


CHAPTER SEVEN

The Trap

From the corridor, a faint sound grew louder. Taran hastened to press his ear against the slot in the portal. He heard the heavy tread of marching feet, the rattle of weapons. He straightened and stood with his back to the wall. The girl had betrayed him. He cast about for some means to defend himself, for he had determined they would not take him easily. For the sake of having something in his hands, Taran picked up the dirty straw and held it ready to fling; it was a pitiable defense, and he wished desperately for Gwydion's power to set it ablaze.

The footsteps continued. He feared, then, they would enter the other cell. He breathed a sigh of relief when they did not stop but faded away toward what he imagined to be the far end of the corridor. Perhaps the guard was being changed.

He turned away, certain Eilonwy would not be back, and furious with her and her false promises. She was a rattlebrained fool who would undoubtedly giggle and take it as a great joke when the Cauldron-Born came for him. He buried his face in his hands. He could hear her chatter even now. Taran started up again. The voice he heard was real.

"Must you always sit on the wrong stone?" it said. "You're too heavy to lift."

Taran jumped up and hurriedly cleared the straw away. The flagstone was raised. The light from the golden ball was dim now, but enough for him to see that Eilonwy looked pleased with herself.

"Your companion is free," she whispered. "And I took Melyngar from the stable. They are hidden in the woods outside the castle. It's all done now," Eilonwy said gleefully. "They're waiting for you. So if you get a move on and stop looking as if you'd forgotten your own name, we can go and meet them."

"Did you find weapons?" Taran asked.

"Well, no. I didn't have a chance to look," Eilonwy said. "Really," she added, "you can't expect me to do everything, can you?"

Eilonwy held the glowing sphere close to the stone floor. "Go first," she said. "Then I'll come down after, so I can put the stone back in place. Then, when Achren sends to have you killed, there won't be any trace at all. She'll think you disappeared into thin air—and that will make it all the more vexing. I know it isn't nice to vex people on purpose—it's like handing them a toad—but this is much too good to miss and I may never have another chance at it."

"Achren will know you let us escape," Taran said.

"No, she won't," said Eilonwy, "because she'll think I'm still locked up. And if she doesn't know I can get out, she can't know I was here. But it's very thoughtful of you to say that. It shows a kind heart, and I think that's so much more important than being clever."

While Eilonwy continued to chatter away, Taran lowered himself into the narrow opening. The passage was low, he discovered, and he was obliged to crouch almost on hands and knees.

Eilonwy moved the stone into place and then began to lead the way. The glow from the sphere showed walls of hard-packed earth. As Taran hunched along, other galleries opened up on either side.

"Be sure you follow me," Eilonwy called. "Don't go into any of those. Some of them branch off and some of them don't go anywhere at all. You'd get lost, and that would be a useless thing to do if you're trying to escape."

The girl moved so quickly Taran had difficulty keeping up with her. Twice he stumbled over loose stones in the passage, clutched at the ground, and pitched forward. The little light bobbed ahead, while behind him long fingers of darkness grasped his heels. He could understand why Achren's fortress was called Spiral Castle. The narrow, stifling galleries turned endlessly; he could not be sure whether they were making real progress or whether the tunnel was merely doubling back on itself.

The earthen ceiling trembled with racing footsteps.

"We're just below the guardroom," Eilonwy whispered. "Something's happening up there. Achren doesn't usually turn out the guard in the middle of the night."

"They must have gone to the cells," Taran said. "There was a lot of commotion just before you came. They surely know we're gone."

"You must be a very important Assistant Pig-Keeper," said

Eilonwy with a small laugh. "Achren wouldn't go to all that trouble unless . . ."

"Hurry," Taran urged. "If she puts a guard around the castle we'll never get out."

"I wish you'd stop worrying," Eilonwy said. "You sound as if you were having your toes twisted. Achren can set out all the guards she wants. She doesn't know where the mouth of the tunnel is. And it's hidden so well an owl couldn't see it. After all, you don't think I'd march you out the front gate, do you?"

Despite her chattering, Eilonwy kept a rapid pace. Taran bent close to the ground, moving half by touch, keeping his eyes on the faint glow; he skidded past sharp turns, fetched up against rough walls, skinned his knees, then had to move twice as fast to regain the ground he had lost. At another bend in the passageway, Eilonwy's light wavered and dropped out of sight. In the moment of darkness, Taran lost his footing as the ground rose steeply on one side. He fell and rolled. Before he could recover his balance, he was sliding rapidly downward in a shower of loose stones and earth. He collided with an outcropping of rock, rolled again, and dropped suddenly into the darkness.

He landed heavily on flat stones, legs twisted under him. Taran climbed painfully to his feet and shook his head to clear it. Suddenly he realized he was standing upright. Eilonwy and her light could not be seen. He called as loudly as he dared.

After a few moments he heard a scraping above him and saw the faint reflection of the golden ball. "Where are you?" called the girl. Her voice seemed quite distant. "Oh—I see. Part of the tunnel's given way. You must have slipped into a crevice."

"It's not a crevice," Taran called. "I've fallen all the way down into something and it's deep. Can't you put the light into it? I've got to get up again."

There were more scraping noises. "Yes," Eilonwy said, "you have got yourself into a mess. The ground's all broken through here, and below there's a big stone, like a shelf over your head. How *did* you ever manage to do that?"

"I don't know how," replied Taran, "but I certainly didn't do it on purpose."

"It's strange," Eilonwy said. "This wasn't here when I came through the first time. All that tramping must have jarred something loose; it's hard to say. I don't think these tunnels are half as solid as they look, and neither is the castle, for the matter of that; Achren's always complaining about things leaking and doors not closing right . . ."

"Do stop that prattling," cried Taran, clasping his head. "I don't want to hear about leaks and doors. Show a light so I can climb out of here."

"That's the trouble," the girl said. "I'm not quite sure you can. You see, that shelf of stone juts out so far and goes down so steeply. Can you manage to reach it?"

Taran raised his arms and jumped as high as he could. He could find no handhold. From Eilonwy's description, and from the massive shadow above, he feared the girl was right. He could not reach the stone and, even if he could have, its sharp downward pitch would have made it impossible to climb. Taran groaned with despair.

"Go on without me," he said. "Warn my companion the castle is alerted . . ."

"And what do you intend doing? You can't just sit there like a fly in a jug. That isn't going to help matters at all."

"It doesn't make any difference about me," Taran said. "You can find a rope and come back when things are safe . . ."

"Who knows when that will be? If Achren sees me, there's no telling what might happen. And suppose I couldn't get back? You'd turn into a skeleton while you're waiting—I don't know how long it takes for people to turn into skeletons, though I imagine it would need some time—and you'd be worse off than before."

"What else am I to do?" cried Taran.

Eilonwy's talk of skeletons made his blood run cold. He recalled, then, the sound of Gwyn the Hunter's horn and the memory of it filled him with grief and fear. He bowed his head and turned his face to the rough wall.

"That's very noble of you," said Eilonwy, "but I don't think it's really necessary, not yet, at any rate. If Achren's warriors come out and start beating the woods, I hardly think your friend would stay around waiting. He'd go and hide and find you later, or so I should imagine. That would be the sensible thing to do. Of course, if he's an Assistant Pig-Keeper, too, it's hard to guess how his mind would work."

"He's not an Assistant Pig-Keeper," Taran said. "He's . . . well, it's none of your business what he is."

"That's not a very polite thing to say. Well, nevertheless . . .," Eilonwy's voice dismissed the matter. "The main thing is to get you out."

"There's nothing we can do," Taran said. "I'm caught here, and locked up better than Achren ever planned."

"Don't say that. I could tear up my robe and plait it into a cord—though I'll tell you right away I wouldn't enjoy crawling around tunnels without any clothes on. But I don't think it would be long enough or strong enough. I suppose I could cut off my hair, if I had a pair of shears, and add it in—no, that still wouldn't do. Won't you please be quiet for a while and let me think? Wait, I'm going to drop my bauble down to you. Here, catch!"

The golden sphere came hurtling over the ledge. Taran caught it in mid-air.

"Now then," Eilonwy called, "what's down there? Is it just a pit of some kind?"

Taran raised the ball above his head. "Why, it's not a hole at all!" he cried. "It's a kind of chamber. There's a tunnel here, too." He took a few paces. "I can't see where it ends. It's big . . ."

Stones rattled behind him; an instant later, Eilonwy dropped to the ground. Taran stared at her in disbelief.

"You fool!" he shouted. "You addlepatated . . . What have you done? Now both of us are trapped! And you talk about sense! You haven't . . ."

Eilonwy smiled at him and waited until he ran out of breath. "Now," she said, "if you've quite finished, let me explain something very simple to you. If there's a tunnel, it has to go someplace. And wherever it goes, there's a very good chance it will be better than where we are now."

"I didn't mean to call you names," Taran said, "but," he added sorrowfully, "there was no reason for you to put yourself in danger."


"There you go again," Eilonwy said. "I promised to help you escape and that's what I'm doing. I understand about tunnels and I

shouldn't be surprised if this one followed the same direction as the one above. It doesn't have half as many galleries coming off it. And besides, it's a lot more comfortable."

Eilonwy took the glowing sphere from Taran's hand and stepped forward into the new passageway. Still doubtful, Taran followed.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Barrow

As Eilonwy had said, the passageway was more comfortable, for they could walk side by side without crouching and scuttling like rabbits in a warren. Unlike those of the upper galleries, the walls were lined with huge, flat stones; the ceiling was formed of even larger stones, whose weight was supported by upright slabs set at intervals along the square corridor. The air, too, smelled slightly better; musty, as if it had lain unstirred for ages, but without the choking closeness of the tunnels.

None of this comforted Taran greatly. Eilonwy herself admitted she had never explored the passage; her blithe confidence did not convince him she had the slightest notion of where she was going. Nevertheless, the girl hurried along, her sandals tapping and echoing, the golden light of the bauble casting its rays through shadows that hung like cobwebs.

They passed a few side galleries which Eilonwy ignored. "We'll go straight to the end of this one," she announced. "There's bound to be something there."

Taran had begun wishing himself back in the chamber. "We shouldn't have come this far," he said, with a frown. "We should

have stayed and found some way to climb out; now you don't even know how long it will be before this passage stops. We might go on tramping for days."

Something else troubled him. After all their progress, it seemed the passageway should now follow an upward direction.

"The tunnel's supposed to bring us out above ground," Taran said. "But we haven't stopped going down. We aren't coming out at all; we're only going deeper and deeper."

Eilonwy paid no attention to his remarks.

But she was soon obliged to. Within another few paces, the corridor stopped abruptly, sealed by a wall of boulders.

"This is what I feared," cried Taran, dismayed. "We have gone to the end of your tunnel, that you know so much about, and this is what we find. Now we can only go back; we've lost all our time and we're no better off than when we started." He turned away while the girl stood looking curiously at the barrier.

"I can't understand," said Eilonwy, "why anyone would go to the trouble of building a tunnel and not have it go anyplace. It must have been a terrible amount of work for whoever it was to dig it all and set in the rocks. Why do you suppose . . . ?"

"I don't know! And I wish you'd stop wondering about things that can't make any difference to us. I'm going back," Taran said. "I don't know how I'm going to climb onto that shelf, but I can certainly do it a lot more easily than digging through a wall."

"Well," said Eilonwy, "it is very strange and all. I'm sure I don't know where we are."

"I knew we'd end up being lost. I could have told you that."

"I didn't say I was lost," the girl protested. "I only said I didn't know where I was. There's a big difference. When you're

lost, you really don't know where you are. When you just don't happen to know where you are at the moment, that's something else. I know I'm underneath Spiral Castle, and that's quite good for a start."

"You're splitting hairs," Taran said. "Lost is lost. You're worse than Dallben."

"Who is Dallben?"

"Dallben is my—oh, never mind!" His face grim, Taran began retracing his steps.

Eilonwy hurried to join him. "We could have a look into one of the side passageways," she called.

Taran disregarded the suggestion. Nevertheless, approaching the next branching gallery, he slowed his steps and peered briefly into the gloom.

"Go ahead," Eilonwy urged. "Let's try this one. It seems as good as any."

"Hush!" Taran bent his head and listened intently. From a distance came a faint whispering and rustling. "There's something . . ."

"Well, by all means let's find out what," said Eilonwy, prodding Taran in the back. "Go ahead, will you?"

Taran took a few cautious steps. The passage here was lower and seemed to slope still farther down. With Eilonwy beside him, he continued gingerly, setting each foot carefully, remembering the sudden, sickening fall that had brought him there in the first place. The whispering became a high keening, a wail of torment. It was as though voices had been spun out like threads, twisted taut, ready to snap. An icy current wove through the air, carrying along with it hollow sighs and a swell of dull mutterings. There were other sounds, too; raspings and shriekings, like sword points dragged over

stones. Taran felt his hands tremble; he hesitated a moment and gestured for Eilonwy to stay behind him.

"Give me the light," he whispered, "and wait for me here."

"Do you think it's ghosts?" Eilonwy asked. "I don't have any beans to spit at them, and that's about the only thing that will really do for a ghost. But you know I don't think it's ghosts at all. I've never heard one, though I suppose they could sound like that if they wanted to, but I don't see why they should bother. No, I think it's wind making all those noises."

"Wind? How could there be . . . Wait," Taran said. "You may be right, at that. There might be an opening." Closing his ears to the horrifying sounds and preferring to think of them as draughts of air rather than spectral voices, Taran quickened his pace. Eilonwy, paying no attention to his order to wait, strode along with him.

They soon arrived at the end of the passage. Once more, fallen stones blocked their way, but this time there was a narrow, jagged gap. From it, the wailing grew louder, and Taran felt a cold ribbon of air on his face. He thrust the light into the opening, but even the golden rays could not pierce the curtain of shadows. Taran slid cautiously past the barrier; Eilonwy followed.

They entered a low-ceilinged chamber, and as they did, the light flickered under the weight of the darkness. At first, Taran could make out only indistinct shapes, touched with a feeble green glow. The voices screamed in trembling rage. Despite the chill wind, Taran's forehead was clammy. He raised the light and took another step forward. The shapes grew clearer. Now he distinguished outlines of shields hanging from the walls and piles of swords and spears. His foot struck something. He bent to look and sprang back again, stifling a cry. It was the withered corpse of a man—a warrior

fully armed. Another lay beside him, and another, in a circle of ancient dead guarding a high stone slab on which a shadowy figure lay at full length.

Eilonwy paid scant attention to the warriors, having found something more interesting to her. "I'm sure Achren hasn't any idea all this is here," she whispered, pointing to heaps of otter-skin robes and great earthen jars overflowing with jewels. Weapons glistened amid stacks of helmets; woven baskets held brooches, collar-pieces, and chains.

"She'd have hauled it out long ago; she loves jewelry, you know, though it doesn't become her one bit."

"Surely it is the barrow of the king who built this castle," Taran said in a hushed voice. He stepped past the warriors and drew near the figure on the slab. Rich raiment clothed the body; polished stones glowed in his broad belt. The clawed hands still grasped the jeweled hilt of a sword, as if ready to unsheathe it. Taran recoiled in fear and horror. The skull seemed to grimace in defiance, daring a stranger to despoil the royal treasures.

As Taran turned, a gust of wind caught at his face. "I think there is a passage," he called, "there, in the far wall." He ran in the direction of the ghostly cries.

Close to the ground, a tunnel opened; he could smell fresh air, and his lungs drank deeply. "Hurry," he urged.

Taran snatched a sword from a warrior's bony hand and scrambled into the tunnel.

The tunnel was the narrowest they had encountered. Flat on his belly, Taran squeezed and fought his way over the loose stones. Behind him, he heard Eilonwy gasping and struggling. Then a

new sound began, a distant booming and throbbing. The earth shuddered as the pounding increased. Suddenly the passageway convulsed, the hidden roots of trees sprang up, the ground split beneath Taran, heaving and crumbling. In another instant, he was flung out at the bottom of a rocky slope.

A great crash resounded deep within the hill. Spiral Castle, high above him, was bathed in blue fire. A sudden gale nearly battered Taran to the ground. A tree of lightning crackled in the sky. Behind him, Eilonwy called for help.

She was half in, half out of the narrow passage. As Taran wrestled with the fallen stones, the walls of Spiral Castle shook like gray rags. The towers lurched madly. Taran clawed away clumps of earth and roots.

"I'm all tangled up with the sword," Eilonwy panted. "The scabbard's caught on something."

Taran heaved at the last rock. "What sword?" he said through gritted teeth. He seized Eilonwy under the arms and pulled her free.

"Oof!" she gasped. "I feel as if I had all my bones taken apart and put together wrong. The sword? You said you needed weapons, didn't you? And you took one, so I thought I might as well, too."

In a violent explosion that seemed ripped from the very center of the earth, Spiral Castle crumbled in on itself. The mighty stones of its walls split like twigs, their jagged ends thrusting at the sky. Then a deep silence fell. The wind was still; the air oppressive.

"Thank you for saving my life," said Eilonwy. "For an Assistant Pig-Keeper, I must say you are quite courageous. It's wonderful when people surprise you that way.

"I wonder what happened to Achren," she went on. "She'll

really be furious," she added with a delighted laugh, "and probably blame everything on me, for she's always punishing me for things I haven't even thought of yet."

"If Achren is under those stones, she'll never punish anyone again," Taran said. "But I don't think we'd better stay to find out." He buckled on his sword.

The blade Eilonwy had taken from the barrow was too long for the girl to wear comfortably at her waist, so she had slung it from her shoulder.

Taran looked at the weapon with surprise. "Why—that's the sword the king was holding."

"Naturally," said Eilonwy. "It should be the best one, shouldn't it?" She picked up the glowing sphere. "We're at the far side of the castle, what used to be the castle. Your friend is down there, among those trees—assuming he waited for you. I'd be surprised if he did, with all this going on . . ."


They ran toward the grove. Ahead, Taran saw the shadowy forms of a cloaked figure and a white horse. "There they are!" he cried.

"Gwydion!" he called. "Gwydion!"

The moon swung from behind the clouds. The figure turned. Taran stopped short in the sudden brightness and his jaw dropped. He had never seen this man before.

CHAPTER NINE

Fflewddur Fflam

Taran's sword leaped out. The man in the cloak hurriedly dropped Melyngar's bridle and darted behind a tree. Taran swung the blade. Pieces of bark sprayed the air. While the stranger ducked back and forth, Taran slashed and thrust, hacking wildly at bushes and branches.

"You're not Gwydion!" he shouted.

"Never claimed I was," the stranger shouted back. "If you think I'm Gwydion, you're dreadfully mistaken."

"Come out of there," Taran ordered, thrusting again.

"Certainly not while you're swinging that enormous—here now, watch that! Great Belin, I was safer in Achren's dungeon!"

"Come out now or you won't be able to," Taran shouted. He redoubled his attack, ripping furiously through the underbrush.

"Truce! Truce!" called the stranger. "You can't smite an unarmed man!"

Eilonwy, who had been a few paces behind Taran, ran up and seized his arm. "Stop it!" she cried. "That's no way to treat your friend, after I went to all the bother of rescuing him."

Taran shook off Eilonwy. "What treachery is this!" he shouted.

"You left my companion to die! You've been with Achren all along. I should have known it. You're no better than she is!" With a cry of anguish, he raised his sword.

Eilonwy ran sobbing into the woods. Taran dropped the blade and stood with bowed head.

The stranger ventured from behind the tree. "Truce?" he inquired again. "Believe me, if I'd known it was going to cause all this trouble I wouldn't have listened to that redheaded girl."

Taran did not raise his head.

The stranger took a few more cautious steps. "Humblest apologies for disappointing you," he said. "I'm awfully flattered you mistook me for Prince Gwydion. There's hardly any resemblance, except possibly a certain air of . . ."

"I do not know who you are," Taran said bitterly. "I do know that a brave man has bought your life for you."

"I am Fflewddur Fflam Son of Godo," the stranger said, bowing deeply, "a bard of the harp at your service."

"I have no need of bards," Taran said. "A harp will not bring my companion to life."

"Lord Gwydion is dead?" Fflewddur Fflam asked. "Those are sorrowful tidings. He is a kinsman and I owe allegiance to the House of Don. But why do you blame his death on me? If Gwydion has bought my life, at least tell me how, and I shall mourn with you."

"Go your way," said Taran. "It is no fault of yours. I trusted Gwydion's life to a traitor and liar. My own life should be forfeit."

"Those are hard words to apply to a winsome lass," said the bard. "Especially one who isn't here to defend herself."

"I want no explanation from her," he said. "There is nothing she can tell me. She can lose herself in the forest, for all I care."

"If she's as much of a traitor and a liar as you say," Ffleuddur remarked, "then you're letting her off easily. You may not want her explanation, but I'm quite sure Gwydion would. Allow me to suggest you go and find her before she strays too far."

Taran nodded. "Yes," he said coldly, "Gwydion shall have justice."

He turned on his heel and walked toward the trees. Eilonwy had gone no great distance; he could see the glow of the sphere a few paces ahead, where the girl sat on a boulder in a clearing. She looked small and thin; her head was pressed into her hands, and her shoulders shook.

"Now you've made me cry!" she burst out, as Taran approached. "I hate crying; it makes my nose feel like a melted icicle. You've hurt my feelings, you stupid Assistant Pig-Keeper, and all for something that's your own fault to begin with."

Taran was so taken aback that he began to stammer.

"Yes," cried Eilonwy, "it's every bit your fault! You were so close-mouthed about the man you wanted me to rescue, and you kept talking about your friend in the other cell. Very well, I rescued whoever it was in the other cell."

"You didn't tell me there was anyone else in the dungeon."

"There wasn't," Eilonwy insisted. "Ffleuddur Fflam or whatever he calls himself was the only one."

"Then where is my companion?" Taran demanded. "Where is Gwydion?"

"I don't know," Eilonwy said. "He wasn't in Achren's dungeon, that's sure. What's more, he never was."

Taran realized the girl was speaking the truth. As his memory returned, he recalled that Gwydion had been with him only briefly; he had not seen the guards put him in a cell; Taran had only guessed at that.

"What could she have done with him?"

"I haven't any idea in the world," Eilonwy said and sniffed. "She could have brought him to her chambers, or locked him in the tower—there's a dozen places she could have hidden him. All you needed to say was, 'Go and rescue a man named Gwydion,' and I would have found him. But no, you had to be so clever about it and keep everything to yourself . . ."

Taran's heart sank. "I must go back to the castle and find him. Will you show me where Achren might have imprisoned him?"

"There's nothing left of the castle," said Eilonwy. "Besides, I'm not sure I'm going to help you any more at all, after the way you've behaved; and calling me those horrid names, that's like putting caterpillars in somebody's hair." She tossed her head, put her chin in the air, and refused to look at him.

"I accused you falsely," Taran said. "My shame is as deep as my sorrow."

Eilonwy, without lowering her chin, gave him a sidelong glance. "I should think it would be."

"I shall seek him alone," said Taran. "You are right in refusing to help. It is no concern of yours." He turned and started out of the clearing.

"Well, you don't have to agree with me so quickly," Eilonwy cried. She slid off the boulder and hastened after him.

Fflewddur Fflam was still waiting when they returned. In the light of Eilonwy's sphere, Taran had a better view of this unex-

pected arrival. The bard was tall and lanky, with a long, pointed nose. His great shock of bright yellow hair burst out in all directions, like a ragged sun. His jacket and leggings were patched at knees and elbows, and sewn with large, clumsy stitches—the work, Taran was certain, of the bard himself. A harp with a beautiful, sweeping curve was slung from his shoulder, but otherwise he looked nothing at all like the bards Taran had learned about from *The Book of Three*.

“So it seems that I’ve been rescued by mistake,” Fflewddur said, after Taran explained what had happened. “I should have known it would turn out to be something like that. I kept asking myself, crawling along those beastly tunnels, who could possibly be interested whether I was languishing in a dungeon or not?”

“I am going back to the castle,” Taran said. “There may be hope that Gwydion still lives.”

“By all means,” cried the bard, his eyes lighting up. “A Fflam to the rescue! Storm the castle! Carry it by assault! Batter down the gates!”

“There’s not much of it left to storm,” said Eilonwy.

“Oh?” said Fflewddur, with disappointment. “Very well, we shall do the best we can.”

At the summit of the hill, the mighty blocks of stone lay as if crushed by a giant fist. Only the square arch of the gate remained upright, gaunt as a bone. In the moonlight, the ruins seemed already ancient. Shreds of mist hung over the shattered tower. Achren had learned of his escape, Taran guessed, for at the moment of the castle’s destruction, she had sent out a company of

guards. Amid the rubble, their bodies sprawled motionless as the stones.

With growing despair, Taran climbed over the ruins. The foundations of the castle had collapsed. The walls had fallen inward. The bard and Eilonwy helped Taran try to shift one or two of the broken rocks, but the work was beyond their strength.

At last, the exhausted Taran shook his head. "We can do no more," he murmured. "This shall stand as Gwydion's burial mound." He stood a moment, looking silently over the desolation, then turned away.

Fflewddur suggested taking weapons from the bodies of the guards. He equipped himself with a dagger, sword, and spear; in addition to the blade she had taken from the barrow, Eilonwy carried a slim dagger at her waist. Taran collected as many bows and quivers of arrows as he could carry. The group was now lightly but effectively armed.

With heavy hearts, the little band made their way down the slope. Melyngar followed docilely, her head bowed, as if she understood that she would not see her master again.

"I must leave this evil place," Taran cried. "I am impatient to be gone from here. Spiral Castle has brought me only grief; I have no wish to see it again."

"What has it brought the rest of us?" Eilonwy asked. "You make it sound as though we were just sitting around having a splendid time while you moan and take on."

Taran stopped abruptly. "I—I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean it that way."

"Furthermore," said Eilonwy, "you're mistaken if you think

I'm going to go marching through the woods in the middle of the night."

"And I," put in Fflewddur, "I don't mind telling you I'm so tired I could sleep on Achren's doorstep."

"We all need rest," Taran said. "But I don't trust Achren, alive or dead, and we still know nothing of the Cauldron-Born. If they escaped, they may be looking for us right now. No matter how tired we are, it would be foolhardy to stay this close."

Eilonwy and Fflewddur agreed to continue on for a little distance. After a time, they found a spot well protected by trees, and flung themselves wearily to the turf. Taran unsaddled Melyngar, thankful the girl had thought to bring along Gwydion's gear. He found a cloak in a saddlebag and handed it to Eilonwy. The bard wrapped himself in his own tattered garment and set his harp carefully on a gnarled root.

Taran stood the first watch. Thoughts of the livid warriors still haunted him, and he saw their faces in every shadow. As the night wore on, the passage of a forest creature or the restless sighing of wind in the leaves made him start. The bushes rustled. This time it was not the wind. He heard a faint scratching, and his hand flew to his sword.

A figure bounded into the moonlight and rolled up to Taran.

"Crunchings and munchings?" whimpered a voice.

"Who is your peculiar friend?" asked the bard, sitting up and looking curiously at this new arrival.

"For an Assistant Pig-Keeper," remarked Eilonwy, "you do keep strange company. Where did you find it? And what is it? I've never seen anything like that in my life."

"He is no friend of mine," cried Taran. "He is a miserable, sneaking wretch who deserted us as soon as we were attacked."

"No, no!" Gurgi protested, whimpering and bobbing his matted head. "Poor humble Gurgi is always faithful to mighty lords—what joy to serve them, even with shakings and breakings."

"Tell the truth," said Taran. "You ran off when we needed you most."

"Slashings and gashings are for noble lords, not for poor, weak Gurgi. Oh, fearsome whistlings of blades! Gurgi ran to look for help, mighty lord."

"You didn't succeed in finding any," Taran said angrily.

"Oh, sadness!" Gurgi moaned. "There was no help for brave warriors. Gurgi went far, far, with great squeakings and shriekings."

"I'm sure you did," Taran said.

"What else can unhappy Gurgi do? He is sorry to see great warriors in distress, oh, tears of misery! But in battle, what would there be for poor Gurgi except hurtful guttings and cuttings of his throat?"

"It wasn't very brave," said Eilonwy, "but it wasn't altogether stupid, either. I don't see what advantage there was for him to be chopped up, especially if he wasn't any help to you in the first place."

"Oh, wisdom of a noble lady!" Gurgi cried, throwing himself at Eilonwy's feet. "If Gurgi had not gone seeking help, he would not be here to serve you now. But he is here! Yes, yes, faithful Gurgi returns to beatings and bruising from the terrifying warrior!"

"Just keep out of my sight," Taran said, "or you really will have something to complain about."

Gurgi snuffled. "Gurgi hastens to obey, mighty lord. He will say no more, not even whisperings of what he saw. No, he will not disturb the sleepings of powerful heroes. See how he leaves, with tearful farewells."

"Come back here immediately," Taran called.

Gurgi brightened. "Crunchings?"

"Listen to me," Taran said, "there's hardly enough to go round, but I'll give you a fair share of what we have. After that, you'll have to find your own munchings."

Gurgi nodded. "Many more hosts march in the valley with sharp spears—oh, many more. Gurgi watches so quietly and cleverly, he does not ask *them* for help. No, they would only give harmful hurtings."

"What's this, what's this?" cried Fflewddur. "A great host? I should love to see them. I always enjoy processions and that sort of thing."

"The enemies of the House of Don are gathering," Taran hurriedly told the bard. "Gwydion and I saw them before we were captured. Now, if Gurgi speaks the truth, they have gathered reinforcements."

The bard sprang to his feet. "A Fflam never shrinks from danger! The mightier the foe, the greater the glory! We shall seek them out, set upon them! The bards shall sing our praises forever!"

Carried away by Fflewddur's enthusiasm, Taran seized his sword. Then he shook his head, remembering Gwydion's words in the forest near Caer Dallben. "No—no," he said slowly, "it would be folly to think of attacking them." He smiled quickly at Fflewddur. "The bards would sing of us," he admitted, "but we'd be in no position to appreciate it."

Fflewddur sat down again, disappointed.

"You can talk about the bards singing your praises all you want," said Eilonwy. "I'm in no mood to do battle. I'm going to sleep." With that, she curled up on the ground and pulled the cloak over her head.

Still unconvinced, Fflewddur settled himself against a tree root for his turn at guard. Gurgi curled up at Eilonwy's feet. Exhausted though he was, Taran lay awake. In his mind, he saw again the Horned King and heard the screams from the flaming cages.

He sat up quickly. Grieving for his companion, he had forgotten what had brought him here. His own quest had been for Hen Wen; Gwydion's, to warn the Sons of Don. Taran's head spun. With his companion surely dead, should he now try to make his way to *Caer Dathyl*? What, then, would become of Hen Wen? Everything had ceased to be simple. He yearned for the peacefulness of *Caer Dallben*, yearned even to weed the vegetable gardens and make horseshoes. He turned restlessly, finding no answer. At last, his weariness overcame him and he slept, plunged in nightmares.

CHAPTER TEN

The Sword Dyrnwyn



It was full daylight when Taran opened his eyes. Gurgi was already sniffing hungrily at the saddlebags. Taran rose quickly and shared out as much of the remaining provisions as he dared, keeping a small amount in reserve, since he had no idea how difficult it would be to find food during the coming journey. In the course of the restless night, he had reached his decision, though at present he refrained from speaking of it, still unsure he had chosen wisely. For the moment he concentrated on a meager breakfast.

Gurgi, sitting cross-legged, devoured his food with so many outcries of pleasure and loud smackings of his lips that he seemed to be eating twice as much as he really did. Ffleuddur bolted his scant portion as though he had not enjoyed a meal for at least five days. Eilonwy was more interested in the sword she had taken from the barrow. It lay across her knees and, with a perplexed frown, the tip of her tongue between her lips, the girl was studying the weapon curiously.

As Taran grew near, Eilonwy snatched the sword away. "Well," said Taran, with a laugh, "you needn't act as if I were going to steal it from you." Although jewels studded the hilt and pommel, the

scabbard was battered, discolored, nearly black with age. For all that, it had an air of ancient lineage, and Taran was eager to hold it. "Come," he said, "let me see the blade."

"I dare not," cried Eilonwy, to Taran's great surprise. He saw that her face was solemn and almost fearful.

"There is a symbol of power on the scabbard," Eilonwy continued. "I've seen this mark before, on some of Achren's things. It always means something forbidden. Of course, all Achren's things are like that, but some are more forbidden than others.

"There's another inscription, too," said Eilonwy, frowning again. "But it's in the Old Writing." She stamped her foot. "Oh, I do wish Achren had finished teaching it to me. I can almost make it out, but not quite, and there's nothing more irritating. It's like not finishing what you started out to say."

Fflewddur came up just then and he, too, peered at the strange weapon. "Comes from a barrow, eh?" The bard shook his spiky, yellow head and whistled. "I suggest getting rid of it immediately. Never had much confidence in things you find in barrows. It's a bad business having anything to do with them. You can't be sure where else they've been and who all's had them."

"If it's an enchanted weapon," Taran began, more interested than ever in getting his hands on the sword, "shouldn't we keep it . . ."

"Oh, do be quiet," Eilonwy cried. "I can't hear myself think. I don't see what you're both talking about, getting rid of it or not getting rid of it. After all, it's mine, isn't it? I found it and carried it out, and almost got stuck in a dirty old tunnel because of it."

"Bards are supposed to understand these things," Taran said.

"Naturally," Fflewddur answered, smiling confidently and putting his long nose closer to the scabbard. "These inscriptions are all pretty much the same. I see this one's on the scabbard rather than the blade. It says, oh, something like 'Beware My Wrath'—the usual sentiments."

At that moment there was a loud twang. Fflewddur blinked. One of his harp strings had snapped. "Excuse me," he said, and went to see about his instrument.

"It doesn't say anything at all like that," Eilonwy declared. "I can read some of it now. Here, it starts near the hilt and goes winding around like ivy. I was looking at it the wrong way. It says *Dyrnwyn*, first. I don't know whether that's the name of the sword or the name of the king. Oh, yes, that's the name of the sword; here it is again:

DRAW DYRNWYN, ONLY THOU OF ROYAL BLOOD,
TO RULE, TO STRIKE THE . . .

"Something or other," Eilonwy went on. "It's very faint; I can't see it. The letters are worn too smooth. No, that's odd. They aren't worn; they've been scratched out. They must have been cut deeply, because there's still a trace. But I can't read the rest. This word looks as if it might be death . . ." She shuddered. "That's not very cheerful."

"Let me unsheathe it," Taran urged again. "There might be more on the blade."

"Certainly not," said Eilonwy. "I told you it had a symbol of power and I'm bound by it—that's elementary."

"Achren cannot bind you any longer."

"It isn't Achren," Eilonwy answered. "I only said she had things with the same mark. This is a stronger enchantment than any she could make, I'm quite sure. I wouldn't dare to draw it, and I don't intend letting you, either. Besides, it says *only royal blood* and doesn't mention a word about Assistant Pig-Keeper."

"How can you tell I haven't royal blood?" Taran asked, bristling. "I wasn't *born* an Assistant Pig-Keeper. For all you know, my father might have been a king. It happens all the time in *The Book of Three*."

"I never heard of *The Book of Three*," said Eilonwy. "But in the first place, I don't think it's good enough to be a king's son or even a king himself. Royal blood is just a way of translating; in the Old Writing, it didn't mean only having royal relatives—anybody can have those. It meant—oh, I don't know what you'd call it. Something very special. And it seems to me that if you have it, you don't need to wonder whether you have it."

"So, of course," said Taran, nettled by the girl's remarks, "you've made up your mind that I'm not—whatever it is."

"I didn't mean to offend you," Eilonwy said quickly. "For an Assistant Pig-Keeper, I think you're quite remarkable. I even think you're the nicest person I've ever met in my life. It's just that I'm forbidden to let you have the sword and that's that."

"What will you do with it, then?"

"Keep it, naturally. I'm not going to drop it down a well, am I?"

Taran snorted. "You'll make a fine sight—a little girl carrying a sword."

"I am not a little girl," said Eilonwy, tossing her hair in exaspera-

tion. "Among my people in the olden days, the Sword-Maidens did battle beside the men."

"It's not the olden days now," Taran said. "Instead of a sword, you should be carrying a doll."

Eilonwy, with a squeal of vexation, raised a hand to slap at Taran, when Fflewddur Fflam returned.

"Here now," said the bard, "no squabbling; there's not a bit of use to it." With a large key he tightened the wooden peg holding the newly repaired harp string.

Eilonwy turned her irritation on Fflewddur. "That inscription was a very important one. It didn't say anything about bewaring anyone's wrath. You didn't read it right at all. You're a fine bard, if you can't make out the writing on an enchanted sword."

"Well, you see, the truth of the matter," said Fflewddur, clearing his throat and speaking with much hesitation, "is this way. I'm not officially a bard."

"I didn't know there were *unofficial* bards," Eilonwy remarked.

"Oh, yes indeed," said Fflewddur. "At least in my case. I'm also a king."

"A king?" Taran said. "Sire . . ." He dropped to one knee.

"None of that, none of that," said Fflewddur. "I don't bother with it any more."

"Where is your kingdom?" Eilonwy asked.

"Several days' journey east of Caer Dathyl," said Fflewddur. "It is a vast realm . . ."

At this, Taran heard another jangling.

"Drat the thing," said the bard. "There go two more strings. As I was saying. Yes, well, it is actually a rather *small* kingdom in the

north, very dull and dreary. So I gave it up. I'd always loved barding and wandering—and that's what I decided to do."

"I thought bards had to study a great deal," Eilonwy said. "A person can't just go and decide . . ."

"Yes, that was one of the problems," said the former king. "I studied; I did quite well in the examinations . . ." A small string at the upper end of the harp broke with a high-pitched tinkle and curled up like an ivy tendril. "I did quite *poorly*," he went on, "and the Council of Bards wouldn't admit me. Really, they want you to know so much these days. Volumes and volumes of poetry, and chants and music and calculating the seasons, and history; and all kinds of alphabets you spell out on your fingers, and secret signs—a man couldn't hope to cram it all into his skull.

"The Council were very nice to me," continued Fflewddur. "Taliesin, the Chief Bard himself, presented me with this harp. He said it was exactly what I needed. I sometimes wonder if he was really doing me a favor. It's a very nice harp, but I have such trouble with the strings. I'd throw it away and get another, but it has a beautiful tone; I should never find one as good. If only the beastly strings . . ."

"They do seem to break frequently," Eilonwy began.

"Yes, that's so," Fflewddur admitted, a little sheepishly. "I've noticed it usually happens when—well, I'm an emotional sort of fellow, and I do get carried away. I might, ah, readjust the facts slightly; purely for dramatic effect, you understand."

"If you'd stop readjusting the facts quite as much," Eilonwy said, "perhaps you wouldn't have that trouble with the harp."

"Yes, I suppose," said the bard with a sigh. "I try, but it's hard,

very hard. As a king, you get into the habit. Sometimes I think I pass more time fixing strings than playing. But, there it is. You can't have everything."

"Where were you journeying when Achren captured you?" Taran asked.

"No place in particular," said Ffleuddur. "That's one advantage. You don't have to hurry to get somewhere. You keep moving, and next thing you know, there you are. Unfortunately, in this case, it was Achren's dungeon. She didn't care for my playing. That woman has no ear for music," he added, shuddering.

"Sire," Taran said, "I ask a boon."

"Please," said the former king, "Ffleuddur will do very well. A boon? Delighted! I haven't done any boon-granting since I gave up the throne."

Ffleuddur Fflam and Eilonwy seated themselves on the turf, while Taran recounted his search for Hen Wen and what Gwydion had told him of the Horned King and the rising of the cantrevs. Gurgi, having finished his meal, sidled over and squatted on a hillock to listen.

"There is no doubt in my mind," Taran went on, "the Sons of Don must have news of the uprising before the Horned King strikes. If he triumphs, Arawn will have Prydain by the throat. I have seen with my own eyes what that means." He felt ill at ease, speaking as if he himself were a war-leader in a council hall, but soon the words began to come easier. Perhaps, he thought, because he was speaking for Gwydion.

"I see your plan," Ffleuddur interrupted. "You shall keep on looking for your pig, and you want me to warn the warriors of Don.

Splendid! I shall start off immediately. And if the hosts of the Horned King overtake me . . ." The bard slashed and thrust at the air. "They shall know the valor of a Fflam!"

Taran shook his head. "No, I shall journey to *Caer Dathyl* myself. I do not question your valor," he said to the bard, "but the danger is too great. I ask no one else to face it in my stead."

"When do you intend to seek your pig?" asked *Ffleddur*.

"My own quest," said Taran, looking at the bard, "must be given up. If it is possible, after the first task is done, I mean to return to it. Until then, I serve only *Gwydion*. It was I who cost him his life, and it is justice for me to do what I believe he would have done."

"As I grasp the situation," said the bard, "I think you're taking too much blame on yourself. You had no way of knowing *Gwydion* wasn't in the dungeon."

"It changes nothing," Taran answered. "I have made my decision."

Ffleddur was about to protest, but the firmness of Taran's words silenced the bard. After a moment, he asked, "What is your boon, then?"

"It is twofold," said Taran. "First, tell me how I may reach *Caer Dathyl* as quickly as possible. Second, I beg you to conduct this girl safely to her own people."

Before *Ffleddur* could open his mouth, *Eilonwy* gave an indignant cry and leaped to her feet. "Conducted? I shall be conducted where I please! I'm not going to be sent back, just so I can be sent somewhere else; and it will be another dreary place, you can be sure. No, I shall go to *Caer Dathyl*, too!"

"There is risk enough," Taran declared, "without having to worry about a girl."

Eilonwy put her hands on her hips. Her eyes flashed. "I don't like being called 'a girl' and *this* girl' as if I didn't have a name at all. It's like having your head put in a sack. If you've made your decision, I've made my own. I don't see how you're going to stop me. If *you*," she hurried on, pointing at the bard, "try to conduct me to my mean, stupid kinsmen—and they're hardly related to me in the first place—that harp will be in pieces around your ears!"

Fflewddur blinked and clutched his harp protectively, while Eilonwy went on.

"And if a certain Assistant Pig-Keeper—I won't even mention his name—thinks otherwise, he'll be even more mistaken!"

Everyone started talking at once. "Stop it!" cried Taran at the top of his voice. "Very well," he said, after the others grew quiet. "You," he said to Eilonwy, "could be tied up and set on Melyngar. But," he added, raising his hand before the girl could interrupt, "that will not be done. *Not* because of all the commotion you raised, but because I realize now it is best."

The bard looked surprised.

Taran continued. "There is greater safety in greater numbers. Whatever happens, there will be more chance for one of us to reach *Caer Dathyl*. I believe we should all stay together."

"And faithful Gurgi, too!" shouted Gurgi. "He will follow! Too many wicked enemies are smirking and lurking to jab him with pointy spears!"

"If he agrees," Taran said, "Fflewddur shall act as guide. But I warn you," he added, glancing at Gurgi and Eilonwy, "nothing must hinder our task."

"Ordinarily," said Fflewddur, "I prefer to be in charge of this type

of expedition myself. But," he went on, as Taran was about to protest, "since you are acting for Lord Gwydion, I accept your authority as I would accept his." He bowed low. "A Fflam is yours to command.

"Forward, then!" the bard cried. "And if we must give battle, so be it! Why, I've carved my way through walls of spearmen . . ."

Six harp strings broke at once, and the others strained so tautly they looked on the verge of snapping. While Taran saddled Melyngar, the bard set ruefully to work repairing his harp.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Flight Through the Hills



At first, Taran offered to let Eilonwy ride Melyngar, but the girl refused.

"I can walk as well as any of you," she cried, so angrily that Taran made no more of it; he had learned to be wary of the girl's sharp tongue. It was agreed that the white mare would carry the weapons taken from Spiral Castle—except the sword Dyrnwyn, of which Eilonwy had appointed herself guardian.

Scratching in the dirt with his dagger point, Ffleuddur Fflam showed Taran the path he intended to follow. "The hosts of the Horned King will surely stay in the Valley of Ystrad. It's the easiest way for an army on the march. Spiral Castle was here," he added, with an angry jab to mark the spot, "west of the River Ystrad. Now, the shortest road would be straight north over these hills."

"That is the one we must take," said Taran, trying hard to make sense of Ffleuddur's crisscrossing lines.

"Wouldn't recommend it, my friend. We should be passing a little too near Annuvín. Arawn's strongholds are close to Spiral Castle; and I suggest we keep clear of them. No, what I believe we

should do is this: stay on the high ground of the western bank of the Ystrad; we can go quite directly, since we needn't follow the valley itself. That way, we can avoid both Annuvín and the Horned King. The four of us can move faster than heavily armed warriors. We shall come out well ahead of them, not too far from Caer Dathyl. From there, we make a dash for it—and our task is done." Fflewddur straightened up, beaming with satisfaction. "There you have it," he said, wiping the dirt from his dagger. "A brilliant strategy. My own war-leader couldn't have arranged it better."

"Yes," said Taran, his head still muddled with the bard's talk of high ground and western banks, "that sounds very reasonable."

They descended to a broad, sun-swept meadow. The morning had turned bright and warm; dew still clung to bending blades of grass. At the head of the travelers strode Fflewddur, stepping out briskly on his long, spindly shanks. The harp jogged on his back; his shabby cloak was rolled over his shoulder. Eilonwy, hair disheveled by the breeze, the great black sword slung behind her, followed next, with Gurgi immediately after. So many new leaves and twigs had stuck in Gurgi's hair that he had begun to look like a walking beaver dam; he loped along, swinging his arms, shaking his head from side to side, moaning and muttering.

Holding Melyngar's bridle, Taran marched last in line. Except for the weapons lashed to the horse's saddle, these travelers might have been on a spring ramble. Eilonwy chattered gaily; now and then Fflewddur burst into a snatch of song. Taran alone was uneasy. To him, the bright morning felt deceptively gentle; the golden

trees seemed to cover dark shadows. He shuddered even in the warmth. His heart was troubled, too, as he watched his companions. In *Caer Dallben*, he had dreamed of being a hero. But dreaming, he had come to learn, was easy; and at *Caer Dallben* no lives depended on his judgment. He longed for *Gwydion's* strength and guidance. His own strength, he feared, was not equal to his task. He turned once for a last look in the direction of *Spiral Castle*, *Gwydion's* burial mound. Over the hill crest, stark against the clouds, rose two figures on horseback.

Taran shouted and gestured for his companions to take cover in the woods. *Melyngar* galloped forward. In another moment, they were all crouching in a thicket. The horsemen followed along the crest, too far away for Taran to see their faces clearly; but from their rigid postures he could guess at the livid features and dull eyes of the *Cauldron-Born*.

"How long have they been behind us?" asked *Fflewddur*. "Have they seen us?"

Taran looked cautiously through the screen of leaves. He pointed toward the slope. "There is your answer," he said.

From the crest the pale *Cauldron* warriors had turned their horses toward the meadow and were steadily picking their way down the hill. "Hurry," ordered Taran. "We must outrun them."

The group did not return to the meadow, but struck out across the woods. The appearance of the *Cauldron-Born* now forced them to abandon the path *Fflewddur* had chosen, but the bard hoped they might throw the warriors off the track and circle back again to higher ground.

Staying close to one another, they moved at a dog trot, not daring to stop even for water. The forest offered a measure of protection from the sun, but after a time the pace began to tell on them. Only Gurgi did not seem fatigued or uncomfortable. He loped steadily along, and the swarms of midges and stinging insects could not penetrate his matted hair. Eilonwy, who proudly insisted she enjoyed running, clung to Melyngar's stirrup.

Taran could not be sure how close the warriors were; he knew the Cauldron-Born could hardly fail to track them, by sound if nothing else, for they no longer attempted to move silently. Speed was their only hope, and long after nightfall they pressed on.

It had become a blind race into darkness, under a moon drowned in heavy clouds. Invisible branches grasped at them or slashed their faces. Eilonwy stumbled once, and Taran pulled her to her feet. The girl faltered again; her head drooped. Taran unstrapped the weapons on Melyngar's saddle, shared out the burden with Ffleuddur and Gurgi, and hoisted the protesting Eilonwy to Melyngar's back. She slumped forward, her cheek pressed against the horse's golden mane.

All night they struggled through the forest, which grew denser the closer they approached the Ystrad valley. By the time the first hesitating light of day appeared, even Gurgi had begun to stumble with fatigue and could barely put one hairy foot in front of the other. Eilonwy had fallen into a slumber so deep that Taran feared she was ill. Her hair lay bedraggled and damp upon her forehead; her face was pallid. With the bard's help, Taran lifted her from the saddle and propped her against a mossy bank. When he ventured to

unbuckle the cumbersome sword, Eilonwy opened one eye, made an irritated face, and pulled the blade away from him—with more determination than he had expected.

"You never understand things the first time," Eilonwy murmured, her grip firm on the weapon. "But I imagine Assistant Pig-Keepers are all alike. I told you before you're not to have it, and now I'll tell you for the second time—or is it the third, or fourth? I must have lost count." So saying, she wrapped her arms around the scabbard and dropped back to sleep.

"We must rest here," Taran said to the bard, "if only a little while."

"At the moment," groaned Fflewddur, who had stretched out full length with his toes and nose pointing straight into the air, "I don't care who catches me. I'd welcome Arawn himself, and ask whether he had any breakfast with him."

"The Cauldron-Born might have lost track of us during the night," Taran said hopefully, but without great conviction. "I wish I knew how far we've left them behind—if we've left them behind at all."

Gurgi brightened a little. "Clever Gurgi will know," he cried, "with seekings and peekings."

In another moment, Gurgi was halfway up a tall pine. He clambered easily to the top and perched there like an enormous crow, scanning the land in the direction they had traveled.

Taran, meanwhile, opened the saddlebags. So little food remained that it was hardly worth dividing. He and Fflewddur agreed to give Eilonwy the last of the provisions.

Gurgi had scented food even at the top of the pine tree, and he

came scuttling down, snuffling eagerly at the prospect of his crunchings and munchings.

"Stop thinking about eating for a moment," Taran cried. "What did you see?"

"Two warriors are far, but Gurgi sees them—yes, yes, they are riding full of wickedness and fierceness. But there is time for a small crunching," Gurgi pleaded. "Oh, very small for clever, valiant Gurgi."

"There are no more crunchings," said Taran. "If the Cauldron-Born are still on our heels, you had better worry less about food and more about your own skin."

"But Gurgi will find munchings! Very quickly—oh, yes—he is so wise to get them, to comfort the bellies of great noble lords. But they will forget poor Gurgi, and not even give him snips and snaps for his eatings."

After a hurried discussion with Fflewddur, who looked as ravenous as Gurgi, Taran agreed they might take a little time to search for berries and edible roots.

"Quite right," said the bard. "Better eat what we can get now, while the Cauldron-Born give us a chance to do it. I shall help you. I know all about foraging in the woods, do it constantly..." The harp tensed and one string showed signs of giving way. "No," he added quickly, "I had better stay with Eilonwy. The truth is, I can't tell a mushroom from a toadstool. I wish I could; it would make the life of a wandering bard considerably more filling."

With cloaks in which to carry back whatever they might find, Taran and Gurgi set off. At a small stream Taran halted to fill

Gwydion's leather water flask. Gurgi, sniffing hungrily, ran ahead and disappeared into a stand of rowans. Near the bank of the stream Taran discovered mushrooms, and gathered them hurriedly. Bent on his own search, he paid little heed to Gurgi, until he suddenly heard anguished yelps from behind the trees. Clutching his precious mushrooms, Taran hastened to see what had happened, and came upon Gurgi lying in the middle of the grove, writhing and whimpering, a honeycomb beside him.

At first, Taran thought Gurgi had got himself stung by bees. Then, he saw the creature was in more serious trouble. While Gurgi had climbed for the honey, a dead branch had snapped under his weight. His twisted leg was pinned to the ground with the heavy wood on top of it. Taran heaved the branch away.

The panting Gurgi shook his head. "Poor Gurgi's leg is broken," he moaned. "There will be no more amblings and ramblings for him now!"

Taran bent and examined the injury. The leg was not broken, though badly torn, and swelling rapidly.

"Now Gurgi's head must be chopped off," the creature moaned. "Do it, great lord, do it quickly. Gurgi will squeeze up his eyes so as not to see hurtful slashings."

Taran looked closely at Gurgi. The creature was in earnest. His eyes pleaded with Taran. "Yes, yes," cried Gurgi. "Now, before silent warriors arrive. Gurgi is better dead at your sword than in their hands. Gurgi cannot walk! All will be killed with fearful smitings and bitings. It is better . . ."

"No," said Taran. "You won't be left in the woods, and you won't

have your head chopped off—by me or anyone else.” For a moment Taran almost regretted his words. The poor creature was right, he knew. The injury would slow their pace. And Gurgi, like all of them, would be better off dead than in Arawn’s grasp. Still, Taran could not bring himself to draw his sword.

“You and Eilonwy can ride Melyngar,” Taran said, lifting Gurgi to his feet and putting one of the creature’s hairy arms about his shoulder. “Come on, now. One step at a time . . .”

Taran was exhausted when they reached Eilonwy and the bard. The girl had recovered noticeably and was chattering even faster than before. While Gurgi lay silently on the grass, Taran divided the honeycomb. The portions were pitifully small.

Ffleuddur called Taran aside. “Your hairy friend is going to make things difficult,” he said quietly. “If Melyngar carries two riders, I don’t know how much longer she can keep up.”

“That is true,” said Taran. “Yet I see nothing else we can do. Would you abandon him? Would you have cut off his head?”

“Absolutely,” cried the bard, “in a flash! A Fflam never hesitates. Fortunes of war and all that. Oh, drat and blast! There goes another string. A thick one, too.”

When Taran went back to rearrange the weapons they would now be obliged to bear, he was surprised to find a large oak leaf on the ground before his cloak. On the leaf lay Gurgi’s tiny portion of honeycomb.

“For great lord,” murmured Gurgi. “Gurgi is not hungry for crunchings and munchings today.”


Taran looked at the eager face of Gurgi. For the first time they smiled at one another.

"Your gift is generous," Taran said softly, "but you travel as one of us and you will need all your strength. Keep your share; it is yours by right; and you have more than earned it."

He put his hand gently on Gurgi's shoulder. The wet wolfhound odor did not seem as objectionable as before.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Wolves

 For a time, during the day, Taran believed they had at last outdistanced the Cauldron-Born. But, late that afternoon, the warriors reappeared from behind a distant fringe of trees. Against the westering sun, the long shadows of the horsemen reached across the hill slope toward the flatlands where the small troop struggled onward.

"We must stand against them sooner or later," Taran said, wiping his forehead. "Let it be now. There can be no victory over the Cauldron-Born, but with luck, we can hold them off a little while. If Eilonwy and Gurgi can escape, there is still a chance."

Gurgi, draped over Melyngar's saddle, immediately set up a great outcry. "No, no! Faithful Gurgi stays with mighty lord who spared his poor tender head! Happy, grateful Gurgi will fight, too, with slashings and gashings. . ."

"We appreciate your sentiments," said Ffleuddur, "but with that leg of yours, you're hardly up to slashing or gashing or anything at all."

"I'm not going to run, either," Eilonwy put in. "I'm tired of running and having my face scratched and my robe torn, all on

account of those stupid warriors." She jumped lightly from the saddle and snatched a bow and a handful of arrows from Taran's pack.

"Eilonwy! Stop!" Taran cried. "These are deathless men! They cannot be killed!"

Although encumbered by the long sword hanging from her shoulder, Eilonwy ran faster than Taran. By the time he caught up with her, she had climbed a hillock and was stringing the bow. The Cauldron-Born galloped across the plain. The sun glinted on their drawn swords.

Taran seized the girl by the waist and tried to pull her away. He received a sharp kick in the shins.

"Must you always interfere with everything?" Eilonwy asked indignantly.

Before Taran could reach for her again, she held an arrow toward the sun and murmured a strange phrase. She nocked the arrow and loosed it in the direction of the Cauldron-Born. The shaft arched upward and almost disappeared against the bright rays.

Open-mouthed, Taran watched while the shaft began its descent: as the arrow plummeted to earth, long, silvery streamers sprang from its feathers. In an instant, a huge spiderweb glittered in the air and drifted slowly toward the horsemen.

Fflewddur, who had run up just then, stopped in amazement. "Great Belin!" he exclaimed. "What's that? It looks like decorations for a feast!"

The web slowly settled over the Cauldron-Born, but the pallid warriors paid it no heed. They spurred their mounts onward; the strands of the web broke and melted away.

Eilonwy clapped a hand to her mouth. "It didn't work!" she cried, almost in tears. "The way Achren does it, she makes it into a big sticky rope. Oh, it's all gone wrong. I tried to listen behind the door when she was practicing, but I've missed something important." She stamped her foot and turned away.

"Take her from here!" Taran called to the bard. He unsheathed his sword and faced the Cauldron-Born. Within moments they would be upon him. But, even as he braced for their onslaught, he saw the horsemen falter. The Cauldron-Born reined up suddenly; then, without a gesture, turned their horses and rode silently back toward the hills.

"It worked! It worked after all!" cried the astonished Fflewddur.

Eilonwy shook her head. "No," she said with discouragement, "something turned them away, but I'm afraid it wasn't my spell." She unstrung the bow and picked up the arrows she had dropped.

"I think I know what it was," Taran said. "They are returning to Arawn. Gwydion told me they could not stay long from Annvin. Their power must have been waning ever since we left Spiral Castle, and they reached the limit of their strength right here."

"I hope they don't have enough to get back to Annvin," Eilonwy said. "I hope they fall into pieces or shrivel up like bats."

"I doubt that they will," Taran said, watching the horsemen slowly disappear over the ridge. "They must know how long they can stay and how far they can go, and still return to their master." He gave Eilonwy an admiring glance. "It doesn't matter. They're

gone. And that was one of the most amazing things I've ever seen. Gwydion had a mesh of grass that burst into flame; but I've never met anyone else who could make a web like that."

Eilonwy looked at him in surprise. Her cheeks blushed brighter than the sunset. "Why, Taran of Caer Dallben," she said, "I think that's the first polite thing you've said to me." Then, suddenly, Eilonwy tossed her head and sniffed. "Of course, I should have known; it was the spiderweb. You were more interested in that; you didn't care whether *I* was in danger." She strode haughtily back to Gurgi and Melyngar.

"But that's not true," Taran called. "I—I was..." By then, Eilonwy was out of earshot. Crestfallen, Taran followed her. "I can't make sense out of that girl," he said to the bard. "Can you?"

"Never mind," Fflewddur said. "We aren't really expected to."

That night, they continued to take turns at standing guard, though much of their fear had lifted since the Cauldron-Born had vanished. Taran's was the last watch before dawn, and he was awake well before Eilonwy's had ended.

"You had better sleep," Taran told her. "I'll finish the watch for you."

"I'm perfectly able to do my share," said Eilonwy, who had not stopped being irritated at him since the afternoon.

Taran knew better than to insist. He picked up his bow and quiver of arrows, stood near the dark trunk of an oak, and looked out across the moon-silvered meadow. Nearby, Fflewddur snored heartily. Gurgi, whose leg had shown no improvement, stirred restlessly and whimpered in his sleep.

"You know," Taran began, with embarrassed hesitation, "that spiderweb . . ."

"I don't want to hear any more about it," retorted Eilonwy.

"No—what I meant was: I really was worried about you. But the web surprised me so much I forgot to mention it. It was courageous of you to stand up against the Cauldron warriors. I just wanted to tell you that."

"You took long enough getting around to it," said Eilonwy, a tone of satisfaction in her voice. "But I imagine Assistant Pig-Keepers tend to be slower than what you might expect. It probably comes from the kind of work they do. Don't misunderstand, I think it's awfully important. Only it's the sort of thing you don't often need to be quick about."

"At first," Taran went on, "I thought I would be able to reach Caer Dathyl by myself. I see now that I wouldn't have got even this far without help. It is a good destiny that brings me such brave companions."

"There, you've done it again," Eilonwy cried, so heatedly that Ffleuddur choked on one of his snores. "That's all you care about! Someone to help you carry spears and swords and what-all. It could be *anybody* and you'd be just as pleased. Taran of Caer Dallben, I'm not speaking to you any more."

"At home," Taran said—to himself, Eilonwy had already pulled a cloak over her head and was feigning sleep—"nothing ever happened. Now, everything happens. But somehow I can never seem to make it come out right." With a sigh, he held his bow ready and began his turn at guard. Daylight was long in coming.

In the morning, Taran saw Gurgi's leg was much worse, and he

left the campsite to search the woods for healing plants, glad that Coll had taught him the properties of herbs. He made a poultice and set it on Gurgi's wound.

Fflewddur, meanwhile, had begun drawing new maps with his dagger. The Cauldron warriors, explained the bard, had forced the companions too deeply into the Ystrad valley. Returning to their original path would cost them at least two days of hard travel. "Since we're this far," Fflewddur went on, "we might just as well cross Ystrad and follow along the hills, staying out of sight of the Horned King. We'll be only a few days from *Caer Dathyl*, and if we keep a good pace, we should reach it just in time."

Taran agreed to the new plan. It would, he realized, be more difficult; but he judged Melyngar could still carry the unfortunate Gurgi, as long as the companions shared the burden of the weapons. Eilonwy, having forgotten she was not speaking to Taran, again insisted on walking.

A day's march brought them to the banks of the Ystrad.

Taran stole cautiously ahead. Looking down the broad valley, he saw a moving dust cloud. When he hurried back and reported this to Fflewddur, the bard clapped him on the shoulder.

"We're ahead of them," he said. "That is excellent news. I was afraid they'd be much closer to us and we'd have to wait for nightfall to cross Ystrad. We've saved half a day! Hurry now and we'll be into the foothills of Eagle Mountains before sundown!"

With his precious harp held above his head, Fflewddur plunged into the river, and the others followed. Here, the Ystrad ran shallow, scarcely above Eilonwy's waist, and the companions forded it with little difficulty. Nevertheless, they emerged cold

and dripping, and the setting sun neither dried nor warmed them.

Leaving the Ystrad behind, the companions climbed slopes steeper and rockier than any they had traveled before. Perhaps it was only his imagination, but the air of the land around Spiral Castle had seemed, to Taran, heavy and oppressive. Approaching the Eagle Mountains, Taran felt his burden lighten, as he inhaled the dry, spicy scent of pine.

He had planned to continue the march throughout most of the night; but Gurgi's condition had worsened, obliging Taran to call a halt. Despite the herbs, Gurgi's leg was badly inflamed, and he shivered with fever. He looked thin and sad; the suggestion of crunchings and munchings could not rouse him. Even Melyngar showed concern. As Gurgi lay with his eyes half-closed, his parched lips tight against his teeth, the white mare nuzzled him delicately, whinnying and blowing out her breath anxiously, as if attempting to comfort him as best she could.

Taran risked lighting a small fire. He and Fflewddur stretched Gurgi out beside it. While Eilonwy held up the suffering creature's head and gave him a drink from the leather flask, Taran and the bard moved a little away and spoke quietly between themselves.

"I have done all I know," Taran said. "If there is anything else, it lies beyond my skill." He shook his head sorrowfully. "He has failed badly today, and there is so little of him left I believe I could pick him up with one hand."

"Caer Dathyl is not far away," said Fflewddur, "but our friend, I fear, may not live to see it."

That night, wolves howled in the darkness beyond the fire.



All next day, the wolves followed them; sometimes silently, sometimes barking as if in signal to one another. They remained always out of bow shot, but Taran caught sight of the lean, gray shapes flickering in and out of the scrubby trees.

"As long as they don't come any closer," he said to the bard, "we needn't worry about them."

"Oh, they won't attack us," Fflewddur answered. "Not now, at any rate. They can be infuriatingly patient if they know someone's wounded." He turned an anxious glance toward Gurgi. "For them, it's just a matter of waiting."

"Well, I must say you're a cheerful one," remarked Eilonwy. "You sound as if all we had to look forward to was being gobbled up."

"If they attack, we shall stand them off," Taran said quietly. "Gurgi was willing to give up his life for us; I can do no less for him. Above all, we must not lose heart so close to the end of our journey."

"A Fflam never loses heart!" cried the bard. "Come wolves or what have you!"

Nevertheless, uneasiness settled over the companions as the gray shapes continued trailing them; and Melyngar, docile and obedient until now, turned skittish. The golden-maned horse tossed her head and rolled her eyes at every attempt to lead her.

To make matters worse, Fflewddur declared their progress through the hills was too slow.

"If we go any farther east," said the bard, "we'll run into some really high mountains. The condition we're in, we couldn't possibly climb them. But here, we're practically walled in. Every

path has led us roundabout. The cliffs there," he went on, pointing toward the towering mass of rock to his left, "are too rugged to get over. I had thought we'd find a pass before now. Well, that's the way of it. We can only keep on bearing north as much as possible."

"The wolves didn't seem to have any trouble finding their way," said Eilonwy.

"My dear girl," answered the bard, with some indignation, "if I were able to run on four legs and sniff my dinner a mile away, I doubt I'd have any difficulties either."

Eilonwy giggled. "I'd love to see you try," she said.

"We do have someone who can run on four legs," Taran said suddenly. "Melyngar! If anyone can find their way to *Caer Dathyl*, she can."

The bard snapped his fingers. "That's it!" he cried. "Every horse knows its way home! It's worth trying—and we can't be worse off than we are now."

"For an Assistant Pig-Keeper," said Eilonwy to Taran, "you do come up with some interesting ideas now and then."

When the companions started off again, Taran dropped the bridle and gave Melyngar her head. With the half-conscious Gurgi bound to her saddle, the white horse trotted swiftly ahead at a determined gait.


By mid-afternoon, Melyngar discovered one pass which, Fflewddur admitted, he himself would have overlooked. As the day wore on, Melyngar led them swiftly through rocky defiles to high ridges. It was all the companions could do to keep up with her. When she cantered into a long ravine, Taran lost sight of her for a moment

and hurried forward in time to glimpse the mare as she turned sharply around an outcropping of white stone.

Calling the bard and Eilonwy to follow quickly, Taran ran ahead. He stopped suddenly. To his left, on a high shelf of rock, crouched an enormous wolf with golden eyes and lolling red tongue. Before Taran could draw his sword, the lean animal sprang.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Hidden Valley

he impact of the heavy, furry body caught Taran full in the chest, and sent him tumbling. As he fell, he caught a glimpse of Ffleuddur. The bard, too, had been borne to earth under the paws of another wolf. Eilonwy still stood, though a third animal crouched in front of her.

Taran's hand flew to his sword. The gray wolf seized his arm. The animal's teeth, however, did not sink into his flesh, but held him in an unshakable grip.

At the end of the ravine a huge, robed figure suddenly appeared. Melyngar stood behind him. The man raised his arm and spoke a command. Immediately, the wolf holding Taran relaxed his jaws and drew away, as obediently as a dog. The man strode toward Taran, who scrambled to his feet.

"You saved our lives," Taran began. "We are grateful."

The man spoke again to the wolves and the animals crowded around him, whining and wagging their tails. He was a strange-looking figure, broad and muscular, with the vigor of an ancient but sturdy tree. His white hair reached below his shoulders and his beard hung to his waist. Around his forehead he wore a narrow band of gold, set with a single blue jewel.

"From these creatures," he said, in a deep voice that was stern but not unkind, "your lives were never in danger. But you must leave this place. It is not an abode for the race of men."

"We were lost," Taran said. "We had been following our horse . . ."

"Melyngar?" The man turned a pair of keen gray eyes on Taran. Under his deep brow they sparkled like frost in a valley. "Melyngar brought me four of you? I understood young Gurgi was alone. By all means, then, if you are friends of Melyngar. It is Melyngar, isn't it? She looks so much like her mother; and there are so many I cannot always keep track of the names."

"I know who you are," cried Taran. "You are Medwyn!"

"Am I now?" the man answered with a smile that furrowed his face. "Yes, I have been called Medwyn. But how should you know that?"

"I am Taran of Caer Dallben. Gwydion, Prince of Don, was my companion, and he spoke of you before—before his death. He was journeying to Caer Dathyl, as we are now. I never hoped to find you."

"You were quite right," Medwyn answered. "You could not have found me. Only the animals know my valley. Melyngar led you here. Taran, you say? Of Caer Dallben?" He put an enormous hand to his forehead. "Let me see. Yes, there are visitors from Caer Dallben, I am sure."

Taran's heart leaped. "Hen Wen!" he cried.

Medwyn gave him a puzzled glance. "Were you seeking her? Now, that is curious. No, she is not here."

"But I had thought . . ."

"We will speak of Hen Wen later," said Medwyn. "Your friend is badly injured, you know. Come, I shall do what I can for him." He motioned for them to follow.

The wolves padded silently behind Taran, Eilonwy, and the bard. Where Melyngar waited at the end of the ravine, Medwyn lifted Gurgi from the saddle, as if the creature weighed no more than a squirrel. Gurgi lay quietly in Medwyn's arms.

The group descended a narrow footpath. Medwyn strode ahead, as slowly and powerfully as if a tree were walking. The old man's feet were bare, but the sharp stones and pebbles did not trouble him. The path turned abruptly, then turned again. Medwyn passed through a cut in a bare shoulder of the cliff, and the next thing Taran knew, they suddenly emerged into a green, sunlit valley. Mountains, seemingly impassable, rose on all sides. Here the air was gentler, without the tooth of the wind; the grass spread rich and tender before him. Set among tall hemlocks were low, white cottages, not unlike those of *Caer Dallben*. At the sight of them, Taran felt a pang of homesickness. Against the face of the slope behind the cottages, he saw what appeared at first to be rows of moss-covered tree trunks; as he looked, to his surprise, they seemed more like the weather-worn ribs and timbers of a long ship. The earth covered them almost entirely; grass and meadow flowers had sprung up to obliterate them further and make them part of the mountain itself.

"I must say the old fellow's well tucked away here," whispered *Fflewddur*. "I could never have found the path in, and I doubt I could find the path out."

Taran nodded. The valley was the most beautiful he had ever seen. Cattle grazed peacefully in the meadow. Near the hemlocks, a small lake caught the sky and sparkled blue and white. The bright plumage of birds flashed among the trees. Even as he stepped across the lush green of the turf, Taran felt exhaustion drain from his aching body.

"There's a fawn!" Eilonwy cried with delight.

From behind the cottages, a speckled, long-legged fawn appeared, sniffed the air, then trotted quickly toward Medwyn. The graceful creature paid no attention to the wolves, but frisked gaily at the old man's side. The animal drew shyly away from the strangers; but her curiosity got the better of her, and soon she was nuzzling Eilonwy's hand.

"I've never seen a fawn this close," said the girl. "Achren never had any pets—none that would stay with her, at any rate. I can't blame them at all. This one is lovely; it makes you feel all tingly, as if you were touching the wind."

Medwyn, motioning for them to wait, carried Gurgi into the largest of the cottages. The wolves sat on their haunches and watched the travelers through slanted eyes. Taran unsaddled Melyngar, who began cropping the tender grass. Half-a-dozen chickens clucked and pecked around a neat white henhouse. The rooster raised his head to show a notched comb.

"Those are Dallben's chickens!" cried Taran. "They must be! There's the brown hen, the white—I'd know that comb anywhere." He hurried over and clucked at them.

The chickens, more interested in eating, paid little attention.

Medwyn reappeared in the doorway. He carried an enormous

wicker basket laden with jugs of milk, with cheese, honeycombs, and fruits that, in the lowlands, would not be in season for another month. "I shall look after your friend directly," he said. "Meantime, I thought you might enjoy—oh, yes, so you've found them, have you?" he said, noticing Taran with the chickens. "Those are my visitors from *Caer Dallben*. There should be a swarm of bees, too, somewhere about."

"They flew away," Taran said, "the same day *Hen Wen* ran off."

"Then I imagine they came straight here," Medwyn said. "The chickens were petrified with fright; I could make no sense at all out of them. Oh, they settled down quickly enough, but of course by that time they had forgotten why they flew off in the first place. You know how chickens are, imagining the world coming to an end one moment, then pecking corn the next. They shall all fly back when they're ready, have no fear. Though it's unfortunate *Dallben* and *Coll* should be put out in the matter of eggs.

"I would ask you inside," Medwyn continued, "but the disorder at the moment—there were bears at breakfast, and you can imagine the state of things. So I must ask you to attend to yourselves. If you would rest, there is straw in the byre; it should not be too uncomfortable for you."

The travelers lost no time in helping themselves to Medwyn's provisions, or in finding the byre. The sweet scent of hay filled the low-ceilinged building. They scooped out nests in the straw, uncovering one of Medwyn's breakfast guests curled up and fast asleep. *Fflewddur*, at first uneasy, was finally convinced the bear had no appetite for bards, and soon began snoring. *Eilonwy* dropped off to sleep in the middle of one of her sentences.

Taran had no desire to rest. Medwyn's valley had refreshed him more than a night's slumber. He left the byre and strolled across the meadow. At the far side of the lake, otters built a slide and were amusing themselves by tumbling down it. At Taran's approach, they stopped for a moment, raised their heads to look at him as though sorry he was unable to join them, and returned to their game. A fish broke water in a twinkle of silver scales; the ripples widened until the last of them lapped gently at the shore.

Medwyn, Taran saw, had gardens of both flowers and vegetables behind the cottage. To his surprise, Taran found himself yearning to work with Coll in his own vegetable plot. The weeding and hoeing he had so despised at *Caer Dallben* now seemed, as he thought of his past journey and the journey yet to come, infinitely pleasant.

He sat down by the rim of the lake and looked across the hills. With the sun resting above the peaks, the wooden skeleton of the great ship stood out sharply against the mound which nearly enveloped it. He had little chance to study it, for Medwyn appeared, walking deliberately across the field; the fawn trotted beside him, the three wolves followed. With his brown robe and white hair, Medwyn looked as broad and solid as a snow-capped mountain.

"Gurgi is more comfortable than he was," the ancient man said in his deep voice. The fawn danced at the lake shore while Medwyn ponderously sat down and leaned his huge head toward Taran. "He will recover well; there is no longer any danger. Not, at least, while he is here."

"I have thought long of Gurgi," Taran said, looking frankly into the old man's gray eyes. He explained, then, the reason for his jour-

ney and the events leading to Gurgi's accident. Medwyn listened carefully, head cocked to one side, thoughtful, while Taran recounted Gurgi's willingness to sacrifice his own life rather than endanger the others. "At first, I wasn't too fond of him," Taran admitted. "Now I've begun to like him in spite of all his whining and complaining."

"Every living thing deserves our respect," said Medwyn, knitting his shaggy brows, "be it humble or proud, ugly or beautiful."

"I wouldn't want to say that about the gwythaints," Taran answered.

"I feel only sorrow for those unhappy creatures," Medwyn said. "Once, long ago, they were as free as other birds, gentle and trusting. In his cunning, Arawn lured them to him and brought them under his power. He built the iron cages which are now their prison house in Annvin. The tortures he inflicted on the gwythaints were shameful and unspeakable. Now they serve him out of terror.

"Thus would he strive to corrupt every animal in Prydain, no less than the race of men. That is one of the reasons I remain in the valley. Here, Arawn cannot harm them. Even so, were he to become ruler of this land, I doubt I could help them all. Those who fell into his clutches would be counted fortunate if they perished quickly."

Taran nodded. "I understand more and more why I must warn the Sons of Don. As for Gurgi, I wonder if it wouldn't be safer for him to stay here."

"Safer?" asked Medwyn. "Yes, certainly. But you would hurt him grievously were you to turn him away now. Gurgi's misfortune is

that he is neither one thing nor the other, at the moment. He has lost the wisdom of animals and has not gained the learning of men. Therefore, both shun him. Were he to do something purposeful, it would mean much to him.

"I doubt he will delay your journey, for he will be able to walk as well as you—by tomorrow, easily. I urge you to take him. He may even find his own way of serving you. Neither refuse to give help when it is needed," Medwyn continued, "nor refuse to accept it when it is offered. Gwythyr Son of Greidawl learned that from a lame ant, you know."

"A lame ant?" Taran shook his head. "Dallben has taught me much about ants, but nothing of a lame one."

"It is a long history," Medwyn said, "perhaps you will hear all of it another time. For the moment, you need only know that when Kilhuch—or was it his father? No, it was young Kilhuch. Very well. When young Kilhuch sought the hand of the fair Olwen, he was given a number of tasks by her father, Yspadadden; he was Chief Giant at the time. What the tasks were does not concern us now, except that they were very nigh impossible, and Kilhuch could not have accomplished them without the aid of his companions.

"One of the tasks was to gather nine bushels of flax seed, though there was scarcely that much in all the land. For the sake of his friend, Gwythyr Son of Greidawl undertook to do this. While he was walking over the hills, wondering how he might accomplish it, he heard a grievous wailing from an anthill; a fire had started around it and the ants were in danger of their lives. Gwythyr—yes, I'm quite sure it was Gwythyr—drew his sword and beat out the fire.

"In gratitude, the ants combed every field until they had collected the nine bushels. Yet the Chief Giant, a picky and disagreeable sort, claimed the measure was not complete. One flax seed was missing, and must be delivered before nightfall.

"Gwythyr had no idea where he could find another flax seed, but at last, just as the sun had begun to set, up hobbled a lame ant carrying a heavy burden. It was the single flax seed, and so the last measure was filled.

"I have studied the race of men," Medwyn continued. "I have seen that alone you stand as weak reeds by a lake. You must learn to help yourselves, that is true; but you must also learn to help one another. Are you not, all of you, lame ants?"

Taran was silent. Medwyn put his hand into the lake and stirred the water. After a moment, a venerable salmon rippled up; Medwyn stroked the jaws of the huge fish.

"What place is this?" Taran finally asked, in a hushed voice. "Are you indeed Medwyn? You speak of the race of men as if you were not one of them."

"This is a place of peace," Medwyn said, "and therefore not suitable for men, at least, not yet. Until it is, I hold this valley for creatures of the forests and the waters. In their mortal danger they come to me, if they have the strength to do so—and in their pain and grief. Do you not believe that animals know grief and fear and pain? The world of men is not an easy one for them."

"Dallben," said Taran, "taught me that when the black waters flooded Prydain, ages ago, Nevvid Nav Neivion built a ship and carried with him two of every living creature. The waters drained away, the ship came to rest—no man knows where. But the ani-

mals who came safe again into the world remembered, and their young have never forgotten. And here," Taran said, pointing toward the hillside, "I see a ship, far from water. Gwydion called you Medwyn, but I ask. . ."

"I am Medwyn," answered the white-bearded man, "for all that my name may concern you. That is not important now. My own concern is for Hen Wen."

"You have seen nothing of her, then?"

Medwyn shook his head. "What Lord Gwydion said is true: of all places in Prydain, she would have come here first, especially if she sensed her life in danger. But there has been no sign, no rumor. Yet she would find her way, sooner or later, unless . . ."

Taran felt a chill ripple at his heart. "Unless she has been killed," he murmured. "Do you think that has happened?"

"I do not know," Medwyn answered, "though I fear it may be so."