

FORTUNE'S CHILDREN

by

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They named me Lyse, switching the letters of Ysleedale, where I was born, in a cow-barn at Yslekeep. No one claimed me, from lord to stable-hand. My mother left me there in the straw; she didn't linger to tell me who had fathered me. They found me bellowing along with all the cows to be milked, with no legacy but a pale, soft cloth and an odd, jagged bit of metal on a string around my neck. The cowherd had taken pity on my mother, let her in for the night. She didn't give her name. Years later, when I was old enough to wonder about such things, I asked him and he told me: She was a big-eyed, delicate, sweet-spoken woman, he said; she gave him a silver coin for his silence and his help, then she vanished, leaving me to him as well. He was old and rheumy by then, and his memories were fading into fantasy. No delicate gentlewoman could have born such a rawboned gawk as I turned out to be.

I got my first tooth knocked out in a fistfight when I was six. When I was ten, I battled in the long spring evenings among the young boys, with wooden swords and blunt knives. The older warriors laughed to see me chasing the boys around the yard, yelling and whirling my weapon, with my feet bare and my skirt

stained with dirty dishwater. At sixteen, when I joined the army that the lord of the keep raised against the siege of Ysleedale, no one laughed. That was the last I knew of home, then, for our attackers had spilled over like a terrible spring flood, seemingly out of nowhere—though we guessed, by their blurred faces and odd, singing swords of light, that they had come down from the northern mountains, out of the Waste. Yslekeep burned; a handful of us escaped, ducking flames and falling timber. We were beaten into Maryedale, and then into Kylldale. The keeps were ruined; clans scattered into the hills; farms, villages, and families decimated. Finally, after a bloody spring and summer, we vanquished them. Or some say the pounding autumn rains did them in, beat them down into the earth. I don't know. When the smoke cleared, I was a blooded warrior, a blank shield for hire, since I had no home; I had nothing but a bit of metal on a string, an old, thin, finely woven cloth I wore about my throat, and a reputation. I never even bothered to hide my long hair. I was as tall as most men, strong and tireless. The best learned to trust me; the worst learned to leave me be.

So I wandered for a few years, through High Hallack, even across the sea to Estcarp. I hired on a ship for a time, to guard it from a fleet of pirates looting the traders' ships. The bitter battles we fought cleared out the nest of marauders, but they killed my love for open-sea. Standing on a burning ship collapsing into itself, with nowhere to escape but down into a wet, airless, alien world, made me long for land again. So I sailed back to High Hallack, thinking to seek employment in the south, as far from the Waste as I could get. But as soon as I set foot on solid ground, I was seized by a sudden and overwhelming compulsion to find my mother.

It seemed very strange to me. I had thought of her, and then turned my back on those thoughts years before. She was a woman who had left her child unnamed in a cow-barn, to starve, to get stepped on by a cow, to be raised, at best, to a life of drudgery. No one was obligated to care if I lived or died, if I learned to read, if I was loved or abused. I had made myself what I was, with no help from her. I thought I had forgotten her. Yet in an hour I became obsessed with her, furious with

her, curious about her. If she was alive, I would find her. If she was dead, I would trouble memories of her until, dead or alive, she gave me answers to my questions.

I bought a horse and gear at the dock where the traders and farmers and merchants were all dickering. I had money from my work on the trade-ship; I could live on that for some time. I bought some provisions at a nearby inn. Then I sat on my calm gray mare with the roads running north and south and west in front of me, and had no idea where to go.

In the end I rode north for three days, to the blackened ruins of Yslekeep. It was all I could think of doing.

There were sheep grazing on the green hillside among the fallen stones and broken walls. The cow-barn where I had been born existed only in my memory; wildflowers grew where it had stood. I sat on a stairway that had once run up the inner keep; now it climbed seven feet and stopped at open air. I ate bread and cheese and brooded over my past. The old cowherd who saw my mother was long dead; those who had known me best, from the kitchens, the training yard—all were dead or scattered. Where could I go to find her? Who could I ask? Something brushed my cheek: a windblown corner of the silky cloth my mother had left me. Why, I asked myself in sudden, impatient despair, had I bothered to keep it all these years? She had left me so little: that, and the odd piece of metal I wore now on a silver chain. Silvery gray, unornamented, thinner than a coin, the metal was like half an oval or half an eye, cut with a couple of graceful curves down the long center. It was meaningless, valueless. What kind of a woman would leave her child a cold, useless half moon of metal rather than a name?

But, I thought, this is all I have of her, the metal and the cloth. This is where I must begin.

The cloth teased my face again; I stroked it absently. It was light as breath. My hands tugged at it, pulled it loose. I dropped my face into its softness. I seemed to smell memories, then: threads running through it of old fires, the dust and bloody-iron of battles, briny sea winds, even the smell of the cow-barn. My life in those worn, delicate threads . . . I breathed more deeply: a fragrance of meadow grass, bread from the ovens, new-mown

hay, the scent of roses from the rose garden blowing over the wall into the training yard on a long spring evening . . .

I smelled night through an open door . . . Cloth was stretched on a loom, pale as bone, its threads silken, gleaming in firelight. Hands, slender, delicate, workworn, moved a shuttle quickly across the loom . . . A bit of metal flashed from a silver chain that swung free as the weaver bent over her work . . .

I lifted my face out of the cloth, blinking. Had I dreamed a moment?

Or had someone hidden in the woods and rolling hills of the Dales sensed me searching for her, and sent a thought?

I stood up. The shadows had lengthened while I dreamed; it was late afternoon. My mare was cropping beside the old milkhouse wall. I descended the broken stairs, calling to her. When my foot hit the grass I heard a sound out of a grave, out of another life: the eerie, thrumming voices of the weapons that had destroyed Yslekeep.

I leaped onto the mare's back and rode her hard down the hill, feeling my unarmed back a target as wide as a corn field. I didn't know if the sound was only another reverberation out of my memory, or if the dark forces out of the Waste had roused again and caught me there. I just ran. Later, I felt, was a good time to find out which I ran from.

I spent that night in an inn. It was a dreary, thin-walled, noisy place, but at least it was safe. I rode farther north the next day and the next. I told myself I went north only because it was as good a direction as any other; I could turn anytime, for any reason. Yet even when I began to feel the strange, dreary imminence of the Waste ahead of me, I continued north. For no reason. The roads became narrower, rutted, overshadowed by twisted trees. People seemed rougher, surlier; even the fields had a miserly, stony look to them. It was as if a thin, malevolent breeze blew over this part of the Dales, causing the folk here to begrudge a stranger a warm word, and to begrudge even the night the light from their shuttered houses. I felt it keep in me: a bitter, angry sorrow nagged at me, that I had no real name, no home, that I had been unloved, abandoned—when all my life I had made my home where I found myself,

and had never felt unwanted. Still, like spores of trouble blown out of the Waste, the bitterness and anger found soil and grew in me, until I barely recognized myself. One night, for the first time in years, I let myself be edged into a stupid, dangerous quarrel.

My challenger was a half-drunk boy, a guard in some local household. He had come into the tavern with a couple of friends, where I sat quietly in a corner, eating a watery stew. No one else in the place—farmers, a couple of merchants—had paid me much attention, even though since I had heard these singing swords again, I rode armed. I was very tired, depressed; the stew was not helping matters any. I raised my eyes at the wrong time and met the wandering gaze of the young guard. His eyes brightened; I recognized trouble, and my spirits sank to the soles of my boots. I had not had to prove myself or defend my reputation for years; I felt too weary to do it now. I simply wanted peace, and the easiest way to peace leaned, silver and deadly, on the wall beside me.

“What have we here?” the young man exclaimed. He joggled his companions for their attention, spilling ale on them. “A lady warrior?” I chewed stolidly on a bit of leathery meat, ignoring him, but he pulled his friends across the room. “What household do you fight for, lady? A house full of women? What house?” He leaned over the table, nearly falling into my bowl. “What house?”

I looked at him finally. “I have fought for Yslekeep and for the Sulcar traders,” I said evenly.

“And now?” he persisted.

“I am not for hire.”

“Not for any hire?” he asked with a boy’s leer. I ignored it, taking another bite of stew and swallowing with difficulty. He seated himself on the edge of my table. His friends flanked him, grinning; the farmers watched expressionlessly. I felt his hand slide down my hair, then loosen the strip of linen that tied it back. “Tell the truth. You are too pretty to be a fighter. You fight best when the battle is over, and being refought in words around the fire. But who would care? I’m sure you entertain quite well . . . Did you steal this sword from some fallen warrior?”

He lifted his hand from my hair, ran his fingers down the long sheathed sword with the same light caress. Something went dark behind my eyes. When I could see again, I was standing with the unsheathed blade in my hand. The young guard had his back to the wall; I saw the muscles of his throat move as he swallowed beneath the tip of the blade slanted upward to drive through his mouth, into his feeble brain. I was talking; both my voice and my hand shook with rage.

"This sword was forged for me in the armory of Yslekeep, and given to me by the last lord of Yslekeep himself. I fought my first battle when I was younger than you. I have been a warrior for ten years, in High Hallack and on the sea, and I have never in any moment of all those ten years wanted to kill so much as I do now."

His face was dead white; his friends were noiseless as mice. I would have murdered him for any reason: a wrong word, a creaky door, a spoon clattering into a bowl. I didn't care. Someone at my shoulder murmured, "Excuse me," in such a polite, reasonable tone that it eased around my fury. In that moment, a ham-sized fist caught the drunken warrior on the side of his head, and he crumpled away from my blade to the floor.

The same voice spoke again, the same hand moved busily, collecting my sheath, my cloak. "Is that your mare in the yard, lady?" I nodded, speechless. "I know a quieter place for supper. The food here is pig swill. Come."

His voice was like the best of the voices I had taken orders from in my life: I suppose I followed him because of that. When I reached the yard, I began to tremble again, not from anger, but from how appallingly close I had come to killing in such a silly quarrel.

I tried to mount, then gave up and leaned wearily against the gray mare's side. "What is the matter with me?" I wondered, and my rescuer answered:

"It's this place."

I looked at him finally. He was around my age, burly as the biggest farmer I had ever seen. He towered over me by a head. His barley-colored hair fell lankly to his brows; his nose matched his size; his eyes, like his voice and expression, were

clear, good-tempered. He added, as I stared at him, "I thought you might regret killing."

I drew breath and nodded; I saw the flicker of relief in his eyes, and realized I still held my unsheathed sword. I took the sheath from him. "Yes. Thank you." I sheathed the sword and took my cloak. I mounted, and his eyes changed again.

"Wait! I thought—could we share a meal?"

"I'm not hungry now," I said desultorily, "and I have a long way to go. I think. I am very grateful to you, though. I have never killed anyone in a tavern before."

"It gets messy," he said.

"You might think I get pushed into quarrels often."

"No. I don't."

"But I don't. It's been so long, in fact, that I've forgotten how to dance around them." I lifted the reins; his voice stopped me again.

"But who are you?" he asked baldly. "Where are you going?"

I looked down at him, surprised, recognizing the impulse in him that considered my business his business. I found I liked looking at his big, young face, with the fair stubble on it like a mown field. I didn't mind giving him a bit of truth. "I am Lyse, born in a cow-barn at Yslekeep. I decided it is time for me to find my mother."

His eyebrows rose to vanish under his hair. "Why?" he asked with reason. "If that's where she left you?"

"I don't know. It's not a thing I have to understand, just something I must do." I pulled the shard of metal from under my shirt, to prove to him that she had given me—not much—but something. The metal glowed strangely, moon-colored in the twilight. "She left this on a string around my neck. And she wrapped me in this cloth."

He stared at the metal. His hand reached toward it impulsively, dropped: a small gesture that made me catch my breath. "You know what it is."

"No. But I know where it came from."

"Where?"

But, shrewd as a trader, he bargained for that "where." He would not tell me where; I could not go alone, it was dan-

gerous; anyway, the directions were too complicated. He had no great wish to go there himself; I could tell that by the lines of uneasiness and distaste that formed beside his mouth. But for some reason, he was reluctant to let me go out of his life as haphazardly as I had entered it.

"All right," I said finally. "Take me there." And he smiled, his face flushing as if he had won some great victory instead of a ride into uncertain danger.

We had meant to find an inn for the night, but there were none along the path he chose. So we spent a night among the trees, sharing our supplies. He had dried meat and dates and brandywine; I had dried apples and salty, blue-veined cheese. As we ate, I felt my spirits revive a little, enough to finally wonder about him.

"Who are you?" I asked, and realized that the courteous and prudent time to ask that had long passed. But he refrained from laughing at me. He stretched out on the ground, his face, half moonlit, half firelit, looking content with bracken for a bed and a pillow of stone.

"I am a bastard son of the lord of Hollowkeep," he said. My eyes widened in the dark, for Hollowkeep was a story, a fable, a mythical place of grim poverty and eerie ways. To be a child of Hollowkeep was to be a child of chancy fortune; to be a bastard of Hollowkeep was a threadbare destiny indeed.

"You seem cheerful enough in spite of it," I commented.

"Odd things happen to me." He nudged a branch onto the fire. "I've grown used to it."

"Like what?"

"I found a woman lying on a roadside once. I thought she had fainted from weariness and hunger, so I stopped and fed her all I had. It turned out she was a witch, she had just come back from a journey into the Waste. She looked into a midnight-blue jewel she had found there, and read my future."

"What did she see?"

"She said I was a child of Hollowkeep." He chuckled. "Then she gave me the jewel to sell and went on her mysterious way. I bought a horse and sword, since I had lost both in a battle at Maryekeep, and I joined the army in Kylldale in time to get hit by a flying weapon during the—"

"You fought in those battles for the three keeps, too?"

"I mostly did not fight since I was hurt. It was strange . . . I never saw what hit me, and I never bled much. It was as if an ice flow had entered my veins, slowed my blood, my thoughts. I saw things: our world like a dream out of our enemies' eyes. They were alien eyes. They could not see color, they could see heat and cold. Especially cold . . . When autumn came, and the rains turned everything wet and cold, they grew confused."

"What did they want?" I whispered.

"I saw that, too. They were oddly drawn by a bit of metal."

I swallowed. My throat was so dry beneath the touch of the metal I could barely speak. "This?"

"You left Ysle Dale after the final battle, didn't you? You disappeared for a long time."

"Yes." I drank brandy, shifted closer to the fire, as cold as if the icy vision flowed through me. "I went south, then I went to sea."

"And now," he said very softly, "you are back."

"Aren't you afraid?" I whispered. "Of me? I am."

He rolled upright, sat looking at me. "You are not the danger. Neither is that piece of metal. They are."

"But—"

"Do you want to take it off, bury it somewhere?"

I nodded. "But how would my mother know me?" I was silent then for a very long time. His voice came out of the firelight, speaking my thoughts.

"Who is your mother that she would leave that with a child?"

"The ruin of three keeps." A tear slid down my cheek, startling me. I brushed at it furtively, huddled over myself. "So," I whispered. "Son of Hollowkeep. Where are you taking me?"

"I have led you down a road and into a story," he said. "Now I must follow you."

"When you were hurt, dreaming, did you see anything more about this metal?" All the words I spoke had jagged edges, hurting my throat. I could not see the man's face; it was lowered as he listened to me. I saw his pale hair move as he shook his head. I swallowed, but the words still burned. "Who are you? What is your true name?"

"Jaryl," he said. "I am the only living child, bastard or other-

wise, of the lord of Maryekeep." He leaned across our dwindling fire; his big hand stroked away the tears on my face. Then he roused the fire again. "My mother was the abbess of Seely Shrine, who broke her faith and vows to love. So you see, being the bastard son of a ruined father and a foresworn mother, I truly am a child of Hollowkeep. At least I know them both, and that they loved. At least I could fight a little for my father before he died."

"He was a strong, kind man, I heard."

"I heard tales of you, as we fought that war."

"Did you recognize me at the tavern?"

"Yes, the moment you drew your sword. You had us all transfixed. Even the hearth flames stopped moving." That made me smile. He reached across the fire again, slipped his hand behind my head. I saw his eyes, firelit, smiling, and I let him drift toward me. But he caught his breath sharply and loosed me to beat at the tongues of fire along his sleeve.

I laughed immoderately while he put himself out. "I'm sorry," I gasped. "I'm sorry."

He sighed. "Even for me that was clumsy. I'm sorry, too." We sat there uncertainly, the fire still between us, idling innocently within a log. I had not been kissed for a hundred years, it seemed. Did he desire me, or my legend, I wondered; he, on his side, did not seem to know either.

"Are you hurt?" I asked cautiously; he said at the same time, once again, "I'm sorry." We stopped speaking, waited for each other's voices. He cleared his throat.

"I'll find more wood for the fire."

"It's a warm night."

"I know," he said simply. I heard him walk away. And then my whole body chilled again as I realized what he was thinking: The last peaceful spring night at Yslekeep was much like this.

I lay back on the soft ground, feeling the metal like a death-blade at my own throat.

But nothing troubled us that night. When dawn came, we rode again, through thick, dark woods where no birds sang, and then through a pass between steep cliffs. In the late afternoon we rode out of the pass onto a vast, rocky plain edged with purple-gray mountains, the barren southern boundary of the Waste.

Here the plain still had life to it. Small dark streams cut through lichen and stone; solitary trees, twisted and stunted by wind, broke the misty horizon. But among the stones and mossy streams the grass grew pallid, sour; not even mountain sheep could live on it. The air smelled of dust and of rain that never fell. Here and there great dark-weathered stones rose above the ground, wanderers like ourselves, trudging across the plain to an uncertain destiny.

It was there, as I stared at the harsh, bleak landscape, that I had another vision.

Somewhere across the plain rocks gathered themselves out of the embrace of water and moss and cold ground. They built themselves into a tiny cottage . . . Within the shadows of the cottage, something gleamed, swinging gently in and out of darkness. Something quite small, something . . .

I came back to myself. Jaryl's hand was on my shoulder. I held the metal at my breast so tightly it had cut into my hand. I had made a sound, or he had; some voice echoed in the air.

He loosened my hand gently from the metal. It was no gentlewoman's palm he opened, scarred and callused and newly bleeding. He dismounted, searched among the mosses beside a stream, and pulled up a handful of something purple. He pressed it against my palm; the throbbing died away.

"I lived for a while with an old woman who knew every tree-leaf and herb, mushroom and moss in these old hills," he said while he bound my hand. "I was a child then. I had run away from another place . . . She found me curled up asleep among some yarrow, naked and starving, she said, a wild thing. I don't remember that. She took me home and fed me, and taught me how to find things for her. I loved her. When she died, I threw myself into a bog, I was that wild . . ." He gave a small chuckle. I stared at him.

"How did—"

"Oh, a man came along and pulled me out. I fought him, wanting to die. He made a bargain with me: that if I came with him for five years and learned to be a warrior, at the end of those five years we would fight again, he and I, and if I won, I could throw myself back into the bog. I was young—not twelve—but big even then, and he liked my strength. He took me to Maryekeep. Five years later I met the lord of Maryekeep

by accident on a stairway. He looked me in the eye, I looked him in the eye, and we both knew what we saw. He saw the abbess of Seely Shrine, I saw my father. He was still married, my mother had died long before, he had never known what happened to me until I appeared in front of him on his stairs, wearing the colors of his household . . .”

“What did he say?” I asked, entranced. Jaryl smiled.

“He said nothing; he just looked at me, and I saw how he must have loved my mother. Then he kissed me on the cheek and went on down. I sat on the stairs in a daze until someone came along and roused me. He never spoke of the matter—he always was a stiff-tongued man—but he came sometimes to the training yard and taught me himself. I think in time he would have gotten around to speaking. But two years was not time enough. Maryekeep fell and he died, and fighting for Kyllkeep, I was wounded, and then Kyllkeep fell . . . and that was the end of my family life.”

“Then what did you do?” I asked.

“Like you, what I had to.” He mounted again, gazing across the plain. His gear nudged at my attention; for the first time I noticed its incongruity.

“You don’t carry a sword.”

He looked at me. Again for the first time, I noticed the color of his eyes: a light blue that hid nothing. He smiled, amused.

“I never did like fighting much.” Then he touched me lightly, as if guiding me back to some path. “What did you see when you stopped just then?”

“A house.” I drew breath, remembering. “A tiny stone house, somewhere ahead of us. And inside the house . . .” My hand reached again for the metal, as if by gripping it I could see more clearly. Jaryl took it from me before I hurt myself again. “This.”

He grunted. An evening wind came from the east across the plain, a thin, mean, threadbare wind that crept into clothes like a pickpocket. I shivered. Jaryl, his head close to mine, studied the metal in his palm. I studied the shades of wheat and barley in his hair, the muscles in the back of his neck. He started suddenly, his whole body tightening, as if he had been struck, and I wheeled my horse away from him, my throat swelling with

fear and anger. I drew my sword, scanning the pass behind us, sure that our talk of the old battles had brought the attackers with their singing weapons upon us once again.

Jaryl turned his mount also, glancing around us a little wildly. "What is it?"

I looked at him a moment. Then I sighed and sheathed my sword. "Why did you jump like that? You scared me."

"You scared me," he said. He rode close again, lifted the metal. "Look."

"So? It's blood from my hand," I said wearily. My body was still settling itself down after its false alarm.

"No," he said. "Yes. You bled on it. Now look at it."

I did. I saw what he saw, then, and my breath stopped. Beneath the thin film of blood from my hand, a strange language had appeared, etched into the metal in tiny rows that ran the width of the metal and then were broken off.

"No," I whispered. "Not broken, cut. But what language is it? What does it say? Can you read it?"

"No." His voice sounded very distant. "I've never seen anything like it. But it's very simple to explain why it was cut in two."

"Well," I said after a moment. "Explain it. Simply."

He raised his head finally. All the humor was gone from his face. He seemed older suddenly, and beneath his warrior's build and competence I finally glimpsed the other man I didn't know so easily: the one who picked herbs, recognized odd languages. He said, "Two halves make a whole; the whole is very dangerous. Your mother was not able to destroy it years ago, so she cut it and separated the halves. Yet it still must be destroyed, or she would have buried it, flung it into deep water, anything, rather than leave half of it around the neck of her newborn child. She has the other half. You are bringing her the whole."

For the first time in my life, I felt very small on that vast, windy plain, and very vulnerable. "She's bringing me," I said, and shivered. "Jaryl. We don't know her. How do we know what she will use this for?"

"How would you stop yourself from going to her?" he asked,

and I knew he was right. I couldn't stop. Nothing could stop me.

"But how," I asked impatiently, "can I find one tiny stone cottage on this plain?"

He considered it. Somewhere in his piecemeal past he had stumbled into experience of such matters. "Have you had other visions?"

I told him of the daydream I had had sitting among the blacked ruins of Yslekeep. I didn't tell him of the deadly singing I heard out of the past; there was enough in front of us to make us edgy. He made an absent noise, musing.

"Try the cloth," he said at last. "Threads weave, so do lives . . . Perhaps she wove a path in it for you."

So, trying to draw one tiny stone cottage out of this great stony plain, I gathered the cloth in one hand, held it against my face. We rode in silence into evening. We passed dark jutting stones that the earth had thrust out of itself in a mysterious quarter-moon pattern. I watched a black raven land on a stone covered with pink moss, the first living creature I had seen on the plain. Later I watched a long black snake wind along our path awhile and then slither out of sight. A corner of the shawl blew across my nose and mouth. I moved my head to breathe, and a strand of my hair whipped darkly across my eyes.

The dark shadows of the cottage within the open door . . . What vague light fell across the threshold revealed a hard earth floor. The half oval of metal turned in the shadows, caught light, glinted, turned. Someone stood in the shadows, held the metal by its chain. Turning, glinting, the metal beckoned. The stones of the house, the land itself beckoned. This place, they said. This place.

And in the vision I saw a shadow arching out of the earth, bridging earth and air like a black rainbow above the house.

This place. This place.

When I could see the world again, I said, "East. We ride east."

We slid off our horses then, for night was falling fast. Sucked into that vision, I couldn't speak much; I could scarcely think. Jaryl, too, ate silently, preoccupied. But I felt his eyes on my face now and then. Once he reached out, brushed a crumb

from the side of my mouth. That turned my attention; with the same odd, drugged intensity, I regarded him as if he were at once very far away and very close, at once a stranger and a friend.

I felt him kiss me gently; that too was very far away.

It took us four days to cross that wild, empty plain. The day skies were gray, sultry by noon, too cool by evening. But at night the stars seemed to rain down on us, and the wind sang the alien runes. I still spoke very little; all my thoughts were concentrated on one tiny, turning speck of light. But one night as we lay beside the fire, restless on the rough ground, I felt the stars pour into my eyes, and I heard my voice again, "How beautiful they are, all the secret worlds."

"Yes," Jaryl said, but his voice held other words: no, and perhaps, and yes but beware, beware.

In the late afternoon of the fourth day, I saw the black rainbow.

I pulled at my reins, startled, and realized I was free again. Jaryl, murmuring in surprise, had stopped as abruptly. Two enormous, massive black stones had sagged together to form the apex of a triangle. And between them . . . a gray stone house.

Staring at it, I felt chilled without knowing why. The stones were melted into one another by time and weather; they must have fallen together thousands of years ago. It was not such a strange place to build a cottage. Yet something seemed wrong, distorted: the tiny house in the middle of nowhere, the stones themselves . . .

They were alive. As we watched, strands of blue fire spat from the apex of the stones, wove down their sides into the earth.

I saw a gleam of metal within the open cottage door, like a scratch of sudden light upon the shadows. I put one cold hand against my mouth. This was a place of magic, mystery, no place for a plain swordswoman. Then I thought: Lyse of Yslekeep, lady of the cow-barn, you have nothing in this world but courage, and if you lose that you will have nothing at all.

She came outside then: a tiny figure in the distance with the great black stones above her head. She waited for us.

She blinked a little when she saw me: a big-boned, broad-shouldered woman wearing fighter's garb, with a sword at her side. The old cowherd had remembered well: she herself was slight, her dark hair barely beginning to gray, her hands the fragile, workworn hands of my dream. Her metal-piece hung on the chain in her hand, flashing now and then with its own pale light.

I dismounted. We gazed at each other, mute. She said at last, wonderingly, "You kept the cloth."

Her voice was as delicate as the rest of her. I swept my hair out of my face. I had lost the tie somewhere, and now it kept weaving dark webs in front of my eyes. I said, "Who are you? Who was my father, that you got such a giant for a daughter?"

But her eyes had gone past me to Jaryl.

I felt a sudden hurt anger that I had come so far to find her, and she had forgotten me already. I didn't, I reminded myself, need a mother. I never had. This one did not even look probable. Then I heard her say to Jaryl, "You are the child of Hollowkeep," and my anger turned to wonder.

He had a look on his face to match my wonder. "You are the witch out of the Waste I found on the roadside. I fed you my last dry bread and moldy cheese."

"I gave you a blue jewel. Now you have brought me my child."

I found my tongue finally. "You are of Estcarp."

She nodded, sighing. "I would be in Estcarp, if I hadn't found this to keep me here."

"You have been on this plain."

"Since you were born."

She changed under my eyes, then: fragile as she looked, she had a great warrior's strength. "But why?" I whispered. "Why?"

She turned her head to look up at the stones overshadowing her. "I have been guarding this Gate. The strange army out of the Waste that attacked Ysledale ten years ago has been on this world for a thousand years, but their homeworld lies elsewhere. Someone of great power made a key long ago, that locked this Gate against others of their world trying to enter. I found the key in the Waste before you were born, and deciphered it. But

I couldn't destroy it. I divided it, left half of it with you, partly so we could identify each other if fortune were that kind to us, partly to hide it from the alien army, whom I stole it from. But somehow they sensed it in Ysle Dale, and came searching for it. Me they could not find: the Power in this Gate overwhelms the Power of the key. The runes on the key would tell them how to lock and unlock the Gate at their bidding. And they have an army striving to get in."

"How can you tell?"

She glanced at the stones again: the blue fire washed over them swiftly, silently, vanished. "You can see their Power."

I felt another moment's panic. It seemed a very silly place for the three of us to be, in the Gateway on an empty plain, with a darkness out of the stars about to pour through it.

"You have both pieces again," I said. "Can you destroy it now?"

She nodded. "Yes. I have learned how."

"Then do it! I waited for twenty-six years to meet you, and you have been for twenty-six years on this benighted plain—that's long enough for both of us."

She opened her mouth to answer, then didn't. She smiled at me instead, and my heart turned over suddenly, that she had the right to smile at me like that, as if she had accidentally made something pleasing to her. So for a moment I forgot about the Gate.

"Estcarp." She nodded again, silent, waiting. "What brought you across the sea?"

"I felt something dangerous stirring in this part of the world. I was driven to find it. You came with me inadvertently."

"It does not take nine months to get from Estcarp to High Hallack. Normally."

"No."

"So—"

"You were conceived across the sea." She paused; this time I waited. "I walked alone out of this plain, across the Dales, searching for a home for you when I knew you were coming. When I reached Yslekeep I could walk no farther and I sensed it was a tranquil place. A good place. I couldn't keep you on the plain. I had nothing to give you, nothing to help you grow

in the world among people. I made the cloth for you out of threads that worms spin on the plain near dawn. It was all I could give you. All I had." She smiled again, though I saw tears glisten in her eyes. "And look at you. You survived without me, you grew strong, gifted, intelligent, you even kept the things I gave you, when you must have hated me sometimes. You heard me when I called, you came here. None of this I expected. But all of it I hoped for. What did—what did they call you?"

"Lyse," I said. "The cook named me." I added gruffly, because, mother or no, it was not easy to question a witch of Estcarp. "And you? Can— Do you have a name you can give me?"

"Oh, my dear." She crossed the distance between us, held my rough, scarred hands. "I am Chace. Your father was—"

And then the ground shook under us so hard it threw even Jaryl off his feet.

He had been holding the horses' reins as we spoke; falling, he kept his grip on them. As soon as I could get my balance, I drew my sword from where it hung on my saddle. Jaryl found time to ask, "What do you think you can do with that?"

"I don't care," I said tersely. "I want it. What is happening?" I asked my mother as she tugged at the chain around my neck.

"They have grown more powerful," she said breathlessly. "I must get through—" The chain tangled in my hair. Impatiently I pulled it, broke it, and pushed the metal into her hand. And then I felt as bewildered as if I had given her all of my past, and that the next moment was the true beginning—or more probably the end—of my life.

Light flowed continuously down the flanks of the Gate; it began to arch from stone to stone, weave a web within the triangle. A strand of light broke free suddenly. It streaked through the air toward me, and licked my sword. The force numbed my arm from fingers to shoulder; the sword, blackened, pitted, clattered to the ground. I stared at it. Then I lifted my head, watched my mother fit the pieces of the metal—her life and mine—together.

The light within the Gate vanished. A darkness swallowed it, swallowed the cottage, swallowed the world framed by the

stones. There was an eerie silence, and then the long, long sigh of wind coming from another place, or perhaps the sound of time itself traveling between worlds. Stars appeared within the Gate. World after shining world, and webs of light with new stars cradled in them. I stood spellbound again, feeling as if I were the Gate itself and whoever traveled into this world's time must come first through my eyes.

And one came: a dark, faceless rider on a strange beast, with a blade of blue light blazing in his hand. He rippled out of the night, so close to Jaryl that the horses pulled from his hand in terror and fled. Jaryl stared up at the rider, still entranced himself; in that moment, as he stood with his marveling, defenseless face upturned to death, I picked up my poor blackened sword and threw it.

It struck the rider just as his light-sword swung into Jaryl's face. Jaryl had flung up his arm; my sword hit the alien rider; the light-sword descended, and then there was a great explosion of light within my mother's hands. The earth reeled again; I stumbled, blind. When I could see again, I saw:

A pair of black stones toppled together, with a tiny gray cottage between them. An alien beast fleeing in one direction across the plain, our horses fleeing in another. A headless shadow on the ground.

Nothing else. I picked myself up, staring. I retrieved my sword, wondered briefly at the odd metallic gleams within the alien's open neck. I went to the cottage door, saw a dirt floor, a loom with shining, half-worked cloth. I backed out, scanned the plain.

No one. I shivered, my skin prickling. I stepped back from the cottage to stare up again between the dark, weary stones, where moments ago night and the stars had hung.

I whispered, "Jaryl? Mother?"

And then the wedge of daylight winked black again, and a giant spilled out of it, trailing stars.

I screamed, raising my sad blade. Then I lowered it, panting. Jaryl stood before me, looking stunned. The Gate cleared again one final time.

"Where did you go?" I whispered.

"I don't know. She—" He stopped, drew breath. "She took

me with her." He came to my side, dropped his arm heavily across my shoulders. "She saw I might be killed in that instant, so she pulled me through. Then she sent me back."

"Where is she?"

He shook his head. "Somewhere. Some world. She sealed the Gate against them, but she still must destroy the key. She said she would return when she could."

"But, Jaryl—" I found myself blinking away tears. "I just found her!"

"I know."

"How do we know what time does in other places? Or what she will do there? She spent half her life on this lonely plain. If I were her, I would find another Gate, and then another, and then another, just to taste freedom for a while."

He kissed my hair. I gazed upward at the great doorway, envisioning her path.

"There's no way—"

"No. My heart, she took the key with her. There is no way for you to follow."

I sighed, dropped my head against his shoulder. "Then I'll never know who my father was."

"We are fortune's children," he said simply, and loosed me, after another kiss, to call the horses back.