed against the road under her, her whole attitude one of such agony of fear as held him motionless. Somehow she got to her feet. She had only screamed that once, now he saw her arms move under the hindering folds of her cloak. The moon broke in a thin silver from under the curtain of the cloud, glinted on what she held in her hand.

Steel swung in an arc for him. Trystan grappled with her before that blade bit into his flesh. She was like

a wild thing, twisting, thrusting, kicking, eves biting as she fought him. At length he handled her as harshly as he would a man, striking his fist against the side of her chin so her body went limply once more to the road.

There was nothing to do but take her back to the inn. Had her experience in that nest of standing stones turned her brain to see enemies all about her? Resigned, he ripped a strip from the hem of her cloak, tied her hands together. Then he got her up so she lay on his back, breathing shallowly, inert. So carrying her he slipped and slid, pushed with difficulty through the scrub to the valley below and the inn.

What the hour might be he did not know, but there was a night lantern burning above the door and that swung open beneath his push. He staggered over to the fireplace, dropped his burden by the hearth and reached for wood to build up the blaze, wanting nothing now so much as to be warm again.

Hertha's head hurt. The pain seemed to be in the side of her face. She opened her eyes. There was a dim light, but not that wan blue. No, this was flame glow. Someone hunched at the hearth setting wood lengths with expert skill to rebuild a fire. Already there was warmth which her body welcomed. She tried to sit up. Only to discover that her wrists were clumsily bound together. Then she tensed, chilled by fear, watching intently he who nursed the fire.

His head was turned from her, she could not see his face, but she had no doubts that it was Trystan. And her last memory—him looming above her, hands outstretched—to take her again as he had that other time! Revulsion sickened her so she swallowed hurriedly lest she spew openly on the floor. Cautiously she looked around. This was the large room of the inn, he must have carried her back. That he might take pleasure in a better place than the icy cold of the old road? But if he tried that she could scream, fight—surely someone would come—

He looked to her now, watching her so intently that she felt he read easily every one of her confused thoughts. "I shall kill you," she said distinctly.

"As you tried to do?" He asked that not as if it greatly mattered, but as if he merely wondered.

"Next time I shall not turn aside!"

He laughed. And with that laughter for an instant he seemed another man, one younger, less hardened by time and deeds. "You did not turn aside this time, mistress, I had a hand in the matter." Then that half smile which had come with the laughter faded, and he regarded her with narrowed eyes, his mouth tight set lip to lip.

Hertha refused to allow him to daunt her and glared back. Then he said:

"Or are you speaking of something else, mistress? Something which happened before you drew steel on me? Was that—that*thing* right? Did I march to its lair by your doing?"

Somehow she must have given away the truth by some fraction of change he read in her face. He leaned forward and gripped her by the shoulders, dragging her closer to him in spite of her struggles, holding her so they were squarely eye to eye.

"Why? By the Sword Hand of Karther the Fair, why? What did I ever do to you, girl, to make you want to push me into that maw? Or would any man have sufficed to feed those pets? Are they your pets, or your masters? Above all, how comes humankind to deal with*them*? And if you so deal, why did you break their spell to aid me? Why, and why, and why?"

He shook her, first gently, and then, with each question, more harshly, so that her head bobbed on her shoulders and she was weak in his hands. Then he seemed to realize that she could not answer him, so he held her tight as if he must read the truth in her eyes as well as hear it from her lips.

“I have no kinsman willing to call you to a sword reckoning,” she told him wearily. “Therefore I must deal as best I can. I sought those who might have justice—”

“Justice! Then I was not just a random choice for some purpose of theirs! Yet, I swear by the Nine Words of Min, I have never looked upon your face before. Did I in some battle slay close kin—father, brother, lover? But how may that be? Those I fought were the invaders. They had no women save those they rift from the dales. And would any daleswoman extract vengeance for one who was her master-by-force? Or is it that, girl? Did they take you and then you found a lord to your liking among them, forgetting your own blood?”

If she could have Hertha would have spat full in his face for that insult. And he must have read her anger quickly.

“So that is not it. Then why? I am no ruffler who goes about picking quarrels with comrades. Nor have I ever taken any woman who came not to me willingly—”

“No?” She found speech at last, in a wrath-hot rush of words. “So you take no woman unwillingly, brave hero? What of three months since on the road to Lethendale? Is it too usual a course of action with you that it can be so lightly put out of mind?”

Angry and fearful though she was, she could see in his expression genuine surprise.

“Lethendale?” he repeated. “Three months since? Girl, I have never been that far north. As to three months ago—I was Marshal of Forces for Lord Ingrim before he fell at the siege of the port.”

He spoke so earnestly that she could almost have believed him, had not that bowguard on his wrist proved him false.

“You lie! Yes, you may not know my face. It was in darkness you took me, having overrun the invaders who had first made me captive. My brother’s men were all slain. For me they had other plans. But when aid came—then still I was for the taking—as you proved, Marshall!” She made of that a name to be hissed.

“I tell you, I was at the port!” He had released her and she backed against the settle, leaving a good space between them.

“You would swear before a Truth Stone it was me? You know my face, then?”

“I would swear, yes. As for your face—I do not need that. It was in the dark you had your will of me. But there is one proof I carry ever in my mind since that time.”

He raised his hand, rubbing fingers along the old scar on his chin, the fire gleamed on the bowguard. That did not match the plainness of his clothing, how could anyone forget seeing it?

“That proof being?”

“You wear it on your wrist, in plain sight. Just as I saw it then, ravisher—your bowguard!”

He held his wrist out, studying the band, “Bowguard! So that is your proof, that made you somehow send me to the Toads.” He was half smiling again, but this time cruelly and with no amusement. “You did send me there, did you not?” He reached forward and, before she could dodge, pulled the hood fully from her head, stared at her.

“What have you done with the toad face, girl? Was that some trick of paint, or some magicking you laid on yourself? Much you must have wanted me to so despoil your own seeming to carry through your plan.”

She raised her bound hands, touched her cheeks with cold fingers. This time there was no mirror, but if he said the loathesome spotting was gone, then it must be so.

“They did it—” she said, only half comprehending. She had pictured this meeting many times, imagined him saying this or that. He must be very hardened in such matters to hold to this pose of half amused interest.

“They? You mean the Toads? But now tell me why, having so neatly put me in their power, you were willing to risk your life in my behalf? That I can not understand. For it seems to me to traffic with such as abide up that hill is a fearsome thing and one which only the desperate would do. Such desperation is not lightly turned aside—so—why did you save me, girl?”

She answered with the truth. “I do not know. Perhaps because the hurt being mine, the payment should also be mine—that, a little, I think. But even more—” she paused so long he prodded her.

“But even more, girl?”

“I could not in the end leave even such a man as you to them!”

“Very well, that I can accept. Hate and fear and despair can drive us all to bargains we repent of later. You made one and then found you were too human to carry it through. Then later on the road you chose to try with honest steel and your own hand—”

“You—you would have taken me—again!” Hertha forced out the words. But the heat in her cheeks came not from the fire but from the old shame eating her.

“So that’s what you thought? Perhaps, given the memories you carry, it was natural enough.” Trystan nodded. “But now it is your turn to listen to me, girl. Item first—I have never been to Lethendale, three months ago, three years ago—never! Second: this which you have come to judge me on,” he held the wrist closer, using the fingers of his other hand to tap upon it. “I did not have three months ago. When the invaders were close pent in the port during the last siege, we had many levies from the outlands come to join us. They had mopped up such raiding bands as had been caught out of there when we moved in to besiege.

“A siege is mainly a time of idleness, and idle men amuse themselves in various ways. We had only to see that the enemy did not break out along the shores while we waited for the coasting ships from Handelsburg and Vennesport to arrive to carry them from the sea. There were many games of chance played during that waiting. And, though I am supposed by most to be a cautious man, little given to such amusements, I was willing to risk a throw now and then.

“This I so won. He who staked it was like Urre, son to some dead lord, with naught but ruins and a lost home to return to if and when the war ended. Two days later he was killed in one of the sorties the invaders now and then made. He had begged me to hold this so that when luck ran again in his way he might buy it back, for it was one of the treasures of his family. In the fighting I discovered it was not only decorative, but useful. Since he could not redeem it, being dead, I kept it—to my disfavor it would seem. As for the boy—I do not even know his name—for they called him by some nickname. He was befuddled with drink half the time, being one of the walking dead—”

“Walking dead?” His story carried conviction, not only big words but his tone, and the straight way he told it.

“That is what I call them. High Hallack has them in many—some are youngsters such as Urre, the owner of this,” again he smoothed the guard. “Others are old enough to be their fathers. The dales have been swept with fire and sword. Those which were not invaded have been bled of their men, of their crops—to feed both armies. This is a land which can now go two ways. It can sink into nothingness from exhaustion, or there can rise new leaders to restore and with will can courage build again.”

It seemed to Hertha that he no longer spoke to her, but rather voiced his own thoughts. As for her, there was a kind of emptiness within, as if something she carried had been rift from her. That thought sent her bound hands protectively to her belly.

The child within her—who had been its father? One of the lost ones, some boy who had had all taken from him and so became a dead man with no hope in the future, one without any curb upon his appetites. Doubtless he had lived for the day only, taken ruthlessly all offered during that short day. Thinking so, she again sensed that queer light feeling. She had not lost the child, this child which Gunnora promised would be hers alone. What she had lost was the driving need for justice which had brought her to Grimmerdale—to traffic with the Toads.

Hertha shuddered, cold to her bones in spite of her cloak, of the fire. What had she done in her blindness, her hate and horror? Almost she had delivered an innocent man to that she dared not now think upon. What has saved her from that at the very last, throw that stone rubbed with Gunnora’s talisman? Some part of her refusing to allow such a foul crime?

And what could she ever say to this man who had now turned his head from her, was looking into the flames as if therein he could read message runes? She half raised her bound hands, he looked about with a real smile from which she shrank as she might from a blow, remembering how it might have been with him at this moment.

“There is no need for you to go bound. Or do you still thirst for my blood?” He caught her hands, pulled at the cloth tying them.

“No,” Hertha answered in a low voice. “I believe you. He whom I sought is now dead.”

“Do you regret that death came not at your hand?”

She stared down at her fingers resting again against her middle, wondering dully what would become of her now. Would she remain a tavern wench, should she crawl back to Kuno? No! At that her head went up again, pride returned.

“I asked, are you sorry you did not take your knife to my gamester?”

“No.”

“But still there are dark thoughts troubling you—”

“Those are none of your concern.” She would have risen, but he put out a hand to hold her where she was.

“There is an old custom. If a man draw a maid from dire danger, he has certain rights—”

For a moment she did not understand, when she did her bruised pride strengthened her to meet his eyes.

“You speak of maids—I am not such.”

His indrawn breath made a small sound, but one loud in the silence between them. “So that was the why! You are no farm or tavern wench are you? So you could not accept what he had done to you. But have you no kinsman to ride for your honor?”

She laughed raggedly. “Marshal, my kinsman had but one wish, that I submit to ancient practices among women so that he would not be shamed before his kind. Having done so I would have been allowed to dwell by sufferance in my own home, being reminded not more than perhaps thrice daily of his great goodness.”

“And this you would not do. But with your great hate against him who fathered what you carry—”

“No!” Her hands went to that talisman of Gunnora’s. “I have been to the shrine of Gunnora. She has promised me my desire, the child I bear will be mine wholly, taking nothing from *him*!”

“And did she also send you to the Toads?”

Hertha shook her head. “Gunnora guards life. I knew of the Toads from old tales. I went to them in my blindness and they gave me that which I placed in your bed to draw you to them. Also they changed my face in some manner. But—that is no longer so?”

“No. Had I not known your cloak, I should not have known you. But this thing in my bed— Stay you here and wait. Only promise me this, should I return as one under orders, bar the door in my face and keep me here at all cost!”

“I promise.”

He went with the light footed tread of one who had learned to walk softly in strange places because life might will depend upon it. Now that she was alone her mind returned to the matter of what could come to her with the morn. Who would give her refuge—save perhaps the Wise Women of Lethendale. It might be that this Marshal would escort her there. Though what did he owe her, except such danger as she did not want to think on. But although her thoughts twisted and turned she saw no answer except Lethendale. Perhaps Kuno would some day—no! She would make no plan leading in that path!

Trystan was back holding two sticks such as were used to kindle brazier flames. Gripped between their ends was the pebble she had brought from the Toads’ hold. As he reached the fire he buried that bit of rock into the heart of the blaze.

He might have poured oil upon the flames so fierce was the answer as the pebble fell among the logs.

Both shrank back.

“That trap is now set at naught,” he observed. “I would no have any other fall into it.”

She stiffened, guessing what he thought of her for the setting of the same trap.

“To say I am sorry is only mouthing words, but—”

“To one with such a burden, lady, I can return that I understand. When one is driven by a lash one takes any way to free oneself. And in the end you did not suffer that I be taken.”

“Having first thrust you well into the trap! Also—you should have let them take me then as they wished. It would only have been fitting.”

“Have done!” He brought his fist down on the seat of the settle beside which he knelt. “Let us make an end to what is past. It is gone. To cling to this wrong or that, keep it festering in mind and heart, is to cripple one. Now, lady,” she detected a new formality in his voice, “where do you go, if not to your brother’s house? It is not in your mind to return there, I gather.”

She fumbled with the talisman. “In that you are right. There is but one place left—the Wise Women of Lethendale. I can beg shelter from them.” She wondered if he would offer the escort she had no right to ask, but his next question surprised her.

“Lady, when you came hither, you came by the Old Road over ridge, did you not?”

“That is so. To me it seemed less dangerous than the open highway. It has, by legend, those who sometimes use it, but I deemed those less dangerous than my own kind.”

“If you came from that direction you must have passed through Nordendale—what manner of holding is it?”

She had no idea why he wished such knowledge, but she told him of what she had seen of that leaderless dale, the handful of people there deep sunk in a lethargy in which they clung to the ruins of what had once been thriving life. He listened eagerly to what she told him.

“You have a seeing eye, lady, and have marked more than most, given such a short time to observe. Now listen to me, for this may be a matter of concern to both of us in the future. It is in my mind that Nordendale needs a lord, one to give the people heart, rebuild what man and time have wasted. I have come north seeking a chance to be not just my own man, but to have a holding. I am not like Urre who was born to a hall, and drinks and wenches now to forget what ill tricks fortune plays.

“Who my father was—” he shrugged, “I never heard my mother say. That he was of no common blood, that I knew, though in later years she drudged in a merchant’s house before the coming of the invaders for bread to our mouths and clothing for our backs. When I was yet a boy I knew that the only way I might rise was through this—” he touched the hilt of his sword. “The merchant guild welcome no nameless man, but for a sword and a bow there is always a ready market. So I set about learning the skills of war as thoroughly as any man might. Then came the invasion and I went from Lord to Lord, becoming at last Marshal of Archers. Yet always before me hung the thought that in such a time of upheaval, with the old families being killed out, this was my chance.

“Now there are masterless men in plenty, too restless after years of killing to settle back behind any

plough. Some will turn outlaw readily, but with a half dozen of such at my back, I can take a dale which lies vacant of rule, such as this Nordendale. The people there need a leader, I am depriving none of lawful inheritance, but will keep the peace and defend it against outlaws—for there will be many such now. There are men here, passing through Grimmerdale, willing to be hired for such a purpose. Enough so I can pick and choose at will.”

He paused and she read in his face that this indeed was the great moving wish of his life. When he did not continue she asked a question:

“I can see how a determined man can do this thing. But how does it concern me in any way?”

He looked to her straightly. She did not understand the full meaning of what she saw in his eyes.

“I think we are greatly alike, lady. So much so that we could walk the same road, to the profit of both. No, I do not ask an answer now. Tomorrow—” he got to his feet stretching, “no, today. I shall speak to those men I have marked. If they are willing to take liege oath to me, we shall ride to Lethendale, where you may shelter as you wish for a space. It is not far—”

“By horse,” she answered in relief, “perhaps two days west.”

“Good enough. Then having left you there, I shall go to Nordendale—and straightway that shall cease to be masterless. Allow me say three score days, and I shall come riding again to Lethendale. Then you shall give me your answer as to whether our roads join or no.”

“You forget,” her hands pressed upon her belly, “I am no maid, nor widow, and yet I carry—”

“Have you not Gunnora’s promise upon that subject? The child will be wholly yours. One welcome holds for you both.”

She studied his face, determined to make sure if he meant that. What she read there—she caught her breath, her hands rising to her breast, pressing hard upon the talisman.

“Come as you promise to Lethendale,” she said in a low voice. “You shall be welcome and have your answer in good seeming.”