

A Witch World Book

The CRYSTAL GRYPHON



ANDRE NORTON





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The Crystal Gryphon

A Witch World Book

Andre Norton

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Here Begins the Adventure of Kerovan, Sometime Lord-Heir of Ulmsdale of High Hallack.

I was one born accursed in two ways. Firstly, my father was Ulric, Lord of Ulmsdale in the north. And of his stock there were told dire tales. My grandfather, Ulm the Horn-Handed, he who led his people into this northside dale and chartered the sea-rovers who founded Ulmsport, had looted one of the places of the Old Ones, taking the treasure sealed within. All men knew that this was no ordinary treasure, for it glowed in the dark. And after that looting not only Ulm, but all those who had been with him on that fearsome venture, were visited by a painful sickness of body from which most of them died.

When I was born, my father was already in middle years. He had taken two ladies before my mother and had of them children. But the children had been either born dead or had quitted this world in their early years, sickly creatures one and all. He had sworn, however, to get him a true heir, and so he set aside his second lady in favor of my mother when it seemed as if he would get no son of her.

My mother's lineage also laid me under a curse. She was the Lady Tephana, daughter to Fortal of Paltendale, which lies farther to the northwest. There are those who even now make off-warding signs at dalesmen from those parts, saying that, when our folk moved thither to settle, there were still Old Ones, seeming like ourselves; and that our people—the Borderers—entered into a blood-mixing with these, the offspring therefrom being not altogether human.

Be that as it may, my father was desperate for an heir. And Tephana, lately widowed, had borne already a goodly child who was now in his second year—Hlymer. My father was willing to forego dowry, to close his ears to any rumor of mixed blood, and to welcome the lady with full honor. By all accounts I have heard, she was willing, even unto risking the curse laid on my father's family by the treasure theft.

My birthing came too early and under strange circumstances, for my mother was on her way to Gunnora's shrine to give offerings for a son and a safe delivery. When she was yet a day's journey away, her pains came on her very swiftly. There was no hall, not even a landsman's dwelling near enough, and a mighty storm was brewing. Thus her women and guards took her for shelter into a place they would have normally shunned, one of those strange and awesome remains of the Old Ones, the people of uncanny power who held the dales in the dim past before the first of our blood wandered up from the south.

This building was in good repair, as is often true of the constructions left by that unknown race. For the Old Ones seem to have used spells to bind stones together in such a way that even time cannot devour them, and thus some buildings look as if they were abandoned only yesterday. What purpose this one might have served none could guess. But there were carvings of men and women, or tho

who had such seeming, on the inner walls.

My mother's travail was hard, and her ladies feared that they might not save her. After I was born they half-wished that they had failed to, for asking to look upon the babe, she saw me full and gave a great cry, losing her senses and near her wits. She wandered in some mind maze for several weeks thereafter.

I was not as other children. My feet were not with toes, like unto human kind; rather they were small hoofs, split, covered with horn such as make up the nails upon fingers. In my face my eyebrows slanted above eyes that were the color of butter amber, the like of which are not seen in a human countenance. Thus, all gazing upon me knew that, though I seemed far stronger of wind and limb than my unfortunate half-brothers and sisters before me, in me the curse had taken another turning. I did not sicken and die, but thrived and grew.

But my mother would not look upon me, saying I was a demon changeling, implanted in her womb by some evil spell. When those about her brought me nigh, she became so disordered in her wits that they feared her state would be permanent. Soon she declared she had no true child but Hlymer—and later my sister Lisana, born a year after me, a fair little maid with no flaw. In her my mother took much pleasure.

As for me, I was not housed at Ulmsdale Keep, but sent out at nurse to one of the foresters. However, though my mother had so disowned me, my father was moved, not by any affection—for that I was never shown by those closest to me in blood—but rather by his pride of family, to see that my upbringing was equal to my birth. He gave me the name of Kerovan, which was that of a noted warrior of our House, and he saw that I was tutored in arms as became a youngling of station and shield, sending to me one Jago, a keepless man of good birth who had served my Lord as Master Menie until he was disabled by a bad fall in the mountains.

Jago was a master of the arts of war, not only with the lesser skills that can be battered into a youngling with a strong body and keen eyes, but also those more subtle matters that deal with the ordering of bodies of men great and small. Crippled and tied to a way of living that was only a half-life for a once-active man, he set his brain to labor as he had once ordered his body. Always he searched for new lore of battle, and sometimes at night I would watch him with a strip of smooth bark before him, patiently setting out in labored and crooked script facts concerning the breaking of sieges, the ordering of assaults, and the like, droning on to me the while, emphasizing this point that by a fierce dig into the bark with the knife he used for a pen.

Jago was far more widely traveled than most dalesmen, who perhaps in a whole lifetime know little beyond four or five dales outside their own birthplace. He had been overseas in his first youth traveling with the Sulcar Traders, those dangerous sea-rovers, to such half-fabled lands as Karsten, Alizon, and Estcarp—though of the latter nation he said little, appearing uneasy when I besought him to tell of his travels in detail. All he would say was that it was a land where witch spells and ensorcellment were as common as corn in a field, and that all the women were witches and he kept himself to themselves better and apart from men, so that it was a place where one kept one's eyes to oneself and walked very quietly and mum-tongued.

There was this which makes me remember Jago well and with gratitude. In his eyes I was apparently like any other youngling, and not a young monster. So when I was with him I could forgive my differences from my fellows and rest content.

Thus Jago taught me the arts of war—or rather such as a dale heir should know. For in those days we did not know the meaning of real war, giving that name to our petty skirmishing between riv-

lords or against the Waste outlaws. And of those we saw many in the long winters when starvation and ill weather drove them against us to plunder our granaries and try to take our warm halls and garths. War wore a far grimmer face in later years, and men got full bellies of it. It was no longer a kind of game which was played by rules, as one moves pieces back and forth across a board on a winter's eve.

But if Jago was my sword tutor, the Wiseman Riwal showed me there were other paths of life in the world. It had always been held that only a woman could learn the ways of healing and perform the spells my people draw upon in their time of need in body and spirit. Thus Riwal was as strange to his fellows as I. He had a great thirst for knowledge, which was in him as a longing for bread might be in a starving man. At times he would go roving, not only in the forest country, but beyond, into the Waste itself. When he returned he would be burdened by a pack like any peddler who carried his own stock in trade.

Being kin to the Head Forester, he had taken without formal leave one of the cots nearby. This had been made snug and tight by the work of his own hands, setting above its door a mask carved of stone, not in the likeness of our people. Men looked askance at Riwal, yes—but let any animal ail, or even a man keep his bed in sickness that could not be named—then he was summoned.

About his cot grew all manner of herbs, some of those long-known to every housewife in the dale. But others were brought from afar with masses of soil bundled up about their roots, and he set them out with care. Everything grew for Riwal, and the farmer who had a wish for the best of crops would go cap in hand at sowing time and ask the Wiseman to overlook his land and give advice.

Not only did he bring green life, but he also drew that which wings over our heads or pads on four feet. Birds and animals that were hurt or ailing came to him of their own wills. Or else he would carry them to his place gently and tend them until they were able once more to fend for themselves.

This was enough to set any man apart from his fellows. But it was also well known that Riwal went to the places of the Old Ones, that he tried to search out those secrets our blood had never known. And for that, men did fear him. Yet it was that which drew me to him first.

I was as keen-eared as any child who knows that others talk about him behind their hands. And I had heard the garbled stories of my birth, of that curse which lay upon the blood of Ulm, together with the hint that neither was my mother's House free of the taint of strange mixture. The proof of both was perhaps in my flesh and bone. I had only to look in the mirror of Jago's polished shield to see it for myself.

I went to Riwal, boldly perhaps in outward seeming, but with an inward chill that, young as I was, I fought to master. He was on his knees setting out some plants which had long, thin leaves sharply cut, like the heads of boar spears. He did not look up as I came to him, but rather spoke as if I had already spent the morning in his company.

“Dragon's Tongue, the Wisewomen call this.” He had a soft voice with a small tremor, not quite a stammer. “It is said to seek out the putrid matter in unhealing wounds, even as a tongue might lick such hurts clean. We shall see, we shall see. But it is not to speak of plants that you stand here. Kerovan, is it, now?”

“It is not. Men say you know of the Old Ones.”

He sat back on his heels to look me eye to eye.

“But not much. We can look and finger, search and study, but of their powers—those we cannot net or trap. One can only hope to brush up a crumb here and there, to speculate, to go on everseeking. They had vast knowledge—of building, of creating, of living—beyond our ken. We do not even know why they were near-gone from High Hallack when the first of our ancestors arrived. We did not pursue

them out—no, already their keeps and temples, their Places of Power were emptied. Here and there yes, a few lingered. And they may still be found in the Waste and beyond the Waste in that land we have not entered. But the most—they were gone, perhaps long before men, as we know them, arrived. Still—to seek what may still lie here—it is enough to fill a lifetime and yet not find a tenth of a tenth of it!”

In his sunbrowned face his eyes were alight with that same spark I had seen in Jago's when he spoke of a trick of swordplay or a clever ambush. Now Riwal studied me in turn.

“What seek you of the Old Ones?” he asked.

“Knowledge,” I answered. “Knowledge of why I am as I am—not man—yet neither—” I hesitated for my pride would not let me voice what I had heard in whispers.

Riwal nodded. “Knowledge is what every man should seek, and knowledge of himself most of all. But such knowledge I cannot give you. Come.”

He arose and started toward his dwelling with his swinging woodsman's stride. Without further question I followed after. So I came into Riwal's treasure house.

I could only stand just within the door and stare at what lay about me, for never before had I seen such a crowding of things, each enough to catch the eye and demand closer attention. For in baskets and nests were wild animals, watching me with bright and wary eyes, yet seeming, in this place, to feel such safety that they did not hide in fear. There were shelves in plenty on the walls. And each length of roughly hewn, hardly smoothed board was crammed with a burden of clay pots, bundles of herbs and roots, and bits and fragments that could only have come from the places of the Old Ones.

There was a bed, and two stools were so crowded upon the hearth that they sat nearly in the fire. The rest of the dwelling was more suited for storage than for living. In the middle of the room Riwal stood with his fists planted upon his hips, his head turning from side to side as if he tried to sight some special thing among the wealth of objects.

I sniffed the air. There was a mingling of many odors. The aromatic scent of herbs warred with the musky smell of animals and the suggestion of cooking from a pot still hanging on the boil-chain in the fireplace. Yet it was not in any way an unclean or disgusting smell.

“You seek the Old Ones—look you here, then!” Riwal gestured to one shelf among the many.

I skirted two baskets with furry inhabitants and came closer to see what he would show me. There I found set-out fragments, one or two being whole, of small figures or masks—bits which in some instances Riwal had fitted together to form broken but recognizable figures.

Whether these indeed represented various beings among the Old Ones, or whether they had had life only in the imagination of their creators, no one might know. But that they had beauty, even when they tended toward the grotesque, I could see for myself.

There was a winged figure of a woman, alas lacking a head; and a man of humanoid proportions save that from the forehead curled two curved horns. Yet the face below was noble, serene, as if he were a great lord by right of his spirit. There was a figure with webbed feet and hands, plainly meant to suggest a water dweller; and a small one of another woman, or at least a female, with long hair covering most of her body like a cloak. These Riwal had managed to restore in part. The rest were fragments: a head, crowned but noseless, the eyes empty pits; a delicate hand that bore an intricate ring of metal on both thumb and forefinger, those rings seemingly a part now of the hand, whose substance was not stone but a material I did not know.

I did not touch; I merely stood and looked. And in me was born a longing to know more of these people. I could understand the never-ending hunger that kept Riwal searching, his patient attempts

restore the broken bits he found that he might see, guess, but perhaps never know—

So Riwal also became my teacher. I went with him to those places shunned by others, to search, speculate; always hoping that some find might be a key that would open to us the doors of the past, at least give us a small glimpse into it.

My father made visits to me month by month, and when I was in my tenth year, he spoke to me with authority. It was plain he was in some uneasiness of spirit when he did so. But I was not amazed that he was so open with me, for always he had treated me, not as a child, but as one who had good understanding. Now he was very sober, impressing me that this was of import.

“You are the only living son of my body,” he began, almost as if he found it difficult to choose the words he must use. “By all the right of custom you shall sit in the High Seat at Ulmskeep after me. He paused then, so long I ventured to break into his musing, which I knew covered a troubled mind.

“There are those who see it differently.” I did not make that a question, for I knew it to be a statement of fact.

He frowned. “Who has been saying so to you?”

“None. This I have guessed for myself.”

His frown grew. “You have guessed the truth. I took Hlymer under my protection, as was fitting when his mother became Lady in Ulm. He has no right to be shield-raised to the High Seat at my death. That is for you. But they praise me now to hand-fast Lisana with Rogear, who is cousin-kin to you.”

I was quick enough to understand what he would tell me and yet loath to hear it. But I did not hesitate to bring it into the open myself.

“Thus Rogear might claim Ulmsdale by wife-right.”

My father's hand went to his sword hilt and clenched there. He rose to his feet and strode back and forth, setting his feet heavily on the earth as if he needed some firm stance against attack.

“It is against custom, but they assault my ears with it day upon day, until I am well-nigh deafened beneath my own roof!”

I knew, with bitterness, that his “they” must be mainly that mother who would not call me son. But of that I did not speak.

He continued. “Therefore I make a marriage for you, Kerovan, an heir's marriage so that all men can see that I do not intend any such offense against you, but give you all right of blood and clan. The tenth day Nolon rides to Ithkrypt, carrying the proxy axe for your wedding. They tell me that the maid Joisan is a likely lass, lacking two years of your age, which is fitting. Safe-married, you cannot be set aside—though your bride will not come to you until perhaps the Year of the Fire Troll.”

I counted in my mind—eight years then. I was well content. For marriage had no meaning for me then, save that my father deemed it of such importance. I wondered, but somehow I did not dare at that moment to ask, whether he would tell this Joisan, or her kinsmen who were arranging our match, what manner of lord she would meet on her true bride-day—that I was what I was. Inside I shrank, even in thought, from that meeting. But to a boy of my years that fatal day seemed very far away, and perhaps something might happen to make sure it would never occur.

I did not see Nolon set forth to play my role in axe marriage, for he rode out of Ulmskeep where he did not go. It was only two months later that my father came to me looking less unhappy, to tell me that Nolon had returned, and that I was indeed safely wed to a maid I had never seen, and probably would not see for at least eight more years.

I did not, thereafter, think much of the fact that I had a lady, being well-occupied, with my studies.

and even more with the quests on which I went with Riwal. Though I was under the guardianship of Jago, he made no protest when I spent time with Riwal. Between those two came to be an odd companionship, in spite of their being so dissimilar in thought and deed.

As the years passed, that stiffness which had come from my tutor's old hurt grew worse, and I found it difficult to face me in open contest with sword or axe. But with the crossbow he was still a skilled marksman. And his reading of maps, his discussion of this or that battle plan, continued. Though I saw little use then for such matters in my own life, I paid him dutiful attention, and that was to be my salvation later.

But Riwal did not appear to age at all, and his long stride still carried him far distances without tiring. I learned early to match his energy. And, while my knowledge of plants was never as great as his, yet I found a kinship with birds and animals. I ceased to hunt for sport. And I took pleasure in the fact that his wild ones did not fear me.

Best of all, however, were our visits to the places of the Old Ones. Riwal prospected further and further over the borders of the Waste, seeking ever to find something intact from the ancient days. His greatest hope, as he confided in me, was to discover some book roll or rune record.

When I suggested that the reading of such could well be beyond his skill, for surely the Old Ones had not our tongue, he nodded in agreement. Still I felt he opposed that thought, sure that if he did find such, the Power itself would aid him to understand it.

It was in the Year of the Spitting Toad that I had been wed. As I came closer to manhood, the thought of that distant lady began now and then to trouble me oddly. There were two lads near my years in the foresters' hold, but from the first they had not been playmates, or later companions. Not only did rank separate us, but they had made me aware, from the beginning of my consciousness of the world about me, that my non-human appearance cut me off from easy friendships. I had given my friendship to only two men—Jago, old enough to be my father, and Riwal, who could have been an older brother (and how I sometimes wished that was the truth!).

But those forester lads went now to the autumn fair with lass-ribbons tied to the upper latches of their jerkins, whispering and laughing about the adventures those led them to. This brought to me the first strong foreboding that when it did at last come time to claim the Lady Joisan in person, she might find me as ill a sight as had my mother. What would happen when my wife came to Ulmsdale and I must go to bide with her? If she turned from me in open loathing—

Nightmares began to haunt my sleep, and Riwal at last spoke to me with the bluntness he could use upon occasion. When he demanded what ill thought rode me, I told him the truth, hoping against hope that he would speedily assure me that I saw monsters where there were only shadows, and that I had nothing to fear—though my good sense and experience argued on the side of disaster.

But he did not give me that reassurance. Instead he was silent for a space, looking down at his hands, which had been busied fitting together some of his image fragments, but now rested quiet on the table.

"There has ever been truth between us, Kerovan," he said at last. "To me who knows you well—above all others would I choose to walk in your company. But how can I promise you that this will turn to happiness? I can only wish you peace and—" he hesitated. "Once I walked a path that I thought might end in hand-fasting and I was happy for a little. But while you bear your differences to others openly, I bear mine within. Still, there they be. And the one with whom I would have shared Cup and Flame—she saw those differences, and they made her uneasy."

"But you were not already wed," I ventured, when he fell silent.

“No, I was not. And I had something else.”

“That being?” I was quick to ask.

“This!” He spread out his hands in a gesture to encompass all that was about him under that roof.

“Then I shall have this also,” I said. Marry I had, for the sake of custom and my father's peace of mind. What I had seen and heard of marriages among the dale lords did not set happiness high. Heirs and lords married to increase their holdings by a maid's dowry, to get a new heir for the line. Inclination and liking came afterward, that was happiness, but it certainly did not always follow so.

“Perhaps you can.” Riwal nodded. “There is something I have long thought on. Perhaps this is the time to do it.”

“Follow the road!” I was on my feet, as eager as if he meant to set out upon that beckoning mystery this very moment. For a mystery it was, and beckon it did.

We had come across it on our last venture into the Waste, a road of such building as put any dale effort to shame, making our roads seem like rough tracks fit only for beasts. The end of the road we had chanced upon was just that, a sharp chopping-off of that carefully laid pavement, with nothing about the end to explain the why-for. The mystery began nearly on our doorstep, for that end point was less than a half day's journey from Riwal's cot. The road ran on back into the Waste, wide, straight, only a little cloaked here and there by the drift of windborne soil. To find its other end was a project we had indeed long held in mind. The suggestion that we set out on this journey quite pushed from my mind the thought of Joisan. She was just a name anyway, and any meeting between us was still years ahead, while the following of the road was here and now!

I was answerable to none but Jago for my actions. And this was the time of year when he made his annual trip to Ulmskeep, where he kept festival with old comrades-in-arms and reported to my father. Thus I was free to follow my own wishes, which in this case meant the road.

Here Begins the Adventure of Joisan, Maid of Ithkrypt in Ithdale of High Hallack.

I, Joisan of Ithkrypt, was wed at harvest time in the Year of the Spitting Toad. By rights that was not considered a year for new beginnings; but my uncle, Lord Cyart, had the stars read three times by Dame Lorlias of Norstead Abbey (she who was so learned in such matters that men and women traveled weary leagues to consult her), and her report was that my wedding was written as a thing needful to my own fortune. Not that I was aware of much more than the stir the question caused, for I was thereupon the center of long and tiring ceremonies that brought me close to tears for the very tiredness they laid upon me.

When one has no more than eight years, it is hard to judge what occupies most the thoughts and plans of those in the adult world. I can remember my wedding now mostly as a bright picture in which I had a part I could not understand.

I remember wearing a tabard stiff with gold-thread stitchery that caught up a pattern of fresh-water pearls (for which the streams of Ithdale are rightly famous). But I was more occupied at the time with keeping to Dame Math's stern warning that I must not spot or wrinkle my finery; that I must be prudent at the feast table lest I spill and so mar the handiwork of long and patient hours. The robe beneath was blue, which did not please me over-much as it is a color I do not fancy, liking better the dark, rich shades such as hue the autumn leaves. But blue is for a maiden bride, so it was mine to wear.

My new lord was not present to drink the Life Cup and light the House Candle with me hand in hand. In his place stood a man (seeming ancient to me, for his close-cropped beard was frost-rimmed with silver), as stern as my uncle in his look. His hand, I remember, bore a scar across the knuckle that had left a raised banding of flesh of which I was acutely aware as he clasped my fingers in the ceremony. And in the other hand he held a massive war axe that signified my true lord who was about to twine my destiny with his—though that lord was at least a half-dozen years or more away from being able to raise that axe.

“Lord Kerovan and Lady Joisan!” The guests shouted our names together, the men unsheathing their knives of ceremony so that the torchlight flashed upon the blades, vowing to uphold the truth of this marriage in the future, by virtue of those same blades, if need be. My head had begun to ache with the noise, and my excitement at being allowed to attend a real feast was fast ebbing.

The elderly Lord Nolon, who stood proxy at the wedding, shared a plate with me politely throughout the feast. But, though he asked me with ceremony before making a choice from all offered platters, I was in too much awe of him to say “no” to what I liked not, and his choices were mainly of that nature. So I nibbled at what my taste rebelled against and longed for it to come to an end.

It did, much later, when the women with great merriment laid me, wearing only my fine night shift, in the great, curtained bed. And the men, headed by my uncle, brought in that awesome axe and bedded it beside me as if it were indeed my lord. That was my wedding, though afterward it did not seem too strange, just one of those things difficult for a child to understand, something to be dismissed to the back of one's mind.

Only that axe, which was my partner in place of a flesh-and-blood bridegroom, was a star-prophecy of what was to come—not only to me but to all the country that was my home: High Halla of the many dales.

After the departure of Lord Nolon, life soon returned to what I had always known, for by custom would continue to dwell under my birthroof until I was of a suitable age for my lord to claim me.

There were some small changes. On high feast days I sat at the left hand of my uncle and was addressed ceremoniously by my new title of Lady of Ulmsdale. My feast-day tabard also no longer bore only one House symbol, but two, being divided in the center vertically with a ribbon of gold. To the left, the leaping Gryphon of Ulmsdale was worked in beads that glittered like gems. On the right was the familiar Broken Sword of Harb, that mighty warrior who had founded our line in High Halla and given all his kin fame thereafter when he had defeated the dread Demon of Irr Waste with his broken blade.

On my name-day, or as near to that as travel conditions permitted, would come some gift sent by my Lord Kerovan, together with proper greetings. But Kerovan himself was never real to me.

Also, since my uncle's lady was dead, he looked to his sister Dame Math for the chatelaine's duties in Ithkrypt. She took over the ordering of my days, to secret sighs and stifled rebellion on my part. This and this and this must be learned, that I be a credit to my upbringing when I indeed went to order my lord's household. And those tasks, which grew with my years, induced in me sometimes a desire never to hear of Ulmsdale or its heir; a longing in all my being to be unwed and free. But from Dame Math and her sense of duty I had no escape.

I could not remember my uncle's lady at all. For some reason, though he lacked an heir, he made no move through the years to wed again. Perhaps, I sometimes thought, even he dared not think of lessening in any part Dame Math's authority. That she was an able chatelaine, bringing peace and comfort to all she had dominion over, could not be denied. She kept those about her in quiet, sobriety, and good order.

In her long-ago youth (it was almost impossible to think of Dame Math as ever being a maid!) she had been axe-wed in the same fashion as I to a lord of the south. But before he could claim her, the news came that he had died of a wasting fever. Whether she thereafter regretted her loss, no one ever knew. After the interval of mourning she retired to the House of Dames at Norstead, an establishment much-revered for the learning and piety of its ladies. But the death of her brother's lady had occurred before she took vows of perpetual residence, and she had returned to the mistress's role at Ithkrypt. She wore ever the sober robe of Dame, and twice a year journeyed to Norsdale for a period of retreat. As I grew older, she took me with her.

My uncle's heir was still undecided, since he had made no binding declaration. He had a younger sister also—one Islaugha, who had married and had both son and daughter. But since that son was heir to his father's holding, he was provided for.

I was the daughter of his younger half-brother, but not being male, I could not inherit save by direct decree—the which my uncle had not uttered. My dowry was such to attract a husband, and my uncle, should he wish, had also the right—no, even duty, to name that husband heir, but only when he

declared it so would it be binding.

I think Dame Math would have liked to see me in the House of Dames, had the marriage with Kerovan not been made. And it is the truth that I did find my visits there pleasant. I was born with an inquiring mind and somehow attracted the notice of Past-Abbess Malwinna. She was very old, but very, very wise. Having talked with me several times, she directed that I be given the right to study in the library of the House. The stories of the past which had always enchanted me were as nothing to the rolls of chronicles and travels, dale histories, and the like, that were on the shelves and in the storage boxes in that room.

But what held me most were the references to the Old Ones, those who had ruled this land before the first of the dalesmen came north. I knew well that such accounts as I found were not only fragmentary, but perhaps also distorted, for the larger numbers of the Old Ones had already withdrawn before our forefathers arrived. Those our ancestors had contact with were lesser beings, or perhaps only shadows, left as one would discard a threadbare cloak.

Some were evil as we judged evil, in that they were enemies to humankind—like the demon Harhad slain. There were still places that were filled with dark enchantment, so that any venturing unwisely into such could be enwebbed. Other such beings could grant prayers and gifts. Such was Gunnora—the Harvest Mother—to whom all women were loyal, and whose mysteries were as great as their way as the Worship of the Cleansing Flame to which the House of Dames was dedicated. I myself wore an amulet of Gunnora—her sheath of wheat entwined with ripened fruit.

Yet others seemed neither good nor ill, being removed from the standards of humankind. At times they manifested themselves capriciously, delivering good to one, evil to another, as if they weighed men on some scales of their own and thereafter dealt with them as they saw fit.

It was chancy to deal with any of the Old Ones save Gunnora. The accounts I found at Norstead were full of instances where humans had awakened from long slumber powers that never should have been disturbed. At times I would seek out Abbess Malwinna in her small garden and ask questions, to which she gave answers if she could. If she could not, she admitted her ignorance frankly. It was on my last such meeting with her that I found her sitting with a bowl upon her knee.

The bowl was of green stone, wrought so finely that the shadow of her fingers about it showed through the substance. It had no ornamentation but its beauty of line, and it was very beautiful indeed. Within was enough wine to cover the bottom and come a bit up the sides.

I knew it was wine, for the heady smell reached me. The warmth of her fingers about it was releasing the scent of the grape. She turned it slowly around and around, so the liquid washed back and forth, but she did not watch it. Instead she looked at me so searchingly that I felt discomfort, as if I had been found wanting in some necessary quality. I searched my conscience hurriedly for any fault I might recently have shown.

“It is long,” she said, “since I have tried this, Joisan. But this morning I awoke with the need for doing so, and for you. In my youth I had the gift of farseeing—for gift it is, though some shrink from it. They are afraid of that which they cannot touch, see, taste, hear, or otherwise clearly perceive. It is a gift that cannot be controlled. Few who have it can summon it at will; they must wait until the time it draws them to action. But if you are willing, this day I can use it for you—for how much or how well, that I cannot tell.”

I was excited, for of farseeing I had heard. The Wisewomen could use it—or some of them could. But, as the Past-Abbess said, it was not a talent that could be sharpened for use and then put ready to hand like a man's sword or a woman's needle—it must be seized upon when it came, and there was no

use in trying to control it. However, with my excitement there was also a tiny chill of fear. It was one thing to read, to listen to, stories of the Power. It was, I understood now, another to see it in action and for one's own self. Yet at that moment I do not think even panic would have kept me from saying "yes" to her offer.

"Kneel before me, Joisan. Take this bowl within your two hands and hold it level and steady."

I did as she bade, cupping my palms, one on either side of the bowl, holding it as one might hold a firebranch that might be ignited at any moment. Then she leaned forward and touched the fingers of her right hand to my forehead.

"Look upon the wine; think of it as a picture—a picture—" Oddly enough her voice sounded farther and farther away. As I looked down into the bowl, I was no longer seeing only dark liquid. It was rather as if I hung suspended in the air above a wide, borderless expanse of darkness, a giant mirror with none of the brilliance a true mirror possesses.

There came a misting, a change on that surface. Tendrils of the mist became shadow forms. I saw a round ball that glinted and, entombed in that, a form familiar to me—that of a gryphon gleaming white.

At first the ball was very large, near filling the whole of the mirror. Then it shrank swiftly, and I saw it was fastened to a chain. The chain swung from a hand, so that the ball revolved. The gryphon it sometimes faced me, sometimes faced away. But there grew in me the knowledge that this ball was of great importance.

It was very small now, for the hand that dangled it was also shrinking. The arm to which it was attached, and then the body belonging to the arm, appeared. Now a man stood there. His face was turned from me, hidden. He wore war mail, the hood drawn up about his throat. There was a battle sword girded to him, and over his shoulder I saw the arch of a crossbow. But he wore no House tabard, nothing to identify him, only that swinging ball. Then he left, tramping away as if he had been summoned elsewhere. The mirror was dark and empty; nor did any more shadows gather there.

Malwinna's hand fell from my forehead. As I raised my eyes to blink and blink again, I saw a woeful pallor on her face. So I quickly set aside the bowl and dared to take her hands within mine, striving to help her.

She smiled weakly. "It draws the strength—the more when one has little strength left. But it was laid on me to do this thing. Tell me, my daughter, what did you learn?"

"You did not see it, then?" I was surprised.

"No. It was not a farseeing for me, that I knew. It was yours only."

I told her what I had seen: the gryphon englobed and a man in battle dress holding it. And I ended with "The gryphon is the badge of the House of Ulm. Did I then see the Lord Kerovan to whom I am wed?"

"That may be so," she agreed. "But it is in my mind that the gryphon is that which is of the greatest importance to your future. If such ever comes to your hand, my daughter, do you guard it well. For it is also to be believed that this is a thing of the Old Ones and a focus of some power they once knew. Now, call Dame Alousan, for I have need of one of her strengthening cordials. But speak not of what we have done here this morning, for farseeing is a private thing and not to be talked of lightly."

I said naught to any of the Dames, nor to Math. And the Past-Abbess allowed them to believe that she was merely a little wearied, so they fussed about her, for she was greatly loved. No one paid any attention to me. I had taken the bowl with me into the guesting room and put it on the table there.

Though I continued to look into it now and again I saw nothing but the wine; no dark mirror, no

shadows moving. Yet in my mind was so vivid a picture of the crystal gryphon that I could have painted it, had I any skill in limning, in every small detail. And I speculated as to what it might mean. The gryphon so enclosed had differences from the one that appeared as Ulm's badge. A gryphon by rights had the wings and forepart of an eagle: its front legs end in a bird of prey's strong talons. But at the rear, the tail, the hind paws are those of a lion, one of the beasts known to the south alone. On its bird's head a lion's ears stand upright.

In the ancient learning the gryphon symbolizes gold: the warmth and majesty of the sun. Ofttimes in legends it is the guardian of hidden treasure.

Thus the gryphon is mainly pictured in red and gold, which are sun colors. Yet the one enclosed in the globe was the white of ice—a white gryphon.

Shortly after that farseeing, Dame Math and I returned home to Ithkrypt. But we did not remain there long. For in this Year of the Crowned Swan I had reached the age of fourteen, and Dame Math was already preparing my bride clothes and the furnishings I would take with me when Kerovan would send for me, as was the custom, in the next year or two.

So we went on to Trevamper, that town set at the meeting of highway and river where a number of merchants in the north show their wares upon occasion. Even the Sulcarmen, who are searovers and seldom come far from wind and wave, travel to Trevamper. For there is the interior trade. And by chance we met there also my Aunt Islaugha, her son Toross, and her daughter Yngilda.

She came to pay a call on Dame Math, but I felt it was one of duty only and there was little liking between these sisters. However the Lady Islaugha presented a smiling face and spoke us far from congratulating me on the fine marriage that had united me to the House of Ulm.

Yngilda pushed closer to me when our elders had turned their attention back to their own concerns, and I thought she stared rudely. She was a stout girl, bundled in rich clothing down which her braids rippled, their ends bound in ribbons hung with little silver bells meant to chime sweetly as she moved. Such a conceit did not suit her broad, flatfish face, with its too-small mouth always pursed a little as if she chewed upon a spicy secret she debated over sharing.

“You have seen the likeness of your lord?” she asked almost abruptly.

I stirred uneasily under the probing of her eyes. I knew her then for unfriend, though why she should be so when we hardly knew each other, I could not guess.

“No.” As always when such uneasiness with others was in me, I was wary. But the truth is better than any evasion which may later trip one up. And for the first time I wondered a little at a matter I had never considered before. Why had Kerovan not caused to be sent a likeness of himself? That such was done in axe marriages I knew.

“A pity.” Her gaze seemed to have some manner of triumph in it now. “Look you here—this is my promised lord, Elvan of Rishdale.” She brought out of her belt pocket an oblong of wood with a face painted on it. “He sent it with his bride gift two years ago.”

The painted face was that of a man of middle years, no boy. And it was not a pleasant countenance to my thinking, but perhaps the limner had either not been skillful or had some reason not to flatter this Elvan. That Yngilda was proud of it was plain.

“He would seem a man of authority.” I did the best I could in way of praise. My disliking for the pictured face grew stronger the longer I regarded it.

She took that, as I had hoped, as a compliment to her promised lord.

“Rishdale is an upper dale. They are wool people, and the trade is rich. Already my lord has sent me this and this—” She patted an amber necklace which lay above her tabard and thrust her hand out

to me that I might look upon a massive thumb ring of a serpent with eyes that were flecks of red gem fire.

“The serpent is his House badge. This is his own ring, sent for a welcome gift. I go to him next harvest time.”

“I wish you happy,” I answered.

Her pale tongue swept out over her lower lip. Again she was in two minds over some speech to make. At last she brought herself to it, bending her head even closer, while I had all I could do not to withdraw at her approach, for her close company did not please me.

“I would I could say the same to you, kinswoman.”

I knew I should not encourage her now, yet something made me ask, “And why not, kinswoman?”

“We are not so far from Ulmsdale as you. We have heard—much.” And she strove to give such a dire accent to that last word that she did indeed make an impression on me. For all my prudence and distrust, I could not now deny her this confidence.

“Much of what, kinswoman?” My tone made a challenge of that, one she was quick to note and that pleased her, I am sure.

“Of the curse, kinswoman. Did they not tell you that the Heir of Ulmsdale lies under a double cursing? Why, his own mother has refused to look upon his face since his birth hour. Have they not told you that?” she repeated with open relish. “Alack, that I should spoil your dreaming about a brave young lord. He is a monster thing, they say, sent to live apart because all men shrink from—”

“Yngilda!” That saying of her name was as sharp as a whip crack, and under it she flinched as if indeed some lash had bitten into her body. Dame Math stood over us, and it was plain in her face she had heard those words.

So open was her wrath that at that moment I knew Yngilda had indeed spoken the truth, or at least come so close to it as to shake my guardian. Only the truth could have aroused her ire so greatly.

She said no more, only eyed Yngilda menacingly until the girl edged back, her full cheeks blanching a little in her fright. She gave a kind of squeak and scrambled away. But I sat where I was and met Dame Math eye to eye. Within me the cold grew, setting me to shivering.

Cursed—a monster whom even his mother could not bear to look upon! By the Heart of Gunnor what had they done to me, to give me in marriage to that? I could have screamed my terror aloud, but I did not. For in that much I kept my control. I only said slowly, forcing my voice to be level and determined to know the full of it here and now, “By the oath of the Flame you serve, Lady, tell me now the truth. Are her words that truth? Am I wed to one who is not like other men?” For I could not bring myself to say “monster.”

I think up until that moment Dame Math might have covered with fair words. But now she sat beside me, her face grave, as the flush of anger faded.

“You are no longer a child, Joisan. Yes, I will give you what truth I know. It is true that Kerovand dwells apart from his kin, but he is not a monster. There is a curse laid on those of the House of Ulmsdale and his mother comes from the updates, from a family rumored to have inter-wed with Old Ones. That is why he has such blood within him. But he is not monstrous—of this Lord Cyart made sure before he would consent to the marriage.

“Yet he dwells apart from his kin. Is it true that his mother will not look upon him?” The cold within me was such now I could hardly control myself.

Still she was frank with me. “That is true because of the manner of his birthing, and she is a fool. Then she told me an unusual tale of how the Lord of Ulm had taken wives and had no living heirs.”

because of the curse. How he wed a third time with a widow, and how she had been taken on the road before her time with birth pains and had borne her son within the walls of one of the Old One buildings. And of how thereafter she had turned her face from him because she was so filled with fear that the babe was of the Old Ones' sending. But he was sound and no monster. His father swore to that by the Great Oath for which there can be no breaking.

Because she told it all so plainly, I believed her and was less shaken.

Then Dame Math added, "Joisan, be glad that you take a young lord. Yngilda, for all her prattling goes to one already wed once, a man old enough to be her father, and one who will have little patience with any youthful follies. She will find him far less indulgent to her whims and laziness than her mother, and she will perhaps rue the day she left her own keep for his.

"Kerovan by all accounts is one you will well company with—for he is learned in rune scrolls as well as in sword-play, which so occupies the minds and bodies of most men. He has a liking for searching out old things, such as you have also. Yes, you have much to think right in your wedding and little to see of shadows. You are a maid of good mind and not easily shaken. Do not let the envious words of this foolish wench upset your reason. I swear, if you wish it, by the Flame—and you well know the meaning of such an oath for me—that I would not stand by without protest and should you wed to any monster!"

Knowing Dame Math, that reassurance was indeed all I needed. Yet during the days that followed I did think again and again of the strange upbringing Kerovan must have had. That a mother had turned her face from her child was hard to believe. Still, giving birth in a place of the Old Ones might have poisoned her mind against the cause of her pain and fear as she lay therein. And I knew well from my reading at the Abbey that many such places had malignant atmospheres that worked subtly upon mankind. She could well have fallen prey to such influences during her hours of labor.

For the rest of our stay in town my aunt and her daughter did not come near us. Perhaps Dame Math had made plain her views on what Yngilda had told me. I was well content not to see her face, her pursed mouth, and her probing eyes again.

Kerovan

To most dalesmen the Waste is a fearsome place. Outlawed men were driven to refuge there, perhaps coming to regard it in time as they had their native dales. And there are hunters, wild as any outlaws in their own fashion, ranging it to bring back packloads of strange furs as well as lumps of pure metal that had congealed into odd shapes: not native ores, but substances that had been worked and then reduced to broken pieces.

Such lumps of metal were greatly prized, though smiths had to rework them with care. Swords and mail made from this metal were stronger, more resistant to weathering. On the other hand, sometimes it had fearsome properties, exploding in vast configurations to consume all nearby—as if some power had struck it. A metal-smith both yearned to use it for the promise of fine craftsmanship and feared that each piece he brought to the forge might be one of the cursed bits.

Those who found such metal and traded in it were notoriously close-mouthed about the source. Riwal believed that they mined, not the earth, but places of the Old Ones wherein some ancient and unbelievably horrible conflict had fused metal into these lumps. He had attempted to win the confidence of one Hagon, a trader, who had twice passed through our forest territory. But Hagon refused to talk.

So it was not only the broken-off road that beckoned us. There were other secrets to be uncovered. And I found this venture well to my liking.

We reached the broken-off end of the road by mid-morning and stood studying it before we set foot on its earth-drifted surface. It was indeed a puzzle, for that break was as clean-cut as if some giant swordsman had brought down his blade to sever the masonry. Yet, if some such action had occurred, where was the rest? For beyond the break there was not even a trace of old rubble to suggest it had ever run beyond this point. And why would any road come to such a purposeless ending? It may be true that the purposes of the Old Ones were not the same as those of men, and we cannot judge their actions by ours.

“How long ago since men walked here, Riwal?” I asked.

He shrugged. “Who knows? If it were *men* who did so. But if the road ends thus, the beginning may be of more interest.”

We were riding the small, desert-bred horses used by Waste rovers, tough beasts with an inherited ability to go far on a minimum of drink and forage. And we led a third horse with our supplies in a pack. We went clothed as metal traders, so that any spying upon us could believe we were of the Waste ourselves. We traveled alert to sign and sound, for only he who is ever-watchful can hope to best the traps and dangers of such a land.

The Waste is not pure desert, though much is arid land with a scant covering of small, wind-beaten

shrubs and sun-dried grass in ragged clumps. At times, dark copses of trees grow so thick they huddle trunk to trunk. And outcrops of stone stand like pillars.

Some of these had been worked, if not by man, then by creatures who used stone for monuments. But the pillars had been so scoured by years of winds that only traces of the working remained. Here a wall could be seen for a bit; there a pair of columns suggested a past building of some pride.

We passed such a place soon after we took to the road, but there was not enough left to explore. In the open there was silence, for this was a windless day. The clop-clop of our mounts' feet on the pavement seemed to echo, making far too loud a sound, so that I found myself looking from side to side, and now and then over my shoulder. The feeling grew stronger that we were being watched—by outlaws?

In spite of myself I found my hand straying ever in the direction of the sword hilt, ready to defend against attack. Yet when I glanced at Riwal, I saw him riding easy, though he also watched right and left.

"I feel"—I urged my mount closer to his—"that we are watched." Perhaps I humbled my pride to admit that, yet this was more his land than mine, and I relied on him.

"It is ever so—in the Waste," he returned.

"Outlaws?" My fingers closed about the hilt now.

"Perhaps. But more likely other things." His eyes did not quite meet mine, and I sensed he was at a loss to explain. Perhaps he, too, feared to display some weakness before me, a younger and less-tried venturer.

"Is it the truth then that the Old Ones left guardians?"

"What man among us knows?" He countered my question with another. "This much is so: when one ventures into their ways, there is often this feeling of being watched. Yet it has never been with me more than just watching. If they left guardians, as you say, those are now too old and tired to do more than watch."

I found that hardly reassuring. And still I continued to watch—though nothing stirred out in the flat land across which the road hammered a straight and level path.

At nooning we drew to the side of the pavement, ate and drank, and gave our horses to drink also from the water skins we carried. There was no sun, and the sky over us was gray; still I could see no clouds gathering to threaten storm. But Riwal sniffed the air, his head up to the sky.

"We must seek shelter," he said, and there was urgency in his voice.

"I see no storm clouds."

"Storms come unheralded and swiftly in the Waste. There—" He had been surveying the countryside around, and now he pointed ahead to where there was a pile beside the road, perhaps another cluster of time-eroded ruin.

We pushed on, to discover that sight-distance was deceptive in this place. There was a haze that seemed to rise from the ground so that things appeared closer than they were. But at length we reached the spot he had appointed. And none too soon, for the sky was no longer the gray of a gloomy day, but had darkened now into twilight come hours too soon.

Chance had brought us to shelter. Though the ruins at the outset of the road had been so formless as to only suggest they had once had purpose, this ancient building was in better preservation. There was actually part of a room or hall among the jumble of stone blocks with a portion of roof over it. And into that we crowded both ourselves and our animals.

Now the wind blew, whirling up the grit, hurling it in marching columns to fill eyes, mouths, nostrils. We had to fight to gain the last few strides to cover. Once inside, when we turned to look out it was to see a curtain of dust.

That did not last long. Overhead sounded the rumble of thunder as if an army with a siege train marched. And the lash of lightning followed with force enough to suggest it had struck not too far away. Then came rain—quickly beating down the dust, yet not clearing any path for our vision; rather providing a second curtain, this time of moisture, not grit.

Water ran in a stream across the pitted floor, so we crowded back into the farthest corner of the ruin. The horses whinnied and snuffled, rolling their eyes, as if they found this fury of nature frightening. But to me our corner gave an illusion of shelter, though I flinched when the lightning struck again.

Such fury deafened us. We were reduced to the point of simple endurance and we kept hold of the reins, lest our mounts break out into the storm. As they began to quiet, no longer tossing their heads or stamping, I relaxed a little.

The dark was close to that of true night, and we had no torch. So crowded were we that Riwal's shoulder rubbed mine whenever he moved even slightly, yet the rain was so tumultuous we could not have heard each other without shouting, which we did not do.

What had been the original purpose of the ruin? Built so beside the road, could it have been an inn? Or was it a guard post for some patrol? Or even a temple? As Riwal had said, who knew the purposes of the Old Ones.

With one hand I explored the wall. The surface of the stone was smooth, not pitted as the more exposed portions were. My fingers could detect no seam or joining, yet those blocks had been set together somehow. Suddenly—

Men sleep and dream. But I will swear any oath I did not sleep. And if I dreamed, then it was unlike any dream I had ever known.

I looked out upon the road, and there were those moving along it. Yet when I tried to see them through what appeared to be a mist, I could not. They remained but shapes, approximating men. Could they be men?

Though I could not see them clearly, their emotion flowed to me. They were all moving in one direction, and this was a retreat. There was a vast and overwhelming feeling of—no, it was not defeat, not as if some enemy had pressed them into this withdrawal, but rather that circumstances were against them. They seemed to long for what they left behind, with the longing of those torn from deep rooting.

Now I knew that they were not all alike or of one kind. Some as they passed gave to me their sense of regret, or loss, as clearly as if they had shouted it aloud in words I could understand. But others were less able to communicate in this fashion, though their emotions were none the less deep.

The main press of that strange and ghostly company was past. Now there was only a handful of stragglers, or of those who found it the hardest to leave. Did I or did I not hear the sound of weeping through the rain? If they did not weep in fact they wept in thought, and their sorrow tore at me so I could not look at them any longer, but covered my eyes with my hands and felt on my dusty cheeks the tears of my own to match theirs.

“Kerovan!”

The shadow people were gone. And so was the force of the storm. Riwal's hand was heavy on my shoulder, as if he shook me awake from sleep.

“Kerovan!” There was a sharp demand in his voice, and I blinked at what I could see of him in the dusk.

“What is the matter?”

“You—you were crying out. What happened to you?”

I told him of the shadow people withdrawing in their sorrow.

“Perhaps you have the sight,” he said gravely when I had done. “For that might well have happened when the Old Ones left this land. Have you ever tried farseeing or tested a talent for the Power?”

“Not I!” I was determined that I would not be cut off from my fellows by a second burden. Different I might be in body because of the curse laid on me before my birth, but I needed not add to that difference by striving to follow those paths trod by Wisewomen and a few men such as Riwal. And he did not urge me, after my quick denial. Such a way must be followed by one wholly willing, not by one led into it by another. It has its disciplines that are in some ways more severe than any warrior training, and its own laws.

After the storm the day lightened again, and we were able to set out at a brisk pace. The water still settled in pools and hollows, and we refilled our smaller water bag, letting the horses drink their fill before we moved on.

I wondered, when we rode that way, if I would have the sensation of the company of those I had seen in the vision or dream. But that was not so. And shortly I forgot the intensity of the emotion that I had shared with them. For that I was thankful.

The road, which had run so straight, made a wide curve heading toward the north and the great unknown of the Waste. Now ahead we caught sight of heights making a dark blue line across the sky of evening, as if we headed for a mountain chain.

Here also the land was more hospitable. There were trees where before had been mostly shrubs and stretches of grassland. We came to where the road arched in a bridge over a stream of some size. And it was beside that running water that we camped for the night. In fact Riwal settled us, not on the bank of the stream, but on a bar which thrust out into it. The water was high from the storm, and there was flotsam carried with it, piled around the rocks edging that bar.

I eyed his choice with some disfavor. To my mind he had deliberately selected a site which would give us little room and which appeared dangerous from the sweep of water. He must have read my expression for he said, “This is chancy land, Kerovan. It is best to take the common precautions which are within it—some uncommon ones too.”

“Common precautions?”

He gestured at the stream. “Running water. That which is ill-disposed to us, if it be of the Power and not human, cannot cross running water. If we camp so, we have only one front to defend.”

So reasoned, it was common sense. Thus I pushed rocks and pulled loose drift to clear a space between for us and the horses. Nor did Riwal deny us a fire made from the driest of the drift. The river was falling, but the current was still swift. It held life also, for I saw a dark shape of a length which suggested that the fish of this country were of a huge size, though I was teased by the disturbing suggestion that that shadow beneath the surface did not altogether resemble any fish I knew. I decided that in the Waste it was better not to probe too deeply into the unknown.

We set a watch, as we would in enemy country. At first, during my tour of duty, I was so uneasily alert that I found myself peopling each shadow with an intruder, until I took my fancies in hand and exercised forced control over them.

Though the day had been sunless, we did not lack a moon. Its rays were particularly strong, making the landscape all black and silver—silver in the open, black in the shadows. There was life out there, for once I heard the drum of hoofs, and our horses nickered and tugged at their tethers, as if some of their wild kin had pounded by. Once I heard a distant, mournful cry, like the howl of a hunting wolf. And something very large with wings planed noiselessly over our camp as if to inspect us. Yet none of these were frightening in themselves, for all men know that there are wild horses in the Waste, and wolves run through the dales as well. And there are winged night-hunters everywhere.

No, it was not those sounds that disturbed me. It was what I did not hear. For I was as certain as I could see it that out there in the black and silver land lurked something, or someone, who watched and listened with the same intensity that I did. And whether it was of good or ill I could not guess.

Sun and morning banished such fancies. The land was open, empty, in the daylight. We crossed the hump of the bridge and headed on, while before us the mountains grew sharper to the sight.

By noon we were in the foothills, which were ridges sharper than our dales, more like knife slashes in soil and rock. No longer was the road straight. It narrowed to a way along which two of us might still ride abreast, but no wider, and it twisted and curved, ran up and down, as if its makers had followed always the easiest route through this maze of heights. Here, too, the Old Ones had left their mark. Carved on the walls of rock were faces, some grotesque, some human-seeming and benign, and often bands of runes that Riwal busied himself to copy.

Though no one could read the script of the Old Ones, Riwal had hopes that someday he would be able to do so. We had dawdled so while he copied the runes that noon found us in a narrow vale where we took our rest under the chin of a vast face that protruded strongly from the parent cliff of which it had been carved.

I had studied it as we came up, finding it in something vaguely familiar, though what that was I could not say.

Oddly enough, though we were here surrounded by the work of those who had vanished, I felt free of that watching, as if whatever had been here once was long gone and had left no trace. And my spirits rose as they had not since the storm caught us.

“Why all these carvings?” I wondered. “The farther we go, the more they are clustered on the walls.”

Riwal swallowed a mouthful of travel bread in order to answer. “Perhaps we now approach some place of importance; a shrine, even a city. I have gathered and sifted the stories of traders for years, yet I know of none who have come this way, into the foothills of the mountains.”

That he was excited I could see, and I knew that he anticipated some discovery that would be far greater than any he had made during his years of wandering in the Waste. He did not linger over his food, nor did I, for his enthusiasm grew to be mine also. We did not pause beneath that giant chin for long, but rode on.

The road continued to weave through the foothills, and the carvings grew more complex. There were no more heads or faces. Now runes ran in complex patterns of lines and circles. Riwal reined before one.

“The Great Star!” His awe was plain to see.

Surveying the complexity of that design, I could at last make out a basic five-point star. But the star was overlaid with a wealth of other curves and bits, so it took careful examination to make it out at all.

“The Great Star?” I asked.

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